

### CHAPTER 3

Cold numbed Rory's legs, and he squirmed into a different position, only now something poked him in the back.

"Be still, would you?" Adam said.

"Where are we?"

"In Petla somewhere."

"How long are we going to sit here? This rock's uncomfortable." He squirmed again.

"Rocks usually are. We ought to get acclimated."

"Can't we acclimate someplace else? Where's Petla again?"

"On Kamlo."

"Oh, that really helps. And we're here to fix some ships?"

"Ships? Where'd you get that idea?"

"You said something about fixing their ships."

"Not me. I said they were having trouble with their portals. Portals are not ships."

"No, but portholes are *on* ships."

"*Portal*: a doorway or gate."

"Oh, that kind of portal. How do we find them?"

"We just came through one."

"We did? Oh, right, we did. Now what?"

"We figure out our next move."

"I think our next move should be to get off this rock."

"Can you see anything?"

"There's a little light over there."

"OK, then let's go." Rory felt Adam stand up and then wince. "Ow! Watch your head."

They made their way across the rough floor and around a boulder. A short incline led to a hole overgrown with grass. They scrambled through it and were soon blinking in the sunlight.

"Whoa, nice duds," Adam said, knocking dirt off his sleeve.

They both wore heavy brown pants tucked into high boots and a leather shirt that opened at the neck over a cotton undershirt. Hooded woolen capes swept over their backs, fastened with clasps on the left shoulder.

Rory dusted himself off and looked around. They stood on the edge of a cliff, with a small town huddled under their feet and a valley before them that bore a patchwork of farms. Smoke rose from chimneys in a homey sort of way, and a stream meandered through the fields and was lost around a hill in the distance. A narrow path led off to the right, with the cliff falling away beside it, and they worked their way carefully along it to a small dell of grasses and wildflowers. On a rock in the middle of the dell sat a figure wrapped in a green cloak.

"Hello," Adam said.

A young woman sprang up and whirled around to face them. Disconcertingly pretty, she had dark hair, green eyes, and a green hat that reminded Rory of Robin Hood. A smile bloomed on her face.

“You’ve come! Welcome to Petla, my lords.” She curtsayed deeply.

Adam bowed in return, and Rory followed his lead.

The girl looked over their shoulders. “Forgive me, my lords, but we never expected the portal to be right on the edge of the cliff.”

Rory looked back and gasped. His feet were only inches from a sheer drop-off—the cave and the path they had just climbed were gone.

“Adam, what happened?”

“Hmm.” Adam peered over the cliff. “The portal closed.”

They turned back to the girl, who was tugging at the straps of a pack. She pulled out some small sandwiches, apples, and a flask of water.

“I don’t have much with me, for I wasn’t at all sure that you would come, though of course I hoped you would. Here’s a little something after your journey.”

“Thank you, kind lady,” Adam said with a bow, and he passed Rory a sandwich. “And whom do we have the pleasure of meeting?”

The girl blushed. “Please forgive me. I am Serena of Blanchemont, daughter of Lord Eldon, from the clan of Halbert the Wise. I was sent by Baroness Moorland to greet you and bid you come to her with speed. She promises to assemble an army within the week, my lord, and you can lead them to victory.” This alarming remark was addressed to Rory with a curtsy.

“The baroness wanted me to see that all of your needs were met when you arrived, and she is willing to support you for the first month. After that, of course, you should have your own holdings. My provisions here were insufficient, and for that I beg your pardon. We shall dine well, although simply, this evening at my grandparents’ house. Grandmother will be so pleased to have you come, though she’s never had a king in her house and will be rather nervous about it. If you prefer, I could take you to the tavern in Barnack, though Grandmother’s food is better, and the innkeeper won’t know anything more about entertaining kings. I’m sure the baroness will be able to entertain you as you are accustomed.”

She was about to continue, but Rory’s panic finally outweighed his natural shyness.

“What are you talking about?”

She blinked in surprise. “You are the high king, are you not? Come to rule Petla and the northern realms?”

“No! No, I’m not! Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Well, you came as the stone said, and you wear the royal insignia.”

“I what?”

“You came as the stone said, and you wear the royal insignia.” She touched the clasp that held his cape.

Rory twisted to look at it. It was a springing lion with its mouth opened in a roar. He glanced at Adam’s clasp and saw that it was an arrow.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

Serena studied him for a minute and then looked at Adam, who just grinned and shrugged. She turned back to Rory. “What is it that you don’t understand, my lord?”

Rory’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he tried to swallow. She was so pretty! Intelligent thought deserted him. “I, uh, we just came through the portal—and I, uh, well, wow. What stone are you talking about?”

Serena looked at the sky. “We must leave or we won’t get off the cliff before nightfall. Shall we discuss this as we walk?”

“Sure.”

She quickly replaced the wrappings from lunch and Adam picked up the pack. She smiled at him, slung the empty water flask over her shoulder, and led the way into the woods that bordered the dell. They soon came to a bubbling spring, and Rory thought of the fountain and the love in the eyes of the king. Water would never be the same again. Adam took the flask when it was full and handed it to Rory, and they followed Serena through the tall trees.

“Many years ago,” Serena said, “a stone was placed in the dell where we met. It sat deep in the ground and was carved all around with marvelous figures of men and women flying with large birds and riding in carts without horses. Its engraving said: ‘When the yellow menace breaches the portals and threatens the land, I, Roderick Gilroy Montgomery, Son of Anders, High King of Petla and the Northern Realms, will return and come to your aid.’ Beneath the words was the Lion of Anders. That lion.” She pointed at Rory’s shoulder.

Rory stared at her and fingered the brooch on his shoulder. He didn’t like his full name and no one outside his family even knew what it was, yet it had been inscribed on a stone in this faraway place.

“You didn’t tell me about this, Adam.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Below the lion it said Omvert 26, 3380,” Serena said. “We have long puzzled over what that meant.”

“Omvert?” Rory was surprised to realize that he knew that Omvert was a month in a dating system used in some parts of the galaxy. “It’s a month,” he said, “like the month of May. Do you have a month of May?”

She shook her head.

“The sign in the museum said ‘Omvert 26, 3330,’” he said. “So the stone was dated fifty years in the future. How can that be?”

“That’s probably when you left it here,” Adam said.

“What?” Rory said. “I couldn’t have done that.”

“Are you Roderick Gilroy Montgomery, the Son of Anders?” Serena asked.

“Well, yes, my full name is Roderick Gilroy Montgomery Anderson—or Son of Anders if you prefer, but I’d rather be called Rory. And I don’t know anything about this rock.”

Serena gave him a searching look and then turned abruptly and began making her way through the trees.

“Adam, what do you mean I left the stone here in the future?”

“Well, how else would it get here?”

Rory stared after him as Adam followed Serena down the path.

“Adam, wait! You can’t do something in the past that happens in the future. Time just doesn’t work like that.”

“Rory, when you’re dealing with the king, what seems impossible really can happen. Think it through logically. It’s your name on the stone, so you must have had something to do with it. It says you’ll return, so obviously you’ve been here before. You don’t have a clue about what you can do in 3380, so you can’t deny something you haven’t done yet.”

Adam’s “logic” would have been laughed out of the science academy, but there was a Zeddian quality to it that Rory was hesitant to argue with, so they walked on in silence. The sun set in a golden splash of color, and their journey continued through the deepening twilight. Rory wondered what his mom would do when he didn’t come home for dinner. He didn’t want to think about that, so he turned his mind to Serena’s story.

“Serena, where was the stone? I didn’t see it,” he said.

“It vanished,” she said. “I don’t know when. No one visited the stone but my family, and I haven’t been for quite some time. When I began to work for the baroness, she asked me about local legends, and I told her about the stone, for its story has been sung in ballads for generations. She sent her advisors to see it, but it was gone, and there’s no trace of it ever being there. Since then the baroness has occasionally sent me to see if you’ve come, though I don’t think she really expects you.”

The light was quite gone now, and they stumbled along in the darkness until they came to a graveled road. They crossed a bridge to the right and began walking under the cliff. A light bobbed up ahead.

“Grandfather?”

“Serena! Are you alright?”

“Yes. Grandfather, they’re here!”

They hurried forward to meet him, and the old man bowed. “Welcome, your majesties. I am Halbert of Barnack, from the clan of Halbert the Wise. My wife, Lil, and I are happy to welcome you to our home. It’s humble, but it’s at your service.”

Adam and Rory bowed in return, and Adam nudged Rory.

“What?”

Adam cleared his throat. “Thank you, good sir. Your gracious generosity will not be forgotten.”

After dinner, Grandmother passed out steaming mugs of a slightly bitter drink they called flandee. Grandfather savored his first sip and then leaned forward.

“Now,” he said, “please tell me what happened.”

Serena recounted the day's adventure accurately and without embellishment. When she finished, Grandfather sat in thought for a while, then fixed his gaze on Rory. "You're not a king or a prince in your own land?"

"No, sir."

"And you have no knowledge of Petla?"

"No, sir."

"And yet you have come as the stone said, you bear the king's insignia, and own his name as yours. Anders was a great king, but his line ended when his great-grandson, Gilroy, was lost at sea. We haven't had a real king since, though it's been nearly three hundred years."

Rory stared at him for a moment. "My dad's name was Gilroy," he said finally, "but I don't see how I can have any connection to your ancient king. The King of the Fountain of Life sent me here to be his ambassador. He didn't say anything about me being the king."

"Ah, so you were sent. Well then, you *are* the one. We welcome you!"

Rory made himself smile and then worked up the courage to ask, "Sir, can you tell me what the yellow menace is?"

"We believe it's connected to Iver," Grandfather said, and he settled back in his chair. "Many years ago a guild of men dedicated to learning the secrets of nature came up with all sorts of marvelous inventions. Men could fly through the air and talk to people far away and travel through portals. Unfortunately, the inventors opened a portal to a horrible place called Iver. Iverns came and enslaved Petla and the Northern Realms, and carried many of our people back to their wretched planet. They took our food supplies too and killed our inventors. We were in dire straits and cried out to the Creator for help. One of the inventors had hidden his papers, and his son studied them secretly until he could close the portal, though once it closed, those who were carried off had no way to come home and they were lost."

He sipped his flandee and munched on a cookie. "I don't understand everything I hear, but apparently Iverns have found another portal, something to do with gold and a lust for money. They haven't been able to get large numbers through yet, though they're working to re-open the old portal so they can bring their army and carry off more slaves."

"It sounds like they're coming through Gurrachk," Adam said.

"That's an evil word," Grandfather said. "What does it mean?"

"It's an evil dimension, and it twists anyone who goes through it. Human sacrifice is the only way to open it, and everyone who passes through it wears a yellow aura. That's why they would be called the yellow menace."

"Aura?" Serena asked.

"A glow of color. Every dimension gives a gift and marks a man with color. Greenswold, which makes good farmers, is green and Arbornack, for foresters, is brown. Rory, you know all this—you just haven't processed it yet."

Rory realized that Adam had a purple glow, and his own hands had a purple cast to them as well, though a slightly different shade.

"So not everyone can see the auras?" he asked.

“Right,” Adam said.

Grandfather shifted in his chair. “I guess I’m one of those that can’t see them. What color are you two wearing?”

“Purple, sir,” Rory said.

“Ah, of course, the color of royalty. So, have you had experience in warfare?”

Rory shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Then the baroness’s plan won’t work.”

“What shall I tell her, Grandfather?” Serena asked.

“That’s Rory’s decision, Serena.”

She looked at Rory, and he felt his face grow hot. “I want time to sort things out,” he said.

“Can you stall for a while? Not tell her anything?”

Serena gave a reluctant nod.

“Grandfather, can you tell me exactly what I need to do?” Rory asked.

“The new portal must be closed,” Grandfather said, “and you’ll have to get rid of the Iverns that are here.”

“Do you know how to do all that?” Rory asked Adam.

“I can help get rid of the Iverns, but I have no clue how to close the portal. That’s your problem.”

Rory felt as if the walls were closing in, and Adam grinned at him.

“Oh, this looks hopeless,” Serena said. “And I shall remain the laughing stock of Blanchemont.”

“Have faith, pretty maid,” Adam said, “The King of the Fountain can do great things with just a little bit.” He laughed. “You asked for a king and you got one. He’s not what you expected, but when does the great king do what we expect?”

Rory thought of Zed and all the impossibilities he had witnessed in the last day. He laughed with Adam.

Grandmother put away her knitting and rose. “You’ve traveled a long way today, your majesties, and it’s late. Come, I will show you to your room.”