



Chapter 1

The First Magic

David's palms were slick with sweat. He couldn't stop blinking. His brown eyes flicked left, then right, left again. Above his head a ceiling fan whirred, working just hard enough to blow hot March air over his face.

On his right hand he wore a black glove of thick leather. In his left he clutched a scrap of paper so tight his knuckles were white.

Mrs Foster cleared her throat. Sweat trickled down the back of David's neck. He couldn't put it off any longer.

He opened his mouth, praying his voice wouldn't squeak. "*My adventure,*" he read from the scrap of paper.

No squeak.

Phew.

"Last holidays I found a magic door in my grandma's backyard. Through the door was another world, where I met an elf named Jeeka." He risked a glance around the room. His grade eight English class stared back at him, most of them not even trying to hide the bored looks on their faces. "Jeeka, me and our bodyguard –"

“Jeeka, our bodyguard and I,” corrected Mrs Foster.

“Oh. Right. Jeeka and me – I mean, my bodyguard – I mean, *our* bodyguard –” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Jeeka, Tahn and I were given a secret mission. We had to defeat an evil dragon and break his spell before the whole world was sucked into his Heart of Stone. We met a boy named Scud, who has a tail as long as this room. The four of us fought goblins and imps, a witch, tree people, even fairies. We got lost in a ravine with nothing to eat but dried apricots.

“Finally we reached the volcano where the dragon waited. I had to face him alone. I found the dragon’s heart, and destroyed it. The Curse to End the World was broken, and my friends were safe.

“And that was what I did on my holidays.”

He looked up. The class was silent. In the third row, a boy named Samuel Burger who had done his talk on kite surfing was looking at David like he was crazy. Then a few people started clapping. Some even smiled. David’s heart slowed back down to normal speed.

“Er – well done,” said Mrs Foster, with only a little of the same bemused look as Samuel Burger. “Ten out of ten for your marvellous imagination, and eight out of ten for presentation. Well, I think we have time for one more. Rachel?”

David grinned to himself as he walked back to his desk. Eighteen out of twenty – that was pretty good! Of course, neither his classmates nor his English teacher knew his story was actually true – that he really *had* gone to another world over the Christmas holidays and met an elf and a Dragonslayer and a boy with a three-metre long tail, and fought his way through goblins and witches and fairies to break a dragon’s spell. It was the easiest assignment David had ever written.

As Rachel Lewis took her place at the front of the class and started

her talk on ponies, David slid back into his chair. He opened his pencil case and pulled out a small piece of yellowed parchment, worn smooth and threatening to tear along the creases from being unfolded and refolded so many times. He'd found it two weeks earlier on his desk at home after school, along with a single bright green feather. For the millionth time he unfolded it again, his eyes scanning the perfect handwriting.

Dearest David,

Hoping this letter finds you well. As promised, you've been invited to attend one of Esmorde's most important ceremonies, the Banishing Festival, which will be held in Hydrenia next month. It's a truly thrilling event and I would hate to spoil any of the surprises for you, but you must keep a look-out for yours truly during the festivities! Scud, who is rudely standing over my shoulder, says you must also come and watch him compete in the Underage Men's Obstacle Course (though it's just a bunch of boys wrestling swamp goblins and climbing ropes).

My Elder has arranged for someone to collect you from the Second Door and bring you to Hydrenia. Though he refuses to tell me exactly whom, which is quite frustrating.

We can't wait to see you and tell you everything that's been happening since the Curse was broken. It's certainly not been dull!

Tsei mi'eth (Yours always),

Jeeka

David refolded the note and looked at the calendar on the classroom wall. Today was the last Thursday of term one. In just a few days he was going to see them all again – Jeeka, half-elf and nori to the most powerful Elder of Esmorde; Scud, with his never-failing grin and swinging tail; and Tahn, who had won back the missing part of his soul when David had defeated Aurasius and destroyed the Curse to End the World.

Rachel was still dictating the difference between a horse and a pony when the bell rang. Mrs Foster’s class sprang from their seats and vanished through the door over Rachel’s cries of, “But I haven’t finished yet!”

Mrs Foster shooed her out. “Full marks anyway, I’m sure it’s all perfectly accurate, out you go, dear...”

As David was swept along with the sea of students he tucked his right hand against his chest. Even though he’d broken the Curse almost two months ago, his hand was still as raw and mutilated as when he’d first injured it breaking the spell. He was thinking he might ask Jeeka about cursed injuries on Saturday – and smiled, thinking how soon he’d see his friends – when an arm shot out of the crowd and dragged him into the boy’s toilets.

“Hey, what’s going o –”

A sharp blow to the stomach cut his protest short. Clutching his midsection David looked around to see half a dozen boys surrounding him. He recognised some of them from the back row of his English class – there were Caine and Finley, two of the largest boys in the year; a kid everyone called Squirrel, who was thin and fast and never smiled; and at the front, Reece Demarcus. Reece was small, but all the girls thought he was nice looking and he was good at sports, and that made him popular. He had also been in David’s class for most of primary school, and had made it his personal mission to keep David from having any friends.

David swallowed, mindful of the silence beyond the dirty walls.

“Nice story, Flynn,” said Reece. “Told like a real girl. Especially that bit about the fairies.”

The boys around him sniggered.

Ignoring the pain in his stomach, David straightened up. “What do you want, Reece?”

“Well, thing is,” said Reece, “since school started we’ve noticed you have a bit of an attitude problem.”

David tightened his jaw. “Get lost, Reece.” He turned to walk away, but Finley grabbed his arms and held him steady.

“See what I mean?” said Reece. “*Attitude*. Like you’ve forgotten what a loser you are. I reckon it’s time we taught you a lesson.”

“Oh yeah?” David bit back. “I know what kind of grades you get. I doubt you could teach a *goldfish* a lesson.”

Reece glowered at him. David tilted his chin up a little higher. He’d survived attacks by monsters, outsmarted tree people and defeated a dragon; nothing could take that away. Not even Reece Demarcus.

Without warning Reece’s fist shot towards him, stopping short a centimetre from David’s nose. By instinct, David flinched. The boys around him laughed.

“Lesson one,” said Reece, “don’t talk back.”

Unexpected pain ripped through David’s side as Caine leapt forward and elbowed him in the ribs. David doubled over, clutching his side.

“Lesson two – look at me when I’m talking to you.”

This time someone shoved David hard in the back, sending him flying at Reece, who laughed and stepped out of the way.

Then David did something he’d never done before. He straightened up, raised his fist and took a swing at Reece.

Reece ducked, the self-assured look on his face replaced with surprise. He barely managed to choke out “*Gettim!*” before melting back into the crowd. David felt a surge of disgust. Reece never did his own dirty work.

As one the boys leapt at him. Steamrolled off his feet, David’s back slammed into the concrete floor. Kicks and punches rained down, expertly finding gaps between the elbows David threw up to protect himself. His body screamed with every kick, his breath catching in his throat as filthy rubber soles stamped down on his arms, his knees, his stomach.

Then it happened. His right hand, unprotected for only a moment, exploded with unimaginable pain. David howled. It felt like the skin was bursting open all over again, just like it had when he’d broken the Curse. Through blurred vision he saw Squirrel looking down at him, his foot pressing down on David’s gloved hand.

“*Get off!*” David choked.

A wave of nausea washed over him. Just as he thought he might pass out he felt a strange warmth around his waist. He looked down to see a faint blue glow shining through his school uniform. None of the other boys seemed to have noticed it; they were too busy kicking him. The glow pulsed, and at the same time there was a loud cracking from the toilet walls.

Suddenly, the whole room exploded in a torrent of white water and tiles as one pipe burst, then another, and another, firing like gunshots. Streams of water slammed into the boys’ faces. The toilets exploded like fountains, great columns of water gushing so high they touched the ceiling.

“Someone’s chucked a firecracker in the toilets!” yelled Finley. “Get out, get out!”

The room was flooding, fast. David dragged himself to his feet as the other boys scrambled for the door, Reece climbing over his cronies to get out first.

As soon as they fought their way outside the pipes seemed to slow their assault. Within moments the toilets stopped gushing, while the water bursting from the taps and broken pipes dwindled to a sad dripping.

David waded through knee-deep toilet water to the sinks. He looked in the mirror – one black eye, a swollen lip and a sore stomach. Could be worse, he thought. He peeled back the glove on his right hand, wincing at the stab of pain. There was no blood, but fresh bruising was already beginning to blossom around the burn wounds.

“Why won’t it just hurry up and *heal*,” he muttered to himself. A blue glow in the mirror caught his eye. Someone had torn the lowest button off his shirt, revealing a shining blue stone. Vaguely thinking Mum was going to have a fit when she saw his shirt, David lifted it up to peer at the beautiful leather belt hidden underneath. It had been a gift from Esmorde’s leader, Elder Nei, to thank him for breaking Aurasius’ Curse. David had taken to wearing it under his uniform every day, a comforting reminder that Esmorde was real and not just a dream.

He ran his fingers over the belt. Elder Nei had said it would come in handy, especially around water. Had this been what he meant? Glancing at his watch, he groaned. The last bell had rung almost fifteen minutes ago!

He hurried out of the toilet block, grabbed his bag from his locker and jogged through the school to the main gate. Mum was waiting for him in her cherry-red hatchback. She jumped from the driver’s side before he got there, her face almost the same colour as the car.

“What happened?” she cried, staring at his wet clothes and bruised

face. “Have you been fighting?” She gasped. “Is that a *button* missing off your shirt?”

David swallowed. One wrong word and he’d be grounded before the holidays even started. “No,” he said, trying to look innocent. “It was just a prank. Er – water bombs. I sort of got in the way.”

“Oh, Davey, your eye’s a *mess*. Maybe we should take you to the doctor...”

“No, really, I’m fine,” said David. “It’s not as bad as it looks, I swear.”

Mum sighed. “Well, you’re not getting in my car like that.” She reached into the back seat and pulled a towel from David’s suitcase. David bit back a groan. He’d forgotten he was staying at Dad’s for the rest of the week.

Mum seemed to read his mind as she handed him the towel. “It’ll be good for you to spend a bit of extra time with your Dad before the holidays,” she said. The words came out tight, as though she didn’t quite believe what she was saying. “I know you don’t have much in common, but it would be nice if your relationship wasn’t so ... strained.”

David hid his expression under the towel. His relationship with Dad wasn’t strained. It was non-existent.

Mum gave a defeated sigh as David handed back the towel and climbed into the car.

They barely spoke all the way to Dad’s house. Mum kept glancing at David’s glove, her lips pressed tight with worry. David wasn’t surprised. The last time he’d stayed at Grandma’s, he’d gone missing for two weeks and come back with a sprained ankle, cuts all over his back and half his hand melted off.

“I’ll be okay,” he said as they crawled along Coronation Drive. “It’s only for one week. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Mum was holding the steering wheel in a death grip. “*Heaven* knows why I said you could go,” she muttered. David kept his mouth shut as they turned off the main road and wound their way through the rolling streets of Paddington. He already had his seatbelt off before they were up Dad’s driveway, ready to leap out before Mum could change her mind. He looked up to see Dad waiting on the veranda.

“Someone’s home early,” Mum said. Not quite under her breath, she added, “Pigs must have learnt to fly.”

David wasn’t even halfway out of the car before Dad was at Mum’s window, glaring in.

Mum rolled down the window. “What is it, Jasper?”

“I want a word with you,” Dad said. He shot a look at David, frowning at the sight of his bruises and cut lip. “Inside.”

Mum’s lips pursed even tighter.

“It’s important, Alice.”

“Fine,” she sighed, switching off the ignition.

David followed them into the house, wondering what kind of trouble he was in. Dad led Mum into the living room – whatever it was, it was serious. But when David went to sit on the couch, Dad shook his head. “Not you. Go on, upstairs and out of those wet clothes. This is between me and your mother.”

A small wave of relief washed through David. He grabbed his things and headed upstairs to his room. Halfway up he heard his name and stopped. Dad’s voice paused. David thumped his feet on the stairs a few times to make it sound like he was still walking, then silently crept back down, sinking into a crouch on the second-bottom step.

“What’s this all about?” he heard Mum ask.

“*This*,” came Dad’s reply, followed by a pause.

“An exercise book?”

“Read the subject line.”

Mum gave one of her this-is-wasting-my-time sighs, then read aloud, “*My Adventures in Esmorde.*”

David bit his lip. So Dad had found the exercise book where he wrote stories about Esmorde. He gave a mental shrug. So what?

“It’s about what he was doing on the holidays,” Dad said.

There was a pause. Mum must have been reading through the book because then she said, “Jeeka, Scud ... these are the people he was telling us about at your mother’s, aren’t they?”

“Apparently, while we were at Mount Revital, our son was saving an alternate world from a dragon. A *dragon!*”

“Jasper, you’ve lost me. David’s always writing stories. It’s what he does.”

“It’s not what he’s writing, Alice. It’s the *way* he writes, as though everything in here actually happened!”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous,” scoffed Mum. “It just proves he has talent, if he can make it all sound so real.”

There was a brief pause, then Dad blurted, “I want David to start therapy.”

Mum laughed. “*Therapy?* For a few short stories on elves and leprechauns?”

“We need to cut this nonsense out now before it gets any worse. And we’ve agreed it would be best to start as soon as possible.”

“*We?* Who’s we?”

Dad cleared his throat. “Darius and I. He’s very concerned. We’ve discussed the matter at great length.”

“Darius *Drake?*” Mum choked. “The same Darius married to your

poor cousin? No. I won't allow it."

Dad cleared his throat. "Darius has been very supportive since I moved out. And he's a fantastic psychiatrist, practically famous in his field. He believes David is building this fantasy world to escape the pressures of real life, and these preposterous stories are just a way for David to feed his own delusions."

"David isn't delusional, he's a little boy," Mum argued, "writing stories and making up games, that's all."

"Little?" Dad said. "He just turned thirteen! And it's not just the book – he seriously injured himself when he ran off at Blackwater. He claims in here he was burnt by some kind of rock – the Curse to Destroy the Universe or some rot – a *curse*! And who knows what the real truth is, because he won't talk about it!"

Mum sighed. "Jasper..."

"You heard what David's doctor said," Dad continued. "Whatever he did to his hand, it's not a hot water burn, or a fire burn, or even an electric burn. It's something he's never seen before. Doesn't that worry you?"

"Of *course* it does –"

"He's suffering from mood swings," Dad hurried on, gathering steam, "his hand has barely healed – and now he's getting into *fight*s? How often does David come home like that?"

"Never," said Mum, her voice like steel. "It was a prank. Someone got him with a few water bombs, that's all."

"What did they put in them, nails? His *lip* was bleeding!"

"He's a boy. Boys scrap. And the hand, the injuries, of course they worry me. But you're wrong about the mood swings. David's happier than he has been in a long time. Why can't you just stop expecting so much of him and let him be who he is?"

“This isn’t about me –”

“Oh, please, Jasper, it’s *always* about you!”

David leant back against the railing. It had been some time since he’d heard them yelling at each other. It still made his chest feel tight.

Dad paused. “Something happened out there, Alice,” he said, his voice dangerously calm and matter-of-fact. “Something that gravely injured our son – and it wasn’t a dragon. What if it’s more serious next time? What if he puts his *life* in danger? Don’t you think it’s worth sending him to see someone for that?”

Mum didn’t say anything for a long moment. David’s knees were starting to cramp.

“Why Darius?” she finally asked. “There must be a hundred other therapists David could see. After everything that happened...”

David frowned to himself. Everything that happened? Was she talking about the divorce?

“He’s the best at what he does,” Dad said. “Besides, he’s family. He only wants what’s best for David.”

“Fine,” said Mum, a note of defeat in her voice. “Send him to Darius – then he can prove once and for all there’s nothing wrong with David, and maybe you’ll admit the problem is with *you*, and not your son.”

Dad sighed. “Good enough. Well, I don’t see why we can’t start right away. David can start his sessions this weekend, I’ve already arranged it.”

“What about Ethel’s?”

David’s heart skipped a beat – yeah, what about Grandma’s?

“David can go to Blackwater next holidays, in June –”

“No *way*!” Without thinking David leapt off the stairs and into the living room. “You said I could go!”

Mum and Dad stared at him, their mouths open.

“I told you to go to your room!” Dad thundered.

David ignored him. “You promised I could go to Grandma’s, and now you’re saying I have to see some stupid psychiatrist instead?”

“It’s for your own good,” said Dad, his expression grim. “Uncle Darius just wants to talk to you. He’s a remarkable doctor, very accomplished. He’ll fix you up in no time.”

“Fix me up?” said David. “There’s nothing wrong with me!”

Dad folded his arms. “Is that so? Then tell us what happened in Blackwater. Tell us, right now, how you did *that* to your hand. Go on.”

David’s jaw tightened. It was no good lying. Every excuse he’d tried had been shot down by the doctors. “I won’t go,” he said, his teeth clenched. “I’m not crazy.”

“No one’s saying you’re crazy, Davey,” said Mum gently.

Dad puffed out his chest. “No therapy, no Blackwater.”

David stared at him, an angry heat rising in his face. Dad didn’t know what he was saying. To not go back, to not see Jeeka and Scud and Tahn again...

“Okay,” David said, “I’ll go. But not this weekend, please. I’ll go every *day* if you want me to, just *please* let me go to Grandma’s for the holidays.”

Dad looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. “Fine. I’ll call Darius and cancel.” He walked out of the room, muttering, “Last year we practically had to drag him to my mother’s, and now he’s *begging* to go back...”

David collapsed on the couch beside Mum. That had been *close*.

“He has a point, you know,” said Mum. “You do seem very keen to go back.” A small smile rose to her lips. “It’s, ah ... it’s not a *girl*, is it?”

David stared at her blankly. “What?”

“The reason you want to go back. Got yourself a sweetheart in Blackwater, maybe?”

David nearly burst out laughing, then stopped himself. The opportunity was too good. “All right, Mum,” he said, pretending to be embarrassed. “You got me.”

Mum’s grin widened. With feigned casualness she said, “Is she nice? What’s her name?”

“Ah – Jessica,” said David, thinking quickly. “And she’s kind of bossy, actually.”

“Pretty?”

“Yeah. Brown hair, always wears it in a plait,” he said, praying that Jeeka would never, *ever* find out he was basing his imaginary girlfriend on her.

“Well, maybe next holidays she can come to Brisbane to visit? How does that sound?”

“Oh, well...” David trailed off. He couldn’t say, ‘Sorry, Mum, but she’ll turn inside-out if she does that’. Luckily, Dad came back before he had to answer.

“Great news! Uncle Darius can see you tomorrow after school, so we won’t have to wait till after the holidays.”

“Tomorrow?”

Dad nodded. “He’s very eager to get started. So, do we have a deal?”

David sighed. “Deal,” he said, a relieved grin spreading across his face.



Chapter 2

Doctor Darius Drake

The next day David managed to avoid any run-ins with Reece and his gang until the final bell, where he found Reece waiting for him at his locker.

“Got a nice holiday planned, Flynn?” said Reece, flicking his hair back from his face. A pair of grade nine girls walked past and smiled at him. David scowled. How old did you have to be before personality counted more than looks? Older than fourteen, obviously. “More little tea parties with your fairies?” Reece went on. “Maybe prance around in the ocean with some mermaids?”

David shoved his maths textbook into his locker. “Whatever, Reece. It was just a story.”

“Well, it’s kinda funny,” said Reece, leaning in close, “but I don’t believe you. I think it’s all true.” David swallowed nervously. How could Reece know? Had he seen Elder Nei’s belt? “In that messed-up head of yours, I think you believe your little story actually happened. You’d just love to be the hero, wouldn’t you? Save the day, rescue the princess, be

anything other than the little weakling you are, with that stupid glove and your screwed-up family. Oh, we all *know*, Flynn. You're a freak."

David sighed, relieved. "Yep, absolutely. A total freak, that's me."

Reece shook his head. "You can't even stand up for yourself. You're such a loser." He slammed David's locker shut, missing David's glove by millimetres.

David bit back a retort. Reece just wasn't worth it. Zipping up his bag, he stormed off to the main gate and slouched against the wire fence. Students filed past him, chatting about their holiday plans. Everyone seemed to look straight through him as they passed, even the kids from his own class. He might as well have been part of the fence. He stared at the ground and tried not to let it bother him. In Esmorde he was a hero, but Reece was right – here, he was a loser.

Soon he was the only one left at the gate. It was another five minutes before he remembered he was supposed to be having his first therapy session. In a huff, he pushed himself off the fence and stormed across the oval to the back gate. Aunt Mary-Anne and Uncle Darius lived a few blocks behind the school; Dad had gone over the route with him the night before. They lived right at the top of a hill that seemed to go on forever, so by the time David reached their front gate he was red-faced and sweaty, his bad mood at boiling point.

Grumbling to himself, David unlatched the white iron gate and stepped onto a swept brick path. The front lawn was so perfect it looked like it had been trimmed with scissors. Across the lawn stood a large two-storey, dark brick house with a wide front porch. Blood-red petunias hung in baskets along the front. David's bad mood started to dwindle, replaced by curiosity. He tried to remember the last time he'd seen his aunt or uncle. The only thing he could recall was a pair of blurry faces,

one fair-haired and one dark. Even though he called them aunt and uncle, Mary-Anne was in fact Dad's first cousin, and the only living family Dad had apart from Grandma.

David stepped onto the porch and tapped the brass knocker. A few moments later the door swung open.

His jaw dropped.

The woman standing in the doorway could have been his mother. Not that she had the red, crazy hair and smiling face of Alice Flynn; it was just that she looked so incredibly like himself – small and narrow, with dark blonde hair and a spatter of freckles across her nose.

“I ... um ... Aunt Mary-Anne? It's me, David.”

If David had been surprised, it was nothing compared to his aunt's reaction. Her brown eyes – *his* brown eyes – were bulging out of their sockets, and she had gone ghostly pale.

“Er ... Jasper's son? Your cousin?” He cleared his throat. “I have an appointment with Uncle Darius. Is he home?”

His uncle's name seemed to break the spell. Aunt Mary-Anne let go of the breath she'd been holding and managed a smile. “Of course, David, come in.” Her voice was soft and nervous, as though she were speaking in a library. “He's in his office. And how is Jasper?”

“Oh,” said David. “Dad's fine, thanks.”

She led him down a short flight of stairs and into a long hallway. “And your mum? I haven't seen Alice in so long. You know how it is, you mean to catch up but there's always so much to be done,” she said with a nervous laugh. David didn't know what to say, so he just nodded. Finally his aunt stopped in front of a white door at the end of the hall. A shining brass plate on the front read, ‘Dr Darius Drake, Psychiatrist’.

She tapped on the door. “Doctor Drake?” David raised his eyebrows.

She called her own husband *Doctor*? “David’s here for his appointment. Jasper’s son?”

The door flew open and David caught a flash of large teeth and round eyes. “Ah, David, you’re here,” said a nasal voice. A grasping hand shot out and pulled him into the room. “That’s all, Mary-Anne.” The door snapped shut.

The grasping hand steered David to a chair in front of an elaborate desk. As David sat down his uncle took a seat on the other side, staring at David with an expectant smile on his lips.

David gazed back at him, shifting in the uncomfortable chair. There was something distinctly shark-like about Uncle Darius. It wasn’t that he was big or imposing; in fact, he was sort of weedy, with a pot belly and slumped shoulders. His thinning black hair stuck to his head like bits of wet string. But the eyes behind his round-rimmed glasses were small and beady, the irises such a dark green it was hard to see where they ended and the pupils began. There was a sharpness in his gaze that made David think ‘predator’. Even his nose, slightly upturned at the end, resembled the muzzle of a great white, while his mouth was little more than a gash.

David started to squirm under his uncle’s stare. Breaking eye contact he looked around the room. Shelves filled with neatly ordered books lined the walls. Behind the desk hung dozens of framed certificates, diplomas and awards. Plastic models of faceless heads were scattered around the room, their brains eerily exposed. In one corner of the room stood a large metal filing cabinet. Patient files, David thought. He felt a twinge of irritation, to think his uncle was now going to attempt to analyse him and put everything he thought about David in that filing cabinet, like some kind of case study.

He thought of Reece, and frowned. Like some kind of *freak*.

All of this David saw in the dim light of a single lamp on his uncle's desk. The only windows in the room were small and set right up under the ceiling, covered by closed blinds. David guessed they were in some kind of basement.

The seconds ticked by. David sat back in his chair, determined not to be the first one to talk. Who cared if they said nothing? That suited him fine. Then his uncle couldn't write down what he thought about him, and put it in that filing cabinet.

Finally, Uncle Darius placed his hands palm down on this desk. "Well, now," he said in his nasal voice. David caught a glimpse of brilliant white teeth cluttered together at odd angles, too large for the space inside. "You've grown up quite a bit, haven't you?"

"I guess," David said. Of course he'd grown up. Didn't everyone?

"I'm sure you'll be quite interested to know, David," his uncle went on, "that I've been waiting to see you for some time. Since summer, in fact."

David felt a flicker of surprise. "You have?"

"Indeed. Ever since your father told me about your little disappearance at Ethel's, I've been quite eager to speak with you. It would have been my preference to see you right away, of course, but your father was a little reluctant to let me do so." His smile deepened. "At first."

"You mean," said David, quickly adding up his uncle's words, "this whole therapy thing was *your* idea?"

"Oh, of course," said Uncle Darius, "not that Jasper needed much convincing. Your injury has him quite concerned." His dark eyes swept over David's glove. "Let's talk about your hand, shall we?"

David pulled his hand into his lap. "I burnt it," he said.

Uncle Darius' face was polite, impassive. "With what?"

“Hot water.”

“How?”

“I was making breakfast. For my grandma.”

“Ah, yes, your original story, I believe. Boiling an egg, the medical report states.”

David frowned. “You have my medical report?”

“I’m a doctor. I’ve access to all sorts of information.”

David had to force himself not to roll his eyes. He was well aware what his uncle was. It was plastered all over the room.

“Boiling an egg,” Uncle Darius repeated. “For...”

“My grandma.”

“And had you ever made breakfast for her before?”

“Yeah, sure,” sighed David. “Every day.”

Uncle Darius shook his head. “How very disappointing. Here I was, thinking we could be friends, and you’re already lying to me.” He stuck his hand in the desk drawer and pulled out David’s exercise book.

A cold feeling crept through David’s stomach. Dad must have dropped it off since last night.

“*My Adventures in Esmorde,*” Uncle Darius read. He opened it up to a page marked with a piece of scrap paper. “*I am lost,*” he said aloud. “*The caves go on and on. I don’t think I will ever reach the central chamber of the volcano...*” He flicked ahead a few pages, leaning back in his chair. “*The ghost of Aurasius is so big it fills the whole chamber. He is in my head, taunting me, trying to trick me. I am getting weaker, and I think he is going to win.*” He turned the page. “*My soul is nearly touching the stone. Aurasius is telling me to give in. He says my friends are already dead, and I am too late.*

“*But I am not ready to die yet. I want to live.*”

“And then I know the answer. I reach into my pocket and hold out my hand towards the Heart of Stone. It slips inside easily, but my hand feels like it is on fire. I let go of the seeds I am holding and pull my hand back. It works – the Stone explodes with blue light, and the Curse to End the World is broken.

“I have done it.

“I have saved Esmorde.”

Uncle Darius placed the book on the desk, leaning forward so that his face glowed in the yellow lamp light. “Now, David. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me about how you injured your hand? Nothing you want to add to your little boiled egg story?”

David stared at the book, his mouth dry. “Nope. Nothing.”

“Mm.” Uncle Darius stared at him, then got to his feet. “Perhaps we need to start from the beginning.” He walked around the desk and perched on the edge, leaning close to David as though to sniff out a potential lie. “Tell me, what was it like, being delivered by your parents into the squalor of an ill-prepared woman you barely knew? Did you feel abandoned? Resentful? Did it make you want to lash out and hurt your parents, or even your grandmother? Or perhaps even hurt yourself?”

David gaped at him. “I would *never* –”

“So you felt no resentment that your own parents dumped you off with a woman who, it must be noted, has a questionable mental state? Not a single shred of injustice?”

“Well, I guess was a *bit* mad at them. Who wouldn’t be?”

“Are you a clumsy boy, David?”

David blinked, then shrugged. “Sometimes. Not really.”

“You wouldn’t call yourself particularly accident-prone, then?”

“No.”

“And yet,” said Uncle Darius, reaching back over his desk to snatch up a folder and flicking it open, “in less than a month you managed to obtain a twisted ankle and a very serious burn to your hand.”

“Didn’t you hear?” David replied. “I was lost in the bush for two days. It’s not the safest place for a kid.”

“Of course. Does your grandmother own a whip?”

“*What?*”

Uncle Darius stared at him. “Does Ethel Flynn own a whip? It’s a simple enough question.”

Perplexed, David said, “I don’t know. I never saw one.”

“Does she have a bad temper?”

“I don’t think so...”

“Did she ever punish you?”

“*Punish* me? Of course not!”

“Do you think it was irresponsible for your grandmother to allow you to wander out into the bush on your own?”

“She didn’t *allow* me,” said David, folding his arms across his chest. “She warned me to stay close to the house.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Uh, hello? Because the bush is dangerous.”

“So there was nothing specific she was keeping you from? Nothing she didn’t want you to know about?”

David cleared his throat. He’d lied a lot since returning from Esmorde, but it had never seemed this ... *important*. “Of course not. She was just worried I’d get hurt.” He waved at the folder in his uncle’s hands. “And she was right.”

“Ah, yes, of course. *So* worried, in fact, that after you disappeared she neglected to report you missing, even though you were gone for ...

what was it? Almost two weeks?”

“Well, maybe she –” David started to say, then stopped himself. “Two weeks? No, I was only gone for a couple of days. And Mum and Dad were already there. There was a search party, and police and everything.”

“Oh, no, I’m not talking about the *second* time you disappeared,” said Uncle Darius. He threw down the folder and picked up David’s exercise book, shaking it in front of his nose. “I’m talking about the *first* time. The time you disappeared for two entire weeks, before your parents showed up to collect you. You see, I think Ethel neglected to report you missing because she knew *exactly* where you were. Calling the police would have been pointless – bothersome, even. Who knows what might have been found on her property?”

David swallowed. He tried to give an unruffled shrug, which felt more like a nervous twitch. “I dunno. Snake poo?”

“Snake poo...” Uncle Darius started to laugh. “Oh, you really are quite the storyteller. And not an entirely bad liar, either.” His smile faded. “Lucky for me, scars don’t lie nearly so well.”

David blinked. “Scars?”

His uncle waved a hand at him. “I’m talking about the four parallel scars on your back. It would only take an instant to check.” He leaned forward so his upturned nose was just inches from David’s face. “But I don’t think we need to stoop to such an intrusion of your privacy, do you?”

David felt a fresh wave of panic swirl through his stomach. The aurson scratches ... he’d written about them in his exercise book.

“I – I’ve always had those scars,” David stammered, pressing himself back into his chair. “From a dog. It attacked me when ... when I was little.”

Uncle Darius stood up and walked back behind the desk. “No, I don’t think so,” he said. “There’s a marked difference between new scars and old ones. I’m afraid you’re going to have to be quicker than that to fool me.” He held up the exercise book. “You were scarred by a great black-haired beast, a beast without a soul. It’s all in here, every word. Unless you care to prove otherwise. It would only take a second...”

David shook his head. “But you’re a *doctor*! You can’t really believe what I wrote in that thing is real. They’re just stories!”

“Oh, it’s real, all right,” said Uncle Darius. “All of it – the tree, this other world, right down to the ghost of the dragon you destroyed. And I’ve everything I need to prove it. In what *you* wrote...” He tossed David’s book onto the desk, then turned and grasped the handle of the top of his filing cabinet. The front swung out like a door, revealing a hidden safe, which he opened with a key card he took from his pocket. Inside the safe David caught a glimpse of another book, much larger and older than his exercise book.

Uncle Darius pulled it out, placing it gently on the desk amid flurries of dust.

He gave David a terrifying smile.

“...And what *she* wrote.”