



Tom Xavier



# Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

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# Dedication

To my parents, Betty and Ray, who introduced their  
kids to forests and mountains



# Prologue

“Please tell another Story.”

Yawning, the bushy-bearded Storyteller shook his head. It was getting late and he had been telling Stories one after another from sunrise until well past sundown. He was feeling good about the audiences cramming his tent this day, audiences large enough to prove he was the most popular Storyteller in the entire Region. On the other hand, he was in no mood to tell another Story. No, his throat was sore, his imagination depleted and all he wanted right now was to get home, settle himself in the wonderfully overstuffed chair in his front parlor and relax over a strong, hot toddy.

“Please, one more,” the girl pleaded.  
“Please.”

“It’s getting a little late, wouldn’t you say?”  
the Storyteller replied testily. “I’ve already told three  
of my best.”

He had a point. Most toddlers would have been  
satisfied. Yet, the girl with the funny, red-and-brown-  
striped hair, green eyes and puffy lips refused to be  
put off.

She leaned forward and practically begged,  
“Please, just one more Story.”

A few of the other toddlers sniggered, causing  
the Storyteller to think they had seen the girl acting  
like this before. An odd-looking boy with white hair  
sitting cross-legged directly behind the girl rolled his  
eyes and groaned. Other toddlers fidgeted and looked  
about ready to get up and leave. The girl paid no  
attention to the others, however.

“Tell us the story about Trekking,” she said  
instead.

“Not another one,” the white-haired boy  
moaned.

“Yeah, really,” a skinny toddle-girl beside  
him agreed.

“It sounds like you already know that one,”  
groused the Storyteller, hoping but not really  
expecting to discourage the girl.

“Yes but you’re a great Storyteller,” she  
answered. “I’ve never heard Pacy’s Story from a  
Storyteller as great as you.”

“It’s a very long Story,” complained the  
Storyteller, though the girl’s flattery was softening

him a bit. "At this hour, you surely don't want to hear such a long Story, do you?"

"Oh, yes," the girl cried, "I really love your Storytelling, sir."

The girl's enthusiasm was so earnest that, after hesitating for a moment, the man grudgingly relented.

"Well," he said, glancing from the girl to the others in his audience and ignoring the groans from a few of the toddlers in the back, "if you want to hear the best-bestiest Story ever told about Trekking, we need to go back a long, long way. We need to go back to those early days just after the Ancients left Eshmagick. Back to the days before they settled in the Westreach Region and created fine, little villages like Cowgrass here."

Pausing, the Storyteller allowed his eyes to roam over the faces of the toddlers in his audience before continuing, "Now close your eyes, all of you, and picture a time soon after the Ancients arrived here. A time when they were just starting to build their new homes, open their first shops and plow new fields. In most ways, it was a grand time of new ideas and new hopes. Sadly, too, it was also the time when our Ancients were forgetting the old ways, forgetting the old Stories, the traditions and the history that make us who we are."

The Storyteller looked around. Oh yes, he was good at his craft. With this brief introduction, he already had all eyes on him, even those of the toddlers who had been ready to leave just moments ago. He was pleased. He really did love Storytelling and when

he was at his best, like now, he could capture an audience and transport them. Even the very short boy with the greasy, white hair was listening, though he pretended otherwise.

With a small smile of satisfaction, the Storyteller continued, "Yes, our Ancestors were forgetting the old ways and Eshmagick was becoming nothing more than a Storybook memory."

"Not everyone was forgetting," said the girl with the strange-looking hair, speaking in a hushed tone of voice.

The Storyteller smiled and nodded. His initial impatience with this girl was changing into something else, for how could a Storyteller not appreciate such obvious enthusiasm for the old Stories?

"You are correct, lass," he agreed. "Young Pacy Pace was just turning Fourteen and for better or worse, this young lass born of Cowgrass had Folksies with long memories and a love of the old Stories, even the ones all but forgotten, and so they—"

The girl practically bounced off the ground as she interrupted him.

"So they told Pacy about Fourteenies and the Birthday traditions of the olden times."

"Quite so," said the Storyteller, giving the girl another smile before turning his eyes to the others in his audience to draw them into his tale. "Does anyone here know what used to happen on toddlers' Fourteenth Birthdays, back in the Ancient times?" When the girl with the funny hair opened her mouth to speak, the Storyteller cut her off with a sharp shake



of his head. "I mean, other than you, my deary," he said to her with an indulgent smile. Then he gave a soft laugh. "I mean, we all know you know the answer."

This drew snickers from a few of the toddlers.

"All she ever does is talk about the olden Stories," blurted a girl with bright red hair sitting in the back.

"You mean when she's not off in the woods talking to trees," laughed another girl in a tone of voice that was a little too cruel for the Storyteller's tastes.

"Now, now," he called, raising his voice to make it ring out authoritatively, "let's not make fun of the Ancient Stories. As you will see, there's much to learn from them."

"If that's true," joked the boy with the white hair as he pointed to the funny-haired girl, "then this one here oughta be a genius with all the Stories she knows."

This drew loud laughter from the other toddlers in the audience, causing the poor girl to blush and lower her chin. The Storyteller immediately felt sorry for her.

*Time to reign them in,* he told himself.

"Listen, all," he called. "Any of you ever wonder why, in Ancient times, many of the most famous warriors were as young as Sixteen? Or Fifteen? Or even Fourteen? Have you not wondered why the most famous general of his day, the extraordinary Shane Shone, was a mere Nineteen when he led thousands into battle? What was so very

different about those Ancient times, you might ask, that toddles only a few Moon-years older than most of you were able to accomplish so much?" Here, he paused for effect. "Hmm? What was so different back then?"

There was a long moment of silence, which the Storyteller let hang like a kite in that suspenseful moment when one gust of wind has died and you don't know whether another one is going to come up in time to keep your kite flying. When he had held the suspense just long enough, he continued.

"Well, let me tell you, turning Fourteen was very different back then. It wasn't just another toddle Moon-year. Oh no, back in those distant times, the Ancients believed you went from toddle to oldster in the instant you turned Fourteen." Searching the vast inventory in his mind for exactly the right tone of voice to use, the Storyteller chose one of his favorites. "Boom," he cried, snapping his fingers. "For the Ancients, it happened just like that, at exactly noon on your Fourteenth Birthday."

His Boom had caused at least half his audience to jump, the Storyteller noted with satisfaction as he continued, "And in that single moment of changing, you went from toddle to oldster. And this very special changing, well, it was such an important event in the life of every toddle the Ancients did something burnin' special to mark it. The custom is long forgotten now but a Fourteeny like you and you..."

Here he paused to point to one toddle then another before continuing, "Well, back then you

celebrated that special turning of age by going on a great Trek. Leaving at exactly noon of your Fourteenth Birthday, you journeyed for Fourteen days and Fourteen nights, one full day and one full night for each Moon-year of your life up to that moment.”

“Oh, yes,” the funny-haired girl now chimed in, her voice full of excitement as she looked over her shoulder to speak to the other toddles, “and it was not just any Trek you went on. You went alone into the wildest, deepest forest in the center of Eshmagick, looking for adventure and maybe coming home with great Stories to tell but maybe not coming back at all cuz you got killed and eaten.”

This time, the Storyteller noted, none of the toddles made fun of the girl. Maybe a few of them rolled their eyes but most looked quite interested in what she was saying.

“Quite right,” the Storyteller concurred, noting this girl had some of the talents of a Storyteller. “It was intentionally a daring adventure, one meant to prove your worthiness to be an oldster. And now,” he said, pausing dramatically before continuing, “shall I tell you the most amazing Story of the greatest Trek ever by a Fourteeny?”

He expected a chorus of yeses and he might have gotten them but suddenly the boy with the greasy, white hair stood up.

“I don’t think so,” he said in a tone of voice that left no room for arguing. “This toddle here is slakin’ nut-nutty enough to listen to your Stories all

night long but the rest of us have heard quite enough.”

The boy’s words stung the Storyteller. True, he was tired. True, he was eager to get home after his long day of Storytelling and enjoy a hot toddy in his comfy chair. But when he was about to tell one of his Stories, he expected nothing less than everyone’s full attention and the Story only ended when he decided it should end. To think some ridiculously short boy with greasy, obviously unwashed hair would presume to make the choice for him.

*How rude.*

*How utterly obnoxious.*

He would have reprimanded the lad with the full force of his voice but already the other toddlers were climbing to their feet and moving to leave. For better or worse, the boy had broken the mood and in truth, he really didn’t have the energy to get it back. His glorious day of Storytelling was apparently over, ended in sudden failure.

As the toddlers filed out of tent, the funny-haired girl didn’t move to leave with the others. Instead, she remained seated on the ground, staring at him, her forehead creased in thought. It was only when all the others had departed did she finally stand and speak to him in a tone of voice that was serious and reflective.

“Sir,” she said, “I don’t understand why Fourteenies don’t make the Trek nowadays.”

The Storyteller didn’t know what to say.

*Hallow’s Fire*, he thought, *it isn’t even remembered.*

The truth was, Trekking simply wasn't done anymore. Like many of the Ancient ways, it had fallen out of memory. The girl might as well have asked why folks no longer celebrated Switching-Day. Or why they no longer paused to bow before the setting sun. Or why no one ate animal flesh or ever tried catching a Faerie. It wasn't done because it wasn't done and that was the simple but complex answer to her question.

And yet, the girl's face had such an eager, pleading expression that the Storyteller indulged her a little, replying cautiously, "Well, I suppose it could be done if some Fourteeny had the will and the courage to resurrect the old ways and try it."

"Do you really think so?" asked the girl, her eyes widening excitedly.

The man suddenly felt awkward. It was not his place to encourage such dreams in a young toddle-girl who was a stranger to him. Quickly, he backpedaled.

"Well, I cannot imagine any Fourteeny with Folksies so reckless that they would allow it," he said, laughing uncomfortably. "I mean, it's rather a dangerous notion, isn't it? Exceedingly dangerous, you'd have to say. Yes?"

Nodding solemnly, the girl stood and turned to leave but as she did, she muttered a few words in a voice too quiet for the Storyteller to hear.

"Still, it could be done," was what she said under her breath. "If a Fourteeny had the will, it could be done."

Then she smiled happily, though the Storyteller didn't see her smile. Passing through the doorway of his tent, she disappeared into the darkness of the night.

When she was gone, the Storyteller sighed deeply. Now that his day of Storytelling was over and he was alone in his tent, he felt very tired. Used up, really. The way he always felt after a day like this one. Reaching over his shoulder, he plucked his cloak from the hook on a post behind him. With a groan, he slipped it over his shoulders and started toward the door, limping slightly.

*Time to go home, he thought, and Good Gidden, that first toddy will be tasting might-mightily good tonight.*

As he trudged home, the Storyteller gave no more thought to the funny girl or to her odd, final question about whether a modern Fourteeny might go Trekking nowadays. In truth, he never again thought about the girl or about their little exchange in the tent, which was rather a funny thing considering how much the idea he put into her head that night would someday alter the history of his world.

Of course, that's how life is. An event may seem very small at the time but you never really know, do you? How can you?

So let's jump ahead six years and see what this event wrought.

# Chapter 1

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Duggan sat hunched over her worktable, her mind focused on the difficult task of weaving a long, thin strand of Creeper-Vine through the complicated pattern of River-Willow branches that formed the bowl of her Bottle Basket.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap.

Duggan tried her best to ignore the sound but whatever was making the obnoxious tapping noise outside the window behind her, it did not intend to cooperate.

Tap.

Duggan sighed mightily. To get this particular Bottle Basket done right, she needed to concentrate, which meant she needed peace and quiet. Total peace and quiet.

“Go slakin’ away,” she cried.

But no matter how much she wished it gone, the tapping sound refused to go away. It was as if something or someone was intent on ruining her day.

Tap. Tap-tap.

“Hallow’s Fire,” she swore, “I hate this.”

With a mighty sigh, Duggan struggled to her feet. Grabbing her chair by its back, she dragged it to the window in the back of the workshop and climbed onto its seat. Pushing her head against the window’s dirty pane, she peered out to see what was causing the annoying racket. Her eyes were a bit blurry from her many hours of close-up work and so it took a second or two for the object standing beneath the window to come into focus.

Zagger.

There stood obnoxious, utterly aggravating Zagger Dunleavy and standing right behind him was the girl who really should have known better, none other than Duggan’s best friend, Lambrell Quiverill. Zagger was holding one end of a long, crooked branch in his two hands and he was about to bang the other end against the pane of Duggan’s window when she hurriedly pushed it open. Immediately, Zagger looked up and grinned stupidly at her.

In response, Duggan gave the obnoxious boy her most disdainful look. At least, she hoped it was a disdainful look.



“Stop that,” she cried, “what do you think you’re doing, Zagger Dunleavy?”

“There you are, Duggan McDuggan. Finally. I’ve been banging on this stupid window forever.”

“Yes, yes, believe me, I know. Well, here I am. Not where I should be. Where I should be is back at my table, working. I’m very busy, so please go away.”

“We need to talk,” retorted Zagger, ignoring her plea. “Right now. Get down here and join Lambrell and me. We’ll be waiting in the trees at the usual spot.”

“No way. I can’t.”

“We’ll be waiting. Get down here and meet us. Hurry.”

Abruptly, Zagger turned and headed into the trees, with skinny, do-everything-Zagger-says Lambrell following a step or two behind him. Frustrated, Duggan sighed loudly. Although she was burnin’ annoyed, what could she do? Ignore him? No, it was pointless to argue with Zagger when he had his mind made up and obviously, his mind was made up.

Sighing again, she closed the window and went back to her worktable. The Bottle Basket was coming along nicely and she hated to abandon her work at this critical point in its creation but Zagger had left her with no choice. She had to go.

On a normal afternoon, it would have been impossible for Duggan to leave the workshop. Her parents were strict taskmasters and they accepted no excuses for her stopping work before a task was

done. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it right now—Duggan’s Mum and Pops were gone for the day to deliver several crates of new baskets to the owner of the largest and most popular pub in the neighboring village of Groundlevel, leaving Duggan under the neglectful care of her old and rather addled Grandmum, Needles Korney.

“Gru’m,” called Duggan, turning from her worktable and raising her voice so her nearly deaf Grandmum could hear, “I’m going out to stretch my legs. I won’t be gone long.”

Duggan’s Grandmum was sitting at her own worktable in a far, back corner of the shop. Bent over her work, she was vigorously attacking a pile of slender River-Willow branches with her razor-sharp knife, expertly stripping away the bark from one branch after another with deft flicks of her wrist. The nearly deaf, old woman obviously had not heard Zagger’s banging on the window, Duggan noted. Nor had she heard any of the argument between Zagger and her. Nor had she heard Duggan’s raised voice just now.

“Gr’um, do you hear me?” repeated Duggan, shouting more loudly and moving near her Grandmum. “I’m going out for a bit to stretch my legs.”

This time, her old Gr’um must have heard because she looked up to give Duggan an indulgent smile.

“Of course,” she said, “Take your time, deary. It’s spring. Go out and enjoy the sun. Have some fun.”

“Um, thanks, Gr’um,” Duggan answered.

“Certainly, my deary,” murmured the elderly woman. “It’s a day to be playing, not working.”

“Gr’um, I’m not going out to play,” Duggan quickly corrected.

The old lady either didn’t hear her or didn’t understand her words.

“When I was your age,” she continued, “I had to work all the time. Never got to play. Not that that was right, mind. No, it was not right, not right at all. Never got to play.”

Before Duggan could explain again she was not going out to play, her elderly Gr’um lowered her head and went back to stripping bark off her River-Willow branches, their conversation apparently over. Duggan gave a soft smile. She was getting used to these fragmented exchanges with her Grandmum, who was growing more and more addled as she passed into very old age. Impulsively, she bent and gave her Grandmum a quick kiss on the top of her head before heading out.

“Bye, Gru’mmy,” she called quietly as she moved to the doorway, knowing the old woman would not hear. “I love you, *Vankayhol*,” she added, using the Ancient word for Grandmum, a word meaning the vine that ties everything together.

Outside the door, Duggan pulled up her hood and veered to her left, making her way to the narrow footpath that led to Crystal Creek and breaking into a

jog when she was on it. Her Gr'um certainly was right, she observed as she hurried down the path, it really was the kind of afternoon one should pause to enjoy.

Smiling, Duggan glanced up. The sun was well into its afternoon phase and yet it was still high enough in the sky to bathe the whole world in its lovely, golden glow. Struck by the beauty of the afternoon, she slowed to enjoy the forest unfolding around her and what she saw, smelled and heard was so wondrous it took away her breath. Leaves colored in the soft greens of the new spring season were just beginning to sprout on all the trees and bushes, covering branches long bared by winter in new color. And everywhere, the flowers of early spring were thrusting themselves out of the ground to create a fantastic patchwork of brilliant colors across the forest floor.

Duggan sighed happily.

She knew all these pretty flowers by name and she loved every one of them. There were brightly yellow Pollypads and rosy Bollybeets that were said to blush even more deeply than a young maiden's cheeks. In the dark shadows, she could make out aptly named Bluebuttons so perfectly round they looked manufactured.

Duggan quickly decided there was no point in hurrying just because jerky Zagger had told her to hurry. Putting the boy out of her mind, she slowed even more to savor and enjoy this wondrous reawakening of springtime. As she passed a waist-high bush newly come into bloom, she ran her fingers

lightly through its supple, young leaves. A few moments later, she paused briefly under a very old tree that was like an old friend to her. A little farther down the trail, when an orange-breasted Bobbin' Robin landed on a high limb and called down to her, she whistled back while imagining that the Bobbin' Robin was not an ordinary bird at all but rather, it was one of those brightly crimsoned, long-tailed Carnival-Flickers of Eshmagick.

With so much beauty around her, Duggan really didn't care if she was keeping her friends waiting. It could be weeks before she had another chance to enjoy a day as gorgeous as this one. And besides, that little jerk, Zagger, deserved to be kept waiting.

When she finally reached their meeting place under the old Gnarly-Oak, she found her two friends sitting on one of the fallen limbs littering the ground beneath the magnificent tree, their hoods raised, their backs to her, chatting quietly.

"What's up?" Duggan called, laying a hand lightly on the Gnarly-Oak's coarse bark as she worked her way around the giant curve of its trunk.

Under her soft touch, the tree seemed to purr appreciatively, like a cat being petted. Duggan quickly reminded herself trees don't purr; their trunks only vibrate from the wind. Still, she liked imagining that this was not your ordinary Gnarly-Oak but a Magickal one, able to move and talk the way they do in Eshmagick. The breeze gusted, shaking loose a few, dried-out leaves of the recent winter that fluttered like tiny, Magickal whispers to the ground.

Duggan smiled happily and was about to pick up one of the pretty leaves when Zagger's voice snapped her back to reality.

"What's up, you ask? Nothing is up," complained the boy, standing and pulling Lambrell up with him. "That's the slakin' problem. Nothing is up."

Duggan knew exactly why Zagger was complaining but she really didn't care. "It's your problem, not mine," she shot back testily. "I told you, I have work to do."

"No, it is definitely not my problem," replied Zagger, "it is most definitely our problem since *you* were the one who put the idea of going to Eshmagick into our heads, *you* were the one who said, let's leave as soon as everything is ready. So there's no saying, it's your problem, Zagger Dunleavy, not mine. There's no saying, I'm too busy for you, Zagger Dunleavy. There's no saying, I've got too much work today, Zagger Dunleavy. There's no saying—"

Duggan had to laugh. Zagger was the most annoying creature she'd ever met in her life but he did have his moments. And there was no arguing his main point. The idea of going to Eshmagick had been hers.

"All right, all right," Duggan cried, "I get your point. So tell me, Zagger Dunleavy, what's so slakin' important that it can't wait and we need to talk right now?"

"OK. That's better. I have a burnin' important question for you, Duggan McDuggan. My question

is, what's the *thing* that's most keeping us *stuck* here?"

Duggan always hated the way Zagger dragged out unexpected words for effect.

"What makes you think we're stuck?" she replied.

"Come on," said Zagger, "you're the queen of excuses. You always have a reason why we need to wait another week. Then another week. Then another. I'm just asking why."

Duggan suddenly grew angry.

"There are a lot of legitimate reasons why we don't just take off," she countered.

"Such as?"

"Um, like, you know. Having to go to school. Work. Parents. The fact that we're still toddlers and we can't just walk away, just like that."

"No, come on. We all know the big-biggiest problem is with you and your scaredy ways. But that's not my point. What I want to know is, besides you being a total scaredy, what's really, really keeping us from getting started."

Not in the mood for argument, Duggan ignored the fact that Zagger had just insulted her in a huge way. An obvious point came to mind.

"Um, we don't really know where we're going. I mean, all we know is that Eshmagick is somewhere to the east but we don't know exactly where. We don't know how far."

"Not a bad guess. Lack of geographical knowledge, we might call it. That's one, very *big* problem facing us. Not the top one but big. So

Duggan, what's the big-biggiest thing holding us back?"

Duggan thought for a moment.

"Um, that there are scaredier things than getting lost on the way. Like, if we ever get to Eshmagick, they say it's full of deadly creatures."

His lips twitching, Zagger agreed much too readily for Duggan's tastes.

"Another good thought," he said. "If we ever did find Eshmagick and the Storytellers are right, we could meet Black Chargers with giant horns and poisonous Red-Eye Snakes."

"And Dragonsy Lions," added Lambrell, speaking up for the first time.

"Dragonsy Lions would be bad," Duggan agreed, giving Lambrell a small smile.

There was a moment of silence while Duggan and her friends contemplated fierce Chargers, poisonous Snakes and fire-breathing Dragonsy Lions. Then Zagger spoke up.

"Anything else?"

"I think those are pretty good reasons. This thing obviously needs careful planning so we can all come back in one piece."

Zagger shook his head so vigorously a greasy lock of his hair came loose and fell across his forehead, covering an eye.

"Maybe, but this is exactly why I wanted you to come here and talk."

When Zagger gave Duggan a sly, know-it-all wink, she could only respond by asking, "What are you talking about?"



Brushing his lock of hair back into place, Zagger raised his head to gaze at the face of the much taller Lambrell. Duggan immediately noticed how terribly uncomfortable Lambrell grew under the boy's gaze.

"Tell Duggan your idea, Lambrell Quiverill," he said to her.

Lambrell blushed and lowered her eyes.

"No, Zagger, you tell her," the girl practically whispered.

"No, it's your idea. You tell her," Zagger urged.

"No, you tell her," the girl insisted, her face growing even redder.

Watching this little exchange between her two friends gave Duggan a very bad feeling.

"All right," Zagger finally agreed, turning his pale eyes on Duggan. "Lambrell is the one who should be telling this because it's a slakin' fantastic idea. Fantastic because it's so simple and yet it will solve all our problems. I mean, not just one or two of them but *all* of 'em. It's that burnin' fantastic."

"Fine," said Duggan. "Just tell me the idea."

"We catch a Faerie."

Duggan's jaw dropped.

"Do what?"

"Catch a Faerie."

"Zagger, you're slakin' out of your mind. We can't go catching a Faerie and why, in Hallow's Fire, would we even want to try?"

"Interesting you should ask," replied Zagger, giving a smile that made Duggan worry. "Actually, it

was Lambrell who figured it all out. Go ahead. Ask her.”

Facing her friend, Duggan raised a questioning eyebrow but the shy girl only blushed more deeply. Duggan summoned up her soft voice, the one that usually worked to coax Lambrell out of her embarrassment and into talking.

“Lambrell?” she murmured. “You have something to say?”

Her friend didn’t answer right away but after a long hesitation, she raised her chin and looked Duggan in the eyes.

“Um, well,” she finally said, “I do believe I know how to catch a Faerie.”

“No one has ever caught a Faerie,” Duggan pointed out, “not in modern times.”

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be done,” replied Lambrell, her eyes widening. “I mean, even if there is a terrible Curse.”



To see what these symbols mean, visit

<http://eshmagick.com/eshsecrets/>

## Chapter 2

Duggan was about to tell her friends exactly how crazy they were when Lambrell gave such a sweet look it caused Duggan to hold her tongue. Then Zagger curved his lips into an obnoxious grin that looked so superior Duggan couldn't stand it. She felt her temper rising.

"Are you two nuts?" she cried.

"Just think what it would mean if we caught a Faerie," Zagger argued. "Open your mind and *think*."

When the incredibly obnoxious grin lingered on the boy's face, Duggan grew about ready to punch

him. Then, out of nowhere, fragments of an Ancient Story about Faeries popped into her head.

“Do you think it’s true?” she finally asked. “The Story about Clagg McClagg, I mean.”

“Of course,” Zagger answered confidently. “It’s gotta be hundreds of Moon-years old. How could it not be true?”

For Duggan, it felt terribly odd to be the one questioning a fabled Story about Eshmagick but someone had to be the voice of reason.

“I don’t know. I mean, I believe in Magick and all that but you know, some of the Ancient Stories are pretty hard to swallow.”

“Are you saying you don’t believe the Stories?” Zagger demanded.

Duggan didn’t know what to say. Here was Zagger suddenly acting like the great believer in Magick. Why were things suddenly getting so turned around?

“The Stories are just so...you know...” she stammered, “so Magickal.”

Zagger laughed loudly.

“That’s because Fairies are Magickal. Come on, Duggan, stop being a slakin’ mule. Hallow’s Fire, everyone knows if you catch a Faerie, it must do whatever you say.”

“I guess.”

“No guess, it’s fact. Which is why Lambrell’s idea is so fantastically simple and yet so fantastically brilliant. We catch a Faerie just like ole McClaggy did and, boom, we have ourselves the perfect guide to take us to Eshmagick. And when we’re there, we tell

the Faerie to keep us away from all the dangerous critters and show us the wonders and it does *exactly* what we tell it. Like I say, we catch a Faerie and *all* our problems are solved.”

“This was your idea, Lambrell Quiverill?” asked Duggan, eyeing her friend.

“Yes, Duggan,” answered Lambrell, blushing. “I guess so.”

“Well, it’s an interesting idea; I’ll give you that,” Duggan conceded, “though I do have one burnin’ important question for both of you, which is—”

Before Duggan could finish her thought, Zagger cut her off.

“I know what you’re gonna say,” he said. “You’re gonna ask how in Hallow’s Fire we’re gonna catch a Faerie, right?”

Once more, Zagger had such a know-it-all look on his face Duggan was ready to punch him.

*Stay calm*, she told herself, as her hands trembled from the anger welling up inside her.

“Wow, you’re pretty sharp, Zagger Dunleavy,” Duggan remarked, hoping Zagger would catch the sarcasm in her voice, “pretty sharp indeed.”

Zagger failed to take her bait.

“Duggan, I tell you, Lambrell and I have it all figured out.”

“I don’t know how in Hallow’s Fire you could have,” she shot back, unable to believe they were having this conversation. “It may be true that a Faerie once caught must do whatever you say but the modern Stories say you cannot catch a Faerie

anymore. No one can. No one has. Good Gidden, no one is even foolish enough to try.”

Zagger gave a quick nod of his head.

“I know, I know. Everyone knows the Story of how the Lord of all Faeries long ago conjured a special Magick that protects them against being caught. It shrank ‘em permanently and made ‘em lighter than air so you can’t get near one.”

“You’ve got that right, Zagger Dunleavy,” Duggan agreed. “The Stories say there’s a Magick protecting a Faerie from being caught but that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Sure, sure,” Zagger replied, “you’re talking about the Curse. I mean, everyone knows the toddle’s rhyme, even I know it.” Raising his chin, he began reciting:

*Harm a Faerie, cause it pain, bring it death,  
Then comes the Curse, fire and stone, stilling breath.  
Harm a Faerie, scrape its skin, break its bone,  
Then comes the Curse, woe to them, all back  
Home.*

Pausing, Zagger glanced at Lambrell, who spoke up, finishing the rhyme:

*Harm a Faerie, act of will, senseless slight,  
Then comes the Curse, endless sleep, day and night.*

When Lambrell’s voice trailed off, Zagger poked her with his elbow.

“Go on, tell her, Lambrell,” he coaxed, his face shining with delight. “Tell her about the book.”

The edges of Lambrell’s ears grew bright red and although her words came out slowly and cautiously, the excitement behind them was obvious to Duggan.

“Um, well, the thing is, I have this book,” said Lambrell. “It’s a very old book.”

Zagger waved a hand dramatically at Duggan.

“Hear that? A very old book. Go on, Lambrell, keep going.”

Lambrell swallowed hard before resuming, “Um, I wouldn’t even know about this book except my Grandpops, old Hambell the Dyer, well, he slipped it to me when I was a young toddle. ‘Never tell anyone about it, Lambrell,’ he said to me. ‘Especially your Folksies cuz it’s a secret book only for you.’”

“Hear that?” Zagger chortled. “A secret book.”

Duggan refused to let Zagger annoy her. Lambrell’s tale was simply too interesting.

“What about this book?” she asked.

“Well,” Lambrell continued, “I used to read it when I was little. You know, when I was, like, Five or Six. But then I got older and I didn’t read it anymore and I kinda forgot about it. For a long time, I didn’t think about the book.”

“And it’s a book about what?” Zagger coaxed when Lambrell’s voice trailed off and there was a long moment of silence. “Tell her, Lambrell.”

“Um, yeah, the thing is, it’s all about Faeries.”

“And,” Zagger prodded, “what’s in the book, Lambrell? *Tell* her.”

Lambrell got a faraway look in her eyes.

“A few nights ago,” she murmured, “I was walking through old Bailey’s Field after dark, heading home from looking for mushrooms in the high woods. All of a sudden, this light started popping on and off in the trees at the edge of the field. At first, I didn’t pay much attention. But after it kept blinking, I started thinking maybe it was a Faerie over there because of the way the thing was flying in and out of the Honeyhocks and blinking all the time.”

“Fireflies blink in the dark,” Duggan pointed out.

“Duggan, it wasn’t a firefly. It was a Faerie.”

This was too much for Duggan.

“Lambrell, come on,” she cried. “How can you say that? Did you see it up close?”

“No, but I know it was a Faerie,” Lambrell answered stubbornly.

Duggan couldn’t believe her ears. She snorted.

“A Faerie? Here? In little Cowgrass?”

“I’m pretty sure,” replied Lambrell, sounding pretty sure.

Duggan decided the girl was either nuts or suffering from too much time with Zagger.

“Pretty sure you saw a Faerie? Here? In little Cowgrass?” she repeated, snorting again. “All right,



assuming Magickal Faeries still exist, the way the Ancient Stories say, do you know how slakin' crazy that sounds, Lambrell? You saw a Faerie wandering far from Eshmagick and just happening to be here, of all places, buzzing around in some farm field near your house in sleepy old Cowgrass where nothing ever happens."

Lambrell refused to back down.

"Duggan, I know it sounds crazy but I tell you, what I saw was a Faerie flying around in the Honeyhock trees, looking for sugar just like the old Stories say. Maybe I was seeing things but I swear it was a Faerie, right here in Cowgrass. I swear it."

Duggan sighed and relented a bit.

"All right, what's this slakin' got to do with your book?"

Lambrell now spoke more excitedly.

"Like I say, I hadn't thought about that old book for a long time," she said, "but when I saw the Faerie, I remembered there's this part in the book that tells how to get around the Curse and catch one. I never took it seriously cuz it was, you know, just a funny, old book. But when I saw that Faerie in the Honeyhocks, well, all of a sudden I thought, why can't we catch one just like it says in the book? So I told Zagger about the Faerie and about the book, and...well..."

When Lambrell grew silent, Duggan shifted her gaze back to Zagger, who again had that deserves-to-be-punched look on his face.

"Well?" she asked with a skeptical look on her face.

The boy's grin widened.

"See. Like I say, all our problems solved. We use the book and catch Lambrell's Faerie and just like that, we're outa here. So get your work done, Duggan McDuggan, then come to Lambrell's house. Tonight. Meet us in the old shed right after supper and I mean right after supper."

If she had wanted, Duggan could have raised a dozen, obvious objections to all of this craziness but for some strange reason, she held her tongue. Maybe it was the expression on Lambrell's face, which was bright with excitement. Or maybe it was the startling notion they could actually get to Eshmagick instead of just dreaming about it. She was certainly curious about Lambrell's book.

*Hallow's Fire*, she thought, *could it all be true?*



Another EshSecret!

## Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

## Chapter 3

Of course, it went without saying Duggan needed to finish her work before joining her friends and the sun was nearly set when she finally got done with her Bottle Basket. Giving her late-working Gr'um a final kiss goodbye, Duggan left the small workshop and made her way along the narrow, winding path that ran between the workshop and the McDuggan home, which stood in the middle of a grove of Silvery-Aspens. When she reached her backyard, Duggan stopped as she always did to admire her family's pretty, little house with its curved walls made of hundreds of slender branches woven

together and topped by a thatched roof that reminded Duggan of an overlarge muffin.

Opening the back door of her house, Duggan was happy to see her Mum returned from Groundlevel and busy in the kitchen making her justly famous Vegetable Stew. She also heard the unmistakable sounds of her Pops clumping around upstairs, no doubt getting himself cleaned for supper.

When Duggan came into the kitchen, her Mum asked, "Did you finish the Bottle Basket?"

"Yes, Mum," Duggan answered.

"It turned out well?"

"Yes, it looks grandy-good."

Mum McDuggan gave her daughter a quick, little smile.

"No one works a weaving like you, my deary. When you're paying attention, you're the best-bestiest."

"Thanks, Mumsy," mumbled Duggan, blushing and lowering her eyes but nonetheless pleased by the rare, if not entirely unqualified, compliment.

Duggan moved beside her Mum and watched as the woman chopped a long, thick Wavy-Carrot into little pieces. Sensing this was as good a time as any to ask about going out later to join her friends, Duggan took a breath and plunged in, prepared for the worst but hoping for the best.

"Um, Mum, now that the Basket's done, may I go out after supper?"

Duggan's Mum immediately frowned, which was a bad sign.

“Don’t you have schoolwork to do?” she asked.

“Yes,” Duggan had to agree, “but I worked really hard today, Mum. Really hard. And I worked really hard all week, including after supper yesterday and the day before.”

“Hard work is healthy,” observed Mum McDuggan.

Duggan knew enough to let this remark pass unanswered.

“Yes, I know, I know but Mum, I was working on the Bottle Basket every day this week. Every day. I didn’t get to play once, not even when my friends were playing.”

“Duggan, you’re about to have your school holiday,” her Mum pointed out. “You’ll have plenty of time to play once school’s out.”

“Yes but the other toddlers got to play after school all this week,” Duggan argued, “at least for a little while after their chores. Please, Mum, just for tonight.”

Duggan waited expectantly for her Mum’s next words, only to have her hopes dashed when her Mum brought up a touchy point.

“Well, did you move the firewood like I asked?”

“Mumsy, I was working all week on the Bottle-Basket. When would I have had time to move the firewood?”

“Duggan,” her mother responded, “I asked you to move that firewood into the woodshed more than two weeks ago. You had all last week and all

this week to get the chore done. It's going to rot under the trees if it doesn't get moved before the rains come. I can't believe you still haven't moved the wood like I asked."

The conversation was taking a very bad turn. Fortunately, an idea popped into Duggan's head. She felt a little bad about playing this trick card but her Mum had pushed her into a tight corner.

"I missed Shammy Quiverill's Happy Birthday party last night," she pointed out. "Lambrell invited me but I wanted to make sure the Bottle Basket got done, just like Pops says. You know, before starting on anything else, mind your three D's. Do it right. Do it all. Do it now. So I didn't go."

"Shammy's party was last night?" inquired her Mum, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes and I didn't go."

"Well..."

Duggan could hear uncertainty creeping into her Mum's voice.

"Please, please," Duggan implored, pressing her case, "just for tonight."

"Well, I guess it won't hurt to skip your homework for one night, will it?" Mum finally said, caving. "Seeing Lambrell, are you?"

"Yup."

"And Zagger?"

Mum's voice caught when she spoke the boy's name. As with every other Mother in the North End of Cowgrass, Mum McDuggan didn't approve of Zagger, the strange orphan-boy who had mysteriously appeared in the village one day, taking

up residence in an abandoned shack and caring for his needs in ways no one knew or wanted to know. Duggan wisely dodged the question about Zagger.

"I'm going upstairs to say hi to Pops," she said instead, turning quickly to make her escape.

Hurrying from the kitchen into the front parlor-room, Duggan climbed the steeply angled stairs that wound around the tall, thick trunk of a long-dead Gnarly-Oak believed to bring good luck to her home. As she followed the staircase around the tree trunk, Duggan couldn't help but smile happily at the size of the trunk gracing her family's home.

*No home could be luckier*, she told herself.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Duggan found her Pops in the second-floor bathing room, bending over the old washstand in the corner and scrubbing his soiled hands in a basin of cold water. Duggan smiled. She loved watching her Pops, no matter what he was doing. He was unquestionably the most handsome fellow she knew, with lively eyes, thick build, wide shoulders and muscular arms.

From her father, Duggan had inherited the same wide shoulders and green eyes, as well as his above-average height, she now noted happily. Unfortunately, she had also inherited her Pops' only bad feature—his funny-colored hair. Right now, his dreadful hair was hanging fully displayed as he bent over the washbasin, making it impossible for Duggan to ignore its bizarre color, a weird combination of earthy brown strands laced with alternating stripes of charcoal gray and river-clay red. Still, inheriting her Pops' hair was a small price to pay for having such a



great father, Duggan reminded herself. A really small price.

When her Pops failed to notice her arrival, Duggan called to him, "Um, hi there, Popsy."

"Hey, Pollen," Pops McDuggan answered, straightening and turning his head to flash his daughter a bright smile. "Finish the Bottle Basket? Does it look beautiful?"

"Yes and yes."

"No one works a weaving better than you," he remarked, echoing his wife's compliment. "I swear you're the best-bestiest in these parts."

"Um, Popsy, I have a question for you," said Duggan, letting the compliment pass. "What I'm wondering is, have you ever heard anyone say it's possible to catch a Faerie?"

Pops McDuggan didn't give an immediate answer. Instead, he went back to scrubbing his hands, taking a long time to clean thoroughly beneath every one of his fingernails with a short-bristled brush. When he had finished, he took a towel from the chair beside the washstand and dried his hands slowly and carefully before turning to give Duggan a long, thoughtful stare.

"Ask your question again," he said.

"Um, I'm asking if you've ever heard anyone talking about catching a modern Faerie. You know, since the Magick changed them. I know it's supposed to be impossible and, because of the Curse, no one would dare try but Zaggar thinks it can be done."

"Does he?"

"Yes, and Lambrell, too."

“Well,” answered Pops McDuggan, speaking slowly, “I’ve never heard of it being done, not since the new Magick anyway and certainly not with the Curse protecting ‘em but that doesn’t mean it couldn’t be done. I just haven’t heard of anyone ever trying.”

“So, what do you think, Pops?”

Taking a deep breath, her Pops chose his words carefully. “Well, now that you’re putting the question directly to me and I’m thinking on it, I have just one thing to say about the doing of something that everyone else says is impossible, which is that the naysayers are often wrong. Take for example—”

Duggan groaned loudly enough to stop her Pops in mid-sentence. She should have known her question would launch him on one of his longwinded tales about how some lowly folk who had this big dream everyone else laughed at cleverly figured out the right tool and did the impossible. Usually, Duggan tried her best to listen patiently when her Pops got going on one of his never-ending tales. Tonight, however, she didn’t have the time or the patience and so she rudely cut him off.

“So, do you think it can be done?” she asked.

Pops looked long and hard at his daughter before giving his predictable answer.

“If you could figure out the right tool, maybe. It would take a very clever person since they say even the wrinkling of your nose will frighten away a Faerie, they’re that sensitive to movement. Of course, you can’t harm a Faerie while trying to catch it, either. That would bring down the Curse. So it would

be quite the challenge but yes, now that I'm thinking on it, I swear, with the right tool it could be done."

Exactly the answer Duggan should have expected from her Pops but an understandable one considering the quality of toolmaker he was. The best toolmaker in these parts, folks always said. When Pops gave her a smile, Duggan smiled back. She loved her Pops, even if he did tell slakin' boring tales.

"Thanks for the advice, Pops," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

"Then let's go eat. Mum is making her Vegetable Stew, you know."

"Believe me, my nose knows."

Giving Duggan another smile, Pops was about to head toward the stairs when, suddenly, he stopped and turned to give Duggan a most serious look. She instantly recognized the look.

"Of course," he added somberly, "one must never, ever, try catching a Faerie, right? We were just talking theoretically, right?"

"Of course, Pops," Duggan answered hastily, "we were just talking."

Pops gave his daughter a probing look.

"I mean, even if one could figure out the right tool, the trying of it would be too dangerous, what with the Curse and all. I mean, there's a good reason no one has ever tried, right?"

"Yes, I know, Pops," said Duggan, answering too quickly. "Believe me, I know about the Curse and all. We were just talking. Come on, let's go eat."

Pops refused to budge.

“Duggan, I have your word you would never try anything so reckless?”

“Yes, yes, Pops,” muttered Duggan, turning and fleeing to the stairs to escape another one of her Pops’ long lectures, this time about how it’s always best to do the safe, sensible thing.

Preceding her Pops down the stairs, Duggan went into the kitchen and took her seat at the family table. Taking his seat across from her, Pops looked mightily troubled but Duggan couldn’t think of anything to reassure him and so she remained silent. Mum came wordlessly over to the table with her pot of Vegetable Stew and ladled out a bowl for Duggan, followed by another one for her husband and then one for herself.

Before the family started eating, Pops stood and made the Sign of Thankfulness, touching the two, middle fingers of his right hand to his lips, then to his heart and finally to the tabletop. Mum and daughter then said thanks in the olden tongue, each of them using her own, personal pronunciation of the word, *Doounksy*, meaning blessed earth-fruit, following the custom of the Ancients. When Pops sat again, Duggan set herself vigorously to eating her Vegetable Stew, not caring she was slurping loudly. As soon as her bowl was empty, she stood.

“Only one bowl?” asked Pops, raising both eyebrows quizzically.

“Not tonight,” she said. “I’m not really hungry and Mum said it was OK for me to go out and so I’m off to see Lambrell.”

Without waiting for a reply, Duggan pivoted sharply and hurried to the door, tugging the doorknob and slipping through the crack before the door was half open. She was burnin' excited to see her friends and to hear their plan for catching a Faerie. And in truth, her Pops' stern warnings about the dangers of trying to catch one only made her feel slightly more excited.

As Duggan jogged down the path, hurrying from her home, her breathing was going in and out a little more quickly than usual.



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## Chapter 4

Night was falling and there was already a chill in the air. Slipping on her jacket, Duggan pulled up its hood, as was the custom of all Cowgrassian toddlers when going out in public, and then she started forward, running until she was safely away from her house, meaning she was safely away from the watchful eyes of her Mum and Pops. When she was far enough away to feel safe, she slowed to a walk. The sun had set but there was still a pink glow lingering in the western sky. A light breeze tickled Duggan's face pleasantly. Nearby, a lone Nighting-Bird was singing its wistful goodbye to the sun.

*Sigh-bye light, it sang. Sigh-bye light.*

As she made her way down the road, Duggan couldn't help feeling jittery. What awaited her in Lambrell's shed had an element of excitement but there was also a sense of danger. Lots of danger. To keep from thinking about the danger, Duggan shifted her attention to the trees, listening to their rustlings and ignoring her nervousness as best she could.

Unfortunately, the best she could do was not very good.

At last, Duggan arrived at the Quiverill front gate, where she paused as she always did to admire Lambrell's cozy, little house with its laced-branch walls the color of a Walnut's dark trunk, topped by a tall roof in the shape of a pillow. On the front lawn, the family's three pigs were snuffling nose-down in the shaggy grass, searching for the food scraps Mum Quiverill threw to them nightly from the front door. Lamplight was glowing through the two, open windows that flanked the doorway.

It was such a pretty, cozy little scene, it made Duggan feel better immediately. Through one of the open windows, she could see a crowd of Quiverills in the front parlor-room. Pops Quiverill was making music on a battered, old Fie-Fiddle and Lambrell's oldest brother, Marl, was accompanying him on a pear-shaped Thrump-Drum. The other Quiverills in the room were all singing an old song every folk born in Cowgrass knew from early Moon-years on, a catchy tune with silly lyrics called, *Bandy a Word, Break a Heart*.

It was such a jolly, fun song that Duggan had to work hard to keep from singing along as the



Quiverills played and sang happily together. As she walked past the front window, Duggan whistled and gave a friendly wave to the roomful of music-making Quiverills. Pops Quiverill was too busy fiddling to wave back but his wife beamed a bright smile at Duggan, followed by a friendly wave. All the toddlers sang a little more loudly for her benefit, causing Duggan to chuckle happily. She loved the Quiverills, every one of them. Even their bratty baby, Shammy.

Rounding the corner of the house, Duggan made her way across a grassy field to the old shed where the Quiverills stored all the pots, plates and bowls they made from clay dug from their land. When she opened the shed's door, inside Zagger and Lambrell were waiting for her, their hoods pushed back, their sleeves pulled up and their faces aglow in the candlelight that flickered from two tapers sputtering on the table in front of them.

"So, where's this book?" asked Duggan as soon as the door closed behind her.

"Not here," Zagger answered, meeting her eyes with his.

Zagger had a look Duggan didn't like. Pushing back her hood, she gave him a frown.

"What do you mean, not here?"

"I told Lambrell to leave it in the house. Hidden. It's much too dangerous to carry the book around."

"Well, that's a problem, isn't it?"

"No, not really," Zagger replied in his condescending tone of voice. "I had Lambrell copy the part about catching a Faerie. It's all on a separate

piece of paper here. So there's no problem, Duggan McDuggan. No problem at all 'cause I've got the part that counts."

Zagger could be so incredibly annoying.

"Well, where's this piece of paper, Zagger Dunleavy?" asked Duggan, doing her best to maintain her cool.

"In my trouser pocket. My left one, to be exact."

Duggan felt a seed of anger take root and start growing inside her.

"Well, Master Dunleavy, why don't you take the slakin' piece of paper out of your left pocket so we can take a look at it?" she replied testily.

"Right. That's why we're here, isn't it?"

Duggan was ready to punch Zagger.

"Just take the slakin' piece of paper out of your pocket," she muttered, her lips tightening.

Nodding, Zagger dipped his left hand into his trouser pocket and took a ridiculously long time rummaging around inside before finally extracting a folded piece of paper. With great care, he slowly unfolded the paper, one bend at a time. Then he spread the long, single sheet on the table in front of him. Lambrell moved one of the two candles closer for better light.

Duggan immediately lost some of her anger as she moved to the table and bent to peer at the sheet of paper in front of her. Lambrell had very neat handwriting and she had copied the several diagrams from the book with careful precision. Duggan read the whole page slowly and carefully from top to

bottom, taking a good amount of time to study each diagram. When she had finished, there was no need to re-read any part of it. The directions were all very clear.

“This is quite amazing,” were the first words out of her mouth.

Zagger grinned as he replied, “I told you.”

“It’s so simple.”

“Yes.”

“But so burnin’ clever.”

“Yes.”

Duggan wondered how anyone could have come up with anything so clever. It made her think there was a kernel of truth to Pops’ many Stories of dreams-come-true by the use of some ingenious tool.

“My Pops would love this,” she had to say. “It solves the problem of how to trap a Faerie so cleverly it’s burnin’ hot. He’d just love it.”

“Well, you can’t tell him anything about it.”

“Of course not. You don’t need to tell me that. I’m just saying he’d love it.”

“Anyway,” said Zagger, “Lambrell and I have already started working on the thing. In fact, we’re pretty far along. Wanna see?”

“Definitely.”

Motioning for Lambrell to follow, Zagger moved to the back of the shed. Working together, the two of them then dragged forward an old trunk made of thick wood with a big padlock dangling from its hasp in front. It must have been a pretty heavy trunk, Duggan noted, because the two of them were panting by the time they got it in front of her. Zagger reached

a hand into his pocket and pulled out a key, which he raised into the air with a great flourish.

"See this?" he said. "This is the only key to the padlock. Lambrell says this trunk is never used because it's old and moldy inside. Still, just in case any Quiverill ever got the idea of using it, I added a lock with only one key. No one is going to get into this trunk without me."

"Except by breaking the lock," Duggan suggested drily.

"I suppose," Zagger grudgingly agreed. "Or get around it some other way," he added in a tone of voice that left Duggan thinking he had gotten around a lock or two in his lifetime.

Sucking in his breath, Zagger crouched and inserted the key into the dangling padlock. With a deft turn, he unlocked it and then opened the hasp. Lambrell took hold of the trunk's lid and raised it. Duggan could hardly wait to see the thing inside but wait she did while Zagger reached into the trunk and seemed to fumble around forever before hauling out an object wrapped in several layers of gray cloth. He laid the bundle on the tabletop and Lambrell carefully stripped off the cloth, removing it layer-by-layer and gradually revealing the thing inside.

When the last layer came off, Duggan's quick intake of breath was so loud it filled the room.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Zagger, his eyes shining brightly, his excitement obvious.

"You like it?" said Lambrell in a voice that sounded equally as excited.

## Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

Duggan replied in hushed awe, “Hallow’s Fire, it’s a thing of beauty.”



**EshSecret**



# Chapter 5

Her friends' excitement was contagious but now that Duggan was seeing the device for the first time, she wasn't going to rush things. Deeply curious, she slowly and methodically examined the tool from one end to the other, noting every detail of its design, the materials chosen for its parts and how the parts worked together.

The contraption did indeed have the kind of beauty only a toolmaker could truly love. Its main part was a slender, gun-like barrel protruding from a small, bronzed sphere about the size of a large plum. This sphere had a tiny, hinged door on its top that closed with a clasp to keep it shut. Near the end of

the barrel where it fit into the sphere was a shutter that opened and closed. Four slender, flexible tubes of Marsh-Bamboo, each about twice the length of Duggan's arm, extended out of the bottom of the sphere. At the end of each of these bamboo tubes was a slightly rounded mouthpiece.

Having just read Lambrell's page from the Faerie book, Duggan understood and loved every detail of the device, which truly amazed her.

"It's a thing of beauty," she repeated, as she pulled back from studying it.

"There's not much left to do," Zagger said to her. "We just need to improve the shutter and line the inside of the sphere with old spider webbing. If we get going now, we'll have this thing finished by midnight, which would be the perfect time to go Faerie-hunting. You in?"

"I can't stay out that late," Duggan cried. "My Folksies would kill me."

"Oh come on, we need to get this done."

"I said I can't," Duggan insisted.

"Well, then, you go home, Duggan McDuggan," muttered Zagger, angrily. "Lambrell and I will finish this thing and catch ourselves a Faerie. We're not gonna sit around waitin' for some scaredy little toddle who's afraid of her Folksies. This is gonna happen tonight, with or without you."

"No way. You aren't going to use this thing without me."

"Then you're in?"

"I said I can't."

"And I said this is gonna happen tonight."



When Zagger's lips tightened, Duggan understood his mind was made up. It was all going to happen tonight, with or without her. Well, there was no way it was going to happen without her. It was all too exciting, almost in one of her Pops' crazy Stories.

"I suppose you have the tools to finish it?" she asked.

"Of course," Zagger replied. "What do you think?"

Suddenly, a doubt crept into Duggan's mind.

"What about the Curse?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Zagger, impatiently, "I knew you'd bring up the Curse. Typical. You are such a slakin' scaredy, just like everyone says."

Zagger's last remark really hurt, all the more because Duggan knew it was true. Still, the Curse really was something they needed to consider.

"They say the Curse is awf-awfuller than anything you could imagine," she observed. "So bad no one even thinks about trying to catch a Faerie, it's that dangerous."

Rolling his eyes, Zagger pointed out, "Fourteenies don't go Trekking anymore but that didn't stop you from saying we should do it."

Duggan had to think a minute before finding the proper response to Zagger's new argument.

"That's different. Toddles may have stopped Trekking but there's no deep, dark Curse preventing it. We really need to think this over before I go risking the Curse."

"I have just two words in answer to that," countered Zagger.

"What?"

"Burky Hackbeck."

Duggan couldn't believe her ears. How could Zagger possibly know about Burky Hackbeck, her darkest secret? She shot an accusatory glance at Lambrell, who immediately blushed and lowered her eyes.

Duggan couldn't believe it. Telling Lambrell her secret fear that her Folksies were planning to marry her to Burky Hackbeck when she turned Seventeen was the purest act of trust between friends. A trust Lambrell had broken. Duggan was shocked.

"That's not the point," she replied, her voice cracking. "The point is—"

"Oh, I think Burky Hackbeck is totally the point," pressed Zagger. "Come on, Duggan, you know you need to get to Eshmagick while you still can. Time's a'tickin' for ya."

"No, no, the point is," persisted Duggan, ignoring, as best she could, Zagger's hurtful jab, "we are talking about a slakin' Curse made by the Dark Lord himself."

To her surprise, Zagger didn't bother to disagree. Instead, he tried a different tack, one hard to argue.

"Tell me a flaw in this thing's design and I'll worry about the Curse. I mean it. You're the toolmaker, so tell me."

Duggan eyed the instrument.

"I have to confess," she finally remarked, "it's quite the tool. Burnin' hot. Who designed it, anyway?"

Zagger and Lambrell exchanged glances in a way that immediately made Duggan grow suspicious.

"What?" she demanded.

Lambrell had to take a deep gulp before answering, "Um, it was designed by...um, by Esther Nattlin. You know, the Witch."

"What?" cried Duggan.

"You heard," growled Zagger.

"And you didn't think it important to tell me, not until I just asked, that this great invention of yours comes from none other than Esther Nattlin, maybe the craziest Witch ever to have lived?"

"Not everyone thinks she's crazy," countered Zagger. "I've even heard your Pops say she had some very good ideas."

"I wouldn't mention my Pops if I were you. He likes crazy people with crazy ideas."

Grunting, Zagger answered, "OK, forget your Pops; but even if Nattlin was a bit wack-wacky, she did come up with some clever ideas. Admit it. This is one of 'em."

Duggan stared angrily at Zagger. He could be such a slakin' total jerk.

"Yeah, right," she retorted, "like, she came up with maybe two good ideas tops among a hundred totally wack-wacky ones. Zagger, I cannot believe you. Are you crazy?"

Zagger didn't answer right away but when he did speak, it was in a softer voice obviously meant to cajole and persuade.

"Listen," he murmured, "when I first saw who wrote the book, I didn't like it, either. But as I thought about it, I finally decided it didn't matter. I mean, whoever thought it up, this tool can *obviously* work. As you say, it's a thing of beauty."

"Uh, I think Zagger's right," Lambrell suddenly interjected.

Startled, Duggan turned her head to stare at Lambrell. "What?"

"I mean, it's the tool that counts, not who invented it, right? And this is a totally amazing tool. I mean, we all looked it over and everyone agrees."

"Come on, Duggan," urged Zagger. "Admit it. This thing's a toolmaker's dream. So why not take a chance? Come with us. For once, don't be a total scaredy."

Duggan sighed. She really couldn't see anything wrong with the tool. And although she had promised her Pops not to be reckless, that was before seeing the device. How many times had her Pops told her one of his famous tales of a miraculous tool? All of a sudden, she made up her mind.

"All right, I'm in."

"Yes," cried Zagger.

"One thing," cautioned Duggan. "Has it occurred to you that we really need five people to work this thing properly?"

“Already taken care of,” replied Zagger, smirking. “Gundy and Gabby Quiverill are coming along.”

Duggan didn’t like hearing this. Zagger had no right to involve others without first asking her permission. After all, the idea of going Trekking had been hers.

“You told them we’re going to Eshmagick?”

“Of course not; I only told them we want to catch a Faerie. Nothing more. Lambrell and I picked ‘em because they’re toddlers who can keep their mouths shut. Right, Lambrell?”

“We can trust them,” Lambrell agreed. “They’re not snitches.”

“And I told ‘em I’d kill ‘em if they did tattle,” Zagger added.

Apparently, Zagger and Lambrell had everything figured out. Duggan wasn’t sure she liked this but there was no going back now.

“Fine,” she said, “let’s get started.”

With the three of them working together, it took only a few hours to put the finishing touches on the Faerie-catching device. Collecting the spider webbing from all the crevices and crannies inside the shed was their hardest task. When they were done, Lambrell left to fetch her twin sisters, Gundy and Gabby.

When they arrived, the twins were dressed identically in loose-fitting, blue trousers and black jackets. Each jacket had the kind of hood all toddlers wore until their parents deemed them ready for the wide-brimmed hats that oldsters wore. Having just

turned twelve, each twin also had a new Moon-Tattoo freshly etched on one cheek. Duggan smiled inwardly. It was a painful but exciting day when a toddle-girl turned twelve and got her Moon-Tattoo. She had her own set of painful and prideful memories of the pinpricks that created her Moon-Tattoo, colored in the purple hue of the McDuggan clan.

Gundy had her hood pulled up. Gabby's hood was down. Or was it Gabby who had her hood pulled up and Gundy who had hers down? Duggan could never quite tell one twin from the other. They both had the same wavy, red hair and the same, remarkable splashes of freckles covering their cheeks. Tonight, the freckles were not as obvious, what with the flush of excitement reddening both twins' faces.

"Did you get the sugar?" Zagger asked Lambrell once they were all inside.

"In my pocket," answered Lambrell, patting one of the pockets of her jacket. "I've explained to them what they need to do. They're ready."

"Good," Zagger cried. "Let's get going."

The boy carefully rewrapped the Faerie Catcher and clutched it to his chest. With Zagger taking the lead, they pulled up their hoods and left the shed, starting across the open pasture above the Quiverill property and heading toward the Bailey Farm with its giant sorghum field on the north end. On the far side of this sorghum field was a thick stand of Honeyhock trees, the kind of heavy, mature Honeyhocks said to be loved by Faeries when their

sweet-smelling, yellow flowers were in full bloom in the early spring.

*In ripe spring 'tis the season*, thought Duggan as she hurried to keep up with Zagger, *when Honeyhocks and Faeries mingle*.

After crossing a field not yet seeded for corn, this one enclosed by a high wall of stone with gates at either end, Duggan and the others reached the edge of the sorghum field, which was recently plowed and smelled of freshly turned dirt. The sky was moonless and except for the pale light cast by the countless stars twinkling above them, the night was rather dark. With her excellent night vision—a matter of great pride for Duggan—she had little trouble seeing and just as Zagger was about to step into the giant field, she sped ahead to take the lead.

In the field, its deeply plowed furrows made the footing difficult, forcing Duggan to walk more slowly than she would have wanted but she didn't slow much. Every now and then, she paused to peer ahead, searching for a telltale blinking of light that might mean Lambrell's Faerie was out and about. The only light she saw, however, was the occasional glint of starlight off a piece of crystalline rock turned up by Farmer Bailey's plow.

The nearer they got to the Honeyhocks, however, the stronger and sicklier the scent of the flowers became. Duggan frowned and tried switching to breathing through her mouth instead of her nose to escape the stink but it didn't work. As the pungent odor grew stronger, Duggan's stomach churned and

she grew a little dizzy. Still, she kept moving and at last, they reached the end of the field.

With the Honeyhock trees looming in front of them, Duggan came to a halt and turned to face the others. Her nerves were tingling.

“Where should we hide?” she whispered.

Lambrell pointed to her right.

“I saw the Faerie over there, in that really tall Honeyhock just beyond the fence.”

“Right,” said Zagger. “If that’s where Lambrell saw the Faerie, that’s where we should go.”

One of the twins giggled and whispered a few words to her sister. Duggan didn’t quite hear her but she had a bad feeling.

“What’s that?” demanded Duggan, catching the eye of the twin who had giggled and spoken.

“Lambrell is always seeing things no one else sees,” replied the young toddle-girl, giggling again.

“Shut up, Gundy,” Lambrell retorted in a huff. “I did see one”

When the twin giggled again, Duggan winced. Were they off on some wild Gall-Goose chase, she wondered.

“Come on,” she muttered, “one crummy Honeyhock is slakin’ as good as another so let’s try Lambrell’s tree.”

Slipping between the rails of Farmer Bailey’s wooden fence, Duggan straightened on the other side and waited for the others. When they were all together, Zagger took the lead, dropping onto his hands and knees and working his way under the low-hanging branches of the old Honeyhock tree. Duggan



followed. She could hear Zagger's labored breathing as he crawled ahead of her, struggling to keep the device off the ground while avoiding the thorns of the low-growing Retchets one always finds underneath Honeyhocks.

"Evil barbed under flower sweet, never alone, they always meet," Duggan muttered under her breath, voicing an old Cowgrassian saying.

In the next instant, the thorn of a Retchet tore through her sleeve, piercing the skin of her right arm.

"Hallow's Fire," Duggan cried.

"Sshh," Zagger whispered back.

Wincing as she pulled away the thorn, Duggan muttered, "Slakin' retchets."

Her arm stinging from the puncture, Duggan pushed on but soon she encountered a tangle of Retchet branches so thick there was nothing to do but try crab-crawling over them. About halfway across, she lost her balance and her elbow came down full-force on a branch loaded with thorns and several long, cruelly sharp daggers dug into her flesh.

"Ow," Duggan cried. "Hallow's Fire, I hate this."

"Sshh," repeated Zagger, turning his head to give her a sharp look of disapproval.

"Sorry," Duggan mumbled in a low voice. "It's just that I hate Retchets. They're slakin' awful."

"Of course they're awful," Zagger muttered. "Stop being a baby."

Frowning, Duggan resisted the urge to say something equally mean back. Drawing in a deep breath, she followed Zagger silently as the boy led

them through the Retchets until they reached a clearing in the middle of the thorny plants just large enough for the five of them.

Through small openings in the Honeyhock branches above them, pins of starlight provided just enough light for Duggan and the others to see. Having recently read the page from the Witch's book, Duggan knew precisely what needed doing. Without a word, she took the arm of one of the twins. Gundy, she guessed. Pulling the girl beside her, she gestured for her to kneel and then she knelt beside her. In the meantime, Lambrell paired herself with the second twin and the two of them knelt together.

When they were all kneeling, Zagger carefully unwrapped the device. Wetting a finger in his mouth, he moistened the sponge at the end of the barrel. Next, Lambrell reached into the side pocket of her jacket and took out a small sack, which she handed to Zagger. Opening its drawstring with his teeth, Zagger shook the sack, sprinkling sugar onto the moistened sponge, then he tucked the sack back into the pocket of Lambrell's jacket.

"I'll handle the shutter," he announced. "It's my night to catch a Faerie."

Although that was precisely Duggan's plan, she seldom let a Zagger decision go unchallenged.

"I don't know about that," she said. "I have better night eyes and I'm more experienced with tools. Maybe I should handle the shutter."

"No way," shot back the boy, hotly. "You didn't even want to do this until I talked you into it. I'm handling the shutter."

Zagger was adamant. Having made her point, Duggan grudgingly relented.

“Fine,” she replied. “Then I’ll be in charge of the tubes.”

“Right,” Zagger agreed. “First let me get this thing set up.”

Reaching a hand into the low Honeyhock branches in front of him, Zagger found a crook where one thick branch split from another. Feeding the sugared end of the barrel through the crook, he slowly worked the barrel through the branches until its end was well on the other side. When he was satisfied with the positioning of the barrel, Zagger turned to Duggan.

“Give me a second to get underneath,” he said, his hushed voice full of excitement.

Flipping onto his back, Zagger worked himself under the device. Wrapping his fingers lightly around the barrel, he let his thumb rest on the button that opened and closed the shutter. Gently, he opened the shutter then positioned his head so he could look through the slot to see anything that might be passing down the barrel on its way to the sphere.

“Ready,” he whispered.

Duggan turned her head to give Lambrell and her sisters a small smile of encouragement.

“Everyone, take a tube,” she whispered to them.

Each of them found a tube and put the end into her mouth. When they were ready, Duggan shifted her body to get a clear view of the sponge at the end of the barrel. Taking her tube momentarily

out of her mouth, she whispered a last warning to Lambrell and the twins, her voice coming out high-pitched, she noticed.

“Remember,” she said, “stay completely quiet and listen. Make sure you pay attention. If Lambrell’s Faerie shows up, we only get one chance and we can’t make any mistakes. We do this right. Understood?”

They all gave vigorous nods, which did not reassure Duggan very much.

“Be very, very careful,” she felt compelled to add. “Remember the Curse. Hear me?”

When Lambrell and the twins again nodded vigorously, this didn’t exactly quell Duggan’s fears. How could it? It was such a huge risk they were taking. Suddenly, Duggan was full of doubts. So much could go wrong.

So much.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 6

With her lips gripping the mouthpiece, Duggan had no choice but to breathe through her nose, no matter how disgusting the odor of the Honeyhocks. One of the twins must have had allergies because the air going in and out of her nose rasped noticeably. The others remained silent as they all huddled together in the small clearing under the Honeyhock tree, all of them keeping as still as statues, waiting for a miracle to happen.

Seconds became minutes and the long minutes of waiting turned into an hour. Then the terribly long hour grew into a second, even longer hour. As she waited, Duggan could think of nothing

except the terrible Curse they were risking and the foolishness of her choice to be here, doing this.

Then, suddenly, a light blinked in the distance.

*Good Giddens*, Duggan thought, her whole body tensing.

For a long moment, there was nothing but darkness in front of her. Then the light showed again, a tiny flash of brightness in the distance, no bigger than a pinprick. Then there was nothing. Then another blinking of light showed, this time a little nearer to them than the one before. Then nothing. Then there was another blinking of light, this one even larger and brighter than the one before and obviously closer. Duggan felt a shiver run down her spine.

Clearly, the light was moving in their direction.

The twin with the runny nose must have stopped breathing because the rasping sound had ceased. Duggan noticed she wasn't breathing, either.

*Not good*, Duggan thought.

Cautiously, she forced herself to take slow, shallow breaths as she peered ahead, searching for another blinking of light but seeing nothing. For a long time, there was only darkness and it lasted so long Duggan began to wonder if she had been seeing things. But then the light blinked again and this time, it was much nearer than before. Or, to be exact, much nearer to the sugared end of the barrel.

*Could the Ancient Stories be true*, Duggan wondered.

Fragments from the Stories told of Faeries' great love of sugar and of their uncanny ability to find sugar across great distances, even in the darkest hours of night. When the blinking light showed again, this time no more than an arm's length from the sugared end of the barrel, Duggan couldn't believe her eyes.

Duggan allowed herself a quick glance down. On the ground, Zagger was doing an unbelievably good job of keeping his hands rock-steady. When she caught his eye, Zagger must have sensed her excitement, because his eyes went as wide as platters. Duggan gave the boy a quick wink before looking up.

Nothing.

The blinking light was gone, again forcing Duggan to wait for what seemed like forever, peering into the deep darkness and hardly daring to think. When one of the twins fidgeted, she risked lifting a finger to warn the toddle to be still. Then the other twin fidgeted and she had to risk the same movement again, not knowing if the movement would be the ruin of all their plans. Time dragged on. Duggan's whole body ached from being so long in the same position.

*This is crazy*, she thought.

But it was also exciting, an adventure like none she had ever experienced, with its ending unknown. Then, suddenly, the little light blinked again and this time, it was right at the end of the barrel. Or perhaps even on top of it.

Then the light blinked again and the barrel's bright, smooth surface caught the flash. For one, very

brief second, its entire length was illuminated. Squinting, Duggan thought she saw something in the middle of the tiny ball of light at the end of the barrel, though she couldn't be sure. Then she remembered her assignment.

Time to act.

Springing into action, Duggan began sucking hard on her tube. Immediately, Lambrell and the twins joined in, all of them pulling hard on their mouthpieces. The flashing light instantly disappeared and in that amazing instant, Duggan thought she saw a tiny object get sucked into the barrel. Shutting her mind to all the crazy, frightening thoughts of what this could mean, Duggan kept sucking on her tube, pulling as hard as she could. At the same time, she could hear the others sucking hard on their mouthpieces.

Suddenly, Zagger flicked his thumb on the shutter, closing the barrel with the same effect as someone putting a finger over the end of your straw. The flow of air instantly stopped and simultaneously Duggan and the three others dropped their mouthpieces and gasped for air.

**EshSecret** Time.

“Corks,” cried Zagger, reminding them they weren't finished.

Hastily, they all found the corks dangling from the ends of their tubes and pushed them into the holes of their mouthpieces, closing the tubes. Then all of them fell back, their chests heaving, their faces



bright-red. Duggan's mind was awash with thoughts but she didn't speak.

"Have we got it?" one of the twins finally whispered in a tremulous voice.

"I don't see anything blinking out there," the other twin noted in a timid whisper.

"I don't see anything, either," agreed Lambrell, speaking in a slightly louder voice. "It's all dark, dark everywhere. I think we've caught it."

"Of course we've caught it," cried Zagger, making no effort to keep his voice quiet, "just like the book says."

"I don't know," answered Duggan, not daring to believe but unable to disbelieve. "We might have scared it off. It might have flown away."

"Believe me, it's in there," affirmed Zagger, not a shred of doubt in his voice. "Come on, let's get back to the shed and take a look."

Climbing to his feet, Zagger hauled the barrel out of the branches and quickly re-wrapped the device. Then he lowered himself and began crawling through the Retchets, heading back the way they had come. Her nerves tingling, Duggan got onto her hands and knees and followed the boy as he scrambled along the ground. The others fell in line behind her.

The flesh-cutting Retchets again made the going maddeningly difficult and horribly painful. As Duggan struggled to work her way through the tangle of evilly barbed Retchets, she could hear her heart beating loudly. She really didn't know what to think or feel. In truth, she was a little giddy with

excitement. But mixed with the giddiness were other, darker emotions. After all, they had just broken a rule so Ancient and so sacred the breaking of it was all but unimaginable. Duggan couldn't believe she had dared to do such a reckless thing.

*Did it really work?*

Had they really and truly caught a living, breathing Faerie? And if they had, what did it mean to have done so? In her excitement and fear, Duggan could hardly breathe. Her heart was banging away so loudly in her chest she could hear its every beat and her hands were trembling more violently than she could ever remember them doing.

Finally, Duggan passed through the last of the Retchets and with a sigh of relief, she was able to climb to her feet. Warm blood was oozing out of a deep cut in her left palm but she ignored it. Looking around to get her bearings, she saw that Zagger was already on the other side of the fence, a few steps into the sorghum field. Even in the dim glow of the starlight, Duggan could see the odd way he was holding his mouth, with lips curled into a grin so wildly delighted as to be strange and unnatural on a boy as cynical and dark-humored as Zagger.

"Eshmagick here we come," he cried to Duggan, as she moved to join him.

"Don't say so yet, Zagger Dunleavy," Duggan cautioned. "One step at a time."

"Let's just get back to the shed and take a look at our Faerie," he answered excitedly.

Behind her, Duggan could hear the others clambering through the fence rails.

“Come on,” Zagger called gleefully to Lambrell and her sisters, “let’s get going.”

Duggan was just about to start across the field when there was a flash of lightning on the eastern horizon, followed by a low rumble of thunder. In surprise, she glanced up. All night, the sky had been clear and as far as she could now tell, there wasn’t a cloud above them. Far in the distance, however, lightning flashed again followed by another low rumble of thunder.

Duggan didn’t know what to make of the lightning. It was very odd to see flashes when the sky was so clear, especially considering the night was also windless. Still, there was no predicting a thunderstorm, she quickly reminded herself. One could come roaring out of nowhere at any time, moving with the speed of a galloping elk. As if to confirm these thoughts, a brighter flash of lightning lit the sky just above the horizon and a few seconds later, a louder, more ominous roll of thunder followed.

“Let’s hurry,” Duggan called to the others. “There’s a storm coming.”

Before she could take even one step, there was another flash of lightning. This one was large enough to light the entire sky and it seemed to crackle right over them. Startled, Duggan looked up and where there had been only stars a moment ago, long plumes of strangely multi-colored clouds were now racing across the sky, traveling with frightening speed. A big raindrop plopped on Duggan’s face, followed by another.

“Good Gidden,” she cried. “The storm is slakin’ already here. Hurry.”

Gesturing to the others to follow, Duggan began jogging across the field. Electricity again crackled overhead and Duggan looked up in time to see a very large flash of lightning fill the sky with a crazy pattern of bright, crisscrossing lines that reminded her of veins. Then the lightning disappeared, followed by another loud explosion of thunder. Although Duggan had only glimpsed the image overhead, she swore the crackling veins of lightning were not the normal, white color of ordinary lightning but rather, they were red like blood and the thunder that followed sounded more like a groan of pain than a drum roll.

Duggan shuddered.

This storm was unsettling her and she quickened her pace. Behind her, one of the twins stumbled and fell. Lambrell was quickly beside her, helping her up. Around them, the raindrops were growing more numerous and Duggan could hear the unmistakable roar of an approaching downpour.

Lightning flashed again overhead and the explosion of thunder that sounded behind them was so loud it brought all of them to a halt. Trembling violently now, Duggan glanced back. To her dismay, she saw that the Honeyhock grove on the far side of the field was afire and in the center of the flames where the bolt of lightning had undoubtedly struck, was the very Honeyhock under which they had caught the Faerie. The flames licking at the Honeyhock’s branches were as red as blood, causing

Duggan to shudder again as she got the terrible but certain feeling this wasn't an ordinary storm but a Magickal one.

She suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

"What in Hallow's Fire have we done?" she cried aloud, unable to contain her panic.

No one answered but one of the twins began to cry. Feeling guilty, Duggan moved beside the girl and said the first words to come to mind.

"Don't worry, we'll soon be home and everything will be fine. Really. You'll see."

Duggan didn't quite believe her own words.

"I'm scaredy-scared," the girl whimpered.

"Hey," answered Duggan, giving the girl as brave a smile as she could manage, "don't think about the storm, just think about getting home."

"I'll try," the girl answered, sniffing but also managing a brave, little smile of her own.

"Come on," Zagger now shouted, gesturing for Duggan and the girl to get moving. "We can't stay here. Come on, everybody. Follow me."

There was no choice now but to cross the unsheltered expanse of Farmer Bailey's sorghum field with the full power of the storm roiling above them. Her stomach churning, Duggan had to force her feet to work but somehow she got them moving and quickly she fell into line behind Zagger, matching his pace. Zagger was running all out now and Duggan could hear his hard breathing as he ran ahead of her. The lightning began flashing more frequently as they dashed across the field, creating a nearly constant glow that actually helped a little,

illuminating the ground as they picked their way through the field's deep furrows.

Raindrops were plopping on the ground all around them. Or were they raindrops? Once or twice, Duggan thought she saw solid forms falling among the raindrops, landing on the ground with soft plunks then quickly disappearing. One of them she saw clearly enough to think it might be a spider, landing on its feet on the muddy ground and skittering away.

*No way*, Duggan told herself, *you're imagining things*.

She had to be. After all, spiders didn't fall out of the sky.

They just didn't.

Suddenly, there was a long, extremely loud crackling of electricity above them. Duggan looked up in time to see blood-red lightning filling hundreds of veins crisscrossing the sky overhead. At the same time, a spider squished under her left foot, causing her to stumble and nearly fall.

"Don't you be crazy, Duggan-lass," she cried aloud as she recovered her balance. "The sky does not rain spiders." She wasn't sure she believed her own words, however. "Hallow's Fire," she shouted, unable to keep quiet. "What have we done?"

If any of the others heard her, none answered.

When they reached the other side of Farmer Bailey's sorghum field, Zagger hurried to the gate that opened into the next field and fumbled for what seemed forever to find and undo the latch. When he finally managed to get the gate opened, Duggan pushed past him and led the others into the next field.

Immediately, she felt a little safer inside the sheltering walls enclosing this smaller field. She also knew they had only one more field to cross after this one and then they would be home. Duggan felt her spirits lifting.

They were going to make it.

Reaching the second gate at the far end of the field, Duggan had trouble finding the latch but eventually she got hold of it. Pulling hard, she gave the rusty metal an upward tug and managed to lift the latch enough to get the gate opened.

*We're going to make it*, she thought as she hurried through the gate.

Before she had taken two steps on the other side, however, she received a terrible shock. A bright fire was burning in the distance in the exact spot where the Quiverill home was supposed to be.

Duggan gasped in horror.

Behind her, Lambrell cried out in fright and one of the twins screamed.



EshSecret





# Chapter 7

“Our house is burning,” screamed the twin while Lambrell moaned loudly.

“I can’t believe it,” cried the other twin.

Duggan stared in horror. Terrible flames were reaching high into the sky. Numb, she glanced at the others. Both twins were sobbing. Zagger stood immobilized, his mouth agape. Lambrell’s face was terribly pale and her lips were tightly drawn. For a long moment, Duggan felt too paralyzed to do or say anything. Then one of the twins slumped to her knees and when she did, all of a sudden, Duggan grew angry and the anger made her forget she wasn’t strong enough to handle an event as shocking as this.

"This won't do," she muttered aloud, "this won't slakin' do." Raising her voice, she turned and spoke to Zagger. "We need to do something."

The boy's eyes were wide from shock but somehow, he managed to recover his wits.

With a grim nod, he spoke out in a hoarse voice, "Right, I'll take care of it. Duggan, you stay here with Lambrell and her sisters. I'll go down and check things out. I'll be back as soon as I know what's going on."

Duggan was about to say OK when a funny feeling stirred in her, a feeling she didn't quite understand but it was very strong and it told her she needed to go with Zagger.

"I'm coming, too," she said. "Lambrell can stay here and watch her sisters. You hear that, Lambrell?" she called to her friend.

Lambrell appeared much too shocked to hear anything. Duggan put a hand on her friend's shoulder and gave a firm squeeze.

"We'll be back soon," she said to her. Then Duggan glanced at the twins and called to them, "Listen, you two. Wait here with Lambrell. Zagger and I will be right back."

Duggan wasn't entirely sure this was the best plan but at this particular moment, with all that was happening, Lambrell and her sisters were as safe here as anywhere else, which might just mean they were safe nowhere. Whatever the case may be, Duggan needed to find out what was happening at the Quiverill home. She had a terrible feeling she knew

but still, she needed to be sure. She gave Zagger a nod to signal she was ready.

“Right, come on,” the boy responded.

He took off at a run, crossing the remaining field. With a pointless wave to Lambrell and the twins, Duggan followed and quickly she caught up with him. Then they ran together, matching strides. Looming in front of them was a long, narrow stand of Blue-Fir trees and on the other side of these trees, the awful crackling and popping of fires could be distinctly heard. The sounds made Duggan sick to her stomach but she pressed on.

Lightning continued to flash overhead, though less often now than before. The rain, however, had begun falling harder. Big drops were thumping on the ground and bouncing off its bare surface, kicking up ugly spatters of rain-soaked dirt. The wet ground had an odor that reminded Duggan of the Ancient swamp that lay on the western edge of Cowgrass, a dank, festering place that smelled of oily mud, rotting plant and something else, something foul, long dead and terribly rotten.

Duggan shuddered at the thought of that terrible smell.

Quickly, they reached the stand of Blue-Fir trees and as they moved through the trees, Zagger pushed a stride or two ahead of Duggan. As she followed, Duggan noticed a new odor that almost made her falter and turn around. It was the smell of smoke, only it was not the sweet smell of logs burning cheerily in a homey fireplace on a cold winter's night. No, this new smoke had the odor of

destruction, a sickening smell that made Duggan nauseous.

Still, she pressed on because it was the only thing she could do.

Soon, Duggan and Zagger came to the shed where the three friends had met only recently to make their plans. More accurately, they came to the spot where the shed had once stood, for all that remained now of the structure were a few, charred beams, turned black from a fire that had burned itself out, though the wood still smoldered. It was a frightening sight and Duggan couldn't believe she was seeing it.

*What have we done?*

Her eyes smarting from the smoke, Duggan followed Zagger silently past the charred remains of the shed, then down the familiar path that led to the Quiverills' house. As they neared the house, the air was heavy with a dark, acrid smoke that made Duggan's throat hurt, her eyes sting and fill with tears. Ahead of her, she could hear Zagger coughing as he made his way to the house.

The path they were following cut between two Ancient Silver-Aspens. On the other side, they emerged into the backyard of the Quiverill home. To her relief, Duggan saw the house was still standing, apparently untouched by the fires. The trees around it hadn't fared so well, however. Many of them were afire. One big Jack-Pine was in the throes of dying, with hungry flames licking upward from its roots to the tops of its branches, devouring the whole of its trunk and all its limbs.

## Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

It took all of Duggan's will to keep from crying as she watched the tree suffer its agonizing death. Horrified, she looked away only to spy another tree so consumed by fire it was on the verge of falling. Seeing this second tree suffering so cruelly, Duggan had to squeeze her eyes shut to fight back the tears. The urge to turn and run was suddenly very strong but then Duggan reminded herself she had work to do.

Hard work.

Taking a deep breath, she hurried to the back door of the house. Taking another deep breath, she pushed the door open and looked into the back kitchen.

Inside, all was deathly quiet.

Duggan sucked in another deep breath to calm her nerves before forcing herself to step though the doorway. Cutting across the back kitchen, with Zagger following, she made her way to the same front parlor-room where the Quiverill family had been making happy music not so very long ago. Except for the sounds of trees burning fiercely outside the windows, the room was as silent as a morgue. Duggan felt Zagger's hand on her shoulder. She turned.

"Where to?" he asked, his voice raspy and his eyes watering from the smoke.

"This way," she answered bleakly, pointing upward.

With her heart beating loudly, Duggan crossed the front parlor-room and clambered up the stairs that wound around a Bright-Maple tree trunk

supposed to bring good luck to the Quiverill home. When she reached the top of the stairs, she turned to her left and headed for the bedroom of Lambrell's parents. Although it was the dead of night, she needed no lamplight to find her way, not with the tress burning so brightly outside the upstairs windows, illuminating everything in their eerie glow.

Duggan's hand was trembling when she reached to take hold of the wooden handle of the door to Mum and Pops Quiverill's bedroom—trembling so badly she could hardly get a grip. She found herself not wanting to turn the handle and go inside but she knew she had no choice. Lambrell and the twins were waiting anxiously for news. Whatever awaited her on the other side of the door; she had to know the truth of it. Steeling herself, she gripped the wooden handle tightly. Then, forcing herself to do what she must, she turned the handle and pushed.

The door creaked open.

Duggan hadn't really given any thought to what would await her on the other side. Her instincts told her to expect the worst but what she encountered was more horrible than anything she could have imagined. Pops and Mum Quiverill were lying side-by-side in their bed, still as corpses, their faces the lifeless color of white marble, their eyes wide open but unseeing, their mouths agape and ghastly.

Duggan heard Zagger coughing behind her. Or was it something else she heard from the boy? Moving to the bed, Duggan's first thought was that Mum and Pops Quiverill were dead, killed by the smoke. The thought numbed her and made her want

to run away from this horrible scene but that was the coward's choice.

Outside the window, there was a sudden burst of flame from the dying Jack-Pine. The bright light cast a flickering spotlight on Mum Quiverill. Immediately, Duggan saw the woman wasn't dead. Not many signs of life remained in her but there were a few. The woman's chest rose and fell with tiny movements. A little color still reddened one cheek. An eyelash fluttered occasionally.

Mum Quiverill had always been a woman joyously full of life, ruddy-cheeked, good-humored and quick to laugh, and so it was excruciatingly painful to see the woman now so pale and deathlike, her skin looking like lifeless stone instead of flesh-and-blood. Cautiously, Duggan stretched a forefinger to touch the woman's cheek. The icy coldness of it was so shocking she jerked away her finger.

"Easy, Duggan-lass," she muttered aloud.

Taking a deep breath, Duggan reached her hand again and lightly touched her forefinger to a curl of hair lying across the woman's forehead. This, too, was as hard and cold as stone but this time Duggan didn't panic. Withdrawing her hand, Duggan glanced across the bed to look at Pops Quiverill's face, which had a similarly stony quality. To Duggan's relief, the man was breathing shallowly and there were other, small signs of life visible when she looked closely enough.

"They're not dead, are they?" Zagger asked.

"No, thank Gidden. They're still breathing."

"What's that on their necks?"

Duggan turned her head to stare blankly at Zagger.

“What?”

“There,” answered the boy, pointing, “that pokey-out thing.”

Duggan looked at Mum Quiverill. Sure enough, on the side of her neck just below her jawbone a little stick about the size of a toothpick was protruding from the woman’s stony skin. Stick was the wrong word for it, Duggan quickly noted as she peered at the strange little object. No, it was more in the form of a very skinny triangle made of stone, not wood.

Zagger asked, “So, what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Pops Quiverill has one, too,” noted Zagger, pointing again.

“I see that.”

“What about the others? Are they all like this?”

“I guess we should check.”

Duggan knew exactly what they would find in the toddlers’ bedrooms but she forced herself to look anyway. Sure enough, each of the Quiverill boys was lying motionless in his bed, barely breathing, his skin the color and hardness of marble. As with Mum and Pops Quiverill, each had a stony triangle sticking out of the skin of his neck. The last room they checked was the baby’s room and in the crib, Duggan found a still, nearly lifeless toddler where only recently there had been a boisterous, joyful, two-Moon-years-old



Shammy Quiverill. A stony tear clung to one of the baby's cheeks.

Seeing the baby in this condition was more than Duggan could bear. The horrifying fact of the catastrophe falling on them suddenly hit with full force and she practically staggered out of the bedroom, lurching to the top of the stairs and stumbling down the steps. At the bottom, she nearly fell. Dazed and shocked, her eyes welling with tears, Duggan hurried across the floor of the parlor-room and through the front doorway into the smoky, acrid air outside.

Duggan desperately needed fresh air. Even more urgently, she needed to get away, get away from this evil place.

Without a thought of Zagger, she ran toward the open road, angry at herself for being such a weakling, such a coward, but unable to stop her feet as she fled from the horror of the place. When she reached the road, Duggan turned and ran down its middle with no purpose in mind other than to get away.

After a dozen or so strides, the air grew cleaner. Slowing to a walk and wiping tears from her eyes, Duggan took a deep gulp of the fresh air, then another one. Then several more. With each breath, she felt a bit calmer. Gradually, her hands stopped trembling and she was able to blink and to look at the world a little more matter-of-factly.

Her eyes went automatically in the direction of her own house and instantly all her good feelings dissolved. Where her house had long stood, over the

rise in the road and past an Ancient grove of Swaying-Poplars, there was now the unmistakable glow of fire. A bolt of lightning flashed in the sky above the horrible glow.

Immediately, Duggan's stomach heaved and she grew dizzy. Her knees buckled and she fell backward, landing on the ground in a sitting position. There she sat, swaying back and forth, shocked, paralyzed, powerless to move. Of course, there was no need for her to move. Duggan knew with certainty the terrible truth of what she would find when eventually she summoned the strength to get up and make the long, painful walk to her Cursed home.

And it was all her fault.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 8

After seeing what she needed to see, Duggan made her way back to the spot where she had left Lambrell and the twins. The rain had diminished to a light mist and the thunder and lightning were gone. Approaching them, Duggan had a moment of fright when she saw a fire flickering just to the left of the gate and the acrid smell of smoke filled her nostrils again.

*Oh no, not Lambrell and the twins,* she thought. *Not everyone.*

To her relief, she found Lambrell and her two sisters huddled around a small fire, with Zagger beside them, apparently having returned ahead of her.

All of them were looking entirely alive and unfrozen, though they were a gloomy looking trio as they stared forlornly into the orangey flames. Duggan noticed Zagger had something clutched in one of his hands. As she drew near, Lambrell must have heard her footsteps because suddenly she glanced up.

“Duggan’s back,” she cried.

The others instantly looked up. Both twins had glum looks on their faces. Zagger’s lips parted slightly and when their eyes met, Duggan thought she saw a flicker of sympathy.

“You OK?” Zagger asked.

“No,” she answered. “How can I be when—”

Zagger hastily cut her off.

“Um,” he said, “so I gave Lambrell and the twins the good news that everyone is alive, that they weren’t hurt by the fire but they can’t move because they are in a kind of Magickal spell, all of them OK except for the spell.”

*So, thought Duggan, Zagger is sugarcoating the truth.*

“Yeah, um,” she answered slowly, painfully aware of the eyes turning her way as she struggled to find the right words. “I guess everyone is OK. They’re all, you know, kinda sleeping.”

That was the best she could do.

“Sleeping?” one of the twins asked.

“Well, not exactly sleeping,” Duggan answered, still searching for the right thing to say. “More like frozen, I guess.”

Frozen turned out to be a bad choice.

Her eyes widening, Lambrell cried, "What do you mean, frozen?"

"Frozen is maybe not right," answered Duggan, backpedaling. "They're alive and breathing but I think they're slowly changing. You know, like the toddle rhyme says."

Lambrell gasped and cried, "What do you mean?"

Duggan gave up. There just was no gentle way of putting it.

"They're turning to stone."

This news was apparently too much for Lambrell, who moaned and closed her eyes. Beside her, one of the twins instantly began to cry. Was it Gabby or Gundy?

*Doesn't matter*, Duggan told herself.

The other twin didn't cry but she looked on the verge of doing so. Feeling the need to change subjects, Duggan turned to Zagger.

"What's that in your hand?"

"Something I didn't show you before."

Duggan didn't like the look on Zagger's face. There was a funny curl to his lips that didn't look natural.

She muttered, "Which is?"

Zagger handed the thing to her. It was another page copied from the Faerie book in Lambrell's neat handwriting. Duggan held the paper over the fire so she could read it. This excerpt was obviously from an earlier chapter of the Witch's book and Duggan couldn't believe what she was reading. She gave Zagger an accusatory look.

“You knew about this all along?”

“Well, not right away. After Lambrell showed me the page from the book that tells how to catch a Faerie, she kinda mentioned this one and I had her make a copy, just in case.”

Rattling the sheet of paper, Duggan said, “Nattlin writes here that the Curse is worse than what the Stories say.”

“Yeah, I know,” answered Zagger.

“There’s some slakin’ weird stuff at the bottom of this page about it being all her fault and about trickery and a very dark Magick fashioned out of a deep hatred creating a Curse that can’t be stopped.”

“Yeah, I know,” the boy repeated. “Duggan, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” cried Duggan. “Hallow’s Fire, Zagger, after hundreds of years the Curse has finally come down and it’s all our fault.”

Zagger answered in a voice that was strangely not his own, “Yeah, I know.”

Duggan couldn’t contain herself any longer.

“You know? Hallow’s Fire, Zagger. We’ve slakin’ brought down the Faerie Lord’s Curse and...and...”

Duggan’s voice cracked. Her hands began trembling uncontrollably and she could feel her eyes filling with tears. She felt so guilty, so stupid. Zagger’s face turned white. The crying twin now wailed more loudly than before and the other one dropped her chin to her chest and squeezed her eyes

shut. Lambrell was utterly still, immobilized by her grief.

After a long moment of painful, bitter silence, Duggan forced herself to put into words the question she feared to ask.

“Is the Faerie dead then? You’ve checked?”

Lambrell gave a pained nod of her head.

“Look for yourself,” answered Zagger, in a voice that still didn’t sound like his own.

Bending, Lambrell took a small object off the ground and handed it to Duggan. It was the sphere from their Faerie-catching device, now stripped of the bamboo tubes, its four holes plugged with corks. Reluctantly, Duggan took the plum-sized sphere out of her friend’s hands and stared at it, unable to face opening it.

“Go ahead, open it,” coaxed Zagger, his voice sounding miserable.

With trembling fingers, Duggan unfastened the little clasp that held the door on the top of the sphere and looked inside.

Nothing moved.

“I’m the one who killed it,” Zagger muttered behind her. “I must have closed the shutter on it or something.”

Duggan said nothing. She was altogether too full of horror to say anything to Zagger. Something was definitely in there but in the eerily flickering light of the fire, whatever was lying in the bottom of the sphere, held in place by the spider webbing, was barely visible. Carefully, Duggan moved her eye

closer for a better look and when she did, her breath caught.

It was her first sight ever of a Faerie and it turned out a real-life Faerie had a slightly bug-like appearance, with stubby, little legs and fat arms sprouting out of a short torso with a noticeably rounded belly. This Faerie's face was long and bony, with wide, convex eyes that stared unseeing out of shallow sockets in a way that reminded Duggan of fish eyes. Its white hair was stringy and the skin that covered its facial bones had the drab color of old tallow.

Duggan took a deep breath. If the little creature really were dead, she needed to know for sure. Moving her eye even closer to the opening, she forced herself to examine the thing for injuries. Immediately, she noticed what she had not seen before. The Faerie's tiny, left shoulder was smashed and bleeding, with a piece of broken bone protruding through a jagged gash. Above the damaged shoulder, there was a jagged tear in its small, nearly transparent wing that lay broken in the spider webbing.

Duggan felt altogether terrible. All this horrible damage to the Faerie was their doing. Blinking her eyes to hold back tears, Duggan shifted her gaze from the crushed shoulder to the center of the Faerie's chest, looking without hope for any sign of movement that might mean the Faerie was yet breathing. The creature's little chest was utterly still, a very bad sign. Duggan sighed deeply.

*Dead*, she thought dejectedly.



Suddenly, a memory stirred in her, a vague, early toddle memory of something she had seen her Mum do when their pet pig, Raggy, was giving birth to her piglets. Duggan had been only four Moon-years old at the time but her Mum had allowed her to watch the whole, amazing birthing of Raggy's six piglets. The last to be born was a female piglet, the runt of the litter. This tiny creature had come out of Raggy's womb looking about as much a goner as this Faerie did but Mum McDuggan hadn't given up on the poor, little creature.

Duggan sucked in a long breath. Should she try her Mum's cure? Did she dare? Cautiously, she pushed two fingers into the sphere.

"What are you doing?" Zagger cried in alarm.

Duggan answered, "Trying something."

"Let the poor thing be."

In Zagger's voice, Duggan heard an awful mix of emotions: fear, guilt, shock and something else, something she didn't quite recognize. One more time, she ignored the boy. Gently taking the little creature between her thumb and forefinger, Duggan slowly and carefully extracted the tiny Faerie from the sticky webbing. Gently placing the thing in the open palm of her left hand and hoping to imitate what her Mum had done for the piglet, Duggan took a deep breath and exhaled lightly on the motionless Faerie, warming it with her breath.

She allowed her breath to come out slowly and gently, all the while watching anxiously for any sign of color returning to the Faerie's face. To her dismay, she saw none. Still, she wasn't ready to give

up. As she blew again on the poor Faerie, Duggan gently placed the tip of a finger on the Faerie's chest and began making small, circular motions where she thought its heart must be. At the same time, she started murmuring soft, gentle words of encouragement, alternately speaking words of comfort then exhaling light puffs of her warming breath.

"C'mon little Faerie," she whispered, "It's all right. Wake up for us." Then she blew again and whispered, "It's all right. Wake up."

Without being asked, Lambrell moved beside Duggan and began blowing gently on the Faerie, freeing Duggan to speak without interruption.

"Please, little Faerie," cooed Duggan as Lambrell blew. "Wake up for us so we can take care of you. We're sorry we hurt you and we want to help. Please don't be dead, little Faerie. Please wake up. Don't be afraid."

The Faerie remained motionless. Duggan glanced at Lambrell who gave her an encouraging nod.

"Keep talking," the girl urged.

Nodding, Duggan continued murmuring as Lambrell blew.

"It's all right, little Faerie," she said, "I know you're hurt and everything is scary but it's all right. We'll take care of you. We'll find you help. I promise. Just wake up. Please, wake up."

All of a sudden, the tip of the Faerie's right, undamaged wing twitched slightly. Duggan caught her breath. Was it working, she wondered. Then the

wing twitched again, this time so sharply it had to be from a spasm of live muscle. Duggan withdrew her finger and waited, hardly daring to breathe, hoping yet afraid to hope too much. Then the wing twitched again and in the next second, the Faerie's chest began moving up and down as the little creature drew in then expelled shallow breath after shallow breath.

"Oh, Good Gidden," Duggan cried, "little Faerie, you're alive. Thank you. Oh, thank you. Now don't worry. We will take care of you. I promise."

Duggan looked up. The twins were staring at her with mouths wide open. Zagger's lips were tightly drawn and his face had a very strange expression on it, one utterly unfamiliar to Duggan. When she glanced at Lambrell, the girl's eyes were misting with tears but the small smile on her face told Duggan they were happy tears.

"Good Gidden, you did it," Lambrell said. "You've brought the Faerie back from death."

"I guess," Duggan answered cautiously, "though it's still very badly hurt."

"But it's alive."

"I guess," repeated Duggan, hardly able to believe it.

"Do you think we've lifted the Curse?" Zagger suddenly asked.

"I doubt it," Duggan answered coldly.

"Shouldn't we check? Maybe the Faerie being alive changes things."

Duggan gave the boy an icy stare.

"It's barely alive and it could die at any moment," she pointed out, feeling incredibly annoyed

for some reason. “I don’t think we’ve ended the Curse just by putting a little warmth into its mangled body.”

“I think we should go back and check,” Zagger argued.

“Fine. You go, then,” Duggan answered testily. Turning, she handed the Faerie gently to Lambrell. “Here,” she said, “cut a little piece of cloth to keep the Faerie warm. Then put it back in the sphere.”

While Lambrell tended to the Faerie. Zagger turned and headed for the Quiverill home. As Duggan watched him make his way across the field, she told herself to think positively but in her heart, she knew her small success with the Faerie had not brought an end to their troubles but the beginning of a new chapter of them. When Zagger passed into the trees, disappearing from view, Duggan slumped to the ground to wait for his return with the inevitable, bad news.

When Zagger did finally return, Duggan didn’t need to hear any words from him to know what he had found. Zagger’s rigid face told her all she needed to know.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 9

The next morning, loud voices jarred Duggan out of her sleep. And as often happens when you're awakened before you're ready, Duggan came out of her sleep with a shudder and a moan and found herself wishing with her all her heart she could just go back to sleep but the voices nearby were too loud to allow it.

"Let go of me," bleated one of the twins. "I mean it. Let go."

"Ow," cried the other twin. "Stop hurting me."

"Please, no," implored Lambrell. "Not that."

Duggan found herself sitting upright, having fallen asleep with her back against the wind-stunted trunk of an Ancient Olive-Berry. From a night of sleeping in the wrong position, Duggan's back ached, her neck was stiff and as she blinked her eyes to wake herself, she felt altogether miserable. Sighing, Duggan looked around. Off by himself, Zagger was lying on his side and whimpering pitifully as he slept. At one point, he raised a fist and swiped at something invisible above him.

It was very early in the morning. The sky was still dark, with only a tiny hint of the coming sunrise showing on the eastern horizon. The campfire had mostly burned itself out overnight, with now only a few coals still smoldering in the fire ring, giving off occasional wisps of smoke but no heat. A foggy pall hung over everything, making the cold, damp air feel even colder and damper. Curled together against the wall, the three Quiverill girls were still asleep but fidgeting and restless, muttering, moaning and crying odd turns of phrases as they slept.

Duggan shuddered as the memories of her own nightmares slowly came back to her. What terrible nightmares they had been. Well, the night was over. Finally. With a groan, Duggan climbed to her feet and stretched. Across from her, abruptly the twins came awake, each of them sitting up and yawning at the same time. Buried in the shadows of their hoods, their faces looked altogether gloomy.

Opening her eyes a second or two later, Lambrell gave a big yawn and then propped herself on one elbow to stir the coals with a stick, trying

without success to coax the smoldering remains of the fire back to life. Lambrell's face looked as gloomy as those of her sisters, Duggan noted.

"Good morning," Duggan called, trying to sound as cheery as she could manage, which wasn't very cheery. "How did everyone sleep?"

"Lousily," Lambrell replied grumpily. "I had terrible nightmares."

"Same with me," said one of the twins.

"Me, too," the other added.

Duggan glanced in the direction of Zagger, who was just coming awake. Stretching his arms, the boy yawned mightily. The expression on his face scared Duggan a little. She couldn't quite read it but the energy and brightness usually there were missing. Duggan was about to ask Zagger about his night when he spoke first.

"What now?" he asked.

Duggan gave what seemed the obvious answer.

"Clearly, we need to find a way to lift the Faerie Curse," she said. "I have no idea how so I'm open to ideas if any of you clever toddlers has one."

For a moment no one spoke. Zagger's forehead creased and the twins looked glum. At last, Lambrell ventured to speak.

"Well, it seems we must go to Devonwick to find the Witch who wrote the book," she suggested. "Nattlin may be crazy but everyone says she can be brilliant, too. And she knows about Faeries."

Duggan couldn't believe her ears.

“That’s a slakin’ terrible idea. In case you’ve forgotten, Nutty Nattlin was the one who got us in this mess.”

“What about Judge Ware?” said one of the twins. “He’s pretty smart about the Ancient times.”

“Or Regent Wickham?” added the other twin.

“Those two? No way,” Duggan cried. “This is totally out of their league and besides, what are we going to tell them? That after hundreds of Moon-years of no one ever messing with the Faerie Lord’s terrible Curse, now five, totally stupid toddlers from their little village of Cowgrass just did the unthinkable. No way.”

“Then what?” asked Zagger.

Duggan sighed.

“Much as I hate to admit it,” she answered, speaking slowly, “finding Nutty Nattlin looks like our only choice.”

“Um, does anyone know how far it is to Devonwick?” asked Lambrell.

“Around a two-day walk, I’d hazard to guess,” said Zagger.

The boy sounded knowledgeable but Duggan quickly reminded herself she’d be twice the fool if she ever again trusted anything coming out of the mouth of Zagger Dunleavy.

“Like, how would you know?” she demanded.

“Um, I’ve been there a few times,” the boy slowly answered. “Um, you know, on business,” he added.



Then he lowered his eyes and there was another long moment of silence while he fidgeted and looked untrustworthy.

“Well, then, you lead us there, Zagger Dunleavy,” Duggan suddenly pronounced, making up her mind. “Time is against us, so let’s not waste any more of it.”

“Right,” cried Zagger, though the bravado in his voice was obviously forced. “Follow me, everyone. If we move fast and keep walking all night, we can reach Devonwick by tomorrow morning, I’d wager.”

Zagger turned and was about to head out when a practical question popped into Duggan’s head. Impulsively, she grabbed Zagger’s shoulder to stop him.

“Wait. There’s an important question that needs asking,” she said.

“Um,” Zagger answered, “like, what’s that?”

The question was obvious to Duggan.

“What do we do with the Faerie? I mean, we might kill it if we take it with us, what with the hard walking we’re going to do. On the other hand, what’s the point of finding Nutty Nattlin if we don’t have the Faerie with us when we do?”

Lambrell jumped in with a thought.

“Gabby can carry the Faerie. She’s always caring for critters at home and she’s good at it. She could take care of it while we travel.”

The other twin chimed in with, “Yes, let Gabby take care of it. She’s good at taking care of things.”

Then she giggled uncomfortably and for the first time in her life, Duggan suddenly knew how to tell the twins apart. Gabby was the quiet, serious one, the caregiver. Gundy was the silly giggler.

“Um, no,” replied Duggan, as she pondered the few choices available to them, “it’s not a bad thought but I don’t think so. Still, there is something important Gabby can do,” she added. “I’m thinking one of us needs to stay here and look after our families. I mean, we can’t just leave them here. It sounds like Gabby is the one to do it.”

“What do you mean, take care of them?” asked Gabby. “How do I do that?”

“I have no idea,” Duggan answered honestly. “I mean, I have zero knowledge of Faerie Curses that turn folks to stone. But that’s why I’m thinking you’re the one to stay, Gabby. If anyone is going to figure out how to take care of them, it should be you, right?”

For a moment, Gabby looked uncertain but then she nodded bravely.

“I’ll do it,” she agreed, sounding determined.

“Then I’m staying, too,” exclaimed Gundy, surprising Duggan. “Gabby shouldn’t be left here by herself, so I’ll stay with her and help as best I can.”

To Duggan’s way of thinking, leaving the silly twin behind with her sister was a fine plan.

“Then it’s settled,” she concluded. “The twins are staying.”

“What about the Faerie?” asked Lambrell. “We still haven’t decided.”

Duggan quickly made up her mind.

“I’ll carry the Faerie,” she said.

Duggan’s decision was an impulsive one but she wasn’t going to change her mind. Bending, she picked up the sphere where it rested on the ground near the fire ring and gently tucked it into the pocket of her jacket. When Lambrell opened her mouth to say something to her, Duggan gave a quick shake of her head.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

“I know,” Lambrell answered.

“We should get going,” Zagger reminded them. “Wait here while I grab some food and water from the Quiverill kitchen. We’ll need ’em.”

Nodding, Duggan said, “Hurry back so we can get going.”

And although she said it, she was far from certain they were making the right choice.



**EshSecret**



## Chapter 10

As soon as Zagger came back with a sack stuffed with food and canteens of water, the three friends started out together. Duggan was painfully aware they soon would be passing the smoke-blackened house where her Mum, Pops and Grandmum were lying frozen by the Curse, as still as statues and as cold as ice. The thought made her hands tremble and her stomach churn. A pang of guilt nearly choked her.

Too quickly, they reached the last hill before Duggan's house and suddenly, Duggan couldn't stand it any longer. Breaking into a jog and then a sprint, she raced down the road and past her house as

fast as she could, driving herself forward to escape all the dreadful thoughts flooding her mind, running with all her strength until she was far from her home though she was unable to run from the guilt.

Slowing to a walk only when she could run no more, Duggan was so exhausted she had to gasp for air, her head spinning and chest heaving. Suddenly dizzy, she plopped herself onto a patch of soft-looking, green grass by the side of the road, feeling for all the world like crying but not allowing the tears to fall. When her two friends caught up, neither one of them said anything to Duggan. Zagger refused even to look at her. A tight-lipped Lambrell came over and offered a hand to help her up. Taking a deep breath, Duggan grabbed hold of Lambrell's hand and struggled to her feet.

With a quick nod of encouragement, Lambrell started walking again and Duggan fell silently in stride beside her friend. Duggan could feel the weight of the sphere bouncing in her pocket as she moved down the road but she resisted the urge to reach a hand inside and touch it. As she hurried along, she also had to work hard to resist the temptation to look back at her house.

"Eyes forward, Duggan-lass," she muttered aloud.

There could be no more thinking on the past, Duggan reminded herself. Unfortunately, the road ahead filled her with doubts. What if going to Devonwick were a bad choice? They had no idea if Nattlin would be there or if she could help them. For

all Duggan knew, they were moving totally in the wrong direction.

“Don’t think on it,” she muttered. “Hope for the best.”

For the rest of the morning, the three of them walked silently. Eventually, Duggan’s stomach started growling but she didn’t want to stop, not even to eat. No, they needed to get to Devonwick—and get there as quickly as possible.

Finally, as the sun was reaching mid-sky, they paused briefly to discuss whether to take a lunch stop. Quickly, they all agreed to push on. As they resumed walking, Lambrell reached into the food sack and found an apple for each of them, which they munched in silence, none of them feeling any more disposed to speak than before. From time to time, Duggan slipped a hand into her pocket to reassure herself the sphere was still there.

“Hey, you two,” Zagger finally called out, breaking the gloomy silence sometime in the mid-afternoon. “I’ve been wondering what we should call ourselves.”

Zagger’s tone of voice was a little too cheery for Duggan’s tastes.

“What do you mean, call ourselves?” she replied testily.

Coming to a halt, Zagger looked her in the eyes and gave one of his obnoxious grins.

“You know, now that we’re on a quest. When folks go questing, they pick a name for themselves. Take those Elves who went searching in the forest where memories are forgotten. They called

themselves the Lost Seekers. I think we should have some kind of grandy-good name like that for ourselves.”

“You mean like when Delvin Dahl and his sailors went looking for the Enchanted Islands?” asked Lambrell, stopping beside her friends to join the conversation. “They called themselves Dahl’s Dreamers, right?”

“Exactly. They had a burnin’ *hot* name for themselves,” said Zagger.

Lambrell quickly agreed, “They sure did.”

Listening to her friends, Duggan was finding the whole conversation incredibly annoying.

“Dahl’s Dreamers never found their islands,” she felt compelled to point out.

“That’s true,” Zagger admitted, “but my point is, they had a burnin’ hot name for themselves while they were questing. So, I repeat, what should we call ourselves now that we’re on our own quest?”

“The Gang of Idiots would fit us just about perfectly,” Duggan shot back testily.

“That’s a terrible name,” retorted Zagger. “We need something grandiose, something inspiring.”

“The Pack of Fools, then,” said Duggan. “Zagger, this isn’t a game we’re playing.”

Zagger refused to be put off.

“All the more reason for us to have a name,” he argued. “Something to rally around.”

“How about the Fearsome Threesome?” Lambrell suggested.



Grinning happily, Zagger was quick to agree. "I like it," he exclaimed.

*No way, thought Duggan. No way Zagger gets what he wants.*

"Oh, come on, who in this crowd is fearsome?" she pointed out. "We might as well call ourselves the Quakin' Trio."

Zagger snorted.

"That's an insulting name."

"It fits," said Duggan.

"For you, maybe."

Quickly, Lambrell interrupted, saying, "The Quakin' Trio sounds good to me. I mean, I've pretty much been quakin' nonstop since the Honeyhocks. Quakin' and shakin'. In fact, you could say I've been slakin' quakin' and shakin'."

Suddenly, Lambrell laughed loudly and in the next second, Zagger was laughing with her. A second or two later, even Duggan couldn't keep herself quiet though she did not laugh quite as heartily as the others. Still, she laughed and it felt good. When their laughter finally died, they started out again and their step was a little lighter. Zagger took the lead once more, hurrying down the road.

Near sunset, the newly named Quakin' Trio finally stopped to eat. By now, they were very tired and very hungry. For their small dinner, they ate a few, bite-sized chunks of cheese, another apple and a piece of bread torn from a hard loaf of black bread from the Quiverill kitchen, all washed down with water from a leather canteen. After eating, they

discussed whether to bed down but chose instead to keep walking through the night.

Soon, they were back on the road, with Zagger setting a brisk pace, though perhaps not quite as brisk as before. As they trudged forward, the sun slowly dropped to the edge of the western horizon, where it hovered briefly before disappearing without fanfare. Normally, Duggan would have wished for a pretty sunset but on this miserable night, the colorless sunset seemed to fit their dire situation.

With the sun now set, night descended quickly and they had to travel under a bleak sky filled with scudding, black clouds that obscured the stars and made the night even darker. As they kept on, Duggan remained acutely aware of the weight of the sphere in her pocket but she refused to let herself think about the poor Faerie inside.

Thinking was just too scary.

After many thousands of silent paces, they paused and allowed themselves to drop to the ground for a brief rest. The night was now very cold and the sky remained starless. No one was much in the mood for talking while they rested, sprawled on a small patch of dried grass.

“How much farther?” Lambrell finally asked.

“I’m not sure,” Zagger answered. “If we keep going all night, I’m thinking we’ll get there by the middle of tomorrow morning.”

“Well, I vote we keep going all night,” said Duggan.

“What about the Faerie?” Lambrell asked. “Shouldn’t we check on it?”

“What good would that do?” demanded Zagger. “We don’t know Faerie medicine. Suppose it’s gotten worse. Then what? We’d have no idea how to help it.”

“I suppose,” Duggan conceded.

“Um, what if it’s already...” Lambrell ventured to ask. “You know, what if it’s...”

She couldn’t finish her thought. It was too horrible. For a bleak moment, no one spoke.

“Come on, let’s stop lolling and get going,” muttered Zagger, climbing to his feet.

“Right,” Duggan agreed, suddenly eager to press on even though they had only rested for a few minutes.

They took to the road again, with Zagger once more in the lead, setting a brisk pace toward Devonwick. A new weather front rolled in as they walked, filling the sky with low, dark clouds that looked ominously more rain-laden than the earlier ones. With this gloomier weather, Duggan quickly grew so discouraged she almost lost heart. And yet she kept pushing herself forward, not knowing how much longer she could keep going but knowing she couldn’t stop.

Finally, despite the dark canopy of clouds, the first glow of dawn at last showed itself above the eastern horizon and immediately Duggan felt her heart lifting to see a little light appearing. A bit farther down the road, they reached a fork marked by a small sign with arrows pointing in two directions. The longer of the two arrows pointed down a wider road that curved to the left. In the dim light of early

morning, the lettering carved into the wooden sign was hard to make out. Even with her outstanding eyesight, Duggan needed to squint to read the words, which said:

*Devonwick, 1,500 Paces.*

“Wow, it’s so close,” Lambrell exclaimed when Duggan read the sign aloud. “You know, I’ve never been to a city as big as Devonwick. I’m kinda excited.”

“You should be,” Zagger said. “Cities are great and Devonwick is a burnin’ great city. There’s so much to see and do there.”

“Like what?” Lambrell asked.

“Well, for one thing...” Zagger started to say but then his eyes narrowed. “Nothing for us, I’m afraid,” he now answered warily, “not on this visit, anyway. Listen, everyone. Here’s the deal. We all need to keep our hoods up, our eyes lowered and our mouths shut. Avoid talking to anyone.”

Duggan had no idea what to make of this. Zagger didn’t sound nervous or frightened but his advice certainly had an ominous ring.

“There’s a reason you’re suddenly saying this?” she demanded, eying the boy suspiciously.

“Let’s just say not everyone in a big city like Devonwick is your friendly sort,” was his cryptic answer. “Trust me. It’s better not to draw attention.”

“Well, we’ll do what you say,” Duggan decided aloud, “since you’re the only one who’s actually been in Devonwick.”

Following Zagger's advice, Duggan drew her hood far forward until her face was deep in its shadows. Lambrell followed suit, tugging at the edges of her hood and drawing it as far forward as possible, hiding her face within its folds.

"Well?" said Lambrell from inside her hood.

Zagger looked from Lambrell to Duggan then he snorted good-humoredly.

"I have to say, you're as lowdown and sneaky-looking a pair as I've ever seen. Looking like that, you'll definitely blend with the Devonwick crowd. Believe me, you will blend."

"Just doing what you told us," a chuckling Lambrell pointed out.

Zagger didn't argue.

"Come on," he said instead, "let's get to Devonwick and find our Witch."

Duggan and Lambrell hurried after him. At such an early hour of morning, the road to the city was empty. Suddenly excited, they broke into a jog and before long, they were standing a hundred feet or so from the open, main gate of Devonwick. For Duggan, it was like a dream come true. Never in her life had she seen anything quite like the huge wall that surrounded the city, rising to a height of at least three Duggans and constructed out of thousands and thousands of huge logs. At first, the sight before Duggan amazed her but as her eyes took in the size and number of the logs in the wall, the truth of what she was seeing suddenly struck her.

Only by cutting down innumerable living trees could the people of Devonwick have produced

so many logs. Duggan gasped. In Cowgrass, one never cut down trees. Never. To a Cowgrassian, trees were the most sacred of earth's living creatures and Duggan's love of them ran even more deeply, for Duggan actually talked to the trees and listened to their rustlings and many of the tress in the forests around Cowgrass were friends to her. As she looked over the corpses of countless trees killed just to make a slakin' wall, Duggan's hands began to tremble.

"Oh, you poor trees," she muttered aloud, unable to keep her thoughts to herself. "So many trees killed just to make a stupid wall."

Seemingly unmoved, Zagger shrugged carelessly as he replied; "Devonwick folks don't love trees like Cowgrassians do. Trees are just building material for 'em. Nothing more."

"There are so many," muttered Duggan.

"Wait until you see the big buildings in the city," Zagger remarked. "Anyway, enough of this. We can't save the trees, so let's just get there, shall we, and find our slakin' Witch."

Before Duggan could reply, Zagger hurried off, leading them down the road into Devonwick. Duggan and Lambrell quickly followed.

Inside the city's walls, street sweepers were already out, starting their work of brushing debris from the thoroughfare's wide sidewalks into the gutters. As Duggan and her friends ventured forward, keeping to the same, wide road as before, its surface grew filthier and filthier with all kinds of litter: empty bottles, food scraps, broken pottery, paper, cigar butts

and animal droppings. Duggan wrinkled her nose in disgust.

*So this is the great city of Devonwick*, she thought.

All around them, people were beginning to emerge from their homes for the start of a new day. At the first intersection, there were a number of street vendors busily taking their wares from boxes and placing them on open carts lining the sidewalks. In the middle of the next block, Duggan could see through windows and doors of merchants who were now at work inside their shops. Some of the shops they passed were very small, with only one, small door opening onto the street and no windows, while others were quite large affairs, with tall windows flanking large, double-doors flung open to invite passers-by to come inside.

The people of Devonwick mostly appeared to Duggan to be very tall folks, with heavy frames, wide shoulders, long arms and thick legs. The men wore form-fitting trousers with calf-length pant legs, vertically striped socks and black leather boots with long, pointed toes. Most of the men had facial hair shaped into many styles of short beards and carefully trimmed mustaches. This was a new thing to Duggan as the male-folk in Cowgrass favored clean-shaven looks.

The women of Devonwick styled themselves differently, too, with their hair worn very long, often to their waists, and with much jewelry adorning them. The most fashionably dressed women on the streets sported necklaces with literally dozens of

strands of beads around their necks, nearly as many bracelets on each wrist and long hoops dangling from their ears. Their pleated dresses dropped to their ankles and sleeveless, waist-length tunics covered the bodices of their dresses. Like the men-folk, the women also wore black boots but with even pointier toes.

In her hand-me-down trousers, hooded jacket and clunky, square-toed shoes, with her hair cut very short and no jewelry whatsoever adorning her other than the little copper hoops piercing her ears, Duggan instantly felt very self-conscious to be so poorly dressed among the fashionable people of Devonwick.

Be sure to keep hoods up so no one notices us, Zagger had advised. What a great piece of advice! Never mind they all looked like total yokels.

Zagger didn't seem to notice, however. Walking briskly, his head bowed and hidden inside his hood, Zagger led them wordlessly more deeply into the city, sticking to the main thoroughfare and ignoring the folks they passed. Eventually, the three of them reached a square with an open market filled with people. There were all kinds of new smells and sounds for Duggan here, with merchants displaying and hawking strange trinkets hung on rope lines stretched between posts, exotic perfumes laid out on long tables and medicinal ointments arrayed on shelves in greenish, glass bottles with paper labels displaying weird lettering.

On a pole in the middle of the square, three brightly striped pendants flapped loudly in the breeze and in a far corner, musicians played an unfamiliar



tune on accordions and fiddles. Beyond the musicians, Duggan noticed a tall pile of axe-cut firewood stacked beside a ceramic stove spouting smoke and quickly she decided it was best not to think about such things as axe-cut wood.

*And keep your eyes off the buildings,* she reminded herself.

Near the center of the square, they passed a long table where a tall, square-shouldered man suddenly raised an arm and in his hand was a butcher's cleaver. Duggan instantly felt faint. When the man swung his blade to chop off the head of a squawking chicken, Duggan managed to look away just in time. There was a sickening thud as the cleaver came down on the chopping block and the squawking immediately stopped.

"Hallow's Fire," Duggan complained aloud, "let's just kill everything, shall we?"

She glanced at Lambrell, who gave her a horrorstruck look.

"Hallow's Fire," Lambrell echoed in agreement.

"Welcome to Devonwick," Duggan whispered glumly to her friend. "Welcome to the great and exciting, big city of Devonwick."



**EshSecret**



# Chapter 11

With a miserable expression on her face, Duggan pushed forward. At the far end of the square, they came upon a pleasanter sight, namely, a cart filled with brightly colored vegetables of all sorts arranged in neat piles for sale. A stack of tasty-looking Carrots at one end of the cart made Duggan forget the butchered chicken and remember how little they had eaten on their journey. Just beyond the vegetable cart was another cart stacked with ripe Blond-Cherries. Duggan caught Lambrell's eye and gave a jerk of her head in the direction of the Blond-Cherries.

“Don’t those look good?” she murmured, as they drew near the cart.

Lambrell licked her lips.

“Mmm,” she agreed, “burnin’ good.”

“It would be nice to have some fresh fruit,” Duggan remarked.

“You think they’re expensive?” asked Lambrell, reaching out a hand to touch one of the Cherries.

“Hey,” called the owner of the cart, a middle-aged woman in a long, blue dress with a dozen strands of violet beads around her neck. “No touchin’. Payin’ customers only, little lady.”

“I can pay,” cried Lambrell, offended.

“Pay with what?” the woman shot back. “I take only real coin for my Cherries, deary.”

Lambrell thrust a hand into her jacket pocket, yanked out some coins and raised her hand so the woman could see the small, copper pieces lying in her open palm.

“See,” she said defiantly, “I have money.”

All of a sudden, a boy near Lambrell gasped and pointed at the girl’s hand.

“Gidden’s Gate,” he cried, “she’s only got four fingers.”

The woman in the blue dress took a surprised step backward.

“Wha...what’s that?” she sputtered.

“Four fingers,” the boy shouted in a louder voice. “Four fingers. Four fingers.”

Immediately, a man with an angry scowl on his face strode up behind Lambrell and yanked off

her hood, revealing her head of yellow hair and her pointed ears.

The boy screamed, "Troll."

A young woman in the crowd immediately began echoing him.

"Troll," she shouted, pointing at Lambrell. "Troll."

Quickly, folks gathered, forming a ring around Duggan and her friends that left no way out. There were some oohs and ahs but also a lot of angry words in the mix.

"Filthy things," someone cried in a high-pitched voice.

"What's ya doin' here?" another man shouted in a deep, rumbling voice.

"Yeah, go back where ya belong," called another woman in a voice that was decidedly hostile.

"Troll," another woman shouted in a tone of voice that turned the word into a hateful slur.

"Ya's should go back where ya belong," shouted the man who had yanked off Lambrell's hood. "Ya's kind ain't welcome here in Devonwick."

When he took a threatening step toward Lambrell, Zagger quickly inserted himself between the two of them. Frightened, Duggan took Lambrell by the arm.

"We should leave," she whispered to her friends. "We're obviously not welcome here."

Just then, a dirty rag thrown by someone in the back of the crowd struck Duggan on her shoulder.

"Filthy Troll," the thrower of the rag shouted.

"Troll," echoed the boy who had started everything.

A small rock whizzed past Zagger's head and just missed hitting Lambrell behind him. Flinching, the girl paled visibly.

"Should we run?" she asked in a hushed, frightened whisper.

"We should definitely run," said Duggan, her hands shaking.

"No way," Zagger exclaimed hotly. "Don't let 'em scare you."

"But I am scared," Lambrell whispered.

Zagger's face grew very red.

"We have every right to be here," he shouted, pulling back his hood and leveling his eyes at the crowd as he hurled his words at the folks gathered in front of him. "Every right."

Zagger's words had exactly the wrong effect. The crowd pressed in. There were angry murmurs and someone in the middle of the crowd raised a stick. Angry fists shook in the air above the heads of the crowd.

"What do we do now?" Lambrell asked.

"I say run," urged Duggan.

"Where?" said Lambrell, eying the crowd. "They're all around us."

"Hold on," a new voice suddenly boomed. "What's happenin' here?"

A very tall, very thin man pushed through the crowd. He looked to be around Duggan's age or just slightly older and underneath his battered, small-brimmed hat, he had a long, bony face with high

cheekbones. In fact, the face of this man was so bony it almost had the look of death, more skull-like than alive. What saved it was the vivid flush of bright crimson in both cheeks and the keen way the man's bright, blue eyes darted back and forth as he took in the whole scene before him.

"I said, what's happenin' here," he repeated as he worked his way to the front of the crowd.

"They're Trolls," someone in the crowd shouted.

"I see that," the tall man replied calmly. "So what's all the fuss about?"

"Didn't you hear? They're Trolls," said the man with the angry scowl.

"Well, they look like Woodsy Trolls to me," the tall man observed.

"We are Woodsy Trolls," Zagger answered, "and we deserve better treatment than we're getting."

"I don't doubt it," the tall man agreed as his lively eyes roamed the crowd.

He spotted someone he knew, a shorter, lean man in his late teens or early twenties with pale skin, blond hair and long, sinewy arms that dangled out of the short sleeves of his black tunic.

"Jay Swift," the tall man called to the other fellow, "don't ya know the difference between Mountainsy Trolls and Woodsy Trolls? I mean, I thought ya knew better."

Jay Swift blushed and lowered his eyes.

"Um, now that you're askin' it..." he stammered.

“Well,” said the first man, standing tall, his hands on hips, “Don’t ya?”

“I guess I do,” Jay Swift finally answered, raising his eyes and looking embarrassed. “I suppose I didn’t look all that closely, what with everyone shoutin’ Troll and throwin’ insults at ‘em.”

The tall man lifted his chin to peer into the crowd in front of him.

“Don’t ya’s all know the difference?” he reprimanded.

“A Troll’s a Troll,” someone in the back of the crowd answered sullenly.

“If ya think that, ya’s a fool,” the tall man retorted sharply. “We’ve been at peace with Woodsy Trolls for ten generations and they’ve suffered as much from the Mountainsy Trolls as any Human. Am I not right, Jay Swift?”

“I’d have to say ya’s right, Dowd Chase,” agreed Jay Swift, stepping forward and turning to face the crowd. “Dowd’s right,” he called. “We’ve no reason to quarrel with Woodsy Trolls.”

There were a few, cautious murmurs of assent from some of the folks in the crowd. Giving Dowd Chase a nod of apology, the man called Jay Swift then turned and addressed the three Trolls.

“I’m very sorry,” he said, “and I apologize for all of us here. We treated ya’s poorly.”

To Duggan’s surprise, he then bent at the waist and performed a low, respectful bow. There followed a long, awkward moment of silence. A few of the folks in the crowd sniggered but Jay Swift ignored them.



Duggan didn't know quite how she should respond to this unexpected apology but she figured she needed to say or do something and so she stepped forward and awkwardly returned the man's bow. Her large ears flopped forward as she did.

"No need to apologize," she said, picking her words carefully, "there have been many...um, many misunderstandings between Humans and Woodsy Trolls. We're...um, sorry, too, if we surprised you with our sudden appearance."

Someone in the middle of the crowd laughed and called out, "Surprised ain't hardly the word for it."

"More like shocked 'em, I'd say," the tall Dowd Chase observed shrewdly, as his eyes roamed the crowd.

Then he gave a good-humored laugh. This drew laughter from some of the people in the crowd but not from the majority of them, Duggan noticed. Dowd Chase then turned his head and looked first at Duggan then at Lambrell and Zagger, curiously studying each of them in turn. Lambrell blushed, as Duggan would have expected her to do, while Zagger returned the man's stare with a hostile glare, exactly the reaction she would have expected from him, too.

"I'm thinkin' ya's all had better come with me," Dowd Chase finally said. "But for starters, tell me, what are three handsome Woodsy Trolls doin' here in Devonwick?"

Before Duggan could answer, Zagger spoke up in a defiant tone of voice, "We've come to find the Witch, Esther Nattlin."

This drew a surprised reaction from a bunch of the folks in the crowd.

“Ya’s lookin’ for ole Nattlin?” the man named Jay Swift asked. “Ya’s lookin’ for that ole hag, Nattlin?” he repeated.

“Yes, we most certainly are,” answered Zagger, still defiant.

This drew hearty laughter from a wide-shouldered, muscular man in the front of the crowd. Others giggled.

*In for a plinny, in for a shelck*, Duggan silently told herself before calling out, “Does anyone here know where we can find Esther Nattlin?”

No one in the crowd answered.

“Oh, I’ll take ya to her,” Dowd Chase finally announced, his brilliant eyes twinkling, “though why in Gidden’s Gate ya’d want to see that ole thing is beyond me.”

“We have our reasons,” retorted Zagger.

*Reasons no one needs to know*, Duggan wanted to say, though she kept her thought to herself.

“Um, we need to thank you, sir,” she hastened to say instead, addressing herself to the man named Dowd Chase. “If you are willing to be our guide, you are doing us a great favor.”

Dowd Chase gave her a friendly enough smile, though there was a wry twist to his lips when he answered, “After I take ya to that old Witch, ya may not think of me as havin’ done ya a favor. But anyway, here’s for it. Follow me.”

With that, he turned abruptly and waded into the crowd. Duggan hesitated for a moment. Folks

seemed less hostile after the man's dressing down of them but a good many still had unfriendly looks on their faces. On the other hand, what choice did they have? With a roll of her eyes, Duggan plunged into the crowd, chasing after the man, with Zagger and Lambrell following her.

It was an uncomfortable experience for Duggan, wading through a sea of unfriendly faces, with perhaps a few bemused ones in the mix but every one of them turned to gape at the three of them. Even the face of Jay Swift had more of a confused expression than a friendly one. Duggan tried hard not to look at the folks' faces as she passed through them but she couldn't keep from glancing occasionally to have a look at one of these unfamiliar Humans. After all, it was her first time among the Race of Humans. Her Pops had always told her Humans were much like Woodsy Trolls, friendly to their Race, equally ingenious with tools and with other noble qualities, too.

"So much for Pops' notions," she muttered under her breath as she moved nervously through the crowd, following the only Human among them who seemed to be on their side.

But could he be trusted, she wondered. Could anyone in Devonwick be trusted? Instinctively, she slipped a hand inside her pocket. The sphere was still there, she noted, though she got no comfort from the knowledge she had it.



## Chapter 12

When they got through the crowd, Dowd Chase quickened his pace, taking them along the main thoroughfare for another four hundred paces or so before turning down a darker, emptier street that had Duggan immediately feeling nervous and uncomfortable. Drab buildings lined this new street on both sides, their nearly windowless walls covered in grime and spattered here and there with various kinds of filth Duggan didn't want to think about.

Trash of all kinds littered the street—if you could call this narrow way a street. Filling the air was the stench of rotting food, urine, animal feces, puddles of spilled liquor and who knew what else.

Duggan could barely keep from gagging as they moved down this disgusting, smelly street.

“Um, sir, where are we going?” she finally felt compelled to ask.

“Into the foulest part of the city,” their guide answered nonchalantly. “Where else would ya go to find an ole hag of a Witch?”

*Great*, Duggan thought, *out of the frying pan and into the fire.*

Glancing over her shoulder, she whispered to Lambrell behind her, “Forget the Quakin’ Trio, looks like we’re the Bad-Luck Bunch.”

“Don’t say that,” cried Lambrell. “Saying it might make it so.”

“You’re right,” Duggan replied, instantly feeling terrible to have made such a poor joke. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” replied Lambrell, though she spoke in a tone of voice that told Duggan it wasn’t all right.

After that, Duggan kept her mouth shut. A few blocks farther down the filthy street, they reached a particularly squalid square with seedy-looking pubs on two of the four corners. A few drunkards slouched in front of the pub just to their right under a sign that named the place, *The Lazy Lizzzard*. As they drew near, one of the lounging men looked up and waved a hand unceremoniously in their direction.

“Hey, Dowd Chase, ya ole, dirty dog,” he called out, his words so slurred they could barely be understood. “How ya doin’?”

“Hello, Digger Zed, ya mean, ole villain of a thief,” their guide answered pleasantly enough. “How’s it goin’ with ya?”

Laughing, the lounging man replied, “Poorly, sir, very poorly.”

“Only what ya deserve, Digger Zed. Only what we all deserve,” called Dowd Chase with a laugh.

“I see ya’s movin’ in fine company these days,” remarked the man, returning the laugh with a throaty, hacking effort of his own that reminded Duggan of the guttural bark of a Tusky-Dog.

Dowd Chase didn’t answer this man’s last remark. Instead, he turned his head to give Duggan a quirky, unreadable look that was half-grin and half-frown before veering to his left and leading them out of the square via a different street, this one even narrower, filthier and more sordid than the previous one. Duggan heard the drunkard behind them give a squeal of laughter as they entered the new street.

“How much farther?” she asked.

“Almost there,” Dowd Chase replied. “Still wanna see the Witch?”

“Yes,” answered Duggan, though she was not certain she believed it.

“Ya sure?”

“Yes,” she affirmed.

“Stout girl, ya surely are,” the young man remarked then he fell silent.

The stench of this new street was so foul it made Duggan’s stomach heave but she pressed on. Every now then, Duggan heard Lambrell choking

behind her. After three or four blocks, their guide turned to his right and took them down a short, very dark street that was noticeably less stinky than the previous two. This new street was paved with smooth cobbles and for the first time since they had arrived in Devonwick, Duggan found herself walking on a surface that was free of litter.

At the end of this short street, they came to a small, one-story house with a thatched roof and a narrow porch running along the entire length of its front. In the middle of the front wall was a little door flanked on both sides by small, single-paned windows. This door was painted a rather bright, cheery shade of green that seemed decidedly out-of-place in this grim section of the city.

Dowd Chase pointed and announced, "Ole Nattlin's place."

This was not what Duggan had been expecting, not after her experiences with the last two streets.

"This is where the Witch lives?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, I just said that."

"Oh," she answered as the full meaning of the man's words slowly registered on her. "So...um, we're finally here? You've brought us to the Witch just like you said you would?"

The man gave her an inscrutable smile as he replied, "That's what ya wanted, isn't it?"

"We're here?" asked Zagger, arriving beside Duggan and staring at the little house.

"Yes," answered Duggan, "I guess."



"Nattlin's in that little house?" Lambrell asked as she joined them.

"I guess."

All of a sudden, Duggan remembered her manners.

"Um, we should be saying thank you, shouldn't we?" she said to their guide.

"Well, ya's very welcome," replied Dowd Chase, giving her a low, elegant bow.

When Duggan chose to return the man's bow, bending awkwardly in imitation of his more elegant gesture, Zagger snorted.

"Since when did folks here in Devonwick get so polite?" he muttered.

"There's nothin' wrong with bein' polite, is there?" Dowd Chase replied good-humoredly.

"It's just kinda odd," said Zagger, fidgeting. "So this is where the old Witch lives, is it?" he hastily added, changing subjects.

"Quite so again," Dowd Chase confirmed in a pleasant-sounding voice.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Lambrell.

"Well," said Zagger, "I suppose we should just go up there and knock on her door and see if she's in."

"Oh, I'd be very surprised if she isn't," observed Dowd Chase without explaining himself.

"Um, are you coming with us?" asked Duggan, turning her eyes on the man and suddenly hoping very much for his continued company.

"Gidden's Gate, no," he cried. "That there's a Witch's house. So, no thank ya."

To Duggan's disappointment, he sounded most definite about not coming.

Still, she felt compelled to ask, "Have you...um, have you ever talked with her?"

"A few times," Dowd Chase answered in a voice she couldn't read. "A strange bird, she is. Different."

"Hallow's Fire, she should be, considering she's a *Witch*," exclaimed Zagger.

Ignoring Zagger, Duggan searched her mind and carefully chose her next words.

"Um, sir, since none of us has ever talked to a Witch," she said in her politest tone of voice, "I was wondering if you would please come with us. I know it would be another, huge favor but please consider it," she urged. "We really could use your help."

"Yes, please," added Lambrell.

This surprised Duggan who always expected Lambrell to be painfully shy around strangers. For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Duggan humbled herself by asking the man again for his help.

"Please," she repeated, "you'd be doing us a great service."

The man frowned briefly then he gave Duggan a little smile.

"All right," he agreed. "Since ya asked so politely, I'll come with ya while ya talk to the ole Witch."

"Oh, thank you," cried Duggan, meaning it.

"Yes, thanks," chimed in Lambrell.

“Hallow’s Fire, let’s stop talking and just get going,” cried an exasperated Zagger. “I mean, she’s just a slakin’ Witch.”

With that, Zagger pivoted and with the others following, he covered the short distance to the house in a few rapid strides. Climbing the three steps that rose to the front porch, he went to the door and knocked loudly. Almost instantly, the door swung open and in the doorway appeared a tiny woman garbed mainly in black and wearing an enormous, pointed hat.

“I knew it,” she muttered. ”I saw your coming in my dreams and I heard it on the whispers of the wind. And now you’re here, just like that.” Then, to everyone’s surprise, she raised a hand and pointed a long-nailed finger at Zagger. “And you,” she said, “what has happened is your fault, you know. Yours and yours alone. Of all folks, you know the truth of it.”

Then she wagged her finger accusingly at Zagger. The boy’s face paled visibly and a panicky look took hold that was unlike anything Duggan had ever before seen on him. She didn’t know what to make of it.

“Of course, it doesn’t matter now,” the tiny woman suddenly added, lowering her hand. “What’s done is done and all we can do is the best we can with what was wrought.”

The woman then looked from Troll to Troll and while she examined their faces, Duggan couldn’t help but stare back. If this tiny woman were indeed Esther Nattlin, she was certainly not Duggan’s image

of a Witch. For one thing, she was not toothless or even close to toothless but rather, she had a full set of teeth except for one, small hole suggesting a missing tooth in the middle of her lower, front row.

For another thing, she was hardly a hag. In fact, she was arguably pretty. Not exactly pretty, Duggan decided as she studied the woman closely but kind of exotic-looking, with a long, bony face, a full mouth with thick lips, skin the color of roasted coffee beans, glittery-yellow eyes and fine, white hair hanging to her waist. Very petite in most other respects, the woman had surprisingly broad, strong-looking hands with long fingers that were now resting on her two hips as she eyed Duggan and the others.

No, this woman definitely did not fit Duggan's image of a Witch, the one she had gotten from numerous, toddler Stories. Those Stories had always described Witches as aged, stoop-shouldered, cackling, old crones with missing teeth, balding heads and plenty of warts. The Witch here did indeed have a wart but the perfectly round, rather flat, little blemish on one side of her chin made for a striking beauty mark.

She wore an outfit somewhat like the Witch's clothing described in the Stories, her dress all black and old-fashioned in its styling and embroidery. On this woman, however, the well-tailored dress was pretty rather than dowdy and the hat on her head, while pointed like the ones in the Stories, was just about the most wondrous piece of clothing Duggan had ever seen.

Below the hat, her face's most startling feature was the large, yellow sunburst of a tattoo that literally intersected her left eye, highlighting the yellowness of the eye's iris. Its design obviously had some meaning or purpose, though Duggan had no idea what it might be. She only knew the tattoo was amazing.

Zagger and Lambrell must have been as surprised by the woman's appearance as Duggan, because neither of them said a word.

"So," the woman finally said, chuckling a little, "here we all are, eh? Wondering about me, are you?"

Duggan almost nodded, which would have been very impolite but she caught herself in time. She really didn't know what to say. For his part, Zagger stared suspiciously at the tiny woman, silent and glaring.

"But I'm forgetting my manners," continued the woman, chuckling again in a pleasant enough way. "Please, do come into my house. We have much to discuss, which we can do over tea and biscuits if you're hungry. I'm sure you have as many questions for me as I have for you."

When the woman gestured for them to enter, a red-faced Zagger hurried ahead of Duggan and Lambrell to be first through the door.

"No, no. Stop." the woman cried loudly, halting the boy in his tracks.

Zagger spun and glowered at the Witch.

"Womenfolk always enter a Witch's home before the men-folk," she quickly explained

“That’s fine. I’ll go first,” called Lambrell, hurrying past Zagger and zipping through the doorway before the boy had time to make a fool of himself.

Duggan quickly followed, with the Witch entering behind her, followed by Dowd Chase. Zagger came through the doorway last, looking sullen and suspicious. When they were inside the house, the woman excused herself to get food, leaving Duggan and the others to settle themselves around a table that stood in the middle of a small, sparsely furnished, front room.

In only a few minutes she was back, carrying a tray holding a steaming, copper teakettle, five chipped mugs and a plate of golden biscuits. She quickly poured out cups of tea for everyone. The tea was very dark in color and smelled of herbs. Duggan thought she detected Sassafras and Chamomile among the scents. The sugary biscuits were still warm and they smelled of Low-Lemon and Peppermint. When everyone had taken a mug of tea and a biscuit or two—with Dowd Chase taking four biscuits—Duggan decided she needed to address the business at hand.

“Um, we’ve come because of your Faerie book and the part about...” she started to say but immediately the woman’s face darkened and her eyes narrowed, causing Duggan to falter in mid-sentence.

As the tiny woman leveled her fierce gaze at Duggan, a kind of reddish glow spread around her.

“You were not supposed to read that book, you know,” she said in a reproachful tone of voice. “No one was.”

Duggan didn’t know quite what to say.

“Um, I don’t...I don’t understand,” she stammered. “I mean, um, why would you write a book no one is supposed to read?”

With the red glow around her growing even brighter, the woman inclined her head toward Lambrell.

“Ask her. She knows.”

Surprised, Duggan turned her head to look at her friend. Under Duggan’s gaze, Lambrell blushed and dropped her chin to her chest.

Frowning, Duggan asked, “What?”

Closing her eyes, Lambrell refused to speak.

“The Troll-girl knows,” the Witch repeated, “don’t you, Lambrell?”

Raising her chin a little, Lambrell opened her eyes and found her voice.

“I guess.”

Duggan did not like the guilty look spreading across her friend’s face.

“What do you know?” she asked, suddenly afraid of the answer but needing to hear it.

“I’m sorry,” muttered Lambrell, “I guess I should have told you but Zagger was against it.”

Duggan cried, “Not another secret between Zagger and you.”

“I’m afraid so,” Lambrell muttered. “And this one is really bad,” she added.

*Xavier*



**EshSecret**



## Chapter 13

Looking truly miserable, Lambrell opened her mouth to speak but no words came out. Taking a deep gulp, she made another try and this time, she managed to summon a mousy squeak of a voice.

“Um, yeah,” she said, her face reddening as she spoke, “I guess I have another secret, this one about the book. The thing is...um, well...”

Lambrell couldn't finish. Lowering her eyes, she looked as guilty as a dog caught stealing food from the kitchen table.

“What Lambrell wants to say,” said the Witch with a gentle nod in Lambrell's direction, “is that her book was the only one not destroyed when all other

copies got collected because the book was judged too dangerous.”

“What?” cried Duggan, shocked.

“Yes,” replied Lambrell, her voice barely coming out, “though no one ever told me why they needed to be destroyed. I swear it.”

“I know that to be true, Missy Quiverill,” answered the Witch, giving the girl a small smile. “There was nothing malicious about your intentions.”

“I’m very sorry,” whispered Lambrell, her eyes misting with tears. “When the idea came up, I was just so excited to be using the book. I didn’t know that...”

When Lambrell’s voice again trailed off, Duggan was about to say something to make her friend feel better when a question demanding explanation suddenly hit her.

“Yeah but I don’t get it,” she said, turning her eyes on the Witch. “Why would you write a book that’s so dangerous it should never be read? A book so dangerous it needed destroying?”

Raising an eyebrow, the woman gave a dry chuckle as she answered, “You actually think I wrote the book? Do I appear that old to you? Generations old?”

Before Duggan could answer with the obvious fact Witches were nearly immortal, Dowd Chase cut in with, “Careful what you say, lass.”

All of a sudden Zagger spoke up, demanding in a loud voice, “So, are you going to help us?”

The Witch frowned at Zagger for a moment but then her face softened. Turning her gaze from the boy,

she focused her piercing eyes on Duggan, who found herself unable to look away.

“You, girl,” the Witch commanded. “Ask the question most on your mind.”

“Um, like Zagger says, are you going to help us?”

“No, ask the question you’re really thinking,” the Witch directed.

Duggan’s eyes filled with tears and her hands began to tremble. It was not an easy question to voice.

“Is the Faerie doomed?” she muttered. “Is it doomed to die?”

“Show me the poor creature,” the Witch directed. “I need to see.”

Swallowing hard, Duggan reached a hand into her pocket. Wrapping her fingers around the sphere, she extracted it. Her stomach churned and her hands trembled to be facing again the terrible thing they had done but there was no way around it.

Balancing the tiny, metal globe in her open palm, Duggan raised her trembling hand to offer the object to the Witch.

Reaching with both hands, the small woman carefully lifted the sphere off Duggan’s palm. Opening the little hatch, she peered inside. To Duggan’s consternation, she gave a troubled frown as she sucked in a long, slow breath of air.

“Is she...” whispered Duggan, struggling to speak the dread words, “is she...”

“She is alive,” the Witch reassured, “though not for long, I fear, if we do not help her.” Inclining her head toward the back corner of the room, she said,

“Duggan, fetch the brown, clay jar from the shelf over there.”

Nodding, Duggan hurried to the corner and found a squat, brown jar on the top shelf of the little bookcase. Taking the jar in both hands, she carried it carefully to the Witch.

“Open it,” the Witch commanded.

With shaking hand, Duggan pried off the clay top and held the jar for the Witch, who stretched an arm and slipped her hand inside. Rummaging around, the woman drew out a small amount of moist, silvery powder that gave off a pungent, mineral-like odor. To Duggan’s great surprise, the woman quickly popped the substance in her mouth, swished it around a few times then spit it into her palm.

“Now, girl, take a tiny bit and rub it on the Faerie’s head,” she said to Duggan.

With trembling fingertip, Duggan separated a tiny bit of the substance from the gooey glop in the Witch’s palm. Being as careful as she could, Duggan touched the stuff with the tip of her finger then inserted her goo-coated fingertip into the sphere. There, she found the head of the tiny Faerie and gently rubbed the substance onto it.

“Now blow lightly on the stuff,” the Witch directed, as she dropped the rest of the substance back into the jar.

Duggan did as told and while she was blowing gently, the Witch suddenly started uttering strange words.

“*Chuss-saethe-di*,” she said. “*Moss-chuss-di-tay. Shoolnass.*”

To Duggan's astonishment, the tiny glob of the substance atop of the Faerie's head began to glow and slowly it changed colors, going from silver to gold. At the same time, Duggan could feel a slight heat emanating from the sphere, which was itself starting to glow ever so slightly.

*"Chuss-saethe-di,"* the Witch repeated. *"Moss-chuss-di- tay. Shool-nass."*

In the next instant, one of the Faerie's wings twitched. Then the other twitched. Then the Faerie's head cocked a little to one side and Duggan could have sworn she saw an eye blink open briefly before closing again. These were only small movements but the fact the Faerie was making any movements at all was a most wondrous sign of life and hope for Duggan.

She nearly cried for joy, it made her that happy.

Giving Duggan and the others a solemn, little smile, the Witch closed the sphere's door and with a quick nod of encouragement, she took the clay jar from Duggan and handed her the sphere. As Duggan cupped the small object in her hands, she noted the continuing glow of its metal and its warmth to her touch.

"Now, Duggan, open your mouth," the Witch said to her.

Again, Duggan did as told without question.

"This will have rather a bitter taste but you must swallow it anyway," said the Witch as she took a small nugget of the substance from the jar and slipped it into Duggan's mouth. "Now swallow," she directed.

The stuff had a horribly bitter taste but Duggan forced herself to swallow it. Instantly, she felt a heat spread through her stomach.

Leaning forward, the Witch whispered to her, "Now blow softly on the sphere while thinking a loving thought about your mother."

"Do what?" cried Duggan, surprised.

"It is you who must complete the spell. Find a sweet thought of your Mum and keep it in your mind while you blow," said the Witch. "There isn't much time so please, close your eyes and do it."

Duggan gave a dubious look. The sad truth was that a loving image of her Mum wasn't a thing Duggan could easily summon. Not these days, anyway. Something bad had happened between the two of them and for the last Moon-year or so, Duggan and her Mum had fought with one another much more often than they had laughed together.

With a stab of pain, Duggan almost told the Witch the truth but the woman was waiting expectantly for her to act. Duggan closed her eyes and concentrated on finding something good to think about her Mum. The only images she could find, however, were recent ones of a Mum turned to stone from the Curse. Guilt washed over Duggan and she nearly despaired.

"Come on, lass, you can do it," the Witch encouraged.

Nodding and squeezing her eyes more tightly closed, Duggan thought about her home and suddenly an image of her Pops came to mind and when it did, she suddenly remembered how her Mum's face always glowed proudly whenever she was watching her husband as he told one of his toolmaker Stories. Hanging onto this image of her Mum's glowing face, Duggan opened her eyes and began blowing softly on

the sphere. To her surprise, its metal grew even brighter and a greater heat emanated from it.

When she had expelled a full breath, Duggan could hold onto the image of her Mum no longer but the bright warmth remained, as if the sphere now had an inner energy of its own.

“Excellent,” the Witch exclaimed. “Duggan, remember what you just did and repeat it no less than daily. More is better. It will prolong the spell.” Then she gave a wave of her hand. “Now, put the sphere back in your pocket. Keep it safe.”

“Um,” said Duggan as she tucked the sphere away, “now what?”

The Witch sighed.

“It is beyond my powers to cure the Faerie. My humble, little spell has perhaps bought some little time for the creature but the picture is bleak and I see only a faint hope—a very faint hope.”

“What do you mean, faint hope?” cried Lambrell. “We’ve traveled all this way for you to help us. You’ve got to. If you don’t, my Mum, my Pops, they’ll...”

When Lambrell’s voice trailed off, the Witch shook her head sadly.

“I am sorry, Lambrell Quiverill,” she murmured. “I have neither spells nor potions strong enough to counter this particular Magick. It is the Curse of the Faerie Lord himself.”

“What is the faint hope, then?” said Duggan, unwilling to give up.

“The first question you need to ask is not what,” the Witch replied. “The first thing you need to ask is where.”

“Then where?” said Duggan. “Where is this hope you see?”

The Witch gave a dark look as she replied, “Far away. You will need to travel fast on a road that is long and hard and hope for luck.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Zagger leaned forward to ask, “Travel where?”

“Why, to Eshmagick,” the Witch replied. “But you already knew this, didn’t you, Troll-boy?”

“No,” muttered Zagger, staring at his feet.

“Liar,” the Witch accused. “But we will save the matter of your lies for another time.”



## Chapter 14

“An interesting trio of Trolls you’ve brought me, Master Chase,” the Witch remarked, shifting her attention to the tall man and raising the brow of her tattooed eye.

“Yeah, it was funny me runnin’ into ‘em, don’t ya think,” was the man’s dry reply.

“Yes, funny.”

“Not what ya expected, are they?”

“Yes and no,” she replied.

Closing his eyes, the man was quiet for a long moment, his head bowed as if a great weight were bearing down on him. Duggan grew curious to know

what was on his mind but before she could ask, he raised his chin.

Staring at the Witch, he said, "Well, what are ya goin' to do now that they're here?"

"You know the answer," the woman replied simply. "And I might ask the same question of you."

"I've told ya many times how I feel about this."

When the woman's lips tightened and her brow furrowed, Duggan guessed it was not the answer she wanted to hear.

"Indeed, you have made very clear your feelings," she said, "but that was just talk. Now, events have ended the time of talking and you must make your choice for real, Dowd Chase."

There was a quick twitch in one corner of his mouth.

"Do ya not know, Nomi, what I'm goin' to choose?"

"I might hope I do," the woman answered, her brow furrowing again.

As Duggan stood quietly, listening to the exchange between the Witch and the tall man, she sensed there was some deeper, more private meaning behind their simple words but she couldn't quite grasp what that meaning might be. She was about to ask when, suddenly, she realized she had just heard a surprising thing.

"Hey, he just called you Nomi," she cried. "You're not Esther Nattlin?"

"Her daughter," the woman answered matter-of-factly.

“And so what happened—” Duggan started to say but the woman interrupted her.

“Come with me, Duggan,” she said with a smile. “I have something to show you. Something only for you,” she added, giving the others a small shake of her head as she motioned with her hand for Duggan to follow her.

Nomi Nattlin then turned and went through a door in the back wall. Curious, Duggan followed. On the other side of the door, the next room turned out to be a large, very messy kitchen with shelves lining all four walls from floor to ceiling and holding more food and kitchen sundries than Duggan ever could have imagined any kitchen holding. In the center of this messy kitchen was a table with three chairs. No part of the table’s top was free of clutter and on two of the three chairs were boxes and tins of all shapes and sizes.

A small woodstove sat in one corner of the room and Duggan could smell the pungent odor of smoke leaking from its rusted chimney. The other strong smell in the kitchen was an unusually powerful fragrance of mushrooms coming from overhead that drew Duggan’s gaze to the ceiling. Hanging from hooks imbedded all across the ceiling were hundreds of mushrooms of different shapes, sizes and varieties, all of them in various stages of drying. Giving Duggan a small smile, Nomi Nattlin reached a hand up and gently removed one of the mushrooms from its hook.

“Faeries were always my mother’s passion,” she explained, “both before and especially after she went mad. These enormously complex, little things are now my passion.”

"I've never seen so many mushrooms," marveled Duggan, politely ignoring the Witch's comment about her mother going mad though certainly wondering about it.

"Some are remarkably rare and they have an amazing number of uses. And misuses. I'm still learning. But enough talk of mushrooms, let's get the food we will need for our journey."

Duggan felt her heart skip a beat.

"You just said we. Are you coming with us?"

The Witch nodded solemnly.

"My fate is woven with yours. It always has been so, as you must now be suspecting."

Duggan couldn't think of anything intelligent to say in reply, so she changed subjects.

"You said you have something to show me."

"No, not really," Nomi Nattlin answered, chuckling. "But I did want the two of us to have a moment alone so you could ask more of your questions. I sense you are an asker of questions and you have many on your mind."

This was most definitely true. Duggan the dreamer was also Duggan the wonderer.

"So, are you a Witch like your mother was?" she asked.

"Not as famous or as good but yes."

"What about that man, Dowd Chase? Why did he help us?"

"I won't answer that one. Dowd's business is his to tell, not mine."

"But he's somehow connected to everything that's happening, just like you?"

The Witch gave Duggan a sharp look before answering, "Yes, in a way."

Duggan paused for a second. There was an awkward question preying on her mind. Unable to word it diplomatically, she finally decided to put it bluntly.

"Why do you dislike Zagger so much?"

"I don't dislike Zagger," the Witch said with a laugh, "not really." When Duggan gave her a skeptical look, she quickly added, "All right, maybe I do blame him, blame him for allowing himself to be so badly used."

The answer took Duggan by surprise. "What do you mean, used?"

"This subject, too, is best left for another time," she muttered in reply. Then she gave a bright smile. "But enough talk for now. Come, let's find food. We must get going."

"All right," Duggan quickly agreed.

Moving efficiently, Nomi Nattlin collected bread, cheese and dried fruit from the shelves on the back wall of her kitchen and stuffed them into a large rucksack she plucked from a hook. Slinging the sack over her shoulder, Nomi Nattlin led Duggan back to the front room where the others were still sitting around the table.

"Here's a rucksack for you," she said, handing it to Zagger. "You will carry this burden of food, sharing it with Master Chase."

Lambrell gasped.

"Master Chase is coming with us?"

Dowd Chase's mouth curved into an amiable grin as he took the rucksack from Zagger.

"Well, I'm not promisin' much but I'll come with ya at least for a bit, just to make sure ya's all get off in the right direction."

"Oh, good," cried Lambrell, meaning it.

Duggan resisted saying anything but she was happy, too.

While the others waited, the Witch took off her apron and laid it across one of the chairs. Moving to the front door, she traded her large, pointed hat for a smaller, brimmed hat hanging on a hook on the wall. Donning this simpler, more practical hat, she looked at the others.

"Ready?" she asked.

"More than ready," Zagger affirmed, sounding relieved to be doing something at last.

"Well, then, you may lead, Master Dunleavy," pronounced Nomi Nattlin, eying Zagger in a funny way Duggan couldn't quite read.

Nodding excitedly, Zagger led them across the room, out the front door, across the porch, down the front steps and straight up the street. He didn't go very far, however, before he turned and looked back sheepishly.

As the others caught up, he had to admit, "Um, I'm happy to lead but I don't know where we're going."

The Witch gave Zagger a wry grin, saying, "No, you certainly do not. Perhaps I should lead for the moment."

"Um, all right," Zagger reluctantly agreed.

Walking past the boy, Nomi Nattlin took a few steps down the street but then she veered abruptly to her right, moving purposefully to a small door set into the stony wall of a windowless building. Stopping in front of the door, she extracted a large, brass key from a pocket of her dress and inserted the key into a keyhole in the door. Then she turned the key and pushed.

With a loud, creaking sound, the door swung open on rusty hinges. Duggan peered curiously inside but all she could see in the dim light was a short, poorly lit hallway that ended in a staircase that plunged downward. Water was dripping noisily from the ceiling of the hallway and Duggan's nostrils quickly filled with the dank smell of wet soil, mold, wood rot and decay. Pale light flickered from a couple of candles set in shallow recesses spaced unevenly along the hallway.

Nomi Nattlin stepped through the doorway and started down the hallway. Zagger moved to the side and gestured for the others to follow.

"I'll go last," he explained, "to guard the rear."

"Whatever you say," said Duggan, not caring to argue with Zagger.

Moving through the doorway, Duggan hurried to rejoin Nomi Nattlin, who was now waiting at the top of the stairs. Duggan could hear the footsteps of the others behind her as she moved down the hallway.

"Zaggar wants to be last," she remarked when she reached the hallway end, for some reason feeling the need to tell the Witch. "He was very particular about it."

"Oh?"

“Zagger is always saying he’s experienced with danger.”

“What about you?” Nomi Nattlin asked.

Duggan gave a start. Up until recently, she could have answered very definitely she was not experienced with danger but much had changed in the last two days.

“Danger scares me but my feet keep moving, I guess,” was the best she could say in response.

“Good,” the Witch said with a smile. “Me, I prefer avoiding danger. Let’s see how smart we can be, shall we? Come on.”

Duggan glanced nervously down the stairs, which plunged deeply underground. A smell of dank, stale air was wafting up from the bottom. As she stared into the gloomy darkness, Duggan felt her stomach heave. All Woodsy Trolls hated damp, underground places and this place was about as damp and underground as they get.

“The tunnel below runs across the city and emerges in a hidden place outside the East Wall,” Nomi Nattlin explained when all the others had arrived. “Henceforth, we must avoid being seen. From now on, we will trust no one and at all times, we must keep as much out of sight as possible. Understood?”

Before anyone could reply, Nomi Nattlin was making her way down the stairs. Reluctantly, Duggan followed. At the bottom of the staircase, the only light came from a single candle burning inside a lantern tucked into a recess in the wall. The Witch lifted the lantern and held it in front of her to light their way as



she led Duggan and the others into the dark shadows beneath the city.

As she moved nervously forward, following the Witch, Duggan could hear the muffled footsteps of the others echoing behind her. In many spots along the tunnel path, water was dripping from the ceiling to form dark puddles on the floor. A number of these puddles spread from wall to wall, forcing Duggan and the others to walk straight through them, often ankle-deep in water and a few times even shin-deep. Before long, the bottoms of Duggan's pants were soaked and the water doing the soaking was unpleasantly cold. Between two particularly large puddles, a long-nosed, ugly Rattail-Possum scurried across their path, making Duggan gag in disgust.

The air was dank and foul-smelling. As they traveled farther and farther into the tunnel, a dark sense of foreboding took hold of Duggan. The deeper underground they went, the more she came to feel they were walking to their doom. Nomi Nattlin must have sensed Duggan's mood because she turned and gave the girl a friendly smile of encouragement.

"Be brave, Troll-lass," she whispered in a voice meant only for Duggan. "I know this is difficult but you must buck up for the others. You are in front, which makes you their leader."

Surprised, Duggan shook her head.

"But I'm not leading," she felt obliged to point out, "I am most definitely following you."

This made the Witch laugh.

"You do like being specific, don't you?" she chuckled.

Duggan let the remark pass unanswered.

Instead she asked, "Um, how much farther do we have to go?"

"Maybe another two or three thousand paces, that's all."

"Three thousand?"

"Yes, Devonwick's eastern walls are quite distant. I'm sorry."

"Three thousand," repeated Duggan, dejectedly.

After that, they walked for a long time in silence. Duggan's head was full of thoughts but they were not good thoughts. She tried to shut her mind of them but it was impossible. The gloom weighed heavily on her but she kept her feet moving. Finally, Nomi Nattlin lifted a hand and pointed.

"Look," she cried, "We're at the end."

Squinting, Duggan peered into the distance. Sure enough, ahead of them was a dim shaft of light illuminating a narrow staircase that went up.

"That's the slakin' end of this slakin' tunnel?" exclaimed Duggan.

"Yes, the staircase yonder leads into an abandoned tower. We will rest there until dark then travel by night."

"Because it is safer if we are not seen, right?"

"It is so. There's one other thing you should know," she added.

Duggan sensed a warning was coming.

"What?" she asked reluctantly.

"Eshmagick will not be what you think."

## Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

“What do you mean?” asked Duggan as the others caught up.

For some reason, Nomi Nattlin made no effort to speak quietly.

“The Stories only tell half the truth of Eshmagick’s perils. The other half is...well, it is...”

When the Witch’s voice trailed off, Duggan was left to ask the question she really didn’t want answered.

“What’s the other half?”

“Unspeakable.”



## Chapter 15

The tower turned out to be a gloomy place with windowless walls of stone held up by crisscrossing beams covered in dust and dirt and draped with cobwebs. Half the roof was missing. The remaining half above them was made of thatch and below was a cobblestone floor littered with a century's worth of garbage. In fact, there was such a smell of rot and waste Duggan wrinkled her nose in disgust.

*So much for being back in the fresh air,* she thought as she surveyed the rundown place.

"We will wait here until dark," said Nomi Nattlin when they were all in the tower. "Until then, I

suggest you all get some sleep if you can. We face a long night and much travel.”

Duggan certainly didn't need any encouragement. From the last night of hiking, her muscles ached, her feet were tired and a blister on her right heel made any walking painful. Yawning just at the thought of sleep, she found a slightly cleaner spot along the tower's stone, outer wall. Sitting and leaning her back against the hard surface, Duggan took the sphere out of her pocket and cradled it in her lap. Its metal felt less warm and it didn't look quite as golden as earlier.

*Time to do your job*, she reminded herself.

Taking a deep breath, Duggan searched her mind for the same image of her Mum's bright face but she was just too tired to revive it or else she was too discouraged. Whatever the reason, the task was going to be even harder than before, she realized. Concentrating, she searched her mind for a different image and suddenly an image of her Mum busy in the kitchen popped into her head. It was neither a very strong image nor a very loving one but there it was. Quickly, Duggan took a breath and blew gently on the sphere. Its metal surface instantly warmed and the soft, golden glow that had been fading now returned.

“Thank Gidden,” a relieved Duggan muttered under her breath.

Tucking the warmed sphere back into her pocket, Duggan stretched out her legs in front of her. One of her ankles complained by making a loud, cracking sound and a scab on her right knee pulled at the surrounding skin, causing little needles of pain.

Duggan sighed. All of a sudden, despite her tiredness, she didn't feel much like sleeping. This wasn't a good thing, she reminded herself, considering soon she would be facing another night of walking from sunset to sunrise. It was dark enough for sleeping inside the tower but the darkness wasn't making Duggan feel any sleepier.

*Go to sleep, Duggan-lass,* she tried telling herself but her mind was just too full of worries to shut off her thoughts.

*Eshmagick.*

Out of nowhere, the word popped into her head. How often had she dreamed of Eshmagick, conjuring images of the place on her many walks alone among the trees surrounding her little village of Cowgrass? And how often had she resented her Mum for forcing her to work in her family's little shop when all she wanted was to go off by herself and dream of Eshmagick?

From high in the tower, a songbird's lilting call echoed down the walls. Then a grasshopper chirped. A Tree-Frog peeped. Somewhere in the distance, a Swoop-Bat whistled. Out of nowhere, a breeze swept through the tower, tousling Duggan's hair and filling her nostrils with fresh, earthy scents.

The fresh air made it easier for Duggan to feel good. Lifting her chin, Duggan breathed deeply and the air invigorated her. Soon, all the nerves in her hands and face were tingling. The invisible songbird in the top of the tower called to her again.

*Whee-oo nik-nik, whee.*

The bird's call was enticing. Duggan couldn't help herself, she had to follow it. Standing, she slid a toe along the stone floor, stepping cautiously into the darkness in the direction of the bird, following its call, her hands outstretched in front of her as she took one tiny, cautious step after another. After just a couple of steps, a faint green light appeared in the distance. It seemed a friendly light, so Duggan moved toward it and with every step, the light grew brighter. Soon, the greenish light was bright enough for Duggan to see her surroundings. To her surprise, she discovered she was in a forest.

Duggan liked this forest. There was something about the way the trees swayed to the rhythms of the wind, their trunks creaking gently as they moved back and forth. Duggan could tell they were very Ancient trees, older than any she had ever before seen in her life and yet they seemed more alive than the younger trees of Cowgrass, whispering strange things to her as they swayed and creaked to the musical rhythms of the wind.

*Twee-owl*, she thought she heard one of the trees whisper.

*Troun'ole*, another one might have said.

"You're imagining things, Duggan-lass," she said. Then she raised her eyes to stare at the trees. "Stop it," she called to the one nearest her. "All of you," she added.

But the trees refused to be silent.

"*Twee-owl*," whispered a big tree with slender, oak-shaped leaves and long branches that rattled noisily in the wind.



This big tree reminded Duggan of a Gnarly-Oak and yet it was different, less oaken and yet more oaken. Then its name popped mysteriously into her head. It was a Nodding-Oak, she realized with a start.

*"Troun'ole,"* said a nearby Red-Maple.

*"Twee-owl,"* the Nodding-Oak repeated.

"You trees be quiet," Duggan again cried out, unable to contain herself.

"Sshh," the Nodding-Oak now whispered.

"Sshh," agreed the Red-Maple.

Suddenly, the figure of a woman appeared among the trees and with her appearance, the light of the forest changed color, going from green to a more sinister-feeling orange. The eerie light glimmered off the woman's smooth, marble-like skin.

"Duggan," she moaned, "Duggan, why?" The woman was as rigid as a statue and equally as cold-looking and when she spoke, the words came out of a mouth that didn't move. "Look what you've done," she accused.

Duggan felt a pang of guilt. Tears welled in her eyes. Her hands began trembling.

"Mumsy," she cried, "I'm sorry. I was so stupid. I'm sorry."

From the unmoving mouth came another pitiful moan.

"Duggan, why do you not help me?"

"Mum, I want to, I really want to," cried Duggan. "What should I do?"

"You must help me. Please."

"Mumsy, I don't know how," Duggan cried. "Tell me what to do."

“You know.”

“I don’t. Tell me.” Tears flowed down Duggan’s cheeks. “Mumsy, I don’t want to lose you. Tell me what to do. Please tell me.”

“If you don’t know, all is lost,” moaned the woman as the light faded and she slowly began to disappear. “Lost.”

A last flicker of sickly, orange light briefly illuminated the rigid face of Duggan’s Mum then she was gone.

“Mumsy, don’t go,” Duggan cried piteously. “Don’t go.”

With her next breath, Duggan’s eyes popped open. Looking around, she saw she was back in the tower, sitting against the stone wall. Her whole body was shaking and she could feel the wetness of tears on her cheeks.

The voice of Nomi Nattlin brought her back from the dream to reality, as the Witch shouted into the tower from a doorway, “Everyone get up, it’s time to get going.”

Instantly, Duggan’s mood changed. She was suddenly both scared and excited. They were about to take to the road that led to Eshmagick. What dangers and adventures loomed ahead of them, she wondered as she stretched her arms and shook her legs to bring them back to life.

While the others were rousing themselves, Duggan carefully removed the sphere from her pocket. Again, it appeared to have lost some of its warmth and brightness. Instantly concerned, Duggan racked her brain for another loving image of her Mum but only an

image of her Mum with eyebrows raised in a disapproving way came to mind. It was not the best image to use but try as she might, Duggan could not shake the image of her frowning, disapproving Mum to find another.

“Oh well,” she muttered under her breath, “best I can do.”

Duggan sucked in her breath and blew on the sphere. To her surprise, the metal instantly warmed and grew brighter. With a sigh of relief, Duggan slipped the sphere back into her pocket and moved to stand in the doorway where the Witch was waiting. Giving a friendly wink, Nomi Nattlin pushed the door open and in the dim light of early evening, Duggan looked out on a shadowy bunching of ancient Black-Cedars. These twisted, old trees gave off the brittle smell of moldy tangerines that comes to all trees in their final days when rot is taking hold of them and they are dying. Instantly, she felt sad for the dying trees.

“Don’t think on it,” Nomi Nattlin whispered to her. “Come, we have much distance to travel.” Then she reached a hand over Duggan’s head and uttered some strange words. “*Plasse-tem di oons*,” she sang in a lilting voice. “*Plasse-tem di oons*,” she repeated.

As the Witch chanted the strange words, a breeze grew up around Duggan. It was an icy breeze and the cold air sweeping across her skin raised goose bumps.

“What are you doing?” asked Duggan, alarmed.

“Using a spell that will give you strength and speed,” explained the Witch. “Just wait and see,” she

promised as she repeated her Magickal words, "*Plasse-tem di oons, plasse-tem di oon.*"

All of a sudden, Duggan felt the effects of the spell. It was like taking long sips of cold water on a hot day. Her spirits lifted and she could hear her heart beating strongly in her chest. Hearing footsteps, she glanced over to see Lambrell, whose cheeks were bright red.

Grinning, Duggan remarked, "Good Gidden, you look ready to run a race."

"Nomi Nattlin has cast a spell on me," Lambrell explained. "The others, too."

"It's time," suggested Dowd Chase as Zagger and he joined the others.

"Yes," agreed Nomi Nattlin. "Let us go."

And with that, they started out, with Nomi Nattlin taking the lead and the others falling in line behind her. To Duggan's relief, the sad grove of dying Cedars turned out to be only a small one that they quickly left behind. For the next hour or so, the road they were on cut through a gently rolling meadowland that dipped occasionally into a gully or slashed through a narrow stand of scrubby Worm-Aspens. The night sky overhead was cloudy and starless and the wind hardly puffed at all. They marched in the same order as they had in the tunnel, with Duggan matching strides just behind the Witch, followed by Lambrell then Dowd Chase, with Zagger bringing up the rear.

They walked in silence for many hours. Their pace seemed very fast as they strode across the terrain and it amazed Duggan she didn't feel more tired from their exertions. Apparently, one simple enchantment

from a knowledgeable Witch made that much of a difference. As the hours passed, with one hour lengthening into two, then three, four and more, Duggan lost track of time.

At last, Nomi Nattlin came to a halt and Duggan looked up. To her surprise, the sliver of sky directly above the far horizon was glowing brightly. Below the glow, a deep wasteland of barren hills stretched in all directions as far as her eyes could see. Duggan didn't pay much attention to this wasteland. She was too busy wondering how the horizon could be so bright when it couldn't be much later than midnight.

"It can't be morning already," she remarked to the Witch.

Nomi Nattlin answered, "No, it is not morning."

"Then what is that light ahead of us?"

"It is the light of Eshmagick."

"Eshmagick," exclaimed Lambrell, arriving beside Duggan in time to hear the Witch's words. "We are already there?"

"Nearly," said the Witch.

Surprised, Duggan asked, "How can that be? Was Eshmagick always so close to Cowgrass?"

Nomi gave a small smile. "Attitude and belief as much as geography can create a great distance between places and people," she explained, "and here is another lesson about your new place, for in Eshmagick, night is as bright as day for Trolls like the three of you."

"Really?" said Lambrell. "As bright as day? That's burnin' strange."

“Not strange at all,” the Witch corrected. “As I say, for Trolls such as you, it’s entirely normal.”

“That’s twice you said Trolls like us,” Duggan pointed out. “What about you? Or Dowd Chase? Is it not the same?”

“For Dowd Chase and me, night is night, though somewhat brighter, as if there were always a full moon. Eshmagick affects different Races differently.”

Duggan let the idea sink in. It was rather a strange notion and yet what did she really know of Eshmagick? Another question popped into her head.

“If night is like day for us Trolls, then is day going to be like night?”

“Let’s wait on that,” replied the Witch, her eyebrow lifting cryptically. “We must certainly talk of such things very soon but first let’s travel some distance and see if we can reach Eshmagick before this night is over.”

Facing down the road once more, Nomi Nattlin was about to start forward when Dowd Chase spoke up.

“Well, now,” he muttered, hanging back a bit, “what with Eshmagick in sight, I’m wonderin’ if I’m needed any more.”

The Witch turned his way and answered coolly, “Do what you need to do, Master Chase.”

“Ya know I have my reasons,” the man replied in a tone of voice that perhaps had a ring of defensiveness.

“Of course,” Nomi Nattlin agreed, “though if your reasons might allow you a little room to help a friend, we could certainly use your company while we

walk these open lands. I think you know why I ask this.”

“Oh, please come with us,” cried Lambrell.

“Yes, do,” added Duggan.

The man looked from face to face before finally answering, “Well, all right, I’ll stay with ya until ya’s a little farther along.”

“Then it’s settled,” proclaimed the Witch and immediately she started down the road before anyone could say another word.

Happy with the outcome, Duggan took a deep breath and went chasing after the Witch, with the others falling in line in their usual order behind her. Ahead of Duggan and the others, the sky grew brighter and brighter as they sped forward. Before long, what had appeared to be a rolling meadowland in front of them suddenly dipped into a thick stand of trees. As they drew near this wooded stand, Duggan was able to identify the trees and when she did, her heart skipped a beat. For they were not just any trees, they were the Ancient Nodding-Oaks that only grew in Eshmagick. At least, she was pretty sure they were Nodding-Oaks.

The group of travelers was now moving under a sky that was constantly growing brighter until at last, Nomi Nattlin halted and turned to look back, raising a hand and gesturing for everyone to join her. When they had all gathered in a circle around her, she spoke to them excitedly.

“One can never be entirely sure but I do believe we have walked past the outer borders of the Westreach Kingdom and we stand now in Eshmagick.”

"This is it?" asked Lambrell, the pitch of her voice rising. "We're really here? In Eshmagick?"

"Yes, this is Eshmagick," replied Nomi Nattlin.

"Finally," exclaimed Zagger. "So, now what?"

Zagger's reaction annoyed Duggan. The moment deserved more appreciation than Zagger was giving it. How many hours had the three of them dreamed of this exact moment? Planned for it?

*Zagger is such a jerk*, she thought.

"I can't believe we're actually here," marveled Lambrell.

The obvious thrill in Lambrell's voice took Duggan's mind off Zagger. Thank goodness for her friend, she told herself as she wondered for a thousandth time what the girl saw in Zagger. For the thousandth time she could find no good answer.

"We now face a problem and a hard choice," said the Witch, interrupting Duggan's thoughts.

"What problem?" Lambrell asked.

"The problem is the hills facing us are Mountainsy Troll kinds of hills."

Duggan heard Lambrell's sharp intake of breath as she cried, "Mountainsy Trolls."

"Yes," the Witch answered. "Ahead of us are the great and famous hill-lands of the Mountainsy Trolls."

There was a long moment when no one spoke.

"Um, you said we face a choice," Duggan noted. "What choice? Do you know a way around so we can avoid...um, you know, avoid these hills?"

"No," replied the Witch, "the hill country stretches for thousands of paces in either direction. The



choice is whether we keep going now or wait until daylight. Here in Eshmagick, Mountainsy Trolls sleep in the daylight and so we will be less likely to encounter any of them if we wait for the night to pass and daylight to arrive.”

“Then obviously we should wait,” Lambrell said.

“We face other dangers if we walk in daylight,” replied the Witch.

“What other dangers?” Zagger asked.

Duggan was in no mood to hear about other dangers and so she spoke hastily to keep the Witch from answering.

“Um, you should decide. You know best.”

Nodding, Nomi Nattlin thought briefly then pronounced, “The most important thing is to get where we need to get as quickly as possible, before the Faerie dies from her wounds. So we should continue now.”

“Fine,” agreed Zagger. “I’m not afraid of any slakin’ Mountainsy Trolls.”

“Well, ya should be afraid of ‘em, Master Zagger,” said Dowd Chase, speaking for the first time.

“I know how to fight if I need to,” shot back Zagger, looking offended.

“Oh, I’m sure ya could face one of ‘em,” answered Dowd Chase in a friendly enough manner, “but what about five of ‘em? Or a dozen? Or fifty? In fact, what if we came across a whole army? Hundreds?”

“Let’s hope we do not,” Nomi Nattlin remarked before Zagger could speak. “We’ll keep as much as possible to the low ground and hope for the best. Come

all. Let's follow Master Zagger here. He can lead the way."

"Right," agreed Zagger readily enough. "I'm not afraid."

"That may be so but let's all keep our eyes open," the Witch cautioned, "and remember, Mountainsy Trolls are not our only enemies."

"That doesn't sound good," said Lambrell. "What else is out there?"

Duggan sighed.

*Here we go again, she thought, more bad news.*

Instead of answering, the Witch simply pointed ahead. "We will stick to this road until we reach the hills beyond. When we are in the hill-lands, we face much danger before we reach the other side. But we may pass unnoticed if we are lucky."

"And if we're unlucky?" Lambrell asked.

"Let's hope for luck," replied the Witch.

"Let's hope," agreed Duggan in a quiet voice.

Duggan's big-biggiest problem was she was feeling neither hopeful nor lucky.



EshSecret

## Chapter 16

For only the second time in her life, Duggan was about to walk intentionally in the direction of danger. The first time was the night she went with the others into the Honeyhocks to catch a Faerie. How long ago that seemed and how unscaredy compared to this time. Sucking in a deep breath, Duggan marched determinedly forward, following Zagger and doing her best to hope for luck.

Before long, they reached the end of the trees and the beginnings of more barren countryside. At first, the new terrain was rather level and smooth but very quickly the ground grew drier and rockier as it tilted upward. Duggan found this empty countryside

depressing but she pushed on, following Zagger for perhaps an hour or more before reaching the base of their first big hill. There, Nomi Nattlin halted and called to Zagger.

“Hold up, lad.” When Zagger turned her way, the Witch pointed to their left and said, “It’s better to stick to the low ground over there. Let’s follow that creek bed and see if it will take us around this hill.”

Nodding, Zagger veered to his left and began picking his way down a rocky slope littered with treacherously sharp-edged stones colored in shades of grays and blues and varying in size from tiny pebbles to chunky rocks larger than Duggan’s head. Although the sky above them was bright now, Duggan could see neither sun nor moon nor stars when she looked up. Soon they reached the bottom of the slope. The creek bed turned out to be little more than a rock-strewn gully cutting through the rough terrain and dry but for a trickle of water flowing sluggishly along a small channel that meandered down its middle.

“Can we drink this water?” asked Lambrell, pointing to the tiny flow in the creek. “I’m getting kinda thirsty.”

“I wouldn’t,” said the Witch. “Let’s keep moving. We’ll stop and drink from our canteens when we’ve reached a safer place where we might pause to rest.”

Resuming their walking, they stuck to the creek bed, which zigzagged its way through a series of low mounds, each a little taller than the one before. Finally, they rounded one particularly large mound only to find

the creek bed abruptly ending at the edge of a stinky bog filled with stagnant water.

Reaching this turgid bog's edge, Duggan stared forlornly across its wide, gloomy expanse. A funny, green-bodied bird with a long, knifelike beak skimmed over the bog's surface just above the tops of the Marsh-Grass clumps that dotted its expanse before disappearing into some low trees at the other end. Duggan wasn't sure she recognized the bird.

*Maybe a Squally-Flicker*, she thought.

"This bog looks like it goes on slakin' forever," she observed. "Is there no way across?"

Zagger moved to the edge and stepped cautiously onto one of the clumps of Marsh-Grass. Under his weight, the grass instantly sank, causing Zagger to lose his balance.

"Hallow's Fire," he cried, throwing himself backward to keep from falling into the water.

Zagger's quick reflexes barely kept him from having an unwanted swim, instead landing him on his backside with one pant leg coated up to its knee in water and stinking mud.

"Slakin' disgusting," he swore.

"Looks like no going across the grass," Nomi Nattlin remarked matter-of-factly. "It appears the only way is up and around."

Duggan glanced up. Looming over them was a tall hill with steep sides mostly covered in brambly bushes that reminded her of the rough, tangled bristles of your typical scrub brush. Then Duggan noticed a narrow path running uphill from the edge of the bog. Impulsively, she took the lead, skirting the bog's edge

and heading for the path. Nomi Nattlin followed, with the others falling into line behind the Witch.

This new path uphill was tough slogging, slicing across a ground that was flinty-hard and littered everywhere with large, sharp-edged rocks that made for dangerous footing. As Duggan climbed upward, the brambly bushes edged the path with thorn-covered branches that tore at her skin. Nearly as bad, the branches on the plants without thorns were so dry and stiff they hurt whenever Duggan's legs brushed against one.

Above Duggan, the cruel brambles and stiff branches looked to go on forever. More than once, she gave a discouraged sigh but she made herself keep going. After all, what other choice did she have?

Eventually, over a small rise about halfway up the long slope, the narrow path abruptly changed direction, cutting sideways across the hillside before plunging into a deep ravine that hadn't been visible from below. Duggan could hear a noise in the ravine that sounded like wind blowing through trees or water spilling over rocks. There weren't any trees in sight and so she decided the noise had to be the sound of running water. Facing a ravine that dipped below ground didn't give Duggan any good feelings. She glanced back.

"I don't like the looks of what's ahead," she said to the Witch.

"No use thinking on it," Nomi Nattlin replied. "We can't go back and this is the only path."

"I guess," Duggan reluctantly agreed.

The ravine proved to be deep and dark, with ruggedly steep sides. As Duggan pushed farther and farther below ground, she sighed often as a growing feeling of dread took hold. Before long, the air turned chilly and as she went even deeper into the ravine, it grew damper, which made the air feel even colder. And the more she traveled, the more the path had a foot-worn look to it.

*Foot-worn by what*, Duggan wondered.

All of a sudden, a little ahead of Duggan something moved. It was only a small movement deep in the shadows but every muscle in Duggan's body instantly tightened. Slowing, she sucked in her breath. What was it? What was there?

Whatever it was, it moved again.

Duggan could feel her hands curling into fists as the first uncontrollable trembles ran through her body. Looking over her shoulder, she was about to tell the Witch about the movement, when Nomi Nattlin spoke up, her voice low.

"Yes, I saw it."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Something."

"What should we do?"

"Keep going. But move slowly and be ready."

*Ready for what*, Duggan wondered.

Nodding nervously, she did as told, moving slowly forward, all her senses alive as she peered ahead, trying to see through the shadows in front of her. She didn't get very far, however, when suddenly there was a loud, panicky cry behind her. It was the

voice of Zagger. She whirled around and what she saw made her gasp.

Stocky creatures with thick bodies and abnormally long arms were oozing by the dozens out of the sheer cliffs above Dowd Chase and Zagger at the end of the line. Weirdly, the horrid creatures didn't fall when they reached full form but rather, they seemed to hang from the stony face of the cliff as if glued to the stone by their feet.

Their angry shouts filled the air.

Before Dowd Chase and Zagger could react, one of the creatures loosened itself from the cliff and came hurtling toward Zagger, who sidestepped just in time to avoid having the thing land on top of him. The instant the creature hit the ground, it rolled and sprang to its feet, swinging around to face Zagger and emitting an angry scream. Zagger reacted by shouting an obscenity at the thing. This only provoked the creature.

Screaming, it picked up a large rock and hurled it clumsily at Zagger, who stepped nimbly out of the way. The creature screamed again and in the next instant, three of its comrades came loose from the cliff above Zagger and plunged toward the boy. Duggan knew she should be doing something to help but she just couldn't get her feet to move.

Suddenly, Nomi Nattlin was beside her, grabbing her by the shoulders and shouting, "Run. Get away. Don't stop until you're safe. Keep running. I'll find you."

Without waiting for Duggan to reply, the Witch whirled and launched herself in the direction of the



attack, shouting to Lambrell to run, too. Visibly shaking, a white-faced Lambrell hurried over to Duggan.

“She said we should run,” cried Lambrell, her eyes as wide as saucers. “Run, she said.”

Duggan didn’t argue. She was too scaredy to be brave. Motioning to Lambrell to follow, she turned to flee when suddenly, an awful creature with a hairy face and enormous arms landed right in front of her from above.

Duggan screamed.

Startled by the loudness of her scream, the creature hesitated briefly, looking confused and maybe even a little intimidated. Unfortunately, this was only for a second. Quickly recovering, the creature opened its mouth wide and blasted a terrifying, full-throated roar at Duggan. Then it raised an arm and Duggan saw large, lethal-looking nails sprouting from the ends of its fingertips.

She didn’t have time to think, which maybe was a good thing. Reacting mindlessly, she attacked her enemy in the way of a Woodsy Troll, bending at the waist and racing forward to drive her lowered head into the thick stomach of the creature. The strong muscles of Duggan’s neck absorbed the shock of the blow as she drove forward, her tree-strong legs pumping hard.

The creature staggered backward and nearly lost its footing. In the next instant, Duggan was shoving her way past the thing, with Lambrell right behind her. Thrown off-balance by Duggan’s head-butting attack, the creature made a clumsy grab for the

two Troll-girls but they were too quick. Slipping under its outstretched hands, Duggan reached back and gave Lambrell a hard pull to clear her then took off, running down the path, her heart beating wildly, her mind utterly empty except for the strong voice telling her to run, to escape.

She was not proud to be abandoning her friends but she couldn't stop herself. Behind her, there came a booming sound followed by a bright flash of golden light causing everything around them to glow prettily for a brief, unreal moment then the light faded.

*What in Hallow's Fire was that?* Duggan wondered.

Nothing good, she figured. Quickening her pace, Duggan refused to look back, even when there was a second explosion followed by another flash of the oddly pretty, golden light, followed this time by a loud, awful scream of pain.

"What was that?" cried Lambrell in a panicky voice.

Duggan didn't answer. She just kept running, her mind filled with nothing but fear, her hands shaking violently as she raced down the path. Eventually, they reached a narrow bridge coated with something greasy-looking but even this didn't slow Duggan who covered the span of the bridge in three, long strides then she continued up the trail on the other side, still running at breakneck pace.

All of a sudden, they were out of the ravine and Duggan found herself on a brightly lit hillside covered in thorny brambles. She slowed to a jog and when at last, she came to a long, flat boulder lying alongside

the path; she halted and plopped onto the boulder. Lambrell sat silently beside her.

Both girls were panting hard from the running and it took quite a long time for their breathing to return to normal. Lambrell's normally pale face was bright red from the exertion and the lingering track of a wind-stirred tear stained one cheek. Duggan's whole body was shaking and she couldn't quite get her hands to stop trembling.

"What do we do now?" Lambrell finally asked.

"I don't know," Duggan answered honestly. "Nomi Nattlin said we should find a safe place and wait for her."

"So, what does that mean? Stay here?"

Duggan really had no idea. Shrugging, she looked around. They were sitting in plain view on an open hillside. Below them, the bog that had blocked their way across the lowlands stretched for vast distances in either direction, filling a long valley ringed on all sides by hills of varying heights. The hill behind Duggan and Lambrell was very tall. Many of the hills across the bog were even taller and they were just as treeless, their rocky sides nearly bare but for the low brambles covering them.

Duggan suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable on the bare hillside. Instinctively, she moved a hand to touch the sphere. To her surprise, the metal was still warm. The Faerie was yet alive. She suddenly felt the need to protect it, to keep it safe.

Quickly, Duggan rescanned the countryside, looking for the right kind of place for them to hide. A few hundred feet below them was a narrow strand of

moss-covered trees that ran along the edge of the bog for a short distance. Nudging Lambrell with her shoulder, Duggan pointed.

“Let’s go down there. Hide in those trees.”

“How will Nomi find us if we hide down there?”

“I don’t know but I have a feeling she will know where to look.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

When Duggan said nothing, Lambrell tightened her lips and nodded grimly. Then she asked the hard question that was troubling Duggan, too.

“Do you think they’re OK?”

“Sure,” she replied.

## Chapter 17

When they reached the stand of trees, Duggan picked out an old Cotton-Seed with a long, thick curtain of dark-green moss hanging from its lower limbs. With Lambrell following, she moved behind the moss and settled on the ground. There they waited. And waited. Duggan was actually getting sleepy when suddenly, Lambrell poked her with an elbow.

“What’s that sound?” Lambrell whispered.

Duggan listened for a moment before observing, “Sounds like footsteps coming our way.”

“You think it’s them?”

Duggan didn’t ask what Lambrell meant by them. Instead, she leaned forward to listen more

closely. Gradually, the sound grew louder. Duggan could feel her nerves tingling as she listened with Lambrell. All of a sudden, from the shadows at the edge of the trees, a dark creature emerged from behind the wide trunk of a Cotton-Seed tree and lurched toward them. Duggan gasped.

Zagger.

The creature stumbling toward them was a bloodied, grim-faced version of Zagger but most definitely it was Zagger and he was alive.

Before Duggan could react, Lambrell rushed through the moss curtain, crying, "Zagger."

The boy froze, looking fearful then he recognized his friend.

"Lambrell," he called back, a grin spreading across his face, "am I glad to see you."

Lambrell raced over and threw her arms around the Troll-boy. As Duggan moved to join them, she had to smile a little while an over-demonstrative Lambrell utterly embarrassed Zagger by giving him a big kiss on his cheek. Blushing, Zagger looked past Lambrell to give Duggan a pained smile of greeting.

"I am pretty slakin' glad to see you two," he called to her, sounding for once as if he meant it.

"What happened?" asked Duggan. "And where are the others?"

"As soon as Lambrell lets go of me, I will tell you," replied Zagger, trying to sound annoyed but not exactly succeeding.

"I'm never letting go," cried Lambrell.

"Oh yes you are," Zagger disagreed, squirming to escape.

Laughing, Lambrell let go and the instant she did, to the surprise of both Troll-girls, Zagger staggered and had to put a hand on a nearby tree trunk to keep from falling.

“You’re hurt,” cried Lambrell, grabbing her friend’s arm to prop him.

“I’m all right,” answered Zagger, stoically, “just a few cuts and bruises, that’s all.”

Zagger was putting on a brave face. Duggan could see his wounds were worse than the boy wanted to admit, with a long streak of dried blood running down one side of his face and an ugly, black-and-blue discoloration around one of his eyes.

She said to him, “Those things were Mountainsy Trolls, weren’t they?”

“I guess so,” Zagger replied. “And Dowd Chase was right. I might have handled one of ‘em or even five but slakin’ dozens came pouring out of the cliffs. One mean-looking biggie punched me in the face and I got dizzy and fell down. Then there was this giant explosion and something hit me in the head and I guess I passed out. When I came to...well...um...”

“What?” asked Duggan, when Zagger’s voice trailed off.

“When I came to, I was the only one still there—at least, the only living one still there.”

“What does that mean?” cried Lambrell.

“Um, everywhere were loads and loads of dead Mountainsy Trolls,” recounted Zagger, his eyes widening as he spoke. “I mean, they were not just dead, they looked like they’d been thrown into Hallow’s Fire itself, their bodies totally roasted.”

“Roasted?” gasped Lambrell, her eyes going wide.

“Yeah, slakin’ cooked.”

Taking a deep breath, Duggan summoned the courage to ask, “You said dead Mountainsy Trolls. No Humans?”

“Only Mountainsy Trolls,” confirmed Zagger, his voice grim. “If anything bad happened to Nomi Nattlin or Dowd Chase, I saw no signs of it.”

“You sure?” Duggan pressed.

Zagger had to pause and swallow hard before answering, “I’m pretty sure. It was hard to tell with everything being so charred but I checked every stinking corpse before I left.”

“And you have no idea what happened to Nomi or Dowd?” Duggan asked.

“Nope. I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m glad you found us,” said Lambrell.

“That was luck,” Zagger replied. “I came here figuring I could hide in these trees to rest up and instead I found the two of you.”

“Well, you rest here,” Duggan said to the boy, “while we fetch some Calley-grass and mud for your wounds. We’ll be right back. Come on, Lambrell, let’s go.”

“Maybe I should stay here with Zagger,” said the girl, a look of concern on her face.

“No, come help me,” Duggan insisted. “We won’t be gone long. Zagger can manage without us.”

“I’ll be fine,” mumbled Zagger as he lowered himself gingerly to the ground, looking far from fine.



Lambrell gave Duggan a look that said she wanted to stay with Zagger but Duggan wasn't going to argue. She needed to talk alone to her friend. Taking Lambrell by the arm, Duggan led her away in silence. Above them, the sky was darkening. Did that mean a storm was coming, Duggan wondered. She hoped not. Turning to face Lambrell when they reached the bog's edge, she came straight to the point.

"Does Zagger seem weird to you?" she asked.

"Um, yeah, I guess."

Lambrell's blunt agreement surprised Duggan.

"You know him a lot better than I do," she now pointed out. "Any idea what's up with him?"

"Only the obvious. We haven't had many chances to talk since the Honeyhocks."

Once again, Lambrell's answer came as a surprise to Duggan.

"Zagger and you talk about stuff like feelings?"

Now it was Lambrell's turn to look surprised.

"Of course we do. Along with you, Zagger is my best-bestiest friend in the whole world."

Duggan was curious, too, about the other part of Lambrell's answer.

"What did you mean, only the obvious?"

Lambrell thought for a moment before answering, "That we're heading toward the lands of the Faeries. You know, where his roots must obviously be."

Duggan gave Lambrell a confused look but then it hit her.

"Good Gidden, you're saying Zagger's got Faerie blood, aren't you?"

“Of course, haven’t you noticed his white hair? As near as I can figure from things Zagger says to me, he even knew some of his Faerie family until he got orphaned and had to go off on his own.”

This was all news to Duggan. Knowing it, suddenly much about Zagger made a kind of sense. Piles of questions instantly started popping into her head but there wasn’t time to discuss them with Lambrell. More pressing matters needed deciding.

Pushing aside all her questions, Duggan said to Lambrell, “You know we’re slakin’ goners without Nomi Nattlin. And I think we need Dowd Chase, too,” she added, trying her best to hide the pain that unexpectedly hit her when she spoke of needing the man.

“Nomi Nattlin said we should hide and wait until she finds us. Don’t you think she’ll find us?”

“Um, yes, but what if things didn’t go the way she expected? What if...well, just suppose things turned out differently than she wanted.”

Lambrell closed her eyes and thought for a moment before replying in a hushed voice, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking we should go back to the place where we last saw them, in case Zagger missed something.”

Gasping, Lambrell cried, “Back where the Mountainsy Trolls attacked us?” Her face grew a little pale at the thought. “Isn’t that too dangerous?”

“I think we have to take the risk,” answered Duggan. “I’m thinking I should go back while you stay here and take care of Zagger.”

After hesitating briefly, Lambrell surprised Duggan by nodding in agreement.

"I think you're right," she said, "one of us should go."

"Right," agreed Duggan, doing her best to sound cheery even as her stomach churned at the thought of venturing off alone. "Now come on," she cried, pushing away the bad thoughts, "you get the mud and I'll pull some Calley-grass."

Nodding, Lambrell moved to the water's edge while Duggan wandered a little bit down the grassy shore of the bog to a spot where a stand of the curative Calley-grass was growing. Quickly, she yanked a dozen short clumps then headed back to Lambrell who was standing with two fistfuls of mud in front of her. As she drew near, she noticed something weird about Lambrell.

"Good Gidden," she exclaimed, pointing, "what's happened to your hands?"

Lambrell looked down. Beyond the obvious fact that they were full of mud, there was the equally obvious fact all her fingers had turned green and from their ends were sprouting tiny, green tendrils, from which dainty, yellow buds were already beginning to open into flowers.

"Hallow's Fire," cried Lambrell, her eyes widening.

"There are flowers growing out of your fingers," exclaimed Duggan, stating the obvious.

"I see that."

Duggan glanced at Lambrell's face and received another shock.

"And your face is green and flowers are growing under your ears."

Dropping the mud, Lambrell put a dirty hand to her right ear. Encountering a flower there, she quickly snatched her hand away.

"Hallow's Fire," she repeated. "Slakin' what is happening to me?"

"I don't know," answered Duggan, trying her hardest to maintain a calm voice. "It must be an allergic reaction to something. Maybe the mud?"

"That's ridiculous," said Lambrell. "Mud doesn't..." Then her voice trailed off as she watched a slender twig push out of the skin on the back of her hand. "Duggan, what in Hallow's Fire is happening to me?" she cried, her voice growing panicky.

Duggan didn't really believe there was some kind of allergy taking hold of her friend but she had no other ideas.

"Quick," she suggested, "let's move away from here and maybe it will stop."

Lambrell's eyes suddenly grew very wide.

"What?" demanded Duggan.

Lambrell pointed a flowery finger at Duggan's face.

"It's happening to you, too."

Dropping the Calley-grass, Duggan reached her hand up and sure enough, she felt a small twig with little leaves sprouting from the spot where Lambrell was pointing. For some reason, she felt more curious than frightened and impulsively she took hold of the little twig and plucked it from her face.

"Ouch," she whined. "That hurt."

Her brow furrowed, Lambrell reached her hand to take the small twig from Duggan and rub it between her two fingers, crushing its leaves. Then she brought the thing up to her nose and sniffed.

"It's real," she observed. "Duggan, whatever is happening, it most definitely isn't some kind of allergic reaction."

"You may be right," replied Duggan, "but, still, let's get away from this spot and see if it helps."

"OK," Lambrell agreed.

Duggan turned and started to take a step but to her surprise, her legs were as stiff as wood. Alarmed, she glanced down to see roots sprouting tiny leaves pushing out of her ankles and shoving into the dirt.

Reacting, she shouted to Lambrell, "Hurry, before we get stuck."

With her legs already more wood than flesh, Duggan found she could hardly bend her knees when she tried moving but somehow she managed a stiff-legged walk up the slope from the bog, with Lambrell clumping behind her on feet that were quickly becoming covered in flowery vines. As they neared the trees, Duggan peered ahead and spotted Zagger who was lying on his back, eyes closed. When she gave a panicked cry, the boy lifted his head and looked her way. Immediately, his jaw dropped.

"What the—" he shouted.

Duggan tried to answer him but her mouth was not working properly.

"Help...Zag..." was all she could manage through a mouthful of leaves.

Duggan tried looking over her shoulder to see how Lambrell was faring but her head refused to swivel on her neck. Panicked, she looked down. The tendrils growing out of her ankles were taking hold, burrowing into the ground and rooting firmly. Her legs were as stiff as oak boards.

Above her, Duggan had the sensation of something large and leafy spreading over her head, drawing her arms inexorably upward as it grew. She tried pulling down her arms but they wouldn't respond. Her neck was now all but immobilized and even if she could still use it, she was afraid to look up for fear of what she would see above her.

Duggan tried glancing sideways to see how Lambrell was doing but her eyeballs were frozen and her head refused to move, no matter how hard she tried. She tried calling to her friend but her lips wouldn't budge. In fact, no part of her worked anymore. Legs didn't move. Arms were stuck overhead. Feet were rooted to the ground.

Duggan had become a prisoner in her own body.



Another **EshSecret**

Duggan would have cried out but her mouth absolutely refused to work and so she settled for a muffled grunt. Then there was a long, scaredy moment

of utter silence during which Duggan wondered if this was going to be the end of her. Then Zagger's face came into sight, his bright eyes only a few inches from her frozen, unblinking eyes.

"Duggan, is that you?" the boy asked.

Hearing Zagger's voice and seeing his eyes were a great relief to Duggan. It meant she wasn't completely lost. Focusing all her energies on her mouth, Duggan willed herself to speak an answer but she couldn't manage even a single word. If only she could say something. Or do something. Anything. Wink. Roll her eyes. Anything.

Helplessly, she regarded Zagger's peering gray eyes through her frozen ones.

"I see your eyes looking at me," the boy said to her, "but I don't know if you can see me or hear me. This is slakin' crazy but you've turned into this funny, little tree. You've got branches all over you. And sprouting from the branches are these bright, green leaves and these tiny, purple berries. Here, I'll show you."

Duggan couldn't see what Zagger was doing but she certainly felt the little stab of pain when he plucked something from her right arm near the elbow.

"Take a look at this," said Zagger, stepping back and holding up a small branch with green leaves and purple berries. "Can you slakin' believe it?"

*I believe it*, Duggan thought.

For some reason, she wasn't frightened anymore. Not as much as she should have been, anyway. Zagger dropped the branch and moved out of her line of vision.

“And Lambrell here,” continued Zagger from somewhere nearby, “she’s turned into this pretty, little tree full of yellow flowers. I’m looking straight into her eyes but I can’t tell if she sees me or not. Can you see me, Lambrell?” the boy called. “It’s me, Zagger.”

There was no reply from the girl.

Suddenly, however, there was a sharp snap of a twig breaking somewhere not too far in the distance. Immediately, Zagger’s face reappeared in front of Duggan’s eyes.

“Um, there’s something out there in the bushes at the edge of the trees,” he whispered. “I can feel it watching us. I think I’d better hide the two of you then hide myself. Don’t worry, I won’t leave you.”

From the depths of her wooden prison, Duggan got a vague sense of Zagger hurriedly draping strands of moss over her. As a final touch, he laid a fuzzy piece of the dark-green stuff across her eyes, blinding her.

“Sorry,” he whispered, “I don’t want your eyes showing in case it’s...um, just in case.”

Next, Duggan heard Zagger’s light footsteps as he moved away from her. Then she heard the boy grunting behind her, no doubt as he draped moss hurriedly over Lambrell.

“Lambrell, I’m going to cover your eyes now,” Duggan heard him whisper to the girl. “Sorry,” he added a second later.

Next, Duggan heard scraping sounds, telling her Zagger was scrambling into a tree. Then everything grew very, very quiet and the silence lasted for a long time. Then something rustled in the darkness. A paw scratched in the dirt. Behind Duggan, something



sniffed, followed by a deep-throated growl that sounded very ominous.

Or was it something else, something that sounded like a growl but wasn't exactly a growl? Duggan couldn't be sure but it sounded like the creature had actually muttered a single word in a deep, rumbling voice and if a word had indeed come from its mouth, it sounded like, well...

It was all too unbelievable for Duggan. The sound from the creature had sounded like *Tworroll*.

Behind Duggan, a light glowed. Then Duggan heard a succession of sounds that made her feel very scaredy. Whatever the creature behind her might be, to Duggan's way of hearing, it sounded like the creature was digging at Lambrell's wooden body with its claws.

All of a sudden, Zagger began shouting, "Go away. Get. Shoo."

In the next instant, Duggan heard the sound of Zagger beating two sticks together from atop his tree and the thing behind her growled angrily.

"Get away, you beast," shouted Zagger, beating his sticks loudly as he did. "Shoo. Go away."

There was another growl or mutter or whatever then a snort then something padded away, its footsteps fading quickly. Light dimmed. Above Duggan, Zagger slowly stopped beating his sticks then Duggan heard Zagger dropping from the tree, his feet thumping as they hit the ground.

"That was scaredy," he said from somewhere nearby. "Believe it or not, I think that thing was a Shiny-eyed Tiger. Just like from the Stories. Can you believe it? I think it's gone now. Anyway," he

continued, “something weird is happening to me. I mean, I’m not turning into a tree or anything but I can hardly keep my eyes open. I don’t know why but I’ve gotta sleep and sleep right now.”

Duggan wanted desperately to answer the boy and tell him not to sleep, not while they were trapped like this, but her mouth wouldn’t move. In the next instant, she heard Zagger climbing back into the tree. Then all grew silent. For some reason, Duggan was feeling extremely tired, too. Trapped in her tree prison, she was unable to close her eyelids but the moss covering her eyes made everything dark.

In the next heartbeat, she was asleep.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 18

“Duggan, deary, wake up.”

Duggan blinked her eyes open and looked around. She was standing in a grove of Cotton-Seed trees, up to her ankles in a pile of green leaves and purple berries. Under her shirt, something long and scratchy was irritating her skin just below her left shoulder blade. Reaching a hand inside her shirt collar, Duggan pulled out a piece of twig with a leaf dangling from the end and dropped it on the pile of leaves around her feet. As it landed, Duggan noticed the leaf was the same color and shape as the ones in the pile.

“What happened?” she asked, her hands shaking visibly.

Nomi Nattlin reached over and took her gently by the shoulders.

“Here,” she said, in a soothing voice, “let’s sit you down.”

Duggan was feeling rather dizzy and so she didn’t resist as the Witch guided her to the trunk of a thick Cotton-Seed. Slowly, Duggan lowered herself to the ground, leaning her back against the giant tree’s smooth bark.

“What happened?” Duggan asked again, her brain still foggy. “What were those things back there? Mountainsy-Trolls?”

“They were Rock-Goblins.”

Duggan’s thoughts went to Dowd Chase.

“Did everyone escape?” she asked.

“Yes, everyone,” the Witch reassured her.

“Then last night...I mean, last day—”

Nomi Nattlin interrupted her, saying, “I owe you an apology for that.

“That? Can you tell me what that was?” murmured Duggan with a sigh.

“Indeed,” said Nomi, raising an eyebrow to study her carefully. “No doubt, you must feel out of sorts right now.”

*Out of sorts is one way to put it,* Duggan mused.

Suddenly, she remembered the Faerie. Was it all right? She pushed a hand into her pocket and felt the hard metal of the sphere, which was still warm.

“Did I really turn into a tree?” she wondered aloud.

“Yes and no,” the Witch answered. “Like a tree but not exactly a tree. To be accurate, a tree-like creature. Perhaps you might know the Ancient words for it. *Mninh-foli-mutanh-ay*.”

The words triggered a long-forgotten memory from Duggan’s early Moon-years.

Nodding, she replied, “Yes, I know the words. They mean something like the changing of the leaves when summer goes to fall, right?”

Shaking her head, the Witch replied, “That’s how Cowgrassians have come to remember the words but it’s not their Ancient meaning.”

“Their Ancient meaning?” repeated Duggan.

Her brain was slowly clearing but much of her thoughts were still fuzzy.

“Their true meaning describes what happens to *Foli-mutanhs*.”

Confounded, Duggan shook her head, which felt like someone had stuffed Cottonsy-balls into it.

“Um, you’ve lost me,” she confessed.

“I’m talking about what happened to Lambrell and you, for the two of you are *Foli-mutanhs*.”

“*Foli-mutanhs*?” said Duggan, echoing the Witch’s words without understanding them.

“Yes,” confirmed the Witch. “Believe me; the two of you are really quite rare.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you’re creatures with spirits half in the Troll world and half in the world of growing things. In your case, Duggan, your spirit is with the trees. Lambrell’s spirit is with flowering things.”

Although the fog was still dulling her mind, Duggan heard the Witch's words and maybe even understood them, at least a little. Her spirit was with the trees? In a way, she had always known this about herself. Plucking a leaf from the sleeve of her jacket, Duggan held it in front of her.

"Say again the Ancient words."

"*Foli-mutanh*. Two words but when they are put together, they become a single thing that conveys what you are. Right now, the most obvious thing you need to know is that your form will change whenever your Eshmagick day ends and what is night for you begins. You have just gone through your first of those transformations and it is my fault you weren't prepared. For that, I beg your forgiveness for my misjudgment."

"Misjudgment?"

"Yes, I misjudged how quickly it would happen. Because you have lived your whole life out of Eshmagick, I believed it would take weeks or perhaps even longer for the Magick of Esh to take hold and start triggering changes in you—and in Lambrell—and I also believed the changes would happen gradually. Clearly now, I was wrong."

Duggan was trying her best to understand all of this but it wasn't easy. Still, she remembered quite vividly the sudden changes of the previous night.

Day, she reminded herself.

Duggan had a load of questions for the Witch but unexpectedly, her thoughts went in a different direction, away from this subject of *Foli-mutanhs*.

"Where's Lambrell?"

Lambrell called from a nearby spot, "I'm right here."

Giving her friend a bright smile, Duggan asked, "How are you?"

Blushing shyly, Lambrell answered, "OK. How about you?"

Duggan couldn't help but feel a bit amused.

"I see you are back to your old, pale-skinned self," she remarked.

"Oh yes, I am quite back to my old self," Lambrell replied. "However, if you had asked that question just a few hours ago, well..."

To Duggan's surprise, Zagger laughed good-humoredly as he stepped out from a tree behind her.

"I did ask," he said, "and all I got back from Lambrell Quiverill was a bunch of flowery talk."

"Yeah, flowery," agreed Lambrell with a wry smile, "and no doubt it was *way* too full of sweet pollen for you, Zagger Dunleavy."

Shifting his gaze from Lambrell to Duggan, Zagger laughed again as he said, "And you, Duggan McDuggan, when I tried making conversation with you, all I got was totally sappy stuff."

For Duggan, it felt good to hear her friends joking.

"I know, I know," she quipped, joining the fun. "I guess I was quite the sap."

Zagger quickly agreed, "Yeah, in fact, I have to say, the two of you were total vegetables."

"Two peas in a pod," Lambrell hooted, her face blushing.

To her surprise, Duggan found herself suddenly regarding Zagger with a new fondness. After all, the boy had proven himself a loyal friend in their time of need. She should say something nice to him, she decided.

“Um, Zagger,” she said, “I guess Lambrell and I need to be thanking you for taking care of us. I mean it, thanks.”

The boy blushed.

“It’s what friends do,” he mumbled then he shuffled a few steps away, looking slightly embarrassed. “So, what’s next?” he asked, addressing his question to no one in particular.

“Time to go?” said Duggan, turning her head to regard the Witch.

“It is,” said Nomi Nattlin. “I trust you two Troll-girls feel strong enough.”

“You bet they do,” replied Zagger, returning to his old ways of presuming to answer for them.

Lambrell quickly agreed, “Yes, I’m ready and I’ll walk as far as you ask me to, so long as you promise me, no more surprises like the last one. OK?”

Duggan suddenly had another question, one that caused her muscles to tighten a bit.

“Um, where’s Dowd Chase?”

“Here,” answered the man as he joined them. Instantly, Duggan felt her muscles loosen.

“Thank Gidden,” she called to him, meaning it, “I’m glad you’re OK.”

“Well, now that we’re all happily back together,” said Zagger, “let’s get going.”



“Yes,” agreed Dowd Chase, “let’s.” Reaching into the sack of food, he pulled out a loaf of bread. Breaking off chunks, he tossed a piece to everyone. “Here, we can eat as we walk.”

With bread in hand, they took to the trail again, this time with Nomi Nattlin in the lead. To avoid any more encounters with Rock Goblins, the Witch chose to keep them off the hilltops, holding wherever possible to the lowlands. While this had the advantage of making them less visible, it also turned their route into a longer, more circuitous one along the edge of the bog, with many twists and turns, wet feet and dead-ends requiring the retracing of steps.

The more she walked, the more discouraged Duggan became. They were getting nowhere. And she was also growing tired of knowing so little about what was going on. All of a sudden, she grew terribly sure she needed some answers before taking another step.

Halting abruptly, Duggan plopped herself on the ground, arms and legs crossed, waiting stubbornly for Nomi Nattlin to notice she wasn’t following anymore. From behind, Lambrell and Zagger came up and stood silently beside her, somehow knowing enough not to talk. Eventually, the Witch did stop and look over her shoulder. As Duggan watched from her seat on the ground, Nomi Nattlin sighed deeply and hiked back, stopping in front of Duggan and her friends, with Dowd Chase watching from a distance.

“What is it?” the Witch asked.

“It’s time for answers,” Duggan replied. “I think we deserve them.”

Nomi Nattlin’s eyes narrowed.

“Ah, so this is a mutiny, is it?”

“I just want to hear where we’re going and why.”

Sighing, Nomi Nattlin answered, “If we can find her, to see a particular Faerie.”

“What Faerie?” demanded Zagger.

“A special Faerie with the power, maybe, to end the Curse,” Nomi Nattlin explained.

Zagger made a funny sound before repeating, “Yes but exactly what Faerie?”

Duggan noticed Zagger’s tone of voice was not his usual, careless one. Nomi Nattlin eyed him closely.

“Don’t you know, Master Dunleavy?” she asked.

The look the Witch gave Zagger was oddly curious and perhaps even a little pitiful. Under her gaze, Zagger lowered his head to study his shoes.

*What is going on with Zagger,* Duggan wondered.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 19

Out of nowhere, Lambrell asked, “What happens if the Faerie dies? Is that the end of our hopes?”

Raising an eyebrow, Nomi answered calmly, “Well, she yet lives and I believe my spell will protect her for some days more, though I cannot be sure.”

“Well, then, we should get moving,” said Zagger, his face suddenly brightening, “get moving and find this slakin’ special Faerie.”

Nomi Nattlin gave a quick shake of her head.

“No,” she said. “First, we will eat a real meal. Then we will rest a bit to gain back some strength. Then I will do what I can to create another

enchantment to help us travel more easily and more quickly. I'm not optimistic, however. My enchantment uses a Magick that seldom works twice. In any event, we will travel the rest of the day and if we are lucky, no Mountainsy Trolls will see us and we may yet pass safely through their Fiefdom."

"Right," said Zagger, "then let's eat something, get some rest then slakin' get going."

Seating themselves in a small circle on the ground, the five companions ate a dry, tasteless meal. Afterward, they rested for ten or fifteen minutes. After Nomi Nattlin tried and failed to reenergize them with another enchantment, they started out.

As much as she could manage, the Witch continued to keep them off the hills, holding to the lowlands and now leading them away from the bog and through rocky gullies that were so dry, even the brambly bushes Duggan hated were unable to take root. Where there was no other choice, the Witch occasionally took them over a bare, rocky hill, avoiding its peak if possible. Every few hours, they stopped for a sip of water that was too meager to quench their thirsts then they pressed on.

As they trudged through the dry countryside, Duggan tried to cheer herself by finding a happier thought. Her mind went naturally to memories of her many walks through the forests but there were no forests near her now.

All of a sudden, there was a clatter of stone on the hill above them. Quickly, Duggan looked up to see a small rock tumbling down the rocky hillside. Then there was a small movement somewhere higher up the

hill. Duggan instantly felt muscles tensing all through her body. Sucking in her breath, she squinted and tried to make out the thing that had moved briefly on the razor-sharp ridge above her.

Nothing showed.

Then, perhaps a dozen feet or so ahead of them, another rock tumbled down the hillside, drawing Duggan's attention. Slowly, it rolled down the slope and bounced into a little gully below them, where it came to a halt. Duggan shifted her gaze upward again but whatever it was that had disturbed the rock, it was gone now.

Duggan turned her head to look at Lambrell.

"Did you see anything just now?" she asked.

"I saw two rocks come tumbling across our path. Why?"

Giving a little snort, Duggan replied, "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing."

Maybe it really was nothing. Or, maybe, it was something. Duggan just couldn't be sure.

"What's up?" called Zagger.

"Nothing," repeated Duggan.

Still, as the group resumed their walking, every now and then Duggan lifted her chin to examine the ridge above them, just in case the nothing was something. And each time she looked, nothing moved. Nothing seemed out of place.

Then, all of a sudden, on one of her upward glances, one of the rocks smiled at her. It was only a

momentary thing but Duggan was pretty sure she had just seen bright teeth flashing at her.

*Couldn't be*, she thought.

She searched along the ridge from rock to rock and saw only gray limestone and purple shale, with all the stony surfaces lifeless and inert.

"Duggan-girl, oh Duggan-girl," she muttered in a low voice meant only for her, "if you're going to start seeing things, please not smiling rocks."

To the girl's relief, there were no more smiling rocks after that. Eventually, they came to the end of the ridge and after circling around a deep gully, they emerged into terrain that was different, with hills that were lower, rounder and less rocky. In the valleys between these shorter hills, there were scattered stands of sinewy Dwarf-Oaks and stubby Sand-Yews, two of Duggan's least favorite trees. Still, she was happy to see trees of any kind after the treeless lands they had just crossed.

By now, they had walked for most of the night turned day for Duggan and the sky was beginning to darken overhead. Speeding her pace, Nomi Nattlin led them into one of the valleys between hills, this one with a bottom of pretty, pink sand. Coming to a stop, she gathered the others around her.

"For our Woodsy Trolls, there's not much light left," she said, "so I think we'd better camp here."

Pointing to a small stand of trees on the edge of the valley, Dowd Chase chimed in, saying, "Let's make camp over there, where there's a little shelter, have some supper while there's still...um, still time. Then get some rest."

Lambrell stared at the stunted trees then shivered noticeably.

"I have to say, I'm not looking forward to sunset or sunrise or whatever it is that's coming," she admitted.

Dowd Chase gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I understand your feelin', lass," he replied in a voice that was gentle and soft. "On the other hand, I'm thinkin' those trees over yonder are mighty lonely lookin' and they might just enjoy havin' the company of two new friends."

Lambrell didn't react immediately but then she raised her chin and laughed.

"I don't know why I'm laughing," she said, as her eyes filled with tears, "considering that I'm slakin' about to turn into a tree."

"Funny that the old Stories never mentioned us changing like this," observed Duggan.

"Oh, plenty of them do," answered the Witch, "but when they left Eshmagick, the Woodsy Trolls of Cowgrass chose to forget."

"Why?" Duggan asked. She hated thinking about how many Stories they must have lost. "Why did we forget?"

Giving Duggan a sympathetic smile, Nomi Nattlin said, "That's for another time. Come, let's eat while we can."

Duggan almost objected. Information was coming to her in such small bits she felt perpetually dissatisfied. On the other hand, the one thing she knew for certain was she was hungry and thirsty.

With a shrug, she agreed, "Fine. Let's eat."

To Duggan's way of seeing the world of Eshmagick, a dusky darkness was beginning to cover everything and so she ate quickly, sharing with the others a meal of cheese, bread, and dried carrots. When they had finished their meal, it was now almost dark, which meant only one thing.

Duggan shuddered.

"What should Lambrell and I do now?" she asked, glancing up to eye the dimming sky.

"Right," answered the Witch as she, too, gave a quick glance skyward. "I believe it's about time. As I understand how this works, it will be easier if you're standing on level ground. Then you just try to relax and think of the change as natural, which, in fact, is exactly what it is."

"Um, I think I'd prefer it if no one was around when...you know, when it happens," said Lambrell.

"Certainly," said Nomi Nattlin. Thinking for a second, she pointed to her right. "Let's have Duggan and you go behind those trees over there, where you can be by yourselves. We'll check on you periodically while you...um, sleep."

"I'd be happiest if Zagger does the checking," suggested Lambrell. "After all, he's already had experience with...you know."

Duggan might have been happier having Dowd Chase do the checking but she didn't say so.

"Zagger's fine with me," she agreed.

Zagger gave her an unreadable look, which she didn't bother to analyze. Taking hold of Lambrell's hand, she led her friend around the stand of trees. On



the other side, the two girls found a level patch of pink sand on which to stand.

“How long do you think we’ve got?” Lambrell asked.

The sky was growing quite dark.

“Not long,” answered Duggan, unable to make her voice sound cheery.

“You scared?”

“A little.”

“Me, too.”

“We’ll be all right,” said Duggan.

“How should we stand?”

Duggan glanced at the trees in the little stand. Dowd Chase was right. They were lonely-looking trees, seven or eight of them clumped together in the middle of this dry valley, their roots struggling to keep their grip in the dry sand.

“Let’s stand side-by-side,” she suggested, “facing the trees.”

“Sounds good.”

Duggan led them to a spot a good ten paces away from the trees.

“How about here?”

“OK,” agreed Lambrell as she positioned herself on the spot, with Duggan moving beside her. “Just a normal event for us, right?”

“Right,” affirmed Duggan, though she wasn’t able to sound all that convincing.

In fact, the second time around the transformation was not as difficult. Maybe it was the fact Duggan had some idea of what to expect. When the thing began, she watched in fascination as tiny

tendrils started sprouting from her hands and wrists. She could feel other twigs emerging from her face and neck. Then she looked up. Thicker shoots coming out of the collar of her jacket and shirt rose upward, with buds opening and bright green leaves uncurling and shaping themselves into slender oak leaves.

Duggan looked down. Beneath her trousers, roots were emerging from her ankles and burrowing into the sand. It was all so amazing Duggan almost allowed herself to get frozen looking down. Luckily, just when she felt her neck stiffening from the bark now encasing her skin, she leveled her chin to stare outward.

*Phew*, she thought, for a night staring at her feet would have been a long one.

In the next instant, Duggan's transformation was complete and now she stood frozen and unable to move, a tree with unblinking eyes staring at the stand of sad trees that didn't seem to grow any happier having a Duggan-turned-tree as company for the night. Out of curiosity, Duggan tried to rustle some of her leaves at them and to her surprise, she did manage to shake a branch or two slightly.

Did one of the trees wave back?

*No way*, she thought.

All of a sudden, something moved in the trees, causing Duggan's breath to catch. Frightened, she peered into the shadows beneath the trees. Sure enough, there was something there. Then it began dragging itself awkwardly in her direction. The growing darkness made it hard to tell what it was but

eventually, when the thing reached the edge of the tree stand, Duggan saw it was a Troll.

He or she was rather a funny-looking Troll, with grayish skin and silvery-colored hair flecked with sparkly bits of something that reminded Duggan of mica. As Duggan watched with a mix of curiosity and nervousness, the creature's body and limbs slowly hardened.

Only they didn't turn to wood. They turned to stone.

In the final moment of turning, the thing's face froze, its skin hardening and its mouth losing shape as flesh turned to rock. Once transformed, the thing reminded Duggan of one of those crinkled boulders that can appear to have a face if you look at its cracks in just the right way, only this thing in front of Duggan was no lifeless boulder. Duggan knew better.

She also knew she faced a sleepless night waiting for all of them to unfreeze and then she would have to face the creature in front of her and have her first ever conversation with a Mountainsy Troll.

The mortal enemy of Woodsy Trolls.



## Chapter 20

Duggan couldn't believe there was a Mountainsy Troll frozen in front of her. Why had it appeared out of nowhere? Had it been about to attack when darkness suddenly descended, thwarting its plans by turning the thing to stone? No, that didn't make sense.

Duggan studied the creature. Good Gidden, it was ugly. With or without the stony effects of its transformation, its skin was a sickly shade of gray and creased everywhere with unflattering wrinkles. In truth, it looked more like one of those Ancient boulders than a living creature. Its surface was so dimpled and broken you could see almost anything you wished in

the patterns of its creases and cracks, including a face if you looked at its rounded top with just the right imagination.

*So, the Stories are true*, Duggan mused.

All those great boulders that seem to have faces really were Mountainsy Trolls turned to stone. And some really do come alive.

During the long night, Zagger kept his promise and came by a couple of times, yawning and rubbing his eyes. Duggan had no idea how he managed to stay awake but she had to give the boy credit for doing what he promised. At times, she half-expected, or half-hoped, to see Dowd Chase coming instead. But the man never appeared and each time Zagger came, he had some encouraging words for her that he whispered in one of her wooden ears.

If Zagger noticed the Mountainsy Troll, he didn't say anything about it during any of his visits. It was hard to believe the boy failed to notice the thing. Still, Duggan had to admit the Mountainsy Troll looked like many of the large boulders strewn throughout the valley and it lay deep in the shadows of the trees and so it was quite possible Zagger really never noticed anything worth reporting to Nomi Nattlin or Dowd Chase, which was too bad.

During his last visit of the night, Zagger whispered to Duggan, "I see the morning light on the horizon. Just a little while more and you'll be back to your old self."

*Great*, thought Duggan, staring at the frozen Mountainsy Troll across from her as Zagger walked away. *I can hardly wait.*

Just as Zagger had predicted, daylight soon began appearing, though Duggan had to wait what seemed an eternity for the sky to brighten enough to trigger her transformation back to Woodsy Troll. Her first sign of the change was a little itchiness somewhere between her shoulder blades. Then her fingers began twitching, followed by her hands and arms and as her limbs awakened, tiny leaves rattled and fell from Duggan's branches to the ground.

Across from Duggan, the Mountainsy Troll was also changing, though its transformation from stone must have been harder because there were many long creaks and a lot of popping sounds and every once in a while, the Mountainsy Troll emitted a sharp grunt of pain. A couple of times, Duggan even thought she heard the creature sobbing a bit.

Finally, it was all over and Duggan found herself standing in her normal flesh up to her knees in a pile of leaves, berries and twigs. Her skin still showed patches of an oaken hue, with other patches a leafy green, but otherwise she had returned to her old self. Beside her, Lambrell groaned and stretched her limbs to work out the kinks from the long night. Duggan glanced over to see her friend standing in a pile of sweet-smelling, yellowy flowers and looking much like her old self, though not entirely.

Under other circumstances, Duggan might have smiled at the sight of this sweetly altered version of Lambrell, with her skin still pale green and a few pretty flowers still growing in her hair but there was the matter of the other creature turning from rock to flesh in front of her. With a final groan and a stretching of

arms, it took a first step that brought it a little closer to them. The expression on its homely face was almost friendly. It took another step and as it drew near, the thing addressed itself to no one in particular.

“Ow, that always hurts.”

“You’re a Mountainsy Troll, aren’t you?”  
Duggan called.

“Of course I am. What an exceedingly silly question.”

Taking a step closer to Duggan, Lambrell quickly came to the defense of her friend, saying, “Well, you don’t have to be rude. After all, we’ve never seen a Mountainsy Troll before.”

“Oh, that’s right,” the creature muttered, “you’re both Outsidesies, aren’t you?”

“We are what?”

“Outsidesies. You know, creatures that lived your whole lives outside Eshmagick.”

“Well, if that’s what it means, then I guess we are,” agreed Lambrell.

“Interesting,” remarked the Mountainsy Troll, “you’re my first Outsidesies and I’m your first Mountainsy Troll. That makes this meeting propitious, does it not?”

“Makes it what?”

“Propitious. Please don’t tell me I have to explain why.”

“Um, forgive me for saying this,” said Duggan, interrupting, “but it doesn’t seem like you’re here to hurt us.”

“Here to hurt you? Now that is an exceedingly silly notion. Why would I want to hurt you?”



“Um, because you’re a Mountainsy Troll,” said Duggan, stating the obvious.

“You mustn’t generalize about Mountainsy Trolls,” replied the creature. “We are not all the same and I am most definitely not here to hurt you.”

“Then why are you here?” asked Lambrell.

“I am here for many reasons,” the Mountainsy Troll replied, “and I can assure you, all of my reasons are well-intentioned.”

Strangely, Duggan wasn’t feeling any sense of danger standing in front of the Mountainsy Troll but she wasn’t ready to give the thing her trust, either.

“Those are not easy words for us to believe,” she countered, “considering the Race you are and the Race we are. I assume you know the history between our two Races as well as we do.”

“Ah yes,” the Mountainsy Troll murmured, shaking its head sadly, “I knew this impasse would come. So, here.”

With a slow, careful movement, the Mountainsy Troll reached a hand down and drew a small dagger from a scabbard hidden under the front folds of its long, gray cloak. At the sight of the dagger, Duggan flinched and took a step backward. Reflexively, her hands began to tremble.

“Gidden, protect us,” cried Lambrell, equally shocked to see the deadly weapon.

“No, no,” the Troll murmured. Quickly, the creature turned the dagger to hold the weapon by its blade. Sinking onto one knee, the Mountainsy Troll declared, “As a token of goodwill, I offer you my dagger, Flint, which came to me from my revered

forebears of many generations. It is of great value to me and yet I offer it willingly as a token of trust and goodwill.”

With the dagger proffered hilt-first, the creature remained kneeling in front of Duggan and Lambrell, waiting for one of them to respond. Duggan had no desire to touch the dagger but she knew it was being offered as a gift and it would be wrong for her to refuse it. Gingerly, she reached her hand and took the weapon from the Mountainsy Troll.

Instantly, she shivered. It was the first time in her life she had ever touched an instrument devised for killing. The thing felt surprisingly light in her hand, not what she expected from a weapon of death, and so she wasn’t sure how to react. She sensed the Mountainsy Troll was making an extraordinary gift to her and yet her hand trembled terribly to be holding such a lethal instrument.

All of a sudden, she couldn’t stand holding it any longer and she let it drop to the ground.

“What,” cried the Mountainsy Troll, climbing to its feet. “Why did you do that? It was a gift.”

“It is a gift I cannot accept.”

“You cannot accept?” cried the creature, the skin of its gray face turning a deeper shade of gray.

“Really, I cannot,” Duggan cried fervently.

“Please understand,” interjected Lambrell, hastily trying to explain, “it is against our customs, the customs of Woodsy Trolls from...um, who are Outsidesies, to possess a weapon of death.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” murmured the Mountainsy Troll, calming now, “I’d forgotten that fact

about the Woodsy Trolls who fled the wars.” Stooping, the creature picked up the dagger. “It seems I owe you my profoundest apology for making such a poor choice of gift. I was being very insensitive.”

Duggan opened her mouth to tell the thing no apology was needed when suddenly, there was a panicked shout in the distance. Duggan whipped her head in the direction of the shout.

Near the edge of the trees, Zagger was rushing their way, screaming, “Stop. I warn you. Stop.”

Behind Zagger, Dowd Chase was also coming through the trees, with Nomi Nattlin only a few paces behind him. As Zagger raced toward them, he bent and plucked up a rock, undoubtedly to be used as a weapon. Clearing the trees, Dowd Chase raised a fist. Suddenly, the horror of what was happening hit Duggan.

“No,” she cried as Zagger lifted the rock over his head. “Don’t.”

“It’s all right,” added Lambrell. “We’re OK.”

Approaching them, Dowd Chase lowered his fist. For his part, Zagger didn’t let go of his rock, Duggan noticed, but he didn’t throw it, either. Quickly, Duggan’s three companions closed the distance, coming to a halt in front of the Mountainsy Troll.

His eyes narrowed to slits, Dowd Chase called to the Mountainsy Troll, “Explain yourself.”

“My name is Dallewynn Glinty, daughter of Gellway Glinty,” the creature answered calmly.

“You’re a Troll-girl?” cried Duggan, shocked and embarrassed to have assumed the wrong gender.

Grinning and giving Duggan a tiny wink, Dallewynn then turned her attention back to Dowd Chase as she continued, "And to complete our necessary introductions, I can assure you I know exactly who you are, Master Dowd Chase, and you are exactly the person I was told to find."

"Told by whom?" demanded Dowd Chase.

The Mountainsy Troll gave a respectful bow before replying, "The fact is, I have been sent to fetch these three Woodsy Trolls by Devvin Glinnstone, my Master, who also sends his special greetings to you, Nomi Nattlin."

"You say Glinnstone sent you?" said Nomi Nattlin, raising an eyebrow. "Then you're the one who has been following us?"

"Yes, for all the distance you have traveled since arriving in our lands," Dallewynn replied. "Unfortunately, I could not decide how best to approach, so I bided my time, waiting for the...um, the least threatening way to present myself."

"So you showed up with knife in hand," muttered Zagger, pointing at the Troll-girl's dagger.

Nomi Nattlin chuckled.

"Oh, I don't think she's here to attack with it," she remarked, "though I do think you'd better put it away, lass. That way, this Troll-boy here can put down his rock."

Nodding, Dallewynn slipped the dagger back into its scabbard. Reluctantly, Zagger let the rock slip from his fingers.

“There,” Nomi Nattlin said, “now, we’re all friends. So, pray tell me, Dallewynn Glinty, why has Master Glinnstone sent you to fetch us?”

“He doesn’t share his purposes freely with me,” the Mountainsy Troll-girl replied, “but I can tell you that he wishes to help.”

“Why would a Mountainsy Troll want to help us?” cried Zagger.

Dallewynn gave Zagger a cold look.

“To undo what you’ve done,” she said.

Before Zagger could answer, Nomi Nattlin spoke up, asking, “How long would it take us to reach Glinnstone?”

“Less than a day.”

“Really, that quickly?” said Lambrell.

“Of course, if you keep walking in circles, it will take longer,” noted Dallewynn, with a small grin.

Nomi Nattlin laughed.

“I’ll admit to being an urban Witch,” she conceded, chuckling. Then she shot a glance at Dowd Chase. “Any objections to traveling with this lass?”

Giving his friend a long, thoughtful stare, Dowd Chase answered, “Glinnstone could prove somewhat helpful so why not?”

To Duggan’s hearing, he did not sound particularly sure of his answer and apparently Nomi Nattlin heard the uncertainty.

With a nod toward Dallewynn, she said, “I know Glinnstone for an honorable Troll. I do firmly believe we should take the chance.”

“Then take it we shall,” agreed Dowd Chase.

“Then come,” cried Dallewynn.

To Duggan's surprise, without another word, Dallewynn abruptly turned and set out at a fast walk. Nomi Nattlin fell in line behind her while Zagger hurried back to their camp to fetch the sack of food and canteens. Dowd Chase followed the Witch, with Lambrell falling in line behind him. Duggan waited for Zagger then the two hurried to catch the others.

Dallewynn Glinty took them across the valley then down a steep slope that descended into a deep gully. Duggan's Woodsy Troll discomfit with underground places was apparently as strong as ever, for instantly she felt her stomach muscles tighten, though she pressed on anyway.

They passed quickly through the gully, emerging on the other side onto a wide, open plain. With Dallewynn in the lead, they made good time now, following a trail that was remarkably wide and well-worn, stretching like a highway across the desert. As they moved through the new countryside, Duggan's stomach began gurgling; reminding her they hadn't eaten breakfast. She thought about saying something but it seemed the Witch only cared to feed them enough to keep them going. Eating for pleasure or because it was mealtime or because a growing girl needs three meals a day just didn't seem very important to Nomi Nattlin.

After four or five hours of walking without stopping, Duggan noticed a line of green ahead of them that looked more like forestland than hill-country. It turned out she was correct, for after a few more hours of hiking, Duggan and the others found themselves standing on the edge of the great forest that could only

be the forest of the Eshmagick Woodsy Trolls, the Ancient *Anninaborm-ras*.

Gazing on the giant trees looming in front of them, Duggan could feel her heart beating loudly in her chest. She glanced at Lambrell, who returned her look with eyes that were as large as saucers.

"I cannot believe we're about to go into the Ancient forest," said Lambrell, in a voice filled with awe.

"Be prepared," Nomi Nattlin warned, "for the forest may not be what you expect."

"It doesn't matter," Lambrell answered, "it is still the *Anninaborm-ras*."

"No doubt," the Witch replied with a small smile, "but there are dangers lurking in these woods."

"That's nothing new," Zagger muttered. "Let's slakin' get going."

Duggan was about to concur with Zagger when Dowd Chase suddenly raised an arm and pointed toward the horizon to their right.

"My night eyes aren't as good as ya's," he said, "but I don't like the looks of those clouds gatherin' over there."

Duggan looked where the man was pointing and sure enough, the horizon was filling with large, multi-colored clouds billowing up from somewhere far in the distance. The clouds had a sinister look about them.

"You think it's a Magickal storm?" Duggan asked.

Dowd Chase answered, "I don't know for certain but yes, it could be a Magickal storm summoned by the Faerie Lord himself."

"Well, then, let's get going," cried Zagger. "The slakin' sooner we get the Curse lifted, the better."

"Quite right," agreed Dowd Chase. "Lead us to Glinnstone," he called to Dallewynn.

Nodding, Dallewynn turned and took a step toward the Ancient forest when suddenly, there was a loud sound like the clatter of heavy wagon wheels rolling over cobblestones. Duggan immediately recognized the noise as thunder and her heart sank. Looking up, she saw the leading edge of the storm racing in their direction and closing rapidly. Lightning flashed in the middle of dark clouds.

Alarmed, she called to the others, "We need to get among the trees and I mean right now."



# Chapter 21

Nodding, Dallewynn hurried to the edge of the forest. There, she hesitated, took a couple of steps to her left then retraced her steps and walked a similar distance to her right. Thunder rumbled ominously overhead.

“A problem?” Dowd Chased asked.

“Um, I can’t find the path.”

“It is right there,” said Duggan, pointing to a narrow but obvious path virtually right in front of Dallewynn, its beginnings only slightly obscured by a heavily leafed Bee-Bay Plant.

“Oh, right...thanks,” muttered Dallewynn, peering ahead but not moving.

“You sure you know the way?” asked Lambrell skeptically.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find it,” responded the Mountainsy Troll-girl, perhaps a little testily.

“No need,” said Dowd Chase. “Duggan, you lead. Use your Woodsy-Troll eyes and take us down the path.”

“Right,” agreed Duggan, stepping in front of Dallewynn and brushing aside the leaves of the Bee-Bay Plant.

Taking a deep breath, Duggan started down the path with the others following behind her. Quickly, they left behind the barrenness of the Mountainsy Trolls’ hill-lands, heading into a forestland filled with tall trees that looked to be as old as time itself. Thunder rumbled ominously overhead but the storm seemed to shun the forest, lingering on its borders and quickly the sky grew quiet.

As Duggan hurried down the faint path, among all the whistles, creaks and snaps that were the normal sounds of a forest, she also heard a deeper murmuring. At first, Duggan paid little heed to this sound but then, all of a sudden, she realized what she was hearing.

Duggan couldn’t believe it.

She listened more closely and sure enough, the murmuring was undeniably coming from the trees around her and the sounds she was hearing were words.

That’s right, the trees were talking.

And it wasn’t just her slakin’ silly imagination, as toddles back in Cowgrass used to tease. These trees really were talking.

“Hallow’s Fire,” Duggan muttered aloud, unable to contain herself. “I am not crazy.”

Fortunately, no one heard her.

She wouldn’t have cared if someone had. It was all too amazing for her. The trees of Eshmagick really did talk. And as she walked more deeply into their forest, everywhere she could hear their murmuring. Some of the talk seemed friendly enough but there were troubled words as well.

“*Troun’ole*,” said one Nodding-Oak as she passed underneath, using a phrase from one of Duggan’s nightmares.

“*Eys ees dious*,” another tree remarked in a friendly enough way.

Then a particularly regal Bearded-Oak muttered darkly, “*Trey curree bark-tay*.”

“*Tay dar*,” another Bearded-Oak sadly agreed.

Instinctively, Duggan understood the trees were speaking an Ancient language of Eshmagick, using words she couldn’t understand, though she was able to sense some of the meaning that lay behind them. The girl pressed forward in silent wonderment, trying her best to understand what the trees were saying but mostly failing.

Then, as she passed under one particularly giant tree, it gave a violent shudder. Branches rattled and dozens of leaves came fluttering down. Duggan glanced up in time to see five or six tiny sparks of light dart out of the tree’s branches and zip into the next tree, where they disappeared among the thick leaves of its high branches.

Her breath catching, Duggan turned and whispered to Nomi Nattlin behind her, "Faeries?"

"Yes, Buzz-Faeries," the Witch confirmed, using a term unfamiliar to Duggan. "Masters of fire and smoke. Very cunning, very dangerous."

Dowd Chase had apparently seen them, too.

"Sent by their Lord, I fear," he added.

Duggan felt a shudder run through her body. Any good feelings coming from being among the Ancient trees instantly dissolved.

"I thought these were the forestlands of the Woodsy Trolls," she said. "How can there be Faeries here?"

To Duggan's dismay, Nomi Nattlin answered with more bad news.

"I suspect they're scouting for their Lord. Looking for us. I fear our time is growing short."

"What should we do?" Lambrell interjected.

Joining the conversation, Dallewynn pointed ahead.

"This path takes us where we need to go. We must stay on it."

"Then speed your pace, Duggan," Nomi Nattlin urged. "We must get there quickly."

"Understood," Duggan replied. "Keep up everyone. I am going to run."

With that, Duggan took off at a fast jog. The path was visible enough for Duggan to follow it easily as it wound through the trees. As Duggan ran and ran, the trail seemed to go on forever but then, all at once, she rounded the trunk of a particularly massive Bearded-Oak and on the other side was a large clearing

totally devoid of all growing things. In the next instant, as she slowed and looked around, Duggan realized the underbrush was not gone naturally.

A fire or something had burned it away.

The air filling this clearing was murky and Duggan's first impression was of a heavy ground fog. A heartbeat later, a disturbingly familiar odor filled her nostrils and she realized it was the smell of smoke and not just any smoke, it was the smoke from fires charring wood, burning clothing, consuming foodstuffs and destroying lives. Duggan's face blanched and her heart thumped in her chest as she smelled again the terribly familiar odor of smoke from the fires of a Faerie storm.

The harsh smoke caused Duggan's eyes to fill with tears. Immediately, she grew dizzy. Her foot caught on the stub of an incinerated bush and she stumbled and nearly fell. Terrible memories came flooding back and her whole body trembled as she forced herself to gaze ahead, trying to peer through the veil of smoke, knowing there was a scene of terrible destruction somewhere in front of her. At first, she saw nothing but then a small gust of wind pushed aside the thick strands of smoke and there it was—a small village in the throes of being consumed by a Magickal storm.

Across from Duggan, a small Woodsy Troll toddle was crying pitifully in the arms of a mother who peered at her with unseeing eyes, a shocked expression on her face. A moaning man with smoking hair and singed eyebrows came staggering in Duggan's direction, calling pitifully for someone to help him.

Then he collapsed on the ground only a dozen or so paces from Duggan, twitching uncontrollably, then grew silent and unmoving.

As her companions arrived wordlessly on the edge of the clearing, Duggan couldn't stand the sight in front of her. It was all so very horrifying. She was about to turn and stagger away when there was a bright flash of light to her right, followed by a weird, humming sound. Duggan's muscles tensed and reflexively her hands balled themselves into fists.

*What now*, she wondered as she faced this new terror.

In the distance, five slender, eerily glowing balls rose into the air. Instantly, Duggan recognized these insubstantial things from her toddler Stories. They were Wood-Wraiths, those cursed ghosts that haunt the forests and woods on the outer reaches of Eshmagick. As they lifted off the ground, the bodies of these five Wood-Wraiths shimmered and pulsed weirdly, lit from somewhere deep within. Then, unexpectedly, the lead Wraith gave an angry snort and turned its misty head to stare at Duggan and the others. Frightened, Duggan staggered backward. Lambrell cried in terror.

From the depths of the Wood-Wraith leader, there suddenly came a high-pitched, piercing scream and immediately the other ghosts began screaming, too. As the monsters screamed, the winds that formed them spun faster and faster, giving the monsters more definite shape. And as the monsters took shape, their screams grew even louder.

Duggan desperately wanted to run away but she just couldn't find the will to move her feet. The

Wraiths were now spinning so wildly they stirred a wind that smacked against Duggan in vicious gusts, whipping her bangs and causing her large, Troll ears to flop crazily back and forth. Then the Wood-Wraith leader and two others plunged into the trees and there was suddenly a great flash of lights as hundreds of Buzz-Faeries fell from the trees around them and fled to escape the monsters.

Only after the last Buzz-Faerie had disappeared in the distance did the three Wood-Wraiths rejoin the others. Then, just as quickly as everything had begun, it all ended. The screaming faded. The violent swirling of the Wood-Wraiths' airy forms diminished and then dissolved and where the terrible spirits had been spinning just moments ago, now a lone figure stood quietly in their lingering mists. A second later, he stepped forward.

"Are they gone?" he asked in a soft, frail-sounding voice.

"Yes, I believe you have quite driven them away," Nomi Nattlin replied.

"Not soon enough, not soon enough," muttered the short creature as he swiveled his head back and forth, his large ears flopping noticeably. "Abominable things," he cried. "Horrible destruction they have wrought. If only I had come sooner. Curse them. Curse them all."

The creature took a step but then he stumbled and almost fell. Hurrying forward, Dowd Chase caught him by his arm and helped guide him in their direction. As the frail creature limped toward them, Duggan regarded him curiously.

From a distance, Duggan might have pegged him for a very old, very short and skinny Woodsy Troll, with white hair and a frail frame of body. However, now that she was regarding him up close, he was clearly something else, a very ugly creature with an unnaturally long, very bony, super-wrinkled face that was about the weirdest skin color imaginable. It reminded Duggan of the Gray-Granite from Cowgrass' South Quarry, a kind of mottled mix of gray and blue-green hues. Then, all of a sudden, Duggan realized what this ugly creature's skin color meant. She gasped at the thought.

The thing before her was another Mountainsy-Troll—and a really ugly one, at that.

As he made his way toward them, shuffling forward with a pronounced limp, he kept repeating in an anguished voice, "Curse them. Curse them all. Curse them."

"Now, now, Master Glinnstone," Dowd Chase remarked to him in a gentle voice, "I fear there's already one Curse too many in the world. Let's not call up another."

"I say there, who are you?" called the old Troll, blinking his eyes in a way that suggested he had trouble seeing. "Do I recognize your voice?"

Chuckling, Dowd Chase answered, "I doubt ya remember me but ya may hear the voice of my father in mine."

"Ah, yes, it's the voice of a Chase, is it not?"

"Ya's correct. My father was Dwayne. He named me Dowd after his brother."



“Yes, yes, Master Dowd Chase. We haven’t talked for many years. Not since you were a pebble. Yet I have kept track of you from a distance.”

Dowd Chase laughed as he replied, “Not as much as I have kept track of ya, Master Glinnstone. Ya’s quite famous, ya know.”

“Not at all,” Glinnstone demurred, “Not at all.”

“Now, now,” Dowd Chase answered, “let’s not be modest. Ya’s a great Wizard of Eshmagick and I’m guessin’ ya know why we are here.”

“I have heard small whispers on the wind,” Glinnstone answered simply.

“If ya’s heard the whispers,” replied Dowd Chase, “then ya know, too, what we seek.”

The short man looked up and blinked his eyes.

“They say you possess Magickal powers beyond your father’s,” observed Glinnstone.

Beside her, Duggan heard Nomi Nattlin suck in her breath. Dowd Chase frowned slightly and took a long moment to summon a response.

“Well, well, Master Glinnstone,” he said, “perhaps ya can tell me whether Eshmagick is better off or worse off for all the Magickans and their wondrously clever tricks and their meddlin’ in the world’s affairs.”

“I cannot say one way or the other,” Glinnstone answered matter-of-factly, “but this is neither the time nor place for a philosophical debate, Master Chase. With or without Magick, we must attend to those who are suffering here.”

Dowd Chase gave a start then flushed in embarrassment.

“Master Glinnstone, I do apologize,” he said, bowing humbly. “Ya’s quite right, now is not the time for silly talk. Let us attend to these poor folks.”

Before anyone could act on this suggestion, there was a sudden movement across the clearing. From behind a bunch of pitiful-looking Woodsy Trolls, a young Troll-boy carrying a longbow came walking boldly forward. Reaching the middle of the clearing, he abruptly halted and before Duggan or any of the others could react, he drew his bow and aimed it in their direction.

“Damnable monsters,” he cried as an arrow shot from his bow.

There was a cry of pain. Duggan whipped around to see Dallewynn crumbling to the ground, the arrow having struck her in the chest below her right shoulder. Shocked, Duggan turned to face the Troll-boy who was hastily fitting another arrow into the drawstring of his bow.

With all her might, she shouted, “Stop, she’s a friend. Stop.”

Undeterred, the boy was about to raise his bow when Dowd Chase strode forward, quickly closing the distance. Before the boy could react, he raised a fist and with one swift blow, he knocked the bow from the Troll-boy’s hands. When the boy reached down to retrieve it, Dowd Chase placed a firm hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Easy lad,” he said, “I don’t want to hurt you so please don’t give me a reason.”

The Troll-boy gave Dowd Chase an angry glare as he muttered, "Are you with them? With those filthy Mountainsy Trolls?"

His hand firmly gripping the Troll-boy's shoulder, Dowd Chase replied in a soft voice, "Trust me, the one you just shot is a friend and not an enemy. Now go back to your folks and do no more harm here."

The Troll-boy looked unsure for a moment but then he nodded. Dowd Chase let go of him and the Troll-boy slowly backpedaled, his distrustful eyes never leaving Dowd Chase and the others until he was back with his kin.

Duggan quickly returned her attention to Dallewynn. To her dismay, she saw now the Mountainsy Troll-girl looked mortally wounded. Her face was ashen and where the arrow had penetrated clothing and skin, a large stain of blood was spreading across her tunic. Beside her, Nomi Nattlin was rummaging through her pockets to find something.

"Is she going to be all right?" cried Duggan.

Her hands had already begun to tremble and Duggan had all she could do to keep from falling to her knees from the shock of having just witnessed such a terrible act of violence.

Nomi Nattlin answered grimly, "I don't know. It is a grievous wound."

"Can I help?"

The Witch shook her head as she answered, "There is nothing for you to do. I think you should go. In fact, all of you should go. I'll stay and I'll add tending to this brave lass to my many duties aiding all the victims here."

“But we can’t leave you,” Lambrell cried. “We need to stay and—”

Nomi Nattlin flashed an angry look as she interrupted, crying, “Go. Do what you must. I will come when I can. Please, just go.”

“Come, lass,” whispered Dowd Chase, taking Lambrell by the arm. “Nomi is right. They need a Witch’s help. We have other tasks.”

Duggan saw no point in any of them arguing. Reluctantly, she followed as the man led them away, though she paused just before leaving the clearing to look back one last time. Nomi Nattlin was kneeling over Dallewynn, tending to her awful-looking wound, and she never looked up. Beyond her, the tiny Woodsy Troll toddle was still sobbing in his mother’s arms and the rest of the Woodsy Trolls had looks on their faces that ranged from shocked to sullen to gloomy.

Suddenly, Duggan desperately wanted to get away.

“I say there,” called Glinnstone, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. He pointed to his left. “We go this way.”

He took an awkward step and almost fell. Dowd Chase hurried over and hastily gripped the old creature’s arm, steadying him.

“Can you believe it?” Zagger muttered to Duggan and Lambrell, “Not only are we trusting a slakin’ Mountainsy Troll but he’s a blind Troll, to boot. I say he is slakin’ gonna slow us down.”

“We heard that, Master Dunleavy,” Dowd Chase called to the boy. “Please think positively. We

must all be of one mind and workin' together if we are goin' to succeed on this quest of ours."

"Yeah, right," Zagger muttered to the two Troll-girls. "Let's think positively and slakin' be of one mind."

Duggan didn't like the sarcastic tone of Zagger's voice. There was meanness to it. Lingerin' while the others moved ahead, she reached a hand inside her pocket and touched the sphere. Its metal felt neither warm nor cold. No doubt she should be doing something to help the Faerie but everything felt too dark and too bleak for her to find any loving thoughts right now.

As she hurried after Dowd Chase and the others, the piteous cries of the tiny Troll-boy stayed in her ears for a horribly long time.



## Chapter 22

After a half hour or so of walking, Glinnstone came to a halt in front of the large trunk of a majestic Bearded-Oak. Turning his head, he looked back and his eyes came to rest on Duggan. To her surprise, he regarded her with an expression she might have called friendly, even affectionate but for the ugliness of his face. Instantly, she felt uncomfortable.

“Come here, lass,” Glinnstone called gently to her.

“What?” she asked in a neutral tone of voice.

“I need you to talk to this tree,” he said.

To most folks, this would have been an extraordinarily strange-sounding request but not to Duggan.

“All right,” she answered simply.

Glinnstone gave her a friendly smile.

“Here,” he said, “put your hand on this magnificent tree. Right here,” he added, pointing to a spot on its trunk.

Duggan noticed Glinnstone himself was careful not to touch the tree, which made a weird kind of sense when she thought about it. After all, he was not a Woodsy Troll, born of the forests. Rather, he was a Mountainsy Troll, a creature of hard rock and earth and minerals. Wordlessly, she complied. A tremor ran through the tree the instant she touched it.

“I don’t know this tree but I know its purpose,” Glinnstone said to her. “This may sound a bit odd but we need to be let inside. I believe this tree will trust you, so please make this request for us.”

It certainly did seem an odd request but Duggan nodded.

“All right,” she agreed. Raising her chin to peer along the tall trunk of the tree, Duggan called out, “Um, sir, I have been asked to say to you that we need your help. We want to be let inside you. Um, do you understand me? We need to get in.”

When nothing moved, nothing stirred, Duggan swiveled her head to give Glinnstone a dubious look.

“Use its name,” he suggested.

“I don’t know its name.”

“Ask,” he said. “And be very polite.”



Duggan stroked the bark of the tree trunk lightly with her fingers then spoke again, framing her request as politely as she could.

“Um, excuse me, sir; would you please do me the honor of telling me your name?”

Duggan felt a tremor run through the tree trunk from bottom to top then a low, rumbling noise echoed through its branches. For some reason, Duggan was able to discern the distinct syllables among the rumbling noises.

“The tree says its name is *Baroun-iy-hey*,” she said to Glinnstone.

“Excellent. I suggest you address the tree by its name and ask it politely to let us in. You might also address the tree as *Leej-sy*, which is the Ancient word for Noble-Sire.”

Duggan nodded. Moving closer to the tree and putting both hands lightly on the rough bark of its trunk, she tried again.

“Great Sire, *Baroun-iy-hey*,” she said, adopting the formal way of speaking that Storytellers always used when recounting important conversations among the noble creatures of Eshmagick, “*Leej-sy*, my name is Duggan McDuggan. You don’t know me because I am of the Woodsy Trolls who left Eshmagick to escape the wars. You are a great tree and I’m just a sapling of a Troll-girl of no importance but I need to ask a really huge favor, Great Sire. Great *Baroun-iy-hey*, if you would please be so kind as to allow us in, we would be most grateful.”

Leaning back a little, Duggan took a breath and waited. There was a long silence then the trunk of the

tree began vibrating. At first, the vibrations were so weak Duggan could hardly feel them but gradually, they became stronger. High above, the branches stirred and the tree gave a long, slow, rumbling answer. Not being of Eshmagick, Duggan did not know the precise meaning of the words but she got their gist.

*Baroun-iy-hey* was granting them permission to enter.

“Thank you, Great Sire,” Duggan cried.

Then *Baroun-iy-hey* spoke again and Duggan generally understood the tree was telling her to step back and wait, which she did.

All of a sudden, the vibrations running through the trunk grew in intensity, becoming so loud and so violent Duggan became alarmed. From the middle of the trunk, there came a thunderous yowling, deep-toned and full of pain. Then a narrow crack appeared in the middle of the tree’s trunk, running vertically and slowly splitting apart. The yowling grew louder and the ground began shaking violently, causing Duggan to lose her balance and nearly fall.

Grabbing the branch of a nearby bush to steady herself, Duggan watched in horrified fascination as the crack gradually opened wider and wider. Then, all of a sudden, everything stopped as quickly as it had started. The tree grew quiet. Its branches stilled. The ground steadied. In the aftermath, a few leaves ruffled to the ground. Her eyes blinking, Duggan looked around and there was Dowd Chase, gazing on her with his warm, sparkly blue eyes.

“Good going, lass,” he said to her. “And now, ya must thank our tree-friend here for helpin’ us.”

Duggan reached a trembling hand to the bark near the edge of the gaping crack. With jittery fingers, she gently stroked the great tree.

“*Doounksy*,” she said in a soft voice, using the Ancient word she knew to mean thank-you, “*Doounksy, Leej-sy*, for helping us. You will always be our friend and we are in your debt.”

The tree purred and lightly shook one of its branches, causing a few of its leaves to fall. They floated like feathers, landing softly on Duggan’s head and shoulders. She looked up and gave the Ancient tree a warm smile.

“You are indeed a great tree,” she murmured. “Thank you.”

“Come,” said Glinnstone in a gentle voice, “we mustn’t tarry any longer. There’s much yet to do.”

Feeling his way forward with an outstretched hand, Glinnstone found the crack and slipped inside the tree. Dowd Chase followed next, with Lambrell and Zagger stepping through the crack after him. Duggan gave the tree a final pat before following the others, not knowing what she would find on the other side of the crack but curious.

To her surprise, she found herself looking down a long flight of stairs that plunged deeply underground. Below her was the sound of water flowing over rocks and the air had a damp feel to it. Swirling mist covered the staircase, making it difficult for Duggan to see what lay below.

Again, Duggan experienced the Woodsy Troll’s dread of going underground. This time, however, she had too many serious things on her mind

to fret over something as trivial as her fear of being below ground. For one thing, she had just finished her first-ever, real conversation with a tree. Not one of those fanciful conversations she used to imagine herself having with the old trees around Cowgrass. No, this one had been a totally real conversation with a tree that actually talked back.

"I'm not a dreamy nut," Duggan muttered under her breath as she clambered down the staircase to join the others at the bottom.

Suddenly, she was feeling very good. On an impulse, she gave Dowd Chase a big, friendly smile that prompted a warm smile back from him, as if he understood what she was feeling and thinking.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Hazarding a guess," the young man answered in an awed tone of voice, "I would say we are standing on the edge of *Syis-lonnyx*, the great underground river that is said to run the entire breadth of Eshmagick. It is a mythical and Storied river that has always been part of the lore of Eshmagick, yet its existence has never been certain. I cannot believe that I am truly standing on its shores."

"You are indeed, Master Chase," Glinnstone affirmed. "This is *Syis-lonnyx*."

"However did you discover it?" asked Dowd Chase, amazed.

"We must thank the Woodsy Trolls."

"Woodsy Trolls told you?" cried Duggan, startled to hear of cooperation between the Races.

"Oh, yes. Here in Eshmagick, there are Woodsy Trolls who have long suffered from the never-

ending wars and who have the same desire for peace that quite a number of Mountainsy Trolls possesses. And if we are lucky, this river will take us safely where we need to go.”

Duggan gasped.

“You mean to the Faerie we seek? You know where she is?”

The old Wizard chuckled and replied, “Oh, I have ears and over the years, I have learned to keep track of what is important. I cannot guarantee all my information is correct but yes, I do believe I know where to find her.”

Raising an eyebrow, Dowd Chase added, “Master Glinnstone is bein’ modest. He has the far-seein’ vision, ya see.”

“Ah,” Duggan replied, “just like in the Stories.”

Giving Duggan a wink, Glinnstone said, “And now I will summon a boat. Then, Master Dowd Chase, I believe you know what must be done. This is your task.”

His lips tightening, Dowd Chase nodded.

Glinnstone raised his arms and called out, “For you, dear Troll friends. *Dith dayne di hawswah. Dith dayne di hawswah.*”

With a rumble, a boulder on the opposite side of the river rolled back and a long, canoe-shaped boat came floating gently out of a crack in the wall. Glinnstone gave a little wiggle of his forefinger and the boat drifted over to them, its bow bumping softly against the shore at the Wizard’s feet. With a nod and a wave of his hand, Glinnstone signaled for everyone to climb aboard and quickly they settled themselves on

three benches that ran athwart the boat, with Lambrell beside Duggan in the bow, Zagger beside Glinnstone in the middle and Dowd Chase alone in the stern.

"It is time, Master Chase," Glinnstone called back to him. "I know of hills and rock and other things solid and I even know something of air but of water I know nothing. They say you lived for many years with the water people and so I ask you, are you able and willing to do this task?"

After hesitating momentarily, Dowd Chase gave a nod and raised his arms and called behind him in a sing-song kind of way, "*Seck, bock, seck durlin' zay.*"

Then he repeated the phrase and there was a gurgling sound behind their boat.

"What are you doing?" cried Lambrell.

Dowd Chase ignored her.

"*Seck, bock, seck durlin' zay,*" he sang in a louder voice and water gurgled some more.

Surprised, Duggan half-raised to look back, curious to see what was happening. To her amazement, as far back as she could see, the water level of the river was rising, at first a few finger-lengths and then half a foot then higher still. As the river rose behind them, the water underneath their boat remained at the same level, as if there were a dam just beyond the boat holding back all the rising waters. Of course, there was no dam holding back the river, only a rising wall of water held back by an invisible force.

A Magickal force.

With new eyes, Duggan glanced at Dowd Chase.

“*Seck, bock, seck durlin’ zay,*” the man who was obviously a Wizard sang and the water rose higher.

Under his spell, the water kept rising higher and higher, until it was well above the top of the canoe. Then Dowd Chase climbed to his feet and shouted in a voice that was so incredibly loud and deep, it was hard to believe it was coming from the man Duggan knew.

“*Shooflin, bock,*” he shouted. “*Shooflin desslard.*”

With a whooshing sound, the invisible dam let loose and a huge wall of water spilled out, taking hold of the boat’s stern and thrusting the vessel forward with unbelievable force. Thrown off balance, Duggan barely managed to grab the sides of the boat in time to keep from falling.

“Hold tight, everyone,” cried Dowd Chase as he fell onto his bench. “We are going to be traveling very fast.”

This was a huge understatement.

Gripping the sides of the boat, Duggan tried to look ahead but the rush of wind was so great it stung her eyes, blinding her. Her hood blew off her head and her ears flapped wildly behind her. They were racing along at impossible speeds, faster than a galloping elk or swooping hawk, flying through the tunnel on a great cascade of rushing water.

They rushed downriver for many minutes or maybe it was half an hour. Duggan lost all sense of time. Her fingers ached from gripping the sides of the boat so tightly and her face was numb from the rushing wind.

All of sudden, Duggan felt their boat veering to her right then it plunged down a long, steep chute of water. Beside her, Lambrell screamed in terror. Duggan was just as terrified and she screamed with Lambrell. Then she closed her eyes and held her breath, not thinking, all her emotions obliterated by the fear and by the exhilaration of falling. A moment later, the boat hit the flat surface of a pool of water at the bottom of the chute and quite literally, it bounced into the air, causing Lambrell and Duggan to scream again. Then it went crashing down and spun dizzily with Duggan barely able to hang on.

Slowly, the spinning subsided and the boat came to a halt. All grew calm and quiet. Cautiously, Duggan opened her eyes. At first, she was a little dizzy from the spinning but quickly she began feeling normal again.

They were in the middle of a small, underground pool about the size of your average Brown-Beaver pond back in Cowgrass except the water of this pond was honey-colored and it even smelled of honey. From the ceiling above them hung long, icicle-shaped formations of rock that sparkled and shimmered in the honey-yellow light. Fresh air blowing through a large hole in the far wall at the other end of the pond tousled the bangs of Duggan's hair. Eagerly, she drew in a deep breath of this fresh air, which tasted very clean and good to her.

Glinnstone raised an arm and muttered a few words and their boat drifted across the pond, gliding gently through the wind-filled hole and coming to rest



on a sandy beach. Just beyond the beach, a staircase rose upward through a long, narrow shaft of tunnel.

“The way out,” explained Glinnstone, pointing.

Taking care not to tip their boat, Duggan clambered out, followed by Lambrell. Quickly, the others scrambled out and soon they were all standing on the beach, stretching limbs and wiggling fingers to work out cramps. Duggan heard Dowd Chase grunt as he straightened himself. Duggan gave him a quick, surreptitious look.

*So, she marveled, he is a powerful Wizard.*

She almost laughed at the notion. Her first-ever Human friend had just become her first-ever, super-Wizard friend. What other surprises did Dowd Chase have in store for her, she wondered.

“Listen to me, everyone,” said Glinnstone, interrupting her thoughts, “I don’t know what awaits us at the top of these stairs and so you must be ready for anything. Anything. Whatever happens, do what Dowd Chase and I tell you. Understood?”

“Yes, yes, we do whatever we’re told,” Zagger muttered sullenly.

Duggan gave the Troll-boy her iciest stare. Why did Zagger feel compelled to make a constant fool of himself? Then she turned to follow Glinnstone and Dowd Chase to the stairs.

At the base of the staircase, Duggan didn’t waste any more thoughts on Zagger. More important things were unfolding. Taking a deep breath, she started up the stairs and as she climbed from step to step, the air grew more and more fragrant with the fertile smells of living, growing things.

Forest things.

And not just any forest things. Faerie Forest things.

Duggan could feel her heart beating loudly. She couldn't believe it. Every step was taking her closer and closer to the great, fabled, Ancient Realm of the Faeries. The thought was both scary and exciting.

With her heart thumping noisily in her chest, Duggan kept climbing. At long last, the top of the staircase came into sight. She reached a hand into her pocket and wrapped her fingers around the sphere holding the Faerie. Its metal felt cooler than usual. What did that mean? Probably nothing, she hoped. But maybe it meant something?

Whatever it meant, there was no time to think on it now. Duggan took another step upward and a bright beam of light suddenly shined through an opening just above the last stair. On the other side, a pink-hued sky appeared and as Duggan gazed in wonder, a bright-colored bird flew across its expanse. The bird had the red color and the long, double-pronged tail of a crimson Carnival-Flicker, one of the most fabled creatures of Eshmagick. Seeing it, Duggan felt her heart skip a beat. Then she grew a little dizzy.

"Just keep going, Duggan-lass," she muttered aloud.

## Chapter 23

Duggan had no idea what lay ahead. When she reached the top of the stairs and moved outside, pulling on her hood as she did, what she beheld was slakin' beyond her imagination, which was saying a lot considering her lifetime of dreaming of Faerie places.

Duggan couldn't believe it.

They were now deep in the Realm of the Faeries, as close to the heart of Eshmagick as one could get and the trees growing here were unlike any she had ever thought possible. There were countless Ancient Oaks, Maples and other trees of lore and they were all unbelievably tall, with trunks as wide as the front parlor-room of her home back in Cowgrass or maybe

even wider. The enormity of the Ancient trees stunned Duggan but the trees were not the only stunning sights to greet her as she stepped from the last stair to stand among the great roots of an Ancient Bearded-Oak and breathe her first-ever Faerie air.

For one thing, there were birds everywhere. Countless, colorful Carnival-Flickers swooped and dove through the trees' lower branches in small flocks. Although these birds wore coats of paint that were brighter than anything Duggan could have imagined, to her surprise their birdcalls were neither melodic nor pretty. Rather, the Flickers' high-pitched, grating calls sounded the way you might imagine a Crow sounding after being terribly insulted.

Higher up the trees, well above the massive, lower branches that served as the playground for the Carnival-Flickers, hundreds of fretting Speckle-Sparrows displayed their distinctive, pale-blue head-caps and their silvery, slanted eyes. Great bunches of them flitted in and out among long cascades of Hairy-Moss that hung like curtains from the trees' topmost branches. These Sparrows, too, had unpleasant birdcalls, reminding Duggan of fingernails dragging across a slate chalkboard.

The harsh birdcalls were not the only unexpected things greeting Duggan as she had her first encounter with the Faerie Realm. While the Ancient trees were breathtakingly large and beautiful, this was certainly not true of the things growing beneath them. Rather, the ground showed a sparse, unsightly mix of low-growing plants of various kinds. Most of these stubby plants looked old and withered, as if distressed

from drought. In the places where these pathetic plants were not growing, dotting the ground were weirdly shaped, twisted mushrooms of various kinds, most of them with misshapen caps and bizarre, almost corkscrew-shaped stems. The bizarre undergrowth beneath the trees created an ugliness that took Duggan aback.

“Um,” she remarked to Dowd Chase, “I thought the Faerie forests would be...you know...well, they’re supposed to be everywhere magnificent and beautiful.”

The young Wizard shook his head sadly.

“Hundreds of years of war have taken their toll on poor, old Eshmagick,” he observed. “Even in the great *Anninaborm-ras* of the Woodsy Trolls, large swaths of once beautiful forests are no longer so.”

“That’s terrible,” cried Duggan.

“It will get much, much worse if the Curse takes hold and war comes again,” Dowd Chase predicted gloomily.

This remark sent a shiver down Duggan’s spine. Guilt took hold and she was about to tell Dowd Chase how sorry she felt for what they had done when Lambrell gasped, interrupting her conversation with the Wizard.

“Good Gidden,” the girl cried, raising a finger to point, “what is that?”

Duggan looked where Lambrell was pointing. A large clearing lay ahead of them, far enough away to be missed at first glance but obvious to Duggan now that Lambrell was pointing to it.

Squinting, she peered through the forest gloom and all of a sudden, she saw there were dwellings inside the clearing, with creatures moving about among them. She tried to make out the creatures but they were too far away. Then her heart skipped a beat.

“Good Gidden,” she blurted out, “are those Faeries?” They’re on two legs and I think I see wings on their backs.”

“Indeed, they are Faeries of a sort,” replied Glinnstone.

“But they’re big.”

“That is interesting, isn’t it?”

“I mean, they’re really big.”

“Yes, more the size of Elves or Trolls than the size of bugs,” Glinnstone agreed with maddening calm.

“How can that be?” cried Zagger, moving beside Duggan to gaze in the direction of the clearing.

“They are the Faerie Lord’s special warriors,” Glinnstone explained, “Faeries bred with Elves then with the blood of other creatures not to be named to create something new.”

“What are they?” asked Duggan in horrified fascination.

“You may call them El-Faeries, for that is what they call themselves. Half-Faerie and half-Elf, more or less. They are the loyal servants of the Faerie Lord and a deadly enemy to us.”

This caused Lambrell to speak up nervously.

“Um, if they’re deadly enemies, shouldn’t we be getting out of sight?”

“They cannot see us,” replied Glinnstone.

“What do you mean, they cannot see us?” demanded Zagger, who was already dropping into a crouch. “I mean, I’m slakin’ looking right at ‘em and if I can see them, I do believe they can see me.”

“No, they cannot see you, Master Dunleavy,” the elderly Wizard repeated. “Long ago I conjured quite a nice cloaking spell around this tree that is powerful enough to stop even the Faerie Lord himself from seeing us.”

“If you say so,” muttered Zagger. “Still, what if they *can* see us?”

“Well, Master Dunleavy, you raise rather an intriguing problem,” Glinnstone replied in an oddly cheery tone of voice. “Most intriguing, indeed.”

“What does that mean?”

Dowd Chase chimed in, explaining, “What Master Glinnstone means is we are now deep in the heart of the Faerie Realm. It is where we want to be and where we need to be, but bein’ this deep makes it impossible for us to remain undetected. I fear the second we step out from behind this protective spell, we will be detected. Am I not right, Master Glinnstone?”

“It is quite so,” the elderly Wizard agreed. “The Faerie Lord has eyes everywhere in this Realm.”

“Well, that is a slakin’ *troubling* piece of information,” Zagger growled. “May I ask how we’re going to get to this Faerie of ours if it is impossible to travel without being spotted?”

There was a moment of silence and then Dowd Chase spoke up.

“There is only one answer I can think of,” he said.

“Which is?” asked Zagger, frowning.

“We let them see us.”

“What?” cried Duggan.

“My thinkin’ is, we walk straight into that El-Faerie camp over there and announce ourselves as boldly as we can. Surprise ‘em and throw ‘em off balance. It may give us an edge.”

There was another moment of silence and then Glinnstone spoke up.

“Well, it does seem the best way,” he opined.

“The...the best way?” Zagger sputtered. “You’re saying we just walk into a slakin’ Faerie camp? Bold as Lions. You’re saying that’s the best way?”

“Yes,” answered Dowd Chase, his lips curving into a wry smile. “It will certainly shock ‘em, wouldn’t ya say?”

Snorting, Zagger scrunched his face to let everyone know what he thought of this crazy man and his slakin’ crazy plan. As Duggan watched the boy’s face go through its contortions, she wondered what jerky thing he was going to say next when to her surprise, his mouth suddenly curved into a wide, good-humored grin.

“I like your plan,” he chuckled, showing all his teeth. “We just walk in and shock the Hallow’s Fire out of ‘em. Is that the plan?”

“Exactly,” agreed Dowd Chase, grinning back.

“Well, I like it,” exclaimed Zagger.



“Um, after we do that, what happens next?” asked Lambrell, not sounding so enthusiastic.

“Truthfully, I don’t know,” Dowd Chase answered, “but I can tell ya one thing. If ya did want to shock the socks off a bunch of El-Faeries, there’s no better way than by walkin’ in on ‘em with this little group of ours.”

Duggan had to ask, “Just what does that mean?”

“Ya wait and see,” the man replied cryptically.

“But I—”

The man shook his head, causing her to stop.

“No more talkin’,” he said, “we’re decided so let’s get goin’.”

Duggan wanted to object but it was too late. Dowd Chase had already turned and started moving in the direction of the Faerie camp. With a frustrated sigh, she hurried ahead of the others to walk behind Dowd Chase. Behind her, she could hear Lambrell’s nervous breathing as the girl kept pace.

*Here we go,* thought Duggan, imitating the way of speaking of Dowd Chase, *walkin’ straight into an El-Faerie camp.*

And, of course, as they always did in a moment of crisis, her hands began trembling. Weirdly, however, Duggan didn’t feel all that scaredy as she moved forward, following the young Wizard in silence while doing her best to keep her mind cleared of thoughts. Still, instinctively, her hand found its way into her pocket to touch the Faerie sphere, which felt alarmingly cold.

Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about it. Events were moving far too fast and under the current circumstances, there was no way Duggan could conjure any loving images of her Mum.

*Don't think on it*, Duggan told herself forlornly.

They walked in silence through the trees until they were maybe a few hundred paces from the camp. Then, suddenly, Duggan heard a soft, humming sound above her. Looking up, she saw two, faint lights flickering atop the thick branch of a stately Bearded-Oak. As she watched curiously, the lights rose from the branch, hovered in the air for a second or two then zipped away, making a beeline for the El-Faerie camp.

"Buzz-Faeries?" asked Duggan, calling ahead to Dowd Chase.

"Yes," the man answered without looking back. "If our presence wasn't known before, it is now."

"Great," Duggan muttered under her breath.

"Courage," the man called back to her over his shoulder.

*Right*, she thought, *courage*.

In the next moment, a dozen or so flickering lights suddenly dropped out of some not-too-distant Oaks. Gathering themselves in a tight formation, the Buzz-Faeries started moving rapidly in their direction.

Swiveling his head, Dowd Chase called back to her, "Quick, Duggan, please move in front of me."

"Do what?"

"Exactly what I just said," he replied in a strangely calm voice. "Trust me. And please hurry."

It was obviously not a good time for argument. Taking a deep breath, Duggan hurried around the man to stand in front of him.

“Now walk,” he directed.

Nervously, Duggan forced herself to start walking. Ahead of her, the swarm of Buzz-Faeries slowed then made a tight circle in the air. After hesitating briefly overhead, they moved toward Duggan and the others, closing the distance until they were perhaps ten paces or so away. There, they came to an abrupt halt. Duggan halted, too, her courage faltering as she stared at the swarm of Buzz-Faeries hovering in a tight pack right above her.

“Keep walkin’,” Dowd Chase urged. “Nice and steady.”

“Right, if ya say so,” Duggan muttered under her breath, again mimicking the Wizard’s way of talking.

Somehow, Duggan managed to get her feet moving and as she eased forward, taking baby steps, to her surprise the Buzz-Faeries started moving with her, keeping their distance just ahead of her. They were making funny sounds now. Duggan couldn’t quite get a grip on the sounds but they seemed neither friendly nor hostile. It was almost as if the tiny creatures were chattering curiously among themselves.

All of a sudden, the whole swarm of Buzz-Faeries rose high into the air and darted away, disappearing into the El-Faerie encampment, which was now close enough for Duggan to see its details clearly. With a start, she saw there was a crowd of El-Faeries gathered in front of their tents, staring in her

direction. She gasped and would have liked very much to change places with the man behind her but she reckoned Dowd Chase had his reasons for making her go first and so she took a deep breath and kept walking.

As she moved forward, Duggan couldn't help but stare at the creatures in front of her. Most of them were about half her height, with lean bodies, sculpted faces and waist-length, snow-white hair. Attached to their backs were narrow, nearly transparent wings that tapered to sharp points at the ends.

For some reason, Duggan again felt the need to slip her hand into her pocket and check on the sphere. To her shock and surprise, it had no warmth. Instantly, she regretted touching it.

"Don't think on it," Duggan whispered under her breath as she hastily removed her hand from her pocket.

Nervously, she pushed forward and soon she was within a dozen or so paces of the edge of the encampment. As she neared the line of El-Faeries, a few of them began whispering among themselves, though most remained silent. They didn't seem all that hostile to Duggan but then again, they were slakin' El-Faeries.

The thought took Duggan's breath away.

## Chapter 24

All at once, Duggan's hands started shaking so violently it embarrassed her and her heartbeat grew so loud she could actually hear its pounding. Then her head began to throb to the point she grew almost too dizzy to stay on her feet.

Duggan had good reason to be afraid. Lots of olden Stories told of encounters between Woodsy Trolls and Faeries during the wars in Eshmagick and all of them ended violently.

*I'm dead,* Duggan thought glumly.

And yet, miraculously her feet kept moving.

When Duggan reached the El-Faeries, the ones closest to her stepped wordlessly aside to open a way.

Even this close, Duggan could see no hostility in their expressions, which was very odd. Not that she should be complaining about it, she quickly reminded herself.

On the other side of the El-Faeries, Duggan spotted a dirt road running straight into the middle of the encampment. Figuring this was the way to go, Duggan walked over and started down the middle of the road. Immediately, El-Faeries moved to line both sides of the road ahead of her. Taking a gulp, Duggan told herself to keep moving.

*You can do this*, she thought.

As she moved down the road, an El-Faerie with a rather sour expression on its face pushed forward until the creature was only a few feet from her. The creature glared at her and muttered some sullen words under its breath. Duggan's courage slipped but she told herself this was not the time to show doubts, not with a crowd of El-Faeries watching her from both sides of the road. Behind her, none of Duggan's companions spoke, not even Zagger. Taking a deep breath, Duggan pushed on.

It was a tidy enough camp, Duggan noticed, with orderly rows of tents that were clean and well organized though old-looking. Each of them was made of rather threadbare, greenish canvas stretched over curved, wooden frames. Some kind of white, animal fur that had seen better days adorned the front edges of most of the tents, adding an elegant touch.

*Jack-Rabbit fur*, Duggan reckoned.

But then the thought of so many animals being killed and skinned just to trim these tents made her shudder.

As Duggan and her companions continued down the road, more El-Faeries kept emerging from their tents to watch the strange procession. Duggan tried her best not to look at them and mostly she succeeded. Eventually, she reached a good-sized, oval space roughly in the middle of the encampment. On the left side of this empty space was a makeshift structure with sides of vertical, wooden bars spaced closely together. Duggan had heard Stories of jails and the bars made her think this building must be a jail. Curiously, she looked inside to see what it held.

Woodsy Trolls.

To her dismay, Duggan saw a sorry-looking bunch of Woodsy Trolls huddled together in a far corner of the jail. Shocked, she felt her courage slip but she kept going, doing her best to hide her feelings. Behind her, she heard a gasp from Lambrell as her friend passed the jail.

Just beyond the jail on the opposite side of the clearing, a dozen or so vertical posts rose from the ground to heights slightly taller than Duggan. Duggan glanced over and immediately suffered another shock when she realized that tethered cruelly to four of the posts were Woodsy Trolls. They were all frightfully skinny, these Woodsy Trolls. Their only clothing was a hodgepodge of tattered, soiled jackets and torn remnants of pants that barely covered their underfed bodies. Their hair was shaggy and matted, with faces underneath that were so soiled their skin was nearly coal-colored.

With their heads down, these sorry Troll-prisoners showed no reaction as Duggan and the others

approached but then one of them must have sensed their presence because he looked up. With an expression devoid of hope, he stared miserably at Duggan for a second or two but then his eyes widened and he tilted his head to whisper something to one of his fellow prisoners, who looked up with similarly curious eyes. Duggan couldn't help herself. She came to a stop and almost said something to the two Trolls.

"Just keep walkin', lass," Dowd Chase warned in a hushed voice. "Don't speak."

"They're folks like me," Duggan whispered back.

"I know. I'm sorry. Just keep walkin'."

Duggan desperately wanted to say something, anything, to comfort these poor creatures but instead she did as instructed, willing herself to remain silent as she moved past the sorry creatures. As she did, one of the Woodsy Trolls spoke a single word in an awed tone of voice.

"*Mutanh*," he said.

Then the other Troll echoed the word in the same awed tone.

"*Mutanh*."

Duggan didn't know what to make of this. Were they talking about her? Lambrell? Both of them? Why did they sound awestruck? Since she had no idea, she closed her mind of all thoughts.

On the other side of the clearing, the road ended in front of a tall tent that was perhaps twice the size of all the others. Duggan slowed her pace, wondering if she had missed a turn somewhere but then the crowd of El-Faeries closed in behind her,



creating a wall. Taking a deep breath, she made for the tent, which was clearly where all these El-Faeries were expecting her to go.

When she was maybe half a dozen paces from the tent, two tall El-Faeries came out and took up positions on either side of its front door. The one to Duggan's left looked to be a female El-Faerie, not even half the height of Duggan, with incredibly narrow hips and small shoulders. Her wings looked lighter and more transparent than those of the other El-Faeries, reminding Duggan of the fine, woven muslin that only rich Cowgrassians could afford. The creature's faded-blue tunic was cinched at the waist by a wide, metallic belt that shined like gold.

The other El-Faerie was slightly taller and obviously a male, though he wore a tunic and belt of the same colors as the ones worn by the female. His very long hair was snow-white and there was something about the way his eyes shifted back and forth that made Duggan instantly distrustful.

"I must grant you some credit for daring," the El-Faerie-male called out.

Duggan stopped and Dowd Chase came up beside her. A second or two later, the others joined them.

"Yes, perhaps they deserve some small credit," the El-Faerie-female remarked, "although it is arguably more a foolhardy daring than a brave one."

"I know you two," answered Glinnstone in a loud voice. "You are Faedred and Mellally, noble El-Faeries of the Original Order."

“And perhaps we know you,” the El-Faerie-female replied coolly, “although it has been quite a long time and memories can play tricks. We are addressing Master Glinnstone, are we not?”

“Quite so,” the elderly Wizard confirmed. “Now, if I may get to the reason for—”

“Not so fast,” countered the El-Faerie-female, interrupting the Wizard. “Before you go any further, we must be sure.”

“Come, come,” Glinnstone replied, “though it has been years, I look rather the same.”

“Looks can deceive, sir.”

“Deception is possible anywhere and by many means,” the Wizard agreed, bowing graciously, “but I am indeed the Wizard you met at the great gathering at Caeldry, a gathering you should well remember, and I would be most pleased to satisfy your obvious curiosity by introducing my friends here to you.”

The El-Faerie-female returned the Wizard’s bow with a small one of her own.

“It appears you have chosen rather noteworthy friends, Master Glinnstone,” she remarked in an offhand manner.

“Quite. I expected they would draw your attention.”

“If that was your expectation, you are indeed a bold one, sir,” observed the El-Faerie-male, his eyes narrowing. “However, we must admit you have achieved that which you desired if your desire was to draw attention. So, by all means, please do introduce your companions to us.”

Nodding, Glinnstone put a hand on the shoulder of his fellow Wizard as he addressed the two El-Faeries in a most formal manner of speech that intrigued Duggan.

“Guardians of the Realm, Protectors of Nobility,” he proclaimed, “may I first present Master Dowd Chase, son of Dwayne who was son of Derek who was son of Dald, all of them respected Wizards of the Westerly High Order. It is my great honor to present him to you.”

The two El-Faeries inclined their heads solemnly in greeting. In reply, Dowd Chase laid his right hand over his heart and gave a low bow.

“I am much honored,” he said.

This must have been a good thing to do, for the El-Faerie-female gave a small but appreciative smile. In contrast, the El-Faerie-male’s face remained stony and his eyes continued to shift back and forth in a way that bothered Duggan. Then Glinnstone laid a hand on Lambrell’s shoulder.

“To continue my introductions, Less-Lieges, this fine lass here is Lambrell Quiverill,” he said to them, though how Glinnstone knew Lambrell’s last name was a mystery to Duggan. “It is Missy Quiverill’s first time in Eshmagick, as her family left for the Western lands ten generations ago and yet you may recognize from her facial structure and hair color that she is a descendant of the Cambrill Clan of the Glaensy-Glaen Trolls.”

The two El-Faeries again inclined their heads in formal, polite greeting.

“We believe we know the lass’ family by reputation,” remarked the El-Faerie-male, speaking with a casual indifference that seemed feigned to Duggan.

In reply, Lambrell gave an awkward bow then stepped back. Glinnstone next put a hand on Zagger’s shoulder.

“For my third introduction, I hope to satisfy some of your most acute curiosity,” proclaimed Glinnstone in a tone of voice that seemed to have a tinge of amusement. “Zagger Dunleavy is the name of this fine lad. He is a Woodsy Troll and yet he boasts hair white enough and a stature diminutive enough that some might take more than a passing interest. As to his origin and the names of his kin, they are unknown or unremembered or at least unspoken. I have not asked his age nor do I know it but I believe there may be quite a tale to be found in the counting of his years.”

Glinnstone nudged Zagger to step forward. The boy took a small step and stood uncertainly in front of the two El-Faeries. This time, there was no polite inclination of heads, Duggan noticed. The El-Faerie-female glanced at her companion, who peered at Zagger with an expression on his face that was almost disdainful. Duggan couldn’t quite get a full reading of the expression but she didn’t like it. After what seemed forever, the El-Faerie-male finally tilted his head and spoke with the same, false casualness as before.

“If the lad’s origins are unknown, I am quite sure it is his task and not ours to find them. Or, perhaps he has his reasons not to want to know them.”

When Zagger opened his mouth to speak, Glinnstone discouraged him with a touch of his hand to the boy's elbow followed by a quick shake of his head. Zagger's face reddened but somehow he managed to control himself. Closing his mouth, he stepped back.

Glinnstone now put his hand on Duggan's shoulder and eased her forward. Duggan took two uncertain steps and came to a halt. The two El-Faeries stared curiously at her while the Wizard made his formal introduction.

"Last but certainly not least, proud Less-Lieges, may I present Duggan McDuggan," he proclaimed, "a Woodsy Troll also newly come to Eshmagick from Westerly places, though I suspect Eshmagick has always been in her and with her, even as she has lived apart from it. There is really nothing I need to say about Missy McDuggan here. From her appearance, I believe you know quite all you need to know."

Neither El-Faerie moved to acknowledge the Troll-girl. Instead, they stared at her with such frank, undisguised curiosity that Duggan grew uncomfortable and had to lower her eyes.

"May I say that it is rather bold of you to bring this lass to us, Master Glinnstone," the El-Faerie-female finally remarked, her eyebrows arching. "You must know that times have changed and new times bring new ways of thinking."

"That may be so," Glinnstone replied, "and yet I continue to believe words solemnly pledged are words to be trusted."

The two El-Faeries exchanged glances.

"It is rather an old-fashioned notion in times such as these," the El-Faerie-male observed dryly, "and yet your trust may end up serving you well enough, as she has directed us to bring the bunch of you to her."

"Of course she has," Glinnstone replied. "Was there ever a doubt?"

"Careful, Master Glinnstone," the El-Faerie-female warned. "Or you may yet discover the dangers of being too bold. Now come."

With that, the El-Faerie-female turned and went into the tent, with her male companion quickly following.

"She?" Duggan whispered to Glinnstone as the two El-Faeries disappeared. "They said she will see you."

"Yes," the old Wizard replied. "You heard correctly."

Duggan felt her heartbeat speed up.

"Do you mean the Faerie we seek is in that tent?"

Glinnstone looked around. A large crowd of El-Faeries was watching curiously.

He lowered his voice and whispered quietly, "Perhaps."

Zagger must have heard their whispered exchange because he suddenly spoke up from somewhere behind Duggan.

"You mean it's that slakin' easy?" he cried.

"Hush, sir," Glinnstone cautioned, though Zagger wasn't about to be put off.

He continued loudly, "After everything that's happened, we just walk into an El-Faerie camp and just like that, it's done?"

"Hush, hush, Master Dunleavy," the old Wizard cautioned again. "There are many ears and we should keep our business to ourselves."

"Do not hush me," cried Zagger, his face flushing.

Glinnstone shot a look of disapproval and was about to say something when the head of the El-Faerie-female appeared in the tent opening.

Frowning, she called to them, "Why are you lingering? May I be so bold as to say it is decidedly impolite to keep her waiting now that she has agreed to see you."

"Quite right," concurred Glinnstone, shooting Zagger another cautionary look. "Please accept our apologies."

Quickly, the elderly Wizard made for the tent door, limping noticeably as he walked. Swallowing hard, Duggan followed. Her mind was racing and yet none of her thoughts was very clear or coherent. Much too much had just happened and apparently, much more awaited her inside the tent. As she reached the tent door, her stomach heaved and her hands began shaking.

"Hallow's Fire," Duggan muttered under her breath, swallowing hard.





## Chapter 25

Inside the tent, a bright fire crackled from a hearth in the left corner and a second, smaller fire glowed from an iron stove in the right corner. Apparently, the Faerie occupying this tent disliked cold, mused Duggan as a drop of sweat formed on her forehead.

Mysteriously, the two El-Faeries had disappeared and for a moment, Duggan and the others were left standing alone in the tent. Then, out of the shadows behind the hearth stepped a single figure. Duggan instantly recognized her as the Faerie they had been seeking for she carried herself regally, with a

crown atop her head. She, too, was oddly full-sized, not bug-sized. Duggan regarded her curiously.

The Lady was somewhat shorter than the El-Faeries in the camp, probably by half a head or so. Her waist-length hair was mainly snow-white though there were several, long streaks of midnight-black running through its wavy bulk. Her eyes were unusually large and slightly convex, set in deep sockets that reminded Duggan of the fish-eyes of the bug-sized Faerie tucked in the sphere in her pocket. The pupils of her fish-eyes were nearly as black as the streaks in the Lady's hair. Like the injured Faerie, this Faerie's skin had the dingy pall of old tallow.

As Duggan watched, the Lady blinked her eyes and to her shock and surprise, the eyelids blinked upward from the bottom rather than downward like Human and Troll eyes. Then the eyes blinked upward again and Duggan had all she could do to keep from reacting visibly, which would have been terribly impolite. Loads of questions were popping into Duggan's head but then the Faerie turned her eyes on her visitors and they were such terribly sad-looking eyes that all of Duggan's questions instantly fell away.

"We have long dreaded this moment," remarked the Lady, directing her words to no one in particular.

The Lady's voice had a whimsical, musical quality to it, reminding Duggan of the high notes you hear on a Marsh-Flute when someone very talented is playing it. Only the Lady's voice had more the sound you might hear from ten Marsh-Flutes playing the same notes at the same time, though with some of the

notes bent slightly in playful ways. Duggan was instantly mesmerized.

“Lady, my companions and I are most grateful to you for seeing us,” Glinnstone answered, bowing. “It is indeed most gracious of you.”

“An uninformed Faerie might find your words polite and respectful, Master Glinnstone,” the Lady answered in notes that suddenly went very low, “but we both know why you are here, do we not?”

“Lady, I am only doing what must be done,” the old Wizard replied. “As you well know,” he added after a brief pause.

“That may be true,” answered the Faerie-lady, the musical notes of her voice still low, her face rigid, “yet it doesn’t mean we must pretend your coming is welcome.”

“I understand your sentiment,” said Glinnstone with a slight bow to her, “and, Lady, I admire your loyalty. However, whether we wish it or not the time has come and the only course left is to be bold and to rely on courage and daring to carry the day. You know this as well as I.”

Her face softening slightly, the Faerie-lady sighed and answered, “We know you speak the truth, just as you know we will do what needs doing.”

“Then we must not tarry, Lady. It is time to set matters in motion.”

Giving her head a quick shake, the Faerie-lady held up her hand.

“Before we do, I desire to speak with these three Woodsy Trolls,” she countered, turning her eyes to gaze on Duggan and her friends.

“As you wish,” Glinnstone replied, bowing again.

Her eyes came to rest first on Zagger.

“It is most interesting,” she practically sang in high notes, “to see a Troll-boy with hair so white.”

“Yeah, white just like yours,” muttered Zagger, returning the Lady’s gaze with an expression on his face that was almost hostile, Duggan noted.

“Of course,” the Faerie-lady observed with a friendly enough laugh, paying Zagger’s impolite manners no mind, “with all the dirt in your hair, it’s hard to see its true whiteness.”

When Zagger’s face flushed, Duggan braced herself for an outpouring of rude words. Fortunately, Lambrell gave a quick laugh before Zagger could speak.

“Oh, forgive Zagger here; being dirty is just part of his contrariness. You shouldn’t mind him.”

The Faerie-lady turned her grave eyes on Lambrell and studied the girl’s face. Immediately growing uncomfortable, Lambrell shifted awkwardly from foot to foot under the Lady’s close scrutiny.

“So, you are a *Mutanh*, eh?”

Blushing, Lambrell imitated Glinnstone by giving a polite bow before answering, “Um, I guess. That’s what Nomi Nattlin says, anyway. But, to be truthful, I really don’t know much about it, your Highness.”

The Faerie-lady gave a high-pitched squeal of laughter.

“Hear that, Master Glinnstone?” she called out melodically. “The lass here called me, your Highness.”

“Oh, I’m sorry if I got it wrong,” Lambrell hastened to say. “I didn’t mean to offend but you seem like a ‘your Highness’ to me.”

Coming to Lambrell’s aid, Dowd Chase spoke up, saying, “It’s quite all right, Lambrell, don’t ya mind Haelly here too much. She has played the part of the Lady for so long she has forgotten how to talk like normal folk.”

“Master Chase,” the Faerie-lady reproached, “you are the only Human I know who would presume to call me by that name.” Then her face softened slightly as she added, “Just as you are perhaps the only Human who is graced to know it.”

In response, Dowd Chase bowed politely. As he did, Duggan couldn’t help but notice a twinkle in his eyes and a small smile playing on the corners of his lips.

“It has been my honor and pleasure to know you both as my Lady and as Haelly,” he said to her.

“Ah, you two know each other,” remarked Glinnstone.

“Oh, we’ve met a few times,” mumbled Dowd Chase, in an off-hand way.

Shifting her gaze away from Dowd Chase, the Lady gave the old Wizard a friendly smile.

“We are all united in the same cause so let’s have no more pretenses, shall we? In whatever way one might cloak the words, whether in fine garb or rough wear, I meant precisely what I said, Master Glinnstone. We have long dreaded this moment of your coming.”

"Of course you have," Glinnstone agreed. "The dangers facing your Lady are very great. Believe me; I understand this fact all too well."

"But do you really, Master Glinnstone? Are you aware of the precariousness of her situation?"

"I believe so," the old Wizard replied.

"Perhaps you do," murmured the Faerie-lady, her brow furrowing. "We shall see. But now, speak your mind. Tell us your thoughts."

Before Glinnstone could answer, Dowd Chase interrupted, saying, "Lady, may I first ask about the loyalty of the El-Faeries in this camp?"

The Faerie-lady turned her head to regard the young Wizard.

"Master Chase, I know why you ask your question and I am pleased to say that most of them are fully loyal. As you might well guess, it was no easy task to persuade them but we have been most successful in making our case."

"That is good news," said Glinnstone.

"And yet," continued the Lady, "we must also assume there are spies in the camp."

One word, in particular, got Duggan's attention.

"Um, excuse me," she said, "but what do you mean, spies?"

There was an awkward moment of silence while Dowd Chase and Glinnstone exchanged glances then the younger Wizard answered, saying, "Spies hopin' to find the hidin' place of the true Lady."

For a moment, Duggan was confused but then the truth hit her.

“Then the Lady here is not the real Lady we are seeking?”

“Merely her servant,” Haelly admitted.

“And the El-Faeries out there?”

After giving the Lady a wink, Dowd Chase explained, “For many years, the El-Faeries of this camp held the Lady as their prisoner. And yet, as they came to know her and to understand her cause, they began to sympathize. Eventually, they so changed their views that they helped her to escape.”

“And afterward,” Haelly added, “the El-Faeries remained here to perpetuate an image of—”

“Wait” cried Zagger, interrupting. “You mean to say this camp and the El-Faeries in it are part of...um, part of some great trick to—”

“To fool the Faerie Lord,” Dowd Chase confirmed, interrupting Zagger. “It is so. Haelly and the others have willingly played their parts to protect the Lady. No doubt, the Faerie Lord now knows of her escape but if he were to play his hand too heavily, it would accomplish nothing. Instead, he bides his time, planting spies and waiting patiently for a careless word or a disloyal one that will reveal her whereabouts.”

“Well, that’s quite the tale,” muttered Zagger, glowering. “I have to say, it’s quite the tale.”

Lambrell now chimed in with a question of her own.

“What about those two El-Faeries who seemed so...um, so unwelcoming?” she asked. “Please don’t tell me they are secretly on our side.”

“They are indeed,” Haelly replied with a smile.

“So we were never in any danger here?” asked Duggan.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” said the old Wizard, an eyebrow going up. “As the Lady here says, doubtless there are spies in the camp.”

“What’s next?” asked Duggan, changing subjects.

Dowd Chase answered, “Next? Next comes the hard part.” He turned his head to put a question to Haelly. “How much time before he knows we’re here?” he asked.

After pausing briefly to think, the Faerie-lady answered somberly, “Not much time. Likely, spies are already hurrying back to their master with word of your arrival. When he hears, it will doubtlessly drive him to action.”

After a brief silence while everyone digested this news, Glinnstone spoke up, saying, “Even assuming his spies will reach their Lord quickly, it will take him some time to decide how to react. My guess is we have a little time but we must move quickly. It is essential that we reach Lady Nahlwaethe before he finds us.”

Haelly frowned.

“That won’t be easy. She is nowhere near this camp.”

Glinnstone gave a startled look.

“What? It was always the plan to keep her secreted nearby so she would be ready when the time came for action.”

“Plans must change as needs change,” Haelly observed dryly.



“True enough,” Glinnstone agreed reluctantly. “So, Lady, what do you advise?”

“I have drawn a map to her location,” answered Haelly, reaching her hand into a pocket of her tunic and taking out a piece of paper. “I will remain here to maintain the ruse as long as possible. You must travel quickly. Here, take a look.”

Haelly unrolled the small piece of paper and held it open for all to see. It was a strange map, Duggan noted, with surfaces that glowed of their own accord.

Waving a hand over her map, Haelly explained, “This map is lighted by the Magick of Esh. As you move on your journey, a small smudge darkening the light’s glow will indicate where you are. You may not find any clear paths or you may lose the ones you have found but the smudge will move as you move, guiding you.”

“Most handy,” remarked Dowd Chase, taking the map from the Faerie-lady’s hand.

Glinnstone added, “Now that we have this, we should leave immediately.”

Haelly tilted her head toward Duggan and Lambrell.

“I must point out that sunrise is not far off,” she noted.

“Oh yes,” said Glinnstone, “I had forgotten.” He turned to face Dowd Chase. “It is a dangerous choice to leave them here, yet it could also be the best choice if it is so important to make haste.”

Duggan could feel her cheeks growing hot.

She cried, "No slakin' way we're getting left behind."

"I should say not," Lambrell chimed in. "No slakin' way."

Dowd Chase gave a good-humored laugh.

"I am most certain of that," he agreed, eyes twinkling. "You'd better prepare yourselves then," he added, pointing at Lambrell.

Duggan glanced where the Wizard was pointing. From one of Lambrell's hands, tiny, yellow buds were beginning to sprout from her fingertips.

"I guess the sun is already coming up," Duggan muttered unhappily to Lambrell.

"I guess," agreed Lambrell, pointing back at Duggan's hands.

Duggan glanced down and sure enough, her fingers and hands were already turning greenish and slender branches were beginning to emerge. In the next second, she could feel her limbs stiffening.

To Duggan's annoyance, the Faerie-lady took a step closer to stare at her in wide-eyed wonderment while marveling aloud, "This is exceedingly fascinating to me. I've never before seen the *Mninh-foli-mutanh-ay*."

Duggan bit her lip to keep from saying something stupid.

"It's going really fast this time," observed Lambrell as her hair filled with tiny, yellow buds.

Shifting her gaze to Dowd Chase, Haelly asked, "Should we move them to the side or something? They're right in the middle of the tent."

Pointing at Duggan's feet, Dowd Chase shook his head. "Too late," he noted.

Dismayed, Duggan glanced down. Sure enough, roots were crawling out of her ankles and burrowing themselves into the carpeting of the tent's floor, ruining the material. Duggan tried lifting her chin to offer an apology but her neck no longer moved.

That's when the cruel reality hit Duggan. She was now stuck staring at her feet for the length of her transformation.

*Slakin' great, Duggan-lass*, she chided silently, annoyed to have been so stupid.

As she stood there, staring at her feet, Duggan could feel bark enclosing the last vestiges of flesh on her face. Her limbs had gone rigid and her body was as stiff and hard as a tree trunk. Above her, she could hear branches scraping against the tent's high roof, stretching its material.

"Fascinating," the Faerie-lady murmured in her flute-like voice. "You can't imagine how fortunate I feel to have two *Mutanhs* in my tent."

*I'll bet*, thought Duggan, as she watched one last root shove its way through the carpeting into the soil beneath the tent floor.



**EshSecret**

*Xavier*

## Chapter 26

Duggan didn't like being stuck rooted to the ground in the middle of the tent but there was nothing to be done about it. Soon, she dozed off and had nightmares filled with troubling visions of her Mum turned to stone and her Pops covered by spider-like creatures. Then she slept dreamlessly for a while until she was startled into wakefulness by the sound of her hand falling to her side with a woody clunk.

Duggan's eyes immediately popped open. Taking a long breath of air, she wiggled her fingers to confirm what she already knew, that her wooden prison was beginning to dissolve. The process of changing back went quickly this time and before long, Duggan

was standing in an ankle-deep pile of leaves, twigs, and berries, yawning and stretching to get the kinks out of her limbs. Beside her, Lambrell was also returning to her old self.

Out of habit, Duggan touched her hand to the fabric of her jacket pocket to check that the Faerie sphere was still inside. Exhaling a long sigh of relief when she felt its hardness, she looked around. It turned out they were alone in the tent, which surprised Duggan and made her a little nervous. Why were the others not here, she wondered. Did they go off, leaving Lambrell and her?

*No way, she thought. But if they haven't left then where are they?*

Duggan gave Lambrell a concerned look.

"Did you hear any of what they were saying while we were...um, transformed?" she asked. "Like, maybe, where they were going?"

Giving her head a shake, Lambrell answered, "I always try to listen but when I'm transformed, it's like I have my head underwater."

"I know. It's the same for me. So, the question is, what do we do now?"

Lambrell's eyes widened as she asked, "What do you mean, do?"

"I mean, do we wait for them in the hopes they're coming back or do we go looking for them?"

"I think we should wait," Lambrell opined. "I'm sure they'll come back for us. They've got to, right?"

"I don't know," Duggan answered honestly. "Really, I expected them to be here when we changed

back. What if they're not here because something bad is keeping them away?"

"What would keep them away?" cried Lambrell, her eyes widening even more.

"I can't think of anything good."

"Then you think we should go looking for them?"

"I do. Who knows, maybe we'll run into those two El-Faeries and we can ask them to help."

"Maybe," replied Lambrell dubiously. "I guess we should get going, if that's our decision."

With that, Lambrell turned and started for the tent's front door. Immediately, warnings sounded in Duggan's head. If she had learned anything from their adventures thus far, it was to be cautious at all times.

"Let's not go that way" she suggested, stopping Lambrell with a hand. "Let's take a way that's not so obvious."

Lambrell gave a surprised look. "Like, where?"

"Um, let's try this."

Duggan moved to the back of the tent. Kneeling, she slid her fingers under its canvas wall and when she tugged at the bottom, the material lifted easily.

*Good*, she thought.

Dropping to her stomach, she hoisted the material until there was just enough space for her head. Wiggling forward, Duggan cautiously shoved her face into the little hole and peered outside, not knowing what to expect but expecting the worst.

“Oh great,” she muttered, for the first things she saw, not five feet away, were the vertical bars of yet another one of those awful jails.

From her awkward position, Duggan couldn't be entirely sure but the jail appeared empty. Beyond the jail, she thought she saw another, long row of those fur-trimmed tents used by the El-Faeries but to her relief, no one was in sight.

“Come on,” Duggan whispered back to Lambrell. “I think it's safe.”

Crawling on her belly, Duggan worked her way outside. When she was clear of the tent, she climbed hastily to her feet and took a long look around while Lambrell squirmed her way under the canvas to join her. At first glance, Duggan saw nothing to cause alarm.

“Follow me,” she whispered to Lambrell as soon as the girl was on her feet.

Instinctively, both Troll-girls pulled up their hoods. Hugging the near side of the jail building, Duggan made her way around the structure. Beyond the jail, the two nearest tents looked to be empty. Taking a deep breath, Duggan darted through the narrow space between them, with Lambrell close on her heels. On the other side of the tents, Duggan paused again to look around.

“What do we do now?” Lambrell whispered nervously.

Before Duggan could answer, there was a sudden, loud explosion. Startled, she swung her head in the direction of the noise and what she saw shocked and terrified her. For, in the big clearing beyond



Haelly's tent, Dowd Chase and Master Glinnstone were standing side-by-side, arms raised, faces turned upward toward a tumult of low, multi-colored clouds swirling ominously above them.

Behind the two Wizards stood Zagger and Haelly, with Faedred and Mellally on either side of them. The two El-Faeries each held flaming swords, which they brandished overhead. All around them, other El-Faeries were popping out of their tents, some fully dressed, others still in sleeping clothes but all hurrying to join Faedred and Mellally.

From the clouds bunched over her friends, a long plume stretched far into the forest beyond the camp. Duggan had seen clouds like these before and they could mean only one thing. Soon, hundreds and hundreds of spider-like creatures would be raining onto the Faerie camp. A violent shudder ran through Duggan's body.

"What do we do?" Lambrell cried.

"We need to help our friends," Duggan answered. "Come on."

Duggan wheeled, determined this time not to abandon her friends but before she could take one step, she smashed into something tall, hard, and menacing. Gasping, Duggan recoiled violently, throwing herself desperately backward to escape this new enemy.

But then a familiar set of lips smiled at her.

"Easy there, lass" he said.

"Dowd Chase," Duggan exclaimed. "What are you doing here? You're...you're..."

She raised her chin to look over the man's shoulder. Sure enough, in the clearing under the

swirling menace of clouds, another Dowd Chase was about to hurl a ball of fire into the sky.

The man hastily assured her, “My form over there is an illusion, thanks to Glinnstone’s Magick. No time to explain now. Come, we must hurry.”

Without another word, Dowd Chase pivoted and quickly covered the short distance to the edge of the camp, disappearing into the trees beyond. Duggan’s gut told her the man running away from her was the real Dowd Chase. Her gut also told her she needed to get moving and follow him. With a deep breath, she took off, chasing after him. In half a dozen strides or so, she was out of the El-Faerie encampment and moving into the trees, with Lambrell running behind her.

For several hundred paces, they ran at full speed, until Duggan’s lungs were burning and her muscles ached. Then the young Wizard slowed and they jogged at a more leisurely pace for many paces more before finally coming to a halt. Duggan pulled up beside the panting Dowd Chase, followed by Lambrell. Weirdly, everything around them was utterly silent, which didn’t comfort Duggan.

Then a twig snapped somewhere ahead. Beside her, Duggan heard Lambrell suck in her breath. With heart beating loudly, Duggan peered in the direction of the sound but she could see nothing. Then there was another, very ominous snapping in front of them.

Something or someone was out there.

Grabbing an arm of each girl, Dowd Chase hauled them behind a prickly Fay-Floss plant. Duggan’s hands began to tremble as she crouched with

the Wizard, wondering what in Hallow's Fire was out there. Then there was another snapping sound. Instinctively, Duggan crouched even lower. Another twig snapped. Duggan was about to duck even lower when, to her surprise, Dowd Chase suddenly stood and called into the trees from his hiding place behind the Fay-Floss, his voice so deep and guttural Duggan could have sworn it belonged to a different man.

"*Tah-shen tsay*," he shouted, speaking words that were utterly foreign to Duggan.

After a moment of silence, a small creature emerged from one particularly dark stand of trees and called back in a strange, high-pitched whistle of a voice.

"Is that the real Dowd Chase out there?"

"*Shen tsay mee-yay*," the young Wizard responded in a voice that was his yet not his.

"Your answer tells me nothing," the shadowy figure called back in its whistle-like voice. "Many know the Ancient tongue of the Gluellers. Come closer so I may see you clearly."

The young Wizard took a couple of steps forward, pushing his way through the droopy branches of the Fay-Floss plant into the open area on the other side.

"I cannot believe ya don't recognize my voice," he called, "for I recognize ya's no matter how much ya try to disguise it."

The creature in the trees stepped forward and replied in a voice that mimicked that of Dowd Chase, "Well, ya don't sound like yaself when ya's talkin' like a slakin' Glueller, Master Chase."

Duggan couldn't believe it. Springing to her feet, she burst through the Fay-Floss plant.

"Nomi Nattlin," she cried, her heart beating wildly. "I can't believe it's you."

"And it's very good to see you again, Duggan McDuggan," the Witch called back with a laugh.

Duggan rushed over to the Witch and threw her arms around the small woman, hugging her tightly. Nomi Nattlin gave a pained grunt but Duggan didn't care. She had never felt more relieved and happy to see someone in her entire life. Lambrell joined her and together they hugged the Witch tightly. Finally, Dowd Chase cleared his throat and spoke up.

"Come," he coaxed in a gentle voice, "we cannot stay here. We must get goin'."

"What about the others?" Lambrell asked. "What about Zagger?"

"Zagger escaped on his own. He's ahead waitin' for us."

"And Glinnstone," Duggan asked, "and Haelly and all the others?"

Dowd Chase's expression grew grim.

"Glinnstone had to stay to keep the Magick goin', creatin' his illusions to distract our enemies. What happened to Haelly and the others, I don't know. Again, we can only hope."

"So we're going to leave them?"

"I'm afraid we must," Dowd Chase confirmed. "Come, we need to get goin'."

The man reached into his pocket and took out Haelly's map. Unfolding it, he consulted its markings briefly then he pointed to their right.

“Lambrell, use your Woodsy Troll eyes and take us that way through this forest,” he directed. “Ya lead. It’s your turn.”

Looking pleased, the girl nodded and headed out, making for the trees. Nomi Nattlin followed. Before starting out himself, Dowd Chase signaled for Duggan to draw close. Surprised, she moved beside the man. Bending, he spoke quickly in a low voice meant only for her.

“I don’t expect Glinnstone will be rejoinin’ us. He is an old man and that was a hard Magick he was conjurin’.”

Duggan reacted unhappily to this piece of news. Mountainsy Troll or not, Glinnstone had already proven himself an important and trustworthy ally. Her heart sank. She swallowed hard then had to swallow again to get her mouth working.

“Can we manage without him?” she finally asked, forcing out her words.

“I believe we can,” Dowd Chase answered. “But listen, Duggan, now that Glinnstone is gone, if anything were to happen to Nomi and me—”

“That won’t happen,” the girl cut in.

“But if it did,” the Wizard continued, “well, the thing is. Hmm, I’m not sure I know how to say this.”

“Say what?” asked Duggan, her heart skipping a beat.

“Well,” the man said, “the thing is, if ya hear a voice in ya’s head, ya must do what it says. Understand? Don’t question the voice; just do what it tells ya. I know this sounds crazy but ya’s not crazy if ya hear voices. They mean something.”

In spite of her fears, Duggan had to laugh at this advice.

“Master Chase, my whole life I’ve been called crazy for hearing voices in my head and it never stopped me before.”

“Well, they were wrong to be teasin’ ya for it,” the man assured her. “Trust me on this. Listen to the voices and do what they say.”

Duggan shrugged but agreed, “All right.”

“Good. Now, come on, let’s catch up with the others.”

Hurrying, they quickly found the others, who had stopped to wait for them. Together, the four companions hiked silently through the trees, following Lambrell. Before long, they reached a small field and as Duggan looked around, a small, white-haired figure emerged out of some Oaks on the other side.

“Zagger,” cried Lambrell, rushing to greet her friend.

When Lambrell threw her arms around the boy and hugged him tightly, Zagger grew red-faced but he smiled nonetheless, the corners of his mouth twitching happily.

Eventually, Nomi Nattlin cleared her voice to get everyone’s attention.

“There’s no more time to tarry,” she said, “we must find the way.”

“Where?” Zagger asked.

“Let’s have another look,” said Dowd Chase.

Reaching into his pocket, the man again extracted Haelly’s map, examined it and then pointed

to a tree-covered hill far in the distance but clearly visible to Duggan.

“The end of our journey lies over there. If we walk briskly, we will reach the base of that hill before half a night has passed,” he said. “About halfway up the hill, we should find a cave.”

“And the Lady is in that cave?” asked Zagger, speaking in a voice too loud for the Witch’s tastes.

“Shush, Master Dunleavy,” she cautioned, “from now on, we must assume our enemy has ears everywhere.”

“Well, is she in that cave or not?” Zagger demanded in a quieter voice that still wasn’t all that quiet.

“We can only hope,” the Witch answered. “Listen, everybody. Keep your eyes open, stay alert and trust your instincts. Don’t take unnecessary risks. Be smart. Got it?”

After everyone nodded, even Zagger, the five of them started out. For a long time, they walked in silence. Duggan struggled to keep her mind free of thoughts but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t stop herself from reaching a hand into her pocket to touch the sphere. Its metal had no warmth, which alarmed her.

“So much for not thinking,” she muttered aloud.

Nomi Nattlin looked over her shoulder at Duggan.

“My mind, too, is working much more than I’d like,” she said in a quiet voice. “Come, walk closer to me. I want to ask a favor.”

Hurrying up to the Witch, Duggan whispered, "What favor?"

"Listen to the trees and tell me what they are saying."

The Witch's words took Duggan by surprise.

"You mean, right now?"

"Yes, please."

Duggan nodded. Lifting her chin, she listened to the sounds around her. Sure enough, the trees were indeed murmuring. How had she missed their sounds? No doubt because she had been distracted by all her thinking and worrying. Concentrating now, Duggan listened for words among the many sounds but she couldn't distinguish any. Still, she got a general meaning from the tone of their murmuring.

"They're fretting," she whispered to the Witch.

"Can you tell why?"

"Um, I'm not sure but I get the impression that something is coming our way. Something the trees don't name but it is very bad."

"Do they say how far away it is?" asked Nomi Nattlin, her voice suddenly grim.

Duggan listened again to the trees.

"I don't know. I could be wrong but I get a bad feeling from the trees, a really bad feeling."

"It is the Faerie Lord," Nomi Nattlin surmised. "He was never very far from us but now he is drawing near." She called ahead. "Dowd, we must hurry. He is coming."

"Right," the man replied.

Ahead, he said something to Lambrell who broke into a jog, with Duggan and the others quickly



matching her pace. As Duggan ran down the trail, she heard a nearby Oak murmur something.

*Mat-teesy eksay*, it said.

The first word, *Mat-teesy*, was the Ancient word for friend. Duggan knew it well. She wasn't sure about the meaning of the second word, *eksay*. It was also from the Ancient language and it sounded somewhat familiar. Need? Needy? Lacking? It meant something like that, she vaguely recollected.

Well, with the Faerie Lord closing on them, she could use a friend, if that's what the tree meant by *Mat-teesy*. But there was something about the second word, about the *eksay*, that troubled her. Searching her mind for memories, Duggan suddenly wondered if the two words together might mean something like, not-friend. Immediately, her stomach churned. Ahead of her, Dowd Chase seemed to quicken his pace.

*Has the clever Wizard just read my thoughts*, she wondered.



## Chapter 27

For some reason, Duggan couldn't shake the feeling they were heading toward disaster. As they hurried forward, the trail began sloping more and more steeply uphill. A cold wind sprang up. Duggan's stomach growled, reminding her she hadn't eaten for many, many hours. Or was it days? With everything happening so fast, she had lost all sense of time, all sense of such ordinary things as eating meals when you get hungry and sleeping when you are tired.

Agitated, the trees were murmuring all around her. It was as if they were obsessed with a single topic of conversation. Unfortunately, the single topic had something to do with some terrible badness coming

their way. Occasionally, Duggan heard words or phrases that had a familiar ring.

*Desh-ness-waw.*

*Roun' oles.*

*Purth-naethe.*

It frustrated Duggan not to understand exactly what the trees were saying. Why had the Woodsy Trolls of Cowgrass forsaken the Ancient language? Not even the village Storytellers could remember much of the old tongue. She desperately wanted to know what the trees were saying but it was no use.

Making their way through the trees, they suddenly came upon a very Ancient Bald-Elm with a heavily scarred trunk and long branches that reached so high they could have been holding up the sky. Duggan slowed and looked into the old tree's great crown of branches. There was a rustling of leaves then the tree spoke to her, using words she understood.

*Arr-shess-ti*, the tree said.

That meant stop.

*Ress-tarry-ti-shure.*

Look up.

Heeding the tree's advice, Duggan tilted her chin and looked into the sky. To her dismay, she saw a V-shaped formation of El-Faeries racing toward them, their slender wings beating rapidly. Each of the El-Faeries held a flaming sword that glowed brightly. They were still quite a distance away but the V was closing rapidly.

"Dowd," Duggan called ahead in alarm. "Look up."

Raising his gaze, the Wizard gave a nod and said, "Yes, I see. Flames in the sky."

"How many are there?" asked Nomi Nattlin.

"Maybe a dozen," Duggan guessed.

Zagger caught up to them.

"What are you all looking at?" he asked.

Nomi Nattlin answered matter-of-factly, "Flying El-Faeries no doubt dispatched by the Faerie Lord to intercept us."

"What do we do?" asked Zagger.

Nomi Nattlin glanced to her left then to her right.

"I see only one way," she said.

Wordlessly, she dropped to her knees. Pushing her fingers into the dirt, she closed her eyes and brought her mouth close to the ground. In a low voice, she started whispering Ancient words over the soil in a language Duggan didn't recognize.

*"Zenth-pur-tay. Naddis-zenth. Nem."*

Repeating the words, the Witch pushed her fingers more deeply into the earth, which seemed to yield to receive them.

*"Zenth-pur-tay. Naddis-zenth. Nem."*

Raising her voice, Nomi Nattlin chanted the words a third time and, all of sudden, the soil around the Witch's fingers began to bubble as if it were boiling then a low wave rippled through the ground and roiled rapidly uphill, pushing aside roots and plants and carving a long squiggle of a path through the woods. A fourth time, Nomi Nattlin said the words.

*"Zenth-pur-tay. Naddis-zenth. Nem."*

Now a second wave of soil followed the first, rippling through the earth then a third and fourth wave swept uphill, each one deepening and improving the path.

“Best I can do,” muttered Nomi Nattlin after the fourth wave had subsided. “Let’s hope they will only see the obvious as they fly overhead.”

Duggan peered into the sky. The line of El-Faeries was now less than four hundred paces away, their formation undulating up and down as the sword-bearing El-Faeries wove their way through the trees. For a moment, Duggan lost heart but then the sound of Nomi Nattlin’s voice jolted her back to reality.

“Duggan,” she directed, “you will stay here with Lambrell and Zagger while Master Chase and I lead the El-Faeries along the false path. Hide here in these bushes. When the El-Faeries have gone sufficiently past, you must hurry on. Find the cave. We will meet you there.”

Duggan immediately disliked this plan.

“No way. What if they catch you? And what if they spot us? We need to stick together.”

“There’s no other way,” countered the Witch. “Trust me on this.”

“And take this,” added Dowd Chase, pulling the map out of his pocket and thrusting it into Duggan’s hands. “Use it, find the cave.”

Duggan started to object, “But—”

“No more discussion,” the Witch interrupted. “Follow the plan. We’ll find you as soon as we can.”

Overhead, there was suddenly a buzzing of wings. Nomi Nattlin was right. There was no time left for debate.

“All right,” Duggan agreed but then she felt compelled to add, “Just promise you will come back. We need you. Both of you,” she added, glancing at Dowd Chase.

The terrifying sound of drumming wings grew louder.

“We will,” cried the Witch. “Now, quick, you must hide.”

Shoving the map hastily into her pocket and dropping onto hands and knees, Duggan crawled beneath the long, curly branches of a nearby Willowy-Heath, hurrying to reach the thick clutter of leaves always found at the plant’s center. Lambrell and Zagger followed silently behind her. When they were underneath the heaviest leaves, Duggan glanced back at the others.

“Sshh,” she whispered.

Lambrell and Zagger both nodded then the three of them waited in silence. The buzzing of El-Faerie wings grew very loud. Terrified, Duggan lowered her head until an ear was touching the ground. A shadow seeped through the tiny openings among the leaves and reflexively Duggan caught her breath. Beside her, Lambrell was as still as a threatened Fawn. On the other side of her, Zagger was equally still and silent. Duggan slipped a hand in her pocket and wrapped her fingers around the sphere. Its metal felt icy cold.

As quickly as the sound had come, the buzzing of the El-Faeries' wings faded and before long, the three Trolls were left alone in their hiding place, crouching in the silence of the forest. Alone, that is, except for the murmuring of the trees, which were continuing to chatter all around them. Pushing her head through the leaves, Duggan took her time making sure the El-Faeries were gone before standing.

"Come on," she whispered to the others. "I think it's safe."

Lambrell and Zagger followed and the three of them moved to a small clearing on the far side where they could pause and reconnoiter. Duggan pulled the map out of her pocket, unfolded it and eyed its markings. Haelly was a remarkably talented drawer, it seemed, having recorded the topography of the area in amazing detail, using fine pen lines to sketch all the features around them. A black smudge damping the glow of the paper showed exactly where they were.

"Well?" Zagger demanded. "What does the map say?"

"It looks like we should go this way," Duggan answered, pointing. "If I'm reading this thing right, there's a tiny path somewhere in the distance beyond that ridge over there that will take us close to the cave."

"And if we don't find the path?" the boy asked. "What then? That's a slakin' big hill in front of us."

Duggan was in no mood for argument.

She retorted. "If we don't find the path then I guess we bushwhack it. You have a problem with that?"



Zagger's face reddened but he didn't argue. "Fine, let's just get started," he answered.

Duggan's plan proved easier said than done. The higher they went, the thicker the undergrowth grew, until it was so thick the three Trolls could barely see two paces ahead of them. Duggan's old enemies, the thorny brambles from the hillsides of Mountainsy Troll country, returned to punish them. And to make matters even worse, while they were struggling to get through one particularly bad patch of thorns, the air suddenly filled with the disgusting odor of Honeyhocks.

Duggan's nose wrinkled.

"Please, not Retchets, too," she muttered.

"What?" asked Lambrell.

"Nothing."

Fortunately, they soon emerged into an area of the forest where the trees were spaced farther apart and the ground was free of underbrush as far as they could see. The odor of Honeyhocks lingered in the air but the forest ahead appeared to be free of both Honeyhocks and Retchets.

*Thank Gidden*, Duggan thought.

All around them, the murmurings of the Ancient trees of Eshmagick continued to fill Duggan's ears but she no longer paid attention to their words. Her mind needed to be focused on the daunting task in front of them, which was to find the Lady who could save their families.

"Let's run," Duggan suggested to Lambrell and Zagger. "Make some time while we can."

Her two friends seemed as relieved as Duggan to be clear of the thorny underbrush and temporarily able to move freely. With Duggan in the lead, they hurried forward, jogging steadily higher and higher. As they rose, the air grew cleaner and colder, making it easier for them to breathe. At the same time, the sky brightened and the odor of Honeyhocks disappeared.

For one brief, sweet moment, Duggan felt a glimmer of hope and her courage surged. Even on their own, without the help of Nomi Nattlin and Dowd Chase, she felt she could lead her friends to the Faerie-lady.

Suddenly, a loud buzzing sound pierced the air. Duggan looked up to see two, taller-than-average El-Faeries lifting themselves off the thick branches of a regal Bearded Oak to come swooping in their direction.

“Hallow’s Fire,” cried Lambrell, her voice shrill and panicky.

To have two El-Faeries suddenly descending on them was bad enough but the one in the lead had a terrifying look of hatred on its evil face. Duggan’s courage faltered.

“Nomi, Dowd, where are you?” she muttered as her hands began trembling uncontrollably.



**EshSecret**

## Chapter 28

The leader descended on them, his wings sounding like the buzzing of an angry wasp trapped in a jar. Gradually, he settled himself onto the ground about five paces in front of Duggan and her friends then his companion dropped down beside him. The faces of both these creatures were long and bony, with skin as dark as an old hornets' nest and just as wrinkled. Fish-like eyes set in deep sockets glared at the three Trolls from faces twisted by hatred.

“Well, well,” the leader called in a mocking tone of voice that reminded Duggan of strings plucked discordantly from a badly tuned Fie-Fiddle. “What have we here? Ugly Woodsy Trolls on one of my hills,

square in the middle of my Realm and not a one of you with the decency to have asked my leave.” Then he gave a hollow laugh. “What do you make of them, Learred?” he asked, glancing at his companion.

“You know I don’t like Woodsy Trolls, Lord,” answered Learred, his words falling like notes strummed from a slack-stringed Bow-Guitar, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “I would not be merciful, Sire.”

When Learred’s eyelids blinked upward, Duggan instantly corrected her first impression of him. He was no El-Faerie, despite his size. As far as she knew, only a pureblooded Faerie blinked upward.

“Now, now, Learred,” the leader replied with an evil smirk, his eyelids blinking upward, too, “we cannot go judging and sentencing these disgusting criminals before we have heard their side of the story, can we?”

“As you say, my Lord,” agreed Learred, deferring to his master with an unpleasant grin.

The leader then turned all his attention on Duggan, his fierce eyes probing hers.

“So, ugly Woodsy Troll-girl, tell me your name so that I may know who is so boldly trespassing on my lands and flaunting my laws?”

Before Duggan could speak, Zagger grunted angrily and stepped up beside her. With reddening face, he confronted the two Faeries.

“If you want names, I am Zagger Dunleavy,” he growled defiantly, “and the forests belong to the forests and to no one else, so we are not trespassing on anyone’s lands.”

There was a moment of silence then the Faerie leader cackled evilly.

“Now, that is indeed a notion noteworthy for its silliness. What a quaint idea. Imagine, the forests belonging to themselves. What do you think of that, Learred?”

Chuckling unpleasantly, Learred twanged, “It is ridiculous, my Lord.”

The Faerie leader swiveled his head to gaze first at Duggan then at Lambrell.

“And who are your companions here, ugly Troll-boy?” he called to Zagger. “I hope they do not share your silly notion. It will go rather badly for them, if they do.”

Duggan suddenly lost her temper. She had heard enough of this creature’s haughty tone of voice as he fired his mocking taunts at them. They were not criminals. They deserved better treatment than this.

Stepping forward, she said to Zagger, “Don’t answer him. Not if he’s going to talk like that.”

“Oh, a bold one, are you?” responded the Faerie with a cruel laugh.

Duggan could feel her temper rising.

“If you want us to introduce ourselves,” she retorted, “then first tell us who you are and why you claim ownership of these forests.” Duggan was pretty sure she knew who he was but she pressed her demand. “Well?” she cried.

For a moment, the Faerie leader scowled but then his face actually softened a little as he gave an unpleasant chuckle.

“It seems we have quite the daring lass here before us, Learred,” he remarked.

“So it seems,” replied the other Faerie, his eyelids blinking upward. “But my Lord, is she daring or is impertinent not the better word?”

The leader didn’t answer Learred’s question. Instead, he drew himself to his full height and turned his eyes on Duggan.

“Oh, I don’t think you and I need any introductions, do we?” he said to her. “You have felt my presence from the moment you awakened the Curse, have you not? Indeed, I think you know quite well who I am.”

Duggan did indeed know but fear prevented her from speaking his name. To her surprise, Lambrell suddenly spoke up, answering for both of them.

“Well, sir, I have seen you in my dreams,” she blurted out, causing the Faerie leader to jerk his head to face her. Instantly, the girl’s face reddened but she continued, “I mean, we all know you’re the Faerie Lord and maybe I know it best because you have been in my dreams every night since...um, since—”

Scowling, the Faerie Lord interrupted her. “Who are you to speak to me without my leave?” he called.

“I’m...um...Lambrell Quiverill,” the Troll-girl answered in a halting voice.

“And you dare to speak so to me?”

Looking unsure, Lambrell hesitated briefly but then she must have found some reservoir of courage because, when she did speak, it was with a surprisingly firm voice.

"I dare because I have something to say."

"And what is that, ugly Troll-girl?" inquired the Faerie Lord, his cruel eyes probing hers.

"Every time I sleep, I dream of your Magickal storms and the spiders falling from the sky and my Folkies turning to stone and I dream of other terrible things that are happening, all because of you."

"Indeed, is that so?" answered the Faerie Lord, his scowl changing to an evil smirk. "Well, well, ugly Troll-girl, I am rather pleased to hear this. Apparently, my Curse is working rather well."

"I have also dreamed of your death right here on this very hill," Lambrell added.

This remark caused one of the Faerie Lord's eyelids to flutter. A crease wrinkled his forehead. Then he gave a mirthless laugh.

"Oh, dear me," he said, his eyes blinking upward, "I must give you credit, ugly Troll-girl. That is a clever lie. Unfortunately for you, it will not have the effect you desire, though I must admit it was clever."

"Lambrell doesn't lie," Duggan pointed out, coming to her friend's defense. "If she says it, you can believe it."

The Faerie's eyelid fluttered again. Then his face twisted into an angry scowl as he let out a fierce scream.

"Enough of this," he cried. "You know I have come to kill you so let's be done with it, shall we?"

Raising a hand and giving a flick of his finger, the Faerie Lord signaled to Learred who drew a sword from the scabbard dangling at his side. Smiling evilly,

Learred leveled the sword at Duggan. There was a crackling sound as the sword's blade burst into flames.

Frightened, Duggan took a step back. Her first instinct was to run but in her heart, she knew she could not get very far and besides, she wasn't going to abandon her friends. Therefore, she stood her ground, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

*What to do*, she wondered, searching her mind desperately for an idea.

Then something unexpected happened.

Zagger sprang into action.

Bending down, the boy grabbed a big stick from the ground and with a fierce shout, he lifted it over his head and went charging at Learred. Before the Faerie could react, Zagger brought the stick down hard, aiming it at Learred's head and putting all his strength into the blow. His surprise attack almost succeeded but not quite.

At the very last second, Learred raised his sword just in time to parry the blow. Quickly, Zagger followed his first blow with another one. Unfortunately, this time Learred was ready. Howling angrily, the Faerie parried the blow. With a quick twist of his wrist, he twirled his sword and wrenched the stick out of Zagger's hand.

"Oh, very nice try, Troll-boy," he cried. "But now you die."

With another howl of rage, he jabbed his blade at the boy but Zagger sidestepped nimbly then slipped behind the trunk of a nearby Nodding-Oak. Pressing his attack, the Faerie chased after Zagger, slashing at the boy with his sword but Zagger was again too quick



and the blade sliced through empty air before burying itself in the thick bark of the Oak. Fiery sparks flew from the flaming blade and the tree gave a great groan of pain.

“Missed me, you slakin’ incompetent,” Zagger shouted, hurling his taunt at the Faerie from behind the tree trunk. “You are a slakin’ poor excuse for a soldier.”

The Faerie’s face darkened. Screaming wildly, Learred tried again to stab Zagger but the boy neatly slipped to the side, avoiding the Faerie’s blow while keeping the tree trunk between the two of them.

“Missed me again, you slakin’, burnin’ incompetent,” cried Zagger, dragging out the syllables for effect.

Suddenly, Zagger turned and bolted from the tree, heading more or less in the direction of Duggan and Lambrell but steering well clear of them.

“Faerie fool can’t catch me,” he shouted back, mocking his adversary. “Faerie fool can’t catch me.”

With another howl, Learred gave chase, his sword raised, his face darkened with rage. As Zagger raced past Duggan and Lambrell, he gave them a little wink.

“I’ll get rid of this one,” he called in a low voice.

Then he veered away, speeding downhill while throwing taunts over his shoulder to enrage the Faerie and lure him into pursuit.

“Faerie fool can’t catch me, Faerie fool can’t catch me,” he taunted.

An amazed Duggan watched Zagger and his pursuer until they were out of sight, disappearing behind the trees in the distance. Whether Zagger would be all right or not, Duggan had no idea but she didn't have time to worry about him. With heart thumping, she turned to face the Faerie Lord.

Nearby, the Nodding-Oak wounded by the Faerie's blade was moaning piteously as sap gushed from the large gash in its trunk. All around the suffering Oak, the mature trees of the forests—Nodding-Oaks, Bearded-Oaks, Rush-Maples, Bald-Elms and Brown-Chestnuts—were agitated and chattering so noisily they hurt Duggan's ears. The Faerie Lord shouted something in her direction that was lost in the din from the trees.

"What did you say?" answered Duggan.

The Faerie Lord reacted angrily, shouting words again in her direction.

Duggan shook her head.

"Sorry," she shouted above the din.

The Faerie Lord's eyes flashed and he let out a scream of rage. Reaching under his cloak, he drew a sword from its scabbard. Immediately, there was a burst of bright, red light as the blade ignited, burning with a flame so bright it hurt Duggan's eyes.

"Let's see if you are as rude after watching your friend die," the Faerie Lord cried.

This time his voice was loud enough for Duggan to hear.

With a flick of his wrist, the Faerie Lord sent his flaming sword flying straight at Lambrell. The weapon zipped through the air with amazing speed and

a shocked Lambrell just managed to hurl herself sideways in time to avoid it. The sword passed so close to her head it ruffled the tops of her hair, singeing a few of her locks as it flew by. Lambrell let out a high-pitched scream and turned her head to give Duggan a look of terror. Duggan knew she needed to do something and do it quickly but her mind was blank and her feet refused to move.

“So, ugly Troll-girl is nimble, are you?” cried the Faerie Lord. “Well, shall we see how you do with this?”

Raising both hands to chest height and turning palms upward, the Faerie Lord uttered some strange and horrible-sounding words. The air before his palms began swirling, at first slowly but then faster. Before long, there was a miniature tornado spinning fiercely in front of him. Then he raised a hand over his head and hurled his creation in Lambrell’s direction. At first, the whirlwind moved slowly but quickly it picked up speed. Lambrell gave another cry of terror and backpedaled, scrambling to get away from the advancing whirlwind. As Duggan watched in horror, the mass of swirling air closed the distance.

“Lambrell, run,” she shouted but it was too late.

While Duggan watched helplessly, Lambrell screamed as the whirlwind engulfed her, its winds whipping wildly around the screaming girl. Then the cone of whirling air lifted and began carrying Lambrell away.

“Duggan, help,” cried Lambrell, her voice coming faintly from the depths of the whirlwind.

It was a sad, pathetic cry for help. Duggan's whole body trembled. She needed to do something but what? Panicking, Duggan hurried over to her friend and tried thrusting a hand into the tornado to yank her out, but the winds were so powerful they slapped her hand away.

Gritting her teeth, Duggan tried again and this time, to Duggan's horror, the winds took hold and sucked in her hand and arm up to her elbow. Terrified, Duggan pitched herself backward and the falling weight of her body was enough to free her arm from the tornado. As she fell to the ground, the whirlwind sucked the map out of her pocket. To Duggan's horror, the sheet of paper flew upward, whirling crazily on the winds for a moment, then it disappeared into the sky.

Before Duggan could react, the Faerie Lord gave a laugh that had so much evil delight a fierce anger suddenly took hold of her. Her face flushing, Duggan climbed to her feet and faced her friend's tormentor.

"Stop it," she shouted. "Stop hurting her."

The Faerie Lord only laughed more delightedly.

"Or what?" he called to her in a mocking tone of voice.

"Or I'll..."

Words failed her. What could she do?

The Faerie Lord laughed again and this time, something snapped in Duggan. Letting loose a cry of rage, she rushed blindly at the evil creature, determined to smash her head into him, butt him to the ground and

hold him there until he relented and freed Lambrell. She got within a few feet of her adversary but then he raised a hand. Quickly a small ball of whirling air formed in front of his upturned palm. With a cry, the Faerie Lord released it and the tiny whirlwind smashed into Duggan's chest, knocking her backward.

It was a setback but Duggan was not about to give up. Not this time. Ignoring the pain, Duggan charged again at the Faerie Lord, heedless of consequences. A second time, he buffeted her back with a ball of swirling air flung from his hand, the blow to her chest so powerful it knocked the wind out of her. Duggan staggered back, dizzy.

Even in her dizziness, Duggan could hear the uproar coming from the trees, which had grown even louder than before. The tallest trees were shouting oaths in thunderous voices. Many were swaying. Others were rattling their branches noisily. Among the great hubbub of sounds were words Duggan now recognized.

*"Trass-iss twee-owl,"* a Bearded Oak shouted.

From another came a deep rumbling, *"Eesil Fey-or, dast."*

*"Troun'ole 'erde,"* cried an angry Elm.

With a great effort, Duggan straightened and faced her enemy again. Amidst the cries and shouts of the trees, the Faerie Lord appeared as haughty as ever. Swiveling his head from side to side, he gazed angrily and defiantly at the trees around him as they shouted and shook with rage.

Suddenly, he raised his hand and conjured a ball not of wind but of fire, which he hurled at the

nearest tree, a magnificent Nodding-Oak. The fireball crashed into the tree's trunk, exploding and letting loose a shower of small flames that covered the trunk from ground to first branches. The Nodding-Oak screamed in pain. The Faerie Lord lifted his hand to conjure another fireball when unexpectedly and inexplicably, Duggan heard words in her head that were not just any words. They were Ancient words and instantly the power and importance of them struck her.

She knew what needed doing.

Straightening, she took a step toward the Faerie Lord to get his attention.

"Hey, you incompetent Faerie fool," she called to the evil creature, mimicking Zagger.

His eyes flashing, the Faerie Lord shifted his attention from the burning Oak to Duggan. Immediately, all his malignancy and hatred hit her with full force. An evil smile played on his lips. With a circular motion of his hand, the Faerie Lord finished conjuring his fireball, this one larger than the first, then he cocked his arm to hurl the thing at her. Duggan felt a sharp stab of fear and for one brief second, she doubted herself. But then the advice of Dowd Chase came back to her, telling her to trust the words in her head and to do what they told her.

Sucking in a deep breath and putting all her heart into the words, she shouted, "*Tr'ark-den, haff tray.*"

Instantly, every tree in the forest went quiet. The silence was so sudden and so profound the Faerie Lord lost his concentration for a second. His arm faltered and the triumphant smirk on his face dissolved.

*“Tr’ark-den, haff tray,”* Duggan roared again, her voice filling the utter silence of the forest.

The fireball in the Faerie Lord’s palm sputtered and lost some of its brightness. A flicker of doubt showed on his face. Duggan opened her mouth and to her surprise, new words popped into her head. Again, the meaning of them was instantly obvious.

*“Tredury Fey-or,”* she cried to the trees, *“Tre-dury Fey-or.”*

There was one, brief, hanging moment of silence then the trees exploded into action. From deep inside them came angry rumblings followed by a pandemonium of oaths, complaints and accusations. Trunks swayed. Branches rattled. Leaves flew. The ground under Duggan’s feet trembled.

Even the poor tree that was burning so piteously from the Faerie Lord’s fireball reacted to Duggan’s words. Groaning, it raised its great limbs high into the air and shook them, causing a downpour of twigs, leaves and old nuts to cascade onto the Faerie Lord, who shrank from the tree’s onslaught.

Screaming an angry oath, the Faerie Lord adjusted his arm and shot his fireball not at Duggan but at the attacking tree. The fiery missile struck the bark just above the spot where the first fireball had landed, exploding and sending flames running up and down the poor tree’s trunk. The Nodding-Oak screamed in pain and the other trees roared in anger. The ones closest to the Faerie Lord shook their limbs even more violently, showering the Faerie Lord with branches and leaves.

*“Tre-dury Fey-or,”* cried Duggan again, raising her arms over her head. *“Tre-dury Fey-or.”*

Out of nowhere, a large branch came flying through the air. The Faerie Lord let out a shocked cry and tried to duck but it was too late. The branch struck him on the shoulder, knocking him backward. Then dozens more branches came pouring from the trees, peppering the surprised enemy with their blows. The Faerie Lord fell back, dazed and off-balance.

Duggan urged the trees with another cry of, "*Tre-dury Fey-or.*"

Branches of all sizes flew through the air. The Faerie Lord let loose a scream of rage and dodged sideways to escape the onslaught. One large branch struck the ground near his feet. Another glanced off his arm.

Spreading his wings, the Faerie Lord swore horribly at the trees then lifted himself into the air, his wings buzzing fiercely. Wheeling, he plunged into the long plume of smoke billowing from the poor, burning tree and in the next second, he was gone.

With the retreat of the Faerie Lord, the trees quieted little by little until there was silence but for the piteous moaning of the burning Oak. Duggan couldn't stand hearing its suffering. Searching her mind, she tried to find something comforting to say but no words came to her. A tear rolled down her cheek. Then she heard a familiar voice.

"You did it. You saved me."

Duggan looked in the direction of the voice. Lambrell was sitting on the ground, swaying a little. The hair atop her head was a tangled mess of snarls and the skin of her face had the kind of rawness you see on the face of a sailor who has just endured a



raging gale. Her eyes were watering, her lips were split and there was a tinge of frostbite on one cheek. The girl looked altogether terrible and with a gasp, Duggan rushed to her side.

“Are you all right?” she cried.

Lambrell gave a weak smile.

“I’ve been better.”

Laughing softly, Duggan had to agree, “Well, you certainly have looked better, I must say.”

Lambrell winced but then smiled.

“Kidding aside, Duggan, thank you. I mean it. Thank you.”

You should be thanking the trees,” replied Duggan, her eyes going to the poor, burning Oak.

To her relief, the flames on its trunk had subsided a bit and the tree was moaning a little less than before.

“I would thank them,” Lambrell agreed, “but I don’t know their language the way you do. Where in Hallow’s Fire did you learn to talk to trees like that?”

“Don’t ask ‘cuz I have no idea,” Duggan replied, chuckling awkwardly.

Actually, Duggan did have an idea, though it was a burnin’ crazy one best kept to herself.

Lambrell glanced into the sky and asked, “Is the Faerie Lord gone?”

Shrugging, Duggan replied, “Don’t know. If he is, I doubt it’s for good.”

Suddenly, Lambrell’s face clouded. “Do you think Zagger is all right?”

Duggan had her doubts but she wasn’t going to say so.

“Zagger knows how to take care of himself,” she said instead. “I mean, when has the little jerk not landed on his feet?”

“Never,” replied Lambrell, her face brightening. “Zagger always figures out a way. Still we’d better go looking for him, shouldn’t we?”

Duggan knew how much Zagger meant to Lambrell but they had much to do and little time left to do it.

“Lambrell, listen,” she said, putting a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “The Faerie Lord could come back at any moment. And he probably won’t come back alone. The Faerie Lady is out there somewhere. I don’t think we have any choice. We’ve got to push on.”

Duggan expected resistance from Lambrell but her friend surprised her.

“You’re right,” she agreed, giving a brave smile.

Relieved, Duggan offered her a hand. Lambrell grasped Duggan’s hand and climbed to her feet. It lifted Duggan’s spirits to hear such firm resolve in Lambrell’s voice and to see the brave look on her friend’s face. She needed Lambrell with her, needed her badly. Instinctively, she reached her hand into her pocket to get the map but quickly she remembered it was gone, sucked away by the maelstrom winds.

Instantly, all her good feelings dissolved.

## Chapter 29

Duggan muttered to Lambrell, “Um, we have a problem.”

“What problem?” asked Lambrell.

“The map is gone.”

“What?” cried Lambrell, her eyes widening.

“Sucked away by the winds of that tornado when I tried to pull you out,” Duggan informed her friend.

Nodding, Lambrell accepted the new information with surprising calm.

“So, what do we do?”

Shrugging, Duggan answered, “Head uphill, I guess. Hope for the best.”

“The usual,” agreed Lambrell. “Then let’s get going.”

The two Troll-girls set off at a brisk pace. On the distant horizon, huge storm clouds were roiling up. Among their deep billows, Duggan could see the sure-sign streaks of falling rain. Or was it something else, Duggan had to wonder, something worse than rain. The thought made her stomach heave.

Hurrying uphill, the two Troll-girls quickly reached the end of the open terrain. Ahead was a tangled forest of stunted, twisted trees with an undercover of low bushes that consisted almost entirely of Duggan’s deeply detested brambles and even more deeply detested Retchets. Her heart sinking, Duggan scanned the woods, looking for some kind of trail they could take but she saw none.

Lambrell asked, “Now what?”

With a huge sigh, Duggan pointed straight ahead.

“We go right through that mess, I guess. We know this is the way, more or less.”

“What if it’s not the way?”

“It is the way,” Duggan insisted.

When Lambrell gave a dubious look, Duggan almost changed her mind. Then suddenly, she had an idea. Looking up at a big Worm-Aspen in front of her, she called to it.

“*Cas-shere Fey-or-lay dass?*”

For a second or two, nothing happened. Then the tree bent slightly, its trunk inclining to the left.

“It’s that way,” Duggan cried, pointing. “The tree says we go that way.”

"If that's what it says, I believe it," gasped Lambrell.

Then, to Duggan's surprise and pleasure, her friend strode purposefully past the tree, veering left and moving into the cruel sea of brambles and Retchets.

After giving a polite bow to the helpful tree, Duggan followed her friend, wading gingerly into the thorny tangle. Overhead, there was a sudden crackling sound. Looking up, Duggan saw a dark, weirdly striped cloud scudding toward them. A dull light flashed inside its billows, illuminating a spidery web of pinkish veins then the cloud went dark. Duggan recalled another night of veiny clouds and instantly she shuddered.

"We need to hurry," she called ahead to Lambrell, who was picking her way slowly through the tangled mess of thorns.

"If we hurry, we're going to get cut to pieces," her friend pointed out.

"I know but we've no choice. That cloud coming our way is slakin' evil-looking."

After glancing skyward, Lambrell nodded and agreed, "All right but get ready for pain."

Lambrell picked up her pace and Duggan hurried after her. Before she had taken three steps, her arm caught on a branch full of thorns and a savage spike tore through the fabric of her jacket, digging into her flesh. Duggan let out a yelp of pain.

"Ow," she cried.

Her eyes filling with tears, Duggan hastily pried the branch off her sleeve, ignoring as best she could the bloody marks it left behind. Swearing a foul

oath, she took another step and instantly ran into another thorny branch.

“Hallow’s Fire,” she cried.

Up ahead, Lambrell’s cries of pain told Duggan her friend was suffering equally from the thorny Retchets and brambles. All of a sudden, there were some funny sounds to Duggan’s right. The sounds were frighteningly familiar. Duggan looked over in alarm.

Tiny, spider-like creatures were falling from the sky, their hard-cased bodies making clacking sounds when they struck the ground. To make matters worse, the first spatters of giant raindrops were hitting the ground around them, adding their own unpleasant sounds to the clacking of the landing spider-creatures.

“Hallow’s Fire,” Duggan shouted, “they’re here.”

“What?” cried Lambrell, glancing over her shoulder.

“It’s the Faerie Lord’s monsters. They’re after us,” cried Duggan, pointing.

Just then, one of the spidery creatures skittered out of a bush and headed straight for Duggan’s foot. It was a slakin’ ugly thing, with a big, fat bubble of a body and a vicious-looking stabber at the end of its bulbous head. Lifting a foot, Duggan kicked violently at the thing, knocking it away. The creature landed on its back. Quickly righting itself, it scrambled again toward Duggan.

This time, Duggan smashed her square shoe-heel on the creature. There was a crunch and when Duggan lifted her foot, there was a writhing, oozing

monster left squashed in the heel mark on the ground, its body broken, one of its legs cockeyed and its head partly squished. Mercilessly, Duggan stomped it again, putting an end to its miserable life.

Instantly, she felt a terrible stab of guilt. It was the first time in her life Duggan had ever intentionally killed a living thing but then she reminded herself this spidery creature was one of the Faerie Lord's evil creations, a monster conjured to do harm to all good creatures. The thought made her feel somewhat better. She glanced at Lambrell, who had less of a horrified expression on her face than Duggan would have expected.

"We need to run," Duggan cried to her friend.

"Which way?"

Duggan glanced at a nearby Nodding-Oak and cried, "*Cas-shere Fey-or-lay dass?*" When the tree inclined its trunk to the left, she waved a hand and shouted to Lambrell, "This way."

Duggan took off at full speed, driving herself into the thorny mess. Immediately, there was the horrible sound of things tearing. Out of the corner of her eye, Duggan could see Lambrell keeping pace with her, muttering oaths and crying in pain as she drove herself forward. Clacks of spider-creatures hitting the ground sounded behind them, along with the tinnier clicks of spider-feet skittering along the ground as the creatures gave chase.

The girls ran and ran, crying oaths and enduring the pain as best they could. Finally, Duggan thrust herself through a very thick patch of Retchets and burst into a clearing. Gasping, she came to a halt

and looked around. She quickly saw was on one side of a very small, rubble-strewn clearing and on the other side was a low cliff.

With a crashing sound, Lambrell burst through the thorny tangle, stumbled then fell to the rough ground. Climbing quickly back to her feet, a bloodied Lambrell gave Duggan a brave smile.

“My, wasn’t that fun?” she remarked.



## Chapter 30

Duggan didn't have time to acknowledge her friend's joke.

"Take a look," she said instead, pointing across the clearing.

At the base of the cliff was a cave opening and standing in the middle of the cave opening was a short, lean Faerie. Or was it an El-Faerie? Duggan couldn't tell for sure from where she was standing. The creature's waist-length hair was pure-white except for two streaks of black running down one side of her head. Atop her head, she wore a small, bronze-like crown exactly like the one worn by Haelly, though this Faerie was definitely not Haelly.

"You don't need to fear," the creature called in a voice that was as sweet as a lullaby played on a Bonnie-Flute. "They're coming for me, not you."

"You're wrong about that," Duggan called back. "They are most definitely and totally after us."

"They are not, believe me," she responded in her sweetly musical voice.

"Trust me, they are," cried Duggan.

Duggan gestured to Lambrell to follow and together, the two Troll-girls crossed the small clearing to stand in front of what was now obviously a Faerie-lady. Sighing, the Faerie-lady spoke to Duggan.

"Do you not understand that the storm would have overtaken you had he wanted it?"

It took Duggan a second or two to comprehend the meaning of the Faerie's words. Then the shock of it hit her.

"Good Gidden," she cried, "he knew we'd run to you. He used us to find—"

The Faerie-lady waved a hand to interrupt.

"No matter. Come, we must get into the cave."

Before Duggan could speak, the Faerie-lady spun and scampered through the small opening in the cliff, disappearing into the darkness on the other side. Duggan was about to follow when she heard two ominous, clacking sounds some distance behind her. Her muscles tensing, she twirled to see two, surprisingly large spider-creatures righting themselves to scurry in her direction.

"Hurry," Duggan shouted to Lambrell. "Let's get out of here."

Moving quickly, Duggan led Lambrell through the mouth of the cave, which was so low she had to duck her head. Inside, the Faerie-lady was waiting for them.

“This way,” she said, her eyelids blinking upward.

The Faerie-lady hurried down a long, narrow passageway. Slipping off her hood as she ran, Duggan followed. The air in the dark cave had a stale, damp smell that normally would have caused Duggan’s stomach to heave but at this moment, under these circumstances, Duggan didn’t care a whit about going underground, not with a pack of spidery monsters giving chase right behind her.

In a matter of minutes, they reached the end of the passageway and the Faerie-lady abruptly halted. In front of them was a large, hive-shaped chamber noteworthy for its extremely high ceiling and a stone floor littered with sparkly, glasslike rocks of all sizes. Around the outer walls of this chamber ran a moat-like chasm about five or six strides wide and even deeper, with sides so sheer they were impossible to climb. From a high hole in the chamber’s tall wall, water spilled in a long, thin plume to the bottom of the chasm. It then flowed in both directions across the chasm’s bottom, collecting on the other side and pouring out through another hole.

The only means of crossing the chasm was by an extremely narrow bridge of arched stone, no more than a foot wide and looking rather old and crumbly. Looking down, Duggan saw razor-sharp rocks poking out of the fast-flowing water all along the chasm’s

bottom and grease coated its sides. The surface of the water, too, had an oily sheen.

"This way," said the Faerie-lady then she scrambled nimbly over the stone-arch bridge.

"Right," said Lambrell, following without hesitation.

Crossing the bridge proved not so easy for Duggan.

Eying the narrow bridge nervously, she muttered to herself, "Right, Duggan-lass, you can do it. You can do it."

Sucking in her breath, she took a first, cautious step onto the bridge.

"Come on, hurry," Lambrell cried from the other side.

Her heart thumping, Duggan broke into a run and before her heart could beat twice, she was on the other side of the bridge. Just like that.

"Good," the Faerie-lady said when Duggan joined them. "Now we need to buy ourselves some time. One of you must hold the bridge and keep the monsters from crossing while I get things ready."

To Duggan's surprise, Lambrell immediately volunteered, "I'll do it." Her eyes were wide with excitement and her breathing was coming in quick, little gasps. "Just tell me how."

The Faerie-lady reached a hand under her tunic and drew out a long-bladed dagger, which she proffered hilt-first to Duggan, not Lambrell.

"This will be your task, Duggan McDuggan," she said to her. "I need your friend for other purposes."

Taken by surprise, Duggan nevertheless reached her hand out and grasped the hilt of the dagger. Her heart skipped a beat when the Faerie-lady let go and she felt the full weight of the lethal weapon in her hand. Its slender blade was icy-blue in color, with cutting edges on both sides that looked as sharp as glass. With grim determination, Duggan tightened her grip on the hilt. She was ready to do whatever needed doing.

“Now,” the Faerie-lady said to her, “give Lambrell the Faerie so I may make my preparations.”

How the Lady knew Duggan was carrying the Faerie was beyond her but there was no time to ask. Reaching her free hand into her pocket, Duggan extracted the sphere. Its metal was icy-cold and showed none of the earlier brightness from Nomi Nattlin’s spell. As she stared at the dull, cold metal, Duggan suddenly felt terribly guilty for having neglected the injured Faerie for so long.

“Duggan, please give the Faerie to Lambrell,” the Faerie-lady directed again, snapping Duggan out of her thoughts. “We haven’t much time.”

Nodding, Duggan held out her hand and Lambrell gently took the sphere from her. The Faerie-lady then took Lambrell by the elbow and nudged her in the direction of a flat, table-like rock about half a dozen paces from the bridge. Duggan noticed there was an odd collection of small bottles and vials on the rock’s surface.

Suddenly, an ominous sound echoed through the chamber. Duggan jerked her head in the direction

of the racket's source. As she feared, the spider-monsters were arriving.

Hundreds of them, large and small, were skittering down the passageway, closing in on the bridge at the end. Taking a deep breath, Duggan hurried forward to take up a position on the other side of the bridge. Quickly, half a dozen or so of the leading creatures reached the end of the passageway and hastened to cross the bridge. Tightening her grip on the hilt of the dagger, Duggan squared her shoulders and waited, her heart beating loudly, her breathing coming in fast, shallow puffs.

A first spider-creature crossed the bridge and Duggan flicked at it with the tip of her dagger. With a little squeal, it tumbled off the bridge and splashed into the water below, where it instantly disappeared, swept away by the current. Two more spiders followed, skittering side-by-side across the bridge with waves of others behind them. As they rushed at her, Duggan used the sharp edge of the dagger's blade to sweep them off the bridge in ones, twos and threes, knocking all of them into the watery gorge.

Then she missed one and the creature grabbed onto her blade, wrapping several of its legs around the dagger's edge and clinging to it. Duggan had no time to deal with this little monster because many more of the horrible creatures were pouring across the bridge. Ignoring the thing on her blade, she stabbed another, much larger spider-monster coming at her. It squealed in pain and rolled off the bridge. Then she stabbed another but many more were coming and so she had to

use the length of her blade to sweep another four of them off the bridge in one stroke.

After that, a break in the spider's attack gave Duggan just enough time for a quick glance down. To her horror, the creature on the blade had crawled up the shaft and now it was nearly to her wrist. Duggan tried shaking it off but its spidery legs wouldn't let go. In front of her, the sounds of skittering feet again drew her attention to the bridge. Another three monsters were closing fast. Screaming angrily, Duggan swung her blade and swept the bunch of the creatures off the bridge. Immediately, another three spiders were closing on her and it took two swipes of the dagger blade to knock them off the bridge.

Now, Duggan risked a second look down. To her dismay, the creature on the blade had crawled onto her bare wrist. In a panic, Duggan reached down to pluck the horrid thing away. Before she could get hold of the thing, she felt a sharp needle of pain. Yelping, she flicked her wrist and flung the monster into the chasm. She had only a second to glance at her wrist, just long enough to see the little stabber embedded in her skin then a new bunch of creatures was scurrying across the bridge.

With several swipes of her blade, Duggan knocked the crowd of them into the gorge but no relief was in sight. On the far side of the bridge, another wave of monsters was starting across. Beyond them, Duggan could see scores more skittering down the passageway toward the bridge.

Duggan's pricked wrist was beginning to stiffen and she had no doubt about what this meant. A

panicky feeling took hold of her. Glancing over her shoulder, Duggan called desperately to Lambrell and the Faerie-lady behind her.

"I can't hold 'em much longer. How's it going?"

"You must hold them," the Faerie-lady shouted back. "We need more time."

"I don't know if I can," Duggan cried.

"You must."

Gritting her teeth, Duggan turned to face the new waves of enemies.

"Come on, Duggan-lass," she muttered, "you can do it."

The sight in front of her gave little reason to hope. Scads of the horrid creatures were skittering across the bridge with countless more massing on the other side. Duggan swept her dagger and managed to brush off five or six of the monsters but one in the bunch got through. Scuttling onto her shoe, it scampered onto her ankle and an instant later, Duggan felt a sharp pain as the creature sank its stabber into her flesh.

Bending, Duggan tried knocking the creature away but where there should have been a hand of flesh and blood to do the job, now there was only a piece of heavy stone. The stone banged against her ankle with a disturbing clunk that sounded too much like stone striking against stone.

Duggan's eyes filled with tears. Desperately, she swatted her dagger at a large swarm of monsters clambering her way and managed to knock a number of them off the bridge. But it was no use. There were



too many of them and her poor arm was already becoming too stony to work properly. She was failing her friends and there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing.

All was lost.

Then, out of nowhere, words popped into her head.

*“Mutanh-tray-may,”* she shouted, not fully comprehending why she was saying these words but knowing she needed to say them. *“Trannon, mutanh-tray-may.”*

Whatever these words were supposed to accomplish, nothing seemed to happen. Dozens of spider-creatures were now crawling up her legs. Others were sinking their stabbers into the skin of her ankles and shins. Duggan let out a desperate cry.

*“Mutanh-tray-may.”*

Her limbs were hardening and the stony stiffness was quickly spreading to her torso. Her neck had grown so rigid she could hardly move her head. Her eyes still saw and her nose still smelled but soon the monsters’ work would be complete. As despair took hold of her, Duggan tried using her mouth one last time and to her surprise, the words came out.

*“Trannon, mutanh-tray-may,”* she cried. *“Trannon, mutanh-tray-may.”*

If her mouth still worked, maybe other parts of her were working, too. Duggan tried bending an arm. The elbow was stiff but the arm moved. Glancing down, Duggan received a huge shock, for it wasn’t a lifeless, stone arm that extended in front of her. It was the leafy limb of a living tree.

Looking below her arm, she saw a foliage-covered leg transforming from stone to wood. She tried moving it and it worked. All over her body, scads of the little spider-monsters were still scurrying about, stabbing at her. Dozens more were hurrying across the bridge toward her. All of a sudden, Duggan had a crazy idea. She took an awkward step toward the bridge and the spider-monsters moved with her, bent on destroying her. Encouraged, she took another step and the spider-monsters stayed with her, ignoring Lambrell and the Faerie-lady to go after Duggan.

So, her hunch was right.

If she could have, Duggan would have grinned. She now knew what needed to be done. On bark-crusted legs, she walked stiffly onto the bridge and all the spider-creatures followed. Reaching the middle of the bridge, Duggan ignored the creatures that were clambering onto her. Taking a deep breath, she put her simple plan into action, staring at her ankles and thinking only of roots. Immediately, little root-tendrils began growing out of her ankles and working themselves into the stone of the bridge at her feet. Duggan kept thinking about roots and quickly dozens more were digging into the stonework of the bridge.

It was now time to finish the Story of Duggan's great plan and she knew its ending.

Duggan thought about large roots and two thick ones sprang from her ankles and dug into the stone, causing the bridge to crack in places. Then, all of a sudden, the bridge began to crumble and a big piece in front of Duggan broke off. Then another, even larger piece of bridge broke off and tumbled into the chasm.

Gray dust filled the air, causing Duggan to choke and cough. Then the whole, remaining structure of the bridge gave a shudder so violent it shook all the spider-creatures from her body and Duggan understood her plan was about to work perfectly, though she knew exactly what the destruction of the bridge would mean to her.

Still, Duggan felt remarkably calm, for she had done her job and she had done it well. In her last moment on the bridge, she felt a great pride to have saved her friends. Then the bridge disintegrated, Duggan's body teetered and she closed her eyes to wait for the final plunge of her body downward.

In the next second, strong hands grabbed her shoulders and jerked her backward, pulling her away from the chasm. Duggan had the sensation of falling. Then, with a loud clunk, she landed on hard ground. Where her head hit, there came a sickening thud that echoed through the chamber.

"Got you," cried Lambrell as Duggan grew dizzy and passed out. "Got you," she repeated as she wrapped Duggan in her arms and rocked her bark-encased body gently back and forth.



# Chapter 31

When Duggan came to, she was lying on her back, staring at a rocky ceiling. Her eyes were a little out of focus and the back of her head ached. As she blinked to clear her eyes, the soft, friendly faces of Lambrell and the Faerie-lady came gradually into sight. Both of them were smiling at her. With an upward blink of her eye, the Faerie-lady gave her a friendly wink.

Duggan groaned and mumbled, “What happened?”

“You did it,” Lambrell answered. “You smashed the bridge and bought us the time we need.”

"Help me up," said Duggan, reaching a hand for Lambrell to take.

Only she wasn't able to reach her hand, not with her shoulder joint refusing to rotate and her elbow unwilling to bend.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked.

The Faerie-lady reached down, took hold of Duggan's hand and lifted it so she could see.

"Nothing is wrong," she said.

"Oh," breathed Duggan, remembering, "I'm a tree."

"No," replied the Faerie-lady, "not a tree. A *Mutanh-sei-trey-or*."

"*Mutanh*? I still don't know exactly what that means."

"Oh, I think you do," the Faerie-lady suggested with a quick, little smile.

Duggan grimaced.

"Maybe I'm learning a little," she admitted. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. Just tell me what happened?"

The Faerie-lady gave her another smile.

"What just happened is that you transformed yourself and destroyed the bridge."

Duggan squinted and thought. Events of the recent past were rather blurry though she did have vague memories of roots digging into stone and of the narrow bridge cracking and breaking into pieces. Did all of that really happen? Not a dream but real? She shook her head to clear the cobwebs.

"What now?" she finally asked.

“What now?” the Faerie-lady repeated. “First, why don’t you transform back into your Troll form so you can join us for the final chapter of this adventure,” she suggested.

Duggan gave a start and had to ask, “Do I know how?”

“Yes, you do. Think.”

Duggan closed her eyes and thought. In fact, she did know. Opening her eyes, she whispered the words that were in her head.

*“Trannon, mutanh-tray-may twee-owl.”*

Instantly, the bark over her skin began softening and the many branches poking out of her body withdrew, shedding their leaves and berries as they pulled inside her skin. Before long, Duggan’s skin had mostly returned to its normal Woodsy Troll hue. In another half minute, Duggan was again fully a Troll-girl.

“Welcome back,” said Lambrell, giving her friend a warm smile.

She offered her hand to Duggan who took it and allowed Lambrell to haul her to her feet.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Lambrell warned. “Look.”

Duggan looked where Lambrell was pointing. A few remnants of rock dangling from the far edge of the chasm were all that remained of the bridge. Duggan shuddered to think of the fall she would have suffered had it not been for the strong hands of Lambrell. On the other side of the chasm, the cave floor was teeming with hundreds and hundreds of the tiny spider-creatures. In the midst of this teeming mass, countless

numbers of the creatures had managed to pile on top of each other, stacking layers upon layers to form a tall, shaky column at the edge of the gorge.

Duggan couldn't believe what she was seeing. While the creatures in the column clung to each other, others were crawling up the sides, slowly adding to the column's height but also increasing its instability. As the column grew, it swayed back and forth. Then, all of a sudden, it swayed too far over the chasm and immediately broke apart, dumping all its spider-monsters into the chasm.

"Good Gidden," cried Duggan. "That is slakin' crazy."

"You just wait," said Lambrell, "cuz here comes the really wild part."

As Duggan watched, scores of new monsters were instantly back at work, climbing atop each other to form a new column.

"It's the third time they've tried," Lambrell explained. "The Faerie-lady thinks it's only a matter of time before one of their towers gets high enough and holds together well enough to tip across."

"Then they will have a living bridge," added the Faerie-lady.

"I can't believe it," said Duggan. "They're mindless bugs."

"I might have agreed with you except they've already built one tower nearly tall enough to make it across. We need to hurry."

"Then let's get going," Duggan quickly agreed, even though she had no idea what it meant to get going. "Just tell me what to do."



Moving to the rock-table, the Dream-Crown Lady picked up a cup as she explained to Duggan, “First, we need to mix the right potion to fortify my enchantment.”

Giving Duggan a wink, she picked up a vial with her other hand and sprinkled four drops of a deeply purple liquid into the cup.

“The thing is,” she continued as she swirled the liquid in the cup, “we’re not healing the Faerie—that would be easy. What we’re doing is lifting the most powerful Curse ever conjured, a Curse fashioned by the most Magickal creature ever to have lived.”

Duggan didn’t need to ask whom she meant.

The Faerie-lady reached back and startled Duggan by gently taking the forgotten dagger out of her hand while explaining, “The blood on this blade gives me something of the Faerie Lord’s Magickal powers. Having this may help us some.”

Setting down the cup, the Faerie-lady reached up and took hold of a lock of Lambrell’s hair. With a quick, painful jerk, she pulled loose a couple of strands.

Lambrell cried, “Ow.”

“Sorry,” laughed the Faerie-lady as she deposited the hairs into the cup, “but a little of Lambrell in the mix is good.”

Next, she reached for a large jar on the rock table, removed its lid and pulled out a fistful of yellow goop, which she dumped into the cup. With the blade of the dagger, she stirred the mixture. Glancing at Duggan and Lambrell, she gave a little, upward wink of one eye as she lifted the dagger for them to see.

"I've been dreading this part of the Magick," she said. "You might want to take some steps backward."

Nervously, Duggan and Lambrell backed away. Solemnly, the Lady raised the blood-coated dagger in the air. Taking a deep breath, she chanted in a sing-song voice a long string of words Duggan didn't recognize, though they had a familiar ring.

"*Fey-or dess Ley-dor mas ken,*" she sang. "*Fey-or dess Ley-dor mas ken.*"

To Duggan's amazement, the dried blood on the dagger blade turned again to liquid, its lifeless black color becoming a living red. Then the dagger's blade began to glow and its metal changed color, going from icy blue to bright green. Then there was a hissing sound and the blood vaporized, turning to smoke. A black cloud of the stuff floated across the face of the Faerie-lady, causing her to gag and cough.

Raising her arm, wrist upward, the Lady pushed the tip of the dagger against her skin and cut a small slice. Duggan half expected a few drops of blood to dribble out of the wound, the way it always seemed to happen in the Ancient Stories. Instead, a scaredy lot of blood spurted from the Faerie's wrist and went streaming into the cup.

Quickly, the Faerie-lady muttered a few unfamiliar words and the bleeding abruptly stopped. Taking a deep breath, her face now a little pale from the loss of blood, she dipped the brightly glowing, green dagger into the cup. There was a loud hiss and a cloud of black smoke rose. Using the dagger like a spoon, the Lady began stirring the mixture. As she did,

smoke continued to rise, causing her to gag and cough but the Lady ignored her discomfit and kept at her work, stirring for quite some time.

Finally, she stopped and withdrew the dagger, laying it on the table beside the cup. Bringing her nose down, she sniffed at the mixture in the cup. Apparently dissatisfied, she found the small vial of deeply purple liquid and added two drops. Then she sniffed again.

“Yes, I think it’s ready,” she murmured.

Taking the cup in both hands, she raised it into the air. Duggan caught her breath and waited for the incantation that always comes at this point in an Ancient Story. Instead, the Dream-Crown Lady surprised her by giving an almost playful wink before lifting the rim of the cup wordlessly to her lips. With one long, continuous swallow, she drained its contents.

“Horrible tasting,” she muttered, choking violently. “Horrible.”

Then her face paled as she slumped to the ground.

Shocked, Duggan cried, “Hallow’s Fire.”

She was about to run to the Lady’s side to help her when Lambrell squealed, “Good Gidden, Duggan. Look.”

Startled, Duggan turned in the direction of Lambrell’s voice. Her friend was standing on the edge of the chasm, pointing across its width. On the other side, an immense tower of spider-creatures had now reached a great height. The teeming tower was swaying back and forth but this time more than the others, there was a purpose to the creatures’ movements, as if they knew exactly what needed doing as they rocked over

the chasm then back, then over and back, never stopping. With each rocking motion, the tower tipped a little closer to the other side.

It was instantly clear to Duggan what the monsters were about to do.

“This is slakin’ crazy,” she cried, feeling altogether shocked and alarmed but also growing angry.

Impulsively, Duggan grabbed the dagger off the table and rushed to the edge of the chasm. Fiercely, she slashed at the tower when it tipped her way. A few spider-creatures fell off but mainly the tower remained intact. Screaming angrily, Duggan slashed again when the tower came near her a second time but the creatures quickly refilled the small hole her blade had chopped into the tower. On the next pass, Duggan tried hacking in quick succession but she was unable to break the tower apart.

“Any ideas?” called Duggan over her shoulder to Lambrell.

“Too late,” cried Lambrell, pointing again.

Duggan looked back. The teeming tower of spider-creatures was wavering in mid-air, fighting a tug-of-war battle with gravity while the host of spiders on the tower squealed and squeaked. In the next instant, the living tower spilled across the span of the chasm. The mass of creatures managed to hold together, forming a living bridge. There was a second or two of inaction then the horde of monsters waiting on the other side broke ranks and began scurrying over the bridge toward the two, horrified Troll-girls.

Duggan knew it was no use but gamely she raised her dagger to swipe away the leading bunch. There were too many of them, of course, but she wasn't going down without a fight. Beside her, brave Lambrell picked up a large rock and cocked her arm to hurl it at the charging creatures.

Suddenly, deep in the passageway across from them, there was a giant explosion followed by a brilliant flash of golden light that shimmered off the chamber's walls all around them. Immediately, the mass of creatures charging across the bridge halted and with one mind, they turned back to face in the direction of the explosion.

Another giant explosion echoed down the passageway followed by a brilliant flash of golden light that illuminated the chamber brightly. Before any of the creatures on the bridge could react, Nomi Nattlin came rushing into the chamber, followed by Dowd Chase and Zagger. As she ran, the Witch raised both her hands over her head, palms upward, and gave a piercing whistle that caused the spider-creatures to shrink backward.

In front of the mass of spider-monsters, the Witch halted and gave another loud, high-pitched whistle. Suddenly, there were whistles all around the chamber and in the next instant, hundreds—or maybe thousands—of whistling bats came pouring out of innumerable holes and cracks in the walls.

“Come, my friends,” the Witch cried. “Come.”

The leading bats swooped down on the spider-monsters on the bridge, plucking scads of them in their sharp-teethed mouths and flying away. Legions more

bats followed, all of them plucking spider-creatures off the living bridge—or out of the bridge itself. Swiftly, the bats were so numerous they were like a great, living cloud, hundreds and hundreds of them swooping and wheeling everywhere, plucking spider-monsters and carrying them off. As Duggan watched in stunned amazement, the riot of bats whistled, swooped and plunged. Quickly, it was all over, with a last bat zipping away with a squealing spider-monster in its mouth, leaving an empty chasm with not one of the horrid creatures remaining.

Striding to the edge of the gorge, Dowd Chase looked down. Surveying the wreckage of the bridge in the water below, he spread his hands and called out a spell. Magickally, the crumbled rocks at the bottom of the gorge began rising little by little and re-assembling themselves in the shape of the bridge. The Wizard called out more words and there was a rumbling noise as the bridge solidified. As soon as his spell had finished its work, the young Wizard came racing across the bridge, followed by the others. Last in line was Zagger, who hurried over to Lambrell as soon as he reached the other side.

“Am I glad to see you,” he cried, his eyes shining brightly.

Lambrell grinned widely.

“You weren’t worried about us, were you?” she replied.

“Indeed we were,” said Dowd Chase, his lips turning up to form a smile that felt to Duggan to be aimed solely at her. “But it seems ya’s found Lady Nahlwaethe all on ya’s own.”

## Dark Curses, Faerie Dreams

Duggan gave a little smile but then she remembered their work wasn't done.

"The poor Faerie, she—"

Nomi Nattlin interrupted her. "Don't fret, lass," she said. "There's time left."

## Chapter 32

“I’m ready,” muttered the Faerie-lady, her words slurred as if she were drunk.

Duggan looked over. Her face still pale, the Faerie-lady had gotten back on her feet. To Duggan’s amazement, her long, white hair had somehow changed in color from white to golden yellow. Nomi Nattlin walked over and gently helped to seat her on the rock table.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Lambrell.

“Nothing is wrong with her,” Nomi Nattlin answered. “To counter the Curse, Lady Nahlwaethe has mixed and consumed a very Ancient, very



powerful potion. Like all black Magick, its use comes with a price.”

“Is she going to be all right?”

“My well-being doesn’t matter,” said Lady Nahlwaethe. “Bring the injured Faerie to me,” she directed.

Lambrell fetched the sphere. Duggan moved over to her friend and opened its tiny hatch, carefully drawing the motionless Faerie from the webbing inside. She laid the little thing gently in the palm of one hand. The poor creature’s face was as white as death and her open eyes looked so lifeless they caused Duggan to shudder.

“Put the Faerie on the rock in front of me,” the Faerie-lady directed.

Duggan did as told then stepped away. Lying motionless on the hard surface of the rock, the Faerie did indeed look irreversibly close to death. Duggan’s eyes grew teary. It became hard to breathe. This was all their doing.

“Is there no hope?” she whimpered forlornly.

Nomi Nattlin put a hand on her shoulder and spoke to her in a gentle whisper, “Don’t fret, lass,” she said. “There is hope. We have Lambrell.”

Duggan gave a start.

“Lambrell?”

“Me?” said Lambrell.

“Oh yes,” said the Witch, giving Lambrell a small, encouraging smile.

“What do you mean, me?” asked Lambrell, the tips of her ears reddening.

"I believe you know," the Witch replied. "You have sensed it, have you not? That you have certain *Mutanh* powers?"

"It is now time to put your powers to work," the Faerie-lady added. "Working together, we will have twice the Magick."

"What do I do?" Lambrell asked.

"You've been hearing the words, I believe," answered the Witch. "In your head? Now you need to speak them."

Nodding, Lambrell moved beside Lady Nahlwaethe and Nomi Nattlin went to her other side. Drawing in a deep breath, Lambrell spoke in a soft, cadenced voice.

*"Trannon, mutanh-tray-may, twee-owl Florr-el."*

The words came as a total surprise to Duggan. They sounded so much like the ones she had been hearing in her own head. Why hadn't Lambrell ever mentioned she was hearing voices of her own? Duggan had felt so all alone while trying to understand what it meant to walk through forests as a *Mutanh*.

But she wasn't alone.

*"Trannon, mutanh-tray-may twee-owl Florr-el,"* Lambrell repeated and suddenly, a very amazing thing happened.

Lambrell's skin started changing color, becoming first a light shade of green then darkening moment-by-moment, her green hue growing richer, deeper and shinier. At the same time, cute, greenish buds began sprouting among the hairs of Lambrell's head and opening into pretty, yellow flowers. Tiny,

green tendrils grew out of the skin behind her ears and these, too, sprouted flowers.

Lambrell said again, "*Trannon, mutanh-tray-may twee- owl Florr-el.*"

Small roots began curling out of her ankles, burrowing themselves into the stone beneath her feet. The flowers in Lambrell's hair multiplied. Slender vines crawled out of her wrists and began wrapping themselves around the rock table.

"*Trannon—*"

Putting a hand on Lambrell's shoulder, Nomi Nattlin interrupted, saying "I think that's enough, lass. You're about halfway, which should do the trick."

Lambrell gave a stiff nod and asked, "What now?"

"Lower your head. Bring it close to the Faerie."

As Duggan watched in fascination, Lambrell had to struggle hard to bend at the waist, grunting and groaning as she brought her head down.

"Now breathe on her," Nomi Nattlin whispered to the girl. "Do it softly and slowly."

Nodding, Lambrell parted her lips slightly and exhaled a long, soft breath onto the still form of the Faerie. At the same time, Lady Nahlwaethe took up an incantation of some sort.

"*Tre-pless Trannon Fey-or Tre-pless,*" she sang in her musical voice.

When Lambrell finished blowing her breath, Nomi Nattlin whispered, "Keep going, lass, give her another one."

Nodding, Lambrell drew in a deep breath and blew once more as the Lady repeated her incantation.

All of a sudden, something happened that was so utterly Magickal Duggan forgot to breathe. The air coming out of Lambrell's mouth turned yellow and then deepened into gold. Then the gold began to sparkle brightly.

*"Tre-pless Trannon Fey-or Tre-pless."* repeated the Faerie-lady once more, this time in a louder voice.

Lambrell drew in a deep breath and blew again on the Faerie.

*"Tre-pless Trannon Fey-or Tre-pless,"* the Faerie-lady chanted as the golden air coming out of Lambrell's lips bathed the Faerie's face.

All of a sudden, the Faerie's skin changed from the bloodless color of death into the color of a late afternoon's golden sun. Its wings began to sparkle with flecks of silver and gold. Then one of its wings—the left one, Duggan noted—twitched slightly. Then it fluttered back and forth. Then the other wing began twitching and after twitching a few times, it began to flutter, too.

*"Tre-pless Trannon Fey-or Tre-pless,"* chanted the Faerie-lady in full voice.

For a moment, the injured Faerie lay with only its wings moving. Then the creature's left eye ticked once then both eyes popped open. Then the Faerie did something that made Duggan want to cry. It opened its mouth and gave a little yawn. And with that simple act, Duggan instantly understood she was witnessing the miracle she had wanted for so long, the miracle she so desperately needed.

A tear of joy welled up in her left eye and rolled down her cheek.

## Chapter 33

Yawning, the now healed Faerie sat up. Nomi Nattlin reached a hand under the folds of its cloak and took a small bottle out of a hidden pocket, pulled its cork with her teeth, and shook some powder onto the tiny creature. Next, she murmured a short incantation and immediately, the Faerie began growing in size, first becoming hand-sized then Rabbit-sized, its expanding body bursting out of its Faerie-sized clothing. Dowd Chase quickly stripped off his jacket and threw it over the Faerie's shoulders to cover its nakedness.

While Duggan watched in fascination, details of the Faerie began to appear. For one thing, it was now apparent that this Faerie was female and had a face much like the face of Lady Nahlwaethe. Yawning again when she was full-sized, the Faerie stretched her arms, looked at Duggan and smiled.

“You are a *Mutanh*, aren’t you?” were the first, rather unexpected words out of her mouth.

The Faerie’s voice was a little weak but not as much as Duggan would have expected. Much like the voices of other Faeries, this one had a musical quality to it, reminding Duggan of the bright, cheery songs played at Woodsy Troll Weddings.

“Yes,” answered Duggan, for once unembarrassed to be saying so.

“Amazing. Two *Mutanhs* together. In all my years, I have never heard of such a thing.”

Duggan had to ask, “You are related to Lady Nahlwaethe, aren’t you?”

The Faerie flashed a smile.

“Yes. A niece. My name is Glynnze.”

Another question popped into Duggan’s head.

“What were you doing in Cowgrass?”

“Oh, I have been there often. It is Lady Nahlwaethe’s task for me, one I do gladly.”

To Duggan’s left, Zagger made a funny sound.

The Faerie gave the boy a friendly smile before turning to Lady Nahlwaethe and saying, “My Lady, I see you have done what must be done to overcome the evil Curse. Thank our stars it is done.”

Nodding gravely, the Faerie-lady answered, “Yes, we can thank the stars though we should also

thank our friends here, for they brought us the way and the means.

“Then it really is over?” exclaimed Lambrell.  
“No more Curse?”

Before the Faerie could answer, Dowd Chase spoke up, saying, “If ya’s askin’ if the Faerie Lord is thwarted forever and everythin’ is now goin’ back to normal, I fear not. Even if part of his Curse is gone, the callin’ of it awoke an evil that is not goin’ away easily.”

“But our families are saved?”

“Yes,” Dowd Chase confirmed with a smile.  
“Even as we speak, ya’s families will be returnin’ to normal.”

“Then can we go home?” said Duggan, suddenly feeling a pang of homesickness.

“Not only can, you must go home,” answered Nomi Nattlin, giving Duggan a warm, friendly smile.

“Just like that?” said Lambrell in amazement.

“Yes,” said Dowd Chase with another grin,  
“just like that.”

“Well, I’m staying,” Zagger suddenly announced.

“What?” cried a surprised Lambrell, turning to stare at the boy.

“Of course you are,” agreed Nomi Nattlin, giving the boy a little nod. “When Lady Nahlwaethe recovers, the two of you will have much to talk about.”

“As will we,” said Glynnze. “Don’t forget how many years I have spent watching over this fine lad.”

Nomi Nattlin gave a little chuckle.

“Of course,” she agreed.

Looking confused, Lambrell asked, "What is going on?" She stared at Zagger, who quickly lowered his head. "Well?" she demanded.

When Zagger said nothing, Nomi Nattlin spoke up.

"Have you not guessed?" she asked.

Out of nowhere, Duggan suddenly knew. Her eyes widening, she peered into Nomi Nattlin's eyes, which told her silently to go ahead and say it. Taking a deep breath, she gave voice to the newly discovered truth.

"Um, Lambrell, the Faerie-lady here is...um...Lady Nahlwaethe...she is Zagger's mother."

There was a gasp from Lambrell as she cried, "What?"

Zagger made another funny sound.

"Quite so," said the Witch, turning her eyes on Zagger. "The boy who is half Faerie and half Woodsy Troll, seized at birth and taken from his mother by the Faerie Lord's servants, he is at last reunited with her."

"What," cried Lambrell. "Zagger...you...the Lady...what?"

When Zagger said nothing, Nomi Nattlin answered, "The full Story can wait. What I can say right now is that a strange twist of fate has brought them back together. Mother and son reunited. And in a way, it was all Duggan's doing," she added slyly.

"My doing?" cried Duggan.

"Oh yes," Nomi Nattlin replied, "for it was you, Duggan, who first had the idea of going to Eshmagick. Isn't it funny how one thought, one idea, could turn so many wheels?"



“All I wanted was to try the Ancient trek to Eshmagick.”

Nodding, Nomi Nattlin continued, “And that idea took you to Lambrell and Zagger, to the boy who harbored his own, secret desire to go to Eshmagick. His reasons were different, of course. And he was perhaps more aware of the risks. Am I not correct, Zagger?” she added, glancing at the boy.

“Just to be clear,” said Zagger, his face flushing brightly, “I don’t know what happened under that slakin’ Honeyhock. I swear I didn’t mean to hurt this Faerie here.”

“Oh,” said Nomi Nattlin, “it may have been an unlucky accident. Or it may have been the Faerie Lord putting a thought into your head at just the right moment, causing you to react and close a tiny shutter too soon. We’ll never know.”

For her part, Duggan couldn’t feel as charitable toward Zagger.

“So that’s the truth, is it?” she said to Zagger. “You never really wanted to go Trekking to have a Fourteeny adventure? It was all about finding your mother?”

“I am sorry, Duggan,” murmured Zagger, his face flushing even more. “I should have told you.”

“What about me?” interjected Lambrell. “What about telling the truth to your best-best friend?”

“Lambrell, I am so sorry,” said Zagger, for once sounding sincere in his apology.

Lambrell stared at Zagger for a moment then her eyes misted and a tear rolled down her cheek.

“You should have told me the truth,” she said to him, her brow furrowing. “I would have understood.”

“Maybe. But what would I have said? That I’m part Faerie, that I have been wandering from village to village for my whole, long life? That my mother is said to be dead or a captive of the Faerie Lord and yet I cannot believe it, that I have to...well, you know...”

The boy’s voice trailed off.

“You did just tell me,” said Lambrell, frowning. Then her face relaxed and she gave Zagger a small, forgiving smile. “You told me and I’m glad for it.”

Zagger’s mouth tightened. For a moment, he stared silently and unhappily at Lambrell. Then his lips curled into that overlarge, over-toothy, Zagger-grin Duggan had always detested, though now his grin didn’t look quite so bad to her.

“I guess I’m glad for it, too,” he said, showing all his teeth.

Another question, this one important in a different way, now popped into Duggan’s head. She glanced from Nomi Nattlin to Dowd Chase.

“What’s next for Lambrell and me? How do we get home from here?”

Dowd Chase hesitated for a moment before finally saying, “Well, I guess I will be takin’ the two of ya back home. As far as Devonwick, anyway.”

“Oh, so you’re going home, too,” said Duggan, happy to hear it, “back to Devonwick?”

“No, not exactly,” the man answered slowly. “There’s to be no more denyin’ the part I need to play

in fightin' the evil facin' us. When ya's safely to Devonwick, I will turn around and join up with Nomi here to help her in the struggle loomin' against the Faerie Lord."

Oddly, Duggan felt a funny twinge of jealousy to hear Dowd Chase saying he would be rejoining the Witch.

Pushing aside these feelings, she said instead, "In times like these, Nomi will need the help of a friend like you."

Dowd Chase laughed as he replied, "Oh, I wouldn't exactly call me a friend. Not when Nomi is the mother of my half- brother."

Her eye widening, Lambrell exclaimed, "Nomi and you are family?"

"Quite so," answered Dowd Chase, his eyes twinkling.

"Well, that's burnin' sweet," remarked Lambrell, laughing so loudly it caused Nomi Nattlin and the young Wizard to laugh, too.

Had anyone asked, Duggan would have heartily agreed with Lambrell that it was burnin' sweet but she carefully kept her mouth closed. After an awkward moment of silence, Duggan turned her head to face Nomi Nattlin.

"Will I ever see you again?" she asked, her eyes suddenly misting.

Placing her hand on the girl's shoulder, Nomi Nattlin answered in a soft voice, "Of course, and maybe sooner than you think. This isn't a good-bye. It's more of a see-you-later."

Duggan wiped her eyes. Then, impulsively, she threw herself against Nomi Nattlin and hugged her. After hesitating briefly, the Witch wrapped her arms around Duggan's shoulders and squeezed back. The two of them held each other for a brief time before Duggan reluctantly separated herself from the woman who had done so much for her. Sniffing a little, she turned to Dowd Chase.

"I take it we face dangers on our journey home," she said.

Grinning, the young Wizard replied, "Almost certainly we do."

"Well, I guess that's all right," Duggan remarked.

And amazingly, it really was all right.

# About the Author



TOM XAVIER studied archaeology in Italy and Greece and law in England. He helped run ski mountaineering trips in New Hampshire and bicycling trips in Canada. As a lawyer, he worked on a giant fraud case in England and for the past two decades, he has produced concerts with young musicians from countries around the world. Tom draws on these experiences to write stories filled with magic and adventure. He loves writing books of discovery about girls and boys who travel to amazing places where they learn much about life and even more about themselves.