

Alex Kraft and the Otherworld: Prologue through Chapter 27

by John Henry Fleming

Prologue

Late at night, an old man named Drevin Philpott stands on the deck of a cruise ship, looking out at the sea. The man is hunched and very small. His arms and legs are thin and he's got a bowling ball for a gut.

He's standing on a chair so he can see over the railing. If he leans too far out, that bowling ball will drop overboard and dunk him in the dark Atlantic. He leans anyway. He's hoping for a glimpse of a particular island he hasn't seen in years.

The full moon shines like a giant flashlight on the flat sea, and the night air is cool and calm. Drevin knows his coordinates. The island is very close. He spent the best years of his life there, working closely with his friend, the great Phrixus, maestro of all dreamlords and maker of worlds. One day the maestro disappeared, leaving Drevin alone and confused.

That was 34 years ago, almost to the day. Drevin chose this cruise knowing its route would take him by the island. He hadn't realized it would happen at night.

What if he saw a light coming from the old laboratory, a glow in a patch of fog? Would he jump and swim? Could he make it?

He shouldn't get his hopes up. He suspects the great man is dead. A couple of months ago, he felt something change when he closed his eyes. An impossible dream moved just out of reach.

When he leans out a little farther, the chair slips from under him and sends him halfway overboard. He winds up with one foot hooked

under the rail, and both arms wrapped around it, his bowling-ball belly pressed against the wrong side of the ship.

His spine makes groaning noises and he lets out a salmon-flavored belch. The cruise ship food is great but it gives him gas. He pulls with trembling arms, huffing and puffing, trying to roll himself back over the rail.

Then he hears footsteps.

A very tall man strides toward him, his heavy feet thumping the deck. Drevin can only see a shape out of the corner of his eye. He makes a last-ditch effort to yank himself back onto the deck. He can't. He's stuck there with his foot wedged between rails.

He's seen this man around the ship during the first two days of the voyage, always dressed in a dark suit and cap. He figures it's the captain, come to rescue him.

But if the man is a captain, he never seems to do any work. And if he isn't working now, why isn't he sleeping like almost everyone else?

"Here you go," says the man. He shoves Drevin overboard.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

He's falling.

And then he's not.

He's looking up at the sky through the opening in a boat. A lifeboat. He fell through the tarp that covered it.

The tall man's long face appears. The man lifts his fingers and gives him a little wave, and Drevin waves back out of habit before he realizes how stupid it is to wave to a man who's just tried to kill you.

"How's that?" asks the man.

"Not what I had in mind," Drevin says.

The man swings a long leg over the rail and lowers himself next to Drevin in the boat. He leans down, and Drevin gets a close look at the man's wide dark eyes.

"I know who you are," comes a deep whisper from the ape-thick jaw.

Drevin tries to lean up and gets a sharp pain in his arm. He might have broken it. He belches in the tall man's face.

The man jerks back and waves the salmon fumes away from his nose.

Drevin tries to slide away, but the man seizes his arm. "If you try to run or shout, I will feed you piece by piece to the rats in the hold."

Drevin looks at him in shock. "They have rats in the hold? I paid a lot of money for this cruise!"

"I can make it so!"

"Sir, if the rats are going to eat me, I demand a refund." When he says it, it occurs to him the man probably isn't actually the captain.

"Shut up!" the man growls. He stands above Drevin in the life boat, his eyes catching the moonlight. He looks seven feet tall. "You know what I'm looking for."

"I'm afraid I don't. Who are you, anyway?" Drevin asks, but he's beginning to make some guesses.

"That's not anything you need to know."

"What's the opposite of a Guardian Angel?" Drevin wonders aloud. He belches again, and the man turns his nose away. "Sorry, rich food...and it's always worse when I'm nervous."

The man's profile reminds him of someone. A terrible man from long ago, and Drevin's one of the few who got to see him in person. In chains, of course. Being led out of the courtroom and down into the Deep Earth Quarry—the abandoned caverns where the worst of the worst are sent. That's where rogue dreamlords belong, and none more deservingly than Gorvian Halbestad.

"Are you . . ." he begins. "But that's impossible!"

The man grins, then yanks the tarp out from under Drevin, sending him sprawling onto his injured arm.

"Aaarrgh!"

"I've come for the disillusioner, you idiot!"

"The wha?"

"Phrixus's project. I know about it. And you're going to give it to me."

"I don't even know who you're—"

“Don't lie! I know everything! You're Phrixus's assistant. Phrixus is dead. And you will be too if you don't give me the device!”

“I only brought the maestro the books and materials he asked for. I never understood his experiments.”

“I thought you might say that.”

The man peels the rest of the tarp off and sends it flying on the ocean breeze. He shoves Drevin out of the way and gets behind the controls, working them like he knows what he's doing, like it's all been planned out.

The lifeboat descends until it smacks the water and releases itself from its rattling chains.

“We're taking a little excursion, old man.”

The lights of the ship float away, the sound of its motors fading into the dark. Drevin lies on his side on the floor of the enclosed little boat, afraid to move. His arm is throbbing. His stomach hurts.

The lifeboat's motor rumbles to life, and the tall man turns around.

“You're going to show me where Phrixus's lab is,” he says, “or I'll drag you behind this boat until the sharks tear off your legs!”

“First rats, now sharks? You're determined to have something eat me.”

“Shut up and find the island! The disillusioner must be there!”

“Honestly, though, I suppose if something were going to eat me, a shark would be just the thing. Rats would take too long with their little nibbling mouths. Even a lion—you know how cats play with their food before they eat it. No, thank you. A shark's the way to go.”

The tall man smacks the wheel and sends the lifeboat into a spin. “I said shut up!”

Drevin straightens the wheel with his one good hand. “I should've taken the Cunard Line,” he mumbles. “They know how to treat their passengers. Imagine my life savings for a ride in a life boat.”

“There's a compass! There's a GPS! Now steer!”

Drevin takes the wheel, his arms trembling, his right forearm shooting pain up through his shoulder.

“You won't find anything,” Drevin says, though he isn't so sure. He went back to the lab just twice, in the early years of Mr. Phrixus' disappearance, braving the storms and rough seas for any sign of the maestro's return. When Drevin finally gave up, he didn't bother to sort through his employer's belongings. There were stores of canned food and boxes of cookies and books shelved and stacked as far as the eye could see. That's all he knew.

He never understood all of Mr. Phrixus' experiments, but he knows they're dangerous—dangerous enough for Mr. Phrixus to hide his laboratory in a cloak of powerful illusions. And this so-called “disillusioner”? Drevin can only guess.

The tall man raises his huge, bony fist. “Already I can sense the vibrations!”

Drevin steers. He feels it too. He's old but hasn't lost his sensitivity to a dreamlord's powers. He feels the faint quivers pulsing under the skin, and they guide him.

They move slowly over the black sea. Soon, the waves begin to rise. The moon and stars vanish behind clouds. The wind whips froth across the bow. When one wave lifts the boat, the next slams it.

“Sir, we won't make it in this! The storm will roll us!”

“Nonsense! It's only an illusion! It means we're close!”

What the rogue says is true. Mr. Phrixus set up the illusion to keep people away from his laboratory. Who knows how many seekers turned back over the last thirty-four years when they saw the clouds and felt the waves? Mr. Phrixus was a powerful dreamlord. Not only did he surround the island with gales, he shrouded it in fog.

Drevin remembers his maestro in the lab like it was yesterday, his nose buried in books, the tempests he raised across the island on his long walks, the illusory worlds that would flicker to life and sometimes die in failure. Mr. Phrixus would shout in anger and in joy—Drevin couldn't always tell. But each evening, Drevin would bring his maestro a plate of cookies, and they'd share them in peaceful contemplation of the sunset over the waves.

Now the angry sea tosses the little boat, and Drevin can barely hang onto the wheel. His right arm is useless.

“Keep the course!”

“I'm trying!”

“Cut the bow into the waves!”

“We'll flip!”

“Impossible!”

“You don't know my maestro's powers! This storm could take us to the brink of death!”

“Turn into the waves, I said!”

Drevin does as he's told. The wind and rain make it impossible to see. The boat lifts and slams, and the huge waves nearly pitch it over backwards.

“Again!” screams the man. “It's here! I know it is!”

Drevin steers directly into the waves, huge whitecaps taller than the boat is long. The whitewater rips at the roof and sides like the claws of a giant cat. The boat's frame groans under the immense pressure, and Drevin's entire body shudders. It feels as if one or the other will splinter into a thousand pieces any second. The windshield is a white maelstrom. If Mr. Phrixus really is dead, his illusions haven't degraded in the least.

On the third wave, the boat launches into the sky, and for a moment Drevin can't tell if he's rightside up or upside down. His eyes are closed. Is he sinking? Is he drowning? He can't breathe! He's afraid even to try!

Then, in an instant, the wind calms to nothing.

The rain is gone.

The waves flatten to ripples.

Drevin opens his eyes, disoriented. His stomach still churns and his knees tremble. His breath has turned sour.

The windshield looks like it's never been touched by water. The sky twinkles with a billion bright stars.

On the horizon, the yellowed skull of the moon sinks into the sea, its last light striking a small, rocky island.

The tall man laughs and grabs the back of Drevin's neck.
“*Personal demon.*”

“Sir?”

“You asked what was the opposite of a guardian angel, and now I've told you. It's a personal demon, and I'm yours!”

The tall man laughs so loud Drevin's ears hurt.

There, set back from the high cliff, is Mr. Phrixus's lab, the place of his great discoveries, the place where Drevin's life once had purpose. And now, in what might be his last hours, Drevin suddenly feels he's betrayed the one man who'd ever given him a home, the dreamlord who took him in and made him feel useful.

What have I done? he wonders.

Chapter 1

In a little building behind a bigger building off of Connecticut Avenue in Washington D.C., Katrina Harryhausen takes the elevator from her third-floor office down to the Negative 14th Floor, where her boss, Mr. Tintoro, has called her in. Katrina has only two weeks left in her internship before she can return to the Dream Academy in Iceland and finish her studies.

It was Katrina's parents who talked her into this internship. They thought the practical experience would be good for her. She's the youngest intern in the building—just 14—but both of her parents worked for the Council before retiring to Newfoundland, so they have connections.

Her parents think the D.I.A. is a good stepping stone to a job at the Council, but Katrina doesn't want a job at the Council. She has horrible memories of the Bring Your Child to Work Day at the Council Headquarters in Labrador, when all she did was sit around and cough at the dusty papers her parents carried back and forth through the musty caverns somewhere deep below the Negative Ninety-Ninth Floor. She doesn't care that after the Council Records Cleanliness Act was passed three years ago, the Council Caverns

were thoroughly vacuumed by five thousand people for seventeen months. What she wants is to stay in school all the way through Advanced Dream Studies and take her Research Qualls so she can teach.

The elevator moves slowly, and Katrina has time to check her posture and make sure her shirt is tucked in. She has a bad habit of missing the obvious. She's barely seen her boss in her two months at the Agency, and she wants to make a good impression. She didn't think he even knew who she was. And then her desk phone rang this morning, and Mr. Tintoro's nasally voice sounded urgent. He wanted her in his office at 10:00. He had to get a few things together first.

She hopes she hasn't done anything wrong. For two months, all she's done is paperwork, and the experience hasn't been helpful unless she planned on stamping and copying papers for the rest of her life—pretty much what her parents had done deep under the Council Headquarters.

She isn't going to follow in their footsteps. Council Headquarters is inside a glacier, and what kind of life is that? As soon as she's finished with her internship, she's going to pay a visit to the Random Knowledge Dean at the Academy and let him know her plans. She'll worry about convincing her parents later.

But why is this elevator taking so long?

Oh. She forgot to press the button.

The weird thing about the Dream Intelligence Agency building is that the lower you go, the brighter the lights. When she gets off the elevator on Negative 14, she's fourteen floors underground but the place is full of windows that seem to be streaming in bright sunlight. She knows it's just an illusion, but it feels so cheery. Her third-floor office, on the other hand, feels gray even with the actual sunlight.

She takes a breath, calms her nerves, and knocks on Mr. Tintoro's door.

“Come in!”

She opens the door and knows right away something is wrong. Mr. Tintoro is staring at her feet. Actually, he's staring at the place where her shoes should be. She got in the habit of taking them off at

her desk. All she has on her feet are her thick blue socks with pictures of yellow balloons on the toes. At least they keep her feet warm.

“Oh. Sorry, I...” But she doesn't really have an excuse so she doesn't give one, and Mr. Tintoro just makes a face and tells her to take a seat.

“You're the intern, eh?” He seems surprised by this. Maybe a little annoyed. Except he always seems annoyed—“always” meaning the two other times she's seen him face to face—so it's hard to tell.

“Ms...Harryhausen?”

“Yes, sir. An intern for two more weeks.”

“Have you done any field work?”

“No, sir. My internship is strictly in-house.”

“That's going to change.”

The way he says it makes pushing papers sound suddenly more attractive.

“As you know, we're short-staffed at the moment,” Mr. Tintoro continues, “what with all these Gorvian sightings.”

“Sir, did you say ‘Gorvian’?”

“Yes! Yes! I said it and I meant it!”

“I thought Gorvian was banished to the Deep Earth Quarry a long time ago. Or he's dead. Or both.”

“Apparently a lot of people never got the message. It's become a craze. Gorvian's in Maine! Gorvian's in Miami! Gorvian's sailing the ocean blue on a luxury cruise ship! It's mass hysteria. But the Council insists we look into every report. And no one's about to go into the Deep Earth Quarry to check on the prisoner.” He laughs at the idea. “Meanwhile, there are Remnants that need investigating. That's where you come in. And by *you* what I really mean is any warm body that's sitting at a desk in this building. Nothing personal.”

“But sir, I don't have any idea—”

“I know that! You're an intern. A glossy-eyed, sloppy student-type. You don't even have shoes. Your parents both worked as assistants to Special Assistants to Special Assistants of the Council. I know

this. They put you up to this. But you're here. You're available. You're going on assignment. All my agents are out, and the older interns are working at important in-house tasks."

"I could do those tasks instead," she offers. "I could take someone's place."

"No. You don't have the knowledge, and I don't have time to train you. I don't have time to train you for this, but it's relatively simple. Even, uh...someone like you...couldn't screw it up. By *someone like you* I mean a naïve, shoeless, way-too-young intern. Nothing personal. How old are you?"

"Fourteen, sir. But I'm not cut out for field work," she pleads. "I grew up in Council Headquarters and went right from there to school. I've led a sheltered life."

"Don't worry. Rucklings don't bite."

Rucklings! Oh boy. She doesn't even know any rucklings! Not personally, anyway. Rucklings are all those unfortunate people without any powers of illusion. There are literally billions of them, and they know nothing about dreambrights, let alone dreamlords, who have powers of illusion that Katrina can barely imagine. She's spent her whole life in the company of level 1 or 2 dreambrights like her friends and parents, only occasionally meeting a level 3 or 4. She met a dreamlord just once, and that was on a class field trip to a dreamlord lab, which she later found out was itself an illusion, because a real dreamlord would never show off her lab.

One of the tasks of the DIA is to keep all these matters secret from rucklings, *For Their Safety and Ours*, as the sign inside the front entrance says.

"Besides," Mr. Tintoro adds, grinning, "you need a test to pass this internship. Consider this your test."

All Katrina can do is purse her lips and twist them around nervously. She's actually pretty good at tests, but not *this* kind of test!

"The assignment is simple. You do understand the nature of Remnants, yes?"

"I've studied them, sir! They're leftovers!"

He frowns. “No. They're the remains of a dreamworld, left there by a dreamlord who hasn't cleaned up after himself.”

“Like I said, sir. *Leftovers!*”

He looks at her sternly and clears his throat. “All you have to do is take energy readings over a few days, find the remnant's seam and monitor it to make sure no one comes in or out, then file a report. Once you've returned here, a dispersement crew will be sent to take care of the dream energy.”

“How do they do that? Do they just sort of vacuum it out?”

“That's classified.”

“Sorry, sir.” She clears her throat. “Can I ask where it is?”

“Florida. A town called Kiwi Heights.”

She shrugs. “I'm not good with geography.”

He slides a blue phone across his desk. “Do you know what this is?”

“A phone, sir?”

“Not just a phone. An *A-phone*. Latest model. Ever since the Technology Is Okay Act, we've been adapting Ruckling electronics for our own uses, and this one's the best yet. It actually amplifies your illusions as long as you keep the battery charged. If you're a Level 2, you'll be capable of Level 3 self-transformations and a few other tricks—it's all in the User's Manual.”

Mr. Tintoro's fidgets excitedly when he talks about the phone. Katrina is terrified of it.

“Guard it with your life,” he adds. “It's the only way I can reach you. If you lose it, you're stuck for I don't know how long. The details of your assignment are in a file called Rem2294.”

“Very descriptive file name, sir.”

“Exercise extreme caution,” he says. “No official readings have been taken, but early reports suggest the remnant is strong. It may be the work of a powerful dreamlord such as Igoh Treptik—”

“Ooh, I know him!” Katrina interrupts, remembering her history class at the Academy. “He locked up a series of little dreamworlds to preserve them more than a hundred years ago. “They say he found a way to close the seams on his dreamworlds, preventing the drainage

of energy and preserving them forever. But then, without a seam, no one could enter, and how could anyone prove it was still there?" Now it's Katrina getting excited, tapping her cheek. "It's so amazing to think there could be permanent dreamworlds all over the place and nobody even knows!"

Mr. Tintoro looks annoyed. More annoyed than usual. "Igh Treptik was a rogue!"

"But he did his work before the Council passed the Resolution on Ruckling Rights," she said. "So technically he wasn't a—"

"I know my history," he interrupts. "The man was a rogue in spirit if not in letter."

She opens her mouth to defend her favorite historical dreamlord. She has a poster of him on her wall dressed up in a pirate outfit, a thousand bright worlds pouring out of his feathered cap. But she sees the look on Mr. Tintoro's face and knows she'd better shut up.

Mr. Tintoro looks again at her paperwork. "In any case, if it's a living dreamlord, the data you collect with your A-phone will help us identify him."

"Or her?"

"What?"

"Him or her, you mean."

"Yes, yes, of course. And him or her will be fined accordingly. We can't have dreamlords leaving their—"

"Trash, sir?"

He stares at her hard. "We can't have them *littering the planet with their abandoned creations*. Ahem. You're a Level 2, correct?"

"I am," she says proudly. When she was admitted to the Academy, she possessed almost no dreammaking talents whatsoever. Everyone figured she'd take after her parents and become a clerk. She only has a few skills—she can alter her appearance and she can, with a lot of concentration, make small things disappear for a while. Would she ever make it to level 3? Doubtful, but who knows? If she can teach at the Academy, she can spend all her free hours developing her talents.

“Then use whatever skills you have to keep yourself hidden while you monitor the remnant. We don't want rucklings getting suspicious.” Mr. Tintoro's old black desk phone rings. An in-house call. He picks it up but continues speaking to Katrina. “Lastly,” he says, pulling a blue envelope out of his drawer, “here are your plane tickets and your car rental agreement. The agency owns a house in the area. You'll be staying there. The keys are in the envelope.” He hands it to her.

She wants to ask how she's supposed to get away with renting a car when she isn't old enough to drive and doesn't know how. But now Mr. Tintoro puts the phone to his ear and raises his eyebrows to signal her to get out. Someone on the other end of the line is yelling and she thinks she heard the name Gorvian. It makes Mr. Tintoro wince.

“Stay in touch,” Mr. Tintoro whispers to her. “Don't lose your phone. And don't loan it out. Don't even let anyone see you using it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call me when you've arrived. I'm on speed dial.”

She hops to her feet.

“One more thing,” he says, covering up the mouthpiece and the loud, panicked voice.

“Sir?”

“Wear shoes.”

Chapter 2

Alex Kraft has two blocks to walk from his new house to his new school. Just two blocks. Down the driveway, right along the sidewalk by the street, and another right up the sidewalk to school. So why would he take a short cut?

One second his sneakers are tapping along the concrete—right left right—and the next they're angling across the grass of the powerline field, slopping against the wet weeds—left right left.

He could just wake up from his morning daze and order his feet back onto the sidewalk. But the truth is, ever since he moved to Kiwi Heights a couple of months ago, this little strip of woods was a mystery that tugged at his thoughts. And now, today, at his feet.

So he lets them wander.

If he had his choice, he'd skip school, go back to bed, and daydream about his old life in his old house with his old friends in his old neighborhood two hundred miles away. Back when Gramps was still alive and before his mom started acting like a zombie.

Okay, he knows she's not *really* a zombie. But sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. He's seen the blank looks in her red eyes. Her stiff, distracted movements. The mumbling and sighing of her speech. How else to explain it?

Take this morning. He sat there at the kitchen table spooning up a bowl of SugarCubes, wondering if he could get her to remember something.

"Hey, Mom?" he called. "We doing anything special today?"

She didn't even respond at first. Just lurched and groaned between the kitchen and the bedroom.

"I was thinking we could go somewhere if you could get off work early," he said.

When she came back into the kitchen, she gave him a look like she'd just noticed he existed. "Alex, late for school," she said, which he thinks means "Hurry up, or *you'll be* late for school" in non-zombie English.

It's not her fault, he tries to remind himself. She's busy with her new job. And they're both still in shock about Gramps, who had a heart attack just before they moved.

But it hurts anyway.

Because today is his birthday.

His 12th birthday.

She promised him months ago that she'd take him on this day to ride the new coaster at AstroLand—the Saturn Surfer. He'd seen the TV ads and the internet promos with screaming riders getting smogged by angry Saturnian ring surfers.

AstroLand! He's lived an hour away his whole life and he's embarrassed to admit he's never once been. Too expensive, or too crowded, or “we're just too busy right now.” All true, and he felt guilty for asking, so he watched TV ads and YouTube ride videos instead...

Whipping around and around while avoiding imaginary asteroids on The Asteroid Belt.

Zigzagging through red canyons on the Martian River Run.

Floating through solar flares on Journey to the Sun.

Laser-gunning aliens to score points in Invaders from Orion.

He had dreams about all these rides.

Then, this past spring, his mom told him this would be the year. She'd leave work early. They'd take the hour drive after school. They'd stay till closing.

Of course, she'd made her promise before Gramps died.

And before they moved to Kiwi Heights.

And before she went all zombie on him and seemed to misplace half of every sentence.

She wasn't always this way. She used to laugh at the dumb joke books he'd write and staple together after school. She used to hug him after he fell off his bike—he'd do that a lot, and not only because he was a clumsy bike rider.

Then, right after Gramps passed, her hair and skin turned pale, and the bags under her eyes turned to angry bruises. And the funny thing (not funny ha-ha but funny terrible) is that Gramps was the one who'd planned the whole move to Kiwi Heights in the first place. Alex's mom had been stressed at her old job at the ad firm, and Gramps encouraged her to make a change.

He'd even picked out their house. “I'm off to do some reconnaissance,” he'd say, and then he'd leave to go house-hunting, returning in a few days with info sheets, job listings, and photos from towns around the state.

Eventually, Mom landed an interview that turned into a new job as a copywriter, and the three of them made the trip together to put an offer on a new house.

Alex knew he'd regret leaving his friends. He kept quiet for the sake of his mom.

Then Gramps died.

And his mom was so stunned she went on packing like nothing had happened.

"We aren't still moving, are we?" Alex asked after the funeral.

"A new start," she mumbled, repeating Gramps's line. "Plus, house is bought."

That "new start" meant two hundred miles from everything he'd ever known.

And besides a few pictures, the only thing he has left to remind him of Gramps is a little pocket flashlight Gramps gave him once.

Which doesn't even work.

So, as selfish as it seems, he could use a trip to AstroLand, if only to have just one dumb dream come true and take his mind off everything else.

Now, out in the field, he makes dark tracks in the tall, dewy grass. Little black seeds collect on his white socks. As he passes under the powerlines, the morning sun warms the back of his neck.

It would be a stretch to call this route a short cut. If you could walk straight across the field and through the woods to the upper sidewalk of J.J. de Blande Middle School, you might save yourself thirty seconds.

But you can't actually walk a straight route. The thin strip of woods is dense with tree trunks and tall palmetto bushes, with no clear path between them. And there's a good chance those bushes are infested with snakes, spiders, and barbed-wire vines so sharp you don't even notice them until you look down and find your calves pouring out blood.

He keeps going. He moves into the shade of the pine trees. The bushes smack his knees. Soon the palmettoes grow taller, whisking across his stomach, his chest, then his face, until finally they're over his head and he disappears into their leaves, a crowd of sharp-edged fingers.

What does he care about their smothering green hands? What does he care about snakes and spiders and razor vines?

He presses on. You might call it courage. You might call it stubbornness or ignorance. Whatever it is, Alex keeps going through the shortcut that isn't a shortcut at all.

Somewhere in the middle, he feels something very strange. It's like his skin is vibrating from the inside. And then he feels a small, sharp pain.

Zap!

The pain is somewhere between a mosquito bite and a wasp sting. A cold electric sizzle that starts in his hands and rolls over the rest of him like a high-powered x-ray going through him, or an army of miniature men shooting him with arrows. It wakes him up like six bowls of SugarCubes cereal suddenly chugging through his veins.

He hurries through the rest of the bushes and stops in a small clearing under the pine trees. He inspects his arms and sees no scratches or blood.

He leans back into the palmettos and pulls a couple of branches aside. Nothing moves. The buzzing under his skin is gone.

He can't figure it out. At least it's over now.

He adjusts his backpack and continues his morning shuffle. Once he zigzags through the last set of pine trees, he steps out near the bike rack at the top of the school driveway in bright sunlight. The sky looks bluer than ever, the grass a little greener. Even the dull beige of the school looks shinier, like someone gave it a new paint job over the weekend.

Maybe that shock did something to his senses.

It's still early, and no one saw him step out of the woods or cut across the school grass. The opening bell must have rung because the school doors are open. There's usually a few kids who arrive early and wait at the door. They must have gone in.

It's strange that there aren't any walkers coming up the sidewalk, or buses pulling into the driveway, or cars coming up the road. The road looks foggy in the distance, so maybe he just can't see them. Where is everybody?

For a second, he thinks this is some kind of birthday trick, like he's going to walk into school and everyone's already gathered in the courtyard and some are holding "Happy Birthday Alex!" banners and as soon as they see him, they'll all shout "Surprise!" and this whole thing with Mom being a zombie and forgetting his birthday is just part of the joke.

Fat chance.

The more he walks the more creeped out he gets. The whole school is just weirdly quiet and still. Is there even school today? Did he forget about a holiday?

Then he notices a figure standing in the shadow beside the doorway. A looming figure.

The word for that behavior is *loitering*, and the word for the looming figure is *Trevor Womple*.

Trevor is the oversized kid whose meaty elbows always find their way into people's ribs—including Alex's when he passes Trevor in the hall or in gym class or just about anywhere Trevor can get a blow in without being caught.

Alex was pretty popular at his old school, but switching towns and switching schools made him want to lay low. At J.J. de Blande, he's avoided doing anything that would make him stand out. He wears his khaki shorts and his lime green uniform shirt with the barking tree frog mascot on it, just like everyone else. He sits behind the biggest kid in each class, and he never raises his hand. In between classes, he keeps his eyes on the floor or peering into his locker. He barely speaks to anyone except Ol Oppenheimer, his one and only friend in Kiwi Heights.

So why did Trevor Womple notice him when no one else did?

The ways of bullies are an eternal mystery.

Except Trevor Womple is no ordinary bully. He speaks with a fake British accent, even though he's from New Jersey. His favorite strategy is to pretend he's a klutz and bash into people when they least expect it.

"Whoops," he'll say. "I can't believe I just did that to the new guy! What an oaf I am!" He'll smirk and clear his throat at a hundred

decibels while he lumbers away. Trevor is always clearing his throat, and it sounds like a minor avalanche of clattering rocks.

Trevor leans against the wall in the shadow of the overhang, waiting patiently like an evil Wal-Mart greeter who'd just as soon run you over with a shopping cart as say "Have a nice day!" The tall blond teacher who usually serves bus duty isn't outside today—nobody is—and Trevor is out of sight of whichever teacher is pulling duty inside Hallway A.

Alex considers turning around, returning in fifteen minutes when there are more people flooding into school and he can join the safety of a group. But where would he go? Besides, Trevor has already seen him. He'll have to take his chances and hope that whatever fake-clumsy brutality Trevor has in mind won't break any bones or teeth.

He makes a beeline for the door, pretending he has nothing to fear. He keeps his eyes on the open hallway inside, and the courtyard beyond. His movements are stiff and robotic because all his muscles are tense. If he's lucky, he'll get away with just an ugly comment, something to make him feel ashamed and unliked for the rest of the school day. If he can deal with a zombie mom and an electric palmetto bush, he can deal with that.

Trevor stays in the shadow. He makes no move to step out and trip Alex. There comes a point—just three steps from the door!—where Alex thinks he might make it.

Then Trevor clears his throat—a minor avalanche—and what happens next shocks Alex a lot worse than a downed powerline, or a snake bite, or whatever might have buzzed him back there in the palmetto bushes.

Trevor Womple lifts his chin, looks Alex right in the eye, and says, "Good morning."

Pause.

Emptiness.

Shock and awe.

Good morning? Good morning?!

A harmless, friendly greeting, so common it's almost meaningless, like a comma in the long sentence that makes up a day.

Fine. But not when it's coming from Trevor Womple.

When Trevor says it, there's something seriously out of order with the whole universe.

Alex can't grasp it. He's frozen mid-step, teetering on one foot. His backpack lurches to the side and nearly takes him down with it. A small voice in his head says, *You're hearing things. It's just an illusion. Keep moving! Keep moving!*

He can't. His feet don't know how to operate anymore. Trevor Womple's "Good morning" hit him like a punch to the motherboard, like a complete disruption of the natural order.

In the world Alex is used to, a guy like Trevor Womple would step out and trip him with his giant clown-feet. Or flick his ear with a cucumber-sized finger. Or pretend to lose his balance so he can drive his thick forearm into Alex's neck. Or grab the collar of Alex's school shirt, pull it up over his head, and shout for everyone to hear, *"Look, a ghost!"* Instead, Trevor Womple now opens his arms and says, "Hugs!"

Alex's vision blurs. He's starting to make gurgling noises, his foot still dangling in the air.

At last he gets control of his limbs. He staggers backward, saying something like, "Thing-home-forgot-I guess," before he twists and stumbles and eventually hurries back down the sidewalk.

Trevor thunders after him, "Hugs! Hugs!" his arms open wide and a goofy, too-wide smile on his face. "Hugs!"

Alex speeds into the woods and slices back through the palmettos in a confused panic.

Somewhere in the deep middle of the jungle of sharp branches, he feels it again—zap!

A cold zap, but absolutely, positively a zap.

Chapter 3

The tall man picks his way along the rocky shore until he finds a path up the cliff face.

"I can't make it!" Drevin calls out behind him. "My legs!"

The tall man reaches back, grabs Drevin's sleeve, and yanks him along. "Shut up and climb or I'll throw you to the sharks!"

"Again with the eating! Just admit you want to see me eaten by anything that comes along."

"I couldn't care less."

"Rats, sharks, vultures, ants. You'd have me eaten by butterflies if you could!"

"Butterflies don't—" The tall man sighs. He's not going to keep the old man talking.

They follow the steep, winding path as the full moon lights their way. Drevin's huffing and puffing and continually falling behind. The tall man's too close to slow down and wait for him. An electric current seems to run across his skin. When the tall man was a young student at the Dream Academy, he heard only rumors of Phrixus' lab, and everyone seemed to have a theory about why Phrixus had disappeared. What could Phrixus have discovered that would make him abandon his dream experiments? Did he achieve what he set out to do, or was he afraid of what he found?

It took years of searching, and now he's going to find out.

And to think he almost missed his chance. He got a tip from a retired lumberjack in Maine, if "tip" is a word you can use for information that you torture out of someone. The lumberjack had spent a couple of years at the Dream Academy as a child until he'd flunked out. He had minimal skills as a dreambright but a sensitive nose for other failures like himself.

"There's a man," he said, his entire body writhing from the ten thousand needles he believed were jabbing his skin. "Lives in the woods on his own. Miles off Felz Woods Road down a narrow trail. There's something different about him."

"What is it?! What's different?! Speak!"

"The pain! Oh, the pain, sir! Make it stop!"

"Not until you tell me!"

"I only met him once." The man had to keep pausing to catch his breath. His limbs jerked in pain. "He's spent time with someone powerful. That leaves a trace, and I could feel it! Please! Make it stop!"

"Where is he?"

"Felz Woods, I say. A bend in the road. A trail by the caution sign. Ahhhh! Please stop!"

The tall man flourished his hand and the illusion of pins vanished. The flourish wasn't necessary, but the tall man liked the effect. It's important for a dreamlord to have style. He also liked to end on a high note. He brought back two pins and poked the lumberjack once in each eye.

He had a feeling about this tip. Who else would be hiding out deep in the woods but Phrixus's old assistant?

And then, before he even set off for the woods, he received word from his contact at the Council. Phrixus was dead. At least that's what the latest readings pointed to. A ripple in the dreamscape. A release of energy that had Phrixus's signature on it. Rucklings woke up the world over, complaining of nightmares.

And if Phrixus was dead, there was nothing to stop him from stealing Phrixus's life's work. He would track down the disillusioner and take it.

When he reached the old man's cabin in the woods it was empty. He searched the cabin and found a note with the departure schedule for a cruise ship, the *Aqueous*.

He was lucky to make it aboard in time.

No, not *lucky*. It was his *fate* to make it aboard in time. Just as it's his *fate* to reach this lab, his *fate* to help his father escape the DEQ, his *fate* to become a powerful dreamlord himself.

At the top of the cliff, he takes in the stone building now only a hundred yards across the moss-covered plateau and backed up against a towering rock wall.

The rain begins again. The moon vanishes. Lightning strikes nearby and blasts a hole in the rocks.

The tall man smiles. Another illusion. He expected it. Even after death, Phrixus's illusions linger like powerful ocean storms crossing onto land.

He moves forward, his legs carrying him over boulders and deep crevices. The rain comes in sheets, whipping his face. Lightning strikes again and again. In between, absolute darkness.

Only thirty yards to go. A horrific roaring noise comes out of the black night. In the flashes of light, the rain seems to fly upward. A tornado. He can hear the rocks bounding across the plateau. And then boulders everywhere, screeching and tumbling and threatening to crush him.

Something strikes him square in the back and he finds himself face down on the rocks.

The old man was right. Phrixus had skills far beyond a normal dreamlord. The illusions could trouble intruders to the brink of death.

Remembering the old man, he looks behind him, sees nothing but the edge of the cliff and the black sea beyond. Maybe the man stumbled and fell off.

No matter. The lab is here. The disillusioner is here. The island wouldn't have all these protections in place if it weren't.

The tall man crawls, head down, pelted by rain and rocks, until at last his hand falls on something flat and smooth. A stone courtyard? He gets off his knees and runs, hunched against the wind and rain, his hands out in front of him until they collide with the rocky wall. He feels along it. Rocks come flying at him like bullets. They spark when they hit the wall. Another one hits him in the back. Another at the back of the knee. He knows they aren't real, but it's impossible even for an advanced dreambright like himself to ignore them.

One day, he'll be a full-fledged dreamlord. He'll learn from his father, and together they'll conquer, together they'll rule.

At last he feels wood. A door. And then a latch. Unlocked. He flips it up, slams his shoulder against the door, and tumbles onto a tile floor.

Utter calm. No wind, no rain. No flying rocks.

Through the open door, the moonlight pools again on the plateau and on the calm sea beyond. His clothes are dry. His pounding heart and breathless lungs are the only signs he's been through danger.

Back on his feet, he gropes for a candle and finds one on the table beside the door. A large candelabrum. A lighter lies next to it. Lucky.

No, he reminds himself. It's *fate*.

He shuts the door and lights the nine candles. What he sees astounds him.

A nearly empty cavern of a room. And three stories of books. Shelves from floor to ceiling on three walls and narrow metal walkways in front of them. Tiny ladders connecting the walkways. Some of the books have been yanked from the shelves and tossed to the walkways and to the floor below, as if Phrixus had been in a rush to find something. Or destroy something.

In the center of the room stands a long rectangular table with nothing on it but another candelabrum, a quill, and an inkwell.

Phrixus carried out his dangerous experiments right here, blurring the boundary between dreams and reality. Either he had a terrifying breakthrough or went mad.

He picks up a sheet of the loose paper on the floor. It's covered in markings like musical notes on a staff. If only he had the key to understanding them. It would help to have the old man here to torture the information out of him. No worry. He's waited his whole life for this moment. It's his fate to seize it.

He begins his search. He climbs the ladders. He pulls books from the shelves. He feels behind them in the dark corners.

What is he looking for? He's not entirely sure. What form would a disillusioner take? A handheld device? A suit? If he could just find a notebook or a diagram that would point him in the right direction.

With the sunrise, the difficulty of the task becomes clear. The library is even bigger than he'd thought, and the shelves and stacks of books extend into the bedrooms and kitchen. The laboratory seems to have been carved deep into the rocks.

All those books! Over the years, the assistant must have made hundreds of trips by boat to collect books from around the world for

Phrixus's research project. The building isn't so much a lab as a giant library. Phrixus wasn't experimenting with chemicals and potions to expand his powers; he was experimenting with knowledge itself. The books come in dozens of languages and every size and shape. Some are so big they're impossible for one person to lift. Some so small they require a magnifying glass to read. Some have been eaten away by bugs or the elements. Some smell of flowers. Some of death. Their spines crackle and split when the books are opened. Some books are locked like diaries and have to be cut.

The tall man brought precious little food, and all he finds in the kitchen are cookie tins. Their contents have crumbled to dust. He has to pour the sugary substance down his throat just to keep going. The water that flows from the sinks is gray and tastes like salty mud.

Days pass. He's losing energy. And hope. Finally, in a rage, he pulls books from the shelves. Patience has never been his strong suit. He tears their pages. He throws them from the third floor and watches them explode into dust beside the wooden table.

He will not be defeated! All those years in school he'd been bullied and abused and unappreciated. His skills hadn't measured up, and the others called him "WishLord" because his dreamworlds invariably failed, collapsing into little black holes and blipping out of existence.

They didn't know who his father was.

They didn't know his ambition or his will.

And now he is here, so close.

He remembers the vision that came to him one night all those years ago at the Academy. He recognized his father at once, though he'd been very young when his father was sent away.

A tall, bald man in robes stood at the foot of his bed. A walking illusion.

His father must have crafted the illusion before his trial, knowing he'd be sent away. Knowing, too, he could trust his son to save him.

The walking illusion—his own father!—spoke to him with gravity and respect. Find Phrixus's lab, he said. Find his disillusioner and bring it to me.

His father was trapped in the cavern of nightmares known as the Deep Earth Quarry, and it's said that prisoners there could find their way out if only they weren't continually tricked by powerful illusions.

A disillusioner would change everything. With a disillusioner, his father could dispel the illusions or see right through them. Did such a device really exist? Were the rumors about Phrixus's work really true?

When he heard his father speak all those years ago, he jumped from his bed and got down on his knees. Of course, Father, he whispered. I will do as you wish. I will be your good son. I will make you proud.

The fatherly image raised his hand and was gone. An illusion, he knew, but an illusion meant only for him, though his father hadn't called him by name. Did his father *know* his name? Had he forgotten it?

It didn't matter. It was enough that he'd been chosen for such a solemn task.

After, he felt a new sense of power. His stunted talents as an dreambright expanded beyond anything he'd imagined. He felt his father's vitality running through him. For the first time in his life, he knew what it was like to be a dreamlord, and knew he could become one of the chosen.

Now, surrounded by piles of fallen books, he clings to his last ounce of patience. He can't lose his determination when it matters most. He'd rather starve. He'd rather grow sick from the tainted water. He'd rather die than return a failure. His father and all his father's followers are depending on him.

He leaves the library to think, setting out on a path that cuts between boulders and skirts the cliff. The lifeboat rests far below, still beached on the shore. The weak old assistant couldn't have budged it if he'd tried. If he didn't fall to his death, he must have swum out in the cold water and drowned.

The island crackles with dream remnants. He feels them like the breath of beasts in the darkness.

Somewhere on his walk, he strays off the path. Or else the path has simply vanished after years of disuse. He has to climb over boulders to continue, but something drives him on, even in his weakened condition.

A strange feeling comes over him. The island here feels . . . quiet. It's as if Phrixus conducted his experiments everywhere else on the island but left this area empty.

A sweeping view of the eastern sea, beyond which lies Africa, thousands of miles away. The setting sun mellows at his back, and the dark horizon sweeps toward him from the east. If he doesn't return to the great library soon, he might not find his way back in the darkness.

He presses on. The coastline is less rocky here. A flat plain stretches to the edge of the cliffs, and the cliffs drop straight into the sea. Any boat approaching in this direction would be shattered on the rocks.

He climbs down into a miniature canyon, a rocky slice in the plain with a little trickle of water draining out to the cliff.

There he finds a little indentation, a hole in the rocks, mostly grown over with weeds. It looks like nothing more than a small rodent's den. But he hasn't seen any creatures on this island. Even sea birds don't land here.

He kneels beside it. He could fit his arm inside, but when he reaches to do so, he knocks a rock out of the way, and the hole widens.

He pulls away another rock, and another. The hole takes shape into something closer to a square. A door behind the rocks. More hatch than door. Just wide enough for him to fit inside.

The genius of it! Phrixus knew that if a dreamlord ever reached the island and the great library, he'd expect to find traps and barriers to protect his discoveries. Who'd bother to look here—on the other side of the island, unprotected by storms and frightening illusions? Most dreamlords would already have given up.

He reaches into the square hole. He touches nothing. He sees only blackness. Who knows how deep? There aren't any steps or ladders.

The only way to know is to make the leap.

It makes perfect sense. Phrixus himself made a leap of faith. He'd jumped into the dangerous and uncertain world of Dream Permanence and its solution—the disillusioner. If anyone was going to follow him, they'd have to make a similar leap.

He sits on the edge. He lets his feet dangle above the void. He knows he has nothing to lose. He'll be remembered for greatness or for nothing at all, and if greatness lies at the bottom of this pit, he'll claim it for his own.

So he takes a breath. He peers into the darkness.

“Father,” he whispers. “Your son's name is Gregor. I am Gregor.”

And he jumps.

He slides in darkness.

He lands in quiet.

He finds a light.

A room. A small apartment carved out of the rock. A table.

And on the table, a small stack of yellowed paper covered in handwriting.

Dear Alex,

Welcome to my humble island!

I never doubted you'd find this place. You were always a smart and curious boy, and I'm certain now that you're brimming with questions. I only wish I were here to answer them in person.

This letter will have to suffice...

Chapter 4

Oliver Oscar Oppenheimer is the Man with the Shocking Initials.

“O! O! O! Get it?” Ol said when Alex first met him. Alex had just moved to Kiwi Heights, and he was helping his mom carry in their

first carload of groceries when an olive-skinned, curly-haired kid rolled up on his bike and stopped at the bottom of the driveway. The kid chewed on a fingernail while he stared at Alex and his mom and the maze of boxes stacked up in their garage.

“Nice bike,” he said finally. “Wanna ride?”

Alex looked at his orange bike, propped against the boxes at the front of the garage. No way was it a nice bike. It was an old bike, scraped up, pedals bent, and way too small for him—so small he was almost embarrassed to ride it. But not so embarrassed he was willing to give it up.

He looked at his mom, who smiled weakly and took the sweating jug of milk from his cold hands. Alex flipped his kickstand, swung his leg over the seat, and joined Ol at the sidewalk. The bike seat had been raised all the way so it looked like Alex was sitting on a giraffe's head, his knees almost hitting the handlebars.

“Liar,” Alex told him, and Ol shrugged. Alex knew they were going to get along.

They rode off down the street together, down to the river to look for gators, over to the park to balance with one foot on the springy plastic dinosaurs with their chipped purple paint, and stopped at the gated house of the reclusive rich guy to reach through his gate and steal a rotting orange.

“The smell of excess wealth,” Ol said, running the orange under his nose, sniffing deep and gagging.

Seemed like an hour before they even asked each other's names. That's when Ol told him about the shocking initials. He also told him about his African-American mom and his Jewish dad and the way they met at an anti-nuke protest in DC. And now they have a son, Ol's brother, Perry, obsessed with nuclear energy.

“It's ironic,” Ol said. “Atomically ironic.”

Alex told Ol how his Gramps had died just a month ago, how moving to Kiwi Heights made him feel like he'd abandoned his life.

Ol chewed his cheek and couldn't think of what to say, but it didn't matter. He had a kind look in his eyes, and that was enough.

Now Alex needs to tell his friend something so shocking that even the man with the shocking initials might not believe him.

He takes a few minutes to recover, then crosses the field back to the sidewalk and returns to school the usual way. No shortcuts this time.

Ten minutes ago, J.J. de Blande Middle School looked deserted. Now it's suddenly busy the way it's supposed to be in the morning. Walkers walking, drivers driving, buses turning into the driveway. Teachers directing traffic.

It makes Alex feel that Trevor Womple's "hello" ten minutes ago was some sort of hallucination.

But no. It happened. He saw it with his own eyes.

He spots Ol coming up the opposite sidewalk, stooping under the weight of his ridiculously large backpack. It's the kind of backpack you'd need for a trek to Tierra del Fuego, not on a five-block walk to school.

As Alex hurries up the school sidewalk to meet him, Ol suddenly raises his arms, pretending he has a pair of light sticks and it's his job to guide the buses to a stop. Other kids stare. The blonde, wide-hipped teacher on bus duty is out there now, but her back's turned. Ol flicks his wrists to one side to signal the bus driver to veer left. Then he flicks his wrists forward and back until the bus pulls all the way up. He apparently doesn't think the bus driver is really going to pay any attention to him. He keeps his wrists going too long, and the bus's front tire squeals up onto the curb, the bus lurches and bobs, and its brakes groan.

Ol's eyes get big. He throws out his palms and jumps back, even though the bus has already stopped. He adjusts his backpack and stumbles toward the entrance, hunched and running like he's trying to take off with a pair of iron wings on his back.

The bus door opens and driver shouts after him. "Hey!!!"

Ol pretends not to hear. He bolts, and Alex has to run after him, through the front doors and halfway down Hallway A before a teacher shouts at him and Alex catches up.

“Listen to this,” Alex says. They’re both out of breath. “The weirdest thing ever just happened to me.”

“After last night I can handle anything,” Ol says.

“What happened last night?”

“I don’t even want to talk about it, my-man.”

“Okay, listen—”

Alex isn’t even going to mention that it’s his birthday. That barely seems important now, and anyway Ol isn’t listening. “All right, all right, I *do* want to talk about it,” he interrupts. “My brother got inducted into the Future Nuclear Engineers Society last night. I call it FuNeES in an ironic way because it’s not funny at all. It’s the opposite of funny. It’s a group of the nerdiest brainiac turdheads I’ve ever seen. I had to spend a whole night hearing how great my brother was. ‘Oh, Oliver, aren’t you just so proud of Perry?’ ‘Isn’t Perry so suh-mart?’ ‘Hasn’t Perry accomplished sooo much? And only an eighth-grader!’ ‘He looks so dashing up there in his three-piece suit!’ ‘Perry’s the absolute best son in the whole wide world!’”

“You’re lying about that last one.”

“Yeah, but what am I supposed to do? Clap nicely and smile? I can do that once. Twice is pushing it. But sixteen times, my-man?! I counted! Awards and recognitions and special commendations and I don’t even know what else!”

Ol draws stares again from some of the other students. As the two of them move down Hallway A toward the 7th grade lockers in Corridor C, a tall guy in Alex’s Language Arts class sticks his tongue out and pulls his hair like a crazy person.

“And then I had to hear him read a paper he wrote, ‘The Future of Nuclear Energy and You.’ He read some parts of it twice just so we caught his point. ‘Let me repeat,’ he said. ‘Blah blah blah blah blonk.’ How can I be expected to stay awake for that? There *is* no future for nuclear energy and me!”

“I’m sure nuclear energy is crying,” Alex says. He looks around and lowers his voice. “Okay, what I’m about to tell you will blow your mind.”

“What, your mom finally turned into a zombie?”

“How did you know that?”

“My-man, you've been saying like every day that your mom's becoming a zombie. It's about time she did, and to be honest I'm sort of glad about that because now I won't have to hear you say it.”

“Whatever, but that's not it.”

“Of course, now you're going to complain that your mom actually *is* a zombie all the time, so maybe I'm not so glad after all.”

“No I won't, but—”

“On the other hand, I have to admit it would be super cool if your mom *really* was a zombie. We'd have to fight her off with flares and farm tools. Imagine the possibilities at Halloween when some kids come knocking at your door. “Trick or treat!” Ol pretends to open a door, then puts his arms out like a zombie. “Aaaahhhrrrr!”

“Ol, listen up!”

“Well I'm just sayin, my man!” He holds out his fist, and Alex bumps it. All good. “Too bad nothing cool like that ever happens in Kiwi Heights, the most boring regular town in the entire universe, and that includes, you know, that one town on Rigel 7 in the Andromeda Galaxy where all the people do is purse their lips and stare at snails.”

“Listen! There's the zombie thing, yeah, but this is bigger,” Alex says. “This morning I took a shortcut to school and—”

“A shortcut? Dude, you live two blocks away!”

“I don't know, I wasn't watching where I was going. Anyway, you won't believe what happened.”

“I believe everything,” Ol says.

“Is the world flat?”

“Yes.”

“Is the world round?”

“Yes.”

“How can it be both?”

“Depends on its mood.”

“Right. So I took the shortcut, and when I got to the woods, I cut through some bushes and felt this cold zap, like someone poked me all over with sharp ice cubes.”

"The Ice Witch's fingernails, most likely."

"I kept going. I made it to school early, and you-know-who was waiting for me at the front door."

"Trevormort?"

"He Who Must Not Be Seen."

Ol's been picked on and shoved, too, but never singled out by Trevor the way Alex has.

They're walking down Corridor C now, narrower and lined with banks of lockers, weaving through the morning madness. Ol looks Alex up and down. "No cauliflower ears. No new elbows in weird places. You came through all right."

"That's just it. He didn't do anything!"

"What, you outran him? He's a giant potato—he can't be very fast."

"I didn't. What he did was look right at me, and..." Alex stops. He has a hard time even believing it himself.

"Come, come, out with it, lad!" Ol says in a haughty gentleman's accent.

"Okay. What I'm trying to tell you is, Trevor Womple looked me straight in the face and said...he said...'Good morning.'"

Ol stops and jerks like he's become a bobblehead doll. His jaw drops in horror. "I don't believe you."

"But you just said you believe everything."

"Even I have limits, my-man."

"Dude, I'm not lying! And he said it even friendlier than that. No sarcasm. Like, 'Good morning.' Not with an exclamation point, but almost. And then he tried to hug me!"

"You're lying! Tell me you're lying, you lying liar!"

"If it's not true, I'm losing my mind! I was so freaked out I had to run back through the woods and take deep breaths before I could even think about going to school."

"No."

"Yes!"

"And then when I came around the corner, Trevor wasn't there anymore. Instead, I saw a whole bunch of people that weren't there

just a minute before. It's like they suddenly appeared. Or like when I stepped through the bushes before, they suddenly *disappeared!*"

"No."

"Yes! Something totally nuts is going on! You've got to come with me, and we'll re-trace my steps. Maybe there's still time before the bell."

"No"

"Yes!"

"No no no!"

"Yes yes yes infinity. Be a good friend."

"No, I mean, *oh no!*"

Ol is staring over Alex's shoulder, looking scared. "He Who Must Not Be Seen is now in sight."

When Alex twists around, Trevor Womple meets his eyes and makes a beeline for his locker. He holds his arms out while making airplane noises and sliding his hands across the tops of people's heads. Everyone has to duck or get scalped. He's the size of a tenth grader. Rumor has it he's as old as one, too, and he's been held back three times, twice in New Jersey and once in Florida. Not because he can't do the work but because he *won't* do the work. And whenever a teacher or guidance counselor confronts him about it, he gets all teary and pretends to have self-esteem issues.

"What should I do?" Alex asks in a panic. He wishes he didn't have to deal with this. He wishes he could make this hallway *empty*—make all these people disappear, all except Ol, anyway—so he wouldn't have to put up with the bullies and the mean comments, and all the looks that tell him he doesn't belong.

"Come on, if Trevor Womple's really your new best friend, you have nothing to worry about."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Maybe he just wants his hug."

"What if it's some kind of set-up?"

"Trevor Womple's not a set-up kind of guy," Ol says. "He's a *bust-up* kind of guy. And here he comes! Say something! Say 'Good morning'! Destroy him with niceness! Do it!"

Trevor waddles at them like a duck after a loaf of bread. Alex's jaw muscles clench and his mouth goes dry. He isn't sure he can even speak. The backpack slides off his shoulder and falls to his feet, and he braces himself against the momentum of a hundred and fifty-pound pear.

Somehow, he blurts it out: "Good morning!!!"

He wanted it to sound natural, pretty much the way Trevor had said it to him, to remind him of that pleasant exchange. Instead, it came out more like a cartoon frog getting choked by an angry rabbit.

Trevor Womple stops so quick he almost stumbles. For a second, he looks confused. Then his wicked grin morphs into a sneer. "Oh my, I do believe there's something in my way," he says in his fake British accent as he reaches for Alex's backpack.

Alex is out of ideas. He's petrified. He closes his eyes and opens his arms.

Next thing he feels is Trevor's shoulder crushing into his skull like a meaty jackhammer, propelling him backward. He flips over Tiffany Lewis, daintily crouched in front of her locker with her hair perfectly tight against her scalp and her nails perfectly pink and almost too long to twist the dial on her lock.

Tiffany screams. Alex sprawls. One of Tiffany's notebooks somehow ends up on Alex's chest.

Trevor just waddles away, waving like he knows someone down the corridor and the incident has nothing to do with him.

Before Ol can even offer Alex his hand, Mr. Jacoby, the Assistant Principal, arrives on the scene. Mr. Jacoby has a way of appearing out of nowhere.

The tall, bald, and dark-skinned A.P. takes a look at the crying Tiffany Lewis and then at Alex holding the pink notebook covered with happy unicorns. "Is there a problem here?"

"He... he..." Tiffany can barely get it out between sobs. "He-kicked-me-and-stole-my-favorite-notebook!!" She reaches halfway for the notebook but pulls back, afraid to get too close to him.

"Give it back," Mr. Jacoby says sternly.

Alex hands it to her. When she sees how he'd smeared her just-drawn rainbow, she starts crying again and gives Mr. Jacoby her most wide-eyed, pathetic look.

"Get up and follow me," Mr. Jacoby tells Alex.

Ol helps him up, whispering, "Deny everything!" and Alex is thinking, *Happy birthday to me.*

Chapter 5

Alex slouches down the hall in the shadow of Mr. Jacoby, passing all those rubbernecking students who usually ignore him. He knows he's in for it.

They walk through the maze of the front office and down the dim little hallway with half-lit fluorescent bulbs where the school administrators do whatever they do. Mr. Jacoby opens his office door and slides behind his desk. "Take a seat," he says.

His small office holds stacks of folders—on the desk, on a table, on the filing cabinet, on the floor. One of the cabinet doors is half open, like Mr. Jacoby paused in the middle of filing, sniffed trouble the way a shark sniffs a drop of blood three miles away, and dashed out of his office to catch Alex in the act. On his desk is a picture frame holding a photo of Mr. Jacoby and his family of five, all in Hawaiian shirts, posing on the beach with stiff smiles. They all have perfect posture and thick shoulders. On the wall hangs a framed poster of a hippie guitar player wearing a bandana, a wide belt, and droopy sleeves pouring off his tie-dyed shirt. The poster doesn't fit the frame, so the end of his guitar is cut off.

Mr. Jacoby grabs his reading glasses off a pile of papers and slides them onto his shaved head. He leans back in his chair and puts one hand over the knuckles of his other and speaks with a voice so deep it seems to come from an echo chamber in his throat.

"You smeared that girl's rainbow."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, but—"

"Do you know that rainbows are a symbol of hope?"

"I guess, but—"

"You crushed her hopes. How does that make you feel?"

"Lousy, sir. But it's not my fault."

Mr. Jacoby grunts. "Of course not."

"I swear!"

"You're probably going to tell me that someone pushed you?"

"Actually, yes!"

"And you're probably not going to tell me who that person is."

"I, uh..." He considers telling the truth, that it was Trevor Womple who shoved him. But if Trevor found out, the abuse would double. "I can't," he finally says. "Not really."

Mr. Jacoby laughs for exactly one second. "See, I've been around. I know. I know. What's your name, son?"

"Alex Kraft."

"Alex...Kraft." He drags out the sound of his name like he's testing it for flaws.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm remembering your name." He points to his temple as if Alex can watch his memory at work. "I'm pretty good at spotting trouble. I double-majored in criminology and education. If things had worked out differently with my exams, I'd be in law enforcement. See, the kids who take notebooks and smear rainbows are usually the same kids who skip school or get in fights or disobey their teachers—they're the kids who show a general disrespect for the rules. They have to learn that rules aren't suggestions. They're rules. And it's my job as assistant principal of J.J. de Blande Middle School to enforce them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you in a gang?"

"What?! No, sir."

"I have suspicions about gang activity around here. Students are trying to subvert the dress code and show their gang colors by wearing mismatched socks or letting the elastic band of their underwear show. Do you know anything about this?"

"No, sir!" It's hard for Alex to imagine gangs here in Kiwi Heights, unless they're gangs of old people shaking rakes at noisy kids.

"That girl whose rainbow you smeared, is she in a rival gang?"

"I—I don't know."

"So you admit you're in a gang?"

"No! That's not what I meant! Of course I'm not in a gang! I just moved here!"

"That doesn't mean anything. Maybe you transferred. Maybe your gang sent you here to start a new franchise."

"A franchise? Like a McDonald's?"

"So you're offended that I compared your gang to a McDonald's?"

"Sir, I'm not in a gang!"

"Let me tell you something, Kraft. Your underwear's supposed to go *under* your clothes. That's why they call it *underwear*."

"I guess, but I don't—"

"You guess?"

"I mean, yes! Yes, sir! That's how I always wear it! I never wore it any other way."

"Son, don't tell me about your underwear."

"Okay, fine, sir."

Mr. Jacoby stares at Alex for a minute like he's trying to read his mind. Alex looks up at the poster like the hippie guitar player might save him. The hippie guitar player is too busy jamming on his guitar.

Mr. Jacoby nods and opens his desk drawer. He places a small slip of paper on his desk. "Do you know what the penalty is for destroying other students' property?"

Alex doesn't answer.

"That's not a rhetorical question."

"Sorry. No."

"Well, you could get suspension."

He waits for a reaction. Alex doesn't show any. "Oh" is all he can manage.

"Should I put in a call to your parents?"

"My mom?"

"Your mom?"

“My dad died before I was born.”

He pauses. “Sorry to hear that.”

Truth is, Alex wouldn't mind being suspended because it means *he wouldn't have to come to school! He wouldn't have to put up with Trevor Womple, and he wouldn't have to feel like a freakish alien in every class.*

“Are you going to smear any more rainbows?” Mr. Jacoby asks.

“No, sir. I'm all for a smear-free rainbow environment.”

Mr. Jacoby gives him a hard look, then grabs a pen from his “World's Most Respected Dad” coffee cup. “Alex Kraft,” he says. “Is that Kraft with a C?”

“K, sir.”

He hands Alex a hall pass. “I'll be watching you, Kraft with a K. Dismissed.”

Alex jolts out of his seat before Mr. Jacoby changes his mind.

As he walks down the office hallway he hears the morning show students singing the Barking Tree Frog fight song. *Bark, Frogs, Bark. Bark, bark, bark. At J.J. de Blande you know we can!*

He thinks of the life he used to have—the friends, the comfortable school where he fit in and where most people knew him. He thinks of the days when his mom used to drop him off in the mornings with a kiss and a “Have a terrific day, honey!” He thinks of Gramps greeting him at the door when he rode his bike home, then sitting at the table with him while he ate his SugarCubes and mumbled about his day, the milk dripping down his chin. Most of all, he remembers a sense of belonging.

So how did he end up here?

For the rest of the day, he can't slump low enough in his desk, can't clamp his lips tight enough, can't look far enough into the distance with glazed eyes, trying his best to *not be there*.

It doesn't work. Everywhere he goes, he hears, “Hide your rainbows! It's the Rainbow Thief!”

Word spreads fast.

Plus, he has to keep his left hand on his right forearm to cover up a rainbow smear from Tiffany's notebook that won't seem to rub off. When he reaches for a pencil or paper, it looks like he's controlling his right arm with his left, so a few people start calling him "Robot Arm," until someone else points out that if he really had a robot arm, he wouldn't need his other arm to control it, so then they call him "Broken Robot Arm," until someone else realizes they can abbreviate that as B.R.A.

For weeks, no one knew who he was, and now, suddenly, he's the center of the worst kind of attention. He keeps thinking about the strange shortcut he took, and the friendly Trevor Womple. It feels like a dream. Like he entered another world where even bullies are friendly.

Could a thing like that be possible? Is he crazy to think so?

In P.E., Trevor Womple is his usual self. The class plays foursquare, and Trevor whips the ball toward Alex's head every time he gets the chance. He doesn't care if he sometimes misses and gets knocked out of the game. Trevor Womple doesn't care about winning; he cares about beating.

Alex tells Ol about it at lunch. He lowers his voice. "I have this theory. What if I went through some kind of portal into a bizarro-world version of our school?"

"Sure. Anything you say, my-man. But what if Trevor's just messing with your head? It's a new, advanced form of bullying. Extreme Bullying. Bullying 2.0. It's psychological."

"You really think Trevormort is smart enough to think that up and pull it off? Anyway, there was something different about the school when I took the shortcut. It looked, I don't know, cleaner. Brighter. And emptier, too—I didn't see anyone else. And then when I ran back through the bushes and came to school the usual way, there were buses and students and teachers—a normal morning. I'm telling you, something's weird."

Ol inspects his corner slice of square pizza. "This isn't right," he says. He puts it down and cuts it diagonally with a plastic knife to make two small triangles of pizza. He bites off the corner of one, and

then the other. "Triangles taste better than squares. Everyone knows that."

"So will you come with me after school? We have to figure this out."

"Can't," Ol mumbles, still chewing. "Brother has cello concert."

"Then meet me tomorrow morning before school."

"So Trevormort can be nice to me, too?"

"It's bigger than that," Alex says.

"Not many things bigger than Trevormort. Now show me your rainbow tattoo, my-man."

Alex won't do it. He has to eat with one hand while covering up his other forearm. People are staring. It's the third worst day of his life, after the day Gramps died and the day he moved.

"Okay," Ol tells him. "I can see it's bugging you. I'll meet you before school so we can experience the new and improved Trevormort together."

"Sidewalk. 7:15."

Ol gives him a salute.

"I never want to see a rainbow again for as long as I live," Alex adds.

"Okay, then don't look up in the sky over your left shoulder, to start."

"I never want to come back to school again, either."

"The rainbow's a symbol of hope, you know."

"Ol, please shut up."

Chapter 6

Dear Alex,

Welcome to my humble island!

I never doubted you'd find this place. You were always a smart and curious boy, and I'm certain now that you're brimming with questions. I only wish I were here to answer them in person.

This letter will have to suffice. As you've no doubt figured out by now, the little device I left for you has special properties. It led you here to this island, and its beam shines through any illusion that gets in your way—including the ones I left behind.

It's called a Disillusioner. Long-winded term but completely accurate. Use it wisely. Protect it from harm, and it will do the same for you. Someday, you'll share its powers with others who may need them.

I created the disillusioner years ago to stop a man who threatened the world with his reckless illusions. That man went to prison in a deep and dark place, and may he never again see the light of day.

I kept the device when I retired from my long days of isolation and study and married your grandmother. I kept it and little else. I never regretted my decision. I lived a happy life.

When you were born, I felt your dreammaking powers the moment I first held you. I knew you were destined to become a dreamlord, yet I wanted you to grow up and appreciate life among those we dreamlords refer to (sometimes unkindly) as "rucklings." I would never wish you to look down on rucklings as many other dreamlords do.

Only a man who has lived in both worlds can appreciate the value of each.

I do not know what your future holds, and I will not tell you how to live your life. I trust you to make the right decisions because I know you have a good heart.

And know this: the disillusioner is tied to you. It's powered in part by the energy of your own dreams. Sorry if I intruded while you were sleeping. Only a little.

For this reason, the disillusioner is yours and yours alone. It will not work for anyone else unless you give it away freely. Call it theft security!

My advice: give it to no one. But then, I can't foresee your future. I can't know what events may transpire for you, or who you may encounter.

Be wise. I know you will.

As for the rest, as for your pedigree, as for your powers, there are others who will inform you and coach you. My wonderful old assistant will find his way to you if he's able.

There will be others. As your powers develop, those powers will be noticed, and you will be too. A world will open up that you'd never imagined, and I do believe you feel a sense of joy at its magic. Just remember where you came from—your sweet mother, your kind father who passed too soon, your dear grandmother whom I miss every day, and all the friends of your childhood. Whether or not they can create illusions, they all have the power to make magic in this world, and they all have value. They must be respected and loved.

I'll be gone soon. I know as I write this. I wish you a happy and fulfilling life. It's my great regret that I won't be around to witness it. But don't be sad for me. I've lived two lifetimes, it seems, and enjoyed them both.

*With love forever,
Your grandfather*

Chapter 7

On the flight from Washington to Florida, Katrina keeps ducking into the tiny bathroom to check her face and height. Mr. Tintoro just assumed that because she's a Level 2 dreambright, she can make herself look like an adult. He didn't ask if she'd ever tried.

Problem is, practicing a transformation in front of a mirror is even harder than doing it for someone else. That's why you have Illusion Buddies at the Dream Academy. Staring into a mirror, you're always reminded of your real features. It's like trying to tell yourself a joke.

She's been scanning the owner's manual file for the A-phone, especially the part about the Illusion Amplifier. You just type in ctrl-A and select your level. The higher the level, the harder it is to control and the sooner you lose battery power, so she'll have to be careful about that. She scrolled it halfway and concentrated on her illusion. It seems to work, at least for a while. But the chatty old woman in

the seat next to her flips through her in-flight magazine, pauses to read an article about clown schools, and then Katrina has clowns on the brain.

"Every illusion is based on something," she remembers Ms. Kravkat explaining in her first year at the Academy, "and that something is called the *tenor*, while the illusion itself we call the *vehicle*."

Something else Ms. Kravkat taught her in Intro to Illusion was that it's easier to reduce than to expand. That's because it's easier to get people to ignore things than to get them to believe in them. She's transformed herself into small animals and plants plenty of times. She's really good at animals, especially cats, at least for a few minutes at a time. Some of the girls at Dream Academy call her "Kitty Katrina." But expansion requires greater concentration, the ability to hold an image in your mind's eye and focus all of your projection energies on it. And, as her teachers constantly remind her, she's strong on projection but weak on concentration.

Once she thinks about clowns, she can't get them out of her head. She covers her face, just to be sure.

You can do this, she tells herself.

When the plane comes to a stop at the terminal, Katrina grabs her carry-on roller-bag and hurries across the jetbridge and into the terminal, eyes on her feet.

At least she's wearing shoes.

At the rental car counter, she shows her fake license and gets the keys for the car Mr. Tintoro reserved. The very smiley clerk looks at the top of her head the whole time because the illusion she made is just a little taller than herself. That'll take some getting used to.

She finds the small white sedan in space 87 and pops the lock with her electronic key. She opens the trunk and tosses in her suitcase, then climbs in the driver's seat. She finds the ignition and slides in the key.

The car doesn't move.

Some man in a booth is watching her. She has to act like she knows what she's doing.

She shuts the door, puts her hands on the wheel, and reads aloud the address from her A-phone. "2727 River Road, Kiwi Heights, Florida."

The car doesn't listen.

Someone knocks at her window and she jumps in her seat. It's the man from the booth, a chubby young guy in a blue shirt buttoned up all the way. He takes a step back when she looks at him.

She isn't sure how to lower the window, so she cracks open the door. When he gets a good look at her, his face goes pale and he takes another step back.

"What?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you. I didn't expect... It's nothing personal. See, I've always been afraid of . . . your people. When I was a little kid, I went to the circus and this one uh, clown—is it okay to call you that?"

"Whatever."

"I didn't know if you went by a different term now. Like Comedy Worker or something."

Katrina shook her head.

"Or Person of Silly Appearance? Slapstick Artist?"

"*Clown*, I guess, is fine." She wants to bury her face in her hands.

"Anyway, this one clown, he came right up and I thought he was going to eat me. His mouth was huge. I still have nightmares. Also, he had a flower on his shirt." He gestures at his own shirt. "It squirted water up my nose. I thought it was poison. I thought I was going to die. That's what happens in my dreams. I die a terrible death from clown poison." He grabs his arms and shivers. "Sorry, nothing personal."

She looks at him, trying to figure out how she's going to pull off a decent disguise when she gets to Kiwi Heights if her adult illusion looks like a clown.

With the guy's help, she finally figures out how to put the car in drive. The guy steps back and for the next twenty seconds she creeps past his booth, the world's smallest, slowest parade, until she

discovers the accelerator and blasts out of the garage, tires squealing.

When Katrina finally locates the Agency's house in Kiwi Heights, she sits on the living room floor with her back against the wall, feet outstretched, playing a game of Angry Dreamlords that someone—definitely not Mr. Tintoro—must have loaded onto her A-phone. She launches scary illusions at unsuspecting rucklings.

The house is huge but empty. The only furniture is a little table and chairs in the kitchen and a futon on the floor of one of the 6 bedrooms. At least the kitchen is stocked. She pulled a box of frozen French toast out of the freezer and dropped a couple of slices into the toaster. Now, since she lost the first level of Angry Dreamlords three times in a row, she's chewing on her second slice while she stares out the sliding glass doors at the winding river that glows purple with the sunset.

Her A-phone buzzes, and she picks it up to read a text message.

Protect Alex Kraft!

Wait. Who? What?

The sender appears to be unlisted. Just a dash where the name would be. She figures out how to reply and types

Who is this?

I'm trying to help

Thank you but why?

Keep Alex Kraft away

Is this Mr. Tintoro?

Keep him safe for all our sakes.

Sir? Who are you talking about?

She waits a couple of minutes and gets no reply. Then she speed-dials the Agency.

"Who is this?" Mr. Tintoro demands when he answers.

Katrina swallows down her bite of French toast. "It's me," she says. "Katrina Harryhausen. I'm the intern you sent—"

"I know who you are. Are you on the scene? Any problems? Why are you calling? Do you know this is my sauna hour?"

She hears a hiss in the background, which she guesses is steam. She doesn't know which question to answer. "Sir, did you just text me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know, sir. Something about a person named Alex something. Alex Kraft?"

"It's my sauna hour. Have you located the remnant yet?"

"I was just about to."

"You've read the A-phone instructions, right? You know how to use your phone as a detector?"

"Um, yes. Definitely."

"What are you waiting for? Your mission is so simple even you can do it, and by *you* I mean any barely competent, naïve intern—not you specifically, so no offense."

"None taken, sir."

"Good. Are you enjoying your stay?"

"The view is tremendous!" she says. "So is the French toast."

Hssssssss... She hears steam on his end. "Fine. Very good. Brush your teeth after you eat that junk."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't get syrup on your A-phone!"

She wipes her sticky hand on her jeans. "Yes, sir!"

"Tintoro out."

"Me too. I mean, Harryhausen ou—" The line goes dead.

Katrina looks again at the mysterious text. *Alex Kraft*. Hmm. Must be a wrong number.

She finishes her French toast, licks the syrup off her fingers, and pushes herself up. Then, just because she's in an empty room and there's no one around, she skips across the floor.

It's night now. She's on a sidewalk in a neighborhood in a place she's never been before, and she's got her A-phone out. The Remnant Detector is one of the more amazing features of the phone—that and the Illusion Amplifier. Both require apps that not just anyone can download. It's amazing to think that the Technology is Okay Act was passed just five years ago, and already dreambrights have devices like this. Some people would say it's because dreambrights are naturally clever people. More likely, the devices were in the works for years—and maybe even in use—before they officially became legal.

The Remnant Detector picks up the ultra-low frequency waves of powerful illusions. Small, brief illusions like the ones she's capable of wouldn't even register. But dreamworlds and other longer-lasting illusions—the kinds of illusions only dreamlords can create—require massive amounts of dream energy, and some of that energy leaks through the seams. Dreamlord creations give off a signature pulse, something like the fingerprint of a dreamlord. Analysts back at the DIA will use the data from her phone to determine what irresponsible dreamlord left this remnant.

Whoever that is could have their license suspended.

But, ha ha, dreamlords don't care about licenses!

Besides, what can Council do about all those unlicensed dreamlords? Throw them all in the DEQ?

The world would be a sad, sad place.

She's holding the A-phone out in front of her as she's walking down the street, watching the little green pulses of light on her screen. They showed up as soon as she started the app. Little green waves that float across the screen like slow ripples on a pond. And all you have to do is walk in the direction the ripples are coming from. It's a little creepy, honestly. Like watching ghosts glow across the screen. You know they're moving right through you, but you can't feel them. If you were asleep, they'd work their way into your dreams, which means that if everyone in this neighborhood compared dreams, they might find some things in common. Like the

sudden appearance of a flock of storks soaring over the canyons of Mars. Or the face of a loved one brightening into the golden hue of a summer sky.

The pulses show that she's moving in the right direction. They're getting stronger, too. The phone seems to hum in her hands.

She shivers as she turns a corner and crosses a street. She pauses at the edge of a driveway to make sure she's on the right track. She's very close now, and her phone is letting her know, trembling with each bright pulse.

She's standing in front of a small one-story house with a couple of oak trees shading the patch of lawn and some shrubs under the front window. The shade's drawn and the window glows with inside light. The porch light's on. No movement inside.

Do these rucklings have any idea how close they are to a powerful remnant?

Of course not. They're rucklings. They don't have a clue about anything in the dreamscape. No offense.

A car passes, and she gets moving. Don't want to look suspicious.

The phone rumbles in her grip, and the green ripples thicken.

She feels nervous. She's never done anything like this before. She's never been so close to a remnant, at least not that she knows of. Who could have left it here? One of the talented dreamlords of recent years? Marina Hajinsky? Nurleen Flibs? Or one of the all-time greats like Igoh Treptik? Or is it even older than that? Could some early dreamlord have stumbled upon a technique for Dream Permanence and then hidden the evidence?

Well, it's not so permanent anymore. If the dream energy is registering on her A-phone, then there must be a seam, and it must be leaking. She knows this from Advanced Dream Studies. There's a mathematical formula for a dreamworld's rate of decay. She can't remember it at the moment, but it has something to do with initial energy, shape, and time. The death of the dreamlord tends to speed things up, too.

Another block and she's next to an open field with powerlines overhead. The ripples are telling her to head off the sidewalk and

across the field. As soon as she does, the phone starts jumping around in her hand. She's holding it with both hands, and her arms are shaking. The A-phone screen pulses so bright it nearly blinds her.

She takes another step and hears a scream. She trips over something, then finds herself face down on the grass while a dog growls in her ear.

She's lying on top of the dog's leash, and the dog is struggling to get loose.

"Move off the leash, please! My dog! My Lulu!"

"Oh! Sorry!" She grabs the phone out of the grass and tries to hide it against her stomach as she gets up. She starts to laugh because the vibrations tickle.

"Ha ha! It's not you! Ha ha! I promise!" she says.

"It's not funny! Watch where you're going! You kids and your phones! Lulu's just had a grooming, and she was all clean and pretty!"

"Yes, ma'am. So sorry. Ha ha ha!"

The woman tsks and moves on across the field toward the sidewalk with her dog.

Katrina pulls the phone away from her and checks herself for dog poo. She turns off the phone because the bright green light and the buzzing would call too much attention to her.

She's standing a few steps from the bushes at the side of the field. She knows the seam is right there, and she doesn't dare go any farther. The case file warned her in capital letters, DO NOT GO INTO THE REMNANT UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

She didn't need to be told. She's studied what could happen. The decaying dreamworld could literally feed off her and suck the energy out of her. She might never make an illusion again. And if she didn't get out of there quickly enough, she might lose more than that. If the remnant is in its final stages of collapse, holes will form. She'd get swallowed by one. No one knows for sure what happens then. A black hole in a dreamworld stretches the known limits of dream

physics. Time and space collapse. Dreams and reality get mixed up in ways you can't predict.

It's scary that the woman and her dog were so close and didn't know it. What would have happened if they'd wandered through the seam and into the dreamworld?

Would the DIA perform an emergency rescue?

One thing for sure: Katrina would fail her internship.

She's going to have to come back tomorrow night with the A-phone and take more readings from different angles.

Meanwhile, she'll need to keep an eye on this spot and make sure no one takes a wrong turn. It's unlikely, she knows. Why would anyone walk through those bushes just for the heck of it? But the woman was pretty close!

If she's going to hang around a field all day, she's going to need a disguise. An illusion no one will notice. Small and not too showy.

As she heads back down the sidewalk, she gets online and flips through pictures of cats.

Kitty Katrina to the rescue!

Chapter 8

All last night, Alex lay in bed thinking these thoughts:

I, Alex Kraft, am crazy.

I'm a certified nut.

A looney tune with a loose screw and marbles spilling out of my head.

I'm cuckoo.

I'm cray-cray.

Like, way cray-cray. Because that's how I play. Okay?

Yeah, okay, but stop rhyming. Only crazy people think in rhyme. The truth doesn't rhyme. The truth is singular.

Yeah, and the truth is, I have jumped off the high-dive into the deep end of the wacky whirlpool at the Wacksville Wec Center.

Can it really be true? He's about to find out.

7:15 a.m., and Ol comes trudging down the sidewalk with his gigantic backpack low on his back, swaying like a rhino's haunches. The morning's bright and warm. A couple of squirrels chase each other around the trunk of a pine tree. One dashes in front of a car, almost gets hit when he freezes in the middle, then scurries up a tree on the other side. There's an orange tabby cat sitting at the edge of the field.

Ol's not in any hurry. He never is. But he agreed to take the shortcut.

"I know, I know," Ol says as he comes up, interrupting Alex the second he opened his mouth to speak, "you want me to protect you from Trevor Womple and his Hug of Doom. Well listen, I got a plan. I'm the man with the plan, my-man. We fight fire with fire. We beat him to the punch. We run right up to him and shout, 'Good morning, my dear friend Trevor!' before he even gets a chance to speak, and then what's he going to say, huh?"

"I tried that!"

"But we don't let up. We say, 'It's so nice to see you today, chum!' and we follow that with, 'I hope you have a stupendous and terrific day!' It's going to take a little practice, but I think we can say these things without sarcasm. I call this Plan B-Nice. What do you say? Are you in?"

"No. Let's just take the shortcut and see what happens."

"I already took a longcut."

"Ol, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Crazy's a relative word. We're all crazy to a sedated chicken."

"Let's look at the evidence. I'm convinced my mom's a zombie, and when I took a shortcut to school, Trevor Womple was suddenly nice to me, and I felt I'd entered an alternate universe. These things seemed real. Maybe I'm losing it."

"I don't know from sane people," Ol says.

"Well this is it," Alex says. "I'm going to prove it one way or the other. We're going to take the same shortcut I did the other day, and you're going to come with me. If Trevor Womple is nice to me, or if he even just says 'Good morning,' then I'm not crazy—the *world* is

crazy—and in that case we'll go with your B-Nice plan. But if everything's the same as always, I need you to escort me to the school nurse and make sure she commits me.”

“I can't do that, my-man.”

“You have to. For the good of humanity.”

“I can't speak coherent sentences to medical professionals.”

Alex peers into the woods, takes a deep breath and lets it out.

“Here goes.” He steps off the sidewalk into the powerline field, same as yesterday. He's not even sure which outcome he wants. It might be more of a relief to find out he's crazy. Then he could roll around in a padded cell all day and lick his food off a tin plate that doubles as a tambourine when knocked against his head.

Not two steps into the field, Alex hears a screech to his right. The orange cat is charging across the field, headed right for him.

“Whoa! Watch out!” Ol yells.

Alex jumps back onto the sidewalk to avoid the cat. When he looks again, the cat is sitting in the field, a few steps away, licking its paw like nothing happened.

“Does it want to play?” Ol asks. “Come here, kitty!”

The cat won't even look at him.

“Weird,” says Alex. He moves to step around the cat. As soon as his foot hits the grass, the cat screeches and hunkers into a crouch, eyes wide.

“Back off!” Ol says. “The thing might have rabies.”

But as soon as Alex puts his foot back on the concrete, the cat calms down, sits up and licks its paw again.

Now another cat appears, a black one, slinking out of the bushes where the first cat came from. The cat trots over and sits a few feet from the orange one. It paws something on the ground.

A third cat, a striped brown tabby, crosses the street and rubs against Ol's leg. Ol jumps, and the cat runs to join the other two in the field.

“Cat madness. It's freaking me out, man. Let's come back another day. We'll just assume you're not crazy until then.”

"No way," Alex says. "I haven't been sure about anything in my life for months. I need to be sure about this."

Two more cats come out of the bushes, and three more cross the street, and one comes trotting down the sidewalk, and two more from the other direction, and pretty soon they're all sitting in the field, spaced out like pylons in an obstacle course, licking their paws, or flicking their tails, or just sitting there, completely still and staring at Alex and Ol.

"They're trying to block us," Alex says.

"Mission accomplished."

"Something's going on. Something...supernatural. Are you going to let a bunch of cats tell you what to do?"

"Hey, I'm allergic to these things. I already feel a sneeze coming on. They may look all cuddly, but they shoot microscopic poison blow darts up my nose!"

"I'll buy you a year's supply of allergy medication if I'm wrong."

"Fine, but if one of these things bites me and my arm swells up and falls off, I'm going to pick it up and beat you over the head with it."

Alex slides the backpack off his shoulder and holds it out in front of him. He counts to three, then makes a dash for the line of trees.

The orange tabby charges toward him and pounces onto his backpack, knocking him down with surprising force—like ten cats hit him at once. Alex rolls away, protecting his face. Ol grabs him and drags him back to the sidewalk.

"I was coming," Ol says, looking guilty. "I promise!"

The orange cat is licking its paw again. The others slowly approach and form a tighter semicircle between Alex, Ol, and the strip of woods.

"This is too much," Ol says. "Why don't we just get out of here? Do you want to get rabies? Do you want to get rabies *shots*?"

"It's a gang of cats," Alex says, "and the orange one is the leader. We can outsmart them. We both should run at the same time."

"I'm too bulky to outrun a bunch of vicious cats."

"Just zigzag!" Alex says. "You go left and I'll go right. Ready?"

"I have a better idea." Ol crouches down and starts doing some kind of weird dance, hopping from one foot to the other and flapping his arms.

"What is that?"

"My Distraction Dance. It has the power to stun. Sometimes I do it in class when I forget my homework. Sometimes it even works." He steps onto the grass. "Hey cats! Check me out! I'm dancing all over your field!"

The cats just look confused.

"Keep it up!" says Alex. He makes a run for it. The orange cat growls as it slices through the field after him. The others dash to head him off.

He takes aim at the gap in the trees where a clump of palmettos sits still untouched by the morning sun.

He calls over his shoulder, "Follow me, Ol!"

Ol isn't moving fast enough. It looks like the cats are going to get there first. And what if they really are rabid?

"Go, Ol! Go!"

Alex tries to delay the cats by running in the wrong direction, hoping they'll follow. Instead, four of them, including the orange one, bypass Alex and run straight for the shortcut, positioning themselves on the edge of the field between Alex and the palmettos.

A black cat and a brown tabby come up behind Ol and jump onto his backpack. Three more jump onto Alex's, clawing and screeching.

"Ah! Get them off me! Get them off!" Ol yells.

Alex and Ol twist and shake and jump up and down with the cats clinging. One cat keeps whipping its tail into Ol's nose. He sneezes five times in a row.

Someone drives by in a minivan and honks. "Nice dance!"

Alex shakes his cats away, then pulls the last screecher off Ol. The cats crouch and hiss. They're ready to pounce for round two.

"Enough's enough," Ol says. "It's time for Super Distraction Dance!"

"Why didn't you just do that in the first place?"

"I had to warm up!"

Ol has his thumbs under his backpack straps. He's making gorilla noises while dancing around like a funky chicken. He jerks his head like he's headbutting the sky. Meanwhile, his legs and arms turn to jelly, and he whips them like an angry phoenix with broken wings.

Then he comes back louder with the gorilla noises. "Oo ah oo ah oo!"

The cats look annoyed. The orange one hisses and growls then runs at Alex like it's trying to scare him back to the sidewalk.

Alex waits until the orange cat has a full head of steam, then spins around and changes direction. He feels a sharp thud on his calf. He hopes that was a scratch and not a bite.

"Now!" he yells to Ol. "Go go go!"

Ol keeps up the gorilla noises—oo ah oo ah!—as he hauls after Alex into the shadow of the woods. The cat blockers try to run back to their positions, and the big orange cat is barreling full speed behind them.

ReeeeOOWWWWWW!!!!

With the orange cat stretching for his ankles, Alex picks a gap in the bushes and dives head first.

He feels the icy zap, hears a scream that isn't from his own mouth, trips over a root, and tumbles nose-first onto the pine straw.

When he pushes himself up onto his hands, there's Ol, sitting up and swiping at something on his arms.

Things are suddenly very quiet. No screeching cats. No chirping birds. No car riders, buses, or walkers.

Alex exhales heavily just to check his hearing, and then he sees something and taps Ol on the shoulder.

In the distance, between them and the school, stands a very tall man in a dark suit and hat.

Chapter 9

Drevin trudges up a glacier, his breath puffing out in dragon snorts. The incline isn't steep, and he knows he only has a short way to go. He remembers the way.

The morning sunlight sets everything ablaze—the air, the lightly falling snow, the mountains, the glacier. He's wading through an ocean of white. He keeps his eyes mostly closed so he doesn't go snow-blind. He stops now and puts his hand to his forehead, checks his position. The snow plays tricks. Is that the little dark spot he's looking for up ahead? He continues his march. He's not tired at all.

He's glad he didn't fall off the cruise ship or a cliff back on the island. As soon as he figured out who the tall man was, he knew he had to stop him.

The tall man looked vaguely familiar, but Drevin knows how easy it is for a dreamlord to change his appearance.

It all came down to the way he walked. As they climbed the island cliffs, Drevin watched the man push up the steep trail and walk the plateau to Phrixus's lab. With so much attention focused on making it through the tornadoes and lightning strikes, the tall man needed to conserve his energy. He was bound to let some part of him slip back into his normal self.

And the walk is what Drevin noticed. A limp, but not the usual sort of step-limp, step-limp kind. His limp skipped a step.

Step-step-step-limp, step-step-step-limp.

An injury limp doesn't work that way. It's an affectation. Maybe something he's copied and then forgot.

Drevin had seen that limp only once before. It's the walk Gorvian Halbestad used when they led him away to the Deep Earth Quarry, where he'd spend the rest of his days. Drevin shivered to think of that place, where one horrible illusion after another made your life miserable, and you had no hope of escape—no hope of even finding a door, though it's said there are plenty of exits if you could only see through the illusions.

Drevin was in the courtroom that day. He was still young then. He'd just begun work for Mr. Phrixus, and he'd been scanning library stacks in Newfoundland and Labrador for old books on

Concentration Loops—methods of keeping a small part of your brain working with barely any concentration. Drevin kept thinking that Concentration Loops would be a great study aid for school kids. They could keep working on their math homework while they did other things. Like splitting your brain into conscious and subconscious energy.

He knew that Council had a secret book repository somewhere deep under the glacier, and he was dying to get his hands on those books for Mr. Phrixus' sake. His questions about the repository were met with awkward stares. People called it a secret repository for a reason, he guessed. He didn't find it—not on that trip, anyway.

He took time off from his search to attend the last day of Gorvian's trial at the grand courtroom in a deep underground cavern with high ceilings. This was the trial of the century, and the room was packed with dreambrights of every level—except for dreamlords, who usually stay away from public gatherings.

Gorvian had to be tied to a chair behind thick glass. He kept changing his shape. He became a werewolf. Then a ball of black light. Then a creature only a mind like Gorvian's could have dreamt up, with jaws like a shark's, limbs like a bear's, and a body covered in oily scales with blood leaking out from between them. Gross.

Some in the audience wore special glasses (provided by court security) to block them from seeing Gorvian through the glass. Everyone knew Gorvian would take advantage of his last opportunity to frighten people. Others—including Drevin—refused the glasses. He couldn't resist the chance to see Gorvian in person.

Gorvian, the most talented dreamlord of his generation. Some said the most talented of all time, but of course Drevin knew that Phrixus would soon outdo him. Gorvian's problem was that he lacked the temper to use his powers for good. The Council dismissed him as a trickster at first, until they sent spies and discovered his banned experiments using innocent rucklings as lab rats.

His lawyer made the stale argument that most dreamlords did nothing useful with their powers, while Mr. Halbestad at least tried to make something lasting.

The lawyer didn't mention that for Gorvian Halbestad “something lasting” meant an illusion that would trap innocent rucklings and make them his personal servants, drawing dream energy from them to replace leaks and fuel a permanent dreamworld.

The jury saw through the false claims and convicted Gorvian to life in the DEQ.

“There's only one difference between us!” shouted Gorvian at the courtroom audience. “You're cowards, and I'm not!”

Then he was led away: step-step-step-limp, step-step-step-limp. A walk in 4/4 time.

Was his strange ambulation some kind of signal? Did he always walk this way?

And if Gorvian is now miles underground, who was that step-step-step-limping away from him between the cliff and the plateau while the tornadoes drilled around him?

A follower, no doubt. But more than that, Drevin suspected. The tall man's features looked familiar for a reason.

Drevin's right about the dark spot on the glacier. As he gets closer, a broad desk comes into view—a dark wood desk in the middle of a great nowhere—and sitting behind it is a kindly old lady in reading glasses and a parka. She's got a little handbrush, and she's sweeping the snow off the desk. She lifts up an old black telephone and sweeps under it. There's nothing else on her desk.

“Lovely weather today!” says Drevin as he comes up.

“For polar bears!” the woman says.

Drevin claps his mittens together. Some of the snow flies off onto the desk. He sweeps it away for her.

“Here to see the Council.”

“You're in luck—they're in session. But whom shall I say is calling?”

“Oh, they wouldn't know me.”

She puts a finger to her chin. “Then I'm afraid they would not like to be interrupted.”

“For this they would.”

“Don't tell me you're another Gorvian-spotter!”

He shakes his head. “If you have reports about sightings, they're not about Gorvian. They're about his son.”

Her eyes go blank. “Hold on, please,”

After she relays the information into her telephone, she opens her desk drawer and gives him a strained little smile as she presses a button. The snow rises a few feet away and reveals a glass elevator. He returns the smile and steps into the elevator.

After a long descent through the blue glacial ice, he steps off and is met at the bottom by a stern man with a thin nose who takes his parka from him. The man says very little. He leads him down a labyrinth of passages and at last opens a set of double doors to reveal a very dark room.

The man steps outside and shuts the doors behind him.

It takes a while for Drevin's eyes to adjust, and then he sees the outlines of the Council members sitting at their desk with the bright blue ice of the glacier behind them that makes Drevin feel like he's a fish in an aquarium. There appears to be five Council members. Drevin clears his throat.

“It's dark in here,” he says.

“We like it that way.”

“Who said that? I can't see any of your faces.”

“That's the point.”

Drevin rubs his arms. The Council keeps the room chilly, and his muscles are aching, too. He had to row away from Mr. Phrixus's island until the wind caught his sail. Good thing the old *Miss Illusion* hadn't sprung a leak after all those years in the cavern. He'd used her in the old days to sail to Bermuda, where he'd hitch a ride on a freighter to his research destination, sometimes covering ten thousand miles in the most roundabout way to get there. He knew so many sailors back then! So he guessed it wasn't such a surprise that he found one of them still sailing—his old friend Samo the Slovakian, once a deckhand and now captain of his own ship. Samo fed him well and gave him lots to drink and dropped him in Iceland, where

he stowed away on another ship to Labrador, an Estonian freighter with bad food—at least the scraps were bad that he stole from the galley trash cans.

“So. You'd like to report a sighting,” says a woman. “Why should we believe you, Mr., uh...”

“Philpott, ma'am. Drevin Philpott. But I gave myself that last name because I saw it on a sign once. A billboard for acne medication. Philpott's Zit-Away. I'm an orphan. Never adopted.” He laughs. “You can just call me Drevin.”

“Fine. *Drevin*. We get reports all the time of Gorvian Halbestad sightings. Those are investigated by the Dream Intelligence Agency. They'll be happy to take your report. They're in Washington, D.C., but the operator on floor negative 7 can connect you. Just dial—”

“But, ma'am, as I told the nice lady at the top of the glacier outside, this isn't Gorvian. Gorvian's in the Deep Earth Quarry. We all know that. I was at his trial. I saw him being taken away.”

Drevin hears a laugh from one of the shadows somewhere behind the long table. “At least he's not as crazy as some of them,” whispers a woman.

“Don't be so sure,” another whispers back.

“Your Honors, I'm not crazy. Just old and, and, a little tired. But I saw what I saw, and I know it's too important to get filed away in a drawer somewhere.”

“We use computers now,” says a woman. “Went digital years ago. Freed up a lot of space at D.I.A.”

“There was a lot of resistance to that,” a man says. “Some of us are afraid of technology. Some of us think that technology will make us all obsolete—even dreamlords.”

There's a pointed silence. Someone's chair creaks.

Someone clears his throat. “Seems obvious to me.” Several of them groan. “If these computers can make worlds of their own, what's the use of a dreamlord?”

“Whatever was the use of a dreamlord?” says someone else. Now several of the shadows gasp. Drevin's eyes have adjusted, and he can tell there are six members of the Council up there, not five. The

extra one is in deeper shadow, away from the windows that glow faintly with blue glacier ice. He's never been sure how many are really on the Council. That's kept a secret. Is this all of them, or is it only a subcommittee put together to hear petitions? Maybe these are just some of the Council members on vacation in Labrador, and when they're not in hearings like this, they're soaking in hot tubs on the Negative 86nd floor!

"Your Honors, what I'm trying to say to your Honors...the man I saw...the man who *kidnapped* me...he was Gorvian's son."

Silence. Followed by a lot of whispering.

"Why would you think Gorvian has a son?" asks a woman.

"Well, Your Honor, I know it wasn't Gorvian. But he looked like Gorvian. And then there's the walk. I told Your Honors I was at the trial. I watched Gorvian walk away in handcuffs. I saw the way he limps, Your Honors. Step-step-step-limp, step-step-step-limp. Like this."

Drevin does his best imitation of the walk, except it's dark and they can't really see him. And because it's dark, his knee bumps into a chair and he collapses into it.

"Plus, I *know* he has a son because Mr. Phrixus once told me so."

Gasps from the Council.

"Phrixus?!"

"Yes, sir."

"You knew Phrixus?!"

"Your Honors, I wasn't going to bring that up, but since my mouth did it for me, I might as well own up to it."

"How do you know him?"

"I was his lab assistant, ma'am. Twenty-two and a quarter years I worked for him."

A stunned silence. Not even a creaking chair.

"Is it true that he went rogue?"

"*Rogue!* Your Honors! Mr. Phrixus, in my opinion, was the greatest dreamlord of all time!"

"Yes, we know he had powers beyond the ordinary. Exceptional powers."

“Exceptional, yes, sir!”

“But that doesn't mean he used them wisely.”

“Well he did, Your Honor! In the opinion of this humble old man, he did!”

“And where is he now?”

“He's gone, sir. I fear he's dead. I expect he is, or else I would have heard from him.”

“We already know he is.”

“Sir?”

“I was testing you. We know he's dead.”

“That hasn't been proven!” a woman says.

“Phrixus lived among the rucklings. He quit practicing his arts.”

“Enough!” says a man. “Why are you telling him these things?!”

“The man was Phrixus's assistant. He has a right to know what a cowardly fool his maestro was.”

Someone pounds the desk. “The *Council* will decide what information about Dreamlords gets released to the general public.”

“But he's *not* general public. That's my point.”

“He's not on the Council. He's only—”

“YOUR HONORS!!!!” Drevin screams, probably louder than he's screamed in thirty years. He didn't know his vocal chords still had it in them.

Silence.

“Ah hem. Pardon the interruption, sirs and madams. But what I'm trying to tell you about is Gorvian's son.”

Someone clears his throat. “Well, Mr. Drevin, even if you did see Gorvian Halbestad's son, what does it matter? It's been proven, as I'm sure you know, that a Dreamlord's powers typically skip a generation, so even if the man you saw *were* Gorvian's son, his powers aren't likely to pose a threat.”

“That is true, Your Honor, unless he found a way to enhance his powers.”

“Nonsense! A Dreamlord's power comes from within.”

“I wouldn't know, sir. I'm just barely a brightener of dreams. And I don't know what the man is up to. I'm just certain it's no good.”

"I'm afraid that's of no help to us."

"Should we tell him about the remnant?" a woman whispers to another Council member. She doesn't wait for an answer. "There's a peculiar remnant," she says to Drevin. "Down in Florida. Preliminary readings are quite strong. We've turned it over to the D.I.A. We're not at liberty to say anything else, but we're afraid it's a sign of trouble. Not from Gorvian, of course. He'll never be heard from again. But a dreamlord, perhaps, of very advanced powers. Do you know anything about this?"

"Not directly, Your Honor," says Drevin. "But perhaps I should—"

"Do nothing?" The sixth Council member, the one in deepest shadow, speaks for the first time, and his voice is like a rockfall across the valley—deep and clattery. "That's a fine idea, Mr. Drevin. Do nothing, because the D.I.A. is on it, and we don't want anyone asking inappropriate questions and causing a panic, do we?"

"That's true," says another. "Not even the D.I.A. has the full information. We've treated it like any other Dream Remnant case, and we trust that they've sent an experienced field agent to investigate. You know, of course, the grave dangers of even one single ruckling getting trapped in a remnant."

"Of course I do, Your Honor."

"And the danger is compounded when the remnant is as strong as this one. The consequences would be felt throughout the dreamscape."

"A nightmare, Your Honor."

"A very real one, Mr. Drevin. In any case, when we get a full report, we'll go from there. Meanwhile, you're welcome to remain at Council Headquarters. Unfortunately, we won't be able to tell you the results of the investigation, but we can tell you when it's complete."

"But I know things, Your Honors. I can help."

"All the more reason you should stay here and provide us with any information you can," says the sixth member.

Drevin had sat around for thirty-four years. He wasn't about to sit around any longer. "Your Honors, I'll help in any way I can. But I do my best work out of doors."

"We can't allow that!" the sixth member says.

"But can we really hold him?" a woman says. "Do we have the legal authority?"

"We can, and we will," says the sixth member. "We're in a state of emergency."

"But there's been no declaration—"

"I'm declaring it!"

"That will require a vote, as you know," says a man.

"Then let's vote!"

"We'll have to debate the issue first, and then..."

"Fine, but meanwhile we hold him."

Silence. The other five Council members seem to be afraid of the sixth.

"I suppose that's reasonable," says one, finally.

Drevin interjects in a small, high voice. "I disagree!"

"You have no say in this," growls the sixth member.

Another awkward pause.

"Good. Okay then," says another member. "Mr. Turtlington will show you to your temporary quarters. Why don't you have a soak in the hot tub down below? We'll call you when we need you. Mr. Turtlington!" he shouts.

The door opens immediately, as if Mr. Turtlington already had his hand on the knob.

"Fine, Your Gracious Honors," says Drevin. "Very kind of you. I'll await your decision. Now, there's a freighter captain who has offered me a ride if I can make it back to Goose Bay tomorrow. May I ask how long you'll need me?"

"Indefinitely," says the sixth member.

Mr. Turtlington lifts his eyebrows. He's holding Drevin's parka.

Drevin follows Mr. Turtlington's long, slow steps down the hall and into the elevator. Mr. Turtlington hands Drevin his parka and

presses the button for negative 64. They sink into the cavern with its faint shadows and low, booming echoes.

The two of them stand side by side, staring awkwardly through the glass.

At last, Mr. Turtlington clears his throat and turns to Drevin.

“Do they know about Alex Kraft?”

“And who might that be?”

Mr. Turtlington lifts an eyebrow and slowly nods. “I can see we have a lot to talk about.”

Chapter 10

The tall man looks like Abe Lincoln without the beard. He wears a black coat and a top hat, even though it's 85 degrees out, and stands there, completely still, in the shadow of the school's entry. Alex blinks a couple of times to make sure he's not imagining it.

“I don't like the looks of this,” Ol whispers.

“Just don't move,” Alex says. Which is hard to do because they're still out of breath from the cat-frenzy.

Ol puts his hand to his brow. “Does he see us? Who is he anyway? Some kind of cosplayer?”

“I doubt it.”

“I've seen those people at the park bashing each other with Nerf swords. Do you have to have some kind of permit? 'Cause it doesn't seem like anyone should just be able to show up in the park with swords, even if they're made of foam.”

“They're realistic foam,” Alex points out.

“That's exactly what I'm saying,” Ol says. “What if someone thought we were under attack, and they call the National Guard, and the National Guard shows up with *real* swords. Wouldn't be fair.”

“Keep it down, Ol. He'll hear us.”

If the tall man hears, he doesn't react. He stands there a moment longer—sort of a long, creepy moment—then slowly turns and walks through the open front doors of the school.

“Whoa. What do we do now?” Ol asks.

Alex jumps up. His backpack hangs from his arm. He lets it slide to the pine straw. His pants are ripped at the knees from diving through the palmettoes, but no blood.

They hear footsteps on the grass to the right, and a wide figure emerges from behind the bushes. The wide figure is Trevor Womple. He's dressed in a tuxedo and carrying a serving tray.

Trevor waddles into the shade. The tuxedo shirt can't contain his neck rolls.

“Welcome, sirs. Beverage or snack?”

Alex and Al have no words to answer him.

“Beverage or snack?”

Alex makes a noise. “Uh...”

“Got any orange soda?” Ol asks.

Trevor lifts a small bottle off his tray and hands it to Ol. Alex snatches it and tosses it away.

“What?” says Ol. “I'm thirsty after the cat attack!”

“How do you know it's not poison?” Alex whispers.

“He seems so *nice*,” says Ol.

“Only one way to find out for sure.” Alex takes a deep breath and turns to Trevor. “Hey, loser!” he says. Ol gasps. “We don't want you around! Get away from us and don't come back!”

Trevor leans forward, and Alex thinks he might fall on top of him and pound his face into ground meat. Instead, he turns and heads back across the grass toward the side of the school.

“Jeez! Harsh!” says Ol.

“I know, but don't you see? This means I'm not crazy! I'm really not crazy!”

“I believe you, my-man. What do we do now?”

“We go check out the school, or whatever this place really is.”

“It's J.J. de Blande Middle School, isn't it?”

“Look around you, Ol!”

“I'm looking—all I see is our boring school.”

“Keep looking!”

Ol stares at the bright beige building. It almost glows against the perfect blue backdrop of the sky. The school name's missing above the entrance. "Maybe they painted it last night."

"Yeah, but look at the grass," says Alex. "It's brighter. And look at the sky. Bluer. And the people."

"What people?"

"Exactly. No one here to treat us like losers. See? I'm not crazy, Ol. This proves it!" He steps out into the light. "Now are you coming?"

Ol brushes off his pants. They walk out onto the bright green, weed-free grass. The school shimmers, the sprinkler stains are gone from the walls, the beds are mulched, the bushes trimmed, and there aren't any fire ant hills to avoid. No birds, either. Or clouds, for that matter. The light seems to come from all over, instead of from a glowing ball in the sky. There aren't any shadows. Or sounds, other than Alex's and Ol's soft footsteps in the grass. Trevor's nowhere in sight, and neither is the tall man.

"If this is our school, it should always look like this," Ol says.

With every step, Alex is more and more certain that he was right all along. They're in some kind of alternate world.

Down at the street, there are no cars or buses. No walkers or bike riders. Nothing in the distance.

"Why's everything so blurry down the block?" Ol asks.

Alex squints. The street looks normal up close, but the farther you stare into the distance, the blurrier it gets. They hadn't noticed before because out of the corner of your eye the colors and shapes look about right. It's only when you stare directly down the street or across the street where there are supposed to be houses that you realize there's nothing there.

Alex steps into the middle of the road—why not?—and heads straight for the blurry distance.

"Hey, my-man, don't be dopey. You might get sucked into the mist."

"Tell me if I start looking like you need glasses."

Alex keeps walking. When he passes the school's second driveway, he feels a pressure on his face, and against his arms and legs, and soon his whole body slows down. He's getting a headache. He stops.

"Whoa!" Ol says.

"Eh I burry?" he mumbles. It's like talking into a pillow.

"When you stopped, some sort of ripple shot up through the air, like you're a pebble someone threw into the water!"

"I ca moo fo-wa! Eh fee lie da werl ish pushee ba!"

Alex backs up slowly, then returns to where Ol stands in the middle of the street. "We're in some sort of bubble."

"What do you think it is, really?"

"A secret government experiment? An alien colony?"

"As long as it's not those dudes from Aldebaran 9 who suck your blood like ticks," Ol says. "The only way to stop them is to overfeed them until they explode!"

"You've been reading sci-fi comics again."

"I never stopped."

"Let's go inside."

They head back up the sidewalk and step through the entryway into what the administrators at J.J. de Blande creatively call Hallway A.

"Hello?!" Ol calls. "Anyone home?"

His voice echoes back from down the empty hall. No sign of Trevor Womple. No tall man. To the right are the administrative offices. The door is shut. To the left is the wide hallway. The classroom doors are all propped open at exactly the same angle.

When the echo quiets, Alex and Ol look at each other, unsure of what to do. The place is so completely silent Alex can hear the blood rushing in his ears.

"Empty," Alex says.

"Totally."

"There's something I don't get. Why would someone go to all the trouble of creating a bubble world only to make it look pretty much like the regular one?"

"Imaginatively challenged?"

“The only difference is that there's no one here and we could pretty much do anything we want.”

Ol nods. “That’s so true.”

“For example, no one would yell at us or put us in detention or call our parents if we broke all the school rules.”

“Nope.”

“Kind of cool, huh?”

“Yep...yep.”

Alex lifts his eyebrows. Ol grins. They've been friends just long enough to know what the other is thinking.

They break into a run at the same time.

Down the hall, all the way to the multipurpose room, till they hit the far wall and push off and run back the other way. A race, and they don't care who wins. It feels good to run through the empty school with no one to block their paths and no one to shove them aside or give them looks or enforce the rules.

When one of them turns down a hallway, the other turns with him. When one jumps and clicks his heels together like a leprechaun, so does the other. When one does a parkour-style jump off the hallway wall, the other does it on the other side.

When one stops for a drink at the exceptionally-cold water fountain, the other splashes water up his nose.

When one drums on the lockers, so does the other.

When one runs into a classroom and up and down the aisles between desks, the other hops up onto the teacher's desk and does a clumsy tap dance.

The emptiness doesn't bother them. The emptiness is like a hundred doors opening at once.

They're running through the gym and up and down the bleachers.

They're running through the cafeteria and up and down the tables with their bolted-on chairs.

They're tipping over music stands in the orchestra room.

They're fingerpainting the walls in the art room.

They're giving soliloquys on stage in the multipurpose room. “To poop or not to poop. That is the question.”

And then they're lying sprawled out on the floor of one of the hallways—who even knows which one?—staring at the fluorescent lights and catching their breaths.

“It's like our own private school,” Ol says.

“Or a private clubhouse,” Alex says.

“Whatever it is, it's awesome.”

“The floor doesn't smell like cleaning chemicals for once,” Alex says.

“I wouldn't know about that,” Ol says. “I tend to stay upright in the hallways.”

Alex smacks him on the arm. “Hate to ask, but what time is it?”

Ol shrugs. “You think we're in trouble yet?”

“Not here.”

“Then why go back? I'm in no hurry.”

Alex thinks about it. He doesn't want to make things any harder for his mom. She may act like a zombie, but somewhere under that stressed-out and distracted surface is the real person he misses, and he doesn't want to hurt her. Since Gramps died, she has no one but him.

“We don't want anyone to come looking for us,” Alex says.

They take one last run down the hallway and out the front doors.

Outside, the light hasn't changed. The cloudless sky is a gorgeous open vault. The air is still. Everything's still. It's like walking through a 3-D postcard.

“Yo!” yells Ol. “Anyone out here?! Not even Mr. Weird Abe Lincoln?”

Nothing. Not even an echo.

“Woohoo!” he adds.

“Woohoo!” Alex agrees.

“I'm a crazy person!” Ol says, hopping up and down and doing his gorilla dance again.

“I'm not!” Alex says. “I thought I was, but I'm not! I found a school in a bubble! Woohoo! Let's come back every day.”

“I'm in.”

“I guess there's only one way out of here,” Alex says.

They head for the bushes, at least until Alex jerks to a stop and grabs Ol's arm.

Because someone's standing in the shadows.

The man steps toward them in long stilt-strides. He puts a hand up. He's wearing white gloves this time.

Alex and Ol are mortified. "We're done for," Ol says.

"On three, we run," whispers Alex. "Don't split up. That's what they always do in movies, and it always ends in disaster. 1, 2—"

"Very glad to meet you, boys!" The man laughs, so loud and deep it's like a rumble of thunder that stops Alex and Ol in their tracks. His smile is supernaturally wide. "I didn't want to disturb you earlier, you seemed to be having so much fun. I like fun. Who doesn't?"

Alex gargles a sound that wouldn't translate into any known language.

"Tell me," the man says, "what do you think of my little park?"

"Park? It's uh...great. I mean, it's just... *what is it?*"

"We thought it was some kind of bouncy house that's lost its bounce," says Ol.

When the man laughs again, his massive jaw opens wide like it's going to swallow them both. His voice rolls over them like the echo of an amp turned too high. "First things first," he says. "My name's Dr. Kosmic. That's Kosmic with a K. I designed this magnificently fun world with a mix of science and what one might call applied magic." His hat shifts on his head, and he grabs it before it falls off. When he takes a slight bow, his black hair gets tousled like there's a wind, but there's no wind.

There's something slightly smudgy about his edges, which makes him look like a hologram.

Alex and Ol keep their distance. "If this is supposed to be fun, why does it look like our school?" Ol asks. "Not that it's not actually fun."

"I had to start simple, you see. But with your help, it's going to get better and better. You've heard of the amusement park AstroLand?"

Alex nearly jumps at the word. "Have we heard of it? Everyone's heard of it!"

And everyone's been there except me, he thinks.

"I am an entertainment scientist employed by AstroLand. Dr. Kosmic's just a name I give myself."

"You mean you're like...a character in a science exhibit, but the science is real?" Ol asks.

"I assure you I'm real, and so is my work." He lowers his voice. "The imaginative energy I'm harnessing here surpasses anything you've studied in school. It was supposed to be kept secret, but you stumbled right into it!"

"Yeah, sorry," Alex says. "I took a shortcut. If we're trespassing, we can just go, and—"

"Not at all! I chose this test site for its proximity to talented young people just like you. I meant to recruit you as test subjects. You're just a little early, that's all."

"But what is this place? Is it real?"

The tall man leans closer, towering over them. He's got such a shockingly friendly smile, and with those white gloves and top hat, he looks like someone decided to cross Abe Lincoln with Mickey Mouse, an extremely weird combination of Alex's favorite president and favorite cartoon character (though he hasn't admitted he likes Mickey since he was six years old). Even if the combination clashes, it seems rude to run away.

"It's too complicated for me to explain everything at the moment. And anyway I can't give away secrets that even the government doesn't know about yet. You boys have dreams, don't you?"

"Ah! We're dreaming! I knew it!" says Ol.

"That's hard to believe," Alex says. "But I guess it's also hard to believe we're not."

"That's just the point," the tall man says. "Dreams are real. At least while you're dreaming them. Right?"

"You could say that."

The man leans even closer like he's going to tell a secret, even though no one else is in sight. "I'm a dream scientist," he whispers.

“And this—” he waves his hand around, “this is my little experiment.”

“So we *are* dreaming?”

“Not quite. I'm in the profession of making dreams come true. The perfect technology for a theme park, wouldn't you say? AstroLand has hired me to re-create worlds that already exist and create new ones altogether. It's cheaper in the long run than building new theme parks, and the options are limitless.”

“I've had school dreams before,” says Ol. “But they're always about getting yelled at or tripped or forgetting my homework or taking a test that lasts 88 years and I get old and die before I can finish it, which means I fail at life, and now that I think about it, I shouldn't be thinking about this.”

“Of course you're right that it's a school now,” says the man. “But it doesn't have to be. What if you helped me make it an amusement park?”

“You could turn this into something like AstroLand?” Alex asks.

“*Exactly* like AstroLand,” the tall man says, “if that's what you want. But without the lines. Without the crowds.”

Ol laughs. “And I suppose it's all free, too!”

“Not quite,” says the man. His hat drifts. He grabs it and takes it off. “As I'm sure you know, the most vivid dreams are powered by our deepest feelings, and a dream world is no different.”

“What does that mean?” Alex asks.

“It means the price of admission is something important to you.”

“Cheetos are important to me,” Ol says. “Would they get me in?”

“A dream as complex as AstroLand can only be created by giving up something with deep feelings attached to it, something it would hurt you to lose.”

An image leaps into Alex's head, but he's too embarrassed to say it. Gramps's flashlight. It doesn't work, and he keeps it just for sentimental reasons.

“I think I get it,” Ol says. “Because if I eat too many Cheetos before bed, I just get a stomach ache and have nightmares. So maybe I give up Rudy—he's my stuffed chicken. Except I don't sleep

with him anymore, so it wouldn't bother me much to lose him. Can we think about it?"

The tall man nods. "It's your sense of yearning and loss that sustains a dream and makes it real. If you've lost someone you were close to, a memento may be what you're looking for."

Dr. Kosmic's head tilts to the side. He gets a strained look on his face, and he shudders a little like he's trying to lift a barbell. "I've said all I can today, and now I'll have to ask you to go."

"So soon?"

"Come back with the price of admission. Think of it as a gift to your dreams. Your most wonderful dreams. With your help, I'll make them come true."

Alex and Ol stand there for a moment. They look at each other. They can't speak.

Finally, Alex give Ol a little nudge and they head slowly toward the woods, walking a lot like zombies.

Ol pauses just short of the palmettoes. "Punch me," he says.

Alex shakes his head. "I'm telling you, Ol. You're not dreaming."

"Okay then." Ol balls his fist and punches himself in the forehead. "Ow! You wouldn't think that would hurt so much when you know it's coming."

Chapter 11

Drevin and Mr. Turtlington stand in Drevin's bathroom with the shower running, just in case there are hidden microphones. The steam swirls over their heads, filling the small room from the top down.

The hot springs water coming out of the shower head smells of raw earth. Sweat traces their cheeks. Dark stains deflate their clothes.

Despite the heat, Mr. Turtlington's face goes pale when Drevin tells him about his encounter with Gorvian's son on the cruise ship.

“Gregor Halbestad,” he says, spitting out the name like it's spoiled food. “We knew Gorvian had a son. We've had no luck tracking him down in the years since he dropped out of the Academy. The son may not have the talents of his father, but there's no doubt he has the same appetite for power.”

“What can he accomplish?”

“Plenty if we let him. His goal may be to rescue his father from the DEQ and wipe out the Council altogether.”

Drevin sucks in his breath. The situation is even more serious than he imagined.

Mr. Turtlington continues. “We think we know what he wants from Phrixus's grandson. That's the reason I'm talking to you.”

Drevin still can barely believe it. Phrixus has a grandson. He wouldn't have imagined it if Mr. Turtlington hadn't been so convincing. Turtlington's clandestine group of dreambrights, The Secret Purveyors of Truth (S.P.O.T.) have devoted their lives to tracking down the truth about Phrixus and other secrets the Council would like to hide.

SPOT confirmed the rumors: Phrixus met a ruckling woman and married her a long time ago. Drevin had heard as much and was never sure he could believe it. What he hadn't heard was that Phrixus' wife bore a daughter and, 22 years later, that daughter bore a son.

She named her son Alex. Alex Kraft.

Now, dark forces have made inroads at Council, scheming to benefit the supporters of Gorvian Halbestad—all those dreambrights and dreamlords who choose power over art.

“Alex Kraft may know little about his talents,” Turtlington says. “That puts him in great peril. A rogue dreamlord could lure him into a trap and use him for evil. Can you tell me anything about what Phrixus was working on during your time with him?”

“I'm not an educated man,” Drevin says. “The experiments of a dreamlord are beyond me.”

“Do you know if he ever conducted experiments with disillusionment?”

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know."

"There's been a rumor. More than a rumor, actually, that Phrixus crafted a device that would allow people—dreambrights and rucklings alike—to dispel illusions. That is, to see right through them. We've looked everywhere for this device. We've even been to Phrixus's laboratory."

"You've been there?! But how?"

"We nearly died. Or thought we might. When I say 'we' I actually mean other members of SPOT. I'm not the adventurous type."

Drevin thinks a moment. "Mr. Phrixus often worried aloud about rucklings. At the end of the day, we used to share cookies and watch the sunset from the cliffs, and sometimes Mr. Phrixus would share his concerns. It bothered him greatly that if a man like Gorvian Halbestad ever came to power, rucklings might lose their protections. They'd be at the mercy of dreamlords who would trap and manipulate them with their cruel illusions. I know it was on his mind to prevent that from happening."

"That fits with what we know! I understand that he sent you on missions for rare books. Did he ever send you for unusual supplies?"

The thick steam clears Drevin's head, and he remembers more than usual.

"There *is* something," he says. "About a year before the maestro disappeared, he sent me to a Venetian glass blower, a very old man who specialized in glass eyes and used a method he'd kept secret for seventy years. The man was about to retire. Mr. Phrixus had me purchase his eye collection and his equipment and bring it back to the island. I never saw any of it again."

"You say that was a year before he disappeared?"

"Near about."

"Do you think he might have completed that project?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir."

"Here's what we think at SPOT, Mr. Philpott."

"Drevin."

"Yes, sorry, *Drevin*. We think Phrixus completed his disillusioner and disappeared with it."

“Why would he do that?”

“He was hanging onto it in case it was needed. He just didn't know that Gorvian Halbestad would be the one to need it.”

“How so?”

“Escape from the DEQ is relatively easy if you can see through the illusions. If Gorvian's son can get hold of Phrixus's disillusioner and drop it into the caverns of the DEQ, Gorvian will make his way out. And if he's set loose holding the world's only disillusioner, there'd be no one to stop him.”

Drevin stares hard at him. “Well that's simply unacceptable. We must *do something!*”

“That's why I'm here,” says Mr. Turtlington. “And time is of the essence. The DIA has sent someone to investigate a remnant located almost directly beside Alex Kraft's house. We suspect that Gregor Halbestad may use this to trap Alex Kraft and steal the disillusioner.”

“I won't let that happen!”

“The good news is that we've hacked into the DIA agent's A-phone. When I say ‘we’ I mean myself. I have some skills with technology.”

“What's an A-phone?”

“An Agency cell phone with special features.”

“What's a cell phone.”

“Uh...never mind. The important thing is that we're monitoring the situation. We don't know yet if we can trust the DIA agent, but I'm working on that. And here's the thing. The DIA is short-staffed because they're receiving countless calls about Gorvian sightings.”

“I know it! People must be mistaking Gregor for his dad!”

“That's not it, I'm afraid. Whoever's calling knows that the DIA is required to investigate such things, even when the calls are from lunatics. We suspect it's a ploy from Gorvian's followers to distract the DIA while something much more terrible happens. Quite a mess. Everyone's on edge.”

“Listen,” Drevin says, blowing steam into Mr. Turtlington's face. “Something must be done. And I should be the one to go find him.”

Mr. Turtlington nods gravely.

"And please don't argue with me. This boy—Alex—he's an outsider. I can understand that better than most. The truth, when he hears it, should come from someone like me."

"I agree."

"He's got to hear it straight from someone who knows—knew—his grandfather."

"Makes complete sense."

"I won't listen to any other plan."

"Good. That's the only one there is."

"I know it's going to be dangerous. But what does an old man like me care about danger?"

"Not much, evidently."

"I've done nothing with my life since Mr. Phrixus left. I joined a bowling league one time and broke my nose. That's about it. Now I've finally got a chance to make myself useful. Don't even try to deny me that chance!"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"I've been working out onboard the ships, too. These muscles are stronger than ever." Drevin raises his arm into the steam to show off his bicep, which isn't that impressive in a droopy long sleeve shirt.

Mr. Turtlington just nods. What else can he do?

"So if you won't help me, I'll do it myself," Drevin says. "Tonight."

Mr. Turtlington reaches into his pocket and pulls out a thin piece of metal and a folded up sheet of paper. "It's all been arranged. Here's a security-level key card and a map," he says.

"What?"

Mr. Turtlington unfolds the map. "I hope you don't mind the scenic route," he says, tracing a line. "And by 'scenic,' I mean through the garbage dump, the sewage station, and some rat-infested storage areas. Also, you may need a pair of ice picks to climb the interior wall of the glacier right here." He taps the map. "I've arranged for that."

"That sounds a little dangerous," Drevin says.

"You can handle it," says Mr. Turtlington, clapping him on the shoulder. "You've been working out."

Drevin's arms suddenly feel a little soggy.

"The timing has to be right," says Turtlington. "The morning shift change is best. And then we'll need to arrange for transportation."

"I know someone," Drevin says. "If he's still in port."

"Fine. Give me the info, and I'll make the arrangements.

Arrangements are my specialty."

"Mine used to be finding books," Drevin says. "Now I guess it's finding children."

"If anyone can find him, it's you."

Drevin nods, his eyes a little wider than usual.

Chapter 12

Alex and Ol returned to school—their real school—by sneaking in through the playground fence and joining the lunchtime cafeteria crowd. The rest of the day, they moved through the halls and sat through classes in zombified silence. They couldn't even talk about it when they met in front of school at the end of the day—at least not with anyone else around.

It's only now, sitting on his bed with his laptop, that Alex hears from Ol by IM:

Tell me again that happened, Ol writes.

It happened. I think. Almost sure

This changes everything doesn't it?

maybe

We have special knowledge. That means wr special

Uh...maybe so

No more losers

Guess not

I have a plan my-man

Here we go

Will easily make us most popular kids in school
Don't even say it
Special field trip for special friends only. Who wont want to go to virtual AstroLand?
How do we know Kosmic guy is even telling the truth?
Don't tell me you dont believe! Ur the one showed me otherworld
What happens if he can't do it or if trip sux?
Whatev. Run around empty school again
Also Im New Guy, remember. Who would I even invite?
Let me handle it my man. You got entry fee picked out?
Maybe. Not yet.
Really want to just steal one of my bro's trophies and give to Dr K.
Cheating I know
Def
Might be rudy the chicken after all. I still have feelings for him.
I guess he's your entry fee then
We go to school tmrw and recruit friends for field trip. Tell everyone about entry fee. Next day, astroland. Everyone has good time, loves Ol and Al. Bam!
Just that easy
No more rainbow thief. Just two cool guys with secret info who take people to theme parks DURING SCHOOL HOURS!!!
Yeah, lol. Will be tough to go back to school tomorrow
Just 4 1 day. Then go to otherworld/astroland/ whateverbubble whenever we want
I can handle that
Okay. Ol out
A-man out
Wait you calling urself A-man now?
Just trying it out for the next five min
Yeah...bah...bye

Alex closes his laptop and lies back on his bed, heart suddenly pounding.

He can't sleep, doesn't want to turn on the light in case his mom sees and come to check on him.

He leans up and opens the drawer on his nightstand, feels around till he finds what he's looking for. It's what popped into his head as soon as Dr. Kosmic said he needed something with sentimental value.

Gramps's flashlight. It's triangular, like a prism, and decorated with raised little bumps all over it like water droplets on glass. Some of the bumps have designs in them like irises. Kind of creepy, really, especially, like now, when you hold it up to the moonlight sliding through the blinds and all those bumps are looking at you.

On one end, there are tiny numbers inscribed. Some kind of serial number? A coded message? Alex can barely read them, let alone understand their meaning.

Gramps kept the flashlight in his pocket until he gave it to Alex.

"I want you to have this," he said.

"What is it?"

"Just a little sentimental relic from a long time ago," Gramps said. "I'll tell you about it one day."

But one day never came. Gramps passed away, and Alex still isn't even sure what it is. He thinks of it as a flashlight because it looks like light should come out of one end, but he's never seen it work, and there's no switch.

He's tried twisting it. He's tried pressing on all the little glass bubbles. Nothing moves. Nothing loosens. There's not even a way to open it up and replace the batteries.

It's apparently useless. If it had sentimental value to Gramps, he isn't sure why. But it was Gramps', so it means something to Alex.

Then again, Gramps was a trickster. He might have found it in a garbage can somewhere and decided to play a joke on Alex. Except he died before he got around to the punch line.

Alex just isn't sure he can give it away, even for a virtual trip to AstroLand.

Chapter 13

It's that big kid who jumps around like a maniac, Katrina thinks. His flappy dance is enough to freak out an elephant!

She tried. She really did. She even got the neighborhood cats involved. She couldn't believe how they listened to her. Maybe "listened" wasn't the right word. Somehow they felt what she wanted them to do, and they joined in. It must be the effect of the Illusion Amplifier app on her A-phone, which transformed her into the best cat illusion she'd ever made, and somehow, some way, made the cats do what she wanted. Before she knew it, she had a whole gang of neighborhood cats on her side.

When those boys made a run for it, she gave orders to attack. She even tried to bite his ankle!

It didn't help.

And now what?

She'd had one job: keep rucklings out of the remnant.

One job, and she failed it. She failed her mission and the Agency. She failed her internship.

Should she call Mr. Tintoro?

Not yet. Maybe it's not a total disaster. The two boys came back through the seam, after all, and they looked no worse for it. A little stunned, is all.

Makes her wonder what's inside. You'd think if the remnant were old enough there wouldn't be much of an illusion left.

Maybe there's a zoo inside, and that's why the big gorilla-dancing kid feels so much at home there. The dreamlord Hildegard Ambray used to specialize in zoo illusions back in the early 1800s, and some say her zoo animals even talked! But if there *are* gorillas in there—even talking gorillas—they're probably in pieces or faded into ghostly images.

Talking ghost-gorillas. Is that what these kids find so fun?

She has to keep reminding herself that no one's been trapped or harmed. She could tell Mr. Tintoro *that*, couldn't she?

No way. If he finds out, he'll fail her for her internship. She'll never graduate from the Academy. She'll never teach. She'll wind up with a clerk's job at Council Headquarters, filing paper all day, or backing up data to giant computer servers, or whatever the clerks do these days. Maybe she can be a custodian on the night shift so she doesn't have to talk to anyone and see their face when they realize they're talking to the ONCE-PROMISING-STUDENT-WHO-TOTALLY-BLEW-IT.

Her only hope is that the assignment Mr. Tintoro gave her wasn't very important. If it were important, why would they send someone like her?

No offense to herself.

She decides to be brave. She decides to try her grown-up illusion again. She'll make herself look like an authority figure and put a stop to anyone wandering across that field toward the remnant. Who should she be? A police officer? A mayor?

In the morning, all she can muster is the grown-up version of herself she used on the plane. No makeup this time.

It'll have to do. She'll pretend she's out for a walk or something. She'll say she's the mayor or the assistant mayor or something. Is that what mayors do? Walk around and inspect things?

It's a bright, sunny morning. She strolls up the sidewalk like she's got somewhere to go. Then she turns around and comes back like she forgot something. Then turns around again like she grabbed the thing she forgot. Then she turns around again like...like... *whatever!*

Here at last comes one of the boys—not the dancing one. He seems to live in a house just a few doors down from the field.

Katrina crosses the street and walks slowly to watch him pass.

This time he doesn't meet his friend, and he doesn't cut into the field.

Just maybe things are going to be fine after all.

He continues along the edge of the woods until he turns up the sidewalk beside the school driveway.

She crosses the street and follows. She has to make sure he goes into the school and not into another seam. That would be a victory. She could report it to Mr. Tintoro!

A bus pulls into the drive. More students approach. The school doors are opening and kids are trickling in. At the top of the drive, he stops and greets his friend, the chubby gorilla dancer—the guy who ruined everything! Katrina gets worked up into a minor fit just watching him. She'd like to tell him to at least be nicer to cats!

She has to remain calm. She doesn't want to lose concentration and disillusion herself.

The two boys look like they're having a whispered conversation. They enter the school together and Katrina lets out a huge sigh of relief. Now she can call Mr. Tintoro! He doesn't have to know about yesterday's failure. Everything's normal again!

A dark-skinned bald man steps out from under the portico into the morning light. The man waves to someone on the bus, then scans the driveway and the sidewalk. His eyes stop on Katrina.

She turns to go. She's worried she's reverted to her clown face. She's worried about her height. Did she get everything right?

Now he's coming toward her. Should she run?

Too late.

"You look lost," he calls. "Are you here for Ms. Hupla?"

She's mortified. She nods without even knowing who Ms. Hupla is.

He comes closer. "Greta's got the flu, I guess, and then her usual sub called and left a message early this morning. Also sick. I thought we were going to have to disperse Greta's classes." He laughs. "You have a kind of sub look to you. I have an eye for that. I'm Bill Jacoby."

"Oh, uh, Katrina. Katrina Harryhausen." Ugh—she shouldn't have used her real name!

"I don't recall that name. I guess you haven't been to de Blande before."

"Uh, no," she says.

"Follow me. I'll show you to your classroom."

Katrina bites her lip. She's not sure she should be doing this. It definitely can't be standard procedure for the Dream Information Agency, and she could get in big trouble.

On the other hand, this man really thinks she's a teacher. Hooray for her illusionneering!

She decides not to run. Her life's dream is to be a teacher, and at the rate things are going, this might be her only chance.

Mr. Jacoby shows her through the entrance, down the hall, and into a classroom. He promises to check on her later.

And then she's alone in a strange school, standing behind a teacher's desk like she belongs there. Except she doesn't. And now the students are coming in, and she's terrified. She's never taught before. She's never even *pretended* to teach before.

She peeks at her A-phone. There's no app for this.

Chapter 14

"You know what's funny?" Ol asks.

"Your face?"

"No, and neither is that lame joke. What's funny is that Mr. Jacoby thought you were in a gang, and now you really are in one, sort of. Because what's a gang except an exclusive club?"

"An exclusive club with weapons," Alex points out.

"Knowledge is our weapon," Ol says. "Knowledge of the OtherWorld."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"At least until the field trip. Then it's AstroLand 2.0, or whatever."

"We'll see," he says, but inside he's a lot more optimistic. How could he ever imagine things would work out this way? A secret AstroLand experiment two blocks from his house, and he stumbled right into it. It's like Dr. Kosmic knew how badly he needed a wish granted, like he's Alex's guardian angel.

They walk into 1st period Geography and find a substitute for Ms. Hupla. The young teacher sits hunched at her desk staring down at

her smart phone like she's reading a very important text. She doesn't pay attention to the students filing in. It's like she's trying not to. Some of the students greet her as they come in and she doesn't even seem to hear them.

The bell rings. The sub keeps staring at her phone, her waterfall hair almost covering her face.

It isn't long before a few students take advantage of the zoned-out sub and start chatting. Whispers, then louder talk, and finally laughter and paper-wad throwing.

"She appears to be crazy," Ol whispers over his shoulder.

It takes the sub a few minutes to realize the class is out of control. She lifts her head, her thumbs pausing over her phone. She doesn't wear makeup or jewelry. When she stands, her untucked pale blue blouse wrinkles down over her gray skirt.

"Oh," she says. "Good morning."

"Good morning!" a few students reply. Others laugh.

"Is this...Geography?"

"We're the advanced class!" Jake Fripp offers helpfully. "We already know everything, so you're good."

She looks at him like he's a new species of toad. "Or...is that a joke?" she asks. When no one replies, she seems proud of herself for recognizing the joke. Her nervous laugh seems to feed on itself, like she finds laughing funny.

"Yes, okay, it's a joke. But no, really. This is Geography, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," says LeJane Thompson, always keen to win brownie points with a teacher, even a sub.

"I have a list here," she says. "Should I call roll or something?"

"Here!" says Jake Fripp.

"Don't I have to say the names first?"

"You could do that."

She notices Ol, sitting right in front of Alex, and scowls at him before she catches herself and turns away.

She starts down the roll sheet. Carissa Boyd. Alejandro Cunningham. Elon Ho. Midway through, "Alex Kr—what?!!!"
Everyone laughs.

"It's Kraft, ma'am," Alex says.

She looks up at him, her mouth hanging open. "Who *are* you?"

"I'm Alex Kraft," he says, confused.

She's even more confused. The awkward silence continues while she sits down and taps her phone. "Hold on. Hold on." She grips her forehead and tugs at her hair.

"Alex Kraft?" she says.

"Yes, ma'am. With a K."

"I've seen your name before..." She swipes her phone.

"He's the Rainbow Thief, ma'am," says Jake Fripp. "There might be a rainbow with a line through it next to his name."

More laughs. Alex doesn't even like his name called in class, and now this whole long awkward silence seems to have something to do with him. Does she know him? What gives?

"Okay, okay," she says. She takes a deep breath. "I don't know what's going on." She calls the rest of the names so quickly no one even has time to answer, then drops the roll sheet on the desk.

"Okay, I've been doing some research. I have something important to say."

She looks down at her phone again, her hands shaking.

"The lesson I'm going to teach is a lesson called Failed Shortcuts of History."

Alex cranes his neck a little. Did he hear that right? Why would she talk about shortcuts? And was she looking at him when she said it?

"Do you know what the Northwest Passage is?"

"Is that one of those outdoor clothes stores?"

"No. It's supposed to be a water route between Europe and Asia, through the top of Canada." She glances down at her phone. "This guy named John Franklin led an expedition there to find the route. He had two ships, and they were never seen again."

"Ooooo."

"Do you know what's another famous shortcut?"

"Microwave dinners?"

"The Panama Canal."

"I love those hats. The Panama ones...?"

"Do you know how many people died while they made the Panama Canal?"

"A million?"

She consults her phone again. "About 25,000."

"So what are you saying?" Austin Kieffer asks. "Shortcuts are bad?" Austin Kieffer is Jake Fripp's friend. He laughs like he made a joke. He thinks everything he says is funny.

"They're dangerous," says the teacher. "A lot of times, they're not worth it, so you should probably just take the usual route. And they're not always as short as you think they are. Do you know what the shortest shortcut is from here to China?"

"Dinner at the China Buffet?"

"Yuk, yuk, yuk."

"No, a hole right through the earth. And you'd have to be crazy to do that. You'd melt when you hit the core. Also you might get lost in the DEQ."

"The Dairy Queen what?"

"Never mind. Sometimes I forget what I'm allowed to say."

"I like Blizzards," says a girl in back.

"What about that guy's poem about 'The Road Not Taken' or whatever? We studied that in Language Arts."

"That dude was talking about *longcuts*, not *shortcuts*, I think."

"Does cutting in the lunchroom line count?" asks someone else. "Cause that actually does save time and no one dies."

"*You die if you cut me!*"

Then everyone starts talking at once, and the sub loses control of the class again. Finally, in a lull, Austin Kieffer turns to the sub and says loudly, "Who are you, anyway?"

The sub pauses like she's not sure she wants to tell them, then blurts it out. "My name is Ms. Harryhausen. You can call me Katrina."

"That's the best name ever," says Jake Fripp.

"I think so, too," says LeJane Thompson.

The sub smiles. She keeps smiling until her face turns red. "And now I've run out of things to say," she says. She sits and hunches over her phone again, swiping and swiping.

The conversation starts back up. Some people argue about their favorite Dairy Queen Blizzard. Others about their favorite shortcuts. Paper gets thrown. There's a pencil javelin contest.

Alex watches the pencils fly like he's part of the big party. But he knows he's not, and every once in a while he catches the sub glancing up from her phone and he has the strange feeling that he's in trouble for something.

Chapter 15

It's lunchtime, and Katrina's stomach growls.

"I'll have the Supreme Pizza," she tells the cafeteria lady in the teacher's line.

The lady nods and says something in another language. She looks a little lost and Katrina feels sympathy for her. The lady scratches her cheek with her wrist because her hands are wrapped in plastic gloves.

Katrina's A-phone is buzzing in her skirt's waistband, but she isn't going to answer it. She should be glad that the Agency hasn't forgotten her, but she can't talk to Mr. Tintoro here.

Also, she doesn't want to admit she's screwed up her assignment.

At least she's trying to fix it. How crazy is it that the two boys she saw enter the remnant turned up in her Geography class?

She hopes she got through to them. She thought she gave a very nice lecture against shortcuts. So what if it only took five minutes out of a fifty minute class? It's a start. Maybe they won't go back to the remnant. By saving them from themselves, she might just have saved her internship.

Hooray!

But who is this kid Alex Kraft, and why did she get a mysterious text message about him?

“Mashed potatoes, please,” she tells the cafeteria lady. “Extra gravy.”

The cafeteria lady smiles. She probably has beautiful hair and looks a lot younger when she can let it down. Right now it's imprisoned in a hairnet.

Some of the gravy overflows the little potato crater that the cafeteria lady makes with her spoon. The brown lava wraps around the corner of her square slice of Supreme Pizza. It's probably going to taste better that way.

The phone buzzes harder—a Level 2 buzz, which means it's urgent. Of course it is. Mr. Tintoro's mad that she hasn't called him, and when he tried to call her last night, she panicked and didn't answer. She put her A-phone in the fridge and went to bed.

She can't turn the phone off because she needs the Illusion Amplifier app to keep up her appearance as a teacher.

And so far it's working. She shouldn't stay away from the classroom for long—she's afraid some of the adults will question her—but she has to eat, right?

Katrina's stomach squeals like a leaky air nozzle. She thanks the cafeteria lady whose nametag she can't pronounce, fills a cup with iced tea, and finds an empty table in the teacher's corner of the cafeteria.

She takes a bite of her gravy-soaked pizza, feels the A-phone buzz in her back pocket, and pulls it out for a quick glance.

It's not from Mr. Tintoro this time. It's another text from an unlisted number:

We must stop Gorvian. Are you with us?

She looks around to make sure no one's watching her. The cafeteria is crowded. The students are noisy and preoccupied. All right. She'll bite...

Of course! I'm with you! So glad he's in the DEQ!

His son is not.

Gorvian has a son?

Yes. Working to free his father. Can we count on you to help us?

I guess...what can I do?

Find Alex Kraft. Keep him safe until someone gets there.

Hey, I know who you're talking about now! Who is he reall

The phone rattles in her fingers. It's Mr. Tintoro calling again.

She hides the phone under the table with one hand and eats a bite of mashed potatoes with the other. Her heart is pounding. Maybe she should just answer the phone and get it over with. He could be calling to tell her it's time to come back to headquarters. Or maybe he knows who's sending her texts.

She chews, takes a deep breath, and mashes the Talk button. "Yes sir, Mr. Tintoro."

"What are you doing?!" He has a screechy voice when he's upset.

She decides to be honest. "I'm eating lunch."

"*Why* are you eating lunch?!"

"I'm hungry?"

"Didn't you get my last text?"

"Why didn't you answer earlier? I've been trying to reach you!"

"I've been teach—...I've been busy."

"That first set of readings is off the scale. Is something going on?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Well something very strange is happening. Unless your phone is malfunctioning, that's the most powerful remnant we've ever observed."

"Wow."

"Do you understand how dangerous this is?"

"Um..."

"I can't imagine the powers of the dreamlord who created it. And if it suddenly collapses...do you have any idea what would happen?"

"I'm afraid I don't." She thinks she remembers some possibilities from her Advanced Dreamphysics class, but she doesn't want to say.

"Well I don't either! No one does, because *it's never happened!*"

"Oh no."

"We have to elevate our procedures," Mr. Tintoro says. "Do you understand? We have to get someone else on the scene. Someone who has the first clue what they're doing, no offense."

"None taken, sir."

"We don't have anyone else at the moment. I'll need to get a team down there to siphon the remnant. A big team. And there's no one available! Sightings of Gorvian Halbestad are coming in at the rate of one an hour. So far they're all false, but they all have to be investigated. Ah! Why did I send you there anyway? You have no idea what you're doing!"

"You're right! I'm just an intern, sir."

"No kidding."

"My mother and father wanted me to get some professional experience, sir."

"Right—at my expense!"

"I'd rather be back at the Academy, sir. I'm more interested in theory than in field work."

"*Field work!* Is that what you call this?"

"I guess."

"This Agency is in charge of keeping the world safe from rogue dreamlords and decaying remnants and clueless rucklings, among other things. Do you call that *field work*?"

"Well, sir, technically speaking, it's—"

"Stop! Stop before you start! Now listen to me! I'm officially assigning this an Elevated Case number. It's now an Active Secret Investigation. Do you understand what that means?"

"I . . . hold on, sir."

Another teacher, a man, comes up and sets his tray a couple of chairs down from her at the circular table.

"I'm sorry," the man says. "I don't mean to interrupt your conversation."

"Who are you talking to?!" says Mr. Tintoro. "Don't talk to any rucklings. Send him away."

She pulls the phone from her ear like she's about to put it down. "Oh no!" she says to the teacher. "It's nothing."

"I'm *nothing*?!" yells Mr. Tintoro.

She slides the phone to her knee under the table and muffles his screechy voice.

The teacher holds out his hand. "I'm Bradley Styles. I teach Art." She shakes his warm hand. He seems nice. "Are you subbing?"

She nods.

"Is that your phone?"

The phone is buzzing loud, and it feels like a Level 3—Extreme Urgency. She almost drops it. She must have hung up on Mr. Tintoro by mistake.

"I'll get it later," she says. She doesn't know how to mute it, or if muting is even an option.

Another teacher arrives and puts her tray down next to Mr. Styles'. She's young—probably about the age Katrina is supposed to be in her illusion. Her blonde hair is short and she has big bright teeth.

"Hi there!" she chirps. "Are you the sub for Greta Hupla?"

Katrina nods.

"All the kids are talking about you!" she says. Katrina feels her face heat up. "But in a good way!" the teacher quickly adds.

She introduces herself as Debbie Ipso and flashes her smile again. "What's that noise?"

"She's got a phone like a buzz saw," Mr. Styles informs her.

"Sounds more like a broken washing machine," says Ms. Ipso.

Katrina apologizes. The phone is starting to hurt her hand. She can't turn it off—she doesn't even think it's possible. But how can she answer it in front of these teachers?

"Hope that's not an emergency," Mr. Styles says, holding up a ranch-dipped carrot stick.

The phone goes quiet, and Katrina breathes a sigh of relief.

A second later it starts again on Level 4—Immediate Danger! Besides a loud and annoying noise—not so different from Mr. Tintoro's voice—Level 4 includes an electric shock. The phone leaps from Ms. Harryhausen's fingers onto the linoleum floor of the cafeteria, and pieces of its shell scatter under the table.

Ms. Harryhausen dives under the table. Oh no. Oh no. Did she break it? How will she survive? How will she sustain her illusion? Is she already looking more like a teenager? What's the penalty for impersonating a teacher?

"Oh no!" says Ms. Ipso. She and Mr. Styles lean over and try to help her collect the phone pieces. She has to reach the phone before they do. The phone can't be allowed in ruckling hands, even pieces of it. There's a danger of reverse engineering. They could detect dreamlords and dream remnants all over the world. That's one thing she remembers from the online manual. Rucklings have their own technological wonders, but nothing like the A-phone.

Ms. Ipso reaches for part of the blue plastic shell, and Katrina jumps to grab it first, which makes three things happen:

First, Katrina slams her head into the metal support beam under the table.

Second, she unintentionally slaps Ms. Ipso hard on the hand.

Third, she breaks the pieces of plastic shell into three more pieces, and now she has to dive for them before someone steps on them or picks them up.

Katrina propels herself all the way through the underside of the table and out the other side. She grabs the little blue pieces and scrambles toward the other A-phone parts, knocking Mr. Styles out of the way with her shoulder like she's diving for a fumbled ball at the Super Bowl—not that Katrina has any idea what a Super Bowl is.

Mr. Styles' stomach hits the back of his chair. "Oof!"

"Sorry! Sorry!" She quickly collects the other phone pieces and pulls herself back up into her seat, hiding her face in case her illusion is gone.

Ms. Ipso is massaging her injured hand and Mr. Styles is holding his bruised side. It's obvious they both think she's a complete lunatic. A bunch of the students are laughing, too.

When she looks at her phone's screen—black except for a few winking dots—she thinks she might cry.

Your A-phone is your lifeline, she remembers Mr. Tintoro saying.

"I've . . . I'm . . . guh," she says, grabbing her soggy pizza.

She carries the pizza and her phone out of the cafeteria.

Out in the courtyard, she feels like crying. She never wanted this assignment. She wishes she were back at the Academy taking Dream Theory II and History of Dreamlords. She wishes she'd gotten an internship as a lab assistant for a famous dreamlord, someone like Henrietta Zezny or Otto Half-Roman—brilliant cutting-edge experimenters improving the world through better dreaming.

Katrina's no dreamlord, just someone who wants to make a difference. Here among the rucklings, she's more likely to make a disaster.

And what now? She's supposed to elevate her procedures, but she doesn't even know what that means. And if her A-phone is broken, how can she do anything at all?

Chapter 16

Next morning, Alex shouts a quick goodbye in the general direction of his mom's bedroom then bolts out of the house.

Was this happening? Would he really get his chance at AstroLand?

All day yesterday, he kept Gramps's flashlight in his pocket. Sometimes it weighed there like a brick. Other times he barely noticed it.

Couldn't he just use something else? He remembers giving his mom some school art projects over the years. Couldn't he just dig one out of the still-unpacked moving boxes and bring that along?

He can't take that chance. He knows exactly what Dr. Kosmic meant. Whether it works or not, Gramps's flashlight is the most meaningful thing he owns.

He's been thinking about his Geography sub, too. Why did she give a lecture about short cuts? Did she know something?

Ol thought he was just being paranoid. Alex isn't so sure.

When he reaches the edge of the field, he hears a noise and sees the bushes moving, like someone's just pushed the branches aside.

He sprints across the field, cuts through the bushes, and feels the cold zap.

On the other side he finds a small crowd, maybe forty people.

Their backs are turned, and they're facing Ol. Behind Ol is a monorail track.

A monorail track!

"Welcome to KosmicWorld!" Ol says.

The kids are murmuring excitedly. Alex recognizes a few of them. Jared Sims from Language Arts. Shae Lewis from Geography. Walt Hunsford from Spanish. A bunch of other people whose names he can't remember.

Not when there's a monorail track in front of him.

Is it real?

Does it matter?

The track curves around the driveway and disappears into the foggy distance. Where could it go? How could it leave the bubble?

"As OtherWorld's official Vice President of Recruitment," Ol says to the crowd, "I've had the honor of selecting my fellow students to take part in this amazing experiment."

"You didn't select anyone!" someone shouts. "You just promised us a free trip to AstroLand!"

The others laugh.

Ol isn't shaken. "Just to be clear, we're headed for the new AstroLand, which is going to be a lot like the old one, only better. And no crowds."

"What are you even saying?" someone shouts.

"Why weren't we allowed to tell our parents?"

"Where are the chaperones? Is this some kind of trick?"

"No trick, I promise!"

Ol looks comfortable and in charge, like he was meant to do this all along. How did he suddenly become VP of Recruitment?

"If you don't want to go, you can stay and explore the school, which is a lot better than J.J. de Blande."

"You're not making any sense," someone shouts.

"Everything I ever thought about you is true," says Jared Sims, shaking his head.

"If you want to go on the field trip," Ol says, "our monorail leaves in five minutes from the station platform up the stairs. By the way, there are no rules here, so running dangerously is highly encouraged!"

Everybody takes off toward the little monorail station at the front of the school.

Alex lingers behind and calls out to Ol. "Is this for real?"

Ol turns. "Yo, my-man!"

"How did all this happen so fast? And what's this about you being 'Vice President of Recruitment'?"

"Yeah, my-man, sorry, I just...Dr. K appointed me."

"When?"

"Sorry, I went back through the bushes yesterday. I couldn't help it."

"I thought you had to go to your brother's cello recital?"

"Yeah, sorry. Anyway, let's go—we don't want to miss the ride!"

A little bells rings, and Alex watches a monorail glide around the corner and into the station. Ol's already climbing the steps.

The monorail doors open with a hiss, and the students separate into three cars.

"You coming?!" Ol shouts from the platform.

Alex runs up the steps and in through the open doors of the first car. He's not going to let this weird tension with Ol ruin his trip to AstroLand.

The monorail's interior is all white with green trim and wide windows, seats facing forward and back. As soon as Alex settles into a cushioned vinyl seat, the monorail pulls away from the station, slowly at first, then gaining speed as it heads down the entry drive.

"Aren't we going to hit the side of the bubble and bounce back?" Alex asks.

"Dr. K has everything under control," says Ol. "Trust me."

They pass through what Alex thought was the side of the bubble. They're still moving, except everything outside the windows is blurry. Could be the speed.

It's hard to tell how fast they're going. Just a hum inside and streaks of psychedelic colors flashing by the window.

He wants to be mad at Ol for visiting OtherWorld without him. But Alex knows he's terrible at recruiting, so maybe it's just as well.

Before anyone can get bored with the journey, the monorail slows and the outside world comes into focus. Through the windows, Alex sees high, twisting tracks of roller coasters, a bright cityscape of attractions, and gleaming multi-colored walkways lined with manicured shrubs and trees.

He recognizes the view from TV ads. Definitely AstroLand.

He's finally getting the birthday present his mom promised. Courtesy of Dr. K.

Ol laughs when he sees Alex's face. "Told you, my-man! Awesome or what?" He holds his hand out for a low-five.

Alex is speechless.

"Sometimes you just have to accept what's there," Ol says, "especially when what's there is everything you want."

When the monorail stops and the doors slide open, everyone shouts at once. They jump from their seats and spill out of the monorail.

The entry gate's a short walk from the monorail station.

Alex still has Gramps's flashlight in his pocket. He keeps his hand there as they walk. He's still not sure what he's going to do.

Above the crowd, he sees the familiar top hat of Dr. Kosmic. He's standing just inside the entrance, nodding as the students at the front of the line drop their valuable items in a box, one by one.

"Thank you, have a good day," he says. "Thank you, have a good day."

Alex watches as stuffed animals, baby blankets, kindergarten art projects, and homemade jewelry get tossed into the box. Some of the kids hesitate. Some look like they might cry.

One girl asks, "We're definitely getting these back at the end of the day, right?"

Dr. Kosmic just smiles at her.

Alex slows down and lets Ol and some others get in front of him. Dr. Kosmic stands just a few steps away and seems to be watching him.

He pulls the flashlight out of his pocket and grips it tight in his fist. Why is this so hard? It's just a broken flashlight. He's probably getting it back at the end of the day.

It doesn't seem like such a big price for a trip to the theme park he's been dreaming about since he was four years old.

He inches forward and lets some others cut in front of him. Dr. Kosmic keeps nodding and welcoming the other students, all the while with his eyes on Alex.

A kid in front of him—some guy he doesn't know—pulls a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket and drops it in the box.

Alex steps up behind him, raises his arm, and holds Gramps's flashlight over the box.

His hand won't open.

"Hurry up!" a girl says behind him.

A shudder runs up his forearm.

"Come on, my man!" Ol shouts from up ahead.

Alex reaches his hand down into the box, pretends to leave the flashlight there, and takes off toward Ol.

They're halfway up Milky Way Street before he looks behind him. No sign of Dr. K.

Maybe he's okay then. Maybe it's no big deal. He says nothing to Ol. And he has plenty of other things to distract him.

Jared Sims taps him on the shoulder. "Hey dude, just wanted to say thanks."

Alex gives him a confused look. "Sure, but why?"

"I heard you arranged this whole thing. Like, your grandfather died and left you a lot of money or something?"

"Actually," Ol says, then thinks twice about it.

“Thank you, Alex!” comes the shout from April and Ariel Hoffman from his PE class.

Alex waves at them.

“See,” Ol says. “My plan's working. For you, at least.”

“Why do they think I'm rich?”

“I had to explain it somehow. Let's go!”

Even though Alex has never been to AstroLand, he has his favorite rides anyway—the ones that looked the most fun in the videos—The Asteroid Belt, Canyons of the Moon, Journey to the Sun, Invaders from Orion. But there's only one ride he absolutely has to go on: the Saturn Surfer. That's where they head.

He's seen the Saturn Surfer commercials a hundred times on TV. He's watched the ride video online. He thought he'd never get to ride it.

And now he will.

There's no wait anywhere, because there's no crowd. They've got the whole park all to themselves. And even though it's a virtual park, he guesses, it looks and feels no different than the way he's pictured it. If he's dreaming, this is the most real dream he's ever dreamt.

The ramp to the Saturn Surfer winds through a pre-launch maze with animatronic, Hawaiian shirt-wearing, Mission Control specialists warning guests in surfer-speak of the dangers of the mission. “Watch out for the Saturnians, dudes! They don't take kindly to Earth rats carving up their rings!”

At last they climb into the polished silver rockets. Alex and Ol take the front car.

They roll out of the launch pad and come to a dead stop at the bottom of the hill. Steam pours out around them as the countdown begins, just as he imagined it: 10, 9, 8—the cars lurch and creak—7, 6, 5—the steam hisses and swallows them up until they can't see anything—4, 3—“Abort launch! Abort launch! Saturnians detected” comes the surfer voice. “Too late, dude!” says another voice—2, 1...

They're thrown back in their seats and launched almost straight up the ramp. As they near the top, the track curves, and Alex feels

himself pulled up out of his seat into zero-g. He's glad for the shoulder restraints and the lap belt.

Ol is laughing his head off. "This is the best!"

It's almost exactly the way he hoped it would be. One of those perfect moments he knows he'll always remember.

At the top, just as they start the downslope, with Alex feeling like he might slip through the top of the shoulder restraint, they shoot through a dark tunnel. For a few seconds they can't see anything. They curve gently and head for a patch of glowing fog, blast through that and come out into a supercondensed model of the complete solar system.

The sun shines like a sparkling yellow spotlight to the right, and the planets glow ahead. They loop around Mars, dart through the Asteroid Belt, just avoid a collision with Jupiter's red spot before looping twice around the huge planet, and then slingshot toward Saturn, weaving and shuddering, dropping and lifting, until they pass through a blast of cool air, another short tunnel, and emerge onto the rings.

The rings look like trails of diamonds, and the coaster slows for a few seconds so the passengers can admire them. Ol's mouth is wide open. Good thing there are no bugs in space.

Just when they get used to going slow, the coaster drops down into the rings, and they're surrounded by those diamonds. They zigzag and corkscrew and do small loops and big ones, and all the while the huge yellow and brown-banded planet looms above them, and to the side, and beneath, and it's hard to figure out where they are. Alex has never been thrown around so much. He's scared and thrilled and happy all at once, and at some point the coaster itself seems to disappear and he feels like he's flying through space.

He's glad that hanging onto Gramps's flashlight didn't ruin the day for himself or anyone else.

When he turns his eyes up to the surface of Saturn, he can swear he sees Dr. K's face in the cloud bands, top hat raised, big grin spreading like smoke.

Is Dr. Kosmic really responsible for all this? How could he make a virtual world feel so real? Alex doesn't have time to understand, and he doesn't know where to begin. The second he turns his head to see if Ol notices Dr. K's face, too, the coaster lurches right and then left and these little orange creatures with long hair appear on what looks like rocket-propelled surfboards sliding directly toward them, squeaking and shouting and buzzing the heads of the passengers and shooting smelly yellow gas at them.

The coaster speeds into extreme surfing mode, cutting left and right and banking high on the rings, barely avoiding the Saturnian surfers who have it in for the intruders.

Alex thinks of Gramps, how he would have loved this, how he would have ignored all those signs about the dangers for old people with heart conditions. He would have screamed like a kid and enjoyed every second. It makes Alex happy that he didn't have to give up Gramps's flashlight.

Now, a huge wave of blinding light ahead looks like it's going to break right on their heads. They speed straight into it until Alex feels its warmth on his skin. The coaster flips and makes a quick couple of barrel rolls, and Alex realizes they're getting tubed on the rings of Saturn.

Nothing could be cooler.

This is one case where the ride lives up to the hype. It's exactly as good as the ads make it out to be. Then, in a flash, the ring-wave closes out, they flip over twice more, take a big dive, and explode out into the daylight again, still high above the ground, but slowing now on the descent, slowing, slowing, as they re-enter the Earth's atmosphere descending through clouds, and gliding back to the launch pad, where the Mission Control guys are high-fiving each other on the big monitors.

Ol looks over his shoulder at the rest of the riders. "Dudes! Awesome!"

It *was* awesome. Totally awesome. The best ride Alex has ever been on by far, and everyone else thinks so, too.

No ride will ever measure up again. It's hard to believe, but Alex finally got his birthday wish. A little late, but just as good.

As they pull into the exit area, Alex turns around to high-five the riders behind him. He slaps one hand and the other and then spots something completely unexpected out of the corner of his eye.

A section of the track and the ground beneath it disappears. Just vanishes.

That's the only way to describe it. An amoeba-shaped black hole opens up right behind the rocket, big enough to fall into. Except there's nothing to see—no deep craggy cave like in a sinkhole, not even shades of darkness. Just pure black. And the black seems to reach up and take in the air until the air itself is part of the hole. He isn't even sure “hole” is the right word because isn't a hole an opening to somewhere else, even if it's to a pit?

This is just blackness
The absence of everything.
A big blob of zero.

When he thinks about it later, Alex finds it hard to believe he could be so scared of *nothing*. But it was *nothing* as he'd never imagined it before. There's the nothing of an empty gift box when someone wraps it up and gives it to you as a joke. And there's the nothing of a dark, empty room that makes you wonder if it's haunted. But those nothings feel different. They can be fixed with lights or actual presents. Even the nothing of outer space is filled with stars, and you'd probably bump into one every million years or so.

The thing is, no one seemed to see it except Alex. The black hole on the Saturn Surfer simply opened up like some monster's mouth and then disappeared just as fast.

The rocket jerked to a stop in front of the station and threw Alex forward. When he turned to look again, the black blob flickered back into somethingness.

The track was there again. If it ever was.

If everything Dr. Kosmic has shown them is some sort of an illusion, what happens when the illusion falls apart?

The end of the world? A bottomless black pit?

He keeps thinking about it, and it distracts him the rest of the day.

He finally tells Ol about it on the monorail trip back to school.

“Did I see *what?*” Ol replies. “All I saw was the most awesome field trip in the history of field trips, my man!”

He holds out his fist. Alex can't bring himself to bump it.

“Ol, focus here. There's something wrong. What if that black hole I saw wasn't a fluke? What if there are more holes, and we fall into one? And what about Dr. K? We don't know anything about him. Are we just supposed to trust what he tells us? How do we even know he's working for AstroLand?”

Ol laughs. “He has to be. He'd be breaking copyright laws if he wasn't.”

“I don't think he cares about copyright laws.”

“You worry too much. Dr. K's obviously a genius. He's Bill Gates and Elon Musk combined. He's so far advanced his science feels like magic. And so what if there was a hole? Probably just a computer glitch. You ever hear of someone getting killed by a computer glitch?”

Alex tries to control his anger. “You don't know *what* it is! No one does except Dr. K, and we don't even know his real name, so we can't look him up. How do we know *he's* not an illusion, too? What if someone else is behind this whole thing? Someone evil.”

“Where's the evil in roller coasters, my-man?”

“And what's this stuff about ‘VP of Recruitment’? You went to OtherWorld without me. Without even *telling* me. What kind of friend does that?”

“What are you worried about? All these people think your rich grandpa died and left you a million dollars to take them to a theme park. They love you!”

“And what if they get swallowed up by black holes? What if they don't come back?”

“You're just jealous.”

“Jealous?!”

“Because Dr. K believes in me. It's the first time in my life someone actually believed in me.”

“Well I'm happy for you, Ol, but there's more important things than being VP of Recruiting.”

“Maybe for you. My whole life I've been treated like a weird loser. I look different. I act different. But I'm not funny enough to be the class clown. And, hey, I have to wear long pants to cover my chubby legs—so what? In OtherWorld, it doesn't matter. I don't care what this place is or how it's made. All I care is that *I*'m here. It could be our secret clubhouse, a place to bring new friends. If you're going to tell me none of that matters, it won't bother me if you don't come back.”

A couple of kettle corn-eating girls on the other side of the monorail car look over, and Alex lowers his voice.

“*No one* should come back, Ol! That's what I'm saying! Not until we figure out how dangerous it is—and how dangerous *Dr. K* is!”

Ol's cheeks turn puffy. “Fine, you go ahead and sit in your room all day, feeling sorry for yourself and making up zombie stories about your mom. I've finally got a chance to do something important—”

“Something that tops Perry and all his awards? ‘Cause that's really all this is about, isn't it?”

Ol's face turns red. “You don't even *have* a brother. You barely even have a *family*, so you wouldn't know.” He sucks in his lips like he's getting ready to play a trumpet.

Alex can tell Ol regrets what he's saying—or he soon will. For now, he just makes a heavy sigh and stands up as the monorail pulls up in front of J.J. de Blande.

The doors slide open, and Ol steps out on the platform.

He turns to face the other riders. “Okay, everyone, there's still a half hour until the bell, so let's go explore the new and improved J.J. de Blande. I think you'll like what you see!”

It feels like someone dropped a sandbag on Alex's chest. He might have just lost his only friend.

He's the last one to leave the monorail. The others are already down the steps and headed into the school.

He decides not to follow. He descends the steps and heads across the grass toward the bushes.

Dr. Kosmic is waiting there for him.

Chapter 17

Council headquarters is always busy, but a little less so late at night. Drevin sets the alarm on his nightstand, thinking optimistically he'll get a few hours of sleep.

He can't sleep at all. He watches the clock instead.

At 12:57 a.m. he eases himself out of bed, drags a chair into the bathroom, turns on the shower, stands on the chair, and starts jabbing his toothbrush handle into a soft spot on the ceiling.

Mr. Turtlington showed him the soft spot. His room is an elevator but the bathroom isn't part of it. The soft spot comes from a glacier drip that went undetected for several days. Mr. Turtlington put in a work order two months ago, and it hasn't been fixed yet. When the leak stopped, the ceiling dried and looked fine, which is why no one's been in a rush to fix it.

Now the ceiling doesn't look fine at all. The ceiling has a man-sized hole in it.

He's made a mess. Ceiling dust all over the floor. Shower steam flowing out of the hole like smoke from a chimney. Now comes the hard part.

Back atop the chair, he reaches up through the new hole and grabs the metal crossbar above the ceiling.

"You can do it, old man," he tells himself.

He pulls. Slowly. Up and up. His head's through the ceiling. Then his shoulders. His biceps strain and the cold glacial air prickles his face.

He gets a knee through, and that helps him push himself up over the bar until he's resting on top of his bathroom.

Above him and on three sides is a dark, seemingly endless vault, like a giant frozen bubble inside the glacier. Elevators move through it, mostly along the sides, though some rise through the middle, drawn up with electric pulleys and steadied by a metal structure. He remembers when he first saw it years ago, how his jaw dropped in wonder. A cavern of flyboxes, he called it.

Now, from this angle, none of them look safe.

A slight breeze swirls through the cavern. Dim little lights mark the boundaries, while sound echoes from all directions like the rush of blood. Drevin feels as if he's stepped into the glacier's lungs.

He needs to climb over to the next elevator, the last in this row and the only one with up-privileges, according to Mr. Turtlington. The gap between his bathroom and the next elevator is small, but it's enough that he could slip between.

The fall would be fine, the landing terrible.

He stands on the edge. He jumps across, then stumbles and nearly falls off the opposite side. Catches himself by hooking a foot around the crossbar.

Oofs himself to his feet.

A knock from below. That's Mr. Turtlington giving the signal. Drevin knocks in reply, then kneels on the elevator roof and braces himself. The thing jerks into motion.

He's rising up through the cavern, through the dim twinkling lights that look so much like stars. 10 floors, 20 floors. He's suspended near the edge.

Another knock from below.

He hangs on tight. The elevator slows and stops. He's even with a door on the cavern wall. The door is cracked, thanks to Mr. Turtlington.

He's on his own after this. Just himself, his map, his wits, and his memory of snooping around Council headquarters all those years ago, finding books for Mr. Phrixus.

He leans across the gap. Feet on the elevator, hand on the doorknob. He slides open the door, nearly falls backward. Catches himself. Taps the roof with his foot and pulls himself across.

The elevator descends. No going back now.

He steps into the hallway. A tunnel, really. A narrow passage between pipes. A string of old light bulbs dangles overhead, most of them burned out. The pipes churn and gurgle. It's even colder here than out in the cavern.

Some of the pipes leak onto the floor. His footsteps slap through puddles and crunch on the ice.

At the end of the hall is another door. It swings open onto a wider and better-lit corridor, more like a ramp that spirals around the cavern as it climbs. He double-checks his map and looks both ways before stepping into the corridor and shutting the door. He trots up the slope, warming himself up.

He can't go very far because he'll intersect with some of the main corridors of the Council departments. He's coming up on one now. This is where he ducks into a service elevator. He slides his metal card key into the slot and the door opens. He smacks the button for the Records floor.

Before the doors shut, a hand reaches through.

The doors jump open again like they're offended. The hand is attached to an arm, and the arm to an angry-looking man in overalls who says, "Hey, wrong elevator, chum."

"I'm the elevator inspector," Drevin says. He's had plenty of experience with suspicious workers.

The man looks him up and down. "Oh really? Then why don't I know you? I know everyone in Inspections."

"Likewise," says Drevin. He presses the button for R-27 again and the door starts to shut. The man's hand shoots out and stops it.

"Good. Retraction mechanism works," Drevin says.

The man stares at him hard. He wears thick eyebrows and a permanent scowl. "Where's your clipboard?"

Drevin taps his temple. "I've got a good memory. And you're distracting it. Now please step aside so I can check the flight of this here flybox."

The man steps forward and bumps Drevin as he squeezes into the elevator. "How about we check its flight down to Security?"

"Security it is," Drevin says. He presses the D-14 button and turns his back so the man can't see it.

"Who's your supervisor?" the man asks. "Is it Will?"

Drevin nods. "That's the gent."

"Will retired last year."

The elevator creaks as it descends.

"Must be another Will then."

"There aren't any other Wills."

"Ah. Well. I'm not so good with names, anyhow."

"What'd you say yours was?" the man asks.

"I didn't," Drevin says. "Yours?"

"I won't," the man says.

There's an awkward silence as the elevator shoots down through the cavern. Then it slows and stops, and the weight comes back to Drevin's legs.

"Here we are," Drevin says. "Security. After you."

The man looks up at the digits above the door just as it opens.

"Hey, this isn't—"

Drevin gives the man a shove directly onto a garbage shoot, and the man curses as he flails his arms and slides down the ramp into the pile of trash.

Drevin wipes his hands on his shirt. The man had a trashy smell to him. That's what gave him the idea. Good thing they haven't moved the sanitation floor.

He presses R-13 and the door shuts.

The elevator descends. He has to go down to come back up. He has to hope Records hasn't changed much in all these years either.

He knows they've gone digital. That much is okay. As long as they didn't block the secret passages.

The elevator stops again, and the doors open. He pokes his head out and checks the corridor. All clear.

He descends the ramp and finds the little closet between bathrooms he used to hide in when he wanted to read in private. The door's been repainted but it opens just fine.

He shuts it behind him, pulls the string to the light bulb, and moves aside a mop and a dusty fake palm tree. Someone's re-nailed the old piece of plywood that covers the hole in the wall. He gets his fingers between the plywood and the wall and pulls hard. The wood crackles off.

He squeezes himself feet-first into the passage, just in case it's full of rats and spiders. Once he's all the way in, he checks the dimensions by reaching up and around. Just about as he remembered it. It's something between a crawlspace and a hallway. He can walk hunched over in the darkness.

He has no idea why the passage was ever built or how it was ever used. He learned about it from Mr. Phrixus when the Maestro asked him to retrieve a volume from the Repository.

It's as dark as it ever was, and Drevin has to count his steps and hope he remembers the number. 36. His steps were a little longer and sprightlier back then, so maybe he's at 38.

The air inside is cool and humid, like there's a water leak somewhere. Heaven forbid it's the glacier melting. He's heard rumors of that.

He stops at 38 and kneels down onto the cold concrete, runs his fingers along the base of the wall until he finds a seam. Another half-door, this one smaller than the first. He shoves it open with the heel of his hand and creaks his old bones through.

Another dark hall. Only 13 steps this time. Then a thin door that opens to the rear of the Records room. He'll have to cross the Records room to get to a stairway he hopes is still there. No one should be in Records at this hour. He cracks the door.

Bright light. He squints. Everything is different. The room is full of computers. Tall, thin computers like little towers. It's nothing like he remembers, and his disorientation catches him off guard.

"Hey!" a woman yells. She wears big round glasses and a white lab coat, and she's staring at him from between two computers.

He lifts his hand in an awkward wave.

"Where did you come from?" she asks. She's keeping her eyes on him as she backs toward a phone on the desk.

“Just fixing the pipes!” he says. “Looks like everything's okay!” He steps all the way into the room now and heads toward the stairway he hopes is still there. Two men stand in his way—also wearing white coats. They're coming at him.

“He came from out of that wall!” the woman says. “He's a spy! One of Gorvian's followers!”

“Nothing could be further from the truth, ma'am, I'm...I'm just...”

He doesn't have time to finish because the white coats are coming for him and the only way out is through the dark hallway, so he ducks back in and shuts the door.

He heads the way he came until he puts his head through the half-door and a flashlight beam sweeps across his forehead. “There he is!”

How did they respond so quickly?

He backs out, stands, and heads the other way. As he passes the thin door to the computer room, he can hear the woman talking loudly into her phone.

Where can he go? He keeps moving down the perfectly black hallway, trotting and stooped over. Any second he could slam into something. A wall. An old light fixture. He doesn't know what's down here. He seems to be headed down a slight ramp.

Pretty soon the ramp turns steeper, and the floor turns wet.

His feet slip from under him, and he finds himself on his behind, sliding down. The floor has become a water chute, fed by little streams trickling out of the walls.

It might be fun if he weren't being chased by people who want to lock him up.

The ramp gets steeper. He's sliding really fast now. He tries to slow himself with his hands. It doesn't do much good. The walls and floor are slick.

He's picking up speed. If he hit something now, he'd be badly injured. He rotates to the side, puts one hand out in front of him. He's almost skiing down the thin layer of icy water, kicking up a spray. He tries scraping his boots against the wall, wishing the soles weren't so worn.

He starts to slow down, but it's not because of anything he's doing. It's the ramp, flattening out.

Now it's almost completely flat, and he's sliding more slowly until his arm hits something hard. His nose hits it, too. It's a wall. He's at a dead end. Except he can hear the water flowing. The water slides through an opening just big enough for his arm to fit through. When he stretches his fingers out, he feels a ledge. The top of a waterfall.

Thank goodness for the wall or he'd have taken a drop.

He tries to kick himself to a kneeling position and his flailing foot flips a switch on the wall.

A bright bulb flickers to life overhead. A mechanism churns above with a sound like iron gears clanking together. His hand slips and he almost falls into the wall in front of him.

That's when he realizes the wall is not a wall. It's a door.

And it's sliding upward.

He rolls away and kicks himself against the side wall, the one with the switch.

His eyes adjust. He can stand up straight here, and he does, with his back against the wall and his feet in the water.

The water's getting deeper. He can see a little ways up the dark passage, where ripples of water sweep toward him.

He follows the water with his eyes, past his feet and over the ledge into the darkness. The gears stop churning and the door comes to a stop. At the top of the opening, revealed behind the open door, there's a rock ledge with letters carved into it. He blinks his eyes hard to see it.

DEEP EARTH QUARRY
FORBIDDEN TO ALL BUT THE WORST

Drevin presses himself harder against the wall. He can barely breathe, fascinated and terrified at the same time. Mostly terrified, though.

The DEQ. So it's been here all along. Rumors put it in Asia or South America. One had it on a volcanic island in the Pacific.

But of course it's right here. That makes sense. He'd never thought he'd see it in his life. At least he'd hoped not.

Here he'd been afraid they were going to capture him and dump him in the DEQ, and he almost did it to himself!

His heart's clenched like a fist. His pants are wet in back and his socks are soaked. He's trying to catch his breath. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the map Mr. Turtlington gave him. It's soaked and shredded from the wet slide. Useless. Wouldn't have told him where he was anyway.

His eyes keep returning to the open doorway and the infinite blackness beneath the engraved stone. Staring into that darkness is like staring into sleep after a long journey.

It would be so easy just to slide off that waterfall and splash down into...what?

All those frightening illusions. He'd never find his way out. Not without Mr. Phrixus's disillusioner.

He remembers his mission. He shuts his eyes and tries to clear his head. He needs to get out of here. He needs to save the boy Alex Kraft. He needs to keep the disillusioner out of Gregor Halbestad's monstrous hands

When he opens his eyes again, he's staring at the lightbulb, another one of those old incandescent bulbs. It hangs from a cord, and the cord is attached to the arched ceiling with a thick metal staple. His eyes follow the cord across the ceiling, halfway down the wall and up the gentle slope ten feet to his right, where it disappears into the wall.

Could there be another way out?

The water's rushing by now, slowly rising. It's up to his ankles. Bitter cold runoff from the glacier. He can't even feel his feet.

Better to grope in the dark than to risk a fall. He flips the wall switch. The bulb goes dark and the gears crank to life. Then comes a scraping sound. The gears stop turning.

He sighs. Okay, looks like he has to settle for the light. He flips the switch again.

Now the light doesn't work.

He needs to move away from the waterfall before the current sweeps him over. He slides a foot, twists around and presses his belly against the wall. That's a little better.

He finds the wire with his finger and follows it, inching along as the water splashes over his feet and up onto his pants.

A small tidal wave of water surges past. His feet go unsteady and he grabs at the wire for balance. The staples come out of the wall but the wire holds. He uses it to pull himself along.

One inch. Another inch. He can feel the blackness of the DEQ behind him, a nightmare with its own gravity.

His fingers touch a seam. He wedges his fingertips in and uses the leverage to pull himself the rest of the way.

It's another door, midway up the wall and above the water. A rusty metal door, by the feel of it. He slid right past it on the way down.

He runs his hands over it in the dark. There's no knob, but there are hinges. It opens in. And it's locked.

He pulls himself up the slope to the door hinges. They're rusty enough to be weak.

He gets his fingertips under the hinge pin and pulls. He tries it the other way and pushes, groaning.

The water's up to his calves now. It's hard to keep standing. He has to grasp a hinge with one hand and try to pry off the hinge pin with the other.

It's not working. He bangs the hinge in frustration until his hand is bloody. On the last bang, the rusty metal crumples. He thinks it's his bone at first. He wiggles the hinge until the whole thing detaches from the door and wall.

Now he focuses his attention on the upper hinge. He bangs the broken hinge in his hand against the hinge that's still stuck to the door. He feels his feet slip a little. The water's still rising. Here he is, deep under a glacier in the dark with the icy water trying to sweep him into a chasm of nightmares. He doesn't have much time.

He smashes one hinge against the other, and just like that the door moves.

It's falling on top of him. The rusty metal smashes against his head. He starts to buckle and slide. The door is leaning against his head and shoulder and pressing him down. He grabs the doorframe just as his feet slip from under him. He wiggles his shoulder and the door flips into the current. It scrapes along the bottom.

A few seconds later, he hears it go over the edge into the abyss. Then silence. It may still be falling.

He pulls himself back to his feet and gets a knee up onto the doorframe. He pivots and dives through the doorway, then flips onto his back, out of breath and trembling, eyes closed.

When he opens his eyes again, he finds himself in another dark hallway. Except this one has a small light down at the end. He drags himself toward it.

The light is an elevator button. There's nowhere else to go, so he pushes it.

He's dripping all over the floor. His feet are still numb, but there's a slight tingle.

He hears a churning noise rising up through the door. The elevator button blinks. The door opens.

Empty space and a cold wind.

Actually, there's an elevator there, but only the top of it. He can see through a small crack below the frame. There's no one inside. Behind the elevator is the glacial cavern. He must be near the bottom of it now.

What else can he do? He steps up onto the roof of the elevator. He's done this before, so he might as well try it again.

He gets through just before the door closes and hangs on tight to the crossbar. The elevator jerks upward.

"Hey!"

A bald man in a white uniform stands on the ledge in front of a maintenance doorway like the one Drevin climbed through when he first got off the elevator roof.

Drevin recognizes the white uniform and the white dreamblaster at his side. It's Council Security.

Before the guard can raise his dreamblaster, he's out of sight because Drevin's rising up through the cavern. If this is the elevator they use for prisoners, it could go all the way up to the surface. If he's lucky.

Except it stops a few floors up. Either someone's getting in, or someone at Council Security has flipped a power switch.

Drevin peers over the side of the elevator. His elevator is one of a bank of elevators. Another one is rising next to his with a guard on its roof, aiming to blast him into the dreamscape. He checks the other side and finds another elevator rising at the same time.

Drevin is old, his pants are wet, his legs are sore, and his heart's thumping like there's a boxing match in his chest, but he's got to be sprightly enough to get out of this mess.

Just as the guard's bald head comes into view, Drevin jumps onto the roof of the other elevator.

The guard shoots his sleep gun.

And misses.

Drevin's rising. But how's he going to get out? He has to climb over to the glass elevator, the one he took with Mr. Turtlington. He knows that one will rise all the way through the roof of the cavern.

The only way to do it is to leap from elevator to elevator, across the deadly little gaps.

Next one is going down.

Doesn't matter. He has to take it anyway.

He steps to the edge. Times his leap. Falls and rolls.

This elevator's a big one. An apartment-sized one. He's got some room to move around on its roof.

Behind him, the first elevator has stopped and reversed course. The guard is peering over the edge, waiting for the next elevator to come back down.

Drevin's elevator stops. He's kneeling on the edge, waiting for the next elevator to rise. When he looks back, he sees the bald guard jump to a descending elevator. And now the guard is peering over the edge of that one, descending next to Drevin's. He's got his dreamblaster out.

At last the next elevator gets moving. Drevin gets on his feet. The guard sees what he's going to do, so he jumps early, and Drevin jumps while the man is still in the air.

Bang! Bang! Two claps of thunder echo throughout the cavern. Drevin hits, rolls, and lands on his back. The dim little lights are still twinkling above. His back hurts. He's going to pay for this tomorrow with stiff muscles and bruises—if he makes it to tomorrow.

The next few elevators are stationary—probably little apartments like the one he stayed in. He jumps, runs across, jumps and runs down the row. A game of hopscotch he'd better not lose. He pauses at the end to wait for the glass elevator, now rising out of the darkness below.

The guard is right behind him now, sleep gun drawn, one elevator behind and ready to jump.

The guard shouts something, but it's not in English. Drevin's not sure how to respond, so he waves. "Just looking for my keys!" he says. "I think I dropped them! You know, from up there!" He jabs his finger at the roof of the great cavern, and the guard looks up in confusion just as his elevator starts to rise.

The guard jumps, and when he lands, his foot goes right through the roof of Drevin's elevator.

The guard is stuck there for a moment, lurched to the side, his leg missing up to mid-thigh. He's still got his sleep gun, though, and he's pointing it at Drevin. He fires.

And misses. Because Drevin dives onto the next elevator just in time.

He hits and rolls, and his foot finds air. His hand grabs at anything. It slides off one crossbar but grabs another. If he hadn't lost weight on this trip, he would've gone through the glass.

His legs are hanging off. He knows what's below. Nothing, pretty much. Nothing but cold glacial air down into the darkness, however many dozens of stories to a most unpleasant landing. If landing is what you call a big splat.

He hears another bang behind him. He turns and sees the guard collapse on the roof of the elevator, leg still stuck. Looks like he accidentally shot himself when he tried to pull himself out.

As the rucklings say, Nighty-night.

Now he looks down through the glass and sees a woman staring up at him, mouth open, eyes wide, suitcase spilled open at her feet.

He waves. "Just cleaning the glass!" he yells down to her.

Her expression doesn't change. The elevator speeds up. Then the world goes dark. They've ascended through the roof of the cavern. A few moments later, the elevator stops. Down below, the doors open and the woman scrambles out, leaving her briefcase and spilled papers behind.

This is the end of the line. There's only ten feet of elevator shaft above him. To one side is another one of those service doors. Drevin jumps onto the ledge just before the elevator starts descending again.

He presses in on the door, and it opens. He walks a narrow hallway to another door and opens that one. The glare is so bright it blinds him for a moment.

Then the wind hits him.

He's outside.

He's made it.

Once his vision adjusts he sees the top of the glacier and a light snow blowing all over. To his right is the reception desk and the receptionist with his back to him. He straightens his clothes a little and strolls over to her.

"Lovely weather!" he says.

"For polar bears!" says the woman.

Drevin pulls his wet mittens out of his pockets and claps them together. "Welp. Have a fine day."

"You too!" says the woman.

At the bottom of the glacier, there's a snowmobile waiting for him, courtesy of SPOT. He'll catch a ride to Goose Bay and then meet up with the friendly Slovakian freighter and the captain he knows from way back. If he's lucky they'll be headed south.

He doesn't look back at the receptionist.
He doubts she was ever real, anyway.

Chapter 18

The tall man holds out his hand like a giant upturned tarantula. He's not wearing his hat, and his black hair sags across his forehead. "I believe you forgot something, Alex."

Alex keeps his distance. "How do you even know my name? I never told it to you."

"I know more about you than you know about yourself. I also know you have something that now belongs to me."

Alex feels the weight of Gramps's flashlight, practically buzzing in the pocket of his shorts.

"It's my grandfather's," he says. "I'm sorry. I thought I might be able to give it away, but I couldn't."

"The admission fee is not negotiable. You agreed to it."

"You said we had to give up something we love. But you had all those other kids—they all gave up something. And it worked!"

"Yes. And you had fun, didn't you, Alex?"

"Yes, sir. It was just like the real thing. Except—" He's about to mention the black hole but changes his mind.

"Except what, Alex?"

"Except better."

"That's right. And do you know why?"

"No lines?"

"Because I got the dream from you."

Alex feels a shiver go through him.

"Everything here comes from you, Alex. It's just the way you want it."

"How would you know?"

"I know your dreams. Just as I know what's in your pocket. All you have to do is hand it to me, and all this is yours. Everything. Just exactly the way you want it. A personal clubhouse. You can go to

AstroLand every day. You can bring friends. I know you've been lonely since you moved here. Since your grandfather died, your mother stopped paying attention to you. She was always a little too busy for you, though, wasn't she? You could use some friends, Alex. Everyone will want to be your friend when you show them what you can do for them. They'll think of you as a wizard. The special one who grants them wishes. And when you tire of your friends you can come alone. The ones you dislike can be your servants. That, too can part of the illusion, as you know. The bully can wait on you. And are you mad at your chubby friend who betrayed you? We can make an illusion of him. He can be your pet."

"I thought you made him your VP of Recruitment?"

"I gave him what he wanted. The only recruitment I care about is you, Alex."

"I don't understand. Why am I so important? Why would you use my dreams to make this world?"

"There's so much for you to learn. An entire world to step into, and I can open the door for you. Hand me the device in your pocket, and I'll tell you everything. You'll be my partner. You'll meet others who will help you. One day soon you'll meet a man so powerful you'll think him a god."

Dr. Kosmic steps toward him, and Alex instinctively steps back. The man's face is distorted and gray.

"The admission fee must be paid, Alex."

Alex shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I can't—"

"You agreed, Alex! Without the fee, you've stolen my time and energy. There are consequences to that."

Alex shakes his head and steps back as the tall man advances in long strides. He's not sure he can outrun a man whose steps are so long.

"Give it to me, Alex. I know your grandfather's tinket isn't the only thing you love."

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't pay what you agreed to, I'll take something else. You won't like it."

“What are you talking about?”

“Give it to me now!”

Dr. Kosmic strikes with his long, snake-like arm, and Alex jumps out of the way, falls and rolls. The flashlight falls out of his pocket. When Dr. Kosmic charges for it, Alex snatches it up and runs for the bushes, the flashlight tight in his hand.

Something feels strange. The flashlight's shuddering in his grip, and he can barely hang on to it.

And then it looks like a beam is shining out of it. Not a light beam, exactly. Something that makes the world a little clearer. It's hard to understand, and he doesn't have time to ponder it. He races for the bushes and dives through.

Zap!

He's afraid to look behind him until he's halfway across the powerline field.

Dr. Kosmic hasn't followed him. He's not sure if the man even exists outside of OtherWorld. He can't take the chance, though. This is a man who knows Alex's dreams.

He hears the bell ring over at J.J. de Blande, and the cars are lining up for afternoon pickup.

He runs down the sidewalk, up his driveway, and lets himself in with his key. He shuts the blinds, breathing hard.

He thinks of calling his mom, but what would he tell her? She's been so busy, so zombified, she barely knows he exists.

For a few minutes, he peeks through the blinds to make sure Dr. K isn't long-stepping up his driveway.

Once on a standardized test, he read a long paragraph about something called *derealization*, a psychological condition where everything feels unreal.

At the moment, he's got a bad case of *derealization*. He's not sure what's real and what's not, what world he belongs in, and what world's going to kill him.

He's not sure it's safe in his own house.

He grabs a snack bar and gets on his bike—the undersized bike that Ol said he liked—and goes for a long bike ride.

He spirals around the neighborhood at low speed and high speed, just to mix things up, investigating streets he hasn't been on, pushing the boundaries of the known world. He passes Ol's house. He can't bring himself to go up and knock.

His bike feels real and familiar, at least. Nothing else does.

He stops at the park for a while—the old park, the one where almost none of the kids play because the equipment is old, and even though it was painted not long ago, you can see the rust bubbling through like scabs that won't heal. He's come here with Ol a couple of times because it used to be Ol's favorite park. There used to be a set of dinosaur-themed play structures, but all that's left of those is a purple sit-on dinosaur that bounces up and down on a pair of rusty springs. The other equipment looks like it's been picked up at a yard sale and anchored to the dirt.

Alex sits on the baby dinosaur for a while and scrapes his feet back and forth in the ruts made by all those other kids over the years. He's too big for it. He doesn't care.

When he was little, Gramps used to take him to a park near their old house with a huge purple tunnel slide. It took Alex almost a year to get the courage to climb the steps, and then another six months to get the courage to sit in the tunnel and let go. The slide twisted around and around in the purple-tinted darkness while Alex's heart pounded and his limbs banged the sides. He thought he might fall forever. But then a glow appeared and in no time he slid out into the bright day, directly into Gramps' open arms.

He feels like he's inside the slide now, sliding and sliding with no glow in sight. Gramps is gone, and there's no one waiting to catch him at the end.

He gets back on his bike and rides some more, staying off the main roads but venturing farther from his house, so far that he isn't positive he knows the way back. He winds through an apartment complex. He speeds down an oak-lined street where he catches glimpses of sparkling gray water between the riverfront houses.

He has the urge to keep going—out of the neighborhood, out of the town. To where? What would it matter?

He slows in front of a white one-story house that has a picture window. Two adults and a child sit on the couch watching what looks like a pirate movie on a big-screen TV.

Alex stops his bike and pretends he has to tie his shoe. He does tie his shoe—after he first *unties* it. He moves slowly, so he can sneak glances at the family, at the way they sit close together on the couch, enjoying the movie. Every once in a while, the parents seem to say something to each other or to the boy. Once, the dad points at the screen, slaps his knee, then puts his arm around his son next to him on the couch. Alex wonders what could be so funny in a pirate movie.

And why are they watching a movie now?

Because it's later than he thought, that's why.

He's lost track of time. He must've been riding around for hours and now it's dusk. If his mom were herself, she'd be worried. She might have already called the police. If the movie-watching family turned the channel, they'd see his face on the news—BOY MISSING IN LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD. They'd have no idea that the boy sits on his bike right outside their picture window.

He jumps on his pedals and heads home.

He knows he's done something dumb. Even if his mom usually acts like a zombie, he has no right to make her worry like this. He pumps his legs till he can hardly breathe. He takes the shortest route home, even though it takes him across a busy four-laner.

His mom will be mad, but she'll forgive him in the long run.

As he bikes down River Road, a car passes him and he glances at the driver. It takes him a second to recognize her. Long dark hair and oval face. High eyebrows that make her look surprised.

Ms. Harryhausen.

She's driving like she's just learned how, weaving back and forth in the lane, nearly hitting a mailbox, driving barely faster than he's riding his bike.

And then comes the thing that surprises him most. She stops a few houses in front of him, turns on her windshield sprayer—the water splashes off the windshield and makes a fountain spray in the

air—then, after waiting for the automatic gates to open, turns into the millionaire's house on the river.

What?! Why? Is she the millionaire? The millionaire's daughter?

All he can see as he bikes past are her brake lights as the car disappears down the long driveway into the oak trees.

He pedals onward. Too much is happening, and he's numb from it.

Soon he pulls into his own driveway. The kitchen light is on and the garage door is closed. He can't remember if he closed it. He sets his bike against the side of the garage and runs to the front door. It isn't locked. He shoves it open, ready to apologize in twenty different ways and beg his mom not to ground him forever.

He'll tell her everything. He doesn't care if she thinks he's crazy. He'll go to the psychologist. He'll deny Dr. K and OtherWorld ever existed. He'll say it was all a dream.

He calls for her. He checks her room. He checks the garage. Her car is there but she isn't.

He's never felt more scared and alone. It's as if he's back inside the slide and there's no one to catch him at the end.

He sits on his bed, his math textbook staring at him from his desk. He has homework. What's the point?

Should he call the police? What would he say? His mom might just be out for a walk or visiting a neighbor. She never visits neighbors here, as far as he knows.

Who could help him?

He keeps thinking about Ms. Harryhausen. How could she be living at the millionaire's house? Why was she talking about shortcuts at school yesterday?

Is it possible she was trying to send him a message?

About OtherWorld?

But how could she know?

Somebody has to know.

About Dr. K's experiment.

About the cold zap.

About the black hole that nearly swallowed him in AstroLand.

No way could these things exist without someone else knowing about them. Someone who knows they're possible, at least.

Could it be her?

He might get arrested, but he has to take a chance.

He decides to sneak out in case anyone is watching. He unlocks his window, pulls off the screen, and steps out into the darkness.

It's another humid night, and the frogs are croaking like crazy in the retention pond a couple of doors down.

He slinks behind the neighbor's fence and cuts through the empty lot to the street. He probably shouldn't have worn his flip-flops because they're making too much noise.

It's sometime after 11. The tricky part's coming up. How's he going to get through the electric gates at the millionaire's house? If someone sees him climbing them, he'll be arrested for trespassing.

He doesn't care. He needs answers and doesn't know who else to turn to.

As he nears the millionaire's house, he steps off the sidewalk and away from the streetlights. He wishes he could get Gramps' flashlight to work. He doesn't know why Dr. K wanted it so badly.

He follows the fence line, hoping to find an easy place to climb over. There isn't any. The fence is eight feet tall with sharp spikes on top. If he slips, those spikes could pierce his guts. The best place to climb looks like the gates themselves—the spikes look a little rounder, and he might be able to stand on the top hinge and launch himself over. If he doesn't break a leg, and if Ms. Harryhausen doesn't call the police, he'll be in.

What's he going to do? Is he brave enough to talk to her, or should he just spy on her? He hasn't decided.

He waits for a car to pass, slinks over to the gate, and grabs the bars. He pulls himself up to the first hinge, pulls again, and gets his toe on the second hinge. Another car passes, and he keeps still, hoping he won't be noticed.

He grabs the top of the bars, just below the spikes. He takes a breath and bends his knees, ready to jump.

That's when the gate starts opening with an electric buzz.

He yanks his foot away from the hinge so it doesn't get crushed. He's hanging there as it swings inward. He can't see below, but he knows he has to let go.

He drops, lands on the side of his foot, and rolls. He hears footsteps and can't scramble away fast enough. He's twisted his foot. He tries to roll away and bumps his head into the gate.

When the footsteps stop, he notices the bare feet before he looks up into her face.

It's Ms. Harryhausen, and she's got her hand over her mouth.

"Oh my gosh," she says. "I was just coming to see you."

Chapter 19

Alex has never had a good look at the millionaire's house before. It's covered in vines and fallen branches. You'd never guess anyone was living there, let alone a substitute teacher. It's starting to rain, and the clouds are flashing in the distance. The little light over the front door is dim and yellow. Ms. Harryhausen lets them in.

They're standing in the front hall. It opens onto a living room, and the back wall is all sliding glass doors looking out onto the river, he guesses, though he can't really see anything but blackness. It's dark inside, too.

"You know, you could have just pressed the button at the gate," Ms. Harryhausen says. "It isn't locked."

Alex opens his mouth and no sound comes out.

"I'll get a candle," she says. "I'm supposed to keep the lights off."

As he waits for her, he heads for the living room and almost falls on his face. There's a step down he didn't see.

He feels like he'd better sit down. He looks for a chair or couch and finds nothing, so he eases himself to the floor. When Ms. Harryhausen returns with the candle, she looks like a ghost moving through a haunted mansion.

All he can think is, *What's going on?!*

"Were you really coming to see me?" he says at the same time she says, "Why did you come to see me?"

Awkward pause.

"You first," she says.

"No, it's okay," he says.

Another pause. Ms. Harryhausen suddenly seems younger to him, and he doesn't know why.

Alex makes something up. "I'm here because...I just wanted to ask...are you going to test us on all that stuff about shortcuts?"

She laughs and lets out a sigh. "Oh, I'm such a failure!" She shakes her head. "Can I ask...I mean, who are you?"

"Me? I'm Alex Kraft. I'm in your—"

"No, I know that. It's just...why would anyone be interested in you?"

Alex feels his face color over. He's glad it's dark.

"Wait, that didn't sound right. Obviously, anyone would be interested in you. You're totally a great person, I'm sure. I'm just trying to figure out why I'm getting messages about you."

Alex is afraid she's having some sort of mental crisis. Maybe he made a mistake coming here. He's alone with a teacher who lives in a dark mansion with no furniture who says she's getting "messages" about him.

She smacks her thigh. "So you don't know anything?"

"About what?"

"How am I...what am I supposed to..." She throws her head back and groans.

Alex gathers his courage and helps her out. "Do you know something about OtherWorld?"

"OtterWorld?"

"The shortcut. I'm not really here to ask about the test. I came because I thought you might know about OtherWorld."

"Wait, are you talking about...so there's something there? It's not just a degraded remnant?"

"I don't understand," he says. "OtherWorld is our name for—it's like our school, but better. Yesterday, it was a theme park. When we went on a field trip, it was."

"A theme park? In the remnant? Are you sure you're not, like...crazy?"

"I don't even know what a remnant is."

"So you're not even a...you're just a ruckling?"

"A duckling? All I know is that when I took a shortcut there was this other world. The same school as J.J. de Blande but empty. And better. And then I brought my friend, and he brought a bunch of other friends, and—"

"You're bringing people *with* you? So that explains all the absences today!"

"And there's this tall man in there. Dr. Kosmic. He says OtherWorld is some kind of experiment, so we've been helping him test it out, except today—"

Ms. Harryhausen screams. Alex jumps, gets halfway to his feet. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay! I'm a total disaster! I've ruined everything, starting with my own life! Why did they even send me here? I'm just an intern, and I didn't even want to be that! I don't like practical things. I want to study the great dreamlords and teach others about them. I'm not cut out for this!"

She slaps her hands against her head and then covers her eyes like she's crying.

"Ms. uh,...Ms. Harryhausen."

"Katrina!" she blurts. "*Katrina!* Look!" In the candlelight, Ms. Harryhausen looks strange. She looks like someone else. Someone much younger. Is it a trick of the light?

"It's all an illusion," she says, her voice high and cracking. "I'm just an intern, see?"

Alex doesn't know whether to get up the rest of the way and run or sit back down and learn more. She may be crazy, but she doesn't seem all that dangerous.

"If you're not Ms. Harryhausen, then where is she?"

"I *am*! I'm Katrina Harryhausen, except my last name is just borrowed from a movie or something. My parents didn't even have a last name until they started working for the Council. They needed one for the employment forms."

Alex is very confused.

"I shouldn't even tell you that. I could go to the DEQ for telling you anything. My life is ruined. Are you really just a ruckling?"

"What's that?"

She sighs, knocks on her head one more time, and calms herself down with a sigh.

"Okay. Okay." Deep breath. "Something's going on. Something really dangerous. I'm going to tell you a few things, but I'm going to deny everything if you repeat this." Another deep breath. "Where do I even begin? I haven't interacted much with rucklings before this past week. I've been sheltered."

Alex sits back down on the floor, ready to listen to this girl, or Ms. Harryhausen, or whoever she is. She said something about illusions. Is she a magician?

He keeps his distance. It's eerie in the candlelight, like any minute a person or thing could pounce at him from the shadows. The rain picks up, and there's a flash of lightning. The thunder comes rumbling.

"Do you know *anything*?" she asks. "Do you even know about dreamlords?"

"Dreamlords?"

She shakes her head. "Oh no. Forget it. I can't tell you. It's against the law. But I broke my phone! You could be in grave danger! But so am I if I tell you. But—"

"Tell me what?!!"

Katrina puts her face in her hands. She takes deep breaths and calms herself. She peeks through her fingers, spreading them slowly at first and then ripping them away from her face.

She jolts upright. They both hear footsteps splashing through the puddles outside.

Alex turns just in time to see a dark figure approach the sliding glass doors, and then comes a crash when the figure walks directly into the doors, a man-shaped shadow booming against the glass. Both Alex and Katrina scream and jump up. The candle flickers.

The figure outside falls back and collapses into a puddle on the patio.

"Oh my gosh! What do we do? What do we do?" Katrina yells.

Alex scoots himself farther away from the doors. "Is it...someone you know?"

"I don't know anybody here. The Agency just gave me a key and sent me here. The place is empty most of the time."

The dark figure on the patio is stirring. He sits up and rubs his forehead. At least it looks like a he.

"Do you think it's a burglar?"

"A clumsy one, if he is."

"Should we get out of here?"

The figure gets to his feet and starts waving his hands. A flash of lightning reveals a short, thick old man in a soggy parka.

"Do you think he sees us?"

"Maybe he needs help. Maybe he got attacked by an alligator in the river."

"If he's swimming in the river at midnight, he's probably a burglar."

"We can't let him bleed to death!"

"Okay, okay." Alex approaches the doors. Katrina comes up beside him. The man is standing there, waving a little. He must see them. He doesn't look like he's bleeding from an alligator bite.

Alex tries to slide the door, finds it locked, fumbles in the dark until he can figure out how to unlock it, then cracks the door. The rain spits in.

"Sir, are you okay?!" he calls out into the storm.

"For a man who's been assaulted, imprisoned, chased through a glacier, nearly swept over a waterfall into a pit of nightmares, then forced to escape on a snowmobile and find my way here by freighter

and bus, I'd say I'm just fine!" the man says. He's still rubbing his forehead. "And how are *you*, Alex Kraft?"

Chapter 20

The rain is roaring against the patio stones and splattering against the glass doors. It's rolling off the old man's chin. How could this stranger know Alex's name?

"Wait, are you from the Agency?" Katrina yells over Alex's shoulder. "Sorry I broke the phone! Sorry I ruined everything!"

The old man looks confused. "Could I please come in?"

"That depends. Were you bitten by an alligator?" Katrina asks.

"He's not bleeding," Alex tells her.

"It could've been a small one," Katrina says.

"Please, I have important things to tell you."

"So does she, apparently," Alex says. He slides open the door. He and Katrina back away as the man, still out of breath and a little woozy from walking into the glass, steps up into the living room, water still pouring off his parka. The candle on the floor flickers from the draft. Weird shadows flutter across the ceiling.

As the man approaches, he shakes the rain off his fingers. Alex and Katrina back away.

"You wouldn't have anything to eat, would you?" he asks.

"I've recently discovered French toast," Katrina says.

"I was nearly crushed by an elevator," he says. "Then I nearly fell hundreds of feet inside a glacier. I almost got thrown off a speeding snowmobile onto a frozen lake. I also just had to walk through a lightning storm. I've worked up an appetite!"

There's an awkward moment while everyone listens to him drip on the carpet.

"French toast," says Katrina. "This way."

She picks up the candle, and the man follows her into the kitchen. Alex keeps his distance but joins them.

There's a small dining table in there, and Katrina sets the candle on it. The light reflects better in here. Katrina's face is younger than he thought. She barely looks older than he is.

Katrina opens the freezer. It turns out the French toast she makes is the frozen kind that comes in a box.

"How many slices?" she asks.

"All you care to cook," he says.

She drops four of them into the toaster and snaps them down. The toaster begins to glow through the slots.

Alex and the old man sit across from each other, and Katrina joins them on the end. The rain is quieter here, and they can talk normally between growls of thunder. The man is soaked and dripping. He keeps his wet parka on, which smells like someone crossed a fish with a wild dog.

"Okay," Alex says. "How do you know my name? What's going on? Am I sleeping right now?"

"Have pity on an old man until he gets something in his belly," the man says.

"Sorry, but you have no idea what totally crazy stuff I've been seeing and hearing. You've got to tell me something before my head explodes!"

"I can tell you my name is Drevin," he says. "I can tell you I knew your grandfather. And I can pretty well guess what you've been going through, Alex."

Alex can't speak for a moment. "My *grandfather*? I don't believe you." He turns to Katrina. "Okay, are you two teaming up on me? Is this something Trevor Womple set up? Or some sort of evil practical joke from Ol?"

"I never met this man in my life," Katrina says.

The toaster pops, and she gets up from the table.

"Extra syrup, if you don't mind," Drevin says.

"All I have is chocolate sauce."

"Even better!"

Alex can hear the man's stomach gurgle from across the table. Katrina brings him the French toast on a paper plate and the bottle

of chocolate sauce. She fills him a plastic cup of water and brings that, too.

"Now can you tell me?" Alex asks him.

"Mm, just a sec," he mumbles with his mouth full. He swallows, takes a breath, and chugs his water. "Ahh!"

"Okay, if you knew my grandfather, prove it!"

"Phrixus," says Drevin, "was the finest man I ever met in my life."

Katrina gasps and tips back in her chair, nearly falling.

"If you're talking about my grandfather, you've got the second part right," Alex says, "but you don't even know his name!"

"Well I ought to! I worked for the man for twenty-two and a quarter years."

"In the machine shop?"

"Ha ha! Is that what he told you?!" Drevin sniffs and sets his fork down. He wipes the corner of his eye with his wet finger. "That's what we called the lab sometimes. He'd say, 'Drevin, would you pick up some books on Egyptian mummification theory and bring them back to the shop.' 'Aye-aye, maestro!'" He salutes.

Katrina is holding both hands over her mouth and her eyes are so wide it looks like she'll need machinery to ever get them closed again.

"What are you talking about?" Alex says. "My grandfather made metal parts for the aerospace industry. I've seen pictures!"

Drevin chuckles a little as he chews. "You have, have you? Those were illusions, my boy. As easy for him as taking a breath."

"Your grandfather was a dreamlord!" Katrina says. "And not just *any* dreamlord! One of the greatest of all time!"

"*One of?*" Drevin says. "I'll beg to differ with that!"

"Don't forget Igo Treptik!"

"Of course I don't forget Maestro Treptik. None of Phrixus's work would have been possible without him. Of course, as soon as he passed, the Council condemned Maestro Treptik as a rogue."

"It's not right!" says Katrina.

"It's not, and I worry about Mr. Phrixus's reputation now that he's gone. How long before the Council condemns *him*? The sorry bunch of politicians."

"Would you please stop speaking in riddles?!" says Alex. "I don't know any of the people you're talking about!"

"But you do know Mr. Phrixus. He disappeared on me some thirty-four years ago, and I only just learned the truth."

Drevin is chewing as he talks, which makes Alex lean in to understand him.

"Phrixus married a ruckling. A ruckling is what we call anyone without the power to make illusions. I don't know how he met her. One of the secret research trips he took without me, I suppose. They had a child together. Phrixus's wife passed away too young. And then, apparently, Phrixus had a grandchild, and *that*, young man, is *you*."

Alex tries to let this sink in. "It's true that my grandmother died when my mom was young. But why should I believe the rest?"

"I can see him, Alex...in your face. The eyes. The jaw. You're Phrixus's grandson, I'm sure of it."

Katrina is looking at Alex, and she's got a hand to her mouth again. "That means... And you could be... Could..."

"Correct, dear," Drevin says. "And if I'm not mistaken, you're a very good judge of these things." Katrina blushes at the compliment. "The young gentleman might be a dreamlord himself," Drevin continues. "Untrained, of course. Can you make any illusions, lad?"

"I used to do a card trick in first grade. But what are you even talking about?"

"You haven't told him?" Drevin says to Katrina.

"I'm not allowed to!"

"Tell me what?!"

"About dreamlords," says Drevin, but Katrina interrupts.

"Let me tell him!"

"Somebody, *please!*"

"Okay, okay! Mr. Drevin and I are dreambrights, which means we have the power to make illusions. But there's a class of

dreambrights known as dreamlords. They've been around at least since the Middle Ages," Katrina says. "And maybe since forever, but who knows for sure. They make dreams. They learned to do that. They shape dream energy into works of art. Like living sculptures. Like music! That's why some people call them *maestros*."

He thinks of what Dr. K told him about knowing his dreams. "Are you trying to tell me someone's controlling my dreams?"

"Not exactly. It's like...you provide the notes, and they arrange them into a song."

"This girl paid attention in school," Drevin says.

Katrina smiles. "And they only do it sometimes. Like, did you ever have a really weird and vivid dream you couldn't explain? That's probably a dreamlord's work. It's not that they control what you dream. They only control what form it takes. Over the years, the best dreamlords found ways to harness dream energy to make illusions you can see in real life, when you're awake! I'm just a lowly dreambright, but people like me can be trained to use that power a little bit. That's how I made myself into a grown-up-looking teacher—with the help of my A-phone, of course, but that's another story, and now it's broken. Let's just say that dreamlords have a gift. Some people—like me—share it in a lesser form. Do you understand anything yet?"

"I'm starting to, but that doesn't mean I believe it."

"I probably don't know everything you'd want to know. I'm still in school, like you. The Dream Academy—that's where people like me go, as opposed to the Dream Conservatory, where the dreamlords go. We study illusions and the history and practice of making them. I want to teach at the Dream Academy after I graduate—at least I wanted to. Now I've blown it. I was interning at the DIA—that's the Dream Intelligence Agency. They're the ones who help keep dreamlords and dreambrights secret from the rest of the world. And they protect us all from rogue dreamlords. But I'm an outlaw now. Or a complete screw-up, one of the two. I got assigned this field work because Mr. Tintoro—he's my boss—was shorthanded thanks to all the Gorvian sightings."

"Who sightings?"

"Gorvian Halbestad. Let's not go into that just yet. I'm having a hard time staying focused."

Drevin laughs. "You're doing fine!" He stuffs the last huge bite of chocolate-smothered French toast into his mouth and chews noisily.

"I can *not* believe this!" Katrina blurts.

"*You* can't believe it?"

"You're Phrixus's grandson! That explains everything! That's why they wanted to keep you safe. Someone did anyway. They were texting me before my phone broke. So where do you think that remnant came from?" Katrina asks Drevin.

The rain outside is a steady hiss, and the doorway to the living room bursts into brightness from the lightning flashes.

"I'd say there's a reason it's so close to Alex's house," Drevin says. He sips from his water cup and swishes it around before he swallows.

"We only moved here a few months ago, right after Gramps died," Alex says. "Gramps bought the house for us. He arranged the whole move."

"Do you think..." Katrina starts. "Do you think he started experimenting again? I mean, later in life?"

"There's a better explanation," says Drevin. "Alex, I'm sorry to ask you this, but did your grandfather know he was going to die?"

"I don't know. If he did, he never said anything."

"I think he knew," Drevin says. "And he left that dreamworld for you as a gift. He knew you'd grow up and eventually learn the truth. He knew you had the potential to become a powerful dreamlord like him. The dreamworld was something for you to grow into, something to help you hone your powers."

"That's so beautiful and sad," Katrina says. "But why here?"

"I don't know for sure, but I suspect Phrixus knew that others were closing in on him, that they'd tracked him down and were going to pull him back into the world of dreamlords. And of course any dreamworld full of that much energy would eventually be

detected by agents of the DIA. He had to put it somewhere else and move the family only when he knew he was going to die.”

“Yes! And Phrixus knew that Alex would eventually stumble into the dreamworld because as a dreamlord he'd feel the vibrations. He'd be drawn to it.”

Alex raises his hand. “Hello. I'm sorry. I'm still not convinced. It's true I sort of wandered off the sidewalk and into this so-called dreamworld. But it's also possible you're pulling a practical joke on me and tomorrow this all turns up on someone's YouTube channel.” He scans the room for hidden cameras.

“How can we convince him?” Katrina asks Drevin.

Drevin burps, then leans back and rubs his sore forehead a little. “There's another reason I came here. And if you have it, that proves everything.”

“What is it?” Alex and Katrina both ask.

“It's the one thing Mr. Phrixus was working on that I actually had to get parts for. An object. A tool. I didn't even understand it at the time. Someone recently had to remind me of it.”

“An object?”

“A disillusioner.”

Katrina gasps and smacks the table with both hands, making the others jump. “No! No no no! That's impossible!”

“Not for Mr. Phrixus, it wasn't.”

“If he was making a disillusioner, he might have gone rogue after all! Why else would he need it?!”

Drevin raises his voice. “Listen, I won't have you talking like that about Mr. Phrixus, even though Mr. Phrixus didn't believe in labels like ‘rogue.’ He said they were invented by the Council to keep the dreamlords constrained—and to keep the Council up on their thrones, lording it over everyone else.”

“How did it work? The disillusioner. What did it look like?” Katrina demands.

“I only saw parts of it, never the complete form. It's something that could fit in your hand. Made with pure glass imported from a glass eye factory in Venice. I don't know exactly what he put inside.

It might be nothing, just a resonance chamber for dream energy, but—”

A sizzle crosses Alex's skin and he feels electrified for a second.

Katrina notices the look on his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah I...just...” He slides his hand into his pocket and pulls out Gramps' flashlight, feels a slight tingle in his palm.

He sets it on the table between them.

“Is this what you're talking about?”

Chapter 21

“You see?! You see?!” As soon as he's done laughing, Drevin almost starts crying. Katrina's busy staring at Gramps's little flashlight on the table beside the plate of syrup, her jaw gaping.

“It's him!” Drevin says. “I mean, you're you, but you're him, too! Mr. Phrixus! I knew it the moment I saw you.”

Alex shares the old man's joy but the loss hits him, too. He'll never stop missing Gramps. “After he died, everything got worse for me and my mom,” he says.

“Things will get better now,” Drevin says. “You're going to learn things you never imagined, and do things you never thought possible. But you're not out of danger yet. First things first, stay away from the remnant.”

“I tried to keep him out!” says Katrina. “He and his dancing friend.”

“Wait, you tried to keep us out?”

“Mrow,” says Katrina.

“That was you in the field?”

“Me and some neighborhood friends. When it comes to illusions, I have a specialty.”

“Stay away from the remnant for now,” Drevin says. “And keep your disillusioner safe. If that fell into the wrong hands...I don't even want to think about it.”

“Someone's already asked me for it.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Kosmic. He's the tall guy who runs OtherWorld.”

“Tall guy?” Drevin says. “This tall guy—he might've transformed himself, but can you tell me what he looks like?”

“He's, like, *really* tall. Think Abe Lincoln without the beard.”

Alex can hear Drevin swallowing hard.

“What? Who is it?” Katrina demands.

“The one I feared. It's Gorfian's son.”

Katrina's eyes go wide. “Gorfian has a son? Oh no. This is bad, people! I let Phrixus's grandson almost get captured by Gorfian Halbestad's son? I messed up even worse than I thought!”

“His name's Gregor,” Drevin says. “He kidnapped me on a ship and made me take him to Mr. Phrixus's lab. I never thought he'd get through the illusions Mr. Phrixus set up. I never thought he'd find anything useful, either. I'm afraid I was wrong. He found something that led him here, and he's set up shop in Mr. Phrixus's dreamworld, it looks like. He got there before you, Alex.”

“Why is that bad?”

“He's using it to trick you, for one. He asked for your disillusioner?”

“It was supposed to be the price of admission to AstroLand. The theme park. When the time came, I couldn't bring myself to give it up. I ran.”

“That's good, my boy. Gregor doesn't have the power to sustain that dreamworld. If he's misusing the energy in the remnant, the whole thing could collapse.”

“Mr. Tintoro told me it's the strongest remnant we've ever measured!” Katrina says.

“I've no doubt,” Drevin says. “And if a remnant that powerful collapses all at once, there's no telling what could happen.”

“It would be like a black hole in the dreamscape!” Katrina says.

“Wait...a black hole?” Alex tells them about the empty blob that scared him on the Saturn Surfer. “Is that what you're talking about.”

“You were lucky to get out of there,” Drevin says. “Listen, Alex. Gorfian's son is no dreamlord. He's playing at it because he wants

the power, but even by using Mr. Phrixus's dream energy, he can't sustain his illusions. The most powerful dreamlord would have trouble sustaining a whole amusement park for more than a few moments. And the thing is, he doesn't know any more about amusement parks than Katrina. He's tapping into your dreams. And that black hole? It's probably just the beginning. Sooner or later, the remnant will collapse. Probably sooner."

"What about the others? I'm not the only one who knows about it! I mean, they're probably not there now because it's night, but they know about it, so—."

Alex stops, noticing something just as the others do. The dark kitchen isn't dark anymore. Light filters in through the blinds, and over his shoulder the living room is lit up by the morning sun coming through the sliding glass doors.

Alex jumps up. "I'm going!"

"Don't!" says Katrina. "It's exactly what he wants!"

"I've got the flashlight. The disillusioner."

"We don't even know how the disillusioner works," Drevin says, picking it up off the table. He inspects the numbers engraved on one end and smiles.

"I felt it," Alex says. "And I saw something when I held it out in the OtherWorld. Either way, I'm going."

"And if no one's there," Drevin says, "get out right away. Otherwise you're just giving Gregor Halbestad one more chance to trap you."

"Drevin takes a deep breath and presses the disillusioner into Alex's palm. "In and out quickly. Avoid Gregor Halbestad. Just remember, if he traps *you*, there's no hope for any of us."

Katrina jumps up. "I'll go with you!"

"Have a seat," Drevin says firmly. "You won't be any help."

"It's the only way I can save my internship!"

"You can help me stop anyone else from going in there," Drevin adds. "I have an idea."

Alex squints as a ray of sunlight finds him through the blind. He runs out of the room, disillusioner tight in his fist.

“Ten minutes, Alex!” Drevin yells. “Then we're coming after you!”

Outside, he dodges the broken tree limbs strewn across the winding driveway as he runs, his ankle still hurting from his fall over the automatic gate. At this very moment, Ol and the others could be in serious danger.

It's later than he'd thought. The clouds must have blocked the dawn, and now the sun is breaking through and coming over the trees. He runs up River Road and turns the corner at his street.

Then he remembers his mom. She wasn't home last night, so where did she go?

When he refused to give up the disillusioner, Dr. Kosmic said there'd be “consequences,” that he'd take something else.

Panic overcomes him. He has to check. He turns up the driveway to his house, finds the front door locked. He knocks and gets no answer, so he runs around back to his open window and climbs through.

“Mom! Mom!” He calls across the house, checks the garage, finds her car there like it was last night. Her bed hasn't been slept it.

He's taken her, he thinks. He's *kidnapped* my mom.

He bursts out the front door, runs across the field and into the palmettos, the disillusioner wedged tight in his pocket.

Zap!

Before he can catch his breath, he hears screams.

Chapter 22

There's a girl Alex recognizes from his PE class—he thinks her name is Allison. She's sitting over by a fountain in front of the grand entrance to what now looks more like a castle with pointed towers reaching up into the cloudless sky. Exactly like the Europa section of AstroLand.

Part of the fountain is gone. The water is spraying up into a black hole, and it's not coming back down. The black hole is pulsing over

the girl's head, moving a little left, a little right, expanding and contracting.

Allison is cowering beneath it. Alex runs to her, grabs her arms, and pulls her away.

"I was just about to jump into the water," she says, "and then this huge mouth opened up and almost swallowed me."

The black hole floats in the air just a few steps away.

He and Allison back away. The hole pulses and grows, then fizzles out. The fountain reappears in its place, looking paler.

"Where is everybody?!" Alex asks.

"I don't know. Inside, I guess."

"Have you seen a grown-up woman? A little taller than me? Dark blonde hair?"

She shakes her head.

"You should get out of here," Alex says.

"But this place is awesome. Your friend Ol was right. It's magical. All except for that air-pit or whatever."

"I have a feeling there's going to be a lot more of those. You should leave now! I'm going to tell everyone else before this whole place collapses."

"What is this place, anyway?"

"An illusion!"

"I don't get it!"

"Don't try! Just get out! Back the way you came."

"Geez, I was finally going to have something cool in my boring life, and now even *that's* ruined!" She stomps off toward the bushes.

As Alex heads for the open castle doors, a black spot appears in the sky like a piece cut loose from a storm. It grows and seems to rotate, then fizzles back into the blue.

He runs inside, steps onto one of the moving walkways, and starts shouting. "Come out if there's anyone in here! Emergency, emergency! You've got to leave now!"

He hears voices inside one of the classrooms—if you can even call them classrooms anymore. They're lounges, discos, game rooms, trampoline rooms, bowling alleys, snack centers, and even one

labeled Destructo Science Room, where by the looks of the broken glass and dishes on the floor, people can wander in and break anything they want.

Alex had a dream about a classroom like that once, which probably explains why it ended up in OtherWorld. The place is still tuned to his dreams, even though it's collapsing.

As soon as he steps off the walkway, a black hole opens up in front of him and he stops. What would happen if he fell in? Would he be stuck in the illusion forever? But what if the entire illusion disappeared? Where would he be?

He hears voices on the other side of the hole. "Whoa! What's that?"

Alex thinks it might be Gary Allenby from his physical science class.

"Don't touch it!" Alex yells. "Stand back!"

"Who's there?"

"It's me—Alex Kraft. How many people are in there?"

"About fifteen."

Fifteen! Just how many people did Ol recruit this morning?

The hole fizzles and the doorway appears. Shaggy blonde-haired Gary Allenby is standing there. Just as he's about to step out into the hall, the black hole flickers back to life.

"Stop!"

It fades again.

"Hurry! Everyone has to come out! This place is falling apart! Go back through the bushes the way you came."

"We want to stay here, dude."

"Didn't you just see that hole in front of you?!"

"I know—pretty cool!"

"Except if you fall in, you might not come back. And the whole place is about to turn into one giant black hole."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously!"

"What is this place, anyway? Ol said it was some kind of bubble world."

"I don't have time to explain! Hurry up! Get everyone together and leave now! Where's Ol?"

"I don't know. A bunch of people are out on the courts."

Alex jumps back onto the moving walkway and runs down the hall. He leaps onto a second moving walkway that takes him to the back of the school.

The courts have been converted into what looks like a giant, roofless, bouncy house, and there's maybe thirty people out there playing basketball on the inflatable court, taking turns dunking it and flying halfway across on a single bounce. They don't seem to notice that the sky above them is darkening with black dots. Big dots and small ones, falling like slow rain.

"Ol!" Alex yells when he spots his friend jumping toward the hoop, arm extended, half-sized basketball in his hand.

Ol flies over someone's head and slams the ball through the hoop. He gets high fives from his teammates. It's easy to see why he loves this place.

"Yo, it's about time, my-man!" he says as Alex comes up to the edge of the court. "This guy's on *my* team," he announces to the others.

"I told you not to come back here, Ol! It's not safe!"

"Yeah, about that... I didn't listen." Ol is bobbing up and down on the inflatable court as he speaks. His feet are even with Alex's head.

"We've got to get everyone out of here."

"Why?"

"Look up!"

Ol turns his eyes to the speckled sky and squints at the dots.

"It's happening, Ol. The place is shutting down. The tall man—Dr. K or whoever he really is—can't keep up the illusion because he's not a dreamlord!"

"Wha—"

"Just trust me. I have a lot to tell you. And I'm afraid he has my mother! Have you seen her?"

Ol gives him a funny look. "When did your mom—"

"I'll explain later. You need to get everyone together while I go try to find her! Where's Dr. K?"

"Haven't seen him. You could try the office—I saw him go in there once!"

"Just promise me you'll get everyone out!"

"I still don't understand!"

"Ol, this whole place is an illusion created with stolen dreams. And now it's collapsing!"

"Come on, my-man, what's the big deal with a few little—"

Pffffffttttttt!!!

One of black holes falls through the inflated court, and the air starts blasting out. Ol and the other players lose their balance, flail their hands, and fall like chess pieces in an earthquake. People are screaming and laughing. The court wobbles and ripples as it slowly collapses.

Alex reaches up to Ol and helps him down.

"Everybody, come on!" Alex yells to the others who are making their way to the edge, scrambling away from the black hole. Alex glances behind him and sees the damage already. Chunks of the school building are disappearing, including several of the castle spires and a corner of the gym.

"Look!" he says to Ol.

Ol's got a startled expression. Like maybe he's starting to believe Alex.

"I've got to go find my mom before it's too late. Get everyone out!"

"Aye-aye, cap'n!"

Alex takes off for the office, knowing any second he could run into a black hole. He heads down the hallway to the administrators' offices. He pushes open the door.

The entry room is eerily quiet. The only noise in the dim hallway is his footsteps on the linoleum. At J.J. de Blande, the principal's office is on the right, and Mr. Jacoby's office is further down on the left.

He opens the door to the principal's office and finds...nothing. Not a black hole, just a shapeless gray space. It may be because he's never been in the principal's office at J.J. de Blande.

He heads down the hall to what would be Mr. Jacoby's office. He stops in front of the door, which looks exactly the same as Mr. Jacoby's door without the name. He stands there listening for a moment. He thinks he hears a scream outside the building.

He can't leave now. His mother might be inside. He thinks of all those times he was mad at her, all those times he wanted to accuse her of neglecting him. She was just busy and, like him, still grieving Gramps. And now she's been kidnapped.

He's afraid to open the door. Afraid of what he might find.

He twists the knob and pushes.

He's blinded by a bright, pulsing light. It's something you can feel, like the rumbling bass from an amplifier.

But there's no sound. That's the creepiest part. Alex has to squint and hold his hands up to his forehead, and still his eyes have a hard time adjusting. One thing for sure, this isn't Mr. Jacoby's office. There's no desk, no chairs, nothing on the walls. The room's so bright, he can't even *see* the walls.

Then the light dims, and he's in a dark room with a high ceiling, stone walls. In the corner, he spots his mom in her gray work suit, curled into a ball on the floor. He can't see her face, but he's sure it's her.

"Mom!" He runs across the room without getting any closer.
"Mom! I'm sorry, Mom! I'm here!"

She doesn't hear him. She doesn't move. He senses a wide, empty, cold room all around. No matter how fast he runs, he can't get to his mother.

And then she's gone. And so is the room. And all he sees is bright light and a tall, shadowy figure in the distance.

"She's here because of *you*, Alex!" blasts a deep voice. He knows the man's real name now. Gregor Halbestad.

"Where are you?! Let her go!"

"It's a shame. We could have changed the world if you'd joined me. I *know* your potential. I could have helped you take your place among the greats. As for your mother...if you want her back, you'll need to come pay your debt."

"Let her go! I know who *you* are, too, and I swear I'll find you!"

"I'll be waiting, Alex. And so will your mother."

"Alex!" comes Ol's voice behind him. There's a hand on his shoulder and the vision of the tall man disappears.

Alex is out of breath but doesn't seem to have moved.

"Alex! Come on, my-man! You've got to come with us! Most people got out, and then a black hole appeared and we had to back away from the bushes. Now the exit is blocked, and we can't get around it. We have to find another way!"

"My mother!" Alex says. "I just saw her!"

"Where did she go?"

"She's not here. She's in some kind of castle or dungeon or something. She might be hurt!"

Ol tugs on Alex's sleeve, and they run out of the room and down the hall.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you before, my-man!"

"It's okay. I've got a million things to tell you, and you won't believe any of them."

"I always believe, my-man. It's a problem I have."

"There's a couple of people you need to meet. One of them you sort of already know. They can explain things better than I can, and they can help us find my mom."

In the school entry, black spots float at the ceiling, and they're starting to fall like icicle drips.

"Duck!" Alex yells, and they run the rest of the way hunched over.

Outside, the black holes are popping open everywhere like polka dots then falling in a slow downpour. It takes a second to figure out where they are.

"Over there!" Ol says.

The group of students is huddled on the grass, including Melody Connor, Yano Lathe, the Bellingham twins, and Jake Fripp.

“Jake Fripp? Really?!” says Alex.

“Whatevs! I sent out a bunch of messages last night. Anyone I could think of.”

There's a bus-sized black hole where the exit from OtherWorld used to be.

“What's going on?” Jake Fripp demands to know as Alex and Ol run up.

“The place is collapsing!”

“We've got to find a way out!” It's getting harder for Alex to tell where they are. The black holes are linking and growing, with more falling from the sky.

He pulls out his grandfather's invention.

“What's that?” Ol asks.

“Disillusioner!”

“Sounds unhappy.”

Alex holds it up and closes his eyes until he feels his arm give a little shudder. When he opens his eyes again, there's a sort of beam, and the beam is shining directly on a car that's headed straight for them.

Everyone screams and tries to jump away or grab onto the person next to them, but it's too late.

The car goes right through them and vanishes. Ol uncovers his head. “I think I peed my pants a little.”

“Look,” Alex says, sweeping the disillusioner's beam. “It's like a flashlight that cuts through the illusion so we can see the outside world. We've moved out onto the street in front of J.J. de Blande.”

“My brain is a million kinds of exploded,” Ol says.

“Watch out!” yells Melody. A black blob is falling down on them like a giant drop of acid rain. They scatter, and the blob settles halfway in the ground. They're all standing around a quivering black mound that looks like an overturned bowl of licorice jello.

“Keep back!” Alex yells. “Come around to this side.”

The six of them—Ol, Yano, Melody, the twins, and Jake Fripp—group together beside Alex. It's raining now in the

disillusioner's beam, while here in OtherWorld, it's perfectly dry. A minivan approaches the beam and moves right through them.

"Holy mama. Which is the illusion—us or the car?" Ol says.

"I guess it doesn't matter as long as one of them is. Look, there has to be a way around that black hole and into the bushes. We can use my disillusioner to get there. Everyone has to help look out for falling holes and sound the alert if one comes close."

"Like *right now!*" yells Melody.

A small black blob falls just to the side and goes right through the ground, leaving a bottomless pit behind.

"I think they're coming faster," Ol says.

As they move up the street, more of the black holes appear. The school looks half-eaten, the castle towers almost completely gone, along with most of the grand entrance, replaced with black smears like someone colored them over with charcoal.

As the blackness grows together, OtherWorld looks like a screen saver slowly wiping away your Language Arts essay. They have to walk single file between some of the holes.

"This looks like the edge of the woods up here," Alex says.

"Look out!"

"Ah!" Ol's a little slow to jump out of the way, and one of the falling holes sideswipes him, taking the outer seam off of his cargo pants, enough so his tidy whities are showing. "That could have killed me!" He inspects his pants.

"It only killed your dignity," Alex says. "We've got to keep moving. This whole place'll be gone in minutes."

They juke and weave their way around the falling holes. The place feels like an eerily quiet war zone, with silent land mines going off all around and invisible bombs blackening the sky. Alex, Ol, and the others duck and dive and fall over each other to avoid getting blotted out, and meanwhile they're looking into the disillusioner's beam, which shows life as normal on the outside—cars passing, birds flying, squirrels running up trees, dog-walkers having a chat beneath umbrellas in a light rain. A woman strolling her baby seems to look directly at Alex for a second. But no, she's just waiting for a

car to pass so she can hurry across the street. The car comes from behind them and shoots right through the whole group.

And then Alex hits a wall. Not a wall, exactly. A pressure. A resistance. The edge of the bubble. He can press against it, but the harder he presses the more it resists.

"Here's the boundary," he says. "We just need to follow along here until we get to the entrance.

"Hate to say it, but we should hold hands!" Ol says.

"Ew," says Melody, but they all do it anyway.

The world is vanishing around them. They're walking on what feels like a balance beam between the pulsing black hole and the blurry edge of his grandfather's remnant.

"I think I just turned my shoes into sandals," says Carl Bellingham.

Alex spots the trees and bushes now, and the tall palmetto bush that marks the entrance.

"Just a little further!"

As he sweeps the disillusioner ahead of him, he glimpses something like a tiny star in the bushes.

"The magical world is caving in!" yells Yano. "Uncool! Uncool!" The blackness is sweeping toward them from behind now, like a great black moving wall consuming everything in its path, blanking it out forever.

"Run!" Alex leads them to the bushes and shines his disillusioner at the exit. "Right here! Follow the beam!"

He holds the disillusioner in one hand and helps shove them through one at a time with the other hand. There goes Melody. Charlie. Carl and Art. Jake.

"Dive!" he tells Ol, seeing the blackness closing in.

He gives Ol a shove and dives right behind him. The last thing he sees is the black wall closing in behind him. Then a bright flash.

As Alex is falling, his whole body shudders with a familiar cold electric shock until he feels himself bouncing, and something knocks him in the head.

Blackness.

Chapter 23

A light drizzle taps at his cheeks. Someone's shaking his shoulder.

"Alex! Alex? You okay, son?"

He's woozy and wondering why there'd be a man's voice calling him son. He doesn't remember his father, who died a few months before Alex was born. Sometimes in dreams, he'll hear a man's voice that sounds familiar, and he'll wonder if he's hearing his father. But this voice isn't the same.

Then he hears Ol's voice, and everything comes back to him. He wonders why he's lying around when his mother's in danger. He pushes himself up to a sitting position and opens his eyes...

The world is spinning. He lies back down, puts a hand to his forehead and feels a bump.

"We made it out!" Ol says. "It's going to be okay!"

Alex opens his eyes again. "My mom..."

"You ran right into a tree trunk," says Drevin, who's wearing a crossing guard uniform with an orange sash. "Tried to stop you. I guess I'm not as quick as I used to be."

"What about the others?"

"They're all safe, and Katrina brought them back to school. She's going to stay there as a substitute teacher today.

"I don't know what happened exactly," Ol says. "The bubble popped."

"The remnant's gone. Imploded." The rain runs down Drevin's cheeks, and it looks like he's crying. "Gorvian's son stretched himself too thin. He didn't have the power or the knowledge to sustain Phrixus's dreamworld, especially after he tried to expand it. What did you see?"

"I saw her!" Alex says, getting up on his elbows again. "My mother! The tall man kidnapped her, but I saw her!"

"Inside?" Drevin looks worried.

"Yeah, but not here. I went to what I thought was Dr. Kosmic's office. When I opened the door I was looking into a castle or something. My mom was curled up in the corner like she was in a trance."

"A castle?" Drevin asks. "What did it look like? Do you remember?"

"Stone walls. Stone floor. It was pretty dark in there, but I could definitely tell it was my mother. She wore her work clothes. It looked like she came home from work and wound up in someone's dungeon. I tried running to her but got nowhere."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"Books. I remember books. The walls weren't stone at all. They were covered in books, stretching up into the darkness."

Drevin's eyes go wide, and that gets Alex back to his feet.

"Do you think she's in an old library somewhere?" Ol asks.

"Not yet. There's no way he could have taken her there so quickly. I believe Gregor left you an illusion. To send you a message."

"If you know, tell me where she is. I'll go there now! I don't care how dangerous the tall man is. I've got Gramps' disillusioner. I'll go and save her!"

"There's no guarantee," Drevin says. "He may be trying to lure you there because it's the only place he knows where he has access to dream energy. It could be another trick to get your disillusioner."

"I don't care. Wherever it is, I have to go."

"Hey! Hey!" a deep voice shouts, and the three of them look to the sidewalk. Mr. Jacoby is there in the rain with a giant purple umbrella. He's striding toward them like he's going to crush all of them under his massive feet.

"Don't worry, son," Drevin whispers. "I can get us there."

"Kraft with a K!" Mr. Jacoby shouts. "And you—Underachieving Brother of Perry Oppenheimer! The bell has rung! What are you doing out here? And who is this?" he asks, looking at Drevin, still in his crossing guard uniform.

"The boy fell and bumped his head," Drevin says. "We're helping him up."

Mr. Jacoby looks skeptical. "Are you okay, Kraft?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've got a purple tattoo on your forehead. Need to see the nurse?"

"No, sir."

"Come with me. Both of you."

"Go on," Drevin whispers. "I need time to make arrangements."

Mr. Jacoby steps forward. "What did you say?"

"I just wished him a good day," says Drevin. "He needs it."

"You're not some kind of old gang leader, are you?" Mr. Jacoby asks.

"I'm a gang of one," Drevin says.

Mr. Jacoby shakes his head. "In my office, boys."

"Great," Ol whispers. "The world ends and I still have to go see the A.P."

It's hard for Alex to grasp how truly strange it is to walk into Mr. Jacoby's office when just minutes before he'd walked into the same office in OtherWorld and seen an image of his mom. He thinks of the end of *The Wizard of Oz* movie, when it turns out that Dorothy dreamed the whole thing, and that the characters in her real life played the characters in her dream. When Alex first understood the ending, he was disappointed and moped around the house for days. He wanted so badly for Oz to be *real*, if only movie-real. He never imagined he'd be living a real-life version of *The Wizard of Oz* and wishing now the whole thing were a dream, that Mr. Jacoby played the tall man, that Ol and the other kids played themselves, and that his mother was never kidnapped and taken to an ancient library somewhere.

"Sit, please," Mr. Jacoby says.

Ol is shaking in his skin. His knee is bouncing up and down and his heel is hitting the floor. Mr. Jacoby looks under his desk to figure out what the noise is. "You'll need to stop that, please."

Silence.

"I'm not even going to ask," Mr. Jacoby says. He shakes his head. "Why should I bother? I know gang activity when I see it. Look at your head."

"Sir, like the man said, Alex just slipped on the wet grass and bumped his head is all!" Ol says.

"What's he doing on the grass? The school isn't on the grass."

"A shortcut, sir."

"A shortcut?! There's no shortcut that way. Is that the best excuse you could come up with?"

"Actually, sir, if you want to know the truth—"

"Shh!" Ol says.

"I *only* want to know the truth," Mr. Jacoby says. "Go ahead and hurt these delicate ears."

Silence.

"That was a joke," Mr. Jacoby says. "My ears aren't delicate."

"Sir, the truth is that we've been taking a shortcut for a while now. It turned out to be dangerous. We shouldn't have done it, but our substitute teacher set us straight, and now we've learned our lesson."

"What do I look like to you?" Mr. Jacoby asks.

"A tall, handsome gentleman!" Ol blurts.

"I'm talking to *him*."

"A stern assistant principal trying too hard to cover up his soft side?" Alex says.

"What?!" Mr. Jacoby says.

"Nothing."

"Do I look like some kind of circus clown or a doped-up kook who'd believe anything you tell him?"

"I tried, sir."

"I had reports the last two days of excessive student absences. You know what I think?"

"No sir."

"I think you're behind this."

"That's true," Alex says. Ol gives him a look.

“Kraft, I don't think you're as bad a kid as I've said to others. But you don't know where to draw the line. You thought you could handle it, but it got away from you. When you step outside the accepted social practices, the door's wide open. You walk right through and keep going. You don't know when to stop. You don't know when to turn back.”

“Yes, sir. I sort of lost sight of things.”

“You're talking sense now, Kraft. You lost sight. And now look at you—your forehead's bruised, you're soaking wet, and you're failing all your classes.”

Alex tries to look contrite. He just wants to get out of there and go find his mother. “You're totally right, sir.”

“Tell me the truth. Were you in a gang fight this morning?”

Alex glances at his shoes, then meets Mr. Jacoby's eye. “Yes, sir. We meant well, sir. Another gang didn't like our tattoos, so they challenged us to a throwdown. At 7:30 a.m. In the field right next to school. Where everyone could see. Because that's how we roll.”

“Mm-hm.” Mr. Jacoby thinks about it. “Just as I thought. And the name of this gang?”

Alex draws a blank, and Ol jumps in to rescue him. “The Shnordles, sir!”

“Shnor—what?”

“They're from L.A., I think. Trying to open a franchise here.”

“Franchise? What are they, a fast food business?”

“Not that I know of, sir. They just...they use a business model.”

Mr. Jacoby puts his fingertips in front of his chin. “I'll have to post an alert about this on my Facebook group. You defeated them, I assume?”

“Ol here's the number one enforcer,” Alex says.

“Oh yeah,” Ol says. “They won't be coming back. I didn't even throw a punch. That's how good I am at public speaking.”

“Hmm. Well this is just a bunch of nonsense. I don't know exactly what happened, but I'm giving you both a second chance. If I see any more evidence of gang activity, I'm calling Sheriff Larrette. He's

a personal friend of mine. He'll open an investigation, and you won't like it."

"Sorry, sir. We're disbanding the gang," Alex says. "It's been getting in the way of homework."

"See?"

"We're all about homework and good behavior now," Ol says. "And frankly, I'm pretty excited about it!"

Alex nods vigorously.

In the hallways, Alex gets looks and secret nods from people in the hallway—the people he'd helped escape from OtherWorld. They're not making fun of him anymore. Jake Fripp comes up and shakes his hand.

"You're one awesome dude," Jake says.

It's not until late first period that Alex and Ol get the call.

"Ms. Hupla?" comes the principal's voice over the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Welcome back!"

Alex and Ol were surprised to see Ms. Hupla when they walked in. What happened to Katrina? She was supposed to be substituting again.

"Thank you," says Ms. Hupla. "I'm feeling much better, thank you."

"That's wonderful. Listen, will you send Alex Kraft and Oliver Oppenheimer to the office?"

"Of course."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

When Alex and Ol get to the office, the receptionist with the octopus tattoo tells them that both of their mothers are here to pick them up.

"Quite the coincidence," she says with a wink. "Two family emergencies at the same time."

Alex and Ol look at each other, terrified.

"Hello, dear," says a voice.

Two women who look nothing like Alex's or Ol's mothers come toward them from the entrance to the administrative hallway, where they were sitting.

"Don't worry, Oliver, it's nothing serious," says one of them.

"Nothing, uh, serious either. Alex, dear."

"Wh—" Ol starts until Alex elbows him. "Trust me," he whispers.

"I hope everything works out okay," the receptionist says.

"Oh, I'm sure it will," Ol's so-called mother says. "It was very nice talking with you."

"And you. The both of you."

"Let's go," whispers Ol's "mother," pushing Alex and Ol out the door.

The four of them climb into the car Alex saw Ms. Harryhausen driving, a new-looking pale blue sedan. The two mothers sit in front. Once the doors are shut, they turn around. Their faces go blurry and change.

When their features settle, Alex and Ol are looking at Katrina and Drevin.

"How'd you do that?" Ol asks.

"We'll have plenty of time to talk about that later," Drevin says.

"First, we need to get to the port. We have a ship to catch."

"Why am I driving?" Katrina asks.

"Because I don't know how," Drevin says.

"Neither do I. Plus, I'm not even old enough."

"Then at least you have an excuse. Hurry!"

Katrina puts the car in drive and accelerates one wheel over the curb and onto the sidewalk. She yelps, floors it again, and the car jumps back into the driveway, weaves all the way across and nearly hits a parked van there, before she finally steadies the wheel and stops at the stop sign.

"Which way?"

Chapter 24

Drevin gives Katrina a blank look. "Don't you know which way?"
"How would I know? I'm not from here!"

"I got this!" Ol says. "Take a right."

Something squeals—either Katrina or the wheels—as the car spins right and takes off down the street.

"Wait, why is Ol coming?" Alex says. "We should drop you off at home," Alex says.

"And let you guys get lost?"

"Once we get on the highway, I can figure it out. I don't exactly know where we're going, but it's probably dangerous. Anyway, it's my mother we're saving. What are your parents going to say if you don't come home?"

"I already took care of that!" Katrina says. "After I found out Ms. Hupla was back, I swore the other kids to secrecy. Then I had some time while I waited for Drevin. Ol, I know all about your brother. The other teachers talk a lot. I made sure your parents got a call"—she glances over at Drevin—"from the International Student of the Millenium Awards Committee. Your brother and your parents are on their way to Seattle to accept his award."

"They don't want me to come with them for once?"

"No, they think you're spending a few days at Alex's house. It's all been worked out!"

"That's great. But what's going to happen when they get there and there's no award?"

"There will be," Drevin says. "I took care of that part. I have old friends in Seattle. Librarians."

"See?" Ol says. "It's all arranged. I have nowhere else to go."

"I still don't get it," Alex says.

"He knows too much," says Drevin. "The only way to make him forget is for a dreamlord to put a few waking dreams in his head. And if that were to happen...you two would likely lose your friendship. It's time we stop treating rucklings like children."

Katrina applauds.

"Fine," says Alex, turning to Ol, "but if you get killed, your parents will never forgive me."

"It won't matter, because I promise not to get killed unless you do first."

"Deal."

Katrina weaves between lanes on the highway, gets honked at eight times, and almost rams a dump truck on the side of the road. Every time she tries to use the turn signal, she sprays the windshield wiper with wiper fluid. And then things start getting interesting. Katrina glances into her rearview mirror.

"Uh oh."

"What is it?"

"Someone's following us."

Alex and Ol turn their heads. "What clued you in?" Alex says. "The fact that he's like eight inches from our bumper?"

"Floor it!" yells Ol.

"Floor what? What does that even mean?!"

"It means *Go faster!*"

"There's two men in there. They're probably from the agency," Katrina says. She smacks the steering wheel and growls as she accelerates. "That's it for me! No more internship! No more school! I'll be shuffling old papers in a cave somewhere the rest of my life."

The other car stays close behind them. It's the same kind of boring car Katrina's driving, probably another rental.

"If my A-phone were working, we could call the DIA and tell them to call off the chase."

The bald man in the passenger seat rolls down his window and holds out a white tube.

"I don't think they're from the DIA," Drevin says. "I think I recognize one of them from Council Headquarters. A Council Guard I beat in an elevator-jumping contest. Probably sore in more ways than one."

"Well that's a relief."

"They have sleep guns."

She looks over at him.

"Is that what it sounds like?" Alex asks.

"Exactly," says Drevin. "Dreamblasters."

"I think driving while sleeping is illegal in this state," says Ol.

"I don't think they care."

The car lights up like there's a silent explosion behind them. Katrina swerves, almost hits a bus, but manages to cut off the Council Guards and put a car between them on the highway.

"Everyone all right?"

Ol's head falls against Alex's shoulder. "He's been hit!" Alex shakes his friend. "Ol! Hey Ol! Will he wake up?"

"Don't worry, my boy. He'll be fine after a short nap. We've just got to make sure they don't hit our driver."

"Is giving up an option?" Katrina asks. "How bad can they be if they work for the Council?"

"I'm an escapee," Drevin says. "And I'm not sure which side of the Council they work for. Some of Gorvian's supporters have clawed their way in."

"That's bad."

"It's worse if we don't escape."

It helps that Katrina's a terrible driver. She's weaving so much the other drivers tend to give her wide berth and slow down as she gets close. She cuts in front of cars and trucks and gets honked at and pounds the steering wheel again and again. Meanwhile, Ol's flopping across the back seat, banging into Alex, into the door, and back into Alex. Alex tries to grab his friend to prevent him from hurting himself, but that only means he gets tossed around, too.

He looks up and sees where they are. "Take this exit!" he yells.

Katrina cuts across three lanes of traffic. The car wobbles so hard it nearly flips into a culvert. On the highway, the Council guards slam on the brakes but get rear-ended and pushed past the exit. When Alex last sees them, they're trying to turn around against the stopped traffic with a flat tire and a crumpled trunk.

Alex directs Katrina to the port entrance. She pulls into a parking space and stops the car with a jerk.

"I think I'm finally getting the hang of driving!"

Alex opens his door and vomits onto the concrete.

“Hurry, we've got to get Oliver out of the car and onto the ship before the Council Guards find us,” says Drevin.

Ol seems to weigh twice as much when he's asleep. Alex takes a deep breath to settle his stomach and helps Drevin pull him out of the seat.

They half-carry and half-drag Ol up to the docks, where cranes are loading metal freight containers onto the ships. They pass by a gleaming new Panamanian freighter and start up the ramp of a dilapidated, rust-colored Slovakian freighter that looks like it might sink if it bumped into a large ice cube or a slow dolphin.

Halfway up the plank, a narrow-faced security guard comes out of the ship and puts his hand up. Drevin speaks to the man in a language Alex doesn't understand. The man keeps shaking his head sternly while Drevin's voice goes from pleading to anger. Finally, the man calls back to someone inside the ship. After a few minutes, more words are exchanged between those two, and then the security guard, gun wagging in his holster, leads them the rest of the way up the ramp and into the dark ship.

Ol is beginning to stir. He sort of moves his feet in a half-walk as long as they keep holding onto him and pushing him forward. They grunt and groan up several flights of narrow metal steps, down a hallway, and in through an open door to the bridge, where a jowly man with a red complexion jumps up and gives Drevin a hug like they've been best friends forever. They smack each other on the back so hard, it looks and sounds like they're both playing the bass drum.

“Ah, my old stowaway friend!” the man says. “Each time it is like we'll never cross paths again, and then here you are! And what's this—you brought family?”

His thick legs propel him over to the others, and one at a time he shakes hands and claps the shoulders of Alex, Ol, and Katrina. All three of them wince under the weight of his thick paws. Ol actually opens his eyes for a second, says “whew,” and dozes off again.

“Niece and nephews,” Drevin says proudly. “This one's still sleepy from the car ride.

“Such beautiful bunch of family,” he says. “Even with bruise on that one's head. You never told me nothing of family.”

Alex looks at Katrina. They both know not to say anything.

“Oh, well, I just picked them up from school for a little vacation. They're really looking forward to it, aren't you, kids?”

“You know it, Uncle Drevin!” Alex responds.

“Where you going? Disneyplace?”

“Actually,”—he hands the captain a slip of paper—“here are the coordinates.”

The captain takes a look. He frowns and shakes his head. “Middle of ocean! No island there!”

“It's not far from Bermuda. Just a rocky island place with an old house. My elderly aunt still lives there.”

The captain laughs and slaps Drevin on the shoulder, which makes him stumble in the other direction. Their affection for each other borders on a street fight. “Ah, Drevin, you joker! No island there! Not on charts, not on satellite! No island! Anyway, no kids allowed on Samo's ship, eh?”

“Samo, my friend. It's very important to us. These kids have had their hopes up for months. It's like Disney for them.”

Samo shakes his head again. “Sorry, *no kids*. Kids make problems. Get into troubles. Get everyone sick from kid germs. No kids.”

“They're no trouble at all, these kids. They're about as well-behaved as you'll ever see.”

Alex and Katrina straighten up and smile innocently. Alex lifts Ol's chin and tries to push up his cheeks.

“No. No kids! Filip!”

The guard steps into the room, and the captain speaks to him in Slovakian. The guard folds his arms and nods them toward the door.

Ol jerks loose from Alex and Katrina's grip and falls to the floor. A little white fluffball of a dog comes trotting out from under the control panel, its tiny legs like furry mechanical fingers, and heads right for Ol's face.

“Emo! Emo!”

The dog starts licking Ol's cheek like it's an ice cream sundae.

“Emo! You leetle...”

Ol, still half-asleep turns his head and licks the dog's snout before Samo can pick him up.

Samo finds that hilarious. “Ah ha ha ha ha! Leetle Emo finds new friend!” The dog starts whimpering and squirming. He has his eyes on Ol.

Ol half-opens his eyes.

“Emo is prince waking up Sleeping Beauty! What do you say, Sleeping Beauty?”

“Pom-pom,” Ol mumbles.

“Yes! Ees Pomeranian! Pomeranian is best. Emo is usual shy with strangers. Aren't you, you big leetle scaredy-cat.”

The captain gives him a hug. He blows Emo's puffy white fur out of his face, then holds him up to Alex's arm.

“See, boy? I tell you everyone love Emo. Don't I? Don't I? You never believe me because of bad self-esteem, but look. I love you, and this boy loves you, too.”

He sticks the dog's face up to Ol, and the dog gives him another lick.

Filip the security guard clears his throat and waves them out the door.

“Wait!” Captain Samo yells. Emo flinches and squirms. “Only kidding,” he says. “Friend of Emo's belongs on Samo's ship. Please, have seat. I take all of you. But this...” He crumples the slip of paper with the coordinates. “We go near here anyway, but I not drop you off in the middle of the ocean.” He laughs and punches Drevin in the shoulder. “You come with Samo to Funchal. Samo deliver fireworks there. Okay, no more talk of islands that not exist. We have good time and eat good food and play with poopydog.”

Everyone agrees to that. But Alex can see the look on Drevin's face. He's already planning something. He thanks Samo by grabbing his neck and squeezing until Samo's eyes bulge.

Ol lolls his head and smacks his lips. His eyes crank open. He blinks once and points at Emo. "Ahh! Tiny sheep!"
Then he falls back to sleep.

Chapter 25

"Tell me more about my grandfather," Alex says to Drevin. He's nervous about his mom, and what they're going to find on the island. The three of them—Katrina included—sit on deck at the stern, watching the sunset after a day of chores around the ship—sweeping, mopping, scrubbing, and painting. Captain Samo was happy to have them aboard, so long as they earned their keep. When chores were finished, they had a huge meal of crab claws, shrimp, and potato soufflé, with Baked Alaska for dessert.

Ol, once he finally shook off the grogginess from the sleep gun, wanted to go hang out on the bridge with the captain and his little dog.

"Mr. Phrixus was a great man," Drevin says. "When I first answered his ad for an assistant, I was still a boy. He asked me if I had any research skills. I didn't. He asked me if I had any family. I didn't. I'd just run away from a home that wasn't a home—a foster home where they kept me cleaning birdcages all day for their bird breeding business. Mr. Phrixus asked me if I could ply a trade. No. My only skills were catering to the cruel whims of my foster family—and getting knocked in the head for it. Then why are you applying for this job? he asked me. Because I'm interested in what you do, I told him. And it was true. The work of a dreamlord, with all its strange power and mystery, was about the most exciting work I could think of, and I wanted to be part of it. And he hired me. Just like that.

"I worked for the man for twenty-two and a quarter years. I never started a family. I made many friends in far-flung places and saw them on my travels. I understood very little of Mr. Phrixus's experiments. But I never regretted the companionship or the sense

of duty for a moment. Mr. Phrixus was kind and caring. He was good company who could converse on any topic. Unlike some dreamlords, he had an appreciation for the world as it is, rather than simply for the creations he could make from it. Maybe that's why he decided in the end to give up his talents and live with the rucklings."

Alex has a hard time connecting this man Phrixus with the Gramps he knew. Still, something about Gramps' ability to appreciate the world sounds true. Alex tells Drevin about Gramps' love of baseball. Gramps watched every game he could, on TV or at the local minor league stadium. He read biographies of players. He had ball caps from every team, even some that no longer exist. He could quote baseballs stats like a walking encyclopedia. "Statistics," Gramps told him once, "are the secret world that reveals the real one's beauty."

"Ah," Drevin says. "That sounds like Mr. Phrixus all right. I've no doubt he was a good father and grandfather. I just wish he hadn't left me wondering what happened."

"Do you think..." Katrina starts and hesitates. "Do you think he felt he had to?"

"Mr. Phrixus must have had his reasons," Drevin says. "I knew that. But I couldn't help feeling abandoned. I'd been abandoned as a baby, too, you know. It made me feel I'd done something wrong, or that Mr. Phrixus stopped trusting me."

"I doubt that," Alex says.

"The rumor I always heard was that he fell in love with a ruckling," Katrina says. "I guess that's your grandmother."

"My grandma died before I was born," Alex says. "If that's the story, then I believe it. Gramps talked about her like she was a goddess. And my mom cries every time someone mentions her. Gram was a schoolteacher, too. I wish I'd known her."

"She must have been an amazing woman for Phrixus to give up so much."

"Not to say your grandmother wasn't special," Katrina says, "but do you think he might have had another reason to abandon his research?"

“Like what?”

“Maybe he was getting too close to something dangerous. Maybe he was scaring himself.”

“Mr. Phrixus didn't scare,” Drevin says.

“Even if he discovered the secret of dream permanence?”

“No dreams are permanent,” scoffs Drevin. “Even Mr. Phrixus's experiments fade over time. Now that he's gone, it won't be long before even the illusions on his island fade, and then the wider world will find his laboratory and appreciate his genius.”

“Yes, but what if he discovered that dream permanence was *actually possible*, and that's why he had to make the disillusioner—so others could defend themselves from powerful rogues like Gorvian.”

It's easy to see how excited she is. She's holding her mug of warm apple juice in both hands and tapping her feet.

“Let's not get carried away,” Drevin says. “We can be glad Mr. Phrixus made the disillusioner for Alex here, but I think we may never know why.”

“Sorry,” Katrina says. “It's just fun to think about. Especially if Alex here is going to pick up where Phrixus left off.”

Alex almost chokes. The idea of it sounds ridiculous. A dreamlord? He's only just learning what they are.

“Speaking of which,” Drevin says, “we should see what the boy's capable of.”

“I'm no dreamlord,” Alex says. “I can barely pull off a card trick.”

“Only because you haven't had the proper training,” Drevin says. “Artists and musicians are born with talent, but their talent means nothing if it's not cultivated with training and practice. Same goes for dreamlords. They're artists of dreams, and they must train and practice like the others. Anyway, you worked the disillusioner to perfection.”

“Because I had to.”

“Exactly. You called up your powers because you had to. You probably don't even know how you did it.”

“That's for sure.”

"You've got the talent, Alex. You're not so different from your grandfather. Let's try something. I want you to close your eyes."

"Just don't get your hopes up." Alex shuts his eyes.

"Now think about what happened this morning. Try to remember how you felt when you held the disillusioner in your hands. Remember knowing how you had to make it work to save your friends."

Alex remembers the black holes popping open like dark bubbles, the death spots raining from the sky. It's all fresh in his mind. He feels the fear and anger again, the panicked efforts to find his mother—she's still missing!

"Do you feel it, Alex?"

Alex nods. He can't speak.

"Hold on to it. Now imagine you're growing larger and stronger. Meeting the challenge because you have to. If you believe in yourself, others will believe in you."

Alex feels shaky, like he's going to collapse, and then his thoughts focus on an image of himself—bigger, stronger, able to defeat Dr. Kosmic, or anyone else who tries to hurt his family or friends. He stops shaking. The fear and anger goes away.

He hears some chairs scraping against the deck and opens his eyes. "Not sure that did anything," he says.

Drevin's eyebrows are raised, and he's got a big grin on his face. Katrina curled into the corner of her chair with a shocked expression. They're both looking two feet over his head.

"What?"

"It worked, son! It worked!"

"What did?"

And then they lower their gazes and they're looking at his face again.

"Well, you lost your concentration, but you had it."

"Had what?"

"Oh my goodness. You looked like an ogre!" Katrina says.

"I guess that's what I was thinking about. I was angry, and I pictured myself a big, angry ogre I saw in a cartoon once."

"That's pretty much what you were. Frightening."

Alex bursts out laughing. "So it really works? I really am a dreamlord?"

"You're your grandfather's grandson," Drevin says. "No doubt about it. Did you never suspect? What kinds of dreams did you have as a child?"

"I wasn't a good sleeper. Sometimes I just lay in bed telling myself stories instead. If I nodded off, those stories turned into some pretty amazing dreams. Doesn't seem all that weird though."

"In Dream Theory, we studied the case of Wolfie Maartens—the abandoned dreamlord child raised by wolves," Katrina says. "They ran tests on him when they found him. Instead of creating illusions, he acted out stories, running around the laboratory and bringing down imaginary elk, drooling all over the floor. He never became much of a dreamlord, but at least they trained him not to drool."

"I'll settle for that if I can get my mom back," Alex says.

Just then, Captain Samo opens the bulkhead door behind them. "The sun is set!" he announces. "Time for poker, Dre-veen!"

"Where's Ol?"

"Someone has to steer the ship!" Samo laughs.

"I'll be right there!" Drevin says.

"I'd better help Ol steer," Alex says, getting up. "If there's a stray iceberg in the middle of the ocean, he'll find it."

Katrina gets up, too, but Drevin motions her to sit. "She'll be along," Drevin tells Alex.

Alex gives them a curious look before heading through the door. As soon as he closes it behind him, Drevin starts laughing.

"Well, this is awkward," Katrina says. "Is it a private joke?"

"I knew it all along," Drevin says. "I felt it back at the Council's house."

"What?!"

"You've got the talent."

"What talent? What are you talking about?"

"Alex couldn't have done that without you...do you understand? He's got his grandfather's talents, for certain. He'll be a great one,

but for now he's only barely able to tap those talents. He simply doesn't know what he can do."

"Yeah, but he just—"

"*You*, my girl, have been in school. It's just too bad you've been in the wrong one."

"What are you talking about? I love the Academy! I want to stay there and teach."

Drevin shakes his head. "It's not where you should be, my dear."

"What else would I do? My only other options are to go straight to work in the duller departments at Council Headquarters or go to school at the Conservatory, and the Conservatory only admits dreamlords."

"Exactly."

Katrina grips the sides of her chair. "You're kind of freaking me out now."

"Dear, I'm no dreamlord, but I have a good nose for them. I was around Mr. Phrixus and other dreamlords for many, many years. I know when a dreamlord walks into the room. I can feel it like an electric brush on my skin."

"You think *I'm* the one who made Alex into an ogre?"

"Not exactly. He drew from your energy. Probably more accurate to say you gave him the energy he needed."

"I didn't mean to!"

"Maybe you did. And another thing: you said your Agency phone broke, but somehow you were able to maintain the very impressive illusion that you were a teacher. I have news for you. You never needed your phone to make that illusion."

Katrina shakes her head. "No, no, no. I can't be. I don't even have any relatives that..."

"Not that you know of," Drevin says. "Remember, there are some dreamlords who stay hidden. They don't want the hassle. They don't want the responsibility. They don't want to study in the Conservatory and become a responsible member of the greater guild. So they hide their talents all their lives. They deny those talents. We call them The Hidden. It's a tragedy if you ask me."

"I've heard of them," Katrina says. "But how can this be?" I'm just—I want to be a teacher. I can't make dreams, and I definitely don't want to go into politics."

"I can't tell you what to do," Drevin says. "I can only tell you what you are, and I've no doubt about that."

"It's too much," she says. "I can't even think of a way to think about this."

Drevin laughs. "You have decisions to make, my girl. And *I* have a poker game to win." He stands and pats her shoulder. "You stay here a while. Stare out at the sea." He smiles. "Always helped me."

Drevin walks away and closes the bulkhead door behind him, leaving Katrina trembling and numb and staring out into the dark waves, her disbelief slowly dissolving into a sense of wonder.

Chapter 26

It's late afternoon the next day, and they're all on the bridge when Drevin gives the signal. He visited their cabins last night to tell them his plan. "Who wants to take Emo for a walk?" he says.

"I do!" come the shouts.

"Take poopie scoopie by the door there," Samo says. "No poopie allowed on decks. Not even on poop deck! Ah ha ha ha!"

It seems a little fishy to have four dog walkers, but none of the crew on the bridge says anything, and Alex, Ol, Katrina, and Drevin all file out behind Emo on his leash.

"We're very close to the island," Drevin whispers when they get outside on deck.

"I don't see anything," Ol says.

"See that fog? It's one of Mr. Phrixus's illusions."

"How does anyone ever find this place?" Alex asks.

"They don't," says Drevin. "Unless they already know where it is. Let me show you, my boy. Take out your disillusioner."

Alex pulls the prism-shaped object out of his pocket.

"Now look at the end of it."

Alex turns it. "The serial number or whatever that is?"

"Not a serial number. Coordinates. Your grandfather put the latitude and longitude on there for you. He wanted you to find his lab. I just sped the process!"

Alex is stunned. "All this time," he says.

Drevin smiles.

The ship is on course to skirt the edge of the fog, and Drevin tells them they'd better act fast. They head down two decks to a passageway that runs beside a couple of lifeboats.

"What are we going to do with Emo?" Ol asks.

"We'll have to tie him up. Someone will discover him soon."

Ol gives the dog a hug and hands him over, looking worried. As soon as Drevin ties his leash to the railing, Emo starts barking like he knows he's about to get left.

"Shh shh shh," Drevin pleads. Emo yaps louder.

"I have an idea," Katrina says. She unties Emo.

"We need to hurry!" Alex says. "My mom's in that fog!"

Katrina closes her eyes and concentrates. *I'm a dreamlord*, she thinks, even though she doesn't completely believe it yet. *I can do this*.

She starts trotting away from Emo, and then breaks into a run.

A four-legged run. With her tail wagging.

Emo chases off after her.

"What just happened? Where did Ms.—Katrina go?" Ol says.

Drevin smiles.

"Remember, she was the cat who attacked us in the field," Alex reminds him. "The one that tried to bite your ankle."

"A lot of people can make animal illusions," Drevin says, "but very few can convince other animals. The girl's got talent."

"We can't just leave her," Ol says.

Drevin pulls back the tarp on the boat. "She knows what she's doing."

The lifeboat isn't one of the newer, enclosed boats. It's an open boat with oars and a collapsible sail. The paint's mostly flaked off,

and the metal parts are rusted like they've developed a bad case of acne. Alex isn't convinced the thing will even float.

"Okay, everyone in!" Drevin says.

Just in time, Katrina comes running back around the corner, looking herself again.

Alex holds his hand out and gives her five.

"He almost bit my tail!" she says. "Now he's searching for me one deck up."

Drevin helps boost everyone in, one at a time: Katrina, Ol, then Alex. Drevin groans himself over the rail, and Ol and Alex grab his arms to help ease him down.

Back up on the ship, a hatch opens just down the passageway, and an angry-looking bald guy peeks his head out to see what's going on.

"Hey!"

Drevin has already scoped out the lifeboat and knows the controls. He flips a switch on the warped little control panel. Nothing happens at first.

"Hey!" The man shouts something else in Slovakian or another language as he jumps out onto the deck and starts running for them. He's a small, muscular guy in a tight shirt. Looks like he belongs in a circus.

On the deck above him, Emo realizes he's been tricked. He puts his little paws on the rail and yaps about it.

Drevin rocks the switch back and forth until at last the boat lurches and drops, picking up speed. "Hang on!"

The air rushes up and then BAM!—the boat hits the water so hard Alex thinks it must have cracked something.

The ship surges ahead with a hiss and already the man's yells and the Pomeranian's yaps are fading.

"Emo!" Ol calls.

"That little dog'll be just fine," Drevin says. "We'd better get paddling before they turn the ship around and try to rescue us."

Drevin fixes the oars to the oarlocks. Ol and Alex volunteer to start first, while Katrina helps Drevin put up the sail. The ship's

wake bounces them up and down before they fall into the gentle rhythm of the ocean swells.

"Just head for the fog, boys!" Drevin says.

"By the way, does anyone know how we're going to get back?" Ol asks.

"We'll worry about that later," says Drevin.

In no time, the sail is up and catching the wind, and Drevin takes the rudder. The others lean back and rest as the breeze carries them along. In a way it feels good to be out in the open sea. Then again, they're in a lifeboat with no land in sight and only Drevin's word that the fog hides an island. What if he's wrong?

The ship has moved way off to their port side. It seems to be slowing and turning.

"Come on, come on," Drevin whispers.

And then, more quickly than Alex expected, they sail into the fog. The sky grays out and visibility shrinks to almost nothing. The sail droops. They're bobbing on the gentle waves, moving nowhere. The world's turned gray.

"We'll have to paddle again."

"But which direction?"

"Alex, your disillusioner!"

Alex pulls it from his backpack and moves to the bow. "Almost forgot!" He holds it out over the water, gripping it tight, closing his eyes and concentrating until he feels the cool vibration in his hand.

"Whoa!" Ol says.

Alex opens his eyes to a gray, rocky island in the near distance. With its steep cliffs and flat top, it reminds him of Devil's Tower in Wyoming.

"There she is!" Drevin says. "Let's get paddling!"

Ol and Katrina take up the oars and row in the direction of the island. The closer they get, the higher the waves, and pretty soon they're struck by a storm. The wind whips into the boat and the rain needles their faces. Katrina and Ol struggle at the oar, while Drevin struggles with the rudder. Alex grips the disillusioner with both hands and keeps his eyes on the cone in front of him, where there's

no wind, no rain, and the seas are gray but calm. It's disorienting, like looking out from inside a TV, or being on a motion simulator ride that's out of synch. He can feel the rain on his cheeks, yet he knows it's an illusion set by Gramps, surviving somehow after his death.

The bow flies up and over the waves. Drevin nearly falls into the sea, and Ol has to snatch his arm and yank him back, meanwhile almost losing an oar to the sea.

"You call this an illusion?!" Ol yells.

Almost as soon as he says it, the storm quits and they're back on calm seas. Alex puts the disillusioner away when there's no difference between the cone it reveals and the rest of the world around it.

The current carries them to a rocky shore, where they beach the boat and pull it up to the edge of the cliff in case a real storm comes. There's a fine mist over the island that doesn't seem to be an illusion.

"Here's the path," Drevin says, pointing at a steep, narrow trail that switches back and forth up the cliff face. "Last time I nearly killed myself on it. I'm in better shape now!" He flexes his bicep. "Hold on to your disillusioner, Alex. We'll run into some powerful illusions up top."

The climbing is slow and difficult. The mist makes the path wet and the rocks slippery. Looking back out to sea, Alex sees the dense fog shrouding the island like a soft gray wall. The sky above is nearly the same color. He senses the sun as a slight burn when he turns his eyes up too long. One foot up and then the other. Climb and climb. Slip back a few inches on the wet rocks. Catch yourself or have someone else catch your slide. Keep going. Up and up through the mist, which feels to Alex like someone's ringing out a wet towel in his lungs.

At the top they pause to collect. They crouch. They catch their breaths.

"Things could get hairy," Drevin says. "Be prepared."

"If we know they're illusions, can't we just ignore them?" Ol asks.

"The illusions are more sophisticated than magic tricks," says Drevin. "Remember, they're made from the same stuff as dreams. They go beyond the surface. You feel them whether you want to or not. That's why even a dreamlord falls for them. If Mr. Phrixus himself were here, he'd be struggling just the same as us, and he's the one who *invented* them!"

"Then what's the difference between the illusion and the real thing?"

"Illusions can't kill you," Katrina says.

"At least there's that!" Ol says.

"But they can lead you to get careless and kill yourself," Drevin says. "And it's easier than you think."

"Great. Thanks for the pep talk."

A stone building rises up from the rocky plain at the top of the cliff. "That's Mr. Phrixus's lab," Drevin says. "It was my home for many years—at least when I wasn't traveling the world on errands for the maestro."

Alex tries to get his head around it. So this is the place where Gramps lived and worked for most of his life before he met Gram. Here on this rocky island in the middle of the Atlantic, huddled in a stone castle filled with books, studying the mysteries of illusions.

He feels a connection to the place even though he's never seen it before. A strange sense of belonging.

The moment they start toward the stone building, the weather changes again. The wind picks up. The rain stings their cheeks.

No, not rain. *Sand*. And it's blowing everywhere.

"I can't see!" yells Katrina.

"I can't breathe!" yells Ol.

"Push ahead! Push ahead! Alex, use the disillusioner!"

Alex raises Gramps' flashlight and tries to focus. It's harder this time with the sand hitting his cheeks and getting in his eyes. He has to cover his mouth to even breathe. The cone appears but it's not much help. He can only see ten yards ahead. It's cloudy after that. It looks like there's fog—real fog—on the island.

“This way, I think!” He leads them up the gentle rise toward the spot where he'd seen the stone castle before. Ol gets blown over, and Drevin and Katrina have to help him up. The sand collects in their ears and eyes and mouths. They're trying to spit it out and breathe at the same time. And Drevin's right, knowing that it's an illusion is no help.

A few steps further and the sand turns cold. In a blink, the sandstorm has become a blizzard, and the wind-whipped snow flicks at their faces and their exposed arms. They hunch over and move closer together. The air grows frigid. Their limbs stiffen, their steps slow. Any movement's a pain. It's hard even to turn their faces into the icy wind and see where they're going.

“We're going to die!” yells Ol.

“You can't! Not unless you get scared and run off the cliff!”

“That might be better!”

There's still no sign of the stone laboratory. He thinks they're going in the right direction. The snowdrifts build up and make it harder to walk. Their feet crunch in the snow, and their shoes sink into it, and then their ankles, and then, just before the snow comes up to their calves, the air warms and the snow melts. Slowly at first, then rapidly. It feels like somebody set a giant blow dryer to max heat.

In a blink, they find themselves on a stone bridge. The snow's gone, and now there's lava. Hot sulfurous fumes sweep the last of the cold air away, making it harder to breathe for a completely different reason. Alex feels his clothes dry out, his skin grow hot, his face covered in sweat.

Just an illusion, he thinks. Just an illusion.

His body doesn't believe him.

“Can't be much further!” Drevin yells.

Alex holds the disillusioner out while the four of them walk single-file across the hot stone bridge. His sneakers feel like they're going to melt onto his feet. The bridge narrows. Alex kicks a loose stone and watches it skip off into the lava, where it vanishes with a soft sizzle. The four of them hold hands and inch carefully to the other

side. Alex can't rely on the disillusioner because he needs his other hand for balance.

Once they get across, the lava vanishes, the air clears, and they're standing directly in front of a great stone building.

"Whew," Ol says. "That was like when I take a shower and my brother keeps flushing the toilet. Hot, cold, hot cold. Are we done with the illusions?"

"I'd guess so," Drevin says.

"My mom must be in there," Alex says. "Let's go!" He runs for the steps.

"Careful!" Drevin calls.

They all follow Alex to the tall, heavy wooden door. Alex pushes, and the door groans open. The room is lit only by the gray light filtering in through the tall windows. There's a long wooden table in the center with a pair of candelabras on it. A couple of chairs, including one comfortable-looking reading chair in the corner.

Alex thinks he recognizes the room from his vision in Dr. K's office. The walls are lined with bookshelves, the shelves overflowing with books. Some have fallen into the floor in piles like sand in a timer. The room is so tall the bookshelves fade into twilight and shadows at the top. A walkway gives access to the second floor of shelves, and another walkway to the third. He can't tell if there's another floor above that.

The air feels heavy with echoes. Was Gregor Halbestad just here? Was Alex's mother?

"Mom?!" Alex yells, and the room fills with the sound, ricocheting between bookshelves and up against the unseen ceiling.

"Anyone home?" Ol says.

Just echoes.

"There's a kitchen off the library, across the room," Drevin says.

"I hate to even ask this," Ol says. "Do you think you could have been mistaken about seeing your mom here?"

"This was the room!" Alex insists, angry at the suggestion. "I recognize the bookshelves and the stone floor! She was *here!*"

“Okay, my man, I believe you,” Ol says. “Anyway, we're here, and we almost died getting here, so we might as well look around.”

“We're not just going to just 'look around'! We're going to *find my mother!*”

“Right!”

“Come with me and stay close,” Drevin says.

They cross the cavernous room, their footsteps everywhere. They move around the heavy wooden table. Across several large rugs. Into a tiny hallway with a storage room on one side and a kitchen on the other.

“If they're here, we'll find them,” Drevin says.

Alex can't hide his frustration. “What if he's taken her away?”

“In what?”

“He got here somehow, right? Is there another room?”

“That's all, I'm afraid.”

“No bedrooms?” Alex asks.

“Dreamlords don't sleep much.”

“What about you?”

“I slept on a cot in a corner of the entry,” says Drevin.

“I don't get it!” says Alex.

“What if he's hiding right here behind some sort of illusion?” Ol asks. “Can they do that?”

Alex pulls out the disillusioner and focuses all of his attention on it, thinking about his mother and how much he misses her. He feels bad for ever calling her a zombie.

The others hold their breaths as Alex points the disillusioner at the wall of the kitchen.

“Did you do it?” asks Ol.

“I can feel the vibration. It's like my fingers are on the strings of a piano while someone's playing the keys.”

“It's not working. I don't see anything. Do you?” Ol asks Katrina.

She shakes her head. Drevin looks worried.

“It has to work!” says Alex.

And then the cone appears.

Katrina gasps.

The others can't speak.

The cone is pointing at the wall. But the wall's not there.

Alex's hand is trembling. He sweeps the cone of the disillusioner in a slow arc around him.

The counter's not there either. Nor are any of the other walls. Or the floor or ceiling.

In every direction, he sees only the barren, rocky plain of the island.

Drevin falls to his knees on the stone floor that's actually the island's rocky ground. "How can this be?!"

Chapter 27

Drevin flutters his hands on the floor as if trying to convince himself it's real. "No," he says. "No, no. This can't be!" He looks up at the others with pleading eyes.

"You mean there's no lab?!" Ol asks.

"Maybe...there never was one?" Katrina asks.

"I lived here," Drevin says. "I worked here. I spent years of my life here!" His eyes tear up, and he doesn't bother to wipe them.

"You said yourself Mr. Phrixus was the most powerful dreamlord of all time."

"Yes, but why would he do it?"

"Because it's easier than building a castle?" Ol says.

Drevin looks pale. "He would've told me that. We were close friends. I'm sure he told me everything except those dreamlord secrets that could get me in trouble with the Council or with Phrixus's enemies."

Alex is still staring into the cone, stunned by the open landscape in front of him. "Could this be one of Gregor's illusions?" he asks. "What if the lab is real and Gregor's making it *seem* like an illusion?"

"Agh! Stop frappé-ing my brain!" Ol says.

“Gregor’s not powerful enough,” says Drevin. “I have a hard time believing he can do anything without tapping into the illusions that Mr. Phrixus left. And even then, he couldn’t pull this off.”

Alex shakes off his sense of shock. “I don’t know if this is an illusion or not, but it’s definitely the place where I saw my mother. So where is she?! We came all this way! She’s got to be here!”

“It’s okay, Alex.” Drevin gets back to his feet, looking suddenly weary and older. “We’ll search. Let’s head back outside...or, uh, away from this...illusion.” He says the word like it’s the name of a lost friend.

The rain starts falling shortly after they step out the door. When Alex shines the disillusioner, he finds it’s real rain—not an illusion this time. No snow, sand, or lava either. Just a steady, gusting rainfall.

“Where do we even begin? There’s nothing here but rock.”

“We’ll just follow the path I always took on my walks.” Drevin says. There’s no conviction in his voice, and Alex begins to doubt they’ll find his mother here. They’ve made a long trip to an island in the Atlantic for nothing. He doesn’t even know how they’ll get back to the mainland. And meanwhile, his mother may be tied up somewhere else.

The center of the island is the flat plain where the castle illusion stands. From there the land slopes unevenly toward the cliffs, so there are some small hills to navigate, and no one wants to get too close to the edge. There’s not much to see. The few clumps of small, windswept trees don’t block the view. The bushes are scraggly.

The wind and rain push them along, and they have to step carefully. It’s easy to imagine your foot slipping on the wet, mossy rocks—then you’d slide and grasp at nothing until you plummet off the cliff.

They circle the island until they’re soaked, their clothes sagging on their limbs, their hair flattened to their heads.

“This island’s a whole lot of nothing,” Ol says.

“Let’s split up,” Drevin says.

“Oh boy,” says Ol. “Famous last words.”

"We need to cover more ground fast," Alex says. "My mom's in danger!"

They split up into pairs. Drevin and Katrina make loops toward the cliff, while Alex and Ol loop toward the interior.

"She has to be here!" Alex keeps saying. He sounds less and less convincing, even to himself.

"I agree, my-man."

They come across a rock formation that looks like something's gouged the surface. A mini-canyon. They couldn't see it earlier from the path.

"Come on," says Alex. "Let's look down in here."

"Pretty steep!" Ol shuts up when he sees the determined look on Alex's face.

They find a crude rocky stairway and climb down. The rain spatters off the rocks and drips down in hundreds of tiny waterfalls that gather into a stream at the bottom of the canyon. The stream travels fifty feet before spilling off the edge of the cliff and into the sea.

"This place would be awesome if we could take it back to Kiwi Heights," Ol says.

At the bottom of the small canyon, they straddle the little set of rapids heading for the cliff.

"It's a good hiding place," says Alex.

"Yeah, but there's nothing here and this stream's getting bigger. I'm not into cliff diving. At least not without my water wings."

The rain is heavier and the stream is growing. Ol backs up to the canyon wall. He's staring at the point where the stream disappears at the edge of the cliff. There's a sound like a long, low exhale or a growl.

"Did you hear that?"

Alex nods.

"That's the sound of *time to go!*" Ol jumps back over the stream and scrambles for the rocks. He trips and slides back into the growing stream that nudges him toward the cliff. "Um, Alex..." He

throws his hand out at the slippery rocks and can't hang on. He slips closer to the edge. "Alex!"

Alex lunges for him and falls into the water. He grabs for Ol's shirt.

Another growl, longer and lower. Something's moving in the rocks at the dark end of the canyon.

"I've got you!" says Alex.

"Yeah, but who's got *you*!"

Alex is holding himself against the current with one arm and both feet wedged into the rocks. His body makes a dam, and the cool water pools against his side. The stream lowers beneath Ol. With some *oof*-ing and *ow*-ing, he's able to get on his knees and groan himself up, kicking at rocks that tumble off the cliff. The ocean's too far below for them to hear a splash.

A bigger rock comes tumbling from the shadows.

"Watch out!"

Alex ducks his face into the water and Ol throws himself against the canyon wall as the rock bounds past.

"*Now* can we get out of here?!"

"That sound. I think someone's up there."

No sooner does he say it than some dark figure moves and another small boulder launches toward them. The dark figure comes closer, slowly at first, then gaining speed. Whatever it is, it's not human.

"Up!" Alex yells. "Climb!"

They scramble and slip up the rocky steps as the thing roars with a skull-rattling voice ten times its size.

"Go, go, go!"

At the top of the canyon ledge, they run back to the path. Katrina and Drevin are hurrying toward them.

"We heard you," Katrina says while Drevin catches his breath.

"What's down there?"

"Pretty much the scariest thing in the history of scary things!" Ol says. They're both shaking.

"A monster," Alex says. "It sounds silly, but I don't know how else to describe it!"

"Did you see those jaws?" Ol says. "Like a Great White!"

"But it had arms," says Alex. "Thick, hairy arms. Like something from a nightmare. And scales covered with dark, dripping slime."

Drevin sucks in a gasp.

"Another one of Phrixus's illusions?" Katrina asks.

"That's not the kind of illusion Mr. Phrixus would make. A chimera of sorts. There's only one man who would create such a horror. But it *can't* be him!"

"Who?!"

"I don't even want to say until I see for myself."

"Don't! What if it's *real*?"

"If we're going to find Alex's mother, we'll have to take that risk."

Alex and Ol lead them to the canyon's edge. They stand at the top of the rocky steps. It's still raining, and they're all thoroughly soaked.

No sign of the creature. No sound but the rain and the burbling of the stream as it heads for the cliff.

Drevin is shaking his head. "I don't remember it. In all my years of walks around the island, I don't remember this."

"An illusion?" says Katrina.

"Could be. But the monster they saw..." Drevin takes a step down the rocky stairs.

Ol reaches out. "I wouldn't do that!"

"Illusion or not, some things must be confronted," says Drevin.

Before he's halfway down, the rocks in the shadows move, and the beast roars. Rocks shake loose from the canyon walls, and Drevin nearly falls.

When the beast steps into the light, they can see it from above in all its nightmarish detail. A dog-like head with wide, toothy jaws. Matted hair on its thick arms. Gray eyes. It can't be real, but there it is, roaring like a dozen tortured lions and dripping a dark, reddish fluid from its scaly body like blood.

"Alex," says Drevin. "The disillusioner."

Alex pulls it from his pocket. It's wet like the rest of him, and he doesn't know if it'll work.

He holds it out and tries to focus all of his fear into a concentrated beam. He feels the vibration. The beam should be there.

"Is it working?"

"I don't know. I think so."

He's pointing it directly at the beast as it crawls among the rocks, its thick arms—or are they legs?—pounding the earth. When it turns to face them, they all move back up the steps. Alex keeps the disillusioner pointed at it.

"I don't understand," he says. "How could it not be an illusion?"

"I don't either," says Drevin. "Not completely. But I can tell you I've seen this beast before."

"Where?!"

It's inching up the canyon wall now, its breaths coming in low snorts as it shoves aside heavy rocks that go tumbling through the canyon and off the cliff.

"At the trial," says Drevin. "When Gorvian received his life sentence in the DEQ, he transformed himself into...this. Right in the courtroom. I'll never forget it."

"Are you saying that's Gorvian Halbestad!" Katrina says.

"Shhh! I think he's coming after our voices," says Ol.

"I don't know if it's Gorvian himself or an illusion he's projected," whispers Drevin.

"But the disillusioner—"

"I know, my boy. The disillusioner says it's real. But it can't be."

"It's the collapse of the remnant!" Katrina says.

"Shhh!"

She lowers her voice. "If a remnant that powerful collapses, the dreamscape ruptures. It's all theoretical because nothing like that has ever happened!"

"Shhh!"

She lowers her voice again. "Illusions and reality get confused. An illusion can become real."

"A real illusion?" Ol asks. He makes an exploding head noise.
"Does that also mean that some real things have turned into illusions? Like, am I real?"

"Shh!"

"It's possible!"

"What can we do?" Alex asks

"The beast is there for a reason," says Drevin.

"Notice how it doesn't go far from the end of the canyon? That dark area behind it? It's guarding my mom," says Alex. "It has to be!"

"We must be careful, Alex. We don't know what it's capable of."

"If it's real, can't it be affected by illusions?"

"It's possible."

"I'm going in!"

"Alex!"

He leaps over a rock and stands on a ledge above the climbing monster. He tries to focus his mind on the ogre image again. It's a lot harder with a set of shark jaws staring you in the face.

"Katrina, help him," Drevin whispers.

"I don't know how!"

"Try!"

She closes her eyes and tries to remember what she was thinking when they were on the ship.

The creature roars. And then another creature roars back.

"It's working!"

Ol shakes his head. "What the—!"

Alex roars again, trying to scare the chimera away. The thing pauses, roars back, and stretches its hairy arm for another handhold on the rocks.

Alex leans over, a rock gives way, and he slides down the canyon wall. The chimera takes a swipe and misses him, and Alex tumbles the last few yards to bottom of the canyon, beside the flowing water. He looks like himself again.

"Alex, are you okay?" Drevin shouts.

"I think so!"

The chimera makes a choice and turns toward Alex.

"Can you get up?"

"I think so!" Alex stands unsteadily at first. He's banged up and sore, but he thinks he can walk, maybe climb. He heads for the other side of the canyon, steps through the running water, and slips.

Katrina screams. "We have to do *something!*"

Ol sucks in a breath. "I'm coming, Alex! Distractor to the rescue!"

"Ol!"

Too late. Ol climbs over the rocks and heads down the canyon wall. He's already shouting at the chimera as he slides.

"Woohoo! Yo, monster! Woohoo!"

The creature turns. Ol reaches the floor of the canyon, shouts again, and starts his Distraction Dance, swinging his arms and gyrating his hips.

"What is he doing?" Drevin asks.

"It's so weird it might just work," says Katrina. "Believe me."

The creature pauses as if stunned. Only for a second.

Now it's coming for Ol.

Ol dances as he picks up rocks and throws them at the beast, his arms flapping wildly, knees like jelly. The more he gets into it, the less he pays attention to where he is.

Alex is halfway behind a boulder on the other side of the canyon.

"Ol! It's not working!" he shouts. "Go back up!"

"I've got his interest! Maybe he'll follow me!"

Ol slides along canyon wall and in the direction of the sea cliff.

"Katrina, can you do something?" Drevin says.

"I don't know! I don't know!"

Ol loses his footing and slides out of sight. Katrina screams. And then she screeches. Like a cat.

She bounds down the cliff face on all fours, cat ears tucked back on her head.

Ol's lying in the water, his leg wedged between rocks, the monster just ten feet away, its huge jaws gnashing, its bloody scales flowing into the stream and coloring it red. Ol kicks away and moves behind a boulder.

“Hold on, Ol! I'm coming!” Alex says.

The cat screeches behind the chimera.

Drevin steps over the rocks and moves slowly down the cliff face. “Alex, focus your anger! Focus your fear! Picture what you want to be!”

Alex pauses behind the chimera, closes his eyes. Focus, focus. He's got to be what he sees in his mind. He's got to believe in himself and project his powers of illusion. He tries not to tense up. He needs to stay loose and concentrate. He thinks of Gramps, the way he kept all his powers under control for years, never once giving himself away. The way Gramps gave up so much for love and never seemed to regret it, keeping only the disillusioner that he somehow knew—he *must have* known!—would wind up in Alex's hands. He thinks of his mom, still grieving over Gramps's death when she was kidnapped by the tall man.

She didn't give up, and neither would he.

Everything he feels—the sadness, the anger, the regret, the love—it all comes together into a single beam, sharply focused. And in the next instant he grows into a bright orange ogre as big as the chimera.

He roars. The canyon shakes. When the chimera turns, the cat bounds up and takes a swipe at the thing's hair leg. It spins and stumbles.

Alex roars again. The chimera slides in the water and tries to get its footing.

Ol's eyes are like cue balls. The thing's about to fall on him. He scrambles away.

Alex ignores his fear and comes after the beast. He roars. He gives it a shove. Its teeth gnash and blood spatters off the scales. It rights itself and comes up Alex again.

A boulder comes tumbling down the side of the cliff. “Look out!” yells Drevin. “I put my back into that one!”

As the chimera moves to get out of the way, Alex leaps to give it a final shove, and Katrina pounces on its calf. The boulder just misses Alex and splashes through the water toward the edge of the cliff.

The beast falls and slides after it, its jaws gnashing and its hairy arms flailing in awkward imitation of Ol's Distraction Dance.

It makes a final effort to grab at a dry rock. Its hairy hand grabs and slips, and the beast slides off the cliff.

The four of them—Drevin on the canyon ledge, Ol behind the boulder, and Katrina and Alex by the stream and suddenly themselves again—stare at the suddenly empty space, the gap in the rocks where the stream pours into the sky.

The only sounds are the falling rain and the trickling stream, the ocean waves crashing the rocky beach below. They never hear it hit bottom.

"We did it," says Katrina. "Are you all right?" she asks Alex.

"Fine. Ol, you all right?"

"Totally fine, my man."

"Drevin?"

"I'll recover."

"Thanks for the boulder, by the way!"

Ol steps up to the edge of the water. "We Wompled him!"

Alex's shirt is torn and his face is scratched. His leg hurts but he can stand on it. He ignores the others and heads toward the dark shadows at the head of the canyon.

"Where are you going?"

"To see what that thing was guarding!"

They follow him over the rocks and through the stream.

In the darkest corner of the canyon, there's a mossy patch under a rocky overhang. Alex scans the walls and ground. He searches until he steps on something that feels different. He bends down and pushes his hands against it. It's a square of wood with a small metal ring on it. A kind of hatch.

He motions to the others, then yanks up on the ring as they gather around him.

The hatch opens onto a black pit. He can't see anything.

"I never imagined," Drevin says, shaking his head. "It's as if there were another world on this island all along."

"I'm going down."

"You don't know what's there," says Ol. "Could be another one of those sharkfaces."

"I don't care." He sits on the edge and lowers his feet into the hole.

"Be careful, my boy!"

Still gripping the sides, he stretches his legs and toes and feels nothing. "I'm going to let go now."

He exchanges a worried look with the others.

"This might not be a good idea," says Katrina.

Alex relaxes his fingers. He drops.

He falls through the darkness, every muscle tense and ready for impact.

Now he's sliding. Somehow his fall was caught by a smooth surface like a playground slide. It twists and weaves through the rocky tunnel while gradually leveling out. He thinks of those days at the park with Gramps. The tunnel slide that never seemed to end.

At last he sees a light ahead.

