# AMBRIL’S TALE

# THE RETURN OF THE DULLAITH

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# Chapter 1 the Forest of Trelawnyd

“Aren’t you just a little 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!” Ambril rolled her eyes but not so her mother could see. It didn’t count if you were going back to a place you didn’t remember; after all she’d only been three when they had moved away. Ambril wrinkled her fourteen year old freckled nose and tossed her lumpy brown pony tail. Trelawnyd was just a stupid country town to her.

Her mother had turned to smile at Zane, her older brother, who was staring fixedly out the window his unruly blonde hair half hiding his face. Zane had that stretched look of a fifteen year old boy who had grown too tall too fast. “Zane you remember Circle Park in the center of town? You played tag for hours there on the big stone circle.” Zane’s shoulders tightened ominously, Ambril braced herself as it looked like he was ready to blow. He had been on edge since her Mom had announced they were moving again, for the ninth time, but instead of moving to another apartment in San Francisco as usual, she had told them they were moving to Trelawnyd to live with Feldez---and that he had asked her to marry him.

Ambril had been a little upset, no one liked Feldez…except her Mom, of course, he’d come into their lives just a few months before, but Zane had gone nuts, he had raged and shouted and sworn that he wasn’t going back, they couldn’t go back, and that he’d run away and join the Foreign Legion, whatever that was, if they forced him. He hadn’t quieted until Ambril’s Mom had wrapped her arms tightly around him. 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.

Her mother was smiling a little too wide at Zane’s unresponsive shoulder, “and the old Wall trail through the woods? We used to take a lunch, walk for a bit, 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 way too long, thought Ambril. Months, years---well maybe it had been just since lunch...but still. She peered out the window at the darkening northern California forest but saw nothing but the ghoulish shapes the shadows made out of the trees. Trolls, Monsters and Axe murderers…Ambril shook herself, too many scary movies.

“Almost there!” Her mother sounded overly cheery as she switched on the high beams, which did nothing to dispel the thickening darkness. She cleared her throat. “Now that we’re all in a better mood, I have something to say.” She straightened in her seat and looked pointedly at the back of Zane’s head, “something important so listen. 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 had used her mother’s family name, Derwyn for as long as she could remember. “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, but, the townspeople are just, well they’re just a bit old fashioned about some things. It’s a new school, a new home. It would make things---easier for everyone if we all had the same last name.” She paused and looked at Zane’s unresponsive back. “What does everyone think?”

Then Zane mumbled something, “what was that Darling?” Ambril’s mother laid a hand on his shoulder. Without warning Zane threw himself around to face her causing the van to swerve erratically.

“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,” 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 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 words 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 as Ambril scrambled out grumpily. It was bad enough starting a new school in a new town without all the additional drama. And what was her Mom not telling her? Something about her Dad? She rummaged in her pocket and found the mini flashlight she had bought at the Haight Street Fair. “Mom!” she said trying to sound braver than she felt, “I’ll go find Zane.”

Her Mom paced like a lioness about to charge near the edge of the road. When she whirled Ambril saw the cell phone glued to her ear.

“Ambril get back in the van this minute!” She grabbed her and started dragging her daughter back to the van. “Feldez, you have to come now!” she screeched into the phone, “I don’t care what emergency you’re on your way to---” swaying slightly she tried to stuff Ambril bodily back into her seat. But Ambril just glared at her unmoving, arms folded. “It has to be right now! Of course he can get hurt inside the wall! He doesn’t know the forest at all Feldez NOT 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

“I’ll go and find him, Mom.” 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.

Her mother huffed in frustration as she flicked her phone off and took a deep breath. “Don’t be silly, I’ll go, honey, I know this forest, I grew up here,” she looked warily up at the trees leaning over them.

Ambril sighed and handed over her flashlight before allowing her mother to stuff her into the van. As the door clicked shut 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. Whipping the 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 horrible must have happened to her family in Trelawnyd, so horrible that her Mom wanted to give up their family name…again. So horrible that Zane was even willing to brave the trolls, monsters and axe murderers in the forest---that was unbelievable to her as he watched more scary movies than she did. It must have happened just before they left, maybe something to do with her father’s death? Ambril shook her head, trying to make the fuzzy images of that time clearer in her mind.

Her Dad had been a scientist and had died in some sort of lab accident she knew that. She had been young, three or four. She remembered the funeral in flat, snapshot moments. How cold and empty the church had felt, how crumpled and sad her Mom had looked. She hadn’t understood 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. Maybe that was what her Mom had wanted.

She shook herself, willing the sad memories away and bringing back the dark interior of the van. It would be impossible to get her Mom to tell her what had made her run from Trelawnyd and then keep running; she’d have to get it out of Zane if she could. And that wasn’t going to be easy.

# Chapter- A Vicious Vegetable Attack

Frustrated Ambril peered across the road and into the forest as the moon came out from behind a cloud, revealing a path leading deeper into the gloom. Ambril bit her lip, 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 that had whacked her on the head when it fell out of an old cupboard on its way to storage. Earlier that day, practically everything they owned had been packed into a slightly mashed moving van and carted away. Her mother had wanted the puzzle box to go too, she had pursed her lips and hiked her hands on her hips, a very familiar pose to Ambril, then 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 to pat the old grandfather clock as it marched by, “just won’t fit in.”

Ambril 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? She looked down at this new thing…and smiled. It was interesting in a filthy, ancient sort of way. It looked more like the thick part of a twisty branch than anything else; not perfectly round, a little longer than her foot and thicker than her wrist. The best part was that every inch of it had been carved with images of animals and plants all woven together with tracery. It seemed to tell a story. She wiped some of the dust off to get a better look then shook it slightly…it rattled.

She had shown it to her friend, Chao Feng when she had gone to see him for the last time in his herbal remedies shop. She would miss the wizened little man, the walls of his shop lined with odd drawers of every shape and color---star shapes, lion head shapes and plaid had been like a second home to her. Hidden in drawers were mysterious roots, pungent berries and dried wriggly things Ambril felt positive were not of this world. Her friend’s wrinkled hand had traced the engravings carefully, prodding it gently…suddenly his face brightened, “ah yes,” He offered the cylinder to Ambril. “Now, press here and here!”

Ambril had only been able to feel the tiny bumps, she hadn’t been able to see them. She pressed gently and then harder until finally she heard a soft click, a drawer had popped out, a round object slid into view. She had pulled it out and twirled it in the bright sunshine…it dazzled.

It was a medallion with a gemstone flower. The diamond like gem was shot through with colored light and decorated with gold tracery around the edges. Ambril thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“This is keepsake of your ancestors. In my country, such things are more precious than gold…. and more powerful than swords…. guard it well.” Chao Feng had taken the chain and slipped it over her head.

It had felt light around her neck, a whisper of family secrets. Chao Feng’s eyes had crinkled at the edges, “this must be a secret shared with your ancestors. Strangers, they not understand that your ancestors give this to you, that they *choose* you.”

All alone in the cold van the medallion felt warm under her sweat shirt. Ambril smiled, it didn’t make any sense but having the medallion made her feel safer. Maybe someone really was watching over her now. She turned her attentions back to the puzzle box.

It glowed even in the moonlight, she rubbed it with her sweatshirt before holding it close to the window and smiled as the carvings almost came alive. She shook it gently and then a little harder until she felt something shift inside. “Alright you, what else is in there?” she muttered to herself 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 do anything, “Toad butts,” she groused and whacked the car seat with it.

She later realized it was just a coincidence but at the time everything seemed to happen the moment the puzzle box hit the seat. There was a bone-jarring boom as a spray of sparks erupted from the top of her puzzle box and a brilliant flash of light lit the forest all around her. Shock waves thundered past. In the moonlight Ambril could see flames and a plume of smoke forming above the forest just ahead of her. Then something big hit the road and rolled toward the car. It was a sign with a face made out of vegetables painted on it, which grinned at her before clattering to the pavement. A volley of blueberries , brussel sprouts and avocados followed. The blueberries pelted the car making squelchy, pinging noises just before something hard slammed into the windshield scaring Ambril so badly she hit her head on the van’s ceiling. 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 also rained fiercely down on the forest and road. Ambril decided she didn’t like getting whacked by vegetables any more than eating them and covered her head with her backpack to avoid the sting of the brussel sprouts. Fortunately the barrage stopped as quickly as it started and the forest became eerily quiet---holding its breath quiet. Ambril didn’t like that either, especially when she discovered that the billowing smoke above the fire wasn’t behaving the way it should. Instead of it drifting away into the night sky, it hung around and seemed to be shaping itself into something out over the treetops. Maybe it was a new type of explosion, a mushroom cloud from a nuclear blast came to mind as she squinted at it. She’d probably missed that day in Science when they’d discussed spontaneous vegetable combustion. Shaking her head she turned around and resolutely faced the real problem, the avocado spattered, blueberry smeared van with a broken windshield. Somehow she was sure to get blamed for it.

To her surprise there was a curious black box deeply imbedded in the glass. It hissed and steamed. Though 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. Ambril nudged it with the puzzle box. It fizzled, then surprised her when the cover flipped open to reveal a statue of a winged boy…a fairy? Ambril flinched at his agonized expression. The statue was covered with sparking threads, which overflowed the box and stretched across the street pointing in a ragged tangle toward the explosion site.

Curious, Ambril picked up the statue and cleaned off the sparking threads with difficulty. They were sticky and burned her fingers. Free of the cobwebs the six inch boy didn’t look so bad, if you liked fairies. In fact the boy would have been kind of cute if he didn’t look as if someone had just run over his dog. Who would want a statue like this?

As if it to take revenge for her unkind thoughts the statue began to vibrate and quiver. Then without warning, it shattered into a million glassy shards and flew in all directions, including Ambril’s face. She jumped in surprise and flung the statue away from her. Spitting out mouthfuls of exploded statue she stumbled and fell into a tangle of sticky, sparking threads. Staggering to her feet she ripped off most of them as she limped toward the relative safety of the van rubbing bits of statue out of her eyes. It was then she felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. Something large was smacking its lips right behind her. She whirled around.

To add to the surreal-sci-fi-movie-turned-reality feel of the night, a monster hovered over the trees not more than thirty feet away. The smoke from the explosion really had formed itself into something, a monstrous head loomed over her---the skull of a horned beast with glowing red eyes and a too wide, jaggle toothed mouth. The smacking sound came again as the monster opened its jaws, testing their strength. It hissed and crackled as it moved her way. Ambril knew instinctively this was a truly evil creature.

She hunched down hugging the van as the monster came closer. The temperature around her plummeted, she shivered as her breath frosted up the window of the van. The monster paused to sniff the air and then let loose an eager, bone-jarring scream. Ambril crouched down near the back fender and willed herself 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? She could sure smell it! Its smell reminded her of Girl Scout camp when she’d drawn the short straw and had to help clean out the septic tank. Her mother had to throw her clothes away when she’d gotten home the smell had been so bad. The van’s front shocks squealed as it rocked back and forth, the creature seemed to be butting 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. She was so surprised she dropped her backpack. When she straightened up she found herself staring right into the glowing eyes of the monster. She had just enough sense to jump to one side as the creature lunged at her. Fingers of electricity snaked out from where the creature hit the asphalt as it gouged long groves into the pavement with its teeth. Then it reared up again searching and sniffing, apparently for her. She must smell nice, Ambril thought, 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 wildebeests was more appealing to her than battling that thing.

She stumbled on unseen rocks and branches and put out a silent plea that the monster would discover its great love of brussel sprouts and stop to graze on the road, but it wasn’t long before she felt a wash of cold and the smell of a port-a-potty left too long. The thing was still after her. It hissed as it drew nearer, riding high above the trees. She felt a sharp, stabbing pain in her side and cursed herself for slacking off in P.E. If only she could see! “Light, I need light,” she panted to herself.

She nearly dropped the puzzle box still in her hand when a beam of light shot out of it. What was this thing that sparked and lit up on command? She flashed her new light around and found nothing but trees; just ahead though they grew very close together--- like a hedge.

Maybe, she thought, she could hide out in there until the monster got bored and found a nice cow to munch on. At a dead run she dove into the wall of greenery. Her sweatshirt took the brunt of the scratchy branches as she burrowed her way in. Halfway through she wriggled through something that felt like dry water, a denser band of air, but forgot all about it when she suddenly popped out into a clearing. It really had been a hedge, a very tall, very thick one.

She froze when the monster screamed again, but this time it sounded frustrated. It seemed to be having no luck with the hedge. It rammed itself against it again and again but the hedge seemed to be holding. Then the grisly crackling sound faded as the monster turned away. Ambril sighed with relief and took a moment to shake the dead leaves from her hair before flashing her light around. She was in a large area surrounded by the neat and tidy and definitely man-made hedge she’d just tunneled through. Her heart lifted as her 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, “Monster! There’s one in the forest! Anyone here know anything about getting rid of monsters?” But no lights came on, the houses stayed dark and quiet. As Ambril drew near she saw the roof had fallen in on one and a 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; she was alone, lost in a forest and being chased by a foul smelling demon with nothing to defend herself with but a decorated stick. The moonlight was bright that night, it softly illuminated the forest beyond the hedge, there were acres and acres of it, she stood in a sea of trees. The big question now was would she be able to find her way back to civilization? She could be lost for days or weeks---if she made it that long. She thought of her Mom and Zane and wondered if they would ever know what happened to her. Her lower lip quivered for just a moment until she squared her shoulders and shook herself hard. She *would* find her way out, she *would* see her family again---she just had to.

It was probably a good thing that she had no more time to feel sorry for herself as the sound of snapping branches and a shower of leaves let her know the monster had not given up and had found a weak spot in the hedge. It broke through not twenty feet away. The foul, hissing chunk of grinning evil shook itself like a dog until its glowering eyes latched onto Ambril.

Ambril did the first and only thing she could think of, she flashed her light in its eyes. Its brilliance surprised the creature just long enough for Ambril to race out onto the central stone plaza, silently cheering. But it recovered quickly. Ambril felt the air swish just behind her and heard the snap of its jaws.

“Back off, you mangy, stinky thing!” She turned and slashed at it with the light using the puzzle box like a laser sword. Surprisingly burning lines formed on the monster’s face where the light zigzagged over it. Ambril gagged, the stench of a wounded monster smelled much worse than a healthy one. The creature snuffled and wheezed but still came at her, this time with more care. It began stalking her now, weaving its head back and forth as it circled her. Ambril warily watched its stealthy progress as she took a few steps back…and stumbled over the roots of an old lumpy tree growing out of the center of the stone plaza. It was more dead than alive with just a few leaves clinging to its old gnarled limbs. She scrambled up the roots and put her back to its trunk feeling comforted by its solid scratchy bark.

How could this be happening? Up until a few moments ago she had been a completely normal kid, living a regular life. Somewhere she’d taken a sharp left turn into another reality. Her head filled with images of her own death. What would it be like to be dinner? How long would it take before she wasn’t able to feel the monster’s teeth ripping her apart? She shuddered and her light dimmed.

Then suddenly the brief respite was over. The creature reared up and attacked, opening its jaws wide as if to swallow her whole. Ambril realized too late that while circling her it had crept in closer and closer. Caught without any defenses, she could only slip behind the tree trunk and cower. It was then she felt something strange---but this time, it was a good sort of strange. Under her shirt the medallion began to glow and a deep thrum resonated through her. It seemed to be coming from the tree, which warmed under her hand. A nearby branch startled her when it twisted and flexed independent of any breeze.

The monster rammed the tree so hard Ambril was knocked back off her feet. Brittle twigs and branches flew everywhere. There was a groaning sound of wood being pushed to its limits as the tree absorbed the monster’s charge. But then something changed. Every twig and branch on the tree came to life. They set to work curling around the monster, gathering it in. The monster screamed again as it tried to jerk itself free, but it was too late.

Ambril skittered away and watched as the tree’s sinewy limbs slowly and carefully compressed the monster into a mini matchbox sized version of itself. Jets of smoke escaped harmlessly into the night sky. Then with a flash of violet light and one last puff of rancid smoke, the monster disappeared entirely. For a few moments the old tree waved its branches around in wild celebration, but after awhile it seemed to grow sleepy. It soon quieted and was still, like all the other trees…except for the smug air of satisfaction that remained around it.

Ambril fell to her knees as she filled her lungs with fresh forest air. She laughed and hugged herself amazed she was still alive. Her heart thumped loudly---too loudly. But when the leaves on the old tree began to quiver with every thump she realized it wasn’t her heart making the racket. A thumping rumble echoed through the forest; the kind of thumping rumble made by very large feet. Something huge was coming her way…another monster? What was it with her and monsters that night?

It was then her heart started to match the loud thumping. The thing was close now, in the moonlight she could see the trees bending away as something large and bulky forced its way through and into the clearing. It towered over her, but she couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing. Then something hit her in the head. Just before she blacked out her head cleared enough to register its enormous yellow chicken feet.

# Chapter 6 FowlClun to the Rescue

Ambril awoke to the aroma of fresh baked scones and the feel of a warm comforter. For a moment she thought this might be heaven as memories of a lunging chicken footed monster returned. Her death had been painless at least--- But she realized her mistake when she tried to turn her head and winced at the pain. She was definitely still alive. She gingerly explored the top of her head and found a throbbing lump. Some one had thoughtfully placed an ice-filled cloth on it---which almost helped.

She recalled the last moments of the fight, the tree finishing off the monster, how she stumbled away just before she was nearly squashed by another monster, this one with huge chicken feet and blacked out. It had been as big as a house, silhouetted against the sky and she had been helpless. So---why wasn’t she dead? Her limited experience with monsters had been that they generally wanted to eat her, not tuck her into bed with an ice pack.

So just where was she? She lay there with her eyes closed, pondering this for a moment and became aware of an odd, rocking sensation---this place she was in was moving.

There were also sounds of movement nearby. She heard the whuffle of fabric, the crinkle of paper and screeching metal as something scraped across the floor. There were whispers too…perhaps the monsters were planning a dinner party---with her as the main course!

Ambril slowly opened one eye. She found she was lying in a huge bed layered with patchwork quilts. She timidly opened the other eye and blinked. The ceiling, which vaulted above her, was covered with a fuzzy, warm fabric. Judging by the swinging lanterns hanging from the rafters they were moving along at speed. Still feigning sleep she took a careful look around keeping her eyes half closed. The room was spacious and filled with furniture softened with age. As far as she could tell she was alone in the room and wondered where the whispers were coming from.

She took another look. There was an old-fashioned kitchen, a huge stone fireplace, and an umbrella opening and closing itself in the corner.

She stopped and looked again. Sure enough, an umbrella was smoothing out it’s fabric just before leaning itself up against the wall. Ambril swallowed hard as she noticed a feather duster swirling around the kitchen table and twitching crumbs off the edge all on its own.

What had happened to the world? Had her juice been spiked or something? How did she end up in Beauty and the Beast? Ambril felt suddenly nauseous. She stared up at the ceiling and tried to focus on anything ordinary and settled on one of the swinging lanterns, which proved to be a bad choice ---whether it was from her head injury or plain old motion sickness she didn’t know, but it wasn’t long before her body urgently wanted to relieve itself of lunch AND breakfast.

Overwhelmed she shut her eyes tight and concentrated on keeping everything down. She wished she could just reset the clock, go to sleep and wake up in her old familiar room with the sound of the streetcars outside. But what was she thinking? They didn’t even live in San Francisco anymore…they didn’t live anywhere. In fact, even if she managed to escape, how would she ever find her family? She imagined herself tacking up signs all over the forest: ‘PLEASE HELP!! LOST FAMILY! One blonde mother and one grumpy brother. If found, please send up a flare.’ She had to smile at that---which helped calm her. Her breathing evened out just as the whispers became loud enough for her to make out what was being said.

“—Such a slip of a thing, and chilled to the bone! How she ever took on a Dullaith is beyond my ken!” a young girl’s voice tisked-tisked from across the room.

A boy’s voice said grumpily. “And us out of the action---again Quill! Just once I’d like to make the party! The most exciting thing to happen around here is when Brolly falls over.”

Someone snorted in disgust as a dry, dramatic voice bleated, “I was nearly ripped to shreds by that awful tea tray!---TO SHREDS, I tell you! Not that any of you care what happens to me!” flapping fabric followed this.

“Of course we care, Brolly,” the young girl voice said not very convincingly.

“The cocoa’s ready but do you think she’d like tea instead Quill?” it was the boy asking. There were sounds of cups rattling.

“Cocoa’s perfect, Jute!” The young girl who must have been Quill answered.

The snappish voice belonging to Brolly sniffed, “what does it matter? We’ve more important things to attend to than babysitting a silly child. First Fowlclun is ambushed, AMBUSHED I tell you! Ohhh! The snags I endured as we went down! The HORROR! Why I nearly bent one of my ribs!” Brolly continued hysterically, “And now, this MONSTROUS Dullaith!” There were more flapping noises and then a soft ting. “Your scones are ready, Quill.”

“Oh! I nearly forgot them,” the young girl voice of Quill said.

There was the sound of an oven door opening and warm cinnamon smells wafted Ambril’s way as Quill continued. “Fowlclun’s fall was probably an accident, Brolly, but this tonight—”

“Accident aye? Quill, Do you recall the last time Fowlclun stubbed her claw? Never! Not in a hundred years, I’m telling you there was strong magic at work, some one wanted to bring us all down!” Brolly groaned, followed by the sound of metal stretched to its limits.

“Brolly go back to your corner and stop being so dramatic! You bend the wrong way like that again and you might just snap your handle right off!” Quill was angrily annoyed. Ambril didn’t blame her, she was already sick of the old guy. “Hendoeth will be in soon, she just went out to strap up the chimney.”

Ambril’s curiosity overcame her worries of nausea and she risked another look. The feather duster stood on a small, wheeled table with a steaming teapot and a plate of scones. It was watching an umbrella waffling across the floor, scraping the floor as it went.

The feather duster glanced over at and caught her staring at her. Ambril easily spotted two bright eyes and a small mouth at the top of a shiny black handle.

“Finally she’s awake!” Sailing toward her was a small paper world war II airplane with a piece of string dangling from it. The string was knotted into a huge smiling face. The airplane crashed into a pillow and immediately unfolded itself into a piece of paper on which was written the word HI!

The knotted face raised itself from the quilt it had landed on. “That’s Parch there saying HI!”

“Oh, Hi…Parch.” Ambril said feeling strange about talking to a piece of paper.

The paper crinkled and flexed itself clean then immediately drew a sketch of Ambril, blinking words appeared underneath, “WHAT’S YOUR NAME?” it said.

“He’ll do that all night long if you don’t answer,” said the string face. “My name’s Jute by the way.”

“Hi Jute, my name is---Ambril.”

Her name appeared under her face, then the words “YOUR AGE?”

“Um---I’m fourteen.”

That appeared under her name.

“HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT RECYCLING?”

“Oh, recycling’s great, we do it all the time at home,” she answered.

Immediately a picture of a roaring crowd appeared---with the sound of a roaring crowd.

“Oh, you can make noises, can you talk too?” Ambril asked, she was fascinated.

Parch wiped itself clean and new writing appeared, “WE’RE HAVING A CONVERSATION AREN’T WE? SO WE MUST BE TALKING.”

Jute snorted and drew the edges of his mouth up higher. “He can’t talk in the way you mean, just make noises---and other things.”

“You’re as white as a sheet!” said the feather duster as she pushed off and rolled the small table toward the bed. Ambril guess she must be Quill. “You’ve had a time haven’t you? First battling a Dullaith and then getting hit on the head by Fowlclun’s chimney brick!”

“That’s Fowlclun for you—first knocking her out, then getting us all lost!”

Ambril went rigid as the entire house rumbled; it felt worse than an earthquake, every rafter moaned and groaned, even the bedsprings sounded irritated.

“Jute! You know how sensitive Fowlclun is! He can’t help it if he’s molting! And of course we aren’t lost, we’re just taking the long way around---you know we have to be careful about being seen.” Quill scolded.

“All right, look we know you didn’t mean to whack her on the head.” The string face of Jute yelled into the rafters.

Ambril hadn’t heard that last part she was still trying to get her mind around the fact that she was riding in a Fowlclun, which she suspected was some kind of a living house, complete with lace curtains and doilies on the sofa. She was chatting with a piece of paper, string and a feather duster. If her head hadn’t been hurting she would have banged it against the headboard to see if that might bring back reality.

She then spotted a framed photo on the bedside table. It was of an old woman standing on the front porch of a small house. Nothing unusual there but when you added in the giant chicken feet on either side of it---then the unusual part was hard to miss.

Quill frowned at Ambril. “She thinks we’re going to eat her or something.”

Jute giggled. “Just how we’d manage that is a puzzle! Just look at us!”

“I guess we should introduce ourselves. This is Jute,” she pointed at the string face who winked at Ambril. “Yes he’s always this annoying. You’ve met Parch; he’s quite the prankster, you’ve been warned. That’s Brolly over there in the umbrella stand, he’s the drama queen of the bunch, and I’m Quill.” She said pointing a feather at herself. “And you’re---” She squinted at Ambril’s sketch that had reappeared on Parch. “Ambril.”

“Nice to meet you.” Ambril managed to smile and nod which made her ice pack shift over her eye. She righted it as she continued. “So let me get this straight, this---Fowlclun you call it? Did he eat us or something?”

The string face of Jute literally let his eyes fall out of his face, he giggled as he gathered them up again and said, “Legged Houses don’t eat people! Don’t you know anything? He’s our home, how else would we get around?---well---maybe we could lash ourselves to the chimney so we can knock out---excuse me---rescue more kids!”

“Be polite Jute!” Quill put two feathers on what might have been her hips and gave him a look that would have melted something more solid.

“Alright, alright---but I’m disappointed. This can’t be the Ashera wielding savior Parch keeps talking about. She’s too---average.”

There was a dry cough from the corner and Brolly said. “You can’t think that fortune teller was serious Parch? Pallleeese, he was just a garden gnome swathed in curtains having a little fun at our expense. Didn’t you see him laughing as we left?”

The paper quivered slightly as an image of Pinocchio appeared with the words, “I just want to be a real boy again!” printed beneath it.

“What does that mean?” asked Ambril. “Do you mean you were once people?”

“We were once but now---well we ain’t normal now are we?” Jute waggled his nose at her and let it grow into an elephant’s trunk.

Honestly Ambril couldn’t tell the difference between normal and not normal anymore but fortunately Jute didn’t expect an answer. “Fowlclun picked us up just like he did you--- wandering around in the forest---at least you know who you are, at least you remember your name. We on the other hand don’t remember anything before getting picked up.“

“And if Fowlclun and Hendoeth hadn’t picked us up, we’d have all ended up in the junkyard---broken and scared.” Quill nodded. “We owe them a lot.”

“Yeah, hurray for Fowlclun,” grumbled Jute, “deep down we all can’t shake the feeling that we’re missing big pieces of ourselves and wonder about who we left behind."

“A fortune teller in Chert told us to be on the look out for an Ashera. That she would---make us whole again.” Quill shrugged and sighed. “It’s probably just as Brolly said---just a gnome in a curtain having a bit of fun.”

# Chapter Hendoeth

Just then a door slammed and a short, round and very old lady energetically trotted across the room. Her gray hair was braided with colored ribbons in a style only a seven year old would love. She wore red cowboy boots, and a wildly striped skirt. Ambril sat up too suddenly and lost her ice pack.

“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 a gander at it when the sun comes up.” She was wiping her hands on her skirt when she spotted Ambril. Her bright eyes crinkled and she smiled wide enough to show off a missing tooth.

“Still lying about, are ya?” She said cheerfully as she bustled over. Looking at Quill she said, “what? Ya haven’t fed her yet?”

“We were just getting to that Hendoeth.” Quill said defensively. “Hendoeth, this is Ambril Derwyn.”

Hendoeth picked up a mug and poured a large amount of steaming chocolate into it before handing it to Ambril. “Nice to meet you kid, Drink it all down, now.” She said. “There’s nothin’ better for what ails you than hot cocoa and one of Quill’s scones.”

Ambril obediently took the mug and one of the scones, she was afraid not to. She took a doubtful sip of cocoa---and then another. It warmed her clear down to her toes. The cinnamon scone crunched in her mouth, Yum. But though she soon felt better 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 new isn’t it?” She scratched her chin absently. “I’m guessing your Ma hasn’t said much ‘bout your family history. Some misguided effort to protect you from it, I expect.” She sighed. “I’m afraid 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’re in for so’s to figure out who the bad guys are and get prepared.”

“Take another swig of that you’re still looking a might peaked!”

Ambril nearly spilled chocolate all over herself, when she slapped her on the shoulder

“Yes, we have some explaining to do, don’t we.” Hendoeth chuckled as she heaved herself into a rocking chair and poured herself a cup of cocoa. Keeping her smile toward Ambril she set her boots on the bed.

“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 answering them all. There’s no fun in having it all spelled out for you.” She smiled over her mug. “I’m Hendoeth and this is my home, Fowlclun---you’ve heard of us right? We’re big down Mexico way. Witch with a chicken legged 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 wrong, we’re mostly vegetarian nowadays.”

“No one seems to tell the old stories anymore.” Brolly sniffed from his umbrella stand. “Too busy with those blinky things, cell phones, game boys, and such.”

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

“Internet,” volunteered Ambril, proud she knew that.

Hendoeth shrugged, “Fowlclun will deliver you back to your family and what’s left of your---van.” She grimaced as if she couldn’t figure out why anyone would travel that way.

Ambril was almost afraid to ask but she felt she had to know, “so---who---what is Fowlclun? Is he some kind of living motor home or something?”

An injured hoot rattled through the house and the rafters groaned.

Hendoeth looked outraged. “Motor home! Watch your language! A finer example of a Legged House cannot be found anywhere in the universe!” She sputtered and tried to calm herself by gulping more cocoa. “Or a sweeter one! I raised him up myself from a wee little shed! Now he’s trying to grow an upstairs for me, bless him!”

“Sorry,” said Ambril angling for the rafters as loud as she could.

After a bit Hendoeth calmed down enough to ask, “You related to Rosa Derwyn?”

Ambril nodded, “She was my Great Grandmother.”

“Ha! I knew it!” Hendoeth clicked her boots together. “Didn’t I tell ya?” She rounded on Quill. “She’s Rosa’s kin!” Quill gamely smiled but looked blank. “Rosa was a fair hand at using magic, I’ll tell you that much.” Hendoeth smiled broadly again at Ambril showing off her missing tooth again. “Best around of the human-kind, that’s fer sure. She was the last to wield an Ashera---until you popped up.” She leaned back in her chair.

There was another loud low squawk that shook the house again.

Hendoeth seemed to ponder the squawk before saying, “yep, course that’s true, Rosa wasn’t only a human-kind, but who is nowadays?”

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

Hendoeth screwed up her face in disgust. “They haven’t told you nothin’ have they? 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 and waved the pot at Ambril. “Want some more?”

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

Hendoeth frowned, “do you wanna know more about that funny family tree of yours? And how that thing helped save you from that ol’ Dullaith, or not?” She said taking a loud, slurpy sip. She waited patiently while Ambril hesitated a moment before slowly pulling it out. It twinkled in the lantern light.

“That stone’s the Ledrith Glain. It be from ancient magic…powerful too. It marks you as fairy born, that you wear that medallion so easy.” Continued Hendoeth. “It would just spark and spit at most of us. Meaning, it ain’t just you’re your Great Gran who has fairy blood---you’ve a bit of the fairy in you too. I’d wager you’ve a fair lot of all four of the magical families, yessirree.” She twinkled at Ambril over her mug.

“Four magic families?”

“Yep, Tylwith Teg---that’s fairy to the rest of us, Anamalfia---shape-shifter types, magic wielders---that’s us humans, and earth-kind- they can literally move mountains though they spend most of their time looking under them for gems and gold and such.” She pointed at the foot of the bed.” “I betcha you got that pretty thing outta that Ashera, didn’t cha?”

Ambril looked down and found her puzzle box near her left foot. She grabbed it up and held it close feeling suddenly very protective of it.

“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 shook her head at Ambril, “Nah, that’s your little adventure maker,” 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.

“I’m jus’ teasin’ don’t go and git your tail feathers in a snit.” Hendoeth hollered up at the ceiling as she just barely saved herself from falling off her chair.

“Do you mean, that this—“ she searched for the right word. “Puzzle box was brought on that monster?”

“Ya best use its proper name, *Ashera,* or it’ll get ornery after a while.” said Hendoeth. “Yes and No. Your Ashera didn’t summon that old monster but the monster was sure attracted to your magical power. Waving an Ashera around and sporting the Ledrith Glain will do that. He must have thought Christmas and Easter had come on the same day! Now that Ashera is here for a reason---there’s something it wants you to do.” Hendoeth smiled at Ambril. “And no, I have no idea what that might be.”

“Because---I’m supposed to figure that out myself.” Ambril was getting a little annoyed at all this lesson learning. A little help would have been nice. “So exactly what is this Ashera thing?” she asked.

“It’s a tool, your tool, with a very particular reason to have jumped into your hands.“ 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 and are only given only to those who have the chutzpah to use ‘em.” Hendoeth’s eyes narrowed, “It’s quite a combo, there, the Ledrith Glain and Ashera…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. “There are big doings in your future, darlin’.”

Ambril suddenly felt cold. Was she was up for this? It was one thing to watch someone else battle monsters on a big screen while munching popcorn and another to almost get eaten by one. Maybe just moving to a new town was enough of an adventure for now. Her head was starting to hurt again and the bumpy ride in the Legged house made her stomach feel as if it had just starred in a soccer tournament. Suddenly she just wanted to go home to her family. It didn’t matter where they were or what weird things went on around them as long as they were all together.

“What if I don’t want to go through with this?” She asked hesitantly. FowlClun suddenly dipped to the side and the Ashera gently rolled off, ending up at the foot of the bed. “Look--- even Jute saw this right away. I’m not special, in fact I’m not really good at much of anything…at least…not yet anyway. Because I really am just an ordinary kid. There’s been some mistake about this whole Ashera thing.” It was embarrassing to admit it but---it was a true.

Hendoeth’s face went from chuckling fun to deadly serious in half a second. “Don’t think we all haven’t tried that. Don’t think that every one of us that’s been called on a quest 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 someone waiting in the wings. But you do have a choice. You can quit if you’ve a mind to, go back to your usual stuff, become a doctor or an accountant and live like any other human-kind. You know, just be normal. The question is, now you know can you be happy with normal?” She squinted gleefully at Ambril. “Don’t you worry about the world any, there will be another someone like you in another couple hundred years. And if it breaks to bits in the meantime, it won’t be ALL your fault.” Hendoeth jabbed her finger at her. “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 Gran before you and her Great-Great Auntie Maimee, and then your Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather…” she scrunched up her forehead in thought, “I forget his name, well anyway, it’s an unbroken chain of Derwyns that goes back to the first families. Wielding an Ashera is part of your heritage, sweetie, and a might fine one at that.” She leaned in toward Ambril her bright eyes ablaze, “you wouldn’t wanna disappoint all of them ancestors of yours now, would ya?”

Fowlclun slowed, then after a lot of creaking and groaning he stopped and was quiet. Keeping her eyes on Ambril Hendoeth smiled., “then there’s the small matter of yer Daddy.” She paused a moment looking like she’d like to say more but couldn’t then asked, “Well?”

Ambril looked at the crazy old woman. It made her really mad that Hendoeth had bullied and cajoled her into thinking she had to do this; more so because it had worked. Sewer breath demons aside, the whole magic stuff intrigued her and she was more than a little curious about her family---especially her Dad.

“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. She stretched until her back cracked twice. “If you do things right, you might could fix it so he’s remembered for who he was rather than what he got mixed up in.”

“What you’re talking about, my Dad died in a lab accident.”

Hendoeth grunted and shook her head sadly. “They really have kept you in the dark.” She looked at Ambril gently. “Do you love your Daddy?”

Ambril shrugged. “I don’t remember much about him but---yeah of course---I love him.”

Hendoeth nodded slowly. “I want you to keep that in your head---always. Your Daddy was a good man, a strong magic-wielder and a good friend---maybe too good of a friend. I’m not gonna tell you any more---it’ll sound funny coming from me. Ask your Ma.” She looked hard again at Ambril as she set down her mug. “Back to your Ashera---what do ya say, darlin’, ya in?”

Ambril swallowed hard and thought about the monster, her Dad, being a fairy---did that mean she’d grow some wings? Then she nodded---first just inside to herself then she found herself looking Hendoeth in the eye and doing it for real. “I’m in.”

The door opened and let in a dark man with a cowboy hat and a scowl. He stood and stared hard at Ambril as if he’d rather toss her out the window more than anything else. A tall, thin, beak-nosed man dressed in black came in behind him carrying a sack. He at least nodded at her.

“Who summoned the Dullaith?” The first one growled accusingly at Ambril.

“Not her, she fixed it, well her and the old Derwyn Oak,” 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 harmless.”

The one called Koda looked her over. Ambril now saw he looked Native American, “how did one so small…”

Siddhart interrupted, “Glad to see you made it Ambril,” His voice was high reedy, “I wish I’d been there when the Dullaith came, that was unexpected.” He lowered his head and sighed.

“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.”

Ambril shrugged and told them about the explosion, the Dullaith forming and the strange box hitting the car.

“is this it then?” asked Sid and pulled out the black box which Ambril had last seen starring in the demolition of her Mom’s minivan.

There was a pause then Hendoeth grunted. “That’s a Morte Cell. I haven’t seen one of those in a month of Christmases.” Hendoeth looked grave. “And I sure wish it had been longer…bad doin’s that’s fer sure.”

Ambril nodded, “But there was a statue of a fairy 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 intolerable, the pain---death by Morte Cell. It sucks the life right out of ya and channels it into something else. The victims are so damaged even their souls are scarred…and have only one place to go then…”

Koda shifted uncomfortably.

“Wait, the little fairy boy was hard like a rock, he couldn’t have been alive!”

Hendoeth snorted. “Little fairy boy? He was at least 200 years old, maybe more. And he had to have been alive or he would have looked like your Ledrith Glain.”

Ambril suddenly felt like a failure. Here she had stumbled right into a murder scene without even knowing it. There was so much she didn’t know about this place...all this magic stuff. She wished now she’d tried harder to save him…or at least stopped to pick up the pieces.

“Can’t afford to lose them fairies, they’re fewer and fewer every moonrise,” Hendoeth looked sad.

Koda grunted, “Fairies have skin thicker than a rhino, he probably just crawled off to lick his wounds.”

Hendoeth brightened considerably. “So true! Maybe it was his outer aura that had crystallized. Maybe he’s kickin’ up his fairy boots in one of those circle parties even as we speak!” she patted Ambril on the back., “I think we’ve heard enough, time to get you back to your kin.” She up-ended herself and rummaged under the bed and came up clutching Ambril’s sneakers and handed them to her. “We’ll talk agin before too long. Fowlclun and I are always around, it’s our job to be lookin’ out for the bad guys. I reckon you’ll run into a few more of them before you’re through.” She paused to hitch up her skirt.

“Koda will take it from here. By the by, I wouldn’t go jawing about all this Dullaith stuff too much,” she said in a low voice, “Most won’t understand and for those who do it won’t make them feel easy being around you.”

After wiggling into her shoes, she headed toward the door. Through the doorway she could see a farmhouse dwarfed by a big red barn with smoke curling up from its chimney. An ornate weather vane stood framed against the moon, a wolf dancing with a bird.

“You be careful now kid, Holler if you get into trouble,” Hendoeth tweaked her ear as she went through the door.

The word “Thanks,” stuck in Ambril’s throat as she gathered her stuff, walked outside and stepped off the porch. She froze when she saw Fowlclun, really saw him for the first time. The house looked as if it was made of the usual materials, stone, wood, bricks and stuff. But the brass knocker on the front door wiggled as the porch steps bowed into a smile. The lacey curtains in the windows crinkled…in fact the whole house was smiling at her. But the jaw dropper was what the house was wedged between--- two huge yellow chicken feet, which were attached to knobbly chicken legs.

Ambril stared dumbstruck as the house winked a curtain at her then slowly began to rise---up and up and up. She made sure she was well out of the way when she saw the brick chimney wobble. Standing, Fowlclun brushed the highest treetops. He nodded to her and Ambril nodded back as the legged house turned and carefully picked his way through the forest, limping slightly.

Hendoeth stood on the front porch waving to the small figure.

“She’s the one isn’t she.” Quill said from behind her. “I wasn’t sure at first---she’s young and---so normal. But when you started talking with her---I thought that maybe…” Hendoeth turned to find all of the talking household goods had crammed themselves into the doorway their faces expectant.

Hendoeth grimaced and shook her head slowly. “That’s what we have to keep by us---maybe.” She waved her hand impatiently at them and with a screech of wood and metal they cleared the doorway. “She has it in her---you all can see that. But they are on to her---so MAYBE is what we have to hold in our minds.”

Quill shuddered with joy anyway. “Maybe is a site better than nothing. At last---we can hope.”

# Chapter 7 Rosebud

Siddhart nodded to them before turning toward the farmhouse. “Aster needs tending,” Ambril looked longingly after the tall gaunt man and really wished he would stay as Koda still looked as if he’d like to eat her.

“You’ve stirred up enough trouble tonight, let’s get you back to your Mommy.” Koda sneered, making Ambril feel as if she were six years old and had just burned down someone’s house. 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 and had been dinged and scratched so much you could barely make out its name written in scrolly letters across the basket. Oddly enough, the basket was decorated with flowers---rosebuds of course.

Flowers were the last things Ambril thought she’d see on anything of Koda’s, he being a cowboy, but as she’d seen far stranger things that evening she barely blinked as Koda strode over to the bike and gently patted the rosebud blossoms before getting on.

There was an awkward moment when Ambril realized there was only one seat. Where was she supposed to ride? Perhaps Koda intended to lasso her and drag her along behind like a lost calf. But then Koda muttered something under his breath and suddenly the decorative rosebuds came to life. A sinuous budding vine shot out from the bike’s basket, wrapped tightly around her, lifted her bodily off the ground and jammed her into the basket. Not gently either. The bike seemed to be even angrier at the world than its owner. “No broken bones? Atta girl Rosebud!” Koda smiled for the first time.

For just a second Ambril thought about screaming, wriggling free and threatening a lawsuit not necessarily in that order. But immediately discarded that idea. Who would hear her? And would they care? She had no idea where her family was but she was pretty sure they weren’t in earshot. Besides Koda looked like he could stare down any amount of lawyers. So she settled for looking angry and turned to give an unusually large bud the evil eye. It took offense, reared up and nipped her nose.

“Hey, that hurt!” Ambril struggled to free her arms to check to see how much of her nose was missing but the vines simply tightened their tangled grip. The best she could do was wiggle it a bit as she jammed herself into a corner of the basket and stared daggers at the giant bud.

Koda grunted as he pressed down hard on one pedal and they began to glide silently through the forest.

Now that Ambril had a chance to study Rosebud up close she began to doubt it was even a member of the rose family. First, it smelled nothing like a rose, its scent was more like orange sherbet tinged with shoe polish. Also the buds themselves looked very rose-like but the vines were ropey and tough and, fortunately for Ambril, thornless. Even stranger was the way the buds seemed to glow and sparkle in the moonlight. They were very much alive but not in an ordinary way.

After a few moments the large, vicious bud leaned toward her and sniffed her like a dog before it tossed its flower head and turned away as if to say that Ambril wasn’t worth any more of its valuable time. But it did loosen its vines, in a moment Ambril’s hands were free. After verifying her nose was intact Ambril gave the bud one last angry glare before turning away herself.

“Behave yourselves,” groused Koda from behind, “Both of you.”

What had she done? Ambril steamed silently as she watched the forest glide by. Perhaps it was the way the moonlight made the stones on the path ahead light up like an endless chain of reflective road bumps or that there was a light in the forest ahead, but the forest seemed less scary to her now. The fact that she had some magical power tools at her disposal also made her feel more confident. Though she did wish she had a better idea of where the ‘on and ‘off’ buttons were.

It was surprisingly comfortable inside the basket. The rhythmic sway of the bike reminded her of Fowlclun and her conversation with Hendoeth. Now that the thrill of the moment had cooled a little she wondered just what she’d gotten herself into. It sounded like her family history was riddled with magic users at least on her mother’s side---but what about her Dad? It made her both very sad and frustrated that Zane and her Mom were keeping some dark secrets and it sounded like it had to do with his death…did it also have something to do with magic? It must have been something really bad for her mother to want to change their family name---twice.

Ambril’s head started to throb again. She patted it gingerly and tried to concentrate on other things. Her thoughts went to her family, her parents had been only children. Both her mother and father’s parents had died young, in fact her mother’s parents had died when her mother was just a child. It had been Rosa, Ambril’s Great Grandmother, who had raised her.

Her mom had told her many bedtime stories about growing up with Gran. They had lived in a big old house with a wonderful garden complete with a blackberry patch and ancient fruit trees. Ambril’s Mom and her Gran would walk out and pull a couple of oranges off the tree and eat them in a Gazebo overlooking a pond. Ambril smiled as the old stories came flooding back. Listening to them had helped to ease the frantic pace of their life---moving here then there, never happy anywhere. She smiled as she remembered stories of her mother struggling to master the big old stove in her Gran’s kitchen and spilling tea all over Gran’s friends when they came to socialize. But her reverie was interrupted by a sharp tug on her ponytail. Godzilla Rosebud was examining her hair.

“Relax fertilizer breath! I washed my hair last Tuesday---and I’m parasite free.” She won back her ponytail in a tug of war---losing a hank of hair in the process then had a glaring contest with the nasty bud, which was hard for Ambril because the bud didn’t have any eyes.

“If you can’t get along,” Koda growled ominously, “one of you’ll have to get out and run along side.”

Ambril knew which one that would be so she had to content herself with fiercely folding her arms. “What is Rosebud by the way? She isn’t a rose.”

“She’s ornery and short tempered just as you are. She’s a warrior princess sort of being…part of nature’s spirit. Everything has a spirit, Rosebud’s spirit is---tough, hardy and strong.” Koda said proudly, which of course didn’t answer her question.

The bike chain made a tinging sound as they coasted down a small hill. Koda began to hum. Ambril smelled wood smoke, someone must be having a campfire.

Ambril grew hopeful; Koda seemed a titch less angry, maybe he would answer some of her questions. “You sound like you know something about the---magic side of things around here. 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—“

But Ambril had misread him, “a Dullaith’s nothing to play around with!” Koda interrupted her angrily, “it’s an ancient dark creature which feeds off its victims until they die. Lucky for you the Old Derwyn Oak took pity on you,” he snorted disgustedly. “There are few human-kind who face down such a demon and live. But it should not have happened, the honorable old tree risked too much to save you.” He sounded as if he would have preferred her death over the old tree losing even a small twig.

“What do you mean by the Derwyn Oak?”

“Haven’t they taught you anything? It’s an ancient oak brought over from the old country. It’s called Derwyn because your family brought it over.” He continued with rising anger, “that tree’s life straddles at least a millennium, it’s magic runs deeper than all that grows in the forest so if you think that you’re more important than it---guess again.“

The bike bumped over some rough stones and Koda turned his attentions to controlling it. “We’ve all grown careless and let new ways cloud our vision.” Then Koda grunted in surprise and braked hard. Gravel spit under Rosebud’s wheels as they skidded to a stop.

Ahead of them a smoldering building lit up the forest. Fire fighters were everywhere. Jets of water showered the roof but fortunately the fire had just about lost the fight. Smoke and steam billowed out from the blackened structure and enveloped them. It was then that Ambril smelled it, the faint but unmistakable smell of the Dullaith. This was no welcoming bonfire with marshmallows to roast.

Koda slowed the bike. “You stay here,” he ordered leaning Rosebud against a tree. Ambril wasn’t sure if he was talking to her or Rosebud. “The Dullaith may be gone but it still ain’t safe,” he strode off stiffly toward the smoky mess.

Ambril was disgusted. She wanted to go investigate, after all hadn’t she just battled an evil monster? How unsafe could a burned-out building be? She struggled against the vines until she saw how much Rosebud was enjoying her frustration then sat back to think. As she did so her Ashera, still in her pocket poked her in the ribs. An idea came to her…it could work!

Trying to appear casual she whistled as she worked the Ashera free and pointed it at the vines she was tangled in. Then she willed the Ashera for just a few sparks. A spray of stinging electrical charges immediately enveloped her. Luckily the vines recoiled from the sparks just long enough for her to leap out of the basket. As she hit the ground Ambril reached up and felt for her eyebrows, they were mostly there. She ran toward the burned out building, hugging the underbrush.

The firefighters were shutting down the operation. Most of them were congregating near the road, but there were two men behind the building talking. As Ambril tiptoed past she recognized Koda’s voice and hid behind a tree.

“—Fair job they did of it too,” an elderly man quavered, sounding upset, “a shadow summoning circle! And look there! The ancient writing all around accurate to the letter,” he sighed heavily, “written in fairy blood.”

“How did they know to do this? I thought dark magic knowledge was locked up tight in the Archives!” Koda towered over the bowed back of his companion.

“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 sounding distant, “Sid recovered it. There’s enough magical power in a fairy to fuel ten Dullaiths, I reckon.” He seemed to be looking at the ground in front of him. “But the fairy got away just in time. The way the girl described it, he had begun to transform into Glain.”

“This was done by someone with talent and skill,” the old man said slowly. “We’ll have to be more vigilant.”

“The Archive Vault is the poor step-child of the Library. Money’s a problem.” The old man murmured. “But I’ll do my best.”

The two men bent their heads to study the ground, an eerie light lit their faces.

“They didn’t get what they wanted…this won’t be the last we see of them,” the older man hunched his shoulders. “It’s a good thing the Dullaith got distracted and went off into the forest rather than attacking the town. There would have been such carnage.”

Ambril gulped as she realized that she had been the distraction and wondered what the Dullaith raiser had really been after. Ambril risked peeking over the bushes. What she saw startled her. On the ground a circle of symbols and writing sketched the ground with light. The images were tortured and dark, even the words looked evil. Ambril cringed to think that that the glowing paint was really he fairy boy’s blood.

She stretched to get a better look, as she did so a branch snapped just behind her and she felt something tighten around her arm.

She whirled expecting another monster; it had been that kind of a day. But instead she found Rosebud glaring at her; the entire bicycle was quivering with rage. Before Ambril could blink she was jammed back into the bike basket and strapped in so tightly she couldn’t even wiggle her pinky. The bike backed itself up until it leaned against the tree just as Koda had left them. Then they waited…and waited for what seemed like an age. Ambril’s nose began to itch…and a small bud wriggled itself under her arm, which tickled…then her foot began to tingle as it fell asleep…

Finally Koda returned frowning. He was so preoccupied with what he had seen that he didn’t notice Ambril’s predicament. He mumbled to himself as he got on the bike and pushed off. Once again they glided smoothly through the forest. After a short while Rosebud seemed to lose interest in torturing her and relaxed her hold on Ambril just enough for her to wriggle her toes, scratch her nose and drive away the offending ticklish bud.

Ambril sat back and started thinking about Trelawnyd. Was every one here magical? She was painfully aware of how little she knew about magic. Would she be an outsider again? Not that she wasn’t used to it but still...

“So Koda, is everyone here a magician?”

Koda snorted. “We are magic-wielders not magicians. No rabbits jumping out of hats here. Most Trelawnyd folk are like everyone else these days, they’ve lost their magical abilities.” He looked at the stars above the treetops. “Nowadays they use only the magic they understand,” he continued. “Technology is human-kind magic now,” he shrugged. “It’s plenty useful, but a poor substitute for real magic.” He looked at Ambril stolidly and said with a note of warning in his voice, “those who don’t understand magic fear it. Fear makes people act crazy. The ones who still remember the old ways, we keep it to ourselves. You must do the same,” he said ominously before grimly training his eyes on the path ahead and refusing to answer any more of Ambril’s questions.

Ambril sighed and gave up, so much for help from the adults, she’d have to figure this out on her own. She squinted down the path and noticed the trees were thinning. The bike suddenly banked to the left and they rode out onto the road. Ambril’s entire being felt lighter when she saw her mother silhouetted by the flashing lights of a tow truck.

She was so excited she barely heard Koda when he said, “I think things must change now. The reason the Ashera has come to you is still not known but if its what I think it is this town’s in for a busting out fight. Magic may be the only way to protect ourselves.” Just as they coasted to a stop, he added. “But your Mommy ain’t the one to seek help from, her type never understands.”

Ambril nodded, she was beginning to understand that secrets grew high and tall in Trelawnyd, her family’s secrets among them

# Chapter 8 Roadside Stand

“Ambril! My baby!” shrieked her mother, she ran over her eyes wide.

Ambril managed to shove her Ashera into a pocket just before she was engulfed by her Mom’s hug and wrenched out of the bike’s basket. Rosebud gave her one last pinch just before Koda turned his bike toward the forest and rode away without a word.

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

“Yes! Thank you---Koda!” her mother echoed before holding her daughter at arm’s length and giving her a shake, “where have you been darling? AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAN!”

Ambril had to improvise. “Um…the explosion scared me so…I ran. Then I got lost and---Koda brought me back. Did you find Zane?” Ambril was finding it hard to talk as with her cheek squashed against her mother’s sweater.

“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 something from the explosion, it smashed the windshield,” Ambril shrugged.

“Oohhhh, you poor thing!” said her Mom launching herself at Ambril again for another claustrophobic hug. “I found your brother and dragged him back only to find you were gone…but WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAN! How did it flip over like that?”

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, its belly exposed on the side of the road. It looked pretty bad. Ambril couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound crazy, especially the truth, so she just shrugged.

Her mother was still staring at the van, “this has been the weirdest evening.”

Ambril nodded vigorously. She could now see the tall, slim form of Feldez her soon-to-be-stepfather slipping out of a sleek sedan, looking annoyed with everything as usual. He beckoned to them as he walked over to inspect the van. Her mother released Ambril and began finger-combing leaves out of her hair as they walked toward him. With a lot of clanking and squealing, the tow truck driver managed to turn the van right side up.

Ambril put her hand on the old wreck she’d spent so much time in. The windshield, nearly gone now, was strewn all over the road in sparkling lumps. What was left of their boxes and bags was 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.

“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 on the truck with Zane who looked pale and avoided her eyes, clearly not wanting to talk about anything. They both watched silently as the driver flipped a switch; the front of the van groaned as it slowly began to rise.

“You two have had quite an evening, haven’t you?” suddenly Feldez loomed in front of them. 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? You fairly drove your mother insane with worry.” His eyes locked accusingly on Ambril. “And what happened to the minivan!” he demanded as if she had single-handedly bashed the windshield and flipped it over herself.

Ambril’s face grew hot, “I’d rather talk to my Mom about it, it’s her car anyway,” she said defiantly.

Zane slid up next to her protectively, “come on, Feldez, you think that Ambril did this?” he asked in disbelief, “she doesn’t even know how to turn the car on. Like the driver said, it was probably a hit and run.”

Feldez backed off a bit, “we’ll discuss your inconsiderate behavior later,” he pursed his lips as he walked back 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 and then quickly walked away.

So he had seen something too! Ambril felt her spirits see-saw up then crash down again making her feel more alone than ever. As usual, he didn’t want to talk about it.

The tow truck finished winching up the car and was just pulling away when Feldez waved Ambril and Zane over to his car. Inside it smelled of leather and freshly laundered shirts. Ambril closed her eyes and sank gratefully 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 fighters were rolling up their hoses and climbing into their trucks.

Feldez cleared his throat impatiently, “it was the Tupelo’s roadside stand, they’re local farmers, someone started a fire too close to their diesel tank and it exploded, look at this mess!” he nodded stiffly to a group of people standing near the road.

So that was the official story. As the car drove slowly by Ambril could see a family looking dazed and shattered. There was a girl about her age, her face streaked with soot and tears. As she watched a square shouldered boy with wild black hair walked up and handed the girl a cat. The girl shrieked and hugged it to herself sobbing. Nearby a firefighter was shaking the hand of a geeky looking kid with longish dark hair. Ambril yawned; she wondered if she would meet them at school…starting a new school seemed the least of her worries now.

The road wound around and through the forest for a while but soon began to straighten and widen into a well-tended country lane. Farmhouses gave way to orderly rows of lawns and picket fences surrounding family homes. 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, “Here we are kids, our new home!”

# The House that Feldez Built

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?” asked Zane sarcastically.

Ambril’s mother glared at her son while 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. Then he happened to glance at Ambril’s Mom and blanched at the wriggly creepy things crawling off her and onto his unblemished sofa. “Darling! Let us 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. “I must look a sight.”

Feldez gestured up the stairs, “you need to take a nice long soak, I’ll get you something that will help you sleep,” they walked up the steps together, Feldez leading Ambril’s mother and Zane trailing behind. “A good night’s rest is what everyone needs.”

Ambril succumbed to a gigantic yawn before she followed the others upstairs. She wanted to pull Zane aside to hear what he’d seen but she found it hard to keep her eyes open, she was that exhausted. As she trudged slowly up the stairs she looked around, the house really was nice in its way; even Ambril could tell Feldez had spent a lot of money making everything just so. Ambril looked in the first bedroom she came to and found her moving boxes in the middle of the room. It had bookshelves clear across one wall with a big long writing surface below. The bed looked unusually comfortable with lots of pillows tossed around; her mother’s idea, for sure. Ambril 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 Fridge!” Zane slouched by behind her.

Ambril discovered that she was 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.? Feldez is a stickler for neat and clean.”

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 bypassed the herbed goat cheese and went straight for the peanut butter and jelly. She 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?” Ambril’s Mom playfully rumpled Zane’s hair 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 had another talk with Feldez and we both agreed that using his last name wasn’t a good idea,” she patted Zane’s shoulder as she sat down, “so we’ll be Derwyn’s until after the wedding…and,” she added hastily when Zane suddenly looked up angrily, “you will decided whether to change your name then or not.”

Zane snorted.

“Zane, please, we have to work at this,” Ambril’s mother looked at her son, searching for something, “we have to face this.”

“Face what?” asked Ambril angrily as she plunked down a plate of sandwiches next to the strawberries, “what are you guys always NOT talking about?”

Ambril’s mother jumped as if she’d been pinched, “darling I don’t want you to worry about this,” she smiled at her, “you were so young, only three when it happened, kids your age won’t remember.” She squared her shoulders, “and that goes for us too, Zane. What’s past is past. It will be a little weird at first, but we’ll get over it,” she took a huge breath, “then we’ll finally be through it all.”

Zane grunted as he swallowed half a sandwich, “when pigs fly, Mom, you must be crazy to think these people will forgive and forget,” he said nastily, “you should tell her now before someone else does.” He stood up so quickly Ambril jumped, she was suddenly aware of how tall he had grown, “they’ll add stuff to the story, you know how evil he must have been…how it was a shame he’d been killed because it would have been nice to have watched him hang.” Zane’s eyes were pools of remembered 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---you have to tell me, what was Zane talking about?”

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 continued, “it’s--it’s just that your father died under---unusual circumstances.” She absently tucked her hair behind one ear, “the lab accident? They say he’d been working on something dangerous and---wrong, something that put everyone here at risk. Things got out of control---there was a fire---your father lost his life fighting it.” She looked down the empty hall. “Zane has a chip on his shoulder a mile high about this. I don’t want it to happen to you. That’s why I think it might be better if we don’t dwell on it and look to the future.”

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 a pat on the head.

“I have to talk to Zane. He’ll never get to sleep unless he calms down.”

“Mom, something happened in the forest---“

But her mother was already half way through the door. “We’ll talk more, 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 trudged into the hallway and was about to go upstairs when she saw 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 dog-eared maps, ancient drawings, and even rolls of parchment lying haphazardly on every horizontal surface. Musty old books were jammed into a bookcase which sat behind a desk swamped with faded blueprints with a laptop teetering on top. Trash overflowed the waste basket---it looked like it should have been condemned…which made it the most interesting part of the house. An old map caught her eye; she looked closer and discovered that it was of a town with houses surrounding a circular plaza, a tree in the center. Could it be a map of the ruins in the forest? There seemed to be notes scribbled in pencil on it, Ambril leaned in to read them and accidentally jiggled the laptop alive, she froze. There on the screen was a Dullaith!

Ambril jumped back and then felt a little silly when she realized it was just an image. It was a good likeness, smoke hemmed in by bright cobweb-like tracery which curled through it like tattooed skin. It was chillingly beautiful when it wasn’t trying to kill you, she decided. Underneath were a series of numbers ‘10—1 12:00 OLD COUNCIL HALL BRING GLAIN OR DIE’. She was about to tap the keyboard to see what else she could see 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 found her admiring the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen table.

Feldez’s forehead was wrinkled in thought, 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 still in need of a shower, do that first before you get into your bed,” without missing a beat he turned into his office.

Perhaps it was because Feldez was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that Ambril got off so easy that night. Though Ambril waited for Feldez to turn around and angrily accuse her of going through his things---there were no fireworks, Feldez simply pulled the door closed behind him. As soon as the latch clicked she raced out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her room and stood a moment with her back pressed against the door.

Was Feldez mixed up with conjuring the Dullaith? But why? What was he really after? It was so frustrating; she didn’t know where to begin. She screwed up her face and angrily jammed her hands into her pockets and felt something soft and small. She pulled out the piece of cloth she’d rescued from the minivan’s demolished windshield. She held it up to the light and saw to her surprise that it was a little cloth boot. It glistened in the light, curled up at the toes and had a quaint row of silver buttons up one side. There was a large hole in its sole, Ambril thought about the fairy in the box and wondered if there was a Craig’s List, Lost and Found for fairies---she set it on her bedside table.

Then it hit her again, just how tired she was. She dragged herself into the shower, dried off, then wiggled into her P.J.’s. But before she crawled under her crisp, clean sheets she rummaged around in her backpack and pulled out her new robot…new to her that is. It stood a foot high was made of red metal and was more than a little scratched up. But she didn’t care, it had been a going away present from Chao Feng.

“This is special A.I. robot!” He had said proudly when he set it on the counter and turned it on. “You know---A.I.---Artificial Intelligence, you teach, he learn so that one day, he be a little friend to you.” They watched as it jerkily walked along the counter then teetered on the edge before swinging a foot around and marched the other way. “I put in all new works, so it’s up-to-date.” Ambril watched as the robot. The more you let him do, more he do it better.”

The fake button label on his chest had been partially ripped off. Leaving ‘ff’ on one line and ‘Lit’ on another. “ff---lit. fLit, that’s what I’ll call you.” She yawned as she set him on her bedside 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.

# Chapter 10 Zane finally talks

But Ambril couldn’t get to sleep. The mystifying events of the day swirled around and around in her head. She lay awake a long time staring at the smooth ceiling wishing it was cracked like her old bedroom’s ceiling that she could have made interesting pictures with. She had started counting sheep when she heard voices arguing across the hall. She slipped from her bed and put her ear to the door.

“It’s not possible, Zane, it was dark, you were angry, you were bound to mistake what you saw,” Feldez’s voice sounded strained.

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

“Certainly not, it’s just that your new to this area, it could have been a trick of the eye, a swaying tree making an odd shadow, it could have been anything.”

“I remember what it looked like, Feldez.” Zane said in a low voice.

The tone of Feldez’s voice veered to ominous. “You know what it does to your mother to hear you talk about that! 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. Come now, let’s finish this conversation in here.”

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

The voices receded. Ambril opened the door and peered out. There was a crack of light at the bottom of Zane’s door and the low rumble of voices from inside. She strained to make out what they were saying but they kept their voices down. She didn’t dare move any closer. She was glad she’d stayed in her room when the door was suddenly thrown wide and Feldez strode hurriedly out. Ambril skittered behind her door, praying she hadn’t been seen.

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

Ambril had had enough of not knowing. When the coast was clear she opened her door and crept across the hallway. She needed to talk to Zane. She hesitated, then with her fingernail she tapped out their code, which she and Zane had used to signal to each other through the walls when they were young. No response. She was about to turn the knob when she became aware of the sound of boxes being ripped open and books toppling over. 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 preparing to leave.

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!” He stared at his little sister in consternation and noted her hands were balling 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,” 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 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? Wait, describe it to me.” He sounded hopeful but wary.

Ambril described the thing in the forest. Zane got more and more excited. “I knew it! It really was there!” he said jubilantly.

“So you’ve seen one before?”

Zane nodded, “the Dullaith, yeah, I saw one---,” he paused to look hard at her, “the night Dad died.”

Ambril felt as if a stake had been driven through her chest. “What?” She suddenly felt light headed. “Mom just told me Dad died from an explosion in his lab.”

Zane just looked. “No, he died fighting a Dullaith. They say he---he was the one who raised it---brought it to life. Feldez had to bring it down. Mom and I saw it in the park, we were walking home eating ice cream.” Zane hung his head, “you don’t remember anything do you?” his voice was low and sad, “you’re lucky---I can’t forget.”

Ambril felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room, there was none left for her to breathe. “No, I---don’t remember anything.” she said tightly.

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

Ambril thought hard. “I remember them laughing.”

Zane bowed his head, “Yeah, me too, they laughed all the time together.” Then he 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.” He started worrying a small hole in his jeans. “Mom had a really hard time after, people here didn’t treat her right, I think they were afraid of her, they thought she had helped him or something.”

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

Zane’s head jerked up. He got up and walked over to the window and cleared his throat, “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---so,” Zane straightened up; he seemed to have made a decision. “Maybe Mom is right, we should put forget all of this. Maybe we imagined it all anyway.”

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

“We should just forget it, Ambril,” he still faced the window.

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! It’s one of the scariest and weirdest things that’s ever happened to me!”

Zane turned around, “there are scarier things than monsters. How about Mom cracking up and us left with only Feldez as a parent.” Zane advanced on Ambril, “we don’t ever, ever talk about this again,” his voice was steely.

Ambril started backing up, “take it easy Zane,” she had never seen him 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 on a branch outside. The stars twinkled. Actually more than twinkled, one of them began swooping around wildly and with a breezy bump flew into Ambril’s window and onto her desk. It wasn’t a star really, and it wasn’t twinkling, just sparked in a tired way. It crouched there for a moment 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 wings sprouting from his shoulders. He was missing a boot and looked tremendously tired as he scanned the room. Then his face brightened as he flitted over to Ambril’s bedside table and triumphantly snatched up the tiny boot lying there. He immediately put it on and smiled at both his feet.

Ambril mumbled something in her sleep and turned toward him. He blanched as she yawned in his face and fanned the air with a disgusted expression. Her arm flopped out of the covers and a tinkle of gold drew the fairy’s attention as Ambril’s medallion fell out onto the quilt. He stared…then stared some more before flying 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.

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 as he turned back to the bedroom window, “hey where’d he go?”

“Where’d who go, the fairy?” the squirrel stood up on her hind legs for a better look. Inside Ambril snored peacefully on all alone, there was no sign of the fairy.

“Maybe he hightailed back to wherever they hole up,” Aster mused, scratching her ear with her hind leg.

“I am surprised, I must say,” said Sid, “that young thing saved his life, obligations like that are powerful in most magic families,” he snapped his beak a few times.

Aster looked thoughtful for a minute and then said, “Might be the forest fairies have a different take on being obliged to human-kind, they’re awful snooty, thinking themselves above everyone---‘especially human-kind.”

They stared silently at the sleeping child until the squirrel yawned, “I’m all tuckered out, you mind taking the first watch Sid?” without waiting for an answer the squirrel scampered over to a hole in the tree trunk, “there’s a nice cubby here that I---“ the branches rustled violently. “Oh! I am sorry Ma’am, I didn’t see you---well--- well---WELL EXCUSE ME!” Aster sputtered as an indignant possum poked its head out of a hole and took a jab at her. Aster retreated up the branch, “My goodness, how rude!” After indignantly flicking her tail a moment Aster wedged herself in the crook of two branches, “wake me when it’s my turn to keep watch…and steer clear of that old hole,” 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 blue from end to end, it was shaping up to be a stellar day. As Ambril sat up and rubbed her eyes she heard a strange, whirring sound over by her desk.

Her mother had wandered in and was watching fLit as he 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. Your other robots were not much more than something to stub my toe on.”

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. The robot cricked its neck and unhinged his earflap, revealing the wiring inside.

Her mother snorted. “Not exactly a looker is he? What do you call him? fLit?” she smiled ruefully as she picked up her daughter’s dirt encrusted jeans, “at least HE stayed clean. Feldez wants you out of the house today so that the new housekeeper can get organized.”

Ambril realized that was code for she couldn’t be trusted to wipe her feet,“what, a housekeeper?” Ambril wrinkled her nose in distaste, “I don’t want a stranger going through my stuff.”

Her mother smiled, “think about it, 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 fLit before racing down the stairs.

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 bite---yum! Feldez had walled himself in with a 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:

**A fire broke out in the Tupelo farmer’s market off the Main Road. The Tupelos had just finished renovating the old building to sell their farm’s produce. “It’s a real shame though it’s always been an eyesore,” said neighbor and grocery store owner Larch Dogwood. “Do 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 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.

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 gave a short laugh, “that’s fine with me, cell phones don’t work very well here anyway.”

His mother shifted uneasily as Feldez glared at him, then coughed drily. “I hope you will use your time wisely and familiarize yourselves with the town as you’ll be starting school tomorrow.”

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

Feldez cleared his throat and checked his watch. “I’m off to the office, there is some one here you should 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 on gray pants and a sweater and 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 and smiled showing off abnormally large front teeth.

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, then sipped her coffee as if meeting her new housekeeper was an everyday occurrence. Then Feldez motioned to his napkin 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 are as follows, you’ll be home 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 give them a close range glare. “You will limit your sweets to one treat a day.” He stared 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 shrugged and looked away.

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. Let Mrs. Sweetgum handle everything she’s very capable.”

Ambril cringed as she watched her Mom grow smaller. Ambril had seen her Mom go ten rounds with the toughest of tough---school principals and the ladies who worked in the unemployment office. She was very capable---but something about the way Feldez treated her made her feel as if she wasn’t. 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.”

Feldez gave her a disapproving look, “darling I want you to rest. The children can find their way around town.”

She gave him a small nod and said hesitantly, “I thought we would have a talk with the kids before---“

But Feldez was already half way out the door, “we’ve just had our 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 and his work is---very important,” her Mother nodded as she trying to gloss over her fiancé’s behavior.

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

“We all have to keep in mind that the role of Hospital Administrator is a big responsibility.” Ambril’s Mother said softly and then as she caught sight of the glorious day outside she smiled. “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 garage as if having them closer would contaminate it. Zane jumped on his and without a word took off.

“Wait honey! I want to show you---“Ambril’s Mom yelled after her son…but he was already around the bend and gone.

Ambril jammed her backpack in her bike basket and jiggled the handlebars experimentally. Her mother was looking out over the town. The whole valley rolled out in front of them. The forest marched straight up the mountains all around, except for one barren hill on the far side of the valley everything was alive with life. Ambril spotted the Main Road winding away down and around and on through a checkerboard of farmland and into the forest.

Ambril’s Mom began talking excitedly and pointing at the buildings below, “there’s where old Mrs. Sumac used to live, her daughter is the Mayor now. I used to have acorn wars with her older brother 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. “Trelawnyd’s a village really, but you’ll soon see you can get everything you need here. There’s the Hospital where Feldez works, and that’s the Library where you’ll of course be spending loads of time.” she continued.

The Hospital was nothing special but the Library looked interesting, it 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 and I did.” The schoolhouse was a red brick two-story building decorated with frilly white woodwork and surrounded by pools of grass and a large playground.

Ambril was anxious to get started, “thanks for the info Mom, gotta go.”

“And don’t forget to visit Betula’s! It’s everyone’s favorite place,” called her mother as Ambril pushed off and coasted down the hill, “don’t forget---Betula’s!”

Ambril was soon gliding down a shady street. It was a strange new experience to ride through uncrowded streets. No business people in a hurry, no cable cars to veer around, no clueless tourists standing in the street gawking at everything. She rode by the schoolhouse; it was much bigger 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 pear, then she was showered with 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!”

More heads popped up---too many heads. What had she gotten herself into? Her tires spit gravel as she rode off as fast as she could. After a few turns she thought she’d lost them, the realized she was lost herself. In the distance she spotted another bike rider, maybe they’d give her directions, she thought. As she drew closer she could see it was a girl about her own age. But when the girl looked around at her she started to pedal faster.

“Hey wait! Is this the way to town? I’m new here and I’m kind of lost.” Tthe girl turned around, blanched then began pedaling furiously.

What was the girl doing? Last she checked she didn’t look like a maniac, the girl could at least stop and answer her question…so much for small town hospitality. Then she heard a snicker behind her and found that the gang of tomato throwing thugs was right behind her looking like they’d like nothing more than to tie her in a knot and hang her on a branch. A big, angry guy with a mop of blonde hair rode in front, grinning maniacally. Ambril stood on her pedals and pumped as hard as she could, putting on a burst of speed. But when she looked behind her she saw the boys were gaining on her. Ahead, the girl ahead vanished around a curve. Ambril followed her 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 almond shaped eyes with 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.

“I saw you at the fire last night! We drove by on our way into town.” Ambril realized too late that 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, “when they finally got it under control, our stand was gone.”

“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 a new family I guess, it’s not like we remember anything from before,” Zane’s taunt face from last night flashed in her mind, “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, “you’ll hear that a lot around here, Trelawnyd villagers are big on family roots.” Sully wagged her head. “We’ve been here over six years and we’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. “My Mom said I should try a place called Betula’s,” continued Ambril, “she said it’s everyone’s favorite place.”

Sully smiled hugely showing somewhat crooked teeth, “well you have that right, Betula’s Sweet Shoppe 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. 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 what exploded in your vegetable stand?”

Sully shrugged, “they’re not sure really but they think somebody set it intentionally, though why anyone would want to blow up bunches of broccoli and turnips is beyond me. Because we’re New Family the police are a little worried it might happen again.” Sully scrunched up her nose, “My parents find that hard to believe. Trelawnyd’s been good to us until last spring when Mr. Dogwood, the grocery store owner started to get greedy. He suddenly started paying us less for the stuff we grow. 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 paused to flick a fly away from her bike handle, “we were doing great! My Mom and Dad were really happy...”Sully sighed, “then this had to happen,” her voice trailed off.

Ambril didn’t know what to say. It sounded so awful. They had just come 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 a bit ahead until they rounded a corner and had to slow down due to the traffic on Main Street…all three cars of it. There were little shops lining several blocks.

Ambril smiled as she rode by the shoe store. There were two elderly woman, one small and frail the other gaunt with a flowered hat, admiring a gigantic, buckled boot as it was hoisted and chained under a sign, ‘Flood’s Excellent Shoes’. An old man with wild white hair stared at her suspiciously as she rode past a cluttered shop with dirty windows with a sign over it, ‘Junkson Fine Collectables’.

“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 laughing and talking. Betula’s front window was filled with mouthwatering cakes and goodies. She was so busy deciding what she’d try first she tripped on 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. It was the lady with the flowered hat, 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.

“Sorry,” Ambril quickly picked up her backpack.

“Now Crystal, she didn’t mean to fling that in front of you!” said the frail woman kindly, “do you need help, Deary?”

Ambril shook her head as she brushed off her backpack.

“I see not, so quick you are!” she continued. “I’m Daisy Flood. Are you new here?”

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

“Oh! A Derwyn! Isn’t it nice Crystal to hear that name again?” she tugged on her thin companion, “why you must be Tylia’s daughter!”

“Yes, that’s right,” 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, “you forgot this.” He held out a large shopping bag, which advertised Bob’s Bots.

The thin woman’s manner abruptly changed as she smiled down at the plump man, “how kind of you to run all this way just to give me my package, Robert, you’re such a gentleman,” she simpered as she extended her bony hand to take the package, “a rare find in society today. But since we’re nearly half way there wouldn’t you like to come for tea? I’d so appreciate a demonstration on how to operate this complex machine.” Mrs. Twid eagerly leaned in closer which prompted the slightly sweaty man to quickly back up.

“It’s really very simple, you just press the ON button and it goes,” Bob shrugged, “Sorry I haven’t time for tea today, I really have to get back to my shop,” he took a larger 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 embarrassed as he hitched up his pants and turned to walk away. But Mrs. Twid wasn’t done yet; she tried out a flirty pout which came off more as a grimace, “but this evening, you promised to help me at the Tea?”

“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, “are you coming to the church tea this afternoon?” he asked hopefully.

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

“Daisy and I will be there as well.” Mrs. Twid patted her shopping bag enthusiastically. “I’m planning to share my homemade bread!” she simpered at Bob who nervously adjusted his glasses.

“That sounds mighty tempting! I wouldn’t miss it, Crystal,” Betula caught Ambril eying her and winked, “though I’m a coffee drinker, myself. Bob, are you going?”

“Yessirree, you want to go together?” he paused chagrined, “wait, I promised to help set up, you want to help?”

“I’m always happy to help.” Betula turned to smile at the now mortified Mrs. Twid, “I’ll see you at Church Crystal--- it’s such a pleasure to see you out and about again Daisy.”

Mrs. Twid gasped a little, still taken aback by Betula’s easy friendship with Bob, “come now Daisy, we’re behind schedule,” she patted the wrinkled hand on her arm, “we’re off to review the lovely brochure the new retirement home sent. The shop is just getting to be too much for you isn’t it?” she nodded to them all before setting sail 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’d never guess it looking at him but he owns half the town,” She waved cheerily at Bob as he turned into 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 swept Ambril through the door and onto a stool in an instant. “Ambril Silva am I right?”

“We just got here last night---and my last name is Derwyn now.” Ambril kept her voice low.

Betula looked surprised but then nodded, “Derwyn’s a fine name too, and just as much yours.” Betula set a glass of water in front of Ambril, “do you like chocolate?”

Ambril nodded. What a ridiculous question, of coursed she did!

I’ve been tinkering 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?”

It was now obvious to Ambril why Betula’s Shop was everyone’s favorite place. Ambril smiled up at her.

“I’ll bring two spoons!” Betula said as Sully slid onto the stool next to her, her shirt damp but tomato free.

“Yum, a new flavor, if I didn’t know I was going to spend the afternoon stuffing char broiled turnips into garbage bags I’d say this was my lucky day!” Sully put both elbows on the counter and leveraged herself up and over to better see what Betula was doing.

“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 Ambril, “it sure is nice to see her again.”

She looked past them and waved at a girl with curly blonde hair behind Ambril. “Hi there Lola, darling, how’s your Pop? Feeling better?” Betula moved off to chat with other customers.

Ambril picked up her spoon and dug in trying to savor 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.

The shop stuffed to the rafters with candy in fantastic shapes and colors. A large glass case sat in the middle of the counter filled with sugar figurines so lifelike Ambril could have sworn one of them winked at her. A large rabbit in red high tops leaned against a miniature Ferris wheel made of red licorice and a fat brown bear with an eye patch and an earring was laughing up at a striped giraffe with a long, long necktie.

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

Ambril nodded, “almost everyone will love it---except, maybe not Mrs. Twid,” out of the corner of her eye she 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. “Crystal and I were friendly once but somehow she hardened as she got older, and turned bitter.” She absently reached into the glass case and rearranged a chocolate cannon, “she’s not ever satisfied with what she has, she’s always wanting more and not too particular how she gets it.”

“New bugs! Ambril, you have to try the wolf spiders they’re my favorites!” Sully pointed at a large display of gargantuan iridescent bugs. “Help yourself, love,” Betula rocked back on her heels happily.

Sully grabbed a spindly green bug that Ambril had never seen and then pounced on something fuzzy and brown. She shoved the whole green bug into her mouth and blissfully crunched down hard, “wow, watermelon!”

Ambril picked a polka dotted orange beetle with red striped wings and hesitantly bit off one of the legs… orange marmalade dipped in chocolate. Once you got over the fact you were eating a bug they were really good.

Sully had moved onto the hairy brown thing, “these are my Mom’s favorite!” Sully enthusiastically cooed as she snapped off a leg and handed it to Ambril, “Wolf Spider, my folks love bugs, our farm’s organic.”

“So do you raise bugs on her farm?”

Sully snorted, “no, I mean we try to make the good bugs feel welcome, you know the ones who take care of the bad bugs? We try to get them to live on our farm.” Sully continued to cull through the pile of bugs. “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?”

Ambril didn’t really know how to answer that, cautiously she said, “she’s good, I guess.” What kid really knows? “She’s engaged to Feldez Petri…I think she’s a little nervous about the wedding---and everything.” Ambril’s voice trailed off.

“Feldez, he’ll have her eating all the right foods in the wrong way, food with no love in it.” She frowned as she straightened up, “what does he know about it all? His formulas and calculations aren’t gonna make anyone happy,” clearly Feldez wasn’t Betula’s favorite guy either. She raised her arms to encompass the entire store. “I don’t use any formulas, but we try to add a little bit of love into everything we do so that with every bite we give away a little bit of happiness.” She chuckled in that low rumbly way again, “we all need some of that, don’t we?”

She shot a measured glance at 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, “here’s a nice loaf of fresh baked cinnamon bread---I can’t sell it as it’s a little burned on the top,” she had it wrapped before Lola could protest, “you tell your Papa he needs to feed you more.”

Lola blushed then smiled as she turned away a swirl of feathers in her wake. Ambril smirked when she caught Zane staring at Lola with a stunned deer-caught-in-the-headlights sort of look. It looked like her older brother had been smacked hard by the Love Beast--- she might be able to use that. He was standing next to an awkward kid with longish dark hair.

The tinkle of a 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 blink she had darted through the crowd and slid through the door.

“Hey Betula, I’ve another fine offer for you!” the man boomed, waging his generous jawbone at her, “you won’t be able to refuse this one!” he stumped over to the counter grabbed a handful of candy centipedes and threw them into his mouth. Then he caught sight of the geeky next to Zane who was now licking an ice cream cone, “RILEY! CHORES! NOW!” he yelled.

It startled the boy and he dropped his ice cream onto the floor. The square jawed man harrumphed disgustedly, “clean that up before you go!” then turned back to Betula all sweetness and nice, “how’s my favorite sweetie huh?”

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

“$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.

“I’m ready and willing to take this dump off your hands at any time Betula,” Mr. Dogwood nodded vigorously as he handed her some change. “Yep, this would be the perfect way for my store to expand. You and I both know this town needs a supermarket. I’ll even let you sell your sweets in my store.”

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

Larch’s sunny expression darkened, “I didn’t have anything to do with that!” he jabbed a puffy finger in the air emphasizing every other syllable, “though I’m not sorry that old shack burned down, it was a dump!”

“They’d fixed it up real nice, you know that. You couldn’t find a better tomato, anywhere and their produce was reasonably priced, more reasonable than your own.” 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 bulged just like the bug he was eating as he said tightly, “they’re not one of us, Betula, they don’t belong here.”

She met his gaze coolly, “Larch, they are good honest people who came when we needed them. When all the old farming families sold up and moved away, remember? They came and tilled the fields and tended the orchards. Where would we be without them?” Betula turned her back on him and moved 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’d like to talk to you about this property---“he followed her gesturing wildly.

“S-s-sorry about that, my Dad comes on too strong sometimes,” someone behind Ambril said. It was the geeky kid, his too long bangs half hid his amazing gray eyes.

“Oh---Um--- it seems like Betula can handle herself Ambril stuttered, “I’m new here, my name’s Ambril Derwyn,” then she blushed, mortified. Duh, she was new here what a stupid thing to say.

But the gray eyed boy didn’t seem to mind. “I’m Riley Dogwood, my Dad owns the grocery store,” he jerked a thumb at the wall of Betula’s shop, “next door.”

Ambril flashed on a scene from last night…the geeky kid shaking hands with one of the fire fighters. “You were there last night when Sully’s shack burned down weren’t you?”

Riley smiled nervously, “Do you m---m---mind not mentioning that around my Dad?” he looked around furtively, “I wasn’t supposed to be out last night.” He paused and absently fingered the candy bugs. “So you’re new---what do you think so far?”

Ambril smiled again, “it’s not San Francisco but it’s---interesting.”

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 GET OUT OF MY STORE!” she took another swing at him.

“We’ll talk later,” Larch said angling his large frame toward the door, “when you’re feeling more---ladylike---I’m not giving up!” He deftly sidestepped another sweep of the mop. Over his shoulder he hollered, “Riley, let’s go.”

Ambril looked around but Riley had disappeared---smart boy.

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!” hoping to catch up with Sully she squeezed through the jostling crowd and out the door.

But Sully was nowhere to be seen. Betula waved cheerily at her as she got her bike out and pointed it down the side alley next to Betula’s shop. Ambril remembered Larch Dogwood’s snide comment about their roadside stand and how he pronounced them ‘New Family’ like it was some rare form of leprosy. Poor Sully, it must feel lousy to have people treat you like that. Then she thought about the explosion. It seemed Sully’s family had cut into Mr. Dogwood’s business, he had good reason to blow up their produce stand but could he really have been involved in summoning the Dullaith? She was so distracted by this thought that the overripe tomato whizzing past her head caught her by surprise.

# Chapter 15 An Alleyway Brawl

It was the tomato gang again. Ambril launched herself from the bike and ducked behind some boxes while scoping out possible missiles to fire back. Apart from the gravel under her feet there was nothing. She braced herself for the next attack---and waited---it never came. She peeped over the boxes toward the end of the alley. There were soft, squelchy thuds coming from around the corner.

Then she saw Riley hunched down behind some crates. He lobbed something over them and grinned when he heard an answering groan.

“Hey, watch it!”

Ambril crept up to the corner of the building and found the tomato throwers had found someone else to bully. They were pummeling Riley with all manner of overripe produce from a nearby dumpster. The onslaught was ferocious, Riley was outnumbered seven to one and several had armed themselves with ball throwers. Riley was covered with fruit pulp and tomato slime. Then Ambril noticed another slimy arm lob a moldy grapefruit at the bullies. It was hard to tell at first but it was Sully.

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 here.” whispered a big burly kid with wild black hair. Ambril couldn’t place the accent, it sounded almost Scottish though the boy could have passed for Pacific Islander. His white shirt and bow tie were uncomfortably tight but 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 positioned himself at the corner of Betula’s building then raised his arm and effortlessly let go a tomato. It blurred past Ambril. One of the bullies groaned and clutched his arm as his ball thrower clattered to the ground.

The burly kid made no attempt to hide. He leisurely picked out another tomato and launched it at a big blonde boy. Ambril recognized him as the boy leading the pack earlier that day. The tomato caught him just under the eye and he roared with rage as he put his hand to his face. His attacker paid no attention as he picked up another tomato.

The blonde kid located his attacked with his one good eye, “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 named Ygg snorted, “it’s not a bit like last time Lance, ya great waltzing buffoon. 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 ratty looking boy just behind Lance.

The boy instantly clutched his eye then high-tailed it down the alley. Some of the other boys looked longingly after him. “I think I hear my Ma calling,” another boy mumbled just before he took off running.

Ygg smiled as he picked up a tomato and weighed it in his hand. “The odds be getting better.” He threw the tomato and beaned another boy who dropped his ball thrower and shuffled away holding his nose. “Ya ready to quit?”

Lance’s eye had swollen completely shut and was slowly reddening to purple as he said vengefully, “outsiders like you will always be losers,” he sneered. “You’re never gonna fit in here, or anywhere really. A loser’s always a loser.”

“Is that you, Ygg Drasil? I’m shocked to see a relation of mine behaving so disgracefully!” screeched a voice from down the Alley. It was like fingernails on a chalkboard, Ygg cringed. An instant later Mrs. Twid marched up her flat feet flicking gravel.

“You ungrateful cur!” she sputtered, “after all I’ve done for you---tTaken you in, fed you, given you work! And here you stand behaving like a common hooligan!” she paused here to smooth out her dress. “The Lord only knows how hard I’ve tried to correct the obvious omissions in your upbringing,” she drew herself up flat feet and all. “I’m speechless!”

Not really, thought Ambril.

Mrs. Twid turned to the blonde boy who was trying to suppress a grin. “I do apologize for my nephew’s poor behavior, Lance. You and I both know how important it is that proper respect must be shown to our finest families, yours and mine being among them.” She said her cheeks quivering like underdone Jello. “he’ll clean this up, of course,” she turned back to Ygg, “You will also restock all the shelves and deliver every single Sunset Tea order to your chores before bedtime!”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Twid, we know it’s not your fault,” Lance smirked as he signaled to the other boys, “can you see he turns over the compost heap too?”

“Of course, it seems a fitting penance for someone caught tossing vegetables around.” Mrs. Twid nodded pointedly at Ygg.

“It, it wasn’t Ygg’s fault, he didn’t start the fight, you see Lance and his buddies, they—“ Ambril began.

“That’s quite enough from you, young lady!” Mrs. Twid was looking down her big skinny nose at Ambril. “Just, who might you be? Another New Family?” she pronounced ‘New’ as if it was some sort of disfiguring disease.

“We’ve met, my name’s Ambril Derwyn.“

Mrs. Twid drew back, surprised. “Oh yes, I remember. You nearly ran Mrs. Flood and myself down in front of Betula’s earlier. Yes I see you are carrying on in the family’s tradition of visiting mayhem upon us.” she sniffed. “Lurking in dark alleys like a stray dog.” then she hesitated and seemed to compose herself. “But your family of Derwyn is one of the original families…well.” She managed a nauseating half smile her checks wagging fiercely. “perhaps allowances should be made---this once.”

She patted Ambril’s head as she would a baby goat, “do say hello to your mother for me, won’t you?” then she snapped her fingers at Ygg as if summoning a waiter. “No supper for you tonight,” before marching back down the alley, her feet flapping at the gravel.

Lance waited until Mrs. Twid had turned the corner before he sneered, “Riley, stop messing around or I’ll put you where you belong---in the dumpster!”

The other boys laughed appreciatively. One of the last to slouch away was a too tall, thin boy. Ambril was stunned to see Zane trailing the bullies.

“Whew!” Sully stood up removing a glob of gooey tomato from her hair, “we’re sure glad you came along!”

Reilly stood up laughing while putrid pear juice dribbled off his arms. “That felt good! Watching my brother get taken down a notch in front of his gang!”

“Wait, one of those goons is your brother?” asked Ambril.

Reilly bent down to scoop up a couple of rotten apples and lobbed them into the dumpster, “Lance is my brother, the biggest of the bullies.” Reilly said ruefully.

Ambril was stunned, Zane looked like Mother Teresa in comparison. She knew a guy like Riley would hate to be pitied so she just grinned and said, “My brother was the tall one in back.”

They all pitched in and made short work of the clean up while laughing at Sully’s hair and Reilly’s messy shirt. 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, “be seein’ you tomorrow,” he tugged on his collar as he strode away.

“Yeah, see you at school.” said Reilly as he backed toward the storeroom. In a moment Ambril and Sully were alone in the alleyway.

“Well, that was interesting,” said Ambril.

“It sure was!” Sully crowed, “It was downright insane to see Lance get a black eye!” her smile was huge,“it was absolutely fabulous!” then gave Ambril a searching look. “You’ll find out tomorrow that Lance is not only the biggest bully at school but also pretty popular. And… it won’t take you any time at all to figure out 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 hopefully. “If you like I can meet you at the front gate tomorrow.”

“Great! I’ll look for you,” Ambril said as she pushed off.

The sun was lazily making its way through the afternoon as Ambril wound her way through the streets. A smile refused to leave her face, she had made a friend. She was so preoccupied with this happy thought she didn’t even notice the hard looks and suspicious glances she was getting from those she passed.

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# Chapter 16 The First Day of School

The alarm clock went off too early. Ambril 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 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, “and I accept the offering.”

Ambril hadn’t seen Zane since the food fight in the alley, “what were you doing with those jerks yesterday?”

“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 d’ere, you’d ‘ave bin toast,” he rolled the cereal around in his mouth as he crunched.

Ambril snorted. “Yeah, right.”

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

“You’re not much help, if you’re egging them on, “Ambril scowled as she grabbed her bowl put it in the sink.

“I’m going to do what I have to do to stay healthy,” said Zane swallowing hard. “If that means I have to hang out with Lance and his bullying thugs, I’ll do it,” Zane downed his orange juice.

Ambril looked around and found a cloth lunch bag on the counter with her name on it. “Where’s Mom?” she asked as she stuffed it into her backpack.

“Still asleep I guess, Feldez gave her some more stuff last night,” Zane poured himself another bowl of cereal, “he thinks--”

“What do I think?” a cold voice asked from the stairwell.

Ambril stiffened instinctively as Feldez appeared looking sleek and calm in an expensive suit.

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

Feldez nodded as he adjusted his cuffs. “Not surprisingly this has been a difficult transition for her 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. The engine purred as he backed the car 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 snorted 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.

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

Too late she saw how tight the muscles in his jaw had become, he turned slowly t0 face her. “I told you, we can’t tell anyone about what we saw, but especially not her. She’s so stressed out now that…,” he paused, groping for something. “I have to think,” he said as he picked up his backpack and slid past his sister.

Ambril’s heart was leaden as she climbed on her bike. Zane was growing more and more distant at the very moment she needed him most. She grimaced, it was beginning to feel as if her family had a bomb strapped to it but she couldn’t find the red or green wires to defuse it . If she didn’t figure something out fast it would explode. But the cool morning breeze lifted her spirits as she coasted down the hill. Minutes later, she pulled into the crowded schoolyard feeling much better.

“You made it! You didn’t run into any more trouble last night, did you?” Sully waved her over to the bike rack.

“No, I got home alright, but my brother, Zane thinks Lance and his buddies are out to get us.”

“It looks like they’ve moved on, they’ve working over somebody else right now,” near the play structure Ambril could see a large group of kids milling around.

Sully sighed, “It’s Riley again, why can’t they leave him alone?”

Ambril caught a glimpse of Riley being shoved around in a tight bunch of jeering boys. A big blonde boy was doing most of the shoving. “Just quit it, you geeky nerd!”

Ambril hated watching it, it wasn’t fair, “shouldn’t somebody do something?” she asked and waited for a grown up to race out, impose order and march Lance off to detention. But the front doors remained locked. Finally, Lance shoved Riley right off his feet and laughed as he sprawled on the grass, arms flailing. Still jeering, Lance and his buddies walked away. Ambril spotted an uncomfortable looking Zane on the fringe of the group and was mollified to see how uncomfortable he looked.

“Come on, there isn’t anything we can do, the bell’s about to ring.” Sully grabbed her arm and towed her up the front steps.

“Does that happen a lot?”

Sully shrugged, “sometimes…usually the teachers are pretty good about breaking up fights but if Lance is involved they look the other way. Lance’s Dad gives the school sports program a lot of money. I hear he’s even bankrolling the new gym.”

Ambril shook her head, she had thought maybe there’d be a few redeeming features to a small town school, but her first impression of it made her want to embrace home schooling. At the office Ambril was given her class schedule with a sniff from the school secretary, the ancient Miss Jonquil. Miss Jonquil had still dressed as if it was still 1962, she glared at Ambril from under her pill box hat and fingered the pearls around her neck, she was dressed all in black. There were several pictures of a bleary eyed cat who looked to be older than Miss Jonquil with black ribbons draped across the top. “your mother was supposed to come along today and sign some forms,” she said stiffly.

“Sorry, my Mom’s ---not feeling well,” said Ambril almost truthfully.

Miss Jonquil softened a bit. “I’m sure the move was greatly unsettling,” she frowned at Ambril as she’d rather to having a limb removed than subject herself to a move, then she warbled, “be sure to tell her she needs to come in and see me.”

“Hi Miss Jonquil, I’m sorry about Beauregard.” Sully nodded toward the nearest ribbon draped cat picture.

Miss Jonquil sighed laboriously and nodded sadly, “such a great loss to the world really, he---he had a gift you know.”

“A gift?” asked Ambril.

“Yes, Beauregard could tell the future you see,” she lifted her eyes to the ceiling, “he read kibble just as easily as some read tea leaves,” her eyes seemed to recede a little in their eye sockets as she adjusted one of the trailing black ribbon before going back to her papers.

Out in the hallway Ambril whispered, “is she---you know---playing with all her marbles?”

Sully was busily examining Ambril’s schedule. “Jonquil? Probably not but she’s harmless, there are plenty of scarier nuts around---Great! You have Pinwydden for English, Berry for P.E. and horrible Breccia for History. That’s three classes we have together.” She handed it back to Ambril. “Come on, let’s go find your locker.”

Ambril smiled as she followed her new friend, she’d had a lot of ‘first’ days, having Sully there to guide her made it absolutely the best one she’d ever had.

Sull jumped as a second bell sounded, “Pond scum! Forget the locker, we’re late!” they raced down the hall and skittered into class.

“So glad you could join us,” said a dry voice, “and set a bad example for our new student.” A tall, thin man nodded. He was neatly dressed, the crease of his pants was razor sharp and his moustache appeared to have been penned on with a ruler. He had short hair and a long Adam’s apple which bobbed at them above his brilliant green bow tie. “Ambril Petri? Correct? I’m Mr. Pinwydden you English teacher and I do not appreciate tardiness.”

“Sorry about that, but you’ve made a mistake,” Ambril said slowly…some one hadn’t gotten the memo, she wasn’t about to use Feldez’s last name. “My name is Ambril Derwyn.”

Mr. Pinwydden’s eyebrows rose slightly before he nodded curtly and made a note in his ledger,“Ambril Derwyn, welcome to English,” he gestured toward an empty seat near Sully, “now, open your books to page 357, we are discussing Myths and Legends.”

Ambril slid into her seat and looked around. She saw Ygg sitting nearby struggling awkwardly with his book. He looked more at home tossing tomatoes. The rustle of books and paper reached a crescendo and then slowly died out just as Riley limped in, his shirt torn and took a seat in the back without looking up. Mr. Pinwydden frowned but said nothing.

Ambril wished she’d done something more to help Riley. She knew how it felt to be made fun of. That had been---move five? She couldn’t remember the details, but she’d never forget the jeering faces and sharp remarks she’d faced alone out on the playground.

Ygg had his hand in the air.

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

“I heard a story as a wee child about a man named Morz- or Morozey?”

“You most be referring to Moroz Fitzwilliam? It’s a local story. I don’t believe it’s ever left these mountains. Yes, let’s begin with evil Moroz, ” continued Mr. Pinwydden. “It’s an interesting story and yes, Moroz actually did exist, unlike many of those who populate myths and legends. He was born an orphan sometime in the mid 1800’s though no one is sure of the date, and raised by a local family. He showed early promise and attracted the interest of a wealthy benefactor who paid for him to leave Trelawnyd and attend one of the finest engineering schools on the East coast.” Pinwydden frowned slightly. “It would have been better for him to have not returned.”

“When he returned, he had grown into a charming and quite persuasive young man. He then went to work at the Mines and in a few short years made the Mines twice as profitable as ever before by developing efficient and more effective mining processes. He also became heavily involved in local politics.” Mr. Pinwydden cocked his head, birdlike at them. “Let it be said he did wonderful things for the town, including rebuilding the Main Road so well it hasn’t required any significant repairs to this day. He also reached out to nearby communities and encouraged trade with Trelawnyd which made some of the townspeople quite wealthy.” Mr. Pinwydden looked severely at them though a half smile played with his moustache. “And here, as happens in myths and legends, we stray from reality. As the story goes, he was also gifted in the use of magic. His dinner parties were legendary. He was said to have taught his dining table to tap dance just after the soup course and his floral centerpieces to take wing and fly around the room after dessert. He was said to have transformed his guests into animals or objects---at their request of course, and charmed household items to be his personal staff.” Mr. Pinwydden paused and pursed his lips. “Sounds quite wonderful doesn’t it? Unfortunately, as often happens that when someone is given too much power, too young---Moroz’s sense of right and wrong became---befuddled. As time went on, he grew bolder and began to dabble in dark magic. Perhaps he felt he needed something more challenging than what Trelawnyd had to offer him? Or perhaps his dark side ran deeper than the rest of humanity---who knows? Before his dark exploits had become too much for the townsfolk to ignore; he was said to have enslaved hundreds of beings and maimed and tortured many others. He grew so powerful, the local authorities against him. Finally the four ancient families of Trelawnyd combined their powers and ensnared him, imprisoning him for all eternity.” Mr. Pinwydden paused for affect though his Adam’s apple still wobbled excitedly, “it is said his exploits were so demonic that the shadow hounds, the Cerberus can still be seen running the forest in search of him.” Mr. Pinwydden straightened his bow tie. “The Legend doesn’t explain why the guardians of the underworld would be interested in him. But it is thought that he had plumbed the depths of evil so deeply he had shaken the very fabric of the world beyond, an unforgiveable act.”

A small girl with freckles and badly applied eye shadow raised her hand. “What are Shadow hounds?”

“The Cerberus, also called the Hounds of Hell. Some say it a single dog with three heads and others that it is a group of three dogs that act as one. They are said to be as large as elephants, breathe fire and have eyes that glow red. They guard over the vilest of the evil, dark creatures of the underworld.”

Ambril sat stunned. Dog’s of the Underworld, Dullaiths, this was anything but a quiet little country town.

Riley had his hand in the air, the large bruise forming on his right cheek forgotten, “does anyone know where his prison is?”

Pinwydden chuckled, “it’s easy to be taken in but remember we are discussing a legend---it’s a fairy tale, really, more fiction than fact. Trelawnyd Historians are sketchy about what truly happened to Moroz but the odds are he simply went to prison and died.”

Riley had his hand in the air again, “but what does the legend say of 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 this time making a dry little sound.

“Now onto other 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 magical prison. It made her wonder if the wall around the town was to keep something in or to keep evil out. 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 before racing 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. Ambril recognized the slightly sweaty man she’d met in front of Betula’s shop the day before.

“Hello students, I hope you’ve welcomed our new student Ambril Derwyn. Ambril just call me Bob. I hope you all had an enjoyable weekend,” he patted his ample belly, I certainly enjoyed mine,” his eyes swept the group and zeroed in on a large blonde kid. “I see some of us ran into trouble. Lance, Riley---are you fit to exercise?”

Lance hunched his shoulders into a shrug. For the first time Ambril noticed he was sporting a huge black eye about the size and shape of a green tomato. Riley simply nodded.

“Excellent! I want two laps around the grounds.”

Everyone groaned as they stumbled to their feet and started off. Lance and his buddies streaked by. Ygg jogged effortlessly but slowly along just ahead of them. Sully and Ambril matched his step and let the others pass them. Before long the others were out of sight. Ygg then slowed to a walk which prompted Ambril and Sully to do the same.

Ygg gave them a lopsided grin, “It be best to steer clear of Lance until that shiner has healed.”

Ambril nodded and grinned, then looked around and 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 northwest black clouds roiled.

“That doesn’t look 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 this spooky old house near our farm. It’s boarded up but I know a way in, there’s this really weird garden and a gazebo we can get under if it rains.”

“Sounds fun,” said Ambril, “how about you Ygg?”

Ygg looked surprised to be included but then shook his head, “I’ll be making more deliveries I expect, for Mrs. Twid.” he said glumly, “her Sunset Tea is gettin’ popular with the old ones.”

Later, Ambril remembered feeling a strange, frizzing sensation just as an eerie scream curdled the air. Ambril whirled to see Lance who had come around on his second lap, jumping around as if he was at the mercy of a sadistic puppeteer. His face stretched taunt as he screamed again while whirling and hopping from one foot to the other. His friends raced up then stopped in their tracks unsure what to do without Lance able to tell them.

One smirked and took a risk. “Dude, I wouldn’t take those moves out of the basement, keep practicing.”

He did look pretty silly hoping around like that but Ambril could see it was no joke when his face turned a chalky white and his body went rigid and seemed to vibrate. His hair smoked as his eyes rolled up. Then Ambril was shoved aside as Bob blew through the ring of students.

He took one look at Lance and yelled, “Jeb!” he pointed at a skinny, pimply nosed kid, “go and ask Pinwydden for a nullifier quick! The rest of you get out of here!” When no one moved, Bob turned on them, “Don’t you understand? This is dangerous! MOVE!”

The kids turned obediently and began to amble toward the school building, but when the nearby monkey bars started to spark and hum there was suddenly a stampede for the safety of the school steps.

Ambril was running along blindly with the herd when she felt a tug on her sleeve. “Here! This ought to be safe enough, we can watch what happens from here.” Sully beckoned from on top of a wooden bench nearby. Ambril noticed Ygg had also hung back, curious.

Bob had hunched over several feet away from where Lance still stood. He was peering at something on the ground. Quickly he brushed away some stones---then something odd happened, Ambril didn’t quite see exactly what he did but with a flick of his hand he began rolling up what appeared to be invisible carpet. It was transparent except for some glowing symbols which at his command twisted into a tight roll. Ambril’s heart froze as she saw the circular pattern of symbols surrounding Lance. She realized they looked eerily similar to the symbols she’d seen drawn on the ground at the site of the explosion.

“Oh my gosh, it’s a shadow summoning circle!” Ambril blurted out too loudly.

“It’s a what?” asked Sully.

But Ambril just put a finger to her lips as she had seen Bob turn his head when she had spoken. Had he heard her?

Fortunately Bob turned quickly back to his task. In just a few moments he had rolled the carpet of symbols up to within a few feet of Lance. He reached over and pull the boy to safety. Lance landed on the grass with a grunt and rolled around as if his shirt was ablaze all the time whimpering and wailing.

The pimply nosed kid, Jeb, came running up carrying a pail of steaming murky brown liquid.

“Where –do you --want this?” He puffed, out of breath.

Without a word Bob took the pail and emptied the entire contents over Lance’s head. There was a fizzing sound and a look of relief spread over Lance’s face.

“Come on, let’s get out of here!” Ambril tugged on Sully’s sleeve as she jumped down from the bench and turned toward back to the Gym.

“You three! Not so fast, I’ll need to talk with you. Didn’t you hear me say the playground wasn’t safe?” he asked sternly.

Riley limped up behind them just as Lance struggled to his feet. Lance said nothing, his face ghoulish with rage he pointed his finger at his skinny brother.

Bob grabbed Lance by the shoulder and tried to pull him back down on the grass. “Take it easy, Lance, your body just took quite a hit.”

I’m---peachy---just frigging peachy.” Lance said through clenched teeth as he stared angrily at his brother. But he said nothing more as he shrugged Bob off and began sloshing his way to the locker rooms.

Sully whispered “What no marshmallows?”

Ambril smiled as she realized that the brown liquid all over Lance was none other than warm chocolate milk. She hadn’t known it was so versatile.

The bottom of the ambulance grated against the pavement as it screamed onto the playground. Bob walked over to Lance, “Come on, you may feel fine but it’s best you’re checked out by a doctor.”

Lance sighed as he changed course and walked over to the ambulance. Looking resigned he let the efficient Medical Technicians busy themselves with machinery, poking and prodding him as they questioned him.

“You three come with me! Riley, where were you? Never mind, Jeb got it done, now get on to your next class.” Bob beckoned sternly to Ambril, Ygg and Sully, then marched them silently into the school. Just as the doors to the school swung shut behind them Ambril caught sight of a larger-than-average police officer heaving himself out of his car.

Bob bit his lip when he saw the police officer and ushered them hurriedly into his cramped office. There was one, abnormally large desk and three small chairs and no room for anything else. The walls were covered with pictures of smiling school teams, basketball, soccer, badmitten and something that involved pogo sticks and funny hats. Younger versions of Bob smiled out of every one.

With difficulty, Bob shut the door and nervously swept his nonexistent hair off his forehead as he wriggled behind his desk and waved them into chairs. There were only two so Ambril and Sully shared one while Ygg took the other.

Bob commanded tersely, “tell me what you saw out there.”

“Well,” Sully began, “We saw Lance jumping around as if he was being electrocuted.”

“Go on,” Bob folded his arms and tipped his chair back as far as it would go.

“Then,” Ygg continued, “you pulled him down on the grass and poured chocolate milk all over him. He got better right quick.” Ygg smiled slowly then added, “like magic.”

Bob glared at him for a long moment, “magic! Don’t be silly! Magic is NOT ALLOWED here,” he paused and studied the dirty tiles on the floor. “I thought you understood this Ygg, you should never accuse anyone of using magic in Trelawnyd. Magic users are thrown out of town at the very least, jailed at other times. But the villagers here have also been known to take matters into their own hands, beatings and curious---disappearances have been known to happen. Don’t use that word lightly.” He unconsciously pulled at the collar of his sweatshirt, “magic users are considered dangerous to the community.”

Bob took a deep breath and tried a more reasonable tone, “Perhaps what you saw is Lance stumbling into some sort of toxic substance and I pulled him out and---well everybody knows that chocolate milk is a fine nullifier, don’t’ they?” He looked hopefully over his glasses at the three children in front of him, and then his eyes narrowed. “Ambril I thought I heard you say something more---”

They were interrupted by a curt knock on the door. Bob looked as if he wanted to say much more but couldn’t. Then he reached over and opened the door. Outside was the hulking form of the long-and-extremely-fit arm of the law. He had a square jaw, very straight teeth and shiny, button-like eyes. He looked as if he’d just stepped from a comic strip. His elaborate sheriff’s badge glinted as he blinked at them.

“Deputy Sheriff Skarn,” Bob nodded.

“Hi ya Bob,” Ambril was startled by his high, squeaky and unheroic voice. It sounded odd coming from such a big guy, “this makes it easy,” he fingered the clipboard in his hands as he turned his flat, shiny eyes on them, “the Med Techs said the victim is well enough to return to class---after he showers. Are these the kids Lance said were acting suspicious?

“We were just curious, Sir,” Sully said respectfully then nudged Ambril as if to say, ‘don’t tell him anything’.

Skarn looked them over as if sizing them for a ball and chain, “let’s hear it then. Start from the beginning, what happened?”

Ambril looked at Ygg who gave her an almost imperceptible nod, “we were running around the field, kind of slowly. Just Riley was behind us. Lance had come around again on his second lap when it happened. He just started yelling and jumping around…and if you’re asking if we say anyone? We didn’t,” said Ambril in a rush.

“Where was Riley then?”

The three of them looked at each other.

“We didn’t see him until after Bob ran up,” Ygg said, “maybe he set himself down for awhile, he was limping.”

Deputy Sheriff Skarn concentrated on his notepad, his tongue listing to one side like a school boy trying his first letters, “right, clumsiest kid I’ve ever met. Then what happened?”

“Well---Bob ran up and told us all to get inside.” 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.

“---And Bob dumped it all over Lance…then--- you arrived.” Sully volunteered.

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

“We waren’t paying attention what with Lance doing his thing.” said Ygg with a shrug.

Deputy Skarn nodded as wisely as a live version of a cartoon character could. “Sounds like a prank,” he leaned heavily on the doorjamb. “Kids’ stuff,” he frowned when he looked hard at Bob. There were beads of sweat on Bob’s forehead as he nervously swiped his forehead again. But then Skarn shrugged, “it wouldn’t be the first time.”

After a few more questions followed by a lot more waiting for Skarn to laboriously getting everything down he straightened up, “I’ll look around the perimeter for any Perp’s who may still be lurking about before making my report,” he nodded at Bob before marching off down the hall, his highly polished shoes clicked efficiently on the linoleum.

“See you tomorrow Bob,” the three got up to go.

“Wait, not so fast, Ambril I want to know why you said---,” he stopped and cocked his ear toward the clicking noises coming back down the hall. There was another sharp rap on the door. Groaning, Bob reached over and opened it.

Deputy Sheriff Skarn stood there scratching his head, “just one more thing---”

Bob turned resignedly toward the three kids, “alright, you’re off the hook, go on you’re already late for lunch,” he pointed toward the door and let his eyebrows explore the top of his forehead. “It’s probably best this isn’t---discussed with other students, we don’t want to create any undue---excitement.”

“I keep myself to myself.” Ygg said pointing his chin at the Deputy and squaring his shoulders.

Sully and Ambril just nodded as they escaped to the hallway.

“That was beyond uncomfortable wasn’t it?” whispered Sully.

“Did you see that magic carpet with the glowing symbols? That’s what nearly turned Lance into a crispy critter,” Ambril whispered.

“The chocolate milk thing was weird---he called it the great nullifier but then told Skarn it was cleaning solution.” Sully whispered back.

“It looks as if Bob knows a thing or two about Magic.” Ygg had that funny smile on his faced again.

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

“I’ve no reason to make trouble for him.” Ygg shrugged as he veered off to the boy’s locker room.

Ambril and Sully 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 and a red light labeled ‘Alarm’ next to it, “what’s in there, nuclear waste?”

“That, believe it or not is the janitor’s closet,” said Sully with a grin, “there are all sorts of rumors about it because of---you know---the big silly sign.” Sully started counting them off on her fingers, “people going in and never coming out, weird noises, strange voices being heard---even rattling chains!” 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 lunch bag she knew her mother had been nowhere near it. Normally lunch was a squashed peanut butter and jelly sandwich, some wizened grapes and stale, store bought cookies. This lunch contained julienned carrots, a sandwich made with homemade bread, a shiny apple, and a large quantity of fresh baked cookies; all wrapped in red checked napkins. There was even a handwritten note, which said, “Enjoy your day Lovie!” Ambril couldn’t speak she was so happy. Her Mom had been right; having a housekeeper like Mrs. Sweetgum was outrageously great. She shared a cookie with Sully who rolled her eyes in ecstasy.

Ygg was sitting near them just staring out the window, the table empty in front of him. Not that she’d been keeping track but Ambril hadn’t seen him eat anything. She looked down at her last two cookies. She was pretty full. She made a quick decision and gathering them up she walked over to his table.

“Here, take my cookies, I can’t finish them,” she slid them onto the table.

His face lit up briefly but then frowned, “I’m not hungry, but thanks,” he turned slightly away but he couldn’t get his eyes to obey. Instead they did their best to burn a hole through the red checkered napkin. She’d been right, he was really hungry, but wouldn’t admit it. He wanted the cookies more than anything. Had Mrs. Twid forgotten to make him a lunch? Ygg gave her a sideways glance. “Are ya sure you’re nought hungry? I do not want to take something that’s needed.”

Ambril patted her tummy, “I’m stuffed, go ahead!” she shoved the cookies right under his nose.

Ygg couldn’t help himself. He picked up two cookies and inhaled them so fast that Ambril became afraid they’d let the ambulance go too soon. After a few hefty pats on the back, Ygg seemed to be fine.

Ambril was turning back to pick up her lunch things when Lance swaggered in with his buddies wearing his black eye like a badge of honor. In no time he was jeering at a group of skinny boys who were constructing something out of tin foil and tooth picks. He picked up their project and grinned at them as he crunched it in his hand. Ambril hated to see how quickly they picked up their scraps and fled. Zane came in then, slid on a bench and looked away.

After tossing the ruined project at one of his pals Lance turned to leer at a curly haired girl walking by. Ambril recognized her from Betula’s Sweet Shoppe.

“It’s lovely Lola! Hi sweetie!” Lance leered at her with his one good eye. Do you wanna come by my Dad’s shop later? I can getcha some make up and stuff for free.”

Lola took a long look at his black eye and sniffed, “it looks like you’re the one who needs the make up. What did you do? Trip over one of your victims?” She dropped her trash into the bin and flicked her hair as she flounced out of the lunchroom. Ambril happened to catch Zane smile as he watched Lola walk down the stairs with her friends.

Ambril and Sully left the lunchroom and started down the hallway toward the playground they had made it to the entry hall when Sully turned to Ambril and said, “Lola really gave it to him didn’t she?” but Ambril wasn’t there. Ambril had stopped dead in the middle of the hallway three steps back and looked as if she’d seen a ghost. “What’s wrong? You look like you just found out your brother had sprouted antlers in an embarrassing places.”

Kids shoved past them, jostled them both but Ambril hardly noticed, her eyes remained riveted on the janitor’s closet. The security light flashed a few moments then glowed a steady red. Did she really see that? She couldn’t have… she shook her head hard willing the last few moments to rewind and replay differently. Because moments before there had been a drawing of the Dullaith tacked above the janitor’s closet. But what had really stopped her cold was seeing who had reached up and crumpled it in his hand before swiftly rounding the corner…it had been Feldez. Even from behind she had recognized his well tailored suit and perfect hair. 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 and yelling in her ear.

“We have to get out of the way!” Sully towed her out of the onslaught of kids and safely off to the side.

“O.K., you’re freaking me out, we almost died out there, you can’t stand in the way of kids and the playground without paying for it somehow,” Sully ruefully inspected a new bruise on her arm, “what’s wrong?”

“I think I just saw my future stepfather coming out of the janitor’s closet. Didn’t you just say no one was allowed in there?”

Sully looked at her curiously, “well---the janitor uses it I guess so it’s not completely off limits,” she stared hard at Ambril’s face. Let’s go outside, fresh air and all that.”

“Just give me a sec.”Ambril reached out for the closet door knob but Sully pulled her back.

“Watch it! That alarm is REALLY sensitive, the cops hauled two sixth graders off last year after their science project crashed into the door.” Sully stared meaningfully at her, “it was just a paper airplane.” Sully bent over suddenly and squinted at the lock, “that’s weird, can you see that? I think someone really did try to break in, see?” she pointed to some scratches around the lock. “I lost the key to my diary once and had to pick the lock. It still has scratches on it like those. These are recent too---see how shiny they are?”

Ambril nodded but only for affect. The reality was she didn’t get any of it. What was behind that door? Feldez wouldn’t risk his reputation by breaking into just a janitor’s closet in broad daylight. Maybe some of the rumors were true. She grimaced in annoyance as she thought about the drawing of the Dullaith she’d seen hanging above it. What was his connection with it? Had he been involved in the explosion? She sighed, she was getting nowhere except more confused.

# Chapter 18 History with Ms. Breccia

“Keep your head down, don’t look her in the eye and…brace yourself.” Sully advised as they slid into the back row of Ambril’s History class. Sully ducked behind the pudgy kid sitting in front of her and made herself as small as possible.

“ORDER please!” the teacher yelled bullishly, dwarfing her desk as she scribbled away at something. Ms. Breccia was a large, cubic woman, with helmet shaped hair and bright red lipstick to match her shiny, square fingernails. Her rough voice had a bite to it as she bellowed, “I’m so excited about today’s lecture that I’m postponing roll call. History waits for no man or woman, it flows on and on.” she rose, raised a hand and affected a dramatic pose but 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 sonorously as her small eyes darted around the room. When they found Ambril her eyebrows went up slightly. “We shall discuss the well-documented, TRUE history of our town,” then added condescendingly, “and then delve into the fanciful but highly inaccurate tales you’ve, no doubt, heard around the campfire.”

“This valley was first settled over 150 years ago by disgruntled gold miners anxious to start a new life.” She paced bearishly back and forth in front of the class her shoes making flabby, flapping noises. “Unsuccessful in the gold fields up north they brought their families down by horse and wagon to this valley, cleared the fields and built their homes around the circular plaza in the center of town. 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 a marshy area and was abandoned soon after it was built after swamp fever broke out.” She waved her hand brutishly toward a largely unpopulated area. “Old Town was pulled down when the townspeople moved to our current location. It has enjoyed growth and prosperity ever since.” She turned away from the map and smiled at the class. “Does anyone know the names of the original four families?”

A skinny girl with braces raised her hand and recited, “Tylwith, Silva, Derwyn and Anamalfia.”

“Correct,” Ms Breccia preened in front of the class, “my family, the family of Breccia came soon after, we are 9th family, there are only 25 founding families.” She raised her considerable frame to its full height and looked over their heads, “yes, my forefathers built this town, WITH THEIR OWN HANDS---tilled the soil, and worked, really WORKED!” Her voice filled the room as she 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? Who has 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 but quickly rallied. “I mean who comes from pure, unsullied stock? A direct lineage and no ‘New Family’ blood?”

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 Four Families,” now there were only three hands raised, one of them was Ambril’s of course. 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 guiltily. 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 snapped her gum and looked bored. “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? Like your friend there---Suddy---are you not one of the New Families?”

Breccia’s tone and the way she seemed to be making fun of her friend made Ambril lose her cool, “my friend’s name is Sully. My name is Ambril Derwyn,” Ambril couldn’t stop herself from adding, “though I’m not sure it should make a difference to anyone.”

Ms. Breccia stopped in her tracks and glared at her, speechless at being contested in her own classroom. “A Derwyn---are you sure?”

It was Ambril’s turn to glare back, shouldn’t she know her own name? “My Mom’s last name is Derwyn and my father’s name…was Silva.”

Ms. Breccia’s eyebrows lifted in recognition, “well, well, I see!” she said her voice dangerously quiet. “I guess good breeding doesn’t guarantee mannerly behavior.” Then Breccia bent at her, Ambril could almost feel the heat of her anger, even over four rows of kids. She knew right then that she could kiss a good report card goodbye. Ms. Breccia looked as if she held Ambril personally responsible for all the World’s Wars---every one of them.

After a very long moment Ms. Breccia cleared her throat and strode back to the writing board, “now for the more colorful account of our town’s beginning. 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, “on broomsticks maybe!” More laughter erupted.

“The old legends aren’t---err---specific about their mode of travel,” chortled Ms. Breccia. “The four families 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 were fairies,” she pointed briefly at Ambril, “and the Derwyn’s were magic wielders.” The class turned around and stared at her.

Lance guffawed, “can you work a little magic now and make yourself disappear? We’d appreciate it.”

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

“The illustrious families of Animalfia supposedly were Shape Changers,” chortled Ms. Breccia, “beings who could change into animals on a whim! There are also stories tell of how some would---poof! Transform into animals right on the street. One minute your neighbor is discussing the price of cheese with you and the next he’s a mouse running around underfoot!”

Nearly everyone was laughing hard but not everyone. Ambril noticed there were some who looked downright uncomfortable. Ambril thought it wasn’t a stretch to imagine Breccia as a nice grizzly bear---well maybe not so nice.

Ms. Breccia stretched her arms wide. “I’ve saved the best for last! “she cried. “The family of Silva is said to be Earth-kind,” Ms. Breccia again giggled as she enumerated on her fingers, “meaning Trolls, Gnomes and Dwarfs!” Ms. Breccia’s laugh was harsh, “my what a family tree you have, Ambril! You’re young yet, I’m sure it won’t be long before you develop some of the more obvious Silva traits---hunched back, projecting jaw, perhaps their tendency to grunt.”

Lance started stomping on the floor and making guttural noises, “this is how Silva’s order lunch!” he sneered at Ambril. Some of his pals joined in and soon the classroom rattled with grunts, stomps and jeers.

Ambril kept her eyes on Ms. Breccia but it was hard. She could feel her face flush hot with embarrassment. She hated having her Dad’s family belittled like this. She had to shove her feet under her seat when her left foot began to quiver. Slowly the class got itself together but there were occasional grunts and stomps throughout the period.

“Now, now, class, Let’s have your essays, ‘My family and Trelawnyd’.

Sully looked stricken and raised her hand, “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?”

Ms. Breccia frowned then rolled her eyes disgustedly, “but the fire occurred Saturday! You had all of yesterday to redo it. You mean to say that you have nothing, nothing at all?” Ms. Breccia’s glare burrowed down the rows of desks. “What a flimsy excuse! Even ‘New Family’ must learn to be responsible,” she drew herself up to her true Amazonian proportions, “zero on your essay and,” she spiked the air with her index finger, “detention.” She swept her arm in a grand gesture and pointed to the door, “any other slackers here today?” she began to prowl between the desks as she randomly pointed an accusing finger at their occupants. “Did a dog eat your essay? Did it burn up in a silly little fire?”

Ygg raised his hand, his head down. Ms. Breccia frowned at him and jerked her head toward the door, then her eyes narrowed to slits when she saw Ambril’s hand in the air. “Naturally I can’t expect an essay from you today as you are new,” she said with a disappointed grimace, “though a detention may be in order considering your rudeness earlier,” she paused to consider this, “yes, why not? A detention for you as well.”

The three scrambled to gather their stuff. Ambril couldn’t believe her good luck, she had managed to get out of listening to Ms. Breccia and she got to hang with her new friends. Just as they headed out the door Ms. Breccia turned slowly as a small, evil smile formed on her face.

“I shall also expect a three page essay from all of you on the founding of Trelawnyd, due Friday,” as the door closed Ambril heard her say, “Lance, wherever has your brother gotten to? He’s usually the first to get a detention.”

“Whew! I’m glad we’re out of there,” said Sully. “Breccia is such a toad, I’ve learned more history reading out here in the hallway than sitting in her class.”

“Is she always that bad?” asked Ambril struggling to zip up her backpack as they walked up the corridor.

“That be her good side today,” said Ygg, “Riley wasn’t there. He usually takes the brunt of whatever she be dishing up.” He stopped midway down the hall. “Let’s set down here, if’n we go any farther we’ll get a citation for bein’ out a class without a note.” He threw his backpack down near a bank of lockers. “In case you’re wondering, 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 and a Derwyn,” Ygg looked sideways at Ambril.

Ambril noticed his hands were big and square like Ms. Breccia’s though they looked like they belonged on Ygg, she nodded.

“I’m a Silva too, as well as a Drasil,” he put up his hand and stage whispered, “number seven,” then smiled.

“You should have said something to her, you know,” said Sully playing with her shoelaces, “it might make things easier on you if she knows you’re not a New Family like I am.”

“Well my connections aren’t doing me any good!” Ambril shrugged.

Ygg’s smile became smaller, “Ms. Breccia isna’ ever going to warm to me.” He said softly. “There be a part of me that’s too close to her, a part she daren’t own up to.” He shook his head slowly, “nay, best to just stay quiet and stick it out.”

Ambril watched his shoulders tighten. It seemed to be his ‘go to’ solution and she wondered about what his life was like; having Mrs. Twid as a relative was pretty harsh. As she thought about what it would be like to eat dinner across from Mrs. Twid, she heard a curious thud then a muffled groan from nearby. The three looked around but saw nothing unusual. The thuds came again and then another louder groan.

“It sounds like that creature from the black lagoon.” Sully scrambled to her feet. “It’s coming from one of the lockers, I think.” She knocked on lockers until on the ninth knock there came an answering thud from one.

Sully struggled to open it, “I think it’s jammed.”

There was an unearthly groan.

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

“Here, let me be giving it a try,” Ygg looked at it carefully, “right, it’s jammed.” He raised his fist 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 with 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 guys, it was getting hard to breathe in there.” He took another deep breath as Sully tore off the duct tape from his wrists.

“I be guessing your brother did this,” said Ygg.

Riley nodded, “still angry about last night.”

“But he started the food fight!” Sully exclaimed.

“And why would that matter? We are talking about my brother right?” Riley 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 better.”

Ambril was so angry she thought she could feel her hair spark. “You can’t let your brother do this to you, Riley!”

Riley looked at her in surprise. “What am I supposed to do? Everyone’s on his side,” he bent down and fished out his backpack from under a crumpled science test. “The golden boy---good at sports, good with his hands---and he has a half the school following him around like dogs. My Dad won’t hear a word against him.” He sighed as he brushed off his pack and let his hair fall down over his face. Then his voice changed, it sounded more determined. “But it won’t be forever, I have plans. One day soon, I’ll get him back so-oo good---and then he’ll have to stop picking on me.”

As he raised his head Ambril caught the anger searing his face before he replaced it with a smile. She wondered how long he’d been keeping all that anger inside.

Ygg grimaced at the trash, “this mess will be getting us another detention if’n we don’t clean it up right quick.”

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.

Riley started backing down the hall, “I’d better get out of here, while I can,” then he turned and quickly walked out the front door. They watched him limp off down the street.

“Okay, so life could be much, much worse,” mused Sully. “We could be living Riley’s life.”

“If’n he would just stand up to the great lump once in a while, it wouldna’ be 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 held in her hand a drawing of a Dullaith. Ambril smoothed it out. She hadn’t been imagining anything. Feldez must have tossed it in the trash on his way out the door. It appeared to be on ordinary printer paper. The top was slightly torn.

“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 a stream of desperate students, “AGAIN!”

Ambril showed her the drawing, “this is what I was talking about, it’s a drawing of a Dullaith. I’m sure it’s the one I saw tacked on the door of the janitor’s closet, see how it’s ripped at the top?”

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

Ambril pointed to the trashcan. “Feldez must have tossed it in there right after he left the janitor’s closet then Lance emptied the trashcan into the locker with Riley!” Then Ambril noticed something written on the bottom of the page, she’d seen the same thing on Feldez’s computer. “What do you think this means? 10-1 12:00 Bring Glain or Die?”

“Sounds like a threat to me… 10-1 12:00 could mean October first at noon I guess. That would have been today at lunch.”

“About the time I saw Feldez leaving the janitor’s closet!” Ambril exclaimed.

But instead of getting excited about this Sully just cocked her head at Ambril, “are you sure you want to make trouble for your future stepfather? It’s O.K. with me if you want to ignore your own family politics but he’s a big wig in this town. Feldez is on all the committees that promote peace and harmony yada-yada; in fact most of the town thinks he’s a God.”

“Well if you don’t believe me I’m sure no one else will,” said Ambril feeling subdued as she shoved the drawing into her backpack.

“No, I didn’t mean that I didn’t believe you,” said Sully, “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.”

Ambril had to smile at that. Somehow it made it O.K. that Sully believed her then she looked at her friend appraisingly. But would she believe her when she heard the whole story? Even Ambril had to admit it sounded pretty strange.

The hallway was beginning to clear out. Sully still stood there watching her closely, her arms folded. “This isn’t fair, you’re holding out on 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. But she couldn’t tell her right here in the hallway so she just shrugged.

“I guess that means No,” Sully sighed then shook her head, “forget it for now, let’s ride over and explore the old haunted mansion I told you about…but I have to warn you, it’s pretty scary,” Sully smiled.

Ambril smiled back, “Creature in the Black Lagoon scary?”

“Even worse.”

“I’ll race you to the bikes!”

# 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, grab her Ashera, some snacks, and at the last minute her robot, fLit before flying out the door. The afternoon was at it’s warmest, late blooming flowers stretched themselves toward the sun as she breezed by. Flit disentangled himself from the backpack and stuck his head out of the basket, his head slowly revolving. Up ahead, Ambril could see a boy on a bike talking to an elderly woman. Ambril recognized Ygg by his too small shirt and his too baggy pants.

Ygg looked up just as she pedaling past them, “hey Ambril!”

Ambril skidded to a stop,“what’s up?”

“We were just talking about you, Miss Fern, this is Ambril.”

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

“Really? Um that’s n---nice,” she stuttered, embarrassed and then looked around to see if she remembered anything.

It was a garden like no other. This was a gardener’s garden with not a weed in sight. Every bush and tree was radiant with life. Flowers bloomed everywhere, even those not in season…but there was one odd thing Ambril noticed right away. An army of garden gnomes stood, sat and lounged, taking up almost every bit of available space. They all had red hats, long white beards, green tunics and green boots with toes that turned up slightly. They were unnervingly life-like as if they’d simply been frozen mid-conversation. Ambril jumped when she found one peering up at her through the picket fence.

There was one gnome who was different. Larger than the others he was taking a snooze under a bench with one eye open. He seemed to be looking right at Ambril. He had a ratty, dirty beard, a green cap and shiny black boots. The stump of a corncob pipe stuck from his mouth. Ambril smiled.

“They remember you.” Miss Fern nodded vaguely at the nearest ceramic figurine as she struggled to lift a large watering can. Ambril decided Miss Fern must be like a neighbor they once had who would discuss politics with dust bunnies under the sofa when she visited.

Miss Fern tipped the watering can forward and let a foul smelling, green slush slop out of it. “I’ll make sure Daisy gets your delivery Ygg, she swears by that Sunset Tea…I can’t see why.”

Ambril wrinkled her nose and leaned away as the wind blew the stink of the slush her way.

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

Ygg said in a strangled voice, “I best be off,” he held his breath as he waved then hastily pedaled off. Ambril did the same.

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

“I don’t rightly know. The package just says, ‘Koda’s house’ do you know where that might be?”asked Ygg.

Ambril nodded proudly, “I do, it’s about the only place I do know how to get to---so follow me,” said Ambril.

Ambril stood up on her pedals and off they went. They found the Main Road and turned toward the forest. The farms were slowly giving way to forest when Koda suddenly glided up alongside them looking like he’d like to murder somebody. He was riding Rosebud who turned her flowerhead away when she saw it was Ambril.

Ambril kept her distance, “we were on our way to your house to deliver something.” They slowed to a stop and waited as Ygg groped around in his messenger bag and pulled out a small package.

Koda grunted when he saw the Sunset Tea label, “so this is what everyone’s talking about,” he said to himself then tossed it into Rosebud’s basket. Ygg’s eyes widened when she sneezed.

Then without a word Koda rode off, the gravel crackling under Rosebud’s tires.

“He be an angry one, what’s with the flowers?” Ygg squinted as he watched Koda pick up speed.

“It’s a long story,” said Ambril, “hey, why don’t you come and explore the haunted old house with Sully and I? It’s supposed to be really spooky.”

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

“I have cookies!” said Ambril, “and sandwiches.”

Ygg’s eyebrows shot up eagerly, “I’ll come for a wee bit.”

“Good, now you can help me, where’s Sully’s house?” asked Ambril.

Ygg gave her a demonic grin as he pushed down hard on his pedal and whizzed past her, “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 roadside stand. Ambril could see they had removed the burned parts already. New wood lay neatly stacked nearby. No signs of the shadow circle remained.  
Such a waste that was,” muttered Ygg.

An image flashed in Ambril’s mind, a boy giving a tear-stained girl her cat.

“I remember you there! You were the one who saved Sully’s cat!” Ambril exclaimed. “It was really awful for Sully…did you see anything---weird that night?” she asked as they started down a gravel road.

“Weird? The whole thing was weird,” snorted Ygg as they veered around a bend in the road, “I be on me way home from a 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 firefighters,” Ambril said just barely avoiding a big pothole. She was disappointed, she had hoped he might have seen who had called up the Dullaith. But it sounded as if he hadn’t even seen the monster.

“Yep, but I think Riley was there earlier, he be the one who called 911.”

Ambril wondered about what Riley knew as they rounded a red barn and pulled up in front of a ranch house. There were even 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.

“Sully don’t forget your jacket, just in case it rains!” an Asian woman swathed in an oversized apron, wielding 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 greenery which must have belonged to aliens because there were all sorts of odd-looking plants Ambril had never seen before. Worse, the plants had gone wild, growing helter-skelter, rumbly poly; they eagerly clambered over each other and onto the path. Ambril had to duck more than once to avoid the trailing and sometimes ferocious looking plants. Ambril could have sworn one of them snapped at her as she rode by.

They soon broke out into a clearing making its last stand around a couple of abandoned buildings. A large stone mansion stood aloof between a dilapidated old garage and a crooked gazebo nearly consumed by vines. It was enchanting---but there was something else about it that Ambril couldn’t put her finger on. The mansion had three stories with a series of chimney pots lined up on both its ends and lots of boarded up windows. A wide, inviting porch ran circles around it. It looked like it hadn’t been lived in for a very long time but had weathered the lonely years well. The garage leaned companionably off to one side with one door swinging crazily on one hinge.

“This way,” in a businesslike way, Sully led them to where a board had been pulled off a window. Inside it was dark and smelled of musty socks and moldy potatoes but the three of them wiggled inside anyway. In the light coming through the cracks between the boards Ambril could see it had once been a great house. Birds flew out of a large stone fireplace as they began to explore.

“Someone 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 and trash piled in every corner.

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

They all listened for a moment, holding their breath, but the house was still and quiet. Ygg was the first to let his breathe out in a rush.

Ambril’s eyes were now accustomed to the half light and could make out a carved banister swirling around wide steps to the upper floors. The ceiling was high with windows lining one wall. Around the corner they found a kitchen colonized by rabbits who bolted through Ambril’s legs when she opened a cabinet. It startled her and she fell back hitting something hard as she landed in a pile of trash.

“Oof!” She groused as she rubbed her bottom and pulled out an iron plaque.

“It looks like a shield or something!” exclaimed Sully.

It was true. Ambril leaned it against a chair leg and rubbed it hard with her sleeve. There was a large circle with a tree in the center of it. The top half was missing as a jagged rough edge cut into it.

“It’s not a shield, its made of iron---too heavy,” said Ygg examining it.

“When did you become an arms expert?” asked Sully.

“Nought arms, I be---interested in metal working.” Ygg held it up to the light. “That be someone’s family crest.”

They looked at it a few moments longer then Sully said, “let’s try upstairs!”

They raced up the stone steps. But Ambril slowed near the top, feeling suddenly odd. “I’m getting a weird feeling about this place.”

“What like something’s about to pop out of a closet or something?” Sully slowed to match Ambril’s pace, “isn’t it great?”

“No more like---I’ve---been here before,” when they reached the second floor she pointed to a door on the left, “Like I know this room had a white fluffy bed in it and the bathroom here,” she pointed to a door on the right, “has green tile.”

Sully peered into the door on the left, “Yep, there’s green tile in here.”

Ambril hugged herself as she walked dazedly down the hall and pointed to another door on the right. “This room was spooky because it had a creaky floor.” Ambril continued walking until she stopped in front of a door at the end.

“You’re as white as my Mom’s favorite onions! Take a deep breathe, I bet the monsters only come out at night.” Sully pushed the door open too hard as she entered the room, it hit the wall and bounced back. As Sully swiveled at the noise she stopped and stared at something behind the door, the smile instantly leaving her face. “That’s weird,” Sully hunched down, “you need to see this.”

In her mind Ambril could see herself reaching up and pushing the door open. The room was vivid in her mind. There were clouds painted on the wall, a pink dresser under the window---with pictures of a happy family on top. She suddenly knew why the house had felt so strange to her---so familiar. But it didn’t make any sense…

Ambril took a deep breath and walked into her old room, the room her Dad had painted for her…clouds, a happy sun, a blue ceiling. Sully motioned her over and pointed to a section of the wall where there were tick marks where a child’s growth had been measured. “No wonder this place looks familiar to you.” Sully pointed to the top. There was a name scrawled in a child’s writing.

“Ambril,” seeing her name on the wall made it impossible to ignore. This had been her family’s home. She stumbled but steadied herself by grabbing the door. It seemed like everywhere she turned in this town, pieces of her past kept coming at her. She knelt down again for a closer look. The ages went from one years old and ended at three years.

“I didn’t know your family was rich.” Sully carefully brushed away a cobweb hanging from the door.

“We’re not---some of the apartments we had in San Francisco would have made a rat cringe,” Ambril straightened up quickly, hoping Sully wouldn’t ask any more questions. It would only add to the mountain of unanswered questions she had already.

Ygg came in carrying the old piece of metal Ambril had fallen on. “I found the broken piece in the fireplace. “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.

Ambril swayed a little, overwhelmed. Why hadn’t her Mom told her?

“Maybe it’s time we explored the garden,” Sully was watching her closely.

“Yeah, I’m starved” Ygg said.

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

“They be the very best cookies,” Ygg said defensively as he followed them out the door.

They went down the stairs and wriggled back through the window, being out in the sunshine made Ambril feel much better. They made their way over to a gazebo crowning a hill, though it wobbled to one side it straightened itself out near the top and let its curly spire streak up into the sky. Vines curled around the stone pillars and blanketed the top. To the side of it, the Trelawnyd Wall slid around the garden hugging a brilliant blue-green lake before lunging back into the forest.

“I brought lemonade,” said Sully as they raced up the stairs. The air hummed with insects as sat down on the curved stone benches ringing the gazebo’s edge and looked up through the vines. Sully handed around lemonade and Ambril spread out sandwiches, cookies and mammoth red grapes on red checked napkins.

“So, this be your family’s place then?” Ygg said munching on his second sandwich.

“I guess so, but my Mom never told me about it. I probably would never had known if we hadn’t walked around in there.” Ambril busied herself with restacking the cookies. Ygg had already made quite a dent in them. “It’s kind of hard to get my mind around it. It was---really hard sometimes in San Francisco… and here we had this huge house---waiting for us all that time.”

“It’s an old place and 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 not wanting to talk about it anymore. They ate in silence for a while.

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 none of these plants look familiar.” She pointed with a carrot stick to a plant which seemed to have feathers instead of leaves and then another which looked like some sort of green tie rack. They spent a few minutes looking out over the greenery and at the lake.

They had eaten almost all the food when Ambril’s backpack unzipped itself and fLit appeared dragging her Ashera behind him. Ambril lunged at him, grabbed the Ashera, and tried to stuff it back in her pack before the others spotted it. “This is fLit, my robot, he’s supposed to be getting smarter,” she said over her shoulder.

“What’s that thing you’re trying to hide from us?” asked Sully.

“What this?” Ambril asked as nonchalantly as she could, “it’s just an old puzzle box that belonged to my Great Grandmother,” the robot gave Ambril an injured look as it put its steel hands on its hips.

“That’s some robot,” commented Sully.

“That nought be some old thing of your Great Gran’s, but a real spanking Ashera!” Ygg nodded emphatically 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 one?” asked Ygg.

Ambril stared mulishly at him.

Ygg chewed thoughtfully, “where I come from those that be precious,” he said nodding to her pack again, “they nought be something you let your robot play with.”

“O.K. SO WHAT’S AN ASHERA?” asked Sully again impatiently.

“I wasn’t showing off!” sputtered Ambril, “the stupid robot dragged it out, not me! Look, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about it,” Ambril pulled her backpack to her protectively as she sat back on her bench wracking her brains for some way to change the subject.

After a long pause Ygg said “So, you don’t 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 glared through the vines.

“Maybe you be thinking we might run away scared or laugh at you?” Ygg snorted, “you be kidding, right? I’m be an outsider with no family here…I be nought one to judge you.”

Silence hung between them like a day’s wash left out in the rain.

Ambril stole a glance first at Ygg then at Sully.

“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?”

“O.K. I’ll tell you,” Ambril slowly unzipped her backpack and removed her Ashera, “but you have to swear not to tell anyone else,” she added hesitantly, “and you can’t laugh---no matter what.” Ambril sighed as she wondered at what point they were going to run away screaming.

Sully and Ygg both nodded solemnly, but then Ygg smirked. “I canna promise not to laugh at the funny parts,” then he added more seriously, “but I will nought laugh *AT* you, that I promise.”

At that Ambril took a deep breath and told them. She started with getting hit on the head with the Ashera. Ygg did chuckle at that. Then she moved on to finding the medallion and pulled it out for them to see. Sully seemed mesmerized by the intricate details of the Ashera and the sparkling stone on her medallion. Then she told them about the explosion in the forest and the Dullaith. Both Sully and Ygg were on the edge of their seats during that part.

Sully was outraged they had chosen to bring the monster to life behind her family’s stand, “couldn’t they have found a nice dung heap or something---why there?”

Ambril tried to describe Hendoeth and Fowlclun and the talking household items 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 pulled out the Dullaith drawing.

“Now you see why I’d like to get into the janitor’s closet,” Ambril said as she smoothed out the drawing on her thigh.

Sully wagged her head, “that room has more stories built around it than downtown Manhattan. It’s probably just a janitor’s closet filled with mops, brushes, and loads of cancer causing cleaning solutions.”

Ygg had been quiet, staring at Ambril’s medallion, “so that be the Ledrith Glain, it’s famous in Chert, where I come from. I dunna understand---Chert is just a mining village but we be using magic every day---life is easier that way. Trelawnyd be having a long history of magic. The four families came here when it wasna even California yet and yet magic be nought used much here.”

Ygg peered again at the medallion. “That holds fairy power. It’s sacred to the Tilwith Teg, the fairy kin. It’s a right beauty, the carvings be 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?” asked Sully.

Ygg put his head down and muttered something.

“Come on, cough up the goods, Ambril did it, so can you.” Sully cocked her head at him.

“So where’s Chert?” Ambril asked taking a bite of cookie, glad the spot light had moved away from her.

“Far up in the mountains,” Ygg said as he took a 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? This is America, everyone has to finish school!” Ambril said.

“the schools there are nought like here,” Ygg mumbled. “And I be nought sure if’n we are part of America truth be told…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 14, you be tested for magic. They tested me and I…” he hesitated for a moment…I failed.” He bent his head, so that Ambril could not see his face. “Now the mines, them are nought nice places.” He shook his head. “Though there warn’t any smoke nor fire down there it be mighty hot and hard to breathe. Miners stay down for hours and hours. Me Da and brothers all went down the mines and became old men over night.” He carefully brushed a purple striped bug from his sleeve, “I didna believe that that was all I was good for. I decided that there be a better way to live, somewhere, some-how. I wouldna go down the mines,” his face hardened as if remembering something painful, “me Mam agreed with me, so I took me pack and I left.”

Ambril was impressed. To leave his home and go out into the world all alone took a lot of strength and courage.

“Mrs. Twid, she be doin this as a favor for me Mam as they be kin. I stay in her extra room and work for her,” Ygg fiddled with his collar.

Ambril thought that living with Mrs. Twid took even more strength and courage.

“So tell us more about the magic stuff you do in your town.” Sully asked eagerly. “Did you do your chores with it or make chocolate ice cream appear?”

“We practice Earth-kind magic mostly, like floating or casting for the Glain, “ he nodded toward Ambril’s medallion, “Glain’s what that be made of.” Once it be found, the miners bring it up.”

Ambril had seen miners trapped underground on the news, “do you use magic to rescue people?”

Ygg’s face went hard and cold. “Not in Chert, if’n there be a cave-in, they just dig another way.” Ygg had a far away look in his eyes, remembering something painful. “They focus everything on getting the Glain, as much as they can, as quick as they can,” Ygg shifted uncomfortably.

There was a stunned silence.

“I can see why you left,” said Sully nodding her head.

Ygg screwed up his face, “still it is me home, I do miss it terrible, especially me Mam.” He looked at Ambril’s medallion hungrily, “that be worth a pretty penny in my neck of the woods. There be no more Glain of that heft to be found, mainly just grains of it buried deep.”

“So you must know something about magic---can you teach us?” beamed Sully excitedly.

Ygg looked startled and then laughed nervously, “me? What makes you think I be knowing anything about magic?”

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

“I failed the magic tests remember?” said Ygg.

Sully looked thoughtful. “There has to be some way of doing it…I know! We’ll go to the library…they must have something…I don’t care what you say Ygg, at least you know something about magic…and we have Ambril’s Ashera thingy…”

“We could get ourselves in a lot of trouble! Magic be powerful stuff.” Ygg exclaimed.

Sully shrugged, “we’ll start small---and work our way into trouble.”

Ambril stole looks at her new friends. Despite telling them about weird monster that almost ate her and all the stuff about her Dad neither of them showed any sign of high tailing it out of there. She liked the idea of playing around with magic. A little dangerous maybe, but it would be interesting.

Ygg caught her looking, “bet you’re thinking you’d like to move back to the big city for some peace and quiet,” 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.

**Chapter The Dogs of Hell come for Tea**

The next few weeks went by quickly for Ambril as she settled in to a routine of school and hanging out with Sully. Ygg joined them when he could and they’d talk about Magic and fiddle with the Ashera. But either the Ashera didn’t seem to be interested in helping them or they were going about it wrong. It remained unresponsive.

Ambril’s robot, fLit though was…too responsive. He was always getting in their way, falling into stuff and needing to be rescued. He even refused to switch off even when Ambril pressed the ‘Off’ button twice. She had tried to leave him at home but somehow he’d find a way into her backpack. Ambril considered trading him in to the junk man but couldn’t. It had been a gift from Chao Feng.

“You’re coming with me to the Harvest Festival right?” Ambril asked as they walked up to the Gazebo after school.

“Yeah---that is if you want.” Sully sounded hesitant. “My Mom insists on making my costume for me…last year---I was a tomato, the year before a bunch of celery. You get the picture, right?”

Ambril grinned. “My Mom’s been really busy helping Betula get her booth ready, she hasn’t even thought about my costume. I may have to go as a lame ghost or something. You know, an old tablecloth with cut outs for eyes.”

Sully’s face lit up. “Can you bring two ghost costumes? That way---if it’s really bad I can just throw a tablecloth over it!”

Ambril’s grinned as she nodded, two lame ghosts were better than one.

They spread out their snacks on a blanket in the sun to gain as much warmth from the October sun as they could. Her medallion spilled out into the sunshine as she bent over and sprinkled their feast with rainbows.

“Any of Sweetgum’s sandwiches in there? I’m starving.” Ygg bounded up the steps two at a time his bike lay on its side the wheels still turning.

“She made four this time, she must have known you were coming.”

“Four huh? That means three for you and Ambril and I’ll share one, right?” Sully smirked at him.

Ygg had his mouth full already so just gave her a dirty look. They ate in silence for a while. It had rained for the first time in several months and the grounds smelled fresh and clean. A faint image of a full moon rode high in the sky. Ambril cocked her ear---there was a new sound coming from nearby.

“Do you hear that humming sound?”

Ygg and Sully looked at her and shrugged. “Nope.”

Suddenly her backpack unzipped and fLit emerged carrying her Ashera. Before she could react he dropkicked it toward the lake. Luckily it hit one of the vine wrapped columns and rolled back toward her.

“Knock it off! That’s my Ashera not a football!” Ambril yelled as she scooped it up and looked daggers at the shiny red metal man. But then she stopped and looked at the wooden cylinder in her hand. It was humming. She felt its energy run up her arm.

Sully and Ygg were beside her in a second.

“What did you do?” Ygg asked.

“Nothing. Not a thing I swear.”

“What are those? Have they always been there?” Sully pointed at the top of the cylinder.

For the first time Ambril noticed some images had begun to glow and rotate slowly around the rim. There was an image of a gryphon, a bird, a dragon, a flower and a three-headed dog.

That’s the Cerberus, you know the Hounds of Hell? “What are they doing on your Ashera?” Sully scratched her head.

Ygg held his hand up to his eyes. “Do you mind putting the Glain away, it be a bit too dazzling.”

Ambril looked down and found she’d forgotten to put her medallion away. “Sorry.” she scooped it up and dropped it under her shirt. Instantly the Ashera stopped humming and the images went dark.

“Bring that out again.” Sully said insistently.

The moment the Ledrith Glain came out in the light the Ashera began to glow and hum again. Ambril tried putting it away and bringing it out again; every time the medallion came out into the light the Ashera started humming.

“Hendoeth said there was a connection between them. That the Ledrith Glain stored energy and that you could transfer it to the Ashera,” Ambril said excitedly.

Ygg eyed the Ashera, “why now? If’n you can’t control it, it nought be of use.”

Sully was now squinting up at the sky, “maybe it’s because of the full moon? ”

They were getting nowhere. Ambril closed her eyes to concentrate. And just like that everything changed. A curtain of fog rushed in and the world stood still and silent. Ygg and Sully disappeared in the fog. Ambril soon was alone…in the silence and the gray…slowly though she became aware that others were nearby, possibly human but maybe not; present with her in that place.

“Hello!...Um---Excuse me but---where am I? And what have you done with my friends?” she yelled but the swirling fog snatched her words away and replaced them with whispers and shadows. A gryphon made of fog lunged from one side, making her sidestep. A massive gray cat eye taller than herself opened suddenly as a jet of flames just missed her ear. A giant gray hawk swooped over her forcing her to duck as vines made of fog grew all around her.

Then…looming above her, as big as an elephant---the fog formed itself into a massive three-headed dog. The heads stared at her as their red eyes glowed, one head tipped skyward and howled a terrible, raging sound, which brought Ambril shivering to her knees her head down. She was sure to be eaten this time. After all they were the Guardians of the Underworld.

But after a bit more quivering on her knees she started to get angry. Exactly why was she going to get eaten? They must have some sense of justice---there was that whole heaven and hell, good and bad thing…she stood up slowly; she didn’t want to die on her knees anyway. When she raised her head she found the great heads watching her---looking only slightly hungry.

She risked breaking the silence, “you’re the Cerberus, right?”

She immediately wished she could take back her words for as soon as she spoke their name the foggy place began to resonate and thrum. She could feel it moving through the ground, in the air. The fog form of the Cerberus started to firm and thicken into a real being. Before it had fully formed, the Ashera flashed so violently it shocked Ambril out of her trance. She opened her eyes and the world of light and gardens and friends came flooding back.

“Nought the moon, it’s the sun.” Ygg said as if nothing had happened.

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

“Did you see anything? It was so weird, I closed my eyes for a second and the Hounds of Hell were there.”

Sully stopped squinting at the moon and squinted at her instead, “See what? What are you talking about? The Cerberus? Where?” The howls were louder now as the hounds grew closer.

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

“We---we have to get out of here!” Ambril shrieked as she pointed to the top of the mountains just visible over the wall. Near the top of one 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. Something large, perhaps more than one, was barreling through the trees, coming straight at them. The baying of hounds was now punctuated with the sharp, staccato sound of snapping trees and bushes.

Ambril felt herself grow cold. It was one thing to imagine the Cerberus and another, much scarier thing to face them in real life. She quickly stuffed her Ashera in her pack and swept up fLit as she started backing toward the bikes. The stone wall looked like it could withstand anything, but was it enough for the Cerberus?

“Sully, what do you know 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?” Sully was backing up twice as fast as Ambril and stumbled down the Gazebo steps.

“I think I---I might have---accidentally---called them.” Ambril said in a small voice as she helped her up.

Ygg snorted incredulously, “so the Hounds of Hell be after us---accidentally?”

Ambril felt flattened like a gnat under a snoozing rhino, “sorry,” was all she could think to say.

The hounds bayed again, this time Ambril could tell by the snorts and growls that there was more than one huge beast and they were very, very near.

“How do we call them off?” yelled Ambril over the din.

“I had to write an essay on them for Pinwydden last year---but I barely remember it,” said Sully, her eyes on the wall. “Let’s see…summoned by magic…independent minded…in other words doesn’t mind well…we had a dog like that once---“

As they watched a large Bay tree suddenly toppled over and with a loud boom slammed against the wall, spraying dust and gravel for a hundred feet in all directions. Ambril covered her head. The beasts were there just on the other side, breathing heavily. Ambril could sense their terrible strength.

“But I don’t remember how to call them off! Maybe we can distract them. Anyone have 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 rained down on them with every hit…but the wall held.

“They be the Guardians of the Underworld, why would they be coming for you?” hissed Ygg as he brushed gravel and dust out of his hair. “You be murdering anyone lately?”

Ambril just glared at him.

“Look we could be making too much of this. Maybe it’s just elephants---or dinosaurs or something…” Sully yelled as a couple of rocks fell from the top of the Wall.

Ygg just gave her a sarcastic look and waited.

“O.K., O.K., I see your point. Cerberus, elephants, dinosaurs---equally strange,” Sully muttered.

There was a scrambling sound as a massive paw shoved a large boulder off the top of the wall. Then a giant dog’s head, the size of a Volkswagen reared up. Its red eyes glowered at them as it fangs dripped saliva. A jet of flames escaped it’s jaws.

“Niiiccce doggie---Sit boy!” Sully cooed nervously.

Ambril wanted to run but couldn’t seem to move her feet. The dogs 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.

“Let’s get out of here!” she shrieked. As if sprung from a trap they all sprinted for their bikes, picked them up and slammed down the pathway, pedaling hard for the opening in the underbrush. They took the path fast, not caring if the thorny branches scratched or tugged at their clothes. A few minutes later they shot through the hedge and into the safety of Sully’s front yard. Ambril took her first deep breath in minutes.

“That was scary! Really really scary! Hollywood can throw anything at me now!” Sully hooted as they coasted to a stop in front of the barn.

They all laughed though Ambril had to fake it. She could still feel the Cerberus at the wall…they wanted something…something from her. And they weren’t going away until they got it. But what disturbed her more was their connection with her Ashera. She hadn’t thought it would endanger her like that. At the first opportunity she stopped and shoved the wooden tube down to the bottom of her pack.

**Chapter Eye holes and other empty spaces**

It wasn’t until the next day before school that Ambril told Ygg and Sully about the deep voice she’d heard in her head--- which lead to Ygg telling her not to go out alone---until she was thirty, and Sully warning her about Dog parks. Ygg rolled his eyes.

“What! If I were a dog who wanted to kick some butt that’s where I’d go!” Sully had said defensively.

But as the Cerberus hadn’t followed Ambril home or pooped in her front yard they all forgot about it in their excitement for the Harvest Festival that evening. As soon as she got home, Ambril had commandeered some old tablecloths from the linen closet and was cutting eye holes at the kitchen table when her robot appeared walking trancelike and wearing an old doll head with darkened eye sockets drolling fake blood.

“Let me guess, you’re a---zombie robot!”

fLit stopped and put his hands on his metallic hips.

“JUST a zombie…then everyone’s supposed to ignore your metal body and the fact you’re only a foot tall?” Ambril asked.

fLit just shrugged.

“You realize you’re going to be in a backpack under a sheet the entire time.”

fLit tossed his doll head which made it swivel around backward and walked away in a huff with the doll head staring vacuously off to the side.

“Look I can’t run around pulling you out of puddles and protecting you from curious dogs tonight---If you wander off you’re on your own!” Ambril called after him and shook her head. He was really more of an obnoxious little brother than a toy now. She pondered just how overrated AI was as she finished the last eye hole on the second tablecloth and threw it over her head.

“Eeeek a ghost!” Her mother wandered in with a stack of laundry and a big grin on her face---which she immediately lost when recognized the tablecloths. “Ambril! That was expensive! Why didn’t you ask me---“

Ambril scrambled out from under the cloth, “I asked Mrs. Sweetgum. This one has a huge stain and this one is ripped, see?” She held up the first offense and then the second.

Ambril’s Mom looked only slightly mollified. “Well you could have asked for my help anyway, I hardly see you anymore, you’re always with your friends.”

“You ‘ve been really busy too...besides how many times did you tell me to go out and play with my friends and I couldn’t because I didn’t have any! Now I have some and you complain about that!” Ambril began defensively, feeling angry and annoyed until she realized that her Mom was right, she had been avoiding her Mom, afraid to confront her Mom about the old boarded up mansion.

The stinky truth was that she had been afraid to talk to her Mom about it for fear of stirring up more trouble for her family. Then all the frustration and confusion she’d kept at bay came bubbling up.

“Mom, I know about the Mansion, the one that belongs to our family.”

Her mother’s face went tight with anxiety, Ambril knew she knew. “What are you talking about? There are dozens of mansions around here.” She said with brittle dishonesty.

“There’s only one with a Derwyn crest and my name scribbled behind the door in my old room…I remembered it the minute I walked in.”

Her mother looked shocked as she set the laundry down on the table and smoothed a wrinkle from the top shirt, “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. “Me and most of Trelawnyd’s homeless.”

“All three of them,” returned her mother as she wriggled uncomfortably. “It---it sounds like you were in my Grandmother’s house,” she said softly.

“But doesn’t that mean you own it now? She must have left it to you…she raised you.”

Her mother took her time but finally nodded while staring at a spot on the wall.

Ambril screwed up her face. “How could you do that to us Mom! It was really hard sometimes! Sneaking out of dumpy apartments because we didn’t have the rent, living in the van--- and we didn’t have to? Mom! Remember those times we didn’t have enough money for food? All along we could have been living in a mansion---that place must be worth a fortune!” Ambril sputtered angrily.

Her mother went very pale. “I couldn’t sell it---it was impossible to sell it then and ---we couldn’t live here, not then. So---I just---left,” she said softly.

Ambril was too angry to speak for a long moment.

Her Mom took a deep breath and gathered herself in. “It was a terrible time…I know I could have done it better---I just didn’t know what to do,” she looked Ambril full in the face, “I’m sorry honey, I---I wanted you to have an easier time of it. To not carry it around---knowing what your Dad did…living like we did was hard, I know…but living here---just then---you have to believe m--- would have been much, much harder. The people here---they are…different.”

Her mother paused here and Ambril waited hopefully for the truth---the real truth about her very, very different family, and her father. But instead her mother blinked away a tear then tried on a small smile. “The truth is that we’ll never know if staying here would have been best, we can’t go back and change anything---it’s in the past.” She raised her chin. “Life is better now--- you have friends and a lovely home...Zane even seems happier.” She nodded with great finality as she gathered up the laundry again.

“How is Gran’s house, is it really bad?”

Ambril tried one more time. “Please Mom; we have to talk about what happened. He was my Dad!”

Her mother’s mouth flattened into a thin line, “no more talk, we can’t revisit that time again. We’re moving forward, into this new life.” She set her jaw in that way Ambril knew the Jaws of Life would have no luck with opening. “When are you going to the Harvest Festival? Perhaps we could go as a family.” Her voice, still brittle was overly bright.

Ambril felt beaten and fingered the eyeholes in one of the tablecloths.

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

“It would be fun!” Ambril’s mother sounded artificial.

“Not,” Zane grabbed an apple and crunched down on it.

The sounds of Zane’s munching helped mask a heavy silence as Ambril felt the gap widen between herself and her mother. Finally she’d had enough and began stuffing the tablecloths into her backpack. Her mother turned toward the hall.

“Perhaps it’s better you go with your friends, I forgot I’ll be there helping in Betula’s booth---look for me!” Ambril gulped as she watched her mother walk away. Her shoulders were set so rigidly, she looked so breakable. She hadn’t seen it for a while but Ambril remembered it---it was the way her Mom had looked for most of her childhood.

Zane had stopped munching. Looking over, Ambril found him glaring at her.

“What?”

He jabbed and narrowed his eyes, “knock it off!” he hissed.

“I found our old house.”

Zane looked startled but just for a second. “Yeah---so?” He bit down menacingly on his apple. “It doh chage any-ting--- leaf iih alone.” He stared at her a long moment before sliding out the side door and into the sunset, leaving Ambril alone.

# Chapter Harvest Moons and a Ghostly Rutabaga

Ambril had left the house huffily, soon after Zane. She managed to cool off a little on the way down the hill as she watched the little monsters, vampires, and space-persons race from house to house. A half hour later found her tucked into the deepening shadows of the Redwoods lining Circle Park, waiting for Sully. The Park had booths set up around the stone plaza with a spooky archway of goblins and ghosts off to one side promising a haunted house, a spook alley and games. Ambril could smell pumpkin cookies and apple cider and saw her Mother smiling happily as she chatted with Betula and her customers in the Sweet Shoppe booth. At least their argument created no lasting damage.

“That was the best haunted house ever! That clock that came to life? He looked so real! I wonder how they did that?” A small boy yawned as he allowed his mother to drag him toward home. The circle stone was rapidly filling with townsfolk. Ambril looked around anxiously for Sully.

“Pssst! I’m over here!” came a loud whisper.

Ambril whirled around but saw no one, “where are you? Come on out.”

Some one groaned, then Sully hopped from behind one of the redwood trees. She was wedged into a lumpy, purple and grey sack, tight at the ankles and bulbous at the top. There were green leaves sprouting from her hair and weird grey tentacles from her body.

It was hard but Ambril kept the smile from her face…for a minute.

“Your Mom made that? It’s---really interesting…sorry but…what are you?”

“I’m a rutabaga! You mean you can’t tell? Ohhh, this is worse than all the other costumes put together!” Sully looked ready to cry.

“Why didn’t you just tell her you didn’t want to be a vegetable?”

Sully screwed up her face. “I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, she slaves over these things…you should have seen the broccoli costume---she crocheted it…it took her months.” Sully began to wriggle out of the stretchy, lumpy bag. “Did you bring me something? Anything?” she pleaded as she started pulling the green leaves out of her hair.

“Yeah, here, you and I are seriously stupid ghosts---but at least no one will be able to tell who we are.”

Sully crammed the rutabaga costume in her backpack, “wonderful! It’ll be great not to be teased tomorrow at school…for once. Come on, let’s go!”

“Let’s try the haunted house first, it may be more than haunted,” Ambril thought about what the little kid had said.

Sully pulled the tablecloth over her head before joining the crowd under the goblin arch.

“Keep your head down---Lance at three o’clock!” Sully hissed. Ambril turned and found Lance with greased hair and a muscle shirt shoving his way through a group of smaller kids, his gang followed. Every Halloween there was always one really popular costume. This year it seemed to be a hooded black cloak with a white grinning mask. There were several of them following Lance.

“The one with the lamest costume here and gets a---special treat!” Lance smiled nastily as he grabbed a skinny boy in a pirate’s costume and hung him by his fake hook hand.

“Any one for second place?” He grinned evilly. “Hey Tooth Fairy boy! Step up and get your prize!” the bigger boys took off after a hapless kid who was running for his life.

“Let’s get out of here while we still can!” Sully tugged on Ambril’s arm and whimpered, “I was second place last year! I have the DVD of the Grim Reaper meets the Alien at home. We can trick or treat on the way.”

But Ambril wasn’t listening instead she was staring at a small house with a front porch and mounds of black cloth draped on either side of it, “you have to meet the haunted house before we go.”

Sully stopped tugging.

“Just follow me!”

The two ghosts slid through the crowd and over to a small house ringed with disappointed kids. A large ‘Closed’ sign hung across the front porch. Ambril bumped into a stocky boy with a too small Darth Vader costume on. “Sorry---can’t see.”

The boy shrugged and took off his mask. Ygg’s face emerged, streaked with sweat. “Ambril? That must be a site more comfortable than this thing Miss Fern found in her attic.”

“Leave it off, you look scarier with your hair all spiky like that.” Sully put in.

Ygg frowned at her, then stuck the mask under his arm and ruffled his crazy hair.

“Everyone stand back, we’re experiencing---um---technical difficulties! It won’t be long!” A mummy addressed the crowd from the porch wrapped head to toe in bandages. One end had come loose and Ambril could nothing but empty space and a couple of strands of twine underneath. She hurriedly beckoned to her friends as she wedged herself through the crowd.

She wriggled onto the porch and whispered urgently, “your…slip knot is showing Jute!” she grabbed the loose end and wound it back around its neck, and tied it at the end.

“Ambril?--- thanks! That’s what freaked out that little girl!---You’d better go inside, they’re looking over the damage.” Jute whispered just before a mournful groan sounded from above.

“Hey! My son was first! These guys butted in line!” A red faced Mom tried to elbow Ambril back.

Jute held up a cloth covered hand. “M’am you’re son is first in line, this is---technical support!” He waved Ambril, Sully and Ygg toward the front door before, “Won’t be long now folks!” he said loudly.

“Jute, how’d you like to be a lovely root vegetable next year? I have a costume right here!”

Sully fumbled for her backpack but Ambril steered her toward the door before she could get it out, “Later! we have to get out of sight, the crowd’s getting ugly!”

“I’m guessning this be---Fowlclun?” Ygg said squinting up at the windows and nearly tripping on the doormat.

“No, really?” exclaimed Sully as she really did trip over the doormat and saved herself by grabbing the brass door knocker, “oops! Sorry about that!” She patted the door knocker and smiled too hard up at the house.

Ambril pulled off her sheet as she prodded him forward, “yep, Fowlclun, these are my friends Ygg and Sully!” she whispered up at the house.

Fowlclun’s lacy curtains crinkled in response as a hollow cackle echoed around the house. The door creaked open on its own. Ambril had to tug her friends her awestruck friends hurriedly inside.

Poor Fowlclun, thought Ambril, it looked as if a bomb had gone off in the living room, the walls were blackened and a big pot of glowing green goop boiled merrily away in the middle of the room. There were skeletons dangling from the rafters and mummies piled up everywhere. A large, blocky ghoul swathed in a voluminous black cloak fussed in the corner. Ambril guessed that was Plinth. Parch had folded himself into an origami bat and had draped a wispy white cloth over himself, which smoldered as it trailed behind him. He cheeped eerily at them as he swooped around.

Quill had acquired some moth eaten feathers shaped like wings which looked as if they’d sat in a closet for ten years and a beak as long as Ambril’s foot. She hung from a wire attached to the ceiling. “Ambril, what do you think? I’m the harbinger of death!” She flapped her dusty wings slowly as she glided around flinging feathers in all directions.

“Very feathery---and deadly,” said Ambril then sneezed twice.

“Well lookey who turned up!” Hendoeth, her face smudged with soot galloped over and gave Ambril a big hug.

She released Ambril who said, “these are my friends Sully and Ygg.”

Hendoeth nodded as she sized them up, “glad to know ya!” she gave Ygg a longer look, “it’s unusual to see earth-kind so far from Chert.”

Ygg shrugged, then looked at her hard. “ I be thinking I’ve seen you somewhere.”

“You could have done---we get up to Chert now and then, there’s a junk man there I like to barter with.”

“What happened in here?” Ambril gestured at the fire bombed room.

Hendoeth looked surprised, then she relaxed into a giggle, “that there’s window dressing---Fowlclun likes to get into the spirit of things on Halloween.”

“So this is Fowlclun’s---Halloween costume? Great job, it really looks like a bomb exploded in here…so then, why did you shut down?”

Hendoeth grimaced, “It’s Teg and his dang-blasted allergies, don’t know what to do about ‘em!”

But before she could explain Quill gasped, “Tweek, you poor thing! One of the kids must have knocked her off her shelf while Plinth was doing his Grim Reaper impression.” Quill swooped down to the floor and swept something up. Ambril heard the tinkle of glass as Quill wafted over to Hendoeth, hovered over her and dropped several somethings into Hendoeth’s hand. Ambril saw bits of sparkling jewels; one of them was carved into an indescribably beautiful flower and was as big as Ambril’s hand. It was missing a few petals.

“Bandersnitches!” said Hendoeth, “not agin!” she bent over to examine it. “This is a job for Fixit Joe…she’s more broke than not now. I do wonder where he took himself off to.”

There were many mended cracks running through the jewel flower.

“We’ll just have to do our best to mend her I reckon,” the old woman picked up one piece and experimentally tried to find its place. Then she put her face right down to the jewel and bellowed, “Ya O.K. in there, Tweek?”

The jewel flower glowed faintly, Ambril jumped when she heard soft bells tinkle in her head. Hendoeth worriedly nodded. “And that’s all we ever get from you, isn’t it.” She straightened up suddenly and rubbed her hands as she turned and looked at the fireplace.

“Put her in a safe place, Quill, we’ll take care of her later. The real problem is Teg! He nearly roasted Parch earlier, good thing it warn’t one of them kiddies. Give him another good poke with the tongs will you?” she shouted at Plinth who sniffed.

“I’m not fraternizing with that little imp! He singed my base the other day!” Ambril could see Plinth frown as he put his clock face in the air and turned away.

Hendoeth snorted, “grumpy are we? All righty then, I will.” The old woman skipped over to the fireplace and started poking around with long black tongs.

Ambril peaked over the back of the sofa and saw the tip of something red and scaly in the fireplace. Curled up inside on a bed of blackened wood, was a pint-sized gryphon. It was sound asleep despite the vigorous jabs Hendoeth was giving it. It finally raised its beaked head and yawned a spurt of flames. Hendoeth neatly sidestepped them.

“Hey there Teggy, having a snooze are ya? We need a bit more heat---no, now wait a minute---Teg!” She was cut off by a massive sneeze and an explosion of flames, then there was a funny sort of snap and the fire went out. Hendoeth jumped back but lost her balance and ended up on the floor with her feet waving over a liberal amount of petticoats.

The old woman quickly heaved herself back on her feet. She shook her head while brushing herself off. “Borogoves! He’s gone and sneezed himself away, in between agin.” The fireplace was empty now the gryphon had vanished, “he’s been sneezing like that more and more.” Then to the old clock she said, “ya best git some wood and light a fire the old fashioned way Plinth. No tellin’ how long that fire brand will be gone.”

There was a loud clash of chimes. “Me, why am I always the one!” The clock cried. “ I am HIDEOUSLY flammable, why don’t’ you have Quill do it? She’s---“

“Cuz Quill does just ‘bout everything else around here.” Hendoeth rounded on the seven-foot tall clock and stared at it so heatedly the clock actually began to wilt. Ambril now could see his two eyes blinking rapidly above the clock face while his peevish mouth curled into a pout.

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

The clock shivered and immediately set to work building a fire.

“There, things’ll be better now... until he sneezes himself back. Ever-one back to your stations, we’re gonna open up for business agin!”

“We’d better go then.” Ambril said as she pulled out her tablecloth and slid it over her head.

“We’d just be in the way.” Sully added nervously, her eyes wide.

“Just one more thing, Ambril,” Hendoeth gave her a sharp-eyed look, “mind you stay safe inside the Wall. There are those who don’t wish you well in the forest, you hear me?”

Ambril’s stomach clenched as she nodded thinking of Dullaiths and fire breathing dogs, for a little while, she’d almost been able to forget them.

# Chapter Up in a puff of goblin smoke

“Just a few more minutes people---Madame! Jumping the railing will put you at the end of the line!” Jute had both cloth wrapped hands up, trying to ward off angry Mothers and their charges.

“The haunted house is open for business again, the---heating problem has been taken care of.” Sully announced.

“Thank the inventor of Velcro!” Jute sounded relieved under his cloth wrapping as he turned toward the crowd, “listen up, we’ll be sending you through in groups of ten! Not eleven, not nine---TEN! Got it, we’ll do this in an orderly fashion or not at all, got that?” he yelled authoritatively. But the crowd paid no attention to him and stampeded toward the front door.

Ambril was slammed up against the porch railing and found herself next to Jute who had been all but flattened by the large rump of an overeager Mom.

He turned a battered but smiling cloth face, “this is great isn’t it? Finally we’re in the thick of things! Try jumping the railing around the corner, you’ll never get through this.” he said before being bodily picked up by the crowd and carried away.

“This way then,” Ygg had heard him and beckoned to Ambril and Sully as he nudged his way around the corner. The crowd thinned dramatically as they went, by the time they reached the chimney they were alone, the hub-bub of the crowd had receded into the background. “We can climb down Fowlclun’s leg from here.” Ambril pointed to the black shrouded mountain of chicken leg next to the railing. Ygg was the first to jump the railing and test the chicken leg with his foot.

But before he could take another step Sully grabbed his arm and whispered, “wait, who’s that?” she pointed toward a cluster of trees near them. The shadows were so dense Ambril had a tough time making out a hooded figure with a grinning mask hunched behind some garbage cans. He seemed to be reciting something as he waved his hands around. Ambril felt an odd frizz in the air, the smell of something rotten hit her at the same time a huge ball of flames exploded above the goblin arch.

There were terrified screams as people raced away from the roiling flames. “Come one!” Ambril jumped the railing, landing on one of Fowlclun’s massive claws, then sprang to the ground.

There was a surprised caw from the house.

“Sorry Fowlclun!” Ambril yelled back as she ran around the house and straight into the well tailored back of Feldez.

“What the---watch where you’re going!” he sputtered as he recovered from a graceless stumble. “Ambril! I should have known as you always seem to be in the wrong place at the wrong time!” he fumed. His eyes narrowed accusingly as his hand clamped down on her shoulder and he dragged her out of the way of the terrified mob.

But Ambril was too preoccupied with the smoke now forming over the archway to answer. Feldez turned to follow her gaze just in time to see the smoke shape itself into the head of a Dullaith. The yawning mouth opened slowly as its glowing eyes stared sightlessly down at them.

“Get out of here! NOW!” Feldez commanded as he shoved her roughly aside before striding purposefully toward the now smoldering archway.

Ambril stumbled and sprawled backward in the dirt just as Sully and Ygg ran up.

“What happened?” Sully demanded.

Ambril just pointed as she shrugged off her backpack, unzipped it and stuck her hand in, she had to get to her Ashera fast.

“Holy smoking cow skull!” whispered Sully.

“By the Glain---I see it, it be---a Dullaith right?” Ygg’s jaw dropped in awe.

But Ambril stopped then to squint up at the monster, “No---no look, it’s breaking up.” The smoky head above them was now losing its shape as the hot air from the fire below swirled around it relentlessly. In a few moments it had vanished completely.

Ambril got to her feet. “Thank whatever God you think is responsible that it’s not a real one, because someone would be dead right now if it was.” Ambril watched the fire fighters run up with their hoses at the ready. Just before the hoses blasted Ambril saw Feldez bending over a circle of glowing symbols just under the archway. Just as Bob had done on the playground, Feldez flicked his wrist and the symbols rolled neatly into a glowing tube which Feldez then collected. He unbent himself and walked quickly away through the crowds leaving the fire fighters to their work.

# Chapter 21 The Library

“I don’t care if you don’t believe it, I KNOW Feldez is mixed up in this somehow!” Ambril said angrily.

The three friends were sitting on the swings after lunch the next day discussing last night’s adventure.

“Look, we were there---and saw the guy waving his arms around inthe forest. It might have been Feldez but it could just as easily have been someone else!” Sully countered.

“Like who? Who else has been right there for every Dullaith appearance? There has to be SOME connection! I---I just know it.” Ambril knew she sounded like a stubborn child but it felt so much worse when her own friends wouldn’t see it her way.

“We nought be getting anywhere by arguing like this, besides I got somut’ to say---“

But Sully wasn’t listening, “It could have been anyone really, he had on that big hooded robe thing that everybody and their brother was wearing last night!”

Ambril sighed, “Look, let’s meet after school at the Gazebo—“

“Listen, there be something wrong about Trelawnyd that I’m—“

“We can’t go to the Gazebo tonight,” Sully cut in again, “we have to get those detention papers written for Ms. Breccia, remember?”

Ambril groaned, what had she done this time? Oh yeah, swallowed too loudly.

“Let’s go straight to the Library after school and knock them out. While we’re there maybe we can try to find out more about Dullaiths and stuff…then, if we have time—“

“THERE BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE OLD PEOPLE HERE!” Ygg glared at Sully, “and if’n some of us would just listen for a sec, I’ll tell ya about it.”

Sully sighed and folded her arms.

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

“Yeah, well old people are like that,” Sully said smugly, “guess what? We all get older every day.”

“Nay, nay,” said Ygg drawing his eyebrows together. “There be something really wrong,” Ygg shoved his hands in his pocket as he continued, “the old people I’m making deliveries to are acting---different, like they be all sickly from the same thing at the same time…it be like an epidemic,” his voice trailed off, “the only one who’s still herself, is Miss Fern.”

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, she didn’t take to Sunset Tea.” Ygg grimaced, “I nought know why anyone would. People in Chert would call Mrs. Twid a Quoocker.”

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

“So her stuff may not do any good but it doesn’t mean it’s bad, “reasoned Sully, “do you have deliveries to make 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. Maybe she’ll have some ideas.”

Ygg screwed up his face to consider this before nodding.

The bell rang and they all jumped off the swings and pointed themselves toward the school building.

Sully cocked her head. “Fern really knows a lot---maybe even 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 ‘Secret Nerd Code’?”

His friends jeered loudly. “Good one!” said the one with the unibrow. Tiana and her two friends, all dressed in pink, were just in front of them, checking their makeup in their compact mirrors.

Tiana snapped her mirror shut the minute she caught sight of Ygg. “Hi! You sure can throw a ball, are you going out for the baseball team?”

Ygg was suddenly shy, “I had’na thought about it.”

She winked at him as she snapped her gum,“I’d cheer for you if you did.”

Ygg blushed and shoved his hands deep in his pockets just as the second bell rang and they had to run for class. Ambril smirked as she noticed Lance looking angrily at Ygg and then at Tiana. For a moment she thought there might be trouble but the rest of the day passed uneventfully. Before Ambril knew it they were getting their bikes out and setting off for the Library. Minutes later they had racked their bikes and were running up the steps of the Library. The quiet, cool of the Library felt welcoming as Ambril held the door for two elderly women. One nodded as her white hair waved in the breeze.

Her friend chattered as she struggled with her glasses. “I was shocked to see it, plain as day, ‘For Sale’, right in the front window!” she raised a quivering hand dramatically. “Whatever could be the reason? Flood’s Shoes has been there since my mother was a child!”

“Daisy is feeling her age, I expect,” Her friend answered, “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 handbag 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. We’ll have to go all the way to Half Moon Bay!”

The door swung shut. So Mrs. Twid wanted to buy the Flood’s Shoes. But thoughts of Twid flew out of her mind as she inhaled the odd, enticing smell Libraries all seem to have---the dusty smell of possibilities. Ygg and Sully were arguing over the Library floor plan. Ambril looked around and found a glass display case filled with town memorabilia. There were old trophies, some of them dinged here and there, as if the sport had continued after the trophies had been handed out, and dignitaries smiling out of yellowed photographs accepting this award or that. She was about to turn away when something caught her eye. It was a small plaque featuring two men solemnly shaking hands. One of the men Ambril had rarely seen smile. Underneath she read:

**‘The Dragon Crest was awarded to Dr. Feldez Petri this year in commemoration of a courageous deed. Trelawnyd residents wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Petri for quelling the monstrous disturbance 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 with a goatee grappling with a pile of books in Riley’s arms.

“I’m sorry but SOMEONE has to pay these fines!” said the Librarian angrily, “I can’t let you take out another book until they are paid in full!”

“But they’re my brother’s fines,” pleaded Riley, “not mine! He 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, “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 next time.”

Riley smiled, “next time right, I’ll tell Lance,” 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, he’s the Town Historian,” she pointed to a small office near the Archives, “maybe he could get us started.”

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 every day due to budget cuts. But it’s Thursday? You’re in luck, ”she pointed a slightly crooked finger to the stairwell, “down the stairs, then 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 set 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 crookedly on a stack of books. An iron bound, glass case was mounted on one wall. It was filled with an odd assortment of things. Ambril caught her breath when she saw a familiar black box, the same one that had broken their windshield inside. It was labeled,

**The Morte Cell:**

**In years past it was thought this box could transfer life energy from one magical being to another, often resulting in an indescribably painful death.**

Under the dull glare of the florescent light Ambril got a closer look at it and could see it was carved beautifully just like her Ashera but the stories told in images were much darker. Ambril shivered remembering the fairy 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 deep purple. There was a small metal cup the size of a doll’s tea cup attached to it by a chain.

**The Dorcha Blade**

**A dark magic tool capable of rending magical beings in two. It inflicts a deadly curse with every incision. The Dorcha chamber captures raw physical life energy allowing the blade wielder to use it without fear of injury.**

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

Ambril nodded vaguely still puzzling over the Dorcha chamber---was it the cup attached to it? If was so tiny it wouldn’t hold much of anything and what was the injury that could occur?

“That’s where they poor little fairy was tortured?” breathed Sully as she squinted into the case.

“---So those are the latest codes…yes,” a voice came through the double doors, Ambril recognized it as the voice belonging to the man she had seen talking with Koda after the fire. “that’s correct, 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.”

They were treated to loud, off-key humming.

“Dr. Afallen?”

“Oof!” There was the sound of books falling as a tiny man with a fluffy white beard peeked through the doorway. His surprise changed to delight immediately, “visitors on a Thursday? Wonderful!” he darted through the doorway and started bustling around tidying his desk and shoving books off chairs. He smiled as he scurried around his desk and dusted off the seat of an old, sagging sofa with the sleeve of his jacket, “please have a seat,” he said bobbing a welcome.

The three sat down gingerly then slid together in a lump as the sofa sagged even more.

“Would you like some tea?” Dr Afallen asked as he anxiously jiggling the kettle.

“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 as he smoothed out his rumpled collar, went around his desk and plunked down on his chair.

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. “And we were wondering if you had any---interesting---reference materials?”

“Ah!” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows went up. “I’m not allowed to discuss *everything* 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 shiny, new books, “here they are,” he said as he shoved them across his desk, “it’s the approved history of Trelawnyd.”

Ambril read the cover, ‘Trelawnyd, Our Noble Heritage’ and looked exactly like something Ms. Breccia would approve of, boring, boring and more boring. “Thanks…but---do you have something---that might explain---” Ambril’s eyes went to the glass case.

Dr. Afallen sat up straighter as he followed her eyes and peered at her over his glasses as a quick smile came and went. He pointed to the bulletin board again and said ruefully, “it would have been better had you come tomorrow as the items in the display case are about to be placed in our new high security vault. I’m not even allowed to talk about them. In fact this book is all I can let you check out.”

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---the contents of the Archives would quickly be disposed of.”

“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 are truly interested, are you?” he asked hopefully, “you’re not just here to make fun of all of this?” He leaned forward eagerly.

“We want to learn the truth about Trelawnyd’s heritage,” Ambril said.

Dr Afallen nervously shuffled papers as he muttered, “I have to be so careful, you see, especially now...” he stroked his beard, “but we must make sure this knowledge is passed on…” then his eyes closed, Dr. Afallen was silent for so long that Ambril wondered if he had fallen asleep when his head jerked up. “I’m sorry,” he said apologetically, “I simply can’t risk it, not now.”

They were crestfallen, Ambril especially. Would she ever know the truth about her family’s heritage? And what about the Dullaiths? Would they come for her again? And the Ashera…the Ashera!

On a hunch she unzipped her backpack and pulled out the wooden tube. “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 more about it,” 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—look!---strings of Ogam!... interesting, very intriguing.” 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 found that one!” he chuckled as he slid it back in place. “There are others? I’m sure there are, an Ashera of this age holds many secrets.”

Ambril was on the edge of her seat, “Age? How old is it?” she asked curiously.

Dr. Afallen looked up so quickly she jumped, “It is ancient, 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 shared a common belief, it was that which brought them here together. It’s a good thing they fled when 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 founding families believed their---knack---would be strengthened if they worked together, and combined their energies,” his eyebrows rose to new heights as he nodded, “quite revolutionary for that time. Most kinships back then believed that the purity of their lineage made them stronger and so kept apart from the other families. Unfortunately for them, remaining apart made it easier for them to be hunted down, captured, and exterminated.”

He turned the Ashera to better scrutinize the emblem on the top, “this is the Derwyn family crest,” he cleared his throat and squinted at the writing around the edge. “*ut supremus sic subter supter*,” he mumbled softly, “‘As Above, So Below’, it’s a reference to the great tree of life. He settled back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “To find out the reason this Ashera has come into your life will require really looking into your family’s history,” his eyebrows rose slowly, “is that the real reason why you’re here?”

Ambril nodded.

“Well that and the detention essays due tomorrow,” added Sully.

“Use these for your penance,” He rapped one of the shiny books with his finger, his eyes reluctantly straying to the bulletin board, “it’s not strictly within the rules…but 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 his teapot, “are you Bren and Tylia’s daughter?”

Ambril started, “um…yes, I am.”

Dr. Afallen’s bright eyes crinkled as he handed back the carved tube. Then he leaned even farther forward and peered at Ambril over his spectacles, “this is 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. It isn’t just you who would be at risk,” then he smiled and said in a softer tone, “But I do have some things here that might be of service to you.”

“I must take these items to the new vault anyway,” he pulled a leather pouch from his desk drawer and opening the display case he carefully took out the Morte Cell and the Dorcha Blade, wrapped them in what looked like an old sweater and stowed them in the pouch before strapping it on. Then he grabbed a lantern from its hook on the wall and shouted “follow me!” as he scurried through the double doors.

Beyond the doors was a long winding stone stair leading down. More lanterns lined the stair which narrowed the farther down they went. Finally the stairs ended and they found themselves looking out at the Archives. To call it a large room would have been silly, it was a cave, with rough hewn stone walls and veins of gleaming metal catching the lantern light. There was a gray, basement sort of daylight coming from somewhere toward the back which gave form to the walls rising so high that the light couldn’t reach the ceiling. There were stacks and piles and disorderly rows of everything you could imagine and a lot you couldn’t that went marching off into the gloom.

Ambril caught sight of Dr. Afallen’s coat tail disappearing down a nearby aisle. “Come on or we’ll lose him!”

“We’d better not do that, getting lost in here might be---fatal.” mused Sully as she stared up at a stuffed two headed Polar Bear.

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 as he paused to sift through the shelves. 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, correct?”

“Yes! How’d you know?”

Dr. Afallen’s 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, Mamie, made the best ginger cookies in town! But my she could scold! Especially if you were caught sneaking peaches from her prize trees!” he blinked owlishly at her, “Rosa and I were good friends, we snuck a lot of peaches together! Later, I taught both 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!”

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 was involved with Feldez and rarely talked about her Dad.

“Wait up!” Ygg raced up with Sully following, wheezing slightly and holding her side, just as they walked into a pool of fluorescent light showcasing a shiny metal vault decked out in high tech locks. The door looked odd being so new while everything else was on the verge of collapse.

“Now this won’t take but a moment!” said Dr. Afallen. As he busily spun one lock around, stuck his finger in another, then had his eye scanned---twice. Finally, the heavy metal door slid open and revealed several sweater wrapped bundles, stacks of papers and a few boxes. Dr. Afallen took off his pouch and laid it carefully on the middle shelf before heaving the door closed. The locks clicked and snapped and dinged for several seconds until a green light blinked at them: ‘RESTRICTED , KEEP OUT, ALARM WILL SOUND’. Dr. Afallen looked relieved, “That should do it!” he said as he prepared again to launch himself down another corridor.

“Is that where you’ll store all the stuff about the Dullaith?” Ambril asked innocently.

Dr. Afallen stopped, then swiveled to examine her face for a long moment then collected himself, “how silly of me, of course you would know of the Dullaith, because of your father,” he patted her arm consolingly, “he was a good man, your father.”

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

Dr. Afallen appeared shocked, “you mean your mother hasn’t shared that with you? I suppose she means to protect you---yes…” Dr. Afallen squeezed her arm, “I should talk with your mother about this first, but perhaps I can show you something.”

Then he started off once more. They picked their way through a giant chess set with alien beasts as pawns and scrambled over a mountain of hair, which turned out to be a Mastodon lying on its side. A plant licked Ambril’s ear then snarled at Ygg as they paused at one intersection and she nearly lost her shoe in a puddle of quicksand in the middle of another aisle.

Finally Dr. Afallen exclaimed, “Ah here we are!” As he stopped in front of a rack of wooden crates and dusty cardboard boxes labeled ‘DO NOT PURGE! PERSONAL!! AFALLEN’. Dr. Afallen rolled up his sleeves and then without warning pitched himself into one of the larger crates and dragged out several intriguing books.

One seemed to be fashioned out of diamonds. 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 it with his sleeve.

Ambril peeked over his shoulder, etched in the glittering stone were the words: ‘The Troll Uprising’. Dr. Afallen motioned to Ygg. “Here, this might interest you. It tells the story of your ancestors and the reason they fled to Chert.”

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

“Simple, young man! Your accent! Your face! You are the spitting image of your great-great-great grandfather, Chunnel the Gnasher!” chortled Dr. Afallen. He opened the book and pointed to a man with too much hair and not enough teeth.

“Ah thanks…I think,” Ygg mumbled 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 Fairy Rebellion’. “The illustrations are…illuminating to say the least.” Dr. Afallen winked.

Sully cracked the book open, instantly the room filled with brilliant multicolored lights. She was entranced.

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

He handed her an ordinary scrapbook. “Alas this local paper succumbed to fire nearly nine years ago, its archives were completely destroyed. This is a personal collection of articles I have collected over the years. A few of them contain information about your father,” Dr. Afallen’s eyebrows drew together as he said this before he nodded kindly, “as I said before, not all of us believed what they wrote about him.”

Ambril slid to the floor cross-legged as she opened it.

“Now, I can’t possibly let you take away these books, you’d be arrested.” He nodded fondly at the book in Sully’s lap. ”However, you may 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! I’ll be back to collect you in fifteen minutes or so,” he tripped lightly down the corridor and was gone.

“Mmmmm, uh huh,” mumbled Sully as she squinted at her book. The lights pulsed blue and green now, “any one got any sun glasses?”

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

The scrapbook in Ambril’s lap was labeled, ‘Four Family Journal’ She opened it and found it packed with yellowed newspaper clippings of magical doings dating back 50 years. Ambril spotted a young Dr. Afallen receiving his diploma from Harvard and picked him out in various group pictures of unsmiling men and women posing with serious looking decrees. But there were also some where he was smiling and laughing among friends clearly celebrating something. Ambril didn’t stop to read any of them she was so anxious to find something about her Dad. She thought she recognized a much younger Mrs. Flood with her arm around a comfortable looking man in front of the shoe shop and a painfully thin Mrs. Twid receiving a trophy for broad jumping as a teenager. She was half way through the book when she turned the page and there they were, her family looked back at her--- her mother and father smiled 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.**

Her Father looked confident and relaxed, gone were the worry lines around her Mother’s 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 stuck his tongue out. They had been a typical family then…before everything fell apart. She looked at the picture long and hard before reluctantly turning the page. There were many more articles showing an aging Dr. Afallen. Toward the back she found a picture of a blackened room with a domed ceiling. The headlines screamed:

**Trelawnyd Terrorized, A Monster Returns**

**Terror struck the hearts of Trelawnyd villagers last night when an ancient demon called a Dullaith was unleashed at the Old Council Hall. Bren Silva, who was working on a secretive and dangerous power project, apparently had secretly been dabbling in dark magic, went too far and lost control of the demon. Feldez Petri, an associate of Dr. Silva was able to bring the demon under control but not before it consumed the life of Bren Silva. Mr. Petri was seriously injured in the process 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 town.”**

Ambril stared numbly at the headlines. She just couldn’t believe it. The article made it sound as if her Dad had brought the Dullaith to life. So this was the dark secret no one would talk about.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of leaves being blown by a swift wind. Sully had closed her illuminating book. The aisle reverted instantly to gloomy, “I can’t read any more of this, what snobs fairies are! Always talking about “Pure” blood…yuk.” she rose and crammed the book back in the cubby Dr. Afallen had taken it from. Still fuming she began to pace up and down the corridor until she stopped in front of another bookshelf. Slowly she pulled out a very worn, very old book. The binding crackled and moaned as she pried it open. Ambril could see it was written mostly by hand or by many hands, some in old, scrolly script and other parts in neat print. Sully leafed through the first few pages, “I think it’s some kind of history book, but with recipes.”

“A magic journal you mean? They be common in Chert.” Ygg muttered not looking up.

“Yeah---hey! There’s a whole section here on Flying Powder---and here’s a recipe for Love Potion #9!” crowed Sully as she sat down and buried her nose in her new find.

Ygg growled still reading his glittery book, “Moroz was one bad dude. Here it says he enslaved the Earth-kind miners and tricked them out of their profits. But the miners weren’t having any of that. They got free and ran for the hills, that’s when they must have founded Chert,” Ygg mused, “it says here that the fairies helped Moroz do this---then Moroz turned around and tricked them too! So the Fairies left and settled in the forest---that’s why they’re called Forest Fairies.”

“It sounds like he drove half the town away! No wonder everyone is so suspicious of magic users!” Sully exclaimed.

Ygg looked sad. “It’s a shame, all this magic, bottled up for years. No wonder people be funny about it! Unused magic can turn you mean inside.”

Sully sighed her agreement, “just think of how great it would be if we could learn to wave our hands around to clean our rooms, brush our teeth and---and zap our zits away!”

Ambril was only half listening by then, she had gone back to looking at the picture of her family.

“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’ll have to call security if you don’t—“NOOOO!” Suddenly, an explosion rocked the entire building followed by the braying of fire alarms. Ambril covered her ears and hunkered down as she was showered by old maps and books. The shelves swayed dangerously on either side of them. A small stuffed gryphon nearly raked Ygg with its talons as it fell to the ground. Ambril hastily grabbed her backpack and jumped to her feet, which was a mistake. The room filled with smoke, fuzzing the blinking exit light and making it hard to breathe.

Ambril hunched down again and squinted down the direction they had come, “Dr. Afallen! The smoke began to thicken and Ambril had to cover her mouth with her sleeve as she turned back and said to Sully. “You go for help, I’ll see if Dr. Afallen is all right.”

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 dress made entirely of harp strings twangily out of the way. Ygg crouched 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!”

Just ahead she could see Dr. Afallen lying inert near what moments before had been the shiny new vault. Ambril crawled 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, extinguisher in hand, was fanning the smoke away from the now blackened vault, “it warn’t much of a fire, it be out now,” he wheezed and wiped his eyes.

Ambril took off her sweatshirt and pillowed the old man’s head with it.

“He be needing a doctor,” said Ygg as he knelt down beside Ambril.

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

“Do you think the person who did this might still be around?” whispered Ambril.

“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.

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

His eyelids flickered. “Sully, who is Sully?” the old man’s eyes flew open and fastened quizzically on Ambril.

“Who was it that did this to you?”

“Who did what? Where am I?---Who---am I?” He looked closely at Ygg, “have we met sir? You remind me of---Chunnel…” then the Doctor’s eyes slowly closed as he lost consciousness again. His head listed to one side just as the rumble of booted feet and yellow slickers surrounded them.

“I’ve a good mind to lock you in your room and not let you out again,” said a familiar clipped voice, Ambril turned to see Feldez glaring at her. He motioned 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 toward Ygg and Ambril. “Those are the malicious thugs I was telling you about!” she continued yelling, “they were eyeing the priceless trophies in the lobby first---then they asked for directions to the Archives!”

“Priceless?” snorted Ygg, “Those things?”

But the Librarian was too busy wringing her hands to listen, “to think I directed them to this treasure trove! These hoodlums should never have been allowed in here, it’s against regulations, I’m sure they muscled their way past poor Dr. Afallen…you brutes!” The Librarian’s mouth was practically lathering as she pointed her finger at them again, “they’re all New Family,” she nodded knowingly toward Ambril, “You can tell by their beady little eyes!”

Sully was suddenly beside them.

“Chief Buckthorne? These are my friends,” she was talking to a thick-necked man in a rumpled suit who had quietly shouldered his way through the crowd. “We were researching a couple of history papers when the explosion happened.”

Chief Buckthorne took a quick look at Dr. Afallen, “get this man to a hospital.” Two med-techs came through with a stretcher.

Buckthorne gave a curt nod to Feldez who had unfolded himself to tower over everyone, “go with him Feldez.”

Feldez gave Ambril a hard stare then swept away behind the stretcher.

Buckthorne turned to Deputy Skarn who stood at square-jawed attention behind the Chief, “we’re gonna need some tea,” he said jerking his head toward the frantic librarian, “lots of tea.”

Then 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 nodded to Sully.

“We went over to the plan of the Library, then we---“ Sully picked up the story and was off. 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 efficiently 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.

“It’s good for you,” said Skarn and showcased his perfect teeth with a cheesy grin. “Sunset Tea, drink up!”

Ygg stiffened next to her, “it be Twid’s stuff, don’t drink it,” he whispered.

Skarn watched them closely. “Come on now, drink it up.”

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 stuff down?” she said as Skarn turned around long enough for them to empty their cups into a nearby waste basket.

Ambril gagged at the thought.

“Old people don’t taste so well,” whispered Ygg, “Mrs. Twid banks on that.”

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 then he watched them walk under the blinking exit light and out into the twilight.

# Chapter 24 Mrs. Twid’s Sunset Tea

Ygg grunted as he jumped on his bike, “glad that’s over, tomorrow then,” he called back at them as he slid into traffic.

“Yek! I still taste that awful tea,” Sully rubbed her tummy just before she shoved off.

“Ambril! What happened?” It was her mother who had just pulled up in a shiny new SUV. “Feldez called and said you had gotten mixed up in something!” Her mother had jumped from the car and tugged up the back hatch door. “Let’s get the bike in the back, honey, then I want to hear ALL about it.”

They awkwardly maneuvered her bike in the back then jumped into the front seats. It had that new car smell, much better than the stale smell of the their old van, “nice wheels Mom, did you get it today?”

“Don’t change the subject! But yes, Feldez picked it out, you like it?”

Ambril nodded, though she liked it less knowing that Feldez had selected it. Then she told her Mom what she’d just told Chief Buckthorne. As she talked she thought about how good she had gotten at keeping secrets, holding back the truth. The thought made her sad. The growl of Ambril’s stomach spoiled the symmetrical tick of the car’s blinker as it turned and purred its way up the hill. But when the car slowed to a stop, her mother grabbed her arm.

“I know when you’re holding back something, Ambril…you used to tell me everything. When did that change?” she said sadly, “now I want to hear it 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, of course her mother had seen right through her. But what could she really tell her? Zane would try to roast her over hot coals if she upset her Mom again and what proof did she have that Feldez was wrong through and through?

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

Ambril cleared her throat and shrugged her shoulders. “Mom, it’s not like we’re planning to rob a bank or anything...in school we’ve been talking about the old stories and we---we just got curious and ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

But her mother’s eyes narrowed, still not convinced, “what old stories?”

“You know the ones about how the town was founded millions of years ago by fairies and trolls and stuff…” Ambril let her voice trail off, hoping she had said enough.

She was heartened when her mother relaxed a little, “those are just stories,” her Mon said firmly, “when I was your age, my Grandmother came to me and told me all about the fabled Derwyn family heritage. It was exciting---at first.” Her mother’s knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering wheel tightly. “But I learned the hard way that it’s best to not believe in some things, no matter how wonderful they sound. They can get you into trouble and hurt your friends, your family, even yourself…trust me on this it’s better to believe they’re just fairy tales,” she stared unseeing at the dashboard as she eased her door open, “just stick to the facts, it’s easier.”

“Where have you been? I’m hungry,” it was Zane in his usual foul mood standing on the doorstep, “Mrs. Sweetgum won’t let me eat without you because it’s impolite or some tripe, 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 slices of ripe melon. It smelled delicious. She almost felt sorry for Zane, driven half mad by all the good smells while he waited for them; she splashed her hands and face with soap and water and took her seat.

“I’ll just put some nuts out for the squirrels,” Mrs. Sweetgum 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.

“What’s the matta wif oou?” mumbled Zane his mouth full of meatball, “normally, you eat more tha’ me.”

“Not possible,” she countered watching Zane taking seconds already.

“Honey you don’t look well,” her mother put her cool hand on Ambril’s forehead and frowned, “it’s probably all of the excitement, why don’t you go on up to bed.”

Ambril took one last look at her plate and sighed. Dragging her backpack behind her she slouched up the stairs, threw on her pajamas, and then slid gingerly between the sheets. What a lousy day. She closed her eyes and groaned when she remembered she still had to write a 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. She sighed as she flipped through the glossy pages.

There was a soft knock on Ambril’s door, Mrs. Sweetgum smiled over a steaming tray.

“Sorry but I don’t think I can eat anything,” Ambril turned slightly green just thinking about it.

Mrs. Sweetgum let herself in anyway. She peered at Ambril’s face as she trotted over and handed her a steaming mug, “I thought something was wrong when I saw you come in so I brought you some of my special tea.”

“You didn’t get it from Mrs. Twid did you?” 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 won’t have that stuff in my house! 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 melon on the side. Ambril sniffed tentatively. It smelled great but how would it taste? Ambril hesitantly took a small bite of melon…it tasted---like food! She dug in and soon had cleaned her plate.

“That’s better,” said Mrs. Sweetgum as she gathered up the empty dishes and trotted toward the door, “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Deary.”

“Wait! Mrs. Sweetgum! Do you have anymore of that tea?” Ambril remembered that look on Sully’s face as they left the Library, “I might need some 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 yawned before picking up the Trelawnyd history book again. An hour later found her putting the finishing touches on a very correct but very boring essay. Ms. Breccia would love it. She switched off her light and snuggled down under the covers to mull over her day.

Whoever had been behind the attack on the Archive had taken lots of risks. Had they gotten what they wanted? Was it the Morte Cell and Dorcha Blade they had been after? Ambril shuddered knowing that losing control of such powerful magical tools could only mean more trouble. And then there were the articles about her Dad...How did Feldez figure into it? Her mind cycled through the odd happenings of the day until she fell into a dreamless sleep.

# Chapter 25 Miss Fern

The next morning Ambril was shoving her bike into the school rack when Ygg coasted in beside her.

“How ya feeling?” he asked as he closely examined her face.

“I felt lousy until Mrs. Sweetgum fixed me up,” she rummaged around her backpack until she found her thermos, “I brought some of her tea for Sully.”

“Ooooohhhhh,” moaned Sully as she stumbled up, looking pale and green, “all I smell is a septic tank on a hot summer’s day, you don’t want to hear how things taste,” Sully bent over, holding her stomach.

“Take a swig of this, it really helps,” Ambril poured out a cupful of tea.

Sully turned her head in refusal.

“Come on, it’s Mrs. Sweetgum’s tea, it cured me,” pleaded Ambril.

“What do ya have to lose besides your breakfast?” chortled Ygg then he stopped, “oooh, maybe you’ve already done that.”

Sully made a face at him, then frowned at the thermos, “this must be what Zombies feel like, no maybe if you eat a Zombie you feel like this…are you sure this will help?” she took the cup and took a tiny sip…then she smiled, “hey this is good!” she took another swallow and straightened up. After a few more gulps she started rummaging around in Ambril’s lunch. “Do you have any cookies?”

Ambril smiled as she fished out a sandwich and a pile of cookies and handed them over. Sully grabbed them and consumed them in short order.

“I wonder if that’s how the old people be feeling?” mused Ygg as he watched Sully eat.

“If it is, we have to figure out a way to help them!” said Sully taking another swig of Mrs. Sweetgum’s tea.

“We could ask Mrs. Sweetgum to make a couple of gallons of that stuff,” suggested Ambril, pointing at the thermos.

“And then what? Invite everyone over for Tea every afternoon?” Ygg shrugged, “as soon as take another sip of the Sunset Tea they have at home, they’ll get sick again.”

“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 she’s just cleaned her toilet with her tongue.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot! I stopped by Miss Fern’s house last night.” Ygg pulled open the front door. “She wants us to come for moonrise tonight to see something special. That’s around eleven, do ya think you can sneak out?” he asked his eyes bright.

“Are you kidding? Sneaking out at night, sounds like an adventure to me, I’m in!” said Sully as they scooted into first period just as the bell rang.

The day went by smoothly. In History Ambril, Ygg, and Sully tossed their essays onto Ms. Breccia’s desk before sliding into their seats toward the back.

“Class, settle down!” rumbled Ms. Breccia, “now, before we move on to the California Gold Rush does anyone have any questions about the founding of Trelawnyd?” Ms. Breccia noisily sucked her teeth.

Sully had her hand in the air immediately, “I know that Moroz did a lot for Trelawnyd. Why isn’t he even mentioned in the history books?” she asked holding up the gold trimmed book from 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. “It appears that he was a bit---rough with the miners,” she said thoughtfully, “too much brute force. 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. 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.

Ms. Breccia stared at Riley for a long 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 or how Moroz was imprisoned.” She fanned herself and looked out the window, “he was a powerful individual and not without friends---but that was long ago, all of those involved have long since passed on.” She looked critically around the room as if daring them to raise their hands and sneered, “any other questions?” without waiting for a response she continued, “no? Then turn to page 279 and tell me what those contraptions are.”

Ambril sighed she turned to the required page and found pictures of antiquated miner’s equipment, she had studied the Gold Rush the year before. She settled down for a serious day dreaming session.

There were bits and pieces about Moroz everywhere---but not enough to paint the whole portrait. He must have used powerful dark magic to rouse the Hounds of Hell and earn himself a lifetime of imprisonment. Ambril shivered remembering the gigantic jaws of the Cerberus…were they after her now?

# 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 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 downloaded 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 and stared vacantly at her, “you press here, right?” she said encouragingly and pointed to a key on her laptop.

The robot put his hands on his hips and looked disgusted.

Ambril sighed, “let’s just 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 up on the keyboard and stomped on the ‘F1’ key.

From the laptop, 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’ key.

Ambril’s recorded voice said even more sleepily, “can we talk about this in the morning Mom, I’m really tired, ‘Nite.”

Ambril grinned and poked the robot in the chest; “nice job!” she had to admit that it was handy having an almost smart robot around. But then fLit stomped on the ‘F3’ key. Immediately the room was filed with loud reggae music.

Ambril jumped over to the computer and jabbed the F3 herself, the music instantly stopped and snarled, “listen, that can’t happen! If I’m caught I’ll be grounded for a month.” 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 key again.

“It’s not like we’ll be hanging out together either,” she hunkered down so they were eye to metal eye, “you’ll be spending that month in the closet!”

The robot stared at her indignantly.

Ambril sighed and rolled her eyes. “All right, we’ll listen but until I have to leave,” she tapped the keyboard and Reggae music again filled the room. She smiled as she watched the robot jump around, dancing slightly off beat; sadly her robot couldn’t do ‘The Robot’.

When she got bored of watching him dance badly she picked up her Ashera. Ogam ran around the Derwyn crest, small cuts along three lines, making a pattern, almost like a code…but how to crack that code? She tried to decipher the repetitive rhythm but soon gave up. 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 to when her fingers suddenly brushed a slightly raised bump near one end that she was sure hadn’t been there moments before. She eagerly pressed and with a whirring click, a new section opened up. Written on the Ashera itself were a series of hatch marks lined up on one side with English letters on the other. Ambril gave her Ashera a squeeze as she realized it was an Ogam translation.

Then she got right to work. Carefully she sorted out the hatch marks and after many false starts came up with 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.**

Where Vine and Root Forever Entwine---Present, Past and Future Combine…she rubbed her forehead, frustrated. How was this supposed to help her? It could be anywhere that vines and roots come together, like a riverbank, or a fallen tree. And what good would lumping the present, past and future together do? Life was confusing enough.

She pondered the poem until her eyes were bleary, looking up she realized time had flown by and she was now late for her adventure. She clicked off the music, shook a warning finger at fLit and raced to the window. A gentle breeze swirled the branches of the old Oak tree as Ambril swung her foot out over the three-story drop. She frantically felt around with her foot for the ladder then woofed, relieved when her foot grazed its top rung, 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 into a pile of leaves. She floundered a bit but found her way through the plantings without making too much mess…she hoped. Pulling twigs from her hair, she got on her bike and rode down to Fern’s house. As she pulled up to the little house with the big garden she blinked at the warm light shining cheerily through the front windows and took the porch steps two at a time. Impatiently, she rapped on the door.

Sully pulled the door open, “what took you? 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 a very worn, very old book. Curiously it looked just like the book Sully found at the Library.

Ambril grabbed Sully by the arm and hissed, “that’s one of Dr. Afallen’s books! You just walked out with it?”

Sully looked uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean to, in all the panic I just jammed it in my backpack without thinking. When I found it there I thought about returning it until I remembered what Dr. Afallen said---that without him there, the other librarians would clear out everything.”

Sully shrugged. “So I decided to keep it---at least until Dr. Afallen is back on his feet…and you won’t believe what we found in there!”

Ambril went and looked over Miss Fern’s shoulder as she laboriously read through a neatly penned recipe in curly script. Ambril noticed notations in different handwriting scribbled in the margins, bits of other recipes were also clipped to the page. It would be nice to learn more magic.

Ygg dumped a handful of purple berries into a bowl full of leaves and twigs at Miss Fern’s direction, “that’s more than enough Elderberry Dear. Now stir it briskly, yes that’s right.” Fern then smiled at Ambril.

“When new orders come in, Ygg will use this instead of Twid’s tea, he does all the order filling anyway,” Sully’s eyebrows wiggled up and down, “I thought of that part.”

“She’s bound to figure it out at some point,” countered Ambril.

Sully shrugged, “we’ll just have to take that risk,”

“You mean I have to take that risk,” Ygg said grimly giving the tea one last stir.

“That should do it, though, I warn you, it might be a little strong,” said Fern vaguely, “though everyone will calm down---eventually.”

Ygg put a couple of spoonfuls into a teapot and poured hot water in. “Let’s try it out.”

“It won’t have much affect on you kids. It would be best to have an elderly person try it, one who…” there came a timid knock on the back door. Miss Fern walked slowly over and opened the door. “Daisy Dear, do come in, we’re having tea, will you join us?”

“I just came over to see if you had any red yarn handy, I want to finish a scarf for Crystal Twid before it gets too cold.” painfully Mrs. Flood maneuvered herself over to an overstuffed chair festooned with doilies and plopped down.

“Now, you must try my new tea Daisy, it’ll make you feel lovely!” she handed her a large mug of the steaming tea, “so much better than that Sunset Tea.”

Mrs. Flood sniffed as scents 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. Crystal has been so thoughtful these days, bringing me tea and taking me to church. She thinks it’s time for me to try something new…such as moving in with my daughter. I put a ‘For Sale’ sign in the window 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 smells like my Mother’s kitchen at Christmas time.” she took a small sip and her eyes brightened, “my but that’s good!” then she took a big swallow and sat up straight, her walking stick clattered to the floor unnoticed. “This is lovely Fern, I’ve felt so chilled lately---but your tea makes me feel positively girlish!” she stood up and twirled.

Fern looked startled and said softly, “yes, too much elderberry.”

Mrs. Flood stretched, pointed her toe and…giggled.

Fern nodded decisively, “far too much elderberry!”

Mrs. Flood then started humming a tune from the 60’s while dancing around the kitchen, “thanks so much for the tea, Fern dear,” the old woman trilled as she pirouetted through the door, “I think I’ll take a turn around the block before bed,” then she was gone.

“Oh my!” murmured Fern, “we must tone it down a bit.”

Sully giggled, “but not too much, let’s let the old folks enjoy themselves!”

Fern laughed, “we’ll leave in just a little---fun then,” they made their way back to her kitchen. “We’ll need to calm the Impatience with something…Ah! Sage would be just the thing! I believe I have some drying in the garage, would you mind bringing in a bunch?” she asked Ygg.

“Happy to do it,” said Ygg beckoning to Ambril and Sully.

“It’s a bit of a mess,” Fern added just as the screen door banged behind them.

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 almost entirely with vines. It was made solidly of stone, small windows marched down the garden side with an arched garage door punctuating the driveway. Ygg pulled hard on one of the tall doors. It creaked resentfully open to reveal a deeper darkness. Ygg disappeared inside for a second and then light flooded the building. Ambril liked it better dark.

“Yep, it’s a mess all right,” said Sully.

That was an understatement. Boxes teetered over them as they stepped inside. Paint cans and tools lay haphazardly on a large stone table to the side beyond which cabinets sagged under thickly draped cobwebs. Bunches of dried flowers and herbs hung from the rafters competing with vines which had somehow found a way inside.

“Is that a fireplace? What a funny thing to put in a garage,” Sully pointed to fireplace imbedded in one of the stone walls.

“This garage was nought built to put cars in,” said Ygg as he scrambled up on the stone table. “It be more house than garage, Fern said Fixit Joe lived here once--- before that it was some kind of laboratory,” He reached up and pulled down a bunch of dried herbs.

“That’s right, Fern said it was my Dad’s Lab!” said Ambril excitedly and looked around with renewed interest. But it was hard to see past the cobwebs and neglect.

“I think this be Sage…no time for lollygagging now, let’s get back,” Ygg jumped down from the table and headed for the door.

Sully batted away a few cobwebs as she followed Ygg out but Ambril hesitated wanting to explore a little more. The longer she stood there among the dusty clutter the more the garage became creepier and creepier. The scratching of little rat feet sent Ambril racing to catch up to the other kids.

Back inside, Sully picked through the remedy and removed just some of the purple berries as Ygg added a few of the dried sage leaves. Fern finally gave a nod of approval.

Ambril lifted the top of the teapot and sniffed. “This smells like the tea Mrs. Sweetgum made for me last night.”

“Aster’s an old hand at this,” said Fern.

Ygg said. “Now all I have to do is replace the Sunset Tea with this, right?”

“Without getting caught,” added Sully.

“As if I don’t have enough to do what with schoolwork,” he grumbled.

The cuckoo clock chimed in at eleven thirty startling Fern, “Oh my, the time! We’d better hurry, it’s almost Moonrise!” the old woman threw a shawl around her shoulders and scurried for the door, “watch your step now, it’s a bit crowded out there what with all the gnomes.”

They all barreled through the back door and out into the starlit garden.

It took a while before Ambril’s eyes adjusted to the darkness. She shivered when she saw the looming dark outlines of the forest beyond the Wall. She hadn’t been near it since the Dullaith attack.

But Fern’s garden that night was extraordinary. In the soft glow of the patio lanterns autumn flowers swayed in the breeze as the trees embraced the house with feathery shadows. There was also something strange…an emotion in the air. The night seemed to be holding its breath, waiting. Ambril could almost smell the anticipation.

Ygg set to work arranging rickety folding chairs and nearly tripped over a couple of gnomes standing in the middle of the patio.

Ambril found Fern at her elbow nodding at the vines growing on the garage, “That is my very favorite plant, the Vita Fiore. It blooms just once a year and this is its big night!”

“Hey, come take a load off your feet,” Sully beckoned to Ambril from one of the folding chairs. She had pulled up a grouchy looking gnome to help prop her chair up. Ambril found a laughing gnome with a long, tall hat near her chair

“Did you know my garage is one of the oldest buildings in Trelawnyd?” Fern nodded proudly then she pointed excitedly at the moon peeking over the mountains, “here it comes, watch the vines now!” as the first of the moon’s rays hit the Vita Fiore 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 Vita Fiore buds began to quiver in time with the rhythm. As the moonlight touched each flower the buds unfolded into the most exquisite flower Ambril had ever seen. They glowed pure white and sparked with all the colors of the rainbow. Each had petals that cascaded like a rose and from the center a long arching stamen began to grow. At its tip danced a dot of light.

“By all the Glain that’s pretty,” Ygg had his mouth open, amazed.

“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 three flowers that grew large in the moonlight. The dots of light began to dance wildly, resonant with the thrum of the earth.

“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. The three flowers had now grown to several times the size of the other flowers. Their dancing dots elongated and grew into something familiar---a figure 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 fairies hovering in the air watching the spinning, dancing beings within the flowers.

“Ooooh, look how sweet they are!” enchanted, Sully reached out to touch one. But the fairy swatted her hand away and gave her a nasty look.

“Ouch!” cried Sully as she pulled away, “touchy little things aren’t they?”

“Watch now!” Fern pointed as the fairies grouped themselves around each of the three forms. In the glow of the new being they looked happy and excited. Then the fairies began spinning, blurry fast in a dancing circle. Ambril could hear wild bells in her head, as the fairy circles became hoops of light as they detached themselves from the flowers and careened around the garden in a mad dance forcing Ambril 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. Ambril gasped, within each group hovered a newborn fairy, looking around in wonder. One 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,” mused Fern, “they only come at Moonrise to gather up their young.” Fern shook her head sadly, “not long ago we’d see fifty or sixty born each Moonrise, but lately, there have been so few,” they watched as the fairies vanished into the twinkling sky until they were alone again in the garden.

“It be Booglish, that be true,” said a voice by Ambril’s knee. Ambril looked around but saw only a frowning gnome near her chair…Wait, hadn’t he been laughing before?

“Wasn’t he smiling before?” Sully asked.

“You be meaning like this?” the gnome suddenly cocked his head and smiled hugely.

Ambril yelled and jumped up so fast she bumped the little ceramic man.

“That be Bummil.” Ygg nodded as if garden gnomes coming to life were perfectly natural.

Bummil had drawn back rubbing his arm and looking puzzled.

“You shouldn’t be scaring them like that, you know you take some gettin’ used to,” Ygg scolded.

“I be no doolally,” the gnome looking at Ambril reproachfully.

“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 glare to Ygg and still rubbing his elbow.

Ygg sighed, “let’s have a look-see, then.”

Bummil sidled over to Ygg, “she be batie in the head, aye?” he whispered as he dropped something into Ygg’s open hand.

“Nay, she be right in the head,” Ygg held up a small chip of green to the light, “most days at least…it be a lucky thing I brought glue,” he motioned to Bummil to hold out his arm as he pulled out a small tube.

Bummil raised his elbow 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 as 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 her eyes wide.

The gnome gave the chair a shove and it clattered to the ground. “You best watch who you be using to prop up your own self, Missy!”

“Now Baldot,” Ygg squinted knowingly at the gnome who was now trying to look innocent, “you could have politely asked her to move.”

Baldot grinned, “you be right there, Ygg, but I love to see human-kind jump and jibber,” he straightened his cap, “Seeing as it’s just about all they’s good for.” A faint crack was heard, “Garn! Oh fer Fixit Joe!”

Ygg pulled the pudgy gnome closer to the 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.

“Right---so---let me get this straight,” Sully said, “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, “but mostly less---we’re garden variety ceramic---now your Gran’s is very likely porcelain---“

“Blagoor, stop your jawing and give me some peace to work in,” grumbled Ygg as he examined the new-old crack on Baldot’s cap.

Sully rolled her eyes, “where was I? Oh yeah, the gnomes break and you fix them with this super-strength glue,” she grabbed the tube from his hand. “My Dad swears by this stuff,” she said handing the tube back to Ygg. “But he just fixes lamps and tea cups that don’t---jump and jibber,” she eyeballed Ygg. “YOU are fixing a living---,” her eyebrows came together suddenly, “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 be much more refined, don’t you know,” Baldot demonstrated his refined locomotion by plunking along the patio making tink-tink noises with every step. Ambril thought he looked like a two-legged goat but she didn’t say a word.

Sully gave Baldot a dirty look, “I was about to say that maybe we could look for something better, you know, in our new---magic recipe book,” Sully put her hands on her hips and stared down at the little men,” but seeing as we’re just human-kind that are only good at jumping and jabbering…”

“Ya mean you’d really try and help us?” Bummil said clearly stunned.

“I take it back, you never jump and jibber, that be OTHER human-kind, nought you,” said Baldot smiling hard and displaying five chipped teeth.

Sully cringed. “I liked you better when you were rude and obnoxious,” but Ambril could see she was thinking. She raced back into the kitchen and returning with the old book and started paging through it, “here! This might work---Smart Lip glue---especially effective on mouthy grumps who---“

“Stop playing with them and getting their hopes up,” Ygg yawned, “besides, I’m tired and want to get to bed.”

Baldot snorted in disgust and turned away.

Sully looked miffed, “sorry---seriously though I think there might be something in here…” she mused reading through a few more pages, “I’ll have another look tomorrow, shall we meet at the Gazebo for lunch?”

Ambril nodded, she was glad it was Saturday the next day, her eyelids were drooping, “good night Miss Fern, it was fantastic.”

“I’m glad you three came by, now don’t forget your remedy,” she said handing Ygg a large brown bag.

“I’ll be delivering this stuff all day, I can’t be meeting you tomorrow,” Ygg looked crestfallen.

“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. “We be experts at borrowing---but we be good at delivering too. How’s about we’ll do the delivering and you do the glue making---deal?” he twinkled up at Ygg.

“The gnomes do have a knack for getting into places unseen,” Fern nodded, “lock or no lock.”

“Right you are!” crowed Bummil.

“Alright then, if Miss Fern says you aren’t no Booglish lay bouts, then you aren’t,” Ygg smirked then turned to Sully and Ambril, “I’ll just explain what needs to be done to these little tykes---“

“Tykes! Who you be calling tykes! Yelled Baldot, “I be at least a hundred years old!”

“And you be acting like you’re eight!” growled Ygg as he scooched down on his knees and was soon surrounded by red capped little men.

As they turned to go Sully asked, “I wonder whatever happened to Mrs. Flood?”

Fern smiled and pointed at up at her neighbor’s rooftop, “she’s quite enjoying herself!”

Silhouetted by the moon’s light there was Mrs. Flood, twirling on the tippy top of her weather vane.

“That is some kind of tea, Miss Fern,” said Ambril admiringly.

# Chapter 26 The Gazebo Garden

Noon the next day found Ambril coasting to a stop at the Gazebo. She had come early to poke around a little. As she struggled to free her overstuffed backpack from her basket, Mrs. Sweetgum had been generous with lunch, then something hard banged her hip.

Oww!” she yelled as fLit’s head emerged from her pack, “how did you get in there?” she grumbled as she rubbed the sore spot, “listen, if you don’t behave yourself today I’m locking you in my bottom drawer---you’ve been warned.”

She dragged her pack to the Gazebo and zipped fLit back inside before skipping down the steps and into the sad, tangled, wondrous mess of her Great Gran’s garden.

The flagstone path before her tipped and turned every which way and was choked with the tiniest of pink flowers with an intoxicating sweet scent. Ambril ducked under a frilly bush with what looked like beach umbrella’s hanging from it, then eased through a thicket of reeds whistling tunelessly in the breeze, only to slip and fall on some shiny green leaves the size and shape of a baby grand piano lid. Getting to her feet she became entangled in a curtain of sticky tendrils that looked and smelled like old socks. Finally she gave up when she found herself up against a ten foot high hedge bristling with nuts the size of basketballs. Frustrated, she trudged back to the Gazebo and batted aside one of the beach umbrella blossoms a little too hard. She should have seen it coming, after all she was in the garden of a great magic wielder---it then whacked her back---so hard that she lost her balance and fell face down, getting a mouth-full of dirt. The blossom blew a long, loud raspberry at her.

“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 sound of the garden was louder here…and different, instead of the usual buzzing insect sounds expected in a garden Ambril heard clickity clacking noises…Ambril had heard that sound before but couldn’t place it.  
 “Except for them teeny tiny stalk,.” said a third voice.

“Do you think she’s right in the head though? Jumping and spitting, kind of odd that!”

For some reason Ambril thought of the elderly schoolteachers who had lived next door several moves back; every day, all day Ambril had heard them arguing through the walls. They spoke loudly to be heard over the clickity clacking sound their knitting needles made…that was it! The sound she heard was exactly like the old ladies knitting. But who would be knitting in her Great Gran’s garden? Ambril chuckled as she stooped to brush off her pants---then she froze.

“She finally spotted us.”

Ambril just stared not at all sure that what she was seeing was real.

“She don’t say much does she’s.”

There at the base of the Gazebo, nestled in the dirt were three lumpy, turnip-like growths knitting furiously. Each had small pinprick eyes just above a long wrinkled mouth. Like the last potato in the bin left a little too long they were nearly covered with wrinkles and where they weren’t wrinkled hairy tendrils had sprouted and collected dirt clods of various sizes. While Ambril watched, one stopped and pulled out long muddy roots from the ground to knit with. Their knitting had produced a muddy, smelly mass of woven muck. Bits of roots and rotting leaves dangled from it. Ambril tried concentrating on the spectacles. For 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 knitting furiously and peered through them at Ambril, “She is a Lovey though,” she sighed, “you can tell the nice ones can’ts you?” then she sighed sadly, “why is it always the nice ones who gets it hard?”

“Done are we?” grunted the one on the right. She held up the muddy blanket they’d been working on, shook it and 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 same pink fragrant flowers that were growing down the garden path.

“You---you knitted that? But…that’s impossible!” gasped Ambril then realized how silly that sounded, after all she was chatting with turnips who wore spectacles.

The one on the right grabbed the glasses and gave Ambril a curious look. “Course it is, impossibles is acres more fun than usuals isn’t it?” she scrunched up her face, “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 it thrum with life. The tiny flowers turned toward her and began to glow.

“Well looks there! They likes her!”

The middle one ripped the glasses from her sister’s face, “can’t work out why---she’s as dull as a patch of pigsweed,” her mouth went all prunish.

“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 and spread it out on the bare patch. She tried to smooth out all the wrinkles but before she finished, the flowers began to take root.

“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. “You better pull away quick or’n you mights be there for centuries.” she warned.

Ambril got right to work and pulled on her shoe hard, after a few tugs she was able to rip her shoe free. Turning her shoe over she found that the flower tendrils had grown right through her shoe.

“Well she almost gots it right,” said the left one as she grabbed the glasses off her sister’s nose.

Ambril said nothing as she picked bits of plant from her favorite sneakers.

“I thinks she’s a bit soft in the head,” the middle one then waggled her top lump.

The left one snorted, “you’ve gone soft in the head, she was chosen.”

The middle one sucked in her mouth as she stole the glasses from her sister then banged her on the head with them, “she’ll be lunch to one of them that’s after her, if’n she doesn’t smarten up right quick though.”

“Won’t makes it to lunch, she’ll be mid-morning snack,” waggled the left one.

The right one sighed heavily.

“Excuse me, but I don’t like being talked about like this,” broke in Ambril somewhat huffily, “my name is Ambril and this used to be my great grandmother’s house. Who are you?”

“No need to gets all tangled about it. We knows who YOU are,” 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 sister’s face.

“Sorry Lovey, it’s just we’s not used to any human-kind seeing us.”

“It’s the Glain, it is,” mused the middle one.

“No, no it’s more, she’s more---she’s ones of foursies,” said the one on the right. “Lookey!” she whacked her bigger sister with the spectacles.

The middle one took them without comment and peered once again at Ambril. “Ones of fours AND with Fairy Glain, my, my.” She eyed Ambril up and down and then again.

“So who and---what are you exactly?” asked Ambril.

“Everyones calls us Aunties,” said the middle one. Her tendril fingers reached out and brushed aside some of Ambril’s messy hair, “it 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. “Have you gone rotten?” “It’s been wrongs only once in all the years we’ve---“

“Once is enough, you know that one was a doosey! ” said the right one as she tried unsuccessfully to grab the glasses, “let’s gives her the riddle,” she said as she resumed knitting.

The left one gave a little jump. “Oh yes, we cans! We cans do that at least!” She bounced so excitedly several earthworms wriggled frantically out of the soil and under a nearby rock.

“What are you talking about, what riddle?” asked Ambril.

“That’s our problem, Lovey, we can’t tell you.” said the center one nodding sagely. “We’re can’t tells what we sees.”

“We see’s EVERYTHING. We see’s the future---also the past and the present, but everyone sees them.” said the one on the left nodding just as furiously as she was knitting, “but we can’t tells, we can’t says…at least not directly,” she twinkled, “one day you’ll meets a little green man.”

“A green man with a somethings in his pockets.” offered the center one.

“He’ll asks you a riddle and you’ll not knows the answer, no one ever knows it.” said the left one, “he thinks he’s so clever,” she scoffed, “so you’ll makes a guess.”

“But we’ll tells you now,” the center one put in, “so you bests him.”

“Cause we hates him,” said the one on the left nodding furiously again.

“Hates ‘em, so true…he’s worse than bare patches,” put in the right one, then she stretched toward Ambril until she was inches from her face, “it’s daybreak and nightfall.” She whispered her breath smelling of fresh turned soil.

“What is?” Ambril asked.

“The answer is!” screamed the center angrily and sucking her breath in loudly she said, “definitely gones soft in the center, she has,” she spoke clearly and slowly to Ambril, “we knows its hard but 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 vigorously deeper into the dirt. “We’s so much to do this time of year,” she seemed to shrivel right before Ambril’s eyes.

“Wait, I’m confused! What about---“

“No time---Lovey---” whispered the one on the right who was no more than a wrinkled smile on one of the ropy vines growing around the Gazebo.

“Ambril? Who are you talking to?” Sully was just getting off her bike.

“I just had the weirdest experience.” Ambril called back as she waded through the weedy grass to the stairs.

“Run-of-the-mill weird or run for your life weird?” Sully plopped down on the steps the old book of recipes in the crook of her arm, “and why is it always you?”

Ambril paused to scratch her head. “I don’t know, maybe I just wasn’t 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 on the path. Several other gnomes popped out of the bushes.

“This garden’s a disgrace, you know!” Baldot yelled, “I’d like to hogtie whoever let it get so very bad.” He stared accusingly at Ambril.

“Don’t look at me,” she said innocently, “I’m just a kid!”

“A Derwyn kid and this be the Derwyn Estate!”

“But we haven’t lived in Trelawnyd for ten years, my Mom hasn’t even seen this place yet,” Ambril sadly looked around. “That might be a good thing, it’ll break her heart to see like this… I don’t know how we’re going to get it cleaned up.”

Bummil twinkled, “are you askin’ what I think you be askin’? You want us to work here?” He sounded oddly hopeful.

“I can’t pay you,” Ambril shrugged.

“You just find a way to fix our broken parts, that be payment enough. We’ve nought enough to do at Fern’s, that garden’s real gentile. This one you be takin’ your life in your hands just strolling about.” Baldot nodded at the beach umbrella blossoms. Ambril couldn’t agree more.

“It be a grand, fine garden!” Bummil grinned foolishly until Baldot hit him with his hat.

“Did ya get all them deliveries done?” Ygg came up just then.

Baldot snorted, “easy as a lay about afternoon! We even snuck some into old biddy’s Twid’s tea! Dried up old Newt that she is.”

Ygg’s face turned thunderous. “I told you to stay away from her! She don’t cotton to magic folk. If’n she even get’s the idea that I be the one to switch things, I’m out on me hoochallaly--- then what would I do?”

“Well you could stay with us at the farm,” piped up Sully, “we can always use some extra---hoochallaly.”

But Ygg just shook his head, “your parents would ask questions---too may questions---they’d try to send me back to Chert thinking it be best for me, that’s what parents do.” He bent down to the ceramic men who were looking very uncomfortable. “So ya nought do anything that might make her suspicious.”

“She didna notice a thing, it nought had any effect on her---some folks are hopeless,” Baldot sniffed, “pity that, I’d a like to have seen her somersaulting down the stairs like old Mrs. Dogwood,” then he cleared his throat and groused impatiently, “time’s a wasting! YOU need to be making some fixit juice NOW to hold up your part of the bargain.”

Ambril nodded. In the bright sunlight she could see that the gnomes were riddled with cracks where they had been mended.

“We’ll get right on that.” Sully said but looked a little sick as she motioned to Ygg and Ambril up the Gazebo steps. She sat down heavily on a bench and patted the worn book, now bristling with bookmarks. “This is an Astarte by the way, a magical remedy book,” she opened the book and removed the first bookmark. “I found a bunch of remedies that I think might work---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! I’m even hazy about what a beaker is.” She hunched over the book and shook her head.

“A beaker is one of those cup thingies in the science lab,” put in Ambril.

A commotion erupted in the garden, “get out a there, or you’ll be damaging its teeth!” Baldot yelled.

Ambril jumped up to find that one of the beach umbrella flowers, the one 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.

“fLit again,” muttered Sully.

“Sorry, it’s not my fault---he stowed away again,” Ambril said sheepishly.

“No offense but that is the stupidest smart robot I’ve ever met,” said Sully as they raced down the steps to help.

Baldot and the other gnomes had armed themselves with ropes. They managed to rope one of fLit’s legs, three of the gnomes had lined up and began to pull hard on it; but the blossom seemed to relish the fight and pulled back, refusing to let the robot go.

“Never you mind, we’ve got him sorted!” shouted a particularly fat gnome as the three friends ran up. This one’s called a Brellie plant on account of the umbrellie flowers. They get grumpy in late winter, they’re anxious to launch.”

“You’ll just make more of a mess of it, anyway.” Baldot added.

Ambril was jostled out of the way as a gnome began to tickle the flower just under the blossom with bunches of prickle grass while dodging the other Brellie blossoms who were vigorously trying to whack him. One gnome failed at this and sailed off over her head. He landed in a tangle of brambles but scrambled out, grabbed a stick, and went back in.

These gnomes were warrior gardeners, Ambril thought. After a few moments, the plant started to giggle, then it chuckled, and finally broke into a belly laugh. At last, with a belch it spit out the robot. The three gnomes who had been pulling on him 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, then blew it out in a whoosh launching itself into the sky.

“Look at Boocher, he be flying!” shouted Bummil. Sure enough, Boocher, the 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, 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 tangled 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!” Ambril ran up and started tugging on the vines, “he’s a smart robot but he still has a lot to learn---“

“Smart robot my checkered undies!” snorted Baldot, “I know what he be, we don’t like his kind on principle,” he screwed up his face angrily, “they’re sneaky and nought 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 a gnome and was chewing away on him.

“Coadsnigs, that’s Blagoor!” Baldot swore forgetting his anger, “tickle just under the nape! No, lasso his right leg, the left one broke last month!” Baldot raced back into the fray.

Ambril tugged and wiggled the vines until she was able to pull the robot down. There was just one little vine wrapped stubbornly around his middle.

The ever annoying fLit grabbed at medallion and hauled it out into the light. It dazzled in the bright sunlight. The moment her medallion connected with the budding vine Ambril felt the thrum of the garden heighten and pulse right through her and combine with the bright energy of her medallion. The bud on the vine flew open, there was the beautiful flower she had seen just the night before.

But Ambril sensed another presence there…watching her. This one sucked the bright energy away, her medallion dimmed slightly. Ambril shivered, she instinctively shoved the jewel under her shirt and pulled fLit clear of the vines. The flower bud instantly closed.

“Master Ygg!” Bummil ran up then, “Boocher’s in a bad way,” he huffed and pointed down the path. They followed Bummil down the path to where Boocher lay on the ground. His left leg had been cracked.

“I fell and hit this here marker is all. Can you fix me up Master Ygg?” Boocher peered over his expansive belly at his leg.

“We’ll have you right as rain soon enough,” Ygg said easily as 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 cows you’d a’ seen them by now,” groused Baldot scornfully then he walked over and tapped one of the gray stones that lined the garden paths.

Ambril bent down to get a better look and brushed aside some dry leaves to reveal something 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 leaves and smelled like cough syrup.

“Here’s another one!” cried Sully and bent over another gray stone.

Looking down the pathway, Ambril now could see many markers. There was one next to Ambril’s knee. She read out, “Vixen Brill.”

“Hey! That’s one we need!” said Sully excitedly.

The Vixen Brill was a compact, frilly plant with black tipped seedpods on long stalks waving high above the greenery.

“Great, this looks easy, I’ll just grab a few of the leaves,” said Sully and reached out but just as quickly snatched it back, “Ouch! It’s prickly!”

“Prickly my patootee! It’s 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. 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 bared its vicious, needle-like teeth at them as it weaved and bobbed looking 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 until they cried.

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 to mend your ungrateful patootees.”

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, “Look lively! Bring the Lambs Ear!”

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 from cute little lambs are they?“ asked Sully apprehensively.

Baldot looked offended, “Nay, that’s a right disgusting thought. 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?” 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 snapped at his elbow.

Ambril and Sully stealthily inched closer to the plant, “the gnomes sure know a lot about these plants,” said 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.”

They had gotten well off the path and were within grabbing range. “O.K., on three, then,” said Ambril, “One, two---three!“ they both lunged at the plant but Ambril had to veer sideways into the orphan sock tree to escape a counter attack from one of the larger seedpods. Ambril pulled off a couple of argyle pods and stuffed them into the vixen’s mouth which distracted it enough for Ambril to make it back to the safety of the path. As she did so Sully raced up with handfuls of leaves and three seed pods snapping at her 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 and nudged Sully.

“Slag Fern, we need the Gooberous part and the fiber from a Bomber Nut, a medium.” Sully read the recipe from the Astarte.

Baldot smirked, “JUST the fiber, aye?” he said sarcastically and rolled his eyes, “piece of cake, I’ll let you grab those then,” he turned and trotted off down the path, “come on then, don’t keep me waiting!”

Sully and Ambril jogged to keep up. As they rounded a bend they found gnomes were busily raking leaves and pruning or trying to prune some of the more unruly plants.

“Watch it Bandler!” yelled Baldot as a giant dandi-lion head snapped viciously at a gnome, his mane looked as ragged as a homeless man’s beard, “just give him a little trim to start, not one of them goatees you hear?”

He gestured to the overgrowth, “You see? These plants have had to fend for themselves so long 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 out Barmie that Foolish Boatman’s overripe!” Baldot yelled just as one of the berries burst, raining a yellowish gel down on the hapless gnome. Ambril wrinkled her nose, it smelled like a herd of flatulent Camels as it dripped in long gooey strands to the ground then hardened so quickly Barmie was soon anchored to the spot.

Bummil sighed, “Those lacquer berries are too ripe by half. Get the water then!”

Baldot continued down the path unconcerned. “He’ll be all right just as soon as the juice is washed off. We tried that on ourselves once. Worked a treat---until the first rain, won’t hold up to water.”

“Won’t hold up anything, including me arm---it fell right off. Ygg found me and fixed everything.” Bummil nodded.

Baldot cupped his hands over his mouth, “hey Bittle! We’ll be needing some Goober from that Slag Fern!”

Bittle was playing cat and mouse with an enormous purple plant with tightly wrapped leaves around a central trunk. As Ambril watched, a serpent like seedpod snaked toward him hissing angrily. Nearby another gnome was lazily swinging a lasso around his head.

“Anytime there Beadle no hurry,” said Bittle sarcastically as he dove to one side to avoid the snapping jaws of the seed pod. Beadle seemed not to have heard him he was so focused on the sinuous movement of the seedpod and let the lasso swing over his head for several minutes until finally letting the lasso go. It sailed effortlessly over the seedpod’s head and down its long scaly neck.

Beadle immediately pulled it taunt. “There, now Bittle you can stop your dancing and come help with the tugging.” he chuckled then hunkered down and pulled hard on the rope. The seedpod struggled wildly to free itself but when Bittle and several of the other gnomes lent their strength the its entire central trunk began to tip forward as if it was hinged at the base.

“Get your beaker ready then!” Baldot said to Sully.

Sully looked blank. “Beaker? I haven’t got a beaker.”

He rounded on her his hands on his hips, “a pail maybe, paper cup, your Mom’s thimble collection---anything? ”

“Well no.”

Baldot snorted. “What was your plan then? To carry it in your cupped hands then? What would you be doing without us?”

“We’d not be making Fixit Juice that’s for sure!” Sully said looking hot and bothered.

Baldot muttered something under his breath as he marched over to the bristly hedge with huge nuts that Ambril had run into earlier and picked off a nut the size of a basketball. Using a sharp stone he neatly cracked it in two. Inside was a shiny black ball that immediately began to fizz and smoke. Ambril heard a faint ticking noise which grew louder…and faster.

“Cragnuts! These Bomber Nuts be overripe too!” exclaimed Baldot as he picked up the black ball and tossed 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 dove for cover. Before Ambril and Sully could react the Bomber Nut exploded with a squelchy boom. Caught in the open, Ambril and Sully were instantly coated with what looked and felt like Lime Jell-O, but smelled like unwashed underwear.

For the second time that day the gnomes roared with laughter as the wiped smelly goo from their eyes and slipped and slid on goo covered path.

After a few moments, Baldot threw Ambril something the size and shape of a bike helmet. “Here be your B---Bomber Nut,” he giggled, “the fiber is inside.”

It was half of the shell he’d just pried open. Ambril reached inside and pulled out handfuls of what looked like greasy, monkey’s hair…and smelled like monkeys too.

“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 decided not to try it out as she didn’t think that was possible.

“Where’s the hose?” asked Sully looking around.

“Who be needing a hose when you have a pond to be swimming in,” Baldot huffed then stopped, “but you might be frightened of the---“

“Relax, we can handle it, right Ambril---frogs, snakes, slugs, bring them on.”

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 glittered in the sun, an inviting blue-green and was fed by water flowing out from under the Wall.

“It’s like a postcard, isn’t it?” asked Sully, “picture perfect.”

They squelched out of their shoes and jumped in with their clothes on. The water cooled Ambril’s sticky, goober covered body. Though it was still early spring the water didn’t feel too cold. She ducked under water and swam out toward the center of the lake. It was surprisingly deep at the center with long ropy strands of bright green slime crisscrossing the lake bottom. A perfect place for a Sea Monster, Ambril thought, as she surfaced for air. As a kid Sea Monsters had been her worst fear. Sully was floating lazily on her back staring at the blue sky, “wish we could spend all afternoon in here, instead of helping out annoying garden ornaments. But if we did stay in here, they’d find some new way to annoy us,” she started paddling back toward the shore, “coming?”

Ambril nodded but dove down for one more glide through the serene water. Her body felt almost weightless, the swush of her pants against her legs was all she felt. When she was almost to the shore, she noticed a piece of plastic floating near her with a black ball inside. Probably one of the homeless people had tossed it in the pond. She reached out to grab it and found it wasn’t plastic---it wiggled a little then---it blinked.

Ambril realized she was staring at an enormous eye. She screamed then madly lunged for the shore. Her feet touched solid ground almost immediately and she scrambled out sputtering and coughing.

“What! Wait; don’t tell me---another weird plant right?” Sully asked as she picked up her shoes and vigorously swished them through the water.

Ambril stood staring at the lake. “I---I think I saw a Sea Monster.”

“A Sea Monster? What---did it come after you and try to eat you?” Sully barely looked at her she was so preoccupied with wringing out her hair.

Ambril purposely slowed her breathing, she was safe, come to think of it the Sea Monster hadn’t seemed to want to hurt her, “no, it just---blinked at me.”

Sully looked at her skeptically, “it---blinked at you. Come on, just today we’ve been snapped at by a rabid vixen plant, escaped an explosion, slimed with something that hopefully isn’t toxic---and you’re terrified by something---blinking at you?”

“It was a huge—and---horrible eye!”

“The horrible blinking eye….Whooo---scary!” Sully schlepped over to the Gazebo steps and tried to wring out her clothes while still in them. “Sorry, look I’m sorry something scared you but 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 fought with the laces of her wet sneakers, “let’s hope these dry quickly,”

“This is going to sound really weird 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 shrugged and put her face toward the warm sun, her mind must be playing tricks on her.

“Come on let’s eat,” Sully took the Gazebo steps two at a time. Ambril followed a slowly, when she reached the top step she turned to look at the pristine waters of the pond. What she really wanted to do was jump back in the water, find the

Sea Monster and wrestle it out of the water, it may not help her understand what was happening much but at least she’d feel in charge of her own life for a little bit.

# 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.”

They ate 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 overhead.

Sully was pulled goo from her hair, “this stuff is soooo sticky!”

“Perfect for Fixit juice,” Ygg was rooting hopefully through the lunch leavings looking much less stretched thanks to Mrs. Sweetgum’s industrial sized lunches and snacks.

Sully knocked on her head sideways and a slime ball bounced out like a super ball. “Uh oh, it’s starting to morph! We’d better get to work,” she opened the Astarte remedy book, “Fixit Juice, recipe #158--- it seems pretty simple, we just put all this stuff together and stir,” she continued to read, “There is something weird at the end though. I guess we’ll just have to wing that part.” She rubbed her hands together smiling at Ambril and Ygg, “ready?”

The Gnomes had brought over a Bomber Nutshell the size of half a boulder for them to use. It wobbled when Ambril touched it and refused to sit straight.

Sully read through the recipe again, “we’ll start with the easy stuff first,” she said as she dumped out her bag. Under all the Bomber Nut fiber and Vixen Brill was a clump of wilted leaves, Sully putting a finger to her lips. “These are from my Mom’s herb garden; she’d kill me if she caught me in there,” then she started busily sorting through the greenery. It calls for three sprigs of thyme--- I guess you want it to last.” She threw in a few twigs with small green leaves. “Next, some Speedwell, to make it fast acting---ah! Here it is! Five strands with buds.” She threw in something with purple flowers. “Four flower heads of Everlasting,” she extracted some papery yellow flowers and tossed them in carelessly. “And three drops of Milk Weed.” She held up a stiff stock, snapped it in two and squeezed out three milky drops. “And then my personal favorite, seven leaves from a cast-iron plant,” Sully triumphantly held up a bunch of thick green blades before shredding them into the shell, “I got lucky, we had these in our front yard.”

Ambril found a stick and stirred the leaves. Other than mashing up the leaves and flowers, nothing happened

“Now we move onto the more interesting stuff,” Sully unceremoniously dumped in the Bomber Nut fiber and the Vixen Brill all at once.

Instantly they were enveloped by a cloud of yellow smoke which smelled like rotten eggs. “Something tells me things are going to get a whole lot crazier,” Sully coughed as she reached for the nut filled with Gooberish Slime and upended it over the mixing pot. It took its goobery time and hung in long slimy dangles until Sully gave it a firm shake.

Ambril hastily stepped back as the pot began to bubble and fizz in a big way. The smoke became an ominous blue. But when it didn’t explode, they braved the smoke and took turns peering into the pot. Ambril saw it was now a molten mess of greenish goo and stank of excitable skunks and dead cats. Apart from burping at her, it did nothing more.“Pee-Yew!” she said holding her nose.

“How long will it keep doing this then?” asked Ygg

Sully frowned and consulted the Astarte again. “until we---give it some life energy, whatever that is,” she said uncertainly. “I went to a wellness camp once where we tapped into our life energy; maybe we could try joining hands and meditating.” Suddenly the remedy began to fizz and pop like firecrackers on Chinese New Year.

“Just who are you trying to kill?” shouted Baldot running up from the garden.

Sully dove back into the Astarte, her nose brushing the page as if getting closer to it would help her understand, “It---it just says: A tap of life-energy---what the heck does that mean?” she said frustrated.

“Whatever it is do it now you Dingslags!” Baldot motioned wildly at the top of the Gazebo, “the Vita Fiore is about all-in!”

Through the steamy haze Ambril could see that Baldot was right. The noxious fumes had made the vine above them wilt. One of the larger buds sneezed, reminding Ambril of Rosebud and her Ashera…An idea flashed through her head. She rummaged through her backpack and raced for the concoction, which now seemed to be spitting Molotov cocktails, pitting the ground around it with blackened holes.

“What you be doing?” asked Ygg dubiously.

Ambril held her nose as she was advanced toward the foul smelling pot and raised her Ashera, “we hab da do somethig before we choke da death.”

Ambril felt nervous---here she was doing something dangerous that she’d never done before. She held her breath and grasped the Ashera tightly in both hands before timidly tapping the nut.

There was a loud boom and a brilliant flash of light inside Ambril’s head. Her heart filled with cold despair as a presence was suddenly there. It yanked her sideways so hard it took her breath away.

When she opened her eyes it was frigidly cold and dark. She definitely wasn’t anywhere near the sunlit Gazebo anymore. She could hear water dripping and sensed she was underground. When her eyes grew accustomed to the dark she was able to make out the outline of something monstrous…a darker shadow was there with her in the darkness. That she was in the presence of a powerful evil she had no doubt and began instinctively to search for some sense of what she was facing. The figure seemed to shift and change, writhing like a mass of eels then shifting to a more human form.

“So kind of you to offer yourself to me Ashera,” a gravely voice said inside her head. Its grating laughter sent spiky chills through her making her lose her nerve, she stepped back and rammed into a dank stone wall and stepped on something small and furry. It whimpered and shifted away.

The shadow seemed to grow larger as 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. The chain bit into her skin but didn’t break.

“I want the Glain… I need it,” the creature said patiently as it twisted the chain tighter and tighter until it began to choke her. She struggled but the creature was incredibly strong. Spots formed in her eyes and her knees weakened as she began to lose consciousness. At the last minute she lashed out at the monster. Luckily she was still holding her Ashera, an arc of blue white energy erupted and the creature grunted in surprise and released her.

She stumbled away and pressed her back to the wall, taking in as much of the fetid air as she could stand.

The creature loomed over her and said musingly, “I see now the taking of this must be done carefully.” the thing grasped the medallion once again and slowly pulled her up off her feet.

She was choking again. She lashed out again but the creature held her arms and legs. The spots reformed in her eyes…she knew she had only a few minutes left…death? She was too young to die. Her head became fuzzed with sadness, she didn’t want to die alone with this creature.

She wanted her friends and family---images flashed before her eyes as her movement slowed and her brain went inward, focusing on her life not her death, her Mom laughing with her over dinner, Zane smirking as he made a joke, Chao Feng puzzling over the checker board, Sully, Ygg, Miss Fern, Mrs. Sweetgum, even fLit her stupid robot…

With an electric crack and the sounds of tires screeching followed by 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 lay there happy to just breathe. She sat up and looked around. 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. And the fairy was nowhere to be seen.

Ygg found her first. “You O.K.? That be some explosion!” he offered his hand.

Ambril took it and got unsteadily to her feet. She wasn’t sure she hadn’t imagined the monster in the cave so she decided to say nothing,“I’m O.K.”

“What did you get tangled up into this time?” asked Sully looking at her hard.

“What do you mean?”

“Those red marks around your neck, where’d they come from?”

Ambril’s hand flew to her neck she could feel welts where the Medallion’s chain had bit into her skin. Fortunately there was no blood. “One of the vines maybe,” she said vaguely.

“This mighta gotten in the way of things.” Blagoor trotted up with her badly mangled robot. fLit’s head was askew, one leg had been torn off and there was a piece of string tied around his middle. “Strangest thing---the chest cubby wouldn’t stay closed at first, now it won’t open.”

Ambril took the robot and looked at it closely. She shook it gently and heard the faint sound of bells...

Ambril suddenly understood, “ no worries, it’s just a stupid toy,” She stowed the ruined robot not too gently in her backpack and zipped it firmly shut.

“Bob’s Bots can fix him.” Ygg nodded. “He can fix anything.”

“Excepting us, grumbled Baldot, then brightened, “speaking of that!”

Everyone looked over at the remedy which had thankfully stopped smoking. There was already a large group of gnomes eagerly gathering around it.

Ambril craned her neck to see inside, “did it work?”

The mixture was crystal clear and glossy smooth and smelled of new rain.

“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 began arguing over which was to be the first one cured.

“Nay, nought you live un’s,” said Ygg, “what we need is a broken pot or---“

“How’s this?” asked Bummil dragging a large something out from under a bush. It was a three-footed jug, lion-like paws jutted out from the bottom and balanced the jug on its padded toes. A large piece of its handle was missing.

“I broke it this morning while trying to water the Elli-plant.”

“Fine,” Ygg nodded as he picked up the broken handle and dipped it in the Fixit juice. He 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 be meaning prayer or something?”

“A wish more like,” Baldot shrugged.

Ygg shrugged. “O.K. then, how’s this. I hope this pot be put all-together again,” he sang out solemnly then stuck the broken piece back where it belonged.

When the pieces touched Ambril heard a soft click, then the break lines began to glow and fizz slightly. 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 new!” then he gasped as he was knocked sideways.

The jug shook its fist handle at him as it reared up on its clay feet.

“Well I’ll be jiggered and sold for scrap!” said Baldot in surprise, “The thing’s come alive!”

“And become nicely grouchy too!” said Bummil approvingly.

The jug stretched itself as it swaggered around, as if looking for a fight. Fortunately Bummil seemed to know from experience how to deal with grouchy ceramic beings. After ducking a few times to avoid jabs from the handle fist he said matter-of-factly. “Do you fancy a job?” he had to step quickly to one side to avoid a kick, “we be needing help carting water around, don’t you know.”

The jug stopped to consider this.

“Come and see then.” Bummil started walking up the path beckoning to the jug to follow. The jug boxed with the air a moment more then reluctantly, as if it couldn’t think of anything better to do, followed him.

“That be a right fine jug!” Blagoor said admiringly, “plenty of spirit.”

Apparently being rude and grouchy was just good manners to a gnome, Ambril thought.

“Now, I want you to fix me,” Baldot turned to Ygg, “and I ain’t gonna take NO for an answer. We be waiting years for Fixit Joe---who ain’t be coming back. I’ll take my chances with this stuff.”

Ygg looked unsure, “I think we be needing more testing---to make sure there be no side effects.”

Baldot grabbed the tip of his cap, “how’s this?” there was a small chip missing from the white tip, “we can test on this wee bit.”

“We might could try it,”

Baldot’s smile showed all five of his cracked teeth again as he walked up to the remedy, but before he dipped in his cap he paused and said stiffly, “I hope this be making this old goat whole, and thank ye for it,” then without hesitation he grasped the shell and jumped in headfirst.

Ygg yelled as he lunged for him but missed. Baldot was completely covered with Fixit Juice before Ygg finally fished him out. “What you be playing at?” Ygg growled as he held up the dripping gnome by his left foot.

For a moment Ambril feared the worst. Baldot was as stiff and still 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 before quieting.

“Baldot?” asked Ambril anxiously, “are you alright?” she bent down so she was eye to eye.

For a long moment nothing happened, and then slowly his right eye---winked.

Ygg held him up higher and yelled in his ear, “can you hear us?”

Baldot’s face slowly relaxed as he blinked both eyes and said sarcastically. “The great Trolls of the North can hear you, you Lummox!”

Ygg unceremoniously set him down, right side up.

Baldot began to stiffly move his arms and legs, “am I fixed?” he hesitantly took a step then another, “I be fixed!” he cried and began skipping around, “look at me! It works!” He said then did a somersault off the Gazebo.

The other gnomes cheered and made a mad dash for the remedy.

“Hold on there, now, one at a time!” said Ygg battling through to the pot. Every gnome was dipped that night which made them unusually cheerful. Bummil came up and hugged Ambril’s kneecap seven times and Baldot only frowned when Bummil tried to hug him. The sun was setting over the mountains when they finally wound their way through the heavy overgrowth and through the hole in the hedge.

“I’m beat,” Sully yawned as she stashed her bike by the side of the barn. “But---I think this was the best day I’ve ever had.”

Ambril stopped just short of agreeing when she remembered the creature in the dark cave.

“You want to stay for dinner?” Sully asked, “I’m sure it’ll be O.K.”

“Of course it is! We’d love to have you both!” Sully’s Mother was heaving a basket over her garden gate filled with a mountain of spinach and huge carrots. “You should stay you two. It’s the last of the carrots tonight!”

Ygg nodded vigorously, Ambril was about to accept when she remembered the broken robot in her backpack, “I’m really tired tonight---but Thanks.”

“Another time then,” said Sully’s Mom as she headed for the kitchen door. “Sully! Don’t’ forget to park your bike BEHIND the barn. You’re Dad nearly ran it over with the tractor yesterday,” she said over her shoulder.

Sully winced and walked her bike around the barn with Ygg just behind her.

“See you tomorrow,” the gravel spit from under her tires as Ambril shoved off. It had been an amazing day with some terrifying parts. Truth be told, certain parts had been amazingly terrifying…but the 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 bowl of stew and a large slice of homemade bread. It was heavenly. There was nothing but slurping noises for several minutes. When Ambril finished she set her bowl in the sink.

“That was great, Mrs. Sweetgum,” Ambril yawned as she scooped up her backpack, “where’s Mom?”

“She’s resting Feldez thought she looked a little tired.”

Ambril’s stomach tightened Feldez was getting way too controlling, soon he’ll have talked her into a padded cell; she fumed as she took the stairs two at a time.

After locking her door her she swung her pack onto her bed.

“Come on out of there!” she said sharply facing the pack.

She waited for a full minute, no reaction.

“I know you’re in there,” Ambril muttered angrily, “and I know WHAT you are,” Ambril shoved the backpack hard, “so show yourself!”

Still no reaction, Ambril was so angry now she couldn’t keep her hands from balling into fists. “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 punched the bag hard.

With a bang, the backpack burst open. fLit emerged just long enough for the string to break around his chest. An angry blur of light whizzed right at Ambril’s face and the robot fell back, lifeless.

It was the fairy all right, angry and disgusted. He opened his 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 more grating sounds, then switched to something like piano destruction followed by the sound of a dentist’s drill. He streaked around the room before zipping back to her and kicking her nose.

“Knock it off!” said Ambril raising her arms defensively, but she was helpless, the fairy was way too fast. He zipped in to kick her then was away again before she had time to duck. All she could do was cover her face with her arms---leaving a huge amount of real estate unprotected.

After several minutes of being poked, punched and kicked Ambril said through her fingers, “you’ve been cooped up in that robot since the Dullaith attack, haven’t you?” she winced as the fairy kicked her right ear, “watching everything I do, getting me into trouble, annoying my friends. Why? What am I to you?”

There were more sounds of piano destruction followed by a head-on collision.

“You don’t want to be here either, I can tell,” Ambril bit her lip as the fairy pulled her hair hard, “I know you’re here for a reason, tell me what that is, then maybe we can work something out.”

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.

The fairy began to speak, this time in a long cadence of chimes and bells with just a few grating screeches thrown in.

“I can’t understand you,” Ambril said, “there’s another way of communicating, isn’t there?” The fairy looked offended and sniffed as if it was beneath him.

“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 can you think of another way?”

The fairy looked disgusted but then he opened his mouth and a torrent of bell tones came out, then some clangs. Then the fairy screwed up his face with effort and she heard clearly in her head, “*Donkey*!” clang, ting, screech, “*Butt*!” then, “*You’re the Butt of a Donkey*!”

Ambril looked startled, “I heard that! You called me a Donkey’s Butt!” she drew her eyebrows together. It was pretty weird being insulted in her own head. Perhaps she could return the favor. She concentrated on the fairy and willed some words back at him.

“The fairy jumped then punched her in the nose.

“Ha! We’re even!” said Ambril rubbing her poor, abused nose, “besides it’s true, you are a pain in the b’ass akwards.”

The fairy made a face and flitted away, the picture of a sulking child.

Ambril tried 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.”*

She heard the sound of cars being dropped from a great height, 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, and looked as if she should be impressed.

She wasn’t.

Then he kicked her in the ear.

“*No more hitting and kicking, will you? We humans don’t do during polite conversation, it tends to make us a lot less polite.”* Ambril rubbed her ear.

“*First up, you don’t owe me a thing. I was curious that night I found you in the Morte Cell…really I saved you more by accident than anything. Second you repaid the favor this afternoon. You came and brought me back from that awful cave. So that means we’re even right?”* A second later Ambril had to duck as the robot slammed into the wall just where her head had been.

Sounds of a runaway elevator racketed around her head, “*you know nothing! You silly, stupid---plodding---HUMAN-KIND!*” he said it as if being a human was worse than being a dung beetle slimed by a slug and sat on by a baboon. The fairy now flew 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 his face, no longer angry, he looked sad and frustrated. Ambril got a flash that there was something more to this, something personal; but when the fairy caught Ambril watching him he landed a smashing blow to her chin.

“*Alright already*!” she shrugged him off and picked up her ruined robot. “*Let me spell it out for you again, I saved your life and today you saved mine so we’re even*,” she walked over to her window and opened it wide, “*you’re free!”*

But the fairy stayed where he was, watching her. After a moment she sensed his sadness, “*It’s not that simple*.  *There are traditions to be upheld, protocol…”*

Ambril snorted, “*and you call us stupid, what do you do when new things happen? Stuff that your precious protocol doesn’t cover*? *What happens when YOU change*?”

This time the fairy snorted. “*We don’t change dung-breath. The Tylwith Teg have been around since the dawn of time. We have perfected ourselves. We have no need of change.”*

Ambril laughed out loud. “*So you’re perfect---really? That’s not what I see*. *I see a sad, angry fairy who loses his temper and pokes 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 protocol that keeps you here is it? Because I have a hunch your fairy protocol doesn’t require any interaction with us “lowly” human-kind,”* she continued. “*There’s something else*.”

The fairy suddenly looked uncomfortable as his eyes strayed to Ambril’s shirt...the Ledrith Glain. She pulled it out and watched it twirl in the light, “so *it’s 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. I’m here to protect it! Today’s a good example. You practically gave it to him! It can’t fall into his hands.”*

“*Whose hands? You mean that creature in the cave*?” asked Ambril.

The fairy nodded. “*Moroz was once human but now*…*who knows what it is?”*

“*Moroz? That was Moroz?”*

The fairy looked mildly surprised. “*You know of Moroz*? *Then you must have learned that Moroz was the last human-kind that we fairies ever trusted*, *we paid a high price for that*,” the fairy shot a hateful glance at Ambril. “*He betrayed us so we vowed to never have any dealings with your kind…EVER again*.” Then the fairy’s shoulders sagged, “*until now, anyway*…*because you saved my life, stole my boot and now have the Ledrith Glain hanging around your unworthy neck*.”

Ambril decided to change the subject before she got her head kicked again. “*So what’s the Ledrith Glain to Moroz?*”

“*The Ledrith Glain is one of the most powerful sources of life energy in existence* *which makes it one of the most powerful things on earth.*

*But it means more to us, it is a sacred. We once thought better of human-kind and foolishly shared it with you. We learned the hard way that human-kind are unreliable. Some of you are honorable and kind, but most are weaklings and easily corrupted by power. The last straw was Moroz.”* He drew his eyebrows together in concentration. *“So I am here to collect the Ledrith Glain and take it back to my people. But 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 has chosen a bearer, never a human-kind.*” It flew slowly backward looking her up and down, “*it is true that you bear the Sign of the Four, but stronger and wiser beings have also had this lineage and not been chosen*,” he stared mystified, at Ambril.

The Sign of the Four, Foursies…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. Clearing her thoughts she held up the medallion, “*so I’m one of a few human kind to own this?”*

The fairy flew at her in a rage and pulled her hair, “*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…so usual. There’s nothing remarkable about you!”* He threw his hands up in frustration, “*you’re just so—average*.”

Ambril had heard this too many times for it to really hurt anymore…and she was beginning to believe it. Not for the first time she thought about how ridiculous it all was. She was just a regular kid. Did they really expect a normal, average kid to go out and save the world or whatever it was she was supposed to do? She stood there thinking for a long moment, “*you know how to protect this better than I do*, *what would happen if I just gave it to you*?”

The fairy didn’t answer, he just watched her.

“*Well*?” still no answer…so Ambril lifted her medallion from around her neck and held it out to the fairy, “*Just take it and go*.”

The Ledrith Glain glittered in her palm lighting up the fairy’s face, a look of longing, of greed crossed it, then he sighed heavily, “*this isn’t going to work. I’ve tried to take this off you at least once every night. But just in case*---”

In a flash the fairy flew over, grabbed the chain and flew full speed toward the window, the chain played out to its full length and then jerked to a stop. Like a dog on a chain fLit flattened out, then the chain swung backward until it dangled from Ambril’s hand again. The fairy tried again and though he pulled and tugged the medallion stuck to Ambril’s open hand like glue.

“*See?*” He threw the chain down in disgust and watched it swing. “*It won’t leave you…believe me I’ve tried everything.”*

Ambril was shocked, she slowly put her medallion back around her neck then went over to her backpack and pulled out her Ashera, “*you’re rude and ridiculously arrogant---but you’re right. I’m too young and inexperienced to be carrying these things around. I have to learn how to use them somehow, to protect myself and to figure all of this out,”* she looked at the hateful fairy, “*you know how to use an Ashera right?*

“*It’s a simple tool which comes with instructions,*” he smirked as he pointed to the decorative lines and images on it.

Ambril resisted the urge to tweak his wings, “*do you think---you could teach me how to use these things?”*

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 squeezed her head and waited, “*you haven’t anything else to do*.”

She was treated to a crescendo of broken glass ended with a tinkle of bells.

“*What have you got to lose?”*

fLit drifted back to her, “*just the respect of everyone I know. Associating with human-kind is worse than bringing home a flatulent toad for tea,*” he studied her, then grimaced in annoyance, “*hold it lower down, like a wand…not a tube of toothpaste,”* he instructed.

Ambril adjusted her hand.

“*Better…if we’re to do this, and I’m not saying we are---it will be hard work. We’ll start with energy channeling, sighting and protective wards, then move onto* *chute travel and environmental mod’s…but as you are so ploddingly slow you’ll be middle aged before we’re half way through.*” he hovered a moment, lost in thought. “*I’ll, of course, continue to protect the Ledrith Glain*.”

Ambril pointed at the demolished robot, “*just how will you manage that*?”

“*I hid in the robot because I was too weak from the Morte Cell. But I’ve recovered enough make myself invisible some of the time.”* He squinted at Ambril’s head, *‘Or I’ll hitch a ride in that---hair of yours*,” He sniffed and wrinkled his nose. “*When it’s clean at least…One more thing, you can’t tell anyone about me, NOT ANYONE.”*

Ambril hesitated, how her friends would take it when they found out? But the fairy folded his arms firmly, he wasn’t giving her a choice---finally, she nodded.

The fairy flew over to the window, “*you’ll be safe here, 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 then cocked his head.

Ambril snorted. *“I’ll call you fLit then, the robot’s just a robot now.”*

The fairy shrugged then made a beeline out the window.

Ambril headed to her bathroom and picked up her toothbrush. She should have known, no robot was that smart or that much trouble. And now she had Moroz, one of the most evil magic wielders ever, after her medallion. She finished brushing her teeth and stood there lost in thought until her eyes refused to blink at the same time. Exhausted, she threw on her PJ’s and fell into bed.

# Chapter 27 School again

The days marched on with school taking a back seat to her nightly schooling with fLit. The fairy proved to be an experienced magic wielder but not a patient teacher. But she was learning. She’d already mastered some protective wards and was working on how to control an attack and tailor it to her opponent. The more she learned though the more there was to learn.

She blinked blearily one early spring morning as she coasted into school and noticed Ygg sitting on the steps looking upset.

“Mrs. Twid suspects,” he said before she could get out a Hello.

“How do you know?” Ambril asked as she sat down beside him.

“I just do,” he said wearily, “she be acting strange and hinting about wanting me gone. ”

“That wouldn’t be the worst thing, would it?” asked Sully as she plunked down on the other side of Ygg, “I’m serious about us needing help on the farm right now, let me tell you!”

“Twid would just get angry and get me sent back home. But it be getting bad, last night she ‘forgot’ and locked me in the cellar all night.”

“We have to find a way to get you out of there,” said Ambril tensely, let’s meet at the Gazebo later and talk about it.” (add in new part here)

It was getting crowded on the playground with gaggles of kids milling around. 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 blushed just as the bell rang and they raced up the steps and into school just as it started to rain.

# Chapter 28 Back at the Gazebo, an Uplifting Adventure

Fortunately the rain stopped by mid afternoon and the Gazebo was dry and sunny as the three pulled up on their bikes. After polishing off one of Mrs. Sweetgum’s snacks: homemade bread, thick wedges of cheese, carrots and cookies, Ambril leaned back and stared out at the garden. The gnomes had been hard at work; pruning and weeding to the point that the ground smelled sweeter, even the air seemed brighter. A cool breeze made Ambril draw her sweatshirt close around her. Looking up she saw the rain hadn’t finished with them, thunderclouds were forming again over the mountains. “What’s this big surprise you have for us, Sully?”

Sully smiled and whipped out a small plastic box her face looking like a three year old on Christmas morning. “I‘ve been playing around with a few things,“ she held out the box. “And came up with this!”

Inside was a bunch of ordinary 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 as she looked closer she began to see tiny colorful sparks exploding from its surface, like eruptions on the sun.

“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?”

“Yeah!”

“It wasn’t anything like that. It was just a whole lot of grinding and pounding and---more grinding.” Sully 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?”

Sully waved her off, “I tried it on my pillow, it hovered in the air for a few seconds and then came down,” Sully started taking her shoes off, “We’ll just float around the gazebo for starters,” her smile faded when she saw the hesitancy in their faces, “look if you 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? “I’m in.”

“Take your shoes off then.”

Ygg frowned at the powder but took off his shoes anyway.

Sully got out a spoon and ladled a heaping tablespoon into their shoes, “I thought if we put it inside our shoes it won’t blow off as easily,” a sharp gust of wind made Sully pause before putting the powder in the last shoe.

“You’re nought overdoing it, are you?” asked Ygg still frowning.

“This is what you need for a ‘sprightly sail’ the book said…if you feel out of control just slip off a shoe.”

“That’s what the book says?” Ygg peered dubiously at the powder in his shoe.

“That’s what the book says,” Sully sounded annoyed as she put her shoes on.

Ygg opted to leave his laces untied. As they stood up Ambril braced for whatever was to happen. They waited…and waited…for nothing.

Sully’s face went from supreme elation to horror then settled into dejection in about half a minute. She looked down and stamped her feet, “It worked perfectly last night, maybe if we just…” she swooped down, grabbed the powder and began sprinkling more on their feet.

“Not so much!” was all Ygg got out as a great gust of wind came through the Gazebo, took the powder right out of the box and swirled it all around them.

“It tingles!” Ygg said as he jetted off the floor and bumped into the roof of the Gazebo, “Ouch!”

Ambril was sneezing too hard to notice Ygg’s predicament, then suddenly she began feeling different---lighter, airier---like a dust mote on a summer afternoon. She looked down at her toes and found them lifting slowly off the ground. Sully hovered next her, “isn’t this incredible? I feel like dandelion fluff!”

But then another powerful burst of wind howled through the Gazebo and before Ambril could grab onto something it swept them both away. Ygg grabbed a vine but the wind was so strong, it came loose in his hands, both he and the vine blew away after them.

Ambril found herself caught in a dizzying whirl as she tumbled head over heels. She screamed until she was hoarse and then curled into a ball when the nausea hit her. She suddenly felt a lot more respect for dandelion fluff.

“Ambril! AMBRIL! Cross your legs like mine,” still tumbling, Ambril looked over and saw Sully sitting the wind current as if it were a magic carpet, “only go slow, no sudden moves!”

Ambril stuck her feet straight out and found herself rocketing backward which is when she rammed into Ygg.

“Oof, thanks,” he said surprisingly as he grabbed her and held on tightly, “I just about lost me lunch!”

“Cross your legs! Cross your legs!” Ambril yelled over the whooshing of the wind and took her own advice. Ygg tried to imitate Ambril but ended up in a squat with his feet pointing straight down. They rocketed upward, “no, like you’re back in kindergarten sitting on the floor!”Ambril yelled and helped him rearrange his legs. After shooting off to the side, plummeting downward and gliding weirdly in a spiral, Ygg got his legs to cross; they found themselves floating over the forest 500 feet up. Birds flew below them eyeing them suspiciously.

In another universe Ambril knew she would enjoy this but she couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen if the powder suddenly wore off.

Sully bobbed up beside them, “hey look at that!” Sully pointed below them.

“I don’t think I’ll be doing that,” said Ygg nervously, his eyes firmly shut.

“Afraid of heights are we?” said Sully as she calmly floated over to him and linked arms, “come on relax and look around, you’re flying!”

“Come clean! You practiced, didn’t you!” accused Ambril.

“Maybe a little,” said Sully sheepishly, “I had to make sure it worked, there are so many variables---like wind currents, air temperature and the amount of moisture in the air.” Sully starting retying her shoelace.

“What happens when there’s moisture in the air?”

“It washes off I think---at any rate it stops working.”

Ambril froze when over Ygg’s shoulder she spied a massive thundercloud about to roll into them, “Hold on, we’re about to get hit by a very big variable!”

Seconds later they were engulfed in a freezing, swirling mist, to Ambril it felt like being covered with a fuzzy, whirling blanket of cold. Ygg must have panicked then, she felt him push away flailing. Leaving lost in the grayness. “Where are you?” she yelled but her voice sounded flat and small as if she was yelling into a pillow.

Then she heard Sully yelling, she sounded far away, “just relax, Ygg, I’ll tow you down. Let me rearrange my feet a little then---Ygg not you—No!” Ambril was suddenly rammed in the side as Ygg and Sully ran right into her, punched through the storm cloud and rocketed down toward the forest below.

“Pull up! Pull up!” screamed Sully but Ygg had gone rigid with fear the moment he spotted the trees rushing up to meet them. Sully reached down and wrenched one of Ygg’s shoes off, they instantly slowed, “whoa! That was close!”

“This flying be nought for me,” Ygg’s eyes were still round with fear as he kept an eye on the treetops just below them.

Sully manually folded Ygg’s legs before handing his shoe back to him, “don’t put that on until I say so!” Sully was interrupted by a bolt of lightening snaking right under her nose. It was followed by a bone-jarring thunderclap. Ambril felt the hair on her arms singe as they were pelted with raindrops.

That sinking feeling in Ambril’s stomach she found was real…they were sinking…slowly at first but soon they picked up speed until the wind whooshed past them like a hurricane. Ambril felt like a runaway train as they entered the forest canopy.

“It’s gonna be rough!” shouted Ygg.

That was an understatement, the slick branches of a redwood tree whipped past Ambril. She instinctively put out her arms and tried to grab onto something but the wet branches slipped through her fingers. Tree branches whacked her in the face as she tumbled and flipped end over end until she finally came to a stop. She laughed right out loud, surprised to be alive.

“Sully? Ygg?” she called hoarsely. Rain dripped down her nose as she slowly looked around. She found herself caught in between two branches halfway up a very tall Redwood tree. Ambril wriggled enough to untangle her feet, then gingerly stepped down to the branch below her. She was getting ready to do it again when she heard a decisive snap.

“Oh no, no---NO!” the branch under her gave way and she was off again. This time she managed to slow her fall by slipping and sliding from one branch to another all the way to the ground. She landed with a thump on a mound of redwood needles. Straining to breathe, she sat up slowly and found herself looking into the upside-down face of Ygg.

“I’m gonna kill her if she isna’ dead already,” he said resolutely, “help me?”

He looked like a spider’s bedtime snack, all tightly tangled in a vine. Ambril found a sharp stone and sawed away at a couple of the vines until Ygg slumped to the ground.

“Are you all right?” she asked as he got shakily to his feet.

Ygg nodded grumpily as he picked leaves out of his hair.

Ambril took a deep breath, “SULLY!” She listened intently but heard only the soft sighing of the wind and the dripping of the rain.

“I only half meant that, about wishing Sully dead,” said Ygg.

The clear, high screech of a hawk sounded above them.

“Sully, where be you!” Ygg bellowed then started grumbling about the state of his clothes. But he soon stopped and cocked his head, “hear that? It be from over there,” Ygg pointed toward a bright spot in the dense trees. “Sully!”

“Over here!” Ambril finally heard the faint reply.

Relieved, they limped toward the sound and found a clearing. As they broke free of the forest, the sun sent shafts of sunlight over the late winter grass there.

Sully stumbled toward them as she brushed herself off. Her sweatshirt was torn but otherwise she looked all right. “Where the heck are we?”

Ambril was about to say something snide when she felt rather than heard distant thumps of something large running through the forest. It was coming their way.

The hawk screamed again, this time much louder. Everything was suddenly too quiet now in the forest. The birds had even stopped chirping. Ambril looked up and saw a gigantic gray bird circling overhead. It looked like something out of Jurassic Park being at least three times the normal size.

Ygg braced himself and looked around, suddenly aware of the heavy footsteps too. “We be beyond the Wall is all I know. We be better off hiding in the trees. We’re sitting ducks out here.” Ygg pointed to the trees which rimmed the clearing and broke into a run.

Ambril had just turned to follow when it happened. A stabbing, cold flash flooded Ambril with pain. She doubled over and shut her eyes as 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 and gasped for breath.

“Ambril! get a move on!” Sully beckoned to her watching the monstrous bird above them. Ygg had just disappeared in the underbrush. Ambril lurched into a run. She squinted up at the massive hawk, could that be who was in her head?

But the thumping footsteps pushed the hawk away, they were too loud to ignore. Could it be the Cerberus? Whatever it was it was very close now. Ambril was running flat out now for the trees and felt rather than saw the monster break through the trees on the other side of the clearing.

Sully stared dumbstruck at something above them as Ambril put on a last burst of speed. Squinting up at the hawk she saw it break into a dive just above her. There was no time for nice, Ambril grabbed Sully and shoved her away, “Run!” she shouted then scrunched into a ball under a bush as the deafening footsteps…stopped right next to her. She prepared to be eaten…wait she’d done this already--- for instead of being punctured by giant teeth or shredded by spiky talons she heard Fowlclun’s hollow caw ripple through the forest like a tsunami.

She looked up in time to see the hawk fail to pull itself out of its dive, it rammed beak first into Fowlclun’s chimney instead. She covered her head this time to avoid the falling bricks.

“You git back to whar you belong!” came a scrappy voice. “If it warn’t for my trick elbow, I’d take ya over my knee, you flea bitten old crow!” Hendoeth hollered then said in a more normal tone, “Err---sorry, Sid, no offense.”

“None taken,” Sid drawled.

“Vamoose, ya yellow bellied old Coot you’ve no business being here!”

There was an injured screech then a shocking brilliant snap of light as Ambril felt the gray presence slip sideways. Feathers floated down all around her as she got up and saw to her relief Sully and Ygg struggling to their feet nearby.

“Ambril, are you O.K.? I could feel how much that hawk really hated you!” Sully limped over nursing a nasty scrape down one arm. Ygg fingered a new bump on his head as 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 sparring with an old enemy to get the blood flowing agin!” She crowed then she put her hands on her hips and glared at Ambril. “Just what are you doin’ out here? Didn’t I tell you to stay put inside the Wall?”

Ambril could only shrug, “It was an accident---long story.”

Hendoeth looked all three of them up and down, then sighed, “by the looks of things I guess you’ve learned yer lesson. Come on in, we’ll talk while Fowlclun runs you home.” She turned but found the doorway blocked by a heap of beaming household junk.

“We came as soon as we could!” Ambril recognized Quill’s voice.

“And lost another tea cup and saucer along the way,” grumbled Plinth.

“Well Tarnation! How are we supposed to get in? Give a body some room!” groused Hendoeth giving the massive grandfather clock a shove.

The clock lumbered aside then Hendoeth lead the way flipping back one of her braids as she did so. Sid was there leaning against the fireplace and nodded to Ambril as she sat down on the big sofa.

Quill bustled over with a first aid kit clutched in her feathers, “let’s have a look at that arm---Sully is it?” she hopped up on the sofa to examine Sully’s arm.

The room lurched to the side as Fowclun got under way and a jewel flower began to slide off the coffee table, Ambril managed to catch Tweek before she fell.

“Mercy, that was close!” Hendoeth called over the sofa, “ya alright in there Tweekie girl?” the flower glowed dully in response. Ambril heard a faint tinkling of bells in her head as the flower glowed warm in her hands.

“That’s a Vida Fiore flower right?” asked Sully looking curiously at the sculpture as Quill bandaged her arm, “they’re all over Trelawnyd.”

“But not anywhere’s else. It’s nearly forgotten outside of these hills,” Hendoeth frowned as she took the glittering flower from Ambril, “it’s sad but Tweek here, she’s even forgotten herself. It’s not right for her to be cooped up in there so long.”

Ambril faced Hendoeth, “I’m not sure what’s worth, forgetting yourself or not knowing who you are or what’s going on. Why did that hawk attack me? Was it another kind of monster, like a Dullaith?”

Hendoeth grunted, her face thunderous, “that Gray she-devil! She’s got no business in my forest. She’s not your average good hearted magic wielder but neither is she pure evil like a Dullaith.” Hendoeth rubbed one of Tweek’s petals.

The Gray Lady was once a great magic wielder who fell from grace. Because of her actions she was forced to live in the Gray Lands on the banks of the River Styx,” when the three kids looked incredulously at her she nodded, “Yep, THAT River Styx…THE River that separates the living from the dead.

The Gray Lands, it’s been said, are a wasteland. Beings lose themselves there because of what they done or what they should ‘a done, but didn’t….many think that living there among the lost for so long---made the Gray Lady lose her mind.”

Hendoeth looked curiously at Ambril, “I don’t know why she’s after you, darlin’ but I’ve a notion she don’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 and you three STAY INSIDE THE WALL, you hear me? That Wall’s strong enough to hold back Hades himself.”

Ambril thought of the fire breathing dogs, she could see that.

“Ruff!” was heard from the fireplace.

“Stay Teggy! Stay where you are!” hollered Hendoeth, “I just got them new curtains up!”

The fire gryphon was awake and wagging his tail at them sparks flew everywhere with every thump. Teg’s stubby beak opened in a grin as his amber eyes stared up them looking like a love starved puppy. Hendoeth grabbed a charred potholder and began to scratch under his chin. He was soon purring.

Then the Gryphon wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

“Uh oh---stand back everyone, he’s gonna blow!” Hendoeth stepped back and barked, “Plinth! Grab the rug!”

“Why is it always me?” Plinth rolled his eyes then clumped over and nudged it with his base, the rug neatly 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!” Hendoeth shoved the kids down then crouched down behind the sofa herself.

With a great gust of fire, the Gryphon sneezed, filling the room with flames. Ambril’s toes curled as she felt the heat go right through her sneakers. Then the flames were gone leaving the air smelling of singed feathers.

“Ya O.K.?” asked Hendoeth swiftly appraising them.

An injured hoot resonated through the house.

“Nothing to worry about, nothin’ got burnt this time,” Hendoeth yelled into the rafters as she reached over and stroked the feathered wall.

Just as before, Teg had sneezed himself away…well most of himself anyway. For this time Ambril saw a scaly, red tail waving in the fireplace, attached to nothing but thin air. It flicked to the left suddenly stirring up clouds of soot.

“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.”

“Wish we knew what the little guy was allergic to…” mused Hendoeth watching the tail jerk around, “One day he’ll sneeze to a place he can’t get back from.”

“Any one for sandwiches?” A platter appeared carried by a long string arm on string wheels. Jute slid the platter on the table and switched back to his string face. “Hear you’ve been having adventures without me.” He said reproachfully.

“Come on kids let’s make him jealous,” said Hendoeth. “Tell me what happened back there.” Hendoeth bounced on the sofa and beckoned at Ambril and her friends. “Now start when we last saw you, Halloween wasn’t it?”

And they began. First Ambril talked, but soon Sully and Ygg were adding to finding the Astarte, Mrs. Twid’s tea and the gnomes. When they got to the flying powder Ambril thought Hendoeth was having a fit she laughed so hard.

After they finished, Hendoeth wiped her eyes, “lemme see that stuff.”

Sully pulled out the empty plastic box from her pocket, “we spilled most of it.”

“YOU spilled it, ya mean,” groused Ygg.

Hendoeth gave it a sharp rap with her knuckles and peered inside, “there’s still some left,” she said holding it up. Ambril could see a light dusting of powder coating the bottom of the container.

“This might just be enough, I reckon,” she mused.

“For what?” asked Ygg his eyes widening.

“Getting you over the wall, that’s what!” Hendoeth jumped to her feet.

Ambril realized that Fowlclun had come to a standstill. Outside the window she could see the Gazebo’s spire just beyond the Wall.

“Great!” said Sully jumping up, “look it’s still light out so I won’t even be grounded!”

They stepped into the beginning of a spectacular sunset. Hendoeth turned and said, “Ya git just one shot, there’s not enough for more.”

She held the box up and sprinkled a few grains of powder over all three kids.

“Why’d you do our heads and not our feet?” asked Sully.

“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.”

“Will we have any trouble with the Walls’s protective wards?” asked Ambril.

“Naw, it knows you belong inside,” said Hendoeth dismissively then added, “you do remind me of Rosa, she was smart and spunky too,” she smiled at her fondly, “off you go, remember ya get one jump, try and make it a good one.”

“We got that,” said Ygg rubbing the bump on his forehead.

Ambril stepped off Fowlclun’s porch and onto Trelawnyd’s formidable Wall. Standing on top of it, the Wall was looked even more impressive, it was at least five feet thick in most places. As her foot touched the stones she could feel something denser than air slice through her for an instant, then 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 Quill ask, “are you sure that stuff will work?”

“Well, almost…they’re kids though, they’ll bounce, right?”

Ygg stood well back from the edge.

Sully had squeezed her eyes shut, intent on something, “I think I’m feeling it!” she said excitedly and grabbing Ygg’s hand she began dragging him over to the edge. Then she burped. “Oops, false alarm.”

“Let’s be waiting a bit longer,” Ygg said pulling his hand away and stepping back hurriedly, “like until next week!”

By then Ambril started to feel something. It was a light-headed, tingling feeling, which made her nose twitch and her ears wiggle.

“O.K. enough stalling!” Sully firmly grasped both their hands and pulled them right over to the edge.

“Wait, wait!” Ygg said clamping his eyes shut.

“Come on, you can’t spend your life up here!” Sully said giving his hand a shake. Ygg clenched his teeth and wrinkled his nose.

“Just one big jump, 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 lagged behind. Just before he jumped Ambril heard him sneeze. Sully got the most height from her jump. She easily cleared the brambles, sailed over the pond and made a beeline for the Gazebo.

“Wheeeeeee!” Sully managed to do a couple of somersaults before grabbing one of the Gazebo’s columns. Grinning broadly she clambered down the vines and jumped to the stone floor. Ambril too bounded over the tangled mess of greenery easily but made a less graceful landing when she tripped on a treetop, skimmed the pond and found herself rolling up the porch steps.

“Wasn’t that great?” giggled Sully. “I’m gonna try to make a new batch tomorrow, but this time I’ll---“

“Whoa, what the---!” It was Ygg whose jump hadn’t been nearly high enough. He had gotten tangled in the overgrowth, and with the wrong sort of plant.

The brambles shifted to reveal long rows of shiny thorns which glinted around a large mouth-like hole. It wrapped its spiky tendrils around Ygg’s ankle and began pulling him toward its mouth, its thorns clicking excitedly.

“We have to do something!” screamed Sully unhelpfully.

Ambril thought immediately of her Ashera but before she could react she heard a jangle of off-key horns.

“*Stay where you are, you’re so clumsy you’ll probably kill him---the plant I mean. Perhaps I’ll save your friend too*.”

Light streaked toward Ygg as Ambril felt a frizz of magic. The plant puckered as if it tasted something sour. Then 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 grabbed the vines at the last moment and tumbled to the floor.

“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 tried to pull Ygg to his feet. “So your jump wasn’t high enough and---“

“By the Glain, I just want to be breathing in and out for a minute, without being a part of your science experiment,” said Ygg freeing his hand and crawling over to a bench.

“Any more damage?” asked Ambril looking for any bite marks or gashes.

Ygg moved his arms and legs experimentally and wobbled a bit as he got to his feet, “it’s hard to tell I be so bunged up all ready. I know now that I be better off with me feet on the ground.”

Sully patted him on the back distractedly as she looked anxiously at the fading streaks of sunlight. “Whatever---we ought to get a move on. My Mom’s probably dialing the sheriff’s office right now wondering where the heck I am.”

Ambril got a flash of her Mom’s anxious face. “Right! Let’s go!”

The three bounded down the Gazebo steps, grabbed their bikes and pedaled hard toward home.

# Chapter 32 A Short Visit From Someone too Large

They had made it 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 up and up she watched as her bike continued on without her for a while before it sheered off into a bush. Something gripped her tightly around the middle.

“Iggy? That you Ygg boy?” A deep gravely voice boomed in her ear. She rose in the air until she was parked in front of a broad, flat face. It grinned malevolently, displaying an array of crooked, yellow teeth. Then the smile faded, “nought Yggy boy,” he grunted and tossed Ambril away.

Fortunately, the garden was so overgrown Ambril wasn’t flung far. She landed in a tall, prickly bush then half-slid, half-fell to the ground. As she struggled to her feet she saw Sully kick away her bike and run full tilt at a mountainous man who must have been over seven feet tall.

“Let him go, you overgrown Rambo!” she screamed and started kicking his ankle, but the big man hardly noticed, he now had Ygg in his fist and patted him on the head with his meaty hand. It looked like it really hurt.

“I told them I be finding you Ygg boy…I be getting my reward now---new boots for me,” he growled a chuckle.

Sully gave up on his ankle and started whacking his knee with a stick. “Ambril come and help me I think I’ve almost got his attention!”

As Ambril waded through the underbrush she took stock of the gigantic man. He certainly wasn’t from Trelawnyd---or anywhere else it appeared. His homemade clothes were worn and fastened with bits of bone and wood. He wore a leather tunic with many pockets over baggy shorts. Ambril could see why he wanted new boots, as he had on just one. An enormous, ratty old sock, looking like it had once been a windsock at an airport covered the other foot with ‘Alaska, Go Nanooks!’ printed across the top.

“Put me down,” panted Ygg his face now a nasty shade of lavender.

“Put you down? You worth too much,” said the big man, turning him back and forth in his hand as if he were a toy, “I be taking you back to Chert now to collect my money,” He turned toward the forest as if to go, with Ygg still struggling desperately in his hand.

“Wait! Wait just a second!” Ambril raced over straining to get a good look at the big man’s monstrous boot. It---looked familiar. “I---I think I might know where your other boot is.”

The bounty hunter turned slowly around his bright little eyes narrowing as he said accusingly, “how you be knowing that? You be the one to take it?”

Ambril backed up a little nervously…because when someone that size looks like he wants to drop kick you to China…that’s what you do. “No! I---I didn’t take it but I think I might know where it is.”

The big man still looked dangerous---but also curious. “Where it be?”

“I’ll get it for you…it’d be nice to have your old boot back wouldn’t it? old boots are so much more comfortable then stiff, new boots that would give you blisters for a week.

Listen, if you let Ygg go and promise not to drag him back to Chert, we’ll get your boot for you.”

The big man’s furry eyebrows fused together as he thought about this. He looked at Ygg still struggling in his fist then back at Ambril, “but if’n I put this rascal down, he be running and hiding. Then I be having no reward and no boot.”

“No, he won’t run and hide---you can trust him,” Sully cupped her hands and yelled up at her friend “Relax, Ambril has a plan!”

“A plan? What kind of plan? You mean like the plan where the dogs of hell came after us? Or like the plan where we shot off into space using that stupid flying powder?”

“This is a new and improved plan---come on, what other choice do you have?”

Ygg stopped struggling, “this plan better be good, Ambril,” he wheezed, then he nodded at the bounty hunter, “I won’t run, you can be putting me down.”

The Giant looked unconvinced, “by the Glain you swear?”

Ygg nodded slowly, “by the Glain, I swear.”

But just as the big man was about to set the boy down a ball of greenery sailed over Ygg’s head and exploded over the Giant. It unfurled and draped over him like a net.

“Charge!” Came a tinny yell as Ambril’s bike sailed down the path pumped by gnomes, two on the pedals, one steering and three in the basket with sticks.

“No prisoners!” Shouted Baldot as the bike crashed into the big man’s boot and upended itself, launching the gnomes straight at the amazed bounty hunter. The Gnomes grabbed hold of the first hairy thing they came in contact with and began kicking, biting and poking him.

“You’re ruining everything, knock it off!” Sully began pulling off whatever gnome she could get her hands on.

But the gnomes paid no attention to anything but the glorious fight, “you leave our Ygg alone you ten ton ape!” grunted Blagoor. He scrambled on top of the big man’s shoulder and started jabbing his hairy ear. That was when the bounty hunter decided he’d had enough, he shook himself---just once, but it was enough to send every gnome flying.

“Bandersnitches!” Bummil yelled as he sailed over Ambril’s head, then she heard a series of thunks, groans and loud cracks as the gnomes peppered the landscape.

The big man tore the vine netting away as if it were paper lace.

“Stop the fighting!” Ygg yelled, “we be reaching an agreement here.”

Baldot stumbled out of the undergrowth, “why didn’t you say so instead of yelling like a stuck pig!”

The Gigantic man rubbed his ear then grunted, “If’n you weren’t earth-kind, I be grinding your bones to powder about now,” he wiggled his sock toes, “but I nought be taking my revenge on ones such as you,” then he set Ygg down roughly on the ground but pinched his arm between two fingers, “I be needing security before I be letting you go.”

Ygg filled his lungs gratefully, when his color evened out he reached inside his shirt and pulled out a leather packet. “These be precious to me, I nought leave without them.” he handed them over.

The Giant took the packet looked at it once, then again, and one more time, giving it a long appraising look before shoving it into one of his many pockets. He stood there a moment looking at Ygg, deep in thought.

“We’ll need some time to get your boot,” Ambril said trying to sound confident.

The bounty hunter squinted at the moon just rising above the mountains, “we meet here next saucer moon.”

There was a swish of air around Ambril, as suddenly the big man’s face appeared just inches from Ambril’s own. Ambril could see where the hard lines from living rough had creased his face, “bring me mine boot---orn’ you won’t be seeing your friend ever again,” he whispered dangerously.

Ambril could only gulp and nod. He held her gaze for a moment longer…curiously Ambril was struck by how they softened. Then without warning, he melted into the forest. Not a twig snapped or a branch swayed. The too large man just up and vanished.

Ambril felt the now familiar frizz of magic, the Giant was not only powerful physically, he was gifted in magic as well. She felt a little dizzy thinking about what might happen to them especially Ygg if they failed to get his boot…they just wouldn’t fail.

Sully snorted at Ygg. “You have a lot of explaining to do. You can start with why a guy like that came after you.”

A look of longing followed by sadness flashed across Ygg’s face before he ducked his head, “A strong young back is worth a little something to the Mining Company,” he said to his shoes. “ It nought be like they can replace me with someone from a neighboring town, there be no neighboring towns around Chert.”

“You mean there’s a reward on your head offered by the Mining Company? Hasn’t that been illegal for a couple of centuries?” Sully asked incredulously. “I never thought I’d say this but you’re better off with Mrs. Twid.”

“What was in the packet you gave him?” Ambril asked.

Ygg still looked at his shoes, “they be letters from me Mam is all.” he shrugged, “they help during the lonely times.”

Ambril’s heart sagged as she wondered how many lonely times there had been for him since he’d left home.

Sully was still staring pitchforks at Ygg, “there’s something you’re not telling us, I can see it in your face.”

“Nay, he’s mastered the art of befuddlement, in Chert they hold contests to see who befuddles best,” Bummil came up supporting Blagoor who smiled as he handed his left foot over to Ygg.

“We showed that bounty hunter!” He took a deep breath and let it out in a satisfied way. “It be a dandy of a fight warn’t it?”

Ygg groaned as three other gnomes marched up with cracks and chips, “I be wishing it had been a sight less dandy. This’ll be taking half the night,” he sighed as he got out the fixit juice and went to work on Bummil’s foot. Then he turned to Ambril, “seeing me life be riding on it, what’s this grand plan of yours?”

“The bounty hunter’s boot is hanging under Flood’s Shoe Store sign. You’ve seen it, big black boot with geraniums growing in it? All we have to do is get it down and clean it up.”

“But we can’t steal it from Mrs. Flood! She’s a nice old lady!” countered Sully.

“You’d rather have Ygg get hauled down the Mines? We have no choice! We’ll just have to find something to replace it with.”

“Well---I don’t know---maybe...but I still don’t like it,” groused Sully then mused, “I wonder if Junkson would have anything?”

Who’s Junkson?” asked Ambril.

Ygg looked surprised, “Junkson’s Shop next door to the Shoe Store? You mean you haven’t been there yet?”

“It’s great---if you don’t mind your stuff really, really used. And dealing with creepy Mr. Junkson,” Sully cringed.

“It’s just his lazy eye---you don’t know what he be watching.”

Sully’s shoulders went up, “and that he takes his teeth out and leaves them on the counter, his long, dirty fingernails…I don’t think he’s ever washed that jacket he wears…you know I’m right, he’s flat out creepy.”

Ygg just shrugged, “creepy or no, he may have something we could use.”

“I’ll check with my Mom, it’s unbelievable the stuff we have in our basement.”

Sully added then she turned back to Ygg, “Come on, you know how I hate secrets, we’re all friends here.”

Ygg’s eye twitched as he pointed his chin at the deepening shadows, “Weren’t you saying something before about how your Mam’s been known to call the police if’n your just a few minutes late?”

Sully looked up at the darkening sky and shrieked, “Holy tractor belts! I’ll be grounded for a week!” then she raced for her bike, “I’ll see you when---or if they take the manacles off!” then she pushed off hard, in another second she disappeared through the hedge.

Ambril’s heart nearly stopped when she realized the stars had been out so long they’d had baby stars. She hurried to her bike. The gnomes had brushed it off and put her backpack in the basket, “nearly good as new!” said Baldot, “though I care nought for the nasty twit hiding in your---“

“Night everyone!” Ambril yelled trying to drown out the gnome’s words.

Ambril started off, it had made her nervous when Sully had accused Ygg of keeping secrets. She scrunched her nose at her backpack. When she finally told them her secrets would they still think of her as a friend?

She was about to barrel through the hole in the hedge when she heard Bummil shout after her, “it be true, none of us be liking him!”

# Chapter Boot Nicked

“Ouch! That’s my foot!” Sully whispered, “It’s the only part of me that doesn’t ache! I had to clean out the vegetable garden as part of my penal servitude for being so late the other night…and I’m grounded.”

“I’m grounded too but I at least I didn’t have to clean anything,” Ambril whispered back. The two were huddled together in Betula’s alley across the street from the Shoe Store waiting for Ygg. It was just past midnight and a little chilly.

“I brought these to replace the boot with,” Sully pulled out something that looked like wind chimes but sounded like file cabinets being pushed down a flight of stairs, “my Mom bronzed every baby shoe I ever had…they’re very sentimental, my parents. But the wind chimes idea didn’t fly---too clunky sounding.”

“Won’t your Mom miss these,”

“Not likely, she has two more sets.” Sully pointed at an object swinging in the breeze above the Shoe Store, “are you sure that’s it? It looks more like a flowerpot than a boot.”

“I think so, I checked this morning, It’s hard to tell, too many geraniums but it’s big enough.”

“Bigger than two of me!” said a voice at Ambril’s knee.

Ambril jumped, “Bummil! Where’s Ygg?”

“Ygg wants you doolallies to join him across the street; Baldot’s run into a snag.”

Ambril squinted up at the big boot and realized that it wasn’t a breeze that was blowing it around; swinging around the boot were several gnomes attached to ropes. Sully and Ambril snuck across the street and found Ygg leaning against the Shoe Store, “what took you?” he asked.

Suddenly Baldot hovered an inch from Ambril’s nose, “we be having a problem getting the boot unhitched. It be chained up but good! We can saw through it but it’ll be noisy,” he jerked his chin toward the junk shop next door. “Junkson there’s a light sleeper.”

Ygg and Ambril stared dumbly at each other, but Sully started rummaging around in her backpack. She popped up triumphantly with what looked like a bottle of perfume in her hand.

“This might work! I whipped this up a couple of days ago and haven’t had a chance to try it out.”

“Making the boot smell nice won’t be helping,” Ygg sounded annoyed, “though a few of the gnomes could use something, any of you been hanging out with farm animals?” several of the gnomes snickered, then shrugged.

Sully looked slightly injured, “this is a REMEDY not perfume! It’s Disappearing Spritzer.”

“You mean like making something invisible? Just how that be helping? Making the boot invisible nought be better than making it smell nice!” Baldot groused as he swung from his rope.

Sully was miffed now, “No, you spray this on a link in the chain which makes it disappear just long enough to pull the chain apart…you see?”

Some of the gnomes still looked mystified but Sully handed the spritzer to Bummil and said firmly, “just try it, just be careful where you spray it, it’ll make anything disappear.”

Bummil sniffed the spritzer dubiously. “It nought be smelling too---frilly? The boy’s would be having fun with that.”

“I had to make it in my Dad’s manure tea jug, believe me it doesn’t smell frilly,” Sully said and wrinkled her nose.

“Then I’ll be trying it,” Bummil swung up to the boot. Ambril heard a Pffft sound and then another…then Baldot yelled, “nought both chains, you Ding slag! --- Look out below!” They managed to duck out of the way just as the boot came landed with a monumental smack on the sidewalk, geraniums and potting soil flew everywhere. Everyone held their breath as Ambril and Ygg dragged the boot into the shadows. Then they held it a little longer. Finally Ambril let hers out in a soft rush of relief and smiled at Ygg.

Sully bent down to talk to Bummil and Baldot who were just stepping out from the shadows. Bummil was admiring the spritzer as he talked to Baldot, “it works a treat! We could be using this with the carnivorous plants—“

Suddenly a wild haired, skinny-legged apparition charged out from the Junk shop next door, a shotgun in his hands. “Thieves! Beggars! Lottery losers! You keep away from my valuables, you hear me?” He banged his shotgun on the ground which frightened Bummil so much he accidentally spritzed Baldot’s head with the disappearing remedy.

Baldot’s head instantly disappeared. Headless, his body began walking zombie like toward Junkson. Before anyone could drag him into the safety of the shadows Junkson spotted him. He gawked at the ceramic apparition as Baldot marched right by him. He looked up and down the quiet street and followed the headless gnome for a few moments before carefully scooping up the gnome and tip toeing into his shop. Ambril could hear a series of clicks, slides and thuds as Junkson fussed with the locks on the door.

“What are we going to do, poor Baldot.” Sully whispered.

“Baldot can take care of himself, once he is himself. It’s Junkson I be worried about. He could be having a heart attack or calling the police in there.” Ygg whispered then beckoned to Ambril and Sully as he slunk over to the Junk Shop’s dirty windows and peered inside.

In the glow of a desk light Ambril could see the gloating face of Junkson as he set Baldot on his back and watched the gnome’s body continue to walk.

“The stuff should be wearing off about now,” Sully whispered.

Sure enough, Ambril could see the outline of Baldot’s head begin to glow. Fortunately Junkson became preoccupied with switching on another light just as Baldot came to his senses and froze.

When Junkson turned back his face went from gleeful to disappointment in a heartbeat when he found instead of a unique and possibly valuable object he found an ordinary garden gnome. He spent the next fifteen minutes feeling around for a switch examining Baldot’s neck, banging, poking and trying to wrench Baldot’s head off. Finally he gave up, opened a large wooden cupboard behind the counter and locked Baldot inside. Mumbling foul things to the universe he turned off the lights and limping up the stairs. Silence settled around the room comfortingly.

“Now what do we do?” whispered Sully, “He’s locked inside!”

Ygg just chuckled, “He’s a gnome isn’t he?”

Bummil was already working on the Junk Shop door. He expertly jiggled it, just once. Ambril heard several clicks, squeals and thunks before it whispered open. They followed Bummil inside. Ambril looked around and shivered, even a Dullaith seemed tamer than a Junk Shop after midnight. In the dark the piles of junk morphed into monstrous shadowy shapes---shapes with fangs and too many limbs….Ambril could have sworn the coat rack leaned toward her and that the flowery arm chair tried to nip her. After that, Ambril kept her head down as she followed Sully and Ygg to the cupboard behind the counter; just as Sully reached for the knob it miraculously slid open. Baldot stood there with a bag over his shoulder; he winked and jumped into Sully’s arms, “miss me?”

Sully snorted and set him down. The bag clinked slightly as he made his way out the front door. The other’s waited while Bummil with a wave of his hand relocked the front door.

Not until they were safely back in Betula’s alley did Ambril begin to breath normally again. A couple of gnomes dragged the dirty black boot which Ygg pounced on and looked over carefully under the street light, then he looked up his grinning hugely, “it has the same buckle, it be about the right size, this might could be it.”

Sully smiled, “that went well, we have the boot and no one even lost a limb.”

“Baldot did lose his head---but it be only temporary,” put in Bummil sounding disappointed.

“Do you be having any fixit juice on you?” Baldot asked Ygg.

Ygg pulled out a vial and held it out, “who is it now?”

“It nought be for one of us you Ninnies, it be for this fine thing!” Baldot pulled out a very ornate ladies shoe, big enough for a basketball player, from his bag. It laced up the center in a quaint, old-fashioned way but the ornate buckle had snapped loose and the heel had broken off.

“Hey! That’s the stolen shoe! The one that was stolen from Mrs. Flood’s sign, where’d you find it?” Sully gasped.

Baldot frowned at her, “I nearly sat on it in the cupboard…it nought be Mrs. Flood’s no more, I’m taking it to ease the pain I went through at the hands of that snot-nosed codger. He nearly broke me neck three times!”

“We’re talking about nice old Mrs. Flood here, it was her shoe first!”

Baldot stared mulishly at her.

Ygg picked up the shoe and held it up to the light, “What would Junkson be wanting with this old shoe? He stole it from his neighbor of forty years…then he just hides it in a cupboard?”

“I be finding it fair and square---if’n she misplaced it before---that’s nought to do with me.” Baldot groused still looking like he’d like to boil Sully in beet juice.

Ambril nudged her friend, “offer him something,” she whispered.

Sully rolled her eyes, “All I have are the wind chimes---like that’s going to work,” she sighed but then with a clatter she pulled out the bronze shoe wind chime, “I know it’s not much but would you take this instead? They’re real bronze--” but then Sully stopped.

Baldot’s mouth had dropped open as he stared at the shoes in open admiration. “They’re like me Mamie’s shoes! She wore some just like those!” He reached up and grabbed one of the shoes and held it to his chest.

“Mamie’s a girl’s name---so there are girl gnomes?” Sully asked.

Bummil sighed, “It be a long sad story with lots of arguing in it…after which they all ran off never to be seen again.”

“I guess this means you’ll take them.” Ambril smiled.

Baldot nodded still hugging the bronze shoe.

Ygg had already set to work repairing the shoe. He stopped to stare at the ornate buckle closely, “I be seeing this somewhere… but I can’t place it.”

“You didn’t use fixit juice on that thing did you? Don’t you remember what happened with the three legged jug?” Sully warned.

Ygg blanched, “Oops! Ygg took a step back just as the shoe’s toe twitched slightly. Then before Ygg could clamp both hands on it the shoe wriggled free and hopped into the shadows. Ambril then heard munching sounds and smelled something pungent.

“It seems to like geraniums,” mused Bummil.

“Great, how do we get a live shoe up on Mrs. Flood’s sign?” Sully asked.

Bummil squared his shoulders. “All objects want to be useful is all, let me talk to it a bit.” he marched over to where the sounds of munching were loudest. “Hey! We be having an important job that needs doing, you interested?”

The munching continued.

“It be a job requiring lots of---high level observation---only the keenest eye-lets will do.”

They still heard only munching.

“Geraniums be involved.”

The munching stopped. Out from the shadows emerged the shoe with bits of geranium still stuck in its stitching.

Bummil crouched down to it. “Now this be a secretive sort of job, you must nought let anyone see you doing your observing, are you up to it?”

The shoe wrinkled its toes thoughtfully then twitched its top up and down.

Bummil beckoned to the shoe, then marched back across the street. Ambril watched him gather up some of the geraniums from the old boot and plant them in the shoe before hoisting it into place.

They watched the shoe swing gently back and forth, testing its supports.

Ygg yawned as he picked up the big black boot and dusted it off. “I’ll be taking this back home to clean it up,” he squinted up at the moon, “I’m guessing the moon will be saucer full in a few days.”

“Good! I’ll be ungrounded in time to risk getting grounded again,” Sully put in as she pulled her bike out of the rack.

Ambril waved goodbye as she too jumped on her bike and pedaled home. Her mind ran back and forth over the evening’s events and kept going back to the shoe—and its ornate buckle. She wondered where Ygg had seen it before.

# The Bounty Hunter comes back

A few days later Ambril and Sully were hurriedly eating their snacks at the Gazebo when Ygg lugged a badly wrapped brown paper parcel tied with string up the Gazebo steps. “I thought you be still grounded,” he said to Sully.

“I am, I snuck out---cleaning the tractor engine put me over the edge,” Sully said taking a huge bite of cookie.

“I be having a time bringing this here, used half of Mrs. Twid’s paper to cover it.” He tore off the string and paper to proudly show off the shiny black buckled boot. Ygg had worked hard to clean it up, it shone with new polish, the brass buckle glinted in the sunlight, “I hope it be the right one for him.”

“It be the left one I be needing.” Ambril whirled to see the Bounty Hunter had materialized just behind her. He reached down and grabbed the boot and held it up to examine it.

Ambril held her breath, the boot on his foot looked the same but it was hard to tell as his was so dirty and cracked in several places, was the new boot the right size? The big man sat down on one of the stone benches and removed his filthy, holey sock before slipping the boot on. He stood up and wriggled his toes.

“Yep, it be me boot all right,” he said with a smile and stomped hard enough to make the entire Gazebo quiver. He looked over at Ygg and nodded, “I’ll hold up my end of the deal, I’ll nought take you in.” He reached into one of his pockets and pulled out Ygg’s leather packet and tossed it to him, “those be from your Mam?”

Ygg started, “you be reading me letters?” he said angrily.

The bounty hunter shrugged, “I nought had much else to do, waiting for the moon to fill out. Be your Da’s name Daegon Drasil then?” he seemed to really want to know.

Ygg scrunched his face up angrily then nodded, “nought that it be any of your business!”

The bounty hunter gave him a long appraising look, “you be here on your own then? Does your Mam know where you be?”

“Me Mam wanted me to come and finish my schooling here. She nought want me to go down the Mines like me Da. I be staying with a relation, Mrs. Twid.”

The bounty hunter made a face, “she be no true relation to earth-kind.”

“She be mine, she’s me Mam’s cousin.”

“But she nought true, she be nought caring for you, I can see that.”

Ygg took a step back, “I be a sight better off here than down the Mines that be well and true,” he looked at the big man apprehensively, “you nought be going back on your word…you won’t be taking me back without a fight.”

The big man gave him another long look before slowly shaking his head, “I nought be making trouble for you, I be taking my leave of you then.” He bowed his head and in a sudden rush of wind he was gone, leaving only leaves to swirl over the red checkered napkins at their feet.

“He makes quite an exit doesn’t he?...I don’t know about you but I’m glad that’s over,” said Sully as she settled back on the warm stone floor, “I guess that means you’re safe now, Ygg!”

But Ygg didn’t look relieved as he stared up at the forested mountains, “for now at least.”

# Chapter 31 Gossip at Betula’s

Sure enough it was Friday when even Sully’s penal servitude had been completed. After school 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. She had also tried her hand at sighting, which allowed her to perceive others being’s life energy. When she closed her eyes she could keep the swirling mist at bay which fLit thought was a sign she was getting more powerful.

Sully came in after Ambril, dragging a huge sweet smelling box behind her.

“Here you go Betula, my Mom wanted you to have these early strawberries from our greenhouse. 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.”

Sully could only nod as she dragged herself over and sat down next to Ygg.

“I had to pick those strawberries, rake the entire herb garden and help Dad clean out the tool shack yesterday,” she blew up her bangs in disgust, “Why do we have 23 screwdrivers? Don’t they all do the same thing?”

“Just think how bad it would have been had your folks found out what we really did!” whispered Ambril.

Sully grinned back.

“Did you check out the shoe? Everyone seems to be glad it’s back.” Ambril pointed to the Shoe Shop sign with the ladies shoe swinging below it. Mrs. Flood was out front proudly pointing it out to some elderly passerby’s.

Ygg squinted at it. “It made the front page of the local newspaper---‘The Mysterious Buckled Shoe’, they even interviewed old Junkson about it.”

“What’d he say?”

“He thinks we’re about to be taken over by aliens and went on and on about little green, headless men.”

Betula set down glasses of lemonade and a big bowl of strawberries. Sully smirked as she picked out the biggest and reddest one, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking this past week, it’s important to have something to think about when you’re pulling up old pumpkin vines and turning compost heaps, I kept going back to Mrs. Twid and her Sunset Tea.” She leaned forward and popped another berry into her mouth. “What if Mrs. Twid had a reason to poison half the town?” She nodded to the Shoe Store across the street and whispered, “a real estate reason! Mrs. Flood, with the help of Sunset Tea starts feeling poorly. Twid, her old friend swoops in to ‘help’ her with her store, her house and her investments.

It’s all going according to plan, Mrs. Flood actually puts a For Sale sign in her window…but then…it stops working. Mrs. Flood starts feeling better again, takes the sign down and starts taking ballroom dancing classes.” Sully took a long pull on her straw. “Now the big question is what would you do if you were Mrs. Twid? Would you just shrug your shoulders and go back to hosting Church teas?” Sully shook her head vigorously. “No way---you’d try it again! But this time you’d make sure it worked---you’d go right to your mark.”

“You mean you think she’ll be poisoning Mrs. Flood herself?” asked Ygg incredulously, “that be just stupid if’n you ask me. She’ll go to jail.”

Sully shrugged, “Who would suspect such an upstanding, church-going old lady of poisoning her good friend?”

Ambril was shocked at how naive they had been. They should have thought this before now…but what could they do?

Just then the door behind them opened. Ygg stiffened, Ambril knew who it was without turning her head.

“You are lounging again I see,” a stiff, sharp voice broke over them.

“I’ve finished me chores, Mrs. Twid,” 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 had been right. Mrs. Flood looked two hundred years old. Her face was nearly as gray as her hair. She was quivering so she had to lean on her tall strong friend just to stay upright.

“I don’t want you causing trouble today Ygg,” Mrs. Twid sniffed and pointed to the door, “I have a sick friend in need of cheering up.”

Ygg nodded and headed for the door. Ambril jumped up and hurried outside right on Ygg’s heels but Sully took her time.

Outside Sully steamed as they turned down the side alley, “she’s so crafty, poisoning her friend right under every one’s nose!”

“What?” asked Ambril, bewildered.

“She’s doing it in Betula’s shop! She’s replacing Betula’s tea with her awful Sunset Tea and making Mrs. Flood sick in front of God and everybody---then she’ll blame Betula! She wants Mrs. Flood to have a fit right there,” growled Sully and jerked her thumb at the Sweet Shoppe. “We have to see what’s going on!”

“Over here!” Ygg had his head in a half open window. “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 put Mrs. Flood in a chair and settled in across the table from her. She reached over and patted her friend’s hand, “you look so poorly Daisy; let’s have some of Betula’s tea before we tackle these real estate forms.”

She looked around and called imperiously, “Betula! Daisy and I have a bone to pick with you; neither of us have felt well since we had tea here yesterday. Daisy hasn’t been able to eat a thing, poor dear! Just look at her.”

Betula bustled over, “Daisy? Not yourself today I see, here now, I’ll fix you a nice pot of tea and a plate of my best scones to go with it.”

“Do you have any of the remedy tea on you?” whispered Ambril as she watched Mrs. Flood struggling to stay upright in her chair.

Ygg rummaged through his backpack and came up with one, lint-covered bag. “This be all I have.” He said trying to pick the worst bits off.

“Give me a boost,” Ambril said. Ygg and Sully heaved her half way through the window.

Betula was setting up a teapot on the counter just below her as Ambril wedged herself into the window opening. She was about to drop the remedy in when---!

“Make sure it’s hot, now!” Mrs. Twid shrilled, “It’s always so lukewarm!” Everyone in the shop turned to see what was going on.

Ambril pulled back just as Betula turned to fiddle with the teapot. Then she turned away again to load a plate with blueberry scones.

“Now, do it now!” whispered Sully urgently.

Ambril reached in but found Betula had moved the pot farther down the counter. It would be a stretch now. She took carefully aim and threw the tea at the pot. The bag would have dropped inside except that 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 boiling water into the pot.

“*This is so tedious*!” said a bell like voice inside her head, she felt a whoosh of air and smiled as the teabag miraculously slipped under the lid just as Betula clamped it shut.

“Did you see that?” Sully whispered.

“Funny thing, I know I should have seen something---but didn’t,” said Ygg. Ambril tried to look innocent. They watched as Betula carried the tray over and insisted on pouring out the tea for the two elderly ladies. Mrs. Twid was tight lipped at that. Ambril guessed that was when she usually slipped in the poison.

They watched as Mrs. Flood brought the teacup to her lips and took a very small sip. Her lips puckered slightly then formed a little half smile. She thoughtfully took another sip and after a moment sat up a bit straighter and picked up a scone. She smiled at her gaunt friend. “Crystal you were right, having tea at Betula’s does wonders!”

“I’m so pleased you’re feeling better Daisy,” said Mrs. Twid looking anything but pleased.

Mrs. Flood finished off her tea in a twinkling and started tapping her toe to the Ragtime music Betula always played.

Mrs. Twid took an experimental sip of tea herself then jerked upright, her face puckered like an ancient prune. “There’s something terribly wrong ---Daisy, I’m not certain this tea is quite right.” she tried to snatch her friend’s teacup away from her.

But 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 children.”

Mrs. Twid’s face suddenly tensed with anger. “What children?”

“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 from behind, “losers clogging up the alley, we can’t have that!” She twisted around just in time to see Lance’s sneering face before she was shoved right through the window. She flailed in midair a moment then tumbled to the counter. Her foot felt oddly cold.

“Look that girl has her foot in the ice cream!” shouted a little girl with freckles.

Ambril looked and found her foot was indeed ankle deep in chocolate ice cream. 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---look I can explain!”

Betula said nothing as 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!” she pointed to the back door, “and take this out to the trash!” she handed Ambril the half full tub of Kamikaze Chip---with essence of sneaker.

“I’m really, really sorry,” said Ambril giving the angry woman a wide berth, she half hopped, half tiptoed to the alley and threw the ice cream in the dumpster. She was rinsing off her shoe when Sully and Ygg limped into view. Sully had a smashed avocado 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 this stuff,” she extracted avocado from her hair.

“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, Mrs. Flood let it slip that we were at Miss Fern’s the night of her last recovery.”

Ygg started pacing the alley, his whole body a taunt wire of nerves.

Ambril winced as she watched him while trying to wring out her shoe. “It’s time you got out of there anyway, Ygg. Look, I’ll talk to my Mom---“

Suddenly 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.”

# Betula’s secret

“You can explain it after you clean every one of my dishes!” Betula continued angrily and motioned inside, “just you, your friends have to leave.”

Ambril nodded to her friends, put on her shoe and slopped toward the door.

Just as Ambril slipped inside she heard Sully say, “you’re coming home with me tonight! No more Twid!”

Inside Ambril squelched over to the sink and picked up the first of a massive stack of dirty dishes. She realized that this would take all afternoon.

As Ambril washed she stole looks a t the elderly ladies finishing their tea. She found that if she kept the water at a slow dribble she could just hear them.

Mrs. Twid was doing damage control, “Daisy all you have to do is sign here and it will all be over. I’ll be the one worrying about sales, lifting heavy boxes and dealing with rude customers,” Ambril heard her say, “you’ll be basking in the sun at your niece’s place in San Clemente,” Mrs. Twid shoved a sheaf of important looking documents under her friend’s nose and held out a pen.

But Mrs. Flood wasn’t paying attention; instead she was looking around the shop and humming to the music.

“Daisy dear, It’s just as we talked about, I’ll handle everything---JUST SIGN HERE!” Mrs. Twid said impatiently as she pointed to a long blank line.

But Mrs. Flood just smiled and looked out the window.

Mrs. Twid stared hard over her glasses at her friend, “Daisy you are looking quite strange,” her eyebrows rose, “how about a pot of Sunset Tea! I just made a very special batch today.”

“But Crystal, I feel marvelous,” crowed Mrs. Flood, “in fact I feel like dancing!”

Ambril held her breath and willed the old woman to not try doing double flips off the counter or swinging from the ceiling fan like some of the other old folks.

Fortunately Mrs. Flood giggled and put down her teacup. She started looking over the papers in front of her still humming to herself, “I feel as if I’ve been in a fog and the sun has just come out! So let’s review, Crystal, my dear old friend, you wish to purchase my shop and---oh! ‘The property behind it’ that must be my home as well I assume?” she looked up sharply at her stiff friend.

Mrs. Twid looked as if she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “We did discuss this, Daisy, you said you wanted a clean break.”

Mrs. Flood went back to flipping through the papers, “oh---and the ten acre farm as well? That’s a fine piece of land,” Mrs. Flood wasn’t smiling anymore.

“This is what you wanted. This is all for you dear,” sputtered Mrs. Twid.

“And I was to receive this paltry amount for ALL of my property?” continued Mrs. Flood pointing with disgust at a number mid-stack. “This is far below what my store alone is worth!”

“But it’s all I can afford!” whispered Mrs. Twid, beginning to wilt.

Mrs. Flood slapped the pages down and got up so quickly, Mrs. Twid dropped her teacup. The tea spilled over the papers and dribbled its way to the floor unnoticed.

“I don’t know what to make of this Crystal. I trusted you, I thought we were friends,” said Mrs. Flood quietly. “But now---well now I’d prefer not to say what I think of you---as it wouldn’t be ladylike.”

Mrs. Flood swiftly collected her things and turned toward Betula. “I’m not sure what you put in your tea but I’ll be back for more tomorrow!” She patted Betula’s cheek and trotted out the door.

Betula laughed a deep, heartfelt chuckle, “my she’s perked up!” She eyed the thin woman awkwardly rising to her feet. “It’s funny how these things work out.”

“It’s not funny---it’s downright---criminal!” Mrs. Twid’s glared at her then at Ambril as she marched toward the door then turned and sniffed, “I see where things stand now Betula,” then she marched off down the street.

Betula nodded at the tea stained papers, “I do love to get under that woman’s skin!” She turned to Ambril, “Not done yet? Well keep at it…it won’t be long.”

Ambril looked at the dishes still stacked three feet high and knew that was a lie. An hour later Ambril dried the last dish as Betula turned the ‘OPEN to ‘CLOSED’ sign on her door and shooed the last customers out. She stopped to stretch after pulling down the blinds, a satisfied smile on her face.

“Come out from behind there, Sweetie,” Betula boomed as she sat down, dwarfing one of her freshly wiped tables.

Ambril, one sneaker still squelching, padded over and slipped into a chair across from her. “I really am sorry, Betula,” she said softly.

Betula leaned back in her chair, “Sure enough, you’ve done your penance.” She nodded toward the now shiny stacks of dishes next to the sink then folded her arms, “you knew I wouldn’t take kindly to someone meddling with my food,” her lips were a flat line, “just what did you put in my tea?”

Ambril shrank from her intimidating tone. She’d have to be straight with her, but she didn’t want Sully and Ygg getting into trouble.

She took a deep breath. “Well it all started when we noticed the old folks, the ones who bought Sunset Tea, seemed to be sicker and older all of a sudden,”

“We, being you, Sully, and Ygg?” interrupted Betula.

“Well it was Ygg who first noticed it---not that he’s responsible for all of this or anything.” Ambril rushed to add.

“Let me be the one to judge.” Betula nodded, looking---judgmental. “Go on.”

Ambril then muddled through the entire story but kept the magical parts out. She nervously examined her sneaker as she finished with, “---so then we slipped Miss Fern’s remedy in the teapot---and that’s when I fell into the ice cream.”

Betula said nothing for a long while then she asked, “did you know old Mr. Samuels was doing cartwheels down Main Street here just last week?”

Ambril shrugged sheepishly. “Miss Fern’s tea was a little strong at first.”

Betula rocked back in her chair as she laughed her rumbly laugh. “Child, there is even more to you than I can see---and I can see more than most.” She nodded appreciatively. “But that’s not the whole story now is it?”

Ambril just stared at her hands not trusting herself to say anything.

Betula got slowly to her feet. “I think we need to stop playing cat and mouse, us two. Especially seeing as we’re on the same team.” She beckoned to Ambril as she walked behind the counter and over to a display case. Inside her famous candy animals stared back at them. She remembered them from her first day in Trelawnyd. Beside a licorice cannon stood a foot high striped giraffe with the world’s longest eyelashes. Next to him a white rabbit with red, high top sneakers lounged against a sugar coated Ferris wheel and a tubby black bear with a gold hoop in his ear and an eye patch stood next to him. The bear seemed to be looking her straight in the eye. Ambril marveled at how well they’d been crafted…the detail on the shoes---she could even see the stitches.

“They’re in here for their own good.” Betula said as she unlocked the case. “Otherwise people would reach up and try to snap off a piece of them. Mind you it’s pretty nigh impossible but, if you know what you’re doing…” She whispered behind her hand, “that’s how Slim here, lost an ear.”

““Still itches, it does.” Ambril jumped as the giraffe lifted its hoof unsuccessfully to scratch its ear.

“That ain’t any way to scratch, you need to bend a bit more, like this!” Suddenly the rabbit raised a leg and scratched his long floppy ears vigorously, coating everyone with sugar, “that’s how it’s done!”

“Come on, Red, he’s just not built like you.” Betula admonished as she reached in to scratch the giraffe’s ear. He wiggled appreciatively.

“These are my pals, Shug my bear friend, Red, named for his sneakers and Slim,” Betula patted the skinny giraffe affectionately, “named for obvious reasons. They have helped me through some troubling times,” Betula reached over and pulled on the Sugar Bear’s ear. The Bear shook himself loose with a chuckle as a cloud of sugar made Ambril sneeze.

“Powerful trouble too,” chimed in Shug as the fat bear clambered out of the case, “but a fine adventure!”

“Boys, the list is on the board. Why don’t you get things started while I walk Ambril out?” Betula nodded at a Bulletin Board, which was covered with lots of scribbled recipes.

“Why do we always let her get out of working?” Red said ruefully as Ambril turned to follow Betula out the door.

“Cuz we kind a’ like to do it ourselves,” the bear dimpled as he switched on an old fashioned radio, “but mainly I suppose it’s the music.”

They started tapping their toes to a ragtime tune as they put on their aprons. Ambril wanted to stay and watch but Betula steered her toward the door.

“They get nothing done with an audience. I’ll just walk you down the alley, it should be quiet now.” Betula slung her arm around Ambril as they walked down the silent, shadowy street, “I could tell from the first day, you were shiny bright with magic. Child, I done showed you my heart, tell me your story.”

Ambril took a deep breath and everything rushed out, “It happened just as I said except that the old book we found in the Library is some sort of magical recipe book…and there are the gnomes---Hey, maybe your friends could use some of the fixit juice we made for them? Anyway---” Ambril told the story all over again but this time included the magic. Betula clucked and nodded in all the right places and occasionally interrupted her with questions. They were so intent on their conversation they didn’t notice a shadowy figure as he followed them down the alley, listening intently. When Ambril finished, Betula gave her a hug and waved as she watched her ride away. By the time Betula retraced her steps the figure had slipped away into the night.

# Unk

The next evening, Saturday, Ambril coasted down the hill to Miss Fern’s house for dinner. Sully and Ygg were invited too. Ygg had stayed at Sully’s house last night and had helped out on the farm that day. He’d managed to get his stuff out of Mrs. Twid’s house without running into her. But they all knew it was only temporary. Judging by the last glimpse Ambril had had of Mrs. Twid’s livid expression, there would be fireworks when they ran into her again. Somehow Ygg had to work something out with his legal guardian or he really would be sent home. As she turned the corner and cruised toward Miss Fern’s driveway, she could see Ygg and Sully laughing as they got off their bikes

“Hey you survived! hope it wasn’t too bad,” Sully smiled as Ambril got off her bike.

“My hands have never been so clean, I had to wash about a thousand plates. But afterwards, we talked. I found out that Betula’s a magic wielder!”

Sully and Ygg’s couldn’t have looked more astonished if Ms. Breccia strolled down the street in a bunny suit.

“Betula? I wonder how many other people…” Ygg looked around as if he expected to see magic users jump out and try to turn them into Newts.

“Then Betula introduced me to her friends, these--- sugar animals, you know the ones in the case? They’re like the gnomes---except made of sugar not ceramic---and they’re a lot easier to get along with.”

Ygg and Sully just stared at her.

“That be making sense, every so often I’ve noticed that the rabbits shoelaces are untied and the Bear’s patch switches from eye to eye,” Ygg said.

Just then Sully pointed down the street, “Is that who I think it is?” Ambril turned and saw a figure approaching them, moving stiffly and resolutely, it’s long flat feet slapped the pavement.

“It be Twid!” cried Ygg.

“And she does not look happy,” Sully added.

# Mrs. Twid’s gets dirty then Ygg comes clean

That was an understatement, Mrs. Twid’s thin wiry hands curled into fists as she stopped in front of them and bent over Ygg, her upper lip curled in a sneer, “it was you all along, wasn’t it? You--- you ruined everything!”

“If it wasn’t for you I the great family of Twid would have risen to where it belongs, a ruling force in Trelawnyd’s society!” Her jowls wobbled with every breath. “Before the Mine closed---we were like Gods to the villagers!” She sputtered angrily. “Then those fool miners started making trouble -- wanting better wages, demanding safer lifts, taking, taking, taking until there was nothing left!” Her eyes narrowed into slits as she said in a deadly whisper, “Then you came to me---another fool of a miner’s son!” she viciously spat out the last words, “to have you in my home was torture, but I endured it---it pains me to say it but there is Twid in you. Then I find that not only are you inferior in every way, you foiled my plans!” A maniac light gleamed in her eyes as she grasped Ygg’s collar and began to twist, “but now, I’ll have my revenge! I had an interesting conversation with your older brother today.”

Ygg went still and white as a statue as he stared at her in horror. Mrs. Twid just watched him for a moment, fascinated by his pain.

“Yes,” she said in a singsong voice, “you’re brothers are on their way to collect you. Poor little Ygg, not able to finish school like his sad little Mommy wanted! Now you’ll go down the Mines to die like your father did!”

Ambril went cold, it all seemed so hopeless, Mrs. Twid had the law and Ygg’s family on her side. Her head drooped as she examined her shoes. Try as she might she couldn’t think of one single thing to do to help.

It was then that she felt as well as heard a resonant boom as two huge black boots landed next to Ambril’s shoes, Ambril nearly fell over as the bounty hunter stepped forward and grabbed Mrs. Twid around the waist.

“Let the boy go!” he thundered angrily, Mrs. Twid’s face stretched in horror as she realized she was now being lifted off the ground by a giant...

“Troll!” she screamed, “a throwback! Run for your lives!” She tried to do just that but being several feet off the sidewalk her legs flailed, and her arms pin wheeled like a cartoon character. The bounty hunter looked at her in disgust and then shook her just once. She stopped wriggling then and simply cowered in his fist, whimpering.

“The name of Twid be known to us forest dwellers. It be the name of schemers, liars and tricksters!” The big man boomed, he opened his hand and let the thin woman slip to the ground. Mrs. Twid unsteadily took a step back.

“From now and forever the house of Twid be nought linked to the house of Drasil. We wash our hands of you and yourn.” The big man said firmly, “YOU GO!” he flicked his wrist as if he were batting away a fly. Ambril felt a frizz of magic as Mrs. Twid was knocked backward several feet as if by an invisible hand. Then she got her legs working well enough to put them to use and was half a block away in the blink of an eye.

The big man watched calmly as she raced out of sight.

Sully cleared her throat, “wait---did you say---are you a Drasil---one of Ygg’s relatives?”

The big man squared his shoulders and turned a surprisingly gentle face toward them, “that be true, this moon I be learning this, I be Ygg’s Unkley, I come to help my brother’s boy,” he strode over to his nephew, “it’s true, we be kin, I be your Unk.”

By this time Ygg had gotten his breath back but the shock of what had occurred hit him hard, “I---I nought remember any Uncle---me Da said nought about you.

“Never? He never speak of me?”

Ygg shook his head, “I---I thank you for your help. But now I best be going, I must be getting well away from here before my brothers come to take me back,” he said sadly.

Unk looked at him quizzically and scratched his head. “What you be saying? I be telling your brothers you be staying here with me, your Mam wish you to stay, she knows what’s besty for Yggy boy.”

“Me brothers, they nought want what’s best for me, or care what Mam wants, they be wanting what’s best for them.” Ygg lowered his head and looked beaten.

“What is it you haven’t told us? They don’t just want your strong back. They’re after you ---why?” asked Sully.

Ygg’s shoulders came up defensively, “remember me telling you about magic wielders and miners in Chert---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. “I….I lied to you then…I didna fail, I be testing high,” he shrugged, “I be off the charts in magicking.”

Ambril and Sully stared at him. “You lied to us?” asked Ambril “why?”

“I nought be telling anyone. I--- be afraid.”

“But we’re friends, how---how could you do that?” Sully asked looking incredulous and hurt at the same time.

Ambril felt horribly betrayed, “thanks a bunch, I showed you my Ashera, told you about the Dullaith, my Dad and everything---and you still couldn’t trust me?”

“I---I be sorry,” said Ygg anxiously.

Ambril and Sully just stood there with folded arms.

“So they want you back because you can find Glain for them?” Sully asked.

Ygg nodded looking miserable, “they had me down the mines the day of the cave-in,” his body bent inward like a bow, “I heard them give the order to leave the men---they nought even try to dig them out. Me---me Da was down there…the engineers be telling them for weeks they be digging too fast---but they didna listen.” he folded his arms angrily, “they acted concerned for me family and said I should be proud about me Da giving up his life for the good of the Mine…for the Mine? Are they daft? For the good of their pocketbooks!”

It was Unk’s turn to look angry, “I be seeing now, but your brothers? I canna ken.”

“Our family’s nought high in the village, we be regular folk. Me brothers, they always be wanting more---wanting to be richer, bigger, best.” Ygg shrugged, “they nought just want the reward but also a higher place in the village...through me. But I don’t want it; I’ll never see the good without the tarnish of the bad.”

Ygg turned and looked Ambril and Sully straight in the eye, “I’m asking for your forgiveness, after I be leaving, I---want you to be thinking well of me.”

Sully’s foot tapped impatiently as she said stiffly. “So that’s it then? You’re giving up? Turning tail and running for the hills?”

Ygg shook his head. “They nought be letting me loose again, I be too good at finding the Glain.”

Just then headlights flashed as a police car rounded the corner and bore down on them, “Ygg it’s the cops!” Ambril tried to shield him from the lights, “you have to get out of here!”

Ygg lunged for his bike but was stopped by a very large, very firm hand, “we nought be running and hiding. We stand together, we be family,” Unk turned to face the police car as it 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? It would save time if I just had a deputy follow you around,” he got out his weathered notepad and flipped through a couple of pages as he walked slowly up to Ygg, “I had a call from Crystal Twid, your guardian,” he paused to sift through more pages, “she claims you’re a runaway, my boy.”

Ygg didn’t even look up.

“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, that wouldn’t be right,” he cleared his throat, “though how you managed to stay alive in Mrs. Twid’s care is beyond me. 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.

Unk cleared his throat, “I be wanting you to read this---it be from Ygg’s Mam.” Unk handed a hairy leather pouch 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,” I be here to take up his care and guard him,” he nodded 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. There was a messily applied red wax seal with a thumbprint in the center. Breaking the seal, he unfolded then read the letter. He looked carefully up at Unk and down at Ygg---twice before handing it 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 beamed, “that’s me Mam, always thinking.”

Ambril peered over Ygg’s shoulder and read:

**To whom this might mean something,**

**I, Skylla Twid Drasil, wish all to know that I be wanting Ygg to finish schooling in Trelawnyd. I be nought wanting his brothers to get at him no-ways. His Uncle, Urgan Drasil be taking up his care until he is growed and able to go his own way.**

**Hoping you Best Wishes,**

**Skylla Drasil**

Unk then handed some official looking papers to the chief and a family photo. There was a boyish Ygg sitting next to a broad man who had Ygg’s unruly hair and bright smile. A tall thin woman stood proudly behind them with a homely but happy face.

Chief looked through the papers, “these guardian papers look complete, made out to Urgan Drasil.” He peered up at the Giant in front of him, “that you?”

“I Urgan Drasil,” said the big man, “I be Ygg’s Unk and Guard.”

“We’ll have to verify all of this of course. Where are you staying?”

Unk looked blank, “I be just back today.”

The Chief looked at him quizzically, “No home? Well then, you’ll have to come with me anyway Ygg.”

“But her can stay with us on our farm!” said Sully.

“Yeah, or at our house!” put in Ambril.

But the Chief was emphatic, “can’t be done that way, Ygg needs a home of his own with a roof to keep the rain off and a place to break bread. I can’t just leave you here on the sidewalk.”

“Why Chief Buckthorne whatever are you talking about? Don’t you remember asking me about my spare rooms Unk?” came a quavering voice from the shadows. Miss Fern stepped firmly into the light, “they’re staying with me, of course. In fact supper is waiting, would you like to join us Bucky?”

# Chapter 33 Supper with Fern

*“Bucky?”*  thought Ambril barely disguising a smile.

Chief Buckthorne looked more uncomfortable than usual in his rumpled suit as he fiddled with his tie, “I’m going to have to see these rooms of yours Fern.”

“Well sure! Come and take a gander, we were just on our way out there anyway, that’s where supper’s laid,” Fern said easily, “would you mind helping me back there? I’m a little wobbly today,” she took up the Chief’s arm then pointed toward the back, “you kids go one ahead, don’t wait for us.”

“Come on!” whispered Sully, I think we’re supposed to go to the Garage.”

Ygg looked apprehensive as they jogged up the driveway. Ambril remembered all the trash, cobwebs and dirt everywhere, “I’m sure it’s been cleaned up,” she said optimistically.

“When? There’s been no time to clean it! The Chief’ll just get huffy, turn around and take me away,” Ygg grimaced as they raced around the house.

“Fern’s pretty resourceful, I bet she managed something,” Sully added.

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 was freshly scrubbed. 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 vines above them wound contentedly through the rafters. 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 were shiny clean. The workbench had been transformed into 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.

“This looks right nice, Fern,” Chief Buckthorne said admiringly as he poked his head through the door.

There were two doors in the back, one so large it dwarfed the one beside it. Sully went straight over and looked inside the smaller one, “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 was open to the garden.

Ygg gasped, “me bed! Me books! And…Mam made this quilt!” He flopped down on the bed and tried to hug the whole thing at once.

“The books nought be 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 the forest sprites,” he looked hopefully at Ygg, “you be liking it?” he asked.

Ygg could only smile and nod.

Something like the sound of an angry sci-fi creature filled the room, Ygg grabbed his belly and looked embarrassed, “sorry, I be that hungry,”

“Me too, though I’m not going to broadcast it like that!” giggled Sully as they all headed out to the kitchen.

Fern was at the front door waving, “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 tinked 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 fifteen minutes work!”

Ygg’s smile grew until it was much too big for his face, “this be right fine, right fine enough!” he said softly looking at them all.

Baldot scowled at Bummil, “what you be waiting for you loll-about! Where are the supper fixing’s?”

Bummil jumped, then whipped out platters of sandwiches, artichokes, and a lovely chocolate cake. Baldot laboriously climbed a stool to the stove and began to ladle out steaming tomato soup.

“I’m starved!” said Ambril as they all grabbed a chair.

“Yum, my favorite!” exclaimed Sully eyeing the artichokes greedily.

Mugs of 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. She tried to keep track of how many sandwiches Unk put away but lost track after five.

Finally Unk leaned back and rubbed his belly, “that be right fine eats, thanks.” Then he cocked his head at Ygg, “so your Da nought tell you about me?”

Ygg looked at him sideways, “I remember him saying he be having a brother who had to go away, but that be all.”

“I was a wee boy then younger than you, they made me leave me family---I was lonely, very lonely I nought want that for you,” he looked resolutely at Ygg.

Ygg stared at him, understanding coming to him slowly. “You---you be the throwback then.”

The big man nodded sadly, “that’s what they called me.”

Ygg shook his head,” he didna’ say you be his brother though.”

“What do you mean by throwback?” asked Sully,

“In Chert if’n you be growing too fast, too big, they be branding you a---throwback,” Ygg shook his head sadly; “they say all throwbacks be too wild, part of a strain of earth-kind that must be taken back to the wildness.”

“Da told me once that he watched the Elders take a young boy by the hand and lead him out into the wild forest and leave him there alone,” Ygg kicked at his chair, “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 followed the boy and watched where they left him.”

“The big man grunted, “your Da he came to me and comfort me. We be building a shelter and a fiery place by starry light.” Unk 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 until I be finding the other Forest Dwellers,” he said softly, “then when your Da got all married, he came less, once a moon or so,” he smiled to himself, “we sit around my fiery place and talk and laugh. I be showing him my doings, he be bringing me pictures of his baby boys,” then his smile faded. “One time, your Da brought your biggy brothers---but they nought like me. They call me---freaky--- and run away.”

“Your Mam, she come to me in the forest. She tell me about your Da,” the big man’s face spasmed with pain, “she so sad, I so sad, then she talk about you…I be good at seeing people. I see love for you all through her, “he reached into another pocket and pulled out another letter and handed it to Ygg, “I go to see her this past moon, that’s when we decide I be guard to you and she give me this.”

Ygg took the letter, broke the seal and smoothed it out before reading it. Ambril peeked over one shoulder as Unk leaned over the other. Ambril saw it was tear stained and written in a shaky hand.

**My Deary Ygg,**

**I be missing you. But more I be hoping you be finding a happy place, a home place where they be nought forcing you to live a narrow drip of day, but a wider river of life. Trust your Unk Urgan, he be good and true. He be wanting to help you grow to be a Man.**

**I be so happy you make the choosing you did. Your brothers they turned out differenting. They be loving the Mines and wanting to be biggies there. You must not be blaming them they come out this way. I be thinking of you every day, 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,**

**Mam**

Ygg blinked hard trying to hide his tears as Ambril quickly brushed some from her own eyes. Unk wept with such gusto, he pulled out a pink and green paisley handkerchief and blew a long blast on his nose.

Fern looked around at all the blubbering and cleared her throat, “so who’s up for dessert? Ambril, see if you can find a knife in one of those drawers behind you, it’s time to cut the cake!” Ambril thankful for the distraction turned and opened one of the drawers.

It was the junk drawer; rusty nails, screwdrivers and bent paperclips littered the bottom...no knives. 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 they had been scratched out and the words ‘household accounts’ written underneath. Ambril grabbed it, and flipped through it, curious. GERN had been the name of her father’s last project. The first few pages were filled with sketches and mathematical formulas but the back part of the book had been used to make lists of expenses in a different hand.

“Hey, we’re hungry for cake here and it’s about to get ugly!” said Sully.

“Right, sorry,” said Ambril shoving the drawer closed, she laid the booklet on the table then searched around for the perfect cake knife and handed it to Fern.

“Oh look! That must be one of your father’s lab books,” Fern paused to lick a finger as she glanced at the little green book, “that’s Fixit Joe’s writing there, he must have found some blank pages in the back.” Fern handed a slice of cake to Sully. “He was such a nice man, your father. Such a shame really, it all ended badly 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…why would your father be raising monsters? He just wasn’t capable of such a diabolical act,” she looked down at the little notebook, “perhaps there’s something in there that might shed some light on it.”

Ygg had just finished mopping up the last of his cake when Sully got up and stretched, yawning hugely, “I guess it’s time to hit the road.”

“Why yes, I expect you are all tired out---what a night its been!” Fern said as she gathered her shawl around her. The elderly lady looked very tired, 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 home,” he said and offered her his hairy arm.

As Ambril got to her feet her exhaustion hit her like a grand piano falling from a great height, she felt a million years old, fLit had worked her hard the night before, the excitement with Ygg and Unk was just a little too much. After saying good night to everyone she pedaled home but had to walk her bike up the hill for the first time. Upstairs, she stashed her backpack near the door, shrugged off fLit and the night’s training and rolled into bed, the little green book forgotten.

# Chapter 32 A break-in at school

Ambril hummed to herself happily as she headed toward school the next morning. The sun was shining, she’d woken up on time, and there had been pancakes for breakfast. But she stopped humming when she rode past the Sweet Shoppe. There was a huge crowd of people milling around.

Koda struggled to unload some sheets of plywood from an old truck. “Move or you’ll get splinters in your backside, I’m coming through!” he shouted angrily. The onlookers parted enough for Ambril to see Betula looking shaken, standing in a sea of broken glass. 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. 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 you did this---which might just be true,” he frowned accusingly at her.

“Ambril that you? Ambril you come and 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 need your help, 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 the Sweet Shoppe? Ambril took a deep breath and blew it out, wishing she could turn around and help, but she knew if she tried, Betula would just send her on to school. Her bicycle glided smoothly down the shady streets and into the schoolyard---straight 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 Techs busily unloaded a stretcher from a nearby ambulance. Riley came up as she was racking her bike. He looked pale and jittery but his smile was quick when he saw her.

“What the heck’s going on?” She asked as she squinted at the flashing lights.

“Someone broke into the school last night and did some damage,” Riley smirked nervously, “I’m hoping it was Breccia’s room, she’s going to hate my diorama.” As they walked over to Ygg and Sully Ambril smelled rotting fruit on him; 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 on mine,” he smiled then did an imitation of Ms. Breccia, “As usual this is an example of poor workmanship and planning, Riley.”

Ambril smiled, “mine’s not so great either, I had to use marshmallows for the stone buildings. Does the school have an ant problem?”

Riley laughed, “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 swallowing 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 wins 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 our Vocab words, right?” asked Ygg.

Sully winced, “Bear with me here; I’ve failed the last three quizzes.”

The four of them moved toward the growing crowd around the steps. Everyone jostled each other trying to get a look inside.

“I know where we can get a better view,” Riley said in a low voice and motioned for them to follow. He led them to the great oak tree in front of the school. A fat, low branch hugged the building, creating a low shelf before climbing skyward.

“Quick while no one’s looking!” Riley started climbing up the trunk using a ‘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. Inside 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 shooed everyone away. A pillbox hat had rolled to one side and lay forgotten in a corner, Ambril caught a glimpse of a pale, elderly woman…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 what was left of it. It was blackened and puckered as if it had blasted with a blowtorch then smashed with a sledge hammer. The door handle had been sheared off clean leaving a gaping hole. She watched as the janitor ambled up with a thick chain and padlock.

“Here comes Skarn,” whispered Sully as she pointed to the 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. The elderly woman was lifted onto a stretcher, “Ms. Jonquil, can you tell me what happened?”

“I don’t want her to get excited, Officer just a few questions, please,” interrupted one of the medical technicians.

Ambril had to strain to hear her warbled reply, “I’m not sure I know, Officer Skarn…I…I had just let myself in the front door when it happened.” the secretary’s lips quivered as she continued. “I noticed the light right off.”

“Light, can you describe it?” asked Skarn scribbling madly.

“It was very bright, like a camera flash---and then there was this feeling…”

Skarn wrinkled his nose. “Just the facts, M’am, no---feelings.”

“Oh, yes of course…it was sort of a fizzle really…like a jolt of electricity.” The older woman grasped the blanket they had tucked around her. “I turned to see what it was and…and this blast of air hit me! It smelled just like the dumpster behind Dogwood Market,” she shut her eyes tightly, “and—and then there was the monster.”

Skarn sighed and rolled his eyes, “A real live…monster?”

“I’m not sure but I believe I really did see a large---skull…it had red eyes, horns, and glowing…tattoos.”

Skarn stared at her in disgust, “right, large skull, red eyes, big mouth…teeth? Did it have long yellow teeth to eat you with...my dear?” Skarn chuckled derisively, “Like in Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Well…yes, I believe it did have teeth,” Ms. Jonquil was beginning to look embarrassed.

Skarn put his pencil down and jutted his jaw at her, “kind of dramatic, that,” he said dubiously, “maybe we should continue this when you’re more…coherent.”

Ms. Jonquil seemed to wither under his jaw, “Oh Dear…perhaps you’re right Officer…it does seem a bit farfetched now, really…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.”

“That’s enough Officer, we have to get her 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 magicking in the janitor’s closet.” murmured Ygg.

Ambril nodded slowly. She was very familiar with that frizzy feeling and 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 Ambril---“ Sully realized her mistake just a minute too late. Riley stared at her curiously.

“I mean, it sounds like---what I think a Dullaith would look like,” she finished quickly, “I read something about them appearing here…years ago.”

“I remember hearing about that; Feldez was involved then too, wasn’t he?”

Ambril drew in her breath quickly. Riley was right, Feldez always seemed to be right there whenever a Dullaith appeared.

“We’re busted, let’s be getting out of here!” hissed Ygg as he pointed at Skarn 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 slipped away immediately.

“You can’t think Feldez would do this,” said Sully, reading Ambril’s thoughts.

“He wouldna be so daft,” scoffed Ygg.

But Ambril barely heard them…she had a feeling that something was off, “this sounds weird but…it just doesn’t feel right,” she said finally.

“An uncomfortable feeling that you’re about to be zapped, right?” asked Sully.

“No, well yeah… 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. Just then a kid walked by eating a scone.

“Hey, that reminds me! There was an attack on the Sweet Shoppe last night! Some one broke the front window; I saw it on my way to school.”

“Who would attack the Sweet Shoppe? A mad, angry diabetic maybe? There isn’t anything valuable in there,” mused Sully.

“Was anyone hurt?” asked Ygg.

“Betula seemed fine, but I don’t know about her---helpers.”

Just then the front doors opened and the janitor wearily beckoned them in. “Double file, please! Mind the cones!” The kids filed in slowly carefully avoiding the 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.

Ambril looked at it longingly; she just had to get inside that room. They were just passing the office when Ambril heard a familiar voice.

“No time Deputy Skarn, I must check on Ms. Jonquil just now.” Feldez stepped out of the principal’s office with Skarn and Chief Buckthorne in tow.

Skarn gave him a disgruntled nod. “You’re not helping us by putting this off. It was you who called 911.”

Chief Buckthorne said nothing but paused and sniffed the air experimentally, his face blank. Feldez turned and marched out of the building.

“That’s it!” hissed Ambril just as the bell reverberated down the hallway, “the smell!”

Ygg and Sully looked at her curiously, “I smell nought anything,” Ygg said mystified as they rounded a corner and raced into English.

“Exactly, Dullaiths really, really stink!” whispered Ambril excitedly as they slid into their seats just in time, “It smells like corpses and sewage and stuff.”

“Ms. Jonquil said she smelled something rotten didn’t’ she?” Sully sniffed loudly.

“Are you quite finished, Sully sniffing like that is quite rude.” Mr. Pinwydden stared down his nose at her.

“Sorry,” Sully said reddening, “I must be getting a cold.”

The class snickered.

Then 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 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? 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.

“Come on!” Sully said grumpily, “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! There’s nothing more frustrating than having one way conversations with someone who’s just pretending to be among the living.”

“Just thinking.”

“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 got. There was a circle of teachers including Ms. Breccia blocking the door.

“No, No, the show must go!” Ms. Breccia boomed as she towered menacingly over everyone, “think of how disappointed the children will be if they don’t have the honor of performing our annual Maypole Dance!” she thundered.

Ambril thought it would be better than finding $100 in her shoe, but Ms. Breccia wasn’t finished.

“The Maypole Dance has been a Trelawnyd tradition for over 150 years! Do you think our forefathers would have allowed a silly little death threat stop them?” She snorted so loud it made Mr. Pinwydden jump. “Nooooo! Of course not! They would have carried on until the bitter end. Besides do we really know what Ms. Jonquil saw?” Ms. Breccia wrinkled her nose disdainfully, “she’s always been fanciful if you ask me, there’s Tylwith in her.”

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---“

Ms. Breccia pointed a square finger at Pinwydden’s nose and continued her tirade. “Nonsense! Our forefathers must be ROLLING in their graves to hear you talk so flippantly about this! We MUST go forward with our plans.” She towered over poor Mr. Pinwydden who stared nervously back. Eventually he lowered his eyes and nodded. Ms. Breccia smiled widely, “I knew you’d come around, Pinwydden, you always do,” with that she turned and swept from the group, wrenched her classroom’s door open and strode inside.

The remaining teachers looked a bit shell-shocked, “we tried,” said a nervous looking man with red hair and suspenders.

“Yes Mr. Fig, we did…let’s just hope there isn’t any more trouble,” Mr. Pinwydden straightened his tie and walked quickly to his classroom.

Ambril, Ygg and Sully reached the door just as the bell rang. Ms. Breccia threw down her roll book disgustedly, looking positively disappointed that she wasn’t able to give any of them a tardy.

“Children, children, your dioramas belong here,” she said pointing to an already loaded table. “And you---belong in the gym---Maypole Dance rehearsal!” She folded her arms and looked down her nose at them. “Mrs. Twid doesn’t think this particular group is capable of dancing, 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,” she pointed to the door, “out, on the double!” With a grand wave of her hand she turned and began forcefully stacking dioramas smashing two before Ambril could get out of the door.

As they walked down the hallway Sully said, “I made up a batch of remedy tea and dropped it by Betula’s the other day. I figured after what happened to Mrs. Flood it was a nice safeguard.”

“Good thinking,” Ambril 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.

“If you can possibly manage not tripping all over yourselves, we’ll begin. Mrs. Twid’s nasal voice was shrill. “Mrs. Flood, our pianist 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.”

She had to stop when a loud angry voice behind them said, “you little rat! I know what you’re doing!” It was Lance threatening his brother again, “stop messing around! You can’t handle it!”

“Stop going through my stuff!” Riley countered.

“I’ve been watching, I know what you’re up to, knock it off or else!”

“Lance! Riley! Control yourselves!” Mrs. Twid marched over to them, “you will continue this family skirmish in the principal’s office!” But the two boys paid no attention to her. Some of the other boys started gathering around, expecting some action.

“Or else? What or else?” scoffed Riley, “what more could you do to me? You’ve already stuffed me in lockers, garbage cans and dumpsters.” Riley drew himself up to his full height, “I’d explain what I’ve been doing but I’m afraid you’d hurt yourself trying to think that fast,” Riley continued dismissively, Ambril had never seen him like this, “and I’m not going to stop until I get what I want.” He chuckled scornfully, “All you’re ever going to be is a shopkeeper. Me? I’ve got bigger plans; I’m getting out of here!”

Lance couldn’t take it anymore and shoved his brother hard into a large pile of boxes then followed him, his fists flailing. The boxes toppled down on everyone. Then things started getting weird, 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 started to unzip it…but then slowed, unsure. There it was again, that missing something, it smelled bad for an instant, but it smelled more like rotting fruit than corpses more importantly she wasn’t panicking, nothing was trying to invade her mind, she felt perfectly fine. Ambril zipped up her backpack. “It’s not a Dullaith.” She said calmly.

But there was a frizz of magic in the air, something magical was going on. The room had emptied by then; a terrified Mrs. Twid whimpered in the corner, but other than that it was just the three of them. Ambril took another hard look at the Dullaith and pointed. “See? It’s not moving and look! It’s beginning to fade.”

The image had begun to waver. As the smoke cleared a posse of teachers raced into the room with Bob in the lead. Bob flipped the light switch a few times. “Must have blown a fuse,” he muttered as Mr. Fig pointed a screwdriver shakily at the fading Dullaith.

“That’s nothing to worry about Hal, see how it’s fading? We need you over here,” said Bob steering him toward the light switch.

“Mr. Fig looked relieved to have his back to the monstrous image and applied his screwdriver with gusto. After a moment he exclaimed, “here’s the problem, it’s just a faulty wire, people!” In moments the room was flooded with light.

In the stark, fluorescent light Mrs. Twid still stood stock-still, her white knuckles squeezing her pearl necklace, “oh my!” she gasped.

“Perhaps you’d like to sit down a moment..err..Crystal,” Bob solicitously as steered her into a chair.

“Riley, come on out!” Lance, still itching for a fight, was heaving boxes around.

In all the excitement Riley had been forgotten, Ambril imagined him 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 when the last box was lifted Riley wasn’t there.

“He must have slipped out in all the confusion,” said Ygg.

“No chance! I was watching!” said Lance angrily, “I would have seen him!”

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 standing in the hallway, we would have seen him too.”

“Where’d he go? He didn’t vanish into thin air!” shouted Lance.

A few more of the kids had trickled in when Tiana squealed and said, “It was that monster! The Monster took him!” Two or three of her friends shrieked and huddled together excitedly.

“Great, that’s great,” muttered Bob, “there is a rational explanation but right now you need to get to class, Mrs. Twid will you walk the students back to class?”

A little color had returned to Mrs. Twid’s cheeks by then. “It is beneath my station to perform such a menial task but as it is an emergency, and it’s for you Robert….” she nodded and creakily rose to her feet, “children, this way,” she said as she turned on her heel, “if you are not immediately behind me, you’ll be given detention---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. The three friends automatically slowed their pace in hopes of overhearing something.

“Now look,” Mr. Dogwood said, “you can’t expel Lance for a simple little spat between brothers, can you?”

Pinwydden firmly shook his head, “at the very least Lance will be suspended from school. Naturally, this means he’ll be barred from any May Day activities, which means 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 all school functions,” Mr. Pinwydden’s Adam ’s Apple jogged up and down nervously. “As for the disappearance of your son, Riley, the police have begun investigating his disappearance and wish to talk to you,” he motioned toward the Gymnasium.

Larch scoffed, “Riley’s sulking, he’ll turn up when he gets hungry enough, just like all the other times.”

“Are you saying Riley has run away in the past?” Mr. Pinwydden asked, surprised.

Larch sighed heavily and then shrugged. “Not like this, no…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…can’t we just forget this happened?”

Mrs. Dogwood tugged on her husband’s sleeve, “But darling, don’t you think we should take this seriously? He’s been quite upset and---very odd lately.”

“Scarlet, we’ll discuss this at home!” Larch glared at his wife then pointed his beefy index finger at Mr. Pinwydden’s thin nose. “Listen up Pinhead! Lance is the star player of your team! Either my kid plays on Saturday or I’ll withdraw my support for your new Gymnasium!”

Mr. Pinwydden clucked disgustedly as he pushed Larch’s finger away. “You haven’t changed since we were in school. It isn’t hard to see where Lance learned his bullying behavior. Your son must learn to control himself, I suggest you begin practicing it yourself,” he paused to adjust his glasses, “the school will not be coerced into mishandling such a serious infraction,” with that Pinwydden straightened his bow tie and strode away.

Ambril, Ygg and Sully continued down the hall, “it looks like Pinwydden won that round!” crowed Sully. The three friends rounded a corner and saw Mrs. Twid holding open the classroom door.

“If you are not in this room in 15 seconds, your grades will be lowered one full mark!” she said with relish, “no running!”

They speed walked into the classroom in just under 15 seconds and found their seats…but not fast enough. Ms. Breccia stopped writing on the blackboard and turned her beady little eyes on them, “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 through the school, “due to recent events, the Maypole Dance will be cancelled this year, thank you,” there was another whoosh of static.

Ms. Breccia stared open-mouthed as the kids 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 marched out without a word.

“So what’ll it be this time you think?” Sully muttered, her chin in her hand, “a ten page essay on her great-great Gran’s toe nail clipping method? Or a poem about the famous Aldoon Breccia, pigfarmer?”

Ambril sighed heavily as she thought about the Sweet Shoppe and poor Betula, who was probably wondering where they were right that minute. She scanned the classroom for something interesting to take her mind off things. The jumble of dioramas caught her eye; there was one teetering on top that looked interesting. “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 as she bit her nails, “It’s the old Council Hall; they tore it down along with Old Town.”

Ambril got up and cautiously plucked 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 as she examined the model. It was of a simple domed structure, the model had been cut half way through so you could see both the inside and the outside at the same time. There were ornate arches supporting the dome and a circular image on the floor, “look at this circle stone, it’s different than ours.”

Ygg came to look over her shoulder, “it be like the summoning circle we have in Chert, it be special, used only for magic gatherings if’n there be a flood or a collapse in the Mines…when the town be thinking it needs extra help.”

“It was really pretty,” Sully yawned, “but it doesn’t have anything to do with us as it was torn down a long time ago.”

Just then the door banged open and Ms. Breccia strode in, seething. Ambril slipped the model back to the pile and slipped into the nearest seat. She was sure to lose at least one limb. But Ms. Breccia walked right by her, clenching and unclenching her fists. Ambril didn’t dare move, in fact she didn’t dare breathe. But Ms. Breccia surprised them again, she looked at them as if she’d like to kill somebody…but for once it wasn’t them. “Get out of here,” was all she said.

The three were up and out the door in half a second, “we got off easy that time!” said Sully cheerfully as they walked toward the door.

As they passed the Gym Bob stepped into the hallway holding a mop, “would you mind moving these boxes to the entry hall? They need to go back into storage,” he motioned to a stack of boxes just inside the door.

“No problem, you caught us in a great mood, in the last half hour we managed to get out of the Maypole Dance and detention!” said Sully genially as she stacking up two boxes.

Ambril and Ygg followed her lead but not quite so cheerfully. Together they lugged the boxes into the entry hall.

“This is as good a place as any,” said Ambril as she set her box down near the blackened hulk of metal which once was the janitor’s closet.

The janitor came around the corner and sneezed loudly into a large handkerchief. “Where’d I put my allergy pills? They’re sure acting up today. Just leave them boxes there and I’ll put them inside myself,” he sniffled as he fiddled with the padlock.

Ambril, Sully and Ygg turned and headed back to the Gym to get more boxes.

“So who’s behind these attacks then? And what they be wanting?” asked Ygg.

“World domination maybe? Wanting to be the evilest of evil geniuses?”

“You’ve been watching too many Saturday Morning Cartoons,” accused Ambril.

“No really, why scare people away from the Dance?”

Sully shrugged, “Hey why worry? We’re getting our Saturday morning back right? This is a great, great thing!”

They picked up the rest of the boxes and stacked them with the others in the entry hall. Sully stretched, cracking her back several times. “That’s better, that last one was way too heavy!”

Ambril rubbed her shoulder ruefully, they all had been way too heavy she thought…then stopped dead, the chain was off the battered door, and it yawned open temptingly.

Sully spotted it too, “look, the janitor left the door open!” she whispered.

“He went for his pills…I bet he’ll be right back,” said Ygg, “wait, you can’t be thinking what I think you’re thinking!”

Ambril grabbed her friends and dragged them over to the open door, “just one little peek, then we’ll go.”

# 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.”

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…

“So the history books were wrong,” whispered Ygg, “here be Old Council Hall.”

The arches were filled in with intricate mosaic artwork. One was a map of the town. Something was written across one of the arches.

“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’.” Ygg mused, “Though where you’re 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. Ambril was nearly on top of it when she looked down and gasped.

“What did you say that was?” Sully elbowed Ygg hard as she crouched down for a better look.

“It be a power gathering circle, but this be for a special summoning.”

On the floor was an ornately tiled circle stone. Like the circle stone in the Park it was decorated with plants, animals and people. It was hard to make them out, however as a glowing red ink had deformed and mutated the images so they resembled monstrous beasts. Someone had added two glowing eyes and a gruesome gash for a mouth to the central flower.

Ambril drew in her breath, “its Moroz!”

“What? Where?” Yipped Sully as she jumped around, staring into the shadows.

“No, no, someone tried to draw in Moroz!” she said pointing, “there on the floor!”

“Um, Ambril…” Sully tugged on her arm.

But Ambril shrugged her off and leaned out over the image as far as she could, “see the weird eel things growing off his head? And his mouth, it looks just like that.”

“How could you possibly know that?” accused a cold voice from behind Ambril.

Ambril whirled to find Feldez just inside the door, “there are no images of what Moroz became, no record of his mutation, only someone who has studied his practices, someone who has scoured Trelawnyd to learn his history would know this,” His voice was so quiet it was difficult at first for Ambril to hear the rage that boiled underneath his words, “you have at last gone too far.” He took a step towards her his thin pallid hands reached for her.

Just then the janitor popped his head in, looking sheepish.

“My fault, I left the darn fool door open to get my pills,” he sneezed into a large red handkerchief. “I shouldn’t have…you know the reputation this room has…”

Chief Buckthorne then came in behind him; his face a thundercloud.

“What the blazes are you three doing? This is a crime scene; get your tails on out of here!” Chief Buckthorne boomed.

The kids scrambled thankfully for the door. Ambril had never been so pleased to get yelled out. She had one last glimpse of Feldez staring thunderbolts at her before they slipped through the door and 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

“It makes me boiling mad to think of someone attacking Betula’s shop!” said Ygg as they stashed their bikes. It looked like the entire town was trying to get inside all at once.

“Excuse me! Coming through! On your right!” Sully yelled as they 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 Today only!**

Inside it was an absolute mad house. Things were not moving along with their usual efficiency.

“Where’s my muffin!” complained an old man in overalls at one table.

“I ordered a Blueberry muffin not blackberry!” screeched a heavily jowled woman in polka dots.

“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 it was Mrs. Flood who raced distractedly from one table to another never quite finishing anything. Miss Fern manning 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 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 grabbed some aprons 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, then grabbed a couple of aprons herself, “look, we’ll stay and help out here,” she threw an apron at Ygg. “while you see what’s going on back there.” Then she turned and said as if she’d been a drill sergeant her entire life, “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. Are we clear?” 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?”

Amid the clammering shouts Ambril turned toward the back room. She took a deep breath as she pushed through the door and into what felt like a wall of magic.

“Betula? Betula!” She called nearly tripping over a large sack of flour. It looked like it had snowed. Everything in the room was coated with sparkling sugar.

“Ambril?” came a strained voice from the back, “come on back child.”

There was a faint glow coming from around a stack of boxes. Ambril picked her way through the cluttered room then stopped.

Betula looked up at her, her face gray with fear and exhaustion. She smiled weakly while rocking something wrapped in blankets 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.

Slim looked up, “brace yourself, kid, ”

“It ain’t pretty,” Shug nodded toward the bundle in Betula’s arms.

Betula slowly opened the blankets enough for Ambril to see a rabbit ear twitch. “Red? What happened to him?” Ambril cried as she knelt down beside Betula’s arms. Red looked barely alive, he squeezed his eyes tightly as he winced in pain. Ambril could see that 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 then floated down over everything. Ambril could see he was working on a red high topped sneaker.

Red’s eyes fluttered open. “Now I just want to be sure you’re making a right one, yeah? No two left feet for me!” He tried on a laugh but ended up coughing instead.

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. “Who did this to you?”

Betula raised her head sadly, “let him rest honey, he’s about done in,” she sighed. “Late last night someone broke through the front window and cut Red’s red sneaker right off!”

“But I thought that you needed really powerful magic to do that!”

Betula brooded, “you’ve no idea how powerful,” she fussed with Red’s blanket.

Slim picked up the story, “we couldn’t see his face he wore a mask but he was tall, taller than you and thin.” The striped giraffe swallowed hard, “he seemed to know what he wanted and had Red’s shoe and was gone before we could blink…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!

“I can’t for the life of me think why anyone would want one of Red’s smelly old sneakers,” Betula mused softly.

Ambril turned back to the Giraffe. “So he came for the sneaker and only the sneaker.” Something niggled her from the back of her mind. “What does the sneaker do? Does it have some special magic power?” she asked.

Betula looked confused, “nothing special, it’s just a piece of Red’s magic.”

There it was again, something jiggered her thoughts…something… that glowed red… “That’s it! The Janitor’s Closet! Which is really the Old Council Hall---someone broke in last night 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 the working last night.”

They were all silent, considering this.

“That’s despicable,” growled Shug.

“It makes sense, that does.” breathed Betula as she rocked Red back and forth. “My friends here are made of solid magic really. I reckon if you were working a big magic, the kind that needed a big shot of power…” Her voice faded as the rabbit groaned she hugged her friend closer. “They’ve always been precious to me but it never occurred to me that they might be valuable to others.”

She turned toward Ambril her eyes pleading, “We thought we could fix him ourselves, but…we just can’t seem to button him up. Already a good part of him has spilled out.” Betula’s voice broke as she clasped the sugar animal to her breast. “He’s lost so much magic energy…he’ll leave us if we don’t find a way to heal him soon.”

“We’re not giving up, there’s stuff we haven’t tried,” said Slim courageously, “right Shug?”

But Shug didn’t respond instead he turned his tired, blood shot eyes toward Ambril, “It’s like Betula said, the two parts just won’t stick together.”

Ambril screwed up her face, trying to remember what she had seen at the Library, “the Dorcha Blade is a cursed knife, it spreads its curse with every cut.”

Betula was still looking at her, “so you see why you’re here.”

Ambril then 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, fLit’s thought at her, “*you don’t need to help this lowly creature; he is inferior to even human-kind.”*

Ambril sighed, “*That’s where you’re wrong, we’re all connected, especially magic kind. You never know when you might need someone’s help,*” she grimaced, hating how preachy she sounded.

A train whistle sounded and the skidding of tires echoed around in her head. *“Their kind help the Tylwith? They’d never!*” the fairy scoffed.

Ambril pushed the fairy away in her mind, “*go away*.”

Betula wiped her eyes, “look at him Ambril…Just look at him! I’m supposed to be the expert and I…I’ve failed.” Betula looked scared and vulnerable as she hunched her shoulders protectively over her friend.

A cascade of falling books sounded, “*you’re not really going to do this!”*

Ambril slowly and carefully pulled her Ashera from her backpack, it glowed with magic energy, *“I have to try…or he’ll die”.*

His reply was quick and sharp, *“you shouldn’t deplete your energy like this, it’s wasteful!”*

*“Wasteful? You really think it’s wasteful to try and save a life?”* she was so angry her thoughts roared through her, *“you fairies think of yourselves as superior beings. But you’re just as ordinary as the rest of us; small-minded, silly beings who can’t be bothered to just try to see things in a different way!”* She had to pause here as an airplane crash and volleys of explosions echoed around in her head trying to drown out her thoughts. Finally it quieted enough for her to continue, *“LOOK AT HIM!” He’s in pain. LOOK AT HIS FRIENDS, they’re all suffering along with him!”* She blew out her breath hard, *“even a hard hearted little chit like you 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---but the fairy was suddenly quiet…and that was even worse than the noise.

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, there was no blood…nothing to show that anything was wrong, except the space between the shoe and the leg.

Ambril took a deep breath and closed her eyes and in her mind brusquely pushed the gray fog away. She could now see the hot, red magic flowing from Red; it swirled around her like a river. The flow was enormous, she could see the rabbit dimming slightly…and then again…

Ambril was startled to hear the jangle of wind chimes in her head, “*don’t just sit there, 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.”*

Ambril felt a rush of confidence, fLit hadn’t abandoned her---maybe with his help they could actually do this. “*What do I do*? *I’ve never worked with curses*.”

*“Unpick it of course, before weaving a healing*.”

Unpick…weave…Ambril wished she’d paid attention when her Mom had tried to teach her how to sew once upon a time.

*“Still slow like a plodding camel...remember what we’ve practiced, Visualize, Focus, then Will it to happen.”*

Ambril pointed her Ashera and focused on the thin threads of darkness. The Ashera produced a laser-like brilliant beam of light. Everywhere it touched it annihilated the dark curse threads. She went around the cut once and then again to pick up all the little loose bits she’d missed the first time.

*“Did I get it all?’* She asked anxiously, squinting at her work critically.

*“Just that one little piece… yes there… good.”*

*“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 took a quick breath, she had no idea what weaving felt like, But she pointed the Ashera with one hand and picked up the red shoe with the other. She pressed the shoe to the leg and with a soft slurp and a blinding brilliance of light, fused them together. Ambril stopped suddenly afraid and blinked hard trying to get the spots out of her eyes. Now that the energy flow had stopped she could see that the edges of the wound were like frayed cloth. She watched as Red’s magic began to knit a closure. She lent it a small shot of energy until she saw Red’s big toe wiggle. And then all of Red’s toes flexed at once…and then…

Ambril suddenly 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---didn’t mean to do that, no control, yet!” Ambril raised her head and saw Red jumping around, testing his new foot, “works a treat!”

Betula kissed the Rabbit at the top of one jump and laughed happily as she picked her way over to Ambril. “You did it Sweet Pea!” Ambril was soon free of the mops and brooms and swept up in a big Betula hug.

“Thanks bucket’s there, Ambril!” Red hopped over to join them, balancing on Betula’s shoulder and he pulled on Ambril’s ear, “I owe you one.”

“One! I’d say you owe her twenty or thirty at least,” mused Slim as he tripped on a broom lying on the floor.

“He’s always been a bit stingy,” said Shug smiling as he looked around critically, “maybe you ought to see how things are going out front Betula, it wasn’t pretty out there a while back and has probably gotten worse.”

“Shug, as usual, you’re thinking around us and ahead,” Betula smoothed out her hair and grabbed a fresh apron from a nearby peg.

“See if you can get Red to lie down and rest.” Betula bustled toward the door then added, “we’ll celebrate after closing time.”

Ambril braced herself as she tried to follow Betula into the Sweet Shoppe but Betula stood frozen in the doorway, hands on her hip, “How bad is it?” asked Ambril as she peaked around the chubby woman.

“---And that’ll be $10.75 Miss Thyme,” Sully collected money from a large woman with a cane, the same one who had looked ready to kill someone a half hour before.

Amazingly all the tables were filled with chattering customers, the line at the counter was moving smoothly.

“Saint’s alive,” whispered Betula as she watched Sully breeze past them with a teetering pile of plates, “she reminds me of me, years ago!”

“You have the hot fudge for table seven?” Sully asked.

“Yep and the last of the shortcakes as well,” Ygg piped up then noticed Betula. “We’ll be needing more of that shortcake soon, Betula, everyone’s asking for it.”

“Got it all squared away back there?” asked Sully as she scooped up the sundae and shortcakes and was off…then, just as quickly, she was back again.

Betula’s laughter rumbled around the kitchen. “Maybe I’ll just put my feet up and watch the show!” But then she squinted at the clock and walked gingerly over to the front door, “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 interested grunts of approval now as the scrapping of chair legs on tile sounded throughout the shop, people filed obediently out the door. Betula collected all the aprons as Ambril tried to shake sugar out of her hair.

“I can’t ever repay you, not really, but I’ll start by giving you free ice cream for the rest of the month!”

They walked out into the sun slanting toward evening. As they got on their bikes Ambril smiled when she heard the muffled sounds of ragtime music.

# Handlebar Wrestling

Sully pulled out first,“The May Day Festival is tomorrow, you want to meet there in the morning?”

“Great, meet me by Betula’s stand, she’s making berry popovers.” Ambril yelled back.

“Race you!” Ygg yelled then started pedaling madly, he and Sully were off like greased pigs in a rodeo. Ambril smiled as she headed down the alley now filled with deepening shadows. Ambril assumed that’s why she nearly ran over someone coming out of one of the sheds.

“Hey watch it Moron, that’s my foot!” Lance was now hopping around holding his foot.

“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 lit his anxious face. He looked…almost concerned.

“You can’t mean you actually care?” Ambril snorted skeptically as she leaned back in her seat, “not after the way you’ve treated him.”

“Of course I care you idiot, he’s my brother…he just takes it the wrong way is all.” Lance scoffed. I’ve been waiting for him here---this is where he does his experiments. 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 back for that stuff.”

Ambril didn’t know what to say, Lance was clearly concerned for his brother. “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 saying good-bye and that he was done with us,” Lance lowered his head. “My Mom is in pieces about it,” Lance caught his breath in a way that sounded suspiciously like a sob.

There was silence as the space between them slowly lessened. 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.

But then it was over. Lance must have realized how much of his human side he’d shown and not liked it. The monkey part of him came back with a vengeance. He released her handlebars so forcefully she was nearly knocked sideways. “If you do see him, tell him I know something he needs to know…I’m waiting for him here…and I’m getting sick of waiting!” Ambril watched him walk stiffly toward his Dad’s storage shed. Then Ambril froze 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---“

Lance whirled around and sneered, “I don’t want to talk to losers like you, I only want to talk to my loser of a brother, got that? Now get out of here!” then he slammed the door so hard the entire shed shivered.

# Mrs. Sweetgum goes missing

As Ambril pedaled hard up the last hill she noticed that every window of their house was lit. Her mother stood silhouetted in the open doorway.

“Ambril! Finally!” Her mother looked tired and worn, “I’m so glad you’re safely home, it’s been such an odd day.” As Ambril came up the steps 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?”

“She went out for a walk mid-morning---she puts nuts out for the squirrels…and she never came back. The police and a few of her friends have been searching for her for hours.” She heaved them both through the door and slammed it shut behind them then 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 looks…interesting. But I’m not hungry,” she patted her tummy, “nerves probably, it has been a bad day,” Ambril tried to sound sincere. “I’ll just take an apple with me upstairs.” She grabbed one from the bowl of fruit on the counter.

Ambril’s Mother felt her forehead, “All right honey, then why don’t you get some rest, Everyone’s on pins and needles today, even Feldez asked about you!”

“Feldez asked about me?” asked Ambril, she’d forgotten about what he’d been like in the Janitor’s closet, maybe she should have slept over at Sully’s house. “Is he home?”

Her mother shrugged, “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 and I are concerned about you.”

“You mean my not-yet-stepfather.” Interrupted Ambril.

“Your SOON-to-be stepfather, whom I LOVE requires respect!” She yelled.

Ambril stopped then and just looked at her mother, her face full of anger. “Mom, do you really, you know…trust Feldez?”

Ambril’s mother looked at her suspiciously, “why of course, I trust him, I love him, why else would I 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.”

“He has other obligations, meetings to attend, decisions to make…of course I trust him---why wouldn’t I?” Ambril’s mother was beginning to get flustered.

“It’s just that Feldez, well I don’t think…”

“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, “for Mom’s sake, you’re gonna shut up now,” he whispered through clamped jaws. He then shoved her roughly in front of him; “we’re going upstairs to have a little chat,” he said to his Mother. As they trudged up the stairs he 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’d 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 the likes of Mrs. Twid and Ms. Tittle.

She looked up at her big brother, knowing what he was going to say, “Look, glossing over all the bad parts so that we don’t upset Mom will make it worse for her. She’s going to find out about it all anyway, the gossip here is thicker than that stuff Mom made for dinner. She’ll be blindsided---and that will hurt more.”

Zane gave her a disgusted look.

She took a deep breath. “Zane, “I know you don’t want to hear this---but I think there’s going to be another attack, another Dullaith.” she said hesitantly.

Zane snorted, “like the one in the gym? It was a fake. It was just some kids playing around.”

“No my friends and I saw something at school today that---“

Zane rounded on her and really lost his cool, “so you and your little friends are now experts on Dullaiths are you? And you’re going to try 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! It all started when WE arrived,” Ambril sensed a current of fear under his anger, “people are going to put two and two together…our family…Dullaiths… they’ll run us out of here AGAIN!” he stopped to glare at her, breathing heavily, “And I’m supposed to be the insensitive one! Do you want to be responsible for killing your own mother?” he asked, “No? If something that humiliating happens to her again…that might do it,” he thundered, “so I’m telling you---you have to keep out of this, understand?”

His hands worked themselves into tight little fists, “Do it for Mom if you’re too much of an idiot to do it for yourself. Mom’s been happier here than anytime I can remember, and I remember a lot more than you. It wasn’t easy 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 minivan, eating hot dogs for dinner, sometimes for days...she still couldn’t eat a hot dog.

“Do you know 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, he turned toward the door, “so think about that the next time you ride in to save the day,” he said sarcastically and slammed the door behind him.

Ambril slid back on her bed and stared at the ceiling just breathing in and out. Would they really split up her family? She didn’t want to cause trouble but at the same time, she couldn’t stand by and watch anyone get hurt.

She went over to her desk and spread out her homework, but ended up staring at the wall instead. Finally she gave up, got into her P.J.’s and went to bed. Maybe it would all be clear to her in the morning.

But it wasn’t rest her mind wanted. She was 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. She ran through the forest and onto a circle stone. There were dark shapes of abandoned houses around it. But instead of a tree Ms. Breccia grew out of the center of it. She laughed 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, the house was quiet, too quiet.

“Mom? Zane?” she yelled. There was no answer. They must have gone to help set up for the Festival. AT least her mother had, who knows where Zane had went. Her backpack lay in the sunlight half open on the floor. Peaking out was a worn green book, her Dad’s lab book. She scrambled to retrieve it without having to touch the floor then wrapping the blankets around her like a furry tortilla, she cracked it opened. Her Dad’s writing was messy, like her own.

August 3.

**‘I can’t help but think this is it!. Honestly, if Feldez and I hadn’t made that stupid bet I would have given up and moved on to something else long ago. I’m glad I didn’t --- creating the world’s first biomass regenerative energy solution is pretty exciting. Combining ‘natural energy’ and science is a risk, but I’m convinced we can find a way to explain it rationally to the public…back to the salt mines**

Below this entry Ambril found a bizarre mass of scribbles, numbers and Greek letters with sketches messily sketched in the margins. It looked mostly scientific but Ambril thought she recognized some of the images on her Ashera. Toward the bottom there were a couple of equations crossed out over and over again; the one at the bottom was circled and underlined. It was a mixture of Greek letters, numbers and the strange images on her Ashera. The next entry read:

**This is definitely it! I’ve gone over and over it. The next step is to test it. I’ve put in a call to Feldez and started setting everything up.. He’s never in his lab, always at Betula’s shop. I’m glad my lab isn’t a stone’s throw from there, or I’d have gotten paunchy from all those scones and cupcakes just like he has!**

Below this was a line scribbled hurriedly:

**Test run’s tomorrow, we’ll see if it works, if it does then we’ll see 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:

**‘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 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 cup of coffee. I tried not to be smug.**

**Feldez talks of nothing but his pet project:: melding inorganic and ‘natural energy’ sources. He thinks it’s possible he might invent a new form of organism but he’s blind to the inherent danger of playing with life creation. There is something off about these workings too, too many unknowns, too dark.**

**Even more worrying is that he got these ideas of his after studying Moroz’s last workings. 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.**

That was the last of his writing. A Monster Truck Rally advertisement was pasted on the next page followed by Fixit Joe’s careful accounting.

Moroz! Here was the connection between Feldez and Moroz; he was working on some formulas of Moroz. ‘The melding of inorganic and natural energies.’ Combining metal and magic maybe? The twisted, writhing creature in the cavern had looked like that…sort of a metallic mold or a misshapen stone tree.

# 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 expensive shoes in the hall. Feldez was home. She jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She was very certain she didn’t want to confront him in pink pajamas. She grabbed the little green book then took a deep breath and slipped downstairs. Sounds of rustling paper were coming from Feldez’s study. Feeling like an avenging angel at high noon Ambril marched down the hall and banged the door open. Feldez looked up in surprise, his face haggard and drawn.

“Ambril, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you helping your mother at the May Day Festival?” He said, irritated.

Ambril held up the little green lab book, “I’ve been doing some reading, it’s good, this book, you’d like it. It’s all about you and him and was written just before the Dullaith killed him.”

Feldez froze in place, then faster than Ambril thought possible he slipped around his desk and shut the door. The lock clicked softly into place.

He towered over her, “explain.”

“My father left behind a lab book, sort of a diary about G.E.R.N.” Ambril’s face screwed up with anger. “You were the one experimenting with dark magic, not him! But you let everything think it was him!”

“No, that’s not true, I didn’t---“

“Don’t lie to me, you were the one doing experiments 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---“

“Now you’re threatened everyone in town with more Dullaiths. Everyone gets scared and---turns to you for help. They open up the Archives to you and let you in on all its magical secrets. Everything you need to know to release Moroz!”

Feldez just stared at her.

Ambril was too worked up to notice his silence, “Moroz was a powerful magic wielder, and knows more about magic than almost any other being. If you could gain access to his knowledge, you could be the great too. 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, “that must be it,” then he straightened, “firstly, you have everything turned around, it isn’t at all what you think---but I don’t have time to explain it slowly and carefully to you just now.“

“You have to tell everyone the truth and clear my Dad’s name. Have you any idea how awful it’s been for my Mom? ” she raised the lab book and flapped it in the tall man’s face. “If you won’t tell the truth then this will.” Feldez stepped back then and tried to snatch the little green book away from her. But Ambril sidestepped around the desk. Feldez stood there a moment observing her then he grew calm and shrugged, “your father’s lab book is of little value---who would believe you anyway---you are your father’s daughter in so many---frustrating and annoying ways,” he smiled briefly then walked briskly toward the door. “I don’t have time for this! As you appear determined to mess things up once again you leave me no alternative,” he said in his clipped, quiet way as he quickly opened the door and slipped through, the lock clicked smoothly in place a moment later.

“NOO!” Ambril scrambled to her feet and tried the door---it was locked from the outside. She started pounding on the door---but the door was so solid she doubted anyone could hear her. When her fists started hurting she stopped and giving the door a kick she slid to the ground…she was trapped, alone in an empty house. Worse, Feldez was out there free to make more trouble for everyone but especially for her family.

And what would he do to her when he returned? Would he kidnap her then dump her in the forest to die? Perhaps he’d sell her on Craig’s list to a family in some foreign country who wanted a live-in scullery maid and weren’t too particular about how they got one. Her head dropped into her hands as she let herself wallow in self-pity, sobbing quietly as she thought about what her disappearance would do to her Mom. There was something soggy in her hands, eventually she raised her head to discover she still held the lab book. Something had came loose and was sticking out the side. She opened the book and the Monster Truck Rally advertisement fluttered to the floor. Behind it was one last page of her father’s notes. Drying her eyes she read:

**‘Now it’s my turn to help Feldez, I’ve warned him but he won’t listen. We’re going to do it at Old Council Hall to tap into the power of its Circle Stone.**

**I have to say that Feldez’s ideas are original and if successful might be more viable than Gern.**

**But I still have my doubts, he thinks he can control it---we’ll see. I’m boning up on natural energy containment just in case. He’s my friend and he did help me with Gern. But I’m worried.**

**I cant’ think of Gern as a ‘test batch’ anymore---I’m set to run the final tests tomorrow---after that I won’t be able to put my decision off any longer. I’ll have to decide whether to announce my discoveries---or not. Sometimes doing the right thing is painful, it just is.**

The rest of the book was just lists and accounts written in a different hand.

Ambril sat there stunned. Everyone had it backward! It sounded as if it hadn’t been her Dad who had raised the Dullaith, he’d only been there to help Feldez with his dark magic workings---it must have been Feldez all along. Feldez attempting to raise Moroz to get at his power…but instead he had raised a Dullaith.

As Ambril quickly ran through it all the pieces fell into place. The day after her father had written the last entry in his lab book he had stood by his friend’s side as Feldez did his dark workings. Feldez probably hadn’t meant to raise a Dullaith---that must have been an accident. And when Feldez had lost control of the evil creature, it had turned on her father first and consumed him.

Then Feldez had made it worse by trying to cover up his mistakes and placing the blame on her father. When her family had left town, all had been well. But Feldez hadn’t been satisfied with that, for some reason he had coaxed her Mom back to Trelawnyd…why?

With a start Ambril suddenly got it. Feldez had wanted to continue his research and experiments. If things went wrong again, he could use her family as cover. Just like Zane had said, they were the perfect ones to blame if his experiments went wrong again.

She scrambled to her feet, she had to get out of there and show this to her Mom first then they would tell the rest of the world that her Dad was innocent, as she had always known in her heart.

Unfortunately she had left her Ashera zipped up tight in her backpack in her room. She looked carefully around the room, there was just one window set high in the wall, and something unnaturally thick and sluggish hugged the space---protective wards. How would she ever break out on her own.

Sounds of mules brayed in her head followed by twangy country western music echoed around her head, “*really? After all I’ve taught you, all you can think to do is stand in the middle of the room and look stupid*?” fLit’s voice in her head sounded like a bad radio connection.

“*fLit, you can hear me?”*

She was treated to the sounds of crunching metal mixed with a lot of high pitched screeching, *“of course I can hear you, like a badly tuned saxophone, I can’t help but hear you.”*

“*You sound like you’re in China, this is a really bad connection.”*

“*I’m in the hallway trying to find a way through the wards Feldez has put up. I always knew he was paranoid but this is beyond---*“ Ambril heard an electric sound, like a bug zapper, “*Ouch! …beyond thorough---the son of a camel tender---may he fall into a vat of bat guano with his mouth open!*”

She was treated to some bad opera with the national anthem chanted in pig latin simultaneously, followed by more bug zapping---fLit groaned. “*This isn’t working, even I can’t break through this level of protection---you’d have to have skin made of cast iron…*” fLit groaned again…then everything was quiet again.

“*fLit---are you there?”* She tried sighting the fairy but the wards were so thick she could only make out fuzzy shadow images…and none of them were fairy size.

She sat back on her heels trying to make sense of the fairy’s departure. He wouldn’t have left her without a parting insult, Ambril knew that. She also knew in her heart that fLit wouldn’t leave her in this predicament. If only to justify the time he’d spent with her already, he wouldn’t have given up so quickly.

Then suddenly Ambril spied some new fuzzy images coming toward her. Larger than fairies but smaller than a kid they made tink tinking noises in the hallways.

“Stop trying to run this operation, that’s my job---if you want our help you best stay out of the way you pesky gnat! We’ve work to do, don’t you be keeping us from it!” One of the shorter fuzzy images pounded on the door.

“Ambril, how you be? You be breathing enough oxeeygen in there?” came the anxious voice of Bummil.

“Of course she be breathing enough you soft headed dolt! This be a modern house with air ducts and everything! Speaking of which---Boucher where be ya?”

Somewhere above her Ambril heard the tap, tap of ceramic boots 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 Boucher.

‘All right there, Ambril?”

Ambril smiled hugely and nodded. Then Boucher let fall a rope which Ambril tied around her waist.

“All set then?” Boucher asked and when Ambril nodded she fairly flew through the air and into the air duct, she managed to scramble inside. The duct groaned a little under Ambril’s weight but held. Boocher greeted her with an arm punch.

“You’re lucky the ducts be a bit bigger than most in this house,” he turned and trotted off, “come on then!”

Ambril elbowed her way down the duct to where Boucher stood next to a hole with light streaming through. “Time’s a wasting!” Boucher nodded once and jumped through the hole. Ambril braced for an accompanying sound of breaking china---but there wasn’t one. She wriggled over and peeked through the hole. There was a small net erected below…it was just the right size for a gnome, three sizes too small for a girl. Baldot glared at her from below. “Don’t you be getting cold tootsies over this, we’ll catch you.”

But Ambril wasn’t so sure. The net was awfully small, and no fixit juice for humans… she sighed as she started to wriggle through the hole in the duct head first. “So what’s your back up plan? What happens if your net---whoa---LOOK OUT!” She had wriggled out too far and all of a sudden she slid through the hole, arms and legs flailing. She landed face first in the netting and bounced down the hallway. She landed on her back and slid several more feet.

Baldot trotted up a self satisfied smile on his face, “worked a treat didn’t it?”

She struggled to a sitting position checking for any broken bones then smiled weakly, “yeah right---but thanks for getting me out of there.” Beyond Baldot’s grinning face she noticed fLit hovering, his back to everyone. “And fLit---thanks.”

Baldot turned around and scowled.

“During what century are you going to learn to get along again? Do you even know what it was that started this feud?” asked Ambril eyeing them both, “And wasn’t that a really, really, really long time ago?”

Baldot screwed up his face with rage, Ambril could feel in deep rifts of anger in him. “It nought be so long that we don’t remember. We nought be forgetting…we are what we are because the Tylwith betrayed our kind. They sided with Moroz---and---enslaved us---like this.”

The other gnomes came to stand with Baldot and glare at fLit, “are we talking about what happened the last days of the Mines? You mean Moroz---made you like this?”

Still keeping his eyes on the fairy Baldot nodded, “his kind, they set snares and laid traps for us. We be simple miners just breaking shift, on our way up and home.” Baldot’s hands tightened into fists. “The Tylwith, they take down to the deepest shaft---Moroz was waiting---I nought remember much but the pain---when we woke up, we be like this…forced to work day and night in the darkness…until we be rescued by our own kin.”

So the gnomes really were over a hundred years old Ambril thought. fLit turned around then looking annoyed, she braced herself for something insulting but all she heard were chimes in her head, “*but that’s not the whole story.”*

Baldot shivered involuntarily and held his hands up to his ears. “Do you mind? I’ll nought have the likes of you rolling around in me head!”

“*You have it wrong!”* fLit snorted. “*So like your kind!”*

“Easy easy, fLit has something to say about what happened to you, wouldn’t you like to hear it?” Ambril looked questioningly at the gnomes.

They still glared suspiciously at the fairy but eventually a few of them nodded. Ambril nodded encouragingly to fLit.

*“You know of Moroz’s betrayal of our kind of course and how we rebelled and helped capture him.”*

“That nought count, you be doing that to save yourselves, you did nothing to help us!” Baldot snorted.

“*Don’t interrupt---you rude little garden ornament!”*  fLit sniffed, “*What you don’t know is there was a group of us who didn’t agree with the ruling Tylwith Teg’s decision to side with Moroz. We planned a rescue of both your kind and a few of our own whom Moroz had also enslaved and abused.*  *In fact we had already broken into the Mines and were working on the wards surrounding Moroz’s private study when word of his containment reached us. A group of miners were already on their way down to release you so we continued working to release our kin.”*

“Did you manage to release them?” asked Ambril.

fLit stared off through the hallway walls, “*most---but not all.”*

Baldot grunted, “I be never heard that story, nought from any of our kind, or even any of yours.”

“That nought count, you’ve only met the one fairy,” Bummil pointed to fLit, “that be him.”

Baldot folded his arms and looked hard at flit. “Still, I learned the hard way nought to be trusting Tylwiths.”

fLit glared back at him a moment and then with a twinkle vanished.

Ambril sighed, for a moment there she’d thought they were really getting somewhere, “*you can’t just twinkle off somewhere when things get uncomfortable. You have to at least try to get along with everyone!*” Ambril thought at the fairy.

“*It isn’t me, you heard him, the little cattle prod! He as much as called me a liar!”*

*“He didn’t call you a liar, he just needs some time to think about what you said. The best thing you can do now is stick around and show him you’re ready to talk about it.*

Freight trains roared through Ambril’s head, then the fairy snorted, “*Wait? Tylwith’s don’t wait for earth-kind---not ever…I see it now…I can see whose side you’re on!*

Ambril felt the fairy’s presence slide away from her---for the first time since she’d woken up in Trelawnyd she felt really alone in her head. They’d been apart of course but this felt different. This felt almost…permanent. She was surprised at how big an empty space he left. He was obnoxious, annoying, arrogant and always in a snit about something, but she knew she would miss him. He’d become more than a friend---he was almost family. She moaned as she slowly got to her feet and headed for the stairs.

“It looks like you could be using some fixit juice---where you be going in such a hurry?” asked Baldot.

“Feldez locked me in there because I told him I knew he lied about my Dad and let my Dad take the blame for raising the Dullaith. I have to tell my Mom about what he did and then get him to tell the truth…that is if I have time before he raises another Dullaith.”

The stubby gnome blanched, “you think he’ll be raising one of them any time soon?”

“I---I don’t know…but one thing’s for sure. If I can, I’ll stop him,” she said hoping she sounded more confident than she felt; then she winced as she started back up the stairs to collect her backpack. She felt bruised from head to foot.

Baldot tinked to the foot of the stairs, “if we can, we’ll be there to help.”

Ambril turned and smiled down at the little man knowing he meant well but how could little ceramic men help against a Dullaith?

# Chapter the beginning of a disaster

Ambril slammed hard on her pedals and rocketed down the hill toward the center of town. Her wheels hummed as she wove through the crowded streets trying to avoid the glut of villagers who seemed to be lugging everything they owned to Circle Park.

“Sorry…excuse me…coming through….thank you!” Ambril yelled as she threaded her way through the crowd soon thickened like overcooked pudding.

“Watch it Grandma, there’s another hooligan!” A man in a loud Hawaiian shirt shouted as he dragged a frail woman carrying a card table out of the road.

A few blocks away she abandoned her bike, ran then was forced to walk the rest of the way. Finally she made it to the circle stone. Rows of booths had sprouted overnight around the circle park. Betula waved her over to one and handed her a bag of fresh baked bread and cookies. “Here’s your breakfast child, your Mom wanted to make sure you had a little something,” Betula put her hands on her hips and peered into her face, “what’s going on child? You’re as white as Red’s whiskers after a roll in the sugar bin.”

“I’ll explain later, do you know where my Mom is?” she asked anxiously as she stuffed the bag into her backpack.

“She was just here,” Betula shielded her eyes and scanned the crowd, “I’ll tell her you need to talk to her when I see her.”

“Thanks,” Ambril looked out on the circle stone and spotted Mr. Pinwydden talking with an efficient looking woman with a “Hi, I’m Mayor Jacaranda” badge clipped to her lapel. Off to one side the high school band was warming up. Ambril could see security was tight, Peace Officers and barricades lined the circle stone, probably because of the attack on the school. She fought her way to one of the barricade entrances.

“Stay back please!” Skarn paced self-importantly behind a strip of caution tape and a crooked line of orange cones.

Ms. Breccia steamed just behind the yellow tape, looking like a mad Viking woman, a large wreath of bristly flowers were jammed on her head, she had thrown a leather hide over her shoulders. Her bare feet slapped inpatiently on the pavers as she glowered at Skarn, “but we must get in place for the Spring Dance of Maidens!” Several lumpy women nodded with her as they peered from under their bristly wreaths.

“Orders are orders---no one gets on that stone until the Chief deems it’s safe,” Skarn waved her back dismissively.

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 onto the stone. Feldez was making his way swiftly to the center; a section of stone had been removed, probably for the May Pole which hadn’t been placed. His face was taunt like a mask.

“No!” Ambril 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.”

“What’s up?” surprisingly it was Riley who appeared at her elbow.

“Riley! Where have you been?” Sully appeared next to Riley with Ygg just behind her.

“Long story, but it’s a good one, I’ll tell you all later.”

Ambril smiled then froze when she saw that Feldez was now bent over the hole in the center. She watched he reached out toward it.

“Stop him!” yelled Ambril frantically, was he going to try something right then and there? He couldn’t---he wouldn’t risk so many lives---would he?

An amplified voice rolled out over the crowd, “Sorry for the delay, now that our fine men in blue have been able to verify the area’s safety, I’m happy to announce the opening of the May Day Festival!”

Sully tugged at her sleeve, “what’s wrong? Tell me!”

“No time, but Feldez has to be stopped!”

Riley grinned mischievously as he grabbed the caution tape and ripped it away, “what’s keeping us? I’m about to be grounded until Christmas anyway, after you!”

Ambril didn’t hesitate, she was through and running hard toward the angular man hunched over the circle stone in seconds with her friends at her side.

Skarn bellowed behind her them, “stop them!”

Ambril’s heart jumped into her throat as she saw Feldez whispering to himself over the hole---was he chanting? He seemed to be struggling with something, trying to wrench something out of the ground. Beside her, Riley matched her stride for stride.

“Get those kids out a’ there!” Now Chief Buckthorne yelled and waved his hands at them.

“I’m trying’!” Skarn yelled from close behind them. She felt a hand grab her ponytail but she yanked it away. She was just a few paces away from Feldez when his head swiveled up had he saw her, his eye grew wide. There was no time for finesse, she launched herself into a full tackle.

“Not again you’re not! Not this time!” she screamed, bells sounded signaling the start of May Day just as 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. For just as the bells pealed a fountain of acrid smoke shot up from the stone followed by sparks thirty feet high.

Ambril scrambled to her feet feeling her chest tighten with fear as a crackling, slithering sound drowned everything in thick smoke. Her worst nightmare was forming overhead, the black smoke took 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 wretch.

She looked around quickly as she pulled out her Ashera and threw her backpack aside. Ygg and Sully stood coughing at her side, Riley was nowhere to be seen---he’d had enough sense to keep running. Looking down, Ambril discovered Feldez however was lying at her feet, unconscious.

“Will you do me a favor and get him out of here?” she asked Sully and Ygg. They picked up his arms and dragged him out of danger. “Try to keep everyone back!” she yelled after them.

Ambril turned to face the terror, she could feel it begin to infiltrate her mind. But thanks to fLit she had some practice with this and pushed away her own hysteria.

Off to the side, Chief Buckthorne and the Fire Chief were staring dumfounded up at the monster. Behind them Ambril watched Skarn turn tail and run.

“Get that kid gone NOW!” shouted the Chief fingering Ambril.

The Dullaith inhaled deeply, already on the hunt for its first victim. Ambril knew she’d be first on its list. She sensed immediately that this Dullaith was larger and faster than the first, already the stench of it made it hard for her to breathe.

She knew instinctively she had to act quickly to cut off its energy supply so without hesitating she dove toward the twisted stem of the monster. Cold numbed her mind the closer she ran. Her breath grew ragged, she could barely feel her legs as her brain fuzzed and 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. Blindly she held her arm out full length and slashed at the magic’s source. She felt the sinuous magical bonds snap and fizzle as the Ashera found its mark. She slashed at it again and again. The Dullaith’s anguished screams were 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. Spots formed in front of her eyes, she was soon dizzy from lack of oxygen. Just when she thought her lungs would burst her fingers closed around something angular and cold--- she stumbled away. As she broke through the dense wall of smoke she filled her lungs with fresh air. She looked down and found acrid steam curling 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, “we’re counting on you Ambril, you’re the only one who can take that thing down,” he shouted over the wailing of the monster, then he turned and ran to safety.

Great, no pressure, that was no help at all, thought Ambril. She took a big breath as she turned back to the monster. The severed threads of dark magic sizzled as they whipped around beneath the raging monster. But then…it stopped and seemed to gather itself inward. Then it did something that Ambril dreaded most---it sniffed the air, its massive jaws opened and inhaled--- just before 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, to her Ashera---to her. The stench was overwhelming as it began to stalk her. She had to act fast, her hand shook as she pointed her Ashera at the creature and let loose a massive energy ball 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. A flock of ungainly jellyfish flying in formation was bearing down on them. Ambril smiled softly as she recognized them as Brellies draped heavily with vines. She could barely make out the outline of a gnome lashed to the massive stamen in the center. They swooped down over the monster and let loose a volley of bomber nuts. Where ever they landed their sharp explosions made the Dullaith wince as portions of its skin short-circuited.

A stream of Gooberous slime from another Brellie rained down on the creature, hissing on contact. The creature’s magical fiber fizzed, curled and snapped under the greenish goo. Ambril held her nose as she soon found that Dullaiths smelled even worse when basted with slime and blasted with explosives. After a few more bombardments of bomber nuts and slime the Dullaith had had enough, roaring at its attackers it blasted the Brellies with its smoky breath. The Brellies tumbled crazily like leaves caught in an updraft, “Prepare for crash landing boys!” Ambril heard Baldot call as the flailing Brellies tumbled away.

Ambril raised her Ashera once again and was about to fire another blast of energy when she heard behind her,

“Come on guys, time to get jumping!”  It was Betula, she’d cleared the barricades away from her booth and pulled up the tablecloths draping the tables, revealing 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, the Dullaith’s skin dimmed even more as the smell of burnt sugar filled the air. The Dullaith dipped lower and lower.

“Shug! Slim! What’s keeping you?” Betula yelled, “we’ve got him on the ropes!”

“We’re coming, we’re coming, hold your unicorns,” Shug said as he and the Giraffe rolled out the candy Ferris Wheel loaded with jelly beans.  
“Fire it up!” nodded Shug as he gave the wheel a spin. The Giraffe lent a hand making the Ferris Wheel spin faster and faster.

“Wait until he comes around again---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 jelly beans launched themselves at the Dullaith’s head liquidating and spreading themselves into a solid mass of goo which slowly dripped to the ground.

“It’s working!” shouted Red gleefully as he reloaded his cannon.

But then suddenly it wasn’t. Ambril felt a bolt of white hot energy singe her mind. It came from the jumble of booths and debris. Someone was feeding the creature life energy, someone who had crouched behind the wreckage of the Festival, hidden from sight. The creature’s eyes flickered purple then glowed with renewed energy as the monster shook itself, spewing burned jelly everywhere and reared up, once again on the hunt, it’s jaws snapping hungrily as it lunged at Ambril. Ambril sidestepped it just in time, racing around it, trying to buy herself time.

The sugar animals continued firing volleys of jelly beans and sugar bugs but the creature just shook them off. It seemed to be up to her now…how would she ever bring down a rechargeable Dullaith? She looked out over the tables and booths tipped on their sides. She was sure it was Feldez who was keeping his creation alive. He was sure to have regained consciousness by now.

Too late she turned back around and found the creature bearing down on her, its mouth open wide. Ambril was so close she could see hundreds of ghoulish faces caught in a swirling mass of gray fog. It was mesmerizing---one face in particular stood out, it was grotesquely scarred and opened its mouth in a wide grin of horror. AT the last moment, Ambril ducked then dove into the dense black smoke under the monster. She rolled to her feet then began fighting her way out, swinging her Ashera in front of her and spraying the monster continuously with energy sparks. The smoke began to thin as the creature howled in pain. Just as Ambril was beginning to hope she could bring it down she felt something tighten around her neck briefly then give way. Someone shoved her hard from behind and she somersaulted out of the smoke and rolled free.

She instantly knew something was very wrong, something dragged at her heart. Her body felt heavier, drained. She cut off the flow of energy to her Ashera as she scrambled to her feet and raced to the edge of the circle stone. She examined herself briefly, two arms, two legs, one working head, no gashes or burn marks…what was different?

Bells clashed in her head, “*He has the Ledrith Glain*!”

*“What?”*  Ambril felt around her neck---fLit was right, her medallion was gone! *But…how?*

*“He must have used the Dorcha Blade, back there in the smoke.”* fLit sounded anguished and sad.

“*Was it Feldez? It must have been Feldez!”*

*“Whoever it is, they’re still under the monster in the smoke…can’t you feel him there?”*

Ambril sighted briefly and felt the bright energy spot directly under the monster. Ambril looked down at her Ashera still sparking with life. She knew what she had to do. She pointed her Ashera at the monster and began walking toward it.

“*What are you doing? That’s suicide, that monster has a nearly unlimited power source now!”*

*“Now maybe, but if I can get that medallion away from Feldez it won’t!”*

*“You’ll never manage that, he’s too powerful!”*

Ambril shook her head as she broke into a run, “*I have no choice! If I don’t do something the whole town will be at its mercy.”*

*“No---wait you can’t,”*

Ambril didn’t have the energy to argue with him anymore and tried to force the fairy out of her mind. The creature had fully regenerated, the sugar animals had kept up their assault; the boom of the sugar cannon echoed off the stone as another volley of sugar bugs attached themselves to the monster. The monster inhaled deeply, then blasted the sugar animals with foul black smoke. The cannon and Ferris wheel melted instantly. Ambril’s heart caught when she saw the sugar animals get blown like crumpled paper into the ring of redwood trees beyond the circle stone. She hoped they were all right.

She turned back to the monster who had turned toward her again. She sent a small bolt if energy at the Dullaith’s left eye and felt her heart seize from the effort. The eye blinked out briefly but then slowly began to regenerate. She’d have to time this just right, there’d be no second chance.

She focused on the black smoke spewing from under the Dullaith. When she was just a few strides away from the monster she leveled two short blasts of energy at the creatures eyes and watched them fizzle and dim as she gathered in as much untainted air as she could then ducked once more into the darkness. But inches into the darkess she rammed into something that felt solid and icy cold like a wall of black ice. She fell backward dazed, the wind knocked out of her. For just a second too long she lay there, fighting to breath, gathering what little energy she had left to her. As she rolled to her feet and pushed herself away she felt the creature’s icy breath all around her. It’s jaws clamped down over her and her body went numb. She was now among the swirling faces, as memories of her life drained away. Her brain filled with voices, her voice was added to them as they whirled around her consuming her. She felt her feet leave the ground, she floated now, feeling lighter and lighter. Just in front of her now was a brilliant white light. It was drawing the swirling mist into it. She was helpless to resist, but after a few moments she didn’t want to. All she wanted was to enter the light, to be a part of the light…it called her by name. She had one last rational thought, this must be it, the end, her end. It was so lovely, this ending---the light seemed to smile at her as it welcomed her in.

But there was something tugging at her, pulling her away from her beautiful ending---her dance with the light. It grabbed her hair and pulled her face around. A horribly scared face grinned ghoulishly at her as it dragged her into the cold gray mist. “Ambril! Call the Cerberus! They promised remember? When all hope is lost, we will come---Say it with me! Cerberus!”

The figure had bony nasty limbs---what were they called? Arms...hands. It shook her mercilessly with them. “Say it Ambril! Cerberus!”

Maybe if she said it he’d leave her alone and she could go back to the light, Ambril thought dreamily.

“You’ve come all this way, don’t give up now---say it---Cerberus!” the man was frantic now.

She opened her mouth slowly, trying to remember how to form words---it had seemed such a long time ago that she had done it---Cerber…us.” She whispered.

“That’s it---that’s my girl,” the man laughed as he hugged her to him for just a second then swiftly spun her around and gave her a shove.

# Nice Doggies from Hell

Reality stabbed her in the heart as she flew back through the jaws of the Cerberus and skidded along the hard cold stone. Looking back she saw the roiling gray fog swirling around the deformed grin of the scarred man. Then a gray hawk swooped down and batted him aside as it winged toward Ambril. For a moment she thought the gray hawk would make it through—but just at the last moment the head of the Dullaith was ripped to one side and the jaws clanked shut. The Dullaith screamed in agony.

Ambril struggled to clear her mind. When she had gotten the hang of breathing in and out again, she turned and saw the Cerberus, their bodies the size of mastodons, their red eyes glowered, their razor sharp teeth dripped saliva and their breath singed her arms. The Cerberus had come, just as they said they would. Ambril felt a wave of energy vibrate all around her. There were two of them, massive black dogs with heads and body fluid with dark power. They brought with them the smell of caverns of molten rock. Their gigantic jaws ripped and tore at the Dullaith. Smoke billowed around them as chunks of fizzling demon fell all around them. A piece of its eye landed near Ambril, she watched as it slowly dimmed then faded to nothing as the trapped smoke thinned then was gone. In moments it was over, a gentle breeze blew the rancid stench of the Dullaith away. Ambril filled her lungs with fresh air for the first time since the Dullaith appeared

Slowly the gigantic dogs turned toward her, towering over her with their razor sharp teeth clearly visible through their fiery breath which swirled around her. Was this all there was to it? Was this her destiny then to be some giant doggie treat? If it was, she willed it to be over quickly, there was no way to fight the not so mythical beasts. Fortunately, she didn’t have to wait long as the largest one suddenly opened its mouth and engulfed her in flames.

She flinched, expecting to be burned. But the fire felt warm and invigorating as if she was warming herself at a fire not at all as if she were burning at the stake as she expected. The warmth blew through her and re-sharpened the edges of her mind. She felt her heart strengthen.

Time seemed suspended. The dog beasts stood before her but when they moved Ambril caught a glimpse of something else. Something kingly and masterly…something almost human briefly flashed in her mind. The largest one nodded, “We thank you for calling us to the Dullaith. They will not bother you anymore. They haunt the weak points of this world’s defenses and take advantage of any opening. We will take them deep into the maze of Hell, they will never return.” He dipped his head closer to Ambril. “May you find solace in these words through the dark times ahead Ashera,” his voice resonated with kindness, his power obvious, “when all hope is lost, we will come,” he bent his head toward her. “Ashera, this 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. But there was something slightly wrong.

“Thanks for saving my life…I don’t want to be rude, but aren’t there supposed to be three of you?”

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---“

“Enough, we cannot speak of such things,” the larger one looked pointedly at his younger brother.

The smaller one rolled his eyes and snorted at him but said nothing.

The larger one turned back to Ambril, “we have cleared the memories of most of the villagers. They will remember a powerful twister touching down on the stone, nothing more. I must warn you though there will be some who wish to cause trouble for you, beware of them.”

Ambril immediately thought of Feldez, no worries, she’d be on her guard.

The two dogs regarded her in silence for several moments. Then the larger one nodded, then gathering himself he leaped into thin air. One instant his massive body was solid and warm beside Ambril and the next it just wasn’t there. The smaller one gazed at her a moment longer, clearly wanting to say something more to her but then it changed its mind and, just as his brother had, leaped away.

# An Angry Mob

It was as if someone had flicked a switch on, the day rushed back to her with a vengeance. There was noise and dust and the lingering stench of the Dullaith all around her.

“Hey are you all right?” It was Riley who limped up first and pulled her to her feet. 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.

“You did it child, you did it!” Betula came racing up, Sid at her side and gave her a big hug.

Sid hugged the squirrel close. “Aster needs rest 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 gray clothes and the white scarf Mrs. Sweetgum always wore around her neck, and of course her fondness for hazelnut scones…she felt a little silly not to have seen it before.

“I thank you, Ambril,” Sid’s bright eyes twinkled but then grew sober, “you must leave now, it isn’t safe for you here.”

The more intrepid townsfolk had begun to make their way through the wreckage looking anything but elated to have been freed from a monster. Most of them looked angry, and they were all staring at Ambril.

*“They won’t thank you for your efforts and do not wish you well.”* fLit chimed a funeral dirge.

“*So you made it, I wasn’t sure what happened to you there at the end.”*

*“I slammed into the wall just like you…then I think you stepped on me because I blacked out for a while. I came to just as the Cerberus were leaving.”*

*“Any idea who stole the Ledrith Glain?”*

*“None, I can feel it’s presence but its camouflaged by something else---possibly the Dorcha Cup, it hangs on a chain on the Blade’s handle…that would do it.”* fLit blasted a fog horn in her head, *“I’ll keep feeling around for it.”*

“Ambril! Ambril, my darling! Are you all right? Ambril was nearly smothered by her mother’s hug.

“I’m O.K., Mom, really, I want you to do something for me.” Ambril pulled the little green lab book from her back pocket and handed it to her Mom. “I want you to read this, the first pages are Dad’s last notes on the Gern experiment. It didn’t happen the way everyone thinks.”

Her Mother took the little book and looked at it curiously then slid it into her pocket looking at her daughter curiously. “If it will help put it behind us, I will.”

Ambril could only shrug her shoulders. She wanted to say she wanted to put it in front of everyone first, then they’d put it behind them but she didn’t get a chance, Riley’s mother came running up next.

“Riley? You’re home! Where have you been?” She folded her son in a brief hug, “we’ve been so worried!” Riley stood there mutely studying his toes. Mrs. Dogwood gave Ambril and her mother an appraising look as she dragged Riley away. “What odd weather we’ve been having! Come on, let’s go find your father.”

There were lots of others eyeing Ambril suspiciously. A crowd formed around them grumbling about the damage and speculating about what had brought about the destructive twister. Ambril smiled as she saw Ygg running toward her with Sully just behind him.

“Ambril! Are you O.K., it looked like you were sucked into that mad twister then spit out again!” Sully looked her friend over for injuries just as the Chief walked up, looking stern.

“What the heck do you think you were doing running right into that twister? It’s a miracle you weren’t killed! Why if it wasn’t for the quick thinking of Feldez here…you would have been!” The Chief bellowed over the crowd.

Feldez appeared beside the chief a large lump on his forehead but otherwise unruffled. He glared at Ambril.

“Feldez? Are you kidding? He didn’t have any---“but Ambril stopped when the Chief gave her a particularly potent glare.

“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 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 visiting mayhem in the form of a monstrous tornado upon us all!” She brayed into the crowd. “I don’t know how she did it. Frankly I don’t want to be tainted by her methods,” she nodded at Feldez and the Chief, “I didn’t see it myself as I was teaching those less in the know how to take cover during a crisis. But we all know it was Feldez who saved the day yet again!” She began clapping, the crowd joined in and soon everyone was admiring Feldez.

“We are greatly indebted to you!” simpered one of the other floral wreathed maids adoringly

Ambril felt nauseous. He was getting the credit for this too? She couldn’t contain herself any longer and lunged at him but the Chief stepped in front of him and stared her down.

“Easy, we’ve had enough drama for the day; 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 stepping back to address the crowd. “We’ll release a full statement after we’ve completed our investigation. “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 with sparks shooting out of it!” His face reddened 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.

“Hooligans! They somehow brought the storm down on us!” another man snorted loudly.

“They’re out to get us, nasty kids!” quavered a squinty-eyed lady in a nauseously pink jogging suit.

The crowd around them tightened as got angrier, “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!”

“Let’s throw them 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 have a name for people who dump defenseless children out in the wilderness, we call them murderers.”

“We sure as heck don’t let them stay so’s they can bring us more trouble!” countered the red faced man.

“I say into the forest with all of them!”

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!” sneered the weasel-faced woman.

Ambril watched as her mother’s shoulders crumpled. Zane appeared at her side and put his arm around her. He wouldn’t even look at Ambril.

The crowd was so worked up now Ambril, Sully and Ygg were getting jostled and shoved. Skarn came up just then talking with Riley.

“Now that’s enough!” The Chief boomed, the veins on his heck looked more like ropes. “If any of you puts a hand on these kids, you’ll be spending the night in jail!” but the crowd roared over him, it was well past the point of listening.

“Chief, why don’t I take these kids on over to Moon Bay to Child Services! They can keep them there until we get everyone here calmed down.”

The Chief looked surprised and nodded at his bright eyed deputy, “good thinking Skarn, you do that, right now!”

Feldez suddenly appeared at Ambril’s side. Without warning he wrenched her Ashera out of her hands then handed her over to Skarn. “We’ve had enough trouble from you today,” he hissed.

“Hey, that’s my Ashera, give that back to me, it belonged to my Great Grandmother, not yours!” Ambril struggled to free herself of Skarn’s grip but he was too powerful. Skarn grabbed Sully and shoved Ygg roughly in front of him. “O.K. Kids, march! My car’s over there.”

“But Ygg and Sully didn’t have anything to do with this!” Ambril cried, she struggled even more when she realized her friends were to be punished too.

“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.

“You tell that to this crowd.” Chief Buckthorne had to yell over the crowd, he cupped his hands at his Deputy, “right now, Skarn! MOVE!”

*“I’ll wait for you here,”* fLit announced.

“*Right you can’t leave the walls…well just keep searching for the Ledrith Glain then.”*

Sully wiped tears from her face as she waved good-bye to her parents. Skarn shoved them roughly into the back seat of his police car then wedged himself behind the wheel. Part of the mob had followed them and shouted nasty things about their parents and brothers and even dogs. The crowd pounded on the windows as Skarn eased the car out and away. Away from everything they knew and loved.

# The Mines

Shell-shocked, the kids lapsed into silence as they watched the houses thin and the forest thicken and darken. Ambril felt totally beaten, stripped of her medallion and her Ashera she felt frightened and unprotected. Just outside the wall, they turned off the main road and 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 coasted to a stop in front of a pair of heavy steel gates. There were a dozen rusty ‘no trespassing’, ‘keep out’ and one ‘warning- radioactive wastes!’ signs nearly obscuring the gates.

“It’s the Mines! hissed Sully trying to peer 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 driver’s seat at the dash and studied it intently, “I don’t want to be waiting around to see.”

There was steel mesh separating the driver from the occupants of the back seat; 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…What you want me to do with them?” Skarn walked slowly away, “I can’t do that, they’re not under arrest…and when do I get my money.”

Ygg was right; this really wasn’t at all good.

“I be thinking…because we’re kids we have certain advantages over garden variety criminals.”

“Like what?” asked Sully.

Ygg 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, another click folded the seat back forward leaving a small gap, “we be 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.

“But it’s the mine!” whispered Sully tersely, “there are 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, “Maybe we should just go with the Deputy…our families will come and get us eventually.”

“Didn’t you hear what he was saying?” Ygg asked skeptically, “he brought us here for money, someone bribed him to do it. I don’t think he ever planned to take us to safety.”

Sully’s face went a little pasty as she thought about this.

Ambril mulled it over herself, “we don’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.”

Sully looked unconvinced…Ambril sighed, “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 out there, not you. 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 on your own?” snorted Ygg.

Can you imagine what it’s like out here at night?” Sully shuddered. “Besides which, Ygg and I have always been outsiders. Honestly, I never felt like I belonged until I met you guys.”

Ygg nodded, though he looked a little uncomfortable talking about it, “and it’s nought safe out here, we’ll try to get back inside as quick as we can…we be needing a safe haven is all.”

Sully’s face lit up. “Your Gran’s house of course! NO one goes there and it wouldn’t be trespassing, not technically anyway. We could stay in the old house. It would be like camping out---inside!”

Ygg peered out briefly at Skarn, “it be an idea…but now we need to be getting free of Skarn,” he whispered, “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 as Skarn raced up on the double, scanned the empty car then banged noisily on the fence.

“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 Mines…we pulled off the road for privacy’s sake.” 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 away 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. As they walked Ambril filled Ygg and Sully in on what she’d found in the Lab book and what had happened during the fight. At first, they didn’t believe there had actually been a Dullaith there, the Cerberus had done a good job modifying their memories. But gradually hazy images began to come back to them. Before long they were recalling their version of the event. Ygg had ran over to Betula’s shop for more sugar bugs and Sully had spent a long time talking and talking to the Chief before persuading him to not race in and safe the day. Before long they had 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.

“Everyone says there are weird things living near the mines, but I haven’t seen anything but the same old squirrels, birds, trees, fishes…”

“But this green slime counts for something doesn’t it?”Ambril scooted over to the edge of the water, “it isn’t…normal.” 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.

She couldn’t believe she had fallen for it again! Her scream was so loud it created ripples in the otherwise still water. Sully screamed too as together they jumped off the rock and ran flat out toward the cover of the forest trees.

But then Ambril felt Sully tugging on her arm, “wait…why are we running?”

“Sea Monster, they’re everywhere!” Ambril pointed back to the placid lake. “There was this eye…staring at me…BLINKING!” Ambril panted.

Ygg raced up, “what be wrong now?”

“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 nonchalantly 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, her friends were right, they had had enough excitement that day.”

“It was just your friendly neighborhood sea monster,” said Sully reasonably as she scrambled back to her feet and started limping back to the lake.

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…it was the Gray Lady.

The gargantuan predator swept past Ambril shrieking in her mind, “*you shall pay…No one takes from me…Breaks with me. One comes, one must goes on!”* she banked off to one side.

Sully and Ygg had found safety in the jumble of rocks off the shore, if she could make it to the water she might be able to evade the Gray Lady’s talons and beak until she tired of the game and found a nice buffalo to munch on. “Stay here!” She yelled to her friends as she broke into a run. Her feet pounded the grass as she watched the hawk sweep around and come back again. Not bothering to gain height, she bore down on her the wind underneath its wings flattening the grass with each stroke. Ambril caught the crazed gleam in the hawk’s glassy 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 then swam frantically under an overhanging rock. Ambril saw the head of the hawk enter the water, and stretch toward her. The Gray Hawk opened her razor sharp beak wide and---missed. The force of her maneuver had driven it too far forward, she snapped at open water. But just as Ambril was beginning to think she was safe talons lashed out and gripped her shoulders, she was lifted from the water. She was held so tight she could barely breathe, her eyes blurred by pain.

The gray hawk screeched crazily at her, “*Mine! Mine you will not take them!”*

“We’ve never even met you crazy bird! I can’t possibly have taken anything of yours!” Ambril yelled up at the hawk but the bird just screeched and climbed higher into the sky.

Ambril could see her friends below yelling, Sully began throwing rocks…which missed luckily. Below her was the lake shimmered like a tropical sea. They were very high now, she began to shiver as a chill gray mist swirled around them. Is this what the Gray Lands were like? Is that where they were going? It was cold, now---very cold, stabbing shards of icy pain began to invade her mind, slowing her senses. Soon all the color of the forest below her was gone---everything but the lake. The lake remained a brilliant blue green gem. She smiled in a detached way as the lake appeared to come alive, she must be hallucinating for it looked like to her that the lake itself reached up and plucked her out of the sky.

She was falling now safely wrapped in something soft, and wet and green. It had a warm, wet magic sense to it and 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 air and cleared her mind. But reality made no sense. She really was wrapped with some sort of green-blue slime and hovered inches above a large eye in the middle of the lake.

“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. Then the sea monster flicked the hawk high into the wild blue of the sky. The bird went 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

Ambril felt the Gray Lady’s spiky cold magic slide away.

“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.

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?” When Ambril smiling got unsteadily to her feet and nodded. Sully then turned to the bobbing eye in the lake apprehensively. “Are you going to introduce us to your Sea Monster friend then?”

“*Megern---megern---megern—Me Gern! You Am---you am---you am---you Ambril!*” A voice hummed through them.

“Wait---did you just say you were…Oh, I get it!” Ambril turned to her friends a wide grin on her face, This isn’t a Sea Monster, this is Gern, like in my Dad’s last 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.

“My Dad wrote about how something unexpected happened something that he wasn’t prepared for,” Ambril smiled at the slime monster, “I think my Dad was trying to create a living energy source, because living entities generate a lot of energy. But somewhere, somehow along the way Gern developed into a being.”

“It be magic or science?” said Ygg studying the slimy creature.

“Both, I think,” Ambril shrugged.

Sully slowly tentatively extended her hand, “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 his feelings,” hissed Sully.

With that Gern giggled.

Ambril wasn’t sure where to begin.“Can you tell me anything about my Dad?”

H*e wake---wake me. He teach---teach me*.”

“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 what?” put in Ygg.

“*Moroz---Moroz---Moroz.”*

That sent chills down Ambril’s spine. He had her Ashera and the Ledrith Glain, how could he be stopped?

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

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

“They must have been trying to find out more about Moroz’s energy source at the Old Council Hall that night, instead they accidentally raised a Dullaith.”

“Accidentally?” Sully asked incredulously.

“Yeah, one of the Cerberus told me that the Dullaiths were always testing this world’s weak spots. When Feldez constructed an opening to their world, it didn’t hesistate, it came right through and attacked my Dad.”

“*Me not know---know what happened*.” Gern looked very sad now and seemed to quiver.

Ambril scrunched up her face in concentration, “they must have thought that Moroz was imprisoned at Old Council Hall. But he wasn’t was he?” She turned back to the great bobbing eye, “Gern, did they ever find out where his cell was?”

*“No---no---no they not.”*

Ambril sighed, another dead end.

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

The three friends stopped and starred at him.

“Wait did you just say…Do you mean 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*.”

“Yeah, but which circle stone?”

*“Place where there are no more---more---more people there, very old, very quiet, very sad.”*

“You mean…it sounds like you’re talking about Old Town!” Ambril said. It made perfect sense now, of course.

“But I thought Old Town was torn down years ago,” said Sully bewildered.

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

*“It hidden---hidden by magic.”*

“So that’s why it’s never been found! Problem solved then, Feldez won’t find it either---the town is safe!”

“I don’t think we can bank on that,” Ambril said remembering the old plans of a village around a circle stone she’d found in Feldez’s study. “Feldez is pushing too hard for us to get complacent. At the very least we should make sure the magic that contains Moroz is still strong.”

“Are we absolutely sure he’s contained in Old Town?”

Ambril shrugged, “I think Feldez does now---it’s the last major circle stone he hasn’t tried.”

Her friend’s faces turned sober. Sully turned slowly to Gern, “you know where it is right? 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, just as they were getting somewhere they suddenly find themselves a million miles away again.

“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 helped a lot already…but right now, unless you can get us to Old Town---“

“Or even just into town!” Sully looked as if a light bulb had appeared above her head, “do you remember what was on the wall in Old Council Hall?”

“Yeah, there was some sort of mural…a map maybe.” Ygg volunteered.

“Yes, A map of what?” ssked Sully excitedly.

Ygg looked annoyed, “you are going to be telling us sometime soon instead of hopping around like a bunny in a carrot bin? It be a map of the Trelawnyd, so what?”

“It’s a map of Old Town!” Sully squealed excitedly and hopped some more.

“What makes you so sure?” asked Ambril skeptically.

Sully looked disgusted, “the date of course! It’s dated 1787, didn’t you notice?”

“I be too busy noticing the sticky sketch of Moroz,” said Ygg, annoyed.

Sully paid no attention and continued, “the new city wasn’t built until 1849 right? So the mural must be of Old Town!”

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

“Of course I’m right, so now all we have to do is take a look at that map!” said Sully triumphantly.

“Is that all,” said Ygg skeptically, “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 shrugged and nodded.

“Do you have a better idea?” asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed and shook his head slowly. “I guess that’s what we’ll be doing.”

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

Ambril shook her head ruefully. “Thanks but we have to get back to town.” She stooped down and collected her backpack.

“*Can---can I can help*!”

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

“*River run---run, we 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 all the way through the lake and disappeared down the stream. Then, off in the distance beyond the wall, a bright green tentacle wave back at them.

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

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

“You be miles long,” said Ygg, clearly impressed.

“So…can you take us back to the Gazebo?” asked Ambril.

Gern bobbed up and down excitedly, “*me---help---elp---me help*!”

“We’re not going to have to squeezy---eezy through the ground?” asked Sully warily.

Gern stopped to think, before saying “*no squeezy eeded-needed.”*

They stuffed their shoes into their backpacks then lined up 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. She slid carefully on as Sully clambered on in front. Ygg grabbed her elbow tightly as he awkwardly lunged for a place behind her splashing everyone with water.

“Thanks for that Ygg,” Ambril wiped water from her eyes “Ready?”

“I be as ready as I’ll ever be,” said Ygg grimly and firmly gripped her arms.

Gern raised the tentacle behind Ygg and they slipped away, skimming along the top of the water like a water skeeter; water spraying out in a ‘V’ behind them. They coasted through the warm afternoon, shadows making patterns on the water as they swished along. Then, just as in the movies, a roar of water made Ambril stiffen. The river ahead disappeared abruptly, there were plumes of water spray erupting below---it was a waterfall!

“I hope Gern knows what gravity can do to those of us who aren’t as squeezy as it is,” Sully yelled over the roar of the water.”

They had no time to think about this as all three of them were launched into the air. Ambril’s stomach jumped into her throat as she sailed through the misty air. Twenty feet below there lay a frothing pool of water, with sharp, pointy---painful rocks all around it. Ambril shut her eyes and curled into a ball. Her body slammed into the surface of the water an instant later, making her feel as if she’d been slapped all over by an army of Mrs. Twids. But the next moment… she bounced out of the water and into the air again. Opening her eyes she found they were bouncing on a slime trampoline. Ambril began to giggle as she watched Sully do a double somersault and Ygg, looking terrified did his best imitation of a piece of wood. Now thoroughly wet, they bounced a little more then found themselves off again. Ambril had just finished wringing out her ponytail when rounded a bend and she found they were headed straight toward the Trelawnyd Wall. The water disappeared ominously underneath.

“Uh oh! Gern, no squeezy please! I’d really like to keep all my limbs!” shouted Sully as they barreled down the slime slide straight at the wall.

Ambril felt only slightly better when a tentacle reached out and removed a steel grate from the wall.

“Hold your breath, we be going in!” Ygg yelled right in Ambril’s ear just before they were sucked under the wall.

# The Windbog and a snitty blossom

Moments later they were squirted into a small lake on the other side. After floundering a little, Ambril found herself wading toward a familiar Gazebo.

“Phew! I have to admit I was a bit worried there, right at the end---well---almost the entire time really,” said Sully as she schlepped out beside her.

Ygg turned up on Ambril’s other side and said shakily, “riding a sea monster be almost as bad as flying for earth-kind,” he wiped his face as he set his feet gratefully on the garden path.

“And here you all are dripping slime all over me tidy garden!” Baldot tinked tinked down the path looking grumpy as usual, “it’s gonna leave a mark,” beyond him Ambril saw Koda sauntering down the path, a sack in his hand.

“Ah, that was it, the smell of unwashed kids and slime, I could smell it from the other end of the garden.” He snickered then frowned at the gnomes who in turn frowned back.

“What are you doing here Koda?” Ambril asked.

Koda still frowned at the gnomes as he said, “picking up some things for Fern.” The bag wriggled slightly in his hand. “And keeping an eye on these little tykes.”

“We nought be tykes and we naught be needing another grouchy boss, we already have one.” Bummil groused and nodded at Baldot.

“That be for sure,” chimed in Boucher 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, “Rosebud might take you but not like that, she hates a soggy basket.”

Sully shook like a dog without much affect, “Windbog first then.”

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. A moment later he stopped in front of a marshy area filled with reeds. The marker read, ’Windbog Extremus’. Its leaves looked like large, wrinkled, deflated balloons. There was a large pile of musty old books stacked nearby. Bummil rummaged through them and pulled out a thick 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 over to the swamp and circling around like a shot-put thrower heaved the tomb into the middle of the bog. It landed with a splash then gurgled as the book slowly settled itself into the mud and disappeared with a burp.

“Won’t be long now,” Bummil said watching the pool closely. It suddenly began to bubble and froth. The limp, rubbery balloon leaves began slowly to inflate. Ambril heard the hum of voices in deep discussion burbling up through the mud, “now you have to disagree!” said Bummil as he plugged both his ears.

“What?” yelled Ambril, the voices were arguing loudly now.

“Just say something like ‘I don’t believe you!’” Bummil yelled back and scrunched his face in anticipation. As he did so a large blast of hot air squirted out of one of the balloons, the voices roared over them as Bummil was nearly blown off his feet, “now you try it,” he nodded encouragingly.

Ambril turned toward the bog feeling silly but before she could think of anything to say Sully yelled, “that’s nonsense!”

Hot air whooshed around them as the voices treated them to a strident and lengthy debate concerning the origins of the Great Depression. A moment later the argument had run its course and the warm wind stopped. Ambril already felt less damp.

“Now get really insulting!” said Bummil taking a firm grip on a nearby 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!” yelled 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.

“That did the trick!” said Sully trying unsuccessfully to finger-comb the tangles from her hair.

“It’s all in what you feed it.” Bummil nodded wisely, “Baldot chose one on why fairies feel superior,” 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 wrestling with a Bomber Nut near the Gazebo, “Rosebud’ll take you there herself,” Koda nodded at the bike parked on the path.

Ambril braced herself, Rosebud didn’t look pleased, “Rosebud, how’ve you”--- She wasn’t allowed to finish as Rosebud whipped out vines, grabbed them and then jammed them none too gently inside her basket. It was a very tight fit.

“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,” the big man shrugged and grinned broadly as the bike jerked forward and accelerated down the path, “you’ll be there in no time!”

“Yeah but will we still be alive!” shouted Sully.

The garden flashed past as the bike sped out into the darkening forest. The sun was setting and the shadows were gaining in strength as 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 narrow groove they were following.

‘I think---Oww!--- I jus’ bi’ my tongue,” said Sully as they jounced over some rough ground. After being thoroughly shaken and then stirred, they burst through a hedge near Circle Park. Without ceremony Rosebud ejected them onto the grass near the Circle Stone. Ambril lay still for a minute while she tested everything to make sure there were no broken bones before raising her head just in time to see Rosebud disappearing back into the forest.

# The too Long Arm of the Law

“She’s never going to forgive me for zapping her with my Ashera,” Ambril muttered as she gingerly pulled herself to a sitting position.

“That much be clear,” mused Ygg as he pulled a branch from his shirt-pocket.

”You could have warned us,” Sully stretching her arms uncertainly.

Church belled tolled dolefully in her head, “*You’re back, I’d say Welcome Home but I don’t really know where your home is now. Your mother had it out with Feldez earlier. She and Zane packed their bags and moved into Betula’s spare rooms.”* fLit sniffed.

Ambril felt shocked, then happy then more than a little uncertain. fLit was right, where would they live now? Then she shook her head hard, she’d have to think about that later, “*Where is Feldez?”*

*“Madly racing around in his car, he’s so overly excited I can’t take more than a few minutes in his presence.”*

That didn’t sound good, thought Ambril. What was he excited about? Could he be closer to finding Moroz? 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 angry, aggressive voice. He seemed to be holding down a struggling figure much smaller than him.

“You’re not going to get what you want this way!” surprisingly it was Riley.

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that!”

There was a sharp, smacking sound, Skarn slumped forward just as Riley broke free and raced behind the school. Skarn staggered up with his hand on his face and then ran after him. Ambril was relieved she’d had enough sense to stay in the shadows. If Skarn had seen them…well she didn’t even want to think about that. Ambril struggled to her feet just as headlights grazed them. A sleek sedan swung around the corner.

“Duck! Ambril whispered hoarsely as she dragged Ygg and Sully behind some shrubs. Ambril’s heart nearly stopped as the car slowed to an idle in front of the school. The angular features of Feldez were dimly lit by the dashboard as he talking angrily on his phone. He turned on a small light and looked over some old maps and blue prints as he talked. Ambril recognized them as the ones she’d seen in his office. He was wasting no time, he was searching for Old Town. He was still talking when the car pulled away moments later.

Ambril’s hands bunched into fists as she ran out into the street to watch the car lights fade into the night. Here was the guy who nearly got them all killed and all she could do was hide in the bushes.

“*Would you mind following him?”*

The sounds of a wailing, crazed woman echoed around her head, “*I do mind---chasing after a stiffer version of you---but if you insist.”* She felt fLit slip away.

“School’s seeing a lot of action tonight,” mused Sully.

“Come on! We have to get to Old Town before he does!” Ambril cried as she darted across the street. Hugging the building they made their way to the back of the school checking windows and doors as they went.

“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 grinned as he came out from behind a bush.

“Riley! Why is Skarn chasing you?” Sully exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” he asked warily.

“We saw you two fighting. You need to steer clear of him, that guy’s nothing but a liar and a kidnapper,” Ambril added.

“A kidnapper? Skarn?”

“Yeah he was supposed to take us to 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, “but probably not the Chief.”

“Big day for you---tornado at the Park, 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 is bad news… I should have known. He likes to gamble, he wanted me to fix it so that Lance wouldn’t be able to play ball today.” Riley shrugged. “I couldn’t do that to my brother.”

“Why is he angry then? Your brother didna’ play ball today anyway.”

Riley sighed, “he’s mad because everyone knew about it before the game started, the odds changed just before the game---he didn’t make any money.”

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---“

She was interrupted by a loud snort. Skarn had snuck around the corner and now stood leering at them, his big square hands on his hips, “Well, what do we have here, it must be a juvenile delinquent convention!” he sneered as he charged them, “I’m getting a bonus this month for sure!”

Ambril looked anxiously at the window set above her shoulder. Ygg vaulted in easily then 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, “we still have things to settle, boy! You’re going to feel real pain now!”

Ambril reacted without thinking and reaching for the boy below she said tersely, “Riley, get in here!”

He grabbed her hand and half jumped half scrambled up the wall while Ambril pulled him through the window. They landed in a jumble on the floor just as Skarn lunged through the window at him.

Ygg shoved the big man back through the window then dropped the window and locked it.

‘This ain’t over for any of you! That’s breaking and entering, evading arrest…” Skarn yelled a list of offense at them as they staggered into the dark hallway.

“You’ve probably made things worse for yourself hanging with us,” warned Ambril.

Riley laughed, “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?”

“We have to find Old Town,” Sully quavered as they felt their way down the stairwell. The shadows made even this familiar place feel 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 draped loosely on the closet’s door.

“This isn’t going to work, let’s sneak out the back while we still can!” 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 last year,” 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 nearly through, hurry!” yelled Sully frantically.

With a final spin the lock clicked open and Riley pushed the door open wide. Just as Ambril skittered through the doorway behind Sully part of the front door gave 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. Ambril held her breath. Skarn, breathing heavily, was right outside.

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

The hard, clean light of a flashlight illuminated the one dingy window just above the door. Skarn stood for a long time listening…then he snorted disgustedly and moved down the hallway. Ambril exhaled slowly in the oppressive darkness. Along with Skarn went the light. 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, “and put it out right quick before Skarn comes back.”

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

“He won’t call for back up. Skarn doesn't want the Chief to know what he’s been up to,” Riley shook his head confidently. Ambril agreed, Skarn would lose his job if the Chief ever found out about what he’d been doing the past few days.

“What is it we’re looking for?” asked Riley lifting the lantern higher.

“Over here, bring the lantern over here!” Sully pointed at the large mural on the wall. “See the date?” She pointed confidently at some scrolly writing at the bottom which said ‘Trelawnyd, 1787’. “See! This is Old Town.

“This might be a map of Old Town, but it be nought helpful.” said Ygg squinting at the map, “everything’s…catawampus.”

Ambril followed his gaze, the map was confusing. The Buildings were too large. The roads were all different sizes and the forest with its trees evenly sized and spaced looked more like a tree farm.

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…”

“Who cares? Old Town was torn down right?” Riley asked

Ambril hesitated. “We think it still exists, it’s just been hidden and forgotten.”

Sully nodded, “we think some one is trying to free Moroz.”

Riley still stared at the mural, “and you think he’s in Old Town?”

Ambril nodded and said, “whoever’s behind this Dullaith business, we think he must be heading to Old Town to free Moroz.”

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. “Plus Ambril’s family has been blamed for raising the Dullaiths because of what happened to her Dad.”

Riley looked at Ambril surprised, “who would go after you and your family? You’re all so nice.” He smiled at her in a way that made Ambril feel---a little uncomfortable.

She looked down at her shoes.

Meanwhile Sully had turned back to the mural, “Hey, I’ve found something, look here!” she coughed as she brushed layers of dust and dirt from the wall, then pointed to a Gazebo with vines growing over it, underneath it was a name…

“Derwyn,” Ambril breathed. “It’s my Great-Gran’s Gazebo!”

Sully began jabbing the wall, “So it’s near the Derwyn Estate…here’s the Main Road and here’s the wall--- now we just need one more landmark,” Sully squinting at the wall.

The mural was hopelessly dusty, but Ambril thought she saw something further 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 sighed heavily “That be one big piece of possibility, there be acres of forest there. We’ll never be finding it tonight or even next week.”

Even Sully looked crestfallen as that piece of news sank in. It was frustrating to 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 the sound of someone large falling down the stairs. It seemed to go on forever when it finally quieted, Riley whispered, “we should start thinking about how to get out of here.”

“There be just the one door,” said Ygg, “with Skarn on the other side.”

Riley looked curiously at the ceiling as he held the lantern high looking above them all at the archway. “So why label this an entrance?”

They all turned and stared upward at the words running along the archway framing 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 fairies flitted, dragons roared and gryphons flew, on the other, three lumpy faces stared down at them, one was wearing spectacles.

# The Aunties Again

“The Aunties!” Ambril cried and laughed when she saw they were even knitting.

“What, your Aunties look like turnips?” asked Sully.

“No that’s what they like to be called, I met them at the Gazebo.”

“I wonder why they’re on the archway?” Sully mused.

Ambril wondered that too and wanted to ask them that very question, she also wondered how the heck she was going to get their attention, for the tenth time she cursed Feldez for taking her Ashera and Ledrith Glain. “I just want to try something,” Ambril announced then closed her eyes and tried sighting but though the fog began to lift the Aunties don’t come. Discouraged she had to face the fact that without her Ashera and medallion, magically, she was a weakling.

A car horn blared in her head “*That was just feeble,” fLit sighed.*

*“I can’t help it, I don’t have my tools!”*

*“You ninny, haven’t you been listening? They are only there to help focus you, you’ve always been able to do this.”*

*“Really? Then how come it’s so much harder without them?”*

*“You’ve been relying on them too much. Try it again---I’ll give you a little boost.”*

Ambril shut her eyes and that now familiar gray fog swirled in until she pushed it away. It was hard at first but with her renewed confidence she was able to push it away. She sent out a call to the Aunties and hoped it would be enough.

“Whoa! Look at that!” Ygg was pointing at the floor. In the center of the circle stone, the floor was fading, transforming into an intricate web of tracery. The walls also faded to reveal an immense starry sky riddled with glowing, nearly transparent tubes. The room was filled with rustling sounds as budding vines grew out of the floor and up along the archways. It was replaced with the clickity clacking sounds of knitting needles.

“Told you---too soft in the head,” said a scratchy voice.

“She got this far didn’t she?” grated another.

“Her friends don’t look much smarter neither,” the scratchy voice added.

Ambril looked up and smiled, there they were, three large knobby lumps on the vines, knitting industriously. The middle one blinked owlishly through spectacles.

“No, she’s a Lovey she is!” the Auntie on the left grinned and snatched the glasses, “though that earth-kind looks like a plodder to me. Did you bring a change of undies Dearie?”

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

The right one snatched the glasses away from her sister and screeched, “but that other’s a dear! So chirpy!” She rounded on Ambril and sniffed, “shame she’s such a scrawny, slip of a thing, ”

Ambril had now gone from startled, to uncomfortable, to downright insulted but held her tongue, she knew it’d be worse if she didn’t.

Unfortunately Sully didn’t know this, “Why are you so rude?” she asked

“We says what we sees.” nodded the biggest one in the middle.

“We’s never lies,” the left one nodded solemnly.

“No we never does,” said the right one. “but sometimes it looks like we do! Things change---we don’ts control everything.”

The middle one snatched the glasses back and shook her head sadly, “too true, shame though---only one way---straight through on into it.”

“Maybe she’ll gets through---” said the left one encouragingly.

Ambril shook herself as if trying to shed all their pity, she had had enough of this. “We need to get out of here, is this a way out?” She pointed to the hole in the floor.

“A way out and a way in Lovie.” The one on the left nodded at her.

“A way into everywhere.” the middle one pronounced.

An idea suddenly came to Ambril, “Is this a way to Old Town then?”

The middle one blinked at her behind the glasses. “I just said didn’t I? The chutes goes everywhere? she huffed, “maybe it’d be clearer if I spells it? 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--- then what?”

“Well, nothing of course as we’s can’t open the door for you,” the one on the left shook her head vigorously.

“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 above Ambril’s left shoulder.

“What, the Tylwith? Have you gone rotten? He’d never!” Said the middle one squinting.

“He helped her before,”

They all looked expectantly at a point near Ambril’s left ear.

“He’s as daft as she is!” the middle one exclaimed.

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

“Beneath him he thinks,” sniffed the one on the left.

A plane crash echoed painfully through Ambril’s head, then “*No*.”

“*Come on we’re really in jam here-*--“ said Ambril.

“Oh lookie, they’re talking! A human-kind and a fairy…friends! How long’s it been since that’s happened?” The left one as she vigorously batted away her sister’s tendrils, she kept the glasses.

“Never happened.”

“Sure it has, once…maybe?”

The middle one shook her head with assurance, “never”.

With a twinkle fLit appeared and kicked Ambril hard in the nose. A swift swipe of discordant harp strings and then, “*NO, I said NO!*”

Sully’s mouth forming a perfect ‘O’ as she stammered, “Ambril? I…I don’t get it…Who’s this?” Sully looked utterly bewildered.

Ambril sighed, this was going to be rough, “I’m sorry, really sorry guys but fLit and I had an agreement, he wouldn’t let me tell anyone he was here,” Ambril’s words came out in a jumbled rush, “I found fLit in the Morte Cell, when it totaled our windshield? He hung around to teach me how to use my Ashera and protect the Ledrith Glain.”

“Well that nought worked out well…fLit? That’s no fairy name.” said Ygg.

“No, that’s the robot’s name---wait---was he spying on us inside the robot?” asked Sully incredulously.

“Well not the entire time,” Ambril shrugged sheepishly.

fLit folded his arms sniffed in a superior way, “*It was necessary to be as invisible as possible. The less you 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 of course, it is highly unusual amongst the lower species.*”

Ygg glowered at him, “so predictable, thinking you be better than all of us.” Ygg squared off and clenched his fists. Ambril stepped between them, waving her hands, “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, “sure he has a lot of magical fire-power but fairies aren’t known to be loyal to beings other than their own kind.”

“They be thinking they’re above us all,” growled Ygg his face, ugly mad now.

“Do you want to get out of here or not?” hissed Ambril, “yes I do trust him, he’s saved my life more than once.”

Surprisingly Sully said, “O.K.”

Ygg looked at her stunned, “O.K.?”

“Yeah, Ambril thinks he’s alright… besides we don’t 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 said angrily.

“Now see there? You spoke too soon, they’re never friends.” said the one on the left, they’d all begun knitting furiously.

“*I won’t do it.”* fLit folded his arms obstinately.

“Figures,” snorted Ygg.

Ambril was incensed, “*Why? You know we’ll never get out of here without your help.”*

“*The chutes are---unpredictable. Evil lurks there…beings who will come---and take you down into the darkness,”* fLit said bitterly, he stared through the wall.

“*So that’s how you lost her---your friend.”*

fLit colored and zipped huffily across the room, “*that’s none of your business…and the answer is still NO!”*

They were interrupted by a massive shuddering thud on the door. They’d been so involved in their discussion they’d forgotten all about Skarn and his great need to bash their heads in.

“I know you’re in there, whispering and giggling! Breaking into high security areas, we’ll just add that to the list of felonies you’ve committed. After today, they’ll lock you in the deepest, dankest prison cell and walk away!” The next thud was accompanied by a splintering crack. Ambril caught the glint of an ax blade. “No worries, you’re gonna enjoy jail, I’ll be your full time guard!” sneered Skarn

“fLit you have to 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. Skarn’s eye leered at them.

fLit suddenly hovered inches from her nose, “*it’s on your head if anything goes amiss!”*

Ambril looked around and was startled to see Riley standing there, he’d been so quiet she’d forgotten he was there, she extended her hand to him, “Don’t let go!” she winced as fLit grabbed her ear and gave it a tug.

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

It wouldn’t take much more, between the earlier attack and Skarn’s axe the door was all in. Riley took Sully’s hand who already had a hold of Ygg’s hand. “*On my mark!*  *Don’t let go or you just might find yourself on one of the moons of Jupiter---forever!”* fLit’s voice vibrated so powerfully through Ambril’s head it made her head throb. *“Especially you at the end earth-kind!”*

“I be nought stupid, fairy-kind,” Ygg growled back at him.

The Aunties finished their knitting, the larger one in the middle grabbed it and draped it over the center stone on the floor. Instantly a dark hole yawned at their feet, Ambril felt a cool breeze ruffle her hair.

Ambril felt fLit’s hand tense, “*ready*? *One, Two, Jump!”*

Ambril felt her heart jump into her mouth as they half fell half slid into the Chutes.

# A sharp left turn

The webbed chutes thrummed with magic, in seconds they were whirling down a long spiral. Ambril stared out through the nearly transparent webbing into endless space. There were chutes all around them some winding upward, some downward and others branching out all around. fLit maintained his firm grip on her arm as he steered them through an array of intersections with other chutes coming at them from all directions. Riley’s hand felt warm and strong in hers. But after another few minutes of gliding, whooshing and sliding, 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 always think so small. I wasn’t joking before about the Moons of Jupiter, this is the universe.*” he thought at her disparagingly as he tugged her ear hard to the left.

*“Ouch! 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 sounding like his usual annoyed self, “*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, family bonds…since Old Town is ancient, we have to go a long way out to pick up its connection.*” fLit squeezed them through a narrow tunnel. “*stop bothering me or we’ll never get out of here!”*

Ambril shut her mouth tight and contented herself with watching a meteor shower rain down on a pastoral scene filled with dinosaurs, then suddenly they were sheering through what looked like the rings of Saturn and in through the kitchen of a New York City apartment. A small bald man looked up then dropped his bagel. After what seemed like hours of this Ambril began to wave and smile at the passing beings, some human, some not. She was yawning for the tenth time when she noticed the webbing around them had started to fade and the world beyond came into focus. Familiar trees and rocks and night sky sailed by as they began to slow down. But just as they were almost safely…somewhere, everything went wrong.

In the darkness, Ambril felt a knife like pain at her ear then felt Riley’s hand slip from hers. She suddenly found she was alone and falling. Tumbling end over end she struck a patch of wet grass then 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 where are you? 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 rode the sky in the right way. This was definitely Earth. But where was she? She looked around at the dense forest held back by a tall green hedge…this place really did look familiar, she had been here before. Her hand touched the stone wall she’d bumped into, it was really part of a tumbled down stone house. The roof had caved in and stones lay in puddles all around it. In the moonlight she saw a stone circle with a knarled, twisted tree in the center. With a smile she realized that fLit had done it, she was standing in the middle of Old Town, it was the same place she had faced the first Dullaith.

Ambril heard footsteps behind her, “Ygg? Sully? Finally, I was getting worried!”

But the figure who emerged from the shadows was much too tall, too stiff and too angry, “why is it Ambril that you are almost always in the worst place and absolutely the wrong time!” Feldez said tersely as he marched toward her, “you’ve made a mess of everything, including your Mother’s life...she left me…left ME!” Feldez ended with his hands raised incredulously. Ambril noticed he had her Ashera in one hand.

It was all Ambril could do to keep from leaping at him and let her fists do the talking, but she knew that wouldn’t get her very far, “my Mother left you because she finally knows the truth about my father’s death and your part in it!”

Feldez went white with rage. “Are you accusing me of killing your father? The Dullaith did that not I!”

“But it was you who raised it and you who let my father take the blame for it. When all he had done was try to protect you!” Ambril’s voice was shrill with rage. “But that wasn’t enough was it…when you found us in San Francisco you brought us back here to use as your camouflage so you could continue your search for Moroz!” Ambril’s body had gone rigid from the effort of maintaining control, she just had to get all of this out before she took a swing at him. “You were there when the first Dullaith was raised and again you were there at the library when the Dorcha Blade and Morte cell were stolen! You even have blueprints of Old Town and images of the Dullaith on your computer!” Ambril’s throat grew tight as her thoughts turned to her mother, “people were suspicious of us from the moment we arrived…now…well they want to throw us all in a deep hole somewhere in the forest---thanks to you!”

Feldez’s face went starkly pale in the moonlight as it tensed with so much disgust and rage he appeared inhuman. “No! You whining, snot nosed runt! How dare you preach to me!” he hissed as he bent over her and raising her Ashera brought it down on her head.

Several things happened rapidly, the most satisfying for Ambril was when a bolt of energy shot out of her Ashera and through Feldez making him light up like a Chinese New Year’s celebration. Shock registered on his face as the Ashera slipped from his hand and dropped to the ground. Ambril hurriedly picked it up and showered him with a burst of sparks. Both shocked and surprised now, Feldez staggered back into a pile of stones and fell to the ground. Ambril walked warily over to where he lay.

Feldez croaked from the shadows, “so it’s true, the Ashera has chosen you,” He struggled to his feet and flexed his hand as if it were numb, “I had heard the rumors that one had been chosen---but I hardly believed it could be a fourteen year old walking disaster area like you,” he regarded her stiffly, his face wiped clean of emotion.

Ambril nodded watching him warily. “Tomorrow my Mom and I are going to the press to let everyone know what really happened the night my father died and how you’ve been raising Dullaiths in an effort to free Moroz.”

Feldez’s chuckle startled her. It was so…natural. She saw his shoulders slowly relax, “I haven’t raised any Dullaiths except for the one that regrettably killed my best friend, your father, and that was an accident.” Feldez looked unseeingly into the night sky, “an accident that has consumed me ever since.” He looked at Ambril full in the face, “your father’s last words were to make me promise to stand by your family and help however I could after he was gone.” Feldez sighed, his eyes filled with longing and regret. “He also forced me to agree that he was to take the blame for raising the Dullaith---I think he thought it would blow over quickly…alas he was wrong.” Feldez lowered his head and shook it sadly, “I was seriously injured from the fight, when I woke up in the hospital, you and your family had gone…I spent the next ten years trying to track you down. Ten years of enduring compliments I didn’t deserve, accepting awards I hadn’t earned…this secret that I kept at your father’s request…changed me…it has broken me.” He paused lost in a swirl of memories then continued resolutely. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry for what your family went through. It was wrong.” Feldez’s shoulders drooped as the last vestiges of his masquerade slipped off. “I was hesitant to bring you all back to Trelawnyd, but your mother thought it might help to heal the wounds…I think she was thinking mostly of Zane.”

The air felt thick with the tattered remains of the past. Ambril took a deep breath and looked at this man she had hated for so long. She was glad she finally knew his side of the story. She wasn’t entirely sure she’d be able to fully forgive him---but she would try. Then something niggled at her from the back of her mind, “O.K., so if it wasn’t you, who’s been causing all the trouble lately, raising Dullaiths, robbing the archives and all the rest?”

“That’s why I’m here, I’ve been trying to track down who is responsible…In fact I have you to thank for providing me with a link to Moroz. Up to that point I’d always thought it was the power of the Glain the Dullaith raiser wanted. When you mentioned Moroz everything changed. It’s not longer just a power hungry idiot who wants power and money. Freeing Moroz might actually destroy…wait, who is that?” Feldez was staring into the shadows directly behind Ambril. A breeze blew back the strong smell of rotting fruit. Ambril whirled just as a searing bolt of violet energy streaked by her nose and hit Feldez squarely in the chest. He flew back and slammed into a rock wall then slumped senseless to the ground. Ambril jumped back her Ashera ready.

But it was only Riley. Riley, with a satisfied grin stood there chuckling looking first at her then at Feldez’s inert body. Gone was her joking, smiling friend. The new Riley’s smile was bitter, his face hard.

“I have to thank you and your friends for bringing me here. I never would have found it on my own---honest,” something dark and powerful glinted in his hand.

“Riley, what---what are you doing? That’s the---Dorcha Blade!”

His laugh grew deeper as he held it up in the moonlight. A darker slit against a dark sky. Then she saw it around his neck, it was dark now but still resonated with power. “You have my Ledrith Glain!”

He sneered then, waiting for her to realize…

“It couldn’t have been---not you,” whispered Ambril incredulously. “you sent the threats you raised the Dullaiths!”

Riley smiled proudly. “My first one, the one at the Tupelo shack?” He shrugged. “It was just for practice. I didn’t expect much, it took me a long time to snag that fairy…”

“Then the Playground, it was you who did that to your brother!”

Riley 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 as you know.”

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 and the Morte Cell out of the vault. I had to eradicate his memory,” he said sheepishly, “the explosion was just a smoke screen, they’re what I do best.”

Ambril felt nothing but disgust for Riley now, “and Red---what did Betula and her friends ever do to you?”

Riley snorted, “don’t be stupid, you know why I needed Red’s magic.” he 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 sneered angrily. “When did they ever try to include me in anything? I wasn’t invited to birthday parties or backyard barbeques---I was so lonely.” Ambril felt the sadness and frustration in his words. “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?” asked Ambril disparagingly, “you’re shooting yourself in the foot, you know, Trelawnyd is where you’re from, where most all your memories have been 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. I didn’t know it but we were running away from who we were.” She stood in front of him willing him to understand. “But this is worse, at least I was able to come back---my Mom and brother too. If you continue this way you’ll cut yourself off forever, never feeling anywhere is truly home. It may not look like it but your family does love you---even Lance. You have to try and work this out. Talk to your family…tell them how you’re hurting---“

But Riley backed away his face hard, “you don’t think I’ve tried that? I’ve talked and talked to them,” his face twisted into a tight mass of anguish, “they never listened, I know now that they’ll never ever see me as anything other than embarrassing.” His face filled with resolve, “but now---now they will…I’ll show them,” he nodded simply, “And finally they’ll see me as I really am, a powerful magic wielder! With Moroz to guide me---“

Ambril scoffed, “Listen I’ve seen Moroz, he’s not even human anymore. The last thing he’ll want to do is to help a kid take revenge on Trelawnyd!”

Riley snorted. “No one’s seen Moroz for 150 years!”

“Unfortunately, I have…he tried to kill me and take the Ledrith Glain just like he’ll do to you. Look even the most powerful magic wielders of his day knew they couldn’t control a being like Moroz, that’s why they put him away.”

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, he’ll explain some stuff to me, then he’ll crawl off to die somewhere.” Riley yawned then pulled a familiar dark metal box from under his sweatshirt., the Morte Cell. “I’m 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 as he raised his hands and uttered a series of foul sounds. Ambril felt a jolt of power as her being was briefly encased in violet light. She too fell to the ground, with a clunk the Morte Cell landed near her and slid into her side. Riley gave a short laugh as he walked over and bent down over her, observing her as if she was some sort of laboratory experiment. “The Dorcha Blade doesn’t have to cut you to curse,” he looked over at Feldez, inert and pale, “I’m impressed at Feldez’s strength of will, he should have died the moment the curse hit him, I gave it to him good…so good. He deserved it for all the trouble he caused me.”

Riley straightened up, “sorry about your friend, I needed conserve all the power of the Ledrith Glain for my next trick---releasing the greatest magic wielder that ever lived!” Riley chortled.

Ambril could only breath in and out as she watch him turn and jog slowly out toward the Old Derwyn tree. Still stunned Ambril looked down and saw her friend fLit inside the Morte Cell, just as on her first night in Trelawnyd he was frozen in a gut wrenching expression of pain and terror. That was all she saw before the pain in her chest took her down and away into the dark.

# The Center of Everything

Ambril opened her eyes to find herself wrapped with a million tendrils of smoke riding on a river of roiling black fog. She felt the tendrils infiltrating her body through the curse wound, slowly binding her heart and freezing her mind. With the last of her energy she pushed back on it just as fLit had taught her, slowly gaining enough ground to place protective wards around her mind, heart and finally her body. She sat up groggily and found her Ashera in her hand. She looked around her and saw immediately she was riding in a chute but could see this one was different. Instead of glowing bright with health, its delicate tracery was gray and dull. Sparks of power flowed through it occasionally erupting in a stinging spray of sparks, much like the cursed webbing of a Dullaith. Just ahead of her she could see someone else almost entirely covered with smoky tendrils. A flailing hand with long, pale fingers was visible briefly. Ambril’s stomach lurched as she recognized Feldez’s hand.

She couldn’t let him die like this, but what could she do? She barely had enough energy to sit up after beating back her own curse threads. Looking out through the deadened tracery of the cursed chute she saw they had traveled into an unfamiliar part of universe. It was darker there, there were few chutes and far fewer stars. Clouds of gas formed and reformed around her just as they had when the universe was very young. Ambril realized they were going back to the beginning of everything. Ahead the clouds of gas parted for an instant and she saw a brilliant glowing chute, massive like the trunk of a redwood. The curse threads were pulling them toward it. Ambril could now see the tree extending out in all directions, branches, roots and budding vines all knitted together to form the fabric of the universe itself.

With a flash Ambril suddenly got it, what fLit had been telling her all along; that the life energy of every being was shared with the universe itself---for the universe consisted of nothing more but the sum total of them all, their experiences, hopes, struggles---all that every being created---all the quirky, unique, silly, trite, wonders were blended into the very fiber of the worlds being created all around her. That was why fLit gave little thought to drawing the life energy of the beings around him. He recognized the shared nature of their existence. Ambril sat up a little straighter, she knew what she had to do.

Ahead Ambril could see a burn mark spreading out on the great trunk where the curse threads had begun its attack. The curse threads were using Feldez’s life energy to launch an attack on the Great Tree. She raised her Ashera and sighted down it, then sharply drew in her breath as the similarities between her Ashera and the sinuous branching trunk beyond it hit home, the swirling tracery of images, the glowing lines of Ogam…her Ashera was nothing more than a cutting from the Great Tree itself.

She stored this revelation away as she pointed at the center trunk and instead of using her own energy to attack, she willed its energy to her. Her Ashera sparkled with brilliance as the warm glow of health instantly surrounded her, then she moved the flow of energy and channeled it back through her Ashera and into Feldez. The roiling mass of curse threads thinned instantly, Feldez’s limp body became visible then began to glow. His hand twitched and went to his chest and he groaned. Ambril smiled as she saw the cursed chute start to fade around her and the burn mark slowly heal on the Great Tree. She grabbed Feldez’s hand and refocused her heart on home and the last few moments she had spent on earth. It was there she was needed most.

As soon as the image of the abandoned homes brooding at the edge of Old Town’s ancient circle stone formed in her mind, they were there. Feldez’s sharp intake of breath beside her made her turn toward him.

Feldez smiled weakly at her, “it seems I owe you the same debt I owed your father, thanks for saving my life.”

“You can repay me by telling the truth about my Dad,” Ambril said simply as she struggled to a sitting position. She put out a hand to steady herself and felt something cold, hard and angular under her fingers. The Morte Cell. Swiftly she touched her Ashera to it and felt her heart connect with the life energy of the Great Tree. No longer would she worry about spending her own life energy. With a spray of sparks and an explosion of Glain fLit rolled out of the Morte Cell and into her hand, his body limp, his face pale. She would have to work fast to save him.

She was raising her Ashera to deliver a blast of life energy when she felt a sickening lurching feeling, downward and to the right in her stomach. She looked up to see Riley standing at the center of the stone circle, strewn around it, the remains of the old tree he had hacked and burned away. Blue sparks flew all around him as he struggled to ignite something.

“Ambril you have to stop him!” Feldez pulled her Ashera up and pointed it at the boy.

But Ambril hesitated, she looked down and saw curse threads wrapping around fLit’s body. He was being taken. In another moment fLit would be gone from this world, forever bound by the dark energy already consuming him. She couldn’t let that happen to her friend, even if the world twisted sideways, she had to help him. She jerked her hand away and let loose a blast of energy so powerful the curse threads vaporized on contact. fLit’s eyes fluttered open.

Simultaneously a massive bolt of energy exploded out of the circle stone in front of them and blew the remaining stump to pieces. A series of shockwaves and the sound of thunder followed as chunks of wood rained down everywhere. Riley threw himself off the stone and scrambled for safety as it quivered and shook. With a booming crack the stone split itself in two leaving a gaping fissure running through its center, black smoke escaped the opening. 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 out of the void. 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 then slid out onto the stone with reptilian grace, supported by a mass of eel like tentacles underneath. It flinched in the moonlight then half crawled half slithered into the shadows.

Riley scrambled to his feet, “wait! You’re 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---“

Ambril heard a low guttural sound, something like a laugh, come 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 slithered toward the far end of the circle stone and 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.