

PHINEAS
HAWK
AND THE LOST COSMO-GEMS

Also by R.K. Grant
(R.K. Hinrichsen)

HEROES OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

Book 1: The Hidden Kingdom

Book 2: The Prisoner of the Shadows

Book 3: The Mouth of the Dragon

PHINEAS HAWK AND THE LOST COSMO-GEMS



R.K. GRANT

RKH PRESS L.L.C.

Copyright 2024 © R.K. Grant

www.rondagibbhinrichsen.com

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without the express written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover image created by Ronda Hinrichsen on DALL-E through Magai. Final cover design and map by Sheri McGathy.

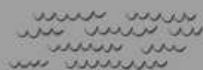
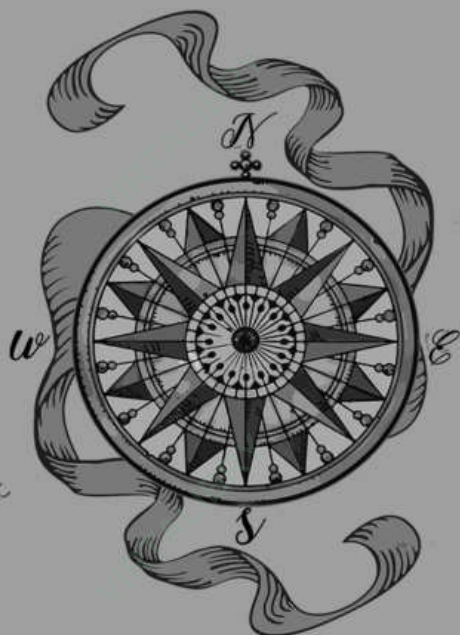
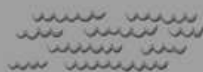
This is the standard edition featuring black and white illustrations. A special color edition is available exclusively at rondahinrichsen.com.

Print ISBN: 979-8-9851270-9-6

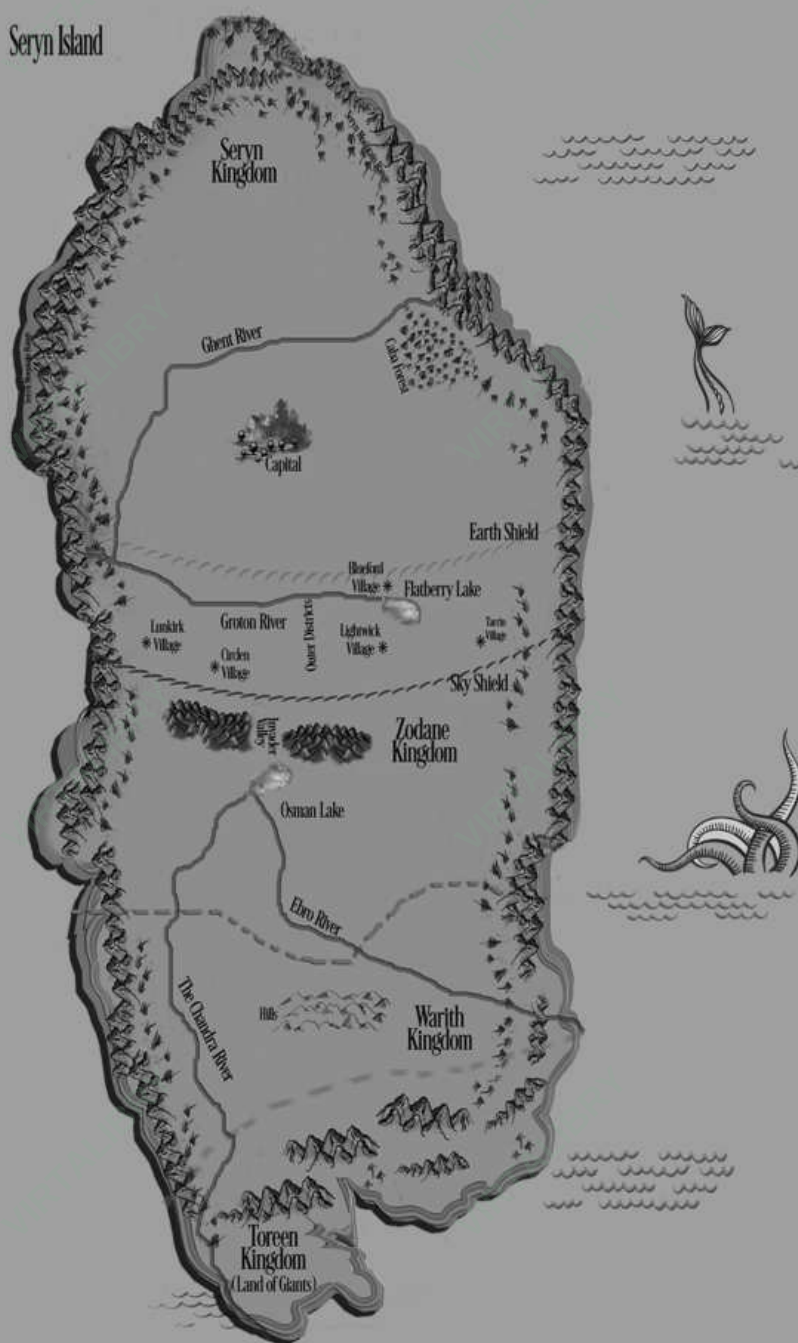
ebook ISBN: 979-8-9925721-1-7

For everyone with strong, never-ending imaginations.

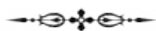
And to Ella, my newest treasure.



Seryn Island



Chapter 1



THE DEEP, RHYTHMIC POUNDING against Earth Shield echoed through the kingdom, and each impact sent pulses through the ground. I shivered, adjusted the strap of the leather pouch attached to my waist, and peeked over my shoulder. Even though a breeze whispered through the air, nothing moved. Not even tree branches. But I had heard something, hadn't I? Like crackling twigs or something brushing through the leaves—I caught my breath. Had I heard footsteps? Were there invaders nearby? Watching, or worse, following us?

Father peered back at me. His supplies, tucked in his shoulder pack, blocked much of his lower face, but his gaze caught mine. "You're doing well, Phineas. Remember that."

I shrugged. Father had said that to me when he'd first taught me how to fight. Then again, he'd also said that one day my shoulders would be broad like his. That I'd be tall and strong, too. He'd thought, and I'd hoped, I'd one day become a soldier.

But that hadn't happened. Instead, on my eleventh birthday, the king had assigned me to be Father's apprentice. King Yahir had chosen Father as his Royal Advisor, trusting him to help govern our kingdom. After Yahir's death, King Zedek continued to rely on Father's counsel. So now, according to Father, rather than fighting, I needed to learn wisdom. Which was ridiculous. I had fighting skills—a few of them, at least. Shouldn't I be using them?

I grabbed the hilt of my imaginary sword, pulled it out of my pretended scabbard, and whisked it in front of me. I lunged.

Again, Father peeped back at me. "We must keep our minds on our purpose and our watch on our surroundings, Phineas. That is wisdom."

Oh.

I frowned, placed my hands on my hips, and didn't glance down at my sword-empty waist. Not much, anyway.

Instead, I concentrated on our purpose. Seven months ago, the invaders broke through Sky Shield's protective dome and poured into the outer district that lay between Sky Shield and Earth Shield. Like two giant bowls, one nested inside the other, these magical barriers had always protected our kingdom. But now the invaders had breached the outer dome and attacked the villages in the outer district. The villagers, terrified, fled to Seryn for safety. Seryn, our kingdom's capital city, still lay secure within Earth Shield's inner dome. But now the invaders threatened to break through our last defense. That's why Fa-

ther and I hunted for the lost Cosmo-gems. They, according to legend, had power that could strengthen the Shields.

“Come along now,” Father added.

His words were code for “keep watch and stay vigilant.”

I drew back my shoulders and scanned our surroundings. Three times, I searched the path behind us. And once, I peeked around Father at the narrow path ahead of us. But all I saw was regular, gravelly dirt meandering through the tall pines and the broad-leafed shadows. Nothing dangerous.

What if invaders lurk behind those trees?

I shivered again. If only the trees were actual walls that we could hide behind.

“Flatberry Lake is just ahead of us,” Father said. “We’re almost there.”

“I hope we find the Cosmo-gems this time.”

“I hope so too.” Father lengthened his pace.

I patted my leather bag—the map was inside it—and likewise lengthened my pace.

King Zedek had found the map tucked inside Book 3 of the *Chronicles of the Kings*. He’d explained that King Fanuk, Seryn’s first king, had written that the map revealed the location of the legendary Cosmo-gems. King Zedek had then given me and Father the map and had assigned us to complete this quest.

“Find the Cosmo-gems,” King Zedek had said, “and together, they and Vida will repair Sky Shield. Without them, the invaders will destroy us.”

Unfortunately, the map wasn't very helpful. It contained only three images:

- 1) A tree-like shape Father and I thought must be the statue, Vida—one of the three Forces.
- 2) A large circle.
- 3) An X drawn near the center of that circle.

Still, Father and I did our best to interpret and follow the map. We searched circular fields, circular hills and valleys, and even Circlen, one of Seryn's now-vacant outer-district villages. The outer district, still part of Seryn Kingdom, made up the area between Earth Shield and Sky Shield.

The Cosmo-gems weren't there.

A sudden fishy scent mixed with the forest's fresh pine smell brought my thoughts back to the present.

"Flatberry Lake?" I asked.

"Aye. We must be about there." Father stepped off the path. He plowed through the branches and underbrush.

I followed him, but my walking wasn't so easy. I even tried to push the branches out of my way, but all they did was claw at my cloak, jab my cap, and scratch my arms and face. "Ugh!" I swatted at the nearest branch, but it flipped back at me and snagged my clothes.

Father pressed his forefinger to his lips, indicating that I should stay quiet, and I closed my mouth.

Mud squished beneath our leather boots, and all around us, the lake's pulse lapped against the shore. At last, we stepped out of the trees.

There it was. Flatberry Lake. Its mile-long expanse of blue-green water spread across the landscape like a fallen piece of sky.

“Where should we look first?” I whispered.

Father pointed at the six large boulders near the center of the lake. Some were sharp, like upside-down Vs pointing toward the sky. Others were round. But each poked out from the water as if a long-ago giant had flung them there.

Father pushed back his hood. “Come along now.”

I nodded at his use of his code words and gazed into the water. The boulders were only about a quarter mile away, and the water wasn’t too deep for Father to wade through. It would only rise to about his chest. Unfortunately, that was almost a foot higher than my head.

I crossed my arms. “I’ll wait here while you get the stones.”

“Nonsense. My apprentice goes wherever I go.” Father unfastened the hook at the base of his neck. “Remove your cloak. Your boots, too.”

We did so and left them in the trees.

That finished, Father crouched low, and I climbed onto his back. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist. He, holding on to my legs, trudged down the steep-angled shoreline and stepped into the water.

The water rose higher. Cold water sloshed against my feet . . . my ankles . . . my calves.

I gasped.

“Hang on,” Father said. “We’re almost there.”

“G-good.”

The water climbed to Father’s stomach, which was now to my backside.

I gasped again.

“Are you all right back there?” Father’s voice didn’t even shake a little. When I became a man, would I resist the cold as well as he did?

“Right enough,” I replied.

He grunted and continued forward.

On and on, Father slogged toward the boulders. Occasionally, he commented on the too-bright sun and crisp-cool air. But I didn’t answer him. I could only clench my teeth to keep them from chattering. At least the water didn’t rise any higher.

Finally, we reached the boulders. They, like the images on the map, formed their own circle.

“Look closely,” Father said. “Especially in the circle’s center. Down inside the water.”

I hoisted myself up higher onto Father’s back and leaned over the top of his shoulders. Next to the boulders, the water was clear. Almost like glass. But in the grouping’s center, the water blackened like night. Not like smoke, but like—“A cave?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Hold tight.”

I did. Father choked.

“Sorry.” I relaxed my grip around his neck, and Father tromped toward the nearest boulder.

Reaching it, he whisked his bare foot in front of him, took another step, and chuckled. "It must be a land bar. The water's only a few inches deep there."

"Can I get down?"

"Yes, but stay close."

He stepped onto the land bar, and I slid down from his back. The water covered my feet, but nothing more.

"Follow me," Father said.

We waded to the night-murky water. The area didn't open to an underground cavern, but the earth did droop into a funnel-like drain. Or a narrow well.

"Do you see the Cosmo-gems?" I asked.

"Not yet." Father knelt. He swirled his fingers back and forth through the water. "Something's here." He pressed his lips into a tight line, plunged his entire arm into the funnel, and pulled out a stone box. Carved swoops and curves decorated its lid.

I stared at it. Back at Seryn Kingdom, Vida, that was kept in the castle's throne room, had three indentions carved into its top branches. The indentations were the size of chicken eggs, and according to legend, they would one day house the Cosmo-gems. Yet, this trinket box couldn't hold much more than a few thin-chained necklaces. I'd never seen the Cosmo-gems before. But they couldn't actually be the size of pebbles, could they?

Father unlatched the lid's clasp.

Whisk.

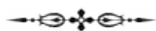
An arrow flew out from behind us. It whizzed past my arm, crashed into the boulder straight in front of us, and flopped into the water.

Father and I whirled.

Three men, standing on the shore, glared at us. Mud blackened their faces, and they wore Warith Kingdom's blood-red uniforms.

Invaders.

Chapter 2



FATHER SHOVED THE BOX into my hand, stepped forward, and whispered, “Stay behind me.”

I whisked the box behind my back. I hunched my shoulders and lowered my head. If only I could disappear. Better yet, if only I was a well-trained soldier. If I was, I could fight those invaders and send them back to their own kingdoms.

The tallest invader, likely the leader, stepped into the water and slogged toward us. His red uniform clung to his thick, bulky muscles. He appeared younger than King Zedek, but his skin was blacker than his, and it glistened in the sunlight like fire. So, too, did the invader’s black eyes.

“You,” Father said when the man reached the boulders.

“Don’t try to escape, Hawk,” the man said to Father, “unless you seek death.”

Father moved in front of me, and I gaped up at the back of his head. Did he and the invader know one another?

“It’s you and your men who seek death, Slaterider.” Father’s voice rumbled through the air like a deep rhythmic drum,

and my stomach tightened. *Slaterider*. He was the man who'd killed King Zedek's father, King Yahir, after he'd chosen Father to be his advisor instead of him. The brutal invader who'd led Warith Kingdom's army against the giants in Toreen Kingdom and left no survivors. The warrior many Serynians called "the Dreaded."

"You've grown braver over the years," Slaterider said. "But not smarter. You always were a fool."

"Fool enough to trust you."

"Fool enough to hunt for the Cosmo-gems."

I jerked my head back. How did he know about our quest?

Slaterider smirked. "The Cosmo-gems. You really believe in that fairy tale?"

"It's not a fairy tale," I yelled. "They have power. You'll see—"

Father reached behind himself and grabbed my arm. I closed my mouth. *Idiot. As the royal advisor's apprentice, I need to learn wisdom. Like knowing when to speak and when to remain silent. Right now, I should stay silent.*

"That boy has quite the mouth on him," Slaterider said.

"Like someone else I used to know."

Slaterider gave Father a hard smile and yelled to his companions, "Get them!"

The other two invaders, who were several feet behind Slaterider, charged toward us.

I stumbled backward, but Father, grabbing my arm, pulled me upright and tugged me out of the invaders' reach. Then,

still in front of me, he leaned forward and clenched his fists in what he termed his *battle stance*. It was the position he'd used when he'd taught me the few fighting skills his father had taught him when he was a boy.

"Run," Father yelled.

"To where?" Only deep water surrounded us. And while I could swim, I didn't swim well. The invaders would catch me before I made it to the shore.

Two invaders reached us.

"Go!" Father punched one of them in the mouth, but before Father could strike the second one, the first attacker grabbed Father's arm and twisted it behind Father's back.

I whipped the box behind me with my free arm. "Leave him alone."

Slaterider grabbed my wrist. "What do you have there, *boy?*"

"Nothing."

Slaterider growled. He yanked my hand out from behind me, seized the stone box, and shoved me into the water. Drenched, I jumped to my feet. "Give that back!" I lowered my head and charged at him.

He angled sideways.

I crashed into his elbow and flopped into the water. This time, on my backside.

"Leave the boy alone!" Father leaped toward him, but Slaterider's soldiers pulled him back.

I jumped up.

Slaterider shoved me back down. He stepped on my shin, holding me there. "Stay still or die."

I glared up at him.

He held the stone box. If I stayed still, he'd get the Cosmo-gems. He'd destroy Seryn. *I can't let that happen.*

I twisted. I tried and failed to free my leg. "Give me the box. It doesn't belong to you."

Slaterider pressed his lips into a tight, crooked line. Holding my gaze, he opened the lid and pulled out a book with thin silver pages. The book was square, a bit smaller than the box, and tiny markings covered the pages. Probably writing of some sort.

I groaned. Once again, Father and I hadn't found the Cosmo-gems.

Father caught my gaze. He eyed the box, gave me a slight nod, and turned back to Slaterider.

Father's signaling me. Even as I thought those words, understanding flowed through me. True, we hadn't found the Cosmo-gems, but we had found something. What was it?

Slaterider, scowling, flung the tablet at me. It ricocheted off my chest, but I caught it before it fell into the water. He motioned to the other invaders. "Take them."

Quick. No one's looking. I slipped the tablet into my waist pouch. Still, no one noticed me. I'd succeeded.

The invaders shoved me and Father into a single-file line in front of them.

"That way, prisoners," Slaterider said.

Prisoners. The word shot cold through my core. The giants' physical features looked just like those of humans, except that they, our enemies, were four times bigger than us. In the past, they nearly destroyed us, so our ancestors trapped them in the southern-most kingdom, using the land itself as a weapon. Between them and the human kingdoms lay ground that enveloped their massive feet in hidden sinkholes and deep peat. The mountain passes were likewise so narrow and boulder-strewn that only humans could slip through them. That had held the giants at bay.

However, in recent months, the attackers decided to completely destroy the giants. Under Slaterider's command, they invaded their kingdom and captured some of the smallest ones. They used them as shields, knowing the largest giants wouldn't fight, because they didn't want to risk hurting their countrymen. Now, Father and I were the invaders' prisoners.

The hair on the back of my neck stood at attention. Would the invaders use us as their shields?

"I need to help my apprentice," Father said. "The water's too deep for him."

"Useless kid," Slaterider muttered.

Father hoisted me onto his back, held on to my legs, and strode forward. "Come along now," he said under his breath.

I gaped at him. *Come along now.* His code for "stay vigilant." Why did he say that? Did he see other dangers? Or—hope raced through me—had he figured out a way for us to escape?

An invader pushed me against Father, but when I bumped him, Father didn't even flinch. He only plodded forward.

I studied Father's slumped shoulders and slow-moving pace. It was different than his usual stance and gait.

Wait a minute. Father is acting differently. That was another one of his signals, which meant, *Do as I do.*

Yet again, the invader shoved me, but this time, I stiffened so I wouldn't bump into Father.

Father shuffled toward the shoreline. The men behind us also walked slower.

We continued that way until Father stepped out of the water and onto the rocky, upward-sloping beach. He paused.

"Keep going," Slaterider said.

Father didn't obey. Instead, he grabbed my arm from around his shoulders and pulled me off his back. He tossed me up the slope.

"Run." Father pulled his sword out of his scabbard and faced the invaders.

"Fool!" Slaterider said to Father.

Ignoring the sharp rocks, I stumbled up the bank.

The other two attackers sprang after me. Fingers brushed my foot, but I slipped out of their grasps. I reached the flatter part of the land and ran into the forest.

Metal clanged behind me like the sound of swords hitting one another.

I ran faster.

Footfalls pounded nearby.

I leaped off the path that had led us to the lake. I charged into the trees. I wove back and forth between them, holding my bent arm in front of me to block the sharp branches from hitting my face. Finally, I dove into a thicket of thorny bushes. Their pricks poked my bare feet and tore my clothes, but I didn't cry out. I only crouched low, and though breathing hard, I exhaled in soft puffs.

I listened.

No footfalls. Where were the invaders? Had I eluded them?

I clutched the soft, cool tufts of grass beside me, soothing my pierced palms, and narrowed my gaze. I'd heard tales of the invaders' tricks. Of how they could creep up on their enemies unaware. "Stealth" was the word Father had used.

Well, the invaders could try stealth all they wanted, but they wouldn't catch me. They wouldn't even find me. Stealth might be their weapon, but silence was mine. Or—I shifted my stance. All right. Only moments before, I hadn't stayed silent, but I'd learned my lesson. *I will stay silent now.*

Crouching lower and barely breathing, I continued listening for footfalls. Nothing but clanging swords pinged the air.

I kept still. I counted inside my head. When I reached twenty, I paused and listened again.

Still nothing. Not even a breeze brushed the leaves.

If only I dared peek out of these brambles.

But I *didn't* dare.

Instead, I counted all the way to two hundred. Finally, I lifted my head, peeked above the bushes, and scanned the forest.

No movement.

I crawled out of the bush. Again, I watched and listened. Only bird calls, distant squirrel chatters, and the breeze rustling through the tree branches surrounded me. Where was Father? Was he safe? Had he scared off the invaders and was now searching for me? Or was he hiding like I had been?

I didn't know those answers. But surely, if Father had left the lake, he'd return there, wouldn't he? Because it was a large landmark? And because it was the last place we'd been together?

"Yes," I mouthed. "That is what he would do."

Hoping I was right, I scanned back and forth over both my shoulders. No invaders. So, tip-toeing through the sharp and prickly underbrush, I crept back to the beach.

The moment I stepped out of the trees, I caught my breath.

Father, alone, lay face down on the rocks next to the lake. The incoming tide lapped against the side of his body.

I rushed to him. "Father!" My voice echoed around me, and I slapped my hand over my mouth. *Stay silent.* What if this was a trap? What if the invaders were nearby, watching me, planning to attack me too?

Nothing but the lake's lapping waves sounded. I was alone. I hoped. Still, an ache burned the back of my throat. Was Father dead?

I crept closer to him. I scanned from Father's bare feet to his scabbard that no longer held his sword to his torn shirt.

"Are you all right?" I whispered.

Father didn't answer or move.

My throat constricted.

I crouched next to him and touched his neck. A slight pulse beat beneath his skin.

Exhaling in relief, I gently turned his body over onto his back. People often said Father and I were mirror images of one another. And we were, as far as our dark-colored hair, light brown skin, and dark brown eyes were concerned. But in the big and muscular ways, he was far superior. Yet right then, I didn't envy him. Being big and muscular hadn't saved him from the invaders. Instead, blood caked much of his now-swollen face. It trickled from a cut across the length of his upper shoulder. Blood also pooled from a stab wound above his hip.

I yanked my handkerchief from my waist pouch, bunched it into a ball, and pressed it against his wound.

Father groaned.

I clasped both his shoulders. "It's all right. I'm here."

"Leave me." Father's voice scratched as if sand filled his throat.

"No. You need help." I felt his forehead with the back of my hand the way Mother did when someone was sick.

Father turned his head away from me. "Please, son. Slaterider left me for dead, and so must you. I'm not long for this world anyway. Get back to the capital. Warn the king. Tell him Slaterider is leading the invaders and taking prisoners."

"You told me that as your apprentice, I must learn to be wise. Well, this is me being wise. I'm not leaving you out here to die."

"You have much to learn about wisdom."

"Maybe so, but not about this."

He groaned.

"Don't worry. I'll get you back to Seryn."

"You're not strong enough for that." Father's cheeks grew even paler. He closed his eyes. "And even if you were, Slaterider's surely hunting for you. I'll only slow you down. Please . . ."

"Father! Don't fall asleep."

His eyelids fluttered. "P-please, go. Tell your mother and sister . . ."

I slid my hands beneath his shoulders and lifted.

He groaned in pain. "Stop."

I lowered him back to the ground. "I'm sorry."

He didn't respond. I patted his cheeks.

Still no response. And his hands felt as if he'd been out in a winter storm. He needed warmth.

Our cloaks and boots.

I ran back up the shore and gathered our clothing from where we'd tossed it into the trees. I then returned to Father. I slipped his feet into his boots and draped both our cloaks over his too-still body. Finally, I knelt next to him. I shook his shoulders. He didn't open his eyes, but he breathed.

I sighed in relief, slumped back onto my heels, and stared up at the sky. How could I get Father back to Seryn? The mouth of Groton River, which flowed out of Flatberry Lake and back to the capital, was about a half mile away. So if I could build a raft, and if I could somehow get Father on that raft and row us across the lake to the river, we could float back to the capital.

Yet even as I pictured myself going through those supposed motions, I knew I couldn't do it. Not because I couldn't build the raft—the needed supplies, like fallen logs, spattered the forest's floor. But because I was too weak to carry Father to it once I built it.

I put on my boots.

Carry . . . Fallen logs . . .

What if I built a sledge?

Chapter 3



I READJUSTED THE CLOAK around Father, tucking each edge under him, and again peeked over both my shoulders. As before, nothing moved. And only bird calls and the sloshing of waves touched the air.

We're alone. Think only of making the sledge.

That's what I told myself. Still, my thoughts raced. What if I couldn't even hoist Father onto the sledge?

I'll find a way.

Or couldn't pull him up the slope?

It's only a few feet. I can manage a few feet.

Or couldn't tug him and the sledge the entire two miles back to Earth Shield?

Think of success.

I reached the top of the bank. I shook my feet, flicking away the mud that caked my boots, and veered toward the haphazard mix of fallen logs and tree branches. First, I gathered two long, strong poles and four shorter ones and carried them back to the beach. Second, I set them beside Father. Third, I

removed the ropes he'd carried in his shoulder bag and built a sledge.

Yes! I did it.

But Father still needed help.

I took a deep breath and knelt behind his head. I slid my arms under his shoulders and tried to heft him sideways onto the sledge. But I only moved him a couple of inches.

I exhaled in frustration and tried again. This time, a bit more of his torso slid onto the sledge, but it still wasn't enough.

I slumped backward and glared up at the sky. "How do I do this?"

Rustling.

I jumped to my feet. Had the invaders returned?

The rustling grew louder, plodding toward me like monstrous footfalls.

I grabbed one of the extra logs. I moved in front of Father and drew back my arm, preparing to throw the log at whoever—or whatever—presented itself.

A tall, bulky shadow stepped into the sunlight. It was neither a man nor a monster. It—he—was just a boy. He looked to be about my age, except that he was almost as tall as Father.

"Don't come any closer," I said.

The boy stopped. He stared back at me.

"Who are you?" I said. "What do you want?"

Still, he stared.

"Answer, or I'll throw this."

The boy shrugged, and I scanned the length of him. His dark brown hair draped around his face and down to his shoulders. His eyes were dark brown, too. His skin wasn't as white as mine, but tanned, like he'd lived in the sun for a long while. He wore black leather ankle boots, brown pants, and a dark green cloak. With that coloring, he could have stayed camouflaged within the trees. Why hadn't he?

"Are you from one of the rural villages?" I asked. But then, where else could he have come from? After Sky Shield had cracked open, allowing the invaders and anyone else who wished Serynians harm inside our kingdom, the rural villagers had run to the capital for protection. All except this boy, apparently.

"What's the name of your village?" I continued. "Circlen?"

The boy didn't respond.

"Tarrin? Or maybe Lunkirk? Oh! I know. Blueford. It's the village closest to here."

The boy frowned.

Was that it? Blueford? I inched toward him, and he back-stepped. I studied his expression. He seemed calm, yet his eyes were wide. And his gaze frequently flitted between me and the lake. He peeked over his shoulders a lot too, the same way I did.

I lowered my makeshift club. "I'm not an invader."

He scratched the back of his head.

Hmm. Try again. “I’m from the capital. If you’d like, you can come with me, and I’ll help you find—” I scanned the trees behind him. Where was his family?

“Find what?” The boy’s voice boomed over the lake’s lapping water and the breeze’s whisperings. Yet he hadn’t yelled. He’d just spoken without inflection. No wonder he’d said so little. If the invaders had been nearby, they’d have heard him straight off.

“Find your family,” I replied.

I studied his calm expression. His stance, too, though tall, wasn’t tight like he was angry. Hopefully, that meant he didn’t wish to fight me. I offered him a slight smile. “Actually, maybe we can help each other.”

“How?” This time, he whispered so softly that I strained to hear him.

I motioned toward Father, who lay sprawled on the ground behind me. “He’s hurt. I need to get him back to Seryn, but I’m—”

The boy harrumphed. “Not strong enough.”

I frowned. “Can you help me get Father back to the capital?”

“What happened to him?”

I knelt next to Father and clasped his hand. He still felt cold. “He fought some invaders. That’s all I know for sure.”

The boy knelt next to me, and I bit the inside of my lip to hide my cringe. He was bigger than every other boy I knew. Would he hurt me? Or Father? But then he touched Father’s

forehead with his index fingers and ran them down the sides of his face.

I grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?"

"Healing." The boy, still not looking at me, pursed his lips and puffed air against Father's forehead. Then, while humming a tune I didn't recognize, he lifted Father's eyelids. He stared into his unseeing eyes as if he—was he willing Father to live? I gaped at him. "Do you have Origin Power?"

The boy shrugged. "My grandmother called it Healing Power."

Origin Power. Healing Power. They had to mean the same thing. Yet, if he had Origin Healing Power, why hadn't I ever heard of it or him?

In the beginning, all who lived on Serynian Island were born with a fullness of that innate magical power. And all followed the laws that governed it. Each family's power was unique. But as time passed, people stopped following the rules, and Origin Power stopped restoring itself. Because of that, each generation had less of it than their parents had. Now, so few people possessed Origin Power that everyone knew those who did.

Or so I'd thought.

"Let's see if the healing worked." Again, the boy leaned over Father and lifted his eyelids.

Father inhaled a large, deep breath. Slowly, his cheeks pinked.

I grabbed Father's hand. "He's getting warmer."

The boy nodded, and I stared at him. Who was he?

The boy slid his arms under Father's shoulders and motioned for me to lift Father's feet. Together we hefted Father onto the sledge.

Father groaned a little, but he didn't waken.

"Does this mean you'll help me take Father back to the capital?" I asked.

He nodded. Then, without saying another word, he lifted the top side of the sledge. He then dragged it, along with Father, across the rocky beach. He walked so fast that I didn't even realize he'd reached the incline that led to the forest until he started climbing upward.

"Wait," I called out. "I said *help me*, not *do it yourself*."

"Just hurry."

I ran after him, but he moved so fast I didn't catch up to him until he'd stepped into the forest.

"Should I carry his feet?" I asked.

"No." He handed me one of the sledge's poles. I wrapped both my arms around it and heaved it forward. The sledge moved several inches. I grinned. I'd done it.

The boy, however, paled. Why?

"I'll do it," he said. "Faster that way."

I scowled down at my scrawny arms and handed the pole back to him. "Have it your way."

He pulled the sledge past me, trudging over the underbrush, around the boulders, and between the trees. I hurried to keep up with him.

"I suppose I should have asked you this before," I said, "but what's your name? Mine's Phineas."

"Tate," he said.

"Tate? I haven't heard that name before."

"It's old."

"My name's old too," I said. "At least my middle name is."

"What is it?"

"I'd rather not say."

He grunted, and we continued on. Twice, I asked him other questions, like what village he was from and where his parents were, but he didn't answer me.

A couple of hours later, we stepped out of the forest that dotted the area around Flatberry Lake and started up the closest hill. Groton River ran on the other side of that hill and continued along this side of Earth Shield.

"Let's stop and rest a minute," I said.

"Really? It's almost sunset."

"Not for a few hours yet. And anyway, we'll just be a minute."

Tate rolled his eyes, and I angled away from him. I leaned against a thick tree, slumped to the ground, and took a deep, relieving breath.

Tate, however, didn't even release the sledge. He just stood there like he was a fierce warrior, with the horizon haloing his profile. His enormous chest moved in and out with his breaths. If only I was big and strong like him. Certainly then King

Zedek would have assigned me to be a soldier instead of a royal advisor.

"I felt the same way when I was your age," Father had said when I'd complained about it. "Now I know everyone has a role to fill. *You* have a role to fill."

I stood. Tate and I had to get Father home.

"Rested enough?" Tate asked.

"No, but let's go. We're almost to the capital."

We climbed the steep grassy incline to the top of the hill. Down on the other side, Groton River wove along its base. And across from the river was Earth Shield. I smiled.

"Hurry," I said.

Tate ran down the hill even faster than he'd run up it and stopped beside the river. I caught up to him several seconds later.

The river's current was as slow as a gentle brook. And, according to the map of Seryn, it was only twenty feet wide and three feet deep.

I smiled again. Yeah, it was deeper and wider here than at the capital's main entrance, but we could manage it. Besides, the invaders were pounding at the entrance. And since we were loyal citizens, we could cross through Earth Shield anywhere.

"Ready?" I asked Tate.

He didn't move.

"What's wrong?"

He tightened his brows into a deep furrow and stared at Earth Shield. I glanced between it and him. Was he nervous?

True, Earth Shield looked like a green dome of fire, but so did Sky Shield, only Sky Shield was blue. And as Tate was from the outer districts, he'd surely seen Sky Shield lots of times.

"Tate?" I repeated.

Tate inhaled. He drew back his shoulders and looked me straight in the eyes. "I'll carry him across the river, but that's as far as I'll go."

Cold dropped through me. At Flatberry Lake, I hadn't been able to move Father more than a few inches. I couldn't possibly drag him through Earth Shield on my own. Not before the invaders found and attacked us, anyway.

"No," I said. "Please. I mean, we're almost there. Almost safe."

Tate tilted his head as if he didn't believe me. "You'll manage."

"What? No. Father is too heavy for me. Please. I'll help, but I can't do it alone."

Sharp bird cries crackled the air behind us.

We whirled.

A flock of black robins flew out from behind the hill. Flapping hard, they aimed for the sky. Their warning yelps cried out to one another. Something must have spooked them. *Invaders.*

"Please help me," I said to Tate.

Men's voices roared from behind the hill, and I grabbed the sledge.

Tate pulled it from me, moved to the center, and lifted it and Father over his head.

“Run,” Tate said.

I charged into the water. Tate, carrying Father above him, followed me.

The voices behind us grew louder.

We slogged harder . . . faster. Finally, we reached the shore on the other side of the river. Behind us, half a dozen invaders crested the top of the hill. An invader’s arrow flashed past me. “Go!” I yelled.

Tate leaned forward and stepped into Earth Shield’s fiery green mist. I followed him.

Rain-scented flames swirled around me. They licked at my clothes, splashed my skin with what felt like dry snow, and shoved us through to the other side.

Chapter 4



IN FRONT OF ME and a bit to my left, a mile of lush grass, dotted with blue and purple flowers, welcomed us like a vast royal carpet. A thick grove of trees grew beyond that carpet, and the tall, gray-stoned castle with its towering spires stood behind the trees. It loomed in front of Seryn's capital city like a giant, impenetrable sentry. The field, which smelled of sweet, wet earth, also spread for miles in the other direction toward the forested mountains that circled the island. Their peaks almost touched Sky Shield. According to *Chronicles of the Kings*, the Originators had created those mountains, along with the four forces, as a further protection for Seryn.

I sighed in relief, stepped farther into the lush grass, and dropped to my knees. We'd made it. *We're home.*

Tate gasped.

I leaped to my feet and faced him. He gaped toward the distant city, especially at the castle's towering spires.

"What is it?" I scanned around and behind him, but nothing worrisome lurked nearby.

“Beautiful,” Tate whispered.

I tilted my head and more fully followed his gaze. I hadn’t thought about it before I’d begun traveling outside the capital with Father, but all the kids I knew stayed inside Earth Shield. That was for safety, I’d assumed. But now . . . was that normal? Had most Serynians spent their lives inside the capital, seeing nothing of the rural districts, much less the outer kingdoms? And had those from the outer kingdoms never seen the city?

Probably. After all, I’d only stepped outside Earth Shield to hunt for the Cosmo-gems.

“Haven’t you been here before?” I asked.

Tate, still gaping at the cityscape, shook his head.

“Well, it’s not much different from the rural villages. Those blue flowers? The evergreen trees? They’re in the outer district too.”

“Not as many.”

“That’s because of the rain. There’s more of it here.”

Tate did a double take.

Why was he surprised about that? I mean, I learned about Seryn’s weather patterns even before I started school.

“Well,” I said in Father’s straightforward tone, “let’s go.”

Tate picked up the head of the sledge, and together we strode across the fields and toward the capital.

Shortly before we reached the road that led from Earth Shield to the castle, a hollow-sounding horn blared across the air. It wasn’t a warning cry. Rather, it was the same melodic tone that Father and I had heard on our last return from hunt-

ing for the Cosmo-gems. Apparently, the king's watchguards, spying from their positions on the castle walls, had seen us.

Tate set down the sledge. "I go now."

"No! I mean, it's only the king's men. They'll help us take Father back to the city."

Tate pulled his cloak tighter around him. "You'll be well."

"But it's getting late. You can't go back to the outer district now. Not alone. And look at the sky. I think it's going to rain. Where will you go?"

"Someplace." He headed toward the eastern mountains.

"Wait," I called. "I know where there's a cave." Father and I had slept there a few weeks ago.

Tate stopped, though he didn't turn around.

"Stay close to Earth Shield," I said. "Follow it to Caba Forest. As fast as you are, you'll get there in no time. Cross through the forest to the mountains. From there, about halfway up the mountainside, you'll see a large white boulder. It points at the sky like a sharp arrow. The cave's just below it."

Tate took off again.

"Stay in the cave," I called out louder. "I'll bring you supplies tomorrow."

Tate kept running.

Hopefully, he'll be all right.

I watched him until I could no longer see him and then assessed Father. He breathed, but he was still unconscious. How long would he be like that? Would he waken before the king's men arrived?

“Phin-e-as!” a familiar voice called out.

I whirled. Was that Ellya? I peered across the grass toward the copse of thick, bushy pines.

Ellya, my younger sister, wasn’t there.

Yet I couldn’t have imagined her voice. Nothing nearby sounded like her. Not the birds screeching across the sky or the breeze wisping over the grasses. Besides, it was evening, and Ellya and Mother were likely still working at the preservation garden. When Sky Shield first cracked, King Zedek realized war might come, especially since all the Origin-powered protections were weak. Because of that, he had us create weapons workshops, wall-building brigades, a formidable fort at the rear of the city, and the preservation garden. All citizens now donated time to one of those four protections. Me? I helped Father. But Mother and Ellya worked in the garden.

“Phin-e-as.” This time, Ellya, followed by Mother and several of the king’s guards, stepped out of the trees.

Ellya and Mother ran down the path toward me. The guards behind them didn’t run, but they kept up with them.

“Hallo.” I waved my hand high above my head.

Mother and Ellya waved back.

I turned away from them and knelt next to Father. I removed the scarf I’d tucked around his lower face to keep off the dust and poured water from my canteen onto one of its cleanish corners. With it, I wiped the dust from his upper face.

Mother arrived first. She, seeing Father lying on the sledge, paled. She dropped to her knees next to me. "Is he alive?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said. *Thanks to Tate.*

She brushed her white-skinned hands over Father's forehead. She didn't have Tate's Origin Power, but right then, I wished she did. So much love and determination burned from her clear blue eyes that if she had possessed it, Father would have sprung upright. I felt certain of it.

Ellya came up behind us. "How is he?"

"Hurt," I said.

"Where?" Mother asked.

I pointed to the dried bloodstain above his hip.

Ellya yanked off the tan headscarf that held back her matted-with-sweat blonde hair. She bunched it into a ball and knelt next to Mother and me. With a shaking hand, she pressed the scarf against Father's wound. Mother wrapped her hand around Ellya's, steadying her.

"What happened?" Mother asked me.

"Invaders attacked us." I supposed I should have added that we'd also faced the notorious Slaterider. But if I'd said that, she'd likely ask me more questions. Especially about our battle. And all I knew was that Father had fought them alone because I'd been hiding in the forest. Like a coward.

No, I reprimanded myself. I'm small, but I'm not a coward.

I stiffened my spine. "That's all I know. Father told me to hide."

Mother took the scarf from Ellya and dabbed it on Father's wounds. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm well enough."

"I told your father it was foolish to . . ." She shook her head and pressed her lips into a hard line. "Thank the heavens you survived. Thank you for saving your father."

Actually, Tate saved him, not me.

The guards caught up to us. One was Rodge, the king's captain of the guard. He was also one of Father's childhood friends.

"What happened?"

"The invaders attacked us," I said.

He groaned and helped Mother to her feet. Ellya and I stood too.

"He needs to get home," Mother said. "And he needs medical attention."

"Of course." Rodge motioned to one of the other guards. "Find the physician. Deliver him to Hawk's cottage."

"Yes, sir."

The guard left.

Rodge and another guard lifted the sledge, and Mother hurried ahead of them. The rest of us followed.

Rodge glanced back at me. "King Zedek is waiting for your report."

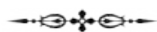
My mouth turned dry. Of course he was. And of course, I would give it to him. But couldn't it be later? After I'd worked up the courage? Before now, the only times I'd ever spoken to

King Zedek was when he dubbed me Father's apprentice and when I'd accepted his commission to find the Cosmo-gems. Even then, Father had been with me.

"We didn't find the gems this time either," I said to Rodge.

He lifted an eyebrow. "The king must know," he said. "Hurry to the castle. I'll see to your family."

Chapter 5



I HEADED TOWARD THE castle.

As I ran, my arm brushed against my waist pouch. Relief jolted through me. Oh, yeah. I'd been so caught up with taking care of Father that I'd almost forgotten about what we'd found—the stone box and the tablet. They weren't the Cosmo-gems, but at least this time, Father and I hadn't returned empty-handed. Besides, who knew? Maybe the tablet could help us interpret the ancient map, since the writing on it appeared as old as the parchment.

I raced down the path. Soon after, I stepped inside the grove of trees and veered left onto Castle Road, which circled round the castle to the front entrance.

There, the weathered stone staircase, wide enough for several people to walk side by side, curved upward to the castle's imposing double doors. A grand, intricately carved archway framed those doors, and two guards stood on either side of them. Usually, only one guard stood there. Why not now? Did

King Zedek already sense our kingdom's growing danger and feel the need to protect himself?

Perhaps.

I squeezed the pouch where it contained the stone box and ran up all twelve steps.

When I reached the landing, the guard opened the door. "King Zedek is in the throne room," he said. "He is expecting you."

I drew back my shoulders and entered the vast entry hall. The scent of musty leather and tallow candles wafted over me as I strode to the grand staircase. Usually, when Father and I joined the king in the throne room, we had knowledge meant only for his ears. Which meant we kept silent as we climbed the stairs to the second floor. Like I did now. Yet those silences with Father had been companionable ones.

Unlike now.

At last, I reached the throne room's two golden doors. They were three times the height of any man I'd ever seen, and jagged lines molded their frames. Father said they represented pathways to the universe. To me, they, like the crack in Sky Shield, looked like lightning bolts.

I faced the guard who stood next to the door. "Phineas Hawk to see King Zedek," I said.

The guard knocked on the door and opened it.

I stepped inside. Large and small circles patterned the white marble floor. Pillars lined the walls. King Zedek sat on his throne at the back of the room, and three guards stood behind

him. What most caught my attention, though, was the cosmic skyscape that decorated the ceiling. King Fanuk, Seryn's first king, had commissioned artists to cover the ceiling with the universe. "Man lives within the cosmic order," he'd written in *Chronicles of the Kings*. "Serynians must remember that."

King Zedek motioned for me to approach him. When I reached the small staircase that led up to his throne, I bowed.

"I understand your father is injured," King Zedek said. "Will he survive?"

"I believe so. I brought him back to the capital as quickly as I could."

King Zedek raised an eyebrow. He scanned the length of me. "You?"

I lifted my chin. "I had help."

"From whom?"

Father had instructed me to be forthright with the king, which meant I should tell him about Tate. But didn't I also owe Tate allegiance? He'd helped me carry Father, even though he'd been nervous about entering the capital. Besides Tate had clearly meant no harm to the capital. If he had, Earth Shield wouldn't have let him pass through it so easily. Which meant . . . surely I could tell the king about him.

"I met up with another boy," I said. "He was from the outer district, and he was lost, I think. He helped me carry Father, and I told him I'd help him with whatever he needed."

"A wise decision."

I didn't smile at the compliment. Doing so seemed undignified. But inside, my senses skipped happily. True, I still wasn't a grown man, but I could think. And thinking wise thoughts wasn't a bad thing.

I took the stone box out of my pack, handed it to him, and told him how we'd discovered the metal tablet inside the box. I rehearsed how the invaders had attacked us. I also told him about Slaterider fighting us at the lake.

King Zedek, who'd removed the writing tablet as I'd talked, scrutinized both sides of it. "Can you read any of this writing?"

"I haven't analyzed it yet. Maybe. I'm hoping so."

"Hmmm." He scrutinized the tablet another moment and returned it to the box. "We're fortunate the invaders didn't take the two of you as their prisoners."

"That's what I think."

He studied me. "Now, as your father's apprentice, what do you believe he would advise me to do? Your father is injured. We don't have the Cosmo-gems, and Seryn is still in danger."

He paused, and I peered up at the yellow sun painted in the center of the ceiling's nightscape. Did he really expect me to advise him?

"Seryn Kingdom is already doing what it can to preserve our people," King Zedek continued. "Our preservation garden is growing well. The weapons masters have increased their productions. The guards are keeping watch over Earth Shield, especially the entry gate. And—"

“And we’ve nailed Vida’s agreement to signposts across the city,” I blurted.

The king raised his eyebrows, and I winced inwardly. I’d spoken out of turn. Would I never learn when I should and shouldn’t speak?

A lump near my heart grew. *Maybe silence isn’t my strength.*

“Forgive me, sire,” I said.

King Zedek flicked his hand, discounting my apology. “I’m sure you will control your tongue better next time. Now, it looks like you have more to say. What is it?”

“It is only—“ I bit the inside of my lower lip. Sternness, not anger, bathed the king’s expression the same way it filled Father’s face when he taught me. It was a look I didn’t fear, because Father’s love and respect for me covered it.

I stood taller. “I think Father would tell you the same things he told you before.”

“To post signs.”

I nodded.

“We did that, but nothing must have changed. Sky Shield cracked wider.”

“That’s why we have to keep reminding them to mend their ways,” I said. “Send out teachers—perhaps the scribes who keep our histories. They know more than anyone what will happen to us if we don’t keep our part of the Oath.”

King Zedek, watching me, thrummed his fingers across his throne’s armrests.

I shifted my stance.

"Agreed," King Zedek said. "Let it be done."

Phineas lifted his chin. The king had taken his advice.

"You may go," King Zedek added.

"I won't let you down, sire. I will find the Cosmo-gems and bring them back to you."

King Zedek's gaze narrowed. He said nothing, yet the words "You're only a boy" stomped on my foot. But I wasn't only a boy. I was the apprentice to the royal advisor. King Zedek himself had given me that honor.

"Are you saying you wish to continue your quest?" King Zedek asked. "Without your father?"

"I do." I pressed my lips together so I wouldn't wince. *Please don't forbid me from going.* "Father must heal."

"True, but there are many dangers. It might be best for me to send someone else to find the Cosmo-gems."

"No, sire! I mean, our kingdom needs them."

King Zedek frowned.

"No one else can do this," I added.

King Zedek straightened his shoulders. "Explain your reasoning."

"I'm the only one who's been with Father through the entire search. I know what he knows about the Cosmo-gems. Also, Father and I are the only ones who have the necessary Origin Power. Only we can reveal the Cosmo-gems' hiding place."

The king regarded me for another moment. Once again, he opened the box. He pulled out the metal tablet. "Do you understand the writing?"

“No, but I’m hoping Father does. And that he’ll waken tonight.”

“Do you still have the map?”

I removed it from my pack and held it out to him.

He didn’t take it, and I returned it to my pack.

“I thought the map would lead you to the Cosmo-gems,” he said.

“Father and I thought so, too. And I still think it might. But I also wonder if it wasn’t a coincidence that the invaders attacked us right after we found the box. I mean, what if they were following us? And what if Father and I *had* found the Cosmo-gems? The invaders would have taken them from us, and we would be doomed. Instead, all they know is that we had that tiny metal tablet. They even threw it away.”

“Which means they think it’s worthless.”

“Yes, but look at the top of the tablet. There are three round circles. Three exactly like those on the map. Three like the Cosmo-gems.”

King Zedek arched his eyebrow. “A riddle this time? Rather than a map?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s another clue. Whatever the case, that map led us to this tablet. The two must be connected.”

King Zedek leaned back in his chair. He set his elbows on his armrests and steepled his fingers. “I believe you are becoming a worthy advisor.”

“Thank you, sire.”

"I suppose now you wish to return home and help your mother care for your father."

"Tonight, yes. Tomorrow I'll continue hunting for the Cosmo-gems."

King Zedek studied me. "Perhaps I should send one of my soldiers with you on your quest. Someone like Rodge? You are young yet, and it is dangerous outside of the capital."

I caught my breath. The king was giving me permission to hunt for the Cosmo-gems. Me! Without Father, and yet—

Cold tightened the back of my throat and dropped into my stomach.

I'd never done such important work on my own before. Maybe Rodge should join me. He was Father's friend. Still, Rodge wouldn't know what to do. He, unlike Father and me, hadn't studied the records and the map. Only we—I—knew what to do.

At least, I hoped I knew what to do.

"I think it would be best to keep Rodge here," I said. "If the invaders break through Earth Shield, you'll need him."

The king steeped his fingers in front of him. "That is very mature of you, Phineas Hawk, to be more concerned with Seryn's welfare than your own."

A part of my heart leaped toward the sky. He'd added Hawk to my name. I was succeeding. Yet even as I thought those words, tremblings fluttered over them. In hunting for the Cosmo-gems, I'd have to leave Earth Shield's protection again. Did I really want to do that alone?

“However,” King Zedek continued as if he’d heard my thoughts, “I cannot in good conscience send you, alone, outside Earth Shield. You’re maturing, but you are still a lad.”

My stance slumped.

“At the same time, I cannot in good conscience stop you from going. We need the Cosmo-gems. Which leads me to—” He reached inside the front of his royal robe and removed a circular, blue-stoned amulet on the end of a gold chain. “This is all that remains of my family’s Origin Power. It isn’t much, but take it. Let it help you.”

I turned the small pendant over in my hand. “What does it do?”

“Warn you when your enemies are nearby. Here, wear it.” He draped it over my neck. “Feel how the stone is cold against your chest? That’s because none of the invaders are nearby. But if that changes, the amulet will turn hot. It can’t fight for you the way your father or Rodge would, and you’d still be alone, but that foreknowledge can help you escape the invaders. In many ways, it’s better than a companion.”

“Thank you, sire!”

He smiled a little. “Now go. Find the Cosmo-gems and save our kingdom.”

“Yes, sire.” I turned toward the door, but I didn’t leave.

“Is something else troubling you?”

“No. I mean, yes. Well, it’s not really troubling me, it’s just . . . May I visit Vida before I leave?”

When Father and I first stepped outside Earth Shield, Father had said he was glad he'd visited Vida before we'd left on our quest. Vida's power had come from the Originators, he'd said, so touching it had made his own Origin Power feel stronger. Now that I was on my own, I hoped it would strengthen my Origin Power too.

"Of course, Phineas," King Zedek said. "Take whatever time you need."

I sighed. Just plain Phineas again. Well, I supposed I hadn't fully earned him only calling me *Hawk* yet. "Thank you, sire."

I descended the staircase and crossed to the Center Place. There, two grand pillars stood on either side of a large tile that jutted a few inches above the floor. That tile was more than twice the size of the other tiles, and it was white rather than gold patterned.

I knelt next to the tile. Then, following Father's instructions, I touched each corner with my right forefinger and flattened my palm across its middle.

The floor rumbled.

The white tile slid sideways, revealing moist, rich earth in the space beneath it.

How could there be dirt there? We weren't on the castle's ground-level floor. "Vida's natural laws aren't always the same as Earth's laws," Father's voice said inside my mind. "Remember that."

Seconds later, the white tile disappeared within the gray tiles, and a stone sculpture rose from the ground. Vida. It

was tree-shaped. It glowed with white light, and three thick branches grew out from the top quarter of it. The branches reached toward the ceiling, but just before they touched it, they widened and cupped, forming three indentions. The Cosmo-gems' settings.

My heartbeat thumped in my ears.

Before that moment, I'd only seen drawings of Vida. They'd always intrigued me. But today, standing next to it, I felt like an ant. Not because its branches reached up toward the sun's rays that were painted across the ceiling, but because its light pulsed in the air. My Origin Power felt like that, only stronger.

I pressed both my hands against Vida's trunk.

Heat enveloped my fingers and prickled against my skin.

King Zedek, followed by his three guards, came up behind me. I side-stepped out of his path. He reached to the bottom of the lowest branch. He brushed his fingertips across it and scrutinized his palm.

"Is your Origin Power stronger now?" he asked me. Then, lower, he added, "Strong enough?"

"It has to be."

He, watching me, lifted his chin. I should go now, but I couldn't make my legs move. Right then, I was safe. But out there? On the other side of Earth Shield? And alone?

Slaterider.

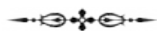
I shivered.

"If you're having second thoughts," King Zedek said, "I'm still willing to assign someone else to this task."

Tate's image flashed in front of me. Unlike Rodge, he wasn't an adult, but he was strong. Strong enough to fight off invaders? I didn't know the answer to that question, but maybe. After all, he'd actually carried Father and the sledge over his head as he'd crossed Groton River.

"No second thoughts," I said, but the next day, when I took food out to Tate, I'd ask him to join me.

Chapter 6



THE SUN HAD DROPPED into night by the time I left the castle. Evening with my family sounded like heaven. It had been days since I'd had a warm, home-cooked meal. And with Father being looked after now, Mother would insist I rest too.

Yet, though my eyes burned with wanting sleep, my senses raced. And the pounding of the invaders' battering rams only made it worse. I couldn't sleep now. The capital was in danger, and I needed to find the Cosmo-gems before it was too late.

I raced down the castle's front stairs.

But I also need to see Tate.

I jumped off the last few stairs and searched the darkness that was occasionally lit by oil lamps hanging from poles. I scanned past the preservation garden and out toward the tall, rugged mountains. Was Tate there? Had he found the cave I'd told him about? Should I go look for him now rather than return home?

I yawned and rubbed my eyes.

No. First, I need to sleep. And make sure Father is all right.

I raced down the cobblestone road that led away from the castle to the stone archway that indicated the marketplace. From there, I veered toward the western residential district. A vine-covered trellis wall surrounded the market. However, with the scents of newly baked bread and roasted meats wafting over that wall, it seemed more like a thin line than a thick barricade. It didn't muffle the low chatter of voices and the rhythmic clatter of footsteps, either.

Yet none of that mattered. All of it, even a distant dog's ongoing bark, soothed me. This was Seryn's capital city. This was home.

I turned off the cobblestone road. Our neighborhood, which housed the king's most regarded servants, was at the end of this first alleyway. Fortunately, only an old man walked there—the alleyway was two-people wide—and I easily slipped past him. The bad thing was, the smell of baking bread faded into the earthy aroma of wet stone. To be sure, wet stone wasn't a noxious smell, but newly baked bread was heaven.

I licked my lips. Might Mother have some in her cupboard?

I crossed my fingers and quickened my pace.

Within moments, I entered the small, square courtyard that sat at the front of our district. I rushed past the central communal well and straight to the wrought-iron gate on the other end. It opened up onto our property.

Maybe it was due to how the moonlight touched it. Or maybe it was my exhaustion. But whatever the case, our home's steeply pitched thatch roof seemed grayer than usual.

Sad, even. And the large front windows that usually welcomed plenty of light through their multiple panes seemed like angry, closed shutters. It was like my family was grieving a loss.

Father!

I scrubbed my eyes, pushing away that thought, and rushed to the front door. I inched it open and stepped into the long entry hall. Both sides of the hall had two closed doors, but candlelight seeped beneath the farthest back door. The sitting room. Had Mother turned it into Father's sick room?

I hurried to it and softly knocked.

"Come in, Phineas," Mother said.

I did.

Father lay on a cot in front of the fireplace that spanned the entire far wall. His chest rose and fell with labored breaths, and I exhaled in relief. *He still lives.*

Mother and Ellya sat on wooden stools next to him.

Mother held a moist cloth to Father's forehead. "What did the king say?"

I eased the door closed and moved to her side. "I'm to rest tonight and leave at sunrise."

"Who's going with you?"

"No one. I'm going alone."

"No." Mother pressed her lips into a flat scowl, gave Ellya the cloth, and turned to me. "I won't allow it, Phineas. It's one thing for you to go with your father, but it's an entirely different matter for you to go alone. You're only a boy."

"I may be a lad"—that word sounded much better than *boy*—"but I'm the best choice, other than Father, to do this."

"You're not going without your father."

"I have to go. *Now*." I flicked my hand toward the distant pounding. "For all we know, the invaders have already cracked Earth Shield."

"And if they have, what then? You can't fight them on your own. You're too young."

"I might be young but King Zedek's counting on me. Look. He gave me this amulet." I pulled the ornament out from beneath my shirt. "It contains what remains of the king's family's Origin Power. He said it will warn me if the invaders are close." Willing my fingers not to tremble, I clasped her forearm. "Don't you see? I'll be able to escape before they find me. I—I wager I won't even see any of them."

"You're not going."

"I have to go," I repeated, holding her gaze. "*The king* told me to go and find the Cosmo-gems."

All color left Mother's already pale cheeks. She folded her arms and turned away from me.

I stepped in front of her. "I've been with Father. I know what to do. All will be well." I hoped.

She pursed her lips as if she was biting back her words. Finally, she drew back her shoulders, "I'll get some food ready to take with you."

"Do you have bread?"

"Of course."

I thought of Tate. "Can you add in extra helpings?"

"Why?" she snapped. "You won't be gone long."

I almost told her about Tate, but then I stopped myself. Tate seemed to want to keep his identity hidden. Besides that, Mother meant nothing by her response. Not really. Comfort for me and, I suspected, for her was her only intention. She had, after all, said the same thing to me and Father before we left last time, and she'd given us food enough for five days.

"I don't know how long I will be gone," I said.

She stiffened. After a moment, she gave me a tight nod.

Ellya stood from her stool. "I want to go with you."

"You're too young," I said.

"If you're not too young, neither am I. I'm almost ten. That's just one year younger than you."

"One year is a long time."

"Not all that long."

"That's enough, Ellya," Mother said. "You're needed here inside the city."

"But—"

"You're not going." Mother looked at me as if she were about to add "and neither are you," but she instead brushed past me and returned to Father's side.

I followed her. "Is he conscious?"

"I don't believe so."

"He is getting better, isn't he?"

“He is. He’s even wakened twice. Spoke to us, too. Though I hate to imagine what happened to him to make him sleep for so long.”

I didn’t know the answer either. Perhaps the invaders struck his head. Yet even as I thought that, I pictured Tate leaning over Father and healing him. Sleep always helped me overcome sicknesses faster.

Hold a minute.

Was that one of the things Tate had done for Father? Had he helped him sleep longer so he could heal faster?

I furrowed my brows. I didn’t know, but I’d wager that was exactly what he’d done.

I clasped Father’s arm, which lay at his side. “I will sit with him tonight. You and Ellya need your rest.”

“So do you,” Mother said.

I blinked against the sting in my eyes. Yes, I needed sleep, but if Father woke, I wanted to be there. He might know where I should next look for the Cosmo-gems. I sat in Ellya’s chair.

“It’s late,” Mother said to Ellya. “Time for bed.”

Ellya glared at me, whirled with a huff, and left the room.

Mother returned to her seat next to Father. Again, she pressed the cloth to his forehead.

“Can you hear me?” I asked Father.

He didn’t answer.

I winced and took off my cloak. I removed the stone box from my waist pack.

"I'm glad to see you found a use for that pouch," Mother said.

"I've found many uses for it."

She gave me a soft smile that appeared more like a frown and turned back to Father. Mother had made this pack for me soon after King Zedek had announced I would be Father's apprentice. Father always needed places to put objects, she'd said, and she expected I would too.

I opened the box and took out the metal tablet. I angled it toward the lit candle on the trunk next to the door. Although the metal gleamed in the dim light, the black etched writing seemed to stand out as strongly as shadows in sunlight. I brushed my finger over the straight, angular markings. They looked a bit like jagged mountain peaks divided into sections. Were they words? And that marking there . . . was that an upside-down Y with a tiny slanted line above it? Father had just begun to teach me about Seryn's ancient language when King Zedek had assigned us to find the Cosmo-gems. But that marking looked similar to a word Father frequently pointed out to me. The word had been "force." Symbols next to the Y differed from those we'd studied. Still . . . I finger-tapped that grouping . . . could this word be "force" too?

And at the top of the page . . .

My eyes widened.

Three circles. Might they be the Cosmo-gems? And if so, maybe this word, if it was a word, really *was* "force."

Sudden warmth tingled through my skin. My thoughts settled, too. Father had taught me that those sensations were a clear yes to my questions about which direction I should take. That feeling hadn't happened often in my life, but in the few instances it had occurred, Father's advice had proved right. My previous path was right, so that meant my current one was too.

"You, like Ellya, should go to bed," Mother said. "Even your voice sounds tired."

"I'm going to wait here with Father."

She, holding my gaze, tilted her head, drew her eyebrows together, and pressed her forefingers against her temple. After a long moment, she sighed and adjusted the coverlet that draped over Father. "Very well. If you're that determined, I'll leave him here with you for a while. At least one of us should get some sleep."

I nodded, and she gave me a quick hug.

She left, and I turned to Father. His cheeks were almost as pale as sea foam. Or maybe the dark bruise on his temple made it look that way. And he was breathing. Not deeply, but his chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm.

"He will be all right," I whispered.

I watched him a few minutes longer and returned to my stool. I put the tablet back in the box and slid them both inside my pack.

Again, I watched Father.

Sleeping . . . breathing . . . hopefully healing. Nothing more.

Finally, I folded my arms, leaned back against the wall, and closed my eyes.



“Phineas?”

I sat up at the sound of Father’s voice. I blinked. The candle had burned out, gray morning light spread across the room, and Father’s eyes were open.

I leaned toward him. “I’m here.”

He smiled a little and again closed his eyes. “I don’t know how you brought me here, but thank you.”

“I had help.”

“From what?”

From whom, you mean. I opened my mouth, about to tell him something about Tate, then stopped myself. *Honor Tate’s trust in you.*

Father’s breath slowed.

I clasped his forearm. “Father? Please try to stay awake a little longer. I need to talk to you.”

“I’m not asleep.” Father took in a deep breath. He opened his eyes. “What is it?”

I stood taller. “I-I’m going to keep looking for the Cosmo-gems.”

He shook his head. “You’re too young and too inexperienced. I won’t allow it.”

"I know I've had little training, but I must do this. Seryn's in danger."

"The king will send someone else."

"There is no one else."

Father frowned. "Who told you that? Yourself or King Zedek?"

I shifted in my seat. "King Zedek eventually agreed with me."

Father's frown deepened.

"Please, Father. I really need your help." I showed him the tablet. "I haven't seen this language before, but I've been trying to interpret it anyway. Like these markings here. This symbol looks a lot like a word you were teaching me about in Seryn's ancient language. It meant the word 'force.' So, I wondered if these markings might mean 'force' too."

He didn't answer me, and I glanced up from the tablet. Had he fallen asleep again? But he hadn't. He only stared at me. And the longer he stared, the louder the invaders' poundings against Earth Shield grew.

I rubbed the back of my neck.

Finally, Father said, "I believe you're right, Phineas." He paused. "You've done well."

Why did the room seem brighter?

I smiled a little and once more referred to the tablet. "There are also these three circles. They resemble the circles on the map. The ones that represent the Cosmo-gems."

"Let me see it."

I handed Father the tablet, and he studied it. "Again, Phineas, I believe you are right."

"Can you read the rest of it?" I asked.

"I wish I could, but I haven't seen this language before either."

"Do you know how to translate it?"

"Yes. Given the time. But I'm not . . . strong enough to do so right now."

"Then tell me how to do it." Father shook his head again, but I quickly added, "Not all of it. That would be too much. But a little? Like this short line here. The tablet has three others like it. There, beneath the word's beginning. And there. And there. If I can understand what that marking means, I might decipher these other words."

Father pursed his lips the way he sometimes did when he was studying something. "I don't know what that marking means," he said at last. "And as far as you translating it on your own, I fear I haven't taught you enough even to get started. The process is rather complicated."

"I might not possess the same skills, wisdom, or intelligence as you, but I've—"

"That's not the problem, son. You have a fine mind that will benefit Seryn. That's why King Zedek made you my apprentice."

I smiled outright this time. I couldn't help it. It was rather nice knowing people thought I had a fine mind. It made me

feel smart. But what help would my thoughts be to anyone if I couldn't find the Cosmo-gems and save our kingdom?

"Please, Father," I said. "I need to figure out what's on this tablet. I—no, all of Seryn needs me to find the Cosmo-gems."

Father, rubbing his jaw, gazed about the room. "I know it's important, but . . ." He blinked and stared at me. Like he was confused. Or like he'd never seen me before. Was he all right?

I crossed and uncrossed my arms.

"I have an idea," Father said at last. "Since you recognized a similarity between a word on this tablet and one in Seryn's ancient language, you might recognize some other similarities."

"I'll try it. Just tell me what to do."

Father motioned to the door. "Pour pebbles from the well into that flowerpot."

I looked at the flowerpot tucked in the corner behind the door.

I tilted my head and turned to Father. "Our Origin Power pebbles?"

"Yes."

More than a century ago, my great-great-grandfather had recognized that our people's Origin Powers were becoming weaker with each new generation. He didn't want that to happen to our family, so he preserved them. In the same way the Originators gave their powers to the protective forces, my great-great-grandfather had transferred most of his Origin Power into our well's stones. The Origin Power then seeped from the stones, through the well's water, and

down to the pebbles at the bottom of the well. Fortunately, Great-Great-Grandfather hadn't given up all of his power, so it hadn't cost him his life.

"Why should I put the pebbles in there? The pot's empty." But the moment I said those words, my breath caught. Our Origin Power revealed hidden things. "Is something inside the flowerpot?"

Father smiled. "Yes. Your mother still has enough of her family's Origin Power to hide simple objects."

"Mother has Origin Power? I thought you and I were the only Serynians who still had it."

"Most think that, but I suspect others exist."

Like Tate. "But—why didn't either of you tell me about Mother's Power?"

"Because it hardly seemed to matter. Her Power is weak. And as neither you nor Ellya inherited it, she is the last of her family to possess it. Why speak of an irretrievable past?"

I supposed his reason made sense. Sort of. Even so, I wished they'd told me. Knowing something about those who came before me made me feel more real somehow. Like I belonged in this world. That the earth was part of me and I was part of it.

"What's in the flowerpot?" I asked.

"A list of words I've interpreted from various languages over the years. And their meanings. I asked your mother to hide it." Father glimpsed at me from the corner of his eye. "I don't know why. I just had this feeling that I should do so."

That tingly, settled sort of feeling, I suspected. "Why'd she hide it there?"

"It seemed as good a place as any."

The flowerpot had simple, straight lines. Like a crate. And it was as gray and uninteresting as a muddy puddle. I'd always wondered why Mother planted nothing in it. She wouldn't let Ellya do so, either.

"Actually," I said, "I think it's ingenious. If someone was searching for your list, who would look in an empty flowerpot?"

"That decision was your mother's." Father's gaze clouded. His voice trailed. Was something else wrong?

"You'd best be on your way, son," he quickly added. "It's almost sunrise."

I jolted. A new day already? I needed to get hunting for the Cosmo-gems.

"Very well," I said. I headed toward the flowerpot, but as I reached to pick it up, I remembered my promise to watch over Father while he slept. "I'll get Mother before I go," I added.

"There's no need," Mother said from behind me. "I'll stay with him now."

I turned. Mother bustled in through the doorway. Dark circles rimmed her eyes, and strands of her hair fell from the bun at the back of her head. It didn't look like she'd slept much, if at all.

Mother moved past me to Father's side. She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead.

Her hand is trembling.

Why? Father was getting well, wasn't he? And when I found the Cosmo-gems, Seryn would be safe again. She should be happy, not sad.

My thoughts paused, and sudden understanding spread through me. How could she be fully happy when she was worried about me?

She couldn't.

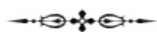
But she wouldn't stop me from going after the Cosmo-gems, either. My mission was too important to give up.

I squeezed her free hand. "Thank you, Mother."

She gave me a slight nod. Nothing more. But somehow I felt stronger. Braver, too.

"I won't let you down." I whispered. I collected the flower-pot and left the house.

Chapter 7



I RAN TO THE backyard. My footsteps plodded against the earth in rhythm with the invaders' distant pounding, so I ran faster. If only I could race beyond the sound to a place and time where the invaders couldn't break through either Shield.

At last, I reached the well. I adjusted the rope and pulley and lowered the bucket.

Down . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

Splash!

I let the bucket drop deeper into the well before I brought it back up. I tipped the bucket, dumping the water out of it. Then, following Father's instructions, I poured part of the gravel into the flowerpot.

Nothing appeared. Was there something else I should do? Father hadn't given me any other instructions, but a sudden image of Father swirling his fingers in the lake before we found

the stone box flashed in front of my thoughts. A slight tingling spread over me.

Hmm. Did that sensation mean that was what I should do? *It's worth a try.*

I knelt next to the flowerpot and swirled my fingers through the water inside it.

Bubbles blurred. A green stem with an oval-shaped tip shot out of the water.

A flower? Shouldn't it be a scroll?

The stem inched upward.

I stepped back from it.

It grew taller and taller. When it stood about a foot above the flowerpot's rim, the bud burst. Purple flower petals sprang out of it. A tiny rolled-up piece of parchment did too. It measured about two inches long and a quarter-inch thick.

I plucked out the scroll. Holding it between my fingertips, I gingerly unrolled the thin paper, yet with each unrolling, the parchment grew thicker and longer. Wider, too. And writing spanned the length of it until it appeared the same as any scroll from the castle's library.

I laid my cloak on the moist ground and spread the parchment over it. Next, I removed the map and the metal tablet from my waist pack. Third, I lay the three documents next to one another. And finally, I scanned between them. If only my Origin Power could reveal those words.

But it couldn't.

Though, someone had written the word I'd already recognized on the tablet, along with its interpretation, at the top of the scroll. *Force*. Beneath it lay a list of at least another hundred ancient words and their meanings.

I groaned. With so many odd symbols representing ancient words, decoding the tablet's writing was going to take forever. If the needed words were even there.

They'll be there.

I set my jaw and again compared the three documents. The next four words on Father's list weren't on the tablet.

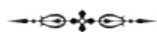
I groaned again.

"Keep moving," Father's voice said inside my mind. "Forever will come sooner that way." He always said that when I complained about a chore.

"I hope you're right."

I studied the next word on Father's list. The metal tablet didn't have it either, so I moved on to the next word. And the next. All the while trying not to hear the ongoing pounding.

Chapter 8



FINALLY FINISHED.

I yawned, stretched out my back, and rubbed what remained of the morning chill from my arms. The sun had already risen halfway up the sky. That meant three hours had passed since I'd first started comparing Father's list of ancient words to those written on the metal tablet.

Now I'd not only read through them all, but I'd also found three similar words. They were "force," "unity," and "awake." In relation to the Cosmo-gems, "unity" and "force" made sense. But "awake"? What was that about? Was something sleeping?

I shook my head. I didn't know the answer to that question, but if I was correct about the rest of it, the writing on the tablet now read, "Unity—*unknown word*—force—*unknown word*, *unknown word*—awake."

It wasn't much to go on, but at least it gave me more information.

I gathered up the documents, put them in my waist pack, and returned to the house.

Quiet surrounded me, which meant Ellya wasn't there. That wasn't surprising. It was late morning, and she'd likely already left for the preservation garden. Though it did surprise me that she hadn't come to check on me, or rather, *bother* me before she left.

I frowned. Maybe she had peeked out at me. And I'd been so busy hunting for the missing words I hadn't noticed.

I crept down the entry hall to the sitting room. Inside, Mother, sitting on the stool next to Father, leaned against the wall behind her and slept. A few strands of her hair draped over her face, fluttering against her mouth and nose with each of her soft snores.

Father, also sleeping, lay on his cot in the same position he had been in when I'd left him last night.

I tiptoed closer.

Father's face had more color. He almost looked like his usual self.

I released a huge breath. He was getting better! He might be completely healed when I returned with the Cosmo-gems.

I stood taller, watched my parents a moment longer to confirm everything was well with them, and left the sitting room.

As I stepped into the dark hallway, a sudden wave of tiredness drooped through me. I yawned and glanced toward my bed chamber. Dared I rest a while longer before I left? After

all, it had been days since I'd had a full night's sleep. A body couldn't keep going without sleep.

Like that ever-present pounding did.

I blinked and shook my head. The invaders weren't resting, so I couldn't either. At least, not yet.

I did, however, need something to protect myself and Tate, if he joined me, from the invaders.

I pressed the cold amulet against my chest.

This was a helpful tool, but I needed something more than a warning, didn't I? After all, as Father frequently said, overpreparation was the wisest course.

I hurried to my parents' bedchamber. Father's trunk sat at the foot of their bed, and just as I'd remembered, his swords lay across the top of it.

I grabbed the hilt of his longest sword. Its grip felt sturdy in my hand. It made me feel strong, like I really was a fearless warrior. Surely Father wouldn't mind if I borrowed it. Not under these circumstances. Not when he knew the king relied on me to find the Cosmo-gems.

I took a deep breath, lifted the sword with both hands, and pointed it straight in front of me.

Its tip drooped.

I tried to aim it at the ceiling, but my muscles gave way. I groaned. I couldn't fend off any enemies with this sword. It was much too big.

I am far too small.

I set Father's long sword back on the trunk and tried each of the others. All were too big and heavy for me.

I put my hands on my hips. *If only Father had a smaller one.*

But even as I thought those words, my breath hitched.

Hold a minute. He does have a smaller one. Last I saw it, it rested inside the trunk alongside Father's other prized possessions. True, Father had many times warned me never to touch the dagger without his permission, but if he were awake, he'd know I needed it, wouldn't he? And he'd let me use it.

I hefted the swords off the trunk, set them on the floor next to it, and opened the lid. Next, I carefully shifted its contents to the side and lifted the hidden panel at the bottom.

Father's dagger.

I pulled it out. Its weight felt perfect in my hand—not too heavy nor too light. But then, given its smallness, could it even help me battle an enemy?

I whisked the dagger in front of me. It wasn't long, but it was sharp. I whisked it again. It would do.

I put the dagger back in its sheath. I then tucked it inside my boot the way Father had shown me.

"Father won't mind," I said aloud. That would make it true, wouldn't it?

Back before the king chose me as the royal advisor's apprentice, Father taught me sword fighting. Then, like now, the swords had been too big for me, so I'd asked Father if I could use his dagger. He'd refused. He'd said we needed to keep it safe and secure.

“The dagger is both a symbolic heirloom and a powerful artifact,” he’d said. “Passed down through our family for generations, this shows our family’s strength. When we focus our Origin Power into it, it can actually make it stronger. But it must be used wisely.

Then I’d promised myself that when I grew up, I would take special care of that dagger like Father had. That I would be a model soldier.

Instead, I’m merely an apprentice to the royal advisor.

I grimaced, stomped the word “merely” beneath my feet, and left my parents’ bedchamber. I headed to the front door.

A full burlap bag sat on the small table next to it. *Thank you, Mother!*

I grinned and hurried to it. How had I not seen it when I’d first entered the house that morning? Especially considering I should have expected it. Mother never let me leave on any sort of journey without foodstuff.

I peeked inside the bag. Yup. That’s what it was. Two loaves of brown bread, an enormous block of goat cheese, and several strips of dried venison. Alone, the food would last me a week. Maybe more if I rationed it. However, if Tate joined me, it would only last two or three days. Possibly not even that long, given his size.

I tapped my forefinger against my lips. But then, maybe we’d only need three days to find the Cosmo-gems. I’d soon locate Tate. And after that, working together, we’d figure out the map. We’d know right where to go.

Hardly. Father hadn't even known where we should go next.

I rolled my eyes at my too-hopeful thoughts and stiffened my spine. *I must prepare for many days.*

I tiptoed to the kitchen, ate a quick breakfast of bread and cider, and collected more bread, cheese, and dried meat from Mother's pantry. I then stuffed them into the bag. After cinching it closed, I slid the bag over my shoulder and left.

On my way out of the housing district, I nodded to several people. I knew some, like the baker who lived near us and two of my old school friends. They nodded back at me. But most people either seemed lost in their thoughts or worried enough about the pounding that they didn't notice me.

Which was just as well. It was much easier to reach one's destination when no one stopped to talk to you.

Finally, I walked along the cobblestone path that ran beside the marketplace. I wove through the grove of trees that surrounded the castle and stepped into the wet, grassy field. In front of me and to the south, wildflowers dotted the grassy landscape that divided Seryn's capital city from Earth Shield. To my left and far beyond the preservation garden lay Caba Forest. Caba Forest spanned the full length of the mountain range that encircled the entire island and separated us from the ocean.

The mountain range. That's where I'd told Tate to go. *I hope he went to that cave. If he didn't, I'll never find him.*

“Don’t borrow trouble,” I said in Father’s voice. “Just move forward.”

I drew back my shoulders.

Yet would it matter if I borrowed trouble? As long as that trouble was nothing more than something that barely mattered? Something like . . .

I peered into the sky.

. . . something like bouncy white clouds. Clouds that would disappear when a strong wind blew them away.

I smiled. *I will be like a strong wind that won’t float away.*

I walked faster. I continued on through the vast rolling field. Sometimes I kicked a stone out of my path. Sometimes I watched birds fly across the sky. Mostly, I pondered which words could persuade Tate to come with me on this quest.

If I find him.

I shook that thought aside and continued with my musings.

Should I offer Tate a reward if he joined me? If so, what? I had nothing anyone would want. And anyway, keeping Seryn safe should be enough, shouldn’t it? It satisfied me.

In the end, I decided I’d be honest with him. I’d just straight-out ask him to help me search for the Cosmo-gems.

What if he refuses?

I shifted my food bag to my other shoulder.

If he refused, I’d at least know I’d tried.

I kicked another rock and pressed my lips into a tight line.

Hopefully, he won’t refuse.

I continued walking.

I forced my thoughts away from the ten miles still in front of me and focused on the metal tablet.

“Unity—unknown word—force,” I said aloud. “Unknown word, unknown word—awake.” What were those three unknown words?

I repeated the statement three more times. Two of those times, I added words I thought might fit in the blank spaces. Words like *stars*, *Cosmo-gems*, *power*, and *hidden*.

Unfortunately, none of them seemed right. Besides that, I had no new ideas. Except . . . a memory flooded through me.

During our initial search for the Cosmo-gems two weeks ago, the map only had a title. It was the word *Seryn*. Three circles lay next to it. In the middle of the parchment, there was an X. We’d determined that the three circles had represented the Cosmo-gems, and the X likely meant that the Originators had hidden the gems in the kingdom’s center. That was why we’d first searched the throne room around Vida, which grew out from the capital’s center place. But as Father and I had turned up nothing, we’d expanded our search to other important places throughout the kingdom. One of them had been Groton River, which ran through the outer district and alongside Earth Shield.

My thoughts trailed back to that all-important day.

We’d been walking along the river, searching for the Cosmo-gems, when Father had said, “Stop. Hand me the map.”

I did so.

He opened it, held it above him like a sun shade, and shifted it from one direction to another. He widened his eyes. "It can't be! Here. Hold the map like this."

Standing in front of him, I held it out flat the way he had done.

Father clasped my shoulders and angled me more fully into the sunlight. Then he took his sword from its hilt. He positioned it next to the parchment, pointed its tip toward the sky, and drew his brows into a deep, concentrated furrow, calling forth his Origin Power.

Sunlight bounced off the sword like a misty pillar. It landed on the X. The reflected light splattered across the page like a growing, twinkling puddle.

"Oh, ho!" Father grinned.

"What is it? Do you see something?" I studied the map closer. The X appeared—disappeared—appeared amid the sunlight's intermittent sparkles. A moment after, three oblong-shaped circles emerged. They flickered around the X.

Tingles raced from my head, down my neck, and across my shoulder blades. "Where did those circles come from?"

"Reflective light has uncovering properties," Father said.

"Uncovering properties," I repeated. "Like our Origin Power?"

"Yes. Our ancestors occasionally combined the two forces when they had a hard puzzle to unravel. Regardless, we'd thought we'd lost that ability back when Great-Grandfather

infused most of our Origin Power into the well. And yet, here it is.”

“Working again,” I said.

“Almost.” Father brushed his forefinger across the map. “It’s struggling to reveal itself. Focus your Origin Power on the map too.”

I gulped. Father had shown me how to do it, but I’d never practiced it.

“Will my Power be enough?” I asked.

“I hope so.”

I’d edged closer to Father and concentrated on the light flickering across the map. I’d willed my Origin Power into it. Gradually, the oblong circles had arched around the X like a fence. Or a rainbow. Wavy lines had jumbled around the whole of them. Our united powers had worked. They’d revealed the images that had eventually led us to Flatberry Lake.

My thoughts flashed back to the present and to the metal tablet.

Reflective light, I thought. Could those be the missing words?

“Unity—unknown word—force,” I said. “Reflective light awake.”

I frowned. The phrase or sentence still made little sense, which meant those words likely weren’t the right ones.

I groaned and continued on. Sometimes I peered out beyond Caba Forest toward the mountain cave I’d told Tate

about. Mostly, I focused on the sweeping green fields around me.

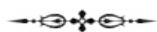
On how the moist grasses bowed in the crisp breeze, no matter how tall they were.

On the birds cawing or chirping as they flew across the sky. Some were white. Most were black. And a few of them, though they still cawed, didn't fly at all. They only pecked at the ground.

On how Earth Shield's power marks streaked across the sky, whisper-buzzing an assurance that Earth Shield protected Seryn Kingdom.

And on how the invaders' poundings never stopped.

Chapter 9



BY THE TIME I reached the mountains, the sun sat high in the sky. The cave where I'd told Tate to hide was about half a mile up from my current location. The slope was steep and dotted with tall, thick weeds and sprawling ferns and bushes, but the cave was on a narrow level strip of land. Father called it a bench.

"Please, Tate, be up there," I said. Then, drawing back my shoulders, I climbed.

Had the trek been a flat and easy jaunt, I'd have reached the bench in minutes. Instead, the climb was so grueling that it took me a full hour. Then, when I finally reached it, I took several minutes to catch my breath before I trudged to the cave.

I peered into its wide opening. All was black inside, like a moonless midnight. It smelled like muggy dust, and something crept from somewhere nearby. Or had it slithered?

"Hello," I called into the darkness. "Tate? Are you in there?"

No answer.

"It's Phineas. Just Phineas. No invaders."

Silence.

"Please answer me. I have food."

I inched inside the cave and blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the shadows. I scrutinized the semi-circular room. No footmarks pressed the earth. No man-made objects lay strewn about. And the firepit Father and I had built looked just as it had when we'd used it two weeks ago.

I slumped. "Skeed, Tate. Did you decide not to hide here? Did you get lost?"

"I didn't get lost." Tate stepped out of the narrow tunnel at the back of the cavern.

I whirled to him. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"I did answer you."

"Not at first."

Tate stepped out of the shadows. He still wore his green cloak. While the cave was cooler than the outside, it was still warm in here. If it had been me, I'd have taken it off hours ago.

"As promised, I'm here," I said.

He grunted and stepped closer to me. I stepped back. Not because I was afraid of him, but because the cave seemed to shrink. I remembered Tate was bigger than me. Almost as tall as Father, even. However, in that position, with hands on hips and head touching the ceiling, he appeared wider. Almost as wide as two of me, though he wasn't fat. Was that bulk the reason he was so strong?

I wish I was as big as him.

I took the food bag from off my shoulder and pulled out a loaf of bread. I handed it to him. "Here ya go."

He ripped off a quarter of it with one bite.

I gaped. How could he eat such a large piece like that? Sure, he had a wide mouth, but that bite was huge.

"Skeed," I said.

"What's that word?"

"Just something I made up."

Tate took another bite, and I furrowed my brows. "You must be starved."

He nodded. "How's your father?"

I blinked so he wouldn't think I was still staring at him, though I was. "Better. Thanks to you. Hey, slow down. That needs to last you a while."

"Sorry. I haven't eaten for days."

Days? I struggled to make it through half a day without food. "How many days?"

"Three."

I huffed a skeptical laugh. "Be serious."

"Two-and-a-half then." He stuffed the last of the loaf into his mouth.

I studied the hollow look in his expression. The gravity in his eyes. *He is serious.* "Why so long?"

"No time to grab food."

That was right. When he'd first come upon Father and I, he'd only carried a water bag. I should have paid closer attention to that. How could I be a royal advisor if I ignored details?

"So, two-and-a-half days," I repeated. "Two-and-a-half days without food."

"Uh-huh."

I frowned. Just over two-and-a-half days ago, the invaders had broken through Sky Shield. "What about your parents?"

"They didn't escape."

I choked. "Did the invaders capture them?"

"Not captured. Killed."

Emotion twisted through me and blurred my eyes. No wonder Tate had been so worried about the invaders seeing him. Even more worried than I had been about them seeing me. If the invaders had killed his parents, did that mean they wanted to kill Tate too?

Yet, why would they? Father, my schoolteachers—everyone taught me the invaders only captured people and made them join their kingdom. Had they lied to me, deceived me on purpose? Maybe because I was just a kid? Or was Seryn in greater peril than we realized?

A new sort of fear trembled through me.

"I—" I swallowed my words and took another loaf of bread from my pack. I held it out to him.

He shook his head. "I've had enough. And anyway, I saw a deer this morning." He lifted his chin as if that should tell me

all I needed to know. "I can take care of myself. If—can I stay here?"

"Why do you want to do that? I mean, I'm sure it's all right. The cave belongs to all Serynians." I rubbed the back of my head. *Now's your chance. Ask him.* "Why don't you come with me? I'm on an assignment right now. From the king. But when I'm finished, I'll go back to the capital. I'm sure someone would let you live with them. Perhaps even my parents."

Tate tilted his head. "What assignment?"

"Nothing too hard," I lied. "King Zedek just wants me to find the Cosmo-gems."

"The stones of power? Impossible."

"Why? They can stop the invaders from destroying Seryn once and for all."

"They're lost."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Father and I had been hunting for them when you first found us. And anyway, King Zedek stumbled upon a map in the old records that told a different story."

Tate watched me as if he was waiting for something to happen. He even smiled a little. Did he think I was teasing him?

"No joke," I clarified.

He crossed his arms in front of him and continued to stare at me. At last, he said, "I'll go."

"You will? I mean, I'm glad for it, but—you will?"

"We must stop the invaders."

I grinned inside. I'd done it. I'd convinced him to come with me. I wouldn't be alone.

“Let’s go.” Tate reached toward the food bag on my shoulder. “I’ll help you carry that.”

“All right, but don’t eat any of it while I’m not looking.”

He rolled his eyes, draped the food bag over his shoulder, and left the cave. He strode back down the mountain-side. Easily, like he was just taking a simple jaunt through the countryside. But me? I sometimes jogged, sometimes ran. Maneuvering through sagebrush and navigating slippery slopes required extra care. Yet no matter what I did, I couldn’t catch up to him.

How could he—a boy—move with such speed and ease? Was it because he was tall and strong and had long legs?

At last, Tate reached a grove of trees at the bottom of the mountain. I caught up to him about a minute later. He was staring into the trees’ shadows.

“Have you seen any invaders?” I asked.

“No.”

“We’ve been lucky.”

Tate grunted and pointed to the east. “Search that way. I’ll look this way.”

“Good thinking,” I said. But inside, I growled. Being faster and bigger didn’t make him the leader. This was my assignment. I was the apprentice to the royal advisor. Not him.

I stood taller. I lifted my chin and spoke with the same firm voice Father used when he wanted me to obey him. “We’ll need to check inside the grove, too. When that’s finished, we’ll head out after the Cosmo-gems.”

Tate glanced down at the food bag—*my* food bag—and angled away from me.

Good. It looked like he'd understood.

I turned from him and searched in the opposite direction. I scanned between the trees and among the upper branches.

"See anyone?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"All right. Come on." I stepped farther into the grove and motioned for him to follow me. He did.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"I wish I knew."

"I thought you had a map."

"I do, but it's not super helpful at the moment. Here—why don't you look at it? Maybe you'll see something I don't."

I took the map out of my waist pack and handed it to him. I pointed out the word "Seryn," the X, and the circles. I also told him about my Origin Power—how it had caused the reflected light to uncover more of the map and how the map had finally led us to the metal tablet at Flatberry Lake.

"I'd thought the tablet would tell us where to go next," I continued. "And maybe it does. The problem is, I only figured out three of the five words."

"Can I see the tablet?"

"Sure." I handed it to him and pointed out the words.

He studied it and handed it back to me. "Did you try your Origin Power on other spots?"

I frowned. Why hadn't I thought of that? I was supposed to be smart, wasn't I? Smart enough to one day be the king's royal advisor? "I wasn't able to."

"Why?"

"The conditions weren't right."

"What conditions?"

Now what could I say? If I told him the truth, he'd see how weak I was. He might even try to take charge again.

I glanced sideways at him. He was watching me with that same disbelieving look he'd given me when I'd told him about the map. Only then it had been the truth. Would it always be like this between us? With him believing nothing I said?

Maybe. Especially if I kept lying.

Prove he can trust you, I thought. Tell the truth.

I blew out a long breath of air. "I haven't even thought of shining the reflection on more of the map. Dumb, huh?"

He stared at me. And the longer he stared, the smaller I felt. "What conditions?"

That was all he said. Nothing unkind or disparaging. Sometimes I tried to be kind, and Mother said it made me a bigger and better man. Tate was already big on the outside. Did his response just now mean that he was also big on the inside?

"Are conditions good now?" he added.

I shaded my eyes with my hand and squinted up toward Sky Shield. The sun's late-afternoon rays flowed down hot and bright.

"They are," I said. "Let's try it."

I stepped out of the trees' shadows, took off my cloak, and spread it across the ground. Next, I slid Father's dagger out of my boot.

"Now what?" Tate asked.

I knelt beside the map. "Now I fill the dagger's reflection with my Origin Power."

Tate knelt next to me, and I juggled the blade within the sun's rays. After several moments, I caught a reflection. It spread across the northern edge of the blank white map.

"Now what?" Tate repeated.

I bit the inside of my lower lip. Father said the dagger channels our Origin Power and makes it stronger. *I hope he's right.* "I focus my Origin Power into it," I replied.

"Healing power works that way too."

What did that mean? I hadn't even had the dagger with me when he'd healed Father. Even so, I gave Tate a slight nod and gathered all the Origin Power I could find within me. I then concentrated it into the reflection bouncing off the dagger.

Nothing new appeared on the map.

"Try another spot," Tate said.

I angled the reflection right, but the paper remained blank. I shifted it left. Still whiteness.

Tate slumped back onto his feet. "I guess you were right."

I slumped backward too. But as I did, the reflected light flashed across the page south of the X. A new line appeared and disappeared.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

“See what?”

I shifted the reflective light toward the area farther south of the X. Again, I focused my Origin Power into the dagger.

A solitary sometimes-curved, sometimes-straight line appeared on the map. Only this one, thicker and stronger than the previous lines, didn’t disappear. It also ran farther south.

I laughed a little. *It worked! Just like Father said it would. My Origin Power strengthened the reflection.*

“Is that line a road?” Tate asked.

“I don’t know.” I squeezed the dagger’s handle and willed more Origin Power into it. I continued moving the reflection southward. A few inches farther, the line stopped, and a horizontal grouping of upside-down Vs appeared. They were like the markings that had represented the boulders in Flatberry Lake, only they were bigger. And one of them had an X in the middle of it.

I jabbed that X. “I wager that’s where the Cosmo-gems are.”

“Or another clue,” Tate said.

I tried not to frown. “It better be more than that. We don’t have time to keep solving puzzles. We have to find the Cosmo-gems.”

“Yeah, but—” Tate swallowed. “What’s next?”

“We figure out what these new markings are. Any ideas?”

Tate leaned over the map. He ran his forefinger over the circles. Sometimes he hurried. Other times he paused. But when he leaped to his feet, he spun away from me and squeezed the back of his neck.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Do you know what those markings are?"

He lifted his face toward the sky.

"I'm thinking it might be one of the outlying villages," I suggested. "And those markings are houses."

He turned back to me. "Not houses. The villages are close to the lake."

I shifted the dagger's reflected light back to where the line began, a bit south of the lake. I held the reflection there. Just as Tate had said, a small grouping of house-like squares appeared.

"That must be Lightwick Village," I said. Then, just as Father had done after he'd uncovered Flatberry Lake's image, I shifted the reflection sideways. Like before, no new images appeared, but those I'd already uncovered remained on the map.

Thank you, dagger.

I slipped the dagger back inside my boot and again leaned over the map. I trailed my finger downward along the line from the X to the—I caught my breath. A faint arching line that crossed through the vertical line hovered about an inch below Lightwick Village.

"That's the mark I saw," Tate said.

"Sky Shield," I said.

Tate folded his arms beneath his cloak. "The vertical line crosses it."

"I see that."

“The Originators wouldn’t do that, would they? Hide the Cosmo-gems outside Seryn? What if someone from another kingdom found them? And anyway, it’s too—we can’t go out there. We can’t cross Sky Shield. If we do, the Protective Forces can’t help us.”

I flinched at the fear I heard in his voice, and glanced over both my shoulders. Not only was that the longest statement Tate had ever made to me, but it was also the loudest. I pressed my finger against my lips and mouthed the word, “hush.”

Tate clamped his hand over his mouth. “Sorry,” he whispered.

I nodded slightly. “What’s the matter? Why are you so worried?”

“Aren’t you?”

I lifted my chin. I was the apprentice to the royal advisor. I couldn’t be worried.

“Well?” Tate pressed.

I returned the map to my waist pouch and focused on the feel of the dagger in my boot. It was neither cool nor hot, and its hilt protected my skin from its blade. But the metal was hard. Sturdy. Tough like steel.

I willed the dagger’s strength into my leg and dragged that feeling up to my heart. *I can do this.*

“Yes, I’m worried,” I said aloud. “Assuming the map is accurate, I see no other choice. We have to find the Cosmo-gems, which means we’ll have to pass through Lightwick Village and cross through Sky Shield. We’ll have to leave Seryn.”

Tate shook his head. He back-stepped. "Not me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not going."

My thoughts spun. My insides twisted. "Why?"

"*Why* doesn't matter."

"*Why* always matters."

Tate held the foodstuff bag out to me.

I didn't take it.

"Suit yourself." He set the bag on the ground and headed back in the direction we'd come.

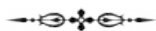
I stiffened my spine. I'd been foolish to trust him so readily.

"Never mind, then," I called after him. "Go back to the cave. Or anywhere you want. I can find the Como-gems on my own."

Tate kept walking.

"So be it." I ignored the churnings inside my stomach and hefted the foodstuff bag over my shoulder. "I don't need him anyway," I lied.

Chapter 10



ALONE.

I didn't say the word aloud, but it pounded through me as if I had. Pounded almost as loudly as the invaders' poundings against Earth Shield. Pounded as I walked deeper into the thick wood.

Why had I trusted Tate so easily? Yeah, I'd wanted a companion. Someone who could help me now that Father couldn't. But I hadn't known Tate long. What if he worked with the invaders?

That was dumb. Tate was clearly fleeing from them.

The memory of Tate's pale face when he'd told me he'd changed his mind flashed in front of me. So did the shrill in his voice when he'd said, "not me." He was *afraid*.

I widened my eyes. So that was it. Tate hadn't abandoned me because he was a lout. He'd abandoned me because he was afraid of leaving the relative safety of Seryn. I couldn't blame him for that. Not after all he'd gone through, and lost.

But I was still alone.

Shadows from the upper tree branches tightened round me. They cast a gray eventide hue upon the afternoon light. The trees that held up those branches grew everywhere. They surrounded me, fenced me in, blocking my view of the outside world.

For the tiniest of moments, I considered turning back to the cave and hiding with Tate, but in the next moment, I put my hands on my hips and imitated Father's voice. "Do that, and all Serynians—not just Tate—will lose everything, including their families. You have to find the Cosmo-gems."

I rubbed the back of my head, drew back my shoulders, and inched forward. *I can do this.*

Crack!

Prickles spiked across the back of my neck. I whirled. I peered deep into the wood.

Tree branches bristled back and forth against one another in the wind.

Stop scaring yourself. I'm not being watched.

Another crack.

I ran.

I ran all the rest of the way through Caba Forest.

At last, before stepping outside of its cover, I scanned toward the southwest. Since Father and I had studied the map of Seryn, I knew that Lightwick Village was only about fifteen miles from here. I couldn't yet see it, but if I went straight there, I'd arrive around midnight.

That plan had one big flaw, though. All that lay between me and Lightwick was an open field. No boulders or trees. Nothing I could hide behind. Nothing to stop invaders from seeing and capturing me.

I shrunk back.

But what other choice did I have?

“Please don’t let the invaders be out there,” I said aloud.

The wind picked up, wisped over me, and lightened again.

It wasn’t a promise of safety. It couldn’t have been. Even so, something about its brush against my skin made me feel stronger.

That was what I told myself, anyway.

I inhaled, clenched and released my hands, and stepped into the bright sunlight. I ran.

After the first mile, sweat poured down my neck and my muscles trembled. I stopped, leaned over, propping my hands against my knees, and took several long breaths, slowing my heart rate.

I drank from the water bag.

Finally, I stood upright and again scanned the vast field.

Still empty.

I readjusted my packs, and once more, I started toward Lightwick Village.

But this time, I didn’t run. Not because I was stopping—I would never stop until I found the Cosmo-gems—but because I’d pushed myself too hard.

“Be indomitable,” Father’s voice said inside my mind.

At first, the words felt like guilt. Like if I slowed down, I wasn't being indomitable.

But in the next moment, that guilt disappeared. *Indomitable* meant being *unstoppable*. Never giving up. Persevering until one conquered. And I wasn't giving up. I was managing my strength. I was being wise. Just like a royal advisor would do.

Wisdom was part of being indomitable, wasn't it?

I continued on.

Sometimes I pictured Father encouraging me onward, even when I believed someone was watching or following me. Other times, I wondered if I should return home and wait until Father was well enough to travel. Twice, I even headed back to Earth Shield. Yet each time I moved that direction, a wrongness consumed me. So did a reminder that while Father needed time to heal, Seryn Kingdom didn't have time to wait. Which meant neither did I.

I continued on toward Lightwick.

Close to midnight, I reached the first two cottages on the outskirts of the village. No light shone from any of their windows or doors. Not that I expected any. Lightwick's inhabitants had run from here when the invaders came. They now lived in the capital city. Still, that darkness felt as heavy and cold as the storm clouds that were then gathering in the night sky. The same cold I'd felt when I'd feared the invaders had killed Father.

My fingers trembled. *There's no reason to be afraid. No one's here.*

But what if I was mistaken?

Just focus on figuring out why the map led you here.

I took my dagger out of my boot. Right then, I didn't need a lot of Origin Power—just enough to light my way through the blackness. So, I pointed the blade toward the slice of moon that peeked out from behind the clouds. Then, after angling that blade one way then another, it at last caught a tiny beam. I willed a bit of Origin Power into it.

Reflected light burst from its steel.

I whisked the dagger in front of me. Light splashed across the two thatched-roof houses. Both had full rain barrels in their overgrown yards, and cobbled paths led to their front doors. The house closest to me was larger than the other. Perhaps it had belonged to one of the village's leaders or wealthier citizens. Someone who might have a store of food they'd left behind? Food that I could add to my pack?

Maybe.

I strode to the front door.

A glint flashed to the side of me. *What was that?*

I aimed the reflected light that direction.

Nothing glinted near the rain barrels.

I swished the reflection across the unkempt yard. The tall grasses fluttered with the growing breeze, but nothing else moved. Beyond it, the leaves of two thick ferns I hadn't noticed before likewise wisped in the wind, but otherwise, all was still.

"Is anyone out there?" I said.

Silence.

I held the dagger at arm's length and again slowly searched the area.

"I'm alone," I said aloud.

Hoping that was true, I again started toward—

Another glint of light.

I whirled back to it. I pointed the dagger straight at the rain barrels.

"Whoa!" Lit by the dagger's reflection, a glimmering yellow-green line ran north across the ground between the barrels and the base of the nearest house. The line was about four inches wide, and it weaved back and forth a little. Kind of like—

I widened my eyes. Tingles shot through me, and I pulled out the map. I held it in front of me, close to the stream of reflected light. I compared it with the shimmering line. It seemed impossible. Too good to be true, even. Yet, what else could that lighted line be aside from the map's path to the Cosmo-gems? That had to be the reason the map led me to Lightwick Village.

The line disappeared.

"No!"

I hurried closer to where I'd seen it. Again and again, I whisked the reflection back and forth in front of me.

Still nothing.

Back when Father first showed me this dagger, he told me it could strengthen our Origin Power. Might it work now?

I scrunched my brows into a tight furrow, stared at the dagger's blade, and willed all the Origin Power I could summon into it.

Finally, slowly, the line reappeared.

Warmth rushed through me. *It worked.*

Even as I thought those words, Father's voice said inside my mind, "Follow it." At the same time, that tingly, settled feeling rushed through me. "This is the right path," I whispered.

I clenched the dagger, focused harder on the reflection, and walked along the line to where it stopped at the house. Now what? The map showed the line continuing south past the village, through Sky Shield, and onward to those upside-down Vs. If this was that line, it had to continue beyond here. But where?

I crouched down and ran my hand along the line. It felt just like the ground felt anywhere else in Seryn—cool soil and damp grass. Nothing odd. Yet, the line was definitely there.

In case the house was sitting on top of the line, I traipsed round it to the opposite side. I shone the reflection along the grass where I thought the line would resume. No line.

I glared at the house. Where could the line have gone?

I scanned from ground to roof. I shone the reflected light about the yard. No line. Anywhere.

I returned to the front of the building. I knelt next to the line and patted the damp earth where it met the house. Did it perchance move through the wall?

There was only one way to find out.

I walked to the door and twisted the knob. It opened with a long creak.

I peeked inside. Black darkness filled it.

I raised my moonlit dagger and stepped into the house, shining its reflection across the chaotic room. Either the owner had fled or someone had ransacked the place. A wooden table and stool had been overturned, and an upside-down cooking pot lay on the floor, surrounded by splatters of moldy stew. Was the line near that pot? I angled the dagger's reflection toward it.

No line.

I moved the reflection across the entire floor. Back and forth. Back and—

Something flashed.

I aimed the reflection toward it. A door on the back wall presumably led to sleeping quarters, and—

The lighted line appeared.

I hurried to it, but the room was so dark that I lost the moonlight. I needed an alternative light source for the reflection. Was there a window nearby?

At last, I located a small shuttered window in the shadowed corner near the fireplace.

I opened the shutters and captured the moonlight's reflection. I focused my Origin Power into it and aimed the reflection at the floor near that back door.

The line reappeared.

Like outside, it spanned a few feet and disappeared. Only this time, the line touched nothing. It simply ended. In the middle of the floor. Where had it gone?

I stooped and ran my free hand along the wooden slats. I knocked against them, too. Most sounded thick, like the ground was beneath it. But one—no, two—of those knocks sounded hollow.

Hmm. Some Serynians had cellars under their houses. Was there a cellar under this one?

I continued knocking on the floorboards, moving several feet in both directions. At last, I ran my fingertips across them. Most were smooth and snug against their neighbors. But where the floorboards sounded most hollow, I found a tiny rounded opening. It was about the size of a cherry pit. I couldn't get my forefinger into it, so I tried my pinky finger. It slid right in.

Something cold and a little moist flexed inward.

I cringed. All kinds of creatures lived underground. Mice, rats, and—I caught my breath. What if I'd just pressed the mouth of a snake?

I yanked my hand backward. Thankfully, no snakes chased it. No other creatures did either, though somewhere close, a

bird's whispering lilt sang out at the night. Maybe it liked to eat snakes. If so, I wished it was here.

I again shone the reflected light at that line. I trailed it across the—

The amulet burned hot against my chest, and I flinched. *Enemies!* I jumped to my feet. Where to hide?

The doorknob turned a little.

They're here already? That isn't much of a warning.

"I'll take this house," said a deep voice from outside.

I backed into the shadows on the opposite wall.

"This house is mine to search," a familiar male voice called out.

I gasped. *Slaterider*. What was he doing here? The invaders had already attacked this village.

"You take the house next to this one." Slaterider's voice sounded closer. "Yell if you see any sign of that Hawk kid."

I froze. Why was Slaterider looking specifically for me? Had he figured out that Father and I were hunting for the Cosmo-gems? That if we found them, we'd be able to stop the invaders?

I didn't know, but whatever the case, I couldn't let him find me.

The first man harrumphed. The doorknob turned back to its original position. One man's shuffle-stomps moved away from the house.

I crept to the back door. A stream of my dagger's reflected light shot straight down and seeped into the small hole.

The floor rumbled . . . pulsed. I gaped at it. The earth had done that before Vida had emerged from the castle floor. Was that what was happening now? Was something ascending from this floor?

I stepped back.

The wooden slats shifted apart. They formed a square opening that was about two feet wide. Cool, musty air drifted out from within it. I aimed my dagger's reflected light into the square opening. As I'd first wondered, it turned out to be a dirt cellar. An illuminated line stretched across the floor. It began where it disappeared up here and ran south.

Heavy footsteps scraped the ground from outside the door.
Slaterider. Hurry.

I sucked in a big gulp of air and jumped into the opening.

Chapter 11



I HIT THE CELLAR floor. I gasped as pain jarred up my spine. Was I all right?

I patted my arms, my legs, and my face. My jaw ached from clunking my teeth together at the moment of impact. My backside stung, and my neck and shoulders throbbed.

I was sore and maybe bruised, but nothing seemed broken. Whew!

I peered into the darkness. A narrow stream of the upper room's dim light flowed down through the opening. I guessed that opening to be about fifteen feet above me, and it looked narrower than when I'd jumped into it. Had the floorboards already closed partway over it?

A shadow blocked the light. "Who's down there?" Slaterider called.

I clamped my hand over my mouth. I couldn't see him, which meant he couldn't see me either, right? Likewise, if I stayed quiet, he wouldn't hear me. I hoped.

Slaterider swore. His footsteps scuffed away from the opening.

The dim light flowed back into the cellar. Was he leaving? Could I be that lucky?

The footsteps returned.

Nope. Not lucky.

I smelled smoke. Fire flickered across the opening. Slaterider had a torch.

“Who’s down there?” Slaterider repeated.

I backed into the shadows and went to where I remembered seeing the lighted line. It had moved to the south. So I went that direction until I reached a dirt wall. I pressed my body against it, staying inside the darkest shadows.

Some of the torch’s light dropped to the floor and spread across the cellar’s rock walls.

“I know you’re down there. Reveal yourself.”

I pressed my body tighter against the wall.

Slaterider lowered the torch farther beneath the ceiling. He pointed its light at the floor below him and swayed it back and forth. The light lit up the wall beside me.

I held my breath. *Stay still. Make no noise.*

The light moved—

Wait. What was that?

—and moved.

I looked to my left. There! Only bits of the torch’s extended light reached this area. Still, it revealed a cavity in the rock wall only a few feet away from me. It appeared dark and hollow

inside too. Might it be more than a cavity? Could it be a tunnel?

Hope shot through me.

Yeah, I could hide in a cavity, but the line might have followed a tunnel. *Check it out.*

I reached down to my boot for my dagger.

It wasn't there.

Cold wrapped around my spine.

I patted up and down both boots. Where was the dagger?

Slaterider's torchlight aimed straight at me.

I lifted my bent arm over my head, blocking the light from my eyes, and scanned the cellar floor. My dagger lay in the center of the room, just where I'd landed after I'd jumped. I groaned.

"Ahh," Slaterider said. "I was right. Hawk's kid."

I gulped.

"Well, boy, I bet you now wish you'd stayed hidden in the forest. But then, Hawk never knew what was good for him either."

I clenched my lips together. *Ignore him. He either doesn't know what he's talking about or he's a liar.*

"Give yourself up."

My dagger wasn't that far away. And Slaterider, though he could see me, couldn't grab me. I inched toward it.

Slaterider didn't laugh, but a smile touched his voice. "It's no use. You can't get away."

Oh, yeah? I leaped toward the weapon.

Slaterider yanked up the torch.

The surrounding light emptied.

Something above me thudded. And pounded. Wood splinters dropped on top of me. I held my bent arm over my face, protecting it from more debris. At last, I looked up. Dim light outlined the opening, and Slaterider's leg filled its center.

Skeed! He's breaking through the floor.

I dropped to my knees. I swept my hands across the ground. Back. Forth. Back. Forth. Where was my dagger?

"Like I said . . ." Slaterider's voice was closer than before. "You can't get away."

Moments. That's all I had before Slaterider would be inside the cellar. Before he would catch me.

I swiped faster. Faster.

No dagger.

Sweat pooled on the back of my neck. Tears clouded my eyes. How could I have been so careless?

I have to find that dagger!

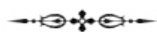
Slaterider laughed. He was getting closer.

I jumped to my feet and charged into the shadows toward where I remembered seeing that cavity.

"Run if you want, boy, but there's no place to hide."

I found the cavity. I swished my hands in front of me, palms outward, and walked into total blackness.

Chapter 12



ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, I BUMPED into another dirt wall. I blinked, trying to see something, anything, and patted the wall's rocky surface. *Please, there must be a way out.*

More thumps sounded behind me.

I looked over my shoulder but saw only blackness. Were the thumps footsteps? Was Slaterider now inside the cellar?

I again patted the wall, up and down and from side to side—there! The wall opened into another cavity. Or was it another tunnel?

I felt along the opening's frame. The sides were narrower than the tunnel where I now stood. And the ceiling was lower.

"You can hide," Slaterider called, "but you won't get away."

I ducked into the new opening.

Somehow, the darkness blackened even more. The air grew thick and stifling. And the ground sloped upward, continuing, from what I could tell, south.

Footsteps.

I pressed the backs of my hands against the rocky dirt walls at my sides and walked forward. Little space separated them from my body. Maybe only about two feet.

I walked.

Was the air growing thinner? The darkness blacker?

I sucked in two heavy breaths. *I can do this.*

The air turned colder. Staler, too. And heavy, like it was crushing my lungs.

"I can do this," I repeated aloud this time.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. Was I walking into a trap? Would I never find the Cosmo-gems, especially now that I'd lost the dagger? Would I wind up stuck in here forever? Die in here?

Stop panicking. You can still breathe. You're fine.

I wasn't sure I believed those words. But pretending I did, I slowed my pace. Out of habit, I peeked over my shoulder. Not even a pinprick of light touched the darkness. Should I go back? Maybe Slaterider had left.

Faint scrapes on gravel echoed through the tunnel behind me.

Or maybe Slaterider was following me.

I walked faster, and—"Ow!" I'd bumped my head on the tunnel's ceiling. It had sloped lower.

Stay silent!

I rubbed the pain on the top of my head and dropped onto my hands and knees. I crawled forward. Sometimes, I ran into sharp rocks or banged my arms or head into jagged boulders,

but when I did, I didn't cry out. I didn't even check to see if I ripped holes in my clothing or cut my skin. I could look for wounds once I made it out of this tunnel.

If I made it out.

I sucked in another deep breath. I tried not to hold it, tried to breathe calmly and evenly. Most times, I failed. But always, I moved onward through the dark, gravelly tunnel, all the while hoping no one was following me.

I crawled for about another half hour before a humid airiness whooshed into me. It prickled my skin and pulled at my clothes. Where had I felt such tinglings before? They differed from the sensations I felt when I was following the right course, but they were also similar.

I crawled farther.

The sensations stopped.

I back-crawled. The sensations returned. That's when I knew what they reminded me of—Earth Shield's wet flames.

I sat back on my calves.

Did that mean I'd just crossed through Sky Shield? That I was now in enemy territory?

If so, wow! I hadn't realized the Shields extended underground, though it made sense that they did. If they didn't, Seryn's enemies could get inside the capital by digging under the Shields.

I imagined those living in the other three kingdoms. I'd never seen them before. Not even drawings of them. Still, every report I'd heard had described them as warring and violent.

Did that mean everyone, including children, wore armor and carried weapons with them all the time? Did they dress and act like the invaders chasing me?

Scraping sounds echoed behind me.

I whirled. I reached for—*my dagger wasn't there*—and groaned. Without my dagger, I not only couldn't strengthen my Origin Power or uncover more of the map, but I also had nothing to protect myself with.

Shivers trembled through me.

Ignore fear.

I swallowed and continued crawling forward.

Minutes passed.

Still, I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything either. Hopefully, that meant Slaterider hadn't entered the cellar, or if he had, he'd given up looking for me. Perhaps he and his companions hadn't followed me through the tunnel because . . . because they feared the dark.

I smiled at that thought.

Or because they were too wide and muscular.

I pictured Slaterider and his companions trying and failing to crawl into the narrow tunnel and laughed. If true, it meant they hadn't been able to follow me because they'd crammed their torsos inside the opening while their wide backsides stuck out the other side.

Perhaps my size wasn't such a terrible thing.

I crawled onward.

I can do this.

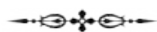
At last, a pinpoint of light glimmered in the distance ahead of me. I focused on it and crawled faster.

The air freshened and cooled.

Crickets chirped.

I reached the opening. I poked my head outside of the tunnel. Where was I?

Chapter 13



NOTHING NEARBY MOVED, AND the air, while fresh, smelled damp. Had it rained?

I ran my hand over the dusty gravel just outside the tunnel. Nope. No rain.

I glanced up at the moon, which was sinking below the horizon. Above me, the stars shone brighter than I had ever seen them.

At least, they looked brighter.

Was that because Earth Shield and Sky Shield weren't between us?

I didn't know, but the heavy clouds above the mountain peak suggested it would soon rain.

My breath hitched.

Hold a second! A mountain peak?

I peered through the shadows toward the base of the mountain. The land between us spanned about a mile. A thick carpet of lush ferns covered the ground, their green fronds whis-

pering in the breeze. The terrain was flat at first, then sloped upward toward the towering summit.

That pinnacle stood among many others stretching east and west as far as I could see. It was an entire range similar to the mountains encircling the island. The originators had created the alps that surrounded the island as a shield from outside dangers. Had they also formed these mountains to protect Seryn? Somewhat like Sky Shield and Earth Shield protected us from our enemies in the other kingdoms?

Most likely, yet why had nobody ever mentioned them?

Maybe they didn't know. Few Serynians ever left our kingdom.

I climbed out of the tunnel and stood. I walked a few feet away from the mountainside and through the ferns and grasses, weaving around massive boulders and bucket-sized rocks. Scattered trees grew here and there, some forming small groves, but most stood alone.

That changed, though, when the land angled upward. There, the ferns grew fewer. The land became more gravel than grass. And each step rose steeper than the one before it.

Lightning shot out of the clouds. It struck the distant peak.

"Skeed!" I slipped backward, scrambled for something to hold on to, and grabbed a thick, coarse fern.

Thunder boomed.

I righted myself and again peered into the surrounding darkness. I needed to find shelter from the coming storm, but

where? I could go back to the cave, but I'd rather not. I was tired of stale air and no light.

Lightning flashed again. A cold raindrop splattered on my nose. Another drop hit my right eyelid.

I groaned. So what if I was tired of stale air and no light? The tunnel was my best protection from the weather.

I pressed my lips into a tight frown, pulled my cloak over my head, and hurried back to the tunnel. By the time I reached it, the rain fell hard and fast.

I ducked inside. I brushed the rainwater from my cloak and crawled a few feet farther. Away from the opening, I settled against the tunnel's wall. How long would the storm last? If I was back in Seryn where Sky and Earth Shields kept our kingdom well supplied with our needs, the rain would likely last the rest of the night. Perhaps all of tomorrow too.. But what about out here where the kingdoms didn't have those protections?

"Please end soon," I whispered. "At least before tomorrow." After all, rain would slow me down, and I had to find those Cosmo-gems now. Otherwise . . .

I squeezed my eyes closed over memories of my home and family.

. . . I wouldn't even think about otherwise.

I leaned against the tunnel wall, slumped down it to a sitting position, and pulled my knees up to my chest. I peered through the entrance and into the blurry rain. The mountains' sharp

peaks pointed toward the clouds like the triangular tips of sharp spears.

Triangular. Like the upside-down Vs on the map.

Shivers swept through me. Could those images represent these mountains?

I took the map out of my waist pouch and held it closer to the dim light flowing through the opening. Still, I couldn't understand its markings.

I huffed.

"All I can do is wait out the storm."

I leaned against the tunnel wall and slid my hands behind my neck. I closed my eyes.

The rain tapped harder.

My muscles relaxed. My breathing slowed. Finally, my thoughts settled.

"Are you asleep?"

I jolted, sat up, and opened my eyes.

Tate's face, close to mine, stared back at me. Rain soaked his hair and dripped down his cheeks.

I pushed him away from me. "What are you doing here?"

"That's all you can say?" Tate, who'd been on his hands and knees, sat back on his wet heels. "I'm here for you."

"That doesn't even make sense. You said you wouldn't come."

Tate lowered his eyes. "Sorry."

"I mean, why are you here? How did you find me?"

Tate hunched his shoulders and folded his arms. "I realized my mistake when you left. I ran after you. But you walked into the open field. The invaders could have seen you. Seen both of us. So I hid in the forest. When dark came, I crossed the field."

I frowned. If I was as fast as Tate, I would have waited in the forest too. "That still doesn't explain how you found me."

Tate shrugged. "I saw you in the village. You went inside that house. The invaders did too. I hid behind some trees and watched."

Though the shadows obscured his full expression, I could see his eyes drooping at the edges. His skin was paler, with some faint creases. That likely meant he was tired. I narrowed my gaze. Or was he still afraid?

"Shortly after," Tate continued, "Slaterider returned. He told the other invader you'd escaped through a tunnel in the cellar. I knew about this tunnel entrance. And since it was close to the cottage, I wondered if they were connected. Especially since it ran south—the same way you were going." He shrugged. "It was a guess."

I tilted my head. "A pretty good one."

He looked straight at me as if he was telling the truth. And yet, was he? But if he wasn't, did it matter how he'd found me?

"Give people the benefit of the doubt," Father's voice said inside my mind.

I pursed my lips. "That tells me how you got here. But it doesn't answer why you're here."

Tate narrowed his gaze.

“Are you still afraid? If so, just go back. I can’t count on a runner.”

“I’m not a runner.” Tate said that, but he also gulped, like he wasn’t sure he believed his own words. If he couldn’t trust himself not to run, how could I trust him not to run?

“I won’t run.” He drew back his shoulders. Still, his teeth chattered. “Give me a chance. Just one. If you start to doubt me, tell me. I’ll leave.”

“In other words, if you get scared, you want me to give you permission to run.”

“I. Won’t. Run. Never again.”

He spoke the last sentence in such a hushed tone that I almost didn’t hear it, yet its strength compelled me to believe it.

“Well?” he asked.

I assessed him. Father would want me to give him a chance. He also wouldn’t want me to be outside Seryn on my own.

“All right,” I said. “You can stay.”

Tate gave me a crisp nod. He then scooted backward to the opposite wall and leaned against it. He closed his eyes. “Wake me when it’s time to leave.”

“We’ll leave when the rain stops,” I said. “Or earlier, if it doesn’t stop.”

Tate nodded. Then, shivering, he hugged his arms around himself.

“Your cloak’s drenched,” I said. “Why don’t you take it off so it can dry? It won’t help either of us if you get sick.”

He tugged his cloak tighter around himself. “I won’t get sick.”

Moments later, he snored.

Chapter 14



THE NEXT TIME I opened my eyes, gray light bathed the tunnel's walls. The rain's pattering had stopped too, and the air smelled clean. Time to go.

I crawled over to Tate and nudged his shoulder. "Wake up. It's morning."

Tate moaned and rolled onto his side. Then, facing the tunnel's opening, he half-opened his eyes. "Oh!" He sat up and rubbed his face. "How long has the storm been over?"

"I don't know. I just woke up. A while, I'm guessing." Moving to a stream of light, I took the map from my waist pouch and spread it across the ground in front of us. I trailed my finger along the line leading from Flatberry Lake to the upside-down Vs. "Those markings could be the mountains."

Tate paled as if he was going to be sick.

I rubbed the back of my neck and groaned. Why didn't he take off his wet cloak? "Are you all right?"

He swallowed—twice—and nodded.

"Are you sure? You look like you might puke."

"I'm not sick." He frowned, and the nauseated look disappeared.

"Do you agree with me, then? About these upside-down Vs?"

He nodded and swallowed again. This time, when he spoke, his voice cracked. "Yes. Those Vs are mountains. I know it."

I gave him a skeptical look. How could he know that? Even I, an apprentice to the royal advisor, knew almost nothing about the lands outside of Sky Shield. Though, right then, that tingly feeling rushed through me. That meant we'd made the right deduction. Did Tate feel tingling like that too? Was that why he was certain?

I pointed on the map to the base of the mountains. "If we're right, then we're here. Now what?"

"Try shining your dagger on it," Tate said. "Maybe something new will appear."

Heat warmed my ears, and my stomach felt like rocks. "I lost the dagger."

"What?"

"I know. I'm upset about it too."

"Upset! How can we read the map without it?"

I blew out a long stream of air, pretending nonchalance. "I—haven't figured that out yet. But don't worry. We'll find another way."

"How?"

I ran my hand over the top of my head and scanned our surroundings. Yeah, how? What else could reflect light?

"Do you," I said, "by chance, have anything metal with you?"

He lifted his hands in front of him, palms upward. "I have nothing. That's all your dagger was for? To make reflections?"

And to strengthen my Origin Power. "I also had it to protect myself from the invaders."

He flicked his hand and frowned. "All daggers can do that. The way you held it, I thought it must be important. Like it helped you activate your Origin Power or something."

He is smarter than I thought. "I just didn't want to lose it. It's an heirloom."

"It's important to your family, then."

"Something like that." I gulped down the lump in my throat, shoved aside my memory of the dagger lying on the cellar floor, and again leaned over the map. I scrutinized the upside-down V. Especially the X in the middle of it. At last, I ran my forefinger over the surrounding markings. I compared them to what I could remember of the outside mountains—which wasn't much.

"Let's get out of here." I rolled up the map. "We need a better view."

We gathered our belongings. Then, with Tate in the lead, we crawled to the tunnel's opening.

"Be careful," I said. "Make sure no one's around before you climb out."

"I'm not an idiot." Tate peeked through the opening. "It looks clear." He crawled farther forward.

I followed him.

Outside, the landscape appeared as I remembered it from last night, with towering mountains and grass and ferns covering the ground. In the stormy darkness, the mountains had appeared dangerous. Scary, even. Now, a gentle breeze made them look rather inviting. So did the occasional bird songs.

"All seems quiet to me too," I said.

I again opened the map. I held it in front of me and compared the upside-down Vs with the actual mountains. "There must be something here that can show us where to go. Something like a taller marking—er, mountain. Or a river or . . ." I blinked.

"What is it?" Tate asked.

"Look." I pointed at the upside-down V with the X inside it. Then I pointed to the upside-down V just east of it. "These shapes mostly touch, but here, the lines don't. See that? There's space between them, almost as wide as my little finger." I tapped the map.

"So?"

"So," I echoed, "check out over there. There's a break between this mountain and the one next to it."

Tate followed my gaze toward the west. "What about it?"

"Notice how those mountains interconnect and form a chain. That's like the connected markings on the map. Where these two mountains separate, I think that's this space."

Tate fiddled with his cloak's neck clasp. "It's quite a distance."

"It doesn't look like it's that far. Maybe a couple of miles is all. The point is, the mountain to the west is the upside-down V with the X. I bet that's where we'll find the Cosmo-gems. That's where we have to go." Assured tinglings spread over me, and I grinned.

"Maybe." Tate lowered his voice. He widened his eyes, too. It was the same expression he'd held at the cave in Seryn. Was he about to run away again?

"You don't have to come along."

"That's not what I meant." He swallowed. "Are you sure that's where we need to go?"

I narrowed my gaze and stared at him. Maybe he wouldn't run, but something was bothering him. Was it the distance? "It looks far, but it's only a mile or two."

In response, Tate grabbed the food bag from me, slung it over his shoulder, and headed toward the separation between the mountains.

I frowned. Maybe it wasn't the distance.

I hurried after him and fell into step beside him. "I'm glad you're not leaving, but something is bothering you."

He shrugged.

"What is it?"

He flattened his trembling lips into a tight line. He peered at something far behind me.

"The truth," I pressed.

At last, he spoke. His voice shook a little. "I know what's between those mountains. It's Invader Valley."

Cold shivered down my spine and across my shoulders. Invader Valley. I'd overheard the king's head guard, Rodge, and Father talking about that place once. Zode Kingdom had built it, but the invaders—mercenaries from all the human kingdoms—captured it. They'd imprisoned one of Seryn's soldiers there. He'd later escaped. When he returned to Seryn, he told the king that he'd been lucky. Most prisoners died.

I choked out the words, "Invader Valley." I scanned our surroundings. If we were that close to Invader Valley, there could be invaders anywhere. In those trees. Behind those boulders. Crouching in the tall grass like a lion stalking its prey.

Hold a minute. How did Tate know about Invader Valley? Only criminals ever stepped outside Sky Shield's protection. Or those the invaders captured. Or, I supposed, fearless explorers who didn't care what happened to them. Also, those who—

My thoughts tripped. I ran my hand over my face.

—who wanted to leave Seryn Kingdom. Those who weren't loyal to Seryn.

Was Tate loyal?

I pictured that first day I'd met him. How he'd helped me carry Father back to Seryn. Then Tate had crossed through Earth Shield as easily as I had, which meant he was loyal. Both shields, except where Sky Shield had cracked, kept all enemies out.

Yeah, Tate's loyal. Why then did he seem so frightened?

I cleared my throat. "How do you know that's Invader Valley?"

Tate didn't answer.

"Please answer me."

Tate sighed, though his sigh sounded like a grumble. "I once had an uncle who'd leave our kingdom to explore the other kingdoms. Then, after several weeks, he'd return. He'd tell us what he saw. The fort in Invader Valley was the last thing he ever mentioned to us."

I arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean, you *had* an uncle? Don't you still?"

"One of those times that my uncle left, he didn't come back." Tate, his expression firm, held my gaze.

He's telling the truth. "Did you think the invaders had captured him?"

"I didn't know what to think. I only knew he was gone, and no one ever spoke of him. Not even my parents."

"So, he was a criminal?" Whenever someone committed a crime, the king banished them, and no one spoke of them again. That way, citizens would be less likely to follow the criminal's corrupting examples, and Earth and Sky Shield's protective powers would remain intact.

Tate lowered his head in embarrassment, or perhaps shame, and I closed my mouth. *Idiot.* I wouldn't have liked it either if someone in my family had been a criminal.

My thoughts paused. A criminal. Slaterider was a criminal. At first, no one spoke of him either, but after he later

attacked some of Seryn's explorers, people talked about him again. They warned others to watch out for him. To fear him.

"That's another reason," I said, changing the subject, "that we'd better keep closer watch for the invaders. That fort isn't very far—"

The grass rustled from a grouping of nearby ferns.

I froze. Tate stopped too.

I held my breath and watched the grass.

A crow leaped out of the bushes. It flapped into the sky.

Relief dropped through me, and I laughed a little. "It looks like our nerves are getting the better of us."

I again started forward, but Tate grabbed my arm. He shook his head, and wide-eyed, he whispered, "Someone's coming."

"What? Where did you see them?"

"Not see. Feel."

"What do you mean?"

He put his finger to his lips, indicating for me to stay quiet.

"Later. Come on!"

He turned and charged back down the mountainside toward the tunnel. I raced after him.

Tate didn't go back to the tunnel, though. Instead, he veered east.

I did too.

Sometimes he paused behind tall and wide boulders, like he was hiding, so when I reached those boulders, I followed his lead.

At last, Tate slowed. He stepped into a gully. Dry gravel made up the bottom, and a few small groves of cottonwood trees lined its banks.

Tate ducked within the thickest of those groves.

I reached him a few seconds later.

Catching my breath, I peered behind me through the tree branches. Still, thankfully, no one followed us. Again, I asked, "What do you mean, you feel someone following us?"

Tate crouched down and pressed his palm against the ground. "Do you feel those vibrations? They're footsteps."

I set my hand next to his. "I don't feel anything."

"Wait."

Several moments passed. "I still don't—" The dirt shifted. "Wow. I didn't know—"

Tate grabbed me. He stood and yanked me deeper into the trees. We hunched at the base of one of them.

Footsteps marched past our hiding spot.

"Keep up your pace," a man's gravelly voice said. "Hawk's kid can't have gone far."

I gasped and clamped my hand over my mouth. *Slaterider*. How had I run into him again? With so many invaders patrolling the area, it was way too coincidental unless—

"He's probably in the tunnel," another man said. "If that's where he hid in the first place."

"Course that's where he hid," Slaterider said. "He had nowhere else to go. But it was pitch black in there. I wager he

got out the first chance he had. We'll have to keep our eyes out for . . .”

Slaterider was now too far away for me to catch the rest of his sentence, but it didn't matter. What I heard was crystal clear. Slaterider was watching for me. Following me. Why?

Tate, still holding one hand to the ground, pressed his other forefinger to his lips.

“They're still close enough to hear us,” he whispered.

I closed my mouth and listened.

Another long minute passed.

Finally, Tate stood.

Releasing my breath, I peeked out through the branches. A breeze wisped through the leaves, but nothing else moved. Or sounded.

“That first man was Slaterider,” Tate said from behind me.

I held down the sickness that roiled inside my stomach, and I peered back at him. His face had paled the way everyone's faces paled when someone spoke of Slaterider.

“I think we better keep in the trees,” I said. “They're great hiding places.”

“Agreed.”

Tate peered out at something behind me.

I turned and followed his gaze. Short ferns, gravel, and the rise and fall of the dry grassland. That was all that filled the space between us and the mountains that surrounded Invader Valley.

“Not many trees,” Tate said.

"So we'll stay as close to those as we can and hunch low the rest of the way."

"That's easy for you to say. You're short."

I scowled. "I'm not short."

Tate rolled his eyes, but he said nothing more. All right, so I was short. Right then, I'd rather be short than as tall as Tate was. Tate might even wish that about himself.

"We also ought to slow down," I said.

"No way," Tate said. "I'm running."

"Running will only make you stand out. Slow movements slip by people."

"Or make them nervous."

"Better to unsettle them than let them see me."

He grunted. "So, stay low and walk slow. Unless we're in the trees. That's your plan?"

"What else can we do?"

We stared at one another.

At last, I put my hands on my hips and again searched the landscape between us and Invader Valley. "There are trees and boulders along that ridge. Let's head that way. It makes our route a little longer, but it might be safer."

Tate harrumphed.

"Are you ready?" I asked him.

"Ready enough."

Together, we took a deep breath and stepped out from beneath the trees.

Chapter 15



HUNCHING LOW AND KEEPING our heads down, we charged away from our hiding place.

We ran farther up the mountainside toward the west, breathing in the hints of moss and mineral stone.

We dashed over the uneven grassy terrain.

We traipsed through, around, and between tall ferns.

Occasionally, we stopped behind one of the few large boulders and caught our breath.

Most of all, we watched for invaders. Thankfully, we saw none.

We reached the first mountain ridge when the sun rose high in the sky. The trees were close to the edge that overlooked the valley. We hurried to them and ducked within their branches. Then, leaning over, we braced ourselves against our knees and waited until our heartbeats slowed.

At last, I stood upright.

Tate did too. "Hear that?"

"Hear what?"

The din of voices rumbled up from Invader Valley.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no invaders were nearby. Both of us dropped onto our hands and knees. We crawled across the gravel toward the edge.

We weren't far from it, but the closer we moved, the louder the voices grew. Some yelled louder than the others, and all mixed with the clangs of metal clashing against metal. Heavy poundings, too. From what, I couldn't tell, but they reminded me of the invaders banging against Earth Shield.

I shivered. *Go back home!*

I hugged my arms and shook my head. *I won't go home. Not until I've found the Cosmo-gems.*

Tate and I peeked into the valley.

Like this side of the mountain, ferns and grass covered the slope. The valley floor was only a quarter mile wide, but the fort spanned its entirety. Even its sides butted against the neighboring mountains.

The fort, made of stone and wood, had two lookout towers. One stood on the north side, the other on the south. The walls were at least ten feet thick and about a hundred feet tall. The lookout towers rose an additional twenty feet above them.

A wide moat abutted the northern and southern sides of the fort, flanked by a tall, grassy embankment. No way could anyone break through those protections. But the most menacing part was the black smoke. Not because it billowed out from dozens of campfires inside the fort, but because red-uniformed men strode around those fires. Hundreds of men.

I groaned. It was an entire army of invaders—all trying to break into Seryn.

And capture us.

“How can we possibly reach the other mountain unnoticed?” I whispered.

Tate gave a slight shake of his head. “Maybe wait until sunset? So the darkness can hide us?”

“Good idea. Unless . . . could we get to that mountain from a different direction?”

I peered south. Flat, dry, and rocky land spread out from the fort. Beyond that, water spanned the horizon. Was it a lake?

“Never mind,” I said. “This looks like our only way to Cosmo-gem Mountain.”

Tate arched an eyebrow. “Cosmo-gem Mountain, huh? Nice name.”

“It seems to fit.”

“Up there,” a male voice yelled from behind us. “Two kids!”

Tate and I jumped to our feet. We whirled.

Three muscular invaders, their swords bouncing from their hilts, charged up the mountainside toward us. They came from the direction where Tate and I had first hidden. Were they the same invaders we’d heard before? And why, oh why, was the amulet still cold?

Maybe it doesn’t work as well as King Zedek said it did.

I quick-scanned the three approaching invaders. Slaterider wasn’t with them. They were a different patrol.

“How did they see us?” Tate asked.

"We'll worry about that later," I said. "Run!"

Tate took off. He headed farther up the mountain and toward the east, away from the valley. I raced after him.

Several times, my feet tangled in the grass. Still, I plowed through them. I pushed my muscles harder, trying to keep up with Tate and stay far ahead of the invaders.

Twice, the invaders almost caught me, but each time, they either tripped over ferns or fell onto the uneven ground.

I couldn't catch up to Tate, so I followed his path up a hill jutting from the mountainside. He disappeared over the top.

A couple of minutes later, I likewise dropped over that crest. Tate had vanished.

Dozens of towering, pillar-like formations stood at the base of the hill. Each was as round and thick as an ancient oak tree. They looked identical to one another, and the entire grouping resembled a stone maze that a long-ago giant, or perhaps an Originator, had fashioned there.

Was Tate hiding among them?

I hoped so.

I peeked over my shoulder. The invaders moved closer and closer. At this rate, they'd soon catch me.

Tate had been right to hide.

I charged down the hillside to the rock formations. I leaped within the closest grouping and peered from one formation to another. Where should I go?

Tate, moving as if he had no worries, stepped out from behind a formation.

“What are you doing?” I said. “We’ve got to hide. The invaders are almost here.”

“Waiting for you. Come on.”

He again quickened his pace, and I followed him back and forth between the rock formations. At last, we stopped next to one that was nestled against the mountainside. Several boulders of all sizes lay beside it.

Tate pushed aside the smaller ones, which were about the size of footstools. He wrapped his arms around one that was more than twice his size. It resembled the boulders we’d passed on our way up the mountainside. Those had been so heavy that leaning on them was like leaning on the mountain itself.

“Boys?” a man’s voice called out.

I froze. *An invader*. I gaped at Tate.

“We know you’re out there. Show yourselves, and we’ll be easy on you.”

Cold shot through me. What did *easy* mean to an invader?

“Help me move this,” Tate said between his teeth. “There’s a cave behind it. We can hide there.”

I huffed in exasperation and looked over my shoulder. Footsteps rumbled through the maze behind us. How many invaders were back there?

“Help me,” Tate whisper-yelled.

“Oh, fine. But if we die, it’s your fault.” I wrapped my arms around the boulder. It was so wide and smooth, I could barely grip it. Still, I squeezed, and it lifted. Just an inch off the ground, but it lifted. *We’re moving it!*

Tate groaned.

The boulder rose higher, but not because of me. I scowled. How could Tate be so much faster and stronger than I was? Yeah, he was taller, but he was still just a kid.

"Boys?" the invader called out again. His voice was closer this time.

"Hurry," Tate said. "Climb in."

"Climb in where?"

"There." He pointed to a small cave in the mountain-side where the boulder had been. The cave was about waist-high—my waist, not Tate's. It was just wide enough for us to crawl inside, leaving only a foot of space between us.

I cringed. It had been less than a day since I'd finally left that cold, too-narrow tunnel. I couldn't—*couldn't*—climb inside something like that again.

"Go on," Tate said.

"No."

"You have to. They're coming."

I winced and shook my head.

"If you don't, they'll capture you. You won't get the Cosmo-gems."

The Cosmo-gems. That was right. My family and kingdom needed me to do this. I couldn't back out. Not now. Not like Tate had done after I'd first asked him to help me.

Guilt niggled through me. *I'm no better or braver than he is.*

Tate set the boulder down beside the opening and took hold of my upper arms. He faced me toward the cave. "Get inside. I'll climb in after you."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and dropped onto my hands and knees. I scrambled into the cave.

Chapter 16



I GAGGED ON THE cave's fetid odor.

"Keep going," Tate said from behind me. "I'm still outside."

I crawled farther.

The air cooled and darkened, revealing only vague outlines of the cave. I cringed. *Please, not again.*

"Far enough," Tate said.

I stopped, exhaled in relief, and turned to him.

He reached through the cave's opening and again wrapped his arms around the boulder. He pulled it inside. Pulled it. Like it weighed nothing heavier than a sack of onions. *How can he do that?*

Tate shifted the boulder back and forth until it blocked the entry. Darkness, lit only by small beams of light, seeped in from around the boulder.

"That should hide us," Tate said.

None too soon, either, for in the next moment the amulet burned my skin.

I stiffened. Invaders! That wasn't good news, but at least the amulet was working.

Something brushed across the boulder. Moments later, muffled footsteps pounded the ground outside the cave.

"See the boys?" It was the man who'd yelled at us earlier.

"No," a second man said, "but don't give up. They have to be close. Look there. Small footprints."

I winced and hugged my arms. Those footprints had to be mine. Tate's were man-sized.

More steps sounded outside the cave.

"If I were to guess, I'd say—"

I bit back a groan. Slaterider again. If I'd had any doubt before, I no longer did. He had to be following us. Why? Yeah, the invaders were attacking Seryn, but Tate and I were just kids. Few adults even noticed us.

"I know who one of them is," Slaterider said. "I tracked him last night. At first, I wasn't certain, but then I thought he might be Hawk's apprentice. If so, he'd be valuable to us. I even almost captured him, but he escaped. Not before leaving this dagger behind, though, which told me exactly who he is. See this jagged line along the hilt? Beneath these other markings? I carved it myself."

My thoughts tripped. I shook my head, but the thoughts wouldn't leave. How could Slaterider have made that line? The dagger was an heirloom. Surely Father wouldn't let just anyone mark it up.

But then . . . hadn't Father once told me his cousin—another member of our family—had made that mark as a symbol of their loyalty to one another?

Cold dropped like ice to the pit of my stomach.

Was Slaterider Father's cousin? Were we, in fact, related? If so, why hadn't Father mentioned him to me?

I knew the answer as soon as I thought the question. Because Slaterider had committed both murder and treason. He was a criminal.

"This dagger once belonged to the late Alexander Hawk," Slaterider continued.

His words brought me back to the present, and I scowled. *Father's not dead.*

"Which means that boy is Hawk's son. King Zedek will pay a tremendous amount of star coins to get the boy back after we capture him."

Other gruff voices chuckled.

I scowled harder into the dimness. *Laugh all you want for now. You'll be crying once Father regains his strength and stops you.*

"Sir!" one of the other invaders said. "There's a dust cloud blowing across the ground out there. Maybe those kids stirred it up."

I bit the inside of my lower lip and leaned closer to the boulder. Were they about to leave?

"You might be right." Slaterider's voice sounded fainter. He must have walked away from the cave. "Let's go."

Footsteps thudded and soon after faded into silence.

Had they left? I didn't know, but I remained still. Tate didn't move either. We waited like that—not moving and scarcely breathing—for several long minutes.

At last, I relaxed back on my calves. I ran my hands up and down my arms. It couldn't be possible, but the cave's darkness felt like it stuck to my skin. We needed to get out of there.

I motioned to Tate's hands, which were pressed, palm flat, against the ground. "Do you hear or feel anyone moving out there?"

"No."

"Good. Let's go."

"No."

"Why not? If we're alone, we should be safe enough."

"Let's wait until dark."

"I'd rather get out of here now." I crawled closer to the boulder and pushed it. It didn't budge. "How can you move this so easily? I might be small, but I'm not weak." I pumped my arms. "Do you do a particular kind of exercise?"

Tate shrugged. "All my family is—were—strong."

His shoulders drooped, and I again slumped back. Tate's family wasn't strong anymore because they'd died. He was an orphan.

I frowned. If only I could help Tate feel better. But even as I thought those words, jealousy pinched my emotions. Maybe Tate should be the royal advisor's apprentice instead of me. At

least then, the people of Seryn would have someone strong to help them instead of scrawny me.

"I bet your family was tall, too, weren't they?" I asked.

Tate grunted.

I turned away from him, hiding my scowl, and again pushed against the boulder.

"What's your plan? To keep me trapped in here until *you* think it's time to leave?"

"You're not trapped. I'll move the boulder now if you want. It's only . . . things aren't always how they appear."

I looked back at him and narrowed my gaze. "You say that like you know something about this place. How?"

"My uncle—"

I shook my head. "There's more to it than your uncle told you."

Tate shrugged again.

"You've been here before, haven't you?" I stared hard at him, and he shrugged a third time.

"You have! How? What did you do? Join your uncle on his excursions, even though . . ." I widened my eyes. "That's it, isn't it? You went with your uncle even though you weren't supposed to. Admit it."

"Uh—all right, I'll admit it. But that's all I'm saying. Except for this. Let's wait here until dark. It's our safest hiding place."

I frowned. "I was afraid you'd say that."

We stared at one another. Finally, we leaned back against the cave walls. I scanned the shadows. Was anything else in here seeking refuge? Like bugs or rats?

I cringed. "Maybe we should sleep, since we'll be here a while."

Tate sighed. "Sounds good."

I closed my eyes, but sleep didn't come.

Slowly, silently, time ticked by.

"I wish I had rice pudding," Tate whispered

"Rice pudding? Yuck! What made you think of that?"

"Stomach."

I rolled my eyes. "We still have food in the bag, don't we?"

"Not rice pudding."

"You can be sure about that." This time, my stomach growled, and I shifted my position. "There is bread and cheese, though. Get them out."

Tate opened the foodstuff bag. After feeling around inside it, he handed me a small chunk of bread and an even smaller chunk of cheese. I ate them. He ate some too.

He brushed the crumbs from his mouth. "That's all of it."

"What?" I grabbed the food bag from him and turned it upside down. I shook it. Nothing fell out. "Why didn't you tell me it was almost gone before we ate it all? We could have rationed it to make it last longer."

"We'll find food somewhere else."

"What makes you think that?"

He folded his arms. "Things work out."

“Like how you hadn’t eaten in days until I showed up with food?”

He frowned. “I was about to hunt game.”

I frowned too. Maybe he was fine with going without food for days, but I wasn’t.

He leaned against the rock wall behind him and drank from his water bag. I drank from mine. I also scowled at him. He turned away from me.

Gusts of wind howled through the openings around the boulder.

At length, I said, “Why don’t we plan what we’re going to do once it gets dark?”

“What’s there to plan? We return to our other hiding place.”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea. The invaders saw us there before chasing us here. They might still be watching it.”

He drew his brows into a deep, thoughtful furrow. “What then?”

I scanned my thoughts, but no answers came. I slumped. That was not like a royal advisor. Royal advisors always had answers. Didn’t they?

Memories of Father reading the map flashed before me. He hadn’t understood its markings until he’d analyzed it and we’d tried various options. Maybe answers didn’t always come instantly. Maybe royal advisors only seemed to know everything because they’d already pondered the questions. I could do that, couldn’t I? Study things out before acting?

“Well?” Tate said, pulling me from my musings. “Any suggestions?”

“Only one. We find a new hiding spot on the same side of the mountain, only higher up. That way, we can still see into the valley.”

“While we make a new plan.” Tate raised his voice, like he was trying to convince himself of what he was saying. But then he softened it again. “You haven’t given up, then? You believe we can do this?”

I ran my hands up and down my arms. “I believe we have no other choice. And we absolutely cannot get caught.”

Tate shifted taller. “You’re right. That’s how it will be. We won’t get caught.”

I smiled at his confidence, but I also shoved my hand through my hair. What dangers would come next?

Chapter 17



SUNLIGHT NO LONGER SEEPED through the cracks around the boulder. Night had come.

“We should go,” I whispered.

“Yes, well, all right.” Tate pushed the boulder away from the opening as if it was nothing more than an empty crate.

“How can you do that?” I asked him yet again.

Tate didn’t answer. Instead, still in front of me, he crawled out of the cave.

Cool air, thick with the sharp green smell of crushed ferns and damp earth, filtered in through the opening. I took a deep, relieving breath.

“Wait there.” Tate flattened his hands against the ground. After a long moment, he looked both directions—twice—and stood. “We’re alone.”

“Good!” I scrambled after him and jumped to my feet. I banged my head on the cave’s entrance ceiling. “Oww!” I fell to my knees. My right hand jammed against two sharp rocks. “Aah!” I rubbed my head with my left hand.

Tate, who'd stepped a few feet away from the cave, returned. "What happened?"

"I was too anxious to leave this place." I moved my right hand into the moonlight. Blood seeped from the base of my palm.

Tate held his hand out to me. "Let me help."

That was right. He had healing power.

"Not now," I said. "Let's get out of here before the invaders come back. This will heal soon enough on its own."

Tate sharpened his gaze. "It's bleeding."

"Only a little."

"Heal first. Pain will make you slower."

"I won't slow us down."

He scowled.

"Oh, well, all right." I gave him my hand.

He knelt next to me and took a bunched-up piece of gray cloth from his pants pocket. Then, humming that same tune he'd hummed when he'd healed Father, he pressed the cloth against my bleeding wound. He held it there for several more seconds. Finally, he stopped humming and lifted the rag, releasing my hand.

"It should feel better soon," he said.

I inspected my hand. The blood was already forming a scab.

I stretched out my fingers. Normally, that movement would have pulled at the wound. But I didn't feel one bit of pain.

I gaped at him. "Thank you."

Tate lifted his hand, palm up, like it was not a big deal.

"Really, Tate," I said. "Your Origin Power is amazing. I could get used to having a friend like you around."

Tate must have recognized the playful tease in my voice. "I could get used to you too."

We both chuckled, stood, and left the cave.

"You remember the way out of here?" I asked.

"Of course." Then walking in front of me, he zigzagged between and around the rock formations.

I stayed close behind him.

Within minutes, we stepped out of the rock maze and headed up the hill behind it. Not one bush, tree, or fern grew out of the gravelly landscape, and moonlight bathed over us almost as bright as sunlight. If anyone was out there and looked our way, they would see us.

I winced and hunched my shoulders. I peered into the surrounding shadows. I listened. Nothing sounded.

"We're alone, aren't we?" I said.

"We are. Just keep moving."

At last, we reached the hilltop. We were the tallest things around.

"Stay low," I whispered.

We hunched down.

"Now where?" Tate asked. "Farther up or back down?"

I searched down the mountainside toward the small copse of trees where we'd first hidden. *Skeed*. From here, they seemed like bushes, not trees. The invaders had chased us a lot farther than I'd realized.

“Invaders might be patrolling down there,” I said. “Let’s move higher up to those ferns. They look thick enough to hide in.” The ferns were above our last hiding place—almost to the mountaintop—and far enough west that we should still be able to overlook Invader Valley.

Tate tugged his cloak tighter around him. “Yeah, but how do we get up there without being seen?”

“It’s dark,” I said.

“The moon’s bright.”

“We’ll just run like before, stay as low as we can, and—”

—hope no one sees us,” we spoke in unison.

We stared at one another. Tate’s eyes seemed to smile, and he held his mouth in a soft, straight line. It reminded me of the ever-calming way Father looked at me. The expression that said he understood my thoughts because he knew me well.

Did Tate know me well? Even though we’d only met a few days ago?

I studied him closer.

Or might discerning people’s characters be one of his talents? Or—

My thoughts raced.

—Or maybe that ability was part of Tate’s Origin Power. Healing ailments restored bodies. Was it the same with healing spirits? Showing understanding and compassion comforted—healed—people?

“Tate the Healer,” I said under my breath.

“What?”

“Never mind. Let’s go.”

We ducked our heads and raced up the mountainside. Most times, we dashed through the gravel and occasional grass, but once, we crouched within a small cluster of ferns and caught our breaths before again charging up the mountainside.

In the end, it took us about what I guessed to be half an hour of hard running to reach the bushes. Only they weren’t bushes. They were short, wide, scruffy oak trees.

Tate, who’d reached the trees a couple of minutes before I did, had already caught his breath. Still, he waited for me to catch mine. Then, together, we crept in among the trees. We sat next to the thickest tree trunks and across from one another. We drank from our water bags.

“I like this place,” Tate said. “It’s dark outside and shadowed in here.”

“I like it too, except for all these twigs and leaves. They crackle every time I move. It makes me feel like I’m yelling out, ‘Come and find us!’”

“Naw. We’re far from the fort. They can’t hear us.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I took in two more long breaths and shifted onto my hands and knees. I crawled to the edge that overlooked the valley. Tate followed me. Together, we peeked down at the fort.

Lit by torches and campfires, it blazed through the night like a beacon. If I hadn’t known the truth, I might have mistaken it for a refuge. Instead, a sense of power and destruction emanat-

ed from its walls. Worse, even more invaders than I'd noticed earlier patrolled the fort's upper battlements.

I gulped. "I wish it was darker."

"We only have to plan." Tate's words were hopeful, but they sounded like sadness.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head and lowered his gaze. "Let's just go."

I studied him. He grimaced, as if battling nausea. His gaze bounced from point to point, like it didn't quite know where to settle. But what struck me most was the red rimming his eyes. They weren't tearful, so he wasn't crying, but he definitely was sad.

I frowned. Was he remembering when the invaders killed his family?

Or maybe it wasn't sadness. Maybe he was simply worried or fearful about the dangers ahead of us. I knew I was.

I folded my arms. *No time for fears.*

Yet, if Tate had been trying to understand me—and comfort me through that understanding—shouldn't I try to do the same for him?

"All right," I said. "Let's plan how to cross the valley without getting caught. You study the fort and identify the invaders we most need to avoid. I'll scout the land between here and Cosmo-gem Mountain. Maybe there are places out there where we can hide."

Tate nodded and faced the fort. I looked out across the valley.

Most of it was like the land we'd just crossed. Tall grasses and clusters of ferns dotted the slope that led down to the fort. We could hide among the ferns if we needed to, though most of them were closer to Cosmo-gem Mountain than they were to us.

There were also a lot of boulders. Some were tall and wide, similar to those in the rock maze. However, most were no larger than the heavy stone balls athletes tossed at objects they called pins. Not much help there.

I rubbed the back of my head. If only we could run straight across the valley. If we could, we'd be on the other mountain in minutes.

"What do you see?" I asked Tate.

He grimaced. "Invaders are everywhere."

"Up on the battlements too?"

"Yes. But there are only three patrolling the back wall."

"Good. We can sneak past that many."

"Maybe," Tate said.

I did a double take at the tightness I heard in his voice.

"What makes you think we won't?"

"They have spyglasses."

The hair on my arms stood at attention.

"They don't always look in them, though," he added.

"How often is 'don't always'?"

"When they're walking."

"So when they're not walking, they're looking out here through their spyglasses?"

Tate's face contorted and he nodded. "They walk a few feet. They then stop and lift their spyglasses." He formed a loose fist, held it in front of his eye, and pretended to look through it. Slowly, he turned left, right, and left again. "They search across the entire valley."

I groaned.

Tate swallowed. "Somehow, we'll do this."

"I hope that means you already have a plan."

"What's there to plan? We crawl, and we watch the guards. If they look our direction, we stop."

I scrubbed the top of my head. Keeping track of three men scanning in different directions was going to be hard.

"There's also that embankment along the moat," Tate said. "It's covered in grass. And it stretches to Cosmo-gem Mountain. If we can get to it, we can hide in the grass the rest of the way."

I looked to where he pointed. The moat, around thirty feet wide, ran between the fort and the embankment. A thick wooden drawbridge leaned upright against the fort. That must be how the invaders crossed the moat and how they would come after us if they saw us.

I folded my arms and tucked my hands under my elbows to stop their trembling. It didn't work.

"What about this?" I said as steadily as I could. "The grass here is pretty tall. What if we lie flat on our stomachs? We can watch the invaders through the grass. Then, when they aren't looking our direction, we scoot down the mountain."

Tate frowned. "That could take a long while."

"Maybe. But at least we'll get there." *I hope.*

"We'll have to leave your backpack here. It's bulky."

I groaned. "You're right. But we're taking our water bags. We won't make it long without them."

Tate gave a crisp nod and patted his water bottle, which was strapped to his hip. "Ready?"

I ran my hands up and down my arms. *The tinglings said we're going the right direction.*

"Yes, I'm ready."

I took off my backpack, tossed it into the trees, and the two of us dropped onto our stomachs. I peered down at the fort. The three invaders on the rear battlement were looking through their spyglasses, but only the middle one peered in our direction.

"When I say go . . ." I said.

Tate nodded.

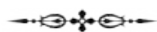
I waited.

The three invaders lowered their spyglasses. The middle one turned away from us.

"Go!" I said.

We scooted over the edge and slinked down the slope toward Invader Valley.

Chapter 18



THE INCLINE WASN'T VERY steep, but our descent was tough. The thin grass blades cut my hands and stomach, and the full moon lit up the land. If an invader looked in our direction, he'd see us.

Still, inch by quiet inch, we scooted down the slope. As planned, we hid in the grass and behind ferns or boulders. We only moved when the invaders turned away from us.

After what felt like hours, we reached the embankment.

Tate, staying within the night's shadows, angled toward Cosmo-gem Mountain.

I stopped crawling and hunkered up against the embankment. I took in a deep breath. The foliage smelled of dirt and wet nuts, yet the pleasant scent didn't settle my thoughts. They'd tossed and jumbled since we'd crawled over the ridge.

Tate glanced over his shoulder. "Come on. No one's looking."

"I need another minute," I whispered.

"Why? Did you see something?"

"No. It's just . . . Do you believe we're going in the right direction?"

He stared at me. "I thought you were sure."

"I was. I am. Well, I'm not sure anymore. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I keep wondering that too."

I groaned. *If both of us wonder, does that mean we're wrong? Oh, why didn't the tinglings return? Did something change? Are we now on the wrong path?* "What do you think we should do?"

Tate lifted onto his elbows. He peered toward the invaders and dropped back down. He pressed his forefinger to his lips. "One's looking this way."

I gulped. I counted to seventy inside my mind. Finally, I lifted my head, peeked—

The invader still faced our direction.

—and lowered back into the grass. If only I still had my dagger. If I did, I could have used it earlier. I could have aimed the sunlight's reflection on the map. We could have been more certain of our course. *And I'd have something to protect us with.*

"They've turned away again. Hurry. Let's go to that tree up ahead. We can hide there and figure this out."

"What's there to figure out? Without a reflection, we can't—"

A soft gurgle splashed from the moat next to us, and my thoughts tripped. *The moat is water.*

Back at Flatberry Lake, Father hadn't found the box by focusing his Origin Power into the sun's reflection off his sword. He'd focused it on the water's reflection.

“Tate!” I whisper-yelled. “Stop. The moat.”

He, already several feet ahead of me, glimpsed back. I pointed toward the other side of the embankment.

“What about it?” he asked.

“Not the moat itself. The moonlight. It reflects off water.”

“So?”

“So, it’s a reflection.” I clenched the grass to keep from jumping up in excitement. “Don’t you see? I don’t have my dagger, but maybe I can reflect the moonlight off the water and onto the map. If I can do that, the reflection might show us whether or not we’re going the right way.”

“You can do that?” Tate asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried. But maybe. Wait here. I’ll check the moat for reflections.”

“I won’t wait.”

“Suit yourself.”

The invaders lifted their spyglasses. None aimed them toward us.

“Go,” I said.

We scurried to the top of the embankment. We pressed ourselves low in the grass and peeked over the edge.

“There’s a reflection,” Tate said, “but it’s in the middle of the water. We can’t reach it from here.”

The invaders faced our direction.

We pressed our faces against the ground.

“I don’t have to touch the reflection,” I whispered. “I just have to focus my Origin Power into it.”

“Skeed! You can do that from here?”

I smiled at his use of “skeed.”

“I don’t know, but it’s worth a try.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Keep watch. Tell me when the invaders look away.”

Tate peered up over the top of the grass, and I laid the map in front of us. I stared toward the water’s brightest reflection.

“Now,” Tate said.

I took a deep breath and focused my Origin Power on it.

Nothing happened.

“Maybe I need to focus harder,” I said. “Keep watching the invaders while I try again.” I drew my brows into a tight furrow. I set my jaw and stared straight at the reflection. I willed all my Origin Power into it.

Still, nothing happened.

I exhaled in exasperation.

“Duck!” Tate said.

I dropped on top of the map and glared at the grass blades that surrounded me. If only I hadn’t lost the dagger. If only I didn’t keep making mistakes.

We waited for another long minute.

Tate peeked up. “They’ve turned away.”

I lifted onto my elbows. “I’m going to give it one more try. If it fails, let’s head to the mountain. There’s no point in waiting here.”

Tate pursed his lips. “Did you focus harder?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t work. Not that time anyway, but this time—“

Tate shook his head. "I mean, did you *really* focus? I used to have a hard time channeling Healing Power. But then my grandmother taught me about an ancient knowledge. It unified, which strengthened, our Healing Power. It's Family Song. Do you have Family Song? Maybe that would help you with your Origin Power."

"Family Song?" I drew my brows together into a tight furrow. "You mean like, sing a song? Father never sang while he used his Origin Power."

"It always worked for Grandmother. And for me. Especially when we sang together." Tate shrugged. "It's worth a try, don't you think?"

I rolled my eyes. "I suppose anything's worth a try. What do I sing?"

"A song that's unique to your family."

"My family doesn't have a song like that." Or did we? I searched my thoughts. I couldn't pinpoint a family song, but something about the words "ancient knowledge" felt like a memory I couldn't quite see.

And then I saw it.

Years ago, Ellya and I had sat at Mother's feet. She'd told us bedtime stories about long-ago days when nature and man worked together. "Silver threads of knowledge weave through the moonlight," Mother had said. "It's like a vast fabric of unity."

My thoughts jumped back to the present. “You and your grandmother sang your Family Song together? In unity?” I asked Tate.

“Sometimes.”

I stared at both the moon’s reflection and the map. Unity gave the Forces their protective powers and strengthened Tate’s Origin Power. Also, moonlight could not only reflect its light, but it also held ancient knowledge. I wonder . . .

“Let’s try something,” I said. “Together, let’s aim our Origin Powers at that reflection. I’ll concentrate more on the moonlight than on the water. You hum your Family Song. Maybe if we’re unified, it will work.”

“Good idea. Let’s do it.”

Again, we made certain the invaders weren’t looking toward us. I then focused on the moonlight’s reflection and willed my Origin Power into it. Tate, also staring at the reflection, sang the words of his Family Song. Its notes lilted and paused, lilted and paused:

Still, still, calm your soul.

Heal, heal, your body whole.

Peace, peace, United sing.

Peace, peace, power bring.

The reflection wobbled.

I focused harder. I commanded the reflection to bend toward the map.

It wobbled a little more. It bent too. But not toward the map. Instead, the reflection gathered more of the moonlight

into itself and shot northward. It zipped upward above several tall boulders and finally against the mountain. It lit up a patch of earth, and inside that patch, a black X flashed three times.

“Yes!” I whispered.

The X disappeared. The reflection dimmed and returned to normal.

“Skeed!” I growled at the reflection. “Why’d you stop? Show us that X again.”

Nothing changed.

I exhaled.

Tate stared at me.

I frowned. “Well, it might not have worked as well as my dagger would have, but at least we now know we’re on the right track.”

Tate nodded, but then he widened his eyes. “Drop. The invaders are looking this way.”

We sprawled on the grass.

Lying there, we waited.

“One,” I said.

“Two,” Tate said.

“Three . . .”

Together, we counted all the way to seventy.

Finally, I peeped at the invaders. Their backs were to us.

“Go,” I said.

Side by side, Tate and I scooted toward Cosmo-gem Mountain.

"I wish we could stand," Tate said. "I don't like creeping like this. It makes me feel like a snake."

"I hate it too. But there's nothing else for it. If we stand, they'll capture us."

Tate grunted, and we continued scooting.

After many too-long minutes, we reached the base of the mountain. Then, still staying low, we clambered upward. In actuality, we were only about a quarter of a mile away from the fort, but scooting made the distance feel longer. Scooting also scraped our hands, knees, and stomachs. Still, we clambered on.

Around an hour later, we stopped about forty feet shy of the first bench. The trouble was, gravel covered the remaining distance. Only gravel. No bushes, boulders, or even grassy patches to hide us.

I winced. Cottonwoods and red oaks lined the bench above us. Lots of them. If we could just reach them, we could hide.

"Go," Tate said. "Run up to the trees. I'll keep watch."

"Run? They'll see me for sure."

"Not if you hurry. Once you're there, watch for me, and I'll run."

"I don't like that idea."

"You're wasting time." He nudged me forward.

I stumbled into the open.

"Now!" Tate said.

I took off. My footsteps scratched over the gravel. The dirt and rocks shot out behind me.

“Hurry!” Tate whisper-yelled. “They’re turning around.”

I ran harder. I only had five feet to go. Four feet. Three feet. An alarm blared.

I dove onto the bench. I scrambled into the trees. I peered through the branches down at Tate. He was pressing his body flat against the ground. Beyond him at the fort, the invaders faced our direction. One aimed his spyglass toward us. The others shot arrows. Some flew at me, but others landed near Tate. They’d seen us.

“Get up here,” I yelled.

The invaders’ shouts pelted the air. More arrows flew at us.

Tate jumped to his feet. He raced up the mountainside toward me.

Chapter 19



CRASH!

A drawbridge dropped over the moat. At least a dozen invaders charged out of the fort. Their yells grew louder . . . closer.

Tate raced up the mountainside and leaped onto the bench. I yanked him into the trees with me.

“They don’t have to crawl.” Tate’s voice was tight. “They’ll be here soon. We have to get out of here.”

“And go where? Farther up the mountainside?”

“Somewhere. Anywhere.”

“Give up,” an invader shouted from too close. “There’s no place to hide.”

Hair lifted on the back of my neck. *Slaterider!*

I headed north toward where I’d seen the lighted X. I tripped. Tate, next to me, grabbed my arm. He kept me upright.

“Don’t wait for me,” I said. “You’re fast. You can get away.”

“And have to come back for you? That’s harder than escaping now.”

He ran faster, tugging me with him. Twice, I stumbled, but he didn’t let go of me. He—we—only continued along the gravelly bench. Sometimes we zigged, other times we zagged, but always we stayed within the trees’ shadows.

“Gotcha!” a female voice said.

A net lifted from under our feet. It wrapped around us and closed over our heads.

“Ahhh,” we yelled.

We pushed, yanked, and clawed at the net’s scratchy ropes. The invaders’ shouts grew louder.

“We’re trapped,” I said.

“They’re coming,” Tate said.

“Hush!” An old woman stepped out of the trees. She was thin and willowy, like the surrounding branches. And she had dark eyes and long, white hair. Scowling, she moved toward us. She placed her hands on her hips. “Hush!” she repeated.

“Let us go,” I said.

“Stay. Quiet.”

Wait. Didn’t she want the invaders to hear us? Wasn’t she one of them?

She turned and seized a hanging rope. High above us, the rope draped over a thick branch. Its other end secured the net.

She pulled downward on her side of the rope.

The rope, as if aided by a pulley, lifted us above the ground.

“Let us out of here!” I yelled.

Tate grabbed my arm, shook his head at me, and pointed toward the approaching voices. “Shh.”

I clamped my hand over my mouth. Somehow, I had to learn to think before I acted. If I didn’t, I’d never be the king’s royal advisor.

If I even made it back to Seryn.

The woman pulled down on the rope, hand over hand.

The net, with us in it, lifted higher . . .

Beside us, thick, gnarled branches reached out for us from several tree trunks.

Higher . . .

The net swayed back and forth.

Higher . . .

The branches wove in with other trees’ branches and stretched out like an umbrella. Not one as vast as Sky Shield, but large enough to mask the moonlight.

Higher . . .

The net stopped.

I peeked over the shorter treetops. The taller trees obstructed my view of the fort. Behind me, the mountain ascended toward a familiar group of boulders. Above them, instead of the X, loomed a cave.

I caught my breath. Were the Cosmo-gems in that cave?

“You there!” Slaterider called.

I jolted. Tate, his eyes wide, clutched the net. Together, we peered downward. Branches crisscrossed the space between us and the ground. And leaves, some living, others dead, fluttered

between them. Together, they didn't quite hide us. Hopefully, the invaders wouldn't look up.

I pressed my forefinger to my lips, signaling for him to stay silent.

He nodded.

"Stay where you are," Slaterider called out. He hadn't yet stepped out of the trees.

The woman hurried behind a tree large enough to hide her from the invaders, but not from us above. She lashed the rope that held us to one of the tree's lower branches. Then, leaving the rope, she returned to the small clearing. She faced toward the valley.

Slaterider tromped out of the trees. Four other invaders followed him.

"Where are the boys?" Slaterider asked.

The woman turned to them. Slowly, she put her hands on her hips. "Who are you?"

Slaterider pulled his sword from its hilt. He pointed it at her. The other invaders pointed their swords, too.

"I'll only ask you one more time," Slaterider said. "Where are the boys?"

Both Tate and I hunched into ourselves. *Please, please don't look up.*

The woman cupped her hand around her ear. She raised her voice. "What was that?"

I gulped. No way was she deaf. She'd just spoken with us. So why was she acting like she couldn't hear well?

The invaders sneered, but the woman stared calmly back at them.

“Two boys.” Slaterider spoke louder this time. “They were right in front of us. We chased them here.”

“You must have seen something that wasn’t. That sometimes happens around here.”

“We didn’t see something that wasn’t.”

“What was that?”

Slaterider, louder, repeated his statement.

“Bah,” the woman said. “They must’ve gone somewhere else. Perhaps they ran up the mountain. Or down to the valley.”

Slaterider’s sneer tightened. He watched her, peered from one direction to the next, and watched her again.

I held my breath.

Finally, Slaterider signaled the remaining invaders. Two went straight down the mountainside toward the valley. The remaining two went back the way they came.

Slaterider pointed the tip of his sword at the woman. “You’d better not be lying to us.”

She didn’t answer.

He repeated his threat, only louder.

“What’s there to lie about?” she said. “And even if I did, what does it matter? You’re not in charge here.”

Slaterider tightened his grip on his sword. He glanced at where the other invaders had gone. Then he peered back at the woman. “Who are you?”

“Jinir.”

He didn’t lower his sword, but his stance relaxed. “Ju-neer. King Betin’s mountain spy?”

The woman gave a slight nod. “Who are you chasing? They must be important.”

“That’s no concern of yours.”

“It is, if you expect to pass by me. This is my mountain.”

“It’s King Betin’s mountain. King Betin of Zodane.”

“Which he assigned to me. I alone, other than the king, have authority here.”

The two stared at one another.

Finally, Slaterider said, “One of the boy’s is Alexander Hawk’s son.”

“What was that?”

Slaterider clenched his free hand into a fist. “One of them is Alexander Hawk’s son,” he repeated.

“Hawk. King Zedek’s advisor?”

“That’s him.”

She tilted her head. “What does Hawk’s son matter to you?”

“Zedek sent Hawk after the Cosmo-gems.”

I swallowed. How did he know that?

“Now Hawk is dead.” Slaterider raised his voice even louder.

“And his kid is here. That tells me the boy has taken his father’s place and is hunting for the Cosmo-gems.”

“Ah,” Jinir said. “So that’s it. If the boy finds the Cosmo-gems, the invaders fail.”

“Only if he returns them to Seryn.”

She gave a slight nod.

“We will conquer Seryn,” Slaterider said, his words squeezed between his teeth. “It’s too powerful.”

“Seryn’s more powerful than you are, you mean,” Jinir said. “They’re stopping you from taking over the entire island.”

I blinked. So that was why the invaders had attacked us. They wanted to rule all.

Slaterider’s stance stiffened. “More powerful than *anyone*, according to King Hunfray, which means they must be destroyed.”

King Hunfray ruled Warith, the kingdom that assembled the invaders and first attacked Sky Shield.

“You’ll kill the entire kingdom?” Jinir asked. “Like you did the giants?”

“Only those Serynians who won’t join us—those who will not forsake the laws of peaceful unity.” He sneered over those last words. “No one is free to live as they wish to live while Seryn rules the island.”

What was he talking about? Seryn’s people only ruled Seryn Kingdom, didn’t they?

Jinir folded her arms. “You said boys. Who else are you chasing besides Hawk’s son?”

Again, the two stared at one another.

Finally, Slaterider lowered his voice. “I don’t know who the other kid is, but if he’s with Hawk’s son, he’s important.”

“Eh?” Jinir said.

Slaterider huffed. "I don't know who the other kid is," he announced.

I glanced at Tate. He stared back at me. He didn't smile, but his eyes glinted like he had. But not with pride. More like wariness. About what, I wondered? What did Slaterider think about Tate?

The other invaders returned. They reported they'd seen no one.

Slaterider again pointed his sword at Jinir. "When did you arrive here?"

She nudged his sword's blade away from her. "Only a moment ago. I'm on my night patrol."

Slaterider lowered his sword. "Then you *must* have seen the boys."

"Wrong assumption." Jinir stood taller. "Now step aside. Unless you'd rather explain my actions to King Betin and tell him why I haven't completed my rounds. I'm sure he'd be quite interested."

Slaterider, frowning, shoved his sword back into its sheath. "Be my guest." He motioned for her to pass by him.

She snorted, eyed the invaders, and disappeared within the trees.

Tate drew back his shoulders. I froze. Jinir had just left us alone with our enemies.

The other invaders sheathed their swords. "Should we continue on, Captain?" one asked.

Slaterider didn't answer. Instead, he tilted his head like he was listening. He stepped toward the north. He turned in a slow circle, scanning the forest. The longer he scanned, the narrower his eyes became. At length, he frowned. "I don't know if Jinir told the truth. In either case, the boys aren't here now. No sign of them that way, either. Let's go back."

"Yes, sir."

The five men turned, and like Jinir, headed south. Within moments, they also disappeared within the trees.

Tate and I waited. We listened. Eventually, the invaders' voices and footsteps faded.

Silence.

I closed my eyes. Slowly, I scratched my nose.

Please don't let the invaders hear me move.

Tate likewise shifted his position.

Again, we listened. Crickets chirped, but otherwise nothing sounded. Light, however, peeked above the horizon.

"Morning's coming," I said. We'd been running and hiding all night, yet I didn't feel at all tired.

Tate nodded. His eyes, like mine, were wide open.

"Do you see those?" I pointed toward the boulders. "The Cosmo-gems could be in that cave."

"Whoa! I'm glad you saw that. I only paid attention to the invaders."

"So did I, mostly. Anyway, I think we're alone now. Let's find a way out of—"

"Not alone."

I flinched.

Tate caught his breath. “That woman’s back.”

Chapter 20



JINIR PLACED HER HANDS on her hips. She glared at us through the net's ropes. She pursed her mouth like she was thinking.

At least, I hoped she was only thinking. When I was little, Mother told me fairy stories. Most were about disobedient children. They ended up lost and captured by witches or ogres. And sometimes eaten.

I crossed my fingers. *Please let her not be imagining how we taste.*

Yet Jinir didn't look like a scraggly, one-toothed witch. Not even in the dark. And she wasn't an ogre. But she *had* captured us. She'd also said she worked for King Betin. King Betin ruled Zodane Kingdom, and he helped the invaders. Did that mean Jinir, King Betin's servant, had his same goals? That she wanted to destroy Seryn's peace and help Zodane and Warith Kingdoms steal Seryn's wealth and power? Would she take us to him?

I crossed my fingers tighter. *Please be friendly.* “We’re sorry we bothered you. If you let us leave, we won’t come back. I promise.”

“You must be the one Slaterider’s after,” she said. “Hawk’s son. What’s your name?”

I stared back at her. The less anyone knew about us, the better. And yet—I glanced at Tate. “What should I say?” I whispered.

He shrugged. “She already knows who you are.”

True. I bit the inside of my lower lip. “I’m Phineas.”

She looked at Tate. “What about you?”

“Tate.”

She folded her arms and tilted her head. “Where are you from? Who are your parents?”

Tate’s face paled so white, it almost glowed. Was he afraid? Would he run away as soon as he had a chance? Would he leave me here alone to contend with Jinir?

I gritted my teeth. *No. I will trust Tate.* And anyway, why would Tate fear an old woman? He was bigger than her. And probably stronger.

Tate lifted his chin. “I don’t have any parents.”

“You’re an orphan?” she asked. “From where?”

Tate swallowed and lowered his head.

An ache filled the back of my throat. If I’d seen my parents killed, I wouldn’t talk much either. Just thinking about them would make me sick. And devastated. Was that how Tate now felt?

"He's with me," I announced. "We're partners."

Tate lifted his head. His eyes widened, and he stared at me.

"Please let us go." I tugged my cloak around me. Hopefully, my body didn't smell like tasty food to her.

"Why?" Watching me, she tilted her head. "Unless, of course, Slaterider was right. Did King Zedek give you a task to perform?"

I gulped. *Do not tell her about the Cosmo-gems.*

"I'll take that as a yes." She pursed her lips. "Don't leave tonight. It's late. Your friend there looks ready to fall asleep." Her voice snapped with reproof, but it smiled, too.

I followed her gaze back to Tate. *Was he tired?*

He yawned, but otherwise, his eyes were bright. His posture slumped, but he squirmed too. Was he pretending to be tired just like Jinir had pretended to be deaf? But if so, why? And why were his hands behind his back?

The net shifted.

My thoughts jumped. Tate was pulling at the net. He was trying to break free. Strong as he was, he might just do it.

I shifted sideways, blocking him from Jinir's view. "Yes, we're tired. But we still have a long way to go. Please, just let us out. We'll leave you in peace."

"Peace, eh? There hasn't been peace in Zodane for years. Not in Warith, either." She put her hands on her hips. "More's the pity," she muttered so softly I almost didn't hear her. Then louder, she said, "It's been even longer since anyone trespassed on this mountain."

“Yeah, well . . .” *Keep Jinir talking.* “It sounds like you’ve been here a long time. Y-you must have many interesting stories to tell.”

“More than most folks would believe.” She stepped sideways, giving her a better view of Tate. “Like that one. Tate is not his real name. You two lied to me. I don’t like liars.”

“What? No! We didn’t lie. That’s his name.”

Tate’s knee bumped my shoulder blades.

“Is it?” Jinir stared at Tate.

I looked back at him.

Tate swallowed, shrugged, and at last said, “My name’s Tatengooloog.”

The woman huffed. “That’s more like it.”

“Tate-n-goo-loog?” I said.

Tate’s face flushed. He gave me a slight nod.

He’s embarrassed. But as I thought those words, memories flooded through me. Tate’s descriptions of his family. How he’d healed both Father and me. How he’d helped me strengthen my Origin Power. He was my friend.

I stand up for my friends.

I sat taller. “Why does his name even matter? Tatengooloog means nothing terrible. It’s not like Slaterider.”

Jinir laughed.

I glared. “It’s not funny. Don’t be a lout.”

The woman’s expression hardened.

I winced. *Dupe! Be careful. We’re her prisoners.* “I mean, it’s not as funny as—as my name.”

Her expression softened a little. "Oh?"

"It's Odor. My middle name. After my grandfather."

She didn't even smile.

Behind me, though, Tate snickered.

I glared at him. "Don't laugh. I just stood up for you."

He stopped smiling.

I turned to the woman. "Let us go. Now. If you don't, I'll—I'll tell everyone about you. We'll escape. You'll see. And then I'll tell King Bentin you helped us. He won't have any more use for you."

"Bah!" She returned to the other end of the rope. Then, glancing our way, she untied it.

We dropped a mite.

I gasped in surprise. Had my threat worked?

She didn't look up at us. She only lowered the net hand over hand. When we reached the ground, she untied the ropes. We shoved aside the net and stepped out.

"You can leave," Jinir said. "Go back to the invaders. But if you'd rather sleep, follow me. I live up there." She pointed toward the cave above the boulders. The one the reflection had shone on. The one guiding toward the Cosmo-gems.

I furrowed my brows. She lived in *that* cave? Did that mean she knew where the Cosmo-gems were? Did she possess them?

Jinir turned and continued south along the bench.

"What should we do?" Tate whispered to me.

"I don't know. Do you think we can trust her?"

Tate scratched his cheek. "She hasn't hurt us. That's a good sign."

"And she is walking away from us. That doesn't seem very threatening."

"Maybe that's the whole point," Tate said. "Maybe she's luring us to—to another trap."

I imagined a new net around us. One made of light fibers, and Jinir with eight legs instead of two. Hairy spider legs that wrapped us in a cocoon like she was saving us to eat later.

I shivered and shook my head. *Be reasonable*. "If she wanted to hurt us," I said, "why didn't she? Besides, I don't think we have another choice."

"Why not?"

"She just said she was going to that cave."

"Where the X had flashed?"

"Yes."

He frowned. "So, we need to go with Jinir."

"I think so. In case the Cosmo-gems are there."

Tate took in a deep breath. "Well then, let's go."

Again, we walked south. Soon after, the bench narrowed. The trees grew thicker too.

"Where's Jinir?" Tate asked.

I peered through the tree branches. I figured she'd be on the other side of the tree.

She wasn't.

"I guess we're on our own again," I said.

"Being slow around here is dangerous," Jinir said.

We looked upward at the sound of her voice. She sat on a boulder that protruded from the mountain.

“We’re not slow,” I said.

“Only cautious,” Tate added. “We don’t know this land.”

She cocked her head, studied us, and at last motioned for us to follow her. She strode up the mountain.

I ran after her, huffing to keep up.

Tate just walked. He didn’t even break a sweat.

Jealousy climbed onto my back. *If only I was as tall and strong as he is.*

But before that jealousy squashed me, Jinir stopped. She pointed to several flat rocks. They jutted out of the mountain-side like a staircase, and they weren’t much bigger than my feet.

Behind me, Tate groaned. “I hope I can climb those.”

My jealousy slipped off my back and sank beneath the earth. True, some things were easier for tall people, but other things were easier for small people. That was the way of life.

“Stay close this time,” the woman said. “Only step on the rocks that I step on.”

“Why?” I asked.

She pursed her lips. “Why doesn’t matter. Just obey.”

She stepped over one rock and climbed on top of three others. She then skipped two rocks and climbed the rest of them to the top. We mirrored her steps.

At last, we stood in front of a rock wall. A bucket of water sat next to it. She dipped her hand into the bucket then brushed her hand over the wall.

The ground rumbled. The wall slid sideways, revealing a dark cavity within the mountain.

Tate's mouth dropped open.

Sweat pooled on the back of my neck. *Please let it be a cave and not another tunnel.*

"You have Origin Power over rocks?" I asked. How much Origin Power still existed in our world?

Jinir rolled her eyes. "I'm a Doane, aren't I?" She said that as if everyone knew what being a Doane meant, yet I, the apprentice to the royal advisor, didn't. Why? Was my education so incomplete?

"But my power's not over rocks," she continued. "It's over water. And it's a minor power at that."

"Doane," Tate repeated. "That's your name? Mrs. Doane?"

"What can you do with water?" I asked at almost the same time.

Jinir glanced between the two of us. "There's no *Mrs.* about it," she said to Tate before turning to me. "Open rock walls. As I said, minimal power."

"Whoa," Tate said. "It might be minimal to you, but it's amazing to me."

"To me, too." I said.

Jinir shrugged and stepped inside the cavity. "Come along. It's not much, but it's home." She took a lantern from a nearby wall hook, lit it, and motioned us inside.

I swallowed and stepped forward. She nodded when I passed her. Nothing more. Yet something in that nod reminded me of the spider. Once again, I shivered.

“Move along,” Jinir said. “I won’t bite.”

I winced. *She’s not a spider. She’s not leading us into a trap to kill us.*

Jinir gave me an odd look, and I turned away from her. *She’s not a spider.*

Inside the cavern, firelight from the lantern reflected off the walls. A bearskin rug spanned the center of the floor. A plank table and two stools lined the right wall, and a stack of closed crates sat against the left one.

Nothing looked like Cosmo-gems, though. *Dare we ask her about them?*

Jinir stepped around us and headed to the back rock wall. Like before, a full water bucket sat next to it. She dipped her hand into the bucket and brushed it across the wall. The wall slid sideways, and we entered the next room.

Inside, the air was crisp-cold, like wispy ice. The only furniture was a bed with two folded blankets, and several short, narrow openings lined the outer walls. Were they doorways? Tunnels? Might the Cosmo-gems be in one of them?

“I sleep in this room.” Jinir pointed to the smallest of the outer wall openings. “You two can sleep in that room. I’m not used to company, so there isn’t a bed. There is a stack of blankets, though.”

Prickles crawled down my neck, and my breath caught. I stepped back, finding myself before another short, narrow cavern. I shot Tate a worried look.

I can't do this. Let's leave. That was what I wanted to say to him, but we couldn't leave until we'd found the Cosmo-gems.

"Go ahead," Jinir said. Her tone commanded obedience, boss-like and authoritative.

"I know it looks small," Tate whispered. "But you'll be all right. You won't be alone."

I clenched my fists and walked to the opening. I crouched down. "I'm not scared," I whispered back.

"I didn't say you were."

I gave him a hard look, took in a deep breath, and crawled inside. Tate followed me.

"I'll wake you when the sun rises." Jinir slid something heavy over the opening behind us.

Darkness.

"I sure hope we were right to trust her," Tate said.

"So do I."

I brushed my palm across the floor in front of me and crawled forward. Where were the blankets?

At first, Tate stayed close behind me, but after we crawled a few more feet, he veered in another direction.

I continued forward. The floor felt smooth, with no rocks or lumps—or so I thought. I bumped into a thick mound. Running my hand over it, I felt what must be animal skins. Probably the blankets.

"Tate?" I said. "Where are you?"

"Over here."

"Stay still, but keep talking so I can find you. I think I have the blankets." I moved toward him.

"I hope there are a lot of them," Tate said. "I'm freezing. And this floor isn't soft."

"I don't know how many blankets there are. Wait a minute. I'll count them."

"Just come on. We'll figure it out when you get here."

I picked up the stack of skins and continued onward, following his voice while whisking one hand in front of me. Finally, I found him.

"Ah!" Tate said. "That was my eye."

"Sorry." I counted the blankets. "It looks like there are two each. I hope it will be enough."

"I hope so too. The ceiling's only a foot or two above us. That should help keep the heat in."

Tate took two of the blankets. I still couldn't see him, but I heard him flop them open and shove them around on the floor.

I moved a little away from him and spread one of mine out too. Then, lying on my back on top of it, I pulled the other blanket over me.

"Wake me if something bad happens," Tate said.

"What could happen?"

"Oh, you know. Lots of stuff."

“Like what?” I asked, but I didn’t want an answer. Fewer scary images equaled better sleep.

Tate didn’t seem to have those worries. Instead, he sighed, grunted a little, and shifted his position. A moment later, he snored.

How could he already be asleep?

I scowled and pulled my blanket over my head. I closed my eyes.

Sleep didn’t come.

Not because of Tate’s snores. Nor because images of a spider-like woman scratched my thoughts. But because the Cosmo-gems were somewhere in this cave.

I hoped.

And somehow we had to find them.

Chapter 21



“IT’S SUNRISE. TIME TO get up.”

I opened my eyes. Gray light replaced the darkness. Someone had pushed aside the wooden slab that blocked the tunnel’s opening, and Jinir stood beyond the entrance.

“Fold your blankets and come for breakfast,” she added.

Tate sat up. “Food!”

I inhaled. A light, bland scent wafted over me, and my stomach growled. How long had it been since we’d eaten? One day? Two? I couldn’t remember. Yes, I’d felt hunger for some time now, but it had become so commonplace that I’d made myself quit thinking about it. Was that how Tate was able to bear hunger for so long?

Whatever the case, food was now nearby.

I scrambled out of the blankets, and together, we crawled out of the cavern.

Jinir, in what must be her kitchen, stood next to an iron pot filled with something pale and lumpy. Like oatmeal. The pot hung on a hook attached to the ceiling. Beside that hook, a

narrow slit opened through the ceiling to the sky. And beneath the pot, a small fire crackled. Its smoke drifted out of the cave and up through the slit.

I crossed my fingers. *She will not cook us. Trust her.* “Thank you for making us breakfast,” I said. “It’s good of you to feed us, but we don’t want to keep taking advantage of your kindness.”

“Bah! I haven’t had proper company for years. Sit yourselves down on those stools there by the table.”

We headed for the stools. But as we did so, I glanced at the net heaped beside the front entrance. The net that had trapped us. Cocooned us like a web.

Goose bumps flashed down my back, and I shook my head. *She is not a spider.* “Th-thank you. But as you already figured out, we have an assignment . . .”

She stirred the mush.

“ . . . from King Zedek.”

She ladled the mush into two clay bowls and set them on the table. She then took an opaque vial from a nearby shelf, opened it, and shook its contents into the bowls. Tiny brown flakes sprinkled across the mush.

Jinir caught her breath. She turned her head. “Achoo!”

Tate and I recoiled.

Jinir took a handkerchief from her pocket, wiped her nose, and returned the handkerchief. She then slid the bowls across the table in front of the two stools. “Sit down. Eat up while it’s still warm.”

Tate stepped backward. He narrowed his gaze at Jinir. “What did you sprinkle in the mush?”

“Cinnamon and sweetening flakes.” Jinir returned the vial to the shelf.

We studied the mush.

“Go ahead,” she said. “The food’s not poisoned.”

I again glanced at the entry. Maybe we should run. “What made you use the word *poisoned*?” I asked her.

She rolled her eyes. She then pulled my bowl toward her, set a spoon into it, and lifted the mush—

“A—” Jinir turned her head. “—choo!”

I winced. She hadn’t sneezed in the bowl, but still . . . Ew!

Again, Jinir wiped her nose. “Sorry about that.” She took a bite of the mush and swallowed. “See, not poison.”

“So, what’s the issue?” Tate asked. “It makes you sneeze.”

“My sneezing? Is that what’s troubling you?” She laughed a little and sneezed a third time. “It’s nothing. Smelling cinnamon always makes me sneeze. I love its taste, so I keep it around anyway.” She handed the bowl back to me. “Eat up. Empty stomachs won’t help you on your quest.”

I glanced at the door again. The sooner we left, the sooner I could stop worrying about how much we could trust Jinir. But we couldn’t leave until we found the Cosmo-gems or another clue.

Tate, though, simply emptied his bowl, and all the while, nothing troubling happened to him. He didn’t even sneeze.

My stomach growled again.

Jinir ladled more mush into Tate's bowl.

I'm worrying over nothing, I told myself. I grabbed my spoon and took a bite.

"'Twas my mother's best oat-gruel recipe," Jinir said. "Good, isn't it?"

We, our mouths full, nodded.

She leaned against the wall behind her, folded her arms, and watched us eat.

Finally finished, I set Tate's empty bowl inside mine. "Where should I put these?"

"Don't worry about them," Jinir said. "You're my guests." She collected the bowls and set them on the floor next to the water bucket.

"Now," she said, walking back to us. "How can I help you find the Cosmo-gems?"

"What do you mean?" I faked a slight smile, pretending I didn't know what she was talking about. "I—I know what the invaders think, but—the Cosmo-gems are only legends. King Zedek sent us on a different—"

"Bah! Tell the truth."

I narrowed my gaze. Her eyes were bright and looked calm. Kind, too. And she hadn't betrayed us to the invaders. Nor had she hurt us. *We can trust her*. I'd thought those words a hundred times, but this time, a sudden stillness settled through me. So, too, did Father's voice. "*Stay vigilant.*"

I paused. Did those words mean we couldn't trust her?

I waited for a long moment, but no new feelings or voices answered me. Maybe that meant I could trust her, but I also needed to stay vigilant?

I didn't know, but eventually that's what I did.

Watching Jinir, I removed the map from my pocket, unrolled it, and held it out to her. "King Zedek found this in the ancient records. He said Seryn's first king, King Fanuk, made it. It shows where King Fanuk and the other Originators hid the Cosmo-gems. King Zedek wants me to find them so we can stop the invaders from breaking into Seryn."

Jinir scrutinized the map. She moved her forefinger from one X to another. "I suppose these represent the Cosmo-gems?"

"That's what we thought, but so far, each place has only contained clues that sent us to another X."

Jinir furrowed her brows. "Does that mean a clue sent you here?"

"It did." I pointed to the X inside the upside-down V. "And that one, we finally figured out, is this cave."

"*This* cave?"

"Yes," Tate said.

She folded her arms. She stared hard at us. "Why would the map send you here? This is my home. Nothing more."

"I don't know why it sent us here," I said. "But if it's the same as the rest of the map, either the Cosmo-gems are here or there's another clue. Any ideas on how we can locate the Cosmo-gems?"

"I can't imagine what could . . . Bah! I think you'd better tell me more about this quest of yours."

I narrowed my gaze at her. This was a secret mission.

"Go ahead," Tate whispered. "I think we can trust her."

I rubbed the back of my neck. He trusted her, and I sort of trusted her. Together, that was a lot of trust. *I will trust her more.*

"All right," I said aloud. I explained my Origin Power and how it revealed the map. I also described how I'd powered the moon's reflection to lead us here.

Jinir ran her fingers over her mouth. After a moment, she said, "Stay there." She went to another room and returned with a hand mirror. Golden vines and flowers adorned its frame. "This was my mother's. Until now, I've never had much use for it."

I arched an eyebrow.

She chuckled. "But that's not why my hair flies about."

"That's not what I was thinking," I said.

"It's what I was thinking," Tate said under his breath.

I rolled my eyes at him and looked back at Jinir. "I was thinking about reflections."

Jinir angled the mirror toward the lit candle. Light bounced off it. "See what you can do with this reflection."

I pursed my lips. The mirror didn't hold ancient knowledge like moonlight did. And it wasn't Father's dagger. But could its reflection help me reveal more of the map?

“Well, here I go.” I peered at the mirror’s reflection, pushed aside my wandering thoughts, and focused all my Origin Power into that reflection.

Nothing happened.

I should have known. Even so, I shifted the map into the reflection. “Come help me,” I said to Tate. “Sing your song while we focus on the light.”

“Hold on.” Tate lumbered over to me. Then, together, we focused on the reflection while Tate sang his song.

Again, nothing changed on the map.

Jinir sighed, and I handed the mirror back to her. “Thanks anyway.”

She slid aside our bowls and set the mirror in the middle of the table. “A . . . a . . .”

Tate and I stepped backward.

“—choo!”

Sneeze particles splattered all over us and on the map.

“Eww,” Tate said.

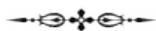
“Yuck.” Cringing, I wiped the wet off my face. “Are you sick?”

“Sorry. I sneeze a lot, but that one caught me by surprise.” Jinir dabbed her handkerchief across the parchment. “Wait. Look at that.” She pointed at the map, and we stepped closer.

Sneeze droplets wet some of the map, but—

I widened my eyes. “Skeed.”

Chapter 22



“WHOA,” TATE SAID. “WHAT are those markings?”

“More mountains?” I asked.

“Not mountains.” Jinir’s face paled. She trailed her fingers over the unconnected lines. Some were longer than others. But together, they curved around the X-marked cave in an almost-complete circle.

“Is it a moon?” I asked.

“How did you do that?” Tate asked.

“I wish I knew.” She touched the new marks on the map.
“Can this be real?”

“Can *what* be real?” I shoved my hand through my hair. “And why did your sneeze reveal more of the map? We didn’t use either of our Origin Powers, and—wait! Is your sneeze connected to your Origin Power?”

Jinir flicked her hand. “I doubt it. Whoever heard of a person’s snot having Origin Power?”

“True,” I said. “Though snot is a kind of water.”

She furrowed her eyebrows.

“Let’s test it,” Tate said. “Maybe her Origin Power works on the map.”

“What do you say?” I asked Jinir. “Will you let us test that?”

“Uh, sure. I suppose that’s all right.”

I shifted the map more fully in front of her, collected the water bucket, and set it on the floor beside where she stood.

“Treat the map like you do the rock walls,” I said. “Like you’re going to open them. And this time, we’ll keep a closer watch.”

Jinir tilted her head and dipped her hand into the water. She touched the map.

New marks appeared. Some filled in more of the moon’s image, but others outlined a new shape above the moon. A four-point star. Another X appeared at its tip.

“Wow,” Tate said.

Jinir rounded her eyes with apparent disbelief.

Shivers raced down the back of my neck. “An X. That must be where we go next.”

“Yeah, but where is that?” Tate asked. “It looks like it goes to the sky.”

“It must be something else,” I said. “The Originators wouldn’t have hidden the Cosmo-gems in the sky. Even they couldn’t fly.” I bit my lower lip. At least, I didn’t *think* they could fly.

“Then where?” Tate said. “Further up the mountain?”

“Probably.” I released a long puff of air. “That moon and star connect to each other and they touch this cave’s X. Hope-

fully, that means that new X is close.” I peered up at Jinir. “Do you agree?”

Jinir stared back at us. She swallowed. “I’ve seen that symbol before. I know where it is.”

“You do?” Tate and I said at the same time.

She nodded. “Come with me.”

She picked up the water bucket and led us to the back wall of her bedchamber. There, she dipped her hand into the water and brushed it across the wall up near the ceiling.

Etchings seeped out of the rock and formed a four-point star surrounded by a full moon.

“That image is on the map,” Tate said.

“Perhaps,” Jinir said, “but there’s no X above it.”

“There isn’t,” I said, “but it’s definitely the place on the map. That means either the Cosmo-gems are here or there’s another clue.”

Jinir shook her head. “I’ve lived in this cave all my life. I’ve never heard anything like that.”

I analyzed her unfazed expression. Back when she had told the invaders she knew nothing about us, she’d seemed calm then too. Did that mean she was again playacting?

“Bah!” I said, mimicking her commanding tone. “Tell the truth. What haven’t you told us?”

She pressed her lips into a tight, crooked frown.

“Please, tell us what you know,” I said.

She folded her arms. She paced to and from the door. “Very well. But you must first swear never to reveal it. To anyone.”

“Why?”

“Swear it.” She stepped closer to me and peered hard into my eyes.

I leaned back.

“Do you swear?”

“Uh—all right. Yes. I swear.”

“And you?” she asked Tate.

Tate, frowning a little, nodded.

“Good.” She swallowed again. “This home once belonged to an Originator. To Minika. Minika was my ancestor.”

I stiffened. “Your king, Bentin, was Minika’s descendant too. So, you’re related to him.”

“King Betin was not her descendant. He just claimed to be so the people would crown him king.” Jinir pressed her palm against her chest. “If he knew my true heritage, he’d have me imprisoned, or even killed, so I couldn’t tell others about it. Many in Zodane disapprove of King Betin’s attacks against Seryn, so if they learned of his treachery, that he wasn’t really one of Minika’s descendants, they’d fight him. They’d take away his authority. King Betin will not allow that to happen.”

“Secrecy keeps you safe,” Tate said.

“Yes.”

“So you’re related to the Originator who created the Cosmo-gems,” I repeated. “And the symbol on your wall matches the map. That must mean something that will help us find the Cosmo-gems.”

She frowned and shrugged.

I stood on my tiptoes and reached up to the moon-and-star symbol. I ran my forefinger along its lowest edge. "What does it mean?"

"My parents only said it represented our family and our Origin Power," Jinir said. "That it united us with Minika, who likewise had Origin Power over water. They also insisted we memorize an odd verse Minika had written in her journal and instructed her descendants never to forget it. It had a future purpose, she'd said. So, as Minika directed, every full moon, my family and I stood in front of that symbol and repeated that odd verse." She glanced between us. "A strange tradition, isn't it?"

Tate shook his head. "It's family stuff."

"Tate's family sings to focus their Origin Power, and it actually works."

"And Phineas had a dagger. A family heirloom. It helped him with his Origin Power."

I glared at Tate. My dagger wasn't a secret, but I wasn't proud that I'd lost it.

Jinir arched an eyebrow at me. "Oh? Do you have your dagger with you?"

"No. Slaterider has it."

She raised both eyebrows that time. She opened her mouth, too, as if to ask more questions, but I shook my head.

"There's nothing I can do about my dagger now," I added. "But we still need to find the Cosmo-gems. Please tell us about that verse of yours. How does it go?"

She folded her arms in front of her and expelled a soft, nervous laugh. "Like I said, it is odd, so you can't tell me I didn't warn you. Here it is:

"Stars merge with wisdom's moon.

Unity powers Force.

Web breaks the Ancients' Croon.

Awake!"

"Awake?" Tate said. "Like it's sleeping?"

"I told you it was odd."

I furrowed my brows. Yeah, it was odd, but she'd said "awake." That was a word I'd translated on the metal tablet.

I patted the tablet inside my waist pocket. "Unity, force—unknown word, unknown word—awake."

"What was that?" Tate asked.

"Awake," I said louder. "That word means something." I removed the metal tablet from my pocket. I held it out to them and told them about it. "For instance," I concluded, "this word here is 'awake.'"

"Whoa," Tate said.

"Incredible." Jinir, her brows furrowed, stared at the tablet for a long moment. At last, she tapped the unknown word symbol next to *unity*. "This one must be 'powers.' Unity powers force. That sentence is in the verse too."

Warmth shot through me, and I grinned. "Skeed," I said. "Unity powers force. Unknown word—unknown word—awake." I stared back at Jinir. "It is, as you said, incredible."

Jinir tapped the side of her fist against her lips. “Now what?”

“I wish I knew,” I said.

“We try something,” Tate said. “We’ll get nowhere if we do nothing.”

His words were matter of fact. Like he’d heard them many times before. In truth, they sounded familiar to me, too. They were like words my parents would have said. Had Tate heard them from his own parents?

Once again, sadness for Tate’s plight filled me. But so did amazement. How had he managed so well without family?

Will I ever be as capable as Tate is? Or as brave?

“What do you suggest we try?” Jinir asked Tate.

“Ask Phineas. He’s better at ideas than I am.”

I did a double take. *I am*? I didn’t know he thought that about me. Yeah, I always tried to figure out what to do, but—I smiled a little—did that mean I actually succeeded sometimes?

Jinir placed her hands on her hips. “Well?” she asked me.

“Um . . . Could you repeat that verse again?”

Jinir did so. While she spoke, I paced back and forth across the room. Unlike before, her voice grew louder in some places and softer in others. But in both cases, her words felt important. Like they had some hidden meaning.

At last, I said, “*Awake* means to no longer sleep. But it also means to arise. To become active again. To actually do something, like Tate just told us to do.”

Tate grinned.

“Something like what?” Jinir asked.

“I wish I knew,” I said.

“How about we repeat that verse?” Tate said to Jinir. “The way your family did. Who knows? Maybe the words have power. Like a magic incantation.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched,” I said.

“No, it’s not. I’ve heard magic incantations before. Lots of times.”

“Yeah, right.”

“If that verse was an incantation,” Jinir cut in, stopping our argument, “something would have happened every time we’d repeated it. But it didn’t.”

“True,” Tate grumbled.

“It’s more likely that verse works like your song.” I said.

“Your song doesn’t have its own power, does it?”

Tate shook his head.

“But singing the song strengthened both our Origin Powers. Even when I didn’t have my dagger.”

Those affirming shivers shot down my back.

Did that mean that family stuff strengthened Origin Power? Stuff like heirlooms and songs and traditions?

“Did you ever sing that verse?” I asked Jinir.

“No. We just spoke it in unison.”

“*Unison*,” I said. “It’s nearly the same word as *unity*. And all four Protective Forces—Earth Shield, Sky Shield, Vida, and the Cosmo-gems—require *unity* to safeguard Seryn.”

“That has to be the key,” Tate said. “Let’s try it right now.”

“Try what?” I asked.

“Unity. You know, work together. Like how we focused our Origin Powers on the—the *moon*’s reflection. Whoa. ‘Moon’ is another word in that verse. So, yeah. Let’s repeat it in unison. And focus our Origin Powers on that star-moon symbol.”

“Minika recorded nothing about Origin Power being connected to that symbol or that verse,” Jinir said.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But it’s worth a try. So far, our Origin Powers have helped us figure out parts of that map, and that symbol is on the map.”

Jinir stared at us. At last, she sighed. “Very well. I don’t suppose it will hurt anything to try.”

“Agreed,” Tate said.

“Where would your family stand?” I asked Jinir.

“Here.” Jinir stepped directly beneath the symbol. “After that, we just quoted the words.”

Tate and I moved next to her. The three of us peered up at the symbol.

“Anything else?” Tate asked.

“Only that we did it at night when there was a full moon. I don’t suppose you want to wait until then?”

I frowned and shook my head. “The full moon won’t be out for several more days.”

“Let’s try it now,” Tate said. “You never know. It might work.”

Jinir gave him a halfhearted smile and peered up at the star-moon symbol.

“Remind us how the verse goes,” I said.

Jinir repeated the words. Then, staring hard at the symbol, I gathered up every thread of Origin Power I could find inside me—I expected the others did too—and together we said:

“Stars merge with wisdom’s moon.

Unity powers Force.

Web breaks the Ancients’ Croon.

Awake!”

Nothing happened.

We repeated the verse two more times.

Still, nothing.

I groaned.

“Maybe you shouldn’t sing the words,” Jinir said to Tate.

“Just speak them.”

“Singing is how he focuses his Origin Power,” I said. “It’s how it works best.”

“Hmm.” Jinir, scrunching her nose, placed her hands on her hips. She glanced around the cave and up at the star-moon symbol. She peered down at her open palm. “Maybe I’m the reason it’s not working.” She hurried to the water bucket and slid her hand inside it. “Sorry, I should have thought of this. I’m not used to using water for anything but opening walls.”

I frowned and folded my arms. “You’re not the only one who’s not using your Origin Power like usual. I still need a reflection.” I didn’t say I needed my dagger, but Tate must have understood my thoughts anyway.

“You don’t have your dagger,” Tate whispered to me. “But that doesn’t mean give up. Never give up”

I should have flinched at the sharpness I heard in his voice. Who did he think he was? I was the apprentice to the royal advisor. Yet, instead of flinching, quietness settled through me. Tate had lost home and family—everything—yet still he persevered. Still, he had real, almost tangible hope. I, who possessed all Tate had lost, could do the same, couldn’t I?

“You’re right,” I said. “I won’t give up. Somehow, we’ll find the Cosmo-gems.” *And somehow I’ll get my dagger back. I hope.*

He gave me a crisp nod and focused back on the star-moon symbol. Jinir set a stool beneath it. She dipped her hand into the water bucket, climbed onto the stool, and pressed her wet palm against the middle of the symbol.

“Focus your Origin Power with ours,” Tate said to Jinir.

She glanced back and forth between us. “*Unity*. That makes perfect sense. Unity strengthens the Power Forces.”

“Exactly.”

I clenched my fists and stared straight at the symbol. Again, we repeated the verse. I listened closely to the words. I pictured Tate healing my arm and Jinir opening the rock wall. I pretended I held my dagger in my hand and aimed the reflection at that star-moon symbol.

The earth rumbled beneath our feet.

“You were right, boys,” Jinir said. “I think it’s working. Keep repeating it.”

We did so.

Rumble—

—rumBLE . . .

“Awake,” we finished.

. . . RUMBLE.

The wall cracked around the etchings, and streams of bright light seeped out of them.

My skin tingled, and I caught my breath. Tate backed up. Jinir stepped off the stool.

The crack in the rock wall became a long, jagged line. It spread up to the cave’s ceiling and down to the floor. The rumblings hollowed into a hum, and the wall slid open, revealing a small cavern. Brighter light, surrounding a flat rock shelf, burst out of the cavern. A lidded stone box sat on top of that shelf. The box looked like the one Father and I had found in Flatberry Lake, though it was bigger than my waist pouch.

Jinir jumped back onto the stool and snatched the box.

The humming and rumbling stopped.

She lifted the box’s lid. Three smooth ruby stones lay inside it. A large carved X spanned the top of each one, and deep-red light shot out of the Xs.

“Skeed,” Tate and I whispered.

Jinir again stepped down from the stool. She handed me the box. Both her fingers and her voice shook. “I’m assuming they’re the Cosmo-gems.”

“They look the way Father described them. Let’s make sure. Father said Cosmo-gems uniquely respond to Origin Power. So, everyone focus your Power on them now.”

We stared at the stones.

All at once, the red light glowing from the Xs turned blue.

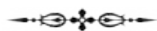
I grinned. "They're real."

Poundings banged against the cave's front door.

"We know you and the boys are in there," Slaterider said.

"Open up. Now."

Chapter 23



I CLENCHED THE STONE box. My knuckles turned white.
“How did they find us?”

“Where can we hide?” Tate asked.

“Not just hide,” Jinir said. “Escape. There’s a tunnel beneath this cave. It leads out of the mountain.”

“A tunnel?” Tate said.

“*Beneath* the mountain?” I said. “Underground?” My stomach rolled. Why, oh, why did I have to crawl through so many tunnels?

“Yes. This way.” She hurried to the small cavern where Tate and I’d slept and crawled inside.

Tate and I scrambled after her.

Three thundering pounds rattled the door.

“Let us in,” Slaterider yelled.

A crate sat next to the cavern’s back wall. Jinir slid it aside, revealing a two-foot-wide hole in the dirt floor. Cool, stale air wafted out of it.

“It’s a long tunnel,” Jinir said. “Crawl inside and follow it to the end. It will lead you out of the mountain.”

I stared into the tunnel and cringed. Nothing but darkness and spider webs stared back at me. “What about light?” My voice trembled, but I didn’t care. “We won’t be able to see anything down there.”

“Just keep crawling,” Jinir said. “The tunnel will widen into a cavern. You’ll find a torch there on the cavern’s wall.”

I peered deeper into the hole. It spanned only a couple of feet wide, just big enough for Tate and me to crawl single file through it. I bit the inside of my lower lip.

“Don’t worry,” Jinir said. “Be careful, and you’ll be fine.”

I winced. If we had to be careful, that meant we had reason to worry.

“Open now,” Slaterider yelled. “Or we’ll break down the door.”

“Go,” Jinir whisper-yelled. “Once you’re out, take the Cosmo-gems back to Seryn.”

Tate lowered himself, feet first, into the tunnel. A couple of moments later, he disappeared into the darkness.

I shoved the stone box into my water bag. It only had a few drops of water left in it anyway. Hopefully, Tate still had a lot of water in his. I pictured what I remembered of his flattened water bag and groaned. *If only we’d had time to refill them.* “How long will it take us to get out of the mountain?” I asked Jinir.

“At least an hour.”

More poundings struck the door.

“Go!” Jinir repeated.

I clambered into the dark, sloped tunnel. How far had Tate already crawled? Was he nearby?

Jinir slid the crate over the hole. Darkness spotted by light seeped through the crate’s cracks.

“Y—you said there’s a torch close by, right?” I asked.

“Yes. Just follow the tunnel.” Jinir slipped a fire stick through a crevice in the crate. It landed on top of my head. Her movements scuffed the ground as she left the cavern.

I grabbed the fire stick off my head.

A thunderous crack split the silence, and the walls shook.

“Get out,” Jinir yelled. “You have no right—”

Men’s rough voices crowded out the rest of her statement. Was she all right?

I shoved the fire stick inside my waist pocket and crawled backward down the sloped tunnel. At first, the voices from above rumbled around me. But the farther I crawled, the softer their voices became. The air grew colder, too. And smelled staler.

“Tate?” I whispered.

“I’m here,” he said from behind me.

“Can you see me?” I brushed a spider web off my cheek.

“No.”

“I hate the dark.”

“So do I. But keep crawling. This is our only way out.”

I glared at the blackness, clenched my teeth to keep them from chattering, and crawled several more feet. Twice, I bumped into Tate, but we didn't stop.

At length, all I could hear was our breathing and the gravel scraping out from below our hands and knees.

"Hey," Tate said. "The tunnel's wider."

"Maybe it's the cavern Jinir talked about."

I continued crawling until I again bumped into Tate. The air felt colder and damp.

"It's wider and taller in here," Tate said. "I can even stand. And when I reach over my head, I almost touch the ceiling. I don't feel walls nearby either."

I exhaled in relief and stood next to him. "This has to be the cavern. Feel around. See if you can find the torch."

"What use is a dead torch?"

"It won't be dead for long. I have a fire stick."

"That's perfect!"

"So, yeah. I'll check over here. You check around over there."

"All right."

I moved my hands through the darkness and shuffled to the right. About three steps later, I smacked my fingers against a rock wall. I patted it in all directions.

"Yes!" Tate said. "Here's the torch."

I walked back toward the sound of his voice. When I reached him, I handed him the fire stick. He struck it against the wall and lit the end of the torch.

It burst into flame. Ghoulish shadows danced across Tate's face, and I stepped back. Cringing, I blinked until my eyes grew used to the brightness. Finally, I scanned the now-lit cavern. The walls shimmered like crystals. Dripping stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites rose from the slanted floor. They formed a narrow path, almost like a maze lined with upward-pointing spears. That path led across the cavern to another dark tunnel.

"Let's keep going," Tate said. He, still holding the torch, moved in front of me.

At first, I wondered if I should insist that I walk in front. After all, I was the royal advisor's apprentice. But instead, I followed behind him. Not because he was the leader or anything, but because he could hold the torch higher. And anyway, I wasn't invincible. I could rely on others. I could let them help me. Besides, weren't two people stronger together?

Unity requires more than one person.

I suppose I'd always sensed that truth. But somehow, that knowledge felt newer now. Stronger, too. Like it had settled all deep and tingly inside me. Just like those feelings of certainty Father had described to me.

We continued toward another narrowing section, moving downward until the floor dropped off in front of us. The light beyond it disappeared into a dark, empty space.

"Let's think about this," Tate said. "I'm not sure it's safest."

"It might not be, but what else can we do? We can't go back. Anyway, Jinir said we *could* do this."

Tate grunted. "If we were careful."

We stared at the blackness.

"I wish I could see over the ledge," I said. "Maybe it's not as dangerous to climb down as we think it is."

Tate grunted. "I'll lean over it. I might see more."

"You also might fall."

"I won't fall. You won't let me. Here. Hold my arm."

"No way. I'm not strong enough for that. You're too big."

"Yes, you are. Go on. Take it."

Grumbling, I grabbed his outstretched arm. He held the torch out over the ledge with his other hand. He leaned . . . leaned . . .

I gritted my teeth, straining to hold onto him. "What do you see?"

"That it's steep. Pull me back."

I planted my feet harder into the dirt floor and yanked him backward.

He tumbled onto the ground in front of me.

"Skeed." Tate stood and brushed the dirt off his knees with his free hand.

"What's down there?" I asked.

"I think we're almost out of here. There's a glimmer of light farther on."

"Light?" I peeked over the edge. "I don't see anything."

"I don't from up here either." He crouched down. "Climb on to my back and hang on. I'm going to jump."

"What? No!"

He backed into me, and I fell onto him. He pulled my legs around his waist and stood.

“Hey!”

“Hang tight.”

“No way. Let me down.”

“One . . . two . . .”

I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“ . . . three.” Tate jumped.

I squeezed my eyes closed. Air rushed over me.

A heavy impact.

We’d landed. And I was still alive.

I scrambled off him. “Never do that again.”

“Don’t save your life? Don’t get us where we need to go?”

“You know what I mean.” I motioned toward the incline.

“I could have climbed down here myself.”

“You think so?”

I scrutinized the rough, uneven stepping ledges, which fit only one foot at a time. I frowned. Alone, we would have struggled with that section. But together, it would have been even harder. “You were right. Thanks.”

He gave me a slight nod and shifted his position.

“So, where did you see the light?” I asked.

Tate aimed the still-lit torch in front of us. The cavern narrowed into another tunnel.

I squinted, searching the blackness.

A pinprick of light flickered. It wasn't orange like fire, so it wasn't a lantern or torch or anything. It appeared whiter than that. Like daylight.

I grinned. "There!" I pointed toward it. "We're almost out of here. Come on."

I focused on where I'd seen the light and ran between the occasional stalagmites and stalactites.

Tate, still holding the torch out for us, jogged.

Eventually, the surrounding blackness faded, and the light lengthened and widened into an exit.

"Yes!" Tate rushed ahead of me.

"Wait," I said. "Let's make sure it's safe before we climb out."

Tate stopped in the entry.

I caught up to him and lifted my face toward the sunlit sky. I took in a deep breath of fresh air. "We did it!"

"Everything looks safe to me," Tate said. "Let's get out of here."

"You're probably right about it being safe, but . . ." I peeked around both edges of the cave's walls. A wide thicket of trees and bushes surrounded the opening. High above us, birds chirped from the trees' branches, and beyond us, Sky Shield rose like a beacon. We were almost back to Seryn.

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

Tate grinned. He put out the torch, and together we stepped out of the tunnel.

As he walked, Tate pressed his palm against a tree. He froze, widened his eyes, and grabbed my arm. "Vibrations. Someone's coming."

"Invaders?"

"Who else?"

"How far away are they?"

"A mile, I think. Maybe less."

I scrubbed the back of my head. How did the invaders keep finding us so fast? "Let's run."

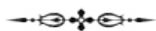
"Back to the tunnel?" Tate said.

I shook my head. "They'll find us right off if we go back. Besides, we're almost home. Seryn's just over that hill."

Men's voices called out in the distance.

My stomach tightened. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter 24



TATE AND I RACED to the edge of the thicket. We peeked out from the trees and surveyed our surroundings. The mountain tunnel was behind us, and Sky Shield to the north loomed before us. Seryn wasn't far, but only short grasses covered the land between us and Sky Shield. If we ran, the invaders would see us, and if we couldn't outrun them, they'd capture us. Yet, what other choice did we have? We had to run. We had to get through Sky Shield. And after that, Earth Shield.

"What are you waiting for?" Tate asked.

"I'm not waiting. I'm planning."

"Well, stop planning. The invaders are coming."

Their voices echoed louder. I imagined their powerful arms and pictured their red, angry faces yelling at Jinir. Where was she? Was she all right?

Tate grabbed my forearm and yanked me out of the thicket. "Run!"

Together, we charged straight north.

Harsh shouts called out to us. I peeked over my shoulder. About a dozen invaders raced around the mountainside toward us.

“Don’t look back,” Tate said. “Focus ahead. Only ahead.”

Focus, focus, focus, I told myself.

We quickened our paces. This time, though, Tate didn’t run ahead of me. He stayed beside me.

We plowed through underbrush, veered around large stones, and jumped over wide holes.

The voices grew louder.

“Keep running,” Tate said. “We’re almost there.”

“Let’s head east,” I said. “Away from the crack in Sky Shield.”

“Yes! Where the invaders can’t get through it. Good idea.”

We angled east.

“Can you run faster?” Tate asked.

“Watch this.” I lengthened my stride. “How’s—?” I couldn’t get out the rest of my sentence. I was breathing too hard.

Tate likewise quickened his pace, again matching mine.

We ran. The invaders’ footsteps pounded the earth behind us. Their voices grew louder . . . and louder . . .

Tate grabbed my arm.

“Hey!” I yanked away from him. “What are you doing? You’re slowing me down.”

“Quit fighting me. We’ve got to get through Sky Shield *now*.” In one quick swoop, Tate lifted me off the ground and

flung me forward. I flew across the rest of the land and dropped in front of Sky Shield. Tate, suddenly beside me, tugged me upright. Together, we leaped through Sky Shield's fiery green mist.

Chapter 25



OUR STRATEGY HAD WORKED. We'd outfoxed the invaders. They hadn't been able to follow us through Sky Shield. *Skeed, we're awesome.*

I dropped onto my hands and knees, clasped the grass, and breathed in its heavenly freshness. *I'm almost home*, I thought. But in my next breath, I said aloud to Tate, "You threw me."

"Sorry." Tate leaned over. He propped his hands on his knees and took in several deep breaths. "It was the fastest way . . . I could think of to get us here . . . You're not hurt, are you? From when you hit the ground?"

"Not one bit." I sat on my calves and held up my palms. "See? Not even a scratch. Actually, that whole flying bit was rather exciting."

Tate arched an eyebrow, tilted his head, studying me, and gave me a quick smile. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Maybe you can throw me again sometime."

“Maybe I will.” Laughing, he placed his hands on his hips. He took another long breath and peered up at the pink-and-yellow sunset.

I stood and brushed the dirt off my knees. “It’s getting late. We’d better leave before the invaders make their way back here.”

“Definitely.”

I took off running.

Like before, Tate stayed close to me, even when we passed the outer districts and crossed Groton River. Once, I asked him why he stayed by me when he could run so much faster, and he just shrugged.

“Safer,” he said. “In case the invaders show up again.”

Whether that was true, I didn’t know. After all, wouldn’t it be easier for them to catch two of us together than one of us on our own? But I didn’t complain. I was glad he was there. Glad I wasn’t alone.



A few hours later, we crossed through Earth Shield.

I scanned the familiar landscape and likewise slowed my breathing. To our right, almost thirty miles of lush fields separated us from Caba Forest and the Seryn mountain range. To our left, Seryn Castle rose on the other side of the preservation garden like the grand, welcoming symbol it was. Yet, though I’d only been gone six days, the landscape was unfamiliar too.

The posts that marked the garden now marked off land that reached all the way to Earth Shield. Someone had also plowed that land, and it appeared ready for planting.

"Where now?" Tate asked.

I pressed my lips into a hard line. I folded my arms to keep from tapping them in rhythm with the invaders' still-present poundings against Earth Shield. "To the castle. We have to get the Cosmo-gems to King Zedek. Come on."

We took a narrow path that ran alongside Earth Shield. When we reached the end of what was now the preservation garden, we headed to the grove that surrounded the castle. As we approached it, one of the king's watchguards blew his horn.

"They've seen us," I said.

Tate grunted.

Within moments, several guards stepped out of the grove. Rodge, the head guard, was one of them.

"Phineas Hawk," he called.

I waved my arm over my head and ran to them. Tate trailed behind me.

"You've made it back," Rodge said when we met up with each other. He scanned down the length of Tate and back at me. Sweat stained our now-tattered clothes and dirt caked our skin.

Rodge carefully clasped my hand in both of his. "You're not hurt, are you? Either of you? Seriously, I mean?"

"We're well," I said. "Thanks to Tate."

Tate, behind me, grunted again.

Rodge nodded to Tate and looked back at me. "Did you find the Cosmo-gems?"

"We did."

He grinned and exhaled in relief. "When King Zedek told me of your quest, I worried it would be too much for you. I'm glad you proved me wrong. Come along. Let's get the two of you to the castle."

Tate and I, surrounded by the guards, continued onward. As we walked, townspeople seeped out of the grove and flocked toward us.

"It's Phineas Hawk," someone nearby said. "Where has he been?"

"Who's that boy with him?" someone else asked.

I peered up at Tate. Did he want me to introduce him?

Tate must have understood my expression because he shook his head. I said nothing.

"Phineas!" Mother's voice rang out above the others. "My dear Phineas." She, with Ellya behind her, pushed through the crowd. Reaching us, she hugged me. She kissed the top of my head.

I scrunched my face over her kiss. Did she have to do that in public? "I'm glad to see you too," I said.

She laughed, and I scrunched my face even tighter. I glanced back at Tate.

He, with his arms folded, watched us. His expression seemed empty. Was he sad? Did all this affection remind him of his dead family?

I frowned and hugged Mother tighter. Maybe affection wasn't such a bad thing.

"How is Father?" I asked Mother.

"A little better."

"He's still not awake much, though," Ellya added.

Mother wiped the dirt from her apron. "Perhaps that will change now that you're home. He will want to hear of your travels."

"So does the king," Rodge said to me under his breath. He turned to Mother. "We must go now, but you and your daughter are welcome to join us."

"Thank you," Mother said.

Rodge urged us forward again, and Mother and Ellya followed us.

We continued on through the grove and along the lesser-used path that led to the front of the castle.

A tall staircase lined by guards led up to the entrance. With two guards in front and two guards behind us, Tate and I climbed it. At the top, another guard opened the door and motioned us inside.

I peered at Tate. Was he nervous? Worried? I would be if I had never been to this castle before.

Tate caught my glance, but his expression remained blank.

I turned back to the scene before us and crossed the great hall. I climbed the grand staircase to the throne room. There, a waiting guard opened the door and stepped to the side. He motioned for us to enter.

We strode across the vast hall to a short staircase. Atop it, King Zedek sat on his golden throne. Another guard, more muscular than the others, stood behind him.

“Come forward, Phineas Hawk,” King Zedek said. “And bring your companion.”

Tate and I climbed the staircase. We stopped on the stair just lower than the throne. I bowed. Tate hesitated, but a moment after, he likewise bowed.

“This is Tate—“ I almost said “Tatengooloog,” but Tate bumped my arm, stopping me.

I pressed my lips into a tight line. That was right. Tate hated his full name, just like I hated mine. Well, I’d have to explain to the king who he was, but I could keep the full of his name to myself.

I stood taller and cleared my throat. “Tate is from one of the outer districts. The invaders attacked his village and killed his family.”

Mother and Ellya behind us gasped.

“Were your parents murdered?” King Zedek asked Tate.

“Yes, sire,” Tate said.

“That isn’t common. Not among our people.” He furrowed his brows. “You were fortunate to escape.”

Tate swallowed and nodded.

I shifted my stance. “Tate is one of the bravest people I know.”

King Zedek, watching us, called out to the guards who stood near the entrance. "The dangers from the invaders are getting closer. See that the entire kingdom makes more preparations."

"Yes, sire." The guards bowed and left.

King Zedek again looked at Tate. "You must now consider yourself a member of our village. Think of us as your parents and relatives. As your friends."

Tate shrugged, but his muscles tensed, like he wasn't sure what he should do. And who could blame him? What would I do if someone said that to me? Beyond that, where would I go? With whom would I live?

I caught my mother's attention and motioned at Tate. She must have understood me because she nodded.

"Thank you, King," I said. "May I suggest, if Tate agrees . . ." I stared straight up at Tate. "Why don't you live with us?"

"Whoa," Tate said. "Are you sure?"

"I asked you, didn't I?"

"Uh, all right, yeah."

"Now that's settled," King Zedek said, "where are the Cosmo-gems?"

I glanced down at my water bag, which was now secured beneath my belt. Then, holding King Zedek's gaze, I removed the box from my water bag and handed it to him.

King Zedek opened it. He removed one of the ruby-colored Cosmo-gems. He scrutinized it, turned it over, and scrutinized it again. Finally, he returned the gem to the box and handed

them back to me. "Since you, Phineas Hawk, found the Cosmo-gems, this honor is yours. Please place them in Vida."

I lowered my gaze and swallowed. Such a moment required solemnity, yet everything inside me grinned. Forever after, I'd be the boy who found the Cosmo-gems. The one who restored them to their original places. The boy—no, the young man—who'd helped save our kingdom.

I bowed to the king and carried the Cosmo-gems to the large white tile called the Center Place. There, I knelt. As I'd done the last time I was in this room, I touched each corner of the tile and set my palm against its center.

Like before, the floor rumbled, and the tile slid sideways. Vida, glowing white, rose from the ground. It stretched toward the sun's image, which was painted on the ceiling. It grew higher and higher. When it finally stopped, I stood on my tiptoes and reached for the statue's lowest tree-like branch.

I couldn't even touch it.

"Help him," King Zedek told the guard behind him.

The burly man stepped toward me and—

Outside there was a thunderous crash, and the earth shook.

I grasped for Vida, but before I could get a good hold of it, I fell onto my backside. "What's happening?"

Wood exploded. Voices screamed.

King Zedek jumped to his feet. He raced down the steps from his throne.

Another guard ran into the room. "Earth Shield has cracked."

"No," I cried. "I have the Cosmo-gems." *I can't be too late.*

"The opening is still too narrow for the invaders to cross through," the guard continued, "but they can see us. And they're still ramming it. I don't expect Earth Shield will keep them out much longer."

"Everyone to their posts," King Zedek commanded his guards. "Those who can manage a weapon, go to Earth Shield. All others to the stronghold."

Mother, holding Ellya's hand, started toward me. King Zedek stepped in front of her.

"All others to the stronghold," he repeated.

"But Phineas—"

"Phineas has work to do first. Now go."

Mother frowned. Her eyes grew watery, but after glancing between me and the king, she curtsied to him and left with Ellya and the others.

When they were gone, King Zedek said, "Phineas, put the Cosmo-gems in their rightful places. After that, return to your family. Tate, stay with Phineas."

Both Tate and I nodded.

King Zedek and his guards left.

I stared at the closed door. I rubbed the back of my neck. Yeah, I had to set the Cosmo-gems in Vida's concaves, but I couldn't even reach the branches. And anyway, I needed to help my family. Father couldn't get to the stronghold alone, and Mother and Ellya couldn't carry him.

"What are you waiting for?" Tate asked.

"I'm not waiting," I snapped. "You saw that, didn't you? I can't reach the—"

In one swift movement, Tate lifted me onto his shoulders.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He carried me to Vida. "Are you tall enough now?"

I reached as high as I could. "Not quite."

Tate grabbed my waist and lifted me higher. I leaned against Vida, steadying myself, and extended toward the branches. "I'm still too low."

"Stand on my shoulders. I've got you." Tate grabbed my shins, pushed me farther upright, and set my feet on his shoulders. "Tall enough now?"

"I think so."

Leaning harder against Vida, and with Tate holding on to me, I stretched out for the indentions. "I have it."

The poundings grew louder.

Leaning my elbow against Vida for support, I opened the box. One by one, I placed the Cosmo-gems into the indentations.

As if Vida was alive, the indentations' edges spread out as if they were snake-like fingers.

I jolted backward. "Skeed!"

The stone fingers curled inward and tightened around the Cosmo-gems.

Somewhere, splintering exploded.

"That sounds like Earth Shield's crack just widened," Tate said. "Let's get out of here."

Streams of blue light burst out of the Cosmo-gems' Xs. They twisted around each other, and snapping and crackling like hot oil, they whisked across the room.

Tate lifted me off his shoulders and plunked me on my feet. "Come on."

I put my hands on my hips. I stared up at Vida's branches. "Stop the invaders!" I yelled at the Cosmo-gems. "Seal Earth Shield."

As if in response, the Cosmo-gems' streams of light gathered into themselves. They formed a fiery-looking ball that shot upward, hit the ceiling, and seeped into it.

Silence surrounded us, but outside, screams and the invaders' ongoing poundings filled the air.

Tate and I faced one another. We crossed our fingers and held our breaths. *Please stop the invaders*, I silently begged the Cosmo-gems.

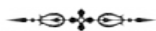
Instead, the poundings grew louder, and the ground shook again.

"The crack's spreading," someone out in the hallway screamed.

My stomach tightened.

The Cosmo-gems had failed.

Chapter 26



THE INVADERS' POUNDING AGAINST Earth Shield hammered my senses.

"Let's go," I said to Tate. "The invaders will break through the wall. We have to help the others."

Tate's face paled. His eyes rounded wide, and he stared at the doorway. "I have to get out of here."

"We both do." I grabbed his arm. "Come on."

"No. I can't face them. I'm leaving Seryn." He pulled away from me.

"What? Why?" I grabbed his arm again and shook it. "Tate? Are you all right?"

"The invaders will kill me."

I scrutinized him. The invaders had destroyed his village. He'd told me that before. Yet, despite all that, Tate had helped our kingdom. Had helped *me* find the Cosmo-gems. What had changed his mind now?

I followed his gaze to the doorway. Was there something else—something worse—he hadn't told me? Something I

might help *him* with? “I’ll . . . I’ll come with you, then. After we help Seryn. We have to help Seryn first.”

Tate gaped at me, but at last he shook his head. “Sorry, Phineas. It’s too dangerous for me. But don’t worry. You’ll be all right.” He swallowed, whirled, and ran from the room.

I raced after him. “I’ll only be all right if you’re with me.” Although I’d only said those words because I didn’t want him to leave, that tingly sensation ran through me. *My words were true. I do need Tate with me.*

Tate didn’t even flinch.

I charged down the hall after him. I paused on the landing at the top of the grand staircase. Tate was almost at the bottom. “Stop,” I called down to him. “You’re safer with us than you would be on your own.”

He kept running.

“Please, Tate. We work best together. You know that. Like how your song helps strengthen my Origin Power.”

Finally, he stopped. He turned back to me, and I rushed down to him.

“Together?” he said. “You really believe that?”

My thoughts simultaneously raced and halted. Unity had powered the protective forces since the Originators created them. Through that same unity, those forces had protected Seryn. Unity, or working together as a single group, was essential. And over the past days, Tate and I had accomplished much together. We had developed *unity*.

“I believe it,” I said.

“Unity,” Tate said under his breath.

I nodded. “It’s the only thing that will save us and our entire kingdom.”

His gaze lingered on me. Finally, he said, “All right. I’ll help you.” Though he didn’t say, “and you’ll help me,” those words echoed in my mind. No matter what, before this war ended, I would help Tate. He faced danger—perhaps more than me, though I didn’t know why. Maybe it was the reason the invaders destroyed his village instead of imprisoning its people. Wasn’t that what they’d do to Seryn if they conquered us?

I pressed my lips into a tight line. *They must not conquer us.*

I nodded to Tate, and side by side, we raced from the castle.

In the courtyard, citizen fighters, along with Seryn’s guards, ran out of the marketplace and the surrounding villagers’ quarters. They stormed into the grove that surrounded the castle. Some carried weapons, others carried garden implements, and still others called out, “Do whatever you can to block the crack” or “Stop the crack from opening wider.”

Seryn’s older women, young children, and weakened townsfolk headed toward the stronghold that was beyond the marketplace. Some helped each other walk. Others carried supplies. Were Father, Mother, and Ellya at home or in the stronghold? Should I search for them in case they needed me? In case the invaders broke through Earth Shield and overtook Seryn?

Images of my family cowering beneath the invaders’ raised weapons choked through me. I couldn’t leave them alone and

unprotected. Yet, staying back and hiding with them wasn't an option either. I needed to help protect Seryn. Father would do that if he were well. Protecting Seryn was his duty. *That is my duty.*

Nausea groaned through me. Still, I clenched my fists and drew my eyebrows into a tight line. Yes, I needed to protect my family. But the best way to do that was to keep the invaders out of Seryn.

Tate and I followed the fighters through the grove and to the open field that divided the castle from Earth Shield. To the east, the preservation garden still looked fresh. However, orange flames and black smoke rose from one section near Earth Shield. Several citizen fighters batted their cloaks at the flames.

Tate stopped. "How did it catch fire?"

Bams rumbled and snapped.

I grabbed his arm. "Let's worry about that later. Right now, the poundings are getting louder. Come on."

We ran to the crack in Earth Shield.

There, the hair on the back of my neck stiffened to attention. The crack spanned all the way from the ground to the sky. Jagged in some places and straight in others, it now looked like a monster's lightning bolt rather than a giant's walking stick.

Still worse, the crack had widened. Earth Shield had split apart. Despite being the width of my pinky finger, the opening allowed several invaders to peek through. Some even poked their pointer fingers through it.

At least a dozen of Seryn's guards surrounded the opening. Some pounded on the invaders' fingers until they pulled back to the other side. Other guards stuffed kerchiefs, bandannas, and even some of their shirts into the opening, blocking the invaders' peerings.

But hundreds of guards, under Rodge's direction, worked about five feet back from the crack. Some rushed in supplies. Others scrambled to build two half-circular walls. They hadn't begun building those walls until Earth Shield had cracked, but so many people now worked on them that both walls were already about thirty feet long and ten feet tall. They also abutted Earth Shield on both ends. The sharp-pointed vertical logs left over from constructing the stronghold made up the first wall. Large stones, held together with mortar, made up the second wall.

When King Zedek had begun preparing our kingdom for possible war with the invaders, Father had advised him to build such walls as a second line of defense. King Zedek had agreed, but he'd added it to the bottom of his priorities. He'd said the protective forces were in place, and the best thing Father and I could do was find the Cosmo-gems while the rest of the kingdom worked for unity. Then, the king's suggestion had seemed right, but now . . .

"If only we'd built the walls sooner," I said.

Tate glanced at me, but he said nothing.

We rushed up to Rodge.

"We're here to help," I said. "What do you want us to do?"

“Collect more rocks,” Rodge said. “The biggest you can find. I’d like to build that wall two layers thick. Maybe even three.”

Tate frowned. “Walls won’t hold them off. We made walls too, and they broke through them. The invaders were determined to . . .” He swallowed.

I pictured the terrible scene of death and destruction that Tate must have witnessed, and my stomach churned. “Perhaps they will break through no matter what we do, but we can’t just give up. We have to try to stop them.”

Tate’s gaze at me narrowed. Not like he was angry, but like he was thinking hard. At last, he turned away from me, bypassed the guards, and strode to the crack.

I raced after him.

“Get away from there, Tate,” Rodge yelled. “You’ll only get in the way.”

“I won’t get in anyone’s way,” he muttered.

He pushed through the guards closest to the crack. He then pressed his hands against Earth Shield, with one hand on each side of the crack. He clawed his fingers around the jagged, bulging edges and pulled inward.

“What are you doing?” I said, running up behind him. “You’re strong, but not that strong. One person alone can’t pull those two sides together.”

“I can try. Maybe I can heal it.”

I blinked. Heal it? *What a great idea.*

“Move away, Tate,” Rodge called out again.

One guard who'd been working on the first wall dropped his tools and seized Tate's arm. Another grabbed Tate's waist. Both tried to pull him away from Earth Shield.

"Rodge is the captain here," the guard holding Tate's waist said. "If you can't obey him, you must go to the stronghold."

Tate, still holding the edges, elbowed the two men away from him. They fell backward.

"Tate," I said, "stop. Let's help build the walls."

"The walls won't do anything," Tate strained harder against the crack.

The guards jumped up. They grabbed Tate's cloak and tugged.

The cloak's clasp pressed against Tate's neck, choking him. He snarled, unfastened it, and flung his cloak to the ground.

Instantly, Tate's muscles bulged. His head enlarged, and his body shot upward. He grew taller . . .

. . . taller . . .

. . . and taller.

So tall he could see across the treetops if he'd wanted to.

I gasped. *Incredible. How did he grow like that? Not even Origin Power could change the way someone looked.*

The guards swore at Tate. Others froze. Many of the citizen fighters backed away and raced toward the town center.

But if Tate hadn't used Origin Power, I continued musing, then what? No one could be that big except . . .

Understanding flashed through me. I gaped up at my friend's hard-lined face.

Tate is a giant.

No wonder he was so strong. No wonder the invaders had killed his family. The giants were all humans' enemies.

Yet, Tate is my friend.

"Giant!" a citizen fighter behind me screamed. "Kill him. He's helping the invaders."

That citizen and the others with him ran forward. The guards, yelling, charged at Tate.

I leaped in front of them and held up my palms. "Stop. Tate won't hurt us. He's helping us."

They shoved me to the ground.

"It's your fault that enemy's here," a man snarled.

"Not true," I said. "If he were an enemy, Earth Shield wouldn't have let him enter the kingdom."

No one listened. They only plowed past me.

I jumped up and ran after them.

They hit Tate's feet and legs with clubs. They pelted him with rocks.

I grabbed their arms to try to stop them from attacking, but they slipped from my grasp.

A large, muscular man caught me from behind. He dragged me away from the fray.

"Leave Tate alone," I cried. "He's only trying to close the gap."

The fighters ignored me.

Tate kicked at their clubs. Still holding on to Earth Shield, he shuffled back and forth, away from their attacks.

His hands slipped.

The poundings grew louder. The crack spread wider. And wider.

Cheering erupted from the other side of Earth Shield. Men's entire arms poked through the opening.

"Stand back," a familiar voice boomed.

Relief dropped through me, and I whirled. It was King Zedek. Several guards stood on both sides of him.

"Let the giant do what he can to close Earth Shield," King Zedek said.

My captors, grumbling, released me, and the citizen fighters and guards who were attacking Tate stepped away from him.

Tate took a deep breath, nodded to the king, and tightened his grip on the slit. He pulled inward, his veins bulging.

The crack widened farther. A few of the invaders' legs kicked through it.

"They're breaking in," someone shouted.

"To the stronghold," another yelled.

King Zedek, his guards, and several of the citizen fighters backed away from Earth Shield. Likewise hollering, they raced to the grove that surrounded the castle.

Tate, still trying to close the crack, groaned. Two of the remaining guards and I ran to the bottom of the crack. We, joining Tate, pulled the edges inward, but the opening widened farther.

Dozens of invaders poured through the wall. They charged straight at Tate.

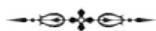
Slaterider, pointing his sword heavenward toward a flock of birds, led the attack. "Get the giant!"

The birds, seemingly following Slaterider's command, flew toward Tate.

Did Slaterider control the birds?

Memories of the birds I'd seen while hunting for the Cosmo-gems spread through me. They burned too, almost as hot as the amulet did when it warned me of approaching enemies. Was that how Slaterider kept finding me? Because he'd commanded the birds to follow me?

Chapter 27



MORE INVADERS FLOODED THROUGH Earth Shield. Shouts shattered the air, and their weapons clanged against the royal guards' weapons.

Tate, standing like a lone tree in a grassy field, swept his hands in front of him, brushing invaders and birds out of his way. Birds screeched. Men yelled in fear.

"Tate," I called again.

Slaterider looked over his shoulder at me. Venom filled his gaze, and I stumbled backward.

"Get that boy," he said to his companions.

My heartbeat shot into my throat. *Run.*

I turned, scanned left and right, and sprinted toward the grove surrounding the castle. Invaders were everywhere, and the two chasing me were only moments away.

I pushed my muscles harder. *Hide.*

But even as I thought that word, a memory flashed through me. Back at Flatberry Lake, I'd hidden in the forest while Father had fought the invaders. I'd been a coward. But since

then, I'd survived many dangers. Yeah, I'd run from them, but I'd survived. I'd grown.

Or had I? There I was again—running away. Had nothing inside me changed? Was I still a coward?

I reached the grove. *I won't be a coward.*

I leaped into the shadows and crouched behind a thick tree trunk. I glimpsed out at—no one? I rubbed the back of my neck. Where were the invaders who'd been chasing me? Had they lost interest in me? Given up?

I almost smiled at that thought.

Yet in the next moment, I realized they'd likely returned to attack Tate and the guards. Despite Slaterider's relentless pursuit, I was just a regular kid. I was not a threat to them. But Tate was a giant.

A giant kid who, unlike me, was not hiding. He was not a coward. He wasn't even a runner. He was fighting.

Be strong.

I stiffened my spine as more understandings flooded through me. Tate wasn't a Serynian, yet he'd sacrificed his identity and safety for Seryn. *For me.* And Jinir, who wasn't tall or muscular, had twice held off the invaders to protect both Tate and me. She too was brave.

"Go back and fight," a familiar voice said inside my mind.

I blinked. I didn't recognize the voice at first. Yet, it was steady and fearless, sounding a bit like mine but blended with Father's. It was as if Father and I were speaking together. Simultaneously.

“Go back and fight,” I said aloud. “For Tate, for my family, and for my kingdom.”

I clenched my fists. I pressed my lips into a determined line.
I can . . . no, I will do this.

I picked up two heavy rocks that were about the size of my hands and stepped out from behind the tree. The rocks weren’t the best of weapons, but they were better than nothing.

I peered about me. Nothing nearby moved, but the clanging of swords and the yelling of guards and invaders clamored across the distance. Too, the earth rumbled from the battle rams’ ongoing poundings against Earth Shield.

Go.

I charged out of the grove and raced toward the battle.

Almost immediately, I gagged on the rank scent of sweat and blood. Fiery arrows flew. They’d set more of the preservation garden ablaze, and invaders swarmed the landscape. Some attacked Tate. Others clashed with Serynian guards. And still others—I froze. Slaterider and about a dozen of his men were charging toward me.

I leaped off the road. I headed back to the grove and ran, ran, ran—stopped.

I’m not a coward.

I clenched the rocks tighter, turned, and raced back toward Earth Shield. But Slaterider and his men no longer ran toward me. Instead, they’d veered off the path and were running straight to the castle. *The castle.*

Cold dropped through me. Most of the king's guards were fighting the invaders. The castle and King Zedek were unprotected.

Help him.

Slaterider and his men angled toward the front of the castle, but I went to the servants' entrance at the rear. With any luck, I'd reach the king before—

"Phineas," King Zedek's voice called out to me. "Stand still."

I stopped. "King Zedek." I searched among the trees. Where was he? "The invaders are coming for you. Hide."

"I don't need to hide." King Zedek stepped out of the shadows. His two favored guards, holding spears and body shields, strode on either side of him.

"Sire," I said. "The invaders are—"

King Zedek flicked his hand, silencing me. "The invaders are our allies!"

I gaped. "What are you saying?" I scanned the trees behind him. Were the invaders already there? Had they threatened him and were now forcing him to comply with their demands?

No one stood behind him.

One of King Zedek's guards handed him a blow horn. King Zedek lifted it to his mouth. The horn blared long and loud across the land. The surrounding clamor softened.

"Halt!" King Zedek shouted.

The battling stopped.

"Stand back. Let the invaders enter through Earth Shield."

Gasps pounded around me, and I stumbled backward. *Let them enter? What was happening?*

King Zedek lifted his hand high above his head. He whisked it back and forth. At the same time, hundreds more invaders poured through the crack. Some Serynian guards fought to push them out, but others either allowed the invaders to pass by them or fought their fellow guards. *They're traitors.*

Tate plowed through the fighting men and raced to the break in Earth Shield. He gripped the shield's lumpy, ragged edges on each side of the crack. He pulled inward. Inch by inch, the break's sides slid toward one another.

I jumped into the fray. "Help Tate," I said to anyone who'd listen.

"Stay back, kid," Slaterider's voice called after me.

So many men fought around me that I couldn't see Slaterider, but his voice was loud enough that he had to be nearby.

I hunched low and wove between and around the soldiers and invaders. They, much taller than me, swung their fists and thrust their weapons at their enemies, who were also taller than me. It was like I was an ant among grasshoppers, where none of the grasshoppers even noticed me as I charged past them.

The hilt of a man's sword brushed my shoulder.

I dropped to my knees. This time, his swing whisked almost an entire foot above me. *Yay for being short!*

Staying close to the ground, I crawled through the swarm of men. Tate wasn't far from me now. Only about thirty feet . . . Twenty feet . . .

A second battle ram pushed through the opening in Earth Shield. It inched the shield farther open and plowed into Tate.

Tate fell onto his backside. He turned over onto his knees, but before he could stand, dozens of men either dove on top of him or clambered around him. They wrapped ropes around his hands and feet.

Tate kicked and squirmed.

I tried to push through the men, but they blocked every opening.

Within moments, Tate lay flat on his back. Someone had tied his feet and legs together. His arms, folded in front of him, were bound against his chest. Several tall, thick-muscled invaders lifted their swords above Tate's head.

"Don't kill him!" I screamed.

"Stop," Slaterider cried out from behind me.

The raucousness silenced, and the men—some wearing the invaders' red uniforms and others wearing Serynian's white ones—lowered their weapons. Everyone faced Slaterider. He strode toward us. King Zedek walked with him. *With* him.

Nausea rose through me, and blinking hard, I scanned the white-uniformed men-turned-traitors. King Zedek was a traitor too.

"There is no need to keep the giant alive," King Zedek said to Slaterider.

"Forgive me, King." Slaterider said. "We must question the monster before we kill him. Others of his kind may have escaped, and this thing may know where they are."

The nausea burned hotter inside my chest. Tate was not a monster, nor a thing. He was my friend. A friend who had witnessed the annihilation of his people.

New sadness mixed with respect tumbled through me, but I couldn't focus on that now. We were at war.

"Very well," King Zedek said to Slaterider. "We'll keep him alive for now."

I exhaled in relief, but when I inhaled again, a soft groaning sound rumbled around me. What was that? Everyone else must have had the same wondering, for all turned and faced the castle. I again dropped to my knees. I peered between their wide stances.

My breath stopped. The townspeople—all of them, including men, women, children, and *my family!*—stumbled out of the forest. Red-uniformed invaders, walking behind them, forced the townspeople forward at sword point.

"No," several guards shouted. They must still be loyal to Seryn, for they, holding their weapons at the ready, lunged at those red-uniformed invaders.

Men near them—our enemies—caught them. They forced the loyal soldiers back.

The fighting stopped.

The invaders and traitors had conquered Seryn.

My muscles pulsed. My heart raced. I gaped from the loyal guards to our enemies, to King Zedek, and to my family. Father, though held upright by two other townspeople, stared back at me. His gaze was intense. It was the teaching look he

sometimes gave me while he waited for dots of understanding to connect themselves inside my mind. But what dots could he be thinking of? And why must I figure them out now? Seryn was no more, and—

I glanced at my fellow Serynians. Tears streaked some of their faces and fear filled many of their eyes, but the fire that was in Father's eyes was in theirs too. Defiance. Seryn's heart still lived.

Fight.

But how? I had no weapons, and my Origin Power was . . . Wait. *Weapons.*

Father, staring at me, arched an eyebrow. He nodded toward Slaterider. No, he was nodding toward the sheath on his waist.

I widened my eyes. That sheath held Father's—not Slaterider's—dagger. The dagger I'd lost.

I grinned but turned it into a frown. Hopefully, no one was looking in my direction. Or if they were, hopefully they couldn't interpret the new, outlandish thought that tumbled through me.

I scanned between me, Earth Shield, Tate, and Slaterider. Invaders and guards, including traitors, spread over the land as far as I could see. But every single one of them was as I'd hoped—taller than me.

I whipped off my cloak, making myself as thin as possible, and flung it to the ground. I ran straight toward Slaterider.

At first, he didn't notice me. But when I passed two rotund invaders, both of whom roared in irritation when I slipped

from their grips, Slaterider turned. Seeing me, he narrowed his eyes, focused only on me, and headed my way.

Now.

I pretended to trip. I fell to my knees.

Slaterider, reaching me, chuckled. "Foolish boy."

I peeked up at him, lifted my arm in front of my head, and hunched even closer to the ground. "Please don't hurt me," I said in a small, whiny voice. "I'll do whatever you need me to do."

Slaterider glared down at me. Nothing of sympathy or mercy touched his expression. What if my plan didn't work?

"You will do whatever I say, will you?" He grabbed me by the collar and lifted me to my feet. "Well, then, tell that giant to cooperate with us."

I peered toward Tate. I bit my lower lip, pretending fear, and sidled closer to Slaterider. "Th-that giant?"

I inched my hand toward the dagger at his waist.

"He's your friend, isn't he?" Slaterider said.

"No, sir. I mean, he was, sir, but I didn't know he was a—"

"Friend or foe," Slaterider said, "it doesn't—"

I grabbed the dagger's hilt.

"—matter. Now go." He shoved me forward.

I yanked the dagger from the sheath. Clenching its handle, I stumbled forward, caught my balance, and without looking back, I charged toward Tate.

Someone growled. "Why's he running?"

I held the dagger in front of me and ran harder. The farther I could get away before Slaterider noticed—

“Thief!” Slaterider shouted. “Get that kid.”

I pushed through a group of tall men, hunched my shoulders, and dove under their body shields. Sidestepping their swords’ blades, I jumped out of the way of the spears flying past me. I was almost to where I could cut the ropes off Tate.

A large hand grabbed my left arm.

I clutched the dagger in my right hand even tighter and twisted toward Slaterider. “Let go of me.”

Slaterider pushed me to the ground. “It’s time to get this over with.”

King Zedek stepped up behind Slaterider.

I jumped to my feet. I faced him, and holding Father’s dagger in front of me, I prepared to fight, just as Father had once taught me.

King Zedek murmured a laugh. “Give the dagger back to Slaterider and get out of the way. If you don’t, you’ll die. It’s your choice.”

I, staring at him, didn’t flinch.

The king narrowed his gaze, watched me for a moment longer, and nodded to Slaterider. He backed a few feet away from us.

Slaterider and I stared at one another. Men in both red and white uniforms circled us from about twenty feet away, but they didn’t approach us. I pointed the dagger at Slaterider’s heart.

Slaterider rolled his eyes. "I'm surprised you want to fight me again. I thought you had enough of losing last time. At the lake."

"I won't be losing," I said between my teeth. I lunged forward.

He sidestepped, missing my attack. He laughed, too. So did King Zedek and his cohorts.

I lunged again. Slaterider sidestepped again. Back and forth, I lunged, and he sidled. And laughed.

"A dance," Slaterider said. "I should have known that was your only so-called fighting skill."

I whisked my dagger in front of him, whirled, and whisked again. "Seems you're afraid of me."

Someone, either King Zedek or the invader next to him, snickered.

Slaterider's smile disappeared. "It's time to end this." He held his sword straight over his head and swooped it down.

I sidestepped, missing the blade.

He lifted his sword again.

Holding the dagger above my shoulder, I charged toward him with a yell.

Just before I reached him, I angled to the side and ran away from him. I slipped between two of the onlookers and raced toward Tate.

Slaterider roared in anger. He shoved the onlookers out of his way and chased after me.

I reached the men who circled Tate. I ran back and forth in front of them, searching for some space wide enough for me to slip through. But each time I thought I'd found one, the enemy spread their arms and legs, blocking my way.

"Grab him," Slaterider said.

A red-uniformed invader reached out for me.

I dropped to my knees.

He leaned over, but before he could catch me, I scrambled between his legs. Then, while he and the other invaders stumbled after me, I rushed to Tate. I placed my dagger in his hand.

"I'll keep them distracted," I whispered. "You save the kingdom."

His eyes widened, and he seemed about to say something, but I whirled away from him. An invader grabbed my arm, but I dropped to the ground out of his grasp. Again, I crawled, weaving between their legs, until I at last cleared the battle. I jumped to my feet.

Slaterider stood before me. "Clumsy, eh?" He peered at my empty hands. "Where's my dagger, thief?"

Once again, a crowd of invaders and traitors watched us.

"It's not your dagger. It's Father's."

He scowled, grabbed my collar, and pulled me up onto my toes. He leaned over me. His sour breath blew over my face. "I'll only ask you one more time. Where's the dagger?"

I glared back at him. "I dropped it. Somewhere back there."

“Clumsy and a fool. A small, irritating bug of a boy who’s about to be squished beneath my boots if he doesn’t tell me where he dropped it.”

“I don’t know. I had it, and then I didn’t.”

He shoved me to the ground.

I scrambled on my backside away from him, and he strode toward me. I searched my surroundings. How could I get out of this?

A roar echoed across the air. The ground shook. Men cried out.

Slaterider gaped upward. His mouth dropped open, and his face paled.

I peeked over my shoulder and grinned. Tate now stood among us, unrestrained and as tall as some of the surrounding trees. He roared again and grabbed Slaterider. He picked him up and threw him through the open slit to the other side of Earth Shield. Tate then grabbed two other invaders in each hand, and without even taking a step, he likewise threw them through the rent.

“Guards,” King Zedek yelled. “Kill that giant.”

Weapons in hand, the traitors and invaders charged at Tate. Loyal guards grabbed their weapons and fought back. The attackers tried to overwhelm Tate, but their efforts were useless. Every time one or more got close, Tate scooped them up, and ignoring their pleas, threw them through the opening, just as he’d done with Slaterider and the other guards.

“Hurrah,” the townspeople, including my family, cheered.

One of the thrown invaders pushed back through the slit, but before he'd taken his second step inside Seryn, several loyal guards collected large rocks from the unfinished wall and pelted them at the invader. He tumbled back to the other side.

"Stop," King Zedek said, "or I will sentence you to death."

I faced the king. "I don't think you have that kind of power anymore."

He scoffed, but before he could do anything else, Tate picked him up by the collar and threw him through the slit. He threw others too, several at a time until all Seryn's enemies were on the other side of Earth Shield.

The townsfolk and the remaining Serynian guards shook their fists over their heads. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"We still have to close the Shield," I said. "Help us."

I and all who were able raced to the slit in Earth Shield. Tate was already there. He shoved the battle ram backward through the crack to the other side. Then, like before, he grasped both sides of the fissure and pulled it inward. Likewise, the townsfolk and I positioned ourselves on both sides of it. We pushed the edges toward one another.

Several times, invaders tried to ram through the crack again, but each time, one of us shoved them back. Slowly, rumbling with each movement, the opening inched inward—

A sharp crack sizzled across the air.

I turned to the sound. Others did too.

Streams of red, blue, green, and gold light shot out of the castle's highest steeple. They spiraled around one another,

forming a single, blinding beam, and streaked across the sky. It crashed into the topmost point of Earth Shield's breach.

A sudden, hot prickling like a thousand tiny needles surged through my body.

I gasped. Others yelled. But all jumped back as ribbons of multi-colored light splashed across Earth Shield. It, like thousands of glowing fingers, wove through the breach's cracks until the slit, rumbling with each movement, gradually inched inward, knitting it back together into smooth, seamless perfection.

The breach sealed.

Silence whispered over the land.

I gaped at Earth Shield, at Tate, and at every nearby Serynian. I grinned and shouted, "We saved the capital!"

Applause, cheers, and laughter roared across the kingdom. "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Chapter 28



SERYN'S CITIZENS GATHERED AT long tables that stretched across the field, south of the castle. Large clay bowls containing vegetables from the preservation garden, warm breads, and savory meats adorned the tables' centers. Sadly, the bowls weren't overflowing with as much food as they usually did during Seryn's celebration feasts, but there was enough.

Seryn's new leaders, also there, sat at the round table next to the platform. And my family, Tate, and I sat at the rectangular honorary table next to them. Tate, back to his smaller, human size, wore his cloak again.

Two days ago, soon after Earth Shield had resealed itself, I'd asked Tate how his cloak could mask his appearance like that. He'd said it was because his grandmother had made it for him. Her Origin Power protected life, and when she'd learned the invaders would soon attack them, she'd focused all her Power into the cloak's fabric and threads. It would protect him.

"From what?" I'd asked him. "You're huge."

He'd glared so long at the ground that I'd started to think he wouldn't answer me.

Finally, he'd said, "Only a few of us giants were that big. The others called us *the unwanted*. They made us live outside of town."

"By yourselves? Without your families?"

"Our families visited us." He'd scrunched his face. "History says it's our fault the humans cast us out. When the invaders came, Grandmother insisted I wear this cloak. To never take it off. She said it would be worse if they saw my size." Tate's voice had choked, and he'd fingered the clasp at his throat. "She stood in their way while I ran. She's the reason I survived."

Now, because of Tate's willingness to help us, his enemies, Seryn had survived. Tate was amazing.

My thoughts returned to the present, and I gave him a quick smile.

He smiled back.

"Cheers to Phineas Hawk and his new friend, Tate!" a voice boomed from behind me.

Everyone stood. The townsfolk cheered and drank from their cups.

"I can't believe we're having a feast just for you," Ellya whispered. "It's like everyone thinks you're wizards or something."

"We're not wizards," Tate muttered.

"I wish we were wizards," I said. "Maybe then the invaders would have feared us."

Ellya huffed. "Afraid of two kids?"

Father, who'd been watching our exchange, held up his forefinger as if noting an important truth. "Two powerful *young men*," he corrected her.

Tate grinned, and I stood taller. *Father thinks I'm now a young man*. I'm no longer a kid.

"Two young men who were both brave and resourceful," Father continued. "Without you, we wouldn't have the Cosmo-gems. Without you, the invaders would have destroyed Seryn."

Mother, who stood on the other side of me, gave me a side hug. "We would have lost everything—our kingdom, our freedoms, and maybe even our lives." She sighed. "It makes me wish I'd shown more trust in you."

Happiness shot through me. Still, I said, "No, Mother. You were right. *I was* too young to face such dangers. I'm just glad that in the end I didn't have to do it alone." I nodded to Tate, who'd sat again and was taking a large bite of the rice pudding Mother had made for him.

We four Hawks likewise sat.

"However," Mother continued, "though I am proud of you—very proud—when you first realized how dangerous your plan was, you should have returned to Seryn. You're now confined to our home for a week."

I groaned.

"And to Seryn Kingdom . . ." She glanced at Father, who nodded to her. ". . . until your father is well enough to accompany you."

I groaned louder, but inside, I sighed in relief. The truth was, I didn't want to leave Seryn ever again. And judging by Tate's relaxed stance and easy half-smile, he didn't want to leave Seryn either.

King Zedek's sister, Lizbeth, left her place at the round table and climbed onto the platform. She wore a thick, purple cloak, and she carried Seryn's scepter. She didn't possess a crown, for King Zedek had it when Tate had thrown him from the city. But as she was the king's nearest relative, and Zedek would never again rule our kingdom, Seryn's law had dubbed Lizbeth our temporary head ruler. We would crown her queen after time proved her loyalty.

Lizbeth moved to the center of the platform. Two guards followed her. One held his spear above his head and pointed it toward Sky Shield.

Everyone stopped talking.

Lizbeth unrolled a thin scroll. "This is the contract between Seryn and the Protective Forces. Everyone is familiar with it. However, because of recent events, I believe it's important for us to review a key truth. The forces' powers are conditional. They can only protect us if we maintain peaceful unity among ourselves."

Tingles spread from the top of my head down to my chest. "Unity powers Force," I mouthed.

"Although we have now cast out the traitors who'd likely caused the Shields' powers to diminish," she went on, "please stay true to your vows. Don't think all is well. Don't believe

we no longer need fear the invaders. Our protection still relies on our strict adherence to this contract. Believe in and practice peaceful unity. Without it, we are weak and vulnerable.”

A blacksmith rose from his spot in the audience and raised his hand. Lizbeth nodded to him, giving him permission to speak.

“If living in peaceful unity is all that protects our kingdom,” he said, “why then was Tate able to close the breach? He isn’t even from Seryn.”

“And he’s a giant,” someone called out. “Our enemy.”

Low murmurs surrounded us.

“I’ve wondered that too,” Tate whispered to me.

I shifted in my seat. *Please, everyone, let’s not fight again.*

Lizbeth held up her hand, palm outward, and everyone hushed.

“Tate may be a giant,” she said, “but he is not our enemy. If he was our enemy, neither Shield would have allowed him to cross so easily into Seryn.”

“Exactly,” I said.

For a moment, it seemed everyone stared at Tate.

“Remember when the crack actually sealed?” Lizbeth continued.

“It was after the Cosmo-gems powered it,” the Blacksmith replied.

“Yes. And before that, Tate tried to close it, but he failed.”

“That’s because we kept fighting him. We didn’t know he was trying to help us.”

Several people grunted in acknowledgement.

“That is partly true,” Lizbeth said. “But that wasn’t what stopped him. Our human weapons are puny against the giants. If he had wanted to destroy the invaders or us, he could have. But he didn’t.” She nodded to Tate. “That proves his valor.”

Tate lowered his gaze. He blushed, too.

“However,” Lizbeth continued, “think back on when the fissure actually sealed itself. Tate wasn’t pulling it on his own. We Serynians were working *with* him. He, a boy from another kingdom, and we Serynians, had come together for a common purpose. It was that peaceful unity that truly powered the Forces protective powers.”

A warm, settled feeling draped through me, and my awareness expanded. “Peaceful unity” was more than just words. They were crucial to our survival. Not just peaceful unity among Serynians, though, as I’d always thought. But peaceful unity among all who sought the protective forces’ power. That was the real, absolute truth.

“Thus,” Lizbeth concluded, “please work for peaceful unity. It is our best hope.”

Some people nodded, but most of us quietly whispered, “I will.”

Lizbeth smiled. “Thank you for your attentions. You may now return to your celebrations.”

She, followed by her guards, climbed down from the platform and returned to the table she shared with the other leaders.

Father whispered something in Mother's ear.

Mother nodded to him and held her hand out to Ellya. "Come, child. Let's see what the royal cooks have prepared for dessert."

"I don't want dessert," Ellya said.

"Come with me anyway," Mother said. "Your father wants to speak with Phineas and Tate."

Ellya scowled at me. But in the end, she followed Mother toward the castle.

After they had gone a good distance away, I asked Father, "What do you want to talk to us about?"

"My dagger."

I gulped. My thoughts raced back to the moment I'd taken Father's dagger from his trunk. Because of hunting for the Cosmo-gems, running from invaders, and later fighting to send the invaders out of our kingdom, I'd thought little about it. But now, my stomach turned over.

This is ridiculous. Father hadn't minded that I'd taken the dagger, had he? He had to have realized I'd needed it. And anyway, he wouldn't reprimand me in front of Tate.

Or would he?

I plunked my forearm on the table in front of me. Mother had bandaged my cuts, and Tate had healed them with his Origin Power, but they still ached. I groaned.

"Are you all right?" Tate asked.

"Right enough."

The twist inside my stomach tightened, and I peered across the table at Father. He merely watched me. What was he waiting for? My confession?

I opened my mouth. *Just get it over with.* But the words wouldn't come.

I shifted in my seat and squeezed the back of my neck. *Say something else.*

But what?

Finally, a safer subject came to mind. "King Zedek is a traitor."

"Yes," Father said.

"But why?"

"We are still figuring that out. I helped the guards search the king's rooms for clues. So far, we—I—found an incriminating document hidden within the king's royal seal. It was inside a secret compartment." Father blew out a long puff of air, studied Tate and I, and sat taller. "The document was a contract between King Zedek and Slaterider. Zedek hired Slaterider to kill his father, King Yahir. At the time, King Yahir was in good health, and Zedek wasn't willing to wait—perhaps, for years—until his death before he would inherit the crown."

"King Zedek *and* Slaterider killed King Yahir?" I asked.

"Yes. That was why we banished Slaterider. We hadn't known the full of it, though, until now. If we had, the council would have banished Zedek with Slaterider."

Our gazes locked, each of us staring at the other two.

“What about the birds?” I asked. “I didn’t suspect it until Slaterider broke through Earth Shield, but does he have Origin Power? Can he control birds?”

“Slaterider doesn’t have Origin Power, but his wife, who left Seryn with him, does.” Father removed the amulet from my neck. “This is her family’s amulet. She uses it to communicate with birds. Slaterider gave it to King Zedek to give to you. It signals the birds, and the birds told Slaterider and his wife where you were.”

“What! King Zedek said it would warn me when enemies approached. It even worked, or so I thought. But instead, it lead Slaterider to me?”

Father frowned. “Forgive me, Phineas. If I had been conscious when you showed that amulet to your mother, I might have recognized its true power, but as it was, well, King Zedek fooled you, son.”

I slumped.

“He fooled all of us.” Father leaned over the table toward me. “But now it’s time we talk about the dagger.”

I winced and crossed my arms.

“Not here, though,” he said. “It’s a private matter. Let’s return to the house.”

I sighed. *So he is going to reprimand me.* “Wait here,” I told Tate.

“No,” Father said. “Tate must come too. He needs to see this.”

I did a double take. “See? What does he need to see? He’s already seen the dagger.”

Father nodded, and though he said nothing more, he stood—so did I—and motioned for Tate to join us. I then handed Father his walking crook. Together, we headed to the road that would lead us to the village.

After walking for several silent moments, Father said, “Tell me everything about the dagger. When you took it and what you did with it.”

He didn’t seem angry, rather curious, so I told him how I’d taken the dagger. I also described how I’d used it to create reflections on the map and how I’d lost it. He said nothing throughout my telling—only occasionally clenched his teeth—but when I came to the end, we’d reached the village and were then following the trail that led to our courtyard.

“Where’s the dagger now?” Father asked.

“In my bedchamber.”

He nodded, and we said nothing more until we at last entered our house. We went straight to my room. By then, the sun had set, casting the room in deep shadows. Father lit the candle in the wall sconce while I retrieved the dagger from under my bed. I handed it to Father.

Father pulled it from its sheath. He turned it over in his hand. “I’m glad you got it back.”

“I’m sorry I took it. At the time—“

“You were right to take it, Phineas,” Father interrupted. “I couldn’t be with you, and you needed something to protect

yourself. In truth, I'd have been much more upset if I'd lost you than if I'd lost it." His lips quivered a bit, but he pressed them into a tight line. "I'm also glad it helped you with your Origin Power. Though, if you had lost the dagger . . ." He shook his head. "I'm glad those who had it didn't know how to use it."

What was Father talking about? The dagger's only purpose was to cut things, reflect light, and strengthen our Origin Power.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "I know the dagger means a lot to you."

"It seemed to mean a lot to Slaterider too," Tate muttered.

Father jerked back. "What are you talking about?"

Tate winced and shrugged.

"We overheard Slaterider talking about the dagger," I said.

"He said he'd once carved a symbol in the handle."

Father frowned. He turned the dagger over in his hand.

"This dagger *is* important," he said under his breath. "And now I'm especially glad I never told Slaterider why." He trailed his forefinger along the handle's inscription of a connected star, moon, and sun. "You, Phineas, were destined to inherit it one day, when you were mature enough to comprehend and safeguard its power. But now, after all you've overcome in recent days, I'm sure you're both ready and worthy to possess it."

I gaped at him. "You're giving it to me? Now?"

Father handed the dagger back to me. "I am. And it's time for you to learn about its power. Watch, rather, listen closely, Phineas. You too, Tate."

I stared wide-eyed at the dagger. Tate stood taller.

Father pointed at the lines beneath the inscription. "Graft Slaterider was once my friend. More than that, we are cousins. He is my father's favorite sister's son. His parents died of pneumonia when he was a toddler, and my father took him in. Graft and I grew up together."

"Like brothers?" Tate asked.

"Almost. Once." Again, Father turned the dagger over. "He made these two parallel lines here, beneath the heavenly bodies. He said they symbolized our connection to one another. I wished he hadn't done it. The dagger was an heirloom, and I was supposed to keep it safe. But Slaterider snuck it away from me and carved those marks. I hadn't even known the dagger was missing."

I frowned. Apparently, Slaterider had always been a dishonest sneak. "Kind of like how I took the dagger from you when you were unwell," I said.

"It's not the same at all. And anyway, that dagger helped you preserve us."

"Its blade is also really sharp," Tate put in. "One slash cut the ropes."

Father gave him a quick smile. "The blade *is* sharp. Keeping it that way will now be one of your duties, Phineas. But the dagger's true value is rather amazing." He held my gaze. "It can interpret ancient languages."

"Huh?"

"Skeed," Tate whispered simultaneously.

Father pointed to the star-moon-sun symbol on the dagger's handle. "This inscription is the key to the dagger's power. To make it work, someone with our family's Origin Power must press and hold his or her thumb on that symbol. He or she must then capture a reflection. Natural light, like from the sun or the moon, works best. But, surprisingly, you can also use an unnatural light that comes from inside the dagger itself."

I stiffened. "The dagger has light inside it?"

"Like magic?" Tate asked.

"More like Origin Power," Father said. "It's almost like the dagger has its own."

"Incredible," I said.

Father again referred to the dagger. "The person holding it then focuses their Origin Power into the reflection. The dagger can then help the user interpret any ancient language that's within the reflection's rays. Until the holder moves his thumb, that is. If he does that, its power stops."

I took the dagger, which Father held out to me, and clasped its handle. "So, I put my thumb on top of this inscription. Then what?"

"Since you've already used sunlight and moonlight reflections, let's try the dagger's own light. Focus your Origin Power into the inscription beneath your thumb."

I did so.

Light burst out of the dagger and formed what looked like a small sun. That sun's rays then folded inward into a single, thick ray of light. That ray resembled those that had shot out of

Jinir's cave wall before it had revealed the Cosmo-gems. Only this time, it circled me three times.

"Now listen," Father said. "Do you understand me?"

I nodded.

"What's going on?" Tate asked Father. "Why did you talk like that?"

"I'm teaching Phineas how to use the dagger. I'm speaking the ancient language of the Originators. If I were speaking in our language, he wouldn't know—"

"Wait." I relaxed my grip on the dagger. It slipped, but I caught it by the hilt before it hit the ground. However, my thumb no longer covered the inscription. "You weren't speaking in Serynian?"

"I wasn't," Father said, "but you heard it in Serynian, didn't you? That is what the dagger does. It interprets ancient languages."

"Merciful skies!" I said.

Tate, his eyes wide, slowly shook his head.

"It is quite incredible," Father said. "And a valuable tool. You must keep its power secret and safe."

"I wish this tablet could talk," I said. "If it had told us what the markings meant, I wouldn't have spent so much time translating them."

Father tilted his head. "You know, it actually might translate it."

"What? Why didn't you—?"

He held up his hand, stopping me. "I didn't tell you anything about the dagger's power before, Phineas, because I didn't believe you were ready to hear it. Besides, I wasn't altogether sure it could translate it."

"But you thought it might."

Father nodded.

"So let's try it," I said.

"No, son. You do it. The dagger belongs to you."

"And I need the practice," I said under my breath.

"Yes." Father set my pillow on the middle of the bed in front of us. "Put the tablet there."

I did as he asked, but after that, I froze. I wanted to do this. I had to do this. But what if I failed? My Origin Power only worked sometimes.

"Go ahead," Tate whispered. "You *can* do this."

I stared at Tate. He gave me a slight nod, and I drew back my shoulders. Those were almost the same words I repeated to myself when I had to do something difficult, but Tate's soothing tone made them feel more potent than words. Like they were a tingly, healing tonic. Was he using his Origin Power on me?

"Thanks," I said.

He gave me a slight nod, and I pressed my right thumb on top of the dagger's heavenly symbol. I then focused my Origin Power into the dagger.

Light shot out of its center.

"You did it," Tate said.

I felt like shouting hurrah, but I feared that would break my concentration. Instead, I focused harder on the ray of light and angled it toward the tablet. Instantly, the unknown words revealed themselves:

Netherweb Shroud.

Tate groaned.

I blinked. The complete line now read, *Unity powers force Netherweb Shroud awake.*

I set the dagger on the bed. The light disappeared.

“What is a Netherweb Shroud?” I asked Father.

Father rubbed his jaw. “It’s been a while since I read about it—it was in the *Chronicles of the Kings*—but if I remember correctly, the book defined it as a fabric made from dark Origin Power.”

“Dark Origin Power?” I said. “You mean it’s something evil?”

“I fear so. The Netherweb Shroud can weaken the Forces’ protective powers.”

“It can weaken Origin Powers too,” Tate said under his breath.

I jolted in surprise and turned to Tate. “How do you know that?”

“Yes, how?” Father asked. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“My grandmother told me,” Tate said. “It was in her stories about the long-ago days. Some included the Netherweb Shroud.”

“A story?” I said. “Not real then?”

"Oh, it's real," Tate said. "Grandmother said so."

I quirked a smile. "And you believed her?"

"Grandmother never lied about anything."

I narrowed my gaze, studying him, and he met my eyes. *He's telling the truth.*

Father, watching us, drew his brows into a deep, thoughtful furrow. After a long moment, he raised his eyebrows. "That's it! *Unity powers force.*" Pause. "*Netherweb Shroud awake.*"

"What's it?" I said.

"Did you hear that? It's not one sentence. It's two. Unity powers force and—"

"Netherweb Shroud awake," Tate cut in. He grinned at me.

"It's a riddle. But this one's already solved."

"Another puzzle?" I asked.

Father gazed at me. "Puzzles fill the world, my boy." He'd said those same words when we'd first started our quest.

"I know," I responded. "But—" I looked at Tate. "What do you mean, the riddle's already solved?"

"Think about it," Tate said. "Peaceful unity gives the Forces power. And the Netherweb Shroud, which is like a blanket, takes power away. It's like it puts powers to sleep."

Understanding shot through me, and I sucked in a quick breath. "Which means if someone takes the Shroud off the Forces, it's like waking them up. That's genius!"

Tate smiled wider.

"You're quite the puzzle-solver," Father told him.

"You really are," I said.

Tate folded his arms in front of him and cocked his head. "So are you, Phin."

"Phin?" I stared at him. That wasn't my name. I mean, no one ever called me *Phin*. But somehow, *Phin* felt right coming from Tate.

Tate smirked. "Or would you rather I call you Odor?"

"Go ahead, *Tatengooloog*," I said.

He narrowed his gaze at me, and I put my hands on my hips.

"There now, boys," Father said. "Your names are nothing to fight—"

Tate and I burst out laughing.

"We're not fighting," Tate said.

"We're just friends," I said.



Did you like *Phineas Hawk and the Lost Cosmo-gems*? If so, please consider leaving a review wherever this book is sold. It only takes a few minutes, authors really appreciate it, and it helps readers find books they might like. Thanks!

Fun with Phineas Hawk

Enjoy this puzzle inspired by the story!



Keep watch and stay

vigilant.

R.K. GRANT

Did you solve it? Want more fun activities? If so, see below.

Parents: Subscribe to R.K. Grant's email newsletter and you'll get "Phineas Hawk's Discovery Pack Starter Kit." Three exciting activities await! You'll also receive behind-the-scenes content, upcoming book announcements, and other exclusive deals. Note: we respect your privacy. Your email will never be shared, and you can unsubscribe at any time.

Newsletter Signup: Scan QR Code or Visit: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/l81ezpd874>



About R.K. Grant

(R.K. Hinrichsen)



Award-winning author R.K. Grant (Ronda Gibb Hinrichsen) has been writing for children for several years. She lives beside the beautiful Rocky Mountains, where she regularly sees eagles, hawks, owls, and ducks. Lots of ducks. She enjoys reading, writing, and music, though not necessarily in that order, and she loves hearing from readers. To contact her, learn more about her books, or subscribe to her newsletter, visit her website at rondagibbhinrichsen.com.