

DELOS:
The White Tree



Blake Miller



THE WHITE TREE

chapter 01

The Impossible Twins

Forces in the universe wanted Cynthia Summers and Kaden Krossway to be in the same place—to be together—this much was clear. But never was this truer than on their birthday, June 1st, which saw them being brought together in ways that were always highly improbable and usually seemingly impossible. This was just one reason why they knew that they were—despite having different parents, and despite Cynthia being a singularly unique black girl with brightly silver hair and eyes, and Kaden being an easily overlookable white boy with dull brown hair and eyes—twins.

A year ago almost to the day, their fifteenth birthday had very nearly broken the scientific fields of Mathematics and Probabilities when they had found themselves—despite living an ocean apart—eating lunch on the back patio of the same restaurant in the Old Town district of Alexandria, Virginia, with their tables separated only by an oak tree. Their parents had laughed at yet another incredible “coincidence,” and had soon marveled at the fact that, completely by “chance,” it turned out that their children would also be attending the same boarding school. Cynthia and Kaden, however, had known better.

Not long after, they had begun working at this very same restaurant, The Oaken Door, after the owner—a rather eccentric old man named Mr. Boreall—had taken an immediate liking to them. Although technically underage (until tomorrow, at least), they had spent the past schoolyear working the weekends, Cynthia being a (pretty bad) hostess and Kaden being a (very good) bus boy. Kaden had been thrilled for the chance to make some extra money. And

Cynthia had been very convincing in acting thrilled, not wanting him to know that restaurant work was right there alongside ditch digging and coffin testing when it came to things that she never wanted to do—even for money.

Telling others that they were twins, which they did quite regularly, almost always resulted in the same reaction. And here it was yet again...

“Twins? Yeah, right,” said the final lunch customer of the day, a rather unfriendly man with an unshaven face and impressively large belly. Rising from his seat, he shoved a hand in his pocket and produced a few silver coins and a paperclip, which he dropped on the table as a tip. He was almost to the sliding glass door leading inside when he stopped to frown at a large statue of a very odd-looking animal. “What’s this thing supposed to be?” he demanded.

“A horse,” said Cynthia politely, speaking in the proper style of language called *Queen’s English*.

“Maybe the artist should’ve looked at an actual horse first, because this thing...it’s all wrong.”

“I can let him know,” said Kaden genially. “Because he’s also the restaurant owner.”

The man eyed him harshly. “You being smart with me, boy?”

“Smart?” said Kaden. “Nope. Cyn’s smart, though.” He pointed at her.

Turning, the man took in her metallic silver hair and equally chrome-colored eyes. “Where’re you from?”

“Knightsbridge,” said Cynthia. “That’s in London, England.”

The man returned his attention to Kaden. “And you, boy, where’re you from?”

“Southern California,” said Kaden. “And then Arizona, and then Colorado, and as of last year my folks took jobs at Vanguard High School just up the road, so now I’m from here.”

“Yeah, didn’t need a history lesson,” said the man shortly. “Just wondering why you two claim to be twins when you’re not even from the same place and—well...come on, seriously? She’s black and you’re white.”

“Yeah, we’ve heard that once or twice,” said Kaden, shrugging.

The man scrutinized Cynthia. “You dye your hair to make it so brightly silver, right?” he asked. She shook her head. “But you must be wearing special contacts to make your eyes...wow. They look like extra-shiny hubcaps.”

“Nope, no contacts,” smiled Cynthia, mentally adding this newest comparison of her eye color to an already extremely long list. “Just always been this way.”

The man glanced several more times between them before shaking his head in disbelief and throwing his hands into the air, then turning and entering the restaurant.

Cynthia confirmed that they were alone before plopping down on a chair. “I hate working,” she groaned. Under the mid-afternoon sun she lowered her head to the tabletop, which felt comfortably warm against her cheek.

“You love working,” said Kaden, putting the dirty plate and glass into his bussing tray before sitting beside her. “Just not this kind.”

“Schoolwork isn’t work,” she said. “It’s...fun.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Kaden truthfully. “I hate it.”

From her sideways vantage point, Cynthia found herself looking at the oak tree at the patio’s center. Though it was just a tree, it had always been a very special one to both of them. Their very first memory was of playing tag around it on their fourth birthday.

“I used to dream about this tree all the time,” said Cynthia. “And I’ve started to again.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Kaden, wiping sweat from his forehead after what had been a very busy lunch. “Lately I’ve been dreaming about it a lot.”

“Probably the stress of exams,” said Cynthia, trying unsuccessfully to blow away several strands of hair from her eyes. “You know, needing to see something comforting when everything’s so...stressful.”

Kaden’s gaze roved up the tree trunk to its distinctive double-knot. “I still think that it looks like the number 8.”

“Huh? Oh right, the knot. I happen to think that it looks like—*Ouch!*” Wincing, she sat upright and began massaging her temples, enduring the pulsating pains of yet another sudden headache. She noticed that Kaden had also begun itching his ear. “Still hearing those weird echo noises?”

“Yeah. And they really are weird—as well as itchy,” he said frustratedly. “It’s like I can almost hear something...but there’s no actual sound. But it’s nowhere near as annoying as the phantom pains—or whatever they are.” He had started calling them *phantom pains* because it was like feeling pain in his arm—but as if his arm was extended sideways even though it was actually hanging down by his side. But it was Cynthia that he was most worried about. “Your headaches are getting worse, aren’t they?”

“They’re absolutely infuriating,” she said, squinting from the pain. “It’s like—like—I don’t know...like I’m having a windy migraine that’s blowing around inside my head.” As the aches began to abate, she sighed thankfully. Then, like an actor delivering a climactic line, she declared in an exaggerated and carrying voice, “My birthday wish is for my weird headaches to go away and never return!”

“But your birthdays aren’t till tomorrow,” said a man’s gravelly voice from the center of the patio, successfully causing Kaden to jump in his chair and Cynthia to let out a startled squeal.

Turning, they found a stranger walking—or limping, rather—just past the oak tree toward the restaurant. He was too well-kempt to be a homeless person but too unkempt to be a reputable customer. And he was limping against... nothing—yet as if he was holding a very tall cane.

Lowly, so that only Kaden could hear, Cynthia whispered, “He kind of looks like an out-of-work Gandalf in desperate need of a shower and tailor.”

Kaden laughed. “Whoa,” he whispered, “check out his eye.” Well, it wasn’t so much an eye as it was a wooden eyepatch surrounded by an unnervingly large, spiderweb-shaped scar.

“Who’s this Gandalf person?” asked the eye-patched man, darting a sideways glance at Cynthia. She promptly gaped back in surprise that he had somehow heard her. After a moment or two, when no answer came, the stranger turned his good eye to Kaden. “And this here,” he said, pointing a finger at the grisly web of scarred flesh on his face, “is a story best left for another time.” He then continued limping ahead—and still as if leaning rather heavily against something that simply wasn’t there.

“Wait a sec,” said Cynthia, frowning at the stranger. “How’d you know that our birthday is tomorrow?”

But he was too busy admiring the odd-looking statue’s elongated, slender features to hear her. Cynthia found herself glancing at it too, even smiling at it, for there was a distinctly feminine grace about the stone horse.

“You really did capture her aspect, Boreall,” said the eye-patched man without looking away.

Cynthia and Kaden jumped again, for they hadn’t seen the very tall Mr. Boreall making his way outside.

“You’re too kind,” said Boreall, a magnificent smile raising his deeply lined face. “I had to replicate my original statue of Alassyn from memory.”

“And quite a memory it is, I must say,” said the eye-patched man, now patting the statue’s stone head.

“*Alassyn*.” Cynthia mouthed to Kaden.

“Yes, *Alassyn*,” said the eye-patched man, who could neither have heard her say it—as she hadn’t actually produced any words—nor have seen her mouthing it—without having looked through the back of his head.

“*Alassyn* was the mother of an entire race of horses called *potnias*,” said Boreall in his uplifting, gusting voice. Upon receiving a pair of raised eyebrows from Cynthia and Kaden—as neither had heard of a *potnia* horse before—he explained, “A legend from my homeland.”

“Which is...where?” urged Kaden with a grin, for Boreall routinely referred to his old home without ever revealing its location.

“By the sea,” said Boreall elusively, smiling. The smile faded, however. His expression became tense, even grave, as he turned to the stranger. “So...it’s finally time, then?”

“It is,” said the eye-patched man curtly, limping into the restaurant. He was nearly inside when he stopped and turned, fixing his good eye on the almost-sixteen-year-olds. “Since I won’t be seeing you two again before it happens, happy birthday.” He paused, leaned against his non-existent staff, and let out a sigh. “Let’s hope it’s not your last.”

Cynthia and Kaden promptly shared confused—and slightly alarmed—glances.

“Um...it won’t be,” said Kaden. But the eye-patched man had already limped inside.

Frowning, Cynthia looked at Mr. Boreall. “Why would he say something like that?”

But Boreall didn’t reply. He simply smiled at them. Then he looked around to make sure that they were alone. “I need the two of you back here tonight at 11:30. Under normal circumstances I’d never ask you to break school rules and leave campus after hours. However, circumstances are anything but normal at present.”

“Oh you’re being serious?” said Cynthia in surprise.

“I am indeed. And please don’t be late.”

“Um...okay,” said Kaden, perplexed by such a strange request.

Boreall nodded then looked expectantly at Cynthia.

“Yeah, okay,” she said, despite being unable to come up with a single reason why he might want them back here at such a late hour.

Boreall nodded firmly. “11:30, then.” Turning, he

stepped through the sliding door and closed it behind him, leaving Cynthia and Kaden all alone, and quite confused, in their seats beside the oak tree.

A couple hours later, in the common room between their adjoining dormitories, Cynthia and Kaden were relaxing with their best friends and fellow sophomores, Jessie West and Manning Moore. Their casual conversation about what each would be doing over summer break changed abruptly when Jessie and Manning shared a meaningful look.

“So...we’ve got something for you,” said Jessie apprehensively, readjusting her black-framed glasses.

“Yeah, we think it’s time that ya put yer money where yer mouth is,” said Manning far less apprehensively, speaking in a deep Southern drawl. He was on the verge of saying something else—when he suddenly stood and raced out.

“That was weird,” said Kaden.

But Cynthia was looking suspiciously at Jessie, who clearly didn’t want to meet her eye. “What’re you up to?”

Jessie, with reddening cheeks, made a series of awkward shrugs and inaudible mumbles. She was saved any further embarrassment by Manning, whose sneakers *squeaked* loudly on the hallway’s tile floor as he turned and hit the carpeted commons in a run. Coming to a stop, he tossed a small rectangular box toward Cynthia and Kaden, who were sitting on the same couch.

Kaden swiped it from the air. Turning it over in his hand, he stared at it. “Seriously?” he said, looking up at Manning and Jessie. “Check out what they got us, Cyn.”

Cynthia leaned sideways and examined the box. It bore highly stylized wording above a slogan:

Sibil DNA Testing Kit

“For the best results, always ask a sibyl!”

“DNA tests?” said Cynthia, frowning.

“Yer always tellin’ everyone that yer twins,” said Manning, not unkindly and not accusingly—well, a little accusingly, for he shared in the prevailing certainty that they couldn’t possibly be biological brother and sister, much less bona fide twins. “And frankly it’s a little weird.”

Staring decidedly at her socked feet, Jessie said faintly, “It is a little weird. Not in a bad way, though,” she added hastily, now so red in the face that she greatly resembled a bespectacled cherry. “I mean, I definitely believe you.” She

looked up at Cynthia and, clearly trying hard to sound genuine, emphasized, “*Definitely.*”

Manning, with a jovial smirk and nod at the box, said, “I see that yer not in a hurry to prove it with a DNA test.” He clearly thought that he had called their bluffs—until Cynthia and Kaden made eager smiles back, effectively turning his smirk into a confused frown.

Jessie looked equally shocked. “So you’re really going to do it?”

“Yep,” said Kaden, nodding.

“Yeah, of course,” said Cynthia, grinning.

“But...yer mom and dad,” said Manning, looking at Kaden, “are Mr. and Mrs. Crossway.”

“And yours,” said Jessie, looking at Cynthia, “are Ambassador and Mrs. Summers.” She glanced at Manning before returning her attention to them. “You two come from different parents.”

“We know,” said Kaden.

Again Manning and Jessie shared a glance.

“Remember what our Biology teacher said after you told her that you were twins?” said Jessie, now sounding insistent as she looked from Kaden to Cynthia. “She explained how polygenetic inheritance—like skin color—*isn’t* a completely dominant trait. It has degrees of difference.”

Cynthia nodded. Kaden said, “Huh?”

“She told us,” said Manning with mild incredulity, “that, yeah, it’s possible for twins to be different colors. They can be a little different or a lot different. One can be mostly black and the other can be mostly white. But there’s just too many factors involved for them to be completely different colors. Because the odds of that happenin’ are—”

“*Roughly the same as a tornado passing through a junkyard and assembling a fully functional fighter jet,* according to Ms. Finch,” finished Jessie. “Yes, it was hyperbole. But she only overstated it to make her point clear...that it’s *practically impossible.*”

“Actually, she said an *X-wing Starfighter*, not *fighter jet*,” said Cynthia. “You know, from Star Wars.”

With expressions of disbelief, Jessie and Manning watched as Kaden opened the box and Cynthia removed both swabs, handing one to him and keeping the other for herself. In unison they dabbed the insides of their cheeks, replaced the swabs in their protective casings, and then returned the completed kit to Manning, whose mouth now hung wide-open.

“But—but—” he stammered.

Jessie looked rather wildly from Cynthia to Kaden then back again. “But it’s going to say—!” She cut herself off and took a deep breath. “But what if it says that you *aren’t* related? Won’t you be kind of...totally...crushed?”

But this only made Cynthia and Kaden share a smile and let out laughs. And it was the sincerity of their laughter that caused Jessie and Manning to exchange looks of pity and produce rather sad smiles in return. Because they were certain what awaited their best friends two months from now when the test results came back. The cold, hard truth...that they were *not* twins.

At 11:05 that night, after lights out for the students, Cynthia crept quietly down the back stairwell to a first-floor bathroom, opened a large window and crawled through it into the fresh night air. She stuck to the bushes where best she could, taking great care to avoid the many lampposts in case campus security was doing a round. Kaden was waiting for her at the end of the long front drive. They Ubered it to Old Town and arrived at The Oaken Door with just minutes to spare.

Kaden was wearing a pair of old jeans and a gray VHS athletic tee that bore the phrase: *No Pain, No Gain*. He hadn’t actually chosen it, just grabbed whatever was nearest while dressing in the dark. Cynthia, on the other hand, looked like she was going clubbing. Her stylish jeans were studded with glittery stones and her designer blouse was slightly low-cut.

“You going to a party after this that I don’t know about?” grinned Kaden, able to see her full ensemble now that they were under the restaurant’s brightly lit entrance.

“Yeah, well, you look like you got dressed in the dark,” she fired back, finding the front door to be locked.

“That’s because I did.” Kaden led them through a narrow alleyway to the back patio, which was enclosed by a brick wall, one that he climbed over with ease. “It’s not even that high,” he laughed as Cynthia struggled to simultaneously climb the wall and keep her clothes from brushing up against it and getting dirty. “At least you’re not in heels,” he remarked as she landed awkwardly on the bricks below and proceeded to nearly tear his shirt, having grabbed it to keep from falling down completely.

“I don’t wear heels with jeans,” she said, futilely attempting to pat down the stretch mark that she had left on his tee.

"I've seen you wear heels with jeans before."

"But not with *this* outfit."

"But definitely with jeans."

"Oh shut up," she grinned, finding the sliding door to be unlocked.

Only a quarter of the quaint restaurant's lights were on, reflecting darkly off the waxed wooden floor. The usual, indistinguishable medley of cooking scents filled their noses, either wafting in from the kitchen or simply having bonded permanently with the very walls themselves.

"Must be in his office," said Kaden, making for a side door in the shiny kitchen.

"What a shocker," said Cynthia sarcastically, for Boreall basically spent all his time up there.

"Why does he even own a restaurant?" asked Kaden, pushing open the door and letting her pass through first.

"No idea. We only ever see him when we arrive for work and leave—and that's just because he always makes a point of saying *hello* and *goodbye* to us." Cynthia smiled as she took the stairs two at a time. "He's so nice."

"But especially to us. I mean, he's nice to everyone," Kaden went on quickly. "But—"

"Yeah, he dotes on us," finished Cynthia, stopping before the office door and knocking.

"Enter," came the gusting voice.

She pulled it open and, once Kaden had walk through, followed right behind.

Boreall's office was both surprisingly large and surprisingly cramped. It looked like part museum, part workshop, part library, and part artist's loft. One of its long worktables was home to at least a dozen exquisite, highly detailed, hand-drawn maps that, as far as either Cynthia or Kaden could tell, didn't correlate to any locations on earth.

Boreall was pacing anxiously behind a desk along the rear wall. So they navigated the many stacks of books, easels, and object-laden tables, coming to a stop beside a corner table that was shockingly devoid of clutter, having only two smallish items. They looked like gift boxes—except they were wrapped in what appeared to be tree leaves. When Boreall only continued pacing, Kaden's attention drifted to the oil painting hanging behind him. It was of a large and very different-looking house that rose to three staggered stories while having neither hard edges nor ninety-degree angles.

"Mr. Boreall, sir?" said Cynthia tentatively.

Boreall came to a stop. After a deep breath and a firm nod of the head, he turned to them. He had just opened his mouth to speak when he noticed Kaden admiring the painting. “Ah...that was my home,” he said, smiling reminiscently at it. “It’s called Windblown Manor.”

Cynthia raised an eyebrow, confused—and a little concerned—by his sudden willingness to be so open about his past. “We’ve asked you about this painting before. So why’re you finally telling us about it now, sir?”

“Because *now*, my dear Cynthia, things are different. Did you know,” he quickly went on, “that many years ago I was bestowed a ring made from the extremely rare and highly precious chrius metal? I was given it on the day of my daughter’s wedding, in fact.”

“Chrius?” repeated Cynthia, her face puckered in thought. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“You have a daughter?” said Kaden in surprise.

“I did,” said Boreall softly. “But she passed away.”

“Oh,” said Kaden awkwardly. “Sorry to hear that, sir.”

“I’m sure that she loved you very much,” said Cynthia warmly. “You must’ve been a great dad—because you’ve been nothing but wonderful to us.”

“How very kind of you to say,” said Boreall, suddenly misty-eyed. He reached down and pulled open a drawer. From it he produced a very simple-looking golden ring. He placed it on the desktop.

“Um...that’s just normal gold,” said Kaden confusedly.

“But is it?” said Boreall enticingly. “Or is it something more like...a cousin to gold? Ah-h-h, you see it now,” he exhaled as Cynthia’s eyes widened.

“It’s...but, sir, it’s *glowing*,” she said in shock.

And now Kaden saw it too. It looked like a golden aura was emanating from the metal itself. Though, strangely, it had taken a good five seconds of staring at it before the glowing light could be seen.

“Yes, I thought that you two would enjoy seeing this,” said Boreall. He glanced at a clock on the wall. “Midnight approaches...Follow me.” After grabbing the leafy boxes from the table, he made his way to the office door.

“Something’s going on,” said Cynthia lowly, turning and following him. “He’s acting strange—even for him.”

“Definitely,” said Kaden, trailing behind her.

Soon they were passing through the sliding back door onto the brick patio. It was a wonderfully clear night. The pale silvery moon was shimmering down from the starry

skies above, and a pleasant little breeze was playing on their faces. Boreall came to a stop near the oak tree and turned so that he was facing them.

“Did you know,” he said as if pointing out an interesting fact, “that in certain cultures the oak tree represents a doorway?”

Cynthia and Kaden glanced confusedly at each other before looking at the tree.

“Oh!” said Cynthia in realization, the pieces of one mystery falling into place. “That’s why you named your restaurant *The Oaken Door*. Because of this oak tree and the myth of oaks being doorways.”

“Almost entirely correct,” said Boreall with a smile. But he didn’t go on. He just gazed at them through those magnificent cerulean eyes, appearing almost sad.

To her enormous aggravation, Cynthia found herself suddenly trying to fend off another windy migraine; and Kaden, squirming beside her, was starting to feel those phantom pains in each arm—not to mention that he could also hear the distant echoes of a non-existent noise.

“Oh my, I nearly forgot,” said Boreall, handing a gift box to each of them. “These are for you.”

“That’s so nice of you,” said Cynthia, valiantly trying to sound sincere despite the awful aches in her head.

“Oh they’re not from me, my dear,” said Boreall courteously, shaking his head. “They’re from...*her*.”

“*Her...who?*” asked Kaden as the throbs extended down to his legs. The box, to his surprise, wasn’t covered in wrapping paper designed to look like leaves, but in actual tree leaves.

“You’ll come to know her by many names,” said Boreall. “But there’s one name by which she’s known to all. It is...the Lil of Lurkur.”

“Who’s the—? Ooh, it’s a compass!” said Cynthia, having unpeeled the leaves and opened the box to find a truly stunning compass of pure white wood. “It’s magnificent,” she said, examining it. And the compass seemed to feel the same way about her—until she reminded herself that compasses couldn’t *feel* anything.

“Mine’s black,” said Kaden of the otherwise identical compass that he had unwrapped, speaking a little more loudly than he had intended because the shadowy, echoing noise was getting even louder. “Hey, I think that mine likes me.” Realizing what he had just said, he promptly shook his head at such a ridiculous thought.

THE WHITE TREE

“Keep them with you at all times,” said Boreall seriously, sounding insistent. “Promise me.”

“Huh? Oh okay, we will,” said Cynthia, now having difficulty focusing through the swirling pain behind her eyes.

Boreall glanced over a shoulder at the tree—and his face suddenly paled. “Just a few minutes remain,” he exhaled tensely. Dropping to a knee, he made a backward nod at the patio’s center. “What do you see there?” he asked loudly, as if somehow aware of what they were currently experiencing.

“A tree,” said Kaden, flinching from a particularly nasty throb.

“An oak tree,” said Cynthia, not having heard him, the churning pain between her ears being too intense.

Boreall, while smiling kindly, shook his head. “No, there’s no tree there,” he said, still speaking loudly. “In fact, there’s *never* been a tree there.”

“Huh? No, there’s *always* been a tree there,” Kaden nearly yelled.

“Our first memory is of playing tag around it,” said Cynthia, this time having heard Kaden due to the sheer volume of his voice.

“On your fourth birthday, right?” said Boreall, to which they made brave attempts at nodding back but mostly just grimaced. “No, you weren’t even here then. Cynthia, you were in the backyard of your London home. And Kaden, you were at your neighbor’s house in California playing in the front yard. As for the tree that you see behind me...” He stood and extended an arm toward it. “...it’s a very real one, yes, but it’s just...*not* here.”

Again they looked at the tree, which had begun doing something strange...it was pulsating. And with each heartbeat-like pulse it was coming in and out of focus. Odder still, they could now hear something coming from it. It wasn’t a voice...nor was it producing any actual words...yet they could still understand it. They even recognized it...as though it had always been with them...but only now was it speaking to them directly. Because now...now it needed them. It needed their help...needed it badly. Its wordless voice was flowing with notes of desperation.

“It knows us,” gasped Cynthia. “And...we know it. But...how?”

“And—Cyn, it needs our help!” said Kaden in a suddenly fierce voice.

Dong

As one, Cynthia and Kaden turned to the distant sound

of a church bell. It had just stroked midnight...marking the official beginning of their sixteenth birthday. When they turned back—

The flickering tree had completely vanished. In its place was a door...but a door unlike any that they had ever seen. Hauntingly beautiful to gaze upon, it was made of a pure white wood that softly glowed in the night air. And...it was waiting to be opened, waiting on them. Instinctively they took a step toward it. At once their pain lessened. They took another step forward—and they suddenly felt even better. Shocked, they turned to Boreall.

“What’s happening?” said Kaden, his heart thumping.

“After sixteen years, you are finally moving toward the future,” said Boreall, extending a long arm toward the stunningly white door.

“What’s on the other side?” asked Cynthia.

Smiling magnificently from one to the other, Boreall said, “Your destiny.”

Cynthia knew that she should feel more anxious than she did. But her connection to whatever had created this doorway was so clear, so powerful—and so intimate—that she could no more deny it than herself. The harder that she concentrated, the clearer—yet the more songlike—that the voice became...and the more urgently that it could be felt reaching out. Yes, it needed them. Because without their help...it was...it was...going to *die*.

“Cyn, we have to help it,” said Kaden almost pleadingly.

“I know,” she said without hesitation.

Slowly they faced one another. Cynthia nodded at Kaden, who nodded back. Wordlessly their decision had been made.

Then Cynthia glanced curiously at Boreall. “But why Kaden and me?”

“Yeah,” added Kaden, “because there’s nothing special about us.”

“If that were true,” said Boreall through a grand smile, “I never would’ve left my home to come here. Oh,” he went on quickly, “you needn’t worry about being understood or about understanding what’s being said. The journey there will take care of it for you. After all, it did for me.” They stared confusedly back. “You can understand me, can you not?”

“Yes, of course,” said Cynthia.

“You’re speaking English,” said Kaden.

“Oh...am I?” And on this final, mysterious note, Boreall stepped away, giving them a clear path. “It’s time for you, Cynthia Summers and Kaden Krossway, to discover why

you've always known with such certainty that you are—despite it seeming utterly and laughably impossible to everyone else—twins.” As they turned to the doorway, he said, “Oh, two more things. One, you needn't worry about your parents wondering where you are, for they've already been, um...*taken care of*, so to speak. And two, you should leave your cell phones here with me. Primitive electronics won't survive the crossing.”

“The crossing?” repeated Cynthia cautiously.

“Primitive?” said Kaden with a frown, retrieving his cell and handing it over. True, his wasn't a particularly fancy model. But there definitely wasn't anything simple or primitive about it.

Cynthia, however, found it much more difficult to part with hers. It took three attempts to finally drop it in Boreall's awaiting hand. Then—she suddenly launched herself at him. Kaden watched with a smile as Boreall's long arms wrapped around her, hugging her back.

“Farewell,” said Boreall emotionally, concluding their goodbyes and watching them walk away.

When Cynthia and Kaden arrived at the door, it swung open of its own accord. Without turning their heads, they reached out a blind hand toward one another. And without needing to look, they knew exactly where the other's hand was. Holding tight, they continued on. There was a dazzling, silvery white ripple in the air all around them as they stepped, side by side, over the door's threshold and passed into some great unknown, not having any idea where they were going...or what dangers might lie beyond.

chapter 02

Lurkar Woods

Bright and dizzying light was all that Cynthia and Kaden could see for several seconds...or perhaps it had been several hours. Time didn't seem to be acting like it should, nor were their bodies...Were they themselves the bright and dizzying light, mere particles and waves in the vastness of space? Or were they being carried by the light? Or was it just light that they were seeing?

Then the light became less bright, less dizzying, until it was nothing but hazy sunlight beaming down on them. When their eyes had finally adjusted, they discovered that they were standing at the very center of a perfectly circular forest clearing.

"Where are we?" said Kaden, his voice feeling like it hadn't been used in a long time.

"No idea," said Cynthia croakily, promptly coughing and clearing her throat. Looking down, she noticed that they weren't standing on the ground but rather atop a large tree stump. Partially visible through all the debris...Were those words?

Kaden turned in a slow circle. Around fifty yards away in every direction the leafy green trees began. But everything here in the clearing was...barren and brown. He wondered if a fire had burnt down all the trees and bushes and killed all the grass. But if so, it hadn't left behind any black scorch marks—or a single flake of ash.

"There's something strange about this place, Cyn," he said. Then he saw that a single tree still remained here—kind of. It was lying sideways next to the stump. He was examining it curiously when Cynthia, now on her knees, began pushing on his legs.

“Move your feet for me, Kaden.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s something written down here,” she said, using a hand to brush away the last of the dead leaves. Upon standing—she wiped her dirty hand on Kaden’s tee.

Carefully they maneuvered around the edge of the stump until facing the inscription. Strangely its words had been engraved upward—as if raised from the wood itself. Each letter was the same, gleaming silvery black color too. And reading them only added to the portentous feel of this whole clearing:

The Diobhail Rising
Sword and Fire
Death and Life
Fury

“What’s a Diobhail?” asked Kaden, never having heard a word quite like this one.

“I...I don’t know,” said Cynthia slowly. Tilting her head, she began looking around. “Kaden, have we...been here before?”

“No way,” he said. But as he took in their surroundings, icy chills began tingling the length of his spine. “Um, yeah, maybe we have. But when?”

“I don’t have any—Kaden, look! It’s the same double-knot!”

“The—what?”

“The knot,” said Cynthia in shock, thrusting a finger at the tree lying sideways on the ground. “The one that you’re always saying looks like the number 8.”

Kaden quickly located it on the trunk. “So this is...? But how’s the same tree from The Oaken Door also here?”

Cynthia considered for a moment. “Maybe the ‘myth’ about oak trees being doorways wasn’t purely a myth after all.”

“So it’s...an actual doorway?” said Kaden. “But instead of being between two rooms, it’s between two...um...Cyn, are we still on Earth?”

“I...honestly don’t know,” she said. She looked from the stump to the fallen tree. Leaves of vibrant green were thriving on its every branch and limb. “Kaden, it’s...still alive. How?”

“Maybe it’s just recently been cut down,” he suggested. But a glance at the completely desiccated stump proved

otherwise. He was turning back to her when—

They were overcome by the unnervingly eerie sensation that...they weren't alone here. Upward their attentions turned at once. High in one of the trees at the very edge of the clearing was a large wooden structure. It looked like a treetop gazebo or lookout station, but it had long since fallen into disuse and disrepair.

"What's up there?" asked Kaden in hushed tones.

"I don't know," said Cynthia quietly, gazing at the wooden structure.

"You don't think that it could be a ghost, do you?" he asked, only half-kidding.

"No," she laughed, but her mirth faded quickly. "Maybe it's just this place. It feels...haunted. But I can't tell by what. Maybe by death. You know, because things should be growing here but the only life—anywhere—is on something that should be, well, dead." She pointed at the tree on its side. Then she realized— "My weird headache is gone! Like, completely!"

"Hey, so are my phantom pains—and the strange noises too!" said Kaden in amazement. "Actually..." After a brief but intense contemplation, he made a face at Cynthia. "I feel kind of..."

"Different?" she finished. "Yeah, me too." Lost in thought, she didn't initially realize that she was staring straight at something just within the trees. "Um...what is that thing?"

Kaden followed her gaze. "It looks like one of those old timey, fancy horse-drawn carriages...but also like a space-age Winnebago."

"Let's check it out," said Cynthia.

Jumping off the stump, they made their way through the clearing to the tall trees. A few steps later they were standing before a vehicle of some kind. But they had never seen anything quite like it. For one thing, it had no wheels. It was just hovering in the air a few feet above the grass, having come to a stop against a tree.

"So we're definitely not on Earth anymore, right?" said Kaden. "Because I'm pretty sure that an almost-flying... whatever this thing is...would've found its way to the internet."

"I...yeah, I guess that we're not..."

On the door they discovered a knob, so not everything was different here. Deciding that politeness was likely a universally appreciated quality, Kaden knocked. When no answer came, he knocked again.

Turning, Cynthia reexamined their surroundings intently. But everything appeared just like it should...trees were trees, sky was sky, and the air was perfectly breathable. Finally she just shrugged. "Well, all I can say for certain is that we're not on Tatooine." She pointed at the sky. "Only one sun."

"Good," said Kaden. "I'd definitely freak out if the door was answered by a real-life Jabba the Hut."

"I'm going in," said Cynthia, grinning.

"I'm not sure if that's a good—oh, you're already turning the knob and...walking up a stair that appeared out of nowhere. Yeah, sure, let's break in. What could possibly go wrong, right?"

He followed Cynthia up the floating stair into the dark, carpeted interior. As his eyes adjusted, he discovered several things that he recognized, such as the full-size refrigerator, the plush armchairs and the row of cabinets, just to name a few. But on the long wall that they had entered through he found an assortment of electronic fixtures that he certainly didn't recognize. Quite a few even reminded him of the futuristic, Jetsons cartoon.

"Ouch!" he yelped, his foot having been landed on by a suddenly backward-leaping Cynthia. "What was that for?" he demanded, trying to shake out the pain.

"There's a bed," she whispered, pointing. "And someone's in it."

Kaden looked at once. Lying sprawled in a surprisingly large bed—and clearly dead asleep—was a teenage boy with long, curly blonde hair who was around their own age.

Cynthia leaned in closer. "Ooh, he's cute." Upon spotting Kaden's raised eyebrow, she added rather defensively, "What? He is."

"Maybe you should try waking him with a kiss."

"Thanks, but I'll just use a hand," she grinned. Slowly, and with increasing uncertainty, she reached for his shoulder. But then he suddenly let out a tremendous snore, a noise that had no effect at all on Kaden, but one that sent Cynthia in a startled leap worthy of a surprise appearance by the paralyzingly terrifying crawling-out-of-the-television-girl from the horror movie *The Ring*.

Banging into the opposite wall, Cynthia had hit at least one button—perhaps all of them—because there was an immediate eruption of sounds. One was definitely an up-tempo song; but most others were electronic chirps and screeches. Kaden attempted to silence any of them by

pressing more buttons—but all that he managed to do was get sprayed straight in the face by a stream of water.

“What’s going on?” said a groggy voice.

Kaden immediately stepped in front of Cynthia, wiping water from his eyes.

The unknown teen was sitting up and squinting blearily in their direction through strikingly blue eyes. He quickly located a remote control that, thankfully, brought silence to the harsh cacophony of sounds.

“You’re kind of cute,” he said to Kaden.

“Um...okay.”

Spotting the tilted head of Cynthia poking out from around Kaden’s shoulder, he said, “And you’re...wow.”

“Um...okay.”

Tall and slender but clearly athletically built, the teen rubbed his eyes, stood, yawned, then walked with lumbering steps to a window and opened its blinds.

“Where are we?” he asked. Having no possible way of knowing, Cynthia and Kaden just stood there silently, feeling incredibly awkward. “Must be in Lurkur Woods.” Yawning again, he turned, opened the fridge and retrieved a bottled drink, taking several chugs. “You guys want some juice?”

“You—you don’t seem very surprised to see two complete strangers in your...your...carriage?” said Cynthia uncertainly.

“It’s an ortux,” he corrected her. “Well, it’s an ortux carriage.”

“A...what?” said Kaden.

“An ortux carriage,” he said. “You’ve heard of ortuxes, right?” Upon receiving shakes of the head, he looked curiously at them. “Where’re you two from? Because I’m pretty sure that everyone knows what an ortux is.”

“We’re...not from around here,” said Cynthia evasively.

“Yeah, I figured so much,” he said. “By the way, I’m Alec. Alec *Mulsiver*.”

“Um...I’m Cynthia,” she said, noticing that he had emphasized his last name. “And this is my twin brother, Kaden.”

As if on cue, Alec choked on his juice. “Twins? Yeah, right,” he laughed.

They made kind-of laughs in return due to the sheer strangeness of the situation.

“So...why exactly are you completely fine with us being here?” asked Kaden.

“Oh right. So my dad told me to expect a girl and guy

about my own age to be somewhere nearby when I woke up,” said Alec. “He didn’t tell me that they’d be *in* my ortux...but he wasn’t really sure about any of the details of my ‘wilderness retreat.’ At least, that’s what we told my mom that I’d be doing for a few weeks this summer. Not that she cares, but we had to tell her something.” Rubbing his neck, he looked at a nearby clock. It was 12:15 in the afternoon. “Wow, I’ve been out for...like...twelve hours straight. The last thing that I remember is...a man with an eyepatch telling me that I might feel a little drowsy. Man, was he right.”

Kaden looked meaningfully at Cynthia before asking, “Did he have a wicked scar around his eyepatch?”

“Yeah, that’s right, he did,” chuckled Alec. “That dude was seriously weird.” Sitting on the bed, he grabbed a pair of boots from beneath it and put them on. Then he stood and looked expectantly at them. “So where do we go from here?”

“How should we know?” said Cynthia at once.

“Because I definitely don’t,” said Alec flatly. “Seriously, about a week ago my dad and grandad got all secretive. Then two nights ago they tell me—well, nothing helpful. Just that there was something really important that they needed me to do—and that I’d be meeting up with, well, you two, I guess. Next thing I know, I’m travelling to my great-grandfather’s old house, getting into this ortux carriage, being drugged—I guess—by that weird dude with only one eye, and...well, here we are.”

“Oh,” said Cynthia, having hoped for more.

“Hey, there’s a note tacked to the door,” said Kaden, having just noticed it. “And—it’s made out to all three of us...‘*To Cynthia, Kaden and Alec.*’”

Kaden swiped it from the door; Cynthia promptly swiped it from his grip and was on the verge of opening it when—Alec, with a grin, swiped it from her hand. She was already reaching to swipe it back when he stepped out of her reach.

Opening it, Alec read aloud: “*Your destination is Cairdea. Please take great care while travelling through the woods, for there are many dangers here. I do very much look forward to meeting you in person! Dearly, the Lil of Lurkur.*”

“We’ve heard that name before, Kaden, remember?”

“Um...”

“Right before we left, we were told it by Mr.—”

“Oh right,” said Kaden, recalling that Mr. Boreall had told them—well, basically nothing, except for the name of this mysterious woman.

“No...no...no...this can’t be right,” muttered Alec, staring

with wide-eyed fear at the note. “No way. Not possible.”

“What’s not possible?” asked Kaden.

“The Lil of Lurkur...it’s not real,” said Alec.

“The Lil of Lurkur is a *she*,” said Cynthia, “not an *it*.”

Alec stared at them in utter disbelief. “We’re in Lurkur Woods, right?” They made weird faces in reply. “We are,” he assured them. “And most people don’t call it Lurkur Woods, do they?” Cynthia and Kaden just screwed up their faces. “They don’t,” he assured them again. “They just call it the Haunted Woods. Everyone knows what haunts it too. And it—or *she*, if you’re actually right—is *the Lil*.”

“Oh,” said Cynthia.

“Oh,” said Kaden.

“*Oh?! That’s it?!*” said Alec animatedly. “Because we’re talking about the friggin’ Lil of Lurkur, an evil spirit or...something else that’s equally terrifying—and definitely deserving of more than *oh*.”

“Can I see the letter?” said Kaden.

“Only if you promise to burn it afterward so that it can’t curse us,” said Alec, sounding mostly as if joking, yet handing it over quite eagerly.

After reading it twice, Kaden said, “She doesn’t seem very evil. It’s a pretty courteous note.”

“So we’re headed to Cairdea, then,” said Cynthia with a grin, turning to Alec. “You know how to drive this thing?”

“I—yeah...basically,” he said unconvincingly. “I mean, it’s pretty big, and ortux carriages usually aren’t driven by anyone, they just go on autopilot to their location. But since—”

“We have no idea how to get to Cairdea,” inserted Cynthia, smiling, “we get to search for it in luxury.” She promptly dropped into a lavish armchair that both looked and felt rather like an airplane seat in first-class. A bottled water even rose up automatically from the armrest, which she opened and began drinking.

“So...I’m driving, then.” Alec glanced at Kaden and shrugged. “This should be interesting.”

Most noticeable about the driving compartment was its complete lack of a steering wheel. Instead two holographic boxes appeared, which Alec stuck his hands into. The ortux’s motor came *humming* to life. Impressively it took only a handful of seconds for Alec to get them completely stuck between five or six large trees. After a final failed attempt to free them via the ortux version of flooring-it, Alec removed his hands from the holographic boxes, which immediately

vanished from view, and the engine went silent.

“So we’re walking, then?” said Cynthia dejectedly, leading the way outside.

Alec emerged last, carefully scanning the area before leaving the safety of his vehicle.

“The Lil could’ve been a little more helpful with directions,” said Cynthia, wondering which way they should try first.

Kaden, however, tilted his head. “You hear that? It sounds like...someone whistling.”

“We should go ask for directions,” said Cynthia tentatively, looking around for the whistler. “Right?”

Kaden promptly shrugged at her, then he shrugged at Alec. Alec promptly shrugged back at him, then he almost shrugged at Cynthia—but instead he made a dashing, *you’re-hot-and-I’m-sexy* grin. This elicited a scoffed nose-laugh from Cynthia and a sideways glance from Kaden.

“What?” said Alec defensively. “She’s dressed like she’s ready to party. I like that.”

Soon the whistling had gotten loud enough for Cynthia and Alec to hear as well.

“I vote that Kaden goes first,” said Cynthia, grinning apologetically at him.

“Toward the sound of a complete stranger whistling in a forest that’s definitely haunted?” said Alec. “Yeah, he’s got my vote too.”

“Yeah, okay,” chuckled Kaden.

Swiftly but carefully, he led the way between trees and over small rocks and under low-hanging branches until they could see the whistler. It was a man in a long green cloak carrying a bundle of firewood. He was armed with a bow and arrow. The hood of his cloak was undrawn, revealing—to Kaden’s utter astonishment—long, brightly silver hair... identical to Cynthia’s.

Kaden came to an immediate stop and glanced over his shoulder. Cynthia was gazing in absolute wonder at the man, shocked beyond shocked to have found someone else with hair exactly like hers. Meeting Kaden’s eye, she eagerly nodded him on.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Kaden, stepping into the man’s view. “I was wondering—”

Thump

Upon sight of Kaden the man had promptly fainted, sending firewood tumbling this way and that. Kaden led them over in a jog. Once there, Alec promptly moved the

fallen weapons out of reaching distance.

“Good idea,” said Kaden.

After nearly thirty anxious seconds of waiting for him to regain consciousness, the man finally began to stir. He blinked several times. Upon discovering Kaden standing over him, his eyes suddenly widened in horrified, confused shock. Then—he promptly fainted for a second time.

“That’s a pretty cool power,” said Alec. “You’ll have to teach me how to make someone pass out just by looking at you.”

Kaden, however, was hardly listening. “Cyn, did you see—?”

“I did,” she gasped.

Alec then found himself being shuffled sideways by Cynthia in her haste to get to Kaden’s side.

“His eyes...” said Kaden, at a complete loss.

“Are the exact same as mine,” exhaled Cynthia. Questions were suddenly storming her mind, so many of them—too many of them—as she stared mutely down at the only other person that she had ever met who shared in her otherwise perfectly unique features. Again he was beginning to stir.

“Um,” said Kaden, “how do we keep him from passing out a third time? Oh maybe this’ll work.” He quickly guided Cynthia by the shoulders so that another silver-haired and silver-eyed person was directly in the man’s eyeline.

After several hard blinks, the man looked up and found her. He didn’t immediately pass out—a good sign. But upon glimpsing the two boys with her, his pleasant expression swiftly became an enraged one.

“Why have you brought these *silverlesses* into our home, girl?!” he demanded furiously, pointing a wobbly finger behind her.

“Silverlesses?” repeated Cynthia, glancing over a shoulder at Kaden and Alec. Yes, they certainly qualified as being *silverless* in terms of hair and eyes. “He’s my brother,” she said, nodding at Kaden. “And he’s...also...here,” she finished uncertainly while looking at Alec.

“And clearly a valued member of the team,” said Alec buoyantly.

“You’ve broken the Ancient Law of No Entry!” burst out the man angrily. “You’ve put all Forisheans at risk!”

“*Forisheans?*” said Kaden, this being another word that he was pretty sure didn’t exist in any dictionary that he knew of.

The man looked absolutely outraged. “Certainly you know the punishment for such a transgression, girl! Don’t expect Sen Straic to take pity on you either, for he won’t. And for a crime of this magnitude, you’ll be given...the Gourgi,” he finished ominously.

“Sen Straic?” said Cynthia, quickly performing a mental sweep, but the name didn’t register.

“What’s *the Gourgi*?” asked Kaden slowly.

The man scowled at Kaden as if deeply offended at merely having been spoken to by someone who didn’t share in his silvery features. Yet he seemed quite happy—even eager—to point behind them. “That’s the Gourgi, silverless.”

All three turned to the clearing, which was still mostly visible through the trees. But it wasn’t clear what he was pointing at because nothing seemed out of the ordinary... except perhaps for the glimmer of something silvery.

“What’s that?” asked Cynthia warily.

“No,” gasped Kaden, horrified.

“What’re you two looking at?” said Alec, still unable to find it.

“That’s...*hair*,” said Kaden in a sickened voice. “It’s a person’s hair. And it’s been tied to a tree branch. But—” The sight of it dangling there reminded him disturbingly of a noose hanging above a killing platform. He then rounded on the man. “Where’s the person that the hair belongs to?”

“That’s all that’s left, isn’t it?” said the man matter-of-factly. “The person’s arms and legs are bound so that they can’t escape. Then they’re tied by their hair to a tree branch. And from it they dangle until dead. Eventually the weight of their body will cause it to rip apart from their scalp, leaving only their hair tied to the tree. We also call this magnificent Straic tradition...the Dangle.” Notes of pride were now ringing in his voice. “The Gourgi is one of our most sacred practices. We perform it quite often on our enemies.”

“Often...?” Kaden turned quickly and scanned the tree line. What he found was truly disturbing...Left and right, there were more headless heads of silver hair tied to other tree branches. In fact, it looked like every single tree around the clearing had gleaming silvery strands tied to it. “There must be a hundred of them,” he said in horror.

The sight was so awful, so horrifying, that it had rendered Cynthia momentarily speechless. Beside her, Alec was staring in disgust as he looked from side to side at the leftovers of so many deaths by this unthinkable means of execution.

"It's nothing less than what the Lil of Lurkur deserved for having killed so many noble Straics in the cursed clearing," said the man, a sneer on his face. "Which is why we have ornamented it with our many Aruinn trophies."

"Trophies?" said Kaden uncomprehendingly.

"He means their hair," said Cynthia with revulsion.

"Aruinn must be...a place here in the forest, right?" said Alec, sounding nauseated.

"But—but, you're not a Straic, are you, girl?" snarled the man. "Tell me now, what clan do you hail from?"

"Clan?" repeated Cynthia, turning to him.

The man was now examining her studded jeans and blouse. "You're not even a Forishe, are you?"

"Forishe?" repeated Alec confusedly.

Kaden, however, stepped toward the man and demanded, "Who did this?! Who killed all these people?!" Then he recalled the name—or title—that he had seen on the tree stump. "Did...the Diobhail...do it?"

The man's reaction was immediate. His eyes widened in deepest fear and his face drained entirely of its color, leaving him ghostly pale.

Quite cleverly, Alec suddenly sprang a question on the man: "Which way is Cairdea?"

Now trembling in fear, the man raised an arm—but as if under the control of a jittery puppeteer—and he pointed the way. "D-due west." And then, for a fourth time in just about as many minutes, he fell limply to the ground, unconscious.

Alec turned and marked the direction with a tree on the edge of the clearing. "Let's get moving," he said.

But Cynthia was staring down at the cloaked man, just staring at him, unable to process all the horrible things that he had described with such pride, such zeal. "Yeah, let's get away from here," she said disgustedly.

"Should we just leave him here?" said Kaden anxiously. "What if he runs off and finds his friends...or tells whoever tied all those people to the trees by their...by their..." But he couldn't finish, couldn't say *silver hair*, because he had just caught sight of Cynthia...of her silver hair. And he couldn't even consider the possibility of his twin sister being forced to suffer the truly horrific fate of dangling by the hair until dead.

Kaden swallowed hard. "Yeah, let's get moving. And the faster, the better."