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## Scene 1 (The Secret Doorway)

Harper sat down at the table as her stomach growled loudly. The smell of the food made her mouth water as she thought of the fresh, cheesy pizza she was about to eat. She had not eaten anything that day, and she stared longingly at the people around her as they ate their delicious pizza right before her eyes.

Soon, Harper heard the soft ringing of a bell, and looked up just in time to see her best friend Luna walk through the door.

Harper had called her earlier that day so they could eat lunch together.

Harper and Luna often got mistaken for twins, though neither of them understood why. In fact, they were almost like exact opposites.

Harper kept her long black hair in a bun all the time, while Luna's light brown hair was not even long enough to tie up. Harper was outgoing and curious, while Luna liked to draw and keep to herself.

Luna loved to wear necklaces and other types of jewellery while Harper only had one bracelet. (Even though she wore it all the time.) It was a thin, silver one that had been passed down through her family for almost 50 years. It had a bunch of little charms dangling from it. There was a star, a moon, and a lightning bolt. Harper's favourite charm was the lightning bolt. It always seemed to stand out and shine a bit brighter than all the other ones.

One thing a lot of people knew about Luna, is that she stuttered a lot. Ever since she was little, she would always stutter when she talks. Her parents took her all over the world, but none of the doctors could figure out why.

Luna walked over to where Harper was sitting while holding a notebook and pencil in one hand, and her hoodie in the other. As usual, she had her white, round glasses sitting on her face. She also had three gold necklaces hanging around her neck, and four rings on her left hand. Just by looking at her, Harper could tell Luna had just come from the park across the street.

They lived in a small town called Ephemeral, and according to Harper and Luna, it was the prettiest place on earth. They always went on walks together, and Luna always brought her notebook and pencil to draw whatever she thought was interesting.

Luna joined Harper at the table and sat down. Soon enough, they had each ordered their choice of pizza, and started talking.

A few minutes later, Harper excused herself to go to the bathroom. She had never been to this restaurant before, so she wandered around looking for it.

Eventually, she came across a long, dark hallway, far away from where guests were being seated and enjoying their food. None of the waiters seemed to notice Harper as she started walking further into the dark hallway.

As she was walking through the hallway Harper deeply wished she had a jacket with her. She could see a small cloud of vapour come out of her mouth whenever she breathed. The further she went, the darker and colder it became. Shivering, Harper wrapped her arms around her to try and preserve her body heat. She could feel her frozen fingers on her arm as she looked around the hallway. All she could see behind her was a small square of light where the rest of the restaurant was. She had already come so far, and it was too late to go back now.

Eventually, it got so dark that Harper could not see anything ahead of her. She stuck her hand in the right pocket of her jeans and pulled out her phone.

She had an incredibly old iPhone 5 that had a shattered screen, and a small piece of the phone was missing in the top left corner.

Harper turned on the phone's flashlight and held it in front of her. She could see mold all over the brown bricks on the walls, and Harper could see her footprints in the thin layer of dust on the floor.

The smell of the hallway made Harper wish she had never entered it. It was horrible. It smelled like a mixture of mold, dirt, raw fish, and garbage. The putrid smells made her gag every time she breathed. If she had not been so eager to know what was at the end of the hall, she would have left that very moment.

Every inch of the bricks was covered in shiny white cobwebs. She even saw an orange and brown spider in the middle of a big spider web.

Usually, Harper did not mind spiders. This one, however, was bigger than her whole hand. She could see its red beady eyes piercing her skull like a laser. She quickly rushed past it.

After what felt like forever, she made it to the end of the hallway. "*Darn that's disappointing.*" She thought to herself. Standing in front of her, was a brown brick wall that looked exactly like the walls on either side of her. She traced her fingers on the thin indents between the bricks. They felt rough and hard on her fingertips.

She stood there for a few minutes, with her fingers on the wall right in front of her. She did not realize how excited she was until the adrenaline started to leave her body.

Feeling defeated, she started to turn around, ready to head back to the table where Luna was waiting for her. Suddenly, she noticed a small, lightning bolt scratched into the middle of the wall.

Completely forgetting she needed to go to the washroom, she sprinted back through the hallway and slowly began to feel her fingers again. She ran all the way back to Luna and grabbed her arm.

“Come on!” Harper exclaimed. “There’s something I need to show you.”

Feeling confused, Luna grabbed her hoodie and trailed behind Harper as they both ran toward the dark hallway.

Harper pulled Luna along as they continued running down the long, dark hallway. Soon enough, the two girls started to shiver as they walked further into the hall.

“Where are we g-going?” Luna asked, as a cloud of vapor left her mouth.

“You’ll see.” Harper replied, with a slight smile on her face.

“So... w- what’s the point of this?” Luna was staring at the moldy brick wall in front of her, as Harper stood beside her, breathing heavily.

Harper took the small thin bracelet off her hand and handed it to Luna.

“Look closely at the wall.” Harper whispered.

Luna’s eyes darted back and forth between the wall and the bracelet as her brain tried to understand what she was seeing. Moments later, she saw the small lightning bolt on the wall, and looked down at a charm on Harper’s bracelet.

“The t-two lightning bolts” Luna said, “They look identical.”

“What do you think it means?” Harper asked, thinking hard.

“I- I think it’s a key.” Luna answered.

Harper could feel the adrenaline coursing through her body once again. She took the bracelet back from Luna and slowly entered the little charm into the wall.

For a few moments nothing happened. They could feel each other's disappointment radiating through the room. Just then, the floor started vibrating, and the solid brick wall that was standing in front of them vanished.

Scrambling to pick up her bracelet, Harper ran through the archway that appeared as Luna followed right behind her.

## **Scene 2 (Stranger in a Strange Land)**

The second they stepped through the tall white archway, the brick wall appeared behind them, locking them in the room.

As Harper and Luna looked around, they saw the room they were in looked remarkably like the hallway they had just left.



They were standing in a small square room that was also built with brown bricks. However, unlike the hallway, the bricks were clean and had no sign of mold or cobwebs.

The room was about the same size as Harper's bedroom, and standing in front of Harper and Luna was a glowing, purple portal.

Wrapped around the portal was a thick, gold thread. The portal was sparkly and had a dark purple colour to it.

The two girls looked at each other and seemed to know exactly what to do. Together, they stepped through the portal.

Instantly they both could feel something happening. They felt a weird twisting sensation in their stomachs.

Harper's whole body felt tingly, and her head was spinning. But as soon as it started, it stopped.

Her head was throbbing, and she felt like she was going to fall over. She slowly opened her eyes and was blinded by a bright yellow light.

Now that she did not feel dizzy anymore, she could take in her surroundings. The portal had vanished, and people all around her were running away from the bright yellow light piercing her eyes.

Neither Harper nor Luna could see where the light was coming from, but all around them there were houses and dirt paths leading in every direction.

All the houses looked similar. No matter what colour it was, the paint on the outside was faded and peeling. Most of the windows were cracked and some of them were completely covered in dust. None of the houses were more than two stories and they all had smoke billowing out of a grey, brick chimney on the top.

Despite the houses being damaged, they did not seem weird or creepy. To Harper, they had a cozy feel to them. They felt inviting and she would not mind living in one of the houses.

The air around Harper and Luna was cool and crisp. Luna pulled her grey hoodie over her head and curiously watched the people around her.

Even though everyone was running, they did not look confused or worried at all. Most of the people Harper could see looked about her age, but there were toddlers and adults running as well.

Suddenly, Harper and Luna felt a cold, rough hand seize their upper arms, and pull them toward one of the houses.

They were pushed onto a silky, cushioned couch and saw a tall figure sitting on a chair in front of them.

All around the room they sat in, there were shelves with bottles full of different liquids. The bottles were many different shapes and sizes, but they all had a brown wooden cork on the top. Some of them were filled with glittery, glossy liquids that seemed to slowly move with the bottle. Some of them had clear liquids that looked just like water. And some of them had chunky substances that looked freakishly like dried blood.

Harper could hear faint hissing sounds coming from some of the bottles, and in a room beside where they were sitting, there was smoke seeping out the bottom of the door.

The whole room was filled with different scents. Harper could smell roses, rotten eggs, lemon, peppermint, chocolate, raw sewage, beans, and many other odd smells.

Harper looked at Luna and could see a puzzled expression on her face as she looked around the room.

“What is this place?” Harper asked.

“It’s my shop.” Said a voice.

Completely forgetting there was someone else in the room, Harper and Luna jumped at the same time.

There was an elderly woman sitting in front of them, with her hands resting on her lap.

“This is where all the magic happens.” The woman said, with a smile on her face.

“Ms.-” Luna began, sitting up.

“Please,” The woman exclaimed. “Call me *Mr.* Flitz. My pronouns are he/him.”

Harper saw Luna’s face go red as she slumped back down onto the bright orange couch.

“Don’t worry about it.” Mr. Flitz chuckled. “Happens all the time.”

Harper felt ashamed that she thought Mr. Flitz was a woman as well. His silver hair was almost as long as Harper’s, and it was tied back into a slick braid that went down to his knees. His face had wrinkles all over it, and even more appeared as he gave the two of them a big smile with his pearly white teeth.

“So, uh- would you mind explaining what just happened?” Harper asked, looking at Mr. Flitz.

“Yes of course.” He answered. “Welcome to Land Unknown. Everyone here has also gone through a portal just like you did.”

“Oh...” Luna exclaimed. “What a- about the y-yellow light?”

“Oh that, is the monthly Sunpell. The sun here is vastly different from the one where you live. The sun in Land Unknown feels the need to be different than all the other suns. It’s almost

like it's alive and thinking for itself. But nothing to be worried about, just get inside and you will be fine."

"Ok. This has been fun and all, but we really need to get home." Harper said.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"W-why not?" Luna asked.

"Well," Mr. Flitz answered. "There is a special potion needed to open the portal of Land Unknown. The ingredients are almost impossible to find, and the last thirteen people who have tried to find them... well, they never came back."

Feeling crestfallen, Harper slouched back onto the couch just as Luna had.

"There are three ingredients." Mr. Flitz continued. "The tear of a ghost, the leg of a flare spider, and the hardest of them all, the eye of a Goljica. If I had all the ingredients, it would be easy to mix them together. But a Goljica is impossible to get near."

"W-what's a G-Goljica?" Luna asked, puzzled.

"A Goljica is a blue, scaly serpent. If it touches you, you will denigrate and disappear from the world forever. A full grown Goljica is about as tall as a five-story building, and they are very violent. There is a myth of a special bracelet that can lull a Goljica and put it to sleep, but no one has ever found it."

Harper nervously looked at her own bracelet as she thought about the pros and cons of their situation. They really needed to get home, and their parents would be worried sick if Harper and Luna didn't get home in a few hours. On the other hand, Harper really didn't like the idea of 'disappearing'.

"We are going to do it." Harper said defiantly.

### **Scene 3 (Crossing the Magical World)**

"W-what do you m-mean?" Luna asked looking bewildered.

"We need to do this. We can't stay here forever." Harper replied.

"B-but-"

"I'll let you two figure this out." Mr. Flitz said. "Do you want tea?"

"Yes please." They both responded.

"I know this sounds stupid-" Harper said as Mr. Flitz left the room.

“E-extremely stupid.” Luna replied, with a stern look on her face.

“But I think we can figure it out.” Harper continued.

“You t-think?!?” Luna yelled as she stood up.

“Look it’s our only option.” Harper replied. She could tell Luna was about to object, so she continued. “Look at all these people who have been stuck here for, well, who knows how long. Do you want to live here for the rest of your life?”

Luna took a deep breath then sighed.

“Look, I think my bracelet is the special one Mr. Flitz was talking about.” Harper said.

“Y-you really think so?” Luna asked.

“Well, it did get us here in the first place...” Harper replied. “Maybe it will get us out!”

“You k-know fine.” Luna sighed. “L-let’s go make this stupid p-potion.”

“Yes!” Harper said as she pumped her fist into the air.

Just at that moment, almost at once, Mr. Flitz came into the room with a tray of tea and cookies. He set the tray down and sat in front of Harper and Luna.

The three of them took their cups of tea and sat in silence for a few moments.

“So, you guys are going to do it then?” Mr. Flitz asked as he took a sip of tea.

The two of them nodded.

“Well, you should get going soon.” He spoke. “The sooner you start the sooner you can get home.”

They both nodded again.

Mr. Flitz got up and walked out of the room. Harper and Luna, both gave each other curious looks.

Moments later, he came back with a brownish, tattered piece of paper that was rolled up. He moved the tray aside and set it on the table in front of them.

“This is the map of Land Unknown.” Mr. Flitz explained. “It has all the places of Land Unknown on it.”

Harper and Luna both leaned forward to see the map better. The edges were brown and burnt, and the edges of the paper were ripped and tattered. All over the map, there were various locations with small images above them. Unrolled, the map was about as wide as Harper’s arm.

“To start your journey, you must go here.” Mr. Flitz told them.



He moved his finger, and it landed on a place called 'Ghosts Despair'. Above the name, there was a small, scribbly, black and white drawing of a ghost with its mouth open as if it was screaming. Coming out of its mouth was a little cloud of smoke that shot upward.

"Fun." Harper said sarcastically. "Can't wait."

"H-hey you're the one w-who suggested this." Luna shot back.

"Ok, ok." Harper exclaimed, raising her hands over her head.

"Once you make it to Ghosts Despair, you need to use this." He pulled a tiny net out of the pockets of his jeans and handed it to Harper. "This will allow you to catch the ghost tear. Then," He handed Luna a small glass vile. "You can put in in here for safe keeping."

"H-how are we supposed to g-get there?" Luna asked as she inspected the tiny vile in her hand.

"Ah yes." Once again, Mr. Flitz reached into his pocket. This time, he pulled out two tiny diamonds and handed one to each of them. "This will allow you to teleport wherever you want. Inside of Land Unknown of course. Just throw them in the air three times and say where you want to go."

Mr. Flitz turned his head and looked out of the glass window beside them.

"The Sunspell is over now, it would be a good time to start your journey." He advised.

He reached down and grabbed a dark green backpack that was lying by his feet.

"In here," He said unzipping the bag. "There is water, cookies, a dagger, a book on some of the creatures in Land Unknown, two small jars, and this potion." He took out a small, thin glass potion bottle with a wooden cork on it. The potion inside was a fiery red colour and it swirled around in the bottle like it was desperately trying to escape.

"Make sure to only use it during emergencies. When needed, drink the whole thing and it will give you extra strength. Physically and mentally."

He handed the two of them the bag so Harper and Luna could put their stuff in it.

"Well, uh we should probably get going" Harper exclaimed as she rolled up the map, put it in the backpack and swung it over her shoulders.

The two girls both stood up and walked awkwardly to the door.

"Thank you for your help." Harper said.

"It was my pleasure." Mr. Flitz responded, waving as they left.

When Harper stepped outside, she could see that the sun was not emitting a blinding light anymore. In fact, it was dimmer than Harper had expected. The sun was now a soft orange colour. It almost looked calm and happy.

*Interesting.* Harper thought to herself.

“W-well I guess we should use these.” Luna said as she held out the little diamond that was in her hand.

“Right.” Harper replied as she held out her own diamond.

They stood beside each other, and both threw the diamond in the air three times as instructed. After the diamond was tossed for the third time, Harper and Luna, both caught it and closed their eyes.

“Ghosts Despair.” They both muttered.

It felt as though nothing had happened. Harper opened her eyes, expecting to see the same orangey, dusty path, but she was mistaken.

They found themselves standing on grey paved ground. That was it. There was no end to the space around them. Nothing else was there except for misty white figures floating in front of them.

“Ghosts” Harper said breathlessly as she put her diamond in the backpack. “And all of them are crying.” She continued as she saw little droplets under what she assumed were the ghosts' eyes.

Luna put her diamond in the backpack as she looked around at all the ghosts.

“W-well at least we came to the r-right place.” Luna said through gritted teeth.

Just then an ice-cold wind blew past them causing Harper and Luna to shiver.

“I-I hate ghosts.” Luna muttered.

“Well let’s get this over with.” Harper said as she walked towards one of the ghosts with the vile and net in her hand.

The ghost was floating in mid-air but otherwise not moving at all. In two swift movements, Harper scooped up the tear with the small net and poured it into the vile.

“W-well that was easy enough.” Luna said. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Luna suddenly heard a cracking noise under her feet.

“Luna...” Harper began. “Whatever you do, don’t move.”

Luna looked down and saw a huge crack forming between her feet.

“T-that can’t be good-” Luna said staring at the crack as it slowly spread across the floor beneath her.

“Ok uhm... what do we do-” Harper asked looking around. “We could just use the pearls. After all we already have the tear.”

“N-no. If I drop it, then it’s g-gone forever.” Luna replied.

Luna looked down again and saw the ground was slowly spreading further apart beneath her feet.

“Ok. I have an idea.” Harper said after many minutes of thinking. “I saw it in a movie once.”

“W-wow,” Luna replied. “Very reassuring.”

“Ok, so you need to slowly get onto your knees.” Harper continued, ignoring what Luna had said. “But go *very* slowly.”

“G-got it.” Luna replied.

Being very cautious, Luna slowly got down onto her knees. And luckily, the crack on the ground didn’t get any wider.

“Now,” Harper said, taking a deep breath. “You need to lie down on your back and cross your arms. Then, roll towards me.”

Hesitantly, Luna got down on her back, crossed her arms across her chest, and rolled towards Harper’s feet.

“W-wow I can’t believe t-that actually w-worked.” Luna said as she got up from the ground.

“I told you it would!” Harper exclaimed, looking triumphant. “Now let’s get out of here.” She said as a ghost flew past them blowing their hair in their faces.

#### **Scene 4 (The Mysterious Message)**

“Ok the next thing we have to do,” Harper said after they teleported to a place called ‘Flowers Bloom’. “We need to get the leg of a flare spider.”

“U-uh what is that e-exactly?” Luna asked.

“No idea-” Harper responded as she looked around at the colourful flowers blooming around them.

“C-could you hand me the b-book Mr. Flitz gave u-us?”

“Sure.”

Harper took the book out of the backpack and handed it to Luna. Luna flipped through the pages until she found ‘Flare Spider’ under the letter F.

“I-it says here,” Luna began, reading the book. “Flare spiders are a type of spider k-known for their venom, magical legs, r-riddles, and fire like appearance. When k-killed, they spit out a riddle before they, well, d-die. You need to solve the riddle w-within the 3-minute time l-limit. D-during those 3-minutes, the spider will r-release its deadly venom w-when it senses the s-slightest movement. T-the only way to stop the venom f-from being released is t-to solve the riddle. F-flare spiders are usually f-found in fiery locations like ‘Dragons Breath’. A-also, the spider’s riddles are k-known to have special m-meaning to them.”

“Right, so we need to solve the riddle in 3 minutes so we can cut off its leg.”

“A-and we have one try t-to get it right.” Luna finished as she pulled the rolled-up map out of the bag and put the book back inside it.

Harper leaned over to get a better look at the map as Luna opened it and held it in front of her.

“We should probably go to ‘Dragons Breath’ then.” Harper exclaimed, pulling the diamonds out of a side pocket on the backpack.

She handed one of the diamonds to Luna and they both tossed it in the air three times.

“‘Dragons Breath’.” They both muttered after they caught the diamond.

This time, Harper decided to keep her eyes open so she could see what would happen. But when her eyes were open, nothing changed. However, when she opened her eyes after blinking, she could see red, hot fire swirling all around them. She could feel the temperature rising as she started to take in her surroundings.

Beads of sweat started to form on her forehead as she looked around. There was smoke everywhere coming from the fire around them. It was as if they were in a steam room but with smoke instead of steam.

*It's like a gigantic smoke room.* Harper thought to herself.

Luna was standing beside Harper staring at the flames billowing around them. Other than the red fire, everything else was black. The sky and ground were black. Even the smoke floating into the air was black.

Suddenly, Harper felt a soft scuffling on her right shoe and looked down.

“W-well there are the flare s-spiders.” Luna said looking down at Harper’s shoe as well.

Crawling on Harper’s shoe were about 20 flare spiders moving in a line across the black, charcoal like ground. The spiders were about the size of Harper’s thumbnail, but they were as black as night. The only thing that made them stand out was the bright red vertical line in the middle of the spider’s body. Their skin was scaly like a snake, but they looked like a regular spider you might find. The biggest difference was that they had 6 legs instead of 8.

“Good thing I didn’t step on them.” Harper noted.

“T-that would have been a d-disaster.” Luna agreed.

“So, uhm do I just stab it?” Harper asked, pulling the dagger out of the backpack.

“I-I guess so,” Luna replied. “Just make sure not to move after that.”

In one swift motion, Harper swung the dagger and stabbed the spider right in the middle of its body.

Moments later, the fire swirling around them started to move towards the spider lying motionless on the ground. To Harper and Luna’s surprise, the fire started to go inside the spider’s mouth.

“Is that supposed to happen?” Harper asked, turning her head to look at Luna.

“J-just wait.” She responded, still staring at the spider.

As soon as the fire entered the spider’s mouth, it came out even faster. It looked as if the spider was breathing fire into the dark air.

“W-wow-” Luna said softly.

Right in front of them, floating in the air, was a riddle. It had the same texture as the fire surrounding them. It was bright red and swirling all around the two of them. It was as if someone had taken a giant paint brush, dipped it into the fire, and wrote in the air.

“Go to the building with the big red cross,” Harper said as she began to read the words in front of them. “Because of the fire, all lives were lost. There you will find the one you rely. But by then, you will surely ask why.”

### **Scene 5 (Into the Monster’s Lair)**

After Harper finished reading the riddle, it disappeared and, in its place, there was a timer counting down from three minutes.

“U-uhm,” Luna thought staring at Harper. “What do you think it is?”

“Big red cross.” Harper muttered to herself. “Where could that be?”

“W-what place was d-destroyed in a fire?” Luna asked no one in particular.

For a few moments, the two of them thought in silence.

“D-do you think this place is where we will f-find the Goljica?” Luna wondered aloud.

“Red cross, red cross,” Harper said, ignoring Luna’s question. “What has a red cross?”

Harper looked up and saw the countdown was almost at zero.

*Twenty-nine, Twenty-eight, Twenty-seven,* Harper thought as she watched the numbers change.

“I-I got it!” Luna shouted, making the flare spiders that were still crawling on Harper’s foot jump.

“I-it’s a hospital.” Luna continued, looking directly at the fiery numbers in front of her.

*Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen,*

Harper felt like her heart was going to burst out of her chest. *What if it didn’t work? Were they going to die right then and there?*

Seconds later, to Harper’s relief, the numbers dissolved.

Harper quickly cut off the spider’s leg and put it into one of the thin vials. Then, the spider disappeared just like the numbers. The other flare spiders continued to crawl over Harper’s feet as if nothing had happened.

“You did it!” Harper explained.

“Y-yeah I did-” Luna said, looking shocked that her guess was correct.

Harper took the diamonds out of the backpack and handed one to Luna.

“Where do you think we should go now?” Harper asked as she admired the diamond gleaming in her hand.

“D-do you think we could j-just say hospital?” Luna wondered.

“Well, we could try.”

Together, the two of them tossed the diamond in the air. In just three seconds, everything went wrong.

The second time Luna caught the diamond, it slipped out of her hand and bounced into the blazing fire in front of them.

They stared in shock at the fire that had engulfed the diamond.

Harper stared at Luna.

“What are we going to do now?!?” Harper shouted; her voice came out madder than she had wanted.

“H-harper you are going t-to have to go by yourself.” Luna said calmly.

“But how am I going to defeat the Goljica without you?” Harper asked.

“Y-you have everything y-you need. The b-backpack, and the bracelet.”



Harper was about to protest, but Luna cut her off.

“Go.”

“But what about you?” Harper asked, tears dripping down her cheeks. “I can’t just leave you here.”

“Y-yes you can. I’ll b-be fine.”

Harper knew there was no point in arguing anymore. She hugged Luna tightly, threw the diamond in the air three times, closed her eyes and whispered,

“Hospital.”

She opened her eyes and wiped the tears off her face.

*Ok Harper, She told herself. You can do this.*

She looked around and in front of her, was a hospital. Or what was left of one.

It looked as if someone had thrown a huge fireball right through the middle of it. Surprisingly, the hospital was still standing and looked stable. The edges around the hole were crisp and brown, but other than that the hospital looked untouched. The inside, however, was a different story.

Harper had walked through the double glass doors at the front of the hospital and was shocked. Everything around her was burnt. Absolutely nothing was left untouched. There were no floors in the building. All the ceilings and floors were burnt and destroyed. She was standing on burnt rubble and hospital supplies were littered on the floor. There was a rubber glove with a missing finger, the burnt sheet of a hospital bed, and a burnt packet of medicine labeled ‘sleeping pills’.

Suddenly, Harper’s face felt hot. She was so focused on the burnt remains of the hospital, she didn’t see the creature in front of her.

“Woah...”

There was a big, scaly creature standing in front of her.

*That must be the Goljica.* Harper thought.

The Goljica looked like a ten feet long, green and red lizard. Its head and tail were red, and its body was green. Its whole body was covered with diamond shaped scales, and its large tail flicked back and forth. The Goljica was bent down on its four legs and its red beady eyes were fixed on Harper, and its skinny pink tongue flicked back and forth in its mouth.

*Ok, how am I supposed to do this?* Harper thought.

Harper stood there for a while, staring at her surroundings. Soon, she noticed the Goljica seemed to be protecting something. Slowly, she walked closer to the Goljica to get a better look.

Just as Harper had thought, the Goljica was protecting something. An egg.

*The Goljica is protecting its baby.* Harper realized.

The egg was about as big as her, and it had the same colours as the Goljica. The top of the egg was red, and the middle of the egg turned green. The egg also had bumpy scales on it. However, they were shaped like upside-down triangles instead of diamonds.

Suddenly she felt bad about wanting to kill the Goljica. Even though from what Mr. Flitz had told her, the Goljica was a horrible monster that would kill anything in its path.

But to her, the Goljica just seemed kind of like a human. It only wanted to protect its baby. Plus, she could tell it was hungry just by looking into its eyes.

*This is going to make my goal a lot harder.* Harper thought.

Once again, Harper stood there thinking. She could feel the gears in her brain turning as she thought about ways, she could get the eye of the Goljica without killing it.

After what felt like ten minutes, she came up with a plan. She had no idea if it was going to work, but it was the only way she could think of.

She walked over to where she was earlier and picked up the sleeping pills. Harper also took off her backpack and took out the fiery potion of strength.

*I hope this Goljica likes cookies.*

Harper took the cork off the vial and poured the whole thing onto the cookie. She dropped the vial onto the ground and slowly moved towards the Goljica with the soggy cookie in her hand.

With all her might, she threw the cookie at the Goljica hoping it would open its mouth and eat it.

To Harper's dismay, the cookie fell right onto the ground beside the Goljica's green, scaly, taloned feet.

Harper frantically looked around for anything she could use to get the cookie back, but there was nothing.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. She opened her eyes again and saw the Goljica was happily eating the cookie by its feet. She sighed with relief. The first step of her plan had worked. Now, she just had to give the Goljica the pill as well.

Taking a sip of water from the water bottle, she took one of the pills out of the packet and stuffed it into the cookie.

She could feel the Goljica's beady eyes watching her as she placed the cookie in front of her. Probably trying to decide if Harper was trying to help it or not.

Slowly, the Goljica ate the cookie, and immediately fell to the ground.

To be continued...



Aster  
Lost



# Clyde Scene 1

Aster was lost. The gravel crunched under her feet, and a light rain started to fall, soaking her wool coat. She ran through the woods as the rain turned to hail and she could almost feel that it was chasing her. Through the trees, she could see a cave, shrouded in moss, slick and weathered as though it had been damaged in an ancient battle. Aster only saw it as a shelter, and she ran into it, breathing hard. She wasn't sure why she had gone for a walk in the first place. It had been a terrible day, she supposed - she had failed her test and her mom had yelled at her. Again. "It's the 3rd time this week," her mother had said "that I have been disappointed by you." Aster shook the thought away. Sometimes the pain was too much. She had crept out the window of her room, unbeknownst to her mother, who was muttering to herself angrily in the kitchen. Aster just needed a break. It had been a year since her dad had left, and her family couldn't get over it. He was too special to them. It broke them - and Aster, too. In the cave, she stood and started to take in her surroundings. It was dark, darker than she thought was possible, and freezing cold. She took off her coat and slowly, uncomfortably moved farther into the cave. There was something back there, she knew, and there was something inside her that made it clear she needed to get to it. After walking, slowly at first, and then faster as she got more comfortable,

Aster was lost. Outside, the hail poured down and cracked against the ground. She had been walking out in the woods, when it had started to rain. It was a cold winter day, and she was

With the darkness, quite a ways, she realised 2 things: One, that she was now walking downhill, and 2, that she could smell something or, more accurately, feel something, at the back of the cave. She couldn't place it, but she was sure it was cold - almost deathly. This thing was underneath the ground. And it was hiding something. With a feeling of sickening dread settling upon her shoulders, she took a breath and walked further, deeper, into the black abyss. Soon she reached what looked like a slab of rock - a dead end. And then she saw the door. Etched into the surface was a shape that looked centuries, even millenium older than anything Aster had seen before. It was made of pure black granite, but she could see what seemed to be large eyes staring back at her. Before she could wonder why anyone would make this door at the back of a cave into the middle of the woods that dug miles underground, something black and almost blurry crawled out. And Aster could tell that it wanted to kill her.

How does  
Aster know  
this?

DESCRIBE  
/SHOW US.



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## Scene 2

Clyde

The next thing she knew, the thing lunged at her, and she rolled away quickly. As she stood up, she finally got a good look at the creature. It was completely black, the surface of its skin almost bubbly, and she realized that the cold she was feeling was coming from it. And then she saw the eyes. Covering the middle of the thing were eyes, all pale and completely white. She shuddered when she saw them, and the thing took that chance to lunge at her with what looked like long, spindly legs. Panicking, she struck it with her sneakers still slick with rain, and it cried out and jumped back into the darkness. Aster was terrified, and she jumped into the door.

The bright sun blinded her. As she hit the ground, now somehow grass, she looked back - and the thing was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief and stared up at a cloud laughing to herself.

And then she realized that there were no clouds in a cave. She stood up, and saw that she was in a meadow surrounded by trees, and that it was warm - from the sun that caressed her skin, now shining down from the bright... Well - there was no sky at all, just a white sheet that seemed to

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go on infinitely.

Then, she remembered the door and saw that the surface of black granite was gone, now just a boulder towering behind her, the surface pure stone. She got up and slammed both fists into the roughness, trying to open it again.

"No, no, no!" she said, and slumped down against the wall.

And then she heard a voice. It was small and quiet, but she could hear it.

"Hello?" It said.

Aster stood up and looked for the voice's source, and saw a small, snow-white squirrel scampering across the meadow towards her. Then, before her eyes, the squirrel changed into a young girl, about her age, with scraggly brown hair wearing old, musty clothes. The girl smelled strongly of wood and pine, and her eyes were a pure green.

"D-did you just...?" Aster stammered.

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"You understand me?" The girl asked with a soft voice.

"Yes!" Aster said, still shocked.

"Wow, I haven't met anyone from here since..." She went silent, her eyes downcast.

"What is this place?" Aster blurted out.

"This is Liza." The girl said, before frowning and asking "Where did you come from?"

The girl started walking around Aster, sniffing the air like a wild fox.

"Where are you from?" she asks, this time with more confidence. "You aren't from here - I can smell it."

She stops walking and suddenly crouches.

"I - I'm from Vancouver." Aster replies.

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"Va-n-cou-ver?" the girl says, the words sticking to her mouth like honey.

"Yeah!" Aster says, "I've come through that door - but it's gone now... somehow!"

The girl seems to relax, though only slightly.

"My name is Mist. Mist Fier. I'm a shift."

"A... Shift?" Aster asks.

"Yes. I can shift into different animorphs."

"You mean animals?" Aster says.

"Sure." The other girl says, though she sounds confused.

Suddenly, Aster felt a shivering cold - the same cold she felt in the cave - and underneath her feet a crack formed, and the earth and dirt crumbled away. Panicked, Aster ran, following Mist as she ran across the meadow. Aster looked back and saw the crack, growing across the forested landscape.

And then it stopped. Aster and Mist stood, breathing heavily, at the edge of the crevice that had formed.

"What - What was that?" Aster said, panting.

Mist struggled to find her words.

"That was a shadow seam. But - but it was bigger than normal."

"You get those regularly?" Aster nearly shouted.

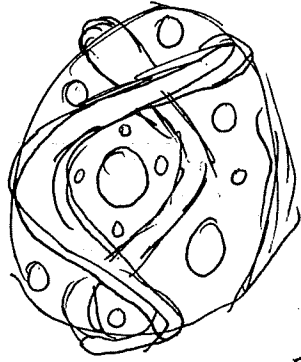
"Yes" Mist said, her eyes now sad and cold.

Aster could only think of one thing to say.

"Why?"

"I - I don't know" said Mist.

8



Forn  
Far  
Forest  
Fern  
Diaz  
Fuschia  
Tooth  
Claw  
Bat

Cornelius  
Darno  
Loona  
Solar  
Storm  
Tate  
Sun  
Marlo

"We've been attacked by those since the white covered our skies - they're all over Liza!"

Aster stared up, again, at the bright, white sheet covering the skies.

"I've been looking for this creature, Fern. I believe they know how to help our world - they have a book that can help us stop whatever is happening. The thing is, Fern has been in hiding for centuries - and nobody has ever found them."

Aster, for some reason, felt a need to find Fern - to help Liza, but, somehow, help herself.

"I'll go with you," she said with a confidence she didn't know she had. And so, she and Mist journeyed deeper into



# 9 Scene 3

Clyde

Aster stumbled over a log covered in damp moss. She and Mist had been traveling through the forest for hours, finding small ponds of freshwater from time to time. Aster had been surprised at the incredible animals and flowers she had seen - they were huge, and more colourful than any she had ever seen! Auburn trees loomed far above, casting shade on the forested growth below. Flies the size of small rats buzzed around them in the air, and birds with more wings than possible flitted above her head. All around her, flowers with small, jagged teeth on their buds reached out at her as if hungry for her flesh. She could hear a cacophony of wild noises... all around her, and she did not want to know where they came from.

Soon, they found a clearing and decided to stay for a while to regain some energy for the rest of the journey. Mist had told her that Fern liked to stay on the outskirts of Liza, so they had a way to go. Mist left - to forage for some unknown berry called Zivranthey and Aster was left with her thoughts. She still didn't know how she had gotten to this world - and how she would get back to her own. The only thing she knew was that her gut thought that finding Fern would help her - the only problem was

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that she didn't know how:

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice the strange, bird-like creature land beside her, staring her intensely. Curious, it tapped Aster's shoulder and she cried out, shooting up onto her feet. The bird only stared, its large, pale eyes looking onward, unblinking. The bird slowly lowered its head, showing the bright orange plume of feathers on its neck. It shook itself, then started preening its feathers calmly.

"It doesn't look like it wants to hurt me," Aster whispered to herself.

Slowly, trying not to startle it, she sat back down. She looked again at the orange feathers on the back of the bird, and she realized that they looked spiky, like needles that could puncture your skin at any moment. Timidly, she reached out and touched the strange plume. She felt it prick her skin, and she pulled back. Blood started to seep out of the small wound, and suddenly she felt strange. Her arm started to look orange, and the world started to spin. The last thing she could think of before the world went black was one word: poison.

Aster awoke, a dull ache in her left arm. Through her blurry vision, she saw Mist, sitting across from her. Aster looked down at the bed she was laying on. It looked makeshift, and was made of leaves and twigs. She looked around and realized she was in a tree hollow, and it was decorated with small, wooden ornaments of all kinds. Below her feet sat a bed of huge, orange leaves. She slowly lifted herself up, trying to remember what happened. She was in the clearing... and... and there was a bird!... What had it done to her? She had touched the spike, and... that was all she remembered. Everything else was black. Mist had now realized she was awake, and she went over to Aster.

"Aster!" She said, "you're awake!"

"What happened?" Aster asked.

"You got poisoned. When I came back to the clearing, you were lying on the ground, venom running up and down your arm. I had to find some kind of cure, or else you'd die, so I came to my friend. He knows the most about potions, so I thought he could help you and make some kind of elixir to help to at least stop the venom from spreading." "

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"Who's your friend?" Aster asks.

Suddenly, a 6 foot squirrel crawled into the tree, green eyes wide.

"Hi!" It said, a smile on its face.

Aster jumped back, surprised.

"Wh-what is THAT?" she said, edging away from the humongous creature.

"That," said Mist, "is Pluto. He's somewhat of a potionmaster."

"Hi!" Pluto said in a low, rumbling voice, sitting down on a small stool that shouldn't have held his weight.

Aster's shoulders relaxed, though she still looked on warily at the squirrel, as he sat, absent-mindedly jotting down notes in his leather-bound journal.

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NOTES | MEMOS

Suddenly, a shooting pain ran up Aster's arm and she cried out. She felt the venom running through her, and she fell back onto the bed, her vision beginning to blur. Through the strange fog covering her eyes, she saw Mist and the Squirrel, Pluto, run to the side of the bed. She could hear Mist shouting, but couldn't make out the words. A cold sweat started to overtake her, and she moaned in pain. She saw Pluto pull something out from a satchel across his chest - a glass vial filled with some sort of liquid. He removed the cap, and she felt his warm paws open her swollen mouth, pouring the liquid in. A calmness seemed to take over her body, and her shaking and sweats slowed until she felt like she couldn't feel them anymore. She felt her heartbeat slow, and her vision slowly clear. Now she could hear Mist, perching beside her.

"Is she okay?" She asks. "What happened? I thought the poison was gone? How?"

Pluto put a hand on her shoulder, and calmly comforted her.

"She is fine." Pluto said. "The Antibodies should work immediately."

Aster slowly lifted herself up, wincing as Mist gave her a relieved hug. She couldn't feel anything anymore - no pain, no venom on her arm, not even a lingering sensation. She looked at Pluto, amazed and said:

"Thank You."



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NOTES | MEMOS

This creature didn't know her—  
and had saved her life.

“Not a big deal.” He said, though  
his smile looked proud. “Just try  
not to touch anything you don’t  
know about, okay?”

Aster smiled, and looked down  
at her hand.

“While you were asleep,” Pluto  
said, “Mist told me how you’re  
trying to find Fern. But there’s  
something you should know. Fern  
has had their memory blocked by  
something—and he is the only one  
who knows how to read his book—  
the book that tells you how to  
stop the evil. You should take  
this with you—convince Fern to  
drink it and his memory will  
be restored.”

Pluto pulled out a small vial

filled with a milky white liquid from his pouch. He...  
Aster really is, and... it

66 And one more thing," He says.  
66 They may be a bit... difficult to convince. Be careful.99

Aster nods, clutching the vial tightly.

66 Thanks again, Pluto. We couldn't do this without you.99 Says Mist, giving him a small hug.

She gestures to Aster, and climbs out of the tree hollow down to the ground. Aster follows her, taking one last look at the squirrel. Then, she turns away and follows Mist through the forest.

"We must be careful." Said Mist, shaking Aster from her thoughts.

Mist had been being very cautious ever since they had left Pluto's house/tree hollow. It seemed that Aster had really become her friend and, of course, didn't want the little poison issue to happen again. After they left, they journeyed on through the forest for hours before stopping and starting a fire. Though the everlasting blanket of white snow never changed (Aster couldn't tell if it was night or day anymore), it still got frigidly cold. They cooked up some berries and fruits Mist had picked up foraging, and Aster managed to find herbs like rosemary from Earth to season it. Aster was starting to get her bearings in this new world, but she still didn't know how she had gotten there. That thing was after her... she jumped in the door... but there was a wall behind her? That didn't make sense! She needed to find Fern - she knew that they would help her find her way home. She pulled the potion from her pocket, and saw to her surprise that the previously milky white liquid was now a dark gray - and it felt cold. Small bubbles were rising from the dark surface. She got a feeling in her chest that could only mean one thing - dread. What if the potion didn't work? What if it lost its magic qualities before they got to Fern? What if she never got home?

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She looked up and saw Mist starting to get ready to sleep. She stuffed the potion back into her pocket and started getting ready too - She layed out a few soft leaves she had found and rested her head down on them. It wasn't as comfortable as Pluto's bed, but it would work fine.

"Night, Aster." Said Mist.

"Night." She answered, and she let herself lull into sleep.

She awoke the next so-called "day" to mist poking her in the shoulder. She groaned, then got up, squinting in the morning sun.

"Time to go!" Said Mist.

"We need to make good time." She said

They started walking farther into the forest, where Mist said there would be mountains where Fern was said to be. They walked for days, the forest getting less and less dense, clearing into more rocks and hills. Soon, they came to the range of mountains, snow capped and towering above them.

The mountains felt like they went on forever, a forest of rocks and snow. Aster knew Fern was out there somewhere - and she needed to find them. She took a breath and walked out into the unknown.

The mountains were cold. Aster trudged through the snow, her Nikes soaked through. She didn't know how they had overlooked the possibility that it would be freezing cold on a snowy mountain, but it had been a big mistake. She saw mist pull off an icicle hanging from her nose, and she had just finished getting the snow off of her long, brown hair. They had been travelling for 6 hours straight, and it seemed they hadn't been making any progress. The mountains seemed to be an endless wasteland of snow and ice, and understandably, not a lot of creatures lived up there. They saw the occasional small squirrel-like thing burrowing under the snow, but the mountains must have been 3 times colder than any on Earth, so nothing else could survive.

Before Aster had left on this absurd, otherworldly journey, she and her mom had gone to Asia to climb K2, the second tallest mountain in the world. The cold she had felt up there was half of the cold she felt now. She shook off the memory of her mom - Aster couldn't think about her now. She looked down at her fingers and saw purple starting to cover

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the ends. She could barely feel her hands at all - but now she could feel a sharp pain running through them. Now, Aster had frostbite before - she had been in the cold many times - but this felt worse. More dangerous. More - before she could finish her thought, she walked right into a wall. She fell back and landed in the snow. A furry hand pulled her up, and she saw a giant polar bear standing in front of her. She leapt back, and the polar bear started to change. And it turned... into Mist, standing in the snow, shivering.

"Sorry, Aster!" she said. "I can't stay warm in the cold."

She turned back into the bear and turned back towards the wall Aster ran into. It looked to be a wall of stone on the side of the mountain. Cracks seemed to be formed in the very middle of the slab inside of the shape of what looked like a hand. Aster walked toward it and ran her hand across the surface. She noticed that the surface was covered in strange glyphs she had never seen before, carved into the rock. As she felt all of these strange shapes, she saw the shape of the hand on the stone. She realised it looked exactly like hers. And the cracks inside...

She suddenly looked back at the glyphs. She

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had never seen any of these symbols before, but they suddenly started to unscramble and shape themselves inside of her head. They formed words, words that said:

The secret lies in the palm of your hand.

She looked down at her palm and realised that the cracks in the stone looked like the creases in her hand. She placed her hand in the stone - and it fit perfectly. The door started to split, and she pulled back from it.

And out from the darkness inside stepped Fern.

## Scene 5

Fern was a dragon. A huge, scaly beast, reptilian and monstrous. It was a bright green, with small, colourful streaks of red and yellow across its skin. Its claws were huge, like butcher's knives, long and sharp. And its wings - huge wings spread out to the side of its body. Unlike its colourful scales, its wings were a dark autumn brown, with hints of bronze. But its eyes were the thing that sent a shiver down her spine. They were clear, as clear as the sky, but they felt like they were filled with malice and evil. It crawled out of the cave and knocked both Aster and Mist back. Aster landed in the snow, but then heard a crack and a yell from somewhere to her right. It was Mist. Aster got up, wincing from a sharp pain in her leg, and ran over to her. Mist was slumped against a rock, her arm bent at a grotesque angle. She was bleeding from the sharp rock that had smashed against her forehead. Aster crouched down and felt her pulse. It was weak, like she was using the last of her energy. Then she heard a roar behind her and saw the dragon coming closer, swishing its tail eagerly. The tail was long, with 3 sharp tips like daggers pointing out of the end.

Aster got up and started to run, but the pain in her leg was too intense, and she fell



back down in pain. She heard the dragon coming, and just before its claw was able to strike her, she rolled over, getting snow stuck to her face. She could feel the heat of the dragon's breath above her, and it struck again with its claw, this time hitting its mark. Aster screamed in agony as the claws dug into her arm. The dragon picked her up, toying with her, and then threw her on the ground. She moaned, blood seeping from her gaping wound. With the last of her strength, she took the potion out of her pocket (somehow it hadn't been crushed) and stood up. The dragon then ran at her, tilting its large head down, and she could see horns she hadn't seen before - long and curved. She tried to run, but the dragon headbutted her, sending her flying into the snow again. She heard the dragon open its mouth, getting ready to deliver the final fiery blow. Gritting her teeth, Aster gathered her remaining strength and slowly lifted herself up from the snow. The pain in her leg was becoming unbearable, but she pushed through. She looked down at the potion in her hand, the liquid now a bubbly black. It seemed to be nearly gone, just a small bit of life still lingering in its core.

She looked back at the dragon and felt heat radiate off her skin. Fire burned in the dragon's throat, and it was just about

to release it when Aster did something very unexpected - she ran towards the flames. She took the cork out and threw the black liquid right into the open mouth of the dragon - and it froze. It started to convulse and shake, shrinking down, growing smaller and smaller. Its eyes started to unclasp, revealing bright green eyes beneath. The dragon collapsed, and Aster collapsed: next to it - falling into a deep, frozen sleep.

## Another World

*By Kaitlyn Pleasance*

Nobody knew how it got there. Nobody knew why it was there, or how long it would be there for, or even when it appeared. And most importantly, nobody knew why people never wanted to go near it, why it repelled people like plague. It was in a haze of memory, along with the smoke and fog of childhood dreams, darting around your mind, just out of reach.

But it was there. It appeared out of nowhere one day, last week or two years ago, nobody could tell. It was a door. A door hidden in the deepest, wildest part of Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. It was hidden in a place that nobody ever ventured, yet they found it without trying to, but then ended up walking in circles when they finally found the courage to look for it again. It attracted some, while repelling others, and people tried without any success at all to avoid it.

Some people called it magic, while others said that it was just the imagination playing tricks, and there was no door at all. This theory was backed up by the fact that nobody could agree what it looked like, or what sort of building was behind it, or even where in Stanley Park it was. But mostly, people pretended it didn't exist, generally because they were terrified of it and what lay beyond it.

Eleanor hurried along the path, hoping to get as far away from her house as possible. She had had another fight with her mother, and when that happened, she preferred to get away as soon as possible.

All her life, her parents had been slightly wary of each other. They often got into disputes about insignificant things. Eleanor knew her father loved her, but she could not recall a time when her mother had spoken to her without some level of contempt or disgust in her voice.

Eleanor knew she was the only reason her father had not run away long ago. He didn't love his wife any more than Eleanor did, and Eleanor had no idea how or why they had gotten married in the first place.

But she did know that her father loved her more than anything else in the world. Eleanor endured her parents' fighting as long as her father was there, making her laugh, taking some of the weight off her shoulders.

But then, four months ago, they had had one of their regular arguments, this time about a painting in their living room. Her father had wanted to throw it out, but her mother had said that the painting had been in the family for three generations and was not getting rid of it.

Eleanor had not thought much of the fight at the time, but it had gotten worse than it usually did. After that, her mother was even snappier than usual at everyone, and even her father seemed strained. It had gotten worse as time went on.

Then one day, a few weeks ago, Eleanor's parents had come back to the painting argument and her father had stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him. He did not come back and had not been heard from since. After he left, her mother was angered even more frequently,

and the anger was always directed towards Eleanor. These days, if there was the occasional moment without yelling in the house, there was a freezing silence. Whenever her mother got mad, Eleanor felt the need to get out of their tiny apartment on the edge of Downtown, and Stanley Park was the closest place.

Without realizing it, Eleanor had bumbled off the path, lost in her own thoughts. After wandering around for what felt like hours but was barely five minutes, when she was beginning to feel lost and scared, she appeared in a sunny clearing. It wasn't large, but it was better than trees closing in on all sides. As Eleanor was getting a better look at her surroundings, for something about this small clearing intrigued her, she saw something on the other side that made her freeze.

It was a door. The same mysterious door that had appeared to so many others recently, but Eleanor didn't know that because the rumours had not reached her aggressive family who lived on the outskirts of society. And it wasn't a door to a house, or any building at all. It was set into a massive tree (Eleanor didn't know what kind); the biggest, most ancient one she had ever seen, far taller than any of the others. If the base were a table, it could have comfortably fitted ten, and Eleanor was surprised that she had never noticed it before. In fact, it was so immense that it could probably be seen from North Vancouver, towering high over the city. And it seemed to be inviting her to come closer.

Without meaning to, Eleanor started walking toward the door in slow, jerky steps. It was only when she was quite close to it that she stopped to look at the bizarre door. The door radiated melancholy and despair. It smelled faintly of parched deserts and leaf mulch, and Eleanor felt terrified of what lay behind the door. But that did not stop her from noticing every detail on every part of the door.

It was solid wood, painted blue like the Pacific Ocean on a bright day. It was round at the top, instead of being plain rectangular. It was covered in shallow scratches that gave Eleanor the impression that they had once been deeper, but they had healed. Eleanor wondered what animal's claws could make scratches so big. *Or what human*, she thought with a shudder.

The hinges looked like pure silver, like the fancy cutlery Eleanor had at home. They curled across the door, covered in detailed patterns so intricate that no matter how close she looked, Eleanor could not make them out. Sometimes they looked like flowers, from a different angle they looked like dragons, and if she tilted her head up slightly, they looked like trolls with big clubs. The more Eleanor looked at them, the more she was confused and dizzy, so she pulled away.

There was no door handle, only a silver knocker that matched the hinges, although much simpler. The knocker was shaped kind of like a badger, and although it was not coloured, it was so realistic that Eleanor could almost see the black and white stripes on its face. It had a frown on its face, like it was guarding something. Its front paws were visible too; they were holding a heavy silver ring about the size of the badger's head. The whole knocker, along with the hinges, Eleanor realized, were perfectly shiny, as if it had just been polished. The whole door was beautiful and radiated a quiet power, like magic just waiting to be discovered.

And then, not knowing what she was doing, Eleanor placed her hand on the door. For a moment, she felt a searing heat on her palm, like it was being burned to a crisp. Then the pain

subsided, and she realized that her hand had gone numb from heat. As soon as her head had cleared enough to think, hundreds of voices filled her head, some the softest whisper, while other were shouts that were all too familiar. *Help us...how could you...we are desperate...you don't know what's best for you...you're only a little child...she's the one...*

As the sun was reaching its zenith, it caught the stripe on the silver badger's face, and the badger seemed to come to life; its solid fur was ruffling without a breeze, its sightless eyes were watching her...

Without thinking, Eleanor – with one hand still on the door – picked up the heavy silver doorknocker and knocked on the door – once, twice. Then there was silence. The badger turned lifeless once again.

Then, after what felt like eternity, but must have been only a second, Eleanor felt the world swirling around her... and at the corner of her vision, slowly, very slowly, the door swung silently open. Eleanor thought she saw a dark shape standing just behind the doorway, then it was gone, and she was being pulled towards the open door, through it, she heard the door slam behind her... and then darkness.

Eleanor felt herself flying through darkness, faster than she had ever moved before. Then she saw a light up ahead, in the shape of the doorway that she had just come through. She tried to make out what was beyond the opening, but she was moving too fast to see anything but light. She blinked and was suddenly being shot through the hole, landing face first on the ground.

After a few seconds, Eleanor's senses slowly returned. The first thing she noticed was that she was lying on some sort of leafy soil. She rolled over onto her knees and felt a searing pain on her right hand. She instinctively looked, and at once wished she hadn't. Her hand was covered in nasty, bright red blisters. Eleanor wrenched her gaze away and focused on her surroundings.

She was in a shady forest that wasn't particularly dense, but wasn't sparse, either. She looked behind her and saw a replica of the door she had gone through, in Stanley Park. It was set into a tree about a metre above her head. The badger door knocker was still and lifeless. Eleanor blinked, and the door was gone. After a moment, panic set in. How was she going to get back now?

Eleanor forced herself to calm down. Panic wouldn't get her anywhere. She turned back around and saw, through the trees, a long way off, there was a vast expanse of open desert just beyond the forest. There were no plants or vegetation there, or any sign of living things. Heat shimmered off the surface, making it seem unreal.

Eleanor slowly assessed her limbs, surprised that they all still worked. She had just gotten to her feet when a shape dropped down from a nearby tree. Before she knew what was happening, Eleanor was being pinned against the tree she had come from, a gleaming knife poised threateningly at her throat.

She stared at the person in front of her for a moment, too shocked to be terrified. Her captor looked like a girl, not much older than Eleanor. She wore a dirty green tunic and brown pants, with a chestnut brown belt that was covered in pockets of every size. Strapped to her back was a sword, another knife, and a short spear. They were mostly covered by her long brown hair.

“Well?”

Eleanor was jerked back to her senses, and she realized that the strange girl had said something. “W-w-what?” Eleanor managed to choke out.

The girl sighed.

“I said, who are you? You’re obviously not an animal, you’re much too big to be a Tiny, you’re far too small to be a giant, you don’t look at all like an elf, you can’t be a tree fairy, because I would recognize you... so you must be a Shadow with some sort of magic put on you to make you look living, or one of those weird deformed outcast wanderers.”

“No, no, you’ve got it all wrong!” Eleanor cried, slightly terrified now. “I’m not a shadow or an elf or any of that! I’m just Eleanor!”

“*Eleanor.*” The girl said it slowly, thinking. “Oh no. Not another one.”

“What?” asked Eleanor.

“You’re the one who I let through the door.”

Suddenly her voice turned much hastier.

“We don’t have much time. Quick, which direction did you come from?”

Eleanor pointed dumbly to the tree that had once held the door. The girl looked up at it and groaned.

“Oh, no. We were too late!” Then she sighed. “Well, what was expected? The door was closing anyway. You wouldn’t have gotten through if I hadn’t opened the door for you. You would have had a minute at most. Well, I guess the only thing I can do now is take you with me. But don’t think I’m happy about it!” She snapped, adopting back her aggressive manner.

And with that, she shoved her knife back into her belt, grabbed Eleanor by the hand and marched into the forest, pulling Eleanor roughly behind her.

“Who are you?” Eleanor asked.

“Audrey.”

After the abrupt reply, Eleanor fell silent for a few minutes, until a new question came to mind.

“You said ‘not another one,’ like lots of people come through that door. Is that true?”

This time, Audrey’s answer was longer, like it was something worth explaining. “Yeah. There’s been so many people come through a door like that one. The most recent one was two weeks ago. It was an older man, in his forties. He looked kind of like you, actually. He looked angry about something.”

Eleanor frowned. Her thoughts wandered to her father. He was in his forties, and he had left two weeks ago. Was it a coincidence? There must be plenty of men with this description, but there was something strange about it. She decided to inquire farther.

“Was he tall and really thin?” Eleanor asked.

“Yes...”

“Were his ears pointy?”

“Not like elf ears, but sort of.”

“Was he wearing a red T-shirt and jeans?”

Audrey looked startled. “How did you know?”

Eleanor felt breathless. “I – I think this man might have been my father.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“My parents got in an argument a few weeks ago. They had been shaky for months. My father left two weeks ago. He was wearing a red T-shirt and jeans.”

“I guess it’s possible...” Audrey still sounded doubtful, but Eleanor was sure she was right.

“I know it was him! Which way did he go?”

“He went into the desert. I watched him, just out of curiosity. He didn’t seem to be thinking about where he was going. Then...”

“Then what?”

“Ubel captured him. He’ll be in the fortress now. It’ll be hard to get him back.”

“Who’s Ubel? What fortress?”

“Nobody knows where he came from. He just arrived one day and cut everything down to wasteland. There’s only this little bit of forest that stretches in a line across the desert. Everybody’s working together to preserve it, because if they don’t, he’ll capture us all, if he doesn’t kill us.”

Eleanor shuddered, but this only made her more determined to find her father.

“We have to find him!”

“Who? Ubel? That’s not hard. He has this big fortress that can be seen from anywhere. But it’s more likely that he’ll find you if you go onto that desert. He claimed that territory and took all its inhabitants as slaves.”

“No, I don’t mean Ubel. If he captured my father, then we need to save him!”

“Well, I guess I’m going in that direction too. Fine. If you do everything I say, you can come, and we might get your father back.”

“Alright.” Eleanor knew that this was the best deal she was going to get. “Where are we going?”

“To meet an old friend.” she spat the words out as if they were something disgusting.

They walked on in silence for a while, until Audrey stopped at a large tree.

“Here we are.”

The tree looked completely unremarkable, except for being immense. It was more than twice the height of the tree with the door in it and three times the width. Audrey took a strange trinket out of one of the pockets in her belt. It looked like a key, except larger, and with bumps on every side, except for where it was held.

Audrey poked the key into a crack in the tree bark and twisted it a to the right. There was no click, but Eleanor could hear a quiet creaking noise, coming from inside the tree. Audrey seemed to hear it too, because she abruptly stopped swinging, and hauled herself up so that she was sitting on the branch. The creaking became louder and turned into a soft rumble. A patch of bark slid downwards into the ground, leaving a small, ragged hole that was covered in netting made from ropes. Audrey cut an opening in the netting with her knife and slipped through. Eleanor followed. After she had pulled herself through the netting (getting tangled a few times), Audrey pulled out a gadget from her belt that looked like a ruler, but with no numbers. She ran it along the gash in the netting. Eleanor blinked, and the hole was gone.

The inside of the tree was round and smooth, like it had been sanded and polished. The rope netting covered the walls, which stretched up at least twenty meters. There were caves carved into the wooden walls all around them, making rooms that all overlooked the ground where Eleanor and Audrey were standing. The only way to get up to them was the rope netting.

“Hello?” Audrey called, scanning the caves for any sign of life. Nothing stirred.

Audrey sighed and started climbing up the rope netting faster than Eleanor could have imagined, especially with her bulky tool belt. Eleanor scrambled after, being careful not to fall. Audrey climbed all around the inside of the tree trunk, up and down, side to side, checking every cave one by one. Eleanor slowly continued to climb up, in a straight line. She figured that once Audrey found the right cave, she would make her way over to it.

Eventually, Audrey found a cave, about halfway up the trunk, that she thought had promise. Thankfully, it was only a little way directly up from where Eleanor was. When Eleanor had finally hauled herself into the cave where Audrey was, she collapsed. Climbing wasn't her strong point, and she had never been this high before.

Once Eleanor was on her feet again, she followed Audrey, venturing farther into the cave. It was larger than Eleanor would have thought was possible. There was a counter that stretched the length of three of the walls, the fourth being the cave opening. There were wooden stools dotted around the room, most of them by the counter.

There were vials and beakers and flasks everywhere, filled with every colour of liquid, neon pinks and dull greys, and everything in between. There were a few spots on the floor that were blackened, as if a minor explosion had taken place. The only sources of light were a few low-burning torches in their brackets on the walls, and some glowing liquid that was in some of the vials.

At the back of the room, a figure sat hunched over something Eleanor couldn't see. She moved closer, and then stopped short. As the figure moved into the light, Eleanor saw it clearly, and he was the most hideous thing she had ever seen.

It was a man, older than would have been possible in Vancouver (Eleanor was fairly sure by now that she was in another world). His face was covered in deep wrinkles that looked more like cracks. He appeared to have not had anything to drink in fifty years. He was wearing an old, ragged cloak that was an ugly purple colour. One eye was covered on a patch, the other bulged out of his head. He had no nose, just a blackened patch that had a twig sticking out of it. His fingers were short and stumpy. In one hand he held a match that was lit, in the other, a beaker of bubbling red liquid. He had no hair, but his head was covered in long black squid tentacles that waved around, trying to grab onto things. But the worst thing about him was his breath. It smelled like rotten eggs and wet dog.

Audrey walked up behind Eleanor.

“Eleanor, this is Jacob. Jacob, we need your help.”

Eleanor could have laughed. This man was named Jacob? He seemed so old and magical. She had expected his name to be Wartbreath or something. Suddenly, he spoke, which surprised her even more.



“Yes, yes, I can see the confusion in your eyes. You’re thinking, ‘how can this old magical guy be named Jacob?’ Well, your friend can explain later. And hello, Audrey. What can I do for you?”

Audrey tried again. This time she was more exasperated.

“Jacob, we need one of your potions.”

“You know the rules. One piece for one potion.”

Audrey sighed and pulled something out of her tool belt. It flashed once in the light, but Jacob grabbed it so greedily that she couldn’t see what it was, but it seemed to satisfy him.

“Alright, take anything you want, then be on your way. I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Audrey whisked to the other side of the counter and grabbed a bottle holding a still, golden liquid. Then she went to the cave entrance and disappeared over the edge. Eleanor followed.

They made their way down the rope netting and out into the forest again. Once they had walked for a few minutes, Audrey sighed tiredly.

“I guess I have some explaining to do.”

*Nothing could be seen except fog. White fog, Eleanor noticed, so thick she couldn’t see her hand in front of her face. And she was simply floating in it.*

*Suddenly a patch of fog in the distance stirred. A shape moved toward her. As it moved closer, the fog cleared around it, and Eleanor could see by its big, lumbering shadow, coming from some unknown light source, it was a creature of some sort, and a big one, but could not see the creature itself. She realized that that was because it was pure white.*

*Eleanor was sure she had seen this animal before. Recently, and it hadn’t been in a book. It was important, she knew. But before she could figure it out, the great beast spoke. It was a deep, booming voice that made Eleanor at once respect a creature with so much power.*

*“Eleanor. Our light in the darkness. We’ve waited a long time for one like you.”*

*“What do you mean?” asked Eleanor.*

*“My name’s Aldrich. I’ve been watching you for some time now. Don’t ask me to explain now –” he said as Eleanor opened her mouth. “there’ll be plenty of time later.*

*“As you already know, Audrey has little patience. She didn’t ask to go on a quest with you, and she certainly doesn’t want to. Yet. She’ll explain everything clearly to you. I think you’ll learn to get along quite quickly. I need to go now, and besides, I have nothing else to say.”*

*And with that, he lumbered off, until his shadow was lost in the fog. All was still again. Then the fog darkened, and sleep folded over Eleanor like a blanket.*

It was late morning. Eleanor rubbed her eyes as she sat up, wondering what was going on. She was lying on the ground at the edge of a forest. Past the forest there was a vast expanse of hard-packed desert, where she could see a few silhouettes of moving creatures in the distance.

Suddenly, everything came flooding back. The door, the man in the tree with all the bottles, Audrey and all her secrecy, and finally, the dream.

The last few traces of sunrise were disappearing, giving way to a clear blue sky. There were a few wispy clouds in the distance, and absolutely no wind. Even at this early hour, it was too hot.

“Look who’s finally awake.”

Audrey’s voice cut into her thoughts. She was sitting on the ground, watching Eleanor.

Eleanor remembered the night before, when, after they had left Jacob’s tree, they had trekked on for hours, far after the sun had set, until Audrey had found a suitable camping place. She had told Eleanor that she would explain everything in the morning, and Eleanor had been too tired to argue. Now, though, Eleanor expected a good explanation of everything – from the door she had come from, to Aldrich and the dream, to why Jacob’s name wasn’t more wizard-y, to what was going on with the desert. It didn’t feel natural.

“Are you listening?”

Again, Eleanor had missed what Audrey had said.

“What?”

“I said, we need to leave right away. We don’t have any time to lose. You slept too late.” Audrey said peevishly.

Eleanor didn’t think this that statement was quite fair, since the sun had barely risen, but she sat up, dusted herself off, and looked around.

“Where are we going?”

“This way.” Audrey pointed vaguely in the direction of the desert. She started walking, and Eleanor followed.

“I deserve an explanation.” Eleanor said blankly after they had been walking for a few minutes.

“You do?” Audrey didn’t look at her.

“Yes, I do. I’ve been flung through a door to who knows where, met a girl with extraordinarily little patience, visited a man in a tree who I have nothing to do with, hiked through a forest for hours, and then had a very strange dream that might not be a dream at all.”

“A strange dream?” Audrey seemed genuinely interested.

“Yes, but why should I tell you about it?”

“How about this: you tell me every detail of your dream, and then I’ll tell you about where you are and answer all your questions.”

Eleanor tried to recall what Aldrich had said anything about sharing the dream, but she couldn’t remember anything. She was too curious to be suspicious at this good deal, so she agreed.

She told Audrey everything that Aldrich had said. But the strange thing was, none of it seemed to make as much of an impact except Aldrich’s name itself. Eleanor had thought it was a cool name, but she hadn’t thought that much of it.

When she was finished, Eleanor asked “Why was his visit so short?”

“I’ve heard he doesn’t do well in social interactions. He’s used to being on his own.” Audrey replied. Eleanor could tell that that was all the explanation she was going to get.

After that, they walked in silence for a while. Then, the awkwardness became unbearable.

“Remember the other end of the bargain?” asked Eleanor.

Audrey came back to her senses.

“Right. I’m a tree fairy.”

“A what?”

“Don’t interrupt. It’s a fairy who lives in a forest. I know what you’re going to ask,” Audrey said, seeing Eleanor’s expression, “and I don’t have wings because they were taken away from me.”

“Why?”

“Listen, if you keep interrupting me, I won’t tell you anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

“This is the short version: the tree fairies live in a colony. We have a leader who is elected every time the earlier one retires. I want to be the youngest leader on history. I’m a good fighter, and I’m good at camouflage. But I’m bad at listening. I always get in trouble for that.

“A couple of weeks ago, I went out when I wasn’t supposed to. I got caught and was put in front of the entire council. They voted to exile me, and took away my magic and my wings, but they left me my tool belt for ‘survival purposes.’ I’ve been on my own ever since.”

Eleanor was stunned by Audrey’s openness.

“How do you talk so openly about that? Isn’t it personal?”

“Yes, but there’s no point denying the facts. I don’t care what people think about me. I tell the truth.”

“Next: Names aren’t just words. They mean something. A child’s name is decided before they are born, and the name somehow always fits perfectly. For example, my name means noble strength, and I am a warrior. My name was chosen even before I was born, but it works. A name can also be based on something we do in the future, like if I did something important twenty years from now, my name might be based on that. I don’t know how it works. It just happens.”

“Why is Jacob named that?”

“His name means supplanter, or replacer. He’s a tree fairy, but he betrayed them to work for Ubel, but then he tried to pretend to be one of Ubel’s highest officials. He got caught, cursed, and exiled. The tree fairies took him back but imprisoned him in that tree for eternity. He’s an alchemist now.”

“What does Ubel’s name mean?”

“Evil. It was predicting what he is now. Evil.”

“What did you take from Jacob?”

“Well, I traded a refilling bottle for spider juice, and then I stole his breath. I’m not telling you any more about that.”

“Who’s Aldrich?”

“Aldrich is the great white badger that is old and wise beyond comparison. He’s a simple wanderer, but he’ll help great heroes, but only in times of distress. So, in a way, it isn’t good that he visited you. It means that we’re desperate.”

“You said that you opened the door for me. What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I happened to be walking past the tree with the door, and I noticed that it was closing. So, I pulled it open and hid, and waited for you to come out.”

“Why did you open it? Why didn’t you just close the door and leave?”

Audrey shrugged, but she seemed to hesitate, like she was actually thinking about it. Eventually she answered.

“I guess it was because I had half a second to make my choice, and I didn’t really think about it. But I don’t really know.”

“Why did it open for me?”

“Because you happened to knock on it at the right time of day, though you almost missed your chance.”

“So, I’m not a long-lost fairy or something?”

“Nope, just an ordinary human.”

Eleanor’s constant stream of questions had finally subsided, so they walked in silence for a while. Eventually, she spoke again.

“Where are we going?”

But Audrey shushed her without answering. “You’ll see. But be quiet for now. We’re almost there.”

They walked for a little while longer, and Eleanor’s legs were getting tired. Finally, when they were about to give way, Audrey stopped. They had come to an empty ditch, which was surprising since the rest of the land was completely flat. Audrey crouched beside it, in a sort of panic.

“No. No. We were too late.” She felt the side of the ditch. “It’s still damp. We were so close.” She hopped down into the ditch, which went up to about her waist, and started pacing, touching different spots in the ditch, clearly looking for something. After a few minutes of this, Audrey sat down a few paces to the left of where she had started and started digging with her knife. Eleanor watched her, wondering what she was doing.

Slowly, the farther down Audrey dug, the darker the dirt looked, until Eleanor realized that the darker dirt was actually damp, and Audrey was digging for water. Eleanor watched until the dirt got wetter and wetter until it could be called mud, and even farther down, the mud got an unnatural black sheen that made Eleanor feel that they weren’t just looking for regular water, and then, finally, Audrey’s knife came out of the hole, and it was wet. Audrey held it up and stared at it for a second, and as they were looking at it, the blade blackened, and then disintegrated into ash. Only the handle was left.

Eleanor looked into the narrow hole Audrey had made with her knife. It was barely a puddle, and it looked pitch black. She shuddered. No water should be this colour.

“Step back.” Audrey’s voice broke the silence. “It’s dangerous.”

Eleanor hurried to do as she was told. Audrey pulled a glass jar out of her belt, along with some brown, heavy-looking gloves. She put the gloves on, crouched beside the hole, and scooped the water into the jar. When she had filled it, the puddle was empty.

Audrey used her gloves to carefully wipe the side of the jar, to make sure that there was no water on the outside. She put it down, and Eleanor got a better look at it.

The jar was barely half full. The water was pitch black and churned around inside its container. It made no sound, not even a slight sloshing that would have been more natural. It gave off a faint sickly-sweet scent that would have been a lot stronger if the jar were open. Altogether, it was no less terrifying than a venomous snake.

“What happened to your knife?” Eleanor asked.

“It’s the water.” Audrey replied. “It holds a powerful curse, strong enough to destroy anything except fire, sand, and copper. That’s how the jar stays intact. The water’s extremely dangerous, and you would burn up if you touched it.”

She wrapped up the jar in her gloves and put it in one of the many pockets of her tool belt.

“Time to go.”

Audrey turned around and had barely taken a step forward when Eleanor noticed figures on the desert, a little ways away but rapidly getting closer. Audrey must have seen it too, because she let out an audible gasp.

“We need to run.”

“Why?” Eleanor asked.

“They work for Ubel. They must have noticed us. They’re coming this way. We need to get to the forest.”

Without saying anything else, the two girls ran in the direction of the distant trees. Eleanor didn’t like how far away they looked. It had probably taken about four hours of walking to get from the forest to the ditch, and Eleanor was sure she couldn’t run all the way back.

They ran until Eleanor was gasping for breath, and the trees seemed no closer. Eleanor made the mistake of looking behind her. The figures were now right behind her. Then she tripped and fell face first onto the hard ground. She felt her lip cut open but had no time to register anything else. She pulled herself up and kept running, but she could barely keep herself moving. She was too tired. Audrey was ahead. Eleanor tried to catch up to her, but Audrey was moving too quickly. Eleanor began to fall even farther behind and then her legs failed her. She fell to the ground. The last thing she saw was Audrey coming toward her on one side, and their pursuers on the other. She felt a sharp pain in her leg. Then the world went black, and she felt no more.

Eleanor had dreams that she couldn’t make out clearly. She thought she saw the clearing in Stanley Park. She vaguely registered Aldrich giving her something. Then her sleep deepened, and the world went black once more.

When Eleanor woke, it was twilight. She was staring into the thin canopy of trees that was the only barrier between her and the stars. The sky was inky purple, with streaks of pink illuminated by the setting sun.

Eleanor sat up and realized that her leg was wrapped up in a white cast.

“Audrey!” she called. “Audrey!”

Audrey was tending to a small fire beside her. “I’m right here. What is it?”

“What happened to my leg?” Eleanor asked, alarmed.

“It broke when you fell. You’re lucky you’re still alive. When you fell, they jumped on top of you. I could barely fight them off. I used a potion to distract them, grabbed you, and ran. I wish I had a way to conceal us, but the forest is the best I have. It’s a different one than last night. We’re much closer to Ubel’s fortress now.

Eleanor knew that by *them*, Audrey meant their pursuers, the ones who worked for Ubel.

Eleanor managed to drag herself over to the little fire Audrey was sitting by. Beside her, there was a variety of bottles, a set of measuring cups, a scale, and a thing that looked somewhere between a pot and a kettle. Judging from the other things on the ground, Eleanor guessed it was a cauldron.

“What are these for?” Eleanor asked. “And why do we need cursed water?”

Instead of answering, Audrey pulled a folded piece of paper from her belt. Eleanor took it and unfolded it. It looked a bit like a recipe. This is what it said:

*Curse potion – use with caution. Results/mistakes can be deadly.*

#### Ingredients

1. 1 cup Curse River water
2. 200 g crystallized elf snot
3. 225 g dried dragon blood
4. 150 g powdered giant skin
5. 1 ½ cup laugh of terror
6. ~~1 slice of death~~
7. ~~¼ bottle carbon dioxide~~
8. ¾ cup sleep of bullfrog (optional)
9. 1 cup rattle of snake (hiss can be used as a substitute)
10. 1 tbsp concentrated breath of prisoner
11. ½ tsp blood of evil
12. 1 tsp starless night
13. ½ cup liquid fire

#### Instructions

1. Combine elf snot, dragon blood, and giant skin. Slowly add curse water and mix to dissolve dry ingredients into a thick paste.
2. Add laugh of terror and slice of death and mix.
3. Slowly add carbon dioxide without breathing it in.
4. Add sleep of bullfrog and rattle of snake.
5. Mix well.
6. In a bowl, carefully mix breath of prisoner, blood of evil, and starless night.
7. Let it sit for 2 hours, 36 minutes and 40 seconds, then add to cauldron. Do not mix.
8. Add liquid fire and wait for potion to bubble and steam. Then mix until smooth and runny.
9. Cover and keep hot until ready for use. Cool to room temperature before using.

Eleanor looked up from the paper.

“Why are some things crossed off?”

“I don’t have them. My personal stores ran out, and I can’t afford the time to try to find more.”

“This looks really complicated. How long will it take?”

“As long as it needs to.”

“Why are you making a curse potion?”

“So that I can curse Ubel’s followers.”

“Isn’t there a more effective potion to – to – to do what you want to do?”

“To curse his followers? No.”

“Most of these ingredients aren’t even real things. How can you add them to a potion?”

“Every potion has to have some non-solid ingredients. It makes it work properly. More powerful potions have fewer solid ingredients. The curse potion is one of the most powerful potions out there, so it only has solid ingredients to give it substance, and those few don’t have any magical properties whatsoever that could mess up the potion. And to answer your other question, of course all these things are real. You just haven’t seen them before.”

“Why are you waiting? Why not start the potion now?” Eleanor asked.

“Because the fire is too high. I need to wait for it to get smaller. It shouldn’t take too long.”

While she waited, Eleanor’s mind wandered. She thought about Aldrich in her most recent dream. Suddenly, she thought of something that should have been the only thing on her mind since she went through the door.

“Home!” she cried.

“What?” Audrey was jerked out of her own thoughts.

“How do I get home? I don’t want to stay here forever! I want to go home!”

“Hmm.” Audrey frowned. She clearly hadn’t thought about that either. “I don’t know, but once I stop Ubel, I’ll be accepted back into the colony, and then somebody will find a way to send you home.”

“Wait, what?!” Eleanor cried. “You’re planning to single-handedly stop Ubel?”

“Yeah. What do you think the curse potion is for? But if you’re good, I might let you help.”

Before Eleanor could reply or even decide if she should take offence at this statement, Audrey announced the fire was ready and used sticks to hang the cauldron over the fire and started to make the potion.

Eleanor watched as Audrey weighed the first three ingredients and placed them in the cauldron. She used a stick to mix it a bit. Then she turned to Eleanor.

“Use this stick to slowly mix. I’m going to open the jar. Make sure to cover your nose.”

“Why?” Eleanor asked. “Is the scent dangerous?”

“No, but it smell really bad.”

“You said that the water destroyed anything except fire, copper, and sand. How will you measure it without your measuring cups and cauldron dissolving?”

“My cups are made partly of copper. I’m hoping it’ll be enough. My cauldron is pure copper. Oh, and be careful not to let the water touch you. It will most likely kill you.”

Eleanor had to fight to keep her voice steady. “Okay.” She covered her nose and started stirring the mixture.

Audrey put on her heavy brown gloves and opened the jar. The stench was overwhelming, even though Eleanor had her nose plugged. She kept slowly stirring as Audrey poured the water from the jar into one of the measuring cups. It was just enough. The cup blackened but held. Audrey slowly poured it into the cauldron, and, because it was pure copper, it held fine. Audrey finished pouring, and what happened next seemed to be in slow motion.

Audrey pulled her arm away from Eleanor’s leg, and one last drip fell from the bottom of the measuring cup, hitting the cast on Eleanor’s leg and searing through to her skin.

Audrey gasped. She dropped the measuring cup and ran over to Eleanor. She bent over to see the damage. There was a small, sharp hole where the water had touched. Eleanor couldn’t see her leg, but it was more painful than anything she had felt before.

After examining the hole, Audrey came to a decision.

“This is probably the luckiest day of your life. The cast was thick enough to absorb most of the water, and an incredibly little amount touched your skin. It’ll probably just be like a really bad burn. When I’m done the potion, I’ll unwrap your cast to make sure, and maybe I can do something to help it but for right now...”

Audrey trailed off and dug out a bottle from her belt. She uncorked it and let a single drop fall directly into the hole in Eleanor’s cast. The intense pain at once numbed, leaving a faint cool feeling.

“Good enough?” Audrey asked.

Eleanor nodded.

“Right. Then let’s get back to the potion.” Audrey turned back to the cauldron. Eleanor watched as she added laugh of terror (a bright orange gas that screeched when combined with the other ingredients), sleep of bullfrog (a bright green liquid that had something that looked alarmingly like warts in it), hiss of snake (an ominous yellow liquid that smelled even more ominous and quietly made the sound of nails against a chalkboard), breath of prisoner (a yucky pink powder that Audrey explained was Jacob’s beath that she had stolen; it had matured overnight), blood of evil (a thick blood-red liquid with pure white smoke coming out of it), starless night (a soot-black powder that stuck to the sides of the bottle and was very hard to get off), and liquid fire (a steaming golden yellow liquid that was “not to be confused with lava” Audrey had said), and mix it all together. The result was a runny, ghastly dark red liquid.

“It should be darker and thicker.” Audrey commented irritably. “That’s what you get for not having slice of death.”

Audrey was very tired after brewing the potion, Eleanor noticed, and it was far into the night now. Eleanor sat still and patiently as Audrey unwrapped her leg and revealed a black spot that was no larger than a freckle, but the most painful thing Eleanor had ever experienced. Audrey put a healing potion on it, said that it was the best she could do, and lay down on the ground on the other side of camp.



The fire had gone out. Eleanor lay on the ground. Her leg hurt terribly, both from the break and from the cursed water. She added it to her growing list of injuries.

*“Burned hand, bleeding lip, broken leg, cursed water. I wonder what’s next.”* Eleanor thought. Despite everything, Eleanor was so tired that she fell asleep at once.

Eleanor woke up to an icy blast of wind in her face. Groggily, she opened her eyes and looked around. All around her, the leaves were blowing off the trees that were at the edge of the forest. Farther in, she could see that the trees were completely still, then they got caught up in the wind, too.

Eleanor was sitting against a tree in a small clearing at the edge of a forest, facing the open desert that lay beyond. Across from her, Audrey was already awake. She was sitting on the ground in a slightly more sheltered spot and motioned for Eleanor to come sit with her.

Eleanor limped over to the other side of the clearing, using two sticks that were on the ground beside her as crutches. She assumed that Audrey had left them there. Eleanor had to fight the wind all the way, and by the time she had reached Audrey, she was exhausted.

“What time is it?” Eleanor had to yell to be heard against the forceful wind. “Where did this wind come from?”

“It’s just past dawn,” Audrey said, just as loudly. “I was going to wake you soon.”

Suddenly, the deafening roar of the wind ceased. Everything was still. Audrey stood up and put on her belt.

Eleanor’s stomach rumbled. She realized that it had been more than a day since she had last eaten.

“I’m hungry.” she said.

“Here.” Audrey passed her a small bag of some sort of trail mix. It wasn’t much, but Eleanor ate it without complaining.

“Can you do something about my leg?” Eleanor asked when she had finished.

Audrey rummaged through a pocket in her tool belt. She pulled out a small bottle of liquid and poured a drop into the hole in Eleanor’s cast that the curse potion had created. Not only did it cool the burning patch that was from the potion, but it also numbed where her leg had broken. She tried to move her leg around, but it wouldn’t respond.

“It’s a really powerful potion.” Audrey said apologetically. “You won’t be able to use your leg for the rest of the day.”

“What was the wind all about?” Eleanor asked, changing the subject. “It just started, and then stopped five minutes later.”

“It means a storm is coming. It’ll probably get here in the next day or so.”

Eleanor shuddered. She didn’t like storms. It was one thing to see the lightning from inside your house, when you’re warm and dry, but that scared Eleanor enough. She had only been in a storm once in her life, and she never wanted to repeat the experience.

Eleanor looked down to hide her face from Audrey. She didn’t want to look scared of a storm when the world had been taken over by an evil king.

Then, something caught her eye. Lying on the ground was a black wooden box.

She picked it up and examined it. It was newly painted black, without any patterns or decorations on it. The wood was rough under the paint, with a few splinters sticking out. It had a clasp that looked like it was made partly of gold but was simple and plain. Other than that, the box was completely ordinary. It could have been a cheap children's toy.

"Audrey, what's this?" Eleanor asked. Audrey turned around to look at the box and frowned.

"It's a box. But it's not mine. Open it."

Eleanor unclasped the box and lifted the lid. On the very top, there was a scrap of paper. Written on the paper was a messy note.

Eleanor read it aloud. "*to elaner frum aldrech.*" She frowned.

Audrey looked over her shoulder. "Wow. He's terrible at spelling."

"Who's he?" Eleanor asked. "Who do you think it's from?"

"Aldrich. Who else could it be?" Audrey replied, sounding slightly exasperated. "Just because he's wise, doesn't mean he's smart. He probably never went to school. Well, what's under the note?"

Eleanor tucked the note in her pocket and looked at the contents of the box. There were a few little bottles holding what she could only assume were potion ingredients. There were also half a dozen round, identical stones, and a bunch of twigs of assorted sizes, shapes, and colours.

"What are they?" Eleanor asked.

"The bottles are just standard potion ingredients – dragon blood, fish scales – that sort of thing. The stones are boomerang stones. You throw them, and they'll hit the closest person on the head. It usually seriously injures them, but they won't die. Not at once, anyway. Then, after they hit somebody, they explode like a firework."

"Why are they called boomerang stones if they don't come back to you?"

"Because they don't fly in a straight line. They go all over the place."

"Do boomerangs do that?" Eleanor has never seen one.

"Who knows? I didn't name them."

"And the twigs?"

"They're just twigs. But twigs are extremely useful. They can start fires, mark things, poke people who ask too many questions..."

At this, Eleanor quickly changed the subject.

"Which way are we going today?"

"Closer to Ubel's fortress. But we'll stick to the trees for as long as possible, even though it's significantly longer. We should start walking now."

They set off, following the edge of the forest, which slowly curved toward the looming building that could now be seen in the distance.

"You said that you were going to defeat Ubel all by yourself." said Eleanor, after they had been walking for a few minutes. "How are you planning to do that?"

"That's what the curse potion is for. You pour it on the ground, and whoever touches it is cursed. But there's something else. An egg. Not a chicken's egg. This one holds a powerful

magical creature. The creature will obey the first person or animal it lays eyes on. If it sees me first, it'll listen to me, and then I can use it to defeat him. He won't stand a chance, even with his followers."

"And where is this egg?"

"In Ubel's fortress." Audrey said it as if she was talking about where they were having a picnic.

"And how are we going to get it?" Eleanor continued. "They won't just give it to us."

"There are several ways into the fortress, but our best hope is a maze at the western end. The gatekeeper is an old friend of mine, and with luck, she won't kill us on sight. But even if she does let us live, there's still the maze that is designed to kill us. And in the very unlikely event that we make it into the fortress, we still have to find the egg, while avoiding Ubel, his guards, and all the booby traps that are probably laid out for us. And then we have to get the egg out of the fortress before it hatches."

"So, what are our chances of surviving all of that?" Eleanor asked sceptically.

"Basically zero."

More questions came pouring out of Eleanor's mouth before she could stop them or consider what Audrey had said about poking her.

"What's the point of a maze if there's just a gatekeeper who'll kill us on sight before we can even walk into it?"

"My friend will occasionally let somebody into the maze if she takes a liking to that person, or if she doesn't want to kill them. None of them stand a chance, though. The maze was designed to be impossible. And if you take a wrong turn, you die. If you're really, really, really lucky, however, you might get riddles that will tell you the right path to take, but I have no idea what kind."

Eleanor felt her chances of surviving the next few days decreasing rapidly.

"When will we get to this maze?" she asked.

"If we make good time, we'll have a good night's sleep and get there tomorrow morning."

Just as she finished talking, there was a rustle in the bushes. Audrey spun around; her sword drawn. Then, the bushes rustled again, and something popped into the open. It was the most adorable thing Eleanor had ever seen.

It looked like a miniature fat, fluffy penguin. It was bright yellow, like a newborn duckling and about the size of Eleanor's two hands put together. Eleanor assumed that it was some kind of bird, but it had no kind of bird shape. It was more like a giant pompom.

The creature had little feathery stubs of wings that would be about as useful for flying as a baby chicken's wings would be, and a little tuft of feathers on the top of its head. It had big, black eyes and a tiny orange beak that snapped open and shut, but in a way that was not menacing, but happy. It had no legs or feet, but it waddled in a very awkward way. It moved one half of its body forward, then the other.

"What is it?" Eleanor asked.

Audrey frowned. "I think it's a piffle."

"Doesn't piffle mean, like, nonsense?"

“Well, yes. They’re completely useless except as a pet, but a lot of people think they’re adorable. They’re called piffles because they can make noises that doesn’t make any sense.”

As if to prove this, the piffle let out a burbling squawk and waddled over to Eleanor. It grabbed onto her ankle and didn’t let go.

“And this one seems to have taken a liking to you.” Audrey commented disapprovingly.

“I’m keeping it.” Eleanor suddenly felt a fierce protection for this fluffy, innocent creature.

“And I’m going to name it – Audrey, what name means fluffy?”

“There isn’t one.” Audrey replied. “No respectable parent would name their child something so silly.”

“Fine then. I’ll name it Fluffy.” She gently reached down and picked up the piffle. It felt like she was holding a stuffed animal. “Hello, Fluffy. I’m Eleanor. I’ll take care of you.”

“This is all very well,” Audrey interrupted, “but we’re on a tight schedule. Can we get going?”

“Alright, but Fluffy goes wherever I go.” Eleanor insisted.

The rest of the day passed without much excitement, other than Eleanor’s difficulty travelling with only one working leg. There was no sign of the storm Audrey had predicted. All was deadly calm.

Finally, they settled down for the night shortly after the sun set. Fluffy hopped down from his perch on Eleanor’s shoulder and started digging at the base of a tree. Soon, he popped up again with several bugs in his beak. Eleanor watched him until he had finished, and then sat down. The potion Audrey had used that morning must have worn off, because Eleanor’s leg was flaring up again.

Eleanor sat down under a tree and watched Audrey start to make a fire. But slowly, her eyelids drooped, until she was fast asleep.

Eleanor woke the next morning, feeling rather grouchy for no particular reason. The first thing she noticed was that the sun was just rising, and Audrey, too, was just waking up. The second thing she noticed was that her leg was more painful than ever. Eleanor hauled herself over to where Audrey was starting up the fire.

“Is there something that you can do for my leg that *doesn’t* result in it being lifeless all day?” she asked irritably.

Audrey replied without looking up. “Other than chopping it off? No.”

“But it’s hurting more than ever!”

Audrey sighed. “I’m sorry about your leg, and I’m sorry you’re in such a bad mood this morning, but there’s nothing I can do about it, and we really need to get going.”

“Fine.” Eleanor grabbed her crutches and called to Fluffy, who cheerfully waddled over as fast as he could. When he finally managed to get to Eleanor, he hugged her ankle with such love that it made her even grumpier. Why did everybody have to be so cheerful this morning?

“We’ll have to leave the trees now.” Audrey said. “We’ll circle around the fortress. The maze is at the other side.”

She started walking out of the trees, alongside the looming building. Eleanor followed, trying not to use her broken leg. As she walked, her mind wandered. She tried to think of somebody to be mad at, since Audrey always had a good retort, and it was impossible to be mad at Fluffy.

Eventually, her thoughts wandered to Aldrich. He was somebody she could be mad at. He was supposed to be her mentor, wasn't he? But all he had done was given her a completely unhelpful dream and sent her a bunch of exploding rocks. He hadn't given her any wisdom or skills at all.

Eleanor was so caught up in her own thoughts that she almost bumped into Audrey, who had stopped. Eleanor looked over her shoulder and felt all her bitterness melt away when she saw it. It was a maze, but not just any maze. It was the biggest one she had ever seen. It was made of hedges, but Eleanor had had no idea that there were this many hedges in the world.

"Here we are." Audrey announced grimly. "Let's go see my friend and hope she's in a forgiving mood today."

Eleanor followed Audrey to a little wooden hut beside the entrance.

A girl, a few years older than Audrey, walked out. She had brown hair that was lighter than Audrey's, but about the same length. She wore a purple shirt and blue pants, and a thick pink hairband. Around her waist was a brown belt that, unlike Audrey's, was plain, without anything in it, except for a leather whip that Eleanor didn't like the look of.

"Hello, Audrey. Who is your friend?" she said.

"Eleanor, this is Matilda." Audrey said.

Matilda frowned. "You know I go by Matty, Audrey. I should kill you just for that."

Eleanor wondered how Audrey had had become friends this girl, but she knew that now was not the time.

"We were hoping to get permission for the maze." Audrey continued.

Matilda, or Matty's frown deepened.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose for old times' sake..."

"And the riddles?" Audrey continued.

"You're really going to push it, aren't you?"

"Please. You owe me. Remember?"

"Well, I suppose... fine. But now we're even."

"Thank you very much." Audrey said formally. Then she hurried into the maze before Matty changed her mind.

Eleanor grabbed Fluffy to make sure he wouldn't fall, and hurried after Audrey as fast as she could, into the maze. Matty gave chase, cracking the whip. Lightning flashed past on all sides of Eleanor. She was falling behind, but then Audrey grabbed her, and they stumbled into the maze together as fast as they could.

After a while, the sound of lightning faded into the distance. Eleanor collapsed on the ground, exhausted.

"Why," she asked, when they were a safe distance from the entrance, "do you have a friend who wants to kill you?"

"Long story." Audrey replied. "It was a long time ago."

They walked in silence, and the only sound was Fluffy chirping happily. After a few minutes, they came to the first junction. There were two paths that were exactly the same as each other and the path that they were currently on, except for one difference: one was twice as wide as the path they were on now, and the other was so narrow that, if they took that path, they would have to go single file.

“Which way do we take?” Eleanor asked. But Audrey was not listening. She was a little ways off, directly between the two paths, looking at something. Eleanor limped over, curious.

It was a stone podium that looked very out of place in the green hedges and dirt ground. On it was a single piece of paper that was folded in half.

“What is it?” asked Eleanor.

“You know how I said that if you were lucky, you could get into the maze, but you had to be really lucky to get the riddles?” Audrey said.

“Yeah.”

“Well, somehow, even though Matty wanted to kill us, she let us have the riddles. Don’t ask me why.”

“Well, what does it say?” Eleanor asked.

Audrey unfolded the paper. On it was a series of numbers:

20-1-11-5 20-8-5 14-1-18-18-15-23 16-1-20-8

Audrey looked at it for a second, then snorted.

“What?” Eleanor asked.

“Is this the best she can do?” Audrey cried. “Seriously?”

“What?” Eleanor said again.

“This is the easiest puzzle I’ve ever seen! It’s just that code that kids use: A is one, B is two, and so on.”

“Are you sure?” asked Eleanor. “It isn’t some more complicated code trying to confuse you?”

“No, I’m positive this is it. The message makes sense: *Take the narrow path.*”

Before Eleanor could argue, Audrey marched into the narrow path. Eleanor hurried to follow.

They walked in silence, the shade of the hedge pressing on all sides. Finally, they came to a clearing. This one had four different paths. They were exactly the same. The only difference was a small stone tablet beside each of them. The first had a picture of a lighthouse. The second had clusters of stars. The third had a display of fireworks, and the fourth had a firefly design on it.

Again, there was a stone podium exactly in between the two paths. This time, Eleanor got there first. She unfolded the paper and read the riddle aloud:

*“I am only seen in the dead of night.*

*To find your way, you use my light.*

*You see me with my many friends.*

*We will burn ‘til the world ends.*

*What am I?’”*

Audrey took the paper and read the riddle again. Eventually, she spoke.

“Let’s take this one line at a time. These are all seen at night, so that’s not helpful. You definitely use a lighthouse as a guide, but if you were really lost, you would use anything you could. Fireflies, stars, and fireworks are all seen with ‘their many friends’.”

She was silent for a while. Finally, she said, “It must be stars. They’re the only ones that will burn until the world ends.”

Eleanor took her word for it and started down the path with the stars. Audrey followed.

They walked for a long time. The path widened a little, enough that they could walk side by side. Eleanor noticed that there was still no wind. The weather had not changed, except that Eleanor felt like it was getting hotter. The path was hard, even though hardly anybody walked here. Eleanor’s broken leg was getting even more tired and painful. Eventually, Fluffy fell asleep on Eleanor’s shoulder. The walls were too high to see the sun, so Eleanor could not judge the passing of time. All she knew was that she was getting more tired by the step.

Finally, after what must have been hours, when Eleanor could barely walk a step forward, they appeared in a small clearing. This time, there were only two paths. Eleanor sat down to rest while Audrey went to the stone podium to get the next clue. She walked over to sit next to Eleanor and read the riddle aloud.

“*Right is right but correct is wrong.*

*Write is incorrect, but right is correct.*

*Wrong is wrong but right when it’s wrong.*

*Wrong is not right but write is wrong.”*

Audrey contemplated for a while, apparently clueless. Eleanor took the clue from her and read it.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” she asked.

“What? How?” cried Audrey.

“Well, the answer is right in the first line. ‘*Right is right.*’ It’s talking about right versus left, not right versus wrong. That’s why it says, ‘*correct is wrong.*’ So, we take the right path.”

Audrey was dumbstruck with this logic.

“You’re right. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Eleanor was immensely proud that she had discovered something before Audrey for once, though she simply suggested that they continue. As they walked, Eleanor reflected that she had gained Audrey’s respect in a new way.

They walked for almost as long as before. The sky began to darken. Then, they met something new. Eleanor noticed the stone podium, but there was no junction. The path kept going, although other paths branched off from it. Audrey ignored the other paths and marched over to the podium. Eleanor followed, but instead of a riddle, the paper was blank.

They stood there, puzzling over this mystery, until it was too dark to see. Audrey lit a match and held it close to the paper, saying that she had heard of stories where the message only came out at night, but nothing happened. She pulled the match away, disappointed, and Eleanor gasped. The paper that had been previously blank now had a message on it.

“*Take twelve steps forward, turn left, sixteen more steps, wait for the sun to set.*” Audrey read.

“Well, I suppose we follow the instructions.” said Eleanor. “But how did the message appear?”

“Must have been the heat from the fire,” said Audrey, “and it took a moment to appear.”

They walked twelve steps forward. To their left, there was a path with more paths branching out from it, and some small clearings were in various places. They ignored all of it, walking sixteen steps forward.

They appeared in a clearing just as the last rays of the sun were disappearing beyond the horizon. There was a tall pole on the middle of the clearing.

“Look at the shadow!” Audrey cried.

The shadow of the pole was pointing at a seemingly normal point in the hedge, but Audrey ran towards it and disappeared as she touched it. Eleanor followed, and just as she was about to crash into the hedge, the world swirled around her, and everything went black.

Eleanor opened her eyes and found herself standing in a completely different place than where she had left. She was in a dark hallway. The only source of light were a few torches on the wall. They cast a meager light but were bright enough for Eleanor to see her surroundings. The walls were bare stone and the carpeting that looked like that of modern clinics, the ones that muffled the sound.

As a result of the carpets, Eleanor didn't hear Audrey coming until she was right behind her. Eleanor saw her shadow on the wall, and jumped, then realized that it was just Audrey.

“How do we find the egg?” Eleanor asked. “Also, can you put that numbing thing on my leg again?”

Audrey pulled the bottle out of her belt, talking as she worked. “I guess I hadn't really thought about it that much. For some reason, I had assumed that it would be in the highest tower. After all, that's where it's closest to the sun.” she said, as she finished applying the potion.

“Well, that's as good a place to start as any.” said Eleanor. “We'll just try to climb as high as we can.”

“I've been scouting ahead, and there's a staircase leading up. Follow me.”

They had been walking for scarcely a minute when Eleanor saw the staircase. It was about ten steps upward, in a straight line. They were not covered in the sound-absorbing carpet, only plain stone. There was the same dim light coming from torches at the top of the stairs.

“How will we avoid guards?” Eleanor asked. “The place will probably be swarming with them.”

“It's still nighttime, so there shouldn't be too many guards, but just to be safe, I have a special potion for that, though I can't guarantee it's going to work.” Audrey pulled a large flask out of her belt. “If we drink this, I *think* we'll be disguised as his workers. Either that, or we'll become warty toads until the potion wears off, and by then it'll be too late. It all depends on if I added enough chicken sauce or not. But we have to try it.”

She took a sip of the potion and grimaced.

“Yep, not enough chicken sauce. Don't drink it.” Then she began to change.

First, she shrunk. Her clothes did too, except for her tool belt, which lay on the floor. Eleanor supposed it was because of all the magic inside it.



Then, her shoulders hunched, and her head grew. Her nose widened and eyes bulged. Her arms got smaller, and her legs strengthened. Then she keeled over, bent double, and her skin turned green and slimy, and grotesque warts popped up all over her body. She was a toad.

Eleanor was about to start panicking, when she felt Fluffy give her a reassuring hug on her ankle. That calmed her down. For a piffle, Fluffy seemed pretty smart. She took a deep breath.

“Alright.” she said to Audrey, who was now a toad. “Can you understand me?”

Audrey croaked, which was not helpful in the least.

“Hmm.” Eleanor tried again. “How about this: hop around me twice if you can understand me.”

Audrey did so, and then croaked again.

“Okay.” said Eleanor. “If I leave you here, will you stay here until I get back? One croak means yes.”

Audrey croaked once. Then she got distracted by a fly and went off to chase it. Eleanor sighed. She could see that this promise could be easily broken, but it was the best she could do.

She called to Fluffy, and, after a moment’s hesitation, took Audrey’s tool belt that was lying on the ground and buckled it around her waist. It was surprisingly light for all the things that were in it, although it was quite bulky. After looking back at Audrey one more time, Eleanor made her way up the staircase.

At the top, glanced around to get her bearings. She was at one end of a passageway. The other end had another staircase the same as the one she had just climbed. Doors lined the walls on either side, but Eleanor guessed that not only were they locked, but they didn’t lead anywhere useful.

Making sure Fluffy was secure on her shoulder, Eleanor hurried down the passageway, staying to the shadows, but there was no need. The passageway was deserted. When she reached the other end, she climbed the staircase, which lead into another hallway. When she reached the end of that one, she found an open window and looked out.

The stars shone brightly in the sky, forming unfamiliar constellations. The ground was not far below, giving her an idea of where in the fortress she had started. Eleanor leaned out farther, craning her neck upwards. She could see the highest tower, but she couldn’t tell how far away it was. She looked harder, and thought she saw a window, and something shining faintly. It could be the egg, or something else entirely.

Eleanor pulled her head back into the building and noticed that there was a staircase on either side of her; one leading up, the other leading down. She took the one leading up.

For a long time, Eleanor explored the fortress, going up staircases whenever she could. The empty stone walls and locked doors were the same, as was the carpeting that muffled her footsteps. Eleanor often came to a dead end or had no choice but to go down a staircase. Her only guide was the occasional window, where she could look up to see where the tower was. Still, she knew that she was making slow but steady progress.

Finally, Eleanor noticed that the sun was starting to rise. The sky was fading from black to inky purple, and the stars were winking out one by one. Eleanor was grateful because of the warmth and light the sun would bring, but also knew that this was bad. With the day came all the soldiers and guards waking up, and the increasing likelihood of her being discovered. Fluffy had long

since gone to sleep, so Eleanor didn't have to worry about his noise level, but she was still concerned that his bright colours might attract attention.

As Eleanor came to another window, she looked out. She could see the first edge of the sun now, peeking over the horizon, the first rays of daylight slicing through twilight. The ground, far below, was bathed in an orange light, illuminating the desert like fire.

Eleanor looked up, and realized how close the tower was, right above her head, just a few more floors. She could definitely see a gleam of gold through the window now, reflecting the sunlight. She drew her head back through the window and looked around at her options. There was a short staircase leading down on her right, and a tall, spiral one on her left. Just what she needed to get to the tower! Eleanor would have run if she could, but between her fatigue, her single working leg, and the dire need for silence, she restrained herself.

The staircase went on for a long time, longer than Eleanor would have thought was necessary. Finally, she reached the top. She was on a landing with no windows or doors. Was this another dead end? Eleanor frowned, looking all around. There were definitely no doors, not even any windows. On the floor, there was only the staircase in which she had come up. On the ceiling...on the ceiling there was a trapdoor! Eleanor looked up at it, wondering how to get up there.

It was a simple trapdoor, made of wooden planks. There was a string hanging from it to pull it down by, but no way to get up to it, not even a window ledge to climb up onto. Eleanor supposed that as a last resort, she could try using the little cracks in the stone wall. Then there was also Audrey's potions, but she wasn't keen to try another one after the toad incident.

Before Eleanor could decide what to do, she saw something in the corner of her eye. She hadn't heard it coming because of the carpet. She assumed that that was why it was there. Eleanor turned around and saw something even more disgusting than the toad coming up the stairs.

It looked like it had once been a man but had lost almost all its humanoid features long ago. It was covered in thick, dark hair. Its arms were thick and muscled, with tiny pink hands. It had short, stocky legs that suddenly diminished in size when they reached the feet. Its face was also covered in hair, though shorter, and maybe not as much. Its eyes were bulging out of their sockets, huge but glazed and sightless, and its ears were tiny, shrivelled, and pink, with no hair. When it smiled, its teeth were blackened, missing, and broken, and its grin was very unnerving. Its back was stooped, like it had been bent over for years. The only clothes it was wearing was a pair of grizzled purple sneakers on its feet. The rest of its body was covered in the thick, black hair, except for its tiny hands and ears.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Its voice was wheezy and slow, like it hadn't spoken in a long time. It reminded Eleanor most of her grandfather, who could never say a few sentences without forgetting what he was saying. This voice was not threatening, but Eleanor shivered inwardly when she heard it.

"You're finally here." it continued. "I knew you would come eventually, but when, I didn't know."

"W-w-who are you?" Eleanor managed to squeak.

"Me? I'm your worst enemy. You're greatest fear. I'm Ubel the rat."

Eleanor couldn't believe her ears. This was the dreaded Ubel? She had expected him to look like a vampire or something, not this...thing. Still, she wished that Audrey were with her. She

would know what to do. Instead, Eleanor was trapped here, with Ubel himself blocking the only exit.

“How did you get like this?” she eventually asked.

Ubel chuckled. The sound was dry and hollow, like dead leaves in the wind. “That story could take all day to tell, but I don’t have all day. I’ll tell you the short version.

“I used to live in Vancouver, just like you. I was neglected by my parents, and one day, I ran away. I went into Stanley Park, and I found a door in a tree. I heard the same thing happened to you.

“I went through the door, and as soon as I had gone through, the door disappeared. So, I explored until I found the tree fairy camp. I asked to live with them, begged them to let me stay. But they turned me away. For years I explored the realm, looking for a home, but nobody would let me live with them.”

“Then, one day, when giants were chasing me, I found a hole in the ground. Having no choice, I went in. It turned out to be a tunnel. I ran blindly for a while, and then I realized that the hole was too small for the giants. So, I rested. Then I tried to find my way out.

“I searched for years, with no success. There were more than one tunnel, and they like a maze. I had no idea if I was going the right way. It was hard to find water and even harder to find food. Finally, after years and years of searching, I somehow found a way out. I saw what I had become. No more than a rat or a wild animal. And it was all the fault of the tree fairies. They were the ones who cast me out! They were the ones who made me wander everywhere, not having a home to go back to! All because I didn’t come from this world!”

At that point, his voice was so vengeful, so full of hatred that Eleanor backed away scared.

“So, what does that have to do with me?” she said shakily.

“After I found my way out of the tunnels, I realized that I was on the other side of the realm. I built my home here. Others came to join me, to be in my service. I almost forgot about those tunnels. But not quite. I hated them almost as much as I hated tree fairies. So, I had them destroyed.

“All the entrances were found and demolished. The tunnels were filled in. The land was leveled, to make sure not a single entrance was missed. They were well hidden, could not be found unless you accidentally stumbled upon them, like I did, or if you already knew where they were.

“All of the realm was scoured and leveled, to make sure that not one tunnel remained. All the mountains, rivers, hills, and plains were torn down, except for that one stretch of forest that still stands. It is protected by the most powerful magic. Everybody in the realm is under my control, except for the tree fairies. What I want more than anything is that forest destroyed. Then, I can overthrow both the tree fairies and the remaining tunnels. Finally, all my enemies will be vanquished. And it won’t be long now.”

His speech finished, Ubel coughed, then fell silent.

“So... what does that have to do with me?” Eleanor asked meekly.

“Your friend is a tree fairy, isn’t she?”

“Well, yes. But she got exiled. So technically, she isn’t one anymore.”

“Once a tree fairy, always a tree fairy. And you traveled with her, so that makes you just as bad.

“But there is another reason. I have several seers among my group, and I have heard warnings about you. If I don’t stop you, you will overcome my forces. And I can’t have that. So, I must stop you. And that means *I* must be there when the egg hatches, not you.”

Suddenly, Ubel lunged at Eleanor. She jumped back in surprise. A second later, Ubel hit the ground just short of where she had been standing. He reached toward her, and she backed into the wall, scared. Ubel’s eyes glinted dangerously, giving the look of a madman. Eleanor’s eyes darted about, looking for a possible escape. She edged along the wall, too terrified to go faster. It was no use trying to climb the stones, they were too smooth. Ubel was between her and the staircase, and even if she did get down, he would chase her, and she would probably run into a guard. She had no choice but to continue her slow progress along the wall.

Then, she felt a crack in the rock. She traced it with her hand, still facing Ubel. The crack extended vertically, as far as she could tell. She traced it up, and then, just below shoulder height, it curved to be horizontal. Eleanor continued edging along the wall, her gaze not straying from Ubel – who had not gotten up from the floor but was pulling himself toward her on his belly – but her finger tracing the crack in the wall. After a few paces, it curved down again. *Just like a secret door*, Eleanor thought.

The only problem was, if it was a secret door – which Eleanor was fairly sure it was – Ubel was sure to know about it. After all, he had built the fortress.

Eleanor realized that she had stopped walking without realizing it. Ubel had gotten up and was crawling now, going faster.

Without thinking, Eleanor pulled a glass vial out of Audrey’s tool belt, which was still around her waist. She glanced down at it. It was a grey powder that left smudges on the glass, like charcoal. The label said *smoke powder*.

Eleanor looked back up at Ubel. He was almost within reach now, with a hungry gleam in his eyes.

Suddenly, an idea came to Eleanor. Ubel couldn’t follow her through the secret door if he didn’t know she had gone through. Swiftly, she raised the smoke powder vial above her head and smashed it down on the ground.

Thick grey smoke filled the room. Eleanor coughed. She turned around to face the secret door and realized that she had no idea how to open it. She ran her hand along the door, and by pure luck, found another, smaller crack. She slipped her finger into it. There was a click, and the door opened a little. Eleanor opened it a little more, worried that it would creak. It didn’t, but the smoke was clearing fast. She slipped through and closed the door behind her, just before she saw Ubel turn around. Then she was left in darkness.

Immediately, Eleanor ran as quietly as she could, just in case Ubel realized where she had gone. She could hear his furious shouts behind her, but that only made her run faster. Finally, when she was out of breath, she stopped, and for the first time noticed that she was alone in the dark.

Eleanor wanted to stop and rest, but she knew that sun would be up by now and the egg could hatch anytime. She wondered if there was a flashlight in Audrey’s tool belt. She quickly checked all the pockets, but there was nothing except bottles and gadgets. So, she hurried on in darkness, using the wall as her guide. The passage twisted and turned, going upward all the time. The

ground was covered in the same carpet, except it was dustier and slightly mouldy. It was clear that this passage had not been used in a long time.

Eleanor stumbled and fell down. There was something in front of her. She felt the ground. There was a stone or something in the way, and another one on top of that. Eleanor realized that she was at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

Eleanor stood up and started carefully up the stairs. As far as she could tell, it was a spiral staircase. It was not carpeted, so her steps rang out a little in a way she was unused to

Eleanor continued to climb the stairs, keeping one hand on the wall at all times, lest the staircase turn unexpectedly. She lost track of time as she climbed, but guessed it was midmorning. As she walked, the ceiling started to get lower, until she was forced to crouch.

Eleanor was just going to stop for a break when she saw something up ahead. A crack of light was coming from the ceiling, right above her head. She looked up, and almost crawled face first into the wall that was suddenly in front of her. She stopped and looked up again. A thin outline of light was coming from above her head, and she realized that it was a trapdoor. She pushed it open, feeling its weight and wondering what it was made of, but just grateful for the light and the ability to stand again. Then she took stock of her surroundings.

She was on the roof of the fortress, where she could see miles in every direction. The desert was brown and dusty, with no sign of any living thing. There was one slightly darker line running across the desert, and Eleanor realized that it was the ditch where the curse water had been.

The forest was so far away that the trees looked like shrubs. Eleanor thought she could even see the little clearing where the door had been, but she couldn't be sure.

Eleanor looked down and noticed that she was standing on a flat stretch of roof that was covered in large, square, black shingles. She was on the flat ridge of the roof, just wide enough for her to stand on. The roof on all sides of her went up and down, much like a range of mountains. Many towers of varying size and shape rose out of the roof. Eleanor knew that one of them held the egg.

She looked down at her feet and noticed the trapdoor. It was cleverly disguised: wooden, but with the same shingles on it. A thin ledge under the trapdoor held it up so that it didn't just swing downwards, revealing the hole. It looked strong enough to walk on.

Eleanor scanned the towers, looking for the telltale glint of gold. It was not easy to miss in the bright sunlight, and it wasn't far away, just at the other end of the flat roof strip. She started across, but it was harder than she expected. The shingles kept catching on her left leg, which she was dragging along the ground, and got in the way of the sticks she was using as crutches. Finally, she reached the tower.

Eleanor studied the tower, and noticed a trapdoor on the roof, just like the one that had taken her to the roof in the first place. This tower was shorter than some, and the bottom of its roof almost touched the ridge Eleanor was standing on.

She pulled herself onto the roof and began to ascend. The roof was not as steep as she had expected, but it was still difficult. The rough shingles scraped her hands, and it was hard to push herself up with only one functional leg. It took a while to get up, but Eleanor eventually made it to the trapdoor.

Then she came to her next problem: how was she going to open the door? She tried pushing on it, but it didn't move. She was sure that it had a ledge on the inside, just like the other one, to stop it from falling inward. There was no string or anything to pull it up by. It was clearly meant to be opened from the inside only.

Eleanor wondered if there was anything in Audrey's tool belt that could help her. She rummaged in one of the pockets and pulled out something that looked oddly familiar. It was a piece of wire that had been twisted into a cylinder shape, but one end of it was flattened. Eleanor studied it for a minute, then realized that it was the same trinket that Audrey had used to get into Jacob's tree. It might also work to open the trapdoor.

Eleanor inserted the flat end of the trinket into the narrow crack between the roof and the trapdoor and levered it up using the round part. The door rose just enough for Eleanor to grab it and pull it up the rest of the way. Then she bent the trinket back into shape (the flat part had gotten a little bent), put it back in the pocket she had found it in, swung her legs over the edge, and dropped into the room below.

It was not much of a drop, and Eleanor hit the ground on her feet and stumbled but didn't fall. The ceiling was not far above her head, and she doubted a fully grown person could easily stand at the edge of the room, though the middle was higher.

The room was small, about the size of a large van. It was covered in the same orange carpet, but the walls were wooden instead of stone. Light poured in through the many windows. The whole room seemed to give off a brightness that wasn't found in the rest of the gloomy fortress. Eleanor guessed that this was the environment needed for the egg to survive. She realized that if Ubel was willing to go out of his way to make the conditions just right for the egg, he really needed it and probably had a bunch of plans for it already.

The trapdoor was not concealed whatsoever, it was just a wooden square on hinges with a string coming out of it to pull it open. Eleanor knew that that was her only way of getting out, as she couldn't get back up to the roof even if she wanted to.

There was nothing in the room except a large wooden pedestal. It was so tall that Eleanor had to stand on tiptoes to see what was on it. When she did see, she gasped in awe.

The egg was bigger than Eleanor had realized before – about the size of a basketball – and pure gold. A raised streak the same colour spiraled from the bottom to the top, creating a magical effect. The egg was covered in bumps of an assortment of colours and sizes that looked like jewels.

Eleanor was jerked back to reality when she heard angry voices. She listened and noticed that the sound was coming from the main body of the fortress. She couldn't make out the words, but judging from the tone of their voices, they were searching for her.

Eleanor knew she had to act fast, before the searchers got to the landing below the tower and cornered her. She reached up and grabbed the egg. It was so heavy she almost dropped it. Immediately, she knew that she couldn't carry it while still using her crutches.

Eleanor was so caught up in her thoughts that she didn't notice the egg's movement until it was actively wobbling. She looked down at it in surprise just as the first crack appeared. The crack lengthened and widened until the egg split in two and the creature poured out.

It was pure gold. It had the head of a lion, which was almost the size of the whole egg, but then, in a second, it grew to more than six times that. It had a full golden mane, even though it was newborn, and two piercingly sharp fangs the length of needles. Its body was covered in something that looked like a mix of fur and feathers.

Eleanor watched the creature come out of the egg in fascination. Its body was impossibly long; it just kept pouring out. Eleanor had no idea how a creature like this could have fit in that egg.

The creature had legs at intervals, golden lion paws with retractable claws as sharp as its teeth. Above each pair of legs was a pair of what must have been wings: big flaps of skin that were more like flags than anything else, though Eleanor had no idea how they would help this creature fly. The wings were in every colour of the rainbow, just like the jewels on the egg.

Finally, after more than five minutes, the creature's tail came out of the egg. It was covered in golden feathers and looked sort of like a feather duster.

The creature was crammed in the tower and looked extremely uncomfortable. In fact, it shouldn't have been able to fit at all. It was probably fifty metres long and at least a metre around, plus its head. And it was also writhing around as much as it could in the confined space. It was squirming in an unusually graceful way, like a fish in the water.

Then the creature caught sight of Eleanor and completely stopped moving. It paused, then looked at her with such love and admiration that Eleanor felt guilty for no particular reason. She knew that she was the first person it had seen and would obey her every command.

*Great*, she thought. *Great*. She had been hoping to bring the egg back to Audrey before it hatched, so that Audrey could be the first person the creature saw, but she had had no such luck. Now *she* had to use this creature to stop Ubel for the last time.

Suddenly, Eleanor heard voices, much closer this time, and was reminded of the dangerous situation she was in.

She was just about to decide her next move when she heard a small snuffle coming from the other side of the pedestal. She walked around to the other side, and what she saw was just as amazing as the egg itself.

It was her father. She had completely forgotten about him in all the excitement of the night.

He was sitting on the floor, slumped against the pedestal. His clothes were tattered and ripped; his face was scratched. His wrists and ankles were enclosed in shackles that looked painfully tight. He looked more miserable than Eleanor had ever seen anybody look, but his face lit up in a grin when he saw Eleanor.

"Eleanor... it is you! Can you get me out? There's a switch that'll unlock the chains. It's on the other side of the pedestal."

Eleanor nodded. She found the switch and flipped it. The shackles fell loosely to the floor. Eleanor's father stood up. Eleanor turned back to the creature.

"Can you... can you get us out of her?" she asked the creature tentatively.

The creature nodded, then motioned toward the ceiling, where the trapdoor was, and then the trapdoor on the ground, in a questioning sort of way.

"Um... down." Eleanor decided. "And quickly."



The creature coiled itself around her like a snake, picked her up, and placed her down so that she was straddling his body right behind its head. It did the same for her father, placing him behind her. Eleanor instinctively held on tightly to its mane.

Then the creature opened the trapdoor using its teeth, and they somehow wind down through the trapdoor and appeared in the room where Eleanor had met Ubel. A thin layer of dust covered everything, and there were new scratch marks on the walls, and floor, doubtlessly the work of Ubel's fury.

The creature looked back questioningly at Eleanor.

"All right." She said, gaining confidence. "Go down to the lowest floor. Uh... can you find Audrey?"

The creature nodded and whisked off down the spiral staircase.

The next few minutes went by too quickly for Eleanor to register any details. The creature seemed to know the need for silence and shot noiselessly down stairwells and along passageways. They often passed searching guards (who ranged from giants to elves to little hairy things that must have been Tinys) but were gone before anybody knew they were there. They went too quickly for Eleanor to notice many details on the guards, but there were some similarities: they all had a thin, hollow look about them, and they all had a wild, savage look in their eyes.

They reached their destination on a matter of minutes, and as soon as they stopped, Eleanor hopped off the creature's back and ran toward the bright yellow shape of Fluffy, a little ways off. Audrey was sitting beside Fluffy, looking slightly pale but otherwise fine.

Audrey looked up at Eleanor's approach, but her gaze quickly shifted to the creature, who had followed her. "Wow. You actually did it. And it hatched." She said in awe.

"Yeah." Eleanor replied. "But I don't know what it is. Do you?"

"No. I've never seen anything like it before."

"What name means golden?" Eleanor asked.

"I'm not going to tell you what to name him. It's your choice." Audrey sounded less disapproving than Eleanor expected.

"Then I'll name him Swift. He brought me all the way from his tower to here in a few minutes, without being caught. It was amazing."

"I'm not so sure about the 'without being caught' part." A voice came from behind them.

Eleanor turned in surprise, and her breath caught in her throat. It was Ubel.

As he stepped into the light, Audrey gasped in surprise. Eleanor remembered that she hadn't seen him before. But even now, he seemed to have come to a whole new level of griminess. A thick layer of soot covered him, tuning him black. His hair stuck up in ragged clumps and had been pulled out in some places. He looked like the victim of the dirtiest tornado ever.

Ubel continued. "Now that you have hold of my monster..."

"He's not a monster!" Eleanor cried, surprised at her own bravery.

"Yes, but he would be if he were in my control. As I was saying, you have hold of my monster, so that means I can't let you live. You see, even if I locked you in prison or tortured you for eternity – which was my original plan – you could still give him orders and take me down from



within. But, if you don't try to escape, I might be nice to your pet," he gestured to Fluffy, who was protectively trying to hug Eleanor's leg, "and maybe I'll set him free! He can live in the wild again! Would you like that?" he turned to Fluffy, who gave an indignant burble and tried to bite Ubel's finger when it came close. Ubel ignored him and continued.

"We might even let the monster live. But you're not allowed to make a fuss."

He clapped his hands together, and from the shadows came a ring of guards, tightly encircling them. Eleanor backed away in panic. Fluffy whimpered. Even Audrey didn't look as confident.

*What do we do?* Eleanor wondered. The guards were closing in. There was a range of everything from giants to little elves who still looked very fierce. Eleanor thought she even saw a few tree fairies. They all had hollow faces and their ribs were easily visible. Their eyes had the look of a wild animal, and Eleanor had no trouble believing they were cannibals. It was possible that Ubel planned to feed the guards Eleanor and her friends' remains. The thought made her shudder.

Suddenly, a huge rock crashed down from above, landing in between Eleanor and Audrey. It made a hole in the roof so that Eleanor could see the sky.

The guards were getting closer. Eleanor was completely helpless. Audrey started fending off the guards, a sword in one hand, a spear in the other, protecting Eleanor's father, who had no strength to fight. Swift was snarling, coiled tightly around himself but whacking anybody who came close with his tail. He opened his mouth and fire came out, licking the walls and causing chaos. Eleanor was sure this was what Audrey had meant by Ubel not standing a chance. If Swift had been on Ubel's side, she would have been killed in an instant. Even Fluffy was waddling around in the crowd, biting ankles.

Still, Eleanor watched in admiration and jealousy. The only thing she had was Audrey's tool belt, and what could that do? Then she remembered the little box she had gotten from Aldrich. Where was he now? He seemed to have disappeared.

Eleanor took the box out of her pocket and opened it. There wasn't much in it: only a few bottles of potion ingredients that could hurt her just as much as anybody else, a handful of twigs, and some stones. Eleanor remembered that Audrey had said that they were boomerang stones. When she threw them, they would hit the closest person on the head. It wasn't much, but she had to try it. She picked up one of the stones and threw it at a nearby guard. It whizzed out of her hand with such force that, when it hit the guard on the head, they were knocked senseless. Then the stone exploded. Eleanor smiled with satisfaction and did it again. Soon all the stones had been used, and the other things wouldn't be much use.

Eleanor wondered what she could do next to help and remembered how much chaos the smoke powder had caused. She still had Audrey's tool belt. What could she do with more potions?

Eleanor was about to start pulling bottles out at random, but then she remembered the curse potion. Audrey had said that you were supposed to pour it on the ground, and anybody who touches it would be cursed.

"Audrey!" Eleanor hissed. "Audrey!"

Audrey turned around.

"Where's the potion?"

Audrey looked confused for a moment, then caught on. “Bottom of the biggest pouch.” She replied. “Blow on it to cool it down.”

Eleanor nodded. She reached into the biggest pouch and pulled the jar out of the bottom. It was wrapped in a thick cloth, but Eleanor still felt how hot it was. She gently blew on it, and the potion cooled rapidly, until she could unwrap it without burning herself. Then, without drawing attention to herself, Eleanor carefully poured the potion on the ground in front of her.

As soon as the first guard touched the potion, chaos reigned. He slipped, and his whole body imploded. The rest of the guards saw, and started screaming, and others touched the potion too. Audrey jumped onto Swift’s back, pulling Eleanor’s father behind her. Eleanor grabbed Fluffy and followed.

“Get us out of here!” she cried.

Swift took off, gliding up through the hole the rock had made. The last thing Eleanor saw was Ubel’s face screwed up in fury, before he slipped on the curse potion and crumbled to dust. Then, the whole fortress collapsed.

In the open air, Eleanor finally saw how Swift flew. All his flag-like wings extended at once and caught the breeze, rippling like banners in the wind. After getting over her fear of falling, Eleanor enjoyed the experience of flying high over the land and knew exactly what a bird felt like every time it took flight.

In little time, they had flown down to the forest floor. Her adrenaline gone; Eleanor suddenly felt very tired. All she wanted to do was go home and curl up in her bed.

“You said that we could find a way to get me home after we defeated Ubel,” she told Audrey.

Audrey sighed. “I’m sorry. I should have told you. There’s no way to get you home.”

“What do you mean? You said you’d find a way!”

“I didn’t want to worry you. If there was any way, we would use it. But there isn’t.”

“But we made a deal! I would help you defeat Ubel if you got me home! Besides, you said that other people had come through. How did they get back?”

“We sent them away while the door was still there. I would have done the same for you if the door were still there. There’s nothing I can do. Not for you, or your father. You have to stay here.” Audrey sounded genuinely apologetic.

As the meaning of this sunk in, Eleanor felt her temper rise. But before she could say anything, Audrey continued.

“The best thing I can do now is take you both back to the tree fairies. I’ll probably be accepted back because we defeated Ubel, and you might get a place there too.”

“And if we don’t?” Eleanor snapped.

“Then I won’t either. We’re all sticking together, and we’ll just have to make do.”

These words took all the fight out of Eleanor. She knew that what Audrey said was true, and that she would do anything to protect Eleanor and her father. She didn’t feel angry anymore, just hollow, and dejected.

Eleanor sighed. “Well, all right then.” she said eventually. “Swift, take us to the tree fairies.”

As Swift rose into the air once more, Eleanor reflected on her argument with Audrey. Did she really want to go home? The obvious answer was yes, of course. But what was really left for her

there? She didn't have any friends in Vancouver. Her tiny apartment was nothing to be proud of. The only thing she had ever really cared about was her father, and he was here, with her. Her mother would manage, and they had never gotten along. Eleanor was actually surprised at her lack of sadness about never seeing her mother again.

*Maybe, she thought, maybe the tree fairies won't be so bad.*

*Maybe things will end up being okay.*