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| Ambril’s Tale, The Return of the Dullaith |
| **By Wendy Walter** |

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# Chapter 1 The Forest of Trelawnyd

Croquet balls rained down on Ambril as her mother swerved sharply to dodge a raccoon scuttling across the road. “Aren’t you just a little excited?” Ambril’s mom asked as she peered anxiously at her daughter in the rear view mirror. “Going back to where you were born? Finding out about your heritage? Think of it!” Her mother’s voice was just a little too high, just a bit nervous.

Ambril rolled her eyes, but not so her mother could see, as she stuffed the croquet balls back in their case and fortified them with a bag labeled ‘future sock puppets’. It didn’t count if you were going back to a place you didn’t remember---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. That afternoon she had watched her real home slide by as their old minivan had made its way through the snarled streets of San Francisco. They had rumbled over the Golden Gate bridge and onto the deserted coast highway and had driven north.

Ambril gazed out at the windy shoreline and watched the pelicans slip easily under the roll of the breakers desperately wishing she could join them instead of face another new school filled with kids she didn’t know. In a few minutes the landscape changed dramatically when the car swerved off the highway and headed east. In moments, towering redwoods and clumps of ancient oaks blotted out what was left of the fading sunlight.

Strands of her mother’s blonde hair escaped her messy bun as she turned to smile at Zane, Ambril’s older brother. “Zane, you remember Circle Park in the center of town? You played tag for hours there on the big stone circle,” she said brightly, then blinked rapidly.

But Zane continued to stare fixedly out the passenger side 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.

Ambril watched as Zane’s shoulders tightened ominously and braced herself. He had been on edge since her Mom had announced they were moving again---for the ninth time. But this time had been different. Instead of moving to another apartment in San Francisco as they had every time before, Ambril’s mom 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. Feldez had come into their lives just a few months before though he had grown up with Ambril’s mom in Trelawnyd. The two had grown up together but hadn’t kept in touch after Ambril’s Mom had moved away.

Zane, however, had gone nuts when he heard that they were moving back to Trelawnyd. He had raged and shouted and sworn that he wasn’t going back, they couldn’t go back, and finally 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. Ambril’s mother was happier than she had been in years and for once they had enough money for clothes and food.

Ambril’s mom smiled 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. Do you remember?” She patted his leg but Zane 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 forest but saw nothing but the ghoulish shapes the shadows made out of the trees. Trolls, Monsters and Axe Murderers…Ambril shook herself, she’d been watching too many scary movies. She was going to miss the sight and smell of the Bay, so blue, so beautiful. Now there would be nothing but oceans of spooky trees all around. Just ahead Ambril saw they were approaching a stone wall. It stretched out into the forest in both directions and towered over them as they slipped through a narrow gateway. Something denser than air sliced through her briefly, then was gone. It happened so fast that Ambril thought she had imagined it.

“Almost there! We’re through the Trelawnyd Wall.” Her mother announced, sounding overly cheery as she switched on the high beams. They did nothing to dispel the thickening darkness. Then 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, “it’s important so listen! Feldez and I feel it’s best for you to use his last name---Petri instead of Derwyn from now on.”

“What?” Ambril sat bolt upright and got whacked on the head with a croquet mallet. Her father’s last name had been Silva, but they had used her mother’s last name---Derwyn for as long as Ambril could remember. “But I don’t want to change my name. I like it just the way it is!” She groused as she shoved the mallet farther down into its case.

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 do you think?”

Then Zane mumbled something, “what was that Darling?” Ambril’s mother patted his shoulder. Without warning Zane threw himself around to face her which caused the van to swerve erratically.

“AREN’T YOU GOING TO TELL HER THE REAL REASON, MOM?” Zane’s 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! But you told me it had been so long that no one would remember!” His jaw tightened as he faced down his mom. “What a laugh! It looks like you don’t believe that either. 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 for a long moment before her mother found her voice.

“Zane! Zane wait, let’s talk about this!” Wild with panic 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. Ambril’s 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 with her arms folded. “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!”

“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 said looking warily 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.

Alone inside Ambril fidgeted, unnerved by this strange weird place and Zane’s crazed behavior. She 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. Something so horrible that her mom wanted to give up their family name…again. Something so bad that Zane was even willing to brave the Trolls, Monsters and Axe Murderers in the forest. Unbelievable as he watched more scary movies than Ambril did.

Whatever this terrible thing was it must have happened just before they left---maybe something to do with her father’s death? Ambril shook her head and tried 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 much. She had been young---just three. 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 because 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 and willed the sad memories away which brought back the dark interior of the van…not much better. Ambril knew it would be impossible to get her mom to tell her what had made her run from Trelawnyd and then keep on running. She’d have to get it out of Zane if she could…and that wasn’t going to be easy.

The shadowy forest seemed to be watching her. Branches swayed slightly in the night breeze and reached for her across the road. She tried to push away her rising panic at being left all alone in a dark and brooding forest. Shouldn’t they be back by now?

# Chapter 2 A Vicious Vegetable Attack

Frustrated and scared Ambril peered across the road and into the forest as the moon came out from behind a cloud. It revealed 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 that morning. It had been during the move when 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 called it something funny…what was it? Ashh---Ashera, that was it! When Ambril had asked her mom if she could keep it, her mother had pursed her lips and hiked her hands on her hips, “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 look fine here, the new house is very modern. 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 had 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 had felt so resentful and angry that she had stuffed the funny old thing into her backpack when her mom wasn’t looking instead of putting it in a moving box.

She looked down at this thing---this Ashera…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. It seemed to tell a story. She wiped some of the dust off to get a better look then smiled when she 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 and his odd shop. It had been lined with drawers of every shape and color---star shapes, lion head shapes, plaid shapes...etc. Hidden in the drawers were mysterious roots, pungent berries and dried wriggly things Ambril felt positive were not of this world. She had spent a lot of time there---playing checkers and laughing at Chao Feng’s stories---it had become a second home to her.

She had shown her old friend her new find, the old wooden Ashera. Chao Feng’s wrinkled hand had traced the engravings on it carefully. The more he examined it the bigger his smile. He said softly, “this is puzzle box, this Ashera. It is very, very old and very, very good quality. We have also something like it in China. My grandmother had one to put her secrets in.” He smiled to himself. “It took my mother three years to unlock all its mysteries.” His hands moved slowly up the side of the box as he chuckled softly. “Then she locked them back into box and give it to me. I still trying to figure them out and she been gone for many, many years.” His hands slid along just under the top prodding it gently…until his face brightened, “ah yes,” he offered the Ashera 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 and a round object had slid into view. She had pulled it out and twirled it in the bright sunshine…it was dazzling.

It was a medallion with a gemstone flower as big as her palm. 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 did make her feel safer. Maybe someone really was watching over her now.

She turned her attentions back to the Ashera. 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. “All right 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 Ashera hit the seat. There was a bone-jarring boom as a spray of sparks erupted from the top of her Ashera 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. It leered at her before clattering to the pavement. A volley of blueberries, Brussels 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 that 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 were raining 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 Brussels 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. Cracks in the glass raced out from it like rays from the sun. Ambril nudged it with the Ashera. 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 that overflowed the box and stretched across the street, pointing in a ragged tangle toward the explosion site.

Curious, Ambril picked up the statue and with difficulty cleaned off the very sticky, sparking threads and burned her fingers in the process. 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 tiny bits which 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 threads. Staggering to her feet she ripped off most of the stinging threads as she limped toward the safety of the van. She rubbed bits of statue from her eyes and looked around. It was then she felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. Something large seemed to be smacking its lips right behind her. Ambril 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 beastly head loomed over her. The skull of a horned beast with glowing red eyes and a too wide, jaggle toothed mouth. It’s skin was composed of sparking tracery which encased roiling black smoke. 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.

Ambril froze for a second or two in amazement before instinct too over and she hunched down and hugged the van as the monster came closer. The temperature around her plummeted. She shivered as her breath frosted up the exterior of the van’s back window. 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. It reminded her of Girl Scout camp when she’d drawn the short straw and had to help clean out the septic tank. Her mother hadn’t been able to get the stench out of her clothes when she had gotten home and had been forced to throw them away. The van’s front shocks squealed as it rocked back and forth as the creature butted it almost playfully. Then quite suddenly…the van wasn’t there.

Ambril heard a gigantic crash as the van landed belly up twenty feet away. 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 grooves 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 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 Brussels 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 as she stumbled and fell.

She nearly dropped the Ashera still in her hand when a beam of light shot out of it. What was this thing that sparked and lit up on its own? She flashed her new light around and discovered something odd. Just a few feet in front of her where moments before a moonlit path had stretched in front of her a hedge had suddenly appeared. A thick, densely packed wall of greenery. It stretched out through the forest as far as her light could reach.

Maybe she thought, she could hide out in there until the monster got bored and found a nice cow to munch on. She immediately half crawled half lunged into the densely packed leaves. 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, 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 as she ran toward the nearest home, “Monster! There’s a monster in the forest! Anyone here know how to get rid of them?” But no lights came on and 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 that she was alone and lost in a forest while being chased by a foul smelling demon with nothing but a decorated stick to defend herself with. The moonlight was bright that night and it softly illuminated the forest beyond the hedge. There were acres and acres of it. She seemed to be standing 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. Instead it 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 away and 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 Ashera like a laser sword. Surprisingly burning lines formed on the monster’s face where the light zigzagged over it. Ambril gagged, the smell of a wounded monster was worse than a healthy one. Fortunately her laser slashes had worked. The creature backed off, snuffling and wheezing as it went.

Then it began to stalk her---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 tree growing out of the center of the stone plaza. The tree 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 minutes ago she had been a completely normal kid, living a regular life. Someway somehow 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 close---too close. Caught without any defenses, she could only slip behind the tree trunk and cower as the monster plowed into the tree trunk on the other side barely missing her. It grunted in surprise and backed away.

Ambril was all out of ideas. She couldn’t think of anything more to try. As she gripped the tree trunk for support, she sent out a silent plea for help. It was then she felt something strange--- fortunately 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 as it warmed under her hand. A nearby branch startled her when it twisted and flexed independent of any breeze.

Then the monster came back in a big way. It rammed the tree so hard Ambril was knocked back off her feet. The trunk of the tree groaned as wood does when its pushed beyond its limits as the tree absorbed the monster’s charge. Brittle twigs and branches flew everywhere. Then something changed. Every twig and branch on the tree came to life and set to work curling around the monster and gathered 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. Then after a while it seemed to grow sleepy. In a few minutes it quieted and became still and quiet, just like all the other trees…except for the smug air of satisfaction that hung 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 rhythmically and loudly---too loudly. But it wasn’t until the leaves on the old tree began to quiver with every thump that 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?

Her heart started to match the loud thumping as she stumbled away from the old tree and raced across the open area. Maybe if she could make it to the old buildings she could find a place to hide she thought as she raced away. The thing was close now. Looking over her shoulder Ambril saw the hedge bowing out as something large and bulky forced its way through it and into the clearing. It towered over her…she couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing. Then something hit her in the head. But just before she blacked out her head cleared enough to register its enormous, yellow chicken feet.

# Chapter 3 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. Someone had thoughtfully placed an ice-filled cloth on it---which almost helped.

She thought about the fight then. She remembered the tree finishing off the first monster and how she had run toward the deserted houses, she had almost made it to safety. But she had been foiled by a pair of huge chicken feet with a fist as hard as stone. Silhouetted against the sky, the thing had been as big as a house. 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 and pondered this for a moment before she became aware of an odd, rocking sensation. Wherever she was, it was moving.

There were also sounds of movement nearby. She heard the whuffle of fabric, the crinkle of paper and a grating ping as if someone was jumping around on a metal tipped pogo stick. There were whispers too. Perhaps the monsters were planning a dinner party---with her as the main course.

She had to find out. 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 vaulted ceiling 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 jumping around all by itself.

She stopped and looked again. As she watched the umbrella gathered itself and jumped into an umbrella stand. As it settled itself the parrot handle yawned and blinked. Ambril scanned the room quickly and swallowed hard when she saw a feather pen sweeping crumbs off a kitchen table.

What had happened to the world? Had her juice been spiked that morning? How did she land in Beauty and the Beast? Ambril felt suddenly nauseous. She stared up at the ceiling and tried to focus on anything ordinary. She settled on one of the swinging lanterns, which proved to be a bad choice. Whether it was from the bump on her head or plain old motion sickness, 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, send up a flare.’ She had to smile at that and smiling 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 Brolly falling over.”

Someone snorted in disgust as a dry, dramatic voice bleated, “I was nearly ripped to shreds when that awful tea tray rammed me last time!---TO SHREDS, I tell you! Not that any of you care what happens to me!” flapping fabric followed this then pogo stick sounds as something tapped across the floor. Ambril guessed it was the umbrella.

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

“The cocoa’s ready,” it was the boy’s voice again. There were sounds of cups rattling.

“Thanks, 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 whuffled hysterically, “And now, this MONSTROUS Dullaith!” There were more flapping noises and then a soft ting. Brolly continued in an ordinary tone, “Your scones are ready Quill.”

“Oh! I nearly forgot them,” 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, someone wanted to bring us all down!” Brolly groaned, followed by the sound of metal being stretched to its limits.

“Brolly go back to your corner and stop being so dramatic! If you bend the wrong way like that again you might just snap your handle right off!” Quill sounded annoyed. Ambril didn’t blame her, she was already sick of the old guy. “Besides if there was a trap set for Fowlclun, it didn’t work. He just stumbled a little, right? So there’s nothing to worry about. Hendoeth will be in soon. She just went out to strap up the chimney.”

Ambril’s curiosity overcame her nausea and she risked another look. The feather pen was standing on its tip atop a small, wheeled table with a steaming pot of cocoa and a plate of scones. It was watching the umbrella who was settling itself again into the umbrella stand.

The feather pen glanced over at Ambril. Ambril spotted two bright eyes and a mouth at the top of pen’s shiny black shaft. The pen smiled and fluffed her feathers when she saw Ambril’s eyes were open.

“Finally she’s awake!” Sailing toward her was a 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. Ambril noticed a large, circular water mark near the bottom as if someone had carelessly put a wet mug of tea on it.

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

“Hi..um…my name is---Ambril.”

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

“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, fascinated.

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

Ambril shrugged and nodded.

“SO WE MUST BE TALKING.” The paper shifted to a picture of a man in a tuxedo with tails taking a bow as an audience clapped.

“You’re as white as a sheet!” said the feather pen as she pushed off and rolled the small ornate tea table toward the bed. Ambril guessed 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 old, chimney brick!”

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

Ambril went rigid as an earthquake rumbled through the house. Every rafter moaned and creaked in annoyance, even the bedsprings sounded irritated.

“Jute! You know how sensitive Fowlclun is! He can’t help it if he’s molting! 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 hit her on the head.” The string face of Jute yelled into the rafters.

Ambril hadn’t heard that last part as 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. Worse, she was chatting with a piece of paper, string and a feather pen. If her head hadn’t been hurting she would have banged it against the headboard to see if that might bring back reality.

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. “So 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 down 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 and she doesn’t know anything.”

There was a dry cough from the corner then 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!” 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.” The string face puckered a little as if in pain, “but 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.”

“Don’t be so ungrateful. If Fowlclun and Hendoeth hadn’t picked us up, we’d have all ended up in the junkyard---broken and scared.” Quill glared at him then nodded. “We owe them a lot.”

“Yeah, hurray for Fowlclun,” grumbled Jute, “but deep down we all can’t shake the feeling that we’re missing big pieces of ourselves. I spend most days wondering about what I left behind."

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

# Chapter 4 Hendoeth

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

“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. Then we’ll get to fixing the wards on that old hedge, something’s wrong there, it’s the first time something that evil has found its way through it.” She was wiping her hands on her skirt when she spotted Ambril. Her bright eyes crinkled as 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.”

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. Then 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.” The old woman nodded to Ambril’s mug, “Take another swig of that you’re still looking a might peaked!” Hendoeth chuckled as she heaved herself into a rocking chair and poured 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 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. “My sister, Yaga hangs out in Russia… “No? Well it’s just as well, those old tales 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 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 just 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 again.

Hendoeth looked outraged. “Motor home! Watch your language! A finer example of a Legged House cannot be found anywhere in the universe!” She 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 then said it again while angling for the rafters. A softer hoot replied.

After a bit Hendoeth calmed down enough to ask, “So, you have the look of a Derwyn. You by chance related to Rosa Derwyn?”

Ambril nodded in surprise, “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 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---of course 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’s ancient magic…powerful too. It marks you as fairy born, that you wear that medallion so easy. It would just spark and spit at most of us. Meaning, it ain’t just 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 in you, 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 and held it close feeling suddenly very protective of it.

“Ha! No worries,” 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 sight more trouble, lemme tell you!”

There was a loud, injured squawk as the house dipped to the right making Ambril take a firmer grip on her mug.

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

“Do you mean, that this…” she searched for the right word, “puzzle box 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 it. That monster was an ancient demon called a Dullaith. We haven’t seen one around here since---” Hendoeth stopped herself and gave Ambril a searching look. “Well for at least ten years. That old demon came after your magical energy. Waving an Ashera around under its nose and wearing the Ledrith Glain must have made him think Christmas and Easter had come on the same day!” Hendoeth giggled, “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 get to figure that out myself,” Ambril guessed, “so exactly what is this Ashera thing?” she asked.

“It’s a tool, your tool,” 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 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 up for this? It was one thing to watch someone else battle monsters on a big screen 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 anyway 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.

“So 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 to the foot of the bed. “Look, even Jute saw this right away. There must be some mistake. I’m not special…and I’m not really good at anything---at least not yet anyway. Because I’m really just an ordinary kid,” it was embarrassing to admit 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 up hasn’t wanted to just step back a bit and let someone 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. You can 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 that now you know about all of this, can you be happy with normal?” She squinted gleefully at Ambril. “Don’t you worry about the world any, there’ll 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 was quiet for a moment before continuing softly. “Truth be told no one can make this here decision for you. 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 want to disappoint all of them ancestors of yours now, would ya?”

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

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

Hendoeth blinked as she slowly got up from her chair. “Now this is 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 are you 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 her eyes gentle, “Do you love your Daddy?”

“Yes 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 as 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, about being part fairy---did that mean she’d grow 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.”

Ambril had no time to think about what that meant as just then the door banged opened and let in a Native American wearing a cowboy hat and a scowl. He stood and stared hard at Ambril looking as if he’d like nothing better than to toss her out the window. A dark, 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. Pay no attention to Koda, it ain’t personal, he’s like that to everyone.”

The one called Koda jutted his jaw at Ambril as he looked her over, “just how did this little imp manage to take down a Dullaith?”

Siddhart pointedly cleared his throat, “It is an honor to meet you, Ambril. We are all heartily glad you were able to bring down that beast,” his voice was reedy with a slight Indian accent, “I wish someone had been there to help you do battle, 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 what with Fowlclun’s game leg.”

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

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

Ambril nodded vigorously.

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.”

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

Hendoeth eyed her, “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…they 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 more like your Ledrith Glain. Just how he managed to get himself trapped is a puzzle. Fairies travel in clumps, never alone. Was he alone or did his pals just leave him there to die?” Hendoeth ruminated more to herself than to anyone.

Ambril suddenly felt like a failure. Here she had stumbled right into a murder scene without even knowing it. All this magic stuff was so confusing. 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 of them 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 only his outer aura that crystallized. If that’s so he’s probably kickin’ up his fairy boots in one of them fairy circle parties right now!” She patted Ambril on the back, “now we’ve talked enough, time to get you back to your kin.” She up-ended herself and rummaged under the bed until she came up with Ambril’s sneakers. “We’ll talk agin before too long. Fowlclun and I are always around lookin’ out for the bad guys. Something tells me 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. Most won’t understand and for those who do it won’t make them feel easy being around you.”

Ambril’s stomach churned uncomfortably as she wiggled into her shoes before heading toward the door. Through the doorway she could see a farmhouse with smoke curling up from its chimney. It was dwarfed by a big red barn. An ornate weather vane stood framed against the moon, a wolf dancing with a bird.

“You be careful now kid, try to stay inside the Wall, there’s a passel of protective wards running all through it. Though it won’t help none if someone calls up evil from the inside. Just holler if you get into trouble,” Hendoeth tweaked Ambril’s ear hard enough to hurt as Ambril limped out the door.

The word “Thanks,” stuck in Ambril’s throat as she stepped off the porch and turned around. 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 smiled at her. But the jaw dropper was what the house was wedged between--- two huge yellow chicken feet, attached to knobby 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 when Ambril waved. Then 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 so young and all…but while you were talking---I began to think that maybe she might be...”

Hendoeth turned to find all of the talking household goods crammed in 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 whuffle and a crinkle they cleared the doorway. “She has it in her---you all can see that. But they are on to her already…does she even stand a chance? MAYBE is all we can hope for.”

Quill shuddered with joy anyway. “Maybe is loads better than nothing. At last---now we have something to hope for.”

# Chapter 5 Rosebud

Back at the farm Siddhart nodded to Ambril and Koda before turning toward the house. “Good luck to you Ambril, we will meet again,” Ambril looked longingly after the tall gaunt man then hesitantly at Koda who still looked as if he’d like to eat her.

“Let’s get you back to your Mommy---you’ve stirred up enough trouble tonight.” Koda sneered, making Ambril feel as if she were six and had accidentally 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 fifty years old and had been dinged and scratched so much you could barely make out what was written in scrolly letters across the handlebars, ‘*Rosebud*’. It was a workhorse of a bicycle with a large wicker basket decorated with flowers---rosebuds of course.

Flowers were the last thing Ambril thought belonged on a cowboy’s bike, but she barely blinked. She’d seen far stranger things that evening. Koda strode over to the bike and gently patted an abnormally large bud 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. Once Ambril was wedged in Koda muttered, “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. But immediately discarded that idea, who would hear her? Who would care? Her family couldn’t possibly be nearby. Besides Koda looked like he could stare down any amount of lawyers. So she settled for looking angry and turned to give the unusually large bud the evil eye. It immediately 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 gravel sputtered from under the big tires as they began moving through the forest.

Now that Ambril had a chance to study Rosebud up close she began to doubt she was even a member of the rose family. First, she smelled nothing like a rose, her scent was more like orange sherbet tinged with shoe polish. Though the buds looked very rose-like, the vines were ropey and tough and fortunately for Ambril, thornless. Also, the buds seemed to glow and sparkle in the moonlight. They were extraordinarily, very much alive.

After a few moments the large, vicious bud leaned toward her and sniffed her like a dog before it tossed her flower head and turned away as if to say that Ambril wasn’t worth any more of her valuable time. But she did loosen her 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 the forest lightened 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 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 awful secret about him from her, did it have something to do with his death? 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, what little she had. Her parents had both been only children. She had never known her grandparents, in fact her mother’s parents had died when her mother was just a child. So it had been Rosa, Ambril’s great grandmother, who had raised her mother.

Her mom had told her many stories about growing up with Gran. They had lived in a big old house with a wonderful garden, a blackberry patch and ancient fruit trees. Ambril’s mom and Gran would walk out and pull a couple of oranges off the tree and enjoy 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 it in the process then had a glaring contest with the nasty bud, which was hard for Ambril because the flower 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 alongside.”

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 a warrior princess sort of being…part of nature’s spirit and just as ornery and short tempered as a warrior princess as a right to be. Everything has a bit of nature’s spirit in it, Rosebud’s bit 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 a little more hopeful. Humming 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, you know, in case it comes back.”

But Ambril had misread him and she cringed as he growled angrily, “a Dullaith’s nothing to play around with! It’s a dark creature which feeds off its victims until they die. There are few human-kind who face down such a demon and live. Lucky for you the Old Derwyn Oak took pity on you,” he snorted disgustedly. “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.

“Why do they call it the Derwyn Oak?”

“Haven’t they taught you anything? That ancient oak was brought over from the old country by your ancestors.” 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 as Koda grunted and braked hard. They skidded to a stop.

Ambril caught her breath. 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 for Ambril. There would be no marshmallows to roast.

“You stay here!” Koda ordered as he leaned Rosebud against a tree. “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 to get out of the basket but the vines tightened around her. She stopped when she saw how much Rosebud was enjoying her frustration and sat back to think. As she did so her Ashera, still in her pocket poked her in the ribs. An idea came to her---maybe it would work…

Whistling softly and trying to appear casual, she worked her 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, fortunately they were mostly there. She ran toward the burned out building, hugging the underbrush.

The firefighters seemed to be shutting down the operation. Most of them were gathering 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 just begun the process of transforming into Glain.”

“This was done by someone with talent and skill,” the old man said slowly. “We’ll have to be more vigilant. You know the Archives are the poor step-child of the Library. Most would love an excuse to get rid of it entirely,” the old man murmured. “But I’ll do my best.”

As the two men bent their heads over something on the ground an eerie light lit their faces. “They didn’t get what they wanted this time…I suspect 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 the 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 as it had been that kind of night. But instead she found Rosebud glaring at her. 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 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 Ambril and relaxed her hold just enough for her to wriggle her toes, scratch her nose and drive away the offending, ticklish bud.

Then Ambril started thinking about Trelawnyd. What kind of a place was this? It certainly wasn’t the sleepy country town she had expected. Though the magic side of things was intriguing, she was painfully aware of how little she knew about it. Was everyone here magical? Would the fact she was new to it make her 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. 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 then grimly trained his eyes on the path and refused to answer any more questions.

Ambril sighed and gave up, so much for any help from the adults. She would have to hide how little she knew about everything. Moving a million times had made her pretty good at keeping things to herself. She’d just keep quiet and look around. It would be lonely but she was used to that. 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’ll change now. The reason the Ashera came to you isn’t known, but I’m thinking this town’s in for a busting-out fight. Using Magic may be the only way to protect ourselves.” Just as they coasted to a stop, he added. “But I can see from here that 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 6 The House that Feldez Built

“Ambril! My baby!” shrieked her mother as 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!” 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 as her mother gave her another hug, “Um…the explosion scared me so…I ran. Then I got lost and---Koda, the guy on the bike, brought me back. Did you find Zane?” Ambril was finding it hard to talk with her entire face squashed up 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 once again. Satisfied she still had all her limbs and---most of her eyebrows she let her go.

“Something from the explosion 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 his 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 was nearly gone now. Most of it 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. He handed her backpack to her, “I found this on the side of the road.” Ambril took it gratefully. They both watched silently as the driver flipped a switch. 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, “Perhaps you’re right. But we haven’t finished with this issue. We’ll have to 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, they’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 as she watched her brother’s shoulders rise as he walked away, as if to shut her out. It made her feel more alone than ever.

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.

But a few minutes later she eyes flashed open when 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.” 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 close. 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 soon, maybe 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 which surrounded 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!”

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 things crawling off her. “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 grimaced as he 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. The room 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 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 grunted and nodded---there was bound to be too much clean in her future. They hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen. At least Feldez did food well. 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 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, “Zane, we need to forget what happened too. 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 moose 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.”

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 again 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 with an ornate border caught her eye; she looked closer and discovered that it was of a town with houses surrounding a circular plaza. A tree stood in the center. 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 the 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 around it like tattooed skin. It was chillingly beautiful when it wasn’t trying to kill you, she decided. Underneath was written

10 1 12

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 clicked 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 looked at her in surprise and then said, “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 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 and she couldn’t talk to anyone about it. She screwed up her face and angrily jammed her hands into her pockets. Her hand touched something soft and small in one of them. She pulled out the piece of cloth she’d rescued from the minivan’s demolished windshield and held it up to the light.

It was a little cloth boot. It glistened in the light. It curled up at the toes and sported a quaint row of silver buttons running up one side---and there was a large hole in the sole. Ambril thought about the fairy in the box and wondered if there was a Craig’s List, Lost and Found for his type---she set it on her bedside table.

Then it hit her again, just how tired she was. She dragged herself into the shower 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 at least and set it on the bedside table. Had it just been that morning Chao Feng had given it to her? It seemed as if it was years ago.

When she had gone to say good bye to her old friend, Chao Feng had given her a grey-toothed grin as he slipped behind the store’s counter. “Now, I finally finish it. But where?---Ah! Here it is.” When he had straightened up he had held an old robot in his hand. “This not a toy, this is special AI robot!” he said quickly heading off her frown. “You too old for toys of course.”

He set the robot on the counter and turned it on. “You know, AI, Artificial Intelligence, you teach, he learn so that one day, he be a little friend to you.” Chao Feng pressed a button and the robot began walking jerkily along the counter. “It’s antique, from the 60’s” said Chao Feng “I put in all new works, so it’s up-to-date, more or less.” The robot narrowly missed walking off the counter. Just as it teetered on the edge, it swung a foot around, swerved and marched the other way.

“See? Spatial sensors too! He learn. More you let him do, more he do it better.” His eyes twinkled as he handed it to her. Its red metal was scratched but some of the lights on his helmet still blinked when it was turned on. Ambril had taken the old thing and tucked it carefully in her backpack.

Ambril smiled as she realized that giving her the robot was her old friend’s way of easing her loneliness in this new place. She fingered what was left of the fake button label on the robot’s chest. It 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 household goods, houses on chicken legs, and angry bicycles.

# Chapter 7 A Tiny Visit

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 a little more cracked like the ceiling of her old room. At least then she would have had something to make interesting pictures with. She had just given up counting sheep as they kept turning into Dullaiths when she heard voices arguing in the hallway. She slipped from her bed and put her ear to the door.

“It’s not possible, Zane, it was dark---you were angry---you imagined it,” Feldez’s voice sounded strained.

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

“Certainly not! You’re 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 looks 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 night! What could you possibly remember Zane? You were all of what, five?”

Zane’s voice was strung taunt with anger. “Monsters are not something afive year old forgets!”

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. Sleeping pills? What was that about? Her mother never took pills. There was a crack of light at the bottom of Zane’s door and a low rumble of voices from inside. She strained to make out what they were saying but didn’t dare move any closer. Suddenly the door was thrown wide and Feldez strode out. Ambril skittered behind her door, praying she hadn’t been seen.

“It’s for the best, for your mother certainly. It is unwise to dredge up these old memories!” Feldez said not unkindly but there was only silence in the room in response, “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 crept across the hallway. She hesitated, then with her fingernail she tapped out their code. The code 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 Zane was turning his room upside down. She opened the door quietly just enough to see Zane shoving things into his backpack.

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

She opened the door wide. “What are you doing? You can’t leave me here all alone with Feldez!” She marched into the room. “I’m coming with you!”

Zane jumped a mile high. Then he leaped over the piles of clothes and electronic gear to close the door before turning to Ambril. “Quiet you idiot!” He stared at his little sister in consternation as he realized how upset she was.

“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 as much as I do,” he ran his hand through his hair as he always did when he was tired. “Go back to bed and 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 narrow, “see what?”

“That thing in the forest, you know that smoky skull thing? 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.

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

“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? Mom just told me Dad had been doing something---wrong when he died, did it have something to do with a Dullaith?”

Zane just looked. “He died fighting one. I was playing in the Park when it happened and saw it.” 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 and there was none for her to breathe.

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

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. “The villagers were suspicious of us after Dad died. Mom had a really hard time of it. People didn’t treat her right. I think they thought she’d been in on it.”

“They didn’t treat you right either, I can see that,” Ambril said softly.

Zane’s head jerked up, his mouth a thin line. 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 and squared his shoulders. “Maybe Mom is right, we should forget all of this. “

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 tree saved me by eating it instead! It’s one of the scariest things that’s ever happened to me! I can’t just forget it!”

Zane turned around, “there are scarier things than monsters in the world. How about Mom cracking up and leaving us with only Feldez as a parent.” Zane advanced on Ambril, “so you listen up---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, he was pleading. “These people here are---different. They’re 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 rhythmically dilate. “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? We have 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 with 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. “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, but he seems to almost---like you.” Ambril stood there willing him to see how important it was that he stuck around.

Zane stood there for what seemed to be forever before nodding---just once. “But, I can’t promise it’ll be for long.” A pained look crossed his face before he switched back into the new Zane mode. Grunting impatiently, he opened the door and shoved her out into the hallway.

Ambril stumbled to her room and whisked her door shut then hugged herself, shaking like a leaf. So Zane had seen the Dullaith too! She shuddered as she tried to get her mind around the rest of it. About her father---a Dullaith had killed her father---just like the one that had almost killed her too. She stood there letting her thoughts run around and around in circus clown circles until she felt slightly dizzy, then she took her desk chair and wedged it under her doorknob. No more trouble allowed tonight.

As she slipped under her covers she realized she just had to find out what had happened to her dad. Zane was fooling himself. She couldn’t just forget it and neither could he. But she felt a little better knowing that at least she wasn’t going to be alone. Zane had promised to stay at least for now. It helped to know there would be a kid sized person going through this with her. She snuggled down with the robot next to her on her bedside table and was almost instantly asleep.

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.

He wasn’t a star really, and he wasn’t really twinkling. He just sparked now and then in an exhausted sort of way. He 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 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. It slowly filled him with light and seemed to energize him. He giggled as his hair began to stand on end, then he froze in astonishment. For the gemstone was not only making him glow, it was also lighting up the sleeping figure as well. He jetted away to the far upper corner of the room and shook himself. Frowning he returned slowly 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, scowling. Ambril sniffed and turned over forcing the Ashera to slip from under the pillow and fall off the bed.

The fairy was on it immediately. With a wave of his hand he slowed its fall. A look of amazement covered his face. The Ashera glowed as the fairy flipped it around scanning every inch. A few times he stopped and looked again at the kid now curled into a ball, snoring softly. After several minutes he put the Ashera back and landed next to the robot on the bedside table, lost in thought.

Outside the large crow shook his feathers and stretched his neck nervously as he hopped from one foot to the other until a furry head rose from behind a tuft of leaves.

“Quit fidgeting Sid, I’m hanging on for dear life, don’t you know!” A large fat squirrel with a white ruff of fur around her neck groused. “This branch is too small for both of us,” she blinked her very blue eyes rapidly as they bobbed up and down.

“Aster, if you had 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.

The branch slowly stopped swaying as the two peered inside the dark room.

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

“Clearly your memory has gone, THAT is a forest fairy! You know--- one of those who left during the rebellion? He has no love of human-kind I promise you. Not that the ones who stayed are any nicer. Besides, we cannot be too careful. Just look what happened this evening! A Dullaith of all things!” The crow cocked its head and jumped to Aster’s smaller branch, which dipped dangerously.

“Watch it you old Coot!” Aster sputtered as she nearly fell off the branch.

“I’m a Crow, an old Crow, not an old Coot,” muttered Sid not taking his eyes from the fairy. “It is our job to keep her safe until she is able to take care of herself, you know that.”

“All right, All right, but I can’t see from here.” 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 suddenly 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, “Where did he go?”

“Where’d who go, the fairy?” the squirrel stood up on her hind legs for a better look. Inside Ambril snored on peacefully---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 got the impression he did not have a place to hightail it to---he had all the earmarks of a loner to me, did you see the condition of his boots? They were a disgrace! But I am surprised, I must say,” said Sid. “The young Miss 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 the worst kind of snobs, thinking themselves above everyone, especially us 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 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,” then 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’s face and she smiled. The crow seemed to smile with her.

# Chapter 8 Tomato Slinging

When Ambril finally woke the sun was nearly half way through the morning. Through her window the sky was blue from end to end. It was shaping up to be a stellar autumn 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 the robot as he walked the desktop experimentally flexing his knees. The red light on the top of its head blinked as he picked up a pink eraser.

“That’s the smartest robot I’ve ever seen. Your other robots were just things to stub my toe on.” Her mother said admiringly.

Ambril shrugged. “Chao Feng added some Artificial Intelligence, his name’s fLit.”

Her mother nodded, “fLit…Artificial Intelligence explains his smarts but what about his cheekiness?” fLit was winding up to throw the eraser but stopped to wink at them. Ambril’s mom giggled then smiled at Ambril, “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.

Her mother smiled ruefully as she picked up her daughter’s dirt encrusted jeans, “at least your robot 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, “we’re getting 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 on the floor 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 burned out building they had seen last night.

The article read:

**A fire broke out in the Tupelo Roadside Stand off the Main Road. The Tupelos had just finished renovating the old building to sell their farm’s produce. “It’s a real shame but let’s face it, that building’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 put it next to his plate. Then 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 further down in 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 her mother saw in him.

“I hope you’ve all recuperated from last night’s adventures. Sadly, it wasn’t quite the introduction to Trelawnyd that your mother and I had hoped you would have. Last night’s events were certainly out of the ordinary but your mother and I both feel your actions showed a decided lack of thought,” 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 Zane. He 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 now but there is some one here I would like you to meet before I go,” he looked toward the kitchen and raised his voice. “Mrs. Sweetgum?”

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

“Hope you like the food.” She squeaked then 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.

“Breakfast was excellent, Mrs. Sweetgum,” Ambril’s mother smiled, then sipped her coffee as if meeting a new housekeeper was an everyday occurrence.

Feldez dismissed Mrs. Sweetgum with a curt nod. He eyed Ambril and Zane again. “Mrs. Sweetgum is here to make our lives a little easier. No doubt it will be an adjustment---having a stranger in the house. However, I’m sure it won’t be long before you’ll wonder what you did without her.” He looked pointedly at Zane who was reaching for another muffin. “Don’t you think you’ve had your quota of sweets for the day?”

Ambril was startled, it was just one muffin.

“You aren’t our Dad, we don’t take orders from you!” said Zane angrily.

“This house will run more efficiently if you obey my rules for cleanliness and order! In addition you’ll be healthier,” cut in Feldez evenly with another one of his tiny smiles. “The rules are as follows. You will be home for dinner each and every evening and keep your room tidy. Your personal belongings belong on your person or in your room and---”, Feldez’s smile faded as he 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 before he took another sip of espresso, “is that clear?”

Ambril was so angry she felt she could burst. But what could she do? They were stuck living in his house. They were stuck living with his rules. Zane seemed to be thinking the same thing for though he still looked angry he shrugged and then looked away.

Feldez nodded and gave them a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. He 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. Why did she let him do that to her? Ambril’s mother stared down at her plate, then took a tiny bite of muffin.

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 could be very strong when she wanted to be. But something about the way Feldez treated her made her feel as if she wasn’t. “But I feel fine. I---I thought I’d take the kids around town.”

Feldez gave her a disapproving look as he rose to his feet, “I want you to rest. Trelawnyd is a small town. The children can find their way around.”

She gave him a small nod, then said hesitantly, “I thought we’d 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 just now, perhaps this evening.”

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

“His work is---very important,” said her mother, trying to gloss over her fiancé’s behavior. “We have to keep in mind that his role at the Hospital is a big responsibility.” Her head dipped a moment but when 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.”

Outside they found the bikes parked three feet from the garage as if Feldez feared contamination. Zane jumped on his and without a word took off.

“Wait Honey! Let me show you something!” Ambril’s mom yelled, but Zane was already around the bend and gone.

Ambril jammed her backpack in her bike basket and jiggled the handlebars experimentally. Her mother stood looking out over the town. From where they stood the whole valley rolled out in front of them. The forest marched straight up the mountains all around them. With the exception of one barren hill on the far side of the valley everything seemed alive with life. Ambril spotted the Main road winding around, on and through a checkerboard of farmland before it disappeared into the forest.

Ambril’s mom began talking excitedly and pointing at the buildings below, “there’s where old Mrs. Jacaranda used to live, her daughter is the Mayor now. I used to have acorn wars with her older brother every fall. I won naturally. 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 County Hospital where Feldez works, and that’s the Library where you’ll of course be spending loads of time.”

The Hospital was nothing special but the Library looked interesting. It was an imposing stone building sheltered by Redwood 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 three-story building decorated with frilly white woodwork and surrounded by pools of grass and a large playground. It was dominated by a massive old Oak. “Now you see that long snaky thing that circles the entire town? That’s the famous Trelawnyd Wall. It keeps the lions and tigers and bears at bay.”

Ambril was getting impatient, she was anxious to get started on her own adventure, “thanks Mom---gotta go.”

“Oh! And don’t forget to visit Betula’s! You can’t miss it on Main Street. It’s everyone’s favorite place,” called her mother as Ambril pushed off and coasted down the hill.

Ambril was soon gliding down a shady street. It was a strange, new experience to ride through a small country town. 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 first. It was much bigger up close, kind of intimidating. She thought about stopping at the Library next but she wasn’t ready to get off her bike yet.

She rode down one street and then another, charmed by the shady trees and well kept gardens. When the houses began to get fewer and farther apart she decided to turn around when WHAM! An over-ripe tomato went splat right in front of her. She veered sharply and missed the worst of it. Braking hard, she heard laughter and looked up just in time to dodge a moldy pear as it whizzed past her ear. It was followed by a shower of green tomatoes. She caught one of them.

“Knock it off!” she yelled and saw a blonde head pop up from behind a rock. The boy grinned at her. Taking aim she threw the tomato hard and was rewarded by a gratifying ‘Oof!”

More heads popped up---there were too many of them. Worse, they were attached to big boy bodies and the boys looked angry. What had she gotten herself into? Her tires spat 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 girl on a bike. As she drew closer she could see it was a girl about her own age. But when the girl looked around and saw her she started to pedal faster.

“Hey wait! Is this the way to town? I’m new here and I’m kind of lost!” Ambril yelled but the girl just pedaled faster.

What was the girl doing? Last she checked Ambril hadn’t thought she looked like a maniac. The girl could at least stop and answer her questions…so much for small town hospitality. Ambril scowled at this just as she heard snickering from behind. Looking around she found that the gang of tomato throwing thugs had caught up to her. They looked as if they’d like nothing more than to tie her into knots and hang her from a tall tree. 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 she soon saw the boys were gaining on her. Ahead, the girl vanished around a curve. Ambril followed her, pumping madly.

“Quick in here!” The bike rider beckoned her into a half hidden dirt road.

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 rolled in next to it. Just as she pulled out of sight the riders roared around the corner shouting insults at each other. Ambril and the girl crouched 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 even realize they’ve lost us,” said the girl as she straightened up. They were both breathing hard. Ambril stole a sideways glance at her rescuer. She was about her age and height, a little Asian looking, and gawky. Tomato was splattered all over her shirt and in her long dark hair. Her face was tear-stained---and familiar.

“My name’s Sully…normally I don’t let them get to me but after last night…”

Ambril suddenly remembered where she had seen Sully before. “You were at the fire last night! We drove by on our way into town.” Ambril realized too late that this probably wasn’t something Sully wanted to talk about. “Oh…sorry. I hope nobody got hurt.” When Sully shook her head Ambril got a little braver. “So---that was your family’s place that burned down then?”

Sully hung her head. “It was really scary, it almost spread to the orchard, that would have been REALLY bad.” She tipped her head and shook her hair out of her eyes with one motion, “but they stopped it in time...too late for our Roadside Stand though.”

Ambril really didn’t know what to say then so she blurted out, “I’m Ambril---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 shrugged before nodding.

“New Family means a family from outside the valley,” said Sully knowingly, “you’ll hear that a lot around here, people here are big on family roots. We’ve been here over six years and we’re still considered New Family!” Sully wagged her head then looked around. “And probably always will be. I think the coast is clear, where are you headed?”

“No place, really, I was just riding around,” Ambril wrestled her bike out from behind the tree, “my Mom said I should try out Betula’s so I think I’ll go there next.”

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

Ambril was both repulsed and intrigued by that.

“I have some time before I have to get back and help with the fire clean-up. I could use some cheering up.” Sully 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.

“What happened last night at your Stand?”

Sully shrugged, “they’re not sure really but they think somebody set the fire intentionally, though why anyone would want to blow up broccoli and turnips is beyond me. But because we’re New Family the police are worried it might have been a hate crime.” 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 started paying my parents less and less for the stuff we grow. We put up with it until last month when my parents decided to do something about it. That’s when we fixed up the old shack and turned it into our Roadside Stand.” She paused to flick a fly off her handle. “Everything was going great! My Mom and Dad were really happy,” Sully sighed, “then this happened.”

It sounded so awful. Ambril tried to think of something to say that might help but just couldn’t so they rode in silence for a bit. They had just paused at an intersection when Sully smiled devilishly 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. Little shops lined several blocks. Ambril smiled as she rode by two elderly women, one small and frail and the other gaunt with a flowered hat. They were admiring a gigantic, buckled boot filled with geraniums as it was being hoisted and chained under a sign proclaiming ‘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. The sign over the door said, ‘Junkson’s Fine Collectables’.

“Whoa, you’re fast!” Sully said as they parked their bikes in front of a violently pink building across the street. ‘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 as she walked purposefully up a side alley toward a hose.

Through the window, Ambril could see a comfortably sized, dark-skinned lady with an infectious smile. Betula’s front window was filled with mouthwatering cakes and goodies. Ambril was so busy deciding what she’d try first that she tripped and lost her grip on her backpack. It fell with a clatter and narrowly missed a passerby’s large, flat feet.

“Watch what you are doing child!” The owner of the large feet glared 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, grandmotherly woman with wispy white hair.

“I’m very sorry,” Ambril apologized and 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, I own the Shoe Store, are you new here?”

“Um yes, my name’s 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!”

Ambril nodded speechlessly, she was surprised to find how good it felt to have her family name recognized, she guessed it was a small town thing.

“Mrs. Twid? Um---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 to my humble home, 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 sounds nice but I’m afraid I have to mind the store today. Besides the machine is pretty simple really, you just press the ON button and it goes,” Bob nodded nervously, “ladies, you have a nice day, you hear?” 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 tugged on his belt and turned to walk away. But Mrs. Twid hadn’t finished. She tried out a flirty pout which came off more as a grimace, “this evening, you promised to help me at the Tea. You will come won’t you?”

“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 and patted her shopping bag. “I’m planning to share my Sunset Tea and homemade bread from my new machine!” she simpered at Bob who nervously adjusted his glasses.

“That sounds mighty tempting!” Betula caught Ambril’s eye 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 I’d go early and help set up.”

“You know I’m always happy to help Bob, I’ll come and help set up too.” Betula turned to smile at the now mortified Mrs. Twid and her friend, “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 then said, “come Daisy, we’re behind schedule,” she patted the wrinkled hand on her arm, “we’ll review the lovely brochure the new retirement home sent over tea. The shop is getting to be too much for you isn’t it?” before her friend could reply she nodded to them all and set sail down the street with little Mrs. Flood clamped to her elbow.

# Chapter 9 An Alleyway Brawl

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 for money. I suspect she’s trying to get her hands on Bob and his holdings, you’d never guess it to look 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?”

“Derwyn, we go by Derwyn now. We just got here last night,” Ambril said quietly.

Betula looked surprised, then smiled and nodded, “Derwyn’s a fine name 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! It’s on the house!” Betula said as Sully slid on the stool next to her. Her shirt was 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 her body up and over the counter to get a better view of 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. “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, 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 was stuffed to the rafters with candy and treats 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. A fat brown bear with an eye patch and an earring laughed 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, “everyone but Mrs. Twid will love it,” 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…always wanting more. Between you and me she’s not too particular how she gets it.”

“New bugs! Ambril, you have to try these wolf spiders!” 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 before 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 bug!” Sully enthusiastically cooed as she snapped off a leg and handed it to Ambril, “my folks love bugs, our farm’s organic.”

“So you raise---bugs on your farm?”

Sully nearly choked on her spider when she giggled, “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, what kid really knows? She cautiously said, “she’s good, I guess…she’s maybe a little nervous about the wedding---and everything. She’s going to marry Feldez Petri.” Ambril’s voice trailed off.

Betula frowned as she straightened up, “Feldez’ll have her eating all the right foods in the wrong way. Food with no love in it. 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 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 on the other side of 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 burned on the top.” She had it wrapped before Lola could protest, “you tell your Papa you both need to come in more often.”

Lola blushed then smiled as she turned away. Then Ambril 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! Ambril stored up that little fact for later---she might be able to use it. She noticed an awkward kid with dark hair standing next to her brother.

The tinkle of a bell tied to the door drew Ambril’s attention. A large man in a loud tie 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 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 and grabbed a handful of candy centipedes. He threw them carelessly into his mouth. Then he caught sight of the geeky boy next to Zane who was now licking an ice cream cone, “RILEY! CHORES! NOW!” he barked.

It startled the boy so much he dropped his ice cream which splattered all over the floor. The large man harrumphed disgustedly, “clean that up before you go now!” Then he turned back to Betula all sweetness and nice, “how’s my favorite sweet treat, huh?”

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

“$1.75 for what?” he looked down at the remaining bugs in his hand, “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.

Mr. Dogwood’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. 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 away.

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 idea I have…” he followed her gesturing wildly.

“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.

“It---it seems like Betula can handle herself,” Ambril stuttered, “I’m new here, my name’s Ambril,” 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, my Dad owns the grocery store,” he jerked a thumb at the wall of Betula’s shop, “next door.”

Ambril flashed back to the scene from last night…the geeky kid shaking hands with one of the fire fighters. “You were there last night when the Roadside Stand burned down weren’t you?”

Riley smiled nervously, “Do you mind not mentioning that around my Dad? I wasn’t supposed to be out.” he looked around furtively then started fingering the candy bugs, “so you’re new---what do you think so far of Trelawnyd?”

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 with her mop.

“We’ll talk later,” Larch said angling his large frame toward the door, “when you’re feeling more---ladylike.” He deftly sidestepped another swoop of the mop as he yelled over his shoulder, “Riley, let’s go!”

Ambril looked around but Riley had already disappeared.

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 when she remembered Sully might be waiting for her outside, “thanks, that ice cream is the best ever!” she squeezed through the jostling crowd and out the door. But when she got outside she found that 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 the Tupelo’s Roadside Stand and how he pronounced ‘New Family’ as if it was a 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 wrinkled avocado whizzing past her head caught her by surprise.

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---but 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 a tomato at someone around the corner and grinned when he heard an answering groan.

So the tomato throwers had found someone else to bully, thought Ambril. Curious, she crept up to the corner of the building. Ambril saw a large group of boys were pummeling Riley with all manner of rotting produce from a nearby dumpster. The onslaught was ferocious. Riley was outnumbered ten to one and several had armed themselves with ball throwers. Then Ambril noticed another slimy hand lob a moldy grapefruit at the bullies. It was hard to tell at first what with all the rotting fruit running down her arm but Ambril thought it belonged to 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, I be thinkin’ we can do more from 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 looked uncomfortably tight but he smiled devilishly as he held up a moldy 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, 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, “Good! Riley 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 nought a bit like last time Lance, ya great waltzing buffalo! It was nigh on fifteen to one last time. Plus I was distracted by keeping you from setting your oversized rear end on Miss Fern’s garden gnomes.” Ygg continued as he almost lazily threw another tomato at a ratty looking boy crouched 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,” one of them 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 when 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? Why---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. An instant later Mrs. Twid marched up, her flat feet flicking gravel.

“You ungrateful boy!” she sputtered, making the flowers on her hat quiver almost as much as her jowls. “After all I’ve done for you! I’ve taken you in, I’ve fed you---I’ve given you meaningful work! And here you are behaving like a common hooligan!” She paused here to smooth out her dress. “Lord only knows how hard I’ve tried to correct the obvious omissions in your upbringing. Why 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 relation’s poor behavior, Lance. You and I both know that proper respect must be shown to our finest families, yours and mine being among them.” Her cheeks quivered like underdone Jello. “You will clean this up,” she demanded as she turned back to Ygg, “restock every shelf and deliver every Sunset Tea order tonight!”

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

“It seems a fitting penance for someone caught tossing vegetables around.” Mrs. Twid nodded pointedly at Ygg.

“But it---it wasn’t Ygg’s fault! He didn’t start the fight. You see these guys, they---” Ambril began.

“That’s quite enough from you, young lady!” Mrs. Twid looked down her big nose at Ambril then seemed to compose herself, “Ah you’re the Derwyn child. One of the original families…well,” she managed a nauseating smile while her cheeks wagged fiercely and patted Ambril’s head as if she were a baby goat. “Perhaps allowances should be made this once. Do say hello to your mother for me, won’t you?” Then she swiveled around to face Ygg and snapped her fingers at him as if summoning a waiter. “No supper for you tonight,” she glared at him for a long moment before marching back down the alley, her feet flapping at the gravel.

Lance waited until Mrs. Twid had turned the corner before he sneered, “You know where you belong don’t you Riley? In the dumpster. But we’ll save that for tomorrow!”

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 and removed 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 big blonde guy? He’s the biggest of the bullies and proud of it!”

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 guy in back!”

They all pitched in and made short work of the clean up while laughing at Sully’s hair and Reilly’s shirt. Ygg tossed around the compost heap quickly and they were done.

Then Ygg seemed to grow shy. “Well, I best be shoving off seein’ as I have these here deliveries,” Ygg said slinging a green satchel over his shoulder, “be seein’ you,” he tugged on his collar as he strode away.

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

“That was fun,” said Ambril simply, and meant it.

“It sure was!” Sully crowed, “It was downright insane to see Lance get a black eye!” Her smile was huge, then she gave Ambril a searching look. “I guess I should let you know now because you’ll find out tomorrow anyway. Lance is not only the biggest bully at school---he’s 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. “Any enemy of that monster is a friend of mine.”

Sully returned her grin hopefully. “I could maybe meet you at the front gate tomorrow…or not.”

“Great, I’ll meet you there,” 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 that she didn’t notice the hard looks and suspicious glances she was getting from those she passed.

# Chapter 10 A Sadistic Puppeteer

The next morning the alarm clock went off too early. Ambril groaned as she rolled out of bed, into her clothes and slumped down the stairs. Another ‘first day’ of school. But as it was the first day of October, it would only be new to her. School had been in session for over a month. She knew from experience that this meant everyone else had already made friends in their classes and no one wanted a new one. Once she’d tried to count up how many schools she’d been to but got depressed when she hit twelve. You’d think she’d be good at ‘first days’, but she had just as many butterflies in her stomach as she always had.

On the kitchen table were bowls of cereal and orange juice. She sloshed juice into a glass. Then as she wasn’t feeling hungry, she 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 morons 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. “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 gonna do what I have to do to stay healthy. If that means hanging out with Lance then I’ll do it.” Zane downed his orange juice with a slurp.

Ambril sighed, then 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.

Zane swallowed, “still asleep. Feldez gave her some more stuff last night,” Zane poured another bowl of cereal, “he thinks--”

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

Ambril stiffened instinctively as Feldez appeared in the doorway 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. Now I know this is an adjustment for you too but from now on I need more cooperation. Your Mother is very…delicate.” He tugged on his cuffs for emphasis as he headed for the door.

It was all Ambril could do to keep herself from throwing her backpack at him. Delicate? Her mother had always been there for her…and under much worse circumstances. She stared hard at the door until she heard an engine purr as Feldez backed his car out of the garage. The crackle of gravel signaled he was away.

Ambril let out a sigh of relief. “If he’s mixed up in this Dullaith business we should tell Mom.”

Too late she saw how tight the muscles in Zane’s jaw had become, he turned slowly t0 face her. “I told you didn’t I? We can’t tell anyone about what we saw, especially not her---not now.” He picked up his backpack and slid past his sister.

Ambril grimaced as she followed him outside and climbed on her bike. She felt helpless. It was as if her family had a bomb strapped to it without any way to defuse it. If she didn’t figure something out fast it would all go up in smoke.

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! No more trouble yesterday?” Sully waved to her.

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

“Yeah well they’ve moved on. They’re busy ruining someone else’s day right now.” Sully nodded to a large group of kids milling around the play structure.

Ambril caught a glimpse of a thin, dark haired boy being shoved around in a tight bunch of jeering boys. A big blonde boy was shouting and doing most of the shoving.

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

Ambril hated watching it---it wasn’t fair. “Shouldn’t somebody do something?” she asked. She waited for a grown up to race down the front steps, flailing their arms and march Lance off to detention. But the front doors remained locked. Finally, Lance shoved Riley right off his feet and laughed as Riley sat down hard in a mud puddle. Still jeering, Lance and his buddies walked away. Ambril spotted 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 and the bell’s about to ring.” Sully said resignedly. Grabbing Ambril’s arm, she towed her up the front steps.

“Does that happen a lot?”

Sully shrugged, “just sometimes. It’s worse when Lance is involved because most of the teachers just look the other way then. Lance’s Dad gives the school a lot of money. I hear he’s even bankrolling the new gym.”

The bell rang and the doors opened with a whush of stale air. As they made their way to the office Ambril shook her head. She thought maybe there’d be a few redeeming features to a small town school. But her first impression of it made home schooling with Feldez look good.

At the office Ambril was given her class schedule with a sniff from the school secretary. The ancient Miss Jonquil blinked at her mournfully from under heavy, blue eye shadow. She wore an old fashioned, cloche hat and fingered her black pearls as she heaved a mournful sigh. Her desk was just in front of an office with ‘Acting Principal, Mr. Pinwydden’ written in gold letters on the glass door. On her desk were framed photos draped with black ribbons. A scrunch-faced, bleary eyed cat, who appeared to be older than Ms. Jonquil looked out from all of them. “Your Mother was supposed to come and sign these forms,” Ms. Jonquil’s voice was deeply dramatic.

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

“Moves are greatly unsettling, of course,” Miss Jonquil shuddered as if she’d rather have a limb removed. “But she must see me by the end of the week…or there will be trouble with the paperwork.”

“She won’t forget, Miss Jonquil, and---I’m sorry about Beauregard.” Sully nodded toward the nearest ribbon-draped picture.

Miss Jonquil’s eyes grew misty, “such a great loss to this sad little world we live in.”

“I guess she really loved that cat.” Ambril whispered as they backed into the hallway.

Sully was busily examining Ambril’s schedule. “No one can figure out why either, that cat was a holy terror. Even the Rottweilers in town were terrified of Beauregard. But Miss Jonquil loved him. He died two years ago and she’s still not over it. People have tried giving her cute little kittens but she rejects them all. They’re too fluffy, too sweet…if you ask me, she’ll never find a replacement for him. It’s impossible to find a cat as ugly and ornery as Beauregard was!”

Sully smiled at the printed form in her hands. “Great! You have Pinwydden for English, Berry for P.E. and horrible Breccia for History---same as me.” 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 as a guide made it absolutely the best one she’d ever had.

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

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

“Sorry,” Ambril said and lifted her chin---someone hadn’t gotten the memo. She wasn’t about to use Feldez’s last name. “There’s been a mistake. My name’s Derwyn not Petri.”

Mr. Pinwydden’s eyebrows rose slightly as he made a note in his ledger, “I’ll have to confirm this with the office naturally…but for today---Ambril Derwyn, welcome to English,” he gestured toward an empty seat near Sully, “please open your books to page 357, we are discussing Myths and Legends.”

Ambril slid into her seat and looked around. She saw Ygg a few seats away struggling awkwardly with his book. He had looked far more comfortable throwing tomatoes. The rustle of books and paper reached a crescendo and then slowly died out just as Riley limped in, his shirt torn and his pants dirty. He 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 said as he clapped his thin hands silently.

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

“You must be referring to Dr. Thomas Moroz? I don’t believe this local legend has ever left these mountains. Yes, let’s begin with Moroz. Unlike many characters populating myths and legends, Moroz actually did exist. He was an orphan, born sometime in the early 1800’s. Fortunately for him he was taken in by a local family. He turned out to be a very bright boy and attracted the interest of a wealthy benefactor who paid for him to attend one of the finest engineering schools on the East coast.” Pinwydden frowned slightly. “It would have been better for him---for everyone really, if he had stayed there.”

“But he did not. When he returned, he went to work at the Mines and in a few short years made them twice as profitable as ever before by developing efficient and more effective mining processes.” Mr. Pinwydden cocked his head, birdlike at them. “Let it be said he did wonderful things for the town, including rebuilding roads and bridges and encouraging trade with nearby communities.” Mr. Pinwydden looked severely at them though a half smile played with his moustache. “And here 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 before dessert. He regularly transformed his guests into the animal of their choice 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 the gifted are given too much power, too young---Moroz’s sense of right and wrong became---skewed. 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? But as the story goes he began to dabble in dark magic. When people began to notice, he told them his experiments were simply a scholarly pursuit of knowledge…but they weren’t.”

“As the story goes, before long the dark had nearly consumed him. He became virtually unrecognizable to all but his staff. He grew so powerful even the local authorities were afraid to confront him. It was only when the four ancient families of Trelawnyd combined their powers and ensnared him that they were able to bring him to justice. But not before he had enslaved hundreds of beings and maimed and tortured many more.” Mr. Pinwydden paused for affect though his Adam’s apple still wobbled excitedly, “as the story goes he plumbed the depths of evil so deeply he shook the very fabric of the world beyond. An act so heinous---so brazen that the Shadow Hounds can still be seen running the forest in search of him.” Mr. Pinwydden straightened his bow tie.

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

“The Cerberus of course, 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, “does the legend say anything about how he was imprisoned?”

“No, 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, there is just enough truth in it to make it believable but also enough fantasy to make it laughable.” He chuckled then clapped his hands together this time making a dry little sound.

“Now onto another famous story, 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 magic prison. Mr. Pinwydden’s reaction had caught her attention too. He seemed almost eager to talk about how Moroz might have been imprisoned. How much did he know about magic himself? Could he be a magic wielder too? It was so hard to tell. Ambril rubbed her eyes feeling frustrated, then thought about the town itself. Was the wall around this town there to keep evil out or to protect the world from Trelawnyd? The bell rang but it took a nudge from Sully for her to pick up her books and head to the gym to change for P.E.

They waited around on the playground until a plump man in a yellow jogging suit and a goatee walked hurriedly up. Ambril recognized the slightly sweaty man she’d met in front of Betula’s shop the day before.

“I hope you’ve welcomed Ambril to our school. Nice to see you here today. Everyone calls me Bob. I hope you all had a great time this weekend,” he patted his ample belly, “ I certainly enjoyed it,” his eyes swept the group and zeroed in on a large blonde kid. “But I see some of us ran into trouble. Lance, Riley---are you fit to exercise?”

Ambril smiled when she saw that Lance sported a tomato sized black eye. He scoffed at the question. 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 away to the front. Ygg jogged effortlessly but slowly just ahead of Sully and Ambril and let the others pass by. Then he slowed to a walk which prompted Ambril and Sully to do the same. Soon they were walking side by side.

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

Ambril grinned, then looked around and saw that Riley, who was 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 roiling clouds had begun to spill over the coastal mountains.

“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 could explore the 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 there too.”

Ambril beamed back at her. Exploring a haunted house---what could be better? “how about you Ygg?”

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

They were walking past the play structure when it happened. Later, Ambril remembered 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 just yet, 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.

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! we can watch what happens from here. This ought to be safe enough,” Sully hopped on top of a wooden bench. Ambril jumped up beside her friend and noticed Ygg hanging back, looking curious.

Bob was hunched over as he peered at something on the ground near Lance. Quickly he brushed away some stones---then something odd happened. Ambril didn’t quite see 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 when she recognized the circular pattern of symbols. They were eerily similar to the ones used to conjure the Dullaith.

“That’s a shadow summoning circle!” Ambril blurted out too loudly.

Bob whipped around and looked her way…had he heard her?

“What?” asked Sully then pointed, “look! I think Lance’s hair is beginning to smoke.”

Bob turned quickly back to his task. In a flash he had the transparen carpet of symbols rolled to within a few feet of Lance. He reached over and quickly pulled the boy to safety. Lance landed on the grass with a grunt and rolled around as if his shirt was ablaze, whimpering like a small child.

The pimply nosed 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. There was a fizzing sound as a look of relief spread over the boy’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 the Gym.

“You three! Not so fast, we need to talk! Didn’t you hear me say the playground wasn’t safe?” Bob pointed at them accusingly.

Riley limped up behind them just as Lance struggled to his feet. Lance turned on his brother, his face filled with rage.

But before he could speak, 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.

“Come on, you may feel---just peachy but it’s best you’re checked out by a doctor.” Bob put his hand firmly on the blonde boy’s shoulder.

Lance groaned as Bob steered him over to the ambulance. Looking resigned he let the efficient Medical Technicians busy themselves with machinery while poking and prodding him.

Bob turned back to Ambril and her friends, “you three come with me! Riley where were you? Never mind---Jeb got it done. You had better get to your next class.” Bob beckoned sternly to Ambril, Ygg and Sully then marched them 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 ushered them hurriedly into his cramped office. There was one abnormally large desk and no room for anything else. The walls were covered with pictures of smiling sports teams. Ambril recognized basketball, soccer, bad-mitten---but there was also something involving 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. He waved them into chairs. There were only two so Ambril and Sully shared one while Ygg took the other.

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

“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, “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 as he pulled nervously at the collar of his sweatshirt. “you know very well that magic users are considered dangerous to this community.” Bob took a deep breath and looked at them sternly. “Perhaps what you saw is Lance stumbling into some sort of toxic substance. Then me pulling him out and dousing him with---cleaning solution.” He looked hopefully over his glasses at the three children in front of him before focusing on Ambril. “I thought I heard someone say---”

They were interrupted by a curt knock on the door. Bob looked as if he wanted to say much, much more but couldn’t. Scowling he reached over and opened the door. Outside the hulking form of the long-and-extremely-fit arm of the law stood at attention. He looked as if he’d just stepped from a comic strip. He had a square jaw, very straight teeth and shiny, button-like eyes. 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 like?”

“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.”

Ambril looked at Ygg who gave her an almost nod, “we were the last ones jogging around the field. Riley was the only one behind us. Lance had come around again on his second lap. When he got to the play structure---something happened and he started yelling like crazy.” said Ambril in a rush.

“Where was Riley then?”

The three of them looked at each other.

“We didna’ see him until after Bob ran up,” Ygg said, “maybe he be setting 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 seen. Then what happened?”

“Well---Bob ran up and told us all to get inside.” Ambril looked at Bob scrunched down in his chair, “then this kid Jeb came with this bucket of null---,”

“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, “anything else?”

“We warn’t paying attention to anything else what with Lance jumping around like an over excited Orangutan,” Ygg shrugged.

Deputy Skarn nodded as wisely as a cartoon character could, “sounds like a prank to me…kids’ stuff.” He leaned heavily on the doorjamb as he frowned slightly at Bob.

Ambril noticed beads of sweat on Bob’s forehead as he nervously swiped at his imaginary hair again.

Skarn shrugged, “it wouldn’t be the first time.”

After a few more questions, followed by a lot of time waiting for Skarn to write everything down, Skarn straightened up and said self-importantly, “I’ll have this sorted out in no time. I’ll just look around the perimeter for any Perp’s who may still be around before making my report,” he nodded to Bob before walking down the hall. His highly polished shoes clicked efficiently on the vinyl tile.

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

“Wait, not so fast! I want to know who said---,” he stopped and cocked his head at the clicking noises which seemed to be getting louder again. Tyhen he groaned soft when Skarn leaned in. “Just one more thing---”

Bob motioned resignedly for them to leave, “never mind---go on you’re already late for lunch. But don’t discuss with other students, we don’t want to create any more---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 weird wasn’t it?” whispered Sully excitedly. “Did you see that magic carpet with the glowing symbols?”

“I bet that’s what nearly turned Lance into a crispy critter.” Ambril whispered back.

“And the chocolate milk thing---Bob called it a nullifier at first but then told Skarn it was cleaning solution.” Sully said.

“It looks as if Bob knows a thing or two about Magic.” Ygg had that funny smile on his face again. “It be true what he said about Magic here in Trelawnyd though. Just talking about it makes people uncomfortable. Then there be the rumors of how some magic wielders have been beaten and worse---some just up and disappeared.”

“I guess we’d better keep quiet. Bob’ll lose his job if anyone finds out.” Sully hissed.

“I be having 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 went on to the lunchroom.

In the main hall, they walked by a door that Ambril hadn’t noticed before. This part of the building looked older than the rest. The door itself had hammered strips of rusty iron running up it and an old fashioned door handle. There were several shiny locks above it. It also had a large ‘DANGER, KEEP OUT’ sign on it and a red light labeled ‘Alarm’ over it.

“What’s in there, nuclear waste?” Ambril asked, squinting at it with curiosity.

“That, believe it or not---is the janitor’s closet,” said Sully with a grin. “There are all sorts of stories 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, creepy voices---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 about the housekeeper. 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 was 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 cookies. She was pretty full. She made a quick decision and gathering them up and walked over to his table.

“Do you want these? I can’t finish them.” She said and slid the cookies onto the table.

His face lit up briefly but then frowned, “thanks but I be nought hungry.” he tried to turn away but couldn’t get his eyes to obey. Instead they did their best to burn a hole through the red checkered napkin. Ambril had been right, he was really hungry but wouldn’t admit it. Ygg gave her a sideways glance. “Are ya sure you’re nought hungry? I nought want to be taking sommut 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 the cookies and inhaled them so fast that Ambril became afraid they’d let the ambulance go too soon. But 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. Then he and his gang laughed as the younger boys scrambled to pick up their scraps and flee. Zane came in then. He slid on a bench and looked away.

After tossing the ruined project at skinny kid with braces, 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 for free.”

Lola took a long look at his black eye and sniffed, “it looks like you’re the one who needs the makeup. 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.

As Ambril and Sully left the lunchroom Ambril felt a cool, dry hand on her shoulder. It was Ms. Jonquil half hidden under a voluminous, silk shawl decorated with peacocks.

“The paperwork has been taken care of my dear, Dr. Petri was in earlier.” She nodded before gliding off toward the office.

Ambril stiffened. She knew she should be grateful---it seemed like he was just trying to help out her Mom, but something about it made her cringe. He was helping a little too much. Why? She followed Sully woodenly down the hall.

A moment later, Sully turned to Ambril and said, “Lola really gave it to Lance didn’t she?” but Ambril didn’t hear her, she had stopped dead in her tracks several paces back.

“What’s wrong?” Sully asked “You look like you just saw your brother sprout antlers in embarrassing places.”

Kids shoved past them and 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, willing the last few moments to rewind and replay differently. Because moments before there had been a drawing of the Dullaith tacked above the door.

What had really stopped her cold, however, was seeing who had crumpled it in his hand before rounding the corner…even from behind she had recognized the well tailored suit and perfect hair. Were her eyes playing tricks on her or did Feldez just come out of the forbidden room?

Ambril felt someone tug on her arm.

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

“You are really freaking me out! We almost died out there! You should know better than to stand in the way of kids and a playground. You can’t do that without paying for it painfully,” Sully ruefully inspected a new bruise on her arm, “what’s wrong?”

“Didn’t you just say no one was allowed in the janitor’s closet?”

Sully looked at her curiously, “well---the janitor uses it I guess so it’s not completely off limits,” and shrugged.

“Just give me a sec.” Ambril reached for the door handle 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 at the lock, “it was a paper airplane.” Then she bent over and squinted at the lock, “that’s weird, can you see that? I think someone tried to break in.” 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. Could some of the rumors be 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? She sighed, she was getting nowhere except more confused.

# Chapter 11 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 and tried on a dramatic pose which ended up looking 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 tales you’ve 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 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. They cleared the fields and built homes around the circular plaza in the center of town. What we call the Circle Stone.”

She pulled down a large map. It showed Circle Park in the center of town with streets radiating out from it. “Unfortunately the original settlement, what we call Old Town, was built in a marshy area and was abandoned soon after it was built when swamp fever broke out.” She waved her a massive hand over a forested area. “It was demolished when the townspeople moved to our current location. The new town of Trelawnyd has enjoyed continuous growth and prosperity.” She turned away from the map and leered at her captive audience. “Now class, who were the original four families?”

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

“Correct,” Ms. Breccia preened a moment. “My family, the family of Breccia came soon after. We were the ninth family to settle here.” 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.” Her eyes swept the room doubtfully.

“How many of you have a lineage such as mine? Who has an ancestral tie to one of our great founding families?” A number of kids raised their hand. Ms. Breccia blanched a bit but quickly rallied. “I mean who comes from pure, unsullied stock? Meaning no ‘New Family’ blood?”

Far fewer raised their hands. Sully slid down further in 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. Ms. Breccia 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---supposedly related to which of the founding families?”

“Um, it’s the Tylwith family,” Tiana said snapping her gum, “on my Mom’s side, she’s always going on about it.”

“Remove that gum this instant! No disgusting, vile habit like gum chewing is allowed in my class!” Mrs. Breccia roared. Tiana hastily removed her gum and hunched her shoulders as Ms. Breccia looked her up and down appraisingly. “Ah yes I see it now---the small, thin frame,” Ms. Breccia narrowed her eyes and smirked. “Did you know you are a descendant of---” Ms. Breccia grinned, “fairies?”

Tiana stiffened.

Ms. Breccia giggled unkindly as she waved her hand at Ambril, “and you? You are new here, perhaps you misunderstood me? Like your friend there---Suddy---you must be New Family, right?”

Breccia’s tone and the way she seemed to be making fun of her friend made Ambril’s jaw tighten, “my friend’s name is Sully and I’m a 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. She was clearly unaccustomed to being contested in her own class. “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! I guess good breeding doesn’t guarantee mannerly behavior.” She said her voice dangerously quiet. Ambril knew right then that she could kiss a good report card goodbye.

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 came here not during the gold rush, a move that has been well-documented. No…they were said to have come over from the old country---hundreds perhaps thousands of years ago.”

She turned toward the class dramatically, “Yes! The story goes that they came with the help of…” Ms. Breccia again smirked, “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---or families.” Ms. Breccia raised her hand to Tiana, “as I have mentioned, the Tylwith family were fairies,” she pointed briefly at Ambril, “Derwyn’s were supposedly magic wielders.”

Lance guffawed, “can you work a little magic now and make yourself disappear?”

More laughter rang out, “abracadabra,” chanted the pudgy boy in front of Sully as he waved his hand in her face.

“The illustrious family of Animalfia were said to have been Shape Changers,” chortled Ms. Breccia. “Beings who could change themselves into animals! There are stories of how some would transform right on the street. One minute your neighbor might be discussing the price of cheese with you and the next he’s become a mouse running around underfoot!”

Ambril thought it wasn’t a stretch to imagine Breccia as a nice grizzly bear---well maybe not a nice one. She looked around and noticed that though most of the kids were laughing there were a few who looked downright uncomfortable

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 snorted as she enumerated on her fingers, “meaning Trolls, Gnomes and Dwarfs! Didn’t you say your father’s name was Silva, dear?” She asked pointing at Ambril. “You’re young yet but I’m sure it won’t be long before you develop some of the more obvious Silva traits---hunched back, projecting jaw, a tendency to grunt!”

Lance started stomping on the floor and making guttural noises, “this is how Ambril orders lunch!” 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. Gradually the class settled down but there were occasional grunts and stomps throughout the period.

“Now 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 Sunday 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 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. “Are there any other slackers here today?” She began to prowl between the desks as she randomly pointed an accusing finger at their occupants. “Did your essay burn up in a silly little fire too?”

Ygg raised his hand, his head down. Ms. Breccia grunted then jerked her head toward the door then her eyes narrowed when she saw Ambril’s hand in the air. “Naturally I can’t expect an essay from you today,” 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 Ambril---the magic wielding Troll!”

The three scrambled to gather their stuff amid another round of grunts and stomps. Ambril couldn’t believe her good luck, though it stung a little to be called a Troll she had managed to get out of class and she got to hang out with her friends in the hallway. As the door closed Ambril heard Ms. Breccia say, “Lance, where’s your brother? He’s usually the first to earn 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 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 hands but they looked better 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 if she knows you’re not a New Family like me.”

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

Ygg’s smile became smaller, “Ms. Breccia isna’ ever gonna 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 be quiet and stick it out.”

Ambril watched his shoulders tighten and wondered what life was like for Ygg. Having Mrs. Twid as a guardian would be pretty harsh. As she tried to imagine what it would be like to eat dinner across from Mrs. Twid and her quivering jowls, she heard a curious thud. Then muffled groans from nearby. The three looked around but saw nothing unusual. The thuds came again followed by louder groans.

“It sounds like the 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.

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

An unearthly groan came from inside.

“It be sounding more like a Zombie to me,” mused Ygg. The locker wouldn’t budge. Ygg came over and looked at it carefully, “right.” 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 also seemed to be 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 it!” Sully exclaimed.

“Why would that matter? We’re talking about Lance, right?” Riley got shakily to his feet. “It was lucky you came along. 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 get away with this!”

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 the mound of crumpled paper. “The golden boy---good at sports, good with his hands---and he has half the school following him around like puppies. 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. “But it won’t be forever.” Suddenly his voice changed, Ambril felt the angry edge to his words. “One of these days, I’ll get him back so-oo good.”

As he raised his head, Ambril caught sight of the anger searing his face before he replaced it with a smile. She wondered how long he’d been keeping it 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, probably the one it had come from in the first place. They all followed suit until the hallway was clean. Then Riley backed down the hall, “I’d better get out of here while I can,” he smiled brilliantly at them before quickly walked out the front door.

“O.K. so life could be much, much worse,” mused Sully, “we could be Riley.”

“If’n he would just stand up to the moldering 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 quickly 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 smoothed out the paper and gasped, it was the Dullaith drawing! She hadn’t imagined it!

“You know we’re about to be either smashed like pancakes or carried against our will out the doors,” said Sully as she fought off a stream of desperate students, “AGAIN!”

As they walked to their lockers she fingered the drawing in her hand. The top of it was ripped as if it had once been tacked up on something. She realized that Feldez must have tossed it in the trashcan right after he left the janitor’s closet. Then it had been poured into the locker with Riley along with all the other trash.

The hallway had begun to clear out. Sully still stood there watching her closely, her arms folded. “This isn’t fair! I can tell you’re holding out on me---what’s going on?”

Ambril swallowed hard. Soon she knew she would have to explain everything to her new friend even if it meant watching her walk away laughing. Sully was no dummy. She would get tired of being her friend if Ambril kept secrets from her. But a crowded hallway wasn’t the place to talk about evil monsters and houses with chicken legs---so she just shrugged.

Sully sighed, “forget it, let’s ride over and explore the haunted house 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 12 A Place Forgotten

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, before flying out the door. The afternoon was at its warmest, late blooming flowers stretched themselves toward the sun as she breezed by. Flit 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 but she felt suddenly shy about stopping to talk.

She had just made up her mind to pedal past when Ygg looked up and said, “Hey Ambril!”

Ambril skidded to a stop and tried to look surprised to see him, “what’s up?”

But Ygg had turned back to the older woman, “Miss Fern, this be 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, 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, vegetables ripened, just standing there Ambril felt healthier. But there was one odd thing. Every inch of the garden that wasn’t growing had been claimed by a chubby little garden gnome. An army of them stood, sat or lounged on the front steps, along the garden path and in among the greenery. There were dozens of them. They were dressed in belted green tunics with long white beards and a variety of pointy hats. 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 lounged under a stone bench with head pillowed on his arms. He appeared to be staring right at Ambril. Unlike the others, his beard was ratty and dirty and he wore a wool cap instead of a pointy hat. His worn boots appeared muddy as if he’d just come in from a long walk.

“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 vigorously discussed politics with the dust bunnies under the sofa when she visited.

Miss Fern tipped the watering can forward and let a foul smelling, green slush slop all over an innocent chrysanthemum. “I’ll make sure Daisy gets your delivery Ygg, she swears by that Sunset Tea…though 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 moved on to slime a perfectly good pot of petunias. “Better than chicken manure!”

Ygg said in a strangled voice, “I best be off,” he waved before hastily pedaling away..

Ambril did the same. She made sure she was well away before taking her first breath. Ygg let out a gust of air just as she did, “so where are you off to?” She asked.

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

Ambril nodded slowly, “I think so. It’s the only house I’ve been to other than my own, follow me!”

Ambril stood up on her pedals and off they went. They found the Main Road and rode toward the forest. Ambril was just starting to wonder if they’d gone too far when Koda glided up alongside them. As usual he looked as if he’d like to murder somebody. He was riding Rosebud who turned her flower head away when she saw it was Ambril.

Ambril kept her distance, “we were on our way to your house to deliver something, Koda.” 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.

Koda nodded, then without a thank you he rode off. The gravel crackled under Rosebud’s tires.

“He be that surly always?” Ygg squinted as he watched Koda pick up speed. “Those flowers---they be lively, yeah?”

“I’ll say!” Ambril agreed but didn’t bother to explain it further. How do you explain Rosebud? “Hey, Sully and me are gonna explore a spooky, old house. Do you wanna come?”

Ygg looked undecided. “I be having homework and chores---”

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

Ygg’s eyebrows shot up eagerly. “Maybe I be coming for a wee bit.”

“Good, sooo—do you know where Sully lives?” asked Ambril sheepishly.

Ygg gave her a demonic grin as he pushed down hard on his pedal and whizzed past her, “follow me!”

Ambril had to work to keep up with him---but not that hard. In no time they skidded to a stop in front of the Roadside Stand. Ambril could see they had removed most of the burned parts. New wood lay neatly stacked nearby. The area around the building had been raked clean. There was no sign of the shadow circle.

“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. “Hey…do you remember seeing anything---weird that night?” she asked as they started down a gravel road.

“Weird? The whole thing was weird,” Ygg squinted at the sun 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 was disappointed. If he’d been there just a little earlier he might have seen who had raised the Dullaith.

“Yep, but Riley was there early on, 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 rangy, western style, ranch house. There were even wagon wheels laid out along the front porch. The freshly painted red barn doors stood open. Ambril saw a tidy arrangement of equipment and a wiry man in an old fedora 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 and wielding a vicious pair of shears unbent herself in the garden.

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

Sully’s mom waved before she went back to work, “have fun you three!”

Ygg and Ambril followed Sully around and through a large hedge and into an overgrown, maze of a garden. As they pedaled along, Ambril could see that the plants had gone wild. They grew helter-skelter and rumbly poly. They eagerly clambered over each other and draped themselves over the path. Ambril had to duck more than once to avoid trailing and sometimes ferocious looking vines.

But they soon broke out into a clearing which was making its last stand around a couple of abandoned buildings. A large stone mansion stood aloof next to a crooked gazebo which was nearly consumed by vines. Sully was right, the mansion was pretty spooky. It had three stories with a collection of chimney pots in a row on both ends. All of its many windows were boarded up. A stone patio ran circles around it. It was enchanting---and something else that Ambril couldn’t put her finger on.

“This 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 very grand house. Birds flew out of a large stone fireplace as they began to explore.

“Someone be living here,” mused Ygg.

There was an old mattress and tipsy chairs pulled up around a burned spot in the center of the living room. Trash spilled out of every corner.

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

They all listened for a moment---holding their breath. But the house remained still and quiet. Ygg was the first to let his breathe out in a rush and step further into the gloom. Around the corner they found a kitchen colonized by rabbits, who bolted through Ambril’s legs when she opened a cabinet. It startled her so much that she fell back and hit 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 and rubbed it hard with her sleeve. There was a large circle with a tree in the center of it. It looked familiar. A part of it had broken off near the top

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

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

“Nought arms, I be earth-kind, metal runs in me blood.” Ygg held the iron plaque up to the light. “That be someone’s family crest.”

The branches and the roots of the tree grew out and joined around the circle. All becoming one.

They looked at it for a little while then Sully said, “let’s try upstairs!”

Sully and Ygg raced up the grand staircase. Ambril eagerly followed but slowed near the top. She suddenly felt odd. “I’m getting a weird feeling about this place.”

“What like something’s about to pop out of a closet or something?” Sully paused at the top of the stairs, “isn’t it great?”

“No more like---I’ve---been here before,” Ambril said quietly. When she 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 and gasped. She gave Ambril a funny look, “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 breath---I bet the monsters only come out at night.” Sully shoved the door open so hard it bounced back from the wall as she tiptoed into the room. Then she swiveled around when she reached the center---then stopped stunned. She was staring at something behind the door. The smile instantly left her face. “You need to see this, Ambril.”

Ambril hesitated only for a moment. All in a rush her memories came back as she stepped forward. She could see herself reaching up and pushing the door open. 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---it was familiar.

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 to show a child’s growth. “No wonder you know this place.” Sully pointed to the top. There was a name scrawled in a child’s writing.

“Ambril,” Ambril read. Seeing her name on the wall made it impossible to ignore. She had lived here once---she and her family. She stumbled but steadied herself by grabbing the door. It seemed like everywhere she turned in this town, pieces of her past kept trying to trip her up. She knelt down again for a closer look. The lowest tick mark was labeled one year and the highest was three years.

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

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

Ygg came in carrying the old piece of metal Ambril had fallen on. “I found the broken piece in the fireplace. “I be thinking it belongs ---here.” He fit the broken piece of metal in. It completed the circle perfectly. There was a name on top, the name of Derwyn. Stories of her mom growing up flashed through Ambril’s mind as she realized that they were standing in what was left of her Great Grandmother’s house.

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

“If you get any paler you’ll start glowing in the dark.” Sully said watching her closely. “Maybe it’s time we explored the garden.”

“Yeah, I’m starved” Ygg said.

Sully rolled her eyes as she grabbed Ambril’s arm and guided her into the hallway. “Nice! 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.

They went down the stairs and wriggled back out through the window. Being out in the sunshine did make Ambril feel better. They made their way over to the Gazebo which crowned a small hill. Though it wobbled to one side, it eventually 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.

Nearby, the Trelawnyd Wall slid around the garden. It hugged a brilliant, blue-green lake before it slipped back into the forest.

“I brought lemonade!” said Sully as they raced up the steps to the Gazebo. The air hummed with life as they 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 wouldn’t have known about it at all if we hadn’t snuck in there.” Ambril busied herself with restacking the cookies to avoid her friend’s eyes. “It’s really weird to think that this might belong to us. Because it was really hard sometimes in San Francisco…we were poor…sometimes even homeless---and here we had this huge house---all that time.”

“It be 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 grew around here. But none of these plants look familiar.” She pointed with a carrot stick at a bush which seemed to have feathers instead of leaves and then at a small tree which looked like some sort of green tie rack. They spent a few minutes talking about the strange plants and looking out over the lake. Ambril was glad of the diversion.

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 and grabbed the Ashera. She tried to stuff it back into her pack before the others spotted it. “This is fLit, my AI robot, he’s supposed to be getting smarter.” She said over her shoulder, “but I don’t think he is.”

fLit gave her an injured look and kicked her shoe.

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

“What this?” Ambril asked inocently, “it’s just an old puzzle box that belonged to my Great Grandmother.” the robot blew a raspberry at her as it watched her zip her pack shut.

“That’s some robot,” commented Sully.

“That be some Ashera! It nought be just some old thing of your Great Gran’s.” 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 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 impatiently.

“It’s an old puzzle box---and 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 hugged her backpack protectively as she wracked her brain 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---I dunno---but nought trusting makes it hard for us to be friends.”

Ambril glared at the blue sky peeking through the vines.

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

“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?”

Silence hung between them like a day’s wash left out in the rain. Then Ambril stole a glance first at Ygg then at Sully. “O.K. I’ll tell you,” Ambril said finally and 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 wondered at what point they were going to run away screaming.

Sully and Ygg both nodded solemnly, but then Ygg ruined it by smiling and saying, “I canna promise nought to laugh if’n there be funny parts,” but 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 trash 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. 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 that janitor’s closet.” Ambril said as she smoothed out the drawing on her thigh. “What do you think this means? 10-1 12:00 Bring Glain or Die.” Ambril read the note at the bottom of the drawing.

“Well the ‘Bring Glain or Die’ is pretty obvious but the other part---sounds like October first at noon. That would have been today at lunch.”

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

Instead of getting excited about this, Sully cocked her head. “Are you sure you want to make trouble for your future stepfather? I mean sure---messing with your own family politics is your business, 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 everyone thinks he’s a God.”

“Well if you don’t believe me I’m sure no one else will.” Said Ambril feeling suddenly deflated 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,” she screwed her face up for a minute. “But it’s true that no one else will. I’m not gonna lie.” Sully wagged her head, “besides the janitor’s closet has more stories built around it than downtown Manhattan. So I wouldn’t get your hopes up. It’s probably just a janitor’s closet filled with mops, brushes, and loads of cancer causing cleaning products.”

Ygg had been quiet, staring at Ambril’s medallion. “So that be the Ledrith Glain. It be famous in Chert, where I be from. I dunna understand---Chert be just a mining village but we be using magic every day---life is easier that way. Trelawnyd be having even a longer history of magic. The four families came here when it wasna even California and yet magic be feared here.” He peered again at the medallion. “That be sacred to the Tilwith Teg---the fairy kin. It’s a right beauty, that one. The carvings be done in the ancient way.”

Ambril and Sully just stared at him.

“So 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 said authoritatively.

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

Chert be 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 leave?” asked Sully as she lazily played with a leafy vine.

“I be wanting to finish school.”

“What do you mean finish school? This is America, everyone has to finish school!” Ambril said.

“I be nought sure if’n Chert be 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 fourteen, 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 be 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 went down the mines and became an old man, too young.” He carefully brushed a purple 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, somehow. So I decided I wouldna go down the mines. I knew I had to leave.” 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.

“So then---this means you’re a real, live magic wielder? Wow! Can you teach us?” Sully asked eagerly. “I’ve always thought that some of the crazy rumors around here were true.” Sully slid toward the edge of the bench, smiling hugely. “Do you know how to make it do your chores? Get an ‘A’ on a math test? Or conjure up gallons of ice cream?”

Ygg shook his head and looked almost offended. “We practice Earth-kind magic mostly---like floating or casting for the Glain.” He nodded at Ambril’s medallion. “Glain’s what that be made of. Once it be found, the miners bring it up.”

“Do you use magic to rescue people?” Ambril said thinking about some miners trapped underground she’d once seen on the news.

Ygg’s face went hard and cold. “Nought in Chert, if’n there be a cave-in, they just dig another way.” Ygg had a faraway look in his eyes. “They be focused on getting the Glain---as much as they can---as quick as they can.”

There was a stunned silence.

“I can see why you left,” said Sully softly.

Ygg screwed up his face, “still it be me home. I do miss it terrible, especially me Mam.” He looked at Ambril’s medallion hungrily, “that be worth a pretty penny in me neck of the woods. There be nought more Glain of that heft to be found. Mainly just grains of it now, buried deep.”

“But you must know something about magic.”Sully looked only slightly deflated.

Ygg looked startled and then laughed nervously. “Me? Why you be thinking 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. “At least you know something about it…and then there’s Ambril’s Ashera thingy. Maybe we could figure out how to do it ourselves! I know! Let’s go to the library and look around---they must have something about it there.”

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

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

Ambril watched her new friends. Despite telling them about weird monsters 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 learning about magic together, it would be a little less scary that way, but it would still be dangerous doing it themselves. Chao Feng had once told her, ‘baby ducks swim on their own but mama duck teaches them not to make friends with snappy turtles.”

Ygg caught her looking, “bet you be thinking it be safer in the big city of San Francisco---more peace and quiet there too.” he chuckled as he lay back on his bench.

There was a lull in the conversation then. 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 at each other.

# Chapter 13 Shadow Hounds come to Tea

The next few weeks went by quickly for Ambril as she settled in to a routine of school and hanging out with Sully at the Gazebo. Ygg joined them when he could which wasn’t that often. Mrs. Twid kept him busy. But when he did make an appearance, they’d talk about magic and fiddle around with the Ashera. But they couldn’t make it work. Apart from allowing them to open the same compartment over and over, it just sat there, a pretty, little stick. Ambril was a little embarrassed, she had really wanted to impress her friends with making it spark and light up. But they didn’t seem to mind, Sully especially remained optimistic.

fLit her robot was…too responsive, though. He was always in the way. Ambril was always rescuing him as he constantly fell into holes and picked fights with dogs by throwing sticks at them rather than down the road. 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. More than once Ambril thought about trading him in to the junk man but knew she couldn’t do it. He 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 toward the end of October.

“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 stopped short. “My Mom’s been…busy I guess, I bet she hasn’t even thought about my costume.” Her mother seemed to be taking a lot more naps lately. In fact Ambril hardly ever saw her mom…Mrs. Sweetgum took care of everything for Ambril. Except at dinner, Ambril’s mom always presided at the table and asked everyone how their day had gone, she tried hard to keep the conversation going. When Feldez was there, it was always an uphill battle. “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 my costume is really bad I can just throw a tablecloth over it.”

Ambril’s grinned as she nodded, two stupid ghosts were much 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 be starving.” Ygg bounded up the steps two at a time. His bike lay on its side behind him with the wheels still turning.

“She made four this time. I guess she knew you were coming.” Ambril smirked and handed the largest one over to him.

“Four huh? That means Ambril and I’ll have to share one, right?” Sully said snidely.

Ygg had his mouth full already so he settled for giving Sully a dirty look.

Ambril stared out at the garden while they munched. It had rained for the first time in several months and the ground 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 gave the shiny red metal man a searing stare. But then she stopped and looked at the wooden cylinder in her hand. It was humming, shivers of energy ran 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.

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. It stopped at the three headed dog. Ambril didn’t think that was a good sign.

“What are they doing there?” Sully pointed at the three-headed dog, “isn’t that the Cerberus, you know the Hounds of Hell Pinwydden was telling us about?”

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

“Sorry,” Ambril 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.

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 Ashera started humming the moment the light hit the gem.

“Hendoeth said there was a connection between them.” Ambril mused as she toyed with one and then the other. They vibrated in unison.

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

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

“That was weeks ago.” Ambril muttered. “I think we’re on the wrong track. Maybe all this talk of magic and playing around with the Ashera has strengthened it somehow. Maybe it thinks we’re ready to learn something finally.”

Sully and Ygg looked unimpressed, but Ambril continued to fiddle with both the Ashera and medallion. She tried commanding them---for ice cream…nothing happened. Then she held up the medallion to the sun and put the Ashera in front of it…nothing again, except that the sparkling light made Ambril’s eyes hurt. She closed her eyes and just like that, everything changed. A curtain of fog rushed in and the world stood suddenly still and silent. Ygg and Sully disappeared in the fog and Ambril was suddenly alone in the silence and the gray. Then she became aware of other beings nearby. There were rustlings and scratching and grunts---possibly human but maybe not, all present with her in that place.

“Hello!...Um---Excuse me but---where am I? And where are my friends?” she yelled but the swirling fog snatched her words away and replaced them with whispers and shadows. Suddenly a gryphon made of fog lunged at her, making her step to one side. Then a massive gray cat eye taller than herself opened suddenly as a jets of gray fire just missed her ear. A giant fog hawk swooped over her and forced her to duck. Vines made of fog grew up all around her and reached for her.

As if that wasn’t enough the scare the pants off her, suddenly there appeared, looming above her as big as an elephant---a massive three-headed dog made of swirling mist. 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. She was sure to be eaten this time. Because this time she wasn’t facing the average, everyday, evil demon. No these were the Guardians of the Underworld.

But after a little 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 swallowed hard then resolutely and very quickly she stood up. When she looked up 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 the vibrations moving out through the ground and rippling through the air. The fog form of the Cerberus started to firm and thicken into a real being. Ambril took a step back, and then another and ran into a solid wall of fog vines which grabbed and held her tight with their tough, ropy tendrils.

“No!” She wasn’t willing to die trapped like this. Ambril struggled against them and without thinking willed the Ashera for help. Instantly, the Ashera flashed violently. Ambril gasped and then blinked. When she opened her eyes, the fog world was receding and the world of light and gardens and friends came flooding back.

“Nought the moon, maybe it be the sun AND the full moon in the sky together.” Ygg said as if nothing had happened.

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

“Did you see that? That was so weird, I closed my eyes for a second and suddenly I was somewhere else.”

Sully stopped squinting at the moon and squinted at her instead, “See what? You’ve been standing here the whole time.” The howls were louder now.

Ygg half turned toward the forest as if only a part of him heard them. “And that Ashera of yourn be nought humming anymore. I think it be playing with us…any more cookies?” He yawned with his head still tilted toward the sky.

The trees on the mountain just beyond the Wall then began behaving oddly. They started swaying strangely as if in a high wind and then stopped only to have other trees lower down sway in the same way. Something large, perhaps more than one something was barreling through the trees, coming straight at them.

“We---we have to get out of here!” Ambril shrieked as she pointed a quivering finger at the mountain. The baying of hounds was now punctuated with the sharp, staccato sound of snapping trees and bushes.

“Whoa, what the---” Sully whispered. Both her friends had gone rigid. Sully took a step back. Even Ygg looked worried.

Ambril felt herself grow cold. It couldn’t really be the Hounds of Hell coming after her, could it? After all, it was the middle of a sunny afternoon. Monsters only came to call during dark and stormy nights, right? But she decided not to take any chances and quickly stuffed her Ashera in her pack and swept up fLit. She tugged at Ygg’s arm and grabbed Sully’s sweater and tried to drag them toward the bikes. They didn’t need much encouragement.

“What do you guys 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 now and stumbled on the Gazebo steps.

“I think I might have maybe---just accidentally---called them.” Ambril said as she helped her up. She wondered if they could outrun them. The stone wall looked like it could withstand anything, but was it enough for the Cerberus?

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

Ambril felt flatter than a gnat under a snoozing rhino, how could she have put her friends in danger like this?

The hounds bayed again, judging by the amount of snorting and growling there was more than one of them---at least more than one head.

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

“Cerberus? I had to write an essay about 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---”

“Sully! How do we get rid of them?” Ambril pleaded.

As they watched a large Bay tree suddenly toppled over and with a loud boom slammed against the wall. Dust and gravel sprayed in all directions, forcing them to cover their heads as it rained down over them. The beasts were there just on the other side of the wall, breathing heavily. Ambril could sense their terrible strength.

“I--- I can’t remember how to call them off! But maybe we can distract them, somehow.”

Ygg’s laugh was short, “Yeah, all we be needing is a giant chew toy---or three.”

There was a bone-jarring thump as something slammed into the wall. Once, Twice, Three times, each time harder and louder than before. Puffs of dirt and small rocks sprayed out 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 murder 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.

“Right, sorry, Cerberus, elephants, dinosaurs---equally strange---” Sully muttered.

There was a scrambling sound as a massive paw shoved a large boulder off 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 its jaws.

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

Ambril froze. The real Cerberus were just like the foggy one except this one was seriously flesh and fiery breath. She wanted to run but couldn’t seem to move her feet. The dog’s red eyes found her and it paused---panting. Did it recognize her? It seemed to be waiting for something. Ambril had the strangest feeling it was listening for her.

Then a dark, deep voice resonated through her. “*Ashera, we have come.*”

Ambril jumped a mile high. “Let’s get out of here!” she shrieked. As if sprung from a trap they all found their feet and sprinted for their bikes. Ambril was the last to pick up her bike and slam down the path, pedaling hard for the opening in the underbrush.

But just as she entered the sheltering overgrowth she heard the terrible voice rumble again through her head, “*Ashera, know this*, *when all hope is lost, we will come.”* Maybe it was her imagination but the voice seemed tinged with sadness and not anger---though it did sound a little hungry.

Ambril took the path fast, not caring if the thorny branches scratched or tugged at her clothes. A just a few minutes, all three of them shot through the hedge and into the safety of Sully’s front yard. Ambril took her first deep breath in minutes.

“That was scary! But really great---in a horrible, near-death kind of way!” Sully hooted as they coasted to a stop in front of the barn. “I think Hollywood could throw anything at me now and I wouldn’t even flinch!”

They all laughed though Ambril had to fake it as she waved goodbye to her friends. She could still feel the Cerberus at the Wall…they had wanted something…something from her. What had they said? ‘When all hope is lost, we will come.’ The ‘all hope is lost’ part sure sounded fun. What had just happened? And why exactly? If she looked at it sideways, it seemed like the Ashera had orchestrated the whole thing. Was it really on her side? She hadn’t thought it would endanger her like that, could she trust it? At the first opportunity she stopped and shoved the wooden tube down to the bottom of her pack.

# Chapter 14 A Ghostly Rutabaga

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 Ygg to tell her not to go out alone---ever, and Sully to warn her about Dog parks.

Ygg cocked his head at Sully.

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

But as the Cerberus hadn’t followed Ambril home or pooped in anyone’s 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 sat down at the kitchen table to cut eye holes. While she was working out how to make the eye holes look the least pathetic, fLit appeared walking trancelike and wearing an old doll head. He had darkened the eye sockets and dripped fake blood from its mouth.

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

fLit stopped and put his hands on his metallic hips.

“JUST a zombie then. So 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 not going with me right? I don’t have time to babysit you.”

fLit tossed his doll head which made it swivel around backward and walked away in a huff. The doll head stared vacantly off to the side.

“Look I can’t run around pulling you out of puddles and protecting you from over friendly dogs tonight---it’s Halloween!” Ambril called after him. She shook her head. He was more like an obnoxious little brother than a toy now. How long before he’d get smart? She pondered how overrated AI was as she finished the last eye hole and threw her costume over her head.

“Eeeek a ghost!” Her mother stood in the doorway 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, “Just when was I supposed to do that? You’re never around! I asked Mrs. Sweetgum instead and she gave me these old ones. 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.”

“Me!” Ambril gritted her teeth and counted to ten. “You used to tell me all the time 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 folded her arms huffily. She felt wrongly accused until she realized that her Mom had been a little bit right, she had been avoiding her.

The stinky truth was that she had been afraid to confront her mom about the family mansion for fear it would stir up more trouble. But just like old cheese this stinky truth didn’t go away, it just got smellier. Standing there holding her costume for the night, all the frustration and confusion she’d kept hidden away came bubbling up, she couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Mom, I know about the mansion, the one that belongs to us.”

Her mother’s face tightened but she said nothing. Ambril suddenly noticed how thin her Mom had become.

“You know what I’m talking about, there’s a Derwyn crest in the living room and my name scribbled behind the door in my old room. The one with clouds on the wall that Dad painted? I remembered it the minute I walked in.”

Her mother set the laundry down on the kitchen table and absently 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 then shifted uncomfortably under her daughter’s gaze. “So you went back to Gran’s house,” she said softly.

“It’s yours now isn’t it? She must have left it to 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 it,” she said in a small voice.

Ambril was too angry to speak for a long moment.

Then her mom took a deep breath and gathered herself in. “It was a terrible time…I know I could have done it better---I 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 then... You have to believe me--- would have been much, much harder. The people here---can be so cruel.”

Her mother paused. 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. “But we’ll never know if staying here would have been best. 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. “Gran’s house is lovely isn’t it? At least I hope it still is.”

Ambril tried one more time. “What really happened the night Dad died? I have a right to know! He was my Dad!”

Her mother’s mouth flattened into a thin line. “Going over all of that won’t fix anything. It’s in the past. We’re moving forward, into this new life.” Her Mom’s face set in that way Ambril knew the Jaws of Life would have no luck with.

Ambril fingered the eyeholes in one of the tablecloths, feeling beaten.

Her mother swerved into a new subject. “Are you going to the Festival with your friends? If not, perhaps we could go as a family!” Her voice sounded brittle.

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

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

“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 her and her mother. Finally she’d had enough and began stuffing 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 anyway---look for me!” Ambril gulped as she watched her mother walk away. Her shoulders were hunched, her body rigid. She looked so breakable. She hadn’t seen it for a while but Ambril remembered it---it was the way her Mom had been for most of her childhood.

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

“What?”

He jabbed a finger at her as his eyes narrowed, “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 door and away, leaving Ambril alone once again.

The silence in the house bore down on her like a piano falling from a great height. She scrambled out the door and grabbed her bike. In a few minutes Ambril was on her way down the hill. She managed to cool off a little as she watched the little monsters, vampires, and alien creatures race from house to house.

Half hour later found her tucked into the deepening shadows of the Redwoods lining Circle Park, waiting for Sully. Booths had sprouted 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 watched her mother laugh while putting on her apron in Betula’s booth. At least their argument had created no lasting damage.

“That was the best haunted house ever! Did you see the monster claws next to it? They were huge!” A small boy yawned as he allowed his mother drag him toward home. Circle Park rapidly filled with townsfolk. Ambril looked around impatiently, what was keeping Sully?

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

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

She heard a groan. Then a large, lumpy creature hopped from behind a tree with Sully’s unhappy face on top of it. She was wedged into a large, purplish 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.

Ambril tried hard to keep the smile from her face.

“Your Mom made that? Wow! So---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 plastic 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, “who cares? It’ll be great not to be teased for once. Come on, let’s go!”

“Let’s try the haunted house first,” Ambril said thinking about what the little kid had said.

Sully pulled the tablecloth over her head and they joined the crowd under the goblin arch. Every Halloween there was always one really popular costume. This year it seemed to be a hooded black cloak with a white grinning mask.

“Keep your head down---Lance at three o’clock!” Sully hissed. Ambril turned to see Lance shoving his way through a group of smaller kids with his gang in tow. He had his hair greased back and a muscle shirt on. There were several black cloaks with grinning masks following Lance.

“The one with the lamest costume here gets a special treat!” Lance smiled nastily as he grabbed a skinny boy in a pirate’s costume and hung him by his fake parrot on the goblin arch.

“Any one for second place?” he grinned evilly, “how about you pumpkin 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! I was second place last year!” Sully tugged on Ambril’s arm, “We could go to my house. I have the DVD of the Grim Reaper meets the Alien at home. We’ll trick or treat on the way.”

But Ambril wasn’t listening. She was staring at a small house with mounds of black cloth draped on either side of it, one huge chicken claw peaked out from beneath it, “you have to meet the haunted house before we go.”

Sully stopped tugging. “O.K. but let’s make it fast---wait who---what are we going to meet?”

“Just follow me!”

The two ghosts slid through the crowd and over to the small house ringed by disappointed kids. A ‘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.” Ambril muttered.

Darth Vader shrugged and took off his mask. Ygg’s face emerged, streaked with sweat. “Ambril? That be a sight more comfortable than this thing Miss Fern found in her attic, I reckon.”

“Leave it off, you look scarier with your hair all spiky like that,” Sully put in as she pulled off her tablecoth

Ygg frowned at her, then stuck the mask under his arm and ruffled his crazy hair.

A small vampire froze nearby, then dropped his candy bag.

“See?” Sully giggled.

“Everyone stand back, we’re experiencing---um---technical difficulties and they won’t get fixed any faster no matter how much you push and shove!” A mummy addressed the crowd from the porch. It was wrapped from head to toe in bandages. One end had come loose though, and exposed the lack of body underneath. There was nothing but strands of twine. Ambril hurriedly beckoned to her friends as she launched herself at the crowd.

As she squeezed onto the porch she whispered urgently, “your…slip knot is showing Jute!” She grabbed the loose end of fabric and wound it back around his neck. She tucked the end in firmly.

“Ambril? So that’s what freaked out that kid! I thought it was my breath for a minute, then I remembered I didn’t have any! 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! They’re butting in line!” a red faced Mom tried to elbow Ambril back.

Jute held up a cloth covered hand. “Madam you’re son is still first in line! This is our technical support!” he waved Ambril, Sully and Ygg toward the front door then added, “it won’t be long now folks!”

As Sully made her way up the steps she said, “Jute, how’d you like to be a lovely root vegetable next year?” Sully fumbled for her backpack but Ambril steered her toward the door, “later!”

“I’m guessing this be---Fowlclun?” Ygg said squinting up at the windows, then nearly tripped over the doormat.

“No, really?” exclaimed Sully as she really did trip over the doormat but saved herself by grabbing the brass door knocker. “Oops! Sorry!” She patted it when it wiggled at her. Then she smiled too hard up at the house.

The whole house giggled, which made Sully trip again---this time over her own feet.

Ambril pulled off her sheet as she prodded Ygg forward, “Fowlclun, these are my friends Ygg and Sully,” she whispered to the door.

Fowlclun’s lacy curtains crinkled in response as a hollow cackle echoed around the house. Then the door creaked open on its own. The crowd clapped as Ambril tugged her awestruck friends 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 masked, umbrella-winged ghoul swathed in a voluminous black cloak fussed in the corner. Ambril guessed that was Brollie. His umbrella stand seemed to be wedged into a fake monster foot. Another one trailed behind him as he stumped back and forth, practicing his moans and groans. Parch had folded himself into an origami bat and had draped himself with a wispy black cloth. It smoldered as it trailed behind him. He cheeped eerily at them as he swooped around.

A severed arm trailing red liquid clawed its way toward them over the kitchen table. Feathers poked out of two of the fingers. The cuff on the shirt shifted enough for Ambril to see a pair of bright eyes on a shiny black shaft peer out from underneath it. The hand rose in the air and waved, which forced another feather out through one if its fingers. Ambril heard Quill’s muffled voice. “Drat, not again! It’s these cheap gloves, they just don’t make them like they used to! What do you think? Are we spooky enough?” She wriggled her feather filled fake hand at them.

“You--you really had us going Quill, is that red ink you’re dripping?” Ambril asked, wiping the smile off her face.

“Lookey who turned up!” Hendoeth, dressed as a witch doctor, had smudged her face with soot and braided her hair with bones. She galloped over and patted Ambril on the head like a puppy.

“This is Sully and Ygg---guys this is Hendoeth.”

Hendoeth grinned 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 stared back at her, “You know Chert? I be thinking I’ve seen you somewhere.”

“You could have done--- there’s a junk man in Chert 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 mostly window dressing---Fowlclun likes to get into the spirit of things on Halloween.”

“So this is Fowlclun’s---Halloween costume? That’s a relief but then, why did you shut down?”

Before Hendoeth could answer, Quill gasped, “Tweek, you poor thing! One of the kids must have knocked her off the shelf during Brollie’s routine. He gets a little wild at the end.” Quill dove off the table and swept something up with her fake hand. Ambril heard the tinkle of glass as Quill dropped the somethings into Hendoeth’s hand. There were bits of sparkling jewels and one large and slightly damaged one which was carved into a magnificent flower as big as Ambril’s hand. It was missing a few petals.

“Bandersnatch!” said Hendoeth, “not agin! This is a job for Fixit Joe…she’s more broke than not now. I do wonder where he took himself off to.”

Ambril could see the many mended cracks running through the jewel flower.

“Hey it looks just like your medallion.” Sully whispered.

She was right, the stone looked a lot like the Ledrith Glain.

“We’ll just have to do our best 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?”

Ambril jumped when she heard soft bells tinkle in her head as the jewel flower glowed faintly. Hendoeth worriedly nodded. “That’s all we ever git from you, ain’t it?” She straightened up suddenly and rubbed her hands as she turned and looked at the fireplace.

“Put Tweek in a safe place, Quill. We’ll take care of her later. The real problem is Teg! He nearly roasted Parch, Dag-nab-it! Good thing it warn’t one of them kiddies. Give him another good poke with the tongs will ya?” She shouted at Brollie, who stiffened.

“I’m not fraternizing with that little imp! He singed my cloth right down to the lining the other day!” Brollie said muffled behind his ghoul mask.

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 something red and scaly curled up in the fireplace. It seemed to be a pint-sized gryphon with an eagle’s head and a lion’s body. It appeared to be 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. Followed by a funny sort of snap. Then 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 and brushed herself off. “Borogoves! He’s gone and sneezed himself away to that ‘in between’ place agin.” Ambril saw that the fireplace was empty now. The gryphon had vanished.

“He’s been sneezing like that more and more.” To the umbrella winged ghoul she said, “ya best git some wood and light a fire the old fashioned way, Brollie. No tellin’ how long that fire brand will be gone.”

Brollie created a small, irritating storm with his flapping wings, “Me, why am I always the one!” The umbrella ghoul cried, “ I am HIDEOUSLY flammable, why don’t’ you have Quill do it? She’s---”

“Cuz Quill does just ‘bout everything else ‘round here.” Hendoeth rounded on the seven-foot tall ghoul and stared at it so heatedly it began to wilt.

“No more complainin’ or I’ll sign you up as a test subject for improving the health of cloth eating moths!” Hendoeth hollered.

Brollie shivered under his costume 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 reopening!”

“We’d better go then.” Ambril said as she pulled out her tablecloth and slid it over her head.

“Just one more thing, Ambril.” Hendoeth gave her a sharp-eyed look, “mind you stay safe inside the Wall. There are bad doings out there in the forest. Creatures roaming about out there who don’t wish you well. You hear me?”

Ambril’s stomach clenched as she nodded, thinking of Dullaiths and fire breathing dogs. For a little while there she’d almost been able to forget them. With a wave to the household goods she followed the others out the door.

“Just a few more minutes people---Madame, this is your second warning! Jumping the railing will put you at the end of the line!” Jute had both cloth wrapped hands up, trying to ward off the restless crowd.

“Mission Accomplished!” Sully yelled grandly over the crowd, “the haunted house is open for business!”

“Thank the inventor of slip knots!” Jute said sounding greatly 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!” he yelled authoritatively. But the crowd paid no attention to him as they stampeded toward the front door.

Ambril was slammed up against the porch railing and found herself next to Jute, who had been momentarily flattened by an overeager mom. He turned his battered cloth face to her, “Finally we’re in the thick of things! Try jumping the railing around the corner! You’ll never get through here.” he said cheerfully just before the crowd bodily picked him up and carried him away.

“This way then,” Ygg 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, the hub-bub of the crowd had receded to background noise.

“We can climb down Fowlclun’s leg from here.” Ambril pointed to the black shrouded mountain of chicken leg next to the railing.

Just then Sully grabbed her 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 hunched behind some garbage cans. He seemed to be chanting 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 on!” Ambril jumped the railing and landed on one of Fowlclun’s massive claws. From there she hopped to the ground.

There was a surprised caw from the house.

“Sorry Fowlclun!” Ambril yelled back then ran straight into a cloaked figure.

“What the---watch where you’re going!” The man sputtered as he recovered from a graceless stumble and brushed furiously at his sleeves, then straightened his tie. It was Feldez dressed for Halloween in a long, hooded cloak. “Ambril? Is that you?” He asked incredulously, “I should have known! You seem to have an uncanny knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time!” His normally controlled expression convulsed with annoyance and anger for an instant, before smoothing back to its usual bland state. His hand clamped down on her shoulder as he dragged her out of the way of the terrified mob.

But Ambril was too preoccupied with the smoke now forming over the archway and shrugged him off. Feldez turned to follow her gaze just in time to see the smoke shape itself into the head of a Dullaith. They both froze as the yawning mouth opened slowly as its glowing eyes stared sightlessly down at them.

“Get out of here! NOW!” Feldez shoved her backward. “I mean it, Ambril, stay out of this! It would kill your mother if anything happened to you.” He commanded as he strode purposefully toward the now smoldering archway.

Ambril stumbled, then sprawled in the dirt just as Sully and Ygg ran up.

“What happened?” Sully demanded.

Ambril just pointed at the smoky head as she shrugged off her backpack and unzipped it. She hadn’t used her Ashera since she called the Cerberus. Just thinking about it made her nervous, but as there wasn’t an alternative, she’d have to try it.

“Holy cow skull!” hissed Sully.

“By the Glain---that be---a Dullaith right?” Ygg’s jaw dropped in awe.

But Ambril stopped then to squint up at the monster, “No---wait! Maybe it’s not what we think. Look! It’s breaking up!” The giant 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 like that it wasn’t a real Dullaith, because we’d probably 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 15 Traipsing through the Archives

“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 weeks later discussing what had happened at the Harvest Festival for the millionth time.

“Look, we were there---and saw the guy waving his arms around in the shadows. It might have been Feldez but who could tell? It was dark.” Sully countered.

“Who else has been there for every Dullaith appearance? Feldez is in on it somehow, I just know it.” Ambril knew she sounded like a stubborn child but in her mind, everything seemed to point directly at Feldez.

“We nought be getting anywhere arguing like this, besides I got somut’ to---”

But Sully wasn’t listening, “It could have been anyone really, everyone and their brother had one of those robes on that night.”

Ambril sighed, “Look, let’s meet after school at the Gazebo---”

“Listen, there be something wrong that I be---”

“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---”

“THERE BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE OLD PEOPLE HERE!” Ygg glared at Sully. “And if’n some would just listen for a sec, I be telling you about it.”

Sully sighed and folded her arms.

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

Sully snorted, “really? Old people getting---older…it boggles the mind.”

“Nay, nay,” said Ygg drawing his eyebrows together. “There be something really wrong. The old people I be making deliveries to are acting---different, like they be all sickly from the same thing at the same time…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, you’ve noticed it’s just the people you make deliveries too who are getting sick?” asked Ambril.

“I dunno if’n there are others, but come to think of it, Miss Fern makes her own home remedies, she didna’ take to Sunset Tea.” Ygg grimaced, “I nought know why anyone would. People in Chert would call Mrs. Twid a Koocher.”

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

“So her stuff may not do any good but it doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with it, “reasoned Sully, “do you have deliveries to make today?”

Ygg shook his head.

“Why don’t we go straight to the Library after school, bang out these silly detention papers and then go see Miss Fern tomorrow. Maybe she’ll have some ideas.”

Ygg screwed up his face to consider this before nodding.

The bell jangled loudly just then, so they jumped off the swings and pointed themselves toward the school building.

Sully cocked her head. “Fern may even know something 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 a skinny kid with a unibrow.

Tiana and two friends were just in front of them. Sashaying along, they were dressed alike and all in pink. Tiana stopped to check her makeup in her compact. But she snapped it shut the minute she caught sight of Ygg.

“Hey, I’ve been watching you in P.E.. Are you going out for the baseball team?” She smiled slowly at him.

Ygg was suddenly shy, “I had’na thought about it.”

She winked at him as she snapped her gum, “I’d go to your games if you did.”

Ygg blushed and shoved his hands deep in his pockets just as the second bell rang. They had to run for class. As she slid into her seat, Ambril noticed Lance eyeing Ygg and looking a little jealous. She thought there might be trouble later on, but the rest of the day passed uneventfully.

Before Ambril knew it, school was over and they 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 escaped her hat and tested the air currents.

Her friend chattered as she struggled with her glasses. “I was shocked to see it there, 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.” The old woman sighed as she grabbed the handrail and began to ease her way down the stairs. “I hope the new owner will be someone who understands us.”

“Well that’s just it, isn’t it!” said the first as she shifted her handbag and prepared to follow her friend. “I hear Crystal Twid wants it!”

The first turned around slowly and peered up at her friend. “Lord, save us! We’ll have nothing but cheap, overpriced shoes in there! We’ll have to go all the way to Moon Bay!”

The door swung shut. Thoughts of Twid and the Shoe store flew out of Ambril’s mind as she inhaled the odd, enticing smell Libraries all seem to have---the dusty scent of possibilities. While Ygg and Sully argued over the best place to start their research, Ambril decided to look around. She wandered over to a display case filled with town memorabilia. There was a collection of old, dinged up trophies. As if the sport had continued after the trophies had been handed out. Dignitaries smiled out of yellowed photographs accepting this award or that. She recognized a few of the faces. Betula was in one, Bob grinned out of another. Feldez’s sour face was everywhere. Sully had been right, the town loved him. She was about to turn away when something caught her eye. It was a small plaque featuring two men solemnly shaking hands. 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 a disturbance at Old Council Hall during which a life was regrettably lost but the town was saved.**

“Step back you!” A large squat woman with multi-layered jowls barreled toward Ambril, “you kids and your grimy fingerprints! I just cleaned that!”

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 as she pushed her aside, “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 this book, NOT to pay the fine, you see it’s my broth---” Ambril turned to see Riley and a librarian with wire-rimmed glasses fighting over the 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. And EVERY book returned. There are several on your card which have been checked out for months. One or two of them are very rare and quite valuable!”

“Next time right, I’ll tell Lance,” Riley turned and triumphantly 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 but I think we want the Archives.” Sully towed Ambril over to the map of the Library, “Dr. Afallen,” Sully read off the map, look! He’s the Town Historian. That’s who Ygg wants us to see first---and his office is near the Archives!” she pointed to a small office near the Archives, “Perfect! He’ll 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.” She squinted at Ambril, “and try not to touch anything!”

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 hanging on the wall.

“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 messy desk sat in front of a set of double doors. Several flickering lanterns lit a sign taped to the desk: ‘Trelawnyd Town History’. A teapot boiled briskly on a pot bellied stove sitting crookedly to one side of the desk. Ambril was immediately drawn to an iron bound glass case just inside the double doors. Intrigued she grabbed a lantern and held it up to get a better look. It was filled with an odd assortment of things. Ambril caught her breath when she saw a familiar black box, 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.**

In the flickering lantern light Ambril could now see that it was carved beautifully just like her Ashera, but the stories told in images were dark and evil. Ambril shivered, remembering the fairy she’d seen locked 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 doll sized metal cup chained to it.

**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? It looked too small to hold much of anything.

The kids jumped when they heard a voice coming from somewhere behind the glass case “Yes those are the latest codes.” Ambril recognized it as the voice belonging to the man she had seen talking with Koda after the fire. “That is 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 then 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. Then he scurried around his desk and dusted off 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. She gave up and slid back down. “We just need some help.”

“What can I do for you?” said the little man as he smoothed out his rumpled collar then plunked down in his chair.

We have to---” began Sully then she added hastily, “Or rather we’re *excited* to do an essay about the founding of Trelawnyd.” She smiled hard at him. “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 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’. It looked exactly like something Ms. Breccia would approve of, boring, boring and more boring. “Thanks but do you have something---that might explain what’s inside that case?”

Dr. Afallen sat up straighter as he followed her eyes. Then he pointed to the bulletin board again and said ruefully. “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 the most recent decree suggests that this book is all I can let you check out from the Archives.”

He opened his hands palms up, “It’s sad really, there is so much to be learned from our ancestors, but 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---absolutely none! 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? That wouldna’ be breaking any rules. You be just showing us things and telling 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 and our---kin,” Ambril said.

Dr Afallen nervously shuffled papers as he muttered, “I have to be so careful, you see---especially now.” he stroked his beard. “Then again this knowledge must be passed on.” Then the old man closed his eyes. He 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!

Hesitantly she unzipped her backpack and pulled out the wooden tube. Could she trust him with it? He looked nice---but not all bad guys had big teeth and breath that smelled like it could take the paint off your bike. Still she had to try something. “Maybe you can help us with this then,” she said timidly as she handed him her Ashera.

Dr. Afallen twinkled as he took the Ashera reverently, his mouth a big ‘O’ of delight. He drew in his breath sharply, then madly went through his desk drawers until he found a bent pair of half-moon glasses. “Let me see, what do we have here.” His face brightened as brought the Ashera up to his nose. “Lovely, lovely, it’s done in the ancient way with—look!---strings of Ogam!...the Latin was added later… interesting, very intriguing.” He muttered to himself. “Let’s see,” he felt around along the wooden tube 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. “Are there others? I’m sure of it! An Ashera of this age holds many secrets.”

Ambril finally scrambled out of the sofa and perched on the edge, “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, then fingered the engravings. “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. This belief is what brought them here.

It’s a good thing they fled the old country 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 strengthen if they worked together. So they combined their energies.” His eyebrows rose to new heights as he nodded, “quite revolutionary for the time. Most magic-kind back then believed that the purity of their lineage made them stronger so each family kept apart from the others. 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, “I’m sure you have figured out by now that 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. A belief many people of the ancient lands believed, that all life is interconnected---knitted or woven together. Do you see how the branches of this Derwyn Oak are entwined with the roots? It’s hard to tell where one ends and the other begins, you see? He settled back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “To find out the reason this Ashera has come into your life will require looking into your family’s history.” His eyebrows rose slowly, “is that why you’re here?”

“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 strayed to the bulletin board. “As for the rest…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, “yes, I am.”

Dr. Afallen’s bright eyes crinkled as he handed back the carved tube. Then he scooched to the edge of his seat and peered at Ambril over his spectacles again. “This is from an age that frighten people nowadays. Most of our history has been destroyed or ‘misplaced’ because of that fear. We don’t want to give them more excuses to destroy what little we have left. Do you understand? It isn’t just you who would be at risk.”

His glare was so severe Ambril felt as if he was boring holes through her. She teetered on the edge of the sofa. But then he smiled and said in a softer tone. “But I do have some things here that might be of service to you.” Abruptly he pulled a leather pouch from his desk drawer. Turning around, he stood on his tip toes and carefully took out the Morte Cell and the Dorcha Blade. “I must take these items to the new vault anyway. He swiftly wrapped them in what looked like old argyle socks and stowed them in the pouch before strapping it on. Then he grabbed a lantern from the wall and shouted, “follow me!” As he scurried through the double doors.

It took a while for Ygg and Sully to scramble up from the depths of the sofa. Ambril was the first through the double doors and caught sight of the tail of Dr. Afallen’s jacket as it disappeared down a winding stone stair at the back of the room. Ygg and Sully finally appeared and they started down. The stairs seemed to go on endlessly and narrowed as they descended. Ambril had to hunch over to make it down the last few steps. At the bottom she straightened, then gasped as she took in the view.

To call the Archives a large room would have been silly. It was a cavern, 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. It 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, which marched off into the gloom.

Ambril caught sight of Dr. Afallen waving impatiently just before he disappeared 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, am I right?”

“Yes, my Mom told me lots of stories about growing up with her Gran.”

Dr. Afallen’s glasses reflected the lantern light swinging drunkenly from his arm. “I’ve lived long enough to have known several generations of your family. Rosa was my good friend. Her mother 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. “We snuck a lot of peaches together, Rosa and I! Then later, I taught both your parents in school.” He paused here to frown down a particularly gloomy hallway. Ambril watched an ornate secretary scuttle out of sight. “Your father had such an inventive mind.” Dr Afallen chuckled as he scurried on, “always joking!”

Ambril felt a warmth rise up from her toes. It was a wonderful feeling to feel connected to her family, especially now that her brother was so distant. Her mother rarely talked about her Dad.

“Wait up!” Ygg raced up with Sully following, wheezing slightly and holding her side. They walked into a pool of light showcasing a shiny metal vault covered in high tech locks.

“Now this won’t take a moment!” said Dr. Afallen. 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 more sock wrapped bundles, stacks of papers and a few boxes. Dr. Afallen took off his pouch and laid it carefully on the middle shelf before he heaved the door closed. The locks clicked and snapped and dinged for several seconds until a green light blinked at them: ‘RESTRICTED ACCESS, 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 all the information about a Dullaith is?” Ambril asked looking back longingly.

Dr. Afallen stopped midstride, then swiveled to examine her face for a long moment. A harsh look sharpened his features before he collected himself. “How silly of me, of course you would know of Dullaiths. 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 well but...” Dr. Afallen squeezed her arm. “I should talk with your mother before showing you anything…but perhaps I can show you something.”

He started off once more. They entered a part of the Archives which appeared much older, some of the shelves had been hewn out of the rock. The cobwebs were so thick in places it was hard to tell what was underneath. Soon things started to get really weird, they picked their way through a giant chess set of alien beasts. Then they 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 Sully 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 into one of the crates and dragged out several intriguing books.

One seemed to be made entirely of sparkling crystal. 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 dropped open. “How you be knowin’ I be from Chert?”

“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.” 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.

As Sully cracked the book open the room instantly filled with brilliant, multicolored lights. She was entranced.

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

He handed her an ordinary scrapbook. “Alas the only paper which reported on the magical elements of our fine community, succumbed to fire nearly five 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. “As I said before, not all of us believed what was written 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.”

“Hey, I’ve seen that before!” Sully pointed to a dusty sculpture perched on one of the upper shelves. It was of a wolf dancing with a beautiful bird.

“Ah, well yes that of course would be Koda’s weathervane. It’s an exact copy of this statue which Koda commissioned for their wedding.”

“Who’s wedding?” asked Ambril.

“Koda and Ariella’s wedding.”

“You mean, someone actually married that guy?” Sully asked, surprised.

Dr. Afallen smiled sadly. “Koda was not always as he is now. Believe it or not, he was once very charming.” Dr. Afallen tisked softly to himself, “I remember them always laughing.”

“So what happened?” Asked Sully.

“Alas, Ariella had a terrible---accident and died. She was unusually young for an Animalfia. Koda has never been the same.”

Ambril swallowed hard and vowed to be nicer to the grouchy guy.

A jarring buzz sounded overhead.

Dr. Afallen jumped, “my goodness, another visitor?” he wrung his hands happily as if he’d just won the Lottery, “I had better go and see who that might be! But I’ll be back to collect you in fifteen minutes or so, don’t you worry!” 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 dated many years before. Ambril spotted a young Dr. Afallen receiving his diploma from Harvard. She picked him out in various group pictures of unsmiling men and women posing with plaques and decrees. But there were also some pictures where he appeared more relaxed. In those he was often smiling and laughing among friends, clearly celebrating something. 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 young, painfully thin Mrs. Twid receiving a trophy for broad jumping. But Ambril didn’t stop to read anything, she was anxious to learn something about her Dad. She was half way through the book when she spied her family looking out of a yellowed newsprint image--- her mother and father held hands with a little girl and boy in front of an old, stone 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***.

There seemed to be a settled balance in the way they stood, leaning in toward each other. Her Father looked confident and relaxed. Gone were the worry lines around her Mother’s eyes. 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. She was nearing the end of the book when she found it. At first glance it was nothing special, just a picture of a blackened room with a domed ceiling. But 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 near Circle Park. Apparently it was raised by notable scientist, Bren Silva. While working on a mysterious energy project Dr. Silva had apparently been dabbling in dark magic. After raising the Dullaith last night, he lost control of it. Fortunately, Dr. Feldez Petri, an associate of Dr. Silva, was able to bring the demon down, but not before it consumed the life of Dr. 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 article in disbelief. It sounded as if her Dad had not only battled the Dullaith but that he had also brought the Dullaith to life. So this was the dark secret no one would talk about. No wonder her Mom had left.

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 ‘keeping the bloodline pure’…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 and slid down beside Ambril. 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 the Elixer of Life! Ponce de Leon would have given his eye teeth for this!---AND a recipe for Love Potion #9!” Crowed Sully as she sat down and buried her nose in her new find.

Ygg growled while 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 after awhile. A bunch of them got free and ran for the hills where they founded me hometown of Chert,” Ygg mused, “it says here that the Tylwith helped Moroz do this---then Moroz turned around and tricked them too! So then most of the Fairies left and settled in the forest---that’s why they’re called Forest Fairies.”

“He must have driven half the town away! No wonder everyone is so suspicious of magic!” 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 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 raked Ygg with its talons as it fell to the ground. Ambril hastily grabbed her backpack and jumped to her feet---which she found was a mistake. The room had 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, forcing Ambril to cover her mouth with her sleeve.

“You be going for help, we’ll see if Dr. Afallen is O.K.” Ygg said to Sully.

Sully nodded and scuttled toward the exit sign.

“This way,” Ygg was suddenly beside her as she clambered over a large pile of four fingered gloves and shoved a dress made entirely of harp strings twangily out aside. Ygg crouched low as he walked. “The air’s a little better down lower.”

Ambril was nearly on all fours all ready. After many wrong turns, Ambril squeezed around a listing bookshelf and her eyes widened in horror, “Dr. Afallen!”

Just ahead, she could see Dr. Afallen lying inert near what a few minutes before had been the shiny new vault. It hung crazily from one hinge as smoke streamed out from the half open door. Ambril crawled crab-like over to Dr. Afallen. He was bruised in several places the worst being a large bump on his right temple. 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.”

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 had been cleaned out, the pouch with the Morte Cell and the Dorcha Blade was gone. “Do you think the person who did this might still be around?” she whispered.

“I wish! I’d like to give ‘em a piece of me mind I would, for to be doin’ this to a nice old guy such as him.”

The old man moaned and moved his head.

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

His eyelids flickered. “Sully, who is Sully?” the old man’s eyes flew open and fastened quizzically on Ambril.

“Who did this Dr. Afallen?”

“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. “But your Mother wouldn’t hear of it, I’m sure.” Ambril turned to see Feldez glaring at her. He didn’t bother to try on his dry smile. Ambril gladly moved away when 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 bunged up trophies and old snaps?”

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 unfolded himself to tower over everyone. “Go with him, Feldez, they’ll need your expertise at the hospital.”

Feldez gave Ambril a hard stare, “I’ll contact your Mother,” he said ominously then swept away behind the stretcher.

Ambril swallowed hard as she watched his rigid form disappear down a cooridor. Knowing Feldez, that could be bad, very bad. She wondered what Feldez’s expertise was.

Then 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.”

“Chief, I hear there has been an accident and came to offer my services.” Miraculously Sid materialized out of the shadows and nodded toward the flailing librarian. The Chief smiled briefly and nodded. Sid walked swiftly over to Miss Tittle and began speaking softly to her.

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---?”

“We went over to the map of the Library and argued a little, 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 very sweet smelling tea. 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, drinky drinky!”

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

“How could anyone get a whole cup of that stuff down?” she whispered as Skarn turned around long enough for them to empty their cups into a plastic plant.

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.

“Looks like Sid will be taking over here until Dr. Afallen is back on his feet. Can you kids find your way home?” he said as he tugged on his belt.

Gratefully the three friends nodded to him. Then they walked quickly under the blinking exit light and out into the twilight.

# Chapter 16 Mrs. Twid’s Sunset Tea

Ygg grunted as he jumped on his bike, “I be glad that be done, tomorrow then!” he called back at them just before 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 jumped from the car and tugged up the back door. “Let’s get the bike in then I want to hear ALL about it.”

“That’s HER!” Someone shrieked behind them. An avenging Miss Tittle marched down the sidewalk toward them and pointed a wobbly finger at Ambril’s Mom. “I remember you now! How dare you show your face here after what your husband did! Now I see you’ve been encouraging your kids to make it a family tradition of wreaking havoc among us! Following in his footsteps!” Miss Tittle’s face looked not all together human. It had flushed to such a weird shade of purple. “SHAME! FOR SHAME!” She thundered just as Sid appeared at her side and put a hand on her shoulder. He again began talking quietly to her. Eventually she quieted. Sid shot Ambril’s mom an apologetic look as he turned her around and walked her back to the building. Ambril’s turned to her mother and found that she had gone rigid. She had frozen with her shoulders hunched, braced for an attack. Her face had paled so her eyes appeared bluer than Ambril had ever seen them.

“Don’t pay any attention to her, Mom. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” Ambril peered anxiously at her mom as she walked her slowly to the driver’s side and opened the door. Her mother meekly slid into her seat. Ambril then awkwardly maneuvered her bike into the back then jumped into the passenger side. Her mother sat staring sightlessly at the steering wheel.

“Mom?” Ambril whispered as she hesitantly touched her Mom’s arm. “Maybe you shouldn’t drive. We could call Feldez. I’m sure he’d come and pick us up.”

Her mother jumped at her touch and shook her head. “Oh---don’t be silly, I’m fine! And you’re right---she doesn’t know what she’s talking about does she?” she said softly, though it didn’t sound as if she believed it at all. “Come on, let’s get you home.” She gave Ambril a brittle smile and turned on the car.

Her mother seemed to recover quickly as she adjusted her seat belt. She gave her daughter a quick smile and patted her arm. As the car moved out onto the street Ambril looked over the new car. It had that new car smell, much better than the smell of stale Cheerios their old van couldn’t shake. “Nice wheels Mom, did you get it today?”

“Um-- yes, Feldez picked it out, you like it?”

Ambril grimaced, she liked it less now that she knew that Feldez had picked it out. She watched her mom’s hands shake a little as she maneuvered through traffic.

But then her mother surprised her, “Alright, I’m ready, tell me what happened in there, Ambril.” She said in her old commanding tone.

Ambril felt relieved for half a second. Her mother was strong, she could shake this off. She took a deep breath and told her what they had told Chief Buckthorne. But it didn’t feel right. As she talked, she thought about how good she was at keeping secrets now. She had learned how to hold back just enough of the truth to make it believable. How many others in Trelawnyd were forced to do the same? The thought made her cringe. She didn’t like what she was turning into, but after what Miss Tittle had said how could she tell the truth?

It would crush her mom to know about all of the magical stuff she was getting into, even if it was for the right reason. To figure out what had really happened to her dad. When she finished explaining everything her mother stayed quiet for a while. The growl of Ambril’s stomach spoiled the symmetrical tick of the car’s blinker as it turned, then purred its way up the hill. When the car slowed to a stop, Ambril hurriedly unsnapped her seat belt and opened the door. She thought she was in the clear, until her mother ominously grabbed her arm and pulled her back to her seat. Her Mom’s eyes looked too large for her face.

“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. Her mother knew her better than anyone on the planet. But what could Ambril really tell her? Zane would roast her over hot coals if she upset her mother any more. Besides what proof did she have that her suspicions were true and Feldez was wrong through and through?

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

Ambril cleared her throat, “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. So we decided to look around in the Library Archives. We ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

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, Ambril.” Her mother 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 in trouble and people can get hurt. People you care about, like your friends, your family---everyone close to you. Trust me on this! It’s better to believe they’re just fairy tales.” She stared unseeing at the dashboard as she released the steering wheel and eased her door open. “Just stick to the facts Ambril, it’s---safer.”

“Where have you guys 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 dinner started---like before midnight?”

“Yeah, I’m starved!” Ambril said. For once she was relieved to be interrupted by her big brother. She slid out of her seat and raced inside. On the kitchen table there were bowls of 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 at the sink to take off the top layer of dust and soot, and then took her seat.

Mrs. Sweetgum had stayed later than usual. She beamed at them from the kitchen door, “I’m just going to put some nuts out for the squirrels,” she trilled and stepped quickly out into the evening light.

Zane and Ambril dug into the piles of food with gusto. Ambril’s mother picked out a few strands of pasta and toyed with them while she watched Zane eat. It seemed to amuse her. 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 eagerly took her first bite. 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 body wanted.

“What’s the matta wif oou?” mumbled Zane his mouth full of meatball, “normally, you eat more tha’ me.”

“Not possible!” She countered as she watched Zane help himself to seconds.

“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. It went on and on about ordinary things and left out all the juicy bits. She sighed as she flipped through the glossy pages.

There was a soft knock on Ambril’s door. It slid open and Mrs. Sweetgum stepped in, smiling over a steaming tray.

“Sorry but I don’t think I can eat anything right now,” Ambril turned slightly green just thinking about it.

Mrs. Sweetgum 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, nothing like horrible Sunset Tea. She took a very small sip. It felt warm as it slid down her throat. She smiled as the nausea began to leave her. She took another sip and then another. She had just about finished it when Mrs. Sweetgum set the tray down on her lap. On it was a heaping plate 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.”

Before Mrs. Sweetgum could disappear through the door Ambril asked, “Is there---how’s my Mom?”

Mrs. Sweetgum turned slowly around. “Mrs. Tittle behaved badly at the Library, I understand. Yes, I heard all about it.” Then Mrs. Sweetgum smiled encouragingly at Ambril and displayed her broad, front teeth. “I’m sure you’re aware that your Mother is going through a trying time just now. The move has been…unsettling for her. But I believe she’ll weather this storm, and get back to her old self in no time.”

Ambril sat back feeling better than she had in a long time. Just as Mrs. Sweetgum turned to go, Ambril through of something. “Wait! Mrs. Sweetgum, do you have any more of that tea?” Ambril remembered the look on Sully’s face as they left the Library. “I might need some for a friend.”

“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, she put the finishing touches on a very correct but very boring essay. Ms. Breccia was going to 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? They had taken the Morte Cell and Dorcha Blade, was that what they had been after? Ambril shuddered, she knew 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 exhausted, dreamless sleep.

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 as a stalk of celery. “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 cured me. It’s Mrs. Sweetgum’s tea.” pleaded Ambril.

“What you be losing other than 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 bag. “Do you have any cookies?”

Ambril smiled as she fished out a sandwich and a napkin full of cookies, then handed them over. Sully grabbed them and consumed them down to the very last crumb.

“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 and smiled broadly displaying bits of lettuce still stuck between her back molars.

“We could ask Mrs. Sweetgum to make a couple of gallons of that stuff,” suggested Ambril and pointed to her own teeth meaningfully.

Sully got the hint immediately. She shut her mouth and started sucking assiduously on her teeth.

“And then what? Invite everyone over for Tea every afternoon?” Ygg shrugged. “They’ll just be getting sick again as soon as they be taking another sip of the Sunset Tea.”

“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.”

The bell rang and they marched up the steps of the school.

“I be forgetting! I be stopping by Miss Fern’s house last night.” Ygg pulled open the front door. “She wants us to come for Moonrise to be seeing something special. That’s December twelfth around eleven, do ya think you can sneak out?” he asked his eyes bright.

“Are you kidding? It’s an adventure, 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 is that?”

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,” 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, then imprisoned.”

Riley had his hand in the air. “Mr. Pinwydden didn’t know but maybe a history expert like you might be able to tell us where he went to prison?”

Ms. Breccia preened at the compliment then pouted. “Sadly I cannot answer your question.” Her eyebrows drew together. “I can’t tell you because no one knows, not even I know where or how Moroz was imprisoned.” She fanned herself and looked out the window. “He was a powerful individual and not without friends---but curiously all record of his existence disappeared soon after his trial. He simply disappeared. It was as if the earth swallowed him up.” She looked critically around the room as if daring anyone 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 as 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.

Moroz had begun to interest her, mainly because he was such a mystery. There were bits and pieces about him 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.

# Chapter 17 Moonrise in Fern’s Garden

A few weeks later, 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 had hardly seen her mother since the scuff up at the Library. Her Mom had missed dinner some night. On those nights Mrs. Sweetgum would bustle up the stairs with a tray laden with food, and then come down again with the food untouched. It had begun to worry Ambril. She had tried knocking on her mother’s door before bed but had received no response. The night before she’d been shooed away by a strained and worried Feldez though it was unclear to Ambril whether it was her mother’s condition or something else that was bothering him. Ambril tried to stay positive and to adopt Mrs. Sweetgum’s optimistic outlook. She kept busy with school work and working with magic after school at the Gazebo as well.

Ambril shook her head and tried to focus on the task at hand. 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 was working on fLit. She had her laptop in front of her and had downloaded a cool, little program that she’d been dying to try out.

“So if 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.

“For the seventeenth time you can’t come!” 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 filled with Reggae music.

Ambril jumped over to the computer and jabbed the F3 button. The music instantly stopped. She 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 his foot connected 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 only 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.

When she got bored of watching him dance badly she picked up her Ashera. Her hands traced the Latin words and then the odd lines with little slash marks which she had been told several times was an ancient language called Ogam. She wished she knew more about it. The Ogam ran around the Derwyn crest making a pattern---almost like a code. How would she ever crack that code?

Frustrated she started on the Ashera. She pressed and twisted it to see if she could unlock any more of its secrets. Suddenly her fingers brushed a slightly raised bump near one end that she was sure hadn’t been there moments before. When she pressed it, she heard a whirring click. A little door slid up. Excitedly Ambril peered inside. Written right on the inside of the door 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 on the Ashera and then copied down the translation. After many false starts, she 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 just outside her window. Ambril swung her foot out over the two-story drop and frantically felt around with her foot for the ladder. She woofed in relief when her foot grazed the ladder’s 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 raced over 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 then 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 had been reading in the Archives. Ambril grabbed Sully by the arm and hissed, “that’s one of the books from the Archives! You just walked out with it?” Ambril was pretty sure they’d be arrested if anyone found out they had 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 later, 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. It’s called the Astarte---and you won’t believe what we found in it!”

Ambril peaked over Miss Fern’s shoulder as she laboriously read through a neatly penned recipe in curly script. There were notations in different handwriting which had been scribbled in the margins and bits of other recipes clipped to the page. All of it looked mystical and more than a little magical…she had to admit she was intrigued.

Ygg dumped a handful of purple berries into a bowl full of leaves and twigs at Miss Fern’s direction.

Fern frowned, “that’s more than enough Elderberry, dear. Now stir it briskly---yes---that’s right.”

“We’re going to replace Twid’s nasty Sunset Tea with this remedy. When new orders come in, Ygg will use this instead of Twid’s stuff. He fills all the orders 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 figure out a way to handle that when the time comes. You know what that tea does! We have to take the risk.”

“You mean I be having to take the 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. “Still I think the side affects of the tea might wear off---eventually.”

Ygg put a couple of spoonfuls into a teapot and poured hot water in. “Let’s be trying it.”

“It won’t have much effect on you kids. It would be best to have an elderly person try it, one who---” just then they heard a timid knock on the back door. Miss Fern walked slowly over and opened it. “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.” Mrs. Flood maneuvered herself painfully over to an overstuffed chair festooned with doilies and plopped down.

“You simply must try my new tea Daisy, it’ll make you feel lovely!” Miss Fern handed her a large mug of the steaming 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 lately, 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 my shop’s 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.” Mrs. Flood took a small sip and her eyes brightened, “my but that’s good!” then she took a big swallow and sat up straighter as 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 can’t seem to stay still, so I’ll say good night. I think I’ll take a turn around the block before bed.” The screen door swished closed and she was gone.

“Oh my!” murmured Fern as she picked up Mrs. Flood’s cane and stood it in a corner, “we must tone it down a bit.”

Sully giggled, “but not too much. Let’s give the old folks a chance to enjoy themselves!”

Fern laughed, “we’ll leave in just a little---fun then. 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 as he beckoned to Ambril and Sully.

“You’ll find it a bit of a mess, it’s been that way ever since my nephew, fixit Joe left.” 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 with an arched garage door punctuating the driveway. Small windows marched down the garden side. Ygg pulled hard on one of the tall doors. It creaked resentfully as it opened to reveal a deeper darkness. Ygg disappeared inside for a second, 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 were piled on a large stone table and cabinets sagged under thickly draped cobwebs behind it. 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 a fireplace which commandeered one of the stone walls.

“This garage be nought built to put cars in,” said Ygg as he scrambled up on the stone table. “It be more house than garage. 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 that day on the bikes, remember?” said Ambril excitedly and looked around with renewed interest. Her excitement didn’t last long though, it was hard to see past the cobwebs and junk.

Ygg stood on his tiptoes and grabbed one of the dried bundles hanging from the ceiling. “I think this be Sage.” He then jumped down from the table and headed for the door. “No time for lollygagging, let’s be getting back.”

Sully batted away a few cobwebs as she followed Ygg out but Ambril hesitated, wanting to explore a little more. But the longer she remained among the dusty clutter the creepier it became. Try as she might she couldn’t dredge up any memory of the place. It was hard to imagine anyone working there, let alone her dad in his clean, white lab coat. The scratching of little rat feet soon sent Ambril racing to catch up with the others.

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. After fussing over it a bit, Fern gave the new concoction 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 be having to do is to replace the Sunset Tea with this, right?”

“Without getting caught,” added Sully.

“As if I don’t have enough to do what with schoolwork and my other chores,” he grumbled.

The cuckoo clock chimed in at eleven thirty and startled 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 the forest at night since the Dullaith attack.

She soon forgot her fears as Fern’s garden that night was extraordinary. In the soft glow of the patio lanterns, autumn flowers swayed in the breeze. The trees ceased to intimidate her. Instead they seemed to embrace each other with their feathery shadows. Ambril soon sensed something else. There was something in the air---an emotion. It ran right up her spine and tickled the back of her neck. The night seemed to be holding its breath---waiting for something. 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’s very rare and blooms just once a year. This is its big night!”

The Vita Fiore buds looked a little like Rosebud to Ambril, only less grouchy.

“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 with two points on his hat to help prop her chair up. Ambril sat down next to her and found a frowning gnome with a pointy hat at her knee.

“Did you know my garage is one of the oldest buildings in Trelawnyd?” Fern nodded proudly. “It was one of the first buildings they built here. I believe it was used as a meeting house back then.” Then she smiled as she pointed excitedly at the moon peeking over the mountains. “It’s beginning! 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 sparkled with all the colors of the rainbow. Each had petals which cascaded out like a rose. From the center, an arching stamen began to grow. A dot of light danced at its tip.

“By all the Glain that’s pretty,” Ygg had his mouth open in amazement.

“Slithey! I do agree,” whispered a voice reverently at Ambril’s knee. But Ambril was too mesmerized by the flowers to notice.

There were three flowers that grew large in the moonlight. Their dots of light began to dance wildly, still resonating 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. When the three flowers had grown to several times the size of the other flowers, their dancing dots began to elongate and grow into something familiar---a figure with arms and legs. They soon had whirled into three perfectly formed, six-inch figures revolving above the flowers.

The chimes grew louder. Suddenly, Ambril became aware of hundreds of dots of light around them. Looking closer, she saw that they were actually 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---faster and faster in a dancing circle. Ambril heard wild bells in her head as the fairy circles blurred into hoops of light. They detached themselves from the flowers and careened around the garden in their mad dance. Ambril was forced 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, for within each group hovered a newborn fairy. The new beings looked around in wonder. One of them looked curiously at Ambril. Ambril smiled at her encouragingly until one of her circle mates grimaced and whispered something to the newborn. The fairy’s curiosity turned to mild disgust as she listened. Then she tossed her long red hair and looked away.

“They don’t care for human-kind,” mused Fern. “They come inside the wall only at Moonrise to gather up their young. Then they go back to their forest home.” 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. In minutes they were alone again in the garden.

“It be Booglish, that be true.” said a sad voice by Ambril’s knee. Ambril looked around but saw only the laughing gnome near her chair…Wait, something was weird…

Sully had noticed it too, “I could have sworn that one was frowning before.”

“You be meaning like this?” the gnome suddenly cocked his head and frowned.

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 looked puzzled.

“You should nought be scaring them like that! You know you be taking 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 be doing it to look clever.”

Bummil now transferred his glare to Ygg while still rubbing his elbow.

Ygg sighed, “let’s be having 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 you I be worried about. It be a lucky thing I brought me 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! You be 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 because 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. It clattered to the ground. “You best watch who you be using to prop up your prize patootee, Missy!”

“Now Baldot,” Ygg squinted knowingly at the gnome who was now trying to look innocent, “you might could have politely asked her to be moving off yourn foot.”

Ambril looked around and gasped. All of the gnomes in Fern’s garden were now stretching and talking among themselves. It looked even more crowded now the gnomes were moving around. Ambril looked over a sea of bobbing pointy hats.

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. “Be 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 a massive belly. “But mostly less. We be garden variety ceramic. Now your Gran’s china be likely porcelain---”

“Blagoor, stop your jawing and give us some peace to work in!” Grumbled Ygg as he examined the new 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 thoughtfully, “ceramic person.”

“GNOME!” shouted Baldot up at her. “What are ya daft? And WE don’t jump and jibber---human-kind do that!” He smoothed his green tunic. “We Gnomes be much more refined, don’t you know.” Baldot demonstrated his refined locomotion by plunking along the patio, making tink-tinking noises with every step.

Ambril thought he looked and sounded more like a two-legged goat but didn’t say a word.

Sully gave Baldot a dirty look. “I was about to say that maybe we could look for a better type glue. You know---in the Astarte, that book I picked up in the Library.” Sully put her hands on her hips and stared down Baldot. “But seeing as we’re just human-kind that are only good at jumping and jibbering…”

“Ya mean you be willing to help us?” Bummil asked, clearly stunned.

“I take it back, you never jump and jibber! That be OTHER human-kind! Nought you!” said Baldot smiling way hard and showing off five chipped teeth.

Sully cringed. “I liked you better rude and obnoxious.”

But Ambril could see the wheels turning in Sully’s mind. Suddenly she turned and raced back into the kitchen then returned quickly with the Astarte and began paging through it. “Here! I found some good glue recipes already! There’s also one for invisible paste---I bet this everlasting bubbly gum might even work in a pinch. Oh! Here’s a good one! Smart Lip glue---especially effective on mouthy little gnomes who---”

“Stop playing with them and getting their hopes up,” Ygg yawned. “Besides, I be tired and want to be going home.”

Baldot sniffed in disgust, then turned away.

Sully looked miffed, “I was only teasing a little. I really do think that one or two of these remedies might work!” She mused as she read through a few more pages. “I’ll have another look tomorrow. Shall we meet at the Gazebo around noon?”

Ambril nodded. She was glad it was Saturday the next day and she could sleep in. Her eyelids were drooping like a bull dog. “Good night Miss Fern, it was fantastic.”

“I’m glad you three came by. Now don’t forget that remedy of yours!” she quavered as she handed Ygg a large, brown bag.

“I nought can meet you tomorrow as I be making deliveries all day.” Ygg looked crestfallen.

“We can work out a cure for the gnomes next week then.” Sully nodded.

“No, no wait! What you be needing delivered?” Baldot trotted up to Ygg and put his hands in the general vicinity of his waist. “We be experts at borrowing---but we might could switch to delivering if’n you be needing it. How’s about we be doing the delivering and you be doing the glue making---deal?” he twinkled up at Ygg.

“The gnomes do have a knack for getting in and out of places,” Fern nodded, “lock or no lock.”

“Right you are!” crowed Bummil.

“Alright then, if’n Miss Fern says you be no Booglish lay abouts, then we be accepting your offer.” Ygg 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 nearly two hundred!”

“But you be acting like you be eight!” growled Ygg as he scooched down on his knees and was soon surrounded by pointy hats.

As they turned to go Sully asked, “I wonder whatever happened to Mrs. Flood?”

Fern pointed a shaky finger 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 18 The Gazebo Garden

Noon the next day found Ambril coasting to a stop at the Gazebo. She had come early to poke around the garden. It had always intrigued her, especially because it was her Great Gran’s garden. She wondered if the vine on the Gazebo was the Vita Fiore. Sure enough, she recognized the rosebud blossoms and ropy vines. It seemed to be taking over the Gazebo just like it had Fern’s garage. She hoped she’d find more plants unique to Trelawnyd in her Great Gran’s garden. She struggled to free her backpack from her bike basket---Mrs. Sweetgum had made them a generous lunch. Then she felt something hard bang her hip.

Oww!” She yelled, as fLit’s head emerged from her pack. “Didn’t you hear me? I told you to stay home!” She grumbled as she rubbed the sore spot. “Listen, if you don’t behave yourself today I’m locking you in my bottom drawer for a week! You’ve been warned.”

She dragged her pack to the Gazebo and zipped the robot back inside. “Now stay put!” She shook a finger at the pack but knew it was useless. The little robot would do just what it pleased as soon as she was out of sight. She shook her head and then took a deep breath before skipping down the steps and into the sad, tangled, wondrous mess that was the garden.

The flagstone path before her tipped and turned every which way. Although it was winter, the path was choked with the tiniest of pink flowers which filled the air with an intoxicating sweet scent. Her hunch had been correct. Hidden among the scruffy weeds, were dozens of strange looking plants. She could tell right off, though, that some of them weren’t pleased to have her around. One plant with a scruffy looking mane actually snarled at her. She’d have to watch her step.

Ambril avoided the biggest of the dangerous looking plants and ducked under a frilly bush with what looked like beach umbrella’s hanging from it. Then she eased through a thicket of reeds whistling tunelessly in the breeze.

The garden seemed to go on and on. She followed the path until it ended abruptly in a sea of slippery green leaves which were the size and shape of a baby grand piano lid. Skiing down some and sliding down others lead her to another stone pathway near a crumbling stone wall. It had a host of old statues, which tipped crazily every which way, keeping it company. The pathway became more and more over grown. Often Ambril had to detour around plants that had grown right up through the stones.

She was fighting her way through a curtain of sticky tendrils, which looked and smelled like old, string cheese, when something soft plopped on her head. She reached up and pulled off a wildly plaid sock. Turning around she saw a clothesline festooned with colorful socks. It took a while for Ambril to figure out that it was actually a small tree. The mismatched, crazily colored socks turned out to be its leaves. It waved a virulently striped sock at her before it slipped behind a bush with saw-blade leaves and disappeared. Ambril heard a funny sounding whir then was blanketed with fine bits of striped sock. Ambril sneezed as she fended off the fuzz, then stuffed the sock into her pocket.

She turned to find her way blocked by a long, tall hedge which bristled with shiny, black nuts the size of small boulders. The ground in front of the hedge was strangely cratered, as if a battle had been fought there recently. After searching for some way through the hedge for several minutes, Ambril admitted defeat.

She turned back to retrace her steps and spied the Gazebo turret just over a hill. She couldn’t believe it. It felt as if she’d been walking for miles when all along she had been walking in circles. Had the garden been playing tricks on her? She looked down at her scratched hands and torn clothes and grimaced, then sighed as she trudged back to the Gazebo. Well, she thought, she hoped it had enjoyed itself. She took her frustrations out on one of the beach umbrella blossoms by batting it aside a little too hard.

She should have seen it coming---after all she was in a magical garden, but it took her by surprise when it whacked her so hard that she lost her balance. She fell face down in the dirt and got a mouth-full of it. The umbrella blossom blew a long, loud raspberry in her general direction.

“Ooch, she’s a right Lovey ain’t she?” came a scratchy voice.

“Gooorgeous!” said another slightly raspy one.

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 buzzing, insect sounds, Ambril heard clickity-clacking noises instead. She had heard that sound before, but couldn’t place it right away.  
 “Except for them teeny tiny stalks.” said a third voice. “They’s ghastly.”

“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. She remembered how every day, all day Ambril had heard them arguing through the walls. They spoke loudly so they could hear each other over the clickity-clacking sounds 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. The one on the left had on old fashioned spectacles. Like the last potato in the bin, which had been left a little too long, they were nearly covered with wrinkles. Where they weren’t wrinkled, hairy tendrils had sprouted and collected dirt clods of various sizes. While Ambril watched, one stopped and pulled out a long, muddy root from the ground to knit with. Their communal knitting had produced a muddy, smelly mass of woven muck. Bits of roots and rotting leaves dangled from it. The one with the spectacles squinted up at Ambril as she screeched, “it needs more pink!”

“You think it always needs more pink!” Groused the large root in the middle.

The one on the right rudely snatched the spectacles away from her sister. Still knitting furiously, she peered through them at Ambril. “She is a Lovey though,” she sighed. “You can tell the nice ones can’ts you?” then she groaned. “Why is it always the nice ones who gets it hard?”

“Done are we?” grunted the one in the middle. 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. Ambril, however, didn’t even notice for the other side of the blanket was spectacular. It seemed to be woven of the same pink, fragrant flowers that were grew up and down the garden path.

“You---you knitted that? But…that’s impossible!” gasped Ambril. Then quickly realized how silly that sounded. After all she was chatting with turnips who wore spectacles.

The one in the middle grabbed the glasses and gave Ambril a curious look. “Course it is! Impossibles is acres more fun than usuals, ain’t it?” She scrunched up her face and eyed Ambril dubiously. “Makes yourself useful then!” Then she threw the blanket straight at Ambril.

Ambril caught it, just barely.

“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 lookey 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 pigweed.” 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. “Youse best 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.

“She *is’s* a bit soft in the head.” The middle one muttered as she waggled her top lump.

The left one snorted, “*You’ve* gone’s soft in the head, she was chosen.”

The middle one sucked in her mouth as she stole the glasses from her sister again, 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!”

“She’ll be a mid-morning snack most likely,” waggled the left one. “But a tasty one!”

The right one sighed heavily.

“I’m right here you know! Stop talking like that about me!” Broke in Ambril huffily then tried to compose herself. “My name’s Ambril. This used to be my great grandmother’s garden. Rosa Derwyn? Who are you?”

“No need to gets all tangled about it! We knows who YOU are!” Said the middle one as she glared 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 there’s more to this one---she’s the Ashera AND 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.

Ambril sighed and tried to change the subject. “So who and---what are you exactly?” asked Ambril.

“Everyones calls us Aunties,” said the one on the right. Her tendril fingers reached out and brushed aside some of Ambril’s messy hair, “tis a shame---“

“Now, now, it is just what’s been foretold.” Said the left one, “sometimes it works out different.”

The center one huffed. “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.

“We see’s EVERYTHINGS, you know. We see’s the future---YOUR future.” said the one on the left. She nodded just as furiously as she knitted. “But we can’t tells, we can’t says…at least not directly,” she twinkled. “But we dids wants to meet you before the worst begins. We does wishes you well.” Their wrinkled mouths collectively went up at the ends in a twisty smile though the middle one’s smile was smaller. “Now we gots to go, Deary,” said the one on the right. In unison, the Aunties began to burrow vigorously in the dirt. “We’s so much to do, before we’s know it, it’ll be springtime again.” she shriveled right before Ambril’s eyes.

“Wait, I’m confused! What about---”

“No time---Lovey,” whispered the one on the right who was now no more than a wrinkled smile on a lumpy root.

Ambril watched them shrivel out of sight. She stood there and pondered what they had said about her. It sounded like they knew her future. Then she thought about how useful it would be to have friends like them. If she had asked nicely, she wondered would they have helped her with Breccia’s next exam?

“Ambril? Who were you talking to?” Sully was just getting off her bike.

“I just had the weirdest experience.” Ambril called back as she waded through the weeds and over to the Gazebo stairs.

“Run-of-the-mill weird or run for your life weird?” Sully plopped down awkwardly on the steps with the Astarte wedged 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 be hogtieing whoever be letting 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 how bad it is.” Ambril sadly looked around. “That might be a good thing really, it’ll break her heart to see it this way. She grew up here, you know.”

Bummil twinkled, “you be askin’ what I think you be askin’? You want us to be working here?” He sounded oddly hopeful.

“No, no. I can’t pay you,” Ambril shrugged.

“You just be finding a way to fix our broken parts, that be payment enough. Besides, it be getting crowded at Fern’s and we’ve nought enough to do. Fern’s garden be real gentile. Now this here garden’s the kind where you be takin’ your life in your hands just strolling about.” Baldot nodded appreciatively at the beach umbrella blossoms. Ambril nodded, she couldn’t agree more.

“It be a grand, fine garden!” Bummil rocked back and forth and grinned foolishly up at Ambril until Baldot hit him with his hat.

“You be getting all the deliveries done?” Ygg came up just then.

Baldot snorted, “easy as a lay-about afternoon! We even snuck some into Twid’s tea! Dried up old Newt that she is.”

Ygg’s face turned thunderous. “I told you to be staying away from her! She don’t cotton to magic folk. If’n she 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 be askin’ questions---too may questions. Then they’d be trying to send me back to Chert, thinking it be best for me, that be 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, the tea nought had any effect on her. Some folks be hopeless.” Baldot sniffed, “pity that, I’d a like to have seen her somersaulting down the stairs like old Mrs. Dogwood.”

He cleared his throat, then 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 now 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 to follow her up the Gazebo steps. She sat down heavily on a bench and patted the worn book, now bristling with bookmarks. She opened it 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. “You be getting your rumpus out of there! You’ll be damaging its teeth!” Baldot yelled.

Ambril jumped up to find that one of the beach umbrella flowers had swooped down and snatched up something. It grated and clunked as it chewed. She groaned as she caught sight of two flailing red metal legs.

“fLit again,” muttered Sully.

“It’s not my fault this time! He stowed away in my backpack,” Ambril said sheepishly.

“Can’t you at least keep him corralled in your pack?”

Ambril just shook her head, “Nope, he just unzips it, then gets into whatever trouble is handy.”

“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 and had managed to snare one of fLit’s legs. Three of the gnomes then lined up and began to pull hard on the rope, but the blossom was feeling feisty. It seemed to relish the fight. It pulled back while waggling its head back and force and refused to let the robot go.

“Never you mind, we’ve got him sorted!” shouted a particularly fat gnome with a curly, pointy hat as the three friends ran up. “This one’s called a Brellie plant on account of the umbrellie flowers. They get grumpy this time of year. The be anxious to launch.”

Ambril was jostled out of the way as a gnome began to tickle the flower just under the blossom with bunches of prickle grass. They now had to dodge the other Brellie blossoms, who had gotten excited and had begun to vigorously whack everything within reach---including each other. One unfortunate gnome failed to dodge a particularly powerful attack and sailed off over Ambril’s head. He landed in a tangle of brambles. After a moment, he scrambled out and grabbed a stick. Then he raced back to the fight, grinning.

These gnomes were warrior gardeners, Ambril thought. Thankfully, in a few minutes the plant started to giggle. Then it chuckled. Finally it broke into a belly laugh and spit out the robot. The three gnomes pulling on the rope suddenly lost their balance and fell backwards. Their stubby, little boots flailed the air. When the blossom realized it had been tickled out of a victory, it tossed its blossom in annoyance, then snapped its stem with resolve. Sucking in air with a whoosh, it blew it out with such force it knocked over all the gnomes left standing. Then it launched into the sky with a satisfied belch---looking curiously like a jelly fish.

“Look at Boucher, he be flying!” shouted Bummil. Sure enough Boucher, the fat gnome with the curly hat, 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 just managed to hook Boucher’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 about!” shouted Baldot. “He should have more sense than to play at this!”

“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 be learning that well and good.”

So the gnomes were anti-tech, that was no surprise. It seemed that most magic wielders were, thought Ambril.

“Come on now, break it up!” Ygg said calmly he pointed back to the garden. “That big one there be needing an attitude adjustment, don’t you think?” asked Ygg.

Another Brellie blossom had just slurped up a hapless gnome and was calmly chewing away.

“Slithey, that’s Blagoor!” Baldot swore, forgetting his rage. “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 around fLit until she was able to pull the robot down. But one little bud stubbornly refused to give up and remained entwined around his middle.

The ever annoying fLit struggled against it and grabbed at her medallion. He pulled hard enough to jerk it from under her shirt and into the light. It dazzled Ambril as it decorated the Gazebo with millions of tiny rainbows.

Something odd happened then. The moment her medallion connected with the budding vine, Ambril felt the thrum of the garden heighten and rush through her to combine with the bright energy of her medallion. The bud on the Vita Fiore flew open. There was the beautiful flower she had seen during Moonrise.

But Ambril sensed another presence there…watching her. She sensed right away that it wasn’t a friendly being. It seemed to suck all the bright energy of the day away. Ambril shivered. Not even the Cerberus had felt this awful. The Ledrith Glain dimmed again when she shoved the jewel under her shirt and pulled fLit clear of the vines. The flower bud instantly closed. With relief, Ambril felt the malevolent present slid away as well.

“Master Ygg!” Bummil ran up then. “Boucher’s in a bad way!” He huffed and pointed down the path. They followed Bummil to where Boucher 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?” Boucher 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 gnome.

“Marker? What Marker?” asked Sully.

“Well if you weren’t always gazing off into the distance like so many donkeys you’d of seen them by now.” Groused Baldot scornfully as he walked over and tapped one of the gray stones that lined the garden paths.

Ambril 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 which smelled like cough syrup.

“Pinwydden could use that! He had a sore throat last week. Here’s another one!” cried Sully and bent over another gray stone in front of an empty area. “Orphan Sock Tree.”

“I think I met that one earlier!” Ambril cried thinking about the sock covered clothesline-tree.

Looking down the path, Ambril now could see many markers. There was one next to Ambril’s foot. She read out, “Vixen Brill.”

“Hey! That’s one we need!” said Sully excitedly.

The Vixen Brill was a compact, six foot tall, frilly plant with long, eel like seedpods waving high above the greenery.

“Great! This looks easy, I’ll just grab a few of the leaves. That’s probably the Brill part.” said Sully and stepped off the path. Just as quickly though, she stepped back, “Ouch! It’s prickly!”

“Prickly my patootee! It be a sight more than that!” snorted Baldot, coming up behind them. “That be VIXEN Brill, you daft little tots! Vixen as in fox! It be slicing 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 barred its vicious, needle-like teeth at them as it weaved and bobbed. To Ambril it looked like it wanted more than just a finger. Suddenly one of them lashed out and ripped Ambril’s sleeve before she could scramble out of the way. She lost her balance and fell flat on her backside right next to Baldot.

Baldot laughed until he 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 a group of gnomes who were still giggling and barked, “Look lively! Bring the Lamb’s Ear!”

One of them trotted off and came back with a handful of soft, fuzzy things that were shaped just like lamb’s ears.

“You didn’t kill any cute, little lambs just for this?” asked Sully apprehensively.

Baldot looked offended, “Nay, that’s a right disgusting thought. Lamb’s 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. Then he began to swing them in front of the vixen pods.

“They love this stuff, can’t resist it!” He said as he began to inch sideways. “I nought be distracting these pods for fun, don’t you know. You be getting in there and grab some of that Brill!” The pods stopped snapping at Ambril and Sully and went into hunting mode. Their heads lowered as they eyed 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 gulped, then they turned back for more.

“We ain’t be having all day for this!” panted Baldot as one of the pods snapped at his elbow.

Ambril and Sully stealthily inched closer to the plant. Ambril spied the Orphan Sock tree lurking behind some bushes. It gave her an idea. She felt around for the maniacally plaid sock in her pocket and put it on one of her hands. It was just as soft as Lamb’s Ear and might make a good distraction. Though if the Vixen pods had any taste they might be put off by the whacky plaid.

Sully grunted as she stubbed her toe on a root, “O.K., so the gnomes know their way around a magical garden but they’re the rudest, nastiest garden ornaments I’ve ever laid eyes on!”

By then, they were well off the path and within grabbing range. “Ready?” Asked Sully, “on three…one, two---three!” Ambril lunged at the plant first, but then tripped over a knotty root and fell to her knees. She scrambled up only to find a Vixen seedpod smiling evilly just inches from her face. Ambril put her hands up to her face and waited for the attack. She heard the pod hiss. Then it tugged just once, before ripping the plaid sock right off her hand. She’d completely forgotten she had put it on. The seedpod pulled back triumphantly munching. When the other seedpods turned and began tearing at bits of sock still hanging from its mouth, Ambril turned and ran madly back to the path. Sully raced up behind her with handfuls of frilly leaves and three seed pods snapping at her heels.

Whew!” said Sully waving her leaves, “Success!”

“At least for you,” Ambril watched the last of her powerfully plaid sock disappear down the Vixen Pod’s throat. Sully stuffed the Brill into her bag then reopened the Astarte.

“There’s more we need.” Ambril said to Baldot as he trotted up with his fishing pole now empty of Lamb’s Ear.

“Slag Fern, we need the Gooberous part and the fiber from a medium size Bomber Nut.” 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 you be dawdling and keeping me waiting! It be making me grumpy!”

It was difficult to imagine a grumpier Baldot, Ambril mused as she jogged behind him. They rounded a bend and found a group of gnomes busily raking leaves and pruning some very unruly plants.

“Watch it Bandler!” yelled Baldot as the gigantic lion-shaped seed pod, which Ambril had avoided earlier, snapped viciously at a gnome. His mane was as ragged as a homeless man’s beard. “Just give that dandy-lion a little trim for starters, you can be trying for style next week.”

Baldot growled as he gestured to the overgrowth, “You see? These plants be having to fend for themselves so long, they’ve gone wild!” Then he cupped his hands over his mouth, “Bittle! We’ll be needing some Goober from that Slag Fern!”

Bittle was trying to clear an area around an enormously purple plant. To Ambril it looked just like an industrial-sized, tropical drink, complete with frilly paper umbrellas. Unfortunately, Ambril soon saw that the pretty, frilly parts hid lethal seedpods with teeth as long as Ambril’s middle finger. The neighboring plants quivered with every snap of its jaws. One of the seedpods grinned broadly as it snaked toward them hissing angrily. Nearby, another gnome lazily swung a lasso around his head. The trunk shifted slightly as several seedpods lunged in unison at Bittle who staved off their attack with his rake. Ambril heard a glubbing, sloshing sound. It seemed to come from within the plant’s cylindrical trunk.

“Anytime there Beadle no hurry.” Said Bittle sarcastically as he dove to one side again, barely avoiding another attack. Beadle seemed not to have heard him he was so focused on the sinuous movement of the seedpods. Finally, he effortlessly let the lasso go. It sailed over one of the seedpod’s head and snagged on its frilly headdress.

Beadle immediately pulled it taunt. “There, now Bittle you can stop your dancing and come help with the tugging.” He chuckled as he 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 to the rope, the 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? We don’t have a beaker!”

He rounded on her with his hands on his hips. “A pail maybe? Paper cup? Your Mam’s thimble collection? Anything?”

Sully shook her head and looked embarrassed.

Baldot grunted. “Would you be planning to cup your hands and carry it that way? Just what would you be doing without us?”

“We’d not be making Fixit Juice that’s for sure!” Sully said looking bothered.

Baldot muttered something under his breath as he marched over to the bristly hedge with boulder sized nuts that Ambril had run into earlier and picked off a nut the size of a weather balloon. 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. It grew louder…and started to tick faster.

“Borogoves! These Bomber Nuts be overripe!” 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 seedpods with frilly hats yelped and dug their heads into the dirt like Ostriches. All the gnomes dove for cover as 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 and pointed at them. Ambril and Sully wiped smelly goo from their eyes as they slipped and slid on the slime covered path.

After a few moments, Baldot threw Ambril something the size and shape of a giant’s bike helmet. “Here be your B---Bomber Nut shell,” he giggled. “The fiber be inside.”

It was half of the Bomber Nutshell he’d just pried open. Ambril reached inside and pulled out handfuls of what looked like greasy, monkey’s hair…but smelled worse.

“Who knew that magic would be so stinky?” complained Sully as she gagged, then held her nose.

Ambril stuffed wads of the fiber into Sully’s bag. Then they filled the nutshell with the slime they scraped from their clothes.

“Yuk!” said Sully as she gagged again. It tastes worse than it smells!”

Ambril decided not to test that out. She didn’t think it was possible anyway.

“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 watch out for 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 down the path toward the blue-green pond. It glittered invitingly.

“It’s like a postcard, isn’t it?” asked Sully, “picture perfect.”

They wriggled out of their shoes then jumped in the pond with their clothes on. The water cooled Ambril’s sticky body. The water seemed just the right temperature, which was odd considering it was winter. Ambril 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 aiding and abetting thankless garden ornaments.” With a sigh she turned toward the shore. “We’d better get back before they find a new way to embarrass us,” she began paddling back toward the Gazebo steps.

Ambril nodded and dove down for one more glide through the serene, sun streaked water. Her body felt almost weightless. The swush of her pants against her legs was all she could feel. When she was almost to the shore, she noticed a plastic ball floating half-submerged nearby. Probably one of the homeless people had tossed it in the pond, Ambril thought. She decided to tow it into shore and find a garbage can for it. She reached out to grab it, but her hand went right through it. Curiously, it seemed to be made of gelatin. It wriggled away and bobbed just out of Ambril’s reach. Then the worst thing possible happened…it terrified Ambril---by blinking.

Ambril realized then that she was staring at an enormous eye! She screamed as she lunged for the shore. Thankfully, her feet touched solid ground almost immediately and she scrambled out of the water, sputtering and coughing. Sully was already there.

“Wait, wait! Don’t tell me---another weird plant right?” Sully asked as she scanned the serene water anxiously. “The gnomes did try to warn us.”

Ambril stood staring at the lake. “I---I think I saw a Sea Monster.”

“A Sea Monster? What? Did it take a bite out of you?” She began inspecting Ambril for teeth marks.

Ambril purposely slowed her breathing. She was safe right? Why was she panicking? “No, but it---it blinked at me.”

Sully looked at her skeptically, “I was expecting at least a near death experience. So it just blinked at you? Come on! Just today we’ve been snapped at by rabid vixens, we escaped an explosion, and then were slimed with something that hopefully isn’t toxic---and you’re terrified by something blinking at you?” Sully picked up her shoes and swished them around in the pond.

“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. “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.”

Come to think of it the Sea Monster hadn’t seemed to want to hurt her. Ambril took one last look at the little lake then began rinsing out her shoes.

Sully was now fighting with her shoe’s soggy laces, “let’s hope these dry soon, the only thing worse than wet sneakers are slimy, wet sneakers.”

“This is going to sound really weird but I think I---recognized that thing.”

Sully looked incredulous. “You think you met this Sea Monster before? You’ve been holding out on us! What at a pond in Golden Gate Park? But don’t they usually hang out in black lagoons or burbling bogs?”

Ambril sighed, then put her face toward the sun. It all sounded so silly. Was her mind playing tricks on her?

“Come on let’s eat,” Sully took the Gazebo steps two at a time.

Ambril followed slowly. When she reached the top step she turned to look out over 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 triumphantly onto the shore. It may not help them understand this mad, captivating garden but at least she’d feel in charge of her own life for a little bit.

# Chapter 19 Fixit Juice

They found Ygg well into the sandwiches. “What be happening to you?” he asked as they dripped in and plunked down on a stone bench.

Ambril sighed, “it’s a long, slimy story, and smelly too! Pass the grapes.”

The food made Ambril feel a bit more normal. Afterwards, they lay back on the warm stone benches and watched puffy, white clouds scuttle overhead.

Sully pulled goo from her hair, “this stuff is soooo sticky!”

“It be perfect for Fixit juice.” Ygg was as he rooting hopefully through the lunch leavings.

Ambril noticed that Ygg was looking much healthier lately. She thought it might have something to do with Mrs. Sweetgum’s excellent food.

Sully knocked on her head sideways. Her eyebrows skyrocketed as a slime ball bounced out like a super ball. “That can’t be good, it’s starting to morph! We’d better get to work!”

She opened the Astarte, “Fixit Juice, recipe #158--- it seems pretty simple. We just put all this stuff together and stir.” She continued to read, “There is something that doesn’t make sense to me at the end though…but I guess we’ll just have to wing that part.” She rubbed her hands together and smiled at Ambril and Ygg, looking a little like a mad scientist, “ready?”

The Gnomes had brought over another Bomber Nutshell for them to use. This one was the size of half a boulder. 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.” Then she dumped out her bag. Under all the Bomber Nut fiber and Vixen Brill was a clump of wilted leaves. “These are from my Mom’s herb garden. She’d kill me if she caught me in there.”

Sully busily sorted 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, orange 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. “Here’s 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. They waited for the fireworks to start---but nothing happened.

“Now for the more interesting stuff.” Sully paused dramatically, “something tells me things are going to get a whole lot crazier now.” Then she unceremoniously dumped the Bomber Nut fiber and the Vixen Brill into the shell.

Instantly, they were enveloped by a cloud of yellow smoke which smelled of rotten eggs. Sully coughed as she reached for the Gooberous 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 excited skunks and dead cats. Apart from burping at her, it did nothing more.

“How long will it be doing this then?” asked Ygg as the remedy began to fizz and pop like firecrackers on Chinese New Year.

One of Sully’s eyebrows went up as she consulted the Astarte again. “So now we’ve come to the part I don’t understand. We’re supposed to give it a shot of life energy…whatever that is.” Sully frowned thoughtfully at the steaming pot. “I went to a wellness camp once…maybe we could try joining hands and meditating.”

“Just who you be trying to kill? You Dings lags!” shouted Baldot motioning wildly toward the top of the Gazebo. “Look! The Vita Fiore is about all-in!”

Through the haze, Ambril could see that Baldot was right. The noxious fumes were making the vines wilt. One of the larger buds began to sneeze. It reminded Ambril of Rosebud and her Ashera…Yes her Ashera! An idea flashed through her head. She rummaged through her backpack and raced for the concoction. It was now burping balls of gloop which acted like Molotov cocktails and pitted the ground with smoldering slime.

“What you be doing?” asked Ygg dubiously.

Ambril held her nose as she was advanced toward the foul smelling pot, “we hab da do somethig before we choke da death.” Ambril’s hand shook as she raised her Ashera. For what was probably the twentieth time that day, she found herself doing something dangerous that she didn’t understand. She didn’t know what would be the outcome so she sent out a silent plea for help. She didn’t want to die with slimy, wet sneakers on. Then she pushed away her fears and closed her eyes. Grasping the Ashera tightly in both hands, she timidly tapped the nutshell.

There was a loud boom and a brilliant flash of light inside Ambril’s head. Light swiftly enveloped her with vibrant energy. She felt fully alive and clearly present with the world. It was a marvelous sensation. Ambril basked in it, she never wanted it to end. But just as quickly as it had come, the bright energy was eclipsed by something dark and evil. It came for her and gripped her heart, filling it with cold despair. Then she was suddenly yanked sideways by something so powerful, 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. She asked her Ashera for light. Even it’s brilliant, true light struggled to pierce the swirling black fog around her. Slowly, an evil being began to take shape before her. Instinctively she began to search for some sense of what she was up against. It was difficult as the figure seemed to shift and change. It fluctuated between a form which writhed like a mass of eels, then shifted to a more human form.

“So kind of you to offer yourself to me, Ashera. But you were too open, too trusting---you made it too easy for me,” a gravely voice said. “I relish a good challenge, sadly you disappointed me.” Its grating laughter sent spiky chills through her. Ambril backed into a rough, stone wall then stepped on something small and furry. It whimpered and shifted away.

The shadow seemed to grow larger as it fed on her terror. Then she felt a tug on her neck as the creature grabbed at the chain which held her medallion and tried to rip it apart. The chain bit into her skin as it was pulled taunt---miraculously, it didn’t break.

After a few moments the shadowy form gave up and released it. “I want the Glain… I must have it.” The creature said patiently, “and you will give it to me.”

Ambril sensed a powerful coercion behind the voice. Ambril felt her hand rising of its own accord to finger the chain. The dark demon laughed a dry, croaking sound as it willed her to slip it over her head and hand it to it. She suddenly wanted to do this more than anything else in the world. It would feel so good to give in to it---but something in the back of her mind stopped her. She latched onto that kernel of resistance and focused all her energy on pushing the creature out of her mind. After several minutes of struggle, her hand lowered and her mind cleared.

The creature grunted in annoyance. Then it seized the chain again and began dragging her to it. “It is useless to resist me. You cannot win.”

Ambril struggled against the thing but it was incredibly strong. The chain of the medallion seemed to sear the back of her neck as the monster twisted the chain tighter and tighter. Spots formed in front of her eyes, then she began to lose consciousness. At the last minute, she kicked out at the monster, then pointed her Ashera at it and willed an attack.

Luckily, her Ashera responded. An arc of blue-white energy erupted, which surprised the creature long enough for Ambril to wrench free. She stumbled away and pressed her back to the wall, taking in as much of the fetid air as she could stand.

But there was nowhere to go, no way to hide from this evil being. The creature soon loomed over her again. It said musingly, “I see now the taking of this must be done carefully.” The thing grasped her medallion once again and slowly pulled her up off her feet until she dangled in the air. Its snake-like appendages grasped her, binding her arms to her side.

In moments, she was choking again. She realized she had only a few minutes left…death? She was too young---she had too much to do. 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 began to focus inward on her life---not her death. An image of her mom laughing with her over dinner flashed through her mind, then one of Zane smirking as he made a joke. She fast forwarded through the myriad of friendships she had made while growing up in San Francisco as the images began coming faster and faster. An image of Chao Feng puzzling over a checker board was followed instantly with images of Sully, Ygg, Miss Fern, Mrs. Sweetgum, even fLit her stupid robot…

There was an electric crack. The sound of tires screeched in her head followed by the tinkling of bells. A fairy, bright with energy, hovered within an inch of her nose. “*I hope this hurts, you idiot*!” he thought at her. He wasted no time and grabbed her by the nose (which hurt quite a lot), then 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 Bomber Nutshell was scorched and singed from the explosion. She saw several gnomes clambering out of the bushes and trees where they had been thrown by the blast. The fairy was nowhere to be seen.

Ygg found her first. “You be O.K.? That be some explosion!” he offered his hand. That Ashera of yourn be a sight too full of that life energy!”

Ambril took his hand and got unsteadily to her feet. Time seemed not to have passed. No one seemed to be aware that she had left. Had she just imagined the monster in the cave? “I’m O.K.”

Sully came up then, “what did you get tangled up in 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 the welts where the chain of her medallion had bitten into her skin. Fortunately there was no blood. “One of the vines maybe?” she shrugged and looked vaguely at the vines overhead..

“This mighta got in the way of things.” Blagoor trotted up with her robot, which had been badly mangled by the blast. 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 wouldna’ stay closed at first. Now it nought be opening.”

Ambril took the robot and looked at it suspiciously. She shook it gently and heard the faint sound of bells…

Ambril suddenly understood, “no worries, it’s just a stupid toy anyway,” she said. Then she jammed the pieces of her ruined robot roughly in her backpack and zipped it firmly shut.

“Bob’s Bots can fix him.” Ygg nodded. “He be able to fix anything.”

“Excepting us!” Grumbled Baldot, then he brightened. “Speaking of that!”

The monster in the cave had made Ambril forget all about the remedy. Looking over at the boulder sized nutshell, Ambril noted it had thankfully stopped steaming and smoking. A large group of gnomes had eagerly gathered around it.

Walking over, Ambril craned her neck to see inside, “did it work?”

The mixture was crystal clear and glossy smooth. It smelled of new rain.

“I guess we should be testing the stuff,” said Ygg looking around.

“I’ll do it!”

No, I be volunteering!”

No, It be me first!”

All the gnomes began arguing over who would be the first to be cured.

“Nay, nought you live un’s,” said Ygg. “What we be needing is a broken pot.”

“How’s this?” asked Bummil as he dragged a large, earthenware pot from under a bush. It was a three-footed jug. An ornate water jug supported by lion-like paws. It balanced the jug on its padded toes. A large piece of its handle was missing.

“I broke it this morning while I be 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 the piece in when Baldot stopped him.

Taking off his cap he said solemnly, “Fixit Joe be always saying 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 be this. I hope this pot be put all-together again.” He said solemnly, then stuck the broken piece back where it belonged.

When the pieces touched, Ambril heard a soft click. The break lines began to glow and fizzed 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. “It be as good as new!” he said cheerfully---just before he was knocked sideways.

The jug shook its fisted 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 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 he said matter-of-factly. “Do you fancy a job?” Then he 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 purposefully up the path. The jug boxed with the air a moment then reluctantly, as if it couldn’t think of anything better to do, it 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 be fixing me,” Baldot turned to Ygg. “And I ain’t be taking NO for an answer! We be waiting years for Fixit Joe--- he don’t seem to be coming back, so I be taking 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. Before he dipped the tip of his cap in, 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.

“Baldot?” asked Ambril anxiously, “are you alright?” She bent down so she was eye to eye with him.

For a long moment nothing happened, then slowly Baldot’s right eye opened.

Ygg held him up higher and yelled in his ear, “can you be hearing us?”

Baldot’s face slowly relaxed as he blinked both eyes, then 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, “I be fixed then?” he said to himself as he patted then shook himself like a dog. He hesitantly took a step---then another, “I be fixed!” He cried and began skipping around. “Look at me! I be all back together again!” He ended by doing 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 as he battled through waves of pointy hats to get to the pot. Ygg stayed until every gnome was dipped that night. Bummil came up and hugged Ambril’s kneecap seven times. Baldot grinned almost the entire evening. He frowned only when Bummil tried to hug him. The sun was setting over the mountains before they finished and got on their bikes to wind 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. “You know, I think this was the best day I’ve ever had.”

Ygg nodded too but Ambril stopped just short of agreeing with her when she remembered the creature in the dark cave.

“The best part is I don’t think we’ll have to make a new batch of fixit juice for a long, long time. Just before we left I checked it. It looked as if it had hardly been touched! Hopefully it will last forever because I don’t want to have to sneak into my Mom’s herb garden again!”

Sully stashed her bike by the side of the barn. “You want to stay for dinner?” She asked, “I’m sure it’ll be O.K.”

“Of course it is! You’re welcome anytime!” Sully’s mother heaved a basket filled with mountains of spinach and carrots over her garden gate. “Carrots and new potatoes tonight!”

Ygg nodded vigorously. Ambril was about to accept when she remembered the unfinished business she had, “I’m really tired tonight, thanks anyway.”

“Another time then,” said Sully’s mom as she headed for the kitchen door.

“See you tomorrow!” Ambril called to her friends then she shoved off. It had been an amazing day---terrifying too. 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.

# Chapter 20 Stupid Truths 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. There was nothing but slurping noises in the room 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 my Mom?”

“She’s resting. Feldez thought she looked a little tired.”

Ambril’s stomach tightened, unfortunately she agreed with him for once. Her mother had been dragging around the house like an old mop. But was it Feldez and his medicinal cure that was making her mother ill? What Ambril really wanted to do was to take Feldez by his expensive lapels and shove him into a deep, murky, puddle, preferably with lots of worms in it. But she knew she’d be grounded for at least a century if she tried anything like that. So she settled for fuming as she took the stairs two at a time. After locking her door, she turned and slammed her pack down hard onto her bed. It felt good.

“Come on out of there!” she said sharply as she faced the pack. She waited for a full minute---no reaction.

“I know you’re in there!” Ambril’s voice filled with anger. “And I know WHAT you are!” Ambril shoved the backpack hard. “So show yourself!”

Still no reaction.

Ambril was beyond anger now and toyed with the idea of dropping the back pack out of her two story window. But with her luck, it would land on Feldez’s car. Then she’d be grounded for two centuries.

“I hate being spied on! And I really hate when someone pretends to be something they’re not!” she sputtered. “SO GET OUT OF THERE NOW!” Ambril took out her frustrations by punching the bag hard.

With a bang, the backpack burst open. fLit emerged just long enough for the string to break around his chest. As the robot subsided back into the pack, an angry blur of light whizzed right at Ambril’s face.

It was the fairy all right, and he was angry too. He opened his mouth and yelled a stream of grating, metallic screeches and then poked her hard in the eye.

Ambril jumped back and put a hand to her eye.

The fairy screeched more grating sounds, then switched to piano destruction followed by the sound of a dentist’s drill. He streaked around the room before zipping back and kicking Ambril in the nose.

“Knock it off!” said Ambril raising her arms defensively. But the fairy was too fast. He zipped in to kick or poke, then was away again before she had time to react. 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 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?”

Sounds of an entire symphony of musical instruments being crushed in a trash compactor while being played filled her head followed by a head-on collision.

“You don’t want to be here I can tell.” Ambril bit her lip as the fairy pulled her hair hard. “I don’t want you here either. So just tell me why you’re doing this.”

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, maybe you don’t want to now, but can you think of another way?”

The fairy looked disgusted but then he opened his mouth. Ambril heard a torrent of bell tones followed by some loud clangs. Then the fairy screwed up his face with glared at her. Ambril clearly heard 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!” It was pretty weird being insulted in her own head. Then she brightened, perhaps she could return the favor. She drew her eyebrows together and concentrated on willing some choice words back at him.

The fairy jumped and then punched her in the nose.

“So there, 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 a few more 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. Then a sniff. “*Unlike human-kind, we take our obligations seriously*.” The fairy flitted over 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 that 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…I really saved you by accident. I didn’t know what I was doing. Second, you repaid the favor this afternoon. You came and brought me back from that dark, evil place. Thanks by the way. So now here’s the big question. Why are you still here? Doesn’t that make us even?*” 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, then sat on by a baboon. The fairy now flew in tight circles around her head, which made Ambril very dizzy.

“*There isn’t anything more loathsome for a fairy than to be CHAINED to another being. But to a HUMAN-KIND? That’s the worst of the worst---as your kind is the lowest of the low!”*

The fairy slowed a little…enough for Ambril to catch sight of his face. It was no longer angry. He looked sad and frustrated. Ambril thought suddenly that there might be something more to this, something personal. Of course 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---accidentally that night in the forest and then today you saved mine. So we’re even.”* She walked over to her window and opened it wide, “*Thanks again---hasta La Vista---have a safe trip---you’re free!*”

But the fairy stayed where he was, watching her. She got the impression that he was struggling with something. “*It’s not that simple*.  *There are traditions to be upheld, protocol…”*

Ambril looked at him with distaste. “*And you call us stupid! Maybe not everything is covered by your precious protocol. It just means you change it up a little.*”

This time the fairy looked disgusted. “*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 jerk with wings who pokes me in the eye when he doesn’t like what I say.”*

The fairy poked her in the eye again---then went back to sulking near the window.

It slowly dawned on Ambril then. “*It’s not your stupid protocol, something else is keeping you here, something you can’t figure out.”*

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, “*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 from your own stupidity! Today’s a good example. You practically gave it to him!”*

“*You mean the creature in the cave?*” asked Ambril. *“What was that thing?”*

The fairy shrugged. “*Moroz was once human but now…who knows what it is?”*

“*Moroz? That was Moroz*?” Ambril was stunned.

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 very high price for that trust.”* The fairy shot a hateful glance at Ambril. “*He betrayed us, of course. So we vowed to never have any dealings with your kind…EVER again*.” The fairy’s shoulders sagged just a little. “*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. Really it’s one of the most powerful things on earth. To a Tylwith, it is sacred. We once thought better of human-kind and foolishly shared it with you. We then learned the hard way how unreliable and untrustworthy human-kind can be. Moroz was the last straw.”* He drew his eyebrows together in concentration. “*So I must collect the Ledrith Glain and take it back to my people. But for some reason, the Ledrith Glain has chosen you as its bearer*.” Ambril could feel his curious probing. “*It’s been centuries since it has chosen a bearer. What I cannot understand is why it has chosen a lowly human-kind. This has never happened before.”* 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 at Ambril looking mystified. “*I think it’s might have become defective.”*

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, you half eaten sausage!*” fLit answered her unasked question.

Ambril shuddered at his intrusion into her thoughts. She realized she had absolutely no privacy around him. Trying to clear her mind she held up the medallion, “*so I’m the only human 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! It just doesn’t make any sense at all. 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 before for it to hurt anymore. Not for the first time, she thought about how ridiculous it all was. Did they really expect a normal, average kid to go on this big quest and save the world? She stood there thinking about the Dullaith attack and the creature in the cave. “*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 and lit up the fairy’s face. A look of longing tinged with greed crossed it. He sighed heavily, “*This isn’t going to work. I’ve tried to take this off you at least once a night. But just in case*---”

In a flash the fairy flew over, grabbed the chain then 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 with the fairy attached. 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 around her neck. Then she went to her backpack and pulled out her Ashera. An idea slowly formed in her head.

She turned to the fairy. “*You’re rude and ridiculously arrogant---but you’re right. I’m too young and inexperienced to be carrying these things around. Attracting monsters everywhere I go. But if I can’t give them away, I have to learn how to use them somehow. Both because I need to learn how 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 and comes with its own instructions.*” He smirked as he pointed to the decorative lines and images on it.

Ambril resisted the urge to tweak his wings. “*I* *can’t believe I’m doing this. Do you think---you could teach me how to use these things?”*

The fairy was instantly offended. He flashed across the room and knocked over all her books. 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, right*.”

She was treated to a crescendo of broken glass ending with a tinkle of bells.

“*What have you got to lose?”*

fLit drifted back to her amid a chorus of blaring car horns. “*Just the respect of all Tylwiths. Associating with human-kind is worse than bringing home a flatulent toad for tea!*” He studied her, then he grimaced, “*Hold it lower down, like a wand…not a tube of human-kind 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 protective wards, you must have wards around your person at all times now that we know Moroz is aware you have the Ledrith Glain. Then we’ll move onto defensive and offensive moves and into, sighting…you must constantly practice magic methodology of course---Visualize, Focus, then Will it to happen.”* He rolled his eyes, *Of course you’re so ploddingly slow you’ll be middle aged before we’re half done*.” 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 had been weakened by the Morte Cell. But I’ve recovered enough to make myself invisible at least some of the time.”* He squinted at Ambril’s messy head, *“Or perhaps 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 would her friends take it when they found out she’d allowed a fairy to spy on them? 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 are safe in this house and at school, they are both 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 21 An Uplifting Adventure

The days marched on. School began to take a back seat to fLit’s nightly instruction. The fairy proved to be an experienced magic wielder but not a patient teacher. But she was learning. By Christmas she had been able to fashion a couple of simple, protective wards. They hadn’t been pretty but they seemed to work. fLit had tested them by throwing energy balls at her for about an hour, smiling all the time.

Sully had surprised her with a pot of whistling reeds for Christmas. They whistled Jingle Bells---off key. The plants were so proud of themselves that they whistled constantly---day and night. After three days and three longer nights, Ambril blearily smuggled the reeds out of the house and pleaded with the gnomes to do something with them. They had taken them to Fern’s garden and taught them a couple of rousing, Irish drinking songs. After which they acquired perfect pitch and whistled them perfectly.

Heavy rains in January and February had kept them from meeting at the Gazebo until Ygg made a fort of giant, piano shaped leaves and Sully figured out that green Bomber Nuts only grew warm when shaken and didn’t explode. Ambril brought a couple of old blankets over and they camped out almost every afternoon. While they warmed their hands over green Bomber Nuts and ate Mrs. Sweetgum’s snacks, they experimented with magic. Sully was teaching herself how to make remedies and often dragged Ambril and Ygg out into the garden to collect more ingredients. The more vicious the plant, the more Sully wanted a piece of them. But they had been lucky so far and still had all their fingers and toes.

Sometimes Ygg would try to teach them earth-kind magic. He taught them how to sense for water and how to hunt for Glain in the surrounding soil. But so far, Ambril had only been able to sense snails, and only if one crawled onto her shoe.

Ambril had taught them a little of what fLit had taught her but she had to pretend she’d figured it out on her own. She hated that. She hated having to lie about anything, especially to her friends. She knew how much they trusted her.

Ambril had grown increasingly anxious about her mom. Ever since the run in with Tittle at the Library, her mother had gotten thinner and thinner. She did brighten when she saw Ambril or Zane, however. She would ask Ambril about what was happening at school and Zane about his friends. But Ambril could see it was an effort for her. Ambril began to haunt Betula’s just so she’d have a new joke or silly story when she came home. It made her day when her mother smiled and Ambril could watch her cheeks grow rosy for just a little while.

Of course Feldez was to blame for everything. It was his fault they’d come back to Trelawnyd in the first place. And why did her mom need so many sleeping pills? To his credit, he did look concerned about her. Ambril heard him plead with her to get some fresh air on his way off to work more than once. Though Ambril wondered how sincere he was as he always ended up giving her more pills.

To avoid thinking about her mom, Ambril threw herself into Ashera training. Around Valentine’s day, fLit had begun to teach her fighting moves. She could now jab and slice and bash with style. She was also getting pretty good at controlling streams of energy. Even fLit appeared impressed, though it could also have been indigestion he was feeling, Ambril thought. It was hard to tell with fairies.

All that practicing made Ambril feel a lot more comfortable with magic. Her Ashera felt right in her hands now and seemed to respond to her thoughts almost before she had them.

She blinked blearily one spring morning as she coasted into school. The night before fLit had really put her through her paces using laser energy beams. She been a fraction of a second too slow with a protective ward during one of fLit’s more vicious assaults and lost all the hair off her arms. They stung a little. She put her bike away, then noticed Ygg sitting on the steps. He looked upset.

“Mrs. Twid suspects,” he said before she could even get out a Hello.

“What? Ambril had completely forgotten about Sunset Tea. Are you sure it’s that?” Ambril asked as she plopped down beside him. “She leads a sad little life---she has no friends. She’s just taking out her frustrations on you is all.”

“She be acting strange and hinting about wanting me gone.” Ygg said, his voice tight.

“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.”

“It be getting bad. Last night she ‘accidentally’ locked me in the cellar all night.”

“Accidentally?”

Ygg shrugged.

“You can bunk at our house anytime you know.” Sully cleared her throat. “Hey, let’s meet at the Gazebo later, I have a surprise!”

It was getting crowded on the playground. Gaggles of kids were milling around. Tiana winked at Ygg as she and her friends sashayed by.

Ygg moaned.

Sully mimicked Tiana’s giggle.

Ygg blushed, “You be keeping quiet, I have enough trouble to be worrying about!” The bell rang. They raced up the steps and into school just as it started to rain.

It rained all morning but stopped by the time they made it to the Gazebo. The sun made brief appearances from behind the clouds. After polishing off one of Mrs. Sweetgum’s snacks of homemade bread, wedges of cheese and cookies, Ambril leaned back and stared out at the garden. The gnomes’ hard work was apparent everywhere. The plants had acquired that well-tended look she’d noticed in Fern’s garden. The ground smelled sweet like spring, even the air seemed brighter. But 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 looking like a three year old on Christmas morning. “I played around with a few things.” She held out the box, “and came up with this!”

It was half full of ordinary, gray powder.

“Yeah? So?” Ygg squinted at it, looking dubious.

“It’s FLYING powder!” Sully said excitedly. She carefully opened the box and held it out again. “Here look!”

Ambril peered into the box. At first it looked like ordinary dust, but when she looked closer, she began to see tiny sparks exploding from its surface---like miniature 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 lots more grinding.” Sully looked ruefully at the powder, “want to try it out?”

It was Ambril’s turn to appear dubious. “Have you tested it yet? I mean I don’t really feel like shooting off into space or have it wear off too soon and plummet to the ground.”

Sully waved her off, “Come on, it’s not powerful enough for that! I tried it on my pillow last night and all it did was hover in the air for a few seconds. Then it came slowly 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.”

“Earth-kind be the type to keep their feet on the ground.” Ygg said nervously as he frowned at the powder. Then he took off his shoes anyway.

Sully ladled a heaping spoonful of gray powder into their shoes. “I thought if we put it inside our shoes it would be safer and not blow off unexpectedly.” 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 Astarte said.”

“That’s what the book be saying?” Ygg peered dubiously at the powder in his shoe.

“Do you really think I could make that up?” 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…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 foot, “It worked really well last night, maybe I didn’t put enough in!” She swooped down, grabbed the powder and began sprinkled it lightly over all three of them.

“Not so much!” was all Ygg got out before a great gust of wind came through the Gazebo, took the powder right out of the box and swirled it all around them.

Then things really started rocking and rolling.

“It be tingling!” 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 too 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 they could grab onto something, it swept them away. Ygg grabbed a vine, but the wind was so strong, it came loose in his hands. Still clutching a strand of vine, he blew away too.

Ambril found she was 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. Suddenly she had a lot more respect for dust motes and 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 tight, “I’d of lost me lunch in another half second!”

Ambril wasn’t about to tell him how close she had come to doing that too. “Sully said to 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 struggled to help him rearrange his legs before they ended up on the moon or plowing a tunnel through to China with their heads. After shooting off to the side, plummeting downward and gliding weirdly in a spiral, Ygg and Ambril finally got his legs to cross. They found themselves floating over the forest 500 feet up. Birds flew below them eyeing them suspiciously. Ygg sat rigidly upright with his eyes firmly closed.

Ambril knew how he felt. In another universe Ambril knew she would be enjoying this, but she couldn’t stop thinking about what would happen if the powder suddenly wore off. The ground was a long, painful way down.

Sully bobbed up next to them. “Hey look at that!” Sully pointed below them.

“I nought be doing that,” said Ygg nervously, and squeezed his eyes shut even more.

“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. You know there are so many variables when it comes to flying---like wind currents, air temperature, moisture in the air---lots and lots of variables.” Sully began to retie her shoelace.

“What happens when there’s moisture in the air?”

“It washes off I think---at any rate it stops working.”

Ambril froze for over Ygg’s shoulder, she saw to her horror that a massive thundercloud was steaming toward them at 90 miles an hour. “Hold on, we’re about to get hit by a very big variable!”

Seconds later they were engulfed in a freezing, fuzzy, whirling blanket of cold. Ygg must have panicked then. Ambril felt him push away flailing, leaving her lost in the grayness. “Sully Ygg! 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 above her. “Just relax Ygg, I’ll tow you down. Let me rearrange your feet a little then---Ygg---NO---let me do it---Wait!” Ambril was the one suddenly rammed by Ygg and Sully. They carried her along with them as they punched through the storm cloud and rocketed straight down toward the forest below.

“Pull up! Pull up!” screamed Sully but Ygg had gone rigid with fear again 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 said through clenched teeth. His eyes were round with fear as he peered down at the treetops below them.

Sully handed Ygg’s shoe to him. “Don’t put that on until I say so!” She said bossily, then started folding Ygg’s legs. She was interrupted by a bolt of lightning which snaked right under her nose. It was followed by a bone-jarring thunderclap. Ambril felt the hair on the back of her neck rise just before the rain began.

“The jig be up---so long, it be nice knowing ya!” Ygg yelled as another bolt of lightening zinged past them to zap one of the trees below them. Thunder rocketed around them.

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 with hurricane force. Like runaway trains, they entered the forest canopy.

“It’s gonna be rough!” shouted Ygg.

Duh, thought Ambril as the slick branches of a redwood tree whipped past her as she barreled through its branches. She instinctively put out her arms and tried to grab onto something but the wet needles 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 too 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!” she yelped as 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 be killing her if she nought be 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 be dead,” muttered Ygg.

The clear, high screech of a hawk sounded above them.

“Sully, where be you!” Ygg bellowed as he tried to wring out his jacket sleeve. Then he 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 heard the faint reply.

Relieved, they limped in the direction of her voice and found her in the middle of a clearing. As they broke free of the forest, the sun sent shafts of sunlight over the early spring grass.

Sully waved as she stumbled toward them. Her sweatshirt was torn but otherwise she looked all right. They ran out to meet her.

“I bounced off a Cedar tree, slid down a Eucalyptus then rolled until I hit something hard.” Sully patted her head gingerly, then winced. “Where the heck are we?”

Ambril was about to say something snide when she felt rather than heard the distant thump of something large running through the forest. It was coming their way.

The hawk screamed again, this time much louder. Everything was now ominously quiet in the forest. The birds had even stopped chirping. Ambril looked up and saw a gigantic gray bird at least three times the size of a regular hawk circling overhead. In the middle of the clearing, she felt small and exposed.

Ygg braced himself, then he looked sideways at Ambril. “You nought be calling another monster---accidentally? ”

Ambril was indignant, “How would I do that? I don’t even have my Ashera, it’s back in the Gazebo!”

Ygg looked uneasily around, “We be beyond the Wall here. It be best to be nought be in the open.” Ygg pointed to the trees which rimmed the clearing and broke into a trot.

Ambril turned to follow him---then 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, “*With your life!”*

Ambril opened her eyes and gasped for breath.

“Ambril, get a move on!” Sully beckoned to her as she watched the monstrous bird above them. Ygg had made it to the trees and slipped into the shadows. 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 fear of the hawk away. They were too loud to ignore. Could it be the Cerberus? Maybe she had called them without knowing it. Whatever it was, it was very close now. Ambril sprinted now for the trees and felt rather than saw the monster break through the trees behind her on the other side of the clearing.

Sully had reached the edge of the clearing by then. She was staring 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, she wasn’t going to make the trees. “Run!” she shouted to Sully, then she scrunched into a ball and half wedged her body under a rock as the deafening footsteps…stopped right behind her.

Wait, this was too familiar. 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 and ram 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,” Ambril heard Sid say quickly.

“Vamoose, ya yellow-bellied, old Coot! You know you’ve no business being here!”

An injured screech was followed by a 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 out of the underbrush.

“Ambril, are you O.K.? I could even feel how much that hawk hated you!” Sully limped over nursing a nasty scrape down one arm as Fowlclun brought the house down. Hendoeth stood astride her front porch, decked out in a big grin.

“My there ain’t nothing like sparring with an old enemy to git 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 she 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 and stopped. The doorway was blocked by a heap of beaming household junk.

“We came as soon as we could!” Quill piped up.

“And lost another tea cup and saucer along the way,” grumbled Brollie.

“Bandersnatch! Give a body some room!” groused Hendoeth.

Murmuring apologies, the household items cleared a path for them. Hendoeth flipped back one of her braids and lead the way inside.

Sully looked around in amazement, “You clean up well, Fowlclun!” She yelled into the rafters.

Ygg nodded appreciatively too. It dawned on Ambril that Sully and Ygg had only seen Fowlclun in his haunted house costume and smiled.

“Yep but it sure takes a whole lot of elbow grease,” Hendoeth jerked her thumb at Jute, “it’s a lucky thing Jute’s so handy.”

Jute rolled his eyes and suddenly produced sixteen hands, “Isn’t it? I hate it though, all that hot water makes my ends frizzle.”

Sid nodded to Ambril then to Hendoeth as they sat down on the big sofa. “I will be off then, I must get back to the Library.” He said as he slid through the door and out into the forest.

Hendoeth jerked her thumb at the door, “You should thank him someday, it was him that sounded the alarm you’d gone over the Wall.”

“How’d he know? We didn’t tell anyone what we were doing?” Ambril asked.

Hendoeth cocked her head and twinkled, “Sid’s got a lot more to him than shows that’s for sure. And he likes you---he’s on your side, Darlin’.”

Quill bustled over with a first aid kit clutched in her feathers. “Let’s have a look at that arm---it’s Sully, right?” She hopped up on the sofa to examine Sully’s arm.

The room lurched to the side as Fowlclun got under way, making a jewel flower slide toward the edge of the coffee table. Ambril managed to catch Tweek before she fell off.

“Mercy, that was close!” Hendoeth said, “Ya alright in there Tweekie girl?” The flower glowed faintly. Ambril heard bells tinkle softly in her head as the flower glowed warm in her hands.

“That’s carved like a Vita 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. That flower’s mighty rare outside of these hills, almost forgotten.” Hendoeth frowned as she took the glittering flower from Ambril. “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 worse, forgetting yourself or not knowing what’s going on. Why did that hawk attack me? I need another monster coming after me like a hole in the head.”

Hendoeth grunted as her face turned thunderous. “That Gray she-devil! She’s got no business in my forest! She’s ain’t as bad as a Dullaith. No, she ain’t pure evil. But neither is she fit to teach Sunday School.” Hendoeth rubbed one of Tweek’s petals.

“That there was the Gray Lady. She takes a hawk form in this world. She was once a great magic wielder who fell from grace for some powerful bad magic she did. To pay for her sins she was ordered to live in the Gray Lands. The land of In-Between. It’s the place you go when you’re too damaged to go on. Many think that living there among the lost for so long---made the Gray Lady lose her own way---and her mind.”

Hendoeth looked curiously at Ambril. “I don’t know why she’s coming after you, darlin’ but I’ve a notion it ain’t entirely clear to her either.” 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? You’ll be safe as babies in a cradle. That Wall’s strong enough to hold back Hades himself.”

Ambril thought of the Shadow Hounds ramming and clawing the Wall but still not getting through. 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. Sparks flew everywhere as he wagged his tail. Teg’s stubby beak opened in a grin as his amber eyes stared up at Ambril adoringly. 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 ever-one, he’s gonna blow!” Hendoeth barked, “Brollie! Grab the rug!”

“Why is it always me?” Brollie rolled his eyes then pegged over and nudged it with his pointy part. The rug neatly rolled up and banged gently into the sofa.

The gryphon screwed up his nose again and huffed once, twice and then…

“Take cover!” Hendoeth shoved the kids behind the sofa, then crouched down behind them.

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.

“It’s O.K. sweetie. Nothing’s burning, not even my new curtains!” Hendoeth yelled into the rafters as she reached over and stroked the feathered wall.

Ambril looked over at the fireplace and stopped short. A scaly, red tail wagged all by itself in the fireplace. It was attached to nothing but thin air. It looked like Teg hadn’t sneezed all of him away this time. The tail flicked to the left, stirring up clouds of soot.

“Slithey!” 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 then 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.

“Any one hungry?” 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 it’s time to make Jute jealous,” said Hendoeth. “Tell us all what happened back there.” Hendoeth bounced on the sofa and beckoned to Ambril and her friends. “But you best start with when we last saw you, Halloween warn’t it?”

And they began. First Ambril talked, then Sully and Ygg added their part to the story of finding the Astarte, Mrs. Twid’s tea and the gnomes. When they got to the flying powder, Hendoeth laughed so hard that Ambril thought she was have a heart attack.

After they finished, Hendoeth wiped her eyes. “Lemme see that stuff.”

Sully pulled out the empty plastic box from her pocket. “We spilled some of it. Then the wind took the rest.”

“YOU be spilling it, ya mean,” groused Ygg.

Hendoeth gave it a sharp rap with her knuckles and peered inside. “There’s still some left.”

Ambril could see a light dusting of powder coating the bottom of the container.

“This might just be enough, I reckon,” Hendoeth mused.

“For what?” asked Ygg, his eyes getting a little too wide.

“Getting’ you back over the Wall, that’s what!” Hendoeth jumped to her feet. “It’s hard on Fowlclun to be going back and forth.”

Ambril realized with a start that Fowlclun was standing still. 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, 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. “Off you go. Remember ya get just the one jump. Try and make it a good one.”

“We be knowing that much,” said Ygg rubbing the bump on his forehead.

Ambril stepped off Fowlclun’s porch and onto Trelawnyd’s formidable Wall. It struck out in a long line in both directions and looked to be at least five feet thick. As her feet 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?” Ambril hoped Ygg hadn’t heard that. He was standing well back from the edge looking apprehensively at the ground.

Sully had squeezed her eyes shut, intent on something, “I think I’m feeling it!” she said excitedly. Grabbing Ygg’s hand, she dragged 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, “’til---maybe next week.”

By then, Ambril felt something too. It was a light-headed, tingling feeling, which made her nose twitch and her ears wiggle.

“O.K. quit 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 gave his hand a shake.

Ygg clenched his teeth and wrinkled his nose before he opened his eyes again.

“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 while Ygg lagged behind. Just before he jumped Ambril had 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 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 bush, 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?” It was Ygg whose jump hadn’t been nearly high enough. He had gotten tangled in the overgrowth next to the Wall---AND with the wrong sort of plant.

The brambles shifted to reveal long rows of shiny thorns, which glinted around a large hole. It wrapped its spiky tendrils around Ygg’s ankle and began pulling him toward the hole. 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 it pulled its brambles back and disappeared into the greenery. Almost as an afterthought Ygg was flung at the Gazebo.

He landed on the roof and then rolled nearly off the edge but he managed to grab some of 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 the flying powder before you took off.” She tried to pull Ygg to his feet. “So your jump wasn’t high enough and---”

Ygg shook them both off. “By the Glain! I nought be some science experiment of yourn. I just want to be breathing in and out for a minute!” said Ygg as he crawled over to a bench.

“Any more damage?” asked Ambril looking him over for new bite marks.

Ygg moved his arms and legs experimentally as he got to his feet. “It be hard to tell, I be so bunged up all ready. But I be knowing now---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 22 A Short Visit From Someone too Large

But their day hadn’t quite ended. 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 sheared off into a bush. Something gripped her tightly around the middle.

“Iggy? That you Ygg boy?” A deep, gravelly voice boomed in her ear. She rose in the air until she was parked in front of a broad, flat face. It grinned malevolently as it displayed an array of crooked, yellow teeth. Then the smile faded, “nought Yggy boy,” he grunted and tossed Ambril away.

Fortunately, the garden was still so overgrown in that part that Ambril wasn’t flung far. She landed in a tall, prickly bush, then half-slid, half-fell to the ground. She was getting good at that. 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 eight 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 which looked like it had once been a windsock at an airport covered the other foot. ‘Alaska, Go Nanooks!’ was printed across the top.

“You be putting me down!” panted Ygg his face now a nasty shade of lavender.

“Why I be putting you down? You be worth too much!” Said the big man as he turning Ygg from side to side as if he were a toy. “I be taking you back to Chert now to collect me money.” He turned toward the forest 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 narrowed as he said accusingly. “How you be knowing that? You be the one to take it?”

Ambril backed up 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, right? New boots would give you blisters for at least a week!” Ambril put on her best used-car salesman smile.

“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 be putting 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 that be? That be encouraging! Like the plan where the dogs of hell be coming after us? Or like the plan where we be shooting off into space using 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.” he wheezed. Then he nodded grudgingly at the bounty hunter. “I won’t be running and hiding. You can be putting me down.”

The big man looked unconvinced, “by the Glain you swear?”

Ygg nodded slowly, “by the Glain, I swear.”

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 worked the pedals, one steered and there were three in the basket with sticks.

“No prisoners!” Shouted Baldot as the bike crashed into the big man’s boot and upended itself. It launched the gnomes straight at the amazed bounty hunter. The gnomes grabbed hold of the first hairy thing they could and began kicking, biting and poking him.

“You’re ruining everything, knock it off!” Sully began and started pulling off whatever gnome she could get her hands on.

But the gnomes paid no attention to anything but the glorious fight. “You be leaving 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. It was enough to send every gnome flying.

“Snicker-snack!” Bummil yelled as he sailed over Ambril’s head. Ambril cringed when 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, holding his elbow. “Why didn’t you be saying 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.” 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 be leaving here without them.” he handed them over.

The giant took the packet, looked at it once…then again…and then gave it a long, appraising look before shoving it into one of his many pockets. He stood there a moment looking at Ygg. His eyebrows drew together, 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 be meeting here next saucer moon.”

There was a swish of air around Ambril, as suddenly the big man’s face appeared just inches from her own. Ambril could see where the hard lines from living rough had creased his face.

“You be bringing me mine boot---Orn’ you won’t be seeing your friend ever again. ” The giant 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 had just up and vanished.

Ambril felt the now familiar frizz of magic, the bounty hunter 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 be 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 at least 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 be helping 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 be doing it 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?” Blagoor said.

Ygg groaned as three other gnomes marched up with cracks and chips, “I be wishing it had been a sight less dandy. This be taking half the night!” He sighed as he got out the fixit juice and went to work on Blagoor’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 so nice!” 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 she 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 then of course you have to deal with creepy Mr. Junkson,” Sully cringed.

“It just be his lazy eye---you don’t be knowing what he be watching.”

Sully’s shoulders went up. “AND that he takes his teeth out and leaves them on the counter, plus he has long, dirty fingernails…and I don’t think he’s ever washed that jacket he wears. Admit it, he’s flat out creepy.”

Ygg just shrugged, “Creepy or no, he may be having something we could use.”

“I’ll check with my Mom too. It’s unbelievable the stuff we have in our basement.” Sully added then she turned back to Ygg. “You are still holding back. You know how I hate secrets---we’re all friends here, right?”

Ygg’s eye twitched as he pointed his chin at the deepening shadows, “Warn’t you be saying something about how your Mam’s been known to call the sheriff 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!” She pushed off hard and in another few seconds, she disappeared through the hedge.

Ambril’s heart nearly stopped when she realized the stars had been out so long they’d had babies. 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 sad and more than a little anxious 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 be friends?

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 23 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 didn’t have to clean anything,” Ambril whispered back. Though her mother had come downstairs just to yell at her. Ambril had thought that was a good thing…except for the yelling part.

The two friends were now huddled together in Betula’s alley across the street from the shoe store. Waiting for Ygg as usual. It was just past midnight and a little chilly. Sneaking out while being grounded had proved to be a lot easier than Ambril had expected, it helped that her mom was downing sleeping pills every night.

“I brought these to replace the boot with.” Sully pulled out something that looked like baby bootie 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 don’t’ you think?”

Ambril put her hands over her ears and said between clashes. “Won’t your---Mom miss---these?”

Sully shoved the clanging bronze booties back into her pack. “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.”

“It’s hard to tell what with all the geraniums growing out of it, but I think so. It sure is big enough.” Ambril responded.

“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’s front door. “What took you?” he asked.

Baldot then appeared, hovering 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 a sight noisier than droppin’ a wildcat in a bubbly bath.” He jerked his chin toward the junk shop next door. “Junkson there be a light sleeper.”

The three friends stared dumbly at each other, unsure of what to do next. It was Sully’s face that brightened first. She started rummaging around in her backpack, then popped up triumphantly with what looked like a bottle of perfume in her hands. “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. “But a few of the gnomes be needing something. Any of you been hanging out with farm animals?”

Several of the gnomes shrugged, then nodded.

Sully looked slightly injured, “this is a REMEDY not perfume! I call it Disappearing Spritzer.”

Baldot scoffed, “just how that be helping? Making the boot invisible nought be better than making it smell nice!” Baldot picked his teeth as he swung from his rope.

Sully was miffed now. “No! You spray this on a link in the chain---it disappears just long enough to pull the chain apart…you see?”

Some of the gnomes still looked mystified, but Sully handed the spritzer to Bummil anyway, then said firmly. “Just try it! But be careful where you spray it, it makes anything and everything 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 wrinkled her nose.

“I be trying it then!” In an instant, Bummil had swung up to the boot. Ambril heard a Pffft sound---then another, after which Baldot yelled. “Nought both chains at once, you Dings slag!---Look out below!” They managed to duck out of the way just as the boot 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. Expecting some sort of reaction, they waited in the dark. Thankfully, the street remained quiet. Finally Ambril let her breath out in a soft rush of relief and smiled at Ygg.

Bummil and Baldot stepped out from the shadows as Bummil said. “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. There was a shotgun in his hands. “Thieves! Beggars! Lottery losers! You keep away from my valuables, you hear?” He banged the butt of his shotgun on the ground with resolve. The sharp crack it made 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 the little ceramic man to the safety of the shadows, Junkson spotted him. He gawked at the ceramic apparition as Baldot marched right by him. He stared after the headless gnome in disbelief for a few minutes. Then he straightened. A cunning little smile toyed with his face. He sneakily looked up and down the quiet street, then followed the zombie gnome. Carefully he scooped him up and tip toed back into his shop. Ambril heard 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 be taking care of himself---once he is himself. It’s Junkson I be worried about. He could be calling the police in there.” Ygg beckoned to Ambril and Sully to follow before he slunk over to the junk shop’s dirty windows and peered inside. In the glow of a desk light, Ambril watched Junkson gloat as he set Baldot on his back and watched the gnome’s body continue to walk.

“The spritzer 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’s head materialized. Baldot came to his senses, blinked, then froze.

When Junkson turned back his face went from gleeful greed to disappointment in a heartbeat. For instead of a unique and possibly valuable object he found an ordinary garden gnome lying on his desk. He spent the next fifteen minutes feeling around for a switch and examining Baldot’s neck. Then he began banging, poking and at the very last, wrenching Baldot’s head off. Finally he gave up. He opened a large, wooden cupboard behind the counter and locked Baldot inside. Mumbling foul things to the universe, he turned off the lights and limped up the stairs. Silence settled around the room comfortingly.

“Now what do we do?” whispered Sully, “Baldot’s locked inside the cupboard!”

Ygg just chuckled, “He be a gnome, he be figuring what to do right quick!”

Bummil was already working on the junk shop door. The little man expertly jiggled it---just once. Ambril heard several clicks, squeals and thunks before it whispered open. They followed Bummil inside.

Ambril looked around, then 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 a flowery arm chair nipped at her sweatshirt. After that, Ambril kept her head down as she followed Sully and Ygg to the cupboard behind the counter.

As Sully reached for the knob, it miraculously slid open. Baldot stood there with a bag over one shoulder. He winked and then 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. They 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 had already dragged the dirty, black boot across the street. Ygg pounced on it and looked it over carefully under the street light. He looked up, grinning hugely. “It be having the same buckle---and it be about the right size. This might could be the bounty hunter’s boot!”

Sully smiled, “that went much better than expected. We have the boot and no one even lost a limb.”

“You’re forgettin’ Baldot be losing his head---but it be only temporary, and nought be counted.” Put in Bummil, sounding only a little disappointed.

“Do you be having any fixit juice on you?” Baldot asked Ygg.

Ygg pulled out a vial and held it out. “You be speaking too soon, Sully. Who be hurt now?”

“It nought be for one of us, you Ninny! It be for this fine thing!” Baldot pulled out an ornate ladies shoe from his bag. It looked big enough for a basketball player. It laced up the side in a quaint, old-fashioned way but the ornate buckle had snapped loose and the heel had broken off.

“Hey! That’s the missing shoe! You know, the one that was stolen last summer? The black boot replaced it. Where’d you find it?” Sully gasped.

Baldot frowned at her. “It be mine now! I nearly broke my patootee on it in Junkson’s cupboard. It nought be Mrs. Flood’s no more! I be taking it to ease the pain I be enduring at the hands of that snot-nosed codger. He almost 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…just so’s he could be hiding it in his cupboard?”

“I be finding it fair and square! If’n the old woman *misplaced* it ‘afore, that’s nought to do with me!” Baldot groused and glared at Sully as if he’d like to boil her in beet juice.

Ambril nudged her friend, “You’re going to have to give him something in exchange. Offer him something.” She whispered.

Sully rolled her eyes. “All I have are the horrible brass bootie chimes---like that’s going to work!”

“Just try it! Reasoning with him sure isn’t working.”

Sully sighed as she pulled out the clattering, clanking booties. “I know it’s not much but would you take these instead? They’re real bronze!”

Baldot’s mouth dropped open as he stared up at the shoes, which now were making noises like miniature train wrecks. A look of beautific admiration filled his face. “They be just like me Mollie’s shoes! She be wearing booties just like those!” He reached up and grabbed one of the uglier booties and held it to his chest.

“Mollie’s a girl’s name---so there are girl gnomes around here too?” Sully asked.

Bummil nodded, then sighed. “It be a long, sad story with lots of arguing in it. Ending with them all running off, never to be seen again.”

“I guess this means you’ll take them in exchange for the ladies shoe!”

Baldot nodded still hugging the bootie.

Ygg had just finished repairing the nowhere-near-dainty shoe. He stopped to stare at the ornate buckle closely, “I be seeing this somewhere… but I can’t be placing it.”

Ambril leaned over his shoulder and saw that the buckle looked a lot like the Derwyn family crest, but this one had a portrait of a man inside it. But before she could ponder this interesting development, the shoe began to quiver.

Sully gasped, “you didn’t use fixit juice on that thing did you? Don’t you remember what happened with the three legged jug?”

Ygg blanched as he took a giant step back just as the shoe’s toe twitched slightly. Before Ygg could clamp both hands on it, the shoe shook itself, then hopped into the shadows. Ambril heard munching sounds and smelled something pungent.

“It seems to be liking geraniums,” mused Bummil.

“Great, how do we get a living shoe up on Mrs. Flood’s sign?” Sully asked.

Bummil squared his shoulders. “All objects want to be useful is all, let me be talking to it a bit.” He marched over to where the sounds of munching were loudest. “Pardon please! We be having an important job that needs doing. You be interested?”

The munching continued.

“It be a job requiring lots of---high level observation---only the keenest eye-lets will do.”

The munching continued.

“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 be letting anyone see you doing your observing. You be up to it?”

The shoe wrinkled its toes thoughtfully, then twitched its top up and down as if to agree.

Bummil beckoned to the shoe, then marched back across the street. Ambril watched him gather up some of the geraniums from the pavement and plant them in the shoe before hoisting it into place.

They watched the shoe swing gently back and forth as it nipped at the geraniums.

Ygg yawned as he picked up the big, black boot and dusted it off. “I be taking this back home to clean it up.” He squinted up at the moon. “I be guessing the moon might could be saucer full in a few days.”

“Well that’s a relief!” Sully said sarcastically. “I’ll be ungrounded just in time to risk getting grounded again!” She pulled her bike out of the rack and slid onto the seat.

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. It had looked a little familiar to her too.

# Chapter 24 Bounty Hunter

A few days later Ambril and Sully were hurriedly eating 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 just had to get out of there today---cleaning the tractor engine put me over the edge.” Sully said, then she took a huge bite of cookie.

“I be having a time bringing this here, and used up half of Mrs. Twid’s paper to be covering it.” He tore off the string and paper to proudly show off a now shiny, black, buckled boot. Ambril could see that Ygg had worked hard. The leather looked smooth and supple and 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, 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 caked with mud and had cracked in several places. Finally, the big man sat down on a bench, removed his filthy ‘Go Nanucks!’ sock, then slipped the boot on. He stood up and wriggled his toes.

“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 solemnly. “I be holding up my end of the bargain, I nought be taking you in.” He reached into one of his pockets and pulled out Ygg’s leather packet. Then he tossed it to him. “Those be from your Mam?”

Ygg started, “you be reading me letters?” he asked angrily.

The bounty hunter shrugged. “I nought had much else to be doing while waiting for the moon to fill out. Be your Da’s name Daegon Drasil then?” He asked casually, though Ambril could tell he really wanted to know.

Ygg scrunched his face up, looking both surprised and angry. Then he nodded, “Nought that it be 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 me schooling. 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. “A Twid be nought a true relation to earth-kind.”

“She be mine, she’s me Mam’s cousin.”

“But she be nought true. She be nought caring for you, I be seeing that.”

Ygg took a step back as the color drained from his face. “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? I be warning you, you nought be taking me without a fight.”

The big man chuckled as he straightened up to his full height and let his body fill the interior of the Gazebo. He gave Ygg another long look before slowly shaking his head. “I nought be brewing more trouble for ye, 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 a banging exit doesn’t he?” Asked Sully as she settled back on the warm stone floor. “I don’t know about you but I’m glad that’s over! I guess that means you’re safe now, Ygg!”

But Ygg didn’t look as if he felt safe at all as he stared up at the forested mountains, “for now, I be.”

# Chapter 25 Gossip at Betula’s

Friday afternoon a few weeks later found them shoving their bikes into the rack in front of Betula’s. Ambril heard a shout behind her and turned to see Lance and his posse chasing someone into the alley.

“Not again, can’t they give him a rest?” Sully groused as they heard the unmistakable sounds of a scuffle coming from around the corner.

They raced over and peered around the corner just in time to see Lance shoving Riley up against a wall.

“NO MORE! You’re the king of all nerds, you know that? Can’t you just be normal for once?” Lance bellowed and threw a rotten orange at his brother. “Get away from here! Dad said he’d ground you forever if he caught you at it again!”

The orange split open when it hit Riley’s chest. Orange pulp splattered all over Riley’s shirt and ran down his pants. But instead of hanging his head in shame as he had done so many times before, something in Riley seemed to snap.

Ambril happened to be looking right at Riley’s face. It went swiftly from confused and frightened to something cold and flinty. Then it hardened with resolve. Ambril waited for Riley to defend himself. This looked like the moment he would start to stand up for himself---finally.

But nothing happened. The moment passed. Riley stared coldly at his brother while he brushed off some of the sticky, orange mess from his shirt. “You’re gonna regret that,” he said quietly. Then ducking his head, he limped from the alley amid the catcalls and jeers of Lance’s buddies.

Sully shook her head as they turned back to Betula’s shop. “What a family! I’m sooo glad I’m an only child!” Come on, let’s see if Betula has any new bugs!” Sully heaved a box out of her basket and waltzed through Betula’s front door.

Ygg followed quickly but Ambril stumbled on the sidewalk and fell. She hadn’t slept well last night, worrying about her mom. Mrs. Sweetgum had intervened and had now started to give her mom regular doses of her remedy tea. After a couple of sips, her mother seemed to take an interest in life again---until the tea wore off.

Zane barely spoke to Ambril now. He looked away whenever she entered the room. She could tell he blamed her for everything. Ambril didn’t know what to do. Every night after practicing with fLit, she worked on her Ashera, willing it to help her fix her family. But the Ashera either couldn’t or wouldn’t help her.

Desperate, she had even asked fLit for help. But the snitty fairy had just sniffed and said he wasn’t about to interfere with her little human-kind problems.

The practices were paying off though. She was now pretty good at focusing energy and using it to defend or attack. She just didn’t know how she was going to repair the burn marks on her bedroom walls.

Recently, she had noticed that fLit behaved a little better around her now. Though he wasn’t exactly kind either. Now he only occasionally insulted her. Ambril had gotten the feeling lately that she was learning faster than he thought she would. He had just started to teach her sighting.

“*Sighting*?”

“*Yes, when you look with your being and not your eyes.”*

Ambril had been just plain confused. “*Come again*?”

fLit had looked pained. “*Right, I forgot what a plodder you are*.” He had sighed dismissively. “*Pick up your Ashera and close your eyes*.”

Ambril had done as she was told and was instantly surrounded by dense fog. It had rushed in and greeted her like an old friend.

fLit had appeared next to her, inside her head. “*Do you see all this*?” fLit had pointed at the fog. “*This is here because you can’t sight.*”

“*So---what do I do to gain sight?”*

*“You have to think---wider*.” Then the fairy had pushed out the fog with his hands. *“You have to focus your energy in a broadening circle. Some magic wielders can sit at the kitchen table and look around the world, literally.”*

Ambril had to think about that for a little while. Then she had tried it…and then tried it again…nothing. The fog had just swirled closer.

“*Try focusing on what’s next to you, not all of it at once. Start small, with one thing at a time.”*

Ambril had then tried again. This time she became aware of her computer…it’s pointy corners and then the window behind it…and the shelves above…Each time she had focused on the hazy images around her they began to clear away, until she and fLit had been standing in a fog free room.

“*O.K., so what? I can see all this stuff with my eyes open.*”

*“Keep going.”* fLit had said with a yawn, floating by horizontally, with his hands behind his head and his legs crossed

Ambril had grumbled but had gone back to work. She then pushed outward from her window to the tree beyond. The fog had cleared for her there. It was then she saw them---the little bits of glowing light. *“What are those?”*

“*Those are other beings. It’s their life’s energy you’re seeing*.” fLit had said*. “Magical beings are very bright with energy while the animals living in this tree are just animals. They glow less.”* He had continued. “*Sighting helps you detect other beings---magical or otherwise before they see you.”*

“*I see how that might come in handy.”*

“*Very handy, especially if you need to draw from them for your own use*.”

“*What do you mean by draw from them?”*

The clatter of household goods rolling down a flight of stairs had rattled through her head. *“Exactly what I said! We are all connected, all beings are sources of energy for us. You can draw from them whenever you need to.”*

“*What? You mean take their life’s energy*? *Doesn’t that hurt them?”*

*“What’s the problem? Especially if they’re lower life forms, Fairies do it all the time.*”

*“But don’t they need that life energy to, you know, live?”*

*“Don’t be silly, we take only what we need. Except in dire circumstances. Magical beings being of a higher order are naturally entitled to it.”*

*“We’re---entitled to behave like parasites and take someone’s life?”*

flit had gotten annoyed then, he had sent the sound of an avalanche roaring through the front of her mind. *“We never take enough to kill---not usually at least. But as I said, we are all connected. What of it?”*

*“What of it? It’s stealing! You’re deliberately taking something precious from other beings just because you can! You know what? I won’t.”* Ambril had then stubbornly folded her arms and refused to even attempt it. Eventually fLit had gotten angry enough to zip out the window in a huff, which is how most of their sessions ended.

Ambril really liked sighting though. It was something she could practice anywhere, anytime and there weren’t any burn marks to clean up afterward. When school got a little boring, that’s exactly what she did. She had gotten good enough to clear the mist from the entire school.

She smiled as she picked herself off the sidewalk and followed Ygg inside Betula’s shop.

Sully heaved her sweet smelling box over to where Betula was chatting with one of her customers.

“Here you go Betula, my Mom wanted you to have these early strawberries.” 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 twenty three screwdrivers? Don’t they all do the same thing?”

“Just think how bad it would have been had your folks found out what we’ve really been up to!” whispered Ambril.

Sully grinned back.

“Did you check out the shoe? Everyone seems to be glad it’s back.” Ambril nodded at Mrs. Flood who was out in front of her store proudly pointing out the sign to some elderly passerby’s.

Ygg squinted at it. “It be making the front page of the local newspaper, *The Mysterious Reappearance of the Buckled Shoe.* They even interviewed old Junkson.”

“What’d he say?”

“The usual, he be always raving about how the world be circling the drain and about little green men taking over the planet. Only this time he be saying they’re headless!”

They all grinned as Betula came over and set down glasses of lemonade and a big bowl of strawberries. Sully 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 someone?” She nodded to the shoe store across the street and whispered, “a real estate reason! Remember what Betula said about Twid? How she’d do just about anything to get rich?”

Sully leaned forward, the gleam of revelation in her eye, “I think Twid poisoned half the town with her nasty Sunset Tea to get at Mrs. Flood’s property!” Sully paused for affect, “Stay with me here! When Mrs. Flood started feeling poorly, Twid did her best Florence Nightingale imitation and swooped in to ‘help’ her with her store, her house and her investments! It was all going according to plan. I bet she could almost taste the caviar! She even succeeded at getting Mrs. Flood to put a For Sale sign in her window, but then suddenly, it stopped working. For some reason, Mrs. Flood started feeling better. The For Sale sign came down and her victim began feeling so good she started taking ballroom dancing classes.”

Sully took a long pull on her straw. “Now what would you do if you were Mrs. Twid? Would you just shrug and go back to clipping coupons?” 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 she be planning to poison only Mrs. Flood in front of God and everybody?” asked Ygg incredulously. “That be just stupid if’n you ask me. She could be going to jail.”

Sully shrugged, “Who would suspect her? Twid’s such an upstanding, church-going, old lady, why would anyone think she would poison her good friend?”

Ambril was shocked at how naive they had been. They should have thought of this before now…but what could they do?

Just then the door behind them opened and Ygg stiffened. Ambril knew who it was without even 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.

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 had become nearly as gray as her hair. She quivered so much that 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 right there for all to see---that way she gets to blame Betula! I bet she’s trying to get Mrs. Flood to have a fit right there.” growled Sully and jerked her thumb at the Sweet Shoppe. “And by the look of poor Mrs. Flood it might be today she gets her fatal dose. We have to see what’s going on!”

“Over here!” Ygg had his head in a half open window. “You can be seeing 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 remedy tea on you?” whispered Ambril as she watched Mrs. Flood struggling to keep from sliding out of 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 halfway 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 careful aim and threw the teabag at the pot. The bag almost made it but right at the last moment its trailing string caught on the handle and the bag fell short. It landed 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 be seeing something---but I nought did,” 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 snatched at her friend’s teacup.

But Mrs. Flood evaded her attempts. “I think it’s marvelous, this tea. It reminds me of some I had at Fern’s with those nice children.”

Mrs. Twid’s face suddenly tensed with anger. “What children?”

“Those nice children who were just here. After sipping Fern’s tea, I felt marvelous. Just as I do now!”

Mrs. Twid went very still. “You mean Ygg and---”

But that’s all Ambril heard. Someone suddenly 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 Mommy!” 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, flustered 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 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 a mango from her hair.

“What happened? Did she 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 house the night of her last recovery.”

Ygg started pacing the alley, his whole body stretched like a taunt wire.

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.”

“But first you’re gonna clean every one of my dishes!” She angrily motioned inside. “Just you---your friends have to leave.”

Ambril nodded as she wriggled back into her wet shoe and slopped to the door.

Just as Ambril slipped inside she heard Sully say, “you’re coming home with me tonight Ygg! No more Twid!”

Inside, Ambril squelched over to the sink and picked up the first of a massive stack of dirty dishes. With luck, she thought she’d be done next month.

As Ambril washed, she stole looks at the elderly ladies finishing their tea. She found that if she kept the water at a slow dribble she could eavesdrop.

She heard Mrs. Twid doing damage control. “I don’t know why we come here Daisy, it’s so noisy and distracting. Now 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. 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 paid no attention to her old friend. She was too busy 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.”

“No more Tea 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 anything dangerous, such as doing double flips off the counter or swinging from the ceiling fan as some of the other old folks had done.

Fortunately Mrs. Flood just giggled as she put down her teacup. Then 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!” She took a bite of scone.

“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 as she pointed 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 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. “You’re new tea is marvelous! I’ll be back for more tomorrow!” She patted Betula’s cheek before she skipped out the door.

Betula laughed a deep, heartfelt chuckle but looked a little mystified. “My she’s perked up!” She mused as 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 glared at her, then at Ambril as she flapped toward the door. She turned with her hand on the knob and sniffed. “I see where things stand now Betula.” Then she marched stiffly through the door and 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 and a half later Ambril dried the last dish as Betula turned the ‘OPEN to ‘CLOSED’ sign on her door and shooed the last customers out. Betula 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. “What I want to know is, what did you put in my tea? Don’t you deny it now! You must have know I wouldn’t take kindly to someone meddling with my food!” Her lips were a flat line.

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? They 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, though she kept the magical parts out. She nervously examined her sneaker as she finished, “---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. “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 two foot tall striped giraffe with the world’s longest tie.. Next to him lounged a white rabbit with red, high top sneakers. He leaned against a sugar coated Ferris Wheel. A tubby, black bear with a gold hoop in his ear and an eye patch stood stolidly 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 and vigorously coated everyone with sugar, “that’s how it’s done!”

“Red leave him be, 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.

“That was some powerful trouble.” Chimed in Shug, as the fat bear clambered out of the case. “But a fine adventure too!”

“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 bristled with 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 flipped a few switches and turned a knob, “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 firmly toward the door.

“They get nothing done with an audience. It’ll be quiet now in the alley.” Betula slung her arm around Ambril as they began walking down the silent, shadowy street. “Child, I done showed you my heart, now tell me your story---the real one.”

Ambril took a deep breath and let everything rush out. It was such a relief. “It happened just as I said except we found an old book in the Library called the Astarte…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. Then Ambril backed up and told her all about the Dullaith attack and her dad. 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 was quiet for a moment.

“You’ve given me a passel of things to think about. Why don’t you get along home now and let Mrs. Sweetgum feed you up. Give your Momma a hug and a kiss for me. I knew she’d been going over some rough ground since you folks came, but I had no idea how rough it was. I’ll bring over some strawberry shortcake and set with her soon.” Betula gave her a hug, “Bring me some of that remedy tea of yours and I’ll put it on the menu!” Betula waved as she watched Ambril ride away. By the time Betula retraced her steps, the shadowy figure had slipped away into the night.

# Chapter 26 Mrs. Twid Gets Dirty, Ygg comes Clean

Just after sunset the following evening, Ambril coasted down the hill to Miss Fern’s house for dinner. She was looking forward to eating with human beings instead of a snarling beast for once. Dinner at her house had become a nightmare. With her Mom eating in her room more, and Feldez out nearly every night, Ambril had to sit across from an angry, sullen Zane every night. When he was in a good mood, they ate in silence. When he wasn’t, he picked at her--- she chewed too loudly, she salted her food weird, her hair was ugly, her shirt was the wrong color. She knew it wasn’t really about chewing noises or how she handled the salt shaker. It was because the real stuff between them was off limits. Zane went ballistic if she even mentioned what had happened to their mom, their dad, even if she brought up Feldez. Zane would bark and snarl and tell her to quit mucking up everything, then he would slam out of the room.

Everything had gone well for Ygg it seemed. Sully had called to check up on her and told her that after a lot of arguing Ygg had finally agreed to stay at Sully’s house and help out on the farm. Somehow he’d managed to sneak 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, it wasn’t over. There would be fireworks when they ran into her again. 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!” Sully smiled as Ambril coasted up.

“My hands are still way too clean from washing all those stupid dishes. You’ll never guess what I found out!”

Betula’s a magic wielder?” Sully asked sweetly.

Ygg and Ambril couldn’t have looked more astonished if Ms. Breccia had just strolled down the street in a bunny suit.

“Betula? If’n Betula is then who else?” Ygg looked around as if he expected to see magic users jumping from the shadows and trying to turn them into Newts. Ygg turned to Sully, “Just how did you be figuring it out?”

Sully preened a little, then she shrugged, “It’s pretty obvious isn’t it? The sugar animals and bugs, they’re just a little too perfect.”

“I guess you figured out that those sugar animals are alive. Just like the gnomes, except they’re sweet and made of sugar. Maybe that’s why they’re so much easier to get along with.” Ambril mused.

Ygg and Sully just stared at her.

Then Ygg snapped his fingers. “So that be why the rabbit’s shoelaces be untied yesterweek! You be noticing how sometimes the Bear’s patch be switching from eye to eye?”

They all grinned at each other, savoring this shared secret.

They were interrupted by a slapping sound which seemed to come from down the street. Sully grabbed Ygg’s arm and pointed, “Is that who I think it is?” A figure approached them. She moved stiffly and resolutely. It was her long, flat feet on the pavement which made the slapping noise.

Mrs. Twid’s was huffing like she’d just eaten a whole bottle of extra hot salsa as she steamed toward them. Her wiry hands curled into fists as she stopped and bent over Ygg. “It was you all along, wasn’t it? I should have known! You---you nasty, stinking fool of a Miner’s son!” she hissed.

“Wait Mrs. Twid! Why don’t we just sit down and talk about this rationally—maybe over Tea?” began Sully.

Mrs. Twid didn’t even look at her. Her arm shot out and shoved her roughly away before she continued. “If it wasn’t for you, the great family of Twid would have risen to where it belongs! As the ruling force of Trelawnyd’s society!” Her jowls wobbled with every breath. “Before the Mine closed, we were like Gods to the villagers! Then the little people, those 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 you went behind my back and deliberately foiled my plans!” A manic 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 brothers today.”

Ygg went as still and white as a statue as he stared at her in horror. Mrs. Twid just watched him for a moment, fascinated by his tortured expression.

“Yes,” she continued in a singsong voice. “You’re brothers were delighted to hear of your whereabouts. They are on their way to collect you! Poor little Ygg, not able to finish school like his whiny, little Mommy wanted! Now you’ll go down the Mines to die like your Father did!”

Ambril went cold with worry. It all seemed so hopeless. Mrs. Twid had the law and Ygg’s family on her side. Try as she might she couldn’t think of one single thing that might help.

Fortunately she didn’t have to worry long. Two huge black boots landed next to Ambril with a resonant boom. Ambril nearly fell over as the bounty hunter stepped forward and grabbed Mrs. Twid around the waist.

“Let the boy bed going!” 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, “Run for your lives!” She tried to do just that but being several feet off the sidewalk her legs flailed while her arms pin wheeled. She looked just like a cartoon character. The bounty hunter looked at her in disgust. Then he 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 Mrs. Twid 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, “Excuse me but---did you just say you’re a Drasil? Are you related to Ygg?”

The big man squared his shoulders and turned a surprisingly gentle face toward Ygg, “that be true, I be your Unk Urgan. Nought till this moon, when I be reading yourn letters that I be learning who you be. Now I here to help me brother’s boy,” he strode over to his nephew.

By this time Ygg had caught his breath, but the shock of what had occurred hit him hard, “I---I nought be remembering any Uncle---me Da said nought about you.”

“Never? He never speak of me?” The big man asked.

Ygg shook his head, “I---I thank ye for your help. But now I best be going. I must be getting well away from here before me brothers come to take me back.” He said sadly.

Unk looked at him quizzically, then scratched his head. “What you be saying? Your Mam wish you to stay. I be speaking to her about it. She knows what’s besty for Yggy boy.”

“It’s me brothers, they nought want what be best for me, or care what me Mam wants, they be wanting what be best for them.” Ygg lowered his head looking beaten.

“What is it you haven’t told us?” Sully asked stridently, her hands on her hips. “The Mines wouldn’t go to all this trouble just for one young kid. They’re after YOU! Why?”

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 they be sending me away again.” Ygg lowered his head and stared at his shoes.

“Not telling the Mrs. Twids and Tittles I get---but we’re friends! How---how could you do that?” Sully asked looking both incredulous and hurt. “Ambril told you all about the Dullaith and everything---we mixed potions together and were almost chew toys for the Cerberus---and you still couldn’t trust us?”

Ambril felt horribly conflicted. On the one hand she felt betrayed by Ygg’s lies and the fact he hadn’t trusted them. On the other, she had been doing the same thing by not telling them about fLit.

“I---I be sorry,” said Ygg anxiously.

Ambril and Sully just stood there with folded arms until Ambril couldn’t stand it and asked, “so they want you back because you can find Glain for them?”

Ygg nodded, looking miserable, “they had me down the mines the day of the cave-in,” his body bent inward like a bow. “The engineers be telling them for weeks they be digging too fast---but they didna listen. I be hearing them give the order to leave the men---they nought even try to be digging them out. Me---me Da was down there…he died down there that day.”

Ygg 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 Mines…for the Mines? 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 want just the reward---they be wanting a higher place in the village...through me. I nought want it. I be never seeing the good without the tarnish of the bad now.”

Ambril felt her heart soften. She knew all about losing a father. She looked sideways at Sully and saw her shoulders had dropped just a hair.

Ygg turned, then looked them straight in the eye. “I nought have a right to, but I be asking for your forgiveness. After I be gone, I be wanting 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. “You nought be understanding. The Mines, they nought be letting me loose again, I be too good at finding them 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 as 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?” 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.” 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 guardy him.” He nodded at the pouch in the Chief’s hand.

Holding it at arm’s length, the Chief opened the pouch and gingerly pulled out a sealed envelope. There was a messily applied, red, wax seal with a dirty thumbprint in the center. Breaking the seal, he unfolded then read the letter inside. He looked carefully up at Unk and down at Ygg---twice---before handing it to Ygg.

“Does this look familiar?” 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 Unk, Urgan Drasil be taking up his care until he be growed and able to go his own way.**

**Hoping you Best Wishes,**

**Skylla Drasil**

Unk then handed some official looking papers to the chief along with a family photo. There was a toddler with wild hair 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. Next to her, Unk stood looking uncertainly into the camera.

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 be 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 he can stay with us on our farm!” said Sully.

“Or at my 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?”

*“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. You don’t have to 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 be no time to clean it! The Chief’ll just be getting 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 had been freshly scrubbed. As they raced up Ambril could see the gleam of the newly polished doorknob.

Inside Ambril barely recognized the place. All the spiders had been coaxed out and their webs swept away. The vines above them now wound contentedly through the rafters in peaceful coexistence. A blazing fire lit the room and a large teapot burbled garrulously on a hook just above the flames. The heaps of rusty equipment and trash had been removed and the floors were squeaky clean. The workbench had been transformed into a kitchen table with a large bowl of cherries set in the middle of it. The lounge chairs and sofa 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 dwarfed the other. It was large enough to drive a tractor through. Sully went straight over and looked inside the smaller one. “Hey Ygg, this must be your room!”

Ygg’s eyes grew wide, “I never be having me own room before, unless you count Twid’s garage as a room.” He said simply, then raced over with Ambril right behind him. The room was small but snug. There was a simple wooden table and chair. An overloaded bookshelf stood next to a bed covered with a patchwork quilt. The window was open to the garden.

Ygg gasped, “it’s me bed! Me books! Me 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 the way.” I be getting so angry I nearly left it for the wood sprites.” He looked hopefully at Ygg, “you be liking it?”

Ygg smiled so wide you could see a good way past his back molars. Then the sound of an angry, sci-fi creature filled the room. Ygg grabbed his belly and looked embarrassed. “Excuse me, I be that hungry.”

“Me too! Though I won’t broadcast it like that!” Giggled Sully as they all headed back out to the big room.

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! I know how you like them.” She smiled as she tugged the big door closed.

A cupboard door slammed as three gnomes tinked out from around the workbench. “Thought he be never leaving!” groused Baldot. “so what do you be thinking of the place?” He asked looking proudly around. “Not bad for fifteen minutes work!”

Ygg’s smile grew even more until it was much too big for his face. “This be right fine, right fine enough!” He said softly looking at everyone.

Baldot scowled at Bummil.“What you be waiting for you loll-about! Where be the supper fixin’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 into mugs.

“I’m starved!” said Ambril as they all grabbed a chair.

“Yum, my favorite!” exclaimed Sully eyeing the artichokes greedily.

After the 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 count 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 there be talk of a brother who be having to go away, but that be all.”

“I be just a wee boy then…younger than you when the Elders be taking me from me family---I be lonely… I nought be wanting that for you.” He looked resolutely at Ygg.

Ygg stared at him, understanding coming to him slowly. “ You must be---you be the throwback then.”

The big man nodded sadly. “That be what they call me.”

Ygg shook his head. “But Da didna’ say you be his brother.”

“What do you mean by throwback?” Sully put in.

“In Chert if’n you be growing too fast, too big, they be branding you a throwback.” Ygg shook his head sadly. “They be saying all throwbacks be too wild, the part of earth-kind that must be taken back to the wildness. Da told me once that he be watching the Elders be taking a young tot by the hand and lead him out into the forest. They be leaving him there all alone.” Ygg kicked at his chair. “They be telling everyone in the village they couldna follow or they be punished in kind. But me Da, he didna listen. He didna think it right.” Ygg looked up at Unk. “He be following thems with the boy, and saw where they be leaving him.”

The big man grunted. “Your Da he be coming to me and comforting me. We be building a shelter and a fiery place by starry light.” Unk rocked slowly back and forth as he continued. “He be bringing me food and tucking me in snug. He be staying till I be sleeping.” Unk smiled remembering. “He be coming most nights until I be finding the other forest dwellers.” He said softly. “Then when your Da be getting all married, he be coming less. Once a moon or so. We sit around me fiery place and be talking and laughing. I be showing him my doings, he be bringing me news of Chert.” Then his smile faded. “One time, your Da be bringing you and your biggy brothers---but they nought like me. They call me---freaky--- and run away.” He nodded. “That be the day we look into the cameree and be making that picture I be giving the Chief.

“Your Mam, she be coming 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 be talking 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 be going to see her this past moon. That’s when we be deciding I be guardy to you and she be giving me this.”

Ygg took the letter, broke the seal and smoothed it out before reading it aloud. Ambril peeked over one shoulder. 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 nought be forcing you to live a narrow drip of day, but where you be free to live a wide river of life.**

**Trust your Unk Urgan, he be good and t rue. 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 just come out t his way.**

**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 a river, then pulled out a pink and green paisley handkerchief and blew a long blast with his nose.

Fern looked around at all the blubbering, then cleared her throat. “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!” Thankful for the distraction, Ambril 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 tattered notebook caught her eye. It was dirty and had once been green, with the letters G.E.R.N. handwritten across the cover. The letters had been scratched out and the words ‘household accounts’ had been written underneath. Ambril grabbed it, and flipped through it, curious. It flashed through her mind that 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 monster truck rally fliers pasted in it and 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!” Ambril shoved the drawer closed. She lay the booklet on the table before resuming her search for the perfect cake knife. When she found it, she handed it to Fern.

“Oh look! That’s one of your Father’s lab books!” Fern paused to lick a finger as she glanced at the cover of the little, green lab book. “That’s Fixit Joe’s writing there, he must have found some blank pages in the back and used them.” Fern handed a slice of cake to Sully. “He was such a nice man, your Dad. 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 then yawned hugely. “I guess it’s time to hit the road.”

“Why yes, I expect you are all tuckered out---what a night it has been!” Fern said as she gathered her shawl around her shoulders with a shaky hand. “I think you have everything you need Urgan.” She nodded to Unk and then hobbled toward the door.

Unk stood up, “I be walking you home safe.” He said, then offered her his hairy arm.

Ambril slipped the lab book in her backpack as she got to her feet. Exhaustion hit her like a grand piano falling from a great height. She felt like she was a million years old. After saying good night to everyone, then pedaled home. For the first time since she had arrived, she had to walk her bike up the hill. 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 27 A break-in at School

Ambril hummed to herself happily as she headed toward school Monday morning. The day had started out well. The sun shone brightly, she’d woken up on time…AND her Mom had joined them for breakfast looking better than she had in months. But Ambril stopped humming when she rode past the Sweet Shoppe. There was a crowd of people milling around.

Koda was struggling to unload some sheets of plywood from an old truck parked in front. “Move or you’ll get splinters in your backside, I’m coming through!” He shouted angrily. The onlookers parted enough for Ambril to see a shaken Betula 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 your friends did this---which might just be true.” He frowned accusingly at her.

“Ambril that you honey? Ambril I need your help, you come and see me right after school, ya hear me?” It was Betula’s strained voice Ambril heard 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 after school. So come quick as you can!” Betula responded.

Ambril reluctantly got back on her bike and rode slowly away. The illusion of a perfect morning had been shattered for good. 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 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, teetered half on---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 so we won’t have to turn in our dioramas today, she’s going to hate mine.”

His eye ticked nervously, then he smiled as they walked over to Ygg and Sully. “I ran out of time and had to use Lego people on mine.” Then he broke into an imitation of Ms. Breccia, “As usual this is a perfect 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 had to cut corners.” He glanced over at her, “I couldn’t get into it. The official history is just too hard to swallow.”

“Why?” asked Ambril.

Riley looked at her appraisingly a minute as they joined up with Ygg and Sully. “You know, history’s written by the ones who win the battles. There’s always a lot left out of the story.”

“My, aren’t we pithy today,” commented Sully.

“Pithy? Don’t tell me, that be one of our Vocab words, right?” asked Ygg.

Sully winced, “My mom told me I have to try using them, 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, a clot of people hovered around a still figure lying on the floor. A pillbox hat had rolled to one side and lay forgotten in a corner. As they watched the Med Techs blew through the front doors and shooed everyone away. Ambril caught a glimpse of a pale, elderly woman dressed in black. It was the school secretary, Miss Jonquil! The Med Techs began checking her vital signs and to Ambril’s relief, she started responding to the Med Tech’s questions.

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 been 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, then pointed to the deputy sheriff who was strutting around and surveying the damage.

“Nooobody panic, everything is 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 eyelids fluttered dramatically 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.” Ms. Jonquil but the back of her hand over her eyes and moaned.

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…this blast of foul air hit me! It smelled just like the dumpster behind Dogwood Market!” She wrinkled her nose, then shut her eyes tightly. “And—and then there was the monster.”

Skarn sighed and rolled his eyes, “A real live…monster?”

Ms Jonquil hesitated, “I’m not sure but I believe I really did see a large skull like face! With glowing eyes and horns and nasty, tattoos all over its face.”

Skarn stared at her in disgust, “right---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. Everything went dark after that…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. It then roared away, its lights flashing.

“Whoa, someone be 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---somewhere.”

“I remember hearing about that too. Feldez was involved then too, wasn’t he?” Riley asked. 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 who was staring angrily through the window at them.

They jumped down hurriedly from the branch and ran to join the milling, jumble of kids on the playground. Riley 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 that feeling again. “This sounds weird but…something 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. Like at the Harvest Moon Festival? It just doesn’t seem like a Dullaith was ever 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! Someone broke into the Sweet Shoppe last night and 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.

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.” 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. You have to talk to us this time, it was you who called 911.”

Chief Buckthorne said nothing. He paused to sniff the air experimentally, his face blank. Feldez nodded to him, then 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 as they rounded a corner and raced into English.

“I nought smell anything!” Ygg said.

“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?” Mr. Pinwydden stared down his nose at her. The class snickered. Mr. Pinwydden then 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 near the janitor’s closet. But if that had been the case, Miss Jonquil would be dead and the entire school would stink to high heaven. The only logical explanation was that it wasn’t a Dullaith. Then what was it? And how did Feldez fit into it? 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 worse than trying to talk 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.” Sully groaned. 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, which included 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 most kids would think it would be better than finding $100 in their back pocket, 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 to them?” She snorted so loudly 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 far too much 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! The student’s safety and well being come first. This threat must be taken seriously. 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. She wrenched her classroom’s door open, then 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…I’m sure you all know that if there is any more trouble I’m going to have to put my foot down.” Mr. Pinwydden straightened his tie and walked quickly to his classroom.

Ambril, Ygg and Sully reached their seats just as the bell rang. Ms. Breccia threw down her roll book disgustedly, looking positively disappointed that she wasn’t able to give anyone a tardy.

“Children, your dioramas belong here!” She said pointing to an already loaded table. “And you belong in the gym for the Maypole Dance rehearsal!” She folded her arms and looked down her nose at them. “Mrs. Twid doesn’t think you are capable of doing justice to this tradition. I believe she said---and I quote, “They have the lumbering gait of water buffalos stampeding over a cliff!” She paused and sniffed. “Please, do not embarrass me.” Then she pointed to the door, “Out! On the double!” With a grand wave of her hand she turned and began forcefully stacking dioramas. She smashed two of them 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 yesterday. You said she wanted some right?”

Ambril nodded 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 manage to not trip over your own feet, we’ll begin.” Mrs. Twid’s nasal voice was shrill.

But she had to stop then when a loud voice interrupted them, “you little rat! I know what you’re doing!” It was Lance threatening his brother again. “Stop messing around! A little, whussy kid like you can’t handle it!”

“Stop going through my stuff!” Riley countered.

“I’ve been watching you, 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. Kids began gathering around them, expecting some action.

“Or else? What or else?” scoffed Riley. “What more can you do to me? You’ve already stuffed me into every garbage can and dumpster in town.” Riley drew himself up to his full height, “I’d explain what I’m doing but you’d hurt yourself trying to keep up with me.” Riley continued angrily. Ambril saw the flinty, coldness she’d seen in his face the night before begin in his eyes and spread across his face. “And I’m not gonna quit until I get what I want.” He chuckled scornfully, “I’ve got big plans! I’m getting out of here! But you? All you’re ever going to be is a shopkeeper!”

Lance lost all control and shoved his brother hard into a large pile of boxes and 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. Most important, nothing was trying to invade her mind. She felt perfectly fine. Ambril zipped up her backpack. “It’s like the one we saw on Halloween, it’s a fake.” She said calmly.

But there was a frizz of magic in the air. Definitely something magical was going on. The room had emptied by then. Except for a terrified Mrs. Twid who whimpering in the corner, it was just the three of them. Ambril took another hard look at the Dullaith and pointed. “See? It’s not moving and…it’s beginning to fade.”

The image really 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 a little nervous about having his back to the monstrous image but he 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 with her white knuckles clamped on her pearl necklace, “oh my!” She gasped.

“Perhaps you’d like to sit down a moment Crystal.” Said Bob solicitously as steered her into a chair.

“Riley, come on out!” Lance yelled. Still itching for a fight he heaved around boxes, looking for his brother.

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. Curiously when the last box was lifted, Riley wasn’t there.

“He must have left and what with all the confusion we didn’t see him,” said Sully.

“No chance! I was watching!” said Lance angrily, “I would have seen him!”

Jed came in with a bucket of steaming liquid as Lance was talking.

“Lance is right, the rest of us were standing in the hallway. We would have seen him leave.”

“Where’d he go? He didn’t just vanish!” 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 to himself, then said with authority. “All of this will be explained later. Right now you need to get to class, Mrs. Twid have you recovered enough to walk the students back?”

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, I’ll do it.” She nodded and creakily rose to her feet. “Children! This way.” she added 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 Ygg 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 family spat, 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 includes the ball game.”

Larch Dogwood looked incredulous. “What? He can’t play for his team? The team I’m sponsoring?”

“A suspension requires he is not allowed to participate in any 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 their investigation and wish to talk with you.” He motioned toward the Gymnasium.

Larch scoffed, “Riley’s just sulking, he’ll turn up when he gets hungry 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…butnhe’s always been unhappy with Lance’s---competitive spirit. He just takes it the wrong way is all.” The beefy man 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 fleshy 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 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 set him a better example and try doing so 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 might be developing some back bone!” 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 down in their seats and waited to hear their punishment. Ms. Breccia surprised them though when she marched out of the room 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 the greatest pig farmer Trelawnyd has ever seen?”

Ambril sighed heavily as she thought about the Sweet Shoppe and poor Betula. She was probably wondering where they were right then. 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 anymore. 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 get 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 the one in the Park.”

Ygg came to look over her shoulder, “It be like the power gathering circle we have in Chert. It be used only for emergencies, if’n there be a flood or a collapse in the Mines. You know, when the town be thinking it be needing extra help.”

“Yeah, yeah so what?” Sully yawned. “it doesn’t have anything to do with us, it’s history---dead and buried.”

The door banged open then and Ms. Breccia strode in, seething. Ambril just had time to slip the model back on the pile and slide into the nearest seat. She felt Ms. Breccia’s eyes on her as she bent her head. She was sure she was about to lose at least one limb. But Ms. Breccia walked right by her, absently pounding every other desk with her fist. Ambril didn’t dare move, in fact she didn’t dare breathe. But Ms. Breccia wasn’t her usual self. She looked at them as if she’d like to kill somebody…and 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, “Whoo! Dodged another bullet!” said Sully cheerfully as they walked toward the door.

“Come on we have to get to Betula’s!” Ambril began running toward the door. But as they passed the Gym a harassed and harried Bob stepped into the hallway holding a mop, “Would you mind taking these boxes to the entry hall on your way out? They need to go back into storage.” He motioned to a stack of boxes just inside the door.

Ambril was about to refuse when Sully said, “Sure! It’s on our way!” Sully genially picked up several boxes.

“But we have to get to Betulas!”

“This’ll just take a sec, right? Bob looks almost done in.” Sully pointed her chin at poor Bob who nervously brushed away his nonexistent hair…three times in rapid succession. Ambril and Ygg followed her lead but not quite so cheerfully. Together they lugged the boxes into the entry hall.

“So who be 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.

“Why be scaring people away from dancing?” Ygg asked mystified.

Sully shrugged, “Hey why worry? We’re getting our Saturday morning back right?” “This is as good a place as any,” said Ambril as she set her box down near the blackened metal which once was the janitor’s closet door.

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 removed the padlock, then turned and walked away with it.

Sully stretched and cracked her back several times. “That’s better, those boxes were way, way too heavy!”

Ambril rubbed her shoulder ruefully, then she stopped dead. The chain was off the battered door! It yawned open temptingly.

Sully spotted it too, “The janitor left the door open! He’s never done that!”

“He be going for his pills…I bet he be be right back,” said Ygg.

Ambril looked from one friend to the other, then back again.

“You can’t be thinking what I think you’re thinking!” whispered Sully her eyes widening.

Ambril grabbed her friends and dragged them over to the open door. “One peek, then we’ll go.”

# Chapter 28 Inside the Janitor’s Closet

“Where’s the light coming from? There aren’t any windows.” Sully squinted into the gloom. Sully was right, Ambril thought, it should have been pitch dark inside but it wasn’t. An eerie red glow lit the room. Ambril took a step and then another. It would have been a beautiful room if it wasn’t for the blackened, sooty walls and ceilings. Whether it was from the recent attack or a fire in years past the room Ambril couldn’t tell. There were arches and a dome above…

“The history books be wrong,” whispered Ygg, “here be Old Council Hall, it nought was built in Old Town. they built the school around it.”

The arches, half covered with cobwebs and soot were filled in with intricate mosaic artwork. One was a map of the town. Just above it there was something written across one of the arches.

“What does that say?” asked Ambril pointing.

“That be the old language.” Ygg said squinting hard at the word. “Chofnoda, yeah, that’s meaning ‘Come on in, friend’, or ‘Enter here’,” 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.

“Big surprise, it’s a janitor’s closet.” 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 like red cherry candy 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 is that?” Sully elbowed Ygg hard as she crouched down for a better look.

“It be a shadow summoning circle.”

It looks as if someone wanting to summon someone in particular.” Ambril whispered and pointed to the ornately tiled circle stone. Like the Park’s circle stone it was decorated with plants, animals and people. But they were hard to make out as someone had scribbled over them with glowing red ink, deforming and mutating the original images so that 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, he looks just like that.”

“How do you know?” came a cold voice from behind Ambril.

Ambril whirled to find Feldez just inside the door, “only someone who has studied Moroz, his practices and teachings…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, “this is no game, Ambril, toying with powers like these can only lead to someone getting hurt…or worse.” He took a step, his thin pallid hands reached for her. “You of all people should know that.”

Just then the janitor popped his head in, looking sheepish and thankfully forcing Feldez to take a step back.

“My fault, I left the darn fool door open to get my pills,” he wheezed. “I shouldn’t have…you know the reputation this room has.”

Chief Buckthorne then came in behind him; his face a thundercloud.

“You three, again? Are you three so anxious to spend a couple of nights in Juvenile Hall? I’d save myself a lot of time if I just had a deputy follow you around! What in the blazes are you 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 Betula’s Shoppe. As they veered onto Main Street they could see a crowd still gathered around the Sweet Shoppe’s door.

# Chapter 29 Operation: Red Sneaker

“It makes me boiling mad to think of someone attacking Betula’s shop!” said Ygg as they stashed their bikes in the alley with difficulty due to the crowds. To Ambril, it looked as if the entire town was trying to get inside the Sweet Shoppe all at once.

“Excuse me! Coming through! On your right!” Sully yelled as they wriggled through to the front door. Ambril saw that Koda had replaced the front window with plywood there was a 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 ice cream!” 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 was attempting to man 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 shakily 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 like she’d trained as a drill sergeant, “Ygg, you do ice cream and tea, I’ll wait tables, Mrs. Flood---counter, Miss Fern---cash register. 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 clamoring 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 with an inch of sugar on top. In fact there was sugar on everything, it looked like it had snowed.

“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 floated down over them. Ambril could see Shug 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 scarily 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,” she sighed. “Late last night someone broke through the front window and cut Red’s sneaker 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 one of those grinning Halloween masks 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,” Shug mused softly.

Ambril turned back to the Giraffe. “So he came for the sneaker and only the sneaker.” Something niggled at 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 jiggering 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. Do you think someone melted Red’s sneaker and used that to do the working last night?”

They all fell silent, considering this.

“That’s despicable,” growled Shug.

“It makes sense, that does.” breathed Betula as she rocked Red back and forth. “Red’s made of solid magic really. I reckon if you were working a big magic, the kind that needs a big shot of power, a piece of Red would do the trick.” Her voice faded as the rabbit groaned and 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 just shook his head then 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, “*Aren’t you always telling me 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 would never!*” the fairy scoffed.

“*Go away*,” Ambril pushed the fairy away in her mind.

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. You’re not, you’re just as ordinary as the rest of us; small-minded, silly beings who can’t be bothered to even try to see things in a different way!”* She had to pause here as an airplane crash and volleys of explosions echoed loudly around 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 suffering too!”* 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. She waited, and waited---but the fairy was stayed quiet…and that was even worse than the noise.

Betula had unwrapped Red’s leg and laid the red sneaker next to it. Ambril could see the stump was cut clean. The sugar animal was made of red gel covered with sugar. She was puzzled, there was no blood…nothing oozing out of the rabbit’s leg to show that anything was wrong, except the almost magnetic repulsion which kept the shoe and the leg from fusing together.

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. She watched the rabbit a moment and realized how quickly she would need to act, the flow of energy was enormous, she could see the rabbit dimming slightly…and then again…

Ambril was pointing the Ashera at the rabbit’s leg when she heard the jangle of wind chimes in her head, “*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 she 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 then pointed the Ashera with one hand pressed the red shoe to the leg with the other. There was a soft slurp and a blinding brilliance of light as the two pieces fused together. Ambril 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 him a steady flow of energy until she saw Red’s big toe wiggle. Then all of Red’s toes flexed at once…

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 was swept up in a big Betula hug.

“Thanks bucket’s there, Ambril!” Red hopped over to join them, balancing on Betula’s shoulder 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 right past us,” Betula smoothed out her hair and grabbed a fresh apron from a nearby peg. “Now it’s your turn to do the impossible Shug, 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 $5.75 Miss Thyme,” Sully collected money from a smiling 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 and 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 everything 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 and 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!” Betula smiled at all three of them.

Smiling they walked out into the sun slanting toward evening. As they got on their bikes Ambril heard the muffled sounds of ragtime music.

# Chapter 30 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, 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 hurt!” It was Lance who was hopping around in front of her holding his foot.

“Sorry, 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, he’s my brother…he just takes it the wrong way is all.” Lance scoffed sounding just like his father. “This is where Riley 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 getting sick of waiting for him!” As he walked stiffly toward his Dad’s storage shed Ambril froze for beyond Lance’s silhouette Ambril could see a faint image on the shed’s floor through the open door. It was scratched and scuffed and looked as if it had been down a long time but Ambril recognized the drawings of grotesque images on the floor…it was a shadow summoning circle.

“Hey wait Lance! What’s---”

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!” he slammed the door so hard the entire shed shivered.

It took a while for Ambril to leave the alley. For a long time she sat gripping her handlebar, staring at the storage shed and watching Lance’s shadow move back and forth, back and forth. She only realized she was in the middle of the alley and blocking traffic when a truck rumbled up behind her. Reluctantly she rode off toward home thinking about who had originally drawn such a circle. It had looked too weathered to have been used lately. She picked up speed as she pedaled up the last hill and noticed that every window of their house was lit. Her mother stood silhouetted in the open doorway looking frazzled but alert. Ambril smiled in spite of herself, it was nice to see her mom looking so---mom-like.

“Ambril, finally! “I’m so glad you’re home, it’s been odd today.” As Ambril came up the steps she wedged her daughter firmly under one arm as if she feared she would be 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 this 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, “it’s 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 put her thin hand on Ambril’s forehead, “All right Honey, you go get some rest then, 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 and wondered if 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 at least part of the reason. She suddenly yawned. “I’m really tired, Mom, it was a big day, sooo…” she backed toward the door.

“Not so fast, Ambril! We need to talk…I don’t like how you are treating your stepfather.”

“You mean my not-yet-stepfather.” Ambril grumbled.

“Your SOON-to-be stepfather, whom I LOVE requires respect!” She yelled.

Ambril stopped then and just looked at her angry mother. Though she still looked thin something had changed, she looked stronger, maybe it was just the anger but she could risk telling her mother the truth, “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, and when she does 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 his usual clamped jaws. He then shoved her roughly in front of him, “we’re going upstairs now Mom, you know---homework and all,” he said trying to conceal his contempt for Ambril and failing. He gave Ambril another shove when they reached the stairs. As they trudged up the stairs he whispered, “what a dolt 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? Haven’t you noticed how bad it is for Mom? It’s like she’s going to blow up any second!”

Ambril sat down heavily on her bed, “I thought she looked a lot better today. I thought that…maybe I could tell her what I’d found out about Feldez and all the stuff about the Dullaiths and Dad.” She looked up at her big brother, knowing what he was going to say but continued on anyway, “Look, glossing over all the bad parts so that we don’t upset Mom just makes 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 get blindsided again just like she did at the Library---and that will hurt more.”

Zane gave her a disgusted look.

She took a deep breath. “Zane, it isn’t over, there’s going to be another attack, another Dullaith.” she said hesitantly.

Zane snorted, “like the one in the gym? That was 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 being hero types 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 Mom?” he asked, “Because if something that awful happens to her again…that might do it,” he thundered, “so I’m telling you---stay out of this, understand? Do it for Mom if you’re too much of an idiot to do it for yourself. Believe it or not it’s been better for us 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 someone 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 whooshed out of him as 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 any more pain for her mom but at the same time, she couldn’t stand by and watch everyone else 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 egged on sometimes by Feldez and sometimes by Mrs. Twid who kept screaming ‘Troll!’ at the top of her lungs. In her dream Ambril ran through a forest and onto a circle stone. 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…”

# Chapter 31 Chit Chat with Feldez and Other Horrors

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. Her backpack lay in the sunlight half open on the floor with its contents half in and half out. Peaking out was a worn green book, her Dad’s lab book. She’d forgotten all about it. 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 bet I would have given up and moved on to something else long ago. But creating the world’s first biomass regenerative energy solution has been exciting. I’m glad I stuck with it, 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 drawn crazily 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; with one at the bottom circled and underlined several times. 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, 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!**

So Feldez’s old lab had been downtown…close to Betula’s place. Below this was a line scribbled hurriedly:

**Test run’s tomorrow, we’ll see if it works, if it doesn’t we’ll try it again.**

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 phrase .natural energy’ kept coming up. Ambril wondered if it was her Dad’s phrase for magic. ‘The melding of inorganic and natural energies’. Combining metal and stone with magic maybe? The twisted, writhing creature in the cavern had looked like that…sort of a metallic mold or a deformed stone tree. Could the weathered circle stone painted on the floor of the Dogwood’s storage shed have been his? It certainly fit, it was close to Betula’s Shop plus Lance had mentioned there was a lot of lab equipment left in the shed when the Grocery Store had taken it over. 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.

Ambril jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She was very certain she didn’t want to confront Feldez 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 my Dad. My Dad wrote it just before YOUR 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.”

“I don’t have to, my Dad’s already done it here in this lab book of his. It’s a 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 everyone think it was him!”

“That’s not entirely 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 is more to it than that---”

“Now you’re threatening everyone in town with more Dullaiths. So everyone gets scared and then, lucky you! They turn to you for help. The Archives are opened wide and all its magical secrets are there for you to take. Everything you need to know to release Moroz!”

Feldez just stared at her.

Ambril was too worked up to notice his silence, “Moroz knows more about magic than almost any other being. If you could gain access to his knowledge, you could be 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 seemed to be staring through her. A slight tick formed in one eye before 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 right 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. “But 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 then he quickly slipped through the door, the lock clicked smoothly in place a moment later.

Too late Ambril realized what that meant, “NOO!” she screamed then lunged for the door---it was, of course, locked from the outside. She started pounding it---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---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? Feldez didn’t seem the violent type. Perhaps he’d sell her on Craig’s list to a drug lord who wanted a live-in scullery maid and wasn’t too particular about how he 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. As she cried she realized that something in her hands was getting soggy, eventually she raised her head to find the slightly damp lab book stuck to her forehead. She pried it off and was about to toss it aside when something caught her eye, the brightly colored Monster Truck Rally advertisement had come loose. She ripped it out and discovered one last page of her father’s notes behind it. 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 took Gern to a safe place today. I can’t 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.**

Ambril sat there stunned. Everyone had it backward! It had been Feldez who raised the Dullaith not her Dad! He’d only been there to help Feldez with experiment---in fact it had been Feldez all along, I had been him all along trying to raise Moroz, but instead he had put the entire town in peril by raising a Dullaith instead.

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 surprise. 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 placed 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? Maybe he wanted to continue his research and experiments. If things went wrong again, he could always use her family as cover. Just like Zane had said, they were the perfect ones to blame.

She jumped to her feet, energized, she had to get out of there and show the lab book first to her Mom then to the rest of the world. Her Dad was innocent or course, she had always known that.

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 small window set too high in the wall. Sighting was more difficult without her Ashera but after a lot of effort she was able to discern something unnaturally thick and sluggish hugging the space. Feldez’s office was wrapped with powerful protective wards. How would she ever break out on her own?

Sounds of mules brayed in her head followed by twangy country western music, “*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?”* Ambril could now make out a fuzzy twinkle beyond the wards.

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 thorough,”* Ambril heard an electric sound, like a bug zapper, “*Ouch! That son of a camel tender, that hurt! 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 mass of protective wards---you’d have to have skin made of cast iron… which gives me an idea,*” then everything went quiet.

“*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 figure out where the fairy had gone. After what seemed like an eternity Ambril spied new fuzzy images coming toward her. Larger than fairies but smaller than a kid they made tink tinking noises in the hallways. They all clustered around the locked door. Ambril could see the handle jiggle slightly then there were more bug zapping sounds as the fuzzy images all jumped back. They all were soon shaking their heads. Then the largest of the fuzzy images squared off against the fuzzy twinkle of a fairy.

“If’n you want our help you best stay out of the way you pesky gnat! I be running this operation!” Ambril heard Baldot’s muffled voice.

One of the shorter ones 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, before Ambril could even nod she fairly flew through the air and slammed into the hole in the ceiling. Grabbing the edge she managed to wriggle inside. The metal duct whined under Ambril’s weight but held. Boucher greeted her with an arm punch.

“You’re lucky this duct be a bit bigger than most and you be a mite smaller than some,” he turned and trotted off, “come on then!”

Ambril elbowed and shimmied her way down to where Boucher stood next to another duct opening. The cover was off and light was 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 looked to be the right size for a gnome but three sizes too small for herself.

“What’s plan B?” Ambril asked apprehensively.

Baldot glared at her from below. “There nought be any! Now don’t you be getting cold tootsies over this, we’ll catch you!”

But Ambril wasn’t so sure. Ambril wished heartily they’d spent a little time making up a fixit juice remedy for humans. Then she took a huge breath and carefully wriggled head first through the hole in the ceiling.

“So what happens if your net---whoa---LOOK OUT!” She wriggled out too far and lost her balance. All of a sudden she slid through the hole and into midair her arms and legs flailing. She landed face first in the netting and bouncing nearly up to the ceiling again she grazed one wall before sliding down the hallway on her back.

Baldot trotted up a self satisfied smile on his face, “worked a treat didn’t it?”

She struggled to a sitting position, doing the usual, checking for any broken bones, “thanks---I guess, but why don’t you guys get that humans are breakable too...you’re made of ceramic!” Beyond Baldot’s grinning face she noticed fLit hovering, his back to everyone. “you too fLit---thanks.”

Baldot turned around and scowled.

Ambril scowled at both of them, “During what century are you going to learn to get along? 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, “it nought be so long, we nought be forgetting…we are what we are because the Tylwith betrayed our kind. They sided with Moroz---and helped enslave us like this.”

The other gnomes came to stand with Baldot and glare at fLit as Ambril asked, “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 were simple miners then, just breaking shift, on our way up and home.” Baldot’s hands tightened into fists. “The Tylwith, they trussed us like animals and took us down to the deepest shaft---Moroz was waiting---I nought remember much else except the pain---when we woke up, we be like this…forced to work day and night in the darkness and the heat…until the rescue.”

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! You know of how Moroz betrayed us too and how the Tylwith rebelled and helped capture him.”*

“That nought count, you be doing that to save yourselves, you did nought to help us!” Baldot snorted.

“*Don’t interrupt you rude lump of clay!”*  fLit sniffed, “*What you don’t know is there was a group of us who didn’t side with Moroz. We tried to rescue both your kind and a few of our own.*  *In fact we 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 never heard that story, nought from any of our kind, or even any of yours.”

“But we’ve only met the one fairy,” Bummil pointed out.

“Which be suspicious on its own. Fairies are nought alone and never within the walls.” Baldot screwed up his face as he looked at the fairy. “I’m thinking you’re an outcast.”

Ambril cringed expecting an all out assault from the fairy, at the very least Baldot would be ground to dust, but the fairy simply balled his fists and drifted away.

“*So it’s true then? So that’s why you were captured and put in the Morte Cell, being alone made you easier to catch. But why are you an outcast?”*

fLit silently shook his head but said nothing.

Baldot folded his arms and looked hard at flit. “We learned the hard way nought to be trusting Tylwiths, this one here, everyone should stay well away from, there’s no telling what he’s done.”

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. “Explain!”* Ambril thought at the fairy.

“*It is of no use, they will never understand. Now I’m wondering who’s side you’re on!”* Freight trains roared through Ambril’s head as Ambril felt the fairy’s presence slide away from her---for the first time since she’d woken up in Trelawnyd there was a void 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 felt heavy with sadness as she got to her feet and headed for the stairs.

“Where you be off to?” asked Baldot gruffly.

“Feldez locked me away because I know too much about him. But I have to tell my Mom about it and try to get him to tell the truth…if I have time before he raises another monster and tries to take over the world.”

The stubby gnome blanched, “You think a Dullaith will be raised any time soon?”

“I---I don’t know…but one thing’s for sure. If I can, I have to stop him,” she said simply. She turned stumbled up the stairs to collect her backpack. feeling a million years old. Baldot tinked to the foot of the stairs, “if it’s a fight you be having, we’ll be there, unlike your flighty fairy friend!” Ambril smiled over her shoulder at him. She knew he meant well but how could little ceramic men help against a Dullaith?

# Chapter 32 A Whirlwind of a Disaster

Ambril slammed down 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 which was thickening 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 picnic basket out of the road.

The crowds worsened so much that in a few blocks she had to abandon her bike, and run then walk the rest of the way. Finally she made it to the circle stone. Rows of booths had sprouted overnight around it. Betula waved her over to one of the larger ones with a yellow striped awning. She put her hands on her hips when Ambril came up and peered into her face, “Child, you’re as white as Red’s whiskers after a roll in the sugar bin.”

“I’m---fine, do you know where my Mom is?” she asked anxiously.

Betula looked unconvinced but pointed out a too thin blonde woman in a fluffy white apron putting out muffins.

“Mom!” Ambril rushed over to her Mom and gave her a sideways hug. There was so much she wanted to say to her Mom, that everything would be all right now, that her Dad really wasn’t the bad guy some people believed but over her mother’s shoulders Ambril could see people crowding around the circle stone. She thought she saw a very tall well dressed man just on the other side.

Her mother looked surprised then concerned when she finally pulled away and saw the worry in her daughter’s face, “Honey---what’s wrong? Take a deep breath---now tell me.”

But Ambril shook her head. “No time to explain,” She pulled out the lab book and extended it toward her mother, “This will have to do it for me---”

But Before her mother could take the book from her hand it was slapped away. “That’s one of the worst ideas you’ve ever had,” Zane said tersely giving Ambril a glare that would roast an entire turkey. “Mom, that lady wants a muffin.” He gestured to a sour faced woman holding a muffin and a dollar bill before steering Ambril a few feet away.

“Zane! It’s all there in the---”

“What? More proof that you were right?” Zane huffed, “When will you realize that it doesn’t matter anymore. Who cares? Leave it alone---leave MOM alone. You’re just gonna make everything worse!” He shook her roughly before fiercely kicking the lab book under the table as he returned to his mother’s side.

Ambril sighed as she crawled under the table to retrieve the lab book then firmly shoved it in her back pocket. She’d have to find a way to slip the green book to her Mom without Zane knowing it. But later, right now she had bigger problems to wrestle with. She picked her way through the thickening crowd toward 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.

The stone right in the center had been removed, leaving a gaping hole. Ambril guessed the May Pole would have been installed there if someone hadn’t made threats at the school. Off to one side the high school band was warming up beyond wooden barriers. Ambril could see security was tight, police officers and fire fighters paced behind barricades which lined the circle stone. 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 with a large wreath of bristly flowers jammed on her head and a leather hide thrown over her shoulders. Her bare feet slapped impatiently on the pavers as she glowered at Skarn, “but we must get in place for the Spring Dance of Maidens!” she brayed. 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 says 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. Everyone around her cheered. For a moment Ambril thought she had overreacted, that everything was going to be all right. Then a familiar, lean figure strode stiffly onto the stone. Feldez was making his way swiftly to the center, his face was taunt like a mask as he stopped and peered down into the hole.

“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! You O.K.? Where’ve 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 as he reached down into 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 Circle Park has at last been deemed safe I’m happy to announce the opening of the May Day Festival!”

Sully tugged at her sleeve, “what’s wrong? Tell me!”

“No time, 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 hesitated as she thought anxiously about Zane and what this might do to her mother. If she failed to stop Feldez from raising another Dullaith, she would certainly be blamed. It wouldn’t take the Chief long to realize that she had been nearby every single time a Dullaith, real or fake, had been summoned in the past few months. She knew her family would never live it down. They’d be outcasts all over again. But on the other hand if she could stop it from happening she’d be able to expose Feldez for the monster that he was and finally put a stop to it all. Best of all she would be able to clear her father’s name. That she knew would be the best medicine of all for her family. She took a big breath and stepped under the yellow tape. In an instant she was running hard toward the angular man hunched over the circle stone with her friends at her side.

Skarn bellowed from, “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 and she saw his eye grow 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.

It was a perfect tackle the gnomes told her later but just an instant off. For just as the bells pealed a fountain of acrid smoke shot up from the hole in the center of the stone followed by sparks thirty feet high.

Ambril scrambled to her feet feeling her chest tighten with fear as she heard a crackling, slithering sound and everything drowned 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. It was real this time, Ambril felt its biting cold, the smell of it made her wretch.

She looked around quickly as she pulled out her Ashera and threw her backpack aside. Unfortunately Ygg and Sully stood coughing at her side. Riley was nowhere to be seen---at least 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. As Ambril turned to face the terror she could feel it trying to infiltrate her mind.

Off to the side, Chief Buckthorne was 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 then turned as Sully tugged on his arm.

Ambril knew she’d be first on the Dullaith’s list, she would have to act quickly to cut off its energy supply. Without hesitating she dove toward the twisted stem of the monster. Cold numbed her mind the closer she ran. Soon her breath grew ragged as her brain fuzzed and she faltered.

“*Snap out of it!”* fLit was suddenly there punching and kicking her in the face. “*Listen, it sees you! It wants your power and when it’s finished with you? It will come for everyone else, including your friends and family! So MOVE!”*

The sharp sting of the fairy’s boots did the trick. Ambril concentrated on pushing away again the panic that had rushed in to overpower her senses just the way fLit had taught her. She shook herself and then gathering all the energy she could muster she plunged inside the smoky darkness.

Coughing she squeezed her eyes shut and felt the dense malevolent magic jetting around her trying to wriggle through her defenses. She shivered knowing she had just a few seconds before she’d be o n 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 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 it. Just when she thought her lungs would burst her fingers closed around something angular and cold, she hugged it to her chest and stumbled away. As she broke through the dense wall of smoke she hungrily filled her lungs with fresh air. Still panting she looked down and found acrid, black steam curling from the Morte Cell, stinging cobwebs trailing behind it. She jabbed at it with her Ashera and gasped as the limp form of a fat squirrel with a white ruff of fur around its neck fell out and landed in her hand.

A large black crow swooped out from nowhere, and transformed into the tall thin form of Sid, “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 for safety.

Ambril should have been surprised but given how her day was going she just shoved the image of Sid as a crow to the back of her mind. Then she took a big breath as she turned back to the monster. The severed threads of dark magic sizzled beneath it as the monster seemed to gather itself before doing something that Ambril dreaded most---it sniffed the air and inhaled, just before its glowing eyes locked onto her. The hunter had found its prey. fLit was right, it was drawn to the power she wielded. There was no way for her to escape it now; its stench became overwhelming as it began to stalk her.

The creature bore down on her, its mouth opening wide. Ambril was so close she could see past the jaggly teeth and straight into the monster’s being. Inside hundreds of ghoulish faces swirled in a 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.

She instantly knew something was very wrong. 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, “*The Ledrith Glain! Where’s your medallion!*”

*“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?”*

Then from behind her Ambril heard the townspeople roar in terror as they pointed 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 just barely make out the outline of the gnomes lashed to their massive stems. 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 then a stream of Gooberous slag rained down on the creature, hissing on contact. The creature’s magical fiber fizzed, curled and snapped under the barrage. Ambril held her nose, Dullaiths smelled even worse when slathered with slime and blasted with explosives.

“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 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.

It seemed to be as the Dullaith was now on the ground breathing heavily.

But then suddenly it wasn’t. Ambril felt a bolt of white hot energy singe her mind. Someone was feeding the creature life energy, someone crouched under the monster, hidden by the roiling black smoke. 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 just in time and raced around it trying to buy herself time. It roared at its attackers then 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 were blown out of sight.

The boom of the sugar cannon echoed off the stone as another volley of candy 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 as she watched the sugar animals were blown into nearby trees. It seemed to be up to her now…how would she ever bring down a rechargeable Dullaith?

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 energy spot and began walking toward it.

“*That’s suicide, that monster has a nearly unlimited power source now!”*

*“Now maybe, but if I can get that medallion back it won’t!”*

She sent a bolt of energy at the Dullaith’s face and immediately felt her heart seize from the effort. The Dullaith blinked just briefly. A plan replaced the wild anger in her mind. 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 creature’s 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 just a few feet into the smoke she rammed into a solid, icy cold 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 breathe, gathering what little energy she had left to her. As she rolled to her feet she was enveloped with dank fetid air as the Dullaith’s jaws clamped down on her and her body went numb.

She was now among the swirling faces, as memories of her life drained away. Her voice combined with their voices as they whirled around, consuming her, consuming each other. She felt her feet leave the ground, feeling lighter and lighter. Just in front of her now was a brilliant white ball of light. It drew the swirling mist into it. It fascinated her, it called her by name and after a few moments she stopped resisting. All she wanted at that moment was to enter the light, to be a part of the light. 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 then something annoying happened. Something tugged at her, and pulled her away from 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! Snap out of this, I know it’s hard---Call the Cerberus! They promised remember? When all hope is lost, they said they would come---Say it with me! Cerberus!”

The figure had hard 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--- sometimes doing the right thing is painful, it just is. 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.

# Chapter 33 Nice Doggies from Hell

Reality stabbed her in the heart as she flew back through the jaws of the Dullaith and skidded along the hard cold stone. After rolling a few times she came to a stop and raised her head. Looking back she saw the roiling gray fog swirling around the deformed grin of the scarred man. What had he said? Who was he? Already his memory was fading from her mind. Detached, she watched a massive gray hawk swooped down within the monster’s mouth and bat him aside as it winged toward her through the fog toward the opening of the Dullaith’s jaws and Ambril. For a moment she thought the gray hawk would make it through—but at the last moment the head of the Dullaith was ripped to one side and its mouth clanked shut. The Dullaith screamed in agony as a pair of gigantic jaws crushed the right side of its face.

Ambril struggled to clear her mind. When she had gotten the hang of breathing in and out again, she turned and saw the Cerberus, massive black dogs the size of mastodons lunging at the demon. Their heads and body were fluid with dark power, their razor sharp teeth ripped and shredded the demon as their breath singed her arms. The Cerberus had come, just as they said they would. Smoke billowed around them as chunks of fizzling demon fell to the stone. An eye landed near Ambril, she watched as it slowly dimmed then faded to nothing as the smoke thinned, then was gone. In moments it was over and a gentle breeze blew the rancid stench of the Dullaith away. Ambril filled her lungs with fresh air as she tried but failed to get to her feet.

There were only two of them, slowly they turned toward her, towering over her with their teeth clearly visible through their fiery breath. 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 invigorated her as if she was warming herself at a stove not burning at the stake. 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 masterful. 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 power, “*when all hope is lost, we will come. 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 and all. 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, snorted then was silent.

The larger one turned back to Ambril, “we have cleared the memories 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 gathered himself and 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 and sighed, clearly wanting to say something more then, just as his brother had, he leaped away.

It was as if someone had flicked a switch on, as soon as the smaller Cerberus had vanished, the day rushed back at 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 one armed hug still holding the fat squirrel in the other arm.

Then he hugged the squirrel close. “Aster needs rest but tell your Mom she’ll be back to work before too long.”

“What, A squirrel 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.

“We’re Animalfia, I thank you, Ambril,” Sid’s bright eyes twinkled but then grew sober, “but you really have to get away from here, it isn’t safe.”

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 under the demon just like you…then I think you stepped on me because I blacked out for a while. I came to my senses 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…if the being who did this cut the chain then used the Dorcha cup to encase it, it would be practically invisible to us.”* 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 thought you were going to be taken away by that awful twister! It was like something out of the Wizard of Oz!”

“I’m O.K., Mom, really, just a little bruised is all.” She beamed up at her mother so vibrant and alive. She thought about her Dad then, there was something about her Dad she wanted to tell her Mom about---but the more she thought about him, the fuzzier her thoughts became. Finally she gave up and pulled the little green lab book from her back pocket and handed it to her Mom. “I don’t have time to explain. Take this and read it, it explains what really happened to Dad the night he died. It wasn’t his fault Mom! It didn’t happen the way everyone thinks…and then show it to Zane but whatever you do, DON’T show it to Feldez until you’ve read it. Don’t let him near it.”

Her Mother stumbled as she took the book, her face growing pale, her body so frail. “If it will help put all of this behind us, I will.” She said resignedly, “but I can’t promise anything.”

Then Zane was there shoving Ambril away. He shoved so hard it knocked the breath out of her, he kept his voice low but it dripped with rage, “You had to do it didn’t you, you just had to be the hero in front of EVERONE! You know what? You don’t deserve to be with Mom! You don’t rate a family like us. The best thing you could do right now is get lost---permanently!” He gripped her shoulder and shoved her away. Then without a backward glance carefully guided Ambril’s Mom away from the mayhem to safety.

Ambril watched them go with a heavy heart. Clearly Zane had retained his memory of what had really happened, would he ever forgive her? And had anyone else’s memories survived the Cerberus’ brainwashing? Her eyes welled with tears, And would her mother survive this?

Her thoughts were interrupted by someone pushing her aside, “Riley? You’re home! Where have you been?” Riley’s mother folded her son in a brief hug, “we’ve been so worried!” Riley stood there mutely staring over his mother’s head. Mrs. Dogwood frowned before she gave Ambril and her mother an appraising look before she dragged Riley away. “What---odd weather! Let’s go find your father.”

As Ambril looked around them she could see that there were lots of others eyeing them suspiciously. Soon a crowd had formed around them grumbling about the damage and speculating about what had brought about the destructive twister. Their eyes never strayed far from Ambril. Ambril smiled as she saw Ygg running toward her with Sully just behind him.

“Ambril! Are you all right? There was something strange about that twister wasn’t there? It seemed to suck you in then spit you 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 storm? 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. “He dove right in to save you!”

Feldez appeared beside the Chief a large lump on his forehead but otherwise unruffled. He glared at Ambril.

“Feldez? Are you kidding?” Then Ambril stopped when the Chief gave her a particularly potent glare.

“We should get the children out of here immediately. It’s about to get 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! Arrest this child!” She pointed a square finger at Ambril. “I’ll have you know I have never had a more troublesome student in all my years of teaching! This!” She said pointing a stumpy finger again at Ambril, “this---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.” she nodded at Feldez, “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 must have been Feldez who saved the day!” She began clapping and the crowd joined in, soon everyone was admiring Feldez.

“We are greatly indebted to you!” simpered one of the middle aged maidens adoringly.

Ambril felt nauseous as anger telegraphed all through her body. He was getting the credit for this too? But before she could lose her temper the Chief stepped in front of her and stared her down. “Help me save your neck by staying quiet. 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 let’s all just settle down---”

“Did you see what them kids were doing?” A pot-bellied man shook his finger at Ambril and sneered, “that one went after Feldez, I saw it myself!”

“Hooligans! They somehow brought the storm down on us all!” another man shouted.

“They’re out to get us, those nasty kids!” quavered a squinty-eyed lady in a nauseously pink jogging suit.

The crowd around them tightened angrily around them, “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 since 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 they can bring us more trouble!” countered the red faced man.

“I say into the forest with all of them!”

Suddenly Ambril’s mother was there again, she drew herself up to more than her full height and faced the angry mob with her hands on her hips. “Over my dead body will you take my daughter out into the forest to die!” She said clearly.

“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. “Probably taught these youngsters everything they know!” Then the crowd roared angrily.

Ambril watched as her mother’s shoulders crumpled under their rage. The crowd began to insult her family and call for their entire family to be run out of town. Zane appeared then put his arm around his mother then shouldered a pathway through the crowd for them both. He wouldn’t even look at Ambril.

The crowd was so worked up now Ambril, Sully and Ygg were getting jostled and shoved in all directions. Skarn came up just then talking with Riley.

“Now that’s enough!” The Chief boomed, the veins on his neck now 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 was well past the point of listening, it roared over him.

“Chief, why don’t I take these kids on over to Moon Bay! They can keep them there until we get everyone here calmed down.”

The Chief looked surprised then 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 mine!” 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. “March! My car’s over there.”

“But Ygg and Sully didn’t have anything to do with this!” They couldn’t punish her friends for just being her friends, could they?

“Sully! Sully! What’s going on!” It was Sully’s parents, white lipped and dazed, reaching out for her. But the crowd kept them apart.

“Mom! Dad!” was all Sully could get out before Skarn shoved her forward.

Chief Buckthorne cupped his hands and roared at his Deputy, “right now, Skarn! MOVE!”

*“I cannot follow,”* fLit said softly in her head.

Ambril nodded at the nothing just above her left shoulder as she brushed a tear from her eyes. She wished no one could. She wished a Brellie would swoop down, swallow her whole then carry her far away.

Skarn shoved them roughly into the back seat of his police car then wedged himself behind the wheel. Sully wiped tears from her face as she waved good-bye to her parents. The mob had followed them and shouted nasty things about their parents and brothers and even dogs as they pounded on the police car’s windows. Skarn quickly eased the car out and away. Away from everything they knew and loved.

Ambril watched it all slide away from her---her family was in ruins. Feldez had won and the whole town thought she was a monster. Worst of all they thought the same about her best friends. Zane had been right about everything. Maybe she should have just stood back and let the demon eat everyone. Maybe she should have kept out of things. Maybe she should have said no to Hendoeth and lived a normal, boring life. Maybe…maybe…maybe.

# Chapter 34 The Mines

Shell-shocked, the kids lapsed into silence as they watched the forest thicken and darken. Ambril felt totally beaten, stripped of her medallion and her Ashera she felt naked and unprotected.

Ambril had her arms folded and hunched over them when she said, “I’m sorry guys, I’m sorry I ever got you involved in this.”

“Well I’m not,” was Sully’s surprising answer. “This is how it’ll play out, our parents and Unk will come and get us this afternoon and take us home—then my parents will ground me for a couple of years--- after that, everyone will have moved on to something else.”

Ygg grunted and nodded. “There be sommut strange about that twister, yeah?”

Ambril stared hard at Skarn’s head and decided she couldn’t risk telling them the truth so she just nodded.

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’ signs and one ‘WARNING---INSTANT DEATH---$200 FINE ’ sign nearly obscuring the gates.

Sully perked up a little, “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. Nearby a stream 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, “And I don’t want to be waiting around to see.” Steel bars separated the driver from the occupants of the back seat; the good from the bad.

Outside Skarn impatiently dialed his cell phone. “Yes…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, “No…you know I can’t do that, they’re not even 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 forward leaving a small gap, “and we be smaller than the average thug as well!” He said as he wriggled out between the seat back and the bars 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 after him.

“Look we can squeeze through here…see?” Ygg pointed to a ragged hole in the fence.

“But it’s the Mines!” whispered Sully tersely, “there are all kinds of wild stories about what lives in there: man-eating fish, one eyed monsters, poisonous gas… 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, 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 inside the fence for long, we could find a way out just as soon as we get away from Skarn.”

Sully still looked unconvinced which made Ambril feel guiltier than ever, “maybe I should go on alone. Because, it’s me they have a problem with, me and my family. 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 what you said isn’t true, all of us went out there, we’re in this together. Speaking for myself I’ve always felt like an outsider. Honestly, I never felt like I belonged until I met you guys.”

Ygg nodded in agreement, though he looked a little uncomfortable talking about it, “so we be in agreement then----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 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 from where she crouched, “easy there, Chief…I’ll find ‘em, they can’t have gone far.” Skarn walked away still talking 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. The fence veered away from them never to be seen again. But it didn’t bother them after awhile. The forest felt peaceful that afternoon. 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 in the Park, the Cerberus had done a good job modifying their memories. But gradually hazy images began to come back to them. Before long they were telling their side of the fight. When the cannon had started firing Ygg had ran over to Betula’s shop for more sugar bugs. Sully had spent a long time persuading the Chief to not race in and get himself killed.

Before long they had followed the creek down until it widened into a small lake the color of a tropical island postcard. Its color reminded Ambril of the small lake by the Gazebo.

“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 burbled pleasantly along the shore. Ambril sat down on a long flat rock, which slid far out into the water. 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, feeling like she was being watched. But how could that be? There was no one around. The lake water was so clear that Ambril could sense the roundness of each pebble on the lake bottom. The ropey green slime streaked around everything.

Sully had taken her shoes off to rub her feet as Ambril scooched next to her. “I guess the rumors of fantastic creatures aren’t true, I haven’t seen anything but the same old squirrels, birds, trees and fishes all afternoon.” Ambril said.

“But this green slime counts for something doesn’t it?” Sully 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. “Hey what’s that?” Sully leaned out over the water as 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 them.

Ambril blinked hard as Sully began screaming so loudly ripples formed in the otherwise still water. Before Ambril could stop her Sully jumped to her feet and started running flat out toward the tree line. Ambril finally caught up to her just as they reached the forest.

“Sea Monsters, they’re everywhere!” Sully pointed frantically at the placid lake. “There was this eye…staring at me…BLINKING!”

“Yeah, I know---scary huh?” Ambril grinned and panted.

Ygg raced up, “what be wrong now?”

“Ambril was just doing what she does best---attracting monsters.” said Sully sounding embarrassed, “and—and it blinked---maniacally at me.” She sat down heavily and began picking prickles from her socks not looking at either of them.

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 it was louder this time.

Ygg looked disgusted, “it be blinking, nought anything more?”

By then Sully had gotten control of herself and managed to look contrite. “O.K., O.K., I over reacted. It was just an eye floating in a lake---blinking maniacally.” she said trying to make her voice calm. She gave up on her socks and took them off before scrambling to her feet and limping back to the lake.

Ambril smirked a little as she dragged along behind suddenly feeling the affects of the day. It was late afternoon and her shadow stretched out before her. Suddenly, the shadow of a large bird flashed over her once, twice and once again. Ambril looked up to see it hover over Sully briefly. But Ambril didn’t get a sinking feeling, the kind of feeling she got when she was about to be eaten, until the giant predatory shadow moved back over her and stayed on her growing larger and larger…

“Sully! Ygg! Get out of here!” She said lunging to one side.

Just in time---the hawk swept down, talons splayed, and grazed the ground where she’d just been standing. Ambril felt a cold stabbing spike of anger pierce her mind…they had so much on their minds they had forgotten about the danger of being on the wrong side of the Wall---it was the Gray Lady.

As the gargantuan beast swept past the Gray Lady shrieked, “*No one takes from me…Breaks with me! One comes, one must goes on!”* the great bird banked off to one side.

Luckily Sully and Ygg had found safety in the jumble of rocks near the shore, if she could make it to the water she might be able to evade the Gray Lady’s talons and beak for a while. With luck the evil witch might tire of the game and go off to find 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 for another attack. Not bothering to gain height, she bore down on her prey, the wind underneath her 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. Seconds later Ambril saw the head of the hawk enter the water, and stretch toward her, its razor sharp beak opened wide and---missed. The force of the big bird’s maneuver had driven it too far forward and she snapped at open water. But just as Ambril was beginning to think she was safe, talons lashed out and gripped her shoulders, then she felt herself being lifted from the water. Her eyes blurred with pain as the talons bit into her skin, and she could struggled to breathe.

The gray hawk’s anger rolled through her mind, “*Mine! They’re 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 shook her harshly and climbed higher into the sky.

Her friends were yelling at her from below, Sully began throwing rocks…luckily she was a lousy shot, the lake shimmered like a tropical sea. They were very high now, Ambril 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? Stabbing shards of icy pain began where the talons bit into her shoulders and began to invade her mind, slowing her senses. Soon all the color of the forest below was gone---everything but the lake. The lake remained a brilliant blue green. Ambril felt herself weakening, she had lost all feeling in her arms and legs and hung limp like a rag doll. Soon the pain had even left her. She smiled in a detached way as the lake appeared to come alive. She knew reality had forsaken her when the lake itself reached up and plucked her out of the sky.

She was falling now in her dreamlike state, 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 which helped to clear her mind. But reality made no sense. She really was wrapped with some sort of green-blue slime and hovering inches above a large eye in the middle of the lake.

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

Another piece of the lake looking suspiciously like a sea monster’s tentacle reached up and wrapped around the bird with a slimy squelch. It squeezed the struggling bird tightly then 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.

Ambril felt the Gray Lady’s spiky cold magic slide away as she swayed gently above the water her eyes locked on the blinking eye. Was it the eye that had just spoken in her head?

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

As if in answer, the eye bobbed up and down then Ambril began moving smoothly toward the shore, the eye keeping pace.

It set Ambril down gently on the long slab of a rock by the shore. Ygg and Sully ran up looking concerned. As Ambril rubbed her sore shoulders and flexed her fingers, miraculously she seemed to be still in one piece.

“Are you all right?” Sully asked eyeing the eye.

Ambril nodded as she got unsteadily to her feet. Still trying to stare down the huge, glassy eye, Sully said. “I take it this monster really is the friendly type. Are you going to introduce us?”

“*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…Gern?”

The eye bobbed excitedly in response.

“As in my Dad’s last experiment? You’re---Gern? Oh…you’re Gern!” Ambril turned to her friends a wide grin on her face, “this is why my Dad was hesitating to announce his experiment, it must be because Gern came alive when he was created...he’s a real being!” Ambril had never felt prouder of her Dad. He had succeeded in creating something great, something world changing but he was struggling with the idea of exploiting this live being, someone who must have become his friend.

“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*.”

“So he made you in his lab and watched you grow, then what?”

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

“What was he studying and worrying about?”

“*Moroz*---*Magic---gic---gic containment*, *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. The lab book had told her as much. 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 were trying to find out more about Moroz’s energy source at the Old Council Hall that night, but instead they accidentally raised a Dullaith.” Ambril said quietly.

“Accidentally?” Sully asked incredulously.

“Yeah, one of the Cerberus told me that the Dullaiths were always testing this world’s weak spots. Something Feldez did created an opening, it didn’t hesitate, the Dullaith came right through and attacked my Dad.”

“*Me not know---know what happened*.” Gern looked very sad now and seemed to quiver.

“He brought you here for safe keeping didn’t he?” 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, 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.”*

Ambril remembered the hedge magically appearing when her Ashera sparked to life, the hedge must have some powerful invisibility wards to keep it hidden for so long. “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, he knows I’m onto him. We have to make sure Moroz’s prison 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.”*

Sully shuddered.

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 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?”

“There was some sort of mural…a map maybe, covered in soot.” Ygg volunteered.

“A map of what?” asked Sully excitedly.

Ygg looked annoyed, “stop hopping around like a bunny in a carrot bin and just tell us!”

“It’s a map of Old Town!” Sully squealed and hopped some more.

“What makes you so sure?” asked Ambril skeptically.

Sully looked disgusted, “the date of course! 1787 right underneath the title ‘Old Trelawnyd’, didn’t you notice?”

“I be too busy noticing the sticky sketch of Moroz,” said Ygg, disgruntled.

Sully paid no attention and continued, “the new city wasn’t built until 1849 right? So of course the mural is 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 the 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.

“You have a better idea?” asked Ambril.

Ygg sighed and shook his head slowly. “I guess that’s what we 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…we aren’t …squeezy enough, remember?” Put in Sully squishing up her face.

“*River run---run, we run river!”*

“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 waved 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---eezy 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 quivered like runny gelatin as she slid on. Sully clambered on after her, sitting in front. Last, Ygg grabbed Ambril’s elbow tightly as he awkwardly lunged for behind her splashing everyone with water.

“Thanks for that Ygg,” Ambril wiped water from her eyes “Ready?”

“I be as ready as ever,” said Ygg grimly as he gripped Ambril’s arms.

Gern raised the tentacle behind Ygg and lowered it in front of Sully 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, following the bends in the river and whooping through every rapid. Shadows made dappled 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 with nothing but plumes of water spray erupting from below

“That be nought a waterfall ahead?” Ygg asked a little too loudly.

They could now hear the roar of the water, “it sure sounds like one!” Ambril said and braced herself.

“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 abruptly 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 were off again. Ambril had just finished wringing out her ponytail when they rounded a bend and she saw 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.

# Chapter 35 The Way Too Long Arm of the Law

It was a tight fit but a short one. 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 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 was surprised to see Koda sauntering down the path, a sack in his hand.

“Ah, that was it, the smell of unwashed kids and slime has made all these little pink flowers close up.” 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, “Fowlclun’s been hurt. Someone laid another trap for him last night, I’m here to pick up some remedy ingredients.” 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?” Ambril interrupted as she tried unsuccessfully to wring out her pants while still in them.

Koda looked them over thoughtfully as Sully shook like a dog without much affect, “Rosebud might take you but not like that, she hates a soggy basket.”

Bummil nodded wisely, “Windbog first then.”

Baldot looked at him as if he were crazy. “Better you than me, I haven’t the staying power for that,” he turned and stumped up the Gazebo stairs.

Bummil shrugged, “It’s all in what you feed it.” He motioned to the kids to follow him down the garden path. A moment later he stopped in front of a marshy area filled with stick like reeds. The marker read, ’Windbog Extremus’. Its leaves looked like 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 nineteenth.” Bummil lugged the book over to the swamp and circling around like a shot-put thrower heaved the book 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 as it 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 be saying something like ‘I nought 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.

“Like I be saying before, it’s all in what you feed it.” Bummil nodded wisely, “Baldot threw in a book on why fairies are 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, the sun had just slipped behind the mountains and the shadows were beginning to deepen.

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 are---” She wasn’t allowed to finish as Rosebud whipped out vines, grabbed them and then jammed them roughly into her basket. It was a very tight fit.

“Wouldn’t it look better if one of us at least pretends 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 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 everything was in the right place and functioning before she raised her head just in time to see Rosebud disappearing into the forest.

“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 up everything and went to Betula’s place.”* fLit sniffed.

Ambril felt shocked, happy and uncertain all at once.

*“So she read the lab book! That’s great…I guess.”* 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 figure a way in yet?” then he stiffened before pulling them down behind some bushes, “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 talked angrily on his phone. Then he turned on a small light and looked over some old maps and blue prints One of the them had a beautiful border around the edges. With a start Ambril recognized it as the one she’d seen in his office. She screwed up her face in frustration and wished she could read his thoughts as easily as fLit. She watched Feldez’s calm cool profile as he poured over the map. He was wasting no time searching for Old Town. Moments later the car pulled away.

Ambril’s jaw clenched 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.

“*He’s looking for Old Town fLit! You have to follow him!”*

The sounds of a wailing, crazy woman echoed around her head, “*he’s flailing he’s no idea where it is...but as I think this expedition of yours isn’t going anywhere either, I’ll go,”* the fairy sighed dramatically then Ambril felt him slip away.

“Come on! We have to get to Old Town before Feldez 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 high off the ground toward the end of the building.

“That’s the art supply closet, they always forget to close that one,” said a voice behind them. Riley grinned as he stepped out of the shadows.

“Riley! You turn up at the oddest moments, why was 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 it’s 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. He likes to gamble, he wanted me to make sure that Lance would play ball today.”

“Then you two ended up in a fight which got him kicked out of the game.” Sully nodded.

Riley shrugged, “He lost his money so he wants to make me pay.”

Ambril was disgusted. “Yep Skarn’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 shout. Skarn had snuck around the far corner and now stood leering at them, his big square hands on his hips, “well lookey here, it’s a juvenile delinquent convention!” he yelled as he spread his arms wide and came toward them, “I’m getting a bonus this month for sure!”

Ambril looked anxiously at the window set well above her shoulder, it was their best option against the muscle bound cop, but how would they manage it? Fortunately Ygg had the same thought, he took a running jump and 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, “I’ll let them go for now, you’re the one I want to spend quality time with---we still have things to settle, boy! It’s time you felt some real pain, play time’s done!”

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 was ready for him, before the big man could gain a foothold he lunged at him and shoved the big man back through the window. Skarn sprawled on the asphalt swearing like a sailor as Ygg calmly 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 crimes and punishments at them as they staggered into the dark hallway.

“I’m glad Skarn didn’t get a chance to pound you into the pavement but I have to warn you, 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. “I’m safer in here with you, 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.

Sully tugged on Ambril’s sleeve looking terrified, “let’s sneak out the back while we still can!”

“Hold on---don’t give up now, didn’t you say you wanted to get in here?” 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 and snapped the lock on the inside of the door. He was just in time, with a creaking sound they could hear the front door surrender and bang open. Ambril held her breath, praying Skarn wouldn’t notice the lock wasn’t visible. She could hear him there on the other side of the door, breathing heavily.

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

The hard, clean light of a flashlight illuminated the dingy panes of glass on the door. Skarn stood for a long time listening…then slowly he began moving down the hallway, shouting insults as he went. His voice grew distant and Ambril exhaled slowly in the oppressive darkness. But 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. “With him bellowing like that we’ll have plenty of time to douse the light before he gets anywhere near here.” Riley lifted the lantern high, “what is it we’re looking for?”

The soot covered walls absorbed most of the light and did nothing to lighten Ambril’s mood, how would they ever get out of here? Fortunately the sticky red stuff had been cleaned off the floor, it sparkled in the soft glow of the lantern.

“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 barely visible through the cobwebs and dirt. It read: ‘Trelawnyd, 1787’. “See! This is a map of 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 and could instantly see what Ygg meant, 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, “but we’re not the only ones, someone else is looking for Old Town, someone who is trying to free Moroz.”

Riley looked quizzically at Sully, “and you think he’s imprisoned in Old Town?” The tall, thin boy looked impressed for a moment, then he laughed softly. “Yeah, I get it now…but why are you involved? 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 everything else---you call that fun?” Asked Sully incredulously. “Plus Ambril’s being blamed for all the Dullaith trouble because of her Dad.”

Riley looked at Ambril surprised, “who would go after 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 familiar name.

“Derwyn,” Ambril breathed. “It’s my Great-Gran’s Gazebo!”

Sully began jabbing the wall getting soot all over her fingers, “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 back 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?”

It was what they had all wondered the first time they’d snuck in. 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 turnip shapes stared down at them, one was even wearing spectacles.

# Chapter 36 A Sharp Left Turn

“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 ninth time she cursed Feldez for taking her Ashera and the Ledrith Glain. But she closed her eyes anyway and tried sighting. The gray fog rushed in around her making everything fuzzy.

A car horn blared in her head “*This is 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.”*

*“Oh really? How come it’s so much harder without them?”*

*“You’ve been relying on them too much. Try harder, I’ll give you a little boost.”*

Ambril gathered herself then resolutely pushed again at the gray fog swirling around her. Maybe it was because fLit had just told her she could do it or maybe it was because she was trying so hard but before long she was able to push it all away. She opened her eyes and smiled to herself.

“Whoa! Look at that!” Ygg pointed at the floor. In the center of the circle stone, the floor was fading, transforming into an intricate web of tracery. The blackened walls of the janitor’s closet also faded to reveal an immense starry sky riddled with glowing, nearly transparent tubes. The room filled with rustling sounds as budding vines grew out of the floor and up along the archways. But the rustling noises were soon replaced by the clickity clacking sounds of knitting needles.

“Told you---too soft in the head, took her ages to figure it out.” said a scratchy voice.

“She got this far didn’t she?” grated another.

“Her friends don’t look any smarter neither,” the scratchy voice added.

Ambril looked up, there they were, three large knobby lumps hanging from the vines that had grown up around the archways, knitting industriously. The middle one blinked owlishly through spectacles.

The Auntie on the left snatched the glasses, “that earth-kind is a plodder that’s a sureness. Did you bring a change of undies Dearie?”

The one in the middle sniffed, “all earth-kind look like plodders if you ask me.”

Ygg reddened, “rude little rutabagas aren’t they?”

The right one snatched the glasses away from her sister and screeched, “but that other one’s a dear, so chirpy!” She leered at Sully then rounded on Ambril and sniffed, “shame she’s so scrawny,”

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 nasty?” 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’t controls 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, can you help us? 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 sagely 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 to get out of here I remove this lacey stuff---”

“No WE’S removes it.”

“You remove it--- then what?”

“Well, nothing of course as we’s can’t let you through,” 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’s helped her before.”

They all looked expectantly at a point near Ambril’s left ear.

“Nothing…do you think he’s deaf?” the middle one exclaimed.

“Not deaf, just not interested.” surmised the one on the right.

“Beneaths him he thinks,” sniffed the one on the left.

A plane crash echoed painfully through Ambril’s head followed by an explosive “*NO!*” As everyone in the room jumped, Ambril guessed fLit’s anger had pushed his words into everyone’s heads. Her friends looked around curiously.

“Sorry guys, I’ll explain later, Ambril said aloud then she thought at the fairy, “*come on we’re really in jam here.”*

“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. Ambril heard 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 that first night? He hung around to teach me how to use my Ashera and protect the Ledrith Glain.”

“That nought worked well now did it!” grumbled Ygg as he glowered at the fairy, “fLit? That be no fairy name.”

“No, that’s the robot’s name---wait---he wasn’t inside the robot---spying on us was he?” asked Sully incredulously.

Ambril nodded slowly, “but not the entire time,” Ambril shrugged sheepishly. “I didn’t even know he was there until the robot got mashed.”

fLit folded his arms and 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.

Sully had screwed up her face and stared at the fairy, “How are you doing that?” she asked, “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*,” here he shrugged, “*not as receptive as a fairy of course, it is highly unusual amongst the lower species.*”

Ygg glowered at him, “thinking you be superior yeah?” Ygg squared off and tensed his shoulders, ‘typical.”

Ambril stepped between them, waving her hands, “O.K. yes, he’s insufferably arrogant and grumpier than a gnome, but 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 angrily. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell us about him. He *spyed* on us, Ambril!” Sully said looking injured. “And he’s a Tylwith---after reading that book on fairies, I don’t see how can you stand to be around him!”

Ambril looked at her six inch companion. “It wasn’t easy most of the time…and I really wanted to tell you, in fact I almost did lots of times…but I promised fLit that I wouldn’t.” Her shoulders sagged, “look I’m really, really sorry guys, I know it feels like I lied to you but---”

“You did lie to us!” Sully sputtered as she viciously folded her arms.

“I didn’t tell you everything because I couldn’t---not because I meant to keep secrets. And fLit helped us out loads of times---remember when Ygg was almost eaten by the wall? fLit saved him. And remember how the remedy tea bag suddenly jumped into the tea pot at Betula’s? fLit again,” Ambril looked hopefully from one friend to the other, “and there were lots of things fLit taught me that I passed on to you. I know it feels wrong---but it wasn’t all bad having him around.”

Sully and Ygg stared at the floor for a long moment still looking as if they had tasted something bad. Sully squinted up at the dirty glass on the door anxiously a few times then blew out her breath in a disgusted way and looked at Ygg. Ygg looked at her and shrugged. Then they both watched the fairy for a long minute.

Finally Sully said, “I feel like you haven’t groveled nearly enough for us to forgive you but we have to get out of here. But if your fairy friend’ll get us out of here, I’ll consider keeping you on my Christmas list.”

Ambril beamed at them both.

“You really think he can get us to Old Town?” Sully 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. What’s to keep him from dropping us into the nearest bottomless pit?”

‘He be thinking he’s above us all anyway,” growled Ygg his face was ugly mad now. “Why would he help us?”

“Do you want to get out of here or not?” Besides I trust him…he’s saved my life more than once.”

Ygg’s shoulders went up uncomfortably high as he said through tight lips, “it be your funeral if’n anything be happening to me friends on your watch, you be hearing me?”

fLit snorted then 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, still 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 if you don’t.”*

“*It’s not safe,* *evil lurks in the chutes…nasty beings wait for the innocent to pluck them from their journey and take them into the darkness with them.”* fLit said bitterly.

“*That happened to some one you know---maybe you lost someone in there---that doesn’t mean it’ll happen again.”* Ambril looked quizzically at the fairy. *“Was it the one you were trying to rescue from Moroz?”*

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. He’d been sneaky and crept up on them silently.

“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, Cuz I’m gonna 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 in a high wind as the center panel splintered out. Skarn’s eye leered at them.

fLit suddenly hovered inches from her nose, “*it’s your fault if anything goes amiss!”*

A hand grasped hers, Ambril looked around and was startled to find Riley there, he’d been so quiet she’d forgotten all about 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.

Ambril knew the door wouldn’t last much longer, between the earlier attack and Skarn’s axe the door was all in. Riley took Sully’s hand as Sully dragged Ygg over. “*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.

fLit’s hand tugged at her ear, “*ready*? *One, Two, Jump!”*

Ambril felt her heart jump into her mouth as they half fell half slid into the Chutes just as the door banged open behind them.

The webbed chutes thrummed with magic as they 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 ear as he steered them through an series of intersections. Riley’s hand felt warm and strong in hers.

There was one chute that looked different from the others, instead of sparkling white it was a deadened gray. “What’s that over there, why is it different from the others?” Ambril asked.

“*It’s a cursed chute, it requires powerful magic and massive energy to create them. They are usually created to attack the Great Tree.”*

*“Where is that?”*

*“Everywhere of course---too many questions! Quiet down!”*

After a long period 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 isn’t merely the earth, 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.

“*The chutes don’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, “*now* *stop bothering me or we’ll never get out of here!”*

Ambril shut her mouth tight and contented herself with watching a meteor shower, she ducked briefly and saw immediately what the Aunties had meant when they said the chutes went everywhere, they really had meant EVERYWHERE. She found herself in the middle of a pastoral scene filled with dinosaurs, then fLit jerked her ear down another chute and they were sheering through the rings of Saturn then skidded through the kitchen of a New York City apartment. A small bald man dropped his bagel as they whizzed through his entry hall.

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 starting to fade and the world beyond begin to come 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 haywire.

In the darkness, Ambril felt a knife like pain at her ear then Riley’s hand slipped from hers. She was shoved roughly to the side and 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 pile of rocks. 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 moon rode through the sky in the right way, the big dipper twinkled at her. This was definitely Earth. But where and when 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. The stones she had bumped into were piled around a rock wall. Taking several steps back and realized it was part of a tumbled down house, 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 and it was the same place where 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 always in the worst place at 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 did you know that? Because of what she read in that little book you gave her!” Feldez shook a fist at her which happened to have her Ashera in it.

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!”

In the moonlight Feldez glowed with blue-white 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 shrilled. “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, but she knew she just had to get all of this out before she burst. “You were there when the first Dullaith was raised and then again at the library when the Dorcha Blade and Morte cell were stolen! You even have blueprints of Old Town in your office 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…and now…well they all seem to 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. “How dare you preach to me! You have twisted everything around!” 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 Christmas tree. 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. 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 did choose you,” He struggled to his feet and flexed his hand as if it were numb, “I have read the prophesies and had heard the rumors that one had been chosen---but I hardly suspected it could be a fourteen year old walking disaster like you,” he regarded her stiffly as he stumbled to his feet hugging one arm to his body.

Ambril nodded still watching him closely. “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 ever since trying 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 been eating me alive ever since.”

He paused a moment to test out his arm before looking at Ambril full in the face, “I know you won’t believe this but I would actually welcome having the truth come out at last.” He smiled briefly and without warmth.

“Trying to keep it all a secret isn’t helping anyone anymore, including me.” He straightened then relaxed his shoulders, gone was the rigidity in his face, he looked almost---normal.

“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 wanted all of you to be protected from the brutal gossip that only this town can produce, when he knew he was dying he forced me to agree that he was to take the blame for raising the Dullaith---so that I would be free to keep you safe.” Feldez lowered his head and shook it sadly,

“I was seriously injured from the fight, when I woke up in the hospital a month later, 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. The secrets that I kept at your father’s request changed me…they broke 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 never meant to happen.” Feldez’s shoulders drooped as the last vestiges of his masquerade slipped off. “And for the record, I wasn’t the one who wanted to bring you back here, it was your mother who thought it might help you heal…sadly it seems to have damaged your mother more than anything else.”

The air felt thick with the tattered remains of the past. Ambril took a deep breath and looked skeptically up at this man she had hated for so long. She wasn’t entirely sure she’d be able to forgive him ever for what he had done to her family even if it was at her Dad’s last request. But she realized she was glad she finally knew his side of the story.

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 for all of this mayhem…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 they were after. When you mentioned Moroz everything came together. I realized it had to be someone who wants what I wanted in the beginning, knowledge and understanding. He knows that knowledge is the true power and the knowledge Moroz has would make him invincible.”

A twig snapped behind Ambril.

Feldez raised his head and squinted into the shadows. “Hold on, there’s someone else here. Who else came with you---who is that?” Feldez pointed into the shadows directly behind Ambril as a breeze blew back the strong smell of something rotten. 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. Then another burst of energy hit Ambril’s arm so hard it knocked her Ashera from her hand. It landed twenty feet away. Ambril fell to her knees when a cold spiky pain numbed her arm and blurred her vision.

But it was only Riley. Riley, with a satisfied grin stood there 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 a glimmer of gold wrapped around his wrist and a round object, black but with a sparkling jewel in the center swinging gently beneath his arm. It still resonated with power but seemed to be encased in something dark and evil.

“That’s my medallion!”

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? You took the Ledrith Glain from me?”

Riley smiled proudly. “My first Dullaith, 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 own 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 though.”

Ambril sighed heavily thinking about how wrong she had been about everything. Her thoughts raced through the past few months, “how could you hurt someone like Dr. Afallen?” accused Ambril thinking of the happy little man whizzing around the 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.”

“Was it you Skarn was talking to when he took us to the Mines? Were you his accomplice?”

Riley grinned, “I just wanted you guys out of the way for a while, Skarn was supposed to leave you there in the forest, but he chickened out. I didn’t want to pay him for half the job and he got sore.”

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 but I do. I’ve spent the past ten years carted from place to place, never fitting in. I didn’t know it back then but now I see that 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---maybe even Lance. You have to try and work this out. Talk to your family and tell them 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 wouldn’t listen, finally I realized I had to change things or else they’d never see me as anything but a loser.” His face filled with resolve, “but now---now they will…I’ll show them,” he nodded simply, “Then they’ll see how powerful I really am! After Moroz shows me a few things there’ll be no other magic wielder more powerful.”

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 his family!”

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, “sorry about this. I don’t---hate you as much as the others.” He straightened up and began backing away from her as he raised his hands and uttered a series of foul sounds. Ambril felt another jolt of power as her being was briefly encased in violet light. She too fell to the ground and rolled to the side, blearily she found her Ashera inches from her hand. She reached out and stuffed it under her sweatshirt.

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, with a clunk he dropped something metallic and heavy. She recognized the Morte Cell. Stunned Ambril looked down and saw fLit inside, just as on her first night in Trelawnyd he was frozen in a gut wrenching expression of pain and terror.

Riley chuckled softly, “your little fairy friend finally will get what he deserves. And you, didn’t you know the Dorcha Blade doesn’t have to cut you to curse?” he looked over at Feldez, inert and pale, “I’m impressed with him, he should have died the moment the curse hit him, I gave it to him good! He earned it after all the trouble he caused me.”

Riley straightened up, “the fairy’s an outcast you know, that’s how I was able to catch him the first time around. I used his energy to take you and Feldez down because I need all the power of the Ledrith Glain for my next trick---releasing the greatest magic wielder that ever lived!” Riley chortled.

Ambril couldn’t move a finger, she was completely paralyzed and could only breathe in and out as she watched him turn and jog slowly out toward the Old Derwyn tree. That was the last thing she saw before the pain took her down and away into the dark.

# Chapter 37 The Center of Everything

Ambril opened her eyes to find she was riding a river of roiling black smoke. Tendrils of it were infiltrating her body through the curse wound in her arm, slowly working their way toward her heart and 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 felt her Ashera poke her in the chest. She grasped it and felt immediately better. Looking around she found she was riding in a chute deadened and gray, a cursed chute. Power streaked through it occasionally erupting in a stinging spray of sparks. 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 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 back at the beginning of everything, where they universe began. Ahead the clouds of gas parted for an instant and she saw a brilliant glowing tree, its trunk massive like a redwood tree. The curse threads seemed to be pulling them toward it. Ambril gasped as she realized she was staring at the Great Tree of Life at the center of everything, 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---that the universe consisted of nothing more than their shared experiences, hopes, and struggles. All that every being had ever created---all the quirky, unique, silly, trite wonders were rewoven into the very fiber of the worlds that were in the throes of creation all around her. That was why fLit had given 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 right then what she had to do.

Ahead Ambril could see a burn mark spreading out on the great trunk where the curse threads had begun their attack on the Great Tree using Feldez’s life energy. 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 the inert form of Feldez, hoping she wasn’t too late. The quivering 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.

In a flash of sharp pain and brilliant light Ambril wrestled her body back to reality dragging Feldez along with her. As soon as the image of the abandoned homes around the circle stone formed in her mind, they were there. Feldez’s sharp intake of breath beside her made her turn.

“Was that? Were we just at the foot of the Great Tree?” he mumbled, then he shook his head and smiled weakly at her. “It seems I owe you the same debt I owed your father, 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 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 lurch, downward and to the right in her stomach. She looked up to see Riley standing at the center of the stone circle. The smoldering remains of the old tree strewn all around him. Blue sparks flew everywhere as he struggled to ignite something.

“Ambril you have to stop him!” Feldez pulled her Ashera up and pointed it at the boy. “Do it now before it’s too late!”

But Ambril hesitated, she looked down and saw the 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 tentacle like 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 huge 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 and root-like at its other end. It blinked then flinched in the moonlight as it half crawled half slithered into the shadows with reptilian grace.

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 that he rolled over and over before coming to a stop at the edge of the smoking fissure, motionless. 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 behind him.

# Chapter 38 What a Mess, Grab a Broom

Ambril probably would have sat there staring at the point Riley was dragged into the shadows for a long time if an irate fairy hadn’t come along and punched her in the eye.

A New York City traffic jam invaded her head then fLit thought at her, “What’s the matter with you? I can’t believe you let him release Moroz! Haven’t you learned anything?”

Ambril held him off with her hand. “What are you talking about? I saved your life!”

“And let the most evil magic wielder that ever was skip away into the forest, you two headed trout! What you should have done is kept Moroz imprisoned at all costs! Now look at the mess you’ve made!” A six story glass house clattered painfully to the ground in her head.

“He’s right,” Feldez was sitting bolt upright next to Ambril eyeing the fairy. “What’s one less Tylwith to this world?”

fLit froze, his face a picture of outrage before he flew at Feldez and kicked his ear. Feldez chuckled as he put up his arm to keep the fairy at bay. “Why are you hitting me? I agreed with you!”

AMMMMBRILLL! WHERE ARE YOU! WE’RE LOST IN THE WASTELANDS HERE!” Sully’s voice rang out behind them. Turning Ambril saw it was snowing in the forest.

Well not really snowing, the twenty foot tall hedge lining Old Town was releasing its leaves to the winds, But in the moonlight it looked like snow. Behind the hedge they heard the rustle of branches, two heads popped through and were immediately engulfed in swirling leaves.

“The invisibility wards were broken when Moroz was released, Old Town is once more accessible to all,” Feldez said.

“How did you find it by the way?” Ambril asked as she got to her feet and offered him a hand.

“By using your Ashera,” Feldez nodded to the decorated stick in Ambril’s hand. “Handy little tool you have there.”

“I’m surprised it even worked for you.”

“Me too come to think of it,” Feldez mused still eyeing the wooden tube. “I suspect it was trying to find its way back to you.”

Sully and Ygg emerged from the barrage of green leaves spitting and waving their hands around. They wiped their eyes and looked around in wonder.

“So this be Old Town!” said Ygg softly.

“We’ll need an army of gnomes to fix this place us!” Sully shook her head at the still smoldering hunks of wood scattered around the circle stone and the dilapidated houses beyond. “Where’s Riley? Isn’t he with you?”

Before Ambril could answer a massive shape materialized above them followed by a hollow caw. Feldez ducked as a brick narrowly missed his head.

“My oh my! Something big’s happened ain’t it?” Hendoeth hollered down from Fowlclun’s porch. “I felt it run clear down my spine and out my tippy toes!”

Ambril noticed a bandage wrapped securely around one of Fowlclun’s knobbly knees as the porch came down to ground level and Parch set sail as a paper boat with a sail over Ambril’s head. An image of a pirate with a parrot on his shoulder winked from the sail. The parrot cawed and said, “get the bootie, get the bootie!”

Jute hung from the anchor, “we’re late again as usual but we’re going to take a gander at all the death and destruction anyway.”

“Hop aboard, I’m to collect you and bring you home.” Hendoeth waved to the kids.

“Who by?” asked Sully.

“Chief Buckthorne of course, he found Skarn making mince meat of the Christmas decorations in the Janitor’s closet. He was a might perturbed to not find you in there with them. The Chief got him to confess everything.” Hendoeth winced as she nodded sadly, “He knows about Riley too, you three are in the clear,” Ambril heaved a huge sigh of relief as they ran up the steps.

“Feldez? Is that you kid? Why I haven’t seen you in a bucketful of Januarys! You wanna ride?” Hendoeth squinted at the tall man watching in fascination as Jute and Parch hovered over something interesting out on the Circle Stone.

“Why no thank you Hendoeth. My car is parked nearby.” He backed up several paces, “I’ll be gone for a while. But I will write a letter to the press regarding Bren Silva’s death before I go.” He gave them a short bow before turning away.

“What kind of research?” Ambril called after him.

“Saving the Universe research.” He said grimly.

Ambril waved as she watched the erect figure pick his way to the now denuded hedge and vanish into the forest. The three kids raced up the porch steps and into the house.

“Need a little help here!” Parch and Jute flew in, this time Parch had adopted the shape of an origami pterodactyl struggling to stay aloft with Jute strung around his neck. Something dangled and swayed beneath them.

Ambril reached for it and pulled it closer. Encased in a harsh blue-black metal was the Ledrith Glain. At Ambril’s touch the metal curled and peeled away like old skin revealing what was left of her medallion. It was still a beautiful thing, but the gem itself had dulled and grayed. Even the warm glow of Hendoeth’s lanterns couldn’t coax a sparkle from it.

“It’s been pushed beyond its strength. It will probably never regain its power again.” fLit sighed heavily as his shoulders bowed. “I thought they might take me back if I---”

“You were thinking this was your ticket back into Tylwith society? Why didn’t you tell me?” Ambril asked.

Wrong thing to say, Ambril watched fLit’s shoulders rise defensively as dozens of women sobbed and moaned in her head. “Because I didn’t want to hear the pity in your voice. It was stupid to even hope it would happen. It has been prophesied that the Ledrith Glain will fulfill its final destiny in the hands of the Ashera, the Four. That’s you if you’re wondering.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I didn’t hear it, I read it---it’s written there on your Ashera.”

“What? What else does it say about me?---Oh never mind, tell me later.”

Ambril didn’t feel like thinking about it, she’d had enough of saving the world for one day. She looked sadly down at her medallion and fingered the broken chain as she felt Fowlclun ease to his full height and begin moving through the forest. Jute bounced onto her shoulder.

“I can fix that,” he said.

Curious, Ambril handed him the medallion. Jute groaned slightly as he ripped off a tiny bit of himself and applied it to the chain.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”

“A little, kind of like snipping too much of your toe nail off.” He handed her back the medallion, with the chain mended, a tiny bit of Jute held the broken ends together. Almost out of habit Ambril slipped it back around her neck and under her shirt. She felt better having it there even if everyone else thought it was wasted and ugly, it would always mean something to her. It warmed to her immediately.

“Thanks Jute.” She smiled at the curly string face who immediately formed itself into a string top hat and doffed itself to her ceremoniously.

“I guess that means your welcome.” Sully brought a platter of scones over and plunked them down on the coffee table. “So what happened back there?” She asked as she sat down on the sofa. fLit hovered in the corner looking disdainfully down on Brollie who glared up at him with equal disdain. Ygg sat down on the coffee table to be closer to the scones. He took a large bite of one and cocked an eyebrow at her.

“It was Riley all along but, even though we didn’t mean to, we helped him---A LOT. He wasn’t even thinking about Old Town until we told him about it,” Ambril began glumly, “Worse we offered him a free ride there. Once Riley knew we were nearing Old Town he used the Morte Cell on fLit. Then he shoved us away like we were just bits of trash.”

Ygg and Sully just sat there stunned for a while. A scone frozen halfway to Ygg’s mouth, then Ygg growled, “We should’a left him bunched up with the trash in the locker.”

“What happened with Feldez?” asked Sully as she slowly chewed a blueberry scone.

Ambril took a deep breath and told them all about her argument with Feldez and what it felt like when Riley had hit them both with Dorcha Curses. She went on to describe her ride down the cursed chute and tried to explain how spectacular the Great Tree really was but failed, naturally. It was that beautiful. Then she finished with Riley raising Moroz and then getting kicked to the curb for his troubles. She ended with Moroz dragging Riley into the forest. Ygg and Sully just sat there with their mouths slightly open looking stunned.

“We tried to follow you when we saw you sliding out of the chutes but lost you right at the end. Then Ygg here got stuck in a tree and refused to come down for the longest time, you know how he is with heights.” Sully made a face at him.

Ygg raised both eyebrows at her, “It be a tall, tall tree! Then you be leading us around in circles for hours,” he accused.

Sully shrugged, “not that it mattered, we were standing right in front of that weird hedge without knowing it until it miraculously appeared and started shedding all over us.”

“Hey, bring your fairy friend over here, I want to see if he can get a rise out of Tweek, she’s been too quiet of late.” Hendoeth beckoned to Ambril as she held up the brilliant gem flower.

A chorus of triumphal trumpets blared through Ambril’s head followed by a cascade of bells when fLit caught sight of Tweek. He streaked over and wrenched the flower gleefully out of the old woman’s hand. He danced with it around the room, circling them so blindingly fast that it reminded Ambril of Moonrise. When he stopped Tweek sparkled and twinkled so brightly Ambril had to hold her hand over her eyes. Then he set her gently down on Hendoeth’s outstretched hand.

“What do ya know! What she needed was a do si do with one of her own kind!”

fLit streaked over to Ambril, grabbed her nose and squeezed it hard, his face the happiest she had ever seen it. “*It’s her! The one that was taken and bound! I’ve found her*!” He circled Ambril’s head a dozen times at warp speed then floated back to Tweek.

*“Then you can go home right?”*  Ambril was surprised at how she felt. Happy that he had found a way to go home but sad because she knew she’d miss him.

“*Not like this, I have to free her first.”*  Said fLit ruefully as he slowly circled the gem flower in Hendoeth’s hand. fLit was so excited that chimes and bells clashed in Ambril’s head for the entire ride back. She was nothing but relieved when Fowlclun finally slowed and lowered himself to the ground.

“Are we home? It seems like we’ve been gone for weeks.” Sully trotted toward the door. Ambril turned but then stopped when she realized she didn’t have a home anymore. She guessed they’d be sleeping on Betula’s floor for a while, maybe in the storage room, Ambril hoped they’d had a chance to clean up all the sugar.

Ygg was first through the door, over his shoulder Ambril could see Unk grinning broadly at him over the heads of Sully’s parents who ran up and grabbed their daughter. They mumbled something about strange methods of travel and bundled her off to a nearby car. It was then that Ambril gasped when she realized where they were for behind them stood a stone house with chimney pots lined up on both sides of the roof, every window lit up like Christmas. It was the Derwyn mansion.

“I’m right proud of what we did today, truth be told,” said someone at her knee.

“We be having all afternoon to do it so’s we even had time for a mid afternoon nap,” came another voice. Ambril found Baldot and Bummil beside her nodding at the house.

“You---you cleaned up the old mansion in one afternoon---for me?” Ambril felt overwhelmed.

Baldot squinted up at her grouchily. “Course not, we be doing it for that nice lady there on the porch.”

It was Ambril’s mom who smiled and waved at them from the front door. She still looked thin and frail but something about the set of her shoulders made Ambril’s heart leap. Surprisingly she seemed not to be bothered by the appearance of a chicken legged house and the gnomes arguing as they pulled weeds from the edge of the stone walkway. Warmth flooded through her as she watched her mother giggle then turn toward the large woman with a big smile standing next to her. Betula put her head back and laughed. Ambril heard the faint sounds of ragtime coming from inside the house. The two of them beckoned to Ambril and disappeared back inside.

Then she saw Zane walking down the steps to meet her and felt her chest tighten. At the Park he had been so angry he’d thrown her out of the family, would he follow through with that? In the glow of Fowlclun’s porch lanterns his face did look a little funny. But after a moment Ambril realized it was because he looked almost---happy. He had something red and metallic in his hands.

He marched up to Fowlclun’s front porch then stopped uncertainly staring wide eyed at Fowlclun then at Hendoeth who gave him a big grin.

“Come on up here and introduce yourself kid!” she hollered just as Parch buzzed by as a supersized mosquito with Jute hanging below making obnoxious buzzing noises. “This here’s Fowlclun and I’m Hendoeth---pay no attention to Parch and Jute---if you can. You must be Zane.”

“Yeah, um---Hi,” Zane nodded warily at them then ducked as Parch and Jute dive bombed him. Then he said, “Come on, we’re about to have dinner Ambril. Do---your friends want something to eat?” he asked doubtfully still keeping an eye on Parch and Jute.

“Nah, we gotta get back on patrol now that Fowlclun is feeling better. Moroz is out there somewhere’s.” Hendoeth volunteered.

Ambril jumped down the porch steps. “Thanks for the ride!”

Zane squinted one more time at Fowlclun briefly then shook his head, “Moroz? You’ve got a lot of explaining to do you know that?”

“So do you, so what happened after Skarn got us away from that mob?” Ambril said as she waved goodbye to Hendoeth then matched strides with her brother.

“Mom read the lab book first then gave it to me.” He ducked his head and shrugged. “I didn’t want to at first but when Mom laid into Feldez, I kinda got curious. It was all over for Feldez after that.” Zane gave Ambril his old lopsided smile. “Mom gave him everything she had! Remember when she went after that principal who wouldn’t let us wear hoodies to class? It was even better than that!” He said enthusiastically, “then we packed up everything and left. We thought we were heading over to Betula’s house but instead we ended up here. We met the gnomes when we got in the house, Mom remembered them from when she lived here with Gran, they are amazing!”

“They have their moments!” Ambril put in.

“We just meant to look around but when we saw the place---we knew we wanted to stay. So we cleaned it up. We’re sort of camping out until the furniture comes.”

Zane gave her a half smile as he held up a shiny red metal man. “I snagged this from your room awhile back…more like rescued, what did you do to him?” He shook his head disgustedly, “never mind, but I took him to Bob’s Bot’s and he fixed him, he works great now.” He held the robot out on his palm and switched him on. At first the metal man just blinked and did nothing---then slowly it broke into a jerky, nerdy dance.

“Look at that! The robot’s doing ‘the robot’!” Ambril giggled.

Zane looked surprised and then a little embarrassed as he switched him off. “He just need’s a little practice, what do you call him?”

Ambril realized that this was the closest they would ever get to a round of apologies and she smiled, “you can call him anything you want, he’s yours now.”

fLit snorted near her left ear, “*good riddance, I can’t look at that human-kind shaped prison without wanting to wretch.”* Ambril shifted her grin at the slight depression in the air near her left ear.

“You know without your training I wouldn’t be here…so---”

“Don’t.”

“But I just want to say thanks for---”

fLit groaned, “You’re not going to start thanking me for every little thing are you? How tedious.”

Ambril stopped and turned to face the depression in the air---which made her feel weird, *“just this once I want to say thanks for sticking around and all the rest, O.K.?”*  She thought at him all in a rush.

“That’s twice. You said Thanks twice.”

Ambril sighed and changed the subject. “you found Tweek I guess this means you’re leaving right?”

There was no response from the fairy for a bit then, “*you’re forgetting you saved my life again.”*

*“You’re staying?”* She stared at the empty space next to her for a moment trying to get something straight in her mind, “*would you call us friends? I’m just curious.”*

“Friends? I think that’s going too far,” scoffed the fairy, “Tylwiths don’t normally befriend human-kind.”

“Normal Tylwiths don’t fight demons alongside humans, they don’t ask earth-kind gnomes for help and they don’t go against their kind to lead rebellions against Moroz. So what would a very un-normal Tylwith call us?”

fLit was silent a moment then said, “Comrades, I’d call us Comrade in Arms.”

Ambril wrinkled her nose, “That sounds too much like we’re going to war.”

The depression in the air twitched, “We ARE going to war, now that Moroz is free he won’t stop until he has the world in his grasp.”

Ambril sighed, “I’m gonna have to call you my friend then because I don’t want to fight alongside anyone but friends.”

“What are you *doing*?” Zane was watching her too closely.

“Just thinking.” She said lightly and turned to face the house again.

“Even toddlers can walk and think at the same time. Come on I’m hungry!” Zane grunted as he headed back up the path toward the house. “Supper’s waiting and even better---Mom didn’t cook it. Betula took pity on us when she heard that Mrs. Sweetgum’s under the weather.”

Ambril paused to watch Fowlclun disappear into the forest before turning back to her new---old home. The photo in Dr. Afallen’s album popped into her head; she in pigtails, Zane sticking out his tongue and her Mom and Dad leaning in toward each other. It would never be that way again but Ambril did get the feeling that things were getting better. Finally they were in a place where they belonged.

She knew of course that the Universe was about to go to pieces but at that moment, right then, Ambril felt pretty good about her own little life.

An announcement arrived in the mail the very next day:

**\*\*MAGIC WIELDER ALERT! FOR YOUR EYES ONLY\*\***

**FELDEZ PETRI SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT**

**Dr. Feldez Petri, Trelawnyd’s most eminent scientist, medical professional and magic wielder has graciously come forward to set the record straight regarding his friend and associate, Dr. Bren Silva. Feldez tells us that on the night of Dr. Silva’s death certain events occurred which he claims were inaccurately reported at the time.**

**He wishes all Trelawnyd residents to know that it was he who raised the Dullaith that night, not Bren Silva. Even though Feldez eventually subdued the creature, his heroics came too late and Bren, involved only in helping him control the creature, had already succumbed to its vicious attacks. Feldez wishes all to know how much he regrets his actions.**

**He wishes to extend his full apologies to the Silva family and points out that at no time were any of the family responsible for raising Dullaiths. Indeed he feels we are all indebted to one unnamed member of the Silva family for vanquishing the monsters that have so terrorized our fair city.**

**On behalf of our entire community we accept his confession and hope that his leave of absence from the hospital does not mean he will stay away from his hometown for long.**

**A version of this letter, adjusted for non magic users will appear in tomorrow’s Trelawnyd Gazette.**