

RETURN TO ALLAPATRIA



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To Steven, who enriched my midnight
ramblings and created THE character.
With love.

CHAPTER 1

16th July 5.55pm, Britain

Daniel smiled happily and snuggled himself further into the recliner. The heat from the sun was just right and he had a large glass of ice-cold lemonade sitting next to him. Plus, it was the very first day of the summer holidays; no more school for six whole weeks.

But the best, most wonderful thing of all, was that he was on level 4 of Attack of the Mutant Frisbees. No one he knew had *ever* got this far. Daniel grinned to himself, as he dodged left and right, avoiding the low flying hordes of possessed discs. It was turning out to be a great day. By the time school started back in September, who knew what level he would be on? Maybe level 9 or 10. He frantically pressed the left button on his portable console, splatting two Frisbees, both of which were oozing pus and cackling madly.

“Gotcha!” he shouted, whooping in delight, as the screen flashed ‘level 5’ in bursts of green and gold, accompanied by a tinny sounding trumpet fanfare.

“Yes!” he yelled triumphantly, just as a large football sailed into view, blocking out the sun and hitting Daniel on the chest. It

bounced off Daniel and landed squarely on the 'off' switch of the console, which did as it was told and immediately switched off.

"No!" Daniel yelled in horror, as the football continued on its path of destruction and knocked his lemonade over. The lemonade streamed onto the grass, leaving behind two sorry looking, half-melted ice cubes.

Daniel snatched up the console and wailed as he looked at the screen. It was blank. His heart sank, as a terrible thought suddenly sprang into his brain.

"Oh no, oh no, please..." Daniel quickly switched on the console and scanned the results table. He had been so thrilled with his score that he'd forgotten to save the last few levels. In fact, the last time he'd saved the game was on –

"Level 2." He whispered the words mournfully, covering his eyes. There was a sudden cough and a small voice called out from the other side of the fence.

"Er, Daniel? Erm, can I have my ball back, please?" Daniel's misery instantly turned to anger. Brown eyes darkening with rage, Daniel snapped his head round and glared at the owner of the voice. There, with his chubby blond head poking anxiously over the fence, was Barnaby.

"Do you know what you've done?" roared Daniel, jumping to his feet and grabbing the football. "I was on level 5! I'll have to do it all over again, now!" Barnaby's anxious look swiftly disappeared.

“Well, come and play football with me, then,” he called, smiling eagerly.

“No, thanks,” retorted Daniel sullenly, throwing the football *at* Barnaby, rather than *to* him. Barnaby squeaked and ducked. “I’m going in. And stop talking to yourself!” Daniel called over his shoulder. “You kept putting me off my game. Weirdo!”

“I wasn’t talking to myself, I was...” But Daniel had already slammed the patio doors shut.

Daniel Green had lived at 18 Yew Tree Gardens with his mum and dad since he was three years old. In fact, one of his earliest memories was of the day his parents had taken him to view the newly built house, nine years ago. The house was on a brand new estate of large, ‘executive style’ homes. Daniel remembered how his mum had been desperate to buy the house at the very end of the road because it was the only detached house on the entire estate. It was also the most expensive. Stephanie Green, Daniel’s mum, was very tall and very pretty, with long blonde hair and blue eyes. One of her favourite hobbies was trying to out-do her friends and neighbours at every possible opportunity. She always wanted the flashiest car, the largest conservatory and the best garden in the street. Living in a detached house, when all the others were semi-detached, was something that she was very keen on doing. She had immediately begun measuring the windows and floors for

curtains and carpets and speaking to the estate agent about landscaping the front garden.

While she was phoning furniture shops and decorators, Daniel's father, Michael, had quietly bought number 18, a large semi-detached house, reasonably priced and right in the centre of the estate.

Michael, a tall, rather good-looking man with brown hair and brown eyes flecked with green, was an easy-going person who normally went along with everything his wife wanted. In fact, he had never refused his wife anything in their entire marriage. But not this time. When Daniel's mum had found out what her husband had done, she had begged, sulked and finally had a huge, foot stamping, face-reddening, screaming tantrum, right in the middle of the road, much to the embarrassment of the estate agent. Daniel had watched in fascination, as he was never allowed to have tantrums. However, her fit of temper did her no good whatsoever. Daniel's father refused to budge. He simply couldn't afford to buy any other house on the estate *but* number 18, he had told her.

As a result, Daniel's mum hadn't spoken to her husband for two whole days after that. She never liked hearing that she couldn't buy the things she was desperate to have. Even now, nine years on, Daniel's mum still reminded his dad, whenever he was home, of how much nicer the other house was. Michael Green worked as a Petro-chemical Engineer and was away a lot.

Daniel often got the feeling that he was away more frequently than he had to be, probably due to his wife's constant nagging about moving house.

One of the oddest things about that day, however, was that Daniel could still remember how right 18 Yew Tree Gardens had seemed to him, despite his young age. As soon as his mum had been persuaded into their new home, Daniel had demanded to be taken upstairs and had immediately chosen the bedroom at the back of the house as his own. His mum hadn't liked that, either.

It was into this same bedroom that he now angrily stormed, brushing his brown hair out of his eyes, console in hand and calling Barnaby every name he could think of. Daniel loathed living next door to Barnaby; he was a real pain in the neck. Barnaby Dawson and his mum had moved into the house next door around six months ago and, at first, Daniel had been really pleased at the idea of having a boy the same age as himself as his neighbour. That, however, was until he had realised how strange Barnaby was. On days like these, Daniel found himself wishing that they had bought the detached house at the end of the road, after all. At least then he wouldn't have to live next door to a weird freak.

There was one thing to be thankful for, however: Daniel and Barnaby went to different schools. Being in the same class as him would have been *too much*. Daniel went to the local High School, which was situated

a mere five minutes' walk from his house. Barnaby, however, went to the Eponymous Hildegarde School for Boys, which was *miles* away. Daniel frequently heard the rickety sounding coach come to collect Barnaby early on school mornings. In fact, it often woke him up, which was another reason to despise Barnaby. Why couldn't Barnaby's school have broken up a couple of days later than Daniel's? At least then Daniel could have had some peace while he played his game.

Life for Daniel had been relatively ordinary until Barnaby's arrival at 20 Yew Tree Gardens. Daniel went to school, hung out with his mates and played on his console, just like everyone else he knew. Then, suddenly, in the blink of an eye, Daniel's life had gone from relatively ordinary to truly bizarre.

It all started on the evening that Barnaby had moved in. Daniel's dad had been helping Daniel to clean out his fish tank, when the sound of voices suddenly drifted out of nowhere through the bedroom wall towards them. The voices were loud and urgent and, each time they stopped, Daniel could hear a strange electrical buzzing, sounding like overhead cables on a rainy day. Daniel already knew that there were a lot of electrical cables in the wall; his dad had explained some time ago that this was why Daniel's hair sometimes seemed to stand on end when he stood near the wall dividing

their house from number 20. But he'd never actually *heard* the cables before.

As cleaning out Rover's fish tank had to be one of the most boring jobs on the planet, Daniel had found his attention increasingly drawn to the sound of the voices as he worked. A sudden, loud electrical throbbing had made him look up and, to his surprise, there, to the right of the poster of his favourite Monster Truck, was a small, shiny blue orb, bobbing around gently against the striped wallpaper. It had disappeared as quickly as it had arrived but, almost immediately, a new, slightly deeper blue orb was in its place, pulsating against the wall and crackling softly. Daniel had stared at the orb in shock and moved towards it to investigate, just as his dad suddenly shouted to him for help. Daniel had turned to see his dad struggling to hold onto the water filled fish tank and immediately ran over to him, grabbing the heavy tank before it fell. By the time Daniel and his dad had moved the fish tank back to its original position against the dividing wall, the orb had disappeared and the electrical humming, plus the voices, had died away.

Despite not being particularly fond of Rover (Daniel had wanted a dog for his birthday but got Rover the Goldfish instead), Daniel had been rather dubious about leaving the tank so close to a wall that suddenly seemed to be super-electrified and had quickly explained to his dad what he had seen. His dad, however, put it down to a

harmless electrical surge and had taken him out for hamburgers as a thank you for helping to clean out the fish tank.

A few days later, Barnaby had come round and introduced himself. Since then, Barnaby had rapidly become a source of frustration for Daniel. Constant frustration. Particularly today.

Daniel tipped fish food into the fish tank for Rover and gazed out of the window grumpily. His bedroom looked out onto the back garden and he could see Barnaby happily playing next door, bouncing his football around like something not right. Somehow, Daniel had never been quite sure exactly how, Barnaby had got it into his head that the two of them were best friends. But Daniel did not want to be best friends with Barnaby because Barnaby was, well, *weird*. For a start, he was the only boy Daniel knew who had his own Wendy House. It was jammed up against the fence that divided their back gardens. What did a twelve-year-old boy want with a Wendy house, anyway? Barnaby was also the only boy Daniel knew who adored doughnuts to the point of obsession. He could easily eat a full, Family Size pack of Sugar Coated Doughy Delights (extra crispy) on his own, in ten minutes flat. Barnaby's love affair with doughnuts, and cakes in general, meant that he was a little on the plump side. However, that didn't stop him wolfing down the occasional chocolate sandwich cake or six, whenever he felt a little peckish.

Barnaby's hair was a little weird, too. It was a shiny blond colour and cut in an odd style, as if someone had stuck a bowl onto his head and snipped round it.

But the strangest and most irritating thing about Barnaby Dawson was that he talked to himself. For hours. *All the time*. Daniel's bedroom was right next door to Barnaby's and, most nights before he went to sleep, Daniel would hear Barnaby laughing and whispering to himself. It didn't matter how many things Daniel threw at the wall – Barnaby continued to prattle on.

Lately, Barnaby had increased the frequency of his nightly conversations. He was also getting louder. In fact, for the last few nights, Daniel had gone to sleep, thinking of more and more imaginative ways to shut Barnaby up. Permanently.

And it seemed that Daniel wasn't alone in his wish. For Daniel knew something – something that he had never told anyone about, not even his dad because it seemed too ridiculous to be true. On the night that Barnaby and his mother had moved in, Daniel had overheard one of the voices through the bedroom wall, just as he was about to take a closer look at the orb. He couldn't be sure but, before his dad had called out to him, Daniel had thought that he'd heard a male voice say: '...killed...but we're sure you'll be safe from them here, Barnaby.'

Now, as far as Daniel was concerned, anyone who had ever met Barnaby would

want to kill him but, looking back, he was fairly certain that he'd been mistaken in what he'd overheard. Nevertheless, it didn't stop him occasionally wondering what thing in particular Barnaby might have done that meant he had to be kept safe. Had he robbed a doughnut shop in the middle of the night, or stolen his Wendy house from some poor little four-year-old girl? All that Daniel knew about Barnaby, apart from which school he went to and that Daniel couldn't stand him, was that Barnaby's father had recently died and that Barnaby's mum, Magenta, was on the committee of the Most Gorgeous Garden Award, which Daniel's mum was determined to win this year. Although Barnaby was always on at him to go round and play some stupid game or stay for tea, Daniel had so far managed to steer clear of him and, despite his curiosity, Daniel was more than happy for things to stay that way. One thing was certain: he was *not* going to get stuck with Barnaby Dawson all summer.

Daniel settled down onto the yellow plastic chair next to his bed, opposite the fish tank, *almost* finding himself wishing that whoever wanted to attack Barnaby could have done so before Barnaby and his possessed football had ruined Daniel's score. Grumbling to himself, he switched on the console. 'Level 2' flashed brightly at him. Daniel sighed despondently. Then he dropped the console onto his bed in shock, as a pencil-slim beam of pearly blue light tore through the fish tank straight towards him.

The light beam struck his body, just above his heart, the shaft of light rapidly expanding in width, until it covered his entire chest. As he gazed down in horror, unable to move, the silhouette of a large hand suddenly appeared in the beam, its fingers splayed, the shadowy digits seeming to clutch and grab at his t-shirt. Daniel yelled in terror and dived out of the path of the light, watching as it glowed and pulsed against the wall behind his bed. The silhouette of the hand was swiftly joined by a second, this hand balled into a large, tight fist.

Strange sounds made him quickly snap his head round and he yelled again. The whole fish tank was now glowing and, worse, something was moving around in its depths. It wasn't Rover. He was happily swimming at the top of the tank, oblivious to what was occurring below him. The thing that was moving was down in the reeds, flinging shale against the sides of the tank. The water bubbled violently, pouring onto Daniel's carpet, bits of pondweed landing on the floor with a wet slap. Even Rover began to look mildly surprised and started to swim backwards, away from the waves of water being jettisoned onto the bedroom floor. The room was suddenly filled with a dull, electrical throbbing, which vibrated around Daniel's room and began to pulse through him.

His heart racing, Daniel stared, frozen to the spot, as more and more water swelled over the sides of the tank, leaving large

puddles on the floor, the eerie sounds growing louder. The pondweed waved agitatedly, as even more clumps of shale plopped onto the carpet. Summoning all his courage, Daniel edged slowly forwards and stared into the water, nervously leaning towards it, while trying to shield himself from the now glaringly bright tank. As he did so, a particularly large clump of shale was flung out of the water. It landed squarely on Daniel's trainer, making him yell out. He jumped backwards in panic, hitting his head on the door as he did so.

"Daniel, tea's ready!" His mum shouted from downstairs. He glanced round anxiously towards the stairs and, almost immediately, the circle of light seemed to implode and the strange noises disappeared with it. When he turned back to the tank, the waves of water had begun to subside and less debris was slopping onto the carpet. Things were calming down again. But it didn't stop Daniel feeling unsettled. The sooner he got out of his room, the better.

He dashed to the bathroom, grabbed a bundle of towels and quickly threw them onto his carpet. Then, slamming his bedroom door behind him, Daniel raced downstairs, skidding into the dining room and collapsing onto the dining room chair, almost knocking his mum over.

"Daniel!" his mum shouted irritably. "Be more careful! And *what's that* on your shoe?" She wrinkled up her nose in disgust, pointing angrily towards the door. "Take

them off! How many times have I warned you about leaving your shoes on when you come inside?"

Daniel hurriedly ran into the kitchen and threw his trainer out into the garden. He threw the other one after it for good measure and quickly returned to the table.

His mum set the plate down in front of him, oblivious to the fact that Daniel was staring nervously towards the stairs and trembling.

"Fruit and vegetable diet this week," she announced, pinching her waist and frowning. "I've put on at least a third of a gram since yesterday, so I've made a sprout casserole, followed by sugar free gooseberry jelly. I'll go mad if I can't fit into my bikini for August."

She continued to prattle on, unaware that Daniel wasn't eating a thing. Stephanie Green didn't need to go on a diet at all but another of her hobbies was testing out new diet recipes. The only problem was that she insisted on trying them out on Daniel as well, who didn't need to diet either. On any other occasion, Daniel would now be complaining loudly and trying to persuade his mum that pizza and burgers were healthy things for a growing boy to eat. But at the moment, he felt as if his throat had been gummed shut. He didn't feel like eating anything. He was feeling rather scared.

Daniel suddenly found himself wishing that his dad were here right now, instead of thousands of miles away on a business trip. He knew that he would be able to talk to him

about what had just happened in his room, without his dad thinking that he was going mental. There was absolutely no point telling his mum. He could just imagine her reaction: she would accuse him of telling lies and ground him for a week. At least his dad would hear him out.

He gazed at the photo of his mum and dad's wedding day that was on the mahogany mantelpiece. His mum wasn't smiling much in the picture because the sun had been too hot and her bouquet had wilted but his dad was grinning into the camera, his eyes full of laughter, as he hugged his new wife. Daniel's mum was always criticising her son for being exactly like his father but Daniel took that as a huge compliment. His dad was a very capable man and could handle anything. He would probably know how to deal with fish tanks that sprang to life unexpectedly. Daniel didn't have a clue.

"Mum, when's dad coming home this time?" asked Daniel, pushing a soggy bit of sprout around his plate and gazing hopefully at his mum.

"Not for another four days," said his mum, eyeing him angrily. "Stop playing with your food or you won't get dessert!" With only gooseberry jelly to look forward to, that wasn't such a threat.

CHAPTER 2

It took Daniel until bedtime to pluck up enough courage to venture into his room again. Even then, it was partly hunger that drove him back upstairs. Daniel's appetite had slowly begun to return and, thanks to his dad, there was a veritable feast awaiting him upstairs in his room.

Daniel's dad was well aware of his wife's obsession with serving revoltingly healthy food to Daniel. Consequently, he sent food parcels home to his son, for use in emergency situations, from wherever he was working. At this moment, stashed under Daniel's bed, were several chocolate bars sent from his dad's last trip to America, six weeks ago. Daniel's stomach had been rumbling for the past hour at the thought of the delicious caramel, straw-berry and mocha filled chocolate waiting upstairs. His dad had even sent a few cakes over, many of which had strange names but still sounded tasty. There was only one problem: to get to the chocolate, he had to go past the fish tank.

Daniel had spent the whole evening going over what he had seen and hadn't even paid much attention to 'Monster Trucks go Mental!' his favourite T.V. programme. What had happened just didn't make any sense. It

was as if his fish tank had suddenly become possessed.

Despite his grumbling stomach, Daniel waited until his mum began to nag him to go to bed before he headed for the stairs. Bracing himself, he took a deep breath before opening his bedroom door.

When he finally peered into the room, gazing anxiously in the direction of the tank, he got a surprise. Everything was back to normal. Rover was swimming around aimlessly as usual, none the worse for his little adventure. A few fronds of wilting pondweed were stuck to the carpet but, apart from that, the room seemed exactly the same as usual. Daniel stared at the tank for several minutes, checking for movement but everything seemed fine. In fact, the fish tank seemed so peaceful, that Daniel almost managed to convince himself that he'd imagined it all and that Rover had chucked the pondweed out of the tank in a fit of pique.

He tidied away the bits of pondweed and hastily tipped the soggy towels into the washing basket, hoping his mum wouldn't notice that they were rather green and smelly. After watching the tank for another five minutes, just to be sure, he debated whether to start on his chocolate stash. He discovered, however, that all he really wanted to do was to go to sleep. He felt exhausted. He got ready for bed, snuggled down under the soft duvet and closed his eyes.

A familiar, muffled voice suddenly floated into the room, through the wall. Daniel groaned.

“Gonna batter you tomorrow, Barnaby,” he murmured, then fell deeply asleep.

But as Daniel slept, events were unfolding in a place he never even knew existed, concerning people he'd never even met, which, together, would completely mess up Daniel's slumber. And that was only the beginning.

THE BEGINNING

11.55pm, Cedar Hill, Allapatria

Paris stood on the hilltop and watched as the full, silver moon disappeared behind a bank of murky grey cloud. It had been raining hard for some time now and the rain was streaming down his jeans and black leather jacket but he hardly noticed. Several metres behind him, Avalon, his white horse, whinnied anxiously and pawed the ground. The storm raged above them in the night sky, each thunderclap louder than the last, each lightning bolt striking the same spot on the brow of the hill. The lightning was hitting the ground every few seconds now, becoming more frequent as the time approached. Paris checked his watch: five minutes to midnight. Five more minutes to live.

Paris had expected all along to win this Battle. This was their last chance to drive evil back over the mountains and a better Defender couldn't have been chosen. Now, however, he was facing certain death. He was unarmed, thanks to Xavier; he didn't stand a chance.

When Paris realised that his weapon had been stolen, he hadn't been able to believe it at first. He had scoured the field

and Gabriel, his life-long friend, had gone ahead to try to track Xavier down and take back the stolen bow. They had agreed to meet at the bottom of the hill if Gabriel had found the weapon but when Paris arrived, Gabriel had not been there. By now, Gabriel, who was Paris's Second in the Battle, would be standing behind him on the bare patch of lodestone, waiting for midnight, when the Battle would begin. They had no options left. The storm clearly showed that Allapatria still wanted the Battle to take place.

Paris could already hear the dull thud of hooves, racing up the hillside: Shadow's horse. He lowered his head as the rider came into view and stopped some distance away. There was nowhere left to run. Paris had no choice but to accept what was to come next.

The thunder and lightning suddenly ceased and, without warning, a pure, golden flame sprang from the point where the lightning bolts had struck the ground. The flame quickly shot across the grass, forming a perfect circle, around a metre in height, enclosing Paris and Shadow in fire. The thunder began again; lightning bolts hurtling across the sky above them, marking out the place where the Battle would be fought between them. The time had come.

Paris turned to the bare stone behind him where Gabriel stood. The heavy rain was preventing him from seeing his friend but he knew that he would be there. They, at least, were playing by the rules.

Paris smiled sadly, bowing his head in salute and, finally, he faced Shadow. Shadow, also a Defender but of a wholly different cause, was robed entirely in black, long black cloak trailing behind in the wind, a black hood preventing Paris from being able to see any features. A glinting silver crossbow was lying against the neck of the tall rider's ebony horse. Paris could just make it out in the driving rain. He shook his head in disbelief. Their side had cheated a *second* time. The chosen weapon for the Battle was to have been the bow, not a modified crossbow. Paris's face hardened and he called out to the black rider.

"Where is he, Shadow? Where's Xavier?" Paris scanned the hillside. There, further down the hill, Paris could see more lodestone, marking out the place where Xavier, Shadow's Second, should stand. But there was no one there. The moon briefly appeared from behind the storm clouds and shone onto the rock. The hillside behind Shadow was empty. Xavier was nowhere to be seen. "No doubt he's hiding in the undergrowth like the coward he is, too scared to face me." Paris laughed mirthlessly and called out again to the dark rider. "At least you could allow me the honour of letting me see your face, Shadow. Or are you as ugly as they say you are? Does it make you feel good, knowing that the only way you can defeat me is by cheating? You're becoming an expert at killing unarmed men, aren't you?"

Paris pushed brown, rain soaked hair out of his eyes and stared defiantly ahead as Shadow silently aimed the crossbow directly at him. Avalon suddenly cantered towards the flames and whinnied agitatedly, his eyes wild. The sound distracted Shadow, who turned as a gust of wind shifted the rider's hood, briefly revealing a pale, scarred face in profile, staring numbly at the horse. The crossbow was slowly lowered, as Shadow tracked Avalon's movements along the hilltop.

Paris reacted swiftly and began to sprint towards the motionless rider. This was his only chance. He may have accepted his fate but it didn't mean that he had to go without a fight. If he could reach Shadow before the bolt was loaded, all may not be lost.

He had covered two thirds of the distance before his movement broke Shadow's trance. With a rapid shake of the head, Shadow's attention was immediately drawn back to Paris. Shadow swung the crossbow round and aimed it towards Paris as he ran. Paris, his eyes on the weapon, stopped dead, breathing heavily. The bolt was already in place. He had lost.

Paris gazed at the rider and smiled. "Do it," he whispered softly. He wouldn't plead for mercy. He wouldn't give Shadow the satisfaction.

Paris heard Gabriel give an anguished yell, as Shadow pointed the crossbow straight at Paris's heart and released the bolt. Paris

could hear the eerie, electrical throbbing of the bolt, blue and purple sparks raining onto the ground as it hurtled towards him. The air around him seemed to thicken and hum, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. His body tensed as he waited for the impact that would end his life.

With a thunderous crack, a lightning flash shot from the sky and exploded in front of Shadow, who cried out, temporarily blinded. When it was again possible to see, there was no trace of Paris left. Only the bolt remained on the ground now, charred and smoking. Shadow galloped to the spot where Paris once stood, as the circling flames died down and the lightning ceased. Three more bolts were swiftly released into the ground. A single bolt was triumphantly shot into the night. With the crossbow victoriously aimed at the skies, the horse turned and Shadow galloped down the hill at incredible speed.

Moments later, four stocky little men emerged cautiously from the thick undergrowth near the hilltop. They were all around a metre in height and each carried a knobbly-ended wooden club, which was almost as big as the men themselves. Their grubby clothing was a hodgepodge of green; every garment heavily patched in yet more green cloth. All four wore black Balaclavas on their large heads, bearing the slogan: 'Grip Battering Squad', written in lime green ink, along with his own name. They stared silently after the rider, watching until the

horse was out of sight, then hurried to an oak tree that faced the Battleground.

“Blimey, that was Shadow,” said Gallipot, the tallest Grip, a squat individual, with piggy eyes, buckteeth and a stubby nose. He stared after the rider and shuddered.

“See the speed of ‘is ‘orse?” said Padstock, the most battle scarred of the group. “Good thing we was ages getting you out of that ditch, eh, Pinvin? He’d ‘ave bin right on top of us, otherwise.” Pinvin, the smallest of the men, glared at the speaker and muttered something abusive, which, fortunately for him, Padstock didn’t hear.

“Must ‘ave bin that battle ‘ere tonight.” Broddlethrup, Gallipot’s brother, scratched the top of his Balaclava meditatively, as he scanned the hilltop. His close-set eyes widened in shock as he saw the effects of Shadow’s weapon. “Look at the state of the grass! Burned to a crisp, that is! Guess Shadow won it then.” There was a collective groan.

“*That,*” said Padstock, absently swinging his club, “must’ve bin ‘ow *he,*” he gestured with his head, “knew where *Paris*” – at his name, all four spat on the ground in disgust – “would be tonight.” Padstock’s club swished left and right, striking the top of Pinvin’s head as it swung, making him yelp in pain.

“‘ang on a mo, then.” said Gallipot, frowning. “If Shadow won, that means Paris lost. So, that means...”

“It means you’re too late,” said a deep voice, shaking with anger and disappointment, behind them. “I told you to be here before Midnight.”

All four Grips turned round in surprise. The forest undergrowth was dense where the speaker stood and they could only just make out the figure of a cloaked man. He was leaning heavily against the tree trunk, head down and trying to remain calm.

“Ah, well, you see, we would’ve bin ‘ere earlier,” explained Gallipot hastily, “only Pinvin ‘ere fell into a ditch and, well, there wasn’t just mud in the ditch...” Broddlethrup and Padstock wrinkled up their noses in disgust, “so we ‘ad to find a stream to chuck ‘im in...”

“You didn’t ‘ave to hold me under so long,” protested Pinvin angrily, earning himself another smack from Padstock’s club.

“Doesn’t matter now, though, if Paris is dead,” Gallipot continued, swinging his club onto his shoulder. “Shadow saved us a job. Pity Paris has bin killed, though. We quite liked ‘im, deep down, even though he was a dirty rotten thief.” All four spat on the ground again. “We was all surprised when you said it was ‘im wot stole our cart, you know. Very surprised.” Gallipot paused in wonder. “Didn’t make sense, that.” The other Grips nodded intently. “Paris always struck us as an honourable type. Wot would ‘ee want with our cart, anyway? But, debts is debts.” Gallipot drew himself up to his full, if tiny, height. “We would only ‘ave roughed ‘im up a

little bit for stealin' the cart. We'd rather 'ave Paris than Shadow, any day. Evil, that one is. We'll all be better off when Shadow's dead and..."

The male figure tore from the trees and grabbed hold of Gallipot, lifting him roughly from the ground.

"*Never* speak ill of Shadow in my presence again," he roared, shaking Gallipot until his teeth rattled. "Do you hear me? *Never!*" Gallipot nodded mutely and Broddlethrup and Padstock dropped their clubs on Pinvin's toes in fright. "I lied. Paris didn't steal your cart. You were meant to be here as a distraction, to give me more time."

The man gazed in anger towards the scene of the Battle. He stared at the charred grass and cursed. "It's too late now; I was too late."

He flung Gallipot to the floor and melted back into the forest before the others had a chance to react.

"*Well!*" bellowed Gallipot, hauling his squat little self upright and glaring at the retreating figure. "I've never bin so insulted in all my life! What's it to 'im anyway? It was our cart! *And* we still 'aven't got it back! Nothing to do with 'im *what* time we got 'ere." His gnarly little face suddenly clouded over and he turned, scowling at the group. "Oh and thanks for the support, Broddlethrup!"

He aimed his club at Broddlethrup's shins. His brother quickly dodged the blows, muttering about being unable to help, due to an untied shoelace on his laceless wellies.

“Where’s all Paris’s body bits, then?” squeaked Pinvin, jumping up and down excitedly, the pain from his feet forgotten. He tugged on Broddlethrup’s sleeve and pointed towards the Battleground.

“Eh, young Pinvin’s got a point there, y’know, Gallipot,” said Broddlethrup, looking up the hill and casually scratching an ear. “That must ‘ave bin some weapon Shadow used on Paris. Hope Shadow never decides to visit Gripville with it. There’s not even an odd stray leg or two ‘ere and Paris was a big ‘un. No puddles of blood. Nothing.”

“Broddlethrup,” said Padstock nervously, nudging the little man as he scanned the hilltop. “Look.” Padstock gulped hard and jerked his head upwards. The others gazed at the night sky, their attention drawn to the strange appearance of the full moon. For it was no longer pale and silvery. It was now a deep, blood red. The Grips gave a sudden and collective inhalation of breath.

“That can only mean one thing,” said Gallipot, glancing round the little group. They nodded apprehensively.

“Trouble,” they said in unison.

* * *

17th July, 03.15am, Britain

Daniel dreamed that something was pushing him further and further into his bed. He tried to pull himself back out but whatever it was that was pushing him was much, much

stronger. With dawning horror, he realised that he wasn't in bed at all but somewhere icy cold and pitch black. He could hear snow crunching under his feet as he struggled and felt the harsh iciness of snowflakes melting, as they came into contact with his face.

Daniel spun round, to find that someone was standing in front of him, someone that Daniel was instinctively afraid of. He couldn't see the figure properly but he felt, rather than saw, that it was grinning and pulling Daniel towards him with invisible ropes. Daniel's skin began to crawl in revulsion, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He shouted out in fear, digging his feet into the ground and trying to pull himself free. The dark figure began to laugh and his grin got wider as Daniel was pulled closer. Just as he felt cold, hard fingertips brush against his arm, Daniel felt a swift rush of warm air and suddenly, he was on the back of a large and incredibly beautiful white horse, galloping through lush, green meadows at an immense speed. He could feel the heat of the sun on his back but its warmth wasn't enough to take away the coldness that he was feeling. Despite the distance that they were covering, Daniel could still hear a voice, loud and eerie, calling to him.

"You'll never win, Daniel," it shouted, laughing in a tone that made Daniel shudder with fear. "Deliver this message to them: give up now, before it's too late."

With a jolt, Daniel awoke and sat up in bed, the words still ringing in his ears. He was chilled to the bone. Scared, he looked around the room, half expecting to see the dark figure emerging from behind his wardrobe but all was quiet. He gazed anxiously at his fish tank, worried that it would go berserk again, but it was calm and peaceful, casting a greenish glow onto the carpet. His mobile phone suddenly began to buzz and flash on the cabinet next to him and he shouted out in fright. Trying to calm himself down (it was just a stupid dream, after all), he snatched up the phone.

‘ARE U OK?’

It was a message from his dad. Every so often when he was away, Daniel’s father would forget about time differences and send messages to Daniel at odd hours. Nevertheless, Daniel had never been so pleased to hear from his dad in his whole life. A wave of relief washed over him and the dream didn’t seem quite as scary, although he still felt frozen to the core and rather jumpy. He debated whether or not to say anything about the fish tank and his dream. But it sounded so stupid. He decided to wait until his dad got home and instead quickly sent him a message back: ‘OK, 3.15AM HERE, DAD! LOVE U’. He settled back down, trying to get warm and vainly attempting to convince himself that it was safe to go back to sleep. All was silent again now, apart from the muted tones of Barnaby talking to himself in the bedroom next door. Daniel

caught odd snatches of Barnaby's night time prattling through the wall:

"I know...I'll start practising tomorrow... easy." Daniel frowned to himself. Didn't Barnaby *ever* sleep? However, for the first time since Barnaby moved in, Daniel didn't mind the sound at all. In fact, he found it comforting.

* * *

Eponymous Hildegarde, 207th Headmaster of the Eponymous Hildegarde School for boys and ninety-eighth member of his family to hold the name Eponymous Hildegarde, awoke with a start and flicked on the bedside light, smoothing down his thinning hair. He had had less than an hour's sleep but he quickly grabbed the large school register that he had placed on his bedside cabinet, just in case. The red, leather bound book looked ancient, with flaking gold lettering embossed on the front.

The register contained hundreds and hundreds of pages, some of which were crumbling away as he handled them. He flicked to the most recent pages at the back and swiftly scanned the list of names, yawning heavily and muttering to himself, as he worked his way down the list.

"Gamble...imagine the hoo-ha his father would have made, Gates...far too stupid, Gregson.... good thing it wasn't him or we'd all be in trouble, Grimshaw..." He halted, finger frozen in mid air. "Where's Green?" He

thought for a moment, drumming his fingertips on the edge of the mattress as he did so. This immediately awoke Yvonne, his wife, who turned over groggily, smearing face cream all over her pillow and catching one of her huge hair rollers in the pillowcase. Her eyes were concealed behind a lurid pink, fluffy eye mask, which she peeled off, glaring angrily at her husband as she did so. A false eyelash fell onto his arm and Eponymous let out a barely concealed yell. He didn't like seeing his wife in bed; he found it quite frightening.

"Do you have *any* idea what time it is?" she asked, staring bleary-eyed at the alarm clock next to her. Eponymous raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Of *course* I do, woman! Didn't you dream about him too? Come on, *think!*"

"Oh, of *course* I dreamed about him, you stupid little man, but why did you have to wake me up? Turn that light off!" Yvonne grumbled to herself and settled back onto her pillows, replacing the eye mask. Before long, she was snoring again. Eponymous warily flicked the fallen eyelash in his wife's direction and switched off the bedside lamp. He was far too awake now to go back to sleep. Instead, he remained sitting up and continued to ponder in the dark.

"Who is Daniel Green?" he said aloud.

CHAPTER 3

When Daniel awoke the following morning, he couldn't quite remember his dream but he knew that it hadn't been pleasant. He hadn't slept well after his nightmare because he had been afraid that he would hear the terrible voice again. His mum commented on the dark lines below his eyes, as she made herself a cup of rhubarb and beetroot tea.

"You look more tired than you do when you're at school!" she said, offering him a mugful of the revolting-sounding drink, which he quickly declined. "You weren't playing that stupid console game in the night, were you? Your light was off when I came to bed."

Daniel muttered something incoherent, then headed into the garden with his console, tripping over his trainers as he went. Seeing the dried bits of shale still attached to the trainer reminded him of the previous evening's strange fish tank experience, which only added to his sense of uneasiness.

Daniel had been looking forward to spending all summer completing as many levels of Attack of the Mutant Frisbees as possible. However, for the first half hour of killing possessed, blood-sucking Frisbees, his mind wasn't on the game at all. He couldn't

get the way the dream had left him feeling out of his head. Coupled with his fish tank escapade, he felt nervous and unsure, as if he was about to take a particularly nasty exam. Something seemed to have changed. Even the day, despite being as warm and sunny as yesterday, looked different somehow. It was making him feel uneasy and, as a result, he barely made it to level 3.

“206 points. *Pathetic*,” he muttered but made sure he saved the level anyway. While Barnaby still lived next door and had access to a football, his console was not safe.

By evening, Daniel had nearly forgotten about his nightmare and was more or less back to normal. He’d really enjoyed his day and the time had flown. He was always amazed at how quickly the time went when he was enjoying himself but how much it dragged when he was at school, doing maths.

The only interruption he’d had all day was from his mum, as she went round the garden, scrutinising every leaf for signs of greenfly and anxiously checking the soil for weeds. Stephanie Green always proudly told everyone who would listen to her that she was *bound* to win the Most Gorgeous Garden Award this year. In fact, Stephanie often cornered Barnaby’s mum, the chief judge, and told her so too, while trying to bribe her with freshly cut flowers from her garden. However, Daniel had never seen his mum so much as get her hands even *slightly* covered in soil in his whole life. She swore Daniel to secrecy that she paid a gardener to come

round twice a week (on Wednesday and Friday afternoons, when Magenta Dawson went shopping) and instead smugly told Magenta that it was all her own handiwork.

Having his mum in the garden, 'gardening', was nothing compared to Barnaby's distracting babble and one of the very best parts of the day had been the total lack of Barnaby. Daniel found that he felt much more relaxed as he switched off his console and put his recliner back into the shed. Barnaby hadn't been in his garden once. In fact, there had only been one odd Barnaby-related occurrence all day and, fortunately, Daniel hadn't witnessed it. Daniel's mum had mentioned that, for the tenth time that afternoon, she had seen Barnaby hurtling out of his house, running to the Greens' front door and hurtling back to his own house, checking his watch as he ran. She asked Daniel whether he had any idea what Barnaby was doing. Daniel had shaken his head in disbelief. Barnaby got stranger by the day.

Shortly before teatime, Daniel took his console up to his room and set it down on his desk. He quickly checked his height against the chart that hung behind his door and groaned angrily. Still no change. Why was he only average height for his age when his mum and dad were both so tall? It wasn't fair. Daniel's Granddad had suggested that Daniel should start putting manure in his shoes and suspending himself from the doorframe for two hours a day, if he wanted

to grow quicker. He had guaranteed that it would work but Daniel didn't really believe him. He was more likely to find himself with ridiculously long arms and exceptionally smelly feet. However, if there were no improvements soon, Daniel decided to seriously consider it. He wondered whether to phone his Granddad and find out more.

Deep in thought, he walked over towards the window. As he drew parallel to the fish tank, there was a frantic knocking on the front door. At exactly the same time, the water in Daniel's fish tank began to froth and boil, even more violently than it had the previous night. It was happening again. Daniel yelled out in fright and backed away, staring wide-eyed at the water. Rover dived down to the very bottom of the tank and hid behind a plastic castle. Daniel could hear his mum going to the front door, muttering indignantly to the person who was clamouring to be let in. No sooner had she opened the door, than it was flung open so widely that it loudly banged against the hall wall. Heavy feet stomped towards Daniel's room. Alarmed, Daniel heard a familiar voice, shouting to his mum.

"Daniel...got to see him...urgent!!" It was Barnaby. Despite his rising fear, Daniel's heart sank. Barnaby Dawson was the very last person Daniel wanted to see at a time like this. He wanted someone sane, someone who would explain what was going on in a calm, collected manner and tell him that he wasn't going mad, that everyone's fish tank

did this occasionally. He did not want the oddest boy on the planet in his house.

Barnaby bounded into the bedroom, breathing heavily and clutching his chest.

“Thirty-seven seconds door to door!” he gasped, holding onto the doorframe. “My best time yet!” In the midst of his panic, Daniel processed this bit of information. Thirty-seven seconds to cover such a short distance? Daniel could have made the trip ten times over in thirty-seven seconds. Barnaby made his way past Daniel and sat on his bed, gazing expectantly at the fish tank. There was a sudden, loud gurgle and a small whirlpool appeared in the centre of the tank, bathed in a pale blue light, which rose up from the shale. Rover now seemed to be opening his mouth wider than usual in shock. As the vortex reached the base of the tank, a watery female voice spoke.

“Good evening, Barnaby. Please take Daniel to the Eponymous Hildegard School for Boys tomorrow morning at ten thirty. You will be given further details then.” The whirlpool disappeared, the blue light faded and the water returned to its usual calm state. After several moments, Rover cautiously appeared from the side of the castle and began swimming normally again. Barnaby turned, smiling happily at Daniel, who suddenly found his voice.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?” he yelled, staring wide-eyed at Barnaby. “HOW DID IT KNOW MY NAME?” He considered for a moment. “AND WHY ARE YOU HERE, ANYWAY?”

Barnaby clapped his hands together, gleefully.

“We’re going to have so much fun!” he said, just as the telephone rang. Barnaby grinned. “That’s my mum,” he said with pride, tilting his head in the direction of the sound.

Daniel heard his mum answer. Sure enough, it was Barnaby’s mother on the phone.

“Oh, I was hoping to catch you, Magenta!” Daniel’s mother trilled. “*Have* you seen my roses this year? Aren’t they the most wonderful...”

“She’s telling your mum you’re coming to a theme park with us tomorrow,” said Barnaby, standing up to leave. “Only we’re not going to a theme park.” He grinned again. “You’re coming to school with me, instead.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” said Daniel, backing away from Barnaby.

“Didn’t you dream about it last night?” asked Barnaby, frowning slightly. Daniel was completely taken aback.

“How do you know what I dreamed about?” he yelled.

“Because that’s how we always find things out, isn’t it? *Everyone* does.” Barnaby, reassured again, proceeded to jump happily about the room like a baby elephant. Daniel, however, wasn’t quite so relieved. In fact, he was feeling even worse. Everyone had dreams that left you freezing cold for hours after, frightened stupid and edgy for most of the day? He didn’t think so.

“Barnaby, you’re not making any sense.” *Nothing* was making any sense. “Look, can you just stop jumping for a minute and tell me what’s going on?” Barnaby always tended to be a little on the hyperactive side and Daniel needed him to be as calm as possible right now. All the sugar he ate, Daniel reasoned, made Barnaby a bit wappy. Maybe if he could calm him down, he’d be able to have a normal conversation with him.

“Don’t worry,” Barnaby continued, smiling brightly again. “It will all be sorted out tomorrow. They can explain it better than me, anyway.” Barnaby headed for the door, a positive spring in his step. “I’m going to make a major entry about this in my journal, tonight. I’ll write it in my special new code. See you tomorrow at ten o’clock.”

“That sounds lovely, Magenta,” Daniel heard his mum say in a sickly sweet voice. “How kind of you to think of him. I’ll see he’s ready for ten. Oh and I’ll send him round with some of my roses. I’m sure you’ll find they’re the best you’ve ever seen!”

“Seeya tomorrow, Daniel!” called Barnaby and ran downstairs.

Daniel moaned and covered his eyes, feeling as if his brain was about to explode. He slid down the wall as his mum called him downstairs for tea.

CHAPTER 4

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Daniel tried several times to tell his mum that Barnaby wasn't taking him to a theme park at all but was instead trying to abduct him and take him to his school for mental cases. Finally, his mum had flashed him an evil look and threatened to tell his father about his lying.

"Carry on like this and you won't be going anywhere!" she had shouted at him.

At this, Daniel's spirits had lifted. If he could just talk to his dad, maybe he would be able to convince his mum that Daniel should stay at home. At the very least, it would give him the opportunity to explain why he didn't want to be within ten kilometres of Barnaby. Daniel then begged and pleaded with her to phone his dad and tell him how badly behaved he was being, which she had eventually done, just to shut him up. However, she continually got the 'busy' tone and gave up after the third attempt, instead promising to tell his father all about his lies when he got home in three days' time. Daniel offered to tell him on her behalf immediately. He had then repeatedly tried to contact his father for the next hour but could only get

the ‘message sending failed’ sign on his phone.

By the time his mum forced him to go to bed, Daniel had given up any hope of getting out of the following day’s weirdness and had resigned himself to his fate. He had alternately tried telling his mum that he had made plans for tomorrow, that he felt sick and was possibly contagious and that he had far too much schoolwork to do. All of his excuses failed and he only succeeded in making his mother angrier still.

He hadn’t expected to get a wink of sleep after his truly wacky twenty-four hours, but his previous sleepless night caught up with him and he slept deeply and, to his relief, dreamlessly. Before he knew it, his mum was shaking him awake with toast and a steaming mug of nettle tea. He ignored the tea and reluctantly got ready, trying to force himself to eat the toast, despite his stomach protesting strongly.

As he slowly ambled downstairs, feeling like a condemned man on the way to the gallows, a news report on morning television caught his attention. What he heard made him stop in his tracks, his jaw dropping in shock.

“And finally, as you’ve been hearing on our phone-in, for the last twenty-four hours, details have been coming in of children all over the country, reporting severe nightmares and believing that ghosties, goblins and all manner of evil beasties have taken up residence under their beds.” The newsreader

suppressed a laugh and continued. "Many children are now too frightened to go to sleep. One child complained that he had woken to find himself suspended from his pyjama bottoms by a dribbling ghoul, who threatened the boy, until he agreed to go to the fridge and find the ghoul some raw meat. The ghoul only went away when the nine-year-old boy gave him a frozen chicken, intended for the family roast Sunday lunch. The frozen chicken is apparently still missing." The newsreader laughed out loud this time and shuffled his papers. "It isn't April Fools' Day today, is it? No?" He shook his head incredulously and continued. "Parents are baffled and wondering whether some new virus has struck our children, causing them to hallucinate. In fact, our phone lines are currently jammed with calls from worried parents. Well, maybe the bogey man *is* real after all." He raised an eyebrow. "Now, back to the phone-in, to hear more of these, er, *interesting* tales. Morag."

Daniel finally closed his mouth. So it wasn't just him. Other kids were having nightmares, too. What was going on? Before he had time to wonder any further, there was a frantic knocking at the door.

"That's Barnaby," said his mum, breathlessly, rushing past him with her arms full of cut flowers. "Are you ready? I've got the gardener coming round, once you've all gone and Magenta's out of the way. Hurry up!" she snapped, as Daniel dragged himself to the door and opened it.

There, standing before him, was a vision of utter oddness. Barnaby was wearing huge, vivid orange Bermuda shorts, his chubby white legs sticking out of the bottom, with an eye-wateringly bright yellow Hawaiian shirt over the top. He also had on a pair of black boots and an overly long black trench coat. Mirrored shades completed the outfit.

“Thought I’d make an effort, as it’s such an important day!” he said, smiling happily. “I look a bit like a superhero, don’t I?”

“Er...no,” said Daniel but Barnaby ignored him and happily slapped him on the back. “Ready, mate?” he said grinning at him from behind his sunglasses. Daniel was about to tell Barnaby in very strong words that they were definitively *not* mates, when his mum appeared behind him.

“Don’t forget these,” she hissed, trying to push the flowers into Daniel’s arms.

“Sorry, Mrs Green but there’s no time,” explained Barnaby, hastily gesturing outside. “The coach is already here.”

Daniel looked onto the road. Sure enough, a rusty, rickety old coach wheezed into view and stopped outside, almost disappearing in a large cloud of grimy black smoke which burst from the exhaust with a loud bang. The paintwork on the outside of the coach was peeling and the entire vehicle looked as if it could do with a good wash. There were tattered red curtains hanging up in all of the windows, tied back with moth-eaten gold cord. The coach gave the very

strong impression that it could fall apart at any minute.

“I’m not getting into that!” shouted Daniel but Barnaby already had hold of his arm and began pulling him down the drive, while Daniel’s mum called out angrily about her flowers going to waste. As Barnaby continued to drag the struggling Daniel towards the coach, Magenta Dawson, Barnaby’s mum, appeared on the pavement, carrying a large handkerchief, which she was using to dab her eyes. Barnaby’s mum was rather plump, like her son, with crinkly hair the colour of rusty nails and bright blue, kindly looking eyes. One of the first things Daniel had noticed about her when she moved in was that she often looked sad. He had initially thought that it was due to having Barnaby as a son but then remembered that Barnaby’s father had recently died. Today, however, she looked even sadder than usual.

“Hello, Daniel, love,” she said, trying to smile, “How are you feeling? Big day for you, isn’t it?”

“Mum!” said Barnaby, taking his sunglasses off and anxiously checking his watch. He held on even tighter to Daniel, who was frantically trying to escape. “We’ll be late!”

“Mrs Dawson, please help me,” pleaded Daniel, desperately gazing at her but she had gone to talk to the coach driver, who had opened the coach door with a loud and

ominous creak. A bit of rusty metal clattered to the floor.

“Must remember to fix that,” said an elderly voice from inside the coach. A wizened old man, who looked at least nine hundred, leaned out of the coach and grinned at the little group. He had a pure white moustache and, despite the heat of the day, a red bobble hat was jammed down onto his head. Tufts of white hair were growing out of his ears and were just visible below the hat. “Mornin’!” he said cheerfully.

He squinted through the grimy windscreen into the clear blue sky. “Nice day for it, eh?” Magenta gave a small sob.

“Now, now, Mrs D., don’t you be worrying about these two young’uns!” said the coach driver heartily, slapping the steering wheel. “They’ll be fine with me!”

A bit of rubber fell from the steering wheel onto the floor. The driver pretended not to notice.

“I know, Mr Jenkins,” said Mrs Dawson, giving him a watery smile. “And it’s a huge honour for them but...”

“Well, now, they wouldn’t have been chosen if they weren’t up to the job, now, would they?” said Mr Jenkins, smiling benevolently at the two boys. “Funny thing, *him* being chosen, though.”

He pointed to Daniel, who was now trying to get Barnaby into a headlock. “Barnaby, I can understand but why him? He doesn’t even go to Eponymous Hildegard.” Mr Jenkins stared at Daniel curiously,

studying his face. “Still, must be a good reason, though I don’t know what it is.”

He lowered his voice and spoke to Mrs Dawson under his breath. “See the news this morning? Kids are having nightmares and things are appearing in their bedrooms *for real* now.” She nodded in agreement, looking worried. “Not good, this. They’re getting more confident. We need these two more than ever before, especially now Paris has gone.”

He sighed. Magenta looked down sadly and wiped her eyes. Mr Jenkins took off his bobble hat and bowed his head slightly, as Barnaby began pushing Daniel onto the coach. Mr Jenkins cleared his throat and quickly wedged his hat back onto his head. “So you’re Daniel Green, then, are you?” he said kindly, as Daniel pushed Barnaby back onto the pavement and tried to make a run for it. Barnaby probably had to go into hiding or something, Daniel thought as he ran. Maybe the people who wanted to attack him had hunted him down and Barnaby had decided that he needed company and was determined to take Daniel with him. Well, Barnaby wasn’t going to get away with this. Not if Daniel had anything to do with it.

As Daniel raced for home, he suddenly saw his mum. She hadn’t yet gone into the house but was instead watching the group, her mouth open in horror. Thank goodness: he was saved!

“Mum!” he croaked, one arm stretched out towards her. She jammed the cut flowers onto the porch window ledge and delved into

her jeans pocket. Pulling out her mobile phone, she punched a few buttons, her face white. Excellent, thought Daniel, his mum was going to rescue him. It must be the police that she was ringing. Once they got here, he'd have Barnaby locked up for attempted kidnapping. Relieved, he slowed down, as her phone was answered.

"Is that Glen's Garden Grotto?" he heard her whisper harshly into the phone. "Cancel everything! She's staying at home!"

Stephanie Green ran back into the house, slamming the front door and Daniel's heart sank. Barnaby ran parallel to Daniel, his long trench coat fanning out behind him and tripped Daniel up, sending him flying. He grabbed Daniel's shirt, pulled him to his feet and dragged him back along the pavement. Then, with a great heave, he threw Daniel back onto the coach, diving in after him.

"Quick, close the doors!" he squeaked to Mr Jenkins and, with a groan of agony, the doors slammed shut, trapping Daniel in the grimy old coach.

"Ooh, seems we've got a live one here!" Mr Jenkins called out happily to Mrs Dawson. Wiping her eyes, Mrs Dawson smiled and waved her handkerchief, as the coach moved away.

"Help! Help me!" Daniel called out, as the coach rumbled down the road. But there was no one around to help. With the exception of Barnaby's mum, the road was empty. Daniel frantically scanned the coach for an emergency exit or some sort of escape

route but finally admitted that there was no way out. Whether he liked it or not, he was being taken to Barnaby's school.

"Anyone would think you didn't want to go!" said Barnaby, indignantly, taking off his trench coat and nursing a bruised elbow, which was swelling up painfully before his eyes. He pointed to a double seat in the middle of the coach. "You'll get a good view from here," he said, giving Daniel a small smile, then gazing worriedly at his arm.

The seat had once been a vivid shade of red but was now faded and somewhat moth-eaten, just like everything else on the coach. Loose, rather menacing-looking springs were sticking through the upholstery. Daniel eased himself down onto the seat, trying to avoid the worst of the springs and Barnaby sat down next to him.

"Barnaby, what's going on?" Daniel moaned, his head in his hands. Barnaby was rummaging in the pockets of his trench coat, his tongue sticking out in concentration. He stopped searching and gave Daniel a puzzled look.

"We've been chosen! But you know that – you dreamed it; you said you did last night. Isn't it exciting? You and me! Course, you'll be a better Defender than I would ever have been, so I don't mind being your Second."

Barnaby began searching his pockets again, finally shouting gleefully in triumph. He swiftly pulled a large paper bag out of his inside coat pocket. "Chocolate fudge squares

for the journey!" he said, grinning and shoving the bag in Daniel's face.

Daniel cautiously looked inside. The bag was full of large, plump squares of dark, buttery fudge. In spite of his fear, Daniel's stomach rumbled, as he caught its rich, chocolaty scent. "Homemade recipe," said Barnaby. Daniel reached inside and took a large piece. "My Uncle Jerome's," Barnaby continued. Daniel dropped the fudge as if it were on fire.

"Your Uncle Jerome's recipe?" he said angrily, wiping his hands on the seat. "The same Uncle Jerome that your mum kept finding in her wheelie bin? The same Uncle Jerome who buried his feet in your front garden because he thought he was a Dutch Elm? *That* Uncle Jerome?"

"Yes," said Barnaby, looking puzzled. "But he's ok now. He came out of hospital a few weeks ago and he's starting work as..."

"I won't then, thanks," said Daniel, pushing the bag aside. "My mum saw him in your back garden once, eating beetles and laughing. There could be anything in that stuff."

"Ok," said Barnaby thickly, through a mouthful of fudge. "I'll just go and see if Mr Jenkins wants some."

Barnaby wandered to the front of the coach, swaying slightly as they rounded a bend on two wheels. A sign at the front of the coach, reading 'Please stay seated at all times', fell onto the floor with a loud crack.

“Have to remember to fix that,” said Mr Jenkins loudly. He turned round, smiling as Barnaby offered him the bag of fudge. “Thank you, Barnaby, don’t mind if I do.” He took both hands off the steering wheel and jammed one knee into the hole left by the missing piece of rubber, while he rummaged in the bag. Barnaby said something to him as he searched for a large square of fudge. “Your uncle Jerome’s recipe, eh?” Mr Jenkins said grinning. “I’ll take two pieces, then, thanks. A wonderful man, your uncle. Very wise.”

Daniel covered his eyes again. He was stuck on a coach with two nutters and with no visible means of escape. Daniel wondered how much worse his day was going to get.

“So, you’re Daniel Green, are you? The one who will make us all so proud.” A soft, deep voice quietly whispered into Daniel’s ear. Daniel inhaled sharply and turned round in his seat. He’d been sure that he and Barnaby were the only two passengers on board. How had he missed this other person?

Sitting directly behind him was a tall man, immaculately dressed in black. He had his head down as Daniel turned around and all Daniel could see of him was the top of his head. The man’s hair was short, raven black and extremely well cut, with every hair in place. He also seemed to be wearing some sort of cloak, the shoulders of which were dusted with a fine layer of snow. Daniel swiftly stole a look outside. It couldn’t be snow on the man’s shoulders, because it was the height of summer and, according to the

weather report this morning, one of the hottest days of the year so far. Daniel stared at the black material, watching the snowflakes rapidly melting in the musty heat of the coach.

As Daniel watched in fascination, the man suddenly raised his head and stared directly at him, with deep, cold, steel grey eyes. Daniel jumped. The man was smiling at him steadily, showing perfect white teeth. Daniel didn't like the smile. His eyes bored into Daniel with a look that he couldn't quite describe but, all at once, Daniel began to feel strangely calm and relaxed. All his worries about the journey and the stranger vanished. In fact, nothing seemed to matter any more. Being on this coach, going to the school, it was all unimportant. He couldn't remember what he was doing here, anyway. But that didn't matter. All that mattered was that he kept looking into the man's eyes.

He was suddenly aware that he was no longer frightened of the man. The man was his friend. The grey eyes seemed to be getting darker and larger. Daniel began to feel as if he would soon fall into them. But that was all right too. The eyes were getting deeper, like bottomless pools of still, black water. Soon, Daniel would be floating in them. He felt himself leaning forward.

From thousands of miles away, Daniel heard Barnaby laughing and suddenly a flash of anger blazed in the man's eyes. With a start, Daniel shook his head and stared, confused, at him, his uneasiness returning.

The same unnerving smile immediately reappeared.

“It’s hot in here, isn’t it? You were falling asleep, I think.” The man reached out his hand. “Nuttall,” he said, inclining his head slightly, as Daniel shook his hand, still feeling a little light-headed. The man’s hand was freezing. “I taught young Barnaby last year,” he said. “One of our more challenging pupils.”

“P-leased to meet you,” stuttered Daniel, even though he didn’t feel at all pleased to meet this man. He was now feeling rather sick, as if he had been stuck on a roller coaster for several hours. He glanced anxiously towards Barnaby but he was deep in conversation with Mr Jenkins and stuffing himself with fudge. Daniel reluctantly turned back to the man sitting behind him.

“I thought I’d come and see Daniel Green for myself, before the deluge of interested parties arrive.” Nuttall smiled once more but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. They remained cold and watchful. “Everyone’s desperate to meet our new champion. So tragic what happened to Paris. Unfortunately, I missed the Battle; I ...I was late arriving.” The flash of anger briefly reappeared in Nuttall’s slate grey eyes. “But I’ll be sure to watch you, Daniel. I’ll be watching very closely. Here,” Nuttall held out his hand, palm upwards. “For you, to welcome you to your valiant future.” It was a game cartridge. “It’s one I confiscated from a pupil last term,” he explained, staring

intently at Daniel and making him shiver. "He never reclaimed it, so I thought you might like to try it. I understand it's quite rare."

Daniel stared at the game and Nuttall placed it into his palm. Its packaging was jet black and made from a hard, metallic substance that was so cold that Daniel felt an icy burning sensation as he first held it. But it immediately warmed to Daniel's touch, with a speed that made Daniel doubt that it had ever felt cold at all. It was unlike any metal that Daniel had seen before. The substance began to soften as he held the cartridge in his palm, taking on the contours of his hand, almost feeling as if it were becoming part of him.

"Play it soon, Daniel," the deep voice whispered softly. Daniel looked up to thank the man but he had disappeared; vanished into thin air. Although he scanned the coach, the man was nowhere to be seen.

"Not long now, Daniel, we're nearly there and...are you ok?" Barnaby was ambling up the aisle of the coach, wiping his mouth. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," he said in concern.

"I'm fine," said Daniel absently, looking down at the cartridge. It now looked the same as any other game in his possession, except that it was totally black and had no title.

"New game?" asked Barnaby, pointing at the cartridge.

"Yeah," said Daniel distractedly. He was suddenly filled with an overwhelming desire

to hide the cartridge and hastily stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans. "Barnaby, who's Nuttall?"

"Nuttall?" Barnaby looked vacant for a moment and chewed a mouthful of fudge. "Oh, you mean *Dr Nuttall*. He's a teacher at my school." Barnaby crammed the last two fudge squares into his mouth. "Don't think he likes me very much. He's quite scary. Always gives us loads of homework. Why? Do you know him?"

"I've just met him," said Daniel. "He was on this coach."

"No, he wasn't," said Barnaby looking at Daniel strangely. "We're the only ones on here. I've been near the door with Mr Jenkins the whole time and there's only one way onto this coach. Are you ok?" he asked again. "Maybe you fell asleep. I did that once. Mum had to ring Mr Jenkins up, to check if I was still on the coach because I hadn't got off at my stop. He'd put the coach away in the garage for the night and everything. I was in here, still asleep. Mum went mad at me."

"Barnaby, I didn't go to sleep." But Daniel stopped, deep in thought. He *had* felt drowsy. Or something. He'd never actually felt like that before – he didn't even know how to describe it.

"Nearly there, you two," called Mr Jenkins from the front of the coach. Daniel looked over at him in surprise, as Barnaby ran to the front of the coach once more, to check his hair in the rear-view mirror. How could they be nearly there? They'd only been

on the coach five minutes. He stared at his watch. Almost half an hour had passed since they'd started their journey. Daniel frowned. Maybe he *had* fallen asleep and dreamed the man. But that didn't explain how he knew Nuttall's name. Unless Barnaby had mentioned him once in his mental night-time ramblings. That was definitely possible. There was still the game cartridge, however. He took it out of his pocket and looked at it again. It just looked like one of his normal games but without the writing on the front. The writing could have been rubbed off, if he had left it in his pocket by accident. Maybe even washed off, if he had left it in his jeans when his mum did the washing. He was normally really careful with his games, though, so...

"Here we go, Daniel! We've arrived!" said Barnaby, running up the aisle and clutching Daniel's arm in excitement. Daniel hurriedly put the cartridge back into his jeans pocket. Then, stomach lurching, Daniel craned his neck for his first view of Barnaby's school.

CHAPTER 5

The coach wound its way up a steep little driveway on a hill, densely lined with sycamore and horse chestnut trees. The driveway turned right and the coach passed through a pair of enormous wrought iron gates.

There was a large sign, also made from wrought iron, on top of the left gate, which Daniel could only read as they passed through it. It read, in large, white painted lettering: Eponymous Hildegarde School for Boys, Incorporating the Ethelred De Souza Academy for Girls.

The coach continued along the tree-filled drive, then, suddenly, the trees gave way to a large concrete car park, at the top of the hill. Daniel looked around the car park in surprise. It was filled to capacity with cars of all shapes and sizes, everything from rusty old Minis to a pristine Rolls Royce. There was also a small collection of motorcycles and mountain bikes.

“Do all these belong to parents?” Daniel asked, as the coach slowly meandered to a large white box, painted on a far corner of the car park, which read ‘School bus only’.

“Some,” said Barnaby, scrunching up the empty fudge bag and stuffing it back into

his trench coat. "The only people here today are the really important ones. Actually," he said, looking round thoughtfully, "there's *loads* of cars. More than I expected. Guess we're more famous than I thought!"

"Guess you are!" said Mr Jenkins, as he switched off the engine. The coach hic-coughed to a stop. "Come on then, off you get. Yes, leave your coat here, Barnaby, lad, it'll be safe with me."

"Come on, Daniel!" shouted Barnaby and, grabbing his arm, half-dragged Daniel off the coach. Daniel reluctantly stepped down onto the concrete, wondering what on earth awaited him inside the school. The two boys walked across the car park, onto a gravel-filled drive, which passed through a cluster of beech and elm trees, then dipped down slightly into a little valley.

As they rounded a corner, Daniel finally saw the school. It was huge. The building was made of sandstone, with ivy growing along its length. The structure itself was made up of two large quadrangles, so, when viewed from the air, the school looked like a large figure eight. There were several storeys, far too many for Daniel to count at the speed that he was being dragged along. Each storey contained what seemed like hundreds of leaded windows. As the sun shone onto the glass, it created a prism effect and as a result, the surrounding sandstone danced with tiny rainbows.

At each corner of the building were sturdy looking turrets, finished in a

burnished, golden metal, topped with ornate flags, bearing the name of the school. Each flag was gently bobbing and falling in the summer breeze. There was a huge, weathered oak door, littered with metal studs marking the entrance and above it, a great black and white iron clock. Two large stone staircases wound from the gravel drive up to the front door.

“This is your school?” asked Daniel in amazement. He thought of his own High School, with its graffiti-lined corridors and peeling paintwork. He was glad that his mum wasn’t here, or she’d be clamouring for Daniel to change schools, faster than you could say sprout casserole. He did *not* like the thought of being stuck with Barnaby and his mad friends all day long. Then again, maybe being a nutcase like Barnaby might be worth trying, if it meant that you got to go to a school as elegant as this.

“Nice, isn’t it?” said Barnaby, smiling proudly. “Everyone in my family went here. My mum, my dad...”

Barnaby suddenly stopped dead, blue eyes blinking rapidly and stared into space. With a swift movement, so swift that Daniel nearly missed it, Barnaby wiped his eyes with his free hand, head down and looking shame-faced. “I’m Daniel’s Second now, got to be strong,” he heard Barnaby whisper. Daniel watched him and, for the first time since he’d met Barnaby, felt something other than irritation towards him. Daniel frowned. He wanted to say something, to tell Barnaby that

he was sorry his dad had died, but he couldn't think of what to say. Angry with himself, he gazed awkwardly at his feet and waited for Barnaby to regain his composure.

Barnaby cleared his throat and pointed to the clock above the doorway. It read ten twenty-nine. "Come on, or we'll be late," he said, not looking at Daniel. He continued up the steps. "We've got to get our photo taken before everyone meets us." Barnaby ran ahead towards the front door, which he swung open. With a deep breath, Daniel followed Barnaby up the steps and into the building.

CHAPTER 6

Inside the school, the temperature was much cooler than it had been outside and there was far less light. Nevertheless, Daniel could still see several scores of people milling around in the large entrance hall. The hall was the size of a small football pitch, with tapestries and ornate rugs filling the walls and floor. Some of them looked extremely old; one of the tapestries, depicting a battle, bore the date 1066. The hall itself was made of grey stone and, as such, the voices of the gathered crowd echoed into every corner. Daniel couldn't make out anything that they were saying but, judging by their raised voices and the fact that they all bore the same look, it was easy to gauge their collective mood: panic.

"Is it always like this?" asked Daniel, looking around in astonishment.

"No," said Barnaby breezily, sounding more like his normal self again. "I expect it's because they're so excited to see us."

He put his sunglasses on and smiled expectantly at the swarm of people. However, no one seemed to be taking any notice of them whatsoever. Barnaby waited patiently for one of the passing throng to recognise him. When no one did, he grabbed a

motherly looking old lady as she hurried by and proudly announced his arrival.

“That’s very nice, Barnaby, dear,” she said, patting his arm and looking distracted. “I’m sure everyone will be pleased to hear that you’ve arrived safely.” Then she scuttled off.

“This is *very* odd,” said Barnaby, frowning. “I thought they were all here for us.”

Daniel watched the milling crowd, running around and colliding into each other as they went. He was surprised to find that they all looked like normal people. They didn’t look insane or crazy; none of them had two heads, or, in fact, looked in any way different to anyone that you would meet in the supermarket or in the street. Daniel had always thought that Barnaby went to a school for the strange and finding people here who were ordinary wasn’t what he had expected at all. As he looked around, there was a sudden electrical squawk and a loud male voice could be heard, shouting through a loudspeaker.

“May I have your attention, *please*? Ladies and gentlemen, a moment of your time, if I may!”

There was a large mahogany stage at the far end of the hall and, standing on it, was the owner of the voice. He was a short, squat man, around fifty years old, with very little hair. What hair he did have, was baby blond and wispy, situated mainly at the back of his head and around his ears. He had a

round, fat face and his forehead was creased with frown lines and wrinkles. Judging by the dark lines under his eyes, he hadn't been getting much sleep of late.

"That's my Headmaster," said Barnaby to Daniel, pointing at the stage. "His name's Eponymous Hildegarde, like the school."

Daniel now looked at the man with more interest. So *that's* what the Headmaster of a school for loonies looked like. Eponymous Hildegarde was wearing voluminous bottle green trousers and a smart white shirt with a red and purple checked waistcoat on top. A large gold pocket watch was sticking out of his waistcoat pocket and he anxiously plucked this from the pocket and gazed at it intently. He appeared to be astounded at the time and began to shout agitatedly into the loudspeaker once more.

"Please! I know we've all had a shock but if you'll just let me give you some updates on what we know so far."

At this, everyone in the hall stopped speaking, with the exception of two plump middle-aged women, who were standing directly below the little man and talking loudly.

"Thank you, I've..." Eponymous stopped talking and stared incredulously at the two women, who were still nattering on. "Yvonne!" he shouted through the loudspeaker, "I thought I could have counted on my own *wife* for a little support, here!"

Yvonne Hildegarde, splendidly attired in a hot pink dress, glared balefully at her husband from under huge false eyelashes and perfectly coiffed, brassy orange hair. She muttered something that Daniel couldn't hear.

"Well, dear," said Eponymous patiently, still through the loudspeaker, "surely you'll be able to talk to Celia about her facelift later."

At this, Celia gave a loud shriek and ran from the hall, her newly lifted face now bright red with embarrassment.

"Oh, *well done*, Eponymous!" shouted his wife angrily. She whacked his legs with her pink handbag and stomped off after Celia, her lurid pink high heels clicking on the polished floor as she went. Eponymous rubbed his shins, grimacing painfully. He placed the loudspeaker down onto the stage and began to address the assembled throng.

"Anyway, as I was saying, we all witnessed the Battle, two nights ago, via the Action Station, here in the Big Hall. We now know that our History Teacher, Dr Xavier Nuttall was Shadow's Second and, as such, is a traitor. He deceived us all."

At the mention of the name 'Nuttall', Daniel's head shot up in surprise. The crowd began to mutter again and the Headmaster held up his hand for silence. "He managed to keep his true loyalties from us all and, therefore, played a significant role in Paris's death. We can also assume from the things that Paris said, shortly before he was killed,

that it was Xavier Nuttall who stole his weapon, which meant that Paris was unable to defend himself against Shadow's modified and illegal crossbow. Had Nuttall been discovered earlier, I think we all know that there would have been a totally different outcome and that Paris would have defeated Shadow. I think a moment of silence is in order, as a mark of respect to Paris, our brave and heroic champion."

Eponymous and the gathered group bowed their heads in unison. Suppressed sobs were audible around the hall. After a few moments, Eponymous looked up and cleared his throat.

"Thank you," he said. "Now, Paris would, I know, have wanted us to continue fighting and there are serious matters to discuss. Some rather disturbing news has been reaching many of you." He paused, looking worried. "I'm afraid to say, the rumours are true. The key to the Half Stone Room *has* been stolen." A horrified gasp went up from the crowd and everyone immediately began talking amongst themselves. It was some time before order could be restored.

"So, have they won, then?" shouted a member of the crowd, an elderly man, wearing a flat cap. "Are we going to be invaded? We all saw what happened to Paris *and* we saw the news this morning about the children's nightmares."

At this, everyone began talking again agitatedly. With a pained expression,

Eponymous grabbed the loudspeaker and eventually managed to calm the group.

“We don’t know anything for sure.” He paused. “We *do* know, however, that although the key to the room is missing, the Half Stone has *not* been taken.”

Relieved gasps went up and Eponymous continued through the noise. “I repeat, despite the key having been stolen, the Half Stone has *not* been removed from the room. So, we believe that we are still safe.”

“Who stole the key? Do we know that?” asked a blond-haired man wearing a smart grey suit. Eponymous glanced warily at the audience.

“We don’t know for sure. However, all the evidence is currently pointing to Dr Nuttall.” The crowd gasped in horror.

“How could he be Shadow’s Second *and* steal the key at the same time?” asked a woman, close to where Barnaby and Daniel were standing.

“We all know that Xavier Nuttall wasn’t in his place on the Battleground as he was meant to be. We all saw that,” said Eponymous patiently. “We think he was late for the Battle in Allapatria because he was interrupted here.”

At this, Daniel played back the conversation that he had had with Nuttall on the coach. Nuttall *had* said that he had been too late to witness the Battle taking place. Suddenly, Daniel, horrified, stopped dead and shook his head in utter amazement. He was astounded at himself. He was starting to

take all this insanity seriously. The last thing he needed was to find himself being drawn into this weird world and its strange goings-on. This was, after all, a nutters' convention, a place where weirdos came to talk nonsense for half an hour, then go home again. Despite this, however, he was still intrigued by their sincerity. They all seemed to really believe what they were hearing.

Daniel looked up at the Headmaster to find that he was still talking, his fingers wearily kneading his forehead, eyes closed in concentration. "It seems that Dr Nuttall was pretending to work late in his office on the night in question," he said. "Nuttall must have decided to take advantage of the fact that everyone would be watching the Battle. Consequently, he assumed, *wrongly*, that the Half Stone Room wouldn't be guarded for the duration of the Battle. Mr Saunders, the caretaker, found Dr Nuttall standing next to the room where the key is kept, at around Midnight. He was surprised to find that Nuttall wasn't watching the Battle like everyone else. When Mr Saunders questioned him, Dr Nuttall...well, we're not exactly sure *what* he did to him but since then, Mr Saunders has been suffering from terrible hallucinations and is still under sedation in the Sanatorium, upstairs. He is only having occasional sane moments. During one of them, he named Dr Nuttall as his attacker."

"I *knew* it!" shouted a voice. "I knew he couldn't be trusted! You only had to *look* at

him! He should never have been allowed to teach...”

“Yes, well, hindsight is a marvellous thing,” said Eponymous, wearily. “Perhaps if I’d listened to Paris all those years ago...” He shook his head and continued. “Nuttall’s rooms have been checked and all of his things are gone. It seems that he had been planning to show his hand for a while. His actions have revealed where his loyalties lie. Anyway, we believe that, due to having been disturbed, he didn’t manage to get into the Half Stone Room. He may still have the key but security has been stepped up now, so he will not, I repeat, *not* be able to get near the door to the room to use it.”

“Mr Hildegarde, I presume the next Battle will be taking place soon? The new Defender and his Second have arrived.”

The speaker was the elderly lady that Barnaby had spoken to earlier. The crowd murmured interestedly at this and began scanning the hall.

Daniel immediately shrank back into the shadows and Eponymous nodded to a tall thin man at the back of the hall, who made his way through the crowd, towards Daniel and Barnaby. “Do you really think Paris is dead, Headmaster? There couldn’t be some mistake?” the lady asked hopefully. “There was no body on the Battleground, as we all saw on the Action Station.”

“I’m afraid that he *is* dead, Margaret,” said Eponymous, lowering his eyes. “The triumphant reaction from Shadow was proof

enough. There is no evidence to the contrary and Shadow used a crossbow, the like of which I have never seen before. We think that Paris's body may have been reduced to little more than atoms by the force of the bolt. However because Shadow cheated, we think that Allapatria has given us another chance. It's the only possible explanation. Our Half Stone is still with us, here in this school. Therefore, they do not appear to be the victors, despite the fact that they won the Battle by cheating. Gabriel has stayed in Allapatria, to try to find out what happened. As soon as we know, we will tell you all, of course."

The tall man finally made his way over to Daniel and Barnaby.

"Follow me, quickly," he said in a curt voice and the two boys silently followed him out of the hall and through a wooden door situated to their right. The last thing Daniel heard as he passed through the door was from the old lady.

"But how can we *possibly* win with such young boys? Shadow has now murdered two unarmed men. They won't be shown any mercy. What chance do two boys have, especially one who doesn't even go to this school? I'm sure *he* won't be trained in swordsmanship. He'll be killed as soon as he sets foot into the arena, ripped to shreds." Daniel's blood ran cold.

CHAPTER 7

Ten minutes later, Barnaby and Daniel were joined in the little wood-panelled room, which turned out to be the Headmaster's study, by Eponymous Hildegard himself. He looked tired and drawn as he sank into a large brown leather chair behind the oak desk in the corner of the room.

"Thank you, Martin," he said to the tall man who had remained in the room with the two boys.

The man bowed and left, shutting the door softly behind him, leaving the Headmaster with Barnaby and Daniel. Both were ashen. Barnaby spoke first.

"Sir, is it true about Paris? He's really dead? Everyone in my class thought he'd win for certain. He was brilliant! When I dreamed of me and Daniel, I didn't think we'd *really* have to..." He tailed off and removed his sunglasses, looking anxiously at his Headmaster. "So that means that we have to fight? *For real?*" Barnaby asked, sounding stunned. "It's not pretend?"

"I'm afraid not," said Eponymous, frowning at Barnaby. "Paris was killed. But you must have known that, Barnaby. Weren't you here with all the rest, watching on the

Action Station? You must have seen what happened to Paris.”

“My mum wouldn’t let me watch,” he said quietly, his head down. “She thought there might have been blood and guts.”

“Very wise,” said Eponymous, nodding his approval. He looked over for the first time at Daniel, giving him his full attention. “Well, we’re all glad young Barnaby and his mum recognised you as the boy in our dream! Otherwise, I really don’t know *how* we would have found you.” He leaned back in his chair for a better look. “So, you’re Daniel Green,” he said wonderingly. Daniel found his voice.

“I’m SICK of people saying that!” he roared, standing up and glaring at Eponymous. “You’re all mad! Why are you all picking on me? I don’t know what you lot are on but I’m not having any more to do with this. You’re all getting worked up about stuff that isn’t even real! You reckon someone called Paris has been murdered in a battle but there wasn’t anything about it on the telly and there would have been if someone had been shot with an arrow, by somebody called Shadow! They’d be out there now, looking for him! Then there’s all this stuff about that Nuttall bloke stealing keys! I don’t know why I’ve been brought here but I’ve had enough! You can try and make some other poor kid go as mental as you lot but it’s not going to work on me. I’m going home.”

“Very wise decision,” said Eponymous briskly, picking up the phone on his desk. “Henrietta, be so kind as to get Mr Jenkins

for me, would you? The boys are leaving us.” He replaced the receiver. “I think it would be best for you to stay at home for now, given the current situation,” he said, smiling worriedly. “You’re safer there than here. No one to my knowledge knows where you live, Daniel, so I suggest you both wait in your bedroom, until further notice. You won’t have to wait long.”

There was a loud rapping on the wooden door and Mr Jenkins trundled in, smiling and carrying his red bobble hat.

“Ready?” he said, grinning at Barnaby and Daniel. They followed him outside.

All three walked back to the coach in silence. Daniel’s brain was doing cartwheels. Maybe this was all some bizarre dream, he thought to himself. He’d heard on the news that children were dreaming odd things, so this must be a nightmare. Anytime now, he would wake up. But he didn’t feel asleep. The sun felt hot, the gravel was scrunching realistically beneath his feet and the coach smelled fusty and old as he boarded it. If this was a nightmare, then, with the exception of the other night’s terrifying dream, this was the most life-like delusion that he’d ever experienced. No, this was real, all right. He’d just spent a couple of hours with loonies. They were probably all cult members, who wanted another recruit. Well, they had another think coming if they thought that new recruit would be him.

Barnaby was silent through the entire journey. Mr Jenkins had asked them to sit

up at the front with him so that he could keep an eye on them and Barnaby gazed out through the windscreen all the way home. That was fine by Daniel because he didn't feel much like talking anyway. He wanted to get back as quickly as possible and contact the police, before they tried to nab some other poor kid.

As they arrived home, Barnaby wandered over to Mr Jenkins, who was fanning himself with his bobble hat.

"Mr Jenkins," he said in a small voice, "I don't want to be Daniel's Second any more."

"Eh, you'll be fine, lad," Mr Jenkins said gruffly and gave him a one armed hug. "You wait and see." He grinned at Barnaby and his blue eyes twinkled. "Both of you are going to be fine," he said. "Just you wait and see who you've got looking after you!"

"So, do we just wait in Daniel's room, now?" Barnaby asked, still looking upset. Mr Jenkins nodded cheerily.

"That's what the man said! I'll stay here until you're both in safely."

Mr Jenkins watched the two get off the coach. Daniel was just about to proclaim very loudly that there was no way Barnaby was ever setting foot in his house again, when he had a sudden flash of inspiration. "Yes, you just come up to my room, Barnaby!" Daniel called.

Daniel waved manically at Mr Jenkins and dragged Barnaby to his front door. He scrabbled round in the front pockets of his

jeans for his house key, opened the door and practically threw the protesting Barnaby into the house. "Right," said Daniel, breathing heavily and glaring at Barnaby, "you're going to show me where you drilled the holes in my bedroom wall that you've been putting the gas through to make me see strange things and dream strange things and make my fish tank talk to me!" Daniel pushed him upstairs, smiling at his cleverness. It was the only explanation. It must be part of Barnaby's desire to get him into the cult he was in. That would explain why Daniel was having so many encounters of the weird kind. Barnaby looked at him as if he was going crazy and tried to wrench himself free.

"Aha!" shouted Daniel gleefully. "Don't like it when someone drags *you* into places against *your* will, *do you?*" By now, they were outside Daniel's bedroom door. "Go on, then!" shouted Daniel, opening the door. He pushed Barnaby into the room and followed him inside.

Both boys immediately stopped dead in the doorway, staring in shock at Daniel's bed. Sitting near the pillows was a creature, around a metre in height, struggling out of sopping wet, shiny black scuba gear, much of which was covered in pondweed. His arms and legs were long and straggly and seemed out of proportion with his chunky, barrel-like body. The creature had a weathered face, the exact colour and texture of heavily tanned brown leather, with a long, pointy nose and pointed ears. Brown, sodden hair clung in

dishevelled clumps around his face. His deep brown eyes were just visible behind the goggles. They were kindly looking but also immensely sharp and bright, festooned with a million crows' feet. He was pulling on the arms of the diving suit, totally engrossed in his actions. He turned round in surprise as Daniel's bedroom door banged against the wall. His face immediately broke into a smile behind his goggles, revealing pearly white, pointy teeth.

"Good afternoon, Barnaby and Daniel!" said the creature, in a surprisingly deep voice for his size. "I was wondering when you two would arrive!"

CHAPTER 8

Both boys stared at the creature. “Oh, no, *OH NO!*” roared Daniel and smacked Barnaby across the head, making him yowl in pain. “You’re not real,” he said breathlessly, pointing at the creature, which was taking off its goggles. “You don’t exist! It’s all part of his plan to get me into his loony cult. Where are they, then? Where are the holes for the gas?”

Daniel dived onto the floor and began to scan the floorboards for holes, sniffing the air as he went. He then crawled under his bed and passed his hand across the wall.

“Must be here, somewhere,” he muttered, wriggling backwards and starting on the opposite wall. He began to move the wardrobe that stood next to the fish tank, glancing warily at Barnaby and the creature, both of whom were looking at him as if he were insane.

“Have I got the wrong house?” the creature asked incredulously, finally managing to remove all of the scuba gear, with the exception of the left flipper, which refused to budge. Underneath his aquatic outfit, the creature wore a smart three-piece tweed suit. His right foot was adorned with a shiny, well-polished, black leather shoe. Still tugging on the left flipper, he delved into the

pocket of his tweed jacket and, squinting, consulted a map. "No, no, definitely the right place," he muttered, pulling at the unruly flipper and looking worriedly at Daniel, who was now ripping down his Monster Truck posters and staring intently at the walls beneath. "Er, is he always so," the creature glanced at Barnaby and tapped his head, "odd?" But Barnaby was staring at the creature strangely, too. The creature, looking exasperated, raised his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head. "Right – enough," he said, clapping his hands together. "Barnaby, Daniel – sit." He gestured to the bed. "We don't have much time and I refuse to waste what little time we *do* have in indulging strange behaviour. Daniel, I said *SIT!*"

The volume of the creature's voice shocked Daniel out of his frenetic poster ripping antics and, surprised, he flopped down onto the bed next to Barnaby. "Right, now, maybe we can have a rational conversation," said the little creature. He gave one final tug on his flipper and gave up in disgust, glaring at it. "Stupid thing," he said, kicking the flipper with his right shoe. "Never trust a pixie with your shopping list. I *said* I'd need the next size up. Anyway, to business." He bowed his head slightly. "I'm Peekin," he said, smiling benevolently. There was a very long pause.

"At what?" said Barnaby hesitantly, staring intently at the creature. Peekin's smile faded slightly.

“No,” he said patiently, as if talking to someone extremely stupid. “I’m Peekin.”

“At what?” repeated Barnaby, looking confused. “At me?”

“I’M PEEKIN!” roared the little man, flicking the flipper at Barnaby. A drop of water hit Barnaby on the nose and he squeaked in shock. “MY NAME IS PEEKIN, ALRIGHT?” He glared at Barnaby. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard that? After a while, you start to get a bit sick of it! Oh and while we’re on the subject of getting sick,” he glared balefully at Daniel, who had his eyes shut, his fingers stuck in his ears and was gently singing a song to himself, the lyrics of which were, ‘you don’t exist’, “don’t you *ever* change the water in that tank? If I don’t get ill after that, I’ll be amazed. I pity that poor goldfish of yours.” Daniel opened his eyes, stopped humming and glared back at Peekin.

“You’ve been in my fish tank?” he yelled, leaning towards Peekin angrily. Peekin leaned towards Daniel, equally irate.

“Well, you don’t think I dress in scuba gear with pondweed stuck on my head normally, do you, you dim-witted idiot? Think I was wearing that stuff for the good of my health?”

“*Why* are you all obsessed with my fish tank?” Daniel yelled, getting closer to Peekin, until Peekin’s nose was nearly touching Daniel’s cheek.

“Because, you raving numbskull, it’s on one of the biggest ley lines in the area!

Honestly!" said Peekin standing up on the bed and furiously pulling on the flipper, "I'm *really* looking forward to this assignment! I just *love* spending my time with village idiots! Oh, *happy* day!"

He left the flipper and turned back to Daniel, his eyes flashing with anger. "Haven't you listened to a *word* Barnaby and Eponymous have told you? This is just ever so slightly important, you know. I don't think you fully appreciate the gravity of the situation."

"I haven't been told ANYTHING!" Daniel roared. "Apart from the fact that I'm obviously going mad, nothing makes any sense at all!"

"You've...no one's...Barnaby and Eponymous didn't..." Peekin stared open-mouthed at Daniel, then at Barnaby. "Excuse me for one moment, Daniel, please," Peekin said, smiling at him sweetly. Peekin stood up again and lurched towards Barnaby, slapping him on precisely the same spot as Daniel. Barnaby yowled again.

"You haven't told him?" Peekin asked in astonishment. "Well, no wonder he's acting strangely! How would *you* feel, if *your* next-door neighbour started telling *you* that *you* had been chosen for something *you've* never heard of, then *your* fish tank starts talking to *you*?! And after all that, you get taken to a school where you hear that you might just get killed by someone you've never heard of in a Battle that you know nothing about!"

“Sorry,” said Barnaby, holding his head and whimpering. “I was just so excited about being a Second, I forgot.”

“Forgot,” muttered Peekin, shaking his head. “Barnaby,” he said, a little more kindly, “you’re Daniel’s Second now; you can’t just forget things any more. We’ve a lot at stake and you’re a very important part of it. And, by the way, what the *devil* are you wearing? You look like a pineapple.”

Peekin glanced at Daniel, who was now giving Peekin his full attention. He was staring at the little man, with his mouth gaping open.

“You know about what’s been happening to me? I’m going mad, aren’t I?”

“Yes, I do,” said Peekin wearily, “and, no, you’re not. This is real. It is happening. But there’s a lot you don’t know that you need to be made aware of. You should have been told about all this by now. We’ve not much time, though. Pity.”

Peekin rummaged into his tweed waistcoat and pulled out a tiny, highly polished little pipe. The bowl of the pipe was made from a hollowed out acorn and the stem was varnished rosewood. He looked at the pipe, his head on one side. “Well, I’ve just got time,” he said musingly.

He removed a tiny, black velvet bag from his other waistcoat pocket and tipped a mixture of what looked like pot pourri into the bowl of the pipe. He then lit it with the tiniest match that Daniel had ever seen. A fragrant scent immediately reached Daniel’s

nostrils: a combination of pine-wood and dried flower petals. Daniel tensed. His mum would want to know what the smell was, he thought to himself, worriedly. She'd go mad if she thought he'd been burning leaves in his room. Unless he was still mad and dreaming all this, in which case she wouldn't smell anything because this creature wasn't really here and there wasn't any smoke to smell and...Peekin held up his free hand, his eyes closed, puffing away on the pipe.

"Daniel, please calm down," he said, a faint crease of annoyance appearing between his eyes. "Your mum is in the garden, sunbathing. She won't come into the house for," he opened his eyes and squinted at a gold pocket watch that he took from his waistcoat, "four minutes and sixteen seconds." Peekin stared at Daniel in surprise. "Doesn't your mum know the dangers of spending too much time in the sun? She's already been out there for an hour and thirteen minutes, as it is! Anyway," Peekin said hastily, as Daniel began to look as if he would go berserk again, "I need to fill you in on everything that you need to know for now and that will have to do. Make yourself comfortable," said Peekin, giving Daniel a swift smile that lit up his weathered face, "and I'll tell you a three minute and twenty-eight seconds long story."

CHAPTER 9

“Right,” said Peekin, leaning back meditatively on Daniel’s pillow and puffing away on his pipe, his legs crossed, flipper stuck in the air, “where to begin? I really wasn’t expecting this, you know, or I’d have prepared something,” he said, one eye closed, the other on Daniel. “Wait ‘til I speak to Eponymous. Ok. You and Barnaby are needed in Allapatria now. Today. That’s why I’m here. I’ve come to collect you and make sure you arrive safely. You’re needed as a Defender, Daniel. You’re needed to come and right a terrible wrong and prevent further terrible wrongs from occurring. Barnaby is to be your Second. That means he has to protect you while you’re training and make sure your weapon is up to scratch.”

“Hang on, *he’s* going to look after *me*?” Daniel laughed hysterically. “That’s *ridiculous!* He can’t even throw a football straight!” Barnaby looked uncomfortable but Peekin continued as if Daniel hadn’t spoken.

“As it’s such an important task, I’ve been drafted in to look after you both. You’ll be staying with me while you’re in Allapatria. I hope they’ve put new sheets on my bed this time,” said Peekin to himself, anxiously. “They know I can’t sleep on cotton. And, if

anyone's been stealing my blackberries, there'll be trouble! Anyway, that's where we're going, so, if you just want to get your things together now, Daniel. You know, a few clothes, essentials, that sort of thing."

Peekin looked sadly at his pipe and reluctantly reached over and tapped the contents into Daniel's bin. "Your mum's already sent your stuff through, Barnaby," Peekin said. "Mimosa took charge of it, earlier."

Peekin glanced quickly at Daniel, who was staring open-mouthed at him. "Well, come on, chop chop!" he said irritably, his hands on his hips. "Can't keep them waiting. They've been getting ready all day!"

"Er, is that *it*? That's *all* you're going to tell me and that's meant to make me change my mind and come with you?" Daniel asked angrily, staring at Peekin from under his eyebrows. "Why should I go *anywhere* with you, especially to a place that doesn't even exist?"

"*Why*? Well, isn't it obvious?" said Peekin staring at him in surprise. "Oh! Hang on a mo! Of course, how silly of me, of *course* you don't know why!" Peekin laughed to himself, tapping his forehead. "I must be getting old! I forgot the most important thing you need to know." He smiled widely, his head held high and proud. "I'm a Defardian elf, Daniel. I'm here to help you. And a better Defardian elf you'll never find."

Peekin the Defardian elf checked his pocket watch again and gasped, swiftly pocketing both watch and pipe.

“Blimey, is that the time?” A pained expression suddenly flashed across his face. He jumped up and shrieked loudly. “Ow, hot, hot! Damn pipe burned my leg!” When he’d manoeuvred the pipe to a safer place, he remembered his flipper and groaned, staring at it miserably.

“I forgot I still had that on. Right, it’s got to come off. I’ll never live it down if I go back like this. Barnaby, use some of that girth of yours to help me out of this thing.” Barnaby was about to protest but Peekin gave him a swift look. “We have two minutes and twenty-six seconds. No time to argue.”

Barnaby immediately began to pull on the flipper. Peekin was dragged across the bed and suddenly found himself spun upside down, suspended from the flipper and hanging in mid air. “Er, Barnaby, that’s not quite what I had in mind,” he said, trying to remain calm.

Daniel hesitated, then grabbed hold of Peekin’s body and pulled, surprised at how real the little man felt. With a small ‘pop’, the flipper came off Peekin’s shoe. “Finally!” said Peekin. “Ok, put me down now, Daniel, we’re running out of time.” He jumped off the bed and ran over to Daniel’s fish tank. “Right, now help me move this,” he said. “There’s no way I’m going through all that again. It took me half an hour just putting on the scuba

gear. We'll move the tank and go through the wall. That's where the ley line is, anyway.

"What are you doing?" asked Daniel in amazement, watching Peekin tugging on the cabinet that the fish tank sat upon. Even Rover swam to the side of the tank and stared in surprise at the little man.

"We've got to go before your mum comes in from the garden, in..." Peekin checked his watch, "one minute and eleven seconds. So, help me move this!"

"Why?" asked Daniel. He still wasn't sure whether this creature was real. He wasn't about to go wandering off with a figment of his own imagination.

"I am real, Daniel," said Peekin, his face reddening with the effort of trying to move the cabinet, "but I can't prove that here. We're going to Allapatria but, to do that, I need access to the ley line that's in the wall that divides your bedroom from Barnaby's."

"What?" said Daniel. "I'm not going anywhere else today, thank you, especially not through a wall!" Peekin raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Barnaby, shift this cabinet *now!*" Barnaby trotted over and slid the cabinet aside, as Peekin gathered up his scuba gear. "Right, Daniel, get anything you need and we'll get going. NO TIME TO ARGUE!!!" he said, as Daniel opened his mouth in protest. "Daniel - *hustle!*"

Daniel glanced from Barnaby to Peekin in dismay. Should he go along with this, or run for his life? Peekin was already standing

next to the wall, moving his hand on a spot halfway up from the floor. "Gotcha!" he shouted triumphantly.

He took something from the inside pocket of his jacket. It was a tiny, very flat, very bright shard of some kind of jewel that Daniel had never seen before. The colours of the shard were dazzling, purple fused with electric blue, which combined with brilliant reds, turquoise and green. Peekin placed the shard flat against the wall. There was a bright, electric blue flash and suddenly, the wall seemed to turn to liquid. It was becoming more and more transparent and now looked like a curtain of water, rather than a wall. A hole suddenly appeared within the liquidy substance. However, instead of the hole leading into Barnaby's bedroom, as Daniel might have expected, it looked out onto a dark, wooded clearing. Daniel could hear birdsong coming through the hole, as well as the distinctive scent of wood smoke. "Nine seconds, Daniel," said Peekin warningly. He moved aside to let Barnaby past. Barnaby jumped through the hole and peered at Daniel, looking anxious.

"Please, Daniel, hurry," he said in desperation.

"Last chance, Daniel," said Peekin, staring at him. "Please," he said quietly, "I can't do this without you." Daniel suddenly heard footsteps on the patio outside. His mum was on her way into the house. Peekin jumped through the hole in the bedroom wall and stood next to Barnaby.

“Daniel! Are you home?” His mum’s voice drifted angrily into the hallway. “What on *earth* is that smell? Have you spilled my Exclusive Serene Country Garden Air Freshener for Heavenly Homes? Do you know how much that cost?” Designer flip flop covered feet pounded up the stairs. Barnaby was dancing from foot to foot in agitation. Daniel stared towards his bedroom door, then over at Barnaby and Peekin. He lurched to his desk, grabbed his games console and, just as his mum reached his door, dived through the hole and into the wood. Peekin quickly motioned with the shard and the hole closed over. He slowly turned round and gazed at Daniel, with a combination of anger and admiration on his leathery face.

“How about keeping us in suspense, next time, eh?” he said, slapping Daniel on the arm. “Come on, we’ll have to hurry. They’re all expecting us.”

CHAPTER 10

Peekin ran ahead, jumping over fallen logs. “Hang on here a sec,” he said and suddenly dived out of sight. Daniel looked at Barnaby in puzzlement. Where were they?

“Oh, by the way, Daniel, while we’re here, I wondered if you’d mind not calling me Barnaby,” said Barnaby, smiling at him and looking hopeful.

“What? Why?” asked Daniel, distractedly, looking for Peekin.

“Well, I’d just prefer you to call me Gripper instead. It sounds really cool, Gripper, doesn’t it? You know, all tough, like a superhero. Is that a deal, then?” Daniel was mercifully saved from having to respond by Peekin’s return. “Ok, all clear!” he said, grinning and looking around. “Oh, it’s good to be back! Right, follow me, this way.”

They silently trudged behind him and soon found themselves at the edge of the forest and standing on a little sandy-coloured lane. The lane wound round to the right and up a little hill. Peekin motioned to them to follow him, still carrying the scuba gear in his hands. Daniel looked around in amazement. Wherever they were, it was early evening. The sky was a clear blue and the air was still and warm, scented with the same

wood smoke fragrance that he had just smelled in his room. The evening sun cast a soft, honeyed glow over the scene. He could hear bees buzzing lazily in the flowers that nestled between the large oak and pine trees lining the road. In the distance was a high ridge of dark, spiky mountains, looking as if they would envelop the land below them at any minute.

“Where are we?” Daniel asked in astonishment. Peekin rolled his eyes skywards.

“Don’t you *ever* listen?” he said, turning round in annoyance. “We’re in Allapatria: A – LA – PAY- TREE – YA. Have you got it now, or should I repeat it a few more times?” Peekin muttered indignantly to himself. “I trust you’re only *pretending* to be stupid, Daniel. We’ll just put it down to shock, shall we?” Peekin shook his head in irritation and continued up the hill. “This lane’s halfway between Sunset Rise and Bracken Point,” he said. “The area doesn’t have a name as such; it’s safer to keep my cottage’s whereabouts secret. There would normally be a bigger welcome for you than this but we’re keeping *you* a secret for now, too. Only a *very* few know that you’re here. Come on, chop chop. ”

As they reached the top of the little hill, Daniel noticed a weathered wooden sign. Written in ornate black writing was, ‘Damson Cottage’. He had to look twice, however, before he actually saw the cottage itself. It was well hidden in a cosy niche in the hill, surrounded by trees and tall shrubs. “This is

my cottage,” said Peekin happily. “Well, the one I use when I’m in these parts. But it’s my favourite by far.” The cottage was small and homely looking, made of stone, with a slate roof and roses and ivy growing all around the door and windows. A chimney was billowing out smoke and skylarks were dipping gracefully in the soft, warm light of the growing dusk. All was quiet and peaceful.

As they walked towards the little green garden gate that led to Peekin’s home, the wooden front door opened with a creak and a young man, who appeared to be in his twenties, came out of the cottage. He had to bend slightly, in order to walk through the little doorway without banging his head. He was as tall as Daniel’s father, with curling, dark brown hair and piercing green eyes. The man was wearing jeans and a white shirt. He would have been extremely handsome but for the drawn look of anguish that was evident upon his face. He looked pale, exhausted and somehow defeated, his head and broad shoulders drooping slightly. Despite this, however, he moved well, walking gracefully towards the trio, his face temporarily losing its sadness.

“Peekin!” he said, smiling softly. “It’s an honour to meet you again.”

“The honour is truly mine, Gabriel,” said Peekin, opening the gate and bowing so low that his nose nearly hit his shoes.

“Gabriel’s a Crowned Prince,” whispered Barnaby to Daniel. “His family’s ruled our half of Allapatria for years. He was Paris’s

Second as well, you know, like I'm your Second." Barnaby sounded utterly awe-stricken. Gabriel gestured over to Barnaby and Daniel, with the same gentle smile.

"I think I can guess who you two are. I'm Gabriel Arc'Allatain. I'm staying with Peekin for the moment, too. Pleased to meet you both." Daniel glanced at Barnaby, who was staring at Gabriel as if he were looking at a film star. His knees were trembling and his lips were frantically moving but nothing was coming out. Gabriel laughed and held out his hand. Barnaby shook it vigorously. "You must be Barnaby," he said, smiling. "It's good to finally meet you. I knew your father well." Gabriel's face suddenly clouded over, his eyes looking haunted. Then, the look vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He turned his attention to Daniel. "Allow me the honour of welcoming you to Allapatria."

"Thank you, er, Sir," said Daniel, feeling awkward. Gabriel waved his hand dismissively.

"Please just call me Gabriel," he said. "Everyone does." He gave Daniel an appraising look and, suddenly, Daniel noticed something in his eyes: a strange mixture of fear and concern. He stared at Daniel for a long time. "This must all seem rather odd to you," he said softly, "as you never went to Eponymous Hildegarde. I'll bet you thought that you were going mad."

Daniel looked at him hesitantly, unsure of what Gabriel's eyes were conveying.

“He thought he was going mad, alright!” Peekin butted in. “Like you wouldn’t believe! You should have seen him!” Peekin gave Daniel a sly look and continued to wander round his garden, anxiously checking lines of lettuces, carrots and beans. “Raspberries are doing well this year,” he muttered to himself, looking pleased. “Raspberry tarts for afternoon tea soon, I think.” He smacked his lips together happily before examining a large patch of rosemary at the edge of the garden.

“Well, we can’t stand and chat all evening; we’re holding up proceedings!” said Gabriel, smiling briefly. He shouted behind him, into the little cottage. “Everyone! They’re here!” There was a sudden flurry of activity and excited shouts could be heard from inside the cottage. The first to appear was a cloud of mosquitoes, which burst from the cottage, their excited buzzing sounding like an orchestra tuning up.

“Ready?” squeaked an impossibly high voice.

“No!” shouted Peekin in sudden panic, covering his ears. “Please, don’t! It’s ok, you can just *tell* us how happy you are to see us!” But it was too late.

“A one, two, three, four!” shouted the high squeaky voice and immediately, high-pitched, out of tune music could be heard coming from the mosquito cloud. All were playing at different tempos and in different keys. “Strings, I said B flat!” shrieked the little voice. “Woodwinds, *allegro*, *allegro*! Godfrey, is your music upside down?”

“What on earth is that?” shouted Daniel above the din, his fingers firmly jammed in his ears.

“It’s Alvin’s Magnificent Mosquito Band!” yelled Peekin. “They always play on special occasions. The only thing that’s magnificent about them, though, is how magnificently bad they are!”

“I think they’re quite good!” shouted Barnaby, tapping his foot, while Peekin desperately waved to the skylarks flying above him. He pointed at the insect cloud and hopefully mouthed ‘dinner’ at the birds. However, even the skylarks appeared intent on avoiding the racket. They swiftly disappeared into the evening sky.

After what seemed an eternity, the band finally reached the end of their musical welcome and the mosquitoes flew around the little group, bowing and curtsying. Daniel squinted at the insects and was just able to make out the instruments, which even included a harp, complete with little stool, held aloft by four exhausted looking mosquitoes.

“Well, that was simply...I’m truly lost for words.” said Peekin, with a fixed smile.

“Thought you’d appreciate it,” said Gabriel, giving Peekin a swift grin. “They did the same for me when I arrived. It’s only fair that you should get the same welcome.”

“Pixie first, stinky pants!” shouted an angry little voice from the cottage. Daniel turned round in surprise to see four little people, three around Peekin’s height and one

substantially smaller. Three were female, one male. All were trying to get through the front door at the same time. "Don't make Pixie use magic twig!" the same voice called out threateningly.

"Pixie, stop trying to push me out of the way! I want to see Peekin. Clementine should go out before you anyway; she did most of the work. You only turned up because you were bored."

"Don't argue, dear ladies', said Dick, cleverly, smiling and giving a roguish wink to camera!" said Dick Cleverley. All four suddenly popped through the doorway at the same time, landing in a muddled heap of arms and legs.

"Oh, joy," said Peekin, rubbing his eyes wearily. "The welcoming party." The first of the little people to get up was a tiny elfin woman, with short, sleek black hair and a delicate, heart shaped face. She angrily smoothed down her billowy lilac dress and glared at the heap of bodies that were still trying to get up from the garden path.

"*Honestly*, what *must* our guests think?" she said, frowning as they struggled. She approached the group, gently waving her hands in front of her, to ward off the mosquitoes that were flying round her head. "I'm so sorry about that," she said, trying to ignore the shouts and yells coming from behind her. She smiled warmly at Daniel and Barnaby. "My name is Mimosa Sheergold," she said. "I look after Peekin's cottage while he's away. The bodies on the floor are my

little sister Clementine, she's the one in the peach coloured dress, Dick Cleverley, our local journalist and part-time Private Eye" – at this, she, Peekin and Gabriel raised their eyebrows incredulously—"oh and Pixie is the one in the pink tutu and dark green wellies. Incidentally, that twig of hers has no magical powers at all, so don't let her tell you otherwise."

Clementine tottered to her feet and smiled shyly at the assembled party. "Hello," she whispered, her face reddening. She had a heart shaped face, just like her sister's and long, wispy blonde hair. She turned round to assist Dick Cleverley, who was having difficulty standing and complaining loudly about his arthritic knees. He had a mop of white hair, black glasses and a huge moustache, which he twiddled merrily, as he shouted his hellos. Pixie, however, completely ignored the guests and pointed her twig, a mouldy looking thing, with silver tinsel tied to the bottom, at Mimosa menacingly. Pixie was the smallest of the group. She had blue eyes and yellowy, slightly matted looking hair, which stuck up all around her head. She also had a set of tiny brown wings, just visible in the centre of her back. The wings didn't look real, however and seemed to have been haphazardly stuck onto her pink leotard with masses of red and green sticky tape, bearing the words, 'Merry Christmas!' Her dark green wellies appeared to be around four sizes too big for her. Peekin greeted the assembled guests, happily waved the

mosquitoes on their ill-tuned way and then turned his attention to Mimosa.

“All quiet?” he asked solemnly.

“Yes, everything’s been fine, Peekin. Were you ok getting to Daniel’s?” At the mention of his name, Mimosa smiled warmly and mouthed ‘hello’ to Daniel.

“Yes, no problem, apart from the scuba gear being ridiculously tight.” Peekin wandered over to a small pile of logs and kindling that was situated near the garden wall and unceremoniously dropped the scuba gear onto it. “That will make a nice fire,” he said, kicking it. Mimosa smiled apologetically.

“Ah, sorry about that. Pixie insisted that she could get a good deal on scuba gear from those frogs that she hangs round with. I should have known not to trust her with such an important task. Anyway, there’ll be plenty of time to talk later,” said Mimosa decisively. “We’ve laid on a huge spread for you all. I hope you’re hungry! Come on in!”

CHAPTER 11

The first thing that struck Daniel, as he wandered into the little cottage, was how much bigger it was on the inside. There was a narrow hallway, with several rooms leading off to the side. Most of the mahogany doors were closed, with the exception of one, which was situated halfway down the hall and led to the dining room. This door was wide open and the delicious scents of home-made cooking were drifting towards the assembled group. Daniel heard his stomach rumble loudly in response and suddenly remembered that he hadn't eaten since his one slice of toast this morning. Even Barnaby, despite his half tonne of chocolate fudge, was also gazing hungrily towards the source of the smell.

"Let me put your things in your rooms," said Mimosa, taking Barnaby's trench coat and Daniel's console, which was attached to one of the belt straps on his jeans. "Peekin, I've put Daniel in Paris's room." At this, Gabriel suddenly turned round, his green eyes blazing in anger.

"Paris's room?" he said. "No, you *can't*! I can't believe you'd even think it, Mimosa! Daniel *can't* have Paris's room. We don't even

know if he's..." Gabriel couldn't continue. There was a nasty silence.

"Gabriel, let's just leave things for the moment and we'll discuss everything later," said Peekin soothingly. "Mimosa, just take their things up to their rooms as planned, for now."

"Rooms?" said Daniel in suspicion.. He'd been surprised at Gabriel's unexpected outburst and even *more* surprised to hear that they thought he would be staying overnight. "Hang on, how long do you think I'm going to be here for?"

"Let's leave *that* until after tea, too, shall we?" said Peekin, elf-handling Daniel into the dining room.

Daniel gasped when he saw the food laid before them. There were hot pies of every description, fresh from the oven, the fragrant steam rising from golden brown pastry. A whole cooked ham adorned a sideboard, along with roast chicken, beef with plump Yorkshire puddings and tiny new potatoes covered with butter and fresh sprigs of mint. There were Scotch eggs, large slices of quiche, paté, huge baskets of crusty brown bread, creamy golden butter and slices of toasted cheese, as well as great bowls of fresh salad and hot, chunky chips. There were also flagons of blackcurrant cordial and lime squash.

"Wow, look at the cakes!" shouted Barnaby, his eyes like saucers. The cakes were enormous and had an entire table all to themselves. Barnaby gazed in wonder at the

chocolate fudge cake, creamy carrot cake, coffee and walnut cake and fat, sticky gingerbread. There were also jam tarts, gingerbread men and...

"I made the doughnuts especially for you, Barnaby," said Mimosa, smiling as she came back downstairs. "Go on, tuck in!" Everyone, with the exception of Gabriel, fell ravenously on the feast. For around twenty minutes, the room was silent but for requests to pass more food. Daniel wandered over to a plate of plump sausages and tried to spear one with a fork. As he did so, the sausage rolled over and swore at him loudly.

"Ha, ha! Sausage roll! Sausage roll!" shrieked Pixie laughing, as Daniel jumped back in surprise.

"Sorry, Daniel," said Peekin, glaring at Pixie, who was knocking back her fourth goblet of blackcurrant cordial and swaying slightly. "Pixie must have bullied Clementine into bewitching these sausages again. Clementine hero worships Pixie for some reason. She'll do anything for her. Here," he speared the sausage with his own fork and offered it to Daniel, as Pixie slid drunkenly onto the floor.

"Er, I won't bother after all, thanks," said Daniel and chose a piece of cheese and mushroom quiche instead. He didn't like the idea of eating food that talked back.

Eventually, everyone had eaten their fill and was sitting back in soft, comfortable armchairs, sipping coffee topped with whipped cream. Peekin had lit his pipe again

and was puffing on it happily. There was surprisingly little food left on the tables. Even Barnaby had had to admit defeat after his seventh doughnut and was leaning back in his chair, looking very contented. Gabriel, however, had hardly eaten anything at all and had seemed preoccupied for the duration of the meal. He stared into space while the others talked, taking little part in the conversations going on around him.

“Mimosa, you, Clementine and Dick excelled yourselves,” said Peekin, undoing the top button of his tweed trousers and sighing. “That was wonderful.”

“Why, thank you, Sir,” said Dick, modestly, his cheeks turning a becoming shade of red”, said Dick Cleverley, speaking loudly and clearly into a little metal box that he held in his hand. Daniel stared at Dick Cleverley as if he was mental.

“Why does he keep talking like that?” he asked Peekin under his breath, as Dick played the tape back to himself, nodding in satisfaction as his voice boomed out. Peekin raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“He’s writing his memoirs, so he speaks everything he says into a voice recorder and writes it up when he gets home. He’s no doubt going to devote a whole chapter to his wonderful pies. He did do a good job, though, I must admit, especially on those steak ones.” Peekin smacked his lips in satisfaction.

“Pixie too! Pixie too! Pixie made everything!” slurred Pixie, briefly lifting her head from the carpet.

“Oh, she didn’t do a thing,” said Mimosa, shaking her head in exasperation. “She just sat in the kitchen all afternoon, eating sugar cubes.”

“Why is she acting like she’s drunk?” asked Daniel, who had had several goblets of the blackcurrant cordial himself.

“Blackcurrant cordial always does that to her,” said Mimosa, as Pixie began snoring loudly. Daniel felt as if he could join her. He thought back on his whole day. It had gone from one bizarre event to another and he felt exhausted. The strangest thing was that he was finally starting to feel as if this was real after all. The feast certainly had been. He was so full that he didn’t feel as if he would be able to move for days. He was sure his imagination wouldn’t have been able to have imagined all that food. Or the cottage and the people in it.

“Told you I’d need to get you here to prove I was real, Daniel,” said Peekin sleepily, seeming to read his mind. “You’ll be fine now.” Peekin leaned over and flicked on a light. “It seems to have gone dark all of a sudden, I...” With a swift, loud crack, an enormous lightning bolt tore through the sky, ripping it in two. There was a huge explosion, as the lightning earthed some distance away. The sky was black as pitch. A loud thunderclap rapidly followed the lightning strike, making everyone jump. The

atmosphere in the room immediately changed. Mimosa and Clementine gasped, Dick Cleverley dropped his voice recorder and even Pixie woke up. Gabriel and Peekin looked at one another in shock and Barnaby began to tremble uncontrollably. Only Daniel remained unaffected.

“What?” he laughed. “It’s only a storm. C’mon, you’re not all frightened, are you? Storms are brilliant! We’ll get a great view from here, too. You can see the sky really well from this window.”

“It can’t be,” said Peekin, shaking his head uncertainly and staring horrified at Gabriel. “I expected at least a couple of weeks.”

“Wait, Peekin, it may be just a storm, we can’t say for sure right now,” said Gabriel, trying to remain calm, his face ashen.

“I don’t think so,” muttered Peekin. “Listen.” Above the last echoes of the thunderclap, squeaking wheels could be heard, hurtling towards Peekin’s house at great speed. Peekin ran to the window and opened it, gazing expectantly at the sky. He turned round and stared in shock at Gabriel. “It’s him,” he said quietly. “It’s Hopper.”

CHAPTER 12

The squeaking wheels got louder and louder. Gabriel had his head in his hands.

“No,” he said angrily. “I refuse to believe it. Peekin,” he said in desperation, staring at the elf, “*do* something.” His eyes were pleading.

“What can *I* do?” said Peekin, shrugging his shoulders and looking worried. He turned back to the window. Daniel was staring from person to person in astonishment.

“What?” he said cautiously. “What’s going on?”

The clouds swiftly parted and the storm disappeared as quickly as it came. The squeaking stopped and there was a sudden, loud screech, as a tiny bicycle hovered into view outside the window, floating gently in the breeze. It looked in every way like a normal, two-wheeled bike, complete with tartan saddle and a wicker basket at the front. The only difference was that it was minute. Attached to the shiny handlebars were two large red balloons. Another red balloon was neatly tied to the rear mudguard with string. The mudguard itself, however, was severely crumpled, as if someone had crashed into it at speed.

Sitting on the bicycle was a little man, who would only have come up to Daniel's knees in height, had he not been suspended two metres in the air. He had short, black hair and bright eyes, with tiny pointed ears. He was dressed head to toe in red and wore a large badge on his chest, reading 'Official Storm Chaser' in gold lettering. The bicycle also bore a sign: 'Official Storm Chaser's Bike: Free License to Park Anywhere.' Despite the fact that the bike had stopped moving, the little man was still furiously turning the pedals round with his little feet. Clementine went pink and waved self-consciously at him. The little man didn't see her, however and instead gave Peekin a swift, distracted salute, while angrily examining his mudguard.

"Seen what Skreel did to my bike, the conniving little mudslinger?" Hopper tried unsuccessfully to straighten the mudguard, while tutting indignantly to himself.

"Skreel?" said Peekin, frowning. "That name's familiar." Hopper snorted.

"Too right it is! He's the Official Storm Chaser for *them*," he gestured behind him towards the mountains. "He jumped out on me and rammed the bike while I was watching the lightning. *And* he tried to pop my balloons! I know his game," said Hopper fiercely. He stared into the sky, as if waiting for the elusive Skreel to commence another attack. "He was trying to stop me getting to the Battleground, trying to give 'em an unfair advantage. Didn't manage, though, did he? It takes more than some jumped up little

upstart to stop the likes of me. Oh, yes. They'd have to get up *very* early in the day to do that! He's nothing but a little runt, that one. Anyway," Hopper exhaled heavily, "back to business." He straightened his badge and gave his balloons one more anxious look, before turning his attention to Peekin. "Howdoo," he said grimly. "Wasn't expecting to see you for a good few weeks yet."

"I know," said Peekin. He sighed. "Right, where's it going to be, Hopper?" The little man suddenly sneezed violently and stopped pedalling to wipe his nose with a large red and white spotted handkerchief. The bicycle immediately sank below the window ledge.

"Hang on!" he shouted from below the window, sniffing loudly. He began to pedal furiously again, until he rose back up to his original position. "That's better," he said, stifling another sneeze. "I had to ride through a patch of lilies and the pollen went right up my nose. Right. Well, you are not going to believe this! Regna's Hill!"

"What?" shouted Peekin, as everyone, with the exception of Daniel, gasped in amazement. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"You *what?*" said Hopper, looking indignant. "Of *course* I'm sure! I know the difference between normal lightning and an Allapatrian signal! Haven't I just nearly ridden my legs off, shaking off Skreel and keeping up with that lightning bolt? My family have been doing this for generations, I'll have you know! Ok, so I had to learn this, 'How to Follow Lightning Bolts that Signify

Battles' lark pretty sharpish, what with there not having been any Battles for the best part of eight hundred years but I know my stuff! Are you sure," he mimicked irritably. "The lightning bolt earthed right on the very top of it! So, that's where the Battle's taking place. You know the drill. Three days from now, at Midnight."

"Sorry, Hopper, I know you wouldn't have got it wrong," said Peekin, kneading his forehead, "It's just – well, Regna's Hill! That's the site of the splitting of the Opal Moonstone. It was the last place I'd have thought it would be. It's a huge shock. Daniel's only just got here."

"Is he here, then?" asked Hopper, grinning from ear to ear. "Let's have a look at him!" Daniel reluctantly came to the window, as Hopper rummaged in his wicker basket and produced a camera. "I promised my dad I'd get a picture of him if I spotted him," he said, raising the camera to his eyes. When he saw Daniel through the lens, however, he lowered the camera in astonishment. "*That's* him?" Hopper said, his mouth gaping open in surprise. "He's a kid! *He's* our Defender? He looked much older in my dream. Oh, I won't bother, then," said the little man in disappointment and put the camera back in the basket.

"Heard through the grapevine who their Defender is?" asked Peekin hopefully.

"Yeah. You're not gonna believe that, either. It's Shadow again."

“No!” Gabriel stormed to the window. “You’re mistaken!” he shouted. “It can’t be the same Defender twice. You’re wrong!”

“No mistake, Sir,” said Hopper, bowing while pedalling fit to burst. “Definitely Shadow. Vernon told me; you know that Demon that the Grips are mates with? The one that keeps putting in an application to come and live on our side of the Mountains? Well, he said he *definitely* dreamed of Shadow. Not sure about who’s Shadow’s Second, though; latest is that he hasn’t got one, according to Vernon. Shadow’s strong and powerful enough to go it alone, now, apparently. Anyway, my work’s done,” he said, stretching and making the little bicycle bob up and down. “My mum will have my tea on and it’s going to take me all night to sort out the mudguard. I’ll get that Skreel, don’t you worry.” He shook his fist balefully at the sky. “Right then, I’m off. Bye, all.” He zoomed into the sky, at an unfeasibly fast speed and disappeared. Distracted, Peekin stared after him.

“That’s rather put a dampener on things,” he said, turning to Daniel and giving him a weak smile. “We’ll have to start your training now. Tonight. Right,” he said, rubbing his hands together decisively. “I presume you’re already trained in basic Swordsmanship?”

“What?” asked Daniel, looking at Peekin as if he were mad.

“Come on, Daniel, don’t play around – this is important,” said Peekin, looking impatient. “How far along are you?”

“I don’t know anything about swords! I’ve never even seen one up close!” yelled Daniel, his eyes darkening. “Oh and, by the way, if you’re expecting me to fight someone, you can forget it! Right, I want to go home. Now.” he said, glaring at Peekin. “Thanks for the food and everything but I’m not having any more to do with this.”

“Daniel, I’m sorry but I can’t let you go home,” said Peekin solemnly. “You’ve been chosen to fight. We don’t know why but you have. Are you *sure* you don’t have any skills in Swordsmanship?” he said, looking up at Daniel and frowning.

“Peekin.” Gabriel was standing next to Daniel, his face white. “Something has to be done. We can’t let a boy fight Shadow; Daniel won’t stand a chance. We don’t even know what Daniel’s abilities are; he’s an unknown quantity, so the Battles shouldn’t be allowed to continue. You could say something,” he insisted. “You could stop it! Damn it, Peekin, we can’t have any more lives affected by this.” There were tears in his eyes. “*Please*,” he whispered. Peekin placed his hand on Gabriel’s arm.

“I’m sorry about Paris,” he said softly. “It must have been terrible to watch your best friend die like that. We’re all dreadfully sorry. I know what a good friend he was to you when...” Peekin lowered his eyes. “I’m

powerless in this, Gabriel,” he continued. “I can’t do anything to stop it. None of us can.”

“This is insane!” shouted Gabriel. He wrenched himself from Peekin’s grasp and stormed towards the door. “I’m going to check on Avalon,” he said tersely, glancing at his watch. “Then, I’m going to bed.” His eyes filled with pain. Head down, Gabriel walked from the room. Barnaby found his voice.

“I-is the Battle really going to happen in three days?” he said, shaking. “I’m not ready. Can’t we change it until later?”

Peekin looked at him as if he was deranged. “Er, *no!*” he said. “We have no say in where or when it is; you know that! The cameras will be going up all round Regna’s Hill now, ready for everyone to watch the Battle on the Action Stations. It’s been decided. We need to start preparing.” Mimosa suddenly rose to her feet.

“It’s too late to start training tonight, Peekin,” she urged, the strain apparent on her face. “The boys look exhausted. Leave it until tomorrow. Things will look better after a good night’s sleep, you’ll see. Dick, can you see Clementine and Pixie home? I’ll help to clear up here and follow on later. Peekin, take the boys to their rooms.” Peekin nodded.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “An early start tomorrow is probably best. I’m not in the mood for running round after all that food, anyway. Ok you two, follow me.” Barnaby looked at Daniel anxiously, expecting him to argue. Instead, with a slight smile, Daniel nodded and followed Peekin out

of the room and towards the stairs. Fine, he thought, let everyone go home. What an excellent idea. For Daniel had a plan.

CHAPTER 13

The spiral staircase leading to the bedrooms was narrow, steep and winding. Peekin, Daniel and Barnaby seemed to be climbing for ages before they eventually reached the top of the stairs. Daniel was quite amazed to find that Barnaby had actually survived the ascent – they'd had to stop four times while he got his breath back.

They stood on the landing and were met with several more mahogany doors, all of which were closed. In spite of his pre-occupation, Daniel was astounded at the amount of rooms that Peekin's home seemed to possess. The cottage looked tiny from the outside, yet there were easily ten doors leading off from the landing. In between the doors were portraits of elves, all of whom looked a lot like Peekin.

"That's my gran," Peekin said proudly, gesturing to a picture of a particularly ugly looking elf, who was glaring out of the portrait, with what looked like a white paper doily on her head. Barnaby stared at the image, while his breathing slowed down. The elf had no teeth and a nose like a misshapen potato. There was also a dense growth of hair on the upper lip. "*That's a lady?*" he said in surprise.

“Yes,” said Peekin huffily. “She was considered very good-looking in her day *and* she died young, so a little respect, please! Poor thing was only three hundred and four, just a baby, really.” He gestured to one of the doors and unlocked it.

“This, my doughnut loving friend, is your room,” he said, smiling at Barnaby and holding the door open as Barnaby trotted in.

“Daniel, you have Paris’s old room. It’s this one.” Peekin unlocked the door to the left of Barnaby’s room and switched on the light. “Breakfast’s at six, then we’ll start training immediately after that. Oh and by the way, it’s nine o’clock here, if you want to change the time on your watch.” Peekin pointed to Daniel’s wrist. “You’re on Allapatrian time, now. Your watch will be right out!” Daniel frowned but quickly altered his watch, bringing the time forward by several hours, to avoid raising Peekin’s suspicions. He didn’t want anything to go wrong now. Peekin gave him a smile and patted his arm. “I’m glad you’re finally ok with this, Daniel,” he said quietly. “Everything will be fine; I promise. Get a good night’s sleep and I’ll see you in the morning.” Daniel heard Barnaby shout good night to him and Peekin closed his door, leaving Daniel alone in the room.

Daniel turned and walked towards a neat bed with a light blue eiderdown. The bed was next to a large window with dark blue curtains, which were pulled shut. There were freshly ironed blue and white striped pyjamas laid out on the bed, which Daniel

presumed must be for him. They looked, however, as if they would be a little too small for him. Good thing he wouldn't be needing them, then. He pushed the pyjamas out of the way and sat down on the bed, impatiently tapping his fingers on the eiderdown. And waited.

It seemed to take an eternity for the cottage to quieten down. Daniel could hear Dick and Clementine hauling Pixie through the front door below him. Pixie was shouting in protest as she was dragged outside between the pair, her wellie-covered feet skimming the path. Daniel cracked open the curtains and watched as the trio lurched out though the gate and onto the little road.

"Peekin! Pixie want to stay here! Don't make Pixie sing the Peekin song!" yelled Pixie drunkenly, as the little procession weaved up the hill and out of sight. Moments later came the sound of a little garden gate creaking open and closing again gently.

Daniel was about to turn from the window when a muffled howl suddenly tore through the night sky, sounding as if it came from several kilometres away. Despite the distance, it still sounded eerie, chilling Daniel to the bone. He was glad he was leaving soon; he didn't like the idea of being in a place with creatures that sounded like that.

He continued to look outside at the night and, for the first time, noticed the full moon. He stared at it in surprise. It was blood red. To the left of the moon was the mountain range that Daniel had seen as they

arrived. He could see little pinpricks of light just visible on some of the ridges. One of the lights seemed to be moving steadily down the mountain.

Daniel closed the curtains and sat back down. He could hear Mimosa and Peekin downstairs, speaking in hushed tones but neither seemed in a rush to go to bed. Daniel sighed in frustration and wandered round the room while he waited. So, Paris, whoever he was, had had this room before him, had he? Opposite the bed was a large, elaborately carved wooden chest. On top of the chest was Daniel's console. Daniel looked at it in surprise, picking it up. He'd forgotten he'd even brought it – he wondered now why he had done. He'd just grabbed it on impulse, when Peekin told him to bring some things with him.

To Daniel's astonishment, sitting next to the console, was a large, expensive looking, state of the art snowboard. He remembered having seen one just like it in his local sports shop a few weeks ago. He also remembered how much it had cost. Daniel would have had to save his pocket money for the rest of his life before he could have afforded one himself.

He stared at it and picked it up, examining it carefully. By the look of it, it had been well used. There were signs of heavy wear along its base and some of the blue and silver paintwork was scratched. Daniel wondered whether it had belonged to

Paris. It was in this room, where he'd apparently slept, after all.

"See you in the morning, Peekin. Get some sleep." Daniel ran back to the curtains, opening them a crack and watched as Mimosa hurried down the little path, through the front door and up the hill after the others. He heard the same garden gate open and close in the distance.

"One to go," he muttered. As soon as he got back home, he'd phone his dad, force him to come home and tell him everything. "Come on, Peekin," Daniel whispered in agitation, "go to bed." Finally, ten minutes later, he heard Peekin climbing the stairs, muttering and moaning about his aching joints. Daniel heard him trundle down the corridor outside and continue a little way along towards the end of the hallway. He heard the sound of a door being unlocked, opening, then softly closing. Daniel heaved a sigh of relief. He glanced at his watch and forced himself to wait twenty minutes.

When nineteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds had elapsed, Daniel could stand it no longer. He took his trainers off and softly padded to the door, opening it carefully. The cottage was in darkness. He stuck his head round the door and listened for movement. All quiet. Daniel felt his way to the top of the stairs and began to make the long climb back down the spiral staircase, holding tight to the banister rail.

As he placed his foot on the step that was second from the bottom, it gave a loud

creak. Daniel froze in terror and gazed up anxiously, waiting for signs of anyone stirring. Nothing happened. He waited for two minutes, just to be sure, and then jumped over the bottom step, landing gently in the hall. He made his way to the front door and suddenly stopped dead, as a horrifying thought entered his mind. What if the key wasn't in the door? How would he get out then? He reached for the door and desperately began to glide his hands over it, searching for the key.

"Please, *please* be there," he whispered. His heart was beating so loudly, that he was sure Peekin would be able to hear it upstairs.

Just as he had almost given up hope, he found the lock. There was a large key sticking out, the metal cold against his hand. He sighed with relief and gently turned the key, listening for more creaks as the heavy wooden door began to swing open. When there was enough room to squeeze through, Daniel darted outside, closing the door behind him. He ran down the path, leaped over the gate and quickly put on his trainers. He was free.

CHAPTER 14

The air smelled fragrant as he ran down the little road towards the wooded area where they had emerged earlier with Peekin. Daniel stopped to get his bearings, looking behind him to check he wasn't being followed. A sudden movement caught his eye and he ducked behind a tree and stared, wide-eyed, towards it.

Daniel could make out two figures standing in the trees further up the hill, just past Peekin's cottage. One of them carried a pale glowing light. They were far too tall to be Peekin and Barnaby, however. They looked like grown men. As Daniel watched, he saw one of the men slowly roll up his sleeve. The other man drew something that looked like a long needle from his pocket and applied it to the man's arm. Daniel heard a sharp inhalation of breath and the first man cried out in pain. Something silvery and smoke-like was pulled from a vein in his bare arm. The wispy substance floated briefly in the evening air and then disappeared into a small vial that was held by the other man.

The vial and the needle were pocketed, the light extinguished, then the second man turned on his heel and melted into the woods, leaving the other alone, nursing his

arm. Even from this distance, it was obvious that he was shaking heavily. He leaned against a tree, as the moon went behind a cloud. When the cloud drifted by, the man had gone.

Panicking, Daniel turned away and hurried down to the opening into the forest, frightened that the man was coming towards him. He jumped through into the trees and quickly began to look around for familiar landmarks. He was definitely in the right place; he remembered seeing the fallen log that was just in front of him. Now, all he had to do was find where they were standing, when they first appeared here.

Daniel checked his position. Here. Definitely. They were *definitely* by this tree. He began to walk around it, expecting to find himself in his room at any minute. Nothing happened. He tried jumping hard on the ground, hitting the tree and even ran round the tree trunk three times, muttering 'hocus pocus'. Nothing.

Then, his heart sinking, he suddenly remembered: Peekin had used a jewel to get to this place. He'd held it against Daniel's wall. To get back, he'd need the jewel. "Oh no," he whispered in devastation, his head in his hands. He was stuck here. He couldn't go home.

A sudden low, blood-chilling growl made him look up. A few metres away, was a creature on all fours, unlike anything Daniel had ever seen. It was larger than a dog, with a humped back and short grey hair. It had

human ears and yellowy human eyes but both were elongated and grotesque, as if they had been stretched out of all proportion. Its mouth was wolf-like, with huge fangs. Its lips were pulled back, teeth bared and the thing was looking straight at him, ready to attack. Horrified, Daniel began to edge backwards, away from the creature, which was now salivating heavily. Each time Daniel moved, the creature moved too, never taking its eyes off him. "Help me, someone," whispered Daniel, edging backwards. He walked back a step and felt a tree trunk behind him, preventing him from going any further. He gasped in terror, breaking into a cold sweat. The creature moved again, snarling. "Got to run, got to run now," he muttered but he was frozen to the spot. He couldn't make his legs move. "One, two, THREE!" Daniel lurched right, forcing himself to go back the way he came and broke out through the trees, running desperately towards Peekin's cottage. He turned and saw the creature darting after him. But it was much, much quicker than Daniel and gaining on him at a rapid rate. Daniel saw the creature jump into the air towards him. He tried to dodge out of the way but the creature fell upon him, head back and ready to bite.

"NO!" The creature was suddenly flung backwards into the air and remained there, suspended. "Leave here. Go back NOW!" yelled a voice. It was Peekin. Daniel practically sobbed with relief, his whole body shaking in fear. He looked up at the creature,

which was hanging in the air, around a metre above him. It was still trying to move, its eyes fixed on Daniel, limbs stretching forward to reach him. Its movements now, however, were slow and clumsy, as if it were running through glue. It turned in mid-air and slowly began to glide away, gradually picking up speed, as it got closer to the expanse of dark mountains, until it was out of view.

“Daniel!” shouted Peekin. Footsteps ran towards him and then stopped around two metres away. Daniel raised his head towards Peekin’s voice and stared, as if stunned. The red moon cast an eerie glow over him.

“Did you do that?” he asked in dazed amazement. “How did you get that thing off me?” Peekin stared back, looking shocked. He was wearing red and white striped pyjamas and a matching nightcap, with a bobble at the end. Pale pink bunny slippers, with huge ears, were pointing towards Daniel. Peekin’s large brown eyes frantically darted over Daniel as he lay on the ground. “Daniel!” Peekin shouted again hoarsely. “Did it bite you? Tell me.”

“No,” whispered Daniel weakly, “you got here just in time.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” The bunny slippers ran towards him and Peekin anxiously helped him to his feet. Over Peekin’s shoulder, Barnaby could be seen, slumped on the road and trembling all over, his face white with fear. “Daniel,” said Peekin, who was shaking himself, “do you

have *any* idea what that thing was? What it could have done to you?"

"No," said Daniel. He was trembling and felt faint. "What was it?"

"It was a Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf," said Peekin, helping him back up the hill towards his house. "Come on, Barnaby, I need to get everyone inside quickly." Barnaby staggered to his feet. "I can't believe it," muttered Peekin, "they haven't come over here in centuries. Things are getting worse. They're getting too confident over there."

"How did you get it off me?" Daniel repeated, allowing himself to be helped up the little road.

"I told you, Daniel, I'm a Defardian elf," Peekin said by way of explanation. "Now, come on, you two, hurry, please."

"Peekin, what happened? I heard shouts." Mimosa suddenly came running over the hill towards them, wearing a pink nightdress with matching slippers. She gazed at them, a shocked look on her face. Mimosa ran over to Barnaby and helped him unlatch the gate, talking to him reassuringly.

"Mimosa," said Peekin unsteadily, "it was a Black Ridge. Here. It went for Daniel." Her hand flew to her mouth.

"No," she whispered, looking horrified. "Is he...are you..."

"No, no, Barnaby and I got there in time, thank goodness. I sent it back over," said Peekin, his mouth set in a determined line. He opened the front door, let everyone

through, then locked and bolted it securely. He gestured with his left hand and an electric blue spark suddenly appeared, engulfing the lock. It glowed brightly for a few moments and then disappeared. "I'd like to see anyone get through *that*," he said grimly, as he unlocked the first door to the left of the hall. "In here, everyone," he said, guiding them into a small room, the walls of which were bedecked with mahogany wood panelling and copious shelves, lined with odd ornaments and hundreds of books. He helped Daniel down into a large, squashy leather armchair, Mimosa doing the same with a still terrified-looking Barnaby.

"I'll go and make us all some hot chocolate, I think," said Mimosa, hurrying down the hall, "with a nip of honey brandy. Shall I make some for Gabriel, too?"

"No, leave him, Mimosa," called Peekin. "He slept through all this. Let him rest; he looked exhausted tonight." Peekin sat down heavily, passing a hand over his eyes.

"Daniel," he said weakly, "what were you thinking, going out on your own?"

"I just wanted to go home," said Daniel in a small voice.

"G-good th-thing I w-went to ch-check if y-you wanted m-more doughnuts," trembled Barnaby, gazing wide-eyed at Daniel. Peekin nodded.

"If Barnaby hadn't got hungry again and gone into your room to see if you wanted anything to eat, we'd never have known you were missing until it was too late. Although

how you could *possibly* have been hungry after what you ate tonight, Barnaby, my lad, I'll never know." Peekin gave him a small smile. "If Barnaby hadn't woken me, that thing would have bitten you for sure, Daniel. If we'd been just two seconds longer..." Trembling, he shook his head. "You must *never* go out alone again. Promise me." Daniel nodded his head, as Mimosa arrived with a tray filled with warm mugfuls of fragrant hot chocolate, scattered with melting marshmallows. Everyone went silent for a while as they drank the warming beverage.

"Peekin, is it true what they say about Black Ridge Mountain Werewolves?" asked Barnaby, the colour slowly returning to his cheeks. Peekin nodded gravely.

"They are far and away the most terrifying of all Werewolves," he said. He slowly sipped his hot chocolate, irritably flicking the bobble of his nightcap over his shoulder, as it tried to dip itself into the mug. "When a Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf bites you, you don't turn into a Werewolf. You stay exactly as you are and, for a few hours, nothing happens. Then, you begin to experience pain all over your body. It's very mild at first, just a slight stinging sensation. Then, gradually, the pain begins to get worse. At the end, you suffer excruciating agony. The pain never subsides, never goes away and just increases in intensity, minute-by-minute. You remain in agony for twenty-four hours. No pills or potions can help you. Nothing can take away the pain. Anyone that

you touch in that time also suffers the same fate. Then, you die. Nothing can save you.”

“If it had bitten me, would that have happened to me?” asked Daniel, his stomach turning over. Peekin watched him carefully. He slowly nodded, looking worried.

“They haven’t ventured beyond the Mountains for a very long time,” said Peekin. “In fact, they’ve stayed on their side of Allapatria for eight hundred years. Until tonight.” He glanced at Mimosa. “You know what this means,” he said. “I think they really are trying to take over.”

“Who’s trying to take over what?” asked Daniel. Peekin smiled. He seemed extremely tired.

“I think you’ve had enough for one night,” he said, “and I *certainly* have. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“No,” said Daniel, setting down his mug. “I want to know now.” Peekin looked over at him. Daniel was frightened and exhausted but there was still an iron will behind his eyes. Peekin leaned back in his seat and sighed. He nodded slowly.

“Alright, Daniel,” he said. “You should have been told all this from the first.” Peekin set his mug down. “As you wish,” he said. “I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

CHAPTER 15

Peekin's brown eyes fixed on Daniel and he smiled. "You don't half pick your moments!" he said soberly. "I'm not exactly prepared for an evening's storytelling. Alright. Allapatria has never been a united world. There are some in Allapatria, those who live beyond the Mountains, where it's always cold, who have always desired *all* the wealth and power of Allapatria for themselves. They have always wanted to enslave all the other inhabitants of Allapatria and rule with evil and cruelty from beyond the Mountains. For centuries, there were huge Battles fought between those on our side of the Mountains and those on the other side. Our side, those of us who wanted freedom, not slavery, won most of the Battles and so prevented them from taking over but it was always at a terrible cost. Many were killed.

After each Battle, things would quieten back down for a while. Then, these few would begin to rise up again and try to take over once more. This went on for years - decades. They were bad times." Peekin looked down and shook his head. "Then, around eight hundred years ago, according to the chronicles, a huge Battle was due to be fought, larger than anything Allapatria had

ever seen, to try and stop the Battles once and for all. There were thousands on each side preparing to fight. As each army drew closer to the Battleground, a huge and ferocious storm began. The sky darkened, lightning struck the whole area and rain lashed down, waterlogging the fields and making *any* Battle impossible.

That night, at 3.15am, so we are told, everyone in Allapatria had a dream. They dreamed of two Warriors, one from each side, fighting in an area chosen by a lightning bolt strike. Each Warrior had a Second to protect him and to take care of his designated weapon, as seen in the dream, until the Battle, which would follow three nights later. Now, we in Allapatria are used to messages coming to us in dreams; it's how the land communicates to us," – Daniel looked at him in surprise – "so they knew that it was a sign. Yet, at first, the two sides ignored the dream and, once again, they prepared to fight. Once more, however, it was to no avail. The storm worsened and continued for three days and nights, with all Allapatrians, on both sides of the Mountains, having the same dream night after night. Eventually, they could ignore it no longer and an uneasy agreement to follow the dream was reached. As soon as the agreement was made, the rain stopped and daylight returned.

Now, Hopper's ancestors had always followed lightning bolts; where they struck the ground would show us where the land was most fertile for planting our crops, so

they were chosen to follow the lightning strike when it came. The lightning bolt struck three days after the agreement, striking the top of Regna's Hill, where you're to fight, Daniel." Daniel gazed at him warily. "Three nights later, the lightning reached a peak, hitting the same spot on Regna's Hill, to show that the Battle was to begin between the two Warriors. They went up the hill on horses, their Seconds following. According to the ancient texts, each Second felt himself drawn to a patch of stone at the top of the hill. Once there, he was unable to move any further, unable to take any part in the Battle. They and everyone else were stopped from going to the top of the hill by a circle of flame, which appeared, as soon as the two Warriors reached the hilltop.

The two Warriors fought each other with ancient swords made from precious metals and the Battle was said to have been swift and ferocious. Then," Peekin said frowning, "something happened up there; we're not quite sure what, nor what happened to the Warriors – the documents are vague but, whatever it was, it was seen as a sign from Allapatria that the fighting had to stop. After this, there was an uneasy truce, with neither side knowing what to do next.

The following night, at 3.15am, there was another dream, this time about the Opal Moonstone, which was found right in the centre of Regna's Hill."

“The what?” Daniel asked. Peekin glared at him.

“Look, do you want me to tell you this or not?” he asked. Daniel nodded apologetically.

“Good, well, stop interrupting, then,” Peekin said, scowling. “Right. Since you asked, the Opal Moonstone is a jewel, with a centre made of crystal and lodestone. The stone holds all the power of Allapatria. All ley lines passed through it, like a junction. And before you ask,” Peekin said, eyeing Daniel grimly, “ley lines are like high-powered energy passageways, into and out of your world, that allow us to visit your world and for some in your world to come through to Allapatria. Like a two-way road. The Opal Moonstone was *the* focus for all the energy of Allapatria. If anyone knew how to control this, they would control *all* the power of Allapatria and all the ley lines, including those that go into your world.

The dream showed the stone being taken from the ground and split in two, with our side receiving one half and their side receiving the other. So, powerful alchemists divided the stone exactly down the middle, using mysterious, ancient rites. How they did it, we’re not sure, the craft has long since been lost. Our side’s half of the Opal Moonstone is at Eponymous Hildegard School, in your world, heavily guarded.”

“But why is it in my world if it’s part of Allapatria?” Daniel asked, unable to stop

himself. Peekin rolled his eyes and continued.

It's far safer for it to be there than here," he explained. "They were less likely to come looking for it. Or so we thought. Their Half Stone is somewhere over those Mountains, we don't know where. Within days of the Opal Moonstone being divided, news began to reach both armies that crops on each side of the Mountains were failing. Cattle began to fall ill and there were terrible floods. We realised that Allapatria had withdrawn its help from us, keeping its power to itself. It still allowed travel through ley lines but that was all. It was only then that we realised how much we had all lost by fighting. It seemed that Allapatria was showing us that we had to learn to live together.

'After all this, things calmed down and, for eight hundred years, no attempts were made to go back to the huge Battles of the past. Apart from the odd skirmish, an uneasy truce was maintained." Peekin finished the last of his hot chocolate and distractedly chewed on a mouthful of marshmallow. "But, the evil has been festering, concentrated in one place for eight hundred years. Around five years ago, there was a terrible escalation: four members of our Royal Family were murdered – *Gabriel's* family." Daniel gasped in surprise. "Then, nothing. For almost four years, everything went quiet over there. There were no skirmishes; no creatures were trying their luck in getting over the Mountains.

Nothing. We had no idea what was happening on their side.

It now seems that they were only biding their time. We got word that their side was being rallied by one individual, who had set himself up as ruler of their side of Allapatria. This had never happened before. No one had united their side, since the last huge Battle of eight hundred years ago. He had begun to whip them into some kind of order. We also discovered why he was doing this. He had decided that he wanted our Half Stone for himself, to rejoin the Opal Moonstone and harness *all* the power of Allapatria. There is only one reason that we can think of as to why they would want to do this: they have found a way to control the Opal Moonstone, to use it as a weapon. If that happens, they would completely rule this land. We can't allow that to happen, Daniel." Peekin's eyes darkened. "Terrible evil lives beyond the Mountains: evil that children have had nightmares about for generations. Beings that want to hurt and maim. If they took over..."he shook his head, looking worried. "We didn't want any more bloodshed, or to go back to the horrific Battles that Allapatria had witnessed in the past. So, around six months ago, we offered to allow one more Battle to be fought; a Battle that would decide who would be the victor once and for all. We decided to try to recreate the conditions of the Battle that had taken place eight hundred years ago on Regna's Hill. Again, it was to be between just two people,

one from each side, with each Defender having a Second to look after them until the Battle. We knew we had an excellent Defender in Paris. He was amazingly good at fighting. He'd been training in various weapons all his life, with the best fighters on our side, including his own father. He was highly skilled.

“Soon after, we were told that their Defender was going to be Shadow. This creature has been building up a reputation over the last few years, as a cruel and ruthless character, with no conscience or sense of honour. Even their own side is frightened of Shadow.”

“Shadow? You mean the one I'm meant to fight?” Daniel demanded angrily, feeling himself beginning to panic. He stood up and glared at Peekin. Peekin, however, ignored him and continued as if Daniel hadn't spoken, leaving Daniel with no choice but to sit back down and listen once more.

“It was decided that bows would be the weapons that Shadow and Paris would use. We waited for Allapatria to tell us where the Battle should be fought but we did not receive any dreams. We think Allapatria was giving us a chance to sort it out on our own, without its involvement. So, we decided on Cedar Hill, which is along the same geographical line as Regna's Hill but is closer to the Mountains. It was just to buy us some time, really; we didn't know what else to do. We didn't expect them to agree to it but they did.” To Daniel's surprise, Barnaby suddenly

looked down, his eyes filling with tears. "Paris should have won it," said Peekin, looking over sympathetically at Barnaby, as Mimosa passed him a handkerchief and gave him a hug. "If he had won, as we all expected, we had decided that the Half Stones should remain where they were. We were then going to demand that they stay on their side permanently and to cease any attempts to take over. It seemed the only thing to do. We knew that they would never give up their Half Stone. Of course, we now know they only agreed that the Battle would be fought, so that Xavier Nuttall," Peekin spat out his name, "could try to steal our Half Stone. They had no intention of honouring their promise to remain on their side. Fortunately, Nuttall failed and at last, Allapatria *itself* has intervened and decided that another Battle should take place, probably to right the wrong that caused Paris's death. Paris was betrayed, you see, Daniel. Nuttall took his weapon. Plus, the crossbow that Shadow used was illegal and had been altered and improved to increase their chances of winning. It worked: it killed Paris. They cheated and it was that betrayal which killed him. However, we, our side, have been given another chance to put things right in Allapatria. Allapatria has decreed it and even *they* have to abide by this."

"How?" asked Daniel in confusion. "I don't understand any of this." He was still feeling worried and was struggling to take

everything in. "How has Allapatria itself decreed there will be another Battle?"

"Because Allapatria gave us another sign," smiled Peekin. "You see, although *we* had arranged the Battle that killed Paris, one hour before he was due to fight, a huge storm blew in. We took this to show that Allapatria itself had got involved in the Battle after eight hundred years. You saw the red moon tonight?" Daniel nodded.

"In Allapatria, a red moon is a warning sign. The moon turned blood red immediately after Paris was killed. It shows us that a great wrong has occurred. So, we waited for the dream and it came." Peekin leaned towards Daniel. "We dreamed of you, Daniel, holding a sword, with Barnaby as your Second."

"What?" shouted Daniel in surprise. "What do you mean, 'we'?"

"Every Allapatrician on our side," said Peekin, as Barnaby and Mimosa nodded their heads in agreement. "Tonight, the lightning came, as you saw, to show that the Battle would be on Regna's Hill in three days' time." Daniel stared at Peekin in mute astonishment. "That's where you and Barnaby come in, Daniel," said Peekin, smiling gently, "you've been chosen to rectify the wrong and prevent them from taking over."

CHAPTER 16

Daniel shook his head in desperation. What was it going to take to get through to these people?

“Look, Peekin, I *told* you; I don’t know anything about swords!” Daniel insisted. “You’ll just have to choose someone else. It’s probably all been a case of mistaken identity,” he said eagerly. “I bet there’s some other kid out there that looks just like me who’s brilliant with weapons.” Peekin, however, continued to smile at him.

“Allapatria chose you,” he said simply.

“Oh, this is crazy,” Daniel shouted, slamming his mug down and spilling his hot chocolate. “This isn’t my world and I can’t even use a sword, especially not against some maniac! Why should I have to fight for a world that isn’t even mine? *I* didn’t dream about...”

“Our worlds, yours and mine, are one, Daniel,” interrupted Peekin. “As I told you, we in Allapatria can come and go into your world through ley lines, just as you, Barnaby and I did, earlier today. We always have done.” Peekin paused. “In fact,” he said thoughtfully, “all the ‘folklore’, as you call it, has its basis in Allapatria. All the good *and* the bad folklore.

‘We try to stop their side getting through, as much as we can and always have done. It’s even more important now. That’s why I needed that little jewel to gain access to the ley line that goes between your houses.’ He gestured to Daniel and Barnaby. ‘It’s like a key that only a few of us have. But they’re still getting through to your world, using other ley lines that aren’t as heavily guarded, or ones on their side that we don’t know about.

‘Until now, they’ve only gone into your world occasionally. They were always too busy fighting amongst themselves to bother too much with your world. However, their new leader is uniting them and they’ve started to go into your world more frequently and in greater numbers. That’s why children in your world have all suddenly started having nightmares and seeing evil creatures in their rooms. The frightening thing is that they’re not just coming through in dreams any more; they’re coming through for real. Children *are* actually seeing them. Fortunately, so far, nothing too horrific has got through. Yet.’ Peekin leaned closer towards Daniel. ‘Can you imagine your world with Black Ridge Mountain Werewolves roaming around at night?’ Daniel shuddered and shook his head. ‘*That’s* why you’re here. To stop that happening.’ Peekin gazed at him. ‘Don’t you see?’ he said. ‘If you and Barnaby fail, it isn’t just Allapatria that they will take over. That’s only the beginning. They no longer just want Allapatria, Daniel.

They want your world too. They want to use all of Allapatria's power and draw on it to take over your world." Peekin eased back into his chair. "Now do you realise how important you are? You and Barnaby are going to stop them."

"But what if I don't want to fight?" Daniel asked in a small voice. "What if I say no?" Peekin was silent for a long time.

"I'm afraid you have no choice, Daniel," he said finally, staring into his eyes. "Not if you want your world and mine to remain free. None of us has. Anyway, that's enough drama for one night." He straightened one of the ears on his bunny slippers. "To bed with you both." Mimosa set down Barnaby's empty mug for him. He looked completely drained.

"Come on, Barnaby," she said smiling, "you've done enough for one evening. Daniel's really lucky to have you as a Second. It's a very good thing that you were here."

"Good thing he loves doughnuts so much, you mean!" said Peekin, giving Barnaby a friendly wink. "See you tomorrow, Barnaby." Barnaby sleepily headed for the stairs, calling goodnight to Daniel as he went. Daniel watched him leave, then took a deep breath and looked down at his hands. He was about to say something that he had never, *ever* expected to say in his whole life.

"Er, Barnaby, before you go," Barnaby turned to him expectantly and Daniel swallowed hard. "Thanks, Barnaby," he said, giving him a watery smile. "For what you did."

You saved my life.” Barnaby’s tired face lit up.

“That’s ok, mate!” he said, grinning. “You’re my friend! Anyway, I’m your Second – it’s my job to look after you. No big deal.” But as Barnaby went up the stairs, he looked so pleased that he appeared to be in danger of bursting. “And thanks, Peekin,” said Daniel, looking seriously at the elf. “I’m sorry I put you in danger. I won’t be going out again on my own, I promise. Not after tonight!” Peekin smiled and waved dismissively.

“Right,” said Mimosa, smiling at Daniel, “bedtime for you, too, I think. Busy day tomorrow.” Daniel walked to the door, his mind doing cartwheels. He wasn’t sure whether Peekin’s speech had made him feel better or worse. “I’ll stay in the room next to Gabriel’s for the rest of the night, if that’s ok, Peekin,” Mimosa said, as she left the room. “I don’t fancy going out alone, tonight. Dick took Pixie back to the hedgerow on his way home, once he and Clementine had sobered her up a little. Clementine was in bed when I left, so I won’t be missed.” Peekin nodded and began to fill his pipe.

“Peekin, won’t my mum be wondering where *I* am, though?” Daniel asked suddenly. Peekin happily puffed away on the pipe, his feet on a small, dark green velvet footstool. Smoke was wafting around his bunny slippers. He shook his head.

“I’ve already consulted the ley line Almanac, Daniel,” he said, his eyes closed. “When you go back, you’ll only have been

away from your world for twelve hours, don't worry. Time in Allapatria and your world are different, depending on where you are at any given moment. It speeds up and slows down. Your mum will just think that you were late getting back from the theme park and Barnaby's mum will no doubt go round with some excuse. Tell her she's in with a chance of winning that gardening competition or something like that, to take her mind off things." He opened one eye slyly. "Now, off to bed, or you'll be in no fit state to train, tomorrow. No playing on that console, which, by the way, you *do* realise you left behind, when you tried to do a runner! Wouldn't have been happy when you got home without *that*, would you now? You'd have been desperate to come back then!" Peekin smiled at him. "See you at six." Mimosa gently closed the door and saw Daniel to the stairs.

"Sleep well," she said and Daniel wearily began to climb back up the spiral staircase. Halfway up, he suddenly remembered that he hadn't asked Peekin who the two men were that he had seen near Damson Cottage. He was far too sleepy to go back down again, however and instead made a mental note to ask tomorrow, unaware of how eventful the next day was going to be.

He had no memory of getting to the top of the staircase, or of getting undressed and into the somewhat short pyjamas. All he knew was that the bed was warm and cosy and that he was incredibly tired: too tired even to worry about Shadow. In fact, Daniel

was asleep almost before his head touched the pillow. He was certainly too deeply asleep to hear the thunderclap in the night, signifying that the countdown to the Battle had begun.

CHAPTER 17

“NO! Daniel, how many times do I have to tell you? *Don't* hold the sword like *that!* All you'll achieve is a broken wrist!” Peekin danced agitatedly round Daniel, as Daniel groaned and tried to grip the cumbersome sword as Peekin directed.

“It's much too heavy – can't I use a smaller one?” he moaned, leaning on the sword and wiping his sweating brow. The sword was almost as big as Daniel himself and obviously designed for someone much taller than he, making Daniel wish that he'd started stretching himself and stuffing his shoes with manure months ago. It was like no sword Daniel had ever seen in his life before, not that he'd seen many. It had a burnished hilt, bedecked with elaborate symbols and was encrusted with valuable looking stones and jewels. The sword appeared to have been made from one huge piece of some precious metal that Daniel couldn't quite describe. The blade was a brilliant, shining silver, with blue, purple, red and green flecks running through the middle. Each time the sun's rays hit the blade, the sword flashed dazzlingly, almost blinding Daniel in the process. It was also unbelievably sharp, as Daniel had discovered

to his cost twice already this morning. He was sporting plasters on his right thumb and forefinger. Both cuts were stinging.

Daniel was feeling hot, sweaty and fed up and it was only eleven o'clock in the morning. They'd been training in one of the fields behind Peekin's house since they'd finished breakfast at six thirty and Daniel had already had more than enough.

"Don't lean on it, you'll blunt the tip! And, no, this is the sword you have to use. It's been used in Battles umpteen times, it's ancient and it's the one we're using, so *NO!* It was brought out of our museum in the High Council especially for you. This is the one we all dreamed you were using, so you're stuck with it, all right?" Peekin sighed and rubbed his forehead wearily. "Ok: break! I'll go and get us all some lemonade." He wandered back towards the cottage. Barnaby, seated on the lawn a short distance from Daniel, looked up from the daisy chain that he was busily making.

"With elevenses?" he called out hopefully. "Mimosa said there was still some carrot cake left." Peekin stomped off, muttering about being treated like a common tea elf.

"Oh, I'm *never* going to get this!" shouted Daniel, flinging down the sword. "It's too difficult." Barnaby immediately dropped the daisy chain, scooped up the sword and began to polish it with a soft cloth that he removed from his trouser pocket. This morning, Barnaby was dressed in full combat

gear. He'd completed the look by smearing a large quantity of mud on his face, to act as camouflage make-up. He breathed heavily on the sword, polishing the blade with the cloth, while he checked for any abrasions on the metal.

"It's what Seconds do, isn't it?" Barnaby said happily to Gabriel, who was sitting beside him. "Part of our job is to look after all weaponry." He continued to clean the sword. Daniel rolled his eyes. He was immensely grateful to Barnaby for helping to save his life, but he was still finding him somewhat irritating at times.

"Barnaby, it doesn't matter how shiny it is, I still can't use the thing properly! I'm just useless."

"It's bound to be tricky at first, you've never used one before," reasoned Gabriel patiently. He'd come out to see Daniel practise shortly after seven o'clock and had been intently watching his every move. Gabriel looked as if he hadn't slept at all. In fact, Daniel couldn't help but think that Gabriel would be better off back in bed. His eyes were heavy and he was deathly pale. He seemed to have aged overnight and worry lines were once again apparent on his thin face, appearing to be even deeper this morning.

"I bet you and Paris were better than this when you started, though." Daniel flung himself down next to Gabriel. He was getting frustrated, both with himself and with the task that had been foisted upon him. Each

time he thought of giving up, however, he'd remember the Werewolf and what it could have done to him. The thought of a world full of Black Ridge Mountain Werewolves, or worse, would then force him to continue, despite his growing dread.

"Barnaby, do you train with swords at Eponymous Hildegarde?" Daniel asked curiously. Barnaby looked up from his cleaning.

"Well, yes but I'm not very good," he said, frowning. "I keep asking if I can do cookery instead but they won't let me." He turned his attention to polishing the weapon once more.

"The school doesn't concentrate on weaponry practise as much as it did when Paris and I went there," said Gabriel. "We had lessons every day in sword fighting and archery." Daniel looked at Gabriel despondently.

"Well, why have I been chosen when I'd never even held a sword before today? I bet even Barnaby would be a better Defender than me. I should be *his* Second."

"Stop putting so much pressure on yourself," Gabriel said, smiling at him, as Peekin came back with a tray containing large glasses of lemonade. Barnaby was pleased to find that there were also four slices of carrot cake on the tray and grabbed his slice ravenously. Peekin looked troubled as everyone helped themselves to cake and lemonade. His worried expression didn't, however, stop him from muttering about the

four slices of toast, two fried eggs, three fried tomatoes and several sausages that he'd seen Barnaby consume less than five hours ago. He tutted in disgust then turned his attention to Gabriel, his anxious expression returning.

"Shadow attacked a village last night," he said grimly. "I've just heard." Gabriel gripped his glass so tightly that it looked as if it would break.

"What?" he said sharply. "Which village?"

"Puckton. That's not far from here at all," said Peekin. "A few thatched roofs were set on fire while everyone was asleep. Barrels knocked over, chickens let out, that sort of thing. Just petty stuff, really. No one was injured. Fortunately." He sipped his lemonade. "It was definitely Shadow, though; apparently there were witnesses. Usual description: black cloak, black horse, couldn't see the face."

Gabriel shook his head dismissively. "That could describe anyone. You can't say for sure that it was definitely Shadow." Peekin looked distracted.

"Sounds like the kind of thing Shadow would do though, doesn't it? Probably letting off steam after the Battle. That's not all. Gripville was nearly invaded by several Arachs last night. Fortunately, they were spotted as they made their way down the Mountain. The Grips saw them off. I'm amazed they were sober enough to even see

straight, never mind chase a group of Arachs away. They were lucky.”

“What are Arachs?” asked Barnaby, taking a huge bite of the carrot cake. Peekin stared at him in astonishment.

“Don’t you *ever* listen in school? If you paid as much attention to your schoolwork as you do to your stomach, you’d be a total genius.”

“Well, we learned about things like that in Dr Nuttall’s class,” said Barnaby uncomfortably, “and I never used to concentrate much on his lessons. I was always trying to concentrate on making sure he didn’t notice me, so that he wouldn’t ask me any questions. Once, he asked me *three* questions in one lesson and...”

“AS I WAS SAYING...” Peekin shouted, glaring at Barnaby, “Arachs are poisonous spiders: *big* ones. The Two Spots are the worst. They’re lethal. The ones that attacked Gripville were Blue Horns. They’re not so bad but you’d still sleep for a week if one got hold of you.” Peekin sighed to himself. “Listen, Gabriel, I’ll tutor Daniel for another hour or so, then, after lunch, I wonder if you’d mind setting the two of them up with the Action Station?” Gabriel nodded. “Daniel needs to see what’s going to be expected of him in a Battle. I want to check the boundaries round the cottage while they’re doing that, make sure everything’s completely secure before nightfall. Can you keep an eye on them while I’m away?” Gabriel nodded again. His face looked even paler than before.

“Shadow’s getting worse,” he said quietly. “More evil. There never used to be attacks like this, Peekin. It’s getting out of control.”

“I know. Shadow’s becoming bolder. It’s probably a result of the Battle; killing Paris...” Peekin’s voice trailed off, as Gabriel looked away in anguish. “They’re *all* getting too full of themselves for my liking.” Peekin’s mouth set in a determined line. He drained his glass and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. “Ok, me laddo,” he said, just as Daniel was about to sink his teeth into his slice of cake. “Back to work with you. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.” Daniel groaned and reached for the sword.

CHAPTER 18

After forty-five minutes of wielding the heavy sword and attempting various intricate moves, Daniel begged for a lunch break and the little party trooped into Peekin's house, to be met with the delicious aroma of home-made macaroni cheese and freshly baked, crusty brown bread. Dick Cleverley met them at the dining room door. Pixie, looking as if she had a hangover, was already seated next to Clementine and was alternating between impatiently banging her fork on the table and painfully holding her head.

Mimosa bustled in from the kitchen with plates and a large bowl of fresh salad. She gave a loud shriek when she saw the dried mud all over Barnaby's face and demanded that he had a thorough wash before coming to the table, shooing him upstairs.

The dining chairs were already laid out and Daniel noticed for the first time that there was a whole stack of unused chairs behind the door, each slightly smaller than the one below it in the pile. The bottom chair was huge, looking as if it was made for someone only slightly smaller than a giant, while the chair at the very top of the stack, was miniscule. Only a very slim caterpillar

would have been able to sit comfortably in it. Daniel wondered what kind of guests Peekin had entertained in the past that would necessitate so many different sizes of chair.

“I cooked luncheon, everyone!” said Dick, cleverly, looking fetching in a pure white Chef’s hat and divine apron,” said Dick Cleverley, looking very odd in a squashed Chef’s hat and an apron, covered with flowers and gambolling chipmunks. As usual, he was speaking loudly and clearly into his voice recorder. He then began to rewind the machine, ready to play back the recording. Barnaby trundled back in, looking longingly at the delicious lunch, as Dick’s recorded voice boomed into his ear.

“Quick, what’s *that?*” shouted Peekin in amazement, pointing upwards. All eyes were immediately on the ceiling. But no one could see anything out of the ordinary. While everyone gazed upwards, however, Peekin casually gestured towards the voice recorder. It gave a little wheeze and a pop, making Dick drop it in surprise. He picked it up and shook it, pressing a few buttons as he did so.

“Dagnabbit, I think it’s broken,” he said, looking puzzled. “That’s the second time that’s happened, you know, Peekin. Both times, it was when I was here with you.”

“Well, now, isn’t that *odd?*” exclaimed Peekin innocently, motioning to everyone to sit down. “Anyway, no matter, let’s just have a nice meal, eh?”

“What’s on the ceiling?” asked Barnaby, still gazing up at it.

“Eh? Oh, it’s gone now,” said Peekin dismissively, helping himself to a large chunk of warm bread and spreading it thickly with butter. “Are they my tomatoes in the salad?” he said, grinning. “Bumper crop this year, eh, Dick?” Dick nodded miserably, looking utterly bereft.

“Raspberry tarts for dessert, Peekin, made with raspberries from your garden. I picked them myself this morning,” said Mimosa, smiling. “Dick made the pastry and Clementine cooked the raspberries.” Peekin looked as if all his Christmases had come at once.

Silence reigned in the dining room, while everyone ate their lunch. Mimosa kept staring worriedly at Gabriel, who only picked at his food, while everyone around him had second and even third helpings of everything. Even Pixie seemed to have got over her hangover and stole Clementine’s raspberry tart from her plate when she wasn’t looking, quickly cramming it whole into her mouth with both hands. When Clementine complained, Pixie, her cheeks bulging, blamed it on Peekin, who gave Pixie evil glares for the next ten minutes, while she pulled faces at him. Barnaby, in between gazing surreptitiously at the ceiling every two minutes, had to be forcibly restrained by Peekin from having a fourth helping of Dick Cleverley’s macaroni cheese.

“Daniel does *not* want a Second who is too fat to climb up to Regna’s Hill!” he said, handing him a stick of celery instead.

Once lunch was over and everyone had gone to sit in the more comfortable easy chairs, the only topics of conversation were the near miss with the Arachs and Shadow's attack on Puckton.

"I knew it would be Shadow! Been saying that all day. Listen!" shouted Dick, trying to rewind the voice recorder, before remembering that it was useless. "Damn! Not to fear, I'm going to investigate further this afternoon!"

"I'm sure Puckton and Gripville will be so pleased to hear that," said Peekin with a fixed smile.

"Yes, indeed, I'm your man!" said Dick, puffing out his chest importantly. "Don't know what people would do without me around these parts, actually. You'd all be lost without me. Especially you, Peekin."

"Yeah," said Peekin, the smile beginning to turn into a glower around the edges. Dick rose from his chair and pocketed the remains of his voice recorder.

"Well, I'll have to toddle home and get this fixed before I commence my investigations. Rest assured I'll be back later to assist you with your security arrangements, Peekin."

"Can't wait," said Peekin, pulling a rather rude face at Dick's portly, retreating frame. "Right," said Peekin, after muttering several disrespectful sounding utterances in the direction of the private detective, "I'm going to start my rounds, make sure Shadow, or anyone else, can't come a-knocking.

Mimosa, care to join me?" She shook her head.

"Thanks but I've got my Taekwondo class in fifteen minutes," she said. "Clementine, can you and Pixie clear up?" Clementine looked apologetic.

"I promised Pixie I'd help her get her things together. She got kicked out of the hedgerow again last night for coming in drunk. She's going to stay with the frogs for a couple of days, until they forgive her." Pixie looked angry.

"Pixie, she shook magic twig at stinky hedgerow, to make it go shrivelled and mouldy! Then they be sorry!" She jabbed her mangy looking twig in the air and looked threatening.

"Ooh, I bet they're terrified," said Peekin sarcastically, as he left the room and went into the garden. "Make sure you pay attention to the Action Station, Daniel," he called over his shoulder. "Any questions, ask Gabriel. See you later." He wandered off into the fields behind his garden, humming to himself.

"It's ok, Mimosa, I'll tidy up," said Gabriel, rising somewhat unsteadily. "I'll set up the Action Station and start on the lunch things then."

"I think you should be in bed," said Mimosa, looking anxious. "You're not looking at all well." He smiled at her softly.

"I'm fine, Mimosa, it's nothing. I'll see you later." He motioned to Daniel and Barnaby to follow him into the hallway.

“Come on, you two,” he said. “The Action Station’s this way.”

CHAPTER 19

Gabriel moved further down the passage, to a room at the very end of the hall. He stopped and addressed Barnaby. It was too dark to see either face. There were no lights at this point.

“Barnaby, are you absolutely sure that you want to do this? You really don’t have to. No one will think any less of you if...”

“No,” came Barnaby’s voice, sounding tense. “I’ll be ok. I want to.”

“Alright,” said Gabriel. He paused before opening the door. “I think you’re an extremely brave individual, Barnaby,” he said in the darkness. “Your father would have been very proud.” Daniel felt confused and a little affronted. It was he, Daniel, who was going to have to fight, not Barnaby. Why was Barnaby brave for watching something that Daniel was going to have to actually *do*? It didn’t seem fair. Gabriel hadn’t told *him* how brave *he* was being. Gabriel unlocked the door and put on the light in the room.

“Apparently, the Fire Weevil in the hall’s light bulb has gone on holiday for two weeks, so we won’t have any light along there until he gets back,” said Gabriel. “That’s why the hall was in darkness.” He grinned at Daniel’s blank look. “Of course, we use electricity in

your world, don't we? Sorry, I should have explained better. Here, we pay West Allapatrian Fire Weevils to give us light. We rent their services for a certain amount a year. They've just got a new union, though, so they get more holidays than they used to. Peekin's going mad. Geoff's still here, though, in this room, aren't you, Geoff?"

"Indeed I am, Sirs," squeaked a little voice from the light bulb. "But only until Wednesday, then I'm off for a week too, so make the most of it while you can!" Daniel followed Gabriel into the room, looking quizzically at the light bulb and Barnaby dawdled behind, his face pale.

Gabriel made his way past two rows of chairs, to a large red plastic machine. There was a smooth, whitewashed wall behind it.

"Right," said Gabriel shakily, swallowing hard. "You two sit here at the front." His eyes took on their now familiar haunted look, as he pressed a few buttons on the front of the machine. A countdown was immediately projected onto the whitewashed wall. Gabriel inhaled sharply and stared in agitation at the countdown as he worked. It was obvious to Daniel that Gabriel was anxious to leave before the film began. His movements were rapid, his face grief stricken. "Come and get me when it's over," he said, clearing his throat and looking anywhere but at the screen. "I'll either be in the dining room or checking on Avalon." In two strides, he was out of the room. Daniel sat back as the film began, while Barnaby, tension etched across

his face, did his best to fill Daniel in at various points, telling him about Paris's horse, as the magnificent white Charger galloped majestically into view at an incredible speed.

"I'm glad Gabriel's looking after Avalon," Barnaby said. "I'm going to ask him if I can feed Avalon later." Daniel stared at the horse, his eyes widening in shock. It was the same horse that he had seen in his nightmare.

"That's Avalon? Avalon was Paris's horse? Gabriel's looking after *that* horse?" he said, staring at Barnaby in astonishment. Barnaby nodded.

"Why?" he said in surprise.

"No reason." Daniel turned back to the screen, his mind working. He wanted to talk things over with Peekin, to ask him why he dreamed of this horse. It was definitely the same one. He could tell by its height and the way it was galloping. So far, the film was generating more questions than answers for Daniel and it certainly wasn't alleviating any of his fears.

Daniel gasped in surprise when he saw Paris leap from Avalon and stand boldly on the Battleground, gazing at the night sky in anger. Paris looked like a true Warrior, the kind you see in action movies. He had light brown hair and a pleasant, masculine face with fine features. He looked as if he was used to wielding heavy swords like Daniel's all day without getting even slightly tired. In fact, he looked as if nothing would beat him. The sense of desperation when Paris had

realised that the Battle was still to be fought, despite being unarmed, was painful to watch.

Daniel strained to see Gabriel standing in the position marked for him as Second but the wind and driving rain were so harsh that he couldn't make out anything, save the actual Battle scene, surrounded in flame.

The most terrifying part for Daniel was when Shadow rode into view. At this point, Barnaby went silent, his fingers gripping the chair, knuckles white. Shadow was frightening to behold. Daniel couldn't make out the face but the way the black-cloaked rider seemed to be coldly observing Paris from beneath the jet-black hood was chilling. The lack of mercy for Paris left Daniel almost sick with fear. He tore out of the room, just as Shadow fired at the Warrior.

Daniel checked the dining room and kitchen, both of which were now spotless. He had to see Gabriel. He dashed into the garden, shouting his name. Gabriel appeared, stepping over a little wall into the garden.

"What's wrong, Daniel? Are you ok?" He moved towards him, looking anxious. "Has something happened?"

"I can't fight Shadow!" Daniel said, his face crumpling. "Have you seen that Battle? Shadow's terrifying!" Gabriel put his arm round Daniel and walked him towards the little wall.

"Sit down," he said, as Daniel tried unsuccessfully to calm down. "The wall's not as comfortable as Peekin's armchairs but it

will have to do.” Gabriel tactfully looked up at the clouds as Daniel attempted to pull himself together. The sky was a clear, cornflower blue and the afternoon sun was perfect for sitting in but it didn’t make Daniel feel any better and it was some time before he stopped trembling. “Daniel,” Gabriel said, still looking at the sky, “Shadow terrifies me too. No one knows how I felt that night, being forced to watch what happened and not stopping it.” His head drooped. “I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for what happened to Paris.” Daniel looked at him in surprise.

“There wasn’t anything you could do, Gabriel, you were only his Second. What else could you have done but stand and watch the Battle? I understand the roles now; what Seconds do. They can only protect the Defender until he’s on the Battleground.” Daniel hesitated. “I heard you shout when Paris...”

“Paris was my friend, Daniel, my *best* friend. We grew up together, we went to the Eponymous Hildegarde School together and we spent most of the holidays together. He was my friend,” said Gabriel softly, “and I let him down.” There was a moment’s silence, then Gabriel turned to Daniel. “I gather Peekin told you a little about my family last night,” he said. Daniel nodded.

“And Barnaby said you were a Crowned Prince when we first got here.” Gabriel smiled and shook his head.

“I’m actually King of this side of Allapatria.” Daniel blinked in surprise. “Well,

I would be if I took the crown,” said Gabriel, quietly. “My parents ruled this side of the Mountains for several years. In fact, my family has ruled in Allapatria since the stone was divided. We’ve always been figureheads rather than true rulers, however. We let people get on with their own lives and only intervene if asked. I’ve lived in Allapatria all my life, apart from the time I spent boarding at Eponymous Hildegarde. Several years ago, Ddraig Castle, which is my home, was invaded. I was away at the time, something I think they hadn’t expected.” Gabriel inhaled deeply before continuing. “They stormed the castle and killed everyone in it: my mother, my father, my elder brother Julius, heir to the throne,” he paused, “and my little sister. She was so innocent. She hadn’t done anything wrong. They think my brother died trying to protect her.” Gabriel lowered his head. “I know they would have killed me, had I been there too but I was always a better swordsman than Julius. I may have had a chance. At least I would have died an honourable death, alongside my family. Paris and I were still at school then and Paris was a true friend to me during that time. He swore an oath that he would avenge my family and not rest until he had hunted down their murderers. He stuck by that; I know he would have tracked them down.

‘So, I’m next in line to the throne but I haven’t taken my title because I don’t think it’s right that I should, until I’ve worked out a way to stop the evil.’ Gabriel lifted his head

and stared towards the Mountains. "There are better men than I, trying to sort out Allapatria, loyal individuals like Peekin. It's right that I'm not King yet. It might make it easier for them if I were." Daniel looked confused but Gabriel said no more. "As for you, Daniel," Gabriel looked at him in a way that he couldn't quite understand, "you'll be fine in this Battle. You're the chosen Defender."

"But Paris was taller than me and stronger *and* he knew how to fight. He still lost."

"Paris was betrayed," said Gabriel quickly. "You won't be. You're isolated out here and you've got Peekin looking after you. It can't happen again; I won't just stand by and let it this time." His eyes flashed with anger, yet there was still a look of desolation behind the rage. "Shadow's out of control now, that's something none of us can do anything about but you've been chosen for a reason, Daniel."

"Yeah, well, it's not because I'm good with swords," said Daniel, kicking the wall despondently. Gabriel smiled, the lines on his face more apparent than ever.

"You've been chosen for a reason," he repeated, staring straight at Daniel, as Barnaby suddenly appeared, looking drawn and shaky.

"Shadow...frightened...killed..." he gabbled the words incoherently. Gabriel went to him, talking to him reassuringly. Daniel got

up, feeling utterly drained by the whole situation.

“I think I’ll go for a lie down,” he said to Gabriel. “Until Peekin gets back.”

“Alright,” said Gabriel, looking at him, concerned. “I’m going to get Barnaby a doughnut, help calm him down. Mimosa made some fresh this morning. Want to take one up with you?”

“No thanks,” said Daniel, going towards the cottage. “I don’t feel like eating anything after watching that. See you later.”

“Daniel,” said Gabriel, looking worried. “Maybe you should stay with us. You shouldn’t be alone at the moment. Are you sure you’re ok?” Daniel looked up at him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

CHAPTER 20

Daniel went into the house feeling completely sapped of energy. He didn't feel like staying and talking. His brain felt as if it would explode and he just wanted some time away from the whole thing. So much had happened in a very short space of time and he didn't know how much more of it he could take. Right now, he didn't want to think about anything.

Until he had watched Paris's Battle, he'd been able to see his own imminent Battle almost as something trivial, that somehow, he wouldn't really have to fight. The idea of a kid like him actually having to fight someone like Shadow was ridiculous, anyway. He'd believed that, eventually, Peekin would realise how hopeless he was with a sword and that someone else would be chosen. Maybe Gabriel. He'd be much better at it. He was a grown man for one thing, not a scared twelve-year-old boy. The fact that Daniel had no choice and would have to fight anyway, no matter how useless he was, was too much to cope with. After seeing Shadow, Daniel had very little faith that he would even be able to face him without running in the opposite direction.

Daniel ran up the spiral staircase and went into his room. On his bed was a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, both of which, like his pyjamas, seemed a size too small for him. Daniel presumed that they had been put there by Mimosa. He'd only brought his console with him, so he only had the clothes he stood up in. He'd been wrestled to the ground by a werewolf while wearing them, so he was about due for a change of clothing.

He was just about to get undressed, when he felt something in the back pocket of his jeans. He drew it out and stared at it in surprise. It was the game cartridge that Nuttall had given to him on the coach. He'd forgotten all about it. Daniel turned it over in his hands curiously. He now knew all about Dr Xavier Nuttall. He'd betrayed Paris by taking his bow and had tried to steal the Half Stone at the Eponymous Hildegarde School, maiming the caretaker in the process. He wasn't exactly the type of man that you'd happily accept presents from. Did he *really* want something of Nuttall's in his possession? Daniel looked over at his console, still sitting next to Paris's snowboard on the wooden chest. It would be nice to play a game for a short while, until Peekin came back. Games always took his mind off things.

Daniel considered. Shouldn't he check with Gabriel first, though, just to be sure? But what harm could it do? he reasoned. It was only a game that Nuttall had confiscated from some kid. It might even be Attack of the Mutant Frisbees. That was quite new; in fact,

Daniel had been one of the first to get it and Nuttall had said that it was a rare game. It would be excellent if it were. He never did get back to the level he was on before Barnaby and his out of control football attacked. Anyway, he could always switch it off if it looked dodgy. Decision made, Daniel went over to the chest, picked up his console and loaded the game.

* * *

Peekin wandered happily round the cornfield, enjoying the summer sun. So far, none of the intricate traps that he routinely laid around his cottage had been compromised.

He'd added a few more, just to be on the safe side, but, so far, all was well. They'd be having no surprise visits from Black Ridge Mountain Werewolves *tonight*, thank you very much.

He sighed and lifted his face to the sun, eyes closed. It was good to be back. It was over six months since he'd been here. Peekin wished now that he'd thought to put his shorts on. His heather-mixture tweed trousers were starting to make him feel a bit hot. But it was certainly bearable and he was in no great rush to hurry home. It would take Daniel and Barnaby a while to watch the Battle. Then Gabriel would probably let them watch one of the re-enactments of earlier, large scale Battles. They were quite good, some of them. Just the right amount of fake

severed limbs, although they tended to go a bit overboard on the fake blood.

He smiled and swung his thin little arms in the heat, rolling up his smart white shirt. Yes, no rush to get back. Then, if he got five minutes when he arrived home, he'd check on his garden. His tomatoes had tasted wonderful in the salad: fresh and sweet. As for the raspberries: sheer heaven. Yes, it was certainly turning out to be a good year for his fruit and vegetable crops.

He suddenly opened his eyes and smiled happily. His blackberries! He'd forgotten all about them with the trauma of last night. They'd probably be ripe for the picking, with the weather being so glorious. He could pick a few now and eat them on the way home, then get one of the others to gather the rest, while he trained Daniel. Blackberry jam, blackberry pie, blackberry tart, the list was endless.

Peekin hurried to the field at the furthest point of his land, where the bramble bushes grew and nearly fell headlong into a rabbit warren. Stupid thing, he thought, kicking the entrance as he went past. Why couldn't rabbits be more considerate, digging holes where poor, unsuspecting Defardian Elves could fall in and be lost for days? Next time he went to a Council meeting, he'd have a few words to say to...Peekin stopped dead, staring ahead in surprise. No. It couldn't be. They were always so careful with their property. One might say downright posses-

sive. There in front of him, large as life and twice as shabby, was a Grip cart.

* * *

Daniel stared at the screen and waited for something to happen. But nothing did. The screen was blank. He stared at it a little longer. Still nothing. Stupid waste of time, he thought, shaking the console. No wonder the kid hadn't asked Nuttall for it back at the end of term. The game was faulty. He was just about to remove it, when three words in luminous purple ink floated onto the screen: 'Close the door.' Daniel stared at the words in surprise. Was this the title of the game? Funny title. He waited a little longer but the words remained, floating gently on the screen.

"Er, ok," said Daniel, laughing self-consciously. Strange. Maybe it was one of those virtual reality games. It had been confiscated from a kid that went to Barnaby's mad school, so it would make sense if the game was a little weird, too. So far, it certainly didn't look like anything that Daniel was used to playing. Daniel went to the bedroom door and closed it gently, returning to the console. He gazed at the screen once more, watching as the words faded and new ones appeared: 'Come closer.' Daniel, frowning slightly, moved forward. 'Closer' said the screen. Daniel moved closer still, until his nose was practically touching the screen. The word disappeared and the blank

screen returned. This time, however, Daniel could see something moving in the blackness, something he couldn't quite make out. What *was* that? He squinted and held the console up towards his face, so that his eyes were as close to the screen as he could get them. The blackness began to get blacker still but something was now morphing out of the darkness. There was a sudden rush of icy cold wind and two eyes appeared on the screen: two familiar cold, grey eyes. Daniel shouted in fright and tried to move away from the console but already the eyes were pulling him in. He began to feel very calm, very relaxed. He remembered this man. The man was his friend.

"Hello, Daniel," said the voice smoothly. "You remember me, don't you? My name is Nuttall."

* * *

Peekin wandered round the cart, frowning to himself. What, in all of Allapatria, was a Grip cart doing in the furthest and most remote of all his fields? He'd had dealings with Grips before and they were never very friendly towards anyone that they believed had stolen something from them. He could just imagine the trouble they'd cause when he tried to return it. Peekin groaned heavily and looked for any identification on the cart. On the far side, half covered with mud and grime, were some words. Peekin took out his handkerchief and wiped away the worst of the

mud. 'This Cart Belongs To The Grip Battering Squad, So Hands Off!' it read.

"Oh no, not the Battering Squad," Peekin moaned, his hands over his eyes. Gallipot, their leader, was a particularly tiresome Grip. "My life just gets better and better," he said out loud. "What would *really* make my day, would be to fall into that rabbit warren on the way home."

Peekin quickly scanned the contents of the cart. It was filled to the brim with rusty, broken bits and pieces that the Grips liked to call 'treasure'. Grips were hoarders and would take anything that they found along their travels, in the hope that someone in Gripville would be able to fix it and sell it on for profit. They rarely could, however; most of their finds were beyond repair.

By the looks of things, the Grip Battering Squad had excelled themselves this time. The cart was filled to overflowing with rusty watering cans filled with holes, spades with no handles, rakes with no teeth and rotten wooden window frames without any glass.

Peekin made a quick note in his diary, detailing when and where he found it and immediately made for home. He'd have to report this straight away and, hopefully, get someone else to deal with the task of returning it. Perhaps he could persuade his brother, Meekin to take it back, the lazy, good for nothing...Peekin tripped over a clod of earth and fell headlong into the rabbit warren.

“Oh, happy, *HAPPY* DAY!!!” he shouted
from the darkness.

CHAPTER 21

“I’ve been looking forward to having a talk with you, Daniel,” said Nuttall through the console. “I saw from the first that your great weakness was computer games but I’d almost given up hope that you’d play *my* game. I thought that perhaps our irritating little friend Peekin had disposed of it. We never did finish our chat on the coach, did we Daniel?” Daniel didn’t respond and continued to stare blankly into Nuttall’s eyes. Nuttall laughed softly. “What a fascinating subject you are,” he said. “I thought at first that I might not have been able to gain control of you. You were something of an enigma, you see. You weren’t a pupil at the school; no one had ever heard of you. We were worried that you may be the one to defeat us. We couldn’t understand why you had been chosen. But we were premature in our fears, weren’t we, Daniel? You’re not going to defeat us. No, no. You’re going to join us.”

“Daniel,” Barnaby knocked on the bedroom door. “Gabriel’s made some blackcurrant cordial to go with the doughnuts. He said we could have some now, before Pixie drinks it all and gets drunk again.” Barnaby knocked a second time, then

opened the door. "Daniel?" he said in surprise. "Are you ok?" He looked over at Daniel uncertainly. Daniel was sitting on the bed, gazing into the console. Purple sparks were shooting from the console into Daniel's face and hands. He was motionless and extremely pale. Barnaby ran over to him and looked at the console but all he could see was a black screen.

"Get rid of him for me would you, Daniel?" said Nuttall easily. "I don't want there to be any interruptions. Make him leave." Daniel continued to stare into the screen.

"Go away," he said in a monotone. His right hand slowly balled into a tight fist.

"Daniel, what's happening to you?" whispered Barnaby in horror, edging out of the door. He ran down the spiral staircase, yelling for Gabriel, who immediately appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "You've got to come...Daniel's...in trouble," said Barnaby breathlessly. Gabriel took one look at Barnaby's ashen face and bounded up the stairs two at a time. He crashed into Daniel's room and stared at him in shock.

"No!" Gabriel tried to wrestle the console from Daniel's grasp, yelling in pain, as the sparks converged and shot into his hands. "I won't let you, not to him," Gabriel hissed, his eyes filled with rage. "Barnaby!" Barnaby was halfway up the stairs, breathing heavily. "Find Peekin, ok? Tell him Daniel's in serious trouble. He'll be in one of the fields. *Find Peekin!*"

“But...” Barnaby wheezed. Gabriel turned and yelled at Barnaby, the anguish evident in his voice.

“Find Peekin now, or Daniel will suffer the same fate as my sister!”

Barnaby turned and ran.

* * *

After thirty minutes of yelling, Peekin was practically hoarse. He was stuck, head first in the rabbit warren, his legs sticking straight upwards towards the sky. He'd called the rabbit that had made the hole every name under the sun and had been shouting as loudly as he could but he was still stuck and now, due to the shouting, also had grotty bits of soil and twigs in his mouth.

Ordinarily, he'd have used Elf magic to get himself out of a tight spot such as this. However, he'd sprained his left wrist, the hand he used for performing his magic, as he fell and he couldn't guarantee that he'd get the correct hand movement with his right. Plus, he couldn't actually move either of his arms, anyway, so closely were they pinned to his sides. Even if he *could* move them, with his injury, he could end up filling the warren with water, rather than escaping, which would not be pleasant.

“Peekin, where are you?” A sudden agitated voice was just audible, from a field away – Barnaby.

“I'm here, I've fallen into a rabbit hole!” Peekin yelled in a muffled voice. “Hurry up,

Barnaby! I've been stuck for hours!" He knew that wasn't actually the case but he hoped that it would encourage Barnaby's plump little legs to move faster.

"Peekin, keep shouting! I need to find you quickly," Barnaby cried. "Daniel's in trouble, he's just sitting on his bed not answering and something's attacked Gabriel. Gabriel said it wants to kill Daniel."

"*What?*" Peekin frantically tried to move but he was jammed fast against the walls of the warren. "Who's trying to kill Daniel? How did it get to him? Does Gabriel know who it is? Barnaby, hurry up! I'm *here*. Oh, thank goodness!" he shouted in relief, as he heard Barnaby's footsteps coming towards him. Barnaby grabbed hold of Peekin's legs and pulled but Peekin was stuck fast. It was several more minutes before Barnaby managed to haul Peekin back onto the grass. He staggered to his feet, blinking in the sunlight and, together, they hurried back to the house, Peekin painfully holding his left wrist.

* * *

"It's a shame we were disturbed so soon, isn't it Daniel?" Nuttall's voice bore into Daniel's brain. Daniel was beginning to feel quite weak but he knew that everything would be fine, as long as he kept gazing into the grey eyes. He just wished that the person, who was pacing up and down in the room, would go away.

Gabriel had tried shouting at Daniel, tried pleading and even tried again to take away the console, gaining another agonising electric shock in the process. Nothing worked.

“It’s ok, Daniel, Peekin’s on his way,” he called out uselessly, for what felt like the hundredth time.

“These people don’t realise that you want to be with me now, do they?” said Nuttall softly. “Peekin’s never going to get here in time. He was foolish to have let you out of his sight. He always was arrogant. Stand up, Daniel; we’re leaving. It’s not far to my kingdom. Just a little way over the Mountains. I think you’ll like it there.” Daniel rose to his feet, still staring into the console.

“Wh-what are you doing?” shouted Gabriel hoarsely, as Daniel walked out of the room, towards the top of the stairs. “No, Daniel, stop; you’ll fall!” Gabriel reached out a hand to restrain Daniel but the sparks once again converged and he received a massive electrical shock. Gabriel shouted out in agony and dropped to the floor, barely conscious. Daniel’s right foot hovered over the first step.

“I think that’s far enough, don’t you, Nuttall?” Peekin said quietly from the bottom of the stairs. He was covered in soil and grass stains, with twigs in his hair. “It is you, isn’t it? I recognise your style. My congratulations, I thought I had this place fully sealed against the likes of you.”

“No,” hissed Nuttall. He stared harder at Daniel and Daniel immediately began to experience a terrible pain in his arm. It felt as if his very essence, his soul, was being sucked into the console. He could see something silvery, like smoke, drifting behind the cold grey eyes. “So sad it had to end this way, Daniel,” said Nuttall softly, as the pain increased. “I was so looking forward to training you. You could have been a star pupil, perhaps even better than Shadow. Still, at least once you’re dead, we don’t have to worry about you any more. Farewell, Daniel.”

Daniel could hear someone from far away yelling in torment and was suddenly aware that it was him. But he couldn’t tear himself away from the cold eyes and, despite the pain, he didn’t want to. Someone else was hurting him, not this man, because this man was his friend. The pain increased again and Daniel felt himself falling. Then, all of a sudden, the console was wrenched from his hands. Someone had hold of him and he was being pulled backwards. The pain was almost unbearable. Daniel collapsed into blackness.

CHAPTER 22

Daniel slowly drifted awake to hushed voices all around him. He couldn't make out what they were saying, or indeed, who these people were.

"Who's that? Where am I?" he whispered, trying to sit up. His throat felt impossibly dry and he had a terrible headache.

"Peekin! He's awake! Peekin!"

"Oh, thank goodness." There was the sound of several pairs of hurrying feet and Daniel was gripped by what felt like a hundred gentle hands, which slowly eased him back down onto the pillows. He opened his eyes and saw Barnaby, Peekin and Mimosa by his bedside, staring at him and looking hugely relieved. Barnaby looked as if he wanted to fling himself at Daniel with joy.

"Here, Daniel, drink some of this," said Mimosa, holding out a glass filled with a strange blue substance. "It's crushed Orchid juice. You'll feel much better after you drink it. Only small sips at first," she said, smiling at him with tears in her eyes. "It will help with your headache."

"I feel terrible," he said groggily.

"You're going to be fine now, Daniel," said Peekin in a choked voice. "Not so sure

about your console, though. It's looking a bit charred, I'm afraid. I had to use my right hand to cast the spell. I was actually trying to bring the console down to me but it, er, kind of smashed itself against the wall and blew up instead."

"What happened?" asked Daniel, as he drank more of the liquid. A pleasant, warm sensation that began in his stomach and spread through his whole body was beginning to make him feel drowsy.

"Nuttall tried to infiltrate your mind through that game of his," said Peekin grimly. "I'm just grateful that Barnaby and Gabriel were around, otherwise he would have got to you properly. I'm never letting you out of my sight in future," said Peekin, looking at Daniel, his eyes shining with something that looked suspiciously like tears. "If you so much as go to the toilet, I'll be right outside the door!" Daniel laughed shakily.

"Thank you, Peekin," he said, holding his hand out to Peekin, who grasped it gently. "You saved me again." Peekin suddenly became fascinated with the curtains.

"Stupid hay fever," he said, wiping away a tear. Daniel turned to Barnaby.

"You too," he said, trying to smile. "Thank you for saving me. *Again.*"

"No, I made this happen," said Barnaby, looking upset. "I should have listened when you said that Dr Nuttall was on the coach. I

should have made sure he hadn't given you anything."

"Why didn't you tell me about the game, Daniel?" asked Peekin. "I need you to promise me that, as well as not going outside alone, you won't accept gifts from strangers. Don't make me add anything else to the list of things you can't do!" Daniel nodded, laughing softly. He settled deeper into the warmth of the little bed and suddenly spotted Gabriel near the door. Daniel gasped in shock. Gabriel looked dreadful. He was paler than Daniel had ever seen him and looked extremely ill – in fact, Daniel was amazed that he was even able to stand. He was also shivering, despite the warm blanket that was draped around his shoulders.

"He attacked you too, didn't he?" Daniel said, suddenly remembering. Gabriel nodded, lowering his eyes.

"Gabriel stopped you falling down-stairs," said Peekin, smiling at him in admiration. "He grabbed hold of you and pulled you back onto the landing; even though he'd just had several massive electric shocks pass through his body. I'm going to recommend you to the Defardian Council for a Bravery Award, Gabriel and I think that you should seriously reconsider taking the throne after your actions today. I honestly don't know how you managed that feat. It was at great personal risk. Allapatria would be *very* lucky to have you as King." Gabriel, his eyes bright, swallowed heavily and turned to face Peekin.

“I can’t,” he said, gazing at Peekin in desolation. “Please don’t ask me again.” He shrugged off the blanket and checked his watch. “I’ll go and feed Avalon and then I’m taking a walk.” He gazed over at Daniel and gave him a small smile. “I can’t tell you what it means to see you safe, Daniel,” he said in a choked voice, then quietly left the room. Concerned, Mimosa moved to follow him but Peekin stopped her.

“Give him some space,” he said. “I think it reminded him of when his family was killed. He’s still grieving for Paris, too. This was Paris’s room, after all. It must remind him terribly, especially seeing Paris’s snowboard, although I can’t for the life of me work out why Paris brought a snowboard with him when he came here. Leave him for a while.” Mimosa nodded sadly and poured a little more of the Orchid juice into Daniel’s glass.

“Peekin, Nuttall made me think he was my friend,” said Daniel, frowning. Peekin’s eyes darkened with anger.

“Yes, he’s good at that. He uses mind tricks to make people carry out his wishes. Only a very few people can resist him.”

“He took something out of my left arm, too,” said Daniel, shivering in disgust. He tried to check his arm for marks but instead found that he was suddenly overtaken by an incredible urge to sleep.

“Don’t worry about that; he didn’t take enough for you to have been permanently harmed.” Peekin paused. “The silvery, smoky

substance that you saw was your life force, Daniel.” Daniel’s gently closing eyes opened in fright. “It’s alright, he only took a small quantity and this Orchid juice will have replaced it all by the time you wake up. Had he taken any more, we’d have had problems but we got to you in time. He was going to use it as energy, we think, to make his side more powerful. Life force from someone young and strong like you is extremely potent.” Peekin smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said. The game has been destroyed. The cartridge will never play again, so he’ll never get to you now. This cottage is impenetrable,” said Peekin stoutly. “He wouldn’t stand a chance. Don’t think about him any more, Daniel.” But Daniel had already fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 23

Peekin motioned to Barnaby and Mimosa to follow him and he gently closed the door behind them.

“He will be all right now, won’t he, Peekin?” asked Barnaby anxiously.

“I think so,” said Peekin. “I won’t be absolutely sure until he wakes up,” he checked his pocket watch, “tomorrow morning at nine seventeen but yes, I’m confident that we were in time to save him.” He rubbed his left wrist, grimacing. “Damn rabbit,” he said irritably.

“Here, let me,” said Mimosa and placed her hands on Peekin’s wrist. It immediately felt warm, as if the sun was gently shining on it. “Ok, try it now,” she said, smiling. Peekin rotated his wrist, gingerly at first. The pain had gone. He smiled happily at her and pointed to one of the portraits that was hanging slightly lopsidedly on the wall. It immediately righted itself.

“Thanks, Mimosa,” he said grinning. “Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Shall we go and get tea ready, Barnaby?” said Mimosa, smiling at an exhausted looking Barnaby. “Then, maybe you’d like to come and feed Avalon a few carrots with me?” Barnaby’s face lit up.

“Really?” he said happily. “Can I ride him?”

“Well, I’ll have to ask Gabriel first. We’ll see if he’s around.” They all headed downstairs, Peekin glaring at the charred, blackened expanse of wall where the console had met its end.

“See if Dick will come and decorate for me again, will you, Mimosa? It’ll keep him away from Puckton and it can serve as material for his book: ‘How Dick Cleverley saved Daniel Green.’” Mimosa laughed and nodded as she and Barnaby headed for the kitchen.

Peekin unlocked a door to his left and went in, closing the door firmly behind him. The sun was shining into the little room, casting its rays on the moss green carpet and intricate objects that lay on shelves all along the walls. He leaned against the door and sighed, before walking over to a crystal decanter and pouring himself a large glass of a honey coloured liquid. He sipped it slowly, while he lit his pipe, the scents of pine needles and marigolds soon filling the room. Moments later, Mimosa came in with a tray filled with blackcurrant cordial, hot buttered toast, paté, a large wedge of cheese and a huge slice of pork pie with egg. There was also a small bowl of salad, two raspberry tarts and coffee with whipped cream on top. She placed the tray on an oak desk that was in the middle of the room.

“Thought you’d be in your study,” she said grinning. “You must have a lot on your

mind. Barnaby's in the kitchen having his tea. I've left plenty for Gabriel for when he comes back." Peekin nodded absently.

"Thank you for bringing the Orchid juice round so quickly," he said. Mimosa smiled. "Don't forget to eat!" she said, closing the door. Peekin absent-mindedly chewed on a piece of toast and added some pat , while he wandered along his shelves, staring at a long row of ancient books that went almost around the whole room.

"There must be something here. Why is the Battle taking place at Regna's Hill of all places?" he muttered, gazing at the books and shaking his head. "Largest convergence of ley lines in Allapatria, site of the Battle to end Battles, site of the splitting of the stone..." He broke off a piece of cheese and stared at a portrait of an extremely wizened Elf, wearing a Deerstalker hat and smoking a large pipe. "I wish you were still here, Uncle Hekk," he said. "You'd know what to do." Peekin went to a very old red book in the furthest corner of his bookshelves and checked the list of names within it for the fiftieth time. "No Daniel Green, no ancestors who went to Eponymous Hildegarde called Green," he said. "So *why* has he been chosen? What talent has he got? He can't use a sword and, even if he had a hidden ability, there's no time to train him. The Battle's the day after tomorrow and he's not even *remotely* ready. After his attack today, he may be too weak to fight, anyway." Peekin sighed again and chewed on a lettuce leaf.

“Ok, it’s official,” he said moodily. “I have absolutely *no* idea what to do.”

CHAPTER 24

Daniel woke up to sun streaming through the blue curtains in his room. He still felt exhausted but his headache was gone and, with the exception of his fatigue, he was feeling almost back to normal again. He reached over to the bedside cabinet and glanced at his watch: 9.17am.

“Wow, I’ve slept for hours!” he said, smiling in surprise. No wonder he felt ravenous. He got ready quickly, putting on the too short jeans and the too tight T-shirt and headed for the stairs, feeling as if he had coat hangers in his clothing. He could hardly move.

He stopped dead when he saw the charred wall. Suddenly, the events of the previous day flooded back to him and he sat down heavily on the top step. Nuttall had thought he could get him to come over the Mountains. He thought he could win by cheating again. He thought Daniel was easy prey.

Daniel began to feel a growing sense of anger as he stared at the wall. He remembered something else and looked anxiously at his arm in the place where Nuttall had tried to extract his life force. The skin behind his elbow was bruised and

swollen. It was also aching slightly. Nuttall did this, he thought. He took my life force, to make his side stronger. He made me believe that my friends were my enemies. Daniel's face hardened.

"No," he whispered, suddenly feeling his strength returning. He wasn't going to let Nuttall win; he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "You've got a real fight on your hands now, Nuttall," he hissed.

Daniel bounded down the stairs and called for Peekin, who came staggering out of one of the little rooms, looking as if he hadn't slept. Bits of twig were still stuck in his hair.

"Daniel!" he said, running towards him, smiling. "How are you feeling? You look a lot better than you did yesterday afternoon, that's for sure! Well, apart from your clothes! What *are* you wearing?" Peekin waved a finger and his jeans suddenly grew an extra ten centimetres and his T-shirt expanded. "That's better," said Peekin in approval. "Unless, of course, you'd prefer it all in tweed?"

"Er, not at the moment, thanks," said Daniel hastily, as Peekin made a move with his forefinger towards him. "Peekin, I've been thinking. I'd like to watch Paris's Battle again but with you this time. I want to get some idea of what tactics you think Shadow is likely to use and also what his fighting technique is." Peekin smiled at him in surprise.

"My pleasure," he said. "Why the change of heart?"

“I don’t want Nuttall to think he’s beaten me,” said Daniel in determination, “and I don’t want to live somewhere where he’s in charge, either. If I’m the person to beat them like you say, I need to start taking things more seriously. Can we start now?” he asked.

“Well, breakfast first, or Mimosa will go mad at me.” Peekin, his eyes shining, led the way into the kitchen, where Barnaby was just finishing the most enormous breakfast that Daniel had ever seen. Barnaby hugged Daniel hard as he walked into the kitchen and fussed over him while Daniel sat down and poured himself a huge bowlful of breakfast cereal. Barnaby eagerly passed him toast, orange juice and anything else that he could lay his hands on.

“No, I’m ok for salt, thanks Barnaby, I don’t really like it on my cereal,” he said laughing, as Barnaby picked up the saltcellar and presented it to him.

“I think my crushed Orchid juice did the trick,” said Mimosa, planting a kiss on Daniel’s cheek, as she brought over a large plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. “You look fine this morning, just a little tired.” She checked his arm and nodded to herself in satisfaction. “That’s healing nicely, too,” she said.

“Mimosa, can’t you zap it like you did to Peekin’s wrist and make it better quickly?” Barnaby asked, looking anxiously at Daniel’s bruised arm. Mimosa laughed.

“No, this can’t be zapped, Barnaby. Daniel has to heal from the inside. This is just the external wound. Daniel’s arm will be fine after a few more doses of Orchid juice, you’ll see.” She handed Daniel another large glass of the shimmering blue liquid and he began to drink.

“Where’s Gabriel, Mimosa?” asked Peekin, munching on a slice of toast. “I could do with his help this morning. Daniel wants some pointers on Shadow’s Battle techniques.”

“He was up before I got here,” said Mimosa, frowning. “He didn’t eat any of the food that I left, either. I’m getting really worried about him, Peekin.” Peekin nodded.

“Me too,” he said. “I can’t understand why he won’t take the crown, either. He’s *exactly* the sort of person we need at the moment; he’d really bring things together. I think he’s worried that he won’t be as good a King as his father was. I’ll have a word with him when he comes back in.”

As soon as Daniel had eaten his fill, which, this morning, even rivalled the amount of food that Barnaby consumed, he and Peekin went to the Action Station. Daniel had invited Barnaby to join them but he’d refused, saying, a little too quickly, as far as Daniel was concerned, that he was going to feed Avalon. Peekin put on the light and, after a violent argument with Geoff the West Allapatrian Fire Weevil about his holiday the following week (“Get lost, Peekin, Fire Weevils have rights, too, you know! I’m going and

that's it!"), they settled down to watch the Battle.

"You can go back to sleep, now, thanks, Geoff!" Peekin yelled, as the countdown started. "We don't need any light now. In fact, you're getting in the way!"

"Good!" squeaked Geoff. "You won't miss me next week then, will you?" Peekin opened his mouth to retaliate but Daniel nudged him quickly. The Battle was about to begin.

Peekin discussed the techniques of warfare and described how he thought Shadow would fight in the next Battle. He went quiet as Paris galloped into view, shouting of his betrayal, then turned to look at Daniel.

"There's something else that I need to tell you, Daniel," Peekin took a deep breath. "I can't guarantee that Shadow will use a sword," he said quietly.

"*What?*" shouted Daniel in horror, feeling some of his confidence ebbing away. "You mean, I could be standing there with a sword I can't use properly, while Shadow's got hold of an extra-lethal machine gun or..."

"Well, that couldn't happen, not in Allapatria but, however much *they* cheat, *we're* playing by the rules, ok? We assume their side dreamed of Shadow holding a sword because we dreamed of you holding one. Nevertheless, they may ignore their dreams and pick another weapon altogether: a Mace or a Poleaxe or something. I honestly don't know. However, regardless of that

possibility, we dreamed you were going to use a sword; a *particular* sword and we will stick to that. Daniel, I don't make the rules," he said hastily, as Daniel tried to argue. "You were chosen for a reason none of us understand."

"Yeah, maybe so you can all watch me die," said Daniel, looking despondently at the screen.

"No, Daniel, you were chosen because you can beat Shadow; of that we're all certain. We're just not really sure how."

"You all thought Paris would beat Shadow," said Daniel, turning to Peekin, as he felt the first signs of rising panic. "What's to stop me being betrayed like he was?"

"We won't let that happen. *I* won't let it. Paris didn't have a Defardian Elf on side like you have."

"Yeah but you can't be up there with me, can you? Only Defenders and Seconds can be on the Battleground."

"Oh, there's ways and means," said Peekin, tapping his nose and smiling. "I can be there with you in spirit. Now, shut up and watch."

Daniel turned back to the screen, just as the lightning bolt struck the hilltop between Paris and Shadow. Daniel looked around the Battleground, trying to find any trace of Paris.

"What exactly happened to him?" Daniel asked. Peekin shook his head sadly.

"He was killed by the arrow, as the lightning struck," he said. "It was agreed by

both sides that bows would be used for the Battle. Shadow arrived at the Battleground with a crossbow instead. Their side ignored their promise. The crossbow had been specially modified in some way, so that it utterly destroyed Paris. It vaporised him. Or something. We don't know exactly what it did; no one has ever seen a weapon like it before. We don't even have Paris's body to bury. They cheated," he said quietly. Daniel stared wide-eyed at Shadow, as Shadow fired several bolts into the ground where Paris had once stood. Shadow's coldness was horrifying. It was as if there wasn't a human being under the black cloak, just a robot who didn't care about life or honour. Daniel watched Shadow tear back down the hill and gulped nervously.

"What if I can't beat Shadow, Peekin?" he said. "What then?"

"You'll beat Shadow," Peekin said, his mouth set in a determined line, as he went over to the Action Station to switch it off. He suddenly froze in shock.

"What in Allapatria...?" Peekin hit the rewind button and played back the last two seconds of the film. "Why are...they've no right to be there, I..." he played back the film again.

"What's wrong?" Daniel asked, staring at the screen. All he could see was a knobbly looking tree branch that briefly came into view, just before the screen went blank. "What are you looking at, Peekin?"

“Didn’t they know they weren’t allowed to be...but why would they be on Cedar Hill at midnight, anyway? It’s miles away from their village.” Peekin continued to watch the last bit of film and then rewound it. “Maybe it’s nothing,” he said, muttering to himself.

“Peekin, *what?*” Daniel was standing up now and staring intently at the screen. “Are you looking at that knobbly bit of branch?”

“It’s not a knobbly bit of branch,” said Peekin, frowning. “It’s a club. The only ones round here who have clubs like that are in the Grip Battering Squad,” He shook his head and looked confused. “Now what could possibly be of interest to the Grip Battering Squad on Cedar Hill in the middle of a Battle?”

CHAPTER 25

Peekin hurried into the kitchen, with Daniel following, looking puzzled. They found Mimosa, practising Taekwondo moves next to the kitchen table.

“Mimosa, have you heard anything on the grapevine about the Grip Battering Squad being seen heading towards Cedar Hill on the night of the Battle?” Mimosa wiped her forehead with a towel and shook her head. She looked as puzzled as Daniel.

“Just before the film ended, I saw one of their clubs, plain as day,” Peekin explained. “I don’t know why I didn’t spot it before.”

“What’s a Grip anyway?” asked Daniel, baffled.

“They’re hoarders, they live in Gripville and wander round, picking up any old rubbish they can find,” said Peekin. “They have what’s known as a Battering Squad, that takes revenge on anyone they think has done anything nasty to them. They live right on the border of our side of the Mountains. Keep themselves to themselves, generally.” Peekin suddenly had a thought. “I wonder if they thought that there might be things worth taking once the Battle was over?” he said. “It’s the kind of sick thing they’d do.”

Pixie suddenly wandered into the kitchen, wearing her green wellies as usual and holding her mouldy twig. Today, however, she was also wearing a bright yellow sou'-wester, with a huge, bright yellow waterproof hat on her head. Daniel stared outside, looking for the rain that would necessitate the wearing of such garments but it was a bright, sunny day and there wasn't a cloud in sight.

"Pixie wants dinner," she announced, sitting down on one of the chairs and scowling at Peekin. Peekin, sighing heavily, asked Pixie the same question that he had just put to Mimosa. She immediately shook her head. "Pixie finkin' Grips are stinky, so Pixie chases them with magic twig," she said, shaking the twig at Peekin. "Dinner!" she shouted, banging her wellies against the chair.

"Oh, go away," said Peekin in irritation. He picked her up out of the chair and swiftly threw her outside. Pixie hammered on the door for a few moments, then gave up and went to sit on the little wall in the garden.

"Don't make Pixie sing the Peekin song!" she yelled, pointing her twig at the house. Peekin groaned and put his hands over his eyes.

"Mimosa, do we have any Pixicide spray?" he asked hopefully. Mimosa laughed.

"No, don't you remember? They banned it in 1848 because Pixies were becoming endangered. There were hardly any left."

“That’s right,” he said, nostalgically, “and what lovely times they were.”

“Does Pixie have a name?” Daniel asked, as Pixie began to sing a couple of lines from a song.

“Oh, probably, but no one can be bothered to ask her. She’s a real pain,” said Peekin, glaring at Pixie through the glass in the kitchen window. Pixie pulled out her tongue and increased the volume of her tune. Daniel could only catch odd phrases but Peekin was growing more and more angry with every line:

“Peekin, he is oh so dim!

Pixie, she don’t much like him,

Like to stick him in the bin,

Leave him there ‘til Tuesday.”

Peekin, his face red with anger, tried to act normally while Pixie belted out another seventeen verses. He continued to discuss the Grip issue with Mimosa, turning his back on the singing Pixie. Pixie suddenly stopped and gave Peekin an evil smile. “Pixie remembered best part!” she called, taking a deep breath, as Peekin moaned quietly.

“Peekin, Pixie don’t like you,

‘Cos she thinks you smell like...”

“Would you please excuse me for a moment?” said Peekin through gritted teeth and walked sedately into the garden towards Pixie. Pixie was swinging her wellie-covered legs in the air, while trying to remember more verses. She had her fingers in her ears and her eyes screwed tight shut in concentration. Peekin suddenly dived towards the wall and

gave her an almighty shove, which sent her flying backwards, headfirst. She landed hard on her magic twig, which popped flatulently and snapped in two. Peekin strolled back into the house, a very satisfied look on his face. He closed the door and pulled down the blind, just as Pixie got up. She screamed loudly when she saw her broken twig and ran at the door, hammering on it and yelling obscenities. Eventually, after ten minutes, she gave up and left, vowing to return with an even more powerful magic twig.

“A *more* powerful twig?” called Peekin, feigning terror. “Wow, you mean that this one might actually *do* something?” The loud hammering began again. Peekin, his face red with rage, ran to the door and flung it open.

“GO AWAY, YOU MENTAL CREATURE!” he roared, then stopped dead. “Oh, sorry, Barnaby, thought you were someone else.”

“I’m *not* mental! My mum says I’m very clever in my own way. Why was the door locked?” asked Barnaby, looking rather frightened.

“Never mind,” said Peekin. “I’m getting a headache, I need to lie down.” He moaned to himself and started to walk out of the kitchen towards his study. Daniel stopped him.

“Peekin, I need to ask you another favour. I was going to ask you about it after we saw the film but with everything that happened...” He tailed off, looking anxiously at the little Elf.

“Ask away,” said Peekin, a pained expression on his face. “What am I but a

slave to Allapatria? Do I complain? Do I protest? Do I..."

"I want to see Avalon," interrupted Daniel and briefly told him about his dream, involving the figure that had frightened him so much and who had tried to grab him. He also told Peekin about the white horse that had come to his rescue. "I want to see if it's the same horse," he said. Peekin listened in silence, then nodded abruptly and hurried out to the garden, Daniel following.

"We're going to see Avalon," he said, as he passed Mimosa and Barnaby.

"Ooh, can I come, too?" asked Barnaby, getting up.

"No, you need to do me a favour, actually, thinking about it," said Peekin, looking at him. "Barnaby, I need you to go back to the field where you found me yesterday..."

"Oh, you mean the field where you were stuck head first in that rabbit hole and you..."

"Yes, yes, you don't have to tell everyone," said Peekin hastily, glaring at him and looking embarrassed. "There's a cart there, full of rubbish. I need you to bring it back here and put it next to the stables for me, ok? Make sure you don't drop any of the rubbish; the last thing I need at the moment is an angry Grip on my doorstep. It won't be too heavy for a big strong boy like you," said Peekin, smiling sweetly.

"Ok," said Barnaby, "but can I have a doughnut first before I..."

“No! Now! Go!” shouted Peekin and Barnaby scuttled off in the direction of the field, as Peekin and Daniel made their way towards the stable area.

“Maybe it would be better if he watched the Battle instead,” said Daniel. “I don’t think he saw all of it yesterday.” Peekin suddenly stopped and glanced up at Daniel. He looked troubled.

“Don’t be too hard on Barnaby about watching the Battle,” he said. “I shouldn’t have asked him to see it at all. Very inconsiderate of me.” Peekin looked uncomfortable. “He was extraordinarily brave to have watched as much of it as he did.”

“Gabriel said the same thing,” said Daniel hotly, “but Barnaby isn’t even going to have to fight! All he has to do is stand behind me. *I’m* the one who has to face Shadow, not him!”

“I imagine Barnaby sees Shadow every time he closes his eyes,” said Peekin. Daniel looked at him questioningly. Peekin exhaled and gazed up into the sky. “Daniel,” he said, “Shadow killed Barnaby’s father.”

CHAPTER 26

“Remember I told you that we decided to ask those on the other side of the Mountains to agree to a final Battle?” Daniel nodded, feeling numb. “Well, it was Malthus Dawson, Barnaby’s father, who offered to go over the Mountains and put the proposal to them. Malthus was an excellent negotiator and a great man, so he seemed to be the ideal person for the job. I, along with several others, watched for his return on the Action Station at the High Council. We’d put cameras on the border to await his arrival back on our side.

We saw him arrive back from the Mountains, looking troubled. There was a terrible storm at the time and it was difficult to hear everything he was saying because of the high winds. He told us that the request to hold another Battle had been accepted by the one that now ruled over there. When we asked who was in charge over the Mountains, however, Malthus had difficulty in remembering his face, or indeed, anything about him. He did say something worrying, however: that he had briefly seen someone from our side of Allapatria over there. He had only seen him for a moment but he was convinced that someone was betraying us, by

feeding information to those over the Mountains.

‘Malthus was trying to tell us who the person was, when something appeared behind him. It was a black figure on a black horse, riding towards him at breakneck speed: Shadow. There was no way for us to warn him of the approaching figure and all we could do was watch.’ Peekin lowered his eyes. ‘Malthus was cut down from behind, before he could tell us. We think now that it was probably Nuttall that he saw.’ Peekin looked drawn. ‘Fortunately, neither Barnaby nor his mum was there to witness the attack. Word soon reached us from over the Mountains that it had been an accident, that Malthus had been killed by someone out of control. They apologised and asked that the Battle still be fought, because, as we now know, they planned to use the Battle as a cover to try to steal the Half Stone.

‘You can imagine how we all felt when we found out that the individual who would fight Paris was the same one that had killed Malthus. As I told you last night, we don’t know Shadow’s real name, or indeed, anything about him. He is referred to as Shadow because no one has ever seen his face. He always wears black cloaks and hoods, you see and the name just stuck. We have no idea what kind of creature Shadow is. But, whatever *does* live within the cloak, is merciless, with no conscience or sense of honour or pity.’

They reached the stables and Peekin stopped. "Malthus had asked us to take his family to a place of safety if anything happened to him and, within hours of the attack, Barnaby and his mum were moved to a protected house."

"The house next door to mine?" Daniel asked, his mouth gaping open in surprise, as Peekin nodded. Daniel could hardly take it in. He'd been right all along – Barnaby *was* being kept safe from an attack. He hadn't misheard the voice on the night that Barnaby moved in after all.

"The Dawsons had always lived in your world; many of the families who play a significant part in Allapatria have homes in both worlds. It's a good way of keeping up to date with everything and finding out what's happening. We ensured that they remained on a ley line and saw to it that it was well guarded. That's why I needed the key to the ley line, in order to get into your house. So they moved next door to you, as you say. You live on an unbelievably powerful line, you know, Daniel," said Peekin, staring at him curiously and studying his face. "Anyway, Barnaby has had to put a lot of fears aside, especially now that he knows he will have to see Shadow tomorrow night." Daniel nodded, his face serious.

"I had no idea," he said. "Barnaby never said anything about how his dad died."

"Barnaby adored his father," said Peekin quietly. "Malthus was a great man. Gabriel also took his death very badly. When

Gabriel's family was killed, Malthus took Gabriel under his wing. Malthus didn't deserve to have been killed in such cold blood."

Daniel suddenly found himself feeling very guilty for all the times that he had been short-tempered and critical towards Barnaby. He'd had a lot to go through and, despite Daniel's harsh treatment of him, he had still saved Daniel's life. Twice. Daniel felt even more determined now to defeat the evil that resided over the mountain range. He looked up. It was just visible above the stables, an oppressive expanse of mountainous rock in the distance. Daniel glared at it. You'll never win, he thought. The phrase jolted a memory.

"Peekin," Daniel said urgently, "in my dream, the man told me to deliver a message: to give up now before it was too late. But I don't know who the message was to be delivered to, unless it was to everyone on this side of the Mountains." Peekin nodded in distraction..

"Was it Nuttall? Think carefully now." Daniel considered. The figure had frightened him far more than Nuttall had ever done but was that just because the dream had occurred in the middle of the night? Everything always seemed worse in the early hours.

"I'm not sure," he said screwing his eyes up and trying to remember. "It *might* have been Nuttall. I can't remember his face."

"Malthus couldn't remember what he looked like, either," mused Peekin, deep in

thought. "So you didn't dream of yourself, at *any* time, on a Battlefield, holding a sword, with Barnaby by your side? That's what we all dreamed and it's how we knew that you and Barnaby were to be our next Defender and Second."

"No," insisted Daniel. "Barnaby asked me whether I dreamed something too but it wasn't that. My dream was much more horrible." Daniel paused. "So why did I dream of him? Why didn't I have the same dream as everyone else?" Peekin shook his head.

"Yet again, it's another thing that I don't understand, Daniel. None of this is following any familiar pattern. If my uncle Hekk were here, he'd probably understand. I'm only three hundred and fifty-eight, you see, I wasn't alive when the Battles were originally being fought." Daniel gaped at Peekin, as he opened the stable door. He was *how old?*

"Right then. Daniel, meet Avalon." Peekin called out and, from the far end of the large stable, a beautiful white horse appeared. It whinnied softly and came forward towards Peekin. Peekin barely came up to the horse's knees and looked extremely nervous at being in such close proximity to him. "Er, nice horsey, nice horsey," he said with a weak smile. "So, er, was this the horse in your dream?" Daniel went towards the horse and stroked his mane. The horse was outstandingly handsome: almost totally white, with dappling on one of its back legs.

"Yeah, this is definitely the same horse," said Daniel in admiration.

“Gabriel found him wandering in the forest after the Battle and brought him here. Gabriel told you all about his family, I heard?” Daniel nodded, stroking the horse, which was nuzzling into him. “Well, Giselle, Gabriel’s sister, named him Avalon. Paris asked her to choose his name when he was born. Paris kept him in the stables at Ddraig Castle in the school holidays and Giselle went riding on Avalon every day when she wasn’t at school. Gabriel, I think, sees Avalon as a connection to his sister and to Paris. He spends a lot of time with him now.”

“So, why did I dream about him, when no-one else did?” Daniel asked. Peekin shrugged.

“Again, I have no idea. Oh, this is all so *frustrating!*” he said, irritably. “Take Avalon into the field while I have a think. He could do with a run.” Daniel led Avalon out of the stable and into the lush green field. The horse cropped some of the grass for a couple of minutes and then wandered listlessly back towards the stables.

“He seems to be really missing Paris,” said Peekin, concerned, as Daniel returned with Avalon. “I’ll have a word with Mimosa, see if she can concoct something to perk him up a bit.”

“When Shadow saw Avalon, he paused, didn’t he?” said Daniel, remembering the scene that he had just watched on the Action Station. “He even lowered his crossbow.” Peekin snorted.

“Yes,” he said. “A few seconds longer and Paris may have actually reached Shadow. He may have stood a chance, then. We think Shadow was checking the weapon, in order to see how many bolts he had with him; hoping he could kill Avalon as well as Paris. It’s the kind of sick thing Shadow would do. He has no sense of honour at all and he wouldn’t think twice about killing an innocent horse. Shadow wasn’t paying enough attention, Daniel. He’d become complacent and thought that Paris wasn’t a threat because he was unarmed. I imagine it was a great shock to him when he saw Paris running towards him.”

The sound of wheels, badly in need of oiling, was suddenly heard from the courtyard behind them. Peekin and Daniel went to investigate. Before they got far, however, Barnaby appeared, pulling the Grip cart along behind him.

“Peekin, look what I’ve found!” he said. “Everything fell out and it was at the bottom under everything.” Barnaby was grinning happily. “I thought you said the cart was full of rubbish! There’s stuff in here that looks really valuable.” He started moving great mounds of broken junk and pulled something out from under a wheelbarrow with no handles. “Look at this!” he said in excitement. He took out a huge, silvery piece of what looked like expertly crafted metal, with a line of spun silver cord running from top to bottom. Rivulets of colour coursed through the metal. Next to the object was a

quiver of arrows, created from the same material. Peekin froze and inhaled sharply. He looked completely stunned. The stunned look was swiftly replaced by anger.

“That was in the Grip cart?” he asked, his eyes flashing with pure rage, bordering on utter hatred. “You’re *absolutely* sure?”

“Yes,” said Barnaby, backing away and looking edgy. “Why? What have I done?” Peekin snatched the object out of Barnaby’s grasp. It was huge. He looked at it carefully, examining it from top to bottom.

“You’ve just told me why the Grips were on Cedar Hill while the Battle was being fought. And why Paris didn’t have his weapon. You’ve just found Paris’s bow and arrows in the Grip cart. The Grips stole Paris’s bow.”

CHAPTER 27

“Lock that cart in the outhouse behind the stable. Take this with you.” Peekin handed Barnaby the weapon. “Put the bow and the quiver of arrows behind the bales of hay, out of sight of the windows. Then, come *straight* back to the cottage.” Barnaby trotted off, looking scared, as Peekin ran for home, calling to Daniel to follow him.

Peekin dived into the cottage, calling for Gabriel. Mimosa appeared, looking worried.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “Has something happened? Gabriel’s still not back.”

“I’ve just found Paris’s bow in a Grip cart. The cart was in one of my fields,” Peekin said grimly. Mimosa let out a shocked cry. “They must have stolen it while he was training. Remember Gabriel said that the bow went missing, a few hours before the Battle? Paris went to get ready and left the bow with Gabriel but Gabriel got distracted by someone he thought was trying to get into my cottage. He was worried they’d come to attack Paris. Gabriel left the bow in the field, while he went to investigate. When he got back, it had disappeared. Those Grips must have thought it was rubbish and taken it. Or, worse, they created the diversion and stole it

because they're in league with the other side. Gabriel thought that it would be safe to leave the bow in my fields because I always keep them well protected. It was still a foolhardy thing to do. Maybe someone like Nuttall told the Grips how to disable one of my traps."

"No, surely not," said Mimosa, looking anxious. "Grips keep themselves to themselves. They don't like *anyone*."

"Maybe but their village is right next to the Mountains. It wouldn't be difficult for someone to nip over and offer them some broken stuff in exchange for stealing Paris's weapon." He looked dourly at Mimosa. "I'm going to go and talk to them right now. If they don't give me answers, I'll have them forced out of their village by nightfall. They can go and live over the Mountains where they belong. *Where's Gabriel?*" Peekin repeated, sounding exasperated. "I wanted him to look after Barnaby and Daniel and carry on with Daniel's training. We're running out of time." Peekin groaned, passing a hand over his eyes. "Come to think about it, even leaving them with Gabriel would be too much of a risk. I don't want anyone to see my absence as another opportunity to try and get to Daniel. Oh, it's no use," he muttered, "I'll have to take them with me."

"What if the Grips try to attack you?" Mimosa said. "And what about Daniel's training?"

"I need to find out what their plans are, Mimosa. They may be plotting to attack

Daniel tomorrow night and at the moment, Daniel's safety is more important than his training. If they *are* planning something, I need to have them thrown out of Gripville as soon as possible. As for attacking me," he said darkly, "let them try. Daniel,"

Peekin glanced over at him, Daniel, who had been listening to the conversation in astonishment.

"Daniel, you and Barnaby need to come with me, so that I know you're safe. As for your training, I'll get this sorted out as quickly as I can and we will start the moment we get back. Gripville is only an hour or so away." Daniel nodded but he felt worried. The Battle was tomorrow night and he wasn't even remotely ready.

"I know, I'm sorry, Daniel," said Peekin, as if reading his mind. "I feel as if I'm missing something in all this," he murmured. "Something is going on that I haven't properly worked out yet and it's driving me mad." Mimosa began to pack some food into bags, just as Barnaby walked into the kitchen.

"We're going to Gripville, Barnaby," said Peekin shortly. "Right now – no time to lose. Can you get the bags?" Barnaby took the bags that Mimosa had prepared and followed Peekin into the garden and over the little wall.

"When you see Gabriel, fill him in with everything that's happened and tell him to wait here until we get back. Could you look after Avalon too? See if there's anything you

can do for him,” called Peekin over his shoulder, as the three disappeared into the fields.

“Where is Gripville?” Daniel asked. Peekin pointed over towards the mountain range. It looked even more imposing now that they were walking towards it.

“It’s in the shadow of Skylac Mountain, that’s the one right in the centre of the range. The Grips reside in the village closest to the other side. Their geographical arrangements appear to have done them some favours,” he said as they walked. “I still can’t believe it.” Peekin shook his head in disbelief. “Alright, the Grips bend the odd rule, always have done, but *this*?” He exhaled, his brown eyes dark with rage. “They’re going to pay. I’ll make sure of it, for Paris’s sake.”

CHAPTER 28

After around an hour's walk, they reached the outskirts of Gripville. The temperature had been dropping steadily during the journey and, now that they were directly in the shadow of Skylac Mountain, Daniel was positively cold. Even Barnaby had begun to shiver some minutes ago, despite being covered from head to toe in his army surplus all-terrain gear.

The closer they had got to the mountain range, Daniel had begun to notice that many of the mountain peaks were covered in thick snow. In fact, some of the mountains looked quite glacial and it was beginning to feel like winter, despite it being the height of summer. Only Peekin didn't seem to be feeling the cold. Judging from the expression on his face, pure anger was keeping him warm.

Peekin eventually stopped at a large, weather-beaten sign, which read: 'Gripville City Limits. Strangers Get Lost!' Peekin kicked the sign and strode through into the village, which was little more than a collection of run-down cottages, surrounded by rusty farming machinery and old, rickety engines.

“Oi!” shouted a voice from behind them. “What’re you lot doin’ ‘ere?” Peekin stopped dead and slowly turned to face the owner of the voice. He was a squat little man, with narrow eyes in an overly large head. His fat stomach, swathed in a moth-eaten green jumper, hung over a thick brown belt and bright blue pants. He glared at Peekin and shook his fist at him.

“Gallipot” Peekin said quietly. “Where is he?”

“I’m not tellin’! You’re on Private Property, so sling yer hook!”

“TELL ME WHERE HE IS, NOW!” Peekin yelled. The little man took a step back in surprise.

“Alright, alright, keep yer hair on, mate!” he said hastily. “is ‘ouse is third on yer right, past that plough.”

Peekin strode off in the direction of the house, Daniel and Barnaby following behind, looking around as they walked. The entire place looked as if it should have been condemned long ago. Corroded, long discarded oddments, clapped-out machinery and several unidentifiable bits of warped and tarnished metal, were scattered in between the houses and along the little path. A long line of broken, rusty looking spikes had been hastily erected next to the Mountain, seemingly in an attempt to ward off another attack by poisonous spiders. The spikes looked far too much past it to be of any use at all, however. Even a one legged spider would have been able to climb over with ease.

As they reached the cottage, which was one of the most dilapidated in Gripville, they could hear loud hammering and various choice swear words drifting towards them.

“Pinvin! Stand still! I don’t care how ‘ungry you are; no food ‘til me roof’s fixed!” Peekin increased his speed and dashed to the back of the house. There, he found a little man with a large, bald head and huge, ill fitting navy blue overalls, which were smeared with paint and grime. He was standing on a small footstool, his hands on his hips, while he looked at his roof. Pinvin was nowhere to be seen.

“Gallipot! Remember me?” hissed Peekin, pulling him down from the footstool. Gallipot fell backwards onto the grass, too shocked to move and still holding the hammer. Barnaby jumped away in terror and stared down at the little man. “What did they pay you to betray him, Gallipot?” Peekin whispered, standing over the cowering Grip. “Two rusty wheelbarrows? A couple of broken old plates?” Gallipot stared up at him in shock. From somewhere in the roof came a muffled squeak.

“O!” shouted Gallipot, who had eventually found his voice. “What do you think you’re doin’, Peekin? I paid me village tax, like you said. I was only a day late.” He suddenly frowned, counting on his stubby fingers. “Well, eight, actually but it’s bin paid! No need to get narky.” Peekin grabbed hold of Gallipot’s navy blue overalls and hauled him

to his feet, then commenced shaking him vigorously.

“Oï!” Gallipot repeated, trying to sound indignant, while his teeth rattled. “Why’s everyone doin’ that to me lately?”

“If you don’t give me some answers, you and all your repellent kinfolk are going to be forcibly removed from your pathetic excuse of a village by nightfall,” said Peekin, his face red with anger. He stopped shaking Gallipot and flung him towards the footstool. Gallipot sat down heavily. He looked confused and a little scared. “I found your cart,” said Peekin, his voice low and menacing, “and its contents.” Gallipot’s face brightened.

“‘Ave yer?” he said, smiling in happiness. “Can we ‘ave it back, then? Some of that stuff’s worth sellin’.” Peekin stared at him in astonishment.

“Have you *no* shame?” he said. “You’re happy to let our side of Allapatia get taken over by evil, aren’t you? Do you know what you’ve done? You really don’t care about us at all, do you? Or Paris.”

“im?” Gallipot spat on the ground. From somewhere in the roof, came the sound of another, more muffled spit. “ee stole our cart, the miserable, good for nothing...oï!” Peekin began to shake him again.

“Don’t you *dare* speak in that way about Paris! How could you steal his bow and leave him defenceless?”

“What?” Gallipot shook his head and tried to push Peekin away. “You’ve gone mental, ” he said. “I’ve never stole nothin’ off

Paris. 'ee stole off us, though. Stole our cart. It's got a good saw in there, too; I could do with that now, actually. Where is the cart?"

"On my land, where you left it," said Peekin, shaking in rage. "What were you going to do, come back for it when all the fuss had died down? Think I wouldn't find it because I was away from my cottage? Well, guess what? I did. I found Paris's bow under all your rubbish."

"Peekin, you're not makin' any sense," said Gallipot, rubbing his piggy eyes wearily. "I don't know nothin' about no bow. Paris robbed our cart. That's *all* I know. A man we met in the pub told us Paris 'ad robbed it and we would be able to get it off Paris if we went to Cedar Hill before Midnight. So we did. But we was late gettin' there 'cos Pinvin 'ere fell into a ditch." At this, there was an indignant, muffled squeak. Daniel curiously went round to the side of the house and looked for the source of the sound. There, to his surprise, was a little man with large, bright blue eyes and a shock of blond hair, standing with his head in the eaves of Gallipot's roof.

"Er, are you Pinvin?" Daniel asked doubtfully. Pinvin nodded in delight and made an incoherent sound. He appeared to be actually holding the roof up with his large head. Pinvin tried to smile at Daniel but was prevented from doing so, due to a row of large, extremely rusty looking nails, which were clamped between his teeth. Instead, he waved merrily at Daniel, who just stared at him in surprise. Gallipot and Peekin,

meanwhile, were still arguing, Barnaby watching and looking increasingly worried.

“Anyway, this fella was on Cedar ‘ill when we got there and ‘ee said us in the Grip Battering Squad was going to be a diversion but we’d got there too late. He even said Paris hadn’t stole our cart after all but we didn’t believe ‘im ‘cos ‘eed already told us that Paris’d stole it. But we’d only gone there to get our cart back. We didn’t care about no Battle.”

“What?” said Peekin, looking confused. “What man?” Gallipot shrugged.

“Dunno,” he said, “couldn’t see ‘is face in the pub. It’s always dark in the Gripville Arms, see. ‘ee was wearin’ a black cloak. ‘ee was tall and ‘ee ‘ad a deep voice. That’s all I know. When we met ‘im on the ‘ill, ‘ee said ‘eed got to the Battle too late ‘imself, too. Belted me for criticisin’ Shadow, as well.”

“Nuttall,” said Peekin and Daniel together, while Barnaby stared at them, looking confused and Pinvin muttered something that no one could make out.

“But why would Nuttall want to stop the Battle taking place?” asked Daniel. Peekin shook his head, frowning.

“Maybe he wanted to delay proceedings,” he said. “Nuttall would want to make sure he gave himself plenty of time to get from the school to the Battleground, when he stole the key.” He turned back to Gallipot and glared at him. “It still doesn’t explain how the bow and quiver came to be in your cart!”

“Look,” said Gallipot patiently, “we don’t know nothin’ about no bow. We just want our cart back. The fella said Paris” – Gallipot and Pinvin spat in stereo – “ad stole it. That’s all I know.”

“Maybe Nuttall stole the cart deliberately, left it in your field and then told the Grips that it was Paris who had stolen it and where to find him,” said Daniel, grabbing hold of Peekin.

“Hmm, maybe,” said Peekin, scratching his chin. “Gabriel left the bow in my field while he went to check on Paris, leaving the bow unattended. Perhaps Nuttall waited until Gabriel went to investigate, then stole Paris’s bow and put it in the Grip cart. That way, Nuttall wouldn’t be caught with the bow. He would only have to take it into the next field, where he had left the cart. Nuttall would expect the Grips to come looking for the cart, especially if he told them exactly where to find Paris.” Gallipot nodded vigorously.

“We all wondered why Paris would want our cart. Didn’t make sense, that.” There came a muffled “no” from the rafters. “We liked Paris; ‘ee used to come into the Gripville Arms sometimes and buy us drinks, when we was a bit short. We wouldn’t steal off ‘im.” Peekin was staring intently at Gallipot.

“You’re *sure* you didn’t steal the bow?” he demanded. “Because if I find you’ve lied to me, your life won’t be worth living. I swear I’ll send you over the Mountains myself.”

“Peekin, for the last time – no.” Peekin gazed into Gallipot’s piggy eyes for a few seconds, then nodded.

“I believe you,” he said, motioning to Barnaby and Daniel. “Sorry to have bothered you, Gallipot,” he said breezily and began to walk towards the front of the house. “Send someone for your cart soon, won’t you? It’s cluttering up my outhouse.” The trio walked past Pinvin who was frantically trying to mumble something.

“If you don’t have any need for Paris’s bow, we could take it off yer ‘ands,” called out Gallipot, looking hopeful.

“Don’t push it,” shouted Peekin grimly as he strode away. “Oh and incidentally, I’ll be fining you for late payment of your taxes, too.” A string of expletives drifted into the afternoon air.

CHAPTER 29

“Do you really believe that it was Nuttall who stole the Grip cart and Paris’s bow?” asked Daniel, as they trudged for home. Peekin nodded.

“We’re all pretty sure that Nuttall stole Paris’s weapon. It would make sense that Nuttall would want to delay the Battle, in case he was late getting there, after trying to get the key to the Half Stone room at the school. Nuttall would want to leave Paris defenceless while he went for the Half Stone key, to make sure that Paris wouldn’t be able to attack Shadow in his absence. Everyone knows Grips are possessive with their things, you see, so, if Nuttall had stolen the cart, blamed it on Paris and told the Grips where Paris would be that night, Nuttall would know that the Grips would come looking. Nuttall was Paris’s History teacher at Eponymous Hildegarde and he always disliked Paris, so I imagine he’d want to make sure that he didn’t arrive too late to see him killed. In delaying the Battle by using the Grips as a distraction, Nuttall could ensure he didn’t miss a thing. I suppose Nuttall expected that the Grips would storm onto the Battleground and attack Paris, which would hold up the Battle long enough for him to get

there. Except his plan backfired. The Grips were as late arriving on Cedar Hill as Nuttall was. He also didn't get to the Half Stone."

Barnaby had been trying to keep up with the conversation between Peekin and Daniel but got confused very quickly. He amused himself instead by picking wild flowers as they walked along. It was very pleasant in the sun. Now that they were out of the shadow of Skylac Mountain, the temperature had warmed up considerably. Barnaby was trundling several metres from Peekin and Daniel, who were deep in conversation and not paying any attention to him, when Barnaby suddenly let out a terrified squeak, then was silent.

"What's wrong, Barnaby?" sighed Peekin. He turned round. Barnaby was nowhere to be seen.

"I'll look back the way we came," shouted Daniel but Peekin grabbed his arm.

"It could be a trick," he said, looking around warily. "Stay with me. I don't want you out of my sight." Together, they walked back, shouting for Barnaby and desperately searching for him. Daniel suddenly let out a yell.

"I think he fell down here – look." To the right of where Daniel was standing, was an enormous hole.

"Keep back!" warned Peekin, as Daniel leaned over to get a better look. .

Suddenly, there came a loud rumbling from below their feet. "Oh no," said Peekin faintly, as the ground unexpectedly gave way.

They began to fall, their arms and legs flailing madly. Daniel was constantly being hit in the face by something that felt like tree roots. He couldn't be sure, however, because they were falling in pitch darkness. There was an overwhelming smell of soil and mulch that was making him gag. Daniel tried to gain a foothold on something – *anything* but the ground was simply crumbling beneath his feet. Each time he jammed his trainers into the earth, it gave way even faster. He heard Peekin begin to choke and cough madly.

“Worm!” he shouted, sounding hysterical. “Just swallowed a worm!”

Daniel couldn't believe that they were still falling. Surely, no one could survive this. He closed his eyes and tried to prepare himself for the worst, which could only be milliseconds away. Then, suddenly, the darkness became filled with a deafening, high-pitched screeching noise that sounded like brakes being applied, somewhere deep below them.

“Hold on!” bellowed Peekin and, almost immediately, he and Daniel came to a complete stop in the darkness. Daniel blinked in the dark, trying to make sense of what was going on. They were being held upright in mid air and bobbing around, like two corks in water. Daniel unexpectedly collided into something soft; something that gave a frightened cry. It was Barnaby. Daniel shouted to Peekin in relief, as Peekin pulled himself over to the frightened Barnaby and clobbered him, making Barnaby shout all the

more. "You idiot!" Peekin roared. "Look what you've got us into!"

"Peekin," said Daniel, sounding nervous, "what's going on?" Peekin seemed agitated and, by the sound of it, was attempting to find a way to climb back upwards.

"Don't like the sound of this," he said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. "You two – see if you can grab onto the walls and pull yourselves up."

They didn't get the chance. Directly below them in the darkness, came a sound like a rusty trapdoor being opened.

"Oh no," said Peekin weakly, as all three were pushed downwards by invisible hands. They landed in a heap, on a dusty, crumbly floor.

"Ow!" Barnaby yelled out in agony, falling hard against Daniel and holding his left eye.

"Sorry about that, Barnaby," muttered Peekin. "Thought my elbow hit something soft."

"Where is this?" asked Daniel in the darkness.

"Erm, this is a Double Room," said Peekin groaning.

"A what?" asked Daniel in surprise.

"A Double Room. One of Allapatria's more irritating quirks. Unsuspecting travellers like us, fall into them occasionally. There aren't any maps of them because they move around," Peekin said, musingly. "Oh and, incidentally, my abilities don't work in

Double Rooms and there isn't anything anyone up *there* could do to get us out of this, either. It's entirely up to us. Only the *very* unlucky get stuck in these forever, though, Daniel. No need to worry."

"WHAT?" yelled Daniel but Peekin was deep in thought.

"Ok, let's give it a try." He cleared his throat and said in a theatrical voice, "One really wishes that Barnaby was a few pounds LIGHTER!"

"That's a rotten thing to say, Peekin!" Barnaby shouted. "My mum..." There was a sudden flash and something small plopped onto the floor, between Barnaby and Peekin.

"*Aha!* Success!" shouted Peekin and scabbled about on the floor. "Gotcha!" he shouted in triumph. There were two small clicks and, suddenly, a flame appeared in the darkness. "Understand?" said Peekin grinning and hopping from leg to leg. "Say a word with a double meaning and the object appears! It only works once on each word, though – no point saying 'lighter' again because nothing will happen. Nevertheless, your wise Defardian Elf friend said 'lighter' and he got a lighter! Clever, eh? Ok, need to find a word with two meanings to get us out of here," he said, racking his brains. "Carefully does it, otherwise the Room will fill up with all kinds of strange things."

"Peekin," said Barnaby nervously. "My stomach's rumbling. Can I..." There were two bright flashes and a rusty can of beans and a large, slimy looking eye landed with a plop

next to Barnaby. Barnaby let out a yell of terror as he stared at the eye. It looked frighteningly real. Even Peekin edged back against the wall, looking distinctly nervous.

“Not another word, Barnaby,” said Peekin through gritted teeth.

“Sorry,” said Barnaby. “I promise to be...” Another flash and the sound of buzzing could be heard in the Double Room.

“Oh joy!” mocked Peekin. “There’s a *bee* to worry about now, too! Barnaby – SHUT UP!”

“Sorry,” Barnaby repeated and then fell silent. He began to rub his eye. Peekin’s sharp little elbow had really hurt him. “My eye’s still sore,” he whispered under his breath. Another flash and a saw clattered to the ground.

“Barnaby, NOT ANOTHER WORD!” Peekin yelled, jumping up and down in anger. “Who brought him?” he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

“No, hang on a minute, that could be useful,” said Daniel, grabbing hold of the saw. “How about sawing ourselves out of the room?”

“Oh, how about sawing ourselves out of the room?” mimicked Peekin, pulling faces at Daniel. “Please, be my guest!” He gave a sarcastic little bow. “Why take any notice of *me*? Try there.” He gestured to the wall, tutting then sat down on the floor, angrily wafting the bee away. “Honestly, I give us light: *nothing*. Barnaby gets a pathetic saw and you’re thrilled! Oh, clever Barnaby, ooh,

you'll save us! Why do I bother, eh? I should have let Meekin, that lazy dolt, take this job after all..." But Daniel and Barnaby were now ignoring Peekin and were on their hands and knees, eagerly looking for a point in the wall that looked weaker than the rest.

"Here!" shouted Barnaby in excitement, pointing to where a clod of earth had fallen out. The hole that was left went back several centimetres.

"Excellent!" said Daniel, grinning. He started to saw at the wall, the sounds of wet soil being sliced through mercifully drowning out Peekin's ranting. He was now explaining that he had never been understood, due to his quite unique intellect and huge brain.

"Peekin, bring that light over here," said Daniel irritably. "I can't see what I'm doing."

"Oh, so I'm your *servant* now, am I? Is there anything else, oh powerful one? Shall I cook a three-course meal, perhaps? Polish your boots?" Peekin glared at Daniel, then heaved himself up and brought the lighter over, positioning it close to where Daniel was working. Barnaby leaned towards the wall to check their progress. His face fell.

"Daniel," he said in a small voice, "the wall's filling in again." Daniel stared at the hole in disbelief. Barnaby was right; more soil was pushing its way out from the wall. As quick as he was sawing the soil away, more was appearing in its place.

"Is it? Now *there's* a surprise!" heckled Peekin, as Daniel despondently threw down the saw and slumped to the ground. "The

walls are enchanted, Daniel. Anyway, this room is fifty metres down. There's no way a saw can get us out." Daniel put his head in his hands and groaned.

"Peekin, what happens when the food's gone?" asked Barnaby piteously. Peekin looked into the bags that Mimosa had given to them. By the looks of things, Barnaby had become peckish on the way to Gripville and there were only three apples and a few sandwiches left.

"Nothing to worry about," said Peekin, his voice taking on a soothing tone. He grabbed hold of Barnaby's arm and squeezed it. "Daniel and I will turn cannibal. This arm alone should keep us going for a couple of days. *Daniel and I* will be fine," said Peekin, grinning nastily. Barnaby looked indignant.

"That's a mean thing to say!" he said. "I always get picked on! If I wasn't so well bred..."

"NO!" shouted Daniel and Peekin together.

Too late. There was another flash and a huge loaf of Best Farmhouse White Bread fell from the ceiling, flooring all three. The lighter immediately went out and, from under the thick crust, Peekin could be heard muttering angrily. He felt round the loaf until he found Barnaby's face, smacked it, then tore off a piece of bread and shoved it into Barnaby's mouth. While Barnaby tried to shout huffily and chew at the same time, Daniel and Peekin managed to heave the loaf into the corner of the room, leaving Barnaby, who

was still trying to struggle back up. Peekin, spying his chance, attempted what was, in his opinion, a long overdue and very well aimed kick at Barnaby's rear as got to his feet. Peekin's tongue was sticking out between his teeth in concentration and he was grinning like a maniac. Fortunately for Barnaby, however, Daniel spotted him just in time and grabbed hold of the Elf, pulling him out of the way. Peekin shouted in disappointment and satisfied himself with taunting Barnaby instead.

"Come on Peekin, this is getting serious now. We're running short on room," Daniel said, looking round and frowning. The combination of an eye, a can, a saw, a bee and a massive loaf meant that there was very little space. Peekin nodded and reached into his pocket for his pipe.

"At least there's food now," he said brightly. "Barnaby's stupidity has done us a favour. Ok, I'm thinking." He drew out the pipe and muttered to himself. Daniel gazed round the room for inspiration, his brain filled with jumbled words and phrases. He suddenly grinned and turned to Peekin.

"Think I may have something," he said, smiling.

"Go on then, only be *careful*," warned Peekin, putting his hands over his head, just in case. Daniel nodded and took a deep breath.

"I wish I could take a trip to the Isle of SKYE!" he said loudly. There was a sudden, large flash and the Double Room abruptly

shot upwards, pinning all three, plus bee and the other objects, onto the floor. The room accelerated faster and faster and then the same loud squealing of brakes filled their ears.

“Hold on!” shouted Peekin, panic in his voice. The ceiling suddenly gaped open, revealing the bright summer sky above. Sunlight poured in through the hole and the Double Room immediately came to a complete and total stop. A yelling Peekin, plus bee, were instantly catapulted out of the room. Daniel watched as Peekin’s tweed legs soared majestically over his head, his panicked cries becoming fainter and fainter, as he sailed towards the clouds.

“Right, our turn to leave now, I think,” said Daniel, scrambling up and beckoning Barnaby over. “Let me climb onto your shoulders. I’m going to get us out of here. *Don’t say a word*, ok, Barnaby?” Barnaby, looking worried, knelt down and Daniel scrabbled onto him. He shouted to Barnaby to stand up and, with some effort, Daniel heaved himself up towards the gaping hole, stretching his arms as far as they could reach. He was just able to grab hold of the grass and dug his fingers deep into the ground. With an enormous heave, he pulled himself up and, standing as tall as he could on Barnaby’s shoulders, scrambled out onto the field, laughing in relief. He stood up and began to scan the area for Peekin but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Daniel,” Barnaby called nervously and Daniel began to look round for something to help pull Barnaby out. After searching for a few minutes, he found some long green creepers, which had wrapped themselves tightly round a tree that was close to the Double Room. He uncoiled them and checked them for strength, hoping that they were neither poisonous, nor part of another weird Allapatrian trap that would send them hurtling into some other horrible place. The vines were woody and knotted and looked strong enough to withstand someone using them to climb up. Daniel shouted a warning to Barnaby and lowered them down, still calling out for Peekin as he did so. It took several minutes to convince the now panicking Barnaby that he wouldn’t be stuck in the Double Room for the rest of his days and to start climbing. Only threats to leave him there with the eye forced Barnaby into action.

“I *never* want to go through that again!” said Daniel, as Barnaby clambered out and collapsed on the grass. The Double Room gave a loud mechanical whistle and the ground closed over again, completely hiding the Room from sight.

“Okay,” said Daniel edgily, staring at the now innocent-looking patch of grass and daisies. “We need to find Peekin but, whatever you do, DON’T stand there, Barnaby!” Barnaby nodded his head, backing away. Daniel threw a few strands of the creeper over the ground, to mark the Double

Room, then began the search for Peekin, shouting his name and checking the scrubby grass for any signs of him but he seemed to have completely disappeared.

“Y-you don’t think he landed on top of another Double Room, do you Daniel?” Barnaby asked, sounding worried. “Sometimes they hang around in pairs.” Daniel’s heart sank.

“No, ‘course not,” he said, trying to reassure himself as much as Barnaby. “We’ll find him in a minute. Let’s try over here.” They walked towards a little copse but, after ten minutes of searching, there was still no Peekin. Then, just as Daniel was beginning to panic, they heard a low moan. “Over there!” Barnaby called, pointing towards a large sycamore tree several metres away. A tweed leg was hanging from the lowest branch. They raced towards the leg and found Peekin, lying spread-eagled, a large bump swelling nicely on his forehead. He pretended to ignore Daniel, as Daniel tried to persuade him out of the tree.

“Leave me here, I like it,” Peekin mumbled, groaning to himself. After several minutes of gentle coaxing, however, they managed to persuade Peekin to drop down into Daniel’s arms. Daniel gently set him back down on his feet and Peekin blinked blearily at them. “If you think I’m walking after that...” he said and motioned to Barnaby. “Congratulations, you’ve just volunteered to be my pack horse.” A protesting Barnaby was eventually pers-

uaded, with the threat of violence, to carry Peekin on his shoulders and the exhausted little party set off for home.

Well done for that, Daniel,” said Peekin, some time later. He was steering Barnaby, by tweaking his ears from left to right as they walked through Peekin’s furthest field. “Next time, give me more of a warning, though, eh? I’ll grab onto something heavy. Like Barnaby.” Ignoring Barnaby’s outraged response, Peekin shoved his heels in Barnaby’s side, in an attempt to speed him up. “I can’t wait to get home for a bit of peace,” Peekin said, sounding worn out. But peace was the last thing that was waiting for them when they got back.

CHAPTER 30

Around ten minutes later, the bedraggled trio finally saw the roof of Damson Cottage, with its gently smoking chimney.

“Hope Mimosa’s got the kettle on; I could do with a brew. I can still taste that worm,” said Peekin in disgust. “Then, after we’ve drunk that, we’re going to have to commence with your training, Daniel, tired as we are.” Daniel was too exhausted to do anything but nod his head.

“Peekin! Oh, thank goodness. Please come quickly!” It was Mimosa. She was running through the field towards them, her face white and tear-stained. “We don’t know what to do. He’s dying, Peekin.”

“What? Who’s dying?” Peekin asked, his eyes wide. He leaped from Barnaby’s back and ran to Mimosa, grasping hold of her gently, as she burst into tears.

“It’s Gabriel. Dick found him about twenty minutes ago. We think he’s been there since last night. He’s been attacked – it looks as if he was trying to crawl back to your cottage. Peekin, it may have been a Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf.” Her voice trailed off and she sobbed. Peekin lightly touched her arm and then raced towards the little lane that ran outside his cottage.

“Wait, I’ll come with you,” called Daniel and, leaving Mimosa with an extremely fatigued Barnaby, followed Peekin through the little gate at the corner of the field. They reached the lane and ran towards Dick and Clementine, who were kneeling next to a figure that was lying at the edge of the forest. Daniel gasped when he saw Gabriel. He seemed barely alive; in fact, he didn’t appear to be breathing. Gabriel was paler than Daniel had ever seen him, his features almost sunken. The left sleeve of his dark shirt had been roughly pulled up and there was a huge wound on his arm, behind his elbow. The skin was raw and bleeding and the flesh surrounding it was black. Dick Cleverley, for once, was not speaking into his voice recorder. He was looking extremely anxious. “Peekin, old chap,” he said, “we didn’t want to touch him, in case...” Clementine let out a sob and Peekin stared at the wound. He muttered to himself, then placed his head on Gabriel’s chest.

“This wasn’t a Black Ridge,” he said grimly. “I know who did this to him and it wasn’t a werewolf. Someone’s taken practically all of his life force. He’s been literally sapped of his energy. This was Nuttall’s work.” Gabriel’s eyes suddenly flickered open and he gazed at Peekin through unfocused eyes.

“Nuttall...punishing me for Daniel...he took too much.” His eyes closed again and his breathing became shallower.

“Right, we’ve got to hurry,” said Peekin, panic in his voice. He knelt down and, with the help of Dick, Daniel and Clementine, Gabriel was carefully carried into the cottage and up the stairs.

Barnaby and Mimosa were already in Gabriel’s room, Mimosa mixing tinctures in readiness. They gently laid Gabriel in the bed and Mimosa set to work cleaning and dressing his arm, while Peekin filled a teaspoon full of the crushed Orchid juice that Mimosa had brought for Daniel the previous day.

“We’re going to need plenty more of this,” he said, putting the teaspoon to Gabriel’s lips and watching as the liquid trickled into his mouth. “Even then, I don’t know if it will save him.”

“I’ll go and get some more,” Mimosa said and hurried out of the bedroom, close to tears. Peekin gave Gabriel the last of the Orchid juice in the bottle, then set the teaspoon down, looking fearfully at him and shaking his head.

“I thought he’d gone out early this morning,” Peekin murmured to himself. “I should have checked that he came back last night. I’m partly to blame for this. I should have realised Nuttall would want revenge.” Peekin looked round at Dick and Clementine, who were standing near the door.

“Go home, you two,” he said, sighing. “I’ll tell you if there’s any change. You’re both safer at home, anyway.” Neither seemed willing to leave. “He’ll be able to rest easier if

there aren't too many people around," Peekin insisted. "I'll let you know if anything changes, I promise." Dick and Clementine nodded reluctantly and slowly made their way downstairs.

"As for you two," Peekin looked at Daniel and Barnaby, suddenly looking every day of his three hundred and fifty eight years, "go and get some sword practice done. I'll let you know if anything changes," he repeated, eyeing Daniel, who had opened his mouth to argue. "Daniel, the best thing that you can do for Gabriel right now is to beat Shadow tomorrow." Gabriel muttered something in agitation, his head flailing on the pillow. "Go - I'll come and get you, I promise," said Peekin in distraction, as he turned to Gabriel. "Stay in the field closest to the cottage, though. You'll be safe there."

"Come on, Daniel," Barnaby wiped his eyes and gestured to him. They both trooped out of Gabriel's room. As Barnaby got to the door, he turned round and gazed desperately at Gabriel. "Please don't die; we need you." he whispered.

* * *

Two hours later, Peekin came into the field to meet Barnaby and Daniel, who were still practising. Peekin looked exhausted.

"That's much better, Daniel, really good," he called out, trying to smile. "You're holding the sword exactly right now."

“How’s Gabriel?” they asked together, crowding round Peekin.

“He’s still alive but only just. We nearly lost him about half an hour ago but he rallied and he’s sleeping now. Mimosa’s just gone home for more Orchid juice and to let Dick and Clementine know. Gabriel’s still very weak. If he lasts the night, then Mimosa thinks he might live.” Daniel and Barnaby nodded, concern etched on their faces. “Come and have something to eat now, you two.” Peekin made his way back to the cottage, followed by Daniel and Barnaby. “What a day, eh?” he said, shakily, going into the kitchen and opening the larder. The shelves were packed to capacity with practically every kind of food imaginable. “Mimosa and Dick have done us proud,” he said, looking at the mounds of food. “Have anything you like, then carry on practising. I’ll be in my study if you need me.”

“Aren’t you having anything?” Daniel asked, as Barnaby brought out a plate of cold meats and a large chocolate cake. Peekin shook his head as he left the kitchen and slowly walked down the hallway.

“Maybe later,” he said. “Don’t take too long with your meal, I’ll come and supervise in an hour or so.”

Peekin unlocked his study and sat heavily in his leather chair. He lit his pipe and stared out of the window in desperation. Everything was unravelling. Gabriel was mortally wounded and, despite Daniel’s improvements, he was still a long way off

from being an excellent swordsman. There was no realistic chance of him beating Shadow and, if he failed...Peekin shook his head sadly. Daniel was a little over twenty-four hours away from a Battle that he would not win. Allapatria was in danger of being taken over by an evil force and there was nothing Peekin could do about it. He had failed. There was something he was missing, something connected with Daniel but Peekin didn't know what and he was running out of time in which to find out.

Peekin put his head in his hands and sighed, just as the garden gate creaked open. He lifted his head and moaned, as Pixie scampered up the garden path, proudly holding a new but still mouldy looking twig in front of her. This time, she was wearing bright orange luminous pants, tucked into her large green wellies. They clashed rather revoltingly with the bright pink leotard and pink tutu that she was wearing over the pants. She spotted Peekin through the window and called out to him.

"Peekin, Pixie wants dinner! Don't make Pixie sing the Peekin song!" She stood still and pointed the mouldy twig at Peekin, gazing at him balefully through the window. Something in Peekin's face must have warned her that he was in no mood for games, however and, totally uncharacteristically, Pixie simply glared at Peekin, jabbed her twig at him and turned round to leave. She scampered back down the path and tried to pull open the garden gate. It

stuck fast. Pixie tried screaming at it, kicking it with her oversized wellies and finally shaking magic twig at the disobedient gate. It refused to budge.

“Oh, for the thousandth time – *lift the latch*, you half-wit,” muttered Peekin in distraction. “It’s not difficult.” But Pixie didn’t hear him.

“Stinky gate!” she shouted, trying to clamber over it. One of her wellies fell off and she screamed even harder. “Peekin!” she shrieked. “Gate broke! Peekin call the fixer man!” Peekin suddenly opened his eyes wide and dropped his pipe on his knee.

“Oh my word,” he whispered hoarsely, as his trousers began to smoke. “Pixie’s just explained everything.”

CHAPTER 31

Peekin dashed out of his study and ran full-tilt down the hallway, flinging open the front door. He hurled himself at the gate, just as Pixie finally managed to clamber over. She gazed at him in horror and tried to make a run for it but tripped over her fallen wellie. Peekin leaned over the gate, grabbed hold of the screeching Pixie and elfhandled her back over the gate and into the cottage. Pixie tried to kick him with her remaining wellie, while he carried her through to the kitchen but Peekin was holding her at arms length and she only succeeded in kicking the wall.

Daniel and Barnaby were just finishing their meal and looked up in surprise at the bizarre spectacle of the now hysterical Pixie being shoved unwillingly through the kitchen door, by a beaming Peekin. Peekin sat her in the chair, pinning her down with one hand, while cutting the largest piece of chocolate cake that even Barnaby had ever seen, with the other. He presented it to Pixie with a low bow, then went into the pantry and came out with a flagon of blackcurrant cordial and a large goblet.

“All for you and anything else you’d care to eat or drink,” he said, grinning. Daniel and Barnaby stared from Peekin to

Pixie in shock. Pixie picked up the chocolate cake and sniffed it suspiciously.

“This got Pixicide spray in?” she asked, pursing up her lips and glaring at Peekin, while she threatened him with magic twig.

“No, you wonderfully irritating Folklore creature and please feel free to sing as many verses of the Peekin song as you can remember, if you so desire!”

“You mental!” shouted Pixie but poured herself a gobletful of blackcurrant cordial anyway and downed it in one. She made a start on the cake, then stole a sausage from Barnaby’s plate, glaring at him threateningly as she did so and sticking magic twig up his nose.

“Stay as long as you like, Pixie!” called a joyful Peekin and made his way back to his study.

“Er, we’ll go back and practise now, Peekin,” said Daniel, frowning at Peekin’s retreating back. “What does he put in his pipe?” he muttered to Barnaby out of the corner of his mouth. Barnaby shrugged, rubbing his smarting nose.

“Yes, yes, good idea, you two!” Peekin trilled and shut the study door. Once inside, he hugged himself with glee and selected the shabbiest, most ancient book on his shelf. “I’ve been so stupid,” he said happily, as he opened the book, turning to the very back.

CHAPTER 32

Peekin was up with the larks the next day. He had hardly slept a wink and had divided the night between reading his ancient tome and sitting with Mimosa in Gabriel's room. At around two o'clock, Pixie had finally staggered out of the cottage between the two frogs that Peekin had summoned to take her home. By then, she had drunk the entire flagon of blackcurrant cordial and eaten at least twice her own body weight in sausages, pies and cakes. Peekin's generosity had finally worn off, when Pixie started hurling her wellie at the study door, demanding more cordial.

By morning, Gabriel had some of his colour back but was still dangerously ill. Mimosa continued to feed him the crushed Orchid juice every hour and he began to show signs of regaining consciousness by dawn. He had suffered terrible dreams throughout the night, however, which seemed to drain him further.

Daniel and Barnaby had continued to train until evening began to fall. Peekin had anxiously called them in once the light began to fade, for fear of Nuttall returning.

However, when Peekin wandered into the kitchen at seven o'clock, to make

breakfast for himself and Mimosa, he saw Daniel outside in the morning mist, already practising with the sword. Peekin smiled wearily and went out to him.

“What time did you wake up?” he asked, standing on tiptoe and ruffling Daniel’s hair.

“I haven’t really slept at all,” Daniel said, his face showing signs of worry and fatigue. “I kept hearing thunder last night.” Peekin nodded.

“The thunder and lightning increases the closer we get to a Battle.” Peekin suddenly smiled to himself.

“Peekin, how can you be happy this morning?” Daniel asked in confusion. “You haven’t forgotten what’s going to happen at Midnight tonight, have you?”

“No!” said Peekin, scornfully. “It’s just that things are looking more positive this morning, that’s all.”

“Er, right,” said Daniel and frowned at Peekin. He wondered whether he should think about hiding Peekin’s pipe in future.

“Oh, it’s no use, I can’t keep it to myself,” said Peekin gleefully. He grabbed hold of Daniel and hugged him hard.

“Do you know why you’re here?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Daniel slowly, “I’m here to fight a Battle tonight, remember?” Daniel was beginning to wonder whether the bump on Peekin’s head had turned him funny.

“You’re the first of your kind for – well, it never even happened in my Uncle Hekk’s

time!” said Peekin. “It was only ever in prophecy and no one really believes those! I remember one prediction that said that it would snow coconut ice in Yule Town on 22nd May 1804 and I waited there all day...er, anyway, you don’t want to hear about that,” he said hastily, his cheeks turning red. “This prophecy is only mentioned in one book and it was generally ignored because it’s very complicated and was written by someone who went mad. Oh, I’m going to be famous!” he said jumping in the air. “We, er, I mean *we* are going to be famous!” Peekin corrected, grinning quickly. “Daniel, you’re a Fixer.”

“A what?” said Daniel.

“A Fixer! Look, do you speak Elfish?” Daniel shook his head in astonishment. “Well, there’s no point showing you the book then, it would just look like nonsense to you. To be honest, most of the book looks like nonsense at the best of times. ‘Fixer’ is the best translation that I can think of. Ok, let me explain,” he said, looking at Daniel’s confused face. “You, my wonderful, *wonderful* boy, are here to give us a chance to put everything right! Allapatria itself seems to be telling us that a terrible misdeed occurred at the last Battle. The moon only turns red in times of great wrong and it’s never happened in my lifetime. The other side cheated to win, giving them an unfair advantage. They also lied and tried to steal the key to the Half Stone. According to the book, you’re here...now, how did he put it? Oh yes, to put right what should never have been. That’s

why we're fighting at Regna's Hill tonight, I think. It's more significant than I realised. It symbolises a new beginning because it's where the largest convergence of ley lines is and also where the Opal Moonstone was divided. Everything has come back to the beginning! It's no coincidence that you're to fight there. The only thing that doesn't fit is that you should, by rights, come from an ancient family, who know all about Allapatria. However, no Greens have ever been linked to Allapatria. So that's odd but of no real consequence. Daniel, there's something about you, something that's very, very powerful. Oh this is so *exciting!*" Peekin shouted.

"How does it effect the Battle tonight, though?" asked Daniel. He had been listening in amazement to Peekin's enthusiastic outburst and was pretty confused. "Do I still have to fight Shadow?" He allowed himself to consider how wonderful it would be, to not have to go to the Battle after all.

"Oh yes," said Peekin, nodding. "You still have to fight." Daniel's heart sank.

"But, when the two Warriors tried to fight on Regna's Hill eight hundred years ago, you said that something strange happened there." Daniel suddenly grabbed Peekin's arm in excitement. "Peekin, maybe they were Fixers too! Maybe this means that Shadow won't be able to attack me!"

"Maybe," Peekin mused, looking thoughtful. "Although there was nothing in the ancient texts about the two Warriors

being Fixers and I think that there would have been if they were. I honestly don't know what's going to happen. Regna's Hill has powers that none of us understand. It has the Defardian Council completely stumped, I'm afraid. All we're sure of is that you're a Fixer. I contacted them with my findings late last night and they're all in agreement with me about that. This is truly a monumental day for Allapatia! The Defardian Council can hardly believe it! "

"But how am I going to fix everything, if I don't know how?" asked Daniel irritably. Peekin grinned.

"I don't know," he said. "That's the thing! The book doesn't say but it's going to be fun finding out!"

"Yeah, for you, maybe," said Daniel, kicking the grass with his toe. "*I'm* still the one that's going to have to face Shadow tonight."

"Oi! Anyone 'ome?" They both turned in surprise towards the direction of the voice. Peekin gazed through the morning mist at a little figure trundling towards them. It was Pinvin the Grip. He was wearing a black woolly hat, with a red woolly jumper, riddled with holes and grubby brown leather chaps and boots. He spotted Peekin and hurried towards him. "Come for the cart," he said, grinning and waving frantically at Daniel. Pinvin's large head still seemed rather flat from where he had been holding up Gallipot's roof the previous day. "Can I 'ave it, please, only Gallipot wants the saw." He smiled

broadly at Peekin and gazed up at him with large blue eyes.

“About *flaming* time; I was going to start charging rent,” said Peekin huffily.

“Gallipot gave me a list of what was in it,” said Pinvin, pulling a long, dirty piece of paper out from under his hat. “He wants me to check you’ve not robbed ‘im.” Peekin gave Pinvin a look that would have curdled custard. He swiftly scanned the list over Pinvin’s head and, muttering indignantly, took out a fountain pen from his waistcoat pocket. He grabbed the list, scribbling off the words, ‘Paris’s Bow, ‘cos it was in me cart, so it’s mine’, which was written at the bottom in Gallipot’s squat little hand.

“And by the way,” said Pinvin, tugging furiously on Daniel’s sleeve, “I *didn’t* fall in the ditch like Gallipot said. Padstock pushed me.”

“What?” said Daniel, staring down at Pinvin in surprise. Pinvin opened his large eyes wider and gestured towards Peekin’s cottage.

“So you can tell ‘im. That’s why we was late! You can tell your friend it wasn’t my fault we didn’t get to Cedar Hill on time. Don’t want ‘im findin’ me ‘ere and smacking me around like ‘ee did to Gallipot.” Pinvin glanced nervously towards the cottage, as Peekin looked up from the list and glared at him.

“Nuttall is no friend of mine,” he said, his eyes flashing in anger, “and I can assure you that he’s nowhere near this place.”

“No, not Nuttall! I’m talkin’ about ‘im what we met on the Battleground. I tried to tell you yesterday but I ‘ad nails in me mouth.”

“You met *Nuttall* on the Battleground, we established that yesterday, remember?” said Peekin, trying to remain patient. “Nuttall stole your cart and left it in my field with Paris’s bow hidden inside it. He met you in the Gripville Arms and told you where you’d find Paris.” Pinvin shook his large, flat head violently.

“No, it was *Gaybee* what we met in the Gripville Arms! Gallipot always uses me head as a footstool in the pub and I could see Gaybee’s face behind the hooded cloak ‘ee was wearin’ when I looked up. We met Gaybee.”

“*Gaybee?*” said Peekin in disbelief. “That mad gnome that lives next door to Dick Cleverley? He’s smaller than Pixie *and* he’s got a wooden leg! He couldn’t move your cart to my fields, even if he tried! You met someone tall, with a deep voice. Do you remember now, my flat headed little friend?” Pinvin nodded his flat head even more violently.

“I know; we met Gaybee! Gaybee reel!”

“Oh, you’re not making any sense,” said Peekin, throwing the list at Pinvin. He turned his back on the little Grip and prepared to go inside, calling out to Daniel to keep practising. Daniel, however, was standing frozen to the spot. He stared hard at Pinvin.

Something was wrong. Something at the back of his mind was nagging at him.

“Who did you meet, Pinvin?” he asked urgently. “What did you say his name was?” Pinvin tutted in impatience.

“Gaybee reel! ‘im what’s Prince! He said Paris stole our cart!”

“*Gabriel?*” said Daniel wide-eyed. Peekin stopped dead. He slowly turned round and faced Pinvin, who was nodding and smiling happily.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Peekin said in a curt voice. “And I’ll thank you not to spread such vicious untruths, or you’ll find yourself up before the High Council, faster than you can say dirty rotten liar.”

“I’m not lyin’!” said Pinvin, looking indignant. “I tried to tell you yesterday, like I said.” Peekin walked back to Pinvin and gazed into his eyes, the frown lines on his forehead deepening. It was several moments before he spoke.

“This is very hard to believe, Pinvin,” he said finally. “You’re telling me that Gabriel informed you that Paris stole your cart?” Pinvin nodded again. “You’re sure, now?” Peekin asked, swallowing hard. “Gabriel Arc’Allatain met you all in the Gripville Arms?”

“Yep,” said Pinvin, cheerfully. “He said to meet ‘im at Midnight on Cedar ‘ill and, when we was late, he said we was meant to be a distraction, to give ‘im more time. Gaybee reel got really mad when Gallipot criticised Shadow. Gaybee reel battered

Gallipot when Gallipot said he wanted Shadow dead!”

“No,” said Peekin quietly, “you’re wrong. Why would Gabriel be mad at someone who criticised Shadow? Shadow killed Malthus and Paris. Gabriel hates Shadow.” Pinvin shrugged.

“Didn’t sound like it to me. *And* he said never to bad mouth Shadow while he was there.” Pinvin looked around the field. “Can I ‘ave our cart now, please?”

“Peekin!” Mimosa came rushing out of the kitchen door. “Gabriel’s awake! I think the worst is over!” Peekin muttered to Mimosa to show Pinvin where the cart was kept and wandered distractedly into the cottage, Daniel behind him.

“Why would Gabriel defend Shadow?” Peekin muttered, frowning in agitation, as he walked down the long hallway. “I can’t think of a single reason why he would want to do that. Unless...” He shook his head and began to climb the stairs. “This *has* to be a mistake. Grips aren’t exactly reliable and Gabriel wouldn’t...he isn’t...but there’s the bow in the Grip cart and Gabriel was the last person to see it. It never made sense to me that he would leave Paris’s bow unattended like that. He knew how risky that would be, even in my fields...but he wouldn’t, not to Paris. Paris was his best friend.”

Peekin halted outside Gabriel’s room. He took a deep breath, then opened the door. Daniel followed him into the room, his heart racing. They found Gabriel sitting up in bed

and leaning on a mound of pillows. His lined face lit up when he saw Peekin and Daniel.

“How are you feeling?” Peekin asked, trying to keep his voice even.

“Better,” said Gabriel weakly. “My arm’s still sore and Mimosa’s gone for more of her crushed Orchid juice. I won’t need anymore now, though. I’m thinking of getting up, actually, I’ve a lot to do. I need to be ready for tonight.” He flashed a quick ghost of a smile to Daniel. “We all do. I can’t miss the Battle.” Peekin watched him carefully.

“No, no, of course not.” Peekin walked towards the bed. “You wouldn’t want to miss a moment of it. Especially as Daniel has improved dramatically in the last twenty-four hours.” Gabriel swiftly turned towards Daniel. He stared at him, a stunned expression on his face, which was quickly replaced with a smile.

“Really?” he said, his eyes never leaving Daniel’s face. “That’s wonderful, Daniel.” Daniel looked at Peekin, beginning to feel uneasy.

“Thought you’d be pleased, Gabriel,” said Peekin smoothly. “In fact, I think Shadow has met his match; Shadow doesn’t stand a chance at all. We discovered a latent talent in Daniel last night, you see: Daniel is actually an excellent swordsman. That must have been why Allapatria chose him. We’re going to win. He’s going to kill Shadow.” Peekin stared at Gabriel, watching his reaction. Daniel swallowed hard. There was something in Peekin’s eyes, something that

Daniel instinctively knew meant that Peekin was on his guard.

"That's wonderful," Gabriel repeated hoarsely, attempting to get out of bed. "I'd like to watch you train if I may, Daniel."

"Wait, stay there a moment," said Peekin. "I'd like to talk to you. Daniel and I just met a friend of yours." Gabriel looked surprised.

"Oh?" he said. "Who?"

"Pinvin," said Peekin. Daniel held his breath but Gabriel just frowned and shook his head.

"I don't remember the name," he said. "How does he know me?" Peekin sat next to Gabriel and stared into his eyes.

"He's a Grip," he said, watching Gabriel's reaction. "In fact, he's in the Grip Battering Squad." Gabriel inhaled sharply, his hands briefly clutching at the bedclothes.

"Ah, I see you *do* remember him now," Peekin looked sad for a moment. "I was rather hoping Pinvin had made a mistake. You know how Grips are."

Peekin got down from the bed and began to pace the room, his hands behind his back. "It seems he knows you rather well, Gabriel. Apparently, you met the Grip Battering Squad in the Gripville Arms and told them Paris had stolen their cart. We were under the impression that it had been Nuttall, you see, Daniel and I." Peekin looked closely at Gabriel. "Do you deny meeting the Grips at the Gripville Arms?" Gabriel stared back at him. He shook his head. Daniel could

see the amount of effort that it was taking Peekin to remain calm. His hands kept balling into fists. "Apparently, you told them that Paris stole their cart and that they would find him on Cedar Hill that night, the night of the Battle. When they were late, you told the Grips that they were meant to be a distraction. Is that true?" Gabriel sat motionless, staring at the floor. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"I see," said Peekin. His head was down. "Now, we come to a rather more damning piece of information." Peekin took a deep breath. "Pinvin told us that Gallipot criticised Shadow in your presence," he looked up, "and that you attacked Gallipot for what he said. It appears that you told Gallipot never to criticise Shadow again. In essence, you defended Shadow, the individual that had just killed your best friend." Peekin paused. "Is that true, Gabriel?"

"Please say no, please say no," whispered Daniel urgently. He stared hard at Gabriel, suddenly feeling that everything he had come to trust in the last few days had just been turned upside down. Gabriel turned to Peekin.

"Yes, it is true," he said. Daniel gasped. Peekin gave Gabriel a look that was hard to interpret. It was a combination of sadness, anger and utter betrayal.

"I'm struggling to think of a rational explanation as to why you would do such a thing," said Peekin, looking away and trying to keep his voice even. "Perhaps you will

enlighten me. Unfortunately, at the moment, I can only think of one reason. ” He turned to face Gabriel again. “Did you steal the Grip cart?” Peekin asked, pacing the room once more. “Gabriel – I can hardly believe that I am asking this question,” Peekin said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Gabriel, did *you* steal Paris’s bow?” Gabriel watched Peekin for a long time.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I can’t deny any of it. It’s all true.” Peekin’s eyes darkened.

“You’re a traitor,” he whispered. Gabriel smiled slightly and nodded.

“Yes, I am,” he said in hushed tones.

“No!” Daniel ran to Gabriel, grabbing hold of his shoulder and shaking him. “Tell him it isn’t true, Gabriel! Pinvin got it wrong, didn’t he? It was Nuttall, not you! Nuttall did it!” Daniel shook him again. Gabriel reached up and squeezed Daniel’s hand.

“No, Daniel. Peekin’s right. It was I.” Daniel’s eyes clouded with anger.

“You let Paris die!” he shouted in astonishment. He hardened his grip on Gabriel’s shoulder. “How could you do that?” Peekin nodded slowly.

“That’s something that I’m having difficulty with, myself,” said Peekin. He suddenly looked extremely tired. “What could anyone give you that would make you do such a thing? You effectively rule half of Allapatria, so it can’t have been wealth or power.” Peekin stopped dead. “Unless they promised that you could rule the other half as well. Was that it?” he demanded. “Did they

promise that you could rule *all* Allapatria, once the two Half Stones were joined together again and they had taken over?" Gabriel shook his head.

"You're going to have to help me, then, Gabriel," said Peekin softly, "because I'm at a loss to understand what would be worth killing your best friend and jeopardising Allapatria for. Paris promised to avenge the death of your family. He was totally loyal to you; the best friend anyone could have. You left him with no means of defending himself on Cedar Hill. You led him to certain death." Gabriel's mouth moved soundlessly. He looked down.

"You betrayed us, Gabriel. I let you live here, in *my* cottage, while you and Paris prepared for the Battle and, all the time, you were plotting his betrayal. You knew he would beat Shadow, didn't you?" Peekin suddenly gasped, his eyes widening in shock. "That's it, isn't it? That's why you stole the weapon. Because you didn't want Shadow to die." Gabriel slowly turned to Peekin and gazed at him for a few moments. Then, he nodded.

"No!" shouted Daniel, flying at Gabriel again. Gabriel looked away from him, his lips white. "Tell him it's a lie, Gabriel! You saved my life! You stopped Nuttall from killing me! If you really were a traitor, you wouldn't have done that." Gabriel smiled.

"I am a traitor," he said. "I knew Paris would kill Shadow and I couldn't allow that

to happen. Just as I can't allow you to kill Shadow tonight, Daniel. I'm sorry."

"No," whispered Daniel in horror.

"I took Paris's weapon because he was the best Warrior I'd ever seen. Shadow didn't stand a chance against him, no matter how many modified weapons were used." Gabriel turned to Peekin, who was staring at him with a mixture of sadness and anger in his eyes. "Everything you said is true, Peekin," he said. "I did betray Paris and I did steal his weapon, to stop him killing Shadow. I stole the Grip cart and I attacked Gallipot for criticising Shadow." Gabriel stared boldly at Peekin. "I will do *anything* to protect Shadow. I will die for Shadow, if necessary."

"You're insane," said Peekin in disbelief. Gabriel laughed quietly.

"Sometimes I think I am," he said. "My life has been hellish for a long time now. Actually, I'm almost glad that you found out, Peekin. I'm relieved that I no longer have to hide my true feelings. I will *not* allow Shadow to be harmed. The bond between us is too strong to break, even now."

"I've heard enough," said Peekin in horror. He turned to leave, gently pulling Daniel towards the doorway. As he got to the door, he turned and gazed at Gabriel in desolation.

"*Why*, Gabriel?" he said numbly. "You owe me an explanation at least. Why are you protecting Shadow?" Gabriel smiled sadly, as a tear sparkled on his pale cheek.

“Because I love Shadow and I always will. Shadow is my sister. Shadow is Giselle.”

CHAPTER 33

Gabriel's body began to shake, as Peekin stared at him in disbelief.

"You *are* insane," sighed Peekin, wearily rubbing a hand over his eyes. "You've betrayed Allapatria and Daniel's world for a delusion. Gabriel, you know as well as I that Giselle was murdered at the same time as your mother and father, five years ago. Your brother died trying to protect her. I know her body was never identified but, after the attack on the Castle, very few people were." Gabriel lifted his head. His face was white and drained. He looked exhausted.

"I believed she was dead for years, Peekin. That thought alone nearly killed me. I wasn't there to protect her, to keep her from harm. I never got over that; it haunted me. Then, a few months ago, I discovered that she had only been badly injured. She actually survived the attack. For some reason, her attackers took her with them, back over the Mountains when they left the castle. It may originally have been so they could use her as a bargaining chip, to try and ransom her off and force our side to give in to their demands. That was until Nuttall discovered that the murderers still had her and that she

was still alive. Then, he found a better use for her.”

“Gabriel, you told me your sister was dead,” insisted Daniel. Peekin nodded in agreement.

“Gabriel, Giselle *is* dead,” he said. “I’ve heard you say it yourself often enough.” He muttered to himself and glanced at his pocket watch. “We’re running out of time. I need to contact the Council about this. You’re a serious threat to Daniel and Barnaby. The Council needs to be informed. They can decide what to do with you.”

“Please,” urged Gabriel, reaching out a hand to Peekin, “*please* let me explain. If you still don’t believe me, then I will go to the Council freely. I’m not sure if I can save Giselle now, anyway. I still can’t believe that she killed Paris. I can’t come to terms with that. Giselle, my true sister, adored him; she would *never* have harmed him. That’s partly why I’ve kept up the pretence that she was dead these last months: she isn’t the sister I knew. Giselle was gentle and kind. She was incapable of hurting anyone. Nuttall may have destroyed my true sister once and for all. The things that I’ve heard she’s done...” He exhaled raggedly, passing a trembling hand over his eyes. Peekin stared at Gabriel for a long time. Finally, he nodded his head. “Alright,” he said grimly, “ten minutes and that’s all. *I* must be insane to be agreeing to this.” Peekin sat in the chair next to Gabriel’s bed. Daniel, still stunned by Gabriel’s

revelations, slumped down beside him. Gabriel swallowed heavily.

“Thank you,” he said, sounding choked, “it’s more than I deserve.”

“I know,” retorted Peekin harshly. Gabriel flinched and lowered his eyes. “Nine minutes forty nine seconds,” warned Peekin, keeping his pocket watch in his hand. Gabriel nodded quickly.

“It was actually down to Paris that I found out that she was still alive. You know Paris brought his snowboard with him when we came to stay here?” Peekin nodded impatiently.

“So?” he said. Gabriel gave Peekin the tiniest hint of a smile.

“Paris and I used to go snowboarding on Skylac Mountain.”

“You did WHAT?” Peekin bellowed, practically falling off his chair in shock. “Do you have ANY idea how dangerous that was? For both of you?” Gabriel nodded.

“He was always a risk taker. You know Paris.” Gabriel’s eyes clouded and once again, the haunted look returned. “Knew – *knew* Paris,” he corrected quietly.

“Eight minutes...”

“Ok,” Gabriel said hastily, flashing an apologetic look at Peekin. “Paris had been scouting round the area for a while, looking for any deserted spots on the mountain, where we could snowboard without being spotted by the other side. The snow’s really deep over there, so it was perfect, hard to resist. Anyway, one day, Paris came back

looking very pleased with himself. He said he'd been watching one particular area for a while and it was always deserted; no one ever went there. So, the next afternoon, we took a chance and went. And the next and the next. Soon, we were going practically every day."

"I don't believe this," sighed Peekin, "you two were meant to be staying in my house so you'd both be safe while you trained and there you were, wandering over the Mountains!" Gabriel shrugged and gave him a small smile.

"Paris always enjoyed snowboarding much more than I, so I used to go exploring sometimes, while I waited for him." Gabriel's features suddenly hardened, his eyes darkening. "One day, I saw a black figure riding a dark horse in a valley close to where Paris was snowboarding. It was Shadow. I couldn't make out the face because of a hooded cloak but the style of clothing was instantly recognisable. I kept watch; both to make sure that Paris wasn't in any danger and to see if I could discover anything about Shadow that I could take back to the High Council. Shadow was almost immediately joined by an old man and they began to train with swords and crossbows. Moments later, another figure on horseback arrived, flanked by two riders and I recognised him immediately: it was Nuttall. I couldn't believe it – seeing Nuttall over the Mountains, in Shadow's company, meant he was a traitor." Gabriel looked down. "As I am," he said softly. "I turned to leave at once, to notify

Eponymous and the High Council of Nuttall's betrayal. As I began to walk away, Nuttall suddenly called out to Shadow, who galloped towards him and immediately removed the hood. When Shadow's hood came down, I saw her, Peekin. It was Giselle, I recognised her straight away. Even from where I was standing, I could make out the colour of her eyes: violet, like my mother's. Of course, she was five years older but it was definitely Giselle. I couldn't believe it; the shock was incredible. It numbed me to the core. They turned to depart and that jolted me into action. I realised that I had to act quickly if I was to get my sister back and so I started to form a plan. Paris was less than five minutes away. We were both armed but we would be outnumbered. If Paris could hold them off for long enough, I thought that there might be a way for me to rescue Giselle. I left my hiding place and raced back towards the valley where Paris was snowboarding. I rounded a bend in the path," Gabriel exhaled heavily, "Nuttall was standing there, blocking my way." Peekin sat forward a little in his seat. "To this day, I don't know how he managed to get there so quickly. I'd just seen him riding off in the opposite direction but at that moment, how he'd got there didn't matter. I drew my sword and ran at him. I was incensed. He'd known that my sister was alive for five years and had kept her from me. All I was thinking was that I wanted revenge. I wanted Nuttall to pay for what he'd done. When I was less than three metres away, he

called out to me. He said we needed to discuss my sister's safety, that he'd instructed the guards to execute my sister if he was more than two minutes late in returning." Gabriel lowered his eyes. "That stopped me in my tracks," he said, "and he told me to drop my sword. Suddenly, it became obvious to me that he'd set this whole thing up. Paris and I thought that we were being so clever, so careful, but Nuttall had known all along that we often came to Skylac Mountain. He *wanted* me to find out about my sister." Gabriel bowed his head. "From that moment, Nuttall had total control over me. I was powerless. He said that he'd been training my sister for some time and confirmed that she was indeed Shadow. I didn't want to believe it at first but I couldn't deny the facts." Gabriel's hand clenched into a fist. "In fact, he took great pleasure – well, as much pleasure as Nuttall ever shows, in listing all the things he'd had her do: the villages she'd ransacked, the murders she'd committed. I told him I was going to report him for holding my sister for five years and for being a traitor. I said I'd have him thrown out of the school and disgraced and demanded Giselle's safe return." Gabriel's eyes closed. "He just smiled at me. He said that Giselle would die if I told anyone about him, or if I told anyone that my sister was still alive. He made me swear to keep up the pretence that Giselle died five years ago. He said he had further plans for her." Gabriel's voice caught in his throat. "Nuttall told me

that, in return for keeping her safe, he wanted my life force, my energy. Just small amounts at first. I knew that it would be used to make their side stronger, so I refused but Nuttall quickly made me see that I had no choice.” Gabriel looked at his bandaged arm and grimaced with disgust.

“You *fool!*” shouted Peekin, standing up and glaring at him. “You helped to strengthen their side! No wonder they’re trying to take over! Do you have *any* idea how powerful your life force will have been to them?”

“What could I do?” Gabriel said desolately. “I couldn’t risk my sister’s life! She wasn’t much more than a child when they took her. She’s all I’ve got.” Gabriel took a deep breath, his voice little more than a whisper. “I *couldn’t* tell anyone, Peekin. It was impossible.” Before Peekin could respond, Gabriel exhaled, then sat perfectly still, gazing into space. After a few moments, he nodded slightly. “It’s still safe,” he murmured. “My sister’s as good as dead, anyway; there’s little point in trying to protect her now.” Gabriel slowly extended his right arm towards Peekin, the arm untouched by Nuttall’s attack on him. Peekin watched him carefully. “I couldn’t tell anyone, Peekin,” Gabriel repeated softly, “because of this.”

Gabriel extended his arm further towards Peekin and Daniel stared at Gabriel in surprise. There was nothing there, apart from his expensive looking wristwatch, black and silver, with an ornate strap and complicated dials adorning the face. Daniel

had seen it many times since he'd met Gabriel. In fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing him without it. Peekin's eyes narrowed.

"The watch your father gave you?" Frowning, he gazed at it. "I don't understand," said Peekin quietly.

"My father gave me a watch for my eighteenth birthday, eleven days before the attack on the castle. While Nuttall was talking to me on Skylac Mountain, I noticed that he was slowly removing something from his wrist. He handed it to me and I realised that it was an exact replica of the watch that I was wearing, right down to the last detail. It even had the same inscription: 'For Gabriel, my beloved son'." Gabriel laughed mirthlessly. "Nuttall made me give him my watch and replace it with the replica. The watch was my last link to my father," he said softly. "Giving it to Nuttall was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do." Gabriel's eyes closed and he began to shake uncontrollably. Peekin hastily motioned to Daniel for more crushed Orchid juice. "No!" Gabriel shouted, opening his eyes in alarm, as Daniel moved towards the little table next to the bed to fetch the glass. "No more. It's the only way I can safely do this. Otherwise..." Daniel, looking confused, sat down, as Gabriel took several deep breaths and continued. "As soon as I put the watch on, I felt the strap tighten around my wrist. Then," he took another rasping breath, "something sharp pierced my skin. My head

began to throb and I fell to the ground. Suddenly, I felt as if my mind was being ripped open and my thoughts and feelings peeled away. In the midst of the pain, Nuttall calmly told me that the watch would ensure I never betrayed him. If I ever schemed against him, told anyone that my sister was alive, or informed the High Council that Nuttall was a traitor, he would know and kill my sister immediately." Peekin's eyes widened. "That's why I couldn't tell anyone, Peekin," Gabriel said desperately. "If I so much as *thought* about trying to find a way to defeat Nuttall, the throbbing in my head would increase and I could actually *feel* my mind being read. I couldn't even tell Paris what had happened after Nuttall left me that day, although Paris could tell there was something wrong – I could hardly walk when I got to him. I have been so worried that I would jeopardise the lives of anyone I told about Nuttall, not to mention my own sister's life. So, you see, I was powerless against him." He gazed at the watch with hatred.

"Hang on," said Daniel, rising quickly, panic in his voice, "so Nuttall now knows that you've just told us everything? He's reading your thoughts now?" Gabriel shook his head.

"No, no, we're safe. Well, as long as I remain weakened, anyway. I can only assume that the watch feeds off my energy. It can't seem to read me when I'm like this, which is something that I discovered quite by chance. Two nights before the Battle between my sister and Paris, Nuttall took more of my

life force than usual. I noticed that, for the first time in months, I could think more clearly, despite feeling drained by the loss of so much life force. It seemed that the watch couldn't get to my thoughts if I wasn't strong. So," Gabriel swallowed hard, "I've been starving myself, doing all that I can to prevent Nuttall invading my thoughts. That's how I was able to tell Paris that Nuttall was Shadow's Second. Therefore, I can't have any more Orchid juice. While I'm like this, we're safe from Nuttall."

"I assume you've tried to remove it?" Peekin asked, taking hold of Gabriel's wrist and examining the watch closely, brows knitted together. Gabriel nodded.

"Many times. It has attached itself to my body by more than just the strap. It won't come off." Peekin looked up.

"You were telling me about the life force that Nuttall collected from you," he said quietly. Gabriel nodded.

"Nuttall and I had an arrangement; to ensure that he got a regular supply of my life force. I'd mostly go to him, to a spot close to the Mountains but lately, Nuttall had become more confident. He said he would come to your cottage to collect my life force, Peekin, to prove that you weren't a threat to him. He made me wait for him near the little copse further up the lane." Daniel suddenly gasped and leaned towards Gabriel.

"Was that you and Nuttall that I saw, the night the Werewolf tried to attack me? I saw two men, just before the Werewolf

appeared.” Daniel quickly described what he had seen.irate, Peekin snapped his head round and glared at Gabriel.

“*Well?* Was that you?” he demanded furiously. Daniel turned away from Gabriel as he gave his answer. Gabriel nodded and Peekin shouted in anger, his eyes glinting in rage.

“And you agreed, knowing that Barnaby and Daniel were in my cottage at the time?”

“I didn’t agree, Peekin, I had no choice in the matter,” muttered Gabriel quietly. Peekin shook his head in disbelief. “Did he bring the Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf with him?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Gabriel. “Maybe the werewolf just saw an opportunity and sneaked down from the Mountains. Maybe Nuttall brought him as protection. I *swear* to you, Peekin,” he said, gazing into Peekin’s eyes, “I honestly don’t know.” Peekin exhaled.

“Continue,” he said, gesturing to Gabriel.

“I had to keep what I knew about Nuttall a secret. Nuttall made it very obvious what he would do to Giselle if I told anyone about him, so I couldn’t even warn Malthus, although I tried. Having had the watch for some time, I’d slowly begun to realise that I could sense when it was reading me. As long as I tried to keep my mind on something else, I could sometimes drop subtle hints, without alerting the watch to what I was thinking. I’d try to swamp my mind with memories of my

family. The emotions just seemed to temporarily block it.

I even tried to stop Malthus from going over the Mountains, by using my position as Crowned Prince but Malthus wouldn't let me. He said that he would be able to override any demands I made because I wasn't King. I told him several times that I thought someone was betraying us and was regularly visiting those over the Mountains. I warned him to be vigilant and dropped as many hints to him as I could, in the hope that he would realise Nuttall was the traitor. I can only assume Malthus saw Nuttall over there and that Nuttall told my sister to attack him. I don't know what Nuttall has done to her to make her do these terrible things. His control over her is very powerful. Malthus's death is something else that I have had difficulty in coming to terms with, both the fact that I didn't warn Malthus and that my own sister killed him, leaving Barnaby without a father." A sudden gasp from the doorway took Daniel by surprise.

"Your sister killed my dad?"

CHAPTER 34

Daniel turned to the door and Peekin spun round in horror. Barnaby was standing in the doorway, his face white. "How long have you been there?" Peekin demanded, breathing heavily. "What have you heard?" But Barnaby was staring, horrified, at Gabriel.

"I thought your sister was dead," he said hollowly. "How could she kill my dad? I thought Shadow killed my dad." Gabriel gazed at Barnaby in dismay, as Mimosa walked past Barnaby and came happily into the room, carrying a large glass jug filled with shimmering blue liquid.

"I've brought your crushed Orchid juice," she said, then stopped dead, looking worried. "Gabriel, you're looking worse than you did earlier. Are they tiring you out?" She put the jug down and made to shoo everyone out of the room but Peekin immediately stopped her.

"What's wrong?" Mimosa asked uncertainly, gazing round the room at the shocked faces.

"I can't explain now," Peekin said, watching as Barnaby slumped against the doorframe. "Can you take Barnaby downstairs for me? I'll follow as soon as I can. I don't want to leave Gabriel alone with Daniel

at the moment; it may not be safe." Mimosa, her brow furrowed, nodded distractedly and went to Barnaby. She hugged him and tried to take him out of the room.

"No," Barnaby shouted, resisting her, his eyes never leaving Gabriel's face. "I want to hear the rest."

"And you will, Barnaby, I promise," said Mimosa, "but not right now. Come on, you can help me feed Avalon. He'll be wondering where his breakfast is." She took his hand and Barnaby, looking askance at Gabriel, eventually allowed himself to be taken from the room. Peekin glanced over to Gabriel, who was now shaking.

"Daniel, give him some more Orchid juice, will you?" Daniel poured some of the contents of the jug into the glass and Gabriel drank a small quantity: less than a thimbleful. After a few moments, the shaking ceased.

"You were saying..." said Peekin grimly. Gabriel nodded.

"I was no closer to getting Giselle back, when she and Paris were chosen as Defenders. I knew some time before our side was officially told that Paris would be fighting Shadow. Nuttall told me that their Defender would be my sister. If I had been the chosen Defender for our side, it would have been so much easier. You know that I asked the High Council to let me take Paris's place." Peekin nodded. "If I had been the Defender instead of the Second, it would have been so much easier for me to rescue her. But when Paris

was chosen...” He shook his head. “Giselle is a very strong fighter, especially with crossbows and swords.” Daniel shuddered. “I’ve watched her train again since that day. Nuttall *graciously* permitted it once, from the same spot where I had originally seen her, near Skylac Mountain. I knew she would be no match for Paris, however. He’d have killed her. So,” he looked immensely sad, “I decided to take his bow.”

Peekin just managed to control his anger.

“You don’t know how much I wanted to tell you; to tell *someone* and put an end to all this but it was far too risky.” Gabriel said desperately. “I didn’t want to do anything that would give Nuttall an excuse to kill Giselle. Besides,” he lowered his eyes, “I thought I’d made a contingency plan; a way to save my sister *and* Paris. The day before the Battle, when my mind had cleared, I came up with a plan. I stole the Grip cart, while the Grips were in the Gripville Arms with Paris. You were away and not expected back here until after the Battle, so I thought that the cart would go undiscovered. I left it in your field and, on the day of the Battle, when Paris went into your cottage to get ready, I took his weapon and hid it in the cart. When Paris returned, I told him I’d heard a rumour that Nuttall was Shadow’s Second. As I had seen Shadow and Nuttall together, I assumed that that would be the case. I then told Paris that his bow was missing. Paris put two and two together and

automatically believed that Nuttall *would* be so cowardly as to steal his bow. He and Nuttall always had a mutual dislike for one another, particularly towards the end of our time at school. I never knew why; I suppose that it was because of the amount of detentions Paris received from him. Paris always bent the rules.

I told Paris I would try to find the bow and made him to go to the Battleground because time was running out. Once he was out of sight, I retrieved the bow, hid it under my cloak and I raced to Gripville. I found the Grip Battering Squad rather the worse for wear in the Gripville Arms and it took me a long time to get them sober enough to understand what I was saying. I told them Paris had stolen their cart and where to find him. My idea was that they would run onto the Battleground and try to attack Paris and therefore create a diversion, in case I needed one. The more confusion I could create on the hilltop, the more opportunity there would be to rescue my sister. The Grips themselves are pretty useless, so I knew that they wouldn't be any threat to Paris."

"What happened then?" Peekin asked quietly, his head down.

I didn't take up my place on the Battleground. By then, the storm had begun and it was raining hard, so I knew that no one would see that I was missing. The Action Stations would be trained on Paris, anyway, not me. Meanwhile, I would wait at the bottom of Cedar Hill for my sister. I planned

to stand in front of her horse as she rode past. I felt sure that I would be able to rescue her before Nuttall realised what was going on. At the very least, I would be able to frighten her horse and that would give me an opportunity to drag her from the saddle. I knew she wouldn't know me; she's too far under Nuttall's spell, worse even than Daniel was when Nuttall got to him through his console. Nuttall's been using his mind tricks on Giselle for years. She's little more than a killing machine now." Gabriel sounded choked.

"I still don't understand why you had to steal Paris's bow," said Peekin, trying to keep his anger under control. "There was *no* need to..."

"If Paris had seen me with Shadow at the bottom of the hill, he may have thought that I was being attacked," urged Gabriel, leaning closer to Peekin. "I couldn't risk that. Paris was an expert bowman; he may have killed my sister before I had a chance to rescue her. By keeping the bow with me, I knew that he wouldn't be able to harm her. I thought I could race up to him after Giselle was rescued and that I would take on Nuttall, returning Paris's bow and arrows to him at the same time, so he could defend himself if necessary. I expected to have rescued my sister before midnight, so I thought that Paris wouldn't be in any danger at all." Gabriel's eyes suddenly clouded over. "I thought I'd planned *everything*," he said, desperately. "I thought I could rescue Paris *and* Giselle. I

miscalculated the length of time it would take me to get from Gripville to Cedar Hill and took what I thought would be a short cut. Instead, I found myself in a Double Room.” Daniel’s eyes widened. “I began to panic. None of the words I thought of to get me out worked. They should have done,” Gabriel said frowning to himself, “but the strange thing was that, after I’d been in the Double Room for around half an hour, the Room just let me go.” Peekin stared at Gabriel in astonishment.

“It let you go?” Gabriel nodded. “I’ve *never* heard of a Double Room letting anyone go like that.” Peekin pulled a notebook from his pocket and jotted down a few lines, while waving to Gabriel to continue.

“I got to Cedar Hill too late,” Gabriel whispered, his head drooping. “Giselle was already at the top of the hill and I arrived just as she fired at Paris. The Grips were nowhere in sight and I watched Paris die, unarmed, by my sister’s hand and then saw her ride away from me. I failed and in doing so, killed my best friend. It was all my fault.” Gabriel’s face crumpled. “I walked for miles after that, well into the early hours, trying to come to terms with what I’d done.” Peekin nodded.

“That explains why we couldn’t find you after the Battle. Where did you go?”

“I can’t remember,” he said quietly. “I eventually found myself back in your outermost field and I put Paris’s bow and quiver back in the Grip cart, where you found

them. I didn't know what else to do with them. If anyone had seen me with them, there would have been awkward questions asked, which would have jeopardised my sister's safety. I knew, however, that, due to my actions, her life was now in terrible danger. Nuttall would surely have known that I'd tried to save her. I believed that he would have immediately killed my sister but I couldn't know for sure. Hearing that their side had dreamed of Shadow gave me some small hope but, to be certain, I had to meet Nuttall outside your cottage as planned, on the night that Daniel arrived here. Nuttall told me that she was still alive," Gabriel said desperately, his voice cracking. "But he did indeed know that I'd tried to rescue her and the last thing he said to me, as he left, was that our association would shortly have to be terminated. I didn't know at first what he meant by that. Then, last night, he told me that it would be our final meeting. As the pain in my arm grew worse, I realised that he was going to take all my life force. He told me that I had become too much of a liability. I was powerless to stop him." Gabriel's head suddenly snapped up. "Do you have *any* idea how this feels?" he shouted, his voice breaking with grief. "I killed Paris and as a result, put my land in grave danger; not to mention Daniel's. And I still don't know where my sister is. And tonight, Daniel may have to kill her. And I will have to watch." Gabriel put his head in his hands as his emotions overcame him.

Peekin sat quietly for a few moments, while Gabriel tried to compose himself.

"There's a lot to take in," he said, brow furrowed, deep in thought. Finally, Peekin raised his head. "Did you know about Nuttall's plans to steal the Half Stone?"

"Yes," Gabriel said shakily, closing his eyes.

"How?" Peekin asked. "How did you know?" With considerable effort, Gabriel's eyes opened.

"Do you remember old Ben Faraday?" he asked "He was a gardener at Ddraig Castle when I was growing up." Peekin nodded.

"I know him," he said. He's Head Gardener at the Eponymous Hildegarde School, now, isn't he? He was always very fond of you, as I recall – and very loyal." Gabriel smiled slightly.

"He still is. As soon as I realised that Nuttall couldn't read my thoughts when I was weak, I came up with an idea to try to discover his next move. I went to the school and asked Ben to keep an eye on Nuttall for me. Ben was very discreet and Nuttall never knew he was being spied upon. Nuttall's office was on the ground floor and Ben occasionally glanced through as he worked, just to check up on him. On the day of the Battle, Ben contacted me and said that he'd noticed some of Nuttall's things had been quietly removed from his office; just a few books and files but it had been happening steadily for a while. That alone wasn't significant; apparently, Nuttall often took

books away with him at the end of term. Ben's other piece of news was more interesting, however. He told me that he'd also seen a former pupil, who was apparently a favourite of Nuttall's, heading towards the corridor leading to the Half Stone Room." Peekin's head snapped round.

"What was the pupil's name?" he asked sharply. Gabriel considered.

"Nathaniel something. Ben will be able to tell you. Apparently, he was expelled from Eponymous Hildegarde for cheating on one of his final exams. As you know, Peekin, no pupils, particularly no *expelled* pupils, are allowed anywhere near the Half Stone Room and it appeared to Ben that the pupil was acting as some kind of lookout. Nuttall obviously had some sort of plan but I didn't know what it was. As he was discreetly removing his things from his rooms, it appeared that he might have been planning to leave the school, without alerting anyone to the fact. I wondered why. It may have been his normal routine but, as I told you, I already had a good idea that he was to be my sister's Second in the Battle. He'd want to be close by, to make sure she was fully under his control. There seemed even more to it, however. I felt that there was a bigger plot behind his plans to disappear before the Battle. The idea that he would take the Half Stone with him when he left seemed ridiculous at first but, the more I thought about it, the more logical it seemed. It

explained why his former favourite was monitoring the corridor.”

Peekin watched Gabriel for a long time. Finally he walked over to the bed and sat down next to him.. “Do they have the key to the Half Stone room?” Peekin asked. Gabriel smiled. He shook his head wearily and Peekin gave a sigh of relief.

“That was one part of the plan that I *didn't* fail on, Peekin,” he said. “Things began to slot into place in my mind. It occurred to me that Nuttall was probably planning to steal the Half Stone shortly before the Battle, when it wouldn't be as heavily guarded. Everyone would want to watch the Battle on the School's Action Station. That's why I thought I would be safe to get Giselle; he wouldn't be around to stop me. So, I decided to try to delay him. That way, I'd buy myself some time and be able to rescue her without his intervention. I made sure I didn't eat much that day, to sap my strength, so he couldn't read my mind. The fact that I wasn't certain of Nuttall's next move also seemed to confuse the watch and I could tell that it was having difficulty in reading my thoughts. Before I went to Gripville, I used the ley line near your cottage that goes to the Eponymous Hildegarde School.” Gabriel looked over at Peekin, his eyes shining. “I stole the key to the Half Stone room,” he said. “It was the only way I could think of to keep it safe. I took the key, a clear six hours before Nuttall went looking for it. It's

somewhere very, very safe, somewhere that no one will ever think of looking.”

“Where?” asked Peekin. Gabriel turned to Daniel. He smiled.

“It’s in your fish tank,” he said.

CHAPTER 35

“WHAT?” said Daniel in disbelief. “How can it be in my fish tank?” But Peekin held up a hand to stop him.

“You used the ley line between Barnaby’s and Daniel’s houses?” he asked, his hand still in the air. Gabriel nodded. “Very well guarded,” Peekin mused, “only access is via a shard key, which Nuttall doesn’t have; Nuttall could search for the rest of his life and never find it. Last place he’d think of is there. I doubt he even knows where Daniel lives. Better still, even if he *did* go searching, I moved the fish tank away from the ley line to get back here, so the tank isn’t even accessible via the ley line any more. Brilliant.” Gabriel smiled.

“Being of Royal blood occasionally has its advantages,” he said. “No one questioned me when I went down the corridor to the room. It was a warm day and the guard jumped at my suggestion to take his place while he got himself a cold drink. I took the key as soon as he left.”

“And the watch?” asked Peekin. “Does Nuttall know?” Gabriel shook his head once more.

No, we’re still safe,” he said. “I didn’t feel that my thoughts were being read as

before, so I know that the watch wasn't able to pick up on what I was thinking when I took the key. I knew I needed to find somewhere safe for it, however," he said. "I couldn't afford to keep it with me. Barnaby's house was the safest place I could think of. I used my shard key, accessed the ley line and just put my hands through. I was desperate, really. When I realised that my hands were in water, it seemed the ideal place. So, I left the key in the fish tank." Daniel's jaw suddenly dropped and he sat forward in his seat.

"Was it around six o'clock?" he asked quickly. Gabriel considered.

"In your world? Yes, maybe a little after that."

"I was in my room when you put the key through," said Daniel. "I thought something was trying to attack me!" Daniel went on to explain how the appearance of two silhouetted hands manifesting themselves in his fish tank and apparently trying to grab him, had frightened him half to death. "My goldfish was terrified!" he said, still in shock. "There was pondweed and puddles of water all over the floor!"

"Sorry, Daniel," said Gabriel apologetically. "I got the wrong side and found your bedroom instead of Barnaby's. I only realised that later, Peekin, when you sent word to Mimosa, about the scuba gear that you needed in order to get into Daniel's room. I wasn't really thinking straight. Anyway, the key's in the shale at the bottom of the tank. I buried the key as deeply as I

could, so I don't think that it will be easy to spot. It should be quite safe there."

"Well, I've heard enough," said Peekin, slapping his hands together. "I've work to do." Gabriel's breath caught in his throat, as he realised the significance of what Peekin was saying. Daniel gazed at him unhappily. It was obvious by the look of utter devastation on Gabriel's face that, in that moment, any hope that he had of saving his sister had instantly faded. He lowered his head.

"I can only imagine the hell you've been going through in the last few months, Gabriel," said Peekin. "It certainly explains how Nuttall wasn't able to kill you. Mimosa said she hadn't heard of anyone who had ever had so much life force drained from their body and survived. You had a reason to live, didn't you?" Peekin said earnestly, giving Gabriel a small smile. "You needed to live, so that you could save your sister." He looked at Gabriel intently. "I understand why you did this. You were forced into betrayal. You had no real choice."

"Thank you for giving me the opportunity to explain," Gabriel said, his voice shaking with grief. "I understand that you have to report me." Peekin nodded in agreement.

"I *will* be reporting you, Gabriel. I have to."

"I know," he said heavily. "I expected that."

"But meeting with the Council to discuss your fate will have to wait; there are

more pressing matters at stake first.” Daniel and Gabriel stared at him in surprise. “Well, don’t look at me like that, you two! Hurry and get dressed, Gabriel. We have to plan a way to get your sister back.”

“What?” said Gabriel in disbelief.

“There’s nothing I can do about Paris’s death,” Peekin said grimly. “That’s something I’m afraid no-one can change. Giselle, however, is another matter. I’m not prepared to leave one of our own over the Mountains. Not if I can help it. It’s making more sense now.” Stunned, Gabriel stared blankly at Peekin.

“What is?” he asked numbly.

“Why the moon turned red. Daniel’s Battle isn’t only to avenge Paris’s death and stop them taking over; it’s also an opportunity to retrieve Giselle. There was more than just one wrong that needed to be rectified. So, that’s what we have to do. That’s probably why Paris had the opportunity to run at Giselle when she saw Avalon, you know,” Peekin said musingly. “She must have recognised Avalon and it briefly broke through whatever programming Nuttall is using on her. That’s a good sign. She isn’t completely under his control. So that means that we’re in with a slim chance of bringing her back.”

“Are you serious?” Gabriel whispered in astonishment, his eyes shining. Peekin smiled grimly.

“I never joke before eleven o’clock in the morning. Come on.” Gabriel staggered out of

bed, while Peekin began to pace the floor, his hands behind his back. He took out his pipe, filled the little bowl and lit it. "Hmm, has to be a way," he mused, as smoke billowed round him. Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks. "Daniel, go and see if Pinvin's left. Hurry." Daniel looked confused. "Go!" Peekin shouted. Daniel bolted down the stairs and through the garden to the stables. Pinvin was nowhere to be seen. Daniel checked through the grimy windows of the outhouse and saw that the cart had already been removed. Pinvin, plus cart, were obviously on their way home.

Daniel ran back up to Peekin and told him the news, while Peekin helped Gabriel on with a shirt. Gabriel flinched as the material snagged on this bandaged arm and his eyes flashed with anger.

"I think Nuttall wanted me dead, as punishment for saving Daniel," he told Peekin. "He doesn't like losing. He must have finally realised that I would never take the throne while he had control over me, in case he tried to take over himself. I suppose he had no more use for me and so decided I should die." Peekin didn't respond. Instead, he stared out of the window and exhaled.

"Well, Nuttall's going to have a nasty shock when he hears that you're still alive, then," he said.

"What are you planning to do?" Gabriel asked hesitantly. "All I could think of was to try to drag Giselle from the horse again, before she got to the top of Regna's Hill

tonight. I had little hope that I'd get her back." Deep in thought, Peekin drummed his fingers on the window ledge. He muttered to himself, before turning round.

"Firstly, I'm going to have to call in the services of the Grips again," he said. Gabriel stared at him in desolation.

"Peekin, I told you, I've already tried that - it didn't work" he said.

"Yes but you didn't have a Defardian Elf organising things, did you, Gabriel? You may be Royalty, Your Highness," he said, smiling slightly, "but you're not very good at planning, are you? Anyway," Peekin said, before Gabriel could respond, "to work. Gabriel, you're staying here. You're too weak to do anything else. Besides," Peekin looked up him. "I need you to go and explain everything to Barnaby. He's a perfectly innocent victim in this mess. You may be able to get your sister back but he will never see his father again. I don't know how he will respond to you," Peekin said solemnly. "He may still see you as being partly to blame for his father's death. It will be for him to decide how he feels about all this." Gabriel nodded, his face pale.

"Peekin," he asked tentatively. "Can you remove the watch? It would be so much easier tonight without it." He looked at Peekin expectantly but Peekin shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel, I can't," he said abruptly, turning away, as Gabriel's face fell. Daniel was astonished and he stared at

Peekin in amazement. Since he'd met Peekin, he'd come to believe that he was capable of beating anything; that there was nothing that would ever defeat him, not even Nuttall. So, why couldn't he remove the watch? Did that mean that Nuttall was more powerful than Peekin? Even Gabriel looked taken aback and Daniel suddenly began to feel very nervous. What if Peekin wasn't as powerful as everyone believed?

Peekin, meanwhile, was muttering to himself and pacing the room. Deep in thought, he pulled out a small file from one of his trouser pockets and removed two sheets of creamy coloured parchment. He went to the little side table next to Gabriel's bed and put them down on it, quickly unfolding the paper. Both contained several lines of closely written script. He made two swift notations on each sheet with his fountain pen and signed each at the bottom, blowing gently on the ink to dry it. Both were placed in the file, which he then put back into his trouser pocket, as Clementine suddenly walked into the room, carrying a tray filled with coffee and hot buttered toast.

"Mimosa thought you might like this," she said, shyly. Peekin nodded his thanks and grabbed a slice of the toast.

"I need to get to Gripville as soon as I can but it's going to take ages to walk there and back and it's time I can ill afford," Peekin said, looking worried as he chewed on the toast. Clementine stopped in the doorway and bashfully turned round.

“Er, I could have a word with Hopper for you, if you like,” she said, her face reddening.

“What good would that do, though?” Peekin asked, frowning at her. Clementine went redder still.

“*He* could take you to Gripville. You could sit behind him on his bike. I do that sometimes, when he takes me out,” she giggled in embarrassment. “Last night, he let me help him paint his mudguard.”

“*Wow*, he *really* knows how to show an Elf a good time,” Peekin muttered sarcastically, as he considered Clementine’s suggestion. He nodded. “Clementine, can you get Hopper for me?” Clementine smiled, happiness etched on her face. “Oh and tell him to put a few more balloons on his bike: Daniel’s coming too.”

“I am?” Daniel asked in surprise as Clementine darted out. Peekin nodded.

“Too risky to leave you alone,” he muttered, watching Gabriel from out of the corner of his eye. Gabriel was sitting down, looking weak and ill. Just dressing had sapped his hugely depleted energy stores. Clementine reappeared in the doorway.

“He’ll be here any...” There was the now familiar sound of squeaking wheels and Hopper, plus bike, appeared outside Gabriel’s bedroom window. The bike was festooned with around twenty balloons and Hopper had to pedal even harder than usual to stay level with the window ledge. The tiny saddle had also been replaced with a larger, more robust

seat, big enough for a medium sized child to sit on. Hopper still had on a badge, which was attached to his red jumper, with another fitted to the bike. Today, however, both read 'Official Defardian Elf Business. Top Secret!'

"Mornin'" said Hopper, panting heavily. "Can you hurry, please, before my legs fall off? Oh, hello, sugar pie," he cooed, spotting Clementine and trying to grin heroically, while pedalling fit to burst. Clementine went scarlet with happiness.

"...lo, Hopper," she managed to squeak, covering her face with her hands. Peekin ignored the pair and gestured to Daniel to sit behind Hopper. It took Hopper a while to manoeuvre the bike close enough to the window ledge but, eventually, Daniel managed to clamber onto the seat. Despite the saddle being larger, it was still a struggle for both Hopper *and* Daniel to sit on in comfort. Daniel felt as if he was in serious danger of falling off at any moment. He grabbed tight hold of Hopper and tried not to look down.

"Where are you going to sit, Peekin?" Daniel asked, looking round. There was absolutely no room behind Daniel.

"Only one place," said Peekin sourly. "I sincerely hope no one is watching." He jumped into the little wicker basket at the front of the bike and tried to sink down as far as he could. "Oh, the humiliation," he said from its depths. "Clementine, help Gabriel downstairs, would you? Oh, and, no matter how much Mimosa protests, he is *not* to have

any more crushed Orchid juice. Gabriel,” one shrewd brown Elfish eye appeared above the basket. “You know what to do. Explain everything to Barnaby as best you can.” Gabriel nodded, his head lowered. Peekin took a deep breath. “Right Hopper, off you go, then,” he said, trying to sound brave.

“Righty ho,” said Hopper. He saluted manfully at Clementine and shot straight into the air, practically sucking the air out of Daniel’s lungs as he did so.

Daniel had never known such incredible speed. He grabbed onto Hopper’s waist for all he was worth, trying to catch his breath but it was impossible. The air whisked by him at an incredible rate, far too fast for Daniel to inhale.

Just as he felt himself to be in severe danger of suffocation, Hopper turned the bike into a sharp dive and they plummeted back towards land. Daniel could hear Peekin’s terrified yells as the ground got closer. Hopper came to a halt right at the edge of Gripville, the bike bobbing gently just above the ground. Daniel jumped off the seat, and took several deep breaths, looking over at the basket, where Peekin’s little tweed legs were draped haphazardly over the sides.

“Not my best journey, that,” said Hopper regretfully. “Bit slow on the acceleration, what with all the extra weight on board.” Hopper looked into the basket in surprise. “Er, you getting out, Peekin?” There was a low moan from the basket and Peekin’s face, covered with indentations from the

wicker, appeared. “Why did you want to sit upside down in the basket, anyway?” asked Hopper, scratching his head. “Is it some weird Defardian Elf thing?”

“I had no choice. I slipped as you took off, you moron,” mumbled Peekin, staggering out of the basket. “Wait here, you’re needed to take us back.”

“Right you are, I’ll just tie the bike to this tree. No rush – I’m charging you by the minute, anyway,” he called, pulling a newspaper from his back pocket. He took an apple from his jacket and bit into it happily, as Daniel and a somewhat dishevelled Peekin wandered into Gripville.

“What are you going to do?” asked Daniel, curiously. Peekin glanced up at him and gave him a fleeting smile.

“Wait and see,” he said. Daniel walked alongside him, his heart soaring. He didn’t really care what Peekin’s plan was, as long as it worked. If Giselle is rescued tonight, he thought, I don’t have to fight Shadow at Midnight. *I don’t have to fight.*

CHAPTER 36

Gripville looked just as shabby and dilapidated as it had the previous afternoon. It was also just as cold. There was no one in sight as they walked down the dusty pathway, towards Gallipot's broken down little hovel. The roof still sported a large hole and an array of rusty tools formed a little pile on the floor. The newly retrieved cart was leaning against the house, its contents covered with an oily looking tarpaulin. 'Keep yer 'ands off' had been hastily scrawled across the tarpaulin in red paint.

To Daniel's surprise, Peekin walked right past Gallipot's rundown house and continued on, towards a large, rickety building, from which could be heard several drunken voices, singing and laughing loudly. The peeling wooden sign outside read: 'Gripville Arms, Purveyors of Peerless Beer and Gherkins'.

Peekin scabbled around in his waistcoat pocket and removed an official looking card, embossed in gold leaf. He flattened down his hair, straightened his clothing and opened the door.

An incredible sight met them. Around thirty stubby men, all with the same large heads, were downing huge tankards of

foaming beer. Most of the wooden chairs in the place were overturned and the floor was awash with spilled ale and smashed jugs. Judging by the state of the men, most of them seemed to have been in the pub for some time, despite the fact that it was still only morning. Many of them were lying on the floor and snoring loudly, completely deaf to the racket surrounding them.

Peekin strode to the bar, giving the sleeping drunkards well aimed kicks as he passed. He smiled in satisfaction, as each one yelped in pain. Peekin made his way through the debris and finally cornered the Landlord, who looked just as drunk as his customers. Peekin thrust the card into the Landlord's face and shouted something above the din, which Daniel couldn't hear. It took Peekin three attempts to make himself heard. Eventually, the Landlord seemed to understand and shook his head angrily.

Peekin ignored him and took the two large pieces of official looking parchment out of the file in his trouser pocket. He moistened the backs with some of the spilled beer on the bar and went to the front door. He stuck one on each side of the door, then returned to the bar and casually gestured to the beer taps with his left hand. There was a sudden, shrill shriek and a bang. The Landlord tried to pour beer from the bar tap but the tap refused to move. He glared at Peekin, who smiled back sweetly, then sat down on one of the few stools that hadn't been knocked over. He folded his arms and waited. The Landlord

took a deep breath and shouted above the din.

“Right, you lot, we’ve bin closed down until tomorrow afternoon. There’s the sign. Order of the Defardian Council.” He gestured to the notice that Peekin had just put up. It said, using extremely complicated words and legal clauses that no beer could be served until three o’clock the following day.

It took the Grips several minutes to understand the meaning of the sign. Eventually, they slowly began to leave, promising all kinds of horrors that would befall the Council as a result of its actions. Judging by the fact that most of the Grips couldn’t even stand up straight, Daniel didn’t think that the Council had much to worry about.

Once the majority of Grips had left, Peekin made his way to a little booth in the furthest, darkest, dirtiest corner of the pub. He called to the Landlord for plenty of water and sat down next to the little group of Grips that were still ensconced there. They completely ignored him. Daniel’s eyes were having difficulty in getting used to the darkness but, as he joined Peekin, he heard a familiar little voice excitedly calling out his name from somewhere on the floor. He screwed up his eyes and looked down. There, lying under a large pair of muddy black boots was Pinvin, or, more precisely, Pinvin’s head. Pinvin waved frantically at him and tried to get up.

“Oi!” slurred a voice and the boots shifted, squashing Pinvin flat. “You can’t get up, Pinvin, I’ve just got me legs comfy now.”

“Good morning, Gallipot, are you well?” asked Peekin in a cheerful voice, jovially punching the owner of the voice in the ribs.

“Eh?” Gallipot slurred. He swivelled round in his seat and stared drunkenly at Peekin, just as the Landlord swayed over with buckets of water, depositing them on the low table in front of the party. Peekin grabbed Gallipot’s tankard, emptied it on the floor, narrowly missing Pinvin, then dipped the tankard into the water, filling it to the top. Gallipot was too drunk to react and just stared at Peekin stupidly. Peekin shoved the tankard to Gallipot’s lips, held his nose and forced him to down the water in one. He did this another four times, Gallipot vainly trying to protest with each mouthful.

Once Gallipot began to look slightly more sober, Peekin started on Broddlethrup and Padstock, who had been watching the scene and laughing hysterically. They soon stopped when both found their heads submerged in the freezing water. Pinvin hadn’t been allowed a drop of ale, so he was left in peace, under Gallipot’s boots. After fifteen minutes of administering the water, Peekin clapped his hands together in satisfaction and raised his voice.

“Right, gentlemen, now that I have your attention – to business. Gallipot here owes me quite a lot of money in fines, don’t you, Gallipot?”

“Oh no! You’re not gettin’ another penny off me, Peekin!” he roared, all signs of drunkenness completely gone, now that money was involved.

“Dear dear, now you *know* I can get you to pay, or I’ll have your house, Gallipot, revolting as it is,” said Peekin gently, as if talking to a wayward child. “However, I have a proposition for you. I am willing to forget all about your fines – and yours, Padstock, for that illegal radish growing last month” – Padstock tried and failed to look innocent – “if you do a deal with me.”

“We’re listenin,” said Gallipot, sniffing reluctantly. “What do we have to do?”

“Excellent – I’m glad you’re seeing sense at last!” said Peekin, smiling. “If the Grip Battering Squad comes to Regna’s Hill tonight at ten to midnight, along with your cart and ten dozen slow burning fireworks; ones that really bang and sparkle, mind and enough matches to light them, then I will forget all about your fines.”

“*Fireworks?*” said Gallipot opening his eyes wide in feigned astonishment. “*Us?* *Whatever* do you mean, Peekin? You know as well as I do that Grips aren’t allowed fireworks! We would *never* go against the Defardian Council and have fireworks in Gripville! I’ve never even *seen* one, never mind...” He closed his mouth, as Peekin gave him a withering look. “Did *you* tell ‘im we ‘ad ‘em, Pinvin?” Gallipot muttered under his breath, kicking him. “I was keepin’ them for me birthday. I’ll ‘ave to get more now. Er,

only joking, Peekin,” he said smiling weakly and giving Pinvin another surreptitious kick.

“And if we don’t do what you want?” butted in a still slightly dazed Broddlethrup, scratching his nose meditatively.

“If not, I will *permanently* close down this repellent shack, ban all beer in Gripville, take away your licence to collect rubbish and treble all your fines. Oh and I’ll tell everyone in Gripville that you like wearing pink frilly dresses, Broddlethrup.” Broddlethrup looked at him indignantly.

“I only wore it *once!*” he shouted, going red, as the others exploded with laughter. “You said you’d never tell.” Peekin shrugged casually.

“Agree and I’ll keep quiet about your red frilly undies,” he said, “*and* the...”

“Alright, alright, we’ll do it,” said Broddlethrup hastily, casting an embarrassed look at Gallipot and Padstock who were now laughing so hard that they were having trouble breathing.

“There, that wasn’t too painful, now, was it?” said Peekin in honeyed tones. He got up and gestured to Daniel to follow him outside. Daniel waved goodbye to Pinvin, who went pink with delight.

“Ten to midnight, in the dense undergrowth, to the left of the large Oak Tree on Regna’s Hill, near the top. Bring everything I told you, or the deal’s off.” Gallipot nodded, wiping his eyes and waving to Peekin, who had stopped in the doorway.

“Oh and Broddlethrup?” said Peekin. “One more thing.” A very embarrassed Broddlethrup looked over at Peekin warily. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, now, will you?” Peekin closed the door, as the Grips exploded in laughter once more.

CHAPTER 37

“Why do you need them to bring fireworks tonight?” asked Daniel curiously, as they walked back through Gripville towards Hopper.

“All will be revealed later, dear boy,” said Peekin, tapping his nose. “For the next part of the plan, I’ll need Mimosa, Dick and Clementine, if Clementine’s not too love struck on *him*.” Peekin pointed irritably towards Hopper, who, seeing them approach, immediately pocketed his apple core and folded up his paper. He straightened his clothing and, grinning, glanced at his watch.

“You owe me big time, Peekin,” he said. “I’ll be able to get a brand new mudguard on this job!”

“I don’t owe you a bean,” said Peekin, glancing warily at the wicker basket. “You’ll have to take it up with the Council if you want expenses.” Ignoring Hopper’s irate mutterings, Peekin reluctantly climbed back into the basket, while Daniel sat behind Hopper. “Right, *slower* this time, please,” said Peekin, as Hopper leaned over and undid the rope which tethered the bike to the tree. He immediately began pedalling and the bike shot into the air, practically catapulting Peekin out of the basket. “*Slow down!*”

Peekin screamed but Hopper, an evil glint in his eye, only grinned and pedalled harder.

Three seconds later, they landed in Peekin's back garden. Daniel jumped off the saddle and went to the basket to retrieve Peekin. He was lying on his back in a crumpled heap, both legs and one arm hanging out of the basket, moaning softly to himself.

"Sorry, was I too fast for you again?" Hopper asked innocently, as Daniel half carried Peekin out of the basket and set him down on the grass.

"I hope Skreel bursts all your balloons," muttered Peekin, as he staggered into the kitchen. Hopper turned to blow a kiss to Clementine, who was gazing at him in adoration through Peekin's dining room window. Then, he shot back into the sky, pedalling madly, the squeaking of metal wheels fading almost immediately into the summer air.

"Defardian Elves shouldn't have to put up with that kind of behaviour," moaned Peekin, collapsing into a kitchen chair. Mimosa passed him a mug of coffee, which he drank gratefully. Daniel sat next to him and poured himself a glass of chilled raspberry cordial from a jug on the table.

"Dick, Clementine and I have done an early lunch for you," said Mimosa, going to the fridge and taking out cold pies, cheese and a huge bowl of fruit salad. She placed them on the kitchen table and brought out plates and cutlery.

“Where’s Gabriel?” Peekin asked, sinking his teeth into a juicy pork pie.

“Upstairs. I forced him to go back to bed for a few hours, after he spoke to Barnaby,” said Mimosa, refilling Daniel’s glass, “and I want a full explanation from you as to why he can’t have any more Orchid juice, Peekin. Gabriel refused point blank. He looked dreadful at the end of their conversation and Barnaby didn’t look much better.”

“Where is Barnaby?” Daniel asked. It wasn’t like him to miss a meal.

“He’s outside, in the fields. It’s ok,” soothed Mimosa, as Peekin looked alarmed, “he’s only in the field closest to the cottage. I made him swear not to wander off. I think he needed some time to himself.”

“Peekin, is it ok if I go and see him?” asked Daniel. “I’m not really hungry yet.” Peekin nodded, grabbing a steak pie. “I’ll come out to you, once I’ve spoken to Mimosa and Dick,” he said with his mouth full. “We need to get you some last minute practise.”

“Why?” Daniel asked, smiling at him. “I don’t have to practise any more! You’re going to get Giselle back tonight, so...”

“Daniel.” Peekin gazed into his eyes. “We may not succeed in rescuing Giselle tonight, despite our best efforts. If we fail, you will still have to fight.” Daniel’s heart sank. “Remember why you’re here,” Peekin said, clasping Daniel’s hand. “Allapatria has chosen you to prevent many great wrongs from taking place. You’re our Defender. You

are the only thing standing in their way at the moment, the only one that can stop them claiming our Half Stone and taking over our world and yours. So, we go on as before. We will continue to practise. We have no choice. They cannot be allowed to win.”

Daniel groaned, covering his eyes. Discovering that he still had to fight hit him all the harder because he'd enjoyed a brief period of assuming that he was off the hook, as far as tonight's Battle was concerned. None of this seemed fair and half a day's sword practise was unlikely to turn him into a master swordsman. He was certainly better than he had been at wielding the sword but it was still far too heavy. He couldn't swirl it around his head or do anything other than hold it. Peekin had shown him how to block an attack, but what good would that be against someone like Giselle, with years of experience in fighting with swords? Daniel couldn't possibly do anything other than fend off an attack for a matter of seconds. As for winning – *impossible*. Unless Giselle came at him with a rubber sword, Daniel had no doubt that he would fail. Then, there was Peekin's notion that he was here to act as some kind of Fixer. Well, that sounded pretty ridiculous, too.

Peekin watched Daniel, seeing the various emotions from misery to despair play across his face. He grinned and took another bite of pie.

“You'll be fine,” he said thickly, “trust me.” Daniel snorted.

“Easy for you to say,” he replied, as Peekin reached for a wedge of cheese. “You don’t even know what’s going to happen to me tonight! If you don’t rescue Gabriel’s sister, I’ve still got to fight her and Nuttall is controlling her. I’ve had it.” Peekin smiled and looked enigmatic.

“Daniel, why don’t I pack you some lunch up and you can take a picnic out to Barnaby?” said Mimosa. She began to put a selection of food into bags, along with the bottle of raspberry cordial and two glasses.

“See you later,” called Peekin, starting on his second pork pie.

Deeply irritated, Daniel took hold of the bags and walked into the garden, trying to think of anything but what was going to happen later. Peekin’s blind faith was beginning to worry him. He didn’t feel any different to how he’d always felt, so how could he be a Fixer all of a sudden? There was nothing even remotely special about him. Plus, nagging at the back of his mind, was the fact that Peekin hadn’t been able to remove Gabriel’s watch. If Nuttall truly was more powerful than Peekin, was there any real point in going ahead with the Battle tonight, even if they rescued Giselle? Wouldn’t Nuttall win anyway? He’d already tried to cheat once, after all. What was to stop him finding some underhand way to get the Half Stone again?

Daniel wandered into the garden, over the little wall and into the field, making a determined effort to ignore his fears for the

time being and concentrate on finding Barnaby instead. It took him several minutes to locate him but he eventually spotted Barnaby sitting under a large beech tree. Barnaby looked as if he'd been crying: his eyes were red and puffy.

"Brought you some lunch," said Daniel, pretending not to notice as Barnaby hastily wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "There's all kinds in here. Mimosa and Dick have gone mad lately, I think. All they're doing is cook! Oh, there are some doughnuts in here, too, look."

"Dick's redecorating the wall, where the console smashed, for Peekin at the moment," said Barnaby dully. "He said he wants a break from making pies." He didn't make any attempt to eat the food that Daniel was placing before him. Daniel offered him a doughnut but he shook his head.

"Not hungry," he said, staring into the distance. Daniel watched him for a few moments, unsure of what to say. Finally he took a deep breath.

"Barnaby, I'm sorry about your dad," he said. "I wanted to say something when we were at your school but I didn't know how to. Wow, doesn't it seem like years ago when we were standing in the hallway at Eponymous Hildegarde?" Daniel laughed, in an attempt to lighten the situation but Barnaby continued to stare into space.

"Gabriel's sister killed my dad," said Barnaby in a monotone. Daniel nodded and lowered his eyes.

“I know,” he said.

“And Gabriel knew that Nuttall was a traitor but he didn’t warn my dad. He let him go over there and get killed.”

“But Gabriel had no choice because of that watch Nuttall made him wear,” Daniel insisted. “He had no idea that Nuttall would tell Shadow, er, I mean Giselle, to kill your dad. He didn’t know that Nuttall would send her to kill him. Gabriel tried to stop your dad going over the Mountains but your dad wouldn’t let him. Peekin said that Gabriel really respected your dad, Barnaby.”

“Yeah, well, he was best friends with Paris and he still betrayed *him*,” said Barnaby. Daniel nodded again.

“I know,” he said. “He thought he could save his sister *and* Paris at the same time but his plan backfired. His own sister killed his best friend.” Barnaby turned and looked at Daniel.

“Gabriel said his sister has no idea what she’s doing. He said she’s under Nuttall’s spell and that he’s controlling her mind. He said she wouldn’t have known that it was my dad that she was killing.” Daniel considered for a moment.

“Remember when Nuttall was controlling me through my console the other day?” Barnaby stared at the ground and breathed in shakily. “Well, *I* had no control over what I was doing or thinking.” Daniel shuddered at the memory. “Nuttall felt like my friend, my *best* friend. He made me feel as if *you* were the enemy, Barnaby. If I’d had

a weapon near me and Nuttall had told me to kill you, I would have done, no question. That's how he makes you feel. You just trust him completely. He was trying to get me to go over the Mountains and it felt like the right thing to do. If you hadn't gone for Peekin, I'd probably be there now. Maybe he'd be training me to be the next Shadow." Daniel suddenly realised that Barnaby was staring at him. "Giselle didn't have anyone like you to save her. I was lucky, Barnaby. I had you. Otherwise..."

"So you don't think she knew what she was doing?" Barnaby asked in a small voice. Daniel shook his head.

"Not if Nuttall is using mind tricks on her like he did to me. Giselle killed Paris, all because Nuttall used that hypnosis stuff on her. If you want to blame someone for your dad, blame Nuttall. It's his fault. He trained Giselle. He told Giselle to attack your dad because your dad must have seen him. She killed your dad because Nuttall made her. That's what's scaring me about tonight. If Nuttall is controlling Giselle, she will just do as he tells her and he wants me dead, so he can win and take over. Nuttall will tell Giselle to kill me."

"Not if I can help it," said Peekin grimly, wiping pie crumbs from his mouth. He strode over to them, Daniel's sword casually hanging over his shoulder in its scabbard. "Barnaby, Gabriel saw his best friend killed, all because he left Paris unarmed. He's got to live with that for the rest of his life and, don't

forget, someone killed Gabriel's father too, *and* his mother, as well as his brother, Julius. All Gabriel had left was his sister, who wasn't much older than you two are now when she was kidnapped. He was trying to save his sister *and* his best friend, knowing that Nuttall could kill Giselle at any time. But it was Nuttall that really killed your dad." Peekin settled down between Barnaby and Daniel and put a comforting arm around Barnaby. "Your father knew that he was taking a huge risk in going over the Mountains, Barnaby. He knew that he could be killed at any stage of the talks. Gabriel *did* try to stop him from going over there but your father was determined to go. He was brave enough to take that chance, for the sake of Allapatria and Daniel's world. Now, I can't make you forgive Gabriel if you still blame him," said Peekin, "because that decision is up to you and I will go along with whatever you decide." Peekin looked at Barnaby gravely. "You know that we're going to try to get Giselle back tonight, don't you?" Barnaby nodded, his eyes filling with tears. "Giselle hasn't got a dad any more, either, or a mum and one of her brothers is dead, too. She probably doesn't know any of that yet. She's going to need a lot of support if we manage to get her back. She has a lot to come to terms with. Imagine finding out that you've done some terrible things but you have no knowledge of doing them because someone else was controlling you."

Barnaby looked up and Peekin smiled at him, taking his hand. "Barnaby, we need you tonight," insisted Peekin. "We need to get rid of Nuttall and you're going to be an important part of that. We don't want him to be able to control anyone else. But we need to work together to stop him."

"I know," said Barnaby, slowly getting to his feet and wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. He looked down at Daniel, who was gazing at him, looking worried. "Pass me a doughnut," he said, attempting a smile.

CHAPTER 38

The afternoon passed in the blink of an eye. Daniel was astounded at how much better he was becoming with the sword. He was still plagued with doubts about the rapidly approaching Battle but, each time he felt himself growing concerned, Peekin would yell at him to remain focused and belt him with the tree branch that he was using in place of a sword. After the fourth whack on the shins, Daniel decided that it was far less painful to keep his mind on the job at hand.

At around five o'clock, Mimosa came out to the fields looking very pleased with herself.

"We've finished," she said, smiling, "and he looks wonderful. Have you got time to come and look at him?" Peekin nodded in excitement, wiping the perspiration from his forehead as he walked towards her. He had changed into tweed tennis shorts earlier and his long, skinny legs looked like twigs with tennis shoes attached.

"We're due for a break," he said and motioned Daniel and Barnaby to follow him.

Peekin walked ahead with Mimosa, both deep in conversation, while Daniel and Barnaby followed. Barnaby, now more like his usual self, proudly carried Daniel's

sword. The little procession made its way towards the stables and on to the field behind. Peekin walked round the large apple tree that marked the entrance to the field and gasped. There, standing majestically next to Clementine and Dick Cleverley, was Avalon, Paris's horse. Peekin went as close to Avalon as he dared and practically danced with joy.

"He looks wonderful," he said grinning from ear to ear. Avalon *did* look superb. His pure white mane and tail had been well brushed and both shone in the afternoon sunshine. His eyes were bright and his coat was dazzling. Even his hooves sparkled.

Clementine and Dick smiled at Peekin, looking worn out. Buckets of warm soapy water, tubs of oil, soft brushes and combs were on the floor between them and both seemed rather more grimy than usual.

"Thank you, everyone," said Peekin gratefully. "Paris would have been very proud."

"Avalon seems more himself today," said Mimosa, smiling. "I've been putting some special flower extracts into his water and I think it's done the job. He loved all the attention, too!" Dick wandered over to Peekin, smiling heartily and twiddling his moustache. He motioned to the left of one of the buckets, where his voice recorder was lying, gently dripping on the grass, having been 'accidentally' dropped into the soapy water by Mimosa some time earlier.

"Peekin, dear chap, wondered if you could use some of that magic of yours to dry

my voice recorder out, only it's a bit damp." Dick picked up the soggy machine and held it out towards him.

"Ah, *sorry*, Dick, my wrist's still not right from my fall so I'd better not; I might make things worse," said Peekin, giving Mimosa a sly wink.

"I wanted to record my observations of the day, you see, for my memoirs and this was my spare. My other one is still clapped out."

"Oh, well now, isn't that *sad*? I'm sure we were *all* looking forward to reading that chapter. Never mind, eh?" He gave Dick a fixed grin, then turned to Mimosa, who was putting the finishing touches to Avalon's mane.

"He's perfect, Mimosa, you've excelled yourselves! I think that will definitely do the trick. Excellent," said Peekin, rubbing his hands together, as Mimosa blushed. "So, that's the Grips *and* Avalon, now. We're on schedule. Right, more practice." He turned back for the field.

"What's going on, Peekin?" asked Daniel in confusion.

"Avalon's coming with us tonight," he said, as they made their way back to the field.

"Why?" he asked. Peekin smiled mysteriously.

"All will be revealed later, my impatient little friend. Ok, hand him his sword, Barnaby. Oh, *all right*, just one more

doughnut but that's all; you'll spoil your tea.
Now, come on Daniel – *attack me!*”

CHAPTER 39

By the time Clementine ran into the field to announce that dinner was ready, Daniel was becoming quite proud of his progress. He could wield the sword a little now and had even managed to block some of Peekin's more unexpected attacks. He just hoped that it would be enough.

Daniel wondered what Giselle was doing at this moment. Was Nuttall briefing her on how he wanted the Battle to develop? Or was he helping her to choose the most lethal weapon in their store? Peekin had warned Daniel that they might not stick to the rules on weaponry, that Giselle might not come to the Battle with a sword. If they decided to choose something like that crossbow again, what use would the sword be to him? Daniel shuddered and tried to put it out of his mind. He checked his watch. They were only a few short hours away now. Already, the sun was sitting lower in the sky and the red moon was starting to appear on the horizon.

While they were practising, there had been a total of eight thunderclaps, signifying that the Battle was drawing nearer. Daniel could feel himself becoming more and more nervous as the hours went by. Even Peekin was beginning to look anxious and frown

lines seemed to have taken up permanent residence on his forehead. Only Barnaby seemed relatively relaxed. As soon as they had stopped practising, he had grabbed the sword and began to polish it carefully, ensuring that it was still sharp and that the handle was free from grease and debris. Now that they were walking back to the cottage, he was proudly holding it in front of him, securely placed in its scabbard, carrying it as if it were made of glass.

The trio walked into the kitchen, to find a huge banner had been draped from wall to wall, reading 'Good Luck, Daniel And Barnaby!' Clementine brought a plate of little cakes to the kitchen table, which was already groaning with food. Sitting around it were Mimosa, Dick (minus voice recorder) and Gabriel. Gabriel looked a little better than he had done earlier but he was still extremely pale. Daniel noticed that his hand shook as he reached for a glass of raspberry cordial and his arm was still heavily bandaged. Gabriel looked up hesitantly as Barnaby came into the room.

"Hi, Barnaby," he said. "How are you feeling? Would you prefer it if I left?" Taking a deep breath, Barnaby slowly walked over to him. He rested the sword on the table, between a plate of sausage rolls and a bowl of strawberries and stared intently at Gabriel. Concerned, Daniel, Peekin and Mimosa watched, as Barnaby sat down in the empty seat to Gabriel's right.

“I don’t blame you, really,” Barnaby said. “It wasn’t your fault. I know it was Nuttall.” He took Gabriel’s hand. “We’ve both lost our dads, haven’t we? And Giselle has, too. We should stick together.” Gabriel seemed lost for words. His eyes shone and he hugged Barnaby with his undamaged arm, keeping the watch well away from him. He looked over Barnaby’s shoulder and grinned in happy astonishment at Peekin, who, smiling proudly at Barnaby, clapped his hands.

“Well, what’s everyone waiting for? Let the feasting commence!”

No one ate very much, despite the fact that the food looked and smelled delicious. Even Barnaby only managed four doughnuts and two sausage rolls. While everyone picked at the food, Peekin ran through the itinerary for the next few hours, ticking each item off on a list that he produced from his tennis shorts. When he got to the final item, he glanced over at Gabriel.

“You know what you have to do, don’t you?” he said gravely. Gabriel nodded. “We’ll do all we can to get her back. I think we’ve got everything covered but you should be prepared for the fact that Nuttall won’t be expecting you to still be alive. Now, the Action Stations don’t switch on until Midnight, by which time, no matter what, Gabriel, you and I *cannot* be anywhere near the Battleground. However, we must ready ourselves for the possibility that Nuttall may still see you. He may be near Regna’s Hill

himself tonight; we don't know. I think he had another reason for trying to kill you, not only as punishment for saving Daniel's life." Gabriel looked at him in surprise. "Think about it," said Peekin, leaning forward. "You're next in line to the throne. In fact, you should have ascended the throne by now."

"I know," said Gabriel, "but I was only eighteen when my parents were murdered. I felt too young to take on what should have been Julius's role. I was never trained to be King. Anyway, for the last six months, I couldn't become King, in case Nuttall used his influence over me, to take over this side of Allapatria." Peekin nodded impatiently.

"If you died, who is next in line to the throne?" Gabriel considered. He frowned.

"Well, my sister, I suppose." Gabriel stopped dead and stared, wide-eyed, at Peekin. He looked totally shocked. "Of course!" he said angrily. "That's why he wanted me dead. He realised I'd never take the throne, so he decided to kill me and get me out of the way, so that Giselle could become Queen. That way, he'd have full control of the whole of Allapatria! She would just be a puppet ruler. He would tell her exactly what to do and she would just follow him."

"That's why you've got to be careful tonight, Gabriel," urged Peekin. "Nuttall won't give Giselle up lightly. If he *does* try to attack you again and I have to choose between saving you and saving your sister... " Peekin looked straight into Gabriel's eyes. "You

know what I will have to choose.” Gabriel exhaled.

“I know,” he said. “The chances of saving my sister are slim, especially as she will fight us every inch of the way.” Nodding in agreement, Peekin took out his pocket watch.

“Right, next task.” He glanced out of the window. The sun was setting over the stables and the full red moon shone down, casting its eerie glow onto the land.

“Daniel, how are you at horse riding?” Surprised, Daniel looked up from his chocolate ice cream.

“Er, I rode on a donkey about eight years ago when we went to Blackpool for the day.” Peekin rolled his eyes.

“Don’t teach you much in your schools, do they? Right, we’ll have to give you a crash course in Equine Studies. Gabriel, can you help us get Avalon ready?” Barnaby stayed behind to get changed, while Peekin, Gabriel and Daniel made their way to the field behind the stable.

“Why do I need to be able to ride a horse?” asked Daniel, frowning.

“It’s customary for Warriors,” said Peekin distractedly.

“I’m not a Warrior!” said Daniel laughing. “I don’t look anything like one!”

“You are now, I’m afraid,” said Peekin, looking grim. “Whether you like it or not. Come on, we’ve not much time.”

Gabriel called to Avalon, who immediately cantered towards him, whinnying

softly. Avalon's white coat and mane had taken on a soft iridescence in the evening light, enhancing the dappling effect on his back fetlock. Gabriel smiled his approval to Peekin at Avalon's appearance. Avalon nuzzled into Gabriel's shoulder, as Gabriel fitted the reins and saddle and showed Daniel how to mount the horse.

Once seated in the saddle, Daniel tried to remain calm, as Gabriel slowly led him round the field. Avalon seemed huge and was obviously intended to be the horse of a much taller rider. Daniel felt as if he was miles from the ground. Peekin seemed little more than an edgy looking dot below him, desperately trying to get out of the way of Avalon's hooves. Gabriel ran through the commands, then stepped back and let Daniel take over himself.

At first, Daniel got it spectacularly wrong. He mixed up left from right and couldn't make Avalon do as he wished. The horse appeared nervous and fretful and Gabriel had to keep calling out to him reassuringly. Gradually, however, Daniel began to get the hang of it and he felt Avalon start to relax and follow his lead.

"That's it! Now try a slow canter," called Gabriel. Daniel looked at him as if he were mad. However, after shouts of encouragement from Peekin and Gabriel, he urged Avalon into a gentle run. Before he knew it, he was galloping.

All at once, riding on Avalon seemed second nature to Daniel, as if he'd been

riding all his life. He seemed to know instinctively what to do. They raced through the lush, green field at tremendous speed, Avalon's hooves pounding the grass. Avalon seemed to be enjoying himself as much as Daniel. Daniel bent low in the saddle, urging the horse faster and faster. He was now even confident enough to look around as the scenery flashed by.

Avalon left the field, jumped over a small hedge and galloped into a neighbouring meadow. As they tore across the grass, the surroundings suddenly began to look familiar. Daniel had been in this meadow before, he was sure of it. He recognised the sweet, clean smell of the grass. Although twilight was falling over the land, the lush greenness of the meadow was still apparent and it was stirring a memory, the memory of his nightmare, when Avalon had rescued him from the terrible voice.

He called to Avalon and the horse slowed down and stopped. Daniel looked around him, his heart racing. Despite his brief time in Allapatria, he was growing very fond of it and it almost seemed like home to him now. It was incredible to think that a few days ago, he hadn't even known that it existed. Now, he was about to go into Battle to save it.

He turned Avalon around and faced the mountain range. It cast eerily jagged shadows onto the territory below it, an ever-present, dark, brooding force of malevolence. Somewhere over there was the owner of that

hideous voice, the voice of his worst nightmare.

Daniel sat upright in the saddle and faced the enemy. Everything seemed quiet on the mountains. There were no lights visible and no signs of movement. Yet, Daniel got the overwhelming feeling that they were waiting for something, readying themselves for what was coming next. He could feel their presence – sense that they believed victory was approaching – that they had already won. Daniel's face hardened.

"I'm going to do everything I can to beat you, tonight," he whispered, staring at the harsh peaks before him. "I don't know how I'm going to do that yet but I will." Behind him, Gabriel called out into the twilight to signal him back. With a last look at the mountains, he slowly turned Avalon around and headed for the cottage.

Avalon cantered back towards the stables, where Gabriel and Peekin were waiting. Daniel shouted a greeting as he reached them and climbed out of the saddle.

"It's time, Daniel," said Peekin solemnly. Daniel turned and looked gravely from Gabriel to Peekin.

"I know," he said, nodding. He took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

CHAPTER 40

Gabriel walked Avalon round to the front of the cottage, while Daniel and Peekin went into the kitchen. Mimosa was waiting for them. She smiled at Daniel and hugged him hard, as Peekin ran swiftly upstairs to change.

“We’ll be watching you on the Action Station the whole time,” she said, “so you won’t feel alone.” Together, they walked towards the front door.

Clementine and Dick were already in the hallway, Clementine trying to wipe away her tears before Daniel saw them. She hugged him even harder than Mimosa had done.

“Hopper and I know you’re going to win!” she said, her eyes shining. “We don’t doubt it one bit! We’ll be cheering for you all the way!” Daniel thanked her, remembering Hopper’s astonishment when he first saw Daniel. Somehow, he didn’t *quite* believe that Hopper really shared Clementine’s confidence but he thanked her all the same. Dick grabbed Daniel in a bear hug and squeezed him so hard that his lungs felt as if they on the verge of collapse.

Peekin came back downstairs, wearing his best three-piece sage mixture tweed suit.

Barnaby was two steps behind him, wearing a truly bizarre ensemble, consisting of yellow Hawaiian shirt, Khaki camouflage trousers, sunglasses and huge black boots.

"You may want to reconsider the sunglasses, as it's pitch black outside, my friend," said Peekin, turning and taking in Barnaby's outfit with a look of complete astonishment.

"Is the rest of it alright?" asked Barnaby, pocketing the glasses.

"Well, put it this way: you're certainly going to be unique out there tonight," said Peekin brightly.

"Really? Thanks, Peekin!" trilled Barnaby. He turned and frowned at Daniel's jeans and T-shirt. "Aren't you getting changed, Daniel?" he asked. Daniel shook his head. He just wanted to go now. The longer he had to think, the more nervous he was becoming.

Peekin opened the door and Dick suddenly darted forward, tapping Peekin on the shoulder.

"Ahem," said Dick. "I took the liberty of arranging a little treat before you go."

"Oh no," said Peekin, going pale. "Really, there's no..."

"A one, two, three, four!" squeaked a little voice and a cacophony of unbelievably out of tune instruments began to play a cross between a jolly Irish jig and a funeral march. Peekin stood in the doorway, a fixed grin on his face, as Dick happily hummed along and Barnaby tapped his feet, smiling fit to burst.

“Aren’t they *good?*” he whispered to Daniel, as Alvin’s Magnificent Mosquito Band buzzed around their heads.

“Er, they’re as unique as your outfit, that’s for sure,” said Daniel, surreptitiously trying to put his fingers in his ears, as an out of breath mosquito flew past him, frantically blowing on a tuba.

After almost a minute of torture, Peekin finally raised his hand to stop them, explaining that they all had to be on their way and everyone gathered round to say goodbye.

“I’m going to memorise every second and write a humdinger of a chapter on how I helped to train you, don’t you worry,” said Dick, cuffing Daniel on the arm affectionately. “I’ll edge it in black if anything happens to you – make it really classy!”

“Er, thanks,” said Daniel, as Peekin kicked Dick hard in the shins, then looked around innocently as, yelping, Dick spun round to find the culprit.

“Rheumatism playing up again, Dick?” called Peekin, strolling towards the garden gate. “You should have that seen to.” Mimosa pressed a small bottle of crushed Orchid juice into Daniel’s hands as he followed Peekin to the gate.

“Give this to Gabriel,” she said, “in case of emergencies. I know he can’t have a lot but he has a great deal to do tonight and a few sips won’t do any harm.” Daniel nodded. He stared intently at Mimosa. He wanted to tell her that he’d see her after the Battle but the

words stuck in his throat and he couldn't bring himself to say them. What if he *didn't* see her later? What if...

"Daniel." He turned and saw Peekin waiting for him. He was standing on the little lane outside the cottage, a hand outstretched towards him and smiling steadily, his large brown eyes fixed on Daniel's.

Behind him stood Gabriel, holding Avalon's reins. Gabriel was wearing a thick, black cloak for warmth but, despite this, he looked cold and pale in the crimson moonlight, his hands trembling slightly. The cloak fell back on his left arm to reveal the white bandage, marking the place where Nuttall had attacked him. Gabriel looked expectantly at Daniel, torment apparent behind his eyes.

"Come on, Daniel," whispered Barnaby behind him. "It's ok, I'll be there too." He carried the sword in his hands. Daniel nodded. He walked down the path and onto the road. Peekin grasped his arm.

"Trust me," he said. From behind him, Daniel heard Mimosa, Clementine and Dick shout their goodbyes, before going back inside to watch from the window. Peekin didn't want anyone venturing out in the night while he was away.

Daniel turned and had one long, last look at Damson Cottage, trying to fix the image in his memory, as a huge lightning flash rent the air. It lit up the surrounding fields, the thunderclap which followed resonating around Peekin's cottage. Daniel

turned his face away and joined Peekin and Gabriel on the other side of the gate, Barnaby following along behind.

Together, they made their way down the lane towards Regna's Hill.

CHAPTER 41

The little party walked down the narrow lane, passing the spot where Daniel had met the Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf. It seemed such a long time ago when he had tried to make his way back home – even longer when he had refused to believe in the existence of Peekin.

Loud croaking broke him from his recollections. Peekin tutted in disapproval, as two large frogs appeared on the lane in front of them, dragging something behind them that was snoring heavily. As they drew closer to the frogs, Daniel realised that they were pulling a drunk and sleeping Pixie along by the shoulders of her grubby pink leotard. Her blonde hair and pink tutu were matted with twigs and leaves and one of her wellies had been jammed onto her head. She was clutching a nearly empty bottle of black-currant cordial in one hand. magic twig was clutched in her other fist, the silver tinsel gently unravelling as she was towed along.

Pixie seemed to be slurring her way through a verse of the Peekin Song in her sleep. Daniel caught the words, ‘Peekin smells of stinky things’, as she was tugged past.

“Oh, just ignore her,” muttered Peekin angrily, mumbling to himself about finding some black market Pixicide as soon as he got back home.

They continued on in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Even Avalon seemed troubled. He kept rearing up onto his hind legs and it was all Gabriel could do to calm him down. The effort seemed to leave Gabriel exhausted and Daniel hastily tried to give him the bottle of crushed Orchid juice that Mimosa had prepared. Gabriel looked at the Orchid juice longingly but finally shook his head.

“Too risky,” he muttered, strengthening his hold on Avalon’s reins. Peekin took the bottle.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” he asked. Gabriel nodded vehemently.

“I have to, Peekin, it may be my last chance to save her.”

“Peekin, how do we even know that Giselle will turn up for the Battle tonight?” Daniel asked suddenly. “The last Battle was only a cover, to allow Nuttall to try and steal the key to the Half Stone. They might not even bother.”

“Oh, they’ll turn up alright,” said Peekin, looking grim. “Think about it. Nuttall tried to steal the key to the Half Stone – he failed. He tried to take you over the Mountains, then tried to kill you instead – he failed. This is one Battle that Nuttall will be determined to win, if only to prove to me and

all my fellow Allapatrians, on *both* sides of the Mountains, that he is powerful. He'll be here, somewhere and with him, will come Giselle, his champion. No, they'll be here. I'd bet my life on it."

"Peekin." Gabriel spoke softly. "We're here." Daniel looked up. They had arrived at the end of the lane and in front of them was a crossroads sign, each arm pointing to a different place: Puckton, Clearwater Heights, Sunset Rise and, right ahead, Regna's Hill.

The hill rose above them in the darkness. It was steep, with a swathe of trees and dense undergrowth on each side and a narrow path meandering upwards, out of sight. Peekin took out his pocket watch. It was a quarter to Midnight. He exhaled heavily, as thunder rumbled overhead.

"Right, here we go. We haven't got much time. I wanted to get here as late as I dared, to make sure no one got suspicious. Gabriel," Peekin stared at him intently. "You know that we have only got until Midnight. After that, the only people allowed on Regna's Hill are Defenders and Seconds." Gabriel nodded, looking apprehensive. "Now, last time, Giselle was two minutes four seconds early. Let's just hope that she's early again. If not, all our planning will have been a waste of time." Peekin turned to Daniel. "Ok, I need you to get onto Avalon and ride him up the hill, until you get to the very top. You'll find a clearing there. Wait there for Barnaby. Barnaby," he glanced over to him. "I'm afraid it's Shanks's Pony for you, my lad."

“Oh. Where is he?” asked Barnaby turning round in surprise. “You know I’ve never ridden a horse before. My teacher said I was far too...”

“I mean you’ve got to *walk* up there, you numbskull,” said Peekin, as kindly as he could. “Only don’t walk – *run!* Go now, you two.” Peekin reached up and hugged Daniel, as he prepared to jump onto Avalon. “I’m very, *very* proud of you,” he said gruffly. “We all are.” Gabriel helped Daniel onto the horse. He looked exhausted from the walk and his whole body was shivering.

“Daniel,” Gabriel gazed up at him. “If this doesn’t work and I can’t get my sister back, do whatever you have to, in order to keep yourself and Barnaby safe, alright? Do you understand?” Gabriel stared at him, his green eyes unnaturally bright. “*Whatever* you have to do.” Daniel nodded, frowning. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“Daniel, Barnaby, it’s getting late. Good luck.” Peekin saluted them smartly. “Go!”

He stared after them as they departed up the hill, Daniel racing up on Avalon, Barnaby going as fast as his plump little legs would carry him, holding the sword in his hands. “Told you not to eat so many doughnuts!” Peekin yelled, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. He took a deep breath and yelled at the top of his voice. “See you when it’s over!”

He watched until Daniel was out of sight and Barnaby was a quarter of the way up the hill. Then, Peekin lightly touched

Gabriel's arm. "Right, let's get this over with," he said, his mouth set in a firm line. They hurried into the undergrowth and began to make their way up the hill. A lightning bolt smashed into the ground above them.

CHAPTER 42

Daniel reached the top of Regna's Hill and looked at the countryside below. He was much higher up than he'd expected to be. He could see little pinpricks of light all around him, marking out houses and cottages and the oppressive blackness of the mountains ahead.

The top of the hill was just a huge circle of bare rock, utterly devoid of grass or vegetation and as wide as half a football pitch. Dense forestation lined each side. Shortly before he and Avalon arrived at the top, he'd seen a lightning bolt explode onto the rock and this was repeated as he reached the top of the hill, the place where the Battle would be fought. Before long, the lightning was coming every few seconds, striking the same point on the hill each time.

Daniel had expected Avalon to be frightened by the lightning but, if anything, he seemed more at ease now that they had reached the top and was far less edgy than he had been on the journey to Regna's Hill. Daniel was glad. He was no match for a horse as large as Avalon and he didn't fancy being injured by flying hooves before the Battle had even started.

He jumped down from the saddle and stood next to Avalon, holding the reins softly in his hands and stroking his sleek mane. Avalon's coat had taken on a pale iridescence in the blood red moonlight, giving the horse an ethereal quality. His tail swished from side to side, leaving silvery trails in the air.

Daniel looked down the hillside for Barnaby but he was nowhere in sight. Another lightning bolt slammed into the hill behind Daniel, making him jump. He nervously checked his watch - eleven forty-nine.

"Come on, Barnaby, hurry," he whispered to himself. It began to rain.

* * *

Peekin checked his pocket watch. Eleven forty-nine. He glanced round anxiously.

"Where are they?" he said, scanning the undergrowth. Two full minutes went by. Gabriel was sweating, his skin pale and clammy. He leaned against a tree, trying to compose himself. Peekin glanced worriedly at him, then forced Gabriel to have a few sips of the Orchid juice, watching him carefully for signs that Nuttall was taking control once more. Gabriel waited for a few moments, then nodded in relief. It was still safe. He closed his eyes, his breath coming in gasps. Peekin frowned to himself. It had taken Gabriel almost all his energy just to climb the hill. It would take him a lot more to accomplish his

next task. It was even more unlikely if those damn Grips –

“No, you *can't* take ‘em off, Broddlethrup, you look dead fetchin’ in ‘em! They go really well with your Balaclava; brings out the colour of yer eyes! Anyway, that’s best sticky tape, that is; that’s *never* comin’ off! Just be thankful we never made you wear that dress. We’re savin’ that for the Gripville Arms tomorrow.” Hysterical laughter, followed by an indignant muttering, floated up the hill.

“Oh, heaven be praised,” murmured Peekin, clutching his chest in relief. The grimy, tarpaulin-covered cart hove into view, pushed by the Grip Battering Squad. As usual, they were well dressed for the occasion, each sporting a black Balaclava, with their names etched in lime green ink and wearing an odd assortment of green clothing. Each carried a knobbly club. Broddlethrup, however, also had a pair of red frilly undies jammed on top of his Balaclava, liberally attached with several metres of clear sticky tape. His face was almost as red as the undies.

“Sorry we’re a bit late,” said Gallipot, smiling broadly at Peekin. “Only Broddlethrup ‘ere threw ‘imself into a ditch, to try and get out of comin’. We got ‘im out though, eh, lads?” Padstock and Pinvin grinned and nodded. Gallipot suddenly spotted Gabriel.

“‘Ere, you’re not gonna start throwin’ me round again are ya, your Princeliness?”

he asked, staring at Gabriel and taking a step backwards. "Pinvin 'ere told me it was you what did it the last time and if you think I'll put up with that again, you've got another think comin'." Gallipot drew himself up to his full, miniscule height and gave Gabriel his best glare. Gabriel ignored him. He still had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily.

"'ee all right, Peekin?" asked Gallipot, gesturing to Gabriel and frowning.

"I hope so," muttered Peekin. He squeezed Gabriel's arm, then ran to the Grip cart and tore off the tarpaulin, quickly scanning the contents.

"All there," said Gallipot proudly. "Now, you're *sure* we don't 'ave to pay our fines after this? 'Cos if there's any doubt, we're off."

"Gallipot, if this works, I'll see that you never have to pay a fine again." Peekin grinned and grabbed a handful of fireworks and tapers, checking his pocket watch as he did so. Eleven fifty four. "These are *definitely* slow burning fireworks?" demanded Peekin, staring at Gallipot, eyes narrowing. Gallipot nodded. "Right then, everyone," Peekin said, his mouth set in a determined line. He began to hand round the matches. "Six centimetre wicks on all the fireworks; that should be enough. No more, no less, all right? Ok then – get lighting!"

CHAPTER 43

Daniel scoured the hillside for Barnaby. He couldn't see any sign of him and it was growing later and later.

"Where's Peekin?" he muttered in agitation, beginning to pace up and down. Maybe *he* knew what had happened to Barnaby and the sword. He looked into the undergrowth for signs of Peekin or Gabriel but it was far too dark to see anything. Avalon followed, seemingly unconcerned, despite Daniel's tension. Daniel walked to the edge of the stone circle and gazed down the hill. Barnaby was nowhere to be seen. Daniel had already tried shouting but the thunderclaps were unbelievably loud now and it was impossible to make himself heard.

Avalon wandered to the grass, which grew at the side of the stone circle and began to gently crop it, ignoring the rain, which by now had soaked Daniel to the skin. Daniel's hair clung to his head and the rain lashed against his face, making it hard to see even a metre in front of him. He checked his watch again, uselessly trying to shield it from the rain. Eleven fifty six. Four minutes before the Battle and, like Paris, he was without a weapon. "No," he muttered his emotions almost overwhelming him.

He was meant to be a Fixer, whatever that was. He was meant to rectify the wrongs of the last Battle and save Allapatria and his own world. How could he do that without a weapon? Not that actually *having* the sword was much better. He wasn't exactly an expert. But it was certainly better than nothing.

A terrible thought suddenly coursed through his brain. What if being a Fixer meant that you had to sacrifice yourself? What if he was meant to die tonight, in order to save Allapatria? Was that why Barnaby hadn't arrived with the sword? Had Peekin called him back and told him that Daniel had to go to the Battleground unarmed, like Paris?

"BARNABY!" Daniel yelled desperately into the night. The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand on end. He checked his watch. Eleven fifty seven. *Surely* part of the plan wasn't to leave him like this?

Daniel began to feel very alone and extremely vulnerable. A sound reached his ears as the last thunderclap died down. It was the sound of horse's hooves coming towards him. He swallowed hard and tried to look through the rain. A black horse and black-cloaked rider were hurtling up the hill at an incredible speed, straight towards the top. His heart sank. "Oh no," he whispered.

CHAPTER 44

“AARGH!” Pinvin suddenly dropped his lit taper on Gallipot’s sleeve and dived for cover.

“What’s wrong?” asked Gallipot, frowning and hastily trying to put out his jumper, which was now beginning to smoulder. He glanced around in the direction in which Pinvin had been looking. “AARGH!” Gallipot also dived for cover and joined Pinvin on the ground.

“What are you two blockheads doing now? We haven’t got time for this,” yelled Peekin, throwing two lit fireworks into the cart. Pinvin and Gallipot gazed up at him, jabbering in fear. They pointed down the hillside. “*What?*” asked Peekin irritably, staring through the trees. His eyes suddenly widened. “She’s early! Gabriel!” Peekin grabbed Gabriel and gently shook him. “She’s here!”

“She who? It’s Shadow!” shouted Padstock, looking nervous. He had also joined the other two Grips on the forest floor. Only Broddlethrup continued to light the fireworks, gently humming to himself, his earlier embarrassment apparently forgotten. The red frilly undies had been securely taped around his ears, making it difficult for him to

hear anything. He was blissfully unaware of the situation unfolding around him.

Gabriel's eyes opened and he staggered over to the edge of the forest. He stared out, just in time to see a black-cloaked rider on horseback, beginning an ascent of the hill.

"Ok, I need everyone to start pushing the cart up the hill, towards the top," called Peekin. "It's only a few metres. *Hurry!*"

"Now, 'ang on a mo, you never said nothin' about Shadow," Gallipot said, backing away. Peekin turned to him, his tiny teeth bared.

"If you don't, the deal's *off!*" Gallipot opened his mouth to argue, then, seeing Peekin's face, closed it again. He nodded sharply and pulled Pinvin and Padstock to their feet.

"You 'eard 'im! *Push!*" They grabbed Broddlethrup, who yelped in surprise and the Grips began to push the Grip cart, which was filled with now smouldering, glowing fireworks, up the hill. Gabriel followed, undoing the cloak as he walked. His movements were painstakingly slow.

They drew level with the top of the hill and saw Daniel restlessly pacing up and down, Avalon wandering behind him. Peekin did a double take.

"Where's Barnaby?" he shouted in horror. Daniel heard his voice through the storm. His head shot round and he began to run towards Peekin.

"I don't know! I thought you'd all left me here!"

“Stay there!” roared Peekin, holding a hand out to stop Daniel. “You’ll give the game away.” Daniel nodded, relief washing over him. Now that he knew Peekin was nearby, things didn’t seem so bad, despite the ever-louder sound of galloping hooves approaching.

Pinvin, meanwhile, was, for once, ignoring Daniel and staring open-mouthed at the Grip cart in horror. Several of the fireworks were dangerously close to exploding. “Hurry, Peekin!” he squeaked, dancing from leg to leg. Peekin turned his attention to the cart, eyeing the fireworks warily. He swiftly turned to Gabriel and took a deep breath.

“Ready?” Gabriel nodded. He removed the cloak and it dropped to the floor. “Come on, closer, closer,” Peekin urged, as the rider galloped nearer.

“Peekin,” warned Gallipot, stepping away from the cart, “they’re gonna go any second...”

“When I say go, I want you to push the cart out in front of Shadow, ok?” said Peekin. “No time to argue,” he said, putting up a hand, before Gallipot could complain. “Ok, ready...GO!” With an almighty push, the Grips shoved the cart out through the undergrowth and onto the grass, below the bare expanse of rock. The rider continued up the hill, just as the cart flew across the ground, right in the path of the black horse. The rider signalled to the horse to dodge round it but the cart mysteriously changed

direction and hurtled towards the horse once more.

As the horse drew level with the cart, the first of the fireworks exploded with an ear-splitting shriek. Multicoloured sparks filled the air and rained down onto the rider. This first onslaught was followed by an even louder bang, as fireworks began shooting left and right, whizzing and screaming. The black horse reared onto its back legs, whinnying with fright, as a particularly loud firework exploded near him. The horse bolted towards Daniel, the rider desperately trying to cling to the reins with one hand, while the other held a sword aloft. Again, the cart followed, stopping right next to the horse. Another loud bang and the horse wrenched itself free, throwing its rider, who landed hard on the bare stone and lay there temporarily stunned, as the horse galloped back down the hillside. The sword skittered along the stone and landed several steps away from Daniel, who, frozen in shock, stared numbly at the fallen rider.

Gabriel, screwing up his energy, dashed out into the rain, towards the black figure. He knelt down and gently removed the hood, trying to shield the pale face within from the downpour. Long dark hair tumbled across his hands.

“Giselle,” he called softly, his voice breaking with emotion, “it’s me. It’s Gabriel.” The rider stared blankly up towards him, violet eyes unfocused, a once beautiful heart-shaped face covered in scars and weals.

Beneath the black cloak was a fine silver choker, with a glossy black oval stone lying in the hollow of her neck. The stone suddenly began to glow, changing colour from jet black to a deep purple. Immediately, she shouted and tried to get up, fighting against her brother, who was too weak to hold her. She savagely pushed him to the floor and ran towards the sword. Gabriel shouted hopelessly after her and staggered to his feet. Peekin, dancing with tension, swiftly checked his pocket watch.

“Less than a minute, Gabriel,” he called in agitation. Daniel meanwhile, was staring at the sword lying on the floor close to him. He debated whether to pick it up, in case he had to protect himself against Giselle, who thought that she was still Shadow. Giselle slowly began to advance towards him, her eyes flashing from the sword to Daniel. She gave Daniel a look of pure hatred. Then, she ran for the sword.

Avalon looked up as she approached and gently whinnied, as Daniel ran to the sword, standing in front of it, in a vain attempt to block Giselle’s attack. He swallowed hard, his heart in his mouth, just as Avalon trotted towards Giselle, whinnying in greeting. The horse stood in front of her, gazing at her with soft, brown eyes and gently nuzzled her arm as she passed. The markings on his back fetlock stood out prominently against the shining white coat. Giselle stopped dead. Avalon trotted after her and nuzzled into her again. She breathed out

heavily and stared at the dappling, her body trembling spasmodically.

“Thirty seconds, Gabriel,” Peekin called. Gabriel got to his feet and dashed towards Giselle, urgently calling to her, as the lightning smashed into the rock above them.

“It’s Avalon, Giselle; you remember him, don’t you? Paris’s horse. You rode Avalon every day. You gave him his name.” Giselle stared at Avalon, who butted her hand and gazed at her in adoration. Almost imperceptibly, Giselle moved her face towards him.

“Avalon,” she whispered, her voice husky, as if from lack of use. She turned towards Gabriel, who watched her intently, desperately trying to reach her. Her eyes temporarily lost their clouded appearance and, for a few seconds, she appeared to recognise Gabriel. Then, the stone glowed again and her eyes became unfocused once more. She lashed out and tried to strike Gabriel, eyeing him balefully. Gabriel stared at Giselle in shock. He saw the black stone glow again, this time with more intensity. Giselle shrieked and hurled herself at Gabriel.

“Nuttall,” whispered Gabriel, incensed. He ran to her and, with one swift movement, wrenched the choker from her neck and threw it into the undergrowth. Giselle screamed and fell to the floor. Gabriel knelt by her and softly stroked her scarred face.

“Please remember,” he whispered. Giselle stared at him, her eyes slowly

focusing and losing their clouded appearance. She blinked. Her hand moved towards his face and he gently kissed her cheek.

“Gabriel,” she said, gazing into his eyes. She suddenly looked frightened and stared around the hilltop in confusion. “What’s happening? Where am I?” Gabriel grabbed her and hugged her to him hard, his eyes filling with tears.

“You’re home, Giselle and you’re never going away again.”

“Gabriel, ten seconds.” Peekin stood on the edge of the forest. “I’ve already sent the Grips back down,” he said. “We need to leave. *Now.*” Daniel was about to question Peekin, to ask him why they had to go, when there wasn’t going to be a Battle now, when he heard a shout. It was Barnaby. He was breathing heavily and running up the hill, as the last of the lightning bolts hit the ground.

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” roared Peekin above the accompanying thunderclap. He ushered Gabriel and Giselle, who were clinging to one another, into the forest. Gabriel called to Avalon, who swiftly followed. “Stand in your designated area,” shouted Peekin urgently. “RUN, BARNABY!” Peekin disappeared into the forest, as Barnaby dashed onto the stone, gasping for breath. He found the darkened section of lodestone, which marked out the elected spot for the Second in the Battle and threw the sword, still in its scabbard, to Daniel, who caught it

neatly. The thunder and lightning ceased and the rain stopped.

“Sorry, Daniel, my shirt got caught on a bramble and it was ages before I could free it in the dark, then it started to rain on me, so I ran into the forest and then I got a bit lost.”

“It’s ok, Gabriel’s got Giselle. We don’t have to fight!” shouted Daniel, almost weak with relief. “I suppose all I had to do was stand here and make Shadow come to fight me, so she could be rescued. I’ve fixed everything! We can go home.”

A golden spark shot across the stone and continued along the ground. It formed a perfect circle, enclosing Daniel in fire and separating him from Barnaby, who called out to him frantically. Flames shot upwards, reaching around a metre in height. Confused, Daniel stared at the fire.

The thunder and lightning began again; this time, lightning bolts scorched the sky, marking out the place where the Battle was to be fought. “No,” whispered Daniel, as he and Barnaby gazed into the sky in bewilderment. “There’s no Battle, there’s no one left to fight.”

“Au contraire,” said a low voice from behind them. “Hasn’t Peekin, that ridiculous little creature, taught you *anything*? If a Defender is incapacitated, the Second takes their place. I’m Giselle’s Second, Daniel. Didn’t you know? Now you have to fight me.”

Daniel spun around, dreading the sight that he knew he was about to face. There,

holding Giselle's discarded sword, was
Nuttall.

CHAPTER 45

“Judging by the look on your face, you weren’t aware of that simple fact, were you?” Nuttall slowly removed his cloak and threw it onto the ground.

He was immaculately dressed, completely in black, with every hair in place. Smiling, he carefully weighed the sword in his hand. “A fine weapon,” he said in appreciation, watching as it glinted in the red glare of the moon, the circling flames making strange patterns on the blade. “Do you know something, Daniel?” said Nuttall, his attention still on the sword, “this weapon has won every battle it’s ever been in. Isn’t that interesting?”

“You don’t control Giselle anymore,” shouted Daniel quickly. “Your plan didn’t work. You’ll never rule all of Allapatria now.” Daniel took a deep breath. “Gabriel’s still alive!” he roared triumphantly above the thunder. “So you might as well give up – you’ve failed.” To his surprise, Nuttall began to laugh.

“Really?” he said, cutting through the air with the sword and admiring the movement of the blade. It resonated eerily. Nuttall smiled and repeated the action. Daniel’s elation began to fade. “I must admit,

Daniel, it was a shock to hear that Gabriel had survived. I was *sure* I'd killed him. I had planned that Giselle would kill you tonight, then, with Gabriel dead, I would reveal her as the rightful ruler of your side of Allapatria. With Giselle as Queen, it would have been easy to join the two Half Stones together. However, things change." Nuttall smiled steadily at Daniel. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I most certainly have *not* failed. Not even remotely. Look around you, Daniel. You see the circle of flames? It shows that Allapatria still wants this Battle to be fought. Once I have won the Battle, I can rightfully claim the Half Stone in the School. Then, my side will have all the power of Allapatria. All that I have to do is defeat you. So, as you see, Gabriel's death is now quite irrelevant. Yours, however, is not."

He turned to Daniel and stared into his eyes. Daniel felt the familiar sensation of losing control. He slowly lowered the sheathed sword, letting his arm fall to his side. The leather scabbard thudded dully onto the rock. Daniel began to question his feelings towards the man standing in front of him. Was he an enemy or...

"Daniel!" A shout from behind him broke his trance. He turned to see Barnaby gazing at him through the flames. "Don't look at him, Daniel," Barnaby pleaded, one arm outstretched. Stunned and shaking, Daniel brought up the sword again, breathing hard.

"Hold your tongue, Dawson," hissed Nuttall, glaring at Barnaby viciously, "or I'll

see you go the same way as your father. Now," the same measured voice returned, "to business. I admire you, Daniel," said Nuttall smoothly. "You have great courage. I think that you would have made an excellent pupil. Pity. Now, turn around."

"What?" asked Daniel in bewilderment. Nuttall walked two paces forward.

"I said, turn around."

"Why?" said Daniel, staring at him in confusion. He took a step backwards.

"As I said, Daniel, I admire you. Consequently, I'm going to grant you a painless death. You won't even have to see the blow. Now, *turn around.*"

"No," said Daniel swiftly, taking himself by surprise. Even Nuttall looked temporarily stunned. The stunned look was rapidly replaced with the same unnerving smile. He stared intently at Daniel and slowly inclined his head.

"As you wish." Nuttall began to walk towards him. "How long have you been a swordsman, Daniel?" Nuttall asked in a casual voice, as he came towards him, his sword slashing at the air. It swished menacingly. Daniel hastily unsheathed his own sword, his heart pounding. "Ten minutes, is it now?" Nuttall's eyes filled with scorn. "I've been a Master swordsman longer than you've been alive."

Daniel quickly threw the scabbard aside and stood in the position that Peekin had taught him. He couldn't believe it. Hopper had said that Shadow was acting alone,

without a Second but he'd obviously been mistaken; Daniel was *still* going to have to fight. So much for being a Fixer, he thought bitterly. The Battle was still going to take place.

Daniel's sword felt unbelievably heavy but he tried to hold it as Peekin had instructed. The blade was dazzling in the blood red moonlight. What next? He desperately tried to remember. Thrust? Parry? He'd forgotten what the words meant. His mind was blank.

"Focus," he whispered to himself.

"Yes, focus, Daniel. These are the very last moments that you have to live. Enjoy them."

Nuttall towered above him. He brought the sword down hard towards Daniel's head. Daniel took a deep breath and raised his sword above him with both hands. It clinked heavily against Nuttall's blade, blocking the attack but jarring Daniel to the core. The manoeuvre took Nuttall by surprise.

"Very good, Daniel, I'm impressed," he said and smashed the sword down again. Daniel only just managed to bring his sword up in time and he fell clumsily onto one knee, as Nuttall's sword crashed against his own.

"Get up, Daniel, get up," yelled Barnaby in agitation. Daniel rose to his feet but, already, Nuttall had reacted and, this time, he aimed for Daniel's side. Daniel dived out of the way and tried to return the attack but his sword just jabbed uselessly into the air. Nuttall turned and, before Daniel could

respond, Nuttall's sword sliced towards him again. He felt the edge of the blade cut into his stomach through his T-shirt and he fell heavily onto his back. Nuttall laughed softly and spun around to face him.

"You're bleeding," he said. Eyes wide, Daniel looked down to his stomach. Sure enough, a thin line of blood was soaking through his white T-shirt. He gasped in horror. "It needn't have ended this way, Daniel," said Nuttall lazily, raising his sword. He brought the tip towards Daniel's throat and rested it in the hollow of his neck. Daniel tried to raise himself up onto his elbows but Nuttall's sword prevented him from moving. The tip of the sword pressed harder against his skin and Daniel slammed his own sword down onto the ground beneath him, trying to lever himself backwards, away from the pressure of Nuttall's blade.

Daniel's sword made contact with the stone circle and blue sparks swiftly shot up into the sky, towards the lightning bolts. The blue sparks plummeted back down to the ground and streamed into Daniel's sword, rapidly coursing through the blade and forming tiny rivulets of iridescence in the metal. Then the rivulets flowed into Daniel's hand. Daniel began to feel as if he was floating. A loud buzzing filled his ears. Nuttall was saying something to him but Daniel couldn't make out the words.

A bright white flash suddenly engulfed the space between Daniel and Nuttall, completely surrounding Daniel. He could

hear Barnaby calling to him from somewhere far away. It sounded as if he was crying. Daniel tensed and waited for the blow that would end his life but none came. The pressure on his neck was relaxed. Maybe it's already over, Daniel reasoned. Nuttall must have killed me. This must be what it feels like to die. Maybe I'm already dead. He gazed into the bright light. It was nowhere near as terrifying as he had expected death to be.

Suddenly, the bright light disappeared. Dazed, Daniel tried to make his eyes work but the light had dazzled him and, for a while, he couldn't focus. He blinked hard and looked round. Daniel found himself in the same position as before. He was lying on his back, a sword blade in front of him. But it was no longer piercing his neck. It was held at a different angle: across his body.

Daniel reacted immediately. He brought up his right hand, ready to attack but found to his horror, that it was empty. Nuttall was still in front of him, sword in hand but he now had a strange look upon his face: mute fear. Confused, Daniel stared at the weapon that was held, perfectly still, across his body. It was Daniel's own sword.

Holding Daniel's sword was a large hand, attached to a muscular looking forearm, within a black leather sleeve. Daniel shook his head in disbelief. What was happening? A loud, clear voice suddenly called out from behind him into the night sky.

“Xavier Nuttall. What a *pleasant* surprise.”

CHAPTER 46

Daniel gazed upwards in shock. Standing over him was a man, around the same age as Gabriel and as tall as his own father, wearing a leather jacket and jeans. His brown hair was wet and clinging to his forehead and he was smiling broadly. He held Daniel's sword in his right hand, protecting him from Nuttall. The man was pleasant-looking and strong, giving the appearance of having been training for this moment all his life.

"Paris." Nuttall sounded breathless. "No," he said, uncertainly, "you're dead."

"Really?" Paris smiled and looked at his hand, flexing the muscles in his arm, before turning his attention back to Nuttall. "Apparently not," he called out in a cheerful voice. Paris looked down at Daniel. "Hi," he said, casually, before turning back to Nuttall. Daniel cautiously mouthed the word 'hello', and then craned his head back to Barnaby, who was looking every bit as shocked as Daniel felt. This was surreal – insane. Maybe he was going mad.

"Should have guessed you'd do something like this, Xavier. Just your style: picking on someone smaller than yourself. You haven't changed, have you?" said Paris. He walked round Daniel and strode

purposefully towards Nuttall, who began to back away. “Mmm, nice sword, this – got a good feel to it,” said Paris in appreciation, taking his eyes off Nuttall and glancing down at the sword which had, until two moments ago, been in Daniel’s hands. Nuttall spied his chance. He advanced towards Paris and swung his sword hard.

Paris swiftly brought the sword up and blocked it easily. He laughed. “You’re so predictable, Xavier. You have remembered that swords are my favourite weapon, haven’t you?” he asked in a relaxed manner, as if nothing had happened. “It’s been a few years since I was a pupil at Eponymous Hildegarde but I’m sure you haven’t forgotten. I always excelled at swordplay, didn’t I? So much better than you, as I recall. Remember that end of term tournament? Bet you still have the scar.”

Paris’s face hardened and he smashed the sword down hard against Nuttall’s blade. Both men were of equal height and Paris gazed into Nuttall’s eyes with pure hatred. The two swords clashed together and Paris lunged at Nuttall, pushing him backwards. “I swore I’d get my revenge, remember, Nuttall?” said Paris through clenched teeth. Paris lunged again and again, his sword repeatedly smashing into Nuttall’s. The attack was relentless, the speed of the onslaught breathtaking. Both men were excellent swordsmen but it was obvious, even to Daniel, that Paris had the upper hand from the beginning. Nuttall rapidly began to

tire but Paris was remorseless and slashed at him ferociously.

Finally, Paris smashed his sword down and Nuttall barely blocked it, falling hard onto one knee, as the force of the blow jarred though his arm. He dropped his sword. Paris kicked Nuttall to the ground, pushing the fallen blade out of reach and stood above him, the point of Daniel's sword against Nuttall's neck. A small line of blood appeared beneath the point. Nuttall, breathing hard, stared up at Paris, his eyes darkening. He held Paris's gaze, Nuttall's eyes becoming liquid pools and deepening in colour. Paris stared straight into them for a few moments, then laughed scornfully.

"What are you trying to do, Xavier? Hypnotise me? You know I was always immune to that."

Paris moved closer to Nuttall and towered above him. His voice was so quiet that Daniel had to strain to hear it.

"I swore I'd seek revenge for the murder of Gabriel's family. Eponymous may not have believed me but I heard you congratulating the man who ordered their deaths, on a job well done. I warned Eponymous of what you'd become but he ignored me. Then you stole my bow. So now I have two reasons to kill you." Nuttall gave a short bark of laughter.

"I admit that stealing your weapon *was* a master stroke but, sadly, it was not I who stole it. I cannot take the credit." Paris gazed down at him in disbelief. "As for killing me:

Paris, if you were going to do that, you would have done so by now. We both know that you would never kill an unarmed man and I am, as you see, unarmed.”

Paris’s lip curled with hatred, his grip tightening on the hilt.

“That was always a failing of yours,” Nuttall continued, straightening his shirt. “You were always so honourable. You should realise by now that honour doesn’t get you anywhere.” Nuttall slowly eased himself backwards, away from the tip of the sword. He sat up slightly.

“Neither does deceit and betrayal,” hissed Paris. “*Look* at you. What have you achieved? All this planning, all your effort, has come to nothing. Once the Defardian Council has you, what good will your plans be then?” Again the short bark of laughter rang out. Nuttall casually dusted off his hands, carefully checking for abrasions.

“Paris, you flatter me. You think *I* am responsible for the uprising? You believe *I* could have put in motion the energy and power needed to take back your half of the Opal Moonstone?” Paris frowned, momentarily lost for words. “I’m not *quite* ready for such greatness, although that will soon change. No, someone much more powerful than I is responsible for those great achievements. All will be revealed soon, Paris – have patience.”

Nuttall swiftly reached into his shirt pocket and produced a black, oval jewel, similar to the stone in Giselle’s choker. He

slammed it into the rock before Paris had a chance to react. The stone glowed purple and there was a sudden loud humming, which resonated through the hilltop. Daniel could feel the rock vibrating, sending shockwaves through his body. Paris gave a yell, as a brilliant, purple flash temporarily blinded him.

He lashed out with the sword but the blade hit stone. Clutching his stomach, Daniel sprang to his feet and raced across to Paris, to try to prevent Nuttall from reaching his sword while Paris recovered. Paris opened his eyes and shouted in anger, slamming the sword down hard onto hilltop. The circling flames died out and the storm abated. Paris roared out into the night.

“He’s gone! He’s just disappeared. I didn’t even know that there was a ley line on Cedar Hill to allow him to do that!”

“We’re not on Cedar Hill, er, Paris,” said Daniel awkwardly. “We’re on Regna’s Hill. That’s my sword you’re holding.”

“What?” said Paris in distraction, still looking round for Nuttall. He suddenly grasped what Daniel was saying and spun round, looking at the scenery for the first time.

“What am I doing on Regna’s Hill?” he demanded, flashing a puzzled look at the weapon and gazing at Daniel. “Where’s Gabe?” Barnaby staggered up to join them.

“Gabriel?” said Daniel uncertainly. “He’s...”

“Where’s Shadow?” shouted Paris, in sudden remembrance. He began to scour the top of the hill in angry confusion.

“It’s ok, Shadow’s with Gabriel,” reassured Daniel, as Barnaby nodded in agreement, his eyes wide. “Only she’s not...”

“Shadow has Gabriel?” Paris gave a panicked shout and ran over to the other side of the hill. Daniel desperately ran after him, calling out his name.

Almost immediately, however, Paris returned, his face deeply concerned. He sprinted towards Daniel and Barnaby and turned his back to them.

“Stay behind me,” he called out in a harsh whisper. Daniel frowned.

“Wh...” Paris didn’t need to explain further. Over the top of Regna’s Hill, came around forty large, heavily built *creatures*, beings that Daniel had never seen before. They had large, bulging eyes and dark green, slimy looking skin. Their noses were flat and below them were long, sharp spiky teeth. Their heads and bodies were lumpy and speckles of yellow and brown festooned their stomachs and backs. Each carried a large club with rows of razor sharp spikes haphazardly driven through. They spotted Paris and came jostling towards him, grunting and wailing.

“Xavier came mob handed,” said Paris, raising his sword. “Stay behind me,” he repeated urgently. Daniel watched, his heart sinking, as the hordes lurched towards them. Paris was an outstanding fighter, it was true,

but what use was one sword against forty clubs? Daniel scanned the hilltop for another weapon and saw Nuttall's sword, still lying on the ground, several metres away. He moved towards it but he was too late.

Barnaby grabbed Daniel's arm, trembling, as one of the creatures picked up the sword with interest and began to wield it about its head. The creature glared at Paris, and then ran at him with surprising speed, yelling and swinging both the sword and its own club as it went. Paris, breathing heavily, held his sword aloft and prepared for the attack. The creature darted at him and Paris smashed the flat side of his sword against the creature's face. Stunned, it fell backwards, knocking over the creature immediately behind. There was a loud wailing sound to Paris's right. He spun round, just as one of the creatures swung his club at him. Paris ducked out of the way and pushed Daniel and Barnaby further down the hilltop, the creatures beginning to close in around them.

"Stop right there," came a familiar voice from behind. Barnaby and Daniel snapped their heads round in surprise. It was Peekin. But not *just* Peekin. Standing in a line behind them were around twenty Defardian elves, all looking strikingly similar to Peekin and dressed in three-piece tweed suits of various hues. The Elves were gazing idly at the creatures, as if bored by the whole thing. One Elf was even reading a newspaper and yawning. "I don't think that it would be a

good idea to continue, do you?" called Peekin, glancing at his pocket watch. The creatures briefly halted, staring at Peekin watchfully, then advanced again.

"Oh well, have it your way," Peekin said, sighing. "You Kroggs really *are* tiresome." Each Defardian Elf raised a hand and made a flicking motion towards the Kroggs. The creatures halted mid run, as if frozen. Then, each Krogg slowly rose up into the air. They spun round, gazing stupidly at each other as they turned, their large green feet uselessly dangling in the air. The Elves motioned with their hands again and the army of Kroggs began to pick up speed and sailed towards the dark mountain range, several hundred metres behind them. Moments later, forty dull thumps and forty muffled yells could be heard, sounding as if forty large Kroggs had just made contact with the side of a Mountain.

"Right, then, Peekin, if that's everything, we'll be off," said the Defardian Elf standing to the right of him. The Elf removed his glasses, placing them in the top pocket of his jacket, then smiled over at Daniel, Barnaby and Paris. "May I be the first to congratulate you all," he said grinning. "A most excellent job. It's good to see you safe and well, Paris; you were greatly missed."

"Missed?" said Paris, frowning. "I haven't been anywhere."

"Er, I think we'll just get you back to the cottage and debrief you there, Paris," said Peekin hastily, as the other Defardian Elves

lined up next to a large Oak tree. One of the Elves took out a brightly coloured shard, identical to that which Peekin had used in Daniel's room. He held it against the tree and each Defardian Elf then slowly passed through the trunk.

"Ok, I think we should make a move, too," said Peekin. He grinned at Daniel and Barnaby and hugged them both. "Didn't I say to trust in me, Daniel?" he said smiling from pointy ear to pointy ear. Peekin checked the wound inflicted by Nuttall's sword. "Only superficial: little more than a cat scratch. Won't even leave a scar," he said nodding in satisfaction. "You dodged those blows well; I was impressed."

"You saw me?" asked Daniel in surprise. "I thought you had to get off the hill."

Peekin smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out a little red plastic machine.

"Portable Action Station," he said tapping his nose. "Perk of the job. I was watching from the bottom of the hill. You gave me quite a scare towards the end, I can tell you, Daniel. Then, when Paris appeared...Well!"

"Peekin," urged Paris, grabbing the Elf's arm, "we've no time for this. Shadow's got Gabriel. We have to find them."

"Gabriel's absolutely fine," said Peekin, reaching up onto his tiptoes and patting Paris on the arm. "Well, he's *going* to be fine, anyway, once he's had about a bucketful of

crushed Orchid juice. You two have a lot to talk about, though,” he said gravely. “He’s waiting for you at the cottage. I had one of my colleagues take him back. He looked done in.”

“Ok but there’s still Nuttall,” said Paris in anger, scanning the top of the hill. We can’t let him get away.”

“All in good time,” said Peekin, smiling up at Paris. “He may have evaded us for the moment but we *will* find him. He’ll no doubt be back on his own side now. I don’t think they’ll be happy with him after tonight, though. No, they won’t be happy *at all*.” Peekin chuckled. “For now, let’s just concentrate on getting you all back to the cottage. *No arguments*.” He pointed to Paris, who nodded reluctantly.

“I shouldn’t have waited,” Paris muttered. “I should have...”

“You should have done what?” reasoned Peekin, “killed an unarmed man? Not exactly an honourable thing to do, is it and certainly not your style, Paris. You would have regretted it for the rest of your life. No, you did the right thing.”

“Doesn’t make me feel better, though, Peekin. He was right there and he was going to kill someone half his size. Nuttall has never cared about honour. If I hadn’t been there, he would have killed...er, Peekin,” Paris suddenly stopped and gestured towards Daniel and Barnaby, frowning. “Who *are* these two?”

“Oh, of course! You haven’t been introduced, have you?” said Peekin laughing. He seemed almost giddy with happiness. “Paris, this is Barnaby, Malthus’s son.” Paris shook his hand warmly, smiling down at him.

“I can see the resemblance now. Your father was a brave man. You’re obviously just like him, Barnaby.” Barnaby gave him a watery smile. He looked absolutely stunned.

“This is Daniel,” said Peekin, gesturing to him with pride. “He’s a Fixer; he brought you back. Never mind, I’ll explain later,” Peekin said, laughing at Paris’s blank look.

“How did I come to have hold of your sword?” Paris asked in confusion. “I don’t even remember picking it up.” He tried to hand it back to Daniel, who shook his head at once, backing away. It was far safer in Paris’s hands.

Peekin smiled at Paris and began to descend the hill. “There’s someone else that I think you’ll want to meet,” Peekin said as they walked, “and that person is also waiting for us at the cottage. Come with me and I’ll show you.”

CHAPTER 47

“Aren’t we going to use one of the ley lines?” asked Paris, turning back to face the hilltop. Peekin shook his head.

“We’ve a lot to talk about before we get back to the cottage. Can you give me a hand with Daniel and Barnaby?” Daniel’s wound had begun to sting and Barnaby still had a look of utter shock on his face. “I think they’ve been rather exhausted by this evening’s events. I doubt either of them will make it back unaided.” Paris grabbed Barnaby, who looked as though he would collapse at any moment, while Peekin helped Daniel retrieve the scabbard for his sword.

“I should have known that the sword needed to connect with the hilltop. Stupid of me,” said Peekin, reaching down for the scabbard. “Although the power of the sword actually came through you. Did you know that? There’s something about you, Daniel that I have yet to work out. The connection couldn’t have been made by anyone else. Only you could have brought Paris back.”

“Why did they just use a normal sword?” Daniel asked, frowning. “It hadn’t been modified at all.”

Peekin grinned.

“They thought you were going to be a soft target, so I don’t think that it occurred to them to modify the sword in any way,” he said. “I think you really surprised Nuttall. I had no idea he was going to be the Second again, though. All reports coming to the Defardian Council were that Shadow didn’t have a Second this time. To be honest, I had no idea what was going to happen tonight.” Peekin shook his head in wonder, “and I don’t think Nuttall had, either, although it won’t take him long to work out that you’re a Fixer after tonight’s events, Daniel. The Defardian Council is going to have to keep a *very* sharp eye on you in future. Good thing you live on a ley line; at least we can monitor you properly.”

“Peekin, you know Nuttall was Giselle’s Second and he said Seconds take over if something happens to the Defender?” Peekin nodded. “Well, why weren’t you training Barnaby as much as me, then?” Daniel asked, frowning. “You said that Barnaby’s role was just to look after the weapon and to protect me while I trained. You didn’t say anything about how he might have to take over if anything happened to me. What if Barnaby *had* had to take over? He wouldn’t have been prepared.” Peekin cleared his throat and looked to the sky for inspiration.

“Er, that would be because we’d all read Barnaby’s Swordsmanship report from school,” Peekin said, lowering his voice. “Don’t forget, it was Allapatria that chose you and Barnaby, not the High Council. After I

read his report, I decided that, if anything happened to you, I may as well hand over the keys for Damson Cottage to Nuttall myself.” He smiled. “Let’s just say that Barnaby’s talents lie elsewhere. In saving lives, for example. Twice, in your case.” Peekin looked up at Daniel and lightly touched his arm. “You were extremely brave here tonight, you and Barnaby. You could have run away but you didn’t. That took a lot of courage and we are all of us in your debt. Thank you, Daniel.” Daniel didn’t know what to say.

They rejoined Paris and Barnaby and began the descent, passing the burned out Grip cart, which still had a couple of gently smouldering fireworks at the bottom.

“Where are the Grips?” asked Daniel looking round in surprise. “Are they just going to leave their cart up here? I thought they were really possessive with their stuff.” Peekin smiled.

“They’re going to pick it up some time tomorrow, or whenever they sober up. I gave them an official notice from the Council to put up in the Gripville Arms. I’m allowing special licensing laws: they can stay open all night, tonight. They went straight back to Gripville to tell everyone the good news. They didn’t say whether they were going to allow Broddlethrup to take his red frilly undies off, though. Long story,” he said, smiling at Daniel’s blank look. “I’ve also promised to pay for a new Grip cart for them. That one’s useless now and...”

“Did you just say that the Gripville Arms is open all night?” interrupted Paris, turning round in interest.

“I think you and Gabriel will have a lot to talk about tonight, Paris and the Gripville Arms isn’t necessarily the best place to do that in,” said Peekin stoutly. “Anyway, I have some questions for you.”

“For me?” asked Paris, looking surprised. Peekin nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Nuttall knew the man who had Gabriel’s family killed?” Paris stared at Peekin in shock. He stopped dead in his tracks.

“You mean Eponymous didn’t tell you? I *begged* him to notify the Council. I thought you knew.” Peekin shook his head, looking angry.

“Eponymous and I are going to have a very serious talk very, very soon,” he said. “Tell me what happened.” Paris put his arm more securely around Barnaby and began to explain as they walked.

“OK, you know I wasn’t exactly what you’d call a *model* pupil at school?” Peekin rolled his eyes and nodded, trying not to smile. “Well, lights out for older boarders at Eponymous Hildegard was eleven o’clock and, by my final year, I was sick of having to go to bed so early.” He gave Peekin a wicked grin. “So, when everyone was asleep, I used to sneak out of the dormitory and go skateboarding.”

“Paris!” Peekin tried and failed to sound shocked. “Oh and I know about your

snowboarding adventures on Skylac Mountain; Gabriel told me, so that's off limits from now on." Paris looked crestfallen. "Continue," said Peekin bossily.

"Where was I? Oh, yeah, - skateboarding. I found a passageway out of school that no one else seemed to know about. It was near the kitchens, behind one of the large tapestries. I found it by accident when I had to clean all the tapestries on the ground floor when I was in detention once." Peekin raised an eyebrow. "A couple of days after Gabriel's family were murdered, I decided to use it. Gabriel had been sent home to help organise the funeral arrangements and I was at a loose end. I was going towards the kitchens, when Nuttall came out of his study, so I hid and waited for him to go past. I thought he was doing his nightly rounds; you know, checking on the first years. Anyway, he didn't go near the dormitories. He went behind the tapestry and into the passageway. So, I followed him out. I wondered if he was meeting a girlfriend or something, thought I could blackmail him into not giving me extra homework by threatening to tell everyone about her." Paris suddenly looked angry. "He went into the Arboretum, waited for a few minutes and eventually a man appeared."

"What did he look like? Did you see him?" asked Peekin. Paris nodded, then suddenly frowned in surprise.

"Actually, I can't remember exactly. It's strange because I'm usually really good with faces but I suppose it was over five years ago.

Funny that I can't remember *anything* about him at all, though." Peekin muttered to himself, shaking his head.

"That's what Malthus said, too." Paris squeezed Barnaby's shoulder. "Malthus met someone over the Mountains but he couldn't remember what he looked like." Peekin motioned to Daniel. "And you had a dream about a man, too, didn't you but couldn't describe him. Something very strange is going on over there. Sorry," he waved distractedly, "carry on." Paris's eyes darkened.

"Nuttall embraced the man like a brother. He told the man how happy he had been to hear that Gabriel's family had been killed and how much easier things were now going to be without them." Peekin halted and looked at Paris.

"So didn't they mention anything about Giselle?" he asked in wonder. Paris looked blank.

"No," he said in surprise, "he just said that they were all dead, as we already knew." Paris looked sad for a moment. "You remember how they left the Castle – what state it was in. There wasn't much left of anyone to identify, anyway, apart from Gabe's parents and Julius, of course. They'd left their faces unmarked, to make sure that everyone knew they had been killed."

"Then, Nuttall mustn't have heard about Giselle at that point," muttered Peekin. Paris stared down at him in surprise but Peekin motioned to him to continue. "Nuttall

said his only regret had been to hear Gabe hadn't been home at the time. In fact, we'd *both* spent the weekend at the castle but I had to get back to school early because I had some homework to finish. Gabe decided to return with me. Gabriel never forgave himself for that," Paris said quietly. "He felt as if he'd deserted his family in their time of need. They'd have killed him too, though, if he'd been there. The castle was completely overwhelmed, nobody survived. Anyway, once I heard all that, I raced back to Eponymous' study and told him everything but he wouldn't believe me. He said I'd made it up because Nuttall was always giving me detentions and that I just wanted to get him into trouble. I persuaded him to go to Nuttall's room, to at least prove to him that Nuttall was missing." Paris slashed at the air in anger. "There must be another passageway into the school that I don't know about because, by the time we'd got there, Nuttall had returned. He was sitting in his study, marking books, with a big smile on his face and looking as if nothing had happened. Eponymous made me apologise to Nuttall and I got a week's detention for leaving the school without permission. Nuttall loved that."

They reached the bottom of Regna's hill and began walking up the road that lead to the little lane in front of Damson Cottage.

"So what happened then?" asked Peekin.

“I begged Eponymous to tell the Defardian Council; at least warn them of what Nuttall was doing. I tried every day for weeks and eventually he agreed. But he must have just said that to make me leave him alone. I thought you were monitoring him. I didn’t realise you hadn’t been told.” Paris angrily lashed out at a dead branch with the sword. “If Eponymous had told you, we could have done something about Nuttall long ago.”

“Why didn’t your father or Gabriel say anything to me?” asked Peekin curiously.

“My dad was a field operative when I was in school, remember? He couldn’t have done anything about it. He only joined the High Council a few months ago, after he damaged his leg, falling off that ladder.” Peekin nodded. “But my dad told Malthus because Malthus was Head of the Committee of Elders back then. Malthus said there was no point in taking it further because it was just Nuttall’s word against mine. I had no real proof and Malthus thought that it would just look as if I’d made it up because I was caught outside without permission. As Nuttall was a respected teacher and my school reports were never fantastic, Malthus and my dad felt that there was no point telling the Defardian Council. I wouldn’t have been believed. So, I tried to keep an eye on Nuttall myself, thinking that at least Eponymous had told you that Nuttall couldn’t be trusted.” Paris glanced over at Peekin. “As for Gabe, I didn’t tell him. You know what he was like then, Peekin. He was

devastated by what had happened to his family. It was good that you lot in the High Council didn't pressurise him into becoming King and left him as Crowned Prince. It was Julius that was trained to be King, anyway, not Gabriel. He needed time to come to terms with his new role and I didn't think he needed the extra hassle, especially as we were only weeks away from leaving school for good. I went to see Nuttall and swore to him that I would get my revenge and made sure Gabriel never went anywhere alone." Paris looked at Peekin. "I *still* want my revenge, Peekin," he said. "I want to track Nuttall down. Tonight." Peekin held up his hand.

"No. We need to formulate a plan. We *will* find him, Paris," he said as Paris began to argue, "but not tonight. You disappeared five nights ago; there's a lot of people who want to see you."

"Why does everyone keep saying that I disappeared?" asked Paris in astonishment.

"Because it's *true*." Peekin looked at him in surprise. "You have no recollection of where you've been?" Paris shook his head.

"One minute I was facing Shadow, the next, I'm on a completely different hill, about to attack Nuttall. Do you know what happened?"

"I'm not sure," Peekin said. "There have been a lot of things happening lately that has the Defardian Council, well, the entire High Council, actually, very confused."

Lights suddenly appeared in the lane ahead of them. Behind them, around forty

people were swarming excitedly towards the exhausted little group.

“The welcoming party,” said Peekin, sounding pleased. Paris grinned and quickly ran his fingers through his hair. One of the people detached herself from the large group and came running towards Paris, crying hysterically. She had long, sandy coloured hair, streaked with grey and wore a flowing, wispy red dress. An extremely tall, bearded man with a cane followed her, walking with a pronounced limp. He looked extraordinarily like an older version of Paris.

The woman threw herself at Paris, sobbing violently. She looked worn and fatigued, as if she hadn't had much sleep in the last few days.

“Hiya, mum, are you ok?” Paris said, hugging her and grinning.

“Good to see you, lad,” said the man gruffly, hugging both of them. “You gave us a real shock, you know. We thought you were dead. You fought extremely well tonight; I was very proud.”

“Thanks, dad,” said Paris, as the rest of the group came towards him. Everyone was talking nineteen to the dozen and milling around Paris, Peekin, Daniel and Barnaby in excitement. Peekin had to keep hastily jumping out of the way of their moving feet. Paris's father slowly made his way over to Daniel.

“I can't begin to describe how grateful my wife and I are for what you've done for us tonight,” he said, clearing his throat, his eyes

shining. "I am eternally in your debt." His wife fell on Daniel and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you," she said tearfully, "for returning my son." They both turned back to Paris, who was looking somewhat confused at everyone's reaction towards him.

Barnaby, meanwhile, was grinning with happiness and going red with delight at the congratulations that he was receiving. He had taken his sunglasses out of his pocket and was now proudly wearing them, despite the darkness of the night, while offering to sign autographs.

Daniel, however, suddenly found himself wishing that his mum and dad were here and felt a swift pang of homesickness. Although he was being praised and thanked by what felt like scores of people, it wasn't the same as having his own parents around him. No doubt, his mum would be complaining that blood was very hard to remove from white T-shirts but, right at this moment, even that reaction would have been welcome. He was grateful, therefore, when Peekin eventually raised his voice to the throng.

"Thank you for coming, everyone," he said loudly, "but I'm afraid that, even on this special night, we must be vigilant. It's no longer safe to roam the lanes at night, so I must ask you all to return home, for your own safety." Behind the group, a Defardian Elf appeared, holding a shard. After further hurried goodbyes, the group began to make their way towards the Elf, who tapped a tree

trunk with the shard. The trunk seemed to turn to water and those nearest the trunk began to pass through it and disappear.

“Are you coming back with us for tonight, Paris?” asked his mum, looking anxious. She smoothed his hair down and, grinning, Paris immediately ran his fingers through it again, restoring it to its previous spiky appearance.

“I’m afraid, Mrs Armstrong, that Paris needs to fill out some official Council forms and attend a debriefing at my cottage, tonight,” said Peekin, eyeing Paris. Paris’s father nodded swiftly, hugging his son goodbye, then began to pull his wife towards the tree trunk but not before she managed to give Paris one more kiss.

“We’ll expect you for lunch, tomorrow then, son,” Paris’s father said. “Your brother will be there as well.” Paris rolled his eyes, then nodded, waving until they disappeared into the tree trunk.

“What forms?” he asked, turning to Peekin, eyes narrowed. Peekin gave him a knowing smile.

“There aren’t any,” he said, “but, as I told you earlier, there’s someone waiting in the cottage and, for the moment, we’re trying to keep it a secret.” Paris looked confused. Peekin paused for a few moments, then gazed up at him.

“Paris, something happened just before Midnight, before the Action Stations came on, that no-one else saw,” he said gravely. Peekin took a deep breath. “We got Giselle back

tonight. She's the secret." For a few seconds, Paris stared at Peekin in total shock.

"*Giselle?* Giselle Arc'Allatain? *Gabriel's* sister? No, she's dead! She was murdered five years ago, Peekin. You know that as well as I do." Peekin smiled at him.

"She's in the cottage with Gabriel. Go and see for yourself." Paris shook his head in mute astonishment. He stood completely still, looking bewildered, his breath coming in gasps. He silently handed the sword to Peekin and made a bolt for the cottage. He was briefly stopped by Dick, Mimosa and Clementine, who came running down the lane. They fell on him, hugging him hard and chattering in excitement. Paris untangled himself as politely as possible and sprinted to the cottage, flinging open the door and calling to Gabriel and Giselle. Daniel suddenly had a thought.

"Peekin, wouldn't it have been easier to just magic Giselle off the horse? Why did you need the fireworks and the Grips?"

"It was because Giselle was being controlled by some sort of power already," Peekin explained. "I wasn't sure what would have happened to her if I'd used my abilities on top of whatever mind control Nuttall was using. I could have injured her and made everything worse. That was always my last resort, which, fortunately, wasn't needed. I must admit to giving the Grip cart a little helping hand, however." He grinned. "I needed to be sure that the fireworks would do their job properly. Everything worked

rather well tonight, I think, don't you?"
Peekin smiled happily, as Dick, Mimosa and
Clementine continued down the lane towards
them.

CHAPTER 48

Daniel sprinted up the lane as fast as his worn out legs would go and flung himself at Mimosa, hugging her hard.

“I’m so pleased to see you again,” he said, his eyes bright. “I was worried I wouldn’t be coming back.” Mimosa put her arms round him and guided him back up the lane. She gently placed her hand over the wound left by Nuttall’s attack and, all at once, Daniel felt a warm sensation pass into his skin. The flesh actually felt as if it was knitting together again. When he glanced down at his stomach, the only indication that he had been wounded was in the line of blood and the tear in his T Shirt.

“There’s another T Shirt already waiting for you on your bed,” she said, as he smiled his thanks.

Before Daniel knew it, they were being ushered through Peekin’s garden gate and up the little path. Daniel stood at Peekin’s front door and stared for a moment at the little cottage. Not so long ago, he wondered whether he would ever see it again. Yet, here he was. Exhausted, he smiled to himself. He had done it.

A sudden loud buzzing took everyone by surprise.

“Oh no,” whispered Peekin. A cloud of mosquitoes descended into the little front garden. There came the sound of a tiny inhalation of breath.

“A one, two...”

“Not tonight, thank you,” said Peekin firmly and pushed everyone into the hall, slamming the door.

Everyone trooped inside, scents of hot chocolate and doughnuts filling their nostrils. Soon, the dining room was filled with voices, congratulating Daniel and Barnaby and asking Paris myriad questions, most of which he couldn't answer.

Paris couldn't take his eyes off Giselle. When Daniel walked into the dining room, he found Paris kneeling beside her, talking to her quietly and holding her hand. He looked stunned. He gently cupped her face in his hands and stared anxiously at the scars, which criss-crossed her cheeks and forehead. She was still wearing some of the black garb that characterised Shadow, her long dark hair cascading onto her shoulders. Giselle was leaning against Gabriel, who had his arm wrapped around his sister, as if he never wanted to let go of her again. He was looking much better, sipping a large glass of crushed Orchid juice, with a huge jug filled with the shimmering blue liquid on a little table next to him. He stared from his sister to his best friend in euphoric, stunned silence.

Giselle's memory of her life as Shadow seemed to have been completely wiped from her mind. In fact, she didn't appear to

remember anything of the last five years at all. On two separate occasions, she asked Gabriel when they were returning to the castle to see their parents and brother. Each time, Gabriel quickly changed the subject.

Clementine and Dick shied away from Giselle and continually glanced over towards her, looking terrified. Giselle sat in the corner, as close to her brother as she could possibly get, nervously looking about the room. With the exception of Gabriel and Paris, she didn't know anyone and she was becoming worried by the wary glances that she was receiving.

Eventually, it was Barnaby who resolved matters. He walked over to Giselle, cautiously at first, staring keenly at her. The room fell silent and all eyes were fixed on the pair. Gabriel looked tense and gazed worriedly at Barnaby, as he took a deep breath.

"Do you remember my dad?" he asked abruptly, staring into her eyes. Surprised, Giselle looked up at him. "His name was Malthus Dawson. He came over to your side a few months ago." Barnaby paused. "He was killed over there."

"*My* side?" whispered Giselle in bewilderment. "I'm sorry, I don't understand." Her voice still sounded hoarse. She turned to Gabriel for help and he smiled at her, squeezing her shoulders. She shook her head and gazed at Barnaby, her eyes filled with sadness. "I'm so sorry to hear that he

was killed,” she said. “It must be terrible to lose your father.”

She took his hand. Barnaby flinched at her touch and looked for a moment as though he would wrench his hand free. Gabriel and Peekin watched in concern and Daniel held his breath. Barnaby stared at Giselle for a long time, as if checking her reaction. Finally, he nodded.

“I’m Barnaby,” he said. “Barnaby Dawson.” He swallowed hard. “Pleased to meet you.” Giselle smiled gently at him, as Peekin looked on, beaming at Barnaby with pride.

“It’s an honour to meet you, Barnaby,” said Giselle. “Gabriel told me how brave you and Daniel were tonight.” She suddenly looked tired. Mimosa came forward and smiled tenderly at her.

“We’ve prepared a room for you,” she said. “It’s right next to Gabriel’s, so you won’t be far away from him. Paris will be sleeping just down the hall from you, too. Would you like to come and see it?” Giselle looked uncertain but Gabriel smiled at her and took her hand.

“You do look tired, Giselle. I’ll come up with you and see you’re safe.” Paris seemed reluctant to let her go but he eventually kissed her cheek and she left the room with her brother.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Paris confronted Peekin.

“Where’s she been? What happened to her?” he asked, his voice breaking with

emotion. "Who did that to her face?" He gestured in anger at Dick and Clementine. "And why are you two so scared of her?"

Peekin began to speak but Mimosa intervened.

"Gabriel will explain everything once he comes back down," she said soothingly, then turned to Peekin. "I put a mild sleeping draught into Giselle's hot chocolate," she said. "She'll sleep deeply for a few hours. While she's resting, I'll see to her scars. By the time she wakes up, she'll look the way she used to, before she was taken. As for her memories, I don't know whether they will come back. I hope they don't; she must have seen some terrible things in the last five years." Mimosa left to prepare her tinctures, as Gabriel returned.

"She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow," he said smiling. He walked over to Paris and embraced him.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he said shakily, swallowing hard. Paris smiled.

"Nah, you can't get rid of me that easily. I would like to know what's been going on, though. You look terrible, Gabe. What's happened to you?" Gabriel glanced over at Peekin.

"We're going for a walk," he said. "I think there's a lot that I need to explain to Paris." Peekin nodded and stood up.

"Before you do," he said breezily, "I just need to borrow your right arm, Gabriel, if I may." Peekin grabbed hold of Gabriel's wrist and motioned over the watch with his left

hand. There was a sudden, loud hissing sound and the watch immediately slid from Gabriel's arm, falling with a dull thud onto the floor. As Daniel stared at the watch, he thought he could make out a tiny orange and black creature, rather like a bulbous snake with venomous fangs, trying to emerge from the back of the watch. Gabriel gazed in astonishment at Peekin for the briefest of moments, before slamming his heel onto the watch, crushing it to smithereens. He stared down at the smoking debris and shouted in triumph, before turning back to face Peekin.

"I thought you said you couldn't..."

"Gabriel," said Peekin, looking smug, "you didn't *honestly* believe that Nuttall had outwitted me, did you? I couldn't remove it before the Battle – it was far too dangerous. If Nuttall had realised that you had managed to find a way to disable the watch, he might have killed your sister. I had to wait until it was all over, much as it pained me to do so." Paris, meanwhile, was staring from Peekin to Gabriel as if they'd both gone mad.

"Gabriel," he said in disbelief, "that was the watch your dad gave to you! What did you do that for? You love that watch!"

"I'll explain on the way," said Gabriel grinning, as he led Paris towards the kitchen door.

"Check on Avalon as you pass the stables." said Peekin, filling his pipe. "He's dying to see you, Paris." Paris spun round.

“Avalon’s here?” he said joyfully and dashed out towards the stables, Gabriel following.

“He’s got a friend, too,” called Peekin, as they went out to the stable block. “Giselle’s black horse followed her back,” he said. “She can’t remember him at all but she’s determined to keep him. She’s calling him Midnight, apparently. Quite appropriate, given the circumstances.” Peekin chuckled to himself and lit his pipe.

For the next hour, the little group ate doughnuts and drank their way through several cupfuls of hot chocolate each. Dick bored them all silly with memorised extracts of his life story, until Peekin yelled at him to shut up.

Peekin then took Barnaby and Daniel down to the Action Station room and showed them their Battle. Daniel was shocked at the ferocity of Nuttall’s attack on him and even more astounded that he’d been able to defend himself as well as he had. He asked Peekin to fast forward over the part where he was injured, however; experiencing it once had been bad enough.

“Right then,” said Peekin, slapping his hands together as the Action Station switched off. “We need to see about getting you two home.”

“*Home?*” said Daniel in surprise. Peekin nodded.

“Go and change your T Shirt, Daniel; we don’t want your mum panicking when she sees that blood. I’ll get Dick to mend it for

you- he's a dab hand at sewing and I'll send it on to you later via Barnaby's mum. Your mum wanted to come and meet you tonight, by the way, Barnaby but I thought it would be safer for her to remain at home, at least until we know where Nuttall is. Well, come on, chop, chop, Daniel," said Peekin, sounding impatient. "It wasn't so long ago that you were desperate to go back home and now, here you are, dragging your feet!"

Daniel slowly made his way upstairs, past the portraits of Peekin's odd-looking relatives and into his room. He flicked on the light.

"Do you know what time it is?" squeaked a tired and angry-sounding little voice from the light bulb.

"Sorry," said Daniel hastily. He was surprised to find that, despite missing his parents, he really didn't want to leave. In spite of his initial doubts and his terrifying evening, he had really enjoyed being with Peekin in the little cottage. He wanted to stay.

Daniel quickly changed his T Shirt, this time the correct size, and went over to the window, opening the curtains. There were the Mountains, still oppressive and heavily tinged with foreboding. Daniel stared into the night and wondered where Nuttall was at this moment.

"I won," he whispered, gazing over at the spiky black peaks. "I told you I would." As if in reply, the howl of a Black Ridge Mountain Werewolf rent the air, drifting from

the mountains and chilling Daniel to the bone.

“You’re right,” said a voice from behind him. Peekin came to join him at the window. “We won this Battle but not the war. Have you seen the moon?” Daniel stared up at it. It was no longer totally red but was now a bright, silvery grey, outlined with a narrow ring of deepest crimson. “Allapatria is content for now,” said Peekin. “But all is not yet *fully* resolved. Those over the Mountains haven’t been defeated completely but at least you’ve made them think twice about taking over. You showed them that they won’t find it an easy task to accomplish. I think we’re safe for a while.”

“So will there be more Battles?” Daniel asked.

“You mean, will Allapatria choose more champions?” Daniel nodded and Peekin gazed at the moon for a while before answering.

“No,” he said musingly. “I don’t think so. But something is going to happen. I can feel it.”

“How did I bring Paris back?” Daniel turned round and gazed at Peekin in wonder. “I thought he was dead. Where’s he been for the last few days?” Peekin smiled.

“I’m afraid I don’t know the answer to either of those questions,” he said, sounding tired, “and something tells me I have a lot of sleepless nights ahead of me, while I try to find out.” Peekin frowned. “You’re a Fixer, Daniel; that’s all any of us know. As to the

rest – well, I expect that knowledge will come in time.” Daniel looked down to find that Peekin was holding his console. “Want this?” he asked, turning it over in his hands. Daniel looked at it. It was no longer recognisable as a console. It was now just a charred, mangled blob of melted plastic. Daniel shook his head. The last thing he wanted in his possession was anything that reminded him of Dr Xavier Nuttall.

“Well, I’ll put it in my study for now, until I decide what to do with it. Maybe the Grips will take it off my hands,” said Peekin hopefully. “I’ll tell them it’s really valuable. Right, let’s get going, then.” He held the door open for Daniel.

Daniel gazed back into the room for a few seconds, then walked out towards the staircase. He stared at the wall in front of him. The large, blackened mark left by his console was no longer visible. Instead, there was a new strip of almost straight wallpaper hiding the evidence.

“Well, Dick did as good as job as he ever does,” said Peekin with a brave smile. Daniel grinned and began to descend the staircase.

CHAPTER 49

Barnaby was waiting for Daniel at the bottom of the stairs, his bags already packed. Just as Peekin went to open the front door, Gabriel and Paris returned, looking worn out. Judging by their appearance, it was clear that there had been some kind of altercation between them while they were outside. Both men were pale and Gabriel seemed more dishevelled than he had done before he left the cottage. His shirt was badly torn around the collar, as if someone had grabbed hold of him in anger.

“Well, Gabriel?” asked Peekin, looking anxious. “Have you told him everything?” Gabriel nodded in exhaustion.

“I can’t believe Nuttall turned Giselle into Shadow,” said Paris, his blue eyes glinting in anger. “First thing tomorrow, I want to start tracking him down.”

“And the rest?” Peekin asked gently. Paris slowly exhaled. He looked at Gabriel for a long time. Gabriel held his gaze.

“I wish you could have told me, Gabriel, we could have worked out a way to get Giselle back together. But, if I’d seen you struggling with Shadow at the bottom of Cedar Hill, I *would* have intervened. I would have fired. The idea that I could have killed

Giselle...” He shuddered. “She’s very precious and it’s Nuttall that’s to blame in all this. They still used an illegal crossbow, which might have been hard for me to defeat, not to mention that watch. But to take my bow, Gabriel...I could have been killed.” Paris was uncharacteristically serious, staring straight into Gabriel’s eyes. “We can never let Nuttall, or anyone else, get between us from now on. There’s too much at stake.” Gabriel nodded in agreement.

“Paris told me that Nuttall knew the man who ordered the attack on Ddraig castle *and* the fact he kept that to himself for five years,” said Gabriel. “We’ve sorted a lot of things out tonight.” Paris gave him a ghost of a smile. Peekin, reassured, smiled up at them both.

“Well, everything worked out in the end, so I think we should just be thankful for that, if nothing else. Everything worked out,” Peekin repeated, as Paris looked as if he was about to argue. “Let’s just forget about it and carry on. It’s not over yet.” Paris nodded, watching Gabriel, a slow grin spreading across his face.

“Right then, Gabe, I think we deserve a celebratory drink,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Fancy coming down to the Gripville Arms? Peekin’s extended their licence; we could go and have a couple of...”

“Not tonight,” said Peekin, sounding firm. “I need to check out a few things before anyone goes out in the dark alone. I’m serious, Paris,” he said, jabbing a forefinger

at him as Paris tried to argue. "Don't make me confiscate your snowboard."

"Well, you've got to come home with me, tomorrow, then, Gabe. My mum and dad have asked me round to lunch and Marcus is going to be there, too. He'll bore me to death if you don't; you know what my brother's like. We could take Giselle with us – my parents would love to see her, once they've got over the shock that she's still alive." Peekin shook his head.

"I think we should keep Giselle to ourselves for a while, until we decide what to tell everyone," he said firmly, "and, indeed, how much Giselle herself should be told. By the time the Action Stations switched on, she wasn't in sight, so we've bought ourselves some time. Only the Defardian Council knows about her at the moment. As for Gabriel – he will be needed elsewhere tomorrow, I'm afraid, Paris." Paris looked at him questioningly. "I still have to report your actions to the High Council, Gabriel," said Peekin. Gabriel lowered his head and nodded in silence. "I'll have to leave it up to them to decide as to whether they take up proceedings against you." Paris looked aghast.

"That's *ridiculous*! I'm ok with it, so why can't we leave things as they are? We've sorted it out between ourselves, now." Gabriel grabbed his arm.

"It's fine, Paris; it's what I expected. Look, we'll talk about this later, ok? Now isn't the time."

“Yeah, well, I won’t change my mind,” said Paris stoutly.

“It isn’t just down to you,” Peekin reasoned. “Gabriel committed an act of treason when he stole your bow, regardless of the circumstances surrounding it and therefore jeopardised your life, as well as the security of two worlds. Anyway,” Peekin said, eyeing Paris, who looked set to argue the point all night, “there’s another reason we have to go to the High Council tomorrow. You’re needed there too, Paris, and your father. He’s already been informed.” Peekin looked at the two men. “The Council has decided to put forward a motion to open the Latavla Vaults. We’re going to take a vote on it tomorrow.” Gabriel’s eyes widened and Paris gasped.

“Are you serious?” said Gabriel. “People have gone mad down there! I thought the Vaults weren’t safe.” Peekin nodded his head in agreement.

“It’s a risk we’re having to take,” he said, looking sombre. “All the oldest writings are down there; the most ancient documents in Allapatria. We in the Council have no real idea of what just happened, nor of what will happen next and that’s a dangerous position to be in. It won’t take Nuttall long before he knows as much as we do about Daniel and we need to start arming ourselves for anything that may follow. We can’t afford to find ourselves in a situation where the other side know more than we do. Besides,” said Peekin, “Nuttall isn’t the only person that we

need concern ourselves with. There is someone over the Mountains even more powerful than Nuttall that we know little about. We need to discover who he is. Quickly. Revenge on Nuttall will have to wait.”

“Peekin, I swore I’d...”

“Paris,” interrupted Peekin, looking up at him. “Many a fine Warrior has lost himself in his desire to seek revenge. Don’t become a slave to your obsessions. Nuttall is merely a servant over the Mountains and we need to defeat his master. Nuttall can wait. Anyway,” he said swiftly, as Paris opened his mouth to argue, “we’ll discuss all that later. I need to get these two home safely. Daniel, Barnaby, have you two got everything?” Daniel started in surprise. He’d become so engrossed in the conversation that he’d completely forgotten that he and Barnaby were meant to be going home.

“Can’t we stay until you’ve opened the Vaults?” he asked hopefully. “If there’s stuff in there about me, I should be able to see what it is. I want to know what happens to Gabriel as well.” Peekin shook his head.

“If you don’t leave here in the next hour, the Almanac reckons you and Barnaby will be stuck here until October and I doubt very much that Barnaby’s mum could come up with a good enough excuse as to where you both are, Daniel. People generally don’t spend three months at a theme park. I think your mum and dad would start to worry, don’t you? Come on – time to go. ”

Daniel nodded reluctantly, as Peekin shouted to Clementine and Dick, who came hurrying out of the dining room. Mimosa appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and everyone crowded round to say goodbye. Mimosa hugged Daniel and Barnaby especially hard.

"I'm going to miss you two," she said, smiling, with tears in her eyes. Dick promised to send them each a signed copy of his memoirs and Clementine, blushing furiously, gave them both a kiss. Daniel felt his own eyes filling with tears and he angrily tried to blink them away, as Peekin eventually managed to open the front door. Gabriel lightly touched Daniel's shoulder and he turned round to see Gabriel smiling at him, his eyes bright.

"Thank you, Daniel," he said. "I don't know how I will ever be able to repay you for your actions, tonight. You gave me back my sister and my best friend. I will always be in your debt."

"You saved my life," said Daniel, smiling back at him. "I think that makes things even!"

"Barnaby," Barnaby looked up at Gabriel. "Thank you for forgiving my sister and I," Gabriel hugged Barnaby tightly. "You are truly as great a man as your father and I am honoured to call you my friend." Barnaby hugged him back, his face reddening with pride. Paris suddenly grabbed Daniel in a bear hug, nearly squeezing the air out of his lungs.

"I don't know how you did it but you brought me back," he said smiling. "Thanks. Gabe's going to show me my disappearing act on the Action Station later. Does it look really good when I vanish?" Daniel grinned, as he tried to catch his breath.

"Thanks for taking on Nuttall for me, Paris," he said. "I've never been so pleased to see anyone in my life!"

"It was my pleasure," Paris said, his eyes darkening. "Although next time; and there *will* be a next time," he said, eyeing Peekin, "Nuttall won't get a second chance."

Eventually, Peekin, Daniel and Barnaby filed out into the night air and waved, as Mimosa, Clementine, Dick, Paris and Gabriel appeared in the front windows. Barnaby happily trotted down the path, with the biggest bag of doughnuts that Daniel had ever seen. Surely, even Barnaby couldn't eat *that* many? However, as they reached the gate, Barnaby was already choosing his second doughnut and smacking his lips happily.

They went through the gate and onto the little lane, Daniel glancing back one last time at Peekin's cottage. He suddenly remembered something.

"Peekin, is the key to the Half Stone Room still in my fish tank?" Peekin nodded as they walked along.

"It's the best place for it at the moment. All sources seem to indicate that Nuttall has absolutely no idea where you live and we plan to do everything possible to keep it that

way. Even if he *did* find out, the likelihood of him searching for the key in your smelly, slime filled fish tank is remote.” He gave Daniel a sideways glance. “All the same, if you wanted to clean it out sometime, I’m sure both Rover and I would be very grateful!”

Daniel grinned, as Peekin continued. “Now, this part is very important. When you get back to your bedroom, Daniel, I need you to move the fish tank *well away* from the wall that divides your bedroom from Barnaby’s. That way, the tank can’t be accessed via the ley line, so the key will be safe. Your mum hasn’t moved it from where Barnaby and I left it, when we came to Allapatria, so we know it’s safe at the moment. Put the tank next to the opposite wall; tell your mum and dad that it’s so you can watch Rover while you go off to sleep. It will be safe there.”

They reached the clearing and climbed over various logs, until they reached a large tree. Sitting under it, snoring heavily, was Pixie. Peekin groaned and hauled her to her feet. She still had one wellie jammed onto her head. He sat her down on a log and she promptly fell backwards over it, straight onto magic twig, which popped flatulently and snapped in two. Pixie continued to snore.

“I’ll put her in one of my outhouses overnight,” he said in disgust, “not that I’d be bothered if some nasty creature carried her away. In fact, I’d send them a thank you note.”

Peekin removed the tiny, brightly coloured shard from his waistcoat pocket and pressed it against the tree trunk. All at once, there was a flash and the trunk took on the appearance of water, glistening and shimmering in the moonlight. "Ok," he said, his voice solemn, "through you go." He quickly hugged Daniel and Barnaby, surreptitiously wiping his eyes and clearing his throat. "Allapatria knew exactly what it was doing in picking you and giving you that sword. You worked a miracle tonight, Daniel," he said, smiling up at him.

Daniel frowned.

"Will we ever see you again?" he asked. Peekin's smile widened and he gazed up at Daniel. "You're a Fixer," he said, "of *course* I'll be seeing you again. You're a very important part of Allapatria, now, Daniel. We'll be checking on you regularly for your own protection. You too, Barnaby. Now, go or you'll be late. Incidentally, Daniel, you'll probably sleep until, ooh, eleven twenty eight tomorrow. Barnaby, you dirty stop-out, won't wake up until after twelve! I've arranged it so that you'll both find yourselves in your own rooms when you get back. Your mum's in your back garden, Daniel, watering her chrysanthemums. She's busy with green fly at the moment, apparently, though why she's gardening at night, I'll never know."

Daniel grinned and stood back, as Barnaby stepped through the tree trunk, almost overloaded with bags, Peekin warning

him not to eat all of the doughnuts in ten minutes flat, as he went.

“See you tomorrow, Daniel,” said Barnaby, then vanished.

“Your turn,” said Peekin. “Best change your watch back first, though; you’re still on Allapatrian time.” Reluctantly, Daniel altered his watch, then put one leg through the trunk and turned to face Peekin.

“Thanks for everything, Peekin,” he said.

“For what? I didn’t do anything,” Peekin said, trying to look modest. “Now, off you go.” He motioned to Daniel. “Best be quick. Your mum’s coming back into the house in a bit and, if she sees one of your legs stuck through your bedroom wall, she’ll go wappy.” Grinning, Daniel stepped through the tree trunk. He immediately felt a warm wind hitting his face, then found himself in darkness. To his right, he could see an eerie, greenish glow. His heart missed a beat. Then, he recognised the glow and laughed. It was his fish tank, still where Peekin and Barnaby had left it. Daniel walked over to his bedroom door and switched on the light. He greeted Rover and gently moved the cabinet, complete with fish tank on top, round to the other side of the room, well away from the ley line. He tried to spot the key amongst the shale but it was nowhere in sight. Gabriel had done a good job.

Daniel took a good look round his room and smiled. It was as if he’d never been away. If it wasn’t for the fact that all of his posters

were lying in a torn, sorry heap on the floor, his console was nowhere to be seen and that there was a faint scent of wood smoke in the air, he could almost believe it had never happened. But not quite.

He glanced at his phone, to see that he had several missed calls and messages from his dad. When he tried to access them, however, he just got a jumble of bizarre symbols and warped icons. He decided to leave calling his dad until the morning. Daniel needed time to make sense of the last few days himself, before he tried to explain it to anyone else.

Daniel dashed downstairs and knocked on the patio doors, waving to his mum, who had the outside lights on full blast and was carefully scrutinising every leaf in her chrysanthemum bed. She looked up briefly, smiled and waved, then returned to her examination of the plants. Grinning, Daniel returned to his room. If only she knew.

He slumped onto his bed, his eyes already feeling extremely heavy. Sounds from the bedroom next door made him look up. Barnaby had obviously arrived safely, too. He could hear him excitedly telling his mum about his exploits, between mouthfuls of doughnut.

It suddenly occurred to Daniel that he never did get round to asking Barnaby who he spoke to in his night time conversations. He smiled to himself. It didn't matter. He could ask him tomorrow.

Dear Reader,

Hi! So what did you think? Did you enjoy the adventures of Daniel and his friends?

I've spent a long time thinking up great things for Daniel to get up to and I have plans for even more adventures.

I'd love to know what you thought of the story, the characters and the places. If you'd like to tell me, then please write to me at:

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Thanks for reading *Return to Allaptria*.

Best Wishes

Shelley E. Parker

