

UNDER THE HILL
THE ELLIE & DAVID LARKSPUR ADVENTURES
BOOK I



DON JONES

To James

My Dear Nephew,

Every adventure must have a home to return to, and every storyteller a listener worth the telling. In sending this volume forth into the world, I can think of no finer companion to place upon its opening page than yourself. May you ever meet the unknown with a bold heart, a curious mind, and a steadfast spirit.

I remain, as ever, your affectionate Uncle.

CONTENTS

Prologue	I
1. The Kingdom of Backyard	5
2. Too Dark to Tell	13
3. Dinner Table Legends	21
4. Two Flashlights and a Magnifying Glass	29
5. Down and Down	35
6. The Welcome	41
7. The Queen of the Hollow Folk	45
8. The Feast That Never Ends	51
9. The Games Under the Hill	57
10. The Root-Walled Library	65
11. The Upside-Down Garden	71
12. No Such Thing as Tuesday	79
13. Thistle's Workshop	89
14. The Queen's Sorrow	95
15. The Promise	101
16. Atop and Around the Hill	111
17. The Wolf	117
18. Old Hawthorn	125
19. The Long Way Back	131
20. True Faces	137
21. Merlin	141
22. Borrowed Magic	147
23. What the Animals Saw	153
24. The Millpond	159
25. The Binding Explained	163
26. The Scattered Children of Old Hawthorn	169
27. What Thistle Wanted	175
28. The Snare	181
29. The Blighted Ring	187
30. The Heist	193

31. The Chase	197
32. Midnight at Old Hawthorn	203
33. What the Modern World Deserves	211
34. Home	217
35. Under the Hill	221
Also by Don Jones	225
About the Author	237

PROLOGUE



There are a great many things that grown-ups are quite certain do not exist. And it is a curious fact that the surest way to make a thing invisible to a grown-up is to have it wait, very patiently, directly underneath one.

This particular thing — or rather, these several hundred things, all crowded together, all holding remarkably still — were waiting underneath a hill. Not a famous hill, not a tall one, not a hill that had ever been written up in any book of scenery. Just a hill, green on top and hollow underneath, of the sort you might walk straight over on a summer afternoon without giving it a second thought. That's exactly the sort of hill that tends to have the most going on inside it.

Inside this one, in a cavern that smelled of woodsmoke and turned earth and something sweeter that had no name in any human language, the several hundred things were doing their absolute best to be quiet. They were failing only slightly.

They were of every size and shape a person could imagine, and several that a person couldn't, not without a good deal of practice. There were small winged ones perched along the roots that

laced the ceiling like rafters, their wings folded tight, trying — mostly successfully — not to rustle. There were sturdy, earthen ones seated cross-legged in the moss. There were sharp-eyed, gold-fingered ones counting their own knuckles for something to do with their hands. And there were slow grey ones along the back wall who looked, if you weren't paying close attention, exactly like the wall.

They were all looking at the same thing: an hourglass, hanging in the air in front of a flat wall of packed earth, with no visible means of hanging there at all.

Near the front, a small, hare-eared creature was making tiny, urgent adjustments to the hourglass's position — a half an inch this way, a half an inch back. He seemed to believe that if it weren't exactly, precisely straight, several centuries of waiting would somehow have to start over. Nobody had asked him to do this. Nobody ever did. He did it anyway, mouthing numbers to himself, checking and rechecking — until a large, mossy elbow gave him the smallest of nudges. He sat back down, looking wounded and vindicated at once.

Somewhere behind him, a pair of wings rustled — not much, just a little, the way wings will when someone has been sitting quite still for what felt like an ice age. And it had, in point of fact, not been so far off. It was not a loud sound. It would not have troubled a sleeping cat. But every head in that cavern turned toward it as one, and the look they gave the rustler was the sort of look that could curdle milk at forty paces. The wings did not rustle again.

At the front of the cavern, on a throne woven so cleverly from living branches that you could not have said where the wood ended and the woman began, sat the Queen.

She did not fidget. She did not check the hourglass the way the hare-eared one did, over and over, as though it might have changed its mind. She simply watched it, and had been watching it, by the look of things, for a long time indeed. Long enough, in

fact, that watching had stopped being something she was doing, and had become something closer to what she simply was.

The sand in the hourglass had been falling, grain by grain, for so long that entire creatures in that cavern had been born, grown old, and gone gray waiting for it to finish. It was down, now, to the last thin trickle. Then the last handful. Then — and every single throat in that enormous, crowded, silent room went tight at once — the last grain of all: balanced at the top of the narrow glass waist, deciding, in no special hurry, exactly when it would like to fall.

Nobody breathed. In that whole vast cavern, not one chest rose, not one nostril flared — not even the Queen's. She sat with her hands very still and folded in her lap. Her eyes stayed fixed on that one grain of sand, as though it were the only thing left in the world worth looking at.

It fell.

It made, as far as anyone could tell, no sound at all — and yet the entire cavern seemed to hear it anyway, the way you can hear a held note finally end.

The hourglass was gone before the grain had properly landed. It did not shatter, or fade, or drift away in pieces; it was simply, all at once, not there — the way a held breath is simply, all at once, let go. In its place, the flat earthen wall was no longer flat, and no longer merely wall. It had become the mouth of a tunnel, low and dark and gently, unmistakably, sloping upward, toward a world under open sky. Not one creature in that cavern had walked beneath that sky in longer than any of them — even the oldest, greyest, mossiest of them all — could rightly say.

Every one of those several hundred faces turned toward it.

And the whole room, as one enormous body with several hundred very different heads, drew in a single, long, trembling breath —

— and did not, quite yet, let it out.

CHAPTER 1

THE KINGDOM OF BACKYARD



Sir David of the Farthest Field had been tracking the dragon since breakfast, and by his own estimate, he was closing in.

“Footprints,” he said, dropping to one knee in the grass. “Fresh ones.”

“That’s a woodchuck hole,” said Ellie, a few paces behind him. She was playing several parts today, as she generally did: the narrator, the Wise Old Woman Who Knew Things, and, whenever the story called for it, the dragon itself, which she performed almost entirely through sound effects.

“It’s a *disguised* woodchuck hole,” David said, without looking up. “Dragons are cunning.”

“Sure. Cunning.” Ellie let out a low, rumbling growl, mostly through her nose, which was her standard dragon noise and had been since May. “That’s him warning you off, by the way. That growl. He’s saying, quote, ‘go home, small knight.’”

“He doesn’t scare me.”

“He’s eleven feet tall and breathes actual fire.”

“Still doesn’t scare me.”

“Noted,” said the Wise Old Woman Who Knew Things, in a completely different voice than the growl, without missing a beat.

He drew his sword — a hickory stick worn smooth at the grip from a whole summer of dragon-hunting — and pointed it toward the orchard with the kind of drama that only an eight-year-old can really commit to. “Onward. The trail leads west.”

“The trail leads toward the compost heap.”

“The trail leads *west*,” David said, and went west, and Ellie followed, because that was, in fact, how this worked.

It had been working this way for most of June and all of July. The game had started small — a fort, a made-up password, a single afternoon’s worth of pretending. It had grown, the way these things do when nobody’s paying close attention, into an entire kingdom with a history, a map David kept meaning to draw, and now, apparently, a dragon.

“Wait.” David stopped so suddenly that Ellie nearly walked into the back of him. “I’ve decided something important.”

“Go on.”

“My sword also shoots arrows now.”

“Invisible arrows?”

“Very invisible. You can’t even hear them.”

Ellie considered this with the seriousness the subject deserved. “How many can you fire?”

“Unlimited amount.”

“That’s not going to work for me. I’m the dragon in twenty minutes, and I have exactly one weak spot, which is my foot, and if you’ve got unlimited invisible arrows, this story’s over before lunch.”

David thought it over, weighing infinite power against narrative fairness — a trade he made constantly, and always a little grudgingly. “Three per chapter.”

“Two.”

“Two and a half.”

“Fine. Two and a half arrows per chapter, and they only work if you say *zhoop* when you fire them.”

David considered this too. “...Deal.”

“And,” Ellie added, already walking again, “the Wise Old Woman gets to warn you when you’re about to use your last one, because that’s a Wise Old Woman’s whole job.”

“Fine. But she has to say it in a spooky voice.”

“She always says everything in a spooky voice. That’s the only voice she has.”

It was, Ellie thought, a pretty reasonable system, all things considered. She had been the one to introduce the “per chapter” rule back in June, mostly because David’s imagination did not come with a built-in sense of balance, and someone in this family had to.

They cut through the orchard, which had belonged to somebody once and now mostly belonged to itself — a loose tangle of old apple trees gone soft and lopsided, growing wherever they pleased, dropping small hard apples that were no good for anything except being kicked. Beyond it, the stone wall that ran along the edge of their land had crumbled in enough places that nobody bothered going around it anymore.

“Why’s it all broken like that?” David asked, hopping up onto a low section and balancing along it with his arms out.

“It’s just old. Somebody built it a hundred years ago, probably, and nobody’s fixed it since.”

“Who built it?”

“I don’t know, David. A person.”

“But *which* person?”

“A very old, very dead person,” Ellie said, “who is not part of this game, please get down before you fall and make dinner complicated.”

Ferns grew thick in the wall’s shadow, the good kind for hiding behind. Baxter — who had appointed himself royal hound of the

kingdom sometime back in June and took the job seriously — trotted along a few steps ahead, nose down, tail going like a metronome that had lost interest in keeping time.

Past the wall, the ground rose. Not much. Just enough that if you stood at the top and looked back, you could see the whole field laid out below. The house was visible past that, small and white and a little crooked, the way houses get when nobody's rushed to fix anything about them for a hundred years.

It was, by any reasonable measure, an ordinary hot afternoon in an ordinary field. If you had asked either of the Larkspur children whether anything unusual was likely to happen before dinner, they would have told you, honestly, no.

They would have been wrong. But that's getting ahead of things.

They were most of the way up the rise when David stopped again — not the dramatic, sword-out stop this time, but the other kind, the one where he crouched down slow and quiet like he'd forgotten there was a game going on at all.

"Look at this."

Ellie looked. It was an anthill: fairly unremarkable, as anthills went, with a fairly unremarkable line of ants filing in and out of it in a fairly unremarkable way.

"They're carrying seeds," David said, in the low, hushed voice he used for things he found genuinely amazing, which was a lot of things. "Watch — that one's got something twice its size. That's like if you carried the car."

"Neat," Ellie said, and meant it, mostly — while also doing the math in her head about how much daylight was left before dinner. She was already wondering whether they'd make it back in time to wash up properly, and whether David would remember to wash up at all without being told twice. Someone in the family had to think about things like that. It had simply, over time, turned out to be her.

“D’you think they know where they’re going? Or do they just go, and figure it out?”

“I think,” Ellie said, “that if we don’t get moving, the dragon’s going to have a two-hour head start.”

“That one’s the king, probably,” David said, pointing at the ant with the oversized seed, unwilling to leave the subject entirely undecided. “He’s just carrying it himself because nobody else would.”

“Sure. King Ant.”

“King Ant the Burdened.”

That worked. It generally did.

David sprang back up, sword in hand, already several sentences into a new theory about where the dragon might be hiding. The footprints — real ones this time, or real enough — led on up the rise, toward the place where the field gave way to trees. The trees, in turn, gave way to the low green shoulder of the hill that marked the edge of everything they usually bothered exploring.

“He’s smart,” David said. “He wouldn’t hide somewhere easy. He’d hide somewhere nobody would think to look.”

“Like the hill.”

“Like the hill,” David agreed, with total confidence, as if he had personally interviewed the dragon on the subject.

Baxter, who had been trotting a comfortable distance ahead the whole way, slowed as the ground began to climb. Not stopping, exactly — just falling back, a few paces at first and then a few more, until he was walking alongside Ellie instead of out in front the way he usually did. Neither of them noticed. There wasn’t any reason to, yet.

The trees thickened as they climbed, old growth mixed in with the kind of scrubby, fast-growing stuff that moves in wherever a field’s been left alone too long. Light came down through the leaves in loose gold coins that shifted every time the wind moved

the branches. Somewhere off to the left, a woodpecker worked at something with real dedication, and did not stop, even once, the whole time they stood there.

“There,” David said, stopping at the tree line, sword lowered, voice dropped down to something closer to actual awe than performed awe. “That’s a *cave*.”

Ellie followed his pointing stick to the base of the hill, where the ground folded in on itself beneath a heavy tangle of brush and bramble, and felt the jolt of a made-up story running headfirst into something real.

It wasn’t a cave, not exactly — or if it was, it was a very small and very tidy one: a dark opening about the size of a garden gate, set low into the hillside and almost entirely swallowed by brush. If they hadn’t been climbing right toward it, dragon-hunting or not, they might have walked past it a hundred times and never known it was there.

What struck Ellie first, before she’d even worked out what she was looking at, was how *round* it was. Not cave-round. Not the ragged, lopsided round of something worn away by water over a thousand years. This was neat. This was deliberate. It was the kind of round that looked, if she was being honest with herself, a little bit made.

“Whoa,” David said, with the reverence usually reserved for dragons.

“Huh,” Ellie said, which was as close as she generally got.

“What made this? An animal?”

“Too round for an animal.”

“A person, then?”

“Too round for a person, too. People aren’t that neat.” Ellie tipped her head, considering it the way she considered most things, from the outside in, looking for the seam. “I don’t know what made it. I just know it wasn’t a woodchuck.”

They came closer, pushing the last of the brush aside — care-

fully, the way you push aside brush when some part of you suspects there might be something on the other side of it that you'd rather see coming first. The opening was taller than it looked from a distance, tall enough that even David wouldn't have to duck. It sloped downward and back into the hill at an angle that suggested it went *somewhere*, rather than simply stopping, the way a rabbit hole stops, or a woodchuck hole, or any of the other ordinary holes that ordinary hillsides are generally full of.

And it was cold.

That was the second thing, right on the heels of the roundness. It was so unexpected that Ellie put her hand out into the opening before she'd quite decided to — the way you reach toward an open refrigerator on a hot day, without meaning to. A thread of air was moving steadily out of the tunnel and into the afternoon. It was cold, properly cold, root-cellar cold, nothing at all like the thick, buzzing, cicada-soaked heat sitting on top of the field behind them.

"Feel that," she said.

David already had his hand in it. "It's like a fridge."

"It's like a fridge that leads underground," Ellie said, and heard, only after she'd said it, how strange the sentence was.

For a moment neither of them said anything. Somewhere behind them, in the ordinary, sunlit world they'd just stepped a little way out of, the woodpecker was still going. Baxter had stopped a good ten feet back and did not, Ellie noticed now that she was noticing things, seem to have any interest whatsoever in coming any closer.

"So," David said, and it came out smaller than his usual dragon-hunting voice, more like an actual eight-year-old standing in front of an actual dark hole in an actual hill. "Are we going in?"

It was, Ellie would think later, a genuinely unfair question to ask a person at four o'clock on an ordinary Tuesday, with dinner in

a few hours and absolutely no flashlight, rope, or plan of any kind between the two of them.

“Not right now,” she said, which was true, and also not really an answer. David — who had known his sister for his entire life and could tell the difference — grinned like she’d said something else entirely.

“But we’re coming back.”

“We’re coming back,” Ellie agreed, because there wasn’t really any version of the afternoon where they didn’t, and both of them knew it, and there wasn’t much point pretending otherwise. She crouched at the edge of the opening, the cold air sliding steady and quiet against her palm, and looked as far into the dark as the light would let her, which wasn’t very far at all.

Behind her, David was already narrating. “The knight discovered the entrance to the dragon’s lair,” he said, in his best storytelling voice, “but wisely decided to return home for supplies, and also dinner, because his sister said so.”

“I did not say that.”

“You were thinking it very loudly.”

“That’s not how thoughts work.”

“It’s exactly how your thoughts work. I’ve known you my whole life.”

She probably had been thinking it, loudly or otherwise. Ellie stood, brushed the dirt from her knees, and took one last look at the tunnel — small, round, breathing its slow cold breath into the gold late-afternoon light. Then she turned back down the hill toward home, David already three steps ahead of her, already talking, already turning the whole thing into a story before they’d even properly left it behind.

Baxter fell into step beside her without a word of complaint, and did not look back at the hill even once.

CHAPTER 2

TOO DARK TO TELL



They made it exactly as far as the stone wall before David stopped walking.

"We could go back," he said. "Just to look. Looking isn't going in."

"It's extremely going in."

"It's the *first part* of going in. Which is a different thing entirely, and also, we didn't actually promise not to."

Ellie considered this. It was, strictly speaking, true — they'd promised to come back tomorrow, properly equipped, and had not, if you wanted to get technical about it, promised anything at all about this afternoon. She was fairly sure David had built that loophole on purpose, and was even more sure she was about to walk straight through it anyway.

"Fine," she said. "But we're not going *in* in. We're going to stand at the edge and look, with an actual light this time, and if it's even slightly scary, we're leaving immediately and not discussing it."

"Deal."

"I mean it, David."

"I heard you the first time."

They didn't discuss telling their parents, exactly, though the thought crossed both their minds in roughly the same half-second and got dismissed just as fast, for reasons neither of them examined too closely. Dad was still at the clinic. Mom was somewhere in the middle of a deadline, which meant approaching her required a kind of bravery neither of them currently had handy. It could wait until dinner. Everything could wait until dinner.

The shed sat at the far end of the garden, half-swallowed by an overgrown rosebush nobody had gotten around to cutting back, and it smelled the way sheds always smell: gasoline, dust, something green going slowly to rot in one corner. The flashlight lived on a nail by the door, next to the fuse box, which was the only thing it ever actually got used for. It was heavy, and a little rusted at the seam, and when Ellie clicked it on, it threw a beam about the width of a dinner plate and roughly the color of weak tea.

"That's the best we've got?"

"That's the best we've got."

David took it, weighed it in his hand like he was evaluating a sword, and seemed to decide it would do. "It's not very bright."

"It doesn't have to be bright. We're standing at the edge and looking."

"Right," David said, already walking faster than *standing at the edge and looking* generally requires.

The tunnel mouth looked different with a flashlight aimed into it than it had in the plain afternoon light — smaller, somehow, and larger at the same time, the beam swallowed up after only a few feet without ever finding a back wall to land on.

"Just the edge," Ellie said, mostly to herself, and stepped over the threshold.

David came right behind her, and neither of them was, strictly speaking, standing at the edge anymore, though neither of them mentioned that either.

The ground underfoot was packed hard and smooth, more like a path than a burrow — no roots poking through, no loose stones, nothing that felt dug in a hurry by an animal with somewhere better to be. The walls curved up and over in one continuous line, smooth as something drawn with a compass rather than clawed or dug. Ellie ran her free hand along the surface without quite deciding to, and found it cool, faintly damp, and entirely, unsettlingly even.

She kept that observation to herself. So did David, though she could tell by the careful way he was walking — placing each foot like he was testing ice — that he'd noticed it too.

They went a little further than *just the edge*. Then a little further than that.

The cold air was stronger now that they were standing inside it instead of just in its path. It came from somewhere ahead of them, sliding steadily past on its way out to the field, carrying with it a smell like wet stone and something green and old, growing where no green thing really ought to be able to grow at all.

And there was a sound.

It was faint, and it came and went in a way that let you talk yourself out of it every time it stopped — which was exactly what David did, twice.

"That's wind," he said, the first time.

"There's no wind down here," Ellie said. "That's why the air's moving in a straight line instead of blowing around."

He didn't have an answer for that, so he said "wind" again anyway the second time it happened, a little less certainly — a thread of sound that might have been music, if you were in the mood to call it that, and might have been nothing at all, if you weren't.

The flashlight flickered. Just once, a half-second stutter, there and gone, and both of them stopped walking at exactly the same moment without agreeing to.

"Did you—"

"Yeah."

Then, somewhere ahead of them, in the dark the flashlight couldn't reach, something shifted.

It wasn't loud. It was worse than loud — a small, dry, deliberate sound, like a handful of dirt sliding off a ledge it had been resting on for a very long time. Then quiet. Then, a second later, a different kind of quiet, the way a held breath feels different from an empty room.

Neither of them said anything.

Neither of them needed to.

They were moving before Ellie had finished deciding to move, flashlight beam bouncing wild across the smooth curved walls, David half a step ahead of her and then somehow half a step behind, both of them running with the fast, mindless speed that only happens when part of the brain stops bothering to explain itself to the rest of the body. The tunnel mouth came up fast — the real light of the actual afternoon spilling in around its edges, gold and ordinary and impossibly welcome — and they burst out through it into the heat and the grass and the blinding, wonderful sun, and kept running until they were a good twenty feet clear of the hill.

Baxter had been waiting exactly where they'd left him, a safe distance back from the entrance, and when they came pelting out of the tunnel he startled, barked once, and stayed rooted where he was instead of bounding over to meet them the way he generally did when the front door opened.

Ellie caught her breath first. "Baxter. Hey. It's okay."

He wagged his tail — a small, uncertain wag, more question than greeting — but he kept his distance, and when Ellie took a few steps back toward the tunnel mouth to check that nothing had, in fact, followed them out, Baxter sat down right where he'd

stopped and made a low, unhappy sound in the back of his throat that wasn't quite a whine and wasn't quite a growl.

"What's wrong with you?" David asked him, crouching down, holding out a hand.

Baxter looked at the hand. Then he looked past David, at the tunnel, and the sound in his throat got a little louder, and he didn't budge, no matter how much David coaxed.

"Maybe he just doesn't like caves," David said, though he didn't sound like he believed it.

"Maybe," Ellie said, and found, without entirely meaning to, that she was counting — softly, under her breath, the way she sometimes did when her heart hadn't quite caught up to the rest of her yet. *One, two, three, four.* She wasn't sure what she was counting. Her own heartbeat, maybe. The seconds since they'd stopped running. It didn't matter much either way. By the time she reached ten, her hands had stopped shaking, and that was really the whole point of it.

They sat for a minute in the grass, a safe distance from the hill, getting their breathing back to normal, Baxter pressed close against Ellie's side like he intended to stay there for the rest of his natural life.

"Okay," David said eventually. "That was extremely a little bit scary."

"A lot a bit scary."

"Tomorrow, though. Properly. With the real flashlights, and the rope, and—" He was already counting on his fingers, already rebuilding his nerve in real time, the way he always did, faster than seemed reasonable. "We're still going."

"We're still going," Ellie agreed, and meant it more than she'd expected to, given that her hands had been shaking about ninety seconds earlier. "But we do this right. Both of us, every time. Nobody goes in alone, ever, no matter how good an idea it seems like at two in the morning."

"Why would it be two in the morning?"

"I don't know, David. I'm establishing a rule."

He considered the rule and apparently found it acceptable, because he sat up straighter and held out his hand, palm down, the way they'd sealed every serious decision in the Kingdom of Backyard since roughly the invention of the Kingdom of Backyard. Ellie put her hand on top of his without needing to be asked.

"On the Kingdom," David said, solemn as a knight, "I swear it."

"On the Kingdom," Ellie said, matching his tone exactly, which was the whole game — you had to say it like you meant it, or it didn't count. "Together, or not at all."

"Together, or not at all."

They held the pose a second too long, the way you do when you've just said something that came out more true than you meant it to. Then David ruined it completely by adding, "Also we should bring snacks," and the moment collapsed into laughing, which was probably for the best.

By the time they'd crossed back over the stone wall, David had already decided the sound in the tunnel was a sleeping dragon rolling over. By the orchard, he'd upgraded it to a dragon guarding a hoard so old it had turned to dust. By the time the house came into view, small and white and crooked in the early evening light, the dragon had acquired a name, a tragic backstory, and — Ellie wasn't entirely sure how — a nephew.

"You're making all of this up," she said.

"Obviously. That's the fun part."

"What if it's not a dragon."

"It's definitely a dragon."

"What if it's just a hole."

David looked at her like she'd suggested something faintly insulting. "It was cold, and round, and it made a noise, and Baxter wouldn't go near it. That is not *just a hole*."

She didn't have a good answer for that, actually, and didn't try

very hard to find one. The evening was doing the thing summer evenings do right before dinner — going gold and soft and a little bit slow — and there would be plenty of time to figure out what the hole really was tomorrow, in daylight, properly equipped, together.

Tonight, she decided, they could just let it be a dragon.

CHAPTER 3
DINNER TABLE LEGENDS



By the time they'd washed the worst of the field off their hands, David had rehearsed his telling of the day at least three times, out loud, to nobody in particular, refining certain details — “actually, make it a nephew *and* a niece” — with the seriousness of somebody preparing testimony.

“You’re going to tell Mom and Dad the whole dragon-nephew thing?”

“I’m going to tell them the *true* version,” David said. “Which has a dragon-nephew in it. That’s just accurate reporting.”

Ellie let that go, mostly because she suspected she wasn’t going to win, and partly because she was curious how far he’d actually take it.

Through the kitchen window, before they’d even reached the back door, they could see her — Mom, at the little table in the corner of her studio that used to be a mudroom, hunched over a drawing with one leg tucked under her, a mug of tea gone cold beside her elbow. She had a habit of drawing them without telling them: little quick studies she never quite finished, and there was, at this exact moment, almost certainly a half-done sketch of two

kids crossing a field on the pad in front of her, though neither of them would ever actually see it. She didn't look up as they came in. She never quite heard the door the first time.

"Mom."

"Mm."

"Mom, we found something."

That got her attention, in the somewhat delayed way it always did — a beat behind, surfacing slowly from wherever her pencil had taken her, blinking like someone stepping out of a matinee into daylight. "Found what?"

"A hole," Ellie said, before David could say *a dragon's lair*. "In the hill. We're going to look at it properly tomorrow."

"With a flashlight," David added. "A better one than today's."

Corinne Larkspur set her pencil down, which was, for her, roughly the equivalent of a standing ovation. "Tell me at dinner. Your father's going to want the whole thing, and I refuse to hear a good story twice in one night — once badly, and once properly."

By the time they'd set the table — a job that technically belonged to both of them and somehow, most nights, ended up mostly Ellie's — the kitchen had filled with the smell of a chicken that had been in the oven since well before either of them had found anything worth reporting, and a pot of potatoes going soft enough to mash. The table itself had the warm, cluttered comfort of one that had never once in its life been perfectly tidy: a jam jar of wildflowers David had picked weeks ago that nobody had thrown out, a stack of Corinne's reference books nobody had moved, salt and pepper shakers shaped like unconvincing owls.

He came in forty minutes later than he'd meant to, smelling faintly of hay and antiseptic, apologizing before he'd even gotten his boots off.

"Mrs. Abernathy's goat again," he said, to the room in general. "Head stuck in the fence. Third time this month. I've told her twice now the gap needs fixing, and both times she's told me the

goat needs *humbling*, which is not, as far as I know, a veterinary procedure.”

“Did you humble him?” David asked.

“I freed him with great dignity, and he headbutted me for my trouble, so I’d call it a draw.” Tom Larkspur dropped into his chair at the table with the exhausted satisfaction of a man glad to be sitting down at all. “Now. I understand from the hallway that something happened today that I need to hear about *properly*.”

David didn’t need to be asked twice. He launched into it from the very beginning — the footprints, the trail, the tunnel, the cold air — refining the details as he went, each telling a slightly more finished draft than the last, a habit as old as the Kingdom itself.

“—and it’s round,” he said, “which Ellie says means somebody made it, except there’s nobody who could’ve made it, so actually that means it’s *older* than somebody, which means—”

“Which means we don’t actually know what it means,” Ellie put in.

“Which means dragon,” David said, as if this settled the matter, which, as far as he was concerned, it did.

“A dragon,” Corinne repeated, in the careful, considering tone of someone taking a professional consultation seriously. “With a nephew, I understand.”

“And whose idea was it,” Tom asked, buttering a roll, “to go *toward* the cold air coming out of a mysterious hole, instead of, say, away from it?”

The kids looked at each other.

“Mine,” they both said, at exactly the same time, and then looked faintly betrayed that the other had also claimed it.

“And a niece,” David said. “I revised it.”

“That’s pretty detailed genealogy for a dragon nobody’s actually seen.”

“He’s old. Old things have complicated families.”

Tom pointed his fork at his son, a gesture that seemed to concede the point. "Can't argue with that."

It was around this point that Corinne set the vegetable dish down in the middle of the table, and David's face underwent a rapid and total change of subject.

"Sprouts."

"Sprouts," Corinne agreed.

"I don't think the dragon would want me to eat sprouts."

"I don't think the dragon has an opinion on your vegetables, David."

"He does, actually," Ellie said, in a voice David had learned, over many summers, to be instantly suspicious of — it was exactly the voice she used right before she outmaneuvered him. "The Wise Old Woman has always said it. Only children who finish their sprouts can actually see the dragon. Everyone in the Kingdom knows this. It's basically law."

David narrowed his eyes at her. "Since when?"

"Since forever. I'm the Wise Old Woman. I would know."

There was a longer pause than the moment strictly required, David clearly running the odds on whether this was a rule he'd simply forgotten or a rule Ellie had invented on the spot to get five sprouts into him before bedtime. In the end, historical accuracy lost to the much larger fear of missing a dragon on a technicality, and he ate the sprouts — with the grim dignity of somebody making a strategic retreat rather than a surrender.

"Your sister," Tom said, without looking up from his plate, "makes a compelling case."

Once the sprouts were gone and dessert had appeared — something with berries in it, still warm from the oven, the kind of dessert that existed mostly because Corinne liked an excuse to bake — Tom had decided the goat story deserved a second telling, considerably improved from the first.

"By the time I got there," he said, "that goat had worked

himself so far into that fence, Mrs. Abernathy was fully convinced we were dealing with some kind of possession situation. She'd already lit a candle."

"An actual candle?"

"An actual candle, David. I had to explain, gently, that the goat was not possessed. The goat was simply stubborn, and had a head shaped like a problem, and no amount of candle was going to fix a fence gap that's needed fixing since March."

"That's not as good as our dragon," David said, though he was grinning.

"It's a true story, though," Tom said. "Yours has a nephew and a niece it invented over dinner."

"It has a niece it invented over dinner because new information came to light," David said, with real dignity, and even Ellie had to look down at her plate to keep from laughing.

Somewhere in the middle of all of it — the sprouts, the goat, the dragon's rapidly expanding family tree — Corinne caught Tom's eye across the table for just a second. It was the look that passes between two people who have had this exact kind of evening a hundred times before, and have not yet, and might never, get tired of it. The kids didn't notice. There wasn't any reason they should have.

The phone on the kitchen wall rang just as Corinne was cutting the last of the dessert into pieces too small to reasonably need cutting.

Tom answered it, listened for a few seconds, and made the face both kids had learned, over the years, to recognize as *somebody's animal has done something regrettable*.

"I have to go back in," he said, already halfway out of his chair, already reaching for his boots. "Small emergency. I'll be quick." He paused at David's shoulder long enough to drop a kiss on the top of his head, and then Ellie's. "You two owe me the rest of that dragon. All of it. Niece included."

"You owe us the rest of the goat," Ellie said.

"Deal," Tom said, already halfway out the door, and then he was gone, and the kitchen was just the three of them, the last of the dessert, and the early evening light going gold through the window over the sink.

They ended up on the porch afterward, as they usually did on nights warm enough for it. Corinne took the wicker chair with a book she wasn't really reading; David and Ellie took the steps, checkers board between them — a game neither of them played by the actual rules anymore, having long ago developed a version of their own that Corinne had given up trying to follow. It had, at present, eleven rules, most of them David's, one of them a permanent standing law that any piece that reached the far row got to be called a King *and* got a name, and Ellie's small private amendment that anyone who tried to change the rules mid-game automatically lost.

Baxter took up most of the bottom step, chin on his paws, worn out from an afternoon of dragon-hunting he'd mostly observed from a safe distance.

Fireflies started up somewhere around the third game, blinking on and off over the grass like the field was thinking something over. Nobody said much. It wasn't the kind of evening that needed much saying — just the checkers board, and the bugs starting their evening racket, and the light going soft and gold and then blue, and Corinne turning a page every so often, and the hill sitting quiet and green and ordinary at the edge of everything, keeping, for now, whatever it was keeping.

Bedtime came, as it always did: a little reluctantly, a little later than it technically should have. Corinne kissed them both good-night, told them not to stay up talking, and did not — being a reasonable and experienced parent — expect this instruction to be followed with any real precision.

In her room, Ellie sat cross-legged on her bed for a while with

the door half shut, not talking to anyone, going through the supply list she was building in her head the way other people counted sheep. *Flashlight. A better flashlight. Rope, if she could find rope. Something to mark the way, in case the tunnel branched. Snacks, because David would ask for them, and because, kid logic aside, snacks were rarely a bad idea at any age.* She reorganized the list twice, moved snacks from fourth to third, and then lay back and stared at the ceiling and made herself breathe slowly — in through the nose, out through the mouth — a trick that usually worked, eventually, on the rare nights her thoughts wouldn't sit still. Tonight it was taking longer than usual. She counted twenty breaths, then forty, listening to the house tick and settle around her, and somewhere around sixty she caught herself counting the actual seconds instead of the breaths, which meant, officially, that this was one of those nights.

Down the hall, David was doing the opposite of all of that. He lay flat on his back with his arms out like he was making a snow angel in his own sheets, eyes open, adding a whole new chapter to the dragon's history that he was fairly sure he'd use tomorrow whether or not there turned out to be an actual dragon at the bottom of the hole. He tried closing his eyes. He counted, in his head, to what he was fairly sure was a hundred, though he lost count twice and started over both times, out of principle more than accuracy. He got up once, quietly, and went to the window, and looked out at the dark shape of the hill against the darker sky, and thought about the sound they'd heard that afternoon. Thinking about it harder wouldn't actually help, he decided — with the swift, total confidence he decided most things — and went back to bed anyway to keep thinking about it regardless.

Down the hall and across the house from each other, in two rooms with two different kinds of quiet in them, neither of them was sleeping.

Neither of them was even close.

CHAPTER 4

TWO FLASHLIGHTS AND
A MAGNIFYING GLASS



Ellie made it to the bottom of the stairs at seventeen minutes past midnight — she'd been watching the clock in her room for the better part of an hour, waiting for a decent-sounding number to leave on — and found David already sitting on the kitchen floor with the contents of the hall closet spread out around him like a very small, very serious yard sale.

"How long have you been down here?"

"A while." He didn't look up. He was deep in negotiation with a coil of rope, trying to decide whether it should go over his shoulder or in the bag, and losing. "I couldn't sleep."

"Yeah," Ellie said. "Me neither."

She surveyed the spread. Two flashlights — the good ones, from the camping box nobody had opened since the trip to the lake two summers ago, batteries still miraculously alive when she'd tested them an hour earlier in her room with a pillow over her head to muffle the click. The rope. A half-eaten sleeve of crackers David had apparently already started on, for research purposes. And, laid out with especial care on top of a folded dish towel, a

magnifying glass that had lived in the kitchen junk drawer for as long as either of them could remember, claimed by David sometime in June for the serious business of looking at bugs up close.

"We need the magnifying glass," David said, before she could ask. "In case there's writing. Or a clue. Or a bug."

"There's not going to be a bug clue."

"You don't know that."

She let it go, mostly because arguing about it would take longer than just packing it, and added her notebook to the pile instead — a small one, the kind with a rubber band around it to keep it shut, and a pencil stub she'd sharpened with a kitchen knife that afternoon when nobody was watching.

"What's that for?" David asked.

"Writing things down. Directions. What we find. In case we need to remember it later and our brains are busy being scared."

David considered this with real respect — the kind he reserved for ideas that hadn't occurred to him first — and then reached into his pocket and produced, with some ceremony, a smooth grey stone with two googly eyes glued crookedly to the top and a lopsided smile painted on in what had once been red nail polish.

"I'm bringing Steven."

"You're bringing a rock."

"I'm bringing *Steven*. Grandma gave him to me. He's lucky."

Ellie didn't argue with that either, mostly because arguing with David about Steven's luck was a fight she'd lost enough times over the years to know better. Both of them had gotten one, that Christmas — matching stones, matching googly eyes, matching lopsided smiles, a project their grandmother had clearly enjoyed a great deal more than either grandchild had anticipated at the time. David's had never once left his pocket since. Ellie's lived on her dresser, propped against the lamp, where it had sat mostly ignored for at least a year, its googly eyes fixed on the middle distance with an expression of patient, ongoing forgiveness.

"You should bring yours too," David said. "Rocky."

"I'm not bringing Rocky."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm ten," Ellie said, in the tone of someone stating a fact so obvious it barely needed saying, "and Rocky's a rock with a face glued on."

"Steven's a rock with a face glued on."

"Steven's your rock. That's different."

It wasn't, really, and some small part of her knew it wasn't, and for half of one second she actually pictured going back upstairs, getting Rocky off the dresser, putting him in her pocket where he'd fit just as easily as Steven fit in David's. Then she pictured explaining that decision to herself later, in daylight, and decided against it, and zipped the bag shut instead — and that exact door, not a large one, not one she'd remember choosing to close, quietly shut behind her.

They found Baxter waiting by the back door, already awake, already anxious, tail low instead of wagging, doing figure eights around their ankles in a way that managed to communicate several complete sentences without a single bark.

"No," Ellie told him, crouching down. "Not this time."

Baxter sat down in front of the door like sitting there might change the outcome.

"He really wants to come," David said.

"He really can't."

Getting him into the mudroom took longer than it should have — he wasn't fighting them, exactly, just going gently, deliberately limp, the way a fifty-pound dog can go limp when he's decided, politely but firmly, to disagree with a decision. Once the door was shut, he didn't bark. He scratched at it, twice, and then made a low sound in his throat that they hadn't quite heard from him before, and then, mercifully, went quiet.

“He’s fine,” David said, in the voice of someone reassuring himself as much as anyone.

“He’s fine,” Ellie agreed, and didn’t entirely believe it either, and they let the matter drop, because there wasn’t really anything productive to do with it at midnight in a dark kitchen with a bag full of rope and crackers and one lucky rock between them.

The third stair from the top creaked if you stepped on the left side and stayed silent if you stepped on the right — a fact Ellie had known for years and David had apparently just discovered, judging by the small, offended noise he made when he got it wrong. The screen door was worse. It always announced itself no matter how carefully you eased it, a long, slow creak followed by a soft thump. But the house swallowed the sound without complaint, and nobody stirred upstairs.

Outside, the night had a different weight to it than daytime did. The air was cooler, and quieter in a way that made their own footsteps sound too loud, and the ordinary shapes of the yard — the porch chairs, the garden hose coiled by the spigot, Dad’s truck parked crooked in the drive — all looked slightly unfamiliar in the moonlight.

They crossed the field faster than they had in daylight, moving by feel more than sight in the places where the moon didn’t quite reach, David leading for once, flashlight beam swinging low and steady ahead of them. Crickets went quiet in a little wave as they passed and started up again behind them. The stone wall was easy enough to find even in the dark; they’d crossed it so many times this summer their feet seemed to know the gap without being told. Past it, the hill rose up dark and rounded against a sky gone the deep, bruised blue it only goes an hour or two before it really commits to being night.

They didn’t talk much on the way up. There wasn’t much left to say that hadn’t already been said twice at dinner, and once more, quietly, under the covers, somewhere around midnight.

The tunnel looked different at night. Smaller, somehow, and larger at the same time — flashlights only show you the part of a thing they happen to be pointing at, and leave the rest to the imagination. David's beam found the opening first, and for just a second — less than a second, really, gone before either of them could properly look at it — something inside the tunnel seemed to catch the light and throw a little of it back. A glimmer, low and greenish, gone the moment David swung the beam directly onto it.

"Did you see that?" Ellie asked.

"See what?"

"There was a — I don't know. A light. Green, maybe. Just for a second."

David swept his flashlight slowly across the opening, methodical for once, and found nothing but packed dirt and shadow and, low down near the left-hand wall, a scatter of small pale stones that might, if you were feeling generous about it, have caught the beam and thrown back exactly that kind of glimmer.

"Probably just rocks," he said. "Shiny ones."

"Probably."

They both let it go without quite believing it, and without saying so out loud, and somewhere behind them, out in the field, a single firefly blinked on and off and drifted past — which either explained everything, or explained nothing at all, depending on how you wanted to look at it.

For a moment they just stood there, at the edge of the dark, flashlights steady now, the whole ordinary night humming quietly around them — crickets, the far-off sound of the creek, Ellie's own heartbeat going a little faster than she'd have liked to admit.

"Ready?" David asked.

"No," Ellie said. "Let's go anyway."

They stepped over the threshold together, side by side, the way they'd promised each other they would, and the dark closed

DON JONES

in soft and cool and complete around them, and the ordinary night
— crickets, creek, home — fell away behind them like something
already a long way off.

CHAPTER 5
DOWN AND DOWN



The ground under their feet changed before anything else did.

Near the entrance, it had been packed dirt, hard-tamped and faintly ridged, the kind of surface that still remembered being outside. A few yards in, it started to soften — not muddy, exactly, but yielding, springy almost, like walking on a carpet grown a little too thick. Once the tunnel mouth was well behind them, the walls had changed too: no longer smooth-troweled and cool, but faintly warm to the touch, threaded through with thin pale roots that pulsed, if you watched closely enough, with something that might have been their own slow heartbeat.

“Ellie,” David whispered, though there was nobody down here to whisper for. “Does it feel warmer to you?”

She’d been about to say the same thing. “A little.”

“Tunnels are supposed to get colder. Everybody knows that. Caves. Basements. Anywhere underground.”

“I know.”

“So why—”

“I don’t know, David.”

He seemed to accept this as a reasonable answer, which was generous of him, since it wasn't actually an answer at all.

They found the moss a little farther on, growing in a loose patch along the base of the wall, and it took Ellie a full three seconds to understand what she was looking at, because what she was looking at was glowing.

Not brightly. Not the aggressive, buzzing glow of a nightlight. It was a soft, pale blue-green, the color of the ocean in photographs, pulsing very faintly — the way a firefly's light pulses if you catch one and cup it in your hands, except this wasn't one firefly. It was a whole low carpet of something, breathing light instead of making it.

"Whoa," David said, which had become, over the course of the day, roughly his all-purpose word for things too large to describe properly.

Ellie crouched down and, after a moment's hesitation, touched it — carefully, with one finger, the same caution you'd use on something that might be hot, or might bite. It was cool and slightly damp, ordinary moss in every way except the one that mattered, and where her finger pressed against it, the glow pulsed once, a little brighter, as if it had noticed her.

"It did that because you touched it," David said, unnecessary but delighted, crouching down next to her to try it himself. Under his finger, the moss brightened the same small amount, then settled back to its low, steady glow.

For a moment, that was all there was — the moss, the glow, the two of them crouched over something that shouldn't have existed and did anyway.

Ellie reached back into the bag without quite standing up and pulled out her notebook, working the rubber band off with her teeth because both her hands were busy, and wrote, by the moss's own faint light, in handwriting considerably worse than her usual: *glowing moss. blue-green. reacts to touch.* She considered it

for a second, then added, underneath, in smaller letters: *not normal*.

“What are you writing?”

“Notes.”

“Notes on the moss?”

“Notes on all of it,” Ellie said, tucking the notebook away again. “Somebody should be keeping track.”

They kept walking, and the moss kept appearing in patches along the walls, closer together the deeper they went, until the tunnel was lit well enough in a low, watery blue-green that they didn’t strictly need the flashlights anymore, though they kept them on anyway, unwilling to test their luck.

It was somewhere around here that the sound they’d first heard two days ago — the one David had insisted, twice, was wind — stopped being deniable.

It wasn’t wind. It had never really been wind, not down here where no air moved fast enough to make a sound like that, and now that they were close enough, it had resolved into something unmistakably like music: a thin, layered thread of it, strings and something like bells, rising and falling in a pattern that almost repeated but never quite did, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, muffled and directionless — except this had a shape to it, almost a tune, if you listened long enough to let yourself believe it.

David stopped walking.

“We could still go back,” he said, in the voice of someone who very much did not want to, but felt like the offer needed to be made out loud, for the record.

Ellie thought about it. Really thought about it, the flashlight beam trembling slightly in her hand in a way she hoped David hadn’t noticed, though she suspected he had.

“Do you want to?”

“No,” David admitted. “Do you?”

“No.” She made herself say it steady, even though steady wasn’t exactly how she felt. “But I wanted to ask, so if you say yes, we go back. No arguing. Deal?”

“Deal.” He was quiet for a second. “I don’t want to, though. Just so you know.”

“I know. Me neither.”

They kept walking, and the tunnel kept changing around them, the walls no longer walls in any ordinary sense — the roots had thickened and multiplied until they crossed and wove together like something deliberately built rather than something that had simply grown that way by accident, arches and ribs of pale wood curving up overhead in a pattern too regular to be natural and too organic to be built by hands.

“It’s like a treehouse,” David said. “Except the tree’s in charge.”

“That’s a good way to put it.”

“I have good ways to put things sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Ellie agreed, and meant it as a compliment, mostly.

Then, ahead of them, past the reach of even the moss-light, something else began: not blue-green this time, but gold — warm, low, steady, the kind of light that comes from a fire built by somebody who wants you to feel welcome rather than warned off. Unlike firelight, it didn’t flicker. It simply glowed, softly and steadily, growing brighter with every step, spilling further down the tunnel to meet them.

“Do you smell that?” David asked.

Ellie did. Woodsmoke, and something sweeter underneath it — bread, maybe, or honey, or something with no name she immediately had for it — carried toward them on air that was properly warm now, no trace of cold left in it at all, air that smelled, more than anything else, like somewhere people wanted you to come in.

They walked toward it without really deciding to. It had that

unignorable pull that lit windows have on cold nights — you're moving toward it before you've consciously agreed to go.

The tunnel curved one last time, and the gold light spilled around the bend to meet them fully, and David reached out without looking and found Ellie's hand, and Ellie let him take it, and for one more second — the very last one that belonged to the world they'd always known — they stood together at the edge of the light and did not step into it.

Then they did.

CHAPTER 6

THE WELCOME



The light did not just belong to a fire. It belonged to everything.

It came from lanterns hung in clusters from the ceiling, from strings of something that glowed like captured fireflies looped along the walls, from great soft patches of the blue-green moss grown thick and confident here in a way it had only dared to be timid up in the tunnel. It came, more than anything, from the space itself — a cavern so vast the ceiling disappeared upward into something closer to a sky than a roof, hung with roots as thick as tree trunks that arched and wove together into balconies, stairways, doorways, whole structures that looked grown rather than built.

David's hand tightened in Ellie's — not from fear this time, but because there was too much room in the world to actually understand all at once, and he needed somewhere to put some of the feeling.

Then somebody saw them.

It happened all at once: one voice first, high and delighted,

and then a dozen more on top of it, and then it seemed like the whole enormous cavern turned toward the tunnel mouth together.

“CHILDREN—”

“—actual children—”

“—real ones, look, real actual—”

“—Out-Siders, it’s Out-Siders, somebody get the—”

And then they weren’t standing at the tunnel mouth anymore, exactly, because there were creatures everywhere, closing in not with menace but with the overwhelming enthusiasm of a surprise party thrown by several hundred people who have been waiting an extremely long time for the guest of honor to finally show up.

Small winged shapes zipped past at head height, quick as dragonflies, trailing little showers of sparks from whatever they were carrying or fixing or both. Sturdier, earthier shapes waddled through the crowd at a more dignified pace, beaming, wiping floury hands on aprons that suggested somebody, somewhere, had abandoned a half-finished pie the moment word got out. Something sharp-eyed and quick-fingered sized the two of them up from a nearby doorway with an expression that managed to be delighted and calculating in exactly equal measure. Along the cavern’s far wall, shapes that might have been boulders — if boulders occasionally opened one slow, ancient eye to see what the fuss was about — shifted very slightly and did not otherwise move. And somewhere above all of it, a ragged, joyful burst of music started up: strings, something like bells, a rhythm nobody seemed to be counting and everybody seemed to know anyway.

Near the edge of it all, a small hare-eared creature was attempting, with visible anxiety, to organize the crowd into something resembling a receiving line, and failing completely. He kept consulting a small object that might have been a pocket watch, if pocket watches came in the shape of a tiny hourglass. Nobody was paying him any attention. He did not seem surprised by this.

It was David’s flashlight that brought her in. It had been flick-

ering on and off for the last several minutes, ignored in all the excitement, and something small and quick and winged dropped out of the general chaos to hover directly in front of his face, inspecting it with open professional interest.

"That's not going to last," she said, without introduction. "Give it here."

"It's mine—"

"I'm not stealing it. I'm fixing it. There's a difference, and you'll thank me for it in about ten seconds." She had already produced, from somewhere about her person, a tool too small to properly see, and was doing something to the flashlight's casing with the brisk, unbothered confidence of someone who had fixed several thousand small broken things and expected this to be the several-thousand-and-first. "There. Try it now."

David clicked it on. It held steady, brighter than it had ever been.

"How'd you do that?"

"Skill," she said, "and also I may have improved it slightly, don't worry about the specifics." She hovered back, looking at both of them properly for the first time, head tilted, wings going in a soft, contented blur. "So. You two. You're really here."

"We're really here," Ellie said, because it seemed important to confirm it out loud, for her own benefit as much as anyone's.

"You two," the small creature said again, like she'd already decided that was what she was calling them, and possibly always would. "I'm Thistle. Don't lose that flashlight, I only just fixed it."

After that, it was less like walking and more like being carried along by something that wasn't quite a current and wasn't quite a crowd. Hands found theirs. Sleeves were tugged gently in a dozen directions at once, the whole procession moving deeper into the cavern whether they'd exactly decided to go or not. The smell of woodsmoke thickened, joined by honey, and warm bread, and damp moss, and something green and growing that had no name

Ellie could put to it. Overhead, the not-quite-birdsong threaded in and out of the music, and somewhere close by, someone was singing an actual song with actual words, though the words kept slipping away from her the moment she almost caught them.

Ellie tried, out of habit more than anything useful, to keep track of where they were going: left past the boulder-shaped things, right at the doorway with the singing, under an arch of roots thick as her own leg. She gave up somewhere around the fourth turn, filing the effort away as something to worry about later — possibly in her notebook, if she ever got a free hand back.

David had stopped trying to keep track of anything at all. He was three questions deep into an entirely new conversation with a small, apron-wearing creature about whether dragons were real — the creature seemed to find the question both reasonable and slightly insulting. He showed no sign of slowing down, trailing *but why* and *but how* and *but what about* behind him like a second procession of his own.

The crowd thinned, gradually and then all at once, funneling them toward a wall of woven living branches taller than the house back home, threaded through with small white flowers that hadn't been there, Ellie was almost certain, a moment before.

"Court," Thistle said, dropping down to hover close between them, her voice gone, for just a moment, a little more careful than it had been. "You'll want to be polite. She's wonderful. Everybody loves her."

"The Queen?" David asked.

"The Queen," Thistle agreed, and the great branch-woven doors began, slowly, and with a sound like a held breath finally let out, to open.

CHAPTER 7

THE QUEEN OF
THE HOLLOW FOLK



Whatever Ellie had expected on the other side of those doors, it was bigger than that.

The hall beyond made the cavern they'd already crossed look almost modest by comparison — a space so tall the light gathered into a kind of low gold haze near the ceiling. It was so wide that the crowd pouring in around them seemed, for the first time since they'd stepped out of the tunnel, almost small. And now that the first shock of the welcome had worn off a little, now that nobody was quite so busy shouting delighted things directly into her ear, Ellie found she had enough of herself left over to actually look.

She'd never been especially good at just enjoying things. She was good at *noticing* things, which her mother said was a different skill and maybe a better one, and here, for the first time since the tunnel, there was finally enough room in her own head to use it.

Take the small winged ones, for instance — the same kind who'd swarmed David's flashlight and hadn't really stopped moving since. Up close, properly close, for the first time, she could

see they weren't all identical: some had wings like dragonflies, glassy and veined and quick; some had wings more like moths, soft and dusty and patterned in colors she didn't have good names for. All of them carried tools, or fragments of tools, or things that were clearly *supposed* to become tools eventually, tucked into belts and pouches and, in one case, an actual small toolbox worn like a backpack. If her mother had been here with her sketchbook, Ellie thought, she'd have had an entire field guide's worth of plates just from this one hallway. *Tinker-wings*, Ellie decided. That was as good a name as any, and nobody here seemed to be using an actual one, so she may as well have first crack at it.

The sturdier, rounder ones moved differently — unhurried, planted, like they trusted the ground to still be there with every step, which, Ellie supposed, down here, you probably had to. Several of them were still faintly dusted with flour, and one had an unmistakable smear of jam along one cheek, worn with the unselfconscious pride of somebody who had absolutely no intention of wiping it off before a party. *Round Ones*, she thought, and then reconsidered. *Hearth-folk*, maybe, since half of them seemed to be carrying something either baked or about to be.

Sharper-eyed, sharper-fingered creatures moved along the edges of the crowd in ones and twos, watching everything with the alert attention of people counting something — the crowd, maybe, or the room, or possibly just anything nearby that glittered. One of them caught her looking and gave her a wink so quick she almost missed it, gone before she could decide whether it had actually happened. *Counting-folk*. That one came easily.

Along the walls, mostly still, mostly quiet, sat the huge slow shapes she'd first mistaken for boulders — and hadn't entirely stopped mistaking for boulders, if she was honest. Every so often, though, one of them shifted, or opened one slow ancient eye to take in the noise with an expression of patient, geological amuse-

ment. She didn't have a name ready for those yet. They didn't seem to be in a hurry for one.

David, for his part, was not cataloguing anything. He had found the source of the music — a loose, cheerful cluster of small creatures with instruments that didn't look like they should work and clearly did anyway — and was attempting, with great sincerity and zero success, to learn the words to whatever they were singing.

"It's not real words," Ellie told him, catching up. "I don't think. It might just be sounds."

"It's real to them," David said, which was, Ellie had to admit, a pretty good point, and went back to humming along badly.

It was only when the crowd began, without anyone quite telling it to, arranging itself into something with actual shape — a wide, unhurried funnel toward the far end of the hall — that Ellie's attention shifted from the individual pieces to the pattern all of them were making together.

Because it was a pattern. She could see it now that she was looking for it instead of just being swept along by it: the winged ones keeping mostly to the higher air near the ceiling, the round hearth-folk clustering closer to the doors they'd have to carry food back out through. The sharp-eyed counting-folk drifted toward the edges, where they had the best view of everyone else. The huge slow shapes had settled, unmoved, exactly where they'd apparently always been. Nobody had arranged any of it. It had simply arranged itself, the way water finds its own level, everybody drifting into the spot that had always, somehow, already belonged to them.

At the center of that pattern, on a throne grown rather than built — living branches woven so closely together that Ellie couldn't have said, looking at it, where the wood ended and the seat began — sat the Queen.

She was, Ellie would think later, hard to describe in any way

that didn't sound like something out of one of David's stories, but she'd try anyway, because someone should keep a proper record of it. The Queen was tall, and moved in the unhurried way of someone who had never once needed to hurry, dressed in something the color of old gold that moved like water even when she was perfectly still, her dark hair threaded through with small white flowers like the ones on the doors. She was beautiful in the straightforward way flowers are beautiful, without seeming especially interested in the fact herself. And she was watching them — had, Ellie realized with a small, private jolt, been watching them the entire time they crossed the hall, her attention fixed on them the whole time, steadier than seemed reasonable for a long, noisy procession. She didn't blink, at least not that Ellie noticed. She probably just hadn't needed to, at exactly the moment Ellie happened to be looking.

When the Queen smiled — and she did, warmly, the moment their eyes met — it reached her whole face, except, if you were looking very closely, and Ellie happened to be, some small remaining corner of it. The last of the noise in the hall folded itself down into something more like reverence than celebration. Even the round, floury hearth-folk nearest the throne went a little straighter, a little quieter, the easy unselfconsciousness of a moment ago replaced by something more careful. Ellie noticed it and filed it away without really deciding to — the same reflex that had her, half without meaning to, sorting the whole hall into names and categories in the first place.

"Well now," the Queen said, and her voice matched the rest of her — warm, unhurried, carrying easily across the whole enormous hall without seeming to be raised at all. "It has been a very long while since laughter echoed in this hall quite like that. You are very welcome here, both of you, however you found your way to us."

David, who had apparently used up his entire vocabulary of impressive things to say by ceiling height, managed only, "Hi."

"Hello," Ellie said, elbowing him very slightly. "I'm Ellie. This is David. We — we found a tunnel."

"Tunnels tend to find the people who most need them," the Queen said, which didn't really answer anything and somehow felt like it did.

Somewhere near the foot of the throne, a small, hare-eared shape was attempting — with the same anxious energy he'd brought to failing at the receiving line earlier — to consult his tiny hourglass-shaped watch while also bowing, and managing neither very well.

"Thimble," the Queen said, not unkindly, without even glancing his way, "do sit down. You're making the mice nervous."

"I am aware, Majesty, that the schedule doesn't strictly account for—" Thimble began.

"Thimble."

"Sitting down, Majesty." He sat, still clutching the little hourglass, looking faintly wounded and entirely unsurprised — an expression Ellie was already starting to suspect was simply his default.

The Queen's attention returned to the children, and something in her expression brightened further, if that was even possible.

"You will stay," she said, "and you will eat, and there will be music worth actually learning the words to" — a small, amused glance toward David, who went faintly pink with the delight of being noticed by someone extremely impressive — "and tonight, in this hall, we will have ourselves a proper feast. It has, after all," she added, and something moved behind her eyes that might have been humor and might have been something else entirely, "been rather a long time since we had anyone worth throwing one for."

The hall didn't so much erupt as remember, all at once, that it had been wanting to erupt the whole time, and did.

Somewhere in the middle of the noise, Ellie found David's eyes, and David found hers, and they didn't need to say anything at all — there wasn't really a sentence built yet that covered *this is actually happening* — because they both already knew, without needing to check, that the other one was thinking it too.

CHAPTER 8

THE FEAST THAT
NEVER ENDS



The table, when it appeared — and *appeared* felt like the right word, since Ellie was fairly sure it hadn't been there a minute ago — stretched the entire length of the hall, and was already full.

Not just full. Overflowing, the way a table gets overflowing when everyone setting it has stopped checking whether there's room and started trusting there will be. Platters overlapped platters. A river of small candles ran down the center of it, throwing warm light up into faces on both sides as far as Ellie could see, which, given the length of the table, was not actually all that far.

"Sit, sit," Thistle said, already tugging David toward a bench. "You're guests of honor, you get the good seats, don't argue, just sit."

They sat. David picked up the nearest roll, inspected it with the seriousness of a food critic, and took a bite.

"It tastes like Tuesday," he announced.

"That's not a flavor."

"It is here. Try it."

She did, mostly to prove him wrong, and found — infuriat-

ingly — that she understood exactly what he meant, though she couldn't have explained it to anyone who hadn't tasted it themselves. The soup, when it arrived, was the color and taste of the word *blue*, which made even less sense and bothered her a great deal more. A dish near her elbow emptied and refilled itself so smoothly that she only caught it happening once, out of the corner of her eye, and spent a solid minute afterward pretending she hadn't seen it, purely so she wouldn't have to think about what that meant.

Her cup fizzed gently the whole meal, changing color in slow, lazy swirls — gold when she was delighted, which was often, and a startled, embarrassed pink the one time she nearly knocked it over reaching for more bread.

"It knows what you're feeling," David said, watching his own cup do the same thing, currently a bright, unmistakable orange.

"It's probably just reacting to temperature or something."

"Or it knows what you're feeling."

She didn't have a good counterargument for that, which she found almost more annoying than the cup itself.

Somewhere down the table, the pixie-musicians struck up something new — brighter, faster, clearly meant for singing rather than just listening to — and the whole hall, without seeming to discuss it, began picking up a chorus that repeated every few lines: three quick syllables, up on the last one, that meant, as far as Ellie could tell, absolutely nothing and also, somehow, everything.

"Still not real words," she said.

"Still real to them," David said, already halfway into humming it, and by the third repetition, so was she — badly, half a beat behind everyone else, and it didn't matter even slightly.

Thimble worked his way down the table at intervals, consulting his little hourglass-watch and muttering totals to himself with mounting anxiety.

"That's the ninth course," he informed nobody in particular,

passing behind Ellie's seat. A moment later, on his way back: "Eleventh. I make it the eleventh, but I could be persuaded otherwise." Later still, looking faintly haunted: "I have lost track entirely, and I would like it noted that this is not my fault."

"Is there a right number of courses?" Ellie asked him, mostly out of pity.

"There is *a* number," Thimble said, with the air of a creature clinging to a principle. "I simply no longer know what it is."

It was around then — though "around then" was already starting to feel like a generous way to put it — that Ellie noticed the candles hadn't burned down at all, despite what felt like at least two full hours of eating, singing, and watching her cup change colors. She glanced toward wherever a window might have been, if the hall had windows, and found nothing but warm gold light exactly like it had been when they'd sat down.

"David. How long have we been sitting here?"

He considered this with his mouth full, which took a while. "Dunno. Feels like forever. Feels like also barely any time. Both, maybe?"

"That's not an answer."

"It's not a question that has one, though," David said, with more wisdom than she generally credited him for, and went back to his soup.

She thought about pressing it — actually opened her mouth to — and then a fresh plate of something that smelled unreasonably good arrived directly in front of her, and the question, quite peacefully, lost.

The room's attention swung, a few minutes later — or a few hours, there was truly no way to be sure anymore — toward a small, sharp-eyed figure who had climbed, uninvited, onto the table itself, and was tapping a spoon against his cup with the confidence of someone who did this often and had never once been asked to stop.

"Friends!" he announced. "Neighbors! Lesser hoards of my acquaintance!"

A ripple of laughter and groaning went down the table in equal measure.

"Here we go," Thistle murmured to David. "That's Corrigan. He does this every feast. Just let him finish, it's faster."

"I have," Corrigan announced, "recently acquired a coin of such extraordinary shine, such *unimpeachable* roundness, that lesser collectors" — and here he did not look at anyone in particular, which somehow made it worse for several specific individuals — "have been known to weep upon viewing it."

"You cried when you found it," someone called out.

"I wept from the *sheer quality* of the coin," Corrigan said, with dignity. "There's a difference."

Ellie, watching him hold court, felt a small flicker of satisfaction. *Counting-folk*, she'd called them, back before she'd known any of their actual names — and here was the proof of it, standing on a table, counting his own greatness out loud for anyone who'd listen.

Corrigan's toast went on for some time, expanding to include several other treasures, at least one rival collector he seemed to hold a decades-long grudge against, and a lengthy tangent about the correct way to polish gold that nobody had asked for and everybody seemed used to enduring. He finished, eventually, to genuine applause and only slightly sarcastic cheering, and hopped down off the table looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

Then, into the noise, came something quieter.

An older shape rose from farther down the table — moss-colored, slow-moving, dressed more plainly than most of the room — and lifted a cup that seemed almost too heavy for the gesture.

"To guests," he said, and his voice, though soft, carried in a way that made the whole table go, without quite meaning to, a

little more still. “Who arrive so rarely. And matter so much, in the turning of things.”

Nobody quite laughed at that one, though nobody looked especially troubled by it either. It was simply the kind of thing an old voice said at feasts — the sort of toast that meant more to the person giving it than to anyone drinking to it. The room murmured its agreement, drank, and moved on, and within a minute the noise had swallowed the moment whole.

Ellie found she remembered it anyway.

After that, the feast simply kept going, the way things keep going once nobody’s in charge of ending them: more courses that may or may not have been the actual next number, more songs, Corrigan attempting to start a second toast before being good-naturedly shouted back down onto the bench. At some point David fell fast asleep sitting up for what felt like ten minutes and wasn’t, by his own confused accounting, sleepy at all when he woke. At some point Ellie’s cup went gold and stayed there. And at some point — this was the part she’d think about later, lying somewhere that might have been a bed, in a room she couldn’t afterward describe with any real confidence — she stopped trying to keep track of the time at all, and simply let the feast carry her, the way the crowd had carried her earlier, toward whatever came next.

CHAPTER 9

THE GAMES UNDER THE HILL



Wherever they were being carried to, it turned out to be a wide, mossy clearing somewhere past the feast hall — Ellie couldn't have said exactly how they'd gotten there, only that one moment she'd been finishing a cup of gold-colored something, and the next she was standing on grass that glowed faintly underfoot, watching a mallet stroll, entirely unassisted, from one side of the field to the other.

"That one's just wandered off," said the small creature who'd handed her a second mallet — this one, thankfully, still where it was supposed to be. "Happens if you don't watch them closely enough. They get bored."

"Mallets get bored."

"Everything gets bored, given the chance. Best not to give it the chance."

Ahead of them, a loose scattering of hoops stood driven into the grass in a pattern that might once have made sense, though it was hard to say, since even as Ellie watched, one of them ambled two full feet to the left and settled back down looking extremely pleased with itself.

"Right," David said, delighted. "So how do you play?"

"However you like," said the creature. "That's more or less the whole game."

"That's not a rule."

"It's the only rule. Higgledy doesn't have very many. It has opinions instead."

"Out of my way, out of my way, coming through—" Old Corrigan shoved past a cluster of onlookers, mallet already in hand, a small, smug smile fixed firmly in place. He set something down on a mossy stump with the reverence of a man laying a crown on a velvet cushion: a single, ordinary-looking pebble.

"Behold," he announced, "the Sunfleck."

"It's a rock," David said.

"It is the *finest* rock currently in play," Corrigan said, wounded. "I am wagering it against anyone with the nerve. Winner takes the Sunfleck. Loser," he added, brightening considerably, "takes the shame."

"What do you get if you lose?"

"I don't lose," Corrigan said, with the flat, cheerful certainty of someone who absolutely, statistically, sometimes did.

The game, once it actually started, made a kind of sense that stopped making sense the moment Ellie tried to hold onto it. David caught on almost instantly — swinging at his ball, missing entirely, and announcing, without missing a beat, "That's allowed. Misses count double on a Tuesday."

"Is it Tuesday?" someone asked.

"It is if I say it is," David said, and, astonishingly, nobody argued.

His third turn was the one that really sealed it.

He walked up to his ball like he already knew something nobody else did, tapped his mallet twice against the ground — "for luck," he announced, though nobody had asked — and took a wild, looping swing that missed the ball entirely by a good six inches.

A ripple of amusement went through the small crowd that had gathered. Corrigan, watching with the attention of a man auditing a rival, opened his mouth to say something unkind.

"Wait," David said, holding up a finger before anyone could laugh properly. "That was on purpose. New rule: on a full moon, the first swing is a *decoy* swing. It doesn't count. It's to confuse the ball."

"There's no moon down here," someone pointed out.

"There's always a moon somewhere," David said, with the unshakeable confidence of someone making this up in real time and fully believing it as he said it. "Second swing's the real one."

He swung again — properly this time, and by pure accident, cleanly — and the ball rolled a startling, improbable distance, curved around a wandering hoop that hadn't been anywhere near its path a second earlier, and dropped in with a satisfying little *thock*.

The clearing erupted into applause. Even Corrigan, grudgingly, brought his hands together twice before catching himself.

"That is *not* a real rule," he said.

"It is now," said the small, apron-wearing creature keeping score, scribbling something onto what appeared to be a leaf. "Decoy Swing. Written down. Official."

David turned to Ellie, beaming, arms spread wide, and took an entirely unnecessary bow. By the end of that same round, he'd added an entire subsection of further rules on top of it — bonus points for style, a penalty for any mallet that hadn't been given a name, a complicated exception involving whichever hoop currently had the most dew on it — and the Hollow Folk around him adopted each one with open enthusiasm, adding embellishments of their own faster than Ellie could track them.

Ellie, meanwhile, was losing badly, and hated it.

She'd asked, twice, for someone to explain the actual scoring, and had received, in order: a shrug, a riddle she was fairly sure

wasn't actually a riddle, and a long, unhelpful story about a similar game played several centuries ago that had ended, as far as she could tell, in a minor flood.

On her second attempt, she lined up the shot with real care — feet planted just so, mallet checked twice for angle, the same quiet, methodical focus she brought to everything that mattered to her — and struck the ball dead center. A perfect, textbook shot.

The ball rolled four inches and stopped.

"That's it?" she said, to nobody in particular. "That's the whole shot?"

"Lovely form," Thistle offered, unhelpfully, from somewhere above her head. "Shame about the result."

"I did everything right."

"You did everything *correct*," Thistle said. "Different thing entirely, down here, I'm afraid."

Ellie stared at the ball, four unimpressive inches from where she'd started, and felt something in her chest go tight and stubborn — a feeling that had nothing to do with the game and everything to do with the fact that she was used to being right about things, and being right was, apparently, not currently on offer. Her mallet kept wandering. Her hoops kept relocating at precisely the moment she was lining up a shot. By her fourth turn she'd stopped trying to hit anything and had simply stood there, mallet in hand, glaring at the entire field with the fury of someone who was used to things making sense and was not currently being accommodated.

"You're doing it wrong," Thistle offered, from somewhere near her shoulder, again.

"There isn't a right."

"There's a right *way* to be wrong. You're doing the wrong wrong."

Ellie opened her mouth to argue, and then stopped, because underneath the nonsense of it, something had almost clicked. She

watched David take his next shot — badly aimed, cheerfully declared brilliant regardless — and somehow rewarded for it by a hoop that drifted helpfully closer to meet his ball halfway. She watched Corrigan take his: precise, confident, utterly humorless. He got absolutely nothing for his trouble, his ball rolling to a stop a full foot short while he spluttered in outrage.

It wasn't about the shot. It was about the *conviction*.

She lined up her next shot, and this time she didn't check her feet, or check the angle, or do any of the careful, correct things she'd done every time before. She thought about David's decoy swing, declared into existence a half-second before it worked. She thought about Corrigan's humorless, precise shots rolling to nothing. She thought, mostly, about how tired she was of being careful and getting four inches for it.

"That's going in," she announced, loudly, to the whole clearing, before she'd even swung — and swung, fast and certain and not remotely careful, the mallet connecting with a satisfying, decisive *crack*.

The ball didn't roll so much as it *committed*. It curved hard to the left, well outside anything resembling a straight line, clipped the edge of a hoop that had relocated there roughly two seconds earlier for reasons entirely its own, spun once, and dropped in clean.

For a second, nobody said anything at all. Then the whole clearing was cheering, Thistle was looping through the air in an actual celebratory spiral, and even the boulder-shaped onlookers at the field's edge seemed to have opened both eyes.

"THAT'S the game," Thistle said, dropping down to hover directly in front of Ellie's face, delighted. "You've got it now. Do it again!"

Ellie did it again. And then again after that, each shot louder and faster and less careful than the last, each one dropping in clean.

It was somewhere around Ellie's fourth clean shot in a row — and Corrigan's increasingly wounded silence — that the mishap happened.

Nobody was ever entirely sure afterward which hoop started it. One moment the field was arranged in its usual semi-cooperative scatter; the next, every hoop on the field decided, apparently all at once and for reasons of its own, to relocate at the exact same time. They didn't go far. They didn't need to. It was enough that three different players swung at the same instant, at three different targets that were no longer where any of them had been aiming, and all three balls collided in midair with a sound like a very small, very surprised bell.

Corrigan sat down hard in the grass, entirely by accident, and stayed there.

Nobody could stop laughing for a solid minute, David loudest of all, one hand pressed to his side, mallet abandoned in the grass beside him.

When the game finally wound down — and by then, nobody was pretending to keep score with any real precision — Corrigan pulled himself up out of the grass, dusted himself off with as much dignity as the situation allowed, and pointed his mallet at David.

"You," he announced, "are the single most imaginative cheater I have encountered in several hundred years of this game, and I mean that as the highest compliment I am currently capable of giving."

"Thank you," David said, beaming, and bowed, nearly falling over in the process.

Ellie, a little apart from the noise, looked down at her own mallet, and the small, unremarkable pile of hoops she'd cleared, and allowed herself one private, entirely satisfied smile. Nobody crowned her anything. Nobody needed to. She'd cracked it — actually, properly cracked it — and there was a kind of quiet

victory in knowing that, whether or not anyone else was keeping score.

Corrigan, retrieving the Sunfleck from its stump with theatrical relief, held it up to the light.

“Still mine,” he announced, to nobody’s surprise and everybody’s amusement, and the game, such as it had been, was over.

CHAPTER 10

THE ROOT-WALLED LIBRARY



At some point after the game — Ellie genuinely couldn't have said when, or how; time down here had stopped being a thing she could pin down at all — she and David found themselves wandering a quieter part of the realm, one the crowd hadn't swept them through yet.

The noise of the feast hall faded behind them, replaced by a hush that felt deliberate, almost held, the kind of quiet certain rooms have because they've decided to have it. They found the entrance almost by accident: a low archway, root-woven like everything else, but darker, older-looking, with a smell of dust and dry paper that didn't belong anywhere else they'd been Under the Hill.

"You are in the wrong wing," said a voice from somewhere inside, before they'd even properly stepped through, "if you are looking for refreshments. This is the *Histories*. Refreshments are two turnings back and considerably louder."

They stepped in anyway. The chamber beyond was lined, floor to ceiling, with shelves grown directly out of the root-walls, packed with scrolls and bound books and things that were neither,

exactly, stacked with a precision that suggested somebody cared about this room a great deal more than anybody had cared about the checkers rules back home.

A small, moss-colored gnome peered out at them from behind a leaning tower of books, spectacles slightly crooked, an expression caught somewhere between alarm and delight.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s you two. The guests. I did wonder if you’d find your way down here eventually — nobody ever does on purpose, you understand, it’s always by accident, which I find slightly insulting but have made my peace with.” He straightened, and then immediately checked something that might have been a pocket watch, though it looked more like a very small sundial. “You’ll want to be quick about it, whatever you’ve come for. Time is — well. Time is a complicated subject around here, but generally speaking, it does still pass, and I do still have things to do.”

Ellie recognized him immediately, or nearly — the same sturdy, earthy build as the pie-scented Hearth-folk from the feast, but plainer, quieter, dressed in something closer to grey than flour-white. *Hearth-folk*, she thought again, revising the category slightly in her head. *Just... a library kind.*

“I’m Ellie. This is David. We didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Everybody says that,” he said, not unkindly, already turning back to his shelves. “And then they intrude anyway. I am Bramblecap. I keep the Histories, for what that’s worth to anyone — which is usually very little, until it’s suddenly a great deal, and by then it’s typically too late to have asked me sooner.”

David had already drifted toward the nearest shelf, drawn, as always, to whatever looked most likely to do something interesting. He pulled down a slim, green-bound book, opened it at random, and frowned.

“This page is blank.”

“Is it,” Bramblecap said, not looking up, in the tone of

someone who already knew the answer and was enjoying making David find out for himself.

David turned the page. Then turned it back. The blank page now had writing on it — dense, curling script, an illustration of something that might have been a fish or might have been a cloud, depending on how you looked at it.

“It changed!”

“Everything in that book has already happened, is happening, or hasn’t happened yet, more or less simultaneously, depending on when you open it,” Bramblecap said. “It’s not a difficult book. It’s simply an *honest* one. Most books pretend to hold still. That one doesn’t bother.”

Ellie took it from David’s hands, opened it to a different page, and watched, holding her breath, as the words on it seemed to shiver very slightly before settling into a paragraph that hadn’t been there a half-second before.

“How does it know what to show?”

“I’ve often wondered that myself,” Bramblecap said, which was somehow both an answer and not one at all.

David, delighted, opened it a third time, then a fourth, narrating each new page out loud with mounting excitement — a story about a fox who’d lost his shadow, a recipe that appeared to be entirely for a soup made of moonlight, a single sentence, alone on an otherwise empty page, that simply read: *the door will open when it is ready, and not before*. He read that one twice, frowning, then shrugged and turned the page again, already chasing the next surprise.

Ellie, meanwhile, had found a map.

It hung near the back of the chamber, framed in pale wood, and the moment she looked at it directly, a small, warm dot appeared exactly where she was standing — impossibly precise, right down to which side of the doorway she favored.

“That’s me,” she said, startled into saying it out loud.

“That’s you,” Bramblecap agreed. “It’s quite a good map, as maps go. Extremely reliable on the subject of where you currently are.”

She waited for the rest of the sentence. It didn’t come.

“But where am I *going*?”

“That,” Bramblecap said, “it has never once told anyone, in my experience, which is considerable. I’ve asked. It simply adds another dot, exactly where you’re already standing, as if it finds the question a little beside the point.”

Ellie stared at the map for a long moment, the small warm dot glowing steadily where she stood — utterly correct, and completely unhelpful — and found she was almost more fascinated by that than by anything else in the room. A magic map that couldn’t tell you where to go. It offended some careful, organizing part of her, and delighted some other part she was only just getting to know.

“That seems like a design flaw,” she said.

“That,” Bramblecap said, “is a matter of considerable debate.”

David wandered over, glanced at the dot, glanced at Ellie, and said, with real satisfaction, “It’s very accurate. You’re definitely standing there.”

“That’s not helpful, David.”

“I didn’t say it was helpful. I said it was accurate.”

Bramblecap, watching them both with something that had softened, somewhere in the last several minutes, into genuine warmth, wandered closer, adjusting his spectacles, clearly warming to an audience that actually wanted to hear him talk.

“That map, if you’re curious, is older than nearly everything else in this room, myself included, present company being a close second. It was drawn — ah, let me think — it was drawn just after the Binding, actually, back when—“

He stopped.

He stopped so completely and so suddenly that David, mid-

reach toward another shelf, actually paused with his hand in the air, unsure whether something had gone wrong.

“The what?” Ellie asked.

“NOTHING,” Bramblecap said, at a volume entirely unsuited to a library, and then, considerably faster than seemed physically necessary for someone his shape, was somehow already across the room. “Nothing at all, no, forget I — is that the time? That is absolutely the time. Tea. You’ll want tea. I have several excellent teas, all with fascinating properties, did you know the moss-folk sleep for exactly forty winks precisely, no more, no less, it’s extremely reliable, you could set a very slow clock by it—”

He was pulling cups down from a shelf as he talked, not quite looking at either of them, words coming faster now, tumbling over each other the way words tumble when they’re being used, quite deliberately, to fill a silence that would otherwise be asking questions.

“—and did you know the pixie-musicians only actually know seven songs, total, but will insist under any amount of polite questioning that the number is closer to forty, and further, did you know that Thistle’s actual name, her *full* name, has eleven syllables and nobody has the patience to use it, and did you know—”

“Bramblecap,” Ellie tried.

“—did you know that hoop from the game earlier, the wandering one, has been wandering off during that exact game for longer than anyone currently living can confirm, and did you know—”

“What’s the Binding?” David asked, more directly, because subtlety was not really his instrument.

Bramblecap’s hands stopped moving, very briefly, around the teacups.

“More tea trivia,” he said, brightly, and entirely too quickly. “Did you know the World Above — that’s what we call it, up there, past the tunnel, where you two are from, in case that wasn’t

clear — did you know it's been rather a long while since anyone from this hall walked under its actual sky? A long while. A very long while. Extraordinarily long, in fact, now that I say it out loud, which I hadn't really intended to, and — is that kettle boiling? I believe that's the kettle. Excuse me."

There was, as far as either of them could tell, no kettle.

There was, five increasingly chaotic minutes later, tea — served hastily, slightly too hot, in cups that didn't quite match, pressed into their hands along with a small plate of something crumbly that Bramblecap insisted they eat "for the journey," despite the journey in question being roughly forty feet back to the feast hall.

"Lovely visit," he said, already steering them both, gently but firmly, back toward the archway they'd come in through. "Do come again. Not too soon, though. I have cataloguing. Extensive cataloguing. Years of it, really, all rather urgent, all at once, starting now."

"Bramblecap—" Ellie tried once more, glancing back at the shelf where the sentence had stopped.

"Mind the step," Bramblecap said, and, with a final, overly cheerful wave, the archway was somehow already behind them, and the hush of the library had given way again to the ordinary, distant noise of the rest of the realm.

For a moment, neither of them said anything at all.

"That was weird," David said finally.

"That was really weird," Ellie agreed.

She didn't say the word out loud again — *Binding* — but she found, walking back toward the noise and the light, that she hadn't quite let go of it either. She turned it over once, turned it over twice, filed it away next to the strange toast from the feast and the map that only ever told her where she already was, and decided, for now, that some questions could wait for better answers than a man frantically pouring tea was likely to give her.

CHAPTER II

THE UPSIDE-DOWN GARDEN



They weren't alone for long. The hush of the library was still fading back into the ordinary hum of the realm when Thistle found them — or maybe they'd found her, it was getting harder to tell who was doing the finding around here — trailing three more small winged shapes behind her like she'd collected them on the way.

"You HAVE to see the garden," she said, without preamble, already tugging David's sleeve. "Come on. Come on come on come on."

"Which garden?"

"THE garden. There's only the one that matters." She turned to the three trailing behind her, who were hovering in a loose, expectant cluster. "Tell them."

"You have to see the garden," one of them said, dutifully, as if reading off a script she'd only half-learned.

"That's not helping, Bee," Thistle said.

"I did what you asked."

"I asked you to be *convincing*."

They went, because there wasn't really a version of the afternoon (or evening, or whatever this currently was) where they didn't, David already peppering the small entourage with questions about what, exactly, made this garden *the* garden, and receiving answers that ranged from "you'll see" to "it depends on the day" to, from the quietest of the three, something that might have been "it isn't always the same size."

"What does that mean?" Ellie asked.

"You'll see," said all three of them, together, with the unified confidence of creatures who found this answer perfectly sufficient.

The garden, when they reached it, announced itself with color before anything else — a riot of it, flowerbeds spilling over their borders in every direction, vines climbing walls that might not have technically been there, the whole space lit in a soft, shifting light that seemed to come from the flowers themselves as much as anywhere else.

And the flowers were talking.

A large, deep red rose, positioned at the center of the nearest bed like she'd claimed the spot through sheer force of personality, was in the middle of what was unmistakably a monologue.

"—and of course petal count is everything, everything, anyone who tells you otherwise simply doesn't have the petals to back up the opinion, which, frankly, explains quite a lot about the daisies—"

"WE HEARD THAT," said the daisies, in a single overlapping voice from the bed over, sounding more delighted than offended.

"YOU WERE MEANT TO," the rose said, and returned to admiring herself.

Nearby, a tall, snapping flower — its blossom opening and closing with an audible little *snap* — took one look at David and said, without any introduction at all, "You've got mud on your shoe."

"I know."

"I'm just saying. It's very visible. From here. Where I am. Looking at it."

"Thank you?" David tried.

"I wasn't complimenting you," the snapdragon said, and snapped shut, apparently finished.

Ellie, drawn in despite herself, crouched down in front of the rose. "Do you actually think about petals all the time, or is that just what you say to people?"

The rose considered this with visible surprise, as though nobody had ever asked her to examine her own material before. "I — well. Mostly the first one. Occasionally the second, when I'm tired."

"That seems exhausting."

"It's *fulfilling*," the rose said, recovering. "There's a difference. Ask the daisies about exhausting. All that agreeing with each other, constantly — it must be dreadfully tiring."

"WE HEARD THAT TOO," said the daisies, still delighted.

"GOOD," said the rose.

Ellie tried a different tack with the snapdragon, mostly to see if reasoning worked any better there. "Why do you only say rude things?"

"I don't only say rude things."

"You've said two rude things since we got here."

"Two *true* things," the snapdragon corrected. "I don't see why everyone insists those can't be the same category."

"They can be. It's just not very nice."

"Nobody asked me to be nice. They asked me to be a flower. I'm doing that extremely well, thank you."

Ellie opened her mouth to argue the point further, realized she didn't actually have a good counter for a flower's stated job description, and gave up — which felt, on reflection, like the correct response to nearly everything in this garden so far.

Past the flowerbeds, Thistle pointed out a path — or rather, pointed at the space where a path was clearly meant to be, a stretch of ground that looked, at the moment, like nothing more than ordinary grass.

“That’s the shy path,” she said. “It only shows up if you’re not looking at it. Direct attention makes it nervous.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Ellie said.

“Loads of things here don’t make sense. That’s rather the point of the place.”

David, delighted by the challenge, immediately fixed the path with an enormous, deliberate stare. Nothing happened, except that Bee and the other two small onlookers began, without any real subtlety, taking bets.

“Two on him lasting less than a minute,” Bee said.

“I’ll take that,” said another.

“He’s already fidgeting,” the third pointed out. “That’s basically the same as losing.”

“I am NOT fidgeting,” David said, fidgeting.

He tried looking at it sideways, which mostly resulted in him walking directly into a rosebush and issuing a heartfelt, immediate apology to it. He tried closing his eyes entirely and shuffling forward, which worked for exactly four steps before curiosity got the better of him and he peeked — at which point the path, or at least the feeling of solid ground beneath his feet, promptly vanished, dropping him unceremoniously into a patch of extremely soft, forgiving moss.

The small crowd of onlookers, now numbering considerably more than three, cheered like he’d done something impressive rather than fallen over.

“He’s very good at that part,” Bee said, approvingly.

“The falling?”

“The falling. Yes. Very natural at it.”

David, from the moss, gave a thumbs up.

Ellie watched all of this with real interest, and then tried something different: she didn't look away from the path, exactly, but she stopped looking *for* it — turned her attention instead to the flowerbeds beside it, half paying attention, catching it only at the edge of her vision, never quite committing to looking at it directly.

Her feet found solid ground before her eyes had caught up to explain it.

"That's cheating," David said, from the moss.

"That's *technique*," Ellie said, already three steps down a path she still hadn't properly looked at, moving with the careful, deliberate unconcern of somebody pretending very hard not to care about something she cared about a great deal.

The little crowd applauded this too, possibly more than the falling.

"She's very good at that part," Bee noted, revising the earlier assessment without any apparent embarrassment about it.

Past the path, half-hidden in a bed of low blue flowers that hummed very quietly to themselves, sat a small, unremarkable grey pebble.

"Don't step on that unless you mean to," Thistle warned, a half-second too late, because David had already stepped on it.

He shrank three inches, instantly and without ceremony, and stood there blinking up — genuinely up, now — at a world that had rearranged its proportions without asking him first.

"Whoa."

"I DID warn you," Thistle said, unbothered.

"The grass is huge."

"The grass is the same size it always was. You're just now equipped to appreciate that properly."

A ladybug the approximate size of a dinner plate trundled past, entirely unconcerned with the sudden change in David's perspective, and David watched it go with the expression of someone recalibrating his entire understanding of insects.

Ellie, torn between curiosity and caution, examined the pebble for a long moment — the same careful, assessing look she'd given the map back in the library — before deciding that caution had lost this argument days ago, and stepped on it too.

The world got larger around her exactly as it had for David, and for one dizzy second the whole garden felt like something built at a scale meant for someone else entirely — something she was only borrowing.

"This is amazing," she said, with none of her usual reserve, and meant it completely.

It was right around then — small, delighted, three inches shorter than they'd been a minute ago — that the music started.

It didn't build up slowly at all. It simply arrived, all at once, the pixie-musicians appearing from somewhere in the hedges with their instruments already going, and every flower in the garden — even the snapdragon, even the rose, mid-monologue — joined in like they'd been waiting all along for somebody to give the signal.

"UP IS DOWN AND DOWN IS SIDEWAYS," the whole garden sang, more or less together, more or less in tune, "SMALL IS TALL ON GARDEN FRIDAYS, NOTHING HERE IS QUITE THE SAME TWICE IN ANY GIVEN DAY —

SO IF YOU'RE LOST, DON'T MIND IT MUCH, JUST FOLLOW WHAT YOU CANNOT TOUCH, AND IF THE PATH WON'T LET YOU SEE IT, LOOK AWAY, AND JUST — DON'T — BE IT!"

The daisies took the second verse as one overlapping voice, the rose insisted on a dramatic solo she had not been asked for and got anyway, and Bee and the others swept up into the air in something that might generously have been called choreography, spinning in loose, delighted loops around the kids' shrunken heads.

"Sing the chorus again!" Thistle shouted, over the noise. "You know this part, you did it at the feast!"

And, astonishingly, they did — badly, half a beat behind,

David's voice cracking on the high note, Ellie laughing too hard through most of it to actually finish the words — but they sang it anyway, twice through, arms linked with a small tinker-fae on each side, spinning in the same loose loops as everyone else.

It was in the middle of the second chorus, spinning a little too enthusiastically, that David stumbled backward directly into the fountain at the garden's center — which, being watched by absolutely nobody in that moment, had been quietly pouring upward into the air instead of down, exactly the way Thistle had warned them it sometimes did.

The water caught him full in the face.

He came up sputtering, three inches taller than he'd been a second before — full-size again, drenched, and laughing so hard he could barely stay upright.

"IT FIXES IT!" he shouted, to the entire garden. "The fountain fixes the pebble thing!"

Ellie, laughing too hard to properly object, got splashed a moment later — whether by accident or by the cheerful, deliberate aim of several small winged creatures, she genuinely couldn't say — and came up soaked, full-sized, and grinning in a way she couldn't remember doing in a very long time.

The song wound down eventually, dissolving into general laughter and the flowers going back to bickering among themselves as if nothing had happened, and the little crowd of Hollow Folk scattering back into the garden the way a wave pulls back from a shore. But Ellie and David stayed where they were for a minute, soaked and breathless and grinning at each other, the rose still monologuing somewhere behind them, the daisies still agreeing with each other, the snapdragon informing a passing beetle that its shell needed polishing.

"This is the best place that has ever existed," David announced, with the flat, unshakeable certainty of someone who had done the research and reached a firm conclusion.

Ellie, dripping, laughing, standing in a garden that sang and shrank people and grew paths too shy to be looked at, found — for the first time since the tunnel, maybe for the first time ever — that she didn't have a single practical thought to offer in response.

“Yeah,” she said instead, and meant every word of it. “I think it might be.”

CHAPTER 12

NO SUCH THING AS TUESDAY



“Okay,” Ellie said, sitting up very straight on the mossy bank where they’d landed, “let’s just work this out properly. How many days have we been here?”

David considered the question with the seriousness of someone being asked to solve it for money. “Two?”

“That’s not — you can’t just guess a number.”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t guess a number.”

Ellie held up one finger. “The tunnel.” A second finger. “The Queen’s hall.” A third. “The feast.” She kept going, counting off on her fingers — her old trick for making the world hold still and be reasonable — the tunnel, the hall, the feast, the games, the library, the garden, and ran out of fingers on one hand before she’d worked out whether any of it had happened on separate days or all in one impossibly long one.

“See, that’s six things,” David said, unhelpfully pleased with himself for having followed the math this far. “Six things isn’t the same as six days.”

“I *know* that.”

"So how many days is it?"

"I don't know! That's the whole problem!"

She switched to her other hand and started again, slower this time, trying to remember whether she'd actually slept anywhere in between any of it, and came up with nothing solid — a fuzzy, warm sense of having rested at some point, somewhere, without any clear edge where waking started or stopping ended. It bothered her more than she wanted to admit, this not being able to draw a line and say *here, this is where one day became the next*. She liked lines. She liked being able to say a thing with confidence.

"Maybe it's been one really long day," David offered.

"Or eleven short ones."

"Or it's Tuesday. It's always Tuesday, if you don't check."

"That's not a real rule, David, that's from the game."

"Everything's a little bit from the game," David said, which was, infuriatingly, not something Ellie had a ready argument against.

She gave up on her fingers and let both hands drop into her lap, and became aware, slowly, of something like a light left on in another room: the not-knowing wasn't actually bothering her, not the way it should have. She *wanted* it to bother her. She tried, on purpose, to feel the tight, electric worry she usually felt when a number wouldn't come out right, and found only a soft, general contentment sitting there instead, comfortable as a cushion, refusing to budge.

That was almost more alarming than the not-knowing itself.

"Doesn't it bother you?" she asked David, half hoping he'd say yes, just so she wouldn't be the only one faking it.

"Not really," he admitted. "Should it?"

"I think it should."

"But does it?"

She opened her mouth to say yes, obviously, and found the

word wasn't actually there when she reached for it. "...No," she admitted. "Not as much as it should."

They sat with that for a moment, the two of them, in a silence that wasn't uncomfortable so much as it was quietly strange, like a held note that had gone on a beat too long without either of them noticing exactly when.

It was David, of all people, who broke it.

"Mom's going to be so mad," he said, suddenly, in a voice that had lost its usual bounce.

Ellie turned to look at him. His face had gone still in a way she wasn't used to seeing — not scared, exactly, but caught, like someone remembering something he'd managed to forget for a little while on purpose.

"She probably doesn't even know," Ellie said, quickly, before she'd fully decided what she meant by it. "Not yet. Not really. It probably hasn't even been that long. Up there."

"You don't know that."

"No," she admitted. "But I don't know it's *not* true either. And I'd rather believe the one that doesn't feel awful."

David looked at her for a second, like he was deciding whether that counted as an actual answer or just a nice thing to say instead of one, and then let it go — quickly, easily, without much of a fight, same as he let most things go. Ellie noticed, distantly, that she'd have expected herself to be the one bringing up their parents — the one doing the worrying out loud — and instead here she was, talking both of them out of it, and not entirely sure whether that made her brave or just good at looking away from things.

They might have sat there longer, turning it over, if something hadn't chosen that exact moment to bump gently into the side of Ellie's head.

She swatted at it on reflex, the way you'd swat at a floating bit of dandelion seed drifting too close to your face — and it bobbed

away obligingly, spun in a lazy little loop, and drifted right back in for another pass.

“There’s dandelion fluff down here,” she said, mostly to herself, swatting again.

“It’s not dandelion fluff,” David said, squinting. “It’s got a face.”

It did, in fact, have a face — a very small one, round and drowsy-looking, tucked into a puff of pale fuzz that genuinely could have passed for a seed head in bad light, drifting on no apparent wind of its own, humming a little tune that trailed off before it ever quite finished. Two more joined it a moment later, circling low and unhurried around David’s head, bumping his ear, bumping his shoulder, entirely unbothered by the fact that he kept absently brushing them off like lint.

“Cut it out,” David said, without much heat, swatting one gently away.

It drifted back. He swatted it away again. It drifted back again, patient as weather.

Ellie found herself doing the same thing without quite deciding to — waving the small drowsy shapes off her shoulder, her hair, the back of her hand, the exact same motion over and over, barely looking at it, barely thinking about it at all. It should have startled her. A week ago — an hour ago, maybe, if hours still meant anything — the sight of a tiny fuzzy creature with a face, humming an unfinished song, would have stopped her cold. Now she batted it away like lint and kept talking.

That, more than anything else so far, should have worried her. It didn’t, quite.

The garden around them had gone strangely quiet, she noticed, in a way she couldn’t immediately place — not silent, exactly, just muted, the colors a shade less certain than they’d been a few minutes ago, the warm light that seemed to come from everywhere at once sitting a little lower, a little further off, like a

lamp someone had turned down without asking. The small fluff-headed creatures kept drifting and bumping and humming their half-songs, and David kept swatting at them, and it all felt, for the first time since the tunnel, almost ordinary. Almost like nothing at all.

“David,” Ellie said slowly, “does it seem quieter to you?”

He stopped mid-swat. Looked around, properly this time, the careful sweep you give a room when someone’s just told you something’s missing from it without saying what.

“...Maybe,” he said. “A little.”

She couldn’t have said what, exactly, had changed. The garden was still there. The little humming things were still there, still bumping gently against them, patient and undiscouraged. But the wonder of it all had gone somehow thin, stretched out, like a good dream losing its edges right before you wake up, and for one long, quiet moment, sitting on a mossy bank Under the Hill, Ellie felt almost — *almost* — like an ordinary girl sitting in an ordinary garden that happened to have some odd insects in it, and nothing more remarkable than that.

It was Thimble who broke the moment, hurrying up the path with his little hourglass-watch already in one hand and an expression of profound, practiced distress on his face.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to ask — the feast, the one a while back — was that eleven courses or thirteen? I’ve had *both* numbers rattling around and I can’t get either one to sit still long enough to be sure, it’s been bothering me for—” He stopped, seemed to notice, for the first time, the small drifting shapes circling the children’s heads, and waved a hand at them with the weary familiarity of someone shooing a housecat off a table for the hundredth time. “Oh, ignore the Down-folk. They’re perfectly harmless. Mostly they just want somebody to notice them, and then they get bored and drift off, same as anyone.”

“Down-folk,” Ellie repeated, testing the name in her mouth,

and something about saying it out loud — giving the small floating things a proper name, filing them into the same mental shelf as Tinker-wings and Hearth-folk and Counting-folk — made them come back into focus a little, sharpen at the edges, stop being background and start being *someone* again.

Thistle arrived a moment later, towing Corrigan behind her by the sleeve, Corrigan grumbling the whole way about being interrupted mid-count of something he described, with wounded dignity, as “an extremely important coin situation.”

“You two look glum,” Thistle said, dropping down to hover directly between them, peering at each of their faces in turn like she was checking for a fever. “That won’t do at all. Nobody’s allowed to look glum on my patch of the garden.”

“We’re not glum,” Ellie said. “We’re just — trying to figure out how long we’ve been here.”

“Ah,” Thistle said, in the tone of someone who had heard this question many times before and had never once minded not answering it properly. “That one.”

“Is there an actual answer?”

“There’s an answer for every day up there,” Thistle said. “There just isn’t the same kind of day down here to match it against. Time doesn’t march here so much as it — wanders. Comes back around when it feels like it. It’s not lost, exactly. It’s just not walking in quite the same straight line yours does.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Ellie said.

“No,” Thistle agreed, cheerfully. “But it’s a true thing to say, and true things are worth saying even when they’re not terribly useful.”

Corrigan, apparently deciding the conversation had gone on long enough without his input, cleared his throat with great importance. “In my professional opinion, as someone who has been *not* counting days for several centuries with no ill effects whatsoever, worrying about it accomplishes precisely nothing. I

recommend you both stop immediately and let someone else worry about it on your behalf. Namely: nobody. Nobody worries about it. That's rather the point."

"That's very reassuring, actually," David said.

"I try."

It was somewhere in the middle of all this — Thimble still muttering about the feast, Thistle patiently unhelpful, Corrigan thoroughly pleased with his own advice, the Down-folk drifting in slow, contented loops around all of them — that the light changed again, and this time it changed the other way: warming, deepening, filling back in at the edges all at once, like a held breath finally let go. Ellie hadn't even noticed it had dimmed at all until the moment it wasn't dim anymore, and the whole garden seemed to exhale with her, colors sharpening, the hum of distant music somewhere behind them picking back up mid-note as though it had never actually stopped.

"Ah," said a new voice, warm and unhurried, from just behind them. "There you both are."

Queen Sorrel had a way of arriving that made an entrance out of simply existing in a place — no fanfare, no crowd, just a settling of attention toward her the moment she was near, a room quieting itself around a peculiar kind of certainty. She lowered herself onto the bank beside them with unhurried grace, folding her hands in her lap, and regarded them both with an expression that managed to be regal and genuinely fond at the same time.

"I heard," she said, "that the flowers have not stopped speaking of you since your visit to the garden. The rose, especially, has apparently found in you both a most appreciative audience — which, if you know the rose, is nearly the highest compliment she is capable of giving."

"She talked about petals almost the whole time," David said.

"That sounds precisely like her, yes."

"And the games," Thistle put in, delighted to have an opening.

"You should have seen Corrigan's face when Ellie started sinking every shot."

"I did see it," Queen Sorrel said. "I make a point of seeing most things, eventually. Corrigan's face on that particular afternoon was worth the walk over."

"I have no comment," Corrigan said, with dignity.

The Queen's gaze settled on Ellie for a moment, warm and searching in a way that felt, somehow, like being properly seen rather than simply looked at. "You have both given this hall more delight in your short time here than it has known in a great while," she said. "That is not a small thing. Halls remember who filled them with laughter, long after the laughter itself has faded."

Ellie felt something in her chest loosen at that — the last small, worried knot from the conversation with David, the fingers she'd counted on, the days that wouldn't add up. Nothing was solved. It was only set gently aside, and it only worked because it was someone she trusted doing the setting-aside.

"Stay a while yet," the Queen said, rising as easily as she'd sat, already half-turned to go. "There is no hurry. There is rarely any hurry, here."

She left the way she'd arrived — without seeming to actually walk away, simply present and then, a moment later, not — and the garden settled back into its ordinary golden hum around them: the Down-folk drifting, Thimble still turning his hourglass-watch over and over without ever quite consulting it, Thistle already onto some new plan involving the pixie-musicians and an idea she refused to fully explain in advance.

Ellie looked at David. David looked at Ellie.

"One more day," she said, and it came out sounding almost like a question, though she hadn't quite meant it as one.

"One more day," David agreed, grinning, already forgetting — or choosing to forget, which amounted to nearly the same thing —

that neither of them had the faintest idea what a day even meant anymore, here.

It didn't matter. Overhead, the light held warm and gold and steady, and somewhere behind them the pixie-musicians were tuning up for something new, and the whole hill seemed to settle back into its patient, golden, endless afternoon, exactly as if it had never once threatened to be anything else.

CHAPTER 13
THISTLE'S WORKSHOP



“**T**his one’s mine,” Thistle said, shoving open a low door with her whole shoulder, “so don’t judge it too harshly. It’s a work in progress. It’s always a work in progress. I’ve decided that’s just what it is.”

The workshop was smaller than the library and considerably louder, even with nobody in it but the three of them — a ticking, humming, occasionally sputtering little room, root-walled like everywhere else Under the Hill but crowded floor to ceiling with shelves of half-finished tinker-work: gears the size of buttons, spools of copper wire, tools scaled for hands no bigger than a thumb, and, in one corner, something that looked like it might once have been a teapot and had opinions now about staying that way.

“You made all this?” David asked, already reaching for something that whirred warningly at him until he took his hand back.

“Most of it. Some of it made itself, if I’m honest, and I just took the credit.” Thistle plucked a small brass bird off a high shelf, wound a key in its side with practiced fingers, and set it on her palm. “Watch this one. It’s my favorite.”

The bird's wings clicked open, and it sang — not the tinny, repeating chirp David had clearly been braced for, but an actual song, rising and falling with real melody, a little sad in the middle and bright again at the end.

"That's not a *real* song," David said, delighted and suspicious in equal measure. "Is it? Clockwork birds don't know real songs."

"This one does. I taught it. Took a very long while, and several ruined springs, and one memorable afternoon where it only knew how to hiccup, but it does now, and I'm enormously proud of it, thank you for asking."

"I didn't ask."

"You were about to."

She set the bird back on its shelf, still humming faintly to itself, and moved on to a squat little candle sitting in a dish of its own wax. "This one's simpler. Watch." She cupped both hands over the flame, and the moment the room dimmed, the candle gave a small indignant flare and relit itself around her fingers, as though personally offended at being put out.

"It panics," Ellie said, delighted despite herself.

"It absolutely panics. I don't know why I find that so satisfying, but I do it at least once a day." Thistle uncupped her hands and let the candle settle back to its ordinary glow. "It's meant to be practical. Mostly I just like watching it get upset."

The last of the three sat on the workbench itself: a small brass device, no bigger than a matchbox, with a single dented lever on top. Thistle picked up a chipped teacup from a shelf — the chip old, worn smooth at the edges, the kind of damage that had clearly been there a long while — and pressed the device against it. There was a faint golden shimmer, quick as a blink, and the chip was simply gone, the cup whole again as if it had never been dropped.

"That's brilliant," David said. "Can it fix anything?"

"Small things. Cups, buttons, torn pages, the occasional bent spoon." Something in Thistle's tone dimmed, just slightly, on the

next part. “Not the big things. Never the big things. I’ve tried.” She set the teacup down a little more carefully than the moment strictly required, and the brightness came back into her voice almost as fast as it had left. “Anyway. Small things. It’s still useful. Ask anyone with a chipped teacup.”

David, sensing an opening, picked up the mending-device and turned it over with real curiosity. “We’ve got things like this. Sort of. Not magic — just, like, glue.”

“Glue,” Thistle repeated, like she was tasting the word.

“And tape. And there’s this thing called a zipper, it’s — okay, it’s hard to explain, it’s like two rows of little teeth that lock together when you pull a little tab, and it holds your coat shut, and it’s honestly kind of amazing when you think about it, which nobody ever does, because everyone just has them.”

“That sounds invented,” Thistle said, suspicious, delighted, both at once. “Like someone sat down and *thought* of it on purpose.”

“Someone did.”

“That’s wonderful. That’s actually wonderful. What else. Tell me more amazing ordinary things.”

Ellie, who had been mostly listening, found herself drawn in despite her better instincts. “There’s bicycles. Two wheels, no magic at all, and somehow if you go fast enough you just — don’t fall over. It’s about balance and momentum, mostly.”

“That’s not an explanation, that’s just more words for the same impossible thing.”

“It’s really not impossible, it’s just physics.”

“‘Just physics’ is a very suspicious way to describe not falling over,” Thistle said, and Ellie found she didn’t actually have a comeback for that.

David, warming to the subject completely and immediately, with his usual disregard for accuracy, launched into a description of flashlights that included at least one detail that wasn’t true and

two that Ellie was fairly sure he'd invented on the spot, and Thistle drank in every word of it with the rapt, uncritical delight of someone who had decided, early on, that the World Above ran on rules just as strange as her own, only nobody up there seemed to notice.

"You have a whole world of that," she said, half to herself. "A whole world of tiny invented magics, and you just — live in it. Don't even blink."

"I guess we don't really think of it as magic," Ellie said.

"That," Thistle said, "is possibly the most magic thing about it."

It was somewhere in the quiet that followed — Thistle turning the little mending-device over in her hands, still faintly wistful about zippers — that David reached into his pocket and pulled out Steven.

The rock sat in his palm exactly as it had since Grandma's kitchen table: a smooth grey stone with two googly eyes glued slightly crooked, one eyebrow drawn on in permanent marker at an angle that made him look perpetually surprised. David hadn't planned this. It was obvious from his face that he hadn't planned it — he was looking at the rock in his hand with the mild surprise of someone catching up to his own hands a half-second after they'd already decided something.

"Here," he said. "You should have him."

Thistle went still. "David, I couldn't possibly—"

"He's lucky. My grandma gave him to me. I want you to have him."

For once — for the first time since they'd met her, tumbling and chattering and never quite landing on any one feeling for longer than a breath — Thistle didn't say anything clever back. She took the rock from his palm with both hands, careful in a way that looked almost unfamiliar on her, and turned it over once, twice, taking in the crooked eyes and the surprised eyebrow with

an attention that made it clear she understood exactly what was being handed to her, and that it wasn't really about the rock at all.

"I'll keep him safe," she said, and her voice had dropped its usual bounce entirely. "Properly safe. I promise."

She crossed to a shelf near the back of the workshop — not the crowded one with the half-finished tinker-work, but a smaller one, tidier, holding only a handful of things: a pressed flower, a scrap of ribbon, a single glass marble catching the light. She set Steven down among them, adjusted him twice until he was facing exactly the way she wanted, and stepped back to look at the effect with real satisfaction.

Ellie, watching, felt something small and complicated turn over in her chest. She thought of Rocky, sitting on her dresser at home exactly where she'd left him, and the half-second she'd spent, that first night, actually considering going back for him before deciding she was too old for it. She hadn't thought about that decision in what felt like a very long time. She thought about it now.

"I didn't bring mine," she said, before she'd quite decided to say it out loud. "I have one too. Had. Have. I left him at home."

"You'll bring him next time," Thistle said, easily, not making anything of it.

"Maybe," Ellie said, and found she meant it, and found that surprised her more than almost anything else that had happened so far.

"Have you ever been Above?" David asked, into the small quiet that followed — not pointed, just curious, the way he asked most things.

Something crossed Thistle's face then, quick and unguarded, there and gone almost before Ellie caught it — not sadness exactly, something closer to a held breath, a door glimpsed and not opened.

"Once," Thistle said. "A long while ago. Before you'd call it a

memory, really. More of a — feeling I still have, shaped like a place.” She turned the marble on the shelf a quarter turn, for no reason Ellie could see, and her voice, when she went on, had gone careful in a way it hadn’t been all afternoon. “Grass. An enormous amount of sky. I don’t remember much else.”

“Do you want to go back?” Ellie asked, gently.

For a moment, Thistle didn’t answer at all, and the workshop’s usual ticking and humming filled the space where her voice should have been.

Then she turned around, and whatever had crossed her face was gone, tucked away as neatly as the rock on the shelf, her old brightness sliding back into place like a lamp switching on. “I want you two to see the clockwork bird do the ending part again, it’s the best part, I always forget to let it finish.” She wound the key before either of them could say anything else, and the bird sang its small, real song all the way through this time, rising and falling and landing, at the very end, on a note that sounded almost like a question.

Nobody asked what it meant. Nobody needed to.

They stayed a good while longer — long enough for David to try, badly, to explain how a bicycle actually balanced, and for Thistle to declare the explanation “worse than the first one, somehow,” and for the self-lighting candle to be smothered and re-lit at least four more times purely for entertainment. When they finally left, Steven sat facing the workshop door on his little shelf, crooked-eyed and permanently surprised, exactly where Thistle had set him, looking for all the world like he’d always belonged there.

CHAPTER 14
THE QUEEN'S SORROW



The messenger who came for them was smaller than any Hollow Folk they'd met so far — one of the drowsy, fluff-headed Down-folk from the garden, drifting low and unhurried, humming a fragment of some tune that never quite finished.

"The Queen," it said, when it had their attention, and then, as if that were the whole message and the rest was obvious, drifted off down a passage none of them had noticed before.

They followed. The passage narrowed as it went, the root-walls closer together, the light dimmer and more private, until it opened into a small round chamber that held nothing but a single low seat and Queen Sorrel herself, alone.

No crowd this time. No feast, no music drifting in from somewhere else, no Thistle darting in and out with some new plan she wouldn't fully explain. Just the Queen, and a stillness in the room that felt, to Ellie, oddly like walking into a house right after an argument — nothing visibly wrong, and everything a little too quiet for it to be nothing.

"Thank you for coming," Queen Sorrel said, and her voice,

too, was different from the one they remembered — softer, worn at the edges, missing the easy confidence that had filled the hall on their first night here. “Sit, if you’d like. This won’t take long. It’s simply a thing I find I’d like to tell you, if you’ll let me.”

They sat. David, usually the first to fill any silence with a question, said nothing at all, which told Ellie more than anything about how the room felt to him too.

“You’ve seen a great deal of my hall’s kindness,” the Queen said, folding her hands in her lap. “Its games. Its gardens. Its feasts that forget to end. I wanted you to see this part as well, before you go — because I think you’ve earned the honesty of it, and because I find, lately, that I want to tell it to someone.”

“Tell us what?” Ellie asked, gently.

The Queen was quiet for a moment, choosing her words with visible care.

“Long ago,” she said, “I wore a crown. Not merely an ornament — a true crown, bound up with who we are and what we’re able to do. It was taken from me.” She said it plainly, without embellishment, and let the plainness of it do the work. “Nailed high in an ancient hawthorn tree, in your world, where none of us can easily follow. And without it...” She spread her hands, a small, tired gesture that took in the whole quiet room. “Without it, we cannot leave here. Not truly. Not the way we once did, walking under open sky, in the World of Man, as freely as anyone.”

“That’s horrible,” David said, quietly.

“It has been,” the Queen agreed. “A great while now. Long enough that I’ve mostly stopped counting, which I understand” — the faintest, sad flicker of a smile — “you two have some sympathy for.”

Ellie felt something in her chest twist at that — the reminder that this same slippery, uncountable time that had felt like wonder to them had been, for the Queen, something closer to a sentence. She thought of the map in the library that only ever showed you

where you already stood, never where you were going, and wondered, for the first time, whether that was less a design flaw than an old, careful sadness built right into the walls of the place.

“Who took it?” Ellie asked. “The crown.”

Something crossed the Queen’s face then — not evasion, exactly, nothing so obvious as that, more like the practiced ease of someone stepping smoothly around a hole in a floor she’d walked a thousand times before.

“Someone who believed he had good reason,” she said. “It was a very long time ago, and reasons fade faster than consequences do. I try not to dwell on the who of it. It changes nothing about the where the crown is now, or what its absence costs us.” She looked between them, warm again, the sorrow folding itself neatly back beneath the surface. “I’d rather tell you what’s true than what’s simple. The crown is gone. My people are bound here. That’s the whole of what matters, I think.”

It was, Ellie would think later, a very good answer. It was also, she’d realize on some later reflection she couldn’t yet name, not actually an answer at all — and in the moment, sitting in that small quiet room with the Queen’s sorrow settled over everything like dust, she didn’t think to notice the difference.

For just a moment, watching the Queen’s face in the low light, Ellie caught something odd in her expression — not quite a look, more an absence of one, a stillness that went on a half-beat too long, as though the Queen had, for that instant, forgotten to arrange her features into any actual feeling at all. It was gone before Ellie could decide whether she’d truly seen it, replaced by the same tired warmth as before, and she told herself, not for the first time Under the Hill, that she’d imagined it.

“Can’t you get it back?” David asked. “Send someone? You’ve got — I mean, you’ve got Thistle, and Corrigan, and loads of people who could fly right up there and just—”

“None of us can pass easily into your world without the crown

to open the way properly,” the Queen said. “It’s rather the trouble with the whole arrangement. We are bound here in part *because* we no longer hold the thing that let us leave. It isn’t a door we’ve simply chosen not to walk through. It’s one that doesn’t open from this side, not without help.”

“What kind of help?” Ellie asked, already half-certain she knew, already feeling something in her chest lean forward before her mind had caught up to agree.

The Queen didn’t answer right away. She looked at them both for a long moment instead — really looked, with the kind of attention adults rarely spared, like she was memorizing something she expected to want to remember later.

“I don’t ask lightly,” she said, finally. “You are children, and guests, and I have no right to ask anything of you at all beyond my hospitality, which you’ve had freely and will go on having regardless of your answer.”

“But?” David prompted, when she didn’t go on.

The Queen almost smiled — a real one this time, small and rueful.

“But I find myself an old woman with an old wound, telling two young ones a very old story, and some part of me can’t quite help but wonder.” She looked toward the low, unlit place where a window might have been, if the chamber had one. “If only there was a champion. Someone to take up our cause — like the knights of the old days, when such things were simpler, and a wrong could be set right by someone brave enough to try.” Her voice trailed, soft and unfinished, into the quiet of the room. “Still...”

She didn’t finish the thought. She let it sit there instead, unclaimed, and neither Ellie nor David moved to fill the silence that followed, though both of them, in their own separate ways, were already halfway to volunteering.

“We’d help,” David said, finally, quietly, the words coming out

simpler and more certain than anything else he'd said all afternoon. "If we could. We would."

"I know you would," the Queen said, and there was real warmth in it, and real weariness too, twined together so closely that Ellie couldn't have pulled them apart if she'd tried. "That's precisely why I find it so hard to ask."

She rose, then, unhurried, the sorrow folding itself away behind her usual grace as easily as a cloak settling back into place. "Go on and rest a while. We'll speak more of this — if you're willing — another time." She paused at the chamber's low doorway, and looked back at them both with an expression that was, for just a moment, entirely unguarded. "Thank you for listening to an old woman's old grief. It's a kindness I won't forget."

Then she was gone, without quite the ordinary business of walking away, exactly as she always seemed to go, and the small round room was quiet again, holding nothing now but the two of them and the shape of everything she hadn't quite asked.

CHAPTER 15

THE PROMISE



The garden Thistle led them to this time was nothing like the last one.

There was no singing here, no flowers with opinions, no shy paths or shrinking pebbles. Just a small, tidy square of green tucked behind the kitchens, rows of ordinary-looking herbs and root vegetables growing in ordinary-looking dirt, tended, as far as Ellie could tell, by nobody in particular. A low stone bench sat at its center, and it was there that Thistle set down a wooden tray: a loaf still warm from somewhere, a wedge of pale cheese, a bowl of berries that were, disappointingly and rather wonderfully, just berries.

“This is my favorite spot,” Thistle said, dropping onto the bench between them. “Nobody ever comes here. It’s not impressive enough. I like it specially for that.”

“It’s nice,” Ellie said, and meant it — there was a steadiness to a garden that grew plain vegetables and didn’t ask to be admired for it.

They ate without any hurry, in the relaxed, unplaceable

stretch of golden hill-light that never seemed to belong to any one hour. Nobody said the word *morning*. Nobody said the word *today*. There was only the bread, and the berries, and Thistle's steady stream of half-finished thoughts about a repair she was three weeks or three years into, and the small, comfortable business of simply being three people eating together with nowhere to be.

"Teach us a game," David said, through a mouthful of bread. "A small one. Not like Higgledy. Something we could actually win at."

"Everyone can win at Higgledy."

"Nobody can *understand* Higgledy."

Thistle considered this with the seriousness of someone weighing a genuine complaint. "Fine. Acorns Up. It's simple. You'll like it, it rewards patience, which I understand is your whole personality," she added, to Ellie, not unkindly.

The rules, once demonstrated, were exactly as simple as promised: a scatter of acorn caps on the bench, each flicked with one finger, the goal being to land it open-side up without knocking any of the others over. David's first attempt sent three caps skittering into the dirt. Ellie's first attempt, aimed with the same careful, deliberate focus she brought to everything, landed clean, upright, untouched.

"See," Thistle said. "Told you."

"Beginner's luck," David muttered, lining up his second try.

"It's not luck if she keeps doing it," Thistle said, watching Ellie land a second cap, then a third, with a small, private satisfaction that had nothing to do with anyone watching. "That's just being good at something."

They played three more rounds — David improving by exactly enough to make it interesting, Ellie steady and quietly pleased, Thistle mostly narrating everyone's shots with enormous

unearned drama — and it was in the middle of the fourth round, Ellie's finger poised over her last acorn cap, that a shadow fell across the little garden that hadn't been there a moment before.

It cleared its throat. Twice, for emphasis.

The creature standing at the garden's low gate was unlike any Hollow Folk they'd met so far — tall and thin and dressed with an almost startling formality, a high starched collar, a pocket watch on a long chain that he consulted with grave, unhurried precision, and an expression of someone perpetually one step behind an appointment of enormous importance.

"Ellie of the World Above," he said, consulting a small scroll that had appeared in his other hand from nowhere Ellie could identify. "And David, also of the World Above. I am sent to summon you to audience. Immediately, if convenient. Immediately regardless, if not."

"Who are you?" David asked.

"That," the creature said, with the air of someone who had been asked this many times and still found it faintly beneath him, "is not presently relevant. What is relevant is that Her Majesty awaits, and Her Majesty does not, as a rule, enjoy waiting." He consulted the pocket watch again, though nothing about his tone suggested it had told him anything useful. "This way. Do keep up."

Thistle, packing away the acorn caps with unusual quickness, caught Ellie's eye for just a second — something bright and nervous and entirely unlike her usual mischief flickering behind it, there and folded away before either child could ask about it.

"Go on," she said. "I'll catch up."

They followed the formal little herald back through the winding root-halls, past the library, past the games clearing, until the passage widened into the feast hall itself — and it was empty.

Ellie had never seen it empty. The long table was gone

entirely, the benches cleared away, the space swept clean and vast and silent in a way that made her own footsteps sound too loud. At the hall's far end, on a raised dais she hadn't properly noticed before, past the crowd, Queen Sorrel sat upon a seat that was, unmistakably, in this light and this silence, a throne.

"Come forward," the Queen said, and her voice carried the length of the empty hall without seeming to be raised at all.

They crossed the long floor together, and Ellie found herself standing straighter with every step, some old instinct telling her that this particular room, in this particular silence, wanted to be walked into properly.

"I asked you here," the Queen said, once they stood before her, "to ask you something plainly, since I find I no longer have the heart to ask it any other way." She rose from the throne, and came down the dais steps to stand almost level with them, which felt, somehow, like a greater honor than the throne itself had been. "Will you go into the World Above, find the crown nailed high in the ancient hawthorn, and bring it back to me?"

There was no trailing off this time. No unfinished sentence left hanging in a quiet room. Just the question, whole and direct, and the Queen's steady, hopeful eyes waiting on an answer.

David looked at Ellie. Ellie looked at David. Neither of them needed the look to last very long.

"Yes," David said.

"Yes," Ellie said, half a beat behind him, and found the word came out steadier than she expected, given how much was folded up inside it.

The Queen closed her eyes for one long moment — relief, or gratitude, or something with no easy name — and when she opened them again, the hall was no longer empty.

They came from every doorway at once, as if they'd all been standing just outside them, listening, waiting for exactly this moment to stop pretending otherwise: Thistle first, practically

vaulting through the nearest archway; Thimble close behind, hourglass-watch already forgotten in his hand; Bramblecap, spectacles askew, clutching an armful of something that turned out, on closer inspection, to be several somethings; Corrigan, elbowing his way to the front with the urgency of a man who intended to be first at everything, including this.

“THEY SAID YES,” Thistle shouted, to the hall in general, and the hall in general erupted.

What followed, Ellie would try to describe to herself afterward and never quite manage, because it happened too fast and too warmly to hold onto in order. There was a procession — an actual procession, small Hollow Folk falling into rough formation on either side of them, a path opening down the center of the hall lined with faces, all of them turned toward the two children like they were worth turning toward.

A trio of Hearth-folk came first, bearing between them a long ribbon of deep, woven green, edged in gold thread that caught the light and held it. They draped one over each child’s shoulders with real ceremony, murmuring something in a language they couldn’t place but both of them felt, somehow, was a blessing.

“For champions,” the eldest of them said, in the common tongue, once the ribbon was settled. “There’s an old shape to this. A knight rode out; the hall gave ribbon and jewel before the road. We’ve not had cause to remember the shape in a great while. We’re glad of the chance.”

Behind them came smaller gifts, each pressed forward by whoever had made or found or treasured it: a scatter of semi-precious stones, rough-cut and glowing faintly from within, sewn into a small pouch and tied at David’s belt; a single pale jewel, cool as river water, threaded onto a cord and settled around Ellie’s neck by hands so careful she barely felt it land.

Then, with considerably less ceremony and considerably more noise, came the mice.

There were perhaps a dozen of them, marching in a formation that was mostly correct, dressed in polished acorn-cap helmets and twig-and-leaf armor that had clearly taken someone a very long while to assemble, led by a mouse barely bigger than Ellie's thumb who introduced herself, at tremendous volume for her size, as Captain Bristle.

"THE WARRIOR GUARD OF THE HOLLOW HALL," Captain Bristle announced, "PRESENTS ITS COLORS." She drew a tiny sword — more of a sharpened splinter, if Ellie was honest — and executed a salute so crisp it nearly knocked her own helmet off. Behind her, the assembled mice saluted in a ragged but heartfelt wave. "WE WOULD MARCH WITH YOU OURSELVES, BUT OUR LEGS ARE SHORT AND THE WORLD ABOVE IS LARGE. TAKE THIS IN OUR STEAD."

A single beetle-shell medal, polished to a impossible shine, was presented on a small velvet cushion carried by two mice working together.

"We accept the Warrior Guard's colors with honor," Ellie said, as solemnly as she could manage, and meant every word of it, and had to look very hard at the middle distance for a second so she wouldn't laugh or cry, she genuinely wasn't sure which.

"I HAVE ALSO GOT SOMETHING," Corrigan announced, elbowing the mice gently but firmly out of the way, holding aloft, with visible personal anguish, a single unremarkable grey pebble. "The Sunfleck. My finest treasure. I am *lending* it," he clarified quickly, to David. "Lending. On loan. A very long loan, possibly, but a loan, and I expect it returned, and I want it noted that this is an act of considerable personal sacrifice."

"Thank you, Corrigan," David said, taking the pebble with real gravity.

"Don't lose it."

"I won't."

"Don't let it roll off anywhere—"

“Corrigan,” Thistle said.

“I’m simply saying—“

“Corrigan.”

He subsided, muttering, and shoved the pebble more firmly into David’s hand before stepping back into the crowd with the air of a man who had given up a great deal and wanted everyone to know it.

Bramblecap came forward next, still clutching his armful of somethings, which turned out to be a small collection of practical items he’d apparently gathered in a hurry: a comb, ordinary-looking except that it caught no tangles at all, sliding through Ellie’s hair like water; a single coin, unremarkable in every way except that it stayed warm in David’s palm no matter how long he held it, like something small and alive tucked into his fist. Last of all, a folded length of grey cloth that seemed, when Bramblecap shook it out, to bend the light around itself in ways Ellie’s eyes kept sliding off of.

“For moving unseen, in shadow, should it come to that,” Bramblecap said, draping it over Ellie’s arm. “I do hope it doesn’t come to that. But I’d rather you had it and didn’t need it than the other way around.”

He hesitated, then, in a way that didn’t suit him — Bramblecap, who filled every silence he could reach with trivia, standing quiet in front of them both like he was searching for the right words and not quite finding them.

“Til leaf and root,” he said, finally, formally, in a voice that had dropped all its usual flutter, “safe passage out, and safe passage home.” He blinked, as if surprised at his own solemnity, and added, his voice easing back toward its usual flutter, “That’s — that’s an old blessing. We don’t say it often anymore. I thought it suited.” He didn’t explain further, and his face suggested he wasn’t going to, and Ellie filed the moment away without quite knowing why it seemed to deserve filing.

Thimble arrived last, hourglass-watch spinning uselessly in one hand, looking faintly overwhelmed. “I was going to count something for you,” he admitted. “A proper send-off number. Gifts given, or well-wishes said, or — something. I’ve lost count already. I lost count almost immediately, in fact, possibly before I even started.” He looked genuinely distressed about this for a moment, and then, unexpectedly, laughed — a real, surprised laugh, like the number not mattering had only just occurred to him as an option. “Come back safe. That’s the only number that matters, I suppose. One trip out, one trip back. I can manage counting to two.”

Thistle came last of all, and when she reached them, some of her usual brightness had gone quiet at the edges, though she was fighting it with everything she had.

“I already gave David something,” she said, a little unevenly, “so it’s only fair.” She pressed something small into Ellie’s hand — a tiny brass spring, no bigger than a fingernail, warm from being held. “It’s from the bird. The singing one. It doesn’t do anything useful, before you ask. It’s just — it’s mine, and I want you to have a piece of it, the way David gave me a piece of his.”

Ellie closed her fingers around it, and found she couldn’t say anything at all for a moment.

“I’ll bring Rocky next time,” she managed, finally. “So we’re even.”

“You’d better,” Thistle said, and hugged her, fast and fierce, before either of them could make it any more complicated than that.

The Queen watched all of it from the dais without moving to join the crowd, her expression unreadable at that distance, though when Ellie glanced back at her one last time, she caught what might have been pride, or relief, or just the stillness of someone watching a thing she couldn’t quite let herself hope for.

The walk to the tunnel felt shorter than Ellie remembered, and longer, both at once — a small crowd trailing them the whole

way, Thistle and Thimble and Bramblecap and Corrigan and a dozen mice in polished acorn helmets, none of them quite ready to stop waving.

The tunnel mouth, when they reached it, glowed with the same soft, uncertain light it always had, and beyond it, for the first time in what felt like a very long while and no time at all, hung a patch of real sky.

They climbed.

The world that met them at the top was neither one thing nor the other — light without a clear source, the sky somewhere between the deep blue of last light and the pale grey of first, birds either just beginning their calls or just finishing them, Ellie honestly couldn't have said which. The air smelled like real air, cool and green and enormous after so long underground, and it took her breath in a way she wasn't quite prepared for.

David turned in a slow circle, taking it all in — the ordinary trees, the ordinary dirt, the extraordinary, uncertain sky — and let out a long breath.

"Do you think it's morning or night?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ellie said, and realized, saying it, that the not-knowing didn't scare her nearly as much as it once would have. "I think it might be both. Or neither. I think we're just going to have to go find out."

Steven's pouch bumped against David's belt. The ribbon at Ellie's shoulders caught what light there was and held it, green and gold. Somewhere behind them, faint and already fading, she thought she heard the last of the mice still cheering.

"Crown's this way, probably," David said, pointing at the woods with total, unearned confidence.

"It's not *this way* just because you're pointing at it."

"It might be."

Ellie looked at him, and at the trees, and at the strange, unplaceable light holding steady over both of them, and felt some-

thing settle into place in her chest — not certainty, exactly, but its close cousin: the steadying feeling of having somewhere to go, and someone to go there with, and a whole hall of people behind her who believed, entirely, that she could.

“Fine,” she said. “This way.”

They started walking.

CHAPTER 16

ATOP AND AROUND THE HILL



The grass was wet.

That was the first thing Ellie noticed, stepping out of the tunnel mouth and into it — real, cold, ordinary dew, soaking through her sneakers within a few steps, entirely unmagical and somehow more startling for it. She'd forgotten, a little, what wet grass felt like. She'd forgotten what *cold* felt like, that clean, sharp cold that had nothing golden or forgiving about it.

David breathed out, and his breath showed.

"Okay," he said, watching it fade. "That's real."

They stood together at the crest of the hill for a moment, getting their bearings, the tunnel mouth already half-swallowed in bramble behind them, indistinguishable, if you didn't know exactly where to look, from any other tangle of undergrowth on the ridge. Ahead, the woods rolled out and down and away in every direction, dark-green and enormous, further than Ellie remembered the woods behind their house ever being.

"So," David said. "Where's the tree?"

Ellie pulled out her notebook, damp already at the corners, and flattened it against her knee. She'd written down the Queen's directions the moment she'd been given them, in her own small careful hand, and reading them again now, in real daylight — or real not-quite-daylight — they looked considerably less useful than they had underground.

"North of the three standing stones," she read aloud. "Where the ridge bends like an elbow." She looked up. "That's not a direction. That's a riddle."

"Maybe it's both," David said.

"That's not comforting."

"I didn't say it was comforting. I said it was probably true."

She closed the notebook, opened it again, and started, with the same careful patience she brought to everything, sketching a rough map from memory — the tunnel mouth, the ridge, a rough compass rose guessed from the pale place in the clouds that was probably, hopefully, where the sun was hiding. David paced a slow circle around her, scanning the treeline with the intense focus he usually reserved for spotting animals, and stopped.

"There," he said, pointing. "See where the trees go from that spiky kind to the round kind? That's usually where the ground changes. Means there's probably a ridge or a stream line running through there."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't *know* it. I just — notice it. Grandpa used to point that stuff out." He shrugged, a little self-conscious, like the fact of noticing embarrassed him more than the noticing itself. "It's usually right, though."

It was, as it turned out, more useful than the notebook. They set off toward the tree-line David had pointed out, Ellie updating her rough map every few hundred feet, David reading the ground and the trees and the faint animal paths threading through the undergrowth like sentences in a language only he could half-

follow. They didn't talk much. There wasn't much reason to. Walking took most of the breath either of them had to spare, and the woods, once they were fully inside them, made conversation feel like it belonged to some other, smaller place.

It didn't take long for the wrongness to start.

Nothing Ellie could have named, exactly, if someone had stopped her and asked. The birds were singing — she could hear them, high and constant in the canopy — but there was something thinned-out about it, a few notes short of the full ordinary racket she half-remembered from home, like a recording missing one instrument. The green of the leaves sat a shade too vivid in some patches and a shade too flat in others, never quite settling into the single, unremarkable green she expected. Once, crossing a shallow stream, she caught her own reflection in the water and thought, for one full second before she caught herself, that it had been half a beat slow to move.

"You feel it too," David said, without her having said anything at all.

"Feel what?"

"The wrong thing. The not-quite thing."

"...Yeah," she admitted. "I do."

They didn't try to explain it further than that. There wasn't much further to take it. It just sat there alongside them as they walked, an extra, unspoken passenger, and after a while they both, by some silent agreement, stopped mentioning it and let it ride.

The terrain grew rougher as the ground climbed — loose stone giving way underfoot, brambles thick enough to require real detours, the trees themselves growing closer together and less familiar, oaks and beeches giving way to darker, tighter stands of something they couldn't name. At one point the path split around a fallen, half-rotted trunk, one branch curving left along easier, flatter ground, the other climbing hard right into thicker brush.

"Left looks easier," David said.

Ellie checked her map, checked the pale smear of maybe-sun, and shook her head. “Left curves back the wrong way. I think. The ridge is supposed to bend, and left doesn’t bend, it just — goes around.”

“You *think*.”

“I think,” she agreed. “But I’d rather be tired and right than easy and lost.”

They went right.

The light had been shifting for a while by then, though nobody had said so out loud — not dimming exactly, more settling, deepening, the golden uncertainty of the day finally starting to tip, degree by degree, toward something that might honestly be called evening. The trees, closing in tighter around the harder path, threw long shapes across the ground that hadn’t been there an hour before, and more than once Ellie found her eye catching on some knot or hollow in the bark that looked, for one unsettled half-second, almost like a face watching them pass — there, and then simply a knot in a tree again, the moment she looked at it straight on.

She didn’t mention it. She wasn’t scared, not really — it wasn’t the sharp, cornered feeling of real fear, more a soft, prickling awareness, the sense of walking through a place that was, in some old and patient way, aware of them walking through it. Almost, she thought, like being watched over rather than watched — though she couldn’t have said which of those two things felt more true, or whether there was really any difference between them out here.

“This place feels like a story,” David said quietly, echoing something close enough to her own thought that she nearly jumped.

“What kind of story?”

“The kind where the woods are basically a person. Where

you're not really sure if they like you or not." He glanced sideways at her. "Does that sound dumb?"

"No," Ellie said. "It sounds about right."

They kept walking. The shadows kept lengthening, slow and steady, gathering in the hollows between the trees like something being poured. Once, far off, Ellie thought she heard a branch crack that no wind and no animal she could see had caused, and reached out, without quite deciding to, and took hold of David's sleeve. He didn't say anything about it. He just adjusted his pace to match hers, closer now, shoulder near shoulder, and she didn't let go again for a good while after that.

The ridge, when they finally reached it, did bend — a long, slow curve of high ground folding back on itself exactly the way an elbow might, if you were feeling generous with the comparison, and standing at its bend, weathered and half-swallowed by moss, were three tall, leaning stones, unmistakably placed there on purpose by hands long gone.

"There," Ellie breathed, something in her chest loosening for the first time in an hour. "That's them. That's the stones."

"So the tree's close."

"The tree's close."

They didn't move right away. They stood instead at the ridge's bend, the three old stones dark against a sky gone properly, undeniably dim now — no more golden uncertainty, no more not-quite-morning, just the plain, deepening blue of real evening settling in around them, cold and clear and entirely without magic.

It was David who heard it first — his whole body going still, head turning toward the deeper woods below the ridge.

A howl rose up out of the trees, long and low, carrying easily across the still evening air, and hung there a moment before fading into a silence that felt, afterward, considerably larger than it had before.

Neither of them said anything at all.

They stood together at the bend in the ridge, the three stones at their backs and the darkening woods ahead of them, and waited, without quite deciding to wait, for whatever came next.

CHAPTER 17
THE WOLF



Nothing happened for a long time after the howl. That was almost worse than if something had. Ellie and David stood at the bend in the ridge, backs to the three standing stones, waiting for whatever came next, and whatever came next didn't — not right away. The woods settled back into their ordinary evening sounds, or something close enough to ordinary to almost believe: wind through high branches, the tick and rustle of small things in the undergrowth, an owl testing one low note somewhere off to the left.

"Maybe it was far away," David said, eventually, in the tone of someone trying out a hopeful idea to see if it held any weight.

"Maybe," Ellie said, in the tone of someone who didn't believe it either.

They started moving again, because standing still felt worse than walking, and because the tree — Old Hawthorn, the actual tree, the whole reason they'd come this far — had to be close now, somewhere past the ridge's bend, and standing frozen at three old stones waiting to find out if they were being watched didn't feel like a plan either of them wanted.

They were being watched.

Ellie caught it first — a flicker of pale movement between two dark trunks, off to their right, gone the instant she turned her head toward it. She told herself it was nothing. A deer, maybe, or a trick of the fading light on bark. She didn't say anything to David, mostly because saying it out loud felt like it might make it more real than it already, quietly, felt.

Then David caught it too, a few minutes later, on the opposite side — a shape low to the ground, moving parallel to them through the brush, matching their pace almost exactly.

"Ellie."

"I saw it."

"Same one?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

They kept walking, faster now, not quite running, the kind of fast-but-not-running that comes from two people independently deciding not to be the first to admit they're afraid. The shape kept pace. It didn't close the distance. It didn't fall back, either. It just stayed there, a presence just past the edge of what they could clearly see, patient in a way that felt, to Ellie, considerably worse than if it had come straight at them and gotten it over with.

She caught a real glimpse of it, finally, crossing a thin gap in the trees — grey-brown, low-shouldered, moving with a loose, unhurried economy that had nothing frantic in it at all. Its eyes found the gap in the trees at the exact same moment hers did, and held there, steady, for one long, terrible second, before it slid back into cover.

"That's a wolf," David whispered. "That's an actual wolf."

"I know."

"There aren't supposed to be wolves here."

"I *know*, David."

They stopped, backs together, in the shelter of a wide-trunked

beech, and tried, in fast, low whispers, to think their way through it the way they'd thought their way through everything else so far.

"If we climb something," David started.

"It'll just wait at the bottom. That's what they do. It'll wait us out."

"If we split up—"

"We are *not* splitting up."

"Okay, no, you're right, bad idea, forget I said it." He raked a hand through his hair, eyes still on the treeline. "Which way's downwind? Maybe if we're downwind it can't—"

"I don't know which way's downwind, David, I don't have a — I'm not a *wolf expert*, I read one book about wolves for a school project in third grade—"

"Okay. Okay. New plan. We just — keep moving. Toward the tree. Like we were doing. And we don't run unless it runs, because Grandpa always said running makes you look like something worth chasing."

It was, Ellie had to admit, the most sensible thing either of them had said in the last five minutes, and they set off again at the same fast, deliberate not-quite-walk as before, watching the tree-line in both directions now, the plan holding for almost four full minutes before the plan stopped mattering at all.

The stalking went on for what felt like a very long time and was probably, in truth, only a handful of minutes — the wolf never fully out of sight for long, never fully visible either, a grey shape woven in and out of the failing light like something that belonged to the dusk more than to the ground it walked on. Twigs cracked, off to the left, then the right, then somewhere behind them, and Ellie found herself unable to tell anymore whether there was one wolf pacing them in a wide, unhurried loop, or whether the woods themselves had simply started to feel that way regardless.

It was the sound that broke the standoff — a low, rising growl,

close enough that Ellie felt it more than heard it, vibrating somewhere at the very edge of hearing.

“Run,” David said.

They ran.

It stopped being careful after that. It stopped being anything but pure motion — branches whipping across Ellie’s arms, roots catching at her sneakers, her own breath loud and ragged in her ears, and beneath all of it, unmistakable now, the sound of something large moving fast through the brush behind them, gaining, not gaining, gaining again, impossible to judge with her heart slamming the way it was. David was just ahead of her, glancing back every few strides to make sure she was still there, still upright, still running.

“Left!” he shouted, and she went left without questioning it, because there wasn’t time to question anything, and the ground dropped away sharply beneath them into a shallow ravine, and at the bottom of it, catching the last grey light, ran a stream.

“The rope,” Ellie gasped. “David, the rope—”

He already had it half out of his pack, fumbling with cold fingers that didn’t want to cooperate, and for one terrible second Ellie thought he’d drop it entirely, watched it slip an inch through his grip before he caught it hard against his chest.

“Tree,” he said. “That one. Go, go, I’ll tie it off, GO—”

She splashed into the stream first, the cold hitting her like a slap, water surging hard around her knees, faster than it looked from the bank, and reached the far side gasping, grabbing at exposed roots to haul herself up. David looped the rope twice around a stout trunk on the near bank, knotted it fast with hands that were shaking and somehow, still, sure, and threw the other end across. Ellie caught it on the second try and hauled it taut around a tree on her own side, and David went into the water holding the rope with both fists, the current dragging hard at his

legs, halfway across when the wolf broke through the treeline behind him.

It stopped at the water's edge.

Ellie would think about that, later — the wolf stopping, not because it couldn't have gone in, but because something in it, something old and practical, didn't want to. It stood at the bank, low and coiled and utterly still, watching David haul himself hand over hand across the last of the rope, and it was in that stretch of seconds, soaked and freezing and half-pulled off his feet by the current, that David did something Ellie would turn over in her mind for a long time afterward.

He looked straight at the wolf, and he talked to it.

"Please," he said, voice cracking, barely audible over the water, "we're not — we don't want anything, we're not here for you, please just — please let us go, we're not — please—"

It didn't work. The wolf didn't understand him, or didn't care to, or simply wasn't the kind of thing that could be talked to at all — it watched him with flat, unreadable eyes and made no move either way, and David, realizing somewhere in the middle of his own plea that it was landing nowhere at all, gave up on the words and put everything he had left into his arms instead, hauling himself the rest of the way across and collapsing, soaked and shaking, onto the bank beside Ellie.

The wolf paced the far shore once, twice, testing the water's edge with one deliberate paw and drawing it back, and then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it turned and melted back into the trees, unhurried, as if it had simply lost interest, or decided the stream had settled the matter for it.

Nobody moved for a long moment.

"Are you okay?" Ellie managed, finally, when her own breath would let her.

"I don't know," David said honestly. "Ask me in a minute."

They stayed where they'd landed, dripping and shaking, backs

against the same tree, close enough that Ellie could feel David trembling beside her, or maybe that was her own trembling, she genuinely couldn't tell whose was whose anymore. The stream ran on below them, indifferent, and somewhere on the far bank a last twig cracked and then didn't crack again, and slowly, slowly, the woods settled back into their ordinary sounds.

"I talked to it," David said, eventually, quietly, like he was only now catching up to what he'd done. "I don't know why. I just — I always talk to animals. I didn't even think about it."

"It didn't work."

"No." He looked down at his soaked, shaking hands. "It didn't work at all."

Ellie didn't have anything useful to say to that, so she didn't try. She just leaned her shoulder against his for a moment, the two of them shivering together in the near-dark, alive, across the water, safe for now in the hard-won way that only comes after being genuinely afraid.

"I thought it would work," David said, after a while, quieter than before. "That's the stupid part. For like half a second, when I was saying it, I actually thought it might."

"It wasn't stupid."

"It didn't do anything."

"That doesn't mean it was stupid," Ellie said, and found, saying it, that she meant it more than she expected to. "It meant something. Just not to the wolf."

David didn't answer that right away, and Ellie let the silence sit there instead of filling it, watching her own breath fog faintly in the cold. Her legs had started aching somewhere around the middle of the run and hadn't stopped since, and her sneakers were soaked clean through, and she found, sitting there against the tree with her shoulder still against David's, that she didn't actually mind any of it nearly as much as she probably should have.

They didn't talk much after that. There wasn't much left to

say that the last twenty minutes hadn't already said for them. When they finally got up and started walking again, it was slower than before, more careful, checking the treeline on both sides without needing to discuss why, and the light around them had gone from uncertain evening to real, unambiguous dark — no gold left in it anywhere, no soft edges, just the cold, clean dark of a real night in real woods, with a real tree still waiting somewhere ahead of them, and a real wolf somewhere behind.

David's hand found Ellie's without either of them announcing it, and neither of them let go again for a long while after that.

CHAPTER 18

OLD HAWTHORN



They found it a little past midnight, or what felt like midnight, in a small clearing the woods seemed to have grown around rather than simply left behind.

Old Hawthorn was bigger than any tree Ellie had ever stood beneath — trunk thick as a car, bark deeply furrowed and silvered with age, branches twisting up and out in slow, deliberate arcs that looked, in the pale moonlight, less like the reaching of something dangerous and more like the standing of something that had been asked, a very long time ago, to hold a certain post, and had simply never stopped.

“That’s it,” David breathed. “That’s got to be it.”

It didn’t feel sinister, standing beneath it. It felt old, and tired, and somehow watchful in a way that had nothing threatening in it at all — a sentry, not a monster. Ellie found herself, unexpectedly, wanting to put a hand flat against the bark, the way you’d want to touch the flank of some enormous, ancient, gentle animal, just to know it was really there.

High up, wedged into a deep fork where a heavy limb split

from the main trunk, something caught what little moonlight reached the clearing and threw it back, cold and metallic.

The crown.

It was smaller than Ellie had pictured it — no gaudy fairy-tale thing, but a simple, worn circlet of dull silver-grey metal, its edge driven hard into the wood by a single black iron nail, thick as her thumb and gone deep orange-brown with age.

“That’s really high up,” David said.

“It’s really high up,” Ellie agreed.

They circled the trunk twice before settling on a route — a lower limb thick enough to stand on, angling up toward a second, then a long stretch of open trunk between that and the fork where the crown waited, bark rough enough to offer real handholds if you didn’t mind losing skin over it.

“Rope first,” Ellie said. “Actually for climbing this time.”

David managed a tired grin. “Wild concept.”

They worked the rope the way they’d half-remembered from a book, and half-improvised on the spot — one end looped and knotted around David’s waist, the other around Ellie’s, a long, snaking connection between them that meant, in theory, that if one of them slipped, the other would have some chance of holding on. In practice, the first attempt went about as well as most first attempts do.

David went first, hauling himself up onto the lower limb with more determination than grace, and made it two-thirds of the way to the second before his foot skidded on a patch of damp moss and he slid back down nearly the whole distance, catching himself hard against the trunk with a grunt.

“You okay?”

“Fine. Bark’s slipperier than it looks.”

“Try the other side. There’s a knot you can use, near the — no, lower, there.”

His second attempt went better, using the new route, and

Ellie went up after him with her own share of scrapes and one heart-stopping slide that the rope, true to its purpose, actually caught — a hard, sudden jerk at her waist that left her breathless and grateful in equal measure, dangling for one long second before David's grip on his end held and she found her footing again.

"Told you it'd be useful," she said, once her heart had settled.

"I didn't say it wouldn't be."

"You said 'wild concept.'"

"That's not the same as doubting it."

By the time they'd both reached the wide limb just below the fork, breathing hard, arms trembling with the effort, the crown was close enough to see clearly — and close enough, too, to see exactly how firmly it was fixed in place.

"We can't just pull it," Ellie said, studying the nail. "Look how deep that's driven. We'd need way more strength than either of us has, and even if we somehow managed it, we'd probably just rip the crown in half instead."

"So what do we do?"

Ellie pulled the magnifying glass from her pocket — a little worn now, one corner of its frame scratched from all its time riding around in her bag — and leaned in close to the nail, angling it to catch what light there was.

"Give it a second," she murmured, mostly to herself. "There's got to be something."

The first few minutes told her nothing useful. The nail looked, up close, exactly as solid as it had from a distance — old iron, deeply set, no obvious give anywhere along its visible length.

"Anything?" David asked.

"Not yet."

"Maybe we lever it. Like a crowbar. If we wedge something under the crown's edge—"

They tried that first, working a sturdy stick into the narrow gap between crown and bark, David putting his full weight against

it while Ellie held the crown steady. The stick bent, groaned, and finally snapped clean in half, sending David lurching sideways with a startled shout that Ellie caught, barely, by the back of his jacket.

“Okay,” he panted. “Not that.”

“Not that,” she agreed, heart still hammering.

They tried next to work the nail itself loose by hand, gripping its head between two fingers and twisting, which accomplished nothing beyond leaving a deep, painful groove across Ellie’s palm and confirming, at considerable cost, that the nail wasn’t going anywhere by brute force either.

“There’s got to be something we’re missing,” Ellie said, more to herself than to David, and went back to the magnifying glass, forcing herself to slow down instead of rushing to the next idea. She worked along the nail’s length methodically this time, inch by inch, the way she’d have worked through a math problem that wasn’t giving up its answer easily — top first, then the sides, then, finally, the place where the nail’s head met the crown’s worn metal edge.

There.

A thin, dark seam ran along that exact junction — not iron anymore, not really, but a soft, crumbling rust, deep orange shot through with black, where a century or more of rain and damp bark had eaten quietly away at the metal from the inside out.

“Here,” she said, urgent now. “David, look — right here, where the nail meets the crown. It’s not solid there at all. It’s rotted straight through, you can practically see daylight in it.”

He leaned in, squinting, and his face broke into something that was almost a laugh. “You found the weak point.”

“I found the weak point.”

“So we don’t pull the crown. We break the nail. Right there.”

It took two more tries even with the right spot identified — the first attempt, using the same stick from before, glancing off

without finding proper purchase; the second, Ellie bracing the broken stick's sharper end directly against the rusted seam while David applied slow, steady pressure rather than force, both of them holding their breath — before, on the third attempt, a small, definite *crack* sounded from somewhere inside the metal, and the crown shifted, loose, for the first time in longer than either of them could imagine.

It was in the middle of that same held breath that something crashed through the undergrowth directly below them.

A badger, broad and low and thoroughly affronted, burst from a hollow at the base of the trunk and went tearing off into the dark, and David, startled half out of his grip on the limb, grabbed hard at the nearest handhold and held on, heart hammering, while the badger's indignant retreat faded into the woods below.

"Just a badger," Ellie said, once she trusted her own voice again. "Just a badger."

"Great timing," David muttered, resettling his grip. "Really. Excellent timing."

They worked the last of the rusted nail loose together, hands over each other's on the makeshift lever, and the crown came free all at once — lighter than either of them expected, cold and simple in Ellie's hands — and in the same instant, a sound rose from the tree itself that had no easy name: a low, splitting groan, bark parting along an old seam near the fork, wood fibers tearing with a wet, tearing crack that ran up the trunk and faded into the dark above them.

From the split, something dark and slow began to well up — not blood, nothing so simple as that, but a thick, near-black sap, welling out of the exposed wood in a slow, steady line, catching what moonlight there was in a dull, wet sheen.

Neither of them moved for a moment.

"Did we do that?" David asked, very quietly.

Ellie looked at the wound in the bark, at the dark sap tracking

slowly downward, and didn't have an answer that felt honest enough to give him. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe. Probably."

They climbed down slower than they'd climbed up, careful now in a different way than before — not of falling, but of touching anything else. Near the base, Ellie paused, one hand hovering just above the rough bark, close enough to feel the faint chill coming off it, and held it there a long moment before finally letting her palm rest flat against the trunk.

It was only wood. Cold, ordinary wood, rough under her hand, sap-dark and split a little further up. It didn't feel like anything was watching her back. It didn't feel like anything at all, except old, and hurt, in whatever plain, physical way a tree can be hurt.

"We had to," she said, mostly to convince herself.

"Yeah," David said. "We had to."

Not completely, either of them — but nobody said so out loud.

They set off back through the dark woods with the crown wrapped carefully in David's jacket and held between them, triumphant in the exhausted way that comes after real effort finally paying off — and unsettled, both of them, in a way that had nothing to do with tiredness at all, that stayed with them the whole long walk back toward the tunnel and the warm, golden light waiting somewhere below it.

CHAPTER 19

THE LONG WAY BACK



They moved fast on the way back, faster than the outward journey had allowed, because this time they knew exactly where they were going and exactly why.

The crown rode wrapped in David's jacket, tucked hard against his chest, and every few minutes his free hand drifted up to check it was still there, a small, unconscious gesture he didn't seem to notice himself making. Ellie led with the map, checking landmarks against her sketch by the thin grey light that had started, finally, to edge back toward morning, and found, with real satisfaction, that her lines held up. The ridge. The stream, quieter now than it had been in the dark. The tree-line David had spotted a lifetime ago, back when the woods had still felt like an adventure instead of a thing they'd survived.

Her legs ached in a way she'd never quite felt before, deep and thorough, the ache that comes from real effort rather than ordinary tiredness. She found she didn't mind it nearly as much as she would have expected to.

They heard the howl again crossing the ridge — distant this time, off to the west, nothing close enough to see.

David went still first, one hand rising automatically, and Ellie stopped beside him without needing to be told.

“Same one?” she whispered.

“Maybe. Doesn’t matter.” He was already scanning the tree-line, calm in a way that surprised her, given everything. “It’s far. And we’re not running from it this time. We’re just — not going that way.”

They adjusted course without a word of argument, angling east around a low rise instead of pushing straight through, and the howl didn’t sound again. Whether the wolf had simply moved on, or never noticed them at all, or noticed and decided, this time, not to bother, none of that mattered nearly as much as the plain fact that they’d handled it — quietly, efficiently, the way people handle things they’ve learned rather than things that still frighten them blind.

“We did that right,” David said, once they’d put real distance behind them.

“We did that right,” Ellie agreed, and felt something in her chest loosen that had been wound tight since the stream.

They kept walking, and somewhere in the easing of that tension, the talking started — slow at first, then faster, tumbling over itself the way relief tends to once it finally has room to move.

“I can’t believe we actually climbed that thing,” David said. “Like — I can’t believe my arms did that. I didn’t know my arms could do that.”

“I can’t believe the stick broke. I really thought the stick was going to work.”

“The stick was never going to work.”

“You didn’t say that *at the time*.”

“I was being supportive!”

Ellie laughed — a real laugh, startled out of her, the first one in what felt like a very long stretch of cold and climbing and holding

her breath. “You should’ve seen your face when the badger came out.”

“You should’ve seen *your* face.”

“I didn’t see my face, David, that’s not how faces work.”

“Well, it was bad. Take my word for it.”

They went back and forth like that for a while, replaying it — the slipping foot, the rope’s sudden catch, the exact crack of the rusted nail finally giving — each retelling a little more exaggerated and a little more delighted than the last, the kind of talking that wasn’t really about getting the facts right anymore so much as it was about proving to each other, out loud, that it had actually happened and they’d actually survived it.

“We got the crown,” David said, quieter, somewhere in the middle of all that, like the fact of it was only now fully landing. “We actually got it.”

Ellie looked at the shape of it, wrapped safe against his chest, and felt something complicated settle in alongside the pride — pride and something else, something with the tree’s dark, welling sap still caught behind her eyes whenever she let herself think about it too directly. She decided, for now, not to think about it too directly.

“We actually got it,” she echoed instead, and let the pride win, at least for the moment.

The tunnel mouth appeared out of the pale morning light almost before Ellie was ready for it, half-swallowed in bramble exactly where they’d left it, and stepping toward it felt, after everything, like coming home twice in one very long day.

The warmth hit them first — that same golden, uncertain glow rising up to meet them the moment they ducked below the tunnel’s lip, wrapping around them like something almost physical, chasing the last of the surface cold out of Ellie’s bones before they’d even reached the bottom. She hadn’t realized how deeply

cold she'd gotten until the warmth told her, all at once, exactly how much she'd been missing it.

They didn't even make it past the first bend before the hall found them.

"THEY'RE BACK." Thistle's voice, first, somewhere ahead and closing fast, and then Thistle herself, barreling around the corner at a speed that nearly took both of them off their feet, throwing her arms around Ellie's neck with enough force to make her stagger.

"You're ALIVE, you're back, you're actually — is that mud? Is that BLOOD? Are you hurt, are you—"

"We're fine," Ellie managed, laughing despite herself. "We're okay. We're really okay."

Thimble arrived next, hourglass-watch spinning wildly, already trying and failing to count something about their return; Bramblecap close behind him, spectacles askew, breathless with relief; Corrigan shoving through the gathering crowd demanding, at volume, to know whether his Sunfleck had survived the journey intact. Word seemed to travel through the hall faster than either of them could walk, and by the time they'd gone another twenty feet, a real crowd had gathered, noise and light and warmth pressing in from every side, faces they knew and faces they didn't, all of it swelling into something loud and joyful and almost overwhelming after the long, quiet cold of the surface.

"The crown," someone called out, somewhere in the crowd. "Did they get the crown?"

The noise didn't die exactly, but it shifted, gathering itself toward a single held breath, dozens of faces turning at once toward David and the small, wrapped shape held carefully against his chest.

"We got it," David said, and the words came out steadier and prouder than anything he'd said all night.

The hall erupted.

Somewhere at the center of all that noise and light, word was already moving ahead of them — toward the throne room, toward the Queen, toward the moment neither of them had quite let themselves picture until now, standing here, crown in hand, home.

“Come on,” Thistle said, tugging at both their sleeves at once, eyes bright. “She’ll want to see. She’ll want to see *right now*.”

They let themselves be pulled forward, through the crowd, toward the hall’s far doors, the noise and warmth and relief carrying them the way the crowd itself had carried them once before, toward whatever came next.

CHAPTER 20
TRUE FACES



The throne room was packed tighter than Ellie had ever seen it, every inch of floor and gallery crowded with Hollow Folk, the noise of the hall's joy rolling off the walls in waves that hadn't stopped building since the moment word had reached the crowd that the crown was home.

Queen Sorrel stood at the base of her dais, not on it, close enough to the children that Ellie could see the shine in her eyes — real, unguarded, the look of someone who had waited a very long time for exactly this moment.

“Let me see,” she said, and her voice shook, just slightly, around the words.

David stepped forward and unwrapped the crown from his jacket with both hands, careful as if it might break, and held it out to her the way he'd have held out something enormous and fragile at once. The whole hall seemed to lean in with him.

“For you,” he said. “We got it.”

Queen Sorrel took it from his hands.

For a moment, she simply looked at it, turning it slowly, her thumbs tracing its worn silver-grey edge like she was reading

something written there in a language only she could feel. The hall had gone almost silent, waiting with her, hundreds of faces holding still around the edges of that one small, ordinary-looking circlet of metal.

Then she raised it, and set it on her own head.

For one breath — one single, held breath, the kind that means nothing while it's happening and everything in hindsight — nothing changed at all.

Then everything did.

It happened too fast to properly see, and too completely to miss. The Queen Ellie had known — warm, sorrowful, achingly kind — was simply gone. In her place stood something with the same shape and none of the same face. Teeth, too many and too sharp, behind a smile gone wrong. Fingers lengthened into something closer to claws. Eyes flat and depthless, with none of the warmth that had lived in them a heartbeat before.

And she was not alone.

All around the hall, in the same instant, every face Ellie and David had come to know did the same thing at once — turned, in a single terrible ripple, from something familiar into something else.

Thimble's anxious, fidgeting warmth curled into a low, hungry stillness. His eyes slid over the children with the flat, assessing look of someone counting something that wasn't courses anymore. Bramblecap's fussy, flustered kindness dropped away entirely. Underneath it: a cold, blank patience that had clearly been sitting there the whole time. Old Corrigan's booming, boastful humor twisted sharp and mean, his easy laugh gone jagged in his throat.

And Thistle —

Thistle's face changed too, sharp and swift as all the rest, wings gone ragged and dark, eyes gone flat and strange — and for one half-second, buried somewhere in that unfamiliar new face, something crossed it that Ellie would spend a long time afterward trying to name and never quite managing. It was there, and then

Thistle turned, and it was gone, swept up into the same current as everyone else.

The hall broke into motion all at once.

It wasn't an attack. Ellie understood that even through the roaring in her own ears. Nobody turned on them. Nobody reached for them. Nobody so much as looked at them for more than the half-second it took to shove past on the way to somewhere else. The entire hall surged as one, hundreds of Hollow Folk at once, a single flood toward the tunnel, toward the surface, toward open sky — indifferent to the two children caught in the middle of it, the way a river is indifferent to two stones.

“ELLIE—”

David's hand found hers in the crush, gripping hard, and she gripped back just as hard, the two of them swept sideways by the current before either of them could plant their feet. The noise was enormous — not cheering now, not joy, just the roar of a hundred bodies moving at once, wings and claws and the drumbeat of feet against root and stone.

They ran because there was nowhere else to run. The flood carried them half the distance itself, shoving them down the same passage they'd walked a hundred times before — past the library, past the games clearing, all of it a blur of dark shapes and rushing air — until the tunnel mouth opened ahead of them, packed with fleeing bodies pouring up and out into the pale morning light.

Ellie and David burst out behind the last of them, gasping, stumbling, into cold open air.

The flood didn't stop at the surface. It kept going, streaming away in every direction across the dew-wet grass and into the tree-line, dark shapes scattering fast and silent into the woods until, within a handful of seconds, there was nothing left at all — no crowd, no noise, no golden light rising up from below. Just the two of them, alone on the hillside, chests heaving, the tunnel mouth gaping open and empty behind them.

“What did we do,” David moaned softly. It wasn’t really a question.

Ellie didn’t answer. She couldn’t. She stood there in the thin morning light, hands shaking, and tried to hold in her mind, all at once, the Queen’s sorrowful, worn-out warmth and the sharp, flat-eyed thing that crown had made of her — and found she couldn’t hold both at the same time at all, and didn’t know, standing there, which one had been the lie.

CHAPTER 21

MERLIN



The last of the fleeing shapes vanished into the treeline, and then there was only the hillside, the empty tunnel mouth, and the two of them, gasping in the cold morning air.

And an old man, standing a few feet away, arms crossed, watching them with an expression that made Ellie's stomach drop straight to her shoes.

She hadn't seen him arrive. He was simply there, the way the Queen used to simply be there — except nothing about him felt golden or gentle. He was tall, and stooped with a great, weathered age that seemed to sit on him like a coat too heavy to take off, his beard gone white and wild, his eyes sharp and furious under brows drawn together in an expression that suggested he had been standing there for some time already, and had not enjoyed a single second of it.

"Well," he said, in a voice like gravel dragged over stone. "There it is again."

"Who—" David started.

"Oh, don't." The old man held up one hand, sharp and irrita-

ble. “Don’t you dare *who* me. I have neither the patience nor the years remaining to explain myself twice, and something tells me I am about to be explaining a great deal today whether I like it or not.”

“We’re sorry,” Ellie said, in a rush, before she’d even fully decided to say it. “Whatever we did — we’re really, really sorry.”

“Sorry,” the old man repeated, with a short, humorless bark that might once have been a laugh. “Sorry. Yes. Everyone is always terribly sorry, right after, which is a great comfort to precisely no one, least of all me, who has now had to clean up this mess more times than I care to count, and who is, I would remind you both, *not getting any younger*.”

“You’re Merlin,” David said, wide-eyed.

“I’m tired,” Merlin said. “Merlin will do, if you must use a name, though I’ll thank you not to say it like it’s supposed to fix anything.”

He turned and paced a short, irritable circle, muttering something under his breath that might have been a curse or might have been arithmetic, and rounded back on them both with the frayed patience of someone who had run entirely out of it several centuries ago and was operating now on pure stubbornness alone.

“Do you have any idea,” he said, low and sharp, “what you’ve just done?”

“We got the Queen her crown back,” Ellie said, small.

“You unlocked a door,” Merlin said. “That’s what you did. A door I spent a great deal of effort, and no small amount of my own strength, locking in the first place, a very long time ago, for very good reason — and you have just handed the key back to the one person in all the worlds I trusted least to have it.”

“She said—” David started.

“I know precisely what she said,” Merlin snapped. “She’s had centuries to make it sound reasonable. That’s rather the trouble with people who are very good at being wronged — after enough

practice, they start to believe it themselves, and everyone around them believes it faster.”

Ellie felt something cold settle in her chest. “So none of it was true?”

“Oh, it was true,” Merlin said, and some of the sharpness went out of his voice, replaced by something older and wearier. “That’s the trouble with her, and always has been. She rarely lies outright. She simply arranges the truth until it points wherever she needs it to.”

He sat down, heavily, on a fallen log at the clearing’s edge, and for a moment looked less like a furious old wizard and more like exactly what he was: someone very old, very tired, and profoundly unhappy to be having this conversation yet again.

“They weren’t locked away for being strange,” he said, quieter now, looking at neither of them in particular. “I want that understood plainly, because I suspect you’ve built up some sympathetic picture in your heads by now, and I’d rather tear it down quickly than let it fester. They were locked away for what they did. Quietly. Patiently. Over generations. Unmaking things that take a very long time to make — a child’s wonder, a person’s belief in anything larger than what they can hold in their two hands. They fed on it. They still do, given the chance. That’s what that crown lets them do freely, out there, in your world, and that is precisely what you’ve just handed back to them.”

“They weren’t locked away for being strange,” he said again, harder now, like he wanted the words to actually land. “They were locked away for what they did. And you’ve just handed them the key.”

Neither child said anything for a long moment.

“We didn’t know,” Ellie finally managed.

“No,” Merlin agreed. “You didn’t. That’s rather the design of the thing, and not remotely your fault, whatever guilt you’re currently drowning in — I can see it on both your faces, and you

can stop, it does nobody any good.” He rubbed a hand over his tired eyes. “The fault, such as it is, sits with a queen who is exceptionally good at seeming wronged, and with an old fool who let his guard down enough to let it happen again.”

“We want to help fix it,” David said, all at once, before Ellie could stop him, before she’d even finished deciding whether she agreed.

Merlin looked up at that, sharp again, studying them both with real, searching attention.

“Do you,” he said. Not quite a question.

“We got the crown out. We can help get it back.”

Merlin was quiet for a long moment, and something crossed his weathered face that wasn’t quite a smile — wry, and old, and faintly amused despite everything.

“I have lived a very great number of years,” he said, “long enough to have forgotten more than either of you will ever get the chance to learn, and I will say this for it: age teaches you that the people who make a mess rarely have any real stake in whether it gets properly cleaned. You two, I think, have rather more stake in this than most.” He studied them a moment longer. “There’s an old, stubborn part of me that believes a thing set right by the ones who let it come undone tends to stay set right longer than a thing an old man patches over alone, yet again, for the hundredth time, muttering the whole while about how nobody ever learns.”

“So you’ll help us?” Ellie asked.

“I will *lend* you what you need,” Merlin said, standing, brisk again, the wry softness folding itself back beneath his irritable crustiness as quickly as it had appeared. “Helping implies I’ll be doing the work. I will not be doing the work. I am old, and tired, and this is, properly speaking, your mess to help unmake, given that you’re the ones who unmade the lock.”

He held out one weathered hand toward Ellie, palm up, and

something in the gesture made her step forward without quite deciding to.

"Look," he said. "Truly look. Not the way you've been looking at things all your life. The way things actually are, under whatever they'd prefer you to see."

The world snapped into focus.

It happened all at once, dizzying, the ordinary hillside suddenly, unbearably clear — every blade of grass distinct, every shadow honest about what it was hiding, the treeline resolving into individual leaves and branches with a sharpness that made her head spin for one long, disorienting second before it settled, slowly, into something she could hold onto without swaying.

"Whoa," Ellie breathed.

"That's True Sight," Merlin said. "It will show you what's real, when what's real has gone to some trouble to hide itself. It will not show you what's coming, and it will tire you badly if you lean on it too hard, too often. Use it sparingly."

He turned to David next, and rather than touching him, just nodded toward the woods.

"Listen," he said. "Properly, this time."

David frowned, confused, and then went utterly still.

The birdsong in the trees — ordinary birdsong, background noise he'd have tuned out an hour ago — suddenly wasn't background at all. It was words. Actual words, layered and overlapping, a dozen small urgent conversations about food and danger and territory, all of it resolving out of what had sounded, a heartbeat ago, like nothing more than noise.

"They're *talking*," David said, awestruck. "They've been talking this whole time?"

"They've been talking your whole life," Merlin said. "You simply couldn't hear it before. Consider that a gift, and treat it as one — not a party trick."

He led them, without further explanation, to a tree standing

alone at the clearing's far edge — not Old Hawthorn's full towering height, but old itself, gnarled, and hung with a scattering of pale, trembling leaves that shivered gently though there was no wind at all to move them. Ellie counted them without meaning to, the old habit rising up out of her the moment she saw them.

Eleven.

"Old Hawthorn is wounded," Merlin said, quietly now, all the crustiness gone out of his voice. "You saw that yourselves, I understand, when you pulled the crown free. Every leaf on that tree will fall, one by one, and when the last one does, the binding fails entirely, forever, and there will be no putting it right again — not by me, not by you, not by anyone. You have until then to find the crown, and a true scion of this tree, and set both right at once, at midnight, under the moon."

"How long is that?" David asked. "Eleven leaves — how long do we have?"

"However long eleven leaves take to fall," Merlin said. "Which is not, I promise you, as long as you'd like it to be."

He straightened, and for just a moment, in the pale early light, Ellie saw something in his weathered face that looked almost like exhaustion deep enough to be dangerous — gone as quickly as it had shown itself, tucked back behind his usual irritable crust.

"I have things I must see to," he said, already turning to go. "You have things you must see to as well, though I imagine you'd rather I stayed and explained every last detail first. I haven't the time, and neither, as it happens, do you."

"Wait—" Ellie started.

"I'll find you," Merlin said, not unkindly, already several steps into the trees. "I generally do."

And then, in the maddening way of old and powerful things, he wasn't there anymore, and the two of them were left alone at the edge of the clearing, staring at eleven pale, trembling leaves, and the whole enormous shape of what they now had to do.

CHAPTER 22

BORROWED MAGIC



Merlin left them at the clearing's edge with nothing but a gruff "mind yourselves" and the distinct impression that he expected them to break something before he returned, and for a little while, they very nearly did.

"Try it on that," David said, pointing at an ordinary grey stone half-sunk in the leaf litter near the clearing's edge. "The rock. See what happens."

Ellie looked at it — properly looked, the way Merlin had shown her — and felt the world tilt into that same dizzying clarity as before, sharper and stranger the longer she held it.

The rock wasn't just a rock.

A mark ran across its face, faint as a hairline crack, deliberate in a way no natural crack ever was — a small, spiraling symbol, old and worn nearly smooth, the kind of thing you could stare directly at for years and never once notice unless something made you look properly.

"There's a mark on it," she said, breathless. "It's been here the whole time. I've probably walked past this exact rock a hundred times and never—"

The clarity wavered, then, like a held note finally running out of breath, and a dull ache bloomed behind her eyes, sudden and insistent.

“Whoa. Okay.” She blinked hard, and the ordinary grey stone was just a stone again, the mark gone, or at least gone from where she could reach it. “That’s — that takes it out of you. A lot more than I expected.”

“You look kind of pale.”

“I feel kind of pale.” She pressed the heel of her hand against one eye. “I don’t think I can just look at everything like that all the time. It’s not free.”

“Noted,” David said, filing it away with more seriousness than he usually filed anything.

They started the walk home not long after, the ordinary morning settling in strange and grey around them, neither of them quite sure yet how many hours or days this particular stretch of the World Above had cost them. Baxter met them at the fence line before they’d even reached the yard, tail a blur, barking his usual delighted, indecipherable bark — and then, all at once, entirely decipherable.

“YOU’RE BACK YOU’RE BACK YOU SMELL LIKE EVERYWHERE YOU SMELL LIKE UNDERGROUND AND WOLF AND FEAR AND SOMETHING GOLD I DON’T HAVE A WORD FOR—“

David stopped dead in the yard.

“Baxter?”

The dog skidded to a halt in front of him, ears up, whole body vibrating with the joy of a dog whose person has finally, astonishingly, learned to speak.

“You can HEAR me,” Baxter said, and something in his voice — because he had a voice now, a real one, low and warm and startlingly present — carried an emotion David had never once managed to read off a wagging tail alone: something close to relief,

close to gratitude, close to being properly seen after a very long time of not being. “I’ve been TALKING. I’ve ALWAYS been talking. Nobody ever—” He caught himself, sat, visibly composed himself with tremendous effort. “Sit. Sorry. I’m sitting. This is very exciting.”

David sank down onto the grass right there in the yard, and Ellie, watching, found herself sitting too, unwilling to miss a single word of it.

“What’s it like?” David asked. “Being you. I mean — what do you actually *think* about? All day?”

Baxter considered this with real gravity, the same gravity, David realized with a small jolt, that he’d always brought to considering whether a stick was worth fetching — it had simply never occurred to David before that gravity might be the same thing wearing different clothes.

“The world arrives to me in layers,” Baxter said, and his voice settled into something unhurried now, almost formal, the cadence of someone finally getting to describe a thing he’d waited his whole life to describe properly. “You would call them smells, I think, if you had to call them anything, but that word is far too small for what they actually are. A smell, to you, is one thing. To me, it is a *history*. I can tell you who walked this yard, and in what order, and how long ago, and whether they were happy or afraid or hungry when they did it. I can tell you it rained three days past, and where, and how hard, by the way the old rain and the new rain sit differently in the ground. The whole world is written down for me, all the time, in a language you only get the faintest edges of — a burnt log, a stranger’s shoe, a distant storm. You get the title. I get the whole book.”

“That’s — Baxter, that’s incredible.”

“It is rather incredible,” Baxter agreed, without a trace of false modesty. “I have never once complained about it. Well. Once. There was a skunk.”

Ellie laughed, and Baxter's tail thumped once against the grass, pleased with himself.

"Can I ask you something?" David said, quieter now, leaning forward. "Since the very first day — since before any of this — you never once would go near the old tunnel. Not once. Not even a little. Why?"

Baxter's whole demeanor shifted, the warmth in his voice cooling into something more careful, more deliberate.

"It smelled wrong," he said simply. "Like something waiting."

"That's it?"

"That is a very great deal, actually, if you understood smell the way I do," Baxter said, not unkindly. "You want a longer answer because you're used to longer answers meaning more truth. They don't, always. Some things are simple and enormous at the same time. That tunnel smelled the way a held breath smells, if a held breath had a smell — old, and patient, and waiting on something to finally happen. Every animal down that hedge line felt it, if you'd asked them. None of us went near it. Dogs don't need eleven reasons for a thing our nose has already decided once and for all."

David sat with that for a long moment, something in his chest going quiet and serious.

"You knew," he said. "This whole time. You knew something was down there."

"I knew *something* was down there," Baxter agreed. "I did not know what, or why, or that you two would go and poke at it regardless of every sensible signal a good dog could offer you." He said this with such enormous, weary affection that it landed less like a scolding and more like a well-worn family joke. "You are, if I am honest, both very brave and extremely difficult to properly protect. I have decided to love you regardless. It was not a hard decision."

"I love you too, buddy," David said, and buried his face for a moment in the thick fur at Baxter's neck, and Baxter let him,

patient and warm and entirely unbothered by the mud and the wolf-smell and everything else the day had left on him.

It was, Ellie thought, watching the two of them, one of the strangest and best things she'd seen since the tunnel — stranger, in its way, than singing gardens or shrinking pebbles, because this wonder had been sitting in their own backyard the entire time, patient and devoted and fully, richly alive, waiting only for someone to finally learn how to listen.

They didn't get to sit with it for long.

"Enough sentiment," said a familiar, gravelly voice from the fence line, and Merlin was there, arms crossed, looking exactly as impatient as he had the last time they'd seen him. "Sentiment doesn't put leaves back on a tree."

"We were just—"

"I saw what you were just. It was touching. Truly. Now." He fixed them both with a sharp look. "Your task is simple to state and difficult to do: find out where they've gone to ground. All of them, scattered now across the World Above, hiding in whatever shadows will have them. You'll need eyes and ears in places I can't easily reach myself anymore, and you have, between the two of you, considerably more of both than I currently do."

"We'll find them," David said.

"See that you do," Merlin said. "Quickly, preferably. Leaves don't wait on anyone's convenience."

He walked them back to Old Hawthorn himself — a shorter walk than Ellie remembered, though nothing about distance had felt reliable in days — and the three of them stood together at the base of the great, wounded trunk, looking up at its pale, trembling burden.

It happened while they were still looking.

One leaf, high on a low branch, went suddenly, entirely silver — bleached of all its green in a single heartbeat, pale as frost, trembling harder than the others though the air around it was perfectly

still. It trembled once. Twice. And then, without falling in any ordinary sense at all, it simply came apart, unraveling at its edges into a fine curl of pale mist that hung in the air for one long second before dissolving entirely, accompanied by a small, clear, chiming sound — like a single note struck once on some tiny, distant bell, and then gone.

Ten leaves remained.

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Even Merlin, Ellie noticed, had gone very still, watching the space where the leaf had been with an old, familiar grief on his weathered face — the look of someone who had seen this exact thing happen too many times before, and had never once gotten used to it.

“That’s it, then,” David said, quietly. “That’s really happening. Ten left.”

“Ten left,” Merlin confirmed. “And every one of them will go exactly the same way, whether you’re ready or not.” He turned to them both, and for just a moment, beneath the gruffness, something almost gentle showed through. “So. I’d suggest you get ready.”

CHAPTER 23

WHAT THE ANIMALS SAW



The fox watched them from the tree line for a long time before it said anything at all.

David had learned, already, not to push. He sat on his heels at the field's edge, well back, and waited, and eventually the fox came a few careful steps closer, ears sharp, weight balanced for retreat.

"You're the boy who talks," it said. Not a question.

"I'm David."

"I know what you are. I asked what you're called." The fox sat, finally, though it never fully relaxed, not once, the whole conversation. "There's a den two ridges over that wasn't there a week past. Something's living in it that isn't fox, isn't badger, isn't anything with proper business being in a den at all. It comes and goes at strange hours. It doesn't smell right."

"Can you show us?"

"No."

"We'd really—"

"No," the fox said again, flat and final, no unkindness in it, just a wall. "I go near that ridge for nothing. Not for you, not for the

pretty way you ask, not for anything. You want to see it, you go yourselves. I've told you where. That's the whole of what I'll spend on this."

David nodded, slowly, filing that away without argument. "That's fair. Thank you for telling us."

The fox studied him a moment longer, something faintly approving in its sharp eyes. "You didn't push," it said. "Most wouldn't have known not to." And then it was gone, back into the tree line, quick and silent, leaving only the information behind.

The starlings were nothing like the fox.

They arrived as a single wheeling mass over the near pasture, dropped into the hedge in a chattering, overlapping wave, and started talking before David had even properly asked a question — all of them at once, fast, contradictory, each one certain and each one certain of something slightly different.

"WE SAW THEM WE SAW THEM NEAR THE OLD MILL—"

"THAT WAS TUESDAY THAT WAS A DIFFERENT THING ENTIRELY—"

"THREE OF THEM MAYBE FOUR MAYBE MORE HARD TO COUNT WHEN THEY'RE MOVING FAST—"

"THE MILLPOND THEY WENT TO THE MILLPOND EVERYONE KNOWS THAT—"

"I NEVER SAID THE MILLPOND WHO SAID THE MILLPOND—"

"Okay — okay, thank you," David said, hands up, laughing despite himself at the sheer overlapping chaos of it. "That's — that's a lot of information at once."

"WE ARE VERY HELPFUL," one of them announced, with tremendous confidence, and the whole flock lifted off again in the same wheeling mass they'd arrived in, gone as fast as they'd come, leaving David with a fistful of half-contradictory leads and a headache he hadn't expected conversation to cause.

“So — millpond, maybe,” he said, relaying it to Ellie. “Also maybe the old mill, which might be the same place or might not be. Also three of them. Or four. Possibly more.”

“That’s not exactly precise.”

“They were very fast talkers. I think reliability just isn’t really their thing.”

Ellie, meanwhile, had wandered to the fence line at the pasture’s edge, drawn there by nothing she could immediately name — just a faint, itching sense that something about one post was wrong in a way the others weren’t. She looked at it properly, the way Merlin had shown her, and felt the world tilt into that familiar dizzying clarity.

The post was marked.

Not with anything a normal eye would ever catch — no scratch, no paint, nothing physical at all — but with a symbol hanging just above the wood’s actual surface, faint and silver-threaded, the same rough shape, she realized with a jolt, as the mark she’d found on the stone back at Old Hawthorn’s clearing.

“There’s a sign here,” she said, urgent. “Like the one on the rock. It’s a trail marker. They’re leaving these for each other.”

“Can you follow them? Like, is there a line of them?”

She reached for the clarity again, further this time, trying to hold the whole fence line steady in that sharper focus long enough to spot a second marker, a third — and felt the ache start almost immediately, sharper and faster than it had the day before, a dull throb building fast behind both eyes.

“I can see — there’s one more, past the gate, I think — “ She swayed, slightly, catching herself on the fence post. “Okay. Okay, that’s enough. That’s genuinely enough, I need to stop.”

“You okay?”

“I will be. It just — it costs more every time I push it further. I don’t think it’s supposed to be used like a flashlight you leave on all day.”

They found the second marker exactly where she'd said it would be, and a general direction opened up before them — northwest, roughly, toward the old mill and, somewhere past it, the pond the starlings had half-agreed on.

It was on the walk back that the wrongness of the wider world started showing itself in earnest.

A dog three yards over barked itself hoarse at an empty stretch of fence line, hackles up, for no reason either of them could see. A small herd of cattle in the Hendersons' field stood bunched tight in one corner, unmoving, eyes rolled white, though nothing visible threatened them at all. Overhead, a loose scattering of starlings — maybe even the same ones — wheeled in a pattern that looked, watching it, subtly, uncomfortably wrong, breaking formation and reforming at angles that didn't match any bird-shape either of them had ever seen before.

"It's not just us anymore," Ellie said quietly, watching the cattle. "It's spreading. Into everything."

David didn't have anything to say to that, and for once, didn't try to fill the silence with something anyway.

Dinner that evening was ordinary in the aching way that ordinary things had started to feel lately — Mom asking about their day and getting careful half-truths in return, Dad Tom rubbing his eyes over a plate he'd barely touched, looking more tired than either of them had seen him in a long while.

"Rough one at the clinic," he said, when Mom asked. "Had a horse come in this afternoon, completely panicked, no clear reason for it. Wouldn't settle for anything. And there's an injury on it I genuinely can't explain — not a kick, not a fall, nothing that matches anything I know how to treat. I've been doing this a long time. I don't love not knowing what I'm looking at."

Ellie kept her eyes on her plate, feeling David go very still beside her.

"That's strange," Mom said, sympathetic, entirely unaware.

“It really is,” Dad Tom agreed, and reached for his water, and the conversation moved on to something else entirely, leaving Ellie and David alone with the small, terrible weight of knowing exactly what he couldn’t explain, and exactly why, and exactly how little either of them could say about it at that table at that moment.

Later, in the hallway outside their rooms, David finally said what neither of them had said at dinner.

“That horse. That’s because of them. Isn’t it.”

“Probably,” Ellie said. “Yeah. Probably.”

“We have to find them faster.”

“I know.”

Nine leaves remained on Old Hawthorn, somewhere out past the dark yard and the ordinary, unknowing house — and somewhere north of that, past the old mill, an unseen millpond waited, one that already, from what little they knew of it, nobody was in any hurry to reach.

CHAPTER 24
THE MILLPOND



The old orchard was too quiet before they'd even reached the water.

Ellie noticed it first — the wrong kind of quiet, the kind that isn't the absence of sound so much as sound holding its breath. The apple trees stood in their long, neglected rows, half-wild now, heavy with fruit nobody had picked in years, and not one leaf among them stirred, though a real wind moved steadily through the grass at their feet.

"That's not right," she murmured. "There's wind. The trees should be moving."

"Maybe they're just old."

"Trees don't get too old to move, David."

They came out of the orchard's far edge to the millpond itself, flat and dark and unnaturally still, the old mill's broken wheel standing motionless over water that reflected the sky with a clarity that felt, somehow, less like a mirror and more like something watching them from underneath.

A ring of grass at the pond's near edge had gone entirely brown, wilted in a perfect circle no drought or trampling could

explain. Beneath the surface, something pale moved in slow, wrong loops — a fish, Ellie realized, but swimming in tight, deliberate circles that no fish swam naturally, over and over, the same small loop again and again.

“I don’t like this place,” David said, quietly.

“Me neither.”

They crept closer along the bank, keeping low, keeping quiet, and it was David who caught the movement first — a shape at the pond’s far side, crouched at the water’s edge, drinking, or pretending to.

It wasn’t human. It wasn’t quite anything Ellie had a name for, though some old, instinctive part of her recognized, immediately and without doubt, exactly what it used to be. Sharp-shouldered, too-thin, its face turned mostly away — but even from this distance, even in profile, she could see the wrongness of it: teeth that didn’t sit right in its mouth, fingers too long for the hand they belonged to.

David grabbed her arm and pulled her down behind a fallen log without a word.

They stayed there, pressed low into damp grass and old bark, hearts hammering, while the shape at the water’s edge lifted its head, went very still, and turned slowly toward the orchard — toward, Ellie was almost certain, exactly where they were hiding.

It didn’t see them. Or it did, and decided, for reasons of its own, not to care. Either way, after one long, terrible stretch of stillness, it turned back to the water, dipped its too-long fingers into the pond’s dark surface, and was gone — not walking away, just gone, the way David had described the Queen’s own comings and goings once, a long time ago, back when that had still sounded wonderful instead of unsettling.

Nobody moved for a long moment.

“Okay,” David breathed. “Okay. That was — okay.”

"We need to go. Now, before it comes back, or before something else does."

But the way they'd come was gone.

Not gone-gone — Ellie could still see the orchard, the rows of trees, the path they'd walked in on — but something about it had changed, some quality of the ground itself that made her stomach drop the moment she looked at it directly. She reached, with real effort, for that same dizzying clarity Merlin had shown her, and the world tilted into sharper focus just long enough to show her the truth of it.

The path wasn't a path at all anymore. It was water — shallow, still, disguised so completely that it looked exactly like solid ground, right up until the moment someone's foot went through it.

"Not that way," she said, urgent, catching David's sleeve before he could take a single step onto it. "It's not real. It's water, it's — it's dressed up as ground, David, don't."

"How do you know?"

"I can see it. Trust me. There." She pointed, hand shaking slightly, toward a narrower strip further along the bank, solid ground that read, under her borrowed clarity, as exactly what it appeared to be. "That way's real. I checked. That way's real."

They ran for it, low and fast, and the ground held, and within a dozen frantic strides they'd put the pond and the orchard and the thing that had been drinking from it well behind them, breaking out onto open pasture with the wide, ordinary sky finally opening up overhead.

They didn't stop until they'd put a real stretch of field between themselves and the trees, and even then, they kept moving, faster than a walk, slower than a run, both of them unwilling to be the first to say they could finally, probably, slow down.

It was David who noticed the tree.

Old Hawthorn stood visible from this stretch of pasture,

distant but unmistakable, its pale, trembling burden catching the late light — and even as he glanced toward it, half by habit now, one leaf near the crown went suddenly, sharply silver.

They both flinched. A real, physical flinch, David's hand jerking to his own chest without his seeming to notice he'd done it.

THUMP.

The sound reached them a half-second later, low across the whole open field, heavier and rounder than the small clear chime from days before — not a bell this time, but something closer to a single slow heartbeat, felt as much as heard, gone as fast as it came.

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"Eight," David said finally, quietly, still rattled from everything else, barely sparing the tree a full look.

"Eight," Ellie agreed, and found her own hand had drifted, without her deciding it, to rest flat against her chest, where something in her had felt that single heavy thump land and settle, slow to fade.

They didn't stop walking. There wasn't time to, and standing still in open ground wasn't something either of them much wanted to do a moment longer than they had to — but the sound of it stayed with Ellie the rest of the walk home, low and round and final, a single struck note she couldn't quite shake loose from her chest.

CHAPTER 25

THE BINDING EXPLAINED



Merlin was waiting for them at Old Hawthorn, sitting on the same fallen log as before, looking, if anything, more tired than the last time they'd seen him.

"Sit," he said, without preamble. "There's a plan. You'll want to hear the whole of it before you go charging off toward the next part of this, given how well charging off has served you so far."

They sat.

"The crown," he said. "Back into Hollow hands the moment it left mine, and back it must come, a second time, though I don't imagine that part surprises you. Alongside it, we'll need a true scion of this tree — a living shoot grown from Old Hawthorn's own blood, not any ordinary hawthorn plucked from a hedge. Both together, crown and scion, nailed fast at true midnight, under open moonlight, before the eleventh leaf falls. Miss that mark, and there's no second one to aim for."

"How do we find a scion?" Ellie asked.

"Patiently, and with considerable help from creatures who remember more than people generally give them credit for,"

Merlin said. “That’s a task for another day. Today, I find I owe you something else first.”

He was quiet for a moment, looking up at the tree’s pale, trembling leaves, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost its usual brisk edge entirely.

“You know the shape of it already. I told it to you plain and fast, the last time, because plain and fast was what the moment called for. You deserve better than plain and fast now, I think, if you’re to understand properly what it is you’ve woken back up.” He looked at them both, weighing something. “Sit still, and listen. I’m going to tell it to you the way I still tell it to myself, some nights, when I can’t sleep for the weight of it.”



I WAS YOUNG, THEN, THOUGH YOUNG MEANT SOMETHING different for my kind than it does for yours — young enough still to believe the world would hold its shape forever, the way the very old and the very young both tend to believe, for entirely opposite reasons.

There was an Order of us, once. I won’t trouble you with all our names; most of them are dust now, in every sense that matters, and the ones that aren’t dust wouldn’t thank me for repeating them to children. We were not so different from what you might imagine — old, careful, half-hidden, tending to the seams where the ordinary world and the deeper one still touched. Magic ran thicker in those days. It pooled in old wells and older trees, and people still half-believed in the things that lived at their edges, and belief, as it happens, is a kind of nourishment. It fed the Hollow Folk, back then, same as it feeds them now. There was simply more of it to go around.

For a long while, that arrangement held. The Hollow Folk took their small share — a lost hour here, a forgotten evening there,

a child's fright at a rustling hedge that was mostly, in the end, harmless. Mischief. We tolerated mischief. Mischief is not the same as harm, and I want that distinction understood, because it will matter for what you're about to ask me.

It stopped being only mischief.

I remember a village — I won't say where, it hardly matters now, the ground it stood on has long since forgotten it too — where the children stopped laughing, all in the same season, all at once, and nobody could say why. I remember a fiddler in another town entirely who woke one morning unable to remember a single tune he'd ever played, his hands gone stiff and strange on the strings, as though something had reached in overnight and taken the music out of him like marrow from a bone. I remember an old woman, in a village I did visit myself, who had raised eleven children and buried three, and who told me, quite calmly, over tea, that she could no longer remember what any of it had felt like to love them. Not the love itself — she still knew, factually, that she had loved them — but the *feeling* of it. Scraped clean out of her, tidy as you like, and she spoke of it the way you might mention a missing spoon.

That was the Hollow Folk's true hunger, you understand. Not blood, not flesh — wonder. Belief. The slow, unglamorous work of growing up a person capable of joy, and awe, and love that costs something to give. They fed on that, patiently, over generations, wherever it grew thick enough to harvest, and they left behind husks who still walked and spoke and raised their own children in turn, a little thinner each time, a little less able to pass on what had been quietly taken from them.

We argued about it for the better part of a decade, my Order and I. Some wanted a war — a real one, our whole strength thrown against theirs, settled by force. I was young enough, and angry enough, to want that too, for a time. Others wanted simply to leave it, to let the fading of magic in the world starve the Hollow Folk

out slowly, over centuries, and let time do what we lacked the stomach to do ourselves. Both were mistakes, though it took us a long while to see why.

A war would have cost too much, on both sides, and settled nothing permanent — you cannot kill hunger, only feed it or lock it away. And to simply leave it, to let the slow fading do our work for us, would have meant centuries more of villages like the one I told you of, generations more of grandmothers who forgot how love had felt. We did not have the right to spend other people's children on our own patience.

So we chose the third thing, the hard thing, the one that cost each of us something we never got back.

We bound them. All of them, every Hollow Folk we could gather beneath one hill, using every last measure of strength my Order possessed between us — and it was, I promise you, every last measure, because magic itself was already fading from the world by then, ebbing the way a tide ebbs, and we knew, all of us, standing around this very tree on a night very like the ones ahead of you, that we were spending the last of something that would not be given to us again.

The binding took. I won't tell you exactly how; some things are better left as a closed door than a diagram, and besides, you'd only try it yourselves, and I've had quite enough of children trying things themselves for one season.

What I will tell you is the cost of it.

My Order and I paid a matched price for that binding — a sacrifice weighed evenly against the thing we'd locked away. One by one, my companions withdrew from the world entirely, their own strength spent and given over into the lock itself, until, in the end, there was only myself left standing at this tree, alone, the last of an Order that no longer, strictly speaking, existed anywhere but in me.

I do not regret it. I want that understood plainly. But I have

been alone with that lock for a very long time now, checking it, tending it, watching for the day some well-meaning, curious person finally pried it loose — and I confess, some small, tired part of me had almost hoped, after all this time, that day simply wouldn't come.

It came anyway. It generally does.



ELLIE REALIZED, SOMEWHERE IN THE TELLING, THAT SHE'D stopped breathing properly, and made herself start again.

"That's horrible," she said, quietly. "What happened to that old woman. And the fiddler."

"It was," Merlin agreed. "It is. That's rather the point of telling you plainly, rather than sparing you the worst of it."

"Do you think—" Ellie hesitated, then made herself finish the thought. "Do you think they might have changed? After all this time? Locked away, with nothing to — maybe they had time to think about it."

Merlin looked at her for a long moment, and something in his weathered face softened, just slightly, at the question itself, even before he answered it.

"I'd like to believe that," he said. "I want you to know that, plainly, before I say the rest — I would like very much to believe it. But I have watched hunger for a very long time, in every shape it comes in, and I have never once seen it improve simply for having gone a while unfed. If anything, it sharpens." He shook his head, slow and tired. "I don't enjoy being right about them. I'd have liked to be wrong. I wasn't."

Neither child said anything for a moment, the weight of it settling over the little clearing.

Merlin, seeming to notice the mood had gone properly heavy,

straightened abruptly and cleared his throat with theatrical irritation.

“Well,” he said. “That’s quite enough of that for one afternoon. I don’t know how you two stand it, this modern world of yours — all noise, and wheels, and boxes that shout advertisements at you from every wall. I saw a thing yesterday, some manner of cart with no horse at all, and no rider either, driving itself down the lane as though that were a perfectly reasonable way for a cart to behave. In my day a cart knew its place.” He shook his head, muttering. “Plastic. Everything’s plastic now. I don’t know what plastic is *made of*, and I’ve decided I don’t wish to.”

David, despite everything, found himself grinning. “It’s usually oil.”

“Don’t tell me,” Merlin said, holding up a hand. “I’ve had quite enough bad news for one day.”

It was David who caught the tree shifting first — one leaf near the crown gone silver all at once, trembling harder than before.

THUMP.

It hit harder this time, low and heavy, rolling across the clearing like something physical, and both children flinched together, hands rising instinctively to their chests where the sound seemed to land and settle deep before finally, slowly, fading.

Seven leaves.

Merlin watched it fall with the same old grief on his face as always, though something in his jaw had tightened, just slightly, at the sound of it.

“Seven,” he said. “Time to find you a scion, then, and quickly. Old Hawthorn won’t wait on anyone’s convenience, least of all mine.”

CHAPTER 26

THE SCATTERED CHILDREN
OF OLD HAWTHORN



“Ask the crow,” Merlin said, the next time they saw him, with the flat certainty of a man who had already worked out the entire answer and simply couldn’t be bothered walking them through his reasoning. “Old Hawthorn’s berries have gone into a hundred birds’ bellies over the centuries and come out the other end a hundred places besides. Crows remember. Ask one.”

“Just — ask a crow. Any crow?”

“Not any crow,” Merlin said, already walking away. “You’ll know the one when you hear it.”

They found her in the churchyard on the hill’s far side, perched on a leaning headstone worn smooth by weather, regarding them with one sharp black eye as they approached.

“You’re the boy who talks,” she said, in a voice like two stones grinding, echoing the fox almost word for word. “Word travels.”

“I’m David. This is Ellie. We’re looking for—”

“Hawthorn,” the crow finished. “I know what you’re looking for. Everyone’s been looking for something, this last little while. The whole hedgerow’s been humming with it.” She tilted her

head, considering him with unhurried interest. “I remember every berry I’ve eaten in forty years, more or less, and where I left the seed after. That’s rather the job, for a crow who pays attention. Most don’t. I do.”

“Can you tell us where the ones from that tree went? Old Hawthorn, on the ridge?”

“I can tell you where I *think* they went,” the crow said. “Forty years is a long memory, even for me. I’ll give you what I’ve got. Won’t promise it’s perfect.”

She gave them three.

The first was a scraggly sapling growing wild at the edge of a fencerow half a mile off, and Ellie approached it with real hope, reaching for that dizzying clarity the moment they were close enough. The world tilted, sharpened — and the sapling, examined properly, showed nothing at all. Ordinary. A hawthorn like any other, no different spark to it than the hedge it grew from.

“Not this one,” she said, disappointed, the ache already building faintly behind her eyes.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. It just — it doesn’t have anything special about it. It’s just a tree.”

The second lead took them to an old, overgrown garden behind a house that looked long abandoned, a hawthorn grown wild and untended among the weeds — and this one, at first glance, made Ellie’s breath catch, because something about it did seem different, some faint shimmer at the edge of her borrowed sight.

“Wait. Wait, David, I think—”

She looked harder, pushing past the first flicker, and the shimmer resolved itself, disappointingly, into nothing more than an old strand of tinsel caught high in the branches, half-rotted, catching the light in a way that had nothing magical about it at all.

"Tinsel," she said, flatly. "It's tinsel. Someone decorated this tree for Christmas about a decade ago and never took it down."

David tried, valiantly, not to laugh, and mostly failed.

"It's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

"I got my hopes up over *tinsel*, David."

"That's the part that's funny."

The crow, when they returned to report both failures, seemed entirely unsurprised. "I told you I wasn't certain. Memory's a slippery thing, even mine. There's a third place, if you've the patience left for it — a corner of the old churchyard itself, past the far wall, where I recall a hawthorn taking root a long while back, growing up through the ivy near an old grave nobody tends anymore. Can't promise that one either. But it's the last I've got."

"We've got the patience," David said. "Thank you. Really."

"Bring me something shiny sometime, if this works out," the crow said, entirely businesslike, and lifted off the headstone in a single unhurried beat of dark wings.

The churchyard's far corner was quiet in a way that felt, to Ellie, less empty than simply old — ivy grown thick and untroubled over leaning stones, names worn past reading, and there, pushing up through the green in a narrow shaft of light, a young hawthorn no taller than David, slim and unremarkable to any ordinary eye.

Ellie looked at it properly, and this time, there was no mistaking it.

The spark was unmistakable — not a shimmer, not a trick of tinsel or hope, but something deep and steady running through the young wood itself, faint and old and rooted, the same essential *something* she remembered feeling, distantly, standing beneath Old Hawthorn's own enormous trunk.

"This is it," she breathed. "David, this is really it. I can feel it — it's like the big tree, just smaller. Younger. But it's the same."

Merlin, arriving behind them without either of them quite noticing how, looked at the small hawthorn for a long moment and nodded, slow and satisfied.

“That’s a true scion,” he said. “Well found, both of you.” He crouched beside it, studying the young branches with real care. “Now. Listen closely, because this part matters more than it looks like it should.”

He showed them exactly where to cut — a single healthy shoot, not the whole young tree, taken at a precise angle just above a strong bud, using a small silver blade he produced from somewhere in his coat that Ellie hadn’t noticed him carrying before.

“Not there. There.” He guided David’s hand gently to the right spot. “And not yet — wait for the light to shift, just there, past that stone. A scion cut in shadow takes half as well as one cut in a moment of real light. It matters. Everything about this matters, down to details you’d never think to question.”

They waited, the three of them crouched together in the quiet churchyard, until a stray beam of late light broke properly through the branches overhead and fell across the young hawthorn’s narrow trunk — and then, with careful, deliberate pressure, David made the cut exactly where he’d been shown.

The shoot came away clean, alive, a single perfect length of living wood no longer than Ellie’s forearm.

“Wrap it,” Merlin said. “Damp cloth, and quickly — it needs to stay living until we’re ready to use it, and living things are considerably more trouble to keep alive than dead ones, in my experience.”

Ellie wrapped it with the careful precision she brought to everything that mattered, tucking it safely into her bag, and felt, doing it, the satisfaction of a task done properly rather than merely done.

“Six,” Merlin said, once they’d started back, glancing toward the distant shape of Old Hawthorn on its ridge without needing to

look closely to know. "Six leaves, and the harder half of this still ahead of you. The scion was always going to be the easier piece."

"What's the harder piece?" David asked, though some part of him, Ellie suspected, already knew the answer.

"The crown," Merlin said. "Which is, at present, sitting on the head of someone who will not simply hand it back a second time." He looked at them both, something grim and steady in his weathered face. "You'll want to rest, while you still have the luxury of it. I don't imagine you'll have much more of that luxury left before the end."

CHAPTER 27

WHAT THISTLE WANTED



She was waiting for them at the edge of the old Henderson field, perched on a fence post with her legs swinging, exactly the way she used to perch on the edge of her workbench back in the workshop, and for one whole, unguarded second, Ellie's chest simply lifted at the sight of her.

"There you are," Thistle said, delighted, darting down off the post in the same quick, unhurried arc she'd always used. "I've been waiting an absolute age. Well. An age by my count, which, given recent events, may not mean quite what it used to."

"Thistle." David's voice cracked slightly on it.

"In the flesh. Such as it is." She spun once, arms out, a gesture so exactly, aching her old self that it took Ellie a full second to notice the wrongness underneath it — the wings darker now, ragged at the edges, the eyes holding a flatness that hadn't been there in the workshop, gone almost as quickly as it showed.

She landed light on the fence's top rail — and then, in the same motion, stepped down onto the grass instead, giving the rail itself a wide, careful berth that neither child could have named a reason for, except that it looked, unmistakably, deliberate.

"You're not on the fence anymore," David said, carefully.

"Wire," Thistle said, shortly, in a tone that closed the subject before it opened. "Never mind the wire."

"Is it—"

"Never mind the wire, David."

She recovered fast, the old brightness sliding back over her face like a curtain drawn shut, and gestured them both closer with the same easy confidence she'd always had, as though nothing at all had just happened.

"I've missed you two," she said, and it sounded, infuriatingly, completely genuine. "Missed the workshop. Missed Steven judging my organizational habits from his little shelf." She held up one wrist, and there, tied fast with a length of what might once have been ribbon, sat the small grey rock with its crooked googly eyes, riding along with her exactly as it had since the day David gave him away.

Nobody said anything about it. Ellie found she couldn't have, even if she'd wanted to — there wasn't a sentence built that would have fit around the size of what that small, faithful detail meant, sitting there on Thistle's changed wrist as though nothing about the last several weeks had happened at all.

"You look tired," Thistle said, studying them both. "Properly tired. Not fun-tired. The other kind."

"We're looking for the crown," Ellie said. "You know that."

"I know that." Something shifted behind Thistle's eyes — quick, and dark, and gone almost before it landed. "Everyone knows that. It's rather the only thing anyone's talking about, up here, these days."

"Can you help us?"

Thistle laughed, short and sharp, with none of her old warmth in it at all.

"Help you," she repeated. "That's rich. That's a genuinely rich thing to ask me, of all the — do you know what I've found,

David, out here, in your wonderful, free, wide-open world? Do you have any idea?"

"Thistle—"

"WIRE," she said, loud and sudden, gesturing wide at the fence line, at the distant glint of a tractor rusting in the far corner of the field, at the whole ordinary, unremarkable landscape around them. "Wire, and rails, and pipes, and fences, and a thousand rusted, buried, half-forgotten things underfoot, everywhere, all of it singing the same cold, awful note, all the time, everywhere I go. I forgot — no. I never knew, not really, not the shape of it, not until I was standing in the middle of it. We used to slip between the World Above and our own like stepping through a doorway. Do you understand what it's like now? Every field has a fence. Every fence sings that note. There's nowhere left to simply *be* anymore, not for more than a few careful, aching steps at a time."

Neither child said anything. There wasn't anything to say.

"We thought—" Thistle stopped herself, visibly, jaw tight, and when she went on, her voice had dropped its anger for something quieter and worse. "We thought we'd walk out into something closer to what we remembered. Fields. Hedgerows. A world with room in it. We didn't understand how much time had actually passed, up here, while we sat still down there, counting nothing at all. It's not the same world. It's not even close to the same world." She laughed again, and this time it came out cracked instead of sharp. "Some victory, isn't it. Free at last, and nowhere left that'll have me."

"Thistle, that's—" Ellie started, and didn't know how to finish it.

"Don't," Thistle said, quick and rough. "Don't do that face at me. I don't want it."

She turned away for a moment, wings drooping slightly, and when she turned back, some of the old sly brightness had returned

to her face, though it sat differently now, thinner, like a coat pulled back on too fast to properly fit.

“There’s an old barn,” she said, abruptly, business-like. “North of here, past the second ridge, where you’ll find more of us gathered than you’d like. If you’re looking for the crown, that’s a fair place to start looking. I’m telling you that freely. Make of it what you will.”

“Why would you tell us that?” David asked. “Why would you help us take it back?”

Thistle looked at him for a long moment, something unreadable moving behind her changed eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said, and for once, she sounded like she meant exactly that, and nothing more. “Maybe I don’t actually want any of this either. Maybe none of us did, once we finally saw what we were climbing out into. Maybe that’s the funniest joke in this whole business, and none of us are laughing.” She shook herself, sharp and sudden, like shaking off water. “Or maybe I’m simply telling you nonsense to watch you run in circles. You’d never know the difference, would you. Not really.”

Ellie, watching her carefully, reached for that dizzying clarity without quite deciding to, and the world tilted, sharpened — and something in the shape of Thistle’s words, examined properly, didn’t sit right at all. A faint, wrong seam, the same texture she’d learned to recognize in a disguised path or a glamoured trail marker, running underneath the barn, underneath the whole generous, aching confession.

“David.” Ellie’s voice came out low and urgent. “It’s not just Hollow Folk at that barn. There’s something else there. A trap, or half of one — I can feel it, the same way I felt the water dressed up as ground.”

Thistle’s face didn’t change, exactly, but something in her stillness did, and David caught it too.

“Is that true?” he asked her, quietly.

"I told you what I told you," Thistle said, and her voice had gone flat now, unreadable, the crack of a moment ago sealed back over completely. "What you do with it is entirely your business."

"We should go," Ellie said. "Now."

They backed away together, slow at first and then fast, and Thistle didn't follow. She stood at the fence line, wings drooping, Steven still tied fast at her wrist, and watched them go without a single step in their direction — no chase, no lunge, nothing that could be called a threat at all. Just watching, unreadable, until the distance and the fading light swallowed her small shape entirely.

Nobody spoke again until they were well clear of the field.

"Do you think she was trying to help us?" David asked, finally. "Or trying to trap us?"

"I don't know," Ellie said, and found, saying it, that the not-knowing hurt in a way she hadn't braced for. "I don't think she knows either. I think that might be the saddest part of all of it."

They didn't look back toward the fence again. Somewhere behind them, past the ridge, Old Hawthorn stood with its dwindling, trembling burden — five leaves left now, though neither of them had the heart to go and confirm it — and somewhere ahead, the whole of this would come to an end one way or another. But for now, walking home in the gathering dark, there was nothing like triumph in either of them. Only a small, quiet grief, for a friend who wasn't gone, exactly, just irrevocably, unfixably changed.

CHAPTER 28

THE SNARE



The barn Thistle had told them about stood exactly where she'd said it would, north of the second ridge, its old timbers leaning tired against the evening sky — and the grove around it, the moment they stepped into its shadow, felt entirely, immediately wrong.

"This is too easy," Ellie said, slowing. "She practically drew us a map."

"Maybe she meant it kindly."

"Maybe. Or maybe kindly isn't the only thing that map was good for."

The thought hadn't even finished landing before the grove came alive around them.

Shapes moved between the trees on every side at once — not one Hollow Folk, not two, but a whole ring of them, closing slow and deliberate from every direction, and the ground itself seemed to shift and blur the moment Ellie tried to focus on any one patch of it, real earth and illusion tangled together so thick she couldn't tell, for one horrible stretch of seconds, which way was actually out.

“Ellie—”

“I know. I’m looking. Give me a second—”

She reached for the clarity, hard, harder than she ever had, and the world snapped into sharp, dizzying focus all at once — too much of it, too fast, a maze of false paths and real ground overlapping in her vision like two photographs pressed together. A throb built instantly behind both eyes, sharper than any headache she’d ever had, and she pushed through it anyway, tracing one thin, true thread of solid ground winding between the illusions.

“There. That way, past the fallen log, don’t look at anything else—”

They ran. Shapes closed in behind them, quick and silent, and David, moving fast, flung one arm out toward the trees and called for help in the only language that had ever truly belonged to him.

It came instantly. A scatter of mice broke from the roots at their feet, darting ahead through gaps too small for anything larger to follow, scouting the true path a half-second before Ellie’s eyes could confirm it; overhead, a startled flock burst from the canopy all at once, wheeling low and chaotic across the pursuers’ path, wings and noise and confusion buying precious seconds neither child could have bought alone.

It was David who got cut off first.

A shape lunged from the shadows between them, and David stumbled sideways, separated from Ellie by a sudden wall of moving dark, his voice cracking out her name once before the noise of the grove swallowed it whole.

“DAVID!”

Ellie didn’t think. She pushed through the pain behind her eyes, forced the clarity wider, further, until she could see him — cornered against an old stone wall, three shapes closing, David swinging his bag wildly in front of him with more courage than any real defense — and she ran straight at the gap she’d found, screaming his name the whole way, until she broke through beside

him, grabbed his sleeve, and hauled him bodily toward the path only she could see.

They might not have made it even then.

A great shape surged up out of the ground itself — no, not out of the ground, Ellie realized, out of the *air* between two trees, solid and sudden and blocking the pursuers' path entirely, and Merlin's voice rang out over the chaos, sharp and commanding.

"THIS WAY. NOW."

They didn't need telling twice.

They broke past him, through the gap he'd opened, and it was only once they'd cleared the grove's edge, gasping, that Ellie looked back and saw what it had cost him.

Merlin stood swaying at the barrier's center, both hands pressed against something Ellie couldn't quite see, holding a shape of light and shadow between the children and the shapes still pressing forward — and even as she watched, his knees buckled, just slightly, and he caught himself hard against a tree, breathing ragged, his face gone grey and hollow in a way that frightened her more than the ambush itself had.

"Merlin!"

"I'm — " He staggered upright, waving off David's outstretched hand with visible effort. "I'm fine. I am *fine*. This is what old, borrowed magic costs, when you spend it in a hurry — it takes something out of you, and it doesn't hand it back on request." He drew a long, unsteady breath, color slowly returning to his weathered face. "I'll recover. I always do. Slower each time, if I'm honest, but I'll recover."

"You scared me," Ellie said, small.

"Good," Merlin said, not unkindly. "You should be scared, a little, when someone spends themselves for you. It means you understood what happened." He straightened further, some of his usual crustiness returning to his voice even as his hands, Ellie

noticed, still trembled faintly at his sides. “Don’t thank me. Just don’t waste it.”

David, glancing back at the grove behind them, frowned. “Why’d they stop chasing at the wall? There’s an old fence line right there — I thought they’d just go around it.”

“They won’t cross wire if they can help it,” Merlin said, grim. “Not since they came up into a world laced with the stuff. It slows them, hurts them, if they push through it carelessly. Small mercy, and I’ll take it where I find it, but don’t mistake it for a wall that’ll hold forever. They’ll find a way around, given time. They always do.”

Ellie thought of Thistle’s bitter voice at the fence line — *wire, and rails, and pipes* — and said nothing, the memory sitting heavy and complicated in her chest.

It was David who noticed the tree.

Old Hawthorn stood distant across the darkening fields, and even from here, even through everything they’d just survived, he caught the exact moment one more leaf went silver at its crown.

THUMP.

It hit harder than any before it — a deep, rolling weight that seemed to press against Ellie’s whole chest at once, not just heard but felt, bone-deep, lingering a long beat before it finally, slowly faded. Both children gasped at the same instant, hands rising to their chests without meaning to.

Four leaves.

“Four,” Merlin said, quiet now, watching the distant tree with old grief plain on his tired face. “And we are closer to the heart of this than any of us meant to be tonight.” He looked toward the dark treeline beyond the grove, some grim calculation working behind his eyes. “Their stronghold isn’t far from here. Closer than I’d like. Closer than is safe.”

“So what do we do?” David asked.

“Tonight? Nothing. Tonight, you rest, and I recover what little

I can, and we let our nerves settle before we do anything else at all.” Merlin looked between them both, something almost gentle showing through his exhaustion. “You did well in there. Frightened, and clever, and well. That’s rather all anyone can ask of anyone, at your age or mine.”

They walked home slowly, shaken, the grove’s noise still ringing faintly in Ellie’s ears, and behind them, Old Hawthorn stood with its four remaining leaves trembling in the dark — closer now, all of it, to whatever ending was coming, whether any of them felt ready for it or not.

CHAPTER 29

THE BLIGHTED RING



They smelled it before they saw it. Not rot, exactly — rot at least announced itself honestly, the ordinary smell of ordinary decay. This was something thinner and worse: a flat, mineral smell, like a coin held too long in a closed fist, laid faintly over the whole approach so gradually that Ellie couldn't have said when it started, only that at some point she noticed her nose wrinkling and realized it had been there for some time already.

The trees changed first. Healthy oak and beech gave way, tree by tree, to trunks that still stood green-leaved and technically alive, but wrong in ways the eye kept sliding past and then dragging back to — bark ridged in patterns too regular to be natural, leaves grown slightly too symmetrical, veined in shapes that looked, if you looked long enough, disturbingly deliberate. Nothing here was dead. That was almost worse. Everything here had simply stopped being quite properly itself.

They came out of the tree line into the ring at dusk, and the ring announced itself the way a held breath announces a room: not with noise, but with the sudden, total absence of it.

A circle of standing stones rose from a bald patch of earth where nothing at all grew — not weeds, not moss, not even the pale, struggling grass that clings to the worst ground — just packed dirt, cracked in a fine web pattern like something that had once held water and lost it long ago. The stones themselves leaned inward, ancient and grey and streaked with a black mineral bloom that Ellie's eyes refused to focus on directly, sliding off it the same way they slid off the wrong-patterned bark. At the circle's center, half-shrouded in gathering dusk, something caught the day's last grey light and held it, cold and steady.

The crown. Close now. Closer than it had been since the night they'd first pulled it free of Old Hawthorn.

The quiet pressed against Ellie's ears like a held note stretched past comfort — no birdsong, no insects, not even wind moving properly through the leaves, though she could see branches stirring faintly, silent, as though someone had turned all the sound in the world down to almost nothing and forgotten to turn it back up.

"David," she whispered. "Try. See if anything will come."

He tried.

He called, low and patient, same as he'd called mice and birds and a wary, businesslike crow, and reached out with the whole warm, easy confidence that had never once failed him since the day the gift arrived — and nothing came. Not a rustle, not a flicker of wings, not even the reluctant, grudging cooperation of a creature doing a favor it didn't want to do. He tried again, louder this time, more urgent, and Ellie watched his face change as the seconds stretched on: the easy confidence thinning, replaced by something she'd never once seen on him before, not with an animal — a kind of bewildered hurt, like a hand held out and left, deliberately, empty. Somewhere far back in the healthy trees behind them, she could just make out the ordinary evening racket of birds settling for the night, close enough to hear and impossibly far from willing to cross the last hundred feet between there and

here. Nothing living would come anywhere near that bald, cracked ground, and the silence that answered him felt, to Ellie, far more frightening than any snarl or shriek could have been.

“Nothing,” David said, quietly, lowering his hand. “Not even close. It’s like — it’s like the whole place is holding its breath and daring anything alive to come find out why.”

Merlin, arriving behind them without either child quite noticing the moment he’d appeared, looked at the ring for a long, grim moment before speaking.

“This is what waits for the world, in miniature, if the binding fails for good,” he said, low. “Not all at once. Not with fire or violence. Just this — a slow, patient souring, spreading outward from wherever they gather in strength, turning green things wrong, quiet things silent, living ground into ground that only pretends to live. Give it long enough, and a blight like this doesn’t stay the size of one ring of stones.” He looked at them both, weathered face unusually still. “I don’t tell you that to frighten you. I tell you because you should understand, plainly, what it is we’re actually racing against.”

Ellie found she didn’t need the warning dressed up any further than that. The bald, cracked earth said the rest of it well enough on its own.

She reached for her borrowed clarity, carefully this time, pacing herself the hard-earned way from the ambush’s aftermath, and let the world sharpen by careful degrees rather than all at once. Guards stood at intervals around the ring’s outer edge — more than she’d hoped, fewer than she’d feared — thin, sharp-shouldered shapes holding utterly still between one slow patrol and the next, still enough that twice she lost track of one entirely against the leaning grey stone behind it, only for it to resolve again, a half-breath later, exactly where it had always been. She counted the gaps in their movement same as she’d have counted anything that mattered: patient, methodical, marking each rotation against

the slow bleed of the last daylight until the pattern held true three times running. And there, near the crown itself, a faint distortion hung in the still air, subtle as heat shimmer over summer asphalt, bending the space around it just enough to be wrong if you knew to look, and told her exactly what she'd suspected.

"The crown's not really sitting where it looks like it's sitting," she said. "There's an illusion laid over the real spot. It's close, but it's not exact. I can find the true one, if I take my time."

"Good," Merlin said. "Then let's plan properly, rather than bravely. Bravely gets people hurt. Properly gets the crown back."

They settled at a safe distance, well outside the ring's silent hush, and it was David, predictably, who spoke first.

"What if we just rush the center? Fast, before the guards can regroup—"

"No," Merlin said, flat. "Too many of them, too well spaced, and you'd cross open, dead ground the whole way with nothing to hide behind. You'd be seen within three steps and caught within ten."

"Okay. What if we wait for full dark, then? Everything's harder to see at night."

"We don't have full dark to spare," Ellie said, before Merlin could. "Three leaves, David. If we wait for a perfect night, we might not have a tree left to bring the crown back to."

David frowned, turning it over. "What about bigger animals, then — if David can't get anything close to the center, maybe something big enough to cause a distraction at the edge—"

"They won't come near the edge either, not close enough to matter," Merlin said. "You saw that yourselves, a few minutes ago. Whatever's willing to help you will be small, and skittish, and only useful right at the blight's outer line, not one step further in."

Silence settled over the three of them for a moment, the weight of three rejected plans sitting heavier than any one of them wanted to admit.

It was Ellie who found the shape of it, finally, piecing it together slow and careful, same as she pieced together anything that mattered.

“Okay,” she said. “What if it’s not one big plan. What if it’s small pieces, timed together. David gets whatever will come — mice, maybe something at the treeline — to cause noise and movement right at the ring’s outer edge, timed to the guards’ rotation, right when the gap in their pattern opens. That pulls attention outward, just for a few seconds. In that gap, I go in low, using what I’ve already mapped, straight to the true spot under the illusion, and I’m out again before the rotation closes.”

“That’s still dangerous,” David said.

“Everything left is dangerous,” Ellie said. “This is just the version where being careful actually helps.”

Merlin studied her for a long moment, something like real pride moving behind his tired eyes.

“That,” he said, “is a plan built by someone who’s finally stopped wanting to be brave, and started wanting to be effective. I approve. Let’s set it in motion before I lose what little nerve I have left for standing this close to that ground.”

They moved into position as the last grey light finally gave out entirely, the ring’s cracked earth and leaning stones swallowed into deeper dark ahead of them, three leaves trembling somewhere behind them on a tree none of them could currently spare the attention to check — the dread of it no longer sharp and new, but settled now, constant, carried the way you carry any weight you’ve finally accepted you’ll be holding until the end.

CHAPTER 30
THE HEIST



They waited at the tree line for the gap to come around, counting the guards' slow rotation the way Ellie had counted it a dozen times already from a safe distance. Third guard past the leaning stone. Then the gap. Then nothing, for three full breaths, before the pattern closed again.

"Almost," Ellie breathed. "Almost. Wait for it."

The third guard passed the stone.

"Now," she whispered.

David gave the signal, low and quick. The mice went first — a dozen small shapes darting along the ring's outer edge, rustling loud and deliberate in the dead grass. A heartbeat later the birds broke cover overhead, wheeling low and noisy across the guards' sightline.

Every head at the ring's edge turned outward at once.

Ellie moved.

She kept low, and fast, tracing the exact path she'd mapped in her head a dozen times over. Past the first leaning stone. Along a shadowed seam in the cracked earth. Straight toward the place

where the crown actually sat — not the shimmering decoy a few feet off, the one that would have cost her everything if she'd trusted her eyes instead of her memory. The illusion sat there, patient and convincing, exactly where she'd left it in her mind. She slid past it without so much as a glance.

Twenty feet. Fifteen.

A guard turned back early.

Ellie froze mid-step, flat against the cold stone. Her heart slammed once, hard, loud enough that she was half-certain it could be heard across the ring. The guard's sharp-shouldered shape swept the ring's interior with slow, deliberate attention, pausing, drifting, pausing again — and there was nowhere left to run to, no time to reach cover, nothing at all except stand there and be found.

Then she remembered the cloak.

The folded grey cloth had ridden in her bag since the day they'd left Under the Hill, Bramblecap's parting gift, half-forgotten until this exact second. She pulled it over her shoulders in one motion, and the world dimmed around her, edges softening, her own outline bending into something the eye simply slid past without catching.

The guard's gaze passed straight over her.

It held a half-second too long, right at the edge of noticing. Ellie didn't breathe. Didn't move. Didn't let herself hope, not yet — and then it moved on, drawn back outward by another burst of noise from David's small allies, and only then did she let the breath go, legs nearly giving out beneath her before she forced them steady and kept moving.

Ten feet. Five.

The crown sat exactly where her memory said it would, plain and cold and ordinary-looking on a low stone plinth, utterly unremarkable except for everything it meant.

She reached out, and her fingers closed around it.

For one whole, suspended second, nothing happened at all — no shout, no alarm, just the crown's cool weight settling into her hands and the wild, disbelieving thought that they'd actually, genuinely done it.

She was back at the tree line with David a moment later, both of them crouched low, breathless, the crown wrapped fast in cloth between them. For that one small stretch of time, nothing in the whole world felt as good as that quiet, shared, unbelievable triumph.

"We did it," David breathed. "Ellie. We actually did it."

"We actually did it," she agreed, and let herself grin, just for a second, just long enough to feel it properly.

David let out a low, disbelieving laugh, the kind that comes out half a sob if you don't watch it. "I genuinely thought that guard had you."

"So did I."

"You didn't even hesitate. You just — cloak, gone, like you'd practiced it."

"I didn't practice anything," Ellie said. "I just remembered it in time. That's different."

"It's still amazing."

"It's still amazing," she agreed, and for a second, crouched in the dark with the crown finally, actually in her hands, she let herself believe the worst of it might really be behind them.

Old Hawthorn stood distant across the dark fields, and David glanced toward it out of pure habit.

"Two," he said, barely more than a murmur, checking it almost in passing, the way you'd check the time in the middle of something far more important. Neither of them stopped moving. There wasn't room left in either of them to feel it properly, not yet, not with the crown finally, actually in hand.

That was when the shout went up.

"THE CROWN — SHE'S TAKEN THE CROWN—"

It ripped across the ring like a struck bell, and every head, every shape at the ring's edge, turned at once toward the empty plinth and then, with terrible speed, toward the tree line.

“RUN!” David shouted, needlessly, because Ellie was already running.

CHAPTER 31
THE CHASE



They ran.

Behind them, the ring emptied itself into the dark — shapes pouring out over the cracked earth and through the standing stones, fast and silent and closing. Branches whipped at Ellie's face. Roots caught at her feet, again and again, each stumble costing her precious ground she couldn't afford to lose. Her lungs burned already, the crown clutched hard against her chest, David just ahead, both of them driven by nothing more complicated than the plain, animal need to put distance between themselves and what was coming.

"Which way?" David gasped.

Ellie forced the clarity up, hard, ignoring the fresh spike of pain it cost her. The world sharpened, painfully bright at the edges, and through it she caught the one true line of safe ground threading between two patches of disguised bog.

"Left! Now, left—"

They cut left, and behind them a shriek of frustration rose up as at least one pursuer found the false ground instead.

It bought them seconds. Not enough.

David flung his arm wide as he ran, calling out into the dark trees on pure instinct, and the response came ragged and scattered — a startled deer crashing off at an angle to confuse the trail, a scatter of night birds shrieking overhead, small things doing what small things could. It helped. It wasn't enough either. The shapes behind them kept coming, closer now, close enough that Ellie could hear breath and footfall both.

That was when the wolf stepped into their path.

Ellie's whole body went rigid, old fear surging up instant and complete — the same grey shape from the ridge, the same low-shouldered stillness, and for one terrible half-second she was certain the last of their luck had finally run out.

David didn't run.

He planted his feet, breathless, and looked the wolf full in its flat yellow eyes, and spoke — not pleading this time, not the desperate, half-formed *please* from the streamside all those days ago, but something steadier, something that came out sounding almost like a question between equals.

"We need to get to the old tree. The one with the last leaf. Please — will you help us?"

The wolf went very still.

For one long, suspended moment, nothing in the whole dark world moved at all — not David, not Ellie, not even the wolf's own held breath — and Ellie understood, watching David's face, that something enormous was happening in that silence, something bigger than the chase itself.

Then the wolf understood him.

Ellie watched it land — watched the flat, unreadable distance in the wolf's yellow eyes shift into something startled and aware, ears coming forward, weight shifting from wary stillness into readiness of an entirely different kind.

This time, he understood every word.

“Yes,” the wolf said, low and rough, a voice that had clearly never once expected to be heard, let alone answered. “This way. Fast. I know the ground better than they do.”

It turned and ran, not away from them, but ahead of them, angling into the dark with a certainty neither child could have found alone, and they followed without a single word of doubt between them, the wolf’s low grey shape guiding them along ground firm and sure while somewhere behind, its low, warning growl held the nearest pursuers back a crucial half-step longer than they’d have managed on their own.

“Beast-Speech worked,” David gasped, disbelieving, as they ran. “It actually — Ellie, it *worked* on him, this time it actually—”

“I know! Just run!”

It was Merlin who found them next, appearing at a narrow gap between two hedgerows with his arms already spread, and the first thing Ellie noticed — the thing that made her stumble mid-stride — was that she could see the hedgerow *through* him.

Not fully. Not all at once. But at the edges of him, where his old grey coat should have been solid, the darkness of the trees behind showed faintly through, as though he’d been drawn in charcoal and someone had started, gently, to erase him.

“Merlin—”

“No time,” he said, and his voice, too, had thinned, grown papery and distant, though the iron will behind it hadn’t faded at all. “I’m going to hold this gap. You will not stop to argue with me about it.”

He raised both hands, and the air between the hedgerows thickened, folding into something solid and impassable, and as he held it, Ellie watched the fading spread further — up his arms, across his shoulders, his whole silhouette growing soft and uncertain at its edges, like a reflection in water someone had just disturbed.

“Merlin, you’re—” David’s voice cracked. “You’re disappearing.”

“I am *spending* myself,” Merlin said, sharp even now, even fading. “There’s a difference, and I intend to still be here to explain it to you later, so kindly stop staring and *run*.”

“We’re not leaving you like this—” Ellie started, already half-turning back toward him.

“You are,” Merlin said, and for just a moment the sharpness cracked into something almost gentle, almost pleading. “You are leaving me exactly like this, because that tree will not wait for either of us to feel better about it, and because holding this gap is the one useful thing left in me tonight. Let me spend myself on something that matters. Go.”

David grabbed Ellie’s sleeve, and she let herself be pulled, though she didn’t take her eyes off the thin, wavering shape of him until the trees closed between them.

They ran.

Ellie looked back once, just once, and the sight of him stayed with her the whole rest of the way — a thin, translucent shape holding a gap shut with both trembling hands, more light than substance now, spending the very last of himself to buy two children a few more seconds of road.

Old Hawthorn rose ahead of them at last, dark against a sky gone properly, fully black, and high on its trunk, barely visible, one single leaf clung on — pale, trembling, thinner and more fragile-looking than any leaf Ellie had ever seen, holding on by what looked like nothing at all.

“There,” David gasped. “There, Ellie, we’re almost—”

They broke into the clearing at a dead run, crown still clutched tight, the wolf peeling off at the tree line with one last unreadable look before vanishing back into the dark, and behind them, distant now but not nearly distant enough, the sound of pursuit still crashing through the trees.

One leaf. No time left to spare.

They'd made it. Just barely. Just in time — or *perhaps*, Ellie thought, chest heaving, staring up at that one impossibly fragile leaf, *not in time at all*, and about to find out which.

CHAPTER 32

MIDNIGHT AT
OLD HAWTHORN



They didn't move.
The last leaf trembled above them, pale as breath,
and for three long seconds nothing in the clearing did
anything at all — not Ellie, not David, not the shapes gathering at
the tree line, not even the wind.

Then Queen Sorrel stepped into the open.

She didn't come running. Unlike the others, who'd come
snarling and crashing through the dark all night, she walked,
unhurried, and the shapes behind her stopped exactly where they
stood, as though her stillness alone had told them to.

For one heartbeat she looked exactly like the woman from the
small round room — soft-eyed, tired, wearing her old sorrow like a
favorite coat. Ellie's stomach dropped before her mind caught up
and reminded her, hard, what that same face had turned into the
last time she'd let herself believe it.

"You've done something remarkable," Sorrel said, and her
voice was that same voice — worn at the edges, gentle, patient.
"Truly. I don't say it to soften what comes next. I say it because it
happens to be true."

David's hand found the wrapped crown at his side and tightened around it.

"We know what you are," Ellie said. Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

"I know you do." The faintest smile crossed the Queen's face. "I find I still hoped it might not matter. Old habits." She looked past them, toward the tree, toward the one pale leaf holding on by what looked like nothing at all. "If only there had been a little more time. If only you'd been slower to learn what you were seeing. If only —"

She let it hang there, unfinished, exactly the way she had that afternoon in the small quiet room, and Ellie felt, for one strange half-second, the old pull of it — the wanting to fill the silence, to comfort her.

She didn't fill it this time.

"That's the same trick," Ellie said. "The unfinished sentence. You did it to us before we knew any better."

Something flickered behind the Queen's tired eyes — not anger, something closer to respect — and then it was gone.

"So I did," she said. "It was a very good trick. I'm sorry it's stopped working."

Behind her, a small hunched shape darted forward, and David made a sound low in his throat when he saw who it was.

Bramblecap.

Even now, even like this, something in Ellie's chest twisted at the sight of him — the gnome archivist who'd shown them the Histories, who'd almost told them the truth a dozen times over and always caught himself just short. He held out a crown between two shaking fingers, plain and silver-grey, near enough a match for the one hidden at David's side that for one dizzying second Ellie genuinely couldn't have said which was which.

"Careful," Bramblecap said, his voice cracking. "Careful, now.

Look closely before you choose. One of these is a lie, and the wrong choice undoes everything.”

Ellie reached for the clarity, same as she’d reached for it a dozen times across the last few days, and for the first time all night, it didn’t come.

Nothing happened. The world stayed ordinary, blurred at the edges, as tired as the rest of her felt, and for one terrible second she understood — with a plainness that had nothing to do with any gift — that she might finally have run all the way out.

“Ellie—” David’s voice, tight.

“I know. Give me a second.”

She reached again, harder, ignoring the spike of pain that came with it, an old headache blooming instantly behind both eyes, and dug for the clarity the way you dig for the last of your breath at the end of a race you didn’t train enough for.

It came. Late, and thin, and costly — but it came, the world snapping into focus around her all at once, both crowns blazing into sharp, unmistakable relief. One sat solid and plain and exactly as ordinary as a piece of old metal had any right to be. The other, trembling in Bramblecap’s hand, frayed at its edges like smoke pulled thin — a shape built out of wanting rather than metal, straining hardest to hold itself together right where the moonlight hit it directly.

“His is the fake,” Ellie said, and her own voice sounded strange and far away to her, like someone else was using it. “Ours is real. It always was.”

Bramblecap’s face twisted, relief and grief tangled together past sorting, and he lowered the false crown, and said nothing at all.

Then the shapes at the tree line surged forward, and the world went fast again.

A grey shape hit the nearest of them shoulder-first — the wolf, teeth bared, close enough that David flinched even knowing

whose side it was on — and two more of Sorrel’s people went down in a tangle of claws and startled wingbeats as a fresh wave of birds broke from the dark branches overhead. Small shapes darted between legs and roots, tripping, harrying, buying seconds all night long, exactly as David had asked them to.

“Go.” Merlin’s voice, and there he was suddenly at Ellie’s shoulder — thinner than she’d ever seen him, still faintly see-through at the edges, but steady now, no longer fading further, planted like something that intended to stay planted. “Go, now, both of you. I’ll hold what I can. The leaf won’t wait for either of us.”

David pulled the true scion free from his pack — the small living cutting they’d carried, wrapped and careful, since the day Merlin first pressed it into his hands — and Ellie drew the crown from her own sleeve at last, cold and plain and impossibly heavy for so small a thing.

They knelt together at the base of Old Hawthorn, in the one bare patch of root and earth Merlin had shown them days before, and planted the little scion deep, packing the soil around it with both hands, working fast and careful at once.

Overhead, the last leaf trembled.

Ellie lifted the crown, and for one long, suspended moment felt every single thing that had happened since the tunnel mouth first opened in front of them — the feast, the games, Thistle’s small quick hands, Bramblecap’s library, the Queen’s two faces — gathered into her own two arms at once, all of it riding on what she did next.

She set the crown against the scion’s thin trunk, and nailed it home.

The moon cleared the ridge in that exact instant, full and cold and silver, and threw one long beam down across the clearing. High above them, the last leaf let go.

It didn’t drift. It never had. It hung a moment longer, bleached

almost white, trembling harder than any leaf before it — and then it dissolved, all at once, into a long curl of pale mist, and the sound that came with it wasn't a chime this time, or a sigh.

It was a **THUMP** — deep and enormous, felt in the ground itself, in the soles of their feet, in the center of both their chests at once — the heaviest one yet, gone in an instant and somehow still ringing in the silence it left behind.

And the crown, driven home in that same breath, flared once with a light that had no color Ellie could afterward name, and went dark.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the ground itself seemed to exhale, and every Hollow Folk in the clearing was pulled toward it at once — not walking, not fleeing on their own feet anymore, but drawn, helpless, the way water goes down a drain it never agreed to. None of them, Ellie noticed even now, went anywhere near the old fence line at the clearing's edge, even with the pull dragging at them from every other direction, as though some things frightened them worse than what was already happening to them.

They fought it. Claws dug into root and stone; wings beat uselessly against a pull that had already decided the outcome; and the sound that rose up around the clearing was closer to a howl than anything Ellie had heard from any of them before, grief and fury tangled together past telling apart.

Bramblecap went last among the ones she could name, the false crown still loose in his hand, his eyes finding hers for one final second before the dark took him too. Not angry, she thought. Just tired. Just endlessly, impossibly tired.

Somewhere near the tree line, small and quick and already half-swallowed by the pull, a familiar shape turned its head back toward them — wings ragged, eyes flat and strange, nothing at all like the small bright creature who'd once ridden in David's shirt pocket and fixed his flashlight without being asked. It didn't speak.

It didn't even slow down. It only looked, once, for the length of a single held breath, and then the dark took her too, and she was gone.

David made a small sound Ellie didn't have a name for, and didn't ask him to explain it.

Queen Sorrel alone did not fight the pull.

She stood very still at the clearing's center as it reached for her, crownless now, older-looking somehow than she'd seemed even in her worst grief, and looked at the two of them one last time.

"You were the kindest thing that had happened to us in longer than you know," she said, and there was nothing performed in it this time — no unfinished sentence left hanging for someone else to fill.

Then the dark took her, and her face, in the last half-second before it did, held something Ellie would spend a long time afterward trying to name. Not quite triumph. Not quite grief. Something folded so tightly between the two that she never did manage to pull them apart.

And then the clearing was empty.

Old Hawthorn's wound — the long, raw scar where the crown had been pried free, a lifetime and twelve days ago — closed over as they watched, bark knitting slowly back across bare wood, patient as any ordinary scrape healing on skin, until there was no wound left at all. Only old, healthy bark, dark and whole in the moonlight.

Beside it, the new scion stood exactly as they'd planted it, small and thin and impossibly young next to its ancient parent. As the clearing settled into its first real quiet in what felt like hours, one single green leaf unfurled from its highest twig — small, new, entirely ordinary — and stayed.

The sky had been going grey at its edges for some time, Ellie realized, without either of them noticing quite when it started.

The plain, unglamorous grey of an actual sunrise, nothing magical about it at all, which somehow made it the most magical thing she'd seen all night.

Merlin lowered himself onto a fallen log nearby, slow and careful, and for once didn't complain about it.

"Well," he said, and his voice, though still thin, had steadied at last, none of the fraying that had marked it all through the chase. "That's rather more excitement than I'd have chosen, given the option."

"Are you—" David started.

"I am considerably better than I was an hour ago, and considerably worse than I'd like to be, and that will simply have to do for tonight." He looked between them both, and the tired, weathered lines of his face loosened, just slightly, just for a moment, into an expression that wasn't grumpiness at all. "You did it. Both of you. I want that said plainly, once, before I go back to being insufferable about it."

Ellie let out a breath she felt like she'd been holding since the moment they'd first slipped past the guards into the ring, days and a whole lifetime ago, and for the first time in longer than she could easily count, there was nothing left chasing them at all.

David sat down hard in the wet grass beside her, his hands finally, completely empty, and looked up at Old Hawthorn's whole, healed bark and its small bright new leaf, and didn't say anything for a long while.

Ellie didn't either. They just sat there together in the grey light, breathing, while somewhere behind them the last of the night finally let go — and the clearing held nothing now but wet grass, an old tree standing whole again, and two children who had done, somehow, exactly what they'd set out to do.

CHAPTER 33

WHAT THE MODERN
WORLD DESERVES



They sat like that for a long time — long enough that the grey light around them shifted, by careful degrees, into something with the faintest hint of gold at its edges.

Nobody spoke, for a while. There didn't seem to be anything true enough to say yet, not about any of it, and some quiet was better spent sitting inside than filled up too quickly.

It was Merlin, eventually, who broke it — pushing himself up off the fallen log with a small grunt, dusting off his coat with more ceremony than the coat probably deserved.

“Right,” he said. “Business, before either of you falls asleep sitting up and I have to carry you both home, which I will tell you plainly I have neither the back nor the patience for.”

“What business?” David asked, rubbing his eyes.

“What I lent you,” Merlin said, “I’ll be wanting back.”

Something in Ellie’s chest went still. She hadn’t thought about it — hadn’t had room to, between the chase and the crown and everything after — but of course. Of course it had always been borrowed.

“Do we have to?” David asked, in a small voice that made him sound, for once, exactly as young as he actually was.

“You do,” Merlin said, not unkindly. “It was never yours to keep, and you knew that going in, however much you might have let yourself forget it somewhere around the twentieth mouse.”

He held out his hand toward Ellie, the same way he had at the very start, and she stood, and went to him, because there didn’t seem to be any way through it except straight ahead.

“Look,” he said, quietly this time, none of the briskness left in it. “One last time.”

Ellie looked.

The world was already sharp — it had been sharp for days now, she realized, sharp enough that she’d stopped even noticing, same as anyone stops noticing a sound that never quite stops. She held it a moment longer, on purpose, memorizing it: every leaf on Old Hawthorn distinct, every blade of grass its own small individual thing, the world entirely, achingly honest about exactly what it was.

Then it softened.

It didn’t happen all at once, not the way it had arrived. It happened slowly, gently, like a held note finally allowed to fade — the world blurring back to its ordinary, comfortable edges, colors bleeding a little into each other again, shadows going back to being just shadows instead of things with something to hide. By the time it was done, everything looked exactly as it had looked her whole life, before the tunnel.

It should have felt like nothing. Instead it felt like losing something she hadn’t known she’d miss until it was already gone — a small, real ache, low in her chest, for a way of seeing she’d only had for a handful of days and would apparently spend the rest of her life faintly remembering.

“Thank you,” she said, quietly, “for lending it to me.”

"You're welcome," Merlin said, and for once didn't undercut it with anything gruff at all.

He turned to David next, and didn't touch him, just nodded toward the trees, just as he had the first time.

"Listen," he said. "Once more."

David listened.

Nearby, in the low branches of a hazel just outside the clearing, a small brown bird was singing — ordinary, cheerful, entirely unremarkable birdsong, except that for one more moment it wasn't. David could hear the shape of what it was actually saying: something about the morning, something about a good patch of seed close by, small and busy and entirely uninterested in the enormous night that had just ended twenty feet away.

"Hey," David said to it, soft, testing. "Thank you. For everything. All of you."

The bird cocked its head at him, birds being birds, and sang the same three notes it had been singing before, meaning nothing at all that he could reach anymore.

David let out a breath that was almost a laugh and wasn't quite.

"Yeah," he said, to no one in particular, or maybe to all of it. "Okay. Bye, then."

Merlin watched this with an expression that, on anyone else, Ellie might have called soft.

"It goes back to being just birdsong," he said. "That's rather the point of it leaving. If it stayed remarkable forever, you'd stop noticing the ordinary kind was worth anything at all, and that would be a poor trade for what you're actually keeping." He considered them both. "Sit with it a moment, if you'd like. It's allowed to hurt a little. It generally does."

They sat with it, David plucking at the grass, Ellie watching the ordinary, unremarkable morning arrive around them the ordinary, unremarkable way.

“Will it ever come back?” David asked, finally. “Any of it. Ever?”

Merlin considered the question with real weight, the same seriousness he brought to most things that mattered.

“The world you live in now has precious little room left in it for what I do,” he said. “Less every year, if I’m honest, and I’ve had a great many years to watch it shrink. Wires, and clocks, and reasons for everything. It isn’t a bad world, mind you — only a crowded one, and magic wants room to work in, same as a fire wants air.” He looked at them both, something unreadable behind his tired eyes. “But if the need were ever real — truly real, truly dire, not merely inconvenient — I expect it could be lent again. To the right sort of person. I wouldn’t count on it, if I were you. I’d simply say it isn’t impossible, and leave it there.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Ellie said.

“No,” Merlin agreed. “It rarely is, with things like this. You’ll find that’s true of a great many important questions, the older you get.” He studied them both a moment longer, and something shifted in his weathered face — the crustiness folding back, just slightly, exactly as it had once before, at the fence line, over Baxter. “You didn’t do badly, either of you. For amateurs.”

“High praise,” Ellie said, and found she meant it.

“The highest I give,” Merlin said. “Ask anyone. There is no one left to ask, which rather proves my point.”

He straightened, and the ordinary morning light caught him properly for the first time — thinner than she remembered from before any of this started, older, somehow, though she couldn’t have said exactly what had aged in him.

“Go home,” he said. “Sleep, if you can still remember how you got here to begin with.”

“Will we see you again?” David asked, all in a rush, like he’d been holding the question the whole conversation.

Merlin looked at him for a long moment, and didn't quite answer that either.

"I generally do turn up," he said, "when it matters" — echoing, deliberately or not, the very thing he'd told them the last time he'd walked away from them.

He turned, unhurried, and started for the treeline, and Ellie found herself watching him go the same helpless way you'd watch weather change — inevitable, and a little sad, and not really yours to stop.

"Merlin," she called, once, not really expecting anything.

He didn't turn around. But he lifted one hand, briefly, without breaking stride — not quite a wave, more an acknowledgment that he'd heard her at all — and then, in the same maddening way he'd always managed everything, he simply wasn't there anymore. Not gone into the trees. Not vanished in any flash of light. Just, at some point between one blink and the next, not there.

David let out a long breath.

"He does that," he said.

"He does that," Ellie agreed.

They stood together a while longer at the base of Old Hawthorn, looking up at its whole, healed bark, at the small new sapling standing bright and thin beside it with its one green leaf catching the early light. The crown-quest — all of it, the feast and the games and the chase and everything after — was entirely, finally behind them.

"We should go home," Ellie said.

"Yeah," David said. He didn't move yet, and for one more minute, she didn't either.

They just stood there, together, in the ordinary grey morning, at the edge of a story no one else would ever quite believe.

CHAPTER 34

HOME



They never afterward agreed, not even a little, on how they'd gotten home.

Ellie remembered the tunnel — or thought she did. Some grey stretch of packed earth. The smell of cold stone. David's hand in hers, walking and walking, while Old Hawthorn's healed bark and Merlin's tired, kind face faded behind them. It all faded into something less like a place and more like the memory of a feeling. David remembered climbing instead — actually climbing, up and up, through a dark that had somehow started to smell like morning instead of underground. The two memories never quite matched, not even when they compared them later, and neither one pushed very hard to make them.

What Ellie was certain of was one solid thing in the whole hazy stretch: at some point, the walking simply stopped being walking. It became the ordinary weight of her own blankets, the ordinary smell of her own pillow. Grey morning light came in soft through her bedroom curtains, as though it had always been doing exactly that and nothing else.

Later that day, some errand drew them out back — she could

never afterward remember its actual purpose. They found themselves standing at the edge of the field, looking up toward the old tunnel mouth in the hillside.

It looked smaller than she remembered. Quieter, somehow. Brambles had grown in thick where the path used to be. It was as though the hillside had spent the last several days quietly deciding it preferred not to be found again. Neither of them suggested going closer. After a moment they just turned around and walked back toward the house. It was like walking away from a question you'd silently agreed not to ask out loud.

Baxter met her in the hallway before she'd even made it downstairs. He was ordinary and delighted about it, entirely unremarkable — tail going, nose pressed briefly into her palm, the exact greeting he gave her most mornings. It told her nothing at all about whether he'd missed her for an hour. Or a night. Or the handful of days it had felt like *Under the Hill*. Something in her was almost grateful for that. An ordinary dog, doing an ordinary dog thing, on an ordinary morning.

Mom was at the stove already, humming something off-key. A pad of sketch paper sat open on the counter beside the eggs — a half-finished drawing of the yard. She'd apparently started it and then abandoned it the moment breakfast needed attention. Dad sat reading the news on his phone, glasses pushed up into his hair. It was the posture of a man who has entirely forgotten he owns a pair of glasses at all.

"Morning," Mom said, not looking up. "Sleep okay?"

"Fine," Ellie said, which felt like both the truest and least true thing she'd said in days.

Nobody asked where they'd been. Nobody asked how long. Breakfast proceeded exactly as breakfast always proceeded. Eggs, toast, Dad reading a headline out loud that nobody had asked to hear, Mom sketching between bites. It was ordinary in a way that felt, on this morning, almost aggressively ordinary. It was as

though the whole house had quietly agreed, in advance, not to notice anything unusual at all.

David slid into the chair across from her. He reached automatically into his pocket, the way he did a hundred times a day without thinking about it, and stopped.

“What?” Ellie asked.

“Steven’s gone.” He patted his other pocket. Then his jacket, hanging by the door, with the escalating urgency of someone checking a place they already know is empty. “I always have him. Since Christmas. I don’t even take him out for anything.”

Ellie’s stomach did something complicated. “Maybe he fell out. In the yard, or—”

“Maybe,” David said, in a voice that didn’t believe it any more than she did, and left it there.

They didn’t mention it again over breakfast. But Ellie caught his hand drifting back to the empty pocket twice more before the eggs were gone — small and automatic, the way a tongue keeps finding a missing tooth.

And that, Ellie thought, was the whole trouble with the morning. Her own bed had been properly made when she’d first woken in it. Corners tucked — never like that on a morning she’d actually slept in it herself. Her shoes by the door were dry and clean. There was no trace of the mud she was almost sure she remembered, hip-deep, crossing some root-choked hollow in the pitch dark. If she’d asked her mother how long they’d been gone, she suspected the answer would have been some perfectly reasonable number of hours. It would account for every minute, with no room left over for eleven leaves, and a queen, and a wolf that had finally understood every word. Everything about the morning insisted, quietly and completely, that nothing unusual had happened at all.

And yet David’s pocket was empty where it had never once been empty before.

Later, the dishes cleared and Baxter fed, the whole house

settled into its usual unremarkable Saturday shape. David found her on the back porch and sat down beside her without saying anything about it. For a while they just sat there, quiet, watching the yard do its ordinary, green, unremarkable things.

"Do you think it happened?" David asked, finally, not looking at her.

"I think," Ellie said slowly, "it doesn't really matter what I think. I was there. Whatever *there* means."

David considered that with the same careful weight he gave most things that actually mattered to him.

"Steven would've said it was real," he said. "If he could talk. Which — I guess he never actually could. That was just me."

"Maybe," Ellie said. "Or maybe you always knew how to listen to him properly, and this whole thing just finally gave you the words for it."

David looked at her sideways, weighing that.

"That's a very you answer," he said.

"I contain multitudes," Ellie said — something their mother said sometimes. It made David laugh despite himself, a real laugh, short and surprised. For one small moment, everything about the last several days folded quietly away into a problem they didn't need to solve today.

They sat there a while longer. The yard went on doing its ordinary, green, unremarkable thing all around them, and Baxter dozed in a patch of sun by the fence. Nowhere at all, in any direction Ellie looked, was there a single sign that anything unusual had ever happened to either of them.

Except, of course, for the small, empty space in David's pocket where Steven used to be.

CHAPTER 35
UNDER THE HILL



Breakfast, a week or so later, looked exactly like breakfast had looked every summer morning of Ellie's whole life. Eggs, toast. Dad already half-dressed for a farm call he'd be late for. Mom's sketchbook open beside her coffee, a new, unfinished drawing of the yard taking shape between bites.

"Pass the jam?" David asked, and Ellie passed the jam, and that was, more or less, the whole of it.

After breakfast they wandered out back, same as most mornings that didn't have anything better scheduled. Baxter trotted ahead of them, nose down, tail going like it always did. He cut across the field toward the orchard without so much as glancing toward the hill at the far tree line. It was the same unremarkable green shoulder of ground it had always been — the same as it looked from the kitchen window, the same as it had looked, Ellie was fairly sure, on the very first ordinary afternoon they'd ever noticed it at all.

He didn't look back at it once. He hadn't, Ellie realized, in longer than she could actually remember.

They cut past the crumbling stone wall, ferns growing thick in

its shadow same as always. It was David — it was always David — who stopped first, this time at the fence line bordering the old Hollis pasture next door.

“Hey,” he said. “That’s new.”

Ellie followed his pointing finger to the grey shed at the far corner of the Hollis field. It had sat sagging and forgotten for as long as either of them could remember. Its door had hung open on one hinge every single day of Ellie’s life. Now it wore a bright new padlock, shiny enough to catch the morning sun.

“Huh,” Ellie said, which was as close as she generally got.

“Why would anyone lock the Hollis shed? There’s nothing in there but a busted tractor and about a hundred years of spiders.”

“I don’t know, David.”

“Don’t you want to know?”

Ellie considered it the way she considered most things, from the outside in, looking for the seam.

“A little,” she admitted.

David grinned, already three steps into a new theory before she’d finished the sentence. Ellie let him get almost to the end of it. Then she reminded him, gently, that they had approximately no evidence, and that it was still only nine in the morning.

That afternoon, Ellie dug out her notebook to start a fresh list of Hollis Shed Theories — David’s proposed title, delivered with enough confidence that arguing against it hadn’t seemed worth the effort. Tucked into the elastic band holding the cover shut, she found something.

A leaf. Small, dry, its edges gone a pale, papery gold. It was the kind of leaf that had no business coming off any tree in their yard — not in the middle of a green, ordinary July.

She turned it over once in her fingers. She didn’t remember putting it there. She was fairly sure, though she couldn’t have proven it to anyone who asked, that she hadn’t.

She didn’t show David. She didn’t write it down either, not

even in the notebook that was, after all, meant for exactly this kind of thing. She just tucked it back where she'd found it and closed the cover. Then she went to go find out what her brother had decided the shed theory was going to be today.

She found him around the side of the house, already deep into a working theory. It involved buried treasure, an escaped farm animal, and — because it was David — at least one dragon. She let him get through most of it before pointing something out, not unkindly: the shed had probably just gotten a new lock because Old Man Hollis's grandkids were finally cleaning it out. That was, unfortunately, the sort of boring answer grown-up mysteries usually turned out to have.

"Boring answers are never the real answer," David said. It was the same total confidence he'd once brought to dragons and kings, and every impossible thing he'd ever half-believed in before anyone told him not to. "There's always something else going on. You just have to go look."

Ellie didn't answer that right away. She was thinking of a thread of cold air, sliding out of a small, round hole in a hillside. An ordinary afternoon, not so very long ago. Back then, she would have told anyone who asked that nothing unusual was likely to happen before dinner.

"Yeah," she said, finally. "Maybe you're right."

They walked on together, back toward the house. The hill went on behind them, doing its ordinary business, same as it always had. It probably always would, Ellie suspected — whether or not anyone was ever watching closely enough to notice otherwise.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Goldendoodle named Corentin.

