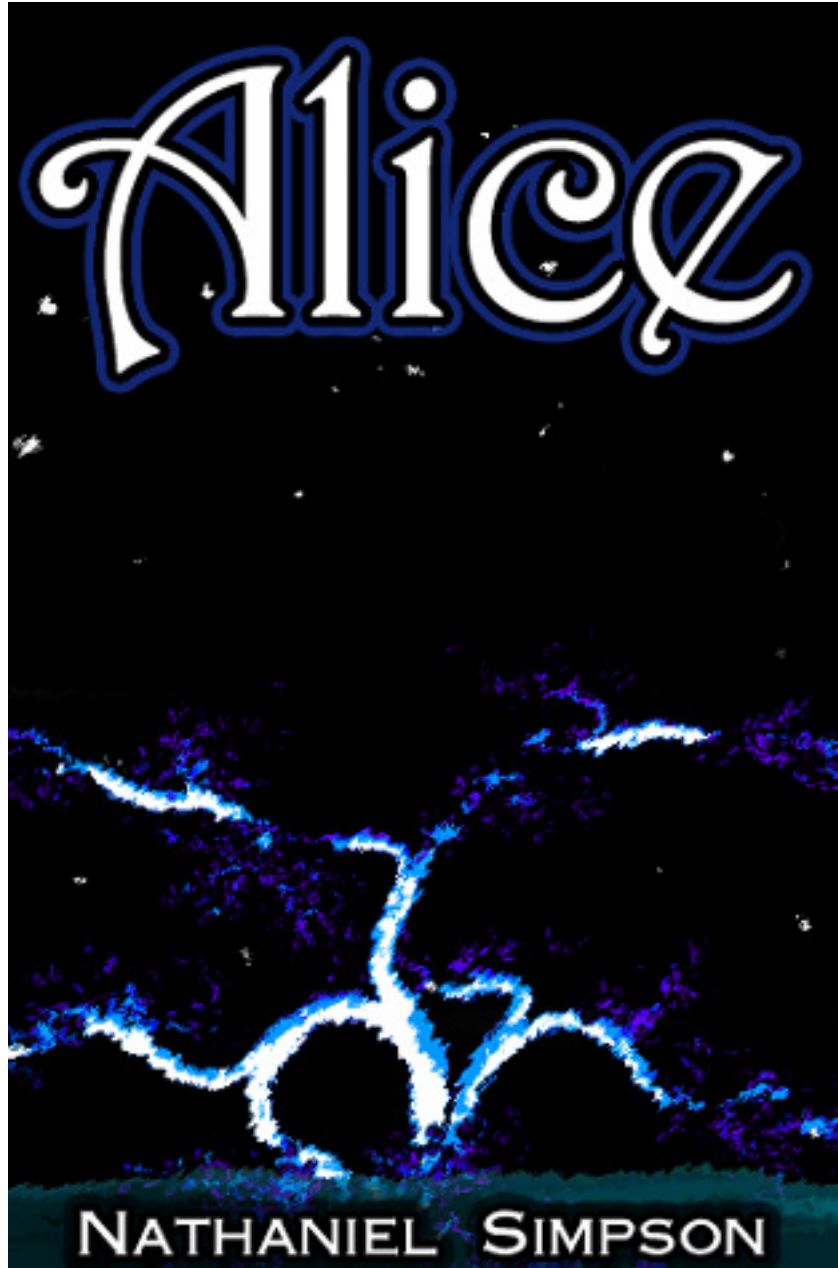


ALICE
by
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When you blink, do you die? When your eyes open again, is it the same you that closed those lids? What about when you sleep, that blessed time when your troubles are far away...

Maybe the relief gained in sleep comes from your death, from the reality of a new you facing each instance of continued consciousness, only to die again at the end of the day or each time your eyelids slide shu-

CHAPTER 1

Alice sat in the corner of the restaurant. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap, her ankles crossed under the chair. Her back was straight, her head tilted back. Her eyes stared at the black needles that served to mark time under the transparent plastic face of a clock. Each minute on that clock was marked by a small sliver of black plastic; each second, by the same slivers and a tick that became louder with each jerking motion of the needle. In the stillness of a single instant, she could see the needle waver, swing to the next black sliver of a second - no, wait, there was too much momentum and the needle swung to mark two seconds before being brutally arrested by a hidden gear. She flinched, watching as the needle was forced to stagger shakily back into place to mark the thirty-fourth second past the twenty-ninth minute of the hour of five past noon with a horrendous crashing noise. She smiled at the clock. *Poor thing, never a chance to breathe, rest, sleep...*

Alice lowered her eyes from the clock. She could see in the dim light the trance-like motions of the young waiters and waitresses wandering about through the restaurant. It was typical restaurant protocol; the servers interacted with their customers in an amicably sterile fashion and pretended to be thrilled at the opportunity to play slave to those who might deign to toss them a few coins after a cardboard meal. *Why bother moving, she wondered at them, when you aren't even there to begin with?* They ignored her, of course. No, wait - a young man in an apron rushed across the room to her.

"Can I get you anything?" The waiter's fingers tapped restlessly on a notepad; dark streaks of a soft pencil marred its surface with requests for fries and a coke. She could almost hear it - *"No, make that two fries and an iced tea, yes thank you you're dismissed go away now so that I can continue to flirt with..."* The waiter's dark eyes looked at her emptily, his feigned patience belied by restless fingers tapping unconsciously on the notepad.

She tried for his sake to focus on the present.

She laughed silently. The echoes of each peal of laughter rippled from one corner of her mind to another as she felt her mouth open. "Nothing, thank you." *Ah, yes, the formulaic response - a ritual, really.* She raised her glass of water in a gesture that plainly said, "I've already been helped". The waiter moved away, unable to conceal his relief when he realized that his services were not required.

Alice sat in the restaurant as she had every year during the rainy autumn season - every year since she had failed to keep a promise. Two promises. She kept a vigil here once each year, a sort of wake for those promises. In this place her mind could wander; there was nothing to distract her in this over-sterile environment. Nothing except a candle.

The candle burned on the dark wooden surface of the table, the ferocity of its flame tempered behind the milky glass of a candle-holder. Alice pulled the candle closer to stare at the flame. She could feel herself being drawn into it - it took up more and more of her vision until she could see nothing else, until she was the flame. Little droplets of fire sparkled in her peripheral vision; an inverted waterfall of fire poured upwards from the wick, sparks dancing up to the ceiling -- and across the room a figure made of light slipped in from the street, rain dripping from its incandescent body.

Alice felt no surprise at the presence of the figure as she watched the dripping water pool around its feet; the seething glow of its body reflected in the puddle. She knew she should be surprised, so she did what she thought might be proper; she blinked. She opened her eyes again, straining to see across the dim room. She could see nothing but the rippling marks of the wood grain on her table. The heat waves from the candle were distorting her vision, but she thought she saw a footprint in the pool of water, a footprint so hot that the water strained to pull away from its impression.

She knew it was silly, but she pulled herself to her feet and walked over to the door anyway. It wasn't only her imagination. She stooped down to touch the water -- and swore under her breath as she jerked her fingers back from the heat. She stood and walked outside; the trail of boiling footprints turned around the corner of a street. She ran after that trail, not pausing to think about what she was doing.

The rain still fell silently, each drop placed precisely apart from all the others. If she could have slowed down time, she would have seen that each drop reflected all the others. She would even have seen her own face framed by straight dark hair that dropped behind her shoulders, the blue neon glow from a sign proclaiming the restaurant to be OPEN shining in the darkness behind her. There were many other things to see, reflected in puddles on the sidewalk: the constellations of lighted windows from the nearby office towers, the sleek, dark steel of passing vehicles, red brake

lights, green traffic lights, yellow helium streetlights, blue neon glow, white constellations of lighted windows. Everything was spinning, falling - splashing into pools of water collected in footprints burned into the concrete. She shook herself away from the spell of the lights and ran on.

She hopped over a puddle whose surface was marred by a thousand raindrops. The rainwater was beginning to run down her skin and soak into her clothes, and the footprints kept going. They vanished around a corner. She started to follow - but she found herself held fast by a memory.

It was one of those two promises. She'd promised Icarus Sinan that she would take care of herself, and it was here that she had failed to keep that promise. It was a particularly dark corner, and on a darker night than this one seven years ago she had found herself - always the strong one - struck from behind and felled by muggers who left her with nothing but the clothes on her back. *Fool me twice, shame on me.* The experience had changed something in her, as surely as if a switch in her brain had been flicked off. She had become fearful, timid.

For once, though, her curiosity was stronger than her fear. It compelled her irresistably. She took a deep breath and moved on, one foot in front of the other.

The street darkened as she walked. The few streetlights faded in the distance, and in the dimming light she noticed that each footprint was glowing slightly. Other details caught her attention. Leaves lay scattered about like torn paper - the leaves were *burying* torn paper, tearing wet paper bags with sharp stems not yet weakened by water and decomposition. A thousand cigarettes lay strewn about, each one bearing the marks of a different pair of lips. Some of them were covered with lipstick, but all of them were contaminated with DNA. Some corner of her brain was thinking how strange it was that something invisible could uniquely identify each smoker more accurately than the mother or lover or friend who would be asked to identify the silent body when it ceased to live - when it died. *Most likely from lung cancer,* she thought as she ran. The concrete sidewalks flowed toward a distant horizon, running parallel to the street. She was running on the west side, on the bank of an asphalt river navigated by the occasional SUV populated with a mother and her children, or an old man driving home alone - or her least favorite, a group of young men shouting and whistling at her from an overcrowded pickup as she hurried on. She kept her eyes ground-focused, shrinking into the shadows on the far side of the sidewalk.

Alice winced at her own reaction. She was so timid these days. She felt ashamed; she had not always been so. She pulled her coat closer, looking about her suspiciously. *Why am I doing this? It's crazy, following footprints at night in the rain. What if someone attacks me?* She shivered slightly before she shook herself, deliberately ignoring the feeling. The

compulsion to follow gripped her much stronger than any fear of the unknown. She laughed aloud softly, a grim little chuckle. *If only my friends could see me now... they could certainly never call me mousy again.* Some part of her brain added before she could stop it, *If they had seen me before, they would have started calling me that.*

The street rushed on. Every step forward pulled her surroundings toward her; every other step pulled them past her. Little trickles of light from nearby street lamps floated over inky puddles, each flicker of light chained to its own lamp. The flickers ran away from her as she approached, followed her as she passed by. She smiled as her toe brushed a puddle; it reflected a rippled evil twin of her face back at her. The reflection vanished in a splash under her foot. Almost of their own volition, her feet came down faster, falling directly in the now-fading footprints. Her pace quickened to match the wide strides that the prints demanded of her. "Where are you?" she wondered aloud, straining her eyes to see any trace of the figure. Cool air brushed past her face and a slight smell of almond coiled its way around a thread of air into her nostrils. She blinked.

Alice was nine years old, standing in a tiny kitchen in a wretched apartment somewhere in the corner of a dying city, listening to the clamor of the crowds of refugees winding through the streets outside her boarded-up window. They were all hurrying to seek shelter in a place already bursting at the seams.

Alice's mother poured boiling water over a handful of ground coffee, straining it into a mug. Cream followed the water, slipping under the murky surface of the coffee. It dove to the bottom of the mug frantically before rushing to the surface for air in a whirling tornado of whiteness, only to meet a drizzle of sugar crystals and a few drops of almond extract - her mother's vain attempt to create the sensation of amaretto. Alice stood close to her mother, watching as the coffee touched her lips when she sipped.

"Why is everyone rushing?" she asked her mother, peering out again through a crack in the boards. She could see a seething throng of people - dozens of heads bobbing up and down in the crowd like driftwood on the sea. There was the occasional boat in the pool of humanity: a vehicle, or a beast of burden laden with some family's possessions floating along, borne to some mysterious destination that she could not fathom.

"Because they have nothing else to do," her mother replied. The words drifted out into the air along with a slight smell of almond, riding coiled around a thread of air into Alice's nostrils. The sensation tickled her nose. She closed her eyes and sneezed.

Alice's footsteps probed gingerly into a footprint in the sidewalk. She found those first steps slippery; her feet planed over water in the super-

sized impressions of the glowing figure's foot. With each step, the footprints fit her feet more exactly; the concrete sidewalk reached into the treads of her shoes and propelled her along with a slight sucking noise. The newly vacated footprints behind her succumbed to a rush of water mixed with broken twigs, dirty leaves, even torn cigarettes leaking shredded tobacco. She wondered why people threw things about; she was as lazy as anyone else, though. *No mystery there, I guess.*

I wonder if I've been here before, she thought. *The footprints know me.* She was sure of it, as sure as she was of her own presence somewhere in a dark city street on a rainy night, running toward a dead end like a fool. A garden gate arched next to the sidewalk down the road. She almost didn't see the silent figure staring impassively at her; the figure didn't even stir as raindrops slipped off its shoulders and clattered to the ground in a broken pile of icy splashes. In a sudden blur of movement, the figure slipped through the gate into the shadows. It only took a moment for Alice to reach the gate herself. Through the blackness and the rain, she could make out a garden of some sort beyond the bars.

Her foot crossed the threshold of the garden. The arch seemed to flex away from her head as she passed underneath it. She ran a finger tentatively over the gate, eyeing the arch. Her fingers met cold iron, wrought in precise knots veiled by ivy creeping up the bars. There was some mysterious vine blooming with tiny silver flowers on the gate. It spilled over the top of the arch and seemed to strain to touch her hair even as the arch itself pulled away from her presence.

Moonlight slipped through a gap in the clouds, sending down shafts of light like sunbeams in an empty room. The light touched her eyelids, and the brilliance dazzled her. Her eyes closed. The light felt gentle now, highlighting the smooth hemisphere of a lid closed over brown eyes. In that exact instant, an onlooker would have seen misty clouds of exhaled air hanging frozen before her face in midair, as if she were a dragon queen. The surrounding trees were bent slightly under the pressure of the wind, and a piece of torn paper hung silently in the air three steps away.

CHAPTER 2

Alice opened her eyes, rubbing away excess tears dripping from the fresh film that protected her eyes from dust and dryness. The wind rocked the trees around her, tugging her hair to one side playfully. There was something floating in the air in front of her. Her hand reached out reflexively as she stepped forward, and her fingers closed around a piece of torn paper tumbling end over end in the breeze. A misty cloud of her breath vanished before she was even aware that it had ever been present. Her fingers smoothed out the piece of paper, turning it unconsciously to align it with her gaze. Her eyes narrowed as her awareness tunneled to the paper alone. She could make out the frayed edges of torn paper coming into sharp focus with the words.

The paper itself was lined, each faint strand of blue dye marking a neat division of the page. Each strand of blue was bleeding down into that division; the paper surface still ran with pooled mud and water. Where the water had already gone, minuscule dunes of mud ran across the paper. There was something scratched through the mud; trails of red ink, near-black to her eyes in the night despite the moonlight. She could barely make out words on the paper.

You have heard the call. Do you dare to answer? Your choices are not unlimited; in fact, you have only two. You may return through the gate by which you entered our garden, or you may step closer to enlightenment. Death lies in either choice; in only one will you find resolution.

Alice shivered slightly in the cool air, looking up at the moon. The moonlight washed over her face, brushing away the shadows trying to rest there. *Our garden? Whose garden? And resolution? What is not resolved?* Her fingers crumpled the paper, throwing it aside carelessly. She raised a foot to step...where? Forward, backward? Her foot hesitated. She stood poised to move, the cold light of the moon illuminating her like a statue, all dark and pale and shadows. All was motionless at the entrance of the garden: Alice, and high stone walls and trees fading off into blackness. A face made of light peered back from the blackness, focusing on her. Her face was tilted upwards, serene and unaware.

The moon watched her carefully, seeing all. Always turning slowly so as to avoid an uneven tan, the moon splashed light around the solar system. Bright at the surface of the earth, that light was almost unnoticeably dim at the outer reaches far past Neptune. In about one-fourth of its thousands of eyes, the moon could catch a tiny glimpse of Alice: a single figure poised and statuesque in a garden, with eyes upcast - eyes that the moon stared back into. The moon saw other things as well; it saw the garden surrounding Alice, and in the midst of that garden a figure made of light; a

crumpled ball of paper suspended in midair and the dark street now crowded by figures peering into the gate. The moon could see even more, though. There were thousands of shadows strolling toward that street from all directions in a dark city. And there were thousands of ghosts, riding about on the wings of tiny night-birds gliding silently and effortlessly on breezes, high enough to see the curve of the horizon marked by a silver arc of moonlight.

Alice stepped forward hurriedly into the garden. She didn't even hear the rustling sounds of a crumpled ball of paper rolling over the grass, or the hushed murmurs of a hundred faces peering through an archway at her, or the muted footsteps of countless beings stepping toward the darkened street outside the garden. All her awareness was focused on the garden. She swept her eyes over the darkness. A glimmer of light caught her eye, there in the blackness of the trees. The garden was dark, but there was enough light to see a face, and to notice the eyes on that face widening with the realization that it had been seen. There was a quick flurry of movement, enough to send a tiny draft of air her way, and the figure was gone. She moved quickly, breaking into a little run.

The open garden vanished into a sort of murky black shadow, broken by slivers of moon and starlight. Alice knew she should turn back, but she was compelled. The moonbeams were split dozens of ways by the branches of trees that closed over her head. Always ahead of her ghosted the light-cloaked figure. Now she caught a glimpse of a lighted foot, now she could see a hand float into view on an arm in mid-swing. She opened her mouth in a soft and hesitant call, "Wait!"

The figure seemed to hesitate mid-stride while moving. Then it picked up the pace, vanishing into the darkness ahead. Alice ran on for a minute, but there was nothing. She stopped, breathing hard. She looked around her, disgusted. Still nothing. She focused on breathing until she was no longer panting.

Suddenly a fox was sitting in the pathway in front of her, its tongue lolling out to one side. "You're a bit out of your way, aren't you?" said the fox. It tilted its head to one side, regarding her with curiosity from dark eyes.

Alice stood up straight, still breathing hard. *A talking fox?* She nearly pinched herself; that seemed to be the thing everyone suggested doing when you were uncertain as to whether or not you were dreaming. A sneaky thought slipped in, though. *Pinching yourself is generally painful and pointless.* That thought made her jump, and she frowned. *What the hell,* she thought, *I don't get a chance to talk to a fox every day.* She decided very firmly against pinching herself.

"Whose garden is this?" she asked. For some reason, it irritated her to see that the fox pulled away from the sound of her voice.

"You don't have to shout, you know." The fox sniffed the air, seeming to indicate both curiosity about her and dismissal of her poor manners in the same sniff. "I can hear you perfectly." The fox turned its head sideways, nipping at a flea that was attempting to get a free supper from its rear leg.

"I wasn't shouting. I just want to know whose garden this is." She tentatively tried on a smile, to see if it would help; as her teeth bared, the fox bared its own. Its teeth were long and needle-sharp, the color ranging from milky to a sickening dull yellow. Alice decided suddenly that she was much more comfortable without teeth being a part of this meeting. Her smile disappeared. The fox's smile stayed.

A breeze whipped around them and the fox shifted uncomfortably, one paw held slightly off the leaf-covered ground. It looked ready to bolt. "The garden is mine, and you're a bit out of your way."

She kicked a few leaves absentmindedly, shuffling them about in the dirt with her toe. *Out of my way?* The leaves were distracting her. Yellow leaves, red leaves, brown leaves, dirty leaves - all were broken and dry and making crisp little hisses as they brushed against each other. They all gave way before the pointed leather toe of her boot. Small insects scuttled away as their cover vanished, and the fox licked its chops unconsciously, still watching her but unable to ignore the crawling treats.

"Stop fidgeting," said the fox. "Clearly, you're out of your way, and you've damaged the grass. Just look at it." The fox pointed a shiny black nose in the direction of the blades of grass poking up among the leaves. There were only a miserable few blades of grass here under the shade of the trees, especially compared to the open garden lawn, but it *was* grass. She peered down at the grass, noticing in the very dim light the darker stains on a few of the blades where her weight had bruised them. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" Her voice faltered as the fox drew itself up, speaking with authority.

"You meant to, alright. That's why you came charging in here, running about and crushing everything in your way. I suppose you'd crush me too, if I hadn't spoken to you." The fox actually looked a bit sad; in the dim light, she could see what looked like a glimmer of tiny tears slipping out from the corners of its eyes.

"I'm sorry. It's only grass, though!" Alice couldn't resist reaching a hand out to comfort the fox. Her fingers brushed soft fur. Only for a second, though. Sharp teeth slipped into her fingers, needle points breaking her skin and sliding underneath to crush fragile blood vessels and nerve endings - and then her fingers reflexively jerked back in surprise. Her hemorrhaging veins spilled tiny drops of blood into the wound, blood that welled up onto the surface of her fingers. She watched, mystified, as the crimson spread, conforming to every ridge of her fingerprints.

"Ow! What was that for?" she shouted, her voice harsh in the quiet

night. Somewhere, small animals crashed through brush in an attempt to scurry away from the onslaught of sound. Alice felt distinctively embarrassed at her shout, although she was not sure why she should. "Oops." Somehow, she felt more embarrassed at saying that.

"Keep your fingers to yourself," snapped the fox. It eyed her with suspicion and more than a little hostility. Finally, it growled a little and barked a curt, "Follow me."

Alice unconsciously slipped her fingers into her mouth, sucking on them. The taste of iron drifted over her tongue and her eyes narrowed. *Follow it? It bit me!* She stood as she was, facing the fox. "I'm not going anywhere."

The fox glared at her impatiently. "Fine, stand there forever for all I care. Just don't blame me when you can't find your way out again." The fox turned away, stalking off into the darkness of the forest. His bushy tail followed him into the trees.

Alice spun around, seeking an exit. There was none; the trees surrounded her on all sides. There was no indication whatsoever of the garden and she had no idea which way she'd been walking. A small panic welled up inside her chest, and her breathing quickened instinctively. *Damn you, she thought, you don't have a choice now...you have to go on. You should have minded your own business.* Some part of her was laughing at herself. Reluctantly she turned back, running in the direction that the fox had taken. Moments later, she breathed a sigh of relief as the bushy tail caught her eye, and she slowed her pace to walk beside the fox. The animal pointedly ignored her.

The trees broke into a clearing of some sort. Alice had no idea where she was, but she found herself gawking. The ground was paved with small stones, each one a different shape and all interlocking like a jigsaw puzzle. The stones glowed slightly, enough to enable her to see that she was no longer outdoors. Above her head, twisted stone arches soared out of sight, rising from wooden pedestals carved with animals. Most of the creatures she recognized; some, such as the frog-like animal with feathers growing from its head, she did not. Immediately to her left, a wooden hawk glared at her. She moved closer, stretching out her fingers to trace the lines marked into the wood. *Odd, none of these lines seem to be made with tools,* she thought. As she looked closer, she could see that the wood actually twisted into the shape of the hawk; there was no evidence of human intervention. It was as if it had been grown that way. She turned back hurriedly at the quiet growl of the fox.

"Will you stop gawking at everything and pay attention for once?" The fox shifted from one foot to another impatiently. "It is almost time for you to defend yourself." The fox seemed to grin slightly, something she knew that foxes did not do.

Defend myself? she thought incredulously, then voiced the thought aloud. Her voice seemed to echo from a thousand places at once before fleeing up into the darkness amidst those stone arches she could not see.

The fox nodded. "Defend yourself. You see, you've entered my garden uninvited, therefore you must defend yourself."

"How can this garden be yours?" asked Alice.

The fox scratched behind its ear. "It is mine because I said so."

"In that case, the garden is mine because *I* say so." Alice smiled smugly.

"I claimed it first. It's mine, and now you have to defend yourself," the fox repeated.

"Defend myself against what?" Alice asked. She didn't like the way that the fox was looking at her.

"Not against anything. Just against yourself." The fox appeared to be calming down, sitting back on its haunches and staring fixedly at the center of the stone pavement. Her eyes followed the fox's stare; she could make out a circle of dark in the stone, composed from non-glowing pieces of that massive mosaic. The whole floor resolved itself into something like the shape of a globe in the mouth of some giant creature with pointy teeth. Alice could not help shuddering, even though some portion of her found it very pretty.

An eerie ball of light sprang into existence in the center of the circle, floating high above their heads into mid-air and hovering there in a slow spin. She studied it curiously; brilliant laser-thin rays of light erupted from its surface occasionally, rendering bizarre tracings of light across the clearing. A thousand hidden mirrors in the arches reflected that light, twisting it into a shape that seemed to hover in the center of the stone circle at eye level, even as the ball of light floated high above their heads.

The fox made a satisfied sound deep in its throat. It licked a paw. Alice suspected the animal was gloating. "There, defend yourself," said the fox.

Yes, definitely gloating. What's this? She peered at the shape of light, walking around it twice before it started to change. She stopped in front of it as it began to resolve into a face. She could see eyes forming, the light itself seeming to depress and then delineate into eyeballs. A portion faded into total darkness to expose a cavernous mouth; other small parts rushed toward her a tiny distance to expose a nose, lips, ears. The lips moved, filling the air with a soft, whispery voice.

"Why are you here?" The one whispery voice seemed to fragment into thousands of whispery voices, each one perching somewhere in the circle - over the curve of a stone arch here, under the carved beak of some tiny bird there. Others seemed to circle tornado-like around her head, an ever-fading tumble of voices all endlessly whispering the same question.

She spoke without thinking. "I don't know."

"Bad choice." The fox's voice made her jump, and the nasty smile on its face could only mean bad things to come. "You should always know."

"I was just curious -" she started to protest. Her voice broke off as the fox interrupted.

"Always the same," the fox grumbled. "'I'm just curious!' 'I just wanted to figure out why!' 'I just wanted to know..'" He bared his teeth at her. "I do hate tourists."

The floating face spoke, the whispery voice again whirling around her like a tiny storm. "You must find out why, or you will die here. You have been judged." The lights suddenly winked out all at once, that whispery voice collapsing into silence. Darkness rushed in to surround her and left her temporarily blinded.

"Why can't someone just know for once?" Her recovering eyes could see that the fox was wrinkling its nose; she could almost smell the imaginary, invisible lemons in the animal's mouth, if its looks were any indication. The fox turned and stalked off into the darkness, pausing at the edge of the stone circle. "Come on, I won't wait for you forever." The animal's eyes were glowing, two dark marbles gathering and reflecting the dim light with laser-like intensity.

She started to say something rude to the fox. She stopped when it occurred to her that she was better off with some guide, even if she didn't like that guide. She stepped obediently into the darkness.

She followed the fox most of the night, walking deep into what appeared to be a very old forest. The trees towered over her, each one a home for myriad little night creatures. She could hear their cries as she walked. The cries faded to a muted hush sometimes, though. The noise of her footsteps crackling on leaves and sticks created a sound wave that snapped into the air and past the trees. She didn't think the local creatures liked that. The fox, for its part, walked quietly. The animal seemed to be very familiar with the forest and kept up a pace that caused the muscles in her legs to burn in protest. As the first dim morning light broke through the trees, the fox stopped abruptly and dropped into a curled bundle of fur, falling fast asleep. Alice almost tripped over the animal.

She stopped and glanced about her, seeing nothing but trees and no indications of any particular pathway. She definitely didn't think that she could get out of here by herself. She was entirely too far into this garden now. Exhausted and at a loss for other options, she settled for collapsing next to the fox. Sleep overtook her quickly, its dreamless oblivion sweeping over her almost as soon as her eyelids closed.

CHAPTER 3

Alice awoke to music. A chaotic ensemble of notes floated in the air next to her head. She opened her eyes and sat up, brushing away leaves that stuck to her hair and clothes. She stared dizzily at the notes orbiting her head, then swatted them away. They tumbled end-over-end among the blades of green-brown grass. Her sudden movement caused a small explosion of feathers as dozens of little songbirds scrambled into the air, rushing away to comfortable tree branches and scolding her as they fled. She looked around her, seeing no one. She was about to call for the fox, but its voice behind her almost caused her to jump out of her skin.

"Wake up!" The fox was definitely grinning at her. *He probably enjoys torturing me by waking me up*, thought Alice. She grimaced at him.

She stood up, though, and stretched her muscles. The fox was demanding, but not wrong. It was time to wake up. "Okay, I'm up." She looked at the forest all around her. *Odd*, she thought, *that I am still here. I thought this was a dream*. She pinched her arm experimentally, and bit off an "Ouch!" before it got away. Now she remembered why she had opted not to pinch herself last night. She rubbed her arm grumpily to take the sting out.

"Yes, you certainly are up." The fox stalked around her in a circle, which began to make her very nervous. "Have you figured it out yet?" The animal was looking at her intently.

"Figured out what?" She looked puzzled; her shadow scratched its head in bewilderment.

"Why you're here, of course." The fox looked at her patiently, like she was a slow child.

"I'm here because I followed some footsteps here." She decided that the simple truth should serve for the moment.

"Footsteps!?" The fox actually jumped up and down in place, pounding its little feet on the ground hard enough to leave small paw prints. "Who follows footsteps around? What does a footprint look like, anyway?" It stepped around curiously, looking underneath each paw as it lifted them. "I see footprints, but no footsteps."

She rolled her eyes and tried to kick the fox. She missed, of course. "Fine, footprints." She dragged the word out sarcastically. "I followed them because they were glowing."

The fox snorted, somewhat like a horse, and Alice couldn't help giggling. The fox frowned. "Laugh all you want, at least I'm not the one imagining things."

"I did see footprints!" She closed her mouth abruptly as the shrill sound of her raised voice collided with her eardrums. She spoke again, almost a whisper. "I just wanted to see what could make glowing

footprints."

The fox raised the fur on its back. It definitely looked angry now. "You must be a cat. Cats are always too curious for their own good."

"I am not a cat!" she shouted.

"Yes, of course you are," said the fox calmly. It looked her over appraisingly, then nodded firmly once. "Definitely a cat. Even your shadow is a cat."

Before her eyes, her shadow twisted, elongating into the graceful shape of a feline before wavering and slipping back into a human-like shape. Her mouth dropped open. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Change my shadow!"

The fox sighed. "I really do hate cats." It turned its back on her. She ran to the fox, planting herself in front of it with a stomp of her foot. "How did you do it? You have to tell me. I won't move until you tell me."

"See? Entirely too much curiosity." The fox shook its head at her. "I didn't do anything at all. You're a cat, like I said. Stop asking so many questions."

This line of conversation was decidedly unpleasant, so Alice simply tuned the fox out. She looked around her, feeling on her skin the shadows of thousands of tree leaves; tea leaves they were, on closer inspection, which was very strange. All around her was the scent of tea and the rustle of leaves like ghostly echoes of thousands of conversations. And everywhere she turned, her shadow flowed into feline coils of darkness about her feet.

Suddenly it occurred to Alice that the fox was leaving. She frowned; the animal was walking off with its nose pointed in the air, sniffing madly. She broke into a giggle at the sight. Her feet moved of their own accord to follow. As she walked behind the fox's tail, some darker instinct made her try to step on the tip of it. The animal didn't seem to notice, but every time her foot came down to stomp the tail, the fox whipped it sideways. It was a silly game, but amusing enough to make the time pass faster. Before she knew it, they'd walked straight into a clearing in the trees, all surrounded with flowers.

A woman stood in the center of the clearing, fiddling around in some pocket or other of her balloon-shaped dress. "Majesty, meet our visitor," intoned the fox. Alice stopped trying to step on the fox's tail and peered at the old woman instead.

The old woman bore a small crown on her aged head. The head itself featured a wedged face with a pleasant lemon frown. This was entertaining, of course, but difficult to understand, so Alice ignored the head and looked at the nose. The nose was long and pointy, with permanent dimples pressed into its sides under the weight of years of spectacle-wearing. It also seemed

to be twitching nervously, to Alice's eyes.

"Visitors?" The nose sheltered a pair of lips beneath it, which opened to emit a horrible screeching noise. Alice found herself cringing. "I do adore visitors! Tell them all to come in, and not to step on my roses. My grandmother planted those, you know. She loved to plant things, was always tottering about planting trees here and there... I remember once there was a tree that grew in the shape of an eggplant. An eggplant, mind you! Fried eggplant... Yum... I always loved those. Frying things is such great fun and the oil jumps about in the air so nicely, you'd never guess it was hot. Last summer it was so hot that I walked about naked... nearly scared my neighbors to death! A shame, that... all my neighbors suddenly moved away and I can't understand why. We always had such great fun at our barbecues, and they smelled wonderful. Nothing like a nice barbecue to bring out the social side..."

While the mouth was moving interminably, the hands were moving also - great gnarly hands that seemed oddly out of place on a tiny female body, but hands that spoke volumes. The hands carved out huge shapes in the air, here describing mountains, there kneading dough, here weighing imaginary eggs, now slashing ferociously through the air at vicious foes, again spelling out words on a dusty old blackboard. It was truly amazing how vocal those hands were, Alice thought, even though they said absolutely nothing at all that her ears could pick up.

While the mouth and the hands were moving, so were the feet. They were moving quite quickly, one wooden shoe in front of the other, pressing little hobnail patterns into the dirt under the great heels. Small crosses they were - one line for the future and one for the past, crossing in the now. Here and there the crosses disappeared under the pressure of a fox's paw centered on the marking, but the shoes kept up an endless rain of new crosses. The old woman would not stop moving; hands, feet, eyes darting here and there, nose sniffing the air - she was all energy and motion. Alice was almost dizzy at the sight. She tried to break in. "Where am -"

Great dark eyes peered at her, but the piercing gaze hid a gentle sparkle. It was all so paradoxical to Alice. The old woman chuckled. "Who are you? Didn't anyone ever teach you not to interrupt? I'm trying to tell you a story. I used to love stories so. My grandmother would tell me so many stories. My mother, on the other hand - " the voice broke into a chuckle again, " - my mother used to tell me not to tell stories." The voice hushed, but lost not a speck of energy. "Did you ever hear the story about the Lost Girl and the Fox? I like fox tails - you can make so many things from them..." The voice trailed off as the feet moved the old woman further away, and both Alice and the fox had to break into a little run to keep up.

The fox glared at the old woman as it trotted. "Fox tails, indeed! I bet she wouldn't like it if I talked about making things from her hamstrings."

Alice couldn't help herself; she laughed, but quickly sobered. "Excuse me, fox," she began, but the fox broke in.

"Maybe she would like to meet the entire family, lots of fox tails to be had there. Lots of teeth, too!" The fox bared its own very impressive canines - teeth that pierced flesh quite nicely. Alice remembered well. She backed away cautiously. Clearing her throat, she tried again, her voice sounding a little stretched from fear.

"Fox, where are we going?" she asked.

The fox paused for a second, one paw lifted in the air for all the world like an ordinary hunting dog. Alice's shadow lashed its tail, irritated at the poise of the fox. *So rude*, it seemed to say. The fox ignored the shadow. "We are," said the fox, "going to the ball."

Alice stopped and looked about her. She stood in the shade of a hundred towering trees. No matter where she looked, there was nothing more to see about her but ever more trees, aside from some mosses, little rocks and big ones; everything was jumbled together in a tangle most people would ordinarily call a forest. There was no music, no noise except the occasional squirrel scolding her as she passed. Not even a songbird chirped right now. There was no clearing in sight, no space to dance. There was only nature, and a little bug that rolled itself into a sphere as she stooped to look at it. Small gray scales covered it, each sliding under the others to form a solid plate of armor over its back, and tiny gray antennae probed the air cautiously, recoiling at her approaching finger. She straightened, stood up, and the little bug uncoiled, crawling hastily under a rock with a speed rivaling that of a snail. She smiled and turned to the fox. "You must be joking."

The fox sank its teeth into the side of her leg, causing her to jump and scream and lash out in a vicious kick that tumbled the fox into the side of a tree. Little fragments of bark clung to its fur as it rolled back to its feet, shaking its head to banish away the tiny stars flashing in front of its eyes. "Joking? I never joke," it growled. The fox was indignant now, The old woman stopped, peering at them both through squinty eyes growing dark with anger.

"You bit me!" Alice accused the fox. She couldn't believe it. This time, she was definitely *not* in the wrong. She found herself gearing up to give the fox another well-deserved kick. The fox gathered itself to sink teeth into her leg again. The old woman's voice broke in, making both her and the fox stop in their tracks.

"Young people, always getting themselves into fights!" The old woman sounded very grumpy; in fact, Alice thought that she would not like to upset this woman any further. She could swear that the old woman's hair was standing all on end like it was crackling with electricity. Alice's shadow was certainly bristling; she looked at her shadow's tail, puffed out like a cat o'

nine tails, and shivered slightly at the sight. So creepy, that shadow. She tried kicking the shadow, experimentally, and it jumped lazily away from her, leaving her momentarily shadowless. That was scarier though, and she stepped back into her shadow before looking up as the old woman paused her rant to snap at her.

"Pay attention to me when I'm talking! Fighting brings nothing but trouble, broken bones and broken noses!" The old woman stopped for breath, smacking her lips together loudly. "My nose used to bleed, back when I was a kid," she confided. "You'd be surprised at the stuff I found in there. I once lost a coin in my nose, you know..." Her voice trailed off into mutters, and Alice suppressed a snicker. *So much for a lecture.* The fox simply glared, taking in both Alice and the old woman at the same time. Alice was beginning to think that a glare was the only facial expression the animal possessed.

She was getting impatient though, and she raised her voice. "Where is the ball that we are going to? Who would be stupid enough to hold a ball in this forest anyway? And where the hell is this place? I want to go home!" She was working herself up; she almost caught herself sniffing. *That's not very dignified,* she told herself, and swallowed the lump in her throat. She pulled herself together, drawing herself up and pointing her nose into the air. She could see from the corner of her eye that her shadow was shaking in silent laughter. It was too late to back down, though. She tried to glare at her shadow from the corner of her eye.

The fox and the old woman spoke at the same time. "Patience is a virtue!"

Alice let out a small shout of irritation. "I am tired of being patient! I think I should very much like to go home *now*, if you don't mind. Enough of crazy old women and talking foxes! Where is the exit from this stupid garden?"

The fox grinned at her. Its red, wet tongue lolled from its mouth, bobbing up and down with its breathing. *Well, I guess it actually can do more than glare,* Alice thought through her tears. The fox stopped panting long enough to speak. It shifted its eyes to the old woman and back to Alice before it spoke, so quickly that Alice almost missed it. *Could that fox be nervous?* wondered Alice. "The exit is later," the fox said with a definite smirk.

"Later?" Alice abruptly stopped, sitting down hard on the firm-packed forest floor. Tears sparkled down her cheeks, each one glinting in the sun before dropping onto the bed of leaves in a tiny, furious splash. "I want to go home now," she wailed.

The old woman was there to comfort her immediately. "Now, now. Don't cry, darling. We'll get you out of this mess. Once I really messed up my kitchen, because I dropped the knife onto the floor and it cut the tiles.

Tiles are very interesting, you know... Some of them are even artistic - that's what they call mosaics. Mosaic, prosaic... What do you know, it rhymes! My mother always rhymed at me when we were children..." The old woman's voice droned on, her energetic arms ceaselessly patting Alice's back. Each pat tossed up little motes of dust that twirled in the sunbeams, gliding lazily on the air currents before settling gently on the ground.

Alice's mother rushed into the small living room where Alice sat playing with her dolls. Each doll was hand-carved, the chisel-bitten wood shaped so precisely that the wooden hairs on each head were thread-thin. Her favorite doll was Evelyn, a small doll dressed in simple linen clothes and wearing tiny wooden heels. The heels were black, with straps around the carved wooden ankles and the crafting so fine that the veins showed under the wooden skin. Her mother always liked to tease her, to tell her that the dolls were once real people who were bad and that if she was bad she might turn into one herself. Not that Alice believed it, but sometimes she could swear that those wooden eyes were watching her, those carved irises tracking her movements with little animal twitches. It was enough to make her shiver.

This time, there was no teasing. Her mother snatched Evelyn from her hand, tossing the doll aside. Alice watched in stunned silence as her doll crashed against the far wall, the flight through the air waving the little wooden strands of hair about the doll's face. Alice's mother ignored her protests. Alice tried to run to her doll, but her mother never noticed. She snatched Alice up in her arms, running into the tiny bathroom and pressing Alice into the bathtub. She dragged a mattress over the mouth of the tub.

"Stay here and be very, very quiet!" Her mother's voice was urgent, but muffled through the mattress.

Alice lay very still. The silence was sudden and absolute, as was the darkness. There was nothing to hear except for her own breathing. As she lay in the tub, her ears adjusted and she could hear distant creaking sounds coming from the drain. The air was warm, and she could smell the dust in the mattress. For a moment, in the total darkness, she fought a rising panic that some stinging insect might crawl up the drainpipe and creep over her skin before injecting some horrific poison into her veins. The panic was only for a moment, though. The air coming through the drain was somehow cool, and she could feel it circulating the stuffy air out. Now that she'd been lying there for a few moments, she could vaguely make out distant murmurs of voices, probably from the crowds outside.

Suddenly something shook the entire building. It was not a gentle shake, but rather a horrifying jolt that seemed to lift the whole building straight up and slam it back into the ground. Alice grunted with the impact, almost losing her breath. There were cracking sounds and muffled thumps

as if something was falling onto the mattress. The air from the drain blew hot for an instant. It no longer smelled clean - there was dust and the smell of burned things. A creeping claustrophobia began to build in her. Her ears were ringing. Outside it was silent, like death.

Only a minute passed, but it felt like hours. Alice could take the quiet no longer. She opened her mouth to scream - and a sliver of soft yellow light appeared above her. The mattress slid out of the way as her mother pulled it aside. There was worry in every line of her mother's plaster-dusted face, worry that changed to relief as she realized that her daughter was safe. As her mother's arms pulled her out of the bathtub, Alice could see blood seeping out of a hundred tiny scratches on those arms. The blood shone wet black flickering to wet red with the dance of the candles her mother had set beside her on the floor. All the lights in the house were out. Plaster had fallen from the ceiling over the mattress in huge chunks, some of them mixed with fragments of wood and nails.

Alice's mother carried her downstairs, clambering over collapsed walls and broken floors. She jumped back against walls several times as pieces of the ceiling caved in, causing streamers of dust to pour down from the ceiling. Finally she made it to the door with her arms still tightly wrapped around Alice.

The door fell away as her mother tried to push it open, provoking an angry shout from outside. A man pulled himself out from under the door, dusting himself off and cursing at them. Alice's mother stepped out over the fallen door, pushing Alice ahead of her. The blood from her mother's arms had soaked into Alice's shirt, making it sticky. Alice closed her eyes to block out the sight. It did not block out the wetness, though, nor the smell of blood.

CHAPTER 4

The arms holding her now were not bloody. They were decorated in speckled showers of hundreds of tiny age-spots. The flesh hung loose on the bones and every tendon showed sharply through the skin. Alice couldn't help remembering the fox's complaint - *"How would she like it if I talked about making things from her hamstrings?"* - and for an instant she could see in her mind the old woman's hand covered by a glove of pale, dappled human skin sewn with tendons. She shook her head and the image faded. *I hope I don't look like that when I get old.*

"Feeling any better? It never helps to throw a tantrum. If you throw things, they might fall back and hit you, you know. Some famous scientist said that a few hundred years ago." The old woman was nodding wisely at Alice as she talked. She stood up, releasing Alice from those baggy arms.

Alice shuddered and nodded cautiously. "I think so." A cool breeze drifted underneath the trees, dodging branches here and there. Something about the crispness of the air cleared her head. She could smell the sharp scent of evergreen somewhere, but all around her fluttered red-gold-brown maple leaves falling down. Some held on, still trying to suck the last bit of life from the branches before their grips weakened and their stems gave way. Alice smiled at the leaves. She could imagine them holding on tightly to the branches, afraid to drop down in a dizzy little whirlwind into the murky depths of the leafy ocean they had feared all their lives. There was much beauty in this place. She stood up slowly.

"How far is the ball from here?" she asked, eyeing the fox cautiously. She had no interest in making the animal think she was challenging it again.

"The ball isn't far at all," the old woman smiled sweetly. "Balls are such wonderful affairs, you know. Especially basketball. I used to play that." She chuckled merrily. "Don't think these old bones couldn't do it. My husband and I went to a ball once, before he died, bless his soul." Her face darkened for an instant. "Sometimes I wondered if he had any. Can't abide a rug, you know." The light returned to her face and she smiled again. "You must stop in at my house sometime. I have a gorgeous Persian on the floor. All wood it is - the floor, I mean. Built it myself, I did! Smacked my thumbs something awful, too. No wonder I have arthritis. Probably smashed my joints to powder..." Her voice trailed off as she marched briskly away into the woods. Even the fox had to scramble in order not to be left behind. Apparently age had done nothing to dampen her mobility. *If I am half so agile at her age, thought Alice, I will consider myself very lucky indeed.*

They walked on through the forest. It was endless; just one tree after another in a great, random mess. Once in a while, thorny patches of brush barred the way. The old woman didn't seem aware of them; at least, she didn't step a single footstep out of the way. She just smashed through the

tangles and expected to be followed. Alice soon found herself swearing every time she saw a brush tangle in the distance; she spent her time between patches removing the thorns from her skin. Soon, she was bleeding freely. She amused herself by blinking, and watching between each blink her blood welling up in the thorn scratches. It was stroboscopic, like dancing in a club or watching the ancient films she'd seen once where staticky black-and-white ants warred over the picture and the rag-doll actors marched about between breaks for the blackboard bearing a message - LITTLE DOES OUR DEAR HEROINE KNOW, MR. HUDSON IS A VAMPIRE! The journey dissolved into blood drops, blinks of an eye, flashes of movement. She stopped thinking; nothing to do but mindlessly place one foot in front of the other, feeling the shock of her foot impacting the ground and the shockwave vibrating through her body. It set a rhythm for a macabre, bloody dance that she lost herself in.

As the sun began to set, Alice found herself starved and sleepy. She had always been grumpy, especially under these rough conditions. Now was no different. She began looking for any opportunity to trip up the fox, out of spite. She made up little tricks. A rock kicked "accidentally" ahead with her foot to slip under the fox's toes just as it stepped down sent it tumbling head over heels; a branch bent forward as she passed and released with perfect timing whipped back into the fox's face. Alice found herself scheming for any trick she could devise to make up for her growing discomfort.

The sun was almost completely below the horizon now, and they were still walking. *I've had quite enough of this*, Alice thought, and opened her mouth to set her tormentors straight. The instant her lips parted, the old woman called out, "Good enough for now!"

Alice closed her lips abruptly. If she hadn't known that reading someone's mind was impossible, she would have sworn that the old woman was reading her thoughts and using the information to play tricks on her. She frowned. She was the one who was supposed to play the tricks. "It's about time," she said irritably. The fox simply glared at her, as usual.

The old woman pattered about, making camp. There was just enough light to gather a few shriveled, gray sticks and set a small fire. She put Alice to work collecting larger sticks. Not even the fox escaped. Alice was quite happy to see it scooting backwards into the clearing, dragging a log bigger than itself with its teeth. *Good for something after all*, Alice thought, grinding her teeth. She wished that the fox would drop a log on itself. She filled her arms with sticks and tossed them into the growing woodpile. She started to sit down, but a sharp look from the old woman made her decide that she wanted to get more sticks instead.

A half-hour later, the fire was blazing brightly. Alice looked around hopefully, but there was no sign of food. She curled up next to a tree. The old woman was mending something with a needle and thread she'd dug from

her voluminous dress, and the fox was pacing back and forth. Alice closed her eyes, yawning. *Just need a minute to rest...*

She was standing on the edge of an ocean. Cold winter air cut through her clothes as if they weren't there. It was clear air, though, easy to breathe and carrying a faint hint of salt to her nostrils as she inhaled. It was not unpleasant. The sun was low in the crystal-blue sky, a pale yellow hemisphere peering up over the edge of the strangely calm sea. The surface of the water seemed almost gelled, the waves were so sluggish; the green-blue blanket barely rippled under that wind. Alice dipped a finger into that water and it went numb almost instantly in a small explosion of pain. The water was slushy with ice. *That's why the sea is so smooth*, she realized. She stuck her finger in her mouth to warm it up. *So cold.*

Her small fighter, nothing more than a aerodynamic wedge, really, was smashed over the rocks that covered the beach. Some of those rocks were crusted with icy snow. Even the smaller pebbles were frozen, little round ice-spheres worn smooth by the sea. They appeared smooth, but they carried needle-sharp burdens of cold to torment the nerves in her skin. She looked at her feet. *I must find some shoes.* She went into self-preservation mode as she had been trained, and turned her attention inland.

A handful of houses lined the seashore; aside from scrambled bits of wreckage still smoldering here and there, there was nothing else. Not even a dead tree or a few scraggly bushes. She stepped toward the closest house, then gasped as her foot punched ankle-deep into the snow lying over the ground. The silence was eerie; not a single voice whispered anywhere, nearby or in the distance. She shivered and made her way to the closest house. It was a simple board-sided affair with a rusted tin roof. She stepped up to the door and knocked on the pale wood. The cold made the knocking sting her knuckles more than she expected; they reddened, and she shook her hands to clear the tingling away.

Echoes of the knock sounded through the house and bounced back to her on the other side of the door. She waited a moment, shivering, then knocked again. Nothing but the echoes. She tried the door handle.

The door swung open freely, and she stepped inside cautiously, peering around in the darkness. The sun behind her provided a few dismal beams of light; the effect was more depressing than it was useful. The silence was more than depressing; it was outright oppressive.

Alice's feet felt a thin layer of dust on the floor. She called out, "Hello? Anyone here?" She could see the steam of her breath. Out of curiosity, she breathed deeper, held her breath, then breathed out. The steam was almost smoke-thick, making her feel like a dragon. She couldn't help grinning at the thought, despite the creepy emptiness of this place. The image made her feel powerful.

The only reponse was the cold, creaking the walls and floors of the house. Alice stood in a hallway; a living room was off to her right and a kitchen straight ahead. In the kitchen, she found some stairs, which led up to a single bedroom. Nobody was home, she determined quickly, nor had anyone been home in weeks. She went back to the bedroom. All of the drawers were empty, but there was a closet, which she opened. It was bursting with clothes.

Finally, some good fortune, she thought. She found some fur-lined boots and slipped them onto her feet. Oddly enough, they fit perfectly. There was an old winter coat as well, and some gloves, which she pulled on gratefully. Rubbing her gloved hands together briskly, she took a deep breath as she felt some warmth creep back into her.

She went back outside, searching the other three houses. She found nothing other than more clothes and a bit of bread in a cupboard in one of them. She took the food. As she walked between the houses, every step left a footprint broken through a crust of icy snow. When she finished her search, she could see her footprints looping around each house, and leading back to the sea. As her glance touched the waves, a flash in her peripheral vision turned into a flare that grew ever brighter. She couldn't help a small cry of pain and covered her eyes with her hands.

As the glare subsided, she cautiously peeked out between her fingers. In the distance over the sea, she could see a bright bloom of flame growing into a pillar, then an expanding cloud. It took her only a second to realize that she was seeing the signature mushroom cloud of a very large explosion. As she watched, other fiery mushrooms bloomed in the distance, all so far away that not even a rumble of the explosions reached her.

Small dots appeared on the horizon of the sea, growing larger as she watched. In a few moments, she could make out boats of some sort, all heading straight for her. She strode out onto the sand, to the very edge of the water. She felt no fear, only curiosity.

As the boats grew nearer, she could see flags whipping on the wind, but these flags she did not recognize. All were black, with a red rose on them, and the boats were full of soldiers clad in black. The boats slid right up onto the beach, crunching sand under their weight and spilling out waves of black-uniformed men. The soldiers stormed past her, past the abandoned houses and further inland in a human flood. She could make out some motorized vehicles of some sort rolling onto the beach amongst the foot soldiers.

Something in the back of her mind was screaming at her. *Bad timing!* She was turning back to the houses when a blow to her back sent her stumbling face-first onto the ground. She slowly pulled herself to her knees; for a moment she could see nothing, then black boots stepped into view, halting inches from her nose.

"Get up." The tone was unmistakably that of an order. She complied. The soldier's helmet obscured his face, and two others trained weapons of some sort on her. *Great.* She looked past into the water. For an instant, a clawed tentacle broke the slushy surface. She tensed imperceptibly.

"What do you want?" she asked the soldier. He appeared to be a captain, if the way that the others watched him was any indication. They seemed to be awaiting orders and trying to watch her at the same time.

"You are a prisoner," the captain said matter-of-factly. "You will come with us."

"This is a dangerous area," Alice replied, gesturing at the troops around them. "I might get hurt if I go with you."

"The only danger," said the captain, "is right here and to you, if you refuse to comply."

Alice hesitated only a second, tensing her muscles. She leaped at the captain, wrapping arms and legs around him like a human net, and knocked him into the water. They both convulsed involuntarily for a second at the touch of the cold. Purple flashes cut through the water behind her as the other two soldiers fired their weapons, leaving hissing trails of boiling water battling the cold of the ocean only for an instant before dying. The captain groped with one hand for her throat, his other hand feeling at his belt for a weapon of some sort. Something else – not her or the captain – moved in the dark water; Alice had only time to flinch backwards, moving in the slow motion that the water enforced, before the captain's chest blossomed in a circlet of sharp claws. Tentacles emerged behind him and wrapped around his neck as other claws slammed into his legs. Blood pumped into the water, a dark purplish cloud that spread slowly in the icy water. Alice turned in the murkiness, swimming along the shore as quickly as she could, rather than to the beach. She had to get clear of the soldiers. She swam all the faster for knowing that she would not survive long in water so cold.

Behind her, the weapons rumbled, sending those purple flashes cutting into the water. One cut through the trapped captain, cutting through a tentacle into the beast behind it. The soldiers fired fast and blind, enraged by their captain's death. Alice swam faster, staying under the water as much as she could despite the cold and watching for more of the tentacled creatures. Not that she had any plans for defending herself if she encountered one. She didn't think that anything she could plan would make a difference. She thought she saw a clawed tentacle out of the corner of her eye once, but if it was a creature, it was ignoring her.

When she emerged onto the beach, the soldiers were little dots far away that sent tiny purple specks of light into the water. For a moment, she lay shivering on the beach. *You have to get up,* she told herself. *Get up or you'll die.* The soldiers were still firing away in the distance; they seemed to

be obsessed with avenging their captain's death on the horror. She dragged herself to her feet and looked around her. The houses were far off now. Some rocky outcroppings meandered like dunes between her and the landing site, providing her with some cover. A little farther down the beach, she spotted a low black building lying inland only a few steps, barely visible above the snow. She ran toward it.

The door was locked, but there was a keypad on the side which opened it quickly enough when she punched in the code: 11111. She wasn't worried at the simplicity of the code. The keys had scanned her fingertips before accepting the code, so unless someone had cut off her hands, it was still as secure as any other pass system. She stepped inside. There was barely enough light for her to see, but she could make out a shape in the dark. *The tank*. She smiled. Good to see that nothing had changed. She ran a hand along the black wedge shape before climbing up onto it. The hatch opened for her hand print, so she climbed inside. She sealed the hatch above her.

There were no windows. Her seat faced a flat wall that curved down underneath her hands into a sort of control panel. She looked at the part under her hands; a section of the flat panel bore the word "Power", and her fingers barely brushed the surface before the entire panel lit up. There were no buttons, only lighted sections of the panel surface. She ran through her checklist: navigation, power, weapons, communications - and in front of her, a video display of the world outside the tank. She touched the indicator for "forward," and was relieved when the tank actually moved. It had been a long time since she'd stashed it in the kennel.

The black wedge sliced through the door of the building and out onto the beach, plowing through the snow as if it were not there. Alice didn't hesitate; she drove straight into the ocean. The vehicle slipped into the water noiselessly to sink just below the surface before it stabilized. Through the screen, she could make out water lapping over the surface in little slushy ripples. She could still see the explosions off in the distance, but now they were refracted through the icy water like an impressionist painting. She chose a direction facing away from the blasts. Full throttle sent the wedge slicing through the ocean as easily as it had through the snow.

The falling sun found Alice moving across the ocean; the ongoing explosions were almost invisible in the distance now. Just little dots of flame, really. As the pale disc slipped below the horizon, a storm blew in from nowhere. Rain whipped the surface of the water just above her. The tank projected a beam of light into the water, but the storm and the sea made it a small yellowish glow around the tank that didn't really show much. Just a yellowish glow in black water, broken up by rain and waves. She could hardly see anything. It was just as well; if there were creatures more dangerous than those tentacled things in these seas - and she was sure that

there were - she didn't want to know.

Boredom and monotony piled on her eyelids, weighing them down. Just before she slipped into sleep, an insistent flashing in her peripheral vision caught her attention. It was only a few minutes more before she could make out the lights of a city under the waves. An odd sort of relief settled over her. *I don't know how much more I could've taken*, she thought; the corner of her mouth twitched with dark amusement at her exhaustion. She yawned, and closed her eyes for just a moment, rubbing them with her hands in defiance of everything her elders had ever told her.

"Wake up!"

The voice was accompanied by a shaking sensation. Alice grumbled something incomprehensible; there was something poking her ribs. It wasn't very comfortable.

Alice tried to open her eyes, but only one cooperated. It took her a few moments to get them both to open. She was lying on her back, staring up at the sky through a canopy of leaves. The morning sun was just coming up, making each individual leaf shine with a halo of golden sunlight. She yawned and rubbed her eyes sleepily. Footsteps crunching dry grass and a pointed shoe probing her side reminded her that she was not alone. She groaned. To head off another kick, she jumped to her feet. She swayed slightly as her blood worked to filter out the last of the melatonin. Her head was still stuffy. A finger poked her back.

"Damn it, I'm awake already!" she said, stomping a foot on the ground irritably. She spun around, fists swinging blindly. The old woman recoiled, a shocked look on her face as she stared at Alice.

"Now, there, dearie. Don't be grumpy. It's far too beautiful a day and you're too beautiful a girl to go looking like a rabid squirrel. I remember days like this when I was your age, you know. I had such beautiful skin back then, not these gnarly old hands." The old woman's hands fluttered in the air like pigeons as she babbled away. She seemed to forget that she was angry.

Alice sighed. "What's your name, old woman?"

"Old? OLD? Who're you calling old? You're the oldest one here." The old lady looked indignant.

Alice just felt baffled. *I'm the oldest one?* She decided to play along. "Fine, you're not old. What's your name?"

The old woman smiled a beatific smile. "My name is Agnes." For a second, Alice could have sworn the old woman wore a halo; the sun beaming around those glowing leaves was beaming around the old woman's hair as well. This morning, everything wore a halo.

Something seemed missing to Alice. She looked around, seeing nothing but the clearing and the blackened earth where the fire had been.

Food, that's what I'm missing. Her stomach rumbled, the sound seeming to echo from nearby trees. That had to be an illusion, though. Nobody's stomach could grumble that loudly.

"Do we have any food?" Alice tried to look pleasant and humble, but it was hard to do. Particularly the part about looking pleasant, since she could still feel where sticks and rocks had nestled in the skin of her back all night. No matter what way she moved, something hurt. Her stomach was more important than her discomfort right now, though.

"Food?" The old woman looked around her, then fumbled through that huge dress. "I'm sure I had something here somewhere... Let me see now." From a pocket hidden in a fold of her dress, she produced a piece of bread. "Eat this. Bread is good for you, you know. When you need food, nothing like it. And nothing like kneading it to make you need it. Hard work, that. I remember once letting Bernard knead bread for me. He was crying on the floor inside of an hour, and his arms were sore for a week." She turned and looked directly at Alice. "Bernard was my husband. Like I said, sometimes I wondered if he had any." She wore that dark look again, but she passed Alice the bread anyway. "Hurry up, child. We should be on our way."

First I'm the oldest one here and now... "Oh, so I'm a *child* now, am I?" It was hard to sound sarcastic when your mouth was full of food. It came out something like, "Mm, sho mmmashyulldmowamee?" Predictably, this produced nothing but a snorting laugh from the old woman.

"You sound like you have a cold. I had a cold once, you know. Took me a week to get over it. A week is just long enough for a vacation. Had some wonderful times at the beach... You should've been there. Nothing like warm ocean water to take the ache out of your joints. Sunshine, too! Oh, you should never look directly at the sun..." The old woman's voice shrank to a distant murmur as she walked off into the forest.

CHAPTER 5

Alice followed Agnes, trying to walk quickly and breathe at the same time as stuffing chunks of bread into her mouth. It didn't work very well; chew, breathe, or walk, it was hard to do all of them at the same time. Abruptly she froze, one foot momentarily hanging in midair. *The fox is missing.* She felt both relief and alarm - relief because the sense of missing had been resolved, but an odd disquiet that the fox was away. She sighed, her eyes dropping to the ground in front of her. The morning sun behind her cast her shadow out before her; the feline shape of shade lashed a tail indecisively as she watched. *Fascinating.*

They walked for what felt like an hour, seeing nothing of interest. The forest seemed to be changing. The trees were further apart, but taller and bigger here. It seemed to be an older part of the forest. There was the sound of a stream running among the trees, and it wasn't long before they broke out onto its banks. Agnes stopped. "Time for a drink," she said. She bent over, and Alice couldn't help laughing at the sight. She'd seen wooden garden decorations that resembled this sight; the typical old woman bending over so that only her bottom was visible, usually petticoat-enshrouded. Agnes' bottom was huge indeed. It blocked most of Alice's view of the stream.

Alice shook her head, smiling as she walked around the old woman. She knelt at the edge of the stream, tossing water over her face and drinking some. She wiped her dripping face on her sleeve. A flash of motion in the water caught her attention and she found herself tensing. *It's just a minnow,* she thought. She wasn't sure why she felt so uneasy.

She studied her reflection. Her hair was messy now; too much wind and too much sleeping outdoors for it to be straight any longer. She was going to pay when it came time to brush those tangles out. The thought made her wince, and the wincing reflection in the water made her laugh without much humor. She was about to stand when another face joined hers, peering in the mirror of the stream's surface. This face was vulpine, the eyes studying her.

"So, you're back," said Alice. She stood, turning to the fox.

"Of course. I can't think of better entertainment than watching you stumbling around here making a fool of yourself." The animal was smirking, staring up at her with its tongue hanging out and a mischievous look in its eyes. "Come, it's time to go." The fox scratched an ear with its hind leg, then shook its head as it stood up.

Agnes watched Alice and the fox as they approached her. "Oh, a fox! How cute," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen a real live fox before! Mostly the ones in zoos and the ones in picture books. I like picture books, you know. Especially if they involve elephants. I need to lose weight," she

babbled.

The fox rolled its eyes, which Alice found interesting. "She can have a short memory at times," it said. "Your majesty, stop playing around. We have a ball to attend."

Agnes picked the fox up, cradling it in her arms like a baby. "So cute, with a big bushy tail. I used to have a cat that looked something like you. Curious animal, that cat. Always poking around in my herb garden. I was never sure if there were mice in my garden, or if it was just the turnips. I think I'll call you Ray." The torrent of words continued. Ray fixed Alice with a warning glare. "Pick me up," the fox seemed to say, "and feel my teeth." The seriousness of the warning was tempered by the fact that the glare was an upside-down glare, and the fox's paws were pointing into the air. Overall, Ray looked harmless, like an infant in Agnes' arms. *It is hard*, thought Alice, *to take seriously anything that looks like that.*

The fox seemed to read her mind. "One single word about this, and you will regret it," it growled in measured tones. Alice managed to look quite innocent. Agnes didn't seem to have noticed; she was babbling to herself happily as she squeezed the fox.

They walked through the stream, feet splashing in the water. The bottom of the stream was oddly adhesive; Alice didn't slip once, in spite of the smooth, algae-covered appearance of the rocks beneath the water. Agnes was still carrying Ray, and Alice trailed behind. No sense getting in the old lady's field of view; it was only going to get the chattering started again if she saw Alice.

The fox was growling softly and its ears were back. When Agnes finally managed to be distracted by some moss growing on a fallen tree, he did not wait to be put down. He leaped from her arms, sailing high through the air in his hurry to get away. His leap landed in a tumble that flowed into a rolling ball; the ball smashed directly into the rough-ridged bark of a tree trunk. Alice barely suppressed a snicker, managing to turn it into a cough instead. Agnes looked at her sharply.

"Are you alright? I have some herbs for coughs, you know. Won't do to have you being sick on us, will it?" Agnes was already rummaging through her dress again.

Alice's eyes grew wide. "I'm fine, really!" she said as quickly as she could. The last thing she wanted was to be stuffed full of gods-only-knew what sorts of plants by someone she barely knew. That seemed to be even more risky than taking candy from strangers. *Come to think of it*, she suddenly realized, *I have no idea what that bread was made of.* The thought was not very comforting.

Agnes seemed to have accepted Alice's self-evaluation, though. "If you're sure, dear. Once I had a cough, you know. Coughed so loud that I knocked pots and pans off the shelves over my stove. Made a godawful

racket. I was good at tennis when I was a child, you know. Oh yes, I actually was a child, believe it or not. My mother was very stern. She liked to cook eggplant!"

Alice tuned her out. The stream meandered along under the thinning trees, and the water grew warmer as they walked further down its bed. A warm breeze smelling of pine needles floated around her head. The scent was pleasant, but after a while the sweetness made her dizzy. Ray was stalking along ahead with his bushy tail trailing through the water. Every few steps, the fox stopped and twitched his tail irritably. Finally, he bounded ahead of Agnes, turned around, and planted himself square in her way. "I think, your majesty, that we should walk on the ground and not in the water."

Nobody expected Agnes to say anything, but the old woman never even stopped walking. Her hobnailed boot left a cross-shaped imprint in the fur on Ray's chest when she kicked him clear out of her way, much like a football. She hadn't even seen him. He flipped over backwards, splashing into the water in the most ungraceful way possible. For a second, Alice was too shocked to react. Only for a second, though. A smirk crossed her face.

"Impatient, Ray?" Alice looked as innocent as possible.

Agnes blinked twice. "Oh my. I didn't mean to kick you, Ray. I thought you were a sunflower. They always plant themselves in front of you and stare at you with that evil expression. You think they're so innocent, ha! Just let one catch you when you turn your back." She shook her head ominously. "Tracherous things."

"Sunflower!? I am a FOX!" Ray didn't hesitate; he launched himself at the old woman's throat with a roar. Agnes was surprisingly limber for an old woman. She barely moved, pivoting smoothly out of his way. Ray's effort awarded him another tumble into the stream, and a bigger smirk from Alice.

Alice's smirk faded away, though. Agnes looked at her face and started to say something - but suddenly her face froze and for once the old woman was speechless. Agnes turned around slowly, staring with Alice. Ray was a bit slower. He picked himself up and gathered for another leap at Agnes. He launched himself into the air - and seemed to hang in mid-air before falling, his grand assault ending in a lame little hop as he joined the other two in staring.

The three of them stood frozen in the stream, mouths hanging open. The fox had one paw raised. Agnes was reaching for something in that tent she called a dress, but those old hands were quite still. Sunlight beamed through the roof of trees, leaving small, dancing spots of light on the ground to play with the shivering shadows of tree leaves. Only the shadows moved; the Alice-shadow lashed its tail, the leaf shadows silently rustled. Each brush of that tail knocked the leaf-shadows aside, making them flutter lazily in their two-dimensional reality before they settled down.

All three companions and their shadows stood before a pool in the stream. It was a fairly small pool, just a place where the water gurgled into a hollow spot in the stream-bed and made a small, mirror-smooth basin. Now that she looked closer, Alice could see that the pool was deep, so deep that even in the sunlight it looked black. Only a sharp eye would notice the waterlogged twigs and leaves sliding under the surface, sucked down by a deep current that ran like a tube through the pool to the other side. All three had sharp eyes, but the twigs and leaves were not what caught their attention.

The water in the very center of the pool was piling up on itself - deep, silty water, gurgling up from the bottom of the pool. There was no other way to describe what the water was doing; it was simply rippling up into a column, layer upon layer like a thick chocolate sauce that grew faster than it could spread out under gravity's pull. Smaller columns - tendrils, even - of the water ran out sideways, forming smaller hanging branches of water that split off yet again. The water at the base no longer rippled; instead, veins of dark mud thickened in it, and a crust of dried dirt grew up from the the water as they watched. Those hanging branches flowed into massive arms; a giant head appeared on the top of that massive column. The column's base split into huge legs that stood on the surface of the water. The creature stretched even before the skin of dirt covered its watery body completely, and opened eyes made of a startling clear, blue sheet of water that flowed like waterfalls over twin clay spheres. The monster breathed. Alice could feel the air around her sucked into its colossal lungs. A small whine filled her ears - it was the air, shrieking in protest as it was compressed into the creature's flattened nose. For some reason, Alice jumped when the thing, whatever it was, blinked; a thin film of mud slid over the waterfalls, then rinsed clear. To Alice, it looked more like the creature was throwing away an eyelid, but it was obviously a blink. She had not expected a huge creature made of mud and water to blink, although she couldn't think of any reason why it shouldn't. The fur on her shadow's back stood up, the outline floating spiky over the surface of the water. A faint memory of clawed tentacles scratched the back of her mind, echoing those spikes, but she quickly dismissed it.

A minnow leaped through her shadow and fell back toward the water on its side. Her shadow flashed out a clawed, two-dimensional paw. The minnow was in five pieces before it touched the water, cut so cleanly that Alice only noticed the wounds after the pool swallowed the minnow and the water broke the sticky seal of leaking fluids that held the cylindrical sections of fish and bone together. She shuddered. *I think the shadow deserves more respect*, she decided.

The minnow's movement attracted the mud-creature's attention. It turned toward Alice, stepping forward much more rapidly than she thought

anything so large should move. She let out a small shriek before she could stop herself. The creature was as tall as she was, but several times thicker. The mud on the surface of its body had dried to form great parched sections of dirt that reminded her of an armadillo's scales. She took a step backward, flashing a glance at Agnes in a wordless request for help. The creature's liquid eyes focused on her.

Alice shuddered. *Great, it sees me. That's just what I needed.* Not really knowing what else to do, she stood her ground. *Perhaps not the smartest thing to do* - but she refused to be cowed by a dirty puddle creature.

Not three steps away, the creature stopped in front of her. With every breath that it took, it made odd little cracking sounds and the clay scales on its chest rippled. It looked her up and down, and then turned its gaze to Agnes and Ray in turn. The giant face crinkled into a frown. "You're contaminating my pool," it said in a voice that took them all in. It was a perfectly smooth voice, like water flowing over flood-worn stone.

Alice's eyes widened. "You...you can talk." She blushed slightly. *That was a particularly dumb thing to say. Still, what else does one say to a mud giant?* She mouthed along with the creature's reply - it was too predictable.

"You don't say. I wonder how you ever discovered that."

At least, thought Alice, it understands sarcasm. The creature tilted its head, and little chunks of dirt plopped into the water as they broke from its skin, making tiny little splashes that hung in the air a moment before falling back and sending up even tinier splashes that went unnoticed.

"You're mocking me, aren't you," said the creature. Its face took on an angry cast somehow, although it was hard to say what exactly changed. Maybe a bit of mud here, or a drop of water there.

Alice folded her hands together and stood at a polite sort of attention. With a creature that size, she would not take a chance that she might offend it. "I'm sorry, but you have to admit that your response was predictable." She thought even her mother would have been proud of her. *Very diplomatic.* That made her smile wryly.

The corners of the mud thing's mouth crooked up in a smile. It seemed less tense. "Agreed," it rumbled. "What are you?"

"Don't you mean who am I?" asked Alice.

"No, *what* are you? I've never seen anything as skinny and hairless as you and the other one. A fox I've seen before, though. Without hair, though, you must get cold often."

Alice laughed. "As a matter of fact, I do. It's easily solved though. I just have to bundle up." She glanced up at the sky. "It isn't cold now, anyway." She stopped, then remembered the question. "Oh, I'm um...I'm a human, of course. What about you? It's only fair that you'd tell me what

you are, you know."

"*Human?*" The way the creature pronounced the word, it seemed to be tasting it; it certainly said the word in a bizarre accent, like it was the first time the creature had ever said it. "It sounds like a food of sorts - no, don't jump like that, I didn't mean that I think you actually are food. It just has a mushy sound, like a nice clump of floating algae." The creature dipped a hand into the water, scooping up a floating green mass into its mouth and chomping on it for emphasis. The water left trails of wet black mud down its parched dirt-gray lips, but the water quickly evaporated to leave the skin a nice, dusty color again. Alice shook her head in amusement. This was certainly an odd creature. The creature lifted another mouthful of algae, then spoke again.

"My race has always called itself *jelbeen*, but that wouldn't really mean much to you. You can call me whatever you like."

Alice thought about that for a second. "Don't you have a name?" she asked.

The creature chuckled, sending out vibrations that rocked the water in the pool so that it splashed up onto the banks. A small band of forest mice were forced to scurry away in a panic at the possibility of being drowned. The chief mouse didn't think that there was enough water to drown anyone, but he decided that it was better to be safe than sorry. He'd read once that some creatures deliberately went into the water, but he could think of no good reason for any self-respecting mouse to be there, and he didn't like the looks of the giants in the water. *The gods must be particularly upset today*, he thought, as he scrambled along with the others back into the hidden nest under the roots of the old oak. He paused to listen behind him. *At least the giants aren't chasing me*. He walked on. Behind him, a small trail of water droplets marked his path. No one heard the little rustle in the bushes, focused on the *jelbeen* as they all were.

"A name?" said the creature with a laugh. "You do realize that a name is only useful when there are others to call you by that name, don't you?"

"So you're the only one - the only one like you?" Alice asked.

"You do ask a lot of questions, don't you," Agnes put in. She smiled diplomatically at both of them. "Leave the *jelbeen* alone. We have a ball to go to. It will be delightful, lots of things to snack on. My favorite snack is apple pudding, you know. Just have to watch out for those apples when you're out walking. Nothing like an apple in the noggin to spoil a nice autumn afternoon." She was tugging at Alice's arm insistently.

The *jelbeen* spoke up. "Wait! A ball?"

Alice nodded. "Apparently, we're going to a ball."

"It's not any of his business," Agnes hissed.

"Why can't he know about the ball?" Alice was indignant. It didn't seem fair that anyone should be excluded; as bizarre as this place was, she

couldn't see any reason why the jelbeen - huge, muddy, and dripping wet as it was - would stand out. "Besides," she added, "you already mentioned it out loud."

"You do realize," said the jelbeen, "that I can hear you." It smiled patiently.

Agnes sighed. "Fine." She turned to the jelbeen, her voice mockingly formal. "Do you want to come to the ball?" she asked with a stiff little bow.

Alice could almost see the gears spinning in the jelbeen's watery brain. This was no simple creature, Alice decided. She made a bet with herself that the creature would agree just to spite the old woman, if for no other reason. Her shadow stretched out lazily, one paw crossed over the other. She could almost hear it purring. She forced herself to look away. That shadow wasn't very comforting.

The jelbeen's voice came out in a parody of chivalrous oratory. "I would be delighted to accept your invitation, my lady." *I win*, thought Alice.

Agnes's mouth opened, and her eyebrows tightened, but all that came out was a single "Humph!"

CHAPTER 6

They made an odd group, traveling through the forest - an old woman and a young one, a pond-monster and a fox. Each formed a point of a diamond with the old woman leading and the fox trailing behind; the whole ensemble moved slowly underneath the shortening trees. The forest seemed to be shrinking, or maybe they were growing. Alice couldn't be sure which it was. Several times, she got the sense that she was being watched, but when she turned around she saw nothing.

Once they passed an old oak with great, gnarly roots that stuck out above the ground. There was a pile of dirt that had been dug out from beneath one; Alice tripped over it and almost fell. While she was leaning over rubbing her leg, she spotted the corpses of several mice and torn pieces of others. For some reason, the fox would not look at the tiny corpses. Everyone else looked and flinched, except for Agnes. The old woman was philosophical.

"Things are born, things die. My husband, he died. The old fool would never listen to me. You'd think he'd have realized by the end that I was smarter than he was, and maybe that he'd have grown - ah, never mind. We must be off; the ball will not wait forever." She stopped and nodded her head wisely at her three followers.

Agnes marched away, heading along the stream. A few times, she headed into the forest - but only a few times. The jelbeen insisted on being watered or getting his handful of algae so many times that even Alice's shadow was getting annoyed. The jelbeen's demand for water was certainly too frequent for them to stray far from the stream. Eying the creature's size once more, Alice decided that she could not really begrudge it the extra food.

During one of the all-too-frequent stops, as they waited for the creature to feed itself and dip its skin in water, Alice studied her shadow. Since she was standing still, the shadow had decided to sit down. It was quietly cleaning its paws in feigned disregard for anything happening around it. Alice decided that she could no longer really think of it as "a shadow;" it had too much personality. It was Shadow now, in her head. She couldn't think of a better name. She shook her head; never had she seen anything so odd as Shadow. Something made her look up at the jelbeen. *Well, there is that*, she thought. *They're both strange.*

The jelbeen saw her watching, and smiled and waved at her. She twisted her face into what she hoped would pass for a smile, waving back. "Ugh," she muttered after she looked away. She'd had enough of strange creatures for a day.

Agnes didn't look much happier. The old woman's back was to the jelbeen, but even when she was facing the creature, she made no secret of

her dislike. Her face wrinkled up like it had been soaked in water for a day. As they started forward again, Alice touched the old woman's arm.

"Why do you hate him so much?"

Agnes snorted. "Stupid creature. And he thinks that just because he's old, he knows everything." She chuckled. "Like me, I suppose. I like me, though. Even old Bernard was good for something. Sometimes. These new-fangled old creatures, though - they're something else. Something else entirely, like marmalade." She made smacking noises with her lips.

The fox was trotting on ahead, ignoring them, and the jelbeen was squishing along behind. Shadow was simply being a shadow for once, albeit a strangely feline one. Alice found herself shuddering, and Agnes noticed.

"Cold? You should be careful, you know. The winters here are awful."

"It's the summer, and it's not cold" Alice said, but the old woman paid her no mind.

"Summertime was so much fun when I was a child. I actually *was* a child once, although you'd never know it now. Even played with dolls. Priscilla, Eveleyn, Diana, even a rag doll named Anne. I always wanted a cat though. DemonSpawn, I wanted to call him." A mischievous look crossed her face. "That way, I could do naughty things and get away with it. Nobody would blame a sweet little girl named Agnes when DemonSpawn is running around." She cackled.

Alice's eyes widened slightly. "Evelyn?"

"My favorite doll. Made of wood, she was. Like my house. It's made of wood too, and cloth. Would you like some tea?" Agnes smiled sweetly.

Alice frowned. *Cloth? Who has a house made of cloth?* She wished the old woman would stop smiling. At the mention of tea, though, her stomach did grumble - but she simply stared at Agnes as if to say, "Are you stupid?" Agnes didn't even look at her though, and marched off ahead so quickly that Alice had to break into a trot. Agnes was already mumbling something else by the time she caught up, but it was far too faint and rapid for Alice to make any sense of it.

They walked for ages. The trees were getting smaller now, though they were still tall enough to block any view of what lay beyond - but they were undeniably shorter. The walk slipped from long into monotonous; it was all Alice could do to keep one foot going in front of the other. The burning afternoon sun was penetrating the thinning forest easily now, glaring into her eyes at almost every other step and making her squint. The light and rhythm penetrated her brain - step...step...step...glare...

Alice stood in the center of an outdoor marketplace. There were wooden stalls all around, some piled high with fruits, some with vegetables, others with assorted types of pots and pans or clothing. It was a bazaar, really. Her mother had left her there a few minutes before, telling her not to

move until she came back. Alice was standing with her back to one of the stalls. The market was quiet; no, more than quiet. It was practically abandoned, except for overturned carts. Behind those carts Alice could see men with rifles, men clothed in dark uniforms. They crouched behind those carts, their weapons pointing across the street - not quite directly at her, but almost. It made her nervous.

She turned around dreamily. There was a tall apartment building behind her, its walls a uniform gray. Almost no window was left intact. The few with any glass left at all featured small holes, their edges white with smashed, powdered glass and radiating spiderweb cracks into the surrounding panes. Here and there, the jagged edges of bricks stuck out, forming the outline of a hole painted into the wall with dark burns and streaks from an explosion. As she watched, a rocket streaked high over her head from somewhere behind her. It slammed into a seventh-floor wall, blossoming into a huge orange flower that quickly subsided to leave soot-stains on the edges of another of those massive holes. The shockwave knocked her off her feet.

Something streaked past her head with a whip's crack, then again. She sat sprawled on the ground, frozen. From a doorway directly across the street people emerged, a ragtag bunch of men wearing jeans and t-shirts, nothing spectacular. One or two wore a uniform of some sort, but full of holes, like they had seen too much wear. All of the men bore their own weapons, and directed a barrage of gunfire toward the crouching soldiers behind her. She watched, spellbound, as a bullet tore through the nearest soldier's head, throwing blood and brains alike over the cobblestones behind him as his body toppled over. He looked like he was resting, lying there on the ground - apart from the pool of blood forming under his body where his head should have been. A small whine started in the back of her throat. She wanted her mother. She wanted her mother now.

In front of her, the bullets continued, tearing this man or that. She tried not to look but she couldn't stop. Suddenly she jumped as a hand covered her eyes and strong arms pulled her backwards under the stall to safety. The hands were not her mother's; they were thinner, older hands. An old woman's voice whispered into her ear.

"Don't move...it's okay - you'll be okay."

An old lady's perfume wafted into her nose, and she opened her eyes. There was enough light coming in through gaps in the old lady's fingers for her to actually make them out, the skin seeming almost to hang from the bones and the palm age-dappled. The arms were very strong. They held her close. Too close; she started to panic, to struggle.

"Don't!" The old lady's voice was low, urgent, warning her not to move. Alice broke free of the hand covering her eyes, kicked more. The stall had overturned somehow; a pile of sacks provided them some

concealment. The sacks were full of oranges, she could see; at some point, bullets had shattered a few of them, leaving citrus pulp rotting in the sun. The smell was sickly sweet.

Across the street, a young man started to run between the two groups, heading in her direction. As he got closer, she could see that he was running for the apartment building. She closed her eyes, knowing that there was no way he would get to the door or even a hole in the wall. Gunfire and a wet, meaty sound invaded her ears. As much as she didn't want to, her eyes opened. Only for an instant; there were pieces of flesh near her and she did not want to think of what they might be. She stopped struggling, finding herself grateful for the old woman's hand over her eyes.

A long time later, the firing and the shouting stopped. Even the voices that had been crying out in pain were silenced. Before the old woman's hands cleared her eyes, she could hear in the distance her mother's voice.

"Alice! Alice!" The calling came from behind her, closer and closer. "Alice! Let go of her!" Her mother grabbed her roughly from the old woman. "You leave my daughter alone," she said fiercely.

The old woman simply bunched her shoulders deeper into her moth-eaten old cape, wrapping a scarf around her neck. She flashed a sad smile at Alice, then trudged away one short little step after another, propping herself up with a thin cane she carried.

Alice's mother wrapped her arms tightly around her, almost too tight; they both stood staring after the old woman.

Her foot catching under the root of an old tree brought Alice out of her reverie. She tottered for a moment, but she regained her balance quickly. The sun was a little lower in the sky now. *She never even thanked that old woman.* Alice kicked the root savagely, ignoring the pain in her foot and the snicker from the fox. *She just hid the whole time.*

Agnes noticed the cloud hovering over her head. "Are you okay, dear? You look a little out of sorts. I hate being out of sorts - it always makes me want to eat some plums. They're nice and purple."

Alice nodded. "I'm fine. Just tired and hungry."

"Only a little farther," Agnes said. She pulled Alice's arm. "This way. Maybe there will be some plums!" Alice would have sworn that the old lady was trying to skip.

The trees were dwarfs now. Alice could almost see over some of them now, and she wasn't very tall. The odd tall tree here and there still blocked her view, though, and the forest was large enough that the scattered tall trees added up. It would be longer still until they could really see what lay beyond those trees, if anything. Up ahead, there was a tight cluster of trees, though, like a green hill rising out of a plain - it was the most interesting thing in sight and walking toward it gave Alice something to think

about besides the interminable marching.

Another hour's walk brought them up to that cluster. These trees were older, massive trunks planted firmly in the ground and surrounded by huge tangles of roots. Some of the roots had grown up to form a sort of natural archway into the center of the trees, and Alice found herself walking underneath with the others.

The circle of trees broke into a clearing. For some reason, Alice felt a general sense of goodwill here. A clean, sharp smell filled the air. In the center was a small hill crowned with wildflowers. Alice couldn't help smiling. It was nice to get some color in the forest. The late afternoon sunlight cast a soft glow around the flowers. The fox bounded on ahead, dancing among the pink and red buttons that dotted the hill.

Alice walked up onto the hill, spinning around slowly. The flowers filled the air with a sweet smell, almost honey-scented, but when she smelled them, a few gave off the scent of lemons. Small clouds of insects rolled through the air like schools of fish, airborne amoebas coalescing and dissipating. There were bees of some sort, but orange and blue instead of yellow and black. Fantastic butterflies flitted around; one landed on her hand as she watched. She touched a wing with her fingertip.

The small creature sat on her hand peacefully, its wings rising and falling almost like breathing. She moved her hand closer to her face to see the butterfly better. The insect was a pale purple color, with orange-edged wings. A black spiral marked the center of the wing, casting a spiral shadow on her hand as the sunshine passed through it.

The creature rubbed its small feet together, then uncurled its long tongue, tasting her skin. Only, it wasn't a tongue, it was a needle-sharp proboscis that plunged through her skin and into a vein so smoothly that she didn't feel it. A small drop of blood welled up around the wound. As she watched, the spiral on the creature's wings began to turn. She tried to move, to pull her hand away, but found herself paralyzed, only able to watch.

Something seemed to be moving through the little tube, little bubbles sliding downward under her skin and into the vein. The spiral was pulsating, unraveling the butterfly as she watched. The wings went first, then the body; the head and antennae imploded liquidly into the tube. The tube itself imploded as well, the whole creature sliding into her veins like a drug. The wound itself pulled in, and for a second she was afraid that her whole body might follow suit, that it might shrink into itself and disappear. The wound was only sealing itself, though.

The paralysis vanished with a shocking suddenness. Alice found herself lurching drunkenly, stumbling as she tried to regain her balance. She covered her eyes with her hands. There seemed to be something different about her eyes; she could feel the sense of a muscle or a nerve that wasn't

there before. Whatever it was, it flexed somehow, and her vision shifted.

This time she did lose her feet, falling backwards into a sitting position with her legs sprawled out and her arms behind her barely holding her up. Colors swam before her eyes, turning the world around her into a bizarre, crawling wash that reminded her of psychedelic-inspired films she'd seen. She shivered, burned up - she went through the whole course of a fever in the span of a single minute. Slowly, ever so slowly, her vision cleared as the storm of fever faded, and she could see again.

She could see, but things were somehow different. She held her head down, looking at the grass between her fingers. She could see the individual cells dividing, pulsing as she watched. She could see her hand; the wound was sealed now. Somehow, she could also see through her hand, to the thread of foreign chemicals circulating deeper into her body with every beat of her heart. She could see the blood rushing around in her veins, even the muscles sliding over her bones as she flexed her fingers. She stood up slowly, so as not to fall down. Even the trees looked different; she could see the sap moving ever so slowly inside them.

A sour little chuckle escaped her. *This would be brilliantly useful*, she thought, *if I were a maple tree farmer*. As it was, she didn't see how it was very useful at all. A sense of panic started to fill her mind. *Will my eyes stay this way?* Just at that instant, her vision snapped back to normal; the transition slapped her brain in an almost-tangible way that staggered her briefly. *Well, I guess I don't have to worry about it staying that way after all*, she thought with a grimace.

Agnes noticed her lurch and grabbed her arm, supporting her. The jelbeen, oddly enough, was holding her other arm. She could feel the strange half-dry, half-muddy sensation of its hands on her bare arm. She shuddered, then straightened, shaking off their hands. "I'm alright," she said.

Agnes frowned faintly. "Are you sure? You looked dizzy. I got dizzy once. Broke into the wine cellar in my parents' basement and drank two bottles just to see what would happen. Never tried that again." She looked slightly nauseated at the thought, then continued to beam concern at Alice.

Alice nodded. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath, which helped to calm her nerves. "We should keep going."

Agnes peered at her, squinting myopically. She reminded Alice very strongly of a mole. After a minute, Agnes nodded. She strode away like an empress expecting the court to follow suit. Alice sighed and duly followed along, trailing the jelbeen. *I am tired of walking*, she thought.

CHAPTER 7

The trees were very short now, some barely more than bushes. Most were low enough that she could get a glimpse over them whenever a little fold in the ground rose up into a bit of a hill. Somewhere in the distance, she caught a glimpse of a structure - but it was too far to make out clearly.

She returned her attention to her immediate surroundings. The little group was splashing along the stream, the light dim enough now that tiny phosphorescent creatures flashed small lights whenever their watery surroundings were disturbed. It made the water have a sparkling blue quality at times, like fiber-optic threads winking in the dark. Sometimes the effect was bright enough to light the stream bottom with a neon-blue glow; it reminded Alice of the little restaurant she'd been sitting in before she came to the garden, of city streets lit by the pulsating glow of flashing neon lights. Somehow, the thought made her homesick, which surprised her. She hadn't really liked being home much, which is why she'd gone to that little restaurant by herself in the first place. It was sometimes nice to be surrounded by people, even if they weren't people she knew. Something rising over the trees caught her attention.

The distant structure was closer now. The sky was starting to turn a deep navy blue in that direction; behind her, the sun still held a small portion of the sky captive, bathing it light blue. Distant storm clouds rumbled, making her uneasy. She was always uneasy around rumbling noises, now. For a moment, an image of an exploding rocket flashed into her mind, but she pushed it away relentlessly. *Not something I want to think about.*

The stream began to widen, turning into a small river. Not a deep one, though. The water gave off a cheery gurgle as it passed over rocks worn smooth over centuries. There was the occasional pool, which seemed to entertain the jelbeen, but no others of his kind appeared out of them. Ray just trotted alongside the banks of the stream, doing insane little hops every few moments to avoid getting wet. Alice couldn't help laughing at him every time he did. Ray jumped like a rabbit, shaking the wet part of his body neurotically until the water drops had migrated to the dry part of his fur. That only served to make him sulk more.

Once a fish sampled part of the jelbeen's leg, leaving him with a wound in his clay skin that leaked water. For some reason, Ray found that funny and let out an oddly human cackle. The wound quickly sealed itself with clay that hardened even as Alice watched, and at the same time the jelbeen shot a firehose jet of water at Ray, slamming him into a tree. It was Alice's turn to cackle, in chorus with the jelbeen. The fox was too stunned to notice.

Agnes noticed, though. She rushed at them, waving her arms. "Now, now! Break it up, everybody! Fights are such ugly things. I was in a fight

once. Pulled her hair good, I did." Agnes seemed to forget what she was waving her arms for, and let them drop at her sides. She looked around, confused - then shook herself. "We should keep going. I don't want to be moving after it gets dark."

The structure was more visible now; a low, rounded dome rose over the trees. The trees grew taller again closer to the dome, making a screen that prevented Alice from seeing much of it in detail. There was something ominous about the place. Everyone was more on edge, moving softly closer to the trees rather than marching noisily out in the open. As they reached the screen of taller trees, the forest was abruptly thick with brush and vines, an almost impenetrable tangle. Agnes winced every time Alice or one of the others made a crashing noise while breaking through the brush.

Just as Alice was beginning to think that it would be better to go around the dome and avoid it altogether, she smashed through the last of the brush with a crash. Her momentum propelled her stumbling straight out into a clearing. She caught herself and stood up, brushing thorns and seeds from her clothes. The others were right with her, the jelbeen as noisy as she was. Ray and Agnes were maintaining some semblance of woodskill. They hardly made any noise at all.

All four stopped in the clearing, looking around them. They stood a hundred paces away from what Alice now saw was not a dome, but rather a large sphere, half sunken into the earth. The stream ran right through the heart of it, vanishing into the darkened mouth of a cave in the side of the structure. The sphere itself appeared to be made of a random mixture of logs, stone, and dirt. Here it was constructed carefully, there it was almost melted together. On the top of the sphere, what looked oddly like hardened sand dunes rippled across its face. Around the mouth of the cave, the whole thing - wood, stone, and dirt - was worn smooth by the water. The sphere had evidently stood for a long time.

Alice walked closer to it, circling around. It took her longer than she expected; the structure was huge. As she wrapped back around to the others, she stopped suddenly. All eyes were staring at her. She checked to make sure that she hadn't left a zipper unzipped. *Nope, it isn't that!* "What?" she asked with a frown. She felt oddly self-conscious.

"We're here." Agnes nodded to herself, as if it was obvious. She smiled at Alice like a mother smiling at a particularly slow child, waiting for a response.

"Here?"

"At the ball," said Ray.

"Ball?" Alice looked over her shoulder at the structure. She supposed you *could* call it a ball, but... "I thought we were going to a ball - you know, the sort where there's dancing and people!" She looked at Ray accusingly. "You said that we were going to the ball!"

Ray was rolling on the ground laughing at her. When he finally caught his breath, he gasped, "I never said anything about dancing!" He broke into another fit of laughter, coughing and wheezing.

Agnes simply looked puzzled. "Who would hold a ball in the forest? Not enough people." She grumbled under her breath.

A distant grumble in the sky caught everyone's attention. Ray immediately became serious. "Your majesty," he said, "we should find shelter soon." He'd begun to pace nervously.

Alice glanced up at the sky. Night was rapidly overtaking them; oddly enough, she couldn't see the glow of city lights even though the sky was increasingly overcast. *Surely I couldn't have come that far in only two days*, she thought to herself. She looked at Agnes. "Okay, we're here. Now what?"

Agnes pointed at the sphere. "That's why we're here. You have to go into the ball, and bring back to me here a small box you'll find inside. It's made of bone, you know. Always did find it creepy." Her eyes looked inward, thinking hard. "Where was I? Oh, right. You need to go inside, and bring the box back to me. Hurry up, we don't have all night!" She turned to Ray and the jelbeen. "You two can get some wood for a fire. Hurry now, I'm not going to wait forever." She was pulling small bundles from her dress, laying them about her. Ray was already running into the woods, and the jelbeen was striding to the edge of the clearing. The huge creature simply reached up into the overhanging trees, breaking off dead branches as easily as if they were small twigs.

Alice simply stared at the old woman. "How exactly do you expect me to get inside that thing? I've already walked around it. There aren't any doors."

"Just follow the stream, dear. Run along now." Agnes turned away, and before Alice could respond, she was already pounding pegs for a tent into the ground. The jelbeen was working like a machine, tossing branches behind him into a huge pile. The creature had incredible accuracy; he never even turned his head, but the branches were piling up in a neat stack.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Alice asked, doubt on her face.

Agnes turned around, blinked. "You're still here? Go! Nothing in there you can't handle, and I need that box."

It wasn't particularly comforting, but Alice didn't see much other choice. *Besides, I can use a few moments to think my own thoughts*, she decided. Her companions were interesting, maybe a little *too* interesting. No, it wouldn't hurt to get away for a few.

Alice took a deep breath. *So, I'm supposed to follow the stream*. She walked to the stream, looking down. Small creatures were glowing that neon blue in the darkness of the water. The light provided her with some comfort, as the cave looked quite dark. She wiped her palms on her hips to

clear away nervous sweat, then took the first step toward the cavern.

CHAPTER 8

There was just enough daylight left to reveal a small path along the stream's bank. It seemed to have been used largely by animals. *Hopefully not large animals*, Alice thought with a wry chuckle. There were dozens of small footprints, mostly animals, but some of them looked oddly human, if too small. She was glad that the tracks looked old. Bits of leaves and dirt had filled in most of them.

She followed the path up to the cavern's mouth, ducking slightly to avoid bumping her head as she stepped inside. The air was damp and slightly cool. She could smell old stone and the moss growing on rocks gave off an earthy plant smell. The wall was bumpy, but not jagged. It looked to be made of dirt embedded with whitish stones, the whole wall worn smooth with age. The cave mouth was bright with diminishing daylight; it seemed much friendlier than the darkness further inside.

She steeled herself. *Stop being a baby, there's nothing to be afraid of here.* Indeed, the only sounds were her breathing, her footsteps, and the pleasant gurgle of the stream as it tumbled through the center of...well, of whatever this place was. Alice forced herself to start moving.

A few moments of travel straight in took her to a curve in the path. She glanced over her shoulder, looking longingly at the light as the last sight of the the cave's mouth vanished behind the curved stone wall.

There was only darkness here, apart from the eerie blue glow cast by the creatures in the stream. Her legs grew tired from walking. She couldn't believe that the path stretched on so far as it did. Several times she stumbled in the dim light; once, she almost tripped. She was beginning to think that she should turn back, when up ahead she suddenly spotted a pinpoint of warm, glowing light.

As she came closer, the light expanded from a pinpoint into a light bulb, then resolved into a arched doorway. Alice could see a huge room there, opening out of the tunnel she was in. If her sense of direction was any good, she seemed to be at the center of the dome, although the only way that could have been was if the tunnel had wrapped in a spiral into the center of the structure.

Alice stepped into the room. There was light here, showing a circular room with torches placed at regular intervals across the room. They provided a warm orange glow to the space, making Alice feel comfortable. The ceiling was low - so low that she didn't even notice the opening that shot straight up through the roof until she was almost directly underneath it. She could see starlight through that opening; it was distant, like looking through a telescope that didn't actually magnify anything. In the very center of the room was a low, round stone that made her think of...*an altar?*

There was nothing on the stone, though. She walked right up to it,

looking at it carefully. There were no marks to indicate that anything had ever been placed on it. In fact, it was covered with a thick layer of gray dust that floated up into the air as she brushed a hand over it, dust that invaded her lungs and making her cough. She could feel it on her tongue, even. She spat, swearing a little. She'd always hated the taste of dust; she badly wanted water, but she needed to find the damn box first.

There was no other exit in the room, and she was sure that she hadn't missed any branches in the tunnel. The tunnel was dim, but not so dim that she couldn't vaguely see the far wall across the stream at all times. No, this was the only possible destination. She looked around the lighted room. Nothing but torches. The walls here were perfectly smooth, not bumpy like the tunnels, and as she looked closer at them she could see that they were grooved with little circular designs interlinking around the whole room. Looking closer, she could see skulls marked into some of those circles; skulls, and knives, and evil-looking insects. The marks were like carvings, but she could see no scratches left by tools around those. *Either a godlike carver or magic*, she thought. She shivered a little. A stone dropped onto the altar with a little clicking noise of rock on rock.

At the noise, she spun around. A fine trickle of dust was spilling down onto the stone from the opening in the ceiling, dust mixed with twigs and dirt but in a stream so straight that it appeared to have been poured rather than fallen. Scratching sounds floated down from the opening with the dirt. She stepped closer, peering upwards.

She just had time to make out spidery arms and legs on a humanoid body before it slammed into her, knocking her down. A vicious snarling sound invaded her ears, and she kicked out, pushing the thing away with arms and legs. Just in time, too. Sharp teeth snapped shut scant inches from her throat, catching only air. She scrambled to her feet, backing up against the wall.

The creature wasn't really that big, but it made up for its diminutive size with an elephant-sized ferocity. It stared at her, growling low in its throat and stalking forward one foot at a time like a cat, only on two legs. She couldn't look away; the creature held her with its eyes. She screamed as it sprang at her.

She screamed, but didn't stand waiting. She threw herself sideways, and the creature smashed into the wall behind her. It crawled to its feet drunkenly, blood trickling from its mouth. It snarled at her again as its eyes uncrossed to focus on her. The snarl was wide enough to reveal that one of its teeth had broken off. The thing flexed human-like hands, reaching for her throat.

She kicked it again, punching it awkwardly. The creature was too close. Its fingers tightened around her throat, choking off her breathing. She tried to push it away, to break the grip, but it was too strong. The

creature stared at her with yellowish eyes, grinning as she struggled. Her arm came too close to its mouth as she tried to push it away, and the creature happily sliced it with those razor teeth.

The world started to move away from her, and she desperately reached behind her for one of the torches. It came away from the wall easily, and with the last of her strength she slammed the burning end of the torch straight into the creature's eyes. She collapsed onto the ground as it let go reflexively with a roar, jumping backwards away from her.

She gasped for breath, trying to stand. Some corner of her mind was screaming at her, *Get up!* At first, she couldn't. The voice in her mind was panicked, telling her to stand, to fight. She could hear the creature moving around, and every scrape of foot on rock, every growl made her flinch as her body braced for the slicing teeth or the gripping fingers. Finally, she dragged herself to her feet, the torch still in her hand. She held it high before her.

The creature was stalking around, growling and shaking its head as if that could rid it of the burn. She'd hit it directly in the eyes with that flame. The creature seemed unable to see her. *Have to get out of here.* She started to edge backwards toward the tunnel.

Her foot scraped the ground, and she froze. In her panic, the sound was slow, drawn out like fingers on a blackboard. She knew it was too late. The creature turned toward the sound, leaping at her with outstretched, clawed hands. She tried to jump sideways away from it, but the creature was too fast. One of its hands caught her ankle; it began pulling itself up her body, its teeth and hands going for her throat again. She hit it with the torch as hard as she could, again and again; those blows were hard enough to make it bleed, but the thing would not let go. The fingers closed on her throat again.

The pressure in her head began to rise as her breathing was cut off, and with a feel of a muscle tensing behind her eyes, her vision altered. She was suddenly aware of the joints in the creature's fingers, could see the exact thickness of its skull. She reversed the torch in her hand, smashing the blunt handle with all the strength she could muster into the thinnest part of its skull she could find. She could somehow actually see the bone buckling, sharp fragments slicing into the creature's brain like nails and then driven deeper by the force of each subsequent blow. Almost immediately the thing let go of her, convulsing. She hit it again and again, every blow hitting something vital - kidneys, heart, trachea. She kept hitting it long after it stopped moving.

Her rage subsided slowly, slinking back into a corner of her brain. Her vision stayed the same, though. She couldn't bear to look at the thing she'd killed; it was unrecognizable now, but her enhanced vision could still make out mangled organs and blood vessels in the bloody mess on the ground. She shuddered, throwing the torch as far away from her as she could. She

tried to wipe her hands on her pants but succeeded only in leaving bloody streaks on them.

She looked around the room, half-expecting other creatures. There were none, though. There was no more dust trickling down, no more sounds other than her breathing and the distant trickle of water and the crackle of the torches. The room smelled of blood now, making her stomach turn slightly. In the center of the room, the altar still stood.

She started to turn to go, but something made her turn back. She realized that she could see into the stone altar now. She walked over to it. Where previously she'd seen smooth stone, she could now make out a small seam running around the side of the altar, and her enhanced vision showed her a small stone bolt inside the lid, set a hair's distance into a stone groove. The groove was a bit wider than the bolt, and for some reason it contained a piece of metal that prevented the bolt from penetrating any further than that hair's distance. If she could knock the bolt out of the groove just the tiniest bit, it would snap open. It seemed almost designed to be opened without actually being touched.

Alice tried hitting it with her hands, kicking it, but all she succeeded in doing was bruising her hands. The altar was no longer clean; blood from her hands smeared the top of it in long, dusty streaks. She let out a shout of frustration, only to shrink down and cover her ears as the echoes crashed back in. Suddenly, she had an idea.

She grabbed a torch from the wall, holding the flame up to the stone as close to the lock as she could. She could almost see the heat traveling through the stone, into the metal bar in the groove, heating it up. The heat caused the metal to expand, knocking the bolt free. The lid sprang open, showering her with dust.

She brushed herself off irritably, then walked to the other side of the altar. Inside, she could see a small, yellowish box. It must've been white once, as it seemed to be made of bone. She picked it up in her arms. It was surprisingly heavy.

For some reason, her altered vision provided no extra help in seeing what the box held. She sighed, closing the altar lid. The bolt slid back into place with a tiny click.

She found herself compulsively extinguishing all the torches around the room, walking clockwise to each one and beating it out with her hands in turn. Something on the floor caught her eye as she passed by the dead creature. It was the broken tooth. Something made her pick it up. It was still wickedly sharp. She shuddered and stuffed it into a pocket, going on to the next torch.

As she came back around to the last torch, she took it from the wall. She took a final look around. The room was dim now, but the altar was still illuminated by the starlight shining through the ceiling opening. It was dark,

but not so dark that she could not see the trails of blood on the floor and the altar. She went back to the tunnel, walking first, then running.

Returning through the tunnel felt longer than entering; something in the back of her head, behind the fear, made her realize that she was walking uphill. The spiral must've been downwards - that made sense, now that she thought of it. Going uphill took more effort, too. She was panting by the time she reached the rounded corner. She stopped abruptly as a thought popped into her mind.

The light was still dim – just the glow of small crustaceans in the stream and the tiny circle of light provided by her torch - but it was enough for her to take a closer look at those white stones in the cave wall. She ran her fingertips over one of the round ones, noticing the hairline fractures in the smooth surface. Something made her dig out the hardened dirt around the stone, scrabbling with her fingers until they blistered. Her fingers sunk deeper into the earth, clearing it away. One of her fingers slipped into something behind the stone. There was a large hollow space behind it, and a few more seconds of work gave her enough room to put an entire hand behind the stone. She gave it a pull, and it came away in her hands, toppling her backwards with the sudden release.

She just barely managed to keep the torch from falling onto the ground or into the stream. Amazingly, it stayed lit. She turned it on the stone to see what she held.

The grinning outline of a skull stared back at her eyelessly, which was just as well because her fingers were looped through its eye sockets. She let out a small yelp, tossing the thing away from her. It splashed into the water. For some reason it attracted the glowing creatures in the stream. They swirled around it, then inside it. Hardly a minute later, it was glowing like a jack-o-lantern, grinning at her from the water with that same eerie stare.

A glance at the wall confirmed her suspicion. The wall was not made of stone; no, it was *bone*. Ancient bones, from the look of it, smoothed by the river. She stood again and began to run uphill, not looking back.

A short time later, but what seemed like an eternity, she was standing at the cave mouth again. It was completely dark outside now, but there was a fire burning in the clearing. She could make out a tent and the jelbeen's towering figure profiled by the firelight. She walked toward the fire, but only made a few steps before something slammed into her back, knocking her face-down into the ground. She groaned as the box pressed into her ribs. The ground, it seemed, was less yielding than her body.

A growl made her shiver, but only for a second. It wasn't fear that made her roll over with her fists flailing. "You ungrateful little bastard! Get off of me!" A well-aimed fist connected with the fox, tumbling Ray back into the grass.

"Sorry. I was just making sure no intruders approached her Majesty." The fox didn't look apologetic at all. He trotted up to her and sat down, licking a paw for all the world like a cat. Ray looked suspiciously like he was concealing a grin behind the paw.

"Do I look like an intruder to you?" Alice was shouting now.

"Can't be too careful," said the fox smugly.

Alice lashed out with a kick aimed at the fox's nose, but completely missed and toppled over backwards. She quickly jumped back to her feet, stomping on the ground before marching off to the fire without so much as a backwards glance at Ray. Only the ripples of laughter from the fox followed her.

The fox watched her, eyes glinting in the dark.

CHAPTER 9

The fire was crackling away happily as Alice walked up. The bright flames were munching on their evening meal of logs and the occasional small insect that flew too close. Agnes was sitting back against a log, humming to herself and doing some complicated needlework. The jelbeen was somewhere out in the darkness; Alice couldn't see him, but she could definitely hear him. She had no idea where Ray was, nor did she particularly care. She stalked over to Agnes, tossing the heavy bone box into the old woman's lap.

"Ouch!" The old woman had managed to jab herself with one of the needles. For an instant, Alice felt bad, but the drying blood from the slice on her arm made that a very *short* instant.

"You told me," Alice said through her teeth, "that it was safe to go in there."

Agnes peered over her nose. Her eyes were twinkling in the firelight. "I said no such thing, dear. I said there was nothing in there that you couldn't handle. A very different sort of statement." She was humming to herself merrily.

Alice dropped wearily into a sitting position, stretching her legs out. She couldn't really argue with the old woman's logic, but it did not make her feel the least bit better. She felt as if she had been taken advantage of. Her arm hurt.

Almost as if she was reading Alice's thoughts, Agnes tossed a cloth-wrapped bundle into her lap; the bundle contained some bandages and ointments. Alice groaned and dragged herself up, wobbling over to the stream where she washed the cut off. She splashed water over her head and neck as well - not really as good as a bath, but better than nothing. The water stung the cut on her arm, and she could feel bruises on her neck. Shaking her head like a dog to throw away some of the excess water, she dug around in the bundle for the ointment. She winced as she applied it to the cut and then wrapped a bandage around her arm.

Feeling somewhat more civilized, she went back to the fire.

"Snacks?" offered Agnes.

There was food now; more bread, and some sort of small animal. Alice thought it might have been a rabbit. She tore into the food rather savagely, finding herself incredibly starved - but not so starved that she forgot about being angry. "What's in the box?" she demanded around a mouthful of small animal.

Agnes seemed to notice the box for the first time. "Ah, you brought me the box. I hope the Yeti was polite. He seemed in a bit of a sour mood last time I visited him."

"Yeti? You knew there was something in there and you didn't tell me?"

Alice's voice was dangerously calm.

"It's just a Yeti. A young one at that. Nothing to worry about. Funny, not any snow here as long as I can remember. Except maybe once when I was a young woman. Bernard hated it."

"Young or not, it could have killed me," Alice pointed out bitterly.

"But it didn't. How'd you get the box?" Agnes was fumbling with it, fingers searching for something. With a small *click*, the box popped open. For some reason, the noise made Alice jump a little.

"I opened the stone - the altar, or whatever it was. With a torch."

"A torch! I never thought of that. I wondered why he'd put them there, so many of them." Agnes chuckled. "He always was a smart one."

Alice was on the verge of asking the old woman if she was paid to be vague, but settled for a more civil "'He?'"

"The Garden King. King of That Side. You've met him, I believe."

The glowing footprints flashed into Alice's mind. "Not exactly."

Agnes nodded to herself. "It doesn't matter. He built the ball, and put the altar up. He always was clever."

"Why does the fox always call you 'Majesty?'" Alice asked.

"Because I am Queen of This Side." Agnes drew herself up royally.

"This side of...?"

"Of the stream." Agnes was taking something out of the box now. It looked like a key, with a long chain attached to it.

"I don't understand. I thought this garden was Ray's" said Alice.

Agnes laughed out loud for once. "There is nothing to understand. I am Queen of This Side; you've encountered the King of That Side. The garden is Ray's. So has it always been. Here, take this." She tossed the key to Alice. "Just because I am Queen does not mean it's mine." She laughed. "Silly young people, always worried about who owns what."

Alice turned the key over in her hand. It was an average-sized key - Alice thought it might have opened the door of a house somewhere. It looked like it would have fit on a regular keyring, but there were no houses anywhere nearby that Alice could see. This whole area seemed quite wild. She looked at the key, then at Agnes. "What exactly am I supposed to do with this?"

"Unlock things," said Agnes, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"What things?"

"You ask too many questions, dear. I don't know *what* things. Keys are always handy to have about, you know." She sniffed her disapproval.

"You aren't very bright, are you?"

Alice ignored the insult. "If they're so handy, why are you giving it to me?" Alice asked, eying the old woman suspiciously.

"Because I don't need keys. Never have. Doors always opened for

me. My mother always hated that, because I could always get into the cookies, even when she locked them away. Oatmeal-raisin - those were my favorite. Crunchy, like peanut butter. Makes good mousetrap bait..."

Agnes was Queen of This Side, the Garden King was king of that side, it was Ray's garden, and Alice was thoroughly confused. *Not*, she thought, *that it makes any difference*. She was incredibly tired. She sighed and dragged herself to her feet. That tent was looking quite tempting; she didn't care if Agnes intended to use it, because she intended to be dead asleep before the old woman stepped inside, whether or not there was room for both of them.

She went to the tent, poking her head inside. She could still hear the old woman rambling by the fire; she was beginning to think that Agnes didn't really care if people were listening. The old woman just liked to talk, probably to hear her own voice. Alice shook her head, smiling wryly as she brought her attention back to the inside of the tent.

She blinked, then blinked again. The tent was enormous. She pulled her head out, walking around the tent. From the outside, it seemed hardly large enough for a person.

She walked around again, stooping down to step inside. She straightened, looking about. She stood in the grand entrance hall of the tent - only, it was a palace with a ceiling soaring high above her head. The floors were marble and the walls made of some carved wood that she did not recognize. The place was well-lit, white light filling the place from sources she could not see. She was fairly sure it was not torchlight, because there was not the slightest flicker. She glanced outside again; Agnes was still sitting by the fire, her back against a log. Alice walked further into the tent - no, the palace...*or is it a tent?* She was thoroughly confused.

For all its grandeur, she could not find a single door in that massive hallway. It seemed to be all in one single straight hall, that steady light coming from nowhere, and the marble floor.

There were symbols on the walls, though. Here she could make out a starfish, there a cow carved into the wood. One symbol looked like an airplane, which struck her as out of place. There was a balance-scale, a dragon, a tea-kettle, even a hand. She wondered at the oddness of it all.

She turned as Agnes' babbling voice preceded the old Queen into the tent. Agnes spotted her and started waving enthusiastically, a big smile on her face.

"Oh, you're here already. I wasn't really ready for visitors. It's well enough, though. Can I offer you some tea, perhaps?"

Alice just stared - it took her a moment to realize that the old woman was serious about playing hostess. She sighed. "What about a bath and some clothes?" she asked, with more than a trace of sarcasm.

To her surprise, Agnes nodded with a smile. "Follow me, dear." She

walked off, Alice trotting along behind to keep up. Agnes was old, but she was not slow.

They walked up to one of those symbols. It was the starfish. Agnes closed her eyes, muttered something under her breath, and the section of the wall slid sideways, disappearing into a cleverly hidden recession. Alice found herself staring into a huge bathroom, with a great tub perched on clawed feet standing atop a marble pedestal in the center. One wall was entirely mirrored, which made the room seem that much bigger.

"How did you open that door?" Alice was impressed; she hadn't seen so much as a seam to indicate that the door was there at all.

"I don't need keys. Doors have always-

"Yes, doors have always opened for you." Alice couldn't help smiling - the prospect of a bath was very cheering. "Thank you, I'd like a bath now."

"Of course, dear. I'll see about getting you something to wear."

Alice peeled off her clothes; they were in woefully bad shape. She supposed that was to be expected after having them shredded in the brush and chopped up by that...that Yeti thing, whatever it was. She looked at herself in the mirror. Scratches and bruises covered her body; her bandaged arm reminded her of the cut, which didn't seem to hurt anymore. Her neck bore distinct finger-shaped bruises. She raised a finger to one, studying it in the reflection. She winced as she probed at it experimentally. She sighed, then turned away from the mirror. *Bath time*, she thought with a smile.

She could hardly believe that she was taking a real bath. The hot water was plentiful, for which she was very grateful. She stepped into the tub and grimaced as the water clouded immediately with dirt and grime. She found herself rinsing and refilling the tub three times before the water stayed clear and she could relax. She settled back in water up to her neck, feeling some of the tension soak away.. She could almost see it, like little fiery threads drifting through the water. For some reason, that was a little scary.

She closed her eyes for a few moments, but a noise at the door made her sit up. She rubbed her eyes. And rubbed them again. Dresses, pants, skirts, blouses, bikinis, suits, hats, gloves, scarves, shoes, and more - hundreds of pieces of clothing for every occasion were walking through the door. She looked around frantically for wires, ropes, anything to explain it, but there was nothing. It was simply the clothes, filing up into lines in front of her. The gloves and hats lined up first, then skirts and blouses, then pants and dresses, forming orderly rows for her to inspect. The last glove through had closed the door behind it politely.

A rustling sound caught her attention. One of the hats had flopped itself over her clothes and was wriggling about, dragging them out of the room. "Hey, stop that!" She jumped out of the tub, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her, but she was too late. A shirt closed the door with its

sleeve. She skidded to a halt.

"Okay, what's going on here?" She tried to look stern, but it was difficult to have a stern face when you were being stared at by empty clothes. One of the gloves jumped up onto a small table near the mirror, tracing out a message in the steam: YOUR OLD CLOTHES WERE DAMAGED AND WILL BE DESTROYED. PLEASE TAKE ANYTHING YOU WISH IN REPLACEMENT, COURTESY OF HER MAJESTY. The glove managed a little bow, folding itself in half.

Alice didn't think her eyes would go any wider. *Pull yourself together*, she thought. She pinched herself. "Ouch!"

She walked up and down the rows of clothing. She pulled out a long, black gown, the bottom cut on a diagonal so that one side was longer than the other. *I might as well have fun while I'm here*, she thought, and pulled out a sparkly deep-purple boa which she wrapped around her neck. She found a hat with a long ostrich feather, but a look in the mirror convinced her that it was too reminiscent of styles she'd seen old ladies wear in the market. She settled for a neon-blue veil, which gave her a sort of ghostly look. She held her arms up in the air - "Booooo!" - then almost fell down laughing. She looked ridiculous. It was perfect. The key and chain were still lying on the floor; the hat hadn't seen fit to take them. She hung it around her neck, tucking the key inside her dress.

The inside of the door was visible, whatever the state of the outside. She pushed it open, stepping back into the main hall. The hall was empty. She looked around thoughtfully. *Should I, or shouldn't I?*

Her shadow flickered its tail; it seemed to be licking water off its fur. Curiosity got the better of her. *I should*. She tiptoed over to the door marked with an airplane. *Maybe there's some way out here*. She felt around, her fingertips feeling a seam that her eyes couldn't see. She felt around blindly until her fingers encountered an invisible lock. She looked at the place where her fingers touched the wall - she could see nothing other than wood. She looked quickly around to make sure no one was there. Silence met her stare, and the emptiness of the huge hall. It seemed to be in a state of perpetual waiting for guests who never came.

She turned back to the door, fishing the key out from her dress. She managed to somehow get it into the lock; a small turn, and the door pushed open under the light touch of her hand. It swung almost effortlessly, yet with a great sense of inertia that made Shadow whisk its tail in as quickly as it could. The door closed with a mute slam that she could feel through her feet. Shadow was licking a paw, feigning disinterest.

This room was dark, much darker than the hall or the other room. The light was mostly starlight, shining through a transparent ceiling, but there was the occasional glow of an uplit lamp here and there. The center of the room was totally empty, but the walls were not.

She walked around, staring. The walls were encrusted with plaques, each bearing a photograph. The first was a photo of an ordinary clothing iron, with a camouflaged figure standing next to it, one hand on it and a proud smile visible on the lips. Above the photograph was mounted a heating coil, an electric plug dangling from it. There were distinct cuts in the cord, slicing it almost in two in places. The next was a photograph of the same figure dangling a mouse by the tail; its paws and ears were pinned to the plaque above it. There were torn pages from a book, a mangled dinner-fork, broken fragments from an office-tower window, a wheel from the landing gear of a small airplane, strange fragments of dozens of objects and creatures, some that she recognized and others that she didn't.

The wheel was apparently the prized possession. It was mounted in a small cleared space on the wall. The figure stood holding the wheel proudly; a crashed, smoking wreck was blurred in the background. A heavy rifle was in the figure's hand. As closely as she peered at the photo, she could not make out anything about the figure, not even enough to tell if it was a man or a woman. She looked around her, shivering in the warm air. The room had a creepy quality that made her feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"Enjoying my collection?" The voice came from behind her, and she spun around so fast that she almost tripped. She threw up a hand to cover her face; the glow was bright in the dim room.

"You're the Garden King." She found her heart beating faster for some reason. This man was the reason that she was here, and she had a lot of questions for him. "I thought this was the Queen's palace."

A hollow, booming laugh danced around the room. "This place is a sanctuary for any who would take it. There is more than enough space for all."

"Aren't you worried that someone will disturb your - your collection?" Alice wasn't sure that it really deserved the name of a collection, but if this man could take down an airplane by himself, she didn't want to annoy him.

"Who would do such a thing? No one comes here."

Alice lowered her eyes, squinting at the glowing figure in the far corner of the room. The Garden King was lounging insolently against the wall; he obviously considered her far less than a threat.

Alice shook her head. People in this place were starting to bewilder her. "Obviously people do. I'm here, you're here, Agnes is here, Ray and the jelbeen." She ignored her shadow, which seemed to be pacing behind her in the flickering glow. She wasn't really comfortable turning her head to find out what it was doing. She met the King's stare.

"This is a...special case," said the Garden King thoughtfully. He straightened, stood at his full height. "It isn't often that we get visitors in this enclave."

"Enclave?" Alice didn't really understand.

The Garden King pulled a small plaque from his pocket; she could not see his hands, only the plaque held by a liquid glow of light. He pinned a photograph on it, tacked something on it that she couldn't see. He turned his back to her deliberately, mounting it carefully on the wall between what seemed to be an alligator's head and a popped balloon. "This space is apart from your city for a reason. The rules that apply outside do not apply in here."

Alice nodded; the clothes walking about had made that crystal in her mind. "I've noticed. Agnes - the Queen, I'm sure you know her - can make doors open without touching them, and Shadow - my shadow, I mean - moves without me and doesn't even look like me."

A sound like gravel falling into water rippled through the room as the Garden King chuckled. He turned back to her. "Why did you come here?"

"Because I followed you, of course."

The Garden King looked at her silently for a moment. "I was afraid of that. I had hoped that you didn't see me, that you were only walking in the same direction." Alice noticed that his feet left no marks on this floor. She didn't know if it was the palace or the enclave, but he'd definitely marked the street. Strange that this floor resisted. The King stared at her a moment more; if she didn't think he was upset, she would've thought he was admiring her dress. "It is impressive that you survived the judgment. I think you should leave as soon as you can." He turned to go.

"Is that a threat? Wait, don't go!" It was too late. The glowing figure had already slipped out the door, and by the time she reached it and skidded out into the hall, there was nothing to see. No footprints, no glow - it was as if he had never been there at all. She turned back into the room. The small plaque in the corner caught her eye.

She walked over to it. The same camouflage figure stared back at her, standing on a dark street in the rain, holding up a mangled notepad with a broken pencil lying shattered in the coil holding the pages together. Above it, the actual notebook and pencil were pierced through with a large nail. The ink had run in the rain, trickling down the paper from the nail like blood from a wound. Alice could barely make out a word on it: TWO fRiES. She reached out a finger tentatively, touched the paper, recoiled at the hint of wetness. Her finger was smeared with black ink. *It shouldn't still be wet - that was days ago!* She touched it again, but it only helped to get more ink on her fingers. She wiped her fingers on her dress absentmindedly, then started as she realized what she'd done. She relaxed. *Good thing I wore black,* she thought. The ink had vanished into the dark cloth without a trace.

She stepped back out into the hall, casting one last glance back at the plaque with the airplane wheel. She wondered if anyone had been hurt; it seemed impossible that anyone would survive that burning wreckage. She

remembered the warning: "You must find out why, or you will die here." Certainly the place seemed to be getting more hostile by the moment. She closed the door and turned around.

The jelbeen was standing in the hall, apparently playing some sort of game of fetch with Ray. He would toss a stick, Ray would catch it and drop it at the jelbeen's feet. Alice wandered over.

"Ray, is this your garden or not?"

The fox grinned at her, showing those disconcertingly sharp teeth again. "It is my garden."

"Then why do you have a King and Queen of the garden?"

Ray's grin never wavered. "Why not? It's more fun than being the only one here."

"You could always have visitors. You don't really need a king and queen if you just wanted company," Alice pointed out.

"If I didn't have them, then I wouldn't have a palace. It's not like I have hands." Ray held up a paw.

Alice sighed. Another thing she had to concede. It would be difficult to build without hands. Not that she had ever really built anything. She had tried once, though. She flexed her fingers, remembering.

Alice could feel the clay under her fingers, rolling out thin, rope-like coils which she placed on a flat circle of clay, wrapping the coils around until the ends met. She smoothed the ends together, merged the bottom of the coil into the top of the circle. She shook the extra clay from her fingers and rolled out another coil, placing it on top of the previous one. She merged it down into the lower coil, forming a wall that started to rise up. Coil, layer, smooth, repeat. It was a cycle, a sort of rhythm that she quickly lost herself in.

When she stopped a couple of hours later, she found herself staring at a plain coil pot, the rough edges smoothed out. It had a nice shape, almost like a vase. She smiled, turned it around - and her smile faded. The thing was crooked; while she'd smoothed the side facing her, the pressure of her hands had caused the far side to buckle. This wouldn't do.

The more she tried to fix the pot, the worse it looked. After hours of work, her arms were aching. She managed to shape it into something vaguely resembling a vase, although a bit wobbly. She glazed it carefully, looping small spiral designs around the neck of it. She loaded it into the kiln.

The next day, she took it out. It was now a light purple, with faint yellow spirals. She wrapped it up carefully.

It was her mother's birthday, so she picked up a little card that she signed and stuck inside the vase. She went home; her mother was there already, so she stepped into the kitchen. They had lunch; she had never

managed to step into the kitchen when her mother was there without getting fed. It was a quiet lunch, though - she had also never managed to have a conversation with her mother that didn't turn into a shouting match. They'd long ago decided to leave the conversation to a minimum. After the lunch, she unwrapped the vase, giving it to her mother.

Her mother made all the appropriate gestures, but Alice could tell that she had no idea what to do with it, and didn't really like it. They sipped their tea, and when Alice left the room it was sitting on the table. It sat there for a while before moving to a cabinet out of sight. A couple of years later, Alice had remembered, asked to see it. Her mother had made small, panicked excuses, but the reality was plain enough; it had been thrown away. Alice had kept her face calm, but she cried herself to sleep that night.

Alice sighed under the grand hall's soaring roof. *Building*, she thought, *is not my cup of tea*. Not that she could think of anything that particularly *was* her cup of tea. She'd always felt very untalented.

Ray and the jelbeen seemed to be finished with their game. Ray was panting as he walked over to Alice. "Tomorrow," he said, "we will continue. You have the key, yes? Good. Since you still don't know why you're here, there is only one other way out. It is dangerous, though." The fox looked at her thoughtfully. "Unless, of course, you want to stay here."

Alice considered. The place, overall, wasn't so horrible. Palaces and queens and kings - it was all very adventurous. Still, there was something...something off, really, about everyone here, and something else that scared her a little. She shook her head. "I definitely want to go home." *Not that there's much waiting for me out there, but it's better than the freak show in here*. A thought hit her. "Wait. Dangerous how?"

The fox shook its head. "No point in crying over milk that is yet to be spilled. Tonight, you should get some rest." Ray trotted away to the door, slipping back out into the wild of the woods.

Alice yawned. Come to think of it, she was definitely tired. One of those doors was carved with a "Zzzz.." For some reason, that made her giggle even as she fumbled for the lock. Inside, she found a huge feather bed, which she tossed herself onto, bouncing a little as she landed. She hardly closed her eyes before darkness washed in and everything slipped away.

CHAPTER 10

Morning light burned into her eyelids, making her brain scramble to place some sort of sense on reality. She opened her eyes groggily. Sunlight was pouring in through a skylight in the ceiling. She could smell breakfast coming in from somewhere. Somehow she had undressed during the night, although she didn't remember doing it. She stood up, looking around for her clothes. She spotted them in the corner and took a step toward them, then stopped as they all marched toward *her*. As they jumped back onto her body, she could understand why she didn't remember getting undressed. She didn't think she would get used to clothes walking around, no matter how often she saw it. There was a scent of strawberries floating in along with the breakfast smell, and her stomach grumbled loudly. She wished the clothes would dress her faster. *Never satisfied, are we?* she thought with a grin.

She found herself drawn along to the kitchen; she remembered the symbols from the night before, and a bit of exploration found it behind the symbol of a cow. Inside, Agnes and Ray were seated in front of a huge bowl of strawberries and a steaming pot of oatmeal. It didn't take much to convince Alice to dig in, especially since Agnes and Ray had already begun eating. There was little in the way of conversation; the air was filled more with the clinking of silverware against ceramic bowls than with words. Alice wasn't complaining, though. Completely starved, she dug into the strawberries.

Ray finished eating first. For some reason, Alice hadn't expected foxes to like oatmeal and strawberries, but Ray seemed to have no complaints. His belly was visibly rounder than when Alice had come into the kitchen, and there was oatmeal stuck on the fur around his mouth. Alice giggled at that.

The fox looked at her. "You do remember," he said while licking oatmeal from his chops, "that we must leave today. In fact, before lunch. I suggest you pack."

"Pack what?"

Agnes answered around a mouthful of strawberries. "You'll find clothes and some useful tools in your room. Don't forget the key I gave you." She wagged an admonishing finger at Alice. "It might be useful." Red strawberry juice ran down her chin, but she didn't seem to notice, or care. Alice wasn't sure which possibility was more disturbing. Agnes was definitely strange.

Alice fingered the chain around her neck. "It's right here," she said, pulling the key out to wave in front of Agnes. "How long do you think it will take for us - for me to make it home?" she asked Ray.

"That depends on how quickly you walk." Ray grinned at her nastily. "Hopefully it will be faster than you think."

"I'm not slow, you know. And if you wouldn't wander off, we'd have gotten here faster. You're the one who can't focus," said Alice accusingly.

"Now, now, children. Behave yourselves. Always good to be well-behaved, you know. Seen, not heard! That's my motto." Agnes smiled at them wisely, filling her mouth with another handful of her strawberries. She chewed with great gasping snorts for air in between bites.

Alice tried to eat a bit more, but found herself generally disgusted - it was difficult to ignore mangled pieces of strawberry dripping from someone's mouth. Her appetite backed away slowly, then turned and ran.

Unable to eat anymore, Alice went back to her room. There was a backpack on her bed, one of those huge ones with metal frames and enough straps to hold her great-grandfather's rusted car together. She muttered curses under her breath; her ribs were still more than a little sore. That thought reminded her, and she pulled away the bandage to examine the slice on her arm.

She couldn't help a little gasp. The cut was nearly healed. There was a tiny bit of a scar, but it seemed to be fading almost as she looked. *Must be the ointment*, she thought to herself. She wished she would've had that for some of her other cuts. She tossed the bandages away. Something scuttled out from under the bed, grabbing the discarded strips of cloth with little clicking and grating noises and dragging it back underneath. Alice stared for a minute. She was slightly concerned about her feet touching the floor with something like that under the bed. *Grow up*, she thought. She shook her head and went back to her backpack.

She rifled through it. A small fortune in clothing was nestled inside, pants and shirts both of a more practical sort as well as ones that she could never imagine herself wearing. Denim lay under golden sequined satin, piled next to silk and coarse terry-cloth and leather. She dug deeper, pulling out shoes for tennis and shoes for running, boots for hiking and boots for watery winter streets. She pulled out so much that eventually she fell inside the pack, although she didn't know how that could be. Panicked, she scrambled for the outside. Her heartbeat didn't calm down until she stood safely on the outside of that pack again.

"What the-?" She eyed the pack warily, glancing around her. Clearly, this place was tricky with sizes. She hoped there was no other violation of the laws of physics happening here. First the tent, and now the pack. It was all too strange.

Careful exploration of the pack yielded a tent which contained a small house - nothing so big as this palace, of course, but still considerably larger than she could imagine the tent to be. Just to boggle her mind, she put the tent into the pack and stuck her head through the pack onto the tent. She could see her legs far away in the palace beyond. *And to think that I'm inside a bigger tent*. It was too much for her brain; everything started

spinning. Dazed, she toppled backwards onto the floor, pulling her head clear of the tent and the pack. She shook her head. It was all *far* too strange.

After her head cleared, she decided she had finished playing games. Besides the clothes, the pack held more food than she could imagine eating, as well as tools for starting fires, flashlights, first-aid kits, and things to keep her dry in the rain. All in all, it was perfect for going outdoors with. She grumbled under her breath as she strapped the thing on, but it was surprisingly light.

Finally back out in the grand hall, she found Ray waiting for her. The place was warm and cheery with sunlight pouring in; it made her smile for some reason. The fox looked at her pack and nodded approvingly.

"You might want to dig out an umbrella," said the fox.

Alice looked at the skylights, drenched only in sunshine. "Are you joking?"

"Suit yourself." The fox trotted away toward the door, leaving Alice with little choice but to follow - so follow she did.

As the door to the great hall swung open, a huge blast of rain sailed through, smashing into Alice. She was instantly thoroughly drenched. She stared at her dripping clothes in bewilderment, looking at the cheery sun through the skylight and the blustering rain through the door.

The fox didn't seem to mind the rain one bit. The water beaded on his fur, leaving sheets of water on the ground under him, but none on him. Ray grinned at her. "I did warn you."

Alice said nothing. She simply stalked back to her room, changing clothes moodily. Nothing fancy this time - just warm, simple clothes. It wasn't long before she was back at that entrance hall, carrying an umbrella and draped in an orange plastic raincoat.

She stepped outside, then halted. The jelbeen was standing outside, humming merrily in the rain. Agnes was bunched all up in a raincoat. For some reason she didn't expect to see Agnes, but before she could say a word about it, the Queen spoke up.

"It's about time you got out here. I want to take down my tent, thank you very much. Children - hmmph. They never seem to know what's good for them. Nor men, for that matter. Certainly Bernard never did." She pronounced it "BUR-nard," in a particularly contemptuous way. While she muttered, she was walking about the tent, yanking pegs from the ground in a very grumpy way. The wind wasn't helping matters; it battered the tent about and whipped the ropes away from her hands. Alice stepped in to offer a hand, but the old woman waved her away. "I may be old, but I'm not an invalid!" she snapped.

"Is *everyone* coming along?" asked Alice. She had to duck as a rope whipped through the space where her head had been. *That would not have*

been a pretty accident, she observed to herself. Not that it was a particularly novel observation, but it didn't hurt to make. She jumped over another one of those ropes that whistled through the air at knee-level.

The fox nodded. "Of course. You're more entertainment than we have in a year. As naive as you are, we're bound to have more fun out of you yet." If the animal had hands, he would've been rubbing them together with evil delight, Alice was sure. She stuck her tongue out at him. The fox ignored her, trotting off to the forest's edge.

In the dim gray light, she could barely make out the ball, close as it was. It was cloaked in sheets of rain that occasionally thinned up enough to let her make out the stream. She shuddered, thinking of the shattered body on the floor that had been the Yeti. For some reason, she felt guilty at the killing, self-defense though it had been. *If she'd have told me, maybe I could have talked to it.* Her mind formed a picture of the animal in mid-spring at her. Somehow she didn't really believe talking would have helped. *You never know, though.*

She pulled the raincoat tighter around her. The patter of raindrops on the plastic was very, very annoying. She did her best to dismiss it, but it wasn't easy.

Agnes finished tucking away the tent. She pulled her pack on and trotted off without a word toward the far side of the forest. The jelbeen was already there, and the fox wasn't far behind. Alice headed into the wind, grumbling under her breath.

She was surprised at the weather. It had been relatively clear the last few days, only to turn nasty now. And she didn't understand how it could've been clear and sunny inside, only to look like this outside. A gust of rain-laden wind slapped her in the face, just to make sure that she wasn't doubting her senses. She made a face as she wiped the rain from her eyes.

As if it weren't already dark enough, the forest grew distinctly darker as they traveled into it. The canopy was thickening, blocking out the little light that was making it through the clouds. The jelbeen had no need of staying near a stream today, but just in case, Alice had packed several jugs of water in that insanely voluminous pack she was carrying. A peal of thunder ripped through the sky, chasing a lightning bolt. No, she would have no need of those jars today.

Over the constant drumming of the rain, Alice could hear little. She concentrated on making one foot step in front of the other, on not tripping over any roots or branches that might stick out in the forest path, which was growing increasingly hilly. Not gentle hills, either, but rocky ones that grew ever steeper.

Eventually, Agnes raised a hand, signaling a stop. They stood in the shadow of one such hillside, the rock eaten away into the heart of the hill by ancient wind and water. It was enough to keep the rain off, though, even if

they had to squat like chairs had never been invented. The squatting got uncomfortable quickly, but the ceiling was too low to stand up and the ground too wet to sit on. Alice wished the raincoat was longer; she could have used it to sit on. Shadow had been in and out of sight all day, but now the dark shape was hiding behind her, peeking out between her toes at the fox. There was definitely animosity there of some sort.

"You should have a cup of tea, er - what did you say your name was, dear?" Agnes was nodding at her vigorously, as if trying to say *Yes!* to something only she'd heard.

Alice was startled at the sound. *Too much time of nothing but raindrops.* "My name is Alice."

"You should have some tea, Alice. It keeps the chill out. Mind you, this is nothing compared to the winter of '37, when it was so cold that if you walked outside things would fall off. Maybe THAT is how he lost them. Bernard, I mean. Not that I don't miss him," Agnes crossed her fingers, "but he once hid under the bed because of a field mouse."

Alice looked at the old woman skeptically. It was never clear how much of that rambling was based on some sort of fact. Still, the old woman's babbling was comforting somehow, and Agnes was handing her a cup of hot tea which she accepted gratefully.

"What is this place?" Alice asked after a sip of the tea. It was nice and warm, but not so hot that she couldn't drink it.

"This place is quite old," rumbled the jelbeen with a gurgling sound from just outside. "I remember playing here as a young thing. There are four springs nearby, not that I have any need of them today." The creature laughed, pointing his face to the sky for the water to trickle over. The water had definitely put him into very good spirits.

"You might find it interesting," added the jelbeen, "to know that this was a hole-in-the-hill for bandits in this forest as far back as anyone can remember. The bandits are gone, now, but the hole isn't. Even Dandy Ryan himself stayed here once."

Agnes snorted, but Alice asked anyway. "Who was Dandy Ryan?"

The jelbeen grimaced for some reason. "He wasn't much liked. You might say he was more - well, more infamous than famous. He liked to strangle people with fancy bow ties. Quite horrid if you ask me."

"But," said Alice, "there are no people here for anyone to have strangled."

"That's precisely the point," said the jelbeen. "After Dandy Ryan strangled them all, there were none left. Just the King and Queen, Ray here, and me. And one other, but I think you've changed that." The jelbeen nodded at Alice with a conspiratorial wink.

Alice's lip began to tremble. She could feel a lump forming in her throat. "I didn't mean to," she began, but Agnes cut her off, patting her

hand with what Alice assumed was meant to be a comforting smile.

"Now, now, dear. You did what you had to do, and you handled it just as I said you would. Everything has its place and time, even Yetis."

Alice nodded, swallowing the lump back, her voice growing stronger. "You're right, I shouldn't feel bad."

The jelbeen shrugged. "Regardless, there are now only four left here, other than yourself. Four who are sentient, that is. There are, of course, myriad small creatures here."

"Some biting ones, too," said Alice. She clearly remembered that butterfly-like creature imploding into her body.

"There are no biting insects here," Agnes said with a frown.

"Tell that to the one that bit me," said Alice.

Agnes gave her a sharp look. "You were bitten? By what?"

"A butterfly." Alice bit her lip for a second. "Well, I think it was a butterfly, anyway. It was like a butterfly mixed with a mosquito." She looked at her hand, but there wasn't so much as a scar. She could still feel that weird sense of some sort of muscle behind her eyes, though.

"What exactly happened when it bit you? You must tell me everything, girl. Quickly, now." Agnes looked quite serious.

"Well, it bit me...and then it - well, it unspiralled into my skin. It didn't really hurt and you can't even tell now where it bit me," she added hurriedly. "It did something weird to my eyes, though. It's like I can see inside-out."

Agnes seemed to be impressed. "A flow worm. I've heard of it, from my mother, but never seen one. They say that the flow worms are intelligent - that they choose their hosts selectively and they do not take without giving something in return."

"Take?" Alice hadn't considered that possibility. She'd felt fine since the bite. "What would they take?"

Agnes nodded her head sagely. "They take time, so I've heard. Not constantly - no, they take it when they want it. Strange creatures. Once I heard a story about a dog who liked to walk on its hind legs. I tried to train my dog to do that but he didn't want to learn." She was rambling on again, a clear sign that her interest in this particular vein of conversation had waned.

The jelbeen smiled at her. "Most people consider a flow worm bite to be good luck."

"Does everyone get the same effect?" asked Alice.

The jelbeen shook its head. "I've only heard of one other person getting a flow worm symbiote, and that person found themselves suddenly able to levitate. Nothing to do with vision whatsoever." The jelbeen shook his head sadly. "It's quite rare, you know. I've never even *seen* a flow worm, not even once."

Alice changed the subject. "What happened to Dandy Ryan?"

The jelbeen chuckled. "I think he put down roots outside of the enclave, and finally stopped strangling people."

Alice considered that as she sniffed the steam from her teacup. It seemed to be a mixture of various herbs - nothing frightening, for which she was thankful.

There was no more conversation. Agnes was busy slurping tea, the jelbeen had slipped into a doze, and Alice was busy with her thoughts. Ray, as usual, was trotting around somewhere outside. Alice didn't think she'd ever encountered any creature as restless as the fox.

Eventually it was time to head out, and so they did. The rain had not let up; on the contrary, it was pouring even harder. The sky itself grew darker, what tiny bits Alice could see through the trees. She found herself pulling out a portable lantern and lighting it. It was almost night-dark, despite the fact that it was probably only mid-afternoon. The lantern cast an eerie glow on the trees.

As they trudged on, feet sloshing through leaves and ever-increasing amounts of mud, Alice caught a glimpse of something off through the trees as she looked over her shoulder. At first, she thought it was her imagination. After a while, she began to think that it was something more. She could almost swear that it was the Garden King, although she could not imagine why he would be following her.

She caught up with Ray, asking if he'd seen anything. The fox gave her a concerned look and dropped back behind her to check, slipping into the forest like a ghost. Alice jumped as a branch snapped right behind her, but forced herself to keep walking.

She felt hot breath on the back of her neck, but when she spun around, there was nothing there. She looked around wildly, finding nothing. She felt stupid. "Stop it," she told herself. She turned around again, heading toward Agnes, just as a crack of lightning danced raggedly through the trees. It was enough to illuminate the face of the Garden King right before her eyes.

She had never seen his face up close before. This close, she could see that his skin itself gave off that eerie glow. And a strange skin it was. It was smooth, yet had a wood-grain quality to it; she felt as if she could almost trace rings from tree-growth on the surface of it, if only she weren't too frightened to move. His eyes were black, like water in a stream at night, and his hair was wild, unkempt without being matted or dirty. She stepped sideways to run around him, and screamed as thunder crashed around her and the Garden King stabbed her arm with something sharp. She ran, so fast that she could see her body slowing behind her and collapsing into a murky heap on the ground. Then there was only darkness.

The city lights floated in front of the viewscreen, and she navigated the

tank easily into an airlock, yawning as she did so. She stepped out, stretching her legs. No one challenged her as she left the docking bay and walked out into one of the many tubes branching away from the airlock. She always loved this part, the feeling of being in the sea but not. The tube around her was a nearly indestructible plastic that formed a transparent barrier between her and the water. Once, so she had heard, fish would swim into that barrier because they couldn't see it; apparently, it had been re-engineered to seem more opaque to fish from the outside. Divers could still see inside, so she'd heard. A ray glided over her head, its wings rippling in the underwater currents.

There was precious little time for sightseeing, though. She hastened her steps. The tube wrapped and spiraled down into darker waters. The lights shining inside the tube seemed to attract small fish the further down she went; apparently the opacity of the tube did not block the glow of lights to fish eyes. Some of them had ferocious teeth. One odd fish dangled a light of its own in front of its face, which Alice found funny; the fish didn't really seem to have well-developed eyes so she couldn't imagine what use a light would be to it.

She turned a corner, coming to a doorway. She gasped; the doorway should have been closed - it led to the city's police quarters - but it was wide open. The two guards who stood there, both men she'd known for years, lay dead in pools of blood. Blood streaked and splattered the walls - it had not been a peaceful death. Something was very wrong.

She pulled a small knife from her pocket, unfolding the steel blade hastily. She edged through the doorway, trying to stare in all directions at once. Bullet marks and energy burns marred the tube as she went further in. Smoke stained one section so thoroughly that she couldn't see out; and another section gave her a view of a hill in the sea floor far below, through a red curtain of blood.

It only took her moments to confirm her fears. Not a single soldier was alive. Some of them were not even in one piece. She hurried out of there as quickly as she could. As she reached the main tube again, the lights died behind her. She turned to look, shuddering uneasily. For just a brief second, she could've sworn that she saw a figure washed in light duck around a corner. Her ears strained for any sound, but nothing.

She didn't know why she'd chosen to live here. At the moment, it seemed to have been a poor decision. She hurried through the tubes, turning toward the heart of the little city. All of the shops and houses were barricaded as she ran past. She tried to stay in the shadows as she made her way to her own tiny apartment.

She'd barely gotten through the door when a voice froze her. "Why did you come here?"

It was her commander, standing out in the tube behind her. She

swallowed hard. "I was at Meadowland, sir. It was empty, lost. They landed on the beach even as I stood there. It was all I could do to avoid being captured. I could think of no other place to come but here."

"You shouldn't have come," said the commander grimly. "There are few enough of us alive as it is. We drove them out once at the cost of every man in those police quarters - and that was just a scouting force. Now, you may have led a much larger force to our doorstep. It's the last thing we needed." As if to underscore the magnitude of her folly, a huge explosion rocked the city. She could see the ocean floor tilting below her like an ever-slipping pendulum as the city restabilized in the water. The captain gave her a hard look. "Icarus says to tell you to remember your promise." He spun on his heel, running hell-bent for the city's heart.

She wondered if it would ever end. She could remember the torment as a girl, watching everyone die around her - but the sea-cities were supposed to solve that. They'd left the land to the invaders, except for a few brave souls like those in the Meadowland. It had obviously not been enough to give up nearly everything. Only everything in its entirety would be enough.

She grabbed a few things hurriedly - old photographs of her and her mother and of Icarus Sinian, a few scattered letters, some small glass figurines. She stuffed everything into a bag that she threw on her shoulder. She strode to the door, walking quickly, pausing only to snatch up an automatic pistol from a secret compartment in her floor underneath a rug as she passed.

The sound of small explosions reached her ears as soon as she stepped outside, and the air was filled with distant shouts and the occasional scream. The dying had begun all over again.

She chose a back way, a tube that led down into the sanitation system for the city. There was a small closet in the back of one of the maintenance offices; inside, she found what she was looking for. The small piece of material felt almost like skin. It looked airtight. She placed it on her face over her mouth and nose, feeling it seal itself tightly against her skin. She held her breath for the requisite thirty seconds, then drew a lungful of air. The first one was always the hardest to draw, but that didn't make the feeling of near-suffocation any less traumatic. It was only temporary, though. Soon she was breathing as effortlessly as if she had not worn the lung.

She found a hatch on the other side of the room. She had it open quickly, slipping down into it. The coldness of the seawater took her breath at first, but she quickly forgot about it. She allowed herself to sink down, well clear of the city.

Above her, she could see flashes of light - gunfire and other weapons - and the city lights flickering as power conduits were damaged. Below her

was nothing but inky blackness. A primal fear crept up her spine, driving her upwards. There were things in that blackness - huge things, capable of swallowing an entire tank easily. A human would be less than a mouthful. She swam up, gliding along beneath one of the tubes that was the city's main street. Above her, panicked citizens ran about, and the black-clad soldiers cut them down mercilessly. She watched in utter silence - not a sound made it through the water. Here and there, a lone soldier fought back, cutting down three, four, even ten enemies, but there were too many. One of those lone soldiers toppled down just above her; the face matched one of the photographs tucked in that waterproof bag over her shoulder. She stared into his eyes as a flicker of recognition hit them both; his flicker was chased away almost instantly by death. A pool of blood welled around his fallen body, and she floated beneath him in an infinitely larger pool of ocean water. Face to face they lay, floating in silence and darkness.

CHAPTER 11

Lightning struck so close that she could feel the heat, and the shockwave knocked her sideways. She was still groggy, but managed to pry her eyes open. *Why am I sitting here?* She tried to stand, but found herself unable to move. Flexing her hands revealed that she was tied to a tree. Her backpack was gone. It was raining still; the sky was dark when there was no lightning, but garishly lit with each bolt. The flashes of light showed her a strange landscape; the trees were far and few between here, and the ground was grassy. It was very different from the leaf-covered forest floor she remembered. A glow crept over the grass and she looked up as it approached her feet. Shadow was hiding somewhere under her.

The Garden King stood a few feet away, staring at her. "Why did you not leave?" he asked quietly. It was not a friendly sort of quiet; more like the calm before a storm.

"I was trying to!" Alice was more furious than frightened. She appreciate being tied up in the rain, and the mud working its way into her clothes from the ground was not making her mood improve. Her raincoat seemed to have vanished along with the pack.

The glow around the Garden King seemed dimmer than usual. Maybe it was just the rain. Alice didn't really want to know. She appeared to be tied with rope, and her fingers were busy trying to wriggle some extra room in the knot. The King didn't seem to notice.

"I have made up my mind," he said finally. "You will be given to Rodgor. He has need of someone who can write. I presume that you can write," said the King. He looked at her expectantly.

Her fingers paused briefly. "Of course I can," she said harshly. She felt quite insulted. "Who is Rodgor?"

"I am," came a squeaky voice. Alice looked around, her eyes settling on an odd little lizard-like creature.

"Why do you need someone to write?" asked Alice.

Rodgor waved his feet dismissively. "These are not very useful; they're rather too small to hold a pen, you know." Lightning flashed in a prolonged flicker that showed the red stripes running down the creature's back. Overall, the thing was an orange-red color.

Alice felt ridiculous. She was being handled like a typewriter, passed back and forth between a glowing man and a reptile. It wasn't very flattering, overall. One of her hands felt like it was a bit looser, and she pulled it free. The slack allowed her to slip both hands out of the rope, and she flexed them to get the blood moving again. "I'm not going anywhere other than home," she said, a great deal more patiently than she felt.

The King laughed, a deep rumbling sound that echoed through the night over the rain and the thunder. "You do not lack spirit. Do you think

you can handle her, Rodgor?"

The lizard nodded. "Of course." He turned to Alice. "Time to go. I have quite a bit of correspondence to catch up on. Can you believe that I've never even written a thank-you letter to my grandmother for that birthday gift she sent me ages ago." He started walking away.

Alice didn't even bother moving. "I'm not going anywhere."

The lizard's stripes suddenly flared, and Alice shrieked. One of her shoes was on fire. She jumped to her feet, stomping it out. The lizard's stripes flared again - this time it was her shirt that caught. She fell to the ground, rolling to extinguish the flames.

I have to do something, she thought to herself. Her fingers scratched through the grass, searching for anything. Her hands closed on a stick, strangely heavy. It was perfect. She rolled toward the lizard, smashing out with the stick as hard as she could. She connected perfectly. Rodgor went flying through the air, his trajectory coinciding perfectly with an incoming lightning strike. He disappeared in a huge flare of light, almost a small explosion. Alice rolled to her feet, stick ready to hit the King if she had to. He was nowhere to be seen. She darted about randomly, ready to strike, but he hadn't hid behind a tree, either. As best as she could tell, he simply wasn't there. She tossed the stick away in disgust.

Her arm burned somewhat where the flames had bloomed in the sleeve of her shirt. She tried to ignore it, concentrating instead on figuring out where she was. She headed through the nearest stand of trees.

A few moments exploring showed her all she needed to know. She seemed to be stuck on top of a *tepui*, a sheet of land thrust up in sheer walls from the surrounding flat countryside. The lightning occasionally illuminated the forest blanketing the land below. She strained her eyes for any sight of her friends - nothing.

There! It was there indeed, a flicker of light far off. If her eyes weren't deceiving her, it seemed to be a fire. It had to be Ray and Agnes and the jelbeen. The thought made her feel faintly better. *Now to get down from here.*

A half-hour of searching for any way down left her tired and disheartened. She ended up slumping down against one of the few trees. A tear slipped down her cheek, then another. Soon she was crying. Her tears pooled on the ground, mixed with the rain. It was a cruel irony, of sorts. She had survived war, death, betrayal, and more, only to end up stuck on a cliff without even a slight trace of food. She could imagine some adventurer years later stumbling up the side of the cliff, tripping over her bones and wondering how they came to be in such a lonely place. She shook with sobs, then wails.

"You make a lot of noise," said a voice at her shoulder.

Her wail turned into a scream. She jumped clear up to her feet,

wobbling unsteadily. Her eyes widened at what was in front of her, and then rolled back into her head as she toppled over. Only for a moment, though. Something acrid invaded her nostrils, causing her head to snap sideways as she recoiled from the scent. She groaned and sat up.

A little dragon was fluttering in the air in front of her. She blinked twice - it looked like Rodgor, only it was a dragon. The creature nodded as if it was reading her mind. "Yes, I'm Rodgor."

"But you are a lizard - er, well, you looked like one last time I saw you." Alice rubbed her eyes, but the dragon was still there.

"Energy makes me evolve," said the dragon. It was flapping its little leathery wings quite happily.

"You burned my arm." Alice frowned. She must have looked somewhat menacing, because Rodgor floated backwards on his cushion of air.

"You batted me around like a baseball," the dragon pointed out. "I would think that we should be able to call it even."

"But you burned me before I batted you! Not to mention that you were trying to - to *barter* me!"

"I'm sorry. If I wouldn't have agreed to take you, the Garden King would have added you to his collection. You wouldn't want that," said the dragon. It lowered its neck meekly looking up at her from under incredibly long eyelashes. The creature was almost...*cute*, Alice thought with a frown. She was somehow embarrassed at the admission, but it was true enough. "As for burning you, the fire is still difficult for me to control, and I was disappointed that you didn't want to come along with me," said Rodgor.

"I would've been more likely to agree if you asked me nicely instead of torching my clothes," said Alice angrily.

"Yes, I can see where you're coming from. It's very logical that you'd feel that way, of course," said the dragon. "Here, I have a proposition. Let's pretend we never met before." The dragon spun around in a circle, settling in front of her with an ear-to-ear smile and eyes that belonged on a six-week-old puppy. "My name is Rodgor."

The eyes were too cute, despite being set in leathery green skin. Alice supposed it was because the creature was miniature - there was always something about tiny animals that endeared them to humans, she'd found. She softened. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry for batting you around."

"Don't be! It was actually quite fun." The dragon somehow managed to bounce around in the air despite the lack of a firm surface to bounce off of. "We can do it again sometime. It will be fun!"

"Perhaps," said Alice. "What is the story of you and the letters that you need written?"

"Oh, those." Rodgor's tone was dismissive. "Just some thoughts that I've had, and a hello to my poor old mother. She lives off in a cave in India

and I only get to see her once every few years. Even though she has mountains of loot to keep her company, I still think it's about time that I said hello."

Alice thought this was a very admirable attitude, and she said so. The dragon actually managed a bit of a blush. "I'd be thrilled to help you," said Alice, "but I'm stuck here and it's wet and I'm hungry."

The dragon made a little clucking noise with its serpentine tongue, wisps of smoke drifting lazily from the corners of its mouth like incense from a censor. "Stuck? What do you mean?"

Alice almost started to cry again, but somehow she managed to retain some dignity. "I can't get down. I've walked all the way around this place and everywhere it's so far down that if I fell I'd die. I really don't want to die," she confided.

"Ah, dying. It's not so bad, really. Do it all the time," smiled the dragon. For some reason, that didn't make Alice feel the least bit better. "Why are you here?" asked Rodgor suddenly.

"Because I want to go home," said Alice. The answer came to her suddenly. At first, it didn't make sense even to her, but it grew on her. "I'm here because I'm on my way home, and my journey took me here."

Rodgor nodded gravely, but with a hint of a smile. "It's good that you know why you're here. This garden is a dangerous place to be without a goal." He pointed to a tree in the center. "The exit," he said casually, "is in that tree."

Alice started to walk toward the tree with Rodgor following along, but she stopped suddenly. Turning to the dragon, she asked. "Why did the Garden King tie me up?"

The dragon snorted, then coughed the snorted smoke out of his lungs. "So that you wouldn't run away, of course."

"Run away? Why would I run away?" asked Alice.

"You know, girl alone in a stormy forest at night confronted by a scary glowing man and fire-mander; what else do you really expect?" Alice found herself chuckling that a dragon was being philosophical. "And obviously," continued Rodgor, "this is not a place where you want to blindly run. It's a long way down."

Alice could agree with that. Although she wasn't sure that she wouldn't have run; she remembered being jabbed with something sharp before she blacked out. Still, that view made her stomach a little queasy. It wasn't so much the height, which she was fairly used to. Rather, it was the sharp uplifted rocks near the bottom which bore pointy stalagmites like sharp teeth. She'd always thought of stalagmites as belonging in cave floors, not outdoors, but these proved otherwise. She focused on the tree, and something about that focus triggered her vision to switch again. She could make out the outline of a door now, and fumbling around once again

yielded her a lock. For a minute she was panicked, thinking that she had no key, but the cool touch of the metal key against her skin reminded her that it was on the chain. *At least he left me this*, she thought. She pulled it out and turned it into the lock; the door opened effortlessly.

Inside, a staircase descended down as far as she could see. Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside. *Just have to take them one at a time*, she thought, *starting with this one*. Just as she thought "this one," her foot touched the top of the stone stairway.

Rodgor followed her. For some reason, she found this extremely funny. It could be so lonely outside of this garden, but now she was starting to feel like there was never any peace inside - no time to be alone. *After this is done*, thought Alice, *I will nap for at least 48 hours*. She chuckled aloud at the thought, which earned her a strange look from the dragon as the noise bounced up and down the staircase and off into the distance.

"Would you mind being just a tiny bit quieter?" asked Rodgor.

"Well, not really," said Alice, "but it *is* more fun to be loud." She was finding the sound of her echoes to be great fun. The walls were swirling in neon colors now, having left the plain gray stone far behind. The inside of the *tepu* seemed to be composed more of color than of matter. For some reason, that didn't seem the least bit strange to Alice. "What are the colors?" she asked the dragon.

"They're lost souls trapped here," said Rodgor. "Every time someone enters the garden and dies without learning how to leave, an extra color is added here."

Alice eyed the walls with distinctly more respect. "Maybe you should teach me how to leave, so that I don't die here," said Alice.

Rodgor shook his head sadly. "Unfortunately, the way out is different for every visitor to the garden. A few find their way out, but there is nothing I could tell you that would help you. Just trust yourself and you'll be fine." The dragon grumbled something under his breath - Alice could barely make out "...not that I know why I'm helping humans..."

"I will write the letters for you," Alice reminded him quickly. It got the desired reaction.

"You'd do that?" The dragon was pathetically excited. It hopped and bounced and its forked tongue was hanging out while it panted. It reminded Alice mostly of a dog.

"Yes, I'd be happy to." She couldn't help a kind smile, genuine this time.

"Then we go first to my home," said Rodgor happily.

Abruptly the ground slipped out from underneath Alice's feet, and she found herself sliding down a long chute that turned suddenly upwards at the end. The dragon was hanging on to her shoulder with tiny claws that dug in and left little drops of blood staining her shirt. She was sliding so fast that

she had no time to stop; her momentum flung her up into the air, dragon and all. She had time for a quick glance down and a gasp of shock at how high she was, and then she found herself plunging down into a tree.

A giant squirrel's nest saved her life - that, and the pond underneath. The nest was soft, cushiony, lined with stolen bird's feathers and brittle twigs. Her landing made it explode into a cloud of debris, leaving a gaping hole that dropped her down into surprisingly warm water far below. The few seconds it took to claw her way back to the pond's surface were just long enough to wet her face. It would have been refreshing, if not for the dirt, sticks, and feathers floating on the surface. The whole mess stuck to her face. As she broke above the surface of the water, she frowned down at her reflection. *Tarring and feathering - that's what they used to call this.* The grime was insult added to injury, of course. She ducked under the water again. *At least this time I chose to get wet,* she thought.

She came up again sputtering, but feeling much better. The dirt and feathers were gone from her face. She struck out for the shore, which lay only a few feet away. Alice thought it strange that a pond should be so small, yet so deep. She pulled herself out, sighing at the state of her clothes. She always hated being soaked, hated the time it took to dry off. The pond was strange; it had no stream attached to it, and it was almost a perfect circle. It was barely wide enough to have caught her. She leaned over, peering in. Her reflection stared up at her. There was something else, though.

Alice stared in shock at the rubble that had been her home. She smoothed her hair back, ignoring the strips of bloody cloth that dangled from her arms. The blast had shredded her clothing. Even her mother was covered in blood, her clothes ragged and the little bag she carried stained a dirty rust-brown. Alice could see Evelyn's wooden body sticking out below a chunk of concrete that had once formed part of a wall. She tried to grab Evelyn, but it was no use; the concrete was too heavy. She sat down, rocking back and forth and crying softly. Her mother's hand on her shoulder made her look up through her tears.

"We don't have much time," her mother said urgently. "Come!" She began to run, pulling Alice along without even waiting for her to get to her feet. The streets they ran along were dirty. There were bloodstains here and there, and fly-covered fragments of what Alice was sure had once been humans. Alice felt as if her arm was going to be yanked out of its socket; she had no choice but to run if she wished to keep her arm. And run she did.

They ducked into back alleyways, sometimes climbing over piles of debris. Alice tripped often, scratching her hands and elbows and knees, but her mother pressed on relentlessly. With her free hand, Alice tried to wipe some of the tears from her eyes but only succeeded in creating a bloody,

dirty smear across her face. She missed Evelyn. The doll had been her constant companion for years.

Just when she thought she couldn't run any longer, her mother pulled her to a sudden halt, pushing her against a wall and peering around a corner. Alice crawled down onto her hands and knees, peeking between her mother's legs at the street beyond. Her mother seemed too frozen to make her go back, so she stayed.

A mob of people filled a square, carrying bricks, broken bottles, bent pipes, knives, and baseball bats. They seemed to be milling around in a circle shouting. Cries of "Traitor!" reached her ears. "Traitor," and "witch" - and more than a few words which her mother had forbidden her to repeat; some of those words implied incest and worse on the part of whomever they were shouted at. Suddenly, a rope was tossed over a streetlight, and it seemed like only a second before someone was drawn up, kicking out vainly at the air. The mob went wild, milling around in a giant circle that drew ever closer to the hanging figure like moths circling a flame, beating and kicking and tearing at the still-living victim. Not that the victim was living for long, of course. The milling stopped; the mob marched off away from the still body, heading on in search of more victims. For an instant there was silence, and then the body abruptly slumped into the street; the rope had apparently not been fastened well. When the last stragglers from the mob had gone and the street was clear, Alice's mother ventured out cautiously, tugging her to follow.

Alice shuddered as they approached the center of the square. She could clearly see a pool of blood on the ground, smeared with footprints and spattered here and there. The crumpled body on the ground grew clearer as she walked closer. She wanted to look away, but something made her look anyway. It was strange what violence could do, she thought, looking at the middle-aged face of a woman. That face was oddly calm, despite the violence that had been inflicted on its body. The woman had been wearing a black shirt. It was untouched on the top; as Alice's gaze traveled down to the waist, it became ragged. The shirt had been tucked into jeans, shreds of which still hung from the waist. Blood drenched the woman's waist, obscuring whatever damage had been done there, but there were deep gashes in her thighs, and by her knees, there was bone showing. Her feet were completely bare of skin and muscle; only white bone remained, looking pink with streaks of blood. It looked as if someone had been constructing her from the top down, and only completed the skeleton below the waist. Alice somehow managed not to vomit, but her mother was not so strong.

For some reason, Alice reached out to touch the dead woman's bony ankle when her mother's back was turned. The body twitched, and Alice jumped. She jumped again when her mother's hand grabbed her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Her mother's voice was hysterical, but hoarse from vomiting. Alice recoiled both from the tone and the smell.

"Nothing!" Alice was trembling with fear and more than a small helping of guilt. "Nothing, mama, I promise!" A promise was the strongest oath she knew.

Her mother stared into her eyes for a long moment, focusing on one and then the other eye, looking hard for guilt. Alice could see the gears spinning, the needle wavering from INNOCENT to GUILTY with each shift of her mother's eyes. Finally her mother straightened, looking around her. "We can't stand here any longer," she said. Once again they were off, Alice being pulled along. The streets swept into a blur of darting, hiding, running, panicking - over and over.

They reached the edge of the city, ducking behind an abandoned house on the edge of a field as a patrol passed by. The soldiers seemed cheery, marching along with a song and not so much as a glance at the dead bodies cluttering the roadside. Here and there a tank clattered by. Alice winced every time the tanks' tracks passed over a body, but the drivers made not the slightest effort to go around.

When the patrol was gone, Alice's mother pointed across the road, to the trees which marked the beginning of a wood. "Run for it, and keep your head down," she hissed. Then she darted, running as quickly as she could. For an instant, Alice was paralyzed, but fear overtook her as she realized she was now alone. It was a short instant, and then her feet were running almost on their own. She tightened her shoulder blades together, waiting for a bullet that did not come, and soon she crashed through a thicket and into the trees. Her mother grabbed her, pulling her in behind a bush just as another column of soldiers went by. Alice was shaking with fear. She did not stop shaking for a long time.

After it was dark, her mother finally started moving again. Alice was dehydrated; when they finally reached a small pool buried in the forest brush and rocks, she fell to her knees, burying her face in the water and drinking deeply. As she knelt there, peering at the water and catching her breath, she could see her reflection. And there was something else.

CHAPTER 12

Alice jumped like a rabbit as something brushed her ear with a buzzing sound. Rodgor went tumbling away from her, rolling head over feet in the air. He stopped, laughing at her as she wiped the water away from her mouth with the back of her hand.

"What's so funny?" she challenged as she stood up, dusting her clothes off grumpily. She could have sworn that the dragon giggled.

"I don't think anyone could hop that high, other than you - not even Ray."

Alice frowned and looked around. *He knows Ray?* The daylight was starting to glow in the sky again. Shadow seemed to be entranced by the little dragon - his dark head shifted every time Rodgor darted from one air current to another.

Alice ran a finger through her hair. It was tangled again, and she had been so happy at having her bath and straight hair again. Travel was definitely rough on her appearance. Nothing to do for it, though. *Some things can't be helped.* "Where is your house, Rodgor?"

Rodgor did a three-sixty circle in the air, rolling belly-up to the brightening sky. "This way," he said, darting off to the east to greet the sun. Alice followed along somewhat less frantically.

Suddenly Rodgor disappeared from view, and Alice found herself feeling strangely panicked at being alone. She didn't particularly want to be alone again. The Garden King's glowing face popped into her head, and she began to feel afraid. Only for a moment, though. Rodgor popped out from behind a tree, beckoning her to climb up. She breathed more easily to have him back.

The dragon crawled through a small hole in the side of the tree halfway up. Alice managed to balance herself rather precariously on a branch just below; when she was steady, she put her eye to the hole and peered in.

The dragon was seated in a large chair, puffing away on a pipe and wearing a rather Victorian house robe. "Ah, I have guests," he said grandly. "Please, do come in."

"How exactly do I do-" Alice was about to protest, when suddenly she felt her eyeball pulled into the hole. She screamed as her body followed, shrinking down as if she had no bones at all. Soon she was standing inside, looking around in wonder.

There was a fireplace burning merrily, and a warm glow filled the room along with a smell of burning wood. Persian rugs decorated the floor, and a carved oaken table served as a writing desk, if the quill, ink, and paper on it were any witness. It occurred to Alice that she didn't think that a fire *inside* a tree was a very good idea, but then, a dragon inside a tree didn't seem to

be much better. She decided not to think about that. She was impressed with the home, though. "You have a very nice place," she said somewhat enviously, looking at a bookshelf filled with books in more languages than she'd ever really thought existed.

"Thank you," said the dragon comfortably. "Please, sit down." He gestured at a chair in front of the writing table. "Hm, let me see."

Alice picked up a pen and waited.

"Very well, then. The first will be to my dear mother. Take this down carefully! 'Dear mother, how long it has been since we've spoken! At least four hundred years by my count. Ah, time does fly so.'" He looked at Alice sharply. "Getting all of this?" Alice nodded. The dragon looked pleased, and continued.

"I do hope that you bear me no permanent ill will. Circumstances are circumstances, and staying would have meant that I would have had to share a cave with that grumpy Sraila. She never even showered! Now, I know that you do not approve of so-called civilization, but you must accept that I am a civilized dragon and will NOT be party to terrorizing the citizenry and making a flaming nuisance of myself all around. In addition, I prefer to rinse the smell of my last meal from my body like all civilized beings. The last thing I need is some adventurous villager trying to slay me while I sleep, and accidentally getting himself caught on fire. My nerves are too weak for all of the screaming and shouting."

"I find myself now in a Norwegian forest, having many friends and being generally well-adjusted. You are welcome to visit me whenever you like. I have collected a number of trinkets in my time here that I have reserved especially for your visit, whenever that may be. Send my greetings to Sraila - I hold her no ill will, even though my nose does. Your loving offspring, RODGOR." He nodded firmly and coughed. "There, that should do the trick." Alice was just copying down the last of the letter. She signed the dragon's name with a flourish.

"What sort of trinkets did you get for your mother?" asked Alice.

The dragon coughed, a little puff of smoke floating away from his nostrils. "Nothing in particular. Would you like to see?"

Alice nodded. The dragon uncurled from his seat, tapping his pipe out as he did so. He pulled something from the cabinets on the wall. "The first thing I found for her is this little tray of chocolates. Do you think she'll like it?"

Alice looked at the chocolates. Once, they had probably had nice little stripes and whorls of different colors of chocolate on them. Now, even as she watched, they bubbled and boiled under the fierce heat of the baby dragon's breath. She could only imagine what it would be like for a full-size dragon. "I think," she began cautiously - and the dragon interrupted her.

"I knew it! It's perfect. Thank you!" He was beaming at her. Alice

smiled weakly. The dragon didn't seem to notice. He was already pulling something else from the pile. It was a rather stiff sponge. "I've heard that this is useful for grooming, helps to scratch off dead skin. Apparently it came from the Ocean." The awe in his voice was tangible.

Alice eyed the dragon's scales. She couldn't very well see how a sponge would take any skin off the creature. More likely, dragon scales would soon wear the sponge down to nothing. She was about to say so, but Rodgor was already pulling out a box of Havana cigars. "These," he said, "are reputed to be among the best in the world." Alice nodded; she thought that Rodgor's mother might actually manage a single puff out of each of them before they were completely incinerated. Her mind traveled for a second, imagining a dragon larger than Agnes' tent puffing away on a haystack-sized pile of tobacco; she imagined that a dragon-sized creature would need so much to really get the experience of a cigar.

Rodgor had other things as well, none of which Alice thought were particularly suitable for a dragon. A Persian rug (*dragon claws?*), olive oil sealed in a small vial with a cork (*flammable!*), an ivory comb (*do dragons even have hair?*), an oilskin raincoat (*spiny dragon backs?*) - Alice didn't think that Rodgor had gotten a single gift that his mother would actually be able to use. She didn't have the heart to say anything - not that Rodgor would let her get a word in anyway. She settled for watching bemusedly as Rodgor pulled out trinket after trinket; she could imagine each one ruined, destroyed, or lying unused. Finally he had no more to pull out, and he collapsed in the middle of the stack of trinkets, panting heavily. After he caught his breath, he stood unsteadily. "Now, if she'll only visit me, I can give her all of these presents." he said.

Alice nodded. *I have something more important to do than deal with a dragon's Mother's Day gifts!* She stood up. "Rodgor," she said, "I need to get out of the garden."

The dragon scratched his head with a hind leg, much like a dog. He nodded. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask, but since you helped me with my letter, I owe you nothing less than some help in return." He smiled and stretched, then pushed Alice toward the door. She popped out of the hole in the tree, and found herself wobbling on the tree branch, suddenly her normal size again.

It took her a couple of minutes to get the feel of being so large again. She felt heavier and more inert than she had before. Crashes and clanking sounds came from the inside of the cave, along with dragon grunts. Eventually Rodgor emerged, carrying a huge pack from which hams and loaves of bread and rolls of cheese and sausages and green beans and a whole grocer's selection of food protruded. Poking through the pack, Alice couldn't find anything other than the food. *At least*, she thought with a wry smile, *we won't starve*. She shivered a little; she didn't think she would like

it much if it rained again and she didn't have a raincoat. All the food in the world wouldn't keep her dry.

Rodgor stopped in front of her, looking around like the captain of a ship. "We must be going," he said.

"Do you think you can find my friends?" asked Alice.

"Your friends?"

"Yes, the Garden King took me away from them. He isn't very nice," said Alice.

"He can be cranky at times," agreed the dragon. "Tell me about your friends."

"Well, there's Agnes - she's queen of This Side, and there's Ray the fox, and a jelbeen - those are my friends."

The dragon's breath grew a little smokier at the mention of Agnes. He looked at Alice, clearly impressed. "You make friends well, if you are on good terms with Her Majesty."

Alice folded her hands with a modest downward glance. "I wouldn't say good terms - it's more like she seems to like pushing me in the directions she wants me to travel in, come hell or high water or the end of the universe." *Still, it feels nice to be friends with royalty,* she thought.

Rodgor nodded. "She has a formidable will. Very well, I will see if I can locate them. In the meantime, let us be off."

Alice followed the dragon down from the tree, doing her best not to fall or snag her clothes on any of the branches. Before long, she found herself doing what she'd come to do best in this garden - trudging through what seemed to be an endless forest. She could avoid roots and other basic obstacles in her sleep now, though. That was good, because it gave her time for thinking.

Once or twice throughout the day, Rodgor had sat his burden of food down, jumped into the air with a strange little dance, and soared high above the trees. He was doing it again now, which always made Alice slightly nervous; she was still not comfortable being alone in the garden. The first few times he came back without anything to report, but this time he came down looking excited. "I've seen them!"

"Where?" asked Alice.

"They're about a day ahead of us - not far at all," said Rodgor.

Alice found herself looking forward to seeing her friends again - even the fox, whom she didn't particularly like. Like or not, they had been traveling companions, and that had to count for something, Alice thought.

As the sun began to darken the forest again, Alice settled down for another restless night with cold food and no fire; she didn't feel particularly civilized. Alice was quite grumpy by the time she managed to slip off to sleep; the darkness sliding over her eyes was a welcome distraction from the forest.

She found herself piloting that strange little tank-like vessel again, gliding through the ocean waves. The settlement had been the only place she really called home, and Icarus the only person she had really cared for. Now, everything was gone. She fought an urge to dive to the bottom of the ocean, to stay there never to surface again. It was blind instinct that kept her going more than anything else.

Hours later, she found herself standing on the waterside in a decrepit port-city bustling with refugees. That is, if she could call the listless men, the begging children, those desperate women struggling to scrape food together for a family meal - if she could call this melting-pot of human misery a bustle. She headed away toward the city center. Only one of the hundreds of skull-eyed stick figures skulking in the shadows attempted to mug her; she quickly disabused him of any such notion - and more importantly, anyone else who might see her and think her easy prey - by leaving him lying bleeding and broken on the dirty cement near one of many rusted-out warehouses. The crowd parted before her after that as if she was one of the Four Riders.

Still trying to wipe the would-be mugger's rapidly drying blood off her knuckles, she ducked inside a market. There were dozens of stalls with every type of food imaginable, staffed largely by sullen, suspicious keepers who seemed to expect to be robbed at any moment. She managed to thread her way through the dirty, unwashed crowds to a fruit stand, where she picked out the least-damaged looking orange she could find for more than it was worth. *Hell, for more than a whole meal used to cost me.* Still, she had to eat. A bit of luck must have been following her, because she managed to find some ancient teabags in a corner of one of those stalls - nothing special, just plain black tea, but it was strangely comforting. *A breath of civilization, she thought, in an untamed world.* She wrapped up her purchases in a little scrap of cloth and headed away from the market.

An alleyway beckoned, so she ducked in, weaving among the little-traveled streets in a warren-like maze of houses. Most were abandoned, boarded up; here and there, some brave citizen had a string of clothes running from a balcony, or was vainly attempting to sweep dust from a doorway. Alice hardly paid them any mind; what fragments of her attention were being paid to people were focused on the shadowy figures that lurked in doorways, refusing to show their faces.

A left, then another left, and a right on a dead-end street brought her to the little house she remembered quite well. She didn't even bother to knock - just opened the door and went in. It almost killed her.

Her mother relaxed her finger from the trigger of the old shotgun. "Alice? Is it you?" She was peering rather suspiciously out from under a ragged mess of gray hair, looking Alice up and down.

"It's me. Put that away," Alice said irritably. She pulled out the orange and the tea. "Here, take this stuff."

Her mother brightened. "Tea! I haven't had any in weeks. It's so hard to get things these days."

Alice only nodded.

"What brings you back so early?" asked her mother.

"The settlement - it's gone." Alice sat down at the table wearily. She looked around; the place was even smaller than the house she'd grown up in, if that was possible. At least it was clean and insulated. Her mother wouldn't freeze here.

"Gone? Invaded?" Her mother seemed more weary than shocked.

Alice nodded again. "They came in the night. I don't think many made it out - I may have been the only one, even."

Something distantly like sympathy showed through on the old woman's face. "What about your young man?"

Alice shook her head.

Her mother didn't really respond, for which Alice was grateful. It was simply too awkward to discuss some things. The older woman busied herself in the kitchen, heating up water. Alice simply watched. It was like old times, she thought, just the two of them in the kitchen and nobody saying a word. There weren't soldiers in the streets right now, but that didn't mean anything had changed. The soldiers came and went as they pleased - a little luxury that the actual residents of this godforsaken city lacked.

Her mother winced a little, put a hand to her chest.

"What is it?" asked Alice.

"It's nothing," said her mother. "Just a little tightness sometimes."

"You should see a doctor," Alice said, knowing perfectly well that doctors were rare these days and that her mother wouldn't have gone anyway. *Stubborn old woman*. The image of her mother lying in a coffin came unbidden to her mind. For some reason, she knew that the wood in that coffin was a particularly fragrant pine. She pushed the thought away - it was a bleak day, but that thought was more than bleak; it was just, well - *morbid*, she thought.

"I will," said her mother, in the tone that meant that she definitely would not do any such thing.

Alice sighed. "Good." Her mother handed her some tea, which she sipped gratefully. She definitely was starting to feel civilized again. She closed her eyes, inhaling the steam from the tea. It picked her up, wafted her away on thin, vaporous tendrils.

For some reason, Alice awoke full of energy. If she had been the type, she would've called herself bouncy, even. The thought made her laugh. Nobody she knew would accuse her of bounciness. She wouldn't let them.

She stretched, opening her eyes slowly, first one and then the other blinking in the light until her eyes adjusted enough to leave them both open.

Rodgor sat a few feet away, brushing his teeth and ignoring her. Alice noticed that he had oddly large teeth. She wouldn't have expected to see those in a creature three times his size. *At least he takes care of them*, she thought. Considering that they were traveling partners, the last thing she needed was a toothy dragon that smelled like a wet, dead cow. She had to admit that there was something endearing about him.

Ravenous hunger attacked her stomach, causing little pangs that reminded her that she hadn't really eaten much before bed. She started rummaging through the bag Rodgor had brought, looking for anything that she might use to start a fire, but not expecting a thing.

She was in luck. There was a little firebow, hand-crafted, and a notched stick. She sighed. She'd definitely get a fire, but apparently she'd have to work for it. She decided to be practical, grabbing the firebow and stick and setting to work.

It took her about half an hour to actually get a fire going, and then it was merrily crackling away as if it had always been there. Rodgor had taken off before she even got the firebow out, flapping his way up over the trees in lazy bumbling flight in another scouting trip to see where her friends were. Only minutes after she got the fire started, Rodgor flapped down lightly next to her. He shook his head, let his breath out quickly in a fiery blast.

"That was exhilarating," he said cheerfully. "Nothing like flight - it's much better than being earthbound." Smoke was puffing out of his nostrils as he panted to cool down.

Alice slapped herself mentally, rubbing the small blister on her finger grumpily as she looked at the smoke. *Why didn't I think of that?* she wondered. *Traveling with a dragon, and here I am, rubbing sticks together like a cave woman.* She decided to change the subject before the dragon noticed and said something. "Did you see my friends?" she asked.

The dragon nodded. "They're not far. It will only take us about an hour to reach them from here." He started to pack up his food.

"Wait!" Alice protested. "I'm not going anywhere until I have some food," she said firmly. She grabbed the pack from the dragon, who hung on with a claw. He reluctantly let go as he saw that she'd made up her mind. The feral expression on her face might have influenced his decision a little.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt us to eat," he said.

Alice's mouth was already full of bread, and she was dangling a sausage over the fire. In no time, she and Rodgor were having a hearty breakfast. She was focused on eating, but she glanced up and noticed Rodgor eying her.

"What?" she asked, spraying crumbs about.

"Well, I was just thinking," said the dragon shyly, "that if you're not in

a huge rush to get back, there is a ghost town an hour to the east that I've never explored. We can still make it back in plenty of time to see your friends," he added hurriedly.

Alice had to admit to being intrigued. She didn't think that she'd ever seen a ghost town. She'd seen her share of evacuations and mass migrations, but never a completely abandoned city. Even in the worst cities she'd seen, there were always society's castaways - squatters, and the homeless, anyone whom no one cared to take the time to drive away. She couldn't think of what it would take to drive a complete population away, especially here. Except maybe Dandy Ryan. Birds were singing somewhere, and squirrels chattered away in the trees. It was not a barren forest, this place; there was a lot of beauty, and she'd been told that Dandy Ryan had left the garden. Her curiosity got the best of her and she found herself agreeing with more than a trace of excitement. "Okay!"

Rodgor began to hop up and down happily. He might've been only a baby dragon, but apparently baby dragons were heavy. Every jump left deep little dragon prints in the dirt, and he managed to dent a tree by accidentally bouncing off of it in his celebratory mood. Before Alice knew it, Rodgor had his pack of food strapped on again, and was heading on without looking back to see if she was following. He bounced here and there in a zig-zag pattern, weaving through the trees with ease. Alice just had time to scrape out the fire with her foot before Rodgor vanished behind a tree, and she had to run to keep up with him.

CHAPTER 13

Alice was somewhat relieved to find out that Rodgor had been true to his word. The ghost town was hardly any distance away at all; she stumbled into the moss-covered wall of a building before she realized where she was. She walked around it, then looked around her curiously.

She stood in the middle of a street that looked like it could've been the set of an old gunfighter movie. The one street appeared to be the entire town - *Mainstreetville*, she thought cheerfully. There was a battered old saloon called *The Rabbit and the T-Rex*; a pretentious-looking General Store; a barber shop marked by a peppermint pole that twisted its way up to a shiny silver sphere with a dragon on top; a tall-- Alice suddenly realized that the dragon was not a decoration.

"Oh, it's you. What're you doing up there?" she asked.

Rodgor flapped his wings much like a chicken as a gust of wind tried to blow him off of the pole. "It's a nice view, isn't it." He looked around. "Can you believe that they even had a jewelry store here?"

Alice could believe it. This place looked too much like a tourist attraction from certain angles. She felt herself bemused. *A strange place to find in the middle of the forest.* Rodgor had flapped his way over to a door which he was trying to pry open without much success. She chuckled and marched over to help him. The door was old and very dusty, which she hated because it left streaks on her clothes, but it gave easily with a tiny push of her shoulder.

She shook her head with a grin. Dragons and their jewels. This place had been long-abandoned, but those who left did so in such a great hurry that they'd left almost everything behind. She saw nothing obviously gold here, but there were silver rings and earrings and bracelets, some set with semi-precious stones. Rodgor was smashing things left and right in his hurry to gather as much as he could, tossing gold and diamonds into the air delightedly.

It wasn't long before the dragon was too tired to pick up anything else. He'd been carrying around that huge bag of food, and now he was wearing so much jewelry that it almost looked to Alice like he was armored. He clinked loudly when he walked; the mysterious rattles and clanks coming from the assortment of jewelry he was wearing sounded like the noises of a ghost in the attic. Alice cleared her throat.

"Rodgor, don't you think that you're carrying too much?"

The dragon shifted his balance awkwardly, nearly falling sideways while still trying to fix her with a dignified glance. "Of course not," he said. It was hard to take him seriously, though. One eye was struggling to stay open under the very real threat of being poked by three earrings dangling from his head. Alice snickered.

Rodgor ignored her; he was plainly still too excited. "Don't you want something?" asked the dragon. "There's lots here!"

Alice looked around listlessly. There wasn't really much left. The dragon had smashed everything. She casually tossed aside the rubble with her foot, and something caught her attention. A little box, sealed with a tiny padlock. She picked it up, turning it over in her hands curiously.

The box itself was fairly plain, carved with little stars and swords and crescent moons set delicately into the wood almost as if stamped there by a giant press. She tried to open it, to no avail. Rodgor watched for a moment, then edged over to her.

"I can probably help you open that," he said helpfully.

Alice was skeptical. The box was almost as big as the dragon. Rodgor noticed the look.

"I can really help!" he said, turning reproachful eyes on her.

The eyes were simply too cute. She didn't really have a chance against them, so she handed the box over. The dragon opened his mouth, baring teeth as big as Alice's finger. He snapped them together a couple of times for emphasis, then opened his mouth wide. His teeth snapped through the lock with a crash of metal, and little metal shavings tumbled out of his mouth like breadcrumbs. Alice's eyes grew large for a moment. *Is he eating that?*

Sure enough, the dragon was munching away on the metal. Alice stared. "Is it good?" she asked.

The dragon nodded. A few more seconds of crunching and smacking sounds filled the air, along with the noise of the wind.

"This is prime metal," he said, with his eyes half-closed in gourmet bliss.

Alice decided to leave the "prime metal" to the dragon, as he was obviously a much more knowledgeable connoisseur of metal than she was. She took the little wooden box from Rodgor and stepped back outside onto the street. The lid opened slowly, stiffly. It hadn't been touched in a long time. Inside, she found a pearl necklace coiled up. She held it up to the light.

Each pearl was flawless, and there were a lot of them. She didn't think she had seen anything like it before. Almost without thinking, she fastened it around her neck, feeling the pearls touching her skin and growing warm with her body heat.

Rodgor came back outside and stopped, staring at her. "Wow, it's glowing!" A quick glance at the mirror just inside the jewelry store told her that the observation was correct. Some part of her was concerned. The pearls simply *felt* right, though. She left them on.

"I think we should try to find my friends soon," Alice said.

Rodgor nodded. "They aren't far away." He started off to the forest in that mad rushing way of his, leaving Alice to catch up as best she could. She

followed, mumbling something under her breath about "ungrateful forest dwellers" and "uncivilized brutes."

They turned a corner past one of the last buildings, Rodgor leading the way and clinking loud enough to scare every animal in the forest for miles - or so she thought until something grabbed her mouth from behind. A silent, fierce struggle ensued. She lost.

And then the jelbeen let go of her. "I'm sorry," he rumbled merrily, "but I didn't know if it was safe to approach. You were making enough noise for a small army."

Alice reeled unsteadily. "Talk to him, not me," said Alice, jerking a thumb in Rodgor's direction. Her heart was pounding with the shot of adrenaline. Suddenly Agnes and Ray were there, relieving Rodgor of some of his newfound wealth - and his noise-generating ability in the process. She smiled at the jelbeen. "I'm glad to see you, though. I was beginning to wonder if our journey would end so soon." She turned toward the others.

"Agnes! Ray!" Alice ran toward them, handing out hugs like candy. "It's been so long, my dear friends."

"Dear friends?" Ray called to Agnes, looking at Agnes with a raised eyebrow. There was a challenge in his voice.

Alice grabbed the fox up in a hug, twirling him around and around. When she finally stopped to let the animal down, they were both dizzy, but she felt exhilarated. She stood up again, brushing fox fur from her hands. Ray was pretending nothing had happened. When she turned around, she almost jumped; Agnes was right there peering at her.

"So you're still with us. Good, I was beginning to wonder," Agnes said. She looked thoughtful. "You know, when I was a kid, I could never tell the difference between a wander and a wonder - and then when I got older I realized that the terms are closely related." She nodded wisely over her nose at Alice.

"I've been looking for you non-stop," said Alice. "I was kidnapped."

Agnes cackled. "Kidnapped? Who would kidnap you? There are no kidnappers in my corner of these lands. I would hang them up by their toes. My father used to do that, you know - hang me up by my toes and dangle me around until I was dizzy." She snorted indignantly. "Nobody would kidnap anyone around here."

"Tell that to the Garden King," said Alice. "He kidnapped me and got me stuck up on the *tepui* - if it weren't for Rodgor, I might have died up there." She sighed wearily. "I wonder if I'll ever get home. I'm starting to wonder if home is just a fantasy, something I dreamed up."

Agnes patted her head. "Now, dear. We'll get you home. We're already on the way, you know."

"Who is on the way, and where?" The voice was eerie, a feathery whisper tickling the ear. Alice found herself rubbing her ear, almost

scratching it. She whirled around. Agnes was looking underneath the porch of a nearby house. Ray was chasing his tail so hard that it raised a little cloud of dust, and the jelbeen was staring at the sky with a glazed look.

No matter how hard she peered, her eyes got a view of...nothing. "Who's there?" she called.

"I asked first," said the voice, floating around her head like a falling feather.

"I am on my way home," Alice said. She was turning around slowly still, and still seeing not a thing. "Now it's your turn. Who are you?"

For a long moment there was no response. An odd grinding noise filled the air, then the voice brushed her eardrum again. "I am called Iya." Alice looked at Agnes; Agnes nodded.

"Okay, Iya. Come out and show yourself," Alice called.

"Come out and show...myself? This does not make sense."

"What do you mean, it doesn't make sense? You've obviously seen us, so it's only fair that we see you." Alice nodded her head once firmly; *that should show him*.

"There is nothing to see," said the voice, in a tone that left no room for arguments. "At least, nothing that you have not already seen."

Agnes had whipped out garlic and a small pouch of silver coins. She was busily rubbing garlic on her dress and shaking the pouch in the air at the same time, muttering some sort of incantation under her breath. Alice thought she could make out the words "vampire," and "ghost."

"I haven't seen any other people here, that's for sure," Alice said dryly.

The voice was a downy monotone. "The people of Iyaopia emigrated to North twenty-six years, four months, eight hours, sixteen minutes-"

"I think I understand," said Alice. "Do you know where the exit to the garden is?"

"The exit to the garden is wherever you wish it to be, as is the tradition of old," said the voice. "So it has always been."

Agnes broke in. "You don't happen to have seen my pickles, have you?" Alice just looked at her strangely.

"I do not understand the word 'pickles,'" said the voice.

"How can you not understand pickles?" asked Ray. "They're disgusting little rotted cucumbers soaked in nasty vinegar - no self-respecting fox would eat that. Much better some fresh pheasant eggs. Yum!" Alice thought he seemed to be trying to rub his belly with a paw; at least, she could think of no other rational explanation for the way the fox was jerking his paw through the air - not in this context, anyway.

"I think," said Alice, "that we should be going on. I'd like to get home sooner rather than later."

"Of course, dear," said Agnes. She clapped her hands briskly together, getting everyone's attention. "Single file," she barked. "Now march!" She

marched off toward the forest without bothering to check if anyone was following - but, of course, everyone was.

Alice sighed and followed along - and then stopped when she bumped into an invisible wall. It didn't make sense, but it was there. Ray noticed her stopping.

"Why are you stopping?" he called. "She won't wait forever!"

"I know that," said Alice. "But I can't pass for some reason!" She felt out the wall with her hands; it formed a loose, invisible circle all around her. Ray trotted up next to her, and then back to the forest. Whatever was holding her seemed to have no effect on the fox.

"Hurry up," growled Ray. "They're almost in the forest again!"

It was true. Alice could see Agnes and the jelbeen at the forest's edge. Rodgor was gliding in a lazy circle over their heads, for all the world like a tiny eagle.

"Something has trapped me here," said Alice. She was trying to remain calm.

"I prefer the term 'detained,'" said that feathery voice. Ray perked his ears at the voice, then trotted up and sat down next to Alice with a low growl.

"Why am I being detained?" asked Alice with some surprise.

"Because I am bored," said the voice.

"Bored? How did you trap me, anyway?"

"I'm bored, yes," said the voice. "And as Iya, I am in control of all of this city's defenses, included the crime field in which you find yourself trapped."

"Exactly what sort of entertainment do you hope to get from my friend?" Ray was definitely growling, and Alice could see that his teeth were more than slightly bare. She shivered as always; those teeth had points, and those points were so sharp. The teeth didn't seem to make much of an impression on Iya, though.

"Well, as I have been trapped here for so many years, unentertained except for the repetitive antics of squirrels and pigeons, I would like a story," said the voice.

Alice shook her head. "I refuse to tell stories when somebody's forcing me to."

Iya's response was less than heartening. "I can wait as long as it takes."

Rodgor had flapped his way back over, and circled over the street a few times before dipping into a building out of sight. A few seconds later, an electric buzzing sound filled the air, like something shorting out.

"What are you doing?" Iya's voice was still flat, emotionless.

"Rodgor?" Alice called. "Are you okay?"

"Who is Rodgor?" asked Iya. His voice seemed to be fading, quieter.

The little dragon flapped back into view. His mouth was smoking oddly, and little blue arcs of electricity floated over his body. He seemed to have acquired a nervous twitch. "Th-there is a b-box-x in th-there that b-bit me!" Little tongues of flame shot out as he spoke. He seemed more angry than injured.

"A box bit you?" Alice asked with a raised eyebrow. Rodgor nodded rather too vigorously, his head twitching up and down faster than any living creature should be able to voluntarily nod without snapping its spine.

"Self-defense is the right of any living being," Iya's voice communicated helpfully.

Alice scratched her head. This was strange. "You're a box?"

"I am contained within a highly sophisticated array of electronics, stored in something you might call cube-shaped. Therefore, it is not inaccurate to refer to me as a box."

Alice started laughing. Ray and Rodgor both looked at her oddly. She shook her head. "No, it's okay. Iya is a computer!" "What's a computer?" The question came simultaneously from Ray and Rodgor.

"A computer!" For the first time, Iya's voice sounded excited. "I am an advanced artificial intelligence, capable of managing the entirety of Iyaopia without requiring outside intervention. I am, in fact, capable of self-repair, self-defense, and self-propagation. I am NOT a computer."

Ray and Rodgor both looked blank. *Too many strange words*, Alice supposed. She sighed.

"Let me out of this - this 'crime field', or I will have you destroyed," said Alice. "I'm not a criminal, and I won't tell you a story!"

Suddenly a vice-like pressure gripped her throat, squeezing ever-tighter. Her heart skipped a few beats. The adrenaline shooting through her body touched something like a muscle behind her eye. Her vision shifted, and if she hadn't been held up by her throat, she might have fallen over.

She could see the wall around her now, a wavery curtain of transparent green energy. A tendril of that energy had detached, floating to her body. She couldn't see the end of it, but she could guess well enough that it was that tendril which was wrapped around her neck and tightening. At a snail's pace. Alice would have laughed at the ridiculous pace if she weren't worried. At this rate, though, she wouldn't be properly strangled for at least a few hours. Still, it was worrying. "Ray! Rodgor! Help! Get it off of me!" She swallowed against the tendril, which wasn't very difficult - yet.

Ray and Rodgor both looked at her oddly. For a second, she thought they must be stupid, but then it occurred to her that they couldn't see the force around her throat.

"All threats to the existence of the Iya must be terminated." The voice was emotionless again. "Your existence has been deemed to be such a threat. Prepare for termination."

Alice winced. She just wished that she had something to sit on, because she didn't think she could sit on the ground without hanging herself. She could see Shadow lashing its tail in a feline panic. Experimentally, she wedged a finger between that invisible force and her neck. Pushing as hard as she could, she barely managed to gain an extra inch of breathing room before her strength gave out. The tendril stayed stretched, though. Alice estimated that it would take about a half-hour for that breathing room to be lost again. She looked at the fox and the dragon. "That box - you'll have to D-E-S-T-R-O-I it somehow." She couldn't risk saying the word, or even spelling it correctly; it wouldn't help if she warned Iya that they were going to attack it. No, it wouldn't help at all.

"Destr-" Ray started, and then stopped suddenly. "I understand." He gestured with his head toward the building. "Rodgor, your name is?" At the dragon's nod, he continued. "Let's go. We have work to do." He launched himself toward the box-building in a dead run, and the dragon followed behind.

Noises sounded from the building, crashes and bangs and general mayhem. She hoped Iya hadn't noticed. Suddenly, the pressure on her neck started to tighten faster. *Iya noticed*, she thought. She panicked, forcing her fingers through the tendril and managing to regain an inch, but it was quickly lost as the tendril wrapped tighter and began to crush the string of pearls into her throat. She started to fight for air, gasping vainly for breath that wouldn't flow through her constricted airway. The pearls, which she had thought so beautiful, were now helping to strangle her. Spots started to dance in front of her eyes, then a creeping blackness inched over her field of view from the outside in. The last thing she saw was Shadow's tail, hardly twitching now. That darkness met in the center by her nose, leaving her aware of Shadow's tail, then of nothing.

The minister droned on. "...leaving the Valley of Shadows...sticks and cups...treasures and golden streets--" Alice tuned him out. There was a small crowd gathered round the sober pine box; all wore black and some old women carried black parasols to shield against the scorching sun. Gravestones stood upright, thrust up evenly from the hill in neat little rows like teeth. Each tooth guarded the mouth of a grave, marking a threat to the sky in case the blue giant had any plans of trying to snatch the grave's victim away. The hill was a monster, Alice realized. She turned her attention back to the coffin.

The old woman inside looked much like her, only older. Her skin was drawn and wrinkled. They had never gotten along, Alice and her mother. It was a pity that the old woman's heart had given out, but Alice set her face firmly. It was her mother's own fault. She'd asked her mother to visit a doctor, but there was too much pride in the old woman, too much of a sense

that not even death could touch her. Death had not only touched her, it had reached inside her and twisted her heart, killing the muscle before the rest of the body died. A *frisson* rippled through Alice's body. Some people said that it meant your grave had been stepped on.

A few strong men capped the coffin, nailing the lid in place and lowering it into the ground. One of those gravestone teeth hovered menacingly over the hole in the ground; messages were carved into it like cavities. Alice supposed that humans were to a gravestone what bacteria-filled plaque were to a tooth. The message remarked that here lay one Laura Wilkin, a good woman taken by a heart attack. The mourners shoveled dirt in, heavy clods hammering on the hollow wood until it was completely covered. They smoothed the mound over carefully, then the minister said a few more words - something about a better place. *Let him try it and then we'll see if he still feels that way*, Alice thought, her teeth clenched. The crowd trickled away. There wasn't so much as a breeze - just the bare, toothed hilltop and the sun burning down. The humid air was starting to make her sweat, but she took a few extra moments to stomp the dirt down firmly. She turned her back on it and walked down the little path.

At the foot of the hill, a scraggly tree - completely bare of leaves, which was odd for this time of year - reached dully to the sky. Alice found herself sliding down with her back to it until she sat on the ground against the tree. She couldn't really decide if she was upset. A blankness filled her so that she couldn't think. She stared up at the hill for a long time, so long that the moon crept up behind it and peeked out at her.

Eventually she found herself sobbing a little. She had failed a promise, and she had always made it a point to keep every promise she made. If she had truly protected her mother, she would have forced her to see a doctor. Alice tried to tell herself that she hadn't known anything was wrong, but she knew better; she had, and she had taken the easy way out. She brushed the tears away eventually. It wasn't helping her to feel better in the least.

She knew she ought to go home, but somehow going back to a dark, empty apartment didn't appeal to her. She had nowhere else to go, though. Her mother's place was emptied, already being occupied by a poor family desperate to get a place away from the refugee camps. New Atlantis had been overrun, and she'd watched people she loved fall and die there with her own eyes. Nothing there for her, either. She found herself walking up the hill one more time, the moonlight throwing her shadow out behind her and elongating it into an oddly feline shape. She looked at the grave, patted an errant piece of sod down firmly. Brushing her hands off, she stood and turned around. At the top of the hill, a man stood watching her, the moonlight casting a glowing nimbus around him. She turned to go, but he called out to her.

"Wait, we should speak." His voice was deep. She stopped, knowing

that she should probably go home, but curiosity impelled her to turn around.

"What do we have to speak about?" she asked. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I am the King of That Side," the man said simply. Alice laughed, a short little bark.

"Very funny," she said. She found herself actually getting angry at the arrogance of the man, pretending to be Death in the night on the hilltop graveyard where her mother lay freshly buried. *His timing could not be any worse*, she thought. She advanced on him, a cool fury filling her with thoughts of hurting him in revenge for the insult. "Now tell me who you really are."

"I just did," said the King.

"Don't you have a regular name? I don't know. Something like Homer, or John." She was deliberately insulting him. "You look like a farmer. A good farmer's name. Jebediah, perhaps?" She was already several steps closer.

"I have no need of a name," he said. "I am simply the King of That Side. I've been watching you, you know. I'm surprised that you don't remember. It's no matter. I have only one thing to tell you."

Alice had almost reached him now. She was preparing to kill him if she could. "What's that?" she asked.

"It's impressive that you survived the invasion," he said. "I think you should leave this graveyard, as soon as you can." He ignored her advance, turned his back on her. By the time she reached the top of the hill, he was already a distant figure striding down the far side, taking impossibly long steps.

"Wait!" she called. "Is that a threat? And how do you know about the invasion? Were you there?" She got no response, just the further retreat of the King's back as he walked away. She frowned, then broke into a run, chasing him down the hill. The King stopped suddenly, turning to her.

"You are quite foolish, I see. No matter, you always were headstrong." He was the one advancing on her now, and as he got closer, she found herself stepping backwards, stumbling as the hill rose behind her.

"What are you t-talking about?" She was genuinely becoming frightening now, casting quick glances behind her as she backed up. The look on the King's face had darkened to murder now. She stopped maintaining any pretense of bravery and ran.

She could hear his footsteps behind her. The gravestones rose up in front of her as she ran, the grave-teeth seeming to gape threatening at her like a dragon's mouth. She leaped over gravestones, stumbled over grave mounds, tripped over her own feet. The ground was treacherous, and her pursuer was faster than she. The footsteps were closer now. She started to look over her shoulder, to see how close the King was. She had only half-

completed the turn when something crashed into her head, knocking her to the ground. *How could anything hit me so hard?* she wondered, then wondered why she would be thinking that. She could tell she was injured. Her hand went feebly to the back of her head, felt hot blood. Her strength was draining away, being replaced by blackness that swam up from her heart and into her eyes...

Alice stood up from the pool, wiping water from her mouth. The watery reflection mimicked her. She'd thought there was something to see out of the corner of her eye, but it was just her own reflection in a ripple of the pool. Still, she thought she looked older for just a second. She'd always wondered what she'd look like when she was older. Her older self seemed much prettier.

Her mother had busied herself somewhere not far, rummaging through the little bag she'd carried out of the city. Alice sat down at the edge of the pool. Little tadpoles swam around in it, and not much else. The water was not very fresh; when she drank it, it tasted like the algae floating at the edge of the pond. She wiped her mouth and sighed loudly. She scratched away an itch on her neck, shrugging to loosen her clothes. It was very hot.

"Mama, I'm bored," she said. She didn't have anything to play with, not even a book to read. A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye, running down her face. Not even Evelyn, she thought with a sniffle.

Her mother snapped at her. "Don't disturb me - I need to find some food or you won't have anything to eat."

"But-"

"No 'buts!' Now sit down and be quiet!" Her mother went back to rummaging.

Alice sniffled some more. After a few minutes, she suddenly brushed away her tears as a crafty smile crossed her face. She watched her mother out of the corner of her eye, until she was sure that she wasn't being watched. Then she stood up, walking into the trees. *If I have to be quiet, she thought, I am not going to sit down.* She kicked at a fallen log lazily. Some little bugs scurried out from beneath it and ran away.

She walked around aimlessly for a bit, making sure to keep her mother close enough to see. She didn't really want to get lost - she just didn't want to sit down and be bored. Her mother was taking something out of the bag, way off in the distance through the trees. A branch snapped behind Alice. She whirled around.

A man was standing some distance away, looking at her through the trees with a smile. "Hello, Alice," he said.

She was suspicious. "How do you know my name?" She looked him over carefully. He was dressed in plain black. She thought that he had a halo around his body, like the saints she'd seen in a church window before.

Some of her suspicion vanished. If he was a saint, he couldn't be all bad.

"I'm the Garden King," he said. "And this - " he gestured at the forest around him, " - this is my Garden. I always knew you'd find your way here."

Alice took a few steps closer to see him better. He had a kindly face, but something about his eyes reminded her of some of the scarier stories of bogey-men she'd heard her mother tell her. "How did you know that?" she asked.

He walked over to stand beside her, looking out through the trees at her mother. He knelt on one knee to be on her level, turned his head to her. "I know many things." He looked down at the ground, and stretched out his hand, waving it in a small circle. The dirt seemed to press in under an invisible force, like a whirlpool that sucked away the land. The hole filled with water; before long, there was enough dirt missing and enough water added for a small pond to be there. Alice could see her reflection in the water, and the Garden King kneeling next to her. "If you look into the water," said the Garden King, "you will see how I saw you."

Alice stared at the water. At first, she saw nothing but the mud settling down at the bottom, forming a clear pool. A shadow cast by tree branches made the water seem black, even though it was still daylight. The blackness made the water even more mirror-like. In the reflection, she watched as the Garden King waved a hand over the water. She jumped as images formed in the water.

It was like watching the television her grandmother had owned. Televisions were long-outdated, but her grandmother had been a collector of old things. The images flashed one after another, sometimes staying long enough for her to make out, other times not. Finally she could see a little girl sitting in a forest. "That's me?" The Garden King nodded at her.

The little girl vanished, giving way to what seemed like a graveyard. To Alice, the stones looked like little doorways, all opened to mark where someone had gone over to the other side. Other doors hadn't been opened yet - there were either no stones, or the stones which existed lay flat. She wondered if the people she'd seen dying in the city lay in any of these graves. There was a woman lying on the hillside. It was too far away to make out any details. "Why is she lying there?" asked Alice.

"Because she can't decide what time it is," said the Garden King. He flicked his hand over the water again.

This time the images showed a little dragon, only as big as Alice's arm. There was a fox there, and the fox and the dragon were chasing each other around a tree in endless circles. They kept biting the tree, and little sparks of electricity flew around each time they did so. There was another woman, kneeling in the street surrounded by a shower curtain. It didn't make any sense at all to Alice. "What about her?"

"She didn't know why."

"Why what?" asked Alice.

"Why she's in my garden." The Garden King smiled, half-sadly.

"Why is she in your garden?" Alice asked.

"Because she followed me," said the Garden King as if it were obvious.

"Why was she following you?"

The Garden King looked at her. "You do ask a lot of questions, don't you."

Alice nodded. "My mother says it's one of my best qualities," she said primly.

The Garden King stood up, smiling. "I'm sure it is. I must be going. You should leave this place too. It's not safe to be in a Garden alone." He walked off as Alice watched. She turned back to the pool.

She stuck her finger in the water. It was cool. She took a sip. The water was actually sweet. It reminded her of sugary drinks that her mother would make for her. Her mother always said she was hyper after those drinks, but Alice didn't think she was. She took a gulp, then a long drink from the pool.

Soon she was running about singing, not really watching where she was going. She danced, leaped about, bounced off of the trees, twirled, pranced. Her foot slipped into the pool and before she knew it, she'd fallen in completely. She tried to pull herself out, but the edge of the pool was too slippery. "Mama!" she cried, but she was half-choked by the water. She couldn't swim - she'd never learned how. The water closed over her head as she thrashed about. She tried to strike out for the surface, but the water was black; she couldn't determine which way was up. She tried to scream again. Her body forced her to breathe, only to fill her lungs with the sweet liquid. She felt like she was being smothered. Soon, the blackness from the inside of her eyes matched the blackness of the water outside, and everything was one.

CHAPTER 15

Alice opened her eyes. She felt vaguely as if something had changed. *What was it...oh!* Her hands went to her throat. The pressure around her neck seemed to have vanished. She was lying on cool, damp grass, under a darkening evening sky. She pulled herself up to a sitting position - oddly, she felt well-rested - and looked around. She was lying at the entrance to the garden. Behind her, she could see the forest, a few trees at first thickening into the dense tangles that had been enough to lose her when she first entered this place. She stood up suddenly. *How did I get here?* she wondered. She could see the stone garden wall running in on both sides from the forest, meeting in front of her at an arched gate made of cold iron tangled with ivy. The gate was closed, but she could make out the street behind it. She started to run toward it.

The figure stepping into the gate stopped her cold. She didn't have to look twice to know the Garden King. A feeling of dread washed over her. "I want to go now," she said.

The Garden King laughed. "Where would you go? It's so much more fun here, in my domain." He was closing the gate behind him, locking it.

"*Our* domain! Don't you dare forget it! I always forget things, you know. Such a bad habit to get into." Agnes was there, suddenly.

The Garden King glared at her. "Mind your own business, you old hag."

Agnes walked right up to him and slapped him. He ignored her, staring over her shoulder at Alice.

Alice steeled herself, then walked right up to him and tried to push him out of the way. "I am going HOME," she growled.

The Garden King casually slapped her, throwing her backwards through the air. She crashed heavily onto the grass, then rolled over onto her back, gasping for air like a fish. The wind had been knocked out of her. She could hear the Garden King laughing.

"I think you should simply stay here. You don't even know why you came here, and there is certainly nothing back there for you. No mother, no lover - nothing."

Alice found herself staring into her own face. The other Alice helped her to her feet. They looked at each other, amazed. Agnes was staring at both of them, shaking her head.

Alice shook her head. Nothing in the garden was as strange as this. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Alice." The other woman touched the back of her head experimentally. "I don't know how I got here. Something hit me...and I was bleeding...but now..." They both looked at her hand; it was clean skin - she wasn't bleeding at all.

"Well, you're certainly not bleeding now," said Alice. She smiled at the other Alice. She decided she'd call her Alice-the-Second.

Alice-the-Second smiled back tentatively. "That's a good thing. Where are we now, and why is he here?" She jerked a thumb at the Garden King.

"He is King of That Side, the Garden King," said Alice.

"That much I know. So why did he hit you?"

Alice found herself on the verge of tears. "I just wanted to go home. I followed him here, and now he won't let me go."

A dull thud behind them made them spin around. A small girl lay sprawled on the grass, not breathing. Alice-the-Second ran over, checking airway, breathing, and pulse. There was nothing. She started CPR, breathe and compress, until the little girl coughed up some sickly-sweet-smelling black liquid. The girl gasped for breath, getting it in ragged sobs. "Mama!" she cried. Agnes was there now, pulling herbs from her pockets.

Alice and Alice-the-Second stared at each other. They both remembered that girl well, even though it had been years ago. Alice put an arm around the little girl.

"It's okay, don't cry!"

"Enough!" The Garden King was standing in front of them. "If you're going to multiply like pests, I'm going to have no choice but to eradicate you like pests." He grabbed Alice by the throat, lifting her off the ground. And then suddenly groaned, dropped her, and bent over. A well-aimed kick between his legs by Alice-the-Second had taken some of the immediate fight out of him.

"Run!" said Alice-the-Second. She grabbed the little Alice by the hand, dragging her toward the Gate. Alice was struggling to breathe, but she started to run too.

"Not so fast." The words brought all three of them skidding to a stop. The Garden King stood in the doorway again. Alice hadn't seen him move. Little Alice looked panicked.

"I want my mama!" she cried, and the Garden King grimaced.

"Children are such a nuisance," he said. "I warned you all to leave my garden, but do you listen? Of course not. Children never listen. Always have to learn by example. Well, here's an example for you!" He held out a hand parallel to the ground, and the ground began to shake. A low rumble built up, a small hill forming underneath his hand. The hill broke open and a boulder jumped into the Garden King's hand. He hefted it a couple of times - then with a roar, he launched it straight at Alice's head.

The boulder flew true - and was intercepted by Agnes. The old woman had leaped into the air, catching the rock like a basketball. "Oh, a game!" she exclaimed with excitement. "I love games." She bounced the boulder on the ground, making it shake under the Alices' feet. All three stood staring in awe. Only for a moment.

"I want all of you *out!*" shouted the Garden King. He began to pull stones from the ground, launching them in a rhythmic cascade at Agnes and the others. Agnes was fielding most of them, but there was no way she could catch all of them. Alice screamed as a stone the size of her head flew at Little Alice. At the last moment, a shape darted through the air, smashing the stone into powder. Rodgor hovered in the air. He flashed a grin at Alice before jumping into the fray with Agnes.

The Garden King's roar grew angrier, and the boulders sprouted fire. They burned the ground where they hit. Agnes took a deep breath, puffing the flames out each time before she blocked the boulders. Rodgor didn't seem to mind the flames - if anything, he bathed in them, floating around lazily as if the flames were nothing.

Alice called to Alice-the-Second. "We can't just stay here! We have to do something!" Alice-the-Second nodded. "I know how to fight," she said grimly.

Neither the Garden King nor his opponents were tiring. If the moon had looked down, she would have seen what looked like a basketball game played with too many balls, and all of them on fire. Alice-the-Second darted toward the Garden King, dodging rocks. She dove to the side into a roll, coming up with a tree branch. She stripped the leaves off as she ran, turning it into a serviceable staff which she slammed into the Garden King's leg. The damage hardly seemed to faze him, but the rocks flew a trace less frequently.

Alice didn't know what to do; she settled for sheltering Little Alice. The rocks seemed to be flying now faster, now slower - but always flaming. One of them smashed into a tree, showering her with flaming stone splinters. Her shirt began to smolder. Seconds later, it was sprouting fire.

She tried to drop to the ground and roll the flames out, but there were too many fiery fragments of stone in the grass already. The flames grew, and she could feel the burn starting into her skin all over. She screamed.

The cool barrage of water splashing over her skin brought instant relief. The jelbeen was there, playing firefighter. She got to her feet, throwing her arms around the creature in her joy at no longer being on fire. The jelbeen patted her head awkwardly with one hand, while catching fiery stones with the other. Steam hissed up whenever one of those stones scorched through his skin.

Ray was there, Alice saw. The fox was sitting at the edge of the forest, tail curled around him. He was just watching. Some part of Alice wondered why he was not helping.

The Garden King had grown fiercer, and somehow larger. He was now taller than the garden gate, and glowing like a fluorescent light. Alice-the-Second was still fighting fiercely hand-to-hand. She had managed to inflict a half-dozen wounds, but the Garden King didn't seem to feel them. Agnes

had scored a few points against the Garden King - scorched places on his clothes and skin told the tale, and Rodgor was darting about here and there. He actually seemed to be trying to *bite* the King.

Her friends were losing the battle, though. A well-aimed rock smashed Rodgor out of the air, slamming him against the far garden wall. He staggered up, walking about in dazed circles - clearly out of the fight. Agnes was unable to handle the entire volley of stones by herself, and soon she was buried underneath an entire avalanche of the rocks. Fortunately she had managed to extinguish most of them, although the ones on top still smoldered.

Alice-the-Second tried to drive her staff into the King's stomach, only to have the stick burned to a crisp. Alice cringed as the King lifted a foot, stomping down on his small assailant with an audible crunch of breaking bone. Alice-the-Second screamed, tried to get back up, but her movement was feeble. She was soon not moving at all. There was blood - too much of it.

Alice felt a sickening sensation in her stomach. She could not win, and there was so much destruction. All she wanted was to be at home, for none of this ever to have happened. The Garden King stopped pulling up boulders, advancing on her.

"You should have left the garden," he said again. Alice couldn't have agreed more.

"Please, don't -" she started, but the jelbeen had stepped between them. Little Alice had wrapped her arms around Alice's leg, hiding her face against Alice.

The jelbeen looked the Garden King over. "I suggest that your majesty returns to the forest." He planted himself firmly, his demeanor saying plainly that he would not be moved.

The Garden King lunged at the jelbeen, who nimbly sidestepped, bringing massive fists crashing down on the back of the King's head at the same time as he fired a huge jet of water at the luminescent King. A hissing sound like something frying filled the air, along with massive clouds of steam. The Garden King crashed to the ground, shaking the earth under Alice's feet. The jelbeen stood over his fallen opponent.

For a second, the King lay there. Then he put his hands underneath him, lifting himself off the ground. He stretched, shaking off bits of water. He turned slowly, laying furious eyes on the jelbeen. "That," he said, "you should not have done."

The jelbeen braced himself firmly. The Garden King tilted his head sideways, studying his opponent - then without warning his fist crashed straight through the jelbeen. The blow was too fast and too sudden; the creature had no time to move. Clay and mud went flying, and water poured out in great torrents, dissolving the jelbeen's shell. The water coalesced into

a thin, seeking stream, a long thread that rolled over the ground snakelike back into the forest. The clay was soon dry, and nothing was left of the jelbeen but a pile of dust.

The Garden King rolled his shoulders, cracking first his knuckles and then his neck menacingly. He turned to Alice with a maniacal grin. "Your friends never had a chance." He struck again, hard, with a foot, catching Little Alice in the back. The blow was strong enough to carry through her body, knocking Alice completely off her feet - but not before she heard the little girl's spine snap. "No!" she screamed. She picked herself up, dazed, and rolled the young girl over. There was a hint of life in those eyes, but the hint was fading fast.

Alice broke into tears, ignoring the Garden King behind her. Not that he was threatening her - she was vulnerable, but he just stood there watching her. Alice looked at her younger self, stroking the hair. She didn't know how the little Alice had gotten into the garden, but this was no way for a child to make an ending of things. "You'll be okay," she whispered, but she knew that she was lying to both herself and to the girl. Alice just looked at her, lips moving soundlessly. Her eyes seemed bewildered, uncertain as to what had just happened to her. She died that way in Alice's arms, bewildered but not alone.

Only Alice was alone. Alone with the Garden King, alone with her friends, at least some of them certainly dead. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She lifted her head up, staring accusingly at the fox. The animal just stared back in a calm, smug "I told you so" look.

She wiped a tear away angrily. *I am not going to sit here again.* She raised her voice. "I am not going to just sit by again! You can't do this!" She felt a familiar sense of righteous fury, of a reckless vengeful rage filling her. She stood up, facing the Garden King.

Tearful, angry eyes stared into cold, dark ones. "Why did you hurt my friends? They never did anything to you."

The Garden King laughed. "Of course they did. They were in my garden. And she --" he pointed to the pile of rocks covering Agnes, "-- stole half of my kingdom. I've been waiting a long, long time for this."

Alice was shaking her head. "It's not your kingdom! It's his!" She pointed to Ray.

The Garden King frowned. "It's his garden, that is true. Nonetheless, I am regent. It is *my* kingdom. You failed to figure out why you were in my garden, and you were judged. Now, I pass sentence on you."

"But-" Alice started. The King interrupted her.

"Enough excuses." He took a menacing step forward.

Alice felt a panic well up in her - and then the rage buried it. She remembered fighting in the war, remembered watching her friends, even her lover dying, remembered the battles that had surrounded her when she was

a child. Indignation filled her. She was no coward, to back off before some radioactive bully. She knew how to fight; she had killed more than her share before. *No more failed promises.* Something clicked in her head - that weird vision was back, and this time something was very, very different.

She could see inside the Garden King, but more importantly, she could somehow see every little vulnerability like she had with the Yeti. She could see where nerves ran close to the skin, where bones were thinnest, where blood vessels could be crushed.

She looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon. There were a few sticks lying some distance away - one was big enough to be a staff. She glanced at Alice-the-Second's body, refusing to acknowledge that the other woman had failed. What she knew, Alice knew, and that included fighting techniques.

A diving roll took her halfway to the stick - another got her to it. She ignored the shards of broken rock sticking up from the ground, despite the thousand little cuts they inflicted on her. She turned to face the Garden King, weapon in hand. The King stretched out a fist over the ground as if to pull up more boulders. Alice hit him as hard as she could; it distracted him, but he simply closed his eyes and started over again.

Panicked, Alice looked around for any way to make the stick deadlier. Suddenly something sharp in her pocket caught her attention. *The Yeti claw!* She pulled it out; it was sharp on both ends, and she slammed one pointy end into the tip of her stick, pounding it against one of the fallen boulders nearby to set it in firmly. She now held a serviceable spear.

With her newfound vision, Alice could see the nerve impulses traveling from his brain to an odd little organ in his torso, from which the energy field flowed out toward the ground. She didn't have time to watch him pull out the stone from the ground, though. Another one of those could kill her. She leaped toward him, staff extended.

The Garden King tried to move, but he wasn't fast enough. Alice scored a direct hit on a nerve that transmitted the shock directly to that strange little organ. She could see the stunned look on his face as he lost the ability to control the energy, and she watched as the energy field slammed into the ground. A half-lifted stone thudded down again somewhere underground; she could feel the vibration under her feet.

The Garden King was trying something else now. She could see another wave of nerve impulses traveling through his body, this time down through his feet into the ground. She could sense the ground heating up under her feet. Remembering those flaming stones, she didn't even hesitate. Launching herself in a furious attack, she struck nerves in ten different places on the side of his leg, the injured sites sending a cascade of messages back to the brain that completely disrupted the wave. The ground cooled again.

She could tell he was hurt; every place that she'd hit him, and a dozen other places where he'd sustained injuries from her friends - all of those places were pulsing with fiery colours, and with her normal vision she could see blood on his leg and his head. The pain signals looked distinctly reddish to her, like photographs of highways taken in time-lapse at night where the red tail-lights of cars made streaks on the roads. She shook her head to make herself focus - this was definitely no time to be admiring anything. The Garden King was pulling back a fist to punch her; she remembered what had happened to the jelbeen and she started to back away.

It came incredibly fast - she tried to throw herself backwards away from it, but his fist clipped her shoulder, smashing into it. The nerves deadened almost immediately. She tried to move her arm, but it was halfway useless. She still held her makeshift staff with her other hand, though. This time, when the King approached her, she was ready. He was preparing a kick. She moved at precisely the right time under it, slamming the staff into the side of the knee he was supporting his weight on. She was rewarded with a satisfying crunch. She'd ruined the Garden King's balance.

He shrieked, dropping to his remaining good knee. She was fairly sure she'd broken his knee. That was fine with her. They faced each other; her with one bad arm, him with one bad leg. "More even now, don't you think?" she said through her teeth.

One of the Garden King's hands closed on a fallen stone. He swung it at her head in a wicked arc which she just barely managed to duck under. She caught him in the side of the head with the blunt end of the spear. He seemed dazed. She started to relax a little into the rhythm of the fight.

She relaxed too soon, though. The Garden King lunged at her in a sweeping tackle, catching her legs and bringing her crashing down. One of his hands groped for her throat while the other dug into her free arm. She cried out in pain, trying to move her other injured arm. It responded a little, in spite of the numbness. By stretching her fingers as far as they would go, she just managed to grab the stick with a deadened hand. The Garden King's hand closed around her throat now, but she managed to bring the end of her staff into his temple with her numb arm. She hit him again and again until he dropped heavily on top of her, unconscious. She kicked him off, rolling out from underneath him and standing up unsteadily.

Alice studied the fallen Garden King. He seemed unconscious; she was no doctor, but she didn't think he was dead. She looked around at her fallen friends, then back at the King. A cold fury filled her. *I should kill him*, she thought. She raised the spear, point down, and prepared to ram it into the King's heart.

She couldn't do it. It was one thing if she killed him in battle, but she was not one to kill in cold blood. She took a deep breath, tossing the spear aside. She was fairly sure that he wouldn't be getting up any time soon

though.

She turned to her fallen friends. Ray was already there, pushing at the boulders over Agnes with his nose. For such a small creature, he'd managed to get a few of them off. Alice stalked over to him.

"Why bother? It's not like you helped us while it could have counted," Alice said in a shaky voice which she was trying to keep level - not entirely successfully.

Ray returned her gaze calmly. "I am only a guide. It is not my duty to interfere with your fights."

"But you did in the forest, with Iya," Alice reminded him. She was definitely being accusatory.

"That was different. That was part of the journey, not part of the trial." He smiled at her.

"Trial?"

Ray nodded. "You should remember. You had to find out why you were here." He looked around at the destruction. Great piles of earth had been pulled up, and stones were lying about here and there. The grass, so beautifully green not long before, was burnt to a crisp in all but a few sparse patches. "You might have spared my garden," he said with a sigh, pulling another boulder free from Agnes.

A shrill voice scraped its way out from little cracks in the pile of rocks. "Let me out of here, you young hoodlum, or I will hang you up by your toes! My father did that once, hung me up by my toes. My, did the blood rush to my head. Worse than being embarrassed!" Agnes' voice was muffled beneath the weight, but sounded strong.

Alice's eyes were wide with wonder. "Agnes? You're alive?" "Of course I'm alive. A few rocks can't keep me down. Takes a lot more than that! When I was a girl, we used to use rocks for washing our clothes. Nothing to be scared of, these rocks." She sounded far away still.

Alice turned to Alice-the-Second. And froze, because the woman's body wasn't there. She walked over to the place where she'd seen the woman fall. There was blood on the ground, to be sure - massive quantities of it that made Alice wince to look at, and the staff was burned to a crisp. There was no body, though. Alice looked around wonderingly.

She couldn't see Little Alice either. The girl's body had vanished just as completely as the other woman's. There was no trace of either one. Alice was sure no one else had entered the garden during the fight to take the bodies away - she would've seen them. She turned around again.

Agnes was just pulling herself clear of the stack of rocks. Alice rushed to the old woman, throwing her arms around Agnes' rail-thin body. "You're okay!" Alice said wonderingly.

Agnes nodded. "It takes more than a stack of rocks to take down a queen for good." She dusted off her hands on her dress, looking none the

worse for wear. "He doesn't look so good, though," she said, pointing at the fallen Garden King, who was lying prone and silent. Agnes looked at Alice appraisingly. "Not a bad job for a young one. I knew you could handle things."

"I almost didn't," said Alice. Her face fell. "The jelbeen - he got hurt, I think."

"Ah, that was a scratch. Water seeks water, you know. He'll be back in his old pool by now, if my instincts are any good. I've always loved pools - my auntie used to have one and we'd go swimming every single summer, you know!" The old woman suddenly seemed to remember something. "Ah, your friends...the woman and the girl - who were they?" She looked around again. "Where are they?"

Alice swallowed a lump in her throat. "They were just my friends, like you said." She had no answer for the second question, but some part of her felt like all was right with the world.

Agnes stared at her for a moment, then nodded to herself. "Very well. So, I suppose you'll be leaving us now?" She nodded toward the gate.

Alice felt torn, which surprised her. She had expected to feel completely ready to leave, to have not the least bit of hesitation about going home. Rodgor was back on his feet, waddling unsteadily over to her, and Ray had sat down nearby. All three were watching her intently.

Alice took a deep breath and nodded. "I have to, I think." She smiled suddenly. "I don't know if I could take anymore excitement - your garden is very demanding!"

The fox grinned at her for some reason at that, and Rodgor hugged her ankle. Alice straightened herself, wanting some dignity in her farewell. A hug for the old woman, and a quick cuddle for Rodgor, and then there was only Ray left. She crouched down to the fox's eye level. "Thanks for being my guide," she said seriously.

Ray just nodded. "It's nice to have some fun once in a while - even if it is babysitting another lost soul who doesn't know why she's here." He was grinning at her for some reason.

Alice stood up, nodded once firmly at her friends, then turned her back on them and faced the gate. The tall iron stood waiting for her. She walked over to it, put a hand on it to open it. It wouldn't budge. There was a tiny keyhole on the gate, and it seemed to be locked shut. A quick rattle of the gate told her that it was too strong to force.

For a brief instant Alice felt panic. *I don't think I can take anymore of this place*, she thought, a tear starting to slide down her face. She was just about to slump down in defeat when she remembered the little key in her pocket. She pulled it out - *whew, it's all in one piece!* - and stuck it into the lock. As Agnes had promised, it fit perfectly. The gate swung smoothly open and Alice stepped back out onto a bright street illuminated by a late

afternoon sun in a clear sky.

CHAPTER 16

Poke...poke...poke... Sharp pressure prodded into Alice's arm, and into her consciousness. Something like awareness began to flood back into her head. Now that she was aware of her head, she was aware that it hurt like hell. She groggily stretched out a hand to reach behind her head, nearly knocking over a pitcher of water that was sitting on a small end-table next to her bed. Her fingers touched cloth bandages where she expected to find only blood.

The room slowly swam into focus in front of her. There was someone in the room with her, sitting on a small chair next to IV tubes running through her skin into the vein in her hand. It slowly dawned on her that she was in a hospital.

She smiled weakly; her throat hurt. She tried to say something but it came out as a croak. The sitting figure stood up, hurrying over to her bed. It was a police officer.

"It's good to see you're awake, Miss Wildkin. I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to wake up."

She blinked her eyes, somewhat dazzled by the light in the room. Her throat was dry, that was why it hurt. She tried to speak again, but had no luck. She looked around - there were paper cups on the end-table, so she filled one from the pitcher and gulped it down. Another glass of water followed the first one. She cleared her throat.

"Where am I?" she asked. *Good, at least my throat works,* she thought.

"You're at the city hospital, Miss Wildkin." The officer was a pleasant-looking young man, who seemed rather nervous about having to be there at all.

"How did I end up here?" Alice asked.

"That's what we were hoping to ask you. We found you lying on Cemetery Hill with the back of your skull split open. The doctor says it's a miracle that your brain hasn't been damaged."

Alice shuddered. She hadn't even considered the possibility that her brain could have been injured. She tried to clear her head, to remember what happened to her. "I think," she said unsteadily, "that I was visiting my mother's grave - she was only buried today-"

"Three days ago, miss." The officer looked sympathetic.

"Three days? Is that how long I've been here?"

The officer nodded. Alice tried to wrap her mind around the fact that she was missing three days of memories. "I see," she said. "Well, I was at my mother's grave and I started to leave. A man tried to get my attention, but I just left, and I think he hit me from behind." She looked directly at the officer. "That's all I can remember."

The officer stood, nodding. "I'm not surprised. You took a pretty hard

knock." He sounded discouraged. "We'll keep an eye out for anyone who might do such a thing. Lots of crazy people out there, and they tend to do things more than once. If he hurts someone else we'll have a better chance of finding him, as morbid as that may sound."

Alice nodded. The officer hesitated for a second. "Well, I should be off. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to call me." He handed her a card with his name on it, and some phone numbers, and then he left.

The next few days passed for Alice in a blur of headaches, tranquilizers, and painkillers. Still, nothing could stay wrong permanently, and she found herself back on her feet soon enough. Everything was back to normal, except the odd dreams of being in a garden with a giant glowing man throwing fiery rocks at her. Such strange dreams she had.

There was pressure on her chest. She felt like she couldn't breathe - like the air was very far away. She tried to draw in a breath, but no air filled her lungs. The pressure was there again. The air seemed closer now. She tried to open her eyes, but could see only blackness.

Suddenly the blackness rushed away, replaced by blinding light. She could hear a voice from a distance. "Breathe, damn it. Come on, breathe!" She took another breath, struggling for air.

A fit of coughing hit her. Some sort of sweet liquid gushed up from her lungs, spilling out of her mouth. She drew in a ragged breath, the air competing with the liquid in her lungs. More coughs, more gasping, and air rushed into her lungs. Soon she could breathe again, but there was an aching in her lungs that she didn't think would go away soon. She rolled onto her face, lifting herself to her knees with all the strength in her arms. Stronger arms helped her, pulling her to her feet. She raised her head to get a glimpse of her surroundings. She stood in the forest on the edge of a pool. Her mother was standing in front of her, concern digging furrows into her brow.

"Thank goodness you're alright," her mother breathed. "I was so worried!" She was actually crying a little.

"Don't cry, mama," Alice said. "I'm sorry for going away - I didn't mean to-"

Her mother cut her off. "Sshh... It's okay, I'm just glad that you're alive. You could have died."

Nothing more was said about the incident. Alice's mother made her drink some hot tea, to soothe her throat. Alice still coughed occasionally for most of the day, but she was soon feeling mostly better. Before the sun was even halfway down the sky past noon, Alice and her mother were on the move again, heading away from the city.

They walked all of that night, and some of the next day as well. Smoke over the trees told them they were heading the right way. Soon the

trees thinned out, giving way to a refugee camp. They headed inside, trying not to notice the poverty all around.

The camp was full to bursting, but it took them in anyway. There was a place to stay, and some little food. The miserable life became routine easily enough, and Alice quickly made friends with many of the children in the camp. One day she found herself invited to play with the older, more serious children. Before she knew it, she was made part of a secret little group of soldiers inside the camp. Small though it was, the training was military-grade, strenuous and serious. She grew strong, and learned to fight. There was little to do in the camp other than to train, and to wait for a chance to take back her world. The days faded into weeks, months, and then years.

* * *

Alice couldn't believe her eyes. The street was just as she'd seen it last, only now she saw it in the daylight and with no rain to coat it. She found herself walking idly back along the sidewalk, looking for traces of those footprints that she'd so naively followed in. She could find nothing.

She kept walking, though, kicking leaves aside. The sidewalks seemed quite normal. She was about to decide that the whole thing was a dream, that none of it was real, when she kicked aside a small pile of leaves - and there it was. The footprint was no longer glowing; it was just a regular footprint impressed into concrete. If anything was odd about it, it was that there was no sole-pattern there to tell of shoes. There was only outline of a bare foot. Out of playfulness, more than anything, she put her own foot inside that outline. It fit perfectly.

Alice stared at the footprint. There was no doubt about it, the footprint was exactly the same size as hers. She shook herself; then she was running along the sidewalk, kicking aside the leaves until she found another footprint, and then a third. They all fit, precisely the same size as her own feet.

She stood there for some time, her foot inside the prints. *What does it mean?* she wondered. She found herself running back to the gate, but it was locked. Her key refused to open it. She considered climbing the wall, but it too high to climb over and she could make out broken glass bottles embedded in the top. *Someone really hates trespassers*, she thought. She rattled the gate in frustration, peering through the iron bars, but there was nothing to be seen. From the gate, she could not even see the forest, only the clearing. It was entirely maddening.

There was nothing she could do, though. She sighed, took a deep breath, and walked away. She turned the corner back onto the main street. A neon sign was flashing, looking dim in the sunlight. *The Fox and Toad*, it proclaimed. There was a board hanging above the sign, showing a fat toad jumping over a fox's back. She smiled, the fox making her remember Ray.

She stepped inside.

The waiters and waitresses were bustling around busily. It was late afternoon, not yet dinnertime, but there were enough old pensioners sitting around to keep the place busy. If she hadn't known, she would have had no clue that a war was on. Alice took a seat near the window.

There was a candle on the table, but it was not lit. She tapped it idly. A waiter came up to her.

"Can I get you something to drink?" He smiled at her. He reminded her of someone she'd seen once, when she was in a hospital. *Must be the uniform.* She nodded.

"Water would be fine, and I'll have some wings," she said. The waiter nodded and turned to leave, but she broke in. "Oh, I know it's not yet dark, but would you mind lighting this candle for me?" She gave her most charming smile. The waiter smiled back and nodded.

A few minutes later he came back with some water for her, and a lighter. He lit the candle, moving it to the center of Alice's table.

"Thanks," Alice said. The waiter nodded pleasantly and went on about his business.

The candle burned steadily, a small flame all on its own. Alice watched it for a long time, not even noticing when the waiter brought her wings, not noticing that the sun was sinking down outside. There was only Alice and the candle.

Alice smiled at the candle. It burned quickly; the wax was almost gone already. *Gone as fast as that trip was,* she thought. Her friends waved at her happily from inside her head. She wondered for a moment if she would see them again, but she knew that she would not.

The candle flame flickered; it was almost out of wax. She sighed, straightened up, and stretched. Her food smelled good. She bit into a wing - spicy, but delicious. The candle flame flickered one last time, and burned out in a thin spiral of smoke.

Alice blinked.