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# FABLEHAVEN

KEYS TO THE DEMON PRISON



BRANDON MULL



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# Fablehaven, Vol. 5

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Keys to the Demon Prison

Brandon Mull



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*For the librarians, teachers, booksellers, and readers who have madethe*

*Fablehaven series a success!*

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Summary: When Kendra and Seth go to stay at their grandparents' estate, they discover that it is a sanctuary for magical creatures and that a battle between good and evil is looming.

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# Table of Contents

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A Dying Wish  
Obsidian Waste  
Dreamstone  
Passageways  
Translocator  
Living Mirage  
Doomsday Capsule  
Bracken  
Assignments  
Nagi Luna  
Vanessa's Secret  
Rescue  
A Promise Kept  
An Unexpected Ally  
Message in a Bottle  
The Sealed Shrine  
Preparations  
Flight  
Cormac  
Roon  
The Singing Sisters  
Mark  
Vasilis  
Civia  
Lady Luck  
Shoreless Isle  
Knights of the Dawn  
The Demon King  
Prisoners  
A New Shrine  
Is This Really the End?  
Reading Guide  
Acknowledgments



## A Dying Wish

Seth knew he should not be here. His grandparents would be furious if they found out. The dismal cave smelled more rancid than ever, like a nauseating feast of spoiled meat and fruit. Almost steamy with humidity, the wet air forced him not only to smell but also to taste the putrid sweetness. Every inhalation made him want to retch.

Graulas lay on his side, chest swelling and shrinking with labored, hitching breaths. His infected face rested against the rocky floor, inflamed flesh flattened in a sticky mass. Although the demon's wrinkly eyelids were shut, he twitched and grunted as Seth drew near. Groaning and coughing, the bulky demon peeled his face away from the floor, one curled ram horn scraping the ground. The demon did not fully arise, but managed to prop himself up on one elbow. One eye opened a fraction. The other was fused shut by congealed goo.

"Seth," Graulas rasped, his formerly rumbling voice weak and tired.

"I came," Seth acknowledged. "You said it was urgent."

The heavy head nodded slightly. "I . . . am . . . dying," he managed.

The ancient demon had been diseased and dying since Seth had first met him. "Worse than ever?"

The demon wheezed and coughed, a cloud of dust rising from his lumpy frame. After spitting out a thick wad of phlegm, he spoke again, his voice little more than a whisper. "After . . . long years . . . of dwindling . . . my final days . . . have arrived."

Seth was unsure what to say. Graulas had never tried to hide his nefarious past. Most good people would be relieved to hear of his demise. But the demon had taken a liking to Seth. After becoming intrigued by Seth's unusual exploits and successes, Graulas had helped him figure out how to stop the shadow plague, and had further assisted him in learning to use his newfound abilities as a shadow charmer. Whatever crimes Graulas may have committed in the past, the moribund demon had always treated Seth well.

"I'm sorry," Seth said, mildly surprised to find he really meant it.

The demon trembled, then his elbow collapsed and he flopped flat against the ground. His eye closed. "The pain," he moaned softly. "Exquisite pain. My kind . . . dies . . . so very slowly. I thought . . . I had sampled . . . every possible agony. But now, it burrows . . . twists . . . gnaws . . . expands. Deep inside. Relentless. Consuming. Before I can master it . . . the pain increases . . . to new plateaus of anguish."

“Can I help?” Seth asked, doubting whether anything from the medicine cabinet would do the trick.

The demon snorted. “Not likely,” he panted. “I understand . . . you will leave tomorrow.”

“How did you know that?” His mission the next day was supposedly a secret.

“Confide . . . no plans . . . to Newel and Doren.”

Seth had not provided the satyrs with details. He had just told them he would be leaving Fablehaven for a time. He had been at the preserve for more than three months, ever since he and the others had returned from Wyrmoost. He had enjoyed several adventures with Newel and Doren in the interim, and felt he owed them a good-bye. Grandpa would only let them discuss the mission in his office with spells to help prevent spying, so Seth had shared no specifics, but he probably should not have said anything at all to the satyrs. “I didn’t give them details,” he told Graulas.

“No . . . but I heard them mention your departure . . . as they moved about the woods. Although . . . I can’t see into your house . . . I can deduce . . . you seek another artifact. Only such . . . a mission . . . would prompt Stan to risk . . . your safety.”

“I can’t really talk about it,” Seth apologized.

Graulas coughed wetly. “The details are unimportant. If I heard and guessed . . . others may have heard. Though I cannot . . . see . . . beyond the preserve . . . I can sense much outside attention focused here. Mighty wills straining to spy. Be on your guard.”

“I’ll be careful,” Seth promised. “Is that why you called me here? To warn me?”

One eye cracked open and a faint smile touched the demon’s desiccated lips. “Nothing so . . . altruistic. I am soliciting a favor.”

“What?”

“I may . . . expire . . . before you return. Which would render my wishes . . . irrelevant. After all this time . . . my days are truly numbered. Seth . . . not only . . . my physical pain . . . troubles me. I am afraid to die.”

“Me too.”

Graulas grimaced. “You do not understand. Compared to me . . . you have little to fear.”

Seth scrunched his brow. “You mean because you were bad?”

“If I could . . . evaporate . . . into nothing . . . I would welcome death. But this is not the case. There are other spheres awaiting us, Seth. The place prepared for my kind . . . when we exit this life . . . is not pleasant. Which is partly why demons cling to this life for as long as we can. After how I lived . . . for thousands of years . . . I will have to pay a steep price.”

“But you’re not the person you were,” Seth said. “You’ve helped me a lot! I’m sure that will count for something.”

Graulas huffed and coughed differently than he had before. It almost sounded like a bitter chuckle. “I meddled with your dilemmas . . . from my deathbed . . . to amuse myself. Such trivialities will do little to offset centuries of deliberate evil. I have not changed, Seth. I am merely powerless. I have no drive left. As much pain as I am now enduring, I fear that the afterlife . . . will hold far greater agonies.”

“So what can I do?” Seth wondered.

“One thing only,” Graulas growled through clenched lips. His eye squinted shut and his fists tightened. Seth heard teeth grinding. The demon’s breath came in sharp, ragged bursts. “One moment,” he managed, trembling. Creamy tears oozed from his eyes.

Seth turned away. It was too much to watch. He had never imagined such misery. He wanted to

run from the cave and never return.

~~“One moment,” Graulas gasped again. After a few grunts and moans, he began to breathe more deeply. “You can do one thing for me.”~~

“Tell me,” Seth said.

“I do not know the purpose of your mission . . . but should you recover the Sands of Sanctity . . . that artifact could greatly alleviate my suffering.”

“But you’re so diseased. Wouldn’t it kill you?”

“You’re thinking of . . . the unicorn horn. The horn purifies . . . and yes . . . its touch would slay me. But the Sands heal. They wouldn’t just burn away my impurities. The Sands would cure my maladies and help my body survive the process. I would still be dying of old age, but the pain would be lessened, and the healing might even buy me a little more time. Forgive me, Seth. I would not ask . . . were I not desperate.”

Seth stared at the pathetic ruin the demon’s body had become. “The Sphinx has the Sands,” he said gently.

“I know,” Graulas whispered. “Even the thought . . . that there is some small chance . . . gives me something to dwell upon . . . besides . . . besides . . .”

“I understand,” Seth said.

“I have nothing else to hope for.”

“Of course we’re trying to get the Sands back,” Seth soothed. “I can’t say this mission will do that, but of course we hope to recover all of the artifacts. If we can get the Sands of Sanctity, I’ll bring the artifact here and heal you. I promise. Okay?”

Discolored tears gushed from the eyes of the demon. He turned his face away. “Fair enough. You have . . . my thanks . . . Seth Sorenson. Farewell.”

“Is there anything else I can—”

“Go. You can do nothing more. I would rather not . . . be seen . . . like this.”

“Okay. Hang in there.”

Flashlight in hand, Seth exited the cave, relieved to leave behind the humid stench and the naked agony.



## Obsidian Waste

Kendra reclined in the comfy seat and tried to doze, but despite the hypnotically steady whine of the private jet's engines, she could not calm her mind. A string of flights had taken her, Tanu, and Seth from New York to London, then to Singapore, and finally to Perth, the capital of Western Australia, where they had boarded the private jet they currently occupied. At the various airports along the way, Tanu had them ducking into bathrooms to change outfits and taking complicated routes through the terminals. They traveled under assumed names using false identification, all in the hope of avoiding the notice of their enemies in the Society of the Evening Star.

At Perth they had met up with Trask, Mara, Elise, and a guy named Vincent. Trask sat across the aisle from Kendra, filing his nails, his dark scalp gleaming. She was glad he was leading the mission. Her past experiences with him had shown that he remained calm under duress, and he was widely considered the most seasoned field operative among the Knights of the Dawn.

Directly in front of Kendra, Tanu leaned against a window, snoring gently. The Samoan potion master had spent more time asleep than awake on their previous flights. Despite his bulk, he had a knack for dozing on planes. Kendra wished she had asked him for a concoction to help her relax.

Elise reclined behind Kendra, listening to music on a pair of noise-canceling headphones. She had new red streaks in her hair and wore heavier makeup than when she had helped Warren guard Seth and Kendra back in December. Eyes closed, she softly tapped her fingers against her thighs to the beat.

At the front of the cabin, Mara gazed out the window. A tall, athletic woman with dramatic cheekbones, Mara hadn't been talkative even before the Lost Mesa preserve fell and her mother was killed. Since greeting them at the airport in Perth, the Native American seemed quieter than ever.

Vincent, the only member of the party Kendra had not met previously, sat across from Mara. A small man of Filipino descent, he smiled a lot and had a faint accent. Grandpa had explained that Vincent had been included on the mission because of his familiarity with the Obsidian Waste preserve.

Although she could not see him, Kendra knew that Seth was up in the cockpit with Aaron Stone, the same man who had piloted their helicopter when they went to Wyrmoost. Had that really been only three months ago? It felt like a lifetime.

She wished Warren were here with them. It felt wrong to go adventuring without him. He had been with her at the inverted tower at Fablehaven, as well as Lost Mesa and Wyrmoost. But now he



was part of the reason this expedition was so urgent. At Wyrmoost, Warren had been trapped inside a magical chamber. The entrance to the room looked like a regular knapsack, but inside the unassuming mouth of the bag a series of rungs led down into a spacious storeroom heaped with junk and provisions. After Gavin had revealed himself as Navarog, he had destroyed the knapsack, stranding Warren inside the storage room along with a small hermit troll named Bubda.

The room had been well stocked with food and water, but any supply was finite, and now, after three months, Grandpa and the others had estimated that Warren would be nearly out of rations. Without prompt intervention, starvation would claim him.

Not long after Kendra had returned to Fablehaven from Wyrmoost, Coulter Dixon had embarked on a campaign to discover how the Translocator functioned. The adventure at Wyrmoost had provided them with the key to the vault at Obsidian Waste, but obtaining the Translocator would be much more useful if they knew how it exerted power over space. Otherwise, it might end up like the Chronometer, a powerful artifact that they had little idea how to operate.

After exploiting his best contacts and hunches, the veteran relic hunter had returned with no new information. Kendra had never seen Coulter looking so old and defeated. Others kept searching for operational guidelines, but a couple of weeks ago, it was Vanessa who finally reported success. She had been mentally traveling out of Fablehaven into the sleeping minds of people she had bitten in the past. Her primary focus had been trying to figure out where Kendra's parents had been taken, but while working with one of her contacts inside the Society of the Evening Star, the narcoblix had uncovered long-guarded information about operating the Translocator. Once Coulter had verified that the intelligence seemed authentic, the Knights had started planning this mission, in the hope that the Translocator could help them rescue Warren and gain a new advantage over the Society.

Kendra also quietly hoped that an artifact as powerful as the Translocator might help in the search for her mother and father. Marla and Scott Sorenson had known nothing about disguised magical creatures existing in the real world. And yet, despite their lack of involvement in the affairs surrounding Fablehaven, contrary to all precedent, they had been abducted. Stranger still, there had been no contact from the Society about terms for their release. After Wyrmoost, the Sphinx and the Society had seemed to disappear.

Kendra tried not to dwell on her parents. The thought of them made her ache. Scott and Marla both still believed she was dead. They had held a funeral and buried a duplicate Kendra and then had been abducted before the record could be set straight. A miserable emptiness overcame Kendra whenever she remembered that her parents believed their daughter to be dead and buried. All of that futile grief! Now that her parents were prisoners, would they ever learn the truth?

To make matters worse, her parents had been taken through no fault of their own. They had never even heard of the Society of the Evening Star. Kendra, Seth, and maybe Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson were the ones to blame. The abduction had to be in retaliation for Navarog's failure at Wyrmoost. The thought of her beloved parents paying for her decisions made Kendra want to scream her way to insanity.

To combat the grief, Kendra usually let it flare into hatred, a fiery coal bed of wrath that grew hotter over time, fueled by fear and fanned by guilt. Almost all of that hate was directed toward a single individual: the Sphinx.

It was the Sphinx who had waged war on the preserves for magical creatures, trying to steal the five secret artifacts that together could open the demon prison Zzyzx. It was the Sphinx who had introduced her to Gavin, a cute guy and a good friend who had turned out to be a scheming, demonic dragon. It was the Sphinx who had initiated the shadow plague, which had led to the death of Lena. It was the Sphinx who had kidnapped her and forced Kendra to use the Oculus, an artifact with amazing

powers of sight that had almost devoured her mind. And it was the Sphinx who was still out there, unpunished, with her parents under his control, plotting further mischief that could lead to the opening of Zzyzx and the end of the world.

At least now she was an active part of the effort to deal the Sphinx a major blow and hopefully help Warren and her parents in the process. After months of wait and worry, it felt good to be doing something, even if it was dangerous. Under tutelage from Tanu, Coulter, and occasionally Vanessa, she and Seth had trained with swords, bows, and other weapons over the past few months, so she felt more empowered than ever. Nevertheless, although she and Seth were now both full-fledged Knights of the Dawn, she had been surprised when Grandpa, as Captain of the Knights, had included them on such a risky mission. In the end, the essential roles their abilities had played on past assignments had won out. Their presence underscored the desperate need for success.

Kendra yawned, trying to get her ears to pop. The plane was descending. Trask unbuckled his seat belt, rose, and retrieved Seth from the cockpit. As Seth found a seat, Trask stood at the front of the cabin to address everyone.

“We’ll be landing in about fifteen minutes,” he announced. “I’ve set up several spells to prevent outside eyes and ears from spying. The magic should divert anything short of the Oculus. Now would be an appropriate time to review our mission.”

Trask paused, brooding eyes roving the cabin. He cleared his throat. “Most of us have worked together before, so we’ll skip introductions, except for Vincent, who is a new face to some of us, though not to me.”

“I’m Vincent,” the Filipino man said, half rising from his seat. “I’ll be your guide at Obsidian Waste. Over the past ten years, I have spent several months there.”

“How do we know you’re not a monster in disguise?” Seth asked bluntly.

Vincent gave a weak chuckle. “I know we’ve all been dealing with unprecedented betrayals lately. The Knights of the Dawn have never seen infiltration and upheaval like the past year has provided. But as Trask can attest, I’m a Knight to the core, have been since my teenage years, when my parents were murdered by the Society.”

“Trust has been running thin lately,” Trask acknowledged, “but I’d let Vincent watch my back any day. Part of the reason this particular group was assembled was because we have been through enough together to trust each other. I have no doubts or hesitations that Vincent belongs in this circle of trust.”

Kendra gazed at Vincent. She was glad her brother had spoken up. She wanted to believe Trask. But what if Trask himself was a traitor, patiently waiting for that vital, heartbreaking opportunity? Probably not. But Kendra had learned that “probably” wasn’t always good enough. From now on, she wanted to be ready for anything.

“Our object is to retrieve the Translocator,” Trask continued. “I have withheld some of the specifics until now. We believe we understand how the artifact functions. If our intelligence is correct, the device can transport an individual to anyplace he or she has visited previously.”

Elise raised a hand. “Can it take passengers?”

Trask gave a nod. “Thanks to Vanessa and Coulter, we understand it can transport up to three people, along with their belongings. The device is a platinum cylinder, set with jewels, divided into three rotating sections. The user twists the sections to bring the jewels into alignment, activating the artifact. Whoever holds the center section controls the destination, and needs to focus mentally on the location as the other sections slide into place. Each intended traveler would grasp a different section.”

“What if not all the passengers have been to the destination before?” Seth asked.

Trask shrugged. “Based on the recovered information, Coulter thinks only the person gripping the

center section needs to have been to the desired location. But we won't be sure until we test it out."

"What if you teleport into solid rock?" Seth asked. "Or a hundred feet into the air? Or in front of a speeding train?"

The jet shuddered momentarily, and Trask raised a hand to brace himself until the turbulence passed. "The device carries unknowable risks, but given the sophistication of these artifacts, we can reasonably assume that the Translocator was designed to minimize those dangers."

Elise raised a finger. "We'll go into the vault tomorrow?"

"The plan is quick in, quick out," Trask confirmed. "We'll spend the night at the main house to get over our jet lag, then proceed to the vault in the morning. Hopefully, by tomorrow evening, we'll be flying home."

"If the artifact works right," Seth pointed out, "maybe we can skip the flight home."

Trask's mouth twitched and his eyes smiled. "We'll see. Our first order of business will be to make preparations at the main house tonight."

"Do we know where the vault is located?" Kendra asked. "The vaults at Fablehaven and Lost Mesa were well hidden."

Vincent answered. "The vault at Obsidian Waste gave the preserve its name—an immense monolith of obsidian overshadowing the surrounding plain. We know the location of the vault, and even where to place the key. But no rumors hint at what dangers await inside."

"Since the vault is so obvious," Trask said, "we must be prepared for the traps inside to be all the more deadly."

"The lack of camouflage may be related to the strength of the obsidian," Vincent observed. "We're not talking about regular stone. Over the years, there have been numerous attempts to drill, chisel, and blast entrances to the vault. So far nobody has scratched it."

"Why hide when you're invincible?" Elise muttered.

The intercom from the cockpit interrupted. "We're on final approach," Aaron announced. "The air is a little choppy, so I'm going to recommend you all take your seats for the duration."

"I'll pass around some walrus butter to make sure our eyes are open to the magical creatures of Obsidian Waste," Trask said. "We'll speak more at the house." He returned to his seat as a prolonged vibration rattled the aircraft.

Kendra didn't need magical milk or walrus butter to pierce the illusions that shielded most magical creatures from mortal eyes, so she passed it back to Elise without sampling any. Kendra checked her seat belt and peered out the window. Down below, the shadow of the jet fluttered over uneven ground. She observed mostly flat terrain, with scrubby bushes, low ridges, and shallow ravines. A pair of jeeps caught her eye, the vehicles kicking up dust as they moved along a dirt road on a diagonal course to intercept the descending jet. She was low enough to see a figure driving each open-topped jeep, but their features were unclear.

Gazing along the road behind the jeeps, Kendra noticed a wall. Actually, it was more the idea of a wall. At regular intervals, pyramids of stones stood in lonely piles, stretching away from the road in opposite directions. Nothing connected the rock piles, so they formed a boundary without creating an actual barrier. But Kendra recognized a shimmer in the air above the line formed by the rock piles, and she realized that it must be the distracter spell shielding Obsidian Waste.

Beyond the orderly stacks of stone, Kendra could see the sweeping loops of a meandering river, and, in the distance, a huge black stone shaped like a shoe box, its rectangular lines unnaturally regular. A tremor ran through the aircraft, and for a moment the jet wobbled sickeningly left and right. Kendra turned away from the window, facing forward, her hands gripping the armrests. The plane

bucked and shuddered again. Kendra felt the tingling sensation that accompanies the initial plunge of a fast elevator. She had never been on a flight with this much turbulence!

Glancing across the aisle, she saw that Trask appeared unperturbed. Of course, he was tough to ruffle, and would probably wear that same impassive expression if the airplane disintegrated and his seat were plummeting alone toward the outback. The thought made Kendra smile.

Despite a few more bumps and jiggles, a minute or two later, the private jet landed smoothly. After taxiing shortly, the aircraft came to a stop. Kendra shouldered her backpack and waited while Tanu opened a door that swung out and down to become a short staircase. Kendra followed Seth down the steps. The isolated airstrip had a single runway, a ramshackle hangar, and a small office topped by a flapping wind sock.

After deplaning, Trask, Tanu, and Vincent started retrieving gear from the luggage compartment. Mara wandered off to one side and began a fluid routine of elaborate stretches. From the door of the plane, Elise studied the area through hefty binoculars. The sun hung high and bright overhead.

“Welcome to Australia,” Seth announced in his best local accent, gesturing at their barren surroundings. After surveying the area for a moment, he frowned. “I expected more koalas.”

“Which way to the baggage claim area?” Kendra asked.

Seth chuckled. “Not one of the fancier airports I’ve seen. This is more like some smuggler’s hidden landing strip.”

“What do they smuggle?”

“Boomerangs, mostly. And kangaroos. Poor little fellas.”

“Here comes the welcoming crew,” Elise reported. “Two vehicles, each with a single occupant.”

Before long a pair of jeeps rumbled into view. Painted a military green, the rugged vehicles had oversized tires and growling engines. After the jeeps pulled to a stop beside the luggage compartment, the Indigenous Australian drivers climbed down. One was a young man, the other a young woman, both in their early twenties, dark-skinned and long-limbed. The woman had white ribbons tied in her innovative hairdo.

Vincent charged over and greeted them with enthusiastic hugs. He was half a head shorter than the woman and a full head shorter than the man. Kendra and Seth drifted over for a closer look. Trask approached the drivers and shook hands with them.

“I’m Camira,” the woman said to everyone, “and this is my brother Berrigan. Don’t pay any attention to him. His head is full of pudding.”

“At least I’m not a know-it-all with a poisonous tongue,” Berrigan replied with an easy smile, one hand resting on the large knife strapped to his waist.

“We’re here to escort you to the house,” Camira went on, ignoring her brother. “I suggest the ladies ride with me, or his smell might be the end of you.”

“I recommend the guys ride with me,” Berrigan agreed, “or you’ll arrive at Obsidian Waste with no self-esteem.”

“You two never stop going at each other,” Vincent laughed. “You’re exactly as I left you!”

“And you’re still about the size of a termite,” Camira teased, rising up on her tiptoes.

Kendra noticed that Camira wore colorful sandals decorated with flashy stones. “I like your shoes.”

“These?” Camira asked, holding up a foot. “I made them myself. They say I put the ‘original’ in ‘Aboriginal.’”

“I say we should get on the road instead of chirping about footwear,” Berrigan groaned. “These

people are tired.”

“Forgive my brother,” Camira apologized. “We don’t normally let him out of his cage when guests are present.”

Working together, it did not take long to transfer the luggage to the jeeps. True to the drivers’ suggestions, Trask, Tanu, Seth, and Vincent piled in with Berrigan, while Kendra, Elise, and Mara rode with Camira. Aaron stayed behind to perform maintenance on the jet.

Camira hit the gas hard, and her jeep roared onto the road first. Glancing back, Kendra saw the guys choking on their dust. Open-topped vehicles were not made for caravanning along dusty trails!

The jeep rocked and jounced as Camira sped along the imperfect road. She swerved to dodge the worst rocks and ruts, heedless of the huge plumes of dust kicked up by her wild maneuvers. The other jeep fell back, leaving room for some of the dust to dissipate before they passed through it.

Despite the bouncy ride, Kendra studied the arid landscape as best she could. The scraggly shrub and barren rocks looked no more hospitable than the terrain surrounding the Lost Mesa preserve in Arizona. She supposed the people who had hidden these sanctuaries would have kept an eye out for unfriendly environments that might deter visitors.

Up ahead, the row of piled rocks came into view. Kendra did not mention the rocks or the shimmer in the air, because she knew that an ordinary person would not have been able to focus on them.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Elise shouted over the road noise.

“You’re just feeling the effects of the distracter spell that shields the preserve,” Camira answered. “I feel it too. We’re on the right road. As long as I focus on staying on the road, we’ll be fine. The sensation will pass once we’re beyond the barrier.”

Kendra felt no such effects, but she knew better than to reveal her immunity to a stranger. Sure enough, once they passed the row of rock piles, everyone in the jeep relaxed.

Beyond the rocks, the terrain became more welcoming. Wildflowers brightened the ground, the shrubs looked more robust, and trees came into view. Kendra saw a few mothlike fairies flitting around on speckled gray wings. Near a muddy water hole, she spotted a pair of animals that looked like large, striped greyhounds with long tails. “What are those?” Kendra asked, pointing.

“Thylacines,” Camira responded. “Tasmanian tigers. We have many of them here. They’re extinct elsewhere. Some have the power of speech. Look up that slope, by those bushes.”

Kendra followed Camira’s gaze and saw a hairy humanoid figure. As Elise shaded her eyes, squinting up-slope, the creature withdrew from sight.

“What was that?” Elise exclaimed.

“A Yowie,” Camira said. “Kind of like a Sasquatch. They’re timid, but curious. Elusive creatures. You often glimpse them, but they’ll flee if you show too much interest.”

“It seemed sad,” Mara observed.

“Their songs are mostly forlorn,” Camira agreed.

As the jeep neared the top of a gradual rise, the main house of Obsidian Waste came into view to the left. Occupying high ground, the wooden house had numerous steep gables and a generous porch. An enormous barn was visible behind the house, along with a wide stable connected to a corral.

Ahead and off to the right, the river Kendra had noticed from the plane could now be seen, and behind it loomed the geometric form of the giant obsidian block.

“I don’t recall a river in the area on the maps I studied,” Elise noted.

“The Rainbow River runs mostly underground,” Camira replied. “But it surfaces here at Obsidian.”



Waste, a gift from the Rainbow Serpent.”

“Rainbow Serpent?” Kendra asked.

“One of our most revered benefactors,” Camira explained. “An entity of tremendous creative power.”

The engine revved, and the jeep raced across the distance to the house before sliding to a stop. The jeep with the boys had almost caught up, and it swung in to park beside them. Kendra jumped down to the ground.

“Seth says he’s hearing voices,” Trask said.

“Like dead voices?” Kendra asked. With help from the demon Graulas, Seth had become a shadow charmer, which, among other things, enabled him to hear the minds of the undead.

“Exactly,” Seth said, brow furrowed. “It’s weird. They’re not talking to me, not directly, but I can hear them murmuring, thirsting. At first the voices were distant. Now they seem to be all around us.”

“Do you have zombies buried around here?” Trask asked Camira.

She met his gaze with wide eyes. Her mouth worked for a moment without speaking. “I don’t know much about what’s buried here. I don’t like to speak of the cursed ones.”

“We don’t usually discuss such things,” Berrigan agreed.

The main door to the house opened and a woman emerged. Her honey-blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and she wore a khaki shirt with matching shorts. Her tan skin was lightly burnt, and although she had to be nearly fifty, she was very fit and walked with a spring in her step.

“Laura,” Vincent called.

“Hello, Vincent, Trask. Welcome back to Obsidian Waste. Greetings to the rest of you as well.” She joined them beside the jeeps, hands on her hips. “I trust you’re all travel weary and ready for a rest.”

Trask gestured at Seth. “Seth says he hears the undead all around us.”

Nodding, Laura shot a brief glance at Camira. “At least one of us has some intuition,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” Trask said.

Camira scowled.

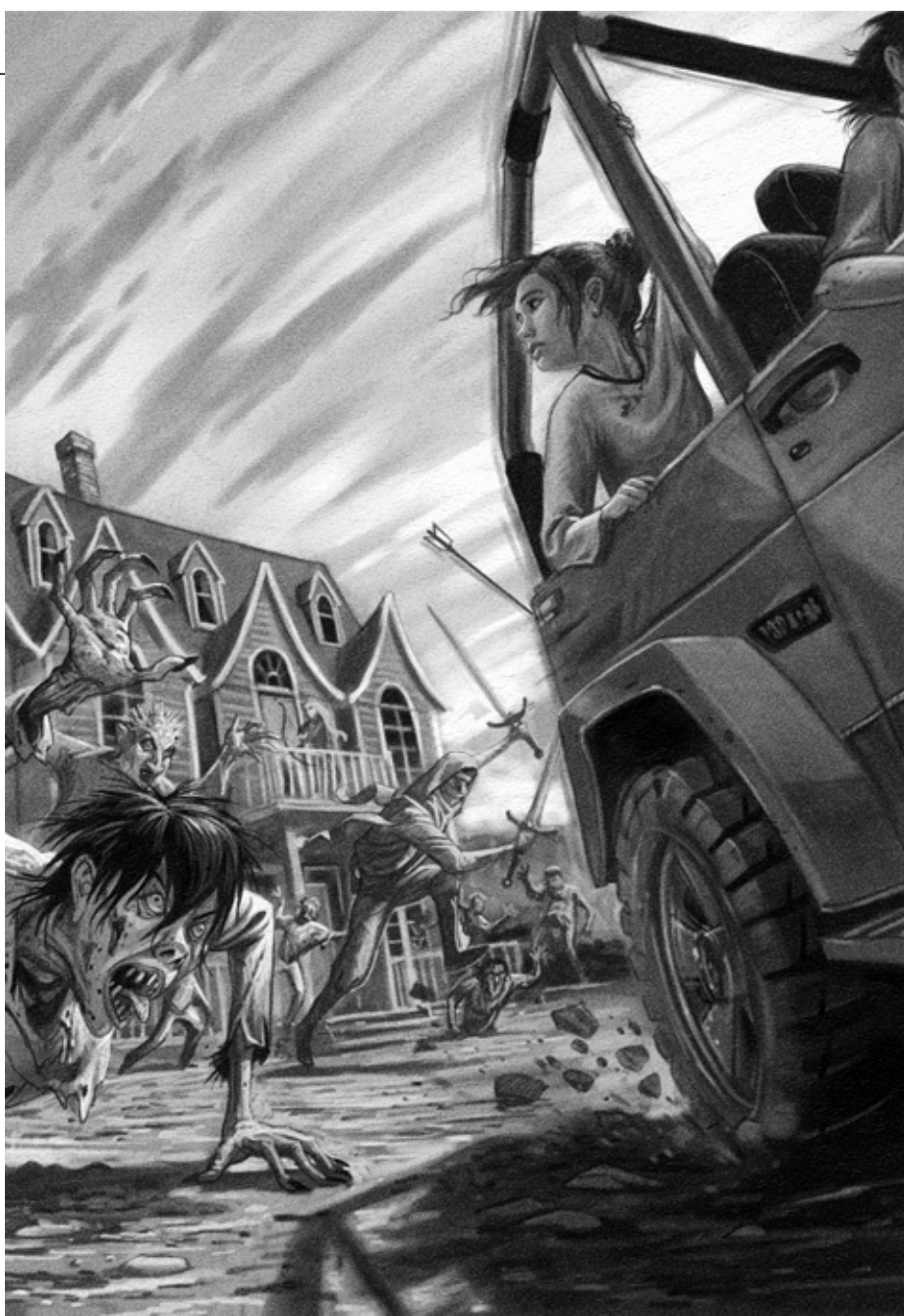
In a quick motion, Laura yanked Berrigan’s knife from its sheath and plunged it into Camira. “It’s a trap,” Laura warned. “They’re waiting for us in the house. Subdue Berrigan. Don’t kill him.”

As Berrigan tried to dodge away, Trask seized the young man, whirled him around, and slammed him against the side of a jeep, levering one arm into a painful hold behind his back. Laura withdrew her blade, and Camira crumpled to the ground.

“Into the jeeps,” Laura commanded, retrieving the keys from Camira. “Make for the Dreamstone. Don’t harm Berrigan—he’s under the control of a narcoblix.”

Trask took Berrigan’s keys, then passed the gangly young man to Tanu, who dragged him into the jeep in a head-lock. Trask and Laura started the engines while the others scrambled back into the vehicles. Kendra boosted herself over the side without opening the door, ending up in Laura’s jeep with Seth, Mara, and Vincent.

As the tires spun, spraying grit and dust, an arrow thudded into the side of the jeep, causing Kendra to look back at the house. Zombies were crashing through the windows and flooding from the door. They moved jerkily, some limping, a few on all fours. In the midst of them she recognized a tall Asian man with long, grim features: Mr. Lich.



A second arrow streaked down, lodging in a suitcase beside Vincent. Scanning the house again, Kendra saw the archer on the balcony, a striking woman with elegantly styled blonde hair. Wearing a knowing smirk, Torina, her former captor, locked eyes with Kendra for a moment before ducking into a window to avoid crossbow bolts fired by Elise and Mara.

Through the front door came a figure clad entirely in gray, his face wrapped in fabric. He dashed toward the jeeps with astonishing speed, easily outrunning the zombies, a sword gripped in each hand.

“The Gray Assassin?” Vincent exclaimed. “Who *isn't* here to kill us? They don't want us kind of dead, they want us extremely dead!”

Dozens of zombies came out of hiding around the yard as the jeeps accelerated away from the house. Some had been crouched in holes or trenches, others beneath bushes, one in a barrel full of water. The shambling corpses approached from all directions, their hideous bodies in various states of decomposition. Trask and Laura gunned the engines and swerved to plow directly into the zombies who were attempting to block their escape. Kendra closed her eyes as grotesque bodies went flying.

A stocky zombie with curly orange hair lunged at Laura's jeep, catching hold of the side briefly until Vincent hacked off the freckled hand with a machete. Seth snatched up the severed, bloodless

hand and chucked it out the back.

~~And then the zombies and the house were receding behind them. The Gray Assassin continued after them, but, quick as he was, he was no match for the jeeps once they got moving. Laura took the lead, with Trask close behind, as they raced toward the distant obsidian monolith.~~



## Dreamstone

Seth wished he had kept the zombie hand. What a perfect souvenir from his first official mission as a Knight of the Dawn! Instead he had thrown it out of the jeep almost reflexively. Hearing all of those zombie voices must have temporarily scrambled his reason.

The voices had been creepy. Hundreds of whispery, yearning zombies, eager to strike but held in restraint by a will stronger than their drive to feed. It had sounded like the zombies were all around them, but he had seen nothing. Until the monstrosities finally lurched out of hiding, Seth had worried that he might be losing it.

Mr. Lich must have been controlling them, instructing the zombies to lay low until the opportune moment. The tall Asian was a viviblix, capable of raising and controlling the dead, and also served as right-hand man to the Sphinx. If Laura hadn't helped them make a speedy escape, they would have all been zombie food.

As the jeep zoomed across a bridge spanning the Rainbow River, Seth continued to mourn for the lost hand. He could have hidden it beneath Kendra's covers. He could have tied a string around it and left it dangling from a showerhead. He could have displayed it proudly on a shelf in his room. He quietly vowed to keep all of these possibilities in mind if a severed zombie hand ever fell into his lap again.

Enormous trees lined the far side of the river, reaching hundreds of feet into the air. "Those trees are huge!" Seth exclaimed.

"Those are karri," Laura answered loudly. "A species of eucalyptus, one of the tallest types of tree in the world."

"What happened back there?" Vincent asked.

"Camira betrayed us," Laura said bitterly. "Last night she admitted several members of the Society to the preserve, along with dozens of zombies brought by that viviblix."

"You said Berrigan is under the control of a narcoblix?" Kendra asked. "Do you know which narcoblix?"

"He's back at the house," Laura said. "His name is Wayne."

Kendra looked over at Seth, relief in her eyes. He had been concerned about the same thing, wondering if Vanessa might have been helping their enemies.

They hit a spine-jarring bump, but Laura did not slow down. Looking behind them, Seth could

detect no pursuers.

As they came out from under the towering karri trees, the obsidian monolith loomed back into view. The scale was amazing—the geological marvel looked like a black mountain that had been carved into a glossy brick.

“It shines like a rainbow,” Kendra said.

“I don’t see much color,” Seth disagreed.

“The stone is black,” Kendra said, “but the light reflecting off of it is very colorful.”

“Her eyes may perceive something ours can’t,” Laura said thoughtfully. “We call it the Dreamstone. It is laced with deep magic.”

Seth squinted at the obsidian monolith. It definitely had a bright sheen, but the gleam was white, not colorful. Why would Kendra see colors? Was the Dreamstone full of fairy magic or something? They drove toward the imposing block in silence.

Engine roaring, Laura finally closed in on the Dreamstone, piloting the jeep around to the far side. The monolith stood hundreds of yards tall, hundreds of yards wide, and the length exceeded the width by double. Seth marveled at the polished smoothness of the stone and the sharp perfection of the corners. They finally skidded to a halt near the only imperfection Seth had noticed on the unblemished surface: a bowl-shaped recess about the size of half a volleyball.

Trask pulled up alongside them. Seth watched as Tanu wrestled Berrigan from the jeep and pinned the young man to the ground. Trask trotted over to Laura. “What happened?”

“We were betrayed last night by Camira,” Laura said. “Members of the Society surprised us and captured the house. They thought the threat of harming their hostages was enough to convince me to lead you into their trap.”

“There are no more hostages,” Berrigan laughed. “Not after that little stunt! Your nephew is dead. So are your sister and her husband. Same with Corbin and Sam and Lois.”

Laura’s face went rigid. Her lip twitched. “You would have killed them either way. At least I managed to save some lives.”

“You’re still all dead,” Berrigan assured her. “You’re just prolonging your demise.”

“Get out of him, Wayne,” Laura snapped.

“I’m enjoying the ride,” Berrigan replied. “How did it feel to kill your prize pupil?”

Laura glared. “I never would have suspected Camira.”

“You heard the lady,” Tanu said, laying his thick forearm across the back of Berrigan’s neck. “Get out.”

“You need to lay off the Twinkies,” Berrigan gasped, his voice strangled.

“I can make things very uncomfortable for you,” Tanu promised.

“You’re not hurting *my* body,” Berrigan panted. “Do what you want to Berrigan.”

“Hold him, Trask,” Tanu said.

Trask switched positions with the Samoan. Tanu withdrew a needle and a small bottle from his satchel.

“You going to sew me to death?” Berrigan chuckled.

Tanu dipped the needle into the bottle. “I can cause you plenty of pain without harming your host.” Tanu touched the needle to Berrigan’s neck.

A full-throated scream issued immediately from Berrigan. His eyes bulged and spittle ran from his lips.

“What are you doing?” Laura asked in distress.



Tanu removed the needle and Berrigan sagged into unconsciousness. “The potion sends a message of extreme pain to the brain,” Tanu explained. “It does no actual damage, just talks to the nerves.” He pricked the needle against Berrigan’s neck again. “The narcoblix truly has withdrawn, or he would be writhing.” Tanu rummaged in his bag and pulled out another small bottle. Unstopping it, he wafted it under Berrigan’s nostrils.

The young man convulsed and his eyes opened. He struggled against Trask, his eyes on Tanu. “Who are you?”

“They’re friends, Berrigan,” Laura soothed, crouching into view. “Be still.”

“What happened?” he asked, somewhat calmer.

Laura caressed his forehead. “That narcoblix drugged you and stole your body. This is the team we’ve been awaiting. Answer me a question or two, to make sure you’re in possession of yourself. What is your Aunt Jannali’s favorite song?”

“‘Moon River.’”

“As a child, what did you like in your mashed potatoes?”

“Little cubes of Spam.”

“What is the farthest your Uncle Dural has thrown a spear?”

“I don’t have an Uncle Dural.”

“Welcome back, Berrigan. Ready to help?”

He nodded, and Tanu helped him sit up. Closing his eyes, Berrigan rubbed his temples. “My head is pounding.” He opened his eyes. “What about Camira?”

“She’s dead,” Laura said flatly.

Berrigan gave a single quick nod, tears welling into his eyes. “Serves her right,” he managed. His face twisted into a pained expression. “Serves her right. I can’t believe, I can’t believe she would—” He broke down into sobs.

“Grieving will have to come later,” Laura said, rising. “Our foes will be on us soon.” She regarded Trask somberly. “Your best hope is to reach the Translocator and teleport out of here. You have the key?”

“Certainly,” Trask said. “What are the chances of us taking the fight to our enemies before attempting to access the vault?”

Laura shook her head. “Very poor. The viviblix has perhaps seventy zombies under his control. Some he brought, some were acquired here. They have the Gray Assassin, a narcoblix, a viviblix, a lectoblix, a psychic, a pair of lycanthropes, and, worst of all, a wizard called Mirav.”

“I know that name,” Trask said grimly. “He’s an old one.”

“The sun is our best ally against him,” Laura said. “He cannot come out during the day. Direct sunlight would kill him. Once daybreak arrived, he was hiding in the basement.”

“Agad told me that all wizards used to be dragons,” Kendra interjected.

“Mirav is a real wizard,” Trask said, “so yes, he was once a dragon. He came out of India. He is truly evil, and a leader among the Society. His presence means the Society is putting everything they have into this mission.”

“We won’t be able to stand against a wizard and a zombie army,” Tanu said.

“Agreed,” Laura said. “Which is why you must hurry to the Translocator.”

“You won’t be joining us?” Trask wondered.

Laura shook her head. “I’ll muster what help I can and try to slow them. I’m not out of allies yet. I’m confident I can take out the bridge.”

“I’ll help you,” Berrigan offered fervently.

“No,” Laura said. “You could contribute more by helping the others reach the artifact. I’ll achieve the same ends with or without you.”

Trask scowled. “After you take action to stall our pursuers, what are the chances you might make it to the airstrip? Our pilot could fly you out of here.”

“None,” Laura said. “I was caretaker here, and I failed in my charge. I’ll do all I can to slow our enemies so you can retrieve the artifact. We all know that to lose the Translocator would be disaster. I will not abandon Obsidian Waste. I will hear no arguments. Tell your pilot to leave while he can. Quick, on your way, we haven’t a moment to spare.”

Trask began pulling gear from the back of a jeep. “You heard the lady—grab your equipment and let’s get moving. Elise, call Aaron, tell him to take off immediately. We’ll get out using the Translocator or not at all.”

Elise produced a satellite phone and started dialing. Seth grabbed his suitcase, set it on the ground, and opened it up. He had not traveled with his weapons—they had been sent through other channels to Perth, where they had been loaded on the private jet. He found his sword and strapped it on, adding a knife as well. Looking over at Kendra, he saw her putting on the adamant mail he had acquired from the satyrs. Light and strong, the shirt had saved her life at Wyrmoost. He grabbed his emergency kit, which was now a leather satchel instead of a cereal box but still contained a variety of items that might come in handy. He still had the onyx tower and the agate leviathan that Thronis had given him. He made sure he also had the small metal flask from Tanu that could change him into a gaseous state. He was only to use the potion in a dire emergency, because Tanu had doubted whether the Translocator would work on him if he were gaseous. Kendra possessed a matching flask.

Glancing to one side, Seth saw Berrigan sitting cross-legged on the ground, looking shell-shocked. “You better get your stuff,” Seth told him.

The young man stared at Seth. “My best stuff is back at the house. Besides, you think swords are going to help you in there?”

“Sure, if we find something to stab.”

Berrigan grinned vaguely. “Who knows what we’ll face inside the Dreamstone? Honestly, I’d prefer a clean death out here under the sky. In there, we won’t know if we’re asleep or awake. Most likely, some twisted combination of both.”

“We have to go in, so we might as well be prepared.”

“Prepare your mind, not your sword,” Berrigan advised. “You’re young.”

Seth shrugged. “You’re skinny.”

Berrigan flashed a real grin. “I like your attitude.”

“Sorry about your sister,” Seth offered. “She seemed pretty funny.”

“She was very funny. I can’t believe she was a traitor. Could they have compromised her while she was away at her university?”

“Maybe it was mind control. Or maybe she was a stingbulb or something.”

Berrigan batted at the flies circling his head. “Camira was amazing. Flighty, headstrong, annoying, but amazing. I’d prefer an alternate explanation to betrayal.”

“I once thought my sister, Kendra, was dead. I also once thought she was being disloyal. Turned out it was all trickery by the Society.”

Berrigan reached out a hand. Seth took it and hauled the young man to his feet. Berrigan squinted up at the Dreamstone. “I’ve always wondered what was inside. I guess I should at least bring a knife.”

Trask now held an egg-shaped iron object roughly the size of a pineapple, with irregular protuberances jutting from the top half. His stance suggested it was quite heavy. Laura and Vincent were inspecting the strange key with interest.

“You’d better hurry,” Laura prompted.

Trask shuffled over to the recess in the wall of the Dreamstone, heaved the top half of the egg into the indentation, and fiddled with it until the key clicked home. Trask rotated the iron egg to the right. After he had twisted it halfway around, the top half of the key detached. Still holding the bottom half of the key, Trask discovered a smaller egg-shaped key nested inside.

“It’s like a matryoshka doll,” Elise murmured.

“A what?” Seth asked.

“Those wooden Russian dolls that fit inside of each other,” she clarified.

“Oh, right.”

“Where’s the door?” Kendra asked. The key had turned, but no opening had appeared.

“I’m not sure,” Laura murmured.

Trask removed the smaller key from the bottom half of the larger one. “Is there a second keyhole? This one has teeth on top just like the first.”

Berrigan shook his head. “Everything else is smooth.”

“Or was smooth,” Tanu mused. “Opening the first lock may have created a second keyhole elsewhere.”

Mara was scanning the broad expanse of the wall. “I see nothing from here. We should examine the whole Dreamstone.”

Laura rushed back to the jeep she had driven. “I’ll go left, you guys go right. Honk if you find something.”

Trask let the empty iron shell drop to the ground, carrying the smaller egg back to the other jeep without too much effort. Everyone piled back into the jeeps they had ridden in previously.

Seth scrutinized the flawless wall for irregularities as the jeep accelerated. He scanned high and low, although if the second keyhole were up high, he had no idea how they would reach it. There were no handholds for climbing, no nearby trees, and no ladders handy.

They raced around a corner and along the side of the Dreamstone, bouncing over the uneven terrain. None of them spotted indentations, and they heard no signals from the other jeep.

Rounding the next corner to the far side of the stone, Mara pointed ahead to a large opening. The other jeep came around the far corner, and they met at the entrance to a tunnel.

“Big keyhole,” Seth said.

“The first key did open a door,” Berrigan said. “Just on the far side of the Dreamstone.”

“The next keyhole will be somewhere inside,” Trask replied. “Make ready.”

Seth and the others climbed down from the jeeps and checked their gear. Kendra came up beside Seth. “Having fun yet?” she asked.

“A little. I’m excited for the zombies to catch up. The best part so far was running them over.”

Kendra shook her head. “We should check if Tanu has a potion for curing stupidity.”

“I’m hoping to get another zombie hand. I can’t believe I threw one away!”

Kendra rolled her eyes.

Seth gazed at the shadowy entryway. It was barely large enough for a person to enter walking upright. The floor of the narrow tunnel sloped upward out of sight. He might be immune to magical

fear, but natural emotions still affected him like anyone. Sick with worry and anticipation, he suppressed a shudder and composed his expression. There was no way he would let his sister see his anxiety.

Trask strode to the mouth of the tunnel and faced the others. "This is not how we planned to enter the vault. We're rushed, we're tired, and we're under duress. On the bright side, we have less time to stress out about it. We can do this. We have a perfect team assembled, and we're well equipped. I'm ready. Let's go."

Laura stood up in her jeep. "I'm leaving. Good luck."

"Laura," Trask called. "Don't throw your life away. You know this preserve. Do what you can to stall our enemies, then get away."

"I'm in no hurry to die." She swung the jeep around and started speeding away.

Tanu approached Trask. "If you're taking the lead, let me carry the key."

Trask handed the iron egg to Tanu, unslung his enormous crossbow, and led the way into the tunnel. Advancing in single file, Vincent followed, then Mara, Berrigan, Tanu, Kendra, Seth, and finally Elise.

Just like the exterior of the Dreamstone, the ceiling, walls, and floor of the passage were smooth obsidian. Seth kept glancing over his shoulder until the entrance was out of sight. Elise watched their rear, keeping her compact crossbow ready.

"Where is the light coming from?" Mara asked.

Only after the question did Seth notice that nobody had flashlights out yet, but the corridor was lit by an even glow. He could see no source for the light.

"This is an unnatural place," Berrigan said.

The corridor began to curve in different directions. First left, then right, then down, then up and to the left, then down and right, and so on. Before long, Seth lost all sense of what direction they were moving in relation to where they had entered. The corridor never branched. The only choice was forward or back.

Seth remained tense, caressing the hilt of his sword as he walked. After several minutes, Trask said, "What have we here?"

"You have to be kidding me!" Vincent added.

Seth rose to his tiptoes and leaned from side to side trying to see what they were talking about, but the corridor was too narrow and there were too many bodies between him and Trask. As he kept moving forward, the tunnel widened, allowing the others to spread out. Soon Seth had a view of the dead end.

After widening, the corridor ended with a rounded wall. Mara, Vincent, and Trask were searching the end of the corridor and the surrounding walls. Tanu clicked on a flashlight, but the added shine revealed nothing new.

"We must have missed a turnoff," Elise suggested, looking back.

"The hall ran unbroken from the entrance," Mara responded with calm certainty. "There were no gaps in the ceiling, walls, or floor, no alternate routes whatsoever."

"I didn't see another way to go," Trask added. "There must be a secret passage."

"Did anyone notice a keyhole?" Kendra asked.

"I saw nothing," Mara replied. She sighed. "It may have been disguised."

"Use your hands and your eyes," Vincent said. "Hunt for any indentation or recess."

They scoured the area at the end of the passage. The ceiling was low enough that most of them

could reach it. They searched diligently, but found nothing.

“The keyhole could have been anywhere along the passage,” Trask finally said.

“There is nothing here,” Vincent confirmed.

“That was a long corridor,” Elise pointed out.

“Then we’d better get going,” Trask said. “Let’s not forget who is in pursuit. Keep your eyes open.”

Trask took the lead again, and the others followed in the same order as before. Seth slid his hand along the glossy wall. How might the creators of this vault have camouflaged the next keyhole? Could it be covered by a hatch? Or shielded by a distracter spell?

“Kendra?” he said.

“Yes?”

“If the keyhole is protected by some kind of distracter spell, you might be the only one who can see it.”

“That’s a good point, Seth,” Trask called back. “Keep a sharp lookout, Kendra.”

“I’m trying.”

They regressed slowly along the corridor for several minutes without finding anything suspicious. “This feels wrong,” Mara murmured.

“What do you mean?” Trask asked.

“This doesn’t feel like the reverse of the turns we took to get here.”

“The tunnel has no forks,” Trask reminded her.

“That’s what I don’t like,” Mara said.

“It just feels different because we’re going more carefully,” Vincent said.

“I disagree,” Mara replied.

Seth caressed the walls, searching for cracks, seams, anything unusual. He shuffled his feet to so of feel the ground, even though Vincent was on his hands and knees examining the floor of the corridor much more carefully. There had to be something all of them were missing.

“Oh, no,” Trask said.

“What?” Elise asked from the back.

“Impossible,” Vincent complained.

“Another dead end,” Trask answered.

Seth felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“What do you mean, another dead end?” Elise challenged.

“This is an unnatural place,” Berrigan repeated, his voice unsteady. “We’ve left the real world behind. We should not be surprised. Is this any stranger than light coming from nowhere?”

Seth kept advancing until he had the same view as the others. Once again the corridor widened and then came to an abrupt, rounded conclusion.

While Vincent and Mara scoured the walls and ceiling, Trask stood surveying the area with one hand on his waist, the other holding his huge crossbow.

“Let’s not waste time here,” Trask said. “Stay vigilant, but let’s pick up the pace. Mara, let me know if the way feels different again.”

They proceeded with greater haste. Within a minute or two, Mara said that the way felt different. A few minutes after that, they arrived at another dead end, almost identical to the first two.

“I’m starting to have my first case of claustrophobia,” Vincent declared, his face shiny with



perspiration.

“Great place to start,” Trask said.

“I think we’re making progress,” Mara said, sniffing the air. “Just not the way we’re used to.”

“Then on we go,” Trask urged.

They came to several more dead ends. An occasional steep slope or odd sequence of turns made clear to Seth that the passageway kept changing, even though they seemed to be traveling back and forth between the same endpoints.

At last, Trask let out a relieved laugh. “Look here, it seems we have found someplace else.”

The passage widened again, allowing them to spread out once more, only this time it opened into an expansive chamber. They paused in the entryway, gazing at the huge room. As in the tunnels, a steady glow illuminated the room, still lacking an apparent source. The wall across from them was curved, the floor semicircular, the ceiling half a dome.

Directly across from them a large statue stood in an alcove, flanked by a pair of granite basins. Carved from a greenish stone, the figure had a long face with exaggerated features and wielded a flat curved club. A smooth expanse of greenish clay dominated the near portion of the floor, bordered by blue and black patterned tiles. The rest of the floor was polished obsidian, unblemished except for a circular indentation near the center.

“No doors,” Vincent said, “but the keyhole in the floor looks to be the right size.”

Seth walked forward and used his finger to mark the greenish clay. “What’s with all the clay?” Seth wondered. “It’s wet.”

“Could it be for drawing?” Kendra guessed. “A huge, prehistoric doodle pad? Like for mapmaking?”

Vincent shrugged. “Who knows? I don’t see any instruments for drawing.”

“What do you suppose would happen if we backtracked from here?” Trask asked.

“More dead ends,” Mara said. “I don’t believe this place allows us to go back. Can’t you feel it? Each dead end cuts off our retreat, luring us in deeper, as if we’re being swallowed.”

“This isn’t helping my claustrophobia,” Vincent mumbled.

“We could double back to check,” Mara continued, “but I’m not sure we’ll get another chance to reach this room. The keyhole must be the way to proceed.”

Tanu shouldered forward. “The rest of you wait here.” He walked around the bordered field of clay to the recess in the floor. Squatting, he studied the iron key, considered the round indentation, inserted the key, adjusted it, and turned it halfway around.

A faint tremor made the floor vibrate. A pair of spouts thrust from the wall near the statue and began pouring water into the basins. The statue raised the curved club high, as if preparing to strike. Tanu discarded an empty shell of the key and tucked a smaller iron egg under one arm.

Everyone watched the statue, waiting to see if it would attack, but it had stopped moving after raising the club. Seth glanced down at the clay on the floor and saw words inscribed in unfamiliar characters. “Look at the clay!” Seth shouted. “Writing!”

“Create a champion,” Kendra read. “Time is short.”

“You read Sanskrit?” Vincent asked. “Or Chinese?”

“I see English,” Kendra said. “And some scribbles, too.”

“Must be a fairy language,” Trask said. “The message repeats in several languages. What does it mean?”

“The basins must be clepsydras,” Elise said. “Water clocks.”

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