

Illumina

A Middle Grade Fantasy Filled with
Adventure and Imagination



Dan O'Mahony

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To my muse, a great slumbering dragon

Chapter One

The universe explodes in a huge ball of fire. The skies burn uncontrollably. It takes centuries for everything to finally cool down, leaving nothing but pitch-black space in all directions. I'm there, floating in that space, all alone – until the dragon appears.

It's massive, like a planet. Its golden scales glimmer. The heat of its body warms me like the sun. Each beat of its wings creates gusts of wind that send me gliding further through space.

"Ronnie?"

I blink back to reality. Instead of floating through space, I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Grandpa's truck, outside of Hamilton Middle School. Great, I don't even remember getting here, and who knows how long I've been sitting here staring ahead like a zombie.

Grandpa chuckles. "What's the matter? You still asleep?"

He slugs my shoulder. Grandpa's a retired Marine, so he's still pretty buff. Ow. Seriously Ow. I know it's meant to be a playful gesture, but man, it doesn't exactly tickle.

"Yeah. Still a little sleepy," I say.

He and Grandma worry about me enough already, about how I'm dealing with Mom and Dad's death. They don't need to know about the dragon too. How I've been seeing it all the time.

"You're not having nightmares again, are you?" Grandpa asks.

I shift in my seat and tug on the cuffs of my long-sleeve shirt. No. No nightmares about Mom or Dad. Or the Face in the Fire.

"I'm just nervous," I tell him. "About going back to school. A new school."

"If you're not ready yet, it's okay. The school will understand."

I manage a smile. For such a tough-guy, Grandpa can be really understanding sometimes.

“It’s been long enough,” I tell him. “I’m ready.”

At least I think I am.

“That’s my soldier.” Grandpa slugs me again – on the same exact spot as the first time.

I step out of the truck. Grandpa throws me a salute, and I give him one back as he drives away. My first stop is the office. The school secretary must know about me, about what happened to Mom and Dad, because when I tell her my name, she gives me a sad smile and looks like she wants to reach over and hug me. I really hope she doesn’t. She gives me my schedule, locker assignment, and a map of the school.

I’m supposed to see the counselor, Mrs. Jenkins, first. She’s really nice and says all of my teachers know about what’s going on with me, and if I feel panicky at all I just have to tell them, and they’ll give me a pass to her office. I thank her and ask if there’s anything else she needs from me before I go.

The first bell rings, startling me a little. I push through the big, double doors and step into the quad. There are kids everywhere, all headed in different directions on the way to their first class.

I grip the straps on my backpack and rush in, slipping through any openings that appear in the crowd. I get shoved and knocked around. All the kids passing by me grin and make little comments, no doubt because I’m so small for my age. Seriously, I look more like a fourth grader than a sixth grader – which I am.

All of a sudden, it feels like they’re seeing right through me and know what happened to me. My heart beats faster. I’m not sure I can do this anymore. Maybe I am not ready yet. No, I’ve got to try. I breathe just like Dr. Hollis taught me and slowly start relaxing. I remind myself there’s no way they can know about what happened, not by looking at me.

I make it to my first class, Math, right before the late bell rings. All eyes turn toward me, the new kid, as I enter the room. I get more looks, chuckles, and grins. A man dressed in a shirt and tie approaches me. He must be the teacher, Mr. Preston.

“Can I help you, son?”

I hand him my schedule. My voice comes out all soft and tiny. “I’m Ronnie Jackman. I’m in your class.”

Mr. Preston stares at my schedule then hands it back to me with a sad smile, just like the school secretary did. He helps me find a desk in the

back of the room then brings me a textbook and tells me which page to turn to.

I have a hard time concentrating during the lesson, just like Dr. Hollis said I might. Somehow, I manage. My next two classes are Science and Social Studies. When I meet the teachers, they each give me sad smiles just like Mr. Preston and the school secretary did. It's starting to bother me a little.

All day long, I work hard on my assignments and try to make a good impression on my teachers. I monitor my breath, so I can stay in the moment, just like Dr. Hollis taught me. But I keep daydreaming about the dragon. I can't help it. Every time, whatever classroom I'm in ends up fading away, and I'm back, floating in space, with the dragon. Only now, there are two smaller dragons with it. One of them shines with white light so bright I can barely make out its shape, while the other one glows with a softer, silver light.

Funny thing is, seeing them is starting to make me relax, even smile a little. They make me want to ignore my work completely and fly with them, see where they'll take me. And I want to go too but know I can't. I have to stay grounded.

I have one more class before lunch. Language Arts. According to my schedule, the teacher's name is Mrs. Price, but I don't see a woman at the front of the class. Instead, there's a tall skinny man with copper-colored hair and big, black glasses. He stands over a table sifting through some papers.

When I approach him, he lifts his head and greets me with a big, happy smile.

"Uh, Mrs. Price?" I ask.

The man's eyebrows arch, almost cartoon like.

"No. Sorry," he says in a cool British accent, like a character from Doctor Who. "I'm afraid I go by my maiden name these days."

I grin, embarrassed. "I mean, is this Mrs. Price's class?"

"Yes, it is. Only I'm afraid Mrs. Price is going to be out for quite a while. I'll be teaching in her place. Mr. Griffin." He holds out his hand. "And you are?"

"Ronnie Jackman. It's my first day."

"Mine too. Fancy that. Well, it's lovely meeting you, Ronnie. I look forward to working with you. Now, why don't you go find a place to sit.

Class is about to start.”

I find a desk in the back and unpack my things as Mr. Griffin gets the class’s attention. Once everyone’s quiet, he introduces himself and tells them Mrs. Price will be out for a few weeks, and he’ll be in charge.

Most of the kids look pretty happy about that. Some even pump their fists and mouth *yes*. The only person who looks disappointed about Mrs. Price’s absence is this girl with long black hair. She’s pretty, like a model, and dressed like she could be one too.

“I thought we’d start the day with a little writing activity,” says Mr. Griffin.

Everyone groans, including me. I hate writing.

The girl flashes a bright smile and raises her hand.

“Yes?” says Mr. Griffin. “Oh, and your name, please.”

“Bianca Hawthorne, hi,” she says. “Will we be writing a persuasive or informative essay?”

“Neither,” says Mr. Griffin. “It’ll be a piece of fiction. A short story.”

I look up, surprised. I can’t remember the last time I wrote a story in school. I’m not alone either. A lot of the other kids in class look just as surprised as me.

“Did Mrs. Price put that in her lesson plans?” Bianca asks. “We’ve only been writing informative and persuasive essays in her class. That’s what we’re going to be tested on in spring. You should really be following the lesson plans.”

“And we’ll get to them. But first, a spot of creative writing to liven things up a bit,” says Mr. Griffin, rubbing his hands together.

Bianca has a worried frown on her face. “What will we be writing about?”

“Whatever you wish. In any manner you wish.”

My eyes go wide. Is he serious? He’s not going to tell us what we’re supposed to do? We’re supposed to just come up with our own thing, our own way? I’m not used to that. So are the other kids by the looks of it.

“But we need a prompt,” says Bianca. “We need – something.”

“No. You really don’t,” says Mr. Griffin. “Give it a go. You might surprise yourself. Now, everyone get a Chromebook. You’ll type your story in one of those and submit it to me on your class’ Google Classroom when time’s up.”

Everyone gets up slowly to fetch Chromebooks from the cart in the back of the room. I get mine, open up Google Docs, and end up staring at the blank screen for what seems like forever.

Mr. Griffin strolls around the room. “Come along now, children. Spit-spot. I’m not hearing fingers hitting keys. Let’s go. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack,” he adds, typing on an invisible keyboard. He stops at my desk. “Ronnie?”

I hesitate then say, “I’m – thinking.”

Mr. Griffin crouches beside me. “There’s your problem. Don’t think about it. Write about it. Whatever’s in your head, let it out on the page. Shape it and breathe life into it with words. I don’t care how silly or stupid your ideas might seem to you. Take a chance. Put them out there. You just might surprise yourself.”

I make a nervous face. Mr. Griffin might not care if I come up with something silly or stupid. But I sure do.

Mr. Griffin leans in close. “Ronnie, you’ve got something worth sharing inside you. You may not believe it, but I do. I can almost see it. Right there.”

He taps my forehead with his finger. When he does, the dragon appears. It flies right at me. No, not *it*. The dragon’s a *she*. And she has a story to tell me.

Birth of the Dragon World

By

Ronnie Jackman

The universe exploded. A fiery cloud consumed the planets and snuffed out the stars. When the last of the flames finally died, they appeared. Illumina, a great golden dragon with dazzling green eyes, and her children, Briam and Lioth.

Briam flew before his mother. He burned, white hot. His light guided them through the darkness, allowing them to cut a path through the dust and debris left over from the universe's demise. Lioth flew behind her mother. She possessed a soft, silvery glow, and every beat of her gossamer wings sent showers of sparkling lights trailing behind her.

Briam may have led the way, but it was Illumina who had determined their course. Once they reached the center of this new universe, Illumina wrapped her wings around her massive body and curled up, nose to tail, floating in space. Her eyes fell shut, and she slipped into a deep slumber while Briam and Lioth flew circles around her, in an endless game of chase.

As Illumina slept, dust and debris from space settled upon her, forming ever-thickening layers of earth. The warmth of her body and her steady breaths stirred the dormant traces of life buried within the thick matter that had formed around her, giving birth to great forests, vast plains, rivers, and lakes.

In the center of this newly blossomed land, surrounded by a dense glen, stood the Soul Tree, which sprang directly from Illumina's heart. It stretched higher than any other tree. Its topmost branches were wreathed with clouds.

It was from there that Erebos, the gryphon, emerged. Through the Soul Tree, he communicated directly with Illumina, who remained aware of all things even as she slumbered. Erebos raised his eagle head and scanned the landscape below. His wings snapped open. His lion limbs coiled then sprang, launching him into the air.

Erebos soared over the land, letting out a long resounding cry. As he did, new life emerged. Birds filled the sky, from the smallest sparrow to the greatest hawk. Fish of all sorts swam the waters while herds of wild horses and buffalo roamed the plains. Horned sheep ascended the mountain peaks,

and the forests teemed with rabbits, deer, bears, wolves and lions. Tall, slender elves also appeared in the forests, while stout dwarves surfaced from their underground homes and timid humans peered from their caves.

His work complete, Erebus returned to his perch in the Soul Tree.

Illumina the dragon was now Illumina the world.

THE END

Chapter Two

Something lands on my shoulder. I cry out. Mr. Griffin stands next to me. He pulls his hand away like he's touched something hot.

The kids in class laugh. I groan, so embarrassed.

Mr. Griffin shuts them up with a stern look. He crouches beside me, smiling. "I called time a few minutes ago. Everyone else has already put away their Chromebooks."

"Sorry. I was –"

"*In the zone*, as you Americans like to say? Quite all right. Need any more time?"

I'm slow to answer. "No. I'm – good."

Everything's so hazy around me. It's like I'm not quite here. Like I'm still in the world of my story. I try to shake it off and go over what I wrote.

Wow, I did this? Me?

For starters, I can't remember ever writing so much in such a short time before in my life. It's everything from my daydream and more. It had all played out in front of me, and the words I needed to describe what I'd seen just came to me. I've never experienced anything like this.

I lean back in my chair, still in a daze. Everyone else around me is already at work on the next assignment. I upload my story to Google Classroom and hurry to put my Chromebook away.

"Ronnie." Mr. Griffin calls out. "I can't wait to read your story."

I smile all bashful. But proud too. That's ruined when Bianca shoots me an evil look. What's that about?

We're reading *Bridge to Terabithia*. Right now, we're in discussion groups, going over last night's assignment. Mr. Griffin puts me in a group with Bianca. I smile, trying to be nice. She smiles back, but totally phony.

There are two other boys in the group. One's tall and skinny with long black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Alex. The other one's shorter, not

as short as me of course, with big shoulders and a big chest. Jeffrey. He's in my science class too.

"I know you haven't read the book, but that's okay," Bianca assures me. "I'll get you up to speed."

"I read it at my old school," I tell her.

"Oh. Good. But we had very detailed discussion questions to answer last night. You might be better off just listening."

Bianca doesn't even wait for me to respond. She just goes ahead and starts leading the discussion. She shares her answer to the first question then sets her paper down and flashes a big, satisfied smile.

Alex and Jeffrey agree with some of the things she said. Bianca looks like she expected this. But when they try to offer their own ideas about the reading, Bianca's quick to argue with them. It's as if her opinions about the book are the correct ones, and no one else's matter. We aren't even able to get through all of the discussion questions because of that she keeps arguing with Alex and Jeffrey.

Mr. Griffin calls the class back together, and we go over the discussion questions together. Bianca's hand is the first to go up. She shares her answer and sits back in her chair, waiting for Mr. Griffin's praise.

Instead, Mr. Griffin says, "Interesting. Thank you." He then turns to the class. "How about the rest of you? Did anyone come up with anything different?"

Bianca's mouth falls open a little. Mr. Griffin ignores her and calls on other people to share their answers. When they do, he asks them for more details to back up whatever they're trying to say. Some aren't sure what to say at first, but Mr. Griffin is real patient and gives them just the right amount of help they need to get to whatever it is they want to say.

He then checks the clock and wraps up the discussion – or at least tries to.

Bianca raises her hand really high to get his attention.

"Yes, Bianca," says Mr. Griffin.

"Aren't you going to tell us what the author was really trying to say in this chapter?" she asks.

"I really don't know. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Paterson to be honest, so I've been unable to ask her."

I chuckle. So do some of the other kids.

“But the study guide,” says Bianca. “You’re supposed to be using the study guide.”

Mr. Griffin picks it up off the table. “This thing. I took it as more of a list of suggestions than anything.”

“But Mrs. Price always uses the study guide. It tells us what we’re supposed to know, what we’re supposed to learn from the book.”

“Actually, what it does is provide some shared interpretations of the book that are meant to spark your thinking, not simply tell you what to think. That’s the beauty of literature or any form of art. It’s open to interpretation. You make your own meaning. Reading a good story should be a personal journey. If you allow it to, reading a good story will transform you, leaving you better off for having read it.” Mr. Griffin glances at me from the corner of his eye. “Same holds true for *writing* a good story.”

I smile back. Everyone else slouches in their seats, checking their phones or whispering to their neighbors. None of them look the least bit interested in what Mr. Griffin just said. For some reason, I feel bad for them. It’s like they missed out on something special.

Mr. Griffin hands out the homework and makes sure I get a copy of *Bridge to Terabithia* to read at home. The bell rings. I pick up my lunch from my locker and find a spot by myself in the cafeteria to eat. After lunch, my last two classes are Computers and the horror that is P.E. That kid, Alex, turns out to be in my computer class. He nods when he sees me. I nod back but don’t have the nerve to try to sit at the station next to him.

The rest of the day, I keep waiting for another “visit” from the dragon – Illumina. Now that I know her name, I should probably call her by that. She’s been bugging me for days, but ever since I wrote that story, there’s been nothing. Is that all she wanted? For me to tell her story? I shut that thought out of my head. I mean, what am I thinking? She’s not real. She’s something I made up. How could she tell me what to do?

The final bell rings, and I head to my locker. Grandma is picking me up. I have an appointment with Dr. Hollis after school.

Something collides with me, sending me crashing into the wall of lockers.

My cry of pain is drowned out by a chorus of laughter.

“Oops, sorry there, shorty.”

I turn to see three preppy boys standing behind me. The one in front wears an ear-to-ear grin, showing off perfect white teeth.

“Guess I didn’t see you there. Because of you being so short and all,” he says, patting me on the head.

My shoulder aches from where it hit the metal lockers, but I pretend it doesn’t hurt.

“Excuse me,” I mutter and try to pass.

The first boy pushes me back. “Whoa, whoa, hold on. Where are you going? Me and my friends want to know more about you. Like what’s your deal? Did you skip some grades? Are you some kind of genius? Are you, what, eight, nine years old?”

“Maybe he’s seven, Chad,” says one of the other boys.

“I’m twelve,” I mumble.

Chad leans in. “What was that? Squeak up?”

“I said I’m twelve,” a little louder this time.

Chad and his friends laugh.

“Oh, my God,” says the third boy. “No way.”

Chad looks me up and down. “So, what’s up with that? Are your parents, like, circus midgets or something?”

Mentioning my parents, I flashback to the night they died. I go numb. My body doesn’t feel like it belongs to me anymore. My vision blurs as my eyes water up. I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt.

Chad sees me doing this and laughs. “And what’s up with the long sleeve shirts, it’s like ninety degrees out.”

“Just let me go. Please,” I say.

“Oh, come on,” says Chad. “We’re just trying to get to know you better. You’re new, right? You want to make friends, don’t you?”

My throat aches. I want to cry. I want to scream. Lucky for me, a couple of teachers pass by, clearing the halls of loitering students. Chad and his friends are distracted for a moment long enough for me to escape.

“See you tomorrow, little buddy,” Chad calls out behind me, followed by him and his friends laughing.

My stomach is in knots. I try to breathe like Dr. Hollis taught me. I make it to the parking lot and spot Grandma’s Mercedes parked at the curb. It’s shinier than any other car around it. That’s for sure. She gets it washed and waxed every couple of weeks whether it needs it or not. She takes just as much pride in her appearance too, always dressing up and never leaving the house without full makeup and jewelry, even when running errands.

She smiles and waves at me through the window. I toss my backpack in the backseat then sit in the passenger seat next to her.

“Are you okay?” she asks, reaching for me.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Are you sure? You look flushed.”

“I just had P.E. It’s my last class.”

Grandma nods, studying me for a moment. She starts the car and pulls away from the curb. “So you made it through the whole day. That’s great. I’m so proud of you. I know your grandpa will be too.”

“Thanks.”

“So how did everything go?”

“Okay.”

Grandma makes a sad face. “That’s all I get?”

“It’s my first day. I don’t know anyone yet.”

“You’ll make friends. Just be patient.” She smiles and pats my leg. “What about your teachers? How are they?”

“They’re okay.” I smile a little. “My language arts teacher seems pretty cool. Mr. Griffin. He’s just a sub though. I don’t know how much longer he’s going to be around.” The thought of that makes me a little sad for some reason, which is weird seeing as how I’ve just met him.

“What did you do in his class today?”

“I wrote a story.”

“Really? What was it about?”

I start telling Grandma. But as I do, she tunes out. I should have seen it coming. Dragons, elves, and dwarves aren’t exactly her kind of thing.

We get to Dr. Hollis’ office. Each session always starts out the same way. She asks the same questions as always. Has my appetite improved? Am I sleeping okay? Have I gotten back into my old hobbies and interests?

Lately, she’s been asking if I’ve gotten in touch with any of my friends at my old school. I haven’t. I don’t know why either. I just haven’t. She then asks how my first day at my new school went. I tell her exactly what I told Grandma, word for word.

“I like that you wrote a story,” says Dr. Hollis. “And that you enjoyed writing it. Writing can be very therapeutic.”

Then, as usual, she asks me to relive “that night.” I don’t want to. But she keeps telling me to try. Seriously, I don’t want to – but suddenly

I'm there again, waking up in the middle of the night, choking on smoke.

It floods my room, stinging my eyes. I panic and tumble from my bed. There's this roaring coming from outside. It sounds like an animal.

I yell for Mom and Dad. I pull the door open. Fire. It's everywhere, devouring the house all around me like an angry, hungry monster.

"Ronnie! Ronnie, over here!" Dad calls out.

He and Mom are at the other end of the hall, near their bedroom. I want to run to them, but I can't move. It's like my feet are stuck to the floor.

The ceiling groans as the fire continues to eat the house alive. Dad and Mom run toward me. There's a horrible crash. Mom cries out. Dad covers her with his body, as the ceiling collapses, burying them in flaming wreckage.

I scream. The flames gather in front of me. In the middle of them, there's a face, like a phantom with hollow eyes and a huge gaping mouth laughing at me. I try to look away but can't. The face in the flames grows larger as the fire spreads around me. My heart feels like it's going to fly out of my chest.

More wreckage falls from the ceiling. Finally, I can move. I hold up my arms to protect myself. They get bruised and burned. My legs buckle. I drop to the ground, thinking this is it, the end, when I'm suddenly swooped into the air.

It's a firefighter. Two more are behind him. He carries me down the stairs, protecting me from the flames, which still roar and growl like a monster. The other two try to dig out my parents.

"They'll be okay," I keep telling myself, trying not to pass out. "They'll be okay."

I don't remember much after that. Except waking up in the hospital with Grandpa and Grandma there, each holding one of my hands. Grandma weeps uncontrollably. Grandpa, the tough guy, wipes tears from his eyes.

Seeing Grandpa cry, probably for the first time in my life, tells me all I need to know about what had happened to Mom and Dad. He and Grandma tell me anyway. I'm numb to it all. They promise they'll take good care of me from now on. It's what my parents wanted.

That's it. No more. I snap back to the present. I'm shaking and almost out of breath. Dr. Hollis gives me a moment then pushes me to analyze every detail of that night like she always does.

She asks the same questions. Did I notice anything new this time? Is there anything I could have done differently? She tells me it was okay to be scared then asks if I think my mom and dad would want me to blame myself for what happened?

I say, no. But inside, in my heart, I don't feel it.

I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt.

"Are you ready to show me the burns on your arms yet? Are they still that bad?" She asks this every time. Every time I always say no. Today's no different.

Dr. Hollis nods and makes some notes on her pad. We talk more about coping skills, and she gives me two new techniques to practice. Dr. Hollis asks me to wait outside while she talks to Grandma. I drop into one of the big, plush chairs and settle in. Every bit of me relaxes. My eyes close part way, as I stare into a corner of the ceiling.

Slowly, the waiting room fades away, the soft furniture, soothing pictures, and music vanish. And Illumina appears. Not the dragon. The world.

I float over the land, watching the different elf tribes track and hunt animals in the forests. From there, I slip underground to see the dwarves mining ore and gems and working them into weapons, tools, and treasures over searing hot forges.

Across the plains, the humans build farms and villages. Years pass in moments. Kingdoms are born. Then come the monsters. Giants storm down from the Dragonback Mountains to raid villages. There are gangs of centaurs, vicious snake men, evil mages, and pitiless hunters of men like the manticore.

It's not hopeless though. There are heroes ready to face them. One of them is young, but people all over Illumina are already talking about him. He travels with a giant wolf and carries an enchanted sword. He's tall, strong and brave. Everything I'm not.

Chapter Three

That morning, my head is on a swivel, scanning for Chad and his friends – or anyone else who might want to mess with me. I make it to my locker, stow my lunch, swap out my books, and head straight to Math.

My hands are sweaty and shaking a little. I wipe them on my jeans and make fists, trying to keep them still. I breathe like Dr. Hollis taught me.

This time, as I settle down, I start thinking about Illumina. Images form in my head. The young hero I saw the other day is having adventures all over the land. This continues to happen throughout the morning. Each little “trip” I take, the details become clearer, less blurry around the edges. I can even hear sounds, like the hero’s enchanted sword slicing through the air, and the growls and roars of each monster he fights.

I still can’t see the hero’s face yet. I don’t know his name yet either.

I get to Language Arts and take my seat. Mr. Griffin greets me with a rather sly nod and grin. He walks over to me, holding some papers.

“I absolutely loved your story,” he says. “So vivid and imaginative.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d love to read it to the class.”

My eyes go wide. “You’re going to read my story in front of the whole class?”

“Only if you give me permission.”

“So, if I say no?”

“Then I will respect your wishes and not read it.”

The corners of Mr. Griffin’s mouth fall a little, like he’s disappointed. He looks at me, waiting for my response. What if I say yes, and he reads it, and all the kids laugh? Then, I remember how Mr. Griffin got mad at them when they were laughing at me yesterday.

Mr. Griffin’s still looking at me, waiting for my answer. I can tell he really wants me to say yes. And for some reason, I don’t want to let him down.

I take a breath, let it out, and say, “Okay.”

Mr. Griffin smiles and gives me a proud nod before walking away. I get to my desk and slouch in my seat, hoping I didn’t make a mistake

agreeing to let him read it. The bell rings, and everyone gets settled. I guess I'll soon find out.

Mr. Griffin stands before the class with my story in his hands. "I read through everyone's stories from yesterday, and there was one in particular I was especially impressed with. I thought I'd share it with the class."

Bianca sits up in her chair and smiles brightly, obviously assuming it's hers.

"'Birth of the Dragon World,'" Mr. Griffin starts to read. He smiles and gestures to me. "By Ronnie Jackman."

I sink into my seat when the other kids in class turn and look at me. Bianca gives me some serious stink-eye. Mr. Griffin reads my story very dramatically, making wild gestures with his free hand as he does so. I'm still a bit embarrassed, but at the same time – it's kind of cool hearing my story read aloud by someone who really enjoyed it. And the story itself, it actually sounds pretty good. Exactly how I imagined it.

I suddenly notice I'm sitting up taller now and not hiding in my seat anymore.

When did that happen?

"Excellent work, Ronnie. Excellent indeed," says Mr. Griffin when he's finished. He then faces the class. "Questions, comments for the author?"

Most of the kids in class just sit there. Some nod my way, looking like they enjoyed my story. Alex and Jeffery are two of them.

Mr. Griffin frowns at the lack of interest from the class. "Right then, let's go over last night's reading. Get into your groups."

Everyone in class starts following Mr. Griffin's directions. Bianca raises her hand so high it looks like it's about to pop out of the socket.

"Yes, Bianca," says Mr. Griffin.

"Were there any other stories that you liked?" she asks with a hopeful smile.

"A few, yes."

"Will you be sharing any of them later?"

"If there's time, maybe. Now, get into your group please."

I pick up my chair and join Alex and Jeffery. Bianca stares a hole through me as she makes her way over. When she joins us, she is even more determined to dominate the discussion than she was the other day and prove

her answers are the only ones that matter, and the rest of us don't know what we're talking about.

It's torture. Alex, Jeffrey, and I all have the same pained looks on our faces, but Bianca keeps going. And just like yesterday, every time we try to contradict something she says or, heaven forbid, have any kind of opinion of our own, she practically turns into a pit bull. Group discussions finally end. We return to our seats and get ready to share out as a class.

"So, Jess and Leslie have just begun constructing an imaginary land, Terabithia, that's all theirs," Mr. Griffin begins. "What motivates them to do that?"

Bianca's hand is the first in the air. Mr. Griffin calls on her.

"They create Terabithia as a way of escaping the problems in their life." She follows her answer with a smug smile.

"Good," Mr. Griffin continues. "But surely they could find other means of escape. Why not simply watch movies or TV?"

"Leslie's family doesn't have a TV," Bianca reminds him.

"True. But Jess' family does. Why go to all the trouble of creating a place to escape to when there are so many easier forms of escapism readily available? Ronnie?"

I blink and look up. I didn't even raise my hand. Mr. Griffin still looks at me, waiting for an answer. After a moment, one comes to me.

"They might not have a choice," I say.

Mr. Griffin's ears perk up a little. "Really? Care to elaborate?"

I swallow. Why did he have to ask me that? Lucky for me, an answer comes to me. "An idea as big as Terabithia, and the need to create it, comes from somewhere deep inside. You've got to let it out. You have no choice."

Bianca scoffs. "What do you mean you don't have a choice? You always have a choice?"

Mr. Griffin silences her with a stern but gentle look. "Go on, Ronnie. Tell us more."

I swallow then continue. "Once you've started, then the rest is up to you. You make up the rules. It can be anything you want it to be. It's all yours, and no one can take it away from you."

Mr. Griffin smiles. "A lot more meaningful experience than simply watching telly, isn't it? Excellent. Thank you, Ronnie." He turns to the rest of the class. "That's the power of creation. Pictures. Stories. What you

create becomes a reflection of who you are. They express your dreams and desires, your fears – that is if you’re brave enough to dig that deep inside of you and turn it into words or images.”

Bianca raises her hand. Mr. Griffin calls on her.

“Yeah, but a fantasy world like Terabithia?” Bianca sneers. “With magic and monsters?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Mr. Griffin asks.

Bianca shifts in her seat. “It just seems so childish.”

“Don’t underestimate fantasy. Some of the most profound and long-lasting tales are fantasies. The fairy tales we read as children. The myths and folklore passed down through cultures for centuries. They’re stories that promote values like integrity, honor, courage, and sacrifice. Values that seem to be in short supply these days. Don’t believe me? Turn on the news. I think these days, now more than ever, we need some good fantasy stories to inspire us to reach for something greater.”

The moment he says that I’m back in Illumina again, watching its young hero battle monsters.

“But aren’t Jess and Leslie just running away from their problems by creating Terabithia?” Bianca asks.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” says Mr. Griffin. “I see it as being a form of revolt. You’re saying *I don’t like this world. It’s not good enough for me, so I’m going to make my own*. And who’s to say it doesn’t empower them and give them the strength to tackle their problems in real-life?”

Mr. Griffin wraps up the discussion then projects some writing prompts on the whiteboard using the document camera. I pick up a Chromebook from the cart, along with everyone else, and start on the assignment.

I can barely focus. I’m so wound up by what Mr. Griffin said about fantasy stories. I don’t know why. I just am. The whole time, all I can think about is Illumina.

I finish the assignment and upload it to Google Classroom. Mr. Griffin runs through the homework with us, finishing right as the bell rings.

“Ronnie, do you mind staying behind a minute?” he asks.

Some kids make faces and go *Oooooo* like I’m in trouble or something. At least I hope I’m not. I head toward Mr. Griffin, but Bianca steps in front of me at the last second, like I’m not even there.

“Excuse me, Mr. Griffin. I was just wondering what you thought of the story I wrote yesterday,” she says.

“It was nice. Quite lovely. Now, if you’ll excuse me –” Mr. Griffin tries to step around her, but Bianca darts in front of him.

“May I ask what you liked about it?”

Mr. Griffin’s face crinkles up, like he’s thinking. “You know, I’d need to have it in front of me to really say. I’ll be handing them back to everyone tomorrow. You can read my notes and comments then. Now, if you don’t mind, Ronnie is waiting for me.”

Bianca stares at Mr. Griffin like the wind’s been knocked out of her. She turns toward me. I brace myself for another nasty look. Instead, she looks disappointed, even hurt. It doesn’t last long. She quickly straightens herself up, and yep, there it is, she gives me the stink-eye as she marches out of class.

“Sorry about that,” Mr. Griffin tells me. He claps his hands and rubs them together. “So, my budding author, I knew you had something special inside you. I’m dying to know, where did you come up with the inspiration for your wonderful story?”

I scramble for an explanation. Something that’ll sound remotely smart, but all I can come up with is, “It just sort of came to me.”

Judging from his smile, my answer apparently works for Mr. Griffin. “Just plucked it from the aether, eh? Ha! I love it. These days, a lot of so-called experts are trying to discover the ‘scientific nature’ of creativity. So desperate to quantify and qualify it. Me, I go with the idea that creativity should be almost mystical in nature. A communion with the unknown. Glimpses into another world.”

I blink with surprise. Mr. Griffin’s smile brightens. “Is that what you’re experiencing, Ronnie?” he asks. “Glimpses into another world?”

I haven’t told anyone yet about what I see. But Mr. Griffin, somehow, I can tell he’ll get it. I nod, yes, and he just about explodes with joy.

“Ha! Brilliant! Have you always had this gift?”

I shrug. “I guess so. I was really good at making stuff up when I was little. I wrote stories. I drew pictures. Made things out of clay. When I’d play action figures with my friends, I was always the one who made up all the stories. But that was a long time ago.”

“Let me guess, one day, you were told you’d become too old for such nonsense and make-believe?” Mr. Griffin doesn’t need to wait for my answer. It’s obviously on my face. “Tragic. I want you to know right now, you’re never too old for nonsense and make-believe. Remember that. In fact, wholeheartedly believe everyone should actively engage in at least one act of total nonsense and-or make-believe a day. Too much reality tends to dull the brain.”

I laugh. I like that.

“You must read a lot,” Mr. Griffin continues. “Your command of words. You could tell they just flowed from you onto the paper. You must be reading some quality stuff too, not those wimpy-dorky-kid books.”

I grimace a little, trying to remember a book I’d read that wasn’t part of some school assignment – something I *had* to read. Then, it comes back to me.

“My mom used to read to me a lot when I was little. *The Hobbit*. *Narnia*. *Wizard of Oz*. *Alice in Wonderland*. Myths. Fairy Tales.”

Just like that, I’m transported back to those nights when Mom would sit next to me in my bed with a big book between us. I’m captivated as she reads, bringing the words to life with every rise and fall of her magical voice. But all of that gets taken away in an instant.

By the fire.

“Ronnie? Are you all right?” Mr. Griffin asks.

I can’t move. My voice won’t work either.

“Thinking about your parents? I know about what happened. I’m so sorry.”

“You know?” My voice sounds like a tiny, little croak.

Mr. Griffin nods. “I’ve known since the first day. Don’t your other teachers?”

“Yeah, but you don’t act like it. Not like they do.”

“What do you mean?”

“They all kind of baby me. They treat me like I’m going to break any second. You’re the only one who doesn’t.”

Mr. Griffin smiles. “I think you’re made of sterner stuff than that.”

I smile back, appreciating what he said. Mr. Griffin walks me to the door.

“I look forward to reading your next story,” he says, like he knows I’m going to write one. “You’ve laid the groundwork, created a magical

kingdom. Now you need a great hero to go on thrilling adventures.”

And just like that, I’m in Illumina again. Watching its hero in the middle of a forest, fighting a monster that’s got the head of a man but the body of a lion with a big scorpion tail.

I’m so close to the action, closer than I’ve been yet. The hero’s fists tighten around the hilt of his enchanted sword. His black hair is slick with sweat. His gray eyes burn with intensity. His upper lip curls into a determined snarl.

Then, just like that, I’m back in the real world.

“Ronnie?” Mr. Griffin gives me a weird look. “Off in Illumina, were we?”

I grin, bashfully. How did he know?

Mr. Griffin rests his hand on my shoulder. “Like I said, I can’t wait to read your next story.”

We say goodbye, and I head to my locker to get my lunch. As I walk through the quad, I slip back to Illumina again. Its hero is still fighting the same monster as before. The battle is epic, going back and forth. The monster’s scorpion tail snaps like a whip. The hero is barely able to block it with his enchanted sword.

There’s a giant wolf there too. He helps the hero fight.

The hero. His name is ... His name is ...

“There you are, little buddy. We’ve been looking all over for you.”

I’m jolted back to reality by the sound of Chad’s voice. He and his friends close in on me.

“Where’ve you been, pal?” Chad throws his arm around my shoulder and crushes me against him. “We waited for you by your locker this morning, but you didn’t show up. I was so sad. Wasn’t I sad?” he asks his friend.

“Yep,” says one. “I was too.”

“We were heartbroken,” says the other one.

I try to pull free, but that only makes Chad grip me tighter. And laugh louder.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks. “Don’t you want to hang out?”

“That’s enough!” It’s Mr. Griffin. He slips his glasses into his coat pocket as he approaches with steady, determined steps. “Let go of him. Now.”

Chad releases me and raises his hands in the air. "It's cool. We were just messing around." He nudges me. "Isn't that right, little buddy?"

Mr. Griffin's gaze narrows on him. "Really? Just messing around?" He stands in front of Chad, staring down at him. "My dear boy, what is wrong with you?"

"What?" Chad asks, almost offended.

"I asked what's wrong with you? And your friends?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," says Chad.

"Oh, no. You misunderstand. I'm speaking out of concern for you and your friends," says Mr. Griffin. "The three of you ganging up on a boy half your size is a cry for help if I ever saw one. There must be some deep pain that you're not ready to deal with, that's causing you to lash out like this." He smiles at Chad. "But it's all right. I want to help. If any of you feel like talking, opening up about whatever is torturing your poor souls, just know that I'm here for you."

Chad and his friends toss confused looks back and forth. Chad then chuckles, trying to act cool, even though there's a trickle of sweat running down his cheek. He and his friends take off, slowly at first, but soon start walking faster, heads locked forward, like they're trying on purpose not to look back.

I catch my breath and relax a little. Mr. Griffin strolls toward me and holds out my silver pen. "You left this in class," he says. "No writer should be without one. They're mightier than the sword, you know."

"Thanks." For more than just the pen.

Chad and his friends have stopped partway through the quad. They're glancing back at us, their hands and mouths moving frantically, like they're still trying to figure out what had just happened and what to think of Mr. Griffin.

"You know there's only one thing you can do with those boys." Before I can ask what, Mr. Griffin turns toward me, leaning in a little. "Write them into a story. And have something horrible happen to them." He follows this with a wink.

I laugh. That sounds like a good idea. A real good idea.

Suddenly, a whole story starts unfolding in my head. All the fragments I'd been imagining throughout start weaving together. Mr. Griffin pats me on the back and walks back to his classroom. I hurry to my locker,

get my lunch, and rush to the cafeteria. I get out my notebook and write, furiously, as I eat.

My thoughts swirl with images and lines of dialogue. My hand can barely keep up. My handwriting is the absolute worst. I finally give up on trying to stay within the lines. My pen actually starts to feel warm in my hand as the ideas keep coming and promise not to stop.

The bell rings. Lunch ends. Darn it. Everyone around me gets up to throw away their trash and head to class. I finish off the last bite of my lunch and scribble down one more sentence. I'll finish the rest when I get home, type it up on my laptop ...

Horror Waits in Em Wold

By
Ronnie Jackman

Briam, the fiery dragon, son of Illumina, had begun his daily flight through the skies. His temperament was fair that day, so he basked the land in gentle warmth.

Far below him, on Brum road, past the village of Tenby, a lone figure drove a tiny cart pulled by a spotted mare. He wore a cloak over his tunic and breeches, the hood pulled over his head to conceal his identity. He had gained a measure of notoriety over the last couple years and could not risk being recognized. He had business in Em Wold, far to the east, but when he heard of what had been happening to travelers along Brum road, he felt compelled to investigate since he was in the vicinity.

Other travelers passed him, farmers transporting their crops, journeymen artisans and craftsmen on their way to a new village or town to ply their wares. As he approached the border into the neighboring Duchy of Phidia, the road grew more desolate. He passed no more travelers nor could he see any farms or pastures.

The mare continued to pull the cart, her head lolling lazily, her tail batting back and forth. As he crossed into Phidia, the road remained empty. Nothing but forest and open fields in all directions. No sounds either, except the occasional songbird perched in the trees and the steady patter of the mare's hooves against the weathered, dirt road.

The hooded figure sat up and scanned either side of the road. From the descriptions he had received, he was in the area where the attacks had occurred. The mare suddenly grew skittish, whinnying and tossing her head. She refused to move another step forward and, instead, shifted in place. Rather than raise his voice and crack the reins to get her moving again, the hooded figure simply slid from the cart, stood and waited.

He did not have to wait long.

A gang of centaurs crashed through the brush. They circled the cart, howling and hollering, waving swords and axes overhead. The terrified mare shrieked and bucked, while the hooded figure remained silent and still.

The largest centaur, the leader by the way he carried himself, approached. His lower horse body was pitch black with muscular haunches. His human torso was just as powerful. His black hair was tied into a large, thick braid.

He scowled and pointed his axe at the hooded figure. "This is our road, fella. No one passes without paying a price."

"I am well aware of that," said the hooded figure. "You have been terrorizing travelers as of late."

The lead centaur sneered. "And you chose to take this road all the same?"

"So I can stop you. Once and for all."

The lead centaur's head jerked back in surprise. He glanced at his friends. They were set to laugh, until the hooded figure leapt into the air. He threw off his cloak, tossed it over the lead centaur's head as he vaulted over him and landed on his feet behind him.

The lead centaur cast off the cloak. His friends closed ranks behind him. The hooded figure stood revealed. He was a youth but tall as any man, lean and broad shouldered. His black hair was bound in a topknot, and his eyes were the color of polished steel.

He crouched in a fighting stance then held out his hand. He reached out with his mind. His large two-handed sword flew to him from his pack in the cart. He caught it and yanked off the scabbard. The blade glowed with a pale green light and hummed with energy. The sight of this gave the centaurs pause.

"Wait!" The youngest of them galloped up to the leader. His blond hair was long, with twin braids dangling by his ears. "We cannot do this."

The leader glanced at the youth and laughed. "He is just one man. Not even a man. A boy. He's barely got his first beard."

The youth grinned. He often used this to advantage. His age often caused many of his opponents to underestimate him.

The youngest centaur pointed. "The sword. It is called Stryke. And look, he wears the sign of the Order."

He referred to the medallion the youth wore over his tunic, bearing the image of Erebus, the great gryphon. A touch of fear crossed the lead centaur's face. He huffed and snorted. A spark of recognition then flashed in his eyes.

"Rionn," he spoke the name softly. He fell silent. As did the others.

The lead centaur stared at Rionn, as if demanding some form of confirmation. Rionn gave him a slight grin and a nod.

The lead centaur bristled. “Ha! You cannot actually be him. Rionn is supposed to travel with a giant wolf. If you really are him, where is this creature then?”

A menacing growl raked the air. The centaurs turned as one. Behind them, blocking their escape was a wolf the size of a horse. The beast, Varg, was as dark as a storm cloud and just as menacing. His paws were planted in the dirt. Hackles high. Eyes wide with menace. Lips curled, revealing dagger-like fangs.

The lead centaur’s bravado faltered. He returned his attention to Rionn, who smiled confidently. The centaurs outnumbered him. They were larger than him and all armed. But he could tell by the way they held their weapons that they had no idea how to actually use them. In fact, most of their axes, swords, and spears were old and worn and had been most likely discarded by the side of the road.

They were bullies. Pure and simple. Just as he’d predicted.

He addressed the lead centaur. “I have heard you have not actually taken any lives yet. Seeing as that is the case, Varg and I will spare yours, as long as you never harm another traveler on this road – or any other, ever again.”

The lead centaur reacted as if he had been slapped in the face. He gnashed his teeth and furrowed his brow. He traded glances with the other centaurs in his gang. They all appeared to be of the same mind, except maybe for the youngest one.

They may not have taken the lives, but they looked confident enough that, together, they could kill a member of the Order and earn themselves quite a reputation in doing so.

The leader raised his axe and charged, shouting. Two more followed close behind him, weapons high. Rionn stood his ground. The lead centaur swung his axe.

In one deft motion, Rionn blocked the attack, leapt into the air, and swung his sword. The lead centaur’s head toppled from its shoulders. His body crumpled into a heap. The other two centaurs paused.

Rionn took advantage, running one of them through the chest, then facing off with the other. His remaining foe pressed his attack but was

quickly disarmed and killed with a blow to the collarbone that almost cleaved him in half.

Rionn glanced Varg's way. The giant wolf had already dispatched one centaur and was tearing the throat out of a second. A third centaur ran at Varg, his spear raised.

Rionn flipped his weapon, indeed called Stryke, into the air. The grip lengthened and the blade shortened, transforming into a spear. It landed back in his grasp. Varg turned to his attacker and growled. Rionn threw Stryke, burying it in the centaur's back.

Rionn held out his hand and reached out with his mind. Stryke pulled free from the centaur's corpse. As it flew through the air, it transformed back into a sword, which Rionn caught and leveled on the youngest centaur, who gasped and threw his hands in the air.

"No! Please."

Rionn lowered his blade. The young centaur held no weapon. He raised his hands and trembled. He let out another frightened gasp when Varg joined Rionn.

"What is your name?" Rionn asked.

"Kludo," muttered the young centaur. He looked even younger than Rionn.

"You will leave here, Kludo," Rionn told him. "You will never come back."

Kludo nodded, fervently. Rionn pointed off into the distance, with Stryke. The young centaur thanked him and galloped off, kicking up dust behind him.

During the fray, the mare had run off pulling the cart behind her. Rionn and Varg continued on foot towards Em Wold. They still had a way to travel, and unfortunately the supplies they had brought with them were in their cart, which was now long gone. Thanks to his training, Rionn was able to block all feelings of hunger and thirst.

They reached the town limits before sunset. Rionn told Varg to wait in the forest. He did not want to, but Varg's fearsome appearance tended to intimidate most people. In the past, this had caused panic and more than one skirmish. Rionn chose to avoid them as much as possible.

He knew Em Wold was the province of Lord Piers. His manor stood on top of a hill. The two guards on duty outside its walls recognized his medallion and greeted him with the respect due to a member of the Order.

Rionn told them the purpose of his visit. A look of relief passed across both guards' faces. They summoned another man and ordered him to report to Lord Piers.

Rionn waited, expecting one of the lord's men to escort him into the keep. What he did not expect was Lord Piers to come meet him at the gate, himself. He was a fit man with close-cropped dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard, and while he may have been dressed in the fine clothes of a lord, he carried himself like a seasoned warrior.

Rionn bowed. Lord Piers quickly bade him to rise and offered his hand. "I have heard stories of a young member of the Order who travels the land fighting monsters. It is an honor."

"Thank you, my lord."

Lord Piers' eyes narrowed as if in curiosity. "Word is you travel with a giant wolf. Has that detail been exaggerated?"

"Varg is off in the forest, my lord," Rionn explained. "I did not want to bring him through the village. His appearance can be rather unsettling for those who do not know him as well as I do."

Lord Piers nodded. "Understandable, I suppose. But I would still enjoy seeing such a creature up close. If that might be arranged."

Rionn glanced at the banner that hung from the nearby wall. A wolf dominated the family's crest. Rionn grinned and agreed to take Lord Piers to meet Varg. Lord Piers ordered horses saddled for them and two of his men. A short ride later, they reached the forest's edge.

"So how do you summon the wolf? Varg, was it?" Lord Piers asked.

"We have shared a mental communion ever since Varg was a pup," Rionn answered.

Lord Piers grinned. "Fascinating. Is he on his way to meet us?"

Rionn pointed to the nearby brush. Varg stepped through it, noiselessly. Lord Piers' men steered their horses toward him in order to protect him. Rionn turned to Varg, who let out a low growl triggered by the men's fear.

They reached for their swords. Rionn prepared to step between them and Varg. But Lord Piers held up a gloved hand and ordered his men to stay back. He slid from the back of his stallion. Rionn followed. The great wolf glanced from him to Lord Piers, who removed one of his leather gloves and held his palm upright, like he would if he was greeting one of his hounds.

Varg sniffed Lord Piers' hand then licked it with his long tongue. Lord Piers laughed as Varg allowed him to stroke his muzzle. Rionn looked on, pleased at how easily the great wolf had accepted him.

"I insist that you and Varg be guests in my home tonight," said Lord Piers. "Both of you will be treated in a manner befitting the great heroes you are."

Rionn agreed. He looked to Varg, who simply yawned and pawed his nose. The great wolf walked beside Rionn's horse as they made their way back to Lord Piers' keep.

"Why are the horses not afraid of Varg?" Lord Piers asked.

"They know he does not wish to harm them," answered Rionn.

"How do they know this?"

"All animals speak the same language. With their eyes. And how they carry themselves."

Lord Piers chuckled. "Amazing."

He looked to Rionn again, his expression now somber. "My men have told me you are aware of our trouble."

Rionn nodded and steered his horse toward Lord Piers, closing the distance between them.

"We have faced our share of threats over the years," Lord Piers continued. "My men and I have been capable of handling them. But this?" He shook his head, his brow creased with worry.

"I will be glad to help you, my lord," offered Rionn.

Lord Piers smiled gratefully. "Your help will be welcome. We received word from a messenger this morning that Earl Benedict will be arriving today to aid us as well. Come first light, we shall scour the woods for this creature. With such a force assembled, it does not stand a chance."

Rionn smiled in agreement. They rode back to the manor in time to meet Earl Benedict and his party of over a dozen men. Rionn followed Lord Piers, who dismounted and approached the young earl, who appeared to be the same age as Rionn but was shorter and more slender with fair skin and shoulder-length blond hair.

Lord Piers bowed before him. Rionn did the same. Earl Benedict seemed to wait an unusually long amount of time before he bade Lord Piers and Rionn to rise again.

"I expected a grander reception than this," the young earl responded.

“Forgive me, my liege.” Lord Piers gestured to Rionn. “We are fortunate enough to have a warrior of the Order in Em Wold. I was showing him the woods and must have lost track of time.”

Earl Benedict looked Rionn up and down. “Are you the young warrior who has been traveling Illumina battling monsters?”

“Aye, I have, my liege,” Rionn responded with a humble nod.

Earl Benedict glanced past him, at Varg. “I have heard of your beast. Up close, he is quite magnificent.”

“Thank you, my liege.”

“His head would make a fine trophy for my wall.”

Rionn bristled at this flagrant threat toward his friend. “If you did, you would lose a powerful ally in our hunt for the monster that terrorizes Em Wold.”

Earl Benedict scoffed. “Perhaps you are not aware of my reputation as a hunter. All manner of beasts have fallen to my spear. The one that currently torments Em Wold will be no exception.”

“I look forward to seeing you in action,” said Rionn.

“Yes, you might learn a thing or two. Are our rooms ready, Lord Piers?”

“Yes, my liege,” he replied. “I have also selected my finest men to accompany us on our hunt tomorrow. If you would like to inspect them –”

“There is no need. The men I brought with me will be sufficient,” said Earl Benedict. “You, of course, are welcome to join us tomorrow, as is your –” He looked Rionn up and down again. “– guest.”

“Yes, my liege,” said Lord Piers. “Thank you, my liege.”

He ordered some men to escort Earl Benedict into the manor, while another escorted his men to the barracks. Rionn looked to Lord Piers. From the expression on his face, he could tell Lord Piers was just as put off by Earl Benedict’s demeanor and treatment of him as he was.

Lord Piers ordered a space be made for Varg by the kennels and assured Rionn he would be well taken care of that night. Rionn thanked him and stayed with the great wolf to make sure he was settled.

By that time, Briam had descended past the Dragonback Mountains. His sister, Lioth, the silver dragon, had taken to the sky for her nightly flight. She was especially bold that evening, so her glow was quite luminous. As she flew, each beat of her gossamer wings and tail painted the cobalt sky with glittering lights.

The servant arrived to escort Rionn to the dining room. Lord Piers introduced him to his wife, Lady Eilena, and his children, Cassian and Kaitlee. Earl Benedict was there as well, along with two of the men from his party. They were all dressed so finely, in silk and velvet clothes that were finely embroidered and decorated with gems.

Earl Benedict smirked as he looked Rionn up and down.

"I see you dressed for dinner," he commented, referring to Rionn's plain tunic, breeches, and boots.

His companions chuckled. Lord Piers and Lady Eilena turned to Rionn, embarrassed. Rionn smiled, hoping to put them at ease and show them Earl Benedict's barb meant nothing to him.

Lord Piers' children sat on either side of Rionn. They were quickly enamored of him, and throughout the dinner, they pleaded with him to tell stories of his time training with the Order and his adventures since leaving them. Rionn was happy to oblige. Lord Piers and Lady Eilena listened as well and appeared just as fascinated and entertained as their children.

As he told his stories, Rionn felt Earl Benedict's scowling at him. When he could, the young earl interjected stories of his own, of the various hunts he had been on and the beasts he had been able to bring down, but Lord Piers' children appeared to prefer Rionn's stories to his. Rionn allowed himself a smile of satisfaction.

Since they would be leaving at first light for their hunt, it was decided they would retire early that evening. Servants came to escort everyone to their rooms. Rionn and Earl Benedict ended up walking together as their rooms were located in the same wing of the manor. A tense silence accompanied them.

Earl Benedict was the one who finally broke it. "Word is you are originally from Larith in the east. Is that correct?"

Rionn nodded. "It is."

"Did you not think to go back? Certainly, the duke would have been proud to have a member of the Order as his champion."

Rionn's jaw set. "I did go back."

"And?"

"It is complicated," was all Rionn wished to say about the matter.

Earl Benedict chuckled. "My father's former champion was of the Order. Perhaps you have heard of him. Gallien?"

"I have heard of him."

“He died when I was a boy. He fought a monster that had emerged from the lake. He killed the beast. But succumbed to his wounds later that night.”

“I am sorry.”

“As was I. He was my first sword instructor. He also taught me how to ride, hunt, and throw a spear. He said I was very talented, and that one day I was bound to receive the call of the Order. I was so excited when he told me that. It made me want to work that much harder and prove I was truly worthy. Then, Gallien died. But I still trained, waiting for that call. Only it never came. Eventually, I gave up.” Earl Benedict smirked. “You, on the other hand, as the stories go, were picked by Erebos himself, plucked from the smoldering remains of your family’s farm. Is that correct?”

Rionn nodded, forced to think back to that fateful night when his family was killed.

“Have you ever bothered to ask why?” Earl Benedict asked him. “What made you so special?”

Rionn had no answer for him.

Earl Benedict scoffed and continued toward his room. “That is what I thought.”

Rionn returned to his room. Earl Benedict’s words plagued him. In truth, the question he had posed to Rionn was one he had been asking himself for years.

What was so special about him? Was there some grand plan for him? A great destiny? At times, Erebos hinted at exactly that but would not go into any details. Rionn hoped he did have some special purpose. At least it would explain why he survived that night and did not die alongside his family.

As the sun rose, Rionn met Varg in the kennels. The two then headed to the courtyard, where Lord Piers waited along with Earl Benedict’s men. The young earl emerged from the manor and made his way toward them, followed by his two companions. He glared at Rionn the whole time.

“There has been a change of plans.” He pointed a gloved hand at Rionn. “He will not be joining us.”

Lord Piers’ appeared struck with surprise, as did Earl Benedict’s men for that matter. Rionn was just as shocked. He then recalled his

conversation with the young earl last night and his behavior during dinner. The motivation for making Rionn stay behind became glaringly apparent.

Earl Benedict waved for one of his men to bring him his horse. "Have two of your men accompany him and his beast to the border," he ordered Lord Piers. "If they refuse to cooperate, they are to be arrested."

"My liege, will you please reconsider?" Lord Piers asked.

Earl Benedict stared back at him, looking almost insulted. "I gave you a command."

Lord Piers cast an apologetic look to Rionn, who nodded, indicating he understood that Lord Piers had no choice but to obey.

Rionn and Varg stood off to the side as Earl Benedict and his men finished preparing for their hunt. Lord Piers insisted on joining Rionn's escort to Em Wold's border. Rionn slid onto Varg's back, following him and two of his men. He looked back to catch Earl Benedict casting a smug look his way and giving him a condescending wave as he passed through the gates.

Rionn let out a long sigh. He hoped the young earl was as talented a hunter and warrior as he imagined himself to be. He had a feeling a great danger waited in the forest outside of Em Wold.

They rode in silence for the longest time, Rionn and Varg behind Lord Piers and his men. They passed the village and had reached Brum Road when, after some consternation, Lord Piers ordered them to stop.

He steered his horse so he could face Rionn. "Go, help them. Please. We will say we gave chase, but your wolf was too swift and could travel terrain our horses could not."

"Are you certain of this?" Rionn asked.

Lord Piers sighed. "Earl Benedict is a brash and arrogant fool. He always has been. But his father is a good man. I ask you, for his sake, go. Help them."

Rionn nodded. His already great respect for Lord Piers increased even more in that moment. He patted Varg's side then held tight as the great wolf dashed into the forest. He pressed his body against Varg's as he quickened his pace, darting around the trees and bounding over whatever obstacles littered the forest floor.

Rionn trusted Varg's powerful sense of smell to guide him. The great wolf trailed the scents of Earl Benedict and his men. He urged Varg to halt when they found the first corpse, partially concealed in the brush.

He slipped from the great wolf's back to get a better look at it. It was one of Earl Benedict's men. His head had been ripped from his body. It was slick with saliva. The monster must have bitten the man's head off then spit it back out.

Varg growled. Rionn dashed to his side, recognizing that particular tone. It was reserved for only the gravest of threats.

"Easy," Rionn whispered into the great wolf's ear, placing his hand on his neck at the same time in order to help calm him.

Further ahead, they found signs of another attack. A chaotic pattern of hoof prints and boot prints stamped in the earth, racing off in various directions. Rionn spotted an unusual set of prints mixed in with the others. Far larger than the rest, slightly bigger than Varg's paw prints even, and tipped with sharp talons.

Varg chuffed, alerting Rionn to the second corpse, another of Earl Benedict's men. It was several yards away. This one's chest had been crushed. His metal breastplate had provided no protection against what must have been a swift and violent attack. They soon found a third. Then a fourth.

Rionn began to think the monster they hunted was as intelligent as it was powerful and vicious. The first man they found must have been at the rear. The monster picked him off first, dragging him into the brush. The others probably didn't even know he was missing, judging by how far away the others were they were attacked.

When they finally noticed the man at the rear was gone, they must have stopped, wondering what had happened to him. In the confusion, the monster attacked, killing the other three men in rapid succession, sending the rest into a panic, fleeing in separate directions – so they would be easier to kill later on, at its leisure.

Varg growled and kicked up earth beneath his paws. He had the monster's scent and was determined to track it to its source. Rionn summoned Stryke to his hand and motioned for Varg to lead the way.

They proceeded slowly and soon came upon another corpse. It was one of Benedict's companions. His body had been smashed in his armor, his limbs twisted in extreme angles. Ahead, they found the corpse of Benedict's other companion, his skull crushed in its helmet.

Rionn and Varg responded to a horrific scream. They wheeled around to find Benedict emerging from some brush, his face drained of all

color and gasping for breath. He clawed and pulled himself across the ground.

Rionn's eyes went wide when Benedict emerged completely from the brush. His entire lower body had been torn away from his torso. Only strands of ragged flesh remained, and a trail of spilled entrails followed him.

Rionn dashed toward him, but Benedict died before Rionn could reach him. A wicked laugh filled Rionn's ears. He leapt to his feet, raising Stryke over his head.

"Your friend was delicious," a phantom voice called out. "A little rich though. I was unable to finish him in one sitting. I wonder how you and your beast will taste."

Rionn breathed deeply and tightened his grip on Stryke. Its glow intensified. Varg growled. His eyes were wide, and his hackles stood tall like spears.

"What? No answer?" the phantom voice called out again.

"Show yourself," Rionn commanded.

Another wicked laugh. "Gladly."

The brush rustled. Rionn stepped back, crouching into a fighting stance. What emerged possessed the face of a man covered in fine red fur. Its eyes were yellow, and its mouth was stretched into a hideous grin that showed off its fangs. Its body was that of a red lion with bat wings folded against its back. A giant scorpion tail extended from the base of its spine.

A manticore. Rionn had heard tales. Such creatures had taken the lives of more than one member of the Order. He was determined not to be added to that list.

Varg exploded past him. Rionn yelled for him to stop.

The manticore's tail struck swiftly. Varg attempted to twist out of its way, but the barbed tip of its tail sank into his flank. With a yelp, the great wolf went down, his haunches paralyzed by the manticore's venom.

Rionn raised Stryke to attack. The manticore's tail sped toward him now. He barely avoided it – but was caught by one of the monster's claws instead. He winced in pain and glanced at the gash that had been torn in his arm.

The manticore licked Rionn's blood from his claws. "First blood goes to me."

Rionn grinned. "It is not the first blow that matters. But the last."

The manticore chuckled, mercilessly. "I had a feeling you would be fun. That is why I chose not to kill you outright."

"You talk too much," said Rionn.

The manticore's grin vanished. It roared and sprang at Rionn. Rionn threw himself out of the way, rolled, and leapt back to his feet. The manticore's tail flew toward him. Rionn swung, severing the barbed tip and sending it flying.

The manticore's yellow eyes widened as it let out a sharp cry of pain. It then narrowed its gaze on Rionn, roared, and charged.

Rionn blocked one claw attack then another. The manticore's mouth opened wide, revealing three rows of undulating fangs that snapped at Rionn, threatening to rip him to pieces.

Rionn forced thoughts of his wounded friend out of his mind. He could not allow the distraction. As the battle continued, the manticore's claws tore Rionn's thigh and grazed his stomach. Rionn shut out the pain of his wounds, thanks to his training with the Order and kept fighting. By that point, he had assessed the manticore's strength and speed and discerned the pattern of his attacks.

The next time the manticore's jaws flashed at him, he leapt back and swung his blade. He cut the manticore's forehead. Blood ran into its eyes. The more the manticore fought, the more blood poured from the cut, stinging his eyes and blinding him.

When another opening appeared, Rionn brought Stryke crashing across the bridge of its nose. The manticore gurgled with pain. As the monster continued to fight, it not only struggled to see – but to breathe now as well.

The fight raged on. The manticore's claws raked Rionn's other leg. Rionn landed more blows of his own, cutting the manticore's flanks and haunches and sliced through one of its wings, so it could not fly away.

The two faced off again. Rionn steadied himself. Though he had blocked out the pain of his wounds, the loss of blood made him weary. He tightened his grip on Stryke, determined to focus through it.

The manticore panted and coughed, its face stained with blood, its body bleeding from numerous cuts. It trembled with rage then let out a terrible shriek. It sprang into the air, throwing everything it had left into this one attack.

Rionn took a wide stance. With a thought, Stryke shifted into a spear, which he held in front of him. The manticore tried to evade in mid-leap – but ended up impaling itself on the spear. Rionn yanked Stryke free and leapt out of the way before he could be crushed by the monster’s giant frame as it toppled to the ground.

He rose to his feet. Stryke shifted back into a sword again. The manticore’s head lolled toward him. It grinned, blood pouring from the corner of its mouth.

“Enjoy your victory, young hero,” it said. “Enjoy all of your victories, for they are indeed fleeting. Malba’s day will come.”

Rionn’s eyes went wide with rage. He flashed back to the night his parents and siblings died in a fire. And the laughing face he saw in the flames. What did the manticore mean by “Malba’s day will come?” What did it mean? Before he could press the beast, the manticore’s eyes fell shut. It let out a final rasping breath.

THE END

Chapter Four

“Ah! Tundra!”

How did he get in here? For a big ol’ Siberian husky, he sure is sneaky. He keeps licking my face until I finally get out of bed. I sit on the edge. Tundra rests his head in my lap, staring at me with his big golden eyes as I scratch him behind the ears. Grandpa and Grandma have had him forever. There are pictures of me when I was two riding on his back.

“I made you a character in my story, buddy,” I tell him. “You’re a giant wolf.”

Tundra lets out a sharp bark in reply. I laugh.

“Ronnie?” Grandma calls out from my doorway. “What are you still doing in bed? Are you sick?”

I reach for my phone. 6:30. Oh, man. I usually wake up at 6. “No, I just slept through my alarm.”

“Well, hurry up. I’m making breakfast,” says Grandma as she disappears down the hall.

I head over to my desk, where there are two copies of the story I wrote last night. One for Mr. Griffin, the other for Grandpa and Grandma – in case they want to read it. I flip through the pages. I still can’t get over how much I wrote or that I woke up at midnight to finish it.

Just like last time, I wonder where all this came from. The words. The details. The action. Then there are the characters. I still can’t get over how they came to life when I was writing, how I was able to hear their thoughts and how there were moments when they told me what they wanted to say and what they wanted to do.

And Rionn. He’s the ultimate hero. Everything I want to be. A serious badass who uses his brain as well as his muscles to help him win fights. He’s noble and a little bit vulnerable, with some tragedy and mystery in his past.

And what about Earl Benedict? I know he started out as a substitute for Chad, and I wanted something horrible to happen to him. But what I came up with still shocks me. I actually feel a little bad for Earl Benedict,

not just the way he died but about how he just wanted to prove he was good enough to become part of the Order.

“Ronnie, are you dressed yet?” Grandma calls out.

I hurry up and throw on my clothes. Tundra is waiting for me in the hallway. He moseys after me all the way to the kitchen. Grandpa sits at the table with his coffee and newspaper while Grandma makes French toast. They haven’t noticed me yet.

“He said he slept through his alarm,” Grandma tells Grandpa. “That’s not like him.”

“I told you, last night, when I went to get him for dinner, he was just staring at his computer, typing,” says Grandpa. “I called out to him a couple times before he finally answered me. It was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Grandma then notices me and shushes him. She gives me a big smile. “Hi, sweetie. Ready for French toast?”

I head over, presenting their copy of my story.

“What’s that you got there, kiddo?” asks Grandpa.

“It’s the story I wrote last night,” I say. “The one I told you guys about at dinner.”

“Oh. Is it for school?” Grandma asks.

“No – I told you – I mean, I guess it is, sort of. I’ve got a copy for Mr. Griffin, my language arts teacher. But I told you, I wrote it because I wanted to. I was up late finishing it. I guess that’s why I slept through my alarm.”

Grandma and Grandpa stare at each other confused. I’m still holding out their copy of my story.

“You got your homework done?” asks Grandpa.

Grandma quiets him with a look. She smiles at me. “That’s wonderful, sweetie. We can’t wait to read it.”

She looks to Grandpa, urging him to agree. He mumbles something as he flips through his newspaper. Grandma takes their copy of my story and sets it on the counter. She then hands me a plate of French toast.

“Now hurry up and eat. We don’t want you to be late for school,” she says.

I set my plate down and pour myself some milk and orange juice. Grandma makes her and Grandpa’s breakfast next. She hasn’t even glanced at my story yet. I know fantasy isn’t her thing. It’s probably too violent for

her too. And Grandpa, I don't think I've ever seen him read anything but the newspaper.

But they'll at least look at it. Won't they?

I finish breakfast and Grandpa drives me to school. Before I go to my locker, I stop at Mr. Griffin's room. He's sitting at his desk, working at his laptop, but looks up and smiles when he sees me. When he gets up to meet me, his eyes lock on the copy of my story I printed for him.

He points at it. "Is that what I think it is?"

I nod, filled with a feeling of pride I've never known before.

"So soon? Someone was definitely inspired." Mr. Griffin takes it from me like it's made of gold. "'Horror Waits in Em Wold.' I love it already."

I'm still smiling, my face all warm. Mr. Griffin's already reading my story. He chuckles and grins. I want to ask him what part he's on and what he likes about it.

But I notice the time. "I've got to go. I don't want to be late for Math."

"No. Of course not." Mr. Griffin looks up from my story. "I'll see you fourth period." He immediately goes back to reading my story, taking it with him back to his desk, and forgetting about whatever he was working on earlier.

All morning long, all I can think about is my story. I flash back to random scenes and wonder if I should have chosen a different word in a certain sentence or if I should have written a certain sentence a different way or if I need to add more detail to one of the action scenes or come up with what I think could be a better line of dialogue.

I just hope Mr. Griffin likes it. But I want him to be honest. If there's something wrong with it, I want him to tell me so I can fix it and make my story the best it can be.

It's finally time for Language Arts. When I get there, Mr. Griffin greets me with a proud smile and a big thumbs up. Don't tell me he finished it already? He looks like he likes it. I'm dying to ask him about it. But the bell rings, and he quickly gets everyone to sit in their seats.

For the first time, I can barely concentrate in his class. It's my favorite class. But all I can think about is what Mr. Griffin will have to say about my story. That time finally comes. As class winds down, and he's giving out the homework, Mr. Griffin asks if I can stay after.

When the bell rings, everyone clears out in a hurry to go to lunch. I stay behind. Mr. Griffin approaches, looking like he's going to burst.

"So you liked my story?" I ask.

"Liked it? I couldn't put it down!" Mr. Griffin exclaims, waving his hands around. "Lucky for me, my first period is my remedial class. They start with silent reading anyway, so I was able to finish it."

He then put his hands together, almost like he's praying. "Will you do me the honor of having lunch with me? I have so many questions. I want to know everything there is to know about Illumina!"

I think about what the other kids would say about me having lunch with a teacher. And you know what? I don't care.

"Sure."

"Brilliant!" Mr. Griffin declares.

I hurry to get my lunch from my locker and head back to Mr. Griffin's room. He's sitting at his desk with his lunch, in little plastic containers, spread out in front of him.

"Do you like Korean barbeque?" he asks. "I always pack too much."

Next thing I know, he's wrapping a piece of meat in some lettuce and placing it on one of the plastic lids, like it's a plate, and sliding it over to me. I take a bite to be nice.

It's good. It's really good. It's sweet and spicy at the same time, and the lettuce adds a nice cool crunch. Mr. Griffin notices I like it and hands me another piece before reaching for his copy of my story.

"So – crikey, where do I begin?" he says. "I guess with Rionn. Tell me all about him. You've obviously already come up with an origin story. You hinted about it. There was a fire. And somehow, this *Malba* is involved."

A quick flashback to the fire. I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt.

"It was the middle of the night. Rionn was just a little boy. He heard screams. His father came to him, told him to hide under the bed. That was the last time he saw his father." I don't know where the words come from. They just – come. "There were more screams. His mother. His older brother. His older sister. Rionn couldn't take it anymore and ran to the window. There were these men. Their bodies were on fire. Their armor was white-hot, so were their swords, and they rode flaming horses whose

hooves set fire to the grass. They set fire to everything they touched. The barn.” I swallow. “Rionn’s family.”

In that moment, images of Rionn’s home and his family burning get mashed up with that night my parents died.

“One of the men-on-fire sees Rionn and heads toward the house,” I’m able to continue. “Rionn bars the door and grabs one of his mother’s cooking knives. He waits. But the man-on-fire doesn’t come near the door. He just sets the house on fire instead.”

I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt. “The flames are too quick. They’re everywhere. Rionn goes for the window, but the fire cuts him off. As it came closer, he sees a face in flames. It was Malba.”

“Malba? As in ‘Malba’s day will come?’” Mr. Griffin asks.

I nod. “Malba’s an evil spirit left over from the old universe. He possessed Illumina when she went to sleep. Over the years, he learned how to influence the people that lived there and turn them evil. Fire is Malba’s element. He appears in the fires set by its followers, like the men-on-fire. They’re known as Malba’s Storm.”

Again, I have no idea where all of this is coming from. It’s like the words are being channeled through me.

“And Erebos, the great gryphon, saved Rionn,” says Mr. Griffin. “That’s what Earl Benedict said.”

I nod. “Malba’s Storm retreated the moment Erebos arrived. Instead of chasing after them, Erebos saved Rionn. He beat the fire out with his wings then carried Rionn back to the Soul Tree. Rionn lived there after that, raised by Erebos and the Order.”

“You mention them a few times.” Mr. Griffin pages through his copy of my story. “Who exactly are they?”

Images appear in my mind as I say the words. “From his perch in the Soul Tree, Erebos can see all of Illumina. His powerful vision can peer into the lives of all of its inhabitants. He can even see into their hearts. In the early years, he reached out to everyone who had the potential to be great warriors or mages, from all three of the races. Elves, dwarves, and humans. These *potentials* made the pilgrimage to the Soul Tree, and after passing the tests they trained with Erebos. He taught them how they were connected to Illumina – that all living things were. They learned how to tap into that, how to channel that energy, add it to their own, and do amazing things.”

Mr. Griffin pages through the story again. “Like Rionn’s ability to block out hunger and thirst and pain during the battle.”

I smile. “That’s just the beginning.”

I hope Mr. Griffin doesn’t ask me what else Rionn can do. To be honest, I really don’t know yet. But somehow, I just know there’s more.

“And what about Stryke?” Mr. Griffin asks. “I absolutely love that you named his weapon. Very mythic.”

My smile widens. “When the members of the Order reach a certain age, they have to craft a special object. For the wizards, it’s a staff. For warriors, it’s a weapon. Rionn made Stryke with the help of Forfec, the greatest dwarf blacksmith in all of Illumina and a member of the Order. Forfec taught the younger members of the Order how to channel their energies into the weapon they created in order to imbue it with magic. When Rionn finished, he said Stryke ‘told him’ its name. And what it could do.”

“Like turn into a spear and fly to his hands whenever he thinks about it?” Mr. Griffin asks. I nod. “Brilliant! And what about Varg? Where did he come from?”

“He was an orphan, like Rionn,” I explain. “He wandered into the grove around the Soul Tree – when he was just a pup. Rionn felt an immediate bond with him. They can communicate telepathically.”

“I caught that.”

“Varg looked like a normal wolf, at least he did at first,” I continue. “Rionn fed Varg regularly until he was able to hunt on his own. And Varg just kept growing and growing and didn’t stop until he got to be as big as a horse.”

“So he’s enchanted then?”

I nod. I know Varg is, somehow. I just don’t know exactly how yet.

Mr. Griffin sifts through the pages of my story again. “You make it sound like the members of the Order tend to return to their homeland at some point.”

“Either that or they stay and help train the new arrivals.”

“You say that Rionn went home to Larith but didn’t stay. Why is it?”

“It’s complicated.”

“That’s what Rionn said.”

I chuckle, nervously. All I can think to say is that hasn’t been revealed to me yet either. “You’re going to have to find that out in another

story.”

“I suppose that goes for Rionn’s grand destiny too.”

I nod. Mr. Griffin lets out a mock-cry of frustration. “Cheeky monkey. That’s fine. That’s quite all right. The anticipation will make the reward of reading it that much sweeter. What can you tell me about Rionn’s motivations then?”

I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt. “He never forgot how scared and helpless he felt the day Malba’s Storm killed his family – or when he saw Malba’s face in the flames. He swore he wanted no one to ever feel that way. Not if he could help it.”

Mr. Griffin leans back in chair with a big smile on his face. “Smashing. Absolutely smashing, Ronnie.” He holds out his hands. “Look at me. I’ve got chills. I can’t wait to read more.”

My mouth twists, slightly. “I don’t have any ideas for any new stories.”

“You will. Give it time. You can’t rush these things.”

He hands me another piece of Korean barbeque. I eat it, along with the rest of my lunch. We spend the rest of lunch just talking. Mr. Griffin wants to know everything there is to know about me. He has a lot of questions about Grandpa and Grandma and sounds relieved to hear they’re taking really good care of me.

I try to ask Mr. Griffin about himself, like where he came from and how long he’s been in town. He answers me very quickly and immediately changes the subject.

The bell rings. I look down. Wow, I can’t believe I ate my whole lunch and the food Mr. Griffin gave me. I haven’t had an appetite like that since – I can’t remember when. I say goodbye to Mr. Griffin.

“I can’t wait to read your next story,” he says, like he knows for sure it’s going to happen.

“Okay.” I know he doesn’t mean to pressure me. But he is. Just a little. I hope I do come up with something. I really don’t want to let him down.

Chapter Five

I get to Computers. Alex cranes his neck from the station where he's sitting to make eye contact with me. He waves me over, pulling his backpack off of the chair next to him.

"I saved you a seat," he says.

"Thanks," I say, surprised. I set my backpack on the floor as I sit down.

"I really liked your story," Alex tells me. "The one Mr. Griffin read in class the other day. I meant to tell you the other day, when we got in our discussion group, but then 'Her Majesty' came over and started barking orders. *Off with their heads! Off with their heads!*"

I laugh, knowing he's talking about Bianca.

"I swear the stick up her butt must have a stick up *its* butt," he adds.

I laugh louder this time.

"Something you'd like to share with the rest of us, Mr. Jackman?" the teacher, Mr. Browning asks, frowning beneath his big, bushy mustache.

I shake my head and turn to face my computer. Alex and I glance at each other, trading grins. Mr. Browning begins his lesson. When he's finished, he gives us our assignment then walks around, checking on us and helping anyone who needs it.

"So where did you come up with that idea? For your story?" Alex asks me.

I shrug. "It just kind of came to me."

"For real? Wow, it sounded like some ancient creation myth. Like something the Native Americans would believe in. Or the Norse, like when Odin used Ymir's dead body to create the world."

I blink with surprise. "You really know your stuff."

"When I write, I always try to add elements of famous myths and legends."

"You write stories?"

"Well. Comics." Alex reaches into his backpack and pulls out his iPad. He taps the screen then hands it to me. "This is some of my latest."

I take Alex's iPad. The picture on the screen is of an elf fighting this sort of snake man in the middle of a forest.

“You drew this?” I ask.

Alex nods, leaning forward as I scroll through the other pictures. They’re amazing. The vivid details. The use of color, light, and shadows. Each picture pops off of the screen. There’s dialogue and captions with some of them. I stop to read them and find myself biting my bottom lip, trying not to laugh. They are kind of hokey.

Alex leans back with a bit of a frown. “It’s the writing, isn’t it?”

I search my brain for something to say. “It’s okay. It just needs some editing.”

“I did edit all that. I lost track of how many times I edited it.”

I do another brain search. “Your pictures are great. In fact, they tell a lot of your story for you.”

Alex leans forward again. “You think so?”

“Heck, yeah. The facial expressions. The body language. It’s all there. I think a lot of the words you’ve added, in the dialogue and captions, are kind of, I don’t know, redundant.”

Alex takes his iPad back. He studies the picture currently on the screen intently then nods. “Okay. I can see that.”

“I think you just need to choose your words carefully. Pick ones that just sort of *fill in the blanks* with what you’re trying to say with your pictures.” I grimace a little, hoping that made some sort of sense.

The way Alex smiles, I guess it did. “Cool. Thanks.”

I smile back, relieved I found the right thing to say, not to mention happy and proud I was able to help him out. Mr. Browning approaches. Alex stashes his iPad out of sight.

“How’s the assignment going, gentlemen?” he asks.

“Good,” says Alex.

“Yeah. Good,” I add.

The corner of Mr. Browning’s mouth rises in a sort of half smirk, like he knows we haven’t been working. He lingers, watching us as we get back to the assignment. He stays a few minutes, checking on us and the students near us before he finally leaves.

“Maybe you can help me out with some editing,” Alex says.

I didn’t see that coming. “Yeah. Sure.”

“And if you write any more stories, I’d love to read them.”

“Actually, I did write another story. Just last night.”

Alex’s eyes widen. “For real? Dude, send me a copy.”

“Okay.”

When class ends, Alex and I trade phone numbers and emails. He makes me promise to send him my story the moment I get home. I agree. He says when he gets home he'll send me some comic book panels to look at.

I'm feeling great right now. Between my lunch with Mr. Griffin and talking with Alex, nothing can bring me down. Not even P.E.

“Well, looks like someone had a good day,” says Grandma when she picks me up.

I smile back at her. She starts her Mercedes and pulls away from the curb. On the way home, I tell her how much Mr. Griffin enjoyed the story I wrote.

“You know, the one I left a copy of for you,” I make sure to add. “On the counter.”

Grandma nods, keeping her eyes on the road. I'm too nervous to ask if she or Grandpa have actually read it yet. I then tell her about Alex and how he wants to read my new story and how he's going to send me some of his comic book panels to look at.

She smiles, warmly. “I knew you'd make friends.”

I lean back in my seat. When we get home, Grandpa's in his recliner in the living room. He looks up from his newspaper to say hello. I still can't believe he actually reads the entire newspaper, every section from start to finish, every day.

Grandma heads into the kitchen to make me a snack. That's when I notice it. The copy of my story I'd printed out for them. It's still sitting on the corner of the kitchen counter. Exactly where I left it. Grandma even walks past it a couple times. She doesn't even look at it. It's like it's not even there.

I try to squash down my disappointment, reminding myself that fantasy's not really her or Grandpa's thing. I then try to focus on how much Mr. Griffin liked that story and how much Alex wants to read it. That'll work. That'll get me through.

I wake up my laptop and notice I've already got a new email. Alex has already sent me some comic book panels in a zip file. I download them then email him a copy of my new story. I really want to look at his comic book panels now but force myself to wait. I have a ton of homework.

I get to it, starting with my language arts assignment. I finish that then pull out my math book. I'm halfway through that when I get a new email alert. It's from Alex. He's already read my new story and telling me how much he loves it, going into detail about his favorite scenes and what he thought was so cool about them.

Wow. The smile on my face feels like it's never going to go away. That's two fans I have now.

Alex goes on to tell me in his email about a website called the Ink Pad. It's where a lot of artists and writers post their work. He says he's got a bunch of his pictures up there and encourages me to post my stories there as well. That would be pretty sweet. I'll have to get Grandma and Grandpa's permission first. Since it's on the Internet, that might not be so easy. Like a lot of people their age, my grandparents think everything about the Internet is evil.

Alex wraps up his email by saying he can't wait for me to write another story.

Jeez, first Mr. Griffin. Now him. I wonder if real authors feel this kind of pressure.

Okay, now that Alex has read my story and raved about it, I feel like I've got to go through his comic book panels now, so I open up the zip file. The pictures are amazing, just like the ones he showed me on his tablet. And just like those ones, his captions and dialogue are too wordy – and seriously hokey.

I take some notes, telling Alex what to cut out and where, and give him some better words to use in certain places, along with some general suggestions. I put it all in an email and send it to him. Once that's done, I finish up my math.

After dinner, I polish off the rest of my homework. I grab the flipper and turn on the TV in my room. I scroll through the onscreen guide. Nothing looks interesting. Not even the shows I usually watch on this night.

I do have my Playstation. But for some reason, video games sound boring too – which is something I thought I'd never say. There's always YouTube.

No. For some reason, what I really want to do is read. Wow, I can't remember the last time I've ever wanted to do that. Probably not since I was little, when I was first learning how to read, when reading was still a

mystery that I was starting to unravel. Looking back, I can remember how captivating even the simplest stories were during that time.

That gets me thinking about how Mom used to read to me, which makes me tear up a little. I turn to my bookshelf, which is full of model spaceships, Legos, and action figures. The only actual reading materials on my bookshelf are manga and graphic novels. But for some reason, those just won't do.

I head to the living room, where Grandma and Grandpa are watching some cop show. Grandpa's more into it than she is. Grandma's more focused on her knitting, a new afghan by the looks of it.

She smiles at me. "Hi, sweetie."

"I was wondering if tomorrow, after school, we could go to the library."

"Do you need a book for school?"

"No. I just want something to read."

Grandma makes a surprised face. Even Grandpa turns an eye toward me, daring to turn even a fraction of his attention away from one of his precious cop shows.

I can see now how it might've sounded like such an odd request. Grandma's surprise quickly fades and is replaced by a sort of sly smile.

"Actually, why wait?" she says, setting down her knitting.

It's my turn to make a surprised face now. "It's eight o'clock. The library is probably closed."

"I'm not talking about the library, silly."

She waves for me to follow her. We head down the hall and into the garage, where she wrestles a large box from a bottom cabinet. She sets it down and waves me over. She opens it, and my breath leaves me for a moment.

"These were your mother's," says Grandma.

I know. I recognize them immediately. Her books. The same ones she read to me when I was little.

"Somehow, miraculously, they survived the fire," Grandma adds.

Miraculous is right. They don't look the least bit damaged. They're exactly as I remember them. I run my fingers over the covers of the books on top of the stacks. *Tarzan of the Apes*, *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*, and *Alice through the Looking Glass*. My hands shake a little. I swallow an ache in my throat.

I'm not the only one who's choked up right now either.

Grandma wipes her eyes and sniffs back a tear. "Your mother had these since she was a little girl."

I nod. I know. Seeing them now, it's like a piece of her is still here. I gently pick up *D'aulaire's Book of Greek Myths* and page through it. Each page brings back a memory.

Grandma digs into the cabinet. "That's not all that survived the fire."

She pulls out another box and opens it. It's a lot of my old stuff from school. Pictures. Stories. All sorts of arts and crafts.

"You were so creative when you were little," Grandma reminds me. "Always drawing and telling stories. You had such an amazing imagination. It seemed like the moment you learned to talk, you were giving your stuffed animals voices and personalities. Each one had its own life story too."

I smile as I remember all of that. Grandma pulls out another box full of pictures, stories, and arts and crafts.

"Are those mine too?"

Grandma shakes her head. "These are your mother's."

Really? I scoot next to her, excited to look inside.

"Your mother was quite creative herself when she was younger," Grandma continues. "You got your imagination from her." She smiles and gets a faraway look in her eyes. "She had a stuffed monkey she swore was alive. She'd make monkey sounds all the time. Your grandfather would tell her to stop, and she'd say, 'It wasn't me, daddy. It was Chi-Chi.'" She chuckles. But then her smile fades. "Your grandfather got so annoyed, he made me give Chi-Chi away. Your mother thought Chi-Chi was lost. She was so upset."

Grandma picks up one of Mom's old stories. "Your mother was so talented. She wanted to be an artist and a writer. There's no telling what she could have done if your grandfather and I had supported her."

"Why didn't you?" I ask.

Grandma sets the story down. "You know your grandfather. He's not exactly the most imaginative or whimsical of people. When your mother got to be about your age, he insisted it was time for her to start growing up and leave all that 'nonsense,' as he put it, behind."

"She let that stop her?"

Grandma nods. "Unfortunately, she did. Then she had you, when she was barely out of her teens, and was forced to grow up fast. Then, she

met your father.”

She doesn’t mean my biological father. My dad, the only guy I’ve ever called dad, was really my step-dad. He adopted me when I was like two. No one ever talks about my biological father though. There are no pictures of him with my mother or anything. I know absolutely nothing about him. And everyone treats him like he doesn’t exist.

Grandma stares at me for the longest time. Her smile is laced with a touch of sadness. “You know your teacher, Mr. Griffin, called me today. He sounded so excited when he told me about your stories. He thinks you’re really talented.”

Mr. Griffin did that? For me?

Grandma cups my chin with her hand. “I’m not going to make the same mistake twice. You keep writing those stories of yours. Now monsters and warriors may not exactly be my thing. But they’re your stories. So I promise I’ll read each and every one of them.”

I lean over and hug her, resting my head against her shoulder. When I finally pull away, she rubs my back. “I’ll leave you alone with these,” she says as she gets up. “Just put the boxes back when you’re finished, okay?”

I nod and go through the box of books, gently handling each one. I stop when I get to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Perfect. It makes me think about how Leslie in *Bridge to Terabithia* loved Narnia, which was no doubt her and Jess’ inspiration to create a magical kingdom of their own.

I set it aside and put the rest of the books back in the box and the other boxes back in the cabinet. I start reading it as I leave the garage and walk down the hall. When I get to the living room, I notice Grandma’s knitting sits on the couch beside her.

She’s too busy reading my story.

When I get back to my room, I turn on my bedside lamp, prop up some pillows, and read in bed. I reacquaint myself with the Pevensie children. I remember how much I liked Peter, at least at first. But I now know, as the story goes on, that Lucy is the real hero.

An email alert on my phone pulls me out of the story. It’s Alex. The message reads *Let me know what you think!* There’s another zip file attached, so I go to my laptop to open the email and download it. When I open the zip file, my eyes go wide.

It’s Illumina. The land. Exactly how I’ve always pictured it, from Dragon’s Head, the mysterious rock formation near the Soul Tree, to the

Dragonback Mountains that eventually turn into the Dragon's Tail, a range of hills that wind their way to Dragon's Head.

There's the capital city and the six duchies. And the Soul Tree. I lean in toward the screen and swear I can see Erebus perched within its branches.

There are more pictures in the zip file. My smile widens with each and every one. There's Rionn and Varg fighting the centaurs. And Rionn fighting the mantichore. It's all just like I imagined it when I was writing it. It's like Alex pulled them right out of my head. I email Alex back and tell him how awesome his pictures are.

I find myself reaching for my pen and notebook. As a new story reveals itself to me.

The Serpent Men and the Dragonson

By

Ronnie Jackman

Rionn woke with a start, leaping to his feet. His eyes darted about. He was in some sort of cabin with plank walls and a thatched roof. He was dressed only in his breeches, but his tunic and medallion were draped over the chair by the bed where he had been laying. His boots were on the floor, and Stryke leaned against the back of the chair, in its scabbard.

He dressed quickly. As he did, he touched the bandage on his shoulder. It had not been there before. He thought back. He and Varg were in the Duchy of Grasmere, hunting a group of bandits that had fled into the eastern woods.

Rionn recalled the rage he had been in, thinking about the crimes these men had committed and the innocent lives they had taken. The bandits' trail had led them through a field of tall grass. Varg led the way, tracking their scent, when he halted suddenly and growled. Rionn tightened his grip on Stryke, believing the bandits were near.

Only something else closed in on them, slithering through the tall grass, surrounding them. Ophidians. Snake men.

One sprang at Rionn, hissing, fangs poised. Rionn swung Stryke, taking off its head. He soon had to face one ophidian. Then another.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw more of them swarming Varg. The great wolf's jaws flashed, taking one ophidian's throat quickly, and then a second.

The two fought what seemed like an endless wave of ophidians. Rionn swung Stryke in lethal arcs, in every direction, taking down the onrushing horde.

A piercing pain in his shoulder halted his onslaught. His breath left him, and he dropped to his knees. As he fell, he caught a glimpse of the ophidian that had bitten him. Its venom coursed through his veins, paralyzing his muscles and threatening to render him unconscious. The last thing Rionn remembered was Varg slaying the ophidian that had bitten him then standing over him, protectively.

But where was he now?

And where was Varg?

Rionn stepped through the cabin door onto a wooden walkway that ran in both directions. The cabin he woke up in, along with the others surrounding it, stood amidst the high branches of a giant oak tree.

There were other giant oaks nearby. They all had cabins and walkways built within their branches, as well. They were joined, from tree to tree, by long suspension bridges. Was this an elf village? Rionn had heard about them from the elves he knew during his time in Erebos' glen but had never visited one.

Rionn turned, suddenly aware he was no longer alone. He turned and faced an elf, with finely pointed ears and skin the color of spring foliage. The elf stopped short. His look of surprise gave the impression he had been caught trying to sneak up on Rionn.

Rionn stepped back, turning to the side, while assessing the elf. He was dressed in deerskin clothes and short, leather boots. His long black hair hung, in a single braid, to the small of his back. He was slightly taller than Rionn, lean and wiry. His almond shaped eyes were pale blue, and his thin, arched eyebrows gave him a sly look.

He grinned, showing off his long eye teeth, as he drew two long knives with curved blades from behind his back.

Rionn summoned Stryke to his hand. The elf closed the distance between them with a swift leap and immediately attacked, spinning and slashing with his knives, each one attacking Rionn from a different direction.

This was the style of knife fighting elves were renowned for. Rionn had learned it from Master Varion during his years of training. He kept Stryke close to his body, which made it easier to block each knife strike that flew at him and did not leave him vulnerable.

The elf had forced him onto the defensive. His speed, agility and skill with his knives were so great that Rionn could only protect himself. He had yet to spot even the slightest opening for an attack.

It then became apparent what the elf was trying to do. He was forcing Rionn back against the nearest railing. But then what?

The elf's mouth fell open when Rionn leapt backwards into the air and landed on the railing, balancing himself perfectly.

The elf resumed his attack. However, Rionn now had the higher ground. With two swift moves, he disarmed the elf, sending one of his knives clattering onto the walkway. The other went flying over the railing.

Rionn pressed the flat of Stryke's blade beneath the elf's chin, its point to his throat. He dropped from the railing, forcing the elf back. The elf looked directly at Rionn. He showed no fear. Instead, he grinned as if impressed.

"Perhaps, we should let the young warrior take your head, Tarron," a disappointed voice called out from behind Rionn. "You are obviously not using the brain housed within it, attacking our guest like you did."

Rionn glanced over his shoulder to see an older elf, tall with long black hair and wizened lines on his green-skinned face, standing behind him. He wore a medallion like Rionn's. The sign of the Order.

The older elf nodded, deferentially. "If you would please lower your blade, you have my word my son will cease his foolishness."

Since he wore the sign of the Order, Rionn knew he could trust him and lowered Stryke. He faced the younger elf, Tarron.

"Forgive me, father. I simply wished to test the young human's mettle," he said, pulling his own medallion from within his shirt.

Rionn allowed himself a moment of surprise. He returned Stryke to its scabbard. "Tarron. I know that name. Master Paeris often spoke of your skill as a hunter and tracker."

Tarron smiled. "That is an honor, indeed. I assume he taught you as well."

Rionn nodded. "And I learned to use a bow and throw a spear from Master Ryo."

"As did I. I suppose Master Varion taught you knife fighting."

Rionn grinned. "He did. However, I proved to be more adept at the sword."

"Indeed, you are," Tarron admitted.

Rionn told the elves his name. They were familiar with his reputation. The older elf, Tarron's father, was named Belanor. He was a mage and said he had used his magic to heal Rionn's wound.

"I imagine you are concerned about your companion, the great wolf," said Belanor.

Rionn nodded, urgently. Belanor beckoned him to follow. Tarron walked with them, as they made their way around the walkway to the other side of the oak tree.

Rionn immediately spotted Varg below, playing with a number of elf children. Their laughter reached his ears, even that high up, they were

enjoying themselves that much. They rode on the great wolf's back as he raced and bounded through the oak trees.

Rionn smiled, delighted and relieved that his friend was uninjured. Belanor and Tarron stood on either side of him.

"He is a magnificent creature," Belanor commented.

"I could not ask for a finer friend," said Rionn. "We were in your woods tracking a group of bandits when we were attacked by ophidians."

"These bandits, were there six of them?" Tarron asked.

Rionn nodded.

"We caught them, not long before we rescued you from the ophidians," Tarron continued. "We suspected they were up to foul deeds, which was confirmed when we found sacks of bloodstained gold among their belongings. Rest assured, they will not be harming another living being again."

Rionn knew exactly what that meant. There was an old saying, *When you are in the woods, the elves are always watching you. You will not see them unless they wish you to. And if you are up to foul deeds, an elf will be the last thing you ever see.*

"So, you saved us from the ophidians?" said Rionn. "I am in your debt."

"These ophidians have been a plague in these woods as of late," stated Belanor. "We would appreciate your assistance in eliminating them."

"You will have it," Rionn vowed.

Belanor and Tarron thanked him. They led him to a platform that lowered to the ground through use of ropes and pulleys. Varg ran to meet Rionn, knocking him to the ground with his enthusiastic greeting. Rionn laughed and stroked the great wolf's muzzle. Varg whined softly, happy Rionn was all right, and licked his cheeks.

Belanor and Tarron showed Rionn around the village and introduced him to the other members of their tribe as they went about their daily chores. Hunting parties returned with deer and rabbits. Gathering parties returned with baskets of wild berries and root vegetables. Others stayed to maintain the village and care for the children, who were especially interested in Rionn. They had never seen a human before. He allowed them to touch his ears. They marveled at their roundness, compared to their own pointed ones.

That night, Rionn was their guest at the tribe's communal dinner. In one of the giant oak trees stood connecting platforms with tables and chairs. Stairs and bridges ran from one platform to another. In the center platform, in the middle of the oak, was a raised cooking pit. Meats, fruits, and vegetables hung from the nearby branches. The cooks pulled what they needed for that evening's meal.

Rionn sat at the same table as Tarron and Belanor, along with the tribe's chief, Goll. He was taller than any of the other elves in the tribe and the only one to have a beard too, long and black.

The meal was simple. Roasted venison and rabbit with root vegetables and bowls of fresh berries and jugs of honey mead. After the meal, the tribe's minstrels strolled from table to table, singing and playing small harps and flutes.

Rionn sat back in chair, with a smile. He had not heard real, elven music since his days in Erebos' glen. Human minstrels, those fortunate enough to have heard traces of elven music tried to copy it. Some were better than others, but no one could capture the original sound. The elves were creatures of nature, and nature's spirit was captured in their music. It was more akin to the song of birds, the rhythm of gentle rain, and the whistling wind.

The minstrel that entertained Chief Goll's table sang of the earliest days of Illumina, when the three races first emerged. Rionn knew these stories. He knew how the elves and dwarves possessed a natural affinity for the land and were able to survive and thrive. The humans, unfortunately, did not. The elves took pity on them and taught them the skills they needed to survive.

The humans were grateful and existed in peace with the elves for generations. Elves, though, lived much longer than humans. Their women bore children infrequently. Humans, on the other hand, lived more fleeting lives and produced many offspring. They began taking more and more land for themselves, cutting down and clearing the forests the elves called home, to feed and house their growing numbers.

The two races clashed. Their conflict culminated with two great armies facing off in the middle of the once great plains of Illumina. Fortunately, Erebos arrived. He halted the potential battle, telling each army that a war of such magnitude would wake Illumina from her slumber and threaten all life in the world they knew.

The elves complied, quickly, while the humans were still prepared to fight. That was when Erebos brought a potential third army into the fray. All of the animals in Illumina, bird and beast, predator and prey, advanced on the human army. Even the humans' own animals turned on them. Horses threw their riders, and hounds snarled and growled at their keepers.

The humans had no choice but to yield. They curtailed their growth and instead fortified the land they already possessed, leading to the construction of towns and cities.

Many humans remained bitter toward the elves, believing it to be their right to spread as far throughout Illumina as they wished to. The minstrel's song reflected the sadness the elves felt over being betrayed by the race they had once seen as their children. They could no longer be able to fully trust the human race, as a whole, and had no choice but to remain apart from them.

Rionn was touched by the minstrel's song. At the same time, it brought up feelings of guilt and shame. He knew the prejudice humans had for elves all too well. It had been instilled within him during his early years.

It was not until he came to live in Erebos' Glen that he finally met elves for the first time. They were both students and masters. He was terrified, wanting nothing to do with them and wondering how the other human students in the Order could mingle with them so easily.

One night, Rionn woke up screaming and crying, reliving the night his family died at the hands of Malba's Storm. It was Master Ryo, an elf, who rushed to comfort him. Rionn was prepared to reject him, but Ryo radiated a warmth and compassion that melted away his fear. Rionn sank against the elf's chest and let him hold him, rocking and singing to him, as he wept for his family.

After spending time with elves and knowing nothing but friendship and compassion, Rionn felt ashamed for his race's mistreatment of the elves. Deep in his heart, he hoped that someday the two races would reconcile.

The feast wound down, and everyone started for home. Many went out of their way to say goodnight to Rionn before they did. He smiled, trying to recall the last time he had felt so welcomed. He slept in the same cabin where he had recovered from his wound.

Belanor and Tarron came for him the next morning. They took him to meet Goll. They stood around a plank table, in the middle of his grand

hall, along with several other important members of the tribe.

Goll unrolled a map of the eastern woods. He pointed to the X's on the map. "These are where our tribe have encountered these ophidians," he told Rionn. "Including the spot where you and the great wolf were attacked."

Rionn studied the markings on the map. "It does not make sense. To my understanding, ophidians are loners. They do not hunt or attack in groups."

"That is what we believed as well." Belanor glanced at Goll. "We have never witnessed such an influx of ophidians in these woods in either of our lives, have we, old friend?"

Goll chuckled. "Aye, and we are not exactly younglings anymore, are we?"

Rionn grinned. He knew elves tended to live to be at least two hundred years old. Goll and Belanor had no doubt seen and experienced a lot in these woods.

"With this sheer number of ophidians that have been appearing, I do not think they are breeding naturally," Rionn offered.

The elves in the rooms exchanged glances. Their lack of surprise told Rionn they had been thinking the same thing. That the ophidians were being created. With magic.

Using the markings on the map, Rionn and the elves were able to narrow down a possible area of origin for the ophidians. It was still a large area of the woods to explore, but at least it was a start.

Outside of the hall, Tarron raised his hands to the sides of his mouth and let out a piercing cry. The cry was soon answered, and an enormous eagle with brown and golden plumage flew to them from a distant tree.

Rionn marveled at the bird's size. It was larger than most hounds he had seen and flew with amazing speed and grace. It perched on the railing beside Tarron, who smiled and stroked its neck.

"You have your Varg," he said. "I have my Riaw."

"He is incredible," said Rionn.

Tarron grinned. "I am aware."

He told Rionn about the mental communion he had with Riaw, similar to the one Rionn possessed with Varg. He said he told the great eagle that Rionn was a friend. Rionn approached, and Riaw allowed him to stroke his head.

Tarron then presented Riaw with the task he had summoned him for. He sent the great eagle to the part of the forest where they believed the ophidians originated from.

“He will be able to tell you where we can find them?” Rionn asked.

Tarron nodded. “He will send word to me. I can see through his eyes and guide him if need be.”

Rionn grinned, quite impressed. He watched Riaw launch himself into the sky and fly toward the location Tarron sent him. In the meantime, Rionn followed Tarron to the forest floor. Tarron showed him True Flight, the bow he created during his time in the Order. It was beautiful, carved from oak, polished, and etched with elvish runes.

Like Stryke, it was enchanted. According to Tarron, the bow guided his arm and his eye and never missed its target. He demonstrated by choosing a number of different targets, each one further than the last. He fired a succession of arrows. Each one hit its mark, dead center.

Tarron brought a bow and quiver of arrows for Rionn. He had not used a bow since his days in the Order. It took a few tries to get used to it again. Rionn hit the targets Tarron set up for him – but not with the same degree of accuracy as Tarron.

The two were about to set up some more targets, when Tarron stopped short.

“Riaw has found the ophidians’ lair,” he told Rionn. “I know exactly where it is.”

The two hurried to report to Goll and Belanor, who began marshaling a force to attack the ophidians’ lair. Rionn and Tarron agreed to leave at once to do reconnaissance. They rode on the back of Varg. Tarron directed Rionn through the eastern woods. They finally slowed down when they spotted Riaw, perched on a tall poplar tree outside of a cave.

Rionn slid from Varg’s back and summoned Stryke to his hand. Tarron followed, holding True Flight, an arrow nocked and ready. They told Varg and Riaw to stay back.

A few steps into the cave, and an inky darkness threatened to consume them. Rionn channeled his energy into Stryke, brightening its normal glow, enough for them to see. And hopefully not be spotted. Tarron did the same with True Flight.

Further within the cave, the silence became so great that the smallest sounds became magnified significantly. The two treaded softly so their

boots would not crunch the dirt below. They controlled their breathing and heartbeats, so they were slow and steady.

Tiny creatures scurried past them. Others fluttered overhead. The whole time, steady drips of moisture fell from the ceiling.

A scream cut through the darkness. Rionn and Tarron raised their weapons.

A second scream. Louder and more tortured.

Rionn and Tarron quickened their pace, as the screams continued. They followed them to the source. A faint light appeared up ahead of them, growing steadily brighter as they drew closer. Rionn could make out the sounds of someone pleading and begging.

The cave opened up into a larger cavern. Rionn and Tarron crept forward, dimming the light of their weapons and pressing against the walls.

Within the cavern, dozens upon dozens of ophidians slithered in pens. At the far end, humans were locked in a cage. A group of robed men, their faces hidden by hoods, milled about the cage and the ophidians' pens. Mages. Followers of Malba.

Two of them pulled a man from the cage. A peasant by the looks of him, too terrified to even struggle. They strapped him to a table while a third brought over a basket. From inside, the mages pulled out handfuls of writhing serpents and laid them across the man. They slithered about while the other mages chanted.

The man shrieked. His body seized and writhed. His flesh and the serpents' twisted together and reshaped like clay, forming a new ophidian.

Rionn turned away sickened, so did Tarron. Another scream. Rionn turned to see a young woman, barely a teen, being dragged from the cage. Rionn tightened his grip on Stryke, ready to charge. Tarron grabbed his shoulder, holding him back. He shook his head, although he appeared just as anguished as Rionn over it.

There were just too many of them. All they could do was wait for Goll, Belanor, and the other elves to arrive. When they did, they would certainly be able to wipe out the mages and their twisted creations. Rionn glanced back at the horrific spectacle one last time. When he did, he noticed the mages' attention focused on him and Tarron. One of them pointed in their direction.

Rionn and Tarron exchanged a glance. There was no time to figure out how the mages detected them, especially as several of them raced to the

ophidians' pens. Tarron pulled Rionn away. They barely made it several yards before the cave shook so forcefully they almost fell.

Boulders crashed from the ceiling, blocking their escape. This had to be the mages' magic. Rionn was sure of it. He contacted Varg. The great wolf was already running into the cave, followed by Riaw. Rionn told him to dig them out.

A refrain of hisses was heard in the distance and grew steadily louder. Tarron scampered onto a crag of rock, his bow drawn, glowing. Rionn stood ready. Stryke glowed in his hands.

A wave of ophidians slithered toward them. Rionn let out a fierce cry and leapt at them, swinging Stryke in lethal arcs. He cut down one ophidian after another, careful to parry their claws and avoid their fangs.

Tarron fired his arrows on either side of Rionn. Some of them pierced two ophidians at a time. A crash of rock was followed by a familiar growl. Varg had broken through and flung himself into the fray, his fangs flashing, tearing out one ophidian throat after another.

Riaw soared past, letting out a ferocious shriek. His talons pierced an ophidian's skull. He then darted into the air, escaping a second ophidian's strike.

Tarron must have run out of arrows, because he was soon at Rionn's side, knives slicing through ophidian flesh. Bodies littered the cave floor, so many they began to pile up and hinder Rionn and Tarron's movement.

Still more ophidians came. Rionn, Tarron, and Varg stood in a circle, backs to each other, fighting them off, while Riaw attacked from overhead.

Rionn breathed heavily. Claws marks ran all over his arms and the backs of his shoulders. Tarron did not look much better. Neither did Varg.

But they continued to battle on. Rionn saw no more ophidians emerging from the cavern. This was the last of them. If they could only hold out.

A volley of arrows rained down on the remaining ophidians. Goll, Belanor, and the other elves had arrived. Several of them took to the high crags and fired their bows, while Goll led the rest of the elves into battle, knives at the ready.

Rionn grinned to Tarron. Together, they cut down the ophidians that barred their path and raced into the cavern. The ophidian pens were empty, gates flung open. The remaining humans pleaded for help, stretching their arms through the cage bars.

Rionn was ready to release them.

“Later!” Tarron cried out, pointing to a tunnel. The mages were gone, and that was most likely their exit.

The humans in the cage continued to plead. Rionn’s face held the promise that he would return. He then followed Tarron into the tunnel.

Torches lined the walls, as they did the cavern. The prints littering the floor indicated the tunnel was used often. Rionn and Tarron turned a corner – and were suddenly overcome by an invisible force. It threw them against the wall, pinning them. Their weapons fell from their hands.

Three mages stepped forward. The two at the rear stared intently at Rionn and Tarron. It was no doubt their power that held them in place. A malicious grin slid across the face of the third mage. The rest of his face was hidden in the shadows of his hood.

“What do you fear?” he said.

Rionn’s head slammed against the wall. He let out a strangled cry. The tunnel faded away. He had been returned to his family’s cottage. The night they died.

Flames surrounded him, closing in.

Rionn screamed, struggled, and tried to flee. He knew this was only an illusion created by the mage, but one powerful enough that he could feel the waves of searing heat crash against him.

But then the face of Malba appeared. Somehow, Rionn knew this was the actual Darksoul, summoned by the mage, and channeled into his mind.

Rionn drew as steady of a breath as he was able and concentrated on summoning his internal energy. “Illumina,” he whispered. “Please, help me.”

He soon saw himself hovering near the great dragon, in front of one of her enormous eyes, which was closed as she slept. Malba’s flames raced toward Rionn, close enough his flesh began to blister. The Darksoul’s face became giant. His mouth twisted and stretched wide, ready to swallow him whole.

Rionn repeated his plea. Illumina’s eye then opened. She gazed right at him. The great dragon’s energy flooded Rionn’s body in a way he had never experienced before. Every fiber of his being was ignited, and everything in his field of vision took on a pale green glow, as if his eyes radiated pure energy.

The mage's vision faded. Rionn flexed his body and shattered the invisible force that held him. He dropped to the ground. His entire body glowed.

The three mages stepped away, ready to run.

Rionn summoned Stryke to his hands, swung it over his head, and with a mighty yell drove its blade into the ground. A great fissure opened up and sped toward the mages, growing wider with each moment.

The mages screamed. Losing their footing, they slid into the fissure. Their screams faded behind them as they plummeted into the unknown.

The entire tunnel shook, threatening to collapse. Rionn dropped to his knees, no longer glowing, exhausted. Tarron pulled him to his feet, half carrying him as they ran, avoiding the falling rocks.

Rionn soon regained his strength and was able to run on his own. The two raced for the tunnel entrance and threw themselves through it before it collapsed behind them. Goll and Belanor helped them up. Varg whined and sniffed Rionn, making sure he was all right. Rionn chuckled and nuzzled the great wolf.

The rest of the elves stood by. They took no losses. Two of them freed the humans from the cage. The humans were slow to move, appearing just as scared of the elves as they had been their captors.

Rionn stepped forward, assuring them they were okay. As they finally made their way toward the cave opening, he told them, "You make sure to tell your people you were rescued by elves this day. Remember that."

One after the other, the humans nodded and made their way out the cage. Huddled together, they hurried out of the cavern.

Tarron stood behind Rionn. "What was it you did in there?"

"I called out to Illumina. She answered me."

Tarron stared at him for a moment, eyes wide. His face then relaxed. His sly grin appeared. "I suppose we will have to start calling you the Dragonson."

Rionn grimaced, his face slightly flushed with embarrassment. He could not imagine himself ever being worthy of such an honor.

Belanor scavenged the recesses of the cavern for whatever magical materials the mages may have left behind. His arms were soon piled with tomes and scrolls followed by a pair of helpers who carried a number of

magical artifacts. Belanor walked between Rionn and Tarron, as the entire group followed Goll out into the forest.

Belanor used his magic to collapse the cave. He then tended to Rionn, Tarron, and Varg's wounds before they returned to the village.

Rionn and Varg stayed with the elves for a while. They both enjoyed their company. Rionn was also curious to learn what secrets Belanor might have uncovered from studying the items he had seized from the mages. Belanor remained sequestered in his home for days. When he finally emerged, Rionn was there to meet him.

"You wish to know what I found," the old elf anticipated.

Rionn nodded. "Not long ago, in Em Wold, I fought a manticore. Before it died, it told me 'Malba's day would come.' Now this, his mages, assembling an army of ophidians."

Belanor sighed. "It would appear as if Malba is marshaling his forces. Documents I found in the cavern confirmed that." He looked at Rionn with somber eyes. "You have seen the face of the Darksoul, have you not?"

Rionn's jaw set. "Once, when I was a boy. And again, in the cavern."

The old elf stared at him with great concern. "Be careful, Rionn Dragonson. Malba watches you now. He considers you a threat."

Rionn thanked Belanor for the warning. He went off to find Varg. As he did, he stopped for a moment, feeling Malba's heat upon him. The screams of his dying family filled his ears. Malba's infernal visage flashed before him, taunting him.

Rionn grinned back at the Darksoul. He stood tall and determined. Reminding him of his dead family, of what he had taken from him, all Malba had done was make Rionn want to defeat him that much more.

THE END

Chapter Six

Yes! Grandma's letting me post my stories on Ink Pad. Setting up an account and uploading documents turns out to be really easy. I need a picture to go with each story though, sort of like a book cover. I go through the pictures Alex has sent me so far and upload the ones I like best for each story.

I text Alex, letting him know I'm all set up on Ink Pad. Minutes later, I have my first follower. Alex, of course. Later that day, I get my second. Jeffery, from my science class.

He and I have been working together on all sorts of projects. Jeffrey's a genius with machines. He's a multi-time Lego robotics champion, has won all sorts of Jr. Engineer awards, and refurbishes computers for a hobby. He's also seriously funny. I mean, for real, he's got me laughing all the time. It's a miracle we ever get any work done in science class.

Lately, he's been asking me about my stories. He's got all these questions about the history of Illumina and the way things work, like the magic and the different races and monsters. He's not the only one either. I get more followers day after day. It turns out Alex has been contacting everyone he knows and having them read my stories. The messages they post are so cool. Everyone's loving my stories so far. I make sure to reply to everyone's messages. I try not to give them too much information though about Rionn and Illumina. I mean, no spoilers, right?

I get little flashes, glimpses, here and there. Nothing's solid enough to turn into an actual story. At least not yet. I know something will come to me when the time is right.

In Mr. Griffin's class, we've just finished reading *Bridge to Terabithia*, and we now have to come up with projects to present to the class. He wants us working with our discussion groups, which is me, Alex, Jeffrey, and – ugh, Bianca.

She insists on us meeting at her house, which is on the other side of town. Grandma offers to drive Alex and Jeffrey with us to Bianca's house. She's happy to meet them and get to know them a little bit. We finally get to

Bianca's house. It's really big and fancy, with a circular driveway and actual columns outside of the door.

"Shoes off," is the first thing Bianca tells us when she opens the door. Not *hi* or *how are you*? "We just put in white Berber wool carpet. It's twenty dollars a square foot."

Bianca gives us a tour. The house is just as fancy on the inside as it is on the outside, with all of its expensive furniture and artwork. She makes sure to show off her trophy case in the living room. It's filled with awards, not just academics but sports too, tennis, softball, and soccer. She tries to act all humble about it, but she's not fooling anyone.

We're allowed to peek into her mom's office. According to Bianca, she runs some big-time marketing agency. She's obviously pretty successful, not just because she owns a house this nice, but she's got all sorts of awards on the wall and lining some shelves.

Bianca doesn't say anything about her dad.

We end up in the kitchen and set our stuff out on the table. Bianca brings over some snacks and drinks. They're all in fancy packages with names I've never heard of. All the labels say *organic*, *all natural*, and *gluten free* in big letters.

Bianca lays her notebook out in front of her. "So, I was thinking we could do a PowerPoint presentation, where we discuss the important themes of the book." She flips through her notebook. "Now I've got a list of them I found. We can each pick one and –" She must have noticed the confused and slightly frustrated looks on our faces. "What?"

"I thought we were going to brainstorm ideas together," says Jeffrey. "Then decide as a group which one we wanted to do."

"Oh, we are," says Bianca. "I came up with this idea, and I'm sharing it with the group." She sits back in her chair, smiling and crossing her arms. "But let me hear some of your ideas. What have you got?"

She looks at each of us, one at a time, almost daring us to say something. I have an idea, but it's kind of crazy. I'm not sure I want to share it yet.

A door opens, and a taller version of Bianca dressed in a lady's business suit enters. She sets her briefcase down and talks into a Bluetooth earpiece.

"Hi, Mommy," says Bianca.

Bianca's mom holds up her hand. I'm not sure if she's waving "hi" or telling Bianca not to interrupt her. The tone she's using, let's just say I'm glad I'm not the person on the other end of that phone call. Alex and Jeffrey are too, by the look on their faces.

Bianca's mom ends the phone call without even saying goodbye. She sighs, puts on a smile, and approaches us.

"Hello, darling." She kisses Bianca on top of the head. "Are you going to introduce me to your friends?"

Alex, Jeffrey, and I each get up to shake her hand. Wow, Bianca's mom shakes hands like a man. She almost crushes my fingers. Bianca tells her mom about our project. She smiles, opens the fridge, and pulls out a fancy bottle of water and some exotic looking fruit.

"So that's my idea," says Bianca, resuming her earlier position, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed. "Do any of you have anything?"

She smirks, thinking we have nothing.

"Actually, I do have something," I say.

"What is it?" Bianca leans forward, staring at me rather intensely, like she's trying to intimidate me or something.

But I'm not going to let her. "Remember when Mr. Griffin talked about how fantasy stories can reflect the values of the writer? What if we create stories that Jesse and Leslie 'wrote' that reflect their values, based on what we've learned about them from the book. That will cover the major themes too."

Bianca's about to say something. From the smirk on her face, I can tell it's not going to be nice.

"I love it," says Jeffrey.

"Totally." Alex reaches for his tablet. "I can draw pictures of Jesse and Leslie when they're in Terabithia to go with the stories."

"Don't forget Prince Terrian," I say.

Alex nods. "And the giants. And I can draw what all of Terabithia looks like, a landscape and a cityscape."

Jeffrey snaps his fingers and points. "I can use those to make computer generated 3D models."

"Yes! Tight," says Alex.

"Bianca, may I speak with you for a moment?" her mother asks, but it sounds more like a demand.

She's already out of the kitchen. Bianca's following her. From her mom's tone, whatever she's got to say doesn't sound like it'll be nice. Alex and Jeffrey can tell that too, judging by the looks on their faces.

"I wonder what that's about," says Alex.

Jeffrey nods. "You want to listen in?"

"Absolutely."

They get out of their chairs at the same time.

"Wait," I tell them. "The two of you can't go eavesdropping like that."

"He's right," Jeffrey tells Alex. "If we both go, we'll get caught."

He and Alex look to each other, then look at me and say at the same time, "You go."

"What? No. I can't."

"Yes, you can," says Alex. "You're small. They won't notice you."

"I mean, I don't want to."

Alex and Jeffrey are already getting me out of my chair and hustling me out of the kitchen, in the same direction Bianca and her mom went.

"Sure, you do," says Jeffrey. "Now, hurry up before you miss anything good."

I stifle a groan and go on. Just another victim of peer pressure, I guess. I sneak down the hall. Lucky, I'm in my socks, and their expensive carpet is so thick, I don't make any noise. Bianca and her mom are around the corner, outside of her mom's office.

I sneak a peek then press myself against the wall but lean in so I can hear them.

"You're letting those boys walk all over you," Bianca's mom was telling her.

"No, I'm not," says Bianca.

"That's not what I saw."

"I told them my idea for the project before you came in. They were just telling me theirs."

"Fine. Then you go back in there and fight for your idea."

Bianca makes a little face. "Their idea is actually pretty good."

Bianca's mom groans. "Bianca," she adds, her voice dripping with disappointment. "Fine. Then go back in there and find some way to take charge. Those boys won't respect you, no one will, unless you do."

She doesn't even give Bianca a chance to respond. She just keeps walking. Around the corner. Right toward me. Bianca's mom towers over me. I'm more than a little scared.

"Uh," I mutter. "Bathroom?"

Her face softens a little. She points to the door behind me as she walks past.

"Thank you."

I head toward the bathroom but stop when I hear crying. I peek around the corner. It's Bianca, slumped against the wall, her face in her hands, her whole body shaking with sobs. She's about to lower her hands. I duck back around the corner and into the bathroom, hoping she doesn't see me.

In the bathroom, I wait a bit then flush the toilet and wash my hands. I open the door but jump back. Bianca's standing in front of me, her eyes red and puffy.

"Hi," I somehow manage to say.

"Did you hear any of that?" she asks.

"Any of what?" I ask, suddenly unable to look her in the eyes.

Bianca groans, embarrassed.

"Sorry. I was looking for the bathroom," I tell her.

Bianca sniffs and wipes her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Bianca nods.

"Your mom was really hard on you," I say. "Is she always like that?"

Bianca stands tall and frowns, like she's about to tell me off. She then sighs and her shoulders drop. "She just wants what's best for me. To be strong and successful. Like her."

I nod. I sort of understand. I guess. "Are you coming back to the kitchen?"

Bianca nods. "I need a couple minutes."

I slip past her. Bianca then disappears into the bathroom. I keep glancing behind me, in her direction, as I head back to the kitchen. Alex and Jeffrey stand by the doorway with big excited grins on their faces.

"Dude, you should have seen the look on Bianca's mom's face when she came back in the kitchen," says Alex. "She just took her drink and her dragon fruit and stormed upstairs."

"What were they talking about?" Jeffrey asks. "Come on. Spill it."

I look at them both for a moment then walk past them toward the table.

“It was nothing.”

Bianca comes back a few minutes later. She looks tired, like she doesn’t want to fight. I hate to say it, but it’s kind of hard to see her like that.

She goes along with our idea. Alex and Jeffrey will do all the design work and begin working on sketches. She and I will write the stories. We come up with some outlines, each one tackling a different theme from the book.

While we’re doing this, Bianca’s mom comes back downstairs, dressed in a different business suit. She looks like she’s freshened up a bit too. She tells Bianca she needs to go back to the office.

“What time will you be back?” Bianca asks.

“I don’t know. Order some dinner from La Cocina. They can put it on our tab.” She kisses Bianca on the head then smiles at me, Alex, and Jeffrey. The same phony smile I’ve seen Bianca put on so many times.

“It was so nice meeting you boys,” she says in her phony tone. “Bianca, remember what we talked about,” she adds in a serious tone.

Bianca nods and sits quietly for a moment. Her jaw then tightens, and she urges us to get back to work. Around six, Grandma calls to tell me she’s on her way to pick us up. When she gets there, she introduces herself to Bianca. I can tell she’s expecting to meet Bianca’s parents. And is disappointed to hear they aren’t there.

As we pull away from Bianca’s house, I can’t help but look back and think about her in that big house, all by herself. Ordering dinner from some restaurant, finishing her homework in that big kitchen, maybe even watching some TV on that ginormous set in the big living room. All by herself.

Chapter Seven

The next day, at school, Bianca is back to normal, always the first one with the right answers in class and bossing everyone around. Over the next week, she insists me, her, Alex, and Jeffrey trade numbers and emails so we can check in with each other on how we're doing on the project.

Alex and Jeffrey text pictures of sketches for us to check out and comment on. Bianca, of course, has a lot to say. Alex and Jeffrey complain about her every chance they get. I know my turn's coming up. No doubt Bianca's going to want to read my stories.

Sure enough, she texts me when she's finished her first story.

I'm just finishing mine, I text back. *I'll email it to you tomorrow.*

We should probably do this person, she texts. *It'll be easier to give feedback.*

I make a face. She wants to do this in person? Really?

Okay, I text. *Your house?*

How about yours? she texts back.

I blink with surprise. Wow, I don't know. I go in the living room and ask Grandpa and Grandma, saying if I can have a "friend" over tomorrow to work on our language arts project.

"Is it Alex or Jeffrey?" Grandma asks.

I hesitate for a moment then say, "It's, uh, Bianca."

Grandma looks up from her knitting with a big smile on her face, her eyes twinkle.

"A girl," Grandpa adds from his recliner. He nods, impressed.

"It's – not like that," I say.

"Not yet, at least," Grandma follows this with a wink. "She just has to fall victim to your irresistible charm."

"Grand-maaah!"

Grandpa lets out a big belly laugh.

Grandma's still smiling. "You let Bianca know we're looking forward to having her over tomorrow. I can drive her home from school with us if she wants."

"Okay," I mumble on my way back to my room.

I text Bianca saying it's okay to come over tomorrow then drop my phone on my bed and return to my laptop to finish up my tale of Terabithia. I focus on the story and getting it done, trying not to think about Bianca coming over tomorrow and how much it might possibly suck.

The next day at school goes by pretty smoothly. Before I know it, the final bell's rung, and Bianca's waiting for me by the front gate. I stop short when Chad, his buddies, and some other kids I don't know approach her.

They're all laughing and talking. From the way some of the kids are pointing and turning their heads, it looks like they want Bianca to go with them. But she shakes her head, looks my way, and waves to me.

I cringe just a bit. Most of these kids smirk and roll their eyes. A couple of them chuckle. Chad and his buddies, on the other hand, mad dog me. Great.

Bianca says bye to her friends who walk off. When I feel it's safe, I head over. We trade *heys*, and I point to Grandma's car. We sit in the back. Bianca's real nice and polite to Grandma, who gives me an approving look out of the corner of her eye.

I give her a tiny scowl, which she just laughs off. Whatever she's thinking about me and Bianca, she needs to stop right now.

When we get back to the house, Grandpa's in his recliner reading the paper but gets up to shake Bianca's hand. He's got a big smile on his face. I can't remember the last time I saw him smile like that – ever. When Bianca's back is turned, he nods and gives me a thumbs-up. Argh, I want to smack him.

Bianca and I get set up at the kitchen table, while Grandma makes us snacks. She asks us what we're working on. Bianca tells her.

"Have you read any of Ronnie's Illumina stories yet?" Grandma asks her. "I think they're wonderfully written. And, you know what, I'm actually starting to get used to all the monsters and magic stuff."

"I haven't had a chance to read them yet," says Bianca, sounding a little nervous for some reason.

"Ronnie hasn't shown them to you?" Grandma gives me a pretend scowl. "Shame on you. Oh, well. You can always read them online at – what's it called again, Ink Spot?"

"Ink Pad," I say through gritted teeth, my face red, wanting desperately for her to stop talking.

“Oh, that’s right. I was just on it the other day. Silly me.” Grandma brings over a tray of sliced cheese and crackers, cut up veggies and fruit, and ranch for dipping. If I didn’t know better, I swear she had all of this made up in advance. “A lot of people are really liking Ronnie’s stories. He’s got all sorts of fans. They leave the most wonderful comments.”

“Really?” Bianca gives me a tiny smile. “I’ll have to check them out.”

“What would you like to drink? Lemonade? Iced Tea? Juice?” Grandma asks. “I promise it’ll be the last time I bother you kids.”

Bianca chuckles. “Oh, it’s no bother.”

I ask for half iced tea, half lemonade. To my surprise, Bianca asks for the same. We then trade copies of our stories. Bianca gets out a red pen. Like a teacher.

I get out my own pen and make notes on Bianca’s story as I read it. The whole time, I’m keeping one eye on her. It seems like she’s making a bunch of marks. She’s real intense about it too. I’m making a bunch of marks and notes on her story as well.

We both finish reading at about the same time.

“What did you think?” Bianca asks.

“Uh, you write well. You’ve got a lot of nice sentences. You’ve got a good vocabulary.”

“Thanks.” The corners of Bianca’s mouth rise a little.

I should stop right there. Seriously. Only I can’t. It’s going to bug me if I don’t.

“The thing is,” I try to think of a nice way to say what I want to say but can’t do it. “Your writing, it’s just *too* fancy.”

Bianca gives me a confused look.

“It’s like you’re trying to show off,” I add. “Your writing draws too much attention to itself. It kept me from getting pulled into the story. There wasn’t a lot of feeling either, and your characters didn’t seem real to me. Both those things should be the most important parts of a story. Not just fancy words and long, detailed descriptions.”

I brace myself, waiting for Bianca to blow up at me. She just gets all quiet instead. A little too quiet. She hands me back my story. I page through it. It turns out most of the marks and notes she made were positive. Things she really liked about my story.

“I found a few typos and made some suggestions. They’re little things, but they might improve it. Or not.” Bianca shifts her shoulders and doodles in her notebook. “I don’t know. I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Okay,” I tell her, in kind of a soft voice.

Bianca sits up straight and turns toward me. “So how can we make my story better?”

I smile back at her. That could not have been easy for her, asking for help like that. She scoots her chair over, and we go through her story together. I tell her what she should cut out and what she should keep. Some of her sentences are really good. The ones where she wasn’t trying to show off that is.

We come up with ways her characters can show what they’re thinking or feeling through action instead of giving long, pretty speeches, and I mention places where the other characters should respond or react better, in order to bring them to life more.

Bianca starts picking up on this. After a few minutes, it’s not just me telling her what changes she should make. We’re soon coming up with ideas together.

When we’re finished, Bianca sits back in her chair. She’s got a smile on her face. A real smile, not that phony one. It looks good on her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re –” My voice comes out all squeaky. I clear my throat. Luckily, it returns to normal. “You’re welcome.”

Grandma comes in and asks Bianca if she wants to stay for dinner. I check my phone. Whoa, is it that late already?

“Yes, please. Thank you,” says Bianca.

“Shouldn’t you check with your mother?” Grandma asks.

Bianca shakes her head, looking a little sad, as she gets up from the table. “She already told me she’d be working late tonight.”

We clear off our school stuff and set the table. Bianca asks Grandma if she can help her get dinner ready. Grandma surprises me by saying yes. She never lets anyone help her in the kitchen. That’s her territory.

Bianca looks happy, really happy as she helps Grandma with dinner. I wander into the living room and sit on the couch. Grandpa folds up his paper and sets it on the coffee table as he comes over and sits next to me.

“How’s it going, tiger?” he asks, giving me a little nudge.

My face gets all hot. “Grandpaaah.”

He chuckles. “She’s a cutie. Want me to put in a good word for you?”

“What? No, it’s not like that.”

“Who’s to say it couldn’t be? You like her, right?”

I glance back at the kitchen, where Grandma and Bianca are working happily. There’s something different about Bianca now. It’s almost like she’s glowing. I’m flooded with emotions. Weird emotions I’ve never felt before. They’re scary but at the same time exciting.

“I’ll help talk you up during dinner,” says Grandpa. “If I know your grandma, she’s been doing it already. You’ll have two wingmen helping you out. What do you say?”

“Fine. Whatever,” I say, just wanting this conversation to end. Besides, even if I did say no, he and Grandma would do it anyway.

The four of us sit down for dinner. Nothing fancy. Just lasagna, bread, and salad. But Bianca looks like she’s really enjoying herself. I bet it’s been a while since she’s had a home cooked meal and sat down and ate it with other people.

For dessert, we have blueberry pie and ice cream. Once everyone’s finished, Bianca insists on cleaning up – and insists that I help her. She shoos Grandma and Grandpa away, and soon the two of us are standing over the kitchen sink scrubbing plates and putting them in the dishwasher.

We’re having a pretty good time. Every once in a while, our hands bump together under the soapy water. I get all tingly when that happens.

We talk as we work. Mostly about school. She admits she didn’t like Mr. Griffin at first, but now she’s starting to change her mind. The conversation shifts when she comes up with a new story idea for our *Bridge to Terabithia* project. We brainstorm, tossing ideas back and forth until we find what could work.

“We should write all this down before we forget,” I say while draining the sink.

Bianca’s just standing, looking sad and nervous at the same time. “Your grandma told me about your parents.”

My breath stalls in my throat for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” Bianca continues. “I’m really sorry. That had to be – I can’t even imagine how horrible that was.”

I tug at the cuffs of my long sleeve shirt and mutter, “Thanks.”

Bianca sniffs and dabs her eyes. “Not that it’s even remotely close, but I feel like my dad – well, he might as well be dead to me. He left me and my mom when I was about five. He moved and has a new family now. I get a card and a check from him on my birthday and Christmas. That’s about it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Bianca smiles, thanks. “He left my mom with the business they started. I’ve heard stories over the years about how everyone told her she should have given up and sold it. But she didn’t. She stuck with it. Made it a success.” She nods, holding her head up. “She’s a great businesswoman.”

I don’t think anyone’s arguing that. I remember all of the awards in her mom’s office. But I think Bianca would have rather she earned those awards for being a great mom instead. We stand there all silent for a moment, just looking at each other. I squirm a little, not sure what to say or do. Bianca neither, from the looks of it.

We’re saved by her alert tone. Bianca pulls her phone from her back pocket and reads the screen. “My mom’s here. I’ve got to go.”

I follow her as she gets her backpack from the living room. She thanks Grandma and Grandpa for dinner and everything.

“Isn’t your mom going to come to the door?” Grandma asks. “I’d love to meet her.”

Bianca looks away. “She’s probably tired and just wants to get home quickly. She works long hours.”

Grandma nods like it’s okay, but I can tell she feels bad for Bianca. She insists on a hug while Grandpa gives her a soft handshake. As Bianca walks away, they gesture for me to walk her to the door. I make a face like *I know. I’m going.*

I catch up to Bianca and walk with her the rest of the way. I unlock the door and open it. We just stand there, looking at each other.

She smiles that nice, warm smile I’m starting to get used to. She leans in and hugs me. I tense up at first then relax without even thinking about it. My arms find their way around her. She’s so soft and warm and smells so good, like flowers. I don’t want her to let go. But she does.

She’s still smiling as she walks away. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Goodnight.”

I stand by the door and watch her hurry to her mom’s car. I stay put, watching them drive away and don’t move until they’re finally gone.

I shut the door and lock it. When I turn around, Grandpa and Grandma are standing there, waiting for me.

“Well?” Grandpa asks.

Grandma slaps his shoulder. “Unlike you, Ronnie is a gentleman. He doesn’t kiss and tell.” She follows it with a wink.

I shake my head and walk down the hall to my room, still smiling. I swear my feet aren’t even touching the ground.

The next morning, at school, when I’m heading to my locker, I see Bianca hanging out with her friends near one of the big planters in the quad. She sees me, smiles, and waves. I automatically smile and wave back. Her friends all look in my direction then at Bianca, making faces, probably wondering why she’s bothering to even acknowledge I’m alive. Chad and his buddies are with them. They mad dog me as I walk past.

I put my head down and walk faster, not stopping until I get to my locker. I stash my lunch and switch out my books. When I turn around, Chad and his buddies block my way.

“What do you think you’re doing, messing around with Bianca like that?” Chad asks.

“I’m not messing –”

I gasp in pain as he shoves me into my locker.

“You think you actually got a chance with her? With a girl like that?” Chad slams his hand into the locker, barely missing my face.

Something builds up inside me. I don’t know where it comes from, but all of a sudden I shove Chad off of me with all my strength. He staggers back, his eyes wide, his mouth open. His buddies look like they’re in shock too.

They get over it, really quick. Chad’s face twists up with anger. He rushes toward me. I bunch up my fists. I’m ready. I don’t care if I get beaten up. I need to do this.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Chad stops short. We all turn to see Bianca standing there. Chad goes all puppy dog, all of a sudden.

“Nothing. We’re not doing anything.”

Bianca doesn’t look like she’s buying it. “Have you been bullying him?”

Chad shakes his head, all big eyes and innocence. Bianca looks to me for an answer. I grimace, my face red with embarrassment.

Chad smiles, looking like he's going to try to charm his way out of it. "Bianca, come on, we're just messing around." He turns to me. "Tell her."

He sounds all cool and calm, but there's a definite threat in his eyes. It doesn't matter. Bianca doesn't look like she's believed a word he's said.

She gets up in Chad's face and stares him down. Chad turns away.

"Stay away from Ronnie. Understand? That goes for your little posse too." She shoots each of them an evil look. They back away. "Did you hear me?" she asks Chad again.

"Okay," Chad whines.

Bianca cocks her head toward the quad. "Now get out of here, all of you."

Chad and his buddies shuffle off without looking back. Bianca steps toward me. The look in her eyes. She cares. She really cares.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

I grit my teeth. I shouldn't be angry. I know I shouldn't, but ...

"You didn't have to do that," I tell her.

Bianca smirks. "Really?"

"I was going to handle it. I had it under control."

Bianca really looks like she's trying really hard not to laugh now. "They would have pounded you into the ground."

"Yeah – well." I mean, she's right. But still.

"Okay. Fine. I'm sorry I wounded your manly pride," says Bianca, smiling, all sarcastic. "Next time anyone gangs up on you, I promise I won't step in. I'll let you take your beating like a man."

"Good. You better," I say. Even though it sounds completely ridiculous.

We both stand there, looking at each other. Bianca's still smiling, looking like she's ready to bust out laughing.

"Stop looking at me like that," I tell her, suddenly trying not to laugh myself.

"Like what?" she chuckles.

"Like. That." I'm laughing now. I can't help it.

Bianca is too. After a little while, we settle down. She then reaches out and pats my shoulder. "See you in Language Arts, tough guy." Then heads back toward the quad.

"Yeah. See you."

I watch her walk away. I've still got some time before Math. I decide to head to the library. I've already got out my pen and a notebook. A new story is coming to me.

The Ice Witch's Daughter

By

Ronnie Jackman

In Ebetha, to the north, stood the Dragonback Mountains. They were home to many fierce creatures, most notably the giants. They were another curse brought about by Malba's dark magic.

Rionn had learned the story when he was young, how the first generation of giants was born from human women. Ugly, brutish infants far larger than a normal child. The mothers rarely survived the birth. Many of these babes were left in the forest to die. Others were brought up in their human homes as they continued to grow to outrageous sizes. A typical giant was three times the height of a normal man.

Despite their parents' efforts to raise them to lead normal lives, the savage nature of the giants prevailed. They would kill someone, intentionally or not, and end up being driven into the forests and eventually into the Dragonback Mountains. There, they banded together into tribes that would descend into the nearest villages and farms to steal livestock and children. Border forts had been constructed along the forest line throughout Ebetha and the other duchies in northern Illumina in order to hold them at bay.

Rionn had never encountered a giant before. He'd heard they had never managed to get past the border forts before. Lately though, there had been talk about some strange behavior being exhibited by the giants. Behavior that indicated a possible threat.

Rionn was not rash enough to try to investigate this on his own. He planned to reach out to an ally in this part of the land. He reached a pasture, where sheep, goats, and cattle wandered and grazed beneath the warm sun. Some hounds lay about, watching them. One bolted after a pair of lambs straying too far from the others. But there was no farmhouse to be seen, in any direction.

Large clumps of bushes stood almost dead center in the pasture. Rionn pushed them back revealing the gateway to the dwarf village his

friend, Formig, called home. This was their pasture, and they led their herd animals to and from the surface through hidden tunnels.

Varg groaned and found a spot to lie down in the grass. Most of the dwarf tunnels were barely large enough for Rionn to pass through, let alone a great wolf like Varg. Rionn reached for the knobs and levers above the gate. In addition to being master craftsmen, dwarves were mechanical geniuses, and no one would pass through a gate to their village without knowing the proper sequence to turn each knob and pull each lever. Too many failed attempts sounded an alarm and brought a squad of heavily armed and angry guards.

Rionn opened the gate on his first try, still remembering when Formig taught him the sequence all those months ago. He had to crouch a bit to keep from hitting his head on the top of the tunnel. The light was extremely dim. Dwarves had the ability to see in almost pitch darkness.

Rionn depended on Stryke's glow to help him see. He soon met a group of dwarves pushing wheelbarrows piled with ore. They stopped to greet him, each hailing him as "Dragonson." Rionn could not believe word of his encounter with the mages had reached the dwarves' ear. He bit the inside of his cheek and smiled, still did not feel worthy of such a title and wondered if he ever would.

Rionn asked where he might find Formig's father, Forfec. He wanted to visit with him first before sitting down with Formig, with whom he had some business to discuss.

"Follow the sound of the hammers, Dragonson," one of the dwarves told him.

That sounded right. Forfec was always working. He was one of Rionn's masters during his time at the Glen. Forfec had taught him metalwork. Without him, Rionn would not have been able to make Stryke.

Further down the tunnel, the sound of hammering metal reached his ears. It grew steadily louder. Rionn had to eventually cover his ears. The tunnel opened into a large cavern, where dozens of dwarves were hard at work. Those that weren't shaping metal with hammers and anvils were fine-tuning each new creation at different worktables spread out through the cavern. They should have all been deaf from the chorus of hammers and anvils, but each dwarf wore a headpiece that covered their ears and dampened the sounds. A young dwarf was kind enough to hand one to Rionn.

At some worktables, sword and dagger blades were sharpened, and hilts and pommels were embellished with gold and jewels. Dwarves were also known for the jewelry they created. It was quite the contradiction, how such gruff and coarse creatures – at least on the surface – could create such delicate and beautiful treasures.

Rionn found Formec pacing up and down the worktables, inspecting each piece that was being made. His standards were exact, and he often enjoyed boasting about “fine dwarf craftsmanship.”

Despite the noise and sound-dampening headpiece, Forfec turned to Rionn as if he knew he was there and greeted him with a smile and a huge embrace. Rionn chuckled. Even though Forfec barely came up to his shoulder, the old dwarf was still powerful enough to lift him off the ground and spin him around.

Once he had put him back down, Forfec waved Rionn to follow him to a quieter spot, where they could talk.

“You have been quite busy,” said Forfec, slipping off his headpiece. “Dragonson.”

Rionn grumbled as he removed his headpiece.

“What?” Forfec continued. “The name suits you. All the masters in the Glen knew there was something special about you.”

A genuine smile touched Rionn’s lips. “Thank you.”

“I suppose you are looking for Formig.”

Rionn nodded.

“There was some business about a troll lurking around some the outer caverns,” said Forfec. “Formig went to investigate – without any backup of course.”

“That does sound like him.”

Formec headed back toward the cavern. “Good luck, Dragonson.” He then added rather cheekily. “And whatever adventure you have planned, do try to bring my son home alive.”

Rionn chuckled and headed toward the outer caverns. Trolls were kin to giants and another part of Malba’s curse. They are twice the height of a man but long-limbed and rangy with scaly skin marked with tufts of black hair. They were smart and cunning, often preferring to survey a target for a while before finally attacking. They were natural mimics too and enjoyed aping the voice of someone close to their target in order to lure them into a secluded spot where they could attack them.

It turned out that Rionn did not have to travel far. A crowd had gathered up ahead. Rionn suspected it had to do with Formig. Sure enough, he was correct. Formig stood in the center of the crowd, his foot on top of a troll corpse.

He held his weapon, Downfall, up high. It was a large war hammer that Formig wielded with both hands. It was near indestructible and could topple anything or anyone that stood in Formig's way.

The crowd made way for Rionn. As soon as Formig saw him, he greeted his friend with a smile and an embrace.

"What brings you down below?" Formig asked.

"The chance for adventure." Rionn glanced at the troll corpse. "Unless you are not too worn out of course."

Formig scoffed then addressed the crowd. "I want the head, claws, and skin brought to my chambers. Use the rest as fertilizer for the fungus fields."

The dwarves hurried to follow his command. A female dwarf lingered. Formig grinned at her, showing off his stubby teeth, giggled, and gave her a tiny wave. The female returned the gesture and followed up with what Rionn assumed was supposed to have been an alluring glance. To him, it looked more like she was trying to stifle a cough and a sneeze at the same time.

"Tis my Sokra," said Formig, his pale skin turning red. His grin raised the corners of his beard. "Such a vision, is she not? So stout and plump, she is almost perfectly round. And her little beard. She takes after her mother."

He giggled again and gave Sokra another tiny wave.

"I am happy for you, my friend," was all Rionn could think of to say, respecting the dwarves' standard for beauty.

He followed Formig to his chambers. The two sat at the table in the center, sharing a bottle of Midlands wine that was part of a trade the dwarves had made with some human merchants.

Rionn started explaining the opportunity for adventure he had in mind.

"So giants are appearing near Elbetha," Formig scoffed. "Almost as commonplace as rats in a kitchen."

"This time is different, my friend," said Rionn. "I spoke with some of the pikemen who stand watch at the forts. They talked about the unusual

behavior they have been seeing in the giants lately. In the past, giants have not been known for their subtlety or for planning ahead in any manner.”

Formig grunted in agreement.

“The pikemen swore they have seen giants scouting and testing defenses. What was even more intriguing was that members of different giant tribes were seen working together. When have you ever heard of that happening before?”

Formig’s bushy brow furrowed. “This sounds worth investigating. Indeed.”

Rionn and Formig poured themselves one last glass and raised a toast to a new adventure. Formig gathered some special gear before they headed out. He had hooded cloaks with a special layer of fabric sewn in them that would capture their body heat to keep them warm in the snow-covered Dragonback Mountains. He also had special footwear to attach to their boots. They were long and flat and could distribute each of their weight.

“They should help us glide along even the heaviest snow patches,” Formig insisted.

Formig only needed one last thing for their trip. Rionn followed him to the burrow where he kept his war rabbit, Ganlan. War rabbits were the size of horses and known for their aggressiveness. Formig had a special bond with Ganlan, much like Rionn did with Varg.

Formig climbed onto Ganlan’s back. A tunnel took them to the surface, where Rionn reached out to Varg with his mind. Once the great wolf had joined them, they were off, racing toward the Dragonback Mountains. It soon turned into an actual race. The great wolf and the war rabbit strove to overtake each other, but neither animal could gain an advantage. They ended up reaching the foot of the mountains at the same time.

Varg’s keen nose quickly uncovered Giant tracks, each one was easily three times the size of a human man’s print, not to mention three times deeper.

Rionn and Formig found one set leading up to a sheer surface then disappearing. Nearby, another set of tracks seemed to appear out of the mountain and head in a different direction.

Formig picked up a stone and chucked it at the mountain near both sets of tracks. It passed through what should have been a solid surface.

“Magic,” said Formig. “An illusion.”

Rionn nodded. “Giants are not known for using magic.”

“They are certainly not.”

Rionn grinned. “You can go back if you wish.”

Formig scoffed. “By my ancestors’ beards, I will be seeing this through to the end with you.”

Rionn chuckled, expecting such an answer from Formig. They passed through the false surface of the mountain as easily as the stone did and found themselves in a tunnel, tall and wide enough to fit over a dozen giants at a time. The sides and roof were smooth, with no outcrops or protrusions.

“This tunnel did not form naturally,” Rionn deduced.

“More magic,” said Formig.

Before they continued, he dug out one of the devices he had brought with him. It was like a giant candle, encased in glass, only the glass helped project the fire’s light further than any torch. There was a handle on top that allowed Formig to carry it easily.

“Remarkable,” Rionn said to himself, not too loud. If Formig had heard him, the comment would have definitely fed the dwarf’s already sizable ego.

The trip through the tunnel took some time. They stopped to eat, having brought salted meats, skins of water, and root vegetables for Ganlan. Once they were ready, they resumed their trek.

The tunnel steadily ascended. Light shone through an opening ahead. A harsh wind whipped and whistled, bracing them with its coldness. Rionn and Formig tugged their cloaks around them, while Varg trotted along unbothered, thanks to his hearty coat. Ganlan was also equally unaffected by the cold.

The ground beneath their feet was soon dusted with snow as they reached the opening. Formig slipped on some goggles. A life underground made dwarves vulnerable to bright light. The three stepped through the opening. They were indeed in the midst of the Dragonback Mountains, surrounded by its staggering snow-covered peaks.

Rionn drew a ragged breath. The air was crisp but thin, because they were at such a great height. Formig was just as affected. They both concentrated, building the energy within them, allowing their bodies to adjust to this new climate.

“Well, where to now?” Formig asked, once he was ready.

Rionn scanned the snowy landscape. There were Giant tracks in the snow heading off in several directions. They had their choice of which one to follow.

Varg pushed past Rionn and Formig. He growled, unsheathing his fangs, and stared up into the sky. What Varg had sensed, Ganlan had detected it too. His ears were rigid and alert. He growled, bearing his large wedge-like teeth.

Rionn and Formig looked up, reaching for their weapons. A large, winged shape momentarily blotted out the sun then swooped toward them. It was a giant snow owl, the size of a man, with talons like curved, black swords. Poised to eviscerate them.

The four scattered. The giant snow owl adjusted itself at the last moment. Its talons barely scraped the snow as it streaked back into the sky, turning nimbly in the air, ready to attack again.

Formig let out a great roar, raising Downfall. The hammer’s head shot from the handle. It was now connected by a long chain. It rocketed toward the giant owl, who was forced to bank sharply in order to dodge it.

“Formig!” Rionn called out. He raised his hand, making a fist. A signal they had learned during their days training in Erebos’ glen. It meant they needed to work together.

Formig nodded. While they skirmished with the giant snow owl, they positioned themselves, so they soon surrounded their enemy.

Varg leapt, snapping with his fangs, turning the giant owl one way. Ganlan kicked at it with his powerful hind legs.

Formig fired his hammer, sending it yet in another direction.

While it was off-balance, Rionn shifted Stryke into a spear and threw it, aiming at the giant snow owl’s chest. It twisted its body at the last possible moment. Stryke pierced its shoulder, just above its right wing.

The giant snow owl let out an eerily human cry as it tumbled to the ground. Rionn summoned Stryke back into his hand. It returned to its sword form, as he, Formig, Varg, and Ganlan raced to finish off their enemy.

The giant snow owl stood up and shrugged. It turned into a young woman, tall with pale skin and hair that was tinged with a delicate blue. She was dressed in a sparkling white gown with a cape of snow owl feathers lying at her feet. She sneered and exhaled a powerful gust of breath. It struck Varg and Ganlan, encasing both of them in a sheath of ice.

Rionn held back a cry. Formig ran headlong, swinging Downfall over his head.

“Witch!” he cried out.

With another gust of breath, she froze Formig where he stood. Rionn grimaced and tightened his grip on Stryke. This young ice witch leveled her gaze on him. Her blue eyes were as cold as the surrounding landscape. Blood stained the shoulder of her otherwise immaculate gown, where Stryke had wounded her.

She placed her palm over the wound. It glowed a pale blue. When she removed it, the wound was covered in frost. The blood had stopped flowing.

“You made me bleed,” said the young ice witch. “Allow me to return the favor.”

Her hands glowed. Twin blades made of ice formed. She leapt at Rionn, swinging them, in deadly arcs. Rionn blocked one then the other. This was no normal ice she had created. It was stronger than most steel he had encountered.

The fight went back and forth. As it continued, Rionn summoned more of his energy into Stryke and was able to shatter one of the young ice witch’s blades and drive her to her knees. He was set to finish her with an overhead strike when she formed an ice shield to block him instead.

The young ice witch continued to block Rionn’s attacks as she made her way to her feet. Rionn caught a glimpse of her flexing her free hand. When she did, the ground beneath his feet shook violently.

He struggled to keep his balance. As he did, the snow beneath him rose and engulfed him. It froze instantly, encasing him up to his neck in ice, with Stryke pinned to his side.

“You are quite the warrior. Dragonson,” she said.

Rionn continued to struggle. “You know me?”

“Indeed. I thought you might make a fine trophy, like your friends.” She glanced their way. “But I do not think my mother would want me to take such a risk. So instead, I shall freeze you from the inside out and watch you shatter to pieces.”

Rionn snarled and tried to fight through the ice. The young ice witch strolled up to him, clutched his face, and planted her mouth over his. Her icy breath flooded his body. Rionn felt himself instantly freezing. He

marshaled his energy, trying to combat it, but it was not proving to be enough.

He pleaded to Illumina for help. And just as she had done before, the World Dragon answered. In his mind, Rionn watched one of her great eyes open, and he was soon flooded with waves of energy. So much, he felt as if he might burst into flames.

The energy countered the young ice witch's cold, fighting back, coursing through his body, reaching his mouth, and spilling into hers. The young ice witch recoiled and was sent flying as if pushed by some great force.

She sat in the snow, her mouth a stunned circle. Bewildered, she touched her lips. She turned her attention to Rionn and let out a terrified gasp, stumbled and scrambled away. In one motion, she swept up her feathered cloak, donned it, transformed back into a giant snow owl and flew away.

Rionn was still flooded with energy. It weakened his icy bonds enough for him to burst through it. He then channeled his energy into Stryke and used that to thaw out his friends. Varg and Ganlan shook the remaining bits of ice from their coat. Despite their warming cloaks, Rionn and Formig still needed to draw inner energy to heat up their bodies and dry their clothes so they would not freeze.

"How did you do it?" Formig asked Rionn, once he, Varg, and Ganlan had been freed. "The ice witch? How did you beat her? And send her off like that?"

Rionn had been thinking about that himself and did not understand what had happened any more than Formig did. Why was the witch so scared? Why did she fly away like that when she still clearly had the advantage?

"Well, how did you do it?" Formig repeated.

"I do not know. Perhaps it was just a ruse. We need to be careful."

"Indeed, by my ancestors' beards she definitely has something to do with the giants. I can feel it.

They picked up their pace, traveling in the direction that the young ice witch had flown away.. A mountain in the distance glittered in the sunlight. As they drew closer, Rionn marveled at the sight before them.

It was no mountain. It was a castle carved out of ice with high walls and turrets. Rionn shielded his eyes from the sun and squinted.

Formig nudged him. "Try this."

He handed Rionn a metal cylinder that looked as if it could collapse into itself. One end was larger than the other. Each was fitted with a glass lens.

"You look through it," said Formig. "Through the small end."

Rionn did as his friend instructed. To his amazement, his vision closed the distance between him and the ice castle. It was as if he was standing there, watching everything up close. Men manned the castle turrets. No, not men. Statues crafted out of ice, animated by magic.

There was activity near the front gate. A trio of giants waited for entry. Rionn could have spotted even without Formig's collapsible viewing device, but it enabled him to see them up close. They were quite a sight.

Each giant had long matted hair and a beard. Their hulking forms were clothed in ragged animal skins, and they carried cudgels the size of small trees. Their noses and ears were pierced with shards of polished bones, and their faces were scarred in patterns. From what Rionn had been told, that indicated which tribe they came from and their rank within it.

According to what Rionn saw, these giants were from the same tribe. The largest of them was a chief, judging by the way the others deferred to him. On his forehead, a symbol had been carved that resembled a jagged crown.

The front gate of the ice castle opened for them. The three giants entered as if invited. As the front gate closed, Rionn scrambled up a nearby outcrop to get a look over the walls. When he reached the top, he almost dropped Formig's viewing device, startled by what he saw. Gathered in the ice castle's courtyard was an assemblage of giants. Including the three that had just entered, Rionn counted eighteen of them.

From their scarring, he determined the giants were from six different tribes. A chief and two seconds from each. The members of these different tribes did not mill about, pleasantly. They appeared to more or less tolerate each other as they ate the slabs of meat and drank from the barrels of ale that had been set out on long rows of tables.

Rionn turned his attention toward the great hall. A woman with pale white hair and skin emerged, dressed in a glittering white gown. He assumed it was the young ice witch they had faced earlier.

When he twisted one end of Formig's viewing device, he was able to see ever closer. This woman only resembled the young ice witch. She

was noticeably older. Was this the mother she mentioned during their fight?

She reached the edge of the courtyard, and the giants turned to face her. Rionn wished Formig had created some sort of listening device so he could hear exactly what this woman was saying as she addressed the giants. She spoke with great intensity though. It was not long until she had the giants whipped into a fervor. They shouted and shoved each other and smashed the tables to splinters with their cudgels.

The woman looked on, with a proud smile and her head held high.

“Rionn, what is it?” Formig called out. “What do you see?”

Rionn lowered the viewing device in his hands as he faced his friend.

“Trouble,” was all he could think to say.

Once he was back down the hill, Rionn told Formig what he saw. The dwarf listened intently, his brow furrowed. He walked away, hands on his hips, appearing to be deep in thought. Rionn watched him and waited for him to return.

“So, what do we do?” Formig asked. “Not even I am reckless enough to attack that many giants and an ice witch.”

Rionn grinned, thinking back at how many times Formig had thrown himself into battle against numerous opponents. His hesitancy spoke volumes.

“We hurry back to Ebetha,” he told his friend. “Report what we have seen. Gather an army and return.”

“You think they will believe you?”

Rionn smirked. “I am the Dragonson, remember?”

Formig let out a gruff chuckle.

“By the time you return to Ebetha and gather your army, it will be too late.”

Rionn, Formig, Varg, and Ganlan turned to see the young ice witch standing before them. It was as if she had emerged from the very snowbank she stood upon. Rionn summoned Stryke to his hands. Formig raised Downfall.

The young ice witch raised her hands. “Please, I wish to help.”

“You? Help?” Formig stepped forward.

Rionn held out his arm, blocking his path. “What do you mean we will be too late?”

“My mother has been forming alliances with the chiefs of all of the giant tribes,” she explained. “The ones below were the final ones she needed to win over.”

“That is your mother?” Formig asked.

The young ice witch nodded.

“How many giant tribes are there?” Rionn asked.

“Thirteen in total,” said the young ice witch. “Each chief has promised twenty warriors for a united attack on Ebetha. Once they have taken the land, they will have a foothold on the rest of Illumina.”

Rionn held back a shudder, imagining over two hundred giants overwhelming the forts on the outskirts of Ebetha.

“When is this attack scheduled for?” he asked.

“First light,” the young ice witch answered. “When Briam begins his next ascent.”

Rionn cast his gaze toward the sky. Briam, the fiery dragon, had just passed the midpoint of his daily flight and was now descending toward the far horizon. By the time they reached Ebetha, night would have fallen. To rouse the number of men needed to combat such a horde of giants by first light – the young ice witch was right. They would not have enough time.

“By my ancestors’ beards,” Formig muttered, woefully.

“This was your mother’s idea?” Rionn asked. “To unite the giants for such an attack?”

The young ice witch’s face twisted with sorrow. “My mother is doing the bidding of Malba. She has served the Darksoul all of her life.”

Malba. His infernal visage appeared in Rionn’s mind, taunting him.

“Malba has been marshaling his forces,” the young ice witch continued. “Their plan is to take over Illumina and destroy all those who get in their way.”

“Tis madness!” said Formig. “The great war between the humans and the elves, Erebos himself said a conflict that size would wake Illumina and destroy us all.”

The young ice witch swallowed. “That is what Malba is counting on. He has promised that after the conflict, he will remake this world in his image. A paradise for the cruel and barbaric.” She shuddered. “I have seen a vision of the world Malba promises. We cannot let that happen.”

Rionn cast a glance at Formig then back at the young ice witch. “You are willing to go against your own mother?”

The young ice witch stared deep into Rionn's eyes. "When I was little, my mother froze my heart so I would do her bidding without question. When I tried to freeze you, what you did —" The corners of the young ice witch's mouth twitched, forming a timid smile. Her hand moved toward her heart. "My heart started beating again. The emotions I have been experiencing — I think about the deeds I have done in my mother's name over the years and the destruction she and the giants will wreck — what all of Malba's servants will do."

Her voice trailed off into a sob. Tears ran down her cheeks. She touched one and laughed, sounding surprised.

"I did not know I could cry. Not anymore."

Rionn looked on at the young ice witch. He could not help but be affected by what he saw. However, there was still much to consider. He gestured for Formig to step aside with him. They reviewed their first encounter with the young ice witch, how she had advantage over them but still fled in the end. She also had the advantage over them when she reappeared moments ago. However, she spoke rather than attacked.

As he and Formig deliberated, Rionn noticed Varg stepping toward the young ice witch. Formig noticed this too and edged forward. Rionn blocked his path, wanting to see what might happen.

The young ice witch smiled and extended her hands, palms up, to the great wolf. She smiled as Varg sniffed them. He then rubbed his muzzle against one of her hands and invited her to pet him with the other. The young ice witch readily accepted.

Rionn noted how innocent she appeared in that moment. When he approached, the young ice witch pulled her hands to her side and stepped away, as if she feared she had done something wrong.

"What is your name?" Rionn asked.

"Geda," the young ice witch replied in a tiny voice.

Rionn caught himself smiling. It was a pretty name.

"I suppose you have a plan," he said.

Geda nodded. Formig joined them. He and Rionn listened to her plan. It was sound. It made sense. As they waited to carry it out, Rionn pulled Formig aside. As credible as Geda seemed, they agreed to keep an eye on her.

They waited until the last of the giants had left Geda's mother's castle. Geda turned her attention to the hill face. A portion of it churned and

bubbled then collapsed into slush, revealing a tunnel.

“You were the one who made the tunnel for the giants, through the mountains,” Rionn surmised.

Geda nodded, rather shamefully. “There are many tunnels. If we are successful, when we are finished, I promise to collapse them.”

Rionn nodded and gestured for her to take the lead. He, Formig, Varg, and Ganlan followed close behind her. The tunnel took an arcing path and ended at a wall of ice. This must have been the castle.

Geda tapped the wall. A spider web of cracks appeared, and a section of the wall collapsed into a pile of broken ice, leaving a hole large enough for them to pass through. She stood staring at the opening, her chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

“Geda?” Rionn called out.

She nodded and stepped through the opening. Formig stepped to Rionn’s side.

“She is planning something. I would bet my ancestors’ beards on it,” he whispered.

Rionn had thought the same thing. Either that or Geda was taking a moment to summon the courage it would take to face her mother.

The interior of the ice castle was sculpted and carved with intricate detail. The walls appeared to be made from bricks of ice. The floors were constructed of ice tiles. Rugs of snow that had the feel of woven material lay beneath their feet. Similar snow tapestries hung from the walls, along with portraits chiseled from ice.

Geda stopped before a set of large double doors. She trembled. Ragged breath escaped her lips. Rionn stepped to her side.

Geda held up her hand. “I am fine. I can do this.”

She concentrated. This time, a portion of the doors melted before them suddenly and silently, leaving a puddle on the floor. They passed through. Inside, a large bed with four ornately carved posts stood in the center of the room. The ice witch, Geda’s mother, slept beneath sheets of woven snow.

They spread out, approaching the bed from different angles. Rionn did not like this, sneaking up on a foe while they slept. However, due to the ice witch’s great powers and the direness of this mission, it was unfortunately necessary.

Formig carried another of his inventions with him, shackles that constricted to fit any wearer. According to him, the more the shackled person struggled the tighter they became. Rionn held a bottle containing a chemical concoction Formig had made, which the dwarf swore would send anyone to sleep no matter how great their constitution might be.

Geda stepped to the side of her mother's bed.

"She is getting what she deserves," she muttered.

The ice witch's eyes popped open, and she sat up as if pulled by a string. "And just what is that, traitorous daughter?"

She smiled. Then melted into a puddle.

The chamber shook. The double doors flew open, and a squadron of soldiers entered. The same ones Rionn had seen manning the castle walls. They were statues, carved from ice and brought to life through the ice witch's magic.

A snowy wind billowed through the chamber. Swirling and spiraling, it solidified. The real ice witch, Geda's mother, stood before them.

"Did you think I was not aware of all that goes on within my castle," she said as she retrieved a feathered cloak, similar to the one Geda wore, from a rack by her wardrobe. "Answer me, daughter. Why this betrayal?"

Geda hung her head. She appeared wracked with anguish.

"Is this your doing, somehow, Dragonson?" she asked Rionn.

Rionn did not answer. His attention was fixed on her ice soldiers, as was Formig's, Varg's, and Ganlan's. The ice witch strolled toward Geda. She lifted her chin with her fingertips so she could look her in the eyes.

"Geda, my darling." She spoke in soft, loving tones that bore a hint of pain and heartbreak. "I implore you, do not do this. Apologize and pledge your allegiance, and all will be forgiven, I swear."

"I – I –" Geda fought to summon a response.

Rionn and Formig waited, anxious to hear her response.

"I am – so sorry, Mother," Geda finally said.

Rionn and Formig each exhaled, fearing the worst.

The ice witch stood tall, with a proud grin – until Geda hit her with a blast of her icy breath. It did not freeze her mother. Geda had told them earlier that it would not work. Instead, the force of it propelled her across the chambers and into a far wall.

The ice witch bellowed, a sound somewhere between rage and heartbreak. She then transformed into a giant snow owl and launched herself at her daughter. Geda transformed as well and met her mother, talons raised.

The ice soldiers swarmed Rionn and Formig, who met them head-on, their weapons swinging in lethal arcs. They were not formed from normal ice. They were made of the same stuff Geda had formed when she had attacked them earlier. They carried swords and spears as solid and sharp as any steel. With Varg and Ganlan's help, Rionn and Formig dispatched one soldier after another.

The two traded confident glances, certain this battle would be won in no time. Then they noticed the pieces of the fallen ice soldiers rising into the air and reforming instantly, ready to resume fighting. Rionn and Formig traded a look of shock. Still, they raised their weapons and charged their opponents.

A violent crash. Rionn glanced over his shoulder to see that Geda and her mother had smashed through the ice wall and were taking their battle to other parts of the castle.

Rionn, Formig, Varg, and Ganlan soon found themselves on the defensive against the ice soldiers. Geda was still fighting her mother. As they fought, Rionn thought back to his encounter with Malba's mages and when Illumina first blessed him with her power.

As he thought about it, he could feel his energy rise within him. Inspiration struck him, and he channeled his energy into Stryke.

"Get behind me," he ordered the others.

Formig was quick to comply. His eyes were wide as if he could sense something spectacular was about to occur. Rionn began flourishing Stryke, swinging it in lethal arcs. The ice soldiers held back, feeling the heat coming off of Stryke.

Energy trailed from Stryke's blade as it coursed through the air. The faster it spun, the more energy was generated. It came together, forming a giant fiery ball. Rionn let out a fierce cry. He swung Stryke over his head and brought it forward. The ball of energy was still attached, but with a flick of his wrist it detached and flew at the ice soldiers.

It crashed into them. The ones struck with the full force of the energy exploded into clouds of vapor. The rest began to melt. They

scrambled toward Rionn and the others, but with each step their bodies turned to slush.

Rionn grinned and turned to Formig, expecting praise.

Instead the dwarf snorted. "You could have left some for me."

Rionn chuckled and shook his head. He then waved for Formig, Varg, and Ganlan to follow him. Outside in the courtyard, Geda and her mother fought as giant snow owls above them, clashing with their talons.

Feathers flew. Blood sprayed the ground. Rionn assumed the smaller of the two was Geda. He watched in horror as she plummeted toward the ground, her left wing twisted and bleeding heavily. When she hit the ground, she shrugged off her feathered cloak and returned to her human form.

Rionn shifted Stryke into a spear, ready to throw it at Geda's mother. Geda held up a trembling hand, urging him to stop. Rionn was unsure, for a moment, as to why she would do that. Then it became instantly clear. Geda needed to finish this herself.

He motioned for the others to stay back. Geda's mother hovered over her. She let out a terrible shriek. Geda pushed her wounded body from the ground and faced her.

"Mother, please," she begged. "I beg of you. Do not make me do this."

Geda's mother let out another terrible shriek then sped toward her daughter, talons poised. Geda raised her hands and cried out. She formed blades of ice, much larger than the ones she had used to battle Rionn earlier. One after the other, they flew through the air, impaling her mother, over and over again, until her body finally went limp and dropped to the snowy ground.

Geda stared down at her mother's lifeless form. A single sob shook her body. Followed by another. She was soon doubled over, weeping.

Rionn approached her. He stood behind her, not sure if he should try to comfort her or not. To his surprise, Geda turned toward him, eyes red with tears. She threw her arms around him and collapsed into his body, sobbing uncontrollably. Rionn held her close, consoling her.

When she was ready, Geda pulled away, giving Rionn a grateful smile. She used her ice powers to heal their wounds. She then turned her attention to her mother's body, which had now returned to human form. She smoothed her hair and her gown, closed her eyes, and gave her a tiny kiss

on the forehead. As Geda returned to her feet, the ground swallowed her mother's body. Geda formed a grave marker out of ice, carving ancient runes on it.

"I will collapse the tunnels made for the giants, as I promised," she told Rionn and the others. "With my mother gone, they will no longer be a threat – at least not as an assembled horde. Chances are they will go back to fighting with each other."

"What about you?" Rionn asked.

Geda responded with a sad smile. "This has been my home for so long. But I do not know if I still belong here or not. So many memories. I will travel through Illumina. I need to be on my own for a while."

Rionn's heart thudded. He swallowed a lump that had risen in his throat. "Will I ever see you again?"

Geda smiled, sweetly. "Do you wish to see me again?"

Rionn nodded. His hands reached out for her. The same hands that had slain numerous monsters and evil men trembled just a bit. For some reason, what he was about to do now required him to summon more courage than he had needed for in any battle.

Geda stood still as his hands rested on her smooth pale cheeks. He closed the distance between them, turning his head ever so slightly. His and Geda's eyes closed as their lips met. A wave of pleasure rippled through Rionn. Geda moaned softly and relaxed in his arms.

Slowly, the two parted. Geda reached for her feathered cloak.

"Until we meet again, Dragonson." She donned the cloak, resuming the form of a giant snow owl. By then, she was fully healed and flew off toward the mountains.

Rionn watched her, shielding his eyes as she passed by Briam, who had begun to descend below the far horizon. An ache rose in his chest. It grew more powerful the further away she flew. When she was finally gone, Rionn wiped his eyes and slowly turned toward Formig, whose face was twisted with disgust.

"What?" Rionn asked.

"You kissed her," he spat out. "You actually kissed her."

"What is wrong with that?"

"The sight of her – bleh! So tall and pale with that smooth skin and long, blonde hair." He shuddered with disgust then looked Rionn up and

down and shrugged. "Then again, you are not much to look at yourself, so who am I to judge?"

"I am willing to wager Geda is just as disappointed as I am that neither of us stands up to a dwarf's standards for beauty," Rionn chided.

Formig shrugged. "I suppose it is what is inside that matters most."

"Well said my friend," Rionn chuckled.

They gathered the gear they had stashed outside of the ice witch's castle and started on their way home. As they walked, Rionn tossed an occasional glance skyward on the chance he might spy Geda flying past. No such luck. However, he was not worried. Touching his lips, reliving their kiss, he knew they would meet again just as she had promised.

THE END

Chapter Eight

Alex, Jeffery, Bianca, and I sit back casually in our seats as the videos we had made play for the class. I hear Hollywood calling. It's a rush seeing something I wrote come to life like this. I'm really proud of them. Still, they're not Illumina stories. Those have a real big piece of me inside them.

I glance at Alex and Jeffery. We nod to each other, proud of our work. I look to Bianca. She's just as proud as we are. Probably a bit grateful too. Her original idea of doing a PowerPoint presentation? Well, it turns out every other group in class did one. They're all almost identical to the one she wanted to do.

My gaze drifts toward Mr. Griffin now. He sits in the back of the class with his feet up on a desk, his hands behind his head, and a big ol' smile on his face. He's so into our videos, he's not even taking any notes. I bet he's just glad he's not sitting through another PowerPoint.

The last video ends, and Mr. Griffin calls for the lights. He's on his feet, clapping as he makes his way to the front of the class.

"Bravo. Well done," he says.

Slowly, the other kids in class begin to clap as well and nod to us, impressed. They comment on our videos and ask questions. Soon, there's a whole discussion going that takes us up to the end of class.

People from class congratulate me, Alex, and Jeffrey as we walk out together. Alex packs a lunch like me, so we walk to our lockers together. Jeffrey buys lunch.

We meet at our usual table. More people join us. They're friends of Alex and Jeffrey. I guess I need to start calling them my friends too. They all follow me on Ink Pad. They've read my stories and are still talking about the latest one, calling it my "epic" just because of how long it is. I got to admit that story took a lot out of me. I didn't intend for it to be that long. But it didn't feel right to rush it either. I don't know, it's like every time I write, I just have to let the story take its time and tell itself.

As we talk, my gaze is pulled toward Bianca, who's sitting a few tables over with her friends. She laughs and smiles. I'm studying her,

committing every little thing she does to memory, like the way her hair brushes her shoulders when she moves her head or the way her nose scrunches up just a bit when she laughs.

She catches me looking her way. I expect her to be upset, because – let's face it, I'm staring at her like a big freak. But instead she smiles, that same warm smile I first saw when she was over at Grandpa and Grandma's house. She then gives me a tiny wave, wiggling her fingers. I smile and wave back then, feeling all warm inside.

Chad sits with Bianca. When he sees me smile and wave back at her, he shoots me a nasty look. Fortunately, that's all he's going to do. I got to admit it's still a little embarrassing, but ever since Bianca told him off that one day he and his buddies have been leaving me alone.

As we're tossing our trash, Alex and Jeffrey give me these weird looks.

"What?" I finally ask.

"You and Queen Bianca, huh?" says Alex.

My mouth opens to say something, but Jeffrey cuts me off.

"Oh, come on. You think we didn't notice you making puppy dog eyes at her? Your little wave too?" he asks, batting his eyes and copying the wave I gave her.

"You guys suck," I mutter and walk away.

They hurry to catch up with me.

"Ronnie, don't be like that," says Alex. "We're just messing with you."

"For real," adds Jeffrey. "We're proud of you. You're setting your sights high. Bianca's cute and smart. And I got to admit she's been less annoying than she used to be."

"Gee. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear that," I say.

"What we're trying to say is – it's cool, you and her. And if you're interested in receiving some romantic advice from a couple of experienced playahs."

Alex and Jeffrey straighten themselves up nice and tall. Jeffrey even clears his throat and brushes off his shoulder.

I grin. "Oh, yeah? Who are these guys? Where can I find them?"

Alex and Jeffrey cry out in unison. Their mouths hang open.

I laugh for a moment then get serious. "Thanks, guys. But me and Bianca." An image of her appears in my mind the moment I say her name.

“It’s just not going to happen.”

Alex and Jeffrey do their best to convince me otherwise. It’s great having friends like them. Alex is still talking up the possibility of me and Bianca as we head to Computers before the bell rings. We like to get there early to beat the mad rush from the lunch area.

“Ronnie!”

I turn to see Mr. Griffin standing in the doorway to his classroom, waving me over. I tell Alex to go on ahead, I’ll catch up, then hurry over to see what Mr. Griffin wants. He isn’t alone. A man steps over to meet me.

“Ronnie, this is Mr. Carruthers. He teaches eighth grade Honors English,” says Mr. Griffin.

I’m staring. And for good reason too. Mr. Carruthers, he looks just like Lord Piers from “The Manticore Strikes.” I mean, exactly like how I imagined him when I was writing it.

Mr. Carruthers offers his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Ronnie. I’ve heard wonderful things about you from Mr. Griffin. Not to mention *read* some wonderful things you’ve written.”

I shake Mr. Carruthers’ hand. He’s real. “You have? I mean, you’ve read my stories?”

“Are you kidding? I’m following you. TolkeinGuy71?”

“Oh, yeah. I recognize that name now.”

I can’t take my eyes off of him. Okay, I admit it. I put people I know into my stories. Alex, Jeffrey, Bianca – they’re all there. But Mr. Carruthers-slash-Lord Piers?

I must have seen him around school before, and his face just stuck in my memory.

That’s got to be it.

“I was telling Mr. Griffin about the young authors’ program the university hosts over the summer,” Mr. Carruthers continues. “I’m one of the instructors, and a lot of local authors visit. They speak and conduct workshops with the participants. Normally, I sponsor one of my eighth grade Honors students to take part in it, but – well, to be honest, the work they’ve been turning in is nowhere near as good as yours.”

I should be excited. Instead, I feel like I’m going to jump out of my skin. I keep telling myself that Mr. Carruthers, over and over, looking like Lord Piers is just a coincidence, but it’s not working.

I still try to hold it together and ask, “You want me to go to this young authors’ program over the summer?”

Mr. Carruthers nods, with a hopeful look in his eyes, waiting for my answer.

“Is it expensive?” I ask, thinking about Grandpa and Grandma always saying they live on what they call a *fixed budget*.

Mr. Carruthers chuckles. “By sponsoring you, that means you’ll be attending for free. All of the instructors get to sponsor one student. What do you say?”

I glance at Mr. Griffin. He smiles and nods, urging me to say yes. I want to say yes. It sounds awesome. Really awesome.

“Yes.” The word pops out of my mouth.

Mr. Carruthers smiles and rests his hand on my shoulder, while Mr. Griffin does a little fist pump.

“Wonderful,” says Mr. Carruthers. “Stop by my room tomorrow morning, and I’ll fill you in on the details. I better get going. I’m sure you’ve got a class to get to yourself, Ronnie.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Carruthers,” says Mr. Griffin.

“Yeah, thank you,” I add.

“You’re welcome, Ronnie.” Mr. Carruthers then says to Mr. Griffin. “And thank you for turning me on to such a bright young talent.”

“Quite all right,” says Mr. Griffin.

Mr. Carruthers walks out the door. I look down and see my hand’s shaking.

“Well, now, there you go,” says Mr. Griffin. “One step closer to fame and fortune. Just remember to mention me in the acknowledgements of your first book.” The smile drops from his face. “Are you all right, Ronnie? You look a bit pale.”

“I’m – okay.” The bell rings. Lunch is over. “I better go. Don’t want to be late for Computers.”

“Are you sure you don’t need a moment? I’ve got a free period. You can stay for a bit if you need to talk. I’ll write you a note.”

I shake my head. “I’m okay. Thank you, for what you did, telling Mr. Carruthers about me and all that.”

Mr. Griffin smiles. “Quite all right.”

I hurry to Mr. Browning’s class, getting bumped by people bigger than me, left and right. I suddenly stop and stare. One of them, a skinny kid

with a cowboy hat – he looks just like Kludo, the young centaur from “Horror Waits in Em Wold.”

“Excuse me, young man.”

I turn and come face-to-face with a man who looks just like Goll, the elf chief from “The Serpent Men and the Dragonson.”

He’s waiting for me to step aside, so he can pass. He looks like a teacher. I then notice a janitor who looks exactly how I imagined Formig, the dwarf chief from “The Ice Witch’s Daughter.”

My chest tightens. I can’t breathe. I stumble away from the crowd of people moving through the quad and lean against a row of lockers. I end up back in the lunch area. The air around me suddenly grows hotter, like I’m in an oven, and the heat is steadily rising. A voice whispers in my ear.

“Malba’s day will come.”

I whip my head around. I can’t see anyone.

The ground smokes and smolders, so do the walls around me, the lunch tables, everything I see. Everything ignites. I’m surrounded by flames – and everywhere I turn, Malba’s face stares back at me, mouth twisting with laughter.

Over the roaring of the flames comes the sound of screaming horses and a stampede of hooves. The flames part, making way for Malba’s Storm. They’re riding horses on fire. Flames rise from the gaps in each rider’s armor. Their armor glows white hot, so do the swords and axes they carry.

I can’t run. There’s fire all around me.

Malba’s Storm closes in on me. The wave of heat coming off of them threatens to cook me alive. They raise their weapons. Through the spaces in their helmets, I see charred, smoking flesh, and bright embers where their eyes are supposed to be.

They let out battle cries that sound like roaring flames.

Clouds of smoke shoot from their mouths.

I scream and throw my hands over my head as I crumble to the ground.

Chapter Nine

I wake up screaming. Arms reach out to keep me under control. It takes me a moment to realize it's the school nurse. I stop fighting and sit up in the little bed in her office, struggling to get my breath under control.

She sits next to me and smooths my hair. "Are you okay? You gave everyone such a fright."

I nod, unable to talk, still trying to catch my breath.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" she asks.

I shake my head. Even if I could form a complete sentence right now, what would I tell her? What would I tell anyone?

I lay back down until Grandma comes to get me. She arrives and stands out in the hallway with the school counselor who's just shown up. They take turns glancing at me through the open door as they talk. The counselor gives me one last sad look before she leaves.

Grandma heads toward me. I sit up to meet her. Before she can finish saying, "Oh, honey," she's holding me tight in her arms. I allow myself to melt into her. "What happened? You were doing so well."

She's waiting for an answer. She lets go of me and stares deep into my eyes, waiting for me to say something – anything.

"Can we go home, please?" is all I can say.

Grandma smiles. She sniffs and dabs her eyes.

"Of course, honey."

She walks me out of the nurse's office, her hand rests on my back the whole time. I'm barely aware of what's going on around me. Grandma signs me out. We drive home. I go straight to my room, get in my pajamas, and crawl into my bed.

I try to sleep – but wake up when the manitcore's standing over me. His stank, hot breath makes me gag. I muffle a scream and throw myself from my bed, ready to run.

Only the manitcore's gone now. Vanished.

The floor shakes, so do the walls. A rumble builds in my ears. My bedroom wall explodes into chunks of debris, as giants from the

Dragonback Mountains pour through the hole they've smashed into it. They roar and raise their clubs.

I clench my eyes shut. Through the giants' roars, there's a knock at the door.

Go away, I want to scream. It's not safe.

"Ronnie? Honey?" Grandma slowly pushes open the door.

My bedroom is intact. There are no giants. I'm still in bed, under the covers. What's happening to me?

"I just wanted to check on you," says Grandma. "See how you're doing."

"I'm – I'm –" I can't bring myself to complete that sentence.

"Are you up for some company?" she asks.

Company? I immediately think of Bianca, Alex, and Jeffrey. Grandma steps to the side, opening the door for Mr. Griffin. He gives me a worried smile. A warm feeling floods me, forcing me to smile back at him. I don't know why I'm so happy to see him. I just am.

"Thank you so much, again, for having me over," Mr. Griffin tells Grandma.

"Oh, you're quite welcome," she answers. "You sounded so concerned over the phone. And Ronnie speaks so highly of you. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Before I know it, I'm out of bed and on my feet. I'm sweating. I wish I wasn't.

"I was about to make some tea," Grandma tells Mr. Griffin. "Would you care for a cup?"

Mr. Griffin makes a funny face. "That depends. You're not one of those people who just fills a mug with water, drops in a tea bag, and heats the whole thing up in the microwave, are you?"

Grandma's hands fall on her hips, playing along. "I will have you know, good sir, that I have an eleven-piece Bone China tea set that I inherited from my mother, who taught me how to properly brew tea. In the kettle."

"Smashing," says Mr. Griffin with a big smile on his face.

"I'll call you when tea is ready," says Grandma, who disappears down the hall.

Mr. Griffin steps into my room and immediately starts looking around. His attention is drawn to my bookshelf. It's no longer filled with

models and Legos anymore. But with books. My mom's books.

He nods. "Quite a collection."

"They were my mom's," I tell him.

Mr. Griffin gives me a sad smile. "Right. That makes them extra special then. I bet it makes you feel close to her, having them here. Like a piece of her is still with you."

My eyes immediately water. I've been thinking the same exact thing. Mr. Griffin stands in front of me now. He offers me a handkerchief.

I wipe my eyes. "Sorry."

"For what?" he asks.

I shrug. "I don't know."

"You gave everyone an awful fright today. Your gran' says you won't tell her what's going on. Let you in on a little secret, she's hoping you'll open up to me for some reason. You don't have to, of course. It's entirely up to you."

I stare at Mr. Griffin for what seems like the longest time. For some reason, I feel like I could tell him what's been happening to me today. I think about all the conversations we've had. It's like we've got some sort of connection. Somehow, I just know – that if I tell him – he'll understand.

Mr. Griffin stands there, patiently.

I decide to go for it. "I think I'm going crazy."

"How so?" he asks, all serious.

"I saw people today, at school, that reminded me of characters in my stories. I mean, they looked just like them – the characters – exactly how I imagined them."

"You did tell me that you based some characters on your friends," says Mr. Griffin. "Maybe you passed by these other people one day, and something about them stuck in your subconscious, and they ended up inspiring you without you knowing it."

"That's what I thought. At first."

"Did something else happen?"

My heart hammers in my chest now. "The lunch area, it caught on fire. And I saw –" I hold myself to stop from shaking. "Malba's Storm."

"Oh, dear." Mr. Griffin sounds so concerned. But is it about me seeing the Storm? Or is it because he thinks I'm crazy?

"Before you got here, I saw the manticore too," I add. "Then giants smashed through my wall." I force a shaky smile. "That's insane, right?"

“If you say that’s what happened, Ronnie, if you say it’s real, I’ll believe it.”

“You will?”

Mr. Griffin nods. “You’re quite the visionary, you know? I think you’ve got a very special ability.”

“I just tell stories.”

Mr. Griffin chuckles. “You don’t just tell stories, Ronnie. You said it yourself, you’re catching glimpses into another world. Its inhabitants share their thoughts and feelings with you. A lot of storytellers choose the stories they want to tell. Then there are those whom a story speaks to directly. The story chooses them, instead of the other way around.”

I blink and shake my head.

Mr. Griffin gives me this mysterious smile. “Ever hear the theory of alternate realities? Parallel worlds? Different dimensions? They are all supposed to be folded on top of this one, vibrating at different frequencies out of the reach of our perceptions. Or at least that’s what we think.”

He wanders over to my desk and my laptop. There are a bunch of Alex’s pictures on the wall. Characters and settings from Illumina.

“Some think the worlds of myths and legends and fairy tales are just parallel worlds,” he continues. “That certain, special people – visionaries – were able to subconsciously tune in to those particular frequencies and describe what they experienced. And who knows? Maybe we’re all attuned to those different frequencies to some degree. It could explain why some stories have resonated with people so powerfully over centuries, millennia, and why we still read them, talk about them, allow them to become a part of our culture.” He grins. “Why stop with myths and legends and fairy tales? What if there really is a Narnia out there? Or a Middle-Earth?” His grin widens. “Or an Illumina. I don’t know about you, but I find that rather comforting.”

“These things I’m seeing – they’re not very *comforting*.”

Mr. Griffin makes a sorry-face. “Apologies, lad. I didn’t mean to be insensitive. But you’ve got to admit, Illumina has brought you a lot of joy. It’s brought joy to others too. Your stories and the reactions they’ve been getting from people – don’t you feel like they’ve been a source of strength for you, not to mention pride?”

A tiny chuckle reaches my throat. He is right.

“But what do I do?” I ask. “About what’s going on?”

“You’ve got an amazing ability, Ronnie. You just need to get it under control.”

“You mean, if I see any more monsters – try to make them disappear back to Illumina?”

Mr. Griffin nods, looking like he’s thinking about it. “You could try that. You could also try going the other way.”

“You mean – Let them come and get me?” I get dizzy, thinking about getting chewed up by the manticore or smashed into jelly by some giants.

Mr. Griffin gives me a sly, crooked smile. “Remember, there are plenty of heroes in Illumina that battle these creatures. And protect people in need.”

Images of Rionn and his friends flash through my mind. “You think they’ll really come if I need them?”

Mr. Griffin winks. “I think you’ll be quite surprised by what might happen.”

I smile back at Mr. Griffin and thank him for listening and taking me seriously. I think about the crazy, scary things I’ve seen in the last few hours. But now, I don’t know why, but I feel comfortable and confident that I’ll be able to handle whatever happens next.

Grandma comes and gets us when tea is ready. We follow her into the living room. Everything’s set up on the coffee table – maybe I should call it a *tea table*, right? There’s a teapot, cups and saucers, a plate of cookies, and bowls of brown sugar, cream, and fresh cut lemon wedges. I’m not much of a hot tea fan, but it wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t join them. I dump in plenty of sugar and squeeze in a couple lemon wedges until it tastes just right.

Grandpa arrives about the same time as everyone’s starting their second cup. He’s been playing golf all day. He joins us but brings a bottle of beer from the fridge. Mr. Griffin wins Grandpa over just as easily as he did Grandma. The four of us sit together, laughing and having a good time. I’m hoping we’ll have more of these moments in the future.

After finishing his third cup – or *cuppa*, as he calls it, Mr. Griffin announces he has to leave. The three of us walk him to the door. Grandma’s already trying to pin Mr. Griffin down for a night he can come over for dinner, but Mr. Griffin apologizes and says he’s “unable to make any commitments at this time, unfortunately.” I’m not sure what that means.

Neither do Grandma and Grandpa, from the looks of it. But they're too polite to ask.

As he shakes my hand, Mr. Griffin gives me a look that fills me with confidence. "Keep fighting the good fight, Ronnie. Like I told you that one day, you're made of stern stuff. Probably more than you've ever imagined."

I smile back, thanking him. As he heads off to his car, Grandma and Grandpa give me a look, like they're dying to know what Mr. Griffin meant by what he said and what on Earth we were talking about in my room. They don't push me for an answer though, respecting my privacy.

Tonight is Grandma and Grandpa's Bridge night. They haven't missed one since I've lived with them. But after what happened at school today, they're not sure they want to leave me alone.

It takes some effort, but I'm able to convince them I'll be okay. Grandpa's an easy sell. Once I have him on my side, we're both able to get Grandma to go along. She tells me several times she'll have her cell with her, and if I need anything to call her. I promise her I will. She gives me, like, seven hugs and kisses before she's finally out the door with Grandpa.

Once the two of them are gone, I let out a long sigh. I need them gone. Something inside, I don't know what it is – a little voice, instinct, my connection to Illumina – tells me that something is going down tonight. I don't know exactly what. All I know is it's going to be huge.

I wait it out, lying on the couch. The TV's on, but I'm not really watching it. Tundra's stretched out the floor near me. I scratch his head without looking.

Before I know it, I'm sitting up, wide-eyed and alert. The air around me feels alive, like it's charged with energy. This is it. Whatever's going to happen is going to happen now.

Tundra feels it too. He whines and presses himself against the floor as I hop off the couch and head for the backyard. My heartbeat is loud and steady. I'm shaking, just a little. But not out of fear. Out of something else.

I push open the sliding glass door and close it behind me as I step out onto the patio. The air feels supercharged. My heart's beating even louder now. I take deep, steady breaths and walk out to where the patio meets the lawn.

A gentle breeze brushes my skin and rocks the plants that hang in pots from the patio roof. Wind chimes tinkle a tiny melody. Crickets chirp.

Bugs fly through the air. A raccoon pokes its head through a bush and sniffs.

A sudden silence drops like a heavy blanket. Everything around me goes still. The breeze is gone. One of the potted plants remains frozen, in mid sway. The bugs literally hang motionless in the air, and the raccoon stands frozen, half in and half out of the bush.

This is it. It's going to happen now.

I plant my feet and curl my hands into fists.

"Let's do this," I say out loud.

In that moment, I see them over the backyard fence. A large group of giants walking between some neighbors' houses. Their clubs rest on their shoulders. After a few more steps, they swing them around and slap the ends against their meaty palms.

Off in another direction, the ground starts to move. It comes alive with ophidians. A trio of Malba's mages stand in the distance, no doubt commanding them. Every time I blink, the ophidians are that much closer. I'm soon able to make out their faces, especially their keen, predatory eyes.

A deep growl spins me around in the opposite direction. Out of the shadows comes the manticore. His pace is slow and steady. He knows he doesn't need to rush.

My fear rises in a sickening wave. I force it back and concentrate. Simply wishing the monsters away doesn't seem like an option. There's just too many of them.

I need help. Rionn instantly comes to mind. But how do I do it? How do I actually bring him here?

I put together a picture in my head, every detail about Rionn. Not just what he looks like but how he acts. His determination. His bravery. I picture him in action, charging into the fight, swinging Stryke, cutting down his enemies.

Pressure builds inside my stomach. For a moment, I think I'm going to barf.

But no. Something else is going on. This pressure releases itself, sending a flow of energy through my body, to every cell. I'm being shaped and reformed from the inside out. My bones lengthen, making me taller. My muscles swell and grow more powerful. My hair grows longer and darker, so does my skin. Even my clothes change.

Something is strapped to my back. I reach for it. It's Stryke.

I just didn't imagine Rionn.
I've become him.

Chapter Ten

An easy grin slides across my face. I summon Stryke. It flies from its scabbard and lands in my hand. Energy rushes through my entire body, coming from deep inside me, where the transformation started. It reaches my arms, my hands, and passes into Stryke, which now glows pale green and hums with energy.

I charge at the manticore. It roars. A claw rushes at me. I dodge it with ease, soaring and spiraling through the air. I feel like I can do anything.

As I touch the ground, I attack. Stryke cuts deep into the manticore's side. It roars and lashes out. Again, I dodge, flipping backwards with ease.

I leap and attack, set to slash the manticore across the face, over the eyes, like I did in our last encounter. But it's learned since that time and turns. My blow lands on the side of its head. A good hit. But not the one I wanted.

The manticore's tail snaps at me like a snake. I bend backwards, almost completely at the waist, to avoid it and return to my feet in time to block his claw with Stryke's blade.

I laugh out loud. This is what it's like to feel strong. To be brave.

We parry, back and forth. The manticore's mouth stretches wide, revealing its rows of sharp teeth. The ground shakes beneath me, like a drum being steadily beaten. The giants are closing in. So are the ophidians. I need help.

And the moment I think it, help arrives.

A snarling, gray shape collides with the manticore. Varg.

A volley of arrows drops the first batch of advancing ophidians. Tarron waves for a squad of elf warriors to follow him. His father, Belanor, follows them. Riaw screeches. He soars through the air and dives into the ophidians, talons outstretched.

Kludo, the young centaur, gallops ahead of them. He swings a double-bladed axe, taking the head off of one ophidian.

"I finally get to smash a giant!" Formig charges ahead, clutching his hammer, Downfall.

His father, Forfec, races behind him. “What are you doing running in there like that? By our ancestors’ beards, will you think ahead just once?”

A rapid rhythm of hoof beats. Lord Piers, dressed for battle, sword raised high, leads over a dozen soldiers on horseback into battle with the ophidians. A shrill shriek gouges the sky. A great snow owl cuts through the air and buries her talons into a giant’s face.

I breathe her name. “Geda.”

I return my full attention to the manticore. “Come at me, bro’.”

The manticore’s tail flashes toward me. Varg leaps into the air and catches it between his jaws. The manticore screams as the great wolf rips its tail off at the root.

We double team the manticore after that. I land one blow. Varg another. Soon, the manticore’s legs buckle. To its credit, it keeps fighting. But it ends when I’m able to leap on its back and bury Stryke’s blade between its shoulder blades.

I slide off as the body collapses and survey the battle. Tarron and his group of elves are surrounded by fallen ophidians. A group of elves with Belanor battle the trio of Malba’s mages. Lord Piers and his men’s horses wade through even more ophidians. Kludo fights with them. He brings another one ophidian down with his axe. He kicks another with hind legs, sending it flying, then rears into the air and brings his front hooves crashing down on a third ophidian.

Forfec takes out a giant’s knee with his hammer. The giant topples. When it hits the ground, Forfec smashes its head in. Formig swings Downfall. The head shoots from the handle, a length of chain follows it. It wraps around another giant’s legs, binding them. The giant wobbles then falls. When it tries to rise, Formig cracks it across the face with Downfall.

Geda sheds her cape of owl feathers and returns to human form. A blast of her freezing breath encases a giant’s head in ice. It staggers, blindly. She forms ice spears from her hands and runs the giant through.

Varg and I race over to her.

“Do you mind if I join in?” I tease.

From over her shoulder, Geda flashes a heart-stopping smile. “If you think you can keep up.”

I laugh as the three of us face off with a pair of giants. We make quick work of them. I circle around, holding Stryke at the ready, scanning

for more enemies. But there are none. The bodies of giants and ophidians and the manticore litter the ground. A few of the elves and Lord Piers' men have been wounded. The rest of us stand, winded and checking our own wounds, but triumphant.

Varg growls and stares into the distance. His hackles stand on end. A huge blaze burns far off. It speeds toward us at an unnatural rate. As it closes in, we all trade glances, able to make out shapes in the flames.

Malba's Storm.

Each rider is twice as tall as any man. They sit atop flaming horses that set fire to the ground they race across. The riders speed closer, drawing their weapons – swords and axes whose blades glow white hot. There are so many of them.

Everyone looks to me. They all have so much confidence in me, that I'll know exactly what to do. As I watch the Storm advance on us, I flashback to the night my parents died. The images get mixed up with memories of the night Rionn's family died too. They become one and the same.

No. I will not lose any more people I care about. Malba's day will not come!

I wheel toward Geda. "Freeze the ground!"

Geda smiles. She draws a deep breath and exhales as forcefully as she can, generating a freezing wind that covers a huge area of ground with thick ice.

Malba's Storm yanks on the reins of their horses, trying to bring them to a sudden halt. But they're too late. The first row of horses' hooves hit the ice and slide out from under them, sending them crashing to the ground. The second row collides with them. The riders are sent flying.

I wave Stryke over my head and let out a battle cry. The others follow my charge, and we meet Malba's Storm as they make their way to their feet.

This close, each rider gives off waves of intense heat as their bodies burn continually. Their armor is as white hot as their weapons.

I attack. Swords clash. Sparks fly from our blades. Sweat stings my eyes and makes my hands slick. I tighten my grip on Stryke and continue to attack.

The cries of my friends reach my ears. They stab my heart. I want to run to them but know I can't. The rider's blade slices my arm. The flesh

sizzles and sears all the way to the bone.

A second attack cuts my stomach, doubling me over. I stumble to the ground. Stryke slips from my hand. In that moment, I catch a glimpse of the rest of the battle.

Lord Piers lies motionless on the ground with what looks like a fatal wound in his chest. The rest of my friends are being pushed to their limits. Their faces are strained. Some stagger, weakened, but continue to fight.

A rider looms over me. His heat hits my back in a wave. I summon Stryke to my hand and shift it into a spear. I come in low, sweeping his legs out from under him. I leap to my feet as the rider falls. I'm on him as he rises, driving Stryke through his chest with all of the force I can muster.

The rider slumps to the ground. His flames instantly die out.

I yank Stryke free and shift it back into a sword. Geda's ahead of me, battling a rider, fire versus ice. I rush to help her. Together, we snuff out that rider's flames.

Tarron fights another rider. True Flight is slung over his shoulder, but without arrows he's forced to fight with his knives. Geda and I rush to help him. Between the three of us, another rider falls.

I pick up a quiver of arrows from a fallen elf and toss it to him. "Go for higher ground!"

Tarron nods and rushes off. Formig and Forfec stand, back to back, each facing a rider of their own. Geda and I hurry to help them. The four of us together are able to defeat both riders.

Arrows whizz past. A rider staggers, an arrow piercing each eye hole of his helmet. I finish him off. Tarron blinds another rider before he can slay Kludo. Geda runs to the young centaur. His hands are slick with blood. He clutches a nasty stomach wound.

"I will care for him," Geda tells me.

Through his pain, Kludo manages to smile. "Did I fight well?"

I smile back and nod. Kludo lets out a weary sigh but looks proud. Geda freezes his stomach wound first then tends to the minor wounds that crisscross his body.

Tarron continues to blind riders with his arrows. The rest of us finish them off. Varg stands against another rider. His fur is blackened and burned in places, but he continues to fight. I shift Stryke into a spear and let out a cry as I throw it. It punctures the rider's helmet through one side and emerges through the other. The rider falls.

I rush to Varg, who sways but doesn't fall. He holds back from whimpering and whining as I check his wounds.

Belanor approaches. "I have him, Dragonson. Go."

I nod, knowing the elf-mage will take good care of him, and rush back into the battle. A handful of riders remain. But they eventually fall. And their flames die out.

We are finally victorious.

Belanor and Geda tend to the wounded. The rest of us see to the dead. Among their number is indeed Lord Piers. I kneel over the fallen lord. His remaining men stand behind me, so do my friends.

We gather the dead together and finish paying our final respects. I scan the faces of my friends. Through our collective sorrow, we share a sense of pride and relief in our victory.

"We must go now," Geda tells me.

My throat hurts. I swallow then say, "Do you have to?"

She nods, so do the others.

"This is not our world," says Tarron. "Illumina is our home."

I force a smile and wipe my eyes. "Until next time?"

Formig snorts. "Of course. You know where to find us."

I take my time saying goodbye to them, especially Varg. Belanor did a fine job healing him. I scratch him behind the ears and press my forehead against his. His whines, tenderly. When I finally pull away, he licks my face until I'm smiling again.

Geda is last. I take her in my arms, and we kiss for the longest time. We pull away from each other a little bit at a time. Geda starts to walk away, still holding my hand. Our grips slip to our fingertips before we finally let each other go.

My friends fade from view, so do the bodies of those who died in the battle. Grandma and Grandpa's backyard and all the houses around it look untouched.

But it's not over yet. There's still no breeze. The bugs still float in mid-air, and my little friend, the raccoon, is still frozen, half-way out of the bush.

What's next? What's left?

Then, I see him. A winged form descending from the sky. He's massive, even in the distance, and grows bigger and bigger as he gets closer

and closer. His golden feathers shine bright. It's Erebos. The great gryphon.

As huge as he is, he flies so gracefully and smoothly through the air and lands in front of me lightly, without making a sound. He folds his wings behind his back and sits on his lion haunches. He bends his head just enough so he can look me in the eyes.

"It is quite an honor to meet you, Ronnie Jackman." His voice is so familiar. I've heard him speak to me before.

"You're honored to meet *me*?" I ask. "You're – Erebos."

The great gryphon raises his head and laughs. "You who have tapped into a great power, at a remarkably young age, and already proven yourself quite capable of managing it so skillfully – yet you remain so humble. That is indeed commendable."

I shake my head. "I thought I was just writing stories."

Erebos lowers his head again. "First of all, Ronnie. There is no such thing as 'just writing a story,' especially when it becomes meaningful to so many people as your stories have. And will continue to do so, I must add."

"They will? You know the future?"

"I am connected to all of Illumina. My gaze not only travels across the land but sees into the hearts and minds of all its inhabitants, throughout the farthest-flung corners of time."

"But I don't live in Illumina."

Erebos cocks his head and crinkles up his brow. "Not even in your stories? The ones you have written and the ones you have yet to write?"

My mouth opens, ready to argue. But I can't. He's right. In a way, I guess I do live in Illumina. At least part of the time.

Erebos stands. "I must leave now. But be warned, Malba is not through with you yet. The Darksoul will try to strike out at you again soon. At someone you care about. Be ready."

"What do you mean? What's he going to do?"

"Those events will unfold in time."

What's he talking about? Then I think back to how Erebos told Rionn he had a great destiny – but didn't really fill him in on the details there either. Great.

Erebos backs up a few steps. His powerful wings snap open.

"Until the next time, Ronnie Jackman."

With one giant flap, Erebos' wings take him high into the air. With another flap, he's soon soaring, gliding, back to Illumina. I watch him until he disappears. He fades away, just like the others did.

The breeze from earlier touches my skin again. The flies are buzzing around again too. The hanging plants continue to sway, and Mr. Raccoon finally emerges completely from the bush and dashes toward the street.

The world's back to normal. I must be back to normal now – if Erebos called me by my real name. I do a quick scan. Yep, I'm me again. But for some reason, I still feel Rionn's power flowing through me.

Then, as I approach the sliding glass door, Rionn's reflection stares back at me.

Chapter Eleven

With all the adrenaline running through me, I didn't think I'd ever fall asleep. But I did. And almost instantly. I wake up with my alarm. Grandma's in the middle of making breakfast when I enter the kitchen. She smiles and is about to say good morning to me like she always does – but stops and blinks, surprised.

“Good morning,” she says, studying me.

“Good morning,” I say back.

Grandma squints, like she's studying me even harder now. “You look different for some reason.”

Grandpa's newspaper crinkles as he looks at me from around the corner of it. He's got the same look on his face as Grandma. He must see it too.

My feet do a little nervous dance. I mean, I know I don't look any different. But I feel it still. Inside. Rionn's power, flowing through me. I still see him in my reflection, even now in the shiny stainless-steel refrigerator. Don't tell me Grandma and Grandpa somehow see it – or at least sense it?

“What's for breakfast?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

Grandma tells me she's making cinnamon French toast, one of my favorites. I get my juice and milk, and we sit and eat. The whole time, Grandma and Grandpa give me looks like they're still trying to figure out what's different about me.

I wish I had something to tell them that didn't sound absolutely cray-cray. I can't tell anyone about it, can I? The battle. The way I'm feeling right now.

Wait, a minute. That's not true, is it?

There is someone.

I finish up my breakfast in a hurry. I can't wait to get to school. Grandma can't drive me there fast enough. Talk about driving like an old lady. When we finally get there, after a quick kiss and a hug, I'm out of the car.

Normally, my first stop's my locker. Today, it's Mr. Griffin's room. I can tell him about last night. He'll believe me. He'll understand. I burst through the door to his classroom, smiling, ready to talk. Only Mr. Griffin isn't there. Just some frowning old lady.

"Can I help you, young man?" she asks. Each word is like a dart she's throwing at me.

"I'm – I'm looking for Mr. Griffin."

The old lady sneers. "You mean, my so-called substitute?"

Wait? Is this Mrs. Price?

She groans. "I will never have that man back in my classroom again. I'll make sure he never works in this school again. Or the district for that matter." She slams books and slaps down stacks of paper. "He completely ignored my lesson plans. I left explicit, detailed instructions for him to follow." She holds up her hands and shakes her head. "We're going to have to work even harder to cover the standards he skipped over if we're going to be ready for testing in spring. Who are you, anyway?"

By that point, I'm not even there to answer her. I'm already out the door. My heart is jammed somewhere in my throat. Mr. Griffin's gone? Like that?

Did he know he was leaving? If he did, he would've said something to me last night. Right? Wait. Was this Malba? Erebus did say he'd try to hurt someone close to me. Did he do something to Mr. Griffin?

I want to cry. Only something inside stops me. Maybe, it's Rionn. I do sort of hear a voice telling me it's okay. I can handle this.

And that's exactly what I do. I head to my locker and then to the quad, to the planter where Alex and Jeffery and the rest of my friends hang out. They immediately notice something's wrong. I tell them. Alex and Jeffery are shocked. They tell me how much they liked him, and how that class won't be the same without him.

The bell rings, and we head to our first class. On the way to Math, Bianca calls out to me. I stop and wait for her. She's smiling – that is until she gets a good look at my face.

"What's wrong?" she asks. "Is it Chad? Are he and buddies bullying you again?"

"No. They're not. It's – it's Mr. Griffin. He's gone." Oh, my God. I made it sound like he's dead. "Mrs. Price is back. He's not teaching the class anymore."

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“I thought you didn’t like Mr. Griffin. You were the only one in the class who was bummed Mrs. Price was gone.”

“I told you, he grew on me, remember?” Bianca stares at me for a moment. “But I know he meant a lot to you. I’m sad for you – that he’s gone.” Her hand is on my arm now. “Are you going to be okay?”

I nod, feeling a little better that I have people who care.

We each head to class. I’m a zombie all through Math. I have Science next. At least Jeffrey’s in that class with me. I don’t feel so alone.

We work on our latest project. It’s about Nikola Tesla’s death ray. I love this project, don’t get me wrong, but my heart’s just not into it today.

Jeffrey and I both have a Chromebook in front of us. He’s pulling up research, and I’m taking notes. A loud boom rocks us. The room shakes suddenly, so hard that people standing get knocked to the floor.

The fire alarm blares. The teacher herds us through the door. Outside, it looks like all of the classes have emptied. The hall’s packed with kids, their teachers trying to keep them in line. I smell smoke and instantly flash back to the night my parents died. The death of Rionn’s family gets mixed in with it.

“Dude, come on.” Jeffery grabs my arm and pulls me along. “I bet it was the Chem’ lab. Something must have happened in the Chem’ lab.”

Chem’ lab? Bianca has chemistry this period. Someone screams and points to the pillars of smoke shooting into the air. Flames spread as quickly as Malba’s Storm. The teachers hurry their classes along. The kids who aren’t screaming and panicking actually have their phones out and are filming the whole thing.

I spot Bianca’s science teacher. Her class is behind her – only I don’t see Bianca. I look around. I don’t see her anywhere.

Chad’s in her science class. Jeffrey’s let go of me by now, so I rush up to Chad.

“Where’s Bianca?” I ask.

Chad stares back at me, terrified.

I grab him and yell, “Where’s Bianca?”

“I don’t know.” He breaks free and hurries away with everyone else. I stand there, confronting the fire. Malba’s face appears in the flames. Bianca. He’s going after Bianca.

Next thing I know, I'm pushing through the crowd, racing toward the fire.

Chapter Twelve

I reach Bianca's science class. The door handle's hot. I pull my sleeve over my hand and open the door. A cloud of smoke hits my face, blinding me. I cough. My eyes water.

Suddenly, I'm back in my house. The night my parents died. Then, I'm in Rionn's house. The night Malba's Storm killed his family.

I push forward. "Bianca!"

I yell over the roaring flames. My vision clears up enough to see the wall of fire at the other end of the room. The flames are spreading to the other walls and ceiling, devouring them greedily.

A pair of legs stick out from behind one the worktable at the back of the room.

Bianca. She's not moving.

I run to her. There's a cut on her forehead and blood on the corner of the table. She must've gotten knocked down when everyone ran from the room. And no one knew it.

"Bianca? Bianca!"

She groans and stirs a little. I sigh with relief. She's still alive.

The ceiling groans. I look up and see only flames.

They form Malba's face. His mouth twists with laughter. Like he did when he killed my parents. When he tried to kill me.

"No. Not this time," I tell him.

I hook Bianca under her arms and drag her toward the door. Malba races me. His flames gobble up more of the walls and ceiling. He fills the room with smoke. I can't see. I can't breathe. My grip on Bianca's loosens as I double over, coughing.

The words come to me. "Illumina. Help me."

I feel dizzy all of a sudden. My vision blurs. Next thing I know, I'm hovering before one of Illumina's giant eyes. It opens. She gazes right at me. Energy floods my body, renewing me. The vision disappears, and I'm back in the chem' lab again. I hold my breath, grab Bianca, and continue toward the door. I'm moving easier now. I glance behind me. The door's not far.

Malba lets out an angry roar and starts collapsing the ceiling. Chunks of flaming debris rain down all around me. I step faster, wincing every time me and Bianca are almost struck. I cry out. Tripping over – something.

My head smacks against the floor. All around me, there's nothing but fire. Malba's face forms in the flames, multiple times, surrounding me, laughing at me from every side.

I struggle to my feet. The ceiling's groaning, ready to bury me and Bianca in fiery debris. Strong arms grab me. Firefighters. Three of them. They whisk me and Bianca out of the room. Malba roars in defeat.

The firefighters hand us off to the paramedics. Ambulances are parked in the quad. Fire trucks too. I lay on a stretcher. Head spinning. Mask over my face. Fresh oxygen floods my lungs. Bianca's okay. She's on another stretcher and being loaded into the other ambulance.

There's no one else around. The school's been evacuated.

Wait. Not everyone's gone.

I see him. Mr. Griffin standing outside his classroom door. I try to climb off the stretcher, calling out to him, my voice muffled by the mask.

"Mr. Griffin. Mr. Griffin!"

Two paramedics struggle to get me to lie back down.

"Take it easy, kid. It's going to be all right," one of them tells me. "You're safe now. So's the girl. You're a hero, kid. A real-life hero."

My focus is still on Mr. Griffin. He gives me a proud smile and nods as if to say, good job, then walks back into his classroom. I smile underneath my mask and settle back into the stretcher. My eyelids fall close. I completely relax.

When I wake up, I'm in a hospital bed. Air flows through a tube into my nose. I'm in one of those gowns. The first thing I notice are my arms. They're uncovered. I look at the places where they'd gotten burned the night Mom and Dad died.

The scars, they'd always looked so ugly to me. Now, for some reason, they're not so bad. In fact, they're so faint I have to hold my arms up close to actually see them. The skin's a slightly different color. But that's about it.

"Ronnie!" Grandma calls out.

She and Grandpa rush from the doorway. Alex and Jeffrey are right behind them. She takes one of my hands. Grandpa holds the other. Like

they did the last time I woke up in a hospital. After Mom and Dad died. They're crying too, like they did that night. But it's the good kind of crying

They're both so proud of me. The big hero. They tell me how the story's been all over the news. People are saying if I hadn't gone in after Bianca when I did, she would've died. Out of nowhere, Grandma gives me a playful swat.

"Don't you ever do anything that foolish again," she orders.

I laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

Grandma then hugs me. She and Grandpa are leaving to pick up a few things for me from the house. They expect me to ask for my Nintendo DS or my laptop. All I want are books. And maybe a notebook and pen if I feel like writing.

Alex and Jeffrey stay. I watch news stories about the fire Alex downloaded onto his tablet. It's so unreal. I can't believe that's actually me they're talking about. Jeffrey suddenly nudges Alex and cocks his head toward the doorway.

A nurse has brought Bianca over in a wheelchair.

"Hey," she says with a tiny smile.

"Oh, my God. Your legs," I say.

She laughs and stands up. "No, I'm okay. They didn't want me getting too winded, you know, because of the smoke inhalation."

"You guys inhaled more than smoke," says Alex. "The fire started in the chem' lab, who knows what else you breathed in."

Bianca walks over to the side of my bed.

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask her.

Her voice cracks a little. "I am now."

I glance at Alex and Jeffrey. They know what's up. They're already heading out the door. Bianca sits on the edge of my bed.

"It's crazy, isn't it?" she asks. "What happened?"

I nod. "Is your mom here?"

Bianca wipes her eyes. "Not right now. But she was here – she's been here, almost the whole time. Can you believe it?"

"She is your mom."

Bianca smiles. Her bottom lip then starts to quiver.

"Ronnie. I –" She covers her mouth, looking too choked up to say another word.

I reach for her hand. "It's okay."

She smiles back at me, through her tears. Her hands rest on each side of my face, and she kisses me. My lips respond on their own, kissing her back. Gently. Softly. As pleasant little chills run through my body.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Alex and Jeffrey standing in the doorway with these big, cheesy grins on their faces, each giving me a thumbs-up. I shut my eyes and let go, back into Bianca's kiss.

I return to school a couple days later. It's all so different now. For one thing, I'm wearing a short sleeve shirt. I don't get any sad looks from the office staff either. In fact, just the opposite.

And when I walk through the quad, I expect to get pushed and shoved by the passing kids. Instead, as soon as they see me, everyone steps aside and gives me nods of respect as I pass by. I even get that from Chad and his friends.

When it's time for Language Arts, I hope to see Mr. Griffin there. Only he isn't. Mrs. Price is back in charge. It's just another class now. I still can't get over seeing him that day, after the fire. What's weird is no one saw Mr. Griffin at school all that day. Before or after the fire.

The one good thing I can say about Mrs. Price is that she lets me work on my stories in class after I'm finished with my work. It turns out Erebus was right. The stories keep coming to me. Each time, I slip into Rionn's skin and have more adventures. Illumina is a part of me – or maybe I'm a part of it – or maybe it's a bit of both.

So am I really making it all up? Or is Illumina really out there, just beyond the reach of our world, along with every story ever told?

The truth is I don't know. And I'm not going to waste time or energy trying to figure it out either. I'm just going to shut up and have fun telling my stories.

THE END

About the Author:

The man known as Dan O'Mahony was raised in a library by a pack of wild fantasy novels who accepted him as if he was one of their own.

Follow him at www.danomahony.com