



# Part I



# Dragon

## *Chapter One*



### *Stars*

**Y**OUR TIME IS UP!” Grendesh roared. His black serpentine body loomed above me, blocking out the sun. “Hand over the jewel!”

My throat closed in terror at the sight of the fierce dragon bearing down upon me.

“You’re early!” I managed to call out. “I still have two weeks left!”

Grendesh scoffed at me and plumes of acrid black smoke bellowed from his nostrils. “What does it matter?” he growled. “The jewel is gone... melted to seawater when it was stolen from you. You are just postponing the inevitable.”

The towering dragon lowered his massive head towards me and bared his gleaming silvery teeth.

“No!” I yelled frantically. “Bridgette said that when it melted it reappeared across the world in the center of a mountain. I can still get it!”

Grendesh was no longer listening, though. His golden eyes had narrowed to hungry slits and without a word of warning, he lashed forward lightning-quick to devour me.

I screamed and jumped up, hitting my head on a low ceiling.

“It’s alright, Jasen.” I heard Elayne whisper reassuringly in the darkness, and I felt her soft hand on my arm.

As my heart galloped in my chest, I fought to shake off the smoky cobwebs of sleep. Slowly, the grip of fear in my chest loosened and I pushed away the fading images of the nightmare that had plagued me for so many months.

“Why did we stop?” I asked at last, my voice still thick with sleep. “Is it my turn to drive?”

“We’re here.” Elayne said. “I wanted to let you get some rest before we looked for the portal.”

The window was open beside me and I could see now that we were parked on a small dirt track in the center of a cornfield. The tall husks around us pressed in closely on all sides and the warm night breeze made them shiver and rustle in the darkness. The swath of sky visible through the windshield was a black velvet cloak that sparkled with a million glistening stars.

“The dream again?” Elayne asked knowingly.

“Same as always.” I sighed. “I’ll be glad when this is all over—one way or the other.”

“We’re close, now.” Elayne whispered over the rustle of the corn outside. “A day and a half drive to Kansas on your highways was much faster than the week-long horseback ride it would have taken in my world. If we can find this portal, it should put us very close to the Mount of Seasons.”

I stretched and tried to rub a cramp out of my neck, peering out into the tall cornstalks that pressed against the car. “See any fairies yet?” I asked.

“Not even a sprite in the past two hours.” Elayne admitted. “If there’s a portal close by, it’s not used very often. We’re

probably going to have to wait until light before we start looking.”

I sighed and tried to calm the impatient fear that bubbled up inside me. Time was going by so quickly. It was spring break, my senior year of high school, and instead of beaches and parties I was racing across worlds to avoid death by dragon.

Although surviving that terrifying fate loomed above all else in my mind, there were a thousand other fears that also danced along the edges of my thoughts... not the least of which was my impending marriage to Elayne in November and the nerve-wracking prospect of being crowned king by her side.

I closed my eyes, trying to push away the stress that threatened to overwhelm me. When I looked up again, my gaze was drawn to the starry velvet sky through the windshield in front of us.

“Are these the same stars that are in the sky above your world?” I asked aloud, surprised that I had never considered the question before.

Elayne pulled herself closer to me, and at that moment the wind rustled the stalks outside and the sweet scent of green corn was carried in through the window. Feeling her closeness in the shadows, the fears that flooded through my mind were instantly quieted.

“They’re not exactly the same.” she said thoughtfully. “The constellations are there, but they are all backwards.” She pointed up to the cluster of stars above. “Do you see The Lion there? I think in your world it is called ‘Leo’. See how it’s facing west? In my world, The Lion faces east.”

I struggled to see the shape that she was pointing to, but I couldn’t see anything that resembled a lion.

“They are all like that.” Elayne continued as the gentle breeze washed across our faces in the darkness. “The ram, the bear, the archer. They are all facing the opposite way in my world.”

I looked up at the stars above and something in Elayne's words made a shiver whisper up my spine. So many strange and phenomenal things had become commonplace in my life these days that I had not had time to consider them closely.

"The stars are backwards? So... when we go through a portal to your world, it's like stepping through a mirror?"

Elayne shrugged. "The Mount of Seasons is east of my castle, yet we're driving west in your world to get to it..." she said quietly, pressing her head against my shoulder. "So maybe there is some connection after all. Maybe our worlds are opposite sides of the same coin or maybe..." she paused, as if considering something, then raised her hand and gestured towards the starry sky. "Maybe the stars all look backwards because my world is actually a planet on the opposite side of these same stars. Maybe when we look up into the sky from my world, we are seeing the *other side* of these stars."

I shuddered. "All right. Now you're just freaking me out. I can take fairies and dragons and spells, but if you're an alien from another planet, then the wedding is off."

Elayne hit me playfully on the shoulder and laughed lightly in the darkness. The wind blew across our faces again. I was about to say something else when Elayne suddenly sat upright in her seat.

"There!" she said quickly.

I jumped. "What is it?"

"A hobgoblin. A small one. It just passed through the corn in front of us. Let's follow it to see if it leads us to the portal."

Although I had been trying to learn as much as I could about the different kinds of fairies, I couldn't remember exactly what a hobgoblin looked like. "Is it... dangerous?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"We should be okay if we keep our distance. Come on. It went that way."

## *Chapter Two*



### *The Apple Tree*

**T**he cornfield around us that had seemed so beautiful and peaceful while we sat in the car became something else entirely as we stalked through it hunting the hobgoblin. The corn plants became a solid wall that we had to push through forcefully and the wind rustling the stalks around us sounded like footsteps bearing down on us from every direction. The absolute darkness of the moonless night only made things worse. After just a few moments, my heart was beating wildly in my chest and I was braced for a surprise attack at any moment.

I never saw the hobgoblin, but I heard it. As fast as Elayne led us through the corn, the thing we were chasing seemed to only get further and further away. We followed the sounds of it scabbling and clawing through the plants until finally, when it felt like we may lose track of it completely, we heard a

distant *splash!* in the darkness and the sounds stopped abruptly.

Elayne and I kept pushing through the corn until we came out into a small clearing with a cluster of rocks in its center. At the base of the rocks, in the shadowy darkness, we saw a small pool of black water. The rippling water was just settling once more to a glassy stillness.

“Looks like we’re going to get wet.” I said.

Elayne agreed. “Let’s go back to the car to get our things.”



By the time we returned to the small pool of water, the sky above was tinted a faint orange and the stars had begun to wink out of sight. The cornstalks shook impatiently around us in the morning breeze.

“We’ll just have to dry things off when we get there.” Elayne sighed.

I made sure our matches and food were sealed up tight in plastic, then hesitantly touched the silver ring on my finger. It was the jeweled ring that Bridgette had given Corey and me that let us breathe underwater.

I started to slide it off my finger. “Here, take my ring.” I said to Elayne.

Elayne shook her head as she pulled off her shoes and pushed them into her own backpack. “No. I’m a better swimmer than you. I’ll be fine. Hobgoblins can’t breathe underwater, either, so it can’t be too far of a swim.”

I knew that she was right. She was a much better swimmer than I was (one of her gifts). Still, I didn’t like the idea of jumping into that black pool of water and not knowing how far down we had to go.

Before I could say anything else about it, though, Elayne smiled at me and gave me a little wave. “See you on the other side.”

A moment later, she did a perfect dive straight down into the tiny pool and disappeared from view beneath the surface.

I took a deep breath (out of habit), braced myself, and jumped in ungracefully after her.

The water was cold... much colder than it should have been in that Kansas cornfield in the middle of spring. The watery darkness around me was a tunnel that led straight down. Elayne was nowhere in sight.

The weight of my backpack pulled me downwards until the faint light coming from the surface of the pool had disappeared altogether. It was a scary feeling, and even though I knew I could breathe in the water at any time, I felt my lungs start to burn as I held my breath.

I didn't realize how fast I was sinking downwards until my legs hit the solid ground with enough force to buckle my knees. When I hit, my lungs released a flurry of bubbles and I took my first deep breath of the water. I hated the horrible feeling of the water filling my lungs, but after a moment the panic subsided and I was taking slow, deep breaths again.

I had reached the bottom and there was nothing but blackness and the jagged stone walls around me. Elayne was nowhere in sight, but there didn't seem to be any way that she could have gone.

Feeling around in the darkness, I finally found an opening in the side of the tunnel, down near my knees. I crouched down to swim through it, but the backpack strapped to my back was too bulky. I had to pull it off and then push it through the small hole in front of me.

A moment later, the tiny passage opened up into another tunnel that turned upwards again. I kicked and started swimming up, pulling my heavy, waterlogged backpack behind me.

Eventually, I broke the surface again, coming up into shadowy air. I coughed and gagged, choking up water until my lungs were clear and I was breathing normally again. I felt Elayne beside me, and her gasping breaths and the sloshing of

the water echoed hollowly against the close tunnel walls around us.

“Are you alright?” I asked, coughing again.

“Fine.” she said. “Although I’d rather not do that again if we have the choice.”

When I looked around, I realized that there was light coming from far above us. The tunnel that rose up around us was a perfect circle of cobbled grey stone all the way to the top.

“Where are we?” I asked. “Did we make it?”

Elayne looked at the mortared stone walls and the circle of light far above. “I think that we’re at the bottom of a well.” she said at last, brushing a loose curl of wet hair from her eyes.

I looked up again and realized that she may be right. “Any ideas for getting out of here?” I asked.

Elayne shouldered her waterlogged backpack. “Sure. We climb.”

With that, she braced her back against one wall of the tunnel and started climbing with her bare feet braced against the opposite wall. Even with her heavy backpack hanging from one arm, she moved remarkably fast and was halfway up the slick stone walls in minutes.

Once I was sure that she wasn’t going to come tumbling down on top of me, I copied her position and started to climb up behind her. While she had made it look so easy, I found that moving up just a few inches was nearly impossible for me. I struggled to dig my toes into the grooves of the mortar, but the slick, moss-covered stones were treacherous. I was exhausted and out of breath after just a few feet.

Up above me, I heard a light giggle and I saw Elayne’s silhouette in the circle of light. She was already standing outside of the well, looking down at me.

“Something funny?” I asked wryly as I fought to slide up the curved walls.

“Nope.” Elayne answered. “I was just wondering how much longer you were going to be. I was thinking I could go ahead and gather some wood, make a campfire, dry out our clothes. Maybe build a small cabin for us to spend the night. You know—since it seems like you’re going to be awhile.”

I strained to push myself up another six inches. “Har-har-har.” I answered. “What a witty queen you are. Instead of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ they should have called you ‘Sleeping Smarty-Pants’.”

“Just helping to pass the time.” Elayne laughed, a light sound that echoed to the bottom of the well and back.

When I moved to pull myself up another few inches, I lost my footing and suddenly toppled ten feet down into the black water again. I was so tired that I could barely pull myself back up to the surface for a gasping breath. My backpack now seemed to weigh a ton.

I was starting to seriously worry that I might not be able to make it out of the well when suddenly the end of a rope splashed down into the water beside me. I followed it upwards to the distant opening to see Elayne smiling down sweetly at me.

“You had a rope?” I asked, still breathing hard.

“Of course.” Elayne said. “You helped me pack it. Don’t you remember?”

I took the end of the rope and pulled on it. It felt like it was tied to something solid up above. “So why didn’t you throw it down sooner?” I asked.

Elayne just shrugged in the distant circle of light. “You called me Sleeping Smarty-Pants. You think I was just going to let that one go?”

I sighed and shouldered my wet backpack again and started climbing up the rope, moving much more quickly this time. In a few minutes, I was out of the well and into the warm sunshine. I collapsed on the soft bed of leaves that covered the ground nearby and lay there for awhile, gasping for breath and

looking up at the clear morning sky through the tree branches above.

After a moment, I started to breathe normally again and I squinted up at Elayne in the morning sun. “Have I mentioned how much I hate swimming?”



We were definitely *not* in Kansas anymore.

It was autumn here in Elayne’s world. The forest around us was blooming with leaves of every color and the wind was much colder than it had been in the cornfield. (Of course, it didn’t help either that we were soaking wet.) The sun was still low in the sky and the trees cast long shadows in the morning silence.

The well that we had crawled out of was in the middle of a small clearing. The stones around its top edge were starting to crumble, and the remainder of it had long since rotted away. The only other sign that the clearing had once been someone’s home was a leaning rock pile that I recognized as an old chimney (even though it seemed a little smaller than it should have been). The rest of the foundation was covered in a thick carpet of leaves and dirt. Near the well, the limbs of a huge apple tree spread out above us, its branches laden with fat red apples.

“There must have been a house here long ago.” Elayne said, looking at the leaning pile of stones that resembled a chimney. “I wonder who could have lived out here, so far from everything?”

I looked around the quiet clearing. The dense forest around us seemed to extend endlessly in every direction. The long shadows cast by the morning sun gave the woods an ominous and menacing feel.

I tried to visualize a map in my head. “We’re west of the Mount of Seasons, right?”

Elayne nodded. “We should be about twenty leagues away from it. This must be the Cascade Forest.” She looked at the silent trees around us. “I’ve never been this far from my castle before. I have always wanted to visit this part of the world.”

I shouldered my backpack and jumped up into the lower branches of the apple tree while Elayne moved closer to the crumbling remains of the stone chimney.

I pulled a ripe, juicy red apple from the branch in front of me and slipped it into my backpack. I looked up, then climbed a little higher to reach some more. They really were the biggest, most beautiful apples I had ever seen... nearly as big as grapefruits and polished to a flawless ripe red.

Elayne was stepping around the long grass that grew where the remains of the small house lay. As I reached another apple, she bent down and pulled something from the ground.

“What is it?” I asked, plucking the apple and polishing it on my wet shirt.

Elayne held up a long, sharp piece of metal that was crumbling with rust. “I don’t know.” she said, turning it over in her hands. “I think it’s an axe of some kind. A pickaxe, maybe, like the kind used for mining gems.”

“Well, if you see any diamonds lying around, I’ll make room in my backpack.” I said, holding the huge apple up to my mouth. “Maybe I can finally have an engagement ring made for you.”

As I went to take a bite, Elayne suddenly looked around the small clearing and seemed to realize something. She gasped and yelled out “JASEN, STOP! DON’T EAT THAT!”

I froze with my teeth on the apple. “What? Why not?”

Elayne looked again thoughtfully at the rusting axe in her hand. “I think that Dwarves may have once lived here.” She said carefully.

I hesitated, lowering the apple from my mouth. “Like... seven of them?”

Elayne nodded. She looked again at the leaning stone chimney which, now that she mentioned it, definitely looked dwarf-sized.

I considered what she was saying and looked around again at the small clearing out in the middle of the deep woods. "So, that one is true, too? There was a real princess named Snow White who came out here to live with seven dwarves and hide from her wicked stepmother?"

Elayne looked at the remains of the foundation near the well. "Yes. This must be the place. Her stepmother disguised herself as an old woman selling apples. When Snow White bit into the apple, she was cursed with an eternal sleep that could only be broken by true-love's kiss." Elayne couldn't help but smile ironically. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"A little too familiar, yeah." I said. I looked at the small clearing with a renewed sense of awe, trying to imagine what it would have looked like with the small house... trying to imagine that it really was all true and that it happened right here on this spot.

I looked again down at the apple in my hand, then at the branches around me, heavy with big, ripe apples. "So, do you think that this apple tree...?"

Elayne looked at the massive tree. "It's right next to the house. If the apple dropped from Snow White's hands when she was poisoned, it could have been forgotten. The seeds would have eventually made a tree."

I jumped out of the tree like it was on fire. When I landed on the ground, I looked at the big red apple in my hand and threw it aside quickly, wiping my hands furiously on my pants.

Elayne dropped the axe head and brushed the rusty grit from her fingers. Looking around the small clearing again, she murmured to herself. "Amazing. Such a famous place... out here in the middle of nowhere. Lost and forgotten."

I looked again at the ominous apple tree, laden with hundreds of poisoned apples. "Right." I said uneasily. "It's a

shame we didn't bring our camera. We could have gotten our picture made in front of the deadly apple tree. That would be one for the scrapbook.”

When I took a deep breath, I could smell the sweet scent of all of those apples, and I may have been imagining it—but even breathing in that heavy scent seemed to make my eyes suddenly feel drowsy and my head feel light.

“Let's get going.” I said uneasily. “This spot isn't quite as charming as I first thought.”

## *Chapter Three*



### *The Troll Bridge*

**W**e walked for hours in the silence of the deep forest. For awhile, Elayne and I held hands as we moved through the shadows and I began to enjoy the peace and quiet among the towering trees. I could almost forget that we were on a dangerous quest with my life at stake.

Our clothes had dried by then and the cool wind that combed through the autumn treetops sent showers of colored leaves spiraling down around us. Dappled sunlight breaking through the branches overhead made shifting patterns of light that played across the ground and slid over worn tree trunks. Sometimes we would hear birds calling from overhead or the scurrying of some unseen animal in a stand of bushes. We never saw anything big enough to worry about, though. Not until we came across the nest.

The crowded trees in front of us parted into a natural clearing and the late morning sun shone down like a spotlight into its center. There, in that patch of sun, a giant nest lay on the ground. Elayne and I approached the clearing and stopped just at the edge, staying in the shadows. The nest was huge, easily twelve feet across and six feet high, made of a random weave of sticks and tree branches with some heavy stones and uprooted bushes mixed in. It was woven together in a chaotic jumble that curved around into a wide circle. Although we couldn't see anything inside, there were some black feathers amid the tangle, some of them as long as my arm.

I shuddered. "I don't think I want to meet the bird that made that." I whispered to Elayne.

Elayne frowned, watching the nest closely. "I don't think it was a bird... entirely." she said.

"What do you mean 'entirely'?" I asked.

Elayne's eyes darted to the blue sky above the clearing, as if watching for something to come from above. "That is a harpy's nest." Elayne whispered.

Harpy. I remembered that one from the books. Huge. Body of a bird and the head of a woman. They were related to the sirens we had encountered last year out at sea... which meant that they were very dangerous and not too friendly.

I looked at the nest again and this time I saw the scattering of bones littered on the ground around the clearing, gleaming bright white in the sunlight. There were other things, too. I recognized a hat and a single leather boot lying on the ground. There was also a saddle that was scored with claw marks and what looked like the visor from a suit of armor lying near a dented and rusting shield.

Elayne had noticed them, too. "Harpy eggs are valuable." she said. "Some people are foolish enough to try to steal them from the nest."

"Looks like that was a bad idea." I said.

Elayne nodded. "We should keep our distance. Let's backtrack a bit and walk around the long way just in case."

I agreed without question and we stepped away from the clearing and back into the trees.



It wasn't much later when we first heard the sounds of rushing water from up ahead. The leafy ground under our feet gave way to a small path that wound through the trees, overgrown and long unused. We kept following the path east until the sound of water became a low, steady roar in the air around us. Finally, we rounded a corner and saw a small wooden bridge on the path ahead.

As we approached, we saw the river. It was small, about twenty feet across, but it looked deep and the water was rushing by in a frothy white torrent from north to south.

The bridge that crossed it was a simple wooden bridge that arced high over the water to where the path continued through the trees on the other side. I moved to walk across it, and as soon as my foot touched the edge of the wood, there was a massive *thud!* and the whole thing vibrated from the force of something thumping it from underneath. The sound was so unexpected and startling that I pulled my foot back quickly as if I had stepped on a bed of hot coals.

"Who goes on my bridge?" a massive voice boomed from the shadows below, deep and rumbling.

Elayne and I took ten quick steps backwards just as a huge green hand emerged from the shadows under the bridge and something started to climb up over the side. Twisted, knotted skin stretched over rippling, misshapen arms. A massive creature lumbered out of the shadows, water pouring from its ragged clothes. Long, stringy green hair framed a lumpy face with a broad, flat nose and bulging yellow eyes. The creature pulled itself up onto the center of the bridge and stretched to its full height, glaring down at us.

“Who goes on my bridge?” it belched again in a voice that seemed to shake the trees around us.

My rubbery legs suddenly felt too weak to even support me, but somehow I swallowed my terror and took a trembling step forward. “I am Jasen Stillwell, future king of these lands, and this is Queen Elayne Lionheart.”

The towering, misshapen creature turned its bulging yellow eyes on me and curled its lip as if considering whether to squash me or not. A moment later, he thrust his long arm towards me with a sudden motion that made me yelp and jump back in surprise, bracing for a blow.

When none came, I looked up again to see the creature still staring at me, its huge gnarled hand held palm-up in front of me.

I looked at the hand in confusion. “I don’t understand.” I said carefully.

“Pay.” it said in its booming, slurred speech.

Elayne laid her hand carefully on my arm. “It’s a troll.” she said quietly. “This is his bridge. He wants us to pay to cross it.”

I looked at the giant creature again, uncomfortable under his bulging stare. “Oh!” I said. “Ok. Sure. A troll bridge... er... I mean *toll* bridge. I get it.” I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and pulled out my tattered black leather wallet. The bills inside were still a little damp, but I thumbed through them, whispering to Elayne. “How much do you think? Is five enough?”

Elayne shrugged, “Jasen, I don’t know...”

I looked up at the hulking troll again and decided to pull out a twenty. Carefully, I stretched the wrinkles out of the soggy bill and laid it in his massive outstretched hand.

The hand withdrew and he pulled the money up to his face for closer inspection. He sniffed at it lightly, then wrinkled his nose in disgust. With a loud snort, he sent the bill flying into the air where it fluttered down to the rushing water and was carried immediately out of sight.

A moment later, the troll's giant hand was extended again towards me. My stomach clenched. "You didn't like that, huh? Well, um... okay. Let's see what else we have here."

I dropped to my knee and unzipped my backpack. "Um, we've got some soggy clothes, some rope, a coat... oh, hey, how about this?" I pulled out one of the peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches that we had packed for the trip. "You like peanut butter? It's chunky... the good stuff."

Elayne stood beside me, watching the troll nervously. "That's not what he wants, Jasen."

"Well then what *does* he want?" I asked from the corner of my mouth.

Before Elayne could answer, the troll replied in his deep, gravelly voice. "Gold." he thundered. "Gold to cross."

We both stared up at him. I finally looked at Elayne. "Do you happen to have anything gold with you?"

Elayne held up her empty hands. "I'm not even wearing any jewelry." she said.

I turned back to the troll fearfully. "We don't have any gold." I said carefully.

His massive green hand clenched into a fist the size of a boulder and smashed down onto the ground in front of me. I fell back, startled, and looked into his yellow eyes, which now burned with anger. "Gold!" he rumbled again.

I swallowed, looking behind the towering troll at the path that continued eastward through the woods across the bridge. We were so close! We had to get across.

I felt Elayne pulling on my shirt and I looked up again at the troll, his eyes blazing at me. "I think we should go now." Elayne whispered.

"Where?" I asked. "We have to get across the river."

"I don't know." Elayne said, tugging my shirt urgently. "Just anywhere but here. Come on. Let's go."

I stood up again and pulled my backpack back onto my shoulders. The troll glared at me, his gaping nostrils flaring with each angry breath. I let Elayne lead me away from the

bridge and I could feel the troll's gaze burning into my back until we had once again turned the corner and were out of sight.



“We can wait until he goes back under the bridge, then run across it before he can climb out.” I said.

Elayne shook her head. “Jasen, you saw that thing. Do you really think you could outrun it?”

I clenched my teeth in frustration. “No, but what else could we do?” I listened to the sound of rushing water through the trees. “Maybe we could find another way to cross the river.” I said hopefully.

“We’re out in the middle of nowhere. That’s the way troll bridges work. There won’t be another way to cross in either direction for twenty leagues.”

“What if we tried to swim across?” I said. “We could go upriver and cross where he wouldn’t see us.”

“Did you see that water? It would whisk us all the way to the Panerian Ocean. It’s too fast to try to swim.”

Still thinking frantically, I combed my fingers through my hair, trying to come up with something. “What about the rope we have?” I asked. “We could tie it across the river and use it to hold on to as we swam.”

“Who is going to tie it to the other side?” Elayne asked.

I threw up my hands in frustration. “I can’t believe this! We’ve come so far. We can’t turn around now.”

Elayne took a deep breath and looked around hopelessly. “I have rooms full of gold back at the castle. I just never thought that I would need to bring any here.”

“All of that gold is on the other side of the world right now. Unless you can fly, it...” I hesitated then, an idea coming to me.

Elayne saw my expression. “What is it?”

“Let’s go back a little ways.” I said. “I want to take a closer look at something.”



We stood on the edge of the clearing again, peering out of the shadows at the tangled harpy’s nest sitting amid a clutter of debris. Among the scattered bones and scraps of cloth were several other items.

“Where do travelers usually keep their gold?” I asked Elayne.

Elayne shrugged. “It depends. Sometimes in a small pouch on their belt. If they have more, they might carry it in a trunk or their saddlebags.”

I nodded, pointing at the tattered and worn saddle that lay at the base of the nest in the clearing.

“Jasen,” Elayne said, her eyes widening. “You can’t know for sure that there’s anything in there.”

I pointed at the bones scattered around. “Maybe not, but look at all of this. With all of the people that bit the dust in this clearing, odds are that somebody dropped a gold piece or two out there somewhere. We just need enough to pay the troll.”

“But they are DEAD, Jasen.” Elayne said. “Just like you will be if that harpy comes back to its nest and finds you here.”

I pulled off my backpack, my mind made up now. “I’ll be quick.” I said.

Elayne grabbed my shirt. “Listen,” she said urgently. “If you have to do this, then just go right to the saddlebag there and right back. Do not stay out there in the open any longer than you need to. If you can’t find anything right away, then forget it. We’ll think of something else.”

I smiled, trying to look braver than I felt at that moment. Elayne kissed me, then let go of my shirt and turned her eyes

towards the sky. I peered out over the trees to make sure that everything overhead was all clear, then I made a break for it.

Time seemed to slow down in my mind. As I ran across the open clearing towards the huge nest, I could hear the thump of my footsteps in the silence and my own quick breaths in my ears. When the sunlight hit my face, I squinted and kept my gaze fixed steadily on the saddle lying in the grass.

I skidded to my knees beside the overturned saddle and immediately started rummaging through the disintegrating leather pouches on either side. My heart was pounding wildly now and my fingers were shaking as I slid them around, searching for anything of value.

This close to the nest, I could smell a foul animal smell, like a cage at the zoo. Flies spiraled in a cloud above the nest and I could hear the buzz of their wings over my own breathing. A mottled black feather lay on the grass beside me and I was startled by how large it looked up close.

The saddlebags were empty, full of nothing but dry moss and the molding remains of disintegrating parchment. I turned towards the sky quickly to make sure the coast was still clear, then turned and started scrambling through the cluttered debris on the ground.

“Jasen! Come back!” Elayne warned.

“Not yet.” I said, breathing fast. “Just another second.” I quickly brushed aside sun-bleached shards of bone and rubble, tatters of rotting leather, and other things that I decided I didn’t want to look at too closely. There was a horseshoe... two actually... and a big piece of what looked like a human skull.

“Jasen!” Elayne called urgently again from the edge of the clearing, but I ignored her and ran over to the remains of the tarnished suit of armor that lay closer to the nest.

There was a dented shield and a sword that looked like it had been nicked and bent in a furious fight. When I lifted a piece of the rusted and crumbling armor, I found a dull red

leather bag underneath, tied closed with a tattered and blackened piece of rope.

*Bingo!* I thought as I snatched up the pouch. It was heavy, and even as I lifted it, I could hear something rattling around inside. I raised it up victoriously and turned back to Elayne. “I think I found something!”

But Elayne was watching the sky and her eyes grew suddenly wide at something she saw there. “Jasen!” she pointed above me. “Look out!”

A chilling shriek echoed through the clearing, followed by the rhythmic beat of massive wings. A shadow blotted out the sun and I looked up in time to see the approaching flurry of feathers and razor-sharp claws.

The harpy had returned.

## *Chapter Four*



### *News on the Wind*

**T**he harpy was a hideous creature, with the black, mottled body of a huge bird and the terrifying head of a woman. She was seven feet tall with wings that reached twice as wide, her hair a wild tangle and her eyes shining with an unearthly green light

She saw me and let out a wail that shattered the silence of the wooded clearing and tore across my spine like iron nails down a slate. When she opened her mouth, a snakelike tongue flicked out between rows of sharp, blackened teeth. Her green eyes locked on me and her talons raked the dirt, tearing long gashes across the ground.

I knew I wouldn't be able to run fast enough to escape. I knelt there, frozen with fear and completely defenseless. Looking around frantically, I saw the dented sword in the grass beside me and grabbed its handle to lift it unsteadily in front of me.

The harpy moved lightning-quick, her terrifying human face screaming at me while she snatched the sword from my grip with one quick swipe of her talon.

She threw it aside and rushed at me in a flutter of claws and feathers. I rolled sideways and grabbed up the shield from the grass. Instantly, it was hit by a shuddering blow, making the steel ring out like a bell and throwing me again to the ground. I pulled the shield up to cover myself just as the harpy leapt at me again, landing on top of it. She stood on the dented metal with me pinned underneath, crushed by her terrible weight.

I heard her claws scratching and tearing as she tried to get at me and she lowered her hideous face to let out another screeching wail. I was blasted with the hot, gagging smell of her rotting breath as she opened her mouth wide as if to bite me... then suddenly a rock sailed out of nowhere and smacked her hard in the eye.

We both turned at once to see Elayne running into the clearing at us. The harpy flicked its snakelike tongue out with a hiss and leapt off of me, lunging at Elayne.

“No!” I screamed, throwing the shield off and struggling to pull myself to my feet. It cleared the distance to Elayne with one mighty thrust of its wings and I knew that Elayne would never be able to get out of the way in time. I saw the harpy plow into her and knock her face-first into the dirt, then lift its razor-sharp talons up to tear into her back.

Before I was even on my feet again, something whipped out from the tree line and smacked the harpy with a thunderous sound that shook the air around us. The creature was knocked through the air and skidded on its back across the dirt twenty feet away. Before it could recover, another blow came, swatting again with a crack that sent the harpy rolling another twenty feet in a cloud of black feathers.

I realized with alarm that it was being attacked by... a tree.

One of the massive trees that lined the edge of the clearing had leaned in and was striking out at the harpy. As the

towering trunk bowed down to take another swing, the dazed beast screamed in fury and leapt into the air, throwing behind her a flurry of dust and feathers as she climbed into the sky. A moment later, her cries faded off into the distance and she was gone.

My heart pounding furiously in my ears, I turned to see Elayne lying in a motionless heap on the ground. I ran to her and lifted her carefully, turning her gently in my arms.

Her face was scratched up from her fall, but as I brushed the tangle of dirty blonde hair from her face, her eyelids fluttered and she let out a faint groan. When she opened her eyes, she looked at me questioningly. “What happened? Where’s the harpy?”

I looked at the huge tree, which was just now straightening itself up again and shaking a handful of loose leaves from its branches.

I turned back to Elayne. “You know how we always wondered what happened to Albero after Grendesh burned him up?” I said.

Elayne squinted up to me. “Yes?”

I smiled. “Well, I think we just found him.”



A little while later, Elayne and I sat at the edge of the clearing at the base of the massive oak tree that we knew as “Albero”. It had been Albero that had guarded over Elayne while she slept for thirteen hundred years. His last tree had been burned in a tangle with Grendesh and we had not seen him since.

I was rubbing my leg, which had begun to hurt badly again from moving around so much. My ribs were also bruised and sore from the crushing weight of the harpy. Elayne was tending to a number of bruises and scrapes of her own, including a painful-looking gash on her knee.

A low, crackling moan sounded from the giant tree as Elayne and I looked over our battle scars. Elayne smiled up at Albero, apparently understanding what he was saying. “It’s good to see you, too, old friend. Your timing is perfect as always.”

The tree branches shivered far above us and a few brightly colored leaves spiraled down. Albero let out another slow, bellowing groan that shook through his massive trunk. This time, Elayne frowned. “Lianne? What about her?”

I looked up at Elayne. “Who is Lianne?”

Elayne shushed me with a wave of her hand as Albero let out another long bellow. She listened carefully, and after a moment, her face turned white with shock. “What? How?”

Albero let out a short rumble.

Elayne shook her head, disbelieving. “But, that’s not possible.”

“What?” I cut in again. “What’s happening? Who is Lianne?”

Elayne stared up at Albero for another moment in stunned silence, then turned to me, her face pale and worried. “Lianne is Bridgette’s sister. She is queen of the Naiads, one of the twelve fairy tribes. She is...” Elayne hesitated and looked back up at Albero. “He says that she is sick.”

I considered this for a moment. “But... I’ve never heard of a fairy getting sick. Is that normal?”

Elayne shook her head, “No, it’s not normal. And that’s frightening enough, but it’s not even the most alarming news. Albero says that Lianne has lost her magic.”

I wasn’t sure what Elayne was saying. “*Lost*? What do you mean? She’s a fairy. How could she lose her magic?”

Elayne looked worried. “I don’t know. He says that the news has been travelling through the wind all day, and he still doesn’t have all the details. Something happened to her last night— she was attacked or something— and now her magic seems to have left her.” Elayne bit her lip thoughtfully. “This

is not supposed to happen. If a fairy queen loses her magic, there could be all kinds of terrible consequences.”

I didn't like the sound of that. “What do you mean? What consequences?”

Elayne shook her head. “I'm not sure, Jasen, but we have to get back to Bridgette as quickly as we can. Something very bad is happening.”

I stood up, grabbing up my backpack and biting back the pain in my healing leg. “Let's go.” I said. “If we keep moving the rest of the day, we should make it to the Mount of Seasons by nightfall.”

Elayne pulled tight the cloth she had tied around her injured knee and stood up beside me. “What about the troll? Were you able to find some gold?”

I had almost forgotten the red leather pouch that I had found before the harpy's attack. I fished it out of my pocket and held it up for a closer look. The top of the bag was tied closed, but when I pulled at the old leather strap, it disintegrated in my hand. I tipped the pouch into my palm and two large gold coins toppled out. I shook the bag to see if there were any more, but it was empty.

I looked down at the heavy gold coins with a smile. “Perfect. One for you and one for me. Just enough to pay off that big green toll troll.”

Elayne lifted one of the coins and held it up to the light, turning it over in her fingers. “These are odd.” she said. “I've never seen anything like them.”

Beside us, Albero seemed to sway imperceptibly, but remained quiet. Elayne looked at the engraving on the face of the coin she held, trying to brush away the dirt. “It looks like a king.” she said, “but it's not one I recognize from recent history.” She turned it over to see the same image engraved on the back. “Very odd.” she murmured again.

I looked at the coin in my hand and saw that instead of a king, there was the image of a queen engraved in fine detail across the surface. I rubbed my finger across the top and I felt

a flutter in my stomach. Carved in a circle around the outer edge were a series of tiny symbols, too small to make out. Like Elayne's coin, the back of this one looked the same as the front.

Elayne finally looked up at the sun that was now past the middle of the sky. She dropped the king coin back into my palm. "We've got to go," she said.

Albero moaned something again and I could feel the roots beneath my feet vibrating with his words.

Elayne smiled and laid her palm on the trunk of the towering tree. "Don't worry. We will be safe. When we have finished what we came to do, we will get word back to Bridgette as quickly as we can."

The limbs above once again sent down a light shower of colored leaves as if to wish us well.



As we neared the place where we had found the troll bridge earlier that morning, I noticed that something had changed. At first, it was hard to place, but as we rounded the final turn that would take us to the bridge, I reached out and touched Elayne's arm to stop her.

Lost in her thoughts, Elayne stopped and looked at me questioningly. "What is it?"

"Do you hear something?" I asked.

Elayne paused, then shook her head. "No."

"Don't you think that's odd? Shouldn't we be hearing the river by now?"

Elayne's eyes widened. "You're right."

We took the last turn in the path slowly, peering around the edge of the trees until we could just make out the small wooden bridge that crossed the river ahead. There was still no sound except the hushed flutters of the forest around us.

Carefully now, we moved from tree to tree until finally we approached the bank of the river. When we got there, we were shocked at what we saw.

The water was gone.

Where the deep and raging river had been only hours before, there was now only a long, empty trench that cut through the woods in a line from north to south.

Even more shocking was that the riverbed at the bottom was not muddy. Instead, it was lined with cracked, hard dirt. It looked like there had not been a drop of water in it for a hundred years.

As we stared in confusion, something silver flashed in the sunlight among the scatter of smooth river stones and we saw that there were fish down there, laying on the cracked dirt and flapping weakly. It was the same in both directions for as far as we could see: dying fish and scattered stones at the bottom of the deep trench.

Elayne let out a quiet gasp and I struggled to understand how this could have happened. Even if someone had dammed the river further upstream, it would never have dried out this quickly.

Slowly, I approached the edge of the bridge and tapped my foot on the wood.

Instead of climbing out to meet me, we heard the troll beneath the bridge let out a long, shuddering wail. Startled, I jumped back just as the wail turned into a bellowing sob.

I looked at Elayne in bewilderment. "Is he... crying?"

Elayne moved up the riverbank a few steps and leaned down so she could look into the shadows under the bridge. "Troll." she called out loudly. "What has happened to the river?"

"Water gone!" came the sobbing reply from the shadows, followed by another anguished wail that echoed in the silence among the trees.

Elayne glanced at me worriedly, then looked again at the dry riverbed. "But how?" she called into the shadows.

The troll cried out. “Water here then water gone.”

Elayne looked up at me ominously.

“How could that happen?” I asked her quietly.

Elayne shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “It looks as if all of the water disappeared at once. There is magic involved here. It’s not natural.”

“Could it have something to do with Lianne losing her magic? You said she was a water fairy, right? Is this one of the ‘consequences’ that you thought might happen?”

She looked again at the cracked and dry riverbed. “They could be connected.” Elayne agreed. “The sooner we get the North Star and get back to Bridgette, the better.”

She seemed to think about something for a long moment, then leaned down again to call to the troll. “We have come to cross your bridge. We have brought gold this time.”

The troll continued sobbing loudly, making the wooden bridge tremble. “Nobody needs bridge without water! Water gone!”

Elayne looked almost sorry for the sobbing beast beneath the bridge. She seemed to consider what to say, then finally just asked. “May we pass?”

“Pass or don’t pass,” the troll wailed. “I don’t care.”

Elayne hesitated a moment longer, then finally stood up again and walked back to the edge of the bridge. “Let’s go.” she said.

“It could be a trick.” I said carefully.

“I don’t think so.” Elayne said. “He is just as confused about this as we are.”

Still, as we walked across the bridge feeling the wooden planks trembling with the sobs of the troll beneath it, I braced myself for a sudden attack. None ever came, though, and soon we were back on the path on the opposite bank and continued on our way feeling a greater sense of urgency than ever before.

## *Chapter Five*



### *The Wood's End*

**T**he path that we were following continued to lead eastward, and although the way was clear and level, we had not covered as much distance as we had hoped by the time the first colors of twilight began to seep into the sky. The forest around us darkened into eerie shadows once again and my aching leg was now making me limp noticeably. I was about to suggest looking for a place to camp for the night when the woods in front of us abruptly stopped and the path ended at the edge of a wide-open plain.

The flat landscape reminded me instantly of Kansas, but that was where the likeness ended. Instead of green grass, the land before us was a barren, crumbling wasteland. Where we stood at the edge of the forest, the ground gave way in a sharp line from leafy growth to dry, cracked earth. For miles in front of us, the remains of crumbling trees lay lifeless and splintered across the ground. On the horizon above all of this, a single

towering mountain stabbed the darkening sky. The sun setting behind us lit up its icy, snow-covered peak.

The Mount of Seasons.

*Finally.* I thought. *All of this will soon be over and I can have my life back again.*

“I don’t understand.” Elayne said, staring at the miles of lifeless landscape before us. “The Cascade Forest is supposed to extend all the way to the slopes of the Mount of Seasons.”

I looked at the shattered husks of trees that littered the wasteland in front of us. “It looks like it used to. Something killed the forest from this point on, though.”

Elayne looked down at her feet where the edge of the forest ended abruptly. “I don’t understand this.”

The straight line that marked the end of the forest extended from horizon to horizon both ways. “Weird how it just ends suddenly though, isn’t it?”

Elayne looked worried. “Yes. Very weird.” She looked thoughtfully at the mountain in the distance. “I think that we should spend the night in the forest. We can make the rest of the trip tomorrow.”

I nodded and tossed my backpack down, grateful at the prospect of being able to rest my aching leg. “Sounds good.” I said. “Let’s get some firewood.”



Later, Elayne and I stomped through the undergrowth looking for wood as the forest darkened around us. I had an armload and was just about to carry it back to camp when I heard a faint noise in the shadows.

“Elayne?” I called.

“Over here.” Elayne answered from somewhere behind me. Then, a moment later, I heard the sound again. Like a faint, plaintive cry from just ahead in the trees.

Elayne came up behind me. “What is it?” she asked.

I carefully lowered the armful of wood I was carrying. “I think I heard something.” I whispered. Then, before Elayne could answer, the sound came again, louder this time.

Elayne turned towards the sound and peered into the shadows. “It sounds like something is hurt or in trouble.” she said.

I looked at Elayne. “Or it could be a fairy trick to lure us from the path.” I said. “Don’t some fairies do that in the woods at night?”

The sound came again, almost like the cry of some baby animal. Small and pitiful. Elayne started walking towards the sound.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I want to see what it is.” Elayne said. Then, before I could stop her, she had moved forward into the shadows.

We didn’t have to look far. There, just behind the next cluster of trees, was an outcropping of rocks that formed a natural shelter. We heard the cry again, a frightened meow. When we stepped closer we noticed something cowering in the deeper shadows beneath the rocks, staring out at us wide-eyed and scared.

I looked at Elayne. “What is it?”

Elayne squinted into the shadows. “I can’t tell. Some sort of cat. It’s just a baby!”

I looked around carefully. “We should go. If its parents come back and find us here they won’t be happy.”

I noticed then that the ground nearby was clawed and disheveled, as if there had been a struggle recently. Following this trail, I saw something lying on the ground just around the side of the rocks... something huge and black crouching in the twilight shadows.

My heart leapt and I jumped back, expecting the sleek, black-furred thing to spring forward and attack me. Then, my eyes adjusted and I could see that the huge, catlike body was lying on its side, and I could tell by the way its head lay that

its neck had been broken. When I took a careful step forward I saw another huge cat lying nearby, also dead.

“It’s a baby panther.” I said to Elayne.

Elayne was still peering into the shadows at the mewling creature. “How do you know that?”

“Because his parents are over here.” I said grimly. “Both dead.”

Elayne looked shocked and moved beside me to take a look. “They’re huge!” she gasped at the two dead cats, each easily four hundred pounds. “What could have killed both of them and then just left their bodies?”

I looked around the darkening woods. “I don’t know.” I said. “But I’m not feeling so good about spending the night here anymore.”

Elayne was about to respond when suddenly I felt something brush against my legs. I let out a yelp of surprise and stumbled backwards in time to see the black cat there, looking up at me as it let out another plaintive cry.

“Poor thing,” Elayne said, kneeling down to stroke the kitten (who was three feet long and knee-high). As she rubbed its sleek, black fur, it let out a rumbling purr.

I looked at it doubtfully. “That thing still looks big enough to be dangerous if you ask me.” I said.

Elayne was smiling at it now. “Aw, Jasen. No. Look at him. He’s just a baby.”

“Right.” I said. “A big, furry baby with claws and teeth. Come on, let’s get back to camp and get a fire going before it gets too dark to see.”

We started to move back through the trees and even before Elayne looked back, we could hear the young panther begin to run to catch up with us.

“You’re not going to feed it.” I mumbled.

Elayne smiled. “We’ll just see about that.”



Just in case you ever get the opportunity to have a young panther follow you home, you should know up front that they do not eat peanut butter sandwiches.

When Elayne offered it a long stick of pepperoni that I had been saving for later, though, the cat tore into it hungrily. Within moments, the whole stick was gone and the cat lay drowsing happily in Elayne's lap, licking bits of meat from its long white whiskers.

By the time the campfire was built, I had already named the young cub "Snapper". This was because he circled Elayne's legs constantly, following her like a puppy, but when I tried to get close he would open his mouth and snap his teeth at me, giving the air a swipe with his claws for good measure.

Elayne thought it was adorable and by the time the moonlight poured through the trees and the autumn stars filled the black sky above, she was curled up on a blanket with Snapper purring softly at her side.

She smiled at me from over the campfire. "We can take him back with us." Elayne said. "He can be our pet."

I looked at the sleeping panther doubtfully. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"His parents are gone, Jasen." Elayne said. "He's got no one to take care of him. Besides, it's good for couples to have a pet."

I snorted. "Right. I think that when people say that, they mean like a puppy or a goldfish... not a wild panther that's going to grow up to be 8 feet long and 400 pounds."

Elayne laughed softly and scratched behind Snapper's ear, making him turn on his back and purr even louder. "It will be good practice for when we have kids."

I rolled my eyes. "Elayne, if we have kids with claws and fur... then something has gone terribly wrong."

Elayne just smiled at me in the flickering orange light of the campfire and I knew then, even before I drifted off to sleep, that there was going to be no talking her out of it.



We were already moving again before the sun came up. We could see the silhouette of the giant mountain on the horizon against the light-purple predawn sky. Snapper walked beside Elayne as we made our way across the wasteland plain that had once been a forest.

Nothing grew here. No grass, no weeds. I remember watching a video in science class once about how some plants will grow in even the most terrible environments, like tufts of grass on a mountainside or cactus flowers in the desert. That didn't seem to be true here, though. Not once did we see the smallest thing growing from the cracked and broken ground beneath our feet. The dirt had a gray, sickly color and even the fallen and broken trees around us looked oddly colorless, as if the life had been sucked out of them.

When the first orange of dawn brightened the sky behind the mountain in front of us, I realized that something had changed.

"That's weird." I said.

"What?" Elayne asked.

I continued to stare at the mountain as we walked, making sure that what I was seeing was not some trick of the morning shadows. "Well, I thought I remembered that the mountain had snow on it yesterday."

Elayne looked at the mountain in the distance, the rising sun a fiery crown above its slopes. "You're right," she said. "I also don't remember seeing the trees around it near the bottom. See the green there?"

I did. Near the base of the mountain in the distance, I could see where the forest started once again.

The wind blew across the flat land, kicking up clouds of dust in swirling eddies that glided from place to place like wandering spirits meandering across the cracked ground.

Once, a gust sent the remains of an old, dry tumbleweed bush skittering by and Snapper chased it like a kitten stalking a ball of yarn.

There was nothing to look at but the growing mountain ahead of us, so when the changes started, we both saw them right away.

“Did you see that?” Elayne asked.

I had. The green trees at the base of the mountain ahead had turned colors all at once. They were now a mottle of red, orange and yellow. We watched them for a long moment, but nothing else seemed to happen.

Snapper had now wandered far ahead of us, playfully chasing a swirling funnel of dust that danced around him. It was about twenty minutes later that Elayne said “There! Look!”

I looked up at the mountain again just in time to see the colored leaves at its base all disappear and a heavy mantle of snow expand like magic over its peak. I blinked at the odd illusion. It was a strange thing to see.

“I think we know now why it is called The Mount of Seasons.” Elayne said quietly.

As the sun rose higher, we continued our long walk across the dusty plain, watching the mountain transform through its enchanted cycle of seasons while we moved steadily closer.

## *Chapter Six*



### *The Mount of Seasons*

**A**s abruptly as the forest had ended in the dusty plain, the flat, cracked earth met a treeline at the base of the mountain and we stepped into the woods once more. It was a strange and jarring change, but even stranger was the never-ending cycle of enchanted seasons that we stepped into.

The mountain loomed above us now, a towering peak that blotted out half the sky. When we first entered the woods, snow covered the ground and the trees were heavy with ice. The forest was a glistening display of crystal branches and silent snow. Snapper ran ahead of us, pouncing through the snow and trying to shake the white powder from his paws. Once, he swatted at a snow-covered bush and the snow fell all at once from it, making him stumble backwards in surprise and run back to Elayne's side.

It was no more than fifteen minutes later that a series of cracks and pops began to echo throughout the silent forest. Elayne and I stopped in alarm and Snapper cowered into a ball at Elayne's feet. The crackles and pops became a roar around us as the ice covering the trees began to shatter and thaw. The snow at our feet began to disintegrate, as if it was being sucked into the ground. In one great rush, all of the snow and ice around us became water that fell to the ground in a single booming sheet.

Only moments later, just as Elayne and I were recovering from the shock of the sudden change, the branches of the trees began to bubble and knot as if ants crawled beneath the bark. The marching bubbles became tiny buds that dimpled the tips of the branches and then, all at once, the forest around us exploded into green springtime and leaves burst from every tree like a choreographed fireworks display.

I looked at Elayne, startled, and saw her looking tense and wide-eyed back at me.

Finally, I smiled. "That... was pretty cool."

Elayne laughed nervously and a moment later we continued on our way towards the base of the looming mountain.



We eventually got used to the startling changes in our surroundings. The cycle seemed to run like clockwork, with the seasons changing every twenty-two minutes. By the time we reached the part of the mountain that would be an uphill climb, we had gone through twelve seasons and it was winter once more.

The remains of a narrow and crooked set of stairs carved into the rock here. They zigzagged straight upward about three hundred feet before disappearing into a small black opening in the mountainside far above.

“This is it.” Elayne said. “The way into the mountain is up there and the North Star should be inside.”

I took a deep breath, my heart racing now at the thought of our journey being so near the end.

Elayne looked up at the treacherous-looking stairs above. “We should leave our backpacks here.” she said, slipping the straps from her shoulders. She knelt down to scratch Snapper behind the ear. “Sorry, boy. You’re going to have to wait here for us. We’ll be back soon, alright?”

At that moment, the spring cycle started. The ice began to crackle and pop all around us as it had been doing regularly the last few hours. This time, though, we were at the base of the mountainside and we could hear a new sound: a strange rumble from far above us.

Snapper looked up first. He jumped from Elayne’s side and ran to the mountainside, finding shelter beneath an overhanging rock. By the time Elayne and I looked up, it was too late.

Directly above us, the tons of snow that crowned the top of the looming mountain suddenly melted into water. There was a strange, horrifying moment when that mass of water hung suspended in the air above us, then it all came crashing down at once.

It was a thunderous flood, pounding against the side of the mountain and right down on top of us. The force of the water hit us like a falling boulder, knocking me off of my feet and carrying me into a nearby tree with bone-shuddering force. By the time the water had disappeared into the ground, I was still seeing stars from the impact. Elayne had been knocked even further away where she had ended up tangled headfirst in some heavy bushes. She pulled herself out just as the bushes exploded with a thousand springtime leaves.

I staggered over to her, still holding my throbbing head. “Are you alright?”

Elayne looked dazed as she combed her drenched hair from her eyes. “Fine.” she said unsteadily. She turned and

looked back at the mountainside as Snapper was slinking out from under his shelter. “It’s a good thing we weren’t halfway up those stairs when that happened.” she said. “That would have knocked us right off the side of the mountain.”

I looked at my watch. “Well, we have eighty-eight minutes until it happens again. Let’s get up there before the next spring thaw.”

We saw Snapper look up, then without hesitation, he jumped up three of the tiny stone steps and began to make his way swiftly up the side of the mountain.



It was a treacherous and terrifying climb.

The narrow stone steps were worn and crumbling, some of them only a few inches wide. I pressed against the jagged rock face of the cliff, my heart pounding with every step. I quickly found out that I had to force myself not to look down, especially once we had climbed so high that the trees below were tiny in the distance. The gusting wind seemed to be trying to pry me from the side of the mountain and every once in awhile, I would just have to throw myself flat against the rock face and hold on tight until the gale died down again.

Snapper had long since finished the climb, and we were well into the autumn cycle when Elayne finally reached the top steps and climbed into the dark opening above. I was close behind her, and had finally reached the last few steps when winter hit again.

The mountainside seemed to tremble and there was a giant gust of wind that pushed down from above. I looked up just in time to see the top third of the mountain get doused in a sudden, thick blanket of snow. Then, before I realized what was happening, a crust of ice formed all at once on the narrow steps that I clung to and I lost my footing.

I scrambled to hold on to the slick and treacherous wall. My feet were sliding, though, and at that moment another gust of wind kicked up that threw me off the steps and tumbling outward off the side of the towering mountain.

A hand grabbed mine at the last instant and I looked up to see Elayne there, reaching out from the cave entrance, holding on to me tightly as I dangled three hundred feet in the air. Her face was red and straining as she pulled, until finally I was able to lift myself up and into the hole beside her.

We both lay there for a long moment afterwards, breathing hard and trembling. Snapper came over and licked Elayne's face lightly.

"Thank you." I said at last as my breathing began to slow back to normal again.

Elayne just squeezed my hand in silent response.



"It's a fairy." Elayne said once we had gotten to our feet again.

"What is?"

"Somewhere here in the mountain." Elayne said. "An air fairy, I think. Maybe a zephyr. That's what's making the seasons change."

And whatever enchantment was causing the endless change in seasons outside the mountain seemed to also have a hold on the inside as well.

The tunnel before us was slick and treacherous with wintery ice, and as it opened up, we could see massive icicles dangling like crystal pikes from the ceiling far above. There was a natural light here that seemed to radiate from the walls, making the ice sparkle like diamonds around us. Eventually, the cavern ended in a towering, multi-tiered circular room that came to a high point in the center and I knew that we had reached the core of the mountain.

The dim chamber around us did not look naturally formed, but appeared to have been carved out of the rock centuries ago. A spiral was engraved into the stone floor that circled around the chamber and receded to a pedestal that stood in the center of the room.

*We've finally found it. I thought. After months of searching, we've found the North Star again.*

Elayne held onto my hand tightly as we stepped into the room. Snapper brushed between our legs and entered ahead of us, looking up at the high ceiling warily. A low noise rumbled from his throat and his eyes were wide and cautious.

My gaze was fixed upon the pedestal in front of me. As I moved forward, everything else seemed to disappear. I held my breath with a rising feeling of triumphant elation.

Then, as we neared, I stopped mid-step.

My stomach tightened and I refused to believe what I saw there, even as we stepped up to the cold stone column and I ran my hand over its empty top.

"It's gone." Elayne gasped.

I ran both hands over the pedestal now, a panic creeping into my chest. "No." I said tensely. "It had to have just fallen off. It's got to be around here someplace."

Elayne and I both dropped to our knees at the base of the column and began feeling around in the shadowy light, trying to find where the jewel could have skidded off to. My heart was thumping furiously in my chest now.

*Grendesh! Was all I could think. Grendesh is coming for the jewel in two weeks. He's going to kill me. Grendesh is going to kill me.*

I was scrambling around in a mad panic now, desperate to find the missing jewel and trying hard not to imagine what it would feel like to be eaten alive by a dragon.

At that moment, a slow, deep laugh echoed through the icy cavern around us.

Snapper's head cocked towards the sound and his back arched high. He let out a wild hiss and laid his ears back as the cold chuckle echoed above us.

Elayne and I looked upward to follow the eerie sound. Then, a voice rang out, rasping and deep. "Looking for something?"

The bestial voice sent a shiver through my spine as I moved slowly with Elayne to stand up, searching the shadows cautiously..

"Who's there?" I called, my own voice hollow against the icy walls. *It's the fairy of the mountain.* I thought, bracing myself. *He's going to be angry at us for trying to take his jewel...*

But then, the raspy voice chided. "Jasen... I'm disappointed. You don't know who I am? We were once so close..."

Snapper let out another fiery hiss. The young panther's face had turned furious and wild at the sound of the voice.

The low chuckle came again. "See? Even the young cub here recognizes me. Of course, he's hissing at me instead of *thanking* me for leaving him alive after I killed his parents yesterday. Kids these days... I tell you, they are so ungrateful."

"Come out where we can see you!" Elayne demanded angrily, searching the rocks and ice above us.

"And it's a pleasure to see you again, princess," cooed that grating, sinister voice. "There was a time when I wanted very much to kill you. In fact, I spent some long nights imagining your painful death in glorious detail. The screams. The begging for mercy..."

Elayne's face went white and I moved towards her protectively.

"But... I'm over all of that now." the voice continued. "I have a new purpose in life. A new purpose, and a new body to help me achieve it."

A slow, terrifying revelation began to dawn on me. I swallowed down a lump that formed suddenly in my throat.

“Charlie?” I called into the shadowy cavern above us. “Is that you?”

“Ding! Give the boy a prize!” the voice rang out suddenly. “Although these days, most people just call me the Big, Bad Wolf.”

As he spoke the last word, something fell to the ground in the shadows behind us and Elayne and I both spun at once. There, in the darkness, a figure crouched low. A bushy tail swept in slow, steady arcs behind its hunched silhouette. Then, as we watched, two red eyes opened in the dimness and the creature there stood up on its hind legs, pulling itself up to a standing height of over seven feet tall.

“Hello boys and girls.” the creature rasped in a chilling whisper. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

To my dawning horror, I saw that the thing that stood before us was indeed a wolf. It looked nothing like a normal wolf, though. This thing looked just like the wolf from the old children’s storybooks. The wolf that followed Red Riding Hood through the woods or devoured the Three Little Pigs.

Its glowing red eyes were slits above an enormous, oversized snout. Rows of needled white teeth peeked from between his curled wolf lips and bony ribs rose and fell beneath oily brown fur as he took slow, deep breaths. His bushy tail continued to swish behind him where he stood towering in the shadows.

Elayne and I reeled from the thing that stood before us.

“How?” I asked breathlessly.

The wolf-thing grinned even wider and took a step towards us. “Oh, that’s right! The last time you saw me, you had left me in a dumpy, dough-faced body stranded on a cloud two-thousand feet in the air.” He clicked his tongue and his tail momentarily bristled with an electric shudder. “Well, out with the old, in with the new, am I right?” He held up his massive furry paw and examined the claws there with his burning red

eyes. "I found someone who has the same interests as me." he said. "Someone who can appreciate my true talents."

His red eyes flicked back to me and he took another slow step towards us. "It's not that I didn't enjoy our time together, Jasen. No, really. It was a blast. I just couldn't shake the lingering feeling that you never really *appreciated me*."

I struggled to swallow down my fear as a quiet anger stirred in my chest. I stepped in front of Elayne and took a step closer to Charlie. "Where is it?" I asked.

"Where is what?" Wolf-Charlie said, opening his glowing red eyes with a look of mock innocence that made his gaze look even more terrifying.

I glared at him and he curled his lips into a big smile again, flashing rows of hungry teeth. "Oh, you mean this little old thing?" He opened up his other paw to reveal a brilliant blue jewel. My stomach tightened at the sight of it.

"Give it to me!" I said through clenched teeth.

Charlie looked at the anger in my eyes and in his wolfish, gravelly voice he whispered to me. "Come and get it."

Then, before I could move, something black sailed through the air in front of me and Snapper landed on the wolf in a snarling attack.

Charlie screamed out and fell back, throwing his arm up to shield himself from the panther's snapping jaws and tearing claws. The huge wolf let out an enraged roar and fought back, trying to throw the panther off, but Snapper seemed only to fight harder.

While Elayne and I stood in momentary shock, unsure what to do, the cavern around us suddenly started to crack and pop in a series of ringing, echoing explosions.

We looked up at the ceiling and the thousands of fat, spiked icicles that hung far above.

"The seasons are changing again!" Elayne yelled above the noise.

Then the icicles began to dislodge themselves from the ceiling and fall like spears down towards us. Both Charlie and

Snapper looked up just in time to see a big one come crashing down towards them. Charlie used the distraction to throw the panther to the side and leap up, narrowly missing impalement by the icy spike that exploded on the stone floor where he had been struggling a moment before.

Elayne and I ran for the cover of the cavern entrance, but Charlie beat us there first. We saw his bushy tail disappear around the bend of the tunnel just as we dodged another giant icicle that crashed to the ground by my feet.

“Go!” I yelled to Elayne and together we ran through the icy tunnel as the frozen shards of the ceiling rained down on our shoulders like shattered glass.

The exit was ahead and we saw Charlie’s bushy tail slip out into the sunlight just before we got to it. I dove forward to chase him, but Elayne grabbed me up in her arms before I could get out.

“Elayne!” I yelled. “What are you doing? He’s getting away!”

Then there came a roar from above that seemed to shake the whole mountain and the entrance in front of us was suddenly covered with a torrent of water rushing past from above. The surge of water and wind lasted a few seconds, then was gone.

Elayne’s grip loosened and together we scrambled to the tunnel entrance, peering down over the side. The last trickles of water were still washing down the narrow stone steps below.

Charlie was nowhere to be seen.

My eyes strained to find his body lying at the base of the mountain, but at that instant the trees exploded into a leafy green canopy and hid everything else from view.

Snapper appeared quietly beside us, licking the red blood from between his long curved claws.

I looked at Elayne, feeling stricken and lost.

“He’s gone.” I said, hearing the hopeless shock in my own voice as I spoke. “He has the North Star.”

Elayne took my hand in hers as we looked out at the dense green forest far below. “I know, Jasen.”

“Grendesh is going to kill me.” I said, as if just realizing for the first time the awful truth of it.

Elayne shook her head. “We still have two weeks left. This isn’t over yet.”