# AMBRIL’S TALE

# THE RETURN OF THE DULLAITH

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# A Puzzle Box

Ambril didn’t wake up when the moving van rammed the Gingko tree in front upsetting an old crow roosting there. Or when the doorbell was pressed too long and too loud. Nope, she just rolled over. But when her mother shrieked as she raced into her room and vaulted on her bed she did. Ambril’s Mother was tremendously good at shrieking.

“Get up! We’re already late!” Said her Mom as she peered down at the slightly mashed 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. “How many times is this Sweetie?” A grunt from the quilt was all she got. She prodded it with her big toe. “How many times have we moved, Ambril? I’ve lost track.”

“Nine times!” A mass of tousled brown hair emerged.

Her Mom smiled. “Nine times is the charm!” She jumped from the bed and was through the door before the old bedsprings had time to squeal. Ambril heard her skip down the stairs, open the door and 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 the San Francisco Bay. It had been home to Ambril, her brother, and her Mom for nearly a year, the longest time they had stayed anywhere. She had actually made some friends for once…well sort of. And now they had to pack up and move to a boring little town and act like they were happy about it. It happened to be 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 every time she said its name, Trelawnyd. It was a stupid name Ambril decided and burrowed back into her comfy bed.

A few minutes later, she heard the heavy clump of boots and the rumble of dollies in the house. The thought of big sweaty guys barging into her room made her cringe. She jumped from her bed into a T-shirt and jeans, snorted at what she saw of herself in the mirror: skinny, fourteen, grumpy-- a mess. She scrunched her hair into a lumpy ponytail and grabbed her backpack before skittering down the stairs.

Her Mother was holding court in the hallway looking beautiful as usual even in her old jeans with her long blonde hair in a pony tail. “Hi Sweetie!” Ambril smiled mechanically 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 and in a tone even a linebacker would cower at said, “that was my Great Aunt’s! You’d better not drop it or she’ll haunt you like she did my Mom after the punch bowl incident!” Then hissed at another ,“be careful with that! It’s twice as old as all of us put together!” He struggled to prevent a large hutch with too many curlicues from bumping the doorframe.

“Unloading the contents of the furniture would’ a made it much easier for everyone, Ma’am.” He grumbled.

“Well, everything’s going into storage this time,” Ambril’s Mother said as she picked up a crystal bowl seconds before its pedestal was knocked over. “Well, almost everything. It seemed a waste of time, really to pack it all up.” 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.”

That was just about right mused Ambril. It was just before Feldez had gotten his well manicured nails into them. Feldez was her soon-to-be-stepfather whom nobody liked…except her Mom of course.

Just then the outlandish hutch wobbled and dipped as it went past Ambril. The cupboard door opened and launched a wooden missile straight at Ambril’s head. There was a sharp, jarring crack which Ambril felt like a jolt of electricity followed by a lot of creaking and swaying.

“There goes another earthquake,” said the mover cheerfully as he hoisted the hutch higher. “Just an itty bitty one, though.”

Ambril rubbed her head irritably. The strange object had 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 this new thing…and smiled. Dusty and old were words too good for it, filthy and ancient were better. It was interesting. It was not perfectly round, a little longer than her foot and thicker than her wrist. It looked more like the thick part of a twisty branch than anything else, but it was too light to be that. She shook it slightly…and heard it rattle. There was something inside! The best part was that every inch of it had been carved with animals, plants and people. It seemed to tell a story. She wiped some of the dust off to get a better look and found the carvings were all woven together with swirling lines.

“Ambril give me that old thing, it was my Grandmother’s and has to go into storage.” Her mother reached for it. But Ambril was not feeling obedient.

“Why does everything have to go into storage? This is our stuff! It’s bad enough we’re moving to a weird little town in the middle of nowhere but do we have to give up all of our things?”

Her mother pursed her lips and hiked her hands onto her hips, a very familiar pose to Ambril. She said, “I’ve told you this at least a hundred times. Feldez has gone to a lot of trouble with this new house. And though our antiques looked fine here, 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 as it marched by---“just won’t fit in.” She grimaced and stroked her daughter’s hair, “you’ll see what I mean when we get there. It isn’t a weird little town, it’s where you were born, you know.” They watched as the living room furniture was heaved onto dollies. “Besides 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 and wrinkled her nose. *Modern, New, just won’t fit in*. Well what if she didn’t fit in? Would they wrap her in blankets and ship her off too? Ambril protectively hugged the funny old tube to her chest and pointed at the underside of their old coffee table. Her name was scrawled in what looked like toothpaste . “You might as well put me in storage too. “ She said petulantly. “I’d be happier there anyway.”

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. The tube felt warm in her hands.

Her mother having finished wiping down the table was now staring savagely at a mover who had just caught a porcelain vase on the verge of tipping off its stand and said distractedly, “of course you can keep it, silly, all of these things are just going into storage. We’re not throwing a thing away.” Her mother closed a cupboard door as it sailed past. “We’ll have to talk about this in the car, I’ve been thinking that we really should make some changes…some *adjustments*. Just small ones, you know, nothing earth shattering...” 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 mind, its so small.”

*Adjustments*? What did that mean? Ambril brooded about that as a door slammed and her brother Zane ambled down the stairs. He had that stretched look of a boy who had grown way too much, too fast for his own good. His blonde hair stood out in wild strikes from his head and matted gracelessly over his eyes as he sneered at his little sister.

“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 and fit in?” He hooked the clothes with his foot and dumped them neatly onto Ambril’s head. A button got caught in her hair.

She struggled with it as the rest of the clothes rolled down the stairs. Freeing herself finally she turned and lunged at her brother just as her mother turned around.

“Ambril, just look at this! I just finished folding these things!” She picked up the clothes and shoved them into her daughter’s arms. “Refold them NOW, neatly, they’re donations, and we don’t want anyone to think we’re slobs.” She gave her son a brilliant smile. “Hi sweetie, so glad you’re out of bed! There’s cereal in the kitchen.” With that she swept into the dining room. They could hear her chewing out another mover who had upended a potted palm.

Zane smirked. “Yep, we have to keep up appearances…or at least you and Mom do. 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 and said just before the door swung to, “Mom’s delusional.”

Ambril sighed and began to fold the old clothes. Normally she would have stuck up for herself but it wasn’t worth it these days. Zane had been a terror ever since they learned they were moving back to Trelawnyd . Granted there had always been times when he was a jerk, but after the night her Mom had broken the news to them about her engagement to Feldez and the move, he hadn’t been the same; no sideways grin, no help with homework, no practical jokes.

Ambril remembered that night vividly. Zane had raged and shouted and sworn that he wasn’t going back, that they couldn’t go back, and that he’d run away and join the Foreign Legion, whatever that was, if they forced him. His Mother had finally stopped him by wrapping her arms tightly around him until he quieted. It had shaken Ambril to see him so crazy. She couldn’t figure it out, it wasn’t all bad, this move. Mom was happier than she had been in years. For once they had enough money for clothes and food. Ambril shook her head as she gave a final pat to the messily folded clothes and picked up her backpack. There was something mysterious about this little hometown of theirs. “Mom? I’m going down the street to say goodbye to Chao 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 wanting to escape before she got roped into any more chores. Just as she opened the front door Zane emerged from the kitchen 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 ride she’d have brought him the entire grocery store. As the door slid shut he added, “You’ll see, ya gonna wish you’d neva heard a tha’ stupid---” but the door clicked shut before he could finish.

Ambril jogged down the steps and along the rolling sidewalk. Well, at least he was going through this with her; he wasn’t exactly helpful but he was a living, breathing, kid-sized person. And that was a little comforting. She frowned at a crack in the sidewalk. When did it begin to feel as if their family really wasn’t a family anymore? When had they started tiptoeing around each other trying to stay out of each other’s way? She always seemed to be on the outside looking in. Ambril sighed. But the cool morning sunshine began to work its magic and refused to let her stay upset.

# Chapter 2: Chao Feng’s Tea and Remedies

Ambril picked up the bagels before heading over to her favorite neighborhood haunt, Chao Feng’s Herbal Remedies. She had just stopped to retie her shoelace when she heard voices just around the corner.

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

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

“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. “Young or no, she was chosen, it’s our job now to keep her safe until its time.”

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

“I am *NOT* eating off the sidewalk!” Said a squawky voice.

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

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

There was a squeaky snort. “Well here then, I’ll brush it off, just try this!”

Ambril straightened up. As she stepped around the corner she could have sworn she saw a fat, blue-eyed squirrel with a white ruff of fur around its neck feeding an old crow. Her friend Chao Feng was sitting in front of his shop smiling at them.

When they saw her, the squirrel skittered down a storm drain and the crow flew off with what looked like a large bean in its mouth.

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

Chao Feng stared a second too long at a gray hawk perched on a telephone wire 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. Ambril was sure that Chao Feng was at least 200 years old. But he was pretty cool. He wore hand painted sneakers and sported a dragon tattoo. And he was her friend. “Ah, good, you come to say good bye before you go?”

Before Ambril could ask more questions he jumped up from his chair and ushered her into his shop. “I have something for you, I so glad I finish in time.”

Ambril paused to fill her lungs with the pungent, mysterious smells of Chao Feng’s shop. Hidden away behind the drawers were medicinal roots, berries and dried wriggly things Ambril felt positive were not of this world. The drawers that lined the walls were every size, shape and color. Yellow star shapes, triangles, One was even a snarling tiger. Each with its own Chinese symbol. Long low counters lined three walls with miss-matched stools parked in front of them. There was also an assortment of shiny, streamlined gadgets as Chao Feng liked to play around with electronics.

“What you got there?” His shaky finger pointed at the carved cylinder poking out from Ambril’s backpack. She had forgotten all about it.

“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 forehead. “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 carefully. The more he looked the bigger his smile. He 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 to unlock all its mysteries.” His hands moved slowly up the side of the box. “Then she locked them back into box and gave to me.” He chuckled softly. “I still trying to figure them out and she been gone for many, many 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.”

Ambril could feel small bumps though she couldn’t see them. She pressed gently and then harder. She heard a small, soft click and a drawer popped out. Ambril peered in. There was something shiny there. She carefully fished out a long loop of 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 a medallion with a gemstone carved into a flower. The green gem was shot through with gold and decorated with gold tracery around the edges. Ambril thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“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.” Chao Feng took the chain and slipped it over her head. It felt light around her neck, a whisper of family secrets. “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. “Tell no one of this until they earn your trust. Strangers will view this differently. They not understand that your ancestors give it to you, that they *choose* you.” He released her suddenly. “You promise you will do this?”

She nodded slowly at her friend. Her father had died just before they had moved away from Trelawnyd. When she was little and life had gotten tough, she liked to think of her father watching over her. This felt sort of like that, a connection with her great grandmother. She took the sparkling medallion and tucked it under her T-shirt. “Sure.”

Chao Feng gave her a grey-toothed grin as he slipped behind the counter. “Now, I finally finish it---But where?---Ah! Here it is.” He straightened up holding a small robot. “This not a toy, this is special AI robot!” He said proudly. He set the robot on the counter and turned it on. “You know, AI, Artificial Intelligence, you teach, he learn so that one day, he be a little friend to you.” Chao Feng pressed a button and the robot began walking jerkily along the counter. “It’s 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 proudly. 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. Its red metal was scratched but some of the lights on his helmet still blinked when it was turned on. Chao Feng smiled warmly. “We will miss you, Ambril.” He squinted up at her. “You special, you keep this in your mind; it easy to forget. Keep yourself open to new things. Now that your Great-Grandmother has marked you, she will watch over 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 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. She wondered if she’d ever see Chao Feng again. Or if it would be like all the other people she’d met in her life, he would simply fade until he was just a hazy memory. The movers were still huffing down the front steps but she could see they were nearly done. She grunted and sat down hard on the front steps. She was going to have to work at feeling better about this whole thing. It was bad form to start out believing the worst. It’s not like she hadn’t made changes before. What was Zane so worried about?

A while 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 walked one last time through the living room and stared sadly at the cold bare walls. Could this really have been their 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.” But Ambril didn’t want to. It wasn’t home any more.

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

“It’ll be hard at first,” she called after him, “but then...you’ll see.” She let it drop and then frowned at her daughter. “Oh please, what is that? A toy?”

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 Chao Feng…AND,” she added defiantly “I’M TAKING HIM WITH ME.” She stuck her chin out and marched out of the house.

“All right, but don’t let Zane see you with---“. But her 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 toy, does she?” Zane snatched the robot out of her hands so fast Ambril had no time to react. “Goody! Let’s see!”

“Hey! That’s mine, give it back!” Zane began to toss it in the air keeping an eye on her face so that he could watch it go from horror to pleading and back to horror. “It’s from Chao Feng, Zane, come on!” Ambril made a grab for it but Zane held the robot up higher and shook it right over her head. He laughed at her as she jumped and tried to grab it back from him. Then he 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 the robot wouldn’t budge until a large crow landed on the branch and bounced it 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. “You know it isn’t her fault.” She shrugged on her handbag and stepped determinedly down the stairs. “It isn’t your fault, or mine either. What happened, happened.” She walked right up to her son and shoved a sweatshirt at him. “Right?” Not waiting for a response, she marched him toward their overloaded minivan. “Right! Now I want a nice pleasant ride this afternoon.” She tugged at her daughter, who reluctantly followed them. “No fighting, no whining, no bloodshed. Got it?”

The van dipped dangerously low as Zane got in. There were mounds of boxes strapped on top. And curiously just as her mother came around the van Ambril saw a fat blue-eyed squirrel squeeze itself among the boxes and bags on top.

“Mom? Mom I think there’s---“

“NOT A WORD.” Her Mom gave her that look. “I WANT ABSOLUTE CALM!” She was scary looking what with all that hair escaping from her pony tail.

So without a word, Ambril meekly shoe horned herself between a croquet set and a stack of Zane’s stinky sneakers.

# Chapter 3 To Trelawnyd: On Top

Crochet balls broke free and rained down on Ambril as the old minivan pulled jerkily away from the curb. Ambril watched the old house slide away as she grumpily stuffed the balls back into their case and wedged it shut with one of Zane’s sneakers. They were off to a place she’d 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 croquet bag and began to examine the robot while she plotted her revenge on Zane. It would have to be done carefully as he was so touchy now.

The robot looked fine really, just a few more scratches and dents. It worked when she turned it on. Though the head listed to one side a little more now it was kind of friendly looking that way. The battered label said “ff “on one side and “Lit” in another place. “Fa lit,” she said, sounding it out, “ffffa-lit. fLit,” She scrunched her nose in distaste. “Well…it’s not much of a name but it’ll do.” She cocked her head the same way as the robot and smiled. Zane made a raspberry sound at her and slouched lower in his seat. Her mother guided them through traffic and out to the Pacific Coast Highway. Ambril watched her favorite city roll away.

Outside, on top of the car, it was bedlam. A large crow had joined the fat squirrel. Both were obviously unaccustomed to car travel, at least when traveling on top of a car. They were getting blown around, blasted by horns and choked by exhaust. The squirrel looked around and industriously began gnawing a hole in a nearby canvas bag.

“We need a safe haven, Sid.”

She winced as she rubbed a lump on her head. She had gotten it when a cord had broken free and catapulted her into a nearby bus; straight onto the lap of a blue-haired lady and her rabid Chihuahua. Both began shrieking, one nipped her and the other wacked her with a tapestry handbag. She managed to clamber out the window and make a swan dive back to Ambril’s van just before the bus veered off onto another street.

The squirrel spit out a large mouthful of canvas and then stopped and sniffed. “What’s that awful smell?” Looking around she suddenly froze. “Uh Oh---Sid!”

Sid cocked his head at the large gray hawk just above them. As the squirrel pointed, it folded its wings and launched itself into a meteoric dive straight at them. “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 made just as the car made a sickening lurch to the side. Peering out she saw that the hawk had grabbed a cord holding the boxes in place and was jerking it to one side. With every beat of its wings, it was trying to unbalance the minivan.

“Cheeky nasty old bag!” Aster said ruffling her tail. Sid dive-bombed the hawk’s massive head but it seemed to have no affect on the bigger bird.

The hawk began to beat its powerful wings, jerking the cord up and up. The bag Aster was in careened to the very edge of the rack, knocking Aster hard into a sharp, pointy Christmas ornament…which gave her an idea. She squeezed through the hole and raced over to another stretchy cord with the ornament clamped in her teeth. A box labeled “Grandmother’s tea cozies’” tumbled off narrowly missing the squirrel’s tail. She hurriedly took aim as she pulled back the cord like a slingshot and let the ornament fly. It shot up, straight at the hawk’s head and broke into a thousand pieces. It surprised the bird so much it let go of the cord. The cord snapped back hard as the van careened dangerously onto the shoulder.

Inside the van, Ambril’s Mother wrenched the steering wheel hard and the van veered back onto the blacktop. “Whooo! That was close, I’d forgotten how strong these coastal winds can be!”

Zane grunted and redraped himself over his backpack. Ambril, having been bombarded by croquet mallets this time wearily put them in with the balls and stuffed a squashy sock bag marked “future puppets” in with them.

Up top Aster was getting feisty. “Come on you nut case! You fancy some more?”

She shouted as she pulled out another ornament. The hawk glared at her a moment then without warning dove straignt down at her. She was on top of her in less than a second. The squirrel was caught off guard. A large talon grabbed her and mercilessly squeezed. It then flicked her away and off the speeding van as if she was no more than a piece of garbage. 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 flicked on the headlights, lighting up a dense forest on either side of the road. Above them the hawk had grabbed another cord and had begun to open its wings preparing to unbalance the van again. But before it could do so, a shiny black blur came at it from above and a sharp, yellow beak stabbed it smartly in the eye. Surprised again, it was knocked completely off-balance and rolled sidways. 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 giant bird, but the forest remained quiet. He cawed softly as he watched the van roll through a gate in a massive stonewall. Flicking a wing he turned smartly and flew low 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 at her worriedly and prodded again. Finally she stirred and winced.

“What? What happened?” Her eyes snapped open wide. “Mercy! They’re all right aren’t they?“

“Just now made it through the Trelawnyd wall. She can’t get past that, no how.” Squawked the crow.

The squirrel smiled wide at her old friend. “Ha! We showed her, 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 Tylwith got uppity, and left, remember that?”

“Tylwith’s have always been uppity if you ask me.” Said Sid.

She paused to shake her right rear paw and took a tentative step. “And then all the earth-kind went off in a huff, right after, 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, the world’s always been a rip, raging, mucky mess so we should just roll up our sleeves and get back to cleaning it up as we always do.”

The crow lifted his beak and cawed in a laughing way as she put her hands on what would have been her hips if she were a little less plump. “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. 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 with a large hooked nose stode. He was dressed in black. He reached down and 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 took them inside the wall and into the darkened forest.

# Chapter 4 What Happened Inside

The old van had by then 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 peered anxiously at Ambril 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 who was staring fixedly out the window. “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 an old log or a patch of grass. Do you remember?” She patted his leg but 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 shadows making ghoulish shapes out of the trees. Monsters and Trolls with huge clubs and…Ambril shook herself. Too many scary movies.

“Almost there!” Her mother’s voice was overly cheery as she switched on the high beams, which did little to dispel the thickening darkness. She then cleared her throat. “Now that we’re all in a better mood, I have something to say.” She straightened in her seat and gripped the wheel firmly. “Something important so listen.” She looked pointedly at the back of Zane’s head. “Feldez and I feel it’s best for you 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, they used the name Derwyn, her mother’s last name for as long as she could remember 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 it too but, it’s a new school, new home. The townspeople are just, well they’re just a bit old fashioned about things. It would 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.

And then a grunt was heard from the front seat. Zane mumbled something. “What was that darling?” Ambril’s mother patted him on the shoulder. Without warning Zane threw himself around to face her causing the van 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? Right?” 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 you said it had been so long that no one would remember it right?” He faced his Mom his left hand curled into a fist. “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 I’m 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 minivan 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 woo-ooo-ods!” Her 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. Ambril scrambled out grumpily. It was bad enough starting a new school in a new town without all the additional drama. And what wasn’t her Mom telling her, something about her Dad? 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. 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 and started to drag her back to the van.

“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. “---It has to be right now!” Her hair stuck out wildly in all directions. “Of course he can get hurt inside the wall! He doesn’t know the forest at all Feldez AT ALL!” Her mother’s lower lip started to tremble. “He could fall and hit his head and wander for days not knowing who he is or where he should go-o-o!” She drew out the last word in a long heaving sob.

“Mom, really, I’ll go and find him.” Ambril hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. A forest at night was pretty intimidating to a city girl like Ambril. The closest she’d come to a forest was a picnic in Golden Gate Park.

“No, No, NOOO!’” Shouted her mother. Her mother flicked her phone off and took a deep breath. “Don’t be silly, I’ll go, honey. I know this forest pretty well, I grew up here.” She looked up at the trees which leaning over them, listening. “All I need is a flashlight, that’s all.”

Ambril sighed and handed over her flashlight before allowing her mother to stuff her back into the van. The door clicked shut. Outside her mother pantomimed locking the door and mouthed the words “stay put” just before she wheeled around and ran back to the edge of the woods. Taking a deep breath and whipping the mini flashlight around like a sword she stepped into the shadows and…disappeared. The forest settled in around the old van, still and silent.

Inside, Ambril fidgeted, unnerved by this strange, weird place and started mulling over what Zane had said. Or more to the point what he hadn’t said. What was going on? Something so horrible had happened to her family that her Mom wanted to give up their family name…again. It must have happened just before they left, maybe something to do with her father’s death? Ambril shook her head, wishing she could remember something, anything about that time. It was all so confusing. What did she really know about her Dad? Well her Dad, a scientist, had died in some sort of lab accident she knew that. She had been young, maybe three or so. She remembered the funeral in flat, snapshot moments. How cold and empty the church had felt, how crumpled and sad her Mom had looked, not understanding why 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. And then moved again, and again and again. There hadn’t been any time to think about the past. And maybe that was what her Mom had wanted. At some point they had changed their name from Silva to Derwyn, but why?

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

# Chapter- A Vegetarian Attack

Frustrated she peered across the road and into the forest. The moon came out from behind a cloud, revealing a path leading deeper into the gloom. But the light only served to make it look creepier. Ambril cringed, she was used to lots of streetlights and people and noise. She double then triple-checked the lock on the door and was wriggling into a more comfortable spot when something in her backpack jabbed her. Curious, she unzipped it and pulled out the puzzle box.

It glowed even in the moonlight and felt slightly warm. She rubbed it with her sweatshirt and held it close to the window where the moonlight made the carvings almost come alive. The fanciful tracery turned out to be the branches of a great tree decorated with intricate shapes and images, which began to tell her a story. It began with a journey over mountains and oceans to a valley where a group built a town. The group was made up of humans and all sorts of weird creatures including giants, animals and what looked like fairies. In the next frame the towns-folk happily celebrated their good fortune. But not for long for in the next image a weird tree-monster seemed to be eating the town. Then a group was shown forcing the tree-monster into a hole. The last frame was an image of just a girl holding a stick. Very anticlimactic, she thought. She shook it gently and then a little harder. She could feel something shift inside. “Alright you, what else is in there?” she muttered as she set to work pressing various lumps and bumps. But though she pressed until her fingers were sore, she couldn’t get it to release any more secrets. “Toad butts,” she groused and whacked the car seat with it.

Several things happened all at once. She later realized it had been a concidence but at the time everything seemed to happen the moment the puzzle box hit the seat. First a spray of sparks and trails of lightening erupted from the top of the puzzlebox. And then a flash of brilliance lighted the forest all around her followed by a large boom. Shock waves thundered past her. In the moonlight Ambril could see a plume of smoke forming just above the explosion. Then something big hit the road and rolled toward the car. It was a painted sign. A face made out of vegetables grinned at her before clattering to the pavement. A volley of cherries and asparagus followed. She was under a vegetarian attack. The cherries pelted the car making squelchy, pinging noises just before something hard slammed into the windshield, cracking it into a million radiating lines and scaring Ambril so badly she hit her head on the van’s ceiling. She knew then that the produce had won. She grabbed her backpack and scrambled out.

To be fair, it wasn’t just the van that had been hit. The vegetables and fruit rained fiercely down on the forest and road. The asparagus in particular hurt as she took shelter temporarily under the sign. Ambril decided she didn’t like getting whacked by vegetables any more than eating them. But the barage soon stopped and the forest became eerily quiet. Ambril didn’t like that either. The forest seemed to be holding its breath. Ambril had trouble breathing herself when she discovered that the billowing smoke above the explosion site wasn’t behaving the way it should. Instead of it drifting into the night sky, it seemed to be purposefully shaping itself into something. She thought it must be a new type of explosion. Maybe she’d missed that day in Science when they’d discussed spontaneous vegetarian combustion. Shaking her head she turned around and resolutely faced the real problem, the asparagus spattered, cherry pitted van with a broken windshield. Somehow she was sure to get blamed for it.

A curious black box lay deeply imbedded in the glass. It hissed and steamed and though it was no bigger than her hand she saw to her horror that it had demolished the entire windshield. The cracks in the glass raced out from it like rays from the sun and covered the entire span. Ambril nudged it with the puzzle box. It fizzled and sparked but surprisingly the cover flipped open to reveal a tiny statue of a winged boy frozen in agony. Ambril flinched---his suffering was so lifelike. He was covered with what looked like electrified cobwebs, which glowed and sparked with electricity. They overflowed the box and stretched across the street ending in a ragged tangle near the edge of the road.

Weird, Ambril thought as she picked up the statue and started clearing the threads away. They turned out to be very sticky. Ambril tried to wipe them off on her pants. They were gross and burned her fingers. This was a nightmare. Was she dreaming all of this?

As if in answer to her thoughts, the statue began to vibrate and quiver. Then without warning, it shattered into a million glassy shards. Ambril jumped back, spitting out bits of statue and lost her footing. She landed on her back entangling herself in more of the sticky threads. The cobwebs nastily began to wrap themselves around her legs and arms. Ambril twisted and pulled until she broke free. Then from behind she heard a loud smacking noise and froze.

To add to the surreal-sci-fi-movie-turned-reality feel to the night, a real monster stared down at her. The smoke from the explosion had formed itself into a monstrous head---sort of a horned beast’s skull with glowing red eyes and a too wide, jaggle toothed mouth. The smacking sound came again as the monster opened and closed its jaws, testing its strength. Ambril gagged as a breeze brought its smell to her. It stank of of dank sewers and rotting flesh. Worse, it hissed and crackled as it moved her way. It’s eyes looking her way. The stuff of nightmares, it was the real deal. Ambril knew this was a truly evil being.

She hunched down hugging the van and squinted up at the monster as it came closer. The temperature around her plummeted and she started to shiver. Her breath turned frosty. The monster paused to sniff the air and then let loose an eager, bone-jarring scream, as if it had picked up the scent of its next victim. Ambril had no time to think and nowhere to go it was nearly on top of her now. Instinctively she crouched down near the back fender and willed herself to be invisible. She couldn’t see the monster anymore but she could hear it snorting and sniffing. What was it searching for? Could it smell her? Then the van’s front shocks squealed and rocked back and forth as the creature butted it almost playfully. Then quite suddenly…the van wasn’t there.

Ambril heard a gigantic crash as the van landed belly up twenty feet away. When she straightened up she found herself staring right into the glowing eyes of the monster. It roared again spraying her with nasty monster goo. She had just enough sense to jump to the side as the creature lunged at her. Fingers of electricity snaked out from where the creature hit the asphalt and made a nasty grating sound as it goughed long groves into the pavement with its teeth. Chunks of its broken teeth coated with goo broke off in swirls of smoke. But the monster seemed not to notice as it reared up again searching and sniffing, apparently for her. She guessed she smelled nice, like…dinner.

That was it---that was the moment she panicked and took off running straight into the forest. She didn’t know where she was going or what she would run into but being attacked by a pack of rabid bears was more appealing to her at that moment than battling that thing. As she ran the cobwebs she’d picked up on the pavement began to tighten painfully around her legs and arms. She hacked at them with her free hand, the one holding the puzzle box. It sparked and frizzed which fortunately the threads didn’t like and they fell harmlessly away.

She was soon out of breath and had to slow down as the trees thickened, blocking the moonlight. She stumbled a few times on unseen rocks and branches as she put out a silent plea that the monster would discover it’s great love of asparagus and stop to graze on the road, but it wasn’t long before she felt a wash of cold. The thing was still after her. It hissed as it came, riding high above the trees. She felt a sharp, stabbing pain in her side and cursed herself for slacking off in P.E. Her breath came in great gasps now as she felt her way along. If only she could see! “Light, I need light,” she panted to herself.

Instantly a beam of light shot out of the puzzle box in her hand. She was so surprised she nearly dropped it. What was this thing that sparked and lighted up on command? Then the creature screamed again driving away all thoughts of anything but getting away from its frigid breath. She flashed her new light around but found nothing but trees but just ahead of her they grew denser. Almost like a green wall or hedge. Maybe she could hide out in there until the monster got bored and found a nice cow to munch on. Almost at a dead run she forced herself into the heavy wall of greenery. The branches scratched and snagged her sweatshirt as she burrowed in but surprisingly she soon found herself rolling free again. The dense trees really had turned out to be a hedge as she struggled to her feet in a clearing. But it wasn’t a natural one…this one looked neat and tidy—and man-made. The monster screamed again, this time in frustration. It seemed to be having difficulty getting past the hedge. That gave her enough time to shake the dead leaves from her hair and flash her light around. Her heart lifted as the light flicked over the humped, gabled shapes of houses. There were several of them clustered around a central stone area.

“Help!” She cried, running toward the nearest home. “Anyone here know anything about monsters?” But no lights came on in the windows, the houses stayed dark and quiet. As Ambril drew near she saw the roof had fallen in on one, and the chimney had drifted away from another. It was soon clear to her that the village hadn’t been lived in for a long time.

It hit her then, how alone and defenseless she was. Lost in a forest at night, she was being chased by a foul smelling demon with nothing to defend herself with but a decorated stick. Even if she were to fight it off, would she be able to find her way out again?

It was probably a good thing that she had no time to obsess about this as the smell of death let her know the creature was closing in again. It had figured out how to get over the hedge and rushed at her, a foul, hissing chunk of grinning evil.

It was so close she could feel its icy breath. Ambril turned and did the first and only thing she could think of, she flashed her light in its eyes. The light was very bright and surprised the creature, who cringed and shuddered. Ambril silently cheered as she raced away from it and out onto the central stone plaza. But the monster recovered quickly and lunged again at her. Ambril felt the swish of air and heard the snap of its jaws as it just missed her backend. She turned and flashed her light in its eyes again.

“Back off, you mangy, stinky thing!” She slashed at it as if the puzzle box were a laser-sword. Surprisingly it acted like one too. She could see burning lines form on the monster’s face as the light zigzagged over it. Ambril gagged again, the stench of a wounded monster turned out to be worse than a healthy one. The creature backed off hurriedly as it snorted and growled in frustration. Then it began to slither around her, weaving its head back and forth as it stalked her. Ambril warily watched it as she took a few steps back…and stumbled over the roots of a large lumpy tree in the middle of the stone area. The tree was more dead than alive but Ambril could see a few leaves clinging to the old gnarled limbs. She scrambled up the roots and put her back to the trunk. For some reason its solid scratchy bark comforted her. She tried to make sense of everything as she watched the monster watch her.

How could this be happening? Up until a few moments ago she had been a completely normal kid, living a regular life. And then it was as if she’d taken a sharp left turn into another dimension.

This monster was smart. Ambril realized that while circling her it had crept in closer and closer. Without warning, it reared up and attacked, opening its jaws wide as if to swallow her whole just as she brought up the puzzle box and shouted. “No you don’t!” She was so scared that the yell came out more like a whisper but the wooden cylinder reacted by shooting sparks straight into the creature’s left eye. It screamed in rage and pain as its eye blinked out. Ambril slipped behind the tree trunk, using it as a shield as the monster backed off again shaking its head and screeching.

Her head filled with images of her own death. What would it feel like to be eaten by this creature? How long before she was unconscious and not able to feel the monster’s teeth ripping her apart? Her vision began to grow fuzzy as she gripped the tree trunk tightly to keep from sliding to the ground.

It was then she felt something strange---but this time, it was a good sort of strange. A deeep thrumming resonated through her. It seemed to be coming from the tree, which began to warm under her hand. Something near her heart glowed and warmed in response. A nearby branch startled her when it began to twist and flex. She looked up and saw that the entire tree seemed to be in motion.

Ambril heard a wheezy snort from behind. She twisted around just before the monster rammed the tree and bent the old brittle branches to the point of breaking. There was a groaning sound of wood being pushed to its limits as it absorbed the monster’s charge. But then something changed. Every twig and branch on the tree began to curl around the monster, gathering it in. The monster realized too late that it was caught and began to jerk and struggle as it tried to get free but the branches continued to pull and wrap and squeeze. Ambril stumbled away and watched as the monster diminshed under the strong sinewy grip of the tree limbs. They squeezed tighter and tighter, the monster became smaller and smaller…until with a puff of rancid smoke, it disappeared entirely. The branches waved around for another minute or so as if challenging any and all nearby monsters, but when nothing presented itself, the tree gradually grew quiet and still.

Ambril fell to her knees as she filled her lungs with fresh forest air. It was amazing but she was alive. Still lost in the forest but---alive. She laughed and hugged herself…then she heard it. A loud regular thumping rumble; the kind of thumping rumble made by very large feet. Something huge was coming her way.

What was it with her and monsters that night? The thing was close now and in the moonlight she could see the trees bending away as something large and bulky forced its way through the trees and into the clearing, It towered over her. Then something hit her in the head. Just before she blacked out she saw two enormous chicken feet land on either side of her. Then the fireworks exploded and she was out.

# Chapter 6 FowlClun to the Rescue

Ambril awoke gradually to the aroma of fresh baked scones and the feel of a warm comforter. For a moment she wondered if the thing with chicken feet had eaten her and this was heaven. But she decided against that as she her head hurt too much. She was definitely still alive. But where was she? She lay there with her eyes closed, pondering this for several minutes. She noticed an odd, rocking sensation as if they were moving. And heard a squeaking sound which sounded as if something needed oiling followed by a small growl.

“—Poor thing, she was chilled to the bone. A little slip of a thing, cute to! And she went up against a full sized Dullaith!” Came a cheerful voice, it sounded like a teenage boy. “Made of hardy stuff, that’s sure enough!”

“Yes well, we were nearly killed as well, 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!” Ambril heard an injured quack. “Spot, you’re in my way as usual.”

“You know 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 tea, maybe?” Said the first voice. “hot cocoa’d be my first choice.” There were sounds of cups rattling and more squeaky wheel sounds.

“What does it matter? We have more important things to worry about than a silly child who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The snappish voice was downright cutting. “First Fowlclun is ambushed and nearly takes us all over a cliff, and now we have another Dullaith on our hands.” There were disorderly, jangling chimes and a soft ting. “Your scones are ready.”

“Oh! I nearly forgot them, Trip go and fetch the scones will you? You’re better suited anyway what with your metal hand grips.” The squeaks wheeled across the room. “Fowlclun’s fall may have just been an accident but this tonight—” The girl voice continued. 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 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 and ceiling were covered with a buttery furry fabric. Then she timidly opened the other. Judging by the swinging lanterns hanging from the rafters they were moving.

They must be in some sort of trailer, Ambril thought, one with a large stone fireplace and an ornate grandfather clock shoving itself into a corner.

She stopped and looked again. Sure enough, a grandfather clock was trying to scooch up against the wall. With one last heave it wriggled and settled in beside the fireplace. As she stared at the clock something jumped up on the bed and trotted over to her. It seemed to be a duck made out of Lincoln logs that clacked when it moved. It bent down until it was inches from her face and aimed a small, beady eye at hers. Then…it barked like a dog.

Ambril was now fully awake. If that wasn’t enough a feather duster seemed to be picking up glittering jewels from the floor all on its own, curling it’s feathers carefully around each piece. When it finished and turned toward Ambril, two bright eyes and a small mouth were easy to spot at the top end of the shiny black handle.

“She’s awake, finally, down Spot!” The teenage boy voice seemed to be coming from a dented, rusty old tricycle whose wheel squeaked as it raced over to her. It had a tray balanced on its handlebars with a teapot, mug, and a platter of scones on it. Ambril could make out two blinking eyes on both handlebars, and a rusty smile where they came together. The Lincoln Log duck retreated to the foot of the bed and wagged it’s body.

“Slithey! You’re as white as a sheet!” Said the Trike. “You best lie back, what with the shock and all, and take a swig of this ol’ hot cocoa. It’ll set you straight. You’ve had a time haven’t you! First battling a Dullaith and then getting hit on the head by Fowlclun’s shoddy old chimney brick!” He wriggled himself up as best he could and then offered her the tray. Ambril didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to offend anyone but she couldn’t quite get her head around all of what she was seeing.

But if a tricycle could beam friendliness that’s what it did. The feather duster jumped up next to the scones and frowned at Ambril.

“Trip, She thinks we’re going to eat her or something.” She said ruefully.

Trip snorted. “Just how we’dd manage that is a puzzle, isn’t it!”

“Huh!” Scoffed the clock. “She’s just a kid, as I said before.” The dry, grating voice continued. “A child who got lucky today fighting that Dullaith.” A jumble of 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 shouted at the ceiling.

A loud warble vibrated through the house, rattling both Ambril and the teapot. Just then a door slammed and a very odd lady flounced in. Though she was short and round and very old, she trotted with the energy of a child. Her gray hair was braided with colored ribbons. The sort of style a seven year old would love. She wore red cowboy boots, a wildly striped skirt and a necklace made of wooden animals jiggled around her neck. Ambril sat up straighter. This must be the one in charge.

“Well, I think I got that ol’ chimney tidied up.” She said with 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 then 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 ya?” She bustled over to her. Looking at Trip she said. “What? Ya haven’t fed her yet?”

“We were just getting to that Hendoeth.” Said Trip 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 what ails you than hot cocoa and one of Ester’s scones.” She offered Ambril a scone.

Ambril finally took one, she was afraid not to. But the hot chocolate warmed her and the cinnamon scone crunched in her mouth, Yum. She felt much better soon, though she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d been taken to the leader of an alien planet.

“We’re a bit much all at once, aren’t we?” Hendoeth said musingly as she watched Ambril eat. “You have strong magic all through and around you, but it’s fairly new, isn’t it?” She scratched her chin absently. “Your Ma hasn’t said much ‘bout your family history has she? She tried to protect it from you, to keep you safe I expect.” She gave a long sigh. “And it just don’t work that way. It’s been the death of more magic users than I am willing to count.” She put the chocolate pot back on the table and patted it thoughtfully. “Yep, you need to know what you are in order to figure out who the bad guys are.”

“Um, Hendoeth, Tweek needs a little attention.” Ester said apprehensively as she slowly unfurled her feathers and showed her the bits of jewels she had collected and held out a large jewel. Looking closer Ambril saw that it was carved into a flower. She could see where some of petals had broken off.

“Ah Bandersnitches!” Said Hendoeth, “Not agin!” She bent over to examine it. “Well, I wonder if Fixit Joe’s back yet. She’s more broke than not now.”

Ambril could see there were many mended cracks running 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 its place. “Ya Okay in there, Tweek?” She bellowed as she put the piece down.

The jewel flower glowed faintly and a bell tinkled as if in response. Hendoeth looked worried and 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! Honestly, he’s gotten so lazy now he’s nearly grown. Give him a good poke with the tongs will you?” She shouted at the big clock who put his clock face in the air and turned away. “Grumpy aren’t we! Well alright then I will.” The old woman picked up the fire tongs and started poking around in the fireplace.

Ambril leaned to one side to see better and gasped. Curled up inside was a pint-sized red gryphon. It looked like it was asleep despite the vigorous jabs Hendoeth was giving it. It finally raised its head and yawned a spurt of flames.

“Hey there Teggy, having 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. There was a funny sort of snap and Hendoeth shrieked, “Oh Borogoves! he’s gone and sneezed himself away agin.”

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

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 and a peevish mouth in the clock face.

“No more complainin’ or I’ll sign you up as a test subject for research for improving the health of wood boring insects!” Hendoeth hollered.

The clock shivered and grated its chimes as it jumped toward the fireplace and set to work building a fire.

“There now, things’ll be comfy in no time.” The old woman trotted over to Ambril smiling widely. “Take another swig of this and a big bite a that!”

Trip leaned in and Ambril nearly spilled chocolate all over herself, when one of his eyes winked at her.

“Yes, we have some explaining ta do, don’t we.” A chuckle came from Hendoeth and a hollow cackle came from above. The old woman heaved herself into a rickety chair and poured herself a cup of hot cocoa. Keeping her smile toward Ambril she set her boots on the bed.

“Yes I see you’re wondering ” Who, What and Why and maybe a little bit of How?” 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.

“My name’s Hendoeth and this is my home, Fowlclun, I’m sure you’ve heard of us?” She gestured grandly at the room. “You know, Witch with a chicken leg house roaming the backwoods lookin’ for little kids to boil for supper?” She chuckled. “No? Well it’s just as well, those old stories are mostly wrong, we’re mostly vegetarian nowadays.”

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

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

“Internet,” said Ambril proud she knew something the older woman didn’t.

“Whatever, Fowlclun is on her way to deliver you back to your family and what’s left of your car.” She sniffed, annoyed, as if cars were beneath her. “What’s your name now?” She asked.

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

“Ha! I knew it!” Hendoeth’s clicked her boots together. “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 off her missing tooth again. “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, Rosa wasn’t technically just a human-kind, but who is nowadays?”

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

“My, they haven’t told you nothin’ have they?” Hendoeth screwed up her face. “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 poured herself another cup of hot chocolate. “Want sum’more?” She waved it toward Ambril.

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

Hendoeth saw her and she frowned, “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 it out. It twinkled in the lantern light.

Ester gasped in amazement. “It looks like Tweek!”

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

Ambril looked down at her medallion and then at the broken flower. They did look a little alike. Though her medallion was much flatter, it was a carving of the same flower and made of 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 ain’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 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 mug of cocoa.

“I’m jus’ teasin’ don’t go and git your tail feathers in a snit.” 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—“

“Ya best use its proper name or it’ll get ornery after a while. It’s called an Ashera.” Said Hendoeth. “It won’t ever help you do evil, no sirrreee. 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?” 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 but are all made from a very special tree. They’re given only to those who have the chutzpah to use ‘em. Since you’re also fairy born, ya got that Glain too.” She paused and her eyes narrowed. “It’s quite a combo, 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. She wasn’t sure if she was up for this. It was one thing to watch someone else battle monsters on a big screen and another thing to do it on your own. She was almost killed! “Well, what if I don’t want to, you know go through with this?” FowlClun dipped again and the Ashera gently rolled to the foot of the bed. “I’m pretty sure that whoever’s in charge made a mistake with me, I’m not special, in fact I’m not really good at much of anything, really. At least…not yet, you know I am just a kid.” 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 over.” She wagged her head at Ambril. “The fact is kid that you’ve 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. The question is, now you know can you be happy with normal?” She squinted gleefully at Ambril.

“But the ‘tother thing you should know is you ain’t gonna get much help.” 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 you’re the only one that can walk your own shoes down this path.” She took her boots off the bed and drew herself up. “Just like your great grandma before you and her great-great Maimee, and then your great-great-great grandfather…“ She scrunched up her forehead in thought. “I forget his name, well anyway, it’s an unbroken chain of Derwyn’s that goes back to the first families.” She shrugged. “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 a them now, would ya?”

Keeping her eyes on Ambril she smiled. “Then there’s the small matter of yer Daddy.” The house slowed and then after a lot of creaking and groaning it stopped moving and was quiet. Hendoeth still had her eyes on Ambril. “Well?”

Ambril looked at the crazy old woman. It made her really mad that she was bullying her and even madder that she had succeeded. She knew she had to do it. Besides the magic stuff was interesting and she was more than a little curious about her family.

“What was that about my Dad?” She asked feeling around for the Ashera.

Hendoeth blinked 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 wankle it out on your own.“ She carefully began to collect Tweek’s broken pieces. “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 and a dark man with a scowl stepped in. He stood and stared hard at Ambril as if he’d rather toss her out the window than anything else. A tall, beak nosed man dressed in black came in behind him. He stared too…but then he smiled at her.

“Someone called a Dullaith.” The first one growled.

“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. “Pay no attention to Koda, it ain’t personal, he’s grumpy but he’s harmless.”

The one called Koda looked her over. “How did one so small—“

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 to the party. Fowlclun’s got a game leg and we were still out patrollin’ the forest.”

Ambril shrugged and told them about the explosion and the Dullaith forming and the strange box hitting the car as she pulled it out of her back pack.

There was a pause then Hendoeth grunted. “I haven’t seen one of those in a month of Christmases. It’s a Morte Cell.” Hendoeth looked grave. “Bad doin’s that’s fer sure.”

“There was a statue of a boy pain inside. When I touched it with the Ashera it broke into a million pieces.”

Hendoeth eyed her and the slowly nodded. “That’s a weeper of a shame, that is. They say it’s an intolerable painful death---the Morte Cell. It sucks the life right out of ya and channels it into something else. Usually nothin’ nice.“

“Wait, so---that little boy was---alive?”

Hendoeth snorted. “Little boy? I imagine he was at least 200 years old, that fairy…maybe more.”

“A fairy?” asked Ambril incredulously. She wished she’d tried harder to save him. But how could she have known?

“Can’t afford to lose them fairies, they’re fewer and fewer every moonrise I’ve heard tell. Hendoeth sighed heavily.

The big man grunted still looking grumpy. “Fairies are a hardy tribe, he might have survived and has just crawled off to lick his wounds.”

Hendoeth brightened considereably. “You’re so right Koda, We should look ‘round to the better possibilities. Now…let’s hear the rest of it.”

Ambril went on to describe the battle and how the tree had saved her by grabbing and gulping down the monster. She started to feel dizzy thinking about how close she had come to ending up a Dullaith snack.

“Okay, that’s enough! Just look at her!” Ester jumped on the bed between Ambril and the others her feathers bristling.

”Yeah quit ganging up on her! Or she’ll keel over again!” Trip made a couple of squeaky runs at the tall men.

“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. Fowlclun and I are always around, it’s out job to be lookin’ out for the bad guys.” She handed Ambril her shoes. “I reckon you’ll run into a few more of them before you’re through. Koda and Sid will take it from here. And by the by, 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.”

Koda swept the Morte Cell into a sack and followed Ambril as she wobbled to the door. Through the doorway she could see a farmhouse dwarfed by a big red barn. Smoke curled up from its chimney as an ornate weather vane was framed against the moon, 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, you be careful now.”

The word “Thanks,” stuck in Ambril’s throat as she stepped off the porch and turned to wave goodbye. She froze when she saw Fowlclun, really saw it for the first time. The house was made of the usual materials, stone, wood, bricks and stuff. But the brass knocker on the red front door wiggled as the porch steps bowed into a smile. The lacey curtains in the windows on either side of the door crinkled up with laughter. The whole house was smiling at her. But the jaw dropper was the house was wedged between two huge yellow chicken feet. Ambril stared dumbstruck as the house winked one lacey curtain and then slowly began to rise. Ambril backed up suddenly when she saw the brick chimney wobbling on the way up. One of Fowlclun’s knobby knees was bandaged. Standing, Fowlclun brushed the highest treetops. It nodded to her and Ambril nodded back finally remembering to close her mouth. It trumpeted as it carefully picked its way through the forest, limping slightly.

# Chapter 7 Rosebud

“I’d better stay with Aster, she needs tending.” Siddhart said to Koda. He smiled at Ambril and walked briskly toward the house. Ambril wished he’d stay Koda looked as if he’d like to eat her.

“Come on, it’s late, kid’s like you shouldn’t be allowed loose in the forest. You just stir up trouble” Koda groused, making it sound as if everything was her fault. He turned to a large bicycle leaning up against the side of the barn. “We’ll be riding Rosebud.”

Even in the flattering glow of the lantern light, Rosebud was no peach of a bicycle. It looked to be about 50 years old, had been dinged and scratched so much you could barely make out its name written across the basket in curlicue writing. The basket was decorated with flowers. “It was a hand-me down, from my sister.” Koda said somewhat sheepishly and looked daggers at her daring her to make a crack about it.

There was only one seat. Ambril wondered briefly how they would both ride when a thick vine shot out from the bike and wrapped itself around her. It reeled her in and jammed her into the basket. The bike was even nastier than its owner.

“Rosebud, good girl! Ya did it all in one move without breakin’ any bones bones!”

For a moment, Ambril thought about screaming, wriggling free and threatening a lawsuit not necessarily in that order. But who would hear her? And would they care? The vine would just pick her up again and toss her around just for fun and she guessed Koda could stare down any amount of lawyers. She sighed and looked around. It was then she really did scream. A short strangled one. For a large pink bud had reared up inches from her nose and nipped her. And then---it sniffed her. It must be a flower thing, Ambril decided and sniffed it back. It smelled nothing like a rose, in fact it didn’t smell like anything Ambril had ever smelled before, like a mix of shoe polish and orange sherbet. It looked her over a moment longer and then with a toss of its head it turned away, disinterested and loosened the vines binding her a little. Ambril then found she was surrounded with tiny very impolite and curious flower buds. There was more sniffing, lots and lots of sniffing as they pulled at her clothes, poked her in the eye and peered into her ears. It was annoying and it tickled. But it was hard to be angry with them they were so cute. Ambril began to giggle.

“Behave yourselves,” groused Koda sternly. To Ambril he said. “She don’t mean no harm, you’re new to her is all.”

“So what is she?” asked Ambril eyeing the large pink bud.

“Good question,” said Koda musingly. “Other than ornery and short tempered, I guess you could say she’s part of nature’s spirit. Everything has 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. They were both silent for a time.

“So, do you know anything about that, um Dullaith thing?” Asked Ambril.

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

“I just want to be prepared, just in case—“

“A Dullaith’s nothing to play around with, it be an ancient dark creature which would have fed off you until you were dead had that Old Oak not saved you.” He looked at her appraisingly. “There are very few human-kind who face down such a demon and live. You were lucky.” He snorted angrily. “But it should never have happened, the honorable old tree should never have risked---” The bike bumped over some rough stones and Koda turned his attentions to controlling it. Then looked embarrassed as he pedaled for a few moments in silence. “We’ve all growed careless and let our eyes cloud over.” His eyebrows drew together in thought. “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 out the Ashera.”

The moonlight made flickering shadows on them as they whooshed through the forest. Koda was silent for some time and then said. “That explains a lot.” And then lapsed back into silence, explaining nothing.

Ambril was about to ask him about what he meant when Koda grunted in surprise. Ambril saw there was a smoldering building just ahead. Fire trucks and fire fighters were everywhere. Jets of water were aimed at the roof but fortunately, the fire appeared to be out. Then Ambril smelled it, and went rigid with fear, it was an all too familiar smell, the smell of death, the smell of the Dullaith, still scary even though it was old and stale.

Koda slowed the bike. “You stay here,” he said leaning it against a tree. ”It ain’t safe.” He nodded to Rosebud before striding off toward the fire.

Ambril was disgusted. She wanted to go investigate, after all she had just battled a huge evil monster, how unsafe could a burned-out building be? She struggled to get free and realized that as sweet and pretty as the flowers were gripped her like iron. Frustrated, she sat back to think. She had to find out more about the Dullaith. Knowledge was the best protection, right? But how could she get out of this without hurting Rosebud? She wriggled and felt the Ashera jostling around in her lap. An idea came to her…it could work. She braced herself before nodding at Rosebud, who was still ignoring her and casually picked up her Ashera. She pointed it at herself and then willed the Ashera for just a few sparks. She was immediately enveloped by a spray of stinging sparks. Coughing and gagging she reached up and felt for her eyebrows, they were mostly there. Luckily the vines recoiled from the sparks just long enough for her to leap out of the basket. She hit the ground and ran toward the now steaming building hugging the underbrush. The firefighters had had just shut off the water. Most of them were congregated near the road, but there were two men behind the building talking. Ambril stopped to listen.

“—Fair job they did of it too,” came the voice of an elderly man. “—A Shadow working! And look there! The ancient writing all around accurate to the letter,” he continued and sighed heavily. “Written in fairy blood.”

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

“I expect from what was stolen from the archives last month.” The older man’s voice was grim. “And you say they used the Morte Cell.”

Koda nodded. “The one that was lost.” He said sounding distant.

“There’s enough magical power in a fairy to fuel ten Dullaiths, I reckon. Even after losing that amount of blood.” He seemed to be looking at the ground in front of him. “The fairy got away just in time. The girl Ambril said it was transforming into Glain. But I think he survived. Anyway there’s no sign of him.” He sighed heavily and scratched his head.

“But whoever did this is 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 somehow at the Archives,” the old man’s voice murmured. “Money’s a problem…private donation maybe?”

They were still studying the ground.

“This isn’t the last we’ll see of this. He didn’t get what he wanted.” The older man scratched his beard. “I’m thinking that Dullaith got distracted by something and went off into the forest.”

Koda nodded and said nothing. Ambril realized that she had been the distraction. The men started scuffing around in the dirt. Ambril risked peeking over the bushes. What she saw startled her. There was a glowing circle with symbols and writing painted right on the ground. Ambril cringed to think that it was painted with the blood of a Tinkerbelle.

At the same time she became aware of someone else 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 but as she did so a branch snapped just behind her and she felt something around her arm. She whirled expecting to defend herself against another monster; it had been that kind of a day. But instead she found Rosebud glaring at her, quivering with rage. Before Ambril could blink she had was whisked back into the basket and strapped in, really strapped in. She couldn’t even wiggle her pinky. The bike backed itself up until it leaned itself innocently against the tree where Koda had left them. Then they waited…and waited for what seemed like an age. Soon Ambril’s nose itched, and a bud wriggled itself under her arm, which tickled. Her foot fell asleep, which tingled…

Finally Koda returned frowning. He was so preoccupied with what he had seen that he didn’t notice Ambril’s predicament. Nor did Ambril point it out to him. The bike started out again smoothly gliding through the forest. After a few minutes however Koda pointedly cleared his throat. Rosebud tossed her head and grudgingly loosened her vines just enough for Ambril to stretch and scratch her nose.

Ambril started thinking about Trelawnyd. Was every one here magical? That would mean they’d look down on her and she’d be an outsider again. Not that she wasn’t used to it but still... “So Koda, is everyone here a magician?”

Koda snorted. “Magic-wielders or magic users, not magicians. No rabbits jumping out of hats here. But no, Trelawnyd folk are like everyone else these days, they’re just not paying attention.” He looked up suddenly at the stars, which twinkled above the treetops. “They use only the magic they know and understand,” he continued. “Technology is human-kind magic now.” He shrugged. It’s plenty useful, but a shame for Trelawnyd folk who have other magics.” He looked at Ambril solidly. “It is the way now, here, yes. Human-kind have turned away from magic so much they’re fearful of it.” The bike suddenly banked to the left and they rode out onto the road. Ambril could see her mother silhouetted by the flashing lights of a tow truck. “I think things might change now.” He said tersely as he began to slow the bike. “Magic’ll be the only way to protect ourselves.” Just as they coasted to a stop, he added. “Best not to tell your mother everything, I don’t think she’s gonna understand.”

Ambril nodded. Trelawnyd was a place of secrets.

# Chapter 8 Roadside Stand

“Ambril! My baby!” Shrieked her mother when they pulled up she ran over her eyes widened as she saw the rider. “Koda! It’s you! Where did you...How did you find…Oh well it doesn’t matter, Thank you!” Ambril’s mother smiled at the big man before she engulfed her daughter in a teary hug and wrenched from the basket. She could feel the vines slipping away as she shoved the Ashera into her pocket.

Koda grunted and then turned his bike back toward the forest without a word.

“Thanks Koda!” Ambril yelled as he disappeared into the shadows.

Her mother hugged her hard again before holding her at arm’s length and giving her a shake. “Where have you been darling? AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAN!”

Ambril had to improvise. “I just got scared and ran. Then I got lost and---Koda brought me back…Sorry. Did you find Zane?” Ambril’s face was squashed against her mother’s shoulder.

“What scared you? AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAN!” Her mother shrieked again as she pulled Ambril back to inspect her. Satisfied she still had all her limbs and---most of her eyebrows she let her go.

“It was the---um---the fire! Something exploded and a piece of it flew into the windshield and cracked it.” Ambril stepped back. “It scared me…so…I just ran.” Ambril shrugged. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“Oohhhh, you poor thing!” said her Mom launching herself on her daughter again for another long, claustrophobic hug. “I found your brother and dragged him back only to find you were gone…but WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAN!” Her mother looked over her shoulder at Zane who was leaning against the tow truck watching the driver work. Ambril squinted at their minivan lying like a dead animal, it’s belly exposed on the side of the road. It looked pretty bad.

“So you ran into the forest just after the windshield was smashed?”

Ambril couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound crazy, especially the truth, so she just nodded.

Her mother was still staring at the van. “This has been the weirdest evening, hasn’t it?”

Ambril nodded some more. She could now see the tall slim form of Feldez her soon-to-be-stepfather standing near the tow truck, looking annoyed with everything as usual. He beckoned to them. Her mother tried to tidy herself up, finger-combing the leaves out of her hair and pulling out the twigs that had snagged her sweater. They walked over to the tow truck. Ambril wanted one last look at the van. With a lot of clanking and squealing, the tow truck driver managed to turn it right side up and was getting ready to hoist it with his towing rig. The windshield was nearly gone now, strewn all over the road in sparkling lumps and the now flattened boxes which had been strapped on top were being loaded into another van. 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, ya 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 gave the old van a pat, which of course made the rest of the windshield collapse spectacularly.

The driver laughed. “You gotta way with cars, kid!”

Ambril went to lean with Zane who 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 van groaned as it 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. As always he was picture perfect. His black hair was smooth, his suit unwrinkled. There was nothing out of place, except his too long nose, which was forever in Ambril’s business. “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 what happened to the minivan,” he said accusingly as if 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 her car anyway,” she said defiantly.

Feldez’s face was instantly a mask of rage.

Zane slide up next to her protectively. “Come on, Feldez,” said Zane quietly. “It was probably a hit and run driver, like the driver said.” Zane shoved his hands in his pocket and looked up at the tall man. “You really don’t think that Ambril did this?” 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 not.” He said but his voice was still tight with anger. “Well, we’ll still have to discuss your inconsiderate behavior later,” he pursed his lips and marched over to Ambril’s Mother.

Ambril couldn’t wait any longer. “Did you---you know see the---“

“Quiet, he’ll hear you,” whispered Zane savagely. “We’ll talk later, after they’ve gone to sleep.” 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 it out hard. Zane wasn’t going to be much help at all, she thought sadly. 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 sank down in the deep upholstery as the car pulled away.

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

They were passing the burned out building Ambril had seen earlier. The fire trucks were just about finished. From the street it 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.

As the car drove slowly by Ambril could see a couple of dazed looking adults and a girl about her age, her face streaked with soot and tears. As she watched a boy walked up and handed a cat to the girl. She smiled and hugged it to herself. A firefighter was shaking the hand of a geeky looking kid with longish dark hair. Ambril yawned as she wondered if she would see them at school in a couple of days. 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 itself out as it widened into a well-tended country lane. There were farmhouses suddenly which gave way to orderly rows of houses complete with lawns and picket fences. Feldez 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 here we are! Our new home!” She said as she pulled a fuzzy caterpillar out of her hair.

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

It was an over-processed, boxy sort of house spaced well back from the other homes nearby. Ambril hated the house on principle. But she had to admit the house had a certain sheen. Inside the stone floors gleamed. All surfaces were uncluttered, every corner free of dust. But as Ambril looked around she noticed there wasn’t an interesting nook to curl up in anywhere. It felt like a laboratory. Just inside the door her mother collapsed on a sleek angular sofa. She immediately groaned and sat back up again rubbing her back.

“Comfy?” said Zane sarcastically.

Ambril’s mother glared at her son and began pulling strenuously on the bits of leaves and twigs still stuck on her filthy sweater. Feldez walked in absently shuffling through some papers in his hands. “Welcome,” he said without looking up. He turned and blanched when he saw his fiance’s condition and what was crawling off her onto his sofa. “Darling! Let’s get you right into a bath.” He said wrinkling his nose and tugging her up.

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. “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 before she followed the others upstairs. The house really was nice in its way, Even Ambril could tell Feldez had spent a lot of money making everything just so. Ambril found her room. It had bookshelves clear across one wall with a big long writing surface below them. 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 as there was a pile of boxes and bags in the middle of the room. She took three steps, dumped her backpack and collapsed on the bed. Her eyes closed immediately.

Quick steps in fine Italian leather awakened her sometime later; unmistakably it was Feldez in the hallway. He passed by and went on down the stairs. Then 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 and 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, O.K.?” She brushed something off Ambril’s shoulder. “Feldez is a stickler for neat and clean, you know.”

No kidding, Ambril rolled her eyes, but not so her Mom could see. 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 sandwiches 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 steaming 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 good idea.” She patted Zane’s shoulder 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.

Zane snorted again.

“Zane, please, we have to work at this,” Ambril’s mother pleaded. 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.

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, kids your age won’t remember. What’s past is past.” She squared her shoulders. “And that goes for us too, Zane. It happened ten years ago. It might be a little weird at first, but we’ll all get over it at some point.” She took a huge breath. “And 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 of how tall he was. “They’ll add stuff to the story, you know how evil he must have been, and how it was such a shame he was killed because it would have been nice to have hanged him.” Zane’s eyes were pools of anger and pain. “You’d better tell her all about it so she’s ready 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 so white for a moment Ambril thought she was going to faint. But she recovered enough to smile unconvincingly at Ambril.

“Mom, come on! What was Zane talking about?” Ambril asked anxiously.

Her mother hugged herself as she looked after her son. After a long moment she looked at Ambril and her eyes softened.

“Zane is upset because of how---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 lab accident? It was reported that he had 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. “Zane has a chip on his shoulder a mile high about this. I don’t want that to happen to you. Which is why it might be better if you started school without knowing any more.”

Ambril was so frustrated 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 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 was already half way through the door. “We’ll talk more later, sweetie, I promise.” She said distractedly.

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 upstairs when she happened to see a light on down the hall. She was just curious, she told herself later, and hadn’t meant to snoop. It was more like---exploration. She opened the door wider and saw it was an office, Feldez’s office.

To her amazement it was a mess. There were large stacks of papers everywhere. Dog-eared maps, ancient drawings, and some rolls of parchment tied with string which were shoved into a corner. A large bookcase stuffed with odd, old books sat behind the desk and a laptop teetered on top of a stack of faded blueprints. The room was dirty, trash overflowed the wastebin---it should have been condemned…which made it the most interesting part of the house for Ambril. The blueprints caught her eye. They were very, very old. She looked closer and discovered that they were the layout of a town where the houses surrounded a circular plaza. There was a tree in the center. There seemed to be notes in a foreign language written all around the central area. Ambril leaned in closer and smoothed out the drawings, jiggling the laptop alive. Ambril froze. There on the screen was an image of the Dullaith!

Ambril jumped back and 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? It was really a good likeness, smoke hemmed in by bright cobweb-like lines which curled and traced all through it, Like tattooed skin. It was chillingly beautiful when it wasn’t trying to kill you, she decided. Underneath the image was the letter ‘V’ and the number one 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 shoes tapped their way 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 was just exploring.“ Stuttered Ambril.

Feldez’s face was grotesquely angry for a half second until he smoothed it away. “Since this is your first night here, allowances have to be made.” He said a 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 a moment when they liked each other, not even just a little bit. “Yes I understand.” Said Ambril nervously. She raced 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 eat her? She shook her head. Why? What exactly was the monster after? 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 screwed up her face. It was so frustrating; she didn’t know where to begin. She jammed her hands down into her pockets and felt something. Surprised she pulled out the piece of cloth. The one she had found on their old van’s windshield. She held it up to the light and saw to her surprise that it was a little cloth boot. Doll clothes. It was blue-green and curled up slightly at the toes, with a quaint row of silver buttons up one side. The weirdest thing was the hole on its sole as if someone had actually worn it out. Ambril thought about the little statue in the box…it hadn’t been alive…had it? Puzzled, she set it on the bedside table.

Then it hit her, just how tired she was. She needed sleep pronto. She showered and changed. But before she crawled under her crisp, clean sheets she set her robot out on her table and tucked her Ashera under her pillow. She’d make time tomorrow to play around with them. She sure needed something to take her mind off all the foul smelling monsters, talking furniture, houses on chicken legs, and angry bicycles. She closed her eyes.

# Chapter 10 An overheard conversation and Zane finally talks

But Ambril couldn’t get to sleep. Everything swirled around and around in her head. She lay awake a long time staring at the smooth ceiling wishing it was her old bedroom’s ceiling. At least there had been interesting cracks to make pictures with. She was just dozing off when she heard voices. They were arguing. She slipped from her bed and put her ear to the 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.”

“I remember, Feldez.” 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.” The voices receded. She opened the door and peered out. There was a crack of light at the bottom of Zane’s door. She heard the low rumble of voices. She stood there straining to make out what they were saying, her feet growing cold until the door was suddenly thrown wide and Feldez was silhouetted against the light. Ambril skittered sideways praying she hadn’t been seen.

“It’s for the best, for your mother certainly. Stop dredging up these bad memories!” Feldez commanded. There was only silence in the room. “Alright then.” The door closed with a smooth mechanical click and Feldez walked away.

Ambril had had enough of not knowing. She needed to talk to Zane, no more waiting patiently for her Mom to tell her. Then she became aware of new sounds coming from across the hallway, sounds of boxes being ripped open and books toppling over. She soundlessly slipped across the hall. With her fingernail she tapped out their code, which 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 opened the door wide. “What are you doing? You can’t leave me here all alone with Feldez!” She marched into the room. “I’m coming with you!”

Zane jumped a mile high then he leaped over the piles of clothes and electronic gear to close the door before turning to Ambril. “Quiet you idiot! You’ll wake them.” He glared at his little sister whose 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 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 narrowed. “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 as he pulled his body around to face her. “What thing? Wait, describe it to me.” He sounded hopeful but wary.

Ambril described what had happened to her in the forest. She left nothing out, even the outlandish FowlClun. He seemed to get more and more excited. “I knew 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---brought it to life. Feldez---he was there. He brought it down and killed it.” 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 and there was none left for her to breathe. “No, not really. I---really don’t remember much about Dad at all.” She said tightly.

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

Ambril thought hard. “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. “Mom had a really hard time afterward. People here didn’t treat her right, I think they were afraid of her, they thought she had helped him.”

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

Zane’s head jerked up. He got up and walked over to the window. “The thing is that…if anything happens and we get blamed for it…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 what we saw, really.” He said in a different voice. “Maybe we imagined it?”

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 tried to eat me! A frigging tree ate it instead, and then I was almost stomped on by a chicken legged house! It’s one of the scariest things that’s ever happened to me!” She raged.

Zane began to walk slowly toward her. “There are scarier things than monsters. I remember it all…I was there… you were only three...” He dropped his head again so that Ambril couldn’t see his face. “I wish I didn’t, but I remember.” His voice trailed off. Zane stood lost in his memories then slowly he advanced on Ambril, his face determined. “We don’t ever, ever talk about this again, O.K.?” Ambril started backing up.

“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; scared of people who aren’t like them, scared of what they might be themselves. People who are afraid 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.” Zane took a step back.

Ambril slumped a bit but righted herself. There was something really wrong about what Zane was saying. “But what if it comes back and hurts some one? Shouldn’t 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 at all.”

“But if it does come back, we’ll have to tell them what we know, right?”

“No!” Zane stood up so fast Ambril slammed herself up against the wall. “Don’t you see? We can’t ever, ever be a part of this!”

Ambril decided it was high time to get out of there. Zane seemed so tightly wound anything could set him off. But he couldn’t just go. “O.K., I’ll go back to my room when you promise me you won’t leave!” She pleaded. “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 for what seemed to be forever. Then he nodded, just once. “But, I can’t promise it’ll be for long.” A pained look crossed his face.

Then he went back into the new Zane mode. He grunted impatiently as he opened the door and shoved her out into the hallway. Ambril stumbled to her room and whisked her door shut. She grabbed her robot and hugged it shaking like a leaf. So Zane had seen the Dullaith too! Her hands felt icy cold and she shuddered. She couldn’t get her mind around the rest of it. About her father… it had killed her father. And he was the one who had brought it to life… She sat there her thoughts running in circus clown circles. She walked slowly over to her bed and slid 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. She slipped one more time out of bed, took her desk chair and wedged it under her doorknob. No more trouble allowed tonight. She felt a little better. At least she wasn’t going to be alone. Zane had promised to stay at least for now. She snuggled down with the robot next to her and was almost instantly asleep.

# Chapter 11 A Visitor

The moonlight tripped lightly through Ambril’s open window and spread itself like a luminous shadow over Ambril’s coverlet. A large crow stared hard at the sleeping girl as he settled himself 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 on her desk. It wasn’t a star really, and it wasn’t twinkling, just a dull tired spark now and then. It crouched there for a while trying to catch its breath and then stood up wearily. It was 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 nearly transparent wings sprouting from his shoulders. When he stood still he was hard to see as he seemed to blend perfectly with whatever was behind him. He looked tremendously tired as he scanned the room. Then his face brightened as he flitted over to Ambril’s table and triumphantly snatched up the boot she had found. He immediately put it on and smiled at both his booted feet.

Ambril mumbled something in her sleep and turned toward him. He blanched as she yawned in his face and he 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 quilt. He stared and stared and then flew nearer. Hovering over Ambril’s shoulder, he put his hand on the gem flower. It began to pulse, gently glowing warm; filling him with light. He giggled as his hair began to stand on end. But what astonished the fairy was that it also seemed to light the sleeping figure as well. He skittered away and shook himself. Frowning he returned and put his hand once again on the medallion. The jewel warmed them both again. He jerked away and hung in the air a few feet above the figure. Ambril sniffed and turned over. The Ashera slipped from under the pillow and fell off the bed.

The fairy was on it immediately. With a wave of his hand he slowed its fall a look of amazement on his face. The Ashera glowed as the fairy flipped it around scanning every inch. A few times he blanched and looked again at the kid now curled in a ball, snoring softly. After several minutes he put the Ashera back and landed on Ambril’s shoulder, lost in thought---looking puzzled.

Outside Sid shook his feathers and stretched his neck nervously. He hopped from one foot to the other 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.

“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 twitching, You’re the one who said we gotta keep a sharp eye on that rascal.”

The branch slowly stopped swaying and the two peered inside 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 memory’s going, that there’s a forest fairy! You know, a descendant of those who left during the rebellion. He has no love of human-kind that’s for sure. Not that the ones who stayed are any nicer.” The crow cocked its head and jumped to a smaller branch, which dipped dangerously.

“Watch it! You old Coot!” Aster sputtered nearly falling off the branch.

“I’m a Crow, an old Crow, not an old Coot,” muttered Sid not taking his eyes from the fairy.

Aster ventured farther out along the branch to get a better look. As she did so the branch bowed and groaned.

“What the!” Squawked Sid as the branch snapped and went down. Aster managed to fling herself onto another branch as the crow gracefully flew to one nearby.

Aster sniffed as she smoothed her ruffled 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 turned back to the bedroom window. “Hey where’d he go?” He screeched forgetting himself and hopping up and down.

“Where’d who? Oh, the fairy? Well he was just…there.” The squirrel stood up on her hind legs for a better look. Inside there was only a sleeping kid. No fairy.

“Well, I guess he decided to hightail back to wherever they hole up.”

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

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

They both stared silently at the sleeping child 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 cubby just on the other side of---“ The branches rustled violently. “Oh! I am sorry Ma’am, I didn’t see you---well, well, excuse me!” Sputtered the squirrel, as an indignant possum poked its head out of a hole and took a jab at her. Aster retreated up the branch, “My! So rude!” And wedged herself in the crook of two branches. Resignedly she said, “Wake me when it’s time.” She tucked her head under her tail and settled herself for a nap.

The crow stood his silent watch as the moon made its circuit through the sky. He didn’t trust fairies, but try as he might, he couldn’t find one single thing amiss. The moonlight played on Ambril face and she smiled. The crow seemed to smile with her.

# Chapter 12 Breakfast and the Robot

When Ambril finally woke up the sun was nearly half way through morning. The sky was blue from end to end. It was shaping up to be 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 fLit as it walked the desktop experimentally flexing its knees. It tooted as it picked up a pink eraser.

“That’s the smartest robot I’ve ever seen. Why didn’t your other robots do that? 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 to throw the eraser but stopped to wink at them. They both giggled. Ambril’s Mom smiled over at her. “Did you sleep well sweetheart?”

Ambril hesitated and then nodded. Looking at her mother relaxed and smiling she didn’t have the heart to tell her about her conversation with Zane. She’d put it off for a little while. The robot cricked its neck unhinging his earflap and revealing the wiring inside. Ambril gave an involuntary start.

Her mother snorted. “Not exactly a looker is he? What do you call him? fLit?”

“Yeah.” Ambril reached over and flipped his earflap into place.

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 organized.”

“What? A housekeeper?” 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 because you’ll never have to clean your room again, and…she bakes!” she said temptingly as she turned to go. “Come on lazybones, breakfast is waiting downstairs.”

Ambril threw on her clothes and smoothed out the worst of the tangles in her hair. She rooted around under her pillow, found her Ashera and shoved that in her backpack along with Red. As she raced down the stairs, she tried to think of ways she could find out more about what happened to her father.

Zane and Feldez sat at the table laden with a huge platter of fresh baked muffins. Ambril picked up a warm blueberry one and took a large bite. Yum…Feldez sat lost behind his newspaper. Facing her, the headlines screamed FIRE! Ambril chewed slowly as she read the front page. There was a splashy picture of the building they had seen last night.

The article read:

**Last night fire broke out in the Tupelo farmer’s market off Forest Road. 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 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 could ever need.” The Tupelos are one of the New Families that joined our community-**

Feldez chose that moment to carefully fold up the paper and lay it down next to his plate. He looked quizzically at Ambril and Zane as he took a tiny sip of espresso and touched his fingertips lightly together.

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

Zane slouched farther into his seat and grunted.

Ambril’s Mom smiled nervously as she sat down. Feldez graced her with a small smile and resumed staring at Zane and Ambril. Ambril wondered for the thousandth time, what she saw in him.

“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. “As punishment you shall not be allowed to use any screens or cell phones for a week unless it’s for school work.”

Zane shot him an evil look. “Cell phones don’t work too well here anyway.”

His mother shifted uneasily. Feldez coughed drily. “Today, you’re expected to familiarize yourselves with the town. You’ll be starting school tomorrow.”

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

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

A plump middle-aged woman bustled out from the kitchen drying her hands on her apron. She was short and huggably round with graying hair and a big-toothed smile. She had the brightest blue eyes Ambril had ever seen.

“Hello! Hope you like the food.” Her voice was squeaky and high pitched. She bobbed her head still smiling. “It’s a real pleasure to meet you.”

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

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

“You aren’t our Dad, 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 and keep your rooms tidy. Your personal belongings belong on your person or in your rooms and---“ Feldez leaned over the table to glare at them at closer range. “You will limit your sweets to one treat a day.” He held his glare a few seconds longer and then took another sip of espresso. “Is that clear?”

Ambril was so angry she could burst. But what could she do? 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 Feldez a nod. Her Mother looked pleadingly at her.

Feldez turned to Ambril’s mother. “I hope you aren’t planning to do too much today, darling, yesterday was quite taxing 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. The children can find their way.”

She gave him a small nod and said hesitantly, “I thought we would have a talk with the kids before you go off to work.“

But Feldez was already half way out the door. “We’ve just had our little talk darling, I’ve no more time.”

Ambril heaved a secret sigh of relief as the door clicked shut behind him.

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

Ambril couldn’t remember a time when Feldez hadn’t been unhappy about something.

“We all have to keep in mind that taking on the role of Administrator at the hospital is a big responsibility for him.” Ambril’s Mother said softly and then she caught sight of the glorious day outside and smiled. “Come on, let’s go find your bikes, I think the movers put them in the garage.”

# Chapter 13 Trelawnyd

Outside they found the bikes parked three feet from the far side of the garage. As if having them closer 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.

Ambril jammed her backpack in the basket and jiggled the handlebars experimentally to make sure everything worked. Her mother was looking out over the town. The whole valley rolled out in front of them. Ambril spotted Forest Road winding away down and around and on through a checkerboard of farmland and into the forest. The forest marched straight up the mountains all around. All except for one barren hill on the far side of the valley everything was green and lush.

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

”*The* shoe store? You mean there’s only one?” Ambril was incredulous.

Her mother nodded. “There’s the Hospital where Feldez works, and the Library where you’ll hopefully be spending loads of time.” she continued.

The Hospital was nothing special but the Library was an imposing stone building sheltered by Eucalyptus trees.

“There’s the old schoolhouse where you’ll 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.

“Thanks for the info Mom, 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. “Don’t forget! Betula’s!”

Ambril was soon gliding down a shady street. It was a strange new experience to ride down uncrowded streets. No business people in a hurry, no cable cars to veer around. She rode by the schoolhouse, it was big up close, kind of intimidating. She rode by the Library and thought about stopping to check out the archives but she wasn’t ready to get off her bike yet.

She had just turned back to 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 lost. In the distance she spotted 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 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. She heard a snicker behind her and found that a gang of tomato throwing thugs was chasing them both. A big angry guy with blonde hair rode in front. Ambril stood up on her pedals and began to pump as hard as she could. She put on a burst of speed, but looking around she saw the boys were gaining on her. She could see the girl ahead vanish around a curve. Ambril took the curve pumping madly.

“Quick in here!” Just ahead the bike rider beckoned her into a side street.

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

“Behind here!” the girl had stashed 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 insults at each other. Ambril and the girl hid behind the tree and watched them hurtle out of sight.

“It’s O.K. now, the road starts to get really curvy. It’ll be awhile before they realize they’ve lost us.” Said the girl.

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. She seemed to have tomato splattered all over her top. Her face was tear-stained---and familiar.

“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.

“Right! 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 the fire and…everything.”

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. “But fortunately, the fire fighters got it out in time.”

“I’m Ambril, 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 new 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.”

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

Ambril squinted at Sully and hesitated before nodding.

“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 family roots.” 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 it’s everyone’s favorite place.”

Sully smiled hugely showing somewhat crooked teeth. “Well you have that right, Betula’s is great! I love her bugs best.”

Ambril was both repulsed and intrigued by that.

“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 a trip to Betula’s, she cheers me up.” She disentangled her bike from the Bay tree. “Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

“Thanks.” Ambril smiled as they walked their bikes down the dusty road. Perhaps she had made her first friend here.

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

“Six years now.” Sully smiled to herself. “It’s 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 for the stuff we grow.” She paused to flick a fly away from her bike handle. “We made do with less and less until my parents decided to do something about it. That’s when we fixed up the old shack and turned 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 soon came to another road. Sully smiled devilishly at Ambril and said, “come on, I’ll race you!”

Not really a fair race, thought Ambril as she didn’t 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 Main Street. There were little shops lining several blocks. Ambril smiled as she rode by the shoe store.

“Whoa! You’re fast!” Sully said as they parked their bikes in front of a violently pink building. ‘Betula’s Sweet Shoppe’ 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 chunks of tomato stuck to her shirt.

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 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 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 quivered when she wasn’t. Clinging to her was a frail looking grandmotherly woman with wispy white hair.

“Oh! Sorry,” Ambril quickly picked up her backpack.

“Now Crystal, she didn’t mean to throw that down in front of you!” Said the frail woman who smiled kindly at Ambril. “Do you need help, Deary?”

Ambril shook her head as she brushed off her backpack.

“I see not, such a quick one you are!” she continued. “My name is Daisy Flood. Are you new here?”

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

“Oh! A Derwyn1 Isn’t it nice Crystal to hear that name again!” The older woman tugged on her tall, thin companion. “Why you must be Tylia’s daughter!”

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

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

The thin woman’s manner abruptly changed. She smiled 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 gushed 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 tea and you can show me how this thing works. What do you say?”

Mrs. Twid eagerly leaned in 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 embarrassed. He hitched up his pants and smiled as he turned to walk away. “But this evening? You promised to help me?” She tried out a flirty pout but it came off as a grimace.

“Crystal Twid, Is that another new gadget?” The plump lady whom Ambril had seen through the window was standing in the doorway to her shop. “That makes the third one this week!” She smiled slyly at the man with the goatee. “Bob, You are quite the salesman now aren’t you!”

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

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

“Are you coming to the church tea this afternoon Betula? Daisy and I will be there.” She patted the shopping bag enthusiastically. “I’m going to bring the bread I’ll make with my new machine!” She smiled at Bob who nervously adjusted his glasses.

“I wouldn’t miss it, Crystal.” She caught Ambril eying her and winked. “Though I’m a coffee drinker, myself. “Hey Bob, are you going?”

“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 turned to smile at the now mortified Mrs. Twid. “I’ll see you at Church Crystal. And you too Daisy, it’s always such a pleasure. It’s nice to see you out and about again.” Betula smiled

“Don’t bother to bring a thing.” Mrs. Twid 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 before sailing down the street with little Mrs. Flood clamped to 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 stool in an instant.

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

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

Ambril nodded. Who didn’t?

“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. 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 as Sully slid onto the stool next to her, her shirt tomato free.

“Yum! A new flavor, I don’t know how you come up with this great stuff.” Sully 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!” Chuckled 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 girl with curly blonde 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 the best ice cream Ambril 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. Candy in fantastic shapes and sizes were stacked to the rafters. A large glass case sat in the middle of the counter filled with sugar figurines. They seemed about to come alive. A miniature Ferris wheel in red licorice gently revolved on its own with marzipan animals occupying all the seats. There were larger sugar animals too. A large rabbit in red high tops, a fat brown bear and a striped giraffe. Ambril thought she might catch them moving if she looked at them the right way.

“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 Mrs. Twid, she won’t thank you for bringing it.” Ambril said as she admired a poodle made of fluffy white divinity with 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 Crystal’s gotten older she’s had just one thing on her mind.” 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 Octopus. “There’s not enough of it in the world for her.” Betula wiped her hands on her ample apron and shook her head ruefully.

“My favorites!” Sully pointed at a large display of gargantuan iridescent bugs. “Help yourself, love,” Betula rocked back on her heels happily.

Ambril picked up a green beetle with red striped wings and hesitantly bit off one of the legs. “Yum, watermelon!”

Sully was chewing on a spindly green bug that Ambril had never seen and then pounced on something fuzzy and brown. “These are my Mom’s favorite spiders!” Ambril’s eyes bulged 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.“

“I mean on our farm we try to make the good bugs feel welcome, 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!”

Betula was putting several bugs in a 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. Food with no love in it.” She straightened up and stretched a bit. “What does he know about life and love anyway? All his formulas and calculations.” Said Betula frowning, clearly Feldez wasn’t her favorite guy either. She raised her arms to encompass the entire store. “I don’t use any formulas and make up most of my own recipes. Everything in my little shop is made with love and brings a little happiness, and we all need some of that, don’t we?”

She shot a measured glance 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. “Just a little something for after lunch.” She popped a chocolate into Lola’s mouth before she could protest.

Lola smiled as she savored her treat. “Just a little bit and savor every bite!”

Ambril noticed Zane was standing next to a gawky kid with dark hair. He was staring at Lola with a 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 the bell tied to the door drew Ambril’s attention. A large man in a shirt meant for a much smaller man invaded the store. 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 waging his square jaw at her. “This time, you won’t be able to refuse!” He stumped over to the counter and threw several centipedes in his mouth. Then caught sight of the gawky kid standing next to Zane who was reaching over to accept an ice cream cone from Betula. “RILEY! CHORES! NOW!” He yelled.

It startled the boy so that he dropped the ice cream onto the floor. The square jawed man looked disgusted. “And clean that up before you go!” He groused before he turned back to Betula. “How’s my favorite sweetie huh?”

“That’ll be $1.75 Larch Dogwood.” Said Betula her arms folded. “And do you have to be so nasty to your son?”

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

Betula stared back stonily.

“You know I’m ready and willing to take this dump and that space between us off your hands anytime.” He nodded vigorously. “Yep, this would be the perfect way for my store to expand.” He straightened his tie. “You and I both know this town needs a supermarket. You can sell your sweets in my 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 outselling your produce, better quality and reasonable prices.” Betula wiped the counter slowly but kept her eyes on him. “If you ask me, this town needs 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 came when we needed them. 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 comes on too strong sometimes.” It was the skinny kid. His too long bangs hid his gray eyes as he wiped the ice cream from the floor.

“Betula seems pretty tough.” Ambril shrugged. “I imagine she can take care of herself. I’m Ambril Derwyn,” she smiled back at him.

I’m 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. “You were there last night when Sully’s shack burned down weren’t you?”

Riley smiled nervously. “Do you mind not mentioning that around my Dad?” He said looking around. “I wasn’t supposed to be out last night.” He paused and absently fingered the candy bugs. “So you’re new, did you just move in? ” When Ambril nodded he asked, “What do you think so far?”

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

A loud whap sounded from the back of the store.

“Easy, Easy there Betula! I only meant---“ Larch backed hastily down an aisle.

Betula advanced on him wielding a large mop. “ I know what you meant, now I’m telling you GET OUT OF MY STORE!” She took another swing at him.

“We’ll talk later.” Larch said angling his large frame toward the door. “But I’m not giving up.” He deftly sidestepped another sweep of the mop. Over his shoulder he hollered. “Come on Riley, let’s go.”

Ambril looked around but Riley had already gone.

After the big man had left Betula said, “I feel like I should check my wallet every time he comes in here.”

Ambril 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 a pedal. She took the alley looking for a short cut. But as she neared the corner she realized she’d made a mistake. There were soft squelchy thuds coming from around the corner.

“Hey, watch it!”

As she rounded the corner an overripe tomato whizzed by her head. It seemed that one of Riley’s chores was to clean up his Dad’s storeroom . The gang of tomato throwers 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 as it looked to be seven to one. Riley’s arms were covered with fruit pulp and tomato slime. Then Ambril noticed another pair of arms dragging the garbage bags behind the crates. It was hard to tell at first as she was lumpy with peach pulp but it was Sully.

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

“Wait a bit, I’m thinkin’ there be more 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. Though his white shirt and bow tie were uncomfortably tight, he smiled devilishly as he held up a bag of green tomatoes.

Ambril smiled back as she grabbed a handful of the 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 just a blur as it hit its target dead on. A ball thrower flew out of a boy’s hands and landed several feet away. The boy didn’t know what hit him. 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. 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.”

The burly kid snorted, “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 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 longingly after him. “I think I hear my Ma calling, Lance, gotta go.” Another boy took off running.

Ygg smiled as he picked up a tomato and weighed it in his hand. “Now the odds 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. “Ya ready to quit?”

Lance’s face was swollen but vengeful. “Outsiders like you will always be losers no matter what,” he sneered. “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 fingernails 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,” 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 Ygg’s poor behavior.” She said her cheeks quivering. “He’ll clean this up, of course.” She turned back to Ygg. “Let’s add restocking the shelves and delivering every single Sunset Tea order to your chores!”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Twid, we know it’s not your fault. “ Said Lance smirking as he signaled to the other boys. “Can you see he turns over the compost heap too?” He turned and said menacingly. “Riley, stop messing around or I’ll put you back in that dumpster where you belong!”

The other boys laughed appreciatively. One of the last to leave was a too tall, thin boy. Ambril was stunned to see her brother was hanging out with the bullies.

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

“It, it wasn’t---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?” She pronounced “New” as if she was diseased.

“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 her checks wagging. “Perhaps sometimes allowances have to be made.”

She patted Ambril’s head experimentally attempting to be friendly.

“Do say hello to your mother 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. She snapped her fingers at Ygg as if she was rudely summoning a waiter. Then she pulled out a handkerchief from her purse and wiped imaginary dirt from her dress. “No supper for you tonight,” she said 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 dripping putrid peach juice and laughed. “That felt good! To see my brother temporarily get taken down a notch like that.” He continued as he picked up one of the trash bags and heaved it into the container.

“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 twin brother.” He stared down the alley unseeingly for a moment a spasm of anger flashed across his face and was gone.

“My brother was throwing stuff too, if it makes you feel any better.” Ambril 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 shirt. Then Reilly got a hose out from behind the store and they washed down the storeroom walls. Ygg tossed around the compost heap quickly and they were done.

‘Well, I best be shovin’ off seein’ as I have these here deliveries.” Ygg said slinging a green satchel over his shoulder as he tugged on his collar “Be seein’ you tomorrow,” he said and strode away.

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

“Well, that was interesting,” said Ambril.

“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.” She went on. “And you’ll find out tomorrow that I’m not.” She looked down embarrassed, “I’m really not.”

Ambril smiled. “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.” She said 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 some friends.

# Chapter 16 The First Day of School

The alarm clock woke her too early. She groaned, her first day at a new school. She rolled out of bed into her clothes and slumped down the stairs. On the table were bowls of cereal and a jug of orange juice. She sloshed juice into a glass and as she wasn’t feeling hungry emptied half her cereal into Zane’s bowl.

“I saw that,” Zane slid down the banister 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 poured 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 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 egging him on, ” said Ambril scowling as she grabbed her bowl put it in the sink.

“Hey, I’m going to do what I have to do to stay healthy here.” Said Zane swallowing hard. “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 asked as she stuffed the lunch into her backpack.

“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 around and stiffened instinctively. Feldez tripped down the stairs looking sleek and calm.

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

Feldez nodded and tugged his cuffs. “Not surprisingly this has been a difficult transition for her,” he stared hard at Zane. “And you two haven’t helped. From now on I need more cooperation.” He tugged on his cuffs once more for emphasis as he headed for the door.

It was all Ambril could do to keep herself from throwing her backpack at him. Feldez did not appear to notice her feelings as he buttoned his jacket and 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. “I think he’s mixed up in the Dullaith business.”

Zane looked at her in disbelief. But when Ambril told him about 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, we can’t tell anyone about what we saw, but especially not her. She’s so stressed out it’s like talking to a wall anyway,” he paused groping for something. “I have to think,” he picked up his backpack and slammed the front door 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.

“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 group of kids milling around.

Sully noticed them too and sighed, “I guess they decided to get Riley first and save us for later.”

Ambril could see some dark shaggy haired kid getting shoved around by a bunch of jeering boys. Lance was doing most of the shoving. “You need to stop playing around, you hear me?” Lance yelled. “You geeky nerd!” He shoved Riley to the ground and walked away. Ambril spotted Zane on the fringes of the group. She was mollified to see he looked uncomfortable.

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

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 as she peered through her half rim glasses and fingered her pearls.

“Oh, sorry she’s not feeling well,” said Ambril almost truthfully

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 Pinwydden for English with me, Berry for P.E. and horrible Ms. Breccia for History!” 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 top lip. “You must be Ambril Petri correct?” he said as he gestured gracefully at her. “No,” 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 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 a guy 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.”

“Moroz was a brilliant scientist and engineer. He became very influential in the town.” Mr. Pinwydden cocked his head at the class looking like an emerald green crane. “And here, as happens in myths and legends, 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 guardians of the underworld would be interested in him. But it is thought that he might have disturbed some ancient magic and transformed himself into something so heinous it does not belong in this world.”

A small girl with freckles 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 but it might involve a form of living magic to counteract—wait! What am I doing?” Mr. Pinwydden slapped his forehead and looked sheepish. “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 chuckled, “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. 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. Mr. Berry turned out to be Bob of Bob’s Bots’.

“Hello students! I hope you had an enjoyable spring break,” he 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.

“Excellent! For starters, I want you to run two laps around the grounds Ready? Go!”

Everyone groaned as they stumbled to their feet and started off. Lance and his buddies streaked by. Ygg 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, limping slowly was the only one behind them.

“Poor kid,” said Sully, “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.”

Sully beamed, obviously happy to be asked. “Maybe we can explore the spooky old house near our farm. It’s 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---.”

There was a strange frizzing sensation, Ambril remembered later. And then they heard an eerie scream right behind them. Ambril whirled to see Lance who had come around on his second lap, doing 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 what to do. He was hopping from one foot to the other as if the playground had been transformed into a hot bed of coals.

One of his friends smirked. “Are you joking, Lance?” he said half laughing.

He did look pretty silly hoping around like an idiot. But he wasn’t joking. He was in real pain. Then Ambril was 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 and jogged 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. 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. He grabbed Lance’s shoes and socks and dumped them in as well. There was a fizzing sound and a look of relief on Lance’s face.

“There, that did it.” Said Mr. Berry almost to himself. Lifting Lance’s feet out of the pail he gave him his dripping footwear. “Here, see if you can wring these out yourself.” He beckoned to the pimply-faced kid. “Here, Fold up that tarp and slosh some of this around.” Said Mr. Berry gesturing to the where Lance had been. A tarp had been thrown down on the track, which hadn’t been there a few minutes before. Faint, glowing lines 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 circle!“ 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? “Wait over there you three! You shouldn’t even be here!” He said sternly.

With a whoosh, the red nosed kid emptied the bucketful of brown liquid on the tarp he’d just folded. It fizzed and steamed. It had a familiar scent. Riley limped up then looking interested and confused.

Sully whispered “What no marshmallows?” Ambril smiled. Hot chocolate had many unique uses in this town.

An ambulance screamed onto the playground. Two men in white overalls jumped out and began to efficiently load Lance onto a stretcher. Mr. Berry turned to Riley. “I’m sorry, Riley, your brother’s been hurt. Why don’t you get changed and meet your parents at the office?”

Riley shuffled off looking stunned.

“Here you three come with me.” Mr. Berry beckoned sternly at Ambril, Ygg and Sully. They marched silently into the school just as a police car pulled up and an overweight police officer heaved himself out of it.

Mr. Berry ushered them into his tiny cramped office and waved them into chairs. He perched on his desk and studied them. “So, what you saw out there.”

“Well,” Sully began, “We saw Lance jumped around like an idiot. And someone had thrown down a tarp with weird symbols on it.” Sully shrugged.

“It waren’t there before when we jogged by.” 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 for a long moment. “Magic! Don’t be silly! Magic is NOT ALLOWED here,” he paused and studied the dirty linoleum floor. “Magic use is not tolerated here. Magic users are thrown out of town or jailed. They are considered,” he paused again and unconsciously pulled at the collar of his sweatshirt, “dangerous to the community.”

He took a deep breath and used a more reasonable tone. “Perhaps what you saw was me nullifying 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 looked at each of them severely before reaching over and opening the door. Outside was the hulking form of a police officer.

“Deputy Sheriff Skarn,” Mr. Berry nodded.

“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?”

“I think Riley was the only one behind us, he was limping. Lance was working on his second lap. Someone must have laid a trap for him, I guess. But we didn’t see anyone. We 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. 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 ran 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. “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 Mr. Berry put Lance’s feet and shoes in the cleaning solution. Then of course, you arrived.” Sully volunteered.

Deputy Sheriff Skarn scratched laboriously in his pad for several minutes before looking up. “Didja see anything else?”

“We waren’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. “Or maybe Lance was just play-actin’ to git outta school.” He frowned, “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 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.

Ygg smiled “It looks as if Bob knows a thing or two about Magic!” He said.

“Shhh! He’ll lose his job if anyone finds out!” Sully elbowed him hard.

The three of them went off to change and then on to the lunchroom.

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.” Sully chuckled. “They ought to just take the sign down, everyone would forget about it then.”

They found a table near the window. When Ambril opened her bag she knew 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 julienned carrots with garlic salt, a sandwich made with homemade bread and home made cookies. Everything was rolled in a red checked napkin. There was even 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 thank your housekeeper for the best cookie I’ve ever eaten.” Said Sully somewhat jealously.

Ygg was sitting near them but not eating. She hadn’t seen him eat 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 them over to him.

His face lit up briefly but then frowned. “I’m not hungry right now.” He turned slightly away but his eyes refused to budge. Then gave her a sideways glance.

“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, go ahead!” She said and 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 swaggered in, he was already back from the hospital and in no time was jeering at ‘astronauts of tomorrow club’. Ambril conceded that their toy astronaut helmets did make them obvious targets. He turned 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.”

Lola took a long look at his black eye. “Knock it off, Lance. It looks like you’re the one who needs the make up!“ She flicked her trash into the bin and flounced out of the lunchroom. Ambril and Sully soon followed. She happened to catch

Zane smile as he watched Lola walk down the stairs with her friends.

“That was great! Lola really gave it to him!” Sully laughed turning to Ambril but Ambril wasn’t there. She had stopped dead in the middle of the hallway three steps back and looked as if she’d seen a ghost. “Hey what’s wrong?”

Kids were jostling her as they shoved past her to get outside. Her eyes were riveted on the janitor’s closet. Because moments before there had been a paper with a drawing on the Dullaith tacked on it. 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 her eyes playing tricks on her or did he just come out of the forbidden room?

Ambril felt someone tugging hard on her arm.

“Get out of the way!” Someone yelled in her ear as Sully towed her out of the onslaught of kids and safely off to the side.

“O.K., you’re freaking me out, what’s wrong?” Sully’s face was anxious.

“I think I just saw my future stepfather coming out of the janitor’s closet. But you said no one was allowed in there. Weird.”

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 and 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---

“Look! Some one really did try to break in here, see?” Sully had bent down and was examining the door handle. She pointed to some marks around the lock. “Those scratches are recent, don’t you think? They’re so shiny,” She said.

Ambril could only nod. Now she was really confused. Feldez didn’t seem the type to break into high security storage in the middle of the day. He wouldn’t 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 cubed woman, with helmet shaped hair and bright red lipstick to match her shiny, 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 a hand. It looked more like she was directing traffic. She paused until the class settled.

“Today we shall discuss the founding 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 our town and the old stories 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 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 by horse and wagon to this valley, cleared the fields and initially built their 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 Circle Park in the center of town and streets radiating away from it. “Unfortunately the original settlement, Old Town was built in the swampiest part of the valley and was abandoned when a virulent 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. It has 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. “Tylwith, Silva, Derwyn and Anamalfia,” 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 to arrive.” 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 puffed out her chest. “To ensure this town’s health and prosperity.” She looked around expectantly as if waiting for applause.

“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?”

Far fewer raised their hands. Sully slid down further on her chair.

“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. “On my Mom’s side. She’s 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. But I’m not sure who my ancestors are should make anyone feel differently about me,” 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. 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 cleared her throat and strode back to the writing board. “Now for the more colorful account of our town’s inception.” She chuckled. “According to local legend, 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.”

Laughter was heard around the room.

Lance called out, “Yeah on broomsticks maybe!” More laughter erupted.

“The old legends aren’t---err---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’s were human magic users.” The class turned around and stared at her.

Lance guffawed, “Can you work a little magic now and make yourself disappear? Some of us would really like that.”

More laughter rang out. “Abraca-dabra,” chanted one boy with a unibrow, as he waved his hands right in her face.

“The illustrious family of Anima supposedly was composed of shape changers, called Anamalfia.” Chortled Ms. Breccia holding her side. “Beings who can change to an animal on a whim!”

Nearly everyone in the class laughed at this, Ambril thought a little about Ms. Breccia and how she’d make a nice grizzly bear.

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. “Ambril, my what a family tree you have!”

Lance started stomping on the floor and making guttural noises. “This is how Silva’s 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 stomping 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 farm. I didn’t get a chance to redo it, may I have an extension?” Sully asked.

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?” “I fear that is too flimsy an excuse. You simply must learn to be more responsible.” She drew herself up to Amazonian proportions. “Zero on your essay and,” she raised her index finger like a spike. “Detention, out to the hallway with you.” 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’s dog eat their essay or had it burn up in a silly little house fire?” She said dangerously smooth.

Ygg raised his hand, his head down. After a moment, Ambril raised her hand.

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. They 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 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. “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, and Ms. Breccia never gives out notes.”

Ambril and Sully added their backpacks to his and sat down on the floor.

“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 a curious thud and a muffled groan from nearby. The three looked around but saw nothing unusual, but then the thuds came again and then another louder groan.

“It sounds like that monster from the black lagoon.” Said Sully as she scrambled to her feet. “It’s coming from one of the lockers, I think.” She knocked on each locker until about the ninth one there came an answering thud.

Sully tried to open it. “I think it’s jammed,” she said struggling.

There was an unearthly groan.

“More like a Zombie to me,” mused Ygg. But there was no doubt it came from the locker, which wasn’t budging.

“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. 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 breath as Sully tore off 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 everyone behind him.’ 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 so good---and then he’ll have to stop picking on me.”

As he raised his head Ambril could just see the searing anger in his face before it cleared to bland. 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 living Riley’s life.”

“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.

“Tomorrow then,” Ygg waved and was swallowed by the sea of kids invading the hallway.

Ambril looked down and found a wadded paper near her foot. She 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 for she held in her hand a drawing of a Dullaith. Ambril smoothed out the drawing. It appeared to be on ordinary ruled school paper. The top was ripped as if it had been pinned to something, like a door.

“You know we’re about to be either smashed like pancakes or carried against our will through the doors.” Said Sully as she fought off the stream of desperate students.

Ambril showed her the drawing. “This was what I saw before, tacked onto the door of the janitor’s closet.”

“So? Someone likes cow skulls. No wait, it’s more of a horse---no--- where’d you find this?”

Ambril pointed to the trashcan. “Feldez pulled it off after he left the janitor’s closet, then he dropped it in the trash.”

“Which was shoved in the locker with Riley.” Sully shrugged. “So he likes cow skulls too, big deal! Look, your future stepfather is a big wig in town. He does all kinds of volunteer work and he’s on all the committees that promote peace and harmony yada yada.” Sully cocked her head at Ambril. “It 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. But would she believe her when she heard the whole story? Even she had to admit it sounded pretty strange.

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 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, you’re holding out on me. I can’t help unless you tell me what’s going on.”

Ambril swallowed hard. Yep, She would have to explain it all even if it meant watching her friend walk away, laughing. How else could she get to the bottom of this? Besides, Sully would soon tire of being friends if she kept 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 smiled 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. She had grabbed some snacks Mrs. Sweetgum had made and flown out the door. The afternoon was at it’s warmest. The flowers 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 talking to an elderly woman. His shirt was too small and his pants were baggy in the wrong places. It was Ygg.

Ambril slowed as they were deep in conversation and she didn’t want to intrude.

Ygg saw her and smiled. “Hey Ambril!”

Ambril skidded to a stop. “What’s up?”

“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. Your parents used to bring you by when you were very, very small.”

“Really? um that’s, n---nice,” she stuttered, feeling a little embarrassed. She took a quick look around to see if she remembered anything.

It was a garden like no other. Every flower and bush was radiant with life. This was a gardener’s garden. There were scads of garden gnomes scattered around. Ambril jumped when she found one at her elbow looking unnervingly lifelike. They all had red hats except for one taking a snooze under a bench who was smaller and dressed in green. Ambril smiled.

“You liked them when you were little too.” Miss Fern nodded vaguely at the gnome nearest Ambril. “They remember you.” She began struggling with a large watering can. Ambril looked dubiously at the ceramic man at her knee and decided Miss Fern must be like her Great Aunt Lilac who discussed politics with the dust bunnies under the sofa when she visited.

“You know my neighbor, Daisy Flood swears by that Sunset Tea, I can’t think why.” Miss Fern raised the watering can and tipped it forward. “But I’ll be sure and give Daisy that package of tea you delivered when she gets home.” A foul smelling green slush came out of the end of the can.

Ambril wrinkled her nose.

“Gardener’s Tea, the plants can’t get enough!” Miss Fern warbled as she doused a perfectly good pot of petunias.

Ygg said in a strangled voice. “Well I best be off.” Ambril noticed he was holding his breath too.

Ambril made sure they were well away before taking her first breath. “So where are you off to?”

“Koda’s house, Do you know where that might be?” Asked Ygg.

Ambril nodded proudly. “I do! It’s about the only place I know. I’m going that way,” said Ambril. “So follow me.”

Ambril stood up on her pedal and off they went. Ambril found the main road and turned in the direction of the forest. The houses immediately thinned and the farms thickened. The farms were slowly giving way to sparse forest when Koda suddenly glided up alongside them riding Rosebud.

“Hi Koda!” Ambril thought the bike still looked a bit miffed so she kept her distance. “Hi, um Rosebud, this is Ygg. He has something for you.” They all three slowed to a stop.

“Ambril? I see you are finding your way around.” Koda smirked at Rosebud. “Rosebud a bit jealous. She like your bike.” He turned to Ygg who handed him a package.

“Ah Yes.” Koda said looking at the label. “I wanted to sample new Sunset Tea of Mrs. Twid.”

“People seem to like it, especially the older ones.” Said Ygg and shook his head. “Between you and me, it’s Tea from the store that she adds 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 and saw the large bud look disgustedly at the package in her basket. They all stood there awkwardly until Koda nodded to them again 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 riding off alone.

“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.”

Ygg looked undecided. “Well, I be having homework and chores—“

“I have cookies!” said Ambril and jiggled her back pack, ”and sandwiches.”

Ygg’s eyebrows shot up. “Maybe for a wee bit.” Ygg caught sight of fLit, which 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. In no time they skidded to a stop in front of the burned out shack. It looked like they had made a lot of progress. The burned parts had been removed and new wood was neatly stacked near it. In back, Ambril could see the place where the shadow 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---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 smacked into a firefighter and his hose.” Continued Ygg as he swatted a branch out of the way. “Riley helped me up…Funny smell all around there. I found Sully’s cat under a bush. Poor thing was a fair bit scared so I coaxed him out and handed him over.”

“So you got there after the fire had started.” 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 about what Riley knew as they turned down a driveway and rounded a red barn. They stopped in front of a homey, ranch house. There were wagon wheels decorating the front porch. The barn was freshly painted and its doors opened onto a tidy arrangement of equipment. A wiry man in a floppy old fedora was working on a tractor inside.

“Hey!” called Sully, “over here!” She was getting on her bike to one side of the house.

“Now Sully don’t forget your jacket, just in case it rains!” A woman with an apron and garden shears unbent herself from over an artichoke bush.

“Got it Mom! Ah, this is Ambril and Ygg.” Sully yelled to her.

Sully’s Mom waved before she went back to work. “Have fun you three!”

Ygg and Ambril followed Sully around and through a large hedge and into an overgrown maze of a garden. Ambril thought they’d been transported to somewhere exotic. There were all sorts of odd-looking plants Ambril had never seen before. The path they were on was so narrow that every now and then they slowed to inch their way around a particularly ferocious looking plant. But after a bit, they came out into a cleared area. In front of them was a large stone mansion. It had three stories and large chimney tops on either end of the house. A wide inviting porch wrapped all around it. It looked like it hadn’t been lived in for a very long time but had weathered the years of disuse fairly well. Though the boarded up windows make it look a little sad, Ambril thought. An old-fashioned carriage house leaned companionably off to one side. Ambril felt an odd connection to the place.

“This way,” Sully said. And led them in a businesslike way to where a board had been pulled off a window. It looked dark and smelled musty inside but the three of them wiggled inside.

“Someone musta camped out here.” Mused Ygg.

There was an old mattress and some broken down chairs pulled up around a burned spot in the center of the living room. Birds flew out of a large stone fireplace. There was trash everywhere.

“Do you think they’re still here?” Sully whispered.

Ambril shook her head. The house was too still. In the light coming through the cracks between the boards Ambril could see it had been a great house in its day. A carved banister swirled around wide steps up to the upper floors. Ambril guess that the grand room they were in was the living room, the ceiling was high and windows at one time lined one wall. Around the corner they found the kitchen, which had been colonized by rabbits. Several of them bolted when Ambril opened a cabinet. It startled her and she fell backward into a pile of trash. She hit something hard and metal. “Oof!” She rubbed her bottom as she pulled a metal sheet out from under her. “What the heck!”

“Hey look! It’s an emblem or something!” exclaimed Sully.

It was true. Ambril rubbed it hard with her sleeve. There was a large circle with a tree in the center of it. Something had been broken off the top.

“I wonder where this came from?”

‘It be part of the fireplace grate, I’m thinkin’” said Ygg. “That might be someone’s family crest.”

Ambril leaned it up against the fireplace.

“Let’s try upstairs!” Said Sully.

Together they raced up the stone steps. But Ambril slowed near the top. “I’m getting a weird feeling about this place.”

“What like someone’s about to pop out of a closet or something? Me too!” Agreed Sully.

“No more like that I’ve been here before.” Said Ambril quietly. She walked into a large room to the left. “I know this room had a big white bed in it and the bathroom here,” she turned and pushed open a door to the side. “Has green tile.”

Sully peered in. “Yep, green tile!”

“I know this room had a rocking chair in it that squeaked. And---“ Ambril walked quickly down the hall and through a door. She stood in the center of the room. “This room had a bed with a blue and white quilt. There were pictures of flowers on all the---“

“Hey, Ambril!” Sully was hunched down behind the door. “Your name’s kind of unusual isn’t it? I’ve never heard it before have you?”

“Nope, I’m the only one I think. It’s an old family name.”

“Well come and look at this.” Sully said she pointed to something behind the door. Ambril came and looked over her shoulder. On the wall in black marker were small lines with ages attached where a child’s growth had been measured. “So, what do you make of that?” Asked Sully pointing to the top. There was a name scrawled in a child’s writing. It said---

“Ambril! What the---“ Ambril jumped back. It seemed everywhere she turned pieces of per past were coming at her. She knelt down again for a closer look. The ages went from 1-½ years and ended at 3 years.

“So you think…that this was you?” Asked Sully carefully brushing away a cobweb.

Ambril could only shrug. Could she have been here before? When she was little? But why hadn’t her Mom told them about it? “There’s something more.” Ygg came in carrying the old piece of metal Ambril had fallen on. “I found the broken piece. “I’m thinking it belongs ---here.” He inserted another piece of metal near the top. It completed the circle perfectly. There was a name on top, the name of Derwyn.

“Well that clinches it. This place must have belonged to your family. “

Ambril suddenly felt odd. She swayed a little suddenly dizzy. There were so many secrets…why?

“So, maybe we should get out of here---this is kind of---creepy.” Said Sully watching her closely.

“Yeah, and I’m starving.” Ygg said.

Sully rolled her eyes at him. “That was thoughtful, Ambril finds out she was raised in a haunted, rabbit infested house and you’re thinking of your stomache.”

Ygg looked sheepish as he followed them out the door.

Together they went down the stairs and wriggled back through the window. As Ambril scrambled out she took a couple of deep breathes and felt much better. The gazebo was just across an overgrown patch of lawn down a stone path. It wobbled to one side and then the but straightened up toward the top of it’s curly spire which poked through its latticed dome and streaked toward the sky. The entire thing was covered with vines which curled around the stone pillars and blanketed the top. To one side of the gazebo, the great wall slid easily around the yard and back into the forest.

“I brought lemonade.” Said Sully as they headed down the path toward the gazebo. The air around them hummed with insects and new growth. It was much cooler under the roof of the gazebo. They lay down on the stone benches and looked up through the vines as they sipped lemonade and ate Mrs. Sweetgum’s snacks.

“So, this be your family’s place then?” Asked Ygg.

“I guess so,” said Ambril softly. “It’s so hard to get my mind around it, all the things that haven’t been said. Here I thought our family came from nothing. We certainly lived that way in San Francisco. It was---hard sometimes. But all along there was this huge mansion---”

“It’s a right nice old place, but it needs a bit of work. Maybe your Mam couldna afford to keep it up.” Ygg suggested.

Ambril nodded slowly as she munched on a cookie and shrugged. They ate in silence for a while as Ambril slowly worked through this information.

Sully sat staring out at the overgrown foliage “This is one wacked out garden. I thought I knew all the plants that grow around here, but most of these plants are new to me.” She pointed with her carrot stick to a plant which seemed to have feathers instead of leaves.

They were quiet a bit longer until Red emerged from Ambril’s backpack dragging her Ashera behind him. Ambril scowled. “That’s fLit, my AI robot, he’s supposed to be getting smarter. And THIS,” she said grabbing the wooden cylinder from his metal hands. “Is just an old puzzle box that belonged to my Great Grandmother.” She said hastily stashing it away again. The robot gave Ambril an injured look.

“That’s some robot,” commented Sully.

“And that be some puzzle box thought it nought be just some old thing of your Great Gran’s, but a real spanking thousand year old Ashera.” said Ygg nodding at Ambril’s pack.

Ambril stared at him… Ygg stared back.

“How did you know it was an Ashera?” She asked him.

“What’s an Ashera?” asked Sully.

“How did you be gettin’ 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.” And then he added scornfully. “They aren’t something you cart around in your backpack.”

“O.K. so what’s an Ashera?” Asked Sully again impatiently.

“It wasn’t me that showed it to you, I was told to keep it a secret from everyone.” Said Ambril pulling her backpack closer. 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---but…I dunno…from the first moment I met you I thought that---maybe we might could be friends.”

Ambril stole a glance at him.

“Maybe you be thinking we might run away scared or laugh at you?” Ygg smiled all the way up through his eyes. “You be kidding! Right?” Ygg snorted. “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 New Family class? You know, the one just above dung beetles and river rats on the social ladder? Even if I did tell someone your secret, who’s gonna listen to me?” Sully grinned. “Come on! Tell us! What the heck is this Ashera thing?”

“Alright, alright, I’ll tell you,” said Ambril rolling her shoulders. “But you have to swear not to tell anyone else.” She said and then added hesitantly, “And you can’t laugh no matter how unbelievable it is.” Ambril looked solemnly at them and wondered at what point they were going to run away screaming. “O.K.?”

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 promise.”

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. Sully seemed mexmerized by the Ashera and it’s intricate carvings and even more so her sparkling medallion. Then she told them about the car in the forest and 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 and junk 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 and finally she pulled out the Dullaith drawing.

“Now you see why I’d like to get into that janitor’s closet.” She said as she handed the drawing to Sully.

“Maybe it was just a coincidence,” volunteered Sully. “That room has more stories built around it. It can’t possibly live up to its hype. It’s probably just a janitor’s closet filled with the mops, brushes, and cancer causing cleaning solutions,” said Sully as she reexamined the Dullaith drawing.

Ygg nodded sagely at Ambril’s medallion. “That thar be the Ledrith Glain aye? A fairy gem of great power. 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 be where it all began here---“

“What, magic began here in California?” Ambril was incredulous.

“It wasna California then, it be just forest…ancient forest.” Said Ygg. “And no, magic didna begin itself here, magic has always been, it was there in the beginning. In Chert we be mostly earth-kind, just one of the four families, we have knowledge 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 Wielder.” He cocked his head to one side. “But Ms. Breccia scoffed at it and made believe it wasna’ real and true. It is, of course. Now you know it yourselves.” He stared at the Ashera in Ambril’s hands. “I was always told that the magics run parallel, they donna mix.” He mused more to himself than anyone. “So why be you, a clear magic weilder and nought a fairy, why be you the one to carry the Ledrith Glain?” He peered at the medallion. “That holds fairy power. It’s sacred to the Tilwith Teg, the fairy kin. And it’s a right beauty, the carvings are done in the ancient way with even a bit of old Ogam.”

Ambril and Sully just stared at him.

“O.K. now it’s your turn Ygg. What’s your story?” Said Sullly.

Ygg put his head down and muttered something.

“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.

“Far up in the mountains,” he said as he took another swig of lemonade, “much too far, nought many from me village ever make it out.”

“So why’d you make it out?” asked Sully as she lazily played with a leafy vine.

“I wanted to finish school.”

“What do you mean finish school? they must have schools that go higher than 8th grade in your town?” asked Ambril

“Well, yes and no, the schools there are nought like yourn here.” Ygg mumbled, he 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 went down the mines and became 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 err not nice places.” He shook his head. “Though there warn’t any smoke nor fire down there it be mighty hot and hard to breathe. 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 made 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 work for her.” Ygg fiddled with his collar.

“So tell us more about the magic stuff you do in your town.” Said Sully.

“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 Ledrith be made of.”

“Why don’t they use magic to make it easier for the miners? Like bringing in fresh cool air and light? Quizzed Sully. “And what happens when something goes wrong? Say there’s an accident or something collapses?”

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. “They don’t care much about the miners and focus everything on getting the Glain out as quick as they can. Me Da died down there, they never did find his body…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. 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.

“I can see why you left.” Said Sully shaking her head wonderingly.

“So you aren’t going back ever are you?” asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed. “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…It’s her wish too though, that I finish school here and go out into the wider world.” He looked at Ambril’s Ashera and medallion, “You know your medallion be worth more than its weight in gold and then some around Chert. There be no more Glain of that heft to be found, mainly just little grains of it now.” 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, that be a fine piece and worth a pretty penny in my neck of the woods.”

Ambril sensed a threat and possessively caught it up in her hand and shoved it under her T-shirt. Immediately the fire went out of Ygg’s eyes. He was just a kid again.

“Wow, who knew there was all this magic stuff going on all around us! Wouldn’t it be great to learn how to do it ourselves!” Said Sully excitedly.

He paused and chuckled. “I be 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 only what’s been done before.”

“Yeah but we’d need a teacher or some books or something…” Sully shrugged. “Unless you can teach us?” She looked skeptically at Ygg.

Ygg looked startled and then laughed nervously. “Me? What makes you think that a lad of thirteen knows anythin’ about magic?”

“Well…the way you were talking, I thought---“

“I failed the magic tests remember?” Said Ygg retying his shoelaces.

Sully was not to be thwarted. “I know! We’ll go to the library and see if there’s anything we can start with…With your experience and Ambril’s Ashera…” Sully lay back on a bench thinking up a plan.

Ambril stole looks at her new friends feeling slightly uncomfortable. It was as if they were entering into some sort of secret, magical pact or something. But then again she liked the idea of playing around with magic. A little dangerous maybe, but it would be interesting. She was thunderstruck that though they did look pretty shell shocked neither of them showed signs of high tailing it out of there.

“Betcha thinking you’d like to move back to the big city for some peace and quiet about now,” said Ygg smiling wryly at her as he yawned and lay back on his bench.

There was a lull in the conversation, the kind that happens between new friends. Ambril looked at her shoes for a while and tried to think of something to say but nothing came to her. Then Sully began to snore. She looked over at Ygg and they grinned. Ambril lay back down and closed her eyes. For the first time since arriving in Trelawnyd, she felt at ease.

But her reverie ended too soon when suddenly she heard an awful whining sound, like a dentist’s drill. Ambril grimaced, fLit had fallen into a hole in the center of the stone floor and was whirring at her. She sighed before she heaved herself to her feet, went over and fished him out. “Come on, if you can manage to figure out how to stay on a table, you can at least figure out how to stay out of a hole.” She complained and then stopped.

There was something odd about that hole. For one thing it seemed to be cut out of a large elaborately carved stone, like it was meant to be there. The hole itself was sort of round, but not quite and was about six inches deep. She cleared out the dead leaves at the bottom and then caught her breath. A beautifully carved flower was etched into the bottom of the hole. She knew that flower. Her hand went instinctively to the Ledrith Glain under her shirt.

A sharp tap and the sound of something rolling interrupted Ambril’s thoughts. She looked over and found that fLit had kicked her Ashera across the floor.

“Hey, knock it off!” growled Ambril. fLit was getting annoying. She made a face at the shiny metal thing.

The robot ignored her and kicked the Ashera so hard it bounced and then banged into one of the posts. As he was winding up again Ambril swooped down and rescued her Ashera. She stood towering over him.

“Stop it you dopey robot!” she barked at him. “Stop kicking my--,” she stopped and looked at her Ashera. It was round about the middle but not quite ---She looked again at the hole. It was just about the right size, she thought but then snorted. That would be too much of a coincidence…still it wouldn’t hurt to try. She bent down and shoved the Ashera into the hole. It was a tight fit but with a little work it slid in. Then there was a sharp crack, like thunder except that it started under Ambril’s feet and rolled out from the gazebo in waves, just like a min-earthquake.

“What the--!” yelled Ygg as both he and Sully jumped up their eyes wide.

“What did you do now?” said Sully grumpily.

Ambril simply pointed at the Ashera, which was now beginning to vibrate still stuck in the hole.

Sully reached out her hand and touched it. “It feels warm!” she said in wonder.

But the Ashera did nothing more. It just vibrated and glowed. Ygg reached out and tapped it experimentally. Nothing.

They sat there and stared at it.

“Perhaps ya need to know the magic words.” Said Ygg unhelpfully.

“Yeah, like Abracadabra or Open Sesame?” said Sully sarcastically. “That’s in fairy tales. Real magic can’t be like that.”

“Well what is it like then seeing as you’ve had so much experience?”

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.”

Ygg screwed up his face but said nothing for a while.

“Maybe it’s some kind of key.” Said Ambril. She bent down to look at the writing around the outside of the hole. “And you’re supposed to turn it.” She grasped it and tried to turn it to the right. But it was wedged in tightly and wouldn’t budge. She tried it a few more times and then gave up. “Great! I can’t leave it here, it’ll be ruined 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 and twisted it.

“Be careful, don’t break it!” yelled Sully.

Ygg rolled his eyes at her. “Break it, this thing feels as if it be made out of iron!” 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 or 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 isna no prescription bottle!” asked Ygg.

“Well let’s just try it. press down and then turn it!” she said excitedly.

Ygg snorted, “Somethin tells me tha it’s more complicated than that.” He mimicked Sully.

“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 hinges complaining of being used. They looked around and found that four of the stone pillars had opened out to reveal hidden compartments. Each had a shelf inside and all were empty…except for one.

Sully, looking triumphant, and was the first to jump up. “Look, there’s something in here!” she raced over and pulled out an old book, a very, very old book. There was a large tree etched into the leather binding.

Sully screwed up her face concentrating on the title. “Astaaaaarrrr, Astauuarttt,” she experimented and then said more confidently, “‘Astarte.”

She ran her hands over the cover. “Shall I open it?”

“What are you waiting for?” prompted Ygg. “Of course we want ya ta open it!”

The old binding crackled and moaned as Sully pryed it open. The pages were yellow with age but readable. It was written mostly by hand or by many hands, some in old scrolly script and other parts in a neat print. Sully leafed through the first few pages.

“I think it’s some kind of history book, but with recipes.” She said curiously.

“Or like some sort of communal magic journal.” Mused Ygg.

“A how to book maybe?” Asked Ambril.

“That’s just what we need!” Crowed Sully joyfully.

Ambril watched Sully page through the book for a bit her nose inches from the paper but then turned back to the Ashera. She just had to get it out of there. She tried wrenching it out, pushing down and then pulling on it, twisting it around and around while pressing down then pulling on it…nothing worked.

“Hey! Remember in class when Pinwydden started telling us about the Cerberus, you know the Hounds of Hell? They’re in here…” Sully’s voice trailed off as she started reading to herself.

“Maybe if’n you push it down and using some elbow grease cause I can see you be nought trying hard enough---turn it back the other way---back to the way it was when you put it in.” Offered Ygg.

Ambril sighed as she hunched over the Ashera again thinking how much easier it would be without an audience. Pushing down she turned it slowly back the other way. It didn’t move as easily so Ambril closed her eyes to concentrate better. And just like that everything changed. A curtain of gray fog rushed in, making everything hazy. Time stopped and the world stood still and silent. Ygg and Sully looked like statues. Slowly though she began to sense that there were others nearby, possibly human but maybe not. They were present with her in that place. “Who are you?” she asked. There was no actual reply but the swirling fog around her became alive with whispers and images. There was a chicken-legged house that lumbered by her. A giant gray hawk swooped over her making her duck and then…looming above her, there was suddenly a massive three headed dog. The heads stared at her, the red eyes glowed briefly as it faded like the other images back into the fog… she was alone again, in the swirling mist. A three headed dog…she had heard a story about one, what were they called? The Hounds of Hell, the guardians of the underworld…why were they connected with her Ashera? What were they called? “Cerberus.” She said out loud. She hadn’t meant to say it, but she did and immediately wished she could take it back for the word resonated and thrummed. She could feel it running through the ground, in the air. And then the Ashera flashed and vibrated so violently in her hands it shocked her out of her trance. She opened her eyes and the world of light and gardens and her friends came flooding back. The Ashera came out of its hole with a slight pop and rolled across the floor.

“That’s it! What’d I tell ya! Just a little old fashioned elbow grease is all it took!” Said Ygg as if nothing had happened.

Far out in the forest came a distant baying of hounds.

“Yeah, it was weird. I just closed my eyes while I was trying to wrench this thing free,” she held up her Ashera. ‘---And it went…strange.”

But Sully was only half listening, “You are a weirdness magnet, aren’t you?” She said absently, sticking her nose back in the book.

They were louder now the hounds were closer. Another chorus of yowls was heard.

Ygg half turned toward the forest as if only a part of him heard them. “Any more cookies?”

Above the wall the mountains loomed. Near the top Ambril could see the trees sway strangely as if in a high wind and then stop only to have other trees lower down sway in the same way. It looked as if something large perhaps more than one something was barreling through the trees coming their way. The baying of hounds was much louder now. There was the sharp, staccato sound of snapping trees and bushes. “What the—“ said Ygg as all three finally realized that something was plowing a path toward them down the mountain. Ambril suddenly had a sinking feeling that whatever was coming their way was her fault. She swept up the Ashera and fLit and stuffed them in her backpack as shebegan backing away. She couldn’t take her eyes off the swaying trees. The stone wall looked like it could withstand anything, she hoped it would be enough.

“Sully, what was that about the Cerberus?” Asked Ambril anxiously.

“Are you kidding? Don’t you think we should start panicking now? Screaming for help? Running for our lives?” Asked Sully incredulously.

“I just think…I think I---I might have---accidentally---called them.” Ambril said in a small voice.

Ygg snorted. “Is that what you be doing there when you went all transparent-like? Calling the Guardians of the Underworld just for fun?”

Sully’s face went pale but she immediately flipped open the book to the page she’d been reading.

The hounds bayed again, this time Ambril could make out several different snorts and growls as they came. They were huge beasts and they were near, very near.

“Here it is! Crowed Sully triumphantly. “Cerberus, the Hounds of Hell!”

“Does it say how to call them off?” Asked Ambril hopefully.

Sully read quickly through the text. “Let’s see…called through castings usually, whatever they are…independent though…in other words doesn’t mind well…we had a dog like that once---“

“Sully!” Ygg shouted. “How do you call them off!”

As they watched a large Bay tree suddenly toppled over against 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 distract them…so…we just need something…like a giant chew toy.”

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 and small rocks sprayed with each hit. But the wall held.

“Are you sure you were the one who called them? I mean they’re the Guardians of the Underworld, why would they come for you?” Hissed Ygg.

“Maybe our imaginations are getting the better of us. Maybe they’re just dinosaurs or something…” Sully whispered

Ygg just gave her a sarcastic look.

“I see your point.” Sully said.

There was a scrambling grinding sound as a massive paw shoved a large boulder off the top of the wall. And a giant head, the size of a garage reared up. Its red eyes glowered at them as it bared its teeth and growled.

Ambril was frozen with fear.

“Niii—ccce doggie---Stay boy---good doggie!” whispered Sully.

There was more grating ripping sounds and another head larger than the first appeared next to its brother. The dogs stared fixedly at the kids…and did nothing…

Ambril wanted to run but couldn’t seem to move her feet. She could only stare at them, watching them stare back. They seemed to be waiting for something. Ambril had the strangest feeling they were listening…for her. And then a dark, deep voice resonated through her. “*Ashera*” She jumped a mile high.

So did Ygg and Sully.

“Let’s get out of here!” Sully shrieked. As if they had been sprung from a trap they all sprinted for their bikes in unison.

But in half a second Ambril slowed and stopped. Sully and Ygg jumped on their bikes and disappeared down the path. There seemed no point in running away. It felt as if the beings were right there with her, waiting for her to answer them. But what do you say to a three-headed guardian of the underworld? She knew they needed to finish their task and if their task was to come when she called…She took a deep breath and…closed her eyes.

Again the fog swirled around her, the wall went transparent and she could see them. The Hounds of Hell. But were they? There were just two dogs. O.K. they were at least the size of elephants and yes their eyes glowed red but as they jumped down from the wall and padded toward her they seemed more curious than anything though Ambril did get the impression that that could change any second.

*“Ashera.”* The word resonated again in her head.

Ambril stared up at them thinking she’d never been so scared before in her life…but then she thought about the Dullaith and it seemed different. These creatures were supremely powerful but…not really interested in hurting her. She shrugged at the thought but then turned her mind to how to communicate with them. What do you say to two story sized legends?

“Ah, thanks for coming---I---Sorry---I didn’t mean to call you just then---thanks though…you can go on about your business now---really, um---bye now.” She thought at them as politely as she could.

The larger one snorted, flames flew out and started a small fire in her head. Her eyes flew open as she batted at the flames. The real world whooshed back to her. She found she was alone. “Sorry, really---“ she said to nothing and nobody. “I’ll be more careful...next time.” She continued sincerely hoping that there would never be a reason to call them again.

Ygg and Sully were long gone. She felt drained as she wearily picked up her bike and shoved off, pedaling for the opening in the underbrush. She took the path fast, not caring if the thorny branches scratched her or tugged at her clothes.

When she shot through the hole in the hedge Ygg yelled, “Finally!”

“Was it really the Cerberus?” Asked Sully. “It couldn’t have been there were only two heads, right?”

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 think it was them. They called me Ashera. I just sort of thought an apology at them and they went away.” She scratched her head. “But you’re right, there were two really big red eyed dogs, not a three headed one…that doesn’t make any sense does it?”

“So true, but what does, we just have no clue about what’s going on. Sully shifted the oversized Astarte to her other hip. “Too many close calls if you ask me. I think we ought to start trying to work out what to do before Ambril here does her thing again and another monster pops up again.” She patted the big book. “I think this will really help us.”

Ygg was listening to the forest. “Everything’s gone quiet.” Then he added, “come on, let’s get on home, we can puzzle about this another time.”

They all nodded. Ambril felt relieved they didn’t need more of an explanation. She really didn’t have any answers for them.

Together they rode back through Sully’s yard.

Ygg pedaled off first. “See you at school, Oh, hey you should have asked 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. See you tomorrow.” She said and hugging the massive book to her, she walked toward her house.

Ambril shoved off and wearily pedaled through the lengthening shadows, homeward bound as she thought about the Dullaiths and Hounds of Hell all who seemed to be taking a very unhealthy interest in her. Then she smiled as she realized she might just stand a better chance now that she had a couple of friends on her side.

# Chapter 21 The Library

The week flew by for Ambril, the newness of everything made even school interesting. It was Thursday morning before she knew it. Ambril coasted into the schoolyard and 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, “the stuff in that book is amazing!”

Ambril smiled. “Let’s 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?”

Ambril and Ygg groaned.

“Let’s go straight to the Library 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 would just listen for a sec, I’ll tell ya about it.”

Sully rolled her eyes.

Ygg continued. “The old people are---well older all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, well old people are like that.” Sully said smuggly. “They’re old, and---guess what! They get older every day.”

“Nah, nah,” said Ygg drawing his eyebrows together. “There’s somut really wrong, it’s 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’re all sickly from the same thing at the same time. It’s like an epidemic.” His voice trailed off. “The only one who’s just herself as always, is Miss Fern, but I dunno that was yesterday.”

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, Miss Fern makes her own home remedies, I expect.” Said Ygg and shrugged his shoulders. “I know for a fact that Mrs. Twid not much good with remedies.” He grimaced. “She’s what we call in our village a Quoocker.”

“We call them Quacks, here.” Said Ambril just avoiding a smile.

“So her stuff may not do any good but it doesn’t mean her stuff is bad.” 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 this and then nodded. “I reckon we can go by the Library first.”

Sully cocked her head. “I’m sure she’s alright, I think she really knows her remedies and about---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? Are you talking in Secret Code? You Nerds!”

His friends jeered loudly. “Good one!” said one of the dumber looking guys. 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 with 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. Her friend strugged with her glasses.

“I was so shocked, there was the sign as plain as day, For Sale! Right in the front window!” The one with the glasses 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 white haired woman. “I know I am today,” she sighed as she grabbed the handrail and began to ease her way down the stairs. “I hope someone who understands us buys it.”

“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 it!”

The first had to adjust her glasses again as she turned around and peered up at her friend. “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!”

The door swung shut. So Twid was first in line for the Shoe Store, Ambril thought as she slowly turned around. But Twid flew out of her thoughts as she inhaled the dusty smell of possibilities. That odd smell library books have. She loved Libraries. Ygg and Sully were already arguing over a map. Ambril looked around. There was a large display of town memorabilia and she ambled over for a look. There were old trophies, some of them dinged here and there as if the sport had continued after the trophy had been handed out. There were rocks which seemed to be samples from the Trelawnyd Mine together and lots of photos of smiling dignitaries accepting this award or that. She was about to turn away when something caught her eye. It was smaller than many of the other plaques. There were just two men solemnly shaking hands. One of the men Ambril had rarely seen smile, it was Feldez. Underneath she read: ‘**Dr. Feldez Petri, in commemoration of a courageous deed, risking his life to save others. Trelawnyd residents wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Petri for quelling the monstrous disturbance and fire at Old Council Hall during which a life was regrettably lost but the town was saved—“**

“Step back please!” A large squat woman with multi-layered jowls barreled toward Ambril. “You kids and your grimy fingerprints! All over my nice clean glass! I just cleaned that case!”

Ambril immediately stepped sideways. “Sorry, I---I didn’t realize,” she stuttered as she tried to wipe away the marks she had made with her sleeve.

The librarian glowered at her. “You’re new family, aren’t you,” she nodded knowingly as she briskly wiped down the glass. “I should have known.”

“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! He just used my card because he lost his!” He tried to wrench his books away.

The librarian pursed his lips but let the boy pull away. “Well, I suppose we’ll let you go this time Riley since we see you here so often. But I will expect payment for ALL fines the next time.”

Riley smiled, “next time, right,” he said straightening his jacket as he turned and raced down the steps.

Funny, thought Ambril, she hadn’t pegged Lance as a reading sort of guy.

“Ygg thinks we need to go to the History section, I think we want the Archives.” Sully tugged on Ambril’s sleeve and towed her over to the 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 and looked significantly at Ygg. “Maybe he could get us started.”

Ygg shrugged and nodded.

The large librarian with the jowls sniffed at them from behind her desk as she rearranged her nameplate it read, ‘Mrs. Tittle’. “Dr. Afallen isn’t here everyday due to all the budget cuts and all. But it’s Thursday? You’re in luck. ”She pointed a slightly crooked finger to the stairwell. “Down the stairs and follow the signs to the Archives.”

# Chapter 22 The Archives

It was down the stairs, past the well lighted nonfiction section, through the poorly lighted reference section, then past the maintenance area sporting naked bulbs on strings and finally down a dark and musty hallway with kerosene lanterns perched on books stacked 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. They had to wedge themselves in between some boxes to make way for a tired looking man with a toolbox and a ‘Hi my name is Steve’ label on his shirt.

At last they came to a nook where a very messy desk sat in front of a pair of double doors. A buzzing fluorescent tube lit a sign taped to the desk: ‘Trelawnyd Town History’. A teapot boiled briskly on a hotplate sitting crookely on a stack of books. A glass case sat in the middle of the desk as if someone had been working on it. It was filled with an odd assortment of things. Ambril caught her breath when she a familiar black box, the same one that had broken their windshield. It was labeled, ‘the Morte Cell’. Under the dull glare of the florescent light Ambril could see it was carved beautifully just like her Ashera but the stories told in images were much darker. There was anguish and horror in everywhere and sometimes much worse. Ambril shivered remembering the still figure inside and his expression of misery and pain. Next to the Morte Cell was a beautifully ornamented dagger. It had a blade which snaked to a dangerous point and glowed a blue-white. It’s label read:

**The Dorcha Blade**

**A dark magic tool capable of rending magical beings in two. It inflicts a killing curse with every incision.”**

“Nasty stuff!” Mused Ygg. “That be the box you were tellin’ us about then?” He pointed to the Morte Cell.

Ambril nodded.

“Seriously weird.” Breathed Sully as she squinted into the case. “There was a fairy being tortured in there?”

“---So those are the latest codes. The ones I just gave you.” A voice came through the double doors. “ Yes, all the new security measures are in place now. The locksmith just left, we’re moving everything over tonight.” There was a pause. “Certainly, stop by anytime, I’ll be here until five or so. Cheers.”

Then there was off key humming.

“Dr. Afallen?”

“Oof!” There was the sound of books falling as a tiny man with a long white beard peeked out from behind the double doors. His surprise changed to delight immediately. Ambril had recognized his voice as that of the man she had seen talking with Koda after the fire. “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 the seat of an old, sagging sofa with the sleeve of his jacket and beckoned to them.

The three sat down gingerly and slid together in a lump.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked anxiously jiggling the pot.

“No thanks,” Ambril said trying to scramble up to the edge of the seat and failing. “We just need some help.”

“What can I do for you?” Said the little man smoothing out his rumpled 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 help us with the writing of it?” added Ygg hopefully.

“Ah!” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows went up. “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 use.” He turned to a nearby stack, rummaged around and brought out three new books.

“Here they are.” he said as he dumped them onto his desk and shoved them over to them. “It’s the approved history of Trelawnyd.” He said without enthusiasm.

Ambril read the cover, ‘Trelawnyd, Our Noble Heritage’.

“You can check these out if you agree to bring them back within two weeks.” He opened the books, and wrote the date and his initials with great flourish on the old fashioned card inserted in the back.

Ambril picked up her copy. It did look like something Ms. Breccia would approve of, boring, boring and more boring. “Thanks…but---do you have something---that might explain---” her eyes went to the glass case.

Dr. Afallen peered at her over his glasses for a time as a quick smile came and went. 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. I would at the very least lose my job and then what would happen to all this history?” He cleared his throat and wriggled more firmly into his seat. “The other librarians think that it’s all fairy tales. 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? Ya wouldna’ have to talk about anythin’ just show us things and 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.

“We’re very interested in learning whatever we can about our town’s---heritage.”

Dr Afallen nervously shuffled papers as he said almost to himself, “I have to be so careful, you see, especially now...” He then stroked his beard. “But on the flip side, in the right hands, this information might help.” His eyes closed and he lost himself 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. Ambril especially. Perhaps she could have found out something about her Dad. And what about the Dullaith? Would they come for her 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 then.” She said handing him the Ashera.

Dr. Afallen twinkled as he took the Ashera reverently his mouth a big ‘O’ of delight.

“We’re trying to find out what’s written around the edges.” Ambril went on.

Dr. Afallen drew in his breath sharply and madly went through his desk drawers until he found a 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, it’s done in the ancient way with strings of Ogam, interesting mixture, very interesting.” 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 found the secret drawer where the Ledrith Glain had been. “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? How old is it?” She asked curiously.

Dr. Afallen looked up so quickly she jumped. “It is ancient, at least hundreds if not thousands of years old…probably closer to thousands. These symbols tell its history.” He said pointing at the decorative lines swirling around the cylinder. He looked at Ambril appraisingly as he fingered the engravings lovingly. “The old families, the original four of Trelawnyd had a--- 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 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. You see our four founding families believed their---knack---would be strengthened if they worked together, combining their energies. This was in the age when the kinships or families believing that purity of lineage made them stronger. Unfortunately for them, remaining apart and being forced tofight their enemies separately as well as fighting each other made it easier for them to be hunted down, captured, and nearly exterminated worldwide.”

He turned the Ashera to better scrutinize the emblem on the top. “This is the Derwyn family crest, the magic wielders. The Derwyn family fled from Wales though the other families hailed from all over the world, parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, etc.” He cleared his throat and squinted at the writing. “The writing, and its meaning, however, starts with an ancient Celtic saying.” “*ut supremus sic subter supter*,” he mumbled softly and then with more confidence, “‘As Above, So Below’, it’s a reference to the tree of life. There is more here in Ogam. Unfortunately I can’t help you with that as our Ogam resources were---misplaced some time ago.” 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 have told you, but to find that out would require really looking into your family’s history.” His eyebrows rose slowly. “I take it that’s why you’re here?”

“Well, yes---it is.” Said Ambril.

Dr. Afallen seemed to remember his place suddenly and frowned his eyes reluctantly straying to the bulletin board. “It’s not strictly within the rules…and I believe, yes I think I can trust you.” Dr. Afallen looked at Ambril severely over his glasses. “You certainly are a Derwyn, but 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 and nearly upset the teapot. “Are you Bren and Tylia’s daughter?”

Ambril started, “Yea, um Yes, I am.”

Dr. Afallen’s bright eyes crinkled as he handed back the carved tube. Then he leaned even farther forward and lowered his voice. “You need to be very careful. Don’t flash this around, it’s from an age people nowadays are frightened of. Most of our history has been destroyed or ‘misplaced’ 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.”

He looked almost menacing, “It isn’t just you who would be at risk.” He stared hard at them one at a time over his glasses but then he smiled and said in a softer tone, “But I do have some things here that might be of service to you.”

“I have to take these things down to the new vault anyway. We’ll pick up some reading materials along the way. He pulled a leather pouch from his desk drawer and opened the glass case they had been looking at before. He carefully took out the Morte Cell and the wicked looking dagger and after carefully wrapping them in what looked like an old sweater stowed them in the pouch and strapped it on. Then he grabbed a lantern from the wall and scurried through the double doors. “Follow me,” he shouted over his shoulder as he set off at brake-neck speed. Ambril was the first to catch up to the little man and his bobbing lantern 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 tucked a book under his arm. They were squeezing past a stack of old manuscripts piled five feet high when he turned to Ambril and asked. “Rosa Derwyn was your great grandmother, of course?”

“Yes! How’d you know?”

Dr. Afallen squinted down the corridor. His glasses reflected the lantern light swinging drunkenly from his arm. “I’ve lived long enough to have known several members of your family. Rosa’s mother, your great-great-grandmother, Maimee, made the best ginger cookies in town but my but she could scold! Especially if you were caught sneaking peaches from her prize 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 a particularly gloomy 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 and her mother, so involved with Feldez, rarely talked about her Dad.

“Wait up!” shouted Ygg. Ygg and Sully caught up to them just as they walked into a pool of fluorescent light showcasing a shiny metal door. Sully was wheezing slightly and holding her side. It looked so out of place as everything else was decades old and seemed on the verge of collapse. But this door was new and had several high-tech locks.

“Now this won’t take but a moment!” said Dr. Afallen. He said as he busily spun one lock after another, stuck his finger in one until a green light shone and had his eye scanned---twice. The first time he blinked at just the wrong moment. Finallly, the heavy metal door slid open smoothly revealing an empty shelf. Dr. Afalleln took off his pouch and laid it carefully on the shelf before heaving the heavy door closed. The locks clicked and snapped and dinged for several seconds Dr. Afallen looked relieved when the green light blinked at them. ‘RESTRICTED , KEEP OUT, ALARM WILL SOUND’. “That should do it!”

“It’s our new high security section. Only the most sensitive and dangerous items will be placed in there,” he said. “We plan to move the most dangerous items there later this afternoon”. He turned to go.

“Is that where you’ll store stuff about Dullaiths?” Ambril asked innocently before crashing into the rigid form of Dr. Afallen.

He turned to her dumfounded and raised his lantern to examine her face for a long moment before he continued. “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.

Ambril was on the verge of telling him everything that had happened to her. He might be the one who could help her figure out what to do.

But she hesitated too long and the moment passed. Dr. Afallen 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 do not believe the official story, he was a good man, your father.”

Ambril felt wooden. “You know, I don’t really know how my father died.”

“Really? I’m shocked that your family wouldn’t share that with you! Well, I hesistate to go against your mother’s wishes…

“Please, I really would like to know. I don’t remember much about it---and Zane won’t talk to me---my mother just tells me it’s better if I don’t know---which isn’t right! I need to know!” Ambril felt all the hurt and frustration starting to well up from deep inside her.

Dr. Afallen reached out and patted her arm. “Well, I should talk with your mother about this first…but…I feel strongly that enlightenment, education rather, might help you find your answers a lot quicker than keeping you in the dark---Perhaps I can help you, in a small way mind you, just in a small wan. “ He slowly shook his head before starting off once more. “For the big answers, you’ll have to find those on your own---Ah here we are!” Exclaimed Dr. Afallen as they rounded a corner and raced down a narrow corridor littered with racks of wooden crates and dusty cardboard boxes. “Please, would you mind?” He handed Ambril the books he’d been collecting before he rolled up his sleeves and pitched head first into a huge crate and dragged out a very odd, intriguing book. It had the spine of an alligator and seemed to be made out of rock. He heaved it with difficulty onto a nearby shelf. “My, I haven’t looked at this one 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 the top book’s title, ‘The Troll Uprising’ before he motioned to Ygg. “Here, this might interest you, Mr. Drasil, is it? It tells the story of your ancestors and how your family came to live in Chert.”

Ygg stared at him his mouth open. “How did you know I was from---?”

“Simple, young man, your accent, your face! Did you are the spitting image of your great-great-great grandfather, Chunnel the Gnasher?” Chortled Dr. Afallen. “Ah, family history, you can’t beat it! It’s better than anything they dream up in Hollywood!” He opened the book and pointed to a very ugly man with not enough teeth.

“Ah thanks, I think.” Ygg said as he took the heavy book from him.

“Here my dear, this one is for you. It lays bare the complex and not terribly nice traits of the Tilwith Teg…Fairies to the rest of us.” Dr. Afallen handed Sully a book made entirely of leaves, titled: ‘The Infamous Tilwith Teg Rebellion’. “The illustrations are…illuminating to say the least.” Dr. Afallen winked.

Sully cracked the book open and the room filled with multicolored disco light. She was instantly entranced.

He turned to Ambril. “And you my dear, this is for you.”

He handed her an ordinary scrapbook. “It contains information about your father.” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows drew together as he said this and then he nodded kindly. “As I said before, not all of us believed what they wrote about him. 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 books as you’d be arrested for having them.” 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 back down the corridor. “I’ll be back to collect you in fifteen minutes or so.”

“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 as she squinted at her book. It seemed to be pulsing red and blue lights. “Any one got any sun glasses?”

The three friends read in silence, the only sound being the turning of pages.

The Scrapbook in Ambril’s lap was labeled ‘Natural Energy’. She opened it to the first page. And there they were, Her mother and Dad smiling as they held hands with a little girl and boy in front of an old garage. The caption read:

**Dr. Silva gets a visit from his young family while working on his latest project GERN: Generating Energy in Rhythm with Nature---**

They all looked so happy. Her father looked so confident and relaxed, her mother too. Gone were the worry lines around her eyes. There seemed to be a settled, balance in the way they stood, leaning in toward each other. Ambril, the toddler in pigtails, stared apprehensively at the camera while Zane had stuck his tongue out for the camera. They had been a typical family then…before everything fell apart. She looked at the picture long and hard before reluctantly turning the page. The next one was blank and the next though there were bits of tape and outlines of where something had been before. In fact most of them appeared to have had articles ripped from them. She wondered if the missing pages might have been---misplaced---as Dr. Afallen had said. Misplaced? Or destroyed on purpose? Ambril sighed as she turned empty page after page. Finally she found a couple of pages stuck together near the back. She pried it open and discovered an newspaper article. The headlines screamed:

**Trelawnyd Terrorized, A Monster Returns**

Sully interrupted her by snorting in a disgusted way. “Fairies, what snobs! Always talking about “Pure” blood,” she made a face. “Yuk!”

Ambril 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 secretive ‘natural energy generation’ project was caught dabbling in dark magic and lost control of the demon. Mr. Petri, an associate of Dr. Silva was able to bring the demon under control but was seriously injured in the process. He is still unconscious though his Physician 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 have 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.**

There was a picture of a stretcher being wheeled out of a room, directed by a young Officer Buckthorne. The room had a domed ceiling and a mural of a town on the wall 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 numbly at the headlines. She just couldn’t believe it. Her Dad wouldn’t have done anything like that. Her mother had told her about how all of his work was focused on helping out society, not releasing something that preyed on it.

Ygg interrupted her thoughts. “Hey remember Pinwydden telling us about Moroz? He’s in this book.”

“He’s in this fairy rebellion book too,“ 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 his slaves. That must a’ been why we all moved to Chert.” Ygg mused. “ It says here the fairies helped him, but then he turned around and tricked them too!”

“That was the Fairy Rebellion.” Said Sully waving her book at him. “A big group of them left then. They call themselves Forest Fairies now. “The Fairies did agree to help Moroz make slaves of the Trolls and then he reneged on his end of the deal and tried to make slaves of them too!” She bent lower over her book. “There’s something here about a prized piece of Glain he never gave them.”

There was silence as he read on. “It got so bad then that they had to close the mine for a great long while. It wasn’t opened again until the Gold Rush.”

“That’s when Magic became a dirty word, I think.” She said as she scanned the text. “It’s not really explained here, it just says: ‘Old Town was plagued by misfortune, and so it was decided to move the town to its present location! Where it is today I guess, that’s why they can say it was built in the mid-1800’s, because it was. They built a railroad line and a proper road in from the coast so they could turn away from Magic and be an everyday, ordinary part of the human world.”

Ygg looked sad. “It’s a shame don’t you think?” She asked. “All this magic, bottled up for years. No wonder people are funny about it! They’re frustrated and confused.”

Sully sighed her agreement. “And not nearly as much fun! Think of how great it would be to wave your hands around and instantly your room would be clean, your teeth brushed and---and your zits cured!” Sully stared down the dusky corridor and sighed.

Ambril ony half listened as she reread the article again and again and then went back and looked at the picture of her family again.

“No! 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.

“NOOOO!” Dr. Afallen shrieked.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the entire building followed by the braying of the fire alarm. Ambril covered her ears and hunkered down as old maps and books showered her. The shelves swayed dangerously on either side of them. She hastily grabbed her backpack and jumped to her feet. A small stuffed dragon, which looked as if it had once been alive narrowly missed Ygg as he scrambled to his feet. The room filled with smoke and fuzzed the blinking exit light.

“Dr. Afallen! ” Ambril choked out as she crawled toward the central aisle. The smoke thickened there. 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 scuttled toward the exit sign.

“This way,” Ygg was suddenly beside her as she clambered over what looked like a large pile of four fingered gloves and shoved a three eyed deer head out of the way. “You’re sure?”

“Ya, the smoke’s blacker up this way. We be 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. Then her eyes widened in horror. “Dr. Afallen! Are you alright?”

Just ahead she could see Dr. Afallen lying inert near the new security doors.

Ambril scuttled crab-like over to him. He was bruised in several places the worst being a large bump at his right temple. But Ambril heaved a sigh of relief when she saw he was breathing. The shush of a fire extinguisher erupted a few feet away. Ygg was hunched beside the now blackened metal doors and fanning the smoke away.

“It weren’t much of a fire. 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 maybe needs a doctor,” said Ygg as he knelt down beside Ambril.

“Dr. Afallen can you hear me?” She touched his shoulder. Could his face get any paler? The old man seemed to sink deeper into unconsciousness as they watched. Ambril risked a quick look around and noticed that she could see that the new vault was now empty and the pouch with the Morte Cell and the Dorcha Dagger was gone.

“Do you think that the bomber might still be---around?” whispered Ambril.

Ygg shook his head. “I wish! I’d like to give ‘em a piece of my mind I would, for doin this to a nice old guy like him.”

The old man suddenly moaned and moved his head.

“Dr. Afallen? Just relax, Sully went for help.”

His eyelids flickered. “Sully, who the devil is---“ His eyes flew open and fastened onto Ambril’s face.

“Child, you’re in danger, be wary, he’s a false friend.” He murmured. “I can hardly believe it was him.” He went on more to himself than anyone.

“Who was it that did this to you?”

But the Doctor’s eyes slowly closed as his head listed to one side. With the rumble of running feet they were surrounded by a large contingency of yellow slickers and rubber boots.

“They bombed the security vault.” Ambril volunteered to the nearest grim faced fire fighter.

“Ambril? What are you doing here?” said a familiar clipped voice.

Ambril turned to see Feldez glaring at her. But he shoved her aside as a Doctor knelt down with his stethoscope.

“That’s them! That’s them!” Miss Tittle, the Librarian shrieked as she ran up and 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 trophies in the lobby and then sneakily asking for directions to the Archives!”

“Priceless?” snorted Ygg, “We’re here to be doing school work.”

But the Librarian wasn’t listening. “Ha! Studying? It’s just a cover story! And to think I gave them directions.” The Librarian was practically lathering at the mouth. “At least one of them’s New Family.” She nodded toward Ambril.

Sully was suddenly beside them.

“Chief Buckthorne? These are my friends, the ones I told you about.“ She was talking to a square-necked man in a rumpled suit who had quietly shouldered his way through the crowd. “We were here to research a couple of history papers when the explosion happened.”

Chief Buckthorne waved his 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 the Doctor.

Feldez unfolded himself to tower over everyone.

Buckthorne gave a curt nod. “Good, take 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 who had lumbered up behind the Chief. “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 from his pocket and without looking up he said. “Suppose we start at the beginning. You arrived at the Library and then---“. He looked up and nodded at the three kids standing in front of him.

“We went over to the map and we---,“ Sully picked up the story. The others chimed in when they needed to. Chief Buckthorne nodded occasionally while 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 it again and again.

Skarn came back and begrudgingly offered them tea. It smelled very sweet. Ambril took a tiny sip but then made a face. The sweetness couldn’t disguise the sewer-like aftertaste. She could feel her heart begin to race from the caffeine.

“It’s good fer ya,” grunted Skarn and showcased his crooked 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 watched them closely. “Come on now, drink up. I made it real good.”

Ambril pretended to take another sip. Ygg desperately elbowed Sully but before he could get her attention, she took a big gulp and then made a face.

“How could anyone get a whole 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. “And it has a kick to it, makes them feel good at first.” Ygg mumbled. “Mrs. Twid banks on that.”

He grimaced as they emptied their cups into a nearby plastic plant. Chief Buckthorne continued grilling them, this time about their friends and family. The three kids answered him truthfully though they kept all of the magic out of their story. At last, the chief seemed satisfied. He nodded as he got wearily to his feet.

“Can you kids find your own way home?” he said as he tugged on his belt. They nodded. He watched them walk under the blinking exit light and into the twilight.

# Chapter 24 Mrs. Twid’s Sunset Tea

“Whoa!” Ygg grunted as he jumped on his bike. “Glad that’s over. I’ll be heading 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! I can still taste that awful tea.” Sully rubbed her tummy just before she shoved off.

“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. Ambril was busted, Feldez of course. “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.

They awkwardly maneuvered her bike into the back then jumped into their seats. It had that new car smell. “Nice wheels Mom, did you get this 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, which wasn’t much. The growl of Ambril’s stomach spoiled the symmetrical tick of the car’s blinker as the car turned and purred its way up the hill. When they slowed to a stop neither of them moved.

Ambril’s mother took a deep breath. “I know when you’re holding back something, Ambril…You know you used to tell me every little thing about your life. When did that change?” She said sadly. “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. Her mother had seen right through her. But what could she really tell her? She had promised Zane she wouldn’t say a word about the Dullaith. She really wanted to warn her about Feldez, but what could she say other than she didn’t trust him? She didn’t have any proof.

Her mother’s jaws remained rigid. “Ambril, I need to know NOW.”

Ambril cleared her throat. “Right Mom. In school we’ve been talking about the old stories and I---I just got curious, that’s all.” Ambril winced and prayed it would be enough for her Mom. It was the best she could come up with.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed, “what stories?”

“You know the ones about how the town was founded a thousand or so years ago by fairies and trolls and magic wielders and stuff…” She let her voice trail off, hoping she had said enough.

That Her mother relaxed a little. “Those are just stories.” She said firmly. “When I was your age, my Grandmother came to me and told me the fabled history of our family. It was exciting to think that I was a part of something so amazing at first.” Then her mother’s knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering wheel tightly. “But then I learned the hard way that some things are best not to be believed no matter how wonderful they sound. They can get you into trouble and hurt everyone around you.” She smoothed down her hair. “Your friends, your family, even yourself…No Ambril trust me on this it’s better to believe they’re just fairy tales.” She reached out for the door handle and eased her door open. “Just stick to the facts, it’s easier.”

“Hey, I’m hungry, where have you been?” It was Zane in his usual foul mood standing on the doorstep. “Mrs. Sweetgum refuses to let me eat without you because it’s not polite or some such tripe.” He yelled. “So can we get started, like before midnight?”

“Yeah, I’m starved.” Ambril said relieved for once to be interrupted by her big brother. She slid out of her seat and raced inside. There was salad, and heaps of steaming pasta on the table, plus a bowl of cherries. It smelled delicious. She almost felt sorry for Zane who must have been driven half mad while having to wait for them. She splashed her hands with water and took her seat.

“Dr. Petri called and said Dr. Afallen will make a full recovery.” Said Mrs. Sweetgum as she wiped down the already spotless counters.

“That’s great news!” exclaimed Ambril.

The housekeeper nodded, “I’ll just water the patio pots then.” 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 and had just taken her first bite when her stomach turned over. She swallowed experimentally. It tasted terrible, more pond scum than pasta. She 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.

“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 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, then 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 reached for her backpack and pulled out the shiny ‘Approved History of Trelawnyd’ book. It was written in typical textbook speak, going on and on about ordinary things and leaving out the juicy bits.

Ambril read about the gold miners discovering the Trelawnyd valley and settling there. It was so confusing having the two stories. Which to believe? Her mother and brother wanted her to stick with the program and take the safe, ‘approved’ path, but the safe route didn’t explain what had happened to her the other night or more importantly, what really happened the night her Dad died. She sighed as she flipped through the glossy pages. She lingered over some grainy old photos of solemn people in hats sitting bolt upright in wagons, on horses and in straight backed chairs on front portches. There was a soft knock on Ambril’s door. Mrs. Sweetgum smiled over a tray with a steaming mug and a plate of food.

“I don’t think I can eat anything, my stomach’s acting up.” Ambril turned slightly green just thinking about it.

Mrs. Sweetgum let herself in anyway. She peered at Ambril’s face as she trotted over to the bed and handed her the mug. “I thought something was wrong when I saw you come in. 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 toilet water to her.

“Of course not!” Harrumphed the chubby woman as she held out the mug insistently. “I wouldn’t have that stuff in my house, no sirree.” She smoothed down her frilly lace collar. “This will take that bad taste out of your mouth.”

Ambril sniffed. It did smell good. She took a very small sip. It felt warm as it slid down her throat. She smiled, the nauseous feeling started 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 with cherries on the side. Ambril sniffed tentatively. It smelled---good…like---food. Wonderful! Ambril dug in. It tasted even better. She cleaned her plate.

“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.

“Yeah, I have to write an essay tonight.”

Mrs. Sweetgum grimaced at the slim book. “I’m not sure you’ll find anything interesting in there.”

Ambril looked up at her surprised. “I’m not sure that’s the point. It’s meant to be more of a punishment”

“Ah, “ Mrs. Sweetgum nodded wisely, “Ms. Breccia?”

Ambril nodded again surprised

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, Deary.”

“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 tomorrow.” Mrs. Sweetgum smiled cheerfully as she pulled the door closed.

Ambril stared at the door for a moment pondering her housekeeper’s comments. Her Mom had been right, she liked Mrs. Sweetgum. She smoothed out all the rough edges. Then she yawned before picking up the book again. An hour later she was putting the finishing touches on a very 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? They had taken a lot of risks to get the Morte Cell and that evil looking knife. Ambril shuddered knowing it could only mean more trouble. 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. But who to ask? Dr. Afallen was now in the hospital for who knows how long…There was Hendoeth but how the heck do you get in touch with a chicken legged house? Ambril sighed discouraged. She realized she had forgotten to ask her Mom about the old mansion. As her mind raced through all the odd things that had happened to her since whe arrived in Trelawnyd until she fell into a dreamless sleep.

# Chapter 25 Miss Fern

The Next morning found Ambril skating down the stairs and 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. Ambril rolled her eyes heavenward as she munched and swallowed. Taking another spoonful she asked, “Mom, Do you know anything about an old mansion with a gazebo out on the main road?” She ladled another crunchy spoonful into her mouth.

Her mother stiffened. “What? Well there must be a dozen like that around here.”

“How about one with a metal plaque with the name of Derwyn on it and my name scribbled on a wall upstairs?”

Her mother looked shocked. “How in the world did you---That place has been boarded up for years, Ambril. What did you do break in?”

Ambril just cocked her head at her. “There was a window open and it looks like half of Trelawnyd’s homeless population has been in there at one time or another.”

“All three of them.” But her mother looked uncomfortable,” well yes, It sounds like you were in my Grandmother’s house,” she said finally.

“It looks like it hasn’t been lived in for years, who owns it?”

Her mother looked sheepish and sipped her coffee.

“You mean you own it?”

Her mother slowly nodded and stared at a spot on the table.

Ambril screwed up her face. “You mean we moved from one dumpy old apartment to another all my life and we didn’t have to? Mom! Remember those times we didn’t have enough money for food? And---and we could have---I mean that place must be worth a fortune!” Sputtered Ambril angrily.

Her mother just sipped her coffee. But she had gotten very pale. “I couldn’t have sold it---that would have been impossible and ---we couldn’t live here, not then. So---I just---let it go.” She said softly.

Ambril could only look at her. She was too angry to trust herself to speak for a long moment, then she said. “Mom, I know about how Dad died. I know about the Dullaith and what Feldez did…I can’t believe you didn’t think it was important to tell me about it.”

Her Mom took in a huge breath but still stared at the tabletop. “It was a terrible time.” She said softly. “I---I wanted you to have an easier time of it. To not carry around knowing what your father did…He never talked about any of that with me. About---dark magic---or any of it. The natural energy source that he called GERN didn’t have anything to do with that.” She paused and set her coffee cup down. “I don’t know what made him go that direction…we’ll never know and I’d rather not talk about it---,” she turned to look at her daughter. “Ever.” She said with great finality and then changed the subject. “I haven’t been to see Gran’s old house, is it really that bad?”

Ambril hesitated. “We have to talk about it, Mom. He was your husband but he was my Dad! Besides maybe we should try and find out what really happened instead of just believing what they said about him. It may not be true.”

But her mother’s mouth had flattened into a thin line as she carefully brushed the crumbs off her placemat. “No, Ambril, you have to believe me---we can’t revisit that time again. It’s finally getting better---we’re moving forward, into this new life. I think if we just give it some time, you’ll see, life will be good.” She set her jaw in that way Ambril knew meant she’d be grounded if she brought it up again. “Gran’s house, what’s it like now?”

Ambril sighed and stirred her granola slowly. “It’s not---that bad I guess. “Maybe we could go and have a picnic or something.” Volunteered her mother.

“Oh boy, a family picnic!” interrupted Zane as he slouched in. “Count me---out.”

“It would be fun!” Ambril’s mother’s voice was artificially cheerful.

“Not.” Said Zane as he grabbed his bowl of cereal.

There was a heavy silence. Ambril felt the gap widen between herself and her mother as the seconds ticked by. Finally she’d had enough and got up to put her bowl in the sink. Her mother got up with her.

“Well, I’m off to help Betula with May Day prep!” Her mother’s voice was brittle.

Ambril grabbed her lunch. “See you,” she said not looking up. She raced out the door and jumped on her bike, she was glad to be out of there. She tore down the hill and in minutes shot through the school gates. She was just shoving her bike into the front rack when Ygg coasted in beside her.

“How ya feeling?” he said. “Ya didna take lot of tea yesterday but still.” 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 for Sully.”

“Ooooohhhhh.” Moaned someone just behind them. Sully stumbled up, looking pale and green. “I can’t stand it, all I can smell is our septic tank on a hot sumer’s day.” Sully bent over, holding her stomach.

“Here, have a swig of this, it really helps.”

Sully turned her head in refusal.

“Come on, it’s Mrs. Sweetgum’s tea.” 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.

“This must be what Zombies feel like, no maybe if you eat a Zombie,” she bent over again. But straightened enough to take the thermos and try a tiny sip. She brightened. “Hey this is good!” Relieved she took another swallow. After a few more gulps she started rummaging around in Ambril’s lunch. “Do you have any more of those cookies?”

Ambril smiled as she fished out a pile of cookies and handed them over.

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.

“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.

“Too obvious,” Ygg shrugged and winced. “We can’t afford to make Mrs. Twid angry.” He said softly. “Or 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 feeling like they’d just cleaned a toilet with her tongue.” Sully shivered as she slung her backpack over her shoulder and turned toward school.

“Maybe we can find something in the Astarte,” said Ambril racing up the steps.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot!” said Ygg. “I stopped by Miss Fern’s house last night.” 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. “That’s around eleven o’clock. Do ya think you can sneak out?” he asked his eyes bright.

Ambril smiled and nodded. “I’m sure gonna try!” she said.

“Are you kidding? An adventure! I’m in!” said Sully as they scooted into first period just as the bell rang. Miss Fern’s good with remedies, do you think she might be able to help us?”

Ygg shrugged. “Let’s ask tonight.”

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 about the founding of Trelawnyd?” Ms. Breccia asked as she noisily sucked her teeth.

Ygg raised his hand.

“Yes?” Ms. Breccia inclined her head and looked dubious.

“I was wondering if you knew anything about a man named Moroz?” Ygg asked.

Ms. Breccia’s eyebrows skyrocketed right under her helmet hair. “Moroz? The Founder of Trelawnyd Mines? How did you come by that name?” she thundered.

Ygg looked stunned. “I was readin’ a history book about the Mine and his name came up more n’ once.”

Ms. Breccia just glared at him for a moment. “Ah, well, Moroz shall we say helped found the Mines and then organized the---labor force necessary for it. He also engineered many of the early bridges and roads.” Boomed Ms. Breccia as she ponderously 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 even mentioned in the official History of Trelawnyd?” she asked skeptically holding up the gold trimmed book fro the Library. “There’s not one road or building named after him, no statues of him anywhere---why?”

Ms. Breccia went back to sucking her teeth. “Well, it appears that he was a bit---rough with his laborers.” She said thoughtfully. “Too much brute force.” She continued. “You need just the right amount you see. 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---efficient and effective!” She said worshipfully and then sighed. “But, not everyone agreed with his---methods. He was tried for his crimes, found guilty and---imprisoned.”

“Where was he jailed?” Riley asked.

“What a silly question! Why would he have been treated any differently than any other criminal?” Her eyes narrowed as she stared at Riley.

“Because he was so powerful. I mean he---must have had a lot of powerful friends who might have wanted him released.”

Ms. Breccia continued to stare at him for a moment. “I can’t answer your question.” Her eyebrows drew together, “I can’t tell you because no one knows, not even an expert in Trelawnyd history such as myself knows where Moroz was imprisoned.” She fanned herself and looked out the window. “No, no one knows where they put him, or how they kept him there. I share your thoughts though, he was a powerful individual and---it would have been difficult to keep him imprisoned for any length of time...But---that was long ago, and all those involved have long since passed on.” She blinked and looked around the class. “Any other questions?” Without waiting for a response she continued. “No? Then turn to page 279 and tell me what the contraptions featured there are.”

Ambril sighed she knew what they were, a bunch of antiquated miner’s equipment; stuff she had studied the year before. She settled down for a serious day dreaming session while appearing to be listening. Moroz was a mysterious character, which made him really interesting. There were little bits and pieces about him everywhere---but not enough to paint the whole portrait. It must have been some powerful dark magic he had used to rouse the Cerberus’ interest. 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 several 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, almost check. Ambril had stuck it in the middle of some tall bushes. You could barely see it from the kitchen. It was the barely part she was worried about. But at the moment she had to work on fLit. She had her laptop in front of her as she had found a cool little program that she’d been dying to try out.

“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 keyboard and stomped on the ‘F1’ button.

Ambril’s voice said sleepily, “Good night, Mom!”

“And if my Mom says anything else, what do you do?” prompted Ambril.

Flit stomped on the ‘F2’ button.

Ambril’s recorded voice said even more sleepily, “ Can we talk about this in the morning Mom, I’m really tired.”

Ambril grinned and poked the robot in the chest. “Good job!” she said.

Ambril had to admit that sometimes it was handy to have a somewhat smart robot around. Then fLit stomped on the ‘F3’ button. Immediately the room was filed with loud reggae music.

Ambril jumped over to the computer and jabbed the F3 button herself. The music stopped. “No!, No! That can’t happen!” 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 tried to get to the keyboard but Ambril grabbed him before he could connect his foot with the F3 button again.

“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 in the closet!”

The robot stared at her indignantly…and then wilted. Ambril watched him drag himself over to the stapler and slump down on it.

Ambril sighed and rolled her eyes. “Alright, we’ll listen but just until I leave.” She tapped the F3 button and Reggae music again filled the room. She smiled to herself as she watched the robot jump around, dancing slightly off beat. But she got bored and picked up the Ashera. Ogam ran along the edge, small cuts along three lines, making a pattern, almost like a code…but how to crack that code? Dr. Afallen had said they had ‘misplaced’ all of their Ogam resources. She carefully copied some of the Ogam script onto a piece of paper. Off the Asera it didn’t look particularly interesting, just some funny slashes. She tried to decipher some sort of repetitive rhythm but gave up after a few minutes. Frustrated she started on the Ashera, pressing and twisting it to see if she could unlock any more of its secrets.

She was about to give that up as well when her finger brushed a slightly raised bump near one end. She would have sworn it hadn’t been there a second ago. She eagerly pressed it hard and with a whirring click, a drawer slid open. Inside was a scroll with a ribbon tied around it. When she rolled it out and eighed down the ends with the stapler and her pencil holder she found to her delight that it seemed to be an Ogam decoder. The hatch marks were lined up on one side and in English as well as two other languages what they meant. Ambril gave her Ashera a squeeze. It was as if it had granted her a wish or something.

She got right to work. Carefully she began to compare the hatch marks with the letters or words in the little book. It took a while, but 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 carefully and noticed that the third and fourth lines were one sentence: Where Vine and Root Forever Entwine Present Past and Future Combine. She rubbed her forehead, frustrated. It could be anywhere that vines and roots intermingle, like a riverbank, or someplace semi-underground. And what good would lumping present , past and future together? Combining time? Wouldn’t that just make everything stand still? She realized she wasn’t any closer to an answer.

She puzzled a bit more until it was time to go. She shoved the poem in a drawer and clicked off the music. Then she grabbed her backpack and raced to the window. A gentle breeze swirled the new spring leaves as Ambril swung her foot out over the three story droop. She frantically felt around with her foot for the top rung of the ladder. And whoofed, relieved when she found it finally, it gave a little when she put her weight on it but remained firm. She carefully inched her way down blindly feeling with her toes for the next rung until four rungs from the bottom she missed one and fell.

“Ouch!” she whispered tersely as she pulled several twigs from up her sleeves. She floundered a bit but found her way through the plantings without causing too much of a mess…she hoped. Grumpily, she padded off down the hill and off to Fern’s house, which 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 the kitchen.

“For Twid’s Sunset Tea of course!”

Everyone was busy. Fern was perched like a small bird on a tall stool reading from the Astarte. Ygg was dumping a large handful of purple berries into a bowl full of leaves, twigs and more berries.

“That’s more than enough Elderberry dear. Now stir it briskly, yes that’s right.” Fern instructed him and smiled at Ambril.

“Ygg is going to replace Twid’s tea with this one when he delivers it.” Sully 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, everyone will calm down---eventually.”

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 as there was a timid knock on the back door. She walked slowly over and opened the door. “Daisy dear! Do come in, we’re having Tea, will you join us?”

“My, you’re having a party Fern and I wasn’t invited!” Fern smiled as she carefully made her way in leaning heavily on her walking stick. “I just came over to see if you had any red wool yarn handy, I want to finish that scarf I showed you in time for Crystal’s birthday next week.” Painfully she maneuvered herself over to a puffy, overstuffed chair and plopped down.

“Crystal has you over for tea quite a lot doesn’t she? Now, you must try my new tea Dear, it’ll make you feel lovely!” She handed her a large mug of the remedy tea.

Mrs. Flood sniffed as the smell of vanilla and cinnamon filled the room. “A nice cup of tea might be just the thing for me. Nothing else tastes quite right these days. It’s time to retire, I think. Everything just hurts.” She said. “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 try moving in with my daughter… but I’m still not sure.”

Fern smiled at her softly. “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, “wonderful!”

Fern looked a bit startled, “Too much elderberry.” She stage whispered to Ygg

Mrs. Flood stretched, “my I feel so…girlish.” She put out her toe, pointed it and giggled.

“Yes,” Fern nodded decisively. “Far 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 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. Lets let the old folks have a little fun, huh?”

Fern laughed, “well just a little, yes, maybe just a little.” She said as they made their way back to her kitchen. “We’ll need to tone down the Impatience with Sage. I have some drying in my garage. Would you mind bringing in a bunch?”

“Happy to do it.” said Ygg beckoning to Ambril and Sully.

As they followed him out the door Fern added. “It’s a bit of a mess.”

Fern’s garage was set apart from the house and leaned right up against the Wall. Its most remarkable feature was that it was covered entirely with vines. But if you looked closely you could see that it was made of stone with small windows running down the garden side. There was an arched garage door on the front. “It’s a ratty mess inside.” He said and pulled hard on one of the large garage doors. It slowly and resentfully opened to reveal a deeper darkness. Ygg disappeared inside for a second and then light flooded the building.

“Yep, it’s a mess alright,” said Sully.

That was an understatement. There were boxes everywhere. Paint cans were stacked on a large stone table to the side. The cabinets behind the table hung crookedly. There was a large pile of garbage in the center of the floor.

Ambril stared up into the rafters thick with cobwebs. Vines had found their way inside and draped themselves around and through them making it seem as if they weren’t really inside at all.

“Is that a fireplace? In a garage?” Asked Sully. The wall to one side was stone; in the center was a large fireplace.

“I’m thinking this garage be used for things other than putting cars into.” Mused Ygg. He had pulled a chair over to the stone table and was using it scramble on to the stone table. “There some rooms to the back too. It be more house than garage.” He reached up and pulled down a bunch of dried herbs. “This be Sage I’m thinking. Come on, no time for lollygagging, let’s get back.” Ygg jumped down from the table and headed for the door.

“Aye aye, Sarge!” said Sully sarcastically as they made their way back to Fern’s kitchen. Back Inside Sully picked through the remedy and removed just some of the purple berries. Fern gave her a nod of approval.

Ambril lifted the top of the teapot and sniffed. “This smells 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 in through the door.”

Ygg said. “Now all I do is to replace the bad stuff with this, right?”

“Without getting caught.” Said Sully, matter-of-factly. “Then keep tabs on her and replace the tea she makes with more of this.”

“As if I don’t have enough to do what with schoolwork and chores,” he grumbled.

“I wish we could just shut her down.” Sully said as she emptied the tea into a bag.

Ambril remembered the conversation she had overheard between the librarians about Mrs. Twid and the Shoe Store. “Do you think she did this on purpose?” and told them about what she had overheard.

“She’s a little daft, but would she go and hurt her friends just for an old Shoe Store?” 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 mustn’t jump to conclusions. Living alone as she has for so long, it can turn a person---bitter and sour.” She nodded. “But to do this…” she shook her head sadly. “Why don’t we keep an eye on her to see how she reacts? Ygg can do that easily. It may all have been an---accident.” The cuckoo clock chimed in at eleven thirty making Fern jump. “Oh my! The time! We’d better hurry outside, it’s almost Moonrise!” The old woman threw a shawl around her shoulders again and scurried for the door. “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 adjusted to the darkness. The Wall ran just behind Fern’s garden The garage seemed to but right up to it. She shivered when she saw the looming dark outlines of the forest beyond. Massive trees towered over her. She hadn’t been this near the forest since that first night and the Dullaith.

But soon she was thinking of other things. Fern’s garden that night was extraordinary. Trees embraced the house with feathery shadows and dappled the patio. And there was something else, something strange…an emotion in the air. She could almost taste the anticipation, the night seemed to be on holding it’s breath, waiting.

There were also lots of garden gnomes around the garden in outlandish poses. Ambril had always thought they were kind of cute in a tacky sort of way. There were a couple of them near where Ygg was setting up some 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. This is its big night!” 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 help prop up her chair. She pointed to the one next to her. There was a laughing gnome 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.” 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. This was the second time in just a couple of days that someone had said this about her Dad. So this was where he spent his time those last few years.

“Shh!” Hissed Sully. “Here comes the moon!” She pointed upward.

The moon could be seen peeking out from over the mountains. As the first of the moon’s rays hit the vine on the garage a thrumming sensation began all around Ambril. It came from deep in the ground, from the plants and trees and possibly from the air itself. The vine itself began to quiver in time with its rhythm. When the moonlight touched them, the buds turned their faces toward the moon and slowly unfolded into a perfect flower. They were iridescent and glowed with all colors at once. Their 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.

“Garn,” Ygg had his mouth open, amazed.

“That is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” whispered Sully next to Ambril.

“Coadsnigs! I do agree.” Whispered a voice reverently at Ambril’s knee. But Ambril was too mesmerized by the flowers to take any notice.

There were two or three flowers that grew larger as she watched. The dots of light began to dance wildly, resonant with the thrum of the earth.

“My Goodness, just the three?” Warbled Fern her face 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 now grown to several times the size of the other flowers. Their dancing dots now were elongating and growing into something familiar, with arms and legs. There were soon three perfectly formed six-inch human figures revolving above the flowers.

The chimes grew louder and then all at once Ambril was aware of hundreds of dots of light surrounding them. Looking closer, she saw they were beings hovering in the air watching the spinning, dancing beings within the flowers.

“Fairies!” Whispered Sully, enchanted as she reached to touch one. But the fairy swatted her hand away and gave her a vile look.

“Ouch!” Cried Sully as she pulled away. “Touchy little things aren’t they?”

“Watch now!” Fern pointed a shaky 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 the fairies darted in toward the glowing being and spun out blurry fast in a dancing circle. So fast they became hoops of light as they careened around the garden in a wild, mad dance. Ambril had to duck a couple of times when they zoomed too close. After a while, the thrumming changed its tempo and the dancers slowed and came to a stop. Within each group, there was a newborn fairy. The newborn fairies glowed and sparkled as they looked around in wonder. One of looked curiously at Ambril, until one of her circle mates grimaced and whispered something to her. 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.”

“What’s wrong with having the three? Is that not a good number?” asked Ambril as they watched the fairies greet the newcomers and then gradually float 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 by Ambril’s knee. The voice came from somewhere the laughing garden gnome near her chair. But the gnomewasn’t laughing anymore, it was frowning.

“Hey, wasn’t that gnome---smiling before?”

“You be meaning like this?” Suddenly the gnome cocked his head and smiled largely at her.

Ambril yelled and jumped up so fast she knocked over her chair bumping the little ceramic man.

“That be Bummil.” Ygg nodded as if garden gnomes coming to life were perfectly natural. “Hiya Bummil.”

Bummil had drawn back looking puzzled.

“It’s O.K. you just take some gettin’ used to is all.” Said Ygg.

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.”

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. “She be mostly batie yay 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 hold out his arm as he pulled out a small tube.

Bummil somewhat reluctantly complied and raised his elbow in Ygg’s general direction exposing a jagged white spot where the chip belonged. Ygg applied a bit of glue and 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. Her chair support had come to life and was grumpily removing his toe from underneath her chair leg.

“Give a body some warning, will you?” Said Sully, clearly spooked.

The gnome gave the chair 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 your own self, Missy!”

“You know you let her, Baldot.” Ygg squinted knowingly at the gnome who was now trying to look innocent. “You could a cleared your throat politely and asked her to move.”

Baldot grinned. “Ya, you be right there, Ygg, But 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 good 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 it the same place we mended yester week?” he asked.

“It be so. So you see why that glue t’ain’t near as good as it should be. 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 break a lot because they are made of the same stuff my Grandmother’s china is made of---“

“More or less,” said another gnome with a long curly beard and little round glasses. “You see lass, fine china consists of a higher ratio of---“

“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 this super-strength 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. Sashay wasn’t what Ambril would call it. He looked and sounded more like a two-legged baby goat.

Sully gave Baldot a dirty look. “I was about to say that maybe we could look for something better. 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 worshipfully up at her.

“I take all of that back, of course you be different, you bein’ a better class of human-kind.” Smiled Baldot showing five chipped teeth.

Sully cringed. “I liked you better rude and obnoxious.” But you could see she had gotten an idea. “I’ll get our remedy book.” She said raced back into the kitchen and returning with the Astarte. She sat down on the steps and read through the index in the porch light. “Here! This might work! 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.”

Baldot snorted 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.”

Ambril’s eyelids were beginning to droop as well. “Let’s talk tomorrow… Saturday, right?” She continued. “Lunch at the Gazebo?”

Ygg and Sully both nodded as they 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 a large brown bag.

“Oh! I forgot, I can’t be meeting you 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---“

“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.

“The gnomes have a knack for getting into places unseen.” 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 red-caps.

“Here’s what we be needing done---“

As Ambril and Sully turned to go Sully asked, “I wonder whatever happened to Mrs. Flood?”

Fern 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.”

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 Ambril admiringly.

# Chapter 26 The Gazebo Garden

Noon found Ambril coasting to a stop at the Gazebo. She was early so she thought she’d look around. It was her family’s place so why not?

She struggled to free a huge bag of food from her basket. Mrs. Sweetgum had been very generous. Something hard banged against her hipbone.

Oww!” 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 everything in the gazebo and skipped down the steps to do some exploring. It felt a little dangerous. After last night, she 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 with an intoxicating sweet scent. 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 and tried following the path. But she didn’t get far, 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 looked and smelled like old socks. Defeated she trudged back to the gazebo only to get whacked by the beach umbrella plant so hard that she lost her balance fell facedown in a thick patch of weeds getting a mouth-full of dirt.

“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. The buzz of the garden was louder there, but it had changed. It now sounded more like soft clicking noises. She had heard that sound before but couldn’t place it.  
 “Except for them teeny tiny stalks, she’d made a fine little tree.” Said a third.

“Do you think she’s right in the head though? Jumping and spitting, kind of odd that!”

They sounded very much like the elderly schoolteachers who had lived next door a few years back. They were always quibbling about something, and knitting…in fact that’s what the sound reminded her of, the three old schoolteachers knitting on their front porch… Ambril stooped down to brush off her pants---and froze.

“There, she finally spotted us.” Said the first one.

Ambril just stared not at all sure what she was seeing was real.

“She don’t say much does she.” Said another.

There at the base of the gazebo column nestled in the dirt were three lumpy, turnip-like growths. Each had small pinprick eyes just above a long wrinkled mouth. They were all knitting furiously. Every once in awhile one would stop to stick a needle in the earth and draw out long muddy roots which the others would grab up and bend around their needles. The outcome of all their labors was a muddy, smelly mass of woven muck. Bits of roots and rotten leaves stuck out everywhere. One of them had a pair of old fashioned spectacles through which she squinted at Ambril.

“It needs more pink!” The one on the right trilled.

“You think it always needs more pink.” Groused the large root in the center.

The one on the left rudely snatched the spectacles while still knitting and peered at Ambril very intently. “She is a Lovey though,” she sighed. “Why is it always the nice ones who gets it so hard?”

“Done are we?” Said the one on the right. She held up the muddy blanket they’d been working on, shook it, then turned it over. A worm flew off and landed on Ambril’s nose. But Ambril didn’t mind for the other side of the blanket was spectacular. It seemed to be woven of the tiny fragrant flowers that were growing all around the gazebo.

“It’s beautiful! You---you knitted that? But…that’s impossible!” gasped Ambril.

The one on the right gave her a curious look. “Yes, yes, we likes impossible---it’s acres more fun than ‘usual’ isn’t it!” She scrunched up her face at Ambril. “Here, makes yourself useful then.” And she threw the blanket at Ambril.

“Just spread it out over there, Deary.” Said the left one pointing with one of her needles at a bare patch nearby. “We hates the ugly spots.”

“Hates ‘em, we do.” Echoed the right one.

Ambril fingered the blanket and felt the thrum of life running through it. The tiny flowers turned toward her and 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 large middle one.

“Don’t be silly, they likes her so I likes her too!” Said the one on the right defensively.

Ambril, not knowing what else to do, took the flower blanket over and spread it out on the bare patch of ground. She tried to smooth out all the wrinkles but before she finished, the flowers began to take root; unfortunately, they were a little too fast for Ambril.

“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!” Ambril exclaimed and pulled at it hard. After a few moments she was able to rip her shoe free. The flower tendrils had grown right through her shoe.

“Well she almost got it right.” Said the left one encouragingly. There was another pause as they watched Ambril pick out the bits of plant from her shoe. “I think she’s mostly alright just maybe a little bit soft in the head.”

The middle one snorted. “Don’t be daft, it isn’t like she volunteered for this.” The middle one sucked in her wrinkle mouth as she ripped the glasses from her sister’s face. “She’ll be lunch to one of them that’s after her, if’n she doesn’t smarten up right quick though.”

“She won’t make it to lunch, just a mid-morning snack.” Nodded the left one.

The right one just sighed heavily.

“Excuse me, but I don’t like being talked about as if I’m about to be sacrified to the Gods or something.” Broke in Ambril somewhat huffily. “My name is Ambril. This used to be my great grandmother’s house---and---just who are you?”

“Well no need to get all tangled up about it. We knows who YOU are, of course.” 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’s the Glain, it is.” Mused the middle one.

“No, no she’s ones of foursies,” 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. “Ones of fours AND with Fairy Glain, my, my.” She said eyeing Ambril up and down and then again.

“So who and---what are you exactly?” Asked Ambril.

“Weeelll, you can call us Aunties if you like.” Said the middle one. She looked owlish with the glasses scrunched up close to her eyes. Her tendril fingers reached out and brushed aside some of Ambril’s curly hair. “’Tis a shame---“

“Now, now, it is just what’s been foretold.” Said the left one. “Sometimes it works out different.”

The center one huffed. “What have you gone rotten in the head, have you?” “It’s been wrong only once in all the years we’ve---“

“Once is enough, and you know that one was a doosey! ” Said the left one as she tried unsuccessfully to grab the glasses.

“Let’s give her the riddle,” said the one on the right as she resumed knitting.

The left one gave a little jump. “Oh yes, we can do that at least!” She bounced so excitedly several earth worms wriggled right out of the soil and under a nearby rock.

The center one stared intently at Ambril through the glasses. “I supposed we could do that 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 see’s EVERYTHING. We see’s 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 tells, we can’t says…at least not directly.” She twinkled. “One day you’ll meet a little green man.”

“A green man with a somethings 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. He’s worse than bare patches.” 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?” Ambril whispered back.

“The answer is!” Screamed the center one in an angry tone, squinting at her ruefully. “Are you sure she’s alright? She is slow, isn’t she...” And then loudly and clearly to Ambril “Do try and keep up!”

“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 tells no more.” Said the left one busily putting her knitting needles away.

“We gots to go Deary.” Said the middle one and then began to wriggle her way vigorously deeper into the dirt. “We’ve so much to do this time of year.” She shriveled right before Ambril’s eyes.

“Wait, I’m confused! What about---” asked Ambril.

“No time---Lovey---” whispered the one on the right. And they all wriggled out of sight. The last to go was a large wrinkled smile.

“Ambril?” It was Sully calling from across the gazebo.

“I just had the weirdest experience.” Ambril called back.

“What like run-of-the-mill weird or run for your life weird?” Asked Sully as she plopped down on the steps. “And why is it always you?”

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.

Ambril and Sully jumped and looked down to find Baldot and Bummil standing waist deep in daisies. Several other gnomes popped out of the bushes.

“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. “I’m just a kid!”

“Are you not a Derwyn? And is this not the Derwyn Estate?” Baldot continued accusingly.

“Well, yes but…it’s my Mom that owns it really. She’d hate to see the garden this way, she loves plants and stuff. I sure wish we could get the place cleaned up….” Said Ambril sadly looking around.

Bummil’s face was wreathed in smiles. “Are you askin’ what I think you be askin’? Ya mean, you want us to work here?” He asked as if Christmas and his Birthday had come on the same day.

“Ah---sure.” Said Ambril hesitantly, waiting for the catch.

“That be right fine then, we’ve not enough to do in Fern’s Garden, that garden just takes care of itself. This one on the other hand---“ Baldot rolled his eyes. “This one you be takin’ your life into your hands just strollin’ about---this one---“

“Be grand!” finished Bummil grinning like a love struck cow at the smelly sock bush until Baldot hit him with his hat.

“Did ya get all them deliveries done?” Ygg came up just then.

Baldot snorted. “Almost as easy as a lay about 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.”

Ygg’s face turned thunderous. “I told ya to stay away from Mrs. Twid! 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 would 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.

“The old buzzard didn’t see and it had no affect on the likes of her anyway. Some folks are hopeless.” Baldot continued with a shrug. Pity that, I’d a like to have seen her doing somersaults down the stairs like old Mrs. Dogwood.”

“Wait, what was that?” Asked Sully.

Ygg sighed heavily. “It’s true, the tea’s still a bit on the strong side.” He smiled involuntarily. “The old folks are acting a tad foolish. 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 that the gnomes were riddled with cracks where they 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.” She said loudly over her shoulder. She sat down heavily on a bench and pulled out the Astarte, now bristling with bookmarks. “We have a problem.” She opened the book and removed the first bookmark. “I found a bunch of remedies that I think might work.” but then she frowned. “But these plants---,” she cleared her throat and read: “Leaflets from Vixen Brill? Fiber from a Bomber 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, and I’m sort of hazy as to what a beaker is.” She hunched over the book and shook her head.

“I think we use beakers in science, you know those cup thingies.” Said Ambril.

“Hey, get out a there, you’ll be 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 that had whacked her before 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.

“This nowt be your average patch of petunias is it?” Mused Ygg.

“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 ran over to help.

Baldot and the other gnomes had armed themselves with sticks and ropes. They managed to snag one of fLit’s legs and three of the gnomes were pulling down hard. The flower was pulling back, refusing to let the robot go.

“This one’s called a Brellie plant on account of the umbrellie flowers. But 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 bunches of prickle grass while carefully avoiding the umbrella like flowers, 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. These gnomes were warrior gardeners, Ambril thought. After a few more minutes, the plant did start to giggle, then a little more until it was laughing uncontrollably. At last, with a belch it spit out the robot. The three gnomes who had been pulling on the rope suddenly lost their balance and fell backwards, their stubby little feet flailing. The blossom had had enough of everything and snapped its stem with resolve. It sucked in a large amount of air and them blew it out in a whoosh launching itself into space.

“Look at Boocher, he be flying!” Shouted Bummil. Sure enough, Boocher an extraordinarily fat gnome had gotten his foot caught in a rope and dangled below the escaping Brellie.

“Stand back!” Yelled Baldot as he twirled a lasso over his head. He took aim and threw just managing to hook Boocher’s tasseled hat. The other gnomes piled on and pulled him to safety. But as he landed Ambril heard a loud crack.

“There be another half hour of work.” Groaned Ygg.

Flit had landed on the gazebo roof where he had become entangled in the vines.

“What the heck is he on about!” shouted Baldot. “He should have more sense than to play at this!” He said marching over to just underneath the robot. “Come on out of there you, we see you plain as day!” He waved his fist at it.

“Sorry about that!” Stammered Ambril. “He’ll be a smart robot eventually, 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 pointed back to the garden. “That big one there needs an attitude adjustment, don’t you think?” Asked Ygg.

The Brellie plant had just slurped up another gnome 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 was dazzling 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 open. 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 then there was something else there, a presence watching her. One that did not wish her any favor. She shivered and cringed as her hand went instinctively for the medallion. Instantly a curtain of dense fog embraced her protectively and the evil was 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. “Like before, you know when you called the---big doggies.”

Ambril was shocked. “Really? It gets all foggy for me and everything freezes, including you.” 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.”

“Master Ygg, we need you! “ Bummil ran toward them. “Boocher’s in a bad way, ” he huffed out of breath.

The three friends followed Bummil down the path to where Boocher 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.

“We’ll have you right as rain soon enough.” Ygg said easily.

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 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 bent down to get a better look and brushed aside some spent flower petals to reveal a name carved in the stone. “Sweet Collar Bramble.” She read out. “Uses: Sour throats and Adam’s Apple maladies.” The plant consisted of long velvety scarf like vines, which 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 the leaves.” Said Sully and reached out but just as quickly snatched it back. “Ouch!” She yipped. “It’s prickly!”

“Prickly my patutee! A sight more than that!” Snorted Baldot coming up 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 that the seedpod was shaped like a fox head. It barred its vicious, needle-like teeth at them as it weaved and bobbed. 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 fell flat on her back 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 your 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 things that were shaped just like lambs ears.

“They aren’t--- 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.” Wrinkling his nose, Baldot got right to work and tied some of the leaves to a stick, which he began to swing in front of the vixen 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 brill, right?” He said his eyes not leaving the seedpods.

The pods stopped snapping at Ambril and Sully and went into hunting mode, their heads down eyeing the lamb’s ear. One or two of them jabbed at it viciously. After a few tries, one of them 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. “Boy, the gnomes sure know a lot about these plants,” whispered Ambril.

Sully nodded. “Well yeah, they’ve been---helpful. But I still think they are the rudest, nastiest garden ornaments I’ve ever laid eyes on,” groused Sully.

They had gotten well off the path and were within grabbing range. “O.K., on three, then.” Said Ambril. “One, two---“ they both lunged at the plant and came away with handfuls of leaves before racing back to the path with the seed pods snapping at their heels.

Whew!” said Sully waving her leaves. “Success!” They stuffed them all into a bag Sully had brought along.

“There’s more we need.” Ambril said to Baldot “Can you tell me where the---“

“Slag Fern, we need the Gooberous part and the fiber from a Bomber Nut---medium sized one.” Sully put in.

Baldot smirked. “JUST the fiber, ay?” He said sarcastically and laughed. “Piece of cake, I’ll let you grab those then.” He said rolling his eyes. He turned and trotted off down the path and yelled. “Just ahead!”

Sully and Ambril followed. As they rounded a bend they found that 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!” Then he groused to Ambril, “Ya see? Some of these plants have been left so long to fend for themselves they’ve gone well and truly wild!”

There was another group of gnomes with rubbery leaves strapped on like armor. They were working with a plant covered with clusters of yellow-green berries.

“Watch it Barmie!” Baldot yelled just as one of the berries burst open raining a yellowish gel all over him. The yellow goo smelled like a herd of flatulent Camels and hardened quickly, anchoring poor Barmie to the spot.

Bummil sighed, “Get the water then!”

Baldot continued down the path unconcerned. “He’ll be all right just as soon as the Gel is washed off.” He cupped his hands over his mouth. “Hey Blagoor! We’ll be needing some of the Goober from that Slag Fern!”

Blagoor was weaving and bobbing in front of an enormous purple plant with tightly wrapped leaves. A serpent like seedpod snaked toward him hissed angrily. Nearby another gnome was lazily swinging a lasso around his head.

“Anytime there Beedle no hurry.” Said Blagoor sarcastically as he dove to one side to avoid being eaten. The seedpod plowed into the earth instead. It came up spitting and screeching. Beedle finally let the lasso go, it sailed over the seedpod’s snapping jaws and down it’s long sinuous neck. Beedle immediately pulled it taunt.

“There, now Blagoor you can stop your dancing.” Beedle chuckled as he pulled harder on the rope. The seedpod struggled fruitlessly and the entire plant began to tip forward as if it was hinged at the base.

“Get your beaker ready then!” Baldot said to Sully.

Sully looked blank. “Oh, sorry, but I haven’t got a beaker.”

“How about a pail or something? You got one of those?” he said unruffled.

“Well no.”

Baldot snorted. “What would you be doing without us?”

“We’d not be making Fixit Juice that’s for sure!” Sully said peeved.

Baldot muttered something under his breath. Then he went over to the bristly hedge that Ambril had come up against earlier and picked off a nut the size of a basketball. He unhurriedly found a sharp stone 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 noise which seemed to be growing louder…and faster

“Cragnuts! These Bomber Nuts are overripe!” Muttered Baldot as he picked up the black ball and started tossing it between his hands looking wildly around. “Fire in the Slime!” He yelled and tossed the bomb at the Slag Fern. The evil looking seedpod yelped and dug its head into the dirt like as Ostrich. 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 Jell-O. But it smelled like something that hadn’t been washed in 6 years.

For the second time that day the gnomes roared with laughter. Baldot giggled as he threw Ambril 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 started to scrape the slime off her front and into the nutshell.

“Now wait there, you be needing the fiber inside that shell.” Baldot said still chuckling.

Ambril reached inside and pulled out handfuls of what looked like greasy brown monkey hair. It smelled like monkeys too. Ambril made a face.

“Who knew that magic would be so---stinky?” Complained Sully.

Ambril stuffed wads of the fiber into Sully’s bag and then filled the nutshell with the slime they scraped from their clothes.

“Yuk!” Said Sully gagging. It tastes worse than it smells!”

Ambril didn’t think that was possible but decided not to test it out.

“Where’s the hose?” Said Sully looking around.

“Faster if you just jump in the pond I be thinkin”. Baldot said. “Oh no wait, you might be frightened of the---“

“Relax, we’re not afraid of frogs and we can handle snakes, right Ambril?”

Baldot shook his head, “well this be a little bit diff----“

“We’ll figure it out.” Said Sully waving him off dismissively.

They squelched back down the path. The pond was fed by a waterfall which flowed out from under the Trelawnyd Wall. The water was almost a tropical blue-green color.

“It’s beautiful! Like a postcard.“ Said Sully.

They squelched out of their shoes and jumped in with their clothes on. The water cooled Ambril’s sticky, slime covered body. She ducked under water and swam out toward the center of the lake. The water was clear and clean with long ropy streams of bright green slime running everywhere. The lake became surprisingly deep at the center. A perfect place for a sea monster she thought to herself. As a kid she had been afraid of Sea Monsters. She surfaced to get some air.

“Isn’t this great!” Sully exclaimed floating on her back. “Wish we could spend all afternoon here, but--” She started paddling back toward the shore.“Coming?”

Ambril nodded and dove down one more time. She glided through the serene water. Her body felt almost weightless, the sounds of the world suddenly blocked. She was alone and safe, contentedly she glided toward the shore. There seemed to be a piece of clear plastic floating in the water near her with a black ball inside it. Trash in this perfect place! Probably one of the homeless people had tossed it in the pond. She reached out to grab it so she could tow it to shore---and---it blinked at her. Instead of just a piece of junk Ambril found she was staring at an enormous eye. She screamed of course, which was silly as no one could hear her underwater then she madly scrambled away from it. She fought her way to the surface and swam like mad for the shore. Reaching it she scrambled out sputtering and coughing and hugged herself.

“Wow, what are you training for the Olympics now? I’ve never seen anyone swim so fast. What’s wrong? Wait, don’t tell me---another monster right?” Sully asked clearly jaded by the happenings of the past few days.

Ambril stood staring at the lake. “I---I think I saw a Sea Monster.”

“Did it come after you? Try and eat you?” Asked Sully wringing out her hair.

“No, it just sort of---blinked at me.”

Sully looked at her skeptically then chuckled. “It---blinked at you. Come on, just today we’ve been snapped at by vixens, escaped an explosion, slimed with something that hopefully isn’t toxic---and you’re terrified by something---blinking at you?” Asked Sully.

“It was a pretty big eye!” Said Ambril defensively.

“Yes, the horrible blinking eye….Whooooo!” Said Sully as she slepped over to a nearby bush and began removing her pants. Sully pointed to a stack of dry clothes. “The gnomes dug these up from somewhere. We can wear these while ours dry.”

“You don’t believe me.” Said Ambril grumpily as she followed Sully’s lead and took off her shirt, replacing it with a bright pink T-shirt, two sizes too small.

“Look I’m just saying that this garden is filled with wacky creatures, some good and some bad. This one didn’t try to eat you so maybe it’s one of the good ones.” Sully rinsed her sneakers off in the pond. “Let’s hope these dry quickly.”

They finished dressing and put their wet shoes back on. As they walked over to the gazebo their shoes made a smulching sound with every step.

“I think memories of this place are getting jarred awake.” Continued Ambril as they walked. “This sounds strange but I think I recognized that thing.”

Sully smirked. “You think you met this Sea Monster before? What in a black lagoon or on an alien planet?”

Ambril slowly smiled, her mind must be playing tricks on her. “All right, forget it. Let’s have lunch.”

# Chapter 26 Fixit Juice

They found Ygg well into his second sandwich. “What took ya?” He asked.

Ambril sighed, “it’s a long slimy story, and smelly too. Pass the grapes.”

And they ate until they were full to bursting. Then they lay back on the warm stone benches and watched the puffy white clouds scuttle by overhead. The sun dawdled that afternoon Ambril recalled later. The golden afternoon stretched as she yawned and sat up slowly.

Sully was pulling something gooey from her hair. “This stuff is soooo sticky!”

“Stickiness is perfect for Fixit juice.” Said Ygg as he rooted through the lunch leavings.

“You’ve eaten everything all ready, vacuum-mouth.” Said Sully.

Ygg was looking much less stretched these days. Ambril decided to bring even 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 super ball.

“Uh oh,” she said pointing at it. “Look it’s starting to morph! 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 simple.” She said after a pause. “We just put all this stuff together and stir.” She continued to read. “There is something weird though, something about a shot of--- life energy?” She looked mystified. “We’ll just have to wing that part.” She rubbed her hands together smiling at Ambril and Ygg. “Ready?”

The Gnomes had brought over the biggest Bomber Nutshell they could find. It was half of a large boulder and refused to sit straight.

Sully was reading through the recipe once again. “We’ll start with the easy stuff first.” She said and dumped out the contents of the bag. Under all the Bomber Nut fiber and Vixen Brill was a clump of wilted leaves. “From my Mom’s herb garden.” Said Sully putting a finger to her lips. “She’d kill me if she caught me in there.” She started sorting through the greenery.

“So, we’ll put in lots of thyme--- I guess you want it to last.” She smirked and threw in sprigs of something with small green leaves and tiny white flowers. “Next, some Speedwell, to make it fast acting---let’s see---ah! Here it is!” She said rummaging around. “Five strands with buds.” She threw in some purple flowers. “Four flower heads of Everlasting.” Sully continued extracting some yellow and orange flowers and tossing them in carelessly. “And three drops of Milk Weed.” She held up a stiff stock and snapped it in two and squeezed out three milky drops.

“Seven leaves from a cast-iron plant.” She said and holding up a bunch of thick green blades, she shredded them into the shell. “I got lucky, we had these in our front yard.”

Ambril found a stick and skeptically stirred up the leaves. Nothing seemed to be happening. It was still just a mash of leaves and flowers. This was like making mud pies.

“O.K.! Now we move onto the more interesting stuff.” Said Sully and unceremoniously dumped in the Bomber Nut fiber and the Vixen Brill.

There was a fizzing sound, followed by a lot of yellow smoke, which smelled like rotten eggs.

“Oh oh, hold your noses, I have a feeling it’s going to get a whole lot worse,” said Sully as she reached for the the Gooberish slime. She poured it all in. Some of it hung in long gooberish dangles from its container until Sully gave it a firm shake.

They all hastily stepped back as it began to bubble and steam in a big way. But when it didn’t explode, they snuck back and holding their breath peered into the pot. It was now a molten mess of greenish goo. It burped at them.

“Pee-Yew!” Coughed Ambril. It stank of excitable skunks 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. There’s just the one thing more,” she said uncertainly. “The life-energy thing. I suppose we could all join hands and meditate. I went to a wellness camp once where we tapped into our life energy that way.” She shrugged sheepishly. “It didn’t really work for me, I just fell asleep.”

“What the---!” Shouted Baldot running up from the garden.

The remedy had begun to fizz and pop like firecrackers on Chinese New Year.

Sully dove back into the Astarte, her nose less than an inch away from the page 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, whatever it is you must be doing it now!” Said Baldot motioning to the top of the gazebo. “Can’t ya see anything you Dingslags? The vine is 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 vine above them wilt. Ambril put her hand out to it. She felt a surge of energy and her medallion vibrated. An idea flashed through her head. She rummaged through her backpack and raced to the concoction which was still spewing nasty yellow smoke.

She pointed her Ashera at it.

“So what are you going to do with that?” Asked Ygg looking dubious.

Ambril held her nose as she was enveloped by foul smelling smoke. “We hab to try somethig before we choke to death.”

“So what then? Do you think energizing thoughts? Like doing Yoga?” Asked Sully.

Baldot snorted behind them. “No, NO, you Dunderheads.” He scoffed.“ It’s sharing life’s power that sort a thing.”

She felt nervous, she didn’t know what she was doing, but one thing was certain, some one had to stop the smelly fumes. She held her breath and grasping the Ashera tightly in both hands she tapped the nut timidly.

There was a loud boom and a brilliant flash of light inside Ambril’s head. Ambril was thrown backwards and out into the garden. She lay there a moment checking to make sure she still had all her body parts. Everything seemed to be in the unbroken and in the right place. She had just managed to sit up when it happened

She felt something grab hold of her and yank her sideways so hard it took her breath away.

It was frigidly cold suddenly and dark. She sensed she was in an underground cavern. There were two glimmers of light in front of her but it took her a few moments to realize they were eyes as they were amber colored. She felt it again; the watchful, evil presence she had felt earlier in the gazebo. Her eyes grew accustomed to the dark and she was able to make out an outline of something monstrous, a darker shadow in the darkness. That she was in the presence of a powerful evil she had no doubt and she searched the darker space for some sense of what she was facing. It was clearly not human. The figure seemed to writhe like a mass of eels.

“So it is time then,” It croaked. “So kind of you to bring me what was mine.” Its laughter sent spiky chills through Ambril’s body.

The shadow seemed to grow larger as if it fed on her terror. There was a tug on her neck as the creature grabbed her medallion and tried to rip it from her neck. It wouldn’t budge though Ambril could feel the chain digging into the back of her neck.

“I just want the Glain, Ashera, you may keep your life, just give it to me.” The creature said patiently as it increased it’s pressure and began twisting it tightly around her neck until it began to chock her. She struggled to free herself but the creature was incredibly strong. She grabbed at the clammy hands that pulled the medallion and there was an arc of blue white energy.

The creature released her and seemed to think for a moment as Ambril caught her breath and backed away from it. She soon ran into a rocky wall.

The creature loomed over her and said musingly, “Your death is of no consequence, but the taking of this must be done carefully.” The thing grasped the medallion once again and pulled her up off her feet, holding her at eye level.

Death? She was too young to die. She had a Mom and a brother. And she had friends now, real friends. And she had too much she wanted to do. Her head was getting fuzzy. She lashed out at the monster, trying to break free. She wanted her friends and family---images of them began to flash through her mind as her movement slowed and her brain focused on her life, her Mom laughing with her over dinner, Zane smirking as he made a joke, Chao Feng puzzling over the checker board, Sully rolling her eyes, Ygg fixing Baldot’s hat, Miss Fern, Mrs. Sweetgum, even fLit---

With an electric crack and the sound of bells a fairy bright with energy hovered within an inch of her nose. “I hope this hurts, you idiot.” He thought at her. He wasted no time, grabbed her by the nose (which hurt quite a lot) and yanked her back sideways. With a whoosh they were back in the brilliant sunlight. Ambril fell hard on the stone floor of the gazebo and just lay there breathing. She fumbled for her medallion warm, it glowed as her hand closed around it. She then felt the damage around her neck and found that though there were welts coming up where the chain had bit into her skin there was fortunately no blood. She struggled to sit up and looked around her. The area around the Nutshell pot looked scorched and singed from the explosion. There were several gnomes clambering out of the bushes and trees where they had been thrown. The fairy was nowhere to be seen.

Ygg found her first. “You scared us half to death! You were there one minute sitting in the garden and the next minute, you were gone!”

Ambril was still breathing hard. “I was sort of taken to this cave. There was this really nasty---creature there---”

“Another Dullaith?” Asked Sully coming up behind Ygg.

“No, worse, much worse. He tried to take the Ledrith Glain from me.”

“And tried to kill you in the process, right?” Asked Sully looking hard at the red marks on her neck.

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 brought me back.”

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 freely in many, many 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 robot. fLit’s head was askew one leg was missing and there was a piece of string tied around his middle. “Strangest thing. The chest cubby wouldn’t stay closed at first, but now it won’t open.”

Ambril took the robot and looked at it closely. She shook it gently and could hear the faint sound of ----bells.

Ambril suddenly understood. ‘Um thanks, Blagoor, I’m sure it’s the wiring---or something.” She stowed the ruined robot into her backpack and zipped it shut.

“Bob’s Bots can fix him.” Ygg nodded. “He can fix anything.”

“Except us,” grumbled Baldot and then brightened. “Speaking of that!”

Everyone suddenly remembered the remedy. The pot had stopped smoking. Everyone gathered around the concoction. Ambril was the last to peer inside.

“Did it work?” She asked.

The mixture was crystal clear and glossy smooth. It smelled 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 fighting with each other to be the first one cured.

“Nay, No, Not you live un’s.” said Ygg. “What we need is a broken pot or---“

“How’s this?” asked Bummil dragging a large earthenware jug out from under a bush. It was a footed jug, three of them jutted out from the bottom for support and balance. A large piece of its handle was missing.

“I done that this morning while trying to water the Elli-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. “O.K. 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 glowed bright 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 gasped as he was knocked sideways. “Hey, what the---“

The jug had shaken itself and reared up on its clay feet. It seemed to be shaking its 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 stretched itself and wiggled its toes. It seemed to be itching for a fight. Fortunately Bummil seemed to know from experience how to deal with grouchy ceramic beings. He trotted up and after ducking a few times to avoid jabs from the handle fist he said matter-of-factly. “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?”

The jug stopped to consider this.

Bummil didn’t wait. “Come and see then.” He said and walked down the steps and up the path beckoning to the jug to follow. It considered this a moment and then reluctantly, 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 just good manners to a gnome.

“Now, I want you to fix me.” Baldot turned to Ygg. “And I ain’t gonna take NO for an answer. We’ve been waiting years for Fixit Joe to return, I’ve given up on him. I’ll take me chances with this new 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 from 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. “Make this old goat whole, and thank ye for it.” Then without hesitation he grasped the shell and jumped in headfirst. Ygg yelled and fished him out.

“What are you playing at?” Ygg growled as he held up the dripping gnome.

For a moment Ambril feared the worst. Baldot was as stiff as a statue. His face frozen with his eyes squeezed shut 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 were quiet.

“Baldot?” asked Ambril anxiously. “Are you alright?” She bent down so their faces were eye to eye.

For a long moment nothing happened, and then slowly his right eye---winked.

“Baldot! Can you hear us?” Yelled Ygg in his ear.

Baldot slowly unfroze his face and said sarcastically. “The great Trolls of the North can hear you, you Lumox!”

Ygg unceremoniously set him down.

Baldot began to stiffly move his head and then his arms and legs. “Am I fixed?” he said laughing. “I’m fixed!” He said as he jumped up and started skipping around.

“Hey boys! Look at me! It works!” He said doing a somersault.

The other gnomes cheered and made a mad dash for the remedy.

“Hold on there, now, let me help you before you tip it over!” Said Ygg battling through to the pot. Ygg found himself dipping little ceramic men into the 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 hardly said a word as they wound their way through the heavy overgrowth and through the hole in the hedge.

“I’m beat,” Sully yawned, “I think this was the best day I’ve ever had.”

Ambril stopped just short of agreeing with Sully remembering the dark cave.

“Hey! You want to stay for dinner?” She asked. “We’re having stuffed squash blossoms! I’m sure it’ll be O.K. with my Mom.”

“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, 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. Maybe when she was older.

“I’m really tired tonight so, I think I’ll just get on home.” She said finally.

“Another time then!” Said Sully’s Mom 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. It had been an amazing day with some terrifying parts. Actually, truth be told, certain parts had been amazingly terrifying; and her day wasn’t over yet. Her eyes went frequently to the backpack stuffed in her basket.

# The Truth About Smart Robots

Zane was eating as usual when she stuck her head in the kitchen. Mrs. Sweetgum smiled as she handed her a plate of food. She dropped her pack right there and dug right in. It was heavenly.

“Seconds?” Mrs. Sweetgum asked.

“Yeah!” said Zane lifting his plate eagerly.

I’m full, thanks.” Ambril yawned as she scooped up her backpack “Where’s Mom?”

“You’re mother’s resting, at Feldez’s request, he thought she looked a little tired,” volunteered Mrs. Sweetgum.

Zane grunted but continued eating. Ambril’s stomache tightened so now Feldez was controlling her Mom’s sleeping habits as well. She fumed as she took the stairs two at a time. After locking her door her mood made her swing her pack none too gently onto her bed.

“Alright, come on out of there!” She said sharply facing the pack.

She waited for a full minute. No reaction.

“Hiding isn’t going to work, 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 guess I should thank you for your help today, but I don’t like being spied on and I really don’t like it when some one pretends to be something they’re not.” She sputtered. “SO GET OUT HERE!” She yelled and kicked the bag hard.

With a bang, the backpack burst open. An angry blur of light whizzed right at Ambril’s face.

It was the fairy all right, 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 her hand to her face.

The fairy screeched grating metal some more, then switched to something like piano destruction 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 trying to fend him off. But she was helpless as the fairy was way too fast. He zipped in and out before she even had time to duck. All she could do was cower and cover her face defensively. Which left a huge amount of real estate unprotected.

After several minutes of being poked, pinched and her hair pulled she said, “look, we need to talk, right?” She winced as the fairy kicked her right ear. “You’ve been cooped up in that robot since the Dullaith attack, 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 was more sounds of piano destruction followed by a head-on collision.

“So you don’t want to be here, but---“ the fairy pulled her hair harder. “Ouch!”

Ambril bit her lip trying to control her own anger. “You have to stay for some reason. If you tell me what that is, maybe I can help you get out of here.”

The fairy let go of her hair and was quiet.

Ambril cautiously peered through her fingers to find the fairy hovering a few inches from her face. She slowly put her hands down, but not too far just in case.

The fairy began to speak again. This time in a long cadence of chimes and bells with just a few grating screeches thrown in.

“Look I still can’t understand you.” She looked at the fairy closely. “There’s another way of talking, isn’t there?” The fairy looked offended as if it was beneath him. He folded his arms and looked away.

“Back there in the dark, you spoke to me.” Ambril tapped her head, “in here. Maybe you didn’t mean to and maybe you don’t want to now but is there another way?”

The fairy, looked disgusted but tried again. It opened its mouth and a torrent of bell tones came out, then some clangs. Then she heard clearly in her head, “*Donkey*!” clang, ting, screech, “*Butt*!” then, “*You’re the Butt of a Donkey*!” The fairy screwed up his face with effort.

Ambril looked startled. “I heard that! You called me a Donkey’s Butt!” She drew her eyebrows together. “Thanks for that!” It was pretty weird being insulted inside her head. Perhaps she could return the favor. 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 and zipped away to the window the picture of a sulking child.

“*Sooo*,” Ambril continued willing her words at the fairy. “ *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 as if she should be impressed.

She wasn’t.

He then kicked her in the ear.

“*Ouch! Look no more hitting and kicking, will you? We humans try not to do that to each other during polite conversation.”* Ambril thought at him while rubbing her ear.

“*Wait, when did I save your life*?” Ambril asked.

The fairy rolled his eyes and pointed to his boot.

“*Oh! You were in the box---and the Dullaith---I see now*.” She mused then thought at him. “*First up, you don’t owe me a thing. I saved you more by accident than anything. 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 moment before.

More screeching and then she heard inside her head, “*You know nothing! You silly, stupid---plodding---HUMAN!*” This last part was uttered as if being a human was worse than a dung beetle who had just been slimed by a slug and then sat on by a baboon. The fairy was now flying in tight circles around her head, making Ambril very dizzy.

“*There isn’t anything more loathsome for a fairy than to be CHAINED to another being, but a HUMAN-KIND! That’s the worst of the worst, the lowest of low*!” The fairy began to slow a bit, Ambril caught sight of its face, which looked a bit sad and frustrated, “*Then it’s the time I’ve lost*,” The fairy said to itself. “*I have to keep searching*---“. The fairy suddenly became aware of Ambril’s presence in his head and landed a smashing blow to her right ear.

“*Oouwww, Gees, alright already*.” She shrugged him off and picked up her ruined robot.

“*Let me spell it out for you. Thanks for your help so far, you certainly saved me from whatever that was in the dark but you can go now, right? We’re even. I saved your life and today you repaid the favor, you saved mine*.“ She walked over to her window and opened it wide. “*Go!”*

But the fairy stayed where he was, watching her. After a moment he said heavily, “*It’s not that simple*. *It isn’t the way it’s done. There are traditions to be upheld, protocol…”*

*“So you follow traditions without thinking about them? You just do what’s always been done, you do what your old to do, is that it*?” Ambril though at him.

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 out loud. “*So you’re perfect? Really? That’s not what I see*.” She hunched over a little more anticipating the next punch. “*No one ---nothing---at any time has ever been perfect, didn’t you know*?” She said. “*Especially fairies who lose their temper and poke me in the eye when I say things he doesn’t agree with*.”

The fairy scoffed but stayed silent hovering near the window.

Then it slowly dawned on her. “*It’s not just stupid fairy traditions is it?”* She continued. “*There’s something else*.”

The fairy suddenly looked uncomfortable. His eyes strayed to Ambril’s shirt. The Ledrith Glain. She 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 it around your scrawny neck!*” He groused. “*I have to protect it from your stupidity. Today’s a good example. You practically gave it to him! I can’t let it get into his hands.”*

“*Whose hands? You mean that creature in the cave*?” 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.*”

“*I don’t know much about Moroz, just that he did something so bad he was locked up for it.”* Ambril said.

The fairy nodded. “*Moroz was the last human-kind that we fairies ever trusted*.” The fairy continued ruefully. “*And we paid a very high price for that*.” 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*. *Because you saved my life, stole my boot and now have the Ledrith Glain hanging around your neck*.”

Ambril decided to change the subject before she got her head kicked again. “*So what’s this, this Ledrith Glain to Moroz?*”

“*The Ledrith Glain 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. We once thought better of human-kind and entrusted it to their keeping. When we realized our mistake, that its power was too much for you weaklings and corrupted you, we could not get it back. Moroz promised to get it for us in exchange for our services. But he lied, as all human-kind do.”* The fairy nearly spat at Ambril he was so angry. “*To Moroz it is the power he needs to free himself from his imprisonment.*” He drew his eyebrows together in concentration. *“For some reason, the Ledrith Glain has chosen you to be its keeper*.” Ambril could feel his curious probing. “*It’s been centuries since it chose a bearer at all, but a human-kind.*” 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, she had heard it before, what the heck did it mean?

“*It means* *you bear the heritage of all four magical kinships*.” fLit answered her unasked question.

Ambril shuddered at his intrusion into her thoughts. She realized she had absolutely no privacy now. Holding up the medallion Ambril said. “*So one of a few human kind to own this?”*

The fairy flew into a rage and whacked her across the nose. “*You don’t OWN the Ledrith Glain, you little Tree Toad, it CHOSE you to be its bearer.* *Why it chose you, I don’t know. You’re just so…usual. There’s absolutely nothing remarkable about you!”* He threw his hands up in frustration. “*You’re so—average*.”

Ambril sighed as her entire body curled inward. He was right, some one, somewhere had made a mistake. What did they expect he to do? Save the world or something? Come on, she was just a regular kid. She stood there thinking for a long moment and then thought carefully at the fairy, “*What would happen if I just gave it to you*? *You know how to protect it and what to do with it*.” She shrugged. “*It sounds like it really belongs to you 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. Or at least it won’t go with me*.”

Ambril was shocked. “*Weird*.” She slowly put her medallion back around her neck and resumed thinking. Finally she thought at the fairy, “*You’re rude, obnoxious and ridiculously arrogant---but you’re also sort of right. I am just a kid. I’m too small, I’m too young, I’m too inexperienced---I’m all those things. But for some reason I got tagged for this. Someone high up must think I can do this so---I’m going to keep trying. Partly because the thing around my neck won’t let me…But I do need some help. I have to get prepared somehow. I have to learn how to use this stuff. To protect myself and your precious Ledrith Glain.”* She looked at the hateful fairy. “*You know how to make an Ashera work*?”

The fairy shrugged, “*It’s a simple tool, the instructions are written right on the it,*” he pointed to the decorative lines and then smirked.

Ambril resisted the urge to flick his wings. “*Do you think you could teach me how to use it?”*

The fairy was instantly offended and zipped across the room in a snit. A lengthy cascade of breaking dishes layered over cowbells resonated through Ambril’s head. Ambril waited until it quieted down.

“*You haven’t anything else to do*.” She reasoned.

More dishes breaking and then a crescendo of broken glassware ended with a tinkle of bells.

“What have you got to lose?” She wheedled.

fLit sighed and drifted back to her. “*Just the respect of everyone I know including myself. You don’t realize what you are asking. I’m doing something that’s taboo in my world. Associating with human-kind is worse than forgetting to put on your pants before going to school. I know I’ll regret this.*” He studied her and then grimaced in annoyance. “*You know it would be so much better if you held it lower down, more like a baton or a wand than a tube of toothpaste.”* He instructed.

Ambril adjusted her hand.

“*Yes, like that…now if we’re to do this, it will be hard work, we’ll work every night. We’ll start with energy channeling, sight and protective wards*.” And then added dismissively. “*Then move onto* *traverse travel, environmental mod’s and try a little history, though you are so ploddingly slow I’m not sure how much we’ll get through.*” He hovered lost in thought a moment.

“*You also need protection until you are capable of doing it yourself. I’ll continue to shadow you, to protect the Ledrith Glain, of course*.” He continued.

Ambril shrugged and pointed at the demolished robot. “*Just how will you manage that*?”

The fairy shrugged back in an off-hand way. “*I’ll be invisible most of the time though at times I’ll change myself into something small that will fit in your pocket or I’ll hitch a ride in that hair of yours*.” He sniffed and wrinkled his nose. “*You will have to wash it regularly from now on*. *One thing, you can’t tell anyone about me, NOT ANYONE, ever. Promise?”*  The fairy looked at her menacingly.

Ambril nodded.

Then the fairy sighed and flew over to the window, the conversation was apparently over. “*You’ll be safe for a little while. This house is unusually well protected,”* he paused at the window. “*I’ll be back by morning.”*

“*Wait! What do I call you? What’s your name?”*

The fairy laughed mirthlessly and emitted a complex cadence of bells and cocked his head at her. “*Can you manage that?”*

Ambril snorted. *“I’ll call you fLit the name of the robot then.”*

The fairy shrugged and then flew out the window.

Ambril slowly shut it behind him; she’d let the fairy figure out how to get back in, and turned toward her bed. She should have known. No robot was that smart or that much trouble. This fairy may be able to help her but he could also prove to be more trouble than ten AI robots put together. She brushed her teeth, threw on her PJ’s and was asleep within seconds of her head hitting the pillow.

# Chapter 27 School again

Ambril coasted into the schoolyard earlier than usual and spied Ygg sitting on the front steps looking anxious.

“Mrs. Twid suspects.” He said to her even before she could get out a Hello.

“How do you know?” Ambril asked as she threw her backpack down and sat down beside him.

“I just do.” He said wearily. “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!”

The doors open and Ygg, Sully and Ambril trudged up the steps. 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 at home, but at school too?” he groaned.

The entire class dragged themselves off to the Gym. On the way Ambril told her friends a little more about the shadowy evil in the cave.

”How can you be so sure it was Moroz? No one even knows what he looks like.” Asked Sully.

Ygg stared at her closely. “There be something you’re not telling us.” He said.

Ambril was startled. “---Well, it’s just that---“ And then she winced, something was pinching the back of her neck---hard. “I’m worried about him getting out of there, if he was able to get me in then---“

“How’d you manage to get out of that cave anyhow?” Asked Ygg curiously.

Ambril hesitated then said. “The---Ledrith Glain helped out. A jet of power burst out of it and shot me back to the garden.”

Ygg stared at her unconvinced. But fortunately they’d arrived at the Gym. Inside loomed a tall pole with strands of ribbons attached at the top, which fluttered in the air currents. A bruised and beaten piano had been rolled in to one side. The kids were slouched on the floor nearby.

Mrs. Twid stood primly next to the piano. “MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION CHILDREN!“ She bellowed as if they were deaf. “Are we all here now?” She said as she walked woodenly toward the Maypole. “You should all consider yourselves fortunate to have been selected for this Dance.” She eyed Ygg sharply “I’m not sure this class is capable of putting on a high quality performance, but…I was overruled.” She sniffed. “Ladies,” Mrs. Twid giving a hard look at Ambril as if she wasn’t sure if Ambril was human. “Please gather a pink or yellow ribbon and space yourselves around the pole.” Her bony finger pointed toward the Maypole and the ribbons softly playing with the breeze. “The boys will chose blue or green ones and stand in between the girls.” She sniffed again and gave Riley a narrow glare. The kids grabbed ribbons 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---“.

“Here I am, Here I am!” Mrs. Flood fairly danced in with a huge smile on her face. “Sooo sorry kids, I’ve been chasing butterflies!” She paused to hitch up her jogging pants before she plunked down on the piano bench. “And caught up with a couple of them!”

Mrs. Twid stared, absolutely flummoxed but she composed herself with effort and whispered, “I’m so glad you’re feeling better, Daisy, I was worried---”

“Oh yes, Crystal, I was feeling poorly there for a time.” Mrs. Flood ran her fingers along the keys lightly. “But I’m much, much better, thank you!”

Mrs. Twid looked as if she had eaten something nasty. She signaled for the music to start and 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, threading her way through the kids spaced around the pole. She stopped and released Ygg who looked ready to burst with indignation but said nothing as he rubbed his ear. A few of the kids giggled.

“Alright then!” She clapped her hands together, “keep up the PACE!”

The kids began a half-hearted skip around the pole. A few of the kids got tangled up together but soon figured it out. 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.

The song ended and Mrs. Twid yelled “STOP!”

The pole was half braided from the top down. The kids were out of breath but smiling.

“It seems that some of you clearly can’t help it but you look and sound like cattle. You have to pick up your feet and lift your knees higher.” Mrs. Twid frowned at them. “Release your ribbons and we’ll just practice the dancing.” 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?”

Ambril found herself fairly flying around the pole skipping as fast as she could. Mrs. Twid picked up a yardstick and brandished it.

“BRISKLY NOW CHILDREN!” She screamed with a gleam in her eye. She whacked at skipping kids indiscriminately. “YOU’RE OUT OF STEP!”

Mrs. Twid kept them going until one of the plumper girls collapsed.

“Crystal my dear,” said Mrs. Flood in a low voice as the kids ran over and to help the girl. “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. “Well, it is true, slower kids require a slower pace.”

Mrs. Flood continued in a stage whisper. “And you probably want to ease up a bit on the---err---physical contact. I don’t imagine the school would appreciate a law suit from one of the more affluent families.”

Mrs. Twid stiffened at this. It had not occurred to her that these particular children might have parents who loved them. 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 with FAMILIES, do we?”

They went around and around and around, never pleasing Mrs. Twid until even the most athletic kids drooped and sagged. Nearly every time around, Mrs. Twid would rap Ygg on his back. Ygg accepted it without complaint keeping his head down and avoiding the other kids eyes. Finally, the bell rang, and the kids limped for the door.

“I’ll have to have you back for EXTRA practices it seems!” 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 and Sully thankfully gathered their things and headed for the door. Ygg was rubbing his shoulder just outside. Together they stumbled to their bikes.

“Twid was beyond horrible today, if you ask me,” said Sully indignantly.

“We have to find a way to get you out of her reach.” Said Ambril tensely. “She’s taking her revenge out on you for helping Mrs. Flood.”

Ambril could see Lance and his friends bunched in a tight wad, scheming.

“They’re up to something.” Said Sully. “Something hugely humiliating, and probably painful.” She mused.

Ambril nodded slowly. She wished now she had kept out of their way as she watched the big boys sneak peaks at them. They were outnumbered and under-sized. They were toast. She sighed.

Tiana winked at Ygg as she and her friends sashayed by.

Ygg moaned.

“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. Ambril leaned back and stared out at the garden. The gnomes had transformed it in short order. Not only did it look beautiful but it appeared content. The pavers were smoother, the ground smelled sweeter and the air had taken on a golden quality as if they were in the middle of an old Italian oil painting.

Sully seemed lost in thought, staring out over the garden. Finally she said. “Here’s something, you know 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 should read up on your heritage some time.” She continued. “The tree of life, according to ancient lore is the universe. It’s a tree with its branches and roots combined around in a circle. 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 believed and the Celt’s and the Vikings, in fact most ancient religions were nature based ones.” She flicked a finger at the vines growing up the Gazebo’s pillars. “And I’ve been thinking, you know the fancy flower on your medallion? I think it’s the Navel-mundi. You know the one the fairies came from in Fern’s garden, remember?”

Ambril pulled her medallion out to see if she was right. Sure enough there were faint etchings on the face of the stone. As the face of the stone caught the light Ambril suddenly could see it, it was definitely very like the flowers they had seen at Moonrise. She grabbed her Ashera and examined the large tree image near the top. The tree in the center did seem to have its roots 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! How’d you know! I decoded some of the Ogam around the edges of Derwyn crest and that was the first and last line! She said excitedly, “As above, so below!”

Ygg smiled. “It be 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. My name is Ygg Drasil, right? It means the great treein one of the old Norse languages.”

Ambril and Sully’s mouths dropped.

“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, who has it as part of her family’s crest, it’s right there on her Ashera---” she shivered. “It feels---creepy---like its---meant to be 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 giggled, it had been getting a little too heavy there and it felt good to laugh. A cool breeze hit her in the face. Looking up she saw some thunderclouds forming over the mountains. “O.K., what was this big surprise you have for us, Sully or should we call you Iramsul?”

Sully grimaced. “Sully, just Sully, my Mom is the only one who calls me Iramsul and that’s only when she’s mad at me.” She said as she raced over to her backpack and pawed through it. When she whipped out a small box her face held the expression of a three year old on Christmas morning. “So I played around with a few things and---“ she held out the box. “I came up with this!”

Inside was a bunch of gray powder.

“Yeah? So?” Asked Ygg looking dubiously at it.

“It’s FLYING powder!” Sully said excitedly.

Sully carefully opened the box and held it out again. “Here look!”

Ambril peered into the box. At first it looked like ordinary dust but then small colorful sparks erupted, like electrical currents with tiny explosions. It looked as if it was alive itself.

“Wow!” Breathed Ygg beside her.

“How’d you make it?” Asked Ambril.

“You know those mad scientist labs in old horror movies? The kind with bubbling concoctions connected with curling tubes and flames and stuff?” She asked.

“Yeah!”

“It wasn’t anything like that.” Sully said matter-of-factly. “It was just a whole lot of grinding and pounding and---more grinding…” She smiled proudly at the powder. “Want to try it out?”

Ambril just stared at her friend. “Is it safe?” She asked hesitantly. “I mean isn’t there a chance we’ll shoot off into space and not come down again?”

Sully waved her off. “Look I tried it on a pillow,” Sully started 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. “We can just put a little in our shoes and float around the gazebo for starters.” Her smile was infectious. “Look if you guys don’t want to try it, you can just sit and watch.”

That did it for Ambril. Who ever wanted to just sit and watch? “Okay, I’m in.” She said, “just a little floating and then down, right?”

“That be just in theory.” Ygg said dubiously. But took off his shoes anyway. Sully got out a spoon. “It said to apply it to the inside of the shoe to keep it from blowing off.” 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 what you need for a ‘sprightly sail’ the book said. Besides we’re inside the gazebo, right? There’s a roof. If you feel out of control just slip off a shoe.”

“That’s what the book says, yeah?” Said Ygg dubiously looking into his shoe.

“That’s what the book says.” Parroted Sully as she put her shoe back on.

Ygg opted to leave his laces untied; They all stood up. Ambril braced herself for whatever was to happen….and waited…and waited…for nothing.

Sully’s face went from supreme elation to serious dejection in about half a minute. She looked down and stamped her feet. “It worked perfectly last night.” She said to herself. “Maybe if we just…” she swooped down and grabbed the powder and began sprinkling more on their feet.

“Be careful there, Sully, not too much, 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. 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. A bunch of the powder had found its way 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 near her.

“This is incredible! I feel like dandelion fluff, or maybe a leaf, or a---“

But before she could finish her thought, another powerful burst of wind howled through the gazebo and swept them both away. Ygg tried to hang onto a pillar but the wind was too strong and blew him away after them. Ambril found herself caught in a dizzying whirl as she tumbled. If this is what dandelion fluff went through, she’d had enough, thanks. She screamed until she was hoarse, and then got too nauseous to yell.

“Ambril! AMBRIL! Cross your legs like mine,” 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 couldn’t stop twirling and just ‘bout lost me lunch and breakfast!” He grabbed Ambril’s arm and righted himself.

“Cross your legs! Cross your legs!” Ambril yelled over the whooshing of the wind. Ygg tried to imitate Ambril but ended up with them straight down. They rocketed upward. “No! Like you’re sitting on the floor!” Squealed Ambril. Finally he figured it out and they found themselves floating over the forest 500 feet up. The cars looked like toys and the people like ants. If she hadn’t been so scared she would have enjoyed the view but she couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen if the powder suddenly wore off.

“Hey look at that!” Said Sully pointing off into the distance.

“No, no I don’t think I’d better do that.” Said Ygg his eyes firmly shut.

“What? Afraid of heights are we?” said Sully as she calmly floated over to him and grabbed his leg. “Isn’t this great?”

“Come clean! You practiced, didn’t you!” Accused Ambril.

“Well, maybe just a little.” Said Sully sheepishly.

“Some pointers would have been helpful, we could a’ been killed!” Yelled Ygg as he squeezed his eyes even more tightly shut.

Ambril froze when over Ygg’s shoulder she spied a massive thundercloud nearly on top of them.

Sully looked around and gasped. “Let’s get out of---”

That was all Ambril heard before she was engulfed in a freezing mist. It was like being rolled in a big, fuzzy, frigid blanket. She could see nothing nor could she hear anything. “Where are you guys!” She yelled but her voice sounded flat and small as if she was yelling into a big pillow. She panicked and started flailing around until she hit something.

Fortunately, it was Sully who had Ygg clamped to one knee. She quickly grabbed her. “Where’ve you been? Gees I thought we’d never find you. Just relax now, hang on. I’ll just tow us all back down.” She yelled sounding almost calm. “I’ll just rearrange my feet a little and then---No Ygg, not you—No that’s too much!” Ambril’s arm was nearly yanked off as they rocketed down out of the cloud. They were going so fast they pelted themselves with raindrops falling at the more normal rate of gravity.

“Pull up! Pull up!” Screamed Sully. But Ygg seemed frozen with fear at the site of the trees below rushing up to meet them. Sully reached down and wrenched Ygg’s shoe off. They instantly slowed. “Whoo! That was close!” Sully said.

“Sorry, I be thinking this flyin’ is not for me.” Ygg said still eyeing the treetops just below them.

“I’ll say!” Agreed Sully. She handed his shoe back to him. “Don’t put that on until I say so!” Now---“ She was interrupted by a massive bolt of lightening which seemed to snake right under Ambril’s nose. She felt the hair on her arms singe. It was followed by a bone-jarring thunderclap. Buckets of rain instantly doused them.

“This stuff be waterproof, yeah?” asked Ygg hopefully.

“I---I think maybe“ They began to descend slowly at first but then faster and faster. The wind was soon whooshing past them as they entered the forest canopy. “---maybe not!” Finished Sully.

“It’s gonna be rough!” Shouted Ygg.

The slick branches of a redwood tree whipped past Ambril. She put out her arms to try and grab onto something but the wet branches slipped through her fingers. 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. “Sully? Ygg?” she said hoarsely. The rain dripped down her nose as she slowly looked around. She had landed on the forest side of the wall in a grove of redwoods, some over a hundred feet high. Ambril saw to her relief that she was only about fifteen 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 lowered herself to the nearest branch and was just getting ready to jump when she heard a decisive snap. She groaned as 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. She sat up slowly straining to breathe and found herself looking into the upside-down face of Ygg.

“Ya know, I’m gonna kill her if she isna’ dead already.” He said resolutely. “Help me?”

He was tightly tangled in a vine, looking like a spider’s bedtime snack. Ambril found a sharp stone and sawed away at a couple of the vines until Ygg slumped to the ground.

“Are you alright?” Asked Ambril as he got shakily to his feet.

Ygg nodded grumpily as he picked leaves out of his hair. “Where she be? She be right next to me when the rain hit and the next minute she’s not.”

Ambril took a deep breath, “SULLY!“ She listened intently but there was no response just the soft sighing of the wind and the dripping of the rain.

“Sully!” Yelled Ambril again.

“Sully, where be you!” Ygg now grumbled to himself about the state of his clothes and then he cocked his head, listening. “Here, this way, I’m thinkin’.” Ygg pointed toward a bright spot in the dense trees.

“Sully!”

“I’m here! Over here!”

Relieved, they broke into a run toward a clearing. The sun was just breaking free of the thunderclouds, sending shafts of light on the grass carpeting the clearing. “Whee!” It was Sully. Swinging from a branch of a huge tree, which seemed to be dancing and twirling Sully around.

“Guys, meet my new friennnnnnd!” said Sully as she swung around again.

Ambril was annoyed. Here she and Ygg had nearly died as they plummeted to the ground and all Sully had gotten was a new dance partner.

“Sully, get down here!” Shouted Ygg angrily rubbing his shoulder.

Sully jumped down smiling and gave 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 and were wet through.

Ambril sighed, “You don’t want to know.”

“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.

It was then that the three of them were swept off their feet. A soft, green vine wove itself into a nest around her and she was lifted and twirled around and around. The air swished through Ambril’s hair freeing some of the prickles and bits of twigs as they whirled around the meadow. Mother Nature’s amusement ride. It was so much fun it was hard to stay mad, soon Ambril was laughing along with Sully. Ygg took a little longer to get out of his bad mood, but eventually he was grinning along with them. Ambril leaned back in her greenery nest and tried to figure out exactly what was happening to them. She peered through the thick branches and leaves toward the trunk of the dancing tree and spotted her, a green woman in fernlike, rustling robes with a crown of brambles and flowers on her hea. She had hair the color and texture of redwood bark. And a face as smooth as a young aspen tree. She was watching Ygg and laughing as she lifted them up above the tree tops. Ambril could see nothing but treetops for what appeared to be miles. In the distance she could see a mountain partly denuded, a gash in it’s side. Ambril recognized the mine and was surprised and saddened that it was so easy to spot even from miles away.

Ambril turned back to the Wood Sprite and noticed a sudden change in her mood. She seemed to be listening to something and looking around fearfully. She began to slow her dance and finally stopped, she cocked her head, still listening. Ambril couldn’t hear anything unusual except for the fact that the entire forest seemed suddenly silent and tense. The clear, high screech of a hawk sounded far above them. The green woman’s eyes grew round and she seemed to make a quick decision. She set them down and began to shrink.

“Boy, guess the party’s over,” panted Sully.

“She seemed to be upset by something.” said Ambril still looking around mystified. The Sprite was still shrinking and now looked like an ordinary tree.

“You mean the green woman?” asked Ygg “She be powerful magic, true?”

Another hawk cry was heard, this time louder. Ambril looked up and saw a large gray bird circling overhead. Reduced now to the size of a large Christmas tree the Sprite gathered up her lower branches and rustled into the comforting cover of the nearby trees.

Everything was too quiet now. The birds had even stopped chirping.

“Where the heck are we?” Asked Sully looking around. Ambril heard distant thumps of something large running through the forest. It was coming their way.

“Maybe we be better off in the trees.” Said Ygg and started making his way out of the meadow. Ambril turned to follow him when it happened. A stabbing cold flash flooded Ambril with pain. She doubled over and shut her eyes. A blizzard like fog blotted out everything except two 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.

Ambril opened her eyes. Sully and Ygg continued walking toward the trees, apparently they hadn’t seen and heard what she had. The thumping sounds now resonated through the ground. Whatever monster animal was heading their way, it was very close now. There was now loud crashing noises in the underbrush, the trees swayed wildly.

“What’s up with that bird?” Sully asked stopping to squint up at the sky. “Hawks don’t attack people, do they?”

Ambril looked beyond her just as the giant hawk broke into a dive just above them. “This one does! Move!” Ambril shoved her friends forward before making a dive under a small bush. She scrunched into a ball as the grass near her was suddenly flattened by a large foot. A familiar hollow squawk sounded righr above her.

“Fowlclun!” Ambril yelled as she scrambled up.

Fowlclun’s indignant bellow rippled throughout the forest like a tsunami. The hawk, caught mid-dive desperately tried to pull itself out but didn’t succeed and rammed beak first into Fowlclun’s chimney.

“Now you git back to whar you belong!” Came a scrappy angry voice. “If it wasn’t for my trick elbow, I’d take ya over my knee, you flea bitten old crow!” Hendoeth’s hollered as a cloud of gray feathers floated the airways.

“Err---sorry, Sid, no offense.” She said in a more normal tone.

“None taken.” Came Sid’s brittle drawl.

“Now vamoose, ya yellow bellied old Coot! Attackin’ defenseless kids in broad daylight! Shame on ya! You have no business bein’ here and you know it!”

There was an injured croak and then a shocking brilliant snap of light. Ambril felt the gray presence leave. Feathers floated down all around the three friends as they collected themselves and assessed damages. Sully had a nasty scrape down one arm from the brambles. Ygg had a few new bumps and bruises but otherwise he was fine. Fowlclun brought the house to the ground with Hendoeth astride her front porch decked out in a big grin.

“My there ain’t nothing like a little sparring with an old enemy to perk up the appetite, ain’t there?” She crowed throwing her head back. “Come on in, we’ll talk and eat while we travel back to the Wall.”

She turned but found the doorway blocked by a heap of beaming furniture.

“We came as soon as we could!” Ambril recognized Trip’s voice. Ambril could hear Spot barking in the background.

“And lost another tea cup and saucer.” Grumbled Cerreg.

“We have sandwiches and hot chocolate nearly ready, come in, come in!” said Ester as she balanced on Trip’s handlebars.

“Well Tarnation! We can’t get through edgewise. Give a body some room!” Groused Hendoeth giving the massive grandfather clock a shove.

The furniture and toys lumbered aside apologetically as Hendoeth lead the way flipping back one of her braids as she did so. Ambril had a hard time keeping a grin off her face as she watched her friends greet Ester and the others in open-mouthed amazement. They soon recovered when the sandwiches and hot chocolate appeared. Sid was there leaning against the fireplace and nodded to Ambril as she sat down on the big sofa. There was a fat blue-eyed squirrel perched on Sid’s shoulder smiling broadly at her.

Trip bustled over to Ambril with a platter carefully balanced on his handlebars and leaned in to offer her a scone. “The Gray Lady, she’s a wily one isn’t she?”

“You know her?” asked Ambril choosing a large blueberry studded one from the pile.

“I should say so! Know her! Why she’s the reason I’m---!”

“I’m surprised she showed her old hooked beak here after what Sid did to her last time!” The fat squirrel interrupted. “That old bat!” The squirrel steamed. Sid raised a hand to calm her just as Fowlclun lurched hard to one side and he ended up grabbing her tail to keep her from sliding off his shoulder.

Ambril scrambled to maintain her balance and managed to catch a plate of cookies and Tweek, the crystal flower.

“Mercy, she was nearly done in just then!” Hendoeth hustled over to Ambril and took Tweek from her. “Ya alright in there Tweekie girl?” The flower glowed dully twice.

“That ‘s a Navel-mundi flower right?” asked Sully looking curiously at the sculpture. Ester was bandaging up her arm.

“Navel-mundi, Eh?” Hendoeth’s bright eyes latched onto Sully. “That’s too formal for us here, we call it a Forget-Me-Not.” She frowned at the beautiful object in her hands. “Shame thought, Tweek, she has been forgotten. “In fact, I think she’s even forgotten herself. That is, who she is, where she’s from.” Ambril heard a faint tinkling of bells in her head as the flower glowed more strongly this time. Hendoeth shook her head sadly. “It’s just not right to be cooped up for so long.”

“So what was the big hawk and why was she attacking me?” Asked Ambril folding her arms and staring at Hendoeth.

Hendoeth grunted, her face thunderous. “That Gray she-devil! She has no business in my forest…crazy as a loon, she is.” She muttered but then said, “She’s called the Gray Lady, her domain’s the Gray Lands on the banks of the River Styx.” When the three kids looked incredulously at her she nodded. “Yep, I do mean THAT River Styx.” She turned back to Ambril and peered intently at her. “Now, why do you think she was after you in particular?”

“Well, she spoke to me in my mind. She said something about having to pay the price and accused me of taking something that belonged to her.”

Hendoeth scoffed. “She’s barmy, has been for centuries, it’s said she lost her mind in all that gray fog she’s forced to live in. There’s no sense of time or place there, it’s all bunched together in one mess…the Gray Lands.” Hendoeth looked lost for a moment herself and then shuddered. “I don’t know why she’d be after you but I’ve a notion she doesn’t know herself.” Hendoeth smoothed out her apron. “So here’s what we’ll do. Fowlclun and I’ll keep a look out for her out here in the forest and you three do not stray out from behind that wall, you hear me?” She said seriously. “The Wall’s strong enough to hold back Hades himself.”

Ambril looked at Sully and Ygg, “Yeah, I think we’re all O.K. with that, right?”

Sully and Ygg nodded.

“Ruff!” Was heard from the fireplace. It wasn’t Spot’s bark.

“Stay! Stay, boy! Now don’t you start galavantin’ round the room and setting fire to the curtains agin Teg!” Hollered Hendoeth. “I just got the new ones up!! She turned and scurried over to the fireplace.

“That’s a Gryphon!” yelled Ygg.

Teg caught sight of Ambril and wagged his tail, sparks flying with every thump.

“He’s just a pup, really.” Said Hendoeth in a motherly tone.

He was about four feet long with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle His tail was long and was now wound twice around his body. He had a stubby beak open in a smile and large amber eyes with long lashes. Instead of fur he had bright red scales covering his body.

“Meet Teg,” he’s a Fire Gryphon. Said Hendoeth proudly. “One of the last I’m afraid.” She said as she grabbed a badly scorched oven mitt and scratched under the Gryphon’s chin. Teg half closed his eyes and purred, the tip of his tail swinging back and forth dreamily and smoke curled from his mouth.

Ambril held out her hand to him. He sniffed it curiously then, extending his beak he sniffed at the rest of her. He gave one yip before turning back to Hendoeth’s scratching.

“He likes you.” Said Hendoeth with a smile.

“Is he always this—um—hot?” asked Sully beginning to fan herself. Ambril had to admit the Gryphon was putting out a lot of heat.

“Well, he being a teenager--- he’s a mite---unpredictable.” Said Hendoeth.

“She means he can’t seem to moderate his temperature worth beans.” Said Ester from across the room.

“He’s always in-between.” Put in Trip who had rolled behind the sofa. “And his allergies are somethin’ fierce. Why we’ve lost all our tea towels, two rugs and a whole stack of woodworking magazines.” He rolled nervously back and forth.

“Who’s the woodworker?” asked Ambril.

“It helps to pass the time.” Sniffed Cerreg as he motioned to a long line of birdhouses on the mantel.

“Those are right fine.” Said Ygg admiringly.

“I just dabble really,” said Cerreg dismissively. Though Ambril thought she detected a small smile of satisfaction.

The Gryphon suddenly wrinkled his nose. Hendoeth snapped back dragging the kids with her.

“Cerreg!, Grab the rug!”

“Why is it always me?” Cerreg rolled his eye and clumped his way to the rug. He gave a well-placed kick with his claw and ball foot and the rug rolled up and banged gently into the sofa.

The gryphon screwed up his nose again and huffed once, twice and then…

“Ever-one take cover!” barked Hendoeth raising her arms protectively in front of the kids.

With a great gust of fire, the Gryphon sneezed, filling the room with flames. Ambril’s toes curled as she felt the heat right through her sneakers. But it died down in an instant leaving everyone slightly singed but otherwise fine.

“Ever-one Okey Dokey?” asked Hendoeth swiftly appraising them.

A hollow caw resonated through the house.

“I know, I know, but nothin’s burning this time.” Said Hendoeth soothingly. She reached over and stroked the feathered wall. “Nothing to worry about.”

Just as before, Teg had sneezed himself away. Well at least he sneezed most of himself away. There was about a foot of tail left in the fireplace, attached to nothing but thin air. It wagged slightly and kicked up clouds of soot.

“Oh, Bandersnitches!” said Hendoeth and made a grab for it. She got it on the third try and tied it loosely to the pothook, which swung above the grate.

“So where’s the other---um---four/fifth’s of him?” asked Sully staring curiously at the trussed tail.

Hendoeth shrugged as she straightened up and wiped the soot off her face with her apron.

“He’s in-between.” Said Ester confidently.

“Wish we knew what that little guy was allergic to…”mused Hendoeth watching the tail jerk around. “One day he’ll sneeze himself to a place he can’t get back from.” Her face filled with concern.

“Trip it’s your turn.” Said Cerreg.

“It’s not, it’s your turn Cerreg, I did it the last three times.”

“Well, I’m just not about to do it today, my chimes are off what with the bounding around Fowlclun has been doing.”

Trip made a face at him but after fetching some wood and matches he soon had a regular fire going in Teg’s place.

“Come on kids,” said Hendoeth. “I need to hear what all has been happening to you.”

She settled herself on the sofa and beckoned at Ambril and her friends. Sully claimed the sofa next to Hendoeth while Ygg and Ambril pulled up chairs.

“Okay, now start at the beginning, ‘bout when I left you off the last time, I guess.” She said to Ambril.

And they began. First Ambril talked, but soon Sully and Ygg were adding their part to when they found the Astarte, Mrs. Twid’s tea and the gnomes. Sid with the squirrel now curled up in the crook of his elbow listened as they talked on and on. Hendoeth laughed and slapped her knee so hard Ambril thought she might be having some sort of fit when they got to the flying powder experiment. But she settled down quickly and wiped her eyes.

“Lemme see that stuff.” She said still giggling.

Sully pulled out a small plastic box from her back pocket. “We spilled it all, right at the end.” Said Sully ruefully.

“YOU spilled it, ya mean.” Grumbled Ygg.

Hendoeth gave it a sharp rap with her knuckles and peered inside. “Not all, see? There’s still some left.” she said holding it up. There was a light dusting of powder coating the bottom of the container.

“This might just be enough, I reckon.” She mused.

“For what?” Asked Ygg apprehensively.

“Getting you over the wall, that’s what.” Said Hendoeth as she jumped to her feet.

Ambril looked around and noticed that Fowlclun had come to a standstill. Outside the window she could see the Gazebo’s spire just beyond a familiar stonewall.

“That was fast!” said Sully jumping up herself. “It’s still light out so I guess I won’t be grounded after all!” She crowed happily.

They stepped out into the beginning of a spectacular sunset.

“Not much here.” Hendoeth muttered as she held the box up over their heads and sprinkled a few grains of powder over all three kids. “So ya git just one shot, hear me?”

“Why’d you do our heads and not our feet?” Asked Sully.

Ygg was wrinkling his nose, trying not to sneeze.

“Better control, of course.” She said pointing to her temple. “Ya use your brain to steer, see?” She broke out in giggles again. “NOT yer feet.”

“Won’t we have problems getting back over the wall because of all the…um…defensive wards?” asked Ambril anxiously.

“Naw, it knows you belong inside, it’ll sense it.” Said Hendoeth dismissively and then smiled at her fondly. “You do remind me of Rosa, ya know. She was smart, spunky too.”

Cerreg cleared his throat. “The sun, Hendoeth, they’ll be late.”

“Ah right, now off you go you three. Remember now, ya get one jump. Try and make it a good one.”

“We got that,” said Sully rubbing her newly bandaged arm.

Ambril stepped off Fowlclun’s porch and onto Trelawnyd’s formidable wall. As her foot touched the stones she could feel something denser than air slice through her for an instant, assessing her. It seemed to approve for a second later it was gone.

“You ever need us, just give a holler!” Hendoeth called as Fowlclun stepped back and turned toward the forest. Just before the chimney disappeared from view Ambril heard, “Are you sure that stuff’ll work?”

“Well, almost, but ya know, they’re kids, they’ll bounce, right?”

Fortunately Ygg hadn’t heard. He stood well back from the edge.

Sully had squeezed her eyes shut, intent on observing the affects of the flying powder. She gasped suddenly. “I think I’m feeling it!” she said excitedly and grabbing Ygg’s hand she dragged him over to the edge. “Are you ready?” she bent her knees as if to jump.

“Whoa now, let’s take another second to think about this,” said Ygg as he dragged her back again. “You might be imagining it, let’s wait a bit longer.” He said taking a big breath and then he sneezed.

By then Ambril could feel something as well. It was a light-headed tingling feeling, which made her nose twitch and her ears vibrate. “I’m feeling it too,” she said.

“Okay, enough stalling!” Said Sully firmly gripping both their hands and pulling them right over to the edge.

“Wait, wait---!“

“Come on, you can’t spend your life up here!” Sully said giving his hand a shake. Ygg shuddered. “Just one big jump.” he said clenchinghis teeth.

“Right, on the count of three, ready?” Said Sully.

Ambril felt herself beginning to levitate.

“One, two---Jump!” shouted Sully as she soared up and off the wall.

Ambril followed. Ygg was last. Just before he jumped he sneezed again.

Sully had gotten the most height from her jump. She had already cleared the brambles and was making a beeline for the Gazebo.

“Wheeeeeee!” Sully did a couple of somersaults before she managed to grab one of its columns. She climbed down the vine to the floor.

Ambril too bounded over the tangled mess of greenery easily but made a less graceful landing when she tripped on a treetop and found herself rolling up the porch steps. “Oof!” she said as she banged her head.

“Wasn’t that great?” Giggled Sully. “I’m gonna try making a new batch tomorrow, but this time I’ll---“

“Whoa, Hey, what the---!” It was Ygg who had not cleared the overgrowth and had gotten entangled in the wrong sort of plant.

The plant flailed it’s long spiky vines and wrapped one firmly around Ygg’s ankle as it opened its center. Long rows of shiny thorns glinted around a large mouth-like hole. It slowly began pulling Ygg in as the thorns clicked together excitedly.

“Whoa! We have to do something!” Screamed Sully unhelpfully.

Ambril thought immediately of her Ashera but looking around saw her backpack was too far away. He’d be toast before she had gotten the zipper open. Then she heard jangle of offkey horns.

“*I’ll handle this*,” groused fLit in her head. “*I’ll rescue the plant and if I have time save your friend. You’re so clumsy, you’ll probably kill him*.” fLit briefly showed himself just in front of her face. “*I’m talking about the plant*.”

That is exactly what Ambril had been planning to do, hopefully before the plant killed her friend. The fairy wasted no time. Ambril saw a spray of light and felt a frizz of magic. The plant puckered as if it had tasted something sour and coughed. Then it grumpily pulled its brambles back and disappeared back into the greenery. Almost as an afterthought Ygg was flung at the Gazebo.

He landed on the roof, rolled nearly off the edge but saved himself at the last moment and with the help of the vines, landed on his feet.

“It was the sneezing that did it,” said Sully knowingly as she and Ambril ran over “You sneezed off most of it before you took off, remember?” She said trying to pull Ygg to his feet. “So your jump wasn’t high enough and---“

“Garn, I just want to enjoy breathing in and out and being alive for a minute, without being a part of your science experiment.” Said Ygg freeing his hand and sitting heavily on a bench.

“So any—um—damage?” asked Ambril looking for any obvious bite marks or gashes.

Ygg moved his arms and legs experimentally. “Luckily it’s spring and the thorns be still green.” He mused as he slowly got to his feet. He wobbled a bit but then steadied himself. “Flying is nought for me.” He said rubbing his shoulder.

Sully patted him on the back hurriedly as she looked anxiously at the sky. “Whatever. But---we ought to get a move on, you know? My Mom’s probably dialing the sheriff’s office right now wondering where the 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 and grabbing their bikes, they pedaled hard toward home.

# Chapter 32 Unk

But the day’s adventures weren’t done. They were almost through the worst part of the garden when Sully screamed, “Ambril! Look Out!”

Ambril had no time to react as she was grabbed from her bike and lifted upward. Her bike continued on alone for a while before gently sheering off into a bush. Something gripped her tightly around the middle.

“Iggy? This you baby boy?” A deep gravely voice boomed in her ear. It resonated right through her with a thrum of magic. She rose high in the air until she was parked in front of a broad, flat face. It was grinning broadly displaying an array of crooked, yellow teeth. The nut-brown eyes that peered from under 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 was once again airborne.

Fortunately, the garden was so thickly overgrown that Ambril didn’t go far. She landed in a tall prickly bush then 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 mountainous man. “Put him down, you overgrown Rambo!” She screamed as she kicked his ankle, but 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 furry pouch hung. The gigantic man now had Ygg in his hands and was happily patting him on the head. It looked like it really hurt.

“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 a little rusty at it.

Ygg struggled against the fist around his waist.

“Put him down NOW!” Roared Sully and then began attacking the big man’s knee with a large branch. “Ambril? If you’re all right come and help me I think I’ve almost got his attention!” she yelled over her shoulder.

“I won’t be talking to you until you be putting me down.” Panted Ygg his face had turned a nasty shade of lavender. Ambril could see it was hard for him to breathe.

“You not fly away?” Said the big man as he gently set Ygg down and squatted in front of him. “I see you fly like birdy before.”

Ambril waded through the tall weeds and dusted herself off while keeping a wary eye on the giant.

Ygg looked relieved. “He don’t 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 then smiled wider.

“You be friends then? The other birdy babies and you?” The big man seemed very impressed. “Before I be having two friends, one was your Da.” He nodded sadly.

Sully stopped whacking the giant, and slowly retreated to just out of grabbing range.“Wait, Ygg Who is this?”

The giant turned his head toward her and smiled, then went back to gazing at Ygg. “I be Unk.” He said simply and waited expectantly as if that would mean something.

But Ygg looked blank.

The giant tried again. “I be your Unk, your Da’s brother.” He said and smiled even more beatifically. “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 briefly contracted the giant’s smile. “I be walking and searching and looking for baby boy Yggy.” Unk stood up so suddenly Ambril, Ygg and Sully each took a huge step back.

The giant rummaged in the furry pouch tied around his neck and pulled out a small bundle of paper tied up with ribbon. He held it out to Ygg and smiled again as sweetly as only a giant can. The bundle looked huge in Ygg’s hands. He pointed excitedly to a blob of red wax with a dirty thumbprint on it. “These be from me Mam, this be my family’s seal.” His hands shook slightly as he undid the ribbon and pulled out the first letter. There were about ten. Each with Ygg’s name written on it in old-fashioned script.

“Your Mam, she come to see me in forest. She tell me about your Da.” The big man’s face suddenly crumpled with pain. “She so---so, sad.”

“I tell them that I bring you back.” He shook his massive braids vigorously making Ambril and Sully duck. “She will be no sad then.”

“Wait, did you say you told ‘them’ you’d be bringing me back?” Ygg asked staring into Unk’s face. “It wasn’t my Mam who asked you to come then?”

Unk looked a little startled ‘They say she too sad to ask. They asking is the same as your Mam asking.”

“Who is---no wait, let me be reading this to you,” said Ygg unfolding the letter. His face tightened with sorrow.

“See you read her sadness.” Unk nodded his face tightening too. “You too wishing to be home.” He grabbed Ygg again and turned as if to leave. “She too sad, you too sad. We make it all better at home place.”

“Bye bye birdie babies, Ambie and Soooly! We be going back to mountain village now!” He waved as he moved toward to the wall.

“You be needing to hear what’s in this letter!” 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 in his surprise. His face went from confused to furious in about a half second. “Not true, you be saddening your Mam, she be writing you with her tears---Your brothers tell me how she cry as she writes.” His own eyes filled with tears. “You not be a good baby boy, Yggy!’ He stomped his big hairy foot creating shock waves through the ground and shook Ygg like a stuffed toy. His anger was so alive it made the nearby bushes bend 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 nought what me Mam wrote here, that be for sure.” Ygg patted the big hand wrapped firmly around his waist and said. “We be needing to talk more, you and me.” Then he pointed to the ground.

Unk looked curiously at the paper in Ygg’s hand and let him down.

Ygg wriggled free and took a deep breath. “Before I be reading you this, you need to be telling us the story of your coming.”

Unk cocked his head to one side like a humungous bird. “O.K., I try to be remembering.” He scrunched up his face in concentration. “I be seeing her in the forest---she come like your Da come to see me. 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. I be so sad. Your Da, he be my friend, my---brother---besty friend.” A bucket-sized tear squeezed out of one eye and streamed down his face. “She be so lonely.” He nodded at the three in front of him. “I see it all through her.” He looked at Ygg and smiled again displaying all of his many 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---to find a better place. She be giving me these letters for reading about you. But I not read. I know besty place is the home place.” He nodded wisely, ”I be knowing that since theynot let me go home no more, I be lonely in the forest.” He paused to sniff, which sounded like the starting of a jet engine. “I was a wee boy then. I be not wanting this for you.” He continued looking resolutely at Ygg.

“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 have a law in Chert which says all throwbacks be part of the wild strain of earth-kind and they must be taken back to the wildness from which they came. Da remembered the day the Elders came 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. “You be just a boy of eight. 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 be watching where they left you.”

The big man wrapped his arms 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 starry 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 most nights til I be growed.” He said softly. “He taught me as much of the forest as he knew and then when I be bigger, I be teaching him some too.” Unk shook his head. “I be nought good at letterings but I learn the forest ways. I do that.” He cocked his head.

“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 slight 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---But they no like me. They call me---freaky--- and running away back to the home place.” Your Da, he be saddened by them running and calling me names.” Unk’s shoulders sagged. “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 Boy.” He prodded Ygg with his elbow and sent him sprawling. “Do you ‘member?”

Ygg got to his feet slowly. “I think I be remembering me Mam and Da and I walked into the forest and sang songs and told stories by a fire. There be a big man there too.” Ygg looked up at Unk and smiled. “I not know you be me Uncle.”

The big man smiled back. “I be your Unk, that be true.”

But then Ygg scratched his head. “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. But now I be wondering why they be asking this if’n it nought be what your Mam wants.” He said clearly mystified.

“Me brothers are nought like me and you,” said Ygg smoothing out the letter in his hand. “Here---I be reading this to you now.”

Ambril saw the letter was tear stained and written in a very shaky hand.

**My Deary Ygg,**

**I am foolishing writing to you again. I know you not be reading this as I no nought where you are but it is a comfort to do this sillinessing. I be missing you. But more I be hoping you be finding a happy place. A home place where they be not forcing you to live a narrow drip 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. They say it is besty for the village but I be thinking it be besty for their pocketbooks. You must not be blaming them they come out this way. You know you were always differenting. 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 Yggy, Go and be happy.**

**Here is me sending you my biggest love,**

**Your Mam**

Ygg blinked hard trying to hide his tears. Ambril quickly brushed some from her own eyes. Unk was weeping with such gusto he soon created a huge mud puddle around him. Ambril ducked down as she watched him pull out a pink and green paisley handkerchief and blew a long blast on his nose.

Sully could keep quiet no longer. “Okay, so I get that your Mam wanted you to have a better life but I don’t get why your brothers want to bring you back.”

Ygg ducked his head and shrugged, embarassed. “A strong young back is worth a little something to the Mining Company.” He said to his shoes.

“Your own brothers would sell you to the company?” Sully nodded decidedly. “I never thought I’d say this but you’re better off with Mrs. Twid.”

They all laughed at that, sad though it was. It helped to clear the air a bit. But the laughter stopped abruptly when a huge ball of greenery sailed over Ygg’s head and exploded over Unk. It unfurled and draped itself over him like a net.

“Charge!” Came a tinny yell as Ambril’s bike sailed down the path pumped by gnomes with bomber nutshell helmets; 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 a big hairy toe and upended itself. It launched the gnomes right at a very startled Unk. The gnomes began kicking, biting and poking him with sticks.

“Stop attacking me Unk!” Shouted Ygg racing over and pulling off whatever gnome he could get his hands on.

The gnomes paid no 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 poking Unk’s ear with his stick when Unk decided he’d had enough and shook himself---just once. It was enough to send every gnome flying. Unk then tore the green net away as if it were paper lace.

“Toad Butts!” Ambril heard Bummil yell as he sailed overhead. There was a thunk and a loud crack.

Ygg groaned. “There be another hour of work.” He grumbled then yelled. “It’s alright! He be me Uncle---me Da’s brother. He will nought hurt me!”

“Ah well why’d ya not say so in the first place! Instead of yellin’ like a stuck pig.” 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!”

Ygg spent a moment introducing Unk to all the gnomes. Unk nodded politely.

But Baldot couldn’t stop staring. “Hey there Unk, you’re good with foresting, yeah?”

Unk nodded slowly.

“Do ya think you might could help us with a few of the---err---garden residents?” Asked Baldot hopefully.

Unk thought seriously about this for just a little too long.

“What he means is can you be helping them with the garden?” Put in Ygg finally. “This be a powerful magicky garden. It needs who knows the forest to handle them.”

Unk brightened immediately. “I be knowing the forest, but good, I be.” He said confidently and then looked thoughtful. “There be nought back at the village to claim me.“ Then he slowly looked at Ygg and smiled. “I be thinking that maybe I be making a new home place, close to my Iggy Ygg, he be me family now.”

Ygg looked taken aback for a moment but then smiled. “It be true that it would be nice to have family near.”

“But, where are you going to live, Unk?” Asked Sully.

Unk looked unconcerned. “I be sleeping with the trees.”

Ygg stared at him a minute. “You mean here in the garden?”

Unk looked around uncertainly. “I be sleeping with my friends there.” 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 Tree with elephant trunks hanging from it. ”These trees I---um---not friendly with…yet.” He said ruefully.

“Is there any house where me Unk will fit?” Ygg asked Baldot.

Baldot scratched his beard thoughtfully. “I can’t think of anything off hand excepting the carriage house. It’s plenty roomy. But we were planning on making it our hospital.”

“What are some of the gnomes sick?” Asked Sully.

“Naw, Nought us---“We gnomes never feel poorly,” Baldot leaned in toward them and whispered, “excepting when the soil turns bad. Now that’s an entirely different bundle of cattails.” He said nodding sagely. He lifted his boot and Ambril could see where something had eroded away the sole of his boot.

“What about tonight then? For Unk?” Asked Ygg.

“I be having to leave for an 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 this be your new home place?” His face was solemn.

Ygg looked his Uncle full in the face and took a deep breath. “I be happier here than going down the mines.” He said with surety. “It’s true I be missing me Mam. But her letter be telling me she be happiest if I keep looking for a better way, a better life.”

“Maybe someday you be finding this and then we go to fetch her here with us.” Unk said.

Ygg 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 deepening shadows.

Ambril looked around and her heart nearly stopped. The sun had already 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 or maybe if they take the manacles off!” She said as she pushed off hard. In another second she had disappeared through the hedge.

Ambril hurried to her bike. A couple of the gnomes had brushed it off and put 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 pack---“

“Night everyone! “Ambril yelled as loud as she could to drown out Unk’s last words.

“Nighty Night!” Called Bummil. “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. Her Mom had been hard at work as there were stacks of signs with arrows and words like ‘Parking’, ‘Lot Full’, and ‘Restrooms’. Clearly Mrs. Sweetgum had been helping out as others were lettered in an old-fashioned script and said “This way to the Loo”, “Fully Engaged, ‘Fancy a cuppa Tea?’.

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 of lavender and earwax. Ambril had almost made it across the kitchen when her mother turned around.

“Ambril? Ambril! How many times have I told you to get home before the streetlights come on? Her mother raged. “Why if I hadn’t been 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!” Ambril’s mother put her one free hand on her hip and glared at her.

“Sorry---We just---lost track of time.”

Her mother frowned and went back to stirring. The gooey stuff was getting so thick her mother had to put her whole back into each rotation. “Plants are fascinating aren’t they? It wasn’t until we came back here that I realized how much I missed working with them.” She stopped to wipe her forehead. “There, now I just have to get this stuff into the forms 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 that in this house---“ She stopped and pursed her lips. “You’d better run upstairs and shower---Oh and Mrs. Sweetgum left you some dinner.”

“Great!” said Ambril and grabbed a plate out of the Frig before going upstairs. She paused to watch her Mom. Her mother looked different---she looked---happy. “What are you making, Mom?” She asked.

Her mother flashed a wide smile at her. “Betula asked me 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. I made my own soaps and candles when I was a kid.” Her mother fussed with the forms laid out on the counter. “Gran taught me.” She then picked up a huge ladle and started ladling the gloop into the forms.

Ambril then figured it out. The something new was a buzz of magic. Her mother was making her own brand of remedies! But she didn’t know she was. Ambril smiled to herself, her family heritage again.

“O.K. then if you’re sure you don’t need me.”

“No darling, I’m fine.” Her mother adjusted her apron and approached the pot of gloop as a lion tamer approaches a lion. “I kind of have to do this part myself.”

Ambril looked down her 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.”

“Just this once.” Said her mother distractedly. “Remember to take a shower BEFORE bed. 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 could sit down she heard the zip of her backpack and fLit hovered over her dinner.

“*What happened out there, you two legged llama? The wards on the wall made you so fuzzy I couldn’t track you*.” fLit thought at her louder than necessary.

“*Look I’ll tell you but I have to eat something first*.” She thought back.

The fairy wrinkled its nose in disgust but looked interested as she removed the plastic wrap from the food.

“*Are you hungry*?” asked Ambril 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 next to Ambril’s plate.

“*Here,*” Ambril held up a strawberry, she figured that if his mouth and belly were full he might be a little less grumpy.

The fairy took it and literally stuck his face right inside it. He ripped out a large chunk and chewed noisily. Strawberry juice dripped all down his tunic.

“*Nice table manners*.” Thought Ambril at him.

The fairy just thought the sound of a train wreck at her and bit into the ripe berry again and again eventually finishing it. Then he picked up another.

“Do you mind?” said Ambril out loud and tried to shove a napkin under him. He was dripping all over her computer. She wiped up his mess wondering if Unk had beter table matters. She guessed yes.

“*Not funny, not funny at all Doo Doo breath*.”

Accept for fLit’s occasional slurping, they both ate in silence while Ambril ran through her adventures in the woods in her head. The macaroni and cheese was delicious. 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 does know how to grow a very fine berry*.” He wiped his mouth on his tunic managing to smear juice in his hair. The he floated 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, “*Would it have hurt you to tidy up the rest of the place*?” She wondered if she could learn to clean her room like that.

fLit shrugged and sat down on the edged of her computer.

“*I want to see the part in the clearing 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*” said the fairy impatiently.

She moved on to the flying episode and shooting into space---

“*That was funny actually, but this is boring, I WAS THERE THEN TOO*!” fLit was getting annoyed.

Ambril moved quickly through the lightening and thunder, falling on a redwood tree, and then meeting the dancing tree---

“*A Wood 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 variegated skin, the rustling sound it made as it swirled its fern-like foliage around, the crown of brambles and flowers on her head.

“*Crown? She wore a crown*?”

Ambril thought the image at the fairy once again and not gently. Then went onto the hawk attack, Hendoeth and arriving back at the gazebo.

“*Well,*” said the fairy unable to keep how impressed he was out of his voice, “*The Green Woman was none other than Hylde-Vinde, the May Queen of the forest*.”

The fairy turned around and stared at her hard, really looking at her. “*Why is she befriending you*?” He said unable to keep the scorn 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 wasn’t dealing with me, just tring to kill me. What do you know about he?r*”

“*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---it’s for beings who have unfinished business or who have simply lost their way.”*

“*So it’s a place you go after you die*?”

“*Well---yes and no. Those in the gray lands haven’t really passed on---they’re stuck.*” fLit continued. “*The Gray Lands are timeless. The Gray Lady has no way of knowing what’s past, present and future---to her it’s all the same. Some say this has driven her to madness*.”

“*I so agree. So is she trying to kill me for something I do in the future*?”

fLit shrugged. “*Guess so, though it could be she just dislikes you on principle*.” He sneered. “*You being just a little human-kind Billy goat*---“

“Kid.” Corrected Ambril.

“--- *Who was given an Ashera and chosen by the Ledrith Glain*.” His eyes narrowed with envy, as he looked her over dismissively. “*Even if you weren’t human-kind, you’d still be so--- 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.” *Not so fast, we have to do some training*.” Said the fairy huffily.

Ambril shut her eyes tightly and breathed in and out a couple of times. She did need some practice…”*O.K. what are we doing tonight*?”

“*You’ve gotten the hang of using energy as a weapon. Now let’s work on sighting*.”

“*Sighting*?”

“*Yes, when you look with your being and not your eyes.”*

Ambril was just plain confused. “*Come again*?”

fLit rolled his eyes. “*Right, I forgot what a plodder you are*.” He scoffed. “*Pick up your Ashera and close your eyes*.”

Ambril did as she was told and instantly the fog rushed in and greeted her like an old friend. “fLit was there with her. “*You see all this stuff*?” He said pointing at the fog. “*This is here because you can’t sight.*”

“*Really? So---what do I do to gain sight?”*

*“You have to think---wider*.” Said the fairy pushing out the fog with his hands. *“You have to focus your energy in a broadening circle. Some magic wielders can look around the world, literally.”*

Ambril thought about it and then tried it…and then again…nothing. The fog just swirled closer.

“*Try focusing on what’s next to you, not all of it at once. Start small, with one thing at a time.”*

Ambril tried again. This time she became aware of her computer…it’s pointy corners and then the window behind it…and the shelves above…Each time she focused on the hazy images around her they began to clear away until she and fLit were standing in a fog free room. “*O.K., so what? I can do this with my eyes open?*”

“Keep going.” Said fLit with a yawn as he floated by her lying down with his legs crossed.

Ambril grumbled but went back to work she pushed outward from her window to the tree beyond. The fog cleared for her there. It was then she saw them, the little bits of glowing light. “What are those?”

“Those are other beings, it’s their life’s energy you’re seeing.” Said fLit. “Magical beings are very bright with energy while the animals living in this tree are just animals and so glow less.” He continued. “Using your Sight you can detect other beings magical or otherwise before they see you.”

“*I see how that might come in handy.”*

“*Very handy, especially if you need to draw off energy from them for your own use*---“

“*What? You mean take their life’s energy*? *Doesn’t that hurt them?”*

*“It might but what’s the problem? They’re lower life forms, Fairies do it all the time.*”

Ambril snorted at his thoughtlessness. “*Alright, that’s enough for tonight.”* “*We have to keep practicing, you still don’t know-*--“

“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, 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. She sighed with relief 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 friends 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 Friday afternoon when they shoved their bikes into the stand in front of Betula’s and waltzed inside. At least Ygg did. Ambril stumbled in after him, still groggy from her late night practices with fLit. The practices were paying off though. After a rocky start she was getting fairly good at focusing energy. She just didn’t know how she was going to repair the burn marks on her bedroom walls. Sully came in last, dragging a huge sweet smelling box behind her.

“Here you go Betula, my Mom wanted you to have these strawberries. They’re really fresh.” She said falling into one of Betula’s famous hugs.

“You picked them yourself didn’t you!” Said Betula as she flipped open the box and smiled at what she saw. “I tell you what, you go take a load off over there with your friends and I’ll bring you a bowl of these and some 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 folks found out what we really did!” whispered Ambril.

Sully grinned back.

“How about you Ygg, What did Mrs. Twid do to you?” asked Ambril.

Ygg shrugged, “she does’na care what I do as long as I get me work done. But she made me clean out her root cellar and do some extra deliveries on account of the dance 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 think about when you’re pulling up milkweed.” She said and then leaned forward. “What if what Ambril thinks is true, that Mrs. Twid had a reason to poison half the town?” She nodded to the Shoe Stop across the street and whispered. “A real estate reason!” “It’s all going according to plan but then…it stops working.” Sully poked Ygg in the chest. “You’re making the deliveries, she knows she put the poison tea in the 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 still came up with handful. She popped 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 we be making remedy tea and the gnomes are delivering it.” Said Ygg matter-of-factly. “What more can we do?”

“She’ll go around us this time, right to her mark.”

“You mean she’s going to poison people 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 behind them opened. Ambril saw Ygg suddenly stiffen and knew who it was without turning her head.

“Are you lounging again you lazy clod?” A stiff sharp voice broke over them.

“I’ve done finished my 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. She turned and saw Mrs. Twid towering over them with the birdlike Mrs. Flood latched onto her arm. Ambril realized with a start that Sully was right. 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. She walked hunched over clearly leaning on her tall strong friend.

“I don’t want to see you in here, Ygg.” Said Mrs. Twid angrily. “I have a sick friend in need of cheering up. So shoo the lot of you!”

Ambril jumped up and hurried outside right on Ygg’s heels. Sully though took her time putting on her backpack and slowly making her way to the door.

“She’s so crafty! Poisoning her friend right under every one’s noses!” Steamed Sully as they turned down the side alley.

“What?” Asked Ambril bewildered.

“I think 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. Everyone knows how jealous she is of her!” Sully jerked her thumb at the Sweet Shoppe next to them. “We have to see what’s going on in there!”

Ygg brightened. “I’m thinkin I know a way,” he said and led them to a half open window half way down the side alley. “You can see behind the counter and a bit of the main floor from here.” The window was very narrow but they squeezed together and managed to peer inside.

Mrs. Twid had just finished depositing Mrs. Flood in a chair and settled herself across the table from her. She reached over and patted her friend’s hand. “Now, now, you look so poorly Daisy, let’s have just a little bit of Betula’s tea before we tackle these real estate forms. Is that alright with you dear?” She purred.

She looked around the shop imperiously. “Betula! Please come here! 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 is 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 as she looked sadly through the window at Mrs. Flood who seemed to be struggling to stay upright.

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 pot of tea and some of my best scones to go with it.”

Ygg rummaged through his backpack and came up with one, lint-covered pouch of tea. “This is all I have on me.” 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 below her and was just about to drop the remedy tea in when---!

“And make sure it’s hot!” Said Mrs. Twid again louder than was needed. “It was lukewarm and tasteless last time!” Everyone in the shop turned to see what was going on.

Ambril pulled back just as Betula bustled up and picked up the teakettle. She felt it and put it back on the stove. She then 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 with the tea bag but found Betula had moved the pot down the counter. It would be a stretch now. She took carefully aim and threw it at the pot. The bag was just about to drop inside when its trailing string caught on the handle and the bag fell short, landing 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 her backpack unzip and felt a woosh of displaced air. The air sparkled around the teapot as the teabag miraculously slipped under the lid just as Betula clamped it shut.

“What the!---“ whispered Sully. “Did you see that?”

“Funny thing, I didna see anything but I know I should have.” Said Ygg suspiciously.

Ambril said nothing and tried to look innocent. 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 wants Mrs. Flood to have some sort of fit right here to really humiliate Betula.” Growled Sully.

They watched as Mrs. Flood brought the teacup to her lips and took a very small sip. Her lips puckered slightly and formed a little half smile. She thoughtfully took another sip and after a moment sat up a bit straighter. She smiled at her gaunt friend and picked up a scone. “Crystal you were right, having tea at Betula’s does wonders!” She said brightly and held it out for some more.

“Oh, well, I’m so pleased you are feeling better Daisy.” Said Mrs. Twid peering at her friend as she refilled her cup. She looked 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.

“There’s something terribly wrong with this! It must have artificial stimulants in it! Daisy, I’m not certain this tea is---well---safe.” She sputtered and tried to snatch her friend’s teacup away from her.

Mrs. Flood evaded her attempts. “I think it’s marvelous, this tea,” she said, “It reminds me of some I had at Fern’s the other day with those nice kids.”

Mrs. Twid’s face suddenly tensed with anger. “What kids?”

“Those nice children who were just here.”

Mrs. Twid went very still. “You mean---Ygg and---“.

But that’s all Ambril heard, someone grabbed her fron behind. “Look who’s here, Losers clogging up the alley! Can’t have that!” She twisted around just in time to see blonde hair and Lance’s sneering face before she was shoved right through the window. She flailed in midair but lost her balance and tumbled onto the counter. Her foot felt oddly---cold.

“Look Mommy, that girl has her foot in the ice cream!” Shouted a little girl.

Ambril’s foot was ankle deep in chocolate. With effort she managed to pull her foot out. But just her foot, her sneaker was sunk up to its laces in Kamikaze Chip.

“What the devil are you doing!” Shouted Betula both surprised and angry.

“It…it isn’t what it seems---I can explain---“

“You’ll explain by working off the cost of that ice cream!” Betula thrust an apron at her and pointed at a huge pile of dishes. Then she tugged on Ambril’s shoe until with a squelchy slurp it finally came free. She threw it into a bucket. “Better clean yourself up outside first!” She pointed to the back door.

“I’m really, really sorry.” Said Ambril giving the angry woman a wide berth.

She half hopped, half tiptoed to the alley and was rinsing off her shoe when Sully and Ygg limped into view. Sully had a smashed peach in her hair and Ygg had taken a tomato in the T-shirt.

“Lance---and his buddies.” Said Sully unnecessarily. “They pinned us down and started pelting us with---” She extracted the peach from her hair, “this stuff.”

“So what happened in there? Did anyone see you?” Asked Ygg worriedly.

Ambril held up her chocolaty shoe. “You could hardly miss me!” She could see Ygg was braced for bad news so she continued, “She knows it’s us. She saw you in the window.”

Ygg winced and started pacing the alley.

“And she definitely looked...vengeful.” Ambril tried unsuccessfully to wring out her shoe.

The alley door banged open and Betula filled the opening. She stood there a moment staring them down. “You have some explaining to do Ambril.” She growled.

# Betula’s secret

# Chapter 32 A break-in at school

Ambril hummed to herself as she coasted down the hill toward school the next morning. Just knowing Betula was on her side made her feel lighter and freer than she had in a while. But she stopped humming when she rode by The Sweet Shoppe. There was such a crowd of people on the sidewalk Ambril had trouble seeing the damage at first. Koda was struggling with sheets of plywood he had unloaded from an old truck.

“Please, wood comes through here now!” Koda shouted gruffly as he stood in the street balancing the unwieldy sheets. The onlookers parted just enough for Ambril to see Betula standing in a sea of broken glass. Sid had his arm around her trying to comfort her. Behind her, the Sweet Shoppe 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 zipped shut in front of her, blocking her entrance. After trying several times to break through the crowd, 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? Ambril you come here to see me right after school, ya hear me?” Ambril heard Betula’s strained voice over the buzz of the crowd.

“Betula, what happened? Are you all right? Is EVERYONE all right?” Ambril yelled back. The old man turned and glared at her again.

“I’m fine, but I’ll need your help after school, so come quick as you can!” Betula responded.

Ambril reluctantly got back on her bike and rode slowly away; the illusion of a perfect morning shattered. Who would attack wonderful, kind Betula? There was something really weird going on and it seemed to be getting worse. Ambril took a deep breath and blew it out frustrated and wished she could turn around and help out Betula, but she knew if she tried, Betula would just send her on to school. Koda and Sid were there helping Betula, she’d be fine Ambril reasoned. 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 half on and half off the curb. 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 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.

“It’s freaky today. Someone broke into the school last night and did some damage.” Said Riley a nervous smirk on his face. “I’m secretly hoping it was Breccia’s room. I need some serious distractions. She’s going to hate my diorama.” He continued as they walked over to Ygg and Sully. Ambril could smell rotting fruit on him again, he must have had an early morning dip in the dumpster courtesy of his brother again. “I ran out of time and had to use Lego people.” He smiled stiffly as he imitated 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. Does the school have an ant problem?”

Riley laughed, “Sounds like they will now! Good, I’m not the only one who cut corners.” He glanced over at her. “I couldn’t get into it…I have a hard time with the official history.”

“Why?” Asked Ambril.

Riley looked at her appraisingly a minute as they joined up with Ygg and Sully. “You know, history’s 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.

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 in front of the school. A fat, low branch low hugged the front window creating a low shelf 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 shimmied up the trunk and out along the branch. As they hunkered down among the foliage Ambril gasped. There was a clot of people hovering around a still figure lying on the floor. As they watched the med techs 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 techs began checking her vital signs and to Ambril’s relief her eyes fluttered open briefly. Beyond the flurry of action Ambril spotted the door to the janitor’s closet. Or at least she thought it was, now it was hard to tell. It looked blackened and puckered as if it had blasted with a blowtorch and then smashed with a Thor’s hammer. The door handle had been sheered off clean. She watched the janitor amble up with a thick chain and a padlock.

“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 elbowed through some medical equipment. Ms. Jonquil had now been moved to the stretcher. “Now, before ya get wheeled off there, Ms. Jonquil, can you tell me what happened?”

“I don’t want her over excited, Officer. Just a few questions, please.” Interjected one of the medical technicians.

Ambril had to strain to hear her soft reply. “Well, Officer Skarn…I…I had just let myself in the front door---“

“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 quivered as she continued. “I noticed the light right off---.“

“Light? What kind a’ light?” Asked Skarn scribbling madly.

“It was very bright, like a camera flash---and then there was this 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 really. 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 air hit me! It smelled like---the dumpster behind Dogwood Market.” 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, horns, and glowing…tattoos---“

Skarn just stared at her unbelievingly. “Right, large skull, red eyes, big mouth…teeth? Did it have long yellow teeth to eat you with...my dear?” Skarn chuckled derisively. “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…I’m not sure…everything went dark then…I think I must have 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., That’s enough. Let’s get you over to the hospital.” Said the Med Tech smoothly as she motioned Skarn away. “Harry, get the door, will you?” Ms. Jonquil was soon whisked down the steps and into the waiting ambulance, which then roared away, its lights flashing.

“Whoa, some one was magicing in the janitor’s closet.” Murmured Ygg.

Ambril nodded slowly. She was very familiar with that frizzy feeling, the 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 in the papers.” She said to Riley somewhat defensively. “Years ago.”

“Yeah, I think I remember hearing about that.” He said evasively. “Feldez was there then too, wasn’t he?”

Ambril drew in her breath quickly. Riley was right, Ms. Jonquil had mentioned he had been on the scene! He always seemed to be right there whenever a Dullaith appeared…it looked like her soon-to-be-stepfather was mixed up in this as well.

“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 there’s a lot of magic still in the air. But I mean there was something sort of…missing. It just doesn’t seem---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 a kid walked by eating a scone.

“Hey, that reminds me! There was an attack on the Sweet Shoppe last night too! Some one broke the front window. I saw it on my way to school. “

“Who would want to attack the Sweet Shoppe? There isn’t anything valuable in there unless you’re a suicidal diabetic.” Mused Sully.

“Was anyone hurt?” Asked Ygg.

“Betula seemed fine, but I don’t know, she sounded upset. Oh---and something else. Betula she’s---kind of like us.”

Sully snorted. “Betula’s nothing like us, she’s a great cook, she’s a grown-up—“

Ambril grabbed Sully’s arm and dragged her out of ear shot from the other kids. Ygg followed, then she whispered “No, I mean she does---you know what!”

Sully and Ygg’s couldn’t have looked more astonished if Ms. Breccia strolled through the parking lot in a bunny suit.

“Betula? Really? I wonder how many other people…” Ygg looked around the playground as if he expected to see magic weilders tagging people with Ashera’s and turning them into Newts.

“But last night Betula introduced me to her friends, these---magic sugar animals, you know the ones in the case? They’re alive!”

Ygg and Sully just stared at her.

“Ya know that makes sense to me, every so often I’ve noticed they’re a little different, the rabbit doesn’t always tie his laces neatly and the Bear’s eye patch moves from eye to eye.” Ygg said.

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.

“We have to get inside that room!” Whispered Ambril.

They were just passing the office when Ambril heard a familiar voice.

“No, no officer, perhaps later, I’d like to check on Ms. Jonquil just now. Shall we meet after lunch?” Feldez was just leaving the principal’s office with Skarn and Chief Buckthorne in tow.

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 but paused and sniffed the air experimentally. His face was blank as he watched Feldez turn and march out of the building.

“That’s it!” Hissed Ambril. The bell reverberated down the hallway. As they ran 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 their 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 corpses with a little sewage mixed in, anyway, a whole lot of rotting stuff.”

Sully took a big sniff.

“Are you quite finished, Sully?” Mr. Pinwydden stared down his nose 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.

Mr. Pinwydden launched into an involved explanation of essay organization. But Ambril only half listened. 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 armpits. She sat puzzling about it as Mr. Pinwydden droned on until the bell rang. Ambril managed to stumble through the rest of the morning.

Someone kicked her.

“Hey, come on!” Sully said. “You’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. “There is nothing more frustrating than having one way conversations with someone who should be horizontal with their eyes closed.”

“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 the children will be if they don’t have the honor of performing our annual Maypole Dance!” She thundered.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg just looked at each other gleefully. It would be better than finding $100 in your shoe, 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 them?” She snorted so loud it made Mr. Pinwydden jump. “Nooooo! Of course not! They would have carried on until the bitter end.” Ms. Breccia raised her eyes heavenward and then scoffed. “Besides do we really know what Ms. Jonquil saw? I’m not sure she knows herself.” Ms. Breccia wrinkled her nose disdainfully. “She’s always been 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 important to the furtherance of our traditions but really, it’s just a Maypole Dance! As the acting Principal, I think---“

“Nonsense! All traditions are important! 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.” She towered over poor Mr. Pinwydden who stared nervously back. Eventually he lowered his eyes and nodded slightly. Ms. Breccia smiled widely, “I knew you’d come around, Pinwydden, you always do.” With that she turned and nearly knocked a student down as she swept from the group, wrenched her classroom’s 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. Fig, 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.

“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. I believe she said, and I quote, “They have the lumbering gait of water buffalo stampeding over a cliff!” She paused and sniffed. “Please, do not embarrass me further.” 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. She smashed two before Ambril could get out of the door.

“Whoo, For once I’m 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 to give out some more to the elderly.”

“Not necessary.” Said Sully. “I made up a batch of remedy tea and dropped it by Fern’s garden for the gnomes to deliver but they said they didn’t need any!”

“What?” exclaimed Ambril, “it’s been at least two weeks, they must need more.”

Ygg shook his head. “They be making it themselves now. 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 can and will get into everything, anytime.” He said and nodded to her backpack. “Astarte in there?”

Sully nodded.

“Did you leave it in the gazebo when we were flying?”

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. She was treated to a series of artillery blasts in her head.

“Anyway, I told them to take it to Betula. After yesterday and Mrs. Flood I thought it couldn’t hurt, everyone goes there,” Sully said as they entered the Gym.

Mrs. Twid stood stiffly by the piano, her mouth a thin line. Her eyes narrowed as she tracked the entrance of Ambril, Ygg and Sully.

“Now that you are FINALLY all here!” Mrs. Twid’s nasal voice was shrill. “If you can possibly manage not tripping all over yourselves, we’ll begin. Mrs. Flood is unable to join us today as she must supervise some---renovations at her shop.” Her neck muscles tightened as she said this. “So we’ll have to make do with a recording.”

But everyone paused when they heard a loud angry voice behind them say,

“You nasty little rat! I know what you’re doing!” It was Lance threatening his brother. “Stop messing with around! You can’t handle it!”

“Lance, look we’ve been over this a hundred times, they’re just experiments, ‘sciencey stuff’ you know nothing about...” Said Riley quietly.

“I’ve been watching you! I know what you’ve been up to. It’s not normal, knock it off or else!” He snarled as he bore down on Riley.

“Lance! Riley! Control yourselves, honestly!” Said Mrs. Twid as she marched over to them with her hands on her hips. “I want you both to continue this family skirmish in the office!” But she had no affect on them They were now circling each other. ”Do you hear me, you two? To the office this minute!”

“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 as tall as Lance. “I’d explain what I’ve been doing but I’m afraid you’d hurt yourself trying to think that fast.” Riley continued dismissively. “And no, I’m not going to stop until I get where I want to go.” He continued scornfully. “All you’re ever going to be is a shopkeeper. Me? I’ve got bigger plans, I’m getting out of here!”

His brother finally lost control and shoved him hard into a large pile of boxes his fists flailing. The boxes toppled down on them. Almost immediately the lights went out and smoke filled the room. A flash of brilliance illuminated the frightened faces of the kids as a large Dullaith appeared and hovered above them. Some of the kids screamed and stampeded through 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, unsure. She had to be careful and not flash the Ashera around. “No, wait…it’s…it’s not what you think.” Said Ambril quietly.

There it was again, that missing something, the lack of revolting smells. And she wasn’t overwhelmed with terror. Nothing was trying to invade her mind. Ambril knew that it wasn’t a Dullaith. But it was something strongly magical, there was a frizz of magic in the air. The room had emptied by then; it was just them and a frozen Mrs. Twid. Ambril took another hard look at the Dullaith image and pointed. “See? It’s not moving and look! It’s beginning to fade.”

The image had begun to waver and dim. The smoke thinned as well. Then a posse of teachers raced into the room with Bob in the lead. Bob immediately tried the light switch a few times. “Must have blown a fuse or something,” he muttered as Mr. Fig pulled out a screwdriver and shakily pointed it at the fading Dullaith.

“Over here Hal, first things, first.” Said Bob pointing to the light switch.

“Oh, right!” said Mr. Fig looking relieved as he applied the screwdriver to the switch plate. He rooted around in the wall a moment. “Ha! Here’s the problem!” It took just another minute or two before the room was flooded with light. “Just a faulty wire, people!”

In the stark, fluorescent light Mrs. Twid still stood stock-still, her white knuckles squeezed her pearl necklace. She took a deep breath. “Oh my!”

“Mrs. Twid---er Crystal, perhaps you’d like to sit down a moment.” Said Bob solicitously as steered her into a chair.

“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.

In all the excitement Riley had been forgotten. Ambril imagined Riley pinned at the bottom of the huge mound of boxes.

“You bully! You might have really hurt him this time!” Yelled Sully as everyone began sorting through the boxes. But curiously Riley wasn’t there.

“He must have slipped out on his own.” Said Ygg.

‘No chance! I was watching!” Said Lance angrily. “I would have seen him!”

“In the dark?”

“Easier then, when the door opens, the light from the hallway comes in.”

A pimply-faced kid named Jed came in with a large bucket of steaming liquid as Lance was 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!” Shouted Lance.

A few more of the kids had returned and stood watching.

Tiana squealed and said. “Maybe it was that monster! The Monster took him!” Two or three of her friends shrieked in dismay and huddled together excitedly.

“Great, that’s great,” muttered Bob. “I’m sure there’s a logical explanation kids. Mrs. Twid! Are you feeling well enough to walk the students back to class?”

A little color had returned to Mrs. Twid’s cheeks by then. She pursed her lips. “It certainly is beneath my station to perform such a menial task but as it is an emergency, and it’s you Bob---yes…I’ll make an exception.” She nodded curtly creakily rose to her feet.

“Come, children, this way.” She said as she turned on her heel. “If you are not immediately behind me, you’ll be given detension---ON MY TERMS.” The kids scrambled to follow her.

Ambril, Sully and Ambril brought up the rear. As they passed the office, Ambril saw that Lance’s parents had arrived and were deep in discussion with Mr. Pinwydden. Lance stood between them hanging his head. The three friends automatically slowed their pace in hopes of overhearing something.

“Now look,” Mr. Dogwood said, “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. “At the very least Lance will be suspended from school.” He said firmly. “Next week, we’ll meet to discuss what further action will be taken. Naturally, this means he’ll be barred from any May Day School functions. The dance is canceled of course though Lance may participate next year. But the ball game will be played without your son.”

Larch Dogwood looked incredulous. “What? He can’t play for his team? The team I’m sponsoring?”

“Of course not, a suspension requires he is barred from participating in any school function.” As Mr. Pinwydden swallowed and his Adam’s Apple jogged up and down.

“I’m sorry about the disappearance of your son, Riley.” Mr. Pinwydden continued sincerely. “The police have begun investigating his disappearance and wish to talk to you.” He motioned toward the Gymnasium.

“Now just wait a minute. Riley’s probably just sulking, he’ll turn up again just like all the other times…when he gets hungry enough---.”

“Has this happened before? Has Riley run away in the past?” Mr. Pinwydden asked, surprised.

Larch sighed heavily and then shrugged. “Not like this, no. But he’s unhappy with Lance’s---competitive spirit. He takes it the wrong way is all.” He nodded firmly. “Trust me on this, it’ll blow over soon. Can’t we just forget this happened?”

Mr. Pinwydden stared stonily at the square cut man before him.

Mrs. Dogwood tugged on her husband’s sleeve. “But darling, I think we should take this seriously, he’s been very odd and more than a little upset lately---”

“Quiet, Scarlet, we’ll discuss this at home!” Interrupted Larch glaring at his wife then pointed his large, beefy index finger at Mr. Pinwydden’s thin nose.

“Now listen up Pinhead! Lance playing ball for the school is a big deal for this town! He’s the star player! 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 and poked his chest. “Got that?”

Mr. Pinwydden clucked disgustedly as he pushed Larch’s finger away. “I see you haven’t changed a bit since school. It isn’t hard to see where Lance learned his bullying behavior.” He paused to adjust his glasses. “The school will not be coerced into mishandling such a serious infraction. Your son needs to learn self control. I suggest you begin practicing it yourself.” And with that Pinwydden straightened his bow tie and strode away.

Ambril, Ygg and Sully continued down the hall. “That was grand, seeing Lance and his Dad get taken down a peg by Pinwydden, who would have thought it!” Crowed Sully as the three friends rounded a 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’d like to extend our apologies to those students who have practiced so diligently. We will of course resume this Dance tradition next year.” It ended with another whoosh of static.

Ms. Breccia stared open-mouthed at the loud speaker as the last bell rang. The kids cheered as they vaulted out of their seats and into the hallway. Ambril, Sully and Ygg slumped in their seats, waiting to hear their punishment. But Ms. Breccia surprised them when she said tersely. “Wait here.” And then marched out.

“So what’ll it be this time you think?” Muttered Sully her chin in her hand. “A ten page essay documenting her great-great Gran’s toe nail clipping method? Or a three page poem proclaiming the virtues of her great great great grandfather, the pigfarmer?”

“Poor Betula, we would have been there by now.”

Ambril sighed heavily. All she could think about was Betula, who was probably wondering where they were right that minute. And they were stuck in school for who knew how long. She scanned the classroom for something interesting to take her mind off things. The jumble of dioramas caught her eye first, they were stacked three feet high, the one on top was a cutaway model of a very old building.

“Hey,” Ambril asked. “I don’t remember seeing that 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? Built at the time of Old Town? ” She got up and picked the model off the top of the pile.

“If 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. The model had been cut about half way through so you could see the inside of the domed area. There were arches to help support the dome and a circular image on the floor. With a start Ambril recognized the image. “That’s a summoning circle, like the one behind the shed where the Dullaith was raised and on the playground that day Lance was hurt.” She said quietly.

“I think I be knowing it too.” Said Ygg in a whisper. “Something like it be on the floor of our own Town Council at home. It be for magic gathering, like circle stones.”

“You mean like the circle stone in the park?” Asked Sully innocently.

Ygg nodded slowly. “Yes, but this be a special one, it was nought for ever-day use. It’s used for, for special things.” Replied Ygg vaguely.

“Special? Like Holidays?”

“No, no more like if there’s a natural disaster or something where the town be thinking it needs extra help.” He continued vaguely. “I never paid much mind to it.”

The three of them stared at the little model some more.

“Well it was pretty all right,” 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 longer before putting it back on the pile. She looked around the room again. On the bulletin board were the usual notices of homework due dates and reading assignments. An 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 and the town shown as it was in the 1870’s. Most of the important structures were there including the Library, the Town Hall, and all of Main Street. And of course Circle Park right in the center of town…

“Hey, I just noticed something.” Said Ambril staring at the map closely.

“What?” asked Ygg, his eyes closed. Sully had put her head down on her desk.

“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 over here---closer to where we are---“

But before she could show them the door banged open and Ms. Breccia stood there, seething. Ambril skittered back to her seat. Ms. Breccia barely noticed them as she stood in the middle of the room clenching and unclenching her fists. The three friends didn’t dare move, in fact Ambril was afraid to breathe. Ms. Breccia thankfully looked up before too long and said, “Go clean up the Gym, that’s all.” She shooed them out looking like she’d like to kill someone but for once it wasn’t them.

“Boy, we got off easy that time!” Said Sully cheerfully as they walked toward the Gym. “Let’s do this fast and then 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 Circle Park and the true center of town. It couldn’t be---. Still lost in thought she pushed open the Gym door.

Jed and Mr. Berry were mopping up the last of the hot chocolate when they walked in.

“Hi, do you need any help?” Asked Sully as Mr. Berry squeezed his mop.

He motioned to the boxes scattered over the floor. “How about moving these boxes back to the entry hall? They need to go into storage.”

“Right!” Said Sully stacking up two and picking her way across the damp floor.

Ambril and Ygg followed. Together they lugged them into the entry hall.

“I guess they’re going into the janitor’s closet? So this is as good a place as any.” Said Ambril as she set her box down near the blackened door.

The janitor came up just then and sneezed loudly into a large handkerchief. “Sorry, my allergies are acting up, I need my pills. Just leave them there and I’ll put ‘em inside.” He said sniffling as he fiddled with the padlock.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg headed back to the Gym to get more boxes.

“So who’s behind these attacks then? And what they be wanting? Asked Ygg.

“Search me, world domination maybe? Or owning most of everything?” Sully smiled, “like in the Saturday Morning Cartoons.”

“No really, why scare people away from the Dance?”

Sully shrugged, “Hey let’s not worry about this one, we’re getting a Saturday morning back right? This is a great, great thing! Who wants to Dance?”

They made several trips back and forth. Ygg had just picked up the last box when Ambril noticed a sheet of paper on the floor. “Whoops somebody’s homework probably---“ She froze though when she looked at the paper. It was another drawing of the Dullaith. This one looked good, someone had spent some time with the details. She noticed something handwritten across the bottom.

“What’s that mean?” Ambril asked pointing to them.

“Come on, let’s dump these first and work that out later.” Interrupted Ygg grumpily. The last box appeared to be heavy.

They helped carry it out or rather Ambril did, Sully stumbled along behind them, and stacked it with the others.

Sully stretched cracking her back several times. “Ah that’s better, boy that last one was way too heavy! Ambril snorted as she rubbed her shoulder. It was then she noticed it and tugged on Ygg’s sleeve.

“Look! The janitor left the door open!” The chain was off the battered door and the door yawned temptingly.

“He probably went to get his pills. I bet he’ll be right back.” Said Sully “Wait!! You can’t be thinking what I think you’re thinking!”

Ambril had grabbed both their arms and dragged them over to the open door. “It’s worth a peek, right?” She said.

# Inside the Janitor’s Closet

It should have been pitch dark inside but it wasn’t. An eerie red glow lit the room.

“Where’s the light coming from? There aren’t any windows.”

There were a lot of boxes lining three walls with a narrow aisle through to the center. Ambril took a step and then another. It was a beautiful room, much too fancy for a janitor’s closet. There were arches and a dome above---and then it came to her.

“So the history books were wrong.” Whispered Ygg. “Here be Old Council Hall.”

“The true center of town!” said Ambril.

Some of the arches were filled in with intricate mosaic artwork. There was a map of the town on one wall and the arches were decorated with tracery images. Something was written across one of them.

“What does that say?” Asked Ambril pointing.

“That be the old language. We know 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?”

Ygg was right, there were no other doors in the room. 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.

Where’s the light coming from?” Sully asked again as they took a few more steps into the room. They came to the end of the row of boxes and saw it.

“What did you say that was?” Asked Sully elbowing Ygg hard and pointing at the floor.

“It be a power gathering circle, a special summoning.”

On the floor was an ornately tiled circle stone. It reminded Ambril of her Medallion, the images around the edges were of plants, 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, Someone tried to draw him there in the center!” She said pointing.

“So the intruders last night decided to doodle an image of Moroz on the floor? Why?” Wondered Ygg.

“Someone doodled what?” 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 fuming. Beside him stood the janitor, looking sheepish.

“My fault, I left the darn fool door open to get my pills.“ He sneezed again into his large red handkerchief. “I shouldn’t have…you know the reputation this room has…I think any kid would have liked to get a peek inside.” He smiled at them.

The kids smiled hopefully back but a moment later Chief Buckthorne came up behind him; his face a thundercloud.

“What the blazes are you three doing? Get your tails on out of here.” Chief Buckthorne raged. “This is a crime scene! You’re destroying evidence!”

“But, but we think you should know that…well we think we figured out---“

Chief Buckthorne was seriously annoyed. “You kids stay out of this! 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. 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. Ambril 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 they turned their bikes toward Betulas. As they veered onto Main Street they could see a crowd still gathered around the Sweet Shoppe’s door.

# Sugar Animal troubles

“Uh oh!” Said Ambril tersely. “I hope nothing more has happened!”

“It makes me boiling mad to think of it!” Said Ygg as they stashed their bikes. Iit looked like the entire town was trying to get inside all at once.

“Excuse me! Coming through! On your right!” Sully yelled as they wriggled through the crowd. Ambril saw that Koda had replaced the front window with plywood. There was a hand written sign 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. But 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!” Screeched a heavily jowled elderly lady. “I’ve been waiting a half an hour for my tea!” Whimpered a large woman as she rapped sharply on a table with her cane.

Betula was nowhere to be seen. Instead Ambril saw it was Mrs. Flood who raced distractedly from one table to another never quite finishing anything. And Miss Fern was the one who manned the cash register. Ambril managed to squeeze through to the counter and flagged down the harried Mrs. Flood. “Where’s Betula?”

Mrs. Flood’s face lit up when she saw Ambril. “Oh there you are!” 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 out when we saw what was going on---or rather what wasn’t going on in here.” She put her hands on her hips and blew a damp strand of hair from her eyes.

Sully surveyed the room. “Look, we’ll stay and help out here,” she said as she grabbed a couple of aprons and handed one to Ygg. “While you see what you can do for Betula.” She then said authoritatively, “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 into what felt like a wall of magic.

“Betula? Betula!” She called nearly tripping over a large sack of flour and caught herself by grabbing a rack of spices. It looked like it had snowed. Everything in the room was coated with an inch of sparkling sugar.

“Ambril?” Called a strained voice. “Come on back child, we’ve been waiting for you.”

The room was dimly lit but there was a faint glow coming from around a stack of boxes. She picked her way around them and stopped.

“I didn’t expect to find you here!”

“I didn’t expect to have to be.” Came Baldot’s grouchy retort.

Betula looked up at her, her face gray with fear and exhaustion. She smiled weakly at her while rocking something gently in her arms. Slim and Shug were feverishly working on something using an upturned pail as a table. A strong, tangy sugar magic swirled around the room.

“Now brace yourself, kid, ” Said Baldot surprisingly thoughtful.

“This isna pretty.” Bummil appeared at her knee and nodded at what Betula held.

Ambrils saw a rabbit ear twitch. “Red? Oh no! What happened?” Ambril cried as she knelt down beside the rabbit cradled in Betula’s arms. He was alive but just barely. His right leg was heavily bandaged and looked…odd.

“Just hang in there, Red---We’re almost done!” Said Shug over his shoulder. A bright jolt of magic lit up the room like fireworks followed by a gentle spray of sugar, which floated down like sugary snow. 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 laugh but coughed instead. He winced before closing his eyes again.

Ambril realized then why the rabbit’s leg looked so odd. His bandaged leg ended in a stump. Red’s right foot had been cut off. “What happened Red?” She whispered. “Who did this to you?”

Betula raised her head sadly. ‘Let him sleep honey, he’s about done in.” She sighed. “Late last night someone 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. “We couldn’t see his face he wore a mask.”

Slim picked up the story, “but he was tall, taller than you and thin.” The striped giraffe continued. “He seemed to know what he wanted and had Red’s shoe in his hand before we could blink.” Slim swallowed hard before he continued. “He had this black knife---with a squiggly blade---“

“The Dorcha Blade! “ Cut in Ambril. “I’ve seen it! It was stolen from the Library Archives they day I went to see Dr. Afallen! It’s specialty is rending magical beings in two!”

“When was that exactly?”

“A few weeks, maybe a month.“ Replied Ambril.

“I can’t 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 asked turning back to the Giraffe.

“Well that was it, he just took the sneaker and left.” Slim 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.”

“Sugar Magic, right?” Asked Ambril. There was something jiggering at the back of her mind. Something… that glowed red… “There was a break in today at school! Someone broke into the old Janitor’s Closet and wrote with red glowing ink all over the summoning circle there. It…smelled like cherry red jellybeans…sweet---and tangy. Just like how it smells right now. I think somehow they melted down Red’s sneaker and used that to do their workings last night.” Said Ambril.

They were all silent, considering this.

“That’s despicable.” Growled Shug angrily.

“It makes sense, that does.” Breathed Betula as she rocked her friend back and forth. She drew her eyebrows together. “I’ve been thinking and thinking 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. “They’ve always been precious to me but I didn’t realize how they might be prized by others. Magic is 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.

“We have to concentrate on how to get Red healed. “When they opened him up the magic just started to flow out. And it will until we find a way to button him up again. Already a good part of him has spilled out. That’s why he’s so depleted; he’s lost so much magic energy. If he’ll leave us soon if we don’t find a way to heal him soon.” Betula’s voice broke as she clasped the sugar animal to her.

“Let’s not give up yet, there’s stuff we haven’t tried.” Said Slim courageously. “Right Shug?”

But Shug didn’t respond.

“Did you try Fix-it juice?” Asked Ambril

Baldot snorted . “What do you think we’re daft? We tried it first thing!” 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.

“We are a bit on the sour side, if you hadna noticed.” Baldot agreed reluctantly.

Ambril looked over Shug’s shoulder. On a clean white napkin lay a small lifelike red high top. “So you have a sneaker 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. The two parts just won’t stick together.”

“Oh yeah, I remember, the The Dorcha Blade is a cursed knife. It spreads its curse with every cut.” Ambril said.

“That sounds about right.” Shug said looking more angry and frustrated than a cute little bear should. “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 find a way around that persnickety ol’ curse.”

Baldot cleared his throat. “So you see why you’re here.”

Ambril was thinking hard as she slowly slid her backpack off her shoulder. She 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 my friend. Besides, we’re all connected, especially us magic kind. You never know when you might need someone’s help.*” She grimaced, she hated sounding preachy especially in her own head.

A train whistle sounded and the skidding of tires echoed around in her head. *“Ha, never! Their kind help us?*” The fairy scoffed.

Ambril shook her head, “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 looked so vulnerable as she hunched her shoulders protectively over her friend.

A cascade of falling books sounded in her head. “*You’re not really going to do this!”* Snorted fLit.

Ambril slowly and carefully pulled out her Ashera, it glowed with magic energy.

*“I have to try.”* 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.”*

“*Betula’s my friend and so is Red* *and they’re not inferior*.”

*“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 fairies are superior beings. But really when it comes down to it---you’re just as ordinary as the rest of us. A small-minded, silly sort of being 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 just try and see things in a different way!”* She had to pause here as an airplane crash and volleys of explosions echoed around in her head and drowned out her thoughts. Finally it quieted enough for her to continue. *“Can’t you---just one put yourself in his place! Here---now---LOOK AT HIM!” He’s in pain! They’re all in pain!”*

She blew out her breath so hard Bummil took a giant step back.

*“You know, even a hard hearted little chit like yourself must know what it must be like to lose a friend.* Ambril braced herself for what she thought would be the war of the worlds in her head. But she waited, and waited some more---but he fairy was silent. And that was even worse than the noise.

*“Hello? Are you there?”* Ambril thought at him, still silence.

*“So, that’s it, fine! I’ll do it without you*!” Outloud she said, “I’m ready.”

“But, what about---“ Bummil began but was shoved aside by Baldot’s elbow.

“But nothing! We should have known, his kind, why would he help?” Said Baldot gruffly.

Ambril wondered if the gnomes had the power to not only get through locked doors, but into her head as well. Betula quickly unwrapped Red’s leg and laid the red sneaker next to it. Ambril could see the stump was cut clean. Inside the sugar animal was a sort of red gel. She was puzzled. No blood. There was nothing to show that anything was wrong, except the space between the shoe and the leg.

“We just can’t get it any closer.” Said Shug as he climbed up next to her.

Ambril took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She watched as the gray fog curtain came down around her and brusquely pushed it away. Betula, the gnomes and the animals were like statues all around her. She could now see the hot, red magic flowing from Red. It swirled around her like a river. The flow was enormous and she now understood the urgency. In fact, as she watched she saw the rabbit dimming slightly…and then he dimmed again…

Ambril heard the gentle jangle of wind chimes. “*Don’t just sit there, Use the Ashera*, *the Ledrith Glain will empower you*. *Look closely at the wound, do you see the curse 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.

*“Unpick it of course, before weaving a healing*.” Came the fairy’s reply.

“*Unpick? Weave? How do I do that*?”Ambril wished she’d paid attention when her Mom had tried to teach her how to sew once upon a time.

There was a long pause.  *“Remember what we’ve practiced. Visualize, Focus and then Will it to happen.”* Said the Fairy quietly.

Ambril pointed her Ashera one more time and focused on the thin threads of darkness.

The Ashera produced a laser-like brilliant beam of light directly at the dark curse threads. Everywhere it touched it annihilated it. 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… I think that was the last one.”* Said fLit.

*“Now, you must weave a healing*. *Better do it now, he’s failing.”*

Ambril saw fLit was right, The rabbit’s glow was very weak. She’d have to do this fast.

Ambril had no idea what weaving felt like, 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 curling up like wisps smoke from the incision. 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 incision line and the edge of the new sneaker. Now that the energy flow had stopped she could see that the edges of both were like frayed cloth. Gently, carefully she began to fuse them together. It was awkward at first and slow work. But she kept at it. She knew she was on the right track when the rabbit’s big toe began to wiggle. And then all of Red’s toes flexed at once. 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 then and she heard a rumble 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 had jumped up, large as life his foot twitching. “Works a treat!” He said cheerfully as he jumped 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.

“Oh yeah, thanks bucket’s there, Ambril!” Red had hopped over quickly to join them, balancing on Betula’s shoulder and pulling Ambril’s ear. “Whatever you and your little friend did!” He said and letting go of Ambril’s ear began pulling his own. “I guess I owe you both 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.” He continued. “Maybe you ought to see how things are going out front. It didn’t look pretty out there a while back has probably gotten worse---“

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 and take a rest yourselves.” She said very businesslike but then smiled. “We can celebrate some more after closing time.”

“We’ll be taking ourselves off now.” Said Baldot and Bummil.

“Thanks boys for giving it your best.” She winked at them. “You were right after all about the fairy, he’s not so bad.”

Baldot immediately bristled. “Now I never said anything nice about that little Gypsy Moth!”

It was Bummil this time who elbowed Baldot. “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…then you surprised us and done it right good!”

Ambril really had nothing to say to this 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 wasn’t going to be pretty. Betula stood framed by the doorway, hands on her hips, immobile. “It’s that bad is it?” asked Ambril as she peaked around her.

“---And that’ll be $10.75 Miss Thyme,” Sully smiled at a large woman in the flowery hat who smiled back at her. It was the large woman with the cane who looked ready to kill someone when last she had seen her.

Amazingly all the tables were filled with happy customers and the line at the counter was moving smoothly. Sully whizzed around the tables with ease.

“Saint’s alive,” whispered Betula to herself. “She reminds me of 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 just before they both noticed Betula and Ambril watching them. Mrs. Flood and Fern had apparently been sent home. “We’ll be needing more of that shortcake real soon, Betula, it’s real good, everyone’s asking for it.” Said Ygg.

“Got it all squared away back there?” Asked Sully as she scooped up the sundae and shortcakes and was off but just as quickly was 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 squinted at the clock and walked gingerly over to the front door. “Why don’t you kids skedaddle?” “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.

“Closing Time folks! Be sure and come again tomorrow though, we’ll still be serving our lovely Sunrise Tea!” She boomed.

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 took the aprons from everyone. “Thanks again to you all, free ice cream for you three for the rest of the month!”

That put a smile on Ambril’s face as they walked out into the sun slanting toward evening. As they got on their bikes Ambril heard the muffled sounds of ragtime music. Ambril smiled wider.

“So, you’re coming to Miss Fern’s for dinner are ya?” Ygg asked as they started off.

“Sure, but I’ll have to call my Mom.” Said Sully. “I’ll race you there!”

# Handlebar Wrestling

Ygg and Sully were off like greased pigs in a rodeo. Ambril smiled as she pushed down hard on her pedals. She headed down the alley just as the sun was making it’s last curtain call and preparing to dive behind the western hills The alley was full of deepening shadows. Ambril assumed that’s why she nearly ran over someone emerging from one of the sheds.

“Hey watch it, Moron! That’s my foot!” Lance hopped around.

“Didn’t see you.” Said Ambril trying hard to hide her smirk.

Lance stopped when he saw it was Ambril and grabbed her handlebars.

“Have you seen Riley? Have you talked to him?” He asked as the dying sun half lighted his anxious face. He looked surprisingly strained, almost concerned.

“You can’t mean you actually care?” She asked skeptically as she leaned back, folding her arms in judgment. “Not after the way you’ve treated him.”

“I’ve always cared, of course, he’s my brother. He just 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. 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 come back when he gets hungry and tired.”

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 was too little too late but Lance did seem to be 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 had flown right out of her head.

“I guess it must be hard on all of you.” She said finally. It was the wrong thing to say.

Lance released her handlebars so forcefully she was nearly knocked sideways

As 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!” Ambril watched him walk stiffly toward his Dad’s storage shed, the one next to Betula’s. Then Ambril stiffened for beyond Lance’s silhouette Ambril could see the shed’s floor through the open door. The center of the shed had been cleared. Ambril could see a drawing on the floor…a shadow summoning circle.

“Hey wait Lance! What’s that on the---“ But Lance had slammed the door. As she pedaled off she heard the sound of cowbells in her head.

“*The alleyway bore the strong stench of dark magic*.” fLit thought at her.

“*What, the rotting fruit smell? That was the dumpster*,” She wrinkled her nose. “*But some one was working with dark magic, Do you think it was 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 smarts and social power. But was he capable of working dark magic? She didn’t think it was possible.

“*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 maybe it shouldn’t count but he had always been nice to her. “I don’t know, he seems so---“

“*Geeky? He is but he’s also smart and I’ve noticed he’s pretty good at lying to people. Of course human-kind are such imbeciles that*—“

“Enough,” Ambril interrupted. “*But you know if you think about it, it could have been anyone working that shadow circle*. “ She said. “*First the alley is deserted after hours and the key is hung beside the door, it would have been easy for anyone to get in there.”*

“*We’re not getting anywhere.*” Sniffed fLit.

Ambril sighed, so what was new? As she 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 Ygg and Sully who had just gotten off their bikes. It’s long flat feet slapping the pavement.

# Mrs. Twid’s gets dirty after Ygg comes clean

“Uh Oh, it’s Twid,” hissed Sully as Ambril got off her bike, “and she does not look happy.”

That was an understatement. She marched toward them, her hands formed hard, knobby fists at her side and beat a merciless rhythm. She bent slightly over Ygg towering over him. Her upper lip curled in a sneer as she said quietly, “I know all, now. It was you all along, wasn’t it?” Her eyes narrowed before she shrieked “You imbeciles ruined everything!”

Ambril stumbled in surprise at the depth of her anger. “I could have had a home befitting a Twid once again and finally received the attention and homage that this village owes my family! “ She was panting now as her cheeks puffed in and out with every breath. “The Twid name once meant something here! Why before the Mine closed---we were like Gods to the villagers!” She sputtered angrily. “It was those fool miners---all along! YOU! “Yes, this is all your fault you lousy little Miner’s son---Miners are always trouble!” She screeched, “wanting better wages, safer working environments, wanting, wanting, wanting until there was nothing left! Ridiculous! Why should we care about your sad, little lives, when there are always so many more to take your place!” Mrs. Twid went limp and curles her shoulders around her like a shell.

“They had to close the mine then.” Her voice lowered to a sadistic hiss. “And then when the money ran out, everyone left. Everyone but my family, because---we knew that one day the family of Twid would rise again and this town would once again bow down to us!” Mrs. Twid gripped Ygg’s shoulder so tightly he yelped. Her eyes burned with maniacal anger. “It was to begin today---My 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 lashed out at her with her free hand. Sully jumped back just in time to avoid getting clobbered.

Ambril grabbed Ygg’s arm and tried to pull him away, but it was too late. Mrs. Twid grasped his shirt collar and had begun to twist, her mouth stretched in a skull-like grin.

“But now, I’ll have my small revenge on you Miners!” Her grin widened 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 still and white as a statue 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 wanted in Chert.” She sniffed. “Not much of a reward, but seeing as you’re just a miner’s runt…it’s a pleasant surprise.” She grinned evilly as she said in a singsong voice. “You’re brothers are on their way to collect you.” She lifted Ygg right off his feet and stared in fascination as his face darkened as he struggled to breathe. “Poor little Ygg, not able to finish school like his sad little Mommy wanted! No, you’ll go down the mines to die just like your father and father’s father!”

There was a resonant boom as two huge, hairy feet landed next to Ambril. Ambril nearly fell over as Unk stepped forward and without preamble grabbed Mrs. Twid and around the waist.

“Let me Yggy go!” He thundered angrily inches from the face of a now terrified Mrs. Twid. Her face whitened as she realized she was now being lifted off the ground by a giant man---.

“Troll!” She screamed. “Troll! Run for your lives!” She tried to do just that but being several feet off the sidewalk ended up looking much like a cartoon character. She then made a desperate attempt to wriggle free. Unk looked at her in disgust and shook her once…and then again. She stopped wriggling and covering her head with her arms simply cowered.

“I be no Troll, I be Ygg’s Unk…I here to guardy him, protecting him from nasties like you. ” Scoffed Unk. He released her and watched as Mrs. Twid unsteadily took a few steps back.

“You, bad!” Unk stormed at her. “I be done with you. We be not trusting you. 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 and then picked up her shoes. “Good, she be gone, now, won’t bother me Yggy.” He said matter-of-factly he put Mrs. Twid’s shoes neatly down on the sidewalk. “I sorry to be going so long.” He said looking concerned as he saw Ygg’s terrified face. “You feel Ok-ee?”

Ygg had by this time gotten his breath back but the shock of what Mrs. Twid had said 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? I will be telling them you stay here when they come, your Mam wishing you to stay, they go home again when they know what’s besty for Ygg.”

“No, no, they not want what’s best for me, they be wanting what’s best for themselves.” 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 again at his shoes.

“Wait just a minute here, there’s something you haven’t told us isn’t there? What’s this about having a price on your head?” Quizzed Sully.

Ambril was curious too. Ygg was the least likely outlaw she could imagine. “Yeah, you’re just a kid, what’d you do?” She asked.

Ygg’s head went down as his shoulders came up. “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.

“You lied to us?” Asked Sully incredulously.

“I nought be telling anyone about that. I---afraid to trust you then.”

“Thanks a bunch.” Ambril snorted, “So after I showed you the Ashera and told you all about the Dullaith and everything---you lied to us.”

“But I be saying the truth but for that.” Said Ygg anxiously. “I be sorry.”

Ambril and Sully just stood there with folded arms, until Sully said warily.

“So they want you back because you can help them find that Glain stuff?”

Ygg nodded his head and looked miserable. “They had me down the mines the day of the cave-in.” His voice became strained, and his entire body seemed to bend inward like a bow. “I heard them give the order to leave all the men---to nought try to dig them out. They said it was a danger and they had to close down the level. The engineers had been telling them for weeks they be too deep, they be diggin too fast---but they didna listen.” He folded his arms tightly. “They acted like they be concerned for me and mine but and that 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 angry. “Nought for bettering our village as they be telling me.”

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, richer.” Ygg shrugged. “They not just be looking to collect the reward but also be getting a ticket to 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.”

“I can’t believe you lied to us!” Said Ambril indignantly. “I mean we’ve already been through a lot and then we find that---“

“I be nought lying about anything but that, it be the truth!” Said Ygg and looked them both straight in the eye. “And I be promising nought to do it ever again.” His eyes pleaded with them. “After I be leaving, I---want you to be thinking well of me, I do.” He hesitated a moment and then grimaced. “Don’t think I’ll be faring well otherwise. 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.

Ygg snorted. “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 as a police car rounded the corner and bore down on them. “Ygg! It’s the cops!” She tried to shield him from the lights, “you have to get out of here!”

Ygg vaulted for his bike but was stopped mid-jump. “We nowt be running or hiding. We stand here together, we be family. I help.” Unk slowly lowered him to the ground and set him upright as the police car slowed to a stop.

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 and mumbled to himself. “Though how you managed to stay alive in Mrs. Twid’s care is beyond me. She doesn’t exactly lean toward motherliness,” he looked Ygg up and down. “it does look as if you could use some feeding up. Now come on along, we’ll see about getting you a bed and some supper anyhow.” He put his arm around Ygg and patted his shoulder.

“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 cautiously as if he 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. The red wax was messily applied with another large thumbprint in the center. He handed back the pouch, looking relieved when it was out of his hands and broke the seal. He unfolded the letter and read the letter. Then he looked carefully up at Unk and down at Ygg---twice before showing the letter to Ygg.

“Is this your mother’s writing?” He asked curtly.

Ygg looked at it and smiled. “That be me Mam’s writing!” He scanned the letter quickly and nodded appreciatively. “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 nowt wanting his brothers to get at him no-ways. His Uncle, Urgan Drasil should be taking up his care until he is growed and able to go his own way.**

**Hoping you Best Wishes,**

**Skylla Drasil**

There were some official looking papers with the letter and a family photo snapped at a happier time. There was a boyish Ygg and Unk sitting next to a broad, 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!” Whispered Ambril up at him. “You went back to Chert to get these papers together.”

Unk nodded. “I knowed it be nowt 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 about you.” His smile was huge, remembering.

“Well we’ll have to verify all of this of course. Where are you staying?”

With that Unk looked confused and stared back at Miss Fern’s house. “I be just back today”.

The Chief looked at him quizzically. “No home? Well then, you’ll have to come with me anyway Ygg.”

“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 her smile kindly. “They’re staying with me, of course,” her voice firm. “In fact, supper is waiting, would you like to join us Bucky?”

# 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. “And call your parents to let them know you’re having dinner here.”

Ambril and Sully pulled out their cell phones. Ambril had to leave a message as oddl enough, Mrs. Sweetgum didn’t answer the phone. “Come on!” said Sully as she stashed the phone in her backpack , I think we’re headed for the Garage.”

Ygg looked apprehensive as they jogged up the driveway. Ambril didn’t remember much about the garage other than the trash and cobwebs and dirt. “I’m sure it’s been cleaned up.” Said Ambril encouragingly.

“It must be, no one could live in that place the way it was.” Ygg grimaced as they raced around the house.

At first the garage looked the same, more like a plant support than an actual building. But then Ambril noticed a warm glow through the small paned windows. The arched garage door seemed to have been freshly painted. As they jumped up the porch steps to the door Ambril could see the gleam of the newly polished doorknob. Inside Ambril barely recognized the place. All the spiders had been coaxed out, their webs were gone. The rafters had been thoroughly cleaned. The vines above them looked contentedly well tended. A blazing fire lit the room and a large black teapot burbled garrulously on a hook just above the flames. The heaps of rusty equipment and trash had been removed and the floors polished. The kitchen still smelled of paint. The workbench had become a kitchen table with a large bowl of cherries set in the middle of it. The sofa and overstuffed chairs were worn but comfortable looking and the mismatched chairs around the table were big enough for even Unk.

“Well, this looks right nice, Fern.” Chief Buckthorn said admiringly as he looked around.

There were two doorways cut into the back wall, one so large the other looked puny beside it. Sully went straight over and looked inside.

“Hey Ygg, this must be your room!”

Ygg raced over with Ambril right behind him. The room was small but snug. There was a simple wooden table and chair, and an overloaded bookshelf next to a bed covered with a patchwork quilt. A window openen to the garden. Ambril could here the low staccato of crickets outside.

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...” Unk smiled through the doorway. “It be poking at every branch and vine on way.” I be getting so angry I nearly left it for forest sprites.” He looked hopefully at Ygg. “You be liking it?” He asked.

Ygg just smiled up at him.

“That be making it worth it.” Unk said.

Something like the sound of an angry sci-fi creature filled the room. “Sorry, I be that hungry.” Ygg grabbed his belly sheepishly.

They all laughed and headed out to the kitchen.

Fern was waving out the front door. “No? Sure you won’t stay? Monday, then! We’ll be down at your office, I’ll bring some of my peach scones.” 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 couple of 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 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 fixing’s?”

Bummil jumped, and then whipped out platters of sandwiches, artichokes, and a lovely chocolate cake. Baldot then laboriously climbed a stool to the stove and began to ladle out bowls of steaming tomato soup.

“I’m starved!” Said Ambril as they all grabbed a chair.

“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. They helped themselves to the rest. There was nothing but slurping and chewing noises for several minutes as Ambril tried to remember when food had tasted so good. Ambril tried to keep track of how many sandwiches Unk put away but lost track after 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.

It was the junk drawer and looked undisturbed. Rusty nails, screwdrivers and bent paperclips littered the bottom. Ambril was about to close it when a weathered notebook caught her eye. It was a dirty green with the letters G.E.R.N. handwritten across the cover but then 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 and it’s about to get ugly!” Said Sully.

“Oh right, sorry,” said Ambril shoving the drawer closed. She rummaged around before she found the perfect cake knife in a lower drawer and handed it to Fern.

“Oh look! That must be one of your father’s lab books.” Said Fern nodding to the notebook in her hand.“ He was always scribbling in them.” 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. He was very thrifty. It looks like he found some blank pages in the back and started writing.” Fern mused as she

handed a slice of cake to Sully. “This was once his laboratory for the G.E.R.N. Project, his last unfortunately. He was such a nice man, your father. Such a shame really, it all ended so badly.” She shook her head sadly. “And your poor father blamed for it.”

Ambril was suddenly no longer interested in cake. “So, you don’t think it was his fault then?” She asked.

Fern slowly shrugged. “Anyone who knew your father sensed that something wasn’t right. The newspaper got things wrong somehow…what they reported just wasn’t true. It said he was experimenting with Dark Magic, raising monsters…he just wasn’t capable of such diabolical things.” She looked down at the little notebook. “Perhaps there’s something in there that might shed some light on it.” She gave it a little pat.

Ygg had just finished mopping up the last of his cake when 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! Fern said as she gathered her shawl around her.

“I’m exhausted.” Ambril jumped up eager to be alone in her own room to read the notebook. “Hey you dropped something,” Sully pointed 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 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. She noticed something along the bottom of the page. “Look at these symbols, a message, maybe?”

There were skull and crossbones on either end. The second one was a bell with a number one on it.

“This symbol here, the one with the bell and the number? Is First Bell on May Day.” Fern continued.

“First Bell?”

“Yes, It varies every year but First Bell is usually around lunchtime.” Fern nodded.

Fern was silent a moment longer. “And that little drawing there is Glain, yes, they want 500 grains. Of it.” She laughed and shook her head, “A fools request! A grain is an old, old-fashioned measure of weight. It’s the weight of a grain of barley. 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.” 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. Ambril’s hand covered it protectively.

Sully was studying the drawing intently. “So to recap, The skull and crossbones means death, probably by Dullaith if they don’t get their 500 grains of Glain before First Bell of May Day. Is that right?” Asked Sully.

Fern clucked to herself. “It appears that’s so. They threaten to raise a Dullaith at First Bell tomorrow.” Fern sighed and drew her shawl closer to her. She looked very tired, suddenly very old and tired. “I’m sure Bucky is aware of this, but I’ll call him just the same.” The hand that clutched her shawl was shaking. “I think you have everything you need Urgan.” She nodded to Unk and then wobbled toward the front door.

Unk stood up, “I be walking you safe home.” He said and offered her his hairy arm.

She took it gratefully. “Now I don’t want you behaving rashly tomorrow. Bucky may not look it but he is a very capable policeman. Let him handle it.” She nodded firmly at them.

After the door closed they all stared in silence at the Dullaith threat.

“It’s a despicable 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.” Put in Ambril.

“And it doesn’t sound like that’s going to happen,” said Sully.

“I almost forgot to tell you, Lance stopped me in the alley back at Betula’s shop. He said he had something to tell Riley and then got mad and stomped off to one of the sheds.”

“Probably the his Dad’s shed.” Volunteered Sullly.

“Well the weird thing was I saw a shadow summoning circle drawn on the floor. It didn’t look new either. It was all scuffed up. Lance said some scientist had left his stuff there too.”

“A scientist? You mean like your Dad?” asked Ygg.

“No, my Dad worked here, remember? Besides, he wasn’t working in dark magic.” Said Ambril defensively.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by that.” Said Ygg. “But what other scientists could it be?”

Ambril just shrugged, still upset. She almost wished she hadn’t brought it up.

“Do you think the police have figured this all out too? About tomorrow and all?” Asked Sully.

“Who knows?” Asked Ygg. “Would they know what to do if they had?”

“Well remember Feldez has put down a Dullaith before.” Sully looked apologetically at Ambril.

“That must be why he was right in the middle of everything from the beginning.” Said Ambril softly. How easy it would have been for Feldez to cover his involvement if he had firsthand information. “And all those people…in danger.” She whispered herself. “Feldez always seems to be helping but he’s the one who’s in the right place at the right time to do the most damage.”

Sully shook her head. “Can’t imagine watching anyone die. Suppose it was some one we knew?” She sighed. “I think I’d rather die myself.”

The three friends were silent a moment as they stared at the drawing.

# Mrs. Sweetgum goes missing

Finally Sully said , “well, I’m sure the police are prepared…I just hope it’s enough.” She shrugged helplessly.

It’s what Ambril was feeling too, helpless. What could they do? Ygg yawned again, his eyes blinked out of sync.

“Come on, we need to get home, Sully,” said Ambril as she headed toward the door. “See you guys tomorrow.” Ambril waved good-bye as she and Sully trudged down the driveway and got on their bikes

As Ambril pedaled hard up the last hill she noticed that every window of the house was lit. Her mother stood silhouetted in the open doorway.

“Ambril! Finally!” Her mother frantically raced down the stairs and squeezed her tightly.

“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 walked toward the house. “You got my message right? About having dinner at Fern’s house?”

Ambril’s mother nodded looking tired. “It’s been such an odd day, though.” She said as she wedged her daughter firmly under one arm as if she was afraid of her being snatched away. “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 puts food out for the animals, squirrels mostly…and she disappeared it seems. The police and a few of her friends have been out searching for her for hours.” She heaved them both through the door and slammed it shut behind them.

“I’m so worried about you---Mrs. Sweetgum---about everything.” Ambril’s mother half dragged her daughter to the kitchen table. There was a plate of lumps on it.

“Did you make…dinner Mom?” Asked Ambril apprehensively eyeing the plate. At least the lumps weren’t moving.“It’s a shame I’ve already eaten.” Ambril tried to sound sincere.

Ambril’s Mother must have sensed her insincerity. “You should have called earlier!” She stormed. “Even Feldez asked about you! It’s been that bad today.”

“Feldez asked about me?” Asked Ambril thinking his interest wasn’t out of concern for her welfare. Changing gears she said. “Where is he, I need to talk to him.”

Her mother looked suspicious. “You want to talk with Feldez? Well…I don’t know where he is, he went out again right after dinner.”

Ambril eyed the lumps and thought she knew why. She suddenly yawned. “I’m really tired, Mom, it was a big day, sooo---” She backed toward the door.

“Not so fast, Ambril! Your stepfather---“

“You mean my not-yet-stepfather.” Interrupted Ambril and realized that was the wrong thing to say. Her mother had worked herself into a rage.

“Your SOON-to-be stepfather, whom I LOVE requires respect!” She yelled.

Ambril stopped then and just looked at her mother, standing there breathing heavily her face full of anger. “Mom, do you really, you know…trust Feldez?”

Ambril’s mother looked at her suspiciously. “Why, why of course, I trust him, I love him, why else would I want to marry him?” She sputtered.

“It’s just that, he’s gone a lot, 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, decisions to make…of course I trust him---what---why wouldn’t I?” Ambril’s mother was beginning to get flustered.

“It’s just that Feldez, well I don’t think---“

“What she means is she doesn’t think much at all, or at least not very well.” Cut in Zane from behind her. He grabbed Ambril’s shoulder and whirled her around his eyes steely with determination. “For Mom’s sake, you’re gonna shut up now.” He whispered through a clamped jaw. He then 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. “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.”

Zane gave her a disgusted look.

“I know you don’t want to hear this---but I---we think there’s going to be another attack---a real Dullaith this time---“ she said hesitantly.

Zane snorted, “yeah, I heard all about the Dullaith in the gym. “It was a fake. It was just some kids playing around.”

“No! Here take another look!” Said Ambril picking up the paper and handing it to him again. “Check out the Bell symbol, See? It’s First Bell on May first, tomorrow! And the rock thing? It’s a drawing of Glain, they want an ounce of it or else—You see there the skull and crossbones, death.”

Zane laughed mirthlessly. “You are such a dolt.” He sneered as he balled the drawing up and threw it across the room. “It’s just a bunch of kids goofing off!” Then he rounded on her. “So you and your little friends are now experts on Dullaiths is that it? And you three little kids are going to save the town?”

Ambril just shrugged defiantly.

Zane went rigid with anger. “You can’t get involved in this stuff! Don’t you see! This Dullaith 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 here AGAIN!” He shouted. “And here I’m supposed to be the insensitive one! Do you want to be responsible for killing your own mother?” He asked. “No? Well you know, if something that humiliating happened to her again…that would do it.” He thundered. “So I’m telling you---You have to keep out of this! If there’s a Dullaith raised tomorrow, you are not going to be anywhere near it, you get me? Understand? 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…sneaking out of apartments because they couldn’t pay the rent; living out of the 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.” And then Zane sagged, all the fight gone out of him as he turned toward the door. “So, think about that tomorrow, as you’re riding in to save the day.” He said sarcastically and slammed the door behind him.

Ambril stunned, slid back and stared at the ceiling just breathing in and out.

Bell chimes in her head. “*Lovely display of human-kind-ness*,” snorted fLit.

As she slipped on her pajamas she mulled over what her brother had said. Would they really split up her family? She went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth and then stood staring at her image in the mirror. She didn’t want to cause any trouble for anyone but at the same time, she couldn’t stand by and watch her family and friends get hurt. She yawned and shook her head. Her mind felt like mush, her eyes were so tired, it hurt to blink.

She wandered back into her bedroom and slid gratefully under the covers and off to sleep.

But it wasn’t rest her mind wanted. She whirled into a labyrinth of nightmares where she was chased, head butted and slobbered over by a gang of Dullaiths lead sometimes by Feldez and sometimes by Mrs. Twid who kept screaming ‘Troll!’ at the top of her lungs. They ran through the forest and into a paved circular clearing. There were dark shapes of abandoned houses around the stone plaza. But instead of a tree growing from the center, there was only a stump. Ms. Breccia stood on it and laughed at her as she pointed to an old map. Then there was only darkness and two staring eyes, a rasping voice whispering, “it’s time….it’s time…”

# Lab Book truths

Ambril sat bolt upright in her bed breathing hard. The sun streamed through her windows. Surprisingly her clock said 9:03, the house was quiet, too quiet.

“Mom? Zane?” she yelled. There was no answer. They must have gone to set up for the Festival early and let her sleep. Her backpack lay on the floor half open. Peaking out was a small green book, her Dad’s lab book. She scrambled to retrieve it without having to touch the floor. Clutching her blankets, she opened it. Her Dad’s writing was big and messy, like her own.

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 looked scientific but Ambril thought she recognized some images found 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 and crossed out over and over again; the one at the bottom was circled and underlined. It looked important. She still had no idea what it meant it definitely looked like a combination of science and magic. She guessed that what she called magic her father called ‘natural energy’. The next entry read:

**‘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 glad my lab isn’t a stone’s throw from there. I bet I would have developed a paunch just as he has! We Will be in operation by tomorrow. A test run. To see if it works and what needs to be tweaked.**

There were lists of equipment and a sort of timeline of what had to be done during the experiment. Then he wrote:

**‘I’ve done it! It worked! My test Gern is strong and gaining strength. Initial tests are off the charts but there seems to be issues I didn’t foresee…It’s now debatable whether this is an energy source we’d feel comfortable using or exploiting. I plan to finish all the tests though and then decide. Feldez is taking his loss hard but did take me in to Betula’s shop for my winning coffee and snacks. I tried not to be smug.’**

**Feldez is excited about the melding of inorganic and ‘natural energy’ sources. He talks of nothing else, it’s so boring and scarily myopic. He thinks it’s very possible he might invent a new form of organism but he can’t see the inherent dangers involved. There is something off about these workings too, they’re 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.**

Moroz! Here was the connection between Feldez and Moroz. Feldez was working on some old formulas of Moroz. ‘The melding of inorganic and organic energies.’ That was the perfect way to describe that thing that had tried to kill her in the cavern. Because the twisted, writhing creature had looked like that…sort of a growth of metallic mold or perhaps a misshapen tree. Either way, it wasn’t human any more. It had gone way beyond that. Her father’s writing looked even messier on the last page.

**‘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, his ideas are very original and if successful and controllable might be more viable than Gern.**

**I have warned him but he insists 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’s my friend and he did help me with Gern. But I’m worried.**

**Gern is surprising. Will have to work this out. Can’t think of it as a ‘test batch’ anymore…But I’m set to run the final tests tomorrow and if they look good, I’ll announce my discoveries and introduce Gern.’**

Ambril sat stunned, her eyes glued to the page. It hadn’t been her Dad who had raised the Dullaith, it had been Feldez. Her Dad had been there to help him and to protect him. Everyone had it backward. In fact it had been Feldez all along. It had been Feldez…and his attempts to raise Moroz to get at his power. Feldez had raised the Dullaiths.

Ambril quickly ran through it all.All the pieces were fitting together now. She could see how Feldez ran through it all.

When Feldez had raised the Dullaith her father had stood by his side prepared to help his friend if something went wrong. But when Feldez had lost control of it, it had killed her father. Then Feldez had let her father take the blame for it all. Her family had left town and all had been well. But on the night her family returned to town, another Dullaith had been raised. What was it with Dullaiths and her family?

With a start Ambril realized that Feldez could have been using the threats and break-ins to continue his search for Moroz’s cell. If things went wrong again, he could use her family as cover.

# A Chit chat with Feldez and other horrors

It was then she heard the quiet click of the front door and the clipped sound of Italian leather shoes in the front hall. Feldez was home. She jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She was very certain she didn’t want to confront a man two feet taller than she was in pink pajamas. She grabbed her pack and the little green book and then hesitated. The book was the only evidence she had against him. She had to find a safe place to hide it. But she came up short. It was, afterall Feldez’s house, he had access to everything. But then she had an idea. She raced across the hall to her brother’s room. The bed roiled with sheets, towels and a large pile of clothes. Apparently Mrs. Sweetgum hadn’t been allowed in here. Ambril smirked. This was the perfect place to hide it, Feldez would have to be crazy desperate to wade into this. She shoved the notebook deep into the pile of clothes and heaped a more on top. It looked even worse than before, perfect!

He took a deep breath and slipped downstairs. There was a sound of rustling paper coming from Feldez’s study. She resolutely walked down the hall and banged the door open. Feldez was hunched over some drawings looking haggard and drawn. He looked up at Ambril in surprise and then annoyance.

“What do you want? Why aren’t you at the May Day Festival helping your mother?” He said, irritated.

“I’ve been doing some reading, it’s good, this book, you’d like it. It’s all about you and was written by my Dad…just before the Dullaith you raised killed him.”

Feldez froze in place, his hands quivering in midair. Then faster than Ambril thought possible he walked quickly around his desk, pulled her inside the room and shut the door. The lock clicked softly into place.

He towered over her. “This is a serious claim, explain yourself.”

“My father left behind a lab book, sort of a diary about G.E.R.N. On the last page he relates what you two did on the day he died.” Ambril’s face screwed up with anger. “It was you, not him who raised the Dullaith and lost control of it! But you let my father take the blame for it!” She screamed. “Then you raised another Dullaith on the day we got back!”

“No, that’s not true, I didn’t---“

“Don’t lie to me, you were the one doing experiements in the shed behind Betula’s shop weren’t you? I saw the shadow circle you painted on the concrete there!”

“There’s more to it than---“

“You’ve threatened everyone in town with more Dullaiths and what does the town do? It opens up it’s vault and gives you access to all it’s magical secrets. Everything you need to know to release Moroz!”

Feldez stared at her. “Release Moroz, wait, why do you think I’d want to do that?”

“Moroz was a fantastic magic weilder, he knows more about magic than almost any other being. If you could gain access to his knowledge, you could be the greatest magic weilder of our time. That’s what you want isn’t it? To gain that kind of power?”

Feldez continued to stare but not at her any longer, he stared through her. A slight tick formed in one eye. “Yes, I see now, that must be it.” He muttered to himself.

“You’re can’t put the town in danger just because they couldn’t give you the Glain you want.”

Feldez snorted. “First, you have everything turned around, it isn’t at all what you think---but I don’t have time to explain. I have to get back to the May Day Festival before First Bell---“

“I won’t let you! You’re not going to raise another one, right in the middle of town!” She grabbed one of his chess tropies from the bookshelf and swung it at Feldez who quickly stepped out of the way and deftly snatched it away from her. He stood there considering her and then swiftly moved around her to the door.

“I don’t have time for this! Everything will be fine, but I need to be there---you appear determined to mess things up once again and so leave me no alternative.” He said in his clipped, quiet way. He put his hand on the doorknob and shoved Ambril hard. She stumbled, lost her balance and landed on a stack of papers. Feldez quickly opened the door and slipped through. He paused to say, “we will discuss this after the festival, you’ll have to remain here until then.” Then the lock clicked smoothly into place.

“NOO!” Ambril heard the jingling of keys as she scrambled to her feet and lunged toward the door. But she was a half second too late. A dead bolt slid into place just as she turned the knob. She was trapped. Worse, Feldez was free to raise another Dullaith. If her mother and brother survived, if all the kids at school survived she knew Feldez would find a way to blame her family for it. Either way they lost. She started screaming and pounding on the door. But the door was heavily padded with insulation. It felt like nothing was getting through. Who would hear her anyway? The house was empty and would be until it was too late. But wait, she wasn’t alone…ever.

“*Are you there?*” Ambril waited tensely for several moments. “*fLit, can you hear me?”*

There was the muffled sound of crunching metal. *“Of course I can hear you, you blare like a badly tuned bass saxophone.”*

“*Where are you? We must have a bad connection, you sound like you’re in China.”*

“*I’m in the hallway trying to find a way through these wards he’s thrown up. He’s been very---*“ There was an electric sound, like a bugzapper. “*Ouch! He’s been very thorough…the son of a camel tender---I hope he wallows in bat guano for the rest of his life! That really hurt!*” There was the sound of high pitched screeches and lots of plopping sounds.

“*You mean you can’t get in? You’re stuck in the hallway and I’m stuck in here? Great! That’s just great! Feldez is about to release another monster on the town and I’m stuck in here…Hey! fLit, you can go and warn them! You can stop this from happening!”* Ambril thought at the fairy.

The forlorn sound of a fog horn echoed in her head.  *“I can’t just fly up and make an announcement! No, that’s not possible, I can’t establish a thought connection with just---anyone.”*

*“This is no time to be a snob! If you don’t do something, lots of people will get hurt, maybe even killed.”* She thought back angrily.

Mules brayed in her head. “*It’s not that you Sloth slobber, it’s that---it doesn’t work with every human kind, just---ones with fairy blood. And they have to want to make a connection with me too.”*

Ambril thought for a moment and then sighed, “*Oh I get it now, they won’t know how to make a connection or even want to try because all they’ll hear is all the noise you make---“* She was treated to some bad opera and a twangy country western tune sung simultaneously. “*There has to be another way, can you think of anything, anyone who might be able to---“*

There were suddenly some sharp pinging footsteps followed by a clumping sound in the hallway. “Get out of the way you pesky knat! We’ve work to do, don’t you be keeping us from it!” Then someone short pounded on the door.

“Ambril? How you be in there? Is there enough oxeeygen, you’re nought sufocatin are you?” Came the anxious voice of Bummil.

“Of course she’s not suffocating you soft headed dolt! This be a modern house with air ducts and everything! Speaking of which--- Boocher, where be ya?”

Somewhere above her Ambril could heard the tap tap of ceramic boots on metal followed by lots of huffing and puffing. It seemed to be getting louder. Then a half second later the air duct in the ceiling disappeared and was replaced with the chubby face of Boocher.

‘All right there, Ambril?”

Ambril smiled hugely and nodded.

Boocher let fall a rope which Ambril tied around her waist. “All set then?” Boocher asked and when Ambril nodded she fairly flew threw the air to the air duct where she managed to scramble inside. It was a tight fit and the ducts groaned a little under Ambril’s weight but held. Boocher greeted her with an arm punch.

“You’re fortunate that the ducts be a bit bigger than most and that you be a bit smaller than many.” He turned and trotted off. “Come on then! I thought you be in a hurry!”

There was enough room in the round duct for Boocher’s pointy hat to clear but it was a tight fit for Ambril who had to elbow her way along. Fortunately she didn’t have to go far. Just ahead, Ambril could see light streaming through a hole where the duct cover used to be. “Just poke yourself through there and we’ll get you down” Boocher slapped her this time and then shoved her head first through the hole. Ambril fell flailing toward the hallway floor but was pulled up short---and painfully by the rope around her waist.

“O.K. then?”

“Ah, I guess---but breathing is kind of a problem.” She rasped as he lowered her to the ground.

Baldot came over with his hands on his hips and a satisfied smile on his face as Ambril untied the rope and felt around for any broken ribs. “Thanks for getting me out of there. How’d you know where I was?” she asked.

He nodded and smiled wider at her. “We can’t be telling you all our secrets to a daft human-kind now, can we?” he asked.

Ambril struggled to her feet. “I hate to ask this but---I think I need more help.”

“More help? That’s rich, we be up to our ears in caring for YOUR garden, tending to Unk’s house and keeping track of Miss Fern.” Grumbled Baldot grumpily folding his arms.

“This will be---better than a no-rules game of Rugby, I promise. I need your help fighting a Dullaith.”

Bummil pushed his way between them. “That would be better than Rugby! I’m in!”

“Wait a minute, It’s me who says what we do, don’t you know!” Shouted Baldot. Everyone looked at him expectantly as he pulled on his beard. “We’re in, of course.”

Ambril filled them in briefly on all what she thought was about to happen as she grabbed her back pack and headed out the door. The hall clock said it was almost 11:00. She jumped on her bike. “So by First Bell, you’ll be there?”

Baldot jumped. “You be pulling my leg! First Bell is in five minutes!”

“First Bell’s not til noon I thought!”

“I guess you’re the last to know, this year it’s early. It’s based on the position of the sun and the inclination of the Mayor.” Boocher nodded.

“I have to hurry, see you later then! But not too much later!” Ambril slammed hard on her pedals and rocketed down the hill towards 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.

“Watch it Grandma, there’s another hooligan!” A man in a loud Hawaiian shirt shouted as he dragged a frail woman out of the road.

“Coming through!” Ambril yelled as she threaded her way through the crowd which thickened like overcooked pudding the closer she got to Circle Park. There were two rows of booths with a central walkway all around the circle park. The inner tables were right on the circle. Ambril was relieved to see that her Mom’s booth was farther away from the action. The last thing she needed was her mother racing in to try and save her. Betula waved her over as she got off her bike. Her booth was already mobbed with people but Betula came around and handed her a bag smelling of fresh baked bread and cookies. “Save that for later. What’s going on child? You’re as white as Red’s whiskers after a roll in the sugar bin.”

“I---I can’t explain but---Will you get my Mom out of here? And maybe my brother too?” She pleaded.

“What?”

“No time to explain, will you?” Ambril was already running away searching for Feldez in the crowd. She looked back one more time and saw to her relief that Betula was making her way over to her Mom’s booth.

Ambril spotted Mr. Pinwydden nearby talking with a small, efficient, red headed woman with a “Hi, I’m Mayor Jacaranda” badge clipped to her lapel. Off to one side the high school band was warming up. There were Peace Officers and barricades lining the circle stone. Ambril was able to fight her way through to one of the barricades.

“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, looking like a mad Viking woman, hands on hips, a large wreath of bristly flowers jammed on her head, and a leather hide thrown over her shoulders. Her feet were bare. She glowered at Skarn, “but we must get into our places for the spring dance of maids!” She said firmly.

Several lumpy middle-aged women nodded with her as they peered out from under equally large wreaths of flowers.

“No can do---ya see, orders are orders---no one gets on that there stone ‘til after First Bell” Skarn waved her back authoritatively.

Ambril stretched herself upward to see if Ygg or Sully were anywhere nearby The band started playing a rousing marching tune, slightly off key but extra loud to make up for it. Then a familiar lean figure strode stiffly out onto the stone. Feldez was making his way swiftly to the center of the circle stone, his face taunt like a mask.

“No!” 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….”

“Hi Ambril, what’s up?” Surprisingly it was Riley who appeared at her elbow.

“Riley! Where have you been?” Surprised she missed the moment when Feldez stopped to bend over the center stone.

“Stop him!” Yelled Ambril frantically as she pressed against the wooden barricade.

Riley tugged at her sleeve. “What’s wrong? Tell me!” He said urgently.

“It’s a long story, but Feldez has to be stopped! He’s going to try to kill the whole town at First Bell!”

Riley looked amazed then he grabbed the caution tape with one hand. “What’s keeping you? 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. She could hear Skarn bellow behind her. “Hey you kids, get off a there!”

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!”

Ambril’s heart jumped into her throat as she saw Feldez slowly reach out his hand to touch the central stone. Riley was matching her pace.

“Get those kids out a’ there!” It was Chief Buckthorne yelling from the sidelines.

“I’m trying’!” Skarn yelled from close behind them. She felt a hand grab her ponytail but she yanked it away. Realizing there was no time for finesse, she launched herself into a full tackle.

“Not again you’re not! Not this time!” 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

It was a perfect tackle the gnomes told her later but just an instant too late. At the first peel of the bell a fountain of acrid black smoke shot up from the stone, sparks thirty feet high erupted simultaneously.

“Ambril, what did you do?” Yelled Feldez and shoved her roughly aside.

“What did I do? Are you going to try and pin this one on me just like you pinned the other on my Dad?” She tried to say but her chest tightened with fear as a crackling slithering sound drowned her voice out. 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. She felt the terror begin to infiltrate her mind. But thanks to fLit she had practice with this and pushed away her own hysteria. She scrambled to her feet and pulled out her Ashera.

She saw the Chief dragging an inert Riley away to safety. The fire chief and his men were staring dumfoundedly at the Dullaith. Skarn had turned tail and run as soon as the monster had appeared. Ambril threw her backpack off to the side and faced the now fully formed monster Dullaith.

“Get that kid gone NOW!” Shouted the Chief pointing a warning finger at Ambril.

Feldez lunged at her his eyes intent. Ambril jumped to the side just in time. “Ambril, I told you to stay out of this! What a mess this is!”

Ambril knew she didn’t have time for this. She snuck a glance at the Dullaith who had begun to inhale deeply, already on the hunt. She had to do something fast or some one would be killed. She raced toward the edge of the booths, Feldez chased her but just before she reached the barricades she swerved to run alongside. Feldez was nearly on top of her when she turned to face him and pointed her Ashera at him. She felt the raw power shoot through her. It engulfed him in sparks after which he slumped against the barricade.

Ambril gestured to a frightened looking woman in a red sweater. “Can you pull him to safety?” The woman just stared at her for a moment and then mutely nodded.

Ambril turned back to the creature and sensed immediately that this Dullaith was more powerful than the last. It seemed larger and faster; already the stench of it made it hard for her to breathe. The creature was hungry, and seeking its next victim. She knew she’d be first on its list.

A frantic jangle of bells sounded. “*Cut off its source of energy fast!”* fLit thought at her urgently. “*The source is a magical being, I just can’t tell which kind… but whoever it is will be dead soon if we don’t act now!* ”

Ambril didn’t hesitate and dove toward the twisted stem of the monster. Cold numbed her mind and hands the closer she ran. Her breath was ragged, 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! It wants your power and then when it’s finished with you? It will come for the rest of your friends! So MOVE!”*

The sharp sting of the fairy’s boots did the trick. Ambril concentrated on pushing away the hysteria that had rushed in to overpower her senses. She shook herself and then gathering all the energy she could muster she plunged in again. Another painful stride and she was at the center. The smoke was so thick and she couldn’t see or breathe. Coughing she squeezed her eyes shut and felt the dense malevolent magic jetting around her, She could feel it pushing her back, wriggling through her defenses. She shivered as she realizing that in another few seconds she’d be on her knees to it. But she still had those seconds to work with. Resolutely she held her arm out full length and slashed at the magic’s source. The Ashera found its mark. She felt the magic snap and fizzle as she slashed at it again and 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 stinging rage pulsing around her as she felt around for the box. When her fingers finally closed around it she stumbled away, light-headed from the lack of oxygen. As she broke through the dense wall of smoke she filled her lungs with fresh air. An acrid steam curled from the Morte Cell and around her arm. She jabbed at it with her Ashera and gasped as the limp form of a fat squirrel fell out and landed in her hand. A large black crow swooped out from nowhere, in an instant Sid was standing next to her. “Aster!” He cradled the squirrel in his arms as he walked quickly away. “We’re counting on you Ambril, you’re the only one who can take that thing down.” He yelled over his shoulder.

Great, no pressure. Ambril took another big breath as she turned back to the monster. The Dullaith was raging, the severed threads of dark magic sizzled as they whipped around beneath it. Then the Dullaith stopped and---sniffed. Its massive jaws opened and inhaled--- its glowing eyes locked onto her. The hunter had found its prey. fLit was right, it could sense the power she wielded, that was the reason it had chased her in the forest, it was drawn to the Ledrith Glain. The stench was overwhelming as it began to stalk her. She had to act fast. Ambril’s Ashera shook slightly as a massive energy ball erupted and launched itself at the roiling smoky madness bearing down on her. It exploded on impact taking out one eye and severing a large chunk of its head which slid in a jumble of smoke and flailing magic strands to the ground.

The townspeople behind her roared in terror. Ambril could see them pointing at something in the sky. It looked like a flock of ungainly flying jellyfish was about to attack the town. As a mass of Brellies draped heavily with vines swooped down over the monster. 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. But only if you knew. Ambril watched as one of the brellie’s got within throwing distance of the monster abd a volley of bomber nuts fell. When they hit their sharp explosions made the Dullaith wince as portions of its skin short-circuited.

A stream of Gooberous slime from another Brellie hissed wherever it landed the creature’s magical fiber fizzed, curled and snapped. It smelled even worse when barbequed. After a few more bombardments of bomber nuts and slime the Dullaith had had enough and shook itself spraying slime everywhere, especially the Brellies which began to smoke and fizz. “Prepare for crash landing boys!” Ambril heard Baldot call as the flailing Brellies sank to the ground.

“Come on guys, time to get jumping!”  It was Betula from the the edge. She’d cleared the barricades away fron her booth. She pulled a tablecloth off and revealed Red rolling out a sugar cannon.

“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 hissed as they melted and the smell of burnt sugar filled the air. The Dullaith was struggling as it dipped lower and lower.

“Shug! Slim! What’s keeping you!” Betula yelled.

“We’re coming, we’re coming, hold your unicorns,” Shug said as he and the Giraffe rolled out the candy Ferris Wheel loaded with Swedish fish.  
“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 toward the ground. Other Brellies slathered the monster with streams of bright yellow gel, which ran off the monster and stretched itself downward. In a matter of minutes the monster’s massive head was tethered to the ground.

“It’s working!” Shouted Red gleefully as he reloaded his cannon.

Ambril pulled out her medallion and summoned everything she had. She could feel it gathering and massing within her. She just hoped it would be enough. She gritted her teeth as she felt its heat singeing her mind. She pointed her Ashera and let go. The beam was so bright it nearly blinded her. It completely enveloped the Dullaith. The monster began to implode, its mesh-like skin shorting out in a firework of sparks. When it cleared there was nothing but a burnt husk; which crumpled into a cloud of smoke and a lingering smell of evil.

Ambril’s knees buckled as she released the power stream and hugged her Ashera.

“Hey are you all right?” It was Riley who limped up first and pulled her to her feet.

“Yeah, I guess

He rubbed his head. “I just caught the tail-end of that, I guess I must have blacked out but that was some show. Is that Glain?” He asked looking curiously at her medallion.

“I guess, it’s an old family heirloom.” She said trying to sound casual as she hastily slipped it back under her shirt. Behind Riley Ambril could see the devastation beyond. The booths looked as if they’d been recently bombed. Much of the merchandise had been ruined by the onslaught of slime, monster and burnt sugar.

A tall, thin man was walking quickly toward her followed by Betula. “No rest for the weary, its Aster, she’s in a bad way.” Croaked Sid. In his arms he cradled the large fat squirrel she had released from the Morte Cell. It groaned a little as the light seemed to hurt her eyes.

“She’s an…Animalfia, Ambril,” explained Betula, “someone set a trap for her in the forest and used her to fuel the Dullaith. Can you help her like you helped Red?”

“Sid’s an Animalfia too, of course.” Added Red.

And finally Ambril put two and two together. “Oh right…I think I remember seeing you and …um…Aster before, you know, as your animal selves.” 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 can’t promise anything but I’ll try.” Ambril said resolutely.

Her Ashera shone even in the bright sunlight. The recent battle seemed to have empowered it.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, you can see it in the way it shines.”

Ambril lost no time and taking the small furry animal in her arms she closed her eyes and went inside. Effortlessly she shoved aside the gray mist but then gasped as Aster was almost entirely encased in thick threads of curse. Worse, they seemed to be growing, using the animal’s energy against itself, it seemed to be binding it ever more closely.

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

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

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

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

Ambril looked down and was surprised to see that the Ledrith Glain had dimmed considerably.

“*It isn’t permanent…yet…the Ledrith Glain has the power to refuel itself by tapping into the emotional strength of those around it*.”

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

“*I have to warn you, that if the Ledrith Glain’s power runs out you may have to use your own life energy to fully heal her.”*

“*You mean it will…start to draw off my own energy*?”

“*You might weaken yourself to the point where you’ll have to choose between your friend’s life and your own*.” Then the fairy sniffed. “*I hope you have the good sense to know when you must stop*.”

Resolutely Ambril pointed the Ashera at the furry creature in her arms and felt the pulse of magical energy roar down her arm into the dying creature. Slowly the black threads began to thin and fade. She looked down at the Ledrith Glain and saw it flicker. When it darkened she could feel a draw on her own heart. Ambril could also see long threads connecting the squirrel with smouldering shadows below the ground. Using the Ashera like a sword she cut the black curse threads from the small creature in her arms. The squirrel arched its back as if electrocuted and fell back, inert in her arms. For a moment Ambril was afraid the shock of cutting the curse threads had been too much but then she could make out the squirrel’s gentle and rhythmic breathing. The squirrel was---sleeping. She smiled as she opened her eyes.

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

Sid hugged the squirrel close. “She needs rest now but tell your Mom she’ll be back to work before too long.”

“What, Aster works for my Mom?”

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!

The beak nosed thin man looked at her carefully. “I thank you.” His bright black eyes twinkled a little as he turned toward the road. “Now you go and get yourself gone. It ain’t safe for you here.”

The more intrepid townsfolk had begun to make their way through the wreckage. None of them looked elated to have been freed from a monster. Most of them looked angry. Two detached themselves from the rest and ran toward Ambril.

“Ambril! Ambril, my darling! Are you all right? Betula asked me to get some things from her store room, what happened?” Ambril was nearly smothered by her mother’s hug.

“I’m O.K., Mom, really.”

“Riley? You’re home!” Riley’s mother came running up next. “Where have you been?” She folded her son in a brief hug and then started to inspect him for injuries. “What happened to you? We’ve been so worried!” Riley stood there mutely studying his toes. “Come on, let’s go find your father.” She looked Ambril and her mother up and down as she dragged Riley away.

There were lots of others eyeing her suspiciously in the crowd forming around them. Her heart sank as she realized that Zane might have been right. Magic in broad daylight was an unforgiveable sin. But just how much had the townspeople seen? Ambril hoped they hadn’t caught sight of the gnomes or the sugar animals.

“Now, we need to get you out of here, sweetie! The townspeople are in such a mood.” Her mother tugged on her sleeve.

Ambril smiled as she saw Ygg with her backpack running toward her with Sully just behind him. The Chief walked up just then looking stern.

“Time for a nice long chat, miss. What the heck do you think you were doing? It’s a miracle you weren’t killed! 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 and yelling out over the crowd around them. Feldez appeared beside the chief having just finished combing his hair. He looked unruffled as always. He stared with undisguised hatred at Ambril.

“Feldez? Are you kidding? He didn’t have any---“ 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 “We should get the children out of here immediately. This crowd is turning ugly.” Feldez said tersely, his eyes surveying the crowd behind them.

The Chief 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.

Ms. Breccia, her floral wreath askew, loomed suddenly. “Aha! I knew it! Chief you must arrest this child!” She pointed a square finger at Ambril. I was forced to teach her this year and I’ll have you know I have never had a more troublesome miscreant in all my teaching career! This!” She said pointing a stumpy 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 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. “And now his daughter has taken up his vile ways and raised another! Yes, it was a Dullaith, A monstrous beast it was! And she, saving a magic wand in front of it, goading it on” She brayed into the crowd. “We are so fortunate to have Feldez among us, I didn’t see it myself as I was teaching those less in the know as I how to take cover during a crisis. But I’m sure, in fact I’m positive it was Feldez who put this monster down!” She started to nod and clap at Feldez. The crowd behind her followed her lead and soon everyone was admiring Feldez.

“We are greatly indebted to you again it seems,” added one of the other floral wreathed maids. “Such a hero! What would this town do without you?”

Ambril was disgusted. Was he going to take credit for this too?

Feldez sputtered, “We don’t really know all that occurred but I have to say that…”

Ambril simply couldn’t contain herself any longer, she lunged at him, “LIAR!” She screamed was stifled by the Chief who stepped in front of her and stared her down.

“Easy there, we’ve had enough drama for the day. This crowd is getting dangerous. Help me save your neck by just staying quiet for now. We’ll work this thing through later.” He waited until her breathing slowed before releasing her hands and stepped back to address the crowd. “We’ll release a full statement after we’ve had a chance to gather all the facts. 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 and sneered. “This one had a magic stick which shot sparks out of it at the monster!” His face was reddening with fear and anger.

“That one went after Feldez, I saw it myself!” said the woman in a red sweater as she pointed at Ambril.

“They were telling that monster what to do, is what I think!” Another man snorted loudly. “They magicked it up to kill us all!”

“And a piece of it nearly fell on my head!” Quavered a squinty-eyed lady in a nauseously pink jogging suit. “They’re out to get us, nasty kids!”

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! Let’s throw ‘em out and be rid of them!”

“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 bring monsters down on us whenever they please!” Countered a red faced man staring angrily at Ambril.

“I say into the forest with them three!”

Ambril’s mother drew herself up to more than her full height and facing the angry mob put her hands on her hips. ‘Over my dead body will you take my daughter out into the forest to die!” She yelled.

“Well that can be arranged, 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 crumpled. The crowd was so worked up now Ambril, Sully and Ygg were jostled from side to side.

“Now that’s enough! The Chief was bellowing so loudly now the veins on the side of his face looked more like ropes. “If any of you puts a hand on these kids, you’ll be spending the night in jail!” He threatened, but the crowd wasn’t in a listening mood. They started shoving him around too. “Skarn! Take these kids on over to 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. But the crowd kept them apart.

“Mom! Dad!” Was all Sully could get out before Skarn shoved her forward.

“Chief Buckthorne! Ygg and Sully didn’t have anything to do with it! They don’t need to leave!”

“You tell that to this crowd. It’s just for safe keeping, their parents can pick them up tomorrow.” Chief Buckthorne said reassuringly and then more urgently to his Deputy. “Right now, Skarn! You hear me, GO!”

Skarn wedged himself behind the wheel. Sully wiped tears from her face as she waved good-bye to her parents. Part of the mob had followed them and shouted nasty things about their parents and brothers and even dogs. They pounded on the windows as Skarn eased the car out and away. Away from everything they knew and loved.

# The Mines and then something much much worse

The kids, shell-shocked, lapsed into silence as they watched the houses thin and the forest thicken and darken. Outside the wall, the road entered a part of the forest Ambril had never seen before where the trees grew so tall the branches seemed to form a sort of sky all of their own.

“This be old growth forest,” mused Ygg.

Skarn turned left at a crossroads and then coasted to a stop in front of a pair of heavy steel gates. There were no trespassing, keep out and private property signs tacked up all over it in various stages of disrepair. One warned of radioactivity.

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

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

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

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

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

There were steel bars attached to the top of the front seat that separated the driver from the back. The good from the bad.

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 and pointed toward the gate. Ambril and Sully wasted no time wriggling through as well.

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 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.”

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 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. “The Gray Lady, you know, wanting to kill you? And that was in the daytime! Can you imagine what it’s like out here at night?” Sully shuddered. “Besides which, Ygg and I have always been outsiders. I never felt like I belonged until I met you guys.”

Ygg nodded. “Nope, Noooo, No---We be staying together and nowt 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!”

“It’s a right good idea…but let’s get free of Skarn first.” Said Ygg. He peeped out briefly. “He’s still on his cell phone. I’m thinking we can make it---ready?”

Ygg snuck over to the fence and scrambled through, Sully right on his heels. Ambril slipped out and through the fence easily enough but just as she thought she was safe, her backpack snagged a rusted wire which shook the fence enough to bring one of the signs crashing down. The noise was impossible to ignore. Even for Skarn. The three kids held their breath. Skarn banged noisily on the fence as he scanned the forest.

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

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.” Skarn walked back down the fence still talking quietly to the Chief.

Ambril looked around. 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.”

They wasted no time picking their way down the hillside and 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.

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. The water made such a pleasant sound. Ambril listened to the sounds of the forest around her. The curt chipping of an annoyed squirrel, the retort of a crow and the far off scream of a hawk…

She suddenly shivered and looked around her. She suddenly had 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. The brilliant green slime streaked around and through everything.

Sully snorted gently as Ambril crouched down and nudged her.

“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 living near the mines, but I haven’t seen anything but the same old Squirrels, birds, trees, fishes…”

“And this green slime, a lot of that…”Ambril scooted over to the edge of the water. She found the crystal clear water mesmerizing. The strands of lime green mold crisscrossed 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 Ambril to a stop. “Wait! Wait! This is stupid…why are we running?”

“Sea Monster, it’s another sea monster!” Ambril pointed back to the placid lake. “There was this eye…staring at me…” Ambril panted.

Ygg raced up, concerned. “What be wrong now!” He asked.

“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 Great-Gran’s place.” She sat down and began picking prickles from her socks.

A flock of crows flew out of the trees and away and the forest got a lot quieter. There was another cry of a hawk.

Ambril was embarrassed.

“Really…a Sea Monster?” Asked Ygg skeptically.

“I saw something…at least I think I did.” Said Ambril defensively.

“What are the odds you’d meet two sea monsters in your life, huh? Come on, it was probably a plastic bottle.” Said Sully reasonably as she scrambled back to her feet and started limping back to the lake. “Come on, let’s go and see.”

Ambril hesitated. The shadow of a large bird flashed over Sully briefly and then over Ygg . But Ambril didn’t get a sinking feeling until it moved over to her and stayed on her growing larger and larger…

“Sully! Ygg! Run! Run!” She said lunging to one side.

Just in time---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 her Ashera.

“Stay here!” She yelled behind her as she broke into a run. Her feet pounded the grass as she watched the hawk sweep around and come back 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 launched the Ashera at her.

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. As she reached the lake she flung herself into a shallow dive. As she entered the water her hand closed around the smooth wood cylinder. She swam frantically under an overhanging rock. She saw the head of the hawk enter the water, and stretch toward 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 grip her shoulders 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 crazy bird! I haven’t done anything! You can’t punish some one for something they haven’t done yet!” She yelled at her attacker but the gray bird just screeched and climbed higher into the sky.

Ambril could see her friends below watching them 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. It seemed to come alive. She thought to herself that it must be a dream as the lake itself reached up 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-blue slime and was hovered inches above a large eye in the middle of the lake. 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.

Another piece of the lake looking suspiciously like a sea monster’s 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 completely encased in slime. It was so helpless it could only blink furiously at Ambril.

The sea monster wound up for and threw the hawk high 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.

# The Sea Monster and a ride home

“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?”

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.

“*I think I saw you before, in my Great-Gran’s lake? Was that you*?”

Gern made a sound like a giggle.

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? Is she gone? And who is this then?” Sully said turning to the lake apprehensively. “Your friendly neighborhood---sea monster?”

“It’s not a sea Monster, its name is Gern, like in my Dad’s last experiment.” Said Ambril softly. She suddenly felt very woozy for her wound was pretty deep. She needed help. All they had were a few rumpled band-aids.

“Boy that’s bad, Ambril, we’re gong to have to do something about that right now.” Sully pointed to her shoulder to where the blood had begun to ooze out again.

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, “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, better.” Said Ambril smiling at the bobbing eye.

“So this is your Dad’s experiment, but I thought he was working on some new kind of energy source, not a sea monster.” Sully paused to peer closely at the eye bobbing in front of her. “Where are the moving parts?”

“My Dad wrote about something unexpected, something happened that he wasn’t prepared for.” Ambril smiled at the slime monster. “I think my Dad was trying to create a living energy source. But somewhere, somehow along the way Gern developed into a being.”

“It be magic or science?” Said Ygg studying the slimy creature.

“I think my Dad would have preferred science but…” Ambril shrugged.

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. “it be 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 to hear the voice inside their heads.

Ambril wasn’t sure quite where to begin. She had so many questions…“Do you mind telling us more about my Dad,” She asked.

H*e wake---wake me. He 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 in lab with him. He study---study---worry---worry. I study---study—worry---worry.”*

“What was he studying and worrying about?”

“*Moroz*---*Magic---gic---gic containment*.”

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

“*Just in case---casey*. *Feldez want to---want to but Bren Silva 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*. “

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

“*Me not know---know what happened*.” Gern looked very sad now and seemed to quiver. *Could not 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.

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

Ambril stopped and starred at Gern.

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

The eye squinted in distaste. “*Tastes bad---bad---bad. Earth poisoned---poisoned---there.”*

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

“*Moroz---Moroz---Moroz is under circle stone---stone---stone*.”

“But where, which circle stone?” They seemed to be back where they started, nowhere.

*“Place no more---more---more people there.”*

“You mean---an old deserted town out in the forest? It sounds like it might be Old Town!”

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

“But I thought Old Town was torn down.” Said Sully incredulously.

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

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

Sully said slowly. “Is there any way you can take us there?”

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

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

“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. “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 were 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.“

“No it is special. ” Sully squealed excited. “It’s a map of Old Town!”

“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 on the floor to be perfectly frank with you.” Said Ygg, annoyed.

Sully paid no attention and continued. “The new city wasn’t built until 1850 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 a better idea?” Asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed and shook his head slowly.

“Then I guess that’s what we’re going to do.”

The glassy eye bobbed furiously up and down. “*Gern 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 I can*!”

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

“*Run---run river!”*

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

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

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

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

“You’re in both places at once, you be miles long then.” Said Ygg, clearly impressed.

“So…you are, connected to the gazebo right now and you can get us back there?” Asked Ambril.

Gern just bobbed up and down again.

“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 squeezy eeded-needed.”*

“It’ll be a slime roller coaster ride.” Sully smirked as she watched Ygg squirm.

They stuffed their shoes into their backpacks. Ambril found that the Ashera had dried itself and looked brighter and shinier than ever. She threw it in her backpack and zipped it closed. The three lined up on the rock overhang and waited as Gern pulled a large tentacle above the water just in front of them. Ambril tested it with her foot. It felt like runny Jell-O and smelled like--- summer rain, Gern’s magical scent.

Ambril slid herself gently on with Sully in front 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 being 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 warm 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 were launched into the air. 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. They slid by a meadow and startled some deer grazing there. Ambril was just beginning to relax when they rounded a bend and she found they were 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.

# The Windbog and a snitty blossom

and squirted into a small lake on the other side. After floundering a little, Ambril found herself wading toward her Great-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.

Ambril heard a tink-tink sound, “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!” 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!”

A heavy clank sounded as the old water jug stumped up. It seemed to have adjusted well to it’s role and stood quietly at attention next to Bummil.

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

“Ah, that was it, I could smell the slime from the other end of the garden.” As Ambril brushed the water from her eyes and saw Koda walking toward them. “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 trotted up.

“We need to get to the school house, can you help us?” Asked Ambril as she tried unsuccessfully to wring out her pants while still in them.

Koda looked them over thoughtfully. “Well,” he said slowly. “Rosebud take you but not like that, she hates a soggy basket.”

Ygg tried shaking himself like a dog without much affect other than annoying everyone. “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 for 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 garden was looking infinitely better. The pathways were swept clean, the plants had all been pruned and looked content and well tended. Ambril was impressed.

“You’ve really been working hard here.” She said feeling guilty; after all it was her family’s estate.

“We’re not doing this for the likes of you.” Said Bummil serenely. “It’s for the plants, they be needing a bit of attention is all.”

A moment later Bummil stopped in front of a marshy area filled with reeds. The marker read, ’Windbog Extremus’. Its leaves were large, wrinkled and rubbery looking like deflated balloons. “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.

“Won’t be long now.” Said Bummil watching the marshy pool. It suddenly began to bubble and froth. The limp, rubbery balloon leaves began slowly to inflate. There was the hum of voices in deep 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.

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 gale of opinions for and against Reaganomics swirled around them, plus a lecture on Ygg’s grammar. Sully giggled.

“That’s Tripe! You can’t prove that!” Said Ambril feeling her nearly dry hair. Several voices yelled at her about what should have been done about the dot-com bubble.

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.

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

“Thanks Bummil!” Said Ygg and 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 slightly soggy backpacks. “Rosebud will take you there herself.” Said Koda nodding at the bike.

Ambril braced herself as Rosebud didn’t look pleased to see her. “Hi…hi Rosebud, how’ve you---“ She wasn’t allowed to finish. Rosebud whipped out vines grabbed them and then jammed them none too gently inside the basket. It was a very tight fit.

“Manners, Rosebud, be nice.” Said Koda warningly. But Rosebud didn’t 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 out in the darkening forest. The sun had set and the shadows were gaining in strength. The bike skidded and bumped along mercilessly. Ambril felt like she was in a large wicker blender as they sprayed gravel around a tight curve and took some air over an old log.

“She’s off the trail!” Shouted Ygg.

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

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

‘I think---Oww!---bes’ not thoo talk, I jus’ bi’ my tongue.” Said Sully.

After being thoroughly shaken and then stirred, they burst through a hedge and out onto the school playground. Without ceremony Rosebud ejected them onto the grass near the circle stone. Ambril lay still for a minute and tested everything to make sure there were no broken bones before raising her head to see Rosebud disappearing back into the forest.

# Breaking and Entering and the too Long Arm of the Law

“She’s never going to forgive me for zapping her with the Ashera that once.” Said Ambril sitting up slowly.

“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, stretching her arms uncertainly. The sun had set and the twilight had begun to thicken to night.

Ygg squinted at the old school building across the street lit by one lone flood light. “Anyone figured a way in yet?” Then he stiffened. “Who’s that?” he whispered pointing at two figures wrestling on the front lawn.

“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 around the school. Skarn staggered up with his hand on his face and then lunged after him. They disappeared around the corner. Ambril was relieved she’d had enough sense to stay in the shadows. If Skarn had seen her…well she didn’t even want to think about that.

Just as they were about to get to their feet when the flash of headlights from a sleek sedan grazed them as it swung around the corner.

“Duck! We can’t be seen, they’ll take us away again!” Ambril whispered hoarsely as she lunged behind some shrubs dragging Ygg and Sully with her. Ambril’s heart nearly stopped as the car slowed to a stop in front of the school and a tall, thin figure emerged. Feldez walked quickly up the front steps and disappeared inside.

Ambril’s hands bunched into fists. Here was the guy who nearly got them all killed and all she could do was hide in the bushes.

“School’s seeing a lot of action tonight,” mused Sully.

“Come on! We have to find out what Feldez’s up to!” whispered Ambril as she crept out from the bushes and darted across the street. Hugging the building they started makng their way toward the back of the school.

“Hey! Is that one open?” Sully asked pointing at a window just above them.

“That’s the art supply closet, they always forget to close that one.” Said a voice behind them. Riley slowly came out from behind a bush.

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

“What do you mean?” He asked warily.

“We just saw you two fighting. You need to stay clear of him. That guys nothing but a liar and a kidnapper---“

“A kidnapper? Skarn?“

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

“His accomplice? You mean, the Chief?”

“We don’t know who it was,” said Ambril ruefully---that would have been really good information to have.

“Wow, big day for you, first fighting a Dullaith, getting kidnapped and now breaking into the school! You are well on your way to becoming hardened criminals.” Riley said smirking. “But you’re right about Skarn he’s bad news. 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 to my brother 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.

“It’s a long story---ending with we have to break into the janitor’s closet. You shouldn’t be hanging around with---”

She was interrupted by a loud snort. Skarn had snuck around the corner. “Well, well a two fer! Nothing better!” He bellowed as he charged them. “I’m getting a bonus this month for sure!”

Ambril looked anxiously at the window, it was set at around her shoulder height. Ygg scrambled in easily and reached back to pull Sully in. “Here, I’ll give you a boost!” Said Riley and grabbing her around the waist practically threw her at the window. She grabbed the windowsill and felt Ygg and Sully pull her 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. Ambril offered Riley her hand. “Riley, get in here!” She yelled.

He took her hand 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.

Ygg lunged toward the window and dropped it onto Skarn’s fingers. A squeal of pain followed by the disappearance of his fingers. Ambril struggled to her feet.

‘This ain’t over for any 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 they staggered into the dark hallway.

“Maybe you can get out through the Gym door. You shouldn’t be hanging with us, in face you should get as far away from us as you can.” warned 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.”

“We have to figure out where Old Town is.” Sully whispered as they felt their way down the stairwell. The shadows made even this familiar place spooky.

“Old Town? I thought that place had been pulled down?” Riley asked suddenly very close to Ambril.

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. 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. Ambril could see the padlock and chain were back on the closet’s door.

“Uh oh! Look let’s see if we can sneak out the back, we’ve no more time!“ said Sully.

“Hold on---Here, this’ll help!” Riley picked up the padlock and spun the face. “This happens to be my old lock. Bert confiscated it when Lance used it to chain me to the basketball hoop.” Riley shook his head. “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 and 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 restrung the chain on the inside of the door and snapped the lock. He was just in time, with a creaking sound they could hear the front door surrender and bang open. They could hear Skarn’s heavy breathing, Ambril held 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 dingy window just above the door; the hard, clean light of a flashlight illuminated it briefly.

Skarn seemed to stand there forever…then he snorted in a disgusted way and slowly moved down the hallway. Ambril exhaled slowly. But with Skarn, went the light. They were left in oppressive darkness. In the close room Ambril picked up the faint scent of dark magic.

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

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

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

“He would’t have called for back up. Skarn doesn't want the Chief to know what he’s been up to.” Ygg shook his head. “He be here on his own.”

Ambril thought Skarn would probably lose his job if the Chief ever found out about what he’d really been doing the past few days.

“O.K., while we’re here, what is it you’re looking for?” Asked Riley lifting the lantern higher.

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

The Town of Trelawnyd, 1753

“See! This is Old Town!” She said excitedly. “The new town was built around the time of the 49er Gold Rush right? 1849?”

“This might be a map of Old Town, but it be nought helpful.” Said Ygg squinting at the map. “Everything’s…catawampus.”

Ambril slowly nodded. The map was confusing. The Buildings were too large. The roads were all different sizes and the forest made it look like a tree farm with the trees evenly sized and spaced.

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…”

“So…Old Town wasn’t torn down when they built this one, is that what you’re saying?” Asked Riley.

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

“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.” She continued.

“Moroz?” Guessed Riley.

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

“Really? Free him? He must be dead or 200 years old, why do you think some one would do that?” Riley asked.

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

Riley wasn’t looking at the mural anymore he was staring at them. “And you think he’s in Old Town?”

Ambril nodded and said, “Whoever’s behind the Dullaith business, we think they must be heading to Old Town to try and free him.” She continued. “That’s why we need to get to Old Town, to stop them.”

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

“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.

“And my family is being blamed for raising the Dullaiths because of my Dad. So, at least I have to get to the truth.” Added Ambril simply.

Riley looked at her surprised. “I wouldn’t…It could have been just an accident right? I mean who would go after you and your family? ---You’re so…nice.” He smiled at her in a way that made Ambril feel---good but a little 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?”

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

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

“So it’s near there. Now we just need one other landmark…” Said Sully squinting at the wall.

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

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

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

Even Sully looked crestfallen as the realization sank in.

“But it’s a start.” Said Ambril trying to make her friends feel better.

They all stared at the mural in silence. It was so frustrating get so close only to run into another brick wall, or in this case a tiled one.

They were suddenly jolted back to reality by a series of booming thuds and then an angry yelp.

“I guess we should start thinking about how to get out of here.” Whispered Riley.

“There be just the one door.” Said Ygg

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

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

# The Aunties Again

“They look a little like…turnips don’t they?” Mused Sully.

“What did you say…turnips?” Asked Ambril as she peered at the faces. There they were, on the archway. “The Aunties!” She cried and then laughed. One of them had glasses and they were even knitting.

“What, your Aunties are turnips?” Asked Sully.

“No I met them---at the Gazebo.” Ambril got an idea and dove into her backpack to retrieve her Ashera.

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

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

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

“Me to!” Ygg grabbed the other one.

“Great idea, But I have to warn you, they’re a little—impolite. Ready?” At the last minute Riley grabbed her shoulder.

Ambril shut her eyes and that now familiar gray fog swirled in until she pushed it away. Ambril could see the bright glow of fLit at her feet still in her backpack.

“Whoa! Look at that!” Ygg was pointing at the floor. In the center of the circle stone, the floor had been replaced with a round door covering a hole. The door was covered with an intricate lace like fabric which Ambril could now see was made out of the same stuff which formed the Dullaith. But this fabric glowed with health. The tile vines and roots had come alive and sprouted from the floor surrounding the door. Ambril was stunned.

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

“Her friends don’t look much smarter neither.” Another mumbled.

There they were, three large knobby lumps on the vines, knitting industriously. The middle one’s eyes were enlarged by the spectacles.

The Auntie on the left suddenly grabbed the glasses and gave Ambril the once over. “Did you bring a change of undies Lovey? You’ll be needing them. And who’s the earth-kind? He looks like a plodder to me.”

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

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

“You’d of thought the Ashera would be a bit…better fed. She’s a scrawny, slip of a thing, ” The right Auntie shook her head, disgusted.

Ambril had now gone from startled, to uncomfortable, to downright insulted. “We are standing right here, you know!”

The three Aunties jumped at that.

“Why do you have to be so rude?” Asked Ambril.

“We says what we sees.” Nodded the biggest one.

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

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

The bigger one looked peeved and snatched the glasses back. “Too true, only one way---straight through on into it ---“

“Maybe she’ll gets through---” said the middle one encouragingly.

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

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

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

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

Ambril had an idea. “We just want to get out here and to Old Town can you help us?”

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

All three aunties nodded as if it was perfectly clear.

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

“No we’s open the door.”

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

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

“Why not?” Asked Ambril exasperated.

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

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

“What, the Tylwith? Have you gone rotten? He’d never!” Said the middle one squinting. “Well maybe---Yoo hoo there!”

They all looked expectantly at Ambril’s feet.

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

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

“Beneath him he thinks,” sniffed the smallest one.

The sound of a crash landing echoed painfully through her head, and then, “*No*.”

“*Come on 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”.

fLit flew out of the backpack in a fury and kicked Ambril her hard in the nose. A swift swipe of harp strings and then, “*No!*”

Sully’s face was a classic picture of surprise, her mouth forming a perfect ‘O’. “Ambril? I…I don’t get it…Who’s this?” Sully stammered utterly bewildered.

Ambril sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, really sorry guys but fLit and I had an agreement.” Ambril’s words erupted in a jumble. “fLit’s here to protect the Ledrith Glain.”

“fLit? That’s no fairy name.” said Ygg.

“No, that’s the robot’s name---wait---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 unusually receptive to magic and its use*.” Here he shrugged. “*Not as receptive as a fairy but still*…”

Ygg glowered at him. “So predictable, thinking you be better than all of us.” Ambril said as she waved her hands between them to intervene. “O.K. yeah, he’s insufferable and arrogant and just as grumpy as a gnome. But I think we can trust him to get us out of here.”

Ygg took a step back as if he needed more space to think about that.

Sully looked at Ambril thoughtfully. “So you think this little guy can get us there all safely?” 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 beings other than their own kind.”

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

“Come on Ygg!” 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 alright so I guess I do too. Besides, do we have a choice.”

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

fLit snorted but and filled their heads with the sounds of a donkey braying.

“Easy there bug boy!” Ygg thought angrily.

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

“*I won’t do it.”* He folded his arms and looked obstinate.

“Figures.” Snorted Ygg.

Ambril was incensed. “*Why?*“

“*Those chutes are---unpredictable. There is evil there…Once I was taking a young novice through and…something---went wrong. I lost her. Something came---and---took her.”* fLit’s expression was bitter.  *“I don’t know what happened but I do know that I don’t want it to happen to you*.”

Ambril was touched and more than a little surprised---

“*Because of the Ledrith Glain. We can’t have that getting lost too*.” He added.

They were interrupted by a massive shuddering thud on the door. It startled Ambril so much that she opened her eyes. They were instantly back in the dark, dusty room.

“I know you’re in there, whispering and giggling! Breaking into high security areas now Aye? After today, they’ll lock you up and throw away the key!” There came another thud and then a splintering crack. Ambril briefly saw the glint of an ax blade. “You’re gonna enjoy jail! Cuz, I’ll be your full time guard!” Sneered Skarn

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

Another blow of the ax made the door shiver like an aspen tree as the center panel splintered out. An eye was visible briefly.

fLit suddenly flashed into view. “*It’s on your head if anything goes amiss!”* “Riley! Grab my hand and don’t let go!” Said Ambril as fLlit took hold of her ear.

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

Ambril could see he was almost through. Riley grabbed her hand and then took Sully’s hand. Ygg was at the end. “*Ready*? Close your eyes everyone!” The gray fog swirled around them again but Ambril didn’t bother to push it away.

“*On my mark! Everyone stay together!* *Don’t let go! You hear?”* fLit’s vibrated so loudly made her head throb. *“Especially you at the end earth-kind!*

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

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

The larger Auntie wrapped an old knarled tendril around the center doorknob and pulled. The door creaked upward revealing a dark, dank cavern.

“Fairies are nasty little bug things, Tylwith Tegs! So rude! Not even an "if you please"---or "When you have a minute!” said the middle one grumpily.

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

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

# The Chutes and a sharp left turn

The webbed chutes thrummed with magic and slippery. In seconds they were whirling down a long spiral. The webbing was nearly transparent. Ambril stared out into a seemingly endless space. There were chutes all around them some winding upward, some downward and others branching out all around. fLit just ahead of her steered through an array of intersections with other chutes coming at them from all directions. After another few minutes of gliding though, Ambril began to wonder why they hadn’t arrived at their destination.

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

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

*“The---entire---Universe? But why are we traveling through the Universe just to go a few miles?”* She asked.

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

“*What do you mean by the 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.

“*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 squeezed through a narrow tunnel. “*You* *have to let me concentrate now or we’ll never get out of here!”*

Ambril shut her mouth and noticed that the webbing around them was fading. Ambril could see a world coming into focus. Trees and rocks and sky sailed by. They were slowing down too. But just as they were almost safely…somewhere, everything seemed to go wrong.

In the dark, Ambril felt a knife like pain at her ear. She reached up and felt nothing---fLit was gone! And then suddenly she was alone and falling. She struck a patch of wet grass but was going so fast she rolled several times before coming to rest against a rock wall. She lay there stunned for a moment and then struggled to her feet.

“fLit! fLit! Anyone!” 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 and the moon had the right shape and size. This was definitely Earth. But where was she? This place really did look familiar. She had been here before. She was leaning against an old stone house. The roof had caved in and stones were slowly puddling around the walls. She looked over and in the moonlight and saw a stone circle in front of her and the twisted tree which had taken care of the Dullaith for her. fLit had done it, they had made it to Old Town.

“Ygg? Sully, where are you?”

“Ambril!” It was Riley.

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

“The fairy? Oh…he’s safe…for the time being.” Said Riley evasively with a brief smile. “I don’t know where the others are, though. Why don’t you bring out that fancy medallion of yours, maybe it’ll shed some light on things.”

“Are you O.K. Riley? you sound a little funny.” Said Ambril holding up her Ashera instead.

Riley looked different too, he stood a little straighter with his knees slightly flexed like a fighter. The Ashera glowed brilliantly in the gloom giving off sparks of energy.

“Where’s your medallion?” Riley asked. His voice had changed too, he sounded more confident, almost commanding.

Ambril heard footsteps behind her and turning yelled. “Ygg? Sully? Finally! I was getting worried!”

But the figure who emerged from the shadows was much too tall. “Ambril come here.” Feldez said softly holding out his hand. “That’s the Derwyn Ashera. It’s too powerful for a child like you.” He said impatiently nodding to the Ashera. “Give it to me now and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m going to hand over my Ashera to the likes of you? The guy who raised that Dullaith right in the middle of town and put everyone, INCLUDING MY MOM at risk! You think I’m that stupid?”

Feldez went white with rage. “Are you accusing me again of raising the Dullaith today?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t I? You were right there when the first Dullaith was raised in the forest and at the library when the Dorcha Blade was stolen! Of course it was you!” Screamed Ambril. “You even had access to the janitor’s closet and the Archives!”

Feldez’s voice was barely in control. “Give me that!” He lunged for her Ashera but as his hands closed around it a bolt of energy shot through him. He lit up like a Chinese New Year’s celebration for an instant. He quickly backed away.

Ambril was stunned. “I---I didn’t do that actually, though---I’m not sorry it happened.” She stuttered.

Riley snickered. “I’m not sorry either.”

Feldez croaked from the shadows, “so it’s true, the Ashera chose you.” He struggled to his feet. He flexed his hands and rubbing his arm as if it were numb.

Ambril nodded watching him warily. “When we get back to town I’m going to tell everyone what you’ve been up to.” She said angrily. “How you’ve been raising Dullaiths and trying to free Moroz.”

Feldez’s chuckle startled her. It was so…natural. And something else, he looked more relaxed than she had ever seen him, more human. “I haven’t raised any Dullaiths or tried to free Moroz, lately.”

“You did! Just like you when my Dad died trying to save you…my Dad said in his lab book---“

Feldez held up his hands in defeat. He looked honestly relieved. “That was before…” He paused lost in a swirl of memories then continued resolutely. “I’m sorry, Ambril. I’m sorry for what your family went through. It was wrong.” Feldez’s shoulders drooped. Ambril could see the last vestiges of his masquerade slip off him.

“I was so certain---so right---I couldn’t---wouldn’t see the dangers.” His voice filled with guilt. “When we met at the Old Council Chamber that last night.” Feldez laughed mirthlessly remembering. “Bren came armed with containment workings, which I dismissed. I began the workings before he had the protective wards in place. Halfway through…by mistake… the tiniest mistake…the Dullaith…” He paused and let the silence stretch too long. “It charged at Bren and…overpowered him.” Feldez raised a hand to half cover his face. “I finished the containment workings…but it was too late, Bren was gone.” Feldez’s body bowed by the force of the memory. “I blacked out and was unconscious for months. When I finally came to my senses, I found they had made me a hero and your father…”

“Why didn’t you tell the truth then?”

“I tried, the papers wouldn’t print it, the Town Elders didn’t want to get everyone riled up again, so…”

The air felt thick with the tattered remains of the past. Ambril took a deep breath, at least she knew the truth about her father. And she’d find a way, somehow, to tell the world.

“O.K., so if it wasn’t you, who raised the Dullaith today?”

A breeze blew back the strong smell of rotting fruit. Ambril wrinkled her nose just as a searing bolt of violet energy hit Feldez squarely in the chest. He was knocked backward ten feet and slammed into a rock wall . He slumped senseless to the ground. Ambril whirled around her Ashera ready.

But it was only Riley. Riley, with a satisfied grin Ambril could see it clearly in the moonlight. “That felt good!” He walked swiftly up to her and grabbed the chain around her neck and pulled her medallion into the moonlight. His face was tight with pain and his hand began to smoke as if the chain burned him. Then with the flick of his wrist he cut off the Ledrith Glain and captured it with a black cup on on the Dorcha’s handle.

“What the!---Hey that’s!” said Ambril both shocked and confused. She made a grab for her medallion but ended up grabbing the knife instead. The knife slit her finger sending a searing pain up her arm. She doubled over in pain.

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

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

“Riley, what---what are you doing? That’s the---Dorcha Blade!”

He smiled at her harder as he held it up in the moonlight. A darker slit against a dark sky. He sneered at her, waiting for her to realize…

“It couldn’t have been---not you,” whispered Ambril, still cradling her hand. “Were you behind it all? I can’t believe it!” She said incredulously. “You sent the threats---and conjured the Dullaiths!”

Riley smiled proudly. “My first one, the one at the Tupelo shack?” He shrugged. “It was just a practice one. I didn’t expect much, it took me a long time to snag that fairy…”

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

Rile continued to smile at her as he slowly held up a small black box. In it, frozen in pain, was fLit just as Ambril had seen him that first night.

“No!” Ambril went wild from the pain of seeing her friend locked in agony once again. She lunged for the box, her Ashera slashing the air in front of her until it hit with a clang the sharp edge of the black dagger. She felt the impact run all the way down her spine.

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

Ambril looked down at her Ashera and was shocked to see the bottom had been gouged, leaving a nasty hole. But it still resonated just as bright as before. Riley held the black box just out of reach.

Ambril couldn’t help herself. “Look, he’s my friend! You can’t do this to him!” She lunged again at Riley but Riley just 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 and tried to warm it unsuccessfully. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Feldez stirring. Maybe if she could keep him talking it would give Feldez enough time to recover. “Then the Playground, it was you again then too?”

Riley nodded and then grimaced. “Poor Lance, he caught me doing some workings in the 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.” He shrugged. “It didn’t work though.”

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

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

“And Red! What did Betula and her friends ever do to you?” Ambril said disgusted.

Riley snorted. “Don’t be stupid, you know why I needed Red’s magic.” Riley was getting annoyed. “You’re missing the point here, it’s not what Betula, or Afallen or any of the rest of Trelawnyd did to me, its what they didn’t do.” Riley cried angrily. “When did they ever try to include me in anything? I wasn’t invited to their birthday parties or backyard barbeques---I was so lonely.” It was dark but Ambril could feel his sadness and frustration. “Thanks to my brother and sometimes my Dad, I’m the town---joke.” His voice broke a little at the end.

“So this to get back at everyone?” Said Ambril disparagingly. “You’re shooting yourself in the foot, you know that. Trelawnyd is where you’re from, where your earliest memories were made. Ambril took a step toward him in spite of herself. “You’ve no idea what you’re giving up. I’ve spent the past ten years carted from place to place, never fitting in. We wre running from who we are.” She stood in front of him willing him to understand. “You have to try and work this out. Talk to your family…tell them how you’re hurting---“

But Riley backed away his face hardening again. “You don’t think I haven’t tried that? I’ve talked and talked to them.” His face was a tight mass of anguish. “But they never ever saw me as anything other than… embarrassing” His face filled with resolve. “But now---now---they will. I’ll show them how powerful I am.” He nodded simply. “And finally see that I’m not someone that should have been ignored. With Moroz to guide me---“

Ambril scoffed, “Listen I’ve seen Moroz. He’s not even human anymore. The last thing he’s going to want to do is to help a kid take revenge on Trelawnyd!”

Riley snorted. “No one’s seen Moroz for 150 years!”

“Unfortunatley, I have…he tried to kill me just like he will you. Look, you can’t control a being like Moroz, no one can.”

It was Riley’s turn to scoff. “Come on, how powerful can he still be? He’s been locked away, alone in the dark…I’ll release him and get him to explain some stuff and then he’ll crawl off to die somewhere.” Riley yawned and started fiddling with the Morte Cell. “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. “You need to know---This Dullaith will be powerful. You won’t be able to take it down without your medallion. 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. “Bye Ambril.”

# Battling a King

A searing violet light pierced the night sky sending shock waves rolling out into the forest as a wall of power and the smell of rot 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 Morte Cell glowed a deep purple 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. Taking her Ashera she pressed her deadened fingers around the wooden cylinder and lashed it to her wounded hand with the broken chain from her medallion.

She opened her eyes tried swinging her Ashera around. It worked though it throbbed with every move she made. She turned around. Staring directly at her was the King Dullaith. It towered over her, this one wore a crown of writhing snapping skulls around its horns. She shuddered, would her skull be added to that crown? The oppressive stench of rotting flesh assailed her and pressed on the edges of her thoughts. The King Dullaith had found her and had started moving toward her the familiar slithering crackle growing louder as it came. As it did Ambril caught sight of the Morte Cell, fizzing and sparking directly below the Dullaith’s enormous head.

Ambril braced herself and let it come. She knew she wouldn’t get a second chance and worked at keeping her mind clear. The Dullaith slowly opened its jaws as it advanced until it was nearly on top of her. Ambril tooka deep breath as a dense black smoke enveloped her. She lunged and slashed upward with her Ashera. A short burst of energy shot out and hit one of its glowing eyes. The energy sizzled and boiled out from the eye cavity extinguishing the magic in its web like skin wherever it touched.

Ambril wasted no time. Her eyes began to water as she ducked underneath the foul smelling creature and swung the Ashera blindly in a wide arc. She found her target. She felt the black threads binding the cell give under her thrust. The Morte Cell dropped into her hands. The shriek from the Dullaith echoed in her head as she stumbled away from it. She was too weak to walk and wound up crawling behind a rock. She brought the Morte Cell and her Ashera together briefly and popped it open. fLit fell out into her hand. His body limp but she sensed his life energy. He was alive. She stuffed him in her 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. She hadn’t the energy to push back the swirling fog. Through it she saw millions of tiny dots of light, like stars. The life energy of all the beings around her. Even the Dullaith which like the Morte Cell, glowed a violent purple, had one. Its energy ball was massive.

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

The tinkle of bells and flit coughed. “*Must not use its energy for yourself*. *It’s tainted.* *You become like them, a Dullaith*.”

“*Thanks, but keep quiet and rest*.” She thought back. All right so she’d have to be careful how she handled its energy but there was hope again, a chance she could do it. A loud racking cough startled Ambril. The monster had snuck up on her and to lurk behind one of the broken down buildings. Dizzy and weak she staggered to her feet. Its great roiling ball of energy was very close now. She reached out in her mind and ripped a mass of energy from it. For a moment she balanced it between her hands. It was so tempting, all that power so very close. All she had to do was draw it to herself---but then she’d be like them, insatiable grasping for more and more energy and power. No, that was not for her. With effort she refocused on the monster and launched the energy at it. The force of the impact sent the creature reeling. It’s one remaining eye winked out and one of its horns sloughed off, narrowly missing Ambril. The creature finally came to rest just twenty feet away from her. She could feel it sucking up the life energy from the tiny dots around them. They began to wink out as the monster began to revive itself. She could see its energy ball growing even larger.

It was hopeless. This Dullaith had the ability to regenerate itself at will. Without the Ledrith Glain, her powers were puny and limited. Ambril looked down at her trusty Ashera still sparking with life. The delicate tracery of lines and images glowed brighter, one of the images seemed to glow brighter than the rest. It was the image of the Cerberus. Ambril remembered their promise of help, when all hope was lost, that they would come for her, but what would they do when they came? Would they eat her? After all they were Hell Dogs. Would it be better to be eaten by a Dullaith or the Cerberus? She decided that if they smelled even a little better, she’d go the way of the dogs.

She could see the creature gather itself for another attack.When it struck Ambril knew that it would be for the last time. She watched, almost detached, as the monster opened it’s jaws wide enough to swallow her. Inside she could see hundreds of swirling faces… She braced herself for the impact. Her brain filled with voices, the forms of past victims whirled around her enclosing her. She felt her feet leave the ground, she was floating, feeling lighter and lighter. This must be it, the end, her end, but with her last thought she defiantly formed the word Cerberus in her mind and brought forth its image. It shimmered in the brilliant light growing denser, there was suddenly more detail. The red eyes, the sharpness of the teeth, the fire breath which seemed to singe her arms. Just as she realized the Hell dog was real and that she was looking at it from within the jaws of the Dullaith, a shockwave of energy vibrated all around her. The Dullaith let out an agonizing scream of pain.

There were two of them. They brought with them the smell of white hot fire and caverns of molten rock. Their gigantic jaws ripped and tore away at the Dullaith. Ambril fell to the ground and was showered with skulls. They bounced off her and wherever they landed sank slowly into the earth. In moments it was over and a gentle breeze came and blew the rancid stench of the Dullaith away. Ambril filled her lungs with fresh air for the first time since the Dullaith appeared and realized too late she had missed her chance to escape. Slowly the gigantic dogs turned toward her, their razor sharp teeth clearly visible through their fiery breath. The largest reached her first.

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

“Nearly gone, she is,” said the other as it came up to stand by its brother. He sniffed her gently. “There is another, there,” It nodded to Ambril’s pocket.

Ambril brought out the limp form of fLit. “Let him go, I’m the one who called.” She laid him gently on the ground and struggled to her feet. The Cerberus were silent as they towered over her. Ambril looked at the Ashera sparkling in her hand. Was this her destiny then? Was this all there was to it? She willed it to be over quickly. She didn’t have to wait long as the larger of the two dogs opened its mouth and engulfed her in flames.

# Cerberus and a Jail break

She flinched,expecting to be burned. But the fire felt warm and invigorating. More like warming yourself near a fireplace than a burning at the stake. The warmth blew through her, inside her and around and re-sharpened the edges of her mind. She felt her heart-beat strengthen.

Time seemed suspended. The Cerberus, gigantic dog beasts stood before her but when they moved Ambril caught a glimpse of something else. There seemed to be a human face briefly visible under the dog’s head and the sinuous lines of a human body winking in and out behind the dog’s form. The largest one nodded to her slowly. “You have come far since our last meeting, Ashera.” Its voice had a deep resonance to it. “May you find solace in these words through the dark times ahead.” He spoke the words with kindness, their power obvious.

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

**Bonds forged will not be forgotten.**

**When all hope is lost---we will come.”**

He bent his head toward her. “Ashera, the last you know. It is but a reminder---that at the end---we will come.”

Ambril looked up at the great beings before her. Shimmering with power they seemed to smile. There was something slightly wrong though.

“But aren’t you supposed to be three headed?” she asked looking at the image of the three headed dog on her Ashera.

The smaller one snorted sending jets of flame around her again. “We…we have lost one of our number.” He said quietly. “It is written---it is foretold that the Ashera shall reunite---“

“Enough, we cannot speak of such things as you know.” The larger one interrupted.

“Well, thanks for---saving me.” Said Ambril. “I don’t know how I can repay you, but if there’s a way, I will.”

The two dogs regarded her in silence for several moments. Then the larger one nodded to her one last time before turning toward the forest and leaping away.

It was as if someone had flicked a switch off. The night rushed in with a vengeance. The stars blinked on and the dark foreboding forms of the crumbling buildings grew up around her. She shivered as she got to her feet

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

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

The fairy nodded and then admitted sheepishly. “*You can’t tell anyone you know, that* *that kid took me again.”*

“*Who would I tell?*” Ambril thought back.

“*He’s just a mere human-kind*…” Continued fLit.

Ambril sighed and rolled her eyes, some things would never change. A groan from the base of a nearby rock wall made them both jump.

“Feldez?” Ambril hurried over ashamed she’d forgotten all about him.

He staggered to his feet holding his right arm. “What happened?”

“It’s a long story. But I just took down another Dullaith, that’s two to your one by the way and Riley took my medallion---he’s going to try and release---Oh my gosh! Where is he?”

They were standing in front of one of the old stone houses which bordered the great circle stone in the center of Old Town. Feldez limped to the side of the building and peered around. “Riley! No don’t!” He yelled.

Ambril raced over to Feldez and felt a sickening lurching feeling, downward and to the right in her stomach when she saw Riley standing at the center of the stone circle, at his feet the remains of the old tree he had hacked and burned away. He seemed to be trying to ignite something, as there were blue sparks flying all around him repeatedly.

“Riley! Knock it off! He’s too powerful!” Ambril made a rush toward the stone circle but Feldez caught her just in time. As just then a massive bolt of energy exploded out of the stone and blew the remaining stump to pieces. A series of shockwaves and the sound of thunder followed as chunks of wood rained down on both Ambril and Feldez. Riley threw himself off the stone and scrambled for safety as the stone quivered and shook 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 escaped the void. A long, sinuous finger slithered up and out of the hole followed by another and then another. Soon there were hundreds of flailing limbs, dark and shiny in the moonlight, each one seeking purchase on the weathered stone. They struck out at the boy who frantically crawled backward and into the shadows Then something massive heaved itself into the moonlight. It had a thick metallic body pierced only by glowing eyes and a narrow gash of a mouth. It lifted itself up and out by its tentacles attached Medusa like to its head and spiderlike to its bottom. It flinched in pain in the light of the moon. Hunching over it crawled and slithered into the shadows.

Riley scrambled to his feet. “Wait! You are Moroz, and I…I’m the one who freed you. I…I command you to pledge yourself to me.” He said his voice shaky. “In return I’ll---“

A low guttural sounding something like a laugh escaped from the shadows. “You command me, boy?” A racking cough followed. Without warning a tentacle snaked out, gathered Riley up and tossed him twenty feet across the stone. He landed with such force he rolled several times before coming to a stop at the edge of the smoking fissure and lay motionless, unconscious. The monster was on the move again. Moroz made a slithering grating sound as he made his way toward the forest surrounding the clearing. He paused just as he reached its edge. “Still…he might be useful,” he mused. Several metallic tentacles snaked back toward the boy binding him securely. Then Moroz crawled into the deepest shadows of the forest dragging the still form of Riley behind him.

“We couldn’t have done anything, it was too late.” Said Feldez and coughed.

“How badly are you hurt?” Asked Ambril.

Feldez’s shrugged. “Probably less than I deserve, I could have stopped this---but I failed.” His voice was weary.

“AAAAAAAMMMMBBBRRILLLL!!!!” Sully’s voice echoed across the clearing. Ambril could make out two small shadows wriggle through the tall hedge just as she had a few months before.

“Over here!” She screamed.

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

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

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

# Hitchhiking and a Chicken House

Sully and Ygg just stared at her open-mouthed.

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

Feldez got unsteadily to his feet.

“Oh and Feldez didn’t have anything to do with it.” She said sheepishly.

A massive thudding vibrated through the clearing as something moved quickly through the forest toward them. The trees shuddered violently at the edge of the clearing as a massive chicken leg clumped onto the stone followed shortly by the shadowy form of a house.

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

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

“Hey! Over here!” She yelled.

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

Hendoeth! He’s out! Moroz, He escaped!” Ambril’s voice was shaky.

Hendoeth face tensed with shock as she turned and surveyed the circle stone for the first time. “That sure is some powerful bad news…” She stood stock still for a moment as if to gather herself and then launched.

“Ester! We’ll need to have a meetin’, lemme see, Sid, Aster, Betula, Fern, Bob, the Doc, and Feldez here plus---“ She rattled off another ten or twenty names while Ester, a feather curled firmly around a ball point pen madly scribbled everything down.

Trip squeakily rolled down off the porch and down to the stone. “Well I’ll be torqued and sold for scrap! Look at this mess!” The tricycle rolled around and through the torn up stone and chunks of wood. “Hey what’s this?” Ambril heard him exclaim. He was dangerously close to the fissure.

“Come on, we’ve a hundred things to do and no time to daudle! Let’s getcha home. Trip get back here!” She shooed them all toward the front door. “Feldez lets have a look-see at that arm.” She said as she patted his back and ushered him inside. Trip rattled back up the porch.

“Look what I found! Isn’t this yours?” the trike had a dark shiny object clamped to its handlebar.

Ambril looked at it closely. It was her Ledrith Glain. But it was different. The stone, instead of sparkling and glowing when she picked it up remained a dull gray. She held up in the moonlight.

Melancholy wind chimes sounded in her head. “*It’s been wasted. The energy Riley asked of it was too much for it. It may never be able to recharge itself. You might as well just throw it away.”* fLit said.

Ambril was about to do just that but something stopped her and pulling out her Ashera she opened the secret compartment and slipped it back inside. “*We’ll see.”*

She surveyed the wreckage of the circle stone. The fissure still steaming slightly and pieces of the old tree were scattered everywhere, some still smouldering from the explosion. It looked as if a war had begun. In a way, thought Ambril it had. A war that she knew she would play a part in. She looked at her Ashera and grimaced. There was no going back now.