

Rory, King of Petla

PROLOGUE

The stone pointed skyward, a lonely sentinel in the dell by the cliff, its western face glimmering softly in the moonlight. The leaves in the trees rustled, and the breeze stirred the silver hair of the two men who stood straight and tall as the obelisk itself. The shorter one reached out to caress the smooth surface and trace its inscription. The stone began to vibrate almost imperceptibly, and they stood together for a few minutes, the man and the stone, before he said, “This is so beautiful!”

He glanced at his companion, and a coronet glinted on his forehead. “Let’s get the flying packs on it,” he said.

They buckled on the packs, and then the king took out a small device with a screen on it and dialed it to Omvert 26, 3128.

“Two hundred years?”

“I think so—it feels right.”

He twisted the knobs. The flying packs strained at their straps, and a purple mist began to form around the obelisk. Slowly, ever so slowly, it lifted out of the ground, its sides clean and free of dirt. The men rose with the stone, the purple mist enfolded them, and they faded from view. All traces of the obelisk faded with them.

Two hundred years into the past they went, crossing time as one crosses a bridge, taking the obelisk with them. They found the dell drenched in late afternoon sun, surrounded by scrubby trees. The stone descended slowly and sank its base deep into the soil. The wind sighed, and the king thought the obelisk sighed with it.

The two men walked together to the edge of the cliff and looked over the valley. Blackened chimneys and weed-choked fields met their eyes where there should have been comfortable cottages and rows of crops.

“I wish we could have prevented this,” the king said.

His companion put his arm around his shoulders. “What you’ve done, you’ve done well. Don’t fret over what you can’t do.”

They walked back to the obelisk to remove the flying packs before they returned to the time they called home. The king stroked the stone one last time, and it vibrated with his touch. Then the purple mists rose, and the two of them faded from view.

Two young men in ragged clothes stood up from their hiding place at the edge of the dell and cautiously made their way to the stone. Their hair was dark and their eyes were green, and they counted themselves fortunate to hail from the clan of Halbert the Wise. When they reached the obelisk, they stared at the engraving on its side.

“What does this mean?” the younger man asked his brother.
“There’s hope for our future.”

CHAPTER 1

Raindrops fell like cool little bombs, and Rory enjoyed the explosions of wet on his face. He inhaled deeply. The rain smelled so fresh and clean after the stuffy halls of the science academy. His classmates poured out of the building after him, and there was laughter and a lot of jostling on the way to the yellow bus waiting in the parking lot. He stepped to the side to wait for his cousin, Marty, to catch up.

“Hi, Chelsea,” he said.

Chelsea Carter floated down the stairs and passed him without a glance. No time for the super nerd today. She was so pretty, and he was so mediocre—medium height, no muscle, brown hair, brown eyes—what could be more boring? And though he was at the top of his class and had scholarship offers from top universities, he could never manage to put together an intelligent sentence when she was around.

Marty punched him, and they jostled their way into line.

“Moo,” Rory said.

Marty gave him a weird look. “What do you mean, ‘moo’?”

“Don’t you feel like one of the cows on Uncle Rob’s ranch, waiting to get on the cattle truck?”

Marty laughed and bumped him a little harder and they climbed onto the bus.

A strange excitement and discontent gripped him, and he endured the cattle-like jostling of getting off the bus and into the science museum with rising impatience. Miss Thurman herded the class through telegraphs, Van de Graaff generators, and tabulating machines, and Rory paid little attention. He knew the exhibits by heart, and today they held no appeal for him.

The class rounded a corner, and straight ahead was the new exhibit “To the Future.” Rory’s heart pounded and he suddenly felt dizzy.

“Students, come this way, please,” Miss Thurman said, charging off in the other direction to the aeronautics exhibit. “The Wright brothers observed some interesting properties of physics to which you should pay attention.”

Rory couldn’t abide more of her lecture, so he quietly slipped away to the new section. In the middle of the exhibit was a silver hoop hovering over a black box with a square silver button on it. The card said that someday scientists hoped to make transportation to other planets as simple as stepping through a hoop. Hokey, but much more interesting than Miss Thurman.

The square button began to glow with a purple light. An interactive display! The purple light pulsed faintly, and Rory reached for it, but at that moment the rest of the class clomped into the exhibit area.

“Rory, you’d better hope Thurman didn’t notice your little disappearing act,” Marty said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were gonna sneak off? I’d have come with you. Man, what a hokey hoop.”

“I was just going to see what happened when I pushed the flashing button.”

“What flashing button?”

“This one.” Rory reached for it, but Marty stopped his hand.

“That’s not flashing. What’s up with you? First you ditch the lecture, and now you’re trying to touch the exhibit.”

Rory stared at him for a minute, feeling the blood drain out of his face. The button flashed furiously, and the purple color intensified. His fingers twitched with his desire to push it.

Marty studied him for a moment. “Come on, let’s go find Sean.”

Rory watched his retreating back.

“But it *is* flashing,” he said to Chelsea, who stood nearby.

“Sure, Rory,” she said.

The silver hoop began to glow and gently spin, throwing off shards of light, and Rory gasped.

“You want to take a little trip to Mars?” Chelsea asked. “I’ll bet all the little fourth graders who come in here like the pretty hoop too.”

What had he ever seen in that girl? He turned away from her and was shocked to find the explanatory card glowing white-hot with blood red letters that looked slightly Arabic. It said, “ZED, Omvert 26, 3330.” Rory’s head spun and he felt a little sick to his stomach.

“Zed? Omvert?” The agony of his desire eased as he searched his mind for some connection with the numbers 26, 3330.

“Rory, are you OK?” Chelsea asked.

“Ah, yeah, sure,” he said without taking his eyes off the exhibit.

All the colors of the rainbow radiated from the hoop and its interior filled with purple mist. Through the mist, Rory could see a fountain splashing in the sun. Flowers crowded around its base, and their colors shifted and glowed like the hoop. The fountain called to him and filled him with ecstasy and longing. Scarcely breathing, he stepped toward the hoop. Was he walking or flying? It didn’t matter—he was going!

“Rory Anderson!” Miss Thurman’s high voice cut through the purpling haze like a foghorn. “Rory Anderson! Every student must be in attendance for the lecture.” She scowled and grabbed his arm.

Rory closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and struggled to control his knees, which were shaking violently.

“I’m sorry, Miss Thurman.”

She dragged him off to the lecture hall, his head swimming with disorientation while cold panic ruled his stomach. He slipped into a seat by Marty and tried to collect his thoughts, but the image of the rainbow-colored hoop and the splashing fountain burned in his mind. He longed with everything in him to return to the hoop and push the button.

“When you’re in trouble, think of what the Bible says,” Grandpa had always told him. Thoughts of his grandfather brought a measure of calm, so Rory groped in his mind for Grandpa’s favorite verses from the 23rd Psalm. He clung to the words like a drowning man clings to a log.

Marty punched him. “Rory, it’s time to go.”

“What? What about the lecture?”

“He just finished. You OK?”

“I don’t know.”

He somehow got home and made it through his afternoon chores, but homework eluded him—he could think of nothing but the hoop. At last he threw down his pencil, grabbed his jacket, and stepped into the kitchen.

“I’m going for a walk, Mom. I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Are you feeling alright, sweetheart? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine—I just had a weird field trip today.”

She looked up with interest in her face, but he said, “I’ll tell you about it later. What are you making?”

“Chocolate chip cookies. Be back in an hour or so and you can get them hot off the presses.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Rory smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

Once outside, he ran for a few blocks and then slowed to a fast walk. The crisp autumn air tingled in his lungs and he began to relax. The maples in the park blazed with color, and he picked a leaf and twirled it in his fingers.

Suddenly a silver hoop appeared in front of him. It began glowing, spinning, growing, and throwing off shards of multicolored light. Purple mist filled the inside of the hoop and reached out to envelop him. He felt himself moving, sliding, and falling through the flashing rainbow into the purple mists, and the world went dark.