

# The Nameless World



by Heather Payer-Smith



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*Dedicated to everyone who strives to make  
the world a better place...*



## CHAPTER 1

Noah never told his mom how much he hated the bus. It wasn't the bus so much as the kids on the bus. They called him names. They tried to trip him. They covered him in spitballs. They made Noah's life a nightmare!

That day was no different. With his hair in a twisted mess and a little dab of syrup on his chin, Noah was the ready target for everyone's pranks and mean remarks. He climbed the stairs of the bus, sped to the first empty seat and slouched down beside the window hoping no one would bother him.

He unzipped his backpack and pulled out the book he had begged his mom to buy for him. They didn't have a lot of money, but his mom managed to scrape enough together to buy him the book recommended by Noah's science teacher, Mr. Porter.

Noah smiled as he looked at the black cover with the galaxy and planets surrounding a large, burning meteor.

*The real things are much better.*

Noah drifted into the memory of the meteor shower from

the night before.

*How cool it would have been to see it from the top of a mountain or in an airplane or sitting on a cloud just out of reach of the falling rocks.*

His daydream was interrupted by the noise of the kids getting on the bus. Noah cringed. It was Kevin Swanson and Jake Maurin, two rough kids who liked to pick on him. Kevin was a year older, but in the fifth grade, too, because he flunked kindergarten.

Kevin, a big kid whose family was well off, was like a mean Dennis the Menace. Blond, floppy hair crowned his freckled face. He scowled a lot and only smiled when someone else was crying. He was always showing off the new toys his father bought him. He never let anyone touch them, and would charge money if other kids wanted to see his latest gadget.

Jake was an average kid, not skinny, not fat, with sandy blond hair that curled at the ends when it got too long. Jake used to be Noah's friend when they were younger. Their dads worked together, but when Noah's dad died, the two boys drifted apart. Noah wasn't good at making friends after that. He and Jake would talk, but it wasn't the same. Then Kevin came along and their friendship really changed.

Kevin and Jake knocked their way through the bus and plopped down in the seat behind Noah. Immediately, the torture began.

"What are you reading, dork?" Kevin bellowed out over Noah's shoulder. "A book about rocks! Ha ha ha... the space cadet is reading about rocks! What a loser."

Noah tried to ignore him.

"What's so fascinating about rocks, Spacey?"

Noah closed his eyes, fighting the urge to tell him that it wasn't a book about rocks, it was about meteors, but Kevin was

too stupid to know the difference.

“I asked you a question, Spacey...” Kevin spat when he talked.

“You better answer him, Spacey, or else,” Jake piped in.

Noah clutched the book, desperate to think of something he could do to get away. *Switch seats? Run off the bus next time it stopped? Fly out the window and never come back?* He wished. Instead he just sat there, waiting for their next move.

It didn’t take Kevin long to swipe the book out of Noah’s hands and hold it like a trophy over his head.

“Maybe I’ll just have to find out what’s so great about rocks by keeping the book for myself.”

Noah’s face turned red with anger.

“I know what it’s good for!” Kevin exclaimed. “Beating rock heads!”

*Thud. Thud. Thud.* Kevin took great care to hit Noah square on top of the head. Noah’s face burned. It was humiliating, but nothing new.

Noah waited for the fourth whack on the head when all of a sudden the bus jerked to a stop, throwing everyone forward in their seat. Mr. Crowley, the bus driver, stood up and clomped like a bull let loose from his pen making his way toward Kevin and Jake. The entire bus fell silent.

“That’s enough out of you two,” he yelled. “Give that book back to him and sit down!”

Kevin and Jake cowered in silence. Noah wished he could peek at their faces.

“I mean it - NOW! And if I so much as hear a peep from anyone, I’ll stop this bus and give you all a whupin’!”

Mr. Crowley’s face twisted in anger.

“Here’s your stupid book,” Kevin grumbled as he dropped

it into Noah's lap.

Mr. Crowley stood in front of the boys long enough to make his point before returning to the driver's seat. Noah was relieved that Mr. Crowley had seen Kevin hitting him, but knew it wouldn't stop Kevin from getting even with him later. He heard Kevin mumbling behind him.

"If he ever touched me, my dad would sue the crap out of him. In fact, maybe I should tell my dad and get him fired once and for all."

Noah put the book back in his bag. He didn't feel like reading anymore.

The school day moved along like any other. First lesson was English. Mrs. Engles droned on and on about the importance of proper punctuation. During math, Noah learned that fractions are trickier than he thought.

As his teacher assigned the class math work, Noah gazed at the clock, counting down the minutes to his next class, science.

*Five, four, three...* Noah watched the second hand tick by until a bell sounded overhead.

"It's 11:00," the teacher announced. "Those of you who have science in the lab can leave, but go straight to the classroom!"

Noah loved science. He knew science better than anyone else in the class and he loved the teacher, Mr. Porter. Mr. Porter was different than the other teachers. He didn't wear suits and ties – instead he wore dirty, old khakis with oversized cardigans, some of which had holes in places Mr. Porter couldn't see. He had little, round spectacles, but always seemed to look over them, even when reading. He never ate lunch in the teachers' lounge. He would eat in the classroom while reading fascinating articles in science magazines.

Sometimes he let Noah eat in there, too, and loaned him older copies of his magazines to look at while nibbling on his lunch.

A few weeks earlier, Mr. Porter made a change in his teaching schedule to educate the class about meteor showers, preparing them for last night's event. Mr. Porter knew how excited Noah was about the topic and invited him to eat lunch in the classroom everyday since then so he could learn more about meteors from the collection of books and magazines.

Noah hurried into the science lab, took his seat and looked around the room. Mr. Porter's ratty jacket was hanging on the back of his desk chair, but no Mr. Porter. He watched the clock, anxious for class to begin. There was so much he wanted to say about the shower!

Minutes ticked by. Noah scowled. Mr. Porter was nowhere in sight. It wasn't like him to be late.

*Maybe it's for a good reason. Maybe Mr. Porter managed to capture a piece of meteor from the night before and is waiting to reveal his find to the class.*

Noah envisioned how glorious such a moment would be: a table with a massive lump on it, covered by a glamorous silk cloth. Mr. Porter would pull away the cover and gleaming in its place would be a beautiful golden meteor, shining like the sun for all to see.

He was startled back to reality by the sound of a ruler being whacked against the chalkboard. The noise quieted everyone. Noah and the rest of the class stared in confusion at the crooked old man standing before them.

"Quiet now! I won't stand for any misbehaving in my classroom."

*His classroom? Noah became disoriented. Did I go into the wrong room?*

He looked around the lab and made certain it was Mr.

Porter's science class. It had the same pictures of animals on the wall and jars filled with creepy crawlies sitting on the windowsill. His classmates were all around him and, yes, Mr. Porter's jacket was definitely on the chair.

*What is going on? Who is this man and where is Mr. Porter?*

As if the old man could read Noah's mind, he looked at Noah and said, "I am Mr. Sput. I'll be taking charge of this class for the next few weeks while Mr. Porter is..." He paused, searching for the right words to say, like he had a secret that he didn't want the class to know.

"...absent."

*Absent?* Noah couldn't believe it. He had waited all day to share his encounter of the meteor shower with Mr. Porter. Mr. Porter was the only person Noah knew who would truly understand how magical the experience was. He wouldn't pretend to care or smile at Noah's silly stories. He wouldn't laugh at Noah's excitement. He would have listened and shared in the conversation, telling his own stories and fascinations.

*How could he be absent, and for weeks? Why didn't he tell me he was going to be gone?*

Noah was in a daze for the remainder of the class. Mr. Sput rambled on about kingdoms and phylum and other things to do with scientific classification of earth's living creatures. Noah didn't care. He was too distracted by his own thoughts. He wondered if there was something more to Mr. Porter's 'absence'.

The lunch bell rang. Class dismissed. Noah would have some time to think. Then he remembered...recess. Noah's heart sank. For the past few weeks, he was able to stay in Mr. Porter's class clear through recess. Now he'd have to face the challenges of the playground once again. It wasn't just

recess...it was recess with Kevin and Jake. After that morning, he was sure to be in trouble.

*Maybe I can find a place to hide. Maybe they won't remember what happened on the bus. Maybe...*

Too late. On the way to the lunchroom, Noah was intercepted by Kevin.

“You know I’ll be looking for you on the playground, nerd.”

Noah kept walking.

“You didn’t think I’d let you get away with getting me in trouble did you?” Kevin laughed as he shoved past Noah.

Just when Noah thought it was safe to run, Kevin turned around, sneered at him, smiled a twisted smile and punched his fist into his hand.

Noah shivered. *This is it. I'm a dead man.*

Noah could hardly eat. Not only did he have to worry about Kevin, but there was still the matter of Mr. Porter’s absence plaguing him.

*Is he hurt? Is he sick? Maybe even dying!?*

Noah didn’t want to think about that. Over the school year, Mr. Porter was the closest thing Noah had to a father. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing someone else who meant so much to him.

Noah stared at his lunch, head and heart pounding. He wanted to eat but his stomach was in severe turmoil.

Little white balls whizzed past Noah. One hit and stuck to his lunch bag. He knew that Kevin and Jake were having their fun with spitballs. He felt one hit his head. Hearty laughter echoed from a few tables away.

Noah looked down at his lap. His knuckles whitened from

the stress of his hands curling into fists.

“Be brave, Noah,” he reminded himself. “Don’t sink to their level. Don’t be like a bully! Be a hero!”

He liked the sound of that. *Noah the hero! Noah the superb! Noah the....* SPLAT. Another spitball nestled itself in his hair.

Defeated, Noah shoved his lunch inside the bag, grabbed his backpack and slipped out of the lunchroom. He’d take his chances on the playground.

The fresh air eased Noah’s mind. It was warm outside and the sound of kids playing lifted his spirits. He hoped Kevin and Jake would get caught up in a game of dodge ball or football and, if nothing else, wait for another time to pulverize him.

Scanning the playground, Noah spotted an empty spot under an old oak tree. He walked slowly in that direction, not wanting to catch anyone’s attention. Across the pavement to the grass - he started to feel better - past the swings, and still no sign of Kevin. Just a few more yards....

“Hey, jerk! Where do you think you’re going?”

Noah wanted to run, but his knees locked up. His lungs tightened. Breathing came hard.

“Just move...” he told himself. With all his will he was able to pick up one foot and slowly inch it forward.

“Don’t walk away from me, you little punk!”

“Just leave me alone.” Noah mumbled between clenched teeth.

“Oh yeah? What are you gonna’ do if I don’t?” Kevin’s voice grew louder. “You gonna’ cry? You gonna’ go run and tell your mommy?”

Kevin's tone was cruel; the laughter of his friends egged him on.

Feeling vulnerable, Noah scanned the ground, looking for something to use as protection. He spotted a stone not three feet away. It wasn't big, but might be enough to ward Kevin and his pack of bullies off long enough for Noah to run back inside.

Kevin's shadow engulfed Noah. He urged his legs to take another step, but was jerked to a halt when Kevin grabbed hold of the backpack strapped to his shoulders. He heard the zipper open as Kevin reached inside the bag.

"Looky what I found," Kevin gloated as he pulled the book about meteors out of the drooping sack.

"NO! You give that back, right now!"

Noah whirled around to face him. Kevin held the book up in front of Noah, knowing very well he couldn't reach it.

"Give it back," Noah demanded.

"I'm not through with it yet," Kevin snarled.

"Give it back to me!" Filled with fear and anger, Noah raised his voice. There was no telling what Kevin planned to do. All Noah cared about was his book. Kevin dangled it in front of him, laughing.

"Fine. Turn around and I'll put it back."

Noah stood firm. He wasn't going to fall for one of Kevin's nasty tricks.

"Turn around, scaredy cat," Kevin demanded.

Noah glared at him.

"I said turn around!" Kevin growled as he reached out and pushed Noah.

The force of the push knocked the wind out of Noah. Struggling to catch himself, he spun around, landing on his

hands and knees. Noah's lunch flew out of his hand, hit the ground and spilled into the grass. The wet ground cushioned his fall but made for nasty mud stains on his pants. He felt a sting and knew he was bleeding.

Noah could feel everyone looking at him.

“Oh, is the baby gonna cry? Is the baby crying?” Kevin mocked.

They all started laughing, even the girls gossiping on the swings giggled. Noah wanted to curl up and die.

“You're pathetic, Noah. Why don't you crawl back under the rock you came from?”

Kevin threw the book past Noah into a nearby patch of mud. The book stuck in the sludge like an arrow lodged in a tree trunk. Noah stared at his precious book covered in dirt and mud, water seeping into the pages.

Tears of fury spilled from Noah's eyes as he watch the book sink deeper into the mud.

“That'll teach you to mess with me, you little freak,” Kevin triumphed.

Humiliation was gone. Reeling with never before felt anger, Noah grabbed a stone and hurled it at Kevin, screaming with rage.

Bullseye! The stone met its target with perfect precision. Kevin didn't know what hit him until blood trickled from the lump on his otherwise perfect forehead.

Right in the middle, like a Cyclops's eye, the wound swelled and drained with Kevin's foul blood. The sight of it made Noah queasy, but he felt like David slaying the giant, Goliath.

His victory was short lived, interrupted by a shrill wail coming from Kevin.

“I’m bleeding! Someone help me, help me!” Kevin screamed.

He was crying and carrying on like it was a bullet from a sniper’s gun. Noah couldn’t believe it. It was swollen, but hardly more than a scratch and Kevin was acting like the biggest baby. All of Kevin’s friends, including Jake, were dumbfounded, not just from the fact that Noah stood up for himself, but that Kevin was making such a fuss.

Noah had to think fast. He couldn’t just sit there. Surely someone would avenge their friend’s ambush, and Noah wasn’t about to take a beating from five people.

All of the commotion caught the attention of Mrs. Tourney, the recess supervisor. She hobbled over to the scene, held back by her own large thighs swishing beneath her flower-print dress. She sucked in a big breath of air and blasted a trill from the whistle hanging around her neck.

“What’s going on over there,” she demanded, waddling closer to the scene, heaving deep breaths.

Nobody answered. They were all focused on Kevin. Someone tried to get a tissue out of his pocket, but it ripped and fell to the ground. It was Noah’s chance to get away. He grabbed what he could of his lunch, scurried up off the ground, reclaimed his book from the mud and sped to his hideout - the old oak tree.

Noah struggled to catch his breath. He was quivering with excitement and fear.

“There is no way I’m getting out of this one,” he heaved. “How could I let him get the best of me? So much for being a hero.”

Noah cleaned off his book as much as possible and laid it out to dry. The pages were stiff and soaked with a dingy, brown film. Some of the words were smeared which made

reading nearly impossible. Noah felt sick. It wasn't just the book. It was what the book stood for: his excitement from the meteor shower, the money his mother sacrificed to buy it, all his hopes and all the dreams Noah harbored - now covered in mud.

The recess bell rang. Noah peered around the tree to see kids scrambling to gather kick balls and jump ropes as they all filtered back into the school.

“There is no way I'm going back in there.” Noah bit his lip, resolved to spend the rest of the day hiding, thinking of a way to explain what he had done.

The afternoon heat dried Noah's book quickly. He picked it up to inspect the damage, scraped off clumps of dried dirt and tucked it safely into his backpack.

A squirrel scampered up and down the tree, gathering what few acorns remained on the ground from last autumn. Noah smiled at the squirrel's work.

“Barely spring and already gathering for winter.”

He watched the squirrel scuttle from one acorn to the next, pausing every so often to eye Noah, making sure he was just another fixture surrounding the tree.

Sunbeams threaded their way through the oak branches. Leaves fluttered and danced in the quiet breeze. As Noah eyed the squirrel, his attention was drawn to a bright flash on the ground. His heart beat fast with curiosity. He took a deep breath and crawled over to the area that harbored the twinkling light.

He was surprised and bewildered to find, not a piece of quartz or rock like he expected, but Mr. Porter's spectacles!

“How on earth did these get out here?”

A wave of concern flooded Noah's mind.

“Mr. Porter wouldn't go anywhere without his glasses, and certainly wouldn't have left them outside behind an old oak tree.”

Noah got closer to study his find. The frame was in one piece, but one of the lenses was broken. Noah wondered if someone stepped on them and, not wanting to get in trouble, disposed of them in this clever hiding spot. That made sense, except the frames weren't bent. Noah was certain they would have warped if someone stepped on them. He thought of Mrs. Tourney and what her massive foot would have done to such frail spectacles.

“No, it had to be something else.”

Noah hesitated, but realized he'd have to move the spectacles in order to get a better idea of what may have happened. He took great care in picking up the glasses, dusting them off and laying them next to his crumpled lunch sack. The shattered lens, broken into a hundred pieces, lay among the leaves and acorns. Noah didn't try to salvage what was left. Instead, his attention focused on what was beneath the lens - something metallic, copper or brass in appearance.

He picked up a nearby twig and scraped the debris away. He found not just one but two pieces of metal shaped like identical puzzle pieces. They had fine lines engraved on them that formed an interesting pattern. Each side was the same shape and the pieces looked like they would fit together at any edge.

Noah had never seen puzzle pieces like these.

A loud *RRRIINNNGGG* broke the silence of the playground, startling Noah.

“Oh no... school's out!”

Pumped with curiosity, Noah snatched up the metal pieces

and put them in his pocket along with Mr. Porter's spectacles. Something was amiss and he was determined to unravel the mystery.

He grabbed his backpack and headed across the deserted playground. If he ran, he'd make it back inside the school with just enough time to catch his bus before it departed.

## CHAPTER 2

As soon as Noah got off the bus, he went straight to his room. He didn't think to change his pants before his mother got home and questioned the day's events. He hadn't even considered what he would tell her when the school called to explain he had gone missing after lunch.

He closed the door tight behind him. He wasn't going to take any chances of being discovered. He dropped his backpack on the floor, took the puzzle pieces out of his pocket and carefully set them down side-by-side on his desk. The dim glow of the lamp offered little help to Noah's struggling gaze.

He looked closely at the metal trying to figure out what they could be.

*Pieces of a machine? Or perhaps a computer chip of some sort that broke in two?*

Noah was clueless. He had a mystery before him and he was determined to solve it. If only Mr. Porter was around. Noah knew he'd be able to help. Mr. Porter was the smartest man alive as far as Noah was concerned. Noah was still

convinced that Mr. Porter and the strange, metallic objects were somehow linked. He tried to make out what the markings might be, but they were too small for him to see clearly. He needed more light.

Noah opened the bottom drawer of the desk and shuffled through old papers and model dinosaurs before lifting out a flashlight. He turned it on and shined it directly on one of the puzzle pieces.

No good. Dirt was embedded in the fine lines and the design was still too small to make sense to the naked eye.

Noah had a high-powered magnifying glass that he used when studying his rocks. If nothing else, it would shine more light than the flashlight and give a better view of the designs on the metal.

He cleared off the books and pencils that were laying on the desk to make more room for his magnifying glass. After setting it up and making sure everything was in place, Noah placed the metal pieces under the glass, turned on the light and looked into the magnified window. His eyes popped with amazement at what he saw. All sorts of lines and designs interweaving with one another created a maze of patterns all over the metal. It was so intricate; Noah began to doubt that these objects were puzzle pieces at all. They would have to have been made by a very skilled hand to fit such detailed etchings together on two separate pieces.

Noah wanted to know for sure. He set the pieces close together and studied the designs. He laid them together, touching, to see if the lines matched up.

“Not at this angle.”

He turned the left piece so that another edge lined up against the side of the piece on the right. Noah noticed the lines were going in opposite directions. He was getting discouraged, but thought he ought to try one more side. He

turned the piece on the right to match up against the piece on the left. To his amazement the lines matched perfectly. Every tiny detailed line from one piece continued flawlessly to the next.

“Eureka!” Noah shouted.

His celebration was brief. There was a flash of light and the ground began to shake. Noah fell back against the bed, afraid that he had done something terribly wrong. The ground was shaking so much that it knocked Noah to the floor – panic consumed him. He was sure that whatever was happening was his fault. The puzzle pieces were somehow involved. He reached for them to gain control of the situation.

Just as he touched them, there was a deep booming sound. The light blazed brighter and brighter and brighter until his room was completely engulfed by it! Then silence and darkness.

Only the dull light of the desk lamp glowed. The bedspread covered the floor where Noah’s backpack had been tossed. The backpack was gone. So was Noah! The two metal pieces remained- separated on the floor.

Noah’s head was pounding. He couldn’t see a thing. The bright light temporarily blinded him. The shaking stopped and it was quiet.

“What happened?” Noah’s voice squeaked. He was too disoriented to think of what damage the earthquake might have done to his room. He felt for the floor to get his bearings. He wanted to find the bed. Maybe if he laid down his vision would clear and his head would stop hurting. He reached down, but he did not feel the creaky wooden floor of his bedroom. He felt something long and soft like grass or weeds. Noah thought his mind was playing tricks on him. He strained to see.

Blurs of color were coming back, but nothing looked familiar. Noah panicked.

“What’s... What’s going on!?” No one was there to answer. “Mom? MOM!!! Mom, where are you!?”

Silence.

“Alright, stay calm... stay calm. It’s probably just an after effect of the light. Mom’s still at work, that’s why she’s not answering.”

Noah felt around and discovered something familiar. His backpack was lying on the ground next to him. He felt inside to find his lunch and a few schoolbooks. Relief subdued him.

Noah’s head spun and he felt sick to his stomach.

“I’d better lie down.”

Taking his own advice, Noah curled up on the ground using his backpack as a pillow. His skin felt prickly like it had gone numb. A nap. A nap was all he needed. Things would be better once his mom got home. He’d let her take care of him.

With comforting thoughts, Noah drifted into a deep sleep, completely unaware that he was no longer in his bedroom or anywhere near home.

The air was warm on Noah’s face. He stirred as a breeze blew across his body. The air smelled sweet like it would on a summer morning when the flowers were all in bloom. Noah breathed deeply. The fragrance filled his nostrils.

He felt something tickle his legs and reached down to pull the covers over him. Nothing. Only sharp blades of grass greeted his searching hands. Noah sat up with a start. His head was spinning, but his vision had returned to normal. He looked around frantically, not sure if he was in a dream. Nothing looked familiar to him.

“Where am I? What happened?”

His first instinct was to cry, but he choked back tears. Crying wouldn't give him any answers. He tried to remain calm.

He was in the clearing of a small forest. There were trees all around him, but not any kind that Noah had ever seen. The bark was perfectly smooth and had a silvery-blue color to it. The branches were twisted and reached out all around as if they were squirming tentacles frozen in time. The leaves looked like budding flowers, but they had sharp edges - not something Noah would think to pick and bring home to a loved one. The grass was lush and deep in color. Each blade glistened in the morning light like soft shards of emeralds.

Other plant-like vegetation flourished. Large red and yellow flowers filled the clearing. They looked like pointy orchids, but were bigger than both of Noah's hands put together. Patches of weeds and bush-like plants were scattered around the forest. Everything was so colorful. Noah thought of how Dorothy must have felt when she entered Oz for the first time. The sound of running water echoed from somewhere in the woods.

“Water.” Noah suddenly realized how thirsty he was. “Maybe a drink will help steady my head.”

He wiped his face with his hands feeling the creases from his backpack embedded in his cheek. His hair was sticking up on one side like the tail feathers of a prancing turkey. He tried his best to smooth it down, but only succeeded in creating a bushy mess.

Noah's stomach growled and he remembered he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He looked at the hazy, pink sky. It was impossible to tell what time of day it was. By the looks of it, he wasn't even sure it was day. There was no sun or moon to help indicate the time. It was plain to see Noah wasn't

anywhere near home.

Noah breathed deep. It was just like one of his daydreams.

*Am I really in this strange forest? Could I really be on another planet or in another place and time altogether? Or is this all a strange dream induced by the most stressful day of my life?*

There was no way Noah could tell. He was too curious to be scared, but too nervous to be adventurous.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

To stay put didn’t make much sense. He saw only plants and trees, and didn’t think they could be of any help.

His stomach was fighting with itself. He needed to eat. He had his lunch from earlier, but nothing to drink. Peanut butter was too dry and sticky to eat without the certainty of a cool, refreshing drink to follow. The air was warming and Noah didn’t want to take the chance of getting dehydrated. The first thing to do was locate the stream or brook that was babbling not too far off.

“Maybe with a full stomach I’ll be able to think of a way to get out of here, wherever here is.”

Noah took another deep breath and stumbled to his feet. Standing helped ease the throbbing in his head.

“Now, don’t get ahead of yourself, Noah. You don’t know what you may find out there,” he warned himself, looking up.

The sound of his voice echoed off the trees. What he thought were flowers resting in the field took flight into the forest. He watched as the flying wonders danced into the trees and through the crooked branches. As they flew up a fine powder fell from their wings and glittered to the ground.

Noah sneezed as powder fell on his face. It left a sour taste in his mouth and made his need for water even greater.

A yellow fluttery creature got too close to the budding leaves of the trees above and... SNAP! One of the flowers closed on it. The yellow wings flapped and twisted and then disappeared as the flowering pod gulped it down. Noah jumped back. Sweat formed on his forehead as he trembled with fear of the unknown.

His eyes grew wide at the thought of something snapping shut around him. "I have to protect myself."

He scanned the ground and found a dried branch. It was black and twisted, but the perfect size for Noah to carry and swing at anything that tried to swallow him. He inched his hand down to pick up the stick, touched it and jerked his hand back just in case.

"Better safe than sorry," he sighed, reassuring his cowardly action. The stick didn't move, so Noah felt safe picking it up. It was cold and hard, not too heavy but could certainly deliver a stinging blow. He felt it would be a trustworthy sword.

Regaining his confidence, Noah picked up his backpack, secured it on his shoulders and, with his new weapon, followed the sound of water.

The woods were a lot thicker than Noah imagined. Vegetation flourished and changed with each step he took. Vines wound themselves through the canopy creating an umbrella of greenery over the dense forest. Noah was baffled that so much could grow in a seemingly dry atmosphere. He was thankful that it wasn't humid or it would have made his trek through the jungle that much more treacherous, because humidity attracts bugs.

Noah liked bugs, but after his encounters with the life in the forest so far, he wasn't anxious to come across any in this strange place. He envisioned terrible, monstrous bugs that might enjoy having him on their menu.

“What if bugs rule this world and I am no more to them than an ant would be to me? Would I be squashed? Would I be a snack for giant frogs or lizards?” he whispered.

He didn't want to think about such possibilities any more. He needed to focus on finding water to keep himself from going crazy.

Every once in a while Noah would step on a dried weed patch or sigh loudly and dozens of fluttery creatures would flee into the upper levels of the forest. They were very clever at hiding. Noah thought how nice it would be to have the ability to camouflage himself so well. Then whenever Kevin and his friends were looking for him, all he'd have to do is crouch down and fold his arm over his head and he'd blend right in with his surroundings.

Noah stopped to see if he could find any fluttery creatures hiding nearby. He crouched down to look under a bush but didn't see anything. He rustled the branches and to his surprise, two flutterers leaped out of the shrub and flew skyward. One of them landed on another tree pod. SNAP. It vanished just like the first one.

The dead flutterer's companion floated back toward the ground and landed on the end of Noah's stick. It looked at him. Noah felt very bad that he had caused its friend to fly into the trees and become something's dinner.

The fluttery creatures seemed to be harmless. Noah took the chance to really examine the yellow one perched in front of him. It was the closest he had been to one and wasn't about to shoo it away. Its wings were a lot daintier than he originally thought. They were like silky gossamer. A slight breeze lifted the layers of wings and fine powder trickled to the ground. It had four legs that stretched out like bent wire from the center of the creature's long body to the corners of its larger set of wings.

Noah wished he could take it with him and keep it to study when he got home. The flutterer looked at him with beady eyes and, as if knowing Noah's thoughts, flew away. It was helpful to see one of the creatures up close and he felt more at ease knowing it had not hurt him.

Noah sighed and continued his quest for water.

Noah felt like he had been walking for days, but knew it couldn't have been more than a few hours. The sound of the brook was louder. He knew he was on the right trail. He tingled with excitement to be able to dip his face into the clear, cool, refreshing water that beckoned ever closer.

Noah summoned what strength he had left in his legs and trekked on. He listened to the sound of his breath as he made his way deeper into the woods. The air was getting stale. With so much vegetation around, there was scarcely a breeze. It made Noah gasp for air. He tried to focus on the sound of the water, but even that was starting to become difficult.

"How much further do I have to walk?" he complained.

To his relief, the answer came sooner than he expected. Noah felt a mist on his face. At first he thought it was just his own sweat, but then he saw it lingering in the air. It was like a million fine water droplets running in the wind, tempting him closer to the thirst-quenching oasis from which they fled.

The hope of relief gave Noah a new sense of energy. His footsteps quickened as he listened to the sound of water. It grew louder and louder. Finally he saw it - a rippling stream flowing over what looked like yellow roots.

Noah ran to the edge of the deep stream. The roots were thickly woven beneath the depths of the water. He dropped to his knees and dipped his hands into the bubbly brew.

He lifted the cool, quenching liquid toward his lips but

quickly noticed that the liquid itself was yellow. Noah split his hands, splattering the liquid onto the ground. He was at a stand still.

“Should I risk impending doom that might follow if I drink it? What if it’s poison, or worse...” he gulped.

The thought made Noah nauseous; but he couldn’t go on much longer without food and water. The stream, whatever it was, seemed to be the only thing around that even remotely resembled water. He reconsidered his situation. The liquid didn’t smell bad, and it didn’t burn his skin when he touched it.

“Maybe just a small sip.”

Noah dipped his hands in the stream one more time. He studied the liquid as it neared his face.

“Here goes nothing.” He closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide.

The water was sweet and cool. It was better than Noah could have imagined. It tasted like liquid candy but was as crisp and as quenching as crystal-clear, spring water. He drank several handfuls before submerging his face into the stream. Gulp after gulp, Noah drowned himself in the tasty nectar of the magical stream.

Gasping for air, he finally tore himself away from his discovery. Noah never felt so refreshed in all his life. It was as if a thousand ice crystals had kissed him. His lips tingled and he felt renewed.

He took a moment to observe his surroundings with a clear mind. It seemed even lusher than before. Noah had a new understanding of how the foliage could be so thick and alive.

“These roots must connect the entire forest! That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Fully rejuvenated, Noah had a new sense of adventure. There was more to this world than he ever could have

imagined, and he wanted to learn all that he could about it.

*Is there life beyond the plants and fluttery things? Surely there has to be. Villages? Cities even?*

He wanted to find out, not only to satisfy his curiosity, but he also knew that somehow he eventually had to find his way home.

Noah thought of his mother and how worried she must be. He had to get home.

“But how? Who or what in this magical world can help me find my way back to a world they might not even know exists?”

“Mr. Porter!” His thoughts turned to the puzzle pieces and Mr. Porter’s spectacles. “What if Mr. Porter had found the puzzle pieces and put them together like I did? Maybe he has been transported here, too?”

Hope swept over Noah. He knew he had to find Mr. Porter or someone who knew what happened to him.

He pulled the spectacles out of his pocket.

“I’ll find you Mr. Porter. Don’t you worry!”

Noah looked around, uncertain of which way to go. The stream - it had to flow somewhere. And Noah knew that if there were any villages or cities, one of them would have to be somewhere along the stream.

“Civilization always forms around a source of water.”

He knew it wasn’t water, but it was the next best thing, maybe even better. Surely he could find someone if he followed it.

Noah took a moment to orient himself. He looked to the sky again, hoping for some sort of direction. It had turned bright orange in color and Noah thought he could make out what looked like sunlight falling through the branches above

him.

“It must be near midday.”

He studied the sunlight and shadows on the ground. He raised his hand into a patch of light and watched as he cast a shadow that stretched in the direction that the stream was flowing.

“If things work here like they do back home, then this must be east,” he said looking downstream.

Noah looked at Mr. Porter’s spectacles one more time before placing them back into his pocket.

“I certainly don’t want to lose these.”

Noah stretched his arms upward and scratched his head. He took a deep breath and turned to the direction in which the stream was flowing.

“I’ll go this way,” he declared aloud. And with that he began his journey eastward.

### CHAPTER 3

As Noah traveled east, the forest began to clear and open up. The sky was more visible and the vegetation became sparse. Noah didn't mind. He was relieved to see sunlight. With less vegetation, the air wasn't so stiff and there was a pleasant breeze to keep him cool.

The ground was firmer than it had been before he reached the stream. It was dry and the grass had given way to patches of dirt and moss, making walking much easier. There were piles of dead, dried twigs and small branches all around. It was difficult for Noah to avoid stepping on them. He worried each time he did that he'd scare more fluttery things out of their hiding spots and into the branches of the hungry trees.

Noah didn't have to worry much. The fluttery things seemed to be less abundant the further east he traveled. When he did stir the occasional hiding spot of one of these creatures, very few of them flew away. Instead, they scurried along the ground to another hiding spot. Those that did fly away into the branches were attacked by several of the leaf pods as if they hadn't had a meal in months.

Noah tried not to pay attention to the fluttery things. He had to be watchful of the stream and where he was going. Every now and then Noah would make his way back to the stream and climb over the bank to get a drink and refresh his energy. He noticed, too, that the stream itself seemed to be getting low. The roots were plentiful in the area. Noah figured they were drinking all they could to keep this meager area of the forest alive.

Noah's stomach growled. The stream had sustained his hunger for the better part of the day, but the thought of peanut butter and jelly made Noah's mouth water.

"Maybe just half," he settled, "but I'd better not eat anymore than that. Who knows how long this will have to last me." The thought of going hungry made Noah's appetite shrink. "Yes, half will do just fine for now."

He found a nearby tree that provided ample shade for him to rest. He wasn't worried about sitting against the trees so long as there weren't any leaf pods close by. Noah set his backpack and stick on the ground before letting himself collapse against the tree and slide onto the mossy ground.

Noah took a moment to close his eyes and rest before eating. He was tired and needed to let his eyes relax and his mind wander. He stretched his legs out and let his arms lay in the moss. He rolled up his pant legs and pulled up the sleeves of his now dirty sweatshirt to keep himself from getting hot. The cool moss was more than welcoming to his body.

He felt something tickle his hand. Noah jerked it away. He looked down at the moss discovering several bug-like creatures making their way through the tiny jungle. They didn't seem to notice Noah sitting there. They were soft and squishy looking. They reminded Noah of water bears, only these were bigger and visible to the naked eye. Instead of being clear, they were

a fluorescent green.

Wanting a closer look, Noah lowered his head to eye level with the little bugs. They were carrying small bits of dirt and moss. Each little bug discarded its load into a pile at the base of the tree.

“They must be nesting,” Noah said intrigued.

Noah loved bugs, and being able to watch the little creatures squirm about almost made him forget about his lunch until he noticed that the bugs weren’t nesting; they were gathering a feast. Every once in a while, one of the bugs would munch on a bit of moss and dirt and another bug would confront it as if yelling at it for sneaking a snack before the rest of them got any. Then the munching bug would take what was left of his food over to the pile and place it with the rest of the goodies.

Noah chuckled. He wondered what special occasion called for such a feast. It was likely he would never know, but liked to imagine it was some bug’s birthday or that the Queen Squishy was coming to visit.

“Yes, that would call for a feast, indeed!”

The thought of feasting brought Noah’s mind back to his lunch. He leaned against the tree and reached for his backpack. He opened it and took out the crumpled and squashed lunch sack. Noah didn’t mind. His lunch had been through as much as he had, and squashed peanut butter and jelly was still peanut butter and jelly.

He unwrapped his sandwich and tore it in half. Returning the other half to the wrapping, he put it away before sinking his eager teeth into the sandwich. Food never tasted so good. His mother knew just how to make the best peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She’d put peanut butter on both pieces of bread and then spread the jelly between them so that it glopped out the sides with every bite.

Noah finished the meager portion of his sandwich. Hunger pangs taunted him, but he fought the urge to indulge in the other half. The length of his journey was unknown. He needed to preserve his food as much as he could. He shuffled through the bag to see what else his mom had packed. He pulled out a napkin, an apple, some crackers and a bag of chocolate covered raisins. Noah loved chocolate covered raisins! His mother must have put them in there as a surprise.

“Maybe just a handful,” Noah contemplated.

He tore open the bag and pulled out a handful of raisins. The chocolate was nearly melted which made them extra delightful to eat. He loved to hold them in his mouth until all the chocolate had melted onto his tongue - then he'd chew up the raisins and swallow. That way, there was always just enough chocolate left on his tongue to savor until the next bite.

Noah was so enraptured by the sweet taste of chocolate and raisins that he didn't even notice the bright, yellow eyes that peered through the bush, gazing at Noah and his chocolate covered raisins.

Bright green skin blended with the bushes; a mane, like that of a lion, helped to camouflage the creature from Noah's sight. Its large, webbed ears perked as it tugged on a tuft of green, twisted fur hanging from its pointy chin. Its eyes were fixed on Noah. The smell of chocolate filled the air.

Noah smiled and savored the last few chocolate covered raisins from the handful he took out of the bag. They were so good it was a challenge not to eat them all. He might have if the chocolate hadn't made him so thirsty. It was time to move on anyway.

Noah packed up what was left of his lunch, put it back in his backpack and stood up. The sun was beating down. The thought of stepping out of the shade made Noah weary. He knew that once he got to the stream and drank, he'd feel better.

He took his backpack and dragged it beside him to the edge of the stream. He set it down, knelt beside the water and took a few handfuls of liquid. With a full stomach and wet lips, Noah was certain he'd be able to make his way down stream until he found what he was looking for. He glanced in that direction and saw how the stream twisted and turned up ahead.

"I'd better stay closer to it from now on. No sense in getting lost."

He stood and turned to climb the bank back to the edge of the stream.

The sight before him made Noah's legs go numb. His arms were like spaghetti at his sides and a wave of dizziness flooded over him. He fell back into the stream. The cool water brought him back to his senses. He looked over to the edge of the bank. There stood the most frightening creature Noah had ever seen in all his life.

Its smooth, green body stood tall and firm. A long, hooked tail swung back and forth behind two muscular legs. Its large, bare feet harbored thick claws that clung to the ground readying the creature so that it could spring forth and pounce on poor Noah. The eyes! The eyes penetrated deep into Noah's heart, striking fear like no one else had ever been able to do. Noah was certain it was the end. He would never be able to fight off a creature of that size. It had to be seven feet tall - and its claws! They would tear him to pieces!

*My stick!* Noah remembered the branch he was carrying for just such an occasion. *But where is it? The tree! I left it by the tree! Foolish boy,* he thought to himself. *You're no warrior. You can't even remember to keep hold of your only weapon!*

His heart sank and he felt sick. He was too afraid to even cry.

The creature grinned, bearing sharp, pointed teeth that

would surely be sinking into Noah's flesh any minute now. Noah sat, frozen in the stream. The creature opened its chiseled jaw and out came a howling cry. Noah closed his eyes, preparing himself for the worst.

He waited, but nothing happened.

More howling. Noah's skin shivered at the sound.

*Wait.* Noah stopped to listen. *Could it be?* he wondered. *Is this creature laughing?*

Noah opened his eyes and looked at it. Its arms were folded over its belly and its body shook as it shrieked and howled. It would pause, look at Noah, and begin laughing again.

"Great. Even here things find amusement at my expense," he muttered.

"Well, you can't really blame me, now can you?" it replied. "You should have seen yourself," it continued between chuckles, catching its breath. Its voice was deep and had a strange accent.

Noah just stared. *I can understand this creature! And it can understand me!*

"Well, come on then," it beckoned, "climb out of there and dry off." It extended its long arm toward Noah.

Noah hesitated. "How do I know you're not going to do something awful to me?"

"Like what? Let you fall back in?" It started to laugh again.

"No! I mean like, eat me or rip me to shreds." Noah covered his mouth. The last thing he wanted to do was give the creature any ideas.

"Well, I suppose you don't know. But if I had any intentions of harming you, don't you think I would have by

now?”

It made sense to Noah, but he was still uneasy at the thought of taking the creature’s hand.

“I’ll do it myself, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” The creature stood back, folded its arms and waited.

Noah tried to stand but the roots were too slippery. The minute he regained his balance, he’d lose his footing and fall right back into the stream. The creature just smiled, holding back laughter to be polite. Noah, trying again, fell forward and grabbed hold of drier roots. He struggled in wet clothes to maneuver up the steep bank.

When he finally made it to the top, he turned to face the creature. Uncertain of what to expect, Noah prepared himself to run or fight. The creature extended his hand toward Noah, which made him jump back. The creature laughed.

“My name is Grelgor.”

Noah’s breathing was heavy from his climb. Having been startled to death didn’t help him to catch his breath.

“Noah. My name is Noah,” he finally squeaked out.

Standing face to face with the creature allowed Noah the opportunity to take a better look and see exactly what Grelgor was all about. Upon closer inspection, Noah noticed that this creature looked more like a man than a beast. It was very athletic in build and stood tall on two legs. Its broad chest rose and fell as it breathed. Strapped around the creature’s waist were several ropes that secured pouches and trinkets of all sorts that hung loosely over a shredded skirt-like cloth. Aside from a long and unkempt mane surrounding its head, the creature was void of fur or hair.

It looked at Noah, squinting its eyes. “Not too many of your kind venture into these parts. You lost?”

“What do you mean, my kind?” Noah asked, hopeful this creature knew where other humans might be.

“Your kind. The kind that looks like you.” The creature seemed equally as confused.

“You mean there are more like me in this place?” Noah asked excitedly.

“No. Not in this place,” he responded. Noah’s heart sank. “I’ve only ever seen them in the North. But, I suppose, now that you mention it, they are a little different from you. They’re not quite as wet.” He grinned.

“But you’ve seen others like me?” Noah asked ignoring Grelgor’s teasing.

“I suppose. But I guess that depends. What are you?”

Noah was getting frustrated. The creature didn’t seem to know anything.

“I’m a person. I’m from...” he paused, hesitant to reveal his situation. “Well, not anywhere near here.” The creature didn’t seem to care. “Anyway, I am lost, and I’m looking for others like me. Do you know where I can find them?”

“How should I know? If you’re not from here, then why would others not from here be here?”

Noah couldn’t tell if the creature was toying with him or if he really didn’t know.

“Well, what about you? Where are you from?” Noah probed.

“I’m not from here either,” Grelgor replied.

“Great. If you’re not from here, and I’m not from here, then we really can’t help each other, now can we?” Noah was clearly upset.

“I don’t need your help, little one. I know where I came from, and I know how to get back if I wanted to.”

“How do you get out of here, then?” Noah asked.

“You just go, I suppose.”

“No. I mean, how do you get back home?”

Grelgor looked at him puzzled. “Now why would you want to go to my home? I don’t even want to go there.”

Noah was losing patience. “I don’t want to go to where you’re from. I want to go back to where I’m from.”

“And how is going back to my home going to help you?”

“Look. If you show me how you get back to where you’re from, then maybe if I do the same thing, it’ll take me back to where I’m from.” Noah hoped he was making sense.

“I don’t think so,” Grelgor replied, scratching the side of his face with one long claw.

“Why not?”

“Because to get back to where I’m from, you head west through the mountains. I already told you, people like you are in the North.”

Noah realized Grelgor wouldn’t be of any use in finding a way home. Unfortunately, he was the only thing that Noah had come across that might be able to help.

“Could you take me to the North?” Noah asked reluctantly.

“No.” The creature examined his claw as if he expected to find something lodged in it.

“But, I don’t know where I’m going!” Noah pleaded.

“You looked just fine before I came along,” he replied.

“Yeah, but I am still lost. I was just looking for someone who could help me.”

“Well, it wasn’t me you were looking for.”

He was right. Noah had hoped to find Mr. Porter or someone who had seen him.

“Wait. You said you’ve seen others like me?” The creature nodded. “What did they look like?” Perhaps he had seen Mr. Porter and could tell Noah how to find him instead.

“I don’t know. Most are taller than you. Older than you. Just as scared as you.” He laughed.

“I’m looking for my friend. Can you tell me where I might be able to find him?” Noah asked.

“Maybe.” He gazed off into the distance. Noah could tell Grelgor was losing interest fast.

“Look, if you can’t help me find my way home, maybe you can help me find my friend?”

Grelgor looked at Noah. He studied him long and hard as if reconsidering his desire to eat him.

“Tell you what. You give me your food and I’ll take you to someone who can help,” he offered.

“My food? But what will I eat?” Noah wondered if he really had much choice.

“Not my concern.”

Noah reached down to pick up his bag. He opened the zipper and pulled out his lunch sack.

“This is all I have,” he said, offering it to the creature.

“What’s that?” His eyes seemed irritated as if Noah was handing him a candy wrapper.

“My lunch. Its all the food I have.”

“No. I want what you were eating by the tree. The little balls.”

Noah was confused. “Little balls? I don’t have any little...”

It occurred to him that the creature wasn’t interested in his lunch. He wanted his chocolate covered raisins! Maybe

it didn't even know about the rest of the lunch. Noah reached inside the sack and pulled out the bag of chocolate covered raisins. He put the rest of his lunch back in his backpack in hopes that the creature wouldn't ask for it later.

He held the candy in his hand. "Now, if I give this to you, you promise you'll take me to someone that can help?"

Grelgor's eyes got large as strings of drool seeped from the corners of his mouth.

"That is my offer. Take it or leave it," he replied.

Noah frowned. He didn't know how much he could trust the creature.

"No, here is my offer. I'll give you half of these now. And half when we get to where you're going to take me."

The creature was annoyed by this. "I want it all now!" He snarled and grunted, clenching his fists.

Noah worried that he angered the beast and knew there was little he could do to stop it from taking what it wanted. He watched Grelgor cautiously, but realized he wasn't planning on stealing his candy. Noah tried to play it cool.

"Well, in that case, there is no deal."

Noah held the bag close to him. Grelgor eyed the chocolate covered raisins like a hungry puppy. Noah opened the bag and took out two chocolate covered raisins and put them in his mouth. They were melting in the heat. He closed his eyes and chewed.

"Mmmmm," he taunted. "Well, it's probably better this way. These are too good to hand over to the likes of you."

Grelgor could hardly stand it. The scent of chocolate was too enticing. It was nothing he had ever smelled before, and he had to have it.

"Fine! Half now, the rest when we get there. But you're

not allowed to eat any more!” Grelgor demanded.

“Deal!” Noah took the creature’s hand and poured half of the chocolate covered raisins into it.

Grelgor did not hesitate to shove the entire allotment into his hungry mouth. Noah watched as he chewed, smiled and swallowed. He spun around, laughing like a little girl in a field of fairies. Chocolate oozed out of his mouth onto his chin, but it didn’t seem to bother him. Noah watched him spin around and around until he fell to the ground.

Noah approached the still body of Grelgor. He wasn’t moving. The creature’s eyes were glassy and staring into the sky. Noah knelt down beside him.

“Grelgor?” he whispered.

“Whoo-haw!” Grelgor yelled as he jumped up, knocking Noah over with fright. “That, my fine fellow, was GOOD!”

Grelgor skipped around, taking a deep breath and letting it out hard.

“We best be on our way, Noah,” he said extending his hand once again to help Noah to his feet.

It took little effort for Grelgor to lift him off the ground to a standing position. It made Noah glad he had become his friend instead of his dinner.

“Grelgor?” Noah asked while brushing himself off.  
“Where are we going?”

Grelgor smiled. “To the Chatnoir. He knows everything about everyone. If your friend is nearby, the Chatnoir will know.”

## CHAPTER 4

Grelgor didn't talk about where he was taking Noah. He just walked and Noah followed. Noah wondered how long it would take to get to the Chatnoir, but didn't want to distract Grelgor from their quest. They had already gotten sidetracked once and it wasn't until Noah asked to take a break that Grelgor remembered he was being followed.

Noah promised not to bother him too much, but would occasionally make a noise or rustle his backpack to remind Grelgor he was still there, just to keep him on the right path, even though there was no way for Noah to know if they were heading in the right direction.

Luckily, they were following the stream. They traveled in the opposite direction from which Noah had started. He was thankful for the familiarity. It was only when they would stop for a drink or to rest that Noah was able to ask Grelgor about this world. He had to be subtle about it or Grelgor might realize that Noah wasn't from the North, or the forest, or this planet at all.

Noah learned that Grelgor was a drifter. His kind were typically mountain dwellers who called themselves Vegarions. Vegarions were peaceful people who liked to tell stories and enjoyed the tonic drink. They raised mountain cattle called jermin and used jermin milk to make cream, butter and moonshine. They didn't eat the jermin or any other animals. They lived off of the crops they raised and the jermin milk.

Noah also found out that Grelgor had been exiled from his people. Grelgor didn't reveal the details as to why he was told to leave, but that since then, he had simply roamed the land in search of something greater.

In his travels, Grelgor learned a lot about the surrounding lands. Vegarions were a solitary people who never left the mountains. They were quite happy to exist in a world of seclusion. Noah figured it must have been hard for Grelgor to leave, not having any idea of what the world outside of the mountains was like.

Grelgor didn't seem comfortable talking about it so Noah didn't press the matter. He did ask Grelgor about his other adventures, but Grelgor preferred to walk instead of talk.

"Save the talking for the breaks," he told Noah. So Noah happily obliged.

They made their way past the area of the stream that Noah first encountered, which put him in unfamiliar territory. Over several days of travel, Noah kept close watch on his surroundings, which started to look a lot different. The trees got bigger and a lot of new plants flourished. Some looked like ferns with green and yellow leaves; others had large pink flowers growing up like vines, twisting around themselves for support. He saw smaller trees that didn't have pods, just thin, hard leaves that clattered in the breeze.

There were a lot of new and interesting plants. There were bushes that had white feathery leaves and plants that folded

up and shrank away if something touched them. So many interesting things surrounded him that Noah wished he had the time to stop and observe. The only chance he got was during the infrequent breaks they took, and he was usually too pooped to do anything but sit and occasionally talk with Grelgor.

During a break, the two travelers made their way toward the stream to drink up. Much to Noah's surprise, the stream had changed direction. Instead of heading upstream, they were heading downstream again. Noah had an excellent sense of direction and paid very close attention to where they were going – but sometimes he felt as if they were traveling in circles.

When they finished drinking, they both sat under nearby trees. The day was long in passing and Noah was tired, disoriented and most of all, curious. He wanted to know more about the Chatnoir.

“Grelgor,” Noah interrupted the silence. “Tell me about the Chatnoir.”

Grelgor had been a loner for so long that he forgot what it was like to have someone to talk with. He acted as if Noah was nothing but trouble, but Noah knew that Grelgor secretly enjoyed the chance to tell his stories.

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, for starters, where exactly is he? I mean, how much longer are we going to be traveling?”

Grelgor studied the landscape, tugging on his scruffy beard.

“I suppose we're about a hopnot's flight away. If we make good time, which we are so far as I can tell, we should get there before the second orb rises.”

*Hopnot? Second orb?*

The information only confused Noah. He tried to look content with the answer, but it didn't ease his mind any.

“Have you ever seen the Chatnoir?” Noah asked.

Grelgor squinted at Noah, raised one bushy brow and leaned forward as if what he was about to say was a secret.

“Not me.” He leaned back and shifted.

“Why?” Noah’s curiosity was heightened by Grelgor’s apparent discomfort.

“I’ve never had need of him. Besides, I have no interest in going through any of the challenges just to meet him.”

“Challenges? What challenges?” Noah grew tense.

“It depends on who wants to see him. The Chatnoir is a mysterious creature. He doesn’t like to be bothered.”

Grelgor situated himself against the tree and stretched out his legs.

“But you never said anything about a challenge,” Noah protested.

“You never asked.”

Grelgor’s sense of important information differed from Noah’s. He wasn’t vague on purpose; he just didn’t care much about details. The simplest answer was the easiest to give. Noah could tell getting information out of him was always going to be difficult.

“Are the challenges hard?” Noah probed Grelgor for answers. He wanted to be prepared for whatever was to come his way.

“No one really knows. Only the one who receives the challenge knows what it is.” Grelgor shrugged.

Noah had heard stories of knights who were asked to slay dragons, or go on perilous quests to save princesses or find cures for a dying king. Noah wasn’t a knight, and he certainly wasn’t brave enough to face a fire-breathing dragon, and any princess he managed to rescue would only laugh at him and

send him away.

Grelgor stretched and yawned. “We ought to keep moving.”

Disheartened, Noah pulled himself off the ground and trudged after Grelgor.

The air was cool and the sky offered a faint red glow. Noah assumed night was drawing near. The two travelers had been following the stream all day, which seemed like two days to Noah. His sense of time was skewed and for all he knew, days there were twice as long as days back home. He was weary, but tried his best to keep up with Grelgor.

The stream had grown larger as they continued to follow it west. The trees were growing thicker and it was difficult for Noah to maneuver through them. Grelgor’s long legs and sharp claws were an advantage for the jungle-like terrain. It seemed effortless for him to climb over the thick bases of the trees and through the ever-increasing vegetation.

Noah looked around in wonder at all the massive trees. They had to be hundreds of feet high. He couldn’t even see the tops from down below. They were much larger than the trees he saw when he first arrived. Noah thought of the leaf pods and how big they must be. They would be able to swallow up a boy his size in no time. He was glad they were so high up, leaving him far out of their reach.

The fluttery creatures were all over the place. It was difficult to avoid them. The grass was so tall and the shrubbery was so thick that the flutterers had plenty of places to hide.

Sometimes Grelgor would whack his tail into a bush just to make a handful of hidden flutterers leap out and fly into the sky. Noah wasn’t sure if any of them became tree food or not, but he still wished Grelgor would leave them alone.

Noah wondered if there were other animals nearby, all cleverly hiding from him like the fluttery creatures. It had been bothering him all day that in such a strange and unique world, the only forms of life Noah had managed to see were the fluttery things, only one type of bug, and Grelgor. Surely there had to be more.

“Grelgor,” Noah panted, trying not to sound winded, “how come we haven’t seen any other animals along our path?”

“I suppose you just aren’t looking well enough,” Grelgor grunted.

“Oh.” Noah was relieved to know that there might be more life than he had seen, but disappointed that they could have been under his nose the whole time and he managed to overlook them.

“Then again,” Grelgor continued, “I don’t blame them for hiding from you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, your kind isn’t looked upon too kindly in these areas.”

“Why not? What did, uh, my kind ever do to them?”

Grelgor stopped walking and turned around. “You really aren’t from these parts, are you?”

Noah, not wanting to give himself away, just shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I...”

“No matter,” Grelgor interrupted. “Won’t be long ‘til we reach our destination.” He turned back around and continued walking.

Noah grew concerned at what Grelgor said.

*Not liked? Why? And if what Grelgor thinks is ‘my kind’ are that bad, will the Chatnoir be willing to help me?*

Too many questions filled Noah's mind. All he could do was follow Grelgor and hope for the best.

The sound of the river was loud. Noah could see a clearing ahead. He hoped they would be able to take a break. His legs ached and his feet were numb from all the walking.

"Just up ahead. We're coming to the crossing of the rivers," Grelgor noted.

"The crossing of the rivers?" Noah asked.

"This is the heart of the land. This is where you will find the Chatnoir."

Noah, both excited and scared, felt a surge in energy and was able to stay right on Grelgor's heels. They made their way up a large, steep ravine. Noah struggled to maintain footing on the moss and roots that surrounded the incline. With the top in sight, he grasped at the vines, using them to pull himself up.

"Just a little further..." he grunted.

With his last bit of strength, Noah heaved himself up onto the bank. He gasped in awestruck astonishment at what lay below as he viewed a vast valley filled with wonders never before seen. In the center was a deep, opulent pool fed by four waterfalls, each a different color, that cascaded gently onto crystalline rocks along the shore. The waterfalls were independent of the four rivers flowing out of the ravine as if one had no effect on the other.

The waterfall flowing from the south had a rich, purple glow, like someone had placed millions of tiny lights behind the fall and each droplet of water shimmered with illumination. The mist created from the water crashing onto the rocks below looked like lilacs dancing in the rain.

The waterfall coming from the north was rose colored. If Noah looked close enough, he could swear that there were

actual roses falling to the rocks, and when they hit their petals smashed into pink water droplets that fell delicately into the pool. The air wafted with the smell of fresh picked flowers.

From the west came an emerald green fall that twinkled with jewels beyond compare. Noah heard the sound of gems tinkling against the rocks below, each precious stone shattering into a green mist that rose above the rocks and swirled into the caverns beneath the fall.

Beside Noah flowed the golden fall from the east. He was already familiar with this wondrous stream. It glowed with the light of life. The sound of it falling against the crystals below was like a song being sung by a choir of angels. Noah closed his eyes, letting the sounds and smells of such a magical place imprint themselves in his mind. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

Beyond the falls, along the banks of the pool were small specks of lights that danced like fireflies in a field of wild flowers. The lights floated up and down all around the banks of the pool. They spread over the water and met in the center of the pool where they swirled and rose to the highest point of the surrounding trees. Within a moment they burst out of formation and fell back toward the pool like the tips of a fountain's spray. They fell faster and faster until they submerged themselves into the pool and disappeared.

Suddenly the pool began to glow and all the colors of the falls could be seen swirling and mixing in the water below. A cool wind tickled Noah's face. The lights within the pool separated and emerged from the water with such force that they splashed the mystical substance onto the banks of the pool and into the trees and plants that surrounded it.

During the light display, Noah heard music and singing, like a celebration was taking place. He looked at Grelgor who watched the goings on with little amusement.

“Looks like the Dobrim know we’re here,” he said with no notion of surprise.

“The Dobrim?” Noah asked.

“The keepers of the Chatnoir. They are his watchers. He sees all, so they tend to know when visitors are near.”

Noah was impressed. Such an amazing presentation melted any fears he had of being looked upon with suspicious eyes. He wondered if they knew who he was and why he was there.

*Surely they wouldn’t put on such a display for someone they felt was a threat,* Noah reassured himself.

“Let’s go. They’ll be expecting us now.”

Noah and Grelgor climbed down the inside of the ravine. The climb was a lot longer than Noah anticipated. He had to be careful not to slip or fall. He wasn’t sure just how sharp the rocks below were, and didn’t want to find out the hard way.

As he clung to the vines and flowers that grew from the edge of the steep cliff, Noah noticed something glittering behind them. Moving the foliage aside to look closer at the glittering rock, Noah accidentally knocked a chunk of it loose. He held it up in the light with amazement. It was gold! Thousands of gold pieces covered every bit of the sides of the ravine.

Noah didn’t know what to do. He tried to put it back but it would not stay in the void from which it came loose. He dug into the side hoping to create a deeper hole in which he could put the gold, but in doing so he knocked out two more pieces. He caught them before they fell into the pool. He panicked.

*Maybe gold doesn’t have the same value here as it does at home. Maybe no one will notice if I held on to them for now? But what if gold is even more precious here? Will I be punished? Maybe that’s why no one trusts “my kind.”*

“Noah,” Grelgor shouted from below. “Are you alright?”

Noah shoved the gold into his pockets so Grelgor wouldn't see what he had done.

"I'm... I'm fine. Just taking my time, that's all. I don't want to fall, you know." His voice was shaky and his forehead began to break out in a sweat.

"Do you need any help?" Grelgor offered.

"No, I'll be fine. Just don't look down." Noah laughed a nervous laugh.

"It's not much further. But I'll stand ready to catch you if you should slip."

"Thanks. Thank you, Grelgor. I'll be okay."

Grelgor shook his head and continued down. Noah took a deep breath. The gold was safe enough in his pocket for the time being. He'd just have to explain to the Dobrim or the Chatnoir what happened. He was sure they'd understand.

Noah was relieved to feel flat ground beneath him. He looked up at the steep cliff and nearly fainted from the view. Grelgor put his hand on Noah's shoulder.

"Come on then." His claws were sharp and pinched Noah's skin. "Shouldn't keep them waiting. They'll have food and a place for us to rest. By the looks of it, you need some shut eye."

Noah looked at the sky. It was deep red, but he could see a pink haze on the east horizon. The second orb was rising. Whether it was day or night didn't matter. Noah knew it had been a long time since he had any sleep. The sound of food and rest was very enticing. He turned and followed Grelgor down the path that led to the Dobrim City.

## CHAPTER 5

Noah and Grelgor were graciously welcomed as they entered the gates of the Dobrim City. Noah hadn't been able to make out much detail from the cliff above, so was amazed at how intricate the city appeared to be.

The light show was actually put on by fairy-like creatures called light dancers flying about the city. They had occupied that part of the land long before the Dobrim arrived. They were the original guardians of the crossing of the rivers, but found companionship and trust with the Dobrim when they entered the land. Light dancers were friendly and loved nothing more than participating in welcoming celebrations with the Dobrim folk.

The light dancers were the first to meet the two weary travelers at the gate. They frolicked around them, anxious to learn what they could about the new stranger that came to seek council with the Chatnoir. Noah couldn't understand what they were saying, but smiled as they chattered. Some continued to dance around while others perched on Noah's shoulders or placed tiny flowers in his tangled hair.

Grelgor tried to shoo the light dancers away but soon gave up when they nestled themselves in his mane and fell asleep. Three or four dancers grabbed the end of his tail making a game of trying to hold on while Grelgor whipped his tail around in attempts to fling them off. Noah could tell Grelgor was not amused but was, at least, being polite.

Further into the city, lush gardens and orchards were loaded with fruits and berries of all kinds, most of which were new to Noah. Never in all his life had he seen such perfect gardens. Everything was in neat rows organized by size and shape. There were smaller berries of all colors, red, blue and even rainbow! Some looked like jellybeans, others miniature cherries or wads of crumpled up paper.

Some grew on vines and bushes while others jutted out of the ground. Light dancers fluttered about the gardens polishing, watering and otherwise tending to the precious berries. Each tiny fruit glistened in the light of the dancers.

Small trees covered in other larger fruits surrounded the gardens. The branches were so overwhelmed with ripe buselbocks and crunuplems that they nearly touched the ground. Noah's stomach grumbled and twisted with hunger as he inhaled the smell of citrus wafting upon the calm breeze.

Finally, the weary travelers came to a great white hall. Strangely patterned pillars supported a large archway at the entrance. Noah looked up in amazement. The symbols on the pillars looked familiar to Noah, but his eyes were too tired to make sense of the details. A grand stairway led to two massive doors that were lined with the crystalline rocks Noah saw at the bottom of the falls.

The light dancers led Noah and Grelgor to the door. There were no handles on the outside. They were far too thick to knock on without hurting one's hands. The light dancers fluttered away, leaving the two to wait in front of the entryway.

Noah looked at Grelgor who stared straight ahead. There was a loud creaking noise as the doors opened. Behind the doors stood a crowd of Dobrim people. They were elegant creatures and Noah felt ashamed to gaze upon such beauty.

It was difficult to tell most of them apart. They were tall and slender, like fledgling trees; they wore shimmering white gowns that reflected all the colors around them. Their hair was long and silky, hanging down to the floor. Long pointed ears stuck out from beneath the tresses. Noah thought they looked like sprites or pixies or some other woodland creature he had heard about in fairy tales back home. Their milky white skin radiated a warm glow that made Noah feel safe.

The clan leader stepped forward and officially welcomed them in with a sweeping motion of her delicate arms. It was easy to tell her apart from the rest because she wore a beautiful silver crown embedded with jewels that came from the western falls. Her pale, purple eyes glistened with intrigue.

“Welcome Noah. We’ve been waiting for you.” Her voice was soft like a whisper in the passing wind.

Noah was speechless.

*How does she know my name?*

“All will be explained in due time, young one. But come... you and your friend look tired and in need of nourishment.” She beckoned them to enter the hall. “My people will take care of you. Do not hesitate to let your needs be known.”

The crowd parted to reveal a long banquet table filled to the edges with fruits and breads and desserts galore. Noah could hardly take in all the splendorous foods that were at his beck and call. He didn’t even remember sitting down before his mouth was full of the sweetest biscuits and berries he had ever tasted.

One of the Dobrim filled a goblet with water from the

purple falls. Noah gulped it down like he hadn't had water in days. The liquid was smooth and refreshing, like the yellow river, only it tasted more of flowers and herbs than of sweet candy. It was relaxing and made Noah's eyes feel heavy. He took a few more bites of honey sweet bread before fatigue overpowered hunger and Noah drifted into a deep sleep.

A Dobrim nursemaid carried Noah to a bedchamber where she placed him in a cradle of feathery-soft flowers and covered him with a silken blanket.

Noah awoke to find himself in a strange, small but cozy room with carvings of leaves and vines on the walls. He sat up, disoriented and confused.

He stumbled out of bed, trying to place the events from the night before in order. Noah looked at himself and realized he was naked. He shuffled back to the bed and grabbed the blanket, wrapping it securely around himself. He turned to look for his clothing and was greeted by the Dobrim nursemaid.

She held his clothing in her arms, freshly cleaned and pressed. On top of the clothes lay the three gold pieces Noah had taken from the cliff. He blushed and looked away.

"Is something wrong?" she asked concerned.

Noah looked at her face.

"Well, I, I wanted to give these back to you. They fell out of the cliff when I was climbing down and..."

The nursemaid smiled. "You may have them," she said warmly. "We do not have much use for these rocks. If they please you, then you may keep them."

Noah felt ashamed that he had been so secretive.

"Thank you." His body relaxed with sudden relief.

“Here,” she offered, pulling something out of the crease in her robe. “I found these as well.” She handed Noah the broken spectacles he had been caring for. “I tried to mend them, but they are of a strange crystal. I am sorry.”

“No, I appreciate that you would try. Don’t be sorry. They aren’t mine anyway.”

She looked at him strangely and Noah suddenly felt like a thief.

“They are my friend’s,” he interjected. “I’m hoping to return them when I find him.”

Kindness and understanding returned to her face. The nursemaid laid Noah’s clothing on the bed.

“I’ll bring you a wash basin and let you clean yourself before morning meal.”

She smiled and exited the room, returning shortly with a large bowl filled with rosy liquid and a silk cloth.

“I’ll wait for you outside the door. When you are ready, I’ll escort you to the feast hall where your friend awaits you.”

Noah felt better knowing that Grelgor was waiting for him. He splashed water over himself and threw on his clothing, making certain to put the spectacles safely back in his pocket. He attempted to smooth his wet hair on his way to meet the nursemaid, who was waiting just outside the doorway as promised.

She smiled and knelt down in front of him, running her long fingers through his hair to touch up his hasty grooming. Noah looked into her golden eyes and thought of his mother. He smiled at her, wanting to give her a hug, but fearing he would offend such a majestic creature.

Instead, Noah nodded his head and helped her up. He followed her to the banquet hall where yet another feast had been prepared.

Grelgor sat at the end of the table. His feet were perched on a nearby chair and he held a bunch of berries in his hand. One by one he dropped the berries into his gaping jaws, occasionally freeing a belch that had trapped itself within the depths of his stomach. Noah was embarrassed that he was being so disrespectful, but the Dobrim didn't seem to mind.

Noah was led to a seat near the clan leader. She sat straight and proper like a queen standing before her subjects. She smiled and nodded at Noah as she welcomed him to sit beside her. Noah helped himself to berries, bread and a goblet filled with pink liquid.

Eating slower than he did the night before, Noah took time to savor the intricate flavors of the food before him. The liquid from the Northern falls was cold and tasteless, but refreshing like the water Noah was used to. He drank two goblets before returning to the sweet breads left on his plate.

The Dobrim leader watched him eat. Noah could tell she had things she wished to discuss but wouldn't dare impose on his mealtime. Noah was grateful for her understanding. He tried not to dally with his food but was nervous about what the Dobrim leader might have to say.

Noah's mind was temporarily put at ease when some of the other Dobrim people joined in the meal. The Dobrim leader spoke to the other Dobrim in a sing-song language foreign to Noah. The symphony of their conversation soothed his nerves and allowed him to enjoy the rest of his breakfast without worry of what was to happen next.

Having finished his sweet bread and drink, Noah closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair to enjoy the music of the Dobrim talking. He could hear the twill of flutes as some of the Dobrim laughed accompanied by the comforting sound of harps as other Dobrim exchanged musical dialogue. It was a song that only kings should hear; but it was Noah who sat

among these mystical creatures.

Noah opened his eyes and studied the faces of the Dobrim people. Each one like the other - perfectly constructed like etched porcelain dolls.

He had so many questions for them; how long have they existed? Why are they the keepers of the Chatnoir? Is the Chatnoir just like them? Are they his slaves, being forced to bend to his every beck and call? Or is he a prisoner of theirs?

Questions. Questions! He was ready to talk to the Dobrim leader in hopes that she could ease his curiosities.

Sensing Noah's change in mood, the Dobrim leader turned and whispered, "Come."

She floated up out of her chair as if lifted by a breeze.

Noah quietly pushed out his chair and followed her to the courtyard beyond the banquet hall. Great pillars separated the courtyard from the morning feast. Lush vines with millions of flowers wound themselves around the pillars, hiding any marking that once decorated the massive crystal cylinders. The ground was laid with crystal stones that made pathways between gardens of rich plant life and white flowers. A beautiful fountain stood in the center of the courtyard. It was a small replication of the crossing of the rivers. Each waterfall was accounted for and in the center of the miniature pool was a glittering statue of a light dancer.

The Dobrim leader led Noah far enough away from the banquet hall that the Dobrim chatter was nothing more than a faint melody blowing in the wind. Noah stared at the fountain.

"This was a gift from the light dancers. It is a symbol of our trust and friendship."

She reached out and placed her hand under the green stream that represented the Western Fall. She cupped her hand and caught a small pool of liquid from the fountain. She held

her hand over Noah and let little green droplets fall onto his head. The drops clung to strands of hair before joining one another in bigger droplets that slid down his tresses and onto his face.

“You, too, are a friend to us now.”

“I am honored that you and your people would think so kindly of me,” Noah responded as if he were a young squire being dubbed knight by a great king.

“They call me Halirain. I am the guardian of the Chatnoir and leader of the Dobrim people. We do not know why you are here, Noah, but we know your coming here is special.”

She looked at him with wonder. It made Noah feel uncomfortable. He did not know why he was there, either.

“I am no one special, your Excellency. But any request you ask of me, I shall try my best to fulfill.”

Noah felt foolish letting Halirain think that he could be of any value to them. He was just a boy and a cowardly one at that.

“I know you would. But before you find yourself in the middle of a Dobrim quest,” she jested, “the Chatnoir wishes to see you.” She smiled to reassure Noah that she was not intending to ask anything of him.

Noah could feel his heart beating inside his chest. Grelgor spoke of a challenge, and Halirain seemed to think Noah’s presence was noteworthy. Noah doubted himself and with that came fear.

He tried to be brave in front of Halirain. He did not want to disappoint her, not yet anyway. She had been kind and was so trusting. It made Noah want to run away and never look back, but he stood firm and tried to look strong.

Halirain was able to sense Noah’s fear.

“Do not be uneasy. You have nothing to fear.”

Her words were of little comfort to Noah.

The sound of claws clicking on the crystal flooring broke the painful silence in which Noah found himself. It was Grelgor. He stood near the edge of the courtyard, feigning politeness as if he did not mean to interrupt.

“Excuse me, your majesty, but I have a matter to discuss with the boy before I take my leave.” Grelgor grinned at Noah.

“Shall you be parting so soon?” Halirain asked with surprise.

“Indeed I shall,” he mocked. “I was only to get him here. Don’t suppose he’ll need me anymore.”

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll leave you to say your farewells.” She turned to Noah. “I shall wait for you near the great doors.” She nodded and slipped away to the banquet hall.

“You’re just going to leave me here?” Noah’s voice quivered.

“I never said I’d stay,” Grelgor replied.

“But what if they ask me to go somewhere? I’d never find it. And even if I did, I’d never find my way back again!” Noah pleaded.

“Should have thought of that before our bargain.” Grelgor was little moved by Noah’s watering eyes.

“All you wanted was the chocolate?”

Noah felt betrayed. He knew it was foolish to hope, but he thought that he found a friend in Grelgor. He was angry at himself for thinking anyone, let alone a beast like Grelgor, would be interested in being friends with him.

“That’s why I came out here. Didn’t want you running off to the Chatnoir before paying your dues.” He looked stern.

“Fine.” Noah held back tears. “They’re in my backpack.

I'll have the nursemaid bring them to you. As for me, I have something important to take care of."

He stormed past Grelgor in the direction of the banquet hall.

Grelgor watched him walk out of sight.

Noah felt alone again. He stood at the entrance of the hall by the great doors, waiting for Halirain. The Dobrim nursemaid was kind enough to fetch his backpack and deliver Grelgor's payment of chocolate covered raisins without question.

Noah looked at the pillars that stood in the archway of the great doors. In the brightness of the pink sky, Noah could see the markings engraved in the pillars that he wasn't able to the night before. He ran his fingers across the design.

His concentration was interrupted by the creaking sound of the great doors opening. Noah turned to find Halirain standing in front of the doorway. She was dressed in silver garb that draped around her like gossamer curtains tied to a beautiful statuette. A white rope cinched her garments around her thin waist. She had removed her crown and tied her long, white hair behind her back.

Moved by her stunning beauty and majestic airs, Noah lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head.

"Arise, fair Noah. You need not bow to me."

Halirain sounded humbled as if she were honored by Noah's gesture.

Noah stood up to face the Dobrim leader. She approached him, gliding along an unfelt wind. Her gown rustled with her movement. She was like a vision out of a dream, there to lead Noah to the great and mysterious Chatnoir.

“Follow me,” she said as she swept past him.

Noah turned quickly and followed Halirain down the stairway. She led him to a path guarded by two dark statues. They looked like ancient dragons standing tall, ready to set ablaze any unwanted trespasser. Their black bodies stood out amongst the tiny white flowers that bloomed in every crevice of the Dobrim City. The coiling vines took care to avoid wrapping themselves around the horns and scales of the eerie statues.

Noah stared wide-eyed, frightened by how real they were. Mist rose from the nostrils of the statues and the red gems in the dragons’ eyes gleamed with a fierceness no one could ignore.

Halirain stepped in front of the statues and whispered a chant that, to Noah, sounded only like crickets chirping on a summer night. As if placed under a spell, the statues’ eyes became dull and the scales on their backs turned to stone.

Noah’s skin prickled.

“They are asleep for now. You will be safe. I will not wake them again until you return.” She turned to Noah and placed both hands on his shoulders. “Just follow the path. It is laid with crystal so you cannot lose sight of it. When you reach the stair, you will be greeted by two more dragons. Do not fear them. They will take you to the Chatnoir.”

Noah’s mouth was dry. He tried to swallow but the lump in his throat was too great. He just looked at Halirain, hoping she could give him the courage to go on.

She smiled, kneeling down to Noah’s height.

“Go now,” she whispered sweetly. “I’ll be waiting for your return.”

Noah, gathering all the courage he could muster, took a deep breath, closed his eyes and walked through the dragon

gateway onto the crystal path that led to the Chatnoir. Once he passed the statues, Noah felt much safer and was able to walk without stumbling. He clutched at the straps of his backpack as he inched his way down the path. Trees arched over the walkway drowning the path in shadows. Only the crystal could be seen clearly. Everything else lining the edges of the pathway was lost in darkness.

Noah could feel his own breath against his face. The air, warm and still, made Noah edgy. He did not like the idea of wandering down a dark path all alone with two dragons waiting on the other end. Noah pushed negative thoughts out of his mind by focusing on the clearing ahead.

He could see the stairway that Halirain mentioned, but did not see any sign of the dragons. A cool wind swept over the path as he neared the opening. Noah shuddered and, for a moment, thought of turning back.

“No! Halirain said I would be safe. I have to trust her; I have to be brave.”

Noah stepped out from the trees onto a broad terrace that lay before the stairs. It was big enough for ten men on ten horses to stand if they dared come to face what lay hidden beyond the stairway.

The stairway was long and seemed to go on forever. Noah could tell there was another platform above and wondered if that’s all the farther he’d have to climb. He stared intently as two shadows emerged from the corners of the platform. Each one was as tall as the other with long horns reaching high into the sky. The massive creatures descended the stairway on four legs, wings stretched outward ready to take flight.

The dragons were gold in color, but resembled the statues that guarded the gate. Their crimson eyes pierced through Noah like an arrow. He trembled inside and clutched the straps of his backpack so tight that both hands turn as white as the

crystal path.

He could hear the sound of scales scraping the stairs as the dragons moved toward him. They stopped halfway down and both released their breath through large, black nostrils. The force of the wind blew Noah's hair straight up when it passed over him.

“Speak your name,” they chanted in unison.

Noah, throat tense, managed to force himself to say his name, “Noah. I am Noah Wright.”

Satisfied, the dragons ascended the stairway. Noah remained still, not certain if he was to follow. When the dragons reached the top of the platform, they turned to face him. He waited for them to tell him what to do; but instead, they laid down and to Noah's surprise, they turned to stone. The ground shook. The stairs in front of Noah parted, revealing a second set of stairs that went beneath the first.

It was dark inside the opening making it difficult to see. Noah peered in trying to let his eyes adjust but no matter how hard he focused, he could see nothing but blackness. There was a sudden flash and a dozen light dancers bounded out of the stairwell. They surrounded Noah. Joining hands, they created a ball of light to guide him through the darkness.

Noah loosened his grip on the backpack, letting his hands drop to his sides. With a deep breath he entered the opening and made his way down the stairs into the cavern of the Chatnoir.

The cavern was deep and smelled of damp moss. Sounds echoed off every corner within the cavern walls. Noah stretched his arms out in front of him to help guide himself through the dimly lit tunnel. He inched his feet along the stony floors in hopes of avoiding an untimely stumble. He heard

water dripping somewhere in the distance and the ghostly sound of emptiness as his own footsteps scraped against the barren rock.

The light dancers moved quickly; Noah struggled to keep up. They dashed around a corner leaving him in the dark. He turned the corner to find a large chamber. The light dancers were gone and only a faint glimmer of light could be seen in the distance. He stepped forward but was halted by the sound of something terrible. A quick, powerful growl echoed through the opening of the chamber. Noah froze.

Again the creature growled a deeper tone. Noah's skin popped with beads of cold sweat. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand straight up. The darkness totally obliterated his sight. The walls of the chamber resonated the noise so that it was coming from all angles.

Noah searched the darkness until his gaze fixed upon two glowing, green eyes right in front of him. They were big and fierce and looked straight at him. Noah was pulled by the gaze. He felt trapped.

The eyes lunged forward. A large paw swept him off the ground. He fell back but the green-eyed creature snatched him up in its massive jaws. Noah tried to run but the creature had hold of his bag. Fear crept over him like a spider in a web. He felt the hot air bellowing from the jaws that held him. His skin felt numb and he could barely breath. It was too much for Noah to bear. His last memory was of dangling by his backpack as the creature carried him away.

Noah slowly opened his eyes. He was hesitant to look around, fearing he would see nothing but mangled bodies of other victims that had gotten lost in the cavern. To his surprise and total relief, he found himself on a velvet cushion tucked underneath a silken blanket.

As he studied his surroundings further, he knew he was safe. The room was large and rich with color, unlike the untainted white in which the Dobrim surrounded themselves. A fire crackled in a nearby fireplace. Various relics lined the walls. A large mirror rested in the center of the room.

Noah's backpack sat neatly beside his resting place. He reached for it to inspect any damage that may have been done. He was surprised to find it all in one piece. There wasn't even a small tear in its tightly woven canvas.

In a doorway opposite the fireplace a large shadow appeared, pulling Noah's attention away from the insignificant bag. The figure sat patiently staring at him, its green eyes glowing. Noah stared back, now feeling more curious than afraid. The figure stood, bracing itself on four strong legs as it entered the room, giving sight to the mysterious figure. Noah's breath stopped as he gazed upon the creature with wonder.

Before him, in the firelight, stood a massive, black lion with a head bigger than Noah was tall. Its paws could crush an elephant. Its mane was thick and silky and as black as ebony on a moonless night. Its eyes were deep and glowing. Noah stared into them and could see the future of the stars. This was a magical beast. An all-knowing creature whose greatness was shadowed only by the passing of time itself. Noah was humbled to sit before it. It was the beast that had welcomed him into the land before Noah even knew he had arrived. It was a being that could shed light on the shadow of questions- the only one who could help Noah. **HE WAS THE CHATNOIR.**

Noah remained motionless as the lion moved closer. It stopped in front of the fireplace allowing a mixture of light and shadows to bounce playfully over his lustrous fur. The two studied each other for some time, allowing only glances to communicate their thoughts to one another. Finally, the Chatnoir sat down, breaking the extreme tension that filled the

room.

“I did not mean to frighten you in the cavern.” His voice was deep and powerful, yet gentle enough to quell Noah’s remaining fears. “The true path to my lair must always remain a secret.”

The Chatnoir tilted his head, searching for forgiveness somewhere in Noah’s blank expression.

“I know you have many questions, Noah. I, too, have questions that seek answers.”

Noah blinked and tried to concentrate. He shifted his position on the velvet pillow so that he was sitting cross-legged, facing the lion. Questions flooded his mind wanting, needing answers. He listened to the sound of the Chatnoir’s breath, waiting for his next words.

“I know you are not from this world, young one, and yet you look familiar in appearance. You are full of fear, but bear enough courage to travel across this land in search of answers. You lack confidence in yourself, but soon that will change. You have a great adventure before you, and much will be learned beyond what I can tell you here.”

The Chatnoir continued to study Noah. His green eyes searched the face of the young boy as if he were looking at a painting on the wall. He squinted, looking deep into Noah’s heart. His eyes grew wide.

“I see,” he said, gaining greater insight from the boy before him. The Chatnoir sat silently.

“What is it that you see, great Chatnoir?” Noah hesitated to speak, but could hold his curiosity no longer. The Chatnoir smiled at the respect Noah tried to show.

“I see you are a curious boy with a mind that burns like wildfire.”

The Chatnoir smiled and assumed a more comfortable

position, letting his forelegs slide across the stone until they lay on the floor with the rest of his body. He yawned, revealing massive white teeth sharp enough to bite through one of the ancient trees that filled the forests.

“Tell me, young one. What brings you to my lair?”

Noah tried to sort one question from another. He wanted to know so many things. It was an opportunity of a lifetime sitting before the Chatnoir, and yet he was too overwhelmed to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. He wondered if the Chatnoir would even humor his questions with answers. He wanted to know all about the land; how it came to be; what creatures roamed the mountains and valleys; if the night sky was red or if that was day; why the trees ate the flutterers and if the flutterers had names.

*No. I have to focus.*

Noah needed to know what happened. He wanted to know why he was in this strange world and, most importantly, how to get back home. These were the questions he had for the Chatnoir.

“Well,” Noah began. He chose his words carefully. “I think I’m lost. What I mean to say is,” already he was stumbling over his words. “I need to find a way home. But, I was hoping, well, I mean... I think there may be someone else here, too.”

Noah felt like a fool. If only he didn’t let his nerves get the best of him. He felt like he was trying to explain a math solution to a room full of classmates. He turned red in the face and tried to remain collected.

“You are in search of someone you knew from your world.” The Chatnoir understood what Noah struggled to put into words. “There is something you wish to give him?” He waited for Noah’s response.

“Yes! I found his... they were broken and I tried to...” He stopped. He knew he was getting ahead of himself. “Do you know of Mr. Porter? Is he here in this world, too? Do you know where I can find him?” Noah was riddled with questions.

“Yes.”

Noah’s mind went wild with excited curiosity. He knew he would find Mr. Porter. He had known all along that something had happened.

Noah reached into his pocket and grasped the spectacles. They were what fueled his hope of finding Mr. Porter.

“Indeed. I know of this, Mr. Porter.”

Noah was relieved to know that he was not alone in this world.

The Chatnoir spoke again.

“Your arrival was a mystery to me, unlike that of your friend.” He stopped for a moment, dwelling in his own thoughts. “I see now how you happened into this world. The question I have for you is, why?”

Noah was caught off guard.

“What do you mean, why?” The Chatnoir did not answer him. “But I don’t...” His eyes grew wide with fear. “You mean, I’m not supposed to be here?”

Noah knew he wasn’t *supposed* to be in this world, but to a boy with a rich imagination, he was sure it was no accident.

“I know a great deal about the future of time. However, I did not foresee your arrival until the moment it came to pass. A force greater than I has brought you into this world, young one. But your purpose here is not certain.”

Noah was confused. Instead of gaining answers, he was plagued with more questions.

“What about my friend? Mr. Porter? Is he supposed to be

here?”

“The answer to that question is better left with your friend.”

Noah readied a protest, but the Chatnoir explained, “It is not my place to reveal the secrets of others. You will find the answers you seek, but you must be patient.”

Noah sighed. It just didn’t seem fair. He fought a sudden sense of resentment toward Mr. Porter.

*Secrets? What secrets could Mr. Porter have? Was he supposed to come here? Where is here, and WHERE IS MR. PORTER!?* If this is all about Mr. Porter, how did I get dragged into this mess?

Noah’s sense of adventure fizzled and the urgency of his situation became clear.

“If... if I’m not supposed to be here, how did I arrive? How am I going to get home?”

Noah feared that getting home might be more unlikely than he hoped. There was much that Noah wished to learn about this world, but the thought of spending the rest of his life in a strange place frightened him.

“Do not let your fears get the best of you. Your arrival was unforeseen, not unexpected.”

The Chatnoir spoke in riddles. Noah still didn’t understand what he was doing there, nor what Mr. Porter had to do with this world. Noah’s arrival was unforeseen, but not an accident, and yet, this all-knowing being was baffled by Noah’s presence.

Noah’s mind spun. He was hot and dizzy. Frustration and uncertainty plagued him. He put his hands over his eyes. He tried hard to wake up hoping to learn that it had all been a very strange dream.

“Perhaps I should let you rest.” The voice of the Chatnoir

was sympathetic. He knew it would be hard for Noah to understand.

“No. I’m fine, thank you. This is just a lot to try to figure out all at once.” Noah feigned a smile hoping it would encourage the Chatnoir to explain more.

The Chatnoir was not fooled but respected Noah’s determination.

“There is much going on in this land. Changes are happening. Most are not good.”

He sighed and lifted himself off the floor. He walked over to the fireplace and stared into the fire.

“I cannot speak of one’s fate,” he said, “for fate changes with the times.” The Chatnoir changed his focus to Noah once again. “Your path is before you. It is up to you to choose the direction in which you wish to travel. I can only guide you where you want to go.”

Noah thought long and hard. Halirain said that his being there was special. He thought for certain that meant his visit had a greater purpose. He was afraid of such responsibility, but now he felt empty without it. He felt like a boy. A small, weak, insignificant boy sitting before a great and powerful beast.

*What could I do for anyone in this world?*

“Then please, Chatnoir. Can you tell me how to get home?”

Noah felt like a coward abandoning his quest to find Mr. Porter, but he realized that he was in over his head. His place was at home with his mother, and at that moment, that’s where he wanted to be. He wished that he had never found those puzzle pieces, and that they had never brought him here.

“I do not have the power to send you home. The key to your way home lies with the Chatalbin. He knows the history

of time. He will know what brought you here, and what can send you home.”

“How do I find the Chatalbin?”

Noah knew without asking that such a quest would be very difficult for a boy like him. It was his only choice. He would have to be brave, and overcome his fears, just like the Chatnoir said.

“You must travel to the origin of the rivers. The journey will not be easy. You will need to have faith in yourself. You mustn’t fear what you do not understand, but you cannot believe what you do not know.”

More riddles for Noah to try to understand.

The Chatnoir spoke in contradictions, but his message was clear. Noah had another journey before him. It was a much bigger journey and he’d have to make it alone. But Noah still had so many questions. He wanted to know about the Chatnoir’s world. It was such a magical place and whether he was meant to see it or not was beside the point. He had come and there was so much he could learn.

“In time,” the Chatnoir interrupted Noah’s thoughts. “Your answers will come in time.” He walked away from the fireplace and stood in front of Noah. “Your challenge lays before you, my boy. The rest is up to you.”

*My challenge.* Noah wondered if that was the challenge Grelgor warned him about. He must have been misinformed. The challenge was not to get to the Chatnoir, but to find the answers he was looking for on his own.

The Chatnoir stood tall and drew near to Noah; so close, Noah could see the wrinkles of time in his face. The Chatnoir looked weary. He was fighting a battle deep within his mind it seemed, and Noah could see chaos in his eyes.

*What changes are happening in this world that could so*

worry *this beast*? Noah wanted to know.

The Chatnoir's last words to him echoed-- "In time." The Chatnoir knew something that he wasn't planning to reveal. Noah could sense that. It only renewed his endless curiosity.

The Chatnoir took a deep breath. He paused for a moment before gently blowing the air he held in his lungs onto Noah, sending the boy into a deep slumber. Noah's vision went dull as he tried desperately to hold onto the image of the Chatnoir. He fought the drowsiness. He still had questions... he still wanted to know...

Noah slipped from consciousness. The world around him fell into blackness. It was time to rest, to ready himself for his journey home. He didn't know what adventures lay before him, but he was ready to face them. He had no other choice. The Chatnoir told him to be brave, to face his fears. But now, sleep was all that Noah knew.

Noah awoke somewhere deep within the caverns. The light dancers hovered over him, watching his every move. He groaned and slowly pulled himself to his feet like a beaten warrior. His body felt rested, but his mind was a fragmented puzzle to which the pieces had been shaken and scattered. He tried to focus on the present. He wanted to get out of the cavern and back to the Dobrim City. He wanted to talk to Halirain. Maybe she could make sense of everything the Chatnoir told him.

The light dancers regrouped and lead Noah back to the cavern entrance. They sensed his weariness and were sensitive to his situation. They felt his sadness and squeaked sounds of encouragement before sending him out of the cavern. He could not understand them, but appreciated their encouragement. He smiled and ascended the stairway to the terrace of the dragons.

Much to his relief, the dragons still slept in their stony

forms. Noah didn't hesitate to move quickly into the tree-formed tunnel and back down the path to the gate where Halirain waited.

Noah wondered if she would think differently of him knowing he wasn't supposed to have entered her world.

He tried not to think about it as he shuffled down the crystal pathway. It twinkled as he moved along. He thought how beautiful everything was and felt sorry to have to leave, but it seemed the best thing to do for himself, and this new world. He worried that being there might only make things worse. The sooner he left, the better.

His pace quickened until he reached the dragon-guarded gates. As promised, Halirain was there to greet him. The sky was orange which made her pale skin look peach. Her pleasant smile faded and grew to concern as she gazed upon Noah's weary figure.

"You need rest," she said without hesitation. "Come, I shall take you back to the great hall. You will feel better once you drink from the falls."

He didn't argue. He followed her, trying his best to clear his mind and ease his worries. Halirain was a sensitive creature and Noah did not want to worry her. Her responsibilities were too great to have to watch over a simple boy. He would rest as she requested. Then he would prepare for his journey to the origin of the rivers.

## CHAPTER 6

Noah sat in the room prepared for him by the Dobrim nursemaid. He politely refused to dine in the great hall. Halirain understood and sent food and drink to his room.

He picked at bits of fruit and bread. There was something new on his plate that looked like a fancy version of mashed potatoes, but it was light blue in color and smelled like buttered acorn squash or yams. Noah thought it looked interesting and knew it would taste incredible, but he didn't have much of an appetite. He was tired and homesick and overwhelmed by everything around him.

He pushed the table holding his meal aside and stretched out on the bed. It had been a long day and Noah, though still uncertain of how time ran in this world, was certain it was way past his bedtime. Unfortunately, his mind was too busy with questions to rest.

He felt like years had been crammed into his head. It was important to him to understand what was happening before he could decide what to do next. It was a mathematical equation

that needed the solution for X before one could begin to solve Y. Noah's mind wasn't swift enough to determine those types of equations yet.

Something just didn't seem to make sense. He tried his best to recall his conversation with the Chatnoir, but it was hazy. It all seemed to pass so quickly. Noah wondered if everyone in the world was as vague as Grelgor and the Chatnoir. Only telling the bare minimum to satisfy the essentials of a question.

It frustrated Noah.

"How am I ever supposed to learn anything if no one gives me a straight answer?"

He squeezed his eyes shut to ease the pressure in his head. He sat up and tried to shake all the thoughts and all the unanswered questions out of his mind. He stood to stretch, hoping that if he could relax a little an epiphany would strike him and everything would fit into place. Noah had a scientific mind and all he wanted was for things to make sense.

He didn't notice himself pacing around until the sound of his bare feet on the floor began to squeak like rubber on freshly waxed tile. He sat on the bed. His mind continued to race but was getting nowhere. He felt like a fly stuck to paper. No matter how hard he flapped his wings, he just got more trapped.

He heard the door click and turned to see who was there. It was Halirain. She smiled pleasantly trying to hide her concern for Noah's worries.

"You have not eaten much. Do you not feel well?" she asked, as if sickness were a myth to her people.

Noah imagined they probably knew little of disease. They were such a pure folk and the crossing of the rivers was such a clean place.

"I'm feeling fine." Noah saw relief in Halirain's eyes. He

wondered if it was because she was concerned for him or her people.

“My mind is just preoccupied. I’ll eat in a moment.” He hoped that would be enough to satisfy her concern.

“Do you wish to talk about what is on your mind?”

The sound of intrigue rang in her voice. Noah thought about telling her his conversation with the Chatnoir but didn’t know what he would say. He was still uncertain about what had occurred. She did have a point though. Talking usually helped Noah figure things out. He felt safe with Halirain and knew he could trust her to listen.

“I’m just confused.” Noah didn’t want to divulge everything at once. He was still worried she might not like that the Chatnoir wasn’t sure why he was there.

“The Chatnoir is a difficult creature to understand. He often speaks in whirlwinds and only tells you what you need to know.” She smiled, recalling an instance where she, too, found herself at odds with the Chatnoir’s insight.

Noah relaxed. “I feel like I’m supposed to solve a riddle, but I’m not sure what the riddle is.”

“Do not worry. The Chatnoir is clever. He gives you what you need to find your path but leaves the rest up to you.” Her insight was keen.

“He did tell me that I would understand more in time. That’s what I’m trying to do now, understand.” He turned his gaze from Halirain to the floor.

“Then you should trust what he told you. You must be patient. The answers will come when you are ready to know.”

She put her slender hand on Noah’s arm and patted it gently. His mother did that, too. It comforted him to think of his mother. He wondered how long he had been gone and how worried she must be.

“Halirain, how long is a day here?” Noah wished he hadn’t asked her that. Now she might discover that he wasn’t from there and he was afraid of how she’d react.

“A day is as long as it lasts.” She looked at him puzzled, not by his question, but by her lack of an answer.

Noah wondered if she already knew about him.

“We do not quantify time here, as time is always changing.” She thought for a moment. “A day is measured by the passing of the orbs. Right now there are two passing through the sky. The white orb, which turns the sky pink, and the yellow orb, which colors the sky orange. We call these the warming sisters, as they follow one another closely, always keeping the land warm. When the warming season begins, the two orbs are very close to the southern horizon at all times. As they continue to cycle, they get higher in the sky and each day lasts a little longer. At the end of the season the days grow shorter until the warming sisters fall below the northern horizon and the next season begins. It is then that the cooling orbs rise from the south. They are beautiful! There are three orbs that pass during the cooling season - each one disappears below the horizon before the next one surfaces. Things get very dark between the setting of one orb and the rise of another. If not for the light dancers, it would be impossible for us to see. Oh, but the colors!”

She paused for a moment thinking about the cooling season.

“The blue orb turns the sky a pale lavender and calls out all the magnifold flowers. Those are a sight. They sleep when the darkness comes. Following the blue orb is the green orb. It is very bright and warms the world during its passing. If not for the green orb, it would get frightfully cold. The third orb is the dark orb. It is even warmer than the green, but gives little light to see by. Between the passing of the dark orb and

the rising of the blue, you will find magnificent mists that rise from the crystals in the falls. This mist settles onto the plants and feeds them during this time.” She looked sadly at Noah for a moment. “It is a shame you won’t be here to see it.” She smiled and touched his face.

Noah was speechless. Halirain was so detailed and so willing to share with him, unlike the Chatnoir. And yet she knew he was not a part of her world.

“How did you know?” Noah asked ashamed that he had tried to hide it.

She removed her hand from his face and continued to smile.

“I know this world almost as well as the Chatnoir. I knew you were lost the moment I saw you.”

“Then you know what the Chatnoir told me?” he asked.

“No. But I know your journey from here will eventually lead you home.”

“He told me I had to find the Chatalbin. That he would know how to send me home.”

He wished that Halirain could go with him to the origin of the rivers, but knew that she had more important things to tend to in the Dobrim City.

“I see. And this is what weighs so heavy on your mind.”

Noah shook his head, yes.

“I understand now why you have been uneasy. A journey through a strange world filled with things you don’t understand to a place you didn’t know existed is enough to weigh on any young mind.” She paused. “Do not worry. We will not send you on this journey unprepared,” she reassured him.

“I... I really appreciate all that you’ve done for me. I wish I could stay to see the cooling season, and I really do want to

learn more about your world. I just..." he stopped.

"You do not need to explain. I understand. I, too, would hurry to return home." She sighed a musical note. "There is much for us to make ready. I will leave you to rest." She stood and turned to Noah. "I hope your mind is at ease."

He smiled. "Yes. And thank you, Halirain, again... for everything."

"You are welcome." She nodded her head and slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

Noah did feel better. He still did not know what his journey had in store for him, but his mind felt lighter and his appetite returned. He would eat, drink and sleep well that night. Morning would bring a new adventure, but for the time being, he wanted to enjoy his last moments in the Dobrim City. He gobbled up his food and went to the courtyard.

Noah looked into the fountain. It was quiet in the courtyard except for the trickling of water down the crystal sides of the miniature waterfalls. It was warm and the sky was red. He could see the setting of the yellow orb and the rising of the white. Noah figured that during the passing of the white orb, creatures slept, and awoke before it set. That's the cycle he found himself in at any rate. He wondered if the Dobrim people needed sleep. They were always awake when he was, but even now he could see them wandering about the city.

The courtyard gave a wonderful view of the crossing of the rivers and the rest of the city. Noah walked over to the edge of the yard and gazed over the land. It really was beautiful.

He watched light dancers play in the pool below the falls. They were like children jumping into puddles after a summer rain. Noah wished he could understand their language. They seemed so carefree, and he imagined they had many adventures

to tell about. They were like little stars that fell from the sky, preferring the company of flowers and dewdrops to that of planets and meteors.

Noah thought of the meteor shower. It paled in comparison to the light dancers playing. He laughed at the irony of having imagined other worlds and other creatures, hoping they were real, but never imagining he'd ever know for sure. He felt happy. No one would ever believe him if he told them, but he would always remember this world. He would write stories about it and visit it in his dreams, but that would be all.

He sighed. He wished he had more time. No one said he had to leave immediately, but he knew that it was best. His mother, his poor mother needed to know that he was all right and that he didn't mean to leave her. He thought of how she would have loved to see a place like the Dobrim City. He wished he could show her, share with her the magic of the world. How nice it would be if he could bring something back for her, a souvenir to show her where he had been.

If he could choose anything, he would bring her a light dancer. He thought of what her face would look like when a little ball of light flew out of his bag and fluttered all about the room. He could never take home a light dancer, though. Not because of the questions it would raise in his world, but because he'd never want to take it away from its home. His world didn't have a Chatalbin that could send it back again. Noah felt lucky he had that option.

He looked to the sky. He could barely make out little speckles in the deep red. They were stars. He smiled to see something familiar again, and it comforted him knowing that no matter how far from home he was, he could still see the stars. He didn't recognize any constellations or patterns. Those were human stories anyway.

Noah wondered if the people of the planet had ancient

heroes that lived in the stars. Great warriors or doomed kings that encountered some sort of God who kept the legend of their deeds written in the history of the night sky.

Noah scanned to find the brightest star. It hovered above the trees over the northern falls.

“Could it be the North Star?” he wondered

Noah returned his gaze to the Dobrim City. He wanted to absorb all that he could, imprinting its details in his mind forever. He took a deep breath, taking in all the smells of the flowers and the falls. Those, too, he wanted to remember forever. It would be his happy place. Whenever he was lonely or scared or just needed to be alone, he would think of the Dobrim City and it would make him smile. Even if he wasn't supposed to be here, Noah was glad that he was.

The sky was beginning to brighten. Noah's eyes felt heavy and he knew it was time to go to bed. He had taken in all that he could and was satisfied with the memories imprinted on his mind. Now he would sleep and dream of home. He didn't want to think of anything else. Not the Chatnoir, not the uncertainties of the journey before him.

He went back into the great hall ready to go to his room for the night. The hall was unusually quiet, and no one was around. Noah didn't give it much thought until he heard shuffling and musical whispers coming from a hallway that branched off from the dining area. Curiosity got the best of him and he felt compelled to investigate.

He crept toward the hallway, hugging the walls as he tiptoed in the direction of the muffled clamor. He peeked down the hall and saw a light coming from one of the rooms located further away. Noah hadn't bothered to explore the great hall - out of respect for the people and all the kindness they had shown him - but now he wished he had.

He crept toward the open room, hoping to go unnoticed.

There were recesses in the walls of the hallway, which gave Noah perfect hiding places as he moved along the way. He would duck into one crevice. When the coast was clear, he'd dash into another. He was very near to the open doorway from where the commotion seemed to be coming. He checked up and down the hallway to make sure no one was watching. It was all clear. He took a deep breath and made his final dash to the crevice across the hall from the door. Noah figured it would be a safe place to hide while investigating.

He strained to look into the room, but all he could see were Dobrim nursemaids crowding around a table. They looked very busy and were working quickly. One would turn to another and whistle something. Then the nursemaid would leave for a moment and bring something back.

Noah had to get a closer look if he wanted to know what was going on. They were all so distracted, surely they wouldn't notice he if he got a little closer. He carefully made his way across the hall and peered around the door frame into the room. He could see a mass of colors and something flopping around on the table.

Two nursemaids were asked to retrieve something. Their absence around the table allowed Noah to see that it wasn't one thing flopping around, but a dozen or more flutterers! Green ones, yellow ones, red and purple. Noah was confused.

“What do the Dobrim want with a bunch of flutterers?”

Disappointed with his findings, Noah felt it best to go back to his room and let the flutterers be. He turned around to find his nursemaid standing behind him. He was startled. He felt like he had been caught stealing cookies from his grandmother's cookie jar. His face turned a deep red and he tried desperately to think of something to tell her.

“This is our healing room,” she said without hesitation. Her voice was calm and she did not seem to be upset or even

surprised to see Noah there. “They found more than usual this time.” She gazed sadly into the room.

“What happened to them?” Noah asked.

“We don’t know. Before, we would find an injured one every once in a great while, but recently, we find handfuls of them every day.”

Noah could sense worry in her tone.

“What are they? Why are you trying to heal them?”

Noah knew they came from the forest. He had seen the red and yellow ones. He also knew that if they weren’t careful, they would be eaten by the tree pods.

“It is complicated, young one. You needn’t worry.”

She seemed sad. Her golden eyes looked tired and full of thought. Noah wondered what was really going on, but did not want to press her. A nursemaid in the room turned toward the door and said something in Dobrim.

“They need my help,” she said to Noah.

“I understand.”

She nodded to him and hurried into the room. Noah watched. The nursemaids worked diligently on the flutterers, bringing them back to their floppy nature.

There were glass cages lining the walls. They were filled with other injured flutterers still healing. Some were nearly better, flapping their wings in attempts to escape the invisible barrier. Others were still, wrapped in silk or covered in a strange goop. Some had wings that were nothing but shreds and some had wings that were completely transparent.

Noah felt sorry for the little creatures, wondering if they had been caught by the tree pods but managed to escape, injured or near death. He understood why the Dobrim would want to save any creature that was in distress.

As Noah watched, his eyelids grew heavy. He wondered how long he had been standing in the hallway staring into the healing room. A big day lay ahead of him and he needed to get his rest.

Noah crept to his room. He pulled back the silken covers of his bed and crawled beneath them, closed his eyes and let himself drift to sleep. He was no longer afraid of the journey before him. He was ready to face this strange, new world.

## CHAPTER 7

Noah woke with great effort in the morning. His face displayed the folds and wrinkles found within the bedding and his hair was damp with sweat. Light filled the room. He stretched and rolled over. He wanted to enjoy the morning. Knowing it would be a while before he could sleep in a bed again, he wanted to prolong his last opportunity to snuggle under the blankets before getting up.

Noah stared at the wall, creating mental patterns out of the uneven surface. He traced mazes in his mind and let his eyes focus and unfocus on images that weren't really there. He blinked hard to clear his vision and rubbed his eyes to bring them back to reality. He was ready to get up.

He threw the blanket off and let his legs dangle over the bedside. He hesitated to put them on the floor as it looked cold and uninviting to morning feet. He placed one foot half way on the tile to test the situation. It was unusually warm and made Noah's foot tingle. He put both feet down and stood up, stretching one last time.

The nursemaid must have come in while he was sleeping. She left him a washbasin and clean linens. Noah removed his sweatshirt, splashed his face and arms with the warm liquid and dried himself off with the linen, taking extra care to make sure his hair was as dry as possible before he put his shirt back on. He ran his fingers through the tangled mop and shook it out like a dog after bath.

Noah sniffed and wiped his nose. He found his shoes sitting neatly in the corner. His bag was set beside them for easy retrieval. He took one last look at the room to make sure he had all of his belongings before going to the great hall for breakfast.

There was a large group already seated at the long table. They acknowledged Noah's entrance but did not overwhelm him with attention. He was glad for that, not wanting to be the center of attention. It made him feel like part of the family; no one special or out of the ordinary.

He sat away from the group. He did not want to seclude himself, but did not want to intrude or be bothered either. He filled his plate with the breakfast selections. Someone was kind enough to fill a goblet with something to drink. She nodded to Noah and smiled when she set it in front of him, but quickly went on her way to other things.

He ate a hearty breakfast, stuffing himself so that he was definitely full but not to a point of being sick. He knew he'd need the energy a good breakfast provided. Noah was very conscious of his body's needs. A healthy body leads to a healthy mind, and Noah always liked to be sharp.

When he finished eating, he went to the entrance of the great hall where Halirain was waiting. He waved good-bye to passing Dobrim and they nodded in return. He felt like a soldier going off to a war from which he'd never return. It made him sad, but he tried to hide it so as not to draw attention

to himself.

He saw Halirain and two other Dobrim standing in front of the massive doors of the great hall. They had several items with them to give to the young traveler.

“We find ourselves at the end of an adventure, and the beginning of a great journey.” She looked fondly at Noah. “It has been a pleasure to know you, young one, and I wish you all the best on your journey home.”

Noah held back tears. He had only been in the Dobrim City for a few days but already felt like it was a second home. He made some very special friends and was sad to have to say good-bye.

“I will miss you, Halirain,” he said with a shaky voice. “You’re a true and honorable friend.”

They looked at each other, taking in the last moment they would ever see one another. Noah took comfort knowing Halirain had enjoyed his company. One of the Dobrim maids handed Halirain a small bundle tied neatly at the top.

“This should keep your hunger at bay for a few days at least.” Halirain handed the package to Noah. She turned to the other Dobrim who handed her a silken blanket. “This will keep you warm should you find yourself in the cold.” That, too, she passed on to him. She reached into her robe and pulled out a small vial filled with a glistening liquid. “This, most importantly, will heal you should you find yourself in harms way.” She handed him the vial and closed his hand around it before letting go. “One small drop on a wound will heal it quickly.”

Noah knelt down and placed the gifts carefully into his backpack. He put the vial on top for easy access in case of an emergency. He closed his bag and stood to say his final farewells to Halirain.

“Follow any one river to its beginning and there you shall find the Chatalbin. Do not stray from the river.”

Her voice was full of warning. Noah took heed of her tone and vowed to stay as close to the river’s edge as possible.

“How far will I have to travel?”

“The orbs will pass over many times before you reach the origin of the rivers. If you stay on course, it will be an easy journey.”

He nodded.

“You have been very brave, Noah, to come as far as you have. I trust you will continue to bear such valor.”

Her words were encouraging. Noah always thought himself a coward, but Halirain was right. He was brave to face their world alone in the beginning and now again, traveling a new path.

“I will not let you down.”

“Then I bid you safe traveling.” She knelt down to look him in the eye. “Take care, Noah. Don’t forget us when you go.”

“I’ll never forget you.” He reached out and gave her a hug. She seemed so delicate in appearance but was surprisingly strong. He let go of her and stood back. She smiled and nodded. With a wave of her arm, the great doors opened revealing the world once again to Noah.

He stepped out onto the stairs, turning to look back one more time at his precious friends. He took a deep breath, smiled and descended the stairway. As he faded from sight, Halirain closed the doors.

Noah climbed from the city down to the crossing of the rivers. ‘Follow one river..’ is what Halirain had told him.

*But which one?*

He knew they would all meet at the same place, but wondered if one path was better than another. He thought of what he might find along each river. He already knew what the golden river was like and considered following it, but his sense of adventure was heightened.

“Why take the same path twice when there is more to learn by taking a new one?”

He looked carefully at the remaining rivers. They were all beautiful and all seemed promising options. He thought of the night before when he stood in the courtyard gazing at the sky.

“The North Star! All the great travelers followed the North Star, so I will follow the north river.”

His mind was set. He started the hike up the bank beside the Northern falls until he reached the top. The climb seemed effortless compared to his previous descent from the banks of the golden river. He turned to examine the pathway of his climb. It was much farther than Noah thought. He was amazed that he was able to make it so easily.

He stared out over the Dobrim City. It looked so small from where he stood. The yellow orb was rising and cast warm light onto the crystals below. They twinkled and winked at Noah as if bidding him farewell in their own way. The scent of roses filled the air. Noah was glad he picked that river to follow. He turned away from the sight of the pool and the city and made his way deep into the thicket that surrounded the red river.

The vegetation was a lot different than that of the eastern woods. It seemed that the trees remained the only constant in the world. The great trees with their flowering leaves and flutter-eating pods flourished all over. Noah was in awe of their towering trunks and limbs that seemed to reach on forever.

He imagined they once ruled and very well could still. They were tall, majestic, and very old. Noah could see the aging of time in the thick, but smooth, bark that covered the magnificent trees. He wished he could talk to them and learn all that they had seen over time. He imagined they could tell him anything he wanted to know. They probably knew more than the Chatnoir, for they had been there far longer than any other plant or creature.

Noah tried to observe the new vegetation as he walked along the unfamiliar path. The vines were thicker but looked old and withered. They had no flowers or color beyond the deep brown that was left in the fibers of their tightly woven masses.

Long moss covered the ground. Little, sprout-like extensions twisted around Noah's laces making walking more difficult. Stiff and prickly fern-like plants scattered throughout the thicket. Flowers were everywhere. Small, multi-colored dew flowers blanketed large areas of the mossy ground. Large stalks on the edge of the river held blooms of long, sharp petals. Cottony plants emitted little poofs of fluff into the air that floated aimlessly about until they found the perfect resting place. Noah could see little insects flying through the cotton poofs, gathering them into nesting clumps. He was happy to see another form of life buzzing around the forest.

Noah tried not to get distracted by the new things around him. He stayed close to the river and only strayed every now and then to take a short break under a shady tree or on a patch of particularly soft moss.

It was difficult to keep track of how far he had traveled. There were no landmarks to watch for and he lost count of his steps long ago. He promised himself he'd walk until the yellow orb set before stopping to eat and sleep.

Step after step, Noah trudged on. He tried not to watch

the passing of the orb, struggling to stay motivated to go on. Each movement of his legs was like pulling himself out of quicksand. He found himself stopping more frequently to rest. The red river was not as rejuvenating as the yellow river. Noah regretted choosing the path he did.

The wear and tear of the day's journey was too much for him. He had to take a break and allow himself some time to sleep. He didn't see much sense in struggling to walk when sleep would give his legs the strength they needed.

Noah searched for a soft patch of moss near some bushes that might shelter him from the unknown elements of the forest. It wasn't an easy task. He trekked on until he finally found the perfect resting place. It didn't take him long to fall into the comfort of the cushy moss. He covered himself with his blanket and drifted into a much-needed sleep.

Noah, wakened by a shrill sound, sat up with a start. His vision was blurry from sleep and his body shook from the shock of sudden awakening. The white orb was high in the sky providing plenty of light for him to see. He scanned the area hoping to find the source of the noise that ripped him out of sleep.

The noise came from deeper in the woods. Hesitating to follow his instinct to investigate, Noah pulled the blanket tightly around him. The shrieking continued. Whatever was making the noise was filled with fear. Noah fought with himself to stay put, but couldn't stand the thought of something out there being more terrified than he was.

He stuffed his belongings into his backpack and ventured toward the source of the noise. He went quickly, but carefully, from tree to bush to tree, wary of anything he came in contact with.

Peering from behind a tree, Noah saw a small creature

covered in leaves struggling against a fallen tree pod. The creature had gotten too close and the pod closed around its fragile leg. It was stuck, causing more damage to its leg by struggling.

Noah grabbed a nearby stick and dashed to the troubled creature. The sight of Noah seemed to scare it even more than the pod did. It shrieked and cried with the utmost fear. Noah tried to calm the creature by approaching more slowly, but it only struggled more, snapping its little mouth to warn it would bite if Noah got too close.

He didn't want to cause the creature more injuries but knew it would die if left trapped in the fallen pod. He found an opening in the clasped pod and plunged his stick into it, tugging hard to pry it apart. The pod creaked and cracked and finally broke in two, releasing the terrified little being.

The creature scurried away from both Noah and the pod, oozing a clear gel from the injuries. Noah wanted desperately to help but didn't know how. His thoughts drifted to the vial that Halirain gave him. Retrieving the vial from his bag, Noah crept toward the injured creature.

Noah knelt beside the crying, trembling creature and poured a small drop on three areas of the creature's leg. With each drop, the little being squeaked. Noah stepped back and watched while taking a closer look at this new life form. Its small body was cream-colored and stalk-like, similar to a mushroom stem. The leaves covering the creature grew on stems that sprouted out of the creature's back. Thick bushes of leaves crowned its head.

The creature's breathing steadied. It stopped crying, confused and curious. Beady black eyes scanned Noah half expecting him to cause more pain.

Its leg mended with miraculous speed. Noah reached out to pick up the creature but stopped when it cowered away. It was

still frightened. Instead, he offered his hand as help to make the effort of standing easier for the little creature. It blinked and shifted its gaze from Noah's face to his hand and back again.

“Come on little fella. It's okay,” he reassured. “I won't hurt you.”

Noah's words seemed to ease the creature's fears. It reached out with caution and grasped Noah's small finger, hoisting itself up. The creature tested its mended leg and was surprised that it was completely healed. The creature stood two feet tall balancing itself with his arms as it hopped from one root-like foot to another.

Noah smiled. The creature smiled, too, while backing away as if going to run, but instead it called out with a loud, squeaky voice. Suddenly the forest came alive. Hundreds of hidden flutterers took flight as dozens of fern-like plants unrolled themselves and stood tall as peers to this little creature. Noah was amazed to see the transformation take place. Though all the creatures were small, Noah realized the creature he helped was a young one as it ran to the thankful arms of another plant person who scooped it up in a protective hug.

The creatures surrounded Noah with wonder. Several dared to get close enough to poke and tug at him. “Oooh's” and “ahhhh's” echoed off the trees as the plant people continued to prod. Noah stood still, muffling laughter as they ticked under his arms and untied his shoes.

A short, stubby plant person pushed his way to the front of the line. He eyed Noah with suspicion and ran toward him as if to attack. When Noah took a step back from the oncoming creature, it stopped and turned to the rest of the crowd. It threw its arms up and yelled something triumphant. All the plant people began to cheer and the stubby one turned back to Noah with a big grin on his face.

“You not like-a de oders,” he said in some form of broken English. “Why you so helping?” He stared at Noah waiting for a response.

“I, uh, well, it was hurt. Helping just seemed like the right thing to do,” Noah replied.

“AH! Gooda gooda! Help is a gooda. You a friend to Shooskas everywhere!” he proclaimed in a pinched, gruff voice.

The surrounding crowd of Shooskas cheered for Noah, their new hero! He had saved the poor little Shooska from the pod and miraculously healed its leg.

Noah beamed. He was a hero.

“Come. You celebrate with Shooska’s,” interrupted the Shooska chief, leading the way as the Shooska people pushed Noah to follow.

Noah’s new little Shooska friend hopped in front of him, turning back to be sure Noah was following. It squeaked like a toy with every hop.

Noah followed the Shooskas to a small opening that led to an underground cave. It was just big enough to walk through, but he had to pay attention or risk bumping his head on a protruding bit of rock or tree root. It was dark and damp, but the Shooskas glowed, making visibility tolerable.

As they came to an opening in the tunnel, Noah felt a draft. The Shooskas turned a bend which led to the large, open, towering village of the Shooska people. Noah was at once amazed that such a complex structure could be under the ground, created by such a simple species.

Stairs connected tunnels to tunnels which let to other levels of the village. Little lights lit every doorway and small fires added warmth to the dampness of the cavern

The Shooska chief marched on. Noah followed down

the narrow stairway to the bottom of the cavern. Small pools of rosy water formed in tiny craters, reflecting the lights and design of the village that towered above.

The Shooska gathered around a larger fire in the center of the open area. The leader climbed to the top of a small hill and yelled out words Noah couldn't understand. Suddenly, cheering rang out from all areas of the cave and hundreds of Shooskas descended the stairways, eager to see the great hero standing before them.

The Shooska chief turned to Noah.

"We celebrate to you!" He turned back to the rest of his kind and shouted, "Ounta ounta! Shaba da ounta!"

Music broke out and the Shooskas commenced dancing.

The crowd built a seat by the fire for Noah. They danced and sang and put on little shows that made him laugh. They brought him miniature cups filled with warm, sweet liquid that reminded Noah of cinnamon hot chocolate. It made him tingle and brought energy to his weary bones.

Noah was joined by the Shooska chief.

"You do great deed, to help little Shooska. Why so kindness?" He looked at Noah with great curiosity.

"I heard him crying and thought I might be able to help. I hope someone would do the same for me if I were in trouble. It's just the right thing to do." He hoped the Shooska chief would be satisfied with his answer. The truth of it was, Noah had acted on instinct.

"Who they call you?"

"My name is Noah."

"No-ah." The Shooska thought about the name for a moment. "Gooda, No-ah. I call me Bar-rig." He sat back nodding, obviously very proud of his name.

Noah, not wanting to be disrespectful, nodded in agreement. Barrig gave a hearty laugh and slapped him on the back.

“I like No-ah.”

Noah smiled. He was glad to have made such an impression on the Shooskas.

“Still, why? Oders like No-ah, not so helping.”

Barrig looked into the fire as if recalling other occasions Shooskas had come in contact with Noah’s kind.

“I’ve heard. But you don’t have to worry, I’m not like them.” Noah said.

“So sees me. I gladded this so.” He patted Noah on the back again and shifted in his seat. “I sees da oders. Do not so gooda to the Shooskas. Take Shooskas out of home, never to see again.” He looked to Noah for an explanation.

“I... don’t know what to say. I wish it wasn’t so.”

Noah was lost for words. He was learning more and more that “his kind” weren’t the kind of people he wanted to be associated with. “If there was anything I could do...”

Barrig held up his hand. “Understand. You, one... oders, many.”

“Yeah. Many.” Noah felt guilty. He didn’t even know “his kind,” but already he didn’t like them.

He was thankful he hadn’t come across any of them but wish he knew why they were so feared.

His contemplation was interrupted by Barrig’s laughter. Shooska dancers were performing a silly routine that had most of the on-looking Shooskas in stitches of laughter. Noah didn’t understand but smiled and laughed as well.

The Shooskas were pleasant creatures. Noah was happy to have met them but didn’t want to linger too long. He had

to get back to the river. He politely excused himself from the festivities, found Barrig, who had gone to get more sweet drink, and thanked him for his kindness.

“We tanka you. You giva hope. Maybe more like you with oders. Maybe...” He chuckled and motioned to a small group of Shooska sitting nearby. “Toonka salbat oopten,” he said to them.

They nodded and surrounded Noah.

“Dey takes back you. No lose you den.” He waved them on and went back to the celebration.

Noah followed the Shooskas back to the tunnel. It wasn't long before he was back to the river where he had slept before his encounter with the little one. His guides approached him and wrapped their tiny arms around his legs and hugged him goodbye. Noah, smiling broadly, waved farewell as he parted ways with them. He turned to watch them wander into the woods and curl up into bushes. Noah looked on in surprise as one by one, flutterers floated to the ground and hid themselves beneath the leaves and twigs of the curled-up Shooskas.

They were strange creatures, the Shooskas, and Noah was glad he found them. He could always use friends in a strange world like this one. He looked around to regain his bearings. The white orb was nearing the horizon. Noah knew he had a long day ahead of him.

His time with the Shooskas helped relax his mind. The drink they gave him replenished his energy. He was ready to continue his journey along the red river.

## CHAPTER 8

Noah was making good time. He had energy and managed to stay free from any unexpected interruptions. He only took two breaks, which helped brighten his spirits and build his confidence. The yellow orb was casting long shadows, which meant that it was nearing a setting point.

Noah's shirt was stained with sweat and his hair was matted to his head from the intense heat. The river trickled and bubbled to the side of him, beckoning him to drink. The flatter terrain of the north made getting a drink much easier than before when he had to climb down the bank.

Noah stretched and took a deep breath. He held the air just long enough to let his lungs feel the ache for release, then let it out with a fierce blow. The rush made his face tingle and his head spin. He lifted his arms and twisted his back to loosen his tightening muscles.

“Yes, a drink would be good.”

He dropped his bag to the ground with a plop. He lowered himself gently so as not to strain his tired legs. Sitting felt

good. He leaned forward to rinse his hands before using them to cup the liquid to his mouth. The water was lower than he expected, forcing him to stretch to reach it.

“Looks like you’re doin’ just fine on your own.”

The gruff voice startled Noah. He jerked around with a start to see who it was, but lost his balance in the process and slipped into the river with a quiet *bloop*. The river was cold, but refreshing. However, the fall was unexpected which made Noah splash and struggle in the shallow rapids.

“Looks like I have that effect on you!” Grelgor stood over him with a large, toothy grin.

Noah could tell he was holding back hearty guffaws at his expense.

“What... what are you doing here!?” he asked between gulps of water. He tried to regain his footing, but the roots of the trees were slippery.

“Just wanted to see if you learned how to swim yet.” Grelgor watched him struggle to stand. “You, uh, want some help?”

Noah looked at Grelgor with irritation, but realized it would be easier to accept than continue to amuse the beast by trying to get out by himself. Noah huffed and sharply extended his arm in Grelgor’s direction.

“Don’t get fussy with me. I’m just trying to help,” he said as he pulled Noah out of the water like a ragged old doll.

Grelgor plopped him on the ground and shook the water from his hand.

“You scared me on purpose!” Noah protested.

“Did not. I can’t help it if you startle easily,” Grelgor responded nonchalantly.

“You could have waited until I had finished drinking before

coming up on me like that.”

“Could have. But then you’d still be dry, wouldn’t you.” Grelgor looked mischievously at Noah.

“I knew it! I hate you.” Noah pouted.

“Nonsense. At least I was here to help.”

“I wouldn’t have needed help if you hadn’t been here in the first place!” Noah yelled.

“You don’t know that,” Grelgor retorted.

“Agh! You’re impossible!” Noah threw his arms to the ground causing streams of water to rain off his sleeves in every direction. “What do you want anyway? I don’t have anymore chocolate covered raisins.” Noah looked at him intently.

Grelgor feigned offense. “I can’t believe you would think so low of me, that I’d come all this way just to steal from a helpless little boy. For shame, Noah. I am hurt.”

Noah saw through his charade. “Then what do you want?”

“Nothing.” Grelgor walked over to the river and took a few handfuls of liquid for himself.

“Nothing?” Noah asked unconvinced.

“Nothing.” Grelgor repeated between sips. He stood up and shook his head like a dog would after a bath. “I just happened to see you and thought I might check up on your findings with the Chatnoir.”

“You mean you didn’t know I was going to be here?” Noah questioned suspiciously.

“Didn’t have one inkling. Figured you’d be, well, home by now.” Grelgor looked at Noah strangely. “Why are you out here?”

Noah shifted his feet and averted his eyes. “The Chatnoir couldn’t help me.”

He looked back up at Grelgor, who looked back at him with obvious surprise.

“Well now. That’s unexpected.”

There was an awkward silence. Grelgor stared at Noah and Noah rubbed some water droplets off his forehead.

“You really are lost. So, what are you supposed to do now?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

“I’m on my way to the Chatalbin,” Noah replied.

Grelgor looked at Noah. His brow furrowed and he crossed his arms.

“And just how you plannin’ to get there?” he asked.

Noah wondered why he asked such a question.

“Walk.”

“You know how to get there then?” His questions were beginning to worry Noah.

“Yes. Well, I mean, no, but they said to just... “

“...follow the river.” Grelgor finished.

“Yeah...” Noah replied exhaling.

Grelgor remained in his rigid stance. He raised one brow, examining Noah’s ability to follow through with such a task. He cocked his head and raised his chin. He raised one hand and began stroking his twisted beard. Noah could hardly stand it.

“What!?”

His sudden outburst made Grelgor jerk.

“Oh nothing. Suit yourself. I suppose you’ll get there eventually.” Grelgor turned and walked away from the river.

“Wait!” Noah demanded. He ran to catch up with the still moving Grelgor. “Wait! Please wait, Grelgor.” He reached out and grabbed hold of Grelgor’s arm.

He stopped and turned to Noah.

“Well?” Noah asked. Grelgor just stared at him. “Do you know a better way to get there?”

“Maybe.” He turned and started walking again.

“Grelgor! Wait up.” He ran in front of him to block his path.

“You’re a nuisance, boy.”

“Are you going to help me or not?” Noah asked.

Grelgor thought a moment. “It wasn’t in my plans. Then again, I hadn’t any plans.”

Noah was out of raisins, so there would be nothing in it for Grelgor if he did help. He stood contemplating these factors for quite some time.

“I suppose if I help you, you’ll be out of my way for good then?”

Noah smiled. “As sure as I’ll be on my way home.”

“Fine then. Follow me.” He veered back toward the river.

“Now which way do we go?” Noah asked.

“We follow the river.” Grelgor replied.

“I thought you said you knew a better way!?” Noah protested.

“I do. But you have to follow the river to get there.”

Noah rolled his eyes. He knew he’d never get a straight answer out of Grelgor, so he picked up his backpack, slung it over his shoulders and followed his green companion once again.

The yellow orb was setting and Noah was tired. They had traveled quickly for the remainder of the day with little time to rest or even talk. Grelgor hummed an odd tune and walked

steadily on while Noah struggled to keep up. Occasionally he'd ask Grelgor to slow down, and for a few paces he would. Then he'd get lost in his humming and pick up the pace again. He forgot how short Noah's legs were.

Lucky for Noah, Grelgor was also feeling the affects of their travels and thought it a good idea to take refuge for the night. The weary pair stopped in a small clearing similar to the one in which Noah found himself when he first arrived in the world. The grass was shorter and the trees were not as thick, but it was cozy and would make a good campsite for the night.

Noah laid his blanket on the grass. The air was still warm, so he didn't need it as a cover. Grelgor stretched out on the opposite side of the clearing against a moss-covered tree. He plucked the stem of a nearby flower and put it in his mouth. He stared into the sky, sighing while chewing on the stem.

"Grelgor?" Noah interrupted. "How are we going to get to the Chatalbin?"

"Don't know," he sighed.

Noah sat up. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Just that. I don't know." He scratched his head and gazed back into the sky.

"Then just how are you being of any help?" Noah asked sarcastically.

"Well, you being a stranger to these parts, I figured you could use a bit of help, especially when we get to the Northern City."

"The Northern City?"

"That's what I said." Grelgor responded.

"Why are we going there?" Noah's concern was growing.

"That's where most of your kind are from. Figured they could lend us something that will get us to the origin of the

rivers faster.” He answered as if his reasoning were obvious.

“But I don’t want to go there!” Noah protested. “I’m not from there. They’ll know I’m not one of them. Who knows what they’ll do!”

Grelgor looked at Noah strangely. “What do you mean you’re not one of them?”

Noah was caught. He had forgotten that Grelgor didn’t know. The whole time he thought Noah was lost, that he lived elsewhere in the world, but never questioned whether or not he was from the North.

“I mean... I’ve never been to the Northern City, and I don’t know anything about the people who live there.” He hoped Grelgor would believe him.

“Oh.” Grelgor seemed satisfied with the explanation. “I don’t see them caring too much that you’re not from the city. They’re a strange folk. Don’t seem to care about much beyond themselves, really.”

That did not ease Noah’s fear of meeting the northern people.

“I’d still rather not go.”

Grelgor leaned forward, propping his elbows on his bent knees.

“Do you know how long it takes to get to the origin of the rivers?” His tone was serious.

“No.”

“The origin of the rivers is on the other side of the world. It would take us into the cold season to get there if we traveled by foot.” He leaned back against the tree, satisfied that his point was proven.

“Into the cold season!?! But Halirain said I would be home before the cold season!” Noah was in shock.

“If we go to the Northern City, you will.” Grelgor was getting impatient. “Now go to sleep. We still have several days’ journey to get there.” Grelgor turned onto his side and curled up with his back toward Noah.

Noah had nothing more to say anyway. There was no way he could make the journey clear through the cold season. He’d never survive. Not only would it be too hard, but by that time, he would nearly be forgotten in his own world.

He wished there was another way, but it seemed clear that he was destined to come face to face with the people he least wanted to meet-- the only people in this whole world that no other creature trusted-- the only people who might be able to get him to the Chatalbin, if they were even willing to help-- *his kind.*

The thought made him shudder.

*Maybe they aren’t so bad. Maybe they are just misunderstood or there are a few bad eggs that gave everyone a bad name...*

No matter how hard he tried, Noah just didn’t feel right about Grelgor’s decision. He tried to go to sleep but his mind was too busy trying to imagine what the northern people were like to allow him any rest.

The white orb was rising. Noah had to get some sleep. Whether he wanted to or not, he was going to the Northern City and he had to be prepared.

Noah’s sleep was restless. He dreamed that he and Grelgor went to the Northern City, but the people who lived there weren’t people at all. They were horrible monsters with big, ugly feet and drooling mouths and they knew at once that Noah wasn’t one of them. They captured him and put him in a cage and sent him to a zoo where all the other creatures from the

world were kept. Halirain was there, but she wasn't elegant or beautiful. She was beaten and weeping. All around her were dead flutterers. Beside Noah in another cage was the little Shooska with his broken leg. He was trapped in the cage with dozens of pods all snapping at him, trying to have one last meal. Grelgor was there, too, only he wasn't in a cage. He was standing in front of Noah's cage laughing at him and throwing water on him. Grelgor poked him and laughed and poked him again.

Noah awoke with a start. Grelgor stood over him poking him with his jagged claw. Noah slapped his hand away and scurried back from him, glanced at his surroundings and realized that it had all been a dream. He put his face in his hands and tried hard to erase the images from the night before. Grelgor stood up and backed away.

“Rough night?” he asked gruffly.

Noah peered up at him through his fingers.

“You could say that.” He groaned and ran his fingers down his face, pulling it into a rubbery contortion before releasing it and dropping his chin into his chest.

“Well, get over it. We've got a long day ahead of us. Time to get a move on.”

His lack of sympathy didn't surprise Noah. “Come on then.” He tossed Noah his bag and wandered over to the river to get a drink.

Noah stuffed his blanket into the bag, all the while giving Grelgor a look of discernment. He took his time getting up, but a parched mouth helped him find the strength to shuffle to the river's edge.

Grelgor's head was submerged in the river. Noah stared—something didn't seem right. He had never seen Grelgor put his entire head into the river, no matter how thirsty he claimed

to be. He walked closer and saw that Grelgor was struggling to pull his head out.

Noah ran to Grelgor's side and pulled back on his shoulders. He could see the strain in Grelgor's arms as he tried to help push himself back from the river. Noah looked closer and saw that something was wrapped around Grelgor's neck. He grabbed hold of it and jerked but it would not let loose.

Noah panicked. He looked for something that might pry the shiny tentacle off Grelgor. He spotted a sharp rock and without hesitation grabbed hold, plunging it deep into the fleshy mass. It quickly recoiled and Grelgor fell back from the river, gasping for air.

Out of the river rose an angry, but clearly injured snake-like creature. Needle-like fangs stuck out of its big, round mouth. It stood four feet out of the water, with the rest of its body well hidden in the river. It had no eyes but seemed to know exactly where Noah was standing. Its mouth gaped open revealing hundreds of sharp teeth and a long tongue that could have wrapped around Noah where he was standing.

Noah, wide-eyed, let out an ear-piercing scream. The creature flinched, affected by the shrill sound. Grelgor, regaining his wits, grabbed the screaming boy and ran away from the river into the woods.

Noah's mouth was still gaping open, but, lucky for Grelgor, he was too frightened to scream. When they were far enough from the river to be in any real danger, Grelgor stopped running and set Noah gently on the ground. Grelgor fell to the ground and lay on his back, chest heaving wildly. Noah was in shock. Once Grelgor's breathing returned to normal he tended to Noah, who hadn't moved or even blinked since their escape.

Grelgor slapped Noah's back. The force of Grelgor's blow jostled the boy back to reality.

"What! What was that!?" Noah's voice was shrill and

winded.

“That was an ichticran,” Grelgor stated as a matter of fact.

“But what... how... I didn’t...” Noah had no sentence in mind. He was trying hard just to form a thought.

“They aren’t from these parts. In fact, I’ve never seen one this far north in all my travels.”

Grelgor was more surprised than Noah, but with better reason. He knew ichticrans existed, but was shocked to see one in that part of the world.

“That creature comes from deep within the southern lakes. I’m not even sure how it came to be in the river. They don’t travel by land, and there is no way it could have gotten here otherwise. This river doesn’t connect to the lakes, and the Dobrim would have noticed it traveling through the crossings. Something is very wrong.”

Grelgor didn’t even try to hide his concern from Noah.

“Come on,” he turned to Noah, “We’d better get to the Northern City.” He helped Noah to his feet.

“But how are we supposed to drink from the river with that thing out there?” He knew their journey would be impossible to make without water.

“Very, very carefully.”

Noah and Grelgor traveled quickly toward the Northern City. They slept little and stopped to drink from the river only if it was absolutely necessary. Each snap of a twig and every whistle that came from a wind in the trees made the hairs on Noah’s arms stand straight up. He would whip around expecting to encounter some hideous beast. His relief was usually coupled with a quick whack on the back of the head from Grelgor’s tail, though Grelgor, too, proved to be just as

nervous.

Several days passed with no sign of anything unusual. Flutterers fluttered, and the occasional pod would catch one for a snack. Smaller creatures from the area scampered across the travelers' pathway.

The farther they traveled, the less dense the forest became. They reached a barren, rocky terrain that was hardly a welcoming stretch of roadway. When they reached the edge of the treacherous landscape, Noah spotted the outline of what he hoped was the Northern City.

He wasn't eager to get there, but he was more willing to face whatever "his kind" had to offer as opposed to spending another sleepless night in a terrifying wilderness.

It may have been the lack of sleep and proper nutrition, but the closer they got to the city, the nicer it began to look to Noah. There was a constant glow illuminating the skyline no matter where the orb hung in the sky. There were buildings that reached high into the heavens. Some were large and boxy while others seemed to spiral out of nowhere. It was quite sophisticated.

Noah and Grelgor staggered over jagged remnants of old statues and crumbling roads. Noah wondered why someone would discard such interesting works of art, and why they wouldn't keep the roads in manageable conditions. He was too tired to ask Grelgor and really didn't care at that point.

His feet were on fire. He had lost track of time and days and where they were in relation to the river. Grelgor was nothing but a green blur that looked more like a used Christmas tree than his guide.

Grelgor, too, was delusional. He would often look back at Noah and think he was being followed by a drunken elf until Noah would shriek and squeal at the sound of something moving in the distance. Then he remembered and would press

on toward the city. He only stopped when he got the strange feeling he was being followed by a drunken elf...

“Stop!” Grelgor threw his hands into the air and stumbled into the dirt. “We have to stop.”

Noah didn’t bother to ask why. He just let himself fall to the ground. He stared into the sky and tried to stop it from spinning like a merry-go-round full of broken figurines. He closed one eye and lifted one foot off the ground to try and regain a stationary view of the world. It didn’t work. Noah felt sick

“I don’t feel so well, Grelgor,” he mumbled.

Grelgor didn’t answer him. He was too busy humming a strange tune and drawing circles in the air.

Noah wondered how they had gotten to such a sorry state. He tried to recall the last time they had eaten. Noah hadn’t a clue. The taste of dirt filled his mouth.

He patted the ground around him searching for his backpack. Maybe he had some food left that Halirain had given him.

He found his bag beneath his back. It was still attached to his shoulders.

He rolled over letting the contents of the pack shift with the weight of his body. He slipped one arm out of the straps and heaved himself off the ground to get a good look at what he had inside.

The sound of the zipper made Grelgor sit up with a start.

“You’ll never take me alive!” he yelled before laughing and falling back into his listless stupor.

Noah inspected the bag. Everything was squashed. The once fluffy and mouth-watering bread was now a pancake of crumbled bits. The fruit had turned and was more of a jelly

than edible bits of juicy berries. The smell was still enticing and even squashed food was better than nothing.

Noah scooped out a handful of crumbs and stuffed them into his mouth. They were dry, but tasted so good. He took another handful between his palms and compressed the crumbled bits into a solid mass that resembled a day old biscuit. He crawled over to Grelgor, dragging his bag behind him in the dirt. He tried to lift Grelgor's head, but it was too heavy.

"Grelgor." The only response he got was a grumble and snort. "Grelgor!"

"I'm not a perry puller!" Grelgor mumbled, waving his arms about.

"I have some food." He held the wad of bread in front of Grelgor's face hoping the scent would entice his wits to come back.

Grelgor's nostrils flared. As if by magical force, his head lifted and he gulped down the handful of bread, nearly taking Noah's hand with it.

"Watch it!" Noah shouted, jerking his hand back to the safety of his chest.

The bread worked wonders on the weary beast. Grelgor was instantaneously revived from his fatigue. Noah, too, felt a hundred times better.

"I... I have some squashed berries too, if you want some," he offered sheepishly.

He regretted that fear made him forget about food, sleep and even water, which he was now willing to risk encountering an ichthcran to taste.

Grelgor contemplated a hefty lash of his tail across the boy's head for having held out on his secret stash of goodies, but was thankful enough that they had the food at all and was

willing to forgive the delay in sharing it.

“Berries would be a delight,” he said with extra appreciation in his voice to mask the irritation he was really feeling.

It was enough to fool Noah, who happily pulled out the dripping berry sack.

They plucked out what they could, then took turns nursing juice from the drenched cloth. Once they had their fill, the two sat back to rest, letting their bodies replenish from all that they had lost over days and nights of endless travel. They even managed to laugh at themselves for letting fear get the best of them along the way.

“Imagine a great beast like you afraid of a little crandydip,” Noah teased recalling an instance where Grelgor jumped halfway up a tree when a small fuzzy creature leaped onto his arm from a nearby bush. The creature itself was scared half to death when it realized the branch it landed on wasn’t a branch at all.

“I wouldn’t have been so jumpy if you hadn’t screamed like a lipshon giving birth!” He retorted with a laugh.

It was a surprise Noah wasn’t hoarse from all the screaming and shrieking that escaped him since their encounter with the ichticran.

The laughter subsided and they sat content with full bellies and a new sense of safety.

Grelgor sighed. “I want to thank you,” he said, staring at his hands.

“It’s no problem. I had enough food for both of us,” Noah replied with a smile.

“No, I mean for saving my life back at the river. Few would have braved facing an ichticran.”

Noah didn't know what to say. He knew the icticran was terrifying, but didn't realize just how dangerous the creature was until he saw the look on Grelgor's face.

"Well, you're my friend. I couldn't just let you drown."

Grelgor realized that Noah didn't grasp the idea of what a horrific death he would have suffered if Noah hadn't been so brave. He tried to fight the memory of the icticran wrapping itself around his neck, latching its head onto his mouth to give Grelgor air to keep him alive. If it had managed to pull him into the water, he would have been done for. Grelgor shuddered, knowing that icticrans like fresh meat and can keep its food alive for weeks at a time, submerged like bait in the water, helpless to escape as it slowly and painfully picks apart the flesh until death.

"Drown." The idea would have been welcomed if the icticran had gotten hold of him. "Yes." He figured it best not to share the truth of the matter with Noah. The last thing he needed was an even jumpier boy following him. "Thank you, all the same."

"You're welcome." Noah smiled, feeling a renewed sense of worth at his heroic deed. "You'd have done the same for me, I'm sure."

Noah's words were stifled by a cough. His mouth was dry and his tongue was swollen from dehydration.

"Do you suppose it's safe to go to the river?"

Grelgor thought for a moment. He, too, was in need of something to drink. He scanned the area looking for other options. He spotted the sack that had held the berries.

"I have an idea," he said, grabbing the stained bag from the ground. "Follow me."

He led Noah to the river where he carefully scanned the rapids for any sign of the icticran. The coast was clear, so he

stooped down and dipped the sack into the water. The cloth became saturated with transparent, red liquid. Grelgor handed it to Noah.

“We’ll drink from this.”

Noah grabbed the cloth and stuffed it into his mouth, squeezing out what he could between his tongue and teeth. He swallowed hard and gave the bag back to Grelgor, who filled it with liquid again and took his turn at drinking. It was a slow method of quenching their thirst, but it was much safer than dipping their hands or heads into the water.

“This way,” Grelgor began as he handed Noah the saturated sack, “we can keep our distance from the river’s edge and will be able to see if anything approaches.”

Noah nodded in agreement as he sucked the cloth dry again.

They took turns drinking from their new fountain until they were both satisfied. Feeling refreshed, they stepped away from the river and headed back to the broken roadway. Grelgor studied the distance to the city. The yellow orb was rising above the horizon.

“We should be able to make it to the gates by midday.”

Noah raised his hands to shelter his eyes from the light of the orb.

“Yes, I think you’re right,” he added, not really knowing for sure.

Grelgor smiled to himself. He glanced down at the boy standing next to him. How peculiar he was. He would never admit it, but Grelgor was growing fond of his new companion. Noah glanced up at him with a serious face that only made him look even more like a silly child. He nodded at Grelgor and marched on like a little soldier heading into battle for the first time. Grelgor watched his little legs scurry in the dust as the

oversized backpack thumped against his back with every step.

Noah turned to Grelgor, “Well, are you coming?”

Grelgor rolled his eyes and smiled. “Right behind you.”

The Northern City was surrounded by a complex stone wall. It was neatly assembled like a jigsaw puzzle-- each piece interlocking with the others around it. It was marvelous architecture as far as Noah was concerned. Grelgor didn't care one way or another. Stone was stone, whether it lay in ruins on the ground or clung together to form the most interesting building.

The gates to the Northern City were always open but well watched by a dozen or so lookouts that stood steadfast like chess pieces waiting to be moved.

The crumbled road on which Noah and Grelgor traveled veered toward the river and the two became parallel paths leading into the city. Grelgor grew agitated as they got closer. That did not help ease Noah's own apprehensions about what lay inside the city limits. He wondered what stirred behind the stone wall that would have Grelgor grunt and spit so feverishly.

“Better walk in front of me,” Grelgor grumbled. “Don't want to look suspicious.”

“Right,” Noah replied as if he knew why walking any other way would seem out of the ordinary.

“And don't be so sloppy. The city folk carry themselves with certain airs,” he added.

“Like how?” asked Noah, not sure what Grelgor meant.

“Well, they don't shuffle their feet or swing their arms as much.” He inspected Noah a little closer. “And they don't act so timid either.”

He stopped walking and put his hands on Noah's shoulders

to straighten him up. Grelgor looked at him in dismay.

“Just try to blend in,” he advised.

Noah dusted himself off and smoothed out his clothes. He stood up proud and tall and brought a stern look to his face. He stared at Grelgor who rolled his eyes and shook his head at the boy’s attempted effort to look more sophisticated.

The two resumed their walk.

“There are some things you’ll need to know before we go inside the city,” Grelgor stated, glancing toward the city gates. “First of all, those that live in the city are less friendly than where you come from, and they aren’t afraid to show it. Ignore most of what is said to you. And don’t be surprised if they treat you like the outsider you are.”

Noah figured as much and had already prepared himself for the worst. He only hoped they were as easy to fool as Grelgor, who still thought Noah was from another city or village in this strange world.

“Secondly, it’s best you play along with any scenario they put you into. If you say or do anything that contradicts what they assume, you’ll only draw attention to yourself. The less we make ourselves known, the better.”

Noah nodded.

“Most importantly, do not refer to me by name.”

“But why not?” Noah asked curiously. “Do they know you here?”

“I’ve been here before, but they won’t recognize me from any other Vegarion. They don’t care about anything that isn’t one of their own. It’ll look suspicious if you act friendly toward anyone, let alone a beast like me.”

He said the word ‘beast’ with a spitefulness that surprised Noah. He wondered what kind of encounter Grelgor had

with the Northerners in the past to spawn such an apparent dislike for their kind. He thought it best to save that line of questioning for a later time. No need to stir up any unnecessary hatred right before they entered the city.

“Where are we going once we get into the city?” Noah asked, nervous at the new expectations his sudden role demanded.

“We’re looking for the plaxar stables. If we can get one of those, we’ll make it to the origin of the rivers in a matter of days.”

He pushed Noah ahead of him so as not to alarm the watchers at the gate of their presence.

Noah turned toward Grelgor. He barely got half way around before Grelgor thwacked him with his tail and pointed ahead with wide eyes and a protruding lower jaw.

“Don’t look at me or talk to me unless absolutely necessary, understood?”

Noah could tell he was serious.

“But, what’s a plaxar?” he whispered, trying his best not to look at him.

“You’ll find out. Now keep walking.”

Grelgor gave Noah a nudge with his tail. Noah held his breath as they entered the city. He tried to look straight ahead but wanted to know if the guards had noticed them. He gazed up and was relieved to find the figures standing still without so much as a sniffle in their direction. He let out a sigh of relief.

Noah pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, just in case, and was mindful to keep his eyes low and his demeanor as cold as he knew. There was little commotion near the entrance of the city, but Noah could see the hustle and bustle of the city folk deeper in town.

The area immediately inside the gates was serene. Not at all the noisy, cluttered mess Noah imagined a city would be like. It looked more like a park with trees and flowers and a few flutterers stuck in cages like songbirds in an old lady's house, though keeping flutterers in cages seemed odd to him.

The outer gardens were comforting. They made the city seem more welcoming, despite the apparent desire of the Northerners to keep unwanted guests from getting too cozy.

The sound of humming echoed in the garden. He glanced from the corner of his eye to spot a head of golden curls popping up and down behind the hedges. The shimmering hair was tied with pink bows. Noah watched as the curls appeared then disappeared behind the bushes. With burning curiosity, Noah paid more attention to the mysterious hair than he did the road in front of him. His foot latched onto a raised stone in the path and before he knew it, he was confronted quite rudely by the ground.

Grelgor swept Noah up to his feet before he had time to even process that he had fallen. He stood still for a moment as his mind caught up with the events that had taken place.

“Oooouch,” he said rubbing his scraped hands.

The commotion attracted the attention of the blond haired thing that pranced carelessly in the garden. A little girl peeked her head out from behind the hedges to inspect the situation. She stared blankly at the two travelers for a moment before furrowing her brow and stepping out from her hiding spot.

“Are you daft boy? I've never seen someone so clumsy.”

She carried a flat basket of flowers and wore a pretty, white dress. She reminded Noah of what Alice from wonderland looked like. Her blue eyes were fierce, but empty, and her long blond locks curled perfectly around her porcelain face. She stared at Noah, waiting for an answer.

“I... I must have tripped,” he stammered, trying not to stare. Grelgor shifted uncomfortably, but remained silent.

“Well, that’s for certain. And look at you, filthy as can be.”

She came closer to inspect Noah like a teacher would a pupil who had been accused of cheating. She was breathtaking, but something didn’t seem quite right about her. Noah was too shy to look her in the eyes as she leaned forward to examine his disheveled appearance.

“And why won’t you remove that hood? Are you scarred or disfigured. I’ve never seen a freak before.”

She set her basket on the ground and quickly pulled on Noah’s hood, jerking it off his head.

Her reaction was bland, but Noah could tell she was disappointed.

“Why, there’s nothing wrong with you whatsoever.” She drew back in disgust. “You shouldn’t lurk around the gardens that way. You’re likely to startle someone. Make them think you’re up to no good. Are you up to no good?”

Her questions overwhelmed Noah. She made him feel stupid and insecure. He should have been used to that sort of reaction, but he forgot what it was like to be scrutinized by someone his own age.

She stared directly into Noah’s eyes. He had no choice but to stare back. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips pouted. But her eyes, as bright as they were, were empty, void of any emotion or thought. She seemed more perplexed by Noah than curious or concerned. She was like a porcelain doll, lovely to look at but not for playing with.

“I did ask you a question, boy.” She was very direct.

“No, I’m not up to no good. Just thought it was a nice day to visit the gardens.” He shrank away from her stare.

“Suit yourself,” she said, stooping down to collect her basket. “I wasn’t that interested anyway.”

She turned around and resumed her task of picking flowers. Only, she wasn’t actually picking flowers. Her basket was full, but every time she bent down to pluck a flower from its resting place, she came up empty handed. That did not stop her from placing her pretend flower in the basket then move on to another imaginary one.

Noah watched her ‘pick flowers’ several times before noticing that the flowers in her basket were not even real. They were shiny like plastic and stuck together in a prearranged fashion. Noah found that more than unusual.

*And she had the nerve to criticize me!*

“What’s the point of pretending to pick flowers?”

The words escaped his lips before he realized he was even thinking them. He couldn’t help it. After her interrogations, he felt it only fair to put her on the spot, too.

Grelgor poked him in the back with his tail, but Noah ignored his warning. The little girl stood still, her back toward them. Her head cocked to the side. Then she slowly turned around with a look on her face of utter shock.

“You can’t pick these flowers.” Her response seemed more like a challenge than an answer.

“Sure you can. It’s not hard.” Noah said smugly. “Or are you afraid to get your hands dirty?”

Grelgor’s tail was pressing so hard into Noah’s back that it sent sharp pangs up and down his spine. But that did not deter Noah from having a jab back at the pompous little girl.

“That is not relevant to this discussion,” she spit back. “But I can see you would have no problem getting dirtier than you already are.” She glared at him, which made Noah laugh.

“Here, let me show you just how easy it is.”

He stooped down and plucked a flower from its stem, brought it to his nose and took a deep breath to mock her. Her eyes grew wide and what little color she had in her cheeks washed away like fresh paint in the rain.

Her mouth fell open and though she tried to speak, nothing came out. Grelgor released his tail from Noah’s back and let out a heavy sigh of disappointment. The little girl remained frozen. Noah suddenly felt sick.

“What did I do?” he whispered to Grelgor. There was no response.

The little girl dropped her basket.

“You’re going to wish you had never done that!” she yelled. “I’m going to tell on you, and your slave!”

With that she ran as fast as she could into the inner gates of the city, losing her little curls in the wind as she raced out of sight.

“I told you not to do anything stupid, didn’t I?” Grelgor reprimanded under his breath.

“All I did was pick a flower,” Noah protested innocently.

“That may be okay where you come from, but these folk are very particular. Picking flowers is an offense that carries great penalties. You’ll be lucky if she was only bluffing.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know.” Noah panicked. “I’ll take all the blame; you can leave if you want to... maybe we both should... I can walk forever... I don’t mind!” He was about to hyperventilate.

“Calm down. If the lookouts didn’t see you, then it’s your word against hers.”

Grelgor grabbed the flower and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing and eventually swallowing it. His face grimaced.

“Blah. Disontrance. You had to pick disontrance.” He belched and a foul fragrance escaped his mouth. He turned sternly to Noah.

“Anymore of that and you will be on your own. Now, lets get to the market and hope we don’t run into that little monster again.”

Noah and Grelgor marched into the heart of the city quickly, but calmly so as not to attract any unwanted eyes. Grelgor said little, which made Noah uncomfortable. He still didn’t know where he was going. His focus was spent on blending in, as Grelgor put it. He certainly didn’t want any attention now. It was far too risky. There was a lot Noah needed to discover about the city, but he didn’t want to stick around long enough to learn any more lessons.

The market place was bustling. Well-to-do people roamed the streets carrying packages with decorative wrapping or pushing carts full of merchandise. Everyone was dressed perfectly and paraded about in their fancy clothes anxious to prove themselves better than everyone else.

Every shop was arranged side-by-side. Each vendor dressed exactly the same as the next, with a flat-topped hat and neck kerchief. Ladies walked strange looking pets on silken leashes with even stranger looking servants following quickly behind.

Each corner had a lovely garden surrounded by perfectly cut grass plots that were a stunning green, or red, or yellow. Noah was very curious why they had so many different colors of grass. Not one blade of a different color could be found intermixed with the perfect display. Signs posted everywhere read “Do Not Walk on Grass.”

Children gathered methodically outside a sweets shop, but it didn’t sell candy. Instead, the children ordered cups of liquid

from the yellow river. Noah could understand why they would enjoy a treat like that. His mouth watered at the memory of its sweet refreshment. He could see it being a delicacy in the city, as the east river was far away and someone had to travel there to get it.

Everything in the city was perfect - a little too perfect. It was eerie to Noah to see everyone looking glamorous and acting like statues. They walked with noses in the air. They greeted one another as a formality but with no true concern for anyone but themselves. The creatures they kept as pets and servants looked tired and worn, like their spirits had been drained by the monotony of perfection.

Their sadness made Noah feel terrible. He wondered why they would be so depressed. Clearly the northern folk surrounded themselves with only the very best.

*It couldn't be that bad to belong to someone like that, could it?* Then he thought of Kevin. He had everything but he was a horrible person.

Noah felt sick thinking of these poor creatures having to deal with a kid like Kevin. They were probably picked on even worse than Noah.

Noah kept his head down, avoiding people's feet to keep from bumping into them. Grelgor stayed close behind. Noah realized why he preferred to follow. The little girl referred to him as a slave. The northern folk obviously took advantage of other creatures to do their dirty work.

Noah wanted to know if Vegarions really were considered slaves or if that girl was just being rude. Surely something as large and frightening as Grelgor couldn't possibly be forced into servitude.

Grelgor kept his tail on Noah's back and guided him deeper into the shadows of the market away from all the hoity toities. Noah hoped they'd reach the plaxar stables soon. He

just didn't feel right about being in the city. He didn't like the people and hated that they kept other creatures as slaves.

The further into the market place they went, the more crowded it became. The more crowded it became, the less perfect it became. People were on platforms selling their merchandise; others in booths offering unfamiliar but interesting items. It was too much for Noah to avoid and was soon surrounded by shifting carts and loud, booming voices.

Noah's eyes shifted from the ground to the commotion. This was a different kind of market place; sloppy-dressed, low-caliber people littered the crowded alleys. Grelgor had led them right into the heart of the black market, apparently the only area in the Northern City where it didn't matter what you looked like or who you were.

Noah searched the crowds for any sign of the sophisticates he had seen earlier, but could see only rough, gruff cart holders, and off-kilter merchants pawning their goods to the highest bidder. There were other creatures as well, most of them on chains bound to someone, being jerked here and there. These creatures were not submissive like the ones in the other market place. Some of these creatures struggled and snarled and in return they were whipped or beaten. Some had on strange collars that delivered a jolting shock if they moved too slowly or refused to respond to orders. Although the area was much more cutthroat, Noah felt safer here. It was easier to blend in with people who were anything but perfect.

Grelgor stopped Noah. "I want you to ask that merchant where we can find the plaxar stables."

Grelgor pointed to a booth across the way where a large bearded gypsy stood. He had a deep, threatening voice, but laughed often and spoke eloquently for a drifter.

"Don't act frightened and he won't think anything of you."

Noah was nervous but led them over to the booth. He

approached the merchant who was sorting through jewelry.

“Uh, excuse me, sir,” Noah interrupted. The merchant did not seem to notice him. “I was wondering, sir...”

The merchant backed up, almost squashing Noah with his enormous feet. Noah jumped out of the way.

Taking a deep breath he yelled as loud as he could, “You there!”

The merchant looked around, glancing side to side. Seeing no one, he returned to his task. Noah tugged at the merchant’s patchy vest.

“Down here!” he yelled.

The merchant turned back around and looked down at the frail boy standing before him. He let out a hearty chuckle.

“Sorry about that, lad. Didn’t see you down there. Are you looking for a gift for your mother? Maybe you have a sweetheart, being such a fine looking boy?”

Noah blushed. He thought of that girl in the garden.

“No, sir, I’m not here for jewelry today.” He hoped his answer wouldn’t anger the merchant.

“Well, then, little one, what can I do for you?” He seemed sincere, and that helped ease Noah’s nerves.

“I need to get to the plaxar stables.” Noah put his hands on his hips. He had seen his dad do that before when talking to sales men. “I don’t suppose you could tell me where they are?”

The merchant chuckled at him. “Well, sir,” he bowed, amused by Noah’s sudden change in disposition. “I’m afraid you’re out of luck.”

“You don’t know where they are, either?” Noah asked with disappointment.

“Therein lies the problem,” he responded. “No one can tell you where they are.” He leaned down closer to Noah. “But I

can tell you where they were...”

“What do you mean, where they were?” he asked confused.

“The plaxar stables have been abandoned for some time. No one keeps plaxar anymore, on account of them eatin’ all the flowers.”

Noah wondered about the city. *Another mystery in this mysterious place.*

“What do you need with a plaxar anyway?” He asked, squinting his eyes as if suddenly suspicious.

Noah wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t even know what a plaxar was.

“His father is a collector.” Grelgor chimed in, saving Noah who was surprised that Grelgor chose to talk.

“Ah. I see.” The merchant became a little more rigid in his stance and lost a bit of his smile. “Well, in that case, you’ll want to see the hunters. They’re the ones who can get you plaxar, if anyone can.” He turned his attention back to his jewelry.

“Where can we find the hunters?” Noah asked with hesitation.

The merchant looked at Grelgor for a moment, then at Noah.

“You’re friend will know,” he said gesturing to Grelgor. “Much luck, little one. Good day to you.” He nodded at Grelgor and went inside his booth.

Noah looked at Grelgor who stared after the merchant.

“Do you know that man?” he asked, suspicious that they knew something he didn’t.

“No,” Grelgor growled. “Follow me,” he ordered as he walked away from the booth.

“But, I thought you didn’t want to look suspicious?” Noah

was really confused.

“The Northern folk don’t come around this part of the city. We’re among the drifters. We’ll be safe for now.”

He flipped his tail, agitated, then let it drag along the ground. He walked with his head down and motioned for Noah to follow. Wherever they were going, Grelgor wasn’t looking forward to it.

## CHAPTER 9

Noah clung tight to Grelgor's side. They found themselves in an uninviting area, surrounded by crumbled buildings full of small creatures running in and out of crevices hidden beneath rotting foundations and damp, dark alleyways with none of the amenities found in the open market place.

There were very few creatures roaming the alleyways, and no Northern folk at all. He didn't blame them. He would have preferred not to be there either.

Noah heard shrieks, growls and whistles ahead intermingled with one another to create a dreadful symphony of agony and despair. His hair stood on ends as they drew closer to the source of the sounds.

Rounding a corner, they came upon an eye-popping sight of what had once been a town. Cages upon cages filled to the brim with creatures of all kinds surrounded by a fountain spewing red liquid. Noah, filled with fear, stared wide-eyed at large, rat-like beasts with spikes that rose on their backs if they felt threatened. Little fuzzy puffballs with tiny, tear-filled eyes

shuddered in terror. They squeaked, curled up and huddled close to one another.

Frightening looking creatures were everywhere: big ones, small ones, floppy ones, even flutterers! One cage was filled to the top with flutterers of all kinds flopping around and standing on one another. Some struggled to fly, but bumped into the side of the cage or another flutterer and fell to the floor with the rest of the injured ones. Flutterer dust filled the air surrounding the cage. Tears welled in Noah's eyes.

Not far from the flutterers, glass cages filled with dingy river water were occupied by water creatures of all sorts. One of the cages near the fountain was broken. Covering the ground were bits of glass and metal as well as the remains of whatever had been unlucky enough to call that tank home.

Noah, examining what he could of the mangled bodies, figured they had been picked over by scavengers roaming in that part of the city. Thumping sounds in one of the tanks caught Noah's attention. He looked inside but the water was too murky to see much of anything. He let himself get close enough to press his face against the glass.

He peered into the tank trying to see anything within the murk. Before he knew it, he was face to face with an ichticran, its jaws gaping. Noah fell back with a scream, exciting all the other caged creatures. The ichticran banged against the glass. Noah stared at it, nearly paralyzed with the memory of the one wrapped around Grelgor's neck. The glass cracked as the creature smashed against it harder and harder.

Grelgor scooped Noah out of the way just before the ichticran gave one final blow to the glass and shattered the tank, spilling itself into the courtyard with the rest of its aquatic company. That ichticran was twice as big as the other. It lunged toward Noah and Grelgor, but was unable to move successfully out of the water. It slithered and flopped

in the wave of liquid that once filled the aquarium. With a last ditch effort, it plunged itself into the broken fountain and disappeared.

The rest of the creatures from the aquarium flopped on the ground. Grelgor put Noah down and picked up what he could of the struggling masses, tossing them into the fountain. Noah grabbed spiny winders and squirming gidlabags, placing them in the shallow water of the fountain. One by one they disappeared into a small hole located at the bottom.

“That certainly explains a lot,” Grelgor stated with an angry tone. “This fountain leads directly into the red river.” He studied the situation and put his hands on his hips. “These hunters are starting to step out of their boundaries.”

His voice was gruff and full of hate. Noah wasn’t sure if it was because of the commotion he had caused, or because Grelgor now knew why there were creatures in the rivers that had no business being there.

Noah was concerned. “What about those other things we put in the fountain? Are they as dangerous as the ichticran?”

“No. In fact, most of these creatures aren’t dangerous at all. They are trophy creatures. The Northern folk like to collect things.” He spoke through his teeth with a locked jaw. Noah watched the muscles in his face twitch and strain.

“What do they do with them?” Noah asked carefully.

“Whatever they want.” Grelgor looked around at the cages. “Some of them become slaves, others pets, but most of them end up...” He stopped and looked at Noah, studying the boy’s troubled face. He hesitated to finish his thought. “They just have no right to keep creatures caged up like this.”

Noah knew Grelgor was hiding something from him.

“Come on,” Grelgor finished, “let’s find these hunters so we can get out of this city once and for all.”

They wove through the maze of cages toward a distant, roaring fire hoping they would find the hunters' campsite. Noah tried not to look into the cages as he passed them. It was too sad for him to see the faces of all the helpless creatures.

Noah's heart fell to the ground when he passed a particular cage. Inside were a dozen or so Shooskas, half starved and very frightened. Their leaves were wilted and they could barely stand on their frail little legs. He tried to look away, knowing there was little he could do to help them, but his eye caught something familiar.

Among the imprisoned Shooskas sat the little one whose leg he mended not too long ago by the river's edge. It was hiding in the corner curled up with its arms wrapped around its legs. The tiny little leg that had been injured had a small but distinct scar. Noah knew it was his little friend. Anger filled his entire being and he swore he would make whoever was responsible pay for what they were doing to these poor creatures.

He barely had time to react to his own emotions before Grelgor grabbed his shoulder and turned Noah to face him.

"There is nothing you can do. Believe me, I know."

Noah could see that Grelgor was just as upset at these findings as he was. Tears welled in Noah's eyes.

"We can't have any of that now," Grelgor stated. "You have to be strong if you expect to get anywhere with the hunters."

He patted Noah on the back and led him away from the Shooskas.

The fire was much bigger than Noah anticipated. The heat was unbearable. Tent canopies, empty cages and plenty of discarded trash surrounded the fire. Sitting nearby with their

backs to Noah and Grelgor were two figures, equal in size. Each had long, brown hair pulled back into ponytails and were dressed in garb that was distinctive to their trade. They looked like two soldiers who had the pleasure of being off duty for the night. They weren't talking or doing much of anything - just sitting, staring into the fire as if entranced by its power.

Grelgor signaled for Noah to stay back. Noah was surprised to see that the men were hardly fazed when Grelgor approached them and began talking. The fire was too loud for Noah to hear what they were saying, but he saw them nod and make some sort of deal. He pointed in the direction of Noah. Like puppets on a string, the two heads turned, looked at Noah, then turned back toward the fire.

The hunters were as strange as the rest of the Northern folk. Not only were they methodical and stale in emotion, but they even looked the same. In fact, they were identical.

Noah shifted his stance. He was tired, angry, hurt and hungry. The day was nearly past. He turned to find a place to sit while Grelgor made arrangements to get a plaxar. He did not expect anyone to be standing behind him, and was startled when he bumped into a third hunter who had been watching from afar.

“What is he doing back here?” She asked, referring to Grelgor.

She was tall, but muscular with the same long, brown hair as the two hunters by the fire. Her eyes were cold, her demeanor much more authoritative than that of her comrades. She stared at Noah, waiting for an explanation.

“He, I'm, uh, we're looking for a plaxar, ma'am.” Noah swallowed hard.

“Don't call me ma'am,” she retorted bluntly. “What does he need with a plaxar? Vegarions have no use for them, especially not that one.” She spoke as if she knew Grelgor.

“The plaxar is for me, uh, my father. He’s a collector.” He tried his best to tell her what Grelgor had told the merchant.

“Oh really. Who’s your father?” She was very suspicious of Noah.

“I don’t think you would know him. He’s nobody. Well, he’s somebody, but nobody you would know.”

He was tripping over his words. He wished Grelgor would notice and come save him from the interrogation.

“I know all of the collectors, boy.” She was very matter of fact, which made reading her very difficult for Noah. He couldn’t tell if she was angry or unconcerned.

“Well, he’s a new collector. This will be his first plaxar.” He smiled hoping she might buy his story.

“You’re either an idiot or you’re lying. Either way, I don’t believe you.”

She would not release her stare from Noah. It made him very uncomfortable. He didn’t know what to do. Lucky for him, Grelgor was not far behind. He and the other two hunters approached them.

Her focus shifted immediately to Grelgor.

“I thought I told you to stay away,” she said without hesitation. “And just what did you hope to accomplish by speaking with my brothers? You know nothing happens here without my say so.”

Grelgor held his stance without wavering.

“You owe me a favor, and I’m here to collect,” he responded fiercely.

The woman did not seem threatened. Noah was very confused.

“The favor was not killing you, Vegarion,” she retorted.

“On the contrary,” Grelgor spat back, “it was I who spared

you, hunter.”

“No matter. I forbid you from ever coming back. If you choose to risk your life again, that is your own matter.” She turned her back to them and ducked into a tent.

“It will take a few passings of the orbs, but we’ll get you the plaxar,” stated one of the twins. “It would be wise to avoid Gretchen in the meantime. She has not forgiven you.”

Grelgor nodded. “We’ll be back in three passings.”

Grelgor put his hand on Noah’s shoulder and firmly led him away from the campsite.

“We’ll hide out in the city until then,” he said to Noah.

Noah was too bewildered and too suspicious to answer. He simply let Grelgor lead him back to the black market where they would find food and refuge for the night.

They came to an old tavern. The sign was hanging by one hinge and the paint was chipped and peeling. Noah was too tired to care that it was not the friendliest place to rest for the night. It was dark inside, but each table had a small lantern that offered enough light to tell if a drink needed filling.

Grelgor claimed a rustic table in the back corner and Noah joined him. He sat down with a thud that made the chair creak and let out a tremendous sigh. Noah plopped down in a large seat beside him and put his head on the wooden table.

“I’ll get us something to eat,” Grelgor offered. “Stay here and don’t get into trouble. I don’t need anymore of that today.”

Noah didn’t argue. He had enough of the city already and the thought of spending three more days there sickened him. He missed the comfort of home. He would settle with getting picked on by his classmates if only he could get back. Noah traced the outlines of the holes and knots of the old table top,

losing himself in thought.

Grelgor returned with a tin platter of cheese and bread and two large, pewter mugs full of yellow liquid. The thought of drinking liquid from the yellow river brightened Noah's spirits. He took a big gulp and savored the sweet, refreshing taste. He felt better already.

"How were you able to pay for this?" Noah asked.

"I know a thing or two about this place," he replied.

"So I've gathered," responded Noah with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"If I had known any of this would lead us to the hunters, I would never have offered to help you in the first place, so don't give me grief about not telling you about them sooner. I'm not exactly on their good side, you know."

Noah knew it was wrong to judge Grelgor but still had questions that needed answers.

"What's going on here, anyway? Why can't you walk on the grass or pick flowers, and why were the plaxar stables shut down, and why is one part of the city so perfect, while the other half is in ruins, and who are these hunters?"

Noah folded his arms, his face full of expectation. Grelgor had little choice but to answer.

"It's a long story," he began.

"Well, we've got three passings for you to tell it," Noah pointed out.

Grelgor sighed. "The city was never like this before. It used to be one, united place. It was very harmonious. But people started to explore the world around them, and discovered new things and new places. The problem with these northern folk is that they always want the best. When they discovered that they didn't have the best, they began to think

of ways to get it. Some people were happy with the way things were, but others refused to settle for anything less than, well, perfect, I suppose. Those who wanted better started altering the way things worked, searching for new life, introducing new plants and creatures and,” Grelgor swallowed hard, “experimenting on what they found.”

Noah’s heart sank.

Grelgor continued.

“While some were eager to create a new environment, others didn’t like the idea of such unnatural change. They were not in favor of experimentation and demanded a stop to importing outside life. Eventually war broke out. It lasted years. It all but destroyed the city. You saw the ruins outside the gates. That whole area used to be part of the city, until it became a graveyard of past battles.”

Grelgor rubbed his face.

“Change won over and those who opposed the change were forced into hiding. Treason, they called it, anyone who opposed the beautification of the Northern City, and the Northern City became what it is today, leaving behind the ruins of the past in favor of the perfection of tomorrow.”

“But why create such a perfect city, only to deny anyone the ability to enjoy it?” Noah asked.

“The price of perfection is high. It takes a lot of work and a lot of sacrifice to create a place like this. They have altered this city to a point beyond recognition. This city is more like a collection of pieces and places from everywhere else. They brought in things that normally couldn’t survive in this part of the world. If someone were to walk on the grass, it might die. To pick a flower means that it is gone forever. It will never grow back, because it would not have normally grown here in the first place. Make sense?”

Grelgor took a large wedge of cheese to gnaw.

“I suppose it does. But what do the hunters have to do with any of that?”

“Who do you think brings in these foreign things?”

Grelgor responded. “The Northerners are so interested in having what no one else has, they are willing to pay a high price to get it. The hunters travel through the lands gathering creatures and plants and river liquid,” he held up his mug as an example, “and bring it back to sell to the highest bidder.” He took a drink from his mug. “It’s not right, but there are few out there who can stop them, and no one is willing to try.” He swallowed hard. “Their day will come. Nothing lasts forever, especially when it’s unnatural. I just hope they don’t destroy our world first.”

Grelgor gazed off into the distance, lost in his own thoughts.

Noah took a moment to digest all the news. Things were starting to make sense. The Chatnoir had told him that things were changing in the world. Now he knew why.

“And what about you? How do you know the hunters?”

Grelgor set his mug down on the table and looked at Noah long and hard.

“I used to be in one of those cages,” he said.

Noah’s eyes grew wide. He never expected to hear those words from Grelgor.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know...” Noah wanted to say something comforting, but he was speechless.

“It was long ago and I was lucky enough to escape.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Is that why you tried to kill Gretchen?” Noah asked.

Grelgor half laughed.

“No. I had no intentions of harming anyone. The thing about the hunters is they don’t care much about their prisoners, and if one escapes, they usually just let it go. They can always get another one, they say. I was the first Vegarion they had ever seen, so they didn’t know what to expect. I had nearly given up on life at that point. They caught me not long after I had been turned away by my people, so I had little to live for. It wasn’t until I was robbed of my freedom that I truly realized how precious it was. I couldn’t see the logic in keeping creatures in cages, so when I stood up against the hunters, I planned to free the others as well. Gretchen wasn’t about to let the rest of their prisoners go with me. She attacked me, probably with the intentions of killing me, but I got the upper hand. Her brothers intervened and bargained for her life. I wasn’t going to kill her, but they didn’t know that. They said they would be in my debt if I let her live. Considering I was going to do that anyway, I accepted and let her go. To show no hard feelings, I let them keep their prisoners.”

Grelgor paused for a moment and looked down into his nearly empty mug.

“I have always regretted that.” He took the last sip of liquid, stood up and went to the bar to refill it.

Noah was intrigued by his story. It explained so much about Grelgor and why he was the way he was. He watched Grelgor standing at the bar. His great strength and lack of concern replaced with the heavy burden of guilt.

Grelgor returned to the table, grabbed more cheese and bread and laid back, kicking his worn feet onto the table top.

“It’s best if we stay here for now. No sense in putting ourselves in trouble’s way,” Grelgor stated. “Besides, I’m tired and could use a vacation.” He smiled at Noah, which made Noah feel better.

“Me, too,” Noah agreed. “Me, too.” He crossed his arms

over his chest and let his eyes close.

*Just a little rest*, he thought, as he drifted into sleep.

A loud crash spun Noah from the comfort of slumber into the harshness of reality. He had been lying funny and his neck formed a crick that ached and pinched at the slightest jolt. Grelgor, too, had dozed off and, being more accustomed to the slap dash way of life, was unaffected by the commotion going on in the tavern.

Noah slid around in his chair to look in the direction from which the noise was coming. He found himself at odds when half a dozen soldiers marched into the tavern. They were intriguing, Noah thought, with their blue uniforms and flat topped hats. They reminded him very much of pictures of soldiers during the civil war, only these soldiers were far better dressed and much less messy.

They marched two by two in a perfectly straight line, carrying musket rifles over their right shoulders, swinging them in unison with their arms. The crashing was a result of them overturning tables that were in their way, spilling food and drinks all over the floor of the tavern. Noah thought it ridiculous that they would rather throw a table out of their way than simply walk around it. He wasn't about to offer up any suggestions, though.

The soldiers marched rigidly, with stale faces and rhythmic stepping. They looked very much like toy soldiers that one might decorate a mantle with during Christmas.

*Clomp, clomp, crash... clomp, clomp, crash*, they marched on, not moving even a smidgen out of step with each other until they stopped in the center of the tavern for all to see.

The head soldier scanned the room like a robot that turned at the waist. The rim of his hat covered his eyes, but it didn't

affect his vision. Noah watched with curiosity as all the soldiers, without hesitation, dropped their rifles from their shoulder, and in a fancy display, twirled and tossed them about until they rested comfortably in both hands as the soldiers stood at ease.

“I am looking for a disheveled boy and his green slave. If you know their whereabouts, you may speak freely,” said the head soldier in a monotonous tone.

Noah went numb. His body felt a wave of heat as panic prodded its way into his nerves. He had never been so glad to be sitting in a dark corner in all his life. He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and shrank down into his chair, hoping to go unnoticed until the soldiers left.

They continued to scan the room. Though many of the tavern’s occupants were well aware of Noah and Grelgor’s presence, no one said a word. Their dislike of the Northern soldiers was far greater than their concern for the two drifters and whatever trouble they were in.

The tavern was silent. Grelgor, who was still very much asleep, began to grumble and twitch.

“I’ll squish you like a tumble berry!” he yelled out, then burped and dropped his chin back to its resting place atop his chest.

The soldiers looked around to confront the person who dared threaten them. They were on guard and ready for any attack. Grelgor began to grumble again. Noah, trying to prevent another outburst, kicked Grelgor in the leg that had fallen from its perch on the table. The impact was enough to wake Grelgor. Unfortunately, his ability to pull himself out of dream-induced stupors was less than timely.

“Oooouch! What’d you do that for?” He snarled at Noah. He shook his head like a lion full of fleas and stretched his long arms toward the ceiling before returning to his comfortable,

sleep position.

“Grelgor!” Noah whispered, trying not to draw any more attention their way from the soldiers who were still waiting for an ambush from the unknown threatener.

“The soldiers... they’re after us,” he tried to explain.

Grelgor, still dazed, had not even noticed the intrusion or the group of soldiers standing only a few tables away. He yawned a loud, roaring yawn that spooked the soldiers into an even tighter formation.

“You’re dreaming, boy. Now go back to sleep.” He scratched his shoulder and nodded off again.

The head soldier dared to step out of formation. He looked over the crowd.

“I say again, we’re looking for a boy and his slave. They have committed a most heinous crime and must answer for their actions.”

The soldier scanned the room, walking among the tavern drifters, peering into faces.

Noah was down to his last calm nerve. If the soldier discovered them, it would be the end of it. No waiting for a plaxar, no going home! He had to wake Grelgor. He was the only one who could get them out of a mess. He nudged Grelgor again, but gently to avoid angering him.

“For the love of crumption!” he yelled. “Just let me be!” He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

The soldiers turned in their direction, pinpointing their location even through the darkness. Noah felt doomed. Just as quickly as it all started, it was about to end. The soldiers marched toward them, rifles at hand.

Grelgor, still oblivious to the situation, turned to Noah and whispered, “Keep your head low, Northern soldiers are here.”

## CHAPTER 10

“You’re under arrest!”

Those were the last words Noah ever expected to hear in his lifetime. He had always been a good boy, polite, courteous, and law abiding, when the laws made sense and he was well aware of them, but now cuffed like a criminal, being led through the black market with a protesting Vegarion trying to talk his way back to freedom.

The Northern soldiers led them back into the ‘proper’ end of town and straight to what they referred to as The Council. As far as Noah could tell, the council was like a jury that would try them and decide their fate. He tried to remain optimistic. After all, they had no evidence, and Grelgor said it would be his word against the little girl’s. And really, she was a bit flighty and, well, a girl, and everyone knows that little girls lie - at least that’s what Noah kept telling himself.

A quick jab of a soldier’s musket let Noah know his pace was too slow for his captor’s taste.

“Keep movin’ boy,” was all he said.

Noah stumbled forward. He wanted to talk to Grelgor, to find out where they were going and what the council was and what would happen to them. But he knew better than to risk drawing the attention of the soldiers.

The soldiers were taller than he was, and marched close around Noah and Grelgor. It was hard for Noah to see anything beyond the shined black boots and tightly held muskets. He watched as the barrels of the guns swung back and forth with the movement of the soldiers' arms. There was something strange about their weapons but Noah couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. He didn't like guns and didn't know much about them, but still, he was puzzled by the look of them.

Noah added a hop to his step in hopes of being able to jump high enough to see over the towering figures surrounding him. He could see large crowds of people gathered along the walkways, each one staring at the soldiers' parade. He could hear boos, hisses and sniggers suggesting that everyone was well aware of the terrible deed that got him in trouble in the first place.

A flick of Grelgor's tail stopped Noah's hopping.

"Blend in you nincompoop," Grelgor muttered under his breath. "Whatever happens to us will depend on you, so DON'T BLOW IT!"

"Sorry," Noah whispered back. "But it would help if I could see what we were heading into."

He hated not knowing. It only increased his nervousness, which made him less prepared for whatever it was they were about to go through.

"Trust me, you don't want to know." Grelgor's response was not what Noah needed to hear.

They stopped marching. A dull silence grew over the crowd. Noah tried to peer between the soldiers' stiff bodies

but couldn't make anything of the bits and pieces he managed to see. The sound of trumpets startled him back into place. He could feel his face getting hot and prickles made their way through his body. He was too nervous to move.

"Make way for the Grand Chancellor," he heard someone announce.

Noah heard people move and feet sweep across stone, then silence again. Suddenly all the soldiers dropped to one knee and bowed their heads in salute. It was only then that Noah could see where he was.

They were at the bottom of a grand stairway that led up to an impressive building. It was as big as a castle and as elegant and refined as the most exquisite cathedral. It would have put any great monument in Noah's world to shame. Spiraling pillars held up a hand carved dome that hovered over the entrance of the majestic building. The windows all had colored glass that reflected rainbows into the air around them. In the center was a tall pinnacle reaching endlessly into the sky.

Standing in front of them, high on the stairway, was an older man with white hair and a smooth face. He was dressed in thick purple robes. His eyes reflected time and events that made him seem ancient, but the stale expression on his face was like everyone else in the Northern City.

"Let it be known that these prisoners have been accused of a great crime," he said in a powerful, yet melodious voice. "They will have their opportunity to answer to the accusations against them and will receive just punishment if found to be guilty of said crime."

He spoke to the people of the Northern City to appease any offense they held against Noah and Grelgor. The Chancellor was very proper and very proud. He did not even glance at the two prisoners standing before him. He immediately turned and entered the building followed by a dozen or more men who

appeared to be the rest of the council.

The soldiers stood up, prodding Noah and Grelgor to march up the stairway into the building. They were led into a large, open area inside the doors. It was pristine inside, like a museum of fine art, only there weren't any paintings or statues. A man in a black robe approached the soldiers.

“You may take your leave. They are in the custody of the council now, gentlemen.” He turned to Noah, “I trust you are well-mannered enough to respect the rules of this court and will not disobey the holding laws of being a prisoner of criminal accusation?”

Noah wasn't sure what he meant but nodded feverishly in response.

“And I trust you will be able to maintain your servant in the meantime without any interjection of a superior?”

Again, Noah nodded. He was too uneasy to do anything else and was afraid that anything he did do might get them into more trouble.

“Very well. You will be escorted to the holding chambers until we are ready for your testimony.”

He motioned to two officials, also dressed in black robes, who led the prisoners down a narrow hallway and into a small, dimly lit room. Noah and Grelgor stepped inside and the door closed behind them. There they stood, awaiting whatever fate would befall them.

The door made a loud THUD when it shut. The click of the lock being turned let Noah and Grelgor know that they might be there a while. There wasn't much to the room in which they found themselves. It was dusty and anything but welcoming; there were no pictures or furniture in the room, just one small window too high for Noah to reach.

The two of them looked around the room and then at each other. There was an awkward moment, when, for the first time along their journey, a pin dropping would have echoed louder than Noah's screams of terror. They held each other's gaze, then with a burst of anger began throwing blame at each other.

"If you would have listened to me in the tavern and kept your mouth shut, none of this would have happened," Noah proclaimed.

"If you hadn't bothered me, I never would have made a peep!" Grelgor retorted. "And if you hadn't picked that flower, we would be well on our way to the origin of the rivers by now!" Grelgor bellowed.

"You're the one who brought us here in the first place! How was I supposed to know all of their stupid rules?" Noah replied.

"Any Northerner, no matter where they dwell in this world, knows the law! How was I supposed to know you were an idiot!?" Grelgor exclaimed.

"If you had given me any sort of warning other than 'just blend in', I may have been better prepared!" Noah stammered, hurt by Grelgor's comment.

"I knew I never should have bothered with you! What a fool I am to trust a northern bred folk!" Grelgor snarled.

"I'm not a Northerner! I'm not even from this world!" Noah yelled with his fists clenched.

Grelgor opened his mouth to belch a nasty reply, but froze in his utterance. He looked at Noah with bewildered eyes.

"All I've been trying to do is find my way home and now, thanks to you, I may never get back." Noah's eyes began to well up with tears, but he was too hurt and angry to let them fall.

Grelgor was speechless.

“Well,” he stuttered, “I knew you were an odd fellow, but never expected to learn that.” He chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. He could tell that Noah was very upset. “It certainly explains a lot, though. Here I thought you were daft, when really, I’m the fool for not taking a minute to put it all together.”

He looked at Noah, still trying to place bits and pieces of their encounters into a sensible picture.

“I should have told you sooner,” Noah said, wiping his eyes, “but I was afraid if you found out you wouldn’t help me.”

“You’re probably right,” he chortled. Noah’s eyes shot open with surprise. “So no hard feelings on my part,” Grelgor assured him.

“Really?” Noah asked, relieved to know that Grelgor was not upset with him.

“Yeah. Besides, I wasn’t completely honest with you either.”

“What do you mean?” Noah asked suspiciously.

“Do you recall when I told you I was taking you to the Chatnoir?” Grelgor asked.

“Yes,” Noah responded with caution.

“Well, it wasn’t to help you find your friend. It was to turn you in.” Grelgor said sheepishly.

“I don’t know what you mean.” He studied Grelgor’s face.

Grelgor diverted his eyes from Noah.

“Thinking you were a Northerner, lost or not, it was my duty to turn you in to the Chatnoir. As you now know, the Northerners have been causing enough trouble in the world, and to see one where I found you, well, you can imagine my concern. The Chatnoir is the only one I knew of who could... well, take care of you, if you know what I mean.”

He paused to look at Noah, who stared back with a blank expression on his face.

“Anyway,” Grelgor continued, “you can imagine my surprise when I found you again by the river. I figured you managed to escape, but then when you told me you were going to the origin of the rivers, I knew there was something more to you than meets the eye.”

“Why? I mean, what’s so special about the origin of the rivers?” Noah asked.

“Northerners don’t know about the origin of the rivers. They don’t even know about the Chatnoir. So I knew the only way you would have known about it was if the Chatnoir told you, in which case you weren’t up to no good like most Northerners. I really should have recognized that something was different about you.”

Grelgor laughed and rubbed his face harshly with his hands, trying to clear away all the confusion and surprise of the moment.

Noah laughed, too. “I think you did know. You just didn’t realize how different ‘til now.”

They chuckled together, thinking back on all the moments that gave away Noah’s true identity. The joke was on Grelgor but both were incredibly relieved to know the truth of the matter.

“Where does that leave us now?” Noah asked, as they sat on the bare floor, not forgetting their current situation.

“We’ll get out of this somehow,” Grelgor sighed.

“You think so? How can you be sure?” Noah asked with little hope.

“We’ve come this far. It’d be a shame to let something like picking a stupid flower get in our way.”

“What if we offered to find another one, you know, replace the one I picked?” Noah suggested excitedly.

Grelgor thought for a moment. “You know, that just might work.”

Noah smiled. Renewed hope flooded over him.

“Then again, it might not.” Grelgor frowned and put his chin in his hand.

“Surely you know where to find another. If anyone could, it would be you!” Noah tried to be encouraging.

“Sure, I know where to find one. It’s convincing the council that we’ll bring it back once we do that’s the problem. And that’s if they haven’t already decided to make an example out of us.” Grelgor was deep in thought.

“They have to let us tell our side of the story though, don’t they? You even said, it’s that girl’s word against ours.” He was clinging to what optimism remained in his heart.

“Noah, these are finicky people. They’ll proclaim you guilty just for looking strange.”

He got up and started to pace the room. Noah just sat there, slumped over.

“I guess all we can do is wait then, huh?” Noah said sadly.

Grelgor stopped pacing. He looked at Noah, so small and frail, amazed that this boy managed to overcome so many obstacles so far. He didn’t like seeing Noah so defeated and struggled to think of something to take Noah’s mind off his worries.

Grelgor sat down in front of Noah. “Tell me about your world.”

Noah glanced up, a slight smile crossed his face, and he began to tell Grelgor all that he could about the wonder and excitement of Earth.

## CHAPTER 11

Noah talked for hours. Grelgor found it hard to keep up with him, but rarely asked questions so as not to distract Noah from his stories. He was so detailed about certain things that Grelgor could envision Noah's world as if he had seen it once in a dream.

"... and then, depending on where the moon is in relation to the planet, the tide will rise or fall." Noah knew all about how the stars and planets worked.

"Only two orbs. How odd." Grelgor stated in response to Noah's description of the sun and moon. "It's confusing, that one revolves around your world, while your world revolves around the other."

"Yeah, I guess I never thought of it being strange because that's just the way it is." Noah responded. "It's really pretty neat, though, the way it all works."

Grelgor paused for a moment. "What did you say you called your world?"

"Earth. My world is a planet called Earth."

He stopped, surprised with himself that he didn't know what Grelgor called his world. In all the time that he had been there, it was always referred to as 'our world' or 'this world.'

"What do you call yours?" Noah asked in return.

"It doesn't have a name." He stated it so matter of fact that Noah felt silly for asking. "We don't have names for our orbs, or changes in season, or anything else like that. These things just are. We simply describe worldly elements when referring to them. To name them implies that you can own them and you cannot own a world." He paused to ponder the matter a moment longer. "I never really thought about it any other way. I'm sure there is a lot to be learned from both of our worlds."

Before that moment, Grelgor was hardly interested in his world, let alone any other. He never stopped to notice the insignificant things or to question how or why they were the way they were.

"People think I'm strange in my world for wanting to know all about nature and the stars. But it's the little things and the big things that make any world so fascinating," Noah said.

Grelgor smiled. He found Noah to be a breath of fresh air. He had a different way of looking at things. He made Grelgor think. Even more, Noah made him appreciate all that he had taken for granted in his nameless world.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the lock clicking again. Both of them stood up and faced the door. With a rusty creak, it opened. The councilman in black stood before them with hands folded in front of him looking strict and lifeless.

"Your presence is requested in the council chambers," he said dryly, "both of you. Now follow me."

He turned and walked down the long hallway. Noah and Grelgor scurried closely behind. Noah's palms sweat and he

tried hard to unclench his jaw. He looked up at Grelgor, who walked beside him, searching for reassurance that things were going to be okay. The knots in Noah's stomach made it difficult to concentrate.

They turned a corner and approached thick wooden doors. The councilman raised his fist and pounded on the door three times. The force of his blows echoed throughout the hallway, bouncing off the stone walls and into the high, vaulted ceiling.

The doors opened revealing a large room filled to the brim with Northern folk of all calibers. Sitting across a long bench were the other members of the council, including the Grand Chancellor. The councilman led them to the foot of a podium that stood in the center of the bench.

"You shall wait here for the duration of the trial," he instructed before returning to his seat on the bench.

Noah inched closer to Grelgor. The Grand Chancellor stood and approached the podium. The room was silent.

"Here before us stand the accused. After much deliberation, the council has thusly rendered these prisoners **GUILTY** of the crime of picking a disontrance flower in the outer gardens," announced the Chancellor.

Noah's jaw dropped.

"They will be sentenced to stand before the muck squad where they will receive due punishment."

A great clamor of approval arose in the chamber room. Noah however, was not about to give up.

"Excuse me, your honor, but I find it unfair that you would deny us a fair trial! You haven't even heard our side of the story! I demand a retrial!" Noah spoke with such authority that it stunned the Chancellor.

"You dare oppose the decision of the council?" he asked indignantly.

“Indeed I do!” replied Noah. “We deserve to be heard as well.”

The Chancellor looked at him blankly for a moment. His brow furrowed, then relaxed as he stated to this pesky boy, “Very well. You may have a retrial...”

Noah felt triumphant. He smiled and stood tall despite the smug look on the Chancellor’s face.

“...if you can find someone to represent you. You see, boy,” the Chancellor whispered, leaning forward, “no one in the Northern City would dare represent a filthy boy and his slave during a retrial when the council had already deemed them guilty.”

He stood back and looked out to the crowd of Northerners gathered within the chamber. “I ask anyone willing to speak for these criminals to step forward and be sworn in as their representation.”

Silence. Not even a whisper could be heard among the crowd. Noah closed his eyes and his heart fell to the floor.

“I will represent those who stand accused.”

The crowd gasped.

Noah’s eyes flew open! That voice! It sounded so familiar.

“Professor?” questioned the Chancellor. “You wish to represent these criminals?”

“If I may, your honor, I will speak for the accused at this trial.”

Noah scanned the crowd. His eyes clamped on an older gentleman dressed in a finely woven suit. His salt and pepper hair was combed neatly back and he stood with great dignity.

“Very well,” answered the Chancellor. “You may stand by your clients as their representation. Approach the council.”

The man stepped forth and made his way to the podium.

The closer he got, the stranger Noah felt. The man looked so familiar, but surely, there was no way that Noah could have known him. Then it struck him. The man was clean-shaven and pristine as the rest of them, but he bore a stunning resemblance to Mr. Porter!

Noah's heart raced as the man drew near. The man didn't just look like Mr. Porter, he was Mr. Porter! Noah had so many questions and so many things to tell him, he nearly exploded with excitement. Mr. Porter made eye contact with him and winked. When he reached the podium, he took his place beside Noah and faced the council.

"Professor, are you certain you wish to do this?" asked the Chancellor.

"I am. Now if I may see the report documenting the series of events leading to the apprehension of the accused?" He held his hand out in the direction of the council.

The Chancellor grimaced, but reluctantly handed him a document. Mr. Porter leafed through the papers, occasionally nodding or placing his finger on his chin.

"I believe these accused are innocent and am ready to present proof of that innocence," he stated.

"I see," grunted the Chancellor. "And what proof have you?" he asked.

"The very lack of it, your honor," Mr. Porter replied confidently. "If my clients truly picked the flower you say they picked, then where is the flower that stands between these accused and their release?"

"That is a pertinent question, professor, but I'm afraid we do not have the evidence you require," the Chancellor answered.

"Then I ask that the prisoners be placed in my responsibility until you can furnish such evidence against them

and we can continue this trial.” He smiled triumphantly at the council.

The Chancellor’s throat tightened.

“As you wish, professor. But I am holding you absolutely responsible for any and everything that this boy and his slave say and do.” He frowned.

“I understand,” replied Mr. Porter, “and I accept full responsibility for them.” He turned to Noah and Grelgor. “If you would...” he motioned them to follow, to which they gladly obliged. “Good day, council. I await your calling upon the discovery of any evidence you may find.” He smiled and half bowed before turning and leading the prisoners out of the council’s chamber.

Noah was very careful to remain quiet until they were well out of that area of the Northern City. Mr. Porter took them to an abandoned underground tunnel that led to what he called a secret lair. Once inside the tunnel, they were safe to talk.

“I know you have a lot of questions, Noah, and I fully intend to explain myself,” said Mr. Porter.

“Wait,” interrupted Grelgor, “you know each other?”

“This is Mr. Porter, the friend I was looking for when I first met you!” Noah exclaimed.

“I thought you said you weren’t from this world?” he asked suspiciously.

“Neither is he!” said Noah.

“Well, that’s not entirely true, I’m afraid,” replied Mr. Porter.

“What? But I, then how, but you...” Noah stammered.

“Allow me to explain,” he offered, holding his hand up to calm Noah’s exasperation.

“Yes, please do,” Grelgor interjected, not happy.

“I am from this world, Noah. I am a professor of science here. I chose to visit your world to study the life and habits of you and your creatures to see if I could find a solution to the ailments of our world,” he explained.

“You were a spy?” Noah questioned.

“No, I was only there to learn. I have been studying the interquadrilant planes of existence for some time now and discovered a way to jump between them into other worlds. I have been to many different places, searching for a cure to the destruction occurring here.”

“What destruction?” Noah asked, still confused and feeling betrayed.

“There are many things you do not know about our world, Noah, but trust me when I say, I am only trying to help.”

“What were you looking for in my world?” Noah questioned.

“Were you planning to bring more outside creatures into this city? Sounds more to me like you were planning to add to the problem,” accused Grelgor.

“Not at all,” Mr. Porter replied with patience. “The problems of our world run even deeper than the intermixing of creatures and vegetation that do not belong together.” Mr. Porter shook his head.

“How do you mean?” asked Noah, noticing the sincerity in Mr. Porter’s voice.

“The problem certainly started when the Northerners began to integrate things that didn’t belong in the city, but only worsened when they realized how complicated it was to keep these things alive.”

“Go on,” said Grelgor, curious with what the professor had

to say.

“As you know, every plant and creature has a link to its natural part of our world. Without their native environments, the creatures would surely die. Instead of letting nature be, the Northerners chose to bring these other habitats to the city.”

“This is nothing new, professor,” Grelgor stated impatiently.

“How do you think they maintain these habitats, sir?” the professor asked Grelgor.

“The name is Grelgor. And I don’t know,” he retorted.

“They need the rivers for that.” Mr. Porter was trying to be patient, but Grelgor’s mistrust of him was apparent.

“We’ve seen the shops that sell the river water,” interjected Noah, trying to keep the peace.

“Indeed,” replied the professor. “In the beginning, they would send the hunters out to collect barrels full of it from every river. But soon enough the hunters realized what a profit they could make, and started to demand a price far higher than what the council was willing to pay,” he explained.

“So this is all the council’s fault!” Noah exclaimed.

“Mostly,” Mr. Porter answered. “But that, unfortunately, is only half of the matter. Instead of bringing the rivers to the city, the council discovered a way to make the river water here in the Northern City!”

“Well, that doesn’t sound so terrible. At least it keeps the hunters away from the rivers, right?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, but it sends them after something much more important,” Grelgor said, realizing where the professor’s explanation was going. “They’re hunting crandelum.”

“Precisely,” answered Mr. Porter.

“What are crandelum?” asked Noah.

“You call them flutterers,” said Grelgor, patting Noah on the head.

“Oh... but what would the hunters want with them?” he asked.

“Crandelum are the most important creatures in our world.” Mr. Porter explained, looking at Noah. “They are a part of the life-force.”

Noah didn’t understand.

“What do you mean? How?”

“These creatures feed the mother trees,” Grelgor said.

“Yeah,” Noah interrupted, “I’ve seen one or two get caught by the pods.”

“Yes. The mother trees create tree colonies that have the crandelum pods on them. The trees share the nourishment they get from these creatures with the mother tree. But the mother tree cannot consume the crandelum dust. In order to get rid of the dust, the trees have to cleanse themselves. They do this by flushing their systems. The result, Noah, is our rivers.”

Mr. Porter could see Noah’s mind working, trying to put it all together.

Mr. Porter continued, “The colonies’ roots are all interlocked with the mother tree’s. With all of the trees cleansing themselves, constantly, our rivers are able to survive. And as you have seen, life in our world depends on these rivers.”

Noah took a moment to digest the new information.

“So the trees don’t feed from the river, they make it!” It was fascinating to Noah. “It doesn’t work that way where I come from. Its just the opposite, the river feeds the trees, and the trees create food for our creatures.”

Grelgor looked at Noah, puzzled, “Our worlds are very

different indeed.”

Noah thought about the flutterers he had seen in the cages.

“But how is that a problem? I mean, I don’t like the idea of someone keeping the flutterers all caged up, but there are so many in the forest, it shouldn’t matter if the hunters capture a few.”

“There aren’t nearly as many as you think. The crandelum used to be everywhere. One could not step without fear of crushing one under foot. Now, they are scarce, and those that remain spend most of their time in hiding.” Mr. Porter’s concern was evident.

“What’s happening to all of them?”

“The hunters are trapping too many of them.” Mr. Porter turned to Noah.

“Can’t they let them go once they are done with them?” Noah asked.

“Most of the crandelum don’t make it through the dedusting process.” Mr. Porter shook his head. And if they do, it is unlikely that they will find their way back to their native land. You see, each crandelum belongs in a different part of our world. The green ones come from the west, the red ones from the north...”

“The yellow from the east!” Noah interjected.

“Yes. You see the connection between the crandelum and the rivers now.”

“But I saw red ones in the east, too.” Noah was getting confused again.

“That is because the crandelum are being forced out of their native areas. They flee into other lands. This, too, creates a problem.”

Noah could tell it was a much more serious situation than

he ever could have imagined.

“The crandelum are different in color because they carry different nutrients. The nutrients they carry depend on where they are from, and the rivers reflect that. Because the crandelum are different, the rivers are different. If red crandelum begin feeding the mother tree of the yellow river, it will change the river.”

Noah was still confused. “But isn’t it better to have a different river than no river at all?”

“Not in this land. Many of the creatures that live along the rivers depend on that river and its nutrients to survive. We are special. We can drink from any river and enjoy the nourishment it contains. Other creatures cannot. If the yellow river becomes red, then the creatures who depend on the yellow river will cease to be.”

Noah thought of the little squishy bugs he found by the tree along the yellow river and how terrible it would be if such an interesting creature became extinct because its life source disappeared. He also thought of the dinosaurs and mammoths and other creatures that no longer existed on his planet and wondered if something similar might have happened to them.

Noah realized that soon, the nameless world and all its creatures might cease to exist. He wished he could help, but he could barely comprehend everything Mr. Porter was explaining. He knew it was a very complicated situation and an even more complicated world in which it was happening.

“Did you find a solution to this problem in my world?” Noah asked.

“No. I’m afraid your world is in far worse condition than ours,” he replied.

Noah was shocked to hear such a thing. “What do you mean, it’s worse?”

“The problems in this world have only begun. Your people have long been destroying your world. It will take much effort to repair the damage done in your world. Right now, few care to try. Extinction of many of your creatures has already occurred and many more are on the verge of no longer existing. I hope for your sake that something is done before that happens.”

Mr. Porter was right. Noah was feeling sorry for the people and creatures of the nameless world, thinking how tragic it would be to lose such a magical place; but his world was dying, too!

He thought of the people who hunt animals for their furs or ivory, of people who use animals for testing household products and how humans have destroyed important marshlands and forests just to put up shopping centers or parking lots. He knew about it and learned about it, but never thought he could do anything to prevent it. To him, it was just another thing that had always been. It broke his heart to think that one day mankind might very well obliterate everything that makes earth so special.

And for what? Another outlet mall or new and improved ways to clean the kitchen sink? Noah felt sick because of his ignorance.

“Let me help you,” he pleaded. “I can’t let your world turn into what my world has become.”

Mr. Porter looked at Noah and smiled. “There is little you can do.”

“Well what are you doing?” he questioned with bitterness. “Going to different worlds, trying to find a solution. Think of all the time you’ve wasted in other worlds instead of focusing on the solutions here!” Noah’s hands trembled.

“Actually, I haven’t wasted any time.”

“What do you mean? You were in my world for at least six months! That’s plenty of time if you ask me.”

“Actually, Noah,” Mr. Porter explained, “when I leave this world, time stops.” Noah looked at him with disbelief. “Well, it doesn’t stop,” he clarified, “but the time I spend away passes, while no time passes here.”

“You mean if you left right now you could be gone for years, and no one would notice because when you got back, it would be like you never left?” Noah asked in amazement.

“Exactly.”

“Does it work the same for me?” Noah hoped with all his heart that it would.

“Well, I can’t say,” Mr. Porter answered reluctantly. “I’ve never gone back to a world I’ve crossed into after returning home. But I suppose it’s possible. I did design the key to work that way.” Mr. Porter thought about it for a moment. “I guess we’ll never know.”

“We will once I get home!” Noah interjected.

Mr. Porter suddenly understood that Noah had, indeed, managed to use the key to get to this world.

“By golly... I didn’t stop to realize that you traveled through an inter-dimensional portal as well! I suppose I was so wrapped up in what’s been going on here and hearing about your trial that I never stopped to wonder what you were doing here in the first place! I don’t understand. How could you have used the key? It takes a physical link to our world to open its portal.”

He patted his pockets, pulling out round spectacles. He placed them on his nose to better inspect Noah.

The spectacles! Noah reached into his pocket and pulled out the twisted pair of glasses. He held them up to Mr. Porter who reached out and took them from Noah, recognizing that

they were the pair he had lost in Noah's world.

"I found them by the old oak in the back of the school yard. They were already broken, but I didn't want them to get lost," Noah explained.

Mr. Porter smiled as he looked at the spectacles. "My boy, you did right." He rustled the hair on top of Noah's head and put the dented spectacles in his pocket. "Very well, then. I think we are better off continuing this discussion over dinner."

"I am certainly willing to do that," Grelgor interjected.

"Me, too!" shouted Noah.

There were still many unanswered questions and much to figure out. Noah and Grelgor were tired, famished and overwhelmed. Food and drink were a much-welcomed solution for the time being.

Mr. Porter led them to the entrance of the secret lair. Inside was very cozy, like a country cottage filled with antiques and strange knickknacks lining the shelves. There was a fireplace and a bookshelf filled with books from hundreds of different worlds. Noah scanned the titles, noticing that beside a book titled "Fel Milten Dis Ilgon" was a copy of the book about meteors that Mr. Porter had suggested Noah read. He reached into his backpack and pulled out the soiled version his mother had bought for him. He compared the covers and smiled.

Grelgor plopped himself into one of the easy chairs and propped his feet on the coffee table in the center of the room. Mr. Porter went to the kitchen and brewed some tea-like herbs in a small, copper kettle.

"I am anxious to introduce you to some friends of mine," he called out to Noah and Grelgor. "I think you might enjoy meeting them."

"What kind of friends," Grelgor asked, sitting up in the

chair.

“No one to worry about. A few more outcasts like yourselves.”

“You make a habit of hiding criminals?” Grelgor asked sarcastically.

“Only ones who I feel deserve rescuing,” Mr. Porter replied.

“What happened that you had to save them,” Noah asked, sitting in a chair next to Grelgor’s.

“Let’s just say they believe in the same things I do.”

“Were they on trial for picking flowers, too?” Noah asked. He would feel much better knowing he wasn’t the only one in that situation.

“Not exactly, but close enough.”

“Were they ever convicted?” asked Grelgor.

“Oh no. One of these days, the council will learn to gather evidence before placing someone on trial, but until then, I’ll continue to speak for those who have no evidence against them.”

“I see,” said Grelgor unamused.

“They are almost always guilty, but the council never follows up on them.”

“So, Grelgor and I will never go back to trial?” Noah asked hopefully.

“Is there a disontrance flower laying about with your fingerprints on it?”

Noah looked at Grelgor and smiled. “No.”

“Then I think it’s safe to say that you are free to go. Of course, you’ll have to stay here with me for a while, until the council forgets about my promise to watch over you.”

“But, we are supposed to leave in two days,” protested Noah.

Mr. Porter stopped what he was doing in the kitchen and turned to Noah.

“And just where do you intend to go?”

“Nowhere,” interrupted Grelgor. “We just have plans to meet with someone.”

Grelgor still did not trust Mr. Porter. After all, he was a Northerner, and even though he saved them from a council punishment, he still might be up to no good. It wasn’t worth risking the secret of the origin of the rivers.

“Right,” Noah agreed hesitantly. He didn’t like to lie, but the look in Grelgor’s eye made it clear that their plans were better left unknown.

“Well, I may have to accompany you on this trip then, just in case.” He smiled and returned to his preparation of dinner.

Noah and Grelgor exchanged a glance. They would have to wait until Mr. Porter was out of sight to discuss a plan of action. In the meantime, they would humor him.

“That’s fine,” stated Grelgor, “but I’m sure they aren’t your type of people.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. I manage to find a friend in anyone.” Mr. Porter whistled with the tea kettle. “Herbal drink, anyone?”

Noah and Grelgor accepted a cup of tea and munched on crackers. Mr. Porter sat with them.

“Now, you managed to get here, Noah, but how do you intend to get back?”

Noah looked at Grelgor. “I know someone who might be able to help him,” Grelgor told Mr. Porter.

“Fascinating! Is this who you will be meeting later? I’d

love to discuss their methods of science. Perhaps together we could develop a remarkable system of travel.”

“It’s unlikely. For all we know, they will refer us to you, being the only one who really knows how to travel to other worlds,” Grelgor replied in a manner that would suggest he didn’t want to discuss it anymore.

“I doubt they would refer you to me. You’re the only ones who know my secret. Well, you and a few others and I’m sure if you had plans to meet with the others who know, I would have heard about it by now.”

Mr. Porter was a peculiar man. He spoke as if he were simple, but the look in his eye gave away that he was much smarter than he let on. It made Grelgor even more wary of him.

“Well, no matter,” Noah interrupted, “I’ll get home somehow.”

“That’s the spirit. I’d send you myself if I still had the key,” he offered.

Noah had not even thought of that, but it wouldn’t have done any good if he had, as he didn’t have it with him either.

“I am still rather perplexed at your arrival,” Mr. Porter continued. “How did you manage to get here?”

“I found your key. I didn’t know it was your key, but I found it all the same and accidentally put it together. The next thing I remember, I woke up in the middle of a forest clearing.”

Noah proceeded to tell Mr. Porter his adventures in the world, leaving out bits about the Chatnoir and the crossing of the rivers.

He also told him about the meteor shower and how he enjoyed watching it. Grelgor seemed fascinated by their discussion of the shower. Mr. Porter was able to see it because he had been in Noah’s world, but things like that didn’t happen

in the nameless world. Grelgor had a lot of questions. Both Mr. Porter and Noah were anxious to share all they could with him.

They talked through dinner and into the evening until it was far past anyone's bedtime. Noah fell asleep in the chair while Mr. Porter and Grelgor continued to talk.

Noah slept well that night, while Grelgor stayed awake, keeping a close eye on Noah and the door that led to Mr. Porter's bedroom. Grelgor enjoyed the conversation and was very fascinated with all of the professor's adventures, but he still didn't trust him.

Mr. Porter awoke early the next morning. He tried unsuccessfully not to wake Noah and Grelgor.

"My apologies. I am meeting with the friends I told you about, which is why I am up so early," he explained. "We usually meet before the city wakes. It's safer that way. I'd like you both to come with me."

"Safer?" asked Noah.

"Let's just say if anyone knew we were meeting, I would need someone to represent me in front of the council." He winked and scurried into the kitchen to make morning tea and scones.

They ate a light breakfast, as it was early in the day for real hunger to strike. Noah had time to clean up and look more presentable for the meeting. He had not seen himself in a mirror since the Dobrim City and was embarrassed by his disheveled appearance. It had been several days since he last had a proper bath.

Once everyone was ready, they followed Mr. Porter to another secret room that connected to the underground tunnels.

"The rebels used these tunnels during the city battle as a

way to travel from place to place. Luckily, the Northerners don't know about them, so we have been able to use them to this day to meet in safety," Mr. Porter told them.

They went through a door that led to a small room inside the tunnels. The ceiling was low and there wasn't a lot of space, but it worked just fine as a meeting place. There were five Northerners and a handful of other creatures that Noah didn't recognize. One of them looked like a rock but had a shape to it that resembled an antelope that could walk on two legs. Another one was small and furry. If it stood on its hands and curled up its legs, it looked like a pile of straw. Some of the creatures were rodent-like, while others were closer to humans, like Grelgor.

One by one more creatures and Northerners arrived until there were over two-dozen in the small room.

"We're waiting for Joiben to arrive before we start our meeting."

It wasn't long after Mr. Porter spoke that the door opened and in walked one of the Northern soldiers.

Grelgor shot out of his seat, hitting his head on the ceiling.

"It's alright, Grelgor," Mr. Porter reassured, "he's one of us."

"He's also the soldier who arrested us in the tavern!" Grelgor complained.

"I know," Mr. Porter replied. "How do you think I found you?"

The soldier smiled and took a seat. "Sorry if our first encounter was of an unpleasant nature, my friend, but I had to remain undercover."

Grelgor scowled and eased back into his chair, keeping a close eye on the soldier.

“Very well, then. Looks like we’re all here.” Mr. Porter sat down. “Let me begin this meeting by introducing you to two very special friends of mine, Noah and Grelgor. Noah, Grelgor, these are the rebels.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Noah cordially. Grelgor grunted.

“It’s nice to see we have more people believing in our cause,” said Joiben. “We can always use more allies.”

“What cause is that?” questioned Grelgor, who was very uncomfortable being crowded into a small room with so many Northerners.

“To save our world, of course,” Joiben responded, baffled that Grelgor would have to ask.

“I thought you might appreciate knowing there were others out there with your passion to stop the Northerners from destroying our world,” Mr. Porter added.

“And exactly what, other than hopping to different worlds, are you doing to stop them?” Grelgor asked sarcastically.

As far as he was concerned, they were just a bunch of outcasts with nothing better to do with their time.

“For starters,” began the rock creature, “we do what we can to protect all creatures from the hunters.”

“We inform our own people of what is going on. That way we can band together and stop the hunters from capturing as many creatures,” added the straw creature.

“In fact,” stated a scaly, walking serpent, “we recently stopped the hunters from capturing a plaxar mare in the western plains.”

Noah’s heart stopped, but he tried not to look disappointed.

“Although,” the serpent continued, “we are almost certain that they will try to capture another in the near future. But it was still one plaxar saved from a terrible fate, and that is

something,” he boasted.

Although Noah did not like the hunters or what they did to the creatures they caught, he was depending on them to get him home. He hoped the rebels would not interfere next time they were after a plaxar. He sighed with worry and conflict.

“I’m glad to see that you, at least, are worried for these creatures,” stated the rock creature, acknowledging Noah’s emotion, “unlike your friend here.”

“You don’t know me or my concerns,” Grelgor growled.

“Alright,” interrupted Joiben. “We are not here to argue amongst ourselves. We are here to make a difference. Now let’s get down to business.”

“The hunters have been more active than ever before, but we have been able to release several of their captives or prevent captures altogether with the help of some of the native creatures. Unfortunately, native creatures do not trust those of us from the city,” reported one of the Northerners. She had scraps of paper and had been recording the meeting in code writing.

“Even those who do trust us are hesitant to help for fear of being captured themselves,” added a small, spiky creature.

Mr. Porter stood up. “We need a plan to put the hunters out of commission for good.”

“What do you propose we do? They are beyond reason and have little concern for what they are doing to the creatures of this world,” said Joiben.

“What about the council?” asked Noah. “They are the ones sending the hunters out, right? Has anyone ever talked to them?”

“They are the ones who have put all of this into motion. There is no use trying to talk to them. Anyone known to think differently than their ways is immediately imprisoned as a rebel

traitor,” explained Joiben.

Noah never understood how people could be so careless and selfish in that way. He wondered if the council even cared that they were destroying the rest of the world as well.

The meeting lasted for hours. Ideas were discussed and dismissed, while other notions were agreed to and committees were put in place. Noah couldn't help but notice that most of the plans that were agreed upon during the meeting happened to somehow involve the other creatures of the world. It seemed to Noah that if other creatures were willing to get involved, then perhaps they could regain control of their lands and stand up to the hunters and the Northerners.

Then it dawned on him. When Noah and Grelgor were in the market place, the ratio of slaves to Northern folk was nearly three to one.

“Why not get the creatures held as slaves and servants to rise up against the Northerners?” Noah interjected into the conversation.

“What did you say?” asked Joiben, who was taken back by such a bold suggestion.

“Well, you seem to be willing to travel all over the world to recruit the help of the creatures against the hunters. So why not get the creatures held captive in the city to fight back as well?”

Noah knew that, in nature, things like that happen all the time. One ant against a scorpion is doomed, but an army of ants against a scorpion will overpower it and win.

“Think about it. If you recruited all the creatures in the city, as well as the creatures currently being held captive by the hunters, then you've got an army against the Northern City.”

“The kid has a point,” added Grelgor. “The only people who can really control the creatures are the hunters anyway and even they are no match for thousands of motivated prisoners.”

“What about those who wear the shock collars?” asked the rock creature.

“We could disable the main control unit. Joiben would have access to that as a soldier,” answered one of the Northerners.

“It sounds like a good idea,” stated Joiben, “but it’s a challenge in itself just to convince any creature to trust us. Besides, only a handful of creatures even speak the same language we do. It would be nearly impossible to communicate a plan to all of them.”

“There isn’t anyone who knows how to talk to all of them?” Noah asked, even though it did seem an unlikely idea.

“Well, there are the Shooskas,” said the serpent. “They speak all languages. But they don’t trust any creature, let alone anyone from the Northern City, rebels included.”

The Shooskas! Noah nearly fell over with excitement.

“You mean to tell me that the Shooskas can talk to any creature?”

“Yes, Shooskas inhabit the entire world. They are very intelligent creatures. But like I said, they don’t trust anyone.” The serpent didn’t like the idea of wasting time on trying to recruit the Shooskas for help.

“They trust me!” exclaimed Noah.

“What do you mean? That is, how do you know?” asked Mr. Porter.

“I rescued one from a fallen pod and healed its leg. His clan threw a celebration for my nice deed. I even met with Bar-rig, their leader.”

It was hard for Noah to contain his excitement. The entire room looked at him in disbelief.

“No one has ever gotten that close to a Shooska and lived

to tell about it,” challenged a Northerner.

“Why don’t you believe me?” Noah asked offended.

“The Shooskas may be small, but when threatened, they put out a deadly, venomous bite,” Mr. Porter explained.

Noah’s heart skipped a beat recalling the little Shooska’s snapping mouth as he tried to free it. It had been, once again, to Noah’s advantage to be ignorant of such things.

“Besides, even if what you say is true, there is no way that you’ll find the same Shooska clan,” stated the rock creature.

“But I have! In fact, the very Shooska I saved from the pod is being held captive in the hunters’ cages, right now.” Noah searched the faces in the room for some sign of belief.

“How do you know this?” questioned one of the Northerners.

“I saw him with my own eyes!”

“And just what were you doing in the hunters’ realm?” Joiben asked with concern. The tone in his voice grew cold.

“We stumbled upon them while hiding from you and the rest the soldiers,” Grelgor interjected. It was a likely excuse and, at that point, the only one they had.

Joiben turned to the others. “We did find them in a tavern not far from there.”

“And you didn’t get caught snooping around the area?” asked the serpent.

“We didn’t linger,” replied Grelgor.

“Well, this information does change a few things,” stated Mr. Porter. “It might be worth looking into. If we could pull off such a plan, we just might be able to regain control of the Northern City.”

“How are we supposed to get the boy back into the hunters’ realm to talk with the Shooskas?” asked the straw creature.

“Leave that to me,” said Grelgor. “I can get him in there. The rest of you work on the creatures in the city. Let them know what’s going on. We’ll take care of the rest.”

It was a long shot, but the rebels were willing to trust Noah and Grelgor to instill the help of the Shooskas. They assigned tasks to various members of the rebels. The straw creature and two Northerners were to act as slave and masters in order to pass along the information to the city creatures. Joiben would be in charge of disabling the shock control unit. The rock creature was sent out to inform the creatures of the black market to stand ready, while the serpent headed to the borders of the city to spread the plan. Mr. Porter, it was his job to distract the council. The rest lay on Noah and Grelgor’s shoulders.

## CHAPTER 12

The rebels gave Noah new clothes to wear and Grelgor a cloak to use as a disguise while traveling through the city. Noah packed his old clothes into his backpack and flung it over his shoulder. They were instructed to wait until nightfall, after the yellow orb had set, but before the white orb rose above the horizon, to make their way across the city into the realm of the hunters. Lucky for them, the rebels did not ask just how Grelgor planned to get Noah to the hunters without seeming suspicious.

“We already know that they lost the plaxar they were hunting, so chances are they haven’t caught another yet,” Grelgor explained to Noah as they made their way quietly through the city. “They don’t know that we know that though, so as far as they are concerned, we’re coming to collect our dues. In exchange for the delay, we’ll demand the Shooska as a holding payment. That way, we’ll have time to inform him of our plan.”

“What if they won’t let us have him?” Noah asked, wanting to be prepared for anything.

“You’ll have to talk to him in the cage. You can do that while I talk to the hunter twins, act like you’re picking one out. That way we’ll know if they’re even interested in helping.”

Grelgor stopped and pinned himself against the side of a nearby building. Noah followed suit. The wind rustled the leaves of a corner plant. They waited and listened. The coast was clear.

It wasn’t until they reached the black market that they felt safe walking at a normal, relaxed pace. Grelgor removed the hood from his head and Noah unzipped his jacket. They were both hot and thirsty, but the day was just breaking and nothing was open for business.

“Let’s just get this over with,” sighed Grelgor as they made their way to the hunters’ campsite.

Again, Noah was bothered to see all of the caged animals, especially knowing their likely fate. He spotted the flutterers. They were in even worse shape than the last time he passed by. Noah frantically searched for the cage that held the Shooskas. When he spotted it, he gave Grelgor a signal and hurried over to it. Grelgor in turn marched determined to the site of the hunters.

Noah crouched behind the fountain until Grelgor was out of site. Then he quietly made his way to the Shooskas, trying not to startle or alarm any of the creatures in the cages. The Shooskas were in terrible shape. Noah wondered if some were even alive anymore. He fought back tears and reached into his pockets. He saved some biscuits from breakfast and brought them to give the Shooskas. He knew they would need food. He held out his hand and tapped the bars of the cage quietly to get their attention.

One of the Shooskas looked up and cowered away. Noah laid the food on the floor of the cage and backed away. The Shooska gathered courage and quickly snatched the food. He

immediately dispersed bits of it to all the Shooskas in the cage. Noah could hear their little mouths working on the food and hoped that it would be enough to last them.

He waited for a moment before approaching the cage again. The Shooskas, although wary of him were curious at his generosity.

“I’m looking for the little Shooska with the mended leg,” Noah whispered. The Shooskas looked at one another, hesitant to respond. “Please, I know him. I am his friend,” he pleaded.

There was some shuffling and a few squeaks. From the back of the cage, one of the Shooskas carried forth the frail and starving body of Noah’s little friend. He was in terrible shape.

Noah quickly ran to the fountain and scooped up a handful of dirty water. He carefully brought it back to the cage and poured what he managed not to spill into its mouth. The Shooska holding him set him down before Noah. His friend opened his eyes ever so slightly and smiled.

“No-ah,” he sighed. The other Shooskas looked at Noah in awe.

“You, No-ah?” asked the Shooska that had held Noah’s friend. “We hear of No-ah. No-ah Shooska friend.”

Noah smiled and tried to hide the tears from his eyes. “I am here to help you, but I need your help to do that.”

“What can Shooskas do?” it asked, cocking its head to the side.

“There is a group of us who want to free you and the rest of the creatures that have been captured by the hunters. But we need you to help us tell them our plan,” Noah explained.

“But we here, in trapped,” it whispered back. “We not reach all creatures dis away.”

“I know. We’re going to take one of you with us. My

friend is negotiating with the hunters now. Will you help us?" Noah pleaded.

The Shooska looked cautiously at Noah, then at the little Shooska with the mended leg.

"No-ah help me," the little Shooska said. "Now me help No-ah."

Noah wanted so badly to get them all out of there, but knew he had to stick to the plan so that in due time, they would all be free.

The Shooska looked Noah in the eye and demanded, "You take dis one," pointing to the little Shooska. "Heal him again, den we know you true. Den we help."

"Agreed."

Noah rushed to find Grelgor. He found him at the campsite discussing the Shooska as collateral for the promised plaxar. The hunters were reluctant, but finally agreed so long as Grelgor promised to return the Shooska upon receipt of the plaxar.

Noah met them half way.

"I have picked out the Shooska we want." He led the hunters to the cage and pointed to his little friend. "I want that one."

"Don't be a fool," replied one of the hunters. "That one is nearly dead. You'll be lucky if it makes it home with you. Take that one instead," said the other, pointing to the Shooska that made the deal with Noah.

"No! I want that one. What do you care if it's nearly dead? It's worth less than a stronger one." Noah spoke firmly.

"He's got a point," one hunter said to his brother. "Besides, if it dies, then we don't have to give them the plaxar."

"Noah," Grelgor interrupted, "let's take the stronger one."

“No, I want this one,” he replied.

Grelgor bent down to look Noah in the face.

“This is not time to choose favorites. Let’s take the stronger one,” he said between his teeth.

“We can’t, this is the deal they made,” he whispered. “If we can save this one, they’ll help us. It’s the only way to gain their trust.”

Grelgor gritted his teeth. “Fine.” He stood up. “We’ll take that one,” he said pointing to the little Shooska.

The hunters opened the cage sending all but the little Shooska fleeing to the edges. They grabbed the little Shooska and tossed him to Noah. He gently caught him and cradled him in his arms. The little Shooska reached up and touched Noah’s face, smiling.

“No-ah, Shooska hero,” he whispered before fading into sleep.

“We’ll be back in three more days,” Grelgor snarled. “Have our plaxar ready.”

Noah looked back at the Shooskas as he and Grelgor left the realm of the hunters. The Shooska in the cage nodded his head. Noah knew that he had placed the life of the little Shooska in his hands and that the fate of the world now lay with this frail creature. Noah nodded back and hurried to the secret tunnels.

“This was your great plan?” exclaimed Joiben. “To bring back a near dead Shooska and nurse it back to health?”

“You don’t understand,” Noah protested, “it was the only way.”

“What if it doesn’t make it? Then all our work will be for nothing.” Joiben paced the room.

“We just have to make sure this Shooska doesn’t die!”

Noah was angry that Joiben was being closed-minded. The little Shooska had already made significant progress and it had only been one day. His energy was returning and he was able to stand for five minutes without trembling.

Mr. Porter made several batches of an herbal medicine mixed with the energizing liquid from the yellow river. Noah was hesitant to feed it to the little Shooska, uncertain that it could drink from the yellow river. But after strong reassurance that it would be okay, Noah nursed the little Shooska back to health with Mr. Porter’s remedies.

In the meantime, the Shooska was introduced to the rebels and informed of their plan.

“We need you to explain to the other creatures that we’re going to set them free,” Noah explained to him. “But you must tell them that in order for this to work, they must stand up against the hunters and the Northerners. Without their help, this will all be in vain.”

The little Shooska nodded his head between spoonfuls of medicine. Joiben was growing more frustrated.

“He doesn’t understand. This is just a waste of time.”

“I do stand under,” replied the Shooska. “You no trust you own plan.”

Joiben stopped pacing the room and looked at the little Shooska.

“I trust in No-ah. You need trust in No-ah, too. If no, dat will be failure.”

Never had Joiben been put in his place by any creature, let alone a frail little Shooska. He felt ashamed that it was willing to risk itself for their cause when Joiben wasn’t even willing to believe it could work.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the Shooska. “You’re right. I need to have more faith in this plan.”

“It work. I feel working.”

It smiled and hummed a calming tune. The sound if its little voice rang through the tunnels and through the Northern City. It was such a lovely tune that no one bothered to wonder where it was coming from, but smiled instead at how peaceful it sounded. Noah became lost in the melody of the Shooska. It was hypnotizing.

When the Shooska’s song ended, everyone felt at ease. There was a lot of work that needed to be done and the rebels had a renewed sense of hope that once and for all, the world would have a chance to be set straight again. If the rebels could take the Northern City back and the council be held responsible for their actions, then things might go back to the way they were. Crandelum would no longer be endangered and the trees could replenish the rivers, which in turn would feed the world. And creatures would no longer have to fear being captured or hunted or enslaved by the Northerners. Harmony would be restored.

It was a workable plan, but it would take a lot of trust and teamwork among the creatures in the city to make it come true. Noah hoped they were as willing as the little Shooska to stand up against the Northern folk. Time was important and Noah had little of that left in their world.

## CHAPTER 13

Three days had gone by. It was time to execute their plan in full force. The little Shooska was back to full strength, which was an amazing feat in itself and would surely prove to the rest of the creatures that the intentions behind their plan were for the good of everyone.

Noah and Grelgor were to take the little Shooska back to the hunters. There they would free the rest of the Shooskas so that they could spread the plan to all of the creatures in captivity. Mr. Porter decided to go with them, just in case they ran into any Northern soldiers or councilmen along the way. They dressed the Shooska as a slave so as not to draw unwanted attention their way.

The rest of the rebels stood ready for the signal. It was a grueling task, but they managed to inform each and every last servant in the Northern City of their plan and convince them to join in the efforts. Anticipation flooded the air as Noah, Grelgor, Mr. Porter and the little Shooska made their way to the realm of the hunters.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” asked Mr. Porter.

“We can only hope,” replied Grelgor.

“I still don’t understand why you told the hunters you would bring this Shooska back,” he questioned.

“It’s a little more complicated than we let on,” Grelgor revealed, knowing there would be no way to hide their other intentions with the hunters.

“How so?” Mr. Porter questioned.

“Do you remember the serpent discussing the hunters attempt to capture a plaxar?” Grelgor began.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with the Shooska?”

“The plaxar is for Noah. I asked them to capture one.” Grelgor found no use in lying anymore. A lot was about to happen and lies would only complicate matters.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? And what does Noah need with a plaxar?” he asked, upset with the last minute confession.

“I need it to get home,” Noah admitted. “Please trust me when I say I will set it free once I get to where I’m going and that we never had any intention of keeping that from you for long.”

Mr. Porter looked at Noah, whose sincerity was obvious.

“Very well, Noah. You’ve done more for us than I ever would have expected. The least I can do is trust you.” He smiled and patted Noah on the shoulder. “When will you be leaving us?” he asked with quiver in his voice.

“Sooner than you think,” was all Grelgor could tell him.

Mr. Porter let out a heavy sigh.

“Had I known, I would have made more of an effort to spend time with you, Noah. There is so much I would have liked to share.”

Noah forced a smile. “It’s okay. We’ve all been busy. Some things are more important.”

“You are important, Noah. Don’t ever think otherwise.” Mr. Porter cleared his throat. “And I’m very proud of you, son. You’ve done well.”

*Son.* Noah suddenly felt like he was saying good-bye to his father again. It was hard to remain strong and focused, knowing that he would never see Mr. Porter again. Regret flooded Noah. He wanted to talk more with Mr. Porter. He wanted to tell him about where he was going, how he felt of things back home and how much he appreciated all that Mr. Porter had done. His mind raced with ‘should haves and could haves.’ Once more, he wished he had more time, but knew that he did not.

Noah wanted to speak but the lump in his throat prevented any words from escaping his trembling lips.

Mr. Porter smiled. “I wish you the best of luck. And you, Grelgor, take care of him along the way.”

“I will,” he replied.

The four rebels continued swiftly through the market place. Upon reaching the black market they were able to pause and regain their wits. It was important that they work quickly to free the Shooska before the hunters realized what was happening. Grelgor needed to distract them while Noah and Mr. Porter focused on the cages.

They were nearing the edge of the black market just outside the realm of the hunters. Mr. Porter stopped.

“Things are about to become chaotic. I’m not sure if I will get the chance to give you a proper farewell before you go.”

Mr. Porter knew as well as Noah did that they would not be seeing each other again.

“I don’t think so,” Noah whispered.

He wished he could stay. He wanted nothing more than to know his plan worked and that the world would be saved. But he knew that he could not risk staying behind long enough to find out. If it didn't work, then he and Grelgor needed to be long gone before the council could arrest them again and squash any hopes of Noah ever going home.

"Right," said Mr. Porter. "Thank you, Noah, for all that you have done for us. Without you, none of this would be possible. You truly are a courageous young man."

Noah's eyes got misty. No one had ever called him a man before. He turned to Mr. Porter and gave him a hug.

"You have helped me, too, even before coming here. I want to thank you, for all that you have taught me. I'll never forget you."

He smiled and released his hold on Mr. Porter. The little Shooska grabbed hold of Noah's legs and hugged him good-bye, too.

"You Shooska hero, and me friend. Me thanks, No-ah." He gave Noah a big Shooska grin and nodded his little head.

Noah smiled and nodded back.

"Let's make this happen," Noah said with confidence. "This world is depending on us."

They marched into the realm of the hunters determined to free the creatures or die trying. Grelgor walked ahead to give them the all clear. Once among the cages, Noah hurried to the Shooska cage to free the rest of the clan. The little Shooska followed closely behind to let his comrades know the plan and to begin informing the rest of the creatures.

Noah had watched the hunters undo the lock of the Shooska cage and was able to open it with little effort while the little Shooska quickly relayed the plan to the other Shooskas. Noah opened the door of the cage and let the Shooskas free. They

immediately fled to the surrounding cages and squeaked, squawked or grumbled the plan to creatures of all sorts, each one nodding in agreement.

Noah and Mr. Porter followed the Shooskas to the cages, carefully unlocking each one, leaving the door closed and reminding them to wait for the signal. One by one the cages were opened and the creatures waited patiently for their move. Noah's stomach was in knots. He had never been so nervous in all his life. He hoped Grelgor could stall the hunters long enough for them to open all the cages.

Suddenly, Noah heard voices heading their way. It was Grelgor and the hunters.

"I want to see the Shooska before we give you the plaxar," one hunter said.

"I want to see the plaxar before I return the Shooska," Grelgor argued.

"A deal is a deal. No Shooska, no plaxar. I want to see the Shooska!"

"What's this?" exclaimed one of the hunters. "The cage is empty! What have you been up to you filthy Vegarion!" he yelled. "Gretchen will have your head for this!"

Noah had to act fast. Without the plaxar, he and Grelgor were stuck. He turned to follow the voices when he came face to face with Gretchen.

"You again?" she said. "What are you doing back here?" She studied Noah's face, which had turned white as a ghost.

He trembled with anxiety, hoping she wouldn't discover the missing locks. She looked at him suspiciously and scanned the area.

"Why you little vagrant! You've been messing with the locks!"

She snatched him by the collar of his shirt and marched straight for the other hunters.

Noah tried to yell, but the force of Gretchen's grip held his collar tightly around his neck. He squirmed, trying to break free from her but only succeeded in twisting himself up even more.

"Grelgor!" she bellowed, marching right for him. "I have something that belongs to you."

She threw Noah to the ground at Grelgor's feet. Noah coughed and gasped for air.

"Once wasn't enough for you, I see. You had to come back for more."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Grelgor dismissed.

"Don't play dumb with me, Vegarion. Your little pet was caught unlocking my cages!"

"You let the Shooskas go!" cried one of the twins.

"I knew it," responded the other.

"Shut up you fools! You're the ones who let him wander in here unattended in the first place. I should have locked you in the cages as well!" Her eyes burned with rage.

It was not because of the cages being unlocked or the missing Shooskas. It was because once again, Grelgor had made her the fool. She was not going to stand for it, not again.

"You want these creatures," she yelled, "then you'll have to kill me to get them!" She pulled out a dagger-like weapon and held it out in Grelgor's direction.

"Gretchen, don't," pleaded her brothers.

"Stay out of it," she spit. "I'll have my day and it will be with this beast."

Grelgor picked Noah up off the ground. "Go free the

others,” he whispered in his ear and pushed him out of the way.

Grelgor took a fighting stance and bared his teeth to Gretchen. Noah watched as she lunged in his direction and Grelgor, barely missing her blade, stepped out of her way. He was toying with her, but Noah still worried.

Grelgor turned his focus to Noah. “I said GO!” he yelled.

Noah turned and ran to the cages, unlocking each one, fumbling with his fingers and sweating up a storm. The creatures could sense that something wasn’t right which only caused them to stir with agitation in the opened cages. Screams and thuds from the fight rang throughout the realm. It made Noah’s head spin. He unlocked the last cage and ran to find Mr. Porter and the Shooskas.

He found the little Shooska crouching behind a cage, startled and uncertain of what was going on.

“Shooska!” Noah called out.

The little Shooska raised his head and ran over to Noah.

“I need your help again. I need you to help me find the plaxar.”

“Plaxar? I see no plaxar,” he responded.

“In all of these cages, you didn’t see one plaxar?” Noah asked feverishly.

“No, no plaxar here.”

“But the signal, the plaxar was the signal! If there is no plaxar how will anyone know it’s time?” Noah was in a panic. “Where is Mr. Porter?”

“Said he lefting to wait with rebels. He wait for signal.”

“We have to keep looking, come with me!” Noah took the hand of the Shooska and tossed him onto his back.

“Hold on to my bag!” he yelled and ran toward the campsite of the hunters.

The little Shooska held on as tight as he could while bouncing to and fro on Noah's back. They passed behind the cages that stood between them and the fight. Noah heard Gretchen yell, a thud and then Grelgor holler in pain.

"Grelgor!" Noah cried. He stopped in his tracks. "I have to help Grelgor."

The little Shooska slipped off Noah's back.

"I find plaxar," he said and scurried off between the cages.

Noah dashed through the opening to find Grelgor lying on the ground, blood seeping from his arm. One of Gretchen's blows caused a deep gash. She stood over him.

"You think you're so clever. Well, who's got the upper hand now?" She raised her dagger and aimed for Grelgor's chest.

Without thinking, Noah grabbed one of the rusty locks lying on the ground and ran toward her, screaming. She turned around just in time to catch the blunt end of the lock right between the eyes.

The force of the blow sent her spinning to the ground. She was out cold. The twins looked at Noah with mouths wide open in surprise. Without hesitation, they turned from the scene and ran deep into the ruins of the old city.

Noah ran to Grelgor's side.

"Are you alright?" he asked, short of breath.

"I'll be fine," he replied, wincing at the pain his arm was causing him.

"You've lost a lot of blood," Noah noticed.

"Yeah, I've got plenty more." Grelgor tried to stand up but stumbled back to the ground.

"Sit still," Noah insisted. "I've got something that will help."

Out of his bag he pulled the vial of healing serum given to him by Halirain. He poured a few drops on Grelgor's arm and rubbed it in. "This should heal you soon."

Grelgor looked up at Noah wearily. "This is the second time you saved my life."

Noah could see the gratitude in Grelgor's eyes.

"Awe, you would have done the same for me," Noah smiled.

Grelgor smiled back. "Yes. I would have."

Noah helped him to his feet and though Grelgor was still wobbly, he managed to maintain his balance.

"I don't know where the plaxar is, Noah, if there is a plaxar at all."

"I know," he replied.

"So everything was in vain," Grelgor sighed.

"I don't think so," Noah said with confidence. "At least we got rid of the hunters. That's a good start."

"But without the plaxar, there is no signal for the others and no quick journey to the origin of the rivers for you."

"It'll be alright. We'll make it there sooner or later."

Noah tried to remain positive. He wasn't sure how they would do it, but hadn't the heart to let defeat sweep over their recent victory. He looked down at Gretchen.

"In the meantime, what do we do with her?" Noah asked, motioning to the unconscious hunter lying on the ground.

"I say let's give her a taste of her own medicine," Grelgor suggested with a mischievous smile. He picked up her limp body and tossed her into the Shooskas' cage.

Noah picked up the lock and clasped it tightly around the cage doors.

“We’ll let the rebels deal with her.”

“Now what do we do with all these other creatures? They were instructed to wait for the signal. It’ll be hard to convince them otherwise,” Grelgor said hopelessly.

A cry from the distance broke the silence of what was left of the hunters’ realm. The creatures in the cages stirred, kicking and scratching at the doors of their cage. Out of the sky came a large winged beast. It was thick in the chest with a long, curling tail. It’s head was long, its muzzle narrow. Two flaring nostrils steamed with the heat. A scaly, pink mane clacked in the wind as it soared toward them. Riding on its back was the little Shooska.

“I find plaxar!” he cheered.

The creature landed with a thud and let out a boisterous cry. The animals in the cages went wild. Creaks and crashes sounded throughout the city ruins and thousands of captive creatures reclaimed their freedom. As directed by the Shooskas, they fled into the city, prepared to fight whatever battle lay before them.

“We need to go,” Grelgor insisted.

The little Shooska slid down the wing of the plaxar and bounced to his feet when he hit the ground. He smiled at Noah and Grelgor and nodded a long, noble nod.

“We thank, No-ah and Grel-gor. Be safe, be missed.”

“Good-bye little Shooska,” Noah waved. “Take care!”

Grelgor helped Noah climb on the back of the great beast before leaping on behind him. With a quick jab of his feet, Grelgor guided the plaxar into the sky and over the Northern City. Its cries signaling every creature that it was time to take a stand and reclaim their freedom and the world they held so dear.

## CHAPTER 14

Mr. Porter unlatched the last lock of the cages he could find. He scanned the area for Noah but there was no sign of him. The Shooskas were busy spreading the plan and unlocking other cages elsewhere in the hunters' realm.

The little Shooska looked up at Mr. Porter.

“What to do now?”

“You stay here and wait for the signal. If anything goes wrong, they are going to need your help. I am going back into the city to wait with the rebels. I want to be there to deal with the council. Do you understand?”

The Shooska nodded in response.

Mr. Porter ducked behind cages and into the shadows of the black market. Once in the safety of the city, he walked more casually but with a quickened pace. It was clear he was anxious to get somewhere, but no one questioned his actions in the hustle and bustle of the market place.

He maneuvered to the center point of the market place

where he met with several of the Northern rebels.

“All is set into motion. Now, we wait.”

They shook their head in approval and resumed their nonchalant chatter about the better things in life and how the council is doing a remarkable job keeping the city in tiptop shape. The straw creature sat faithfully beside them in a fake collar so as not to give away that he was anything but a slave.

Mr. Porter hurried to each post to give an update to the rebels standing by. The serpent waited by the city gates with recruits from the city limits in hiding. They stood ready, as did the rock creature on the borders of the black market. Mr. Porter found Joiben standing at his post as a soldier on duty near the shock control tower.

“Everything is ready to go,” Joiben stated. “Once I hear the signal, the shock unit will be dismantled and I will give my signal.”

“Very good, Joiben,” Mr. Porter commended. “I’m on my way to the council. If anything goes wrong, you know where to find me.”

“Right. Good luck, professor.” Joiben shook his hand and they parted ways.

Mr. Porter shuffled to the council building in the center of the city. It was early afternoon and he knew the council would be returning from midday meal. He watched as one by one they gathered on the main patio outside the building. It was the council’s rule that no one entered the building without the rest of the councilmen unless otherwise stated. It was the perfect opportunity to intercept them.

“Councilmen,” Mr. Porter interrupted their banter, “A good day to you.”

“Good day, professor,” answered the Chancellor.

“I was wondering, have you any new information on my

current clients. They are anxiously awaiting their retrial.” Mr. Porter gave them a coy smile.

The Chancellor forced a smile in return. “Not to my knowledge, professor. But I can assure you we are doing our best.” He bowed his head slightly as to excuse himself from the conversation and turned back to his fellow councilmen.

“No matter,” Mr. Porter continued, “I didn’t come here to talk about the trial.”

The Chancellor turned back to face him.

“Oh, professor? Then what did you come here to discuss?”

He was obviously bothered but curious that Mr. Porter would have something else to say.

“Well, in fact, I want to discuss the possibility of a grant to further my studies of the nature of our rivers to develop a new method of making the different solutions without the use of the crandelum.”

That was no lie. Mr. Porter, as an alternate plan of attack, was working on scientifically creating individual recipes to re-create each of the rivers’ waters using other resources. He had been denied such a grant earlier when the council was first developed, but that was several years ago and Mr. Porter had a much more convincing argument in mind.

“We feel that the crandelum work quite well, thank you,” replied the Chancellor, not amused by the professors notion.

“Yes, but think of the money you would save if you no longer had to pay the hunters to gather them. Besides, eventually the crandelum will disappear and then where will we be?” Mr. Porter explained.

“Nonsense. There are plenty of crandelum in the world. And whereas I would be more than happy to be rid of those barbarian hunters, I think we have a useful arrangement with them. Now, if that’s all you have to discuss this day, I bid you

farewell.” The Chancellor was in no mood to deal with new ideas.

As far as the council was concerned, things were progressing delightfully in their favor and didn’t want to do anything that might change that.

Mr. Porter stalled for time, growing worried by the delay of the signal. His thought went to Noah and Grelgor. He cursed himself for leaving so quickly without making sure they were safe. There was nothing he could do but try to stall the council further.

“Yes, you are most certainly correct,” Mr. Porter said in a very respectful tone. “You have done wonders for the city and we would be lost without the direction of the council, but I do worry about those hunters. Strange things have been happening and I wouldn’t put it past the hunters to be held responsible.”

The Chancellor stopped his conversation with the rest of the council. Mr. Porter’s comment intrigued him.

“What do you mean by that, professor,” he asked turning slowly to face him.

The rest of the council was silent. Although Mr. Porter was a respectable member of society, he always seemed to know when trouble was brewing as far as the council was concerned.

“Is there something we, the council, should know?” The Chancellor’s eyes were cold, but full of sudden concern.

“I can only report about oddities of which I have learned. For instance, I was informed by someone in the black market that the hunters were in search of a plaxar and intend to bring it into the city,” Mr. Porter stated. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t plaxars banned from the city? And anyone who permits otherwise is to be considered a criminal?”

“Indeed you are correct.” A wave of concern filled the

council.

Mr. Porter could see that he had struck a cord with these men and was ready to use it to his advantage.

“If this information is true, your honor,” he continued, “then what is to stop the hunters from bringing in foldrons and glenmors and demanding even more pay to get rid of them? You know no one else is capable of handling such creatures. Imagine the chaos! Imagine the destruction!”

Mr. Porter spoke dramatically and with as much concern for the city as he could muster. His performance paid off. The council was immediately alarmed.

“Indeed, we had not considered such consequences. It is certainly worth taking preventative measures.” The Chancellor paused. “But of course, if what you heard was just a rumor, then we have nothing to worry about, do we?”

He looked at Mr. Porter for a reaction, feeling out the situation. Suspicion covered his face as he peered at Mr. Porter.

“Do you know anything else, professor?” His voice was full of accusation.

“I can only report what I have heard. The rest is up to you. I do hope the council would be wise enough to consider any possibility. If I did not think it a worthy concern, I would not have wasted the council’s time.” Mr. Porter remained calm and indifferent to the Chancellor’s uncertainty.

“Very well then. We thank you for your concern. We will discuss this within the council at a later date. Now if you’ll excuse us, we do have important things to tend to.” The Chancellor turned his back to Mr. Porter once again.

He struggled to think of anything to bring to the council’s attention. He had to keep them from entering the building. He fought with himself to find some bit of conversation to throw at

them, but his mind was filled with worry.

As the council made their way toward the building entrance, a loud, piercing cry rang through the city. Mr. Porter looked up with relief to see the plaxar flying overhead, calling out to all who could hear it. The Northerners looked up in dismay. They were appalled to see such an outlandish creature flying overhead.

The signal had been sent. Joiben stood ready at the shock unit and quickly pulled the wires out of place. It buzzed and crackled and shut down. Joiben ran outside of the tower and aimed his musket high into the air.

The shot rang out clear. It was the moment they had all been waiting for, the signal to start the rebellion, but the slaves and creatures within the city stood frozen. They were not freeing themselves. They were too afraid, even with the disabling of the shock collars. They had been beaten into submission by the Northerners for so long that they forgot what it meant to stand up for themselves.

The rebels were lost. All of their efforts were about to fail because the slave creatures were too afraid to fight. Suddenly, a rumble sounded from the distance. Cries and trumpets of all sorts rang into the city. The hunters' captives were free and headed straight into the heart of the city!

The Northern folk screamed in terror. Some fled into shops and buildings while others climbed on top of fountains and walls to avoid the paths of the determined creatures. The slaves were in shock.

The straw creature leaped onto the shoulders of his rebel companions and cried out, "Fight for your freedom; fight for our world!"

It seemed to be just what the slaves needed to hear. To them, he was a fellow servant willing to take a stand against the Northerners. Together the slaves retaliated, tearing off their

chains and collars, making their way through the city. From the shadows of the black market the rock creature led his band of outcast slaves, and from the city gates the serpent entered with his army of angry natives. The Northern folk were outnumbered and out-smarted. They were too proper to fight back and too cowardly to take control.

The creatures tore through the grass and into the shops, indulging in food and water like they had never eaten before. Some took pleasure in taunting the shrieking Northern folk who stood on tabletops and chairs.

Other Northerners stood dumbfounded as the flowers and plants were eaten, dug up and ripped apart by hungry scapions and rudderbugs.

“All is lost,” they cried. “The council is to blame!”

“The hunters,” scowled the Chancellor. “Those treacherous traitors!” he exclaimed. “How could we have been such fools?” He turned his attention to Mr. Porter. “Professor, what are we to do?”

Mr. Porter looked back at the entire council with a small grin on his face.

“If I were the council,” he advised, “I would surrender.”

## CHAPTER 15

Noah and Grelgor flew high above the city. Below they could see small figures scurrying here and there. The squeals and shrieks of the Northern folk filled the air and Noah smiled.

“Do you think the plan worked?” he asked Grelgor.

“Let’s hope so,” he replied.

“I wish I could have stayed to see how it all ends,” Noah sighed.

“You shouldn’t think of it like that,” Grelgor chastised. “You should want to see how the rest of it begins.” Grelgor smiled, looking back at the city. He was confident that things would be different.

“Let’s get you to the origin of the rivers.”

The plaxar flew higher into the sky with great puffs of air and wings stretched outward. It was an exhilarating experience for Noah. Never had he felt so free than in that moment.

He looked down at the world below him. He could see the flat valleys of the north turn into great forests of the east.

They flew over crystal lakes and deep canyons, over herds of foldrons and clans of berrywiggers. Noah never imagined the world to hold so many wonders and so many magnificent creatures. He felt truly blessed to be a part of it all, even if only for a brief moment.

They traveled hundreds of miles in a matter of days. The plaxar's speed was astonishing. The two travelers stopped only for food and water and to let the plaxar rest. It did not take long for them to reach the vast mountain range that shadowed the origin of the rivers.

Noah looked down in amazement. The mountain range seemed to go on forever. Steep cliffs and jagged rocks protected the most sacred things in that world, the mother trees. The mountain range ceased and in the center of the clearing stood four massive trees that reached high into the heavens.

The mother trees must have been hundreds of thousands of years old. They were thick and lush and absolutely beautiful. They were just as twisted as the smaller trees Noah first saw when he arrived in the world, but they did not have any pods or flowers on them - just silky green, yellow, red or purple leaves that danced in the breeze blowing through them.

The yellow orb rose high in the sky. Grelgor directed the plaxar down to the center of the mother trees. Noah stared at the massive trunks of the ancient trees and all of the intricate designs that weaved around them. Noah strained to make out the pattern. Startled, he realized the trees were lined with the same design that he studied on the key that brought him there in the first place. He looked in awe and wondered if the metallic puzzle pieces were somehow linked to the majestic trees.

When the plaxar settled on the ground, Noah slid down the back of the great beast. He tumbled onto the ground. It was strange to use his legs again, but he managed to regain control.

He stepped up to the plaxar, patted it on the side and whispered, "Thank you."

Grelgor, too, dismounted the creature and stood beside Noah, soaking in all that they could witness of the origin of the rivers.

From out of the trees came dozens of noble beings - tall, slender creatures that moved as though the wind carried them. They were strong in physique, but gentle in manner.

Their eyes were bright yellow and their skin was as black as ebony. Long locks of black, silken hair fell to their backs.

They gathered around Noah and Grelgor, whispering to one another, though no one moved their lips.

"Welcome, travelers," said the tallest of the creatures in a deep, powerful voice. "I am Traiden. We have been expecting you."

Traiden was the leader of the Cortain people and the watcher of the Chatalbin. The Cortains were hospitable and very elaborate in their showmanship. After Noah changed back into his normal clothes, he and Grelgor were welcomed at a great feast held at the center of the mother trees.

There was music, dancing, food and drink for all. Large stone tables were covered with bright lanterns that glowed with a warm, yellow light - a much-needed addition to the shade of the mother trees. A great feast was presented on silver platters engraved with vines and leaves that caught the light of the lanterns, making the images appear real.

Noah was overwhelmed by the splendor of all that lay before him. He and Grelgor had never seen so much food, nor had they ever felt more welcomed by anyone in all their travels. It was a needed change of pace after their experience

in the Northern City. They did not hesitate to indulge in the festivities presented by the Cortain people.

Once seated at a table where food and drink were passed around, Noah and Grelgor shared stories with the Cortains about their adventures along the way. Like curious children, the Cortain sat wide-eyed with anticipation to hear what happened next. They gasped at the story of Grelgor's encounter with the ichticran, and cheered at Noah's valiant efforts to save him. They cried when they heard about the hunters and all their captives, but laughed when they learned of their defeat.

It was a merry time and Noah, though anxious to get home, was very sad to know that he would never sit at another feast or celebration like this one again. He looked at Grelgor, a true friend who stood by his side every step of the way. He was so grateful to have met him and would miss him the most of all.

Grelgor laughed and smiled, which made Noah happy. It had been so long since Grelgor was able to be merry. He looked at Noah and rustled his hair. He stood up and held his glass high.

"To Noah!" he praised.

"To Noah," they all cried. "The greatest hero we'll ever know!"

The cheering that followed Grelgor's toast brought tears to Noah's eyes. He smiled and blushed and took a big gulp of his drink. Everyone smiled and laughed and the music went on.

Noah couldn't tell how long he and Grelgor spent with the Cortains, but the festivities lingered well into the night. He tried his best to soak in every last element of the world before fatigue blurred it all into a hazy dream.

Noah could hardly remember being led to his resting place for the night. Grelgor watched over him as he slept,

not because he was worried, but because his senses had been revived by the feast and he was content to sit and allow his mind the opportunity to relax in the majesty that surrounded them.

Noah stirred and opened his eyes. He saw Grelgor sitting beside him with his eyes closed and his head propped against the tree that sheltered them during the night. Noah stretched, yawned and sat up. Grelgor opened his eyes and looked at Noah.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Noah whispered, not wanting to disturb anyone nearby.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Grelgor responded quietly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as if savoring some faint scent that remained in his nose.

“Where is everyone?” Noah asked, curious at the silence that surrounded them.

“I’m not sure. Probably going about morning business or still sleeping.” Grelgor stood up and stretched his arms.

“Let’s go find out,” he said extending a hand in Noah’s direction.

Noah grabbed his backpack and allowed Grelgor to pull him to his feet. As they wandered through the trees, Noah let his eyes move upward in attempts to see anything in the canopy of the mother trees. A few beams of light penetrated through the leaves that danced high above them, creating a magnificent light show for anyone watching.

The two found their way back to the feast tables where a simple breakfast had been prepared. They were welcomed by several Cortain and offered seats. There was little conversation between Noah and Grelgor, as both were suffering from the sorrow of knowing it would soon be time to say good-bye.

After breakfast, Traiden prepared Noah to see the Chatalbin.

“He will send you home, young one. He has been waiting for you.”

Noah turned to Grelgor standing close beside him. His eyes became misty.

“I’m going to miss you, you know.”

Grelgor clenched his jaw, fighting back his own emotions.

“It won’t be the same without you.”

“Do you think we’ll ever see each other again?” Noah asked, knowing very well they wouldn’t.

Grelgor knew it would be unlikely but did not want to admit it.

“You never know what fate has in store.” He knelt down to Noah’s height. “But just in case, we’d better make this one count.”

He took hold of Noah and drew him into his long, strong arms. Noah hugged him back as tears rolled down his face.

“I wish you could come with me,” he sobbed.

“So do I.” Grelgor said. He released Noah from his grip and put his hands on his shoulders.

“What will you do now?” Noah asked, wiping away tears with his sleeve.

“Actually, I’ve thought about going home.”

Noah’s eyes grew wide.

“But I thought you were banned from your home?”

“I think it’s time to make amends. You have shown me the importance of friendship and the strength of unity. It’s time I bring that back into my life.” Grelgor patted Noah’s shoulder. “Now it’s time for you to get a move on. You’ll want to be

home by dinner.”

Noah laughed and hugged Grelgor again. When he stepped back he straightened himself up and tried to be strong.

“Good luck, Grelgor.”

“You, too, kid. You, too.”

He gave Noah one last smile before climbing onto the back of the plaxar. With a jab of his heels, Grelgor guided the plaxar high into the sky. Noah watched Grelgor and the plaxar fly into the distance until he could no longer see them.

When he was sure that Grelgor was really gone, Noah turned to Traidén.

“I’m ready.”

The road to the Chatalbin was much simpler than the path to the Chatnoir. There were no guard statues or secret tunnels or dark caverns. Traidén simply led him to a secluded stone door that led into the side of the mountains.

“The Chatalbin is inside,” he said. “You have nothing to fear.”

Noah wasn’t afraid. He was curious and anxious, perhaps a little nervous, but not at all afraid.

Traidén knocked three times on the center of the stone door and stood back for it to open. With a hollow creak, the rock slid back into the mountain revealing a dim hallway that led to a bright room in the back.

Noah stepped in and walked down the hall. The door remained open, and Noah could see Traidén’s figure standing outside. He turned the corner into the bright room to find the Chatalbin sitting patiently before him.

The room was bare with only a large looking glass in the center of the floor. The Chatalbin was massive but wore a smile on his face. His tail twitched and he blinked as Noah

drew near. He was all white with deep blue eyes that sent a calming warmth through Noah's body. His mane was thick and filled with streaks of silver.

Noah stood before the great creature, not knowing what to say.

"I know of all your great deeds, Noah." His voice was soft but deep and rhythmic. "You have fulfilled your destiny here, and now it is time to send you home."

"My destiny? But I thought my being here was an accident?" Noah asked confused.

"Nothing is an accident, dear boy. But you don't always know that until the end."

"The Chatnoir said I wasn't supposed to be here." Noah explained.

"The Chatnoir told you only what you needed to know." The Chatalbin smiled.

"But if I was meant to be here, why didn't he tell me?" Noah asked curiously.

"You weren't ready to know. One shouldn't be aware that they are part of a greater plan. If they did know, then their deeds might not get done."

"I'm not sure I understand," Noah confessed.

"You had to let your path guide you, not the words of the Chatnoir. If you had known you were here to help save our world, would you have been ready?"

Noah realized what the Chatalbin was trying to tell him. If he had known then what he knew now, it may have altered the choices he made and the paths he took. It made perfect sense when he thought about it.

"So, did everything turn out how it was supposed to?" Noah asked.

“Whatever happens is meant to be. It may not be what we wanted, or what we hoped for, but fate has a greater plan for us all.”

Noah thought about what the Chatalbin said. He looked back at the moments in his life that he wished had never happened, and realized that without them, his path never would have led him here.

“I guess fate has a strange way of doing things. Sometimes the worst things can bring about something better for someone else.”

The Chatalbin smiled. “I’m glad you understand.”

For some reason, Noah thought of his father. He missed his dad so much. He studied the Chatalbin’s face and saw years of wisdom in his eyes. Such wisdom and majesty overwhelmed Noah.

He became lost in the Chatalbin’s eyes. The depth of them pulled at Noah like a magnet. He saw the stars and the universe and other worlds. He saw his world and home and all that needed help there. Then he saw his father smiling down on him from somewhere far away.

Noah broke free of the trance and looked again at the Chatalbin. Noah knew what he had to do. He had to try to make a difference in his own world, too. Creatures that couldn’t stand up for themselves and the land, helpless against the will of man, all needed help.

With a new sense of self and determination, Noah stood tall and said, “Chatalbin, send me home.”

The Chatalbin smiled. “Before you go, I want to give you something.”

The Chatalbin slid his paw forward, revealing a brand new copy of the meteor book that Noah’s mother had gotten him. Noah looked at it with surprise and quickly pulled out his dirty,

torn copy that was still in his backpack.

“I won’t be needing this anymore,” the Chatalbin said, “and thought you might appreciate having a clean copy of your own.”

Noah picked up the book and studied it carefully. “But how did you...”

The Chatalbin smiled. “It’s the least I can do for the boy who saved my world.”

He lifted his other paw to reveal a small pair of twisted spectacles that were missing one lens.

“But those are...” Noah began.

The Chatalbin winked at Noah.

“Mr. Porter...?”

Before Noah had the chance to ask, the Chatalbin took a deep breath and blew it over Noah. Noah could feel himself slipping away. He clung with every effort to the world he was in, but to no avail. The Chatalbin was sending him home.

The last thing he remembered was the Chatalbin’s kind voice and the words, “Thank you.”

## EPILOGUE

Noah woke up in his own bed. His window was open and a breeze chilled the room. He sat up with a start and looked around. Everything was as he left it. His magnifying glass was sitting on his desk. His backpack lay next to the foot of the bed and beside that was the new copy of the meteor book. He jumped out of bed and grabbed his book bag. Sorting through it, he could not find the soiled copy.

“I must have lost it on the way back.”

He shuffled through his bag and found the pieces of gold he kept from the cliff outside the Dobrim City. He had forgotten all about them. He stuffed the gold back into his backpack and set it at the foot of his bed.

He looked at the clock. It was 4:37 P.M. His mother would be home any minute. He was so excited to see her. It had been weeks. He hoped and prayed that the Chatalbin was able to send him back on the same day that he left. He ran downstairs to the kitchen where he found the dishes from breakfast piled in the sink and a bottle of syrup sitting on the table.

Noah was overjoyed.

“Mom will come home, ask me how my day was and never know I was gone!”

Noah’s excitement suddenly dwindled. He forgot about what happened on the playground that day. He sat down in a chair at the table. He felt sick. All that he had done, all the great deeds that he accomplished in the nameless world, and he was bound to get in trouble for throwing a rock at Kevin.

He looked at the telephone. There was one message blinking on the answering machine.

“It has to be the school.” Noah whispered, shivering with worry. “Of course they would call! I skipped the whole afternoon! This isn’t fair!” he chastised, defeat weighing heavy on his chest.

The light on the answering machine taunted him. Blinking on and off, on and off as if daring Noah to listen to the message.

“I could just erase it...”

A car pulled into the driveway. Noah’s mother was home. He heard the car door shut and the pop of the trunk opening. If Noah hurried, he could delete the message before his mother ever got to the front door.

“But what if it’s not the school? What if it’s something important? I don’t have time to listen to it!”

The trunk clicked shut. His mother carried grocery bags up the walkway to the back door. Noah stood, knocking the chair over. He froze. Time seemed to move so slowly, and yet he couldn’t react.

The door opened. A bag slipped from his mother’s hands, spilling apples and cans onto the kitchen floor.

“Oh shoot,” she breathed. “Noah, can you help me?”

Noah's eyes shot to the answering machine – blinking now with a daunting rhythm, as if to say, *sorry, kid, you had your chance.*

“Noah!”

“Sorry mom, I... I'm coming.”

Noah shuffled over to the spill. He picked up cans, one by one, placing them back in the plastic bag. Hands shaking, he stood, placing the bag on the counter, waiting, knowing that soon enough his mother would see the blinking beacon of truth. Blinking, blinking, blinking – anxious to reveal its secrets.

“I have to tell you something, Mom,” Noah blurted.

“Okay. Can you finish picking up the groceries while you talk?”

“Mom,” Noah continued, ignoring her request. “I got in trouble at school today.”

His mother, holding a box of crackers, paused mid-way between the counter and the shelf on which they were meant to sit. She took a deep breath and eased the box onto the shelf.

“That's not like you, Noah. Is there something we need to talk about?” She turned, to face Noah, concern in her eyes.

“No. Well, maybe, but... I didn't mean to do it. I just, well, I did something I shouldn't have, and then... and then I sort of...” Noah twisted his fingers, staring at the floor. “I sort of didn't go back to school after recess.”

His mother's eyes widened, her mouth fell open.

“You skipped school? Where did you go? How did you get home? Noah, what were you thinking?”

“I don't know! I panicked. I just hid on the playground and didn't go back to the school until the buses got there.”

Heat flooded his face. Sweat coated his palms. Noah thought for sure his mother would explode. She covered

her face with her hands before dragging her fingers down her cheeks. She stared at Noah, lost in thought, then sighed, dropping her hands to her sides.

“Sit down and tell me what happened.”

Noah took great care to tell his mother the events that led up to Kevin, the rock and hiding behind the oak tree. All the while she sat, nodding, squinting, shifting, sighing... but listening.

“When I got home, I saw there was a message on the machine, figured it was probably the school. I didn’t want you find out like that. I didn’t mean for any of it to happen,” Noah confessed.

After a long silence, Noah’s mother stood to play the message on the machine.

*BEEP. Hi, Kathy. This is Rebecca. I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to get back with you before you left work, but I wanted to let you know that I can cover a couple hours of your shift in the morning so you can deal with your son’s school. I hope everything works out. Just call if you are running later than you anticipated. See you tomorrow. Bye-bye.*

Noah blushed. “You... already knew?”

“I appreciate that you were honest, and that you chose to tell me about getting into trouble. The school called me at work about this... Kevin kid. However, they did not mention that you disappeared for the rest of the day, which, mark my words, they will be hearing from me about that!”

Noah held his breath. His mother looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath and let it out as she eased into her chair.

“But, you will have to face the consequences of your actions.”

“I know.”

“The school is going to give you detention for the rest of the week. You’re lucky you didn’t get suspended, but they all seem to agree this was very unlike you, and one of the boys involved said you weren’t the one who started it. Either way, I will take you to school in the morning. I am going to talk to the principal and sort this mess out.”

Noah nodded. “Thanks, mom.”

His mother propped her chin on her hand.

“I think you know you made some poor decisions today, and I trust that you will do better next time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m not going to add to your punishment. Just promise me you’ll find better ways of dealing with anger. You know that running away from your problems doesn’t solve them, now does it?”

“No. No it doesn’t.”

Noah dreaded going to detention. He had never been in trouble before, and most of the kids that ended up in detention were the kids that picked on Noah.

He entered the room and looked around. Sure enough – joining him in detention were Jake Maurin, Justin Folley, Mark Ramburk and every other boy that liked to bully Noah – everyone except Kevin. That, at least, was a minor relief.

Noah inched his way through the cluster of desks to the back corner of the room, where he hoped to be unnoticed. Slouching into the desk, he pulled out his notebook and began to copy the writing on the board.

The other boys in detention sniggered. Noah ignored them, glancing up only to see if the detention teacher had arrived yet.

Jake got up and walked over to Noah’s desk where he

stood with arms folded over his chest. Noah's heart raced. Two more boys joined Jake, then another and another until Noah was completely surrounded. He focused on writing. He pressed the pencil so hard into the paper that the tip snapped off.

One of the boys laughed. Jake leaned over so that he was face to face with Noah. As much as he wanted to slide out of the desk and run, Noah was trapped. He clenched his jaw and looked Jake in the eye.

“I need to sharpen my pencil.”

The crowd of boys laughed.

“No one ever copies the lines, Noah. Half the time, the teacher only shows up to sign us in and doesn't come back until it's time to let us go. Seriously, relax.”

“I still need to sharpen my pencil,” Noah insisted.

“For crying out loud,” Jake protested. “Mark, give him another pencil.”

Mark snatched a pencil off of the teacher's desk and tossed it to Jake, who held it out to Noah.

“Are you going to take it or is your pencil special?”

Noah took the pencil and set it on the desk.

“Really, you need to lighten up.”

“No, I need to copy the lines on the board so I don't get into any more trouble. Now leave me alone.”

“You think you're the only one in trouble here? We're all in detention, thanks to Kevin the cry baby.”

A mutter of agreement swept over the small crowd.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we're all here because of Kevin. We were asked what happened on the playground yesterday, and I told Mrs.

Tourney that Kevin started it.”

“How did that get you into trouble?” Noah asked.

“Kevin said that all of us started it! That he just happened to be there and because we were picking on you, you started throwing rocks and he got hit! Can you believe that? Brought his parents in and everything. His dad started threatening to sue the school unless we were all punished.”

“Tough luck.” Noah had little sympathy for them.

“Look, I know we haven’t been very nice to you, but at least you’re not a chump like Kevin.”

“Gee, thanks, Jake.”

“All I’m saying is you don’t have to worry about Kevin anymore. If he so much as looks at you funny, he’ll have to deal with all of us.”

“That’s right!” Mark agreed.

“Right... thanks.”

“We were rotten to you and now we’re going to make up for it,” Jake assured.

“Yeah, we don’t want to make you mad. There are rocks everywhere and you’ve got a good arm,” teased Justin.

“I’m not like that,” Noah argued. “And I know you guys don’t want to be my friend. So just leave me alone and let me copy these lines.”

Jake shook his head. “Suit yourself, man. Come on guys, let’s just leave him alone.”

By the end of detention, Noah’s hand ached and there was a divot in his finger where he held the pencil. The teacher came to dismiss the boys. Noah tore out all five pages of copied lines from his notebook and turned them in to the teacher.

“Hm? Oh. Just set them there,” the teacher instructed, pointing to the corner of the desk.

Noah glanced back as he left the classroom to see the teacher drop the stack of papers in the trash.

“What a waste,” Noah grumbled.

“Told you, so,” Jake whispered as he brushed past Noah.

“Yeah. I know.”

Jake slowed his pace, allowing Noah to catch up.

“How many days you gonna be in there?” Jake asked.

“The rest of the week.”

“Me, too. Maybe longer if Kevin’s parents have anything to say about it.”

“If you get longer detention, I bet I will for sure. I’m the one who threw the rock.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll show you the ropes. You really just have to look like you’re writing and only when you hear someone coming down the hall. We usually have a look-out, though.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll get in even more trouble?”

“No. Besides, sometimes detention can be fun. Beats going home to do homework, right?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t like homework, do you?” Jake gave Noah a strange look.

“I do it because I have to, but I don’t like it.”

“Just checking.”

Noah and Jake walked to the front of the school in silence. Noah scanned the parking lot, but didn’t see his mother’s car.

“There’s my mom,” Jake pointed across the lot. “She always parks in the same place.”

“Just how often do you get detention?” Noah asked.

“A lot.” Jake laughed. “But now that I’m not friends with Kevin anymore, that will probably change.”

“I hope so.”

“Well, see you tomorrow, Noah.”

“Bye, Jake.”

Noah watched Jake jog to the car, toss his backpack in the back seat and climb in. As the car pulled away, Jake’s mom waved. Noah waved back.

“Weird.” Noah shrugged.

It wasn’t long before Noah’s mom arrived.

“Sorry I’m late. Had trouble getting out of work on time.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t waiting long.”

“How bad was it?”

“Actually, it wasn’t that bad. I had to copy lines from the chalkboard, but then the teacher just threw the paper away.”

“It’s to teach you a lesson. What did you expect them to do with it?”

“I know. But they could have at least recycled it. People waste so much paper.”

“Why don’t you suggest they put a recycle bin in there, then?”

Noah raised an eyebrow.

“You know, I should. I don’t think our school recycles at all. Maybe they can start recycling paper and cans. Do you think they would?”

“I think it’s worth suggesting. It would be a great thing to initiate.”

“I think so, too. Then maybe it will encourage kids to

recycle at home. I'll have to write up my idea and turn it in. Will you help me?"

"I can do that."

"This will be great. I've been wanting to do something to help save our world."

"Save our world?"

Noah blushed. "Well, I mean, to help preserve what we have. People take the earth for granted. I just think that if we can each do our own part, it might help."

"Seems like you've had some time to think about this."

"More than you know."

"I guess something good came out of detention after all."

Noah smiled. "Yeah, detention."

Noah's adventures in the nameless world continue!

Coming Soon...

Book 2

*A New Battle*

### About the Author

Heather Payer-Smith, a native of Northwest Pennsylvania, currently resides in Northeast Texas where she enjoys working as a graphic/art designer for an advertising agency.

Heather is also an illustrator of children's books. She began illustrating with Lily Ruth Publishing, illustrating three books, "My Weird Family Series: My Vampire Cousin" and "My Weird Family Series: My Werewolf Brother" (middle grade books written by J.K. Hawkins) as well as "The Sundancer" (a children's picture book written by Ben Joy).







# Journey to another world!

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