

**THRONES
SECRET OF
THE LOST
KING**

SHAUN STEVENSON

**SPECIAL
5 CHAPTER
PREVIEW**



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ONE

Molly groaned and rolled over to face the window. Her eyes opened one at a time, encrusted with sleep and exhaustion. It had been the longest day she could remember in weeks. She had been trained to work in the stables, which meant shoveling a lot of horse, well, leftovers. A lot. She didn't know if the reek of grimy horses would ever wash out of her dress. But that was a problem for another day.

Right now all she wanted to do was sleep, but that wasn't happening.

Ellie sat in the wooden chair by the window, hugging a stuffed bear with loose stitching. Molly kept telling her if she wasn't careful, the stitches would pop out, and then Mrs. Keswick would toss the bear right into the manure pile.

The little girl was four years younger than Molly, and she had this terrible habit of staying awake far past her bedtime and then crawling over to that chair and whispering at the stars. It was all a bit crazy for Molly's taste.

“I don't know if you can hear me out there, but . . . please send help. Jack needs it.” Ellie clutched the bear tighter. “He's really sad.” And then she started to hum. Apparently, it was some song her mother used to sing, but Ellie couldn't remember any of the words.

Of course, none of their moms would ever sing again. Their moms had all been dead for years.

“Are you humming?” Molly asked, yawning. “It's past one in the morning!”

Ellie whipped around, brushing brown hair over her shoulder. “Sorry, I was just—”

Molly held up a hand. “Just what? Looking for a star to wish on again?”

The little girl buried her chin in the bear's head. “Maybe . . .”

“Listen.” Molly sat up in her bed and leaned against the wall, staring at the wood planks lining the ceiling. “I hate to rain on your star parade, but that's just stupid. There's no star out there for you. And no one is going to come and save you from this place either. Just go back to bed. Okay?” Molly fluffed the feathers in her pillow and lay back down.

There was a faint snuffle from the window, and then Ellie stood and clenched a fist, holding her bear tightly with the other. “Just because you've given up doesn't mean I have to!”

“Whatever.” Molly closed her eyes and tried to fall back asleep, but now she was wide awake. And Ellie was humming again. The same few notes over and over. Why didn't the little girl get it? No one was going to come. They were in an orphanage, and that's how it was going to

stay. Nobody cared about them. Except maybe Mrs. Keswick, the orphanage caretaker. She was at least nice enough sometimes. Although she had been the one to put Molly on stable duty, so there was that to consider.

Ellie stopped humming, and the bedroom fell silent. A cricket chirped somewhere outside, but Molly didn't care. Let the crickets chirp. Ellie's bed creaked and rustled with moving blankets. Molly heard Ellie roll over two more times and then still.

An explosion rocked the whole room. Red light flared through the window, and Molly jerked up, staring across their small bedroom at Ellie, both of their eyes wider than horseshoes.

"What was that?" Molly asked.

"I don't know!" Ellie slipped out of bed, feet landing on the floor.

Yelling echoed up from the village down the road. Sharp screams followed the shouts. Little hairs rose across Molly's forearm in the moonlight, and she felt them rising up on her neck.

"The window!" Molly hissed. She crawled over, and Ellie fell onto all fours and scurried over as well. They poked their heads up and glanced to the ground two stories below. Nothing stirred around the orphanage, or even at the cast iron gate and matching fence surrounding the grounds. Farther up the road, cottages burned bright with orange flames licking up the straw-thatched roofs with sickening speed.

"Who's doing this?" Ellie whispered.

"I can't see very well through the trees." Molly stretched, searching for a better vantage point. But it was no use. Shadowy figures rushed

from cottage to cottage, but who they were was impossible to tell from here. Large oak trees barred their view, branches splayed like fingers covering their eyes. Faint shouts echoed from the cottages. A woman shrieked in the distance.

The door burst open behind them. Both girls screamed. Molly's heart thumped against her rib cage. She had half a mind to punch Jack in the face the moment he stomped in. He stood the same height as her, but with much lighter hair and a huskier build. Jack finished yanking a brown vest over his gray tunic and straightened the belt around his waist.

“Ellie! We've got to get to the cellar!”

“Jack! You can't be in here! This is the girls' room!” Molly said, standing and wanting to at least make him feel stupid for bursting into their room in the middle of the night. It wasn't that they hated each other; they had a friendly rivalry she felt needed to continue, no matter how bad circumstances up in the village were.

Jack stomped across the room and grabbed Ellie's arm, helping her up. “I'm going to just let my sister die up here! Come on! Someone's attacking the village. We've got to hide!”

Molly put a hand on her hip. “Yeah, like where? If we go down to the cellar, then guess what? We'll be trapped down there!”

“Jack!” Ellie grabbed his hand tightly and squeezed. A slight whimper escaped her before she added, “I'm scared.”

Her older brother crouched down to one knee in front of her. “It's going to be okay, Ellie. We have to trust God, remember?”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Oh come on! We have a crisis here!”

The door swung open again, and a woman holding a large lantern and wearing a long blue dress rushed into the room. “Girls! Quickly! Get to—” The woman stopped mid-sentence when she saw Jack standing there. “What are you doing in here?!” “Mrs. Keswick!” Jack said. “Someone's attacking the village!”

“I know.” Mrs. Keswick whisked across the room and pulled the drapes shut with a flourish. “That's why you must all get to the stables.”

“The stables? Why?” Molly asked.

Mrs. Keswick waved a hand at them. “You have to leave. Now. There's no time to explain. Remember when I showed you the packs, Molly?”

“Yes.”

“There's one for each of you. Take one and ride south. Find a man named Jagger.” Mrs. Keswick hurried to the door frame and poked her head out, the lantern swaying in her hand and casting orange light around the room.

A voice shouted from down below. A deep voice, probably a man, Molly guessed. “This house 'ere! Come on!”

“They're here.” Mrs. Keswick hurried across the hallway and whispered to them: “Quickly! Hide under the beds!”

Ellie dropped to the floor and dragged her teddy bear underneath the bed, sliding to the very back against the wall. Jack scrambled in after her, struggling to fit. Molly slid underneath her own bed, hands clutching the bedposts.

“Jack!” Ellie hissed, burying her face into his vest.

“Shhh!” Jack whispered, putting a hand around his sister's head and holding her close.

“What is going on?” Molly mouthed at him from across the room.

“I don't know,” Jack said, “but I think we better do as Mrs. Keswick says.”

Mrs. Keswick had left the lantern glowing in the hallway and returned, holding up a long, thin rapier. She tossed it onto the bed while she tied her hair up in a tight bun. Molly's mouth dropped open. Mrs. Keswick whipped the sword back up into her hand, holding it steadily in front of her as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

Molly couldn't process what she was even seeing. Preciously sweet Mrs. Keswick holding a sword and ready to battle with village raiders? Usually, she was in the kitchen baking a new batch of cakes or scrubbing laundry by the river or reading to them from a storybook, not holding a sword like one of the emperor's soldiers.

“Stay silent! I'll try to draw them off! When they're gone, run to the stables.” She scanned the bedroom and then fixated on the doorway. “Don't worry about me, children. I'll join you shortly.”

The downstairs door splintered inward. Footsteps clomped around the main hallway before trudging up the stairs. The intruder slowed in the upstairs hallway. Mrs. Keswick held out her blade, sweat tracing down her cheek. Molly sucked in a breath and her gaze riveted to the doorway. Two boots covered in mud stepped around the corner.

The man stopped in the doorway, turning to face Mrs. Keswick with a wicked grin. He wore silver chain mail and the crest of the emperor: a silver chalice filled with bubbling blue water. His sword was

longer than Mrs. Keswick's and much thicker. He smirked at her. Molly silently slipped backward out of sight.

“Ello there, marm. You must be the lady of the 'ouse then?”

Mrs. Keswick whipped the sword through the air in front of his face. “Indeed. And no one will be invading on my watch!” The soldier took a step backward as the blade flew past his nose.

“So the poppet wants to play? Well, that tea party can be arranged!” He laughed and lunged forward, swinging his sword and clashing against hers. A spark shot into the air. They pushed away from each other, backing slowly around the room. Mrs. Keswick ran, leaped up onto the bed, and somersaulted right over the soldier's astonished face, slicing his cheek in the process. She landed on both feet and slid out the door.

“Coming?” she asked, waving at the soldier.

He touched the dribble of blood on his cheek and gritted his teeth. “Come back 'ere!” He rushed out the door, swinging his sword around the corner.

“Whoa . . .” Molly whispered. “She's good.”

Jack snapped his fingers, and Molly glanced up. He motioned to the doorway. Now was their chance. Sliding toward the edge of the bed and slipping his head out from under the hanging blue sheets. Molly stuck her head out too, listening as swords clashed downstairs. Mrs. Keswick shouted at the top of her lungs, and the soldier shouted back.

More footsteps echoed in the upstairs hallway, creaking their way toward the open door. Molly sucked her head back underneath her bed and watched as another soldier clomped into the room.

This soldier was taller. Silver chain mail gathered around his neck, and the same silver chalice emblazoned on his chest. He carried a sword equally as long and thick as the previous soldier and swung it around the open room, marching across to the window and swiping back the drapes to tug on the window latch still firmly in place. He spun around, moonlight glinting off the sharp edges of his weapon.

“I know you're in here,” he whispered. “The fancy lady out there wouldn't be defending you if this wasn't the place.”

A third soldier burst into the room. This one shorter, and much stockier. “Stop talking and start finding the little brats. They have to be around somewhere. They couldn't have gotten away.”

The tall soldier gripped the other man's shoulder. “Can you imagine the good fortune if we are the ones who find them? Morogh will—”

The short soldier slapped the taller one across the face, leaving a red mark visible even in the moonlight. He held up a gloved finger under the man's nose. “Don't speak his name. Find them!” He shoved the tall soldier toward the white-painted wardrobe in the corner of the room.

The tall soldier yanked open the wardrobe, rifling through the clothes inside. Molly held her breath. It was only a matter of time before these soldiers checked underneath the beds. Then they were captured for sure. She glanced at the doorway, wondering if she could

make a break for it. But Ellie and Jack were both still huddled underneath Ellie's bed. They would never make it if she bolted now.

Jack reached his arm up and carefully slid one of Ellie's pillows off the bed. He motioned for Molly to grab one of hers. She peeked out to see the soldiers now checking the toy chest in the other corner of the room and quickly snatched her pillow.

The soldiers crossed the room to the beds now, whipping the sheets onto the floor. Molly stared at the boots of the tall soldier right beside her face, reeking of mud and refuse. Jack held up three fingers and silently counted at her: "Three . . . Two . . . One. . . ."

"Now!" Molly shouted, rolling out from under the bed and smacking her pillow across the soldier's face. Jack rolled out at the same time, swinging his pillow at the other soldier. Both of them were taken off guard, stumbling backward as the pillows burst open and feathers flew into the air. Ellie scrambled out, yanked her sheet off the floor, and threw it over the soldiers before giving the taller one a good kick to the knee.

The soldiers fell backward, a tangle of sheets, blankets, and feathers.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" Jack shouted, grabbing Ellie's hand and racing to the door.

"What about Mrs. Keswick?" Ellie asked.

Molly grabbed her and Ellie's shoes by the door. "She can apparently handle herself. Let's go!"

The three orphans pounded out of the room, hearing the soldiers behind them swear and curse as they threw aside the sheets and stood to their feet.

“After them! We can't let them escape!”

Molly flew down the stairs, two steps at a time, just ahead of Ellie and Jack. All three of them ran to the door, shoving it open and running as fast as they could across the lawn to the stable under a large oak tree. They managed to slip inside before anybody spotted them. It would be only moments before the soldiers found them.

TWO

The first thing Jack noticed when he slid to a halt inside the stable was the silence. A single lantern still burned on the far side, lighting up six empty horse stalls and hay strewn across the ground.

“Where are the horses?” Ellie asked, tugging on Jack's hand.

“Oh great. Now what do we do?” Molly spun around in a circle, hands in the air.

Jack's stomach dropped to the floor. Why was any of this happening? Why now? What were those soldiers after? And why were the horses gone? The questions swirled. He swallowed carefully. He had to put on a brave face for Ellie's sake. She was the only family he had left, and he was not about to let her see him panic.

“The packs!” Jack said. “Mrs. Keswick told you to get them! Where are they?”

Molly nodded. “Right. The packs.” She scraped open the first horse stall and hurried inside. A moment later, she emerged with three brown sacks in her hands. Each one clanked when she jostled them. She tossed

one to Jack and handed the other to Ellie. They slung them over their shoulders.

Jack didn't know how far they'd get, but if they started now, they'd at least get away long enough to put some distance between the emperor's soldiers and themselves.

Molly adjusted her sack and pulled the drawstring tightly. "Where are we even going?"

"Mrs. Keswick told us to find someone," Ellie said.

"That's right. It was a man's name. I think it started with a J . . . ?" Jack glanced at Molly who shrugged.

The stable doors swung inward, and a shout startled them all. Jack jumped around and saw the two soldiers, framed by the moonlight.

The tall one puffed a feather away from his face. "Got you! There's nowhere to run now!"

Jack grabbed the pitchfork leaning beside the horse stall. He held it up with shaking hands, dropping the sack to the ground with a clunk. "St . . . stay b-back!" He shouted, pointing the tines at the tall soldier's face.

The shorter soldier chuckled. "Isn't that cute? He's got a little stuttering problem. Afraid, kid? You should be."

Molly dropped her sack, pushed Ellie behind her, and grabbed up the rusting manure shovel. "We're not afraid of you!"

The tall soldier sneered at her and licked his lips. "Good. You shouldn't be afraid of the emperor either." His gaze slowly settled on each one of them for a brief moment. Jack shivered and glanced away

when the soldier looked at him. “He's been anxious to meet the three of you.”

The soldiers raised their swords above their heads. A shovel swung and smacked the two soldiers in the back of the neck. Ellie, Molly, and Jack watched the soldiers' eyelids flutter before their eyes rolled back and they stumbled forward. The kids jumped out of the way as the two soldiers thumped to the ground revealing Mrs. Keswick, hair a bit disheveled and holding a shovel in both hands.

“The emperor isn't getting you today.” Mrs. Keswick glanced around the stables and saw the empty stalls. “They've taken the horses. Drat.” She clucked her tongue twice. “We can make it on foot.” In her hand, Mrs. Keswick clutched three orange flowers. She held out one to each of them. “There's one of these for each of you.”

“What are they?” Ellie asked.

Mrs. Keswick smiled quickly. “They're called nasturtiums. But other people call them the Resurrection flower. I've been keeping these three alive for many years in case we needed them. If any of you should become mortally wounded, eat this, and your wounds shall heal.”

Jack took the flowers and carefully placed them inside his pack.

Mrs. Keswick took a step toward the other end of the stables. Ellie reached up and touched the woman's arm. “Mrs. Keswick? What's happening?”

Mrs. Keswick leaned down and held Ellie's face with one hand. “I can explain everything once we're safe, dear.”

A twig snapped, and the doors on the other end of the stable slid open. A man stepped inside. Even from across the way, Jack could see

his crooked teeth set in a grin that made his stomach uneasy. The man had long, stringy, white hair, clumped together around and over his shoulders. A black cape rustled behind him in the breeze, and he wore dark boots and a dark tunic to match. Patches of fur rested across his shoulders, and a necklace of sharpened teeth hung loosely around his neck. The man unsheathed a long jagged sword; the edges stained red.

“Well, then,” The man whispered, his voice like gravel scraping across a wooden plank. He took a step toward them. All four of them took a step back.

Mrs. Keswick held her rapier up, pointing the tip straight at the man's heart. “Thane.”

Thane nodded his head to one side and smiled slowly. “Who else?”

“Morogh would send you to do his bidding.”

The man's eyes widened. Jack noticed the sickly yellow glow floating under Thane's pupils. “You dare speak his name!”

“He is not my lord. And he will never be.” Mrs. Keswick spat on the ground beside her boot.

“That doesn't matter.” Thane took another step forward, dragging his blade through the hay and dirt. “Your caretaking days are done now, madam. I will be taking these three children with me to see the emperor.”

“You most certainly will not!” Mrs. Keswick screamed and raced forward; rapier held high.

Thane whipped his blade into the air and swung down on hers. It crashed to the ground. Thane whipped his sword at Mrs. Keswick's face. She jumped back and slid to the side, kicking Thane's leg with her

boot. The man buckled, crashing into one of the stall doors and falling inside. Hay flew up around him.

Mrs. Keswick pointed at Jack, keeping her eyes on Thane. "Run!"

Thane leaped back to his feet and charged forward. Their swords clashed in a frenzy, sparks flying from side to side. Mrs. Keswick's bun slipped out, and her hair fell around her shoulders as she spun around and punched Thane in the cheek. Blood flew from his mouth and splattered the hay.

Jack, Molly, and Ellie watched, terrified, unwilling to run away. Mrs. Keswick had been with them for many, many years. Jack had always been by Mrs. Keswick's side as she read storybooks and taught them horse care and farming. She had sung lullabies to them as young children when their dreams and nightmares collided. She had been there when Jack had fallen from the tree and broken his arm. She had been the one to set it with a splint and watch over it carefully as it mended.

And now, here she was, fighting the scariest man Jack had ever seen.

Fear locked his feet to the floor. He willed himself to move. No matter what his brain told the rest of him, it was no use. He was going nowhere.

A shout came from behind. Jack turned to see the first soldier standing in the door frame. The soldier gripped Ellie's arm and yanked her outside.

"Here you are!" the soldier shouted, dragging Ellie to a brown horse waiting by the oak tree. The horse stamped its feet and neighed.

“Help! Help!” Ellie screamed, pounding against the soldier's chest. “Let me go! Jack!” Her gaze found his and unlocked his feet from the floor.

“Let go of my sister!” Jack rushed forward, but not before the tall soldier on the ground reached out and grabbed his ankle, pulling him to the floor. He banged his chin against a rock, and blood trickled down his neck.

Molly rushed over and stomped her foot on the soldier's wrist. “Let go, you pig!”

The soldier released Jack's ankle long enough for him to kick the man in the nose. He heard a crunch, and the man howled in pain.

Jack glanced up and saw the soldier carry Ellie onto his horse and throw his arms around her waist. She screamed and cried, tears streaking her face. Ellie kicked backward, but the soldier turned, smirked at Jack, and then smacked his sister over the head with a gloved hand. Ellie slumped forward, her cheek resting against the horse's neck.

The horse turned, and the soldier kicked at its sides, sending it into a hard gallop across the field, toward the main road leading to one place: the emperor's castle far, far from their tiny village.

Mrs. Keswick grunted behind him. “Quickly! Run! I'll go after Ellie!”

Jack scrambled to his feet and saw Thane swinging his blade at Mrs. Keswick. “But she's my sister!”

“Don't argue with me! Just run! Now!”

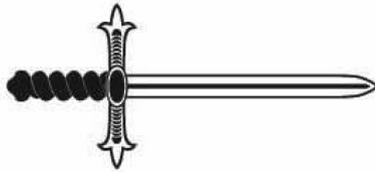
Jack blinked at Molly who grabbed up her sack and shoes and raced to his side.

“We've got to go!” Molly said, kicking the tall soldier again, making contact with his temple. The soldier slumped back to the ground, limp.

Jack's throat was closing in on him. They had to run. But Ellie was gone. Just like that. He had sworn to himself that he would never lose her. Now she was racing into the night on the back of a horse bound for the emperor's castle. Would he ever see her again?

“Sorry about this,” Molly said. She slapped him across the face and then grabbed both of his cheeks. “Look at me! We've got to run! We'll never save Ellie if we're captured too!”

Jack shook himself back to reality. Together they sprinted toward the woods on the far side of the orphanage.



Mrs. Keswick slammed her rapier against Thane's sword and held him there in a deadlock. Thane grit his teeth and pushed her off, sending her stumbling backward a few steps. He spit on the ground and wiped a dirty hand across his face. He could taste blood on his tongue, and he licked his teeth, leaving behind a red smear.

“You've been working on your swordplay.” He took a step toward her and could tell that she was tiring. She gasped for a breath and steeled herself, standing up straight, and holding out her rapier. But the

deep breathing gave her away. “You forget.” He swung his sword at her again. She parried and pushed back. “I always win.” With a quick flourish, Thane spun the tip of his blade around hers and whipped her rapier to the side. It stuck into a wooden post beside them, dangling in the air.

Thane kicked her in the gut. Mrs. Keswick fell to the ground with a gasp. He used that brief moment to drive his blade into her side. Mrs. Keswick screamed and clutched her stomach before he yanked his sword out.

Mrs. Keswick curled her hands into fists and pushed them into the dirt. “You’ll never get those children.”

Thane leaned over her, pointing his sword underneath her chin. “I already have one of them. All I need are two more. And then the emperor will remain in power forever. He will have every inch of this kingdom in his grasp. He will be master of everything!”

Mrs. Keswick took a deep breath. “You’ve underestimated those children. And underestimated another who will never be replaced. By anyone. Even Morogh.” She grimaced in pain and clutched her side, her hands unable to stop the deadly flow of blood streaming out.

“Fool.” He laughed and stood to his full height. “You’ve already lost. This war will be won. By darkness! You were a worthy enemy.” He tapped two fingers against his forehead. “So long.”

Thane swung around, his cape billowing out behind him. He marched to the two fallen soldiers and grabbed the taller one by the hair. “Get up!”

The soldier woke, groaned, smacked one hand against his temple.

Thane pulled him close enough for his foul breath to drift over the simple man's face. "They went into the woods! Find them and bring them to me!" He shoved the soldier toward the stable door.

The soldier stumbled forward, grabbed his sword, and then raced away into the night.

THREE

The woods were always dark, but tonight, they seemed gloomier than normal. Jack would never admit it, but he had sneaked out this way once. Molly had dared him to do it. She had told him the legend of a strange toadstool growing in the woods by the black pond. The legend said if someone plucked a toadstool under a harvest moon, then their deepest wish would be granted.

Jack had never believed those sorts of things could be true, but Molly had accused him of being afraid, so he had done it. He had snuck out in the middle of the night when everyone else had been asleep. Strange noises had echoed through the woods then, and they did now. He had never found the stupid thing, and Molly had teased him endlessly about it. But if he had found it, he knew the wish he would have made: to be with his parents again. Now? He would wish for Ellie to be by his side, and the emperor's soldiers to be far, far away.

Ellie was the only family he had left. They had been dropped on Mrs. Keswick's doorstep many years ago when Jack was four and Ellie was a baby. He had no memory of life before that. Everything was a

foggy blank. Molly had shown up around the same time from somewhere else. And since he and Molly were about the same age, they had become friends.

Sometimes Jack would watch the other kids in the village playing with their dogs and families, sitting around a dinner table with a father, a mother, an annoying older brother, and maybe a cousin or two. He had always dreamed of living like that one day.

But that was never going to happen. He was truly alone.

A tear slipped down his face as he pushed past another branch. They had stopped running and had been stumbling forward in the dark for a long time, tripping over fallen logs, slapping away night beetles, and trying to stay close enough to see each other in the murky darkness.

He wiped away his tear and slipped on a wet log, falling face first into the mud. The tears erupted. He couldn't stop them anymore. They slid down his face, streaking his cheeks.

Molly jerked to a stop ahead of him and circled back. "Jack . . . come on. You can't cry right now! We've got to get away!"

"But . . ." Jack looked up and saw the branches like inky fingers silhouetted against the night sky. "My sister. . . I . . ."

Molly crouched in the mud and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jack. I really am. Ellie was like the little sister I never had. But we have to keep moving."

"I know. I just . . ."

She grabbed his arm and yanked him to his feet. "Come on, Jack. We can do this. Together."

They took a step and heard a branch snap behind them. The forest stood silent, waiting for morning. They whipped around and stared at the darkness, listening to the quiet, wondering if they had just imagined the sound or if someone was coming for them.

Leaves crunched underfoot.

Molly leaned close to Jack's ear and whispered, "Someone's coming. Jack, we have to hide."

He nodded, slid a hand under his nose, and pointed at a bush growing around two trees. It looked thorny and thick enough to hide them until their pursuer had passed by. They took careful steps, putting their heels down first and letting their toes curl over rocks and fallen branches. Molly pushed into the bush first and Jack followed close behind, scratching his hand on a sharp thorn.

They held their breath, scanning the trees and waiting for whoever was following them to show up. A moment later, the tall soldier hurdled into the open, sword at his side.

"Come out. I know you're here. Hiding. Like little cowards." He swung his sword at a nearby bush, slicing clean through the branches. "I promise . . . I won't hurt you if you come out willingly. Morogh wants to see you. Badly." He swung again, smacking at a branch overhead and knocking it to the forest floor. "Come on now. He's the emperor. How bad can he be?"

The soldier stepped past their hiding place. As soon as he had passed them, Molly leaped out from the bush, shoving the soldier to the ground. "Bad enough!" she shouted at him.

The man was quick. He caught himself and swung around, sweeping his sword through the air. Molly jumped backward, missing the blade by inches.

“Ere's number one, but where's your friend?” The tall soldier grinned at her. “Or are you all alone out 'ere in the dark?”

Jack gripped his pack and burst out from the bush, swinging the pack at the soldier. It smacked him in the back of the head. He stumbled forward. Molly stepped to the side and held out her foot. The soldier tripped and fell to the dirt before rolling to the side and jumping back up.

“Come on! Run!” Molly shouted.

Jack raced behind her, and they shoved past trees and bushes and ferns blocking their way. He could feel his chest tightening as he pounded over the dirt. He didn't know how long they had already traveled, but if he didn't get some rest soon, he wouldn't be able to step across another room let alone an entire forest.

The soldier hacked at the branches and shouted after them. They rounded another tree, and Molly slid to a halt, throwing her arm out to catch Jack. “It's a drop-off!”

Jack slammed into her arm. A river raced through the woods forty feet below them. Rocks clung to the side of the drop-off, sharp enough to take off a limb if they had fallen. Both of them spun around as the soldier stepped toward them.

“Now then,” he gasped. “The two . . . of you . . . are coming with me!”

He pointed the sword at them. Jack swallowed.

“Not on my watch!”

The shout came from behind the soldier, and Jack glanced around to see Mrs. Keswick heave a rock at the man's head. The soldier spun as the rock collided with his face. He screamed, clutching what must have been a broken nose. He stumbled backward and tumbled off the edge of the drop-off.

Jack and Molly dropped to the ground and leaned over the edge. The soldier shouted curses at them until he finally splashed into the river. With one more screamed curse, the nasty current swept the soldier downstream.

Mrs. Keswick collapsed against the side of a tree.

“Mrs. Keswick!” Jack shouted. He raced to her, grabbing her hand and holding it tightly. Her fingers felt numb and cold.

“Jack . . . Molly . . .” she whispered.

“Where's Ellie?” Jack asked.

Mrs. Keswick's face scrunched up in pain. “Morogh's fortress. In the mountains.”

“We've got to rescue her!”

Mrs. Keswick shook her head. “You'd be walking right in Morogh's hands.”

Molly crunched over the leaves and crouched down. “Why does he even want us?”

“You three are the most carefully guarded secret in the whole realm.” She looked at them and coughed. The cough racked her entire body. Jack noticed the wound at her side for the first time. “I was

sworn to protect you at all costs. Morogh must never find all three of you. If he does, he will be emperor forever.”

“What should we do?” Jack asked.

Mrs. Keswick coughed again. “Find Jagger. He’s the only one who can help you now.”

Molly threw her hands into the air as tears threatened her eyelids. “I still don’t understand any of this! It doesn’t make sense!”

Mrs. Keswick grabbed Molly’s wrist. “You, Jack, and Ellie are the three heroes. Do you remember the story I always told you? About the three heroes who could stop Morogh from cementing his rule as emperor and unleashing unspeakable evil against Tanniyn?” She pulled weakly on Molly’s hand.

“Yes, we do,” Molly whispered.

“What I never—” Mrs. Keswick gasped and winced before taking two deep breaths. “What I never told you is those three heroes were children. They’re you. You have to be the heroes I know you are!”

Jack snorted. “Heroes? We’re not heroes! We’re just powerless orphans who couldn’t even defend our own orphanage! We’re worthless!”

Molly smacked his shoulder. “Uh, excuse me. You might feel worthless, but I definitely ain’t.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Jack turned away. “We’re not heroes. We aren’t strong enough to fight off Lady Cameron and her twenty mink furs, let alone soldiers from Morogh’s personal battalion!”

“Being a hero isn’t about being stronger than your enemy.” Mrs. Keswick fell to another coughing fit. Jack’s throat caught as he watched

her face twist with what must have been unbearable pain. “Open your pack.”

He picked it up and loosened the drawstring. He hadn't had a chance to sift through it yet. Inside, he found a small pot, a canteen of water, a candle, some flint and a striking stone, and a thick book. “What am I looking for?”

“The book. Pull it out.”

Jack pulled out the book and squinted at the cover. He couldn't quite make it out, but he thought he knew what it might be. The edges felt worn, and the cover was a thick rawhide, probably from a calf. He handed the book to Molly and fetched out the candle and lit it.

The light flickered as Molly held the cover under its glow.

“It's a Bible?” Jack whispered.

Mrs. Keswick nodded. “Yes. Inside this book are the answers you're looking for, Jack. What it really means to be a hero.” She took the Bible from his hands and flipped through the pages. A small black ribbon snaked its way out of the binding. Mrs. Keswick stuffed it into the margin as a bookmark. “I don't . . . have much time left . . . but there's a story you must know before—”

Jack held up his hand. “Don't say it.”

“Promise me you'll read this story.” She grabbed Jack's vest and pulled him closer. “Remember, even when terrible things happen, you must have courage. You're both—” she coughed again and groaned with pain. “You're fighting a battle. Morogh doesn't love the people. He certainly has no love for God. But the question you must answer is this: do the two of you love Him?”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Who? Morogh? I don't love him one bit. Nobody with a brain does.”

“No. Not Morogh. God. Do you love God?”

“Oh,” Molly said, her eyes darting from side to side. “Ummm . . .”

Jack spoke up. “I do. I love God, just like you taught us, Mrs. Keswick.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. Mrs. Keswick's eyelids closed and she took a deep breath. “Then trust Him. Trust Him enough to have the courage to face the next battle that comes. That's what it means to be a hero. The courage doesn't come from you. It comes from knowing God is by your side through all of it.”

Molly let out a sigh. “I don't know . . .”
“You must, children!” She coughed again. “You must . . .”

“Mrs. Keswick . . .” Jack whispered.

The woman curled her hand into a fist and pushed against her head. Wrinkles broke out all along her forehead. “I'm afraid my time has come. My part in this story is almost over, but yours is just beginning. Read the story, Jack. Learn to be a hero. And find Jagger. He's the only one who can help you now.”

Mrs. Keswick leaned her head back against the tree. For a moment, Jack thought she might have already passed on.

Molly ran a hand through Mrs. Keswick's dark brown hair. “How will we find him?”

Mrs. Keswick's eyes opened a crack. “Keep heading . . . south. . . . When you find the obelisk, you should find him not far from there. . . .”

Mention my . . . name . . . and . . . he will . . . help you. . . .” Her eyes closed and her head slumped forward, chin against her chest.

“Mrs. Keswick?” Jack shook her shoulder. “The flower! Those nastarians or whatever they're called!”

Molly placed a hand on his back. “Jack, how can a flower actually save somebody? That's impossible!”

“We have to at least try it.” Jack pulled the orange flower from his pack and carefully picked off the petals, mashing them together in his palms. Then, he opened Mrs. Keswick's mouth and placed the petals on her tongue. As carefully as he could, he pushed her jaw open and closed.

“Jack,” Molly whispered. “It's not working.”

Jack let the tears fall. He kissed his fingers and laid them across Mrs. Keswick's forehead before he whispered, “Goodbye, Mrs. Keswick.” He snatched up the Bible and stuffed it into his pack. Molly grabbed her own sack and together they took off trudging through the woods, leaving Mrs. Keswick's still body far behind.

FOUR

Jack stumbled ahead, blindly leading them in a southward direction. Mrs. Keswick had taught them a long time ago how to orient themselves to the compass, whether by watching the sun, the stars, or the moss on the back of trees. As he stepped over another small bush covered in dark berries, he couldn't help but wonder: how many things had Mrs. Keswick taught them on purpose? Sure, there were the regular day to day things everyone growing up had to learn like how to make food, hunt, or farm, but then there were these other things.

Like how Mrs. Keswick had taught Molly all about horses and their care. And how she had taught Jack about scavenging for food in the forest. The berries he had stepped over were poisonous. The color and shape of the leaves were the main tells of poison. They would have to find other berries in these woods that were safe to eat.

And then there was all this talk about Molly, Ellie, and himself being some carefully guarded secret. What did that even mean? Did it have to do with their families? And what kind of unspeakable evil could Morogh unleash by capturing three orphans from a nowhere village?

He had heard tales of Morogh before. He was a tyrant to say it nicely. Morogh would imprison people for cheating on taxes, and then behead them the next day for complaining about the state of his dungeons. Evil wasn't a harsh enough word to describe Morogh's behavior.

Jack shuddered and thought about Ellie, offering a quick prayer for her soul and her safety. He dreaded the idea of Ellie spending even a single day with the emperor. What would he do to her?

He shook his head, and Molly coughed.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm just exhausted. We should try to sleep. Even an hour would probably help."

"Good idea. How far away do you think this Obelisk thing is?"

Molly shrugged. "No idea. Could be days away, could be hours. I've never been there. Never even heard of it before."

Jack scanned the ground ahead and saw a patch of open dirt covered in soft leaves and surrounded by taller bushes. It would be the perfect place to bed down for what little night remained. He pushed into the clearing and held a branch aside so Molly could step past.

She opened her sack and found blankets and sewn pouches as wide as Jack's shoulders. "What are these?" she asked.

Again, Mrs. Keswick was too smart. "Pillows. We fill them with some leaves to fluff them up."

They began to fill their pillows, setting their sacks under a short pine tree with low-hanging branches. Together they made quick work of it, stuffing their pouches with leaves and pine needles. Jack spotted a

raspberry bush a few steps away. He picked a handful and plopped them into a tin cup from his sack.

They each grabbed a blanket and lay down. As Jack pulled the blanket up to his chin, he watched the stars blinking far above the trees.

He slid the cup over to Molly. "Here, eat these."

"How do you know they're safe?"

"They're raspberries, of course."

Molly snatched them up and popped them into her mouth. "I knew that." She grew quiet as Jack slowly munched his own raspberries.

"Jack?"

"Hmm?"

"What's going to happen to us?"

Jack let out a long breath. "I don't know. I just . . . I keep thinking about Ellie in the emperor's castle and all the terrible things that could be happening to her. The only thing we can do is ask God to protect her."

Molly sighed. "You and all of this religious stuff again. You really think there's a God watching over us when stuff like this happens?" She lay back down and turned her face away from him. "Because I don't."

Jack didn't know what to say. He fingered the tassels on the edge of his blanket, twisting one between his thumb and forefinger. Soon, soft snoring came from Molly's pillow, and Jack closed his eyes.

But as soon as his eyes shut, they opened again. Only, he was no longer lying down in a clearing in the woods. Molly was nowhere to be seen, and instead of trees, he saw sparse, rolling hills stretching off into

the distance. The earth was cracked and crying out for even the slightest hint of rain to soothe its aching skin.

Jack saw the ground beneath him and then spun to see a large valley far below covered with tents and camels tethered to wooden posts. Fires flickered throughout the camp, and every so often he heard a shout and a smack and something shattering.

Where was Molly? Where was the pine tree, the sacks, the scratchy raspberry bush? Where was he? He closed his eyes and held his head. “Open your eyes, because you’re just dreaming, Jack,” he whispered.

He opened his eyes. But Molly, the forest, all of it, was still missing. In the far distance, the sun poked its head above the edge of the hills. As soon as first light struck the tents below, a shout echoed throughout the camp, repeated by hundreds of men on down to the tent closest to where Jack stood.

The words were in another language, but somehow, Jack could understand perfectly. “Ready yourselves! We ride when the sun crests the hill!”

Down below men wearing strange armor and rounded helmets rushed about, gathering short swords and spears, saddling camels, and hanging empty bags made from skins on the sides of their mounts.

The sun inched over the hill, and as soon as its last rays reached the top, there was a collective shout from the camp below. The men leaped onto their camels and galloped ahead, straight toward the hill Jack stood on.

He tried to move, but his feet wouldn't budge. He yanked on his foot with his hand. “Come on! You have to move!” he said.

Jack closed his eyes. "I must be dreaming. I must be." But no matter how hard he squinched his eyelids together, hoping desperately to wake back up in the woods. But nothing happened. When he opened his eyes again, the hills, the tents, the horde of raiders on the backs of camels still charged at him. "Run!" he screamed at himself.

His feet moved like he was trudging through waist deep water, but soon, he was able to run at full speed, racing down the hill's other side. He scrambled past a barren tree, his feet slipping out from under him. Jack grasped a tree branch, and it cracked off with a puff of dust in his hand. He slid down the rest of the hill, tumbling forward, somersaulting until he had reached the bottom. The first wave of riders mounted the top of the hill above him, holding long curved swords into the air and shouting.

Jack raced ahead, ducking past boulders and sharp rocks spread across the ground. He rounded the edge of another boulder when one of the riders came up right behind him, swinging his sword. Jack ducked and heard the schlink as the blade passed inches from his head.

Another boulder loomed ahead. Jack dodged to its side. The rider and his camel rounded the other side and smashed his blade into the stone.

"Leave me alone!" Jack screamed.

The rider jumped from his camel and grinned, licked his lips, and stepped forward. He held the sharp edge of his blade. "Lost in the hills, are you?" The rider clucked his tongue and pulled on the dark, grisly beard hanging to his chest. "Bad place to be in these times." He held

the sword above his head, and Jack dropped to the ground, grabbing a handful of dirt and throwing it up at the man's face.

The dirt stung the man's eyes, and he dropped his sword to the ground with a clatter, clutching his face and screaming. "You little urchin! I'll kill you for this!"

Jack turned and ran, stumbling over rocks and stones sliding around him. The earth shook from the pounding of the camels nearby, and small beetles buzzed through the air all around his head. He swung his arms wildly, pushing through the cloud of bugs. He heard the man behind him scrambling up the side of the hill. He fell to his hands and knees, climbing up on all fours. Stones and trails of dust fell down the hillside behind him.

The top of the hill revealed more hills spread out for leagues and leagues to the south. Jack fell to his butt and slid down the other side. The man chased right behind him, shouting curses with each breath.

He slid forward and saw the opening. A cave in the side of the hill. As he came towards it, a hand reached out and nearly yanked Jack's arm out of the socket. The strong hand pulled him into the gloom. Jack wrestled away, but two hands clamped around his mouth and head, dragging him farther into the darkness of the cave.

In the dim light, Jack saw a woman's face, head covered with a white shawl, blue eyes sparkling even in the darkness. She held a finger to her lips and shook her head.

The raider outside shouted and fell past the opening, rocks crunching underneath him the farther down the hill he hobbled. Jack tried to slow his breathing, consciously thinking about sucking in the

air and blowing it back out, again and again, and again. He felt the hands on him release and slowly pull back.

The woman appeared in front of him again and motioned for Jack to follow her. He turned and silently crept after her as another woman appeared from deeper within the cave.

Footsteps echoed near the entrance. “Where are you, urchin? Hiding in the cave?” The raider smacked his sword against the rock wall. Sparks flew in an arch through the air, lighting the cave in a bright flash of blue and white.

Jack’s chest tightened. He struggled for a breath, but air refused to enter his lungs. The woman pulled his arm around a bend in the cave, and he hurried with her. A tunnel stretched ahead in the darkness, lit by the dawning sunlight managing to slip inside. The raider rounded the corner right behind them, sliding his sword along the ground. It scraped across stones, and in the dark, they could hear him stomp a boot.

A sniff echoed down the tunnel. “Smells like you aren't alone down here. Are you?” He smacked his sword against the wall again. “Come out, little urchin. It's time to play.”

A rock flew at the man from beyond Jack. It smacked him in the shoulder before another rock sailed at him and then another. Jack turned away as the stones piled up, and the man shouted, turned, and ran out of the cave at full sprint.

“I'll find you! I will!” he screamed as he ran out into the sunlight again.

Jack let out the breath he'd been holding. "Thank you," he whispered. "Can you tell em where I am? Please, I was with my friend Molly in the woods, and then I just woke up here and—"

The women held fingers to their mouths again and pulled on his arm. They led him deeper into the tunnels. Jack lost track of how many turns they hurried around, and even though his eyes fought to see, everything around him remained dark.

They stopped some distance away from the entrance, sliding against the cave wall to the ground.

Rustling, a clank, and then a scrape, and a spark ignited a small oil lamp made from bronze. The woman with the white shawl held the lamp up in the gloom. The light shone over her face, and Jack could see her smile sadly at him. The other woman crouched beside her, an olive-skinned face framed with hair as dark as coal. She wore her shawl around her neck; her hair cascading down her back in greasy clumps. Dirt covered both of their faces as if they had been living in these caves for a long time.

"Now can you please tell me where I am? Who was that man?" he asked.

The woman with the white shawl didn't speak. She turned and nudged her friend, who cleared her throat.

"Haven't you heard, boy?"

Jack smacked his forehead. "No! I'm sorry, but I haven't heard anything because I don't know where I am or where my friend is or how I even got here!"

The woman blinked at him, took a long breath, and then spoke. “Those raiders have been coming every spring for the past seven years. Every time from the east. They take everything. Every last sheep, goat, cow, even the donkeys.”

“Who are they?” Jack asked.

The woman with the white shawl picked up the lamp and crossed the small chamber to a round stone against the rocky wall. She sat, picked up a window spoon, and dipped it into a tiny clay jar, staring at the oil inside as she stirred.

“They're from the land of Midian. To the east, like I said. There's no way to stop them. Some of our bravest warriors were killed last week trying to stop the raiders from taking our crops. But it's no use. No matter how hard we fight, they always fight back harder.” She paused, tracing her finger in the cave floor's dust. “We don't know what to do.”

Jack didn't know what else to say or ask. These two women had been through a lot. Had they lived in this cave for seven years? And where was he anyway? He must have been dreaming. It was the only thing that made any sense at all.

“Sleep,” the woman said. “I saw beetles swarming near the cave entrance when you arrived. Might be enough for a meal. Come, sister.” She waved her hand at the silent woman.

Jack nodded. They left the lamp beside him and hurried into the darkness. He watched them until they disappeared into the gloom. He yawned and realized he was ready to sleep for a long, long time.

A small thatch of straw lay on the far side of the chamber. He crawled over to it, laying his head against a small, smooth stone.

Then he saw the basket.

It had been woven together with reeds, dried, and then covered in pitch. Something was bundled inside the basket, covered with scratchy blankets. He sat up, leaning over to see inside the basket. Jack noticed the strange smell wafting up from the blankets. He reached down to pull it back and gasped.

A small baby lay in the basket, eyes shut.

His throat caught, and he closed his eyes, throwing the blanket back over the baby.

FIVE

Molly yawned, stretched, and wished she had a slingshot so she could take out the obnoxious bird chirping somewhere over her head. Sunlight streamed into the clearing. She sat up and glanced around. The trees stood tall, bark peeling from their sides, no doubt a million bugs scrambling up and down their trunks. A path wound through the woods on the other side of the clearing, and she wondered if it would take them south.

Glancing up at the sun, she figured it must have been mid-morning by now. They needed to get moving soon, or they would never put enough distance between themselves and the emperor's soldiers.

She grabbed a handful of raspberries and chomped them down, wishing for some meat with every swallow.

Jack gasped and opened his eyes wide, sitting straight up.

“What?” Molly asked with a smirk.

His mouth hung open. He was breathing hard, like he had just run from Morogh himself.

“Did you have a bad dream?” she asked.

Jack shook his head and ran a hand through his brown hair. It stuck straight up, which made Molly want to laugh even harder. “No! I didn't!”

“Just asking, that's all. You don't have to be so cranky about it.” Molly stretched again and rolled up her blanket. “We need to move.”

Jack nodded. “Right.” His eyes flitted around. He fixated on the tree branches rustling, peeked at the path ahead, and stared at the raspberry bush across from them.

“You sure you're alright?” Molly asked. “You seem kind of flighty.”

“I'm fine.” He whipped his blanket away. “Like you said, we have to get moving.”

She finished stuffing her blanket into her sack and held out a hand. “Give me your blanket.” He slapped the blanket into her hand.

While she crammed it into the pack, Jack dumped the leaves and needles out of their pillows and then shook them out to make sure nothing unwanted had crawled in during the night.

They made quick work of covering up their makeshift camp, spreading the leaves around behind them, hoping it looked natural enough. Within minutes, they set out on the path. It wound south through the woods. They marched all day without seeing or hearing a sign of anyone.

This area was as desolate as they came. Molly tried to remember the maps of the kingdom Mrs. Keswick had made them study endlessly.

She had always hated the maps. It was boring, tedious work, copying out each detail by hand on a stupid scroll that kept curling up underneath her fingers. It would have been easier in a book, but Mrs.

Keswick insisted they use scrolls. More authentic, Mrs. Keswick would say.

They had lived in a village on the far side of the kingdom, toward the Abrayan Seas in the west. To their north was a wasteland that she couldn't remember the name of at the moment, and to the south, the marshes stretched on for a thousand leagues into nothingness. If there was a place someone wanted to hide, surely the marshes were the best place to go. Even the emperor's soldiers hated the marshes.

Molly peeked at Jack. He kept walking, his head down and his mouth moving as if he were whispering to someone she couldn't see. He seemed bothered. Not that he was usually chipper. Jack was one of the most serious kids Molly had ever known. He never really talked to anyone except her and his sister, and he always jumped at the slightest shadows.

One time, she had sneaked to the window by his room, and in the middle of the night, scratched a fallen tree limb against the beveled glass. Jack had shot out of his bed screaming. Molly smirked just thinking about it. Those had been some good days.

And now this. Now the emperor was chasing them. He had already captured Ellie, and Mrs. Keswick was likely dead in the woods behind them somewhere.

“Jack?”

“Huh?”

“What do you think this whole emperor thing is about exactly? I mean, why would he want three random orphans from a village no one ever bothers to visit?”

Jack shrugged.

“Well, don't you think it's strange? And Mrs. Keswick. She was something else last night. I never knew she could fight like that.” Molly crunched a snail under her boot. “Did you know she could fight?”

Jack shook his head.

“I never imagined it was possible. She was always so domestic. Cooking, cleaning, you know, that stuff.”

Jack spun around. “What's the big deal! She's dead now! Ellie's gone! And we're looking for someone we only know the name of!”

Molly held up both hands. “Hey. Don't get defensive. I was just asking questions.”

“Well, maybe they're questions that don't need to be asked. Have you thought about that?”

“Wow. Sorry, you woke up in a bad mood. I was just trying to figure out what was going on!” Molly stomped ahead, shoving his shoulder as she passed. She had made it a few good yards before Jack finally shouted at her.

“Wait. I'm sorry.” Jack ran up beside her, his pack clunking against his back.

“It's fine,” Molly said. “I don't care. You woke up cranky. It's perfectly understandable. I'm just being stupid!”

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“You always do this really dumb thing where you act like everyone's a victim, and you should just get over it.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Let's just keep moving, okay? We don't have to talk.”

Jack's shoulders slumped. “That's so stupid.”

“What's stupid? The fact that you're not the only one who's going through something extremely terrible right now? Or did you forget that I exist. Again.”

“Girls are impossible.” He threw his hands into the air and marched ahead.

“Oh. Now I'm impossible?” Molly bit her lower lip. “I am not the one marching ahead like a baby.”

A twig snapped to their left, and both of them froze. Molly darted behind the nearest tree, and Jack hurried beside her. They crouched against the bark and peeked around the trunk.

“Do you see anything?” Jack whispered.

“No.” Molly studied the treeline in the distance, but nothing moved. All she could see was tree after tree among green bushes and the occasional patch of sunlight streaming to the ground.

Something ran in a blur across the path, and both of them grabbed the tree, screamed, and ducked. A deer paused, gaped at them, then sauntered past, flitting beyond a row of small saplings barely poking up from the earth.

Molly cleared her throat. “So. We were afraid of a deer.”

“What if it had been somebody trying to kidnap us,” Jack mumbled. “It could have been anything.”

“Right. Perfectly possible.” Molly ran her tongue along the inside of her cheek. “So. Seeing as the rabid deer is gone, keep moving?”

Jack nodded. "Yes."

They hurried back onto the path and strode silently. Molly could feel the tension between them lessening. She was still kind of mad at him, and he was probably furious with her in his own brooding way; they silently agreed not to talk about it for the time being. Instead, they focused on moving as fast as possible, stopping for a break at mid-day for Jack to scavenge more edible berries.

Molly wished she could eat something besides the fruit, but it satisfied her for the moment. They marched until the sun drifted over the horizon and gloom returned to the woods. Orange light filtered through the leaves in strange patterns, casting long shadows and making Molly feel nervous every time an animal rustled in the underbrush.

Fog hugged the ground and swirled around their boots with every step. Jack pointed ahead. "Trees are changing," he whispered.

Molly couldn't pinpoint when it had happened, but now the trees were definitely different. The trunks sloped into the ground with longer curves, the roots hung above the earth before diving their tendrils into the dirt, creating small caves under each tree. The branches reached lower, and the leaves hanging from them were billowed and wispy rather than pointed and crisp.

The ground had softened as well. Molly's boots sunk into the muck every few steps and it was harder and harder to yank her foot back out of the mud.

They had officially reached the marshlands.

"This place looks cheery," she said.

Jack nodded. "If I remember the maps, the Obelisk shouldn't be much farther ahead."

"You actually studied those stupid maps?"

"Yes," Jack said. "Didn't you?"

Molly shook her head. "No way. Too boring. Every time we sat studying those things I wanted to be out with the horses in the stable. Even if it meant shoveling manure."

"Well, I'm glad I remember them." Jack paused, and they walked on in silence for a moment before he continued. "Do you get the feeling that Mrs. Keswick was training us?"

"Yes." Molly pushed aside a branch. "She definitely was. I keep wondering when the next skill she taught us is going to surface unexpectedly. I think she knew something like this was going to happen someday."

"I think so too."

The path wound past a cluster of willow trees, and as soon as they came around, Jack pointed ahead. "Look! There's the Obelisk!"

"Finally," Molly said. "I don't think I could have walked much farther. My feet are killing me."

"Come on." Jack stepped into the open clearing. The Obelisk was black as night with small white specks dotting its surface. The top was pyramid shaped; all the points colliding at the very tip where a golden ball perched. The stone structure descended into the muck below, the fog curling around its edges.

No trees grew anywhere near the Obelisk. That was the first strange thing Molly noted.

“My foot! Molly! Help!” Jack sank forward, one foot on hard ground, the other disappearing into the muck below. A strange slurping noise erupted from the sand. A large brown bubble formed above the fog, popped in the air and splattered both of their faces with mud.

Molly grabbed Jack's arm and yanked him back. “Are you okay?”

He was breathing hard, and his face looked paler than usual. “I'm fine. That's quicksand. We need to be careful.”

“Great.” Molly slapped her sides. “We hiked all this way, and now we can't even get to the Obelisk without being eaten by quicksand!”

“There has to be a way over to it.”

Molly scanned the ground, squinting through the fog and fading light. Something that large had to have a path winding to it. But where?

A small wooden sign with two silver nails attaching it to the trunk of a nearby tree pointed toward the ground to their left. Molly noticed the red arrow pointing down. She carefully stepped toward the tree, testing each footfall before she committed. The ground was firm enough until she stood directly beneath the sign. She stretched her foot into the fog and made contact with a flat stone. With one quick jump, she landed on the stone and waited, ready to jump backward if she needed to.

She called over to Jack. “There's a stone path! Come on!”

Jack scurried over and gingerly stepped onto the stone behind her. Together they took one step at a time across the foggy clearing, knowing one wrong step could be a disaster. It would put an end to the emperor's plans. But dying wasn't something Molly wanted to do today.

She took another step and lost her footing. The stone was covered in moss. Her boot slipped backward. Molly fell forward, but Jack grabbed her black tunic, maintaining his balance with his other arm stuck straight out.

“Jack!” she said through gritted teeth. “Don't let go! Hang on!”

“I'm trying!” Jack yanked on her tunic. They heard the slight rip echo through the clearing. “I'm losing you!”

“Pull me back! Or I'm going straight into the quicksand!”

“My fingers are slipping!” Jack staggered back, and Molly smacked face-first into the quicksand. It sucked her hands and feet below the surface. She slowly spun around, so her face looked up through the fog at Jack who struggled to maintain his balance on the small stepping stone.

She gasped for breath and held up her hand. Large brown bubbles boiled all around her, popping and splattering mud everywhere. “Jack! Help!”

Jack caught his balance and crouched down, leaning over the quicksand and reaching for her. “Molly! Grab my hand!”

Molly stretched up for Jack's hand, splaying her fingers, trying to grab his. But he was out of reach. “Closer!”

Another bubble burst beside Molly's face. She sank deeper into the muck. Jack leaned as far out as he dared. He grasped the tips of her fingers, trying to close around them but slipping every time. He was too far away to grab her.

A deep rumble shook the clearing. A rough surface scraped against Molly's legs. A long sand-colored tentacle with suction cups opening all

down its side burst through the fog behind Jack. The tendril curled above his head, sand dribbling from the tip.

“Look out!” Molly screamed.

He spun and saw the tentacle swing through the air at him. Jack leaped to the next stone, farther away from Molly. He barely missed the tendril whipping past him. “What is that!”

Something slid around Molly’s feet and dragged her down a few inches. The quicksand bubbled in front of her, and she screamed. “Jack! It’s got my feet!”

Her shoulders descended below the surface, and Molly gasped at the air. A few more inches and she would be completely submerged. Another tentacle burst through the sand in front of her, a large suction cup blossomed and slammed onto her head. The tendril shoved her downward. Her chin rested against the surface of the quicksand.

Molly tried to yank her arms free of the quicksand, but it felt like large stones had been tied to both of her wrists. No matter how hard she pulled, they refused to come free.

Jack dodged a swing and jumped to another stone, slipping his sack off his shoulder and whacking the tentacle in the side. It shuddered and stood straight up, shooting down into the muck and popping back up behind him. He whirled around, swinging the sack again and smacking the tentacle.

More tendrils erupted from the quicksand all around them. Molly's mouth sunk below the sand. Her eyes darted frantically back and forth as another tentacle sent Jack flying over her head into the mud. He instantly sank to his waist, struggling to stay afloat.

“Help!” Jack screamed, waving his arms like a windmill. Two tentacles snapped to his wrists, wrapping tightly and dragging him downward. “Its got my legs too!” He shouted, sinking with sickening speed.

Panic ate Molly’s insides and crawled up her throat. She wanted to scream, but if she opened her mouth, sand would stream in and fill her lungs in a moment.

The clunk of boots sounded across the quicksand. Molly turned as her nose went under and saw a man wearing a green tunic with a hood over his face, brown boots, and small tan pouches strapped to a belt around his waist. The man leaped to the Obelisk. He whipped out a bow and nocked an arrow faster than anyone she had ever seen. He pointed the arrow at Jack's chest.

“Don't move!” the man said, his voice rising and falling with an accent Molly hadn't heard before.

“Don't shoot!” Jack said.

A smirk crossed the man's bearded face. “Too late for that.” He drew back on the bow and let the arrow fly with a snap.

PURCHASE

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