# AMBRIL’S TALE

# BY

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Blagoor, Baldot, Bummil, Boocher, Bandler

Caodsnigs Toad Butts, llama turd, Dung Beetle,

**Chapter 1**

**The Beginning**

The deep rumble of the moving van didn’t do it. Neither did the indignant squawk of a crow when the van rammed the Gingko tree in front of her house. Not even the annoying ding-dong of the doorbell filling the old house not once, twice but three times. Nope, that made her burrow deeper into her quilt.

It was the shriek her mother made as she raced through her bedroom door and vaulted onto her bed that did it. Ambril’s mother was tremendously good at high-pitched yelling.

 “Get up! Get up! We’re already late!” Her mom peered down at the insanely yellow van. “The movers are on time for once, which makes us, later than usual. “ She wrapped her robe around her as one of the movers squinted up at the house. “Not until today have they ever, ever been here when they said they would, how many times is this Sweetie”? A grunt from the quilt was all she got. She prodded the quilted mound with her big toe. “How many times have we moved, Ambril? I’ve lost track.”

“Eleven times!” A mass of tousled red hair emerged.

Her Mom smiled. “Eleven times is the charm!” She jumped from the bed and was through the door before the old bedsprings had time to squeal. Ambril could hear her skipping down the stairs, opening the door and then the gentle hum of polite conversation. Move Number Eleven had begun.

She groaned. She did not want to get up; she never, ever wanted to get up again. She loved this old turreted house stuck on a hill overlooking over the San Francisco Bay.

It had been home to her brother, her Mom and herself for nearly a year, the longest place they had stayed anywhere that Ambril could remember.

She had actually made some friends for once…well sort of. And now they had to not only pack up and move to a boring country town but act like they were happy about it.

That was because they were moving back to the town she had been born in. She didn’t remember it, of course, being three when she last saw it. But her Mother expected big smiles from her every time she mentioned its name, Trelawnyd. It was a stupid name she decided and burrowed back into her comfy bed.

A few minutes later, however she was up when she heard the heavy clump of boots and the rumble of dollies in the house.

The thought of her being in her ratty old bunny PJ’s when a hefty, sweaty guy started loading up her boxes on his dolly made her cringe. Better get changed. She jumped from her bed into her T-shirt and jeans, snorted at what she saw of herself in the mirror: skinny, grumpy, freckly-- a mess. She scrunched her unruly tangle of hair into a lumpy pony tail before grabbing her back pack and skittering down the stairs.

 Her Mother was holding court in the hallway. “Hi Sweetie! She flung her arms wide, “Today’s the day we finally go home.“ Her smile was huge. Ambril smiled mechanically back and slumped down on the stairs to watch the parade of her favorite things being carted away yet again.

Her mother turned back to the movers. “That was my grandmother’s, don’t drop it or she’ll haunt you like she did my mother after she dropped her punch bowl!” she warned the wheezing mover guiding their old kitchen table through the door. “Be careful with that! It’s twice as old as all of us put together!” she hissed at another as a large hutch bumped the doorframe.

 “Unloading the contents of the furniture would’a made it sooo much easier for everyone, Ma’am. You should try it next time,” grumbled the man in a too tight jump suit maneuvering the hutch through the doorway.

“Well, everything’s going into storage this time,” she said as she picked up a crystal bowl from a table just as the movers shoved it aside. “Well, almost everything. It seemed a waste of time, really; to pack it all in boxes.“

She smiled again at Ambril showing every single one of her teeth. “We’re going back home in style! New furniture, new clothes, new life.” She sighed contentedly. “I would never have thought this possible even six months ago.”

Just then the outlandishly large, old hutch swayed and dipped as it went past the stairs where Ambril sat, chin on fist. It wobbled again, and the top cupboard door opened launching a tubular wooden object straight at Ambril. It landed squarely on Ambril’s head. A sharp, jarring crack reverberated through the old house followed by creaking and swaying.

“Woops! Sorry there kid,” said one of the movers hoisting the hutch. “Felt like another earthquake. Just an itty bitty one, though.” He looked at Ambril. “You O.K.?”

 “No!” Ambril rubbed her head irritably as the strange object bounced into her lap. Normally she didn’t mind a little earthquake now and then. It sort of spiced up the day. But that one had gotten personal. She looked down at the thing in her lap. Dusty and old were words too good for it, filthy and ancient were better. Ambril smiled, it was interesting. She gently held up the slim, carved cylinder to get a closer look. It was a little longer than her foot and slightly thicker than her wrist. It wasn’t perfectly round or symmetrical. It really looked more like the thick part of a twisty branch than anything else, but it didn’t feel like a sawed up branch. It was hollow. She shook it slightly and could hear something moving around inside. The best part was that it had little ridges where it had been carefully and intricately carved.

 “Ambril give me that old thing, it has to go into storage, honey.” Her mother reached for it. But Ambril was not in an obedient mood. She wrinkled her nose at her Mother. “Why does everything have to go into storage? This is our stuff we grew up with this! It’s bad enough we’re moving to a brand-new house in a weird little town but do we have to go without ALL of our things?”

 Her mother pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips saying, “I’ve told you this at least a hundred times, Ambril. Feldez, your soon-to-be stepfather has gone to a lot of trouble with this new house. And though our antiques looked fine in this house, the new house is very modern and these old things…lovely as they are---.” Her hand reached out to sadly pat the old grandfather clock like an old friend as it marched by---“just won’t fit in.”

She grimaced at her daughter. “You’ll see what I mean when we get there this afternoon.” She paused and stroked Ambril’s hair absently as she watched the living room furniture being heaved onto dollies. “It won’t be forever, we’ll look around for a summer place and give these things a new home someday soon.”

Ambril wasn’t having any of it. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. *Modern, New, -just won’t fit in*. Well what if she didn’t fit? Would they ship her off someplace too? Ambril protectively hugged the funny old tube to her chest and pointed at the underside of their old coffee table. “You might as well put me in storage too. “ She said as petulantly as she could. “I’d be happier there anyway….See, there I go!” Her name was childishly scrawled in what looked like toothpaste across its underbelly. She had done it when she was seven and was mad that her mother had gone off to a party without her.

 Her mother blanched. “That’s a Nineteenth century Biedermeier table, Ambril, I had no idea you had---how could you do such a thing!” Her mother scowled then ran after the table with a wet rag.

Ambril was still angry. “I don’t see why we can’t take a few things!” She yelled after her.

“Hello! Excuse me---” Feldez, Ambril’s almost stepfather had just enough time to spring out of the way of a careening lamp and table as it hurtled through the front door. He wedged himself into the hall closet and brushed off his lapel.

 “Oh! Honey, what a nice surprise!” Ambril’s mother abandoned the Biedermeier and fluttered over to him first kissing him on the cheek and then immediately trying to rub the lipstick off. He waved her away.

“I just had some loose ends to tie up in town and thought I’d stop in to see how things were---,” he again had to duck into the closet to avoid being side swiped by a large Grecian urn. “---going.” He looked timidly into the living room. “I must say this place looks better empty.” He mused pulling on his cuffs. “You will really love the new place, I’m sure. By the by, where’s that old kitchen cupboard anyway? There’s something in there I want.”

“It just went into the truck, darling. I’m sure you can still get into it.”

“I see,” he peered out at the cupboard being heaved into the van outside. “Yes, I’ll just step out there now then.” His smile didn’t meet his eye as he kissed her hair dryly and waved indifferently at Ambril then walked out to the truck.

Her mother sighed watching him go. Ambril tried to think good thoughts but couldn’t. She was so mad at Feldez she could spit. It was all his fault they were moving. And it was all his fault they had to put all of their beautiful things away forever into a nasty storage bin.

She could feel the anger rising as she watched him gingerly haul himself into the moving van protecting his lapels from the dust to examine the old hutch. She had to think of other things right now. Her hands gripped the funny thing in her lap and she turned her attention to it. She distractedly wiped the dust off it and found the carvings were of animals and plants all woven together.

 “Mom! What is this thing?”

 Her mother breezed by her staring savagely at a mover who had just caught a porcelain vase on the verge of crashing to the ground and said distractedly “What thing honey?”

 “This thing, see? The thing that fell on me.”

 Mother whirled and squinted at it. Her expression changed. “Oh, I remember it now. That was my grandmother’s. I’d forgotten about that.” She smiled inwardly. “It was one of her favorite things. She always had that by her.” She reached over and ran her hand over an emblem carved into the wood.

“This is our family crest; did you know we had one? At least it’s my family’s crest on the Derwyn side.” Her fingers delicately traced the strange lines. “If you look closely, you can see the oak tree. That’s what Derwyn means you know, in the old language.”

 Ambril wasn’t really sure what the old language was but as she studied the image closely she could make out the twining twisting branches of an oak tree in the intricate tracery. There were rings of funny writing and symbols around it. “Wow, our family crest huh!” Can I keep it?”

 Her Mother started and looked at her closely. “Of course you can keep it, silly, all of these things are just going into storage. We’re not throwing a thing away. Just give it to this nice man---“ She grabbed the sleeve of a mover with a large pile of boxes and dragged him over. “---and he’ll take very good care of it for you.” The mover looked at Ambril pleadingly. There were beads of sweat standing on his forehead and his arm was quivering.

 “No, Um, thanks though,” she said to the mover waving him on. She turned back to her Mom “I mean I want to take it with me Mom, to the new place.” She paused thinking. “You know, Trelawnyd. Please? I promise I’ll take good care of it and everything”. Ambril hugged her new find again to her chest.

 Her mother quickly closed a partially open door as another cupboard sailed past.

“We’ll have to talk about this in the car, I see, I’ve been thinking that we really should make some changes…some *adjustments* to our family or at least how we talk about it. Just a few changes, you know, nothing big. But we’ll talk later.” She paused and looked doubtfully at the tube. “I guess you can keep it… for now.” And to herself muttered. “I don’t know why Feldez would object to something so small anyway.”

 *Adjustments to how we talk about our family*? What did that mean? Just then a door slammed above and her brother, Zane started ambling down the stairs. He had that stretched look of a boy who had just recently grown way too much for his own good. His curly brown hair stood out in wild strikes from his head and matted gracelessly over his eyes. He regarded Ambril morosely.

“Looking forward to our new digs?” He sauntered down the stairs until he got to a pile of clothes innocently blocking his way. “Thinking you might actually make some friends this time?” He hooked the clothes up and over Ambril dumping them neatly on to her head. “Hoping you might for once, fit in?”

He snorted as Ambril snatched at a pair of his old pajamas and a button got caught in her hair. She struggled with that while the rest of the clothes rolled down the stairs. Freeing herself, finally she turned and lunged at him just as her mother turned and gasped. “Ambril, just look at this! I just finished folding these things! She raced over, picked up the clothes and shoved them into her daughter’s arms. “Refold them NOW, neatly, they are donations, but we don’t want anyone to think we’re slobs. Right?”

She stepped back and gave her son a brilliant smile. “Hi sweetie, so glad you are at last out of bed! There’s cereal in the kitchen for you.” With that she swept into the dining room. They could hear her berating another mover who had apparently upended a potted palm.

Zane smirked at his little sister. “Yep, we have to keep up appearances, or at least you and Mom do.” He said sarcastically. He turned his back against the kitchen door. “Me? I’m not gonna bother. It’s a waste of time. Our ‘home town’ is the one place on earth that our family will NEVER make it in.” He slid into the kitchen. “Mom’s delusional.” He said just before the door swung to.

Ambril sighed and began to refold the old clothes. Normally she would have stuck up for herself but it wasn’t worth it these days. Ever since they had learned of the move back to Trelawnyd Zane had been a terror. Granted there had always been times when he was a jerk, but after the night Feldez and her Mom had broken the news to them about their engagement and the move back to Trelawnyd, he hadn’t smiled his sideways grin or made one funny joke, just ones at some one else’s expense.

Ambril remembered that night vividly and how Zane had sworn that he wasn’t going back, that they couldn’t go back, and that he’d run away or join the army or something.

He had raged and shouted insults at all of them. His Mother had stopped him by wrapping her arms tightly around him and not letting him go.

It had left Ambril shaky and jittery to see him so crazy. He had always been the calm one who had helped her look for the better things about every move. She couldn’t figure it out, Mom was happier than she had been in years, they had enough money for clothes and food, for once. Ambril shook her head as she gave a final pat to the somewhat messily folded clothes and picked up her backpack. It wasn’t all bad, this move. But there was something about this little hometown of theirs that really freaked out her brother. She slung her backpack over her shoulder.

 “Mom? I’m going down the street to say goodbye to Mr. Feng.”

“Great, honey, say goodbye for us all and pick up some bagels will you?” Called her Mother from the dining room. There was a magnificent cascading clatter of metal and then silence. “The silverware stays in the drawer, Alright? IN THE DRAWER! IN THE DRAWER!”

Ambril tiptoed down the stairs before she got roped into any more tidying up. Just as she opened the front door Zane emerged eating cereal.

 “Bagels? Greah, I wan’ cinnamom and raisim, careem cheese,” said Zane his grin showing a large amount of cereal. “If ya don’’t,” he crunched menacingly, “I’ll make life miserabo in da car.”

 Ambril made a face at him. But she knew she’d bring him just what he wanted. If it would guarantee a quiet car trip down to their new home she’d have brought him a lot more than that. As the door slid shut he added, “You’ll see, you’re gonna wish you’d neva heard a tha’ stupid town---”. The door clicked shut before he could finish.

Ambril jogged down the steps and along the rolling, much mended sidewalk. Well, she thought, at least she’d at least have someone there, not necessarily, a helpful some one but a living, breathing, kid-sized person to go through this with.

 When had it started to feel as if their family really wasn’t a family anymore? They were just people tip toeing around trying to stay out of each other’s way.

Ambril sighed, perhaps things would be better once they go through this move and they settled into their new place.

The cool morning sunshine of San Francisco was beginning to work its magic and refused to let her stay upset and worried. She smiled as she walked for the last time down their hill.

**Chapter 2: Chao Feng’s Tea and Remedies**

The Bagel shop was part of a triple shot of stores on the corner. There was Madame Zelda’s Tarot Card Reading and Cupcakes, Holey Bagels and More, and Ambril’s favorite: Chao Feng’s Tea and Herbal Remedies. Chao Feng, despite being a grown-up had been her best friend for the better part of this past year. Her heart tightened as she rounded the corner. She would miss the old neighborhood so much. Ambril had to blink hard before she entered the bagel shop.

“These are on the house, Honey Bee,” said Mrs. Holey as she handed Ambril a dozen bagels and container of cream cheese. She came around the counter to give her a huge, floury hug. “All my best to you and your family,” she said straightening up. “Good luck!”

Ambril thanked her and left quickly blinking even harder. She stooped down and pretended to tie her shoe for a minute. As she did so, she heard voices just around the corner.

“When’d she get here?” said a small squeaky voice.

“Just before you.” Said the low, familiar voice of Chao Feng. “She felt it too, of course.”

“I don’t see how you could NOT have felt it if you had the least bit of magic in you, earthquake my front teeth!” The squeaky voice continued. “I guess things have well and truly started, wouldn’t you say?” There were some chewing noises. “She’s so young though.” There were some louder chewing noises. “Ummm yum what are these?”

“Edamame, very good for you,” said Chao Feng.

 There was more munching. “Well,” the squeaky one belched. “No telling what that old witch will do. I wouldn’t put it past her to try something nasty while they’re on the road.” “Sid try these they’re so tasty.” The squeaky voice mumbled, her mouth clearly full of something.

“I am *NOT* eating off the sidewalk!” Said a squawking sort of voice.

“Who are you to talk! Oh don’t be silly, a little dirt won’t hurt you, just look at yourself!”

“It’s not the dirt, it’s the sticky chewing gum, candy wrappers and bits of plastic that I mind, they tend to give me…eeeer… gas. “ Said the squawker.

There was a squeaky snort.

Ambril straightened up. As she stepped around the corner she saw her old friend Chao Feng sitting in front of his shop and no one else around. He seemed to be feeding a fat, blue-eyed squirrel with a collar of white fur. A crow perched on the back of his chair.

“You will keep watch, then on their journey?” said Chao Feng.

“Of course we will, right Sid?” The squeaky one said. “It’s what we signed on for. But I don’t know how or where we’ll---. Whoops!”

Ambril could have sworn she’d seen the squirrel open its mouth and talk. But it had seen her and disappeared into a drain gutter. The crow flapped a bit before flying off with what looked like a large bean in its mouth.

“Hey, who were you talking to?” Asked Ambril.

Chao Feng kept staring at a massive gray bird settling itself on top of a telephone pole across the street for a minute before answering.

His blue eyes crinkled. “I talk to my bunions, they have a lot to say today.” He grimaced as if in pain and then twinkled at her from his scuffed- up plastic chair. Chao Feng was at least 200 years old Ambril was sure of that. He was so old that his body curled into a “C” when he sat down, like only really old people’s bodies do. But, he also had short white hair, hand painted sneakers and a small tattoo of a dragon on his neck. Ambril had to admit; he was pretty cool for being ancient. “Ah, good, you come to say good bye before you go?”

Before Ambril could question him any further he had jumped up from his chair with one last look at the menacing bird across the street and ushered her hurriedly into his shop. “I have something for you, I so glad I finish in time.”

 Of all her favorite neighborhood haunts, this had always been the best. Ambril paused to take a big breath and filled her lungs with the pungent, mysterious smells hidden away behind the worn wood drawers stacked to the ceiling and along every wall. Long low counters lined 3 or the walls with miss-matched stools parked in front of them.

The drawers were every size, shape and color. Yellow star shapes, green triangles, One was even a snarling bear. Each one bore a Chinese symbol, which, though Ambril had spent many hours trying, she had never been able to figure them out. Chao Feng made the best tea in the city. He could cure anyone of anything, including the black plague, if you happen to come down with it. All kinds of people came from everywhere to consult with him. He also played around with electronics. Along one counter was a large display of shiny, streamlined gadgets.

“What you got there?” His shaky finger pointed at the carved cylinder poking out from Ambril’s backpack. She had forgotten all about it but eagerly showed it to her friend as she settled into a stool by the checkerboard set.

“It was my great grandmother’s. It fell out of an old hutch and bonked me on the head.” She rubbed the bump on her head. “My mother thought it should go into storage, but---“

 The old man smiled. “It hit you there?” He rubbed his own head and then nodded wisely. “It stay with you then. You must take it.” His wrinkled hand traced the engravings and carefully examined it from every angle. The more he looked the bigger his smile. He finally said softly, “This is puzzle box, very, very old and very, very good quality. We have also something like it in China. My grandmother had one to put her secrets in.” He smiled to himself. “It took my mother three years after my grandmother’s passing to unlock all of its mysteries.”

His hands moved slowly up the side of the box. “Then she locked them back into the box and gave to me.” He chuckled softly. “I still trying to figure them out and she been gone over 15 years.” His hands slid along just under the top prodding carefully.

 Suddenly his face brightened. “Ah yes,” He offered the cylinder to Ambril. “Now, press here and here.” He showed her where. Ambril could feel small bumps though she couldn’t see them. She pressed gently and then harder. As she did there was a small, soft click and a small drawer popped out. Ambril bent closer and peered into the tiny drawer. There was something shiny there. She carefully fished out a long loop of a thin gold chain until it snagged on something in the back. She wiggled and pulled gently until she felt it give and a round object slid into view. Twirling in the bright sunshine it dazzled.

 “Wow!” One of Great Grandmother’s secrets!” said Chao Feng.

 It was circular with a sort of rose like shape carved into a peculiar kind of stone. The stone was shot through with green and copper. The gold around the edges was decorated with tracery resembling the Ashera. Ambril thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“Hey! Here’s my family’s crest!” She pointed to the uprooted tree like symbol at the top edge. It matched the symbol on the box. She told Chao Feng all that her mother had told her. The more she told him, the more excitement showed in Chao Feng’s face.

 “Ambril,” he said. “This very precious to you. This is keepsake of your ancestor, your heritage. In my country, such things are more precious than gold…. and more powerful than swords…. Guard it well.” He took the chain and gestured to her head.

 Ambril dipped her head slightly and he slipped it over her head. It felt light around her neck, a little tickle and whisper of secrets.

Mr. Feng didn’t release her right away but turning the object toward her he held it up for her to see. “Hide this from everyone. It will keep you safe, bring you good luck.” He said in barely a whisper. “It must be your secret shared with just your great grandmother.” His eyes crinkled at the edges as he continued.

“Tell no one, not your family, not your friends. They not understand that your ancestor give it to you, that they *choose* you.” He released her suddenly. “You promise you will do this?”

 Ambril knew that Chao Feng had the idea that his ancestors watched him from above and helped him when he needed it. She wasn’t sure if she believed all of it but she liked the idea. So she nodded slowly to Chao Feng. When she was little and life had gotten tough, she liked to think of her father, who had died suddenly, was watching over her. She took the sparkling medallion and tucked it under her T-shirt. “Sure Chao Feng.”

Chao Feng smiled a grey-toothed grin at her as he slipped behind the counter. “I finally finish this thing---But where? ----Ah! Here it is.” He straightened up holding a small robot.

“Gee ah, thanks,” she said mechanically. How could he, who knew her so well give her a toy as a present? Didn’t he see how grown-up she was? Fourteen year old’s didn’t play with dolls anymore no matter how electronic they were. At least, they didn’t admit to it.

“This not just a toy, Oh no, Ambril, this is special AI robot!” He said proudly. He set the robot on the counter and turned it on. “You know, AI, Artificial Intelligence, he learn things, you teach, he learn so that one day, he like a little friend to you.” Chao Feng pressed a button and the robot began walking jerkily toward them.

“Artificial Intelligence?” Asked Ambril “Cool!” O.K., that really was cool.

The robot narrowly missed walking off the counter. Just as it teetered on the edge, It swung a foot around, swerved and marched the other way.

“See? Spatial sensors too! He learn. More you let him do, more he do it better.” He twinkled at her as he handed it to her. It was clearly a used robot, but felt solid, good quality. It was made of red metal with lights around its chest that lit up when it turned on. The front label had been partially ripped of leaving only ‘ff ‘on the top line and ‘Litatron’ below.

“It’s an antique, from the 60’s” said Chao Feng “I put in all new works, though so it’s up-to-date, more or less.” He continued obviously proud of his work.

“This will be fun, thanks!” Ambril really did mean it. But as she stuffed the robot into her backpack she realized it was time to leave. She began to feel awkward, as she had no idea how to say goodbye to her friend.

She reached into the brown paper bag and pulling out a steamy sesame seed covered bagel and thoughtlessly took a too-large bite. “I hope they ‘ave bahels in da new town.” She said messily, trying to chew politely and failing.

Chao Feng busied himself with pouring her some tea.

“It’s different there, it’s a teeny tiny town, not like San Francisco. It probably won’t have everything,” said Ambril as she looked sadly around Mr. Feng’s shop and out his front window. The gray bird was staring intently at her through the window and it did not look friendly. A large black crow came out of nowhere and dove at it, but the hawk deflected it with her wing without even blinking. Ambril barley noticed. She had bigger things on her mind. Moving, new school, new town…she turned back to Chao Feng and took a sip of tea. It was very hot and smelled of rose petals and vanilla.

 “I’m going to miss our…‘um…neighborhood and everything.” She said softly.

 Chao Feng smiled warmly. “We all will miss you, Ambril.” He squinted up at her. “You are special Ambril, you must keep this in your mind; it so easy to forget. Keep yourself open to new things. Now that your great-grandmother has marked you, she will watch over you, help you, I know. But you be careful, old saying, it say: ‘Don’t run into the dragon’s mouth unless you know he is fast asleep.’” He added softly. “I will miss you much.” He pressed her hand, “but I know it possible we see each other again and drink some tea. “ His smile broadened and then saddened. He picked up a rag and began to polish the glass counter.

“Please say goodbye to your family for me. You be careful now, you go.” He looked up just for an instant and gave her a warm smile. “I wish you good luck on your journey.”

Ambril nodded mutely, not trusting herself to say the words in her heart. She smiled one last time and slowly walked out.

The hawk was gone but a large assortment of crows and sparrows were perched in the mangled Ginkgo tree carefully watching her Mom load up their old car.

The movers were still huffing and puffing up and down the front steps loading things into the nearly full van. And a growing pile of junk with a sign “donations” on it had begun to take over the front steps.

 Ambril grunted as she sat down hard next to the junk. She was going to have to work at feeling more optimistic about this whole thing. It was bad form to start out believing the worst about a new life. It’s not like she hadn’t made changes in her life before. What was Zane so worried about? She didn’t get it.

Several hours later her mother’s voice echoed hollowly through the emptied house. “Come on darlings! It’s time to go!” The last dolly laden with boxes tottered through the hallway and down the front steps. Ambril was now sitting glumly on the living room floor staring at the bare walls. Could this really have been their cozy home?

 Her mother appeared swinging a coat around her shoulders with one hand and keeping a firm grip on Zane with the other. “Give it one last look before we go kids.” But Ambril didn’t want to. It wasn’t home any more, just an empty shell.

Zane snorted. “Come on Mom, this is gross.” He wriggled free and slouched out of the front door.

 “It’ll be an adjustment,” she called after him, “but eventually...you’ll see.” She let it drop looking sadly after her son. She then smiled bravely at Ambril---then frowned at her robot. “Oh please Ambril, what is that? A doll?”

Ambril was indignant. “It’s an AI robot, you know, Artificial Intelligence?” She paused to shine up his head a bit. “It was a present from Mr. Feng…AND,” she added defiantly “I’M TAKING HIM WITH ME.” Sticking her chin out, and avoiding her Mom’s eyes, she resolutely marched out of the house.

“All right, but don’t let Zane see you with---“. Her mother’s warning came too late.

Just outside the front door Zane was waiting for her, he’d been listening.

“Oh, little Amby baby has a new doll, does she?” Zane snatched the robot out of her hands so fast Ambril had no time to react. “Let’s see.”

“Hey! That’s mine, give it back!” As Zane began to toss it in the air keeping an eye on her face and watch it go from horror to pleading and back to horror.

 “It’s from Mr. Feng, Zane, come on!” Ambril made a grab for it but Zane caught it and held it up high, shook it right over her head and laughed at her as she jumped and tried to grab it back from him. Then he lazily tossed it over her head straight into the tangled branches of the Ginkgo tree, where it stuck.

“You jerk!” Ambril was furious now. She ran over to the tree and tried to shake the robot down but either the tree trunk was too stiff or she wasn’t strong enough, the robot stayed stuck until a large crow landed on the branch, and bounced the little metal man out. It fell to the ground with a clank. Ambril rushed over and swooped it up.

“Zane! You really need to control yourself.” Ambril’s mother snapped from the front steps. “It isn’t her fault, you know very well.” She shrugged on her handbag. “It isn’t your fault, or mine either.” She stepped determinedly down the stairs. “What happened, happened.” She walked right up to her son and shoved a sweatshirt at him. “Right?” She grabbed his shoulder and wheeled him around to face the car. Not waiting for a response, she marched him toward the car. “Right! Now I want a nice pleasant ride this afternoon.” She tugged at her daughter, who reluctantly followed them. “No fighting, no whining, no teasing, no bloodshed. Got it?”

She marched Zane over to the passenger’s seat in front. The car dipped as Zane got in. It was loaded down with boxes of their things strapped on top and crammed inside. And curiously just as her mother slammed the car door shut Ambril saw a large, fat squirrel scramble up the bungee cords and disappear among the boxes and bags on top.

Ambril noticed it because it had startling blue eyes and a white ruff of fur around its neck. It seemed to be having a hard time squeezing in between the straps.

“Mom? Mom I think there’s---“

“NOT A WORD.” Her Mom came around the car looking like an avenging angel. “I WANT ABSOLUTE CALM!” She looked a bit scary with her hair escaping from her messy bun.

So Ambril meekly squeezed herself in beside the crochet set and a voluminous quilt, cradling her backpack and robot.

 **Chapter 3 To Trelawnyd: On Top**

As the car pulled jerkily away from the curb all the crochet balls broke free of their pouch and rained down on Ambril. Ambril watched the only home she could remember slide away from her as she grumpily rubbed her head and stuffed the balls back into their case. She wedged it shut with her backpack.

She sighed, dispirited, they were off on a journey to where she had been born but not a place that was home. It didn’t matter how much her Mom told her it was, it just wasn’t. She mashed her face up against the crochet bag and began to examine the robot, looking for damage; she’d have to plan her revenge on Zane carefully, he was so touchy now.

The robot looked O.K., really. A few more scratches and a little dent to one foot was all she could find that was really wrong. It seemed to work just fine when she turned it on. Though the head listed to one side, it was kind of friendly looking that way, she thought. The label on the front was nearly off now, instead of saying “ff “on one line and “Litatron” on the next it now said “ff” then “Lit”. The rest had been ripped off. Ambril hadn’t really liked the name Litatron anyway.

“Fa lit,” she said, sounding it out, “ffffa-lit. fLit, yeah, that’s a good name for you, actually.” She liked it, it wasn’t a usual robot name, so the geeky, nerdy robot lovers wouldn’t take her for one of their own. “Flit, it is, then pal.” She cocked her head the same way as the robot and smiled.

Zane made a raspberry sound at her and slouched down in the front seat. Her mother guided them expertly through traffic as Ambril watched her favorite city roll by. Then her eyes began to get heavy, so she shut them and was soon dozing.

Outside, On top of the car, it was bedlam. A large crow had joined the squirrel. Both were obviously unaccustomed to car travel, at least when traveling on top. They were getting blown around, blasted by horns and choked by exhaust. The squirrel shook itself a bit, looked around critically and industriously began gnawing a hole in a nearby bag. “We need a safe haven, Sid.”

The squirrel rubbed a lump on her head and winced. She had gotten it when a bungee cord she had been clinging to had broken free and boomeranged her into an adjacent bus; straight at the feet of a rabid Chihuahua and his blue haired owner. Both began shrieking, one nipped at her with sharp little teeth while the other wacked her with a tapestry handbag. She managed to clamber back out the bus window and make a swan dive back onto Ambril’s car just before the bus veered off another street.

 She was just spitting out a large mouthful of canvas when she stopped and sniffed. “What’s that awful smell?” Looking around she suddenly froze. “Uh Oh, Look!---Sid---!” Sid cocked his head and looked hard with one eye at where she was pointing above him. The large gray hawk had followed them. As the squirrel pointed, it folded its wings and launched itself into a meteoric dive straight at the car.

“Lord, Aster, it’s her! Quick, nip inside there, I’ll see if I can deflect her!” The crow cawed as he spread his wings. Aster wriggled through the hole she had just made just as the car made a sickening lurch to the side. Peering out the hole she saw that the hawk had grabbed one of the stretchy bungee cords, which lashed everything onto the roof and was trying to destabilize the car by pulling on it.

 “Cheeky nasty old bag!” She said ruffling her tail. Sid was dive-bombing the hawk’s massive head and squawking insults but the larger bird just ignored him staying intent on its task.

It used the air currents to stretch the cord even farther. The bag Aster was in careened to the very edge of the rack, knocking Aster hard into a Christmas ornament, a sharp, pointy candy-cane…that gave her an idea.

She picked up the ornament and heaved it through the hole she had come through. It had become a large tear thanks to the antics of the gray bird who was now beginning to beat its powerful wings, jerking the cord up with every beat. A box labeled “Grandmother’s tea cozzies” tumbled off narrowly missing the squirrel’s tail. Aster raced over to another bungee cord with the ornament clamped in her teeth. This hurt a bit and made it hard to see. But she hurriedly pulled back the cord, and using it like a sling shop, took aim and let the ornament fly. It shot upward, straight at the hawk’s head and broke into a thousand little pieces. It surprised the bird enough that it let go of the cord. The bungee snapped back hard as the car veered dangerously onto the shoulder.

Inside the car, Ambril’s Mother wrenched the steering wheel hard, the car veered back onto the blacktop.

“Whooo! That was close, I’d forgotten how strong these coastal winds can be!” Ambril mother exclaimed.

Zane grunted and rearranged his slouch. Ambril, having been bombarded by crochet mallets this time began to wearily put them back in their bag and then wedged a squashy bag filled with socks she found marked “future puppets” in with them.

Just above her the squirrel was preparing another missile. The gray bird flew smoothly alongside the car watching her as she stretched the cord back behind another ornament.

 “Come on you nut case! You fancy some more?” The hawk glared at her for a moment and then effortlessly flew in front and above the car. Now the ornament was at the wrong angle, the squirrel scrambled around trying to get it into a position but she lost track of the hawk for a second or two. As she looked around, a large talon came out of nowhere and grabbed her so powerfully it squeezed all the breath out of her, before it flicked her away and off the speeding car.

The squirrel twirled around helplessly, her paws flailing until she hit the rocky shoulder hard and rolled head over tail several times before becoming still, very, very still.

It was dark now and Ambril’s mother switched on the headlights, illuminating a dense forest on either side of the road. Above the hawk had grabbed the bungee cord and had began to opened its wings preparing to unbalance the car and send if off the road again. But before it could do so, a shiny black blur came at it from above, a bright yellow beak stabbed it smartly in the eye and knocked it off-balance. The hawk rolled as it caught a nasty up-current and was hurled crazily into the trees.

The crow hung there a moment searching for any sign of the larger bird, but the forest remained quiet. He looked at the car taillights and heaved a sign of relief as he watched the car pass through a gate in a massive stonewall.

He flicked a wing turning smartly as he gave one more searching look at the forest before flying low and swift over the pavement to the inert fuzzy lump lying in the road.

“Aster? He nudged her gently, come on now, you’ve had worse.” He looked worriedly at the furry lump.

It prodded her again a bit more anxiously. Finally she stirred and sat up, rubbed her shoulder and winced.

“What? What happened?” Her eyes suddenly snapped open wide. “Mercy!, they’re O.K., right? Where’s the car?”

“It’s alright, they made it inside. They’re fine, at least for now.”

The squirrel smiled wide at her old friend. “Ha! we got her this time, didn’t we!” Then her brows flew together and her chin came up. “What was she thinking, going after a family of helpless humans like that!” She got unsteadily to her feet. “I tell you Sid it isn’t like the old days when everyone knew their place and stayed there.” She paused to gingerly probe a new lump on her head. “Well except for that time when the Tilwith’s got uppity, and they wanted to take over the Troll’s mining operation, remember that?”

She paused to shake her right rear paw and take a tentative step. “And then all the earth-kind went off in a huff, Sheesh!” She groaned a bit and pulled out a twig from her left ear. She looked at her friend who had cocked his head at her in a knowing way and she sighed.

 “Yep, I know what you’re gonna say; stop grousing, it’s just business as usual, the world’s always been a rip, raging, mucky, mess so you might as well just get used to it, roll up your sleeves and get back to cleaning it up as we always do.”

The crow lifted his beak and cawed in a laughing sort of way.

“O.K., I’m done.” She stopped, looked about her and put her hands on what would have been her hips if she were human. “Now what?”

“NOW, we find ourselves a snug, warm place with a pot of tea and a fire.” Said Sid looking at her critically. “In other words---home for you. I think I’d better be the one to—“. There was a flash of light and in place of the crow a tall thin man dressed all in black stood.

He reached down and in a fluid motion swooped up his furry friend who rubbed her eyes and said. “Gees, Sid, give a body some notice.”

“Notice? Come on Aster, you’ve known me for what…four or five hundred years? And you can’t tell when I’m gonna shift by now?” He cackled as his long strides soon took them inside the walls and into the darkened forest.

# Chapter 4 What Happened Inside

The loaded down car had made some progress through the forest on the other side of the wall. “Aren’t you the least bit excited?” Ambril’s Mom asked as she peering anxiously at her in the rear view mirror. “Going back to where you were born?--- Finding out about your heritage?----Think of it!”

She turned to smile at Zane staring fixedly out the window in the front seat. “Zane you remember Circle Park in the center of town? You used to play tag for hours there on the big stone circle.” She smiled a little wider. “And the old wall trail through the woods. We used to take a lunch, walk for a bit and then picnic on a log or a pretty piece of grass we’d find just off the path. Do you remember?” She patted his leg to get his attention. He jerked it away and continued to stare out at the passing landscape.

They had been driving for too long thought Ambril. She peered out the window at the dark forest. There was nothing much to see except that the trees had grown so close together that the underlying branches had died leaving ghoulish, lashing shadows of naked limbs.

“Almost there!” Her mother’s voice was overly cheery as she switched on the high beams though they didn’t do much to dispel the thickening darkness. She cleared her throat. “Now that we’re all in a better mood, I have something to say to all of you before we arrive.” She straightened in her seat and gripped the wheel firmly. “Something important so listen please.” She looked pointedly at the back of Zane’s head. “You’re soon to-be-stepfather and I feel it’s in your best interests to use his family name of Petri instead of Derwyn from now on.”

“What?” Ambril sat bolt upright. Though her father’s last name had been Silva, for as long as she could remember, they had used the name Derwyn, her mother’s family name and she had been proud of it. “But I don’t want to change my name, I like it just the way it is!”

Her mother’s eyes were too large in the rear view mirror. “I know, sweetheart, I like the name too but, you know, it’s a new school, new home, new start for you and the townspeople are just, well they’re just a bit old fashioned about things.” She wrinkled her nose. “It would just make things---well---easier for everyone if we all had the same last name.” She paused and looked at Zane’s unresponsive back. “What does everyone think?” She was greeted with stunned silence. “Okay then!” Her mother’s cheerful voice sounded forced and too loud. “So now we’re the Petri family!”

A grunt was heard from the front seat and then a mumble.

“What was that darling?” Ambril’s mother placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Zane reacted violently to her touch, practically throwing himself around to face her and causing the car to swerve erratically across the road.

“AREN’T YOU GOING TO TELL HER THE REAL REASON, MOM?” His face was contorted with anger and rage. “You are going to tell her why we had to leave in the first place?” He snorted a laugh. “Sure I’ll be a Petri, because I don’t want them to know I’m a Derwyn. And, I sure don’t want them to know I’m a Silva,“ he sneered, “that’s really it, right Mom? You don’t want anyone to know we’re Dad’s kids. That would be bad. But I thought you told me you thought it had been so long that no one would remember it right?” He faced his Mom fully his left hand gripped the front seat hard.

“Well I’ve got news for you, Mom, I REMEMBER!” And with that he twisted around and started wrestling with his seat belt. “And here’s a heads up; I’m pretty sure, in fact POSITIVE they’re going to remember it all too!”

Ambril’s mother had managed to get the car back under control and had brought it to a halt by the side of the road. Zane tore open the door and bolted from the car running straight into the woods.

Ambril and her Mom sat frozen a moment; then her mother found her voice.

“Zane!” Zane wait, let’s talk about this! She was wild with panic as she fumbled with the door. “Don’t run, Zane!” She raced to the edge of the forest. “You don’t know these woods, Zane!” The last petered out into a plaintive sob.

But Zane was long gone, the deep mossy black of the forest shut them out like a wall. Her mother hovered indecisively on the edge of the road looking worriedly back at the car.

Ambril scrambled from the car. It was bad enough starting a new school in a new town without all the additional drama. She rummaged in her pocket and found the mini flashlight she had won at a Street Fair last weekend. “Mom!” she said loudly trying to sound braver than she felt. “I’ll go find Zane.” Her Mom was frantically pacing like a lioness about to charge at the edge of the road. She whirled and Ambril saw the cell phone glued to her Mom’s ear.

“Ambril! Get back in the car this minute!” She grabbed her by the arm and started to drag her back to the car.

“Feldez, you have to come now!” She screeched into the phone. “I don’t care what kind of an emergency you’re on your way to---” Swaying slightly she tried to stuff Ambril bodily back into her seat. Ambril just stood there with her arms folded glaring at her.

 “---It has to be right now!” Her hair had completely escaped the bun and had begun to stick out wildly in all directions. “Do you really KNOW there is nothing that can really hurt him inside the walls? He doesn’t know the forest at all, Feldez AT ALL!” Her mother’s lower lip started to tremble. “He could slip and fall and hit his head, and wander for hours not knowing who he is or where he should go-o-o!” She drew out the last word into a long heaving sob.

“Mom, really, I’ll go and find him, I’ll be fine.” She looked a little apprehensively at the impenetrable shadows. Being a city girl the forest was pretty intimidating.

“No, No, NOOO!’” Shouted her mother. “Don’t be silly, I’ll go, honey.” Her mother flicked her phone off and took a deep breath. “I know these forests fairly well, or I did when I was a kid.” She looked up at the overbearing trees that seemed to be growing towards them, listening. “All I need is a little light, that’s all.”

Ambril sighed and handed her the flashlight before allowing her mother to stuff her back into the car. The door clicked shut. Outside her mother pantomimed locking the door and mouthed the words “stay put” just before she wheeled and ran back to the edge of the woods.

Taking a deep breath and whipping the mini flashlight before her like a sword she slowly disappeared. It became still and silent as the forest settled in around the old dusty car.

Ambril was still stunned by what Zane had said. What was going on? Something horrible must have happened when they were here before. Did it have something to do with her Dad? Ambril shook her head, bewildered. It was too confusing; she needed to talk to Zane about it, if he would talk.

What did she really know about her Dad? Well her Dad had died in some sort of explosion she knew that. She had been young, it was before she had started school; maybe three or so. She vaguely recalled the funeral in flat snap-shot moments. How cold and empty the church had felt, how crumpled and sad her Mom had looked, the feeling of disbelief when they told her that her Daddy was in the big box covered with white flowers. She had asked them to open the lid, that he probably couldn’t breathe in there. It had taken awhile before she really understood that her Dad wasn’t coming back and by then they had moved to San Francisco. And then moved again, and again and again. At some point they might have changed their name from Silva to Derwyn, her mother’s family name, but why?

She shook herself willing the sad memories away and bringing back the dark interior of the car. She had a pretty good idea that whatever had happened back then, her Mom would try to shield her from it as much as possible. She wasn’t going to give her all the details. She’d have to get it out of Zane if she could. And that wasn’t going to be easy.

**Chapter 5 The Box and the Monster**

Frustrated she peered across the street into the forest and a path leading deeper into the gloom. The moon came out from behind a cloud which helped to helped make the road in front of her more visible but also deepened the shadows around it. There was a streetlight in front of the car, a warm disc of light beneath it. Ambril craned her neck and saw another streetlight at the bend of the road. As she sat back again something hard shifted in her backpack next to her, and jabbed her in the side. “Oww!” she opened up the backpack and pulled out the puzzle box.

“Oh, it’s you, twice in one day ay?” She said absently rubbing the bump she had gotten earlier from it. The shiny wood glowed in the half light. Most of the dust had rubbed off in her backpack and the wood felt smooth and slightly warm in her hands.

She rubbed it thoroughly with her sweater and held it up to the window to catch the weak light of the moon. The carvings really were marvelous.

As she shifted it around to examine it the lines seem to take on a life of their own. Glowing lines began to tell her its story. There were animal heads and figures entwined in the curly twisting threads as they wound around it from top to bottom. Some strange writing in a very old fashioned script that also spiraled, keeping time with the tracery. She shook it gently and could feel something shift inside.

 “Alright you, what else do you have in there?” She set to work pressing various lumps and bumps, sometimes several fingers pressing at once, other times, just one at a time. She pressed and twisted and pressed some more until her fingers were sore. She couldn’t get it to work. “Toadbutts.” She groused and in frustration whacked the car seat in front of her with it.

Several things happened all at once just then. The puzzle box sparked and sprayed a fountain of light from its end. It so shocked her she dropped it. It rolled around in her lap still smoking. Then there was a large boom and a flash of brilliant light in the forest beyond the bend in the road. Shock waves thundered through her. In the moonlight Ambril could see a large plume of smoke forming just above where the explosion must have occurred; debris fanning out from its source.

Something hit the road. It looked like part of a screen door. Then a volley of oranges and asparagus pelted the car. “Toadbutts and toejam.” Said Ambril just as an unseen object slammed into the car windshield, cracking it into a million radiating lines. Ambril jumped so high she hit her head on the roof of the car. She grabbed the puzzle box and scrambled out of the car.

The rain of debris had stopped thankfully, and it was eerily quiet in the forest, as if it too was in shock. Ambril, breathing hard watched the billowing smoke above the treetops. There was something funny about it. Instead of the smoke wafting up and away, it seemed to be channeling into something, a shape of some sort, yes, a kind of head.

Ambril could make out two large eyes now and what appeared to be a giant horn above them. It looked the skull of an animal. A horse or a cow, no more like a unicorn. A very, very evil unicorn she decided.

Ambril took another look and then laughed. An evil unicorn? Ridiculous! She had been watching a lot of horror flicks recently. She shook her head and turning her back on her imagination as she faced the real problem at hand, the broken windshield.

 A small metal box was the culprit. It had landed smack in the middle of the glass. She could see the cracks emanating from it. It had made quite a deep impression when it landed showing it had been traveling at some speed. It flicked a few sparks at her as Ambril drew closer. Ambril gingerly nudged the metal box with the puzzle box and hoped she that what she remembered from 98th grade science was right, that wood was an insulator and wouldn’t allow electricity to pass through it. The box didn’t spark at her when she tapped it, it fizzled instead as the cover flipped opened.

Ambril peered inside at a small, lifelike statue of a boy frozen in total agony. It was about 6 inches tall and looked so real Ambril flinched when she saw it. It throbbed softly. There were a bunch of delicate threads, like cobwebs attached to the box; which flowed across the street and into the forest in the direction of the explosion. The smoke illusion still had not dissipated. It was stubbornly looking like a horned skull. Even more frightening as Ambril watched, it opened its jaws and then closed them with a snap, experimentally testing its strength. Ambril fiercely closed her eyes and told herself that seeing things like this might just mean she was going crazy---which she didn’t like the sound of---so she wasn’t going to see these things.

She resolutely turned back to the box. She wanted a closer look at the statue and decided she had to get it out of the box. Afraid of getting shocked, she poked at it again with the end of her wooden cylinder. Another bolt of light escaped the end of the puzzle box making Ambril jump back in terror. The statue wiggled slightly, and then again. Ambril hesitantly approached the box again her curiosity getting the best of her. She bent over the box and the statue. She could see the statue vibrating and wobbling as if it was trying to break free. Ambril covered her face and experimentally touched it again with her cylinder. Another bolt of light and a spray of sparks and the statue shattered into a million sharp pointy pieces. Ambril, jumped back startled, and entangled herself in some of the cobwebs.

 The cobwebs turned out to be nasty little things, they stickily wrapped themselves around her wrists and arms and stung her wherever they touched. Ambril smacked at them with her puzzle box and broke free though a few of the cobweb-like strings still hung from her arm, they no longer stung her.

She heard a sharp hissing noise from the forest behind her. Whirling around she saw the smoky skull was on the move; it was coming towards her. It really was the stuff of nightmares. A gigantic, head made of roiling smoke hovered above the forest. There was a mesh of thin threads shaping it. They glowed like hot metal. It had two enormous cavernous holes with red glowing eyes and as she watched its mouth began to open, a deepening black maw of a mouth. Even at a hundred yards, the stench of the monster was unbearable; of dank sewers and rotting flesh.

The smoke seemed to be shaped by the same cobwebs that still clung to Ambril’s arm. The black box was probably a sort of power source for it and Ambril suddenly realized that she had just disconnected it by mistake.

She hunched down hugging the car hoping the monster wouldn’t see her and squinted at the head as it came closer. It seemed to be looking at her, and it seemed to be very, very interested. It opened up its massive jaw and a bone-jarring scream came out of it. A maddened, revengeful scream, smelling of corpses and sickness, it blasted her. The hissing, popping noise seemed to be all around her now.

 Ambril had no time to think. She threw herself beneath the car, crawling toward the back. It paused. The smell of it made her gag slightly the smell of something truly evil, The hissing, crackling noise it made as it moved gave her chills. She felt the car move back and forth as if it was being bumped. Then suddenly the car wasn’t there any more. She heard a gigantic crash as she saw the car land on its side twenty feet farther down the road. She turned over on her back and found herself staring right into the face of the monster. It roared again nearly paralyzing her with fear. She had just enough sense left to roll out of the way just as the creature lunged at her sucking in everything nearby. She stopped rolling a few feet away to catch her breath. The place she had just been was engulfed in smoke. There were little fingers of electricity snaking out from where the skull had hit the asphalt. She could see the head reforming slowly as it reared up, searching for her. She waited no longer and rolled to her feet. She started running blindly into the forest.

She felt a stinging sensation in her hand and arm and looked down to see the cobwebs still clinging on her arm had come alive and were winding themselves more tightly around her wrist cutting off her circulation. She blindly hacked at them again with the puzzle box and they loosened, finally falling to the ground.

The forest was not quite as dense as she first thought. She pointed the puzzle box in front of her. It gave off a little light. She stumbled over a rock but righted herself before she went down and kept running. Running flat out she was soon out of breath.

And it wasn’t long before she felt another wash of cold. The thing was still pursuing her. She could hear it whistle and hiss just behind her. The forest ahead looked much denser and she squinted at it as she ran, her breath coming in great gasps now. If only she could see better. She panted aloud “I wish I had some light.”

Instantly a beam of light shot out of the puzzle box in her hand. Like a laser, it cut through the darkness easily, she felt such a sense of relief she began to slow down until she heard the creature scream that soul-rending cry. The beam of light showed her immediately that the trees ahead made a high dense hedge. As if they had been planted. Perhaps there were people nearby who knew how to deal with horned shadow monsters. She knew how silly it was, who would know that? Still it was worth hoping.

She saw a break in the wall of greenery and shoved herself through. The branches scratched and pulled at her, snagging her sweatshirt as she tried to force her way through, within seconds she burst through the trees.

She shook the dead leaves from her hair and flashed the light around her. Her heart lifted as the light flicked over what clearly were houses. There were several of them clustered around a central clearing.

“Help!” She cried, running toward the nearest home. Sparks erupted from the puzzle box in her hand nearly causing her to drop it. After a moment the light beam was solid again. However, the houses were too dark and quiet as she drew closer Ambril could see saw that they had been abandoned long before. The roof had fallen in. and one of the sidewalls had failed leaving a pile of rubble from which a terrified rabbit bounded.

The smell of long dead things alerted Ambril to the fact that the creature had made it through the boundary of trees. It glided rather than ran through the forest, a large soundless chunk of black. With it came that sour stench of rot.

She turned and flashed her light at it. It was so close she could feel its icy breath.

Surprisingly the creature cringed and shuddered when the light touched it. Ambril held the light steady, aiming at one of its eyes. It screamed a high-pitched keening sound and fell back for a moment. Ambril raced away from the house and out into the clearing. Her legs felt heavy. She couldn’t run much farther. The clearing seemed to be paved with stone and was circular. She instinctively ran toward the center.

And then the monster was on her again. She turned just in time to slash it with light. It backed off a few feet groaning. She stood holding the light steady, aiming at the other eye socket. “Back off, you mangy, stinky thing!” She slashed again and again at it. It retreated to about 20 feet away. The light’s power lessened enough at that distance so that it could stand the pain. It began to circle her slowly, slithering rather than walking and weaving its head back and forth as it stalked her. It was a stand-off for the time being.

Ambril was heartily glad she had a minute to catch her breath and think. Up until a half hour ago she had been a completely normal kid, living in a normal, regular life. She didn’t know anything about monsters that smelled worse than dead skunks. Looking around her, she saw huge trees rimming the clearing and masses of stars above. The outline of the ancient buildings humped up against the darkness of the trees. All was quiet except for the hissing sound of the monster. Ambril realized with a start that it was suddenly all around her.

The monster had made a full circuit of the circle by now and to Ambril’s horror she saw that it had left a trail of smoke as it went. There was now a ring of glowing smoke around her, cutting off her escape. As she watched the wall of smoke began to grow until it was taller than she was and then silently it began to advance inward, enclosing her in a tightening circle of evil.

She did the only thing she could think of doing, “Help!” She yelled. She knew no one would hear her but she wasn’t going to just stand there and wait for it to come and get her. The yell came out more like a whimper but as she did a few more sparks came out of the wooden cylinder in her hand.

The wall stopped for a split second but then began advancing again. She could smell its vile, nasty scent. Her head begin to swim with fear and anxiety. But there was a little, niggly idea there in the back of her mind that wouldn’t go away. Perhaps it would work.

She took a deep breath and yelled again this time much louder. “HELP!”

The sparks turned into a steady stream of electricity in her hands for just a few seconds. She aimed it at the wall and was able to clear away a small part of it. The wall shrunk a several feet as it tried to repair itself, which it did rapidly.

Ambril took another big breath and yelled at the top of her lungs, ‘”HHHEEELLLLPPPPP!!” This time the beam of power was much stronger. Ambril aimed it at the smoking wall and swiveled around in a circle, coating the smoky wall with brilliant sparks until it had completely disappeared. She was able to focus its powerful light on the skull creature for just a second or two before it fizzled once again. The monster moaned but then screamed at her defiantly.

Ambril looked down at the wooden object in her hand. “Okay, let’s try this again, only this time, let me have enough juice to finish this stupid thing off!” Yes it was silly to talk to a thing like that but everything had been so topsy-turvy that day it didn’t seem too unreasonable. She took another huge breath and bellowed. “HELP ME GET OUT OF THIS MESS!” Concentrating her thoughts as best she could on the puzzle box.

Instantly she could feel the power source move through the puzzle box and create a fountain of powerful energy. The source seem to come from inside her somehow, she could feel it tugging at her heart for a moment. It made her nauseous and dizzy but then a bright surge of energy took over. Her head cleared.

This time the beam was huge and so bright Ambril couldn’t look at it. She closed one eye and half closed the other as she aimed it in the general direction of the skull creature. It sounded to her a bit like a waterfall as the energy stream hit the monster and engulfed it in light. The monster groaned in agony as its cobweb like skeleton flamed out briefly. One last loud, unearthly wail split the night and the monster was gone.

 A mass of swirling black smoke remained briefly until the wind began to work on it. Within seconds it had lost its shape completely and faded into the forest beyond.

The light again fizzled. Ambril began to quiver all over from her efforts. She fell to her knees and filed her lungs with fresh forest air. But just as she was beginning to feel safe, There was a loud rumbling from the shadows as two huge chicken feet landed on either side of her. There was an ear splitting squawk as something hit her sharply on the head. Fireworks exploded in her head and she blacked out. Some one had conked Ambril on the head.

**Chapter 6 Fowclun to the Rescue**

Ambril awoke gradually to the delicious aroma of hot chocolate and the feel of a warm comforter. She felt an odd rocking sensation as if they were moving but was so tired she just lay there with her eyes closed. Her head throbbed as she remembered being hit on the head again. The whole terrifying evening suddenly came flooding back and she cringed. Could it have been a dream?

 There was some one moving around near her on pogo sticks it seemed. There were a series of hard, sharp little taps.

“—The poor thing, she was chilled to the bone. A little slip of a thing like her going up against a full sized Dullaith like that, it’s a wonder!” Came a mothering sort of voice. “Made of hardy stuff, that’s sure enough!”

“Yes well, we were nearly killed as well, nearly shaken to bits on the way to save her!” Said a dry, snappish voice. “What’s the matter with Fowlclun anyway? It felt like we were in a bag race at the fair!”

“You know very well Fowlclun was injured last week, her knee is still giving her a lot of pain.” This voice sounded like a kid her own age, a very annoyed kid.

 “Do you think she’d like some tea? “ Said the first voice kindly. “Or did we choose right the first time with the hot cocoa?” It continued. There were sounds of cups rattling.

“What does it matter? She’s probably going to be out for hours! We have more important things to worry about than a silly little kid who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The snappish voice was downright cutting now. “First Fowlclun is ambushed and nearly takes us all over a cliff, and now we have another Dullaith on our hands.” The voice was accompanied by the sounds of disorderly, jangling chimes. “By the way your scones are ready.”

“Oh! I nearly forgot them, come on Maple, let’s get a move on.” The pogo like taps sounded again pattering away across the room. “Fowlclun’s fall may have just been an accident but this tonight—” Called the kid like voice from across the room. There was the sound of an oven door opening and the room was instantly filled with warm cinnamon smells.

“Accident eh? Ester, When was the last time Fowlclun stubbed her toe huh? Never not in a hundred years, I’m telling you there was strong magic at work, some one wanted to hurt her and probably us too!” There was a long groan as if wood was being stretched too far and the tinkle of glass.

“Not again, that’s the second time Hendoeth has had to mend her this week, Cerreg! Just go back to your corner now and stop being so dramatic!” There was the screech of wood across the floor. “We weren’t hurt, except for a few chips and scratches, Fowlclun will recover.”

The girl voice sounded wearily annoyed again, as if they had been arguing for a long time and were getting nowhere. “Hendoeth will be back in soon, let’s make sure we get all of Tweek’s pieces together.”

Ambril pried one of her eyes open. She was lying in a huge bed covered with layers of patchwork quilts in a cozy, snug room. The walls seemed to be lined with a buttery colored furry fabric. The floor was made of scrubbed wood worn smooth from use. Then she timidly opened the other. Judging by the swinging lanterns hanging from the rafters they were indeed moving.

Perhaps they were in some sort of motor home she thought, though this one was really unusual. There was a large, stone fireplace and an ornate wooden clock shoving itself into a corner. She stopped and looked again. She was not mistaken; a grandfather clock was trying to scooch up against the wall. With one last heave it wriggled and settled itself beside the fireplace.

Ambril was now fully awake. If that wasn’t enough a feather duster seemed to be picking up pieces of glass from the floor all on its own, curling it’s feathers carefully around each piece. When she was finished she looked around at Ambril, two bright eyes and a small mouth clearly visible at the end of the shiny black handle.

“Ah! She’s awake, bless her!” The mothering voice seemed to be coming from a small Maple table; which began to trot towards her. Ambril could make out two blinking, knotty eyes on the top and a long dark streak in the grain; which was curled into a smile. Ambril sat bolt upright and instantly regretted it. Her head really did hurt and she felt again nauseous and dizzy.

“Dear, dear, you’re as white as a sheet.” Said the table. “You best lie back down now, you’ve had such a shock! First battling a Dullaith and then getting hit on the head by part of Fowlclun’s shoddy old chimney, haven’t you! “

 The table stopped at the side of the bed raising herself up close to Ambril. Ambril gathered herself in apprehensively but didn’t want to appear impolite.

 “We’ve been waiting so very long for you, you know,” she whispered. We’re so very glad you’ve come to help us.” If a table could beam that’s what it did. There was a large teapot with a cup and saucer on it and some scones next to them. “There, there!” It said soothingly in its regular voice as the feather duster jumped up next to the teapot and frowned at Ambril.

“Maple, I think she thinks we’re going to eat her or something.” She said ruefully.

Maple the table giggled. “Just how we would manage that is a puzzle, isn’t it!” She said.

“Huh!” Scoffed the clock. “She’s just a silly child, as I said before, in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The clock made a face at Ambril. “A child who just got lucky today fighting that Dullaith.” He sniffed. “You made your lovely scones for nothing, Ester.” The dry, grating voice of the grandfather clock continued. The jumbled chimes sounded again as the house lurched to the side slightly. “Oh do be careful, Fowlclun! I nearly fell right over the last time!” It said to nothing in particular.

A loud rattling warble sounded throughout the house. Ambril felt it vibrating through her. Everything started to get a little fuzzy and she allowed herself to fall back into the pillows again.

“And no I don’t think she’s the one you silly goose. She’s not the hero type.” The clock said condescendingly. “She’s not up to saving anyone.”

Just then a door slammed loudly and a very odd lady flounced in. Though she was short and round and old, She trotted into the house energetically. Her gray hair was done in long braids with colored ribbons woven through them. The sort of style a seven year old would love. She also had on red cowboy boots, a multicolored striped skirt and a necklace made of wooden animals. Ambril sat up again, gingerly. This must be the one in charge.

“Well, I think I got that ol’ chimney tidied up.” She had a down-home, cowgirl accent. “It’ll last out the night at least, though we ought to take another gander at it tomorrow.” She wiped her hands on an apron she tore off and tossed onto the counter. When she looked at Ambril her bright eyes crinkled and she smiled, missing a front tooth.

“Well, still lying about, are ye?” She bustled over to her. Looking at Maple she said. “What? Ya haven’t fed her yet?”

“We---we were just getting to it Hendoeth.” Said Maple defensively.

Hendoeth picked up a cup and poured a large amount of steaming chocolate into it she then handed it to Ambril. “Drink it all down, now.” She said. “There’s nothin’ better for nerves then hot cocoa and one of Ester’s scones.” She picked up the platter of scones and offered one to Ambril.

Ambril took one gratefully she was suddenly ravenous. The hot chocolate immediately warmed her, the cinnamon scone crunched in her mouth, Yum. She was feeling much better in no time, though she was still stunned by her companions.

“We are a bit much all at once, aren’t we?” Hendoeth said musingly as she watched Ambril eat. “You have strong magic all around you and through, but it’s fairly new, isn’t it?” She scratched her chin absently. “Your Ma hasn’t said much ‘bout your family history at home, has she?” She shook her head disgustedly. “She tried to keep it from you, to keep you safe I expect.” She gave a long sigh. “Ya know, it just doesn’t work that way, really. There have been more untimely deaths of real strong magic users ‘cuz of that than I am willing to count.” She put the teapot back on he table and patted it thoughtfully. “Yep, its right dangerous not to know who you are and what the bad guys look like.”

“Um, Hendoeth, Tweek needs a little attention.” Ester said apprehensively as she slowly unfurled the bits of glass wrapped carefully in her feathers and set them on the saucer. It really wasn’t broken too badly Ambril could see it was a beautifully carved flower with just a couple of petals broken off. The flower looked familiar to her.

“Ah Liznockers!” Said Hendoeth, “Not again!” She bent over and examined the glass pieces. “Well, I wonder if Fixit Joe’s back yet. She’s more broken than not now.” Ambril leaned in closer and could now see there were many cracks which had been carefully mended running all through the flower. “If he ain’t, we’ll just have ta do our best I reckon.” Hendoeth said as she picked up one piece and experimentally tried to find the place it fit.

“Ya Okay in there, Tweek?” She bellowed unexpectedly as she put the piece down.

The glass glowed very faintly and there was a tinkle of bells as if in response. Hendoeth looked worriedly at it again and slowly nodded sadly. “And that’s all we ever get from you, isn’t it.” She turned and looked at the fireplace, which seemed to have gone cold.

“Is it warm enough in here? Teg!! More fire please, Honestly, he’s gotten so lazy now he’s nearing puberty. Give him a good poke with the tongs will you?” She shouted at the grandfather clock who put his clock face in the air and turned away. “No? Well alright then I will.” The old woman picked up the fire tongs and started poking around in the fireplace.

Ambril, curious leaned to one side and gasped. Curled up inside the flames was a pint-sized red dragon. It looked like it was asleep despite the rather vigorous jabs Hendoeth was giving it. It finally raised it’s head and yawned a spurt of flames and began to glow.

“Hey there Teggy, havin a snooze are ya? That’s right, we just needed a bit more---“ She was cut off by a massive sneeze and an explosion of flames. Hendoeth jumped back so quickly she lost her balance and fell over her feet waving in the air. Then there was a funny sort of snap. Hendoeth shrieked, “Oh Bandersnitches!, he’s gone and sneezed himself away agin.”

She heaved herself up. Ambril could now see an empty fireplace; the little dragon had vanished. “Best git some wood and light one the old fashioned way Cerreg. No tellin’ how long that fire brand will be gone away.” And then more to herself. “He’s been doin’ that more an more, wonder if it’s normal fer fire-dragons ta do that.”

There was a loud clash of chimes. “Me, why am I always the one!” The clock sniffed. After all I am quite flammable, why don’t’ you have Ester do it, she’s---“

“Cuz Ester does just ‘bout everything else round here.” Hendoeth rounded on the seven-foot tall clock staring at it so heatedly the clock actually began to wilt. Ambril could now make out two eyes in the elaborate carvings above the face, and a peevish mouth set in the clock face.

“No more complainin’ or I’ll getcha a nice job as a test subject for research involving improving the health of wood boring insects.” Hendoeth hollered.

The clock shivered making the jumbled chiming sound again and fairly jumped toward the fireplace. He set right to work building a fire.

“There now, things’ll be comfy in no time.” The old woman trotted over to the bed smiling widely. “Take another swig of this and a big bite a that. It’ll help, you know, nothin’s better ‘n a cuppa chocolate for what you’ve been through.” The small maple table leaned in and Ambril nearly spilled chocolate all over herself, when one of the table’s knotty eyes winked at her. She could feel the hot chocolate gently warming her from the head down and soon found she did feel much, much better.

“Yes, we have some explaining ta do, don’t we.” A chuckle came from Hendoeth but Ambril thought she even heard a hollow cackle coming from the room itself as well. The old woman heaved herself into a small chair near the bed keeping her smile toward Ambril. She poured herself a cup of hot chocolate and set her boots on the bed.

“Yes I see you’re wondering ” Who, What and How and maybe a little bit of Where but most of all, Why right?” She slapped her knee with her free hand. “Admirable questions though I won’t be able to answer all of them tonight. Matter of fact; don’t think I should anyhow. Some of those questions are for you to figure out yourself.” She mused and took another sip of chocolate considering the young kid in front of her.

“You’ve guessed by now that my name’s Hendoeth and this is my home, Fowlclun, I’m sure you’ve heard of us?” She gestured grandly at the room and paused to stare at Ambril intently but when Ambril made no sign of recognition she sighed.

 “No one seems to tell the old stories anymore.” The clock sniffed. “They’re too busy with those little blinky things, cell phones, gameboys, and such.” It had gotten a nice blaze going but now turned its face to the wall.

“No matter,” Hendoeth continued, waving away Cerrig’s attitude. “Well, you’ll have to look us up on that whatchamaninny thing, the innerweb.”

“Internet,” said Ambril proud she knew something this strange and clearly powerful person didn’t know.

But the old woman wasn’t interested. “Whatever, Fowlclun is on her way to deliver you back to your family and what’s left of your car.” She sniffed in an annoyed way as if cars were beneath her. “What’s your name, by the way?” She asked.

“It’s Ambril,” she paused and when Hendoeth looked expectantly at her. “ Ambril Derwyn.” She hastily added.

“Ha! I knew it!” Hendoeth’s boots stomped the floor loudly. “Didn’t I tell ye?” She rounded on Ester. “She’s Rosa’s kin!” Ester looked blank but gamely smiled.

Hendoeth looked appreciatively at Ambril. “Rosa Derwyn was your Great Gran right? She was a fair hand at using magic too, I’ll tell you that much.” She smiled broadly again at Ambril showing her missing tooth. “Best around of the human-kind, that’s fer sure.” She leaned back in her chair and took another sip of chocolate. There was another loud low squawk that shook the house again.

Hendoeth seemed to listen and consider it before saying. “Yep, course that’s true, she wasn’t really technically just a human-kind, at least not exclusiv—“

“Excuse me?” cut in Ambril. “Did you just say that my Grandmother wasn’t a…a human?”

“My, they haven’t told you nothin’, have they.” Hendoeth screwed up her face thinking. “Well we haven’t got time for all of it but-“ she pointed at Ambril’s chest. “Take out that there medallion thing.” She then picked up the teapot and poured herself another cup of hot chocolate. “Want sumore?” She waved it toward Ambril.

“No, No thanks.” Ambril had put her hand up protectively over the medallion under her shirt.

“Do you wanna know more about that thing? And how it helped save you from the ol’ Dullaith, or not?” said Hendoeth taking a loud slurpy sip. She waited patiently while Ambril thought a moment and then slowly pulled on the gold chain and brought out the medallion. It twinkled in the lantern light.

Ester gasped in amazement. “It looks a bit like Tweek!” She said.

Hendoeth did not look surprised. “Sure it does, that there’s fairy made, and Tweek has some of the fairy about her too. Your medallion has a name, its called the Ledrith Glain.”

Ambril looked down at the pretty disk in her hand and then at the broken glass flower on the table. They did look a little a like. Though her medallion was much flatter and less realistic, it was a carving of the same type of flower and made from the same stone.

“It marks you as fairy born, that you can wear that so easy.” Continued Hendoeth. “It would just spark and spit and misbehave for most of us. Meaning, you aren’t just human. I’d wager you’ve a fair lot of all four of the magical families, yessirree.” She twinkled at Ambril over her mug. “And believe me, that’s a very good thing!” She pointed at the foot of the bed.” “I betcha you got that pretty thing outta there, didn’t cha?”

Ambril looked down and found her puzzle box near her left foot. She picked it up and shoved it under the covers possessively.

“Ha! no worries, sweetie.” Hendoeth giggled like a schoolgirl her whole face a basket of wrinkles. “I couldn’t make that thing work no matter how hard I tried.” She slapped her knee, “As if I would want to.” She shook her head at Ambril, “Nah, that’s your little adventure maker, sweet pea,” she reached over and patted the fuzzy wall. “I got my own to worry about, and she’s a site more trouble, lemme tell you!”

There was a loud, injured squawk and the house dipped to the right. Making Ambril take a firmer grip on her cocoa.

“I’m jus’ teasin’ don’t go and git your tail feathers in a snag over it.” Said Hendoeth barely keeping herself from falling off her chair.

“Do you mean, that this—“ she searched for the right word. “Puzzle box made the monster come and—“

“Hold on, hold on, Noooo, And that there puzzle box has a name too, it’s called an Ashera. Ya best use its proper name or it’ll get ornery after a while.” Said Hendoeth. “It won’t ever help you do evil, no sirree. Nor will it help you with anythin’ other than what your supposed to do together.” Hendoeth winked at Ambril. “And no, I have no idea what that might be.”

Ambril thought about this for a bit and pulled the Ashera out into the light again. “So exactly what is an Ashera again?” she asked

It’s a sort of tool, and it has a very particular reason to have jumped into your life.“ Hendoeth crossed her boots and leaned back in her chair. “ They come in different sizes and shapes and are given only to those who have the chutzpah to use ‘em.” She pointed at Ambril. “They’re old and made from a very special sort of tree. And.” Hendoeth crossed her legs getting comfortable now. “Since you’re also fairy born, ya got that Glain too.”

 She paused and her eyes narrowed. “It’s quite a combination, there, mighty powerful.” She scrunched up her face, thinking hard. “I can’t recollect a time myself when both were given to the same magic user, and a kid at that.” She looked speculatively at Ambril. “Nope, there are big doings in your future, darlin’. But I don’t envy you, that’s fer sure.”

Ambril suddenly felt cold. What was going on? She was just a regular kid who was until that morning living a very boring, usual life. Then all of a sudden she’s fighting a monster, rolling along in some sort of living trailer and talking to furniture. “Well, what if I don’t want to, you know go through with this?” Fowclun dipped again and she let the Ashera lying in her lap gently roll away to the foot of the bed.

“I’m pretty sure that whoever’s in charge of these things made a mistake with me, I’m not special, in fact I’m not really good at much of anything, really.” She said anxiously. This was embarrassing; she just wanted to go home, wherever that was now.

“Don’t think we all haven’t tried that.” Hendoeth’s face was suddenly serious. “Don’t think that every one of us that’s been called out hasn’t wanted to just step back a bit and let some one else take it on at one time or another.” She wagged her head at Ambril.

“The point of fact is, kid that you, whether you wanted it or not have been tagged for this adventure. Ain’t another waiting in the wings.” She scratched her nose thoughtfully. “You do have a choice, though. You can quit if you’ve a mind to, go back to your usual stuff, become a doctor or an accountant, live like any other human-kind.” Hendoeth slowly smiled at her. “You know, just be normal.” Hendoeth sniffed. “The question is, now you know can you be happy with normal?” She squinted gleefully at Ambril but then grew serious.

“The ‘tother thing you should know is you ain’t gonna get much help with your adventure.” She paused here and looked a bit sad. “Not because we don’t wanna help ya, but because we won’t know how to.” Hendoeth jabbed her finger toward her. “In fact, kid, you are the only one that can walk your own shoes down this path.” She took her boots off the bed and drew herself up in her seat. “Just like your great grandma before you and her great-great auntie Lullabelle, and then your great-great-great grandfather---“ She scrunched up her forehead in thought. “I forget his name, it’s an unbroken chain of Derwyn’s that goes back to the first families.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s part of your own heritage, sweetie, and a might fine one at that.”

She leaned in toward Ambril her bright eyes boring into her. “You wouldn’t wanna disappoint all them relatives now, would ya?” Keeping her eyes on Ambril she smiled. “Then there’s the small matter of yer Daddy as well.” She pulled back suddenly as the house started to slow and then with a lot of creaking and groaning the house suddenly stopped moving and was quiet.

Hendoeth still had her eyes on Ambril. “Well?”

Ambril looked at the crazy old woman who was trying to intimidate her. It made her really mad that she thought she was trying to gently bully her into this and even madder that she had succeeded. But at the same time she really was interested in finding out more about this side of herself and she had to admit she was a little curious about her family.

“What was that about my Dad?” She asked feeling around for the Ashera. She felt a sudden relief when it was back in her hands.

Hendoeth blinked and nodded as she slowly got up from her chair. “Now that’s just a guess, mind ya. But I’m thinkin’ that not everything is known about what happened that night your Daddy died. I don’t have time to tell ya more, you’ll have to find out about it on your own.“ She carefully began to collect Tweek’s broken pieces. “But, there’s a possibility that you might could fix it so he’s remembered for who he was rather than what he got mixed up in.” She looked hard again at Ambril as she set Tweek aside. “So what do ya say, darlin’, ya in?”

Ambril swallowed hard and nodded. “I’m in.”

The door opened suddenly and a Native American with a long ponytail stood there. He stood very still but gave the impressive of power and readiness; like a warrior. There was a second man standing just behind him, a man dressed in black with a long thin nose. They both stared at Ambril.

“Someone called a Dullaith.” The first spoke in a low resonant voice.

“Yep, and this one fixed it.” Said Hendoeth jerking her thumb at Ambril.

Ambril, this here’s Koda, and Siddhart.” She turned toward the men. The two men nodded at her.

The one called Koda examined her closely. “How did one so small—“

The one in back named Siddhart interrupted, “Glad to see you made it alright, Ambril.” He spoke in a high reedy screech. “I wish I’d been there when the Dullaith came. That was unexpected.” He lowered his head and shook it.

“Surprised everyone didn’t it!” Said Hendoeth. “Hey,” she turned back to Ambril. “What exactly happened back there? We were kind of late for the party.”

Ambril shrugged and told them she remembered about the explosion and the Dullaith forming and the strange box hitting the car. They seemed to know all about the Ashera and her medallion, which made her feel better as she’d promised Chao Feng NOT to talk about it.

 Ambril then described how it attacked and chased her and how she used the Ashera finally to end it. She started to feel dizzy again and so tired when she remembered how the Dullaith smelled and how it made her feel.

“Okay, that’s enough! Just look at her!” The feather duster jumped on the bed between Ambril and the others.

”Yes! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, she needs to find her family and get a good night’s rest.” Maple jumped up and down on her spindly little legs spilling hot chocolate all over the place.

“Course, you’re right,” said Hendoeth. “Sorry deary, just got so interested in it all,” she up-ended herself and rummaged around under the bed coming up with Ambril’s sneakers. “We’ll talk agin afore too long.” She handed Ambril her shoes and watched her slip them on. “Koda and Siddhart will take it from here.” She said helping Ambril to her feet. “I wouldn’t go jawing about all this Dullaith stuff too much,” she said to her in a low voice. “The townsfolk just won’t understand and it’ll dredge up old fears and troubles.”

Ambril wobbled a bit on her own feet, but she felt better as she walked toward the door.

The door opened onto a welcoming cabin in the forest. There were lights on in the windows and smoke coming from the chimney. There were several lanterns hanging from the trees, which lighted the neat and tidy yard. There was a big barn off to one side. On top of it, framed against the moon was a huge weather vane, a wolf dancing with a bird.

“Holler if ya need help, specially if yer in trouble. Hendoeth slapped her on the back as she went through the door. “Bye Kid.”

“Bye, thanks everyone!” Ambril walked down the steps and turned to wave goodbye to Fowlclun. But the words “Thank you” stuck in her throat as she did so, however. Fowlclun was indeed a house. It appeared to be made of wood but when Ambril looked closer, the boards were lined with tiny feathers. There was the large red door than Ambril had just walked out of with an ancient brass knocker right in the center that quivered a bit. There were also two windows with lacey white curtains on either side of the door. It appeared to be lodged between two huge yellow chicken feet.

As Ambril stared dumbstruck, the house began to move. It shook itself a bit and winked at her with one lacey curtain, and then it slowly rose to its full height. The brick chimney going up on side wobbled a bit, Ambril noticed. Standing, Fowlclun brushed the highest treetops. Ambril was staring nearly straight up at it, amazed. The chicken legs underneath looked scrawny and around one knobby knee was a dirty bandage. Fowlclun nodded to her and Ambril couldn’t help but nod back finally remembering to close her mouth. Turned slowly and trumpeting hollowly, Fowlclun carefully began to pick its way through the shadowy forest, limping slightly. In an instant it was gone.

**Chapter 7 Rosebud**

“I’d better stay with Aster, she needs tending.” Siddhart said to Koda. He smiled quickly at Ambril, inclined his head and walked quickly toward the house.

“Come, we hurry now. I bet you’re family is getting worried. ” Said Koda. He turned then and picked up a large bicycle that had been leaning against the side of the barn. “We ride Rosebud.”

Even in the flattering glow of the lanterns above, Rosebud was no peach of a bicycle. It looked to be about 50 years old, had been dinged and scratched so it was difficult to read its name written across the front of its basket in overdone, curlicue writing. The basket made out of some sort of wood, was also adorned with a trailing, flowering vine. “It was a hand-me down, from my sister.” Koda said somewhat sheepishly.

There was only one seat so Ambril stood awkwardly, wondering how they were going to do this when a long thick vine shot out from the bike and wrapped itself around her. When she was tightly bound it reeled her in and deposited her in the big basket attacked to the front of the bike.

“Rosebud, be gentle.”

For a short moment, Ambril thought about screaming, wriggling free and threatening a lawsuit not necessarily in that order. But she reconsidered after thinking about it. Perhaps she was getting used to strange happenings. She looked around to see who or what Koda was talking to.

 A large pink bud had reared up inches from her nose and seemed to be studying her intently. For a moment or two it seemed to sniff her then with a tiny toss of its flower head it seemed to decide that she was no threat. The vine binding her loosened and she found herself surrounded with tiny flower buds all extremely and impolitely curious. They sniffed at her and entwining themselves in her hair. They pulled at her clothes, poked her in the eye and peered into her ears. They wound themselves around the Ashera, which began to glow faintly and brought out her medallion. It was annoying and it tickled. But the flowers smelled like lilacs and orange sherbet so it was hard to stay angry at them. Soon Ambril began to giggle.

“Behave yourself Rosebud.” Said Koda sternly. To Ambril he said. “Sorry, you’re new to her, she means no harm.“

“So what exactly is she?” asked Ambril eyeing the large pink bud apprehensively as the tiny buds gently smoothed out her hair and tucked her medallion back under her shirt. They wrapped themselves gently around her like a safety belt.

“This is good question,” said Koda musingly. “Better to think of her as part of nature’s spirit.” He finally said after a long pause. “All of nature’s things have a spirit, it’s just that some are more awake than others.” He steadied the bike.

“Rosebud is sometimes,” Koda gave one of the flower buds a tweak. “Too much alive. ” He grunted as he pressed hard on the pedal and they began to glide silently through the forest. As they picked up speed, Koda hummed tunelessly.

“So, do you know anything about that, um Dullaith thing?” Asked Ambril timidly. ”I’m a little worried that it might come back, you know and I, well I really need to know more about it.” She looked up at his impassive face.

He continued to hum as if he hadn’t heard her.

“I just want to be prepared, just in case I have to do that again I’ll be—“

“There are very few human-kind who face such a demon and walk away.” Koda interrupted. “You were lucky.” He sounded almost angry. “But it should never have happened.” The bike bumped over some rough stones and Koda turned his attentions to controlling the bike. “One so young and unknown to the ways of magic---It is a poor welcome we have given you. I’m sorry for my part in it.” He looked embarrassed as he pedaled for a few moments in silence. “We have all grown careless and let distractions cloud our eyes.” His eyebrows drew together in thought. “A Dullaith is an ancient dark creature which would have fed off you until death had you not used your Ashera.” He looked at her appraisingly. “Did the Ledrith Glain help you?”

Ambril thought about it and shrugged. “I remember this power surge starting somewhere around here,” she pointed to her chest, “and moving through me and out the Ashera.”

Koda was silent for a long time as they continued to move smoothly through the forest. They were going surprisingly fast. The moonlight made flickering shadows on her face. She could see they were now parallel to the road.

“That explains it then, the medallion lent you its power.” Koda nodded sagely. “A small slip of a human-kind would have had only enough power to last a few seconds. Not enough time to take down a Dullaith.”

Ambril thought back on the first few sparks she had made and how drained she had felt and realized that Koda must be right. The medallion had been the source of energy she had channeled through the Ashera. She instinctively reached up and patted the medallion warm against her chest.

They were quiet for a bit. Ambril decided that that was how Koda was, a quiet, comfortable sort of person. She relaxed fully and leaned back against the vines. They seemed to snuggle into her.

She cradled the Ashera to her chest. It was funny how important it had become to her in such a short time. It had been only that morning that she had first laid eyes on it, and now. The Ashera suddenly flashed. Sparks flew out making the flowers at her shoulder recoil.

Koda grunted in surprise and anger and Ambril peered ahead to see what was going on. There was a building smoldering and smoking just ahead. Fire trucks were everywhere and there were several jets of water still aimed at the roof. Lit by several flood lights on the fire engines, the fire appeared to be out. But that wasn’t what had made Ambril suddenly rigid with fear, it was an all too familiar smell, the smell of fetid sewers, the smell of the Dullaith. Not as strong this time, it was an stale, lingering smell.

Koda slowed the bike well away from the building. “You stay here,” he said, leaning the bike against a tree. ”Not safe.” He nodded to the large pink bud who nodded back before striding off toward the fire.

Ambril was disgusted. She wanted to go investigate too, after all she had just battled a huge evil monster, how unsafe could a fire scene be? She struggled to get up but realized that, gentle though the flowers were, they weren’t about to let her loose. They tightened their grip and loved her a little harder every time she tried to break free. She sat back nonplussed to think.

She simply had to find out more about the Dullaith. Knowledge was the best protection, right? But how to get out of this entanglement without hurting the nice, little, clinging vines? She struggled again and felt the Ashera jostling around in her lap. A light bulb went on over her head.

She relaxed and smiled at the large bud who was studiously ignoring her, and snuggled back into the vines while she slowly picked up her Ashera and pointed it towards herself. She braced herself before willing the Ashera for just a little show of strength.

She was immediately doused with a spray of stinging sparks. Coughing and gagging she reached up and felt for her eyebrows, they were mostly there. Luckily the vines had recoiled from the sparks just as she had hoped. Ambril had just enough time to leap out of the basket before they recovered their composure. She hit the ground and ran toward the now steaming building keeping her head down and trying to stay hidden in the underbrush. The firefighters had shut off the water hoses by then. Most of them were congregated near the road, but there were two men behind the building talking. Ambril paused to listen.

“—Fair job they did of it too,” came an unfamiliar voice ahead. It sounded like an elderly man. “—A Shadow Gant, the ancient writing all around accurate to the letter, “ he continued. “And written in fairy blood.”

Ambril breathed in sharply, she was revolted. Especially now she knew she was one, at least partly.

“How did they learn all of this?” Ambril recognized Koda’s voice and crawled nearer.

“I expect from what was stolen from the archives last month.” The older man’s voice was grim. “And using this contraption.” Ambril could just make out the metal box the figure held up. She recognized it immediately as the box that had shattered their windshield earlier.

Koda nodded. “It’s the Morte Cell, The one that was lost.” He said sounding distant.

“Found it next to a car the Dullaith apparently demolished. Why I don’t know. But there is enough magical power in a fairy to fuel ten Dullaiths, I reckon. Even after losing that amount of blood.” His arm spread out to his side, he seemed to be looking at the ground in front of him. “The fairy got away just in time. I found shards of gemstone where it had begun to transform.”

He sighed heavily and scratched his head. “Whoever they are, they are well informed, smart and resourceful.” He continued. “We are going to have to be extremely vigilant.” He pocketed the box. “We’ll have to step up security at the Archives, though I don’t think we’ll get much support from the Library.” The older man’s voice murmured. “Maybe a private donation…?”

They seemed to be looking at something on the ground.

“I’m pretty sure this isn’t the last we’ll see of this. I don’t think they got what he wanted this time, whatever it was.” The older man scratched his beard. “That Dullaith got distracted by something and went off into the forest.”

Koda nodded and said nothing. Ambril realized that she of course had been the distraction and was glad that Koda was the strong silent type and didn’t mention her.

The men started scuffing around in the dirt. Ambril risked rising up above the bushes to sneak a peek. What she saw startled her. There was a glowing circle with symbols and writing around it painted right on the ground. Ambril cringed to think that it was painted with the blood of a cute little Tinkerbelle.

At the same time she became aware of someone or something hiding in the bushes near her. He or she appeared to be listening and watching just as she was. Ambril craned her neck to get a better look at the shadowy figure but as she did so a branch snapped just behind her and she felt something tightening around her arm. She whirled around expecting to defend herself against a hulking thug but instead she found Rosebud glaring at her.

Rosebud was quivering with indignation. The bicycle lay just beyond her, covered with leaves and twigs. If a bicycle could look angry, it certainly did. Ambril could feel Rosebud’s vines swiftly wrapping around her and before she could blink she had been whisked back into the basket and was firmly strapped in. In face more than firmly, she couldn’t move, not even her pinky.

Just before the bicycle wheeled itself away Ambril scanned the shadows for the mystery figure. It had disappeared, of course.

She tried to sound apologetic. “Sorry, no offense, really,” she tried to shrug but found she couldn’t move a muscle as the bud eyeing her triumphantly. “It’s just that I had to know what was going on.” She continued. “That thing, you know, the Dullaith thing? It tried to eat me!” She was going for dramatic.

But Rosebud wasn’t having any of it. She entwined herself around Ambril until only the middle of her face was visible. “Don’t you think you’re going a little far with this?” said Ambril gritting her teeth. Rosebud slowly shook her head.

The bike backed itself up until it leaned itself innocently against the tree where Koda left them. Then they waited…and waited for what seemed like an age. Ambril’s nose itched of course, and a small bud had wriggled itself under her armpit, which tickled. But there was no way she was about to show Rosebud her discomfort.

Finally Koda returned. He was so preoccupied with what he had seen that he didn’t notice Ambril’s predicament. Nor did Ambril want to point it out to him. He’d ask too many questions. The bike started out again smoothly gliding through the forest. After a few minutes, however, Koda looked down and cleared his throat. The vines grudgingly loosened themselves, enough for Ambril to stretch a bit and scratch her nose.

 “So Koda, is everyone in Trelawnyd, you know, a magician?” She asked. She was a little concerned that everyone would know more than she did and she would again be an outsider. Not that she wasn’t used to that feeling.

Koda snorted. “Magic-wielders, not magicians. No rabbits jumping out of hats here. But no, Trelawnyd folk are like everyone else these days, not paying attention.” He looked up suddenly at the stars showing through the treetops. “They use only the magic they know and understand,” he continued. “Technology is your name for this human-kind magic.” He shrugged. It’s plenty useful, but a shame for Trelawnyd folk who happen to have other powers.” He looked at Ambril solidly. “It is the way now, here, yes. Human-kind have turned away from Trelawnyd magic.”

The bike suddenly banked to the left and they rode out onto the road. Ambril could see the flashing lights of a police car and her mother’s silhouette waving her arms frantically.

“I think things change now.” He said tersely as he began to slow the bike. “I think it is the only way.” Just as they coasted to a stop, he added. “Best not to tell your family everything, she not understand.”

So not everyone in Trelawnyd was well versed in magic, thought Ambril.

**Chapter 8 Roadside Stand**

“Ambril! My baby!” Shrieked her mother as she flew towards them. Ambril was engulfed in a huge, teary hug and wrenched from the basket. She could feel the vines slipping away as she shoved the Ashera into the waistband of her jeans and covered it with her shirt. “Where have you been? Darling. AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CAR!”

“Mom, I just got scared and ran. Sorry. How’s Zane?” Asked Ambril her face squashed against her mother’s shoulder.

“What scared you? WHAT HAPPENED!” Her mother shrieked again.

“It was the---um---the fire! Something exploded and a piece of it flew into the windshield and cracked it.” Ambril managed to pry herself loose. “It sort of freaked me out and…I---just ran.” Ambril shrugged her shoulders in a dopey way which she hoped her mother would find endearing. “I really wasn’t thinking.”

“Oohhhh, you poor thing!” said her Mom launching herself on her daughter again for another long, claustrophobic hug. “I found your brother petrified hunkering down under a tree. I don’t know what he saw that scared him so badly but he’s been as quiet as a mouse ever since.” Her mother looked over her shoulder at Zane who was leaning against the police car watching the tow truck working on their car. “We’ll have to talk some more about all of this.”

She paused to squint at their car lying like a dead animal, it’s belly exposed on the side of the road. “So when you ran into the forest the car had been smashed, right?” Ambril took a big breath and tried to think of something convincing, but her mother didn’t expect an answer and continued. “I don’t know how it turned itself over like that, it has been the weirdest evening, hasn’t it?”

Ambril sure agreed with that. She could also now see the tall slim form of Feldez standing near the tow truck, his arms folded, looking annoyed with everything.

“Thank you for bringing my daughter –Oh! It’s you Koda!” said her mother and she flung her arms around him too.

Koda looked startled. A man unaccustomed to hugs.

“Tylia, you’re home,” he said gruffly, clearly uncomfortable.

“Yes, I guess I am.” Her mother’s reply was muffled. She pulled away from Koda and tried to tidy herself up, not very successfully, however. Her hair was ratted with leaves and there were twigs sticking out of odd places; poking out of her shirtsleeves and messing up her shoelaces. Her face was smeared with mud and tears. But she managed to smile up at him.

Koda patted her fondly. “You need to get your family home safe.” He said as he turned Rosebud around. “No blame to you, this not your fault.” He looked past Ambril at Feldez standing there, observing them but gave him no sign of acknowledgment. He did give a quick smile to Ambril before he pushed off with Rosebud wagging its head at Ambril like an annoyed School.

Ambril watched them glide off back into the forest before walking over to the thoroughly wrecked car. She wanted one last look. The tow truck driver had finally managed to turn it right side up and was getting ready to hoist it up with his towing rig. The windshield was nearly gone now, strewn all over the roadway in tiny glass lumps. Ambril wAs about to turn away when something caught her eye. A shimmering too-small piece of cloth had snagged itself on one of the windshield wipers.

“Hey, gotta move kid.” Shouted the tow truck driver. “Don’t’ want to drag you along too.”

Ambril quickly reached over and grabbed the little bit of whatever it was and shoved it into her pocket. She reached in through the empty window. “Just want to get my back pack.” She said as she retrieved it and then gave the old car a pat, which of course made the rest of the windshield collapse spectacularly. The driver laughed.

“You gotta way with cars, kid!” He continued to chuckle. “Ya should see your face! Like it was a monster or somethin’”.

“Ah no, I don’t think that this is exactly what I’d look like if I thought it was a monster, No.” She smiled and waved at him as he scratched his head at her. She went to lean with Zane.

Zane looked a little pale but avoided her eyes, clearly not wanting to talk about anything. They both watched silently as the driver flipped a switch and the front of the car slowly began to rise.

“Well you two have had quite an evening, haven’t you?” Suddenly Feldez was there looming in front of them both. “What were you two thinking bolting into the forest that way?” He bent at them his eyes cold and hard. “You fairly drove your mother insane with worry.”

He sniffed as he towered over Ambril. “And we need to know what happened to the car, Ambril,” it sounded as if he thought she had single-handedly bashed the windshield and flipped it over herself.

Ambril’s face began to get hot as her anger rose. “I’d rather talk to my Mom about it, it’s really her car anyway,” she said defiantly.

Feldez’s face was instantly a mask of rage. Ambril instinctively shrank from him. Zane slide up next to her, protectively.

“Come on, Feldez,” said Zane quietly. “It was probably a hit and run driver, like the mechanic said.” Zane shoved his hands in his pocket and looked up at the much taller man. “He said there have been a lot of hit and runs lately on this road.” He smirked. “You really don’t think that Ambril did this herself, do you?” He asked in disbelief. She doesn’t even know how to turn the car on.”

Feldez backed off a bit and wiped the anger from his face. “No, no of course she had nothing to do with it.” He said but his voice was still tight with anger. “Well, we’ll still have to have further discussions about your inconsiderate behavior,” he pursed his lips and marched over to Ambril’s mother.

Ambril couldn’t wait any longer. She had to know if Zane had seen anything. “I---I had the weirdest thing happen to me, Did you—?“ began Ambril

“Quiet, he’ll hear you,” whispered Zane savagely. “We’ll talk later, after they’ve gone to sleep.” With that he quickly walked away.

So he had seen something, but he didn’t want to talk about it, big surprise. Ambril felt more alone than ever. She took a deep breath and blew out hard. She would just have to wait until he was ready to talk. Though she was getting the feeling that he wasn’t going to be much help either.

The tow truck had finished winching up the car and was just pulling away when Feldez waved Ambril and Zane over to his sleek sedan. It smelled of leather and after-shave. Ambril let herself sink down into the comfy seat as the car pulled away.

A few minutes later her mother said, “What’s that?”

They were passing by the burned out building Ambril had seen earlier. The fire trucks had just about finished. From the front the blackened remains looked like it had been a store of some kind.

“It’s the Tupelo’s roadside stand. They’re local farmers,” sighed Feldez. “It’s a shame, really,” he continued. “They had the best produce in the area,” he nodded to a group of people standing near the road. “I hope they can rebuild.”

As the car drove slowly by Ambril could see a couple of dazed looking adults and a girl about her age looking very sad. As she watched a boy walked up carrying a cat and gave it to the girl who suddenly smiled and hugged it to herself. A firefighter was shaking the hand of a geeky looking, skinny kid with longish dark hair.

Ambril wondered if she would see them at school in a couple of days. She yawned suddenly and laughed. Starting a new school seemed to be the least of her worries now.

The road wound around through the forest for a while but soon began to straighten and widen. The moonlit countryside began to take on a well-tended look. There were suddenly more farms and sleepy looking farmhouses which soon gave way to bunches of houses on quiet side streets complete with lawns and garages. Feldez then turned off the main road and let the car wind around a small hill. It stopped in front of a sleek modern home near the top.

“It’s beautiful honey!” Said Ambril’s Mom as they stepped out. “Well, kids, here we are! Our new home.” She pulled a twig crawling with fuzzy caterpillars out of her hair.

**Chapter 9 The House that Feldez Built, a face of evil**

It was a shiny, boxy sort of house thought Ambril spaced well back from the trees surrounding it. Ambril hated the house on principle. But she had to admit it looked nice in an overly processed sort of way. Inside the stone floors gleamed. All surfaces were free of clutter, every corner free of dust. But as Ambril looked around she noticed there wasn’t an interesting nook anywhere to read or draw or just think. Just inside the door her mother collapsed on a sleek red sofa. But she immediately groaned as she sat up again stretching her back.

“Comfy?” said Zane sarcastically.

Ambril realized that the furniture too had lots of interesting angles but no comfortable spots to curl up in. Ambril’s mother gave Zane a dirty look and began pulling strenuously on the twigs stuck in her filthy shoelaces. Feldez walked in absently shuffling through some papers in his hands. “Welcome,” he said still looking at his papers. He turned and blanched when he saw his fiance’s condition and what she was crawling off her onto his sofa. “Darling! Perhaps you’d like to get right into a bath and take off the top layer of filth.” He said wrinkling his nose and tugging her up off the sofa.

Ambril’s mother let herself be dragged across the room. “Oh, I must look a sight,” she said self-consciously. Feldez gestured to the steel and stone staircase. “I think you need to take a nice long soak, I’ll get you a glass of wine.” They walked up the steps together, Feldez leading Ambril’s mother and Zane trailing behind. “I think a good night’s rest is what everyone needs, right?”

Even though Ambril was desperate to hear what had happened to make Zane so crazy she had to admit she was exhausted. She succumbed to a gigantic yawn and stretched before she followed the others upstairs. The house really was well built. Spacious, no expense spared anywhere. Ambril found her room. It had bookshelves clear across one wall and a big long writing surface. The bed looked unusually comfortable with lots of pillows tossed around, her mother’s idea Ambril thought for sure. The movers had already been there and there was a pile of boxes and bags in the middle of the room. She took three steps into the room, dumped her backpack on the bed and collapsed. Her eyes closed immediately.

She was awakened sometime later by quick steps in fine Italian leather, unmistakably Feldez in the hallway. They passed by and went on down the stairs. She heard the front door click.

Ambril checked the clock on the bedside table. Where was he going at midnight? She didn’t have much time to ponder as a moment later she heard another set of footsteps padding down the hall. Her door slowly opened.

“Hungry?” Asked her mother as she cinched her robe tighter and smiled. “Let’s go raid the frig.” Zane slouched by behind her she could hear him taking the stairs two at a time.

Ambril discovered that she was indeed famished and bounced off the bed.

“Honey, you’re not even out of those dirty clothes.” Her mother picked a dead leaf out of Ambril’s hair and frowned. “Jump in the shower before bed, Okay?” She brushed something off Ambril’s shoulder. “Feldez is a stickler for neat and clean, you know.”

Ambril rolled her eyes, but not so her Mom could see and nodded her head. They hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen.

At least Feldez was good at food. The kitchen was stocked with all sorts of goodies. Ambril got out the peanut butter and jelly and made herself a sandwich while her mother found some apple cider to warm and Zane ate more strawberries than he washed.

“What would you do without us, Honey?” Said Ambril’s Mom playfully winking at Zane as she set a mug of hot apple cider in front of him.

“I’d be back in San Francisco, free of this place.” He growled.

Ambril’s mother made a face at him.

“I did have another talk with Feldez and we both agreed that maybe using his name wasn’t a very good idea.” She patted both their shoulders as she sat down. “So we will still be Derwyn’s until just after the wedding. And,” she added hastily when Zane suddenly looked up angrily. “It will be your choice to change your name then or not.” She smiled brightly at them.

Zane snorted again.

“Zane, please, we have to work at this,” Ambril’s mother pleaded. “This is not just about being happy today, this is about making ourselves more comfortable with the rest of our lives.” She tried to pat his shoulder but he slid out of her reach. “Alright, Zane, you’re right, this is my fault. I’ve been running away from this place, trying to forget what happened since we left.” Her shoulders tightened and her eyebrows twitched. She looked at her son searching for something, ”We have to face this together.” She pleaded.

“Face what?” asked Ambril angrily as she plunked a plateful of sandwiches next to the strawberries. “What are you guys always not talking about? It’s so confusing!” she said angrily. “Don’t I have a right to know?”

Ambril’s mother jumped as if Ambril had pinched her. “I think, darling that this is not something you will have to worry about.” She smiled at her. “You were so young, only three when it happened, the kids at school won’t remember.”

She patted her daughter’s unruly hair as she pulled away. “What’s past is past, I think.” She continued squaring her shoulders. “And that goes for us too, Zane. It happened ten years ago.” She picked up a strawberry. “There may be a little weirdness at first, but everyone will get over it at some point.” She took a huge breath. “And then we’ll finally be through it all.”

Zane grunted as he inhaled half a sandwich. “When pigs fly, Mom, you must be crazy to think these people will forgive and forget,” he said nastily. “That isn’t gonna happen.” He finished the rest of his sandwich and picked up another. “You know you should tell her now. Mom before someone else does.” He stood up quickly still munching. Ambril was suddenly aware at how tall he had gotten. “They’ll add stuff to the story, you know how evil he must have been to do what he did, how it was such a shame he was killed because it would have been nice to have seen him hang.” Zane’s eyes were just pools of anger and pain. “You’d better tell her all about it so she’s prepared for her first day of school. Boy, I’m really looking forward to it!” He grabbed another sandwich and stormed out.

Her mother’s face went deathly white and for a moment Ambril thought she was going to faint. But she recovered enough to smile unconvincingly at Ambril.

“Mom, come on! You have to tell me! What was Zane talking about?” Ambril asked anxiously.

Her mother hugged herself hard and looked after her son. After a long moment she looked at Ambril and her eyes softened. She smiled sadly at her.

“Zane is upset because of how---or rather---that---your father...” She faltered a bit but then looked Ambril straight in the eyes and continued. It’s-- It’s just that your father died in unusual circumstances, darling.” She absently tucked her hair behind one ear. “The explosion? Some people thought at the time, that he might have been working on something dangerous. Something that put everyone here at risk.” She hesitated and then went on. “But the people who really knew him,” she continued. “We knew he would never have gotten involved in something like that.” She looked distractedly at the hall again. “I do think it might be better if you started school without knowing any more about it though, I really do, honey.”

Ambril was stunned and so frustrated and angry she couldn’t get any words out. What was she five years old? Of course she should be told everything!

But her mother took her silence as agreement and standing up she gave her daughter one last pat on the head. “I have to talk to Zane a bit more.”

“But Mom! I need to know this stuff! Something happened in the forest---“

But her mother quietly put her hand to her lips and stopped her there. “We’ll talk more later, sweetie, I promise.” She said distractedly as she walked out.

Ambril put her half eaten sandwich back on the plate with the others and tipped them into the trash. She had lost her appetite.

She went out into the hallway and was about to go up the stairs when she happened to see a light on in a room she hadn’t noticed before. She was just curious, she told herself later, she didn’t mean to snoop, really. It was more like---exploration. She opened the door wider and saw it was an office, Feldez’s office.

To her amazement it was really a mess. There were large stacks of papers everywhere. Dog-eared maps, ancient drawings and some rolls of parchment tied with string were shoved into a corner. A large bookcase stuffed with odd, old books sat behind the desk. A laptop teetered on top of a stack of faded blueprints. Ambril thought that this room was by far the most interesting part of the house.

 The blueprints really interested Ambril so she ventured farther into the room to investigate. They were very, very old. As she looked closer she discovered that they were not of a building but the layout of a village with every house given a name. Ambril leaned in closer and just happened to jiggle the drawings enough for the laptop screen to come alive. Ambril froze. There on the screen was an image of the Dullaith.

Ambril started to breath again only when she realized it was just an image, she felt a little silly, after all it was just a picture, it couldn’t hurt her, could it?

She looked at it closely. It was really a good likeness, smoke hemmed in with bright cobweb-like lines which curled and traced all through it, Like a skin ornamented with tattoos over a mass of billowing smoke. It was chillingly beautiful when it wasn’t trying to kill you, she decided. Underneath the image was the letter ‘V’ and the number 1 which meant nothing to Ambril. Six in Roman Numerals flanked by skull and crossbones. She was about to tap the keyboard to see what else she could find when she heard a door slam and expensive shoe footsteps echoed down the hall.

She raced for the door and darted through into the kitchen just as Feldez rounded the corner. He looked at her surprised and then annoyed. “What are you doing up at this hour?” His eyes took in her dirty jeans and shirt. “And you’re in need of a shower,” he ordered. Without missing a beat he swiftly turned into his office, and stopped.

He half turned toward Ambril, his face stiff. “Have you been in here?” He accused.

“Well, I---I just wanted to see what was in there.“ Stuttered Ambril.

Feldez’s face was grotesquely angry for a half second until he was able to smooth it away. “Since this is your first night here, allowances have to be made, I expect.” He said his smile twisting across his face. “But in the future, this is my PRIVATE study, it’s strictly off limits! Under no circumstances are you ever to enter. Is that clear?” His eyes narrowed.

Ambril knew at that moment that there never would be an instant of time in their lives that they were going to like each other, not even just a little bit.

“Yes sir, I understand, Feldez.” Said Ambril nervously. She quickly skittered up the stairs as fast as she could. When in her room she stood a moment with her back pressed against the door.

Was Feldez mixed up with the monster that had tried to kill her? She shook her head. Why? What exactly was the monster after? And why had it come after her? She screwed up her face.

It was so incredibly frustrating; she didn’t know where to begin to start to unravel everything. Her brother was clearly freaked out about something involving her father. Then she remembered Hendoeth had said something about how her Dad might have gotten mixed up in something by mistake. Did it involve the Dullaith? And now Feldez...

She jammed her hands deep into her pockets and surprised, pulled out the piece of cloth she had found stuck to the windshield wiper back on the old car. She held it up to the light and saw that it was a little boot of some kind. An iridescent blue-green, it shimmered in the light. It had a quaint row of silver buttons up one side and a symbol written on the top face. Ambril examined it for a little while. It was worn on the bottom and there seemed to be a hole on the pointy end. Puzzled, she set it on the bedside table.

She felt a little nauseous and realized that she needed to get some sleep pronto. She showered and changed quickly. When she tossed her backpack off the bed something clanged inside. It was her robot, fLit. She fished it out and set it carefully on her otherwise empty desktop and crawled under her crisp, clean sheets. She would hopefully have some time tomorrow to figure out how the thing worked. Something to take her mind off all the foul smelling monsters, talking furniture, houses on chicken legs, and angry bicycles. Her mind began to drift.

**Chapter 10 An overheard conversation and Zane finally talks**

But Ambril couldn’t get to sleep. Everything kept swirling around in her head. So this was her heritage, Huh? She really needed to know what had happened to her Dad. She lay awake a long time staring at the smooth, ceiling and listening to the hum of the clock next to her bed. She was just dozing off when she heard voices. They were arguing. She slipped from her bed and put her ear to her door.

“It’s not possible, Zane, it was dark, you were angry, and in a strange place. You were bound to mistake what you saw,” it was Feldez’s voice.

“I know what I saw---are you calling me a liar?” Zane sounded angry and hurt.

“No, No certainly not, it’s just that you haven’t spent much time in that forest, Zane, it could have just been a trick of the eye, a swaying tree making an odd shadow, it could have been anything,” Feldez paused. “I just don’t think it likely that it was what you think it was.”

“I remember, Feldez, I was there, remember?” Zane practically hissed at him.

The tone of Feldez’s voice veered to ominous. “You know what it does to your mother to hear you talk about that time. What could you possibly remember, Zane? You were all of what? Seven?”

Zane’s voice was strung taunt with anger. “Monsters are not something seven year olds forget!”

Ambril stiffened with surprise.

“Shh- shh, keep your voice down you’ll wake your mother.”

Zane scoffed at him. “After all the sleeping pills you gave her, I doubt it!”

“Come now; let’s finish this conversation in here.” Feldez said tersely. The voices receded and Ambril could hear nothing more. She opened the door slightly and peered out. They appeared to have gone into Zane’s room across the hall. There was a crack of light at the bottom of the door. She could see shadows moving around and heard the low rumble of voices. She stood there her feet growing icy cold for what seemed like ages until the door was suddenly thrown wide and a tall thin figure was silhouetted in the door frame. Feldez spoke over his shoulder.

“It’s for the best Zane, for your mother certainly. If you continue to dredge up these bad memories you will be punished.” There was only silence in the room beyond him. “Alright then, good night.” The door closed with a smooth mechanical click. Feldez walked quickly away and down the hall.

Ambril was suddenly certain that she needed to talk to Zane that very night, no more waiting patiently to hear it from her Mom. She had had enough of not knowing.

She became aware of new sounds coming from across the hallway, sounds of boxes being ripped open and books toppling over. She soundlessly pulled the door open and slipped across the hall. With her fingernail she tapped out a familiar rhythm that she and Zane had used to signal to each other through their bedroom walls when they were young. No response.

 From the sound of things he was turning his room upside down. She opened the door quietly just enough to see Zane shoving things into his backpack.

It wasn’t school supplies either. Zane was leaving.

She shoved the door open wide and said loudly. “What are you doing? You can’t leave me here all alone!” She marched into the room. “With Feldez!”

Zane jumped a mile high at her entrance,then he leaped over the piles of clothes, stacks of books to close the door before turning to Ambril.

 “Quiet you idiot! You’ll wake them.” He glared at his little sister who had gone very white in the face; her hands were beginning to ball into fists.

“Whoa, whoa, take it easy.” He said sounding a bit like the nice, old Zane. “It’s not as bad for you, you don’t remember what it was like, after---” He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair as he always did when he was tired.

“Go back to bed, Ambril.” He muttered finally, not looking up. “Forget all about this,” he said and turned back to his packing.

Ambril took a tentative step toward him. “Did you see it too?”

His head snapped around, his eyes narrow. “See what?”

“That thing in the forest, you know that dark smoky thingy, they call it a Dullaith. Did it come after you too?” Zane continued to stare at her and pulled his body around to face her.

“What thing? Wait, describe it to me.” He sounded hopeful but wary.

Ambril described what had happened that evening. She left nothing out, even the outlandish Fowclun. Though Zane gave her a funny look when she told him about the talking furniture. He seemed to get more and more excited. “I knew it! I knew I just couldn’t imagine it. It really was there.” His voice was jubilant.

“So you’ve seen one before?”

Zane nodded, “the Dullaith, yeah, I saw it once before---,” he paused to look hard at her. “The night that Dad died.”

Ambril felt as if a stake had been driven through her chest. “What?” She suddenly felt light headed. “I thought Dad died from an explosion in his lab.” Zane was still looking at her very seriously. “No, he died fighting one of those things. They say he---he was the one who raised it. Feldez---he was there. He brought it down.” Zane hung his head. “You don’t really remember that time do you?” Zane’s voice was low and sad.

Ambril felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. There was none for her to breathe. “No, not really. I---really don’t remember much about Dad at all.” She said finally.

“Do you remember how they used to be together?”

Ambril thought hard. She remembered a house with a wide rambling porch. Her Mom and Dad on a porch swing. “I remember them laughing a lot.”

Zane bowed his head. “Yeah, me too. They laughed all the time together.” He raised his head and looked directly at Ambril. “When was the last time you heard Mom laugh? I mean really laugh, like they used to?”

Ambril thought for a while and had to shrug her shoulders.

Zane nodded, “Not since then, I bet. Me either.” He started worrying a small hole in his jeans. “I bet you don’t remember how Mom had a really hard time afterward. People here didn’t treat her right, I think they thought she might have had something to do with it.”

“They didn’t treat you right either did they?” Ambril guessed.

Zane’s head jerked up. He got up and walked over to the window. “They almost took us away from her.” His voice was just above a whisper.

“Who’s they?” Ambril asked

Zane didn’t answer her question directly. He just shrugged. “The thing is that, Mom may not be able to come back from it again. At least that’s what Feldez thinks anyway---So---,” Zane straightened up. He seemed to have made a decision. “You know I’m not so sure I know what I saw, really.” He said in a different voice. “It could have been our imaginations, right?”

Ambril was incredulous. “Both of us imagined the same thing? Come on!”

 “Ambril,” Zane said quietly. “You just have to forget it.”

Now it was Ambril’s turn to be furious. “Forget it! Forget it? Are you crazy? I saw a monster in the forest Zane! It was one of the scariest things that have ever happened to me! I had to fight it all by myself!” She raged.

“Scarier than being taken away from Mom?” Zane began to walk slowly toward her. “Maybe you don’t remember it Ambril, you were only three but I do, I remember.” He dropped his head again so that Ambril couldn’t see his face. “I wish I didn’t, but I do.” His voice trailed off. Zane stood lost in thought for a long time then slowly he turned and advanced on Ambril, his face determined. “We don’t ever, ever talk about this again, O.K.?” Ambril backed up until she was flat against the wall.

“Take it easy Zane,” she had never seen him quite so menacing.

Zane brought his face right up to hers. His voice was just above a whisper. “You can’t tell anyone, you hear me? Not anyone. They won’t understand, they’ll think *we brought it back*.” Ambril could see the fear in his eyes, his voice was pleading.

“These people here are---different. They’re afraid; afraid of people who are---different. Scared people don’t always make the right decisions.” His face was so close to hers that she could see his pupils pulsing. “And it’ll be worse this time. We’ll all be in danger. They’ll come after you, after me and after Mom.” He took a deep breath. “They’ll take us away from her and put us in foster homes or something…They might even put Mom in jail. Are you sure that isn’t scarier that monster---really?”

 Zane took a step back and Ambril slumped a bit. “But what if it comes back and hurts some one? We should try to warn them?” Zane’s hands tightened into fists. “We’ll just have to hope it won’t come back.” Zane walked over to his bed and slumped down his hands on his knees. ”Feldez doesn’t think it will; actually he doesn’t think I saw it in the first place.”

“But we did see it Zane, we did and if it does come back, we’ll have to tell them then, right?”

“No!” Zane stood up so fast Ambril slammed herself up against the wall again. “Don’t you see? We can’t ever, ever talk about this!” His face had gone very white

“O.K., I get it now, I think.” Ambril decided it was high time to get out of there. Zane seemed so tightly wired anything could set him off. “I’ll go back to my room when you promise me you won’t leave me here alone!” She pleaded. “Come on, I need your help. Feldez hates me, and he seems to almost, like you.” Ambril stood there willing him to see how important it was that he stuck around.

He stood there uncertain for what seemed to be ages. Then he nodded slowly just once. “But, I can’t promise it’ll be for long.” He said finally. Ambril could see a pained look cross his face as if he was remembering something particularly cruel.

Then he went back into the new Zane mode and grunted at her impatiently. In one movement he opened the door and shoved her out into the hallway.

Ambril stumbled back across the hall to her room and whisked her door shut.

She grabbed her robot and held it to her shaking like a leaf. So Zane had seen it too, the Dullaith. Her hands felt icy cold and she shuddered. And Zane said it had killed their father. She found that hard to believe; why would her Mom had lied to her all this time?

She sat there lost in thought unable to make much sense of it; her thoughts running in circles. She slid back under the covers. She just had to find out what had happened to her Dad. Zane was fooling himself. She couldn’t just forget it, neither could he despite his best efforts. She knew in her heart of hearts that however bad, they needed to understand what had happened in the past before they could forget it and go on with their lives.

She slipped one more time out of bed, took her desk chair and wedged it under her doorknob. No disturbances tonight. She felt a little better. At least she wasn’t going to be alone, Zane promised to stay, at least for now. The last thing she remembered doing was looking for her Ashera and putting it protectively under her pillow. Then she snuggled down with the robot next to her and was almost instantly asleep.

**Chapter 11 A Visitor**

Outside Ambril’s open window moonlight played over the slumbering village and spread itself like a luminous shadow over Ambril’s coverlet. A large crow stared hard into her room at the sleeping girl and then settled itself for the night. The stars twinkled. Actually more than twinkled, one of them began swooping around wildly and with a breezy bump flew into Ambril’s window alighting just inside on the windowsill.

It wasn’t a star really, and it wasn’t twinkling anymore just a dull tired spark now and then. It seemed to be a little person with wings. It crouched there for a while trying to catch its breath and then stood up wearily. A boy with close shaven blonde hair and a grouchy expression, he looked much like any teenager except that he was six inches tall and had shiny, nearly transparent wings sprouting from his shoulders.

He wore his clothes were an iridescent blue-green color but had the knack of blending perfectly with whatever was behind him. He looked tremendously tired as he carefully looked around the room. His face brightened suddenly. He flitted swiftly over to Ambril’s bedside table and triumphantly snatched up the cloth boot she had found. He immediately put it on and observed, satisfied, both it and its matching twin on his feet.

Ambril mumbled something in her sleep and turned towards him. He blanched as she yawned in his face and fanned the air with a disgusted expression.

 Her arm flopped out of the covers and a tinkle of gold drew the fairy’s attention as Ambril’s medallion fell out onto the coverlet.

He stared at it in shock and flew nearer, hovering over Ambril’s shoulder. He tiptoed up the blanket and wonderingly put his hand on the jewel in the center. It began to pulse, gently glowing warm; filling him with light. He smiled as the jewel made his hair stand on end. He gently rose off the coverlet. But even more astonishing to the fairy, it seemed to light the sleeping figure as well. He jumped away, stunned and shook himself. He frowned as he put his hand once again on the jewel and planted his foot on her collarbone. The jewel once again warmed them both.

He jerked away and hung there in the air a few feet above the figure. As if she was uncomfortable being observed Ambril snorted a bit and turned over. When she did so the Ashera dislodged itself from under her pillow and fell off the bed.

The fairy was on it immediately. With a wave of his hand he slowed its fall and drew it up level with himself. The Ashera glowed and pulsed as the fairy turned it slowly around examining it. He seemed to be reading the figures, starting at near the top and ending almost at the bottom.

A few times he blanched and looked again at the kid now curled up in a ball snoring softly. After several minutes he gently tucked the Ashera back under the pillow. He stood on the covers, lost in thought his hands on his hips looking resigned and puzzled.

Outside Sid shook his feathers and stretched his neck nervously. Then he hopped from one foot to another and then again until a furry head raised itself from behind a tuft of leaves.

“Quit fidgeting, I’m hanging on for dear life, don’t you know!” Aster groused. “This branch is too small for both of us.” She continued as they bobbed up and down.

Well, Aster, if you’d been able to stay away from the almond cakes at tea time, there would be no problem,” hooted the crow and then grunted when the squirrel elbowed him in the gullet. “Besides you should be home in bed.”

“I’m perfectly fine, just a bruise or two. But stop jumping around, we gotta keep a sharp eye on that rascal.”

The branch gradually slowed its swaying and the two stared again into the dark room.

“I don’t think there’s anything to worry about, it’s a fairy. After handling a Dullaith all on her own, she can handle the likes of him.“ whispered Aster.

“Clearly your memories going, you old biddy, that there’s a renegade fairy. You know, descended from the group that left during the rebellion. He has no love of human kind that’s for sure.“ The crow cocked its head and jumped to a smaller branch, which dipped dangerously. “Not that the ones who stayed are any nicer.”

“Sid, watch it! You old Coot!” the squirrel sputtered nearly losing her footing on the branch again.

“I’m a crow, sweetie, an old crow, not an old Coot.” Muttered the crow not taking his eyes from the fairy and the sleeping kid.

Aster scampered along the branch to get a better look as well. As she did so the branch bowed and swayed.

“What the!” Squawked Sid just before the branch snapped and down it went. Aster managed to jump to another branch as the crow gracefully flew to one a good distance way.

The squirrel shook itself and smoothed its chest fur. “I can’t understand it, that branch must have been rotten.”

“Ha! Too many teacakes, I’m telling you!” Cackled the crow and wagged his head at his friend as he again scanned the bedroom through the glass. “Hey where’d he go?” He cried forgetting himself and hopping up and down again.

“Where’d who? Oh, the fairy? Well he was just right there.” The squirrel stood up on her hind legs for a better look. Inside there was only Ambril sleeping away. The fairy was nowhere to be seen.

“Well, I guess he decided to hightail it for the hills or wherever they hole up,” mused the crow.

“I’m a bit surprised, I must say.” Said Aster, wringing her paws. “That young thing saved his life, which makes him beholden,” continued Aster. “Obligations like that are powerful in most magic families.”

Sid looked thoughtful for a minute and then said, “Might be that his kind, the renegade fairies might have a different take on being obliged to help a human-kind.” He snapped his beak a few times. “They’re awfully snooty.”

They both stared silently at the quiet room for a few minutes until the squirrel yawned and scampered back down the branch. “Well I’m all tuckered out, Sid you take the first watch. I though I saw a nice cubbyhole just on the other side of this---“ There were some violent rustling of branches.

“Oh! I am sorry Ma’am, I simply didn’t see you---well, well, excuse me!” Sputtered the squirrel, as an indignant possum appeared just inside the hole she was making for and took a jab at her. She retreated back up the branch and wedged herself in the crook of two branches.

Resignedly she said, “Wake me when it’s time.” She tucked her head underneath her tail and settled herself for a nice nap.

The crow stood his silent watch as the moon made its careful circuit through the sky and the stars began to blink out one by one. He continued to search the room for anything unusual. He didn’t trust fairies, but try as he might, he couldn’t find one single thing amiss. He watched as Ambril stirred, the moonlight playful on her face, she half smiled. The crow seemed to smile too.

**Chapter 12 Breakfast and the Robot**

When Ambril finally awoke the sun was nearly half way through morning. The warmth of the air and the stillness of the curtains bespoke a stellar spring day. There was a strange whirring sound over by her desk. Ambril sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her mother had wandered in and was watching the robot critically as it walked up and down the desktop experimentally flexing its knees. It jingled and chimed as it picked up a pink eraser. Ambril’s mother shook her head in wonder.

“That is quite possibly the smartest robot I’ve ever seen. Why didn’t your other robots behave this well? I remember them as being not much more than something to stub my toe on.” She looked quizzically at Ambril.

Ambril shrugged. “Mr. Feng added some Artificial Intelligence.”

Her mother nodded. “Oh right, you did tell me that. That might explain the smarts but how about his cheekiness?” FLit was winding up for a throw but stopped to wink at both of them. They both giggled. Ambril’s Mom smiled over at her. “Did you sleep well sweetheart?”

Ambril hesitated and then nodded. Looking at her relaxed and smiling she didn’t have the heart to tell her about her conversation with Zane. Maybe Zane was right and it was better to not say anything for a while. The robot turned its wobbly head toward them. His ear hinged open revealing the wiring inside.

Ambril gave an involuntary start.

Her mother snorted. “Not exactly a looker is he?”

 Ambril reached over and flipped his ear back into position.

 “What do you call him? fLit?”

I guess so, um, yeah.”

Ambril’s mother smiled ruefully as she picked up her daughter’s dirt encrusted jeans from yesterday. “Good thing he stayed in your back pack, last night. At least HE stayed clean. Feldez wants you out of the house today so that the new housekeeper can get everything organized for you.”

“What? A housekeeper? We’ve never had a housekeeper Mom.” Ambril wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I don’t want a stranger going through my stuff all the time.”

Her mother smiled. “You’ll like her though. And you’ll never have to clean your room again,” she said temptingly as she turned to go. “And besides once you meet her she won’t be a stranger anymore.” She smiled again as she closed the door behind her. “I laid out some clothes for you on your chair, I’ll see you downstairs O.K.?”

Ambril turned and started. fLit was standing motionless in the middle of the room. “You give me the willies.” She said picked him up and stuffed him into her backpack.

She threw on her clothes and smoothed out the worst of the tangles in her hair. She picked up her backpack and was about to leave when she remembered her Ashera. After routing around under her pillow for a few moments she retrieved it and shoved that in her backpack next to the robot. She started to zip it closed, but a small metal arm interfered. fLit stood up on tiptoe and stuck his head out of the pack.

“What you need to see out?” Ambril frowned but didn’t fuss about it. After all, he had to learn about his environment too.

As she slung the pack over her shoulder and raced down the stairs, she tried to think of ways she could find out more about what happened to her father.

Zane and Feldez were already at the kitchen table laden with a huge platter of home baked muffins. Ambril picked up a still warm blueberry one and took a large bite. Yum…

At the table Feldez was lost behind his newspaper. On the front page the headlines screamed FIRE!

Ambril chewed slowly as she read the front page. Underneath the headlines was a big splashy picture of the small building on fire they had seen last night. There was a separate picture of a shell-shocked family next to it. Ambril recognized the girl she had seen last night.

The article read.

 **Last night fire broke out in the Tupelo farmer’s market off route. Mr. and Mrs. Tupelo had just finished renovating the old building to sell their farm’s produce. “It’s a real shame though it always has been some what of an eyesore,” said neighbor and grocery store owner Larch Dogwood. “I’m not sure how much we really need a produce stand anyway. Dogwood market has everything anyone would ever need.” The Tupelos are one of the new families that joined our community-**

 Ambril couldn’t read any more as Feldez chose that moment to carefully fold the paper. Laying it down next to his plate he said, “Did everyone sleep well last night?’’ Looking quizzically at Ambril and Zane he took a small sip from of his espresso and then touched his fingertips lightly together.

Ambril’s mother breezed in humming. “Good morning everyone!”

Zane slouched farther into his seat and grunted.

Ambril’s Mom sat down across from Ambril smiling hard. Feldez graced her with a small smile and resumed staring at Zane and Ambril. Ambril thought he seemed to want to bore holes through her. Ambril’s mother’s smile faltered a bit. Ambril wondered for the thousandth time, what she saw in him. He always seemed to make her Mom nervous and uncomfortable.

“I hope you’ve all recuperated from last night’s adventures.” Your mother and I think your actions last night showed a decided lack of thought, both of you.” He raised his chin and looked down at Zane. “Your mother and I have decided that both of you should not be allowed to use any screens for the next week unless it’s for school work.”

Zane shot him an evil look but said nothing. His mother shifted uneasily but nodded in agreement. Feldez coughed drily and then continued. “Today, you’re expected to familiarize yourselves with the town as you’ll be starting classes at your new school tomorrow.”

Ambril had to stuff an entire muffin in her mouth to keep from groaning.

Feldez cleared his throat and checked his watch. “I have to run off to the office I’m afraid but before I go, there is some one here I would like you to meet,” he looked toward the kitchen and raised his voice. “Mrs. Sweetgum, will you come out here please?”

A plump middle-aged woman bustled out from the kitchen. She was drying her hands on her apron and smiling warmly at them all. She was short and huggably round with white hair and a huge, welcoming smile. She had a lumpy gray dress on which went to the floor spruced up with a large frilly white collar. Ambril noticed her two very large front teeth when she smiled.

“Hello! Hope you like the food.” The woman said in a squeaky, high voice. “I’m to be your housekeeper I guess,” she bobbed her head and smiled again. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you.”

Ambril liked her on the spot, especially her cooking. Her mother’s muffins were usually so hard they could be used as hockey pucks.

 “We love the food, Mrs. Sweetgum,” Ambril’s mother smiled and then sipped her coffee as if having a housekeeper was usual for her. Feldez motioned to his napkin with his hand and she quickly picked up her own and patted her mouth with an embarrassed smile.

“Thank you.” Feldez dismissed Mrs. Sweetgum with a curt nod of his head.

He eyed Ambril and Zane again. “I think you’ve had your quota of sweets for the day, don’t you?”

“You know you aren’t our father, Feldez, we don’t take orders from---” said Zane angrily.

“You will obey house rules for cleanliness and health.” Cut in Feldez sharply. “ Which means you’ll be home in time for dinner each and every evening, keep your rooms tidy, keep your personal belongings on your person or in your rooms and---“ Feldez leaned over the table to glare at them at closer range. “Limit your sweets to one treat a day.” He held his glare a few seconds longer and then slowly relaxed back into his chair. Taking another sip of espresso he said, “Is that clear?”

Ambril was so angry she could burst. But what could she do? Her Mother looked pleadingly at them. She shrugged and nodded. They were stuck living in his house and with his rules. Zane seemed to be thinking the same thing for though he still looked angry he gave him a small nod as well.

Feldez relaxed as he turned to Ambril’s mother, his voice assumed a more fatherly tone. “I hope you aren’t planning to do too much today, darling, yesterday was quite taxing on your nerves and you should rest.” He laid his napkin beside his plate and rose from the table. “With Mrs. Sweetgum here to handle everything you can do just that.”

Ambril’s mother stared down at her plate then took a tiny bite of muffin remembering a little late to daub her lips with the napkin. “Oh I feel alright. I---I thought I’d take the kids around town.” She smiled nervously.

Feldez stopped to give her a disapproving look. “Darling I want you to rest this afternoon. Mrs. Sweetgum will handle everything including the kids” He looked down at her.

She gave him a small nod and said hesitantly, “I thought we would have a talk with the kids together this morning about last night---before you go off to work.“

Feldez looked at his watch. “We’ve just had our little talk darling, I’ve no more time.” He nodded curtly at them all and closed the door firmly behind him.

Ambril heaved a secret sigh of relief.

“I guess he’s unhappy about the fire last night,” said her mother slowly.

Ambril couldn’t remember a time when Feldez hadn’t appeared to be unhappy but you just couldn’t tell with him as he so rarely smiled.

Ambril’s mother sighed, “We all have to keep in mind that taking on the role of Administrator at the hospital is a big responsibility for him. She turned her head and caught sight of the glorious day outside. “But it is a lovely day and you at least ought to take advantage of it, right?” She smiled brightly at all of them as she got up. “Come on, let’s go find your bikes, I think the movers must have put them somewhere in the garage.”

**Chapter 13 Trelawnyd**

Outside they found the bikes parked on the far side of the garage. As if having them inside would contaminate it.

Zane jumped on his and without a word took off.

“Wait honey! I wanted to show you---“ Ambril’s Mom yelled after her son. But he was already around the bend and gone. She sighed.

Ambril jammed her backpack in the basket and jiggled the handlebars experimentally to make sure everything worked. Zane could be such a jerk.

Her mother was standing on the edge of the drive looking down on the town. From where they were they could see almost the entire valley. A surprisinf checkerboard of farms, Ambril thought. And there was the main road winding away down and around and on through the farmlands to the forest. The forest thickened and darkened as it started at the edge of the farmland and marched straight up the mountains all around. Except for one barren hill, a jumble of rocks on the far side of the valley everything was green and lush.

Ambril’s Mom began pointing excitedly at the buildings below. “-And there’s where old Mrs. Sumac used to live, her son’s the Mayor now I believe. I used to have acorn wars with him every fall. I won of course. And that’s Miss Flood’s house I think she still owns the shoe store here.”

”The shoe store? You mean there is only one?” Ambril was incredulous.

Her mother nodded impatiently annoyed at the interruption. “And there’s the new hospital where Feldez works, and the Library where you’ll hopefully be spending loads of time.” she continued excitedly. The hospital was big and boxy but library was an old stone building sheltered by some old Eucalyptus trees.

“And there’s the old schoolhouse where you and Zane will be going to school. Just as your father, Feldez and I did.” The schoolhouse was a brick two-story building surrounded by pools of grass and a large playground. It was a far cry from her last school, which couldn’t even boast of a window box.

“Thanks for the info, I’m off.” Said Ambril, anxious to get started.

“Oh, you have to visit Betula’s, it’s everyone’s favorite place.” Called her mother as Ambril pushed off and started coasting down the hill. She was soon gliding down a shady street. It was really different than riding bikes in San Francisco. In the city, there were people stepping out in front of you and cars everywhere. In Trelawnyd she was the only one on the road. It looked like the perfect, sleepy little town.

She rode by the schoolhouse, it was bigger up close. She also found the Library. She thought about stopping to check it out and see if she could find the archives but she wasn’t ready to go inside yet.

She had just turned her bike toward what she thought was the center of town when wham! An over-ripe tomato went splat right in front of her. She veered sharply and missed the worst of it. When she braked hard, she heard laughter and looked up just in time to dodge a large peach and then a shower of green tomatoes. One she caught.

“Hey, knock it off.” She yelled and saw a head pop out from behind a rock. Taking aim she threw the tomato hard and was rewarded by a gratifying ‘Oof!”. She rode off fast and after a turn or two thought she had lost them, but after another block or two she realized that she was the one who was lost. In the distance she could see another bike rider. As she drew closer she could see it was a girl about her own age. The girl looked around at Ambril and then started to pedal faster.

“Hey wait! Is this the way to town?” Ambril called and started to pedal faster too. The girl looked back again and started pedaling furiously.

What was the girl doing? Ambril thought, she wasn’t chasing her. But then she thought to look behind herself and saw that they both were being chased by a bunch of riders. There was a big angry guy with thick blonde hair in front.

‘Uh oh… big trouble!’ Ambril thought as she also stood up on her pedals and began to pump as hard as she could. Fortunately she had a head start; she concentrated hard and put on a burst of speed. Looking around she saw the boys were no closer and one of them had given up. She could see the figure ahead disappear from view as she rounded a curve. Ambril took the curve pumping madly. She was breathing hard now but refused to lessen her speed.

“Quick in here!” Just ahead the bike rider beckoned her into a narrow side road between dense bushes.

Ambril braked hard and skidded onto the shoulder kicking up a cloud of dust as she pedaled out of sight.

“Behind here!” the girl was stashing her bike behind a trailing bay tree. Ambril did the same. Just as she pulled out of sight the riders roared around the corner shouting obscenities and pedaling hard.

Ambril and the girl hid behind the tree and watched them hurtle out of sight.

“It’s O.K. now, the road starts to wind around. It’ll be awhile before they realize they’ve lost us.” They were both breathing hard. Ambril stole a sideways glance at her rescuer. She was about her age and height, gawky, with long dark hair and brown eyes. Ambril thought for a moment that she looked familiar. She seemed to have tomato splattered all over her top and there was a large lump coming up over one eye. Her face was tear-stained. The girl caught her looking and wiped her face clean.

“My name’s Sully, Sully Tupelo. Normally I don’t let them get to me but after last night…“

Ambril suddenly remembered where she had seen Sully before.

 “I remember now, I saw you at the fire. We drove by on our way into town.” Ambril realized too late that perhaps this wasn’t something Sully wanted to talk about. “I’m sorry about your shed.”

Sully hung her head. “That was scary. We thought for a while it would spread to the orchard.” She tipped her head and shook her hair out of her eyes with one motion. We’re farmers, organic, at least my Dad and my Mom are. But fortunately, the fire fighters.”

“My name’s Ambril Derwyn.” We just moved back here.”

“Back here?”

“Yeah, I was born here, my brother, Zane too.”

“Oh so you’re not a New Family then, you’re just…new?”

Ambril thought about that for a bit before answering. “We’re a new family I guess, it’s not like we remember anything from before.” She stopped here thinking about Zane’s taunt face last night, “at least I don’t remember much.”

“But you’re family has roots here. You know…ancestors, relatives, that kind of thing, right?”

Ambril squinted at Sully and hesitated before slowly nodding and shrugging at the same time.

“New Family means a family from outside the valley.” Said Sully knowingly. “That’s what my family is called. You’ll hear that a lot around here. They’re big on ancestors and such.” Sully wagged her head. “I know a family who has lived here 20 years and they’re still considered New Family!” Sully looked around. “I think the coast is clear, where are you headed?”

“No place, really. I was just riding around,” Ambril shrugged. “I was going to try and find Betula’s,” continued Ambril. “My Mom said she makes really good chocolate.”

Sully smiled hugely showing somewhat crooked teeth. “Well you have that right, she makes everything really, really well. But I love her painted bugs best.” She paused a minute thinking.

“I have a little while before I have to get back and help my parents with the fire clean-up.” She smiled. “I could use something from Betula’s, she always cheers me up. I know! I’ll get something for Mom and Dad too.” She began to disentangle her bike from the Bay tree. “Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

“Thanks.” Ambril smiled. Perhaps she had made her first friend here.

They started walking their bikes down the dusty dirt road. “This road connects with another one just up here.” Sully said.

“So how “New” of a family are you? I mean, how long have you lived here?” Ambril asked

“Oh I guess it’s been about six years now.” Sully smiled to herself. “It actually has been great until just recently. Mr. Dogwood, the grocery store owner has gotten kind of greedy lately. He’s lowered the amount of money he pays us for the stuff we grow.” She paused to flick a fly away from her bike handle. “We’ve made do with less and less until my Parents decided to do something about it. We fixed up the old shack by the main road and turn it into a produce stand.” She lowered her head. “We were doing great! My Mom and Dad were really happy again.” Sully sighed. “And then…last night…the fire,” her voice trialed off.

Ambril didn’t know what to say. It sounded so awful.

They continued in an awkward silence until they came to another road. Sully seemed to have cheered up because she smiled at Ambril and said, “come on, I’ll race you!”

Not really a fair race, thought Ambril as she didn’t really know the way but she followed her new friend as best she could. They zoomed through the quiet streets Sully always just ahead until they finally turned down the main road. There were little shops lining several blocks. Ambril smiled as she rode by the shoe store.

“Whoo! You’re fast!” Sully said as they parked their bikes in front of a large, violently pink building. Betula’s Sweet Shop said the sign in curly letters.

“I’d better wash this off. I’m beginning to smell like an Italian restaurant.” Sully said ruefully picking at the tomato stains.

Through the window Ambril could see a comfortably sized lady with an infectious smile talking and laughing with everyone. Ambril was too busy soaking up the amazing showcase of goodies displayed in the window to pay attention to where she was going. She tripped on something and lost her grip on her backpack. It fell with a clatter narrowly missing a passerby’s large flat feet.

“Watch what you are doing child!” The owner of the large feet looked at Ambril coldly. Her rail thin frame made her old fashioned dress look as if it wasn’t living up to its full potential. She had large pouches of skin like a bulldog that wiggled when she spoke and hung quivering from both cheeks when she wasn’t. Clinging to her was a frail looking grandmotherly woman with wispy white hair escaping from an untidy bun.

“Oh! Sorry,” Ambril quickly picked up her backpack and rammed the robot out of sight.

“Now Crystal, she didn’t mean to fall down in front of you!” Said the frail woman smiling kindly at Ambril and reaching out to her with a shaking hand.

“Do you need help, Dearie?”

Ambril brushed herself off and smiled back.

“I see not, such a quick one you are!” Continued the elderly lady. “My name is Mrs. Flood. I believe I saw you riding your bicycle earlier, are you new here?”

“Um, Yes, my name’s Ambril, Ambril Derwyn.”

“Oh! A Derwyn, isn’t it nice Crystal to hear that name again!” The older woman tugged on her tall, thin companion. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled. “Why you must be Tylia’s daughter, am I right?”

“Yes, that’s true.” Said Ambril surprised to have her family’s name recognized.

“Mrs Twid? Ah, Crystal?” A slightly pudgy bald man with a rapier goatee came huffing down the sidewalk. “I believe you forgot this.” He held out a square shopping bag which advertised Bob’s Bots.

 The thin woman’s manner abruptly changed. She smiled directly into the plump man’s eyes. “How kind of you to run all this way just to give me my package, Robert,” she simpered. “You’re such a gentleman.” She continued extending her bony hands to take the package. “A rare find in society today. Since we’re nearly half way there wouldn’t you like to walk home with us? I’ll make you some of my famous tea and you can show me how this thing works. What do you say?”

All the while she was speaking Mrs. Twid had been eagerly leaning closer and closer to the slightly sweaty man who was just as quickly backing up.

“No, no sorry, Mrs.---um---Crystal, as I said before I have to mind the store.” He shrugged sheepishly as he took another large step backward.

Mrs. Twid looked dramatically crestfallen. “Ah parting is so very difficult under these circumstances. We have grown so close these past few weeks, haven’t we?” The portly man looked confused and a little embarrassed. He hitched up his pants and smiled as he turned to walk back the way he had come.

“But this evening? You promised to help me?” She attempted a flirty pout which came off more as a grimace.

“Crystal Twid, Is that another new gadget?” The very plump lady whom Ambril guessed was Betula was standing in the doorway to her shop. “That makes the third one this week!” She smiled slyly at the lady holding the packages. “Bob, You are quite the salesman now aren’t you!” She winked at him.

“Not really Betula, you still haven’t bought that new washer I’ve been saving for you for six months,” said he his whole demeanor changed as he twinkled back at Betula.

Mrs. Twid flushed crimson during this exchange and Ambril caught her giving Betula a very predatory look before she collected herself.

 “Are you coming to the church tea this afternoon Betula? Daisy and I will be there. I plan to treat everyone with my new Sunset Tea.” Mrs. Twid said waving a small net bag with a smiling sun on it. “And you should you know; I’m going to make banana bread with my new machine!” She patted the shopping bag enthusiastically and smiled brightly at Bob who took an involuntary step back.

“I wouldn’t miss it, Crystal.” She caught Ambril eying her and winked.

“Hey Bob, are you going to the Church Tea?”

“Yessirree, you want to walk over together?” He paused chagrined. “Oh I forgot, I promised to go over early and help set up, you want to join me?”

“Sure thing, I’m always happy to help.” Betula nodded. “I’ll see you later then.” She waved her warm brown hand at him and turned to smile at the now mortified Mrs. Twid. “I’ll see you at the church Crystal. And you too Daisy, it’s always such a pleasure. It’s nice to see you out and about again.” Betula smiled at the older woman and then turned her attentions back to Mrs. Twid. “Are you sure there isn’t anything I can bring?”

“No, no ‘er I mean yes well I’ll see you at the church and No I think I have everything.” She gasped still taken aback by her easy friendship with Bob. “You know I was just telling Daisy about the lovely retirement home they’re building out by the ocean. The shop is just getting to be too much for her isn’t it?” She patted the wrinkled hand on her arm. “I told her I’d be happy to take if off her hands the moment she feels ready to move on.” She stated and giving a clipped nod to Betula sailed down the street with little Mrs. Flood clamped at her elbow.

**Chapter 14 Betula’s Sweet Shop**

Betula let out a low, rumbly laugh as she held the door open to her shop.

“I just can’t resist making Crystal squirm sometimes.” She shook her head and smirked. “She’d do just about anything to get her hands on Bob and his holdings. You know he owns half the town.” She waved cheerily at Bob as he turned to trudge back to his shop.

“But enough about that, Darlin’ I’d know you a mile away, you’re Tylia’s daughter aren’t you?” The motherly woman had swept Ambril through the door and onto a counter seat in an instant.

Ambril smiled up at her. ”Ambril Silva, right?” Betula smiled down at her.

“We just arrived, just last night,” aid Ambril. “But my last name is Derwyn now.” She said her voice low. Betula looked surprised but then nodded. “I see, well Derwyn’s a very fine name too.” Betula had set a glass of water in front of Ambril. “Do you like chocolate?” She asked, though she seemed to know the answer.

Ambril nodded.

“Well, I’ve been toying with a new flavor of ice cream called “Kamikaze Chip” and need to have a real chocolate lover’s opinion.” She paused and leaned into Ambril. “Do you think you can help me out and give it a try?”

And it wasn’t even her birthday! Ambril nodded enthusiastically.

“I’ll bring two spoons!” Betula smiled at Sully as she picked up a large ice cream scoop.

Ambril could see why this was everyone’s favorite place in town. She had a feeling it would soon be her favorite too.

Sully jumped up onto the stool next to hers. “Yum! A new flavor, I don’t know how you come up with this great stuff.” She said putting both elbows on the counter and leveraging herself higher to see what Betula was doing.

“You know I met Ambril when she was 17 seconds old!” Rumbled Betula as she put a large dish of chocolate ice cream with marshmallow swirls, chocolate covered pretzel chunks and two spoons in front of them both. “And, if you’re wondering,” she put both hands on her hips and beamed at them both. “It sure is nice to see her again.” She waved at a small girl with curly hair behind Ambril. “Hi there Lola, darling, how’s your Pop? Feeling better?” And she moved off to chat with her other customers.

Ambril picked up her spoon and dug in. The two kids ate in silence savoring every bite. It was shatteringly good, the best she had ever had. After she and Sully had scraped every last bit of flavor from the bowl Ambril sat back and looked around.

It was one of the most amazing shops Ambril had ever seen. It had every kind of candy Ambril knew and some she had never seen before. Candy in fantastic shapes and flavors were stacked to the rafters. There was a large glass case set in the middle of the counter filled with sugar figurines. A miniature Ferris wheel in red licorice gently revolved on its own. Animals made of marzipan occupied all the seats. There was a large rabbit in red high tops, a fat brown bear and a striped giraffe. They were so lifelike, Ambril felt as if she looked at them just out of the corner of eye, she’d catch them moving. The shop was spectacular.

“I’m going to surprise the church tea with the ferris wheel.” Betula had come up behind her and stood admiring her own work.

“They’ll love it. Except I don’t think Mrs. Twid will like you for bringing it.” Ambril said as she admired a poodle made of fluffy white divinity and a cherry leather collar. Ambril caught Zane sliding through the door.

Betula laughed again, “You don’t miss much now do you.” Her hand was warm on Ambril’s shoulder. “We were friendly once but as she’s gotten older she’s had just one thing on her mind.” She shook her head sadly.

“Money and lots of it.” She absently reached over and flicked a switch on the back of a chocolate monkey who immediately began to dance a Texas Two Step with a purple spotted monkey. “It may never be enough for her.” Betula wiped her hands on her ample apron and shook her head ruefully.

“My favorites!” Sully was pointing to a large display of gargantuan iridescent bugs. “These things look sooo real!”

“Help yourself, love,” Betula rocked back on her heels happily. Ambril and Sully picked up green beetles with red striped wings and gingerly bit off one of the legs. Sully’s face lit up.

“Yum, watermelon!” She picked up a six-inch spindly green bug that Ambril had never seen. “My Mom loves these, may I have this praying mantis and that chocolate wolf widow for my Mom and Dad?” Ambril’s eyes bulged out as Sully enthusiastically cooed over a large, hairy wolf spider. “My folks love bugs, Our farm’s organic.”

Ambril looked uncomfortable, “Ummm---Yeah well everything that’s been alive is organic.“

“Oh!” said Sully, “I mean on our farm we try to encourage the good bugs, you know the ones who take care of the bad bugs? Any way, we try to get them to live on our farm.” Sully continued to cull through the pile of bugs. “Oh look! A soldier beetle, Wow! And a Lace Wing! These guys are intense!”

Betula was putting several very realistic bugs in a paper bag for Sully when she asked, “How’s your Mama, Ambril?”

“Well, she’s good, I guess.” Said Ambril not really knowing what to say. What kid really knows how their parents are? “She and Feldez are getting married and I think she’s a little nervous about it all.” Said Ambril her voice trailing off.

“Ah Feldez, he’ll have her eating all the right foods in the wrong way, the boring way. Food without soul.” She straightened up and stretched a bit. “I’m not even sure that Feldez has a soul.” Said Betula frowning, clearly Feldez wasn’t her favorite guy either. “And what right does Feldez have to tell anyone how to eat?” She raised her arms to encompass the entire store. “Everything in my little shop brings a little happiness, and we all need some of that, don’t we?”

She shot a measured glance at the girl, Lola who had now taken the stool next to Ambril.

“Speaking of which, what have you been feeding yourself, honey?’ She shook her head disdainfully. “Not enough if you ask me.” Her face brightened as she rummaged around under the counter. “Now, I’ve got just the thing for you and yours, something I know you’ll love. Ah, here it is”. She emerged carrying a gold paper box. “Just a little something for after lunch.” She opened the box and popped a chocolate into Lola’s mouth before she could protest.

Lola instantly appeared transported and let out a moo of delight. “Wow, This is REALLLY good! ” She licked her lips but said hesitantly. “Alright, but do you have a smaller box?” The blonde girl leaned over closer to Betula and whispered. “I don’t think I have enough money---on me to pay for—“

Betula was already wrapping up the large one together with an assortment of candy bugs and animals. “Sweetie, it’s on the house!” Said Betula as she handed the brown parcel to the young girl. “Now what I always say is---.”

“Just a little bit and savor every bite!” Lola finished for her. She smiled magnificently at Betula and took it gratefully.

As Lola slide off the stool Ambril saw Zane staring at Lola. He had that stunned deer-caught-in-the-headlights sort of look. As if he had been smacked hard by the Love Beast! Ambril smirked, she might be able to use that.

The tinkle of a large bell tied to the door drew Ambril’s attention. A large square jawed man in a shirt meant for a smaller man invaded the store. A gawky kid with longish dark hair followed him. Ambril knew she had seen him before.

Sully froze, “Um I’ll meet you outside.” She said quickly and before Ambril could answer she had darted through the crowd and slid through the door.

“Hey Betula, I have another fine offer for you!” the man boomed. “This time, you won’t be able to refuse!” He stumped over to the counter. He picked up several centipedes and absently threw them in his mouth.

“That’ll be $1.75 Larch Dogwood.” Said Betula her arms folded.

“$1.75 for what?” he looked down at his hand at the remaining bugs. “These?” He rolled his eyes as he fished in his pockets for some change.

“How’s my favorite sweetie huh?” He smiled at her as he dumped change in her hand.

Betula stared back stonily.

“You know I’m ready and willing to take this dump off your hands anytime.” He nodded his head vigorously. “Yep, this would be the perfect place for my store to expand.” He straightened his tie. “Come on, you and I both know this town needs a supermarket, right? You can sell your sweets in the store.”

“I heard about the fire last night, Larch.” Betula said pointedly.

Larch’s sunny expression darkened ominously. “I didn’t have anything to do with that.” He pointed a puffy finger. “Though I’m not sorry that old shack burned down, it was an eyesore right on the main road the way it was.”

“Awfully convenient for you as they were doing such a good job outselling your produce at more reasonable prices.” Betula wiped the counter slowly but kept her eyes on him. “If you ask me, this town could use some healthy competition.”

Larch was now a lovely shade of lavender. His eyes protruded slightly as he said tightly. “They’re not even one of us, Betula, they don’t belong here.”

 She met his gaze coolly. “They own the best farm in the county, Larch. They are good honest people who have lived in our community years. They came when we needed them remember? When all of the so-called old farming families had sold up and moved away? They came and tilled the fields and tended the orchards. Where would we be without them now?” Betula turned her back on him and started moving toward the back of the store.

Larch seemed to remember himself and took a deep breath. “Well we don’t have to agree on everything. But I would like to talk to you about this property---“ He followed her gesturing wildly.

“S-s-sorry about that, my Dad, he’s well, he comes on too strong sometimes.” It was the skinny kid. His too long bangs hid his gray eyes. He gestured awkwardly toward his father’s receding back.

“Oh no, well I mean Betula seems pretty tough.” Ambril shrugged. “I imagine she can take care of herself. My name’s Ambril,” she smiled back at him.

I’m Riley, Riley Dogwood, You’ve probably guessed by now that my Dad owns the grocery store,” he jerked a thumb at the wall of Betula’s shop, “Next door.”

Ambril suddenly remembered where she had seen him. The fire last night.

“Oh! You were there last night at the fire weren’t you?”

Riley smiled nervously. “Do you mind not mentioning that around my Dad?” He said looking around. “I don’t want him to find out that I was the one who called 911. I wasn’t supposed to be out last night. Besides which, they were the competition.” His eyes widened as he realized what he had just said. “No, I didn’t mean anything by that. He’d never do anything like start a fire. At least, I don’t think he would.”

He paused and absently fingered the candy bugs. “So you drove by last night? Did your family move here?” When Ambril nodded he asked, “What do you think so far?”

Ambril smiled again. “It’s not San Francisco but it’s---nice.”

Ambril jumped when there came a loud whap from the back of the store. “Easy Easy there Betula! I only meant---“ Larch Dogwood backed hastily out of an aisle.

Betula advanced on him wielding a large mop. “ I know what you meant, now I bet you know what I mean when I say GET OUT OF MY STORE!” She took a swing at him with the mop.

“We should talk later, I guess.” Larch said angling his large frame toward the door. “But I want you to know I’m not giving up.” He deftly sidestepped another sweep of the mop. “Come on Riley, let’s go.”

Riley sighed then smiled at Ambril before following his father out the door.

Betula and Ambril watched as once outside, Larch barked an order at his son who immediately turned down an alleyway. Larch continued walking down the street. Betula said, “I feel like I should check my wallet every time he comes in here.” She said shaking her head slowly.

Ambril suddenly remembered Sully and jumped hurriedly off her stool. “Thanks, Betula! The ice cream was great!” She squeezed through the jostling crowd and out the door.

Betula waved cheerily at her as she got her bike out and looked around for Sully, but she had disappeared. Ambril turned toward home hoping she’d see her at school the next day.

**Chapter 15 An Alleyway Brawl**

The bike lurched forward as Ambril pushed down hard on one pedal. Ambril took the alley hoping to find a short cut home. But as she neared the end of the alley she heard soft squelchy thuds on the back wall and realized she’d made a mistake.

“Hey, watch it!”

As she rounded the corner an overripe tomato narrowly whizzed by her head. She drew back just in time and took stock.

It seemed that Riley had been tidying up the storeroom for his Dad. The gang she had shaken off earlier had waylaid him. They had him pinned down behind some crates beside the storeroom. A couple of garbage bags and a bike on its side lay nearby. This time they had armed themselves with ball throwers and were pummeling him with all manner of overripe produce from a nearby dumpster. The onslaught was ferocious the blonde boy laughed creepily. Ambril held back for a few moments but not for long. It was at least seven to one and they were pretty good with ball throwers.

The top of Riley’s head and one arm were covered with rotting slime. Ambril was just calculating how long before she was covered in similar fashion when she noticed another pair of arms had grabbed one of the garbage bags and was dragging it behind the crates. It was hard to tell at first as she was lumpy with tomato and peach pulp but it was Sully.

Well that did it for Ambril; she could at least even the odds. She crouched down and prepared to launch herself into the frey when someone grabbed her arm.

“Wait a bit, I’m thinkin’ there be more best done from this angle.” It was a big burly kid with close-cropped brown hair. Ambril couldn’t place the accent, it sounded almost Scottish, definitely not Trelawnyd. Though his white shirt and bow tie were uncomfortably tight, he smiled devilishly as he held up a bag of green tomatoes.

Ambril shoved her bike against the wall and grabbed a handful of hard, green missiles.

The new boy had already taken up his position at the corner of Betula’s building. He raised his arm and effortlessly threw. The tomato was a blur and hit its target, one of the ball throwers dead on. It flew out of the boy’s hands and landed several feet away. It happened so fast that the other boys didn’t know what hit them. The newcomer made no attempt to hide, he almost leisurely picked out another green tomato and launched it at the big blonde boy, the ringleader.

It caught him just under the eye. Ambril could see the boy’s face begin to swell. The blonde roared with rage as he saw his attacker carefully selecting another tomato.

“Ha! Even better! Look guys it’s big-time loser, our friend, Ygg,” he jeered. “Riley’s got his tail between his legs too fast again. We were getting bored.” He smiled fiendishly as he took aim. “Let’s get him good, just like last time.”

“Well now, Lance, it’s not a bit like last time, ya great waltzing buffoon,” drawled Ygg. “It was nigh on fifteen to one and I was distracted by keepin’ you cretins from destroyin’ Miss Fern’s garden gnomes.” Ygg continued as he almost lazily threw another tomato at a small, ratty looking boy just behind Lance.

The boy instantly disappeared moaning and then reappeared clutching his eye as he high-tailed it down the alley. Some of the other boys looked wistfully at him. One of them said, “I think I hear my Ma calling, Lance, I’d better go.” He took off as well.

Ygg smiled as he picked up a tomato and weighed it in his hand. “The odds are not in your favor today seein’ as they are getting close to even.” He threw the tomato and beaned another boy who dropped his ball thrower and shuffled away howling and holding his nose.

Lance’s face was swollen but vengeful. “You know as well as I do, that outsiders like you will always be losers no matter what,” he grinned mirthlessly. “You’re never gonna fit in here, or anywhere really.” He lowered his ball thrower and stood up. “A loser’s always a loser.”

“Is that you I see Ygg Drasil?” Screeched a voice from farther down the alley. It was like chalk on a chalkboard. An instant later Mrs.Twid hove into sight.

“Of all the ungrateful, yellow-dog things to do!” she sputtered. “After all I’ve done for you and your family to try and,” she paused here to smooth out her dress. “To correct certain omissions in your upbringing.” She drew herself up flat feet and all. “I’m speechless!”

Hardly, thought Ambril.

Mrs. Twid turned to the blonde boy who was trying to suppress a grin. ”I’m so very sorry for my nephew’s poor behavior.” She said dropping her eyes, seemingly embarrassed. “I’ll have Ygg clean this up.” She turned back to Ygg. “Let’s add restocking the shelves and delivering every single Sunset Tea order placed this afternoon to your chores!” Her glance was steely.

“That’s fine, Mrs. Twid, we know it’s not your fault. “ Said Lance smirking as he signaled to the other boys to follow him. “Can you see he turns over the compost heap too?” He leered at Ygg. “Those tomatoes are gonna be hard to get off the wall, here.” He turned and said laughingly. “Riley, stop messing around in that storeroom or I’ll put you where you belong. That dumpster!”

The other boys laughed appreciatively. One of the last to leave was a too tall, too thin boy Ambril recognized right off, it was Zane, her brother! She was stunned. How could he hang out with bullying jerks like Lance?

But Mrs. Twid had not finished with Ygg yet. “Really, young man, I’ve taken you in, practically as my own and this is how you repay me!” She continued stridently.

“It, it wasn’t really like you think, you see Lance and his buddies, they—“ Ambril stuttered.

“That’s quite enough from you, young lady!” Mrs. Twid was looking down her big skinny nose at Ambril now and clearly didn’t recognize her. “Just, who might you be? Another New Family, I presume?” She pronounced “New” as if it was some sort of disease.

“Well only sort-of new. My name’s Ambril Derwyn and my fam—“

Mrs. Twid drew back a bit. “Oh yes, I remember. You nearly ran Mrs. Flood and myself down in front of Betula’s earlier. Yes, yes I know all about YOUR family, and I see you are carrying on your family’s tradition of visiting mayhem upon our little village.” She sniffed. “No wonder you’re lurking in dark alleys, yes no wonder.” Then she hesitated. “Though the family of Derwyn is one of the original families, well.” She managed a nauseating half smile. “Perhaps sometimes allowances have to be made.”

She patted Ambril’s head experimentally apparently making up her mind that she should at least attempt to be friendly.

“Do say hello to your mother Tylia for me, won’t you?” She turned back to Ygg. “Well, get on with it, don’t be lazy!” She stepped back her feet slightly splayed. “Let me see you bow, come now! You have been practicing haven’t you?” She snapped her fingers at Ygg as if she was rudely summoning a waiter.

Ygg’s face reddened as he bowed slightly toward the older woman.

She frowned at him critically. “Better, certainly though not perfect.” She sighed resignedly, “you must practice, Ygg if we are to make any progress with you at all!” She pulled out a handkerchief from her purse and wiped imaginary dirt from her dress. “No supper for you tonight,” she said absently as she walked toward the main street and was gone.

“Whew!” Sully stood up removing a glob of gooey tomato from her hair as she did so. “Well we’re glad you came along, that’s for sure!”

Reilly stood up next to her and dripping putrid peach juice and laughed. “That felt good! To see my brother get taken down a notch like that.” He continued as he picked up one of the trash bags and heaved it into the container. “If only temporarily.” He added with a shrug.

“Wait a minute, which one was your brother?” Asked Ambril.

Reilly had bent down and was scooping up a couple of rotted apples and lobbing them expertly into the bin. “Lance, of course, the biggest of the bullies.” Reilly said ruefully. “My big brother.” He stared down the alley unseeingly for a moment a spasm of hatred and anger flashed and was gone and Reilly was smiling again.

“And my brother was with him.” She said her voice low.

Reilly stared at her hard for a moment. It seemed they had a real connection then; a sort of bond of lousy brothers.

The four kids made short work of the clean up. They laughed at Sully’s hair and Reilly’s messy T-shirt. Then Reilly got a hose out from behind the store and they washed the back walls and the dumpster down. Ygg tossed around the compost heap quickly and they were done.

“So Mrs. Twid is related to you somehow?” Ambril asked Ygg.

Ygg shrugged, “She’s a relation on me Mam’s side.” He kicked at the store room door.

‘Well, I best be shovin’ off seein’ as I have these here deliveries.” He said picking up a green canvas satchel and slinging it over his shoulder. He straightened his bow tie and stretched the neck of his shirt which was bursting at every seam. “Be seein’ you tomorrow,” he said cheerlessly as he strode away.

“Yeah, see you at school?” said Reilly as he backed toward the storeroom.

Ambril and Sully nodded as they picked up their bikes.

“Well, that was interesting.”

“It sure was!” Said Sully brightly. “That is, it was more than interesting seeing Lance get a black eye!” Her smile was huge. “That was really great.” She realized what she had said and looked at Ambril hesitatingly. “You’ll find out tomorrow that Lance is pretty popular at our school.” She went on. “And I guess you must know now that I’m not.” She looked down embarrassed, “I’m really not.”

Ambril smiled shyly. “Well any enemy of that monster is an enemy of mine.” Sully returned her grin. “If you like I can meet you at the front gate tomorrow.” Offered Sully as she got on her bike.

“Great! I’ll look for you.” Said Ambril as she pushed off. The sun was lazily bedding down behind the mountains and lengthening the darkening shadows. But Ambril didn’t find the shadows so scary that night. She had made some friends.

# Chapter 16 The First Day of School

The alarm clock woke Ambril blinking unreasonably 7:00 AM. She groaned, her first day at her new school. She rolled out of bed into her clothes and slumped down the stairs. On the table were a bowls of cereal and a jug orange juice with glasses beside it. She sloshed juice into a glass for herself and because she wasn’t feeling hungry emptied half of her cereal into Zane’s bowl.

“I saw that,” Zane slid down the banister landing with a leer and sauntered over to the table. “But I’ll accept the offering.”

“What are you doing hanging out with Lance?” asked Ambril.

“Saving your derriere,” said Zane as he sloshed milk into his bowl and took a big bite of cereal. “If I hadn’t ‘ave bin ‘ere, you’d ‘ave bin toast,” he rolled the cereal around in his mouth and crunched.

Ambril rolled her eyes and snorted. Yeah, right.

“You need to watch ou’ for tho’ guys, they’re ou’ to get you,” said Zane taking another gargantuan bite of cereal.

“Well you won’t be much help, if you’re his best friend, ” said Ambril scowling as she grabbed her bowl and took it into the kitchen.

“Hey, I’m going to do what I have to do to stay healthy here.” Said Zane suddenly serious. “And if it means I have to hang out with Lance and his bullying thugs, I’ll do it.” He glared at his little sister before downing his orange juice.

Ambril looked around and found a paper bag on the counter with her name on it. “Where’s Mom?” she called over her shoulder as she stuffed the lunch into her pack.

“Still asleep I guess, Feldez gave her some more stuff last night,” came the reply. “He thinks---“

“What do I think?” a cold voice asked from the stairwell. Ambril snapped up and turned around. Feldez tripped down the stairs looking sleek and calm. Ambril’s body stiffened instinctively, she just didn’t trust him.

“---just that you thought Mom needed to rest,” said Zane quickly.

Feldez nodded and gave a tug to his cuffs. “This has been a surprisingly difficult transition for her,” he stared hard at Zane. “And you have not helped the situation, from now on I want more cooperation.” He tugged on his cuffs once more for emphasis and whistled cheerlessly as he headed for the door. He turned and leveled his gaze at Ambril, “This applies to you as well.”

It was all Ambril could do to keep herself from throwing her cereal bowl at him, but she resisted and lowering her eyes she nodded.

Feldez did not appear to notice her feelings. After buttoning his jacket he strode out the door. Ambril could hear the engine purr as the car backed out of the garage, the crackle of gravel signaled he was away.

Ambril let out a sigh of relief and looked at Zane. “I think he had something to do with the Dullaith that we saw.”

Zane looked at her disbelieving. Ambril told him what she had seen on his computer. His eyes widened. He made her repeat it just to be sure and then without a word, he got up and moved toward the door.

“Well? Aren’t you going to say something? Shouldn’t we try to tell Mom or something?” Ambril asked exasperated.

Zane turned slowly toward her it wasn’t until she noticed his clenched fist that she realized how upset he was. “Just what would we tell her? I told you, you idiot, we can’t tell a soul about what we saw! She’s so stressed out about all of this it’s like talking to a wall and way, way too focused on Feldez,” he paused groping for something and then sighed. “I have to think,” he picked up his backpack and made for the door. “We’ll talk tonight,” with a bang the front door slammed behind him.

Ambril’s heart was leaden as she climbed on her bike but the cool morning breeze and bright spring sunlight lifted her spirits in spite of everything. She pulled up to the bike rack in front of the noisy crowded schoolyard a few minutes later feeling much better.

“Hey! You made it! Any trouble last night?” Sully ran up smiling. She had a large flowery bag in her hand.

“You mean from Lance? No, I got away alright.” Ambril smiled ruefully at Sully “Zane thinks they’re out to get us.”

“Yeah, well that’s nothing new for me, and what would they do with us if they caught us? They’re all bluster, nothing to back it up.” Sully shrugged and led the way to the front steps. Off to the side Ambril could see a large milling group of kids.

Sully noticed them too and sighed, “I guess they decided to get Riley first and save us for later.” She pointed to the center of the group.

Ambril could just see some dark shaggy haired kid getting shoved around a bunch of jeering much bigger boys. Lance, who was much taller appeared to be the one doing most of the shoving. “You need to stop playing around, you hear me?” Lance yelled. “No more experiments, you geeky nerd!” He shoved Riley to the ground and walked away. Ambril spotted her big brother on the fringes of the group. She was mollified to see he looked uncomfortable.

“Come on, there isn’t anything we can do now and the bell’s about to ring.” Said Sully behind her.

Ambril, with the help of her friend found the office quickly and was given her class schedule with a sniff from the school secretary, the ancient Miss Jonquil. “Your mother was supposed to come along today and sign some forms.” She quavered peering through her half rim glasses and fingering her pearls.

“Oh, sorry she’s not feeling well,” Ambril lied, “I’ll tell her though.”

Miss Jonquil softened a bit. “Oh well be sure to tell her she needs to come in and see me.” She warbled and went back to her papers.

Out in the hallway, Sully was examining Ambril’s schedule. “Oh great, you have Mr. Pinwydden for English with me and you have Ms. Breccia for History. They went through her entire schedule and found that they were in a lot of the same classes. Ambril felt a lot less nervous.

A second bell sounded “Pond Scum! We’re late!” Said Sully and they raced down the hall and skittered into class just as the bell ceased to ring.

“So glad you could join us,” said a voice dryly. “Ah our new student, excellent!” a tall thin and graceful man mincing toward them. He had short brown hair and a brilliant green scarf knotted at his neck. A pencil thin moustache outlined his smile.

“You must be Ambril Petri correct?” he said as he gestured gracefully at her. Ambril started when she hears Feldez’s last name.

“Ah no, there’s been a mistake,” she said defiantly. She wasn’t about to use Feldez’s last name. “My last name is Derwyn, I’m Ambril Derwyn.”

Mr. Pinwydden blanched but then quickly recovered. “Oh, I ‘m so sorry, I thought---well, it doesn’t matter. Ambril Derwyn, welcome to English.” He gestured toward an empty seat.” Now, open your books to page 357, we’re going to discuss Myths and Legends, specifically Celtic.”

Ambril found a seat near Sully and looking around saw Ygg sitting nearby struggling awkwardly with his book. He looked a lot more at home tossing tomatoes.

The rustle of books and paper reached a crescendo and then slowly died out. Riley limped in, his hair wild and his shirt torn and took a seat in the back. Ambril caught his eye and smiled encouragingly but he looked away, embarrassed.

Ygg had his hand in the air.

“Yes, Ygg,” Mr. Pinwydden and clapped his thin hands together silently.

I was just puzzling about a story I heard as a wee child about an evil being named Morz- or Morozey“

“Oh you mean Moroz?”

“Yeah, that be him” Ygg nodded his head.

“That is really a local story. I don’t believe it’s ever left these mountains. But many of us have strong Celtic roots, so we’ll spend a moment or two on the evil Moroz. ” Continued Mr. Pinwydden. “It’s an interesting story.

There really was a man named Moroz. A brilliant scientist and by all accounts quite charming, he became very influential in the town.” Mr. Pinwydden cocked his head at the class looking like an emerald green crane. “Here we stray from reality, the story goes, he began to dabble in dark magic. Being gifted in this as well, he became so powerfully evil that the four ancient families of Trelawnyd combined their powers and ensnared him, imprisoning him for all eternity.”

Mr. Pinwydden paused for affect. “And they say the shadow hounds, the Cerberus can still be seen running the forest in search of his prison.” Mr. Pinwydden stopped to retie his scarf. “It’s unclear why the gatekeepers of the underworld would be interested in him. But it is thought that he might have disturbed some ancient magic and transformed his being into something so heinous it does not belong in this world.”

Ambril’s ears perked up at the mention of hounds, she raised her hand, “shadow hounds, like black dogs?”

“No, not regular black dogs, of course,” said Mr. Pinwydden fussing with his scarf, “the Cerberus, the hounds of the underworld. Some say it a single dog with three heads and others that it is a group of three dogs. They are said to be as large as elephants, breathe fire and have eyes that glow red.”

Ambril sat stunned. Dog’s of the Underworld, Dullaiths, this was one weird little town.

Riley had raised his hand. “Does anyone know where his prison is?”

“If such a prison exists, remember this part is just a legend, not fact. Logically it should be located within a few miles of this town as the four ancient family’s first settlement was Trelawnyd.” Said Mr. Pinwydden.

Riley had his hand in the air again. “How was he imprisoned?”

“No one knows really it would involve some sort of living magic to counteract—wait! What am I doing?” Mr. Pinwydden slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

“Now you see class, this is what I mean by a Legend, it has just enough truth in it to make it believable but also enough fantasy to make it laughable,” He giggled in a high staccato, “you be the judge.” He clapped his hands together.

“Now back to our lesson, Celtic Myths and Legends. How many of you know the story of King Arthur?” Mr. Pinwydden turned toward the board.

Ambril had a hard time following the rest of the lecture she was so immersed in her own thoughts about the Cerberus and a forest prison. No wonder they had a wall around the town. The bell rang but it took a nudge from Sully for her to pick up her books and head to her next class.

“Moroz! Now isn’t that’s a great story?” said Sully. They had P.E. next and so headed to the gym to change and then raced out into the bright sunlight.

The class lounged around the playground until a rather plump, perspiring man in a bright yellow jogging suit walked hurriedly up to them. Ambril recognized him as the Bob from Bob’s Bot’s. The kids around her smiled when they saw him, Ambril knew that was a good sign; this would be a fun class.

“Hello, hello, again students! I hope you had an enjoyable spring break,” Bob patted his ample belly, “I certainly enjoyed mine,” his eyes swept the group until he found Ambril trying to look inconspicuous. “And here is our newest student Ambril is it?” he said waving vigorously at her. Class this is Ambril! Say Hello.”

A mumbled hello rumbled through the group. Ambril sincerely hoped that not every teacher felt the need to introduce her. Then she caught sight of Lance sporting a huge black eye. She smirked at him and he made a face back. They weren’t going to be friends, big surprise.

“Excellent! So to start off with, I want you to run two laps around the grounds then we’ll do some calisthenics to music,” there were some quickly smothered giggles as Bob made some awkward attempts at dancing. “Ready? Go!”

Everyone groaned as they stumbled to their feet and started off. Lance and his buddies streaked by, but Ygg dropped back. He jogged effortlessly along just ahead of them. Sully and Ambril matched his step and let the others pass them. Before long they were well behind and they all slowed to a walk. Ambril saw that Riley was the only one behind them. He was limping slowly.

“Poor kid,” said Sully waving at him, “What a family he’s got.”

It had been a clear bright day but spilling over the mountains to the north were some roiling black clouds.

 “Oh that’s not good,” said Ambril. “I was hoping we could go for a bike ride this afternoon. Do you guys have time?”

Sully beamed, obviously happy to be asked. “I think so, maybe we can take some snacks and explore this spooky old house near our farm. The house is boarded up but there’s this really weird garden and a gazebo we can get under if it rains.”

“Great! Sounds kinda fun.” Said Ambril. “Let’s hope it clears up, though, I hate to ride my bike in the rain. How ‘bout you Ygg?”

Ygg looked surprised to be included but shook his head. “I’ll be makin’ more deliveries I expect, for Mrs. Twid.” He said glumly. “Her Sunset Tea is gettin’ popular with the older---.”

Ygg was interrupted by an eerie, scream directly behind them. Ambril whirled to see Lance who had come on his second lap, doing what appeared to be some sort of dance, except he seemed to be in terrible pain.

“Help me! “ he screamed again. His friends had stopped in their tracks uncertain how to help him as he writhed in pain. He was hopping on one foot and then the other as if the playground had been transformed into a hot bed of coals. He managed to hop over to one of his friends and grabbed at him. A half smile played on his friend’s face.

“Are you joking, Lance?” he said half laughing.

Ambril had to admit he looked pretty silly hoping around like an idiot. But Ambril didn’t believe he was joking. She thought he looked to be in real pain. Then she was bumped and shoved aside as Mr. Berry blew through the ring of students.

He took one look at Lance and yelled over his shoulders “You there, he pointed at a pimply nosed kid, “go and ask Pinwydden for a nullifier quick! The rest of you get out of here! It’s not safe!” Most of the kids turned tail and ran toward the gym but Ambril, Sully and Ygg hung back, curious.

Lance’s friend seeing Lance really was in pain pulled him off the track and onto the grass.

Lance seemed immediately to be in less pain. He landed with a grunt and rolled whimpering on the grass. Mr. Berry ran over to him and began to unlace his shoes and remove his socks.

The pimply nosed kid came running up carrying a pail of steaming murky brown liquid.

“Here you go --um where --do you --want this?” He puffed, out of breath.

“Bring it here!” Mr. Berry gestured toward Lance. Mr Berry had Lance’s feet in the bucket the moment it was set down. Lance immediately stopped whining.

“There, that did it.” Said Mr. Berry almost to himself. He grabbed Lance’s shoes and socks and dunked them in the pail as well. He then lifted Lance’s feet out of the pail and gave him his dripping footwear. “Here, see if you can wring these out yourself.”

He beckoned to the pimply-faced kid. “Here, Slosh some of this around.” Said Mr. Berry quickly, gesturing to the area where Lance had been. Ambril looked to where he was pointing. There were some faint, glowing lines on the playground which formed some kind of a shape. She could make out some strange writing, a 5 pointed star and a circle---“

“Oh my gosh, it’s a shadow gant!“ Ambril blurted out.

“It’s a what?” Asked Sully.

She looked over and saw Mr. Berry had noticed them and didn’t look pleased, had he heard her? “You three wait for me over there. You shouldn’t even be here!” He said sternly.

With a whoosh, the red nosed kid emptied the bucketful of liquid on the image. Mr. Berry then picked up a dead branch and began to brush the stuff carefully around. Wherever it touched the glowing lines fizzed and faded. It had a familiar scent. Riley limped up then looking interested and confused.

Sully whispered “What no marshmallows?” Ambril suddenly realized that the brown liquid was hot chocolate.

An ambulance screamed onto the playground. Two men in white overalls jumped out and began to efficiently load Lance onto a stretcher. Mr. Berry walked the stretcher to the back of the ambulance patting and tucking the blanket around the boy. Then he turned to Riley. “I’m sorry, Riley, your brother’s been hurt. Why don’t you go change your clothes and then go to the office? Your parents will be here soon.”

“Here you three come with me.” Mr. Berry looked sternly at the three uncomfortable kids standing in front of him and motioned to the school.

They marched silently into the school just as the police cruiser pulled up and an overweight peace officer heaved himself out of the car.

Mr. Berry ushered the three kids to his office, a tiny cramped, space next to the boy’s bathroom and waved them into chairs. He perched on his desk and studied them unsmiling. “Soo, tell me what you saw just now.”

“Well,” Sully began, “We saw Lance jumped around like an idiot. Oh, and there were weird symbols on the ground.” Sully shrugged.

It waren’t there a few minutes before when we jogged by, it just suddenly appeared.” Ygg put in.

“Go on,” said Mr. Berry folding his arms.

“Then,” Ygg continued, “we saw you run up and dunk Lance’s feet in hot chocolate, and he be better right quick.” Ygg smiled wide. “Like magic!”

Mr. Berry glared at him, and for a moment Ambril thought he would hit him but he seemed to collect himself. “Magic!, Don’t be silly! Magic is NOT ALLOWED in this village, you know that Ygg,” he paused and studied the dirty linoleum floor. “Magic users are thrown out at best and jailed at worst. They are considered,” he paused again and unconsciously pulled at the collar of his sweatshirt, “dangerous to the community.” He quickly got up and walked around his desk.

 “Perhaps what you saw was me soothing Lance’s feet and washing his footwear free of a burning chemical---or something.” He looked hopefully over his glasses at the three children in front of him. “Now Ambril I thought I heard you say---”

There was a loud knock on the door. Mr. Berry jumped and then looked at each of them separately then reaching over he opened the door, the room being so small. Outside was the hulking form of a police officer.

“HI ya Bob, are these the three kids who were there?” Without waiting for a response he continued. “Well now this’ll be easy.” He pulled a rumpled notepad out of his pocket. “The Amb’lance folks said they thought the boy’d be fine,” he said pushing up the brim of his hat. “Now, I heard from the other kids that you three were nearby when it happened. What’d ya see, anything out of the ord’nary?”

Ambril looked at Sully and Ygg and nodded. “We didn’t see strangers hanging around if that’s what you mean, we were one of the last to jog around the playground. I think that only Riley was behind us, he was limping. Lance was working on his second lap. We turned around and ran back when we heard him yell,” said Ambril in a rush.

“Was there anyone else around when you turned around?”

“No, we were the first ones there. The other kids came up after that,” said Sully.

“Where was Riley right then?”

The three of them looked at each other. “We didn’t see him until after Mr. Berry came up.” Ygg said, “maybe he set himself down, he didna look too good, hurting the way he was.”

Deputy Sheriff Skarn concentrated on his notepad, his tongue listing to one side in his open mouth. “Right, then what happened?”

“Well then one of the kids pulled Lance onto the grass and---” Ambril looked at Bob scrunched down in his chair, “---this kid came with this bucket of---,”

“Cleaning solution,” interrupted Bob as he sat up straighter in his chair.

“---Right, and they sloshed it all over the place where Lance had been attacked. Including Lance’s feet and shoes and stuff. Then of course, you arrived.”

Deputy Sheriff Skarn scratched laboriously in his pad for several minutes before looking up. “Didja see anything else? Anything on the pavement or sumpin?”

“Well there might have been something there, a chalk drawing or something but I wasn’t paying attention what with Lance doing that little jig of his.” said Ygg with a smirk.

Deputy Skarn nodded wisely. “It sounds like just a prank some kid cooked up,” he leaned heavily on the doorjamb. “Maybe Lance was just play-actin’ at being in pain to git outta school.” He nodded again frowning, “It wouldn’t be the first time for him.” He straightened up and stuffed his notepad backing his pocket. “I’ll just look around some more before I skedaddle.” He tipped his hat at Bob and sauntered down the hallway.

Mr. Berry let out an audible sigh of relief and smiled at them.

“See you tomorrow Mr. Berry,” The three got up to go.

“Wait, not so fast, I want to know what it is you thought you saw, Ambril---,” he was interrupted by another insistent knock on the door. Rolling his eyes he reached over and opened it.

Deputy Sheriff Skarn stood there scratching his head. “Just one more thing Mr. Berry, I was wondering---,”

“Yes, Yes, just one moment,” Mr. Berry turned toward the three kids. “Alright. You’re already late for lunch.” He pointed toward the door.

The three escaped to the hallway.

“Phew, that was uncomfortable wasn’t it,” whispered Sully as they walked quickly away.

Ygg smiled “But it’s great to know that Bob knows magic, isn’t it!” He said.

“Shhh! He’ll lose his job if anyone finds out!” Sully elbowed him hard.

The three of them went off to get out of their gym clothes, and then Sully and Ambril went together to lunch.

In the main hall they walked by a door that Ambril hadn’t noticed before. It had a large ‘DANGER, KEEP OUT’ sign on it in red. “What’s in there? Nuclear waste?” Asked Ambril.

“That, believe it or not is the janitor’s closet.” Said Sully with a grin. “I guess they use it for storing some other stuff too.” Sully rolled her eyes. “There are all sorts of rumors about it because of---you know---the big silly sign.” Sully continued. “People going in and never coming out again. Weird noises and strange voices being heard.” She shook her head. “You know, the usual stuff.” Sully chuckled. “They ought to just take the sign down, everyone would forget about it then.”

They found a table and slid gratefully onto some benches. Ambril opened her bag and knew immediately that her mother had been nowhere near it. Normally lunch was a squashed peanut butter and jelly sandwich, some old grapes and stale cookies. This lunch contained fresh cut carrots with garlic salt, a sandwich made with homemade bread and fresh baked cookies. Everything was rolled in red checked napkins and a little handwritten note, which said, “Enjoy your day lovie!” Ambril couldn’t speak she was so happy. She shared her cookies with Sully who rolled her eyes in ecstasy.

“Wow! I have to meet your housekeeper and thank her for the best cookie I’ve ever eaten.” Said Sully somewhat jealously.

Ambril looked over and saw Ygg sitting near them. He had either finished his lunch or not eaten anything. Ambril looked down at her last two cookies. She was pretty full.

“Hey, Ygg! Do you want my cookies? I can’t finish them.” She slid a napkin with the cookies over to him.

His face lit up briefly but then he shook his head. “No, no, I’m not hungry right now.” He said turning slightly away but the eyes refused to look away.

“It was really nice of you to help yesterday,” interjected Sully. “Thanks.”

Ygg turned back around. “No worries,” he mumbled. “To be honest, I didna’ see you there at first, just Riley.” He continued. “I’m not really sure if Riley is such a great guy, him bein’ related to Lance and his Da’ and all,” Ygg shrugged. “But I didna like to see him bullied.” He shook his head and took another look at the cookies. “Tisn’t fair.”

He gave a sideways glance to Ambril.

“Are ya sure you be nought hungry? I do not want to take something that’s needed.” He asked.

Ambril patted her tummy. “I’m stuffed, really,” she hoped sounded convincing. “Go ahead!” She gave the cookies another shove so they were right under his nose.

Ygg couldn’t help himself. He picked up both cookies and inhaled them, clearly starving. Ambril wondered if she could get him to accept a sandwich the next day. She’d ask for an extra one, just in case.

Just then Lance and his buddies walked in, he was back from the hospital none the worse for wear. In no time he was talking loudly and jeering at the smaller kids. There were three girls fawning on him, dressed fashionably and giggling at everything he said. He turned just as a blonde girl walking by on her way to the trash.

“Hey it’s Lola ba dola! Hi sweetie!” Lance leered at her with his one good eye. Do you wanna come by later to my Dad’s shop? I can getcha some make up and stuff for free.”

Ambril remembered seeing her in Betula’s shop. Lola was clearly not impressed and rolled her eyes at him.

“Knock it off, Lance. It looks like you’re the one who needs the make up, nice face!“ She flicked her trash into the bin and flounced out of the lunchroom.

Ambril and Sully exchanged smiles as they also made their way to the door. Ambril looked over and saw Zane smile as he watched Lola walk out onto the playground with her friends.

“That was great! Lola really gave it to him!” Sully laughed turning to Ambril but then did a double take. Ambril looked as if she’d seen a ghost. “Hey what’s wrong?”

Ambril had stopped dead in the middle of the hallway; kids were jostling her as they shoved past her to get outside. Her eyes were riveted on a paper tacked above the janitor’s closet. It had a crudely drawn image of a Dullaith.

But what had really stopped her cold was seeing someone reach up and crumple it in his hands before swiftly rounding the corner. It had been Feldez. Were Ambril’s eyes playing tricks on her or did he just come out of the forbidden room?

Ambril felt someone tugging hard on her arm.

“Come on, you cretins, get out of the way!” Someone yelled in her ear as Sully towed out of the onslaught of kids and off to the side.

“O.K., you’re freaking me out, what’s wrong?” Sully’s face was anxious.

“Oh, it was nothing, I guess,” mumbled Ambril. “I think I just saw my future stepfather coming out of the janitor’s closet. “ She shook herself and smiled sheepishly. “But you said no one was allowed in there. Weird, I must be hallucinating. It must have been all that good food, my body’s not used to it.”

Sully looked at her curiously. “Let’s go outside, fresh air and all that.”

“Just give me a sec.” Said Ambril and turned toward the closet door. She tried the handle experimentally. It was locked. She tried it again. Perhaps it hadn’t been Feldez at all, she reasoned. Maybe it had even been the wrong doorway---

“Well, that’s weird! Some one really did try to break in here, look!” Sully had bent down and was examining the door handle.

Ambril bent down to get a better look. Sully pointed to some scratches around the lock. “Those scratches are recent, don’t you think?” She asked.

Ambril could only nod. Now she was really confused. Feldez did not seem like the type to break into high security storage in the middle of the day. He was too concerned about what everyone thought of him to risk tarnishing his reputation. She grimaced in annoyance. She was getting nowhere.

**Chapter 18 History with Ms. Breccia**

“Class, order please!” the teacher yelled as Sully and Ambril slid into seats at the back of the room. The teacher was a large cube of a woman, with helmet shaped hair and bright red lipstick to match her red, square fingernails. Her rough voice had a bite to it.

“Come now children, I’m so excited about today’s lecture that I’m even postponing roll call.” She said still hunched over her desk.

“History waits for no man or woman, it flows on and on.” She rose and dramatically raising her hands. It looked more like she was directing traffic. She paused until the class settled.

“Today we shall discuss the formation of our beloved town, Trelawnyd.” She continued her small eyes darting around the room. When they found Ambril her eyebrows went up slightly. “We shall discuss the well-documented, true history of the founding of our town and the old stories told as well.” And then added condescendingly, “such tales are, if not accurate, interesting in a fashion.”

“This valley was first settled over 150 years ago by disgruntled 49er gold miners anxious to start a new life.” She paced bearishly back and forth in front of the class.

“Unsuccessful in the gold fields up north they brought their families down via horse and wagon to this valley, cleared the fields and initially built small stone homes around a circular plaza. What we call the Circle Stone.”

She walked over to the writing board and pulled down a large map. It showed the current town with its Circular Park in the center of town and streets radiating away from it.

“The original settlement was built in the lowest, swampiest part of the valley and lasted several generations until a very virulent form of swamp fever broke out.” She waved her hand artistically toward a largely unpopulated area.

“Old Town was pulled down and the townspeople moved to our town’s current location sometime around 1907 and has, with the exception of a few lean years enjoyed growth and prosperity every since.” She turned away from the map and smiled at the class. “Does anyone know the names of the original four families?”

Sully raised her hand. “Tilwith, Silva, Derwyn and Amalfia,” said Sully proudly.

“Yes, that is correct, ah Sully,” she said and preened. “My family, the family of Breccia came soon after. “ Ms. Breccia strutted a bit here, “We were the 9th family and helped found this town.” She raised her considerable frame to its full height and looked over their heads. “Yes, my forefathers cleared the fields, tiled the soil, and worked, really WORKED!” Her voice filled the room as her chest puffed out. “To ensure this town’s health and prosperity.” She paused almost as if they all should personally thank her.

“Now, class how many of you have a lineage such as mine? An ancestral tie to one of our great founding families?” With that almost everyone raised their hand, except Sully and two or three others. Ms. Breccia blanched a bit, the wind out of her sail but rallied. “Ah yes, well how many of you come from pure, unsullied stock? That is no New Family lineage?”

Ambril was shocked as she watched Sully sink further into her chair.

Far fewer raised their hands.

“And now who comes from the purest of the pure lineage. Who can point to a direct line of ancestors all the way back to the original settlers, and by original I mean families one through ten?”

Now there were only three hands raised. One of them was Ambril’s. Ms. Breccia narrowed her eyes and smirked. “Ah and now we come to the humorous part of our ancestry.” She pointed to a small fashionable girl who was looking at her reflection in a nearby window. “Ah HEM!” The girl jumped to attention. Ambril recognized her as one of the girls hanging around Lance earlier that day. “Tiana Twee is it? And you are---reportedly---related to which of the founding families?”

Tiana shrank under the massive woman’s stare. “Um, It’s the Tylwith family,” she said rolling her eyes. “My Mom is always going on about it.”

“Ah yes, I believe I see it, the small, thin frame, yes, yes!” You know your family is supposed to be descendants of.” Ms. Breccia smirked at the class. “Fairies isn’t it?” She barked a laugh.

Tiana tossed her hair and shrugged as she popped her gum.

Still giggling, Ms. Breccia waved her hand at Ambril, “And you? You are very new here, perhaps you misunderstood me?” She smoothed her dress with her mannish hands.

“Like your friend there, are you not one of the New Families?”

“I am new to the school, but my last name is Derwyn and my father’s last name was Silva.” She paused for emphasis. “I guess that’s two of the founding families. I also know I have some Tilwith in me as well. Not that it matters, though. I’m not sure that exactly when my ancestors arrived or what my ancestors did really makes much a difference to anybody today,” she continued. Ms. Breccia was speechless with surprise at being contested in her own classroom.

“Well, Well, I see!” She said her voice dangerously quiet. “I guess good breeding doesn’t guarantee mannerly behavior.” Her eyes still bored into Ambril trying to cow her with its strength. But Ambril gave as good as she got and stared right back.

 Ambril knew right then that there would be no love lost between Ms. Breccia and herself, she could kiss a good report card goodbye.

Finally Ms. Breccia turned on her heels and strode back to the writing board.

She cleared her throat her back still toward the classroom.

“Now for the more colorful account of our town’s inception.” She chuckled. According to local storytellers, our forefathers, the original four families came here not during the gold rush, a move that has been well-documented; no, they are said to have come over from the old country thousands of years ago.” She turned toward the class dramatically, “Before the Mayflower, before Columbus, even before the Vikings! Yes! The story goes that they came with the help of--,” Ms. Breccia again smirked at the class, “--magic.”

**Chapter 19 The Magic of Trelawnyd**

Laughter was heard around the room.

Lance called out, “Yeah on broomsticks maybe!” More laughter erupted..

“The old legends aren’t---er---specific about their mode of travel,” chortled Ms. Breccia.

“The four families themselves are supposed to have come from different magical groups.” Ms. Breccia raised her hand to Tiana. “For instance, as I have mentioned, the Tylwith family was supposedly comprised of fairies.” She pointed briefly at Ambril. “The Derwyn family were magic users, but of human kind.” The class turned around and stared at her.

Lance guffawed, “Yeah well can you work a little magic now and make yourself disappear!”

More laughter rang out and Ambril snorted at Lance. “Abraca-dabra,” said one rat-faced boy, and waved his hands right in her face.

“The illustrious family of Animalfia supposedly was composed of shape changers.” Chortled Ms. Breccia holding her side. “That is humans who can change to an animal on a whim!”

Nearly everyone in the class laughed at this, even Ambril thought it sounded a little silly though she thought a little about Fowlclun and wondered if there was a connection there.

Ms. Breccia stretched her arms wide. “I’ve saved the best for last! “ She cried. “The Great name of Silva is supposed to have its roots in the Earth-kind,” Ms. Breccia again giggled as she enumerated on her fingers, “Namely Trolls, Gnomes and Dwarfs!”

Ms. Breccia’s laughed hard then. “That’s you again, Ambril, my dear! My what an ancestral tree you have!”

Lance started stomping on the floor, pounding on his desk and making gutteral noises. “This is how Silvas order coffee!” he jeered.

Ambril kept her eyes on Ms. Breccia. She would be one to watch, she thought. The class slowly got itself together but there were occasional grunts and desk pounding for the rest of the class period.

“Now, now, class, Please pass in your essays, “What I did during Spring Break,” I’m on pins and needles to read them,” she said sarcastically.

Sully looked stricken and raised her hand.

Ms. Breccia inclined her head a fraction of an inch toward her and frowned.
“My essay burned in the fire we had at our produce stand the night before last. I didn’t get a chance to redo it, may I have an extension?” Sully said apologetically.

Ms. Breccia squared her shoulders and glared at her. “So you had all of yesterday to redo your essay and you have nothing to show for it?” She drew herself up to Amazonian proportions.

“I fear that is too flimsy an excuse. You simply must learn to be more responsible. That is, of course my job as well.” She focused her gaze even more intently on Sully. Sully began to slide down in her chair. “To teach you children proper behavior.” She continued to glare. “Zero on your essay and,” she raised her index finger like a spike. “Detention, out to the hallway with you, my dear.” She swept her arm in a grand gesture and pointed to the door.

“Are there any other slackers here today?” She looked down her nose at the class as she began to prowl the front of the classroom. “Any one else forget their essay?” She said dangerously smooth.

Ygg raised his hand, his head down. After a moment, Ambril raised her hand too.

With a jerk of her head Ms. Breccia made it clear that Ygg was to leave as well. “Ambril, you being new are not expected to produce an essay today.” She said with a grimace. “Though a detention may be in order considering your rudeness earlier.” She paused to consider. “Yes, why not? A detention for you as well.”

Ambril couldn’t believe her good luck, she managed to get out of listening to Ms. Breccia and she got to hang out with her new friends in the hall.

Sully and Ambril scrambled to gather their stuff and leave as quickly as possible.

“I shall also expect a three page essay from all of you on the founding of Trelawnyd, due by the end of the week.” Ms. Breccia smiled almost wickedly as they left the room. As the door closed Ambril heard her say. “Lance, wherever has your brother gotten to?”

“Whew! I’m glad we’re out of there.” Said Sully. “She is such a toad. I have learned more history during detention than sitting in her class.”

“Is she always that bad?” asked Ambril struggling to zip her backpack as they walked up the corridor.

“Well that was her good side today,” said Ygg from behind them.

Sully and Ambril turned.

“Let’s set here, if’n we walk that way, we’ll get a citation for bein’ out a class without a note.” He threw his backpack down near a bank of lockers. “I know that from experience,” he said nodding sagely. “And Ms. Breccia never gives out notes.”

Ambril and Sully added their backpacks to his and sat down cross-legged next to Ygg.

“So you’re a Silva an’ a Derwyn.” Said Ygg looking sideways at her.

Ambril noticed his hands were big and square like Ms. Breccia’s hands. His looked like they belonged on him, though.

She nodded.

“I’m a Silva too, as well as a Drasil,” he put up his hand and stage whispered, “number five,” then smiled.

“You should have said something to her, you know.” Said Sully playing with her shoelaces. “It might make things easier on you, she thinks you’re just a new Family like me.”

“Well my connections sure aren’t doing me any good!” Said Ambril.

Ygg smiled smaller. “Ms. Breccia isna’ ever going to warm to me.” He said softly. “There’s a part of me that’s too close to her, a part of her that will always be an embarrassment to her.” He shook his head slowly, “Nay, best to just stay quiet and stick it out.”

There was suddenly a soft thud and a muffled groan from nearby. The three looked around but saw nothing unusual. The thuds came again and another groan.

“It’s coming from one of the lockers, I think.” Said Sully as she scrambled to her feet. She went along knocking on each locker until about the eleventh one there came an answering thud.

Sully tried to open the locker. “I think it’s jammed,” she said struggling.

There was a loud groan. No doubt it came from the locker.

“Here, let me give it a gander.” Said Ygg. He looked at it carefully. “Yer right, it’s jammed.” He raised his fist along one side and hit it with surgical precision above the latch. The door flew open.

Wedged inside, bound and partially gagged was Riley. The entire contents of a trash bin were also jammed in him. He tumbled out slowly, a mountain of paper, gum wrappers, an old sneaker and a half eaten banana followed.

Ambril reached down and took the duct tape off his mouth.

Riley took a huge breath. “Thanks you guys, it was getting hard to breathe in there.” He took another huge breath as Sully removed the duct tape from his wrists.

“Lemme guess, your brother did this?” asked Ygg.

Riley nodded, “still angry about last night.”

He got shakily to his feet. “It was lucky you came along, really. Sometimes I’m in there for hours.” He half smiled as he walked gingerly up and down the corridor. “That’s much better.”

Ambril was so angry and mad she couldn’t think straight. “You can’t let him do this to you, Riley.” She said fairly spitting the words out.

Riley looked at her in surprise. “What am I supposed to do? He has nearly everyone behind him. Teachers, our parents, friends--” He bent down and fished out his backpack from under a crumpled science test. “It won’t be forever, though, that’s for sure.” Riley’s head was still down but Ambril could hear the anger in his voice. “I’ll get him back, don’t you worry about that. And then he’ll stop picking on me.”

As he raised his head Ambril could just see the tail end of his searing anger before it cleared and he replaced with a bland expression. She wondered how long he’d been keeping all that anger inside.

Ygg grimaced at the trash. “We had better get this stuff picked up afore we get another detention.”

Riley began to scoop up the trash and load it into a nearby trash bin, the one it probably came from in the first place. They all followed suit until the hallway was clean.

“Well,” Riley started backing down the hall. “I guess I’ll get out of here, while I can.” He turned and quickly walked out the door.

“Okay, so life could be much, much worse,” mused Sully looking after him. “We could be Riley.”

“If’n he would just stand up to the great lump once in a while, it wouldna’ have got so bad,” said Ygg shaking his head.

The jangling of the bell made them jump. They snatched up their backpacks.

“Tomorrow then,” Ygg waved and was swallowed by the sea of kids invading the hallway.

Ambril looked down and found a wadded piece of paper near her foot. She reached down and was about to toss it in the trash when something made her stop. She uncrumpled the paper and gasped. She hadn’t been imagining anything. Feldez must have tossed it in the trash on his way down the hallway. She held in her hand a drawing of a Dullaith.

**Chapter 20 The Janitor’s Closet**

Ambril smoothed out the drawing. It appeared to be on ordinary ruled school paper. You could get it in any drugstore or market…or school. The top of the paper was ripped as if it had been pinned to something, like a doorframe. It had The same Roman numerals on the bottom.

“You know we’re about to be either smashed like pancakes or carried against our will through the doors.” Said Sully somewhat panicked as she fought off the stream of desperate students racing for the door.

Ambril wordlessly showed her the drawing. “This was the paper I saw before, over the janitor’s closet.”

“So? Someone like’s cow skulls. Where’d you get this?”

Ambril pointed to the trashcan. “Feldez must have dropped it in there, and then I think it got shoved into the locker with Riley and ended up on the floor.”

Sully nodded slowly thinking and then looked at Ambril. “And your future step-father is involved? But wait, that can’t be!” Sully put down the paper looking surprised. “Dr. Petri is a big wig in town. He does all kinds of volunteer work, he’s on all the committees that help cleanup the town and promote peace and harmony yada yada.” Sully cocked her head at Ambril. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Well if you don’t believe me, I’m sure no one else will.” Said Ambril subdued. She took the paper from her friend and shoved it in her backpack.

“No, I didn’t mean that I didn’t believe you,” said Sully anxiously. “I do for some reason, I really do,” she screwed her face up for a minute. “But it’s true that no one else will, I’m not gonna lie.”

Well Sully believed her, maybe there was some hope then that she could get this figured out, Ambril sighed. She looked at her friend appraisingly. Perhaps she wouldn’t though when she heard the whole story. Even though she had lived through it, she had to admit it sounded pretty far fetched.

The hallway was beginning to clear out.

Sully still stood there watching her. “So what do you want to do?”

Ambril thought for just a second. “Well, what I really want to know is what’s behind that door.” She pointed to the janitor’s closet.

Sully snorted. “Have you really looked at that lock? It looks like an expert lock picker would have trouble with it,” she shook her head emphatically. “Besides, we’d get picked up by the principal or a passing teacher before we’d get a chance to try.”

Ambril settled the contents of her backpack and zipped it closed. “Okay, Okay, maybe not right this minute, but it sure would be nice to know.”

Sully stood watching her closely her arms folded. “You know this isn’t fair really,” she said. “ You’re holding out on me. “I can’t help you unless you tell me what’s going on.”

Ambril swallowed hard. Yep, she would have to tell her new friend everything, even if it meant watching her walk away, laughing. She would have to explain. How else could she get to the bottom of this? Besides, Sully would soon tire of being her friend if she kept all of these secrets from her.

Ambril shrugged and nodded.

Sully thought a moment and suddenly smiled wide. “Hey let’s ride over to that place I told you about and we’ll talk.”

Ambril had to smile back.

**Chapter 21 The Gazebo**

Half an hour later found Ambril shooting along a shade-dappled street, her backpack stuffed into her bike basket. She had taken only a few minutes to dump her schoolbooks on her bed, grab her Ashera and then, at the last minute her robot, fLit.

As she took the stairs two at a time she smelled fresh baked cookies and hesitated.

“Hiya Sweetie, did you have a good day?” The housekeeper, Mrs. Sweetgum bustled out of the kitchen a bundle in her hands. “I made some snacks, why don’t you take some with you Dearie?” She handed a lumpy red-checked bundle to Ambril along with a thermos. “Milk, of course,” she answered her unspoken question. “Nothing goes better with cookies.” She patted Ambril on the head like a puppy. “Back before dinner then?” she trotted over to the door and opened it. Her smile showcased her enormous chipmunk-like front teeth.

“O.K., see you before six,” said Ambril stashing the warm goodies and thermos in her backpack.

The afternoon was at it’s warmest. The flowers in her neighbors’ gardens stretched themselves toward the sun as she breezed by. Flit disentangled himself from the backpack and stuck his head out of the basket.

Up ahead Ambril could see a boy on a bike stopped by the side of the road talking to an elderly, frail woman. From 50 feet away Ambril recognized him. His shirt was too small and his pants were baggy in the wrong places. It was Ygg.

Ambril slowed her bike as she approached. They appeared deep in conversation and she didn’t want to intrude.

“Hi!” she said planning to breeze past.

Ygg turned, startled then smiled in recognition. “Hey Ambril!”

Ambril skidded to a stop. “What’s up?”

The old woman nodded vaguely at her and smiled.

“Miss Fern, this is Ambril, we…go to school together.”

A flash of recognition lit up the older woman’s face.

“Ah,” she said examining Ambril’s face carefully. “You’re Tylia and Bren’s then!” Her smile was genuine. “It’s so nice to see you again. I knew you when you were very, very small.”

“Really? um that’s, n---nice,” she stuttered, feeling a little embarrassed. She took a quick look around the garden. It was truly spectacular.

Every nook and cranny filled to bursting with new-budding trees and flowers. There were garden gnomes scattered around, some in the most unlikely poses. She jumped when she found one at her elbow looking unnervingly lifelike. They all had red hats except for one taking a snooze under a large bush. He was smaller and dressed all in green. Ambril smiled.

“Ah you like my little friends now as well!” said Fern. “You liked them when you were little too.” She nodded firmly at Ambril as if that meant a lot to her. She had turned back to her garden and was struggling with some gloves.

“Ygg, My neighbor, Daisy Flood swears by that Sunset Tea, I can’t think why.” She raised a watering can and tipped it forward. A foul smelling green slush came out of the end. “I’ll be sure and give her that package though when she comes back from her store.”

Ambril wrinkled her nose as slimy green sludge glooped out of the watering can onto the flowerbed.

Miss Fern continued on as if it was all perfectly natural. “I’m sorry I can’t help you with directions to Koda’s place,” She said as she doused a perfectly good pot of petunias with green slop.

Ygg caught Ambril’s horrified expression. “Is that your famous Gardener’s Tea, Mrs. Fern?” he asked innocently.

“Why yes, Ygg, it’s very good of you to notice. Not everyone’s knows a good manure tea when they see one?” Fern smiled with delight.

Ygg smiled back. “Your tea is famous in certain circles! And better than Mrs. Twid’s tea.” He chuckled and then pulled up his bike. “Except of course the way it smells. Well I best be off.”

Mrs. Fern waved goodbye to them before mercilessly coating an innocent rosebush with her smelly glop.

Ambril held her breath until they were well away. “So you need to get to Koda’s house?” said Ambril. “I can help.” Ambril was proud. “It’s lucky you asked for that one as it’s the only house I’ve been to, other than my own that is.”

Ygg perked up.

“I’m going that way,” said Ambril. “So follow me.”

Ambril stood up on her pedal and off she went with Ygg behind her. Ambril found the main road she and her family had ridden down and turned in the direction of the forest.

The houses immediately began to thin until they were among farms, which gave way to sparse forest. Ambril could see the wall paralleling the road. She started to look around for the Tupelo’s burned out shack when Koda glided up alongside them riding Rosebud.

Ambril could have been mistaken but the bike still looked a bit miffed so she kept her distance. “Hi Koda, hi, um Rosebud, this is Ygg. He has something for you.”

“Ambril? I see you are finding your way around.” Koda smirked at Rosebud. “Rosebud a bit jealous. She like your bike.” He grinned and then turned to Ygg.

“Yes.” Koda said as he accepted Ygg’s package. “I wanted to sample new Sunset Tea of Mrs. Twid,” he said.

“People seem to like it. Especially the older ones. Said Ygg and shook his head. “I don’t know why, really. Between you and me, it’s mostly right off the shelf tea that she adds a few things to.”

Koda nodded slowly as he tucked the package into his bike basket. “Dangerous if you not know what you doing.”

Ambril thought she heard Rosebud sneeze. Koda nodded again and looked at his toes. They stood there awkwardly until Koda nodded to them and without a word rode slowly off down the street.

“Bye!” Ambril yelled after him. “And you too Rosebud!”

“Who’s Rosebud?” said Ygg curiously watching Koda disappear around a curve.

“It’s a long story,” said Ambril. “Hey, um, why don’t you come and explore this old house with Sully and I? It’s supposed to be right around here, near Sully’s house.”

Ygg looked undecided. “Well, I be having homework and chores—“

“I have more cookies!” said Ambril and jiggled her back pack.”

Ygg’s eyebrows shot up. “Well I guess I could come for a bit.” Ygg caught sight of fLit, who slowly swiveled his head and blinked at him.

“Good, now you can help me, where’s Sully’s house?” said Ambril

Ygg smiled and said as he pushed down hard on his pedal and whizzed past her with an evil grin. “Now you can follow me!”

Ambril had to work hard to keep up with him, but not that hard. She was pretty strong too.

In no time they skidded to a stop in front of the burned out shack. Ambril saw that Sully and her parents had made a lot of progress. The burned parts had been removed and new wood was neatly stacked near it. In back of the shack, Ambril could see the place where the fairy circle had been was tilled under and replanted.
Such a waste that was,” muttered Ygg. Ambril remembered suddenly that he had been there that night as well.

“Did you see anything, you know weird that night?” She asked as they started off again.

“Weird? The whole thing was weird.” Snorted Ygg as they veered around a couple of trees. “I be on me way home from me last delivery and I ran nearly smack into a firefighter and his hose.” Continued Ygg. “We both went down but the firefighter got right up and raced over to the building which was all aflame.” He paused to swat a branch out of the way. “Riley helped me up…Funny smell all around there and then I found Sully’s cat under a bush. Poor thing was a fair bit scared so I coaxed him out and handed him over to Sully.”

“So you got there after the fire had started then.” Said Ambril as they left the gravel bike path and headed out onto the main road.

“Yep, but Riley might a seen something. He be the one who called 911.”

Ambril wondered if Riley knew anything more. They were silent for a bit just enjoying the spring day. They had turned down the gravel driveway and after rounding the red barn stopped in front of Sully’s house. It was a homey, ranch style house. The barn was freshly painted and its doors opened onto a neat and tidy arrangement of equipment.

“Hey!” called Sully, “over here!” She was just getting on her bike, and waved to them from the side of the house.

Ygg and Ambril followed Sully as she led them around and through a large hedge and into an overgrown maze of a garden.

Ambril thought they’d been transported to someplace exotic. There were all sorts of weird flowers and plants, even some bugs Ambril had never seen before. The path they were on was barely wide enough for a bike. Every now and then they had to stop and inch their way around something prickly or a particularly ferocious looking plant. But after a bit, they came out into a cleared area. In front of them was a large gazebo. It slanted off to one side and then corrected itself as if it had grown up with the garden. A curly spire poked through a hole in the center. The entire thing was covered with a massive vine, which curled around the stone pillars and blanketed the top.

Just behind the gazebo stood a large stone house. Ambril loved it on sight though she didn’t know why. The windows were shuttered and the front door boarded up. The front steps listed to one side and there were birds flying in and out of a broken attic window. An old-fashioned carriage house leaned companionably off to one side. Ambril felt an immediate connection to the place, as if she had been there before. To one side of the gazebo, the great wall slid around the yard and back into the forest.

“I’m so hot, let’s cool off in the shade. I brought lemonade.” Said Sully as he threw down her bike and headed toward the gazebo.

Ambril grabbed her backpack and followed her, the air around them humming with insects.

It was much cooler under the roof of the gazebo. They lay down on the stone benches there and looked up through the vines as they sipped lemonade and ate Mrs. Sweetgum’s snacks.

“There’s milk too, if any one wants it.” Said Ambril. And look a couple of sandwiches.”

Ygg sat straight up a famished look of longing on his face. Ambril threw him the sandwiches without a word. Nothing was heard from him for a while, just a lot of munching. But then a strange grinding sound started up. It seemed to come from Ambril’s backpack. Flit ‘s head emerged dragging something behind him. It was the Ashera.

“Oh, That’s Flit, my, um robot, he’s supposed to be pretty smart. And THIS,” she said grabbing the wooden cylinder from his metal hands. “Is just an old thing of my Grandmother’s.” Said Ambril hastily stashing it back into her pack. The robot turned to look at Sully and Ygg.

“That’s some robot,” commented Sully.

“And That be some kind of Ashera,” Said Ygg nodding at Ambril’s pack. “From the look of it, it be nought just a puzzle box, but a real spanking thousand year old kind.”

Ambril stared at him, Ygg stared back.

“How did you know that was an Ashera?” She asked him.

“What’s an Ashera?” asked Sully.

“How did you get your hands on that one?” asked Ygg.

Ambril just stared mulishly at him. Ygg chewed thoughtfully.

“Where I come from those be special things,” he said nodding to her pack again. “They mark you, maybe mold you sometimes.” And then he added scornfully. “They aren’t some keepsake of your ol’ Gran’s you leave lyin’ around for everyone to see.”

“Well, I was told to keep it a secret from everyone.” Said Ambril pulling her backpack closer to her. She lay back down on her bench and stared straight up at the ceiling hoping someone would change the subject.

After a long pause Ygg said “So, you don’t want to trust us then? It be true you just met us both but, I don’t know, from the first moment I met you I thought maybe we might could be friends.”

Ambril stole a glance at him.

Ygg snorted. “Maybe you be thinking we might run away scared or laugh at you?” Ygg smiled all the way up through his eyes. “If that be true, you be kidding! I’m an outsider with no family here. I’m not one to judge you.”

 Sully cut in. “And I’m a member of the newbie class, a New Family? You know, the one just above dung beetles and river rats on the social ladder? Even if I was a jerk and told someone your secret, who’s gonna listen to me?” Sully grinned. “Come on! Tell us!”

“Alright, alright, I’ll tell you,” said Ambril rolling her shoulders. She could see a certain symmetry in this as it had all begun with the Ashera.

“Yep, I’ll tell you but you have to swear not to tell anyone else.” She said and added hesitantly, “And you can’t laugh no matter how unbelievable it may sound to you.”

Ambril looked solemnly at them and wondered at what point they were going to run away screaming. “Okay?”

The two both nodded just as solemnly back but then Ygg smirked. “I canna promise not to laugh at the funny parts,” but he added more seriously. “I will nought laugh at you, that I do promise you.”

At that Ambril took a deep breath and told them absolutely everything. She started with getting hit on the head with the Ashera. Ygg did chuckle a bit at that. Then she moved on to finding the medallion and pulled it out for them to see. Then she told them about the car in the forest and being chases by the Dullaith. Both Ygg and Sully were really quiet by then. Then there was the fight with the Dullaith. Both Sully and Ygg were on the edge of their seats during that part.

She tried to describe Hendoeth and Fowlclun and the talking furniture with a serious face but she just couldn’t and they all ended up laughing through that part.

Then she wrapped it up with seeing the Dullaith symbol on Feldez’s computer with the roman number 12 underneath, the glowing shadow gant on the playground and lastly pulled out the Dullaith drawing.

“Now I guess you see why I’d like to get into that janitor’s closet.” said Ambril as she handed the drawing to Ygg.

“It could be it really is just a janitor’s closet filled with the usual mops, brushes, and cleaning products,” said Sully munching on cookie crumbs as she reexamined the Dullaith drawing over Ygg’s shoulder.

Ygg nodded taking another look at Ambril’s medallion and nodded sagely. “That thar be the ledrith glaim aye? Tis famous where I be from.” He shook his head frustrated. “I dunna understand why here in Trelawnyd magic not be known as much as in Chert. Chert’s just a mining village. Trelawnyd, wel Trelawnyd be where it all began here in these parts. But in Chert we be earth-kind but we know of our magic kin.” Ygg scratched his nose. “It be like Ms. Breccia said there be four parts to the kinship, Fairy, Animalfia, Earth-kind and magic user.” He cocked his head to one side staring at the Ashera. “I was always told that the magics run parallel, they donna mix.”

He mused more to himself than anyone. “So why be you, a magic user, why be you the one to carry the Ledrith Glain?” He continued as he pointed with his elbow toward the medallion. “That holds fairy power. And it’s a right beauty, the carving on it is Latin with even a bit a old Ogam.” He pointed out the odd lines along the side of the Ashera with marks on them. He stared at it deep in thought for a moment longer and then seemed to collect himself.

Ambril and Sully just stared at him.

“Okay, now it’s your turn to talk, Ygg.” Said Sully. “You know far more about any of this than we do.”

Ygg put his head down and muttered something to himself.

“Come on, cough up the goods, Ambril did it, so can you.” Sully jabbed him in the ribs. Ygg jumped and looked at her reproachfully.

 “Where’s Chert?” asked Ambril.

“It’s up far in the mountains,” he said as he took another swig of milk, “much too far, not many from my village ever come out.”

“So what made you come out?” asked Sully as she lazily played with a leafy vine.

“I wanted to finish school.”

“What do you mean finish school? Surely they have schools that go higher than 6th grade in your town?” asked Ambril

“Well, yes and no, the schools there‘re nought like yourn here.” Ygg had his head down again which made it hard to understand him.

“Ya see in my village there are but two choices. Either you work magic or ya go down the mines.” He played with his shoelaces. “When a body turns 13, you be tested for magic.” “They tested me and I …failed.” He bent his head, so that Ambril could not see his face. “Me Da and brothers all had gone down the mines. I watched them turn into old men over night.” He kept his head low as he carefully brushed a yellow and purple striped bug from his sleeve.

“Now the mines, them er not nice places.” He said shaking his head remembering. “Though there warn’t any smoke and fire down there it was mighty hot and hard to breathe and ya had to stay down for hours and hours.”

His head snapped up. “I decided that working for the mining company was nought for me; that there be a better way to live, somewhere, some-how. I wouldna go down,” he shrugged but looked resolute and flexed his hands into a fist. “I didna believe that that was all I was good for. Me Mam agreed with me. So,” he paused here and looked directly at Ambril. “I took me pack and a letter to Mrs. Twid from me Mam and I left.”

Ambril was impressed. To leave his home and go out into the forest all alone without knowing what was in store for him took a lot of courage.

“Mrs. Twid, she be doin this as a favor for me Mam. They are kin. I stay in her extra room and do odd jobs for her. Me plan was to finish school here and then go out into the bigger wide world to make my way.” Ygg fiddled with collar.

“We practice Earth-kind magic mostly, magic that helps in the mines like floatin or ‘castin for the Glain.” He nodded toward Ambril’s medallion. “Like the stone your eldrith be made of.”

Sully and Ambril looked at each other incredulous.

“So that must come in handy when they’re looking for---Glain. What happens when something goes wrong and there’s a tunnel collapse or something?” asked Sully.

Ygg’s face went hard and cold. “Nought, really. They just start diggin in another way.” Ygg had a far away look in his eyes, remembering something painful. “Me Da died down there, they never did find his body.” He stared blankly into the trees. “Actually, they didna’ try to find him. Too busy finding more Glain I guess to rescue a bunch of men and boys. He’s buried but good in there they reckon. Some say they let it happen to me Da. He wasna, popular with them at the top. He was always talking about bettering a miner’s ways of life and questioning…things”

There was a stunned silence.

“So you aren’t going back to that are you?” asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed and nodded his head slowly. “Me Da and me Mam wanted me to figure out a better way of being.” Ygg screwed up his face and scratched his head. “Still it is me home, I do miss it terrible, ‘specially me Mam. I think I’ll finish school and then larn ta do something useful before deciding what to do next.”

He looked at Ambril’s Ashera and medallion, “You know your medallion is worth more than its weight in gold to some. There aren’t big chunks of Glain to be found anymore, mainly little slivers and flakes.” Ygg stared at the Ledrith almost hungrily. “It can channel power, sometimes store it, sometimes call it to itself.” Ygg nodded slowly at the medallion. “Yep, A fine piece and worth a pretty penny in my neck of the woods.”

He paused and chuckled. “You be sounding like some kind ofYou are some kind of magic magnet.” Ygg looked steadily at Ambril and Sully and smiled. I’m thinking I found a way of learning magic the right way, practicing, experimenting and with luck getting things right for a change rather than just doing what you’re told to do.”

Ambril and Sully just looked at each other. Ambril thought this wasn’t where she thought this would end up at all. It was as if they were entering into some sort of secret, magical pact or something. But she liked the idea of playing around with the magic and learning together. A little dangerous maybe, but it would be interesting.

It was hard to put all of that into words without it sounding funny, so she just nodded at Ygg to let him know that she was willing to give it a try.

Out of the corner of her eye she say Sully nodding too. And then it was suddenly a little awkward. Ambril looked at her shoes for a while and tried to think of something encouraging to say to her new friends but nothing came to her. It was amazing to her that she could reveal so much of the weird things that had happened to her in the past few days to them and that they were still sitting there with her. Ambril stole a glance at them and though the two of them looked pretty shell shocked neither of them showed any sign of high tailing it out of there. She started playing with her Ashera just for something to do. And then Ygg slowly reached over and took it from her. He started carefully examining it just like Mr. Feng did, pushing and pressing it gently.

 “Betcha thinking you’d like to move back to the big city for some peace and quiet about now,” said Ygg wryly.

Ambril laughed and thought that though this magic stuff was going to take a little getting used to, she thought it was going to be a lot easier to do with friends around her.

“You know an Ashera hold secrets they say, Me GranPa had one, though his was nothing like yourn.”

“You know how they work, do you?”

 “I know they’re devilishly hard to unlock. Me GranPa’s one, ya had to press a couple places at the one’ to git some secrets to release.” Ygg was pressing on the side and the top at once. His flat fingers gentle and unhurried. But he soon gave up and gave it back to Ambril.

There was a lull in the conversation, the kind that happens between new friends. Ambril couldn’t decided if it was the awkward kind of silence or not until Sully began to snore. She looked over at Ygg and they grinned. Ambril lay back down and closed her eyes, definitely not the awkward kind.

There was suddenly an awful whining sound like a dentist’s drill. Ambril grimaced. While they had been talking, fLit had gotten himself up and fallen into a hole in the center of the stone floor. He was whirring at her.

Ambril sighed before she heaved herself to her feet, stretched and bent down to fish him out. “Come on, if you can manage to figure out how to stay on a tabletop, you can at least figure out how to stay out of a little hole like this one.” She complained as she fished him out. She set him down on a smoother part of the floor and then stopped.

There was something odd about that hole. For one thing it seemed to be cut out of a large stone, like it was meant to be there. The hole itself was sort of round, but not quite and there was scrolly writing written around the edge of it. She poked around inside, it was just a couple of inches deep. After she cleared out a couple of dead leaves. Ambril caught her breath. A beautifully carved flower was etched into the bottom of the hole. She knew that flower, her flower. Her hand went instinctively to the Ledrith Glain under her shirt. What was the flower symbol doing here? Was this house somehow connected to this magic stuff she had gotten entangled in?

A sharp tap and the sound of something rolling interrupted Ambril’s thoughts. She looked over and found that fLit had started attacking the Ashera. He was kicking it, and not gently across the floor.

“Hey, knock it off!” growled Ambril. AI in a stupid robot was just no fun, she thought and made a face at shiny metal thing.

The robot ignored her and kicked the Ashera so hard it bounced across the floor and banged into one of the posts.

“No, fLit, No, bad robot!,” she whispered sternly not wanting to wake her friends. Perhaps treating him like a puppy would work.

Nope, fLit began winding up to kick again when Ambril swept it up. She stood towering over him.

“Stop it you dopey robot!” she barked at him. “Stop kicking my--,” she stopped mid sentence as she realized that she was holding something that was sort of round but not quite which also had scrolly writing around it…

She held the end of it up, sure enough there was the intricate flower carved into its top.

No, it couldn’t be, she thought. What was this place to her? It was an old abandoned house with an overgrown garden. But then Ambril remembered how she had felt when she first saw the house. It had felt like she had been there before, it was familiar and in a good way.

She looked again at the hole in the floor. It was just about the right size, she thought. And shrugged. It couldn’t hurt, could it? She could just to try it.

She bent down and carefully inserted the Ashera into the hole. It really was a tight fit but all it took was a gentle tap and it slid in. As it did so there was a sharp crack, like thunder except that started under Ambril’s feet and like an earthquake rolled out from the gazebo in a waves.

“What the--!” yelled Ygg as both he and Sully sat up and looked around.

“What did you do now?” said Sully grumpily rubbing her eyes.

Ambril simply pointed at the Ashera, which was now beginning to vibrate, as it stood upright in the hole.

They both jumped up and were instantly beside her. Sully reached out her hand and touched it.

“It feels warm!” she said in wonder.

But the Ashera did nothing more. It vibrated and glowed for a couple more seconds and then abruptly stopped. Ygg reached out and tapped it experimentally. Nothing.

They sat there and stared at it a while.

“Perhaps ya need to know the magic words.” Said Ygg unhelpfully.

“Yeah, like Abra-cadabra or open sesame?” said Sully sarcastically. “Those are fairy tales. I don’t think real magic is like that, do you?”

“Well what is it like since you’ve had so much experience?” retorted Ygg grumpily rubbing his eyes again.

Sully turned on him. “I’m just saying that I think it’s not as simple as it is in the stories. You have to KNOW what you’re doing to get it to work.” She said angrily.

Ygg screwed up his face but said nothing for a while.

“Maybe it’s some kind of key.” Said Ambril. She had bent down to look at the writing around the outside of the hole. There seemed to be arrows pointing in both directions. “It looks like you’re supposed to turn it one way or the other.”

She then grasped the Ashera firmly with both hands and tried to turn it to the right. But either it was stuck too firmly in the hole or there was something else that had to happen as well. The Ashera wouldn’t budge.

She tried to turn it the other way and the same thing happened.

Giving up she then tried to pull it out but realized it was wedged in the hole so tightly that it wouldn’t budge.

She then started to panic. “Great! I can’t leave it here, it’s made of wood, it’ll warp the first time it rains!” She sat back on her haunches, feeling beaten.

“I’ll have a go,” said Ygg. He wrapped his big hands around it and began to twist.

“Be careful, don’t break it!” yelled Sully.

Ygg rolled his eyes at her. “Break it, are you crazy, this thing feels as if it’s made of iron!” His eyebrows drew together with his effort. He twisted it one way and then the other his muscles shaking with the effort. Finally he too fell back. “I canna make it move not one iota.” He said defeated.

They were quiet for another minute of two.

“Wait a minute!” Sully suddenly shouted. “It’s got child protection!”

Ambril and Ygg looked at her dumbfounded.

“What are you talking about? This is na no prescription drug!” asked Ygg.

“Well let’s just try it. Maybe you have to do something to it while you’re turning it, like pressing down and then turning it at the same time!” she said excitedly.

“Somethin tells me tha it’s a little more complicated than that,” said Ygg sarcastically.

“Still, it’s worth a try,” said Ambril. She again grasped the Ashera in her two hands and pushed down on it while turning. To her amazement the Ashera turned as if it were stuck in a tub of butter instead of solid rock.

They were startled by another sharp crack and then the sound of squeaky, rusty hinges complaining of being used. They looked around and found that four of the stone pillars had opened out to reveal shallow compartments inside them. There were all heavily carved in the same way as on Ambril’s Ashera. Each had a shelf inside all empty…except for one.

Sully, looking triumphant, was the first to react.

“Look, there’s something in here!” she raced over to one of the compartments and pulled out a parcel wrapped in an old newspaper.

“Hmm, it feels like something solid,” she mused as she carefully unwrapped it.

It turned out to be a book; a very, very old book. There was a large tree etched into the leather binding.

Sully had screwed up her face concentrating on the title. “Azzztaaaaarrrr, Aztauuarttteee,” she experimented and then said more confidently, “I think it says ‘Aztart’ or something like that.”

She ran her hands over the cover. “This is amazing!” She continued. “Shall we open it?”

“What are you waiting for?” prompted Ygg. “A course we want ya ta open it!”

Sully carefully opened the creaky old cover and found an inscription written on the inside. ‘To my darling Rosa it is your time my love; take this book and fly. Love Gran-Maimee.’

On the opposite page was another elaborate tree except that names were written in some in bold red ink and others in black. Above the names were drawn lifelike illustrations of men and women. Some of them in old fashioned clothes and hair styles.

“Rosa Derwyn was your great -Gran, warn’t she?” Ygg asked looking at Ambril and pointing toward the bottom of the tree. There was a drawing of a smiling young woman.

“She looks just like you!” exclaimed Sully.

Below her was another young woman, very familiar to Ambril.

“That’s my Mom!” she said and pointed to her where it said “Tylia” underneath. But Ambril noticed there was no connecting line to her. She was sort of in a bubble. There were a few other faces in bubbles as well.

Sully closed the book with a thump and presented it to Ambril. “Here, this appears to be yours,” she said somewhat jealously.

Ambril took it for a moment, hesitated and then handed it back. “Look, I have enough going on just with this Ashera. Why don’t you keep it for a while.” She put the book back into her friends’ hands.

Sully’s face brightened, “Are you sure?”

Ambril nodded empathically, “Yep!”

“Great! I’ll be very careful with it. And if you ever want it back, just say the word and it’s yours.” Sully settled down on one of the stone benches and bent over the old book. “And I will be very, very careful, really, I promise,” she mumbled as she turned the first page.

“I think it’s some kind of history book, but with recipes.” She said curiously.

Ambril bent down and grasped the Ashera once more in her two hands. Pushing down with all her might she turned it slowly to the left. It took some doing and Ambril closer her eyes to concentrate better. I was as if a curtain went down around her. A gray fog rushed in and focused her mind. She could see a bright spot of energy near her chest and another in the Ashera. Ygg and Sully were blurry but also seemed to glow with light. And there were others nearby but she could only sense them not see them. It felt like she was half in and half out of another dimension. The fog blew away briefly and Ambril could see the stone floor was carved with symbols just as her Ashera was. But the symbols were moving; some were smiling, some silently screaming at her, some doing somersaults and while others did nothing. One image, that of a three-headed dog simply watched her. She had just heard about a three headed dog somewhere…it was school…”Oh yeah, you’re the Cerberus aren’t you?” She thought at them. The Ashera vibrated under her hands startling her enough so that she opened her eyes.

She straightened up just as a giant sucking sound was heard and the Ashera popped out and landed on the stone floor near the robot, who automatically kicked it again. This time, Ambril didn’t complain. She also said nothing to her friends, wanting to think a little more about what had just happened.

From far out in the forest came the distant sound of baying hounds.

“You know, I think this book might be able to really help us, there’s a lot of old words in here with translations.” Sully busily picked up the Astarte and started turning the pages near the back.

Louder now, the hounds were getting closer. Another chorus of yowls was heard. Ygg half turned toward the forest. As if only a part of him had heard them.

Above the wall the mountain loomed. Near the top Ambril could see the trees strangely sway as if in a high wind and then stop only to have another tree lower down sway in like fashion. It looked as if something large perhaps more than one something was barreling through the trees coming their way. The baying of hounds was deafening now.

There was the sharp, staccato sound of snapping trees and bushes being uprooted.

“What the—“ said Ygg as they three kids jumped to their feet and watched something plowing a path down the mountain.

“It---it seems to be coming this way,” said Sully jumping up hugging the book to her protectively.

Ambril instinctively swept up the Ashera and fLit and began backing away. fLit had gotten entangled in the old newspaper the Astarte had been wrapped in. She shoved everything in her backpack.

“It’s ‘They’, not an ‘It’, there be more than one.” Said Ygg also backing away.

She could not take her eyes from the forest and what seemed to be coming toward them. The wall stood stoically between them and whatever was coming at them. She hoped it would be enough.

“Sully can you look up Cerberus in that thing?” Asked Ambril anxiously.

“Now? Are you kidding? Don’t you think we should start running away pretty soon?” Asked Sully incredulously.

“I just think it might help. I think that they might be---“ She nodded toward the rampaging creatures racing toward them. “I think I---I might have---addidentally---called them.” Ambril said in a small voice.

Sully’s face went pale but she immediately sat down and began flipping quickly through the book.

The hounds bayed again, this time Ambril could make out several different snorts and growls as they came. They were beasts of some sort and they were near now very near.

“Here it is! Crowed Sully triumphantly. She had a finger in the Astarte. Cerberus, the Guardians of the Underworld!”

“Does it say how to call them off?” Asked Ambril hopefully.

Sully was reading quickly through the text. “Let’s see…called through castings or with Ashera…independent though…in other words doesn’t mind well…we had a dog like that once---“

“Sully!” Ygg shouted. “How do we call the dogs off!”

 As they watched a large Bay tree suddenly toppled over the wall. The beasts were there just on the other side. Ambril could sense them. And whatever they were, they were very big and very determined.

Sully closed the book with a snap. “No help there, sorry. It just says that they won’t stop until they’re finished with their task.” She said. “But maybe we can divert them long enough to get away…So…Does anyone have a---giant---chew toy on them?”

There was a bone-jarring thump as something slammed into the wall. Once, Twice, Three times, each time harder and louder than before. Puffs of dirt came from the wall, small rocks sprayed with each hit. But the wall held.

“Are you sure you called them? I mean the…the Guardians of the Underworld?” Whispered Ygg as he slowly backed away.

“Maybe they’re just elephants or grizzly bears or something…” Sully whispered sarcastically. “How likely is that?”

Ygg just gave her a look.

“Oh, I see your point.” Sully said.

Then there was silence. Ambril wanted to run but seemed to be rooted to the ground. She listened and found she could definitely hear them breathing hard on the other side of the wall. They seemed to be listening too.

Ambril had the strangest feeling they were listening for her.

And then a dark, deep voice resonated through her. “*We answer the call, Ashera*?” She jumped a mile high. It felt like she had been invaded. “Let’s get out of here!” she said to the others in a strangled voice. She turned and ran as fast as she could for her bike.

She could hear Sully and Ygg right behind her.

The thumping on the wall began again, “*We answer the call.”*

 But Ambril slowed and then stopped and turned.

There seemed no point in running away. It felt as if the beings were right there with her in her mind. They seemed to be waiting for her to answer. She took a deep breath and tried with all her might to be present with them, within herself. She could feel the medallion growing warm on her chest as she hesitantly closed her eyes. Instantly the dense fog was all around her. Sully and Ygg were still visible moving away from her. She looked toward the wall and gasped. The wall shimmered with magic but otherwise was transparent. She could see them with frightening clarity as she realized they were looking right at her.

They were dogs in one way but not really, If she looked at them at an angle she could see they were much more. They were like her, really, but more than that, they were ancient old souls. She knew suddenly that they were kin, like family. She felt her fear slide away.

The middle figure stepped forward and spoke to her. *“We meet Ashera as has been foretold,”* There was the smell of secretive caverns about them. *“You have much to learn. Your call was weak.”* His voice rumbled through her.

*“Heed these words, Ashera:*

As above, so below,

Weave to heal, grace to grow.

Vines and roots forever entwine,

Present, past and future combine.

As above, so below.

 *The Balance Must be Maintained, Ashera. When all hope is lost---we come.”*

He nodded slowly to her. *“We have waited long for you. Your task is great for one so young. Remember, Ashera, When all hope is lost, we come. ”* He said softly now as they seemed to be fading away.

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. She could no longer hear any sound from behind the wall. They had called her Ashera, which was weird. And what did they mean by her task was great, what task? She suddenly felt a million years old. What did any of this mean? She wearily picked up her bike and shoved off roughly pedaling for the opening in the underbrush. She took the path as fast as she could go not caring if the thorny branches scratched her or tugged at her clothes.

“Finally!” shouted Ygg. The two of them had stopped just before the tall tree hedge. What do you mean calling down the dogs of the underworld on us?” He yelled.

Ambril slowed her pace and smiled sheepishly to her friends. “Sorry guys, I—I…” she stuttered and stopped. “She didn’t know what to say. “I…just saw these symbols on the floor, you know when I was trying to get the Ashera out of that hole. I closed my eyes and everything was different.”

Ygg stared at her face. “O.K., start from the beginning, What happened to you back there? Your as white as milk in a clean new pail!”

Sully was rearranging the oversized Astarte. “I think it’s alright now, Everything’s gone quiet. I think they’ve gone.” Together they pedaled their bikes through the hedge and back into Sully’s yard.

They stopped by the barn and took a moment to catch their breath.

“So spill,” said Sully looking at Ambril.

Ambril lowered her head, “It sounds kind of freaky, really.” She said embarrassed.

“And the Dullaith stuff wasn’t?” Asked Sully sarcastically.

“There were three of them. They had dog shapes but they weren’t really, It’s like we were related. They sort of invaded my mind and thought at me.” She shifted her weight from one foot to another as she told them everything she could remember about her recent meeting.

Sully and Ygg were quiet and thoughtful for a moment after she had finished.

“So what was it they said again?” asked Sully.

“Something like: ‘We answer the call, As above, so Below…” her voice trailed off, she suddenly felt very tired. Why was all of this happening to her? For the millionth time she thought, she was nothing special, why her?

As if reading her thoughts, Ygg said. “Come on, let’s get on home, we can puzzle about this some other time.”

They all nodded. Ambril felt relieved.

“Hey, would you mind if I look at this tonight?” Asked Sully.

“Sure,” said Ambril relieved. “Have at it.” She smiled at her friend. Besides she had no room for it in her backpack the silly robot took up too much space.

Sharing with Sully came naturally now. She felt like she had known both Sully and Ygg years longer than the few days it had really been. Sharing secrets like getting attacked by the Guardians of the Underworld and Dullaiths made friendships grow stronger she guessed.

Ygg pedaled off first. “See you at school, Oh, hey you should have asked your friends the Cerberus about Moroz?” he chuckled before he disappeared around the barn.

Sully nodded as she got off her bike she leaned it up against the barn.

“That’s right, they’re somehow connected. Oh well, See ya!” she said and hugging the massive book to her, she walked toward her house.

Ambril shoved off and was soon pedaling through the lengthening shadows, homeward bound.

She had some real friends, her own age this time. She smirked. She also had Dullaiths and dogs the size of elephants following her around, that was true but it she knew she stood a better chance now that she had a couple of people she could trust.

**Chapter 21 The Library**

The week flew by for Ambril, everything being so new made even school interesting. It was Thursday morning before she knew it. She waved at Sully as she got off her bike.

Ygg joined them as they walked up the steps. “Hey, I got somut’ to tell—“

But Sully was too excited to listen, “You ought to see all the stuff that’s in that book!” she said in a low voice.

Ambril smiled at her friend’s enthusiasm. “Let’s all meet after school at the gazebo—“

“No , I can’t make it, there’s something goin’ on about the town that I’m—“

“None of us can go to the gazebo tonight, of course.” Sully cut in again. “We have to get those detention papers written for Ms. Breccia, remember?” She said and sighed.

Ambril and Ygg groaned.

“Let’s go straight to the Library today, after school and knock them out. Then, if we have time—“

“There’s somethin’ wrong with the old people here,” interrupted Ygg glaring at Sully. “And if’n some of us could just listen for a sec, I’ll tell ya about it.”

Sully looked embarrassed for just half a moment and then rolled her eyes.

Ygg continued. “The old people, are---well older all of a sudden.”

Ambril was slightly disgusted with her friend. “Yeah, well old people are like that. They’re old, and---they get older every day. You know they’re creaky and grumpy a—“

“Nah, nah,” said Ygg drawing his eyebrows together. “There’s somethin’ really wrong, somethin’ new. ”Ygg shoved his hands in his pocket and continued. “The old people I’m visitin’, ya know, making deliveries, are actin’ different, like they’ve all gotten sick from the same thing at the same time.” He shifted his weight fro one foot to the other. “It’s like an epidemic, every one seems to be sickly,” his voice trailed off.

“The only one who’s just herself as always, is Ms. Fern.” Said Ygg. “But, I dunno, that was yesterday, she could be sickly too by now. I have to check on her to see if’n she’s Okay.”

There was a pause as the three friends considered this.

“So, it’s just the people you make deliveries too, right?” asked Ambril

“I dunno if’n there are others, but come to think of it, Mrs. Fern doesna’ take Mrs. Twid’s tea like the others. She makes her own home remedies, I expect.” Said Ygg and shrugged his shoulders. “I know for a fact that Mrs. Twid just throws stuff into a pot and stirs it all up. THAT I’m thinkin’ might not be good.” He grimaced. “She’s what we call in our village a quoocker.”

“We cal them quacks, here.” Said Ambril just avoiding a smile.

“I guess that means her stuff can’t be doing them much good but it doesn’t necessarily mean her stuff is doing them real harm,” reasoned Sully. “Do you have any deliveries today?”

Ygg shook his head.

“Well, why don’t we go straight to the Library after school, bang out these silly detention papers and then go see Miss Fern?” Sully asked.

Ygg screwed up his face to consider it and then slowly nodded. “Okay, I reckon we can go by the Library first.”

 Sully cocked her head. “I’m sure she’s Okay, I think she really knows a lot of stuff, you know, like the you know what.”

“You know what, what?” asked a loud obnoxious voice from behind them.

It was Lance and his buddies. “What’s the big secret? Do you need some sort of Barbie decoder hairspray to decode it with?”

His friends jeered loudly. “Good one!” said one of the dumber looking guys. “Barbie decoder hairspray!”

Ambril could see Zane trailing the group looking bored. They slowed to a stop in front of first period. Tiana and her two friends, all dressed in pink, were there already, checking their makeup in their compact mirrors.

Tiana stopped pouting into her mirror the minute she caught sight of Ygg. “Hi! You were great yesterday in P.E.!”

Ygg was suddenly shy. “Oh um, thanks.”

She winked at him and snapped her gum.

Ygg blushed and shoved his hands in his pockets just as the bell rang and they all filed into class. Ambril smirked as she slid into her seat. Ygg was getting noticed. She looked over at Lance who was looking angrily at Ygg and then at Tiana. And maybe that wasn’t all good she thought.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. And before Ambril knew it they were getting their bikes out and setting off for the Library. Ambril could see Lance and his buddies collecting unripe plums from a tree overhanging the playground and quickened her pace. She didn’t want a repeat of the other day.

They pulled up to the Library moments later. It had been too warm that day so the quiet, cool of the Library felt welcoming. Ambril held the door for two elderly women. One nodded as her white hair waved in the breeze. She smiled at Ambril as her friend continued to talk.

“I was so shocked, there was the sign as plain as day, For Sale! Right in the front window!” She stopped and raised a quivering hand dramatically. “Flood’s Shoe shop has been there since my mother was a child!” Whatever could be the reason?”

“Well, I think Daisy is feeling her age at long last.” Said the first woman. “I know I am today,” she sighed as she grabbed the handrail and began to ease her way down the stairs. “I hope they get a nice owner who understands us.” She continued.

“Well that’s just it, isn’t it!” said the first as she shifted her handbags and prepared to follow her friend down the stairs. “I hear Crystal Twid wants to buy it!”

“The first stopped between steps and half turned to peer at her friends face. “Lord, save us! We’ll have nothing but cheap, overpriced shoes in there then.” She grumbled. “We’ll have to go all the way to the mall for---“

The door swung shut and Ambril turned around. So Twid was first in line for the Shoe Store. What was she up to? Did it also involve her doctored tea? Or was that just “Natural, Organic” naïveté?

Turning around Ambril found Twid flying out of her thoughts as she inhaled the dusty smell of possibilities hidden away in every book. She loved Libraries.

Ygg and Sully were already nearing a kiosk with a map of the library on it but Ambril dawdled a bit, wanting to look around.

There was a large display of town memorabilia displayed in the lobby and Ambril ambled over to look at it all. There were lots of gaudy trophies with what looked like drops of blood on them. One or two were dinged here and there as if the sport had continued during the trophy ceremony. There were samples of the types of ore they had once pulled from the old mines and an ancient map of the original town of Trelawnyd. She was about to turn away when something caught her eye. It was a small plaque half hidden behind a hunk of copper. There was a picture of Feldez staring out at her. Underneath was the caption: ‘Dr. Feldez Petri, in commemoration of courageous deed, risking his life to save others’ Underneath Ambril read:

‘**Trelawnyd residents wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Petri for quelling the disturbance and fire which occurred at Old Council Hall last October in which a life was regrettably lost but the town was saved
from certain destruction—“**

“Step back please!” There was annoyance in the voice that came from just behind her. “You kids are always getting your grimy fingerprints all over my nice clean glass! I just wiped it down too!” A large, squat woman with multi-layered jowls barreled toward Ambril.

Ambril immediately stepped back and sideways. “Sorry, I---I didn’t realize,” she stuttered as she tried to wipe away the marks she had made with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

The librarian glowered at her appraisingly. “You are new here, aren’t you.” She nodded knowingly. “I should have known.” She sniffed as she briskly wiped down the glass.

“I’m just here to return the book, not to pay the fine, you see it’s my broth---“ Ambril turned to see Riley and a librarian talking. The librarian had a hand on a pile of books in Riley’s arms. Riley appeared to have been trying to leave.

“Look, SOMEONE has to pay these fines! “ Said the Librarian angrily. “I can’t let you take out another book until you do that!”

“But they’re my brother’s!” Said Reilly tersely, “Not mine!

The librarian pursed his lips but let his hand slide away from Riley and his pile of books. “Well, I suppose we’ll let you go this time, but I will expect payment in full for all fines the next time for both you and your brother.”

Riley’s face was tight with anxiety. Straightening his jacket and keeping his head down he said “Sorry, I’m late for chores.” Without meeting their eyes he shoved his library books under his arm and raced down the steps.

Ambril watched him jump on his bike and race off. Funny, she thought, she hadn’t pegged Lance as a reading sort of guy.

“I think we want the Archives.” Sully tugged on Ambril’s sleeve and towed her over to a map of the Library. “Dr. Afallen.” Sully read off the map, look he’s the town historian.” She pointed to a small office near the Archives. “Maybe he could get us started.”

“Did I hear you say Dr. Afallen?” a voice asked from behind a desk. It was the large woman with the jowls again.

“Yes well he isn’t here everyday, you know due to all the budget cuts and all. It’s Tuesday? You’re in luck, I believe he is in.” She pointed a slightly crooked finger to the stairwell. “Down the stairs and follow the signs to the Trelawnyd Archives.”

**Chapter 22 The Archives**

It was down the stairs, past the well lighted nonfiction section, through the poorly lit reference section, then past the janitor’s, which had only naked bulbs on a string lighting the hallway and finally down a dark and musty hallway with no lights at all. Just a couple of kerosene lanterns perched on stacks of books and boxes piled up on one side of the corridor.

“Boy they sure don’t want this place found,” said Sully ruefully as she stubbed her toe on an old filing cabinet shoved up against the hallway wall. They had to wedge themselves in between some filing cabinets to make way for a tired looking man with a ‘Hi my name is Steve’ label on his shirt.

 At last they came to a nook in the hallway where a very messy desk sat in front of a set of double doors. There was a buzzing fluorescent light above a carefully hand lettered sign taped to the desk: ‘Trelawnyd Town History’ it said. A teapot boiled briskly on a hotplate.

There was also an empty glass case. It looked like the contents had hurriedly been taken out. The labels were still in place. One said, ‘The Morte Cell’ and another ‘The Dorcha Blade: Said to inflict an incurable curse with every cut’.

“I think this is where the box, you know the one that broke our windshield was stolen from.”

Ygg and Sully looked over the empty case.

“What’s that mean? Morte---Death Cell you reckon?” Asked Ygg.

 “Seriously weird stuff.” Breathed Sully as she squinted at the labels. “Incurable curse, it could just be athlete’s foot or something.”

 “---So those are the latest codes. The ones I just gave you.” They could hear someone talking on the phone in the room beyond. “ Yes, all the additional security measures are in place now. The locksmith just left, I believe the---er--- *items in question*, are secure.” There was a pause. “Certainly, stop by anytime, I’ll be here until five or so. Cheers.”

They could then hear humming in the room beyond.

“Dr. Afallen?”

“Oof!” There was the sound of books falling as a tiny man with long white beard peered out. His surprise changed to delight immediately. Ambril realized with a start that Dr. Afallen was the man she had seen talking with Koda behind the burned out produce stand.

“What! Visitors, how delightful!” He started bustling around tidying his desk and shoving books off of chairs. He smiled as he scurried around his desk. “Please have a seat,” he said as he hurriedly dusted off a chair seat with the sleeve of his jacket and beckoned to them.

The three sat down gingerly.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked anxiously jiggling the pot to see how much hot water was left.

“No thanks,” Ambril said. “We just need some help.”

“What can I do for you?” Said the little man smoothing out his rumpled shirt collar.

We have to--“ started Sully but then added hastily, “Or rather we’re *excited* to do an essay about the founding of Trelawnyd.” She smiled hard at him. “Do you have any---interesting---reference materials?”

“And maybe give us some suggestions as to what to write about?” added Ygg.

“Ah!” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows went up as he eyes twinkled. “I’m not allowed to discuss *certain things*, you know.” He pointed to a bulletin board stuffed full of Town ordinances and decrees entitled ‘proper procedures for Librarians’, but I believe I can direct you to some materials that might be of interest to you.” He twinkled at them over his glasses.

He quickly turned to a nearby stack, rummaged around a bit and brought out three beautifully bound books.

“Here they are.” he said as he dumped them onto his desk and shoved them over toward them. “It’s the approved history of Trelawnyd.” He said without much enthusiasm.

Ambril read the cover, ‘Trelawnyd, our noble heritage’.

“You can check these out with my approval, but I must ask you to bring them back within two weeks.” He opened the books, and wrote on the old fashioned card inserted in the back the date and his initials with great flourish.

“There you go!” He sat back in his seat and knitted his hands together.

Ambril picked up her copy. It did look like something Ms. Breccia would approve of, boring, boring and more boring. “Is this just what we need…but---do you have something---more interesting you can show us?” Her eyes went to the glass case.

Dr. Afallen peered at her over his glasses for a time. A quick smile appeared but then was gone. He pointed to the bulletin board again and said ruefully.

“It really is all I’m *allowed* to show you.” He opened his hands palms up. “My hands are well and truly tied.” He cleared his throat and wriggled more firmly into his seat. “I would at the very least lose my job and then what would happen to all this history?” He said sadly. “The other librarians clearly think it’s mostly fairy tales.” He continued with a sigh, “I’ve no doubt that without proper---supervision---it would be…disposed of in no time.”

“Well, what if you just gave us a bit of a tour?” Ygg suggested. “Ya wouldna have to talk about anythin’ just show us things an’ tell us the bits ya can,” wheedled Ygg. “We’ll do the learnin’ on our own.”

Dr. Afallen sat up a bit straighter.

“So you really are interested, are you?” he asked hopefully. “You’re not just here to make fun of the more…unusual items then?” He leaned forward to the very edge of his seat.

The kids emphatically and nearly in unison shook their heads.

“No, of course not!” said Sully.

Dr Afallen looked slowly inward and spoke as if to himself. “I have to be so careful, you see, especially now...” He cocked his head at them and absently stroked his beard. “But on the flip side, in the right hands, this information might help.” He mused.

He was lost in thought for so long that Ambril was nearly convinced he had fallen asleep when he jerked his head up.

“I’m sorry children,” he said apologetically. “I simply can’t risk it.”

They were crestfallen. Perhaps there was information about her Dad. And what about the Dullaith? She really needed help if she was going to have to face one of those again. And the Ashera…the Ashera!

On a hunch she unzipped her backpack and pulled out the wooden tube. “Well maybe you can help us with this thing. Have you ever seen one of these?” She asked handing him the Ashera. “It’s my family’s crest, on the top.” She said proudly. “The Derwyn crest.”

Dr. Afallen took the Ashera reverently and ran his fingers over it his face rapt.

 “We’re trying to find out what’s written around the edges.”

Dr. Afallen drew in his breath sharply and madly started going through his desk drawers until he found a rather bent pair of wire rimmed glasses.

“Let me see, what do we have---“ His face brightened as began to look closely at it. “Lovely, lovely example of Latin writing with strings of Ogam as a band around it, interesting mixture, very interesting. The Latin was added later, yes…” He mused as he held the cylinder delicately in his hands.

He stared at some of the symbols for a long while, “How old? I wonder…” He muttered to himself. “Let’s see,” he felt around along the back of the box and almost immediately the secret drawer where Ambril had found the necklace slid open.

“Ah! I see you’ve already found that one! That one was too obvious!” He said chuckling as he slid it back. “There are others? I’m sure there are, an Ashera of this age holds many secrets.”

Ambril was on the tip of her seat. “Age? Can you tell how old it is?” She asked curiously. “And can you read the writing around the symbol?”

Dr. Afallen looked up so quickly she jumped. “It is ancient, at least hundreds if not thousands of years old, I’m sure.” He smiled and looked at Ambril appraisingly. “You’re right, This is the Derwyn crest, of course, one of our ancient families; one of the four who settled here as I’m sure you know.”

He fingered the engraving lovingly. “The old families, these four had a certain--- knack---for certain things.” His eyes jumped from the Ashera to the faces of the three kids in front of him and narrowed as he carefully observed their reactions. “They also shared a common belief, which bound them together and was ultimately why they came here.” He continued almost to himself. “It’s a good thing they did, mind you. For if they had stayed, they would have been persecuted to extinction just as most of the others were.” He turned the Ashera to better scrutinize the emblem on the top. “Er, Yes, I believe the Derwyn family fled from Wales though the families hailed from all over the world, parts of Europe, Asia and even Africa.”

“The writing, and its meaning, however, starts with an ancient Celtic saying.” He cleared his throat and squinted at the writing. “*ut supremus sic subter supter*,” he mumbled softly and then with more confidence, “yes, it says ‘As Above, So Below’, it’s a reference to the image of the tree of life, the cycle of life thing.”

Ambril scribbled madly to get down what Dr. Afallen said as he settled back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “Yes, I think that’s a fairly sound translation.” He said noncommittally. “It might have a deeper meaning really than what I told you, but to find out it would require really looking into your family’s history.” His eyebrows rose slowly. “You wouldn’t be interested in that would you?”

“Well, yeah, I think I would.” Said Ambril as they all nodded eagerly.

Dr. Afallen seemed to remember his place suddenly and frowned ruefully at the bulletin board. “It’s not strictly within the rules to do this…But I believe, yes I think I can trust you.” He paused again, still undecided and then nodded. “Yes, I think I can direct you to some materials that might help---educate you.”

Dr. Afallen looked at Ambril severely over his glasses. “You certainly are more than a Derwyn, aren’t you? There’s Silva in you as well, I can see it in your face.” He leaned over his desk to get a closer look at her nearly upsetting the teapot as he did it. “Are you Bren and Tylia’s daughter?”

Ambril started, “Yea, um Yes, I am.”

“Yes I see now,” Dr. Afallen’s bright eyes crinkled as he carefully handed back the carved tube. He leaned even farther forward and lowered his voice. “You need to be very careful with this. Don’t flash it around, it’s from an age people nowadays are frightened of. Most of the information about that time period has been destroyed because of that fear. We don’t want to give them any more reason to destroy what little we have left.” He peered at Ambril over his spectacles, “to the average person in Trelawnyd, anyone associated with an object such as this is suspicious, even dangerous so---be careful.”

He looked almost menacing, “It isn’t just your family you would be putting at risk.” He stared at her for a long minute, but then he smiled and sat back thinking, “But I do have some things here that might be of service to you.”

He jumped up and scurried out from behind his desk. “Follow me,” he said and grabbing a lantern he set off. He was half way down the hall before the kids could even get out of their seats.

Ambril was the first to catch up to the little man as he zoomed down one corridor and then up another muttering to himself and pausing to sift through the shelves here and there. Once or twice he picked out a book and tucked it under his arm. They were squeezing past a stack of old manuscripts piled five feet high when he turned to her and asked. “Rosa Derwyn was your great grandmother, of course?” Dr. Afallen beamed.

Ambril thought it absurd that he could know all about her family and she knew so little. “So how come you know my family so well?” Ambril asked, disconcerted.

Dr. Afallen squinted down the corridor. His glasses reflecting the lantern light, which swung drunkenly from his arm. “I’ve lived here long enough to have known several members of your family.” He said as they got around the old manuscripts and set out again at a break neck pace.

“Rosa’s mother, your great-great-grandmother, Maimee, made the best ginger cookies in town. But my could she scold if you tried to sneak a peach from her prized trees!” He blinked owlishly at her, “I was good friends with your grandmother, “we snuck a lot of peaches together---And I taught both of your parents in school.” He paused here to stare down the hallway. “Your father had such an inventive mind.” He chuckled. “Always joking!” He smiled to himself remembering.

Ambril felt a warmth rise up from her toes. It was a wonderful feeling to feel so connected to her family, especially now that her brother was so distant. Her mother rarely talked about her Dad. It was nice to hear about him.

“Wait up!” shouted Ygg from way down the hall. Ygg and Sully caught up to them just as they walked into a pool of fluorescent light showcasing a shiny metal door. It looked out of place where everything else seemed to be years old and on the verge of collapse. This door had several new locks as well as a padlock.

“No, No, this way!” said Dr. Afallen anxiously shepherding them away as the three friends stared curiously at the hand lettered signs stuck all over the door. ‘RESTRICTED , KEEP OUT, ALARM WILL SOUND’.

 “What’s in there?” asked Ambril as they zoomed by.

 “That, my dear, you don’t want to know, really and truly.” Said Dr. Afallen.

“Is there stuff in there about Dullaiths?” she asked innocently and then gasped as she crashed into the rigid form of Dr. Afallen. He had stopped in his tracks and turned on her dumfounded.

“Child, I don’t know how you know that word, but I’d like to assume you know nothing more than that.” He sputtered and then squinted at her. But then he took a deep breath and collected himself. “But of course you would know, because of your father, of course.” He patted her arm consolingly.

“I’m sorry, I wish I could tell you more but times being what they are…” He shook his head in frustration. “I can’t say much more than there are many here who did not believe the official story, he was a good man, your father.”

He slowly shook his head before starting off once more.

Ambril fell woodenly in step behind him, her mind whirling. “You know, I’ve never actually heard the official---“

“Perhaps we can remedy that---ah here we are.” Exclaimed Dr. Afallen as they rounded a corner and raced down a narrow corridor with racks of wooden crates and dusty cardboard boxes. He suddenly dove head first into a wooden crate sitting on its side and pulled forth a stack of very odd, intriguing books.

“My, I haven’t looked at these in years! Positively years!” He exclaimed as he lovingly wiped away the dust from the top cover. Ambril peeked over his shoulder.

Ambril was only able to read its title, ‘The Troll Uprising’ before he had whisked it into Ygg’s hands. “Here, this might interest you Mr. Drasil, as it may answer some questions regarding your ancestors and why your family ended up in Chert.”

Ygg stared at him his mouth open. “How did you know I was from---?”

“Simple, young man, your accent, your face! You are the spitting image of your great-great-great grandfather Chunnel the Gnasher.” Chortled Dr. Afallen.

Ygg, still open mouthed took the heavy book from him.

“Here my dear, this one is for you. It concerns you and your family’s history.” Dr. Afallen handed a very surprised Sully a light green book ornately ornamented with leaves, titled: ‘The Infamous Fairy Rebellion’.

“But wait, I’m sorry but you’ve made a mistake, you see I’m not---from around here.” Said Sully embarrassed. “We’re one of the New Families. No relation to anyone here.” She tried to give the book back to Dr. Afallen but he held up his hand palm out.

“Nonsense child! You bare the distinctive markings of the Tylwith family, no mistake.” He took a step back to get a better look. “Yes, and possibly a little Elf in you as well,” he mused looking her up and down. “That would be the Eithin family. Very good family but came late here. Their family history is on another aisle altogether.“

“That was my Aunt’s name! Auntie Eithin, she hated it actually, everyone got confused and called her Ethyl by mistake.” exclaimed Sully. She smiled hugely and opened the book instantly entranced. “Wow, so we aren’t New Family then?”

“No indeed! Your ancestors could have moved away at some point, and here you are back again.” He patted her shoulder. “It happens all the time. People go and then come back again; the offspring of the old families seem to be drawn to this valley.”

He turned to Ambril. “And you my dear, this is for you.”

He handed her surprisingly a new looking scrap book.

“It contains more recent information about your family.” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows drew together as he said this and then he nodded curtly. “As I said before, not all of us believed what they wrote. But you should be aware of what was said. It will help you navigate the social structure here.”

Ambril slid to the floor cross-legged as she opened it.

“Now, I can’t possibly let you take away these documents, they are one of a kind, you know. “ He nodded fondly at the book in Sully’s lap.” However, I will let you look at them for a few minutes—“

There was a jarring, buzzing sound overhead.

Dr. Afallen jumped. “My goodness, another visitor?” He wrung his hands happily. “I had better go and see who that might be.” He tripped lightly down the corridor and turned where it met the hallway. “I’ll be back to collect you in about fifteen minutes or so.” He said and trotted away.”

“It’s a scary thing when old people can run faster ‘n you.” Muttered Ygg as he hunkered down over his book.

“Mmmmm, uh huh.” Mumbled Sully from within her book.

The three friends read in silence the only sound the turning of pages for a while.

The Scrapbook in Ambril’s lap was unlabeled. She opened it to the first page. On it was taped a newspaper article which screamed:

**Trelawnyd Terrorized
Monster from the Deep Returns
and Consumes the Life of Its Resurrector.**

Sully interrupted her by snorting in a disgusted way and scrambling to her feet. She started rooting around in the shelves looking sour.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ambril.

Sully stopped to roll her eyes and said. “You know, I’ve always wished for some sort of a heritage, I hate being a “New Family” but I’m not sure if I want to be related to these snobs! Always talking about the “Pure” blood,” she made a face. “Yuk!” She turned back to her rummaging.

“I think I’ll just try something—ah!” She pulled out a shiny black book and opened it. “Something with pictures in it!” she smiled to herself and slid again to the floor.

Ambril smirked, that was the last time she would ever think of Sully as the bookish sort, the Astarte being the one great exception.

She settled back down to read:

 **Terror struck the hearts of Flint villagers last night when a Dullaith was unleashed at the Old Council Hall. Bren Silva who was working on a hush-hush ‘natural energy generation’ project was caught dabbling in occult or dark magic and lost control of the demon. In the struggle that followed flammables were ignited. Mr. Petri, an associate of Dr. Silva was able to bring the demon under control but barely escaped from the flames. He is still unconscious. Though his Physician is optimistic and thinks he’ll make a full recovery. “We owe a great deal to the quick thinking of Dr. Petri,” said Mayor Madrone “There’s no telling what might of happened had the creature been unleashed on the townspeople.” Dr. Petri had been collaborating with Dr. Silva investigating the Dullaith phenomena, which has plagued the village for centuries.**

So Feldez had saved the town by bringing down the Dullaith that had killed her father. That was the big secret no one would tell her! Ambril stared at the headlines. But something just didn’t add up. And not just because she was her Dad but to others, like Hendoeth and Dr. Afallen. She sat puzzling in silence as the others read on.

**Chapter 23 An Explosion**

“Hey remember Pinwydden telling us about Moroz?” asked Ygg. “He’s in my book.”

Ambril and Sully both nodded.

“He’s in the fairy rebellion book too book,“ said Sully.

“He really was one bad dude.” Ygg mumbled.

“Here it says that the mass defection of the troll miners was because Moroz tricked them out of their fair share of the profits and pretty much made them indentured servants.” Sully said.

“That must a been why we all moved to Chert.” Ygg mused. “It was to get away from Moroz and his scheming lies. It says here the fairies helped him, but then he turned around and tricked them!”

“That was the Fairy Rebellion.” Said Sully as she picked up the Fairy Rebellion book again.

There was silence as he read on. “It got so bad the mine was close down for a great long while and wasn’t opened again until the gold rush. Everyone got excited about mining about then.”

“Yeah, that’s what it says here except that from the Fairy perspective, Moroz reneged on payment.” Said Sully as she bent lower over her book. “Something about him turning over a special piece of Glain?”

Sully piped up again. “It looks like that was when Magic became a dirty word.” She said as she scanned the text. “It’s not really explained here, it just says: ‘Old Town was plagued by misfortune, it was decided to move the town to a new location! Where it is today I guess, that’s why they can say it was built in the mid-1800’s, because it was.”

“It doesna say much about why they moved the town in this book neither.” Said Ygg somewhat frustrated. “But that they built a railroad line and a proper road in from the coast and turned away from Magic in favor of being a part of the human world.”

Ambril looked at her friends sadly.

“It’s a shame don’t you think?” She asked. “All this repressed magic, bottled up for years and years. No wonder people are funny about Magic, their really, really frustrated and confused.”

Sully sighed her agreement but Ygg just hunched down and concentrated on his book. Silence enveloped them as they each concentrated on their task. Ambril leafed through the scrap book but found that most of the articles just restated what the first one said. Until the very last page. Just as she turned to it, the article slipped out and fell in her lap. She picked it up and gently smoothed it out. And there they were, Her mother and Dad holding hands with a little girl and boy in front of a garage .They were all smiling. The caption read:

**Dr. Silva gets a visit from his young family
At work on his latest project GERN: Generating Energy in Rhythm with Nature---**

“No, what are you doing! I simply can’t allow it! It’s strictly off limits.” A distant voice echoed through the cavernous hall.

“Was that Dr. Afallen?” asked Sully

“Wait, wait! I’m afraid I’ll have to call security if you don’t—“

He was interrupted by a voice too low to decipher.

“No!” Dr. Afallen shrieked.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the entire building followed by the braying of an alarm. Ambril covered her ears and hunkered down as she was showered by old maps. A large book nicked her ear. “Ouch!” she yelped. The shelves swayed dangerously on either side of them. She hastily grabbed her backpack and jumped to her feet.

A small stuffed dragon narrowly missed Ygg as he scrambled to his feet.

The room was filling with smoke. Ambril could barely see the exit light, its doleful blink fuzzed by the smoke.

Ambril began to cough. “Dr. Afallen! ” She choked out as she made her way toward the central aisle.

“Dr. Afallen!” shouted Sully muffled by talking through her sweatshirt.

The smoke was even thicker when they turned down the middle aisle. Ambril covered her mouth with her sleeve. “Look, you go for help, I’ll go see if Dr. Afallen needs help.” Ambril sputtered.

Sully nodded and disappeared back down the corridor toward the exit sign.

“I think we came this way,” Ygg was suddenly beside her as she clambered over what looked like a large pile of four fingered gloves.

“Oof!” Ambril grunted as she shoved a three eyed deer head out of the way. “You’re sure?”

“Ya, the smoke is getting’ thicker up this way. We’re getting closer to where it happened.” Ygg crouched down low as he walked. “The air’s a little better down lower.”

Ambril was nearly on all fours all ready. She squeezed around a listing bookshelf. “Hey, the smoke’s clearing a little bit,” she coughed and then her eyes widened in horror. “Dr. Afallen! Are you alright?”

Just ahead she could see Dr. Afallen lying inert in the middle of the hallway.

Ambril scuttled crab like over to him. He was bruised in several places the worst being a large bump near his right temple. But Ambril heaved a sigh of relief when she saw he was breathing.

Ambril jumped as the shush of a fire extinguisher erupted a few feet away. Ygg was hunched over in a doorway fanning the smoke away.

“It looks like it weren’t more an a pile of old papers.” He said and coughed again.

“I think it’s out now.” He wheezed and wiped his eyes.

Ambril took off her sweatshirt and pillowed the old man’s head with it.

“He needs a doctor right now!” blurted out Ygg as he knelt down beside the old man.

She felt so helpless and wished she had paid more attention in Health. She touched his shoulder gently.

“Dr. Afallen can you hear me?” She murmured. Could his face be paler? “Just hang on!” she said anxiously. The old man seemed to sink deeper into unconsciousness as they watched.

Ambril risked a quick look around. They seemed to be in the center of the hall right next to what was once the brand new door with all the locks. It had been blown nearly off its hinges. What looked like a safe yawned open, it’s door crazily askew. The white mist from the fire extinguisher and a few wisps of smoke still snaked out past the doorway but less now.

“Do you think that whoever did this could still be---around?” whispered Ambril.

Ygg shook his head. “Nay, would you stick around? They would ran right away as quick as they could, no worries there.” He said ruefully. “I wish they’d stayed,I’d like to give ‘em a piece of my---“

The little old man suddenly moaned and moved his head.

“Dr. Afallen? Just lie still, Sully went for help.”

His eyelids flickered. “Sully, who the devil is---“ His eyes flew open and fastened onto Ambril’s face.

“Did he get it?” He asked anxiously. “I can hardly believe it, that it was him.” He went on more to himself than anyone.

“Who was it that did this to you?”

but the Doctor’s eyes fluttered closed again.

They could hear the rumble of running feet coming towards them. Within seconds they were surrounded by a large contingency of yellow slickers and head lamps.

“He’s unconscious, somebody tried to---blow---blow him up!” Ambril stammered.

“Ambril? What are you doing here?” said a familiar clipped voice.

Ambril turned to see her future stepfather, Feldez glaring at her. He shoved her aside and took out his stethoscope as he knelt over the older man.

“That’s them! That’s them! Shrieked the cubic librarian as she stabbed a finger at Ygg and Ambril. “Those are the malicious kids I was telling you about. She continued yelling. “First they were ‘casing’ the priceless items we have in the trophy case and then sneakily asking for directions to the archives!”

“Priceless?” snorted Ygg, “Most of it’s dinged up trophies and old photographs. We’re here for school work.”

 But the Librarian didn’t pay any attention to him. “And to think I gave them directions, I should have realized you know.” The Librarian was practically lathering at the mouth. Her face contorted with hatred. “They have the look of “New Family’ about them don’t they.” She spat out at them.

Sully was suddenly beside them.

“Chief Buckthorne? These are my friends, the ones I told you about.“ She was talking to a tired square-necked man in a rumpled suit. He had gently shouldered his way through the crowd. “We were here to research a couple of history papers when the explosion happened.”

Chief Buckthorne gave no indication he had heard her and waved a hand behind him.

“Get this man to a hospital.” He growled. Two med-techs came through with a stretcher.

“He appears to be stable. But we won’t know until we run some tests.” Said Feldez unfolding himself to tower over everyone.

Buckthorne gave a curt nod. “Good, go with him.” He gave a meaningful nod at Feldez.

Feldez turned and gave Ambril a hard stare. “We will discuss this at home.” He said as he swept away behind the stretcher.

Buckthorne turned to Deputy Skarn. “We’re gonna need some tea,” he said jerking his head toward the frantic librarian. “Lots of tea.”

As Dr. Afallen was wheeled away with Feldez in tow Chief Buckthorne calmly righted a chair and settled heavily into it. He pulled a dog eared pad and a pen from his pocket and without looking up he said. “Suppose we start at the beginning. You arrived at the Library through the front door and then---“. He looked up and nodded at the three kids standing in front of him.

“We went over to the trophy case and we---,“ Sully picked up the story. The others chimed in when they needed to. Chief Buckthorne nodded occasionally writing continuously on his pad.

He stopped and backed them up when it came to overhearing Dr. Afallen shout just before the explosion and made them go over and over it.

Skarn came back and begrudgingly offered them tea. It smelled very sweet with layers of cinnamon and vanilla. Ambril took a tiny sip but then made a face. It tasted good but had a sewage like aftertaste to it. She could feel her heart racing though as if it had a healthy dose of caffeine.

“It’s good fer ya,” grunted Skarn and displayed his crooked yellow teeth with a grin. “Called ‘Sunset Tea’. Drink up!”

Ygg stiffened next to her. Out of the corner of her eye she could see him shake his head almost imperceptibly. “It’s Mrs. Twid’s stuff,” he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “Don’t swallow et.”

Skarn was watching them closely. “Come on now, drink it. I made it real good.” His eyes narrowed.

Ambril smiled bravely and pretended to take another sip. Ygg was desperately elbowing Sully but before he could get her attention, she had taken a big gulp and shortly after wished she hadn’t.

“How could anyone even get one cup of that horrible stuff down?” she said as Skarn turned around. Ambril nearly gagged at the thought.

“Old people, they don’t always taste so well.” Whispered Ygg back. “And it has a kick to it, makes them feel good at first.” Ygg mumbled. “Mrs. Twid banks on that.” He grimaced as he emptied his cup into a nearby plastic plant. Ambril and Sully did the same.

Chief Buckthorne continued grilling them, this time questioning them about their friends and family. The three kids answered as truthfully as they could though they kept all matters of magic out of their story. At last, the chief seemed satisfied. He nodded as he got heavily to his feet.

“Can you kids find your own way home?” he said as he tugged on the part of his belt that cut into his mid-drift bulge.

They nodded.

He inclined his head toward the blinking exit light and watched them as they walked thankfully through it and out into the twilight.

**Chapter 24 Mrs. Twid’s Sunset Tea**

“Whoo!” Ygg grunted as he jumped on his bike. “Glad that’s over. I’ll head over to Miss Fern’s house to see how she’s doing,” he said eyeing the fading light in the sky. “Tomorrow then.” He called back at them as he slid into traffic.

“Yek!” Sully stuck her tongue out. “I can still taste that awful tea.” She rubbed her tummy. “And I think I might be coming down with something.” She said as she shoved off. “See you tomorrow!”

“Ambril! What happened! Feldez called and said you had gotten mixed up in something…and that Dr. Afallen had gotten hurt?” It was her mother who had just pulled up in a shiny new SUV. “Let’s get the bike in the back, honey and then I want to hear all about it.” Her mother had jumped from the car and tugged up the back hatch door.

Ambril and her Mom awkwardly maneuvered her bike into the back then jumped into their seats. It had that new car smell. “Nice, Mom, did you pick this up today?”

“Don’t change the subject! But yes, Feldez picked it out, you like it?”

Ambril nodded and then told her Mom everything she thought she could. The car was uncomfortably quiet as the car purred its way up the hill. The growl of Ambril’s stomach spoiled the symmetrical tick of the car’s blinker as Ambril’s Mom signaled into their driveway; when it slowed to a stop neither of them moved.

Ambril’s mother took a deep breath. “It’s just us here, you know Ambril. She said tersely. “Now once more, tell me the truth, tell me EVERYTHING.” She turned and looked her daughter right in the eyes. “What are you and your friends up to?”

Ambril froze. She was busted. She should have known her Mom would know there was something else going on. But what could she really tell her? She had promised Zane she wouldn’t say a word about the Dullaith and the whole thing with Feldez was still very vague. She didn’t have any proof. Ambril knew she couldn’t ask her Mother to walk away from Feldez just because Ambril was suspicious of him.

Her mother’s jaws remained rigid and her lips tight. “Ambril, I need to know what you are doing if I am to help you with this.”

Ambril cleared her throat. “Right Mom, look I’m sorry. I just got really excited about our family’s heritage, you know in Ms. Breccia’s class we were talking about the old stories about the founding families and I just wanted to learn more about it.” Ambril winced. She knew it was lame but it was the best she could come up with.

Her mother relaxed visibly and she managed a half smile. “Those are just stories.” She said firmly. “I know when I was your age, my mother came to me and told me some of the fabled history of our family.” Ambril’s mother visibly tightened then, her knuckles went white around the steering wheel. “But I learned the hard way that some things are best not to be believed. They can really hurt you and sometimes those around you if you are not careful.”

She smoothed down her hair. “No, you can’t believe in fairy tales forever, Ambril.” She reached out for the door handle and eased her door open. “Just stick to the real history, it’s easier.” She said softly and then turned toward Ambril. “Okay?” She looked at her daughter pleadingly. Ambril thought about the picture of her mother in the Astarte floating, unconnected to the rest of the family’s heritage. Had it been her father’s death and the Dullaith?

“Hey, I’m hungry, where have you been?” It was Zane in his usual foul mood on the doorstep. “The housekeeper refuses to let me eat without you.” He yelled rolling his eyes. “You know, it’s unmannerly or some tripe. So can we get started, like before midnight?” he said sarcastically.

Ambril slid out of her seat; relieved for once to be interrupted by her big brother.

“Yeah, I’m starved.” She said and found she was as she raced inside throwing her backpack on the bottom step just before she ran into the kitchen. There were heaps of steaming pasta on the table, ready to go. It smelled delicious and must have driven Zane half mad to wait for them. She had a hard time holding back herself.

“Yum!” she said as she splashed her hands with water and took her seat.

“Good! Dr. Petri just called and said he would be working late.” Said Mrs. Sweetgum as she finished wiping down the spotless counters. “He also wanted everyone to know that Dr. Afallen was still unconscious but that he was expected to make a full recovery.” She added a bucktoothed grin.

“That’s great news!” exclaimed Ambril’s Mom, relieved. “Thanks and this looks delicious by the way.”

The housekeeper nodded, I’ll just water the patio pots before I go.” She trilled and stepped quickly out into the evening light.

The three dug into the piles of food with gusto. There were two different kinds of pasta, a red sauce with meatballs and Ambril’s favorite, pesto. Ambril loaded her plate with the garlicky green sauce pasta and had just taken her first bite when her stomach turned over. She swallowed experimentally. It didn’t taste quite right, more pond scum than pasta.

She refused to give up so easily and tried again, scooping up a mouthful of pasta she swallowed it almost without chewing, only to have her stomach lurch again. Food was not what her stomach wanted just now.

“Ooff!” she groused, she had lost her appetite.

“What’s the matta wif oou?’ mumbled Zane his mouth full of meatball. “Normally, you eat more tha’ me.”

“Ambril? Honey you don’t look well.” Her mother said anxiously. “It’s probably just all of the excitement,” she put her cool hand on Ambril’s forehead and frowned. “Why don’t you go on up to bed.”

Ambril took one last look at her plate and sighed. Dragging her backpack behind her she slouched up the stairs threw on her pajamas and slid gingerly between the sheets. What a lousy day.

She closed her eyes and groaned as she remembered she still had to write that stupid detention paper. She willed herself to a sitting position and reached for her backpack at the foot of her bed.

It was still so dusty from the explosion that Ambril had to heave herself to a standing position just long enough to shake off some of the dust over the wastebasket. She pulled out the shiny black leather ‘Approved History of Trelawnyd’ book and opened it.

It was written in typical textbook speak, going on and on about mostly boring things and leaving out the juicy bits. This one was about the gold miners discovering the Trelawnyd valley and settling there. There were blurry black and white pictures of people in old-fashioned clothes perched stiffly on horses and sitting bolt upright in wagons.

There was a soft knock on Ambril’s door. Mrs. Sweetgum put her head in and smiled. She was holding a tray with a steaming mug and a plate of food.

“Hey, Mrs. Sweetgum you look just like someone in this old picture!” Ambril paused and clutched her stomach. “You know, I don’t think I can eat anything, my stomach’s acting up.” Ambril grimaced and turned slightly green.

Mrs. Sweetgum let herself in anyway. She peered at Ambril’s face as she trotted over to the bed and handed her the mug. “Ah, well your mother told me you were feeling poorly so I thought I would bring you some of my special tea---“

“You didn’t get it from Mrs. Twid did you? The tea? ” blurted Ambril as she turned her face away. Everything smelled like sewage to her.

“Of course not!” Harrumphed the chubby woman as she held out the mug of tea insistently. “I wouldn’t have that stuff in my house, no sirree.” She said smoothing down her frilly lace collar.

“This will take that bad taste out of your mouth.” She smiled encouragingly.

Ambril sniffed at the tea. It did smell good. She took a very small sip. It felt warm as it slid down her throat. Ambril smiled, the nauseous feeling starting to leave her as she took another sip and then another. She had just about finished it when Mrs. Sweetgum set the tray down on her lap. There was a heaping dish of pasta and strawberries on the side. Ambril sniffed tentatively. It smelled---good like---food. Wonderful! Ambril set the mug down and dug in. It tasted even better. In short order she had cleaned her plate and sat back relaxed.

“That’s better now,” said Mrs. Sweetgum as she gathered up the empty dishes. “I see you’re reading up on the early days of Trelawnyd.” She nodded at the book lying near Ambril’s left leg.

“Oh! Yeah, I have to write an essay tonight.”

Mrs. Sweetgum grimaced at the slim book. “Well, I’m not sure you’ll find anything interesting in there.”

“I’m not sure that’s the point.” Smirked Ambril. “I think it’s meant to be more of a punishment” Ambril shrugged.

“Ah, “ Mrs. Sweetgum nodded wisely as her eyebrows drew up questioningly. “Ms. Breccia?”

Ambril nodded.

Mrs. Sweetgum’s smile was small. “She has so little imagination, poor thing.”

Mrs. Sweetgum suddenly swept up the tray and trotted to the door. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Dearie.” She said over her shoulder.

“Wait! Mrs. Sweetgum! Do you have anymore of that tea?” Ambril remembered that last look on Sully’s face. “I might need some more for a friend.”

“Oh! I’ll put some in a thermos for you to take tomorrow.” Mrs. Sweetgum smiled cheerfully, not waiting for an answer she pulled the door closed.

Ambril yawned and stretched a bit before picking up the book again. An hour later she was putting the finishing touches on a very detailed and boring essay, which she was sure Ms. Breccia would love. She switched off her light and snuggled down under the covers to mull over her day. Who was behind the explosion? And had they gotten what they were after? It was so valuable they had been willing to kill Dr. Afallen for it. And then there was the article about her Dad and Feldez. She needed to find out more about what they had been doing that day her Dad died. Ambril sighed discouraged. Would she ever be able to make sense of it all? Her mind raced through different scenarios until she fell into a dreamless sleep.

**Chapter 25 Miss Fern**

Ambril took the stairs three at a time and skated into the kitchen.

“Glad you’re feeling better!” laughed her Mom as she watched her daughter pick up a spoon. It looked like homemade granola for breakfast.

“Mrs. Sweetgum is a treasure isn’t she!” Her Mom smiled as she sipped her coffee.

Ambril rolled her eyes heavenward as she munched and swallowed. Taking another spoonful she asked, “Mom, Do you know anything about an old house with a gazebo out on the main road?” She ladled another crunchy spoonful into her mouth.

Her mother’s face beamed. “My Grandmother’s house had a gazebo and was on the main road. I haven’t been there in years. We just boarded it up after Gran died. ” She looked out the window for a moment. “I spent many a happy afternoon there, watching my Gran bake and helping her dig in the gar---“ Her mother stopped and stared at her daughter.

“Why do you ask?” She said suspiciously.

“Well, My friend Sully lives next door and we went exploring---“

“Oh! Your friend Sully? Is she your age?” Her mother asked brightly.

“She’s in my grade at school. Her parents own the farm where they fire happened, you know they one we drove by when we first arrived?”

Her mother nodded sadly for a moment and then asked. “So what’s your new friend like?”

“Well, she’s fun, I guess.”

There was a long pause as her mother gave her every opportunity to say more but Ambril didn’t fee like it.

“Well---so good! And you went exploring and happened to see the old Derwyn place with the gazebo and the---“ Her mother stiffened. “Did you happen to wander around the garden?”

Ambril shrugged, “we just rode our bikes through,” she said examining her granola carefully. “It’s really a great old house.”

“”Yes, it’s a great old place.” Mused her mother.

“Who does it belong to now?” Asked Ambril. “It’s a shame it hasn’t been lived in for a long time.”

Her mother stared at her cup in silence for a while. “Well, I think it belongs to me.” She said in a far off voice.

“Mom! You mean we’ve been living in dumpy apartments for all this time when we could have been living there?” Ambril exclaimed.

“Shut up, dopey.” Zane groused as he lunged into his seat.

Ambril realized too late just how thoughtless that had been. She wished she could take it back. “Oh, well,” she said lamely. “I guess you had your reasons.”

Ambril’s mother looked startled. “Yes, well, we were in San Francisco, you know, so…” her mother’s voice trailed off.

Zane looked accusingly at Ambril.

Ambril scrambled for something to say. “It’s really rundown, probably no one could live there now.” She put in quickly. “Still, it’s a really great old house. Maybe we could all go and see it sometime.” She said. “You know have a picnic or something.”

Her mother’s face lost that far off look and slowly brightened. “Yes, maybe we could at that.” She said softly. She set her coffee cub down on the table. “Well, I’m going to go and help Betula get ready for May Day.” She said briskly as she got up from the table.

Ambril got up herself and grabbed her lunch. “See you Mom,” she said as she raced out the door and jumped on her bike.

She was just shoving her bike into the school rack when Ygg coasted in beside her. “How ya feeling?” he said. “Ya didna take lot of tea yesterday but ya had some of it.” He said as he closely examined her face.

“I felt lousy until Mrs. Sweetgum fixed me up and---“ she rummaged around her backpack until she found her thermos. “I brought some of her remedy tea for Sully.”

“Ooooohhhhh.” Moaned someone just behind them. Sully stumbled up, looking pale and green. “I can’t stand it, all I can taste and smell is how our septic tank smells when we get it drained.”

Sully bent over suddenly, holding her stomach.

“Here, have a swig of this, it helped me a whole bunch last night.”

Sully turned her head in refusal.

 “Come on, it’s from Mrs. Sweetgum, the fabulous cookie baker.” Pleaded Ambril.

“What do ya have to lose besides your breakfast?” chortled Ygg. “But maybe you already have done that.”

Sully made a face at him and then frowned at the thermos. She finally took it and tried a small sip. She brightened. “This does help! Halleluiah!” She said relieved as she took another healthy swallow. She took a few more and started rummaging around in Ambril’s lunch. “Do you have any more of her cookies?”

Ambril smiled as she reached into her backpack and handed over her cookies.

Sully grabbed them and consumed them in short order.

“I wonder if that’s what the old people are feeling?” mused Ygg as he watched Sully eat.

“I bet it’s even worse, as they’re so much older, they probably feel it more, don’t you think?” asked Ambril.

“Well, if that’s the case, we have to figure out a way to help them!” said Sully taking another swig of Mrs. Sweetgum’s tea.

“How about asking Mrs. Sweetgum to make a couple of gallons of that stuff?” asked Ambril pointing at the thermos.

Ygg shrugged and winced. “I can’t afford to make Mrs. Twid angry.” He said softly. “Or’n she’ll send me packing.” He shook his head. “I’ve tried telling her there be sommut wrong with her tea but she just gets angry and won’t listen.”

“Well, we’ll have to think of something.” Said Sully as she handed back the thermos to Ambril. “I just can’t bear the thought of poor Mrs. Flood and all the old guys who sit in the park on sunny days feeling awful.” Sully shivered as she slung her backpack on her shoulder and turned to walk into the school building.

“Maybe we can find something in that Astarte thing.” Said Ambril racing up the steps.

“Oh yea, I almost forgot!” said Ygg. “I stopped by Miss Fern’s house last night. She’s fine.” Ygg continued as he pulled open the front door. “She wants us to visit her at moonrise tonight to see somethin’ special.” He turned to Ambril and Sully. “Do ya think you can sneak out?” he asked his eyes bright.

Ambril smiled and nodded. “I’m sure gonna try!” she said.

“Yes!” beamed Sully. “An adventure! I’m in!” said Sully as they scooted into their first period class just as the bell rang.

 The day went by smoothly. In History Ambril, Ygg, and Sully tossed their essays onto Ms. Breccia’s desk before sliding into their seats toward the back.

“Class settle down!” Rumbled Ms. Breccia. “Now, before we move onto the California Gold Rush does anyone have any questions regarding the founding of our town?” Ms. Breccia asked as she noisily sucked her teeth.

Ygg raised his hand.

“Yes?” Ms. Breccia inclined her head toward him and looked dubious.

“I was wondering if you knew anything about man with the name of Moroz?” Ygg asked.

Ms. Breccia’s eyebrows skyrocketed under her helmet hair. “Moroz? How did you come across that name?” she thundered at him.

Ygg looked stunned. “I was readin’ a history book about how the Mine started up and his name came up more n’ once.”

Ms. Breccia just glared at him for a moment. “Ah, well, Moroz shall we say helped organize the---labor force necessary for our Mine. He also engineered many of our bridges and main roads.” Boomed Ms. Breccia as she paraded in front of the class. “You may have cause to question his methods,” she continued. “He was reportedly a---stern task master.” She raised her fist triumphantly. “But he got the job done!”

Sully had her hand in the air next. “So, if he did all these great things, how come he isn’t in the official History of Trelawnyd?” she asked skeptically holding up the gold trimmed book fro the Library. “I mean, if he was so great, wouldn’t we have a road named after him or a statue of him somewhere?”

Ms. Breccia went back to sucking her teeth. “Well, it appears that he might have gotten a bit too rough with his labor force.” She said thoughtfully. “He used just a tad too much force with them at times.” She continued.

 “Mind you, I don’t know how he could have kept such a crew in line otherwise.” She mused.

“To some, you see,” she smiled horribly. “He was quite a hero.” She raised her eyes to the ceiling almost worshipfully. “He was efficient and effective!” She sighed and then said dismissively. “But, he was tried for his crimes, found guilty and they dealt with him harshly.”

“Where was he jailed?” Riley asked.

Ms. Breccia’s eyes narrowed. “That I can’t tell you.”

Riley looked frustrated. “I’ve heard it was somewhere in town.”

Ms. Breccia continued as if he hadn’t said anything. “I can’t tell you because no one knows, not even an expert in Trelawnyd history such as myself.” She fanned herself and looked out the window. “No, no one knows where they put him, or how they kept him there.” She was talking as if to herself. “He was quite accomplished, and---adept.”

She blinked and looked at Reilly directly.

 “Any other questions?” Without waiting for a response she continued. “No? Fine, turn to page 279 and tell me what the contraptions featured there are.”

Ambril sighed and knew what she would find there, a bunch of antiquated gold miner’s equipment. Stuff she had studied the year before. She settled down for a serious day dreaming session and plastered a look of faux concentration on her face. Moroz was a mysterious character. There were little bits and pieces about him everywhere---but not enough information. Which made him really interesting. It must have been some powerful dark magic he had used to have the Cerberus after him. Ambril shivered involuntarily, remembering their rush to the wall. She’d hate to have them come for her.

**Chapter 25 Moonrise in Fern’s Garden**

The sun had just set over the valley and Ambril was in her room doing that hateful thing, waiting. Moonrise wasn’t for three hours. She surveyed her prep work, for the night.

Pillows plumped and prodded into an almost human shape under the covers, check.

Ladder in place, check.

Ladder hidden from view from downstairs, almost check.

Ambril had stuck it in the middle of some tall bushes. You could barely see it from the kitchen windows. It was the barely part she was worried about.

Now she had to work on fLit.

“So when my Mom knocks on the door and says “Good night, Honey!” you do what?” she prompted.

Flit stood stock-still. Ambril grimaced. “You press here, right?” she said.

The robot remained a statue.

Ambril sighed. “O.K., let’s try it.”
 Ambril skittered over to the bedroom door and knocked. “Good night honey!” she said in her best Mom imitation.

Miraculously the robot stepped over to the tape recorder and stomped on the play button.

Ambril’s voice said sleepily, “Good night, Mom!” Flit then took his foot off the play button.

“And if my Mom says anything else, anything at all, what do you do?” prompted Ambril again.

Flit again stomped on the play button.

Ambril’s recorded voice said even more sleepily, “ Can we talk about this in the morning Mom, I’m really tired.” Flit took his foot off the play button again.

Ambril grinned and poked the robot in the chest. “Good job!” she said.

Ambril had to admit, even though he was annoying, it was handy to have a somewhat smart robot around at least some of the time.

Then fLit kicked the tape recorder hard. Immediately the room was filed with loud reggae music. Ambril jumped for the recorder and jammed down the stop button.

“No!, No! That can’t happen tonight!” Ambril snarled at the robot.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this, you realize if I’m caught I’ll be grounded for at least a month, right?” She inclined her head at the robot meaningfully. “That means you’re stuck in here with me.”

fLit stayed still for a moment and then tried to kick the tape recorder again. But Ambril grabbed him before he could connect his foot with the machine.

“Yeah, I see, well it’s not like we’ll be hanging out together buddy.” She hunkered down so that she was green eye to metal eye. “It means you’ll be spending the month stuffed into a box in the closet!” She said. “Got that?”

The robot just stared at her and then wilted. Ambril watched him drag himself back to her computer and perch himself on the edge.

Ambril sighed and rolled her eyes. “Alright, we’ll listen a little but just until I leave.” She reached for her computer, tapped it a few times until reggae music again filled the room and smiled to herself as she watched the robot dance.

She picked up the Ashera started examining some of the carvings. She ran her fingers along the lines circling the Derwyn crest. The mysterious Ogam ran along the edge, small cuts along three lines, making a pattern, almost like a code. But how to crack that code?

Frustrated she started playing with it for the eleven hundredth time, pressing and turning and twisting it to see if she could unlock any more of its secrets. She was about to give up when with a whirring click another drawer slid open. Inside was a small booklet, yellowed, and old. The binding had been hand-sewn. The faded title said ‘Ogam Revealed’. The word Ogam rang a bell. Dr. Afallen had mentioned it…The book was only a few pages long. On each page was a different hatch mark and underneath what the hatch mark meant. Ambril grinned it was a decoder book!

She excitedly copied down the delicate tracings around the Derwyn seal, unwinding it as she went. Carefully she began to compare the hatch marks with the letters or words in the little book. In then end she had a poem of sorts:

**As Above, So Below.**

**Weave to Heal, Grace to Grow.**

**Where Vine and Root Forever Entwine**

**Present, Past and Future Combine**

**As Above, So Below.**

She looked at the writing around the seal and then again at the verse and noticed something, that the third and fourth lines were actually one sentence: Where Vine and Root Forever Entwine Present Past and Future Combine. It sounded as if it was identifying some place where something to do with time happens.

She rubbed her forehead, frustrated. It could be anywhere that vines and roots intermingle, like a riverbank, or an overgrown garden wall.

She puzzled a bit more but soon realized she’d have to give up for the time being. She shoved the poem in a drawer and looked at the clock. It was well past 10:00 and she didn’t want to miss the moonrise.

She snapped down the lid on her computer and grabbed her backpack as she raced to the window. A gentle breeze swirled the new spring leaves making the stars twinkle as Ambril swung her foot out and felt around for the top rung of the ladder. It gave a bit but remained firm. She carefully inched her way down blindly feeling with her big toe for the next rung until three or four rungs away from the ground she missed one and fell the rest of the way.

“Ouch!” she whispered tersely as she pulled a sharp little twig from her sleeve. She floundered a bit but found a way through without causing too much damage to the dahlias just pushing up through the soil. Grumpily, she padded off down the hill.

Luckily Fern’s house was just a block or two off the main road. She blinked at the warm light shining cheerily through the front window and took the porch steps two at a time. Impatiently, she rapped on the door.

Sully opened the door almost immediately.

“What took you?” she said. “Come on! We’ve found a cure!”

“For what?” asked Ambril following her friend down a narrow hallway to Fern’s kitchen. Fern was perched on a tall stool at the counter with the Astarte open beside her. Ygg was dumping a large handful of dried leaves into a bowl full of berries, twigs and more leaves.

“Now stir it briskly, yes that’s right.” Fern instructed him and smiled at Ambril.

“Actually Fern helped us find the remedy.” Sully closed the Astarte. “Ygg is going to replace her old tea with this one and then deliver it as usual.” She looked at Ambril her eyebrows going up and down. “I thought of that part.”

“There that should do it, though, I warn you, it might be a little strong.” Said Fern vaguely. “Still, they’ll calm down eventually---I think.”

Ygg put a couple of spoonfuls into a teapot and poured hot water in. “Let’s try it out.”

“Well it won’t have much affect on you kids, “ said Fern. “Best if we could find an elderly person who---“ She stopped mid sentence a small smile forming, then she walked slowly over to the phone and dialed.

“Daisy? Good you’re home! I have a special Tea I’ve made just for you. May I bring it by?...Are you sure I won’t be intruding?...Good! I’ll be right over.” Smiling broadly she put the phone down.

“She’s due for a cure, I think it’s Daisy that Crystal has e been experimenting on now for quite some time.”

“My, you’re having a party Fern and I wasn’t invited!” Fern said as she slowly opened her backdoor for them. She stood there smiling, leaning heavily on her walking stick as they all filed in. Her sitting room smelled musty and there were doilies draped on everything, even the Television.

“Hello Daisy, Here! Try my new Tea. It’ll make you feel right as rain in a jiffy!” Said Fern cheerfully as she handed a large milky cup of tea to her friend.

Mrs. Flood sniffed as the smell of vanilla and cinnamon filled the room. “Well I think a small cup of tea is just the thing for me. Nothing else tastes quite right these days.” Painfully she maneuvered herself over to a gargantuan overstuffed chair and plopped down.

“It’s time to retire, I think. Everything just hurts.” She said rubbing her knee with her elbow as she eyed the cup in her hand. “That Crystal has been so thoughtful these days, bringing me tea while I’m at the store and taking me to church. She thinks it’s time for me to try something new; maybe moving in with my daughter? But I’m still not sure…she’s getting impatient with me.”

Fern smiled at her softly. “Here you go, down the hatch, it’s freshly made. ” She nodded encouragingly at the cup in her friend’s hand.

“It certainly smells wonderful.” She said squinting a bit. “Like my mother’s kitchen at Christmas time.” She took a small sip and her eyes brightened. “My that’s good!”

She took another sip and then a big swallow. “Ummmmmm.” She sat up a little straighter and her walking stick clattered to the floor, unnoticed. “My this is so very good, I’ve been feeling so chilled lately. And now, I feel positively.” She stood up and twirled a like a little girl. “Wonderful!”

“Now I think a cookie or two would go nicely with this?” She eyed the cabinets.

Fern looked a bit startled “Oops!” She said in a stage whisper to Ygg. “I think we put in too much elderberry.”

Mrs. Flood stretched. “My I feel so…strange, so…girlish. She put out her toe and pointed it experimentally and giggled.

“Yes,” Fern nodded decisively. “Too much elderberry!”

Mrs. Flood started humming an old Beach Boys tune from the 60’s and started to dance around the kitchen. “I’m so sorry, I just don’t believe I can stay still.” She said as she pirouetted through the door. “I’ll just take a turn around the block---“ and she was gone.

“Oh dear, oh my oh my,” Murmured Fern as they followed her outside. There was no sign of the elderly lady. “She is going to have an absolutely wonderful time tonight! But tomorrow---I fear she’ll be a bit---sore.”

Sully giggled. “Well maybe we shouldn’t dumb it down too much.” She said. “Lets let the old folks have a little fun, huh?”

Fern laughed, well just a little, yes, maybe just a little.” She said to herself as they made their way back into her kitchen.

Sully picked out just a few of the purple berries from the remedy mixture and fern gave a final nod of approval.

Ambril lifted the top of the teapot and sniffed. It did smell wonderful, “This smells kind of like the tea Mrs. Sweetgum made for me.”

“Oh Aster’s an old hand at this.” Said Fern. “She probably had the remedy worked out before you were half way through the door.”

Ygg said. “Now al I have to do is to take this mess around and replace the bad stuff with it, right?”

“Oh and you’ll have to take out all of the stuff Mrs. Twid has packaged up ready to go and throw that away too.” Said Sully, matter-of-factly. “Then keep tabs on her to make sure she doesn’t make this mistake again.”

“Great, as if I don’t have enough to do, what with school work and chores and the lot.” He grumbled.

“We’ll have to mix up a new batch every time she tries to make a new batch.” Mused Ambril and sighed.

“I wish we could just shut her down.” Sully said as she emptied the tea into a plastic bag.

Ambril remembered the conversation she had overheard between the librarians about Mrs. Flood’s shop. She remembered thinking at the time that maybe Mrs. Twid was up to something. “Do you think she did this on purpose?” she asked.

Everyone just looked at her in amazement.

 “She’s a little daft, that may be but why would she go and hurt her friends like this?” Queried Ygg

Ambril shrugged. “Are they really her friends?” She queried. “She’s not exactly well liked right?”

Ygg turned to her slowly. “Ya know she’s not me favorite person, that’s for sure. But poisoning half the town just to get her hands on some real estate.” He slowly shook his head. “That’s cold.”

Fern smoothed down the more playful strands of her hair. “We don’t really know what she’s after, do we. She may have bigger plans. As a young girl, she may not have been capable of this, but living alone like she has for so long, it can turn a person---bitter.” She nodded to herself. “Still we shouldn’t jump to conclusions, should we?”

 Ambril nodded along with the others. Perhaps they were imagining things. The cuckoo clock chimed in at eleven thirty.

Fern jumped “Oh my! The time! We’d better hurry outside, it’s almost moonrise!” The old woman threw a shawl around her shoulders. “Now be careful of the gnomes, since my nephew left, they’ve been so hard to repair.”

They all barreled through the back door and into the starlit garden.

It took a while before Ambril’s eyes were adjusted to the darkness. She shivered a bit. Beyond Fern’s garden loomed the dark outlines of the forest. Massive shadowy trees towered over her. She hadn’t been this near the forest since that first night and the Dullaith. But she didn’t feel frightened. She took a deep breath and willed herself to relax.

Fern’s shadowy garden was extraordinary. Trees embraced the house with feathery shadows and dappled the patio. But there was something else, an emotion in the air. She could almost taste the anticipation, the night seemed to be on holding its breath, waiting.

Fern’s garage was set apart from the house and snuggled right up against the Trelawnyd wall. It was also made of stone and had several tiny windows running down the garden side. There were old-fashioned arched doors on the front. But most remarkable thing about it was that it was almost entirely covered with a budding vine. Just like the old gazebo. There were many more gnomes around the garden. There were a couple of them near where Sully and Ygg were setting up rickety folding chairs.

Ambril found Fern at her elbow nodding at the vines. “It’s a rare type of forget me not. We call it Navel-mundi, the navel of the world. It blooms just once a year.” Her eyes were bright as she looked into Ambril’s face. “And it is something you will never forget.”

“Hey you, the living statue. Quit acting like Bambi and come take a load off.” Sully was balancing herself precariously on a three-footed chair. She had pulled up a nearby gnome to prop her chair up with. She pointed to the one next to her.

A laughing gnome stood right beside it.

 “My garage is one of the oldest buildings in Trelawnyd. In fact it was built long before any of these houses.” Fern looked at her neighbor’s houses built on either side of hers. “My nephew, Joe lived there awhile after your father. We took out the front wall and put in a garage door when your Dad decided to make it into his lab.” She continued and smiled at Ambril.

Ambril’s started, “You mean, my Dad worked in that old building?” She felt a little disappointed. “Is this where he did his experiments?”

Fern nodded watching her. “It doesn’t look like much, but your Dad worked well here. He thought he was really onto something too.” She said softly. “It was such a shame, you know. He was such a fine man, your Dad.”

Ambril felt a lump rise in her throat. So this must be where he spent most of his time those last few years.

“Sshh!” Hissed Sully. “It’s beginning, look!” She pointed upward.

The moon could be seen peeking out from over the tops of the mountains. As the first of the moon’s rays hit the vine on the garage a thrumming sensation began all around her. It came from deep in the ground, from the plants and trees and possibly from the air itself. The vine itself began to quiver with the feel of it. The buds turned their faces toward the moon’s light. The buds on the top of the garage began to glow softly and then to open, unfolding into a perfect flower. They were iridescent and seemed to glow with all colors at once. They petals cascaded out like a rose but a long arching stamen rose from its center. At the very tip was a dancing dot of light.

“Waahhh,” Ygg had his mouth open, amazed.

“That is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” whispered Sully next to Ambril.

“Coadsnigs!” whispered a voice reverently at Ambril’s knee. But Ambril was too mesmerized by what was taking place to take any notice.

There seemed to be two or three flowers that were bigger than the others. They seemed to be growing larger as she watched. The dots of light began to dance more wildly, resonant with the thrum of the earth.

“My Goodness, just the three?” Warbled Fern her forehead of warren of wrinkles.

Ambril could hear sweet, velvety chimes all around now harmonizing with the rumbly, thrum underfoot. It came to Ambril just then that she was in the midst of a miraculous celebration of life. Three flowers had grown to several times the size of the other flowers. The dancing dots now were elongating and growing limbs. They soon appeared almost human but about six inches high.

The chimes grew louder and then all at once Ambril was aware of hundreds of dots of light surrounding them. But these were fully formed little people hovering in the air watching the spinning, dancing beings within the flowers.

“Fairies!” Whispered Sully she was utterly enchanted with them and reached out a hand to touch. But the nearest fairy turned and gave her a vile, dirty look and swatted her hand away.

“Ouch!” Cried Sully as she pulled away and turned back to Ambril. “Touchy little things aren’t they?”

“Watch now!” Fern pointed a shaky excited finger at the nearest light form.

The fairies had grouped themselves around each of the three forms. In the glow of the new being they looked happy and excited. Then two fairies darted in toward the spinning being and then spun out blurry fast in a dancing circle. The hoops of light careened around the garden in a wild, mad celebration of life. Ambril had to duck a couple of times as the fairy circles zoomed too close. Then the thrumming changed its tempo and the fairy dancers gradually slowed until the individuals beings were visible again. When they came to a stop there were three instead of two. A fairy had been born. There were two boy fairies and one girl who looked wonderingly around. One of them happened to catch Ambril’s eye for a second. She drew her eyebrows together and frowned in curiosity Until one of her circle mates grimaced and whispered something in her ear. Her curiosity turned to mild disgust and she looked away.

“They don’t care for humans, that’s a fact.” Mused Fern. “They only tolerate us tonight because they have to be here, at this place to gather up their young.”

The other flower fairies had been encircled and were gradually slowing.

“What’s wrong with having the three? Is that not a good number?” asked Ambril as they watched the fairies greet the newcomers then gradually floated away.

Fern just shook her head sadly. “It used to be there would be fifty or sixty born every year this way.” She sighed and shrugged. “But lately, there have been so few.” Her voice trailed off and her face looked concerned and drawn.

It be booglish, that be truth.” Said a voice from near her knee. There stood the happy gnome who was no longer happy. His face was screwed up with concern. But as she watched he cocked his head and smiled largely at her.

Ambril jumped up so fast she knocked over her chair which bumped the little gnome. “What! What are you?” She exclaimed.

Surprisingly it was Ygg who answered her. “That be Bummil.” Ygg nodded at the little guy. “Bummil’s a gnome.”

Bummil had drawn back looking puzzled.

“It’s O.K. you just take some gettin’ used to that’s all.”

Bummil looked reproachfully at Ambril.

“I be no doolally.” He rubbed his elbow ruefully still looking at Ambril.

“He be speaking the old language a bit.” Continued Ygg and shook his head at Bummil. “He does it to look clever, I think.”

Bummil now transferred his reproachful glare to Ygg and continued to rub his elbow.

Ygg sighed. “Let’s have a look-see, then.”

Bummil sidled over to Ygg still looking hurt. “She be mostly batie or nay?” he stage whispered to Ygg as he dropped something into Ygg’s open hand.

“Nay, mostly. She’s right nice.” Ygg said and held a small chip of red ceramic to the light. “Lucky thing I brought me glue.” He motioned to Bummil to give him his arm as he pulled out a small tube of super glue.

Bummil somewhat reluctantly complied raising his elbow in Ygg’s general direction exposing a jagged white spot where the chip belonged. Ygg applied a bit of glue and the pressed the chip back into place. “There, good as new, or almost!” Ygg said as he clapped the gnome on the back.

“Not near almost!” Grumbled another voice. This time it was Sully who shot out of her chair. “Yikes!” Give a body some warning, will you?”

Her chair support had come to life and was grumpily removing his toe from underneath her chair leg. He gave it a shove and it clattered to the ground. “That’s much better.” He said with a satisfied sigh. “You best watch who you be using to prop up yourself, Missy!”

“You know you let her, Baldot.” Ygg squinted at the gnome stretching his arms and trying to look innocent. “You could a cleared your throat politely and asked her to move.”

Baldot grinned. “Ya, you be right there, Ygg, I love to see human-kind jump and jibber.” He put up a hand to straighten his cap. “Sometimes, it’s bout all they’s god for.” A faint crack was heard. “Garn! Oh fer Fixit Joe!”

Ygg was up and pulled the little gnome over to the porch light. “Is that the same place we mended yesterday week?” he asked.

“It be so. So you see why t’ain’t near good as new. Not near!” He said patting his hat gingerly.

Okay, Let me get this straight,” Sully came up behind Ygg and looked over his shoulder at Baldot. “These little toy men---”

“Gnomes, if you please!”

“These gnomes are alive, I guess, but they get broken a lot, because they are made of the same stuff my Grandmother’s china is made of---“

“More or less, you see lass fine china consists of a higher ratio of---“ Another gnome with a long gray beard and little round glasses trotted up.

“Let’s leave the technical stuff alone for now Blagoor, if you please---“ said Ygg as he examined the new old crack on Baldot’s cap.

Sully rolled her eyes. “Okay, where was I? Oh yeah, the gnomes break and you fix them with super glue.” She grabbed the tube from his hand. “Right! My Dad swears by it.” She said handing the tube back to Ygg. “But he just fixes lamps and tea cups that don’t, um, ‘jump and jibber’ and stuff.” She continued eyeballing Ygg. “YOU, are fixing a live---,” here she looked a bit confused. “---ceramic---person.”

“GNOME!” Shouted Baldot up at her. “What are ya daft? And WE don’t jump and jibber, human-kind do that! He pulled at his red waistcoat. We Gnomes are much more refined, don’t you know, We…sashay and dosey-doe and the like.” Baldot plunked along the patio making a tink-tink sound with every step. Ambril thought he looked and sounded more like a two-legged baby goat. Sashay did not come to mind.

Sully gave Baldot a dirty look. “I was just about to say that maybe we could look for something better.” She stared daggers at the grumpy gnome. “But seeing as we’re just human-kind that are only good at jumping and jibbering---“

“Ya mean you’d really try and help us?” Bummil stared at her almost worshipfully.

“I take all of that back, of course you be different, you bein’ almost fairy and all.” Added Baldot quickly.

Sully almost smiled at him. “Almost fairy?”

“Ya, it’s a good way back down your family tree, mind you. Now-a-days, Fairies, they likes to keep their family line clear of the other families.” Continued Baldot. “They’re kind a snobs but ---“ Baldot winked at Sully. “They’re sure pretty.” He smiled showing 5 chipped teeth.

Sully cringed. “I liked you better rude and obnoxious.” But you could tell by her face that she had an idea. “I’ll get the book.” She said raced back into the kitchen and returned with the Astarte. She sat down on the steps and read through the index in the porch light. “Here! This might work!” She turned quickly to a page titled “Smart Lip glue.” She read. “Especially effective on annoying little mouthy grumps who---“

“Sully!” Said Ygg, “Stop playing games and getting their hopes up,” Ygg yawned. “Besides, I’m tired and want to get to bed.”

“O.K., O.K.,” sighed Sully her head still immersed in the book.

Baldot snorted at her in disgust and turned away.

“But I really do think there might be something in here that would be worth a try.” She mused reading through a couple of pages. “I’ll have another look tomorrow.” She yawned suddenly. “I’m getting tired too.”

Ambril’s eyelids were beginning to droop as well. “Let’s talk tomorrow… Saturday, right?” She continued. “Let’s meet at the gazebo around lunch, O.K.?”

Ygg and Sully both nodded as the three collected their things and turned to go.

“Night Miss Fern, it was fantastic.” Said Ygg.

“I’m glad you three came by.” Said Fern smiling. “Don’t forget your tea remedy, Ygg.” She said handing him the bag filled with the tea mixture.

“Oh! Nearly forgot!” Ygg said and started looking around. “I wonder whatever happened to Mrs. Flood?”

Fern just smiled and pointed to the house next door. “She’s quite enjoying herself just now.” She said. “Though she’ll be feeling a few bumps and bruises tomorrow, I would wager.”

Silhouetted by the moon’s light there stood Mrs. Flood, on top of her house twirling on her weather vane.

“That is some kind of tea, Miss Fern,” said Ygg admiringly.

“I’ll say.” Nodded Sully.

Ygg was the first to pull himself away from the strange site. “Sorry I don’t think I can meet tomorrow, I’ll be delivering this stuff all afternoon.” Ygg looked crestfallen.

“Oh well, we can try and find a cure for the gnomes next week then---“ began Ambril.

“No, no wait, what is it needs delivering?” Baldot trotted up to Ygg and put his hands where his waist would have been had he not been so fat.

“You’ll find Baldot and his friends really get into things.” Fern nodded. “Lock or no lock.” She smiled down at Bummil. “Right?”

“Right you are!” Crowed Bummil. “We’ll do the delivering and you do the glue making, deal?” He twinkled up at Ygg.

Ygg nodded his head, pleasantly surprised. “Alright then, if Miss Fern says you aren’t no Booglish lay bouts, then I believe it.” He jerked his head sideways at Sully and Ambril. “No need to stay you two. I’ll just explain what needs to be done to these little tykes---“

“Tykes! Who you calling tykes! Yelled Baldot. “I be at least 350 years old!”

“Yeah well you still act like your eight so pipe down!” Growled Ygg as he scooched down on his knees and was soon surrounded by little red capped gnomes.

“Here’s what we be needing done---“

Ambril and Sully turned the corner and walked down the moonlit driveway.

“That was massively grand.” Said Sully enthusiastically. “Unbelievable!” She grinned up at the sky. “Did you know that was how Fairies were born?”

“Up until a couple of weeks ago, I didn’t even know there were real live Fairies.” Mused Ambril as they turned into the street. The moon was listing toward the mountains and the shadows under the trees were lengthening into grotesque shapes. Ambril shivered, it reminded her too much of when the Dullaith had attacked.

“Me neither! But I always hoped there were. And what about those little Gnomes?” Continued Sully. “Aren’t they the most cantankerous, obnoxious creatures you’ve ever met?”

“Yeah, that’s so true,” said Ambril. “But I liked them anyway, didn’t you?”

Sully thought a moment and then nodded. “It was hard not to like them, really.” She said. “They were---insulting but charming.” She mused. “Besides, Ygg and Fern trust them, and Ygg is pretty good at figuring out who you can count on.”

That was true, thought Ambril. Ygg was pretty solid. She smiled to herself as she waved to Sully at the corner. This was turning out so much better than she had thought.

A breeze had picked up and was toying with the leaves of the nearby trees as Ambril approached the house. She watched the bushes sway making the ladder creak and groan. She opted for a quicker route in, through the half open laundry room window and padded up the stairs in her socks, carrying her shoes. She silently slunk into her room a moment later.

Flit stared at her, immobile as she walked in and turned on the light.

“Everything go alright?” She asked as she set her backpack down.

“Great, just great.” Said a voice from behind her.

Ambril whirled and found her mother standing in the doorway one hand on her hip and the other drumming impatiently on the doorknob.

Ambril cringed as her mother closed the door behind her and strode across the room.

“Where were you?” said Ambril’s mother in a tense whisper.

“Well I---“ began Ambril

“Sshhh, keep your voice down, Feldez is asleep! I didn’t want to annoy him with this until I had heard what you have to say.”
“Miss Fern invited Sully and Ygg and I to see the first moonrise.” Ambril whispered slowly, wondering how much she should tell her mother about all the magic stuff. She decided less was more. “I didn’t think you’d let me out so late, so I didn’t tell you.” She finished in a rush. “I’m sorry, I should have let you know, you must have been worried.”

“Worried? Me? I say goodnight to you and I get this tinny response, like you’ve swallowed a teaspoon or something. I race in here, and…no you! Only little metal man there.” Her mother was starting to get worked up and her voice was rising. Ambril had to think of something to calm her down and fast. “fLit your loyal robot could only tell me what you had told him to say…and who’s Ygg?”

“He’s a friend.”

fLit swiveled his head and winked at Ambril’s mother. She just glared at him.

Ambril decided to take a chance. “We saw the Navel-Mundi open.”

This brought up Ambril’s mother short. “Fern showed you that?”

Ambril nodded.

Ambril’s mother slowly lowered herself to perch on Ambril’s bed. “Well, she must think highly of you. She doesn’t allow just anyone to see that.” Her mother mused and then smiled to herself.

“She showed me once, a long time ago.”

“Really? So you saw the fairies being born?”

Ambril’s mother nodded looking inward. “Your Dad was with me.” She said her face glowing. She looked over her daughter. “I guess I was about your age too. Your father was a couple of years older. He reached out and held my hand as we watched the Fairies circle.”

Her voice began to trail off as she relived the experience.

“Your Dad told me he knew what he wanted to do when he got older.” She looked up at her daughter. “He wanted to help protect them.”

Her face went tight for a moment. Ambril immediately thought of the Dullaith. Was her mother thinking of it too? But her mother went on.

“I guess he was inspired by the Fairy light.” She said more matter-of-factly. “It was so perfect, and seemed to be in rhythm with nature instead of consuming it.” She sighed. “So he started to research natural energy sources. Trying to find a way that energy could be made efficiently without polluting everything.” She sighed heavily. “I think he was getting very close. But---something went wrong.” She got up from the bed and looked uncertainly at her daughter.

“I feel funny punishing you for doing the same thing I did at your age.” She said with a half smile. “So I won’t---just this once. But promise me you’ll TELL me the next time you decided to sneak out all by yourself in the dead of night---“

“Darling?” came a sleepy voice from down the hall.

Ambril’s mother froze. “Coming!---Ambril---couldn’t sleep.”

“Well isn’t she old enough to deal with that on her own?” grumbled Feldez.

Ambril’s mother swiftly opened the bedroom door and shook her finger silently at Ambril as she slipped down the hall.

Ambril took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she eyed fLit. “Well that went better than I thought.” She threw on her P.J.s brushed her teeth half-heartedly and crawled into bed.

**Chapter 26 The Gazebo Garden**

Noon found Ambril coasting to a stop at the Gazebo. Good, she thought, she was the first one to arrive. Maybe she could look around a little on her own. It was her family’s place so why not?

She bent over her bike’s basket and struggled to free a huge basket of food Mrs. Sweetgum had packed for them. Something hard banged against her hipbone.

Ooww!” she yelled as fLit’s head emerged from the bag. “How did you get in there!” Grumbled Ambril. “You have to behave yourself, you know. My friends are already sick of you.”

She left the basket and fLit in the gazebo and skipped down the steps to do some exploring. After last night, Ambril wasn’t sure what she’d find.

The garden was a sad, tangled, wondrous mess. The flagstone path before her was utterly choked with the tiniest of pink flowers. The stones themselves tipped and turned every which way. Ambril ducked under a frilly bush with what looked like beach umbrella’s hanging from it trying to follow the path. The sweet smell of lilacs hung heavy in the air as she came up against a bristly hedge with nuts the size of her head. She retraced her steps and tried again only to get entangled in a curtain of sticky tendrils that smelled like old socks. Defeated she trudged back to the gazebo.

Ambril sighed as she leaned up against one of its pillars and---flinched. Something had pinched her. She jumped back to find a familiar and not particularly welcome flower.

“Hey!” said Ambril nervously. “Um--- are you a friend of Rosebud’s?” She asked as she leaped back.

The bud vigorously nodded its head.

“But you aren’t really---a rose---right? You’re a…Navel-Mundi, am I right?”

The bud shrugged and drifted nearer. Ambril felt a gruesomely sharp pain in her ankle.

“Ouch! What the---“ It was fLit. He kicked at her again. “Knock it off you dopey robot! “ She grabbed her foot and hopped around a bit. “That really hurts!” She lost her balance and gracelessly fell into chaotic mass of garden just off the steps. She managed to grab a vine which help to slow her fall. The overgrowth softened her landing but she did get a mouth-full of dirt. The buzz of the garden was louder there, but it had changed. It now sounded more like soft clicking noises.

“OOch, she’s a right lovey isn’t she?” Came a caustic voice.

“Gooorgeous!” Said another.

Ambril jumped up and looked around spitting out dirt as she did so. There was no one to be seen.
Except for them teeny tiny stalks she has, she’d made a fine little tree, Yeah?” Said a third.

“She’s a bit daft though, jumping and spitting, right barmy!”

“You are hogging the glasses, don’t you know.”

They sounded like the maiden school teachers Ambril had lived nearby a few years back. Constantly quibbling with each other. When one had passed away suddenly, the others had mourned themselves into a nursing home in short order. But why would three old ladies be here? Ambril stooped down to brush off her pants---and gasped.

“There, she finally spotted us.” Said the first one, then after a pause. “She don’t say much does she.”

There at the base of the gazebo pillar were three lumpy sort of growths, sort of like turnips past their prime. Each had small eyes just above a long wrinkle, which seemed to serve as their mouths. They all three were knitting furiously, working on the same blanket. One of them had a pair of old fashioned spectacles through which she squinted at Ambril.

“It needs more pink!” She trilled.

“It always needs more pink according to you.” Groused the large root in the center.

The one on the other end rudely snatched the spectacles away from the other and peered at Ambril now very intently, grimacing in a frightening way. “She is a lovey though,” she smirked. “And it will be so hard for her.”

“Done are we?” Said the one on the right. She held up the blanket they’d been working on. It seemed to be woven of pink flowers with a border of white daisies with a braid of green vines all around.

“It’s beautiful!” Gasped Ambril.

The one on the right gave her a curious look and threw the blanket at her.

“Just spread it out over there, deary.” Said the left one pointing with a tendril at a bare patch near the edge of the path. “We hates the ugly spots.”

“Hates ‘em, we do.” Echoed the right one.

Ambril fingered the blanket and felt again the thrum of life running all through it. The flowers turned toward and her medallion began to glow.

“Well look there! They likes her!”

“Can’t work out why, really, she’s as dull as a patch of pigsweed.” Groused the larger sister.

Ambril shook herself and then took the woven flowers over to the bare patch of ground. She spread it out and tried to smooth out the wrinkles as best she could. The flowers instantly took root and turned away from her and toward the sun.

“Look out!” said the center one pointing a tendril at Ambril’s right foot. The carpet had overlapped her toe and was beginning to tack it to the ground.

“Yikes!” She exclaimed and pulling hard she was able to rip her shoe free. Ambril looked and found that the flowers had grown right through her shoe.

“Well she almost got it right.” Said the left one. There was another pause as they watched Ambril pick out the bits of plant from her shoe. “I think she might be a bit daft, you?”

“That would explain it, yeah.”

 The middle one squinted hard at Ambril as she raised a tendril and ripped the glasses from her sister’s face.

“Gern loves her, he says.”

The one in the center sucked in her hole of a mouth. “Well she’ll be lunch to one of them if she doesn’t smarten up right quick.”

“Not even, just a mid-morning snacky.” Nodded the left one.

“She’s and He’s after her.” Said the right one knowingly.

“Both? She doesn’t stands a chance.” Sighed the left one.

“Excuse me, but I’m not---daft.” Broke in Ambril somewhat huffily. “My name is Ambril…and this used to be my grandmother’s house…so…just who are you?”

“Well no need to get all tangled up about it, we didn’t know, you see.” Said the middle one glaring at her over the top of the spectacles.

The one on the right casually reached over and jerked the glasses off her face.

 “Sorry lovey, it’s just we’re nots used to any human-kind seeing us.”

“It must be the Glain.” Mused the middle one.

“No, no she’s ones of foursies, she is,” said the one on the right. “Look close now!” She said and whacked her bigger sister with the spectacles.

Her sister took them without comment and peered once again at Ambril. “Oh, yes, ones of fours, my, my.” She said softly as she looked Ambril up and down and then again. Then with great enthusiasm. “This will be fun!” The three sisters started clapping in unison.

“So who are you?---I’ve never seen anything like…It’s just you’re a bit---um---unusual.” Ambril said lamely.

“Unusual eh?” scoffed the one on the left. “Unusual? Why we’ve been around since, well since the beginning of things don’t you know.” She sputtered. “If anything WE’RE the usual ones and YOU’re the UN-usual one, don’t you know!” She huffed.

“Sorry, really I’m sorry I meant no disrespect.” Stammered Ambril. They were intimidating to say the least. “You’re---um---unique.” she stammered.

“Weeelll,” said the middle one somewhat mollified. She looked owlish with the glasses scrunched up close to her eyes. “We are that. Perhaps there is a bit of hope for her after all.”

She mused. “You can call us Aunties if you like.” Her tendril fingers reached out and brushed aside some of Ambril’s curly hair. “It’s a shame---“

“Now, now, it is just what’s been fortold.” Said the left one. “You know they don’t always get it right.”

The center one huffed. “They don’t always get it right? yeah?” What you’ve gone rotten in the head, have you?” “They’ve only missed it once in all the years we’ve---“

“Once is enough, and you know that one was a doosey! ” Said the left one firmly trying unsuccessfully to grab the glasses from her sister.

“Let’s give her the riddle” said the one on the right as they all three resumed knitting.

The left one gave a little jump. “Oh yes, we can do that at least!” She nodded so vigorously she caused minor landslides near her.

The center one stared intently at Ambril through the glasses. “I supposed we can do a riddle at least.”

“What are you talking about, what riddle?” asked Ambril completely at sea.

“That’s our problem, lovey, we can’t tell you.” Said the center one nodding sagely. “We’re can’t tell what we can see.”

“We sees the future and the past and the present all smushed together, don’t you know.” Said the one on the left softly. “But we can’t tell, we can’t say…at least not directly.” She said with a twinkle.

 One day you’ll meet a little green man.” Said the left one.

“A green man with a something in his pockets.” Offered the center one.

“He’ll ask you a riddle and you’ll not know the answer, no one ever knows it.” Said the left one. “He thinks he’s so clever.” She scoffed. “So you’ll make a guess.”

“But we’ll tell you now.” The center one put in. “So you bests him.”

“Cause we hates him.” Said the one on the left nodding vigorously.

“Hates ‘em, so true.” Echoed the right one.

The center one stretched herself until she was inches from Ambril’s face. “It’s daybreak and nightfall.” She whispered her breath smelling of fresh turned soil.

“What is?” asked Ambril.

“The answer is.” Said the center one squinting at her ruefully. “She is quite slow isn’t she.”

“Day break and nightfall is the answer, I get it.” Said Ambril but what’s the riddle and who is this green guy?”

“We can’t tell no more.” Said the left one busily putting her knitting needles away.

“We gots to go Deary.” Said the middle one and wiggled vigorously in the dirt. “We’ve so much to do at this time of year, Lovey.” She seemed to be shriveling before Ambril’s eyes.

“Wait, I’m confused about---” asked Ambril.

“No time---lovey---” Whispered the one on the right. Her sisters were gone. Only her smile was visible now looking like a large wrinkle on a fat vine.

“Bye, then.” She said softly.

“Ambril?” It was Sully calling from across the gazebo.

“I just had the weirdest experience.” Ambril said.

“What like run-of-the-mill weird or run for your life weird?” Asked Sully as she plopped down on the steps.

Ambril paused to scratch her head. “Was I just not paying attention before?”

“That’s about the size of it.” Said a grouchy voice at her knee.

“We was always here of course, but you thick-headed human-kind have blinders on most times.” A softer voice added.

Ambril looked down to find Baldot and Bummil standing waist deep in daisies. There were several other gnomes popping out of the bushes.

“Did ya get all them deliveries done?” Ygg came up just then.

Baldot snorted. “Almost as easy as a layabout afternoon!” He scoffed but then grinned up at Ygg. “We even snuck some into the old biddy’s tea! Dried up old Newt that she is.” Snickered Bummil.

Ygg’s face turned thunderous. “I told ya to stay away from her! She don’t cotton to magic folk.” Ygg’s face grew taunt. “If’n she even get’s the idea that I was the one to switch things, I’d be out on me hoochalally and then what’ll I do?”

“Well you could stay with us at the farm.” Piped up Sully. “We can always use some extra hands---and hoochalallies.”

But Ygg didn’t smile. “Nah, I canna.” Said Ygg. “They’d send me off home as I’m still not of age.” He bent down to the ceramic men who now looked very uncomfortable.

“So ya better not do anything that might make her suspicious.” He continued and wagged his finger at both of them.

“Take it easy now boy.” Baldot said trying to calm Ygg. “The old buzzard didn’t see and it seemed to have no affect on the likes of her. Some folks are hopeless.” Baldot continued with a shrug. Pity that, I’d a like to see her doing somersaults down the stairs like old Mrs. Dogwood.”

“Wait, what’s this?” Asked Sully.

Ygg sighed heavily. “It’s true, the teas a bit on the strong side.” He smiled involuntarily. “The old folks are acting a tad foolish. Nought as bad as Mrs. Flood though.” He grinned at that. “I hope they willna be doin’ any lasting damage once the tea wears thin.”

“Do we know how long that will be?” Asked Ambril.

“Not a clue.” Sully shook her head. “We should check to see if Mrs. Flood is back to normal and then---“

“No time for that now!” Said Baldot hastily. “The oldsters will be none the worse for wear, I reckon.” “YOU need to be making some fixit juice now to hold up your part of the bargain.”

Ambril nodded. That was for sure. In the bright sunlight she could see clearly where the little ceramic men had been mended.

Sully suddenly looked a little sick and motioned to Ygg and Ambril as she slipped back into the gazebo. “We’ll get right on that.”

“Yeah, yeah, we will.” Mumbled Ygg as he and Ambril followed her.

“This garden’s a disgrace, you know!” Baldot yelled after them. “We been doing a bit a work here this morning and I’d like to hogtie whoever let it get so very bad.” He continued staring daggers at Ambril.

“Don’t look at me,” she said innocently as she skittered up the steps. “I just got here!”

Sully sat down heavily on a bench and pulled out the Astarte, now bristling with bookmarks.

“We have a problem.” Sully began as she opened the book and removed the first bookmark. “I found a bunch of remedies that I think might work, no problem there.” She stroked the book reverentially but then frowned. “But these plants---” She cleared her throat and read: “Leaflets from Vixen Brill? Fiber from a medium sized bomb nut? And my personal favorite: A Beaker of Gooberous Slag.” Sully shrugged her shoulders. “I haven’t got a clue where we can find this stuff, or even what a beaker is.” She hunched over the book a bit more.

“I think we use beakers in science, you know those cup thingies.” Mused Ambril.

“Hey, get out a there, you’ll damaging its teeth!” Baldot yelled from the garden. There seemed to be quite a commotion.

Ambril jumped up to find that one of the beach umbrella flowers had swooped down and snatched up something. It grated and clunked as it chewed. She groaned as she caught sight of two flailing red metal legs.

“fLit again.” Muttered Sully.

“Why didn’t you leave him home?” Groused Ygg.

“I did, he stowed away in the picnic basket.” Ambril said sheepishly.

“No offense, that is the stupidest smart robot I’ve every met.” Said Sully as Ambril leaped into the overgrowth.

Baldot and the other gnomes had armed themselves with sticks and ropes. They had managed to snag one of fLit’s legs and three of the gnomes were pulling down hard. The flower was pulling back the other way refusing to let the robot go.

“Never you mind, missy, we’ve got him sorted.” Baldot said waving her back. “You’ll just make more of a mess of it.”

Ambril was jostled out of the way as some of the other gnomes began to tickle the flower just under the blossom with masses of soft grass while carefully avoiding the leaves of the plant which were vigorously trying to whack them. One gnome failed at this and sailed off over her head. He landed in a tangle of brambles but scrambled out immediately and grabbing a stick, went back in. The gnomes were serious gardeners.

But then the plant did start to giggle a bit, then a little more and soon it was laughing until with a belch it spit out the robot. The three gnomes pulling on the rope suddenly lost their balance and fell backwards, their stubby little feet flailing. Ambril heard a loud crack.

“Oh no.” Sighed Ygg.

Flit, flew by them and landed on top of the gazebo. It rolled off but became entangled in the vines and ended up swaying in the breeze its feet entwined.

“What the heck is he on about!” shouted Baldot. “He should have more sense than to play at this!” He said marching over to the pillar. “Come on out of there you, we see you plain as day!”

“Hey, I’m sorry about that!” stammered Ambril. “He’s supposed to be a smart robot, you see but he’s still learn---“

“Smart robot my checkered undies!” snorted Baldot. I know what he is, we don’t like his kind on principle.” He screwed up his face angrily. “They’re too sneaky to be trusted, we learned that well and good.”

“Come on, now, break it up!” Ygg said calmly he motioned with his head to the garden. “That big one there needs a bit of an attitude adjustment, don’t you think?” Asked Ygg.

The beach umbrella flower had just slurped up one of the gnomes and was chewing away on him.

“Coadsnigs, that’s Blagoor!” Swore the gnome forgetting his anger. “Tickle just under the nape! Get his right leg lassoed, ya know, the left one broke last month.” And he was back in the fray.

Ambril turned back to the robot. She reached up and tugged and wiggled until she was able to pull him down. There was just one little vine wrapped stubbornly around his middle.

The ever more annoying fLit grabbed at Ambril’s neck hooking her medallion chain with his arm and bringing it out into the light.

It dazzled in the bright sunlight.

“Wow, I forgot you even had that!” Said Sully admiringly.

The moment the Medallion connected with the budding vine Ambril felt the thrum of the garden heighten and pulse right through her to combine with the bright energy of her medallion. The bud on the vine flew opened. And there was the beautiful flower she had seen just the night before. The air was filled with the scents of lavender and lilac.

But there was something else there; a presence watching her. One that did not wish her any favor. She felt ill and overexposed. It was a little like being in the presence of a Dullaith? Dark Magic? She cringed and her hand went unconsciously for the medallion. Instantly a curtain of dense fog embraced her protectively. She felt the evil forced away.

When she opened her eyes Ygg and Sully were staring at her.

“So, what was that about?” asked Ygg slowly.

“You sort of---faded---we could see through you.” Said Sully.

Ambril was shocked. Really? Well I guess that makes sense. It feels like I go to another place---or I have one foot there and one here.” She said softly. “But this time, there was this other---thing---there.”

“What sort of thing?” asked Ygg.

Ambril shrugged. “Search me, but I could tell it didn’t like me. It just sort of watched me. “ She grimaced.

“Hey, Hey, Master Ygg, we need you! “ there was the quick tap tapping of ceramic boots on stone. It was Bummil motioning to Ygg.

“Boocher’s in a bad way, Mr. Ygg.” He huffed out of breath.

The three friends followed Bummil down the pathway to where Boocher, an extraordinarily fat gnome, lay on the ground looking concerned but not in pain. His left leg had been cracked.

“I just fell and hit this here marker right hard is all. Can you fix me up Master Ygg?” Boocher asked anxiously peering over his expansive belly.

Ygg nodded. “Sure nuff,” he said easily. “We’ll have you right as rain soon enough.”

He pulled out his tube of glue and knelt down to attend to the little fat man.

“Marker? What Marker?” Asked Sully.

“Well if you weren’t always scratching yourselves and gazing off into the distance like so many donkeys you’d a’ seen them by now.” Groused Baldot scornfully. He walked over and tapped one of the gray stones that lined the garden paths. It sat up a bit higher than the others.

Ambril and Sully bent down to get a better look. Ambril brushed aside some spent flower petals and found something carved in the stone. “Sweet Collar Bramble.” She read out. “Uses: Sour throats and Adams Apple maladies.” The plant consisted of long velvety vines and smelled like cough syrup.

“Look there’s another one!” Cried Sully.

Looking down the pathway, Ambril could see many such stones. There was one next to Ambril’s knee. She read out, “Vixen Brill.”

“Hey! That’s one we need!” Cried Sully excitedly.

The gnomes had already cleared out around the Vixen Brill. It was a compact, frilly plant with black tipped seedpods on long stalks waving high above the greenery.

“Great! I’ll just grab a few of leaves.” Said Sully and reached out her hand but just as quickly snatched it back. “Ouch!” She yipped. “It’s prickly!”

“A sight more than that! Prickly my patutee!” Snorted Baldot from behind them. “That be VIXEN Brill, you daft little tots! Vixen as in fox!” It’ll slice off your fingers in half a second.” He continued “You were just plain lucky there. See, look at them teeth!” He pointed at one of the seedpods. Ambril could now see a fox head very clearly. It barred its teeth at them as it weaved and bobbed.

It had long needle-like teeth. Ambril thought it looked like it wanted more than just a finger. Suddenly one of them lashed out and ripped Ambril’s sleeve before she could scramble out of the way. She lost her balance and flattened herself on the path right next to Baldot.

Baldot and some of the other gnomes laughed.

Ambril, tried to remember why she had ever thought garden gnomes were cute as she struggled to her feet and brushed herself off. “I guess we won’t be making any fix-it juice.” She said tight-lipped. “Because it calls for Vixen Brill. Sully and I aren’t feeling much like losing our fingers for you ungrateful louses.”

Baldot jumped. “Don’t get our knickers in a knot! We were just having a bit of fun.” He said not the least bit apologetically. He turned to some of the gnomes still laughing and giggling. “Boys! Bring the lambs ear!” He commanded.

One of them trotted off and came back with a handful of soft, fuzzy leaves. They were gray and fuzzy and shaped just like lambs ears.

“They aren’t---not really from cute little---“ said Sully apprehensively.

Baldot looked offended. “Nay, that’s a right disgusting thought, that is. Lambs Ear is a plant, don’t you know.” Still looking disgusted, Baldot got right to work and tied some of the leaves to a stick, which he began to swing in front of the vixen flower pods.

“They love this stuff! Can’t resist it.” He said as he began to inch sideways. “So I’ll be, distracting the pods while you go in and grab some of the greens, right?” He said his eyes not leaving the seedpods.

The pods stopped snapping and went into hunting mode, their heads down eyeing the lambs ear leaves. One or two of them jabbed at it viciously. After a few tries, one of them successfully came away with a fuzzy leaf. The others watched jealously as it chewed and swallowed and then went back for more.

“We ain’t got all day!” Panted Baldot as one of the pods narrowly missed his right elbow.

Ambril and Sully stealthily inched closer to the plant. “I guess the Brill part is the green stuff then.” Whispered Ambril. “Boy, the gnomes sure know a lot about these plants. Don’t they? I’m sure glad they’re here.”

Sully nodded. “Well yeah, they’ve been---helpful. But I still think they are the rudest, nastiest little garden ornaments I’ve ever laid eyes on,” groused Sully.

They had gotten well off the path and were within grabbing range. “Okay, on three, then.” Said Ambril. “One, two---“ they both lunged at the plant together Ambril came away with a handful of leaves but had to race back to the path as the seed pods angrily snapped at her heels.

Whew!” said Sully waving her handful of leaves. “Success!” Ambril handed Sully her contribution. She stuffed them carefully in a bag.

“There are a couple other ingredients we’ll need.” Ambril. Said to Baldot “Can you tell me if there is any, um---“

“Slag Fern, we need the Gooberous part and the fiber from a Bomb Nut---a medium sized one.” Sully put in.

Baldot smirked. “JUST the fiber, ay?” he laughed. “Piece of cake, I’ll let you grab those then.” He said rolling his eyes. He turned and trotted off down the path. His ceramic boots again making a ting ting noise on the stone path. “Just ahead!” He called over his shoulder as he rounded a bend.

Sully and Ambril ducked through an archway and down another path. Here the gnomes really had gotten busy. The pathways had been cleared and swept, the soil dug around each of the plants and there were groups of gnomes pruning or trying to prune some of the more unruly plants.

“Watch it Bandler!” Yelled Baldot as a ragged, petulant lion’s head snapped viciously at a gnome armed with some gardening shears. “Just give him a little trim to start! Some a these plants have been left so long to fend for themselves they’ve gone well and truly wild!” He grumbled.

He cupped his hands over his mouth. “Hey Blagoor! We’ll be needing some of the goober!” He called to the far side of the garden. “How much do you need?” he turned to Sully.

“A beaker, it says.” She said then whispered to Ambril. “We’re going to have to find a cup about the same size.”

Blagoor was weaving and bobbing in front of an enormous purple plant with tightly wrapped leaves. A large seedpod looking remarkably like a Moray Eel followed him closely hissing. Nearby, another gnome was lazily swinging a lasso around his head.

“Anytime there, Boocher, no hurry.” said Blagoor sarcastically, as he dove to one side. The seedpod lunged for him but plowed into the earth instead. It screeched in frustration following Blagoor even more closely. Ambril noticed a long tentacle of green slime nearby. A finger of it snaked towards them.

Boocher almost lazily let the lasso fly and watched it settle over the seedpod and tighten around its stem.

“There, now Blagoor you can stop your dancing.” Boocher chuckled. “Nothing like a little dosey-doe to lighten your spirits.” He said as he pulled on the rope. The seedpod resisted, screeching angrily but the entire plant began to tip forward as if it was hinged at the base. “Get your beaker ready then!” Boocher said to Ambril and Sully.

Sully looked blank. “Oh, sorry, but I haven’t got a beaker, who carries one of those things around?”

“Well maybe we could use a pail or something?”

“You got one of those?” Continued Boocher unruffled.

“Well no.”

Baldot snorted and rolled his eyes. “I guess its gnomes to the rescue once again.” He rolled his eyes at Sully disgustedly. “What would you be doing without us?”

“We’d not be making fixit juice for a bunch of rude little garden decorations.” Sully said peeved.

Baldot muttered something under his breath. He looked around for a while and then bent to pick up a nut the size of a basketball. He unhurriedly found a pointy stone marker and neatly cracked the nut in two.

Inside was a shiny black ball that immediately started fizzing and smoking. Ambril could hear a faint ticking sound which seemed to be growing louder.

“Cragnuts! These Bomber Nuts are overripe!” Muttered Baldot as he picked up the black ball and started tossing it between his hands. “Fire in the Slime!” He yelled. All the gnomes scrambled for cover. Too late, Ambril and Sully tried to follow their lead. With a squelchy boom, the Bomber Nut exploded. Almost immediately the slime rained down on everything including Ambril and Sully.

They were instantly coated with what looked and felt like Lime Jello. But it smelled disgusting, like rotten eggs and flatulent cows.

For the second time that day the gnomes roared with laughter. Baldot unsuccessfully suppressing a giggle threw her something the size and shape of a bike helmet.

“Here you go, it be a b---bomber nut.” He finally got out.

Sully sighed and immediately began to scrape off as much of the slime off herself as she could and into the nutshell.

“Now wait there, you be needing the fiber inside.” Baldot said still chuckling.

Ambril reached inside and pulled out handfuls of what looked like greasy brown hair. It smelled like greasy brown hair too. Ambril made a face.

“Who knew that doing magic would be so---revolting!” Mused Sully.

When Ambril had finished cleaning out the shell and stuffing the fiber into Sully’ s bay they were easily able to fill the nutshell with the slime on their clothes.

“Ewww Yuk!” Said Sully gagging. I got some in my mouth. It tastes worse than it smells!”

Ambril didn’t think that was possible but decided not to test that theory.

“O.K., we need to wash this stuff off NOW!” Said Sully looking around.

“Is there a hose or any kind of water we can wash with?” Ambril asked Baldot who sweeping the path nearby.

“There be a pond by the gazebo, but you don’t want to use that---“

“Relax, we’re not afraid of frogs and we can handle snakes, right Ambril?”

“Well this be a little bit diff----“

“We’ll figure it out.” Said Sully waving him off dismissively.

They squelched back down the path. There was a pond in the garden. It really was more like a small lake fed by a waterfall right out of the Trelawnyd Wall. The water had a blue green tint to it

“Wow, it’s beautiful isn’t it? Like pictures of the Caribbean.“ Said Sully.

They didn’t bother to take off their clothes but jumped right in, shoes and all.

The water cooled Ambril’s sticky, slime covered body. Ambril took off her shoes, swished them around and through them onto the shore. Then she ducked under water and swam farther into the center of the lake. The water, with the exception of the slime, was clear and clean. There seemed to be a lot of bright green slime everywhere, long ropy streams of it. And there were fish, some of Ambril’s favorites in fact, spectacularly showy Koi fish. Ambril swam along with them until they veered off to one side. Ambril realized that the bottom seemed to drop away quickly and the lake became surprisingly deep at the center. It was a perfect place for a sea monster to hide out. She had been particularly afraid of sea monsters when she was a kid. She smiled to herself as she surfaced to get some air, remembering.

“Isn’t this great!” Sully exclaimed floating on her back. Wish we could spend all afternoon here, but we have to get the fixit juice made.” She started paddling back towards the shore. “Coming?”

Ambril nodded and dove down again to take the underwater route back to shore. As she glided through the water she stared thinking about how serene and quiet it was underwater, She wanted to spend all afternoon just floating around in the blue green water. It seemed as if nothing could hurt her---when it happened. A giant eye floated up next to her. It was enormous, twice as large as her head and nearly transparent. There was a giant black ball floating in the center. It blinked.

Ambril screamed and madly scrambled away from it. Flailing and utterly terrified she fought for breath. She fought her way to the surface and swam like mad for the shore. Reaching it she scrambled thankfully onto dry ground and hugged her shoes.

“Well we aren’t in that much of a hurry, what’s wrong?” Asked Sully handing her some clothes. “The gnomes dug these up from somewhere. We can wear these while ours dry.”

Ambril took the clothes still staring at the lake. “I---I think I saw a sea monster.” She said shivering.

“You mean a lake monster, right?” Sully said correcting her. “Did it come after you?” She asked matter of factly. “Try and eat you or anything like that?”

“No, it just sort of---blinked at me.”

Sully chuckled. “It---blinked at you.” She scoffed at her. “Come on, just today we’ve been snapped at by a vicious vixen, escaped an explosion, slimed with something that hopefully isn’t toxic---and you’re terrified by something---blinking at you?”

Ambril was offended for all of two minutes and then smiled. “You’re right, and I guess I could have been imagining it, it was pretty hard to make out, it was so transparent. I really only saw it’s eye.” Ambril began taking off her wet clothes and replacing them with the gray T-shirt and sweat pants the gnomes had brought them. They were a few sizes too big but would do.

“Yes, the horrible blinking eye….whooooo!” Said Sully as she wrung out her clothes and laid them out on a nearby bush. Ambril followed suit.

“You don’t believe me.” Said Ambril getting defensive.

“No, no. I think I do. But this garden is filled with one of a kind creatures, some good and some bad. This one sounded like one of the good ones.” Sully smiled ruefully at her sneakers. “ I guess we’ll have to hope these will dry quickly.” And picked her way barefoot up the path. “You meet up with some of the most interesting---beings.” She said admiringly.

“I think some memories of this place are getting jarred awake.” Continued Ambril as she followed her friend over to the gazebo. “This sounds strange, I know, but I think I recognized that thing.”

“Um, well that’s as good as it’s going to get, I think.” said Sully smoothing down her hair. “I’m glad it’s warm today, aren’t you?”

“You feel like lunch?”

**Chapter 26 Fixit Juice**

The sun seemed to dawdle in the afternoon sky Ambril recalled later. The golden afternoon stretched as she yawned and sat up slowly. They had found Ygg waiting for them at the gazebo and had attacked the picnic basket with gusto. Ambril had never felt so hungry before. Afterwards they had all laid back on the warm stone benches and fallen asleep.

Sully was awake too. “This stuff is soooo sticky!” Sully said digging a blob out from her ear and wiping it onto a nearby Navel-Mundi vine which greatly upset the nearby buds. “Sorry!, Sorry! It won’t happen again!” She backed away from a particularly snappy one.

“Stickiness is perfect for Fixit juice.” Said Ygg as he routed amongst the lunch leavings for any leftovers. He was unsuccessful.

“You’ve eaten everything all ready, vacuum-mouth.” Said Sully. Ygg had eaten his share plus all the leftovers.

Ambril decided that he was looking a little less stretched and tired. She needed bigger lunches from now on.

Sully knocked on her head sideways and another slime ball dropped out of her ear and bounded off like a superball.

“Uh oh,” she said pointing at it. “Look it’s starting to morph! Like an alien creature in an bad Sci-Fi movie!” She continued dramatically and then switched to a business-like tone. “We’d better get to work.” She opened the Astarte and read:

“Fixit Juice, recipe #158,” then continued to read silently. “So, it seems pretty straightforward.” She said after a pause. “We just put all this stuff together, stir and leave it out in the sun until it stops steaming.” She continued to read. “There is something weird we have to do, something about a shot of--- life energy?” She looked mystified and then shrugged. “We’ll just have to wing that part of it.” Sully turned and rubbed her hands together smiling at Ambril and Ygg.

“So let’s get started!” She said excitedly.

Ambril marveled at Sully’s enthusiasm. She really seemed to love the tea making exercise and now this. It was like she had found a purpose or at least something that she really like to do. She was happy for her friend, really. But shouldn’t she be the one who was interested? I mean after all it was her grandmother’s book and her heritage, right? And yet she felt nothing more than curiosity. It was strange.

The Gnomes had brought over the biggest bomb nutshell they could find. It was about the size of a large jack-o-lantern pumpkin and rocked a little when touched.

Sully was reading through the recipe once again. “We’ll start with the easy stuff first.” She said almost to herself and pulled out a paper bag that she had brought with her and dumped out the contents. It was a pile of wilting leaves and cuttings. “From my Mom’s herb garden.” Said Sully putting a finger to her lips. “She’d kill me if she caught me in there.”

“So, we’ll put in lots of thyme--- I guess you want it to last.” She smirked and threw in sprigs with small green leaves and tiny pink flowers.

“Next, some Speedwell, to make it fast acting---let’s see---ah! Here it is!” She said rummaging through her pile of greenery. “Five strands with buds of that.” She threw in some purple flowers.

“And four flower heads of Everlasting.” Sully continued extracting some yellow and orange flowers and tossing them in carelessly. “Oh and three drops of milk weed.” She held up a stiff stock of the annoying weed and snapped it in two over the shell. She squeezed hard until three drops fell in with the other ingredients.

“Okay, now the last of the normal plants. Seven leaves from a cast-iron plant.” She said and holding up a bunch of thick green blades, she began to shred them into the shell. “I got lucky, we had these in our front yard.”

Ambril found a stick and stirred up the leaves. She peered inside; nothing was happening. She began to get skeptical. This was like making mud pies.

“Okay! Now we move onto the more interesting stuff.” Said Sully and picked up her bag she dumped in the Bomber Nut fiber and the Vixen Brill Leaflets.

There was a slight fizz with as they landed in the nutshell.

“Now hold your noses, it’s going to get a whole lot worse.” Sully held up the gooberish slime. It belched a jet a yellowish steam which smelled of rotten eggs.

“Can ya do it extra fast?” asked Ygg fanning his face.

“A Beaker it said.” Sully answered trying to breathe through her mouth unsuccessfully. “Which is what a couple of cupfuls?” Sully shrugged.

“Whatever!” Said Ambril, “Just do something fast.”

Sully sloshed in several gloops of slime while holding her breath then hastily stepped back then dragged the big shell into the direct sunlight where it began to bubble and steam.

“Pee-Yew!” Coughed Ambril. It stank of dirty toilets and dead cats.

“How long will it keep doing this then?” Asked Ygg holding his nose.

Sully frowned and consulted the Astarte again. “It doesn’t say.” She said uncertainly. “And then there’s this whole life-energy thing.”

“I suppose we could all join hands and meditate.” Sully shrugged. “I went to a wellness camp where we tapped into our life energy that way.” She rolled her eyes. “It didn’t really work for me though, I just fell asleep.”

“What the---!” Shouted Baldot running up from the garden.

The remedy had begun to fizz and pop like firecrackers in Chinatown.

Sully’s nose was less than an inch away from the pages of the Astarte as if getting closer to it would help her understand. “It just says: A tap of life-energy---what the heck does that mean?” she said frustrated.

“Well, pumpkin, I don’t know but I do know that we have to do it now!” Said Baldot motioning to the top of the gazebo. “Can’t ya see anything you Dingslags? The Navel-Mundi vine is just about all-in!”

Through the haze of the steam Ambril could see to her horror that Baldot was right. The noxious fumes had made the vibrant vine wilt, the leaves curl and the buds droop. Ambril put her hand out to the wilting buds. When she touched them she felt a surge of energy and her medallion vibrated. The buds revived briefly but then wilted again when she pulled her hand away.

An idea flashed through her head. She rummaged through her backpack quickly and then raced to the concoction still spewing a nasty yellow steam.

She pointed her Ashera at it.

“So what are you going to do with that?” Asked Ygg looking dubious.

Ambril shrugged and held her nose as she bent down to touch the nutshell. “We have to try something before we all choke to death.”

“Okay,” said Sully. “So what do you do?” Think energetic thoughts?” Like when my Mom does Yoga?”

Baldot snorted behind them. “No, NO, You human-kind are so dunderheaded.” He scoffed.“ It’s more like sharing the power of life, that sort a thing.”

But Ambril thought that was just how it had felt when using it against the Dullaith. The sharing of life’s power. Only where did the power come from?

She suddenly felt a little nervous. She had only done this once before, what if she couldn’t make it work again?

Grasping the Ashera tightly in both hands she closed her eyes. The gray fog swirled all around her, focusing her attention on the energy around her. There near her heart was the warm brightness of the Ledrith Glain. She willed it through the Ashera and into the remedy. There was a loud boom and a brilliant flash of light inside Ambril’s head. It was wildly amazing.

But simultaneously a curious thing happened. She felt something grab hold of her and yank her sideways so hard it took her breath away.

She felt immediately cold and when she opened her eyes it was absolutely dark. And then she felt it again; the watchful, evil presence she had felt earlier in the gazebo. She opened her eyes wide and thought she saw something, a darker shadow in the darkness. She could make out the glint of its eyes, assessing her, judging her strength. She became frightened.

The shadow seemed to be amused by that. That she was in the presence of a powerful evil entity she had no doubt. It seemed to want to wring her life out of her, to consume her. She searched the darker space for some sense of what she was facing.

 The thing was not entirely human or at least hadn’t been for some time. So jagged and pocked marked were its contours Ambril had to work to see that what it used as a mouth had wrinkled into a leer.

“Finally, So it is time then,” It croaked. Its laugh sent more spiky chills through Ambril’s body.

 The shadow seemed to grow larger as if it fed on her terror.

Death? She was too young to die. She had a Mom and a brother. And she had friends. She had too much she wanted to do. There seemed to be a shift of power. The thing beyond didn’t like these new thoughts of hers. She concentrated hard on memories of her family and friends. She could feel it was the shadow now that was confused and began to feel afraid. She concentrated even harder, Mom, Zane, Chao Feng, Feldez, forget Feldez, Sully, Ygg, Miss Fern, Mrs. Sweetgum, fLit---

With an electric crack and the sound of bells a small personage bright with energy hovering within an inch of her nose. “I hope this hurts, you idiot.” He thought at her. He wasted no time and grabbed her by the nose (which hurt quite a lot) he closed his eyes and yanked her hard sideways again. With a whoosh they were back in the brilliant sunlight. The area around the bubbling concoction looked scorched and singed. And there were several gnomes dazedly clambering out of the bushes and trees as if they had been thrown up there. Ambril was shocked. The fairy was nowhere to be seen.

Ygg ran up then. “You scared us half to death! You were there right one minute and the next minute, you were gone!”

Ambril looked around still in shock. “I don’t know really what happened or why. “ She began. “I was sort of yanked sideways into this cave. There was this really nasty---um---presence there too. “ Ambril felt cold just remembering it and hugged herself. “I couldn’t get my breath and then this fairy came and---“

“Fairy? A fairy came?” Baldot frowned. “Nasty little buggers, of course they’d be behind this.”

“No, no he helped me, he grabbed me by the nose and yanked me back here.”

Baldot laughed mirthlessly. “Well if’n a fairy really did come and help you, he must a done it by mistake.” He snorted. “Fairies haven’t been known to help any human-kind anytime in the last several thousand years.” He shook his head. “Right little dizters, if you ask me.”

“Hey I think this mighta gotten in the way of things.” Blagoor trotted up with a badly mangled metal man. His head was askew, there were fresh dents on his legs and there was a piece of string tied around his middle. “Strangest thing, really. The chest cubby wouldn’t stay closed, but now it won’t open. I couldn’t get it to work and now it works again.” Blagoor shrugged.

Ambril took the robot and looked at it closely. She shook it gently and could hear the faint sound of ----bells. fLit’s head turned to look at her.

‘Um thanks, Blagoor, I’m sure it needs new wiring---or something.” She ad-libbed

“Bob’s Bots can fix him.” Ygg nodded. “He can fix anything.”

“Except us,” grumbled Baldot. “Speaking of that!”

Everyone suddenly remembered the remedy. It had stopped smoking. Ambril saw with relief that the Navel-Mundi was looking better already.

Everyone was huddled around the concoction. “Did it work?” asked Ambril coming up behind them.

The mixture looked crystal clear and glossy smooth. It smelled slightly of earth and new rain. What an improvement.

“I guess we should test the stuff.” Said Ygg looking around.

“I’ll do it!”

No I’m volunteering!”

No, It be me first!”

All the gnomes were lining up and fighting with each other.

“Nay, No, Not you live un’s.” said Ygg. “What we need is a broken pot or---“

“How’s this?” asked Bummil pointing to a large earthenware jug nearly as big as himself that had suddenly materialized at his side. It was a footed jug, three of them jutted out from the bottom to give it some balance. A large piece of handle was missing.

“I done that this morning while trying to water the Elle-plant.”

“Fine.” Said Ygg. He picked up the broken handle and dipped it in the fixit juice and was about to fit it into the jug’s remaining handle when Baldot stopped him.

Taking off his cap he said solemnly, “Fixit Joe always said something ‘afore he fixed.”

Ygg looked a little lost. “You mean a prayer or something?” he asked

“More like a request.” Baldot shrugged. “Like he was asking for a little help.”

Ygg shrugged. “Okay, then, how’s this. Let this pot be all-together again. Um---please.” He said, and stuck the broken piece back where it belonged.

There was a soft click and the break lines between the broken piece and the pot’s handle began to glow brighter and sizzled. After a moment, it quieted and went still. Ygg ran his finger along the handle and smiled.

“Nary a crack to be seen!”

The gnomes roared their approval. One of them raised his severed arm and waved that as well.

Ygg gave the jug a really good shake. “Yep! It’s as good as---“ he started and then was knocked sideways.

“Hey, what the---“ The jug was standing up high on it’s clay feet and shaking it’s fisted handle at him.

 “Well I’ll be jiggered and sold for scrap!” Said Baldot in surprise. “The thing’s alive!”

“And grouchy!” Said Bummil approvingly.

The jug seemed to be stretching itself and wiggling its toes. It was itching for a fight. But Bummil seemed to know, from experience how to deal with grouchy ceramic beings. He trotted right up to it and after ducking to avoid the handle fist swinging over his head said. “We need help carting the water around, don’t you know.” He stepped quickly to one side to evade a kick. “Do you think you might could use a job?” He asked.

The jug seemed to stop to consider this.

Bummil didn’t wait. “Come and see what I mean.” He said and walked a little way down the path beckoning to the jug to follow. It considered this for a bit more and then, as if it couldn’t think of anything better to do, followed him.

“Well that’s a right fine jug, isn’t it?” Blagoor said admiringly. “Plenty of spirit.”

Ambril got the idea that being rude and grouchy was something gnomes equated with strength and vitality.

“Now, I want you to fix me.” Baldot turned to Ygg. “And I ain’t gonna take a no for an answer.” He shook his head meaningfully.

“We’ve been waiting years for fixit Joe to return, I don’t think he’s ever coming back so I’ll take my chances with this stuff.”

Ygg stared at him for a moment and shrugged. “Well I guess we could try it on a little bit of you.” He said slowly.

Baldot grabbed the tip of his cap. “How’s this?” There was a small chip missing form the white tip.

“Okay, you dip it in yourself.” Said Ygg kneeling down next to the gnome.

The gnome walked up to the remedy but before he dipped in his cap he paused and said stiffly and reverently.

“Make this old goat whole, and thank ye for it.” Then without any more hesitation he grasped the shell and stuck his entire head into the fixit glue. He went in a little too far and Ygg had to pull him out by his feet.

“What are you playing at?” Ygg growled at the little man watching him anxiously.

For a moment Ambril feared the worst. Baldot seemed frozen like a statue. His face screwed up as if he were holding his breath. Then all the mended parts of him began to glow and fizz just as they had on the jug and then grow quiet.

“Baldot?” asked Ambril anxiously. “Hey, are you alright?” She bent down so their faces were eye to eye.

For another long minute there was no movement and then slowly his right eye---winked.

“Baldot! Can you hear us?” Yelled Ygg in his ear.

Baldot slowly unfroze his smile and said sarcastically. “The great Trolls of the North can hear you, you Lumox!”

Ygg set him down.

He began to stiffly move his head and then his arms and legs. “Am I fixed?” he said laughing. “I’m fixed!” He said skipping around.

“Hey boys! Look at me! It works!” He said doing a somersault.

“Now let’s do the bottom half of me!” He said as he threw one leg over the edge of the shell.

“Hold on there, now, let me help you before you tip it over!”

For the first time since Ambril had known them, the gnomes behaved themselves. They all lined up quietly and waited patiently for Ygg who grasped them by their caps and slung them feet first into the goo.

Ygg found himself dipping little ceramic men into a vat of goo until after dark. The gnomes were so appreciative that he just couldn’t find it in his heart to stop. Ambril and Sully left them at sunset. Both of them were tired and hardly said a word to each other as they wound their way back through the heavy overgrowth and through the hole in the hedge.

“I’m beat,” said Sully, yawning. “Though I think that was the best day I have ever had.”

Ambril stopped just short of agreeing with Sully remembering the dark shadow in the cavern. Sully smiled big at her. “Hey! You want to stay for dinner?” She asked. “We’re having stuffed squash blossoms! I’m sure it’ll O.K. with my Mom and Dad.”

“Of course it is! Ambril can stay whenever she likes!” Ambril’s mother was heaving a basket over her garden gate filled with huge creamy blossoms. “You should stay Ambril. The Squash blossoms are gorgeous tonight!”

“Oh, um, they sure look, beautiful.” Said Ambril, at a loss for what to say. She tried to imagine stuffing one of those huge flowers into her mouth and couldn’t.

“I’m really tired tonight so, I think I’ll just get on home. She said finally. “But thanks though, I’d like to come another time.” Preferably when they wouldn’t be serving flowers for dinner.

“Another time then!” Said Sully’s Mom swinging the basket easily along as she headed for the kitchen door. “Sully! Don’t’ forget to park your bike BEHIND the garage. You’re Dad nearly ran it over with the tractor yesterday.” She said over her shoulder.

Sully winced and started walking her bike around the side of the barn.

“Se you tomorrow?” She asked.

“Yeah, tomorrow.” Ambril said as she shoved off and began the ride home. She certainly had a lot to think about. The day had been both amazing and terrifying, actually, truth be told certain parts had been amazingly terrifying.

Her eyes went frequently to the backpack strapped to the front of her bike. That she would sort out right when she got home.

She stuck her head into the kitchen and found Zane eating as usual. Mrs. Sweetgum was wiping down the counters as she turned to smile at her and set out a plate of food for Ambril.

She dropped her pack right there and slid into her seat. It smelled heavenly. Ambril realized she was famished and dug in.

Mrs. Sweetgum was staring at her in amazement when she looked up. “My what an appetite you have, my dear.” She said with a smile. “Seconds?“

“Yeah!” said Zane lifting his plate eagerly.

I think I’m full, thanks.” she yawned as she scooped up her backpack and took the stairs two at a time. After locking her door she swung her pack none too gently onto her bed.

“Alright, come on out of there!” She said sharply facing the pack on her bed.

She waited for a full minute. No reaction.

“Hiding isn’t going to work anymore, I know you’re in there,” Ambril muttered angrily.

“And I know what you are so,” Ambril shoved the backpack hard. “So show yourself!”

Still there was no reaction. Ambril was now officially angry. “I don’t like being spied on and I don’t like it when some one pretends to be something they’re not.” She sputtered. “SO GET ON OUT OF THERE!” She yelled and kicked the bag hard.

With a bang, the backpack unzipped itself. An angry blur of light whizzed over to Ambril’s face.

It was the fairy all right, still angry and disgusted. It opened its mouth and yelled a stream of grating metallic screeches and then poked her hard in the eye.

Ambril jumped back holding her eye with one hand.

The fairy screeched some more, then switched to something like banging on a piano and then onto the sound of a dentist’s drill. It streaked around the room then zipped back to her and slapped her nose.

“Knock it off!” Said Ambril. She felt helpless, the fairy was so much faster there was no way to defend herself.

She covered her face with her hands. “Look, we need to talk, right?” She winced as the fairy kicked her right ear. “You’ve been cooped up in that stupid robot since I got here haven’t you?” She said peering through her fingers. “Watching everything I do, getting me into trouble, annoying my friends, why? What am I to you?” Ambril’s voice was muffled by her hands.

There were more piano banging noises followed by a skidding metal that really grated.

Something tells me you really, really don’t want to be here, but---“ The fairy pulled her hair hard. “Ooch!”

Ambril bit her lip trying to control her own anger. “You have to stay for some reason. Maybe if you tell me what that is, I can help you get out of here.” She said tersely.

The fairy let go of her hair and was quiet.

Ambril cautiously peered through her fingers again to find the fairy hovering just a few inches in front of her face. She took a risk and put her hands down slowly to face him.

The fairy began to speak again; this time a long cadence of chimes and bells came out of his mouth with just a few grating screeches thrown in.

“Well you’re not as noisy, but I can’t understand you.” She looked at the fairy closely. “There’s another way of talking, isn’t there?” The fairy looked disgusted as if it was beneath him, he folded his arms and shrugged.

“Come on! Back there in the dark, you spoke to me.” Ambril tapped her head. “In here.” She continued. “Maybe you didn’t mean to and maybe you don’t want to now but I can’t think of another way can you?”

The fairy, still looking disgusted, tried again. It opened its mouth and a torrent of bell tones came out, then some clangs. Then---“Donkey!” clang, ting, screech, “Donkey’s Butt!” then, “You’re a Donkey’s Butt!” He said screwing up his face with effort.

Ambril looked startled. “I heard that! You called me a Donkey’s Butt!” She drew her eyebrows together. It was pretty weird having someone talking to her inside her head. Perhaps she could turn the tables. She concentrated on the fairy and willed some words back at him.

“The fairy jumped and then punched her in the nose.

“Ha! We’re even!” Said Ambril. “Besides it’s true, you are a pain in the b’ass akwards.”

The fairy made a face at her and zipping over to the window folded his arms, the picture of a sulking child.

“Sooo,” Ambril continued willing her words at the fairy. “You seem to hate being here. What’s keeping you? I hope you’re not here on my account, because I’d really, really love to see you go.”

Bells again. They seemed louder and then a sniff. “Unlike human-kind, we take our obligations seriously.” The fairy came and poked Ambril’s nose again, though not as hard this time. “You saved my life, I repaid the favor as I am honor bound to do.” He dipped into an elaborate bow which made Ambril snort. He looked expectantly at her as if Ambril should be impressed.

She wasn’t.

He then kicked her in the ear.

“Ouch! Look no more hitting and kicking, will you? We humans don’t actually do that to each other during a conversation.” Said Ambril rubbing her ear.

“Wait, so you mean you’re angry because I saved your life…? Is that it?” Ambril was incredulous. She shook her head in disbelief. “That’s just plain stupid.”

The sound of screeching tires and the sound of a tuba being dismantled while being played echoed in her head. When things had quieted down again she said, “First up, you don’t owe me a thing. I release you from your obligation.” She said tersely. “I saved you more by accident than anything.” She continued. “It was more just reflexes than anything else. And another thing, I really hate that you’ve been spying on---“

Ambril had to duck as the robot slammed into the wall just where her head had been a minute ago.

More screeching and then she heard inside her head, “You know nothing\_\_\_ you silly, stupid---plodding---HUMAN!” This last part was uttered as if human was the absolute worst thing in the world to be, worse than a dung beetle who has just eaten a slug and then sat on by an ant eater. The fairy was now flying in tight circles around her head. Ambril got dizzy trying to track it.

“There isn’t anything more loathsome for a fairy than to be CHAINED to another being, but a human-kind!” The fairy began to slow a bit, Ambril caught sight of its face which looked a bit sad. ”The worst of the worst, the lowest of the low.”

“But on top of that, it’s the time I’ve lost---,” The fairy said to itself. “I have to get back out there and keep---“. The fairy suddenly became aware of Ambril’s presence in its head. And landed a smashing blow to her right ear.

“Oouwww, Gees, alright already.” She shrugged him off and picked up her robot.

“Look, you’re delusional. Thank you for your help so far, you certainly saved me from whatever that was in the dark but you can go now, I am grateful but enough’s enough. This isn’t working for either of us. Just go, I release you.“

She walked over to her window and opened it wide and then went and sat down at her desk. “Just, get out of here! Who wants a nosy little jerk like you hanging around.” She groused as she tried to straighten her robot’s head.

But the fairy stayed where he was, watching her. After a moment he said, “It’s not that simple.” He said heavily.

“Don’t I get a say in all of this? But wait, do you mean no fairy ever questions what’s right? You just follow and do what you’re told to do?” The fairy made a face at her and she braced herself for another kick. “And you call us stupid. What happens when things change?” She asked. “What happens when YOU change?”

This time the fairy snorted. “We don’t change, dung-breath. We fairies have been around since the dawn of time. We perfected ourselves early in our development. We have no need of change.”

Ambril laughed. “So you’re perfect? Really? That’s not what I see.” She hunched over a little more still waiting for the next punch. “No one ---nothing---at any time has ever been perfect, didn’t you know?” She said. “Especially fairies who fly off the handle and poke me in the eye whenever I say something he doesn’t agree with.”

The fairy was silent as he hovered near the window, watching her.

Then it slowly dawned on her. She said quietly. “It’s not just this stupid honor-bound sense of obligation is it?” She continued. “There’s something more.”

The fairy suddenly looked uncomfortable. His eyes strayed to Ambril’s shirt. Her hand went instinctively to her medallion. She reached in and pulled it out and watched it sparkle in the light.

“Ah ha!” It’s this isn’t it?” She said. “My medallion.”

“It’s called the Ledrith Glain, you Llama-turd.” Said the fairy derisively. “And show some respect. You’ve no idea how hard it is for me to see the Ledrith Glain around your scrawny little neck! It belongs to us!” He groused. “I can’t let it get into his hands.” He continued.

“Who’s hands? You mean that creature in the shadows?” Asked Ambril.

The fairy nodded. “It was once human but now---“ the fairy just shrugged. “Who knows what it is? But Moroz was once a---“

“Moroz? That was Moroz?”

The fairy looked mildly surprised. “You know of Moroz?” He quizzed. “Well I guess they are teaching you a few things in that school.”

“Well I don’t really know much about Moroz, just that he did something so bad he was locked up for it.

The fairy nodded. “Moroz was the catalyst for the fairy uprising and the troll rebellion. He was the first and the last human-kind that we fairies ever trusted.” The fairy continued ruefully. “And we paid a very high price for our naïveté.” He shot a hateful glance at Ambril. “He betrayed us so we vowed to never have any dealings with your kind…EVER again.” He said. And then his shoulders sagged. “Until now, anyway.”

 Ambril decided to change the subject before she got her head kicked again. “So what’s this, this Ledrith Glain to Moroz?” Asked Ambril still holding the medallion.”

“The Ledrith Glain is fairy-made. It is one of the purest links to life energy in existence.” He continued. “Which makes it one of the most powerful things on earth. To a fairy, it is sacred. To Moroz it is pure power he can use to free himself from his imprisonment and pursue his evil purpose.” He drew his eyebrows together in concentration. “For some reason, the Ledrith Glain has chosen you to be its keeper.” He thought at her quietly. Ambril could feel his curious probing. “As far as I know, such a thing has never happened before.” “The Ledrith Glain has never chosen such a lowly creature as a human-kind to be its bearer.” It flew a little away from her in order to see all of her at once. “It is true that you bear the sign of the four, but stronger and wiser beings have also born this sign and not been chosen.” He stared mystified, at Ambril.

The Sign of the Four, thought Ambril What the heck does that mean?

Holding up the medallion Ambril said “You know I found this in my Ashera. So this is part of my Ashera quest. How could I have been the first human kind to own it?”

The fairy flew over in a rage and whacked her across the nose.

“Ouch! Knock it off!” Screamed Ambril as she reached out and tried to grab the energetic little man. She wasn’t successful so after a minute or so she stopped and just sat there panting and rubbing her nose.

The fairy hovered in front of her just out of reach. “You don’t OWN the Ledrith Glain, you little Salamander, it CHOSE you to be its bearer.”

“WHATEVER! Don’t hit me again or I’ll---I’ll---” Ambril had to stop there as she couldn’t think of anything she could do to the fairy that would hurt him. So she just sat there and glared at him.

The fairy just continued with his insults. “Why it chose you, I just can’t figure out. You’re just so…usual.” He continued. “There’s absolutely nothing remarkable about you at all!” He threw his hands up in frustration. “So—average.”

Usual? Average? Ambril looked down at the medallion. She couldn’t figure it out either, really but she hated how arrogant this fairy was. It hurt her pride to be told she wasn’t strong or smart. Yet deep down she had the same thoughts. How could she stand up to a powerful wizard like Moroz? The plain truth was she couldn’t, she was just a kid, after all. He would squash her like a bug, he nearly had done just that a few hours before. She looked again at the medallion sparkling in the light. She thought it had been worth something that was for sure but she had had no idea it was as powerful and precious as the fairy said. She made up her mind.

“Well, what would happen if I just gave it to you?” Asked Ambril slowly. “You know how to protect this from Moroz and what to do with it.” She shrugged. “It sounds like it really belongs to you, the fairies anyway.”

The fairy didn’t answer, he just watched her.

“Well?” Still no answer.

Ambril lifted the Ledrith Glain from around her neck and held it out to the fairy. “Here, just take it and go.”

The Ledrith Glain glittered in her palm. The fairy still didn’t move and after a moment it sighed heavily. “This isn’t going to work. I’ve tried to take this off you at least once every night since you arrived. But just in case---”

In a flash the fairy flew over, grabbed the chain and flew full speed toward the window where it jerked to a stop; stopped like a dog on a chain. It pulled and tugged but miraculously the medallion stuck to Ambril’s open hand like glue.

“See?” He threw the chain down in disgust and watched it swinging from Ambril’s hand. “Nope, it will not leave you. At least not with me.”

Ambril was shocked. “Weird.” She was so confused and wished there was someone to ask about all of the stuff that had happened to her.

She looked once more at the fairy. “I guess this means you’ll be sticking to me like glue as well.” She said.

The fairy nodded slowly at her. “I think after what happened this afternoon, I should always go with you, to protect the Ledrith Glain.” He continued.

Ambril gave him a long look and then shrugged.

The conversation was apparently over as the fairy lifted the robot with a wave of its arm, fixed the broken parts and set it down on the desk. He flew toward to the window.

“I think you should be safe for a little while. This house is unusually well protected” He continued as he paused at the window. “I’ll be back by morning.”

“Wait! What’s your real name?”

The fairy laughed mirthlessly and emitted a complex cadence of bells and then cocked his head at her. “Can you manage that, do you think?” he snorted.

“Yeah, well then I’ll keep calling you fLit, you’ll be in the robot anyway.”

The fairy shrugged and then was gone.

Ambril slowly shut the window, she’d let the fairy figure out how to get back in, and then turned toward the bed.

Her backpack looked like it had exploded. There were papers from school everywhere and some left over lunch wrappers strewn all over the place. Only the Ashera was left inside.

Ambril sighed. She should have known. No robot was that smart or that much trouble. But now that she had met this fairy she wished she never had. He looked to be more trouble than ten robots put together.

She stacked all the important papers and began tossing the unimportant ones away. She had just about finished when she picked up a crumpled, yellowed old newspaper.

“Where’d this come from?” She said to herself. Smoothing it out she saw to her delight that it was a page from an old newspaper. But how had it gotten into her backpack? With a start she remembered that day they had first gone to the gazebo and discovered the Astarte---wrapped in old newspaper. She had forgotten all about it. The headlines were about the upcoming May Day celebration which wasn’t very interesting but underneath was a picture of her Dad and her Mom holding the hands of a young boy and toddler girl.

**The Silva family in front of Dr. Silva’s new G.E.R.N. Laboratory.**

**Generation of Energy in Rhythm with Nature**

Ambril raised her head from the newspaper and gazed out the window. Something really wasn’t right. Here Dr. Afallen, had praising her father to the sky and yet on the other hand, the newspapers claimed her father had been dabbling in black magic and had endangered the entire town.

All she knew at that point is that her head was swimming and she was so tired she could barely stand. She brushed her teeth, threw on her P.J.’s and was asleep within seconds of her head hitting the pillow. Perhaps it would all make sense to her in the morning.

**Chapter 27 School again**

Ambril coasted into the schoolyard a little earlier than usual and spied Ygg sitting on the front steps looking anxious.

“I think Mrs. Twid suspects.” He said to her even before she could get out a Hello.

“How do you know that?” Ambril asked as she threw her backpack down and sat down beside him.

“I just do.” He said impatiently as he picked at a scab on his arm. “She’s actin’ strange and hinting around about wanting me gone.”

“Well that wouldn’t be the worst thing, would it?” Asked Sully as she plunked down on the other side of Ygg. “You could always come and live on the farm with us, I’m serious about how we could use some help right now, let me tell you!” Sully hugged her backpack.

 Just then Ambril she was shoved rudely in the back. She went sprawling.

“Sorry, really I’m sorry!” said Riley backing up. Behind him Lance and his buddies snorted.

Tiana and her friends watched and giggled.

“What are you hanging out with your weirdo friends, are you?” Lance sneered as Ambril picked herself up.

“They always pretending something big’s going on, aren’t they? Consulting their decoder rings and stuff.” He snorted and the kids behind him echoed him. “Kind a’ like you.”

Riley had turned to face his brother in his usual hangdog sort of way. Ambril wished that he would just once stand up to Lance. After all, Lance was just a garden-variety bully.

But Riley just stood there watching his brother from under his longish hair. There did seem to be something a little different about Riley today. Lance seemed to think so too as all of a sudden he took a couple of steps back.

“So is that your new girlfriend, bro?” Lance taunted.

Riley’s shoulders came up just a fraction of an inch. But he said nothing. He just continued to stare at his brother.

“What, have you gone dumb, dumb-dumb!” Lance teased to the renewed giggles of the girls behind him. Riley’s face had gone very pale. Ambril could see his pupils dilating and his fists beginning to clench.

“Boys, break it up, get to class.” Mr. Pinwydden walked up just then. The crowd dispersed in a twinkling.

Ygg, Sully and Ambril tripped up the steps and into the school. The day passed uneventfully until Ms. Breccia’s class. Her classroom door was locked, the room dark. There was a note taped to the glass, “Children, No History Today, May Day Dance Practice, Gymnasium, Mrs. Twid

Ygg stared in horror at the note. “It’s bad enough I have to deal with her every evening, but at school too?” he groaned.

The entire class dragged themselves off to the gym.

**Chapter 28 May Day Practice**

On the way Ambril told her friends about her brush with Moroz.

”So you’re sure it was Moroz in the dark? No offense or anything but could it have been some sort of a nightmare or something?” Quizzed Sully.

“I’m pretty sure it was him.” Said Ambril trying to sound authoritative.

Ygg just stared at her closely for a moment. “There be something you’re not telling us.” He said.

Ambril was startled. “---Well, its just that---“ She was interrupted by the sound of her backpack unzipping and the robots head pushing itself out. It swiveled and locked onto Ambril.

“You brought that thing to school? Really?” Asked Sully incredulously. “What do you have a death wish or something? Breccia see’s him in action and she’ll make you the laughing stock of the entire school!”

Ambril shrugged sheepishly and tried to shove the tiny metal man back inside her pack but fLit wouldn’t budge. He just stared at her morosely, his battered head askew.

Inside the Gym loomed a very tall pole. Strands of colorful ribbons hung from the top and fluttered in the breeze coming through the open door. A beaten piano had been rolled in to one side. Mrs. Twid followed them in. Most of the other kids were already there, slouched around the perimeter of the floor, leaning against the wall.

“MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION CHILDREN!“ Mrs. Twid bellowed at them as if they were all deaf. “Are we all here now? I was delayed. I was in talking with your principal to see if there had been some sort of error.” She said as she walked woodenly toward the center of the room.

She turned stiffly in front of the Maypole and stared petulantly at them. “You know children, you should all consider yourselves fortunate to have been chosen to do our annual MayPole dance.” She said thin-lipped eyeing Ygg sharply “Personally, I’m not at all sure that this particular class is capable, but…I was overruled.” She sniffed.

“Ladies,” Mrs Twid giving a hard look at Ambril. As if she wasn’t sure if she was even human. “Please gather a pink, yellow or orange ribbon to you and space yourselves around the pole.” Her bony finger pointed toward the Maypole and the ribbons softly playing with the breeze.

She padded over to the piano. “The boys will chose blue, green or purple ribbons and stand in between the girls spaced a little farther out.” She sniffed again and gave Riley a narrow glare. “Surely, you can do that much, I have been told you are capable, intelligent children, though I have extreme doubts.” She said putting her hands where her hips should have been. “Come now, briskly, please.”

The kids ambled over and grabbed the required ribbon and positioned themselves around the pole.

Mrs. Twid folded her arms. “We now must wait until the pianist arrives, I’m afraid she hasn’t been feeling well. She’s been talking of retiring lately---“

“Here I am, Here I am!” Mrs. Flood fairly danced in with a huge smile on her face. “Sooo sorry kids, I’ve been literally chasing butterflies on the grass!” She paused to hitch up her jogging pants. “I actually caught up with a couple of them!” She whistling over and plunked down on the piano bench.

Mrs. Twid stared, absolutely flummoxed.

Ambril couldn’t help but beam at Mrs. Flood who after squinted at her over her reading glasses waved gaily and hallooed at Ygg and Sully.

Mrs. Twid got over her trauma and composed herself before turning to Mrs. Flood and whispering just loud enough for Ambril to hear, “I’m so glad you’re feeling better, Daisy, I was worried…you know the last time you were feeling ill…

“Oh yes, Crystal, I was feeling poorly at the time.” Mrs. Flood ran her fingers along the keys lightly and drew herself up a bit. “But I’m much, much better, thank you! She twinkled at her and then opened her music.

Mrs. Twid whirled around and signaled for the music to start. She began to scream hoarsely over the introduction. “Now CHILDREN! You want to use a SKIPPING STEP, slowly winding around the pole like THIS!” Mrs. Twid grabbed Ygg by the ear and dragged him with her as she began a graceless skip, wending her way around the kids spaced around the pole. She stopped out of breath after one time around. And released Ygg who looked ready to burst in indignation and rubbed his ear.

 “Alright then!” She clapped her hands together, keep up the PACE!” Still having to yell over the piano.

The kids began a half-hearted skip around the pole. A few of the boys got a little bit tangled but figured it out and continued. Mrs. Twid continued to clap in time with the music and glare at Ygg every time he passed. After several times around, Ambril could see the ribbons were plaiting into a messy braid around the pole. It made a startlingly pretty pattern, except where the boys had screwed everything up.

The song ended and Mrs. Twid yelled “STOP!”

The pole was about half braided from the top down. The kids were all out of breath but smiling.

“Well that was awful, of course. You’ll have to pick up the pace and lift your knees higher.” Mrs. Twid frowned at them. “Release your ribbons and we’ll just practice the dancing, shall we?” Without waiting for an answer she motioned to Mrs. Flood who immediately began to play again.

“Faster now Daisy, PLEASE!” shouted Mrs. Twid and began to clap faster.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR CHILDREN!?” She nodded to them to begin.

Ambril found herself fairly flying around the pole skipping as fast as she could. Mrs. Twid brandished a yardstick.

“KEEP UP THE PACE! BRISKLY NOW CHILDREN!” She screamed and whacked Ygg every time he came around. Occasionally she would hit another child by mistake. “YOU’RE OUT OF STEP!” She yelled.

Mrs. Twid kept them going until one of the plumper girls collapsed holding her side.

“Crystal my dear,” said Mrs. Flood in a low voice as the kids ran over and struggled to help her off to the side. “If you wish the Maypole to be nicely braided, may I suggest the kids slow the pace a bit.”

Mrs. Twid considered this as she watched the kids breathing heavily in front of her. “Well, it is true, the braiding would suffer if they kept up that pace, slower kids require a slower pace, yes, that is true.”

Mrs. Flood continued in a stage whisper. “And you probably want to ease up a bit on the er, physical contact, you know, I don’t imagine the school would appreciate a law suit from one of the more affluent families.”

Mrs. Twid stiffened at this apparently it had not occurred to her that hitting kids with sticks was not a usual form of punishment. Her beady little eyes zeroed in on Ygg though and she smiled. “Yes, of course, we don’t want to offend any of the children’s FAMILIES, do we?” She muttered more to herself than Mrs. Flood.

They went around and around and around, never pleasing Mrs. Twid until even the most athletic kids drooped and sagged. This time the only kid taking blows was Ygg who accepted it without complaint. Finally, the bell rang, without waiting for a dismissal they in unison raced for the door.

“I’ll have to have you back for EXTRA practices it appears CHILDREN, as you such doltish dancers!” Screeched Mrs. Twid after them.

“Not if my Dad has anything to say about it!” Grumbled Lance. Fortunately school was nearly over for the day. When the last bell rang Ambril thankfully gathered her things and headed for the door. Ygg was outside waiting for her. He was rubbing his shoulder where Twid had hit him the most. He and Ambril limped over to their bikes.

“Twid was beyond horrible today, if you ask me, said Sully indignantly coming up behind them.

“We have to find a way to get you out of there, some how.” Said Ambril tensely. “She’s taking her revenge out on you for not getting her hands on the Shoe Store and whatever else she had her evil eye on.”

Ambril could see Lance and his friends leaving the building together in a tight wad of kids, their heads together talking seriously about something.

“I think they’re up to something.” Said Sully also watching the boys. “I’m thinking it will be some hugely humiliating, and probably painful kind of revenge.” She mused.

Ambril nodded slowly. She wished now she had kept out of their way as she watched the much bigger boys sneak peaks at the three of them. They were outnumbered and under-sized. They were toast. She sighed.

Tiana and winked at Ygg as she and her friends sashayed by.

Ygg moaned.

“And, I think Tiana might have a thing for you!” Sully mimicked Tiana’s giggle.

“Great, That’s just great.” Ygg blushes as they coasted out of the schoolyard on their way to the gazebo.

**Chapter 28 Back at the Gazebo, an Uplifting Adventure**

When they had gotten comfortable and had dug into the remains of Ambril’s lunch; homemade bread, thick wedges of cheese, carrots and cookies. Sully said “We got interrupted talking about Moroz, let me tell you what I know about him.” She said thickly, still chewing a massive hunk of bread and cheese. “First thing is, you need to steer well clear of him. They don’t even think he’s human anymore and---“

“Wait, wait, where are you getting this information?” Asked Ygg taking a bite of carrot.

“It was in the Archives, you know, just before the explosion.” In that book I pulled out of the shelf.” Said Sully more clearly after she’d taken a swig of water.

“Well, why didn’t you bring this up before?” Asked Ambril.

Sully shrugged. “It just never came up I guess.”

Ambril thought for a moment and slowly nodded. They had had a lot of stuff to deal with. “Okay then, Fire away, lets hear it.” Said Ambril biting into a cookie with gusto.

“Okay, so the first book Dr Afallen gave me was all about the Tylwith charter, sort of an agreement between the four founding families.” She paused to take another gulp of water. “That part was sort of interesting. But then there was this amendment on the end that was just awful.” She shook her head disgustedly. “All about how much better pure-blood fairies were than mixing of magical families. How they should never had trusted them, especially human-kind, who according to the fairies, are naturally evil and untrustworthy, not to mention inferior and just plain stupid.”

She paused to smirk a bit. “It wasn’t exactly the heritage I had hoped for, being related to such narrow-minded jerks---“

There was a clank from Ambril’s backpack as her robot simultaneously unzipped and vaulted from it in one bound.

Ygg scowled at it. “What made you bring that thing with ya, after last time I think you would a’ left it at home.”

Ambril shrugged dumbly as she watched the robot march over to the edge of the gazebo and promptly fall off.

“Are you going to get him?” Sully asked chewing slowly as she watched him disappear over the edge.

“Nope,” said Ambril louder than she needed to, “Let him fend for himself,” She continued. “Anyway, where were we?”

“Umm, oh yeah, the snobbish fairies.”

There was a quick, sharp snap of a branch from the spot where the fairy had gone over.

“I had a belly full of that really soon and got up to find some other thing to read, do you remember?”

Ambril and Ygg nodded.

“I pulled out a book about the fairy rebellion.” She said nodding slowly. “Mlroz was the reason why the fairies turned away from the others.”

Ambril was surprised. “You mean, single handedly he made the fairies think all humans were against them, beneath them and should be sneered at forever more?”

Sully increased her nodding. “It kind of sounds like that.” She sat up straighter and took a deep breath. “Okay, here’s what I found out. So Moroz, was a big mucky-muck in town a long time ago. He was mayor of the village, spoke 17 languages, including Troll, apparently, and was incredibly gifted at Magic. He also ran the mines.” She said as she brushed away some crumbs on her shirt.

“Now at the time, the mines were Glain---“

“The stuff Ygg was talking about?” asked Ambril involuntarily clutching at the medallion under her shirt.

“Yeah! I think you’re right, Glain. Really great stuff, very powerful magic, yada yada.” Sully pulled up her eyebrows and peered at Ygg for a moment but when he didn’t volunteer any information, she continued.

“Moroz was also ambitious. He decided that the mines weren’t producing enough Glain. It was how the village survived, really, they apparently sold it all over the world.”

“Like Chert then.” Mused Ygg. “But how’d they do that back then?” Interrupted Ygg as he stretched out onto a bench. “They were way out here on the west coast of North America.”

Sully shrugged. “It didn’t say how. Anyway, Moroz got together this plan and asked the fairies and earth-kind---“ she pointed her chin at Ygg. “That means you, I think.” She said. “To help him. He got this idea that the fairies and earth-kind could use this special kind of magic they have to find the Glain must faster and extract it more easily.” Sully started to trace a design on the stone with a twig and some water. “Moroz came up with some kind of contract for them to sign and taught them all this special magic.”

Ambril looked over at Ygg who had begun to look uncomfortable.

Sully continued, “I guess it really worked because the mine was soon doing really, really well. Moroz among others, became fantastically wealthy.”

“And then he got really greedy. When the fairies and earth-kind asked for their share, he responded by showing them the contract they had signed which had some sort of bound them magically to their tasks.” Sully sighed.

“In other words, he well and truly cheated them out a what was rightfully theirs.” Said Ygg tensely.

“Now this is where it gets personal.” She glanced at Ambril. “The hook he used to reel in the fairies was the promise of the Ledrith Glain. The fairies had made medallions when they first came out here and gifted them to the other families. The Ledrith Glain was the one they made for human-kind.

“What happened to the other medallions?” Asked Ambril slowly chewing on a cookie.

“No one knows but most believe they be broken up and sold in pieces. The Glain is that valuable.” Said Ygg. “A family can life a lifetime in comfort after the sale of just a small sliver.”

Ambril was shocked her hand went again to her medallion. How would she ever keep it safe?

“So back to the Fairy rebellion, the fairies somehow or other were able to escape their bondage in a short period of time and soon left Trelawnyd en mass.” The earth-kind, unfortunately had to endure many years of servitude.

“They got nothing but long, dark years toiling in the mines.” Said Ygg even more tensely. “I know that part.”

“Hey, take it easy, this was a long time ago, right?” Said Ambril as she watched Ygg’s face turning a dark shade of purple.

Ygg stared darkly at Sully for a full minute and then visibly relaxed. “You be right, of course. “ He said softly. “And now that I’ve left me village, nought to do with me.”

“What, were you thinking that I would have been a part of that?” Asked Sully incredulously. “Just cuz I’m a little bit fairy, you think that I would treat you like a slave?” Sully began to rise from her place on the stone floor, her hands tightening in to fists.

“Calm down, calm down.” Said Ambril getting swiftly in between them. “This has nothing to do with us, right? We’re friends. This is the second millennium, we’ re better than that, right?”

She heard the screeching of metal and a mirthless laugh in her head. Her hand rested lightly on her Ledrith Glain, which grew suddenly warm and began to vibrate slightly.

Ygg and Sully went from looking like they wanted to kill each other to apologetic in about a minute. It was Sully who backed down first. She turned away and visibly shook herself. “S-sorry, sorry, I…I guess I’m just tired or something.”

Ygg nodded in agreement. “Me too.” He looked a little dazed.

“Here’s something, Sully is just a nickname, really. My full name is---promise you won’t laugh? It’s---Iramsul. It means the ‘Tree of Life’ or something.”

Ambril just stared at her in confusion.

Sully sighed, “you know you should read up on your heritage some time.” She continued. “The tree of life, according to ancient lore is the universe.” She squinted hard again at the Ledrith Glain and smiled. “It’s on this thing too.” She said half to herself as she straightened up again.

“The tree of life is part of your family crest. It’s not just the fancy flower in the center.” She flicked her finger at one of the vine-covered pillars. “Which, by the way is probably the Navel-mundi, if you look closely, you can see the roots and branches coming out, connecting with each other and circling around. That’s how the tree of life is always shown. It’s a way of describing how the life before, life here, and the afterlife are all connected. And that we are all part of the whole of nature.” Sully shrugged.

“It’s what the Native Americans believe and the Celt’s and the Vikings, in fact most ancient religions were nature based ones.” Sully nodded at Ambril. “Pull out your Ashera and medallion and see if I’m right.”

Ambril went and got out her Ashera and pulled the medallion out from her under her shirt. She held them both up to her face and tried to see what Sully was talking about. There were faint etchings on the face of the stone. As the face of the stone caught the light Ambril suddenly could see it, carved into the stone around the Navel Mundi flower, there were lines bordering the flower which did connect with one another. The Derwyn crest was much more obvious. The image certainly was a tree in the center with rotts and branches connected, entwined…

“As above, so below.” Said Ygg softly as he too looked at the Ashera. “Like Dr. Afallen said, right?”

Ambril caught her breath. “Yeah but also I decoded some of the Ogam around the edges of the crest and that was the first and last line, “As above, so below!”

Ygg smiled. “Now that’s an old saying where I come from, and one that’s tied to the great tree as well. He jammed his hands into his pockets and frowned at them as he rocked back on his heels.

“Okay here’s another something. Me name, Ygg Drasil, is also a word for the great tree.”

Ambril and Sully’s mouths dropped.

“I think it be old---from the times of the Vikings.”

“That’s kind of---um---weird, isn’t it.” Said Sully slowly. “We’re named for the same thing, the tree of life…and then we meet Ambril, whose family has it as part of their family crest---” she shivered. “It feels---creepy---like its---foretold or something.”

Ygg snorted. “You be a member of the free wheeling free will group, right?” “Hey if it means I don’t like thinking that somebody has already worked out how my life is going to go, then yeah, free wheeling is what I am!” Exclaimed Sully.

Ambril smiled, it had been getting a little too heavy there and felt good to laugh. A cool breeze hit her in the face. Looking up she saw some thunderclouds forming over the mountains.

“Okay, now, what was this big surprise you have for us, Sul or should we call you Iramsul?”

Sully looked annoyed at her and then grinned. “Sully, just Sully, my Mom calls me Iramsul when she’s mad at me. It makes me cringe.”

She raced over to her backpack and pawed through it for a minute. Finally whipping out a small box. Her face held the expression of a three year old on Christmas morning. “So I was playing around with a few things, yesterday night and---“ she held out the box to her friends. “I came up with this!” She said proudly.

Inside seemed to be a bunch of grey powder.

“Yeah? So?” Asked Ygg looking dubiously at the powder.

“It’s FLYING powder!” Sully said excitedly.

“But don’t you need something like a tap fro the Ashera to make it magical?” asked Ambril.

Sully looked a bit crestfallen at their reaction. “I thought you’d be as excited as I am.” She said dejectedly.

“Well we’re excited, of course,” said Ygg. “But if you didna have the Ashera to tap at it, how’d you make it magical?” Ygg scratched his head.

“Well there are other ways of doing it, you know.” Said Sully exasperated. “With some things it just takes the right combination of magical ingredients.” She continued and shook the box a little. “It’s just the big stuff, like healing clay people and bringing jugs to life that takes the big magic.”

Sully carefully opened the box and held it out again. “Here look again.”

Ambril peered into the box. At first it looked like ordinary grey dust but then she started seeing small colorful sparkles running through it, like electrical currents and tiny explosions, as if it was sort of alive itself.

“Wow!” Breathed Ygg beside her.

“Want to try it out?” Asked Sully.

Ambril just stared at her friend. “Is it safe?” She asked hesitantly. “I mean are we going to shoot off like rockets a million miles into the air and not be able to get down?”

Sully waved her off. “Look I tried it on my pillow,” Sully put the powder down and sitting down began to take her shoes off. “The pillow just hovered in the air for a few seconds and then came down.” She held up her shoe. “I’m thinking we can just put a little on our shoes and just fly around the gazebo for starters.” Her smile was infectious. “Look if you guys don’t want to try it, I will and you can just sit and watch.”

That did it for Ambril. Who wanted to just sit and watch? “Okay, I’m in.” She said, “just a little, floating around the gazebo, right?” What could go wrong?

Ygg slowly nodded and shrugged. He seemed to be having the same thoughts as Ambril.

They all took their shoes off as Sully got out a spoon. “There was a note in the margin by this recipe which said to apply it to the inside of the shoe then it won’t come off as fast.” Sully ladled a heaping tablespoon into each shoe. A sharp gust of wind made Sully pause before putting the powder in the last shoe.

“Are you sure you’re not overdoing it?” asked Ygg hesitantly.

“This is just what the book said to put in for a ‘sprightly sail’. Besides we’re inside the gazebo, right? There’s a roof. So if you feel out of control just slip off one shoe.” Sully said confidentally.

“That’s what the book says, yeah?” Said Ygg dubiously looking into his shoe.

“That’s what the book says.” Parroted Sully as she unceremoniously put her shoe back on.

They all got their shoes on, Ygg opted to leave his laces untied, and stood up. Ambril braced herself for whatever was to happen….nothing.

Sully’s face went from supreme elation to serious dejection in about half a minute. She looked down and stamped her foot.

“Well, shoot, it worked perfectly last night.” She said to herself. “Maybe if we just…” she swooped down and grabbed the box with the powder, opened it and began sprinkling just a tiny bit more on their feet.

“Be careful there, Sul, not too much now, it’s beginning to tingle a lit---” that was all Ygg could get out as a great gust of wind came through the gazebo and startled Sully who dropped the box upside down on their feet. The wind took the powder and swirled it all around them.

“Whoa!” Said Ygg as he suddenly jetted off the floor and bumped into the roof of the gazebo. “Ouch!”

Ambril was sneezing too hard to notice much else. She had gotten a bunch of the powder up her nose. When she was paying attention again she felt a slight tingling starting in her feet and then suddenly, she felt as light as a feather. She lifted slowly off the ground. She looked over and found Sully hovering her near her.

“This is such an incredible feeling! Like being dandelion fluff, or a leaf, or a---“

Suddenly there were hit by a powerful burst of wind which howled through the gazebo and swept them both away. Ygg tried to hang onto the roof but the wind was too strong and it blew him along with them.

Ambril found herself caught in a dizzying whirl as she tumbled forward yelling at the top of her voice. If this is what dandelion fluff went through, she’d had enough, thanks. She yelled until she was hoarse, and then got too nauseous to yell any longer.

“Hey, try putting your feet together and pointing them down a little,” she heard Sully say and looking over she saw her friend sitting the wind current as if it was a sofa. “Only go slow, don’t make any sudden moves!” Sully nodded encouragingly.

Ambril stuck her feet straight out and found herself rocketing backward. She rammed into Ygg who was having the same trouble as she was.

“OOf, thanks,” he said surprisingly. “I just ‘bout lost me lunch and breakfast!” He grabbed Ambril’s arm and righted himself.

“Put your feet together like mine! ” Ambril yelled over the shooshing of the wind. Ygg tried to imitate Ambril but ended up with them straight down. They rocketed upward. “Too much! Too much!” Squealed Ambril. “Turn them inward!” Finally he figured it out and they found themselves floating. Ambril managed a peak at the ground and wished she hadn’t, they must have been 500 feet up. She could see the entire valley. The cars looked like toys and the people like ants. If she wasn’t so scared she would have enjoyed it but she couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen when the powder wore off.

“Hey look at that!” Said Sully pointing off into the forest.

“No, no I don’t think I’d better do that.” Ambril said quietly.

“What the---!” Ygg had suddenly been engulfed in a flurry of white and gray feathers. He fought through it briefly, long enough for the seagull to break free and hover a few feet away from him. Ambril could see a glint of interest in its eyes.

“I think she fancies you!” Sully guffawed.

It was true. The bird circled Ygg slowly flapping expertly at the breezes to stay level with him and then lightly dove at him grazing his hair with her beak and whapping him with one of her webbed feet.

Ygg was so surprised he started somersaulting again.

“Feet together!” Sully shouted.

It took a moment before Ygg righted himself again. He was so dizzy Ambril could see still his eyes rolling in his head.

“I’m O.K., I’m O.K.,” he said more to himself than Sully and Ambril.

The bird remained where she was, hovering delightedly in front of him.

“Ah true love!” Said Sully.

“Knock it off! And---Oops---think of something---!“ The bird dove in again to nuzzle him. “Fast!” He said going into another spin. “I can’t take this much longer.”

“What? Afraid of heights are we?” said Sully calmly floating over to him and grabbed his leg. “Isn’t this great?”

“Come on, come clean! You practiced, didn’t you!” Accused Ambril.

“Well, maybe just a little.” Said Sully sheepishly.

“You could a given us some sort of pointers, we could a been killed!” Yelled Ygg. Looking over his shoulder for his love addled attacker. The bird had had let the breeze carry her away. She looked around at him one last time before descending under a massive gray thundercloud, which had come out of nowhere.

“Where did that come from?” Asked Ambril suddenly afraid.

Sully looked around and gasped. “Okay, now we’ll just gradually---“ She was interrupted by a hug bolt of lightening shooting past them followed by an ear splitting peal of thunder.

“Um this stuff is waterproof, yeah?” asked Ygg hopefully.

“I, I don’t know, I think maybe---“Buckets of water suddenly seemed to pour out of the clouds. They were drenched in no time, “---maybe not!” finished Sully as they immediately began to descend, slowly at first and then faster and faster. The wind was soon whooshing past them as the ground started getting closer much too rapidly.

“Put your shoes down!” Ambril barely heard Sully over the whistling wind. She instantly put her shoes down which slowed their descent just slightly.

“It’s gonna be a little rough!” Shouted Ygg.

Ambril looked down and saw the top of a redwood rushing up to meet her. She put out her arms to try and grab on to something but the newly wet branches slipped through her fingers.

**Chapter 29 The Dancing Tree**

She was whacked in the face several times and tumbled end over end until she finally came to a stop wedged between two branches.

She stayed still for a moment sort of surprised she was still alive, trying to catch her breath.

“Sully? Ygg?” she said hoarsely. She thought she heard a far off cry. The rain dripped down her nose and onto her torn shirt. She slowly looked around, careful not to unbalance herself.

They had landed on the other side of the wall in the forest, in a grove of redwoods. The trees were tall and old. Some looked to be a hundred feet high. Fortunately for Ambril she was near the bottom, about twenty feet up. She tried wriggling just a little bit to loosen the grip of one of the branches and managed to slide out from its grasp. She slowly lowered herself down to the lowest branch and was just getting ready to jump when she heard a decisive snap.

“Oh no!” she groaned. Yep, the branch snapped and she fell like a stone all the way to the ground.

She landed with a thump on a bed of soft redwood needles with the wind knocked out of her. She sat up straining to breathe and found herself looking at the upside down face of Ygg.

“Ya know, I’m gonna kill her if she isna’ dead already.” He said ruefully. “Help me out a this?”

He was hanging upside down; tangled in a vine so tightly he looked like a spider’s bedtime snack.

Ambril got out her Swiss army knife and cut him free. He slumped to the ground and grumpily picked the dead leaves out of his hair.

Ambril took a deep breath, “SULLY! “ She yelled as loudly as she could.

She listened intently but there was no response just the soft sighing of the wind and the dripping of the rain and…music.

“Sully!” Yelled Ambril again

“Sully, where be you!” He had gotten to his feet and was now grumbling about the state of his clothes.

They stumbled around the forest for what seemed like hours. Getting even more scratched up and bruised in the process. They both yelled themselves hoarse. Ambril’s neck was beginning to hurt from searching the trees for pieces of clothing, a clue as to Sully’s whereabouts. Ambril was getting worried, her friend could be hurt or unconscious or---worse. “Sully!” She screamed hoarsely as loud as she could. It had finally stopped raining when Ambril stopped so suddenly in front of Ygg that she ran into him.

“Ouch!” Said Ygg rubbing his nose. “Give a body some warning!”

“Do you hear that?” Sully turned to Ygg.

“Hear what?” He groused.

Ambril listened again and heard the music soft and low “…that!” There was definitely an orchestra playing nearby. “Do you hear that?”

Ygg’s face went from annoyed to surprised as he listened, “You mean the music, yeah?” He asked incredulously. “Where’s that be coming from?”

“Let’s find out, maybe they know something about Sully.” Said Ambril trying to figure out which direction the music was coming from.

“Here, this way, I’m thinkin’.” Ygg pointed toward a bright spot in the dense trees. There must be some sort of a clearing there.

“Sully!”

“I’m here! Over here!” Came a familiar voice.

Overjoyed, they broke into a run toward the clearing, the music became louder and louder. They ran from the cover of the trees and into a palatial clearing. The sun was just breaking free of the thunderclouds, sending shafts of light onto the grasses carpeting the meadow. The raindrops clung to the grass and when the sun caught them, they glistened like diamonds, one for every blade of grass.

“Whee!” It was Sully. Ambril couldn’t see her until she looked over her left shoulder and saw a fantastic site. There was a huge tree shape standing in the meadow, dancing. Swinging from one of her branches was none other than Sully who was being gently twirled around by the tree.

“Guys, meet my new friennnnnnd!” said Sully as she swung around. The music appeared to be coming from a wind-up gramophone set up on a nearby tree stump.

Ambril was annoyed. Here she and Ygg had gotten bruised and scratched searching wildly for their friend and all Sully had gotten was a new dance partner.

“Sully, get down here!” Shouted Ygg angrily rubbing his shoulder.

This time around Sully looked at them and her face dropped. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t think---are you guys all riiiiggght?” She said as she swooped by.

The gramophone seemed to be running out of steam and started to slur and stutter. The tree reluctantly slowed with the music, finally releasing Sully.

Sully jumped off smiling giving the branch a pat as she did so. “Are you all right? What happened to you?” she asked looking them up and down. Ambril had a big bruise welling up on her cheek, Ygg’s sleeve was torn nearly completely off and his cheek was bleeding. They were covered with grime were wet through. Sully on the other hand looked fine and was nearly dry Ambril guessed from her swinging around the tree.

Ambril sighed, “You don’t want to know, really.” She said discovering a new bruise on her arm.

“And you, what happened to you?” asked Ygg huffily.

“Well, this---being---I think she’s a wood sprite---saw me falling and just sort of plucked me out of the air.” Sully nodded back to the tree standing behind her. “She started her gramophone to cheer me up and we started dancing.” She continued. “You have to try this! She said unable to stop grinning. “It’s like a carnival ride!” Sully turned back to the wood sprite who instantly swept her up and flung her up into the air, twirled her around. “Whoo-hoo-hoo!” Laughed Sully.

Ambril and Ygg watched in disbelief as Sully continued to whirl around and around.

Ygg grunted and then snarled. “You have got to be kidding me! He bellowed. Ygg was rip roaring livid, his face rapidly went from pink to purple.

“We’ve been callin’ and searching for you!” A vein on his neck began to throb. “And here you be! Having a party with your new---carnival ride!” He sputtered. “Just what sort of a friend are—“

It was just then that he and Ambril were swept off their feet and whirled around along with Sully. The air swished through Ambril’s hair freeing some of the prickles and bits of twigs. The Sprite was very gentle and soon Ambril felt relaxed enough to enjoy herself. She laughed into the breeze.

Ygg seemed to be finally enjoying himself as well. He was smiling at the wood sprite. Ambril could now clearly see her face. She had transformed herself into a green woman in fernlike, rustling robes with the red-brown skin of a redwood tree.

She began to sing something to Ygg. He looked startled at first but then shyly began to sing along. They whirled around again and again, the sprite’s branches keeping time with the song.

Ambril recalled later thinking that they were now bound up in a deeper sort of magic, a warm green energy, which swirled through and around her as she kept time with the rhythm of the forest. It was now a part of her. The wood sprite caught Ambril’s eye and smiled at her. The tempo increased as they began to madly careened around the meadow, their arms wide, their eyes wild, wanting only to laugh, to breathe and to dance never-endingly.

But it did end; abruptly it ended without warning. There was music one moment and then complete silence as the forest seemed to hold its breath. The clear, high screech of a hawk sounded far above them.

The wood sprite quickly set them down and shrunk before their eyes. She appeared to be listening for something.

“Boy, guess the party’s over,” panted Sully.

Ygg limped over to them carrying a water bottle from which both Ambril and Sully, suddenly thirsty, took massive swigs.

“So, where’d she go?” asked Ambril staring at the sprite which was now looking like an ordinary tree..

“You mean the green woman?” asked Ygg bending over slightly and leaning on his knees. “She is powerful magic, true?”

Another hawk cry was heard, this time louder. Ambril looked up and saw a very large gray bird circling overhead.

Reduced now to the size of a large Christmas tree the sprite made a decision and gathering up its lower branches it rustled off into the comforting cover of the nearby trees.

“Hey wait!” Called Sully pensively. “Can you please help us!---she began at a yell and then finished softly, “get home?” She sighed and watched the branches near where the tree had vanished slowly quiet. Everything was too quiet now. The birds had even stopped chirping.

**Chapter 30 The Gray Lady**

“Where the heck are we?” asked Sully slowly turning around and looking frustrated.

“We’re miles away from Trelawnyd, I’d wager.” Said Ygg and pointed toward the sun now dangerously close to the western mountains

“So, we’re stuck here? Overnight?” asked Ambril thinking of her overstressed mother and what that would do to her.

“My parents are gonna have a fit!” Groused Sully.

“Well I’ve no worries on that score excepting your parents will get the entire Sheriff’s department riled up, which’ll means they’ll send me home for sure.” Ygg’s jaw tightened as he finished.

They stood in frustrated silence together, not knowing what to do, watching the lengthening shadows play over the grass.

And then it happened. A stabbing cold flash flooded Ambril. Ambril doubled over and shut her eyes. A blizzard like fog surrounded blotted out everything with the exception of two large hawk-like eyes. Gray, cold and cruel they pierced her with a powerful anger.

“I want what is mine.” Came a voice as cold and cruel as the eyes. “You take them, you must pay the price.” It rasped and grated at her. “All those who come must go on!” That is the way, the only way!” It hissed at her. “You break with the way, you must---die!” The voice rose now, ferociously angry it screeched at her. “You pay with your life!”

Her body was electrified with a searing pain from head to foot. Inwardly she felt herself screaming, trying to breathe, desperate and panicked.

Panic…yes she was panicking she realized. Just knowing that made her head clear just enough for her to struggle against it, to resist. She closed herself to the staring inner eyes and, using her mind she pushed back at it, eking out some breathing room.

“You’ve got it wrong!” She thought furiously at her attacker. “I don’t know what you are talking about!”

“Liar! Fool!” Hissed the voice again. “Do you think I don’t know you in the here and now?” It seethed with disgust and anger.

She realized this being was beyond reason. Mustering all the energy she could she shoved back at the cold cruel eyes. She opened her eyes and breathed in the clear forest air and looked up at the late afternoon sky; the beautifully familiar sky.

“Ambril!? What the---“Sully shook her hard. “Don’t do that again!---This is bad enough without you vanishing like that!” Ambril now was looking into her friend’s concerned face, her nice warm friend.

“Boy am I glad it’s you who’s yelling at me.” She said smiling.

Something big rustled in the trees near them.

Sully and Ambril just looked at each other and started backing up. “Where’s Ygg?” Asked Ambril looking around. He seemed to have vanished.

And then out from the treeline came two massive branches. Ygg was about ten feet off the ground wrapped in fernlike leaves. The branches curled around Sully and Ambril and lifted them gently off the ground.

“Come on! She says we gotta git! She’s gonna attack!”

Sully was looking around, “What, you mean that bird?” She asked. “It’s just a big ol’ hawk isn’t it?”

Ambril looked beyond her just as a giant gray hawk broke out of a dive just above where she had been lying and with a flap or two of it’s twenty foot wing span banked and alighted not ten yards from them. As it touched down it transformed into a tall gray figure in a long hooded cloak.

But Ambril already senses who she was, Her hawk like eyes were unmistakable, peering at her angrily from beneath her hood. She could feel her power as she strode fiercely toward them.

The woman must have been ten feet tall, thin but powerfully built. The wisps of her long hair which escaping from her hood were a brilliant white though her skin was smooth. She was beautiful but Ambril could feel her deep cruelty and anger.

The cold eyes smiled scornfully at the wood sprite holding the three kids.

“Your minions do not have to die with you.” Her dry voice rasped and she snorted. “Dismiss them.” The ancient voice continued.

Sully put her hands on her hips. “Dismiss us?—Are you kidding?” She asked incredulously. We don’t work for---“. She only stopped when the Wood Sprite covered her mouth with leaves.

“Are you that fearful that you cannot face this alone, you must take these innocents with you?” She hissed scornfully.

“Wait, who are you talking to?” Asked Ygg.

“I think she’s talking to---me.” Said Ambril hesitantly.

The Gray Lady continued. “Such cowardice is beneath such a warrior as others claim you to be.” She sniffed and then raised her arms. “Very well.”

A fog rushed at Ambril again and instantly enveloped everything. But this time, just before reaching her a forest of trees grew up around her and a warm forest breeze blew back the fog. The green lady stood at her side.

The hawk eyes pierced her with rays of ice. Ambril found it hard to breathe.

“You must pay! The way must be kept, the path followed.” The timeless voice hissed. A pain deep and wide hit her like a freight train. She lost her balance for just a moment but was steadied by the green woman at her side.

The green woman raised her hands and instantly sunlight warmed them. The trees around them grew thicker and taller obscuring the eyes. She could now feel movement, a gentle rocking sensation.

Ambril breathed deeply and opened her eyes. The wood sprite was moving swiftly through the forest leaving the Gray Lady behind.

“I hate it when you go all transparent like that.” Said Sully right behind her.

“Sorry, that time I didn’t have a choice.” Said Ambril. The wood sprite gait was so smooth and fast it was like riding a train.

“Who is she and what does she want with you?” Ygg yelled from just above her. “She’s not evil---she’s just---mad about something.” He mused.

“I don’t know who she is or why she’s coming after me, but she sure is scary.“

It seemed like only minutes later when Ambril spotted the Trelawnyd Wall in front of them. Reaching it, the Sprite didn’t hesitate but gently unfurled her branches and stretched just enough to deposit them on the other side of the wall. They found themselves on the banks of the lake in front of the Gazebo.

The Sprite branches gave each one of them a pat, maybe two for Ygg and then disappeared back over the wall.

“Thanks!” Yelled Sully as they watched the gentle swish of trees move in a line as she made her way back into the heart of the forest.

Sully was the first to recover. “Wow! That was something wasn’t it?” She raised herself on one elbow. “What’d you think of flying? Great huh?”

Ygg snorted. “I just be wanting to enjoy breathing in and out for a minute thank you very much, without being a part of your science experiment.” Said Ygg struggling up to a sitting position. “We have to find out more about that there Gray Lady, she be seriously peeved with you.” He said to Ambril.

“So any—um—damage?” asked Ambril looking herself and her friends over for any obvious wounds or gashes. It really ad been that kind of a day.

“Flying is naught for me. But racing through the forest in the hands of a wood sprite isna so bad.” Ygg said smiling as he rubbed his shoulder. “Being earth-kind, though it be best if I be on the ground.”

Sully patted him on the back hurriedly as she looked anxiously at the sky. “Whatever.” She said “But---we ought to get a move on, you know? My Mom’s probably dialing the sheriff’s offi ce right now wondering where they heck I am.”

“Oh right, right! Let’s go!” Said Ambril getting a sudden flash of her Mom her face anxious and Feldez looking over her shoulder at her, annoyed.

The three bounded down the gazebo steps once again, grabbed their bikes and pedaled hard down the path toward home.

**Chapter 32 Unk**

They were nearly through o Sully’s hedge each one thinking their own thoughts about the days happenings when Ambril’s thoughts were interrupted by Sully screaming from behind her at the top of her lungs. “Ambril! Look Out!”

But Ambril had no time to react as she was grabbed from her bike and lifted upward. Ambril watched as her bike continued on the path alone before gently sheering off into a bush. There seemed to be a massive fist gripping her around the middle.

“Iggy? This you baby boy?” A deep gravely voice boomed into her left ear. It resonated right through her and around her with that peculiar thrum of magic. She was now about six feet from the ground and rising rapidly until she came to a stop in front of a broad, flat face. It was grinning broadly showing a massive display of crooked, yellow teeth. The small brown eyes that peered out at her under remarkably bushy eyebrows were not malicious, just curious.

But the smile faded as soon as the giant realized that she wasn’t who he wanted.

“You not Yggy boy.” He said disappointed and with a flick of his wrist Ambril felt herself airborne again.

Fortunately, the garden was so thickly overgrown just there that Ambril didn’t go far. She landed and quickly entangled herself in a tall prickly bush. She half slid and half fell down to the ground. She was getting good at that.

As Ambril struggled to her feet she saw Sully kick away her bike and run full tilt at a massive giant of a man. “Hey, knock it off! Put him down, you overgrown Rambo!” She screamed as she began kicking his ankle. The big man didn’t seem to notice.

He stood over seven feet tall and wore only a fur vest and a pair of pants held up with knotted rope. His huge slab-like feet were bare and quite hairy. His long black hair was braided and hung long down his back. Knotted around his neck was a thick chain from which a leather pouch hung.

The gigantic man now had Ygg in his hand and was happily patting him on the head.

“I find you baby Iggy Ygg!” I told them I be finding the one that is hers.” He spoke slowly and carefully as if he was unaccustomed to doing so.

Ygg struggled against the fist around his waist.

“Put him down NOW!” Screeched Sully now attacking his knee with a large branch. “Ambril? Ambril! Are you alright, if you are, come and help me, I think I’ve almost got his attention!” yelled Sully over her shoulder.

“Put me down—I won’t be talking to you until you do.” Said Ygg his face had turned lavender. Ambril could see it was hard for him to breathe.

“You not fly away? Friend, she told me you be flying.” Said the big man as he gently set Ygg down and squatted in front of him.

Ambril waded through the tall weeds back toward the path and dusted herself off.

Ygg turned toward her looking relieved. “Sorry, sorry, he donna know his own strongness---do you now?” said Ygg looking first at her and then back at the giant. “These be my friends, you must be treating them kindly.”

The giant took a minute to process what Ygg said and smiled wider.

“You be friends then? The other birdie babies and you?” The big man seemed very impressed. “I not have but two friends, one be your Da.” He nodded his head at Ambril and Sully. “I sorry, I get excited.”

Sully had stopped whacking the giant, and slowly retreated until she was standing just out of grabbing range next to Ambril. “Who the heck are you?” She asked.

The giant turned his head slowly toward her still smiling and then back to Ygg.

“I be Unk.” He said simply and waited expectantly as if that would mean something to Ygg.

But Ygg looked blank.

The giant tried again. “I be Unk, your Unk, your Da’s brother. He said and smiled even more beautifically. “I come for you when I hear of your Da’s no more coming home.”

The last part came out quietly as a spasm of sadness contracted the giant’s smile but only for an instant.

“I be walking and searching and looking for baby boy Yggy since.”

Unk stood up so suddenly Ambril, Ygg and Sully each took an involuntary step backwards.

The giant rummaged in the leather pouch tied around his neck and pulled out a small bundle of paper tied up with a ribbon. He held out the bundle to Ygg, smiled as sweetly as a giant can and squatted down again.

The bundle looked less small in Ygg’s hands; which tightened around it as soon as he saw a wax seal on one of the envelopes.

“These be from me Mam, see it’s me family’s seal.” His hands shook slightly as he undid the ribbon and pulled out the first letter. There were about ten. The top one had Ygg’s name on it written in old-fashioned script.

Ambril could see a red wax blob with a seal pressed into it. It looked like a thumb print.

“I see your Mam, she come to see me in forest. She tell me about your Da. She miss you.”

The big man’s face suddenly crumpled with pain. “She so sad---so, so sad.” He said his face tight.

“I tell them that I bring you back.” He shook his massive braids vigorously. Ambril had to duck to avoid being hit by them.

“She will be no sad then.” He tried to smile then but it turned out being a grimace. “Maybe soon, she see you, she less sad.”

“Wait, wait go back there. Did you say you told ‘them’ you’d bring me back?” Ygg asked staring into Unk’s face. “It wasn’t my Mam who asked you to come was it.”

Unk looked a little startled but still nodded his head vigorously. “They say she too sad to come and ask. They asking is the same as your Mam asking.”

“No, No, wait, let me read this before we do anything.” Said Ygg shaking his head. He opened the folded letter hurriedly and scanned the letter. His face tightened with sadness.

“See you read her sadness.” Unk nodded his face tightening too. “You too wishing to be home, wishing to see your Mam.” He grabbed Ygg again and turned as if to leave. “She too sad. You too sad. We go, make it better at home place.”

“Bye bye birdie babies, Ambie and Soooly! We be going to mountain village now!” He said smiling and waving as he moved toward Trelawnyd’s wall.

“Wait! Wait! Not so fast big guy! Shouted Sully. “It’s Ygg who gets to decide what he’s going to do with his life right? That’s only fair.”

“You be needing to hear what’s in this letter from me Mam!” Said Ygg struggling again in Unk’s grasp. “She doesna want me to go back home to her.”

Unk nearly dropped Ygg on his head he was so surprised. His face went from confused to furious in about a half second.

“But you be saddening your Mam, she be writing you with her tears---Your brothers tell me how she cry as she writes.” His eyes filled with tears as well. “You not be a good baby boy, Yggy! He stomped his big hairy foot creating minor shock waves through the forest floor. And shook Ygg like a stuffed toy.

“Me Unk! You baby boy Ygg, your Da called you this. He so proud. You must be good boy for your Da’s sake, for your Mam’s sake!” Unk bellowed. His anger was so palpable it seemed even the nearby bushes were bending backward trying to escape it.

Ygg wriggled in the big man’s fist and looked Unk right in the eye. “You be thinking me Mam wants me coming back to the mines. That be what a good son does, yeah? Go back and get meself killed just like me Da, is it?” He shouted. “Is that what you be going on about?”

He waved the letter in the air.

“That is na what me Mam wrote here, that be for sure.”

Ygg patted the big hand wrapped firmly around his waist. “We be needing to talk more, you and me.” He pointed to the ground. “Down, please.”

Unk looked curiously at the paper in Ygg’s hand and slowly lowered him to the ground.

Immediately Ygg stepped back hurriedly to where Sully and Ambril stood. Unk looked bewildered and sad Ambril thought.

“Before I be reading you this letter, you need to be telling us the story of why you came for me.”

Unk sighed cocked his head to one side like a humungous bird. “Okay, I try to be remembering.” He said clearly trying to concentrate. “I be seeing her in the forest---she come like your Da come to see me. He be the only one to come.” He paused clearly saddened by the memory.

“She ‘splain to me how your Da nought come home no more.” His neck sagged as he lowered his head. “He be deep in the ground now. I be so sad. Your Da, he be my friend, my---brother---besty friend.” A tear squeezed out of one eye and water streamed down his face.

“She be so lonely.” He nodded at the three in front of him. “She try to hide but I see it all through her. ”

He looked at Ygg and smiled again displaying all of his many yellow, crooked teeth. “I good at seeing people. I see love for you all through her too.” He wiped his nose on his hand.

“She tell me you go away---to find a better place.” He continued his gravely voice suddenly low. “She be giving me this letter for reading about you. But I not read. I know besty place is the home place.” He nodded wisely, ”I be knowing that since they take me from my home place to be lonely in the forest.” He paused to sniff, a tremendously loud one like the starting of a jet engine. “I was a wee boy then.” His eyes glazed with long ago sadness. “ I be not wanting this for you.” He continued blinking hard and looking resolutely at Ygg.

“No, wait, you can’t mean they just---just took you our of your parents home when you were a kid and let you go in the---Ouch!” Cut in Sully. Stopping suddenly when Ambril elbowed her hard in the stomach.

“I heard that story at school. But I didna know it was your story, me Da didna tell me that part.” Said Ygg shocked. “They said in the village that you grew too fast, too big.” Ygg continued. “They be branding you a---a throwback.” Ygg shook his head sadly. “They not want to be reminded of what they came from, their past. They be afraid of their own, themselves.” Ygg sighed deeply. “They have a rule which says all throwbacks be part of the wild strain of earth-kind. All throw backs must be taken back to the wildness from which they came, the forest.”

“Da remembered the day they came and took you.” He said you be just a boy of eight. The came, the elders and took you by the hand and led you out into the wild forest, like Hansel and Gretel’s Da did.” Ygg kicked at a rock near the path. “They told everyone in the village they couldna follow or they be punished in kind. But me Da, he didna listen. He didna think it right. ”Ygg looked up at Unk. “He be following you and he watching where they left you.”

The big man wrapped his arms hard around himself before he took up the story.

“Your Da he came to me and comfort me. We be building a shelter and a fiery place by stary light.” He rocked slowly back and forth as he continued. “He bring me food and tuck me in snug. He stay till I be sleeping.” Unk smiled remembering.

“He come almost every night til I be growed.” He said softly. “He taught me as much of the forest laws as he knew and then when I bigger, I be teaching him some too.” Unk nodded proudly. “He even be teaching me some letterings.” He said pointing with his chin to the paper in Ygg’s hand. “I be nought good at that but I learn the forest ways. I do that.” He cocked his head again to one side.

“When I be all growed up and your Da getting all married, he come less often, once a half moon or so.” He smiled to himself. “We sit around my fiery place and talk and laugh.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I be showing him my doings, he be bringing me pictures of his baby boys, of Iggy Yggy baby boy and the other brothers.”

The three friends were treated to a massive display of molars again. It was a tremendous improvement to the sight of Unk crying. “I watch you grow from Iggy Baby to Big Ygg boy.” His smile faded.

“One time, your Da brought your biggy brothers once---But they no like me.” He lowered his head again. “They call me---freaky--- and running away back to the home place.” Your Da, he be saddened by they running away and calling me names.” Unks’s shoulders sagged once again. “He be coming only oncy or twosy times after, then nought again.”

Unk took a deep long breath and let it out slowly. ‘he be bringing you when you just Iggy Baby.” He smiled and nodded at Ygg. “Do you member Yggy?”

Ygg was staring at the ground strangely. “I think I be remembering that, when I was a young tyke, me Da and I walked out into the forest and sang songs and told stories by a fire. There be a big man there too.” Ygg looked up at the big man and smiled sadly. “I not know you be me Uncle.”

The big man smiled back. “I be your Unk, that be true.”

But then Ygg shook his head. “But wait, was that the last time you saw me brothers? That time they be running away?” Asked Ygg suspiciously.

“No, they be coming once more---after your Mam.” Said Unk. “They be the ones asking to make your Mam brightening.”

“Why they be asking Unk to do this bringing if’n it naught be what your Mam wants.” He said clearly mystified.

“Me brothers are naught like me Da or like you and me.” Said Ygg shaking his head and smoothing out the letter in his hand.

“Here---I’ll read this to you’n you tell me what you be thinking.” He said and cleared his throat.

Ambril looked over his shoulder. The letter was covered with tear stains and written in a very shaky hand by some one not accustomed to writing.

**My Dearie Ygg,**

**I am foolishing writing to you again. I know you not be reading this as I no naught where you be going but it is a comfort to do this sillinessing.**

**I be missing you of course. But more I be hoping you be finding you a happy place. A home place where they be not forcing you to live a narrow line of day to day, but a wider river of life.**

**I be so happy you make choosing you did. Your brothers they turned out differenting. They be loving the mine company and wanting to be biggies there. They be hoping to find you and bringing you back for their own reasonings. They say it is besty for the village but I be thinking it be bestie for their pocketbooks.**

**You must not be blaming them, they come out this way. You know you were always differenting than them. I be so glad.**

**And though I be thinking of you every day and night, I be hoping you growing strong like an Oak and tall like a redwood. Go and be, my besty son, Yggy, Go and be happy.**

**Here is me sending you my biggest love,**

**Your Mam**

**Loving you my Ygg.**

Unk was weeping with such gusto he had created a huge mud puddle around him. Ambril ducked down as she watched him pull out a pink and green paisley handkerchief and blow his nose. It sounded like a fog horn.

Sully could keep quiet no longer. “Okay, so I get that your Mam wants you to have a better life than working for the mining company. But I don’t’ get why your brothers want to bring you back so badly.”

Ygg’s head went down as his shoulders came up. “Because me home village has put a price on me head.” He said quietly.

Ambril was stunned. Ygg was the least likely outlaw she could imagine. “But why? You’re just a kid, what’d you do?” She asked.

“Remember me telling you about magic wielders and miners in me village---How you be tested and if’n there be no magic, you go down the mines?” Asked Ygg looking warily at both Sully and Ambril.

“Well, I….I lied to you. I didna fail---I be testing high in magic wielding.” He shrugged. “They told me I be off the charts in magicking.”

Ambril and Sully just stared at him.

“Oh, I think I get it now.” Sully said finally. “They want you back because you can help them find that Glain stuff for them, am I right?”

Ygg nodded his head and looked miserable.

They had me down the mines training the day of the cave-in.” His voice became strained, his jaw tightened. “I heard them give the order to leave him---to nought try to dig him out.” Ygg’s entire body seemed to bend inward like a bow. “They said it was a danger to everyone, they had to close down the level.” Ygg’s voice was just above a whisper. Unk leaned in closer to hear.

“I told them they were too deep, they be diggin too fast.---But they didna listen.” He folded his arms tightly to him. “They acted like they be concerned for me and mine but then said I should be proud about me Da giving up his life for the good of the whole mine. For the whole mine? Are they daft? For the good of their profits.” Ygg began to get angrier and angrier. “Not for bettering our village as they be telling me.” He looked straight at Unk. “They be bettering their pocketbooks, nought else.”

It was Unk’s turn to look angry. “I be seeing now, I be.” He said. “But your brothers? I still be wondering…I canna ken…”

“Me family’s not high in the village. We be regular folk. Me brothers, they always be thinking of being bigger, making more monies.” Ygg shrugged. “They not just be looking to collect the reward monies but also collecting a ticket to bigger, higher places in the village. It was na important to me, never saw the good without the tarnish of the bad. And there be a lot of bad.”

“Your own brothers would sell you to the company?” Asked Sully and then nodded decidedly. “Yep, it becomes clear now, you are better off with Mrs. Twid.”

They all laughed at that thought, sad as it was. It helped to clear the air a bit. But the laughter stopped abruptly when a loud explosion and a huge ball of greenery sailed over their heads. It landed atop Unk’s head, unfurled and draped itself around Unk’s head and shoulders like a net.

“Charge!” Came a tinny yell as Ambril’s bike sailed down the path pumped by gnomes with halved bomb shells strapped to their heads; two pumping the wheels, one steering and three in the basket with sticks. Baldot was balanced on the seat.

“No prisoners!” Shouted Baldot as the bike crashed into Unk’s toe, upended itself and launched the gnomes right at Unk.

The gnomes improvised by grabbing a hold of Unk however they could and began kicking, biting and poking him with their sticks.

“No wait, now stop attacking me Unk!” Shouted Ygg racing over to Unk and pulling off whatever gnome he could get his hands on.

The gnomes were not paying any attention to anything but the glorious fight. “You leave our fix-it Ygg alone you ten ton ape!” Grunted Blagoor. He was standing on top of Unk’s shoulder and had grabbed an ear to keep from falling. He had his stick out and was just pulling his hand back to jab him with it when Unk decided he’d had enough and shook himself, just once. But it was powerful enough to send every gnome flying. Then he reached up and tore the green netting away as if it were paper lace.

Toad Butts!” Ambril heard one yell as it sailed overhead. There was a thunk and a loud crack.

Ygg groaned. “There’s another hour of work right there.” He muttered to himself. “It’s alright!” Ygg yelled. “He be me Uncle---me Da’s brother. He will nought hurt me!”

“Ah well why’d ya not say that in the first place! Instead of flailing around in the air, pleading with him to put you down.” Boocher stumbled out of the undergrowth rubbing his elbow.

Next Baldot came crashing through the underbrush. “You’re joking! This big’n is your Uncle?” He looked Ygg up and down. “Why I’ll be jiggered!” He said measuring Unk with his eyes. “How tall are you then?”

Unk smiled at him and shrugged. “I not sure meself!”

Ygg spent a moment introducing Unk to all the gnomes. Unk seemed to just accept the little ceramic men without question, and nodded politely.

But Baldot couldn’t stop staring. “Hey there Unk, We happened to hear you say you’re good with foresting, yeah?”

Unk nodded slowly

“Well, do ya think you might could help us with a few of our---er---garden residents?” Asked Baldot hopefully. “I don’t like to admit this, ya see but some are just too big for us to manage.”

Unk thought seriously about this for just a little too long.

“What he means is can you help them with the garden?” Put in Ygg finally n “this is a powerful magicy garden. There be plants that no one outside of Ambril’s Gran has ever seen before, I reckon. It would take a true forest expert to handle them.”

Unk brightened immediately. “I be knowing the forest, but good, I be.” He said confidently and then looked confused. “I lost my besty friend, my brother. There be nought back at the village to claim me. “ He thought a moment longer and then slowly looked at Ygg and smiled. “I be thinking that maybe I be making a new home place, close to my Iggy Ygg.” Unk smiled broadly again. “He be me family now.”

Ygg looked taken aback for a moment but then smiled broadly at his oversized Uncle. “That be true enough.” He said happily. “It be nice to have family near, that be for sure.”

“But, where are you going to live, Unk?” Asked Sully.

Unk looked bland and then shrugged. “I be sleeping with the trees.”

Ygg stared at him a minute. “You mean here in the garden?” He asked.

Unk turned and motioned to the forest beyond the wall. “I be sleeping with my green friends there and my friend Queenie.” He pointed to the trees on the other side of the wall. “These trees I know,” he said confidently and then turned and looked askance at a Palm tree nearby. :”These trees I---um---not friendly with…yet.” He said ruefully.

“Is there any place you know where me Unk will fit?” Ygg asked Baldot.

Baldot scratched his beard thoughtfully.

“We looking around for something. I cn’t be thinking of anything off hand like excepting…maybe…the carriage house here of course.” He said. “It’s plenty roomy enough. But we were planning on using it as a sick hospital.

“What are some of the gnomes sick?” Asked Sully.

“Naw, Nought us---“We gnomes never feel poorly,” here he leaned in towards them---“ excepting when the soil turns bad. Now that’s an entirely different kettle of cattails.” He said nodding sagely.

He lifted his boot and Ambril could see etched marks where something had eroded the ceramic material away from the sole of his boot.

“So you be looking for something for Unk right soon. What about tonight then?”

“I be having to leave for just a itty bit.” Said Unk. “I be coming back to make my home place with you, right soon though.” Then he leaned down to Ygg and asked. “You be sure Yggy boy be happier here and nought at home place?” His face was solemn. “You could come to share my home place with me and sit with me and Queenie and laugh around my fiery.”

Ygg was touched, Ambril could clearly see. But he looked his Uncle full in the face and took a deep breath. “I be happier here, he looked from the gnomes to Sully and Ambril and then back to Unk, “than going down in the mines every day.” He said with surety. “It’s true I be missing me Mam.” He looked again at the letter still in his hand. “But her letter be telling me she be happiest for me if’n I stay here and look for a better way, a better life.”

“Maybe someday you and I we find this bettering way and then go to fetch her here with us.” Unk said. He folded his arms and looked down quizzically at his nephew. “I not be understanding all yet---But I come back to stay---and maybe I understand one day.”

Ygg smiled up at the giant. “That’s grand!

“Let’s be finding some eats together and then I be saying good bye to you.” Unk said.

Ygg nodded up at his uncle and then turned to Ambril and Sully. “You two best be busting on home, I know you be in a heap of terrible trouble.” He said ruefully looking at the now deep shadows.

Ambril jumped and looked around. She’d totally forgotten the time. The sun had set and the sky was darkening.

“Holy Smokes! I’ll be grounded for a week!” Shrieked Sully as she raced for her bike. “I’ll see you all when they take the manacles off!” Said Sully pushing off hard. In another second she had disappeared through the hedge. “Bye everyone! Nice to meet you Unk!”

Ambril hurried to her bike. A couple of the gnomes had brushed it off for her and replaced her backpack in the basket. “Nearly good as new!” Said one of them as he handed it off to her. As she jumped onto the seat she heard a deep rumbly voice behind her say.
That one be right shiny bright with magic, she be.” He said. “Though I care naught for the nasty twit in the bask---“

“Night everyone! “Ambril yelled as loud as she could to drown out Unk’s last words.

“Nighty Night!” Called some of the gnomes back to her. “Mind the flowers now! You can’t keep running roughshod over them like you do!”

Ambril started off on her bike and had nearly reached the hole in the hedge when she heard one of the gnomes should after her. “And we don’t like the little twat neither!”

 **Chapter 33 A Late Night Chat with fLit**

It was full on dark and the moon had just scrambled up over the mountains when she finally leaned her bike up against the garage and slipped in the back door. Fortunately for her the house had been turned upside down with preparations for the May Day Celebration.

There were stacks of signs with arrows and words like ‘parking’, ‘lot full’, and ‘restrooms’. Some had been done in an old fashioned script. Ambril wondered if Mrs. Sweetgum hadn’t been helping out. These signs had arrows and messages such as “This way to the Loo”, “Fully Engaged, ‘Fancy a cuppa Tea?’ Ambril couldn’t help smiling at these.

She turned from the signs and realized that there was something different about the kitchen. Her mother was at the stove stirring a huge pot of glop, which smelled like lavender and earwax. Ambril managed to tiptoe almost to the kitchen doorway when her mother turned around.

“Ambril? Ambril! I’ve been so worried about you! How many times have I told you to get home before the streetlights come on? Just what were you thinking?” Her mother raged.

“Why if it wasn’t for Mrs. Sweetgum assuring me you were alright and the phone call I received from Sully’s mother, I don’t know what I---“

“Sully’s mother called you? When?” Ambril couldn’t help but interrupt.

“Well it was just a minute ago, really. If I hadn’t been so distracted by all of this---” Her hands swept past the signage and over the soaps and candles cooling on the every available surface in the kitchen. “---Why I would have called the Sheriff and had them culling through the forest!” Ambril’s mother put her one free hand on her hip and glared at her.

“I’m really sorry Mom, really. I tried to get home earlier but…well we got so interested---in our project---we just lost track of time.”

Ambril could see immediately that she had gotten lucky and for once struck a chord. Her mother immediately brightened. “That’s what Sully’s Mom said too. You and your friends are getting interested in plants are you?” Her mother went back to stirring. The gooey stuff was getting so thick her mother had to put her whole back into each rotation. “Plants are really amazing aren’t they? It wasn’t until we came back here that I realized how much I had missed working with them.” She stopped stirring and wiped her forehead. “There, now I just have to get this stuff into some containers to cool.”

“Can I help?” asked Ambril.

Ambril’s mother looked her over, head to foot. “No, no, I’d better do it. If Feldez sees you like this in his house while---“ She stopped and pursed her lips. “You’d better run upstairs and shower---Oh and take the plate of food Mrs. Sweetgum left for you in the Frig.”

“Oh---um, sure!” said Ambril and hurried to grab a well wrapped plate of something before going upstairs. She paused to watch her Mom. Her mother was clearly tired but her face was flushed and happy.

“Just exactly what are you making, Mom?” She asked.

Her mother flashed a wide smile at her. “Well, Betula asked me today to whip up some of my lavender verbena soap.” She said squeezing her eyes shut as she pushed the pot off the heat and turned off the burner. “Whoo! Glad that part’s done.” She said wiping her forehead again with her sleeve. “I used to make up my own soaps and candles when I was a kid.” Her mother fussed with what the few remaining empty containers laid out on the counter.

“Gran taught me.” She then picked up a huge ladle she started filling them up.

Ambril then figured it out. The something new was a slight buzz of magic. Her mother was making her own brand of remedies. She didn’t know she was, but she was. Ambril smiled to herself. her family heritage again.

“Okay then if you’re sure you don’t need me---” she said and turned to go.

“No darling, I’m fine.” Her mother adjusted her apron. “I kind of have to do this part myself.” She smiled again at Ambril and went back to work.

Ambril looked down at the plastic wrapped plate. It looked like macaroni and cheese and a pile of fresh berries. There was a huge slab of chocolate cake wedged in on the side. “Can I eat upstairs, then? I’m pretty tired.”

“Okay, just this once.” Said her mother distractedly. “Remember to take that shower BEFORE bed tonight. Mrs. Sweetgum has to change your sheets too much, poor thing.”

“Right, ‘night Mom.” Ambril slipped through the doorway and trudged up the stairs.

She set her backpack down on her bed and headed over to her desk. Before she had had a chance to sit down she heard the zip of her backpack opening and fLit was hovering over the plate of food she had just set down. She felt him first, though, a sharp frizz of magic.

 “*What happened out there, you two legged llama? The wards on the wall made you fuzzy, I couldn’t track you*.” fLit thought at her louder than necessary.

“Alright, Alright, I’ll tell you but I’m gong to eat while I think.” She thought back, she hoped she sounded as annoying as he had.

The fairy wrinkled its nose in disgust but looked interested as she removed the plastic wrap from the food.

“Are you hungry?” asked Ambril experimentally as she picked up a huge ripe strawberry and took a bite out of it.

“The fairy did indeed look very hungry. “*I was too busy watching over YOUR Ashera to eat*.” fLit groused as he floated down to the desk next to Ambril’s plate.

“Here,” Ambril held up a strawberry to the fairy figuring that if his mouth and belly were full he might be a little less grumpy.

The fairy took the strawberry; which was slightly larger than his head and literally stuck his face in it he ripped out a large chunk. Chewing noisily he let strawberry juice drip all down his tunic.

“Nice table manners.” Thought Ambril at him.

The fairy just thought the sound of a train wreck at her but otherwise ignored her and bit into the ripe berry again and again eventually covering his face in red juice.

“Do you mind?” said Ambril out loud and tried to shove a napkin under him. He was dripping all over her desk. As she wiped up his mess she thought at him.

Accept for fLit’s occasional slurping, they both ate in silence for awhile while Ambril ran through her adventures in the woods for fLit’s benefit. The macaroni and cheese were delicious as were the berries. Ambril drank half a glass of milk before starting in on the cake.

“*Ummm, you know*,” said the fairy in a much better mood. “*I have to admit that despite having the intellect of a newt and the morals of an eel human-kind deso know how to grow a very fine berry*.” He wiped his mouth on his tunic managing to merely smear the juice into his hair.

fLit floated up above Ambril and without warning started spinning like a top. Splattering berry juice all over Ambril’s room---and Ambril too.

“What are you doing?” Ambril covered her face with her arm but still managed to get some in her eyes.

“*Cleaning up of course*.” fLit slowly unwound himself looking picture perfect and with a wave of his hand rid the room of berry juice splatters and drips.

Ambril looked around, “What would it have hurt you to tidy the rest of the room up too?” She snorted and wondered if she could learn clean her room like that.

fLit shrugged and sat down on the edged of the plate.

Ambril sighed. The sooner this obnoxious fairy was gone, the better.

fLit retaliated by blaring car horns and screeching tires.

“Sorry, sorry, I forget how little privacy I have now.”

“*I want to see the part in the clearing once again*,” thought the fairy.

Ambril again went back through her memories of the day starting with her conversation with Ygg and Sully about the Tree of Life---

“*Skip that part, I was there, you idiot!*” sneered the fairy.

She moved onto the fairy powder episode and shooting into space---

“*That was quite funny actually, but this is boring, I WAS THERE THEN AS WELL*!” fLit was annoyed.

She moved quickly through the love struck seagull, the lightening, falling into a redwood forest, and then meeting the wood sprite---

“*A Forest Sprite*!” Whispered the fairy excitedly; there was a spray of bells. “*Show me again*!”

Ambril once again walked through dancing with the wood sprite. It’s green verigated skin, the rustling sound it made as it swirled its fern-like foliage around, the crown of brambles on her head.

“*Crown? She wore a crown*?”

Ambril thought the image at the fairy once again and not gently.

“*Well,*” said the fairy unable to keep how impressed he was out of his voice, “*that’s Hylde-vinde, the May Queen of the forest*.”

The fairy turned around and stared at her hard, really looking at her. “What’s she doing paling around with you?” He said unable to keep the question out of his voice. “*On top of that you have the Gray Lady after you, another first. She has never been known to have any dealings with those in the here and now*.” He sniffed.

“The---Gray Lady? Who is she and why is she so angry at me?”

“*The Gray Lady from the Gray Lands? You’ve not heard of the in-between place*?” The fairy was amazed. “*It’s the place between this life and what’s beyond---beings who have unfinished business or who have simply lost their way find themselves there.”*

“So it’s a place you go after you die?”

“*Well---yes and no. Those in the gray lands haven’t really passed on entirely---they’re stuck.*” fLit continued. “*The Gray Lands are timeless. Which makes it so the Gray Lady cannot tell the difference between the past, present and future---to her it’s all the same. Some say this has driven her to madness*.”

“So she is punishing me now for whatever something I do in the future that will make her angry?”

fLit shrugged. “*Guess so, though it could be she just dislikes you on principle*.” He sneered. “*You’re just a little human-kind billy goat*---“

“Kid.” Corrected Ambril.

“--- *Who has been given an Ashera and chosen by the Ledrith Glain*.” His eyes narrowed with envy, as he looked her over dismissively. “*No, no I still don’t see anything special,*” he said in a disappointed tone. “*Even if you weren’t human-kind, you’d still be---well---normal*.” The fairy sighed. “*Very, very---ordinary.”*

Ambril pushed back hard from the desk. “You know I’ve had enough of you, tonight.” She said angrily. “I’m going to bed.”

The fairy jangled at her inside her head but she pushed it aside.

“I said enough, you snotty little bug!” Ambril marched into her bathroom, brushed her teeth and threw on her pajamas. Then she remembered she needed a shower, tore off her pajamas and took the world’s fastest shower and threw on her PJ’s again. She took a quick look around just before she turned off the light. fLit was nowhere to be seen or felt. Apparently he had gone out for the night. She sighed with relieve and snuggled down in her bed. That was just the way she liked it.

**Chapter 31 Gossip at Betula’s**

It was some days before the three of them could meet up again. The next morning, Ambril’s Mom suddenly remembered how angry she should have been with Ambril and grounded her for several days. But toward the end of the week even Sully’s penal servitude had been completed. It was late Friday afternoon when they shoved their bikes into the bike stand in front of Betulas and waltzed inside. Well Ygg and Ambril did. Sully lagged behind as she had to drag in a huge, sweet smelling box behind her.

“Here you go Betula, my Mom wanted you to have these strawberries. They are really fresh.” She said falling into one of Betula’s famous hugs.

“I bet you know that because you picked them yourself!” Said Betula flipping open the top and smiling wide. “I tell you what, you go take a load off over there with your friends and I’ll bring you a big bowl of these and some of my best lemonade. Doesn’t that sound like a fine way to cool down on a day like today?”

Sully could only nod as she dragged herself over and sat down next to Ygg.

“I had to pick those strawberries, weed the entire vegetable garden and help Dad clean out the tool shack. Jus because I was a little bit late---Well a lot late.” She blew up her bangs in disgust. “I’m just glad that’s over! Why do we have 23 screwdrivers? Don’t they all do the same thing?” She groused.

“Just think how bad it would have been had your Mom found out what we really did!” whispered Ambril.

Sully grinned back.

“How about you Ygg, How did Mrs. Twid behave?” asked Ambril.

“She didna notice really. She doesn’t really care what I do as long as I get me work done.” He shrugged. “But she made me clean out her root cellar and do some extra deliveries on account of the May Day rehearsal.” Ygg shook his head slowly and screwed up his face. “She’s been acting strange of late. Watching me real close.”

“Well I had plenty of time to think these past few days.” Said Sully rolling her eyes. “It’s important to have something to concentrate on other than pulling up milkweed.” She said. “There’s one more thing we have to do to keep the old folks from getting sick again.”

Sully leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Okay, here’s what I think. Let’s just say that Mrs. Twid had a reason to poison half the town.” Sully continued. “A real estate reason.” She nodded to the Shoe Store across the street. “That would explain why she’s so frustrated and angry.”

Sully poked Ygg in the chest. “You’re making the deliveries, she knows the poison tea is in place when the stuff leaves her store room but it’s not doing the job.” Sully took a long pull on her straw and started picking through the bowl of strawberries.

“So you be saying Mrs. Twid does know about me meddling with her tea?” Asked Ygg impatiently pulling the bowl of strawberries out of Sully’s reach.

Sully grabbed a berry into her mouth and chewed slowly while nodding at Ygg.

“Yep, that’s what I’m saying.” She said giving the strawberries a longing look. “But the big question is, what would you do if you were Mrs. Twid?”

She sat back and folded her arms. “Would you just shrug your shoulders and go back to hosting Church teas and teaching dance to kids you hate?” Sully smirked and shook her head vigorously. “No way! You’d try it again!”

Ambril and Ygg just looked at each other. “Well I guess we be makin more tea remedy and having the gnomes deliver it again.” Said Ygg matter of factly.

“No, no, that’s not going to work. She already suspects you. She’s going to go around you this time; right to her mark.”

“You mean she’s going to poison Mrs. Flood herself?” Asked Ygg incredulously. “That be just stupid if’n you ask me. Everybody’ll know.”

Ambril was shocked at how naive they had been. Of course she would try again. They should have thought of that right off the bat. But what to do now?

Just then the door just behind them opened quickly. Ambril saw Ygg suddenly stiffen and knew without turning her head who it was.

“You there, are you lounging again you lazy clod?” A stiff sharp voice broke over their table.

“I’ve done finished me deliveries, Mrs. Twid. And me chores.” Said Ygg jumping to his feet and dipping his head at her.

Ambril hated it when he did that. Ambril turned around and saw Mrs. Flood again latched onto Mrs. Twid’s arm. Ambril realized with a start that they were too late. Mrs Twid had already done her dirty work. Mrs. Flood now looked a hundred years old again. Her face was nearly as gray as her hair and she walked hunched over clearly leaning on her taller stronger friend.

“I don’t want to see you in here, Ygg.” Said Mrs. Twid warily. “I have a sick friend in need of cheering up. So shoo the lot of you!”

Ambril jumped up quickly and hurried outside right on Ygg’s heels. Sully though was less cooperative and took her time putting on her backpack and slowly making her way to the door.

“She’s so crafty, she’s doing it in public! Poisoning her friend right under every one’s noses!” Steamed Sully as they turned toward the alley.

“What?” Asked Ambril bewildered.

“You saw how Mrs. Flood looked! She’s doing it again but she’s doing it right here! She’s switching her tea for Betula’s and making Mrs. Flood sick right in front of everyone!” Sully hissed. “If you ask me it’s the perfect plan. She’s going to try to blame Mrs. Flood’s illness on Betula whom she hates!”

“I think I know g up the other day,” he said and lead them to a small window half way down the alley. “You can see in behind the counter and a bit of the main floor.” He said. The window was very narrow but they all squeezed together and managed to peer inside the half open window.

Mrs. Twid had just finished depositing Mrs. Flood into a chair and was settling herself across a table from her.

She reached over and patted her friend’s hand. “Now, now, you look so poorly Daisy, let’s have jus a little bit of Betula’s tea before we tackle these real estate transfer forms. Is that alright with you dear?” She purred.

She looked around the shop imperiously. “Betula! Please come here! She said loudly. “Daisy and I have a bone to pick with you, Neither of us have been feeling well since we had tea here last time.” She said pointedly. “Daisy here has been feeling so poorly she hasn’t been able to eat a thing, poor dear! Just look at her.”

“Do you have any of the good stuff at all?” Whispered Ambril looking sadly through the window at Mrs. Flood who seemed to be struggling to stay upright in her chair.

Betula bustled over to Mrs. Flood. “Daisy? Is that you honey? You sure don’t look like yourself darlin.” Said Betula looking concerned. “Here now, I’ll fix you a nice fresh cuppa tea and bring you some of my best scones to go with it.”

Ygg rummaged through his backpack once again. “He came up with one lint covered pouch of tea. “This is all I have left, I reckon.” He said looking dubiously at the pouch and picking the worst bits off.

“Here give me a boost.” Ambril said to Ygg and Sully.

Betula was setting up a teapot on the counter just as Ambril managed to wedge herself into the window opening. She could see the teapot on a tray just a couple of feet away and was just about to toss it in when---!

“Betula! Make sure it’s hot this time! Last time, it was quite lukewarm!” Said Mrs. Twid again louder than she needed to. “Lukewarm and tasteless!” Everyone in the shop turned to see what was going on.

Ambril had just managed to pull herself back just in time as Betula picked up the tea kettle, felt it and put it back on the stove. “Better make sure it’s good and hot!” Betula said to herself as she loaded a plate with blueberry scones. Humming to herself she turned back toward the stove.

“Now, do it now!” Whispered Sully urgently.

Ambril reached in quickly and threw the tea bag toward the pot. The bag sailed toward the open top of the pot and was just about to drop inside when one of its trailing strings caught on the handle and the bag fell short, falling harmlessly on the counter.

Ambril was stunned. What could they do now? Betula bustled up and began pouring the boiling water into the pot.

“This is really getting tedious!” Said a bell like voice inside her head. She heard the zipper of her backpack slip open and a swoosh of displaced air. There was nothing but a little sparkle in the air around the teapot as suddenly the teabag miraculously slipped under the lid just as Betula clamped it shut.

“What the!---“ whispered Sully. “Did you see that?”

“No, funny thing, I didna see anything but I know I should a.” Said Ygg suspiciously looking first at Ambril and then at Sully.

“Ambril looked as innocent as she possibly could. “Don’t look at me.”

They watched as Betula carried the tray over to the older women and insisted on pouring out the tea for them. Mrs. Twid was tight lipped at that. But Ambril guessed that she had already dosed Mrs. Flood liberally the day before. Betula gave Mrs. Flood a hug before turning to her other customers.

“I bet she’s wishing Mrs. Flood would have some sort of a fit right here at Betulas just to make her look bad in front of all her customers.” Growled Sully.

They watched as Mrs. Flood brought the teacup up to her lips and took a very small sip. Her lips puckered slightly and formed a little half smile. She thoughtfully took another small sip waited a moment and sat up a bit straighter. She smiled at her gaunt friend sitting across from her and picked up a scone.

“My you were right Crystal, my dear. Having tea at Betula’s does wonders!” She said brightly and taking a very large swallow of tea she finished her cup and held it out for some more.

“Oh, well, I’m so pleased you are feeling better Daisy my dear.” Said Mrs. Twid suspiciously peering at her friend and looking anything but pleased.

Mrs. Flood finished off her second cup in a twinkling and started tapping her toe to the background music.

Mrs. Twid took an experimental sip of tea herself and jerked upright.

“Oh my! There’s something terribly wrong with this tea!” It must have artificial stimulants in it of some kind!” Her eyes narrowed and she began looking around the room carefully.

“Really, Daisy please be careful! I’m not certain this tea is---well---safe.” She sputtered as her friend hummed along with the music.

“I think it’s marvelous, this tea,” said Mrs. Flood dreamily. “Betula! I must say this tea is divine. It reminds me of some I had at Fern’s the other day with those nice kids.”

Mrs. Twid’s face suddenly went tense with anger.

“Hey guys! Happy landing!” Came a voice from behind Ambril. She turned her head just in time to see a blonde head whiz by as she felt a sharp blow to her back.

She flailed in midair but lost her balance and tumbled through the window. She landed, dazed on the counter. Her foot felt oddly---cold.

“Look Mommy, she has her foot in the ice cream!” Shouted a little girl at the counter. Ambril’s foot was ankle deep in chocolate. After some effort she did manage to pull her foot out, but just her foot, her sneaker remained sunk up to its laces in a half full tub of ice-cold goo. It looked like Kamikaze Chip.

“What the devil are you doing Ambril!” Shouted Betula equal parts surprised and angry.

“It…it isn’t what it seems, you see I can explain---“

“Huh!” Snorted Mrs. Twid. “No doubt she was casing the joint, looking for things to steal. This one and her two accomplices in the alley.” She sneered as she looked from Ambril to the window and back.

Ambril hoped that Ygg and Sully had had the good sense to duck out of sight.

“You’ll explain by working off the cost of that ice cream you just ruined!” Betula thrust an apron at her and pointed to a huge pile of dishes. Betula tugged and tugged again on the shoe. With a squelchy slurp it finally came free. Betula threw it into a bucket and handed it to Ambril.

“But start by cleaning yourself up outside!” She pointed at the back door.

“I’m really, really sorry.” Said Ambril giving the formidable woman a wide berth.

She half hopped half tiptoed through the door and found the hose in the alley. She was rinsing off her shoe when Sully and Ygg limped into view. Sully had a smashed peach still stuck in her hair and Ygg and taken a tomato right in the middle of his T-shirt.

“Lance---and his buddies.” Said Sully unnecessarily.

Ambril had of course already figured that out.

“After Lance pushed you through the window he shoved us down to the ground and he and his buddies started pelting us with---” Sully extracted the peach from her hair, “this stuff.”

“So what happened then? Anyone see you?” Asked Ygg clearly worried about what Mrs. Twid saw.

Ambril cut right to the chase. She realized he was already tensed for the bad news. “Yep, she knows. She saw you in the window.”

Ygg winced and started pacing the alley.

“I think she’s still trying to work out how much we know, but she definitely looked...vengeful.” Ambril continued as she turned off the water and tried unsuccessfully to wring out her shoe.

“Look,” said Sully trying to put a good spin on it. “She might think that we just did it as a prank or something.” She picked a half rotten green pepper off her shoulder. “But she doesn’t know about the tea yet, right?”

“I don’t know, I’ll try and get more info.” Said Ambril looking with disgust at her sloppy, wet shoe. “Listen, you guys need to get out of here. The last thing we need is for Sully to get grounded and for you to get thrown out of Mrs. Twid’s house. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, O.K.?”

Before the other two could answer the alley door banged open and Betula filled the opening. She just stood there a moment staring them down. “You have some explaining to do Ambril.” She surprised them by sounding not angry, just curious.

“Come on Betula, go easy on her. We did it for Mrs. Flood.” Blurted out Sully. “We had to save her from Mrs. Twid’s horrible, poisoned tea.” She bleated melodramatically.

Betula blanched and held a finger to her lips. “Quiet! It’s best you two go on home.” She slowly backed away from the doorway her hands on her hips.

“Ambril, Dishes.” She motioned with her head toward the sink inside.

Ambril nodded, put on her sopping wet shoe and moved toward the door.

“We’ll be seein’ you tomorrow then.” Ygg said resignedly.

Ambril nodded her head. She squelched inside and over to the sink. Sighing, she turned on the hot water and dumped soap into it. Then she picked up the first plate; the first of many. Surveying the massive pile of dirty dishes she realized that this would take a while.

As Ambril washed she snuck peeks at the elderly ladies still having tea by the window. She turned down the water in the hopes of overhearing something.

Mrs. Twid was doing damage control. ”Now Daisy, all you have to do is sign here, dear, and it will all be over. I’ll be the one worrying about the store, lifting those too heavy boxes and dealing with very rude delivery men.” Ambril overheard her say. “You’ll be basking in the sunshine while on an extended visit to your niece in San Clemente.” Mrs. Twid shoved a sheaf of important looking documents in front of her elderly friend and a pen held out anxiously for her.

But Mrs. Flood wasn’t paying attention; she was still humming to the music.

Mrs. Twid began to lose her patience. “Daisy? Daisy Dear! You just sign here, it’s just as we talked about; really it’s that simple. I’ll make all the arrangements for you. Truly, it’s easy, JUST SIGN HERE!”

She pointed emphatically at the topmost paper where a blank line was drawn across the bottom. She paused again and squinted at the older woman.

“Can you hear me Daisy?” She said high and loud enough for everyone there to hear. “Honestly, I think there was something off again with Betula’s food.” She sniffed at her teacup. “The tea of course was utterly tasteless as usual, but this time I detected something really---nasty.” She looked significantly at her friend again. “Daisy you are looking quite strange.” Her eyebrows rose rapidly and she held up her finger. “I know! How about a fresh pot of tea! We’ll just ask Betula for some hot water---with the tea on the side.” She sifted through her purse and pulled out a small packet, which she left on her lap.

“But, my dear Crystal, this tea is absolutely---thrilling!” Crowed Mrs. Flood. “In face I feel like dancing!”

Ambril held her breath and willed the old woman to not try anything too dangerous, like doing double flips off the counter or swinging from the ceiling fan.

But Mrs. Flood passed quickly onto something else. She started looking over the stack of papers in front of her.

“Hmmmmm---I feel as if I’ve been in a fog lately, and the sun has just come out once again!” She said brightly. She began to peruse the documents in earnest.

‘So let me just review this with you, Crystal, my dear old friend.” She said her voice clear and articulate. “You wish to purchase my little shop and---oh! ‘The property behind it’. That must be my home as well I assume?” She looked up sharply at her stiff friend.

Mrs. Twid looked as if she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Well---er---we did discuss this, Daisy. You said you wanted a clean break.” She said, twisting her napkin anxiously.

“Ah,” Mrs. Flood went back to flipping through the papers. “Oh---and the ten acre farm as well? The fine piece of land near the Tupelos?” Mrs. Flood was not smiling anymore. She looked accusingly at the woman she had just called her friend.

“Daisy, this is what you wanted remember? I was doing this all for you dear.” Sputtered Mrs. Twid.

“And I was to receive this paltry amount of all that fine property?” Continued Mrs. Flood pointing with disgust at a number on page 32. “You know very well this is far below what my store alone is worth!”

“But it’s all I can afford!” Whispered Mrs. Twid who knew the fight was over, she had lost.

Mrs. Flood slapped the pages down and got up so quickly, Mrs. Twid dropped her teacup, the tea spilled all over the papers and swiftly dribbled its way to the floor.

“I really don’t know what to make of all of this Crystal. I’ve always trusted you.” Said Mrs. Flood tersely. “But now---well now I’d prefer not to say what I think of you---as it wouldn’t be suitable for a lady like me to speak.” Mrs. Flood swiftly collected her things and turned toward Betula.

“Thank you, Betula my dear!” She said giving her a big hug. “I’m not sure what you put in your tea but I plan to be a regular customer from now on!” She patted Betula’s cheek and with a quick wave, she left the store.

Independently Betula and Mrs. Twid turned to look at Mrs. Flood and then at the tea now making a puddle on the floor.

Betula laughed a deep, heartfelt chuckle. “I’m glad she’s feeling better, aren’t you Crystal?” She eyed the thin woman now scrambling to her feet. “It’s funny how these things work out isn’t it?”

“It’s not funny---it’s downright---criminal!” Mrs. Twid’s glared at Ambril still hunched over the sink washing away. Her normally gray complexion had gone even grayer. Ambril hadn’t thought that possible.

“Well, isn’t that just a bit like the pot calling the kettle black now,” mused Betula still smiling broadly but this time at Ambril.

Mrs. Twid raised her chin and sniffed. “I see where things stand now Betula, I see.” Ambril watched her muster as much dignity as she could as she marched out the door and down the street.

Betula still smiling turned and winked at her. “I DO love to get under that woman’s skin!” She chortled. “Now, how you doing, just about done?” NO? Well keep at it…it won’t be long now.”

Ambril looked at the dishes still stacked three feet high and knew that to be false.

**Chapter 32 Betula’s secret**

It was, however just about an hour later when Betula turned around the ‘OPEN, to ‘CLOSED’ sign on her door and shooed the last customers out.

She stopped after pulling down the blinds and stretched, a satisfied smile on appearing on her face.

Ambril was just wiping the last of the dishes.

“Come out from behind there, Sweetie,” Betula boomed as she sat down, dwarfing one of her freshly wiped tables.

Ambril, one sneaker still squelching, padded over and slipped into a chair across from her.

“I really am sorry, Betula.” Ambril blurted out.

Betula folder her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Sure enough, and you’ve done your penance.” She nodded toward the huge stack of now shiny dishes, and pots and pans next to the sink. “Now, I want to know what you did that made you fall through my window and into my fine ice cream.” She folded her arms and waited. “You must know that I wouldn’t take kindly to some one meddling with my food, even if it was for a good cause.” She said her lips a flat line.

Ambril shrank back from her intimidating tone. She realized she would have to be straight with her. Betula would see through any of her lies. The question was just how far she could go. She didn’t want to get her friends in trouble either.

She took a deep breath. “Well it all started when we---“

“We, being you and your friends, Sully and Ygg?” Interrupted Betula.

“Yeah, Well---we, rather it was Ygg who first noticed it---Not that he’s the one responsible for all of this or anything.”

“Let me be the one to judge.” Betula nodded, looking---judgmental. “Go on with it.”

“Well, we just thought---and Ambril muddled through the whole story. Beginning with when they first noticed that all the old folks seemed suddenly older. And then making the connection between Mrs. Twid’s tea and the increase in their aches and pains.

“Why’d you think people still buy the tea if it makes them feel bad?”

Well that was the beautiful part of it, Mrs. Twid’s tea made you feel good at first, it probably had some sort of caffeine in it or something, but then it made you feel awful so you drank more of her tea.”

Betula made a big O with her lips, nodded but stayed silent.

“Well then we---found this tea recipe---“

“You just up and found it, did you?” Asked Betula skeptically.

Ambril hesitated. She hadn’t wanted to pull Miss Fern into it.

“Well, sort of, we---um---we looked it up in this old book we found---“

“You just found this old book?” Asked Betula even more skeptically. “On the side of the road or something?”

Ambril realized she was getting into hot water. “Well, we found it at my Great Grandmother’s house---“

“Rosa’s place?” Betula’s eyebrows went right up to the top of her forehead.

“Yes, the Derwyn house.”

Betula said nothing but her initial look of surprise morphed into amazed understanding and slowly spread across her face.

“Then we mixed up a batch of this new tea and then, you know, sort of ---substituted the good tea for the bad tea.” Ambril finished hastily.

“You know old Mr. Samuels was doing cartwheels down main street here just last week.” Betula chuckled and then nodded to Ambril to continue. “And how did you plan work out for you?” Betula quizzed.

“Well fine really, until today when we noticed Mrs. Flood looking worse than ever.” Ambril grimaced. “We figured then that Mrs. Twid was really after something. We overheard something about Mrs. Twid wanting to buy the shoe store and then today, when we saw them---” Ambril stopped and shrugged looking down at her hands. “---we put some of the good tea into your teapot just before you served it.” Mumbled Ambril into her hands. “Then Lance came along and shoved me through your window.” She shrugged. “And I ended up in your ice cream.”

Betula was silent for a moment. She scrutinized Ambril as she rocked back in her chair. But then she slowly smiled and laughed her rumbly laugh. “Child, there is even more to you than even I can see---And I can see more than most.” She nodded appreciatively at Ambril. “But that’s not the whole story now is it?”

Ambril just stared at her hands not trusting herself to say anything.

Betula nodded and then got slowly to her feet. “I think we need to stop playing cat and mouse, us two. Especially seeing as I’m thinking we’re on the same team.” She beckoned to Ambril as she walked behind the counter and over to her large display case. Inside the candy animals Ambril had noticed on her first day stared back at them. There was the dancing bear, the rabbit in red high top sneakers and the striped giraffe. Ambril marveled again at how carefully they had been crafted. The detail on the shoes---she could even see the stiches.

“I have to keep them in here for their own good.” She said as she unlocked the case. “Otherwise people would reach up and try to snap off a piece of them. Mind you it’s pretty hard to do that but, if you know what you’re doing---“ She put up a hand to hide her mouth and whispered, “mind you, that’s how Francis here, lost an ear.”

“Nasty piece of goods that one was too.” Ambril jumped as she saw the giraffe lift its hoof unsuccessfully to try and scratch behind one of its ears.

Ambril jumped back in shock as all the creatures came to life.

“Still itches, it does.” The Giraffe continued mournfully.

“Here, you just need to bend a bit more, like this!” Suddenly the rabbit had raised its hind leg and was scratching himself vigorously behind its gigantic ear. “You see there? That’s how it’s done!”

“Come on, Red, he’s just not built like you.” Said Betula admonishing the energetic rabbit. “Here, let me help you,” said Betula reaching in to scratch behind the giraffe’s ear. He wiggled appreciatively.

The rabbit wrinkled his nose as he watched them. “I can do it meself, I can.” He snorted and then jumped out of the case to get a better look at Ambril.

Betula just laughed. “Shug, Red, Slim, this is Ambril. Ambril, these are my long time pals.” She said simply. “They came to me when I was about your age and helped me through some troubling times.” Betula reached over and patted the Sugar Bear fondly. A cloud of sparkling sugar enveloped Ambril and made her sneeze.

“Some powerful trouble that was.” Chimed in Shug clambering out of the case himself. “But a fine adventure!”

“Okay, now, we’ve work to do. The list is on the board. Why don’t you get things started while I walk Ambril out?” Betula nodded at the Bulletin Board upon which were about a hundred handwritten recipes.

“Righto chief!” Said the Rabbit as he turned toward his friends. “She’s always finding a way to get out of work isn’t she?” He said ruefully. “The question is why do we let her?”

The bear laughed a familiar low rumbly laugh. “I guess it’s cause we kind a like the work.” He lumbered over to an old fashioned radio and switched it on. “But mainly I suppose it’s we like the music.”

Immediately an old time ragtime tune came on and they all started tapping their toes to the tune as they pulled on some aprons.

Ambril really wanted to stay and watch but Betula steered her toward the door. “Now we got to let them work alone.” Betula said with a smile. “They’d get nothing done with an audience. They’re such show offs.”

“I’ll just walk you down the alleyway a bit. The deliveries have all been made for the day so we should have it to ourselves.”

Betula was right, the alley looked deserted. “Now child, I done showed you my heart. I’m thinking you are---built---the same way I am.” She eyed Ambril for a moment. “I could tell from the first day, you were so bright with it.” She said softly and patted Ambril on the head. “Now I’ve shown you my secret, you tell me yours, leave nothing out.” Betula said. “Who knows, maybe I can help you.”

Ambril let out a huge sigh of relief as she picked up her bike. Betula really was on her side. “Okay, it happened just as I said except that well---we found this book called the Astarte and in it was this recipe. Miss Fern sort of helped us and there are the gnomes---Hey, maybe your friends could use some of the fixit juice we made for them? Anyway---” Ambril told the story all over again but this time included the magic parts to the story. They walked slowly down the alley their heads together, Betula occasionally interrupting with questions. They were so intent on the conversation they didn’t notice a shadowy figure watching them from behind a trash bin. He followed them, listening intently.

When Ambril briefly brought out the Ledrith Glain the figure gasped and ducked behind an old car. A few minutes later Betula gave Ambril a long hug and watched her ride away. But by the time she had retraced her steps and had drawn level with the old car, the figure was gone.

Ambril’s progress home was uneventful. She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open at the dinner table. Feldez was working late as usual. Ambril had not had a chance to talk with him at all. He was always in a hurry coming in or going out---mostly going out. Upstairs, she slipped into her PJ’s and slid gratefully into bed. But just as she closed her eyes she heard the window swish open slightly.

“*Wait, I just want to say thanks for---what you did back there*.” Ambril raised herself on an elbow and looked over at her nearly invisible flying friend. “*It wouldn’t have worked out so well for Mrs. Flood if you hadn’t helped that tea bag get into the pot*.” She thought at him.

She heard just a distant jangle of cowbells, but nothing else as the window slid closed. She smiled as she rolled over and thought that sometimes, all right just once in a very great while, it was good to have a fairy around.

**Chapter 32 A break-in at school**

Ambril hummed to herself as she coasted down the hill toward school the next morning. She had woken up feeling lighter and freer than she had in a while. Just knowing that some one like Betula was there to help them fix the tea problem and maybe sideline Mrs. Twid had made a huge difference in how the world felt to her today.

But she stopped humming when she rode by Betula’s shop. There was such a crowd of people on the sidewalk Ambril had trouble seeing the damage at first. Koda was taking a couple of large sheets of plywood out of his truck.

“Please, wood comes through here!” Koda said gruffly as he stood in the street balancing the unwieldy sheets.

The onlookers parted just enough for Ambril to see Betula wiping her eyes standing in a sea of broken glass. Her café was open to the breeze. The big front window was gone.

“Betula! Are you O.K.?” Ambril yelled as she jumped off her bike and tried to follow Koda through the crowd. But the crowd wasn’t having any of that and slid back together blocking her entrance.

One crotchety old man glared at her. “Git on to school now kid! Or else the police might think you and your friends did this---which might just be true.” He frowned.

Ambril reluctantly got back on her bike and rode slowly away. The illusion of a perfect morning shattered. Who would attack Betula’s shop? There was something really weird going on and it seemed to be getting worse. Ambril took a deep breath. Well whatever it was she’ have to put it out of her mind until after school. After a few minutes of pedaling she started feeling better. The day was still beautiful and the flowers were blooming. She was able to gain most of her equilibrium back as her bicycle glided smoothly down the shady streets and into the schoolyard---and into complete Bedlam.

A fire truck was parked half way up the front steps and a police car with its lights still going was on the playground. Med Tech’s were busily unloading a stretcher from a nearby ambulance. Riley came up just as she put her bike in the rack. He looked paler and a little more jittery than usual but his smile was quick when he saw her.

“What the heck’s going on?” She asked as she squinted at the flashing lights and uniforms.

“Yeah, it’s freaky today. I think someone broke in last night and did some damage.” Said Riley a nervous smirk on his face. “I hope it was Breccia’s room. Maybe it will buy me some time. She isn’t going to like my diorama of Old Town.” He continued as they walked over to Ygg and Sully. Ambril could smell rotting fruit on him again, he must have been stuffed in the trash by his brother again. “I ran out of time and had to use Lego people.” He smiled stiffly as he said, imitating Ms. Breccia, “A fine example of poor workmanship and planning, Riley, as usual.”

Ambril smiled and raised her shoebox. “Mine’s not so great either,” she mused. “I used marshmallows for the stone buildings. I’m hoping the school doesn’t have an ant problem.”

Riley laughed, “Good, I’m not the only one who cut corners.” He glanced over at her. “I couldn’t get into it I guess I just don’t believe the official history.”

“Why not?” asked Ambril.

Riley looked at her appraisingly a minute but just shrugged as they joined up with Ygg and Sully. “You know, history is always written by the ones who win the battles. There’s always a lot left out of the story.”

“My aren’t we pithy today.” Commented Sully.

“Pithy? Don’t tell me, that’ be one of this week’s vocab words, right?” Asked Ygg right behind her.

Sully winced and then shrugged. “I’ve failed the last three quizzes so I thought I’d practice a little.”

The four of them moved toward the growing crowd around the steps. Everyone was jostling each other trying to get a look inside the front doors.

“Come on, I think I know a way we can get a better view,” Riley said in a low voice and motioned for them to follow him.

He led them to the large oak tree. A fat, low branch low hugged the front window before climbing skyward.

“Come on!” Riley said, “no one’s looking!” He started climbing up the trunk using the ‘Keep off, That Means You!’ sign as a step.

They all quickly shimmied up the trunk and out along the branch. As they hunkered down among the foliage Ambril gasped at what she saw.

There was a small clot of people hovering around some one lying on the floor. The med tech’s blew through the front doors and starting shooing everyone away. Ambril caught a glimpse of a pale, elderly woman in sensible shoes and a skirt…it was the school secretary, Miss Jonquil.

The med tech’s began checking her vital signs. Ambril could see her eyes flutter open briefly to attend to the tech’s questions. The janitor’s closet looked as if it had been smashed with a sledge hammer. The metal doors were puckered in places and the door handle had been sheered off.

As she watched the janitor ambled up with a thick chain and a padlock.

“Sshhh! Here comes Skarn, maybe we can hear what’s going on.” Whispered Sully as she pointed to the overweight deputy sheriff strutting over to survey the damage.

“Nooobody panic! We have things under control!” Skarn bellowed loudly as he strode over to where Ms. Jonquil was being carefully moved to the stretcher.

“Now, before ya get wheeled off there, Ms. Jonquil, can you tell me what happened?” Skarn said authoritatively.

“I don’t want her over excited, Officer. Just a few questions, please.” Interjected the medical technician.

Ambril had to strain to hear her soft reply. “Well, Officer Skarn…I…I had just let myself in the front doors---“

“What time?”

“It was about 7:00 or so, I like to arrive early on Monday to get the week started right.” The secretary’s lip began to quiver as she continued. “I had just walked past the door to the closet when I saw the light---.“

“Light? What kind a light?” Asked Skarn as he scribbled madly on his pad of paper.

“Well, it was very bright, like a photographer’s flash---and then there was that feeling…”

Skarn wrinkled his nose. “Now we want to keep to the facts, here, no---feelings.”

“Oh, yes, officer---Of course. Well it was sort of a fizzle is all. Like a jolt of electricity.” The older woman grasped the blanket they had thrown over her. “Anyway, I turned to see what it was and…and this blast of filthy smelling air hit me!” She shut her eyes tightly. ”And—And then there was the monster---.”

Skarn sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yer sure, now? A real live monster?” Couldn’t just have been a bit of a fright you got yourself into now?”

“No…well…I’m not sure but I believe I really did see a large---skull…It had red eyes and a big mouth---“

Skarn just stared at her unbelievingly. “Right, large head, red eyes, big mouth, teeth, did it had long yellow teeth to eat you with...my dear?” Skarn grunted. “Sounds like a fairy tale, what is it? Little Red Riding Hood?” He grumbled but went ahead and wrote down her description.

“Well, I don’t recall any teeth, no…”

Skarn finished writing and stared at her hard. “Kinda dramatic, that.” He said dubiously. “Ya sure you don’t wanta think about it a bit?”

Ms. Jonquil seemed to wither under his gaze. “Oh, dear…perhaps you’re right, officer…I….I will think about it…it does seem a bit far fetched now, really…Yes, I’m not sure, really as everything went dark just then…I think I screamed and then fainted.” She patted her forehead with a shaking hand. “When I came to my senses, I was on the floor and Feldez was here---.”

“O.K., I think that’s enough for now. Let’s get you over to the hospital.” Said the med tech smoothly as she motioned Skarn away and pushed on the stretcher. “Harry, get the door, will you?” Ms. Jonquil was soon whisked down the steps and into the waiting ambulance, which soon after roared away, its lights still flashing.

“Whoa, so some one was in the janitor’s closet, doing magic.” Murmured Ygg.

Ambril nodded slowly. She was very familiar with that frizzy feeling. She could feel it still; a jarring sensation that made the hairs on her arm rise. But something was wrong.

“It must have been a Dullaith, it sounded just like the one you saw Amb---“ Sully realized her mistake just a minute too late. Riley was staring at her.

“Well I mean, it sounds like---what I think a Dullaith would look like.” She finished quickly. “It was described in the papers.” She said to Riley somewhat defensively. “A long time ago.”

“Yeah, I think I remember hearing something, somewhere.” He said evasively. “Feldez was involved with that one too, wasn’t he?”

Ambril drew in her breath quickly. Riley was right, Ms. Jonquil had mentioned he had been on the scene here too! It looked like her soon to be stepfather was mixed up in this as well. He always seemed to be right there whenever a Dullaith appeared…

“Uh Oh!, We’re busted guys let’s scram!” Hissed Sully as she pointed to Skarn who was staring angrily through the window at them.

They jumped down hurriedly from the branch and ran to join the milling jumble of kids on the playground. Riley vanished immediately. The three friends stood in silence for a few minutes, waiting.

“You can’t really think that Feldez would---“ Began Sully.

“He wouldna be so daft---.” Added Ygg.

But Ambril barely heard them. She had a feeling that something was off. Something was wrong. “You know, it’s weird but…It just doesn’t feel right.” She said finally.

“Yeah, I felt that too, sort of an uncomfortable feeling that you’re about to be zapped, right?” Said Sully.

“No, well yes, that’s true but I mean there was something sort of…missing. It doesn’t feel---like a Dullaith was here.” She shrugged feeling frustrated. It was hard to zero in on something that wasn’t there, easier to talk about what was.

Just then the front doors opened and the janitor wearily beckoned them in. “Double file, please! Mind the cones!” The kids filed in slowly. The janitor had placed orange cones all around the janitor’s closet. There was a huge chain draped through the hole where the handle had been with a big padlock on it.

“I’d love to get a peek at whatever’s inside there,” whispered Ambril to Ygg and Sully.

He nodded in agreement. They were just passing the office when Ambril heard a familiar voice.

Feldez was just leaving the principal’s office with Skarn and Chief Buckthorne in tow. “No, no officer, perhaps later, I’d like to check on Ms. Jonquil just now. Shall we meet after lunch?”

Skarn gave him a disgruntled nod. “You’re not helping any, putting this off. You gotta talk to us sometime. It was you who called 911.” He groused.

Chief Buckthorne said nothing for a moment but paused and sniffed the air experimentally. His face was blank as he nodded to Feldez and watched him turn quickly on his heels. His shoes clicked on the stone floor.

“That’s it!” Hissed Ambril.

The bell reverberated down the hallway.

They had to run to avoid another tardy. But as they were running Ambril said. “The smell!”

Ygg and Sully looked at her curiously. “I smell nought anything.” Ygg said mystified as they rounded a corner and slid through the English teacher’s door.

“That’s just it! The Dullaith really, really stinks!” Whispered Ambril excitedly as they slid into their seats, once again just in time. “Even afterward, you can still smell it.” She wrinkled her nose remembering. “It’s something like rotting flesh and maybe a little sewage mixed in, anyway a lot of rotting smells.”

Sully took a big sniff.

“Are you quite finished, Sully?” Mr. Pinwydden was staring down his glasses at them.

“Oh, sorry,” she said reddening. “I’m getting a cold.”

Mr. Pinwydden lowered his head, bending over his roll book. “Please use a tissue next time, really, sniffing like that is quite rude.”

The class snickered as Sully slid lower in her seat.

 Mr. Pinwydden launched into an involved explanation of essay organization and preparation. But Ambril wasn’t listening. She had to think through this. From Miss Jonquil’s description, it sounded like a Dullaith was raised in or near the janitor’s closet. But if that had been the case, Miss Jonquil would be dead and the entire school would stink to high heaven. The only logical explanation was that it wasn’t a Dullaith? Then what was it? And how did Feldez fit into it? He had his hands in everything, right up to his elbows. She sat puzzling about it as Mr. Pinwydden droned on until the bell rang. Ambril managed to stumble through the morning.

Someone kicked her.

“Hey, come on!” Sully said. “You know, I’ve been doing that all day!” It was just after lunch and they were sprawled on the grass. “It’s like you’re sleepwalking or something!” She said grumpily.

“Just thinking.”

“Yeah that’s what you said the last seven times. Come on, Breccia’s class.” The three walked back into the building and down the hall. But that was as far as they could go. There was a circle of teachers including Ms. Breccia blocking the door.

“No, No, that’s out of the question!” Ms. Breccia boomed. “The show must go on!” She towered menacingly over the other teachers. “Think of how disappointed these poor kids will be if they don’t get to perform our annual Maypole Dance!” She thundered.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg just looked at each other. It would actually make their day, thought Ambril but Ms. Breccia wasn’t finished.

“The Maypole Dance has been a Trelawnyd tradition for over 150 years!” She continued. “Do you think our forefathers would have allowed a silly little death threat to hinder stop them from celebrating?”

She snorted making Mr. Pinwydden jump. “Nooooo!, of course not! They would have carried on until the bitter end.” Ms. Breccia raised her eyes heavenward. “Besides do we really know what Ms. Jonquil saw? I’m not sure she’s clear herself are you?”

 Ms. Breccia wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “She’s always been a bit fanciful if you ask me, there’s some Tylwith in her.” She snickered.

Mr. Pinwydden drew his skinny frame up and smoothed his tie. “I would agree with you Opal, if this were in any way important to the furtherance of Trelawnyd traditions but really, it’s just a Maypole dance! We can---“

“Nonsense! All traditions are important to the continuance of our unique culture. Our forefathers must be rolling, positively rolling in their graves to hear you talk so flippantly about something that many gave their lives for!” Ms. Breccia pointed a square finger at Pinwydden’s nose and continued her tirade. “We must---we absolutely must go forward with our plans.” With that she swept from the group nearly knocking down a few students. “I really MUST insist!”

Without waiting for an answer she wrenched the classroom door open and strode inside.

The remaining teachers looked a bit shell-shocked. “Well we tried.” Said a small nervous looking man with red hair and suspenders.

“Yes, well, Mr. Gingko, let’s hope there isn’t any trouble.” Said Mr. Pinwydden as he straightened his tie and walked quickly back to his class.

Ambril, Ygg and Sully reached the door just as the bell rang. Ms. Breccia looked positively disappointed that she wasn’t able to give any of them a tardy. She threw down her roll book disgustedly looking even meaner than usual.

“Children, children! Your dioramas belong here,” she said pointing to an already loaded table. “And you---belong in the gym. It’s your last May Dance rehearsal!” She folded her arms and looked down her nose at them. “Mrs. Twid has been lamenting about your lack of grace and rhythm.” She sighed dramatically. “I believe she said, and I quote, “They have the lumbering gait of water buffalo stampeding a water hole!” She paused and sniffed. “Please, do not embarrass me any further. You will be performing in front of the entire town, including all of your relatives and, most importantly, MINE!” She pointed to the door. “Out! On the double!” With a grand wave of her hand she turned her back to them and began forcefully stacking dioramas. Two of them collapsed before Ambril could get out of the door.

“Whoo, I’m for once really glad to be going to dance practice.” Said Sully.

“She was in a rare mood, was she not?” Mused Ygg. “And she hadna’ had any of Mrs. Twid’s Sunset Tea neither!”

“Hey do you think Miss Fern would help us whip up another batch of tea tonight? Betula wants some to give out some to the elderly she thinks are still suffering.”

“I’m way ahead of you!” Said Sully as she unzipped her backpack just enough for Ambril to see a large bag of tea. “I was going to give this all to Ygg for the gnomes to deliver but---“

“We’ll give it all to Betula.” Said Ygg.

“What? Don’t the Gnomes need any more?” Asked Sully amazed. “It’s been what, two weeks?”

Ygg shook his head. “They be making it themselves now.” He said. “Making it, packaging it and delivering it. I don’t have to do a thing.” He smiled at both of them.

“But how’d they get the recipe?” Asked Sully, mystified.

Ygg looked quizzically at Sully. “Ya do know they get into everything, anytime.” He said and nodded to her backpack. “Astarte in there?”

Sully nodded.

“Didna you leave it at the gazebo when we were flying, yeah?”

Sully nodded again.

Ygg shrugged.

Sully nodded once more much more slowly and hugged her backpack to her chest. “Geees, no privacy---I hate that.” She grumbled.

Ambril nodded to herself. “Tell me about it!” She said eyeing her own pack and jiggling it hard enough to hear a familiar metallic clank.

They eventually made it to the gym.

Mrs. Twid stood stiffly by the piano, arms folded, and her mouth a thin line. Her eyes narrowed as she tracked the entrance of Ambril, Ygg and Sully until they merged with the crowd of unenthused kids.

“Now that you are FINALLY all here!” Mrs. Twid’s nasal voice was shrill. “Mrs. Flood is unable to join us today as she must supervise some---renovations at her shop.” Ambril watched Mrs. Twid’s neck muscles tighten as she said this. “So we’ll have to make do with a recording.”

“Now if you can possibly manage not tripping all over yourselves, I’d be grateful.” Continued Mrs. Twid nodding vaguely at the Maypole and it’s dangling ribbons. But the kids’ attention was diverted by a loud angry voice behind them.

“You nasty little rat! I know what you’re doing! Knock it off!” It was Lance yelling, red-faced at his brother. Riley cringed as his brother towered over him. “Stop messing with that stuff! You can’t handle it and you’ll get us all in trouble!” Lance’s towered over his much smaller brother.

Riley looked stunned. “Lance, look we’ve been over this a hundred times, They’re just experiments, you know ‘sciency stuff’ you know nothing about...” Riley slowly turned to face down his brother.

Finally! Ambril thought.

But Lance either didn’t notice his brother’s change in demeanor or he was to angry to care. He got right into Riley’s face. “I’ve been watching you! I know what you’ve been up to. Knock it off or else!” He bellowed.

“Lance! Riley! Control yourselves, honestly!” Said Mrs. Twid as she marched over to the two boys with her hands on her hips. “I want you both to go to the office and continue this family skirmish there!” But she had no affect on the two boys who were now circling each other, squaring off. ”Do you hear me, you two? Down to the office now!”

The brothers still paid no attention to her. “Or Else? What ‘Or Else?” Scoffed Riley. “Come on, you’ve already stuffed me in lockers, garbage cans and dumpsters. Beaten me up, run over me with your bike---“ Riley drew himself up to his full height and Ambril realized with a start that Riley was really the same height as Lance.

“You are so thick-headed, I’d explain it to you but I’m afraid you’d pull a muscle trying to think that fast.” Riley continued dismissively. “And no, I’m not going to stop until I get it right.” His voice rose as he said this. “All you’re ever going to be is a shopkeeper and a lousy one at that. Me? I’ve got bigger plans!”

His brother finally lost control and shoved him into a large pile of boxes labeled ‘May Day Decorations’, which went flying everywhere. Almost immediately the lights went out and smoke filled the room. A flash of brillance illuminated the frightened faces of the kids as a large Dullaith appeared suddenly and hovered above the Maypole. Some of the kids shouted and screamed then there was a mad rush for the doors.

“Ambril, get your Ashera!” It was Sully who gripped her arm.

Ambril quickly swung her backpack off her shoulder and unzipped it quickly…but then slowed. “No, wait…it’s…it’s not what you think it is.” Said Ambril softly.

There it was again, that missing something, the lack of revolting smells, She wasn’t trying to staph off a terror trying to take over her mind. Ambril knew that it couldn’t be a Dullaith. But there was a strong frizz of magic in the air someone had used magic to perform this illusion.

The room was nearly empty now. Ambril took another hard look at the monster. “See? It’s not moving and look! It’s beginning to fade.”

The image had begun to get fuzzy. It was then that a posse of teachers raced into the room with Bob in the lead.

Bob immediately tried the light switch. “Must have blown a fuse or something,” he muttered as he unscrewed the faceplate. “Ha! Here’s the problem!” He routed around with the wires a moment and soon the room was flooded with light. “Just a faulty wire, people!”

In the stark flourescent light Mrs. Twid stood frozen her hand squeezing her pearl necklace so hard her knuckles were white.

“Mrs. Twid, perhaps you’d like to sit down a moment.” Said Bob solicitously as steered her into the seat.

She took a deep breath suddenly. “Oh my!”

“Is everyone all right?” Asked Bob as he looked commandingly around the room.
“Riley? Riley!” Lance was heaving boxes around. “I didn’t see him get up, and I was---waiting for that.” He threw a box over his shoulder and shoved another one aside.

In all the excitement everyone had forgotten about Riley. The boxes were in a huge jumble and Ambril imagine Riley helpless at the bottom of them.

“Lance! You big bully! You might have really hurt him this time!” Yelled Sully as everyone began sorting through the boxes. It didn’t take long to get them all. No Riley.

“He must have slipped out on his own!” Said Ygg.

‘No chance! I was watching, I tell you!” Said Lance angrily. “I would have seen him leave!”

“In the dark?”

“Easier then, you know when the door opens, the light from the hallway comes in.” He said.

A pimply faced kid named Jed came in with a large bucket of steaming liquid just as Lance finished talking.

“He’s right, Riley didn’t leave the room, that’s the only working exit and we were all standing in the hallway. We would have seen him too.”

“Well then where did he go? He didn’t vanish into thin air!”

A few more of the kids had returned and stood watching.

Tiana spoke up “Maybe it was that monster! The Monster took him!” Two or three of her friends squealed in dismay and huddled close to each other excitedly.

“Great, that’s great,” muttered Bob. “Mrs. Twid! Are you feeling well enough to walk the student up to Ms. Breccia’s room?”

A little color had returned to Mrs. Twid’s cheeks by then. She sat straighter in her chair and pursed her lips. “We,, it certainly is beneath my station to perform such a menial task but, in times of emergency, yes…I’ll make an exception.” She nodded curtly to Bob and got slowly to her feet.

“Come, children, this way.” She said as she turned on her heel. She called over her shoulder as she walked toward the door, “If you are not immediately behind me, I shall tell Ms. Breccia to give you a tardy.” The kids scrambled to get behind her.

Ambril, Sully and Ambril brought up the rear and were the last of the kids to pass the office. Lance’s parents had arrived and were deep in discussion with Mr. Pinwydden, the acting principal. The automatically slowed their pace in hopes of overhearing something.

“Now look,” Ambril heard Larch Dogwood say, “Lance didn’t mean it, you can’t expel him for a simple little spat between brothers, can you?” He blustered.

Pinwydden just stared at him and slowly shook his head. “Lance Dogwood will at the very least be suspended from school.” He said firmly. “Next week, we’ll meet to discuss what further action…if any will be taken.”

Lance had his head down staring at the floor but looked up quickly as Pinwydden continued.

“Naturally, this means he’ll be barred from any May Day School functions…after what just happened during the rehearsal, the dance will, of course, be canceled. And the ball game will be played without your son.”

Larch Dogwood looked incredulously at Mr. Pinwydden. “What? He can’t play for his team, the team I’m sponsoring?”

“No, of course not, a suspension requires he also be barred from participating in any school function or representing the school in any way.” Mr. Pinwydden sniffed as he folded his arms. His Adam’s Apple jogged up and down.

“As for your son, Riley, the police have already begun an investigation as to his disappearance and will need to talk with you.” He motioned with his head toward the gymnasium.

“Now just wait a minute. Riley’s probably just sulking about something, he’ll turn up again as soon as he’s hungry---.”

“Larch, It sound as if this has happened before. Is that true? Has Riley run away before?” Mr. Pinwydden asked in a surprised tone.

Larch sighed heavily and then shrugged. “Not exactly like this, no. But he’s been unhappy with Lance’s---competitive spirit. He takes him the wrong way is all.” He nodded his head firmly. “Trust me on this, it’ll all blow over tomorrow, really. Can’t we forget the whole thing?” He pleaded.

Mr. Pinwydden said nothing just continued to stare stone faced at the square cut man before him.

Mrs. Dogwood tugged on her husband’s sleeve. “But darling, I really think we should look for Riley, he has been more than a little upset---”

“Quiet, Scarlet, we’ll discuss this at home,” interrupted Larch angrily glaring at his wife. “Let me handle this!” He turned his attentions back to the bow tied teacher and pointed his large, beefy index finger at his nose.

‘Now listen up Pinhead, Lance playing for the school’s team is a big deal for the town! He’s the star player.” His face screwed up as he concentrated on the thin-framed man in front of him as he said tightly. “Now either my kid plays on Saturday or I’ll withdraw my support for your new gymnasium.” He stuck his head out like a turtle as he leaned in toward the much smaller man and poked his chest. “Got that?” He said threateningly.

Mr. Pinwydden clucked disgustedly. “I see you haven’t changed a bit since school. It isn’t hard to see where Lance learned his bullying behavior.“ He pushed Larch’s finger away. “Your support will be missed but the school will not be coerced into mishandling such a serious infraction.” He paused to adjust his glasses. “Your son needs to learn self control.” Mr. Pinwydden continued now leaning in himself. “I suggest you begin practicing it yourself.” And with that Pinwydden turned and strode away.

“That was grand wasn’t it? Seeing Lance and his Dad get taken down a peg by Pinwydden, who would have thought it!” Crowed Sully as the three friends resumed their trek back to Breccia’s classroom. They rounded the last corner and saw Mrs. Twid holding open the classroom door and looking at her watch. She cleared her throat. “If you are not in the classroom in 15 seconds, I’ll ask Ms. Breccia to lower your grades one full mark!” She said with relish. ‘No running!”

They speed walked into the classroom and found their seats quickly but not fast enough. Ms. Breccia stopped writing on the blackboard and turned her beady little eyes at them, “well now, late again are we?” She sneered. “Class dismissed---except of course the three miscreants in the back-row.”

A belch of static heralded an announcement. “Attention, Attention please!” Mr. Pinwydden’s amplified voice boomed all over the school. “Due to recent events, the May Day Dance will be cancelled this year. I’m sure I speak for the entire staff when I express our sincerest apologies to those students who have practiced so diligently. We will of course resume this tradition next year. You will be free to participate then.” It ended with another whoosh of static and then silence.

Ms. Breccia stared open-mouthed at the loud speaker as the last bell rang. The kids were out of their seats in a heartbeat. Ambril could hear their elated shouts in the hallway. Everyone was relieved not to have to dance.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg looked resignedly at each other and stayed in their seats, waiting to hear their punishment. But Ms. Breccia surprised them when she said tersely. “Wait here.” And marched out of her classroom. In seconds the classroom was emptied of all but the three sitting glumly in the back row.

“So what’ll it be this time you think?” Muttered Sully her chin in her hand. “A 10 page essay assigned documenting her great-great Gran’s method for floor cleaning? Or a three page poem proclaiming the virtues of the Breccia family?”

Ambril just sighed heavily. There went her weekend. She scanned the classroom for something interesting to look at. There was the jumble of diaramas on the table, stacked three feet high, the tallest one was a model of a very old building.

“Hey,” Ambril asked. “I don’t remember seeing that building anywhere around here.”

“That’s because it doesn’t exist any more. Don’t you ever pay attention in class?” Asked Sully peering at her friend while she bit her nail. “It used to stand right here, where the school house was. It’s the old Council Hall. Nice huh? They had to tear it down for some reason around about the time everything was rebuilt---“

“So it was one of the really old buildings?” Asked Ambril.

She got up and picked the model off the top of the pile.

“Watch it! Ms. Breccia sees you doing that you’ll be in detention for life!” Hissed Sully.

Ambril ignored her and brought it over so they could all see. It was a model of a simple domed structure, not very large. Inside there were arches to help support the dome and a circular image on the floor---“

With a start Ambril recognized the image. Ygg drew in his breath quickly and Ambril guessed that he too understood what it was.

“I’ve seen that kind of image twice before. One was behind the shed where the Dullaith was raised and the other was on the playground that day that Lance was hurt.” She said quietly.

“I think I be knowing this image too.” Said Ygg in a whisper. “It be on the floor of our own town council at home. It be a gathering place, a special kind of stone circle.”

“You mean like the circle stone in the park?” Asked Sully innocently.

Ygg nodded slowly. “Yes, but this be a special one, one for magicking, it was na for ever-day use. It’s used for power gathering, for special things.” Replied Ygg vaguely.

“Special? Like Holidays and the like?”

“No, no more like if there is a natural disaster or something where the town be thinking it needs extra magicking help.” He continued clearly not comfortable with what he knew he added a shrug. “it was na used in my village that I remember.”

The three of them stared at the little model some more.

“Well if it’s anything like this thing here, it was a beautiful place.” Said Sully and then yawned. “Though I don’t think it has much to do with us. According to the history books, They tore that place down a long time ago.”

Ambril stared at the little model for a moment and then shrugged before turning back around and putting it back on the pile; there was something she was missing, she just knew it.

She sat back down in her seat and began to drum her fingers on the desk as she looked around the room again. On the bulletin board were the usual notices of homework due dates and reading assignments. The old map of Trelawnyd was pulled down partially hiding the announcements. Ambril looked at it again for what seemed like the thousandth time. She could see the old wall winding it’s way around the valley. The main road in, the gates, there were 4 of them, an early settlement way out in the forest and the town of Trelawnyd shown as it was in the 1870’s. Most of the important structures were there including the main street stores and the circle park right in the center of town…the center of town…the center---.

“Hey, I just noticed something.” Said Ambril.

“What?” asked Ygg who had his eyes closed.

“That the circle stone in the park is not the dead center of town. See?” She got up again and pointed. “Look if you take all the town roads and try to find their center, it’s more over---“ But before she could find the real center the door banged open and Ms. Breccia stood there, seething.

Ambril jumped and skittered back to her seat as fast as she could. She was sure it would mean extra detention but Ms. Breccia surprised them again. She seemed so preoccupied with the canceled celebration she barely noticed them.

“Go and help clean up the gym, that’s all.” She said and shooed them out the door looking like she’d like to kill someone.

“Boy, we got off easy that time!” said Sully cheerfully as they walked toward the Gym. “Let’s get this over with, I wan to go see what’s up with Betula.” She continued.

“And Miss Fern.” Added Ygg. “We should check up on her.”

Ambril said nothing she was still thinking about the circle park and the true center of town. It couldn’t be---. Still lost in thought she pushed open the Gym door one more time.

Jed and Mr. Berry were just finishing mopping up the last of the hot chocolate when they walked in.

“Hi, do you need any help?” Asked Sully as Mr. Berry leaned on his mop.

“Yeah sure, thanks,” he said distractedly and motioned to the boxes scattered over the floor. “How about moving these boxes back to the entry hall? They need to go back into storage.”

“Right!” Said Sully stacking up two and carefully picking her way across the damp floor.

Ambril and Ygg followed her and picked up a couple of boxes. They lugged their boxes into the entry hall and dumped them.

“I guess they’re going into the janitor’s closet? So this is as good a place as any.” Said Ambril.

The janitor came up just then and sneezed into a large handkerchief. “Sorry, allergies, I need to get my pills. Thanks, kids. I’ll put ‘em inside.” He said fiddling with the padlock.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg turned back around to get more boxes.

“So who’s behind these attacks then? And what they be wanting? Asked Ygg.

“Search me, probably something like world domination…so they can…have more of everything---.” Sully smiled, “like in the Saturday Morning Cartoons.”

“No really, why scare people away from the May Day Dance? What could that possibly prove?”

Sully shrugged, “Hey, it could be anything---we don’t really know what’s going on, right? I mean we are just a bunch of kids.”

They made several trips back and forth and were just picking up the last boxes when Ambril noticed a sheet of paper on the floor. “This must have fallen---“ She stopped short looking at the paper. It was an exact replica of the Dullaith head they had seen earlier but there were some other symbols at the bottom.

“What’s that mean?” Ambril said to herself.

“Come on, let’s dump these with the other lot and go.” Interrupted Ygg.

They carried their boxes out quickly and set them down with the others. Ambril looked around as she rubbed her shoulder. It was then that she noticed it. The chain was off the battered janitor’s closet door and the door yawned open just slightly.

She tugged on Ygg’s sleeve to get his attention. “Hey! Look! The janitor left the door open!”

“He probably went to get his pills? I bet he’ll be right back.” Said Sully coming up right behind them. “Oh No! You can’t be thinking what I think you’re thinking! Nooooo---!”

Ambril had grabbed both their arms and dragged them over to the open door. “It’s worth a peek, right?” She said.

It should have been pitch dark inside but it wasn’t. There were stacks of boxes around the walls. An eerie red glow lit the room.

“What is that?” Asked Sully leaning in closer. “Where’s the light coming from? There aren’t any windows.”

Ambril took a step inside and then another. There was soething familiar with the room, There were arches and a dome above---it suddenly came to her and she gasped.

“So the history books were wrong again.” Whispered Ygg behind her. “Here be the Old Council Hall.”

It sure looked like the model Ambril thought as she scanned the room. Some of the arches were built into the walls and filled in with mosaics. There was a map of the town on one wall. Across the top of one of the arches was an unpronounceable word.

“What’s that mean?” Asked Ambril pointing at the strange looking word.

“That be the old language. We know of that in Chert.” Ygg said squinting hard at the word. “Chofnoda, yeah, that’s meaning ‘Come on in, friend’, or ‘Enter here pal’ or something.” Ygg mused. “Though where you were meant to go is a mystery, yeah?”

That particular archway was part of the back wall of and had been filled in with dirt for so long old lumpy roots and some vines growing all threw it. There was no way through now, thought Ambril. Along another wall were rows of shelves filled with cleaning products. A floor-waxing machine sat ready for use off to one side.

“Yep, it’s a janitor’s closet, big surprise.” Said Sully ruefully.

“Pretty fancy one though.” Said Ambril as she admired the ornate stone carvings on the column and archways. There was a strange smell in the air, sweet but with a bitter aftertaste to it.

Where’s the light coming from?” Asked Sully as they took a few steps into the room. It was then they saw it.

“What did you say that was Ygg?” Asked Sully elbowing him hard.

“It be a power gathering circle.”

In the center of the room the boxes and clutter had been cleared away to reveal a beautiful tiled circle image. It reminded Ambril of her Medallion except that the images around the edges were not just words and lines but images of plants and animals and people. It was hard to make them out, however as a glowing red ink had sketched other images and words on top. The central image, normally a flower or starburst had been altered to have two glowing eyes and a gash for a mouth…

Ambril drew in her breath suddenly. “Its Moroz!” She blurted out.

“What? Where?” Yipped Sully as she jumped around, staring into the shadows.

“No, No I meant it’s an image of Moroz there in the center!” She said pointing.

“So the ones who broke in last night decided to doodle an image of Moroz on the floor---?“

“Someone was doodling an image of whom?” Asked a cold voice from behind them. “And what might you three be up to now, pray tell? This area is off limits to students.”

All three of them jumped and turned to find Feldez standing there with his arms folded. There was no telling how long he had been there and what he had heard. The janitor was standing sheepishly beside him.

“You know, it was my fault, I left the darn fool door open to get my pills---“ He sneezed into his large red handkerchief. “I shouldn’t have left it open…you know with the reputation that this room has…I think any kid would have liked to get a peek inside.” He winked at them.

The kids smiled hopefully back but a moment later Chief Buckthorne came up behind him. His face an instant thundercloud.

“What the blazes are you three doing in here! Get your tails out of here.” Chief Buckthorne raged. “This is a crime scene and you’re destroying evidence!”

“But, but we think you should know that…well we think we figured out---“

“Yeeees?” Asked Feldez bearing down on Sully menacingly.

Sully shivered but stood firm. “Well we think you ought to know that well some one is trying to raise Moroz---“

Ambril watched Feldez’s face carefully and for a brief moment Ambril thought he had lost his composure long enough to reveal a mask of anger. His lip curled slightly and his hands tightened into fists, but then it was gone and the calm, cool collected Feldez was back in control.

“Really?” He said slowly folding his arms. “You would know this, you three children? You being experts on Moroz, the history of Trelawnyd and it’s supposed, fanciful heritage? Is that right?” He leaned in over them as he said this. “Are you experts in magic as well?” He continued skeptically.

Chief Buckthorne looked seriously annoyed. “I wish you kids would keep out of this. You need to let the authorities handle this from now on.” He eyed them coldly. “No more ‘investigating’ on your own, is that clear? You’ll just end up getting into trouble, which means I’ll have to come and get you out of it, and I just don’t have the time! Understand? Now GET OUT OF HERE!” The last was at the top of his lungs.

The kids scrambled for the door.

Ambil had one last glimpse of Feldez staring thin lipped at her before the door closed behind them and they were free.

“Wow! Today is our lucky day! Do you realize we’ve been caught doing things we shouldn’t three times and not been publicly flogged?” Asked Sully exuberantly as she pulled her bike out of the rack and turned it toward Betulas.

The ride to Betulas was uneventful but as they veered onto Main Street they could see a crowd gathered around the front door.

“Uh oh!” Said Ambril tersely. “I hope nothing more has happened to Betula!”

“It makes me boiling mad to think of it!” Said Ygg as he sped up just to be frustrated by an already full bike rack. Word had gotten out about the attack on the Sweet Shoppe and it looked like the entire town was trying to get inside all at once.

“Excuse me! Coming through! On your right!” Sully yelled as they made their way through the crowd. Ambril saw that Koda had gotten the plywood up where the front window used to be. A hand written sign had been tacked up on it.

**Excuse our Mess!**

**Announcing Sunrise Tea**

**Free to the Elderly**

Despite the break-in, Betula was a woman of her word. Inside it was an absolute mad house. Ambril could see that things were not moving along with its usual efficiency.

“Where’s my Muffin!” Complained an old man in overalls from one table.

“I ordered a Blueberry muffin not blackberry!” An elderly lady in a flowered hat bleated.

“I’ve been waiting a half an hour for my tea!” Whimpered a large woman as she waved her cane in a threatening manner.

Ambril could not see Betula anywhere. Instead, it was Mrs. Flood who was racing distractedly from one half finished task to another. Miss Fern sat unruffled manning the cash register methodically ringing up the orders and taking the money.

Ambril managed to wriggle right up to the counter and flagged the harried older woman down. “Mrs. Flood? Where’s Betula?”

Mrs. Flood’s face lighted up when she saw Ambril. “Oh there you are, finally!” Betula’s has been asking for you dear every five minutes since school’s been out.” She pointed vaguely to the backroom. “She’s holed up in there and won’t come out. Fern and I just grabbed some aprons to help her when we saw what was going on, or wasn’t going on here.” She said putting her hands on her hips and blowing a damp strand of hair from her eyes.

Sully suddenly got a determined look on her face as she pulled the large bag of tea out of her backpack and plopped it on the counter. “Look, we’ll stay and help out here,” she said as she grabbed a couple of aprons and handed one to Ygg. “While you go and see what you can do for Betula.”

She then turned authoritatively to a dazed looking Ygg and the two older ladies. “All right, Ygg, you do ice cream and tea, I’ll wait tables, Mrs. Flood you handle the counter. Miss Fern you’re fine where you are. O.K.?” Without waiting for an answer she picked up a tray of muffins and teapots and launched herself into the glut of waiting customers. “Who wants tea?”

There was a huge answering shout as Ambril turned toward the back room. She took a deep breath as she pushed through the double doors and through what felt like a wall of magic.

“Betula? Betula!” She called taking a few steps and tripping over a large sack of flour just in time steadying herself with a rack of spices. The room was coated with sugar.

“Ambril?” Called a strained sounding voice. “Come on back child, we’ve been waiting for you.”

After Ambril’s eyes slowly adjusted to the dim room, she found she could see a faint glow coming from around a stack of boxes. She picked her way through the cluttered room, rounded a tall stake of crates and stopped.

“I didn’t expect to find you here!” she exclaimed, startled.

“I didn’t expect to have to be.” Came the grouchy retort. It was Baldot looking his usual grumpy self.

Bummil was there too solemnly standing next to a tired Betula. She was cradling something and softy humming. Slim and Shug seemed to be working away feverishly over an upturned pail using it as a table. A strong sweet, tangy magic swirled around the room, the smell of sugar magic.

“Now brace yourself, kid, this isna pretty.” Said Baldot surprisingly thoughtful.

As Ambril drew nearer she could see the long ears of a rabbit draped over Betula’s arm.

“Red? Oh no! What happened?” Ambril cried as she knelt down beside Betula who held the rabbit gently in her arms. He was alive just barely. His right leg was heavily bandaged and looked odd.

“Just hang on there, Red---We’ve almost got it done now!” Said Shug over his shoulder. A bright jolt of magic lit up the room like fireworks followed by a gentle spray of sugar. Shug sighed heavily.

Red’s eyes fluttered open. “Now I just want to be sure your making a right one, yeah? No two left feet for me!” He said as he tried to hide the pain with a small smile. He gave up and winced before he closed his eyes again.

Ambril suddenly realized why the rabbit’s leg looked so odd.

“What happened to your foot, Red?” She whispered. “Who did this to you?”

Betula raised her head sadly and shook her head. ‘Let him sleep honey, he’s about done in.”

She sighed. “Last night, after you left, someone busted out my front window, came in as bold as you please and cut Red’s red sneaker right off!”

“But I thought that was really tough to do!” said Ambril shocked. “That you needed really powerful magic to do that!”

Betula just nodded.

“He had a mask on, we couldn’t see his face.” Slim picked up the story, turning toward Ambril to do so. “But he was tall, taller than you and thin.”The striped giraffe continued. “He seemed to know what he wanted because he went right up to Red and slashed off his shoe before we could even blink.” Slim swallowed hard before he continued. “He had this black knife---with a cup on the handle---“

“I think I know what you’re talking about, the Dorcha Blade! “ Cut in Ambril. “At the Library, I was there the day some one broke into the Archives and---“Ambril stopped stunned. “They must have stolen the knife then. ”She said in disbelief. “After they got the knife, they smashed a few things and started the fire!”

“When was that exactly?”

 “It’s been a month or so.“ Replied Ambril.

“So who ever did this had been planning it for at least that long…” Mused Betula. “I cant’ for the life of me think why anyone would want one of Red’s smelly old sneakers.” She continued almost to herself.

“So then what happened.” Ambril said turning back to the Giraffe.

“Well that was it, he just took the sneaker and left.” The Giraffe shrugged.

“So, he came for the sneaker and only the sneaker.” Said Ambril softly and then turned toward Betula.

“O.K., what does the sneaker do?” She asked

Betula looked confused. “Well nothing special, it’s just a part of Red’s magic. But by opening him up, it’s let a good part of him spill out. That’s why he’s so depleted. He’s lost too much of himself. If we can’t find a way to heal him, he’ll leave us.” Betula’s voice broke as she cradled the sugar animal to her.

“Now let’s not give up hope yet, there’s still stuff we haven’t tried.” Said Slim courageously. “Right Shug?”

But Shug didn’t respond.

“What possible use could Red’s sneaker be to anyone?” asked Ambril.

Betula drew her eyebrows together concentrating and shook her head. “I’ve been thinking and thinking about that today.” She said softly. “In a way my friends are just like the gnomes here. Their bodies of made of magic really. So I reckon if you were working a big magic, the kind that needed a big shot of power…” Her voice faded away as the rabbit winced suddenly and groaned. Betula hugged the Rabbit closer. “It’s sort of their life’s blood only red’s is soft and sugary and the gnomes here, we’ll they’re hard and brittle.”

“And not so sweet.” Put in Bummil.

“Did you try fix-it juice?” Asked Ambril

Baldot snorted and wrinkled his nose at her. “What do you think we’re daft?” He said offended but then added softly. “But it didna work…no reason not to---“

“Not enough sweetness, I keep trying to tell him.” Cut in Bummil staring pleadingly up at Ambril.

“We are a bit on the sour side, if you hadna noticed.” Baldot agreed reluctantly.

Bummil said nothing as he continued to stare balefully at Ambril.

“What!” She said to him somewhat annoyed.

The little gnome just turned away.

“Not that it’s they’re fault but it’s done wore him out faster---look at him!” Betula’s voice broke as she began to rock him like a baby. “Hang on pumpkin! Hang on!”

Ambril raised herself enough to see over his shoulder. A small lifelike red sneaker lay there. “So you have a sneaker all made and ready to go,” she said, “What’s exactly the problem?”

Shug turned his tired, blood shot eyes toward her. “We can’t seem to get it attached.”

Ambril remembered the sign in the empty case. “The Dorcha Blade inflicts a curse with every cut.” She said

“Yeah, we know,” Shug said looking more angry than Ambril had ever thought a cute little bear could. “It just resists everything we’ve thrown at it.” He reached up and brushed off a layer of powdered sugar from his brow. “We just can’t seem to counteract that persnickety ol’ curse.”

Ambril was thinking hard as she slowly slid her backpack off her shoulder and let it down on the floor.

Baldot cleared his throat. “So you see why you’re here.” He wrinkled his nose distastefully. You and your…friend there.” He said nodding to her backpack.

Ambril suddenly realized what they expected of her. They wanted her to perform some sort of miracle magic. An anti-curse. But how could she? She didn’t even know where to begin.

There was a soft jingle of bells and she heard fLit’s voice in her head. “*They are not your kind, you needn’t help them.”*

Ambril sighed and thought hard back at him. “*That’s where you’re wrong, he’s a friend. Besides, we’re all connected here. And you never know when you need their help.*” She sounded a bit self-righteous even in her own head.

A train whistle sounded and the skidding of tires. *“Ha, never!*” The fairy scoffed.

Ambril shook her head and spoke aloud to Betula, “But…but I don’t know what to do!” She stammered.

Betula wiped her eyes and kissed her friend gently. “Look at him Ambril…Just look at him!’ “She said softly. “There’s no more time---and there’s no one else…I’m supposed to be the expert and I…I’ve failed...” Betula hunched her shoulders protectively over her friend. She looked so vulnerable that way.

A cascade of falling books sounded in her head. “*You’re not really going to do this!”* Snorted fLit.

Ambril slowly and carefully fished the Ledrith Glain and she pulled out her Ashera, they both glowed with magic energy.

*“I need your help.”* She let the words resonate in her head. “*Or he’ll die”.*

His reply was quick and sharp. *“You don’t need to help this lowly creature, he is…inferior to even human-kind.”*

“*He isn’t inferior, he’s just different. Besides, I have to try to help him, Betula’s my friend*.”

“Now we’re back where we started, *No, you don’t*!” fLit thought at her brusquely*. “You shouldn’t deplete your energy like that, it’s wasteful!”*

*“Wasteful? You really mean that it’s wasteful to try and save a life?”* She was so angry her thoughts seemed to roar through her. *“Look, I know you want me to think, that you’re some sort of superior being, because you’re a fairy. But really when it comes down to it---you’re just an ordinary being like the rest of us. A small-minded, silly sort of one who won’t, yes, refuses to try and think---,”* Ambril cast around for the right word*. “WIDER about the world! You can’t be bothered to try and see things a different way!”* She had to pause here as an airplane crash and volleys of explosions echoed around in her head.

Finally it quieted enough for her to continue.

*“Can’t you---just one time think for yourself! Not the way you’ve been taught to but here---now---LOOK AT HIM!” He’s in pain! They’re all in pain! They’re about to lose each other!”*

She blew out her breath so hard Bummil took a giant step back, still watching her intently. *“You know, even a hard hearted little chit like yourself must know what it must be like to lose a friend. Anyone with a chip on his shoulder as big as yours must have lost someone, sometime!”* She felt a little bad after she said this but really, it was the truth.

Ambril braced herself for what she thought would be the war of the worlds sounding in her head.

She waited, and waited some more---and then started to get really annoyed. Not because of the rather painful noise in her head, no, this time there wasn’t any. The fairy was silent.

*“Hello? Are you there?”* Ambril thought at him. Still he was silent.

*“So, that’s it, “ Fine, I’ll do it without you.”*

“O.K.,” she sighed and out loud said, “I’m ready.”

“But, what about---“ Bummil began but was shoved aside by Baldot’s elbow.

“But nothing! We should have know with his kind, why would he help us?” Said Baldot gruffly.

Ambril said nothing but wondered if the gnomes had the power to not only get through any locked door, but into her head as well. But she hadn’t the time to think about it long.

Ambril knelt in front of Betula who quickly unwrapped the leg and laid the red, sugary sneaker as close as she could to the cut leg. Ambril could see the stump was cut clean. The inside of the sugar animal was a sort of red gel. She was puzzled. No blood. There was nothing to show that something was wrong, except the space between the shoe and the leg.

“We just can’t get it any closer. It’s like there’s some force keeping them apart.” Said Shug as he climbed up on the upturned pail next to her.

Ambril took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She watched as the gray fog curtain came down around her. Betula, the gnomes and the animals were there with her.

She could now clearly see the magic flowing from him. It was the same color as the gel inside, red. And looked like a river flowing out of him and around her. Now she understood the urgency. The flow out was enormous she wondered how he could have managed this long. In fact, even the few seconds she had spent watching the magic flow she could see the rabbit had dimmed just slightly…and then a little more…

Ambril heard the gentle jangle of wind chimes. “*Don’t just sit there, Use the Ashera*, *the Ledrigth Glain will empower you*.” A bored voice sounded in her head.

Ambril pointed the Ashera toward the Rabbit and thought about the order of what she wanted to have happen. First, she should recharge the rabbit by giving it a boost of energy.

Just as she thought it, the Ashera resonated. The Ledrith Glain felt warm against her chest as a huge ball of energy shot out at the rabbit. It hit him hard, and exploded in a spray of sparks. He jerked briefly and glowed for an instant before he relaxed. He did look a little better but there was still a river of red energy flooding the room, flowing out of him and around her. Again he seemed to be dimming before her eyes.

*“Look closely at the wound, do you see that black threading?”* fLit chimed. *That’s the reason they’ve not been able to heal him properly. It’s the curse from the knife.”*

“Well what do we do with it?”Asked Ambril.

*“We must unpick it of course, before weaving a healing*.” Came the fairy’s reply.

“Unpick? Weave? I don’t know what you’re talking about. How do I do that?”Asked Ambril wishing she had paid more attention when an elderly friend had once tried to teach her how to sew. “Come on, how do I do that?”

There was a long pause.  *“That’s all I know. Just that you must get all of it out or it will begin to infect his entire system.”* Said the Fairy quietly.

Ambril sighed, she was getting tired of working blind. It felt like she was spinning her wheels more than half the time. But she pointed her Ashera one more time and focused on the thin threads of darkness. The Ashera pointed a laser-like bright beam of light directly at the blackness. Everywhere it touched the blackness burned away. She went once around the cut and then once again trying to pick up all the little bits she had missed the first time.

*“Did I get it all?’* She asked anxiously, squinting at her work critically.

*“Just that one little piece… yes there…and yes I think that was the last one.”* Said fLit.

*“Now, you must weave a healing*.” *“It feels a bit like weaving, they tell me.”* He said folding his arms. *“Better do it now, he’s losing energy quickly now.”*

Ambril had no idea what knitting felt like, she’d never done that either. But once again, she pointed the Ashera with one hand and picked up the red shoe with the other. She gently held it up to the leg and with a soft slurp they stuck together. For a moment the ebb of energy stopped but Ambril could see some of it still curling up from the cut line like smoke from a fire. She stopped suddenly afraid and blinked hard.

*“Come on, you said you had to try*.” Chided the fairy

She forced herself to think about the cut around the leg and the edge of the new sneaker. Now that the energy flow had stopped she could see that the cut ends looked like frayed cloth. Gently, carefully she began to one by one fuse the rabbit’s magical fiber together. It was awkward at first but after a bit it became easier.

She concentrated on getting every strand and making it whole. The rabbit’s big toe began to wiggle half way through, then all the toes flexed at. Ambril had no concept of time, She felt weightless, in fact she couldn’t feel her body at all. It was as if this small, simple task brought her down to such an elemental place in the universe, all else was meaningless. She smiled broadly as she fused the final strand. fLit had forgotten himself and had come to hover near her looking almost unrecognizable. He was smiling. Then he actually laughed a low treble chime.

The rabbit’s ankle wiggled gently and she heard a rumbly giggle coming from someplace far away…and then…

Ambril found herself flying across the storage room. There was a chorus of laughter as she landed in a tangle of mops and brooms.

“Sorry! Sorry about that! Didn’t mean to do that!” Came the Rabbit’s voice. “No control, yet!”

Ambril raised her head and saw Red standing up, large as life on the upturned pail he had been lying on near death a few moment s before.

“Works a treat!” He said cheerfully as he put all his weight on his new foot and bounced around.

Betula kissed the Rabbit on the top of the head and laughed happily as she picked her way over to Ambril.

“You did it Sweet Pea! You saved him!” Ambril was soon free of the mops and brooms and swept up in a big Betula hug. “Thank you, Thank you!”

“Oh yeah, thanks bucket’s there, Ambril!” Red had hopped over quickly to join them, balancing on Betula’s shoulder and gently pulling Ambril’s ear. “Don’t know what you did, or how but it sure did the trick!” He said and letting go of Ambril’s ear began pulling his own. “I guess I owe you one.”

“One! I’d say you owe her twenty or thirty at least.” Mused Slim as he ambled over nearly tripping on one or the brooms lying on the floor.

“He’s always been a bit stingy.” Said Shug smiling as he looked critically at his friend over the heads of the gnomes. “I’m thinking he still needs a bit of a rest though.” He continued. “And maybe we ought to see how things are going out front, it didn’t look too pretty a while back and could only have gotten---“

Betula let Ambril go quickly. “Why you’re thinking around and mostly ahead of us as usual, Shug.” She smoothed out her hair and grabbed a fresh apron from a nearby peg.

“Slim you and Shug get Red to lie down again if you can. We also will need more shortcake on the double. Got that?” She said very businesslike but then smiled. “We can celebrate some more after closing time.”

“I guess we’ll be taking ourselves off now.” Said Baldot and Bummil.

“Thanks boys, for showing up and giving it your best.” She winked at them. “You were right after all about the fairy, he’s not so bad, right”

Baldot immediately bristled. “You know as well as I do that I never said anything close to nice about that little Gypsy Moth, and I never---!”

It was Bummil this time who elbowed him. “And we thank you and him alike. Now we’ve more work in the garden tonight.” He shoved the older gnome toward the back door. “So we best be going.” Then to Ambril he said. “Knew you could do it!....Well I sort of hoped…no it be more like kinda wished…and then you surprised us all and came through and done it right good!”

Ambril really had nothing to say to this so she shrugged and smiled as she watched the gnomes file out the backdoor.

The now familiar tink-tink of their ceramic books on the stone threshold made Ambril smile as she turned toward the shop and braced herself. Shug was right, it probably wasn’t going to be pretty. The door was open and Betula had stepped through. There she stood, framed by the doorway, hands on her hips, immobile. “That bad huh?” asked Ambril as she peaked around her.

“---And that’ll be $10.75 Miss Thyme,” Sully said and smiled at the large woman in the flowery hat who smiled back at her. Ambril recognized her as the woman threatening everyone with her cane.

All the tables were filled with happy customers, the line at the counter was moving smoothly with Sully whizzing back and forth with ease.

“Saint’s alive,” whispered Betula to herself. “She reminds me a me, years ago!”

Sully breezed past them with a teetering pile of plates, “you have that hot fudge for table 7, Ygg?”

“Yep and the last of the shortcakes as well.” Ygg piped up they two of them noticed Betula and Ambril standing there at the same time.

“We’ll be needing more of that shortcake real soon, Betula, it’s real good.” Said Ygg.

“Got it all squared away back there?” Asked Sully as she scooped up the sundae and shortcakes and was off again but just as quickly back again.

Betula’s laughter rumbled around the kitchen.

“Well I see I should just put my feet up and watch the show. You two seemed to have it all covered!” Betula chuckled as she looked at the clock. “Why don’t you kids skedaddle?” She said as she gently shook her head in disbelief. “Thank you all, for everything. She said gratefully. “Thanks to you I still have a business and friends.”

Betula squinted again at the clock and walked gingerly over to the front door. “But, I’m thinking that for the first time since I opened my doors twenty years ago, I’m closing early!”

She quickly flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED and said in a loud voice. “Closing Time folks! Be sure and come again tomorrow though, we’ll still be serving our lovely Sunrise Tea!”

A low rumble of discontent greeted her. “And, it’ll still be free!”

There were more interested grunts of approval now as the scrapping of chair legs on tile sounded throughout the shop and people filed obediently out the door. Betula smiled as she took the aprons from Sully and Ygg. “Thanks again to you all, free ice cream for you three for the rest of the month!” She said smiling down at them.

That put a smile on Ambril’s face as they walked out into the sunshine slanting toward evening. They got on their bikes as Betula drew the shade down on the door.

“So, you’re coming to Miss Fern’s for dinner are ya?” Ygg asked as they started off. “She’s been asking about you.”

“Sure, but I’ll have to call my Mom.” Said Sully.

“Me too.” Said Ambril though it would probably be Mrs. Sweetgum who would answer.

The three sped off down the street just as the sun was making it’s last curtain call and preparing to dive behind the western hills. The shadows had already begun to grow and deepen. As they turned the corner and coasted toward Miss Fern’s house, a tall thin shadow disengaged itself from Mrs. Flood’s front porch and moved resolutely toward them. It’s long flat feet slapping the pavement.

“Uh Oh, it’s Mrs. Twid,” said Sully in a low voice, “and she does not look happy.”

That was an understatement. She had drawn herself, her hands forming hard, knobby fists at her side. She bent slightly as stopped in front of Ygg towering over him. Ambril could see her face was tight with rage.

“Ah, Hi Mrs. Twid, were you visiting Mrs. Flood?” Asked Sully hesitantly.

Mrs. Twid paid no attention to her. “I know all, now.” She sneered at Ygg. “It was you all along, wasn’t it?” Her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened. “You imbeciles ruined everything!” She shrieked, fairly knocking Ambril sideways with surprise. “I could have had a nice home again! One befitting a Twid.” She raged. “Finally a little money which would have gotten the attention and homage that this village owes my family. “ She was breathing hard now her cheeks puffing in and out. “It used to be that the Twid name meant something here! Why before the Mine closed---we were like Gods to the villagers---and lived like royalty.” She sputtered angrily still watching Ygg closely. Ygg had gone white and was as still as a statue. “But the mine---it was those fool miners…and when the money ran out everyone left. Everyone but me, because---I knew that one day the family of Twid would rise again and this town would once again bow down to us.” Mrs. Twid seemed to go limp then and her shoulders rounded. In her face however her eyes burned with maniacal anger.

“It was to begin today---Our rise to glory! And it would have happened---if had you hadn’t gotten in the way!”

“Look, we’re sorry, Mrs. Twid but we---“ began Sully but was cut off as Mrs. Twid continued.

“Yes, this is all your fault you lousy little Miner’s son---Miners are always the trouble!” She screeched, “wanting better wages, safer working environments, wanting, wanting, wanting until there was nothing left to run the mine! Ridiculous! Why should we care about your sad, little lives, when there are always so many more to take your place!”

Ambril grabbed Ygg’s arm and tried to pull him away, but it was too late. Mrs. Twid grasped his shirt collar and began to squeeze as she looked hatefully at Ygg, her mouth began to stretch in an unnatural skull like grin.

“But now, I will have my revenge on you Miners!” Her grin grew even taunter as Ygg began to choke. “I had an interesting conversation with your older brother today.” She breathed at Ygg inches from his face.

Ygg went limp as he stared at her in horror.

“Yes,” She said smoothly and then to Ambril and Sully. “Did you know that your friend here has a price on his head? He’s a wanted man in his home town.” She sniffed. “Not much of a reward, but seeing as you’re just a worthless little miner’s runt…it’s a pleasant surprise.” She grinned again. “You’re brothers are on their way here to collect you, you are valuable to the mining company.” She hissed at him.

“And don’t even think about running away again! I’ve alerted the authorities AND the principal, they’re out in force looking for you even now!” She lifted Ygg right off his feet, his face now darkening as he struggled to breathe.

“Poor little Ygg, not able to finish school like his my sad little sister wanted!” She said in a sing-song voice. “No, You’ll go down the mines to die just like your father and father’s father!”

There was a booming sound as two huge, hairy feet landed next to Ambril. The pavement vibrated and Ambril nearly lost her footing as Unk stepped forward and without preamble grabbed both Mrs. Twid and Ygg around the waist and lifted them off he ground.

 “Let me Yggy go!” He thundered angrily inches from the face of a now terrified Mrs. Twid. She froze for an instant incapable of movement as Ygg wrenched himself freed of her steely grip. Her face whitened as she realized she had been lifted off the ground by a giant---

“Troll!” She screamed loudly. “Troll! Run for your lives! God save us!” She writhed in agony as she struggled to release herself.

Unk looked at her in disgust and shook her once experimentally and then again. She stopped wriggling and simply cowered in his grasp covering her head with her arms and whimpering.

“I be no Troll, I be Ygg’s Unk…I here to guardy him, protecting him from nasties like you. ”

He opened his fist suddenly and watched as Mrs. Twid slid to the ground and unsteadily took a few steps backward.

“You, bad! You work him like he not be a child!” Unk stormed at her. “You be going now, I be done with you. We be not trusting you.” Unk continued disgustedly. “NOW GO!” He thundered. Ambril could feel the strength of his shout resonate through her. There was that familiar frizz of magic as Mrs. Twid was knocked backward as if by an invisible hand. Her shoes went flying. She finally got her legs working well enough to put them to use and was half a block away in the blink of an eye.

Unk watched calmly as she raced out of sight. “Good, she be gone, now, won’t bother me Yggy.” He said matter-of-factly turning back to his nephew. “I sorry to be going so long. I ask Queenie to keep eyes on you. Queenie be my friend. But I be staying now.” He said smiling down at his nephew then he looked concerned as he saw Ygg’s terrified face. “You feel Okey?”

Ygg had by this time gotten his breath back but the shock of what Mrs. Twid had said to him had hit him hard.

“It be not any matter if’n I be O.K. or no---I be going now. I have to get well away from here before they come for me and take me back,” he said sadly.

Unk looked at him quizzically and scratched his head. “What you be saying? You tell me you want to be schooled here.” He said mystified. “Why you be wanting to leave?”

Ygg lowered his head and sighed. Ambril thought he looked beaten.

“You heard her say she’d talked to me brothers and they be knowing now where I am.” He said quietly looking at his shoes.

“I be telling them you wishing to stay, your Mam wishing you to stay, they go home again when they know what’s besty for Ygg” Unk said.

“No, no, they not want what’s best for me, they be wanting what’s best for themselves.” He said slowly raising his head. “I been thinking I had found a new home and a new kind of family, and now, I be leaving this one too.”

Sully’s foot tapped impatiently as she folded her arms and said stiffly. “So that’s it then? You’re giving up? Turning tail and running for the hills?” She asked incredulously. “What happened to “Buck up there, can’t quit now!” She barked, “Don’t quit, Sully, the best parts of life are always the tough ones you have to wrestle to the ground! Right? Sound familiar?” She was miffed. “How many times have you said that to me?”

Ygg snorted. “This be not some remedy making, this be my freedom.” Ygg shook his head. “They be not letting me get loose again, I be too good at finding them the Glain.” He grimaced.

Just then headlights flashed across them as a car rounded the corner and bore down upon them. As it slid through the pool of light under a street light, Ambril caught her breath. It was a police car.

“Ygg! It’s the cops!” She said and tried to shield him from the lights, “you have to hide!”

Ygg vaulted off his bike aiming for the bushes but was stopped in mid-jump. Unk slowly lowered him to the ground and set him upright as the police car slowed to a stop.

“No, no we be not running. We stand here together, we be family. I help.” Said Unk patting his chest making his hairy little pouch wriggle as if alive.

Chief Buckthorne slowly and wearily stepped from his car. “I should have known, YOU three again.” He said pursing his lips. “Trouble just follows you like a love-starved pup, doesn’t it…I should just assign a deputy to you, it would save time.”

He got out his weathered notepad and flipped through a couple of pages as he walked slowly up to Ygg. “So, I had a call from Crystal Twid who’s been acting as your guardian…as far as that goes.” He paused here to sift through some more pages. “And she claims you’re a runaway, my boy.”

Ygg didn’t even look up he just shrugged.

“Is that all you have to say? You know I have to take you into protective services, don’t you? Can’t let an underage kid fend for himself now, that wouldn’t be right.” He cleared his throat. “Though I have to say how you managed to stay alive in Mrs. Twid’s care is beyond my imagination. She doesn’t exactly lean toward motherliness,” he ruminated looking Ygg up and down. “Yep, it looks like you could use a little feeding up in the very least.” He flipped his notepad closed. “Now come on along kid, we’ll see about getting you a bed and some supper anyhow.” He put his arm around Ygg and patted his shoulder.

“Chief? Mr. Officer? I be wanting you to read this---it be from Ygg’s Mam.” Said Unk. He pulled the hairy pouch from around his neck and handed it to the Chief who took it gingerly as if he half expected it to bite him. Ambril thought it looked like it could, almost.

“I be Ygg’s Unk-ly.” I be here to take his care up and guard him. His Mam wants it.” He nodded hard at the pouch in the Chief’s hands.

Holding it at arm’s length, the Chief opened the pouch flap and gingerly pulled out a sealed envelope. It looked just like the one Unk had earlier but this one had a fresh seal. The red wax was even more messily applied with another large thumb print in the center.

The Chief handed back the pouch, looking relieved that he could get rid of it and turned his attention to the envelope. He broke the seal, unfolded it and read the letter through. Then he looked carefully up at Unk and down at Ygg---twice. He showed the letter to Ygg.

“Is this your mother’s writing?” He asked curtly.

Ygg looked at it carefully and smiled. “That be me Mam’s writing!” He said smiling brightly. He scanned the letter quickly and grinned again. “She be right sharp me Mam, always thinking.”

Ambril had been able to peer over Ygg’s shoulder just long enough to read:

**To whom this might mean something,**

**This be Ygg Drasil’s Mam, Skylla Twid Drasil. I wish all to know that I be wanting Ygg to finish schooling in Trelawnyd. I be not wanting his brothers to get at him no-ways. I be wanting his Uncle, Urgan Drasil to take up his care and living with him until he is growed and able to go his own way.**

**Hoping you Best Wishes,**

**Skylla Drasil**

There also seemed to be some official looking papers. And a family photo snapped at a happier time. There was a boyish Ygg and Unk sitting next to a broadly smiling man who had Ygg’s unruly hair and bright smile. A tall thin woman stood proudly behind them with a homely but happy smile on her face.

Chief took the papers back. “These guardian papers look complete. Made out to Urgan Drasil.” He peered up at the Giant in front of him. “That you?”

“That be me, I Urg.” Said the big man. “I be Ygg’s Unk and Guardy.” He said proudly.

“So that’s where you went!” Said Ambril looking up at him admiringly. “You went back to Chert to get these papers together.”

Unk nodded. “I knowed it be not long before Ygg’s brothers finding him. They be wanting him for mining work, that be true. When Yggy told me he be not wanting that, I went back to tell his Mam how he is. She so happy to hear you be happying here.” His smile was huge, remembering.

“Well we’ll have to verify all of this of course. Where are you staying?”

With that Unk looked blank. “I be just back today---”

The Chief looked at him quizzically. “No home? Well then, you’ll have to come with me anyway Ygg.” Said the Chief.

“No, I’ll stay here with me friends and Unk.” Said Ygg firmly.

“Yes, they can stay at our house until they find a place!” Put in Sully.

But the Chief was emphatic. “Nope, can’t be done that way, you need a roof of your own and a place to break bread. I can’t just leave you here on the sidewalk.”

“Why Chief Buckthorne whatever are you talking about? Unk now don’t you remember asking me about my spare rooms?” Came a quavering voice from the shadows. Miss Fern stepped into the light. “They’re staying with me, of course.” She continued kindly smiling. “In fact, supper’s waiting, would you like to join us Bucky?” She asked.

**Chapter 33 Supper with Fern**

*“Bucky?”* Thought Ambril barely disguising a smile with a small cough.

Chief Buckthorne looked more uncomfortable than usual in his rumpled suit. He fiddled with his tie. “I’m going to have to see these---rooms of your Fern.” He said.

“Well sure! Come and take a gander, we were just on our way out there anyway, that’s where supper’s laid.” She said easily. “Would you mind helping me back there? I’m a little wobbly today.” She took up the Chief’s arm. “You kids go one ahead, don’t wait for us.” She waved them on.

But where were they supposed to go? “Come on!” Whispered Sully, I think she means the Garage.”

Ygg looked apprehensive as they jogged up the driveway. “I’m sure it’s been cleaned up, Ygg.” Said Ambril encouragingly.

“They must of, no one could live in that place the way it was.”

Ygg grimaced as they raced around the house.

To Ambril, the garage looked the same on the outside at first. It looked more like a plant support than an actual building. The Navel Mundi buds waved in the breeze. There was a welcome glow through the small paned windows. The arched garage doors seemed to have been freshly painted.

As they jumped up the porch steps Ambril could see the gleam of the shiny polished door knob. Half the door opened easily as the hinges had been oiled. Inside, things had really changed. In fact, Ambril barely recognized the place. The stonewalls had been cleaned and dusted. The vines looked contentedly well tended. All the spiders had apparently been coaxed out from the rafters which were lit by the soft glow of a blazing fire in the fireplace. A large black teapot burbling on a hook just above the flames.

The heaps of rusty equipment and trash had been removed and the floors had cleaned and polished. The kitchen shown with fresh paint, the slab workbench now doubled as a kitchen table. There was a large bowl of cherries set in the middle of it.

The Chief and Miss Fern had come up behind them. He sighed with relief. “Well, this looks right nice, Fern.” He said admiringly as he tucked away all the important papers into his notebook and slipped it under his arm, “Nice and tidy”.

“We’ll be down at the police station bright and early Monday Morning, Bucky, I’ll bring you some of my peach scones.” Said Miss Fern as she beckoned to the kids. “Come on in.” She said tugging on his arm.

There were two doorways cut into the backwall, One had recently been enlarged for Unk. The other looked puny beside it. Sully went straight over to it and looked inside.

“Hey Ygg, this must be your room!” Shouted Sully.

Ygg joined her as fast as he could with Ambril right behind him. The room was small but snug. There was a window open to the garden. Ambril could here the low staccato of crickets. A simple wooden table and chair, and bookshelf stuffed with books. And a bed covered with a worn quilt.

Ygg gasped. “Me bed! These are me books and…and me Mam---she made this quilt for me when I be a youngin’.” He said excitedly.

He flopped down on the bed and tried to hug the whole thing at once.

“The books be no trouble but the bed was pokey.” Unk slightly bent over smiled through the doorway. “It be poking at every branch and vine on way.” I be getting so angry I nearly leave it for forest sprites, but I not.” He looked hopefully at Ygg. “You be liking it?” He asked. “I be not telling the Chief, I be wanting to make surprise.”

Ygg just smiled up at him.

“Then that make it worth it, seeing your face so happyful.” Unk said.

Something sounding like an earthquake or some horrible sci-fi creature filled the room.

“Sorry, I be that hungry.” Said Ygg grabbing his belly sheepishly. They all got up and headed out to the kitchen.

Fern was waving out the front door. “No? Sure you won’t stay? Then we’ll see you Monday!” She smiled as she tugged the big door closed.

A cupboard door slammed as three gnomes tinkled out from around the workbench. “Thought he’d never leave!” Groused Baldot. “So what do you think of the place?” He said looking proudly around. “Not bad for a day’s work!”

Slowly a small smile formed on Ygg’s face, which seemed to grow and grow until it was much too big for his face. “This be right fine, right fine enough!” He said. “You be right good friends.” He said softly looking at them all. “If I get a chance, I be returning the favor, that I will.”

Baldot looked uncomfortable for a moment and then scowled at Bummil. “Whatcha waiting for you loll-about! Where are the supper fixin’s?”

Bummil jumped, startled and in an instant he and Boocher had whipped out platters of sandwiches, artichokes, and a lovely chocolate cake. Baldot in the meantime had laboriously climbed a stool to the stove and had begun to ladel out bowls of steaming tomato soup.

“I’m starved!” Blurted Ambril as they all grabbed nearby stools and chairs.

“Yum, my favorite!” Exclaimed Sully eyeing the artichokes greedily as she dragged her seat nearer to them.

Mugs of tea and soup were handed around. The rest they helped themselves to. Ambril could not remember when food had tasted so good. There was nothing but slurping and chewing noises for several minutes. Ambril tried to keep track of how many sandwiches Unk put away but lost track at around five.

“Ambril, see if you can find a knife in one of those drawers behind you---it’s time to cut the cake!” Said Fern waving to the cupboards. Still munching Ambril turned and opened the one farthest on the left. Wrong one, it was the junk drawer and looked as if it hadn’t been cleaned out yet. Rusty nails, screwdrivers and bent paperclips littered the bottom. Ambril was about to close it and try another when a weathered notebook caught her eye. It had at one time been green the letters G.E.R.N. were handwritten across the top but had been scratched out and the words ‘household accounts’ written underneath. Ambril grabbed it, and flipped through it, curious. G.E.R.N. had been the name of her father’s company. The first few pages were written neatly and methodically with sketches and mathematical formulas mixed in but then some one else had come along and used the back part of the book to make lists of expenses and grocery lists.

“Hey, we’re hungry for cake here!” Said Sully and it’s about to get ugly!”

“Oh right, sorry,” said Ambril shoving the drawer closed. She rummaged through a couple more drawers before finding the perfect cake knife and handing it to Fern.

She put the little notebook as she accepted a large wedge of cake.

“Oh look! That must be one of your father’s lab books.” Said Fern still carving away at the cake.“ He was always scribbling something down.” She paused to lick a finger as she looked over the book. “No wait!” She squinted hard at the writing. “My that looks like fixit Joe’s writing there too.”

“It looks like my Dad didn’t finish this one and fixit Joe found it and started to use it himself.” Mused Ambril.

“Well, you keep it, then. I don’t believe fixit Joe will mind.”

“Thanks, I’d like to read it.” Said Ambril after swallowing a large bite of cake. “Well this was once his laboratory as I told you. You know the G.E.R.N. Project, his last unfortunately.” Fern said wiping her hands on her apron. “He was such a nice man, your father. Such a shame really, it all ended so badly.” She shook her head sadly. “Your poor father blamed for it.”

Ambril put down her fork as suddenly she wasn’t interested in cake. “So, you don’t think it was his fault then?” She asked.

Fern slowly shrugged. “No one really knows what happened. But anyone who really knew your father sensed that something wasn’t right. The newspaper wrote things that your Dad simply didn’t believe in. Experimenting with Dark Magic, Raising demons…he just wasn’t capable of such things.” She mused and then looked down at the little notebook. “Perhaps there’s something in there that might shed some light on things.” She gave it a little pat.

Ambril looked longingly at the notebook and then around the room. Sully was giving her a curious stare. She slipped it into her back pocket.

Sully got up and stretched, yawning hugely. “Well, I guess it’s time to hit the road.”

“Why yes, I expect you are all tired out---what a day you’ve had! And poor Betula, I’d better go and see what’s what with her in the morning.” She said as she gathered her shawl around her.

“So right, I’m exhausted.” Ambril jumped up eager to be alone in her own room. She glanced over at Ygg who was rubbing his eyes and yawning. He must be three times as tired as the rest of us, she thought to herself; considering what he’d been through today. In fact he was so tired, he stumbled and fell as he got up from his chair. There was a slight clank when he hit the floor.

“I’m alright, I’m alright,” He said embarrassed as he scrambled back up while feeling around in his back pocket. Coads nigs!” Grumbled Ygg as he stared at the key in his hand with surprise.“ It’s Betula’s key to the shed in back of her store. We ran out of napkins today and I had to get some more. He said wrinkling his forehead. “I must have put it in me pocket without thinking.”

**Chapter 34 The Code is Cracked and a Plan is formulated**

“I’ll take it back on my way home.” Offered Ambril holding her hand out.

Ygg slapped the key in her palm. “Thanks, truth be told I don’t think I’d make it there and back, I be that tuckered out.”

“Hey you dropped something,” Sully said to Ygg pointing at a folded paper on the floor.

“Must a come out of me pocket.” Ygg stooped and had it unfolded before he straightened. He let out a short laugh.

“Well, here now—I plum forgot this what with all this excitement.”

He smoothed out the sheet of paper on the counter. It was the Dullaith threat from school.

 Fern drew the paper to her and pulled a large magnifying glass from her pocket. She peered through it for several moments. “Yes, this is certainly a likeness of a Dullaith. Crudely drawn, mind you but just the same, very unnerving.”

Ambril agreed with her entirely. It was a threatening image.

Fern was silent a moment longer. “That little drawing there does look like Glain and the 500 very likely means 500 grains. Do you see those little stipple marks beside it? I believe that’s what is meant.”

She pointed to some little speckles which had been drawn on around the 500. It looked more like a cloud of gnats to Ambril.

“A grain is an old, old-fashioned measure of weight. It’s meant to be a grain of barley when referring to weight. 500 grains is just over an ounce.”

“Well that’s not much is it? They can’t do much with that, right?” Scoffed Sully.

Ygg shook his head. “Glain is powerful stuff.” He said ruefully.

“No matter, really. A stone that large has not been seen for several hundred years. It simply doesn’t exist.” Said Fern bending over the magnifying glass until her nose touched it.

The kids just looked at each other thinking about the Ledrith Glain, weighing several ounces. Her hand went to it protectively.

“This symbol here, the one with the bell and the number, means the First Bell on May Day.”

“First Bell? Asked Ambril.

“Yes, It varies every year but first bell is usually around lunchtime.” Fern nodded.

They went back to studying the image.

“So what’s with the six there at the bottom?” Sully pointed at the roman numerals, V and I.

“You mean the five and the one?” Said Fern slowly. “See here? It’s clumsily drawn but I think that’s supposed to be a dash separating the two numerals.” Fern said as she sucked her teeth.

“Six or a five an d a one, neither one makes any sense to me.” Said Sully looking muddled.

Fern sighed and drew her shawl closer to her. She looked very tired, her hands looked clutching her shawl like a map of the L.A. freeway system. “I’ll be off now, you have everything you need I think Urgan.” She started wobbling toward the front door.

Unk stood up, “I be walking you safe to home.” He said and offered her his hairy arm.

She took it gratefully.

“Night all!” She said and waved as the front door closed.

Ambril got up to get herself a glass of water. Next to the sink one of the gnomes had tacked up a calendar. Another month gone, it was May first tomorrow…May…the fifth month. Ambril stood rooted to the spot, the water ran up and over the edge of her glass for a minute before she came to herself and shut off the faucet.

“it couldn’t be a…a date could it?” She asked. As in the fifth month and the first day---“

“May first!” Exclaimed Ygg.

“May Day,” cried Sully, shocked. “But that’s tomorrow!”

They all stared at each other, shocked.

“It’s a despicable, evil, nasty thing to do.” Said Ambril.

“Raising a Dullaith in the middle of the May Day festival…” Added Ygg.

“If they don’t get what they want.” Said Ambril.

“And it doesn’t sound like that was ever a possibility,” said Sully.

There was something something jiggering at the back of Ambril’s mind. Something… that glowed red… “Hey do you remember that glowing stuff on the floor of the Janitor’s Closet? Do you remember how it…smelled?” Asked Ambril

“In the Old Council Hall? Yeah, It smelled like cherry red jelly beans.” Said Sully quickly. “It was kind of like how Betula’s shop smelled today.”

Ambril nodded. “Like a red jelly sneaker…the Rabbit’s foot!”

Ygg and Sully looked at Ambril like she was crazy. “You mean that was the rabbit’s sneaker they used to draw out that image on the floor? Why would they do that?”

“Betula said that the sugar animals were made almost entirely of magic. I remember when I was trying to get the new foot to stay on, the rabbit glowed red and smelled of cherry jelly---“

“Whoa!” Said Ygg scratching his head. “These guys are at least ten steps ahead of us!”

“Do you think the police have figured this all out too? About tomorrow and all?” Asked Sully.

“Who knows?” Said Ambril. “Would they know what to do if they had?”

“Well remember Feldez put down the Dullaith that killed Ambril’s---oops, sorry Ambril.” Sully looked apologetically at Ambril. “He was able to get the best of one before right?”

“That must be why he’s been so involved right from the beginning.” Said Sully. “But can he do it again? What do you think Ambril, you told us both it would be hard to do again, right?”

But Ambril wasn’t listening. She was thinking about Feldez and he had been involved from the start. How easy it would have been for him to cover his tracks. “And all those people…in danger.” She whispered more to herself than anything.

“The thing I keep gong back to is which side is Feldez on?” Ambril said frustrated. “He seems to be helping and yet he’s always the one in the right place at the right place to do the most damage.”

They couldn’t let all those innocent people die. They had to do something Ambril thought to herself. Her shoulders rounded as she felt the weight of this decision on her. She felt so defeated as they all stared in silence at the drawing.

“You know some one will get hurt if we don’t do something!” said Ambril.

Sully shook her head. “Can’t imagine letting that happen. Suppose it was some one we knew?” She sighed. “I think I’d rather die myself than watch that.”

“So we’re agreed we have to try something.” Said Ygg firmly. “We canna be sitting on the sidelines---we have to find a way to best it, to fight it---“

“Did some one say fight?” Piped a tinny voice from under the sink. The cabinet door burst open again and a ceramic boot appeared followed by the rest of Baldot. He looked as if Christmas had come early. “You’re not funning with us now?” He asked staring furiously at Ygg. “Fighting is just about the best thing---“

“Fighting, Rugby, arguing,” cut in Bummil who had followed right on his heels. “It be all the same fun for us.”

“We be talking about tomorrow now.” Said Ygg folding his arms and staring back at the ceramic men. “Can you be ready by early morning?” He asked doubtfully.

Baldot drew himself up to his full two feet. “We gnomes be always ready for a good fight.” He paused here and scratched his head. “It would be a help if’n we knew who we be fighting, though.”

Ygg smiled again and bent down until he was on Baldot and Bummil’s level. O.K., here’s what we know and what we think will be happening---” Ygg explained briefly about the Dullaith and the May Day festival.

“That’s a tall order, we can’t be seen, you know, it’s against the rules.” Baldot looked worried and grim for a moment, “But we be in, we’ll be finding a way.”

“Of course, it’s a fight!” Chimed in Bummil not being able to contain himself, he danced a little jig.

Baldot cleared his throat and stared down is nose at Bummil. Then turned toward the sink. “We be needing a gathering, Bummil, you give the signal. Now we need as many bomb nuts as we can gather…and some more slime throwers---we’ll have to borrow a few more of them toy squirty guns...”

“From them kids down the block?” Asked Bummil following him into the cupboard.

“No, that’d be too obvious, of course, the kids around the corner, they have too much of everything.” He retorted.

The rest of the conversation was lost to Ambril. The cupboard was silent. Curious, she got up and opened the cabinet. There was nothing but cleaning products and a garbage pail. The cupboard back wall was solid. She shrugged and smiled. In and out of everything.

“I’ve just about perfected my flying powder. I’ll treat some shoes and bring some with me---“ Sully said

“Nought for me,” said Ygg firmly. “I be of earth-kind. I’ll not be flying like that again.” He continued. “Besides, I think I’ll be more use on the ground.”

Ygg grabbed a piece of paper and began sketching furiously. “What we need is a plan.” He said “Let’s be trying this.” He had the circle park laid out in no time. We can put the gnomes here in the trees and we’ll be here and here…” He put X’s for the gnomes and and S,A, and Y for themselves.

Sully shrugged. “How about Betula, do you think she’d help?”

“I’ll ask her when I return her key.” Ambril cut in.

“Well let’s put her in over here, do you think she be bringing…helpers?” Ygg asked as he sketched. Without waiting for an answer Ygg put in three more X’s next to a B. “I be asking Unk to help out too, he raises a mean whirlwind. And maybe he’ll bring his friend Queenie too, He be talking about her.”

“Who---or what is Queenie?”

“Don’t know that but---Unk thinks she’s grand.”

The three friends put their heads together talking through their plan. Ambril grabbed the Dullaith image and made a quick sketch of the layout to show Betula.

Ygg finally leaned back and stretched. “I be bushwackered.” He yawned.

Sully’s eyes were blinking one at a time as she answered. “Me too!” She looked at the clock and bolted out of her chair.

“Yikes, I totally forgot to tell my parents where I am! They are going to be furious, I know it! I gotta get home!”

“Me too!” Groaned Ambril. But I’ll still swing by and talk to Betula. I’m already in trouble anyway.” Ambril grabbed her backpack and raced Sully out the door.

Outside a mountain had planted itself in the middle of Miss Fern’s garden. There was a cloud of butterflies swarming around it’s top and the Navel-Mundi seemed to be stretching out to touch it. It turned at the clunk of the front door slamming.

“Nighty!” said Unk. “I be watching the moonrise.”

“Night Unk! See you tomorrow!” Said Sully.

Ambril waved god bye and followed Sully down the driveway.

“You go on home, Sully,” Ambril said watching Sully stumble a bit on the way to her bike. “I’ll be alright.”

“Sure?”

**Chapter 35 Back at the Alley**

 They were on their bikes in half a minute and off in different directions. The moon went behind a cloud making main street distractingly spooky. As she headed into the alley, she nearly ran over someone emerging from the shadows.

“Hey watch it, Moron! That’s my foot!” Lance danced around holding one foot and hopping on the other.

“Didn’t see you, sorry.” Said Ambril who was glad it was dark and she didn’t have to hide her smirk.

Lance stopped dancing when he recognized Ambril’s voice. He limped over and grabbed her handlebars.

“You seen Riley? Have you talked to him?” He asked his anxious face half lit by a floodlight. He looked strained, almost concerned. Ambril was surprised.

“Why---Are you finally realizing you care about your brother?” She asked skeptically as she leaned back, folding her arms in judgment.

“I’ve always cared, of course, he’s my brother. He just always takes it the wrong way is all.” Lance scoffed. I’ve been waiting for him here---he likes to do experiments in the shed. Some scientist left his stuff in there before Dad took it over.” He cocked his head toward the half open door. “I thought Riley would at least come for that stuff at least. He set such store on it.”

Ambril was again surprised at Lance’s clear signs of concern for his brother. “Well it’s probably like your Dad said, he’ll be back when he gets hungry and tired enough.” Said Ambril.

Lance’s face tightened and he shook his head. “It’s different this time, he left a note and everything. Saying his good-byes and that he was done with us.” Lance lowered his head. “He said he’d had enough…My Mom is in pieces about it.” Lance caught his breath in a way that sounded suspiciously like a sob.

There was silence between them as the space between them slowly lessened. It seemed too little too late but Lance did seem genuinely broken-up about Riley’s leaving. As she watched him struggle with his emotions Ambril realized that all the hateful things she had wanted to say to him in the past had flown right out of her head.

“I’m sorry Lance, I guess it must be hard on all of you.” She said finally.

Lance released her handlebars so forcefully she was nearly knocked sideways.

The old Lance came back with a vengeance. “Yeah well, if you do see him, tell him from me I’m waiting for him here. Tell him I know something he needs to know…and I’m getting pretty sick of waiting!” He turned and walked stiffly toward his Dad’s storage shed. Ambril watched him and then stiffened. Beyond the boy’s silhouette Ambril could see the through the open door. Boxes seemed to be stacked all around the outside walls but the central area was clear and Ambril could see a drawing on the floor…a circle stone drawing---and a powerful odor of rotting fruit.

“Hey wait Lance! What’s that---“ But it was too late, Lance had slammed the door on her and vengefully turned off the flood light.

**Chapter 36 Sugar Animals and Betula**

The darkness fell on her heavily. It took her a minute to adjust to it as she climbed off her bike, groped around for the nail by Betula’s storage shed door. She found two nails, side by side. One of them already had a key on it. Ambril guessed that it was for the Grocery’s storage shed next door and hooked the key on the empty one. Then she stumbled toward Betula’s backdoor, grateful for the light above it. At her knock Betula answered and swept her inside.

“Look who’s back boys!” She called as they walked into her warm kitchen. The sugar animals were working hard and boy did it smell good. The smell of shortcake, brownies and fresh bread made Ambril wish she was just a little bit hungry. But she refused all offers of goodies and got right to work pulling out the Dullaith drawing and turning it over to explain their plan. She finished with, “---The gnomes will be here in these trees and we’re hoping, that is if you’ll help us, that you’ll be here and here.”
“We just want to try and anchor it to the ground as soon as possible, to keep it from eating anyone until I can finish it off with the Ashera.”

There was silence then as they all sat and stared at the sketch. Ambril sighed watching their faces. She knew it sounded incredible, ridiculous, even outlandish. She fully expected them to start laughing at her and turn her out on her ear.

Red was looking thoughtfully at his shoe. “So they used me old sneaker to try and get this guy Moroz out of the can, yeah?” He asked.

“Nasty buggers!” Snorted Slim.

Shug shrugged and turned to Betula. “What we got as ammo Bets?”

Red was already hopping over to the glass case. “We can use that ol’ cannon, yeah?”

“How bout that Ferris wheel? We can turn that into something useful, for once.” Put in Slim as he trotted behind.

Shug turned and smiled at her. “Now don’t you worry, we’ll be ready for anything tomorrow.”

“Yep you go on home now, you look done in.” Smiled Betula looking pretty done in herself.

“I could stay and help---“ Began Ambril.

“We have it covered.” Said Betula smoothly ushering her to the door.

“See you all tomorrow then! And thanks, really…thanks.” Ambril called as she picked up her bike and turned it toward home.

**Chapter 37 A Family Fight**

As she pedaled she heard the sound of cowbells in her head.

“*That place bares the strong stench of dark magic*.” fLit thought at her.

“What, the rotting fruit smell? That was the dumpster, it is just behind a grocery store.” She wrinkled her nose. “But some one was working with dark magic, Lance?”

fLit snorted “*That beetle larvae isn’t capable. He’s far too simple-minded.*”

But Ambril wasn’t sure. She had seen him out on the playground; and with his friends. He definitely had strategic talent. But had he put them to use working dark magic?

“*Why would he hex himself on the playground, I ask you*?” Put in fLit.

“He could have just stepped into his workings by accident.”

“*Well he is that much of an idiot, I grant you that*.” Mused fLit.

But seeing Lance’s concern about his brother made her think not. Amazingly Lance seemed to actually have a heart.

“*AND he’s an idiot*.” Added fLit. “*Who else? Riley*?”

Ambril immediately discounted that option. Riley had been the one to call 911 at the Tupelo’s fire and had shown concern for his brother on the playground. In fact, Ambril decided it could have been anyone. The Alley was seemingly deserted after hours, the key hung right beside Betula’s storage shed key, it would have been easy for anyone to get in there.

“*We’re not getting anywhere.*” Sniffed fLit.

Ambril sighed, so what was new?

Ambril turned off the main road and pedaled hard up the last hill. The house was unusually well lighted as she finally coasted into the driveway. Her mother stood silhouetted in the open doorway.

“Ambril! Finally!” Her mother frantically raced down the stairs toward her.

“Oh I’m really sorry, Mom, I forgot to call. I was at Miss Fern’s house, she asked us to stay for dinner.” She lost the ability to talk and breathe as her mother wrapped her arms around her and squeezed a little too tightly. She braced herself for a scolding. But it never came.

“I did hear about your little dinner party, Fern called. I’m so happy you’re home safe!” She squeezed Ambril too hard again.

“I’m O.K. Mom, really.” Ambril’s Mom released her just long enough for her to park her bike and then put her arms around her again as they awkwardly walked toward the house.

‘It’s been such an odd day, hasn’t it?” Ambril’s mother continued, wedging her daughter under one arm as if to keep her from being snatched away from her.

“The attack on Betula’s and the school and now Mrs. Sweetgum has gone missing…”

“Mrs. Sweetgum? Missing?”

“Well, she went out for a walk mid-morning---she loves to collect nuts in the forest…and she disappeared it seems. The police and a few of her friends been out looking for her for hours.” She heaved them both through the door and slammed it shut behind them.

“Well maybe she just forgot to tell you---“

“She would have called me by now, though.” Ambril’s mother still held her tightly as she half dragged her daughter to the kitchen table. There was a curiously lumpy mass on it.

“I guess you won’t be wanting the dinner I made you…” Ambril’s Mom picked up the plate of brown lumps and heaved it into the trash bin.

“It’s a shame I’ve already eaten.” Said Ambril thankfully.

Ambril’s mother must have sensed that as she seemed to come out of her daze and put one hand on her hip, she pointed the still dripping plate at her daughter. “You should know by now that I, your long suffering mother, need to be told your whereabouts at all time! I am your mother, for heaven’s sakes!” She stormed. “Even Feldez was concerned and asked about you! It’s been that difficult a day for everyone.”

“Feldez asked about me, really?” Asked Ambril thinking of a lot of different reasons why he would want to know where she was. Changing gears quickly she said. “I’m really sorry, soooo sorry. Do you need some help setting up tomorrow for May Day?” She asked backing toward the door.

But her mother wasn’t having any of it.

“Not so fast, Ambril!” She fairly screeched. “Your stepfather---“

“You mean my not-yet-stepfather.” Interrupted Ambril and realized too late that was really not the thing to do. Her mother was really working into a rage.

“Your SOON-to-be stepfather, whom I LOVE…and YOU should too. Requires respect!” She yelled.

Ambril stopped then and just looked at her mother, standing there breathing heavily her face full of anger. Could she really be in love with a man who is out to get the entire town? As much as she wanted to protect her mother, she had to push this a little more.

“Mom, do you really, you know, love him and---and trust him? Don’t you find him a little secretive?” She asked as gently as she could.

Ambril’s mother looked at her suspiciously. “Why, why of course, I love him, why else would I marry him?” She sputtered.

“It’s just that, he’s gone so much of the time, where does he go? What does he do? He can’t be working all the time…”

“Well of course he has other---obligations, meetings to attend…of course I trust him---why wouldn’t I?” Ambril’s mother was beginning to get flustered.

“It’s just that Feldez, well I don’t think that Feldez is just what he seems to---“

“What she means is she doesn’t think much at all, or at least not very well.” Cut in Zane from behind her. As usual, he was angry with her.

He grabbed Ambril’s shoulder and whirled her around his eyes level with hers he matched her surprise with steely determination.

“For Mom’s sake, you’re gonna shut up now.” He whispered through a clamped jaw.

He shoved her roughly toward the stairs. “We’re going upstairs to have a little chat.” He said reassuringly to his Mother and then turned back to Ambril and whispered as he pushed her up the stairs before him. “What a first class idiot you are! Can’t you see how upset she is?”

Ambril stumbled but managed to stay just a step or two in front of him. He followed her into her bedroom and slammed the door.

“What is it with you? Are you blind, deaf and dumb? Haven’t you noticed how bad it is for Mom lately? It’s like she’s going to blow any second!”

Ambril sat down heavily on her bed. In fact she hadn’t noticed. She had been so wrapped up in her own life that she’d forgotten what it must be like for her Mom, moving back to this place, dealing with people’s suspicions… But ignoring what was about to happen, glossing everything over so as to not upset her Mother would make it even worse. Zane, as much as he said he didn’t want to, needed to know.

She took a deep breath. “Zane, hold it, there’s something going on that you should know about.” Said Ambril hesitantly.

Zane paused in his ranting and gave her a disgusted look.

“I know you don’t want to hear this---but,” She pulled out the Dullaith drawing and handed it to him. “This was in the gym after that fake Dullaith appeared. She swallowed before continuing as Zane’s look of disgust didn’t change. “I---We think there’s going to be another attack---a real Dullaith this time---“

Zane snorted and through the drawing on the floor. “Yeah, well I heard all about the Dullaith in the gym. “It’s just some kids playing around---and this is more of it. You can’t possibly take this seriously.”

“No! Here take another look!” Said Ambril picking up the paper and handing it to him again. “Check out the roman numerals at the bottom, it’s a date! See? May first and the rock thing? It’s a drawing of Glain, they want an ounce of it or else.”

Zane laughed mirthlessly. “You are such a dolt.” He sneered as he pointed at the lumpy drawing of a rock. “This could easily be chocolate chip ice cream they way it’s drawn…and the roman numerals---who cares?” He balled the drawing up and threw it across the room. “It’s just a bunch of kids goofing off!”

Zane snorted at her. “So you and your little friends are now experts on Dullaiths is that it? You three little kids are going to save the town and take down a Dullaith?”

“It sounds pretty silly but---“

“You massive idiot!” Zane went rigid with anger. “You know this stuff all started when WE arrived.” He continued, his voice taunt. “People are going to put two and two together…our family…Dullaiths…we’re bad news already! They’ll run us out of town AGAIN!” He shouted.

“Do you want to be responsible for killing your own mother?” He asked. “No? Well that would do it. And here I’m supposed to be the insensitive one!” He thundered. “So I’m telling you---You keep out of this! No more saving the town….If there’s a Dullaith raised tomorrow, you are not going to be anywhere near it, you get me? Understand?”

Zane bore down on Ambril as she sat on the bed. Ambril was trying to squirm away when she felt something poke her…something in her pocket.

“Hey look, I forgot this…I found this in Dad’s old lab, you know Miss Fern’s garage.” She held up the little green notebook.

It has Dad’s writing in the beginning, I guess it’s the last of his lab books because it’s only a few pages of his stuff and then---“

Zane snatched the book from her hands.

“See? It says G.E.R.N on the front of it.” Said Ambril as she sat up on her elbows.

Zane skeptically flipped through it. “Mostly some one else’s boring bills.” He scoffed and threw it in her face. “Look if you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for Mom.” He said still angry. “She’s been happier here than anytime I can remember. And I remember a lot more than you. It wasn’t easy for us early on.”

Ambril blinked hard. She did remember some of the bad parts…leaving apartments hurriedly because they couldn’t pay the rent. Living out of their car, eating hot dogs for dinner sometimes for days.

“Can you imagine what they’ll do to us if Mom cracks up for good?” Zane continued quietly. “We’d be wedged into some one else’s family---foster care. Maybe they’d be good to us, maybe not, but they sure wouldn’t love us like Mom does.”

Zane was silent a moment, the fight seemed to have gone out of him. “So, think about that tomorrow, as you’re riding in to save the day…” He said sarcastically as he turned and slammed the door behind him.

Ambril stunned, slid back onto her bed and stared at the ceiling just breathing in and out.

Bell chimes sounded in her head. “*Lovely display of human-kind-ness*…” quipped fLit in her head.

“Oh shut up and leave me alone!” Yelled Ambril. She jumped up and running into the bathroom she slammed the door. Not that it did any good, the fairy was still in her head. But at least he had the good sense to keep quiet as she went about getting herself ready for bed.

As she slipped on her pajamas she mulled over what her brother had said. It was true that many people looked at her funny; as if they didn’t trust her. She began brushing her teeth mechanically. Her mother was---sensitive to what the villagers thought of them. She rinsed her mouth. She didn’t want to cause trouble for her family.

But at the same time, she couldn’t stand by and watch them get hurt. And she couldn’t just not show up---her friends were counting on her. She’d have to help them. The town may not love her but she realized with surprise she had come to think of it as her home.

And what about Feldez? He had helped her family, just by associating himself with them. He was so well-respected here. He was also the only other person she knew who had actually taken down a Dullaith. She knew that Chief Buckthorne and probably Dr. Afallen were counting on him to protect the town from whomever was behind these threats.

Maybe they won’t, she reasoned with herself. Maybe as Zane thought it really was just a bunch of kids acting tough. Maybe she should wait and see what happens. She could hang back a little, stay in the background and not risk exposing her family to ridicule. She could be the back-up plan.

**Chapter 38 An Overheard Conversation**

She nodded and yawned at her image in the mirror. Boy she was tired. Her mind felt like mush, her eyes were so red and dry that it hurt to blink.

She wandered back into her bedroom and slid gratefully under the covers. What was it she had wanted to do before going to sleep? There had been something… She was having trouble focusing. Slowly her head fell forward on her chest as she fell into a deep sleep.

She slept soundly and heavily as the moon rose and fell. But she was awakened by the sound of voices just outside her window.

“I know---I know you don’t need to help me…But please, do you know anything about where she is? Or why? A croaking voice vaguely familiar to Ambril bleated with anxiety.

“I DON’T know where your little squirrel friend is. With one exception, I don’t associate with human-kind even when they’re Animalfia!” sniffed fLit, arrogant as usual. “With---one exception. Now my EXCEPTION is in need of her sleep tonight, you must go!”

“But you must help me! You must!” The voice resonated with helplessness.

There was a long pause. “Later then! I---I will help you, if I can.” Said fLit finally. “But you must go now! Go on!”

The soft flap of wings ushered in the varied quiet of the forest . Ambril smiled to herself as she fell back to sleep. She had no idea what that was about but…maybe the fairy was softening.

**Chapter 39 The Lab Book**

She woke finally to the sun sketching shadow patterns on her face.

“AAAMbrilll!” Screeched her mother from below. “For the ninth time, come on!”

Ambril sat up with a start. The clock told her it was late as she jumped out of bed…and promptly stubbed her toe.

“Oooooch! “ She cried grabbing it and squeezing .Her hand grazed something lying on the floor. It was the little green lab book of her Dad’s, lying where Zane had thrown it the night before.

“I’m leaving right now, Ambril!” Her mother continued to scream. “Are you coming to help or not!”

Ambril suddenly remembered her promise from the night before. She limped to her door and yelled,

“Yeah Mom, sorry I overslept…I’ll have to meet you down there.”

“As soon as you can darling!” She called in a more reasonable tone. “Love you!”

“Yeah, love you too!”

Across the hall Zane’s door stood open, his room was empty. Ambril heard her mother’s car start as she plunked down on her bed again. She’d be late, her mother would be murderously angry at her. But she had to do this.

She opened the green book to the first page.

The first entry was dated in early August 3.

**‘I can’t help but think this is the final leg of our long journey. Honestly, if Feldez and I hadn’t made that stupid bet I probably would have moved on to other projects. But it does have merit; discovery of the world’s first biomass regenerative energy solution using a combination of ‘natural energy’ and science. Back to the salt mines…**

Below this entry Ambril found a bizarre mass of scribbles, numbers and Latin letters were intermixed with sketches and graphs messily sketched into the margins. It was physics, partly, but Ambril thought she recognized some images found on her medallion and on her Ashera. She couldn’t even begin to figure it out; she was no scientist.

Toward the bottom there were a couple of variations of the same equations repeated over and over again; crossed out a couple of times and rewritten, with one or two circled.

The next entry was dated August 30th

 A neatly lineal equation was inked in. It looked more formal than the other and Ambril thought that it must be the final G.E.R.N. solution. This time Ambril could at least find the beginning and the end of it, and though she still had no idea what it meant it definitely looked like a combination of science and magic. She guessed that what her father meant by ‘natural energy’... was magic. He wrote:

**‘I think this might be it. I’ve gone over and over it and have not found any errors. Can’t wait to try it out. I’m getting everything ready and have put in a call for Feldez. He’s never in his lab, always at Betula’s shop. I’m so glad my lab is farther away or I would have developed a paunch just as he has!**

**Will be in operation by tomorrow. This will be just a test run. To see if it works and if anything needs to be adjusted or tweaked.**

There were a couple of lists of lab equipment and a sort of timeline of what was to occur and had to be done during the experiment.

The next entry was dated September 15

**‘I’ve done it! It worked! My little test Gern is strong and gaining strength. The tests look good but there seems to be issues I did not foresee. I think I’ve found the perfect spot for it to flourish, a variety of food sources for it to replenish itself and grow healthy, as well as privacy. This must be kept secret until all the tests are completed. I’m taking it to its new home today. It is kind of a trek but worth it.**

**Feldez had to take me in to Betula’s shop for coffee. Sweet! I won!’**

The very last entry was dated October 31.

**‘Now it’s my turn. Feldez has asked me to assist him. I’ve voiced my concerns but he won’t listen. We’re going to do it at the Old Council Hall as he needs the power of the Circle Stone there.**

**I have to admit it though, it is something very original and if successful and controllable might be more useful than even my little Gern.**

**Feldez is so excited about the melding of inorganic and ‘natural energy’ sources. He thinks it’s very possible he might invent a new form of organism but he doesn’t see the inherent dangers involved. There is something off about these workings, too dark.**

**Even more worrying is that he got these ideas of his after studying Moroz’s papers from the last days of the mine. We never really heard why they had to close down the mines, All records of what occurred there seem to have been destroyed. Lord knows Feldez has tried every way possible to find out.**

**All I know is that something went very wrong back then and brought this little town to its knees. It changed everything here. Thanks to Moroz, ‘natural energy’ now has to be hidden.**

**I have warned him but he’s insisting that part of the old experiments have merit and are worth a try. He thinks he can control it. But I have my doubts. I’m boning up on ‘natural energy’ containment. I’m obligated to help him; after all he did help me with Gern and he is my friend.**

**Gern is surprising. I didn’t think I’d form such an attachment so soon. Will have to work this out. Can’t think of it as a ‘test batch’ anymore…I’m set to run the final tests tomorrow and if they look good, I’ll announce my discoveries and introduce Gern.’**

**Chapter 40 Resolved to Act**

Ambril sat stunned, her eyes glued to the page. It hadn’t been her Dad who had raised the Dullaith, it had been Feldez. In fact it had been Feldez all along. Feldez…and his attempts to raise Moroz to get at his power. Ambril quickly ran through in her mind, what she knew of the Dullaiths.

There were references to Dullaiths earlier in the town’s history but nothing recent until the one that killed her father. And Feldez had not only been there, he had raised the Dullaith, lost control of it long enough for it to kill her father and then let him take the blame for it.

The next one didn’t occur until her family arrived back in town. Why the delay? Ambril wondered. Perhaps Feldez needed her family as cover just in case something went wrong again, the town would naturally blame them because of her Dad’s reputation, they were easy targets certainly.

Ambril realized that Feldez must had been using the death threats and break-ins that had recently occurred to continue his search for Moroz’s cell. The town elders, thinking they could trust him had given him what he wanted. Access to all the town’s heavily guarded secrets. Access he’d been denied in the past.

And lastly Ambril realized with a start, he had been back using his old laboratory behind Betula’s shop again. That’s why the circle stone drawing on the shed’s floor had looked so clear, it had been freshly painted and recently used. Riley had been the easy fall guy there. Riley the friendless geek. Her Dad had been a geek too, but he hadn’t been friendless, he had had a family. He had her.

She closed the notebook with a snap. She knew what she had to do. Zane wasn’t going to like it but she really had no choice. Feldez was going to take her family down, regardless of what she did or didn’t do. Worse he might actually succeed in releasing Moroz and jeopardize the safety of the entire town.

She got dressed hurriedly and looked at the clock. She still had time. She hoped that Ygg and Sully had gotten their stuff together because she needed to confront Feldez and see if she could head him off.

She dumped the contents of her backpack on the bed, fished out the Ashera and fLit and stuffed them back in. She checked and felt the Ledrith Glain, warm and reassuring around her neck.

“*Are you ready*?” She thought at the fairy as she zipped up her backpack and slung it onto her back.

*“I am, though I think your thoughts are slightly off in certain areas…fairies of course have superior thought processes so if you’ll let me point out…*”

“*Save it, we don’t have time right now. Just tell me this do you think Feldez is guilty*?”

There was a long pause. “*I do, based on the writings in the lab book. But there might be something---“*

*“There’s always something, let’s go talk to him and see if we can get him to explain all the somethings. If nothing else, we’ll distract him and possibly get him to put off his plans, sound good?”* She thought at him.

*There was no reply, just the sound of an old car starting up.*

**Chapter 41 May Day Candles and Charms**

Ambril ran out into the hallway but hesitated in front of Zane’s door. At the last minute she pulled out the lab book and left it on the middle of his bed.

She took the steps two at a time. In the kitchen she bypassed the burned, pebbly things set out on a plate for her and grabbed a banana hoping fervently that Mrs. Sweetgum would be back soon.

She was on her bike and down the road in a flash pedaling hard toward the center of town. Her wheels hummed as she wove through the crowded streets. Everyone in town seemed to be lugging everything they owned toward Circle Park. Families with picnic baskets and blankets jostled each other as they hurried to claim a picnic table and a little grass for family and friends to gather.

“Watch it! You nearly ran down Grandma!!” A man in a loud Hawaiian shirt shouted at her as he dragged frail looking woman clutching a lounge chair out of the road.

“Sorry!, ‘Scuse me!, Coming through!” She sang out as she threaded her way through the thickening crowd.

Mrs. Flood twinkled and waved at her from under a massive flowery hat.

Everyone seemed happy an excited about just being out amongst friends.

“Ambril! Finally!” Her Mother came out of nowhere and grabbed her handlebar so fast Ambril nearly went over.

“Park that thing---and---“ She heaved a massive canvas bag onto Ambril’s lap nearly unbalancing her.

“But Mom—I really need to talk to---“

“Later! I’m your mother and you promised to help!”

Ambril’s mother picked up three other bags even larger than Ambril’s and began to heave two and drag the other toward a cluster of booths that had sprouted up over night on the edge of the park.

“Zane is nowhere to be found! So I really need your help, darling!”

Ambril sighed she had to help her Mom. But she still had a little time. She found space at the bike rack for her bike and was relieved to see Ygg and Sully’s bike already there. She swung the heavy bag onto her back and trudged over to where her mother was spreading out a polka dotted tablecloth on a very long table. This was going to take a while she thought surveying the real estate.

‘Hey Ambril, take one, no take two please!” It was Tiana Twee looking bored while handing out flyers. “I can’t leave until I get rid of all of these.” She said stuffing two into Ambril’s back pocket. “It’s agony sitting here, when everyone else is having fun.”

There were two rows of booths with a central walkway all around the circle park. The inner tables had their backs to the circle park. Ambril’s Mom was on the other side Ambril was relieved to see, farther away from the action.

The last thing she needed was her mother racing in to try and save her. Betula had a nice big booth adjacent to the circle stone. She came right over as soon as she saw them and gave them both a big hug.

“Need any help?” She asked with a big smile. “Cuz we’re all set.” She gave Ambril a meaningful wink and nodded to her heavily laden tables. Ambril caught a quick glimpse of a red sneaker peeking out from under the tablecloth. She smiled relieved. She knew she could count on Betula. She handed Ambril a large bag smelling of fresh baked bread and cookies. “Save that for later.”

Ambril smiled as she stashed the goodies in her backpack. “I have to help my Mom set up---Have you seen Feldez?”

“Haven’t seen him.” Said Betula but every other big wig’s been on patrol since sun-up.” Betula nodded toward the center of the park.

Across the stone circle Ambril could see Mr. Pinwydden talking animatedly with Bob Berry. Off to one side the high school band began warming up.

 Larch Dogwood was having a heated discussion with Miss Jonquil who wore what looked like an oversized flower pot on her head. The flowers nodded emphatically along with her with every point she made. Chief Buckthorne was talking with Deputy Skarn and surveying the additional security forces they had on duty today. There were lots of other important people milling around. Police Officers lining the outer perimeter with barricades set up all around the circle stone. Ambril was happy to see that they were not taking any chances today.

“Mom, I just need to go and look for---“

“Not on your life! These things are not going to set up themselves! Get to work! The sooner we do it, the faster we’ll be finished!” With difficulties she leveraged one of the large bags onto the table and pointed Ambril at it. It turned out to be filled with home made candles and soaps. Ambril began putting them out with lightening speed.

“Neatly, Make sure they look good or they won’t sell!” Her mother cautioned her as she began arranging her charm bracelets and necklaces. Ambril sensed a frizzle of magic, lavender scented in her mother’s case. It made her feel good just handling the stuff. Ambril had a hunch that her Mom’s magic infused wares would sell like hot cakes regardless of how they looked. Still she began to put more care and thought to how she laid them out. She wondered if her mother knew she was adding her magic to these things and how many other people in the crowd could sense it. The booth began to send out calming waves of well being. People passing slowed a bit and smiled.

“Mom, I think these are going to be a big hit!” Said Ambril confidently as she placed the very last candle.

“Do you really think so, darling?” Asked her mother. She looked so happy and bright today.

Ambril gave her Mom a quick hug. “I really do.“

**Chapter 42 First Bell**

“I really have to go, good luck!” Ambril said as she sidled away.

“O.K., thanks Ambril…my it’s nearly first bell---“

“What! First Bell’s around lunchtime isn’t it?” Asked Ambril.

“Not this year. The first bell coincides with the stars aligning---or something like that…anyway this year it’s early, just after 11:00. It’s in your program there, the one in your pocket.” She nodded to the program Tiana had stuffed there. Ambril pulled it out and opened it up. Inside were a list of events and offerings arranged under with a Bell and numbers 1-4 on it. Ambril recognized the symbol right off as the one on the threatening note.

Under the First Bell symbol it said: First bell rings at 11:03AM.

Ambril stiffened as she looked at the clock. The time was 10:45.

She had 18 minutes until someone made good on their threat.

She launched herself into the stream of humanity threading through the booths and around the barricades until she was able to fight her way through to an entrance to the circle stone.

“Stay back please! Everyone!” Said Skarn pacing self-importantly behind a strip of caution tape and a crooked line of orange cones.

Ms. Breccia stood there steaming, her hands on her hips and a large wreath of bristly flowers jammed onto her head, a leather hide was thrown over her shoulders. Her feet were bare. Ambril thought she looked like some sort of mad Viking woman. She glowered at Skarn.

“But we must get into our places for the spring dance of maids just after First Bell! She said firmly. Several middle aged women stood behind her with equally large wreaths of flowers stuck on their heads as well.

Ambril stretched herself upward to see if Ygg or Sully were anywhere nearby. Finally she spotted Sully at her parents produce booth and with difficulty managed to find her way to her.

Sully was just making change when she saw her and raced over and whispered. “Hey! Where have you been? You should see what the gnomes came up wi---“

“---We…we have a problem!” Cut in Ambril. “It’s Feldez! It’s been him all along. I know for sure now…But no time for that. First Bell is early this year! It’s at 11:03! Ambril said tensely. We’re out of time!” Ambril pointed at the program at the very same emblem on the program.

Sully’s face tightened with realization, so it’s not noon--- it’s---“ her head swiveled wildly to get a glimpse of the clock tower. “---In fifteen minutes? Coads Nigs! We have to alert the gnomes, Betula and where the heck is Ygg?” Yelped Sully.

“I’m here of course, what you be nattering on about?” Asked Ygg as he squeezed past a tubby man holding up a bag of tomatoes.

“I was just talking with Baldot and Betula, we’re nearly ready for anything that monster has to dish up!” He said smiling confidently.

Ambril’s terse explanation about the early First Bell wiped the smile off his face. “You’d think one of us would of checked! I’ll be going back to Betula and Baldot to get them going--- and there’s Unk and Queenie---“

“---You can’t do it all, there isn’t enough time! No, I have an idea…I’ll tell Baldot, you tell Betula and Unk---“ cut in Sully.

“And I’ll try and head Feldez off.” Said Ambril as she turned and plunged once again into the fracas. Ambril slipped through the crowds and arrived back at the barricade. Things had not changed much. Ms. Breccia and her cronies were still arguing with Deputy Skarn. Ambril was relieved to find the circle stone empty as the clock ticked toward eleven o-clock.

“Sorry, no can do, today, Ms. Breccia, Chief’s orders---no one allowed on the stone until after First Bell, not before.” He said firmly.

The band started playing a rousing marching tune, slightly off key but extra loud to make up for it. Across the stone Ambril could see some sort of a commotion start.

Suddenly a tall, lean figure strode out onto the stone. It was Feldez making his way swiftly to the center of the circle stone. Feldez’s face was taunt like a mask his gait stiff.

“No! Chief Buckthorne! No! Get Feldez away from there!” She screamed as loudly as she could. But all she did was attract the attention of Skarn who walked toward her his head cocked warningly.

“Take it easy kid, stand back…Oh, didn’t see you there.” Skarn stopped suddenly and looked surprised.

“Hi Ambril, what’s up?” Riley suddenly appeared at her elbow.”

“Riley! You’re all right!” In her surprise she was temporarily distracted. That ended when she saw Feldez bend down over the central stone and peer into it.

“No! Chief! Stop him!” Yelled Ambril frantically.

Riley tugged at her sleeve. “What! Tell me!” He said urgently.

“Feldez has to be stopped! He’s going to try to kill the whole town at First Bell!”

Riley looked blank for a moment and then smirked. He grabbed the caution tape with one hand. “Hey I’m about to be grounded until Christmas anyway, why not do it in style!” He said grinning. “After you!”

Ambril wondered later why she hadn’t thought of ripping the caution tape away herself. But she was through and running hard toward the central stone and the tall angular man hunched over it.

The marching band began a drum roll as an amplified voice rolled out over the crowd. And “Now the official start of May Day Festivities, First Bell!”

Riley had caught up with her and was matching her pace. Her heart jumped into her throat as she saw Feldez slowly reach out his hand to touch the central stone.

“Hey, knock it off you two!” It was Chief Buckthorne yelling from the sidelines. He began to run toward them.

But Ambril, realizing there was no time for finesse, had launched herself into a full tackle. “No! Get away from there!” She screamed, just as the First Bell sounded she made contact with Feldez and the two of them rolled away from the central stone.

**Chapter 43 A two Horned Demon and Flying Jelly Fish**

But it was too late, just an instant too late. At the first peel of the bell a font of acrid black smoke issued from the stone, sparks thirty feet high erupted simultaneously.

“Ambril, what did you do!” Yelled Feldez shoving her roughly aside.

“What I did? Look what you did you monster!” She yelled back at him but her voice was drowned out by the crackling slithering sound Ambril recognized as the Dullaith. Overhead the black smoke was taking shape as the fountain of energy defined the full extent of the Dullaith’s head. Ambril felt the biting cold, the smell of it made her want to wretch. Instead she scrambled to her feet and unzipped her backpack at the same time. Her hand closed around her Ashera.

She saw the Chief dragging an inert Riley away to safety, a large bump forming on his head. The fire chief was madly trying to get a fire hose in place. Ambril threw her backpack off to the side and faced the now nearly complete Dullaith.

“You kids get out of here!” Shouted the Chief pointing a warning finger at Ambril.

Feldez lunged at her his eyes intent. Ambril jumped to the side just in time.

Off to the side Ambril caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, the largest man in town. “Unk! You have to stop them!” Yelled Ambril frantically.

Unk raised his head and saw Feldez making another grab for Ambril and frowned.

“You be leaving Amby alone now!” He shouted. With a flick of his wrist he called up a series of dust devils one of which caught up Feldez and whirled him away.

“Thanks Unk, now try and keep everyone else off the stone, O.K.?”

Unk nodded and deftly arranged the mini tornadoes around the stone. Next to him Ambril saw with surprise one of the trees nearest the stone transform into the Forest Sprite, the one they had met in the meadow. She guessed that must be Queenie, Unk’s friend. Queenie danced near and around the trees which lined the stone. The trees responded by drawing up their branches forming a solid wall of greenery. Ambril just hoped that would be enough.

Ambril realized that this Dullaith was more powerful than the last. It was already hard for her to breathe. The creature was now fully formed and had begun seeking---victims. She knew she’d be first on its list.

A frantic jangle of bells sounded. “*Where’s all the energy coming from*? fLit thought at her urgently. “*We need to cut if off fast*. *Whatever or probably whoever it is will be dead soon if we don’t act now!* ” The fairy thought frantically at her.

 Ambril realized with a start how hard it must be for fLit to watch this as that is what nearly happened to fLit the last time.

Ambril didn’t hesitate, she dove toward the central stone. But this Dullaith was strong and smart. The closer she got, the more numb with cold she became. Within three strides she could barely feel her legs, her brain fuzzed…she faltered.

“*Snap out of it!”* fLit was suddenly out in the open punching and kicking her in the face. “*Listen, it sees you clearly! It wants your power and then when it’s finished with you? It will come for me and the rest of your friends! So MOVE!”*

The sharp sting of the fairy’s boots did the trick. Ambril shook herself hard and gathering all the energy she could muster plunged again toward the center stone. Another stride and she was within reach. The smoke was so thick and dark she couldn’t see or breathe. Coughing she squeezed her eyes shut and immediately saw the dark magic jetting around her from below her. She shivered again but resolutely held her arm out full length and brought it blindly around in a wide arc.

The Ashera found its mark. She felt the strands of magic snap and fizzle as she whirled the Ashera around again.. The Dullaith’s anguished scream was so loud that Ambril felt rather than heard the clank of a metal box hit the stone. Her mind reeled from the malevolent rage pulsing around her. But the black smoke thinned enough for her to find the box. She grabbed it and raced away from under the Dullaith, light headed from the lack of oxygen. She filled her lungs with fresh air as she broke out from the dense black smoke. The box in her hand numbed her hand. She touched it with her Ashera and gasped as the limp form of a squirrel fell out and into her hand.

The Dullaith was reeling in agony, the severed threads of dark magic whipped around beneath it, sizzling. The Dullaith then stopped and---sniffed. Its massive jaws opened and inhaled---then it turned, its glowing eyes locked onto her.

fLit was right, it could sense the power she wielded, it drew it to her. The stench was overwhelming as the popping slithering sound grew louder as it approached. Ambril just had time to focus on a central point between its two horns. Her Ashera shook slightly as a massive energy ball erupted out of her Ashera and launched itself at the roiling smoky mass bearing down on her.

The ball of energy exploded on impact taking out one eye and severing a large chunk of its head. It sheared off and dropped to the ground a jumble of smoke and flailing magic strands. For a moment Ambril thought it would tip over the band of trees and whirling air around the circle stone. But it fell harmlessly back into the circle. Outside the stone Ambril could hear frightened screams and what sounded like a stampede of people as people raced over and through and the booths to safety.

“Easy there, we be needing to anchor the nasty blaggart.” Yelled Ygg suddenly beside her. Cupping his hands he yelled into the trees nearby.

“Hey up there, whatcha be waiting for! Time to be fighting!”

On cue the branches parted and Sully sailed out a large water gun in her hands. She had on some old gardening boots. Ambril could see a blur of magic at the bottom of them where the flying powder had been applied.

‘”No need to yell!” She retorted. “We heard you! Bummil was having trouble with his Brellie!” She had a thick rope tied around her waist. Behind her followed a string of Beach Umbrella flowers draped heavily with vines. If you knew what to look for you could make out the outline of a gnome lashed to the massive stamen with Bomber Nuts hanging from their waists. Ambril thought they looked like flying jellyfish. Ambril watched as Baldot freed a bomber nut and flung it expertly at the Dullaith below. A sharp explosion sounded and the Dullaith winced and looked up.

“Higher there kid! What are you thinking, we look like sausages on a string to him!” Baldot groused picking off another bomb nut and letting it fall.

Sully pumped up her water gun and let loose a stream of slime which hissed wherever it landed and shorted out smoky monster magical fiber.

The Dullaith inhaled and snorted at the Brellies, buffeting them back but Sully corrected herself and the Dullaith slowly began to sink as she and the gnomes sailed upwards, out of reach and rained volleys of bomb nuts and slime down on it.

Ambril staggered to her feet, her legs were working again. “I’ll take care of her now!” Said Betula taking the limp squirrel from Ambril.

“Come on guys, time to get jumping!” She yelled behind her.

The tablecloth rose like a curtain as Red rolled out the sugar cannon and stuffed something colorful into its mouth. “Fire in the hole!” He yelled touching a candle to the fuse. With a puff of cherry red smoke candy bugs exploded from the cannon and rained down on the Dullaith. The bugs melted with a hiss wherever they touched, the smell of burnt sugar filled the air as the magic mesh shorted and sparked, the Dullaith dipped lower and lower.

“We need to get him stuck to the ground!” Ambril shouted to Betula above the whirl of the dust devils and the crackle of the monster.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, honey, we’re experts with sticky gooey stuff.”

“Shug! Slim1 What’s keeping you!” Betula yelled.

The two sugar animals rolled out the candy Ferris Wheel loaded with Swedish fish.

“We’re coming, we’re coming, hold your horses,” Shug said as he got himself into position.

“Ready?” said Slim.

“Fire it up!” Nodded Shug.

Slim flipped a switch making the Ferris Wheel spin faster and faster. Shug manned a lever carefully gauging the speed of the wheel before…

“Wait until he comes around again---ready, are you aiming for the jawbone?” Yelled Slim.

“I’m aiming, I’m aiming!” Groused Shug.

“Now!” Yelled the giraffe.

Shug pulled down on the lever. Volleys of Swedish fish launched themselves at the Dullaith’s head liquidating and spreading themselves into a solid mass of goo. It dripped slowly down to the ground finally tethering the massive head to the ground.

“It’s working!” Shouted Red gleefully as he reloaded his cannon.

“*I guess we’re up*!” Thought Ambril a fLit.

“*Let’s go*!” said fLit with a clang of steel.

But Ambril could sense his nervousness. After all he nearly died the last time around. “*Look we can do this!*” she thought at him encouragingly.

The fairy snorted with annoyance. “*Cut the pep talk*, *Let’s just get this done*!” Ambril fished her Ledrith Glain out from under her shirt and pointed her Ashera at the monster focusing the energy into a solid continuous stream. The beam was so bright it nearly blinded her. It completely enveloped the Dullaith, blocking it entirely from view. With a burst of sparks the energy began to compress the monster, incinerating its mesh-like skin and sucking in the evil smelling smoke. Slowly it folded into itself, imploding until there was nothing left of it.

**Chapter 44 An Angry Mob**

Ambril felt her knees buckle as she released the power stream.

“Hey are you all right?” It was Riley who limping up to her and helped pull her to her feet. There was a large egg shaped lump near his right temple.

“Are you?” She countered looking with concern at his forehead.

He shrugged. “I’ve had worse, you do remember I’m Lance’s brother?” He smiled. “ I just caught the tail end but that was some show.” How’d you do that?” He asked looking curiously at her medallion and Ashera.

“Oh, it’s hard to explain, really.” She said hastily slipping her medallion back under her shirt. Behind Riley Ambril could see Unk’s dust devils slowly unfurling; revealing some very dusty townspeople behind them. Two of them ran towards Ambril and Riley.

“Ambril! Ambril, my darling! Are you all right? Just what were you doing? One minute you’re over talking to your friends and the next you’re about to be eaten by a monster!” Ambril was nearly smothered by her mother’s hug.

“I’m O.K., Mom, really. I was…um…just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” “Riley? It’s Riley honey!” Riley’s mother came running up next. “We’ve been so worried! Where have you been?” She folded her son in a brief hug and then turned her attention to his head injury. “Now what happened here? Are your new friends responsible for this too?” She asked looking Ambril up and down as she dragged Riley away.

Ambril scanned the crowd and found there were others giving her suspicious looks. Her heart sank as she realized that Zane might have been right. The use of magic in broad daylight might be an unforgiveable sin. But just how much did the townspeople see? She fervently hoped they hadn’t caught the gnomes or the sugar animals in action.

“Now, we need to get you out of here, sweetie! The townspeople are in such a mood.” Her mother tugged on her sleeve. But Ambril wasn’t ready to leave just yet. She wanted to make sure everyone was all right.

She spotted a very dusty Chief Buckthorne pointing up at one of the tallest nearby trees.

“I want her down pronto, you hear me? I want to talk to all three of those kids at once!” Ambril followed his pointing fingers and to her relief spotted Sully dangling upside down in the tree, her foot caught in a vine. The fire fighters quickly began maneuvering a ladder truck underneath her.

Ambril smiled as she saw Ygg running toward her, Unk just behind. Ygg had Ambril’s backpack in his hand.

“That be fine workings Amby!” Said Unk.

“Same to you, Unk! You kept everyone out with those whirlwinds of yours!” Ambril squinted up at him.

The Chief walked up just then. Up close, he looked more rumpled and grumpier than ever. His hair stuck straight out every which way, his pockets were filled with leaves, and branches were stuck in his hair. His clothes were so stiff with dust that his tie stood out at an angle.

“I want you kids to get ready for a nice long chat! What the heck do you think you were doing in there with that thing? You could have been killed! In fact it’s a miracle you weren’t! If it wasn’t for Feldez here who came to your rescue at the last minute…you would be!” The Chief was bellowing much louder than he needed to. The towns people we crowding in around them.

Feldez appeared beside the chief having just finished combing his hair. He looked unruffled as always. He stared mystified at Ambril.

“Feldez did not have anything to do with---“ But Ambril stopped when the Chief gave her a particularly potent glare.

“Darned if I know what really happened. I didn’t really see much of anything what with those---dust clouds and---trees getting in the way.” The Chief took out a large handkerchief and sneezed but because the handkerchief was so dusty, he sneezed again.

“Chief, I believe we should get them out of here immediately. This crowd is turning ugly.” He said pointedly his eyes surveying the crowd behind them.

The Chief looked with him and snorted. “They darn near nearly killed each other running away from this and now they think they’re experts as to what went on.” He said in a low voice.

Sully walked up just then, a pair of flip flops on her feet. She was stuffing with difficulty a pair of gardening boots into her backpack. “Wheew! Am I glad to be right side up and out of that tree!” She said.

Ms. Breccia, her floral wreath askew, loomed behind her. “Aha! I knew it! Chief I want you to arrest these children. I happen to have the misfortune to know them personally having been forced to teach them this year. I’ll have you know I have never had more trouble with a group of kids in all my teaching career!” Her voice had built itself into a yell.

“This!” She said pointing her square tipped finger at Ambril “I have just learned---is a Silva,” she said nastily as if Silva was a dirty word. “A Silva! As in the infamous Bren Silva!” She paused for affect to appreciate the Oh’s and Ah’s of the crowd. “She is his daughter! For those of you with shorter memories than mine; he was the one responsible for raising the Dullaith years ago!” She was enjoying the attention now. “Remember? Of course Feldez remembers, he vanquished that one as well.”

“We were so glad you were here,” added one of the other floral wreathed maids. “Such a hero! What would this town do without you?” She added admiringly.

Ambril was disgusted. Was he going to take credit for this too?

“We don’t really know yet what occurred but I have to say that it is not as you say, or rather that I was not the one…” Feldez sputtered. Ambril’s mother went to him and put her arm around him.

“We’ll release a full statement after we’ve had a chance to gather all the facts.” Cut in Chief Buckthorne. ‘In the meantime I think we should withhold judgment, you know these kids are pretty good with techno stuff---and you can get just about anything on the internet now.” Continued the Chief in a loud voice. “Now lets just---“

“Did you see what them kids were doing?” A pot bellied man with the loud Hawaiian shirt shook his finger at Ambril. “One had a magic stick which shot sparks out of it at the monster!” His face was reddening with fear and anger.

“They were telling that monster what to do, is what I think!” Another man snorted loudly.

“And a piece of it nearly fell on my head!” Quavered an elderly lady in a not pink jogging suit.

The crowd around them tightened getting angrier and more demanding.

“In the old days, they put their kind out in the forest to fend for themselves.” Said a weasel-faced woman. “And it didn’t take long for the forest to take care of business! It’s nature’s way to weed out the abnormal and depraved!””

“Well they can’t stay here! They’ll kill us all!”

“Now calm down, calm down!” Shouted the Chief “Can you hear yourselves? We have come a long way from the ‘old days’. We don’t dump defenseless children out in the wilderness to die these days do we?”

“We sure as heck don’t let them stay so’s they can sick monsters on us!” Countered the man with the red face staring angrily at Ambril.

“Get ‘em gone! Right now!”

Ambril’s mother drew herself up to her full height and facing the angry mob put her hands on her hips. ‘Over my dead body will any of you take my daughter and leave her in the forest to die!” She yelled.

“Well that can be arranged too! Tylia Silva! I remember you now, you’re Bren’s wife and probably in on this too!” Countered the weasel-faced woman.

Ambril watched as her mother’s shoulders stiffened and crumpled. Feldez immediately put his arm around her and one on Ambril’s shoulder. But Ambril shrugged it off.

The crowd was so worked up now Ambril was jostled from side to side.

“Now that’s quite enough! The Chief was bellowing so loudly now the veins on the side of his face looked more like ropes. “Control yourselves! Skarn! Take these kids on over to Quarter Moon Bay and talk to Child Services. They can keep them there until we get everyone here calmed down, got it?”

Skarn grabbed the three kids and shoved them roughly in front of him. “O.K. Kids, let’s march! My car’s over there.”

“Sully! Sully! What’s going on!” It was Sully’s parents, white lipped and dazed, reaching out for her. The crowd however was keeping them back.

“Mom! Dad!” Was all Sully could get out.

“It’s just for safe keeping, you an ride over to pick them up tomorrow.” Chief Buckthorne said reassuringly to the parents.

Ambril was nearly knocked down by a large woman with a pink parasol.

“They need to git!” A skinny man yelled from behind her.

“Right now, Skarn! You hear me, GO!” The Chief said quietly but urgently to his Deputy.

The kids walked woodenly to the police car. Sully wiped tears from her face as she waved good bye to her parents.

“Look Deputy can’t we just go home? Our parents and guardians will take good care of us.”

“No sirree kiddo!” Said Skarn chewing gum so slowly he looked like a cow chewing its cud. “You saw that there crowd, looking like a riot was about to form right then and there! No, no, no…We’ll just let things cool down for a day or so and then bring you right back home.” He said attempting kindness.

“But we didn’t raise that Dullaith! We defeated it!” Said Ygg angrily.

Skarn looked at them skeptically in his rear view mirror. “Come on now! I don’t know, I didn’t see much as I was stuck in that same dust storm as the Chief but---you kids? You took that thing down?” He half smiled. “That’s right hard to believe.” He pulled at his nose. “You must of raised that thing by accident or something…to show off to your friends.” He nodded to himself. “And then Feldez somehow or other took the thing down like he did the last one.”

Ambril didn’t know what to say. Everything was turning out wrong. Why wouldn’t they believe them?

“Never you mind thought,” Skarn added after sucking his teeth a bit. “The Chief will have it all sorted though before you know it, you can bank on that.” He continued. “We’ll just take you over to where it’s nice and safe for a bit and wait it out there.”

The three kids lapsed into shell-shocked silence as they watched the houses thin and then the trees crowd out the farmlands, and then the forest thicken and darken. They had just passed through the wall when Skarn said.

“Yep, you’ll be safe and sound in Quarter Moon Bay in no time.” The car abruptly swerved off the highway and onto a narrow dirt road. “But first, we’ll just take a little detour.”

Ambril tried the door, it was locked and the windows wouldn’t roll down either. They rumbled by a rusted out sign hanging askew when Ambril realized---they were trapped.

**KEEP OUT**

**PROPERTY OF TRELAWNYD MINE**

**Chapter 45 Trelawnyd Mine**

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 scooched 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 its 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---sea 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 Sea 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 the 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 Jello 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 deslimed.

“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 allow 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, she’s on her own trail!” Ambril nodded with difficulty to the track ahead of them. There was just one long narrow groove they were following.

‘I think---ooww!---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 from head to foot.”

“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 off to my house and see if we can find Feldez…and you two take a look at that map?” Asked Ambril abruptly changing the subject.

Ygg took a step back is if he needed more space to assess whether 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 uninteresting,*” 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 up and down excitedly next to Betula.

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

“We were waiting for Feldez…it’s 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, 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.

“*Sid…he’s devastated*.” Ambril began. *“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 thought at her angrily.

Ambril looked down and was surprised to see that the Ledrith Glain did glow a little less brightly.

“*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 as if someone was pulling at her insides. 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 to herself and 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 collected the sleeping animal, hugging it close. “She’ll need some rest now. Tell your Mom she won’t be back to work for a few days.”

“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 take her down 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, his nod curt 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 flung her bag onto the pile and 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 on 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 to the equations…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 easily.” 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 really good to talk about all of 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 would be best.”

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 may be 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 looking uncomfortable.

“I’ve still a couple of things to bring down,” 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?” Asked Ambril.

“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 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, 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; It was illuminated briefly by the hard, clean light of a flashlight 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 quickly. But with Skarn, went the light. They were left in an oppressive darkness. In the close room Ambril picked up the scent of dark magic, not reent she guesed as it was faint. Perhaps it was left over from the attempt to raise Moroz earlier.

Some one lit a match. In its glow, Riley’s face smiled. “I think we’ll have to risk a little light,” he whispered. Ambril tracked the match light until it found a home in an old-fashioned kerosene lantern.

“We need to be keeping that low,” whispered Ygg. “Let’s be finding what we need quick 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. I be thinking that Skarn doesna want the Chief to know what he’s been up to.” Ygg shook his head. “I’m thinking he’s 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 Under neath in scrolly writing it said:

The Town of Trelawnyd, 1753

“See! That must be 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.

“Well, you be right there, but it be naught helpful.” Said Ygg squinting at the map and looking just as confused as Ambril felt. Everything’s…catywampus.

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. “And what’s it to you guys?”

Ambril hesitated, not sure how much she should tell him. “We think it still exists, it’s just been hidden and largely forgotten…we just need to make sure that…um…everything is the way it should be.” 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. “It’s about the Dullaiths and this really powerful guy who ran the mines once.” Asked Riley suddenly interested.

“Yes! Well someone’s---well, we think some one is trying to free him.”

“Free him? He must have been dead for over a hundred years! “ Riley exclaimed.

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

Riley was silent while be absorbed this. “And you think he’s in Old Town?” Finished Riley softly.

“It be the last place, the only circle stone, that we know of anyway where he could be imprisoned.” Said Ambril. “The people behind the Dullaith business, we think they must be heading to Old Town to try and free Moroz there so we need to find 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…waving the town…just for fun?” He asked finally.

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

“That and my family is being blamed for raising the Dullaith…because of my Dad and what happened to him. So, we have to find out who is really behind all of this and 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 look away, suddenly uncomfortable.

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, closer.” She said beckoning to him.

Ambril followed Riley and watched Sully vigorously rubbing 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!”

“Yeah now we just need one other landmark…

They were all silent a moment. Ambril studied the mural. It was so dusty there were parts that were tough to make out, but she though she saw something there at the other end of Old Town. 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. She surveyed the map sadly.

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 maybe even next week.”

Even Sully looked crestfallen as the realization sank in.

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

They all stood lost in thought staring at the mural in silence. There were 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 ourselves out of here in one piece.” Said Riley matter-of-factly.

The others turned and started looking around the room.

“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 backwall. The brighter light of the lantern brought out images that had not been visible before. Ambril could see that the images were bound in the curling lines of the ancient Celts. One 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. “And this sort of ribbon thing represents a journey maybe.”

“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 on and they were all knitting something.

“What, you recognize your…aunt there? Does she look like a turnip too?” Asked Sully.

“No, there were these strange beings I met when I was waiting for you at the Gazebo one day…I didn’t tell you about them because I thought you would think I was crazy.” Ambril got a sudden idea and swung her backpack down to retrieve her Ashera in what was now a practiced move.

“Well we be knowing you are now, but it be O.K. as we are too.” Said Ygg watching as the Ashera glowed and pulsed in her hand.

“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. She shut her eyes and that now familiar gray curtain fell down over everything. Tendrils of fog swirled around obscuring everything and everything except for the magical energies nearby. Sully and Ygg were still there staring vacantly at her. She could see the bright glow of fLit at her feet still stowed in her backpack. There was a dark gray smudge just behind and to the right of her, perhaps a remnant of the earlier Moroz raising attempt she wasn’t sure. She turned to look forward at the archway and was stunned to see that the dirt wall had fallen away. Replaced with a round door. It shone and twinkled just as her Ashera did in her hand. The door was supported by thousands of tiny sinuous roots and vines woven around it. There were riddled with knobby bumps.

Ambril just stood there absorbing the scene, collecting herself.

“I told you, she ain’t no better…she’s just downright soft in the head.” Said a scratchy voice.

“Right daft and dumb, I say…” Another mumbled.

Ambril searched around and finally located them near the bottom. Three large knobby lumps knitting industriously. One was staring at her 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 al long searching stare. The other resumed her knitting as if nothing hadhappened.

“Ummm, yes ,she’s to the underworld without a change of undies sure enough.” The biggest one mused. “Your Mam won’t like that will she!” She cackled. “Well, I did tell you didn’t I? Can’t be helped!”

The right one snatched the glasses away from her sister.

“Still she’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, really, what’s the world coming to.”

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

The three Aunties jumped at that.

“Look there! She can talk like a right normal person! So surprising! Said one.

“Bless her. But…I think she’s still a little daft.” 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.

“We we thinks we never do…” 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 at Ambril for a long time and then frowned, disappointed. “Too true, only one way---straight through on into it and then---“

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

“Oh yes, I think so…maybe…with luck.” Said the big one her eyes enlarged ten fold by the glasses were still tiny.

“At least I hopes so…”

Ambril sighed she had had enough of this. “Excuse me, 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 are being chased by this bad guy and we 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.

“You see? She’s just a bit slow.” Said the middle one. “Are you sure she’s the one?”

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

“Well…well we were just hoping to get out of this building and outside say to the circle stone there in the park.”

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 Lovie? 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. The middle one blinked again. “It’s hard to tell but I think she may have gotten that…it just takes her a bit longer see…”

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 would happen?”

“Well, nothing would happen of course as we’s can’t open the door for you’s.” 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 nodding toward Ambril after she’d snatched the glasses back.

“What, that one? You sure?” Said the middle one stopping to squint at something near Ambril’s feet.

“Yoohoo there boy, you Tylwyth Teg!” They waited a moment knitting furiously and squinting 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! Come on! We need to get out of here! Can you help us*?” She thought at him.

The thud of shoes falling on the floor and then, “*No*,” fLit answered.

“*What 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”.

“*Look fLit, just ignore them, we need your help, can you get us out of here through these, um…chutes*?”

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

“Oh, see there, you spoke too soon, they’re never friends, not a fairy and a human-kind.” Said the bigger one still knitting furiously away.

“*It’s not that I’m not capable, of course I can do it I’m a fairy for Tilwith’s sake! It’s just that I won’t risk it.”* He folded his arms and looked obstinate.

Ambril was incensed. “*Why? Is it because it’s ‘beneath you like they said*?” She snorted rubbing her nose.

“*No, no it’s that…I would if I could*.” fLit shook his head slowly. “*It’s just that last time…something…went wrong. And I lost someone in there. Someone very close to me.” fLit’s expression was bitter. “There are forces in there that are…evil. I…Perhaps I attract them? I don’t know But what I do know is that I don’t want to lose…you*.” He thought at her.

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*.”

“*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…hundred…thousand…I guess*.”

“*200,000? Really? I’d say you have a pretty good safety record, myself*.”

fLit looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “*I acted rashly. I was too young and foolish I guess and I didn’t think…*”

“*But you aren’t young and foolish any more are you?*” Prompted Ambril, “*Come on, you can still try right? We’re in a bind*---“

She was interrupted by a massive shuddering thud on the door. It startled Ambril so 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’s events, they’ll lock you up no questions asked and throw away the key!” Another thud and a splintering crack sounded. Ambril briefly saw the glint of an ax blade.

“Wow, you’re back! That is so weird, you know you sort of go invisible---“ 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 com eon, get us out of here! That guy is completely crazy!” blurted out aAmbril right out loud.

“Who’s fLit now? And how’s he gonna help us out of this one?” Asked Ygg looking confused.

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. “O.K. I’ll do it but 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.

“This is fLit, he’s going to be our guide through the chutes which are just through there!”

said Ambril hurriedly grabbing Sully and Ygg’s hands and leading them over to the dirt wall. “”The…chutes? Are through the dirt? What do we dig through it then?” Asked Sully completely confused.

“No, it’s there look, shut your eyes. Ambril grabbed her wrist and aimed the Ashera at the dirt wall. Sully went a little visible and registered shock and awe. Ygg grabbed onto Sully and went a little invisible himself.

Letting go he said, “Those are the Aunties you be talking about? Rude little rhutabegas aren’t they?” He mused. “They up and called me a cubed slab of a plodder.”

“I don’t know, they called me chirpy and cute!” Said Sully.

“Funny, I didn’t hear any of that,” said Ambril and wondered why that was, perhaps the Aunties controlled who hear what and when. But she hadn’t much time to ponder this as a moment later Skarn’s angry voice was heard.

“I’m coming in kiddies, better be saying your prayers!” Bellowed Skarn and let lose a mighty whack.

Ambril could see he was almost through. Riley held out his hand to Ambril and took Sully’s other hand. Ygg was at the end. Ambril tugged on fLit’s hand.

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

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

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

“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 Aunties put aside their knitting immediately. The larger one reached up an old knarled root and wrapped it around the doorknob. The door swung upward revealing more intricate webbing forming a tunnel. An air current smelling of caves and dripping water assailed them.

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

“Nary a thank you I bet as well!” Said the larger one bitterly.

“*Ready*? fLit thought through tem. *One, Two, Mark!*

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

“Thanks!” She yelled back at the Aunties but they were falling too fast. She felt sure they hadn’t heard her.

The whistled through the chutes sometimes completely enclosed with the curious intricate webbing and other times sliding smoothly along an open slide. fLit just ahead of her was carefully steering them gracefully along. After a few minutes Ambril relaxed and began to enjoy herself and when the chute was open stared out into a seemingly endless cavern. It was dimly lit. Ambril could not even guess where the light was coming from. There were chutes all around them some winding upward, some downward and others branching out beyond them in all directions. After another few minutes of gliding a long at a million miles an hour 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 thinking too small. This, this is the universe.*” He said disparagingly as he bore hard to the left.

“*Really? The whole Universe? Wow! 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 and who has 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 by your protectors.*”

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

“*Not really, it hasn’t been that long, just since you came of age at thirteen.*” Said fLit as he threw his weight toward the right and shunted them through an upwardly climbing chute.

“*So who are these protectors then?”* Asked Ambril skeptically.

“*Can’t say, they’ll come forward if it becomes apparent you need to know.*”

“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 and decided to enjoy the scenery. The walls of the cavern seemed to be thinning. Ambril could see trees sailing by them and a familiar night sky. She blinked hard as they dove into a shadowy tunnel. And that’s where everything went…amiss.

Ambril suddenly felt Riley’s grip tighten and felt a freezing knife like pain in her other hand. Her hand felt numb and lifeless.

“fLit! Where are you!“ She screamed. She was suddenly airborne rolling end over end she struck wet grass and rolled several times before she came to rest against a rock slab piercing the ground. 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.

“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 they others with you?” She asked looking around behind him into the shadows. “And where the heck is fLi?”

“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 Ashera and 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 did look different. He seemed cocky and arrogant. More like fLit than the cowering kid Ambril had seen heckled and mocked by his older brother many times over the past few months.

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

“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 to see to walk with. The bright shining light of her medallion made her blink as she pulled it out from under her shirt.

“Why don’t you take it off and hold it out in front of you, that way it won’t be so blinding.” Riley said as he moved closer to her.

Ambril did find the Ledrith Glain’s light glaring. But she hated to take it off, it had become a part of her.

“Come on, it’s just until we figure out where we are and how we get home.” Said Riley reassuringly shielding his own 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 in front of her and focused it’s light in front.

“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 Redwod in front of them. “I think I recognize that tree, I don’t think we’re more than a mile or two from the wall.” He said confidently.

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 very close to Ambril with something in his hand. With the flick of his wrist he cut the Ledrith Glain’s chain from her wrist and then immediately caught it with the deep black cup attached to its handle. The cup instantly wrapped itself around the Ledrith Glain entirely cutting the light off and leaving them with just the glow of the Ashera.

“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 easily away. The knife slit her finger as he did so instantly a searing icy pain shot up her arm. It similar to the one she had felt in the chutes but this one continued to throb and build. She doubled over in pain.

Riley laughed dryly. “Oops, that’s going to leave a mark---that is if it doesn’t kill you first!” He sneered. Ambril looked over at him. Gone was her joking, smiling friend who encouraged her when she needed it. The new Riley’s smile was bitter, his face hard.

“Riley, I don’t understand…what’s going on?”

“My you are slow, just like the Aunties said!” He snorted pocketing the knife along with the Ledrith Glain. He folded his arms and smiled 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 the threatening messages.” She continued. “And it was you at the Tupelo’s shack who conjuring 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, but then I just happened to snag a 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. “You said fLit was safe, where is he?” She said accusingly.

Rile continued to smile at her as he slowly held up a black rectangular box. In it, frozen, as if he was asleep, 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 knife. She felt the impact run down her spine making her dizzy.

“I wouldn’t try that again if I were you, this knife has centuries of curses built into it. Your little Ashera is 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 right?”

Riley nodded and then grimaced. “Poor Lance, he caught me doing some workings in the grocery store 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.

Dr Afallen, he is such a nice man, how could you hurt a guy like that?” 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 glass case. So I had to eradicate his memory.” He said sheepishly. “The explosion was just a smoke screen, really. It just got a little out of hand is all.”

“And Red! How could you attack a defenseless being like that? He’s a part of Betula’s circle of friends. The ones she can never live without. 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 for me.” Riley cried angrily. “When did they ever try to include me in anything? I was never invited to any birthday parties or backyard barbeques, I didn’t get asked to play kickball in the streets in the afternoon.” 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 still see the angry red in Riley’s face. “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 your brother, your family and the town, 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 thinking 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 until I’m blue in the face.” 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 in this world.” He nodded simply. “And for once, they’ll respect me. And see that I’m not some one who belongs in a dumpster anymore.” He continued. “With Moroz to guide me---“

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

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

“Look the point I’m trying to make here is that you’re making a huge mistake, you can’t control a guy like him, no one can.”

It was Riley’s turn to scoff. “Come on, how powerful can he still be? He’s been locked away for 150 years, alone in the dark…I’ll release him, he might decipher some of his more advanced 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 kill 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 had four horns and a wreath of human skulls encircling it’s head. The skulls seemed to be writhing in agony and Ambril wondered if she failed, would her skull be added to the crown? She shuddered and transferred her Ashera into her other hand. It glowed brightly as if it too 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, giving her space to think.

The King Dullaith had started moving toward her the weird crackling and popping noises growing louder as it came. It began to rise as it to get above her to crush her and as it did Ambril caught sight of the fairy box, fizzing and sparking directly below the Dullaith’s enormous head.

Ambril braced herself and let it come for her. Se knew she wouldn’t get a second chance at this and worked at staying focused, keeping her mind clear. Ambril took a deep breath and held it, waiting until the last possible moment. The Dullaith was nearly on top of her, it’s jaws began to open as a dense black smoke enveloped her. Ambril brought up her Ashera quickly and aimed. She gathered as big an energy ball as she could from inside her and shot it directly at one of it’s glowing red eyes. The energy sizzled and boiled out from the eye cavity extinguishing the magic in it’s web like skin wherever it touched.

Ambril wasted no time congratulating herself. She 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. The dark smoke and the stench made her eyes water so she shut her eyes and instantly she found her target. A radiant blue box in a swirl of gray fog. She slashed at it again and again until it broke free and fell into her hands. She was dizzy from holding her breath so long and the tremendous loss of energy so she stumbled and fell as she found her way out. She had to crawl eventually until she found a slanted rocky slab to prop herself up with. She brought the fairy box and the 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. And she noticed something. The Dullaith glowed a brilliant cool blue, just like the fairy box. Its energy ball was massive. She wondered if she could use it to power an attack against itself. Because she knew at that moment, looking at her own modest energy supply, that she’d never be able to take it down on her own. Could she also use its energy to recover her own strength, she wondered?

The tinkle of a bell and then a small voice whispered through her thoughts. “*Must not use its tainted energy for yourself*.” fLit coughed. “*Will then become like them, a Dullaith*.”

“*Thanks, but no more talking, just rest*.” 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 still there was a chance she could do it. A loud racking cough startled Ambril. The monster was a lot closer to her than she expected. Dizzy and weak as she was she staggered once more to her feet.

The creature seemed to be sniffing, vacuuming up as much air as possible. Closing her eyes she noticed that its energy ball had grown once more, even without fLit to fuel it. She watched as it drew a huge breath and grew a little more. It seemed to be siphoning off the life energy of the beings surrounding them. Ambril closed her eyes and searched around. 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 turned back to the battle at hand. The great roiling blue ball of energy was very close now. She could see the creature’s one eye watching her as she grabbed and ripped a massive energy ball from it and balanced it between her hands trying desperately not to absorb it herself. It was so tempting, all that life and power so very close. All she had to do was draw it to herself…but she resisted and refocusing the energy she flung it at the monster’s face. It hit the monster’s other eye which blinked out immediately and sent it reeling backward and down. One of its horns sloughed off slowly falling tip first narrowly missing Ambril. She was able to stagger out of harm’s way, wavered briefly and then stumbled down onto one knee. The creature finally came to rest just twenty feet away from her. She could feel it breathing in again trying to rejuvenate itself. She did so as well but only for a little bit until her head cleared again. It was just too painful to watch all those little lights snuff out just for her.

She looked down at her trusty Ashera still glowing and sparking with life. The delicate tracery of lines and images glowed brilliantly. One or two of the images seemed to glow brighter than the rest. One of them was the three-headed dog, the Cerberus. Ambril remembered back to that day when she had heard their promise of help, when all hope was lost, that they would come for her. She thought briefly about whether getting taken by the dogs of the underworld would be better than being eaten by a Dullaith and decided that if they smelled even a little bit better, she’d go the way of the dogs. But perhaps it wouldn’t get to that, if she could bring them to her and get them to focus on the Dullaith, perhaps she could find an escape while they were occupied with the monster.

It had grown too quiet in the clearing and Ambril opened her eyes and looked wildly around. The Dullaith was nowhere to be seen but the smell of it was overpowering. Just in time she looked up to see the beast had positioned itself 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. She sensed its sudden downward rush and braced herself for its impact at the same time building a protective shield of magic, she curled herself into a ball. At the moment of impact she felt her rib age squeezed close to the breaking point . Her brain filled with a shower of brilliant streams of light. This must be it, the end she thought but still was unwilling to let it end this way she formed the words Cerberus in her mind and brought forth the image of the three headed dog.

The affect was immediate as a shockwave of energy vibrated all around her. The Dullaith, froze in mid attack and let out an agonized scream of pain just over her head.

The Cerberus had come, seemingly out of nowhere. The smell of deep caverns and trickling shadowy water came with them. Ambril could see their gigantic jaws ripping and tearing away the magical fiber of the Dullaith’s head as she was showered with its magical debris and human skulls. Ambril shielded her head with her arms, the skulls bounced off her and sank slowly into the earth wherever they landed.

In moments it was over, the Dullaith was vanquished, the rancid stench of it blown away on a gentle night breeze. Ambril filled her lungs and realized too late she had missed her chance to escape. Slowly the gigantic dogs turned towards 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.

She flinched as he blew on her expecting to be burned. But the fire felt warm and invigorating. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad, she thought.

“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.

She was sad to see her friend would suffer the same fate that she was about it, but it was a little comforting to know that, at least at the beginning of the next adventure, she wouldn’t be alone.

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. They engulfed and consumed them entirely. All was colored red with its heated breath.

But it felt more like a summer breeze than a burning at the stake. The warmth blew through her, inside her and around. It brought color back with it to her thoughts and re-sharpened the edges of her thoughts. She felt her heart beat which moments ago had been going a mile a minute slow to normal. Ambril breathed in the life giving warmth and energy.

Ambril opened her eyes and found herself in a sunlit meadow. There was fLit, healthy and strong hovering just above her right shoulder. He was staring at the three beings just before them, the Cerberus. When Ambril first looked at them, they looked like the gigantic dog beasts in the clearing but when they turned their heads or moved, Ambril caught a glimpse of something else. There seemed to be a human face briefly visible under a dog’s headdress 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.” It’s voice had a deep resonance to it. “Your friends are rushing to you. We will not tarry but offer this before we go.” He continued. “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---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 past her into the forest and was---gone.

It was as if someone had flicked a switch off. The night rushed in on a cool breeze. The stars blinked on and the sunlit meadow was replaced with the dark foreboding forms of the trees. She shivered and felt alone. There was a rock underneath her that felt unbearably icy and hard. Without thinking she got to her feet and was happily surprised that she no longer felt dizzy and weak. The Cerberus had revived her and brought her back to health.

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

“*I feel great really, you*?” She thought back and smiled. “I guess *we did it*!”

“*Well you did it mostly*.” The fairy admitted sheepishly. “*That kid took me by surprise…again!”*

“*I felt his power when he raised that Dullaith. He’s a pretty impressive magic wielder. I wouldn’t feel too embarrassed about it, really*.” 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.

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

“AAAAAAAMMMMBBBRRILLLL!!!! Ambril!”

The trees shuddered violently at the other 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 is our ride*!” Ambril thought back 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 all! The smell of Dullaith and strong dark magic is all around here but look at you! Just buzzing with life energy!” 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 that’s Cerberus kind. My but you do have some explaining to do.” Hendoeth nodded and beckoned to Ambril. But then she caught sight of fLit and froze. “Is that a fairy I see, hanging over your right shoulder there?” 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 and two familiar figures.

Sully blew past Hendoeth. “Ambril! What happened back there in the Chutes? There was that dark tunnel and Riley seemed to struggle with something and then he let go! We saw you two sliding off sideways into the trees. So we got off as soon as we could by sliding sideways ourselves. But you weren’t anywhere to be found!” Sully grabbed Ambril and gave her a huge hug.

“So where did Riley get to?” Asked Ygg coming up behind Sully. “He has some explaining to do.”

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 cur Red’s sneaker off.” Here she wrinkled her nose. “Do you remember how he always smelled like fruit just past its prime?” 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 in open-mouthed horror.

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

Hendoeth elbowed her way in between them. “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 or he wasn’t telling you the truth. 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 blined his blinds at her and bowed the porch into a smile.

“hey Fowlclun!---thanks---really thanks again for coming to get me.” Ambril couldn’t think of anything else to say so she just smiled.

A hollow cackle blew thorugh the curtains and made the lantern by the door flicker. Ambril guess that was his way of saying your welcome.

They all walked into the house but were stopped just inside by a blockade of furniture.

“Ambril! So nice to se you, we were just getting to know 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 bit into her scone.

“”We all can’t complain really, now that Fowlclun’s leg healed and things are so much smoother up here. There’s a lot less breakage.” Smiled Ester swishing her feathers around maple’s spotless top.

“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 the grandfather clock dryly.

Ester rolled her eyes but said nothing.

“Hi all, I’m glad you met my friends finally. It was really tough describing all of you to them.” Ambril said unable to stop smiling at them all.

“So your little friends name is…fLit?” Hendoeth put her hand on her hips and scrutinized him. “Ester, where the heck is Tweek? Maybe this little guy can shed some light on---“

She couldn’t get out another word as fLit zoomed past her making her pigtails flap around. He had spotted something sitting on the counter and had made a beeline for it.

A symphony of joyful sounds erupted layered over the sound of waves crashing and the wind blowing. Tweek had 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. “*You remember I told you I lost some one in the Chutes long ago? Well that was Tweek. I’ve been looking for her ever since!” He laid a hand gently on the hard rock surface. “And now that I’ve found her, I’m not going to leave her again*.”

“*You said some one, not something. I take it she was a some one at some point right*?” Asked Hendoeth behind Ambril.

fLit nodded emphatically. “*Of course, she’s a fairy*.” He said. “*She said she was caught in the Chutes by an evil man and forced to do what he wanted her to*.” He said sadly. “*But when the man finally went away she found too much of her had been lost and she was stuck in-between*.” He said. “*I guess she means this piece of rock*.”

“Well we’ll just have to find a way to get her out!” Said Sully peeping over the back of the sofa at them. “Maybe something in the Astarte will help. She mused taking another bite of cookie.

“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 back at him. Finally they were silent. fLit sat back on his heels, stunned. “*She says it was…Moroz*.”

Ambril felt a 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.

“Riley wants to show the world how great he is by having powerful friends. Or in this case a powerful friend. He thinks that Moroz will be so grateful Riley released him that he’ll share all his secrets with him.” Said Ambril with a sigh.

“Well I don’t know how he thinks he’s going to release Moroz, he’ll need loads of magic to counteract the wards and protections they put on his prison.”

Ambril took a deep breath. “Well he has that 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 to cut it away and capture it with that little cup thing on the handle.”

Ygg shook his head. “That be very bad news. That Ledrith Glain holds a powerful lot of magic. We must be making our way to Old Town then and try to 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.

“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. “He did say he’d been studying Moroz’s notes and formulas a lot.”

“Well studying and knowing how to use it are two different things aren’t they?” Hendoeth nodded her head thoughtfully. “But just in case, Fowlclun and I will be patrolling the wall tonight, never you mind.”

Ambril felt a little better but something kept knawing 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’re swirling all around you.” She nodded again. “As a matter of fact, I’m plum worried you’re gonna out-adventure all of us!” She winked broadly at Ambril.

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 life time’s worth of adventure all in one 24 hour period. 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 spreading her legs apart and taking hold of the top end of the boot-rack. “Everyone grab a’hold of something, we’re going in now and it can be a bit bumpy.”

Ambril looked around and grabbed the arm of the sofa. There was a mild squeezing sensation. All the china rattled and Fowlclun clucked. Then it was done.

Hendoeth straightened and shook herself. “Don’t ever get any easier getting through them protective wards on that old wall.

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

Hendoeth opened the door to reveal a well-swept garden 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, but that was to expected; the gnomes loved tending to the plants.

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.

The had all piled out on the front steps by that time. Ambril paused, uncertain. “You know, Hendoeth, none of us actually live here, Sully is next door and Ygg and I live closer into town.”

“So are 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, sorry, I think I’ll stay here if you don’t mind, with Tweek for a while.” He thought back at her.

Ambril felt a surprising emptiness form in the pit of her stomach. A few months back she’d have given anything for this moment; some privacy in her own life. But now she knew she would miss his presence, annoying or not he had proven himself as a friend. She sighed softly knowing that she, as his friend would have to let him move on. “*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 began walking up the garden path toward the main house when she felt something poke 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. “Look, *why are you always punching and kicking me*? *It’s so insulting*.”

“*It’s because you are so…large. I can’t get your attention any other way*. *At least not right away*.” He fired back.

Ambril rolled her eyes. And she was about to feel sad about missing this?

“*Tomorrow then*.” Said fLit as he darted away. “*And…sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you*.”

Ambril was stunned. He had actually apologized.

“*Well don’t get used to it*!” He chimed in.

“Finally!” Said a grouchy voice from around Ambril’s kneecap.

Baldot had waited for her. “We got the Eee-lectricity working this afternoon…water works a treat thanks to our friendly neighborhood sea monster.” Baldot nodded to the pond.

Several tentacles glistened in the moonlight waving at her. She waved back.

“”---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 there at the front door. 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 the idea that her family would once…”

In the doorway stood a woman in a apron so big for her it wrapped around her 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 coming from.” 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, Mom, it’s just that 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 been doing.” Her mother said begrudgingly. “So, I guess I’ll just have to decide your punishment tomorrow after you’ve had a chance to tell me absolutely---ouch!” Her mother stumbled over a ceramic gnome on the front porch. “These hard pointy 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---“

Ambril’s eyes widened as she saw Bummil break his stance and frown at her mother.

“Well maybe it’s like Mrs. XXX said, they’re alwys XXX XXX XXX!.”

Ambril’s mother laughed. “Well I wish that were so.” 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.”

Bummil rolled his eyes at her.

Ambril jumped and said, “Let’s talk about that tomorrow too, I think 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 popped in finally! What do you think of your new home?”

Whatever she was stirring smelled fabulous and she was suddenly ravenously---“hungry, I think I’m hungry!”

“Well get yourself a bowl and I’ll fill it with this good tomato and basil 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 some cookies for later.”

Ambril smiled gratefully and grabbed a 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 chews.

“Better, she’s asleep in her own bed, ina 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 and probably a little too long as their mother soon stared at them pointedly. “Now that’s beginning to get insulting.” She said stiffly.

“Sorry Mom, but you have to admit her cooking is almost as good as Betula’s.” Said Ambril ripping off a hunk of artichoke bread.

“So, what happened to Feldez?” Asked Sid as he picked at a piece of bread.

Zane snorted, “Feldez? He’s in his house, reveling in its orderliness and---“

“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!”

There was a photograph of Feldez staring suspiciously from the page, the caption read:

***Dr. Petri plans to take an immediate leave of absence from his administrative post at Trelawnyd General Hospital but will continue to pursue his quest for clean, renewable energy elsewhere in the world.***

The article read:

**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 involved in helping to control and vanquish 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!**

Her mother had come to ready the article over her should. She half smiled at Ambril when she looked up.

“So, he’s moving on…I guess.” Said Ambril.

Her mother nodded. “Yes, he’s moving on---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 you 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. Another tug made her dizzy and nauseous.

“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, clawing at the stones. Many followed it, resembling a horde of flailing snakes, dark and shiny in the moonlight; each one seeking a purchase in the weathered stone.

They reached almost to the boy who frantically crawled backward into the shadows, back and away just as something heaved itself into the moonlight. It was unrecognizable, certainly not human with a metallic cylindrical mass for a face 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 where its feet might once have been.

It blinked owlishly up at the night sky. The moonlight graced its disfigured face for the first time in over 150 years. The creature flinched as if in pain and, hunching over 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 gutteral sound something like a laugh escaped from the shadows. “You…command me, boy?” The voice was like the screeching of hyenas and vultures over a carcass. A racking cough followed.

Without warning a sinuous 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. It made a slithering sound mixed with grating metal as Moroz made its way toward the forest surrounding the clearing. It paused just as it 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.

The End,

for now

# End