The Franknorth Adventures

Book One:

The Battle for the North

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Book I

The Den of Darkness

Colby

# Prologue

 If you don’t want to know the theme of this book, DO NOT READ. Spoiler alert. This book is all about my family’s adventures in the real world. Yes, goblins, grindylows, dragons and elves are also in the real world. They are hidden by an aura called the Mist, or glamor. It makes those who do not have the Mist lifted something different, such as a wasp when you’re really seeing a fairy, or a horse when it’s really a kelpie. Warning. Do not believe anything you are reading. You’ll see why if you keep reading. Another warning. Dragons DO NOT have the Mist. They are notorious shape shifters. I hope you like this diary of what I have written. It’s the truth…I mean its complete fiction. All the places I’m writing about are real, but do not go on your little fairy hunts or you’ll get eaten…I mean, lost. This prologue will be very brief, so that you can read about the rest in the real story. I’m actually glad I was blindfolded by the dark elves at Islay so that way YOU CAN’T GO SEARCHING FOR THEM! I told you there would be spoilers. I warned you! If you don’t like the ending but like the book, do not despair, there are many other books retelling all of my *fictional* adventures. If you don’t believe, you’re completely safe. If you do, well that’s another story…

# We Learn the Truth

Hello, reader. My name is Colby Andrew Franknorth. I had better tell you some background about my family before I get started. We live in Solihull, England. You probably don’t know where that is, so I’ll just say it’s near Birmingham, England. If you don’t know where that is, it’s a good distance away from London. We were born in North America, and lived there until I was five, then we moved over to England. I’m thirteen years old, don’t like sports, and love reading my dad’s books. My dad is, or was, amazing. Don’t get me wrong, he’s not dead. He went missing two months ago and hasn’t been seen since. We are devout Christians, and he kept telling me it was wrong to divorce, so I’m convinced he was *taken*. My mom partly agrees with me, but thinks he was taken by humans. Or so she says. I, on the other hand, believe that he was abducted by some mythical creature.

Dad was amazingly fascinated with goblins, trolls, dragons, and other beasts. He even wrote supposedly fictional books of how he interacted with a wood troll, captured a dragon chick, and tamed it. He never has told me whether they are true stories or not. I just believed they were fictitious. My Dad has dark brown hair and a shaved beard. His whiskers are quite scratchy, and he has a pair of glasses that he uses when inspecting something, or just reading. He usually wears a black overcoat, and he’s one of our church’s deacons. He also wrote guides full of amazing monsters. My favorite was probably the wood troll, which he said he beat by tricking him into eating his pet dragon, but it didn’t actually eat him, as the dragon hatchling tore him up, and he ran away never to be seen again. My older brother is fourteen and he loves dragons, and says he doesn’t like football but still plays it. His name is Toby, and he has glasses that make him *look* smart. He has brown hair, and ever since he turned fourteen, his hair became completely straight. He has dark brown hair, and is pretty annoying, and loud. There’s not much to say about him, except he loves my dad’s German sword, but, of course is not allowed to use it. My dad keeps it somewhere behind a shelf in the garage, and I was thrilled the day he asked me to polish that sword. I haven’t seen it since. It’s only ornamental, or so my dad tells me.

My mom’s name is Maurine, and she’s really nice. She has glasses, just like my brother and Dad. Oh, and my Dad’s name is Thomas. You might need to know it. My mom is slightly disturbed by all my dad’s books. She’s awesomely normal, so there’s not much to say about her, except that she’s a great mom.

Jonathan is the youngest in our family. He’s six years old and is already in Pre-Algebra! He actually thinks math is fun, and we have the same class in school. Here’s the story of how he got to Pre-algebra. He was homeschooled until this year, when my mom wanted him to make new friends in public school. He told his math teacher he was in Pre-Algebra, but when they saw him they sent him to first grade at a school separate from us. His teacher was real impressed with how many questions Jonathan got right, (all of them) so he moved him to second grade, our school. His second grade teacher is our neighbor, well, if you can call it neighbor. We live in the middle of the woods, and he lives in a house about a mile from us. His name is Mr. Nogard. I know, it’s weird. He’s a real foul man. Even though none of us except Joshua is in second grade, he still seems to teleport to us whenever we’re out of class. He would always say, “When’s your father coming back?” And then when we told him he’d say he forgot, even though now I’m starting to think he’s trying to see how much I can hold without bursting. He’s from Portugal and goes back every summer break. Then that teacher moved him to third grade, and so on until he came to Pre-Algebra, where the teacher, a woman named Mrs. Hartwieger, would not let him proceed any further. In every other subject he is a grade ahead, but nothing like in math. I guess it’s just because he listens real well.

Joshua is my final brother. If you were wondering, yes it was intentional for our mom to name us Toby and Colby and Joshua and Jonathan. Joshua’s real strong for his age, and already has pretty big muscles, but he’s not too bright. (Don’t tell him I said that or he’d tie my arms in knots!) He can lift sixty pound weights over his head, almost as easily as I can! (Alright, as easy! [Or more easily.]) He’s in second grade, and still doesn’t know how to count over ten. That’s pretty much all you need to know about our family, so now let me get to what I can remember about the important stuff that happened before our trouble started. I got out of bed and brushed my teeth, nothing unusual. I stepped into the hall and tripped over something large, ugly, and alive.

 No, don’t get your hopes up; I’d notice those rodent-like teeth anywhere. I landed on my ribs in the middle of the wooden hallway. An ear-piercing scream rung through my ears as I turned to the horrid creature. (If Joshua knew how to read I’d be apologizing.) Yes, the terrible monster was Joshua Franknorth. He was sitting right in front of the doorway, and he had been playing the card game bluff. With himself. His cards lay strewn on the floor, and he was crying like a baby. “Colby tried to kill me!” he chanted. My mom ran to the crash scene, holding a phone in her hand. She lowered the phone and asked, “What just happened?” while I could hear the voice on the telephone shouting, “Mrs. Franknorth! Mrs. Franknorth! Are you even still there?” It was the voice of Mr. Nogard. I knew there had to be trouble brewing. This was a normal morning for the Franknorths. I was still out of breath, writhing in pain, while Joshua was screaming and yelling. Jonathan ran in the room, his arm full of algebraic equations he had written on himself with a sharpie. “We don’t have any more scratch paper!” he said. Mom got back on the phone and told Mr. Nogard she’d call later. She hung up before he could yell at her. “Joshua, stop screaming,” she started. “Jonathan, stop writing on yourself, and Colby, what happened?” “I tripped over Joshua,” I announced. “Colby tried to kill me!” hollered Joshua. “Why don’t we all do our chores and eat breakfast,” Mom suggested.

I proceeded to the laundry room and took my clothes out of the dryer. I cuddled with the warm and toasty clothes as I walked over to my bedroom. Then I changed clothes and walked over to the kitchen. Our house is moderately sized. It is about two acres across. I proceeded with my chores, including, setting the table, making up my bed, putting dirty clothes in the washer machine, placing the dishes in the dishwasher, and etcetera. When I was done with my chores I entered the kitchen, where everybody else was waiting for me (except, of course, my Dad). “Colby, will you pray for us?” asked Mom. I was a little nervous, as usual, since most of the time my prayers involved a lot of fumbling and pausing. “Dear God,” I started, as everybody bowed their head. “Thank you for this beautiful day, and this food. Please help Dad find his way home, or if anything else happened, for us to find him. Amen.” I opened my eyes to find everybody picking up their silverware and beginning to eat. We all were having bacon and eggs, a casual meal. I was eating quite slowly, my mind drowning with thoughts about my dad. Had he left us? Was he dead? Did he need help? My thoughts subsided when my mom said, “Colby, eat quicker or you’ll be late for school.” I definitely did not want that to happen. Even though Mr. Nogard taught second grade, he would scold anybody from our family who did the slightest thing wrong. That erupted a new thought. “What was Mr. Nogard so mad about?” I asked. “Colby, how do you know he was mad?” “Because he was yelling,” I suggested. I heard my Mom mumble something like, “He’s always yelling.” She looked at the picture of my dad, hanging up near the door. “He was mad that your dad wasn’t back,” she explained. I caught a tint of sadness in her voice, so I decided not to go on. We continued to eat breakfast in silence.

I forked up the last bit of eggs and popped them into my mouth, then jumped up, picked up my dishes, and placed them in the dishwasher. My mom walked the whole family down to the bus stop at the end of our gravel road. We came just in time. The bus drove up and we climbed aboard. I sat in an empty seat. The bus was full of babbling students. I looked out the window and stared at the passing scenery. The trees grew less dense and houses were now more frequent. A couple more minutes passed, and then we arrived at the school. The bus was full of students pushing and shoving to get out of the smelly bus, but I had learned that if you don’t want to be trampled, then you remain seated until you’re the last one. However, one time when the bus started up with me still in it, and I had to yell and holler to let the driver know I was still in, because he wearing ear plugs and listening to some heavy metal song. When I exited the bus, I walked over to the door and pulled it open. Other kids were all walking around, talking all about football, Barbie dolls, and other stuff. Nelson, the school bully, came my way. I knew I was in for trouble as his eyes locked onto me like an eagle does to a hare. Yes, he’s scrawny, but so are tigers! He whistled and two more members of his gang blocked my exits. Yeah, like I had enough courage to run, then I’d have more pain to deal with. Better get it over with now. I cringed and did the smart thing, curled into a ball and screamed, “Teacher!!!” Nelson scowled like a goblin in one of my dad’s books and lunged. I wish I could do the cool thing and get up and judo throw each one of them, or knock their teeth out with one decisive punch in the face for each of them, but no. I stood there, readying myself for whatever they would do to me. Then, uncontrollably, by reflex action, I leaped out of the way as Nelson did a belly flop on the marble floor. He yelled and screamed like a toddler and yelled, “Kill him!” Then his gang members charged me. I rose to my feet and pushed through the crowd but in my way stood Mr. Nogard. He stared straight at me, and I fell back on my bum to the ground.

“What seems to be the problem, Colby?” Mr. Nogard asked with his chilling voice that turns your blood to ice. I turned around to point at the gang, but there they were, talking to each other like nothing ever happened. “Nothing,” I lied. Mr. Nogard was the only person I had ever lied to before. “You’re lying,” he assumed, but I had an idea it was more than an assumption. It was like he knew. But how could he? That was plain impossible. The school bell rang and that was the most relieving part of the day. I skipped to my class, where my teacher, Mrs. Hartwieger, tapped her pencil on her desk in the far corner of the room. When all the class mates were in, she stood up and pressed some buttons on her computer. A projector screen lowered from the ceiling and displayed algebraic equations. She spoke all about equations, and other complicated stuff. “Jonathan, you give me the answer to this equation,” Mrs. Hartwieger commanded. The class’s eyes shifted to Jonathan, who was wearing his thoughtful face. He replied promptly, and the teacher checked her grading sheet, then sighed in disappointment when she found out he got it right. “Good job, Jonathan,” She moaned. I stared across the dark room to Jonathan looking sadly at a photo of our dad that he had stashed away in his school binder. “Jonathan, look up here when I’m speaking, you can look at that later.” Jonathan slipped the picture into his folder and looked back up to the teacher.

I did not have a good time at school that day. Of course, it was a Monday, and I never enjoy Mondays. I was planning of my words to say to Mom when I did my daily plea for us to start homeschool up again. I’d been in this school for six years and hadn’t made one friend who actually stayed my friend. Sure, I was a little dreamy and dramatic at times, but so was Winston Churchill! When I got home I walked inside and was greeted by my mom. She had a worried look on her face. “Hey, you lot, let’s go up to the attic!” She said rapidly. “But why?” asked Joshua. “Come on, quickly!” she ordered. We followed her up a spiral of stairs to the attic. What could be so important, or dangerous that we had to go up to the attic for? Our attic, like most attics I suppose, is very dusty and cluttered. It is a little bit more comfortable, probably, because we have a little ring of chairs that we discuss stuff. Well, neither I nor my brothers had ever done any discussions up here, but my dad and mom had said that they had had many highly important meetings there. I stepped into the attic, behind my mom, who held a flashlight. She clicked a button and a beam of light shone through the room. I brushed a cobweb away from my face. As I approached the chair I heard a box fall over. I looked over at where I thought I heard it and thought I saw a gray and pale green shape dash away, but when I scanned the perimeter all I saw was my family, waiting for me to continue. “What was that?” I asked Mom. “Probably a rat or something,” she replied. I could tell she was lying, because if she really thought it was a rat then she’d be screaming and hollering. There was something else in here, and it was much bigger than a rat.

I sat down in the circle of chairs. There were about eight chairs in all, so we had three chairs left over. “Mom, will you tell us what’s happening?” asked Toby. “This may be a great shock to all of you, and you probably won’t believe me.” Jonathan pulled out his homework but then Mom said, “No Jonathan. You need to listen to everything I say.” Jonathan slipped his papers into his backpack without any hesitance. I slipped my backpack off and left it at the foot of my chair, after the others had done so as well. “Boys, I knew I had to tell you one day or another, but I didn’t want it to be so early.” “Let me guess!” Joshua interrupted. “We all have super powers! I have super-strength, Jonathan has super smartness, Toby has super-agility, and…and…Colby has super-trying to kill peopleness!” I opened my mouth to argue, but Mom began again. “No, it’s not that, although everybody does have something special. It’s much more wonderful, and terrible than that. Your dad’s books, they’re real.” “I knew it!” I stood up and did a little jig. “You’re kidding,” Toby said. “No, Toby,” Mom responded. “When your dad was a little boy, he was attacked by a full grown dragon.” “How old was he?” asked Toby, getting more interested. “A little bit older than you are,” Mom answered. “L-l-little boy!” he sputtered. “The only way he escaped, was he gave him a diamond ring that his mom had given when she knew that she would die from dragon poison. She gave it to him so that your dad could give the dragon in case he got attacked.” A little information is in order. My dad’s father died about three years before his mom did. He died by a heart attack. I’ve felt sad for my dad ever since, but he said his mom was killed by snake poison. That was partly true.

“In the year 1988,” Mom continued. “He found the dragon’s lair. He scaled a cliff up to the nest, where the female dragon lay sleeping. He then stole an egg, and climbed back down. At home, he kept the egg in a blazing furnace to incubate it. Normal campfire is not hot enough to keep the chick alive. When the chick emerged, your dad had to feed it plenty to keep it growing, or else it would take centuries for him to be mountable. When your dad and I were dating, he found a Wood troll in the forest.” “We’ve all heard this,” I interrupted. I didn’t mean to sound rude, but I had also heard the dragon story before. “So you’re telling us every monster, every creature is real?” asked Toby. “No, not all,” Mom corrected. “In fact many were superstitions, or just fictional. Orcs, gnolls, bogeymen.” Joshua breathed a sigh of relief. “But there are redcaps, trolls, hobgoblins, goblins, griffons, chimeras, giants, behemoths, leviathan, and dragons,” My mom said, like it was supposed to make us feel better. “Is that why we have so much food?” asked Jonathan. “To feed a dragon?” “Yes,” Mom retorted. Rain started to patter on the roof. “The fae folk are growing less shy and more dangerous. I think it’s only towards us, but I’m not sure. Your dad was kidnapped by something. From what your Dad’s dragon told me, dark elves. He made a map of where the creatures mostly tend to hide out.” She stood up and walked over to a box. She pulled out a folded piece of paper, and outspread it on a little wooden table in the center of the ring of chairs. It showed all of Solihull city. My dad had added some stuff with a permanent marker. He put a star on the spot where we were, and nearby he had circled an area of woods and labeled it, “Bauchan”. “What are they?” asked Jonathan. “Here are your dad’s notes about them,” Mom replied. She turned over the sheet of paper and started reading. “*‘By this house is a pack of bauchans. I discovered them on August the fourteenth, 2002. When I ran into them, they started arguing with each other of what to do with me. Some of them wanted to kidnap me, or bite my nose off, while others wanted to let me go, or even do some work for me. They are tannish brown with sandy pale hair sprouting from some spots, but otherwise hairless. Some did have shaggy beards or long, wild hair. They had long arms and whiskers, and long toes. They were half the size of a full grown human and still had longer toes then we do. In the end, they decided to let me go, and they gave me some important information!’*” “What was the information?” asked Toby. Joshua was still wide-eyed and shivering. “Your dad didn’t write it down in case it fell into the wrong hands, but he told me,” she paused. “So…” I said, unintentionally curt. “I don’t think you’re ready yet,” Mom said. “Maybe later.” “Wait-” I started. “If we still have lots of food, then that dragon chick must still be here.” “Of course,” A metallic, yet a little bit childish voice hissed.

A long serpentine neck reached through the darkness. I heard a thump of a tail beating in a steady, rhythmic procession. I looked at the top of the scaly neck, about three feet long. On the end of the neck was a horny, reptilian head. It had a hooked beak like a turtle and yellow eyes with black pupils that looked sort of like a goat’s eyes. A lengthy, black, forked tongue slipped through an opening at the bottom of his upper jaw, like that of a snake. The beast stepped out from the darkness, showing long, eagle-like talons on the end of a muscled leg and a coat of gray plates on its belly. The dragon took a few more steps and revealed a ten foot wingspan, with a five inch claw atop one of the joints. Mom pointed the flashlight at the serpent and I could see all of him, a twelve foot long dragon with a barbed tail and gray and green scales. I noticed a pinkish scar below his shoulder on his belly scales. “Truly, Maurine, I am disappointed. A rat?” It hummed. Something about its voice terrified me. I almost fainted then and there. It spread its wings. “I am Windsplitter, son of the notorious Dirthrundil, slayer of civilians and scorcher of towns. Now for my titles: drinker of milk, and scorcher of rats!” Even though that was supposed to be a joke, I found it more terrifying than funny.

“They must not have seen a dragon before,” Windsplitter realized. “You see, children, dragons have this aura that makes humans and other creatures fear them. It will wear off in a while, but when you meet a full grown dragon, then, well, you’re in for a shock.” “H-how old are you?” asked Toby, getting enough courage to speak. “About thirty six,” Windsplitter answered. “Then you still have a lot of growing to do.” “Yep, when I’m full grown I’ll be about seventy feet long,” Windsplitter sighed. “Mom,” Jonathan said. “You were real anxious to go up in the attic, why?” Mom stood up and patted Windsplitter’s head. “It’s about time to go searching for your dad,” she said.

I still had a lot of questions to ask of Windsplitter. “Did dad lock you up in here?” I asked. “No!” spluttered Windsplitter. “I could bust out of here as easy as you can tear a sheet of paper. Your father made a secret passage out of the house, so I could get in and out without anyone noticing. I like it up here. When your dad was captured, I was having a daily stroll through the woods.” “Okay, that’s weird,” Joshua remarked. “Well, you were at the beach. If I had no scales, then I would not want so much sand on me.” He shook himself as if he were shaking off sand. “Is God still real?” asked Joshua. “Of course!” Mom cried. “No matter what happens, God is still God. Every one of the fae believes that there is a supernatural being guiding them, but not all the Fae believes in the true God.” “Oh,” Joshua said. “When are we going?” “The day after tomorrow,” answered Mom. “I wish I could train you and watch you grow more before this happened. If I lose any of you, remember, I will never forget you.” I had no trouble believing that there were monsters if mom said it, because I could not imagine her lying to me. Of course, she did tell us that there’s no such thing as monsters. But that was to keep us safe! “Mom,” I started. “Why can’t we go tomorrow, or today?” “We have a lot of packing to do,” Mom explained. “I hate to do this, but we all need weapons.”

I knew exactly what weapon I’d get, but before I could say anything, “I call sword!” Toby exclaimed. I lowered my shoulders. What would I use? I suddenly remembered my dad’s bow and arrows. These weren’t the little blunt arrows you use for target practice; these were deadly sharp hunting arrows. “I call spear!” Joshua exclaimed. He had made a stone spear when he was six, and used it to kill bugs and stuff. I suddenly felt deeply depressed, and not excited. What if we all got captured or killed? What would that little stone spear do against a troll? “I get bow and arrows,” I sighed. Jonathan stayed content with a bread knife. I know, threatening. My mom said she would use a quarterstaff, a long stick used for cracking heads. I didn’t even know we had one, but I had no doubt she would be great at fighting with it. “Are you coming?” I asked Windsplitter. “No, I am too young,” He explained. “I can’t fly, or breathe fire.” “Neither can I,” I sighed. “But I also have to guard the house, of course,” He replied. “Suit yourself.” We walked downstairs into the living room. “Tomorrow we need plenty of practice with our new weapons,” Mom explained. I stepped out onto the porch, and stared at the sun setting behind the tall trees. I knew I would never look at the world the same ever again.

# At the Bauchan Camp

When I went to bed, I have to admit, I did a thorough check under my bed and in the closet for any monsters. There were none that I could find. Toby and I sleep in the same room and so do Jonathan and Joshua. I also need to admit, I plugged in a nightlight. It took me hours to go to sleep. When I did get to sleep, I had horrible dreams. I was outside, in the woods, and then I saw a huge, fire-breathing dragon swoop down. I ran through the woods, and I knew he was toying with me, because he kept chasing, but never breathed fire or flew out at me, plus, I knew he should be much faster. The trees all around me collapsed, making it harder to run from the dragon, since now he didn’t have to squeeze past any trees. I turned around, and instantly regretted it. A stream of fire blew my way, and burned my skin and bones to ash. I woke up right after the dream. It was about three o’clock, and it felt like that dragon really had burned me. I was sweating like crazy, and breathing heavily, like I was hyperventilating. I stood up and stretched. I peered under my bed and checked my closet again. I was starting to wish everything had just been normal. Why couldn’t it happen when I was like, twenty or something? I bet my father thought the same thing when he was being chased by that dragon. He had lived out my dream in real life.

 When day came at last, I was tired and a little bit bonkers from lack of sleep. I hadn’t slept one second after that nightmare. I combed my unruly hair, brushed my teeth, and changed clothes. It was about five-thirty, and wanted to surprise the family that I was actually the first one up. If you were wondering, I did not think yesterday was a dream, because I asked myself, if yesterday was a dream, then what did we do after school? Mom almost ran into me when she passed through. “Oh, sorry Mom,” I apologized. She was up already? “I was just coming to wake you and Toby up. Joshua and Jonathan are already eating,” I walked over to the kitchen table and fixed some cereal. I scooped up some flakes and crunched them down. Toby stepped inside, looking well-rested. Because of his sleepiness, Joshua almost fell headfirst into his cereal bowl. Jonathan was talking to Mom about school. “Can we go to school today?” he asked. “No, Jonathan. We need to pack today. But first we need to see our skills.” I had never imagined Mom to be so warlike. The most warlike I had ever seen her before yesterday, was her squashing a cockroach. I guessed she had known danger all her life. “Now, before you go, I need to lift the glamour.” “What…” I started, but before I could speak she filled a shot glass of this brownish orange substance from a pitcher full of what she called, “essential oils”. “What is that?” I asked. “I have to drink it?” “No, apply it to your eyes, all of you.” “What?” I sputtered. “You’ve got to be joking.” “It’s the only way to see the faeries and have the Mist lifted!” “What is the Mist?” It won’t concern you if you don’t apply it!” “Fine,” I growled. I took the glass and felt like closing my eyes. Just as I lowered it my reaction was to blink, but a drop got into my right eye. When I drew back, my eye was fuzzy. “It hurts,” I moaned, tempted to rub it. “Next eye,” Mom ordered. “Fine, I might as well be blind with both eyes, then,” I grumbled. I tipped the glass and everything went fuzzy when I opened my eyes. “What was that?” I asked. “It lifts the Mist, otherwise called the sight. It’s made of Hawthorn berries, amaranth bloom and St. John’s wort petal, all ground up for the sight to do the rest. Toby, your turn.” Eventually my sight got better, and soon I could see even a little farther than normal. The rest did the same, with no fair share of crying. “What’s your true story?” I asked mom. She paused, and then began.

“Well, it started when I was about twenty-seven,” Mom started on her tale. “I heard these weird roaring sounds, and followed them into a construction site, where your dad was fending off a chimera with a crowbar.” Joshua suddenly didn’t look too sleepy. “Chimera?” he whimpered. “Yes Joshua, they also exist. It was a full moon, and I had no idea of what to do. Suddenly the chimera turned its attention to me. I ran and screamed, but it was too fast. It dove at me in a few seconds. I thought I was as good as dead, but then, your Dad hit it on the head with his crowbar, and saved my life.” “What happened to the chimera?” asked Joshua. “We carried it deep into the woods,” Mom replied. “If that chimera had bitten me, I’d be dead; they have lethal poison.” “I’m glad you’re not dead,” whined Joshua. If you were wondering, a chimera is just a beast with three heads, dagger-like teeth and razor-sharp claws. Nothing to be afraid of. After breakfast, we read our Bibles. I read about creation, and then Leviathan and Behemoth. It seemed appropriate at the time. When everybody was done reading, we stepped outside into the yard. I looked over our barbed wire fence. Were there really bauchans over there? “Get your weapons,” Mom explained. I walked into a little shack that we have. I heard mysterious giggling, and then I heard something small moving around. Then I got really scared. I searched the small shack for my bow and arrows. I climbed up a ladder into a loft, and came face to face with a little person, about five inches tall. If that wasn’t weird enough, she revealed two wings, kind of like a hummingbird. “I am Beetlesprit!” she said, like I had asked her. She flapped her wings incredibly fast, which confirmed my thoughts of a hummingbird. I spotted my bow right behind her, and I got impatient. I reached for it, but she pricked me with a one-inch rapier[[1]](#footnote-1) she had unsheathed so quickly I couldn’t even see her do it. I pulled out my bow and arrows anyway. “I’ll shoot you next!” I warned, and then climbed down.

A little drop of blood formed above a petite welt where the miniscule fairy had pierced me. I walked over to where my family stood. “There’s a pixie or something in there!” I complained. “Yes, she protects the house from thieves,” Mom explained. “Well then I guess I’m a thief,” I growled. “I thought they were mischievous, not guardians,” Toby said. “She was pretty mischievous,” I reminded. “We promised her nectar and fruit every night,” Mom explained. “But sometimes I think she gets caught off guard,” I sighed, and then she took us into the woods. Not too far, we could still see our house. We entered a clearing where there was a lone tree in the middle. We stood about ten meters away from the tree. A log hung off a chain, and I wondered if that was our practice dummy. “Toby, you go first,” Mom explained. Toby drew his sword and charged the stump like it was some lethal enemy. He slashed it over and over again in the same spot. Mom called over to him, “Toby, if the enemy has a sword, and you slash it in the same spot, then he will easily predict your moves!” Toby followed her advice and sliced it in all different places. I’d feel sad for that stub. “Colby, your turn,” Mom said. I waited for Toby to get behind me before notching an arrow. I pulled back on the bowstring, and glanced off the side of it. I loaded another arrow and missed. “Aim a little bit above the target, because gravity will take its toll,” Mom explained. I pulled back again, aimed right above the stump, and fired. It struck right where the head would be. “Good job,” Mom applauded. “Joshua, you’re up.” Joshua threw his spear from where he stood, and it only sailed about sixteen feet. “Spears can’t be thrown for extra-long distances,” Mom clarified. “Get closer.” Joshua retrieved his spear and threw again from where it had landed. The spear struck the heart of the stump, but then ricocheted off the stump. Joshua charged, grabbed his spear, and stabbed the spear into the stump. It barely stayed put. “I want a different weapon,” he said. I breathed a sigh of relief. “I want the rifle.” “No!” Mom instantly responded. “How about a club?” she asked more nicely. “Yeah!” exclaimed Joshua. “Let’s get you one after Jonathan tries.”

 I had high hopes for Jonathan. He was my favorite brother, since he rarely got into any arguments. “What will we say to our teachers when we get back?” I asked. “I told them we were on vacation,” Mom explained. I was much calmer now, knowing I’d have an excuse for Mr. Nogard. Jonathan took his knife out from his pocket and charged. When he reached the dummy, he slashed his breadknife right down its middle. I tried not to imagine how much gore there would be if it was a living creature. “Good job, Jonathan,” Mom commended. “But everybody remember, in a real fight, it will not be practice, it will be life or death. Now Joshua, let’s find you a club. The rest of you start packing.”

So far I had been beaten up by a human, and a pixie, and I predicted there would be a lot more. We tailed Mom to the house without saying another word. When I was inside, Toby came up to me. “Here,” he handed me a sheet of paper. “Mom printed out a list of things to pack last night.” I checked the clock. It was seven o’clock, still early morning. I scanned the list. It read:

*At least 10 bottles of water*

*Snacks: protein bar, chips, fruits, vegetables, cheese, sandwich*

*First aid kit, we will almost certainly have some injuries*

*Flashlight*

*Compass*

*Remind me to bring your Dad’s map!*

*Whistle*

*Bible*

*Pocket knife*

*Weapon*

*Extra ammo for weapon if it needs any*

*Shovel (for cat holes)*

I kind of wished mom had left out that part.

*Toilet paper*

*Watch*

*Match or fire lighter*

*Board game*

*Radio*

*Walking stick*

*Rocks (Good for throwing at monsters)*

*Slingshot (Optional)*

*Dad’s records (you may need it)*

*Money (chances are we’ll run into civilization)*

*Tent*

*Goggles (optional)*

*Flippers (optional)*

*Phone (in case we get separated)*

*Card game*

*Extra shoes (not crocs, Colby!)*

*Iron (burns fae)*

*Silverware*

*Cookware*

*Jet boil*

*Energy drink*

*Extra clothes*

*Rope*

*Life jacket*

*Paddle*

*Butterfly net*

*Crab net*

*Fishing net*

*Inflatable life raft (We only need one)*

I was pondering how to pack all this stuff. Paddles? Walking sticks? Fishing net? Butterfly net? Crab net? Ten bottles of water? Joshua came into my room and asked, “How does mom think we can pack all this stuff?” “I don’t know,” I admitted. Jonathan came in, hauling his pack full of gear. “Don’t worry, I have the life raft!” he explained. “All that stuff is actually quite necessary. We need the water, or we’ll get dehydrated. We might run into a river or creek, or something, and we need the nets, in case any fairies come!” “Or if we have to catch our own fish,” I murmured. “Yuck.” “I even brought batteries!” Jonathan boasted. “Where’s Windsplitter?” asked Joshua. “Out in the woods,” Mom answered, walking into my bedroom. “Guarding the house,” “So that’s what he was doing when Dad got captured!” Toby exclaimed. “No, that doesn’t make any sense, since Dad got captured anyway.” “Dragons will always say things in either the clearest or most complex way,” Mom explained, “They will never say anything unclear, unless they want to keep a secret.”

“Tell us more,” I pleaded. I knew it kind of sounded childish, but I really wanted to know all about dragons, since I had overcome my fear of them. (At least, the fear of dragon hatchlings.) “Dragons are wise with their old age,” Mom elucidated. “Dragons have been known to live more than millennia, and it is very rare for a dragon to die by battle, as well. Most species are immune to poison, and all dragons have weaker underbellies, but it is still as thick as a rhino’s skin. That is why they lay on treasure, to coat their bellies with armor. Windsplitter and Dirthrundil’s species is Lesser Fire Dragon of Britannia.” “What’s the biggest dragon?” asked Jonathan. That was the least intelligent thing I’d heard him say all year, and still, it wasn’t stupid, it’s just, I’d expect him to say, “What is the largest of the species Draco,” or something like that. “That would be the Indian mountain dragon; they have been known to reach one-hundred fifty feet.” Gasps echoed through the room. “Colby, Toby, how much have you packed?” “My tooth brush,” I answered. “My toothpaste,” Toby mumbled. “You don’t need those; there won’t be any running water.” “I could use my-” I started, but then I realized that Mom was actually allowing me to go without my toothbrush! That was a first. “If you get any cavities we can go to the dentist when…if we get back.” I felt a shiver run down my spine. How comforting. “I packed a lot of my stuff!” Joshua bragged. “I’m on number four on the packing list!” “I’ve already packed all my stuff,” Jonathan murmured. “Good job Jonathan!” Mom cheered. “Now pack, Toby and Colby, I have an idea of where your dad might be.” As I packed my supplies, I looked out the window and saw Windsplitter chasing away some crows. It was awesome; we had a dragon guarding the house. Even though he was a chick, I bet if Nelson saw him, he’d be running home really quickly.

 When I was done packing (somehow I did fit everything Mom suggested in, including my waterproof camera.) Mom called us back up into the attic, where it was least likely anybody would hear us. When I got up there, Windsplitter lay on a fifteen footer heating rock, below about ten heat lamps. I had always wondered what it was for. Dad had said he once had a bearded dragon, but I knew they didn’t grow above thirty inches. Windsplitter yawned, and then rested his head on the nice, hot stone. We all sat in the ring of chairs, while mom started to speak. “Kids, listen up,” Mom started, “We need to ask the Bauchans for help. They may be the only ones who know about what happened completely to your dad.” She stood up. “And if we want to start searching tomorrow, then we need to go to the bauchans today.” “When?” asked Toby. “Now,” Mom replied. “But we haven’t had lunch!” Joshua protested. “Bring something for the way there. It’s only a mile long trip. Everybody, let’s pray before we get going.” We bowed our heads and closed our eyes. “God, I know that all this is planned out by You. Please protect us from these hobgoblins, and let us learn where Thomas is, for You know where he is, and You have it decided whether we go there and come back with him, or go there and don’t come back, or go there and come back without him, but Lord, You are the maker of day and night, the stars and sea, and You made our lives so special, by placing the sun in just the right spot. Lord, You know of what a shock it is to my children, how Your creation is so brilliant, but also so dangerous at times. And even before we knew of these creatures’ existence, we still knew how marvelous Your works are.”

 Toby, Joshua, Jonathan, Mom and I walked past a break in our barbed wire fence. I had my bow strapped to my back with a sash. My arrows were in a quiver, also strapped to my sash. Mom was clearing the way with a machete. I had no idea we had one. Toby was holding his sword with the blade facing upwards and it lined up with the middle of his face, which would have been cool if the flat of the blade didn’t keep knocking his head. Joshua had a police baton, which he and Mom had probably found hidden in the attic. Jonathan had his knife in a sheath tucked away in his belt. We followed a deer trail that was hard to see because of all the fallen leaves. After about ten minutes, we heard a squeal. A wild boar was galloping towards us, shaking its tusks, warning us that it was going to gore us to death then and there.

 “Split up!” Mom called. The boar was squealing like crazy now, and it was only a couple meters away. Mom, Toby and Joshua ran left, and Jonathan and I ran left. The boar tried to brake, but struck a tree head first so hard that the tree shook. (Even though it was only a birch.) As the hog stared at us dizzily, I noticed an arrow sticking in his hip. I knew what I had to do if I didn’t want to see an animal die today. I slowly walked towards it. “Colby, no!” Mom shouted. “The Bible says that Adam was supposed to take care of the animals, and that’s what I’m going to do. He’s dizzy right now; he might leave us alone if I take it out.” I approached the pig and then pulled out the arrow. It squealed and tried to gore me as I fell on the leafy floor and slowly crab-walked away. The boar looked up the hill from where it came, and three squat men started to aim arrows. “Sorry,” I sighed. The boar galloped away down into a forested valley. “What are you waiting for? Fire arrows!” shouted the dwarf in the middle. “There are humans down there,” said the dwarf on the left. “Urgh! Why must humans always interfere with our hunt?” “Should I release the wolves on the hog?” asked the one on the right. “No, he’s gotten too far; he’s probably near the human homes already.” Mom took the arrow from my hands and studied it. It had jagged spines facing inwards, which meant the arrow that shot the boar was more painful coming out of it. The middle dwarf whistled and I heard a few wolf howls. I guessed he had sent the wolves to their camp. “Bauchans,” Mom sighed.

 The bauchans made their way down the slope. We did nothing to resist them, knowing that as easy as pie, they could send their wolves to finish us off. When the bauchans were close, I realized they were just as Dad had said. They looked a lot like owls, I noticed. They wore no shirt, just some tattered leather pants with a belt stocked with different kinds of arrows and knives. I saw knives tipped with some transparent liquid, that I guessed was poison, one that had more liquid splashed on it, and from the smell I guesstimated it was gasoline, an incendiary arrow. I even saw one with a small wooden cask on the end, with a fuse leading inside, an explosive arrow. One had tiny spikes on the side, in which when the tip struck something; they would lengthen, and pierce the flesh, and then you have excruciating pain. And I can’t forget their smell, like long dead cockroaches or millipedes. “Why did you interfere with the hunt?” asked the leader, who was as small as Jonathan and wore only a loin cloth, which is basically underwear. “We came to enter your camp, to get information about Thomas Hughson Franknorth,” Mom said politely. “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah! I remember him!” yapped the leader, who had a military hairstyle.

“We were expecting you weeks ago. I am the leader of the hunt. Whatever you have to ask of us, you can say it to me, right here.” “We want information about where he was taken,” Mom responded to the bauchan. “Oh, yes, yes, yes. You see, we bauchans say the answer to any important question by long, complex riddles.” I slapped my hand onto my face in frustration. “It’s in Scotland, right?” whispered the bauchan on the right, a little too loudly. The leader scowled at the bauchan and said, “Rufflesap, you have to ruin everything!” He stomped his foot and looked like a toddler about to perform a temper tantrum. “Yes, it’s in Scotland.” “But where in Scotland?” asked Toby impatiently. “Hold your tongue, you baby-faced buffoon!” snapped the leader of the hunt. “Like he looks any older than I do,” Toby whispered in my ear, and I suddenly wished he hadn’t said that, for the main bauchan perked up his ears and screamed so loud it felt like tremors were echoing through the ground. I closed my eyes because little droplets of spittle condensed on my face, but I should have held my nose too, because of the horrid breath of the not-so-nice anymore bauchan. When I opened my eyes the bauchan had Toby on the ground and was pounding him. He reminded me of Nelson in a lot of ways. I grabbed one of his arms and Mom grabbed the other, then we had to pull him away from my humiliated big brother. “No, no! Let me at him!” the little fiend hissed. “You’ll never get the answers from me, you nitwit humans! Never, do you hear me? Never!!!”

 I sat down on a fallen log with my head covered with my hands. Our quest was over even before it began. I probably should have been mad at Toby, but when I looked at him, on the verge of tears with a busted lip and black eye, all my anger melted away. Joshua kept staring at the leader of the hunt and his two companions like they were the three bogeymen coming to eat him. We stayed in silence for about ten minutes, while the three bauchans were conversing what to do with us. I tried to listen, but all I could pick up were grunts and strange words I’ve never heard. “What are they saying?” I asked Mom. “They’re speaking goblin, or Gornash, as they call it. Your father taught me a few of the words. So far I’ve overheard a few words, but I think I’ve filled in the blanks well enough. Rocksplit, the third bauchan is asking if they should eat us,” Joshua gasped and whimpered like a scared dog. “Then the leader of the hunt says that we should not be eaten, but Toby should be held captive until he apologizes.” “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” yelped Toby. All three of the dwarves slowly turned around. “We will take that apology into account,” the leader promised. They whirled around and started talking again like nothing had happened. “I’m bored,” Joshua moaned like ‘bored’ was a two syllable word. In a few more minutes, the leader turned around and said, “You will come with us to camp.” The two other bauchans threw some powder that made all of us dizzy, and then they chained us up with shackles, which were attached to chains which one of the goblins would hold. The bauchan leader did not hold any, but just trotted ahead.

Rufflesap held the chains of Mom, Joshua and me, while Rocksplit held Joshua’s and Toby’s. The bauchans all dragged us along. In the distance I heard some music. After a few more minutes, we arrived at a stone-brick wall. Some scrap metal had been used to form copper barred gate, with two bauchans as guards. The reason it was copper was probably because of a faerie’s vulnerability to iron. They had some long crooked sticks tipped with what looked like dragon claws on the side, sort of like a scythe. The sentinels pulled open the gate, and we entered what looked like a gypsy camp. There was a ring of bauchans around the fire, and they were all spinning and dancing to the music. Some of the bauchans were out of the circle, playing banjos and trumpets. There were trees hanging with lanterns, and old-fashion war tents where I guessed the bauchans slept. Some young bauchans were playing with fire crackers, just as human children do. I noticed it was midday. We were supposed to leave to find dad tomorrow, but things did not seem to shape up that way. I saw some planks dangling from trees, and I guessed they were stairs leading up to some tree-house. My family and I were instructed to sit on a bunch of stumps that I guessed were chairs. An old bauchan with a sandy brown beard hobbled over to us. One of his teeth was sticking out from his mouth, sort of like a beaver. He had a tattered, purple cloak, and a stick with a deer skull mounted atop it. I guessed he was the pack leader. The music slowly came to an end, and the bauchans started laughing and talking to each other in Gornash. I turned around and saw a few wolves glaring at us with vicious looks. “What are these humans doing here?” rasped the pack leader. “We found them interrupting our expedition,” said the leader of the hunt. “And then that human,” he pointed at Toby. “Disrespected me in every known way!” “Did he spit on you?” “Well, no.” “Did he punch you?” “No.” “Did he-” “Okay, okay. Not *every* known way.” “Ahh,” sighed the witchdoctor. “Then what did he do?” “Called me babyish,” whimpered the hunter like a child tattle-telling to his father. “And what did you do then?” “Gave him a taste of Bauchan claws!” “Then he has already been punished, we bauchans are not cruel. We only wish to show justice. The humans may go free.”

“But that’s not what we want!” I said without thinking. The bauchan hunter scowled at me. “My father was captured, and we need to know where.” “My pack leader, should I remove of you these nuisances?” asked the leader of the hunt, with whom I was getting more and more annoyed with. “No, I will answer you, youngling. At Sgarbh Breac, Scotland.” Toby pulled a notebook from his pocket and started writing. “Where is that?” I asked. “It’s a mountain on the island of Islay,” Mom informed. “I know where it, is, don’t worry. Your father told me about it.” “One last thing,” the pack leader said. “The elves told us to tell you this, ‘Ript setja inn gumi’”. “Gummy?” asked Joshua, interested automatically. “Thank you, for your hospitality, and information,” acknowledged Mom. “We’ll be leaving now,” Mom said. We got up and followed her through the camp, back to the gate. The bauchans were now staring longingly at a turkey that the chef was roasting over the campfire. The guards opened the gate and we started back home. Joshua stayed near Mom, whimpering about how scary the bauchans were. “They were gonna eat us!” he whined. The line of people suddenly came to a stop. The path split into three different ways. “I don’t remember this!” Joshua sniveled. “That’s because things sometimes look different going forward then going back,” Toby instructed. I looked up at the sky. Dark and threatening clouds loomed over our heads. “Which way?” asked Joshua, who had stayed silent all through the bauchan camp. “I’m not sure,” Mom replied. “Will we get lost?” asked Joshua, becoming much more sociable. Rain started to sprinkle down on us. “No, sweetie, we won’t get lost,” Mom assured. Joshua looked a lot calmer. I wish I could be so easily assured, but I had learned that even Mom made mistakes. “Let’s go left,” Mom suggested. And as you’ve probably guessed, ten minutes after going left we ended up at a gravel road that we had never seen on the way to the camp. Lightning lit up the sky, and then thunder shook the earth.

The rain started to pour a lot harder, soaking my already dirty jeans and cotton shirt. I hate it when cotton gets wet, especially when I’m wearing it. It gets cold and heavy, and the only good thing it does is cool you down. I pulled out a plastic bottle of water from my daypack, and gulped some down. My mom was looking up and down the road, wondering what to do. “Let’s pray,” she said expectantly. “But don’t we need to get going before we get soaked?” asked Toby. “No, we need to spend some time with the Lord,” Mom continued. She closed her eyes and we did the same thing. “God, thank you for showing us the destination of Thomas. If it is Your will, let us find him, but right now we need to find our way home, so please show us the way.” We all opened up our eyes. The rain was still pouring, but I felt a little better. “Let’s go up this road, we may see something familiar.” We all straggled with mom up the gravel trail. We traveled down the road for hours, and then we were blocked by a fallen tree. “Great, now if we go down the road to find our house, it’ll be nighttime before we get there,” Toby complained. Mom shushed him, and we all went quiet. We heard a hiss, and suddenly a dragon leaped over the tree and roared, but then studied our faces. “Windsplitter!” Mom laughed. “So this is the way home!” “Well, you’d have to go through those woods.” “Why did you come through here?” I asked. “Well, I heard something walking through here, but I guess it was you. Still doesn’t explain the growling-” “What?” everyone chorused. A five-foot tall wolf with cloven hooves, goat-like horns and a long, twisted tail was standing like one of those pointer dogs, with one paw raised to show that it wanted to chase us.

The wolfish creature leaped onto Windsplitter and kicked his horny face. They weren’t the same size, but the wolf-creature had caught the dragon hatchling off guard, and now was butting him with his horns. Windsplitter was gasping, “It’s a-” the creature butted his soft stomach. “An alphyn!” The ‘alphyn’ hissed and revealed a thin, snaky tongue. Windsplitter scratched its stomach and knocked it onto its back, but I noticed its underbelly was just as hard as the rest of Windsplitter’s body. It whimpered just like a wolf, but with a little hiss at the end. It sprung onto its feet again like a click beetle, and then resumed the fight. Its color was fiery red and lightning yellow. Its eyes were like sapphires, and its tail was green like leaves. I heard another whimper, but not from the alphyn, but from under the fallen log. Joshua and I bent over to look under, while Toby, Mom, and Jonathan kept cheering Windsplitter. Another alphyn, deep blue with light blue spots was suckling six snow-white cubs, so it was a female. It had no horns, and growled at me menacingly. Windsplitter bit onto the alphyn’s horns, and flipped him onto the ground, released him while holding him down with one of his feet, then got ready to breathe burning air on him. “Stop! Oh, do stop!” Joshua and I hollered like classic English children. Windsplitter turned to us and raised his foot. The alphyn struggled to stand, and then saw me and Joshua, who had spotted the cubs, and growled. Windsplitter stared at the alphyn, warning him not to do anything rash. He sniffed, and then sighed. “Aha!” He yapped. “Cubs.” Mom, Toby, and Jonathan were all saying how cute they were. The female alphyn turned to us and growled, “I believe you should step back,” said Windsplitter cautiously. “Or their father won’t take to you too kindly.” The male alphyn’s rabbit-like ears lowered, and then it growled again. We all stepped aside and let the male proceed to its family. “The house is this way,” said Windsplitter, after staring at his belly-bruises like they were serious injuries.

# The Journey Arises

We all followed the dragon into the dense forest. Though it was as thick as butter, Windsplitter plowed a suitable pass for us with his scaly face. I had completely forgotten a huge question that I could ask Windsplitter, and of course he’d give a long speech like a librarian lecturing about the Dewey Decimal System. “How did we never notice any creatures before, since obviously there’s so many now?” “The Mist,” replied Windsplitter. “Also known as glamor, recently, from those who have seen the fae. You see, when one looks at a creature without believing there are creatures like us, their mind doesn’t register what they’re seeing, or when one does not think that the creature that they’re about to see is “glamorous” as the proper term for all of us fae and beasts are, then they will see something else. Such as if one sees a dragon chick, they’ll think it’s a Komodo dragon or snake, but when one sees an adult dragon, they see the dragon itself, so adult dragons shift into animals or humans to hide their true identity. Can anyone guess what chimera’s glamorous form is?” Nobody answered. “Young or small chimeras take the form of goats, lions, or crocodiles. The bigger or older ones just lie and wait for their prey to come, and if they’re humans, they will make sure they kill the human or humans before they report it, because chimeras are too big for glamor and to unintelligent for shape shifting. They are also very shy, and will only attack humans if spotted, or if they are starving.” “What about griffons?” asked Jonathan, who raised a good point. “They take the form of giant golden eagles, but go high in the sky so nobody can determine their size. Not to be confused with rocs[[2]](#footnote-2), the winged eagles at least three times their size. Does that answer your questions?” “Yes,” Jonathan and I said together, but Windsplitter went on. “It was Homer, the blind poet who discovered the Mist before he was blinded by a young chimera. Just as young dragons have hot breath instead of fire, chimera young do, too. The adult was thankfully deceased, or I’m afraid we wouldn’t see anything of The Iliad or The Odyssey. The Iliad tells all about the Mist, but Homer got it wrong. He thought only immortals could see through the Mist, but in reality there are no gods other than our God.” We leaped over a shallow creek, and then we entered the clearing where we did sword practice. “What other creatures have you seen in our woods?” asked Toby. “Manticores[[3]](#footnote-3), goblins, and an ogre. And of course, the wood troll, but I do believe he’s much farther in the woods.” The sun was setting behind the white oaks, and the clouds were clearing up. It had long since stopped raining. When we reached the house in a few minutes, I plopped on the couch and felt like crying. I usually do this when I’ve had a long, hard day. This was probably the longest of my life. It was Tuesday, of course, since, if you remember yesterday was Monday. “Please tell me we’re driving to Scotland,” I moaned. “Of course!” Mom said, “Most of the way.”

I fell asleep at about five o’clock P.M. I know, it was early, but I slept like a dragon. Trust me, I’ve seen a dragon sleep, and it’s not pretty. I went to say goodnight to Windsplitter, who was up in the attic, and he was sleeping so deeply, that I didn’t dare wake him. If you’re wondering how I knew he was sleeping deeply, it’s because when I opened the door a horseshoe fell off the wall (it was at the edge of the nail that it was hanging on) and made a loud, clonk, then I screamed like a little girl, and still Windsplitter was snoozing. When I awoke, Toby was swinging his sword in the bedroom. I almost had a heart attack. I thought about getting on my belly and crawling out of the room, but I thought it would be better to just ask him if he could just stop practicing for now. He scowled, but lowered his blade. I walked out of the room and asked Mom, “When are we going?” “At ten o’clock,” she answered. “Bring bug spray, I forgot to add it to the list.” I hated bug spray. It was stinky, and it never worked. Joshua and Jonathan were already eating, and then I saw Mom walk into Toby’s and my room and screamed. I heard her scold him, talking about using it outside, or he’ll break something, or hurt somebody. I poured my cereal into a small glass bowl and then dispensed the milk. I prayed silently, and then started eating, and then Toby came in and fixed his food, before he began eating.

Mom came into the kitchen with Dad’s map in hand. It only covered the land of Solihull, so I didn’t think it would help us that much. She placed the map on the kitchen table and we all leaned over to get a good look at it. I saw the old gravel road that we had gone up after the bauchan camp, but I didn’t see the alphyn den. Mom seemed to read my mind. “The alphyn den is there.” She pointed to where Dad had drawn a cave and named it ‘Alphyn’. “They were driven off by some hillbillies who saw them as wolves, and the alphyns were no match for their guns, so they were forced to move to here.” She pointed where Dad had sketched a fallen tree in the middle of the road. I spotted the field where we were trained. The field was labeled ‘Training field’, and next to it was ‘griffons’. I raised one eyebrow. “This is our route,” Mom said. She had highlighted the gravel road leading from our house, and eventually curving over to the gravel road with the alphyn, somewhere a mile or two away. “Are you sure Dad is okay with you highlighting the road?” asked Toby. “If it’s to save him, then yes,” Mom said. The highlighted gravel road led to another more-used road, where I couldn’t help noticing a warning of rocs down the road up ahead. “Let me guess, the rocs pick up the car, then drop it when their high enough, then they pick out the humans,” I groaned. “Yes,” Mom said. “But they never do that, unless there is a single car on the road, with no one else to witness it.”

We all said goodbye to Windsplitter, who was spitting pigeon feathers out of his mouth in the yard. I had asked Mom beforehand the best way to say goodbye to a dragon hatchling. She said to bring it a jug of milk and a frame of honey. Our family has an artificial beehive, just to let you know, and a frame is one of those combed sheets that you put in a bee box. I put on my beekeeper’s suit and took out one of the frames. Just to let you know, beekeeping is about as scary as it looks, but so far I haven’t been stung once. I took my offering to Windsplitter, and he tore into it, licking up all the honey. Surprisingly enough, the bees were still after me, not him. I walked into the kitchen and poured about six bowls full of milk, knowing he probably couldn’t get into a jug of milk without losing most of the milk. Windsplitter gratefully thanked me, which made me feel a little better about crossing roc territory. We all climbed into our van. Toby got shotgun, while I sat in the very back, and Joshua and Jonathan sat in the middle. Mom had gone to the shack to say goodbye to Beetlesprit, the pixie, but I had decided I better stay in the car, to avoid any more cuts or stabs. I know, it was a little cowardly, but you’re probably scared of bees, wasps, hornets, or yellow-jackets, and this was much worse. Imagine being stabbed by a needle, coated in bee poison. You can almost feel the pain by thinking of it. When Mom came back in, she asked if we were all ready to go. Our stuff was already packed in the trunk, and some of the supplies were on either one of my sides. I had Dad’s map in my lap, and I know it rhymes, but get over it! We all said that we were ready to go, so then we pulled out and drove on. Those past days seemed like they took forever, and I wasn’t sure if I was more happy than sad, or vice versa. For my board game, I actually brought one of those ‘jump all but one’ games where you had to jump all but one. I’m so bad at that game that I celebrate when I get ‘just plain dumb’. I started playing it over and over again. I thought all about the Mist when I was bored with the game. If only we had a full grown dragon that could come with us, because I was pretty sure we couldn’t beat a wood troll even if we all worked together.

We exited the forest and entered open plains with farms and hedges dotting the area. In a few minutes we were a good distance down the road away from the gravel path. I looked out the window, searching for any ‘glamorous’ creatures. I saw a dead creature on the side of the road with bat wings, a dragonish tail, a spiky crest, and a rooster-like head and legs. I guessed it was a cockatrice, the terrible mix of a dragon and cock, with a deadly glance that turns one to stone, like Medusa. I checked Dad’s map and saw we were about a mile from the rocs. “Everybody, be careful, we’re close to roc territory,” Mom said. “Why do the creatures want to be so secretive?” I asked. “There is no sure reason,” Mom said. “But it is possible that they know that they will be hunted down or captured when humans report of their existence. It also may just be instinct.” I spotted a sign reading, “Danger, falling rocs.” We drove on for about ten more minutes, and yeah, as you probably guessed earlier, we were the only ones on the road. I kept glancing out the window and trying to look at the sky, but it’s hard to look up through a window unless you crouch down. I saw a shadow on the road, and it looked big. “Mom!” I warned. “I know, they’ve been circling us for a couple minutes.” “What is it?” asked Joshua. “Just a couple of big birdies, honey,” she embellished. Jonathan flashed a doubtful look at me. I heard a crunch and saw a huge talon on either side of the middle seats.

 The car was slightly crushed when some unseen beast latched its claws onto our car. The middle windows gave way just as the air bags inflated. “Ow!” I heard Toby moan. How heroic. Mom was yelling for everybody to stay buckled up no matter what happened, while everybody else was in chaos. I looked out the window and saw our car leave the ground. I heard screams and cries from Joshua, and I felt so scared yet so sympathetic for Joshua, the annoying brother. I’d never see his buck-toothed grin or hear his piercing cry, or feel his punch or anything if we all died now (at least, in this life). Jonathan was of course doing the smart thing, holding onto his armrests and praying silently, with his eyes tightly shut. I looked out the window again and saw we were about thirty feet off the ground, when another roc collided with the one that held us, and our car plummeted bumper first towards the concrete street. The glass shards from Jonathan, and Joshua’s, window flew through the air towards me. I grabbed the only thing I could think of to shield myself, Dad’s map. Most of the shards stuck into the map but a few grazed my face and legs. Somehow Jonathan and Joshua were unhurt; I guess it was because the glass had nowhere to fall from at them. I turned around and peered out the window through all our camping supplies, and saw we were heading right for hard concrete. I heard a crash and the glass in the back window smashed into pieces, and basically the whole trunk door was obliterated. I felt the heat of a small fire that had formed in the trunk-or what *was* the trunk. Our car flipped over upside-down and started to roll down a small hill on the side of the road-and yes, it’s as sickening as it sounds, especially when there’s a bunch of broken glass clattering around you. Our car stopped when it smacked into an oak tree. Thankfully we were right side up. I saw one of the monstrous eagles swoop down on us with claws outstretched. I spotted the other one fly away in defeat. It looked a lot like an eagle with long feathers on the back of its head. It lifted us off the ground, and I could feel the cold air coming from the back of the car, which was as good as an open trunk. “It’s gonna drop us!” screamed Joshua. “No, it’s a female,” Mom said. “You can tell by no-” “But what will it do?” Joshua interrupted brusquely. “Take us to its nest,” Mom answered.

We were in the air for one or two hours, flying over England. It wasn’t too high up, and we weren’t going as fast as an airplane, but the feeling was like we were riding a private jet that couldn’t fly because of its damage but, however, it was. Joshua was chewing some gum, and then when he was finished he spat it out the window. “Joshua!” Mom scolded. I heard somebody shout and curse down below. “Whoopsie daisy!” Joshua giggled. I recalled a story I had read a couple years ago, the adventures of Sandbag? Wait, no, “The Second Voyage of Sindbad” was its name. I vaguely remembered huge eagles that had eggs fifty strides around! I guessed that was exaggeration. I tried to think of how Sindbad defeated the roc, which I remembered it was called. I couldn’t think of it so I asked Mom. “He didn’t,” Mom explained. “The rocs there had no need to attack the humans. They had wyrms to feed on; limbless dragons. They would drop their prey on spikes of diamonds. There was a whole field of diamonds, but eventually merchants and explorers took all of them.” “Where was that?” I asked. “The island of Socotra,” Mom answered. “It was abundant with rocs, rhinos, elephants, and wyrms. However, the rhinos, elephants, and wyrms were all killed by rocs, so the rocs were forced to move away. They were critically endangered at the time, so they moved to Europe to eat griffons and dragon chicks.” “Then let’s hope Windsplitter has better luck then we do,” Toby mumbled. “Why can’t we get to the nest already? I’m ready for them to eat us!” I noticed it was past lunchtime, so I unbuckled and checked the trunk to make sure my family’s packs were there, and to get a tasty snack. They all were, except one problem. Mine was gone.

I guessed that my backpack had fallen out of the trunk when we took the tumble down the hill, but still, why were all the others there? I then saw some bungee cords holding them down. Mine must have come loose and went bye-bye. I groaned and broke the news to the others. “Does anybody want lunch?” I asked. “Alright,” said everybody together. Sure, they didn’t say that exactly, but that’s what they meant! “We can share,” offered Mom. I suddenly felt guilty about telling everyone of my circumstance. “No, you don’t have to!” I started, but Mom had already handed me some pre-cooked bacon and an apple. I started to eat, and then I looked out of the window. We were passing right over Birmingham city. I had only been there once or twice, and both times I was really young. It was amazement but also relief that I was feeling. We were going north, towards Scotland, so if we ever survived the wrath of the roc, we would be a good distance in the right direction. I buckled up again just in case we had another fall. “I can’t believe she hunts so far from home,” Jonathan moaned. “Mother rocs will go miles and miles to search for their babies’ food,” Mom explained. “And I think I know where she’s taking us. A place where several rocs nest: Cairn Gorm Mountains.” “Wait, I’ve heard of that!” said Jonathan, who is also a great geographer. “It’s in Northern Scotland!” “Then where’s…?” started Toby, apparently forgetting its name. “Islay,” Mom reminded. “It’s in Western central Scotland.” “And I’m guessing the Corny Gorny is in Northwestern Scotland.” “Yes,” She replied. “Great,” I said sarcastically. Up on a mountain, in the north, and in April! This was not turning out to be my day. Plus that mountain had a bunch of hungry roc chicks waiting to eat us.

We were long past Birmingham, and it was getting colder and colder. I estimated we were flying at about seventy miles per hour. We were now passing over Manchester, Central England. I saw some of the tallest buildings I had ever seen, and it looked a lot like a castle. We were heading up a canal, which I did not know the name of, but Mom called it Manchester Ship Canal. When the roc stopped following the canal, we were in a rural area, full of fields and plains, like most of England. We glided over the fields for hours, seeing nothing but more fields and sheep. I saw some clumps of snow covering bits and pieces of the land. It started to sprinkle snow, and the clouds got darker and darker. At last we passed some grassy slopes, and I saw some creature, which I guessed was an ogre. I leaned out of what was left of my window and saw the roc, which I had named Brutus, (but mom reminded me it was a girl, so I named her Brutina) and I saw her eyes were getting heavy, and she was getting slower and slower. I leaned back into my seat, and I drifted off to sleep, knowing death came in the morning.

# Roc Nest

When I awoke, which was about ten o’clock at night, I was starving. Everybody else was fast asleep except Mom, who still had her airbag against her face along with Toby, who was snoring like a pig (of course, the Roc was still awake too). I was freezing, and it was still snowing. I stretched, and felt something on my lap. Snow had covered my entire thigh! I quickly brushed off all the snow and grabbed a blanket that Mom had conveniently stashed underneath my chair. I tried to warm myself. “Where are we?” I asked, shivering like I was sitting on a jackhammer. “I think we’re in North Yorkshire,” Mom explained. “Do you have anything for me to eat?” I asked, maybe a little rudely, but I was so hungry that I didn’t think about it. “Cold peach and cold bread,” Mom replied. “I don’t think anything’s *not* cold in here,” I mumbled. I looked out the window and gasped. There were strange creatures in the fields about five feet tall and very ugly. They wore tattered jeans and old tuxedos, and their eyes glowed yellow. “Turn on the headlights!” I asked as I unbuckled. Mom did as I asked and I crept up the car floor which had some glass shards. I stepped on one and heard a crunch. I hobbled more quickly up in between Mom and Toby. The car’s headlights shone just like a spotlight. I can’t say if it was in a field or not, but I’m pretty sure it was. I saw the creatures scamper away from the light as we passed by. They had gray, stony skin and white hair, if they had any. “Trows[[4]](#footnote-4),” Mom enlightened. “Will they attack us?” I asked. “No, as long as we’re in the air we’re fine,” Mom explained, but then I noticed we were coming in for a landing. I heard the roc screech, and everybody in the car jerked awake. “She’s getting food,” Mom explained. The roc gently placed us onto the snowy ground. It had stopped snowing, but it was still as cold as if it were still snowing. The Roc took into the air and I heard some croaks from the goblins. I saw a few turn their gaze towards us. One took the lead and many others followed. The first one and a few others got taken up into the air by Brutina. One leaped onto the windshield and cracked it, and we all screamed. “Out of the car!” Mom yelled. “Why? They can’t get us in here!” Toby shouted. Two or three bogans climbed through the smashed trunk. “Want to bet?” I yelled. We all opened the doors and got out. “Into the light!” Mom screamed. We all rushed into the spotlight, and the monstrosities only stood there and stared at us. I breathed a sigh of relief, but instantly a colossal claw scooped up about ten of the trows. We all screamed again. The trows that were in the car had pulled out the window smasher and started bashing at the controls. (They’re smarter than I thought.) The headlights faded, but then a curious bogan poked one of the airbags with his claw, and it burst open. The trows screeched and gasped as I heard the gas pour through. The three trows then dropped dead from the gaseous cellulose fumes. Mom pulled off her jacket and covered her mouth. We all did the same thing, but the trows simply ran off. “Let’s make a break for it!” I suggested. “No, it’s best to stay in the car,” Mom mumbled underneath her mask. “Besides, I have a plan.” We all obediently climbed in the car as the roc flew back over to us with some trows’ arms dangling out of her beak. I nearly puked.

The roc wrapped her claws around the top of the car and slowly lifted us into the air. One trow leaped into the trunk, and of course, I was still unbuckled. It pulled me out of my seat, proving it was as strong if not stronger then it looked. I was on my knees in the remnant of the trunk. I studied the creature, an ugly, deformed face, long fingernails, or claws, whatever you’d like to call them. It also had teeth similar to an old man, and ears like a bat. It hissed and kicked me in the stomach. I slid across the carpeted floor and flipped over the side. I reached out at the last second and grabbed the goblin’s arm, who was watching my fall with pleasure. He tried to pry my hands off him, but to no avail, so he pulled me up, since if he didn’t he’d suffer the fate that he had tried to bring upon me. I was panting deeply, staring up at the evil little monster. I then did a desperate action. I grabbed a broken glass shard and stabbed him in the shoulder. He pulled a dagger out of his belt and made a wild attempt to stab me to death. I dodged his moves, then took an arrow from the floor (which had thankfully not been in my backpack) and stabbed his arm that held the dagger. He dropped the knife and screamed, then scratched his claws down my back, tearing both shirt and flesh. I yelled much less manly then he did, and crumpled to the floor. The trow picked up his dagger again and tried to stab my heart, but I held him back (what were the others doing at this time?). “Colby!” Toby shouted. “Catch!” I turned around and something heavy and metal hit my head. That might have hurt more than the trow’s scratch.

My eyes grew heavy and I was almost too weak to hold the goblin back. I slid under his legs right before I let go and glanced out of the corner of my eye-the window breaker? I picked it up as the little gremlin tried to pull his dagger from the floor, and then I got ready to smash him, but then I decided it would be too messy so I pushed him over the edge of the car and saw him fall to his grizzly death, well, not *that* grizzly. I picked up my arrow and slid it back into the quiver. I then climbed back over the seat and sat down, dizzy and sleepy. The three dead goblins still sat, poisoned in the front seat. We all took off our masks. Toby opened the door and got ready to throw the trows out, but Mom stopped him. “No, we need to leave the roc some food for her babies after we make our escape,” she explained. I saw her walk over to me with the peach and bread. “You fought well,” she said, but I could barely understand her with the throbbing in my back. “I’m proud of you,” she continued. “Eat, please.” I was starving, but I didn’t feel like eating. I still ate anyway. Thankfully I didn’t need to go to the restroom. It was a little remarkable. When I was done eating, I fell asleep.

I woke up in the morning, by Mom shaking me, and it was colder than ever. “Where are we?” I asked. “We’re at the brink of the Cairn Gorm,” Mom answered. It was early morning, and I saw a huge mountain range in the distance. Everyone else was up, and shivering like they were sitting on a jackhammer. I looked out the window and gasped. “No way!” I said, amazed. There were about three other rocs that I could see in the distance. “I have a plan, as I said earlier,” Mom explained. “This is very risky, and Colby, I’m sorry, but you’re the only one who can complete this plan, unless you were willing to lend your bow to one of us.” “No, I can do it,” I explained. “But you’ll need to tell me what I need to do.” “Alright,” Mom began. “If we are quick, we may survive. Colby, I need you to shoot the roc once we reach the top of this hill.” We passed right over a dirt road with only one or two cars driving on it. We flew up gradually, and now we were now above a steep hill. I grabbed my bow and quiver, (which also had not been in my backpack) and then quickly unbuckled and climbed in between the middle seats, where the monster bird’s claws were holding on to our car through the windows. “I can’t shoot her without opening the door,” I explained. We were nearing the summit of the slope. “Do not open the door!” Mom yelled, a little too loudly, in my opinion. “I can stab her talons with one of my arrows,” I explained. “Then do it,” Mom said. “In three, two, one.” I thrust an arrow into her claws and she screeched, like you would screech if you stepped on your little brother’s toy. She let go of the car and the tip of the arrow snapped off. We landed with a crunch on the foot of the mountains. “Drive!” Joshua said, trying to sound cool by my speculations. “There’s no way this car can drive after all she’s been through!” Mom said loudly. “Get out!” He slid open the doors but I heard a sound, which I knew instantly what it was. We were falling backwards. “Buckle up!” Mom shouted. I secured the door shut as all the others did the same, and then I sat back down and quickly buckled up. As our car slipped backwards, I saw the roc up ahead, veering towards us and giving me the stink eye. I saw her get smaller and smaller, yet she was still flying towards us. Our car bounced as it hit the flat road.

A car drove towards us and stopped. We opened the doors once again and climbed out of the car in the middle of a road. We pulled out all the backpacks from the car as quickly as possible. A man with black hair and a tiny mustache stepped out of his car as well. “What on earth were you-” “Please give us a ride,” Mom pleaded, as the roc flew closer and closer. “Where do you need to-” “Braemar castle, and quick!” Mom interrupted. “Alright, alright, get in,” he grumbled, and I guessed he was Scottish by his accent. We all hopped into the taxi, as it turned out to be. “My name is Maxine,” the man said, without starting the car. “I’m a taxi driver, so do you have money-” “Go already!” Mom shouted. “Alright, alright,” he mumbled. “Bossy woman.”

The taxi driver turned on the ignition and started to drive as the roc swooped down right where we would have been if we hadn’t moved. He maneuvered around our wrecked van and started driving, a little too slowly, I believed. “So why in such a hurry?” he asked. “And how did you slide down that hill-and how did you get up to that hill with your car?” “Can’t you see it?” asked Toby, pointing at the roc, who was on the left side of us, his claws hanging right where we could see them through the window. A nice red convertible was riding right towards us. “Oops, wrong side of the road!” Maxine chuckled. He swerved to the other side just as the roc closed in on us, but instead he was temporarily blocked by the convertible, and he scraped the side of the car with his claw, ruining its paint job. Thankfully it didn’t go through the metal. “So you can’t see it?” asked Toby. “See what? The clouds?” asked Maxine. The roc thankfully gave up the pursuit of us, and flew to its nest. “Wait a second-” I began. “Maxine is a girl name!” “What!” stuttered Maxine. “Well, maybe. My mom gave me the name, not me! Now what are all your names?” We all introduced ourselves. “Now, since apparently you’re not so stressed anymore, how did you get up that hill?” Mom looked thoughtfully ahead at the road, but took a while to answer. “I can’t lie, because I can’t think of anything else to say that wouldn’t be as impossible as this sounds.” “Then what is it, your secret is safe with me.” “You wouldn’t believe me,” Mom sighed. “But a roc took us here.” “A rock?” asked Maxine, apparently dumfounded. “No, it’s a huge bird, they live all around here.” “Ahh. golden eagles,” Maxine said. “No, at least thirty times bigger than that,” Mom said, shaking her head. “Impossible!” Maxine sputtered. “How could birds that big fly?” “It has huge wings and an enlarged tail feather. Plus it has hollow bones. It was chasing us for a little while.” “Then how come I couldn’t see it?” asked Max. “Such creatures have a special aura; it makes those who do not have the Mist lifted in them to see something that it really isn’t. Rocs can go completely unseen to hunt prey, and their prey, our car, would also go unseen so that nobody got suspicious. The creatures know that if the humans see them, they will capture or hunt them, plus it makes it easier to hunt.” She told Maxine what Windsplitter had told us. Before she could finish, we arrived at a field where a beautiful castle stood.

“Why are we going here, again?” I asked before the castle. “We already found civilization.” “You’re right,” Mom said. “Maxine, can you take us to…” she started, scared to go on to be thought insane. “Oban[[5]](#footnote-5)?” “What?” Maxine said loudly in amazement. “That’s on, like, the other side of the world!” “It’s still in Scotland!” Mom said. “We’ll pay for lodging, and we’ll pay 30 pounds! “What!” Maxine sputtered. “One-hundred would be a little too little!” “Fine,” Mom gave in. Toby, Jonathan and I gasped because we knew that was a lot of money, Joshua gasped because he knew one-hundred was a big number. She handed him one-hundred pounds from her backpack that she had placed in between her and Maxine’s chair. “First you tell me that there’s a huge bird, then you want me to go to Oban! And I haven’t even told anyone about your wrecked car!” “Don’t worry, the roc probably took it, because there were trows in it,” Mom said. “What?” asked Maxine. “Nothing.” mumbled Mom. “Alright.” Maxine mumbled. He Pulled out of the street and we rode on for a few more minutes, until Joshua started whining and screaming. Nobody knew what he was saying, it sounded like a mountain lion trying to speak Spanish. Eventually I made out one word…“Breakfast”.

We soon stopped at a fast-food restaurant, and then we got back on the road. I suddenly realized something-we had escaped the roc! I silently thanked God, and then asked Mom for her bag. She handed it back to Jonathan and Joshua, and then Jonathan tossed it back to me. I unzipped one of the pockets and pulled out dad’s spiral notebook. There were so many pages that I hadn’t read them all, including the black elves’ section. He had them in order from the ones he experienced first-to-last. I remembered he had started on the page “Naga” but he was taken before he finished it. His first was the dragon, which was a little crude since it was his first mythical creature drawing. I bet he couldn’t care less about those creatures before he experienced them. I checked the handy index he had in the front of the book, written with small handwriting so he could have more creatures. I searched for the two words…“Dark elf”…but couldn’t find it anywhere. Then I remembered Dad always liked to call creatures the longest name he knew. I tried to remember the Norse name for black elves, but then out of the corner of my eye I saw the word *Svartalfar* and immediately traced my finger down the paper to the page number. I flipped through the pages speedily and at last saw a sketch of a tall, shaded figure with even darker eyes. I knew at once it was the right page, without checking the page number. His skin was as gray as stone, and his hair was black. I started reading silently. (What did you expect me to do? Read it out loud? Then Maxine would know for sure I was mad!) *“The Svartalfar or black elves are a race of beings that, unlike most elves, are frequently malevolent, not benevolent. They are also known as Dokkalfar, the dark elves. No female dark elves have been found, so it is possible that they are born from stone, like dwarves were believed to be. They live in dark forests in the north, where the nights last longer. Some say the Svartalfar will die in sunlight, but it is most likely that they are simply nocturnal, and, as recent research has proven, they have eyes like-heat sensing goggles, and the sun would easily blind them. They have intricate tunnels delved under the earth, or through a mountain. They also have been known for making golems, and booby traps. Some believe that the Svartalfar are in fact dwarves, but this is preposterous, since they are quite larger than the common dwarf. Reasons for this belief may be because they are subterranean, and also when the English found out about tales of elves they made fun of them, and said they were but small folk. Never ask a dark elf if he is a dwarf, whether he is your friend or enemy, a Svartalfar friend would just throw you in the dungeon, an enemy…well best not to speak about that part.”* I chuckled, remembering Dad’s sense of humor. His notes here were quite long, so I kept reading.

*“The Svartalfar hate weakness, love, and cowards,”* I continued reading. *“I once knew a Svartalfr (singular for Svartalfar) who was relatively kind to me, considering most of his folk would rather imprison me. He spoke to me-not as a friend but more an annoyance, and he finally asked me what it would take for me to leave him. That is how I sketched this picture. He introduced himself as Osterkligir.”* His notes ended, so I pulled another sheet out of a folder, and read all about my dad’s personal adventures with the Dokkalfar, or Svartalfar, or dark elves, or black elves, or whatever. I read all about him finding a way into the mountain that we were heading for, then I read about how he stole, as he said, “the thing that cannot be mentioned” from the king of the dark elves, named Farbjodr, meaning “destroyer” in Norse. Dad’s last words on them were, *“I am afraid that the Svartalfar will not forgive or forget my stealing of the thing that cannot be mentioned. I can only hope they do not find it.”*

We were driving for hours. I looked at dad’s pages about alphyns, dragons, rocs, and dunnies, a type of brownie that I had seen chewing on a telephone pole before being shocked. It was about two o’clock when we decided it was time for lunch. Only one problem. We were literally in the middle of nowhere. We were forced to eat packed food, a banana, spoonful of peanut butter and string cheese. Three things that you do not want to pack in a hot taxi. “No more driving.” Maxine said, pulling alongside the road. We then decided it was best to go to a hotel and spend the night than riding along with a relic that neither Mom nor Dad would talk about, since it seems to draw monsters and faeries of all sorts. We pulled into a parking lot and signed in for our stay at the hotel. It was quite chilly outside, despite the heat of the taxi. When we found our room, I plopped down on the couch. “Hot tea,” Jonathan mumbled. That was the first thing he had said for hours. He placed a sketch pad on the table in front of us. It was full of sketches of alphyns, dragons, rocs, and bauchans. Maxine peered at it and applauded Jonathan. Not only was he good at math, but he was also good at drawing. After doing nothing but resting for about thirty minutes Mom asked us if we wanted to go get hot tea downstairs. We all agreed to it, even Maxine. As I walked into the cafeteria with only about ten people eating in it, I couldn’t help noticing some bear pictures on the wall, but what was wrong with that? Lots of people have bear pictures. When I was pouring in my hot water, I scalded my hand, dropped the hot tea mug, as it fell I was soaked with it, and then it shattered on the floor and slightly burnt my feet. I ran around hopping like a one-legged madman, screaming like-well, screaming like someone who was burnt with hot tea. One of the hotel workers, whose name was Ted by his name tag, walked over to me and asked if I had forgotten to take any medication. What? Did he think I was crazy? He was wearing a bear-fur jacket and skirt. He was giving me the scariest stink eye I had ever known. Then he saw my drenched shirt and shattered cup and showed no pity for the boy almost boiled alive, but scolded me for dropping the mug and spilling hot tea, then he told me to clean it up. What?

As I worked like a slave on a pirate ship, I saw mom come over to me and ask what I was doing. “A goblin told me to do it,” I groaned. I knew that the worker was a monster, but it might just have been because I was very mad. I heard some screaming, and I guessed it was Joshua. “Can you check on him?” Mom asked. I got up, and then I remembered my duty to wipe up my mess. Well, my mom had given me another duty, so I dropped my wet rag and searched the nearly empty cafeteria for Joshua, but he was nowhere to be seen. At last I found him in the hallway, that branched right off the cafeteria, and I made my way towards him, but then Ted stood right in my way. I then noticed how strong he really was, bulging muscles and shaggy hair. Did he have sideburns earlier, because I did not notice them? His eyebrows were thick and his eyes were an ominous russet color. His ears were quite pointy, which gave me a funny feeling. “Your work is not done.” he said gruffly. “I was going to check on my brother,” I answered, so I sidestepped him, but he then held my wrist tight and firm. “Finish the job!” the worker roared. That’s not an exaggeration, it sounded almost exactly like a bear. “Now!” He said, with a weird sound in his voice. Was he crying? He threw me to the ground and started to growl. “The Black Diamond will be claimed by us berserkers[[6]](#footnote-6), and we will rebuild the Norse settlements. The Vikings will return!” Ok, so that was weird. “Berserkers!” Mom yelled. She slammed the worker’s back with her staff, but he showed no sign of pain. He roared again, and I spotted massive canines. His nose started to shorten into a little black bear nose. His nose and mouth slowly were stretched out onto a snout as his jacket slowly morphed into his body. He grabbed a chair and threw it at me, and it hit me right in the chest, knocking me to the ground, out of breath. I slid across the cafeteria that was littered with French fries and ketchup. And yes, it’s that disgusting. I heard the first scream and then all the people in the cafeteria ran for the exit door. I saw the Ted, A.K.A. Teddy the big bad brown bear charge for Mom. Teddy was now a full bear, and then his belt tore off and down went his pants. Good thing he was fully bear now. I tried to get to my feet but knew I’d be too late, so I ran towards the opposite door, and pulled down the alarm. Fire alarms rang out through the building, and those who did not know of Teddy yet ran for the exit. But suddenly an old man and his wife came out of the lift, which was dangerously close to Teddy, who was trying to cover his ears as best as a bear can. “Whippersnapper,” the old man said as he passed by as if Teddy was a plain dog. I ran across the room, leaping from table to table until I came to Mom, who was getting up off the floor. I pressed the up button next to the lift and waited for the doors to slide open, just as Teddy turned on us and roared. Joshua ran in with us, screaming and crying. The doors closed right before Teddy slammed headlong into the doors. A huge lump formed on the door where the bear must have rammed into it. “I’ve got to get my bow.” I said as we reached our floor. The doors only opened half-way, due to the dent, so we had to squeeze in between the opening. I heard a crash from downstairs. He was on the stairs.

# Teddy’s Revenge

“What about Toby and Jonathan?” I asked in a panic, walking as quickly as possible without leaving Mom and Joshua behind to fend for themselves. “I need my bow first,” I said as Mom unlocked our room’s door. “They’re in the Cafeteria!” I exclaimed. “No, they’re in here. They finished their hot tea while you were cleaning up.” “Well that’s good, at least,” I said. Guests were still running through the halls, making their way to the nearest exit. Toby, Jonathan and Maxine tumbled through the door as Mom swung it open. “What’s the alarm for?” asked Maxine. “Bomb? Fire?” We all heard a roar that turned our blood cold. Good thing that Toby, Jonathan and Maxine had their packs, since they were preparing for an escape. All three of them stood up as Toby drew his sword from the sheath that was strapped to his belt, and Jonathan pulled out his jagged breadknife. I heard a crash and some screams. He was on our floor. I shoved past Jonathan and Toby and pulled my bow and quiver from a clothes peg. I saw some lights flicker and terrified visitors ran our way, screaming all the while. All of our family and Maxine lay flat against the wall as the stampede of people charged past. Maxine was shivering and whimpering something about his teddy bear’s ghost coming to haunt him for leaving him in the dustbin. A looming shadow passed through a hallway that led right from the area we were on. Instantly, a huge grizzly bear slid into our hallway and came charging straight for us. I loaded my bow and fired as quickly as I could, but it landed a few feet short. I drew back again and fired, this time it glanced off his shaggy fur. “Run!” said Mom, readying her quarter staff. “No,” growled Toby, much like the bear. “Mom and I will hold him off, when we run back, Colby you shoot over us as Mom and I duck, then if he gets past us Joshua and Jonathan will try to face him, while Colby slips behind him and shoots at him from the rear!” Sounded like a good plan, but it was too long because the bear would be there in seconds. Toby stood beside Mom as I pulled back my bowstring. Mom thwacked Teddy in the snout while Teddy readied his paw for a deadly swipe; but Toby stabbed his shoulder, so Teddy turned on him, then Mom hit his brow, and this went on for quite a while, but then I noticed they got more and more tired, even though the bear would be dead if he were a human. “Duck!” I shouted. Mom and Toby stepped back and stooped, but with their weapons pointed up in case Teddy turned on them. I let loose my arrow, and it probably had the most power of any other arrow I shot, because this time I wasn’t that rushed, but I also knew Mom and Toby’s lives were at stake. In fact, all of our lives were at stake, so when I pulled back my arrow, I pulled as far as my arms would allow, and when I released; it hit the bear right in the muzzle. I thought for sure he’d fall dead but instead it barely stuck into his snout.

The bear stood up on two legs and roared, then swiped at Mom and Toby. Toby’s leg got scratched, and it was bleeding pretty badly, so he and Mom fell back. I shot arrows as quickly as I could, but I only could shoot two before Teddy got dangerously close. “Mom, take Toby in the front since he’s injured, I’ll guard the back!” I plotted out loud. Our family slowly shuffled away, me looking backwards aiming my arrow, but I knew I couldn’t run with a drawn bow, so I shot it and missed. It shattered an overhead light and sparks flew down on the bear as the light flickered out. “Run!” I yelled as the sirens still rang out through the hall. “How do you beat a berserkers?” I asked. “Well, how do you beat a bear?” inquired Mom. “Noise!” I said. “Already tried that!” Mom shouted, pointing at the blaring alarms. Suddenly the fire sprinklers rained water down on us, confusing Teddy, and us, I suppose. “We can hold him off at our room!” Jonathan suggested as we turned down a different hallway. “If you haven’t noticed, there’s a bear in the way!” I yelled, losing my patience as Teddy growled and bore towards us. “Keep shooting the lights!” Mom hollered. I obeyed her but one light at a time wasn’t enough. I explained to Mom the plan, and she did it before I even finished. She slammed a hole in the wall with her staff and tore through some wires, turning all the lights off, and leaving us practically blind. Mom turned on a flashlight and we ran with her, Toby only limping in the front, but we were all careful not to leave him behind. I turned around to see two glowing eyes following us. Jonathan tripped over my leg and fell behind as the bear sprang at him for the death blow. Jonathan yelled and plunged his breadknife into the bear’s neck. I did not see that in him. Teddy roared and got ready to collapse, but then he did a final blow towards Jonathan, but I got in the way, tried to stab him with my arrow, but was knocked onto the wall with a bloody hand. I then lost consciousness as the bear fell dead.

This was the first time I had been unconscious. When I woke I was in a hospital with Mom staring at me. I was glad to find out no tubes were stuck onto my arm or an asthma mask on my mouth. “You survived,” she said, joking. “You lost a lot of blood. For a hand wound, of course,” I looked at my hand and noticed some stitches. “Do I look like a zombie?” I asked, actually being serious. “No, and as you age your stitches will grow less noticeable,” a doctor said, spooking me. I was about to ask Mom if Teddy turned back into Ted when he died. Thankfully, I noticed the doctor before I was completely embarrassed and sent to a behavioral hospital. “When will I be ready to leave?” I asked. “Tomorrow, if you’re feeling well,” said the doctor. Right now my hand felt like I had stuck it in our bee box. “I’m going to check on your brother now,” she said. “There are too many people with shock so that there wasn’t any other doctor to treat him. That bear attack really spooked a lot of people. Poor mister Ted.” “Yeah, I feel sad for him. I’m glad he doesn’t have a family.” “Oh, he does!” The doctor exclaimed. “They’re awfully sad about him.” “Oh,” I said, feeling a twinge of fear of his berserkers family. When the doctor left, I waited for about ten seconds, and then spoke to Mom. “How’s Toby?” “They’re checking him for rabies. You got checked too. There on your arm.” I looked and gasped. Some character from a preschool show that I did not recognize was on a band aid on my arm. “No!” I wailed. I tore it off. “Sorry, I just can’t let Nelson see this when I go back to school, or if we go back to school.” “No, we’ll make it back,” said Mom. “Do you know for sure?” I asked. “No, but I think God wanted us to go to find your Dad, and there is probably a reason for it,” “Thanks,” I said, and no, that was not sarcasm. “What day is it?” I asked. “Friday morning,” Mom answered.

 “Here’s the newspaper for yesterday, it’s quite interesting.” Mom handed me the daily and I unfolded it and saw the headlines, *“Bear attacks Hotel and six year old boy saves his Family”* and then I began reading the rest. *“An amazing thing had happened yesterday, the 4th of April 2014, a bear was found in the cafeteria of a hotel and wreaked havoc there. Those who were in the cafeteria at the time report hearing nothing until suddenly the cafeteria became a literal battleground. Maurine Franknorth and her son, Colby were also in the cafeteria. Colby was about to be mauled by the estimated 600 pound male grizzly bear. Mom remarkably saves boy’s life by hitting it with stick, and then the bear reportedly flung a chair at Colby, knocking him to the ground. Then boy saves mom’s life by turning on sirens, and most assuredly, saved all the other guests’ life, except for one of the staff members, Theodore Bjorn, who went missing. Mom, boy, and other child escape in lift, met up with other family, as the bear somehow makes it up stairs, turns on family, and charges. Toby, a 15 year old boy in the family got scratched by grizzly, but the wounds were not incredibly deep. As they ran, Jonathan, a six-year old English boy stabbed the bear’s jugular vein with a breadknife. Colby tries to protect Jonathan in case the bear attacked for the last time, and his hand was injured, but he is alright. This is possibly the most remarkable story of the year. Animal researchers say the bear was probably brought in by terrorists or criminals, since there was no shattered glass or any place that something forcibly got in. Colby and Toby are in the hospital now, and the rest of the family is safe. Another mystery is the police found arrows piercing the bear’s hide, and a cut face, like that of a sword wound. Maybe another day we will know.”* I put the paper on my bedside table and drank some water. “What about the rest of his family?” I asked. “Are they berserkers too?” “I’m afraid so,” Mom said. “So tell me about them, I didn’t see them on Dad’s guide,” I asked. “Berserkers are Norse warriors who enter the battlefield only wearing an animal pelt. They’ve become boars, bears, bulls, wolves, and more.” “So they’re like werecreatures that can change at day?” I interrupted. “Yes, and they can control it,” Mom said. She opened her mouth to speak, but I suddenly remembered a better question. “What’s the Black Diamond? I heard the berserkers mention it.”

“Oh, well I don’t think-” She started. “Please!” I begged. “Oh, alright. The Black Diamond is…” The door opened and another doctor entered. “Hello, how are you feeling?” He asked, as if ‘bad’ wouldn’t be an obvious answer. “Bad.” I answered truthfully. “Well, you and your brother don’t have rabies, it would be pretty weird for the same bear to scratch one person and him not to have rabies, and he scratches another person only a few minutes later and he does have rabies!” He chuckled, but I wasn’t listening, so I didn’t find it funny, but I laughed with him, just guessing it was funny since he was snickering. “That Bjorn guy isn’t found yet. Guess he got eaten.” Then he chortled again, and I realized the flaw of my previous belief-he could have said I was going to die and I could have laughed at it! This time I didn’t laugh. I knew this doctor was a monster, so I got ready to grab the scalpel that was on the table next to me. He adjusted his shaded sunglasses and continued. “You’re lucky you didn’t get really hurt. Not many kids get to go through such a thrilling experience.” He acted like it was fun-and trust me, it was not fun. It was like riding on a rollercoaster without a strap. I thought about our journey, which would have taken one day, maybe two without delays, but instead would last about a week or more. The doctor listened to my heartbeat with a stethoscope. He then checked my blood pressure, my temperature, and, oddly enough, my brainwaves. “He seems to be fine,” he said. “He’s got a small fever, and we’ll treat him for that. So, what have you been doing this week?” “Flying, riding, and fighting,” I said. The strange doctor chuckled. “Was that your first time on an airplane?” “No,” I said truthfully. I hadn’t ever been on an airplane, and that wasn’t my first time, but I didn’t tell him that or he’d get confused. “You’ll be ready to go tomorrow morning, if you feel like it,” he giggled. I’d been told that already, so I wasn’t excited. That was just another day my Dad would sit in a Dokkalfar cell. I missed him so much, more than before we left. A terrible thought occurred to me. What if they killed him? In his notes they were extremely mad, but then I remembered Dad had written, *“When I was about to be put in a cell, the guard told me with an evil laugh, ‘We’ll keep you alive, if you show no fear. If not, we kill you.’”* I predicted my Dad had remembered that, so that gave me some hope. When the doctor left, a nurse brought me some chicken broth. I was a vegetarian, so I asked if I could have cereal or salad instead, with no salad dressing, especially for the cereal. I was relieved that the creepy doctor was gone so I could think. “I need to go back to the hotel and check on the others,” Mom informed. “Is it the same hotel?” I asked. “No, it’s one down the street.” Mom said. “Good thing we got our money back, or I wouldn’t be able to pay for the hospital.”

I sat in that gurney for hours, watching nothing but some animal shows on the TV. At last the door opened and Toby walked in with bandages on his leg and a crutch. “Well, at least you can walk,” I said. “I got a bad hand wound.” “Exactly,” Toby said. “How could a hand-wound effect you’re walking?” I saw the nurse who was watching Toby smile at his comment. “I lost like, 200 pounds of blood!” “The human body has only around 5½ quarts of blood!” laughed the nurse. I looked at the clock. It was 1:43 PM. I still had a long way to go till I was released. I had a plan, that even if I wasn’t feeling good, I’d say I was fine. I just wanted to go face those elves once and for all. I suddenly erased that thought from my mind since I was imagining little dwarfish people loading up Santa’s sleigh. They would make a fair enemy. I would even be okay if we got captured, as long as Dad was there. I talked to Toby all about how scary the “bear” was since the nurse was still in the room. The door opened and another nurse handed me some lettuce, carrots, onions, and spinach. I would have preferred cereal, but it was better than chicken broth. Toby and the nurse left about a minute after I got my salad. I started stabbing the lettuce with my plastic fork, but when I was about halfway through the salad, I fell asleep with some spinach still in my mouth. I had dreams even stranger than my dream with the dragon. This time I was looking at a tall, shadowy figure with a black bow and arrows. He was staring straight at me with those solid black eyes, like I was looking into a black hole. “This is a telepathic message,” said the figure, which I knew was a dark elf. “You are being watched. We have spies at every corner, and we know where you are. I suppose you want proof. We could not send this message unless we had pinpointed your exact location. And don’t think we are unaware of your plan; the Black Diamond is far more precious than you mortals could imagine. The Dokkalfar are gods among men; you have no hope.”

I started to respond to the message but didn’t realize I was awake when I said, “Well you must be very weak gods that you haven’t captured us already!” Then I noticed a nurse wiping off spinach from my chin. He then felt my forehead to check for a fever. He poured me a glass of icy water as I was sweating like a horse, as my brother would say, since pigs don’t sweat. I was breathing quickly and shallowly, so I tried to even it out. “What’s your name?” I asked the nurse, concocting a plan inside my head. “Mark,” replied the nurse casually. My plan was that if he answered too quickly, he’d probably be a spy, and if he hesitated he’d probably be a spy, but I suddenly remembered they were much smarter than to fall for that. I started throwing out random questions, like “do you have a dog, when were you born, what are your parent’s names,” and then I threw out a trick question just to make sure. “Where is my family going?” I asked. The nurse stopped and thought, then said, “I don’t know, why you are asking me all these things?” “Curious,” I said, not thinking of a better excuse. “Can I call my Mom?” “Sure,” he said, picking up a cordless cell phone off my bedside table. “Can you please go out?” I asked as politely as I could, but it’s hard to be polite when you’re asking somebody to leave. “Sure,” he repeated, before handing me the phone, then walking out of the room and closing the door. I had to hold it with my right hand, even though I was already right-handed. I heard the phone ring several times before I was switched to an automatic speaker. “Mom, if you’re there, please pick it up, it’s very important,” I pleaded, then I added, “And if you little Santa elves are eavesdropping, then you’re in for a world of pain!” I then heard a click and Mom was on the phone. “Colby?” she said, with a hint of worry in her voice. “Mom! There are spies all over the place! I had a dream and the elves said that there were a bunch of spies! And I think the spies are in disguise! (No rhyme intended.) Where’s Maxine?” “He went to the tea shop, said he was too sleepy to stay up and watch sports so he’s drinking tea to wake himself up.” “Yes, I know what tea does.” I said impatiently. “You’re not suspecting him, are you?” asked Mom. “Well, no. Well, kind of. It’s just he’s the only one that could see all our plans, and I’m pretty sure nobody in our family is the spy.” “Your father told me that he saw a Svartalfar spy and he looked exactly like a normal human, except he wore shades, to hide his beady black eyes,” Mom explained. I shivered at the thought. “Well, are there any animals they can change into?” “Not that Thomas mentioned,” she continued. “Don’t worry, Colby, tomorrow we’ll start back on our journey. Maxine got the Mist lifted.” “What’s the Black Diamond, you didn’t-” I suddenly remembered the eerie doctor. He wore shades. “The doctor!” I said instantly, before Mom could start. “He wore shades, just like you explained! It had to be him! He was weird, he was creepy, and *he wore shades!*” “I think he’s a decoy,” Mom persisted. “A trained elvish spy would act so much more, *human* than that. Just keep your guards up, don’t talk about anything important, and be patient. We’ll come get you tomorrow morning.” I heard a snap as she hung up. I lay back on the uncomfortable gurney and closed my eyes, and then the door opened and in came the doctor with a scalpel in his hand. I almost leaped out of the bed right then. “I’m sorry, I was helping a crippled lady pass through, and I couldn’t help overhearing.” Then he started to chuckle again.

“How much did you hear?” I asked, trying to sound calm. “I heard about you not allowed to say anything important.” I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but then again he might be acting. “But she was on the other phone!” I exclaimed. “Brand new hearing aids,” He said, pointing to his ear. “I’m not deaf, but I couldn’t resist it.” I still had no clue of what the Black Diamond was. The doctor placed the scalpel on a cart. “I apologize if I scared you with that, I was sent to deliver it here from a surgeon. I’m not going to do surgery on you.” He took off his shades and I was prepared to stare into the black holes like in my dream, but instead his eyes were blue. I felt a surge of relief and guilt at the same time. I had suspected Maxine, the doctor, and who would I suspect next? My Mom? “I just wanted to tell you that your hand is healing up quite well. Can you move it?” I tried to bend my fingers but it was hard because of all the bandages wrapped about my hand. When I did manage to move them, I felt searing pain and winced, but kept moving them since soon my hand would grow used to me moving it. “It’s getting better,” I replied. “Good. You need some rest,” the doctor said, before chuckling. It now seemed perfectly normal since I knew he wasn’t a monster-or a dark elf at least. I was amazed at how many people were actually beasts in disguise. I then remembered what I had been hearing many times lately, the Black Diamond. It had to be special for all these creatures to want it. It was like they all wanted to trap us, and I was sure that was what they were doing. I rested but could not go to sleep, for fear of another telepathic message. The sun was slowly setting, and a nurse came in with a plate of bangers and mash, green beans, ham, and broccoli. Apparently they forgot I was a vegetarian. I ate all the other foods first, even the broccoli. I vaguely remembered the taste of ham, and it must have tasted a lot like pepperoni and bacon, the only other meats that I will eat when I’m not starving. As I ate the meat, I gagged a little, just because it had been about five years since I had had any other meat, besides of course pepperoni and bacon. I was full before I ate the last slice, so I flushed it down the toilet along with my mashed potatoes. I would never eat those, unless I was literally starving, and even then it would be doubtful. I tried to drain out all thoughts of dragons, griffins, bauchans, alphyns, fairies, pixies, rocs, trows, berserkers, dark elves, bangers, and most importantly, the Black Diamond.

# I Almost Get Eaten by Calamari

When I did go to bed, once again, it was full of dreadful incubuses. This time there was an elf with hair braided with golden lockets and a crown of obsidian, I guess? A missing gap was on the face of the crown, and I knew what went in it. “I am Farbjodr, king of the dark elves,” The Dark Lord introduced himself. “I am Colby, king of bad archery,” I stated, but I wish I hadn’t because he laughed at me like the kids at my school laughed at me when Nelson put ice chunks in my pocket without me realizing it. I was yelping like a burning fox. “So now you see how hopeless your cause is,” the evil king said with an malevolent grin showing all his golden teeth. He must have been punched a hundred times for that to happen, but then again for an elf about three thousand years old, you’d expect having to have a lot of teeth to get pulled. Or maybe he just did it to look cool. “No, I just see how haughty you are.” “Haughty!” growled the Destroyer. “When we meet in person, you will find out why my name is Destroyer, and just for fun, I’ll let you live. After you see all your family executed!” “Keep dreaming,” I mumbled. I know, it was cliché, but was there a better comeback than that? “You’re the one who’s dreaming, if you remember correctly!” Farbjodr said, which was the best comeback yet. “No, it’s a nightmare,” I said. “Thank you,” cackled Farbjodr. “No, you don’t understand,” I said. “I just hate to see how ugly you are, that’s what’s nightmarish. Those teeth, if you can call them teeth, dentures, more, well they let you see every single thing stuck in your teeth.” Farbjodr was obviously insulted, but then he said something that horrified me. “Just for that, tomorrow, at sundown, your father will be burned at the stake. Keeping that in mind, you’d better run, boy.” I jerked awake. The light of dawn passed through my window. I was kind of glad, yet scared. I wouldn’t have to break out of the hospital, but it was later then I would like, with our luck it may take another ten days to get there. I checked my clock, and it was eight in the morning. A nurse came in, and when she saw me she said that she had come to wake me up. “What time will my family be here?” I asked. “In about thirty minutes,” she replied. “You must miss them.” “Yes ma’am,” I said. “Well, here’s your breakfast.” She handed me some cereal. “Thank you,” I acknowledged. When she left I ate it a little too fast. I didn’t want to be halfway done when my Mom got here. When I finished all of it accept the sugary milk, I placed the tray on the table and sipped some nice, cold chocolate milk. I would have liked hot tea better. I felt really energetic and worried. At last the door opened and the nurse and Mom came in, along with everybody else in the family. “Mom, we’ve got to go!” I said, sitting up from the gurney. My back hurt like crazy, I guessed it was because I had been laying on the gurney all day and all night. Toby still had his cast, and was leaning his weight to his intact leg. I stood up and hugged Mom, then all the others. “Where’s Maxine?” I asked. “He went to go get gas while we were here. By the time we get down there he’ll probably be there.” My hand felt a lot better, but it still hurt when I moved it. We made our way downstairs, and then Mom signed Toby and me out.

When we got outside the taxi still wasn’t there. Since the only people around were driving in cars, I told Mom about my dream. “We need to get to the gas station; he might have been kidnapped too!” I said excitedly. Mom led us down the sidewalk as we jogged at a good speed, so that Toby could keep up but we would get there soon. I had a bad feeling about this. I could smell the unmistakable scent of fire and gasoline. I saw some police cars drive by, then a police motorcycle stopped by. “There’s a gas explosion over there, this road is closed down,” reported the officer. “But our taxi driver was down there! Is everyone alright?” asked Mom. “Yeah, from what we know. I’m sorry, ma’am, duty calls.” That was the most cliché police saying ever. I knew what had happened deep down, but I didn’t want to scare my family-still, it was better than him dying. “Can dark elves teleport?” I asked. “Yes, why do you ask?” Mom questioned. “I think a dark elf overpowered him, then as he teleported lit the gas to quit suspicion.” “Makes sense, I’ll grant you,” said Jonathan. “In that case, he’s either dead or taken,” Mom said. “So we have to give up finding him here, and go search for him and your Dad at Islay!” Mom said, like one of those medieval captains cheering on his men.

I did not like our new taxi driver nearly as much as Maxine. He never spoke except to ask you for his pay, and if any of us asked him something, he’d tell us to ‘zip it’. Of course, he didn’t do that to Mom; I guess he was one of those people who think kids are only good for work. It was a two hour drive to Oban, and he asked for twenty-five pounds. Sure, he didn’t ask for a hundred, but if we weren’t saving anyone then I thought it would hardly be worth it. On the other hand, Oban was a long way away from the Cairn Gorm. When we departed, we quickly made our way to the pier. The city was a lot smaller than I expected. I looked up at the sun and speculated it was about ten o’clock. Mom thankfully took the faster way to Islay, five Jet Skis. After we bought our quite expensive jets, Mom didn’t take the time to teach us anything else besides go and stop. In fact I think those were the only controls. I asked her if she wanted me to carry her backpack, but she took off and forced me to follow. It was easier than I expected, and even Joshua was doing well. We were in the Sound of Kerrera, my mom had told me. “Are there any sea monsters here?” I shouted over the roar of the jet, which was soaking Joshua who was trying to catch up so he could bump me. Mom didn’t answer, but kept looking straight ahead. She probably couldn’t hear me, or she was ignoring me for the sake of Joshua. I knew that if she was ignoring me, there had to be something that would scare Joshua to death. I silently prayed. The choppy waves were like ramps on a motorcycle game, but I think this was much more exciting. There was land on either side of us, kind of like a river but it was actually the water in between the mainland and an island. Mom took a turn and I steered right. We were riding for hours through sounds and seas. I suddenly remembered where the kraken[[7]](#footnote-7) lived. Wasn’t it around the Baltic Sea? I suddenly got a bad feeling in my stomach. Riding the Jet Skis was just as boring as driving in a normal car now. But both of those combined wouldn’t equal my fear of calamari. Calamariphobia maybe? Mom’s face was grim and serious, if not terrified. I bet I was more scared. The biggest thing I had faced so far was the roc, but I had a feeling the roc would be like a parakeet compared to the kraken. I had heard that the kraken was a giant squid, but had seen old pictures of an octopus dwarfing the ship it was attacking. I didn’t notice the oil until I heard some weird noises coming from my ski motor. It was as thick as tar, but not quite as sticky, though it did slow down our skis. I could barely make out the outline of some large islands. “That’s Islay,” Mom said, pointing to the farthest one. It looked so close yet it would take too long to get to it through all the sludge. My Dad would be killed long before we got there. If I had just stayed quiet with the Dokkalfar king, then I would at least be able to see him again. I turned around and what I feared the most came straight for me. Joshua bumped me.

I was flung off my ski as my vehicle flipped around and floated upside down. I’m a great swimmer, or so says my Mom, but it was more like quicksand, not water. I was sinking pretty fast, too, about to drown in the oil. Mom was about ten feet from me, right ahead. She knew that if she got out she would be a victim too, but if she drove backwards, there was a good chance I’d be run over. I suddenly stopped treading water-well, oil actually. I knew this was going to be the end, but I couldn’t think of any last words good enough, except: “Joshua, didn’t you read the sign? No bumping!” But I didn’t want to waste my breath; I’d need it to try to breathe under the disgusting sticky substance. “Colby,” Mom said, her eyes starting to fill with tears. Then I realized something before my head was submerged. Toby, the closest one to me, tried to reach for my hand, but even if he could reach me there would be no way to force my hand through the glop. I tried again to kick to the surface, but it was hopeless. Before I sunk I saw Jonathan pulling a rope out of his backpack. “I’m sorry,” Joshua said as if it was one of those times he had hit me, nothing serious. I closed my eyes and gave one last warning of the horrible truth. “Ink!” I shouted. The oil was ink.

If you were wondering why I closed my eyes before I sank into the ink, if I made it out I would not want ink in my eyes. I tried to close my mouth but ink rushed in. It tasted worse than I expected. I stayed under the ink longer than I expected I would hold, and then I remembered to pray. I prayed that if I didn’t make it out alive, then that my family would. I prayed that if I did survive I’d see my Dad alive. I prayed that if I was going to die, that it would be quick. I was slipping into unconsciousness when I felt a tug on my right leg. It hurt so much that I thought my leg was gone. I felt myself tear through the tar towards the clean salt water. No, it’s not really clean, but better than ink! Instead of the hot mucky feeling inside the ink, I felt the freezing cold water as I was pulled to the surface. I was lifted about twenty feet into the air, and dangled upside-down by my leg. I saw Mom look over towards me while I heard the faint cries of Joshua, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Mom looked relieved and frightened at the same time. I was being held by a monstrous tentacle. I coughed up the black ink as it fell towards the sea. Soon all my family was looking at the tendril and me. Toby tried to turn his ski around after drawing his sword, but the ink was quite hard to move through. I heard a splash as a huge wave bore towards my family and a terrible octopus head shot up out of the water.

As the wave hit the ink it turned black and then splashed down right before hitting my family. I was glad they were fine, but terrified at the creature. Its eyes were just like in the pictures, rounded like some deep sea creature rimmed with gold but its pupils were as black as its ink. It was emerald green with light blue splotches all over its face. Two flaps like those on the tip of a squid’s head were hanging on a hard shell, also like a squid. My arrows all started to spill out of my quiver and my bow was nowhere to be seen, probably washed away by the kraken’s tsunami. I snatched a falling arrow and stabbed the tentacle over and over again to no avail. At last I threw the arrow towards the kraken’s eye but I was never a good pitcher; it landed about fifteen feet away from him.

The kraken turned upside-down so that its terrifying beak was right below me. Its tentacles were straight up in the air, blocking off all the sharks or humans that may try to steal its prey. I saw the mandibles getting closer and closer as I was being lowered. Joshua couldn’t swim, so Toby was still trying to pass into the open waters. I heard the kraken roar as my doom awaited me, but then I saw Jonathan swinging around a rope with his backpack tied to it. He was going to choke it. He was giving up his food and water to save me again. He tossed it and it slipped in between the empty gap of tentacles and fell down into the monster’s gaping mouth. As the kraken realized something was in its mouth, it snapped its mouth shut. I was surprised its beak didn’t snap the rope, but it held amazingly. The kraken tried to swallow it but couldn’t so it tried sucking it in like you may do to spaghetti. It lost interest in eating me at the moment, but was directing itself to eat Jonathan’s backpack. I suddenly saw Jonathan’s real plan. He was slowly being pulled in as the kraken sucked in the rope. Toby’s hands gripped the back of his seat, as they were both being dragged closer and closer to the monster squid. At last I saw them break through the ink, and then rip through the water. As Jonathan passed by, Toby slashed at the tentacles. I saw Jonathan let go of the rope and the string slipped into its mouth like a fisherman reeling in its meal. I was disappointed that he didn’t choke, but then I saw Toby approach the tendril carrying me, then he cut straight through the tentacle. The kraken roared as I dropped for the sea surface.

I did the most painful belly flop ever when I hit the surface. I sank into the water about four feet, then spat out ink. The kraken’s tentacles waved in the air, and then they bashed the water, vainly trying to hit Toby and Jonathan. One of the kraken’s arms splashed next to me, so I grabbed on. I noticed spiky suction cups on its limbs like cookie-cutters. The kraken shook me off and I landed right in the ink, next to Joshua’s ski. He pulled me out and onto his Jet Ski, my clothes dripping with the tar. I thanked him and jumped for my jet, about four feet away, still upside-down. I flipped it over, and the whole thing was covered in black sludge. I climbed onto the seat and was hoping it would work, when one of the kraken’s actual arms, the long ones you see on squids splashed into the ink and sent all of us in separate directions, but it also separated the ink, which was a relief. I noticed ten appendages on the kraken, like a squid, though he mostly looked like an octopus. Toby and Jonathan were still circling the kraken, but then Mom shouted and they started shooting towards us. I prayed that my ski would work as I turned on the ignition and it shot off to my pleasure. Soon everybody was slicing through the waves at full speed, with the kraken following close behind. Jonathan stopped his jet and threw his knife at the squid, but it only sunk into the water, so he started moving again. We were heading straight for Islay. Some tentacles shot up out of the water like geysers and almost capsized my ski, but I had become used to riding on it, so with much difficulty I dodged the tentacles like a biker dodging trees. We saw what Mom called the Isle of Jura, and then the Island of Colonsay. A huge mountain stood tall in front of us. The Sgarbh breac, our destination. I did not want to go there, but I continued fleeing the kraken. Just when I thought we’d be dead meat before we reached the sea, I heard a scraping noise. The water was too shallow for the kraken. It tried to grab us with its ten long arms but couldn’t. I breathed a sigh of relief. We had escaped another giant.

We landed on the Eastern corner of the island and all hugged. My back hurt a lot, that’s what sitting for hours on end does to you. My hands were red and calloused. There was literally no sign of civilization. “We can eat on the way,” Mom said. She pulled three chocolate chip oatmeal bars out of the pack and tossed them to Jonathan and me, the ones without food. We started hiking on towards the mountain, no matter how sore we were, no matter how much I wanted to take a shower to wash off all the ink on me. “Now, if we get captured they’ll try to scare us, do not scream or they will kill you,” Mom informed. Great news! Mom pulled Dad’s records out of her knapsack and tried to find the pages. Some of the pages were soaked with salt water, useless. When she at last came to another wet sheet of paper, she could barely make out the title, Svartalfar. She used her handkerchief to wipe off her foggy glasses and tried to make out the words. She apparently failed. “Toby, you try to see how to get in,” Mom said. He also wiped off his glasses with his wet shirt. “I can’t,” he said, defeated. “Let’s try someone without glasses,” Mom suggested. “Me! Me!” Joshua cried, bouncing up and down. “You can’t even read,” I mumbled. Jonathan and I gave it a try, but all I could see was splattered ink on an old, soggy sheet of paper. Thankfully, Mom held a case with Dad’s encyclopedia. “It’s useless,” Toby said. “Mom, can’t you remember how to get in?” “No, it’s been about fifteen years since I read this sheet.”

“I read it Thursday, three days ago,” I said. “How do we get in?” asked Toby. Suddenly all went quiet as six shadowy figures pointed their swords and bows at us. “We are the Dokkalfar, and we’ve been expecting you for two months, not long for an elf, but I suppose you really miss him,” mocked one with a black bow. I resisted the urge to sock him in the face, dislocate his jaw maybe, but I decided not to. “Stand where you are and drop your weapons,” the elf said who was the captain, apparently. He wore a vest made of bear hide and a wolverine fur cap. I saw Toby clench his teeth, since wolverines are his favorite animal. Toby, Joshua and Mom reluctantly threw the weapons into a pile. “You, warrior, you’re not supposed to be here!” The captain turned on me after pulling out a leather whip. Apparently he thought I was a dark elf, due to the ink covering my body. I felt a terrible burn on my back that revealed my clothing. The dark elves all started laughing. “Did that kraken beat you up?” asked one. It was a shame, I had a brilliant plan that was about to commence, the old “pretend you’re a bad guy” trick. Apparently, they were too smart for that.

“You’ll see your father soon enough,” chortled the leader. “I am Dothador[[8]](#footnote-8), captain of King Farbjodr!” He cursed as a ray of sunlight hit his face. I slowly got up but another elf pushed me down with his muddy foot. “Get them on the horses.” We were chained, gagged, and brought to seven black mares with red, fiery eyes. We all got placed on the horses like towels on a towel rack. My blood started rushing to my head as I was dangled like that. It was even worse when we started moving. You do not want to be upside down, riding on a horse, gagged and tied at the same time. It’s quite nauseating. It seemed to take hours, and I saw the sun still high in the air, but sinking towards the west. We were heading north. It was around three o’clock so I was kind of glad we got captured or else we’d never find the door before sundown. How come the time limit’s always sundown? I suddenly was dragged off the horse and blindfolded, then led down a prairie by foot. At least I thought it was a prairie, it didn’t quite feel like a forest, much windier. I can’t tell you what the entrance looked like, since I was blindfolded, but I did hear a grating noise and then we made our way down some tunnel. I heard the grating sound again and a thud, the door closing. We remained blindfolded as we walked for quite a long time through halls that were pretty smooth, I couldn’t feel any bumps. I noticed that it would have been really dark even without my blindfold, so really we didn’t need it anymore.

I heard commotion and people jeering at us. They spoke in a really weird accent. I heard some wooden doors open and was thrown to the floor as the gates shut again. One of the elves tore our blindfolds and gags off and pushed me to the floor, so I lay there in a kneeling position. We were in a hall of black granite. The floor was as cold and smooth as my mom’s granite countertops. There were pillars thicker than a tree, amazing masonry chiseled into it with designs of giant snakes, wars, giants and huge wolves. I looked down at the end of the room, which was a throne room, and saw a beautiful throne with diamonds, rubies, sapphires, opals and amethysts. Now the king sitting on the throne was the opposite of beautiful. He sat there with his wicked grin and his antlered black crown. His golden teeth sparkled in the torchlight. “I’m so glad you could make it, two more hours and we’d have to carry out the execution without you. Now, Bobsouths,” “Franknorths,” I growled. I felt a blow on my cheek and fell to the ground with a bloody lip. “Well, anyway, I suppose you want to hear of all our plans,” King Farbjodr continued. “Yes, your entire journey has been our plan! It’s so amusing that you haven’t caught on already.” “I knew,” Mom said silently. “What did you say, woman? Speak up!” ordered the Destroyer. “I knew of all your plans, and I’ve prepared for them,” Mom shouted to make her voice clear.

“Then tell me my plans,” he laughed, obviously enjoying himself. “The spy was a crow. You sent that message to Toby to divert our attention. You put your henchmen in every hotel on our route, since you knew we were bound to rest. We came to the one with Ted, the berserkers who was working with you. You knew at least one of us would probably be injured, though you were almost sure your own servant would die. The closest hospital had the mysterious doctor, who had the shades, the perfect decoy. I don’t know why you did that, since you obviously wanted us to get here quickly. And you knew I would bring the Black Diamond to bargain with you to free Thomas.” One of the hunters who had captured us walked to the king, his metal boots clicking on the floor. He handed a black, round stone to the king. “You catch on fast, but you didn’t expect us to know this is a fake!!!” He threw the stone on the floor and stomped on it over and over again to shatter it. All it did was make cracks in the granite. “Oh, so it is real. This is great! Did you not expect me to search you?” Mom looked completely disappointed. Farbjodr pushed his new gem into his crown. It fit perfectly. It was real. So what was so important about it? “I really hoped you would have translated our little message. It was in Old Norse. Ript setja inn gumi. Has a nice ring to it.” “But I want the gummies *now*!” Joshua screeched. “The only ‘gummy’ you’re going to get is the busted one that holds your teeth in place!” hollered the king in a temper tantrum. “You’re mean!” Joshua insulted. “You’re ludicrous!” mocked the dark lord. “Thank you.” Joshua said, not knowing the definition. “That phrase, in Old Norse, means ‘clothes make the man”. I’m pretty sure you get what that means; that berserkers. Take them to see their father-and husband, I guess. Chop chop!” I saw his crown radiate with black beams. I was lifted by my shirt collar into the air and was gagged and blindfolded once again. One of the guards was guarding me from the rear, but then slipped in a puddle of ink that had formed below me. “Somebody clean up this ink!” shouted Farbjodr.

I felt my blindfold being taken off, along with my gag, thankfully. I realized we were in a circular room with a floor with Celtic designs etched into the stone. Another prisoner was in with us, with long, uncombed hair and a pretty long beard. Five guards each were assigned to chain us to a metal hook, which then transformed into a metal ring, giving us no escape. “You’re in luck,” said our guard with a smirk on his face. “You get one of the highest cells.” “How does that make a difference?” I asked roughly. “So you’re not too close to the Alphyns!!” he laughed before pulling a lever. The floor opened up like a door, leaving us dangling in midair. None of us screamed, following Mom’s advice of no fear. “This batch is boring,” he complained to another elf. “No screaming. Of course, all the others are dead.” I looked down slowly and saw the floor was at least a hundred feet below. There were two red creatures pacing below us. “No!” I said, recognizing them at first. “Alphyns! You cruel dwarves should be there instead! What did you do to make them vicious? Starve them? Take away their cubs?” “Yes, in fact,” the elf guard said. “A little bit of both, actually. And we are not dwarves! Dwarves are tiny! We are tall!” “Wait till you see a giraffe,” I mocked. “If only I could just kill you now,” the elf said after scowling at me. “My master wants you alive to see your family die! This is fun.” He walked away and I suddenly recognized the other prisoner, who had been silent. “Dad!” I cried, shaking my chains. “Thomas!” Mom cried. “It’s been two months!” “Maurine! Guys!” He said; his voice more frail than I’d ever heard. “I was going to be executed today. Now I’m going to be executed tomorrow.” “I’d rather be executed too than to stay here for the rest of my life, probably being tortured, and worse of all I’d be forced to watch you die. These elves are ten times more evil then you said in your notes.” “I see you’ve seen alphyns before,” Dad stated after a pause. “Yeah, the ones underneath the fallen tree,” I answered. “Windsplitter’s awesome, Dad! He fought an alphyn!” “I’ve seen him face more,” Dad said sadly. “That dragon is more loyal than any dog, he’s not a pet. He’s family.” “You said the same thing about Spot,” I mumbled. Spot was a white and brown mutt who had run away about two years ago. Today I was wondering if some faerie got him. “Yeah, the clurichauns started to like him, so when he ran away they kept him,” Dad explained. “They pampered him like a pink poodle.” I heard Joshua giggle despite the circumstances, and I couldn’t help smiling. “Let’s just hope they haven’t introduced him to brandy.” I burst out laughing, but Joshua didn’t know what it was so he just looked at me, flabbergasted. “What did Windsplitter face greater than alphyns?” Toby asked. Dad sighed and began, “he braved the army of Dokkalfar.”

“What?” I said, dumbfounded. “Windsplitter told us that he was taking a walk!” “He was,” Dad clarified hoarsely. “But it’s kind of hard not to notice a whole brigade of dark elves. One elf alone is almost impossible to hear, but not an entire patrol. He ran faster than I had ever seen anything else that I had seen. I was in my study room when I saw Windsplitter bound out of the woods and into the yard. He roared and I knew something was wrong. I grabbed my sword and stood with Windsplitter in the backyard, claws and swords ready. Windsplitter told me to get a shield, since they had archers. I ran off to get one as the elves advanced. He held them off valiantly, charging through their ranks and scorching their men, but there seemed to be no end of their waves. One of the dark elves managed to jab him with a halberd[[9]](#footnote-9), that’s where he got the scar you might have seen on him. I ran back out with a dustbin lid as a shield, but I was unaware of what the archers would fire. I heard them order to fall back, and only the archers stayed put. They shot out blunt arrows that burst on impact to the ground. It was sleeping gas. I fell asleep only seconds after they had fired them, but I don’t think Windsplitter fell asleep until he at last gave away. He told your Mom about my capture and about who captured me, I’m guessing. I’m also guessing you ran into the kraken,” Dad assumed, staring at my ruined clothes. “Yeah, I wish they would at least let me wash off,” I groaned. “Usually the krakens live in the Greenland Sea, but I guess the dark elves lured him here to guard.” “You know, you could just ask me!” reminded the guard. “He traveled here on his own. We had a habit of throwing our meat and leftovers in the sea and that kraken followed it like a shark and chum. Why would we want you to die by it and not us? That would be preposterous.” I suddenly recognized him. “You’re oyster clinger!” “Osterkligir,” he corrected. “I am now Hridsky.” “Why’d you change your name? My Mom likes oysters,” I asked. “It means weak, which is what I was for not capturing your father in the first place!” “What does your new name mean, meanie?” Joshua said in a vain attempt to insult him. “No, it means Storm Cloud!” He growled. “You’re weaker now than ever,” I muttered. “Because now you just fear the punishments, but back then you were brave enough to break away from your people.” “You scum,” he hissed. “I just wish I could feed you to Daisy and Rose down there.” He pointed at the pacing alphyns. “So that’s the real reason their vicious, you named them after flowers,” Toby joked. I saw the one I guessed was Daisy leap up and snap at the air. “And they’re both males,” I grumbled, studying their long horns that females don’t have. “That was predictable.”

I don’t know how long we stayed down there, but it was actually better than I feared. It might have even been a little fun. I could tell Hridsky was pondering whether to let us out. He told us that after he had let Dad escape he had been whipped severely, which, I believed was the only thing holding him back. I guessed it was far into the night, and then I asked Hridsky when the execution would begin. “Midday, tomorrow,” he answered briefly. A large bird fluttered onto his shoulder. It was an owl, I realized. He took a dead white mouse out of a satchel and handfed it. A large and bulky elf walked in. “Your duty is relinquished. I’ll be watching them tonight.” Without a word, Hridsky walked away so we could not see him. None of us spoke, and we could hardly dare to breathe as those black, unblinking eyes stared at us. An hour passed with none of us uttering a word, and still the guard didn’t even move. At last the sentry spoke. “I do realize you want to escape,” he said his voiced deep and gruff. “Everyone does for the first few years. Too bad only one of you is going to make it through the next day.” “What’s so special about me, why won’t you just kill me too?” “Master always likes it when there’s a family. Then he kills the others and leaves one to rot in the cell. He chose you, there’s nothing special about any human.” I closed my eyes and prayed inside my head that Hridsky would help us out, and that he would not be harmed. “Where’s Maxine?” I asked, shocked that I had forgotten about him. “In another cell. We were just playing with you, slowing you down, scaring you, letting your hopes fall like gravity.” A black sword stabbed into his side. “Gravity doesn’t fall,” said a familiar voice. “But evil does.” I saw the sentinel collapse onto the cobblestone floor. Hridsky stepped in front of the barred gate and asked, “Can you raise your feet, don’t want to crush them.” I laughed with joy as I obediently lifted my feet as high as I could when hanging above a huge gap. The trapdoor slammed shut as Hridsky pulled up the lever. He took the other guard’s keys and unlocked the door, then unchained us. “Thanks,” I said. “Vaskr,” Dad renamed the only good Dokkalfar I knew of. “Thank you,” he said gravely. “Vaskr the Brave,” Dad specified. “Vaskr” smirked at his new title. “It means Brave the Brave,” Mom whispered. I chuckled. “Guards! Escaped prisoners!” Vaskr shouted. I was dumbfounded. Why would he free us to capture us again? To quicken the execution? He pulled open a door to an empty prison cell and threw the whole family in, then slammed the door again.

# The Battle of Shadow and Smoke

“They went that way!” Vaskr said when the guards arrived. He pointed at a hole with a ladder leading down it. My family and I were on the ground in the cell as quiet as a mouse. The guards all climbed down the ladder one by one. They never seemed to quit coming, but then Dothador the captain walked by and struck Vaskr hard in the face. He then gripped his throat and growled like a bulldog. “You scum! You guard like a rabbit guarding a bear! How did they escape?” “One of the elves, I couldn’t see his face, he shoved me, killed the guard, and then stabbed my leg.” He pointed to a bloody wound on his thigh. He had planned this out the whole time! He was good at this stuff. “I’ll let you go this time, but you help us in the search.” “Yes, captain,” he said, following the evil leader down the ladder. I was surprised nobody even looked in the cell in which we huddled; I guess they were too focused on the “escaped prisoners”. I heard a guard yell, “It was Hridsky, he paid me to lie to you, but I was too loyal!” He accused, obviously wanting a promotion. We stepped out of the cell and Dad grabbed a great sword from the dead guard as we heard several swords being drawn. I took a black bow and quiver from the guard. Toby grabbed another sword from him. Wow, this guy was overloaded with weapons. “You all release Maxine and try to find the escape; I’ll try to meet you on the shore. Toby, Colby, go with your Mom.” “I’ve got to help you, there are only three of us and…” “Alright, I don’t have time to argue!” Dad shouted, leaping down the porthole, not bothering to use the ladder. He landed about fifteen feet below us and struggled to his feet. I stared down the hole and was tempted to take the ladder, but that would take too long. I then realized how thirsty I was. Dad was already walking off to the execution, so I forced myself to leap. Toby leaped after a few seconds (He’s much more cautious than I). I was in a dark room with not one torch, but I still stepped into darkness where I heard Dad plow through their ranks, blindly swinging and stabbing at the evil faeries. I heard another sword join the battle; I guessed it was Vaskr. I loaded an arrow but then thought about what I was doing. How would I see what I was shooting in such darkness?

I saw Toby leap to the dusty floor of the dark room. Swords and maces clanged all around us but I couldn’t see a thing. I heard a crunch and in a flash Toby struck an unseen elf. “He was behind you,” he noted. “I could barely see him.” I could barely see the whole battle, but I was scared I’d shoot Dad or Vaskr. “Thanks,” I recognized. I then remembered vaguely walking past some hall and hearing an elf put up our packs. Surely there would be a flashlight. “I’ll be right back!” I informed Toby. I climbed up the ladder as fast as I could and ran through the dungeon halls, which were curiously empty. I sprinted till I was out of breath and my feet were sore, but then I saw our packs hanging on some serpent statues protruding from the stone walls. I searched Mom’s pack high and low but couldn’t find the light. Then I saw some matches at the bottom of the pack. I grabbed a spear that was hanging a few yards away from the packs, then I wrapped Mom’s handkerchief around the blunt end. I struck a match, but I never was good at it. I properly lit the handmade torch when the seventh match was used up. I was pretty proud of myself until I heard a voice ask, “What’s that light?” I guessed it was coming from a wooden door with a barred window. I lay flat against the cold and wet wall and edged my way over to the door. The door swung open and hit my face, but I quickly recovered and put the flickering flame in a tall elf’s face. He shrieked and fell onto the floor, and then another one came out with a machete in hand. I recognized him as the one who had sent me the telepathic message the first time. He winced at the torchlight but kept his face confident and sure. “Ah, do we have a little rebel here?” He teased. “You have no suitable weapon but a spear used as a torch, if you were to use the spear end you’d burn yourself! I am General Garexus, the highest ranking officer besides the king. There’s no way you can beat me.” He swung his sword so fast that I barely had enough time to block it, and when I did my torch was split in half. In one hand I had a spear that was more like a dagger now, and a torch so small it singed my fingers. I dropped the torch and yelped in pain. I still had my bow, but I would not have enough time to load and fire the arrow before he sliced me in two. I tried to stab his chest with my dagger but the tip simply broke off on contact. “Platinum armor,” informed the cruel General. “Doesn’t break so easily!” I was glad I slipped on the wet floor because he aimed a blow to sever my head, but I fell just in time. I hit the floor hard on my back, but then I crab-walked back, fearing another blow. I could tell he was trying to intimidate me before I died, and it was working pretty well. I got to my feet slower than I would have hoped, because another slice cut my shoulder slightly. I suddenly remembered my obligation and grabbed the burning torch, stuck it near his face one more time, then I ran down the hall. I turned around and saw him trying to recuperate from my torch, and I shouted back at him, “Sorry Hermey the Elf, but I gotta go help my reindeer friends!” I laughed at myself for such a clever joke, but when I turned a corner my temper lowered. I heard a snap and saw something bounce off the stone wall next to me. A crossbow.

 I dashed down the labyrinth of halls and bridges being swiftly pursued by a naughty elf with a crossbow. I zigzagged from wall to wall to dodge the bolts he fired again and again at me. One of the bolts whistled past my ear so close I could hear it loud and clear. It was a good thing it’s pretty hard to load a crossbow while running. I can barely shoot a short bow when running. I thanked God for making these halls turn every few yards, if it was one straight hall I’d be a real pincushion. I verified a fear that was gnawing at my mind. I was lost. At last I saw a fleet of stairs leading down into the lower halls. My torch was smoking hot and starting to get unbearable. At last I did another desperate action. I threw the torch right in Garexus’ face. He screamed in pain and I caught the scent of burnt hair. Then I realized all the elves had long hair, like in modern movies and books. I guessed that was how they were in mythology. Then another thought dawned on me. I had thrown away my entire mission to bring the torch back. I saw the torch roll across the floor and past where Garexus was whimpering in pain and covering his face to block out the agony. I should’ve felt sad for him, but I didn’t. It was probably just a first degree burn, but that was probably major for the Svartalfar.

I saw the embers of the torch slowly die out. I coughed and my eyes burned with the smoke. I ran down the stairs no matter how dark it was. Since the General was still recovering, I found a staff that was hanging off the wall. They really had a lot of spare items. I pulled it out and repeated my earlier actions minus the hankie; I tore some of my shirt off instead. When it was lit I started running again. How would Toby, Dad, and Vaskr be holding? I had told Toby I’d be right back but it had been at least fifteen minutes. I heard the clank of metal and ran into a gloomy passage. I saw Dad, Vaskr, and Toby standing on some stairs slashing at the oncoming army. Only four or five elves had fallen, so I took it they were pretty strong. I was standing on what was like a stone stage, where the elves could only get up three ways. There was one on each side, and Toby, Dad and Vaskr stood at that high point slashing at the elves below. I pulled out the bow I had found and loaded it with one of the dark arrows. I pulled back and felt satisfied when I saw the arrow bounce off an elf’s helmet. I heard him fall to the ground, unconscious. “Colby! I almost died twice!” Toby yelled. He blocked another elf who would have scalped him. “Three times! By the way, where have you been?” I proudly showed him my hand-made torch, which was almost already out, and then he proudly showed me his flashlight. I groaned in frustration and let my torch clatter to the floor, since it was already nothing more than a smoking stick. I pulled back another arrow and scanned the area for Dothador, Toby’s flashlight dimly lighting the room. I then saw his tall, black helmet. (Just assume everything related to elves in here is black.) I just about released it, but then I felt something cold on my neck and the arrow shot the ceiling instead. I felt my feet leave the floor and heard an evil voice whisper, “You will die seeing your friends and family die as well!” I felt a squeeze on the neck and started kicking my legs in the air. I knew exactly who it was, my old enemy. I tried to reach for an arrow in my quiver but I could already feel my strength slipping away. Then I heard a thump and an arrow pierced an unarmored spot on Garexus. He screamed and dropped me. Garexus said stuff that turned the air blue and I wouldn’t dream of writing down as I breathed heavily, trying to recover my air. I turned towards where I guessed the arrow had flung from, and Vaskr was blocking some elves’ swords with his metal bow. I saw him crack his bow on an elf, which slowly fell unconscious.

 Garexus pulled the arrow from his arm. It was covered with black blood. He charged me, seemingly unhurt. I jumped off the stage and landed on the rocky floor littered with swords, helmets, and one or two unconscious or dead bodies. I clutched a short sword and stepped back as the evil General leaped down where I would have been. I charged him but he gripped my wrist and twisted it with strength that I thought would be impossible for an elf that looked so…weak. I screamed and dropped and my short sword clattered to the ground. I looked towards Vaskr, hoping he had an arrow aimed strait at my enemy, but instead he was slashing at three elves charging him. I was quite surprised none of us had died yet. I fell onto by knees in pain, cutting them on the rough ground.

I saw a helmet just out of hand’s reach. I didn’t know exactly what I would do with it-or how I would get to it with Garexus still grasping my wrist. I yanked back as hard as I could, but it barely did anything to Garexus except surprised him a little. He now had his other hand pointing a sword at me. I then knew that I had to play dirty. I pried one of his pinkies loose and pulled it back. Joshua had done it to me once, and it hurt. A lot. The General cried out and loosened his grip, allowing me to edge closer to the helmet. I grabbed the helmet, which was, of course black. It had a split running down from the eyeholes, allowing the wearer to breathe. I stood up warily. Garexus now had his sword swung back, seconds away from swinging down and putting an end to my life. I quickly put the helmet on my worst enemy. You may ask how that would affect him. Here’s how. I put it on backwards. He let go of me and swung his sword back and forth blindly. I was surprised he didn’t try taking it off. I heard a clang and one of Garexus’ own warriors was knocked to the ground. He stayed on the floor, cowering away from his leader. I grabbed my short sword just as Garexus took off his helmet and I stabbed his back, a non-survivable blow. If he didn’t have armor on, that is. It merely scratched his plated mail. I gasped as he swung his great sword my way.

 I closed my eyes, preparing for my sure destruction. Instead I heard a bang, and saw Dad blocking Garexus’ blow with his own great sword. Garexus slid his sword down the blade, sending sparks up into the air. When Dad and his blades were untangled, Dad hit me with the flat of his blade, sending me to the ground quick enough that Garexus’s sword merely flew past my head. I decided this was not my fight anymore. I wanted to get back onto the stage with my nice bow and no elves to worry about, but in our combat we had journeyed out into the middle of the battlefield. I noticed that the stage where my allies stood was closer than my original stage, and several dark elves blocked either way, none attacking Dad, knowing they might harm Garexus in the process. I hacked my way through the elves, making my way closer and closer to the other stage. Sadly, my blows merely bruised their skin beneath their armor. I turned around and saw a huge sword swing my way so I hit the floor and saw the blade sink into another elf’s shoulder. I wriggled across the floor on my belly, trying in vain to dodge the stomping platinum feet. At last I found a clearing away from the angry imps. I stood up warily, then, to my greatest disappointment, as my eyes scanned the room, I saw swords pointed right at my allies’ throats, and mine!

 A gruesome warrior dressed in rusty armor limped up to the stage I had previously stood upon, followed by the rest of my family and Maxine, chained up and escorted by more skeletal warriors. I could already tell they were not dark elves. They all had helmets with long metal horns coming up from them. I saw Dad’s face flush red with anger and surprise. The leading zombie started clucking his tongue in disappointment. “General Karsh is not pleased. He is *very* disappointed.” He pointed to my chained family and friends. “We caught them trying to steal the Black Diamond!” Dad gasped and I saw a hint of fear in his face. “I bet most of you do not know what the Black Diamond is, do you? It is the symbol of power, the most valuable item in all of earth! With it, my master Farbjodr will gather the berserkers, frost giants[[10]](#footnote-10), and of course, we draugar[[11]](#footnote-11)!” He placed his skeletal hand upon his fading breastplate, proudly showing he too was a draugr. “Now you will be taken to my king and you will all be executed immediately. Any questions?” I raised my hand quickly, just like I was still in school. “What?” hissed the zombie Viking. “You weren’t supposed to answer!” “If you’re an undead Viking, then why do you have a horned helmet? I thought that was made up by the English to show how bad you were!” “Well, true, but once we heard of that superstition the draugr couldn’t resist imitating it! Any more questions…and do not actually ask them this…” he was interrupted by Joshua mumbling through his gag. Toby guessed what he was saying and asked, “Why do you want to gather together? I mean obviously for war, but why go to war? Wouldn’t you rather go back to bed…or coffin?” General Karsh scowled and replied, “You unlearned English folk! It’s obviously because we wish to rebuild the Viking Empire, a raiding, ruling dominion that will soon cover the world! Then, English scum, we will spread our curse of long life so that not even the dogs will be alive…completely. They will be kind of alive, just, also dead. Well, you see what I mean; they will be draugr as well! Maybe this will help you get an idea of it!” I heard a steady crunch of footsteps coming from behind me, so I slowly turned around. Two eyes as creepy as Karsh’s slowly came closer and closer, until a full zombie-hound was revealed. It was a wolf, I soon realized, only a few patches of fur left on its withered body, its ribs showing through skin in some spots, and in other spots there was no skin to hide it. Its tail was nothing more than a pointed bone, and its head was only thin, bare, and wrinkled skin covering up its dog-like skull, but I knew better. It wasn’t a dog anymore. Its skin was so reedy that I could see every bone that came in contact with its skin. If it was technically alive I’d be able to see it’s to see every beat of its heart, every heave of its lung’s, and every blood vessel that touched the skin’s surface. “Drop your weapons!” commanded the zombie. All obeyed except one. Vaskr drew his sword and cut cleanly through the impenetrable armor of one of the elves. All the others were so shocked that they didn’t stop him from sprinting down a dark hallway. “After him, fools!” barked Karsh after breaking one’s ribs into pieces. All the warriors rushed after the traitor, but Karsh shouted curses and awful names at the other half of the army, ordering them to stay and guard the prisoners. “You’re all going to take a little trip to the Throne room!” cackled the sinister Draugr.

# How I Learn Why Alphyn Means “Chaser”

This time we were only gagged and chained, not blindfolded. We crossed through rooms full of intricate stone carvings of wolves, serpents and bears, we passed through tombs echoing with undead moans from inside coffins, we passed over huge bridges and mines, amazing hallways, and awe-inspiring workshops, but none were enough to make me happy. At least I’d die too, instead of decaying in a cell after seeing my family and other allies get slaughtered. We walked so far I thought I would collapse, and most definitely Jonathan, but at last we came to a room full of small iron cages with chains attatched to them. We were pushed inside without any guards, chained to the bars, then the barred doors slid shut and we started to rise, like in a lift. We were being raised concealed in a gibbet surrounded by hard stone. The bars were all at their prime, all bent to make shapes that terrified Joshua, though all he could do was whimper under his gag. I felt like I had never been so dirty, though I did take a shower at Teddy’s inn. I hate the feeling of lifts, old-fashioned or not. I don’t think they have enough gravity, and this one was worse because it sounded like you were going up a roller coaster. Maxine did hand motions to Dad, first pointing at himself, then punching his hand, then raising two fingers to the side of his head, since he couldn’t speak with his gag. I knew plainly it meant “I should beat up elves”. Dad shook his head. I felt a bump and knew we had stopped. The gates slid open and two armor-covered guards took our chains off the bars and dragged us into the all-too familiar room. I overheard Karsh warning the king that “the treacherous scum” had not been found. I heard chanting all around, but Karsh’s booming voice was still audible from the other side of the room. “Attention!” roared a tall dark elf with white hair and a stubby beard. “I am your speaker, Corvus. These *humans* have stolen the Black Diamond, tried to re-steal it, and deluded our beloved warrior, Osterkligir. They have murdered General Garexus, started a battle with their superiors, and, I bet, if they had the chance, would try to kill the king!” Every single elf in the audience booed in disgust and anger. “Now, they will all have the end that they deserve, the horrible death by alphyn!” Cheers rang through the room. “Then let us not wait any longer! Guards! Put an end to these pests!”

This time we were neither gagged *nor* blindfolded, they told us it was so they could hear us scream. We were still cuffed, but these ones didn’t have chains attatched to the guards, they simply were like handcuffs, so that we didn’t have a long chain as a weapon against the alphyns. We were taken down the lift even deeper than before. When we were taken out, the hall was as dark as ever. I was glad to see no skeletons or skulls, but there were the eyes staring from halls we passed by, green like the draugar’. The halls and rooms were just like ours, no stalagmites or stalactites, only a few cave crickets, bats and centipedes. We didn’t walk a very long way; we only journeyed about half a mile. Yes, there were that many tunnels. On the way we talked all about everything on our mind. “How did you get caught?” I asked. “Well,” began Mom. I saw Joshua cringe. Normally he would have been whining and screaming, but I guess that journey changed us all. “When you all left, we went after the diamond. We collected some weapons, and the king was asleep when we reached the throne room. So were the guards, so we snuck past them, but then Joshua slipped on a puddle, where we had sat. Then he cried. Very loudly.” I saw one of the guards try to fight back laughter, but when his fellow guard looked at him strangely he couldn’t help it. “Who’s this?” Dad asked, looking at Maxine. “A taxi driver,” Mom explained. “I am Max, for Maximus,” he said proudly. Toby mouthed out the words “Maxine”. “Well, Maxine, you’ve got a lot of courage to be still sane after all this.” “Thank you,” Maxine said gratefully. We stopped at a door with the regular iron bars. This time two doors blocked off a cage with Daisy and Rose pacing around. I was shaking crazily as one of the alphyns leaped onto one of the gates, reaching his paw through and snapping its jaws. One of the elves pulled a lever and the first egress opened from bottom to top. We were all shoved in, and then the door slammed shut behind us. I felt Rose's steaming breath on my neck as the second gate was lifted and the two wolves stepped in, ready for the kill.

I heard a clang and the two guards dropped dead in front of our coffin. The first door opened up and a familiar voice told us to run. Vaskr started dashing down the hallway with a torch in hand, so we followed him. The alphyns were close behind. We turned a corner so abruptly that the alphyns had no time to turn, and slid down the straight hallway. Vaskr opened up a wooden door and we all ran in, then Dad shut the door. Toby and he pushed against the door as I heard a loud clunk. “Barricade it!” Dad shouted, his redneck beard blowing after the repetitious thuds. I brought over a stool and Maxine brought a small table, then Dad and Toby stepped aside. The door swung open, revealing yellowed teeth and ferocious eyes. Thankfully the blockade stopped the door from opening completely. Dad and Maxine pushed up against the blockade to keep the door shut. I looked around at the room, decorated with iron shaped to look like branches and clear water running from a crevice and into a gold dish. I heard a loud bell ring all through the halls. “No!” Vaskr shouted, on the verge of tearing his hair. “They’re sending the whole place into trap mode. Ten more minutes and all the elves will be in their rooms.” “Well, that’s good!” Joshua exclaimed. “No, there are traps cleverer than you can imagine.” “Then run!” Maxine yelled. We ran to the other side of the room and opened up another door. We darted out down the pass for quite a while, until none of us could run any more. I heard a grating sound and then a click. “Too late,” Vaskr said. “The lifts are still about a quarter of a mile away, and with all those traps it would be like swimming through a piranha tank with bloody meat strapped onto you.” “You haven’t memorized the traps?” asked Toby impatiently, with good reason. “No, only the king’s most trusted servant can learn them, in case of a traitor.” “And we should be heading for the Black Diamond; all of earth is at stake!” “I know, but I have a plan, and we have to get to the prison,” Vaskr assured. “Now follow me, about ten steps behind so if there’s a trap, hopefully you all won’t be affected.” I heard a crunch and suddenly the ground opened up under his feet.

Vaskr fell for the bottom of a shallow pit but managed to grab onto the ledge. I had no doubt he’d get up until his torch collapsed into a black pool of sludge at the bottom of the pit. Green fire erupted beneath the elf, burning his legs from what I could tell through the blaze. “No!” screamed Mom. I made out him heaving himself up from the ledge and rolling on the stony floor. Dad ran towards the gap and leaped through the flames. “Dad!” I shouted. “Thomas!” Mom screeched. “It’s alright!” He yelled. “Just jump across one at a time, if you’re fast enough there won’t be enough time to burn you.” Toby repeated what he had done, and the rest followed. I prepared to jump, then did. When I came to the other side, I was on fire. I then remembered I still had kraken ink on my shirt, so I hit the floor and rolled until the flame was out. I saw Maxine pressing on Vaskr’s singed legs. Those were the nastiest burns I had ever seen. “I spent two years working at the hospital,” he explained. “If you have no water or bandages, add pressure.” Vaskr looked basically dead besides his heart was beating and he was breathing shallowly. His eyes were half opened and he was nearly motionless, but Maxine looked like he had it handled. “Thomas, do you know CPR?” He asked. “Cause he could use it. If we can wake him up we can ask where the medical room is.” “Let’s take him in here,” Mom said, nearly crying. She was opening a door to a small, dark room. “It’s empty of elves.” I took an unlit torch off the wall and put it over the flames, quickly lighting it. “What was that stuff?” Toby asked. “Kraken ink.” said Dad.

Dad and Maxine lifted up the elf easily and brought him into the room. They gently placed him on a cot and then Dad did CPR. He continued for about five minutes, and then at last Vaskr opened up his eyes wide and gasped loudly. “Vaskr, listen,” Dad said firmly. “Thing’s don’t look good. Please tell us, where is the Medical Station?” I was terribly disappointed when he went unconscious again, especially at such a time of dire need. “Here!” Jonathan exclaimed. He unrolled a scroll revealing all the halls of this floor. “We are…..already in it?” I looked around and recognized first aid kits, pitchers of water, chemicals and sacks full of supplies. “Thank you Lord!” praised Mom. Jonathan dropped the map and grabbed a kit. “What do you need?” He asked. “Well, it’s third degree, so I’ll need water and a cloth.” I ran for a pitcher while Jonathan pulled out a tattered rag. We gave the supplies to Max and he soaked the rag in the water, and then applied the cloth on his burns upon gray skin. I felt mad at myself for being happy that it was him and not any human, if he was human he’d be dead by now. “Since he has shock we would normally raise his legs, but since his legs are injured we just need blankets.” Toby grabbed a bundle of sheets and laid it across Vaskr. In a few more minutes Vaskr thankfully awoke again. “Go back to the prison, and you’ll find Mort…” was all he could say before he drifted off again.

I drank two canteens full of water to quench my thirst, but then I was hungry. “Up, Toby and Colby!” Dad said. “I think I can remember the way to the prison.” “Especially with this,” said Jonathan, handing him the map. “But what about the traps?” Mom asked. “I think we can handle them,” Dad said. “Besides, only a quarter of a mile away!” I was not very encouraged by that fact. “If we knock, open the door. I’ll do the official knock.” Of course, that was the old, *rat, tat tat tat tat, tat tat!* Dad opened up the door after hugging all of us, except Maxine and Vaskr of course. “What day is it?” Dad asked. “Wednesday?” “Sunday.” Toby answered. “I think.” “Then let’s have a service.” He opened the door again and explained what was going to happen. “I think it’s nice to have a sermon about something that brings hope,” he said. I saw how Maxine was a little uneasy, like all atheists are that Dad’s talked to. I had kind of guessed Maxine wasn’t a Christian, even though he was nice and funny, but he still seemed a little empty. “Since I don’t have a Bible or script, I’ll go by memory. Gideon was a judge, from what I remember. God called him to attack the Midianites, a marauding army with hundreds of thousands of men. The Israelites only had ten thousand men! They overcame them, however, without having to raise one fist. He even lowered his army’s numbers from those who were afraid and not ready. In the end they had only three hundred men. It was God’s angel of death that killed them, and though we probably will have to shed blood, I am sure God has a purpose for all this. Why else would God chose Gideon, a completely doubtful man to lead the armies of Israel? Let’s pray: “Lord, we really need Your assistance here. Help us to find who Vaskr is talking about and for him to get through this injury. Help Maxine and him to come to know You if they don’t already. Let us pass through without any more casualties, and for us to save the North if that is Your will. Amen.” We all re-hugged and then set off once more.

Dad unfurled the ancient parchment and pointed to the right. “Ahh!!!” I screamed. I moved my hand away at just the right time as Daisy’s maw snapped next to me. Dad grabbed an unlit torch off the wall and slammed it into her…I mean, his snout. He ran to the fire that was above the tar and scared Rose off. “How did they get through?” I asked. “They’re fire resilient!” Dad yelled. “But not fireproof!” He jabbed his torch at Daisy and started to run. A stone wall slammed down in the alphyns’ way. The torch almost was extinguished by the gush of wind, but slowly stabilized. I heard a crunch as Dad yelled, “Duck!” We all hit the ground as the upper half of the walls to our side slammed together, another booby trap. They slowly opened again and we all stood up, all shocked and terrified. We walked on for a few minutes, then I accidentally stepped on a platform and the ground farthest from us quickly slid down. Then another section closer to us collapsed a few seconds later. “Run!” Dad hollered. Toby sprinted ahead and jumped across the two fallen floor parts. Dad jumped across just as the third section slid down. I slid to a halt, studying the situation. Maybe it was best to wait till it came down, and then brought me back up. “No!” Dad shouted, predicting my actions. “Look!” He pointed to smashed marks on the ceiling, showing that the platforms went down, and then they slammed into the ceiling, turning anyone like me flat as a pancake. I ran back and then dashed ahead. The fourth stone started to collapse when I jumped. I hit the ground hard, but not all of it. Like Vaskr, only half of my body was up. I heard the last section slam down behind me. Dad and Toby took both of my arms. The gap below me quickly elevated and flipped me onto my back next to Dad and Toby. A crack shook the room as the pillar slammed against the ceiling. “Let’s rest.” I suggested. We sat down, thankful that the Medical room had canteens full of clean water. I chugged down about half of mine and then we stood up and continued. We passed a few less impressive traps without any casualties besides a hair from a rusty saw that passed above us once. “The lifts should be in this room,” Dad said. We came into a large room with a statue of a raven spreading its wings in the center. It was all amazing and anything you could ask for luxury-wise, even diamonds. One problem: there were no lifts.

# Mortar, the Really Annoying Rock

 “The lifts are supposed to be right here!” Dad exclaimed. He put his ear up to the stony wall and listened. Then he grabbed a hammer from a hold on the hall and beat the wall with it. “Hollow!” he said successfully. He swung the mallet against the wall, sending fragments exploding in all directions. He kept smashing, first there were cracks, then it started to break away, then at last the wall collapsed revealing the familiar barred pulley system. “Must have slid down for trap mode,” Dad hypothesized. “Let’s go.” He smashed another piece of the wall to reveal the lever. It looked nearly exactly like a tractor gear. He pulled it up to level seven, the dungeons above us. The doors opened up and we stepped in. When the doors slid shut again, the lift rose. But not us. “Grab the bars!” Dad yelled, clutching a bar on the ceiling. Both Toby and I obeyed as the walls and ceiling of the lift left the floor below us. When we were around ten feet up, the walls slammed shut, working as another precaution for cheaters who would wait to come up. I got a little air sick when my hands got sore from holding onto the “monkey bars”. The walls below us moved apart and the floor rose back to its normal space as the gates opened. We let go of the bars and dropped to the floor only a few inches below, then walked out. “There!” a skeleton in Viking armor screeched, “the trap mode is off, humanssss! You will be draugar now!” Then his small army of zombies advanced.

 Dad pulled out his hammer and shattered three draugar’ ribs in one blow. I noticed General Karsh’s grin suddenly turned into a look of complete horror. Dad swung again like a berserkers but Karsh lashed him with a leather whip. “Run!” Dad yelled, wincing from the stinging blow. We all passed through the stunned zombies unscathed, besides Dad, of course. We sprinted across the cobblestoned path as the draugar all dashed for us. “BOOO!!!!” screamed a crackly voice. I saw Karsh’s face go from anger to fear even greater than when Dad had unleashed his fury. “Ahhhhh!!!!!!” he screamed, running for the lift. His small patrol followed him in terror. “Hello-o!” The voice echoed. “Over here!” “What is your name?” “Mortimer, but I’m also called Mortar.” “Good,” Dad sighed. “Well, don’t just wait there! I predict I’ve been here three-hundred fifty years.” Dad stepped forward. “Warmer…” another step, “warmer…” another, “hot, hotter, hotter.” We came to an intersection and Dad stepped straight ahead. “WHAT ARE YOU, AN ESKIMO?” roared the voice. He turned to the left and proceeded. “Fifth cage on the left,” the voice instructed. We looked inside the cage, but all that was in it was a few bones and a stone gargoyle. “Wait,” said Dad, looking at our puzzled faces. “Dark elves are extremely neat.” “So….” I started. “Ohhh!” I looked at the cell parallel to us. “No gargoyle!” Toby exclaimed. The gargoyle in the cell next to us leaped to the floor. “Four escape attempts and all of them end up in the fire pit! I hope this is more successful.” The gargoyle had greenish yellow eyes, two pairs of horns, one like a goat and the other like a ram, a blunt snout, horse-like nose, no wings, and saw-shaped claws. His tail had a pincer at the end, with a jagged outside. “The draugar are going to get an army to sound the alarm,” he said casually. “By the way, is Kaiser Wilhelm retired yet?” “Yeah, you could say that,” Dad said. “Good, good, good. Hated that guy!” Mortar mumbled. “What’s the date?” he inquired. “The sixth of April, 2014.” “Oh, my! My speculations were way off. I thought it was the seventh.” “Oh, how terrible,” Toby said sarcastically. “Last one to come here was in 1916. Well, off to the alarm!” He bounded toward the lift and pried open the bars. We all followed much slower. He broke the doors apart and ended the half-lives of five terrified ghouls. “How do you work this thing? Those doors once could be slid open without having to bend one bar! Now which frost giant is going to pull us up?”

 Dad pulled the lever to the fifth floor as the gargoyle talked all about how he had once seen Queen Elizabeth the First. He really was old. When we reached the top he sprinted like a cheetah down the hallway. When we caught up to him, he was crouching next to a pool of water, scratching his chin in deep thought. “I’ve got an idea!” he said joyously. He pointed to a gargoyle feeding the pond with warm water that barely released steam that covered the room. Then I got the faintest idea of his mastermind plot.

 “This way!” I heard Dothador shout. “Prepare for a fight, because if there’s not one I’ll be surprised. You two, go in. If only we could get rid of that cursed gargoyle.” “I’ve heard they have an actual gargoyle with them!” whimpered his lieutenant. “That would explain why the draugar were too scared for the dirty work. If it was only humans they’d beat them in seconds.” “ENOUGH!” screamed Dothador. “There is no gargoyle or we’d all be dead by now!” “Come on, you big babies!” I screamed, the only insult I could think of. “Charge!” Dothador yelled. Only the two drafted elves charged forward and hopped over the stepping stones that crossed the pool. They screamed as they passed through the flow of water that blocked off the entrance to the room with alarm. “All of you!” repeated the impatient captain. I smirked at Toby through the darkness as he looked at the two unconscious elves with steam rising from their armor. Dad had his hammer at the ready in case any didn’t fall for our trick. I was clutching a short sword and Toby held a good sized rapier. Suddenly a burst of elves stampeded into the room and screamed in pain as the boiling water heated their armor. Those who were not unconscious were close to it or screaming on the floor before Toby thumped their forehead with his hilt. Suddenly everything went haywire.

 I heard a hiss and the gargoyle’s spray slowly died down. To the elves’ horror it jumped down drowsily and slugged one, rendering him unconscious as well. Dothador was in the back, waiting for the rest to pass through before he ran in headlong. The big coward. “Ohhh! You don’t know how bad I feel!” the gargoyle’s words were slurred with water, like he was drunk. Another elf charged him but the gargoyle kicked his stomach and he fell on the ground, temporarily paralyzed. “Attack!” Dothador screamed. Though a big chunk of the army was taken out, we still had about fifteen left, which may not sound like a lot, but one; we had only four, and two; dark elves are really good fighters. I plowed through the pile of cataleptic elves and stabbed one of the elves’ breastplates, who socked me with his elbow promptly. I fell into the mound of lifeless warriors and almost fell unconscious along with them. My head would have to have a huge bump in a few minutes. Platinum and foreheads do not make a good feeling. I felt Dad drag me by my collar back into the room, “Let Mortar handle it, and we can’t handle them. I think he’s got this.” Even for a gargoyle that just completely drained himself of water, he was fighting extremely well. I rested on the rocky ground, straining to keep my head up to see the battle. I really wished I could have had some water without any tints of elf blood in it. I saw Toby swordfight one of the elves and get shoved to the floor, but Dad gave him a huge bruise with his hammer. In just a few minutes all left of the elves were some moaning heaps, most of which were unconscious or had amnesia. And, of course Dothador, who was now fleeing the scene. Mortimer pinned him against the wall, his neck caught underneath the forked end of the tail. “I will say nothing!” he screamed. “I know,” gasped Mortar. “I’m going to give you a fair fight, because that’s what you like, eh?” “Yes,” he answered after some thought, probably hoping it was nothing bigger than a trow. “If you win against Thomas here, then you turn us all in,” I silently gulped. “What’s the…” “The catch is that if he wins which he ‘obviously won’t’, then you tell us all we ask, no cheating, no interfering…” “Oh, I’ll beat this easily!” Dothador laughed. “And no weapons!” finished the effigy. “But! I have a brand new mace!” complained Dothador like a toddler wanting to play with his new toy. “If you can’t fight without a weapon then your strength is really useless, but more importantly, if you can’t use your strength to defend yourself or to help others, then all you are is a coward, Even if you don’t run.” I had no idea such a jokester could be so wise also. “And no armor,” he finished. “Toby, Colby, close the door while Thomas and Dothador get ready. And lock them, too! We don’t want anything in or out. Don’t want old Dothador fleeing like a bunny. When your opponent is unconscious, you have won.” Toby and I passed Mortimer and Dothador and slammed the wooden doors shut, then barred them. “Now when you’re done I’ll inspect both of you.”

 When Mortimer learned our names, he said that he remembered talk of Dad at the time Dad was captured. After a few minutes of Mortimer lecturing Dothador about how his leather tunic was armor, he placed them about ten yards away from each other with torches lighting the room so that Dad had a fair point. “Ten, nine, eight, seven…” Mortimer started. “Six, five, four, three, two, one! Commence!” Dothador charged at Dad but at the last second Dad sidestepped and Dothador crashed into the stone wall, thus ending the games. Toby and I chained the unconscious captain head to toe and waited for about ten minutes for him to come around, and by then the doors were rocking with elves trying to bust in. “Can the Black Diamond be removed?” asked Dad. “Not technically,” chuckled Dothador. “I’m not fond of torture but I want a clear answer,” Mortimer said. “I could always drink some water, and then sneeze some.” “No! Just listen. There are guards crawling around the place, there’s no way even a gargoyle could get in! Then the only way to get the diamond out of the crown is to melt the crown itself, which would have to be by dragons or the deep forges, which are only on the last floor.” “Alright, and are there any other ways out of this room?” “I will never tell you anymore; the only reason I told you that is because you won’t live to tell it! In a few more minutes that door will be in splinters, if they haven’t already sent for a frost giant. You’ll all be scrap food after the alphyns get to you!” I heard a scream and a howl. “It’s the alphyns!” an elf screamed. I saw the door redden and then shatter into a few glowing embers. Out of the gate lay a smoking scene of dead elves.

“Tell us where and we’ll let you live!” Dad yelled. “Alright, alright! There’s a pass behind that tapestry!” Dothador pointed to a drapery with a picture of a serpent circling the Black Diamond. Mortimer lifted Dothador like a mummy and ran for another cloth. It was amazing how a creature only my size could pick up a fully grown elf. “Wrong one! Wrong one!” shouted Dothador as his head bashed against stone. “Oops!” Mortimer said, turning around to the other tapestry. Dad led the rest of us into the secret pass. I hopped over the still unconscious bodies. Mortimer charged through the cloth and disappeared under the furls. I leaped into the scratchy cloth and plowed it aside. When I passed through it, Dad had a lit torch and was leading us through a dark and damp tunnel. “Run!” Toby silently said. “They’re in!” Then I heard the bells ring.

 I slipped about four times on the slick, mossy floor. Mortimer was cradling Dothador in his arms, who was unconscious from his bump with the wall. I guessed the alphyns had been stopped or we’d be caught by now. “You know, if you had asked me for a way out I could have found this, I just thought we was…were staying for information. Sorry, staying with those frost giants in the old days gave me bad grammar. Tell me of the new inventions!” We told the gargoyle of cars, computers, televisions, phones, planes and submarines. “Amazing!” He announced when we were done. I was completely out of breath from jogging, but the Dokkalfar were still out of sight. Of course, it still was as black as midnight. Mortimer sniffed and said we were approaching the culverts. Sure enough, we heard running water in a few more minutes. We were blocked by a wide stream of sludge with the other side nearly five yards away. I gagged staring into the dirty brown water. “Oh, no,” Mortimer said, dropping Dothador onto the floor. “I need to get to that passage and then find a way to get you all across.” “Ahem,” Dad said, fingering Dothador’s chains.

 Mortimer took a mighty leap across the channel after Dad unchained Dothador and hooked the chains to a peg. Mortimer landed onto the ground and chained his end to another hook. Apparently there was once a bridge there. “Colby, you first,” Dad said. I gulped and grabbed onto the chain. I carefully stepped off the edge and let my feet dangle over the rushing current. I made my way across arm by arm, many times thinking that I’d fall. It’s quite hard to make your way across a chain with no footholds, but I was glad there were handholds, which would be easier than only footholds. I got to the other side easier than I thought it would be. When Toby successfully crossed, I could hear the telltale foot beats of a small brigade. Dad slid across and Mortimer pulled on the chain until it shattered. We left Dothador behind, hoping we’d keep our promise and he’d live without the elves and draugar dealing with him severely. I saw General Karsh skid to a stop and scream curses at us. “We will cross this sewer if the Haugar[[12]](#footnote-12) hadn’t already disposed of you!” He warned. We did not cease to run, however. One by one we scaled a flight of stairs into a familiar chamber, the undead bedroom.

 Dad quickly extinguished the torch’s flame, not to draw attention to the so-called “Haugar”. Our footsteps were meant to be silent, but the room was already so quiet they sounded obvious. I saw a coffin rattle, sending my heart to my throat. I heard a long moan, then two others. “If only we could rest for once,” I whispered. Mortimer’s breath was unheard in the cold dark of the room. From what I had seen a few hours earlier, this room was longer than I would have hoped. To my horror, one of the coffin lids popped open, awakening several others. The room echoed with shocked moans as the first zombie rose, with an age-worn helmet and cobweb-covered ribs. I noticed these were much more dormant than draugar; they were slow, sleepy, and angry. Their eyes were lost in black skull sockets, and they were obviously much, much more ancient than the zombie that was still screaming below us. They were Haugar. One at a time, the lids either opened gradually or popped up into the air by two lanky arms. “Run,” Dad said incredibly calmly. We dashed through the middle of the room, avoiding the stinking corpses that now were limping to us with arms outstretched, like classic zombies. Dad span about, crumbling some of the fragile monsters. I looked behind us, and Haugar were blocking off the way we came. Soon the exit would be gone also. At every side the zombies closed in. Dad and Mortimer started fighting ruthlessly with their weapons. I noticed I was so scared that I had stopped my legs. I felt a cold, skeletal hand clamp down on my shoulder from behind me, then more held on my body, some even holding my face. I was thankful that they were slow and weaponless, but it was all the more creepy. My legs buckled and all I could do was silently pray. “Colby!” Dad shouted. I started to feel claws scratch at me harder and harder. I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the thoughts of all the skulls watching me without emotion, except amusement, maybe. They reminded me of elderly folks at a nursing home I once visited; some even clutched my cheeks and played with them like your grandparents might. I heard a crack and a row of ghosts were reduced to broken bones. I stood up and ran for the exit. Toby was holding a newly-lit oil lamp and we all ran for the way out of that dreaded asylum.

# Rescue Mission

I collapsed onto the hard ground, dreaming of being back in my nice bedroom, looking through *fictional* pages of my Dad’s encyclopedia. Dad lifted me up, as I struggled to stay up when he let go. “Mom!” Toby laughed. He ran to my Mother and hugged her, but she still seemed sad. “Daddy!” Joshua giggled, and Dad lifted him into the air. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “Vaskr’s taken,” Maxine grumbled, partly out of anger and partly out of sadness. “Where is he?” Dad asked, nearly dropping Joshua. “We don’t know. They said they’d change him into a draugr when he dies of his wounds.” “The corruption room!” Mortimer exclaimed. “Follow me!” Toby handed the oil lamp to the gargoyle and we all followed closely…or far behind. We ran down a hall full of Haugr statues, I guess warning intruders of what was up ahead. “No!” Mortimer complained. A huge spiked portcullis[[13]](#footnote-13) stood in our way. “You!” Dothador spat, swaggering around, still injured by his many bumps. He pointed a lance right at us through the bars of the gate. Dad looked at him funny, and apparently the captain understood. “Okay, okay. As long as you don’t tell anyone,” he whimpered. He twisted a cog and the portcullis slowly was raised. “Drop the lance,” Dad instructed. Dothador hesitantly released the lance, which clattered to the floor and rolled under the portcullis to our side. Mortimer snapped it into splinters, and then we passed through once the gate was raised. Dothador suddenly released the cog and the portcullis collapsed on Mortimer.

“No!” Mom screamed. To my relief, the gargoyle’s neck was only trapped between two bottom spikes. “Traitor!” he hissed as the treacherous Dothador span Dad around and slightly touched Dad’s throat with the side of a blade he had drawn in a second. “Dad!” Jonathan yelled. “Guards!” yelled the elf. “I found them!” He stepped on Mortimer’s lamp and lost all balance. I saw a stick smack Dothador’s forehead, knocking him unconscious, again. Dad stood up with a slight cut on his neck. “Thank you, Maurine,” he said. Mom smirked with her quarterstaff raised high. Maxine twisted the cogwheel and raised the grating. Mortimer slipped out and thanked the doctor/taxi driver. “I like this new staff better than the old one,” Mom said. “We found some weapons in the armory.” Maxine showed off a double-bladed axe, Jonathan presented his bag of metal discuses, and Joshua swung his battle axes about. “Here,” Mom gave me a short, steel bow. “Whoa!” I cried. “Thanks!” She also gave me a quiver full of dark arrows and Dad another great sword. She had a rapier for Toby, but he already had one. “Well, what are we waiting for? The guards might be nearby!” Mortimer whispered. He picked his lamp up and wiped mud from Dothador’s boot off. He bounded off again, leaving us in his dust. “Here it is!” he laughed. We trotted to an iron door with Norse runes above it. There was a barred window, which I could barely reach. Mortimer looked through, and looked surprised that Vaskr was a dark elf.

Each one of us took a turn to look through the bars, except for Joshua and Jonathan, who we decided were too young to see it. What I saw was Vaskr sitting chained to a rusty chair being watched by Karsh. At first I thought Vaskr was dead, but I saw his head sway some, so I guessed he was just weak. “We have to beat him,” I said. “Vaskr’s dying!” A guard looked in through the window right at us. Mortimer kicked the door open so hard its hinges snapped off and the door fell on the guard. He was about the slide out from his trap, but then we all stamped in. The room was huge and circular with balconies hanging with vines and fake gargoyles. “Ahh. Customers. Or patients!” Karsh grinned cruelly. “One on one, I presume,” he laughed. “Alright,” Dad stepped forward. “Not you, that would be an unfair fight!” chortled the zombie. “Mortimer.” “I thought you were terrified of me,” Mortimer said, unwavering. “I was only doing what was best for my men!” Karsh lied. “Like breaking one’s ribs,” Toby said sarcastically. “Alright. I accept,” Mortimer said. “No rules, to be easy on you. The rest of you, watch from the balcony. Thomas, you count to fifty.” “Deal,” Karsh beamed. Dad started counting when we reached the top of a stairway as the two contestants stepped apart from each other; we had decided that we could be anywhere before it began as long as you were on your side of the room. Mortimer was on Vaskr’s side, probably predicting Karsh would turn on the wounded elf. Mortimer tap-danced and sang along with Thomas’s counting, but Karsh was whining in annoyance. Mortimer placed his lamp on the floor gingerly. “Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine…fifty!” Karsh charged at Mortimer faster than any zombie I’d heard of with a great sword swinging about and a huge axe raised high. When Karsh came close enough he leaped up, scratched his face in midair, flipped in between the two horns of his helmet, and kicked his bum. Karsh spat out curses as he fell to the floor. His helmet rolled away until it hit the wall. The ghoul stood up slowly and pulled out a hatchet. I couldn’t find Mortimer until I heard a crash, and saw him standing around several cracks, completely still. Karsh tossed his axe and it struck the gargoyle dead.

I screamed along with the others. Dad turned Jonathan and Joshua away. “Wait!” Joshua said. “Two out of three, two out of three!” “He’s already dead!” laughed the cruel zombie. “There are no replays for you!” Just as I felt tears coming, a stone gargoyle crashed beside Karsh, knocking him off his feet. I looked up and saw Mortimer run above us to the third stone gargoyle. Now I realized that the “dead” gargoyle was in pieces. Karsh used the statue to stand up and screamed at the friendly effigy. I saw his armor bend as he began to grow, until two stubs broke through his back and a tail slid out of his mail. A forked tongue flittered in the air, and when it drew back in, Windsplitter stood in his place, still with scraps of armor clinging to him tightly. “I can only change into thingsss I sssee!” he hissed, his tone off by a ton. “I was the one who checked to make sssure your friend wasss sssleeping!” He leaped onto the banister and shot a wave of hotness right at us. I felt heat ripple through my clothes, yet I still smelled the scent of corpses, the draugr’s scent had not changed. My shirt sleeve caught aflame again, though there wasn’t much left to burn; my clothes had been tearing ever since Vaskr was hurt. I put my hand on the small flame, putting it out quickly. The draugr in Windsplitter’s form smiled, and then hissed. A statue fell down on his back, bringing him down to the ground. Mortimer leaped down as well. I ran to the banister and saw Windsplitter change back into the draugr, whose armor lay about him in a heap, but now he was only bones. “Victory!” Joshua shouted. But nobody else rejoiced. Mortimer grabbed Karsh’s hatchet and snapped off Vaskr’s bonds. He unlatched the chains and laid him out on the floor. “He’s barely alive,” he moaned. “We need to get him to a human hospital, there he’ll be treated and we won’t accidentally feed him cyanide or arsenic!” “I’ll take him,” Maxine said. “That way I can treat him on the way, we won’t have to search for the entrance again, and I can have my tea and nap.” “Alright,” Dad said. “Mortimer and I will carry him to the lift. The rest of you, circle us so we don’t get attacked from in front or behind.” He grabbed Vaskr’s arms and Mortimer grabbed his legs. Toby held the handle of the lamp weakly. I stumbled along to the door, my legs asleep. My sleepiness nearly drowned out my hunger, but when I drank more water it felt a little better. The guard that had been trapped under the door sprung out, but Mom knocked him cold with her stick. Dothador was still dreaming about butterflies and bunnies, but we didn’t take the time to step over him. When we reached the lifter, my stomach was burning like I swallowed hot coals. I would have fallen asleep the minute I lay down, but my immense hunger spurred me on.

The doors closed and we were raised to the top floor, which was the top of the Sgarbh Breac. The doors opened, revealing the night sky. I guessed it was about nine o’clock at night; we had been in the tunnels for about a day. I was tempted to just leave my family behind and follow Maxine and Vaskr, but I couldn’t move and I couldn’t force myself to do it. Maxine tried to lift Vaskr, but it was impossible with such rough terrain. “Very well,” Mortimer groaned. I was glad he spoke up or I would’ve gone. “I’ll hopefully meet up with you all at the closest inn,” Maxine said. “I wish we had phone service down there. Goodbye!” I stood on the tips of my toes, spotting the sea, glinting in the moonlight. The doors shut and we were left alone again. “We have to find a safe place,” Mom said. “We need food, water, and sleep.” “Dothador’s room,” Dad said without a pause. “But where would that be?” Mom asked skeptically. “We don’t have anyone who knows their way around!” “Then we find someone,” Dad said, with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

The doors opened and we stepped into the familiar hall of level seven. Several guards turned and looked at us. Dad pulled out his sword and swung it about, sending the Dokkalfar all across the hall till there was no fun left to the fighting. I was surprised at how effective that weapon was. Soon they grew cowardly and fled. The whole family searched the bodies for keys. “You won’t be finding them there,” laughed a menacing voice with his helmet dented on all sides. Dothador jingled the keys and stuffed them in his pocket. “Ahh, I was looking for you!” Dad said. He pointed his blade at the elf, though they were several yards apart. “Tell us where your room is or you’ll get more than just a bump on your silly head. There’s not much to lose anyway.” I had never seen Dad so aggressive before. “No!” Dothador laughed nervously. “Why do you want it anyway?” “None of your business. In fact, I was hoping you’d say that!” He ran towards his enemy as Dothador stood too frightened to draw his sword. Dad pulled off his helmet, threw his sword out, and grabbed him by his long, silver hair. He turned him around and aimed him at the wall. “Lead us to your room,” he growled. “No!” Dothador screamed. Dad slammed his head against the wall and he crumpled to the floor. “Oops,” he said, rubbing his hands. He snatched up the key ring and threw open the door to one of the cells. Then he closed the floor to it again. Dad tossed Dothador in the first cell, waking him up quickly. Dad shut the door and locked it. “What’s the worst you can do?” laughed the sinister elf. “This,” Dad said, gripping the lever to release the floor. “No!!!” screamed Dothador. “No fear!” Dad taunted. “I’ll tell you anything!” he whimpered. “Go ahead,” said Dad with a yawn. “My room is on the third floor, down the hall and to the left.” “Not what the map says!” Jonathan said in a sing-song fashioned. “Lead us to it if you’re so sure,” Dad said. “If you have the map, why are you asking me?” he asked. We all whirled around to stare at my little brother, studying the scroll intently. “Thank you for your lies and threats,” Dad said, starting to turn the lever. Dothador ran for the wall and grabbed onto the hanging chains as the floor fell apart. “You can wait there until your friends let you out,” said Dad. It seemed cruel, but we do executions in England too, and this man was worse than Hitler. Also, I’m still not sure if it was really an execution; the elves might have let him out before the alphyns got him. I walked away, still furious at him for trying to make me watch my family die.

We entered the lift for the thousandth time, it seemed, and then followed Jonathan across the empty halls. “There must not be many elves,” Jonathan speculated. “No, there’s just so many halls that their all in another region. Besides, the elves are eating right now.” “What do they eat?” I asked. “Cave fungi,” Dad said. “They farm it on the top floor.” “Does that mean it’s all the food they have?” I asked. “No, every elf has snacks stored in their room.” Jonathan tried to open a door with paintings of alphyns. Looked more like his tomb. “Locked,” He grumbled. “Not anymore,” Dad said, unlocking it with one of the keys from Dothador. We stepped in and Dad locked and barred the gate from the inside. “Now nobody can come in since we have the keys!” I laughed. “No, Farbjodr has the keys to every room.” “Great,” I moaned. “But what if Dothador tells them?!” “Then I’ll keep watch,” said Dad. “No, how long have you been awake? Five days?” asked Mom. “It must be awfully hard to go to sleep while hanging above hungry alphyns!” “Who will, then?” Dad inquired.

“Here,” Jonathan said, obviously coming up with another plan to make a guard. He ran to a bell, I guessed for calling the servants. Then he hung it up on the door handle with some string. “An alarm,” he said. It wasn’t that great, but I didn’t blame him. All I wanted to do was eat and sleep. Mom opened a mesh bag and emptied it onto a platter. Sliced bread, turnips, and an apple were revealed. “Well, not that much,” Mom said. “But enough to fill us.” There were precisely five slices of bread, three turnips, and one apple. Mom had a turnip and a slice of bread, I had one and a half slices of bread, Dad had the apple, Toby had a slice and a half of bread, and half of a turnip, Jonathan had half a turnip and half a slice of bread, and Joshua had the same. When we were done, we still were hungry. We all had our fill of water, and then I looked around for a place to lie down, which turned out to be the floor. I lay down, still wishing for a nice bath. The kraken ink had now stuck to my skin and was hardening like caked mud. However, I found sleep in just a few minutes.

# Escape

When I awoke, Mom was cooking bacon. I was so relieved that I got to have a normal breakfast, because my stomach was roaring. I washed my hands in a makeshift waterfall and sat down around the table. Jonathan was asking about how we’d get to the Black Diamond, and later Dad explained why Vaskr was chained to a chair and not to the floor. “Draugar can only be made if one is killed by a draugr or I they die while sitting down, and stay dead in that position. I’m guessing the reason Karsh didn’t kill him was that he didn’t want him yet or he’d be ‘too annoying’.” “I know!” Jonathan exclaimed, “We don’t have to take the Black Diamond individually, so we can take the whole crown!”
Mom placed crunchy bacon on each of our plates, and I devoured it wolfishly. “That would be very dangerous,” she said after she sat down. “But it would be less dangerous than our other plan. Why didn’t we think of that before?” Toby stood up and peeked through the door’s eyehole. “Hughson, we have a problem!” He stated, and yes, my Dad’s middle name was Hughson. “Guards and lots of them!” “Great,” I moaned. No rest for the weary.

“Oil!” Jonathan exclaimed. He put on a baker’s glove and grabbed the pot from a furnace. Oil from the bacon sloshed around and hissed with heat. Dad told us to get ready, and we did. “Splash the oil on my signal, it needs to be soon or it will get cold.” The door was smashed open. “Now!” He yelled promptly. Garexus’ replacement ran in with platinum armor, as usual. Boiling grease splashed through his helmet, and he fell to the floor and took off his headdress. “I am Ohreinn, new General, and prepare to feel my blade!” He stood up and swung the sword right at Dad, but he blocked it as a downpour of warriors charged in. Jonathan stepped back, having no short-ranged weapons. I would have, too, but a warrior brought his weapon down on me. I raised my bow, and though it was also steel, the frail string snapped cleanly. I continued blocking until Joshua thwacked his side with his battleaxes. I took out my sword and guarded Jonathan, who was searching for a weapon his size. Toby ducked a sword and stabbed an elf’s belly, and then Mom knocked one’s helmet off and then gave him a huge bump on his head with her stick. The battle was going well, but I knew we couldn’t keep it up without our spot of tea. “We can’t do this!” Mom shouted, though she was hesitant because of the insults from the enemy. Dad was knocked to the ground by the General, and then his chest was stomped. “Daddy!” Jonathan yelled. He pulled out a disc and threw it smoothly. Ohreinn caught it, but it gave Joshua enough time to smack him with his axe. Dad stood up as Joshua’s throat was being grasped, then, since he couldn’t find his sword, he punched the General smack in the face. He released Joshua and Dad continued punching. “Never try to hurt my son!” he roared, then it was too much for the warrior and he collapsed. “Help!” he screamed. Dad put his own blade to the monster’s throat. “Leave us or he dies!” he shouted, but nobody heard him over the ruckus. “YOU’RE LEADER WILL DIE!” he boomed loudly. All eyes turned to him. “Unless you leave us now,” he said quietly. “Drop your weapons and take off your armor.”

 The elves grudgingly obeyed, their weapons and armor dropping until all they had left was tunics. Dad kept pointing the sword at Ohreinn, but allowed him to stand up and take off his mail. “Leave,” Dad growled once more. Not one disobeyed. “What do we do with all these weapons?” asked Jonathan. “Don’t bother.” We all hugged Mom and Dad; we had made it through another battle. But then we spotted Toby lying on the ground, moaning.

 Dad gingerly pulled a small dagger out of Toby’s side. It was about an inch deep in his skin. A red stain showed on his muddy clothes. Mom ran to get medical supplies, and Dad took off his shirt. I felt ashamed that I hadn’t foreseen this. Toby probably was the most interactive fighter, besides Dad and maybe Joshua now that he’d overcome his fear. No wonder he kept getting hurt. He tried to sit up, but collapsed back on the ground. “How do we get help?” Mom sniveled after wrapping his side and laying him on a stretcher. “I’m not sure,” Dad confessed. “We can’t stay here, but we can’t leave him. The warriors will surely betray us.” “We need to take him to the lift,” Jonathan suggested seriously. “That way Mom can treat him while we steal the crown.” “We have to think on the way!” Mom said. “Or Toby will get worse.” Dad and I lifted my older brother and followed Jonathan out of the wrecked room. I raised Toby’s legs and tried to pick up the pace. “We need Mortimer,” Joshua reminded. “Here,” Jonathan said at last. We turned a corner to face a massive creature. Its eyes were icy blue, and it wore a polar bear coat. Its skin was gray and cold and it had a beard made of pure flesh, like a rooster’s waddle. It clutched a tremendous axe. “Frost giant!” Dad yelled. “We can’t face it and save Toby!” Jonathan tossed a discus and it struck the mammoth’s shoulder. It roared, revealing rotten teeth and yellowed saliva. He swung his axe, demolishing one of the lifts. The he stamped on the ground, knocking Jonathan to the floor. Dad placed Toby down incredibly gently for the circumstance and ran to the beast, whose wattle was jiggling around wildly. His head only came up to the beast’s knee, and my Dad is 6’ 5”! He stabbed his stony hip, but the monster tossed him aside like a rag doll. Dad fell to the floor and slid. Then the giant lifted Mom into the air with both arms. Joshua hacked at the monster’s leg, and I stabbed its belly. Dad slowly stood up with a trickle of blood down his temple as Jonathan tossed another disc. Then he dropped Mom and kicked me. I fell onto the floor next to Toby, with all breath knocked from me. Another swipe from his axe split a pillar into pieces. I stood up again and charged, but the pain from all sides sent the monster to the floor before I could do anything. “That was a painful battle,” Dad remarked. Mom was out of breath too, being squeezed by a giant isn’t my idea of a vacation. Dad wiped the blood off his forehead with his shirt. “Let’s hope there won’t be any more surprises,” he joked. I assisted Dad with Toby and carried him into the lift.

 Joshua pulled the gear and set it on the first floor. “I can’t believe we’re actually doing this,” I gasped, suddenly realizing with odd excitement that there would not be a dull moment in my life from now on. Scratch that, the day in the prison was kind of boring. I was so glad that it might be the last day in this rubbish heap. We stepped inside the small room and the doors closed. “New plan,” Dad said. “Toby’s getting worse; you have to take him to the hospital.” “Agreed,” Mom said. “If you don’t come back in two days, I’m coming back.” I tied a knot to mend the bowstring in place. The doors opened and we got ready to step out. “But I need somebody else to carry him.” This was the most frustrating time of the trip maybe. It would have to be me, because we couldn’t go on without Dad, but I really wanted to help out. “I’ll go,” I sighed. I know, you’ll probably be thinking how much of a twist this story is, you can’t see the climax. One, this is a first person story. Two, you’re wrong. “There they are!” yelled a voice. Five archers lined up, blocking our pass about fifty paces away. They wore gas masks similar to those in WWII. “Oh, no,” Dad moaned. The archers drew back after loading arrows with little sacks instead of shafts. I felt relieved at first, then terrified as I smelled poppies.

 To refresh your memory, poppies are used for sleeping powder. The archers took aim as Dad shouted, “Don’t breathe!” The arrows were released, and each one missed us, but a pinkish powder exploded out of the arrow points. I held my breath as the room took on a rosy color. The archers dropped their bows and took out long, shiny swords. I made the mistake of taking a little sniff to at least breathe some, but then I started to regret it a few moments later, when I felt slightly drowsy. I heard a thud and Joshua was on the floor, yawning. Jonathan’s face was turning red, and then he finally breathed out, and then stumbled back. Dad toiled to grab his sword, and then finally exhaled. “Go back inside the lift,” he gasped. “I’ll handle them.” His head tilted to one side, and then I accidentally took a long breath. I staggered backwards and fell to the floor. Mom lifted Jonathan, the only asleep one outside of the lift, and then she took a breath. Dad grabbed the lever and pulled it to level G, ground level. The doors shut and the last thing I saw of him was the elves closing in, then shortly after the doors closed I fell asleep.

 “I’m sorry about intruding into your beauty sleep,” said the sinister voice of Farbjodr in my head. If my allies haven’t failed, you’ll be executed in a couple seconds. “Dad,” I acted with fake sobbing. I knew Dad would fight his way through the elves, even if he did fall asleep, but here I could trick them into believing the threat was over. “You killed him!” I screamed, and actually, now I was using real tears, thinking of all my sad emotions to get it to actually look like I was being truthful. “I wonder if I can see what happens to you in the Netherworld with this telepathy,” he chuckled. “Even if you could, I wouldn’t be going there,” I said. “Your god must be very weak to have to kill for them.” “We are the gods!” Farbjodr hissed. “I feel sad for you then,” I sighed. “Because the ‘gods’ aren’t doing too well right now.” I tried to force myself to wake up, to act like I had really been executed, but it didn’t work, the powder was too strong. “You can ask me any question you want now, and I might even answer them, since you’re going to die anyway.” “Everybody dies,” I contrasted. “But we are immortal!” objected the dark lord. “Tell that to Dothador and Garexus!” I teased. “Oh, yes, Dothador. The alphyns head-butted him before eating him.” “Another head injury,” I said. “But if you take such joy in the death of our men, then I can ricochet it back on you! If Vaskr isn’t dead already, then you will!”

“Colby, wake up!” I heard a voice say. “You sound just like my Mom!” I remarked. “I am,” Mom said, shaking me awake. “We’re there. We better get out before some other elf uses the lift.” I felt my eyes grow heavy again, but she lifted me to my feet before I went back to sleepy land. “Another dream,” I slurred. Mom woke Jonathan and Joshua and we lifted the stretcher with Toby on it. The sun was slipping behind a rock, and we were right on top of the mountain. When we were all out, the lift’s doors closed and the lift descended, a rock that lay on the roof hiding the way. “I’m tired,” Joshua moaned. I wasn’t in the mood for jokes, but I did say, “Hi Tired, I’m Colby.” Then I regretted it as Joshua was screaming and crying. “Shh! There may be something out here!” Mom warned. We slowly traveled down the mountain, stepping over rocks and occasionally tripping. Toby was deep in sleep as we kept continuing down the mount. “How do we get across the sea?” I asked. “Great,” Mom murmured. “We need to get Jonathan’s pack; it has the raft in it.” “Good news and bad news,” Jonathan said. “The good news is we won’t have to. The bad news is, well, the kraken ate it.” “Oh,” Mom said after a pause. “I don’t think there are many houses around here,” Mom pondered. “And our skis are almost certainly plundered,” Jonathan sighed. “Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Mom said. “I wanna go home with Daddy!” Joshua whined, shortly before tripping on a stone and skinning his leg, which increased the tears. “It’s getting darker,” I cautioned. “I’m scared,” whined Joshua. Mom took a horn out of her belt quickly. “What’s that?” I asked, staring at the intricate details of fishes and merfolk. She put the horn to her mouth and blew, which sounded through the seas. Then all was silent, until we suddenly heard a blood-chilling howl that tore through the eerie silence. “Run,” Mom sighed. “Wolf draugar.”

Joshua leaped to his feet and ran. “Pick up the pace,” Mom said, holding the stretcher carefully but going at a good speed. “Look!” Joshua screamed. Behind us were several yellow eyes pursuing us quickly. “That helps!” I said. “We need a plan!” “Here!” Jonathan tossed a discus and missed, but spooked a few. “Keep going!” Mom shouted. I took off my quiver and bow with one hand and held the stretcher with the other. “Joshua, it’s a good time to learn some archery!” I shouted. Jonathan tossed another blade, shattering the leader’s skull. Joshua ran backwards and hastily grabbed the weapons. He looped the quiver about his neck and shot an arrow, which sailed about two inches. “Almost there!” Mom yelled, pointing to the sea. “Then what? Even if the sea does open up we’re dead meat from the Egyptians!” I yelled. Jonathan and Joshua launched at the same time, both hitting a target. Several other wolves tripped over their skeletal bodies and were dashed to pieces on the rocks. When we reached the mountain’s foot hills, Mom started picking up the pace. I had been running so long that my lungs burned and my breathing was shallow. My heels kicked up sand as I ran along, and then I dared to look behind. A wolf lunged at me but was severed with Jonathan’s discus. “Thanks,” I panted. We halted at the brink of the sea and panted. Mom lay down the stretcher and I followed. “Is this it?” I asked. “Most likely,” Mom answered. I turned around and drew my sword, accidently stabbing it into a wolves’ neck bone. It coughed, and then collapsed as its spinal cord was disconnected. I swung again, shattering one’s rib. Joshua dropped the bow and quiver and took out his two battle axes, cleaving a wolf’s skull. Mom slammed her quarterstaff so hard into one’s head that it went straight through. Thankfully, there was no blood or gore since they were skeletons. Joshua’s arm was instantly bitten by a wolf, but he chopped off its head before it could add major pressure. “Swim,” Mom shouted. I smashed a wolf away from Toby. “What? We’ll drown in minutes!” “Trust me!” Mom said. “Now carry the stretcher.” She lifted one end and I lifted the other. My shoes were wet by the cold water as I trod into the sea hesitantly. Joshua and Jonathan followed quickly behind as the wolves stood listlessly on the seashore, staring with bright yellow eyes. “So, we just wait for them to leave?” I asked. “No, keep going,” Mom instructed. “Alright, I guess were drowning?” Suddenly four horse-like faces splashed through the water when I was about shoulder deep. It blew vapor into my face, and I realized it was a giant seahorse. “Hippocampi[[14]](#footnote-14)!” I exclaimed. “That’s what the horn was for!” “So they really are seahorses,” Jonathan said. “Interesting.” Below us was something a seahorse didn’t have, hooves. I climbed onto an orange one and Mom took Toby on a ruby one. She tossed the horn to the shore, where the wolves sniffed it and growled. “That way Thomas can get across,” she explained. “Gee up!” Joshua giggled. His horse went jetting through the water, and all the others followed. “So, we’re going to another hospital?” I guessed. “Yes,” Mom answered solemnly. I wrapped my arms around the hippocamp’s neck and murmured. “I’ve had quite enough of hospitals.” “Well, if we don’t go then Toby will die,” Mom clarified. “Yeah!” Joshua said matter-of-factly. He stuck his tongue out, acting like he knew all along. “What about the kraken?” I asked. Joshua cringed. “He won’t be a problem,” Mom replied. I turned around to see the shore, but a wave blocked my view. Some sea foam splashed in my face, and I clutched to my steed harder. “Hydrohorse,” I named. “Thomas already named this one that,” Mom laughed, pointing to hers. “You’re alike.” “Then, Aquasteed,” I retitled. “That’s better, but Thomas stole that name first.” We all laughed, but a larger wave cut us off.

As we rode on a bit longer, all five horses started to dive under water and jump out like dolphins. At first my nose was full of water as we came up, and by the time I cleared it we were under again, but then I learned to wrinkle your lip before you went under, then breathe as you came up. I heard sea gulls above us, and though it was fun, I was missing land, home, and, most of all, Dad. I thought of the possibilities of him getting out of there with the crown, which were slim, then thought of the possibilities of the horn not being washed away by the tide, which were even slimmer. It looked like it was made of pearl, so it wouldn’t float. We rode on and on for hours, till the moon was right above our heads. We saw dolphins, and the slightest glimpse of what I thought to be a mermaid. Joshua got stung by a jellyfish, and Jonathan reported seeing a sea snake. Then suddenly a school of flying fish leaped up and soared over us, splashing shortly after they had risen. “Onward, Hydrohorse!” Mom shouted. “Throw away your weapons,” she said. “Don’t want to go to jail.” I sadly threw my bow and sword into the deep water. The fish galloped on faster, and after a while we saw the ports of Oban. The horses halted suddenly, and blew vapor into the salty wind. “We can’t get any closer to land on them,” Mom said. “People would get suspicious.” “Why not, wouldn’t they see dolphins because of the glamor?” asked Jonathan. “Well, five people riding dolphins still would be a bit suspicious,” Mom laughed. I stepped off Aquasteed and sank to the sea floor, and the waters only reached to my shoulders. I took some soaking bread from my pocket and it melted in my palm, but Aquasteed wolfed it down anyway. I scratched his rigid head, and he splashed me with his tail, and then swam off. Joshua and Jonathan were treading water, and Mom and I lifted Toby and started back to shore.

Mom explained to act like we had had a wreck with our skis, and Toby was hit by some shrapnel. I felt bad about lying, but it was a little better than an asylum or hospital. When we got to the shore, I fell onto my knees and collapsed to the sand, like somebody in a shipwreck movie. Joshua and Jonathan were gaping on the ground, like some poor stranded children, and Mom was slouching like a tired person. As you can see, creativity is lacking in our family. I shut my eyes tightly as a couple ran to us. “Are you alright?” asked one. “Joshua, Jonathan, Colby! Get up!” Mom snapped. “We need to get him to the nearest hospital,” Mom coached, pointing to Toby, who was next to Mom, mumbling about bad grandpa king with weird dentures. The man took out his cellphone and dialed the hospital. I stood up and wiped sand off my knees. “We had a wreck on our Jet Skis,” Mom explained. “And Toby, here, was hit by some shrapnel.” “They’re on their way,” said the man. Soon enough, we heard sirens. The ambulances and police cars drove up, and some nurses wheeled out a stretcher and placed Toby on it. They rolled Toby into the back of an ambulance, and we rode in a police car. On the ride there, we had to explain over and over again the story to a Scottish police officer, each time having more details but more lies. “Sounds unlikely,” the officer explained. I saw something out the window, which was Mortimer, posing on a lampstand. I pointed out the window, but no one else saw him. “Tell us the truth, and this will be much easier,” the officer instructed. “You wouldn’t believe us,” Mom said. “Try me,” the police officer said grouchily. “Some very bad people took my husband,” Mom started.

# The Hospital

 When we explained all about the “bad people” stabbing Toby and all that, the police officer asked us why not to tell him immediately. “We didn’t think you’d believe us,” Mom said truthfully. “How would you explain it?” The officer asked me. “They were very bad people,” I admitted. “Well, lying to the police isn’t very good at all, but since it was for your husband and father, I’ll let you pass. So where on the island?” “Sgarbh Breac,” Mom answered surely. “But I think my husband will come back.” “We’ll make sure of that, for sure,” he said. He lifted a walky-talky, which is the only name I know for it, and told his men to search the island around the Sgarbh breac. “Did they have a base or anything?” The captain asked seriously. “We were blindfolded, but I’m sure it was underground. I’ll doubt you’ll find it, truthfully.” “That’s alright,” he said. “We’ll just find your husband, and then search. Strange that a gang would stay so close to a well-known location.” The car stopped and he stepped out of his door and opened all the doors. “What about handcuffs?” asked Joshua, since the only thing he knew about police cars was arresting people. The officer laughed and explained all about the police officer’s jobs. Toby was long gone, taken quickly to an A&E room. “You need a change of clothes,” A nurse noticed. “Here, I’ll go get you some.” After changing, we walked inside the lobby and checked in. “So, Toby Franknorth, was at another hospital last week for a….bear attack. You must have a very interesting life. And you must be…Colby Franknorth.” “Yes mam,” I answered. “Can we go see him?” Mom asked. “No, not yet. It might be a bit nasty.” “Well, there’s a two friends of ours here. Can we see them?” “What are their names?” asked the nurse. “Maxine Bower,” Mom answered. “Oh, and Fred Jones!” The nurse said. “Yes, they checked in last morning. They had pretty much the same problem. This way. Fred might still be in pain from his burn, but we’ve got him well taken care of.” We walked down the linoleum hall until we came to a door where Vaskr was lying in a gurney. “The other must be in the lobby,” the nurse said. “I’ll go get him.” We walked in and were all glad to see he was awake. His legs were majorly wrapped, and an IV was taped in his hand. “Hello,” he said weakly. “Hi,” I said. “Thank you for telling us about Mortimer.” Mom said. “Ahh!” I screamed, but Mom clamped her hand over my mouth. Mom slid the window open and the gargoyle jumped in. “All back in one piece! What are those weird chariots?” “Cars,” I answered. “And the birds just get more and more delicious! I just stopped by a market and got a big bag of chicken nuggets!” “In other words, you stole it?” I asked. “Well in my time, people were glad to see gargoyles! Now they just scream and run away. One even shot me with an enchanted arrow right here!” He pointed to a spot where a bullet had grazed him. “Well, anyways, where’s Thomas?” “He’ll be here,” Mom assured. I heard footsteps and turned to the door, but when I looked back our friend was gone.

“Maxine!” I laughed. “Mr. Maxine!” Mom corrected. “Sorry,” I confessed. “How did you get across the sea?” Mom inquired. “Some people saw us and gave us a ride on their boat. What about you?” “Hippocampi,” I answered, since the nurse was gone. “So, where is your Dad?” he asked. “Still gone,” I moaned. Another nurse came in and took Vaskr’s blood pressure. When she walked out, we continued. “Where is Mortimer?” Maxine wondered aloud. “Here!” Mortimer popped his head in the window. “Can you go get Thomas?” asked Mom. “It would be my honor!” he saluted. “Yes!” I laughed. He spat out a green feather and wiped his mouth. Mom opened her mouth but no sound came out. “All locked up in a gibbet, ready to be…eaten.” The gargoyle said creepily. “A parakeet!” whined Joshua. Mortimer leaped out the window like he was ready to do a swan dive and leaped from lamppost to lamppost until he reached a building, which he scaled like a fence lizard. I heard some screams and honks, but after a while it cleared up. “Someday he’ll learn to pose like a real gargoyle.” Mom said. “Or else I’ve got a feeling he’s going to be a lab experiment.” “How are you feeling?” Maxine asked Vaskr. “Bad,” he answered. “Big bad.” “I’m guessing he’s drugged or something,” I implied. “I’m hungry,” Joshua complained. “Hi Hungry, I’m…” Joshua cut me off with a kick to the knee. “Just a second,” Mom said. “Where’s Toby?” Maxine asked. “He got stabbed,” Mom said melancholy. “He’s….I am so sorry Maurine, if only…” “No, he’s in another room. Right now their working on him, he’s just not exactly well.” “We got to ride water horsies!” Joshua giggled. “We caught a draugr,” Maxine bragged. “Thankfully none of the other crew was there, so I was able to knock him back underwater.” “So, I’m guessing Mortimer didn’t go across with you?” I hypothesized. “Well, he hung onto the stern. Got hooked up on some Sargasso, but he was fine.” Suddenly a raven flew in through the window and quickly shifted into Corvus, the elvish speaker. “I come to offer you a deal,” he laughed. He placed his hand on Vaskr’s leg and started to press down on the wounds. “Stop!” I growled. Mom balled her hands into fists. “No need to fight, this is just a bit of incentive. We have captured your father, and we already have everything we need. Your father, our diamond, our army. If you hand the treacherous villain, Mortimer, over to us, we will give you back Thomas. If not, he dies.” “And how will you stop us from choking…” I started, but I changed my phrase because of Joshua and Jonathan. “From stopping you,” I restated. “Oh, there’s nothing at all.” “Well then…” I started towards him but Maxine grabbed me by my shoulder. “Here’s another deal. No matter what your answer is, I will not hurt this traitor. But I will press down more and more until you answer.” He leaned over, pressing more and more weight onto Vaskr. “Bad baba!” Vaskr shouted quickly, waking up. “No!” shouted Mom. “Never!” Corvus lifted his hand. “Very well then. I’m disappointed. Farewell, I hope you realize you won’t be seeing Thomas again…in one piece. Tata!” He morphed back into a raven and flew away, cawing triumphantly. A black cloud of ravens followed his lead, like a death omen. “He lied!” Joshua screamed. “He would hurt us!” “But what about Dad?” I asked. “Well, they can only send the message when they get there, and I think Mortimer will get there first.” “Is everything alright in here?” asked a nurse. “Yes.” Mom said without changing her expression. “I’m just hoping Mortimer can find a way across the sea.” “Are you okay?” Maxine asked Vaskr. “Bad good,” He answered. “I’m hungry,” reminded Joshua, but I wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

 While at the cafeteria, Jonathan told us all about how he thought the elvish lifts worked. Then he drew a pencil sketch of them, which was quite detailed. “Why don’t we focus more on good things, like Mortimer,” Mom said. “Who is going to stop Dad from certain death over a bunch of water?” Joshua asked encouragingly. “Impending is a better word,” Jonathan said, playing with his pie’s whip cream. “Better than certain, is what I mean. Or obvious, at least.” “Alright,” I moaned. “My Brother is stabbed, the only good Dokkalfar had legs made of charcoal, and my Dad is about to be even worse.” “More like bacon than charcoal,” Jonathan noted. “Enough,” Mom snapped. Mom had a noble look, but I was glad she didn’t stand on the table and yell a speech. “I believe things will work out or I wouldn’t have given that answer to Corvus. We’ve gotten through so far, with a couple injuries and losses but nobody is going to…” “The D word,” I suggested. After a little while, we finished eating and made our way back to Vaskr’s room. Thankfully the medicine was wearing off, so his words were clearer. “Why did you rescue us?” asked Mom. “After all the elves pressuring me and naming me, I wanted to believe there was more. Other than that, I saw that your father was kind, he endured his tribulation though I was harsh to him.”

After talking to Vaskr about what all had happened a nurse came in and told us Toby was ready to be visited. We walked into the room, and he too was hooked up to many devices. “What happened while I was asleep?” He mumbled. “Oh, nothing much,” Mom sighed. “Except a giant,” Joshua corrected. “And poppy seeds,” I added. “What did the giant look like?” Toby asked, and I couldn’t blame him. “Big,” was all Jonathan said. “Bad,” Joshua commented. “Scary,” Mom finished. “And it was gray with wattles, and it was bald and twice as big as Dad!” I broke in, but Mom cut me off. “Toby, your dad is back at the mountain. He might be there for a while. I’m sorry, but he got captured. Mortimer’s going to try to find him,” Toby groaned. “I feel like crying, but I know he’ll be fine.” “Me too,” I said, but when I get sad, my voice cracks and it’s obvious, and it happened then. I thought of what my Dad said when Toby and I were little and crying: “Whiney party!” that gave me a grin. “What’s so funny?” asked Mom. “Whiney party,” I said, which confused Maxine, but Toby chuckled. Joshua yawned and sat down on the floor. “I think we’re going to go to a hotel tonight,” Mom said. “We’ll come back in the morning.” “Alright,” Toby agreed. We all left the room and started down the hall. “Here’s some money for the hotel,” Maxine said. “I’ll pay.” “But I still owe you for the taxi!” Mom reminded. “That’s fine,” he said. The nurses let us go out into the darkness with a borrowed flashlight. We walked for about two miles until we reached an inn. When we were inside our rooms, we all took turns taking showers. “What day is it?” I asked. “Tomorrow will be Tuesday,” Maxine stated. “Actually, it is Tuesday. It’s one o’clock,” Jonathan contradicted, pointing to a digital clock. After my shower I went straight to bed. Of course, I had more dreams.

 “I’m disappointed in your answer,” Farbjodr sighed. “You’re too late. Our messengers have arrived, and your father should be executed by now. And don’t think we don’t know about you’re imp. He already tried to get in. It was hopeless.” “Well I still don’t believe you,” I growled. “I’m guessing you’re upset about us not really dying?” “Not at all!” Farbjodr laughed. “When you try to warn others of the doom that is approaching, you’ll be worse than dead! You’ll be locked away in an asylum.” For the rest of the night, I had other dreams, but not with any telepathy. When I awoke, it was still the normal family, except with no Dad and no Toby. For breakfast I had frosted flakes and hot tea, plus a crumpet. The police captain came in and told us that they did find several footsteps but no gangs. He also said some strange footprints were sighted leading away from the mountain. “What?” I asked. “Here, let me show you.” He handed us a photo of footprints that looked like a dinosaur’s. “I’m very sorry, but we’ll keep searching,” he said. He walked out of the cafeteria with his walky-talky yapping away. “Mortimer left!” Mom laughed. “And if you know Mortimer, he never leaves empty handed!”

 The rest of the day, we went back and forth from the hospital to the hotel, from Vaskr to Toby. “Don’t you think if Dad was dead Corvus would come and gloat?” I asked. “They must be ashamed.” I heard Mom’s borrowed cell phone ring. “Hello?” She asked. I saw her mouth drop open and I had a suspicion. “Here!” Mom said, handing me the phone. “Dad!” I exclaimed. I saw Mom shake her head in embarrassment. “No, this is Officer Alkyl.” The familiar voice said. I felt ashamed and disappointed at the same time. “But we found your father on the port. He was dropped off by a boat.” “Really?” I asked, overwhelming with excitement. “Yes, he’s at the hospital right now. After you visit with him I need some questioning. Looks like he’s a little battered, and I think he’s been drugged with poppy seeds.” “Yeah, the gang did that,” I said. “Are you sure there was a gang, because we can’t see much evidence,” he said. “Probably not a gang. More like a…civilization,” I admitted. “O…kay,” he stuttered. “Can I talk with your Mother again?” I literally threw the phone at Mom, but she caught it. “Dad’s at the hospital!” I laughed. After a few more minutes, Mom got off the phone. “Before he was captured, I never thought I would be so happy about Dad being in the hospital!” I jested. We made our way out of the inn and then jogged along the seaside street until we came to the hospital. When we got inside, the nurse led us to his room. “Dad!” I laughed. He still hadn’t shaved to my dismay, but I was still thrilled. Not much was new, just a few bandages. “Where’s Mortimer?” I asked. “He’s over at St. Columba’s Cathedral. I hope nobody notices there’s an extra gargoyle. Anyway, where’s Toby? Is he alright?” “Yes, he’s conscious,” Mom exhaled. “And Vaskr?” “He’s fine, that rat bird Corvus tried to make sure he wasn’t.” “What all happened?” I asked. “Well, that gas did work on me. They were ready to set the guillotine when Mortimer came in. He let me out of the mountain, and then stole the crown. In fact I think he’s still wearing it.” “Wait, wouldn’t the Dokkalfar steal it?” I asked. “If he could make it through their base, he could make it through Oban.” “Plus all he has to do is eat a few birds,” I laughed.

# Home Adjustments

 After around two weeks (I know, a long time) we were clear to head home. Vaskr was fine, though he did have crutches. He sold his gold to buy a house in Tutbury, which you probably don’t know where it is but I won’t explain, since it would confuse you more. Dad finally shaved, so I could hug him without any bristles in my face. They never did find the gang, and Toby was just fine a few days before Vaskr was released. On the way back home, I read Dad’s notes, which Mortimer had foraged from our backpacks. I read about gargoyles, frost giants, berserkers, and draugar. I couldn’t find any notes about Haugar, so I guessed he had not experienced them. We were driving in Maxine’s taxi, which he was able to order from our first hospital, and Mortimer was relaxing in the trunk, snacking on some potato chips. We stopped at a hotel in Moffat, which you also probably don’t know where it is. Thankfully, I had no telepathic dreams. I supposed he was too ashamed to mock me. The next day, we drove towards home. I was so excited when we pulled into our street. Maxine allowed us to go without paying, and we all said our goodbyes to our travelling companion. “I hope Windsplitter’s alright.” I stated. Mortimer scaled our wooden wall and posed on our roof. “So this is your home, eh?” He asked. “There ain’t-isn’t…aren’t any wells.” “Welcome to the modern world,” I said. We opened the doors and turned on the lights. We heard a deafening roar, and then we heard the back door open. “Thief!” Mortimer shouted from outside. We opened the door, but there was no sign of a robber. “Check the house.” Dad ordered. We found broken vases, open cabinets, turned over tables and smashed chests, but nothing was stolen. We heard a closer roar, and saw Windsplitter outside, bursting from our woods. “Windsplitter!” I shouted. “Oh, I thought there was somebody else,” he sighed. “Welcome back, Thomas.” “Mr. Thomas!” Mom corrected. “In dragon years, you’re only two years old!” “Sorry,” he whimpered. Mortimer leaped on his back and started throwing punches. “Die, Draugr!” He shouted. Windsplitter spread his wings, which terrified the gargoyle. “I am a dragon, obviously!” he stated. “And you are a gargoyle.” “Aye,” Mortimer hissed. “This is Windsplitter, the one that Karsh morphed into,” I said. “Wait!” Dad said. “Beetlesprit might have seen something!” I moaned in dismay. Dad opened up the shack door, and saw the pixie drinking from a hummingbird feeder. “You didn’t see anything?” Dad asked, startling her. “None of my business,” “But you’re the guard!” “No, Windsplitter’s the guard. I guard the shack and the shack only!” “Whoopee,” I added sarcastically. She took a messy bite from a peach, and then tossed the core at me. “I might have to cut this out of your pay!” threatened Dad. “Then I’ll go back to stealing your peaches and nectar!” she reminded. “You already have!” Dad said, pointing to the pile of peach cores. “Well I didn’t know you were coming back today!” she said, dipping her sword in the feeder and licking up all the nectar. “One last chance,” Dad said. “Or we’ll go back to the burglar alarm.” “I couldn’t even hear that thing!” She squeaked. “But we could,” Dad warned. “Fine. Clean up that mess, the flies are very annoying.” Since Dad knew he’d get nowhere, he told us to pick up the cores. Not one of us went without gloves.

“Good to be home,” grumbled Toby. When we cleaned up the shack and the house, we started guessing who could have done it. At dinner, Mom asked if we wanted pasta. We all agreed, but she said, “Good, I’ll go get some in the store tomorrow. It’s gone stale.” We had the conference in the attic, at the ring of chairs. Mortimer was perched on the top of a bookshelf and Windsplitter lay on his heat rock. “How did you know there was a thief?” Dad asked Windsplitter. “I could smell him.” “And had you smelled him before?” “Yes, on Joshua. But he couldn’t have done it, since he was gone at the time I smelled him. “And Mortimer, you saw him, right?” Dad questioned. “Not well, the sun was in my eyes, but his car was silver.” “Who do we know with a silver car?” I asked. “Nobody that is with Joshua, but I don’t know everybody’s car.” “But I smelled something else on him.” Windsplitter said. “He reeked of a foul smell. I think it was methane.” “In that case…” started Dad. “The only thing that reeks of methane is…” He gulped, and then I realized what he was meaning. “We’re not dealing with a human.” “Dragon[[15]](#footnote-15),” I gasped.

# Book II

# The Dragon’s Jewel

# Toby

*“Treachery!” hissed the serpent. “You shall be burned to cinders!” And with that he knocked another boulder our way.”*

# Prologue

 “Wait, do you mean Dirthrundil?” I asked with a shiver. I am Toby Adam Franknorth, and this was my response to Colby’s discovery. A dragon had apparently pillaged our home, and he was looking for something. “Do you know any other dragons that have such a bloodlust?” Dad inquired. “But, he’s after the Black Diamond,” I realized aloud. “What do we do, then?” asked Mom. “Apparently he has human form, unless Joshua’s seen any dragons.” It was April, and we had been on a wild adventure approximately two weeks ago. Right now we had returned from the trip, but it wasn’t a delightful vacation. I still could feel the pain from one of the dark elf’s dagger, and I barely made it to the hospital in time. I stayed in the hospital for more than two weeks recovering from the nasty wound. “We need to find a friend of mine,” Dad said. “He’s from Saudi Arabia, and likes playing magic tricks. Oh, and he’s a jinni[[16]](#footnote-16).”

# The Dragon Revealed

 Hello, my name is Toby Adam Franknorth. Before this journey I actually liked dragons. I still do, but not the ones that toast you in an instant. My brothers are Colby, Joshua, and Jonathan. Jonathan’s smart for his age but sort of fragile, Joshua is strong but he’s not overly intelligent, and Colby’s good at archery but terrible at math. I myself enjoy a good, fair swordfight, which cannot be found within a horde of dark elves. Colby is fourteen, I am nearly sixteen, Joshua is early eight, and Jonathan is also early seven, yet in Algebra 1. The date was November the First, 2014. For Halloween I was a berserker[[17]](#footnote-17), and Colby was a draugr[[18]](#footnote-18), which is a Viking zombie. The children, however, thought he was a reindeer and stole his candy. At the moment I leaned back on a metal chair in a medium sized room. It was an auction for a gargoyle that was found in the middle of Solihull. This particular gargoyle had a confused look on his face and was intricately designed, as if it were real. There were only four other people in the auditorium, minus my family. “Ten pounds,” an old lady proposed, I guess the confused look was too odd, though it was very detailed. “Anymore bids?” asked the actioner faster than a pixie’s wing beat. “Twelve pounds!” offered my Mom. “Going once…twelve…going twice…any more bids? Sold!” Two men lifted the gargoyle onto a cart and wheeled it out of the stadium. At the moment I was praying that Mortimer, the gargoyle wouldn’t say, “You know, I can walk myself!” Thankfully they lifted the statue into the back of our car with no words from the effigy. Mom handed the auctioneer twelve pounds and we walked over to our car. It was a brand new, red SUV that we had bought after our white van had been ruined by a roc[[19]](#footnote-19). “You know, I could have moved myself,” Mortimer said from the trunk. “Remember the enchanted arrow?” I asked, since he still didn’t know what a bullet was. It’s strange, since he should have seen guns and bullets before he was captured by dark elves. I assumed he had seen them, but never heard their proper name. At home, my dad handed me a wooden club. “Smash that jack-o-lantern,” he instructed. My brother Colby had carved out a jack-o-lantern and made it resemble some creature’s skull. I gladly took the bat, naming the pumpkin Dothador[[20]](#footnote-20), an elf that commonly was struck on the head. I brought the pumpkin into the woods, but still inside the barbed wire fence. There were strange creatures back there, and I didn’t want to pass over that border. I smacked the pumpkin hard after placing it on the leaves. Its head was dented and the top went flying. After a while I flattened Dothador into an orange soup.

I walked inside and put up the baseball bat. Mom was scolding Mortimer about not being discrete enough, and Dad opened up a dry aquarium’s lid. He had latex gloves on and lifted a large salamander out of the cage and placed him into a smaller open cage. The amphibian thrashed about, releasing a white liquid from its skin. The salamander ranged around six inches long and was colored red and black. My dad called it a “Pliny’s Salamander.” The creature had some silk on it as if it had been tangled in a spider web. I had recognized it instantly as salamander wool. You see, that milky liquid dries and forms this flame proof substance, and when you toss wet salamander wool onto a fire the fire goes out instantly. However, wet wool is quite deadly. My mom even made up a rhyme about it, “When it’s wet its milky when it’s dry its silky!” So that Joshua wouldn’t play with wet wool. I made a better maxim, “When it’s wet it kills you when it’s dry it heals you!” My dad took out tweezers and started gingerly pulling off the silk from our pet. He placed it in a capsule to hand over to Mom, who was working on a fireproof fleece. Did I mention that we were getting ready to face a dragon? Yeah, fireproof fleeces are needed for that.

I wish I could tell you our house had spires and a drawbridge, but it’s quite contemporary. Dad told me that a friend of his, a jinni was holding a magic show that night. “We need the information about Dirthrundil, he may know who he is,” Dad explained. If you haven’t realized, Dirthrundil is the name of the evil dragon. At the moment I sat in the attic, sketching Windsplitter, our dragon chick. Presently, he was snoozing, and the only thing that would perfect the scene was if drool was coming from his limp jaw, but I don’t think dragons have that. Dragons are incredibly deep sleepers, but still I wouldn’t be noisy in Dirthrundil’s lair. I left the sketchbook on the bench a few minutes later and walked outside, where Mortimer was perched with a wren on his snout, his eyes staring up at the bird. I saw him lick his chops with his forked tongue, but the bird fluttered off. He leaped off the roof but his prey evaded him, and he landed in my mom’s garden. “Rats!” he shouted. “Flying rats they is…are!” His language is coarse from sitting in a cell with frost giants. Mom had tried to teach him about contractions, but he still can’t understand that just because you and are make “you’re” and are and not make “aren’t” doesn’t make you are not “yaren’t”. I admit, it is pretty confusing. He claims to be able to speak to animals, but if he can speak to birds I think he’d show more pity. “Dad’s out speaking with the bauchans,” Jonathan explained. “He left just before you came out.” In the last couple of months, we had seen a manticore, a griffon, a vargr, which is the original form of the word warg, like from Lord of the Rings, and some fairies. “Time to dress up!” Mom called. It was only six, we were to leave at nine, but my mom always draws things out. I wore a simple buttoned shirt and a black overcoat, while Colby wore a denim shirt and navy blue pants. That’s not the worst part. He wore suspenders and a bowtie. When he came home, he mistakenly called them “restrainers.” I suppose they could technically be used as those. Two hours passed by slowly, and I made use of my time by finishing up Windsplitter’s drawing. He was still in the same spot. One hour into the wait, Dad had returned with grass stains, cobwebs, and leaves in his hair. “What took you so long?” I asked. “This,” Dad murmured. He held out a quill. “Manticore[[21]](#footnote-21). I didn’t see it, but it’s been fighting the alphyn, I believe.”

Just out of curiosity I picked up a small box that held all of Dad’s creature notes. Sadly, all the notes that explained his personal journeys were lost to the sea. I flipped to the well-known page of “manticore” though I had read it a year or two ago. *“The manticore is a lethal predator common in the Middle East, where it plows the deserts, searching for tasty mammals. It is best known for its reputation to devour humans whole, not even leaving possessions or bones behind. They have a tail loaded with spines, which can be flung every which way to paralyze prey. When, however, the victim is stabbed without the quill being extracted, fatal doses of venom can be pumped directly into the host, which kills with no known cure. They bear a face that looks remarkably like a hominid, despite for feminine characteristics and three rows of shark-like teeth. Their colors depend on the gender and age, while young males have red, shaggy fur, old ones will have duller colors and shorter hair. Female manticores have brown fur, which will also grow hoary with age. Like jaguars and leopards, one can rarely find a black individual, which is all the more camouflaged. They have recently been sighted in southern Europe and other parts of Eurasia and North Africa. Some have been sighted much farther north than expected. They are the largest living feline, ranging around fourteen feet long, three feet longer than their well-known relative, the lion. Their call is described to sound like a trumpet, and it is usually sounded when the beast gets a good sniff off some prey. In my experience, it sounds like a deeper sounding whale song.”*

“Time to go!” Mom said immediately after I locked up the notes. “Magic!” giggled Joshua; though that was not the real reason we were going. On the way there, I watched the nightly streets and woods. “Now, Joshua, if you get bored, you can just work on your homework,” Mom explained. “And if you get scared, just tell us.” “Okay Mommy!” Joshi giggled. Yes, I have a nickname for my own brother. Dad drove along the road and stopped after turning into a parking lot. It was a much shorter drive than it was to reclaim Mortimer. The building, however, was much cheaper, obviously. We walked into the doors, which were not sliding, and entered a hall with linoleum floors and sheetrock walls. The ceiling was plain ceiling tiles, and when we gave a man a ticket and stepped into the theatre all that sat to greet us on the stage was a wooden platform with a cloth over it. Surprisingly, there were still about fifty people in the audience, though it was a poor population. We sat in the very back and waited for around ten minutes. I saw Mr. Nogard, Joshua’s old teacher slip in behind us. He has a military buzz cut and a very bad attitude. Also the lines on his face stand out when he frowns, which is always. “Happy Day of the Dead!" A man in a tacky white suit and top hat bawled. “How would you all like to see some magic?” I heard a few half-hearted cheers. “Well, introducing Ray Anderson, or the Blue Lightning!” The spotlight followed him under the curtain, and from the other side emerged a man in a much better outfit, who marched up with in a weird way so that his knees touched his stomach. He wore a blue robe that trailed him and an ornate necklace of gold. After closer inspection I noticed he had a chin that stuck out in a bony way, making it look like a beard. He had little doohickeys lining the top of his head and his fingers were long with curved talons at the end. His feet were lost beneath his robe, and his skin was light orange, like he was getting a tan. I knew at once this was a jinni, not a mere cheesy magician.

 “Marhaban, I am Aba…the Blue Lightning!” stuttered the jinni. While everybody was trying to figure out if Marhaban was a curse or a greeting, the sprite sent out a blinding light, making all guests cringe or cry out. “I love doing that for starters!” he chuckled as a baby cried. “Sadly, I am only limited to lightning magic, not that I’m inferior, of course!” Many people gaped or stared blankly at the illusionist. He somehow crossed his legs together and stood on his hands at the same time. Several people gasped or clapped, but I still was stunned at his otherworldly appearance. “Now, for, of course, more magic!” He rubbed his hands like he was trying to warm them and stretched his arms out at an angle, sending static electricity through every metal object in the room. My chair radiated with shock, and I had to stand up. Many other people did the same, and the baby cried harder. “Oh, yes, I love that!” giggled the conjurer. A couple and their baby left the room. “Did you know that basenjis are the only dog that can’t bark?” asked Ray unexpectedly. “I heard a few varied answers, but he silenced them with another flash of light. I guess that’s one way to say you want attention. “Now for the more dangerous part,” he said deviously. He pointed to a bean bag on the wall opposite of him with a red target painted on. He stepped four paces backwards and cracked his knuckles. I saw a stream of lightning strike the bag, and then a deafening roar of thunder followed. I closed my eyes and shut my ears, and when I opened them the bean bag was a smoking pile of beans and a melting cover. I saw a few more people leave, but others clapped and whooped. “Now, see those other five targets?” Ray asked. By now Joshua was whining. “Watch and learn,” he held out his right hand and his blood vessels glowed shining white, then five lines of electricity hit each five targets directly. Each one was scorched, though not as badly as the first. One loud boom followed the feat as beans rolled across the room. “Now for my favorite part.” He placed his hands together like he held an orb, and light shone from in between his fingers. “Never mind, too dangerous,” he decided. I heard several disappointed moans. “Now, get ready to run for the emergency exit, because we’re going to see a real live dragon!” “I’m scared now!” whimpered Joshua.

“I need a volunteer,” Mr. Anderson informed. “But he’s not actually a volunteer since he didn’t volunteer and he wouldn’t volunteer even if he was the volunteer!” I heard a couple whines like a sad dog. “You,” he pointed towards me and I slowly stood up. “Not you, you!” He pointed behind me at Mr. Nogard. He frowned, but when all eyes turned towards him he said innocently, “well I’m not a dragon!” I sat down slowly in confusion. “Sure you ain’t,” teased Ray. He leaped off the stage and trotted down the aisle, then dragged the full grown man back to the stage. Due to the glamor, the guests still only saw Ray, not a jinni. “Now, everybody, we have to make him really mad for him to become a dragon, so on the count of three, make the meanest face you could think of!” Joshua stood up and did the official teasing face, but Dad pulled him back to his seat. Several people, mostly under ten made horrid faces at the poor teacher, whose ears turned bright red. “C’mon mister, we know you can do it!” laughed the mage. “Make the guests happy!” but after several seconds the crowd died down. “I’m sorry, our volunteer was not reliable. The food is in the room on the right down the left hall, the bathrooms are on the left hall and the right door, and the exit is straight ahead. Never mind, I’ll lead you.” He tromped down to the door, and the audience followed slowly, probably thinking they didn’t get their money’s worth.

I stood in line in front of Colby, and since I was a vegetarian all I took was potato chips and Jell-O…not to mention hot tea. Joshua grabbed the whole plate of Jell-O, but Dad stopped him. “No, see, you take one, don’t be a glutton,” Dad informed. He gave Joshua a spoon, but then the jinni reached over them and took the whole thing. “Somebody’s been stealing from my plate,” he noticed without seeing Dad. He sat on a couch and started slurping up the substance. Joshua’s eyes watered, but Dad led him to the sandwiches. I took several bites from the blob of matter, until I was finished. Then I started smacking on my chips, which aren’t great with Jell-O. “I’m having a siesta!” laughed Colby, eating Mexican chips and salsa, though siesta means sleep in Spanish. I looked back to the magician’s seat, but he was trotting down the hall in his odd fashion. “Up, we’ve got to catch him before he gets away,” Dad notified. Joshua took a messy bite from his lamb chops and tossed his plate in the dustbin. I sat up and followed Dad down the hall. Mom put away her phone and hurried up behind us as Dad sped up. We reached the end of the hall and looked both ways down two other halls. “There he is!” Jonathan pointed at the spirit about to pass through a side door. “Abadaba!” Dad called. First I thought he was accidently stuttering of nervousness, and mispronounced another word, but the jinni turned around to face us. “Thomas!” he laughed. He ran to us, revealing plates on the bottom of his jawbones, which folded in and out. “It’s been fifteen years!” He did the old fashioned cheek kisses like they did in Israel, and then did it to the rest of us, scratching me with his bony chin. He stood about a head taller than I, though I’m quite tall for my age. I realized how different he was than my idea of a jinni. “I want three wishes!” giggled Joshua, rubbing his cheek off. “No, very few jinn can do that,” Abadaba, the jinni informed. “In fact, none can make stuff appear instantly. Read the old stories, the jinni usually takes them to their wish; it’s a matter of wisdom, not magic. We can do stuff like magic, of course.” “What about your bottle?” Colby questioned. “Or ring, or vase, or lamp,” listed the entity. “We can change into a gas so we can slip into our domain, but they use it as a home. When one sees them and summons them, they are bond to them as their servant if humans encage them. It takes energy to stay solid, and in an encasement they can keep their particles together without drifting apart. Many jinn grow spiteful and will be very close to evil, which is why I made sure my bottle was secretive.” “That sounds like a very long anatomy lesson,” I sighed. “Well, just about as complicated as human anatomy!” Abadaba laughed.

“Follow me,” Abadaba evaporated into a wisp of blue gas and passed under the crack beneath the door. Each of us gasped and the door opened. “Foolproof,” bragged Abadaba, who was in solid form again. I looked inside the small room, more like a closet, and observed the shelves full of swords and daggers. He rolled aside a silk carpet and revealed a trapdoor that was disguised as the wooden floor. Once again he evaporated and passed through an opening. The door swung open and we passed down a metal spiral staircase. The walls were stone and round as if we were in a dry sewer. “I wouldn’t even suspect this being a secret path,” I said in awe. “Where are we going?” “To my study,” proclaimed Abadaba. He flipped a lever and several weak lights sparked to life, lining the way down the tunnel. “The jinn races include lightning jinn, like me, fire jinn, ice jinn, nature jinn, water jinn and earth jinn. With age our skin tans until we are red, thus making us an ifrit. Fire jinn are not popular, mostly because ifrits can already use the ability of fire.”

 We made our way to a door in stone, and Abadaba was still explaining jinni biology. It turned out he was seven hundred forty-three, but ifrits were made at around a thousand. Also he was neither male nor female. By now I was accustomed to old age. Abadaba opened the door manually this time, and we entered an igloo-shaped room of stone. A wooden desk circled the room and Abadaba shifted through a folder of manuscripts. “Beowulf, Fafnir, Krakow,” he cast aside some ancient archives like rubbish. “Ahh, my work! Much more satisfying, and no old English.” He held out a notebook and flipped to a page. He started humming an ancient tune without explanation,

*“Oh, how the earth sizzles and burns,*

*We watch the sacking of the earth,*

*Watch the rending of trees and ferns,*

*And see the skies lose their worth.*

*Oh how the dragon bellows smoke,*

*And shatters the mountains like twigs,*

*Watch as he burns thy innocent folk,*

*And the consumption of ponies and pigs.*

*See the skies turn blood red,*

*And the defiling of the woods,*

*Watch the mountains fall as if dead,*

*And if one could, then he would.*

*Run as Dirthrundil raids the keep,*

*And the courtyards are ash fields,*

*And the walls crumble at our feet,*

*Glory and destruction the dragon wields.”*

“There is much more than that, though I will not go on. That song was written in 1173 by the jinn. My father was one that composed it, especially the part about pigs.” The song chilled my bones with sadness. “How old is Dirthrundil?” I managed. “He is old for a Western dragon, one thousand and fifteen. He was born in 999, if you do the math. “That’s odd,” I remarked, though I was born in 1999. “Almost exactly one thousand years apart,” I realized. “If our birthdays were the same,” “Dragons have a slow digestion period, so their meat released methane, which allows them to fly easier and breathe fire. Their teeth and tongue are like flint and steel, they spark the methane, releasing a fiery blast. All glamorous creatures, which are that way due to an odd organ that releases gas into the human’s retina and brain, still have the Mist after death. They somehow affect cameras as well. Dragons, however, decompose quite quickly, in a matter of hours. They are lazy in winter, but they are warm blooded. They are consumed by greed.” “The Black Diamond,” Dad breathed. “Yes, he’d be on that in a heartbeat,” Abadaba proposed. “Especially if he was revealed as Mr. Nogard.” “What?” I questioned. Then I realized it. Nogard was dragon spelled backwards. “Follow me,” Dad hissed. He ran down the hall. I hesitated, and then followed him. Abadaba ran even funnier than he walked. “Wait, where are we going?” asked Joshua, who was toiling behind. “To protect the Black Diamond!” Dad shouted. We ran down the hall until we huffed and wheezed in exhaustion. We all climbed up the spiral stairs and entered back into the closet, covered in sweat and dust. Abadaba shut the trapdoor and rolled the carpet over the secret pass, and then he opened up the door. All the lights were out, except of course the ‘exit’ signs. Dad struggled to keep running. Abadaba opened the door to the outdoors and our ears rang with the sound of cars passing by in the dead of night. “I’m coming with you,” Abadaba decided. I slid open the skylight to stare up at the stars as the car started. We rode down the street at least ten miles over the speed limit. “So what if Dirthrundil has the Black Diamond, it’s safe from the Dokkalfar,” I compromised. “Besides, we don’t even have sufficient weapons. Sorry, but bauchans are good archers but terrible smithies.” “The dark elves will know where the Black Diamond is when Dirthrundil flies around Europe gloating his find, and then they will steal it, or take it forcefully. They have drakes of their own…the big kind. Once we get out, we run right to the shed to get our weapons.” We had bought copper weapons from the bauchans after we had left our old Dokkalfar ones in the sea. The swords, however, were blunt, the discuses were flimsy, the axes were chipped, and the copper was corroded. At least Colby got a good bow. I closed my eyes, recognizing another peril awaited us. My scar from a Dokkalfar knife still stung when I bent over, and as much time it took away from school, it was not entirely fun. “Maurine, bring the salamander wool,” ordered Dad. “It’s not done, but it may offer some protection,” Mom sighed. We arrived at our house shortly, now dark and looming. “Joshua, Jonathan, stay here,” Mom commanded. “But I…” “Now!” Mom reinforced strictly. We hopped out of the car and a shadow leaped to the night floor. “What’s wrong?” asked Mortimer with peanut butter on his claw tips. “Did a random person pass by through here?” asked Dad. “No, why?” Mortimer stuttered. A booming roar shook the ground. “Windsplitter!” Many of us screamed together.

Mortimer dashed ahead to the shack as we unlocked its squeaky door. “Oh, you,” muttered a voice much like a bratty teenage girl. The pixie sat on an old stool petting a ladybug. “Here,” Dad pushed through a box and tossed me my sheathed sword. He handed Colby his bow and Mom her quarterstaff as Joshua and Jonathan reluctantly walked towards the back door. “Whatever you do, stay inside!” Mom shouted. “C’mon!” Dad yelled. We hurtled a barbed wire fence and followed the sound of snarling. The woods were all untamed, and bats fluttered in the trees above. We broke through some bushes and entered a field we once had trained in and still did. A single oak tree stood in the center, and a figure was barely visible underneath it. “Hello random person!” Mortimer hollered. Windsplitter was circling the man, speaking to him inaudibly. “Stand back!” he thundered imperatively to us. We all were frozen in the spot, however. “So, the ‘dragon slayers’ have come to face me?” asked the man, which was identified as Mr. Nogard. Now it was no enigma to know he was a dragon. He held up a black crown encasing a black jewel with two hands, the Black Diamond. “Hand it over, vagabond!” cried Abadaba hoarsely. “Rindotharn, my long lost son,” Mr. Nogard shouted so we could all hear. “You were stolen from my nest before humans killed your mother! You could have been raised in power; the world would be your playpen!” “I am thirty-seven, I do not play.” “But you are still a hatchling to me!” reminded Dirthrundil matter-of-factly. “But,” Dad shouted at the top of his lungs. “I went back to the nest a year later, and found the eggs as cold as ice. They were dead. After your mate died, from facing a battleship which she brought down with her, you abandoned your eggs, if Windsplitter had stayed longer, he would have frozen. You are the true murderer.” “That does not change the facts,” interrupted Nogard. “You can fly above the scorching towns of England, if you’d like.” “No,” defied Windsplitter. “And I am not Rindotharn, I am Windsplitter!” He spread his wings, but Nogard laughed, unshaken. I drew my sword from its scabbard and noticed Nogard grow two humps on his back, and small protrusions on the side of his head. I had seen this happen with a draugr, but that was a fledgling, this was a full grown dragon. Unlike the draugr, this one first changed into a dragon’s shape, then grew into its normal size. His skin turned sickly green and gray, and his face turned into a draconian snout, and the stubs on his back turned into two wings. A long tail slipped through his clothes as he started to grow. By now he was a full dragon, and his clothes ripped away. He grew to at least seventy feet long and even Windsplitter leaped back. “I am Dirthrundil!” roared an inhuman voice. “Run!” Dad shouted. “Come close!” shouted Abadaba. I huddled next to the bony critter despite his stench, and he produced a shield around us all…except Mom. Fire blew our way and I closed my eyes in tears. “Maurine!” shouted Dad. I opened my eyes slowly. The fire died off, and all that was left was flaming grass and embers. None of us had been scorched at all. Mortimer was in the crumbling trees and leaped to the ground. “There!” he pointed to a fleece that Mom had brought. The fleece was pulled away and Mom was in it with only first degree burns. My rubber shoes melted on the red ground, and I saw a shadow block out the moon and fly off. “Are you alright?” I asked Mom. “Yes,” she assured. “But I need to make more fleeces.”

“What happened?” asked a voice. An ugly, squat shape crept from the forest, and then he leaped back after stepping on an ember. My shoes by now were sticking to the floor. “They’re what happened!” Another different shape pointed to us with a stubby finger. “They brought this trouble upon us!” I identified him as Gorbatton, leader of the long-nosed clan of clurichauns. The other I found as the bauchan leader of the hunt. We all quickly made our way to ground not as hot. I took off my shoes and rubbed them in some dirt to cool them off. “Let me explain,” said Dad. Windsplitter trotted over to the session. “Mr. Nogard, Joshua’s old math teacher just turned into Dirthrundil, my worst enemy. Now he has the Black Diamond and is going to somewhere I know not.” “Call the school,” I suggested. Dad took out his phone and dialed the Solihull School. Dad waited, then spoke as someone apparently answered the phone. “What number is Mr. Nogard?” he asked. “I’m sorry; he just called me an hour ago. He’s going back to his home. He’s retired suddenly.” I heard vaguely. Dad hung up without a proper goodbye. “We have to go to his old den, the Scafell Pike,” Dad decided. “Isn’t that the highest point in England?” I asked. “Yes,” Dad replied. “I’m ready for a shower and a fiesta,” Colby yawned. “So, you want to party while you’re sleepy?” I asked, joking though at a dark…or fiery time.

# The First Step

 Seven bauchans followed us back to the house. “He probably thinks we’re dead.” I realized before it was my turn to take a shower. “I mean, how else could we have made it out alive?” Mom was quickly finishing the coat with the wool Dad had taken from Pyromander, which was his new nickname. I took a shower, washing all the ash and dirt from my hair, and then I cleaned my minor burns and wounds thoroughly. I went to bed restlessly, though it was midnight. When I awoke, at about ten o’clock, which is quite late for me, I heard voices from the attic. Apparently Dad had cancelled our church for the day. Colby was still snoozing, so I got up and pulled down the attic door and climbed up the ladder. Windsplitter sat on his basking stone, and about ten bauchans gathered around the ring of chairs, where Mom and Dad were in deep discussion. “No, Joshua and Jonathan are not coming this time,” I heard Mom affirm. “They weren’t harmed seriously last time, but they are much too young for another adventure.” Thankfully, neither of my younger brothers was there or Joshua would pitch a fit and Jonathan would sulk and do math problems in the garage. “Toby, come in,” Dad said without looking my way. I sat down on an empty seat. Mortimer hung upside down on a beam, like a sleeping bat. “Mortimer, will you come?” “It would be my honor!” chuckled the statue. “I shall come also,” Abadaba stated. “But Windsplitter, we need you to guard Joshua and Jonathan,” Mom ordered. Mortimer looked at Windsplitter. “First I learn that Vaskr is not coming, then Maxine, and now yaren’t?” “You are not!” corrected Mom. “He can’t shape shift yet, or fit in our van if you were wondering,” Dad backed up. “Here is our route.” Dad held out fold-out map of Europe. He took out a pen and drew a line from Solihull to Scafell Pike. “But how do we find the exact location?” I asked. “We can sniff a dragon from Morocco to India!” boasted the leader of the hunt. “But how will we defeat him?” “Ideas come later,” Mom decided after a pause. “One week ‘til we take our leave. We have a lot of training to do.”

 Joshua screamed and Jonathan drooped when they heard the news. “But I want to go!” Joshua cried. “This is not a game!” Dad strictly rebuked. “Last time Toby was almost killed. In fact all of us were almost killed. Joshua, you were nearly killed by wolves, you tell me all the time. Jonathan, you were within a claw-swipe of a bear. Colby was scratched and Toby was stabbed, and you want to face a dragon? Maybe when we go to defeat a goblin horde or a troll, but not a dragon. It was bad enough taking you the first time, though you did do well.” I could tell he was anxious, and he had all the right to be. Joshua cried and went to his room. “Toby, Colby, you just barely made it in,” he warned. “Toby, come outside with me.” He picked up two wooden swords and handed one to me outside. “Dragons surely won’t be the only thing we’ll face,” he cautioned. “Are you ready?” he asked. I agreed. I heard a twang of a bowstring and guessed Colby was training with the leader of the hunt. Dad lunged at me unexpectedly and I blocked with my wooden sword, holding it with two firm hands. I swiped back, but he intercepted my blow and put his blade to my throat. “Dead,” he reprimanded. “Again.” Once more we started fencing, until each of us had our share of losses and victories, and we had to use a sweat rag. Next, Dad took a shield, since the enemy might as well have extra artilleries. The shield was metal, thus the only scars on the safeguard was a scrape on the paintjob. It took around ten tries to finally beat him, but next time he beat me again. We didn’t stop until I had won three times in a row, and still he wasn’t entirely satisfied. I had bruises all over my arms where he had thwacked me, and they ached like they had been squeezed by a giant. Next we used real swords, and I ended up with a scrape across my chest, though it was only skin-deep. Once we were totally done, I was sweating like a horse[[22]](#footnote-22).

 “It’s time to hold a meeting with the clurichauns,” decided Dad. All of our family, and Abadaba walked down into the woods. We followed an old gravel road where alphyns lived down into a hobo-like camp full of laughing and terrible music. It was the clurichaun camp, not the bauchan camp. There were tents with bent sticks and a large bucket full of berries being crushed by muddy boots. “Would you like a drink?” asked a clurichaun waitress that came up to my waist, sloshing around some brandy. “No thank you,” I answered plainly. “What do you want here?” growled Gorbatton. “Sober folk,” he spat out some chewing tobacco. He said “sober” as if it was a swear word. “We come to ask you some questions,” responded Dad. Spot, our old dog came running up to us being ridden by a young clurichaun, who came up to below my knee. Another child that looked identical to him ran beside him, shouting, “I’m king!” Gorbatton growled and shouted, “Bacchus, Dionysius, just because you were named after Greek and Roman gods doesn’t mean you’re king yet! Honestly I hope I outlive my evil cousins. Maybe I should get married just so you’re not next in line!” I was shocked at how he treated his relatives, especially when they were in the line of kings. We were led into a makeshift gallery made of branches and trunks. I sat down on a stump as the others did so about a rectangular table, which was a split pine tree. A waitress passed through and poured us a drink, but I knew better. Joshua was about to drink from the wine cup but Dad stopped him. “Can we get grape juice, unfermented?” Dad asked. “We have unfermented grapes without an ‘un’ at the beginning!” chortled Gorbatton. “Then can we just have water?” “Sure, sober people!” “Are you a human?” asked Dionysius. “Of course he’s not, look at those eyes!” His mother tapped my glasses furiously. “Did Mr. Nogard change on you?” asked Dad. “Well, no,” said Gorbatton after deep thought. “And you didn’t stop him?” “Well…we weren’t really awake.” “You’re nocturnal, for the most part!” Dad reminded. “…We were drunk,” admitted the skinny drunkard. I slapped my face with my hand in frustration.

“Colby, you can do it!” I shouted half-heartedly as Colby climbed up the treacherous cliff. One foot was on an outcrop and the other was on a handhold. Both hands held onto a smooth rock, and he was nearly at the top of the cliff. He stepped up a stone but lost his balance and clung to two stones. “Colby!” Dad shouted. “Come on, you can do it!” Colby pulled himself to two other footholds and steadied himself. “You just saved yourself from a fate worse than death!” Dad encouraged, but he tripped and plummeted towards the ground. He landed with a clang onto the cushioned floor in the climbing wall building. Several younger children looked at him in a heap across the floor. There were ten walls, ten was the hardest, and one was the easiest. While all the others ran for one, he ran for ten without hesitation. The youngest child barely met the limit of fifty pounds, and my brother himself is a scrawny eighty-two. My saying is, “If you don’t have big expectations you’ll never be let down.” Dad was still training us for the journey ahead, and neither of us were excelling.

 The week passed by slowly, and Abadaba was in and out. On Monday, The tenth of November, we started packing. My birthday was on the twenty-fourth, but I had a feeling we wouldn’t have a proper celebration. Mom and Dad had given us a release on school for next week, and after school in the current week we would spend all our time in training. My Dad also kept working as an architect, though we didn’t do well, thinking only of the journey and its dangers.

“Toby, sit up!” shouted my Latin teacher for ninth grade. I was thinking deeply about ways to defeat Dirthrundil, but all led back to somebody dying. I heard a snicker, and a couple giggles. “Quiet class, this isn’t Communication class!” hissed the bossy teacher, Mr. Rudolph. I agre…Rudolph is a funny name, especially around the holidays. “Can somebody name what this means, ‘*Taurus leonem permit sub quercu,’*” I raised my hand and he looked to me, so I gathered he wanted me to answer. “The bull pursues the lion under the oak tree,” I replied quietly. Another boy raised his hand and answered the same, stealing my answer. I was too anxious to get mad, however. At lunchtime it was worse. Nelson stole my money from my locker, somehow learning my number. Then we got into a fight after he called my dad retarded and we were sent to school detention together. The rest of the time, I was sent to the principal twice for not paying attention or not answering when I was called on. An example is on Wednesday the teacher quoted from John Adams, “You was persuaded in your own mind,” then the teacher, sadly, asked us, “Now what does this tell us about John Adams?” And I said, “He was bad at grammar.” On Sunday we went to church and Dad had deacon duty, and Mom had found her old list of packing supplies from last time, and instructed us to pack it all up on Monday. She had made three new sweaters to our delight, and we were starting to warm up to the thought of leaving to Scafell Pike. Until Monday. Then all the anxiety and mortification came crashing down like a tsunami. I packed up my supplies, but I couldn’t decide if I wanted to pack them quickly or slowly. If I packed them quickly, we’d leave sooner. If I packed them slowly, there’d be more anxiety in waiting. I decided to go in the middle. “Why can’t we take a plane?” I questioned. “Uh, Mortimer,” Colby pointed to the figure posing like a cupid. We all heaved our supplies into the trunk and said goodbye to Windsplitter, Joshua and Jonathan. “Don’t answer the phone unless you check caller ID, and don’t go outside unless you’re with Windsplitter, and Windsplitter, make sure they don’t answer the doorbell or eat only sugar! Also check the caller ID for us, but answer it for nobody…” “Momma, we’ve got it,” Jonathan assured. The leader of the hunt and Rocksplit were the only bauchans that went with us. After that we started driving off into the great unknown.

# Fire, Jaws and Maws

We left at about nine o’clock in the morning. Dad and Mom sat in the front seats, Colby and I sat in the middle seats, Abadaba, Rocksplit and the leader of the hunt sat in the backseats, and Mortimer sat in the trunk. “What’s your real name?” I asked the leader of the hunt. “That way I won’t have to call you ‘the leader of the hunt’ all the time.” “Backbreaker,” sighed the bauchan. “But to the bauchans I am the leader of the hunt, just to clarify I am the main hunter.” “Why don’t we do some school,” Mom decided. “Name the organs,” “Pancreas, heart, liver, kidneys,” I started. “Bladder,” Colby said slowly, as if he was dumb. “Islets of Langerhans!” I shouted playfully, as if it was a Dokkalfar island. All of us chuckled except backbreaker. “Enough!” he shouted. He unbuckled and stood up on the chair but hit his head, so he stood up on the car floor, but we hit a bump and he fell back into his seat, so he buckled up. “We are on our way to defeat a dragon with no plan at all, and we do…anatomy lessons!” I concealed a giggle with a cough, but Colby broke out in furious laughter.

We drove for two hours until we reached Preston. “Can we eat?” asked Colby. “Sure, just be careful. Whenever we stop we’re in danger.” We crossed a bridge and ate at a fast food restaurant, where I ate French fries and a chocolate milkshake. Then we drove on again until we reached the Great Gable, a large mountain near Keswick. “I’ve got another question,” Colby sighed. “If we don’t have the Black Diamond, why are there still so many monsters after us?” “The creatures, not monsters can sense when the Mist is lifted for somebody, and they often try to befriend or exterminate them, since they may spread the word. Also, remember the Mist, and besides, most wouldn’t survive without a weapon.”

Two hours later, Scafell Pike came into view. We stopped our car and pulled over on the side of the road, and Rocksplit stayed to guard. We climbed up the side of the mountain in deep toil, and then we met up with a trail. “Any signs of a dragon?” I asked. “No, not yet,” Dad sighed. “Let’s take the trail,” I suggested. “No, the cliff cannot be found on these trails,” We hiked farther and farther up the mountain, until sweat was pouring down us despite our constant canteen use. “Where is the shade?” I gasped. “No trees in miles!” We all stopped as we heard a rumble. A large rock beside me rose from the earth and two, placid eyes stared at me past a stony face. “Apologies if he scared you.” trembled a faint voice. Behind me stood a man with twigs as hair and a woman with grass as hair. “Landvaettir!” Abadaba exclaimed. “Aye, that is us, but we are not on good terms. We hear things in Islay that the Dokkalfar are readying for war,” “But we defeated them!” Colby shouted. “Karsh is dead, Dothador’s dead, and Garexus is dead!” “But not Farbjodr,” reminded the bush man. “Like a centipede, it only separates when cut, they now call the mountain Ramator.” “What of Dirthrundil?” asked Dad. The rock giant snorted. “Not here,” he bellowed slowly. “Not me knows. Me sleeps a lot.” “We have not seen Dirthrundil here in ten years,” the man implied. “My name is Steletar, leader of the landvaettir. This is Grunt,” he pointed to the giant. “Though he looks different, we are both landvaettir. Iceland will be their first target,” he dug into the earth, and all that was left of him was a bush, all that was left of the woman was some grass, and the giant was just a rock.

A roar shook the ground. “Chimera!” Dad yelled after climbing a hill. We drew out our weapons and stood in a circle. “There!” Colby released an arrow in fear and it bounced beside a deer. It continued running from some unseen foe. “Where is it?” I questioned anxiously. “Lookout!” a boulder fell from above us and rolled down the side of the mountain. We leaped aside, landing on the ground as a beast the size of an elephant bolted down the cliff. It had an ugly frilled head with a mouth agape, a goat-like head that snorted flame, and a snake head that hissed violently. Dad stood up and blocked the snake head’s venom that it spurted, but the leader of the hunt was fending off the frilled head’s maw. It was not how I pictured a chimera. I stood up and charged the beast, but felt something trip me and then in a flash I was underneath the roaring beast. I rolled aside for a massive foot to stomp beside me, and then I noticed I had dropped my sword. The creature was neither Reptile nor Mammal; it was a dragon, which is related to Dinosaurs. Its frilled head roared as I turned around and ran for my sword just as I fell down and rolled towards a cliff.

I grabbed onto a patch of grass to prevent me from breaking my neck on the sharp rocks on the bottom of a shallow cliff. I climbed the steep hill, hearing battle cries and roars from the chimera. I saw a gleam in the short grass and brandished my sword, then charged up the cliff. “Separate!” screamed Dad. I stood back and the others scattered. However, the goat head spewed fire at Mom and Colby. “Maurine! Colby!” Dad roared. We all ran to where Colby screamed with blisters on his legs and Mom’s hands were tanned red. “We need a new plan, with none of us as decoys,” Dad growled. The chimera charged us, but we spread apart and it plummeted to where I would have fallen, however it only had a few bloody patches in its fur as it stood up. Mortimer, who had been scratched up by the beast’s tail led the way up the hill for us to come up with another plan while holding Colby.

 Mom grabbed her backpack from where she had dropped it and fumbled with the zipper with her burned hands, but Dad helped. “Carrots,” she held out a bag of the veggies. “Birds,” Mortimer said, spitting out a dead sparrow. I looked away, disgusted. “And meat,” Dad took out steak from a Ziploc baggie. We peered over the edge of the cliff from where the chimera had leapt and saw the chimera walking around another precipice. “That’s Dirthrundil’s cliff,” Dad identified. “Here,” he threw the meat below us, then Mom tossed the carrots to the floor around ten feet from it, and Mortimer threw his slobbery bird on the other side of the meat. “Over here!” Dad yelled. The beast roared, but apparently with so much sulfur it spewed, its smelling wasn’t great. It charged towards the sound, but then the goat head reached for the carrots, the frilled head reached for the meat, and the snake head reached for the bird. The heads each strained to get what they wanted; apparently it takes a while for them to coexist. Dad leaped off the cliff and swung his sword down the beast’s back, and it roared in pain, then Dad swiveled the sword, forcing it deeper and deeper into the beast’s back. I swung my sword, severing the beast’s snake head. Colby was on the floor breathing quickly and Dad was battling the entire beast with the leader of the hunt. The leader of the hunt plunged his sword deep into the beast’s belly, and then Abadaba struck his head with lightning. The chimera collapsed onto the grass. “That was not Dirthrundil,” Dad informed. Dad unrolled the linen and wrapped Colby and Mom’s burns. “Dirthrundil’s mine,” Dad snarled.

 Mom and Colby stayed at the bottom of the cliff because of their burns, even before the dragon attacked. I started to scale the cliff, one handhold after another. I pretended I had a harness on like Colby, just climbing along safely, but the sharp stones cut my hands. Right before I reached the top an ugly face popped out and shouted, “Don’t fall!” I lost balance and started to fall back, but the leader of the hunt grabbed onto my shirt collar and helped me to the top. “It was here,” Dad said surely, pointing to a blackened stone. “There’s no methane or anything,” hissed the leader of the hunt. “Except a little trace, but I predict it’s been ten years since any methane was shed.” “Portugal, I should have known!” I groaned. “Every year Mr. Nogard moves to Portugal. We were set up!” “Blast!” howled the leader of the hunt. “Confounded dragon!”

We drove back home, treated our wounds, and gathered around the television. *“Three fires have broken out near Lisbon, and six people have died, fifteen injured. Scientists speculate it has to do with the recent methane release. This may be much worse than cows.”* “Why would cows cause methane?” asked Joshua. I smirked, and Jonathan and Colby giggled. “Their toots,” I mouthed out, but Joshua didn’t get it. “Six people are dead because of a silly misdirection!” the leader of the hunt roared, always making stuff worse. “It’s time to go.”

We all said goodbye to Windsplitter, Joshua and Jonathan, and then set off once more. We drove on and on across fields and farms until I was sick of the landscape. That’s what England is like, it’s nearly all farm, a few cities, and barely any woods. “I’ve never been on a hovercraft before,” awed Abadaba. “Only Maurine and I have,” Dad clarified. “They’re fast, too.” At last we saw London in the distance, but we didn’t go into the city. We kept driving in boredom. At lunchtime we reached Dover. Dad handed a man his passport and toll and we drove up a ramp onto the large craft with the rounded hull full of fans. In a few minutes we started off. “How fast are we going?” asked Colby. “About thirty-five miles per hour,” Dad answered. “We should get to Calais, France in another hour.” We ate our packed lunch; mine was string cheese, an apple, and a peanut butter sandwich. “Do draugar have the Mist?” I queried. “No,” responded Dad. “It’s a nasty story,” sighed Mortimer. “There are parasites in animals that can control or change them. One gives tadpoles two extra legs, another doesn’t disable a cockroach but gives it the urge to stay put, or when the time is right to go to a wasp nest and get eaten alive by its larva. This one is similar to when a dead ladybug is controlled by a parasite; you see, it drifts into the dead host, which has to be sitting upright and unburied, and then the host has zombie-like status. Its brain can be intact, but its soul is still in Heaven or the other place. Then it spreads to another host when the draugr’s prey dies, and it allows them to change sizes, and even shape shift.”

The hovercraft landed on the shores of France and we took off again. “Let’s have a vote,” Dad decided. “Who votes on going to Paris?” All raised their hands except Backbreaker, who sat with crossed arms and a grumpy frown. “It’s unanimous!” Dad said. “I didn’t vote!” Backbreaker contradicted. “You don’t count!” jested Dad. “Paris it is!” I was disappointed to know the landscape was nearly the exact same to England. After four hours of sheer monotony, we reached the huge and famous city. We ate dinner at a nice, French restaurant. I ate French bread and soda, and Colby ate a big slice of pepperoni pizza, French bread, and soda. I usually eat more than he does, but at French, Italian, Greek or Mexican restaurants, he’s in his element. Abadaba found no Jell-O, so he crushed all his grapes up into a jelly-like substance. The leader of the hunt and Rocksplit ate medium-rare pork, and we had to prepare a go-box for Mortimer since he didn’t have the Mist. When we left, we fed Mortimer in the trunk and set off to find a hotel. We found many hotels, but since we were low on money we chose the least expensive one. We had to leave Mortimer outside, and Mom explained to him to freeze if he saw anybody. When we reached our room, Rocksplit collapsed onto the couch, which was going to be my bed. I slept on the floor in a sleeping bag and fell to sleep slowly. When I awoke, I was thirsty for hot tea. The others also had the same craving, so we all went down to the cafeteria. I got a shiver, since last time I had gone to get hot tea in a hotel a mad berserker attacked me. There was no tea, so I had what they called café crème with double crème.

I sat peacefully in a chair next to a square table, Mom in front of me, Dad beside me and Colby on the other side. “This trip has been peaceful so far,” I noticed sarcastically. My eyes then were drawn to the TV. Since the sound was too low to hear, I read the subtitles which were thankfully not French, *“Four more forest fires have broken out around Cabo da Roca, and now police have completely evacuated the city. Some have started thinking there really might be something else out there. Scientists report that they found shed skin of something large, and it is not a hoax. The authorities are not letting anyone else into the area until further research except after inspections, and a few fans and beseecher have started calling it ‘Portugal’s Dragon.’ Now only a few can go in the city at a time, and all must show their license.”* I stopped reading there, and all the rest were also staring at the screen. “I need to call Joshua and Jonathan,” Mom decided. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed in the number. She waited, and then left a message. “Joshua, Jonathan, please call me back. And Windsplitter, if you hear this go tell them.” She hung up. “They weren’t there,” she growled. “I hope they’re alright.”

We ate, packed up all our supplies and set off again. We passed the Eiffel tower to please Mortimer, who was hopping up and down. “I want to climb it, and then go to Notre Dame!” he exclaimed. “No, we have a job to do,” Mom answered his plead. “We need a taxi, I can’t stand to get this beauty scratched up,” decided Dad, patting the car while driving. We stopped at a parking garage and then hailed a taxi. “Where are you off to?” asked the driver with a familiar accent that I couldn’t put a finger on. “Just take us to the border,” Dad replied. “Lannemezan would be close,” answered the driver. I was surprised he could say those names. “Something smells funny,” decided Mortimer. I looked at his picture on his license, and something looked familiar. He had sunglasses and a silver beard. He wasn’t Maxine, though. We kept riding until we reached woods, about an hour later. I saw a sign reading Fontainebleau, and yes, it did take the internet to spell that. We took an abrupt turn and the driver said nothing else. “This isn’t the border!” Dad objected as we went down a gravel road. The driver said nothing. Then it all came back to me. “Corvus,” Dad growled. “Rat bird!” hissed Mortimer. “Farewell, *amis*,” said the Dokkalfar in French. He turned the car again and we headed into the woods. Corvus morphed into a craven and flew away as we crashed into a tree.

I spat out some blood as Colby shook his head. Mom had a bloody lip and Dad’s nose was pouring blood. The front of the taxi was obliterated. “This thing ain’t driving again,” Mortimer growled. The leader of the hunt scratched a bump on his head, Rocksplit wiggled a tooth, but Abadaba sat unharmed. I looked up and noticed we were in deep woodlands. “Let’s go,” Dad groaned, putting a tissue in his nose. We climbed out of the wrecked car and took our rucksacks out of the trunk. After getting ready, we started hiking through the woods. We saw two red deer and a centicore[[23]](#footnote-23), but they ran off before we could get close. “Hey, look at ’em!” A raspy voice hissed. “Hikers? A whole fami’m! With a goygoyle!” “And a jinni! And a boychan!” Another voice snarled with an American Northern accent. “Kerkopes,” mumbled the leader of the hunt. “I saw them all the time in our old camp. They’re nasty little thieves!” I saw a shadow from behind me and felt my sword leave its scabbard. I turned around to face a baby hairless monkey sucking on the hilt, an then the biggest one took it from him. “We don’t want trouble, we want fun!” laughed the first monkey. “Enough!” The leader of the hunt pulled out his short bow and aimed an arrow at the biggest one. “Oh no!” He laughed, dropping my sword. Another one swung on a vine and scooped it up before it hit the ground. “I am Rustlefur, the leader of *the hunt*!” He teased. “Fool!” barked Backbreaker. Their laughter echoed through the trees as the primates danced about, tossing my sword from one to the other. Eventually all of them left us, and I was also weaponless.

In short time we reached the brink of a corn field that was weathered down as if nobody had tended it in a year. “Well, it’s the only way,” Dad decided. Mom’s phone rang and she lifted it up. “Mom, where are you?” asked the barely audible voice of Jonathan. “France. Why didn’t you answer when I called?” “There was a manticore, but Windsplitter scared it off. Seen any monsters?” “My battery’s really low, but we did see the rat bird, centicore, and kerkopes, but that’s all.” Suddenly I heard static grow on the phone. “That’s about to change,” it cracked, then went dead.

 I saw a sign that read, “Beware of Dog,” as we continued grimly. “This does not look good,” whimpered Rocksplit. The letters were faded and the sign had a greenish tint with age. The leader of the hunt handed me his dagger, but greedily kept his two swords, which were copper because of the fae’s weakness to iron. We plowed through the thick corn stalks, slowly but surely making our way to the sound of cars up ahead. When I looked around, however, I noticed I was alone. “Dad?” I called. My call was answered by another phone ring. But I thought it was dead! I took it as a good sign despite the bad feeling. The phone continued to ring, and then I heard Dad’s voice in the distance. I looked around in a frenzy and saw some corn rustle. I closed my eyes and silently prayed as I heard a deep growl. Then I ran. I heard something follow me quickly and the phone had gone silent. I tripped on a corn stalk and turned to face a horrid face with a mouth that went past its eyes. It was the color of a bear yet the size of a hyena, and its face was sort of like a badger. First, I thought Andrewsarchus[[24]](#footnote-24) or Hyaenodon[[25]](#footnote-25), but they were most likely extinct. Then I thought of a crocotta, which lived in Ethiopia and India. I remember it mimicked sounds or voices, so I drew my dagger and did pitiful strokes against its iron-hard head. Then it growled and lunged at me, but my knife plunged into its front left leg. It yelped and started running, dragging me along. The dagger came loose and I tumbled into the dirt. I jumped up and followed the voices of my family calling me, tempted to drop my rucksack. I ran right into the leader of the hunt, who growled and pushed me aside. I pointed back towards the beast that was far back beneath the stalks, probably licking his wounds. “Crocotta,” said Dad in recognition. “Stay close.” We continued plowing through the corn, which is quite difficult, especially after such a shock. “Crocottas once lived in Ethiopia and Morocco, but the Spanish transported them to their country across the Strait of Gibraltar. They went North or *South* from there.” I laughed at his joke dryly. “Also the Italians introduced it into Italy, and they live in India as well.” “So, I’m guessing their glamor is a Spotted hyena?” I assumed. “Yes,” Dad answered. “Let’s hope it doesn’t get ready for round two, though.” We at last made it to the street and were able to get a car to stop and take us to the nearest car rental. They would not let us take Mortimer in the trunk, who was now stationary, so we hooked him to the roof. We had to go backwards a couple miles towards Paris and we rented a black Sudan for two weeks. We placed Mortimer on the roof again, since he had eaten some of our food, ate lunch, and then drove off down the road towards Spain. “If only we could live in peace for a little while,” I sighed. “Why do good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people?” I asked. “I didn’t bring my Bible,” said Dad. “But one chapter comes to mind. Psalm 73, verse one says, ‘surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity in the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.’”

 “But verse eighteen says,” Dad continued, “‘Surely you place them on slippery ground; and you cast them down into ruin.’ You see, deep down you can’t be happy without the Lord, but you also can be unhappy with the Lord, but one day he’ll lift you up. The first verses have to do with the seen, the next have to do with the unseen.” Five hours later we ate dinner and stopped at another hotel. I was glad we could shower commonly, without any kraken ink for Colby or black blood for me. In the morning we started eating, and a small man, around Colby’s size with a full handlebar mustache and a stubby black beard walked in and sat at our table. “The Mist has been lifted,” he said with a Scottish accent. “How do you know that?” Colby stuttered. “I should know,” the man unbuttoned his shirt, revealing an animal fur undershirt. “You’re a berserker!” I scooched back on my chair. “And a wolverine one at that!” “Aye, I am a rebel. In the old days berserkers were quite civilized, until we laid eyes on the Black Diamond, and many joined forces with the dark scum.” “So, you’re on our side?” I guessed. “Indeed, but I will come with you. I came in honor of Vaskr; he was captured after I left. The Dokkalfar are rising again, and I must guard you. Where is the Black Diamond?” “That’s where were headed, Dirthrundil the dragon stole it. But how do we know you’re not a spy?” “I have no proof, but you must trust me in the name of the Messiah, our true Lord. Vaskr was able to convert such a stubborn man as myself. My name is Barg.”

 We reached Portugal a few hours later, and at nine o’clock in the middle of nowhere we ran out of gas. “Blast it! I told you wolves are more reliable!” cursed Backbreaker. “Now what?” “We can call,” Colby suggested. “No, my phone is almost dead again,” Mom sighed. “Here,” I took out a jet-packed inflatable raft and pointed to a bridge. “Rio Zezere leads strait to Cabo da Roca,” recognized Abadaba. “We go by boat,” “We could go hail a taxi,” I suggested. “No, I’ve had enough time standing still,” Mortimer sighed. “Another drive and I’ll grow moss!” He hopped onto the newly inflated raft and we took off paddling harshly. “Why couldn’t you cooperate and let us drive?” asked Colby impatiently. “Because I saw several eyes turn to me when I scratched my back!” hissed the gargoyle. “Enough, we can’t start fighting not an hour into it!” Dad panted. Abadaba played in the water with his finger and tried to catch some minnows, ignoring his paddling job. “If we head this way by boat we should arrive at Cabo da Roca in around a full day or two, at this speed,” noted Mortimer, paddling with his hands. “If we’re not assaulted by grindylows[[26]](#footnote-26),” groaned Barg. We heard the phone ring and Mom answered it. “Mom, it’s already Friday! Where have you been! You haven’t been calling since Tuesday!” “I’m sorry; we have been driving all week. After you called we were attacked by a crocotta.” “We went to the zoo!” laughed Joshua, who had seemingly stolen the phone. “You did not!” scolded Mom in disbelief. “No, he was kidding!” Jonathan said quickly, apparently reclaiming the phone. “Ever heard of speaker phone?” Jonathan asked, sounding like a big brother though he was younger. “I thought you were being a hog!” excused Joshua. We laughed despite the circumstances. “Well, we also ran out of gas, and the fine will be thousands,” Mom sighed. “Mom, watch out!” I shouted. She dropped the phone into the water in a panic as we were dropped overboard by a net that dangled above the surface. I came to the surface and spat out some water. I looked around in suspicion, and all the others were thankfully above the water. “To the shore!” shouted Mortimer, swimming ahead to a sand bar. Suddenly I felt a tug on my leg and a rope or something was tied to my foot. Apparently, the others had the same thing, because Dad was kicking and Abadaba was sparking the water with static electricity. I felt a jerk and most of us were pulled underwater.

# The Hydra

I regained consciousness in a dank room with slime-covered brick walls. I heard raspy breathing and a slick; amphibious humanoid stood over me and hissed. I rolled over quickly with a headache. Then I realized that my hands were shackled to a wall and the creature was my guard. I tried to stand up but slipped on the algae-infested floor and landed hard on the ground. I looked around; noticing the rest of my family was gone. Probably in another cell…unless I was the survivor. “What are you going to do, eat me?” I questioned harshly. The creature, which I speculated was a grindylow, cocked its head and widened its frog-like eyes. It had slimy grey skin, a small snout, and a head sort of like an olm, one of those externally gilled salamanders. Sorry, I’m an animal addict. Apparently these grindylows didn’t speak human language, but I still had a feeling it had something bad planned for me. It snapped its toothless jaws and reclined against the wall. From the smell I guessed I was in a dry sewer system, long dormant. I noticed he stood next to a barred portcullis; I guess they have different guarding procedures; the guard would stay in the cell. I stayed there for a couple hours, waiting for these monsters to do something with me. Eventually I got the nerve to take off my shirt and use it as a pillow. Every time I was on the verge of sleep a drop of brackish water would drip onto my head. When I found I couldn’t sleep, I counted the days from when we started and found out that it was probably the 14th of November if I hadn’t spent a day in the cell already. Every time my mom was called by phone creatures would come. Maybe they were attracted to the sound or something. Suddenly I heard a grating sound and the grindylow opened up the gate. I quickly put my shirt back on and the grindylow unchained me, only to chain me again and lead me down the hall, which reminded me of Abadaba’s secret passage. I slipped twice and each time my guard jabbed me with his pointed stick. “Toby?” asked a voice. Colby came around another corner being dragged by another identical grindylow. “I didn’t know grindylows were so, creepy,” he shivered, looking at both of ours. I sighed in relief that I was not the only one left, but also I was anxious to see what they would do to us. We met up with the others gladly, but superficially the grindylows discouraged loud noises so we had to whisper. About a mile from my cage, we reached a large room with a pool of water in the middle. A cascade fell behind a large, grated gate big enough for an elephant to walk under. What they had in store was much worse.

 There were no guards, and all our escapes were blocked. We huddled in a corner, praying as the gate opened slowly. We all stood up and heard a sizzling hiss that chilled our bones. An amphibious head broke through the waterfall. Then another. Then another. Then another. There was a total of five heads, and the middle one was the largest. “Hydra[[27]](#footnote-27).” I gulped. The middle head had a fin down its spine leading to its rudder-shaped tail. It stood about six feet at the shoulder, smaller than I would picture it, but it was at least twenty-five feet long, its massive tail trailing behind it. It had no legs, like a caecilian. Again, I’m sorry about my animal genius, not to be prideful. Its coloration was that of an oriental fire-bellied toad, green with a red belly. “The coliseum,” I realized. “They want to kill us for sport!” “See any spectators?” asked Dad. “This is a sacrifice. More like a temple.” The creature’s heads hissed together like a mass of snakes. I rattled my chains, trying to scare it off. “Stop!” whispered Dad. “The other heads are blind and deaf. If we could decapitate the middle one, the whole thing would die,” The gate slammed shut as the middle head struck and I narrowly dodged the attack. “Spread out!” Dad shouted, but there were five heads and four of us. One of the toothless jaws latched onto my leg and shook me about, then flung me into the wall. Another head lunged forward and I tried to hook my chains around its neck, but I’m no James Bond. I landed in the puddle of brackish water and stood up swiftly. “Help!” Colby shouted, half swallowed by the fourth head. Dad sliced his rusty chains across the slimy creature’s neck. I guessed if it was a human he would have tetanus soon. The creature gagged and Colby landed into the puddle. I ran to my family, who were now in the corner of the room. “I have an idea!” Dad shouted. “Separate first!” we all ran in separate directions as all of the creature’s heads lashed out like a five-tailed whip. “Now come together!” I didn’t fully understand his plan yet, but I obeyed him and all the heads huddled to see us. The two heads on each side, however, covered up the middle head’s eyes and hearing holes. “Yes!” I whispered. “Now what?” the hydra stood silent, hissing grimly. “Now we escape,” decided Dad.

The heads snapped and moved slowly, but the middle one was still blinded. We crept as silently as we could to the door while the serpent stood dumbly. Dad unscrewed a nail from a fallen door and got Colby to reach in the grates to pick the lock as the hydra was standing mutely as the heads started to grow restless. Colby was able to reach both of his scrawny hands into the grate and fumbled with the lock. Then the legless body started to turn towards us and the heads separated. The door squeaked open and we rushed through, but the middle head bit Mom’s leg and dragged her back into the room. Dad ran back in and started throwing punches. A grindylow ran to close the gate but I hooked my shackles around his neck. However, his spear was to my throat, so we would both die if we fought. I heard a scream and tightened the shackles. I felt the splintery point on the side of my neck, but I tried something I had never done before and hoped to never do again. I personally killed a living thing, fist to fist. I snapped his neck and grabbed the spear with my two shackled hands, then tossed it to Colby, who stabbed the serpent. It spat out Mom and Colby threw the spear to Dad as we all ran back in and shut the gate. “What is that?” I questioned, watching the bones of the grindylow melt away into atoms. “Glamorous creatures have bones that can disintegrate in a matter of minutes, though most of the time it takes a few hours. That way while the bones are still there the Mist has enough time to die down without revealing the true creature. But when someone detaches a part from this special gland, then that part does not decompose as quickly as the rest.” The hydra hissed and recoiled, and then we continued on after Dad unlocked our shackles with the keys, the only thing remaining of the grindylow. “Where are the others?” I asked. “Mortimer, Abadaba, Barg, and the leader of the hunt were able to escape, but they could not find the opening, I would guess,” Dad sighed. “Plus they would be too strong for the hydra with Abadaba’s magic, Barg’s strength and Mortimer’s power.”

“Hide!” whispered Dad as we heard a hiss. We ducked into the shadows as two grindylows passed by and started sniffing. Dad lunged out in anger and knocked the two unconscious if he didn’t kill them. Apparently he was still getting out his anger over Mom’s being grabbed by the hydra. We ran down the slick, round halls until we came to a well-like hole full of water. “What do we do now?” I questioned. “It’s a dead end.” “No, see that light?” Dad asked. He pointed down the porthole. “It leads outside,” I noticed after watching sunlight barely show. “I’ll go first,” Dad volunteered. “But I am not opening my eyes like they do in the movies.” We chuckled coldly. “Be careful,” Mom warned. “And before you run out of breath, come back to the surface!” Dad lowered himself into the cold water and sunk under the ripples. I prayed that he would make it to the other side without drowning. “I’ll go now,” Colby sighed. “I’ll go last,” I decided. Both Colby and Mom went in without returning, so I looked around in total loneliness, then stepped into the ice-cold water and dunked myself under.

 I tried to recover from the coldness and pushed off from the wall down the shaft. I held my arms out; scared of touching my family’s drowned bodies. To my pleasure, my hands touched another wall, showing the underwater tunnel went up from here. My breath nearly gave away as I exited the hole and entered into open river water, then burst through the surface. My family looked like drowned rats, drying off on the shore. We were right below a bridge, but Mortimer, Abadaba, Rocksplit, Barg, and the leader of the hunt were missing. “Let’s head upriver,” Dad concluded. We walked up the bank farther and farther, and thankfully it was only about three o’clock in the day, we had only been down for around five hours. “There you are!” growled an encouraging voice. The leader of the hunt scowled at us harshly from the inflatable raft. “Abadaba forced us to search high and low for you four!” “Where have you been?” Abadaba gave each of us an Arabian cheek kiss, and then hugged us. “You are stinky,” he noticed. “Hydras, grindylows, what could be stinky about that?” I joked. Mortimer landed for the trees and scrubbed with his fist my noggin like my grandfather. “Hydra?” asked Abadaba. “I once faced a hydra; you have to blind it by its own heads! I bet only I could think of that trick!” Though I thought of Dad’s identical trick, I decided not to discourage him. We rode softly down the river, looking back and forth for grindylows or something worse. We rode down the river for hours. Abadaba held out a spotlight since he wasn’t paddling anyway. I sat back in the raft, waiting for us to arrive at the dreaded area. “Wait; is it legal to go in without a gas mask?” I asked spontaneously. “No, so here,” Dad handed each of us asthma masks. “I’ll tell you when to put it on,” Backbreaker decided. “Methane reeks the area ahead.” “What’s the plan now?” I asked. “I don’t know,” Dad sighed. “We haven’t run into anything that inspires me.”

# Dirthrundil’s End and the Start of the Battle

“Why did you separate?” I asked Dad and Abadaba. “It sounds like you had fun together.” “Your mother was pregnant,” Abadaba began. “And after your dad got bitten by a wendigo and nearly changed, we decided it was best we parted ways.” “And we wanted to give you a stable foundation,” added Mom. We got beached frequently, and it took until morning for Backbreaker to decide the air was too thick and we needed gas masks. Backbreaker and Abadaba looked ridiculous. “What makes a faerie?” I questioned. “Their stature and humanoid looks, and…” “In other words, they repel iron,” Abadaba interrupted Barg. In a few more hours, we saw a boat patrolling a tributary, and we paddled up to him. Past his boat were the open waters. “How did you get out here?” asked a man in a uniform with a gas mask. “I’m Thomas Franknorth, cryptozoologist. I come here to study the methane and fires, just to see if I can provide any help,” “Crypto-what? Well, we keep draining the methane but more comes in. Come up here and show me your license.” We climbed up to the bow and he checked Dad’s credentials. “Oh yes, Franknorth! You’re the one that I heard about on the news! The gang and the grizzly bear! I’m Portuguese but you’re a legend around here.” I was disappointed that he didn’t point out that only Mom, Colby and I had seen the bear. “You can take a ride to shore if you’d like!” the man decided. “My name is Henry Talbot.” “No, it’s okay, but nice to meet you.” Dad and Mr. Talbot shook hands and we lowered ourselves into our fragile boat. “And what’s the gargoyle for?” asked the man. “Souvenir from Islay,” Dad enlightened, and we grabbed our oars and rowed away. We landed ashore on the beach after floating in the ocean. The sky was full of smog and the nauseating smell of methane slipped behind my mask’s cracks. “No weapons,” I reminded. “This is our final destination on the journey, and all the time our weapons get stolen.”

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil,” Dad quoted Psalm 23 to encourage us. “For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” “This would be a pretty place if Dirthrundil never ruined it,” Colby noted, looking at the cliffs towering in the sky. It looked as if it was about to rain, courtesy of the smog. “What exactly are we looking for?” I asked. “The destroyer,” Mortimer sighed. “That would be Farbjodr,” I reminded. The jagged cliffs shadowed the waters, and the sun barely shone through the pollution. We pulled ashore and stepped onto the beach. “This smells terrible,” I choked. The smell itself was enough to make me rasp, but without the mask I would be on the floor, choking on the gas. “Colby, if you can climb with a harness you can climb without one,” decided Dad. “No way!” Mortimer hissed. He took a rope from our raft and scaled the cliff in a matter of seconds. “This is the westernmost part of Europe,” Dad lectured. “I wish we could enjoy it.” “Ready!” Mortimer tossed the rope down and Colby climbed up first. When he reached the top, I was forced to follow. I heard a rumble and nearly let go of the rope. “The dragon is at work,” Mortimer noted. I reached the top of the cliff, gasping for breath. Next to me stood a barren lighthouse, slightly charred. Beside it stood Colby, tracing his ashy finger across the whitewashed walls. Mortimer stood atop the lighthouse, looking around the area. “Where could he be?” He mumbled, climbing over the house’s walls. We all heard a roar, then a hiss. “I’d follow that,” I guessed.

The others made their way to the top, and we heard no more creepy sounds. We made our way down an abandoned road, and saw no scientists whatsoever. I had a scared feeling that they might have been devoured. We followed the road, until Rocksplit noticed he was quite close. “I’ll scout ahead,” Mortimer decided. “If you see him, do thumbs up, if you don’t, thumbs down,” Mom whispered. “I do not believe in that signal as it was used in the coliseum,” decided Mortimer. “I’ll just say boo if he’s not there and bah if he is there,” “Fair enough,” Mom decided. “Wait…” But Mortimer was off towards the seashore. He peered over the cliff and yelled, “BOO!” And it echoed all through the country. We heard a roar and a shadow crossed the land. I turned around and shouted, “Duck!” as two monstrous claws snapped for us. “Colby!” I shouted as the dragon passed by, carrying my brother. “Enough!” shouted Mortimer. Dirthrundil alighted on a cliff face and released Colby onto the ground. We ran forwards to Colby and the intense conversation. “Why should I listen to you, *gargoyle*!” hissed the dragon. Colby limbed towards us with a bloody spot on his chest. “Why should I listen to you, booger-breath?” asked the playful gargoyle, now serious as he spoke. Dirthrundil’s laughter boomed across the land. “I thought they were dead, but I am not surprised, nor frightened. I have eaten every last man that did not flee in terror. What do they call me nowadays? The dragon of Portugal?” Has a nice ring to it.” “You smell funny,” Mortimer remarked, and I couldn’t agree with him more. The dragon stretched out his long neck and viewed each of us for a while with his sideways slanted eye. Then he laughed. “No weapons! Only the puny bauchan and berserker dares come armed into my domain!” The leader of the hunt drew out his bow and aimed an explosive arrow and fired it. The smoke cleared and smoke bellowed out of Dirthrundil’s nostrils. Abadaba shot a blast of lightning but Dirthrundil sidestepped. “A jinni!” He laughed. “How did you like how I feasted on you forefathers?” “My father,” corrected Abadaba. “I was three hundred years old!” He shot out a ball of lightning but missed again, only charring the side of Dirthrundil’s neck. He fell, back, sweating like a horse. “How does it feel to be so…downsized? Ha ha ha!” He swung his tail, shattering the top of his peak, but Mortimer stood unblinking in front of him. Dirthrundil sparked a flame that covered the gargoyle but he stood, unsinged and unafraid. I put out a flame on my shirt from the dragon’s blaze. “You killed my mother,” Dad stepped forward, with tears growing in his eyes. “If we’re to play the “blame game” then I can say humankind killed my mate as well!” He blew out fire but Dad blocked his blast with his coat of salamander wool, his hair singed. I had started growing tears in my eyes as well with such hate for the monster, ruining so many lives. “Oh, yes. I forgot about that,” Dirthrundil laughed. “You forget about murder!” I burst out. “What do you have, Alzheimer’s?” “Since I do not wish to kill you instantly,” stated Dirthrundil. “Why don’t we have a game of riddles? No fighting until one loses. If you win, I conceal myself in human form for the rest of my life, and hand this to you,” He held out the Black Diamond crown with two claws. “You go first,”

*“What goes up and never stops,*

*what goes down but never drops!”*

I blurted without reconciliation. Dirthrundil thought for two seconds, and then answered, “Air.” I groaned in frustration. Dirthrundil smirked, then started,

*“Earthen palace,*

*void of malice.*

*Earthen barrow,*

*Like stone’s marrow.*

*Has a mouth,*

*Speaks after you,*

*Has teeth,*

*Now I’m through.”*

 “What on earth?” Mom asked. “Can you repeat it?” I asked through clenched teeth. “No,” hissed Dirthrundil. “Earthy kingdom, full of malice,” was all I thought of. “Earthen palace,” Dad started. “Full of malice,” I recalled, “Earthy…Earthen barrow, like stone’s marrow,” continued Colby. “Has teeth, doesn’t eat…” “Speak,” Dad corrected Mom. “And I believe it’s mouth, not teeth.” “Cave!” Abadaba shouted. “Very well,” hissed Dirthrundil. “Now you go.”

*“What can you never show a dog?”*

asked Dad. Dirthrundil thought for a while, then answered slowly, “Color,” “Correct!” Dad applauded, much too joyously. “Now I begin,

*“What weighs nothing upon a scale,*

*Yet ruins kings without fail?*

*What wreaks havoc on the earth,*

*But underwater, has no worth?”*

This time Colby wrote it down in the sand, despite his minor chest wound. “What weighs nothing upon a scale,” He read. “Gas, fire, methane, a feather, a hair,” Backbreaker listed pessimistically. “Yet ruins kings without fail?” “Methane, fire, gas,” I narrowed down. We read through the last verses, and gave our answer. “Fire,” Barg decided. “You are excelling in this so far,” hissed the dragon. “But not for long!”

*“What eats and eats but never sleeps,*

*What drinks and drinks but never dines,*

*What reaches and reaches but never finds?*

*What sheds in time will soon rewind,*

*It creaks and creaks but slow to die,”*

“A tree,” decided Dirthrundil faster than we ever would have guessed it. “You are running low on riddles, and soon you will be my prey!”

 Dirthrundil yawned and began his long and complex riddle,

*“Where people fail, fire will hail,*

*Men in mail will not prevail.*

*Fire rise*

*Ash fills the skies,*

*Mountain thunder,*

*City asunder,”*

Okay, not that long or complex, for Mom answered swiftly, “Volcano,” “Ooh, seems like you’re the one running out of riddles!” I hissed, terribly hateful of the proud dragon. “Not for long,” hissed the dragon. “Continue,”

*“What roars and roars but never snores,*

*What melts and melts but never welts,*

*What hardens and hardens, soon to be forgotten,*

*What floats but weighs a ton,*

*What falls but can’t run?”*

“I do fire, you do ice, or glaciers to be exact,” Dirthrundil answered boastfully, rubbing his horns against the cliff side. “A female alphyn is going through the woods, yet she hooks her horns on a branch. How does she get out?” “Easy, female alphyns have no horns!” Mom sighed. “If we’re down to logic riddles, I have one too. What way did the stone on the top of the cliff roll?” “Whatever way the wind blows,” answered Dirthrundil. “No, whichever way Mortimer pushes it.” A fragment of the cliff was pried free of the hillside and crumbled to pieces on Dirthrundil’s armor. “Treachery!” hissed the serpent. “You shall be burned to cinders!” And with that he knocked another boulder our way.

 The rock was cleaved in two as Abadaba shocked the stone. Both pieces landed beside us, but I landed hard on a stone behind me, and intense pain shot up my shoulder. I screamed loudly in short bursts, and my hearing was muzzled as if I had cotton balls inside them. I closed my eyes as some cold hands snapped my shoulder back into place. I screamed louder, but by the time I grew hoarse I felt better. It still felt horrible, and it stung when I moved it. I opened my eyes, gasping for breath and found the hands had been Mortimer’s. Abadaba lay on the floor, breathing shallowly, and Dad’s shirt had melted away, plus his skin was crisp after a second-degree burn. “Foolish humans!” hissed Dirthrundil. “We didn’t even finish the game!” “Wrong, you answered the last question wrong!” Dad corrected. I heard Dirthrundil say something that sounded like, “*Argh*,” and he sprayed a stream of venom towards us. Mortimer picked me up and ran across the fields. I screamed some more, my shoulder being aggravated. The grass that Dirthrundil sprayed withered, and Dad and the leader of the hunt lifted Abadaba wearily. I knew almost for sure this would be the end, and Dirthrundil roared again. Mortimer dropped me and sprayed out a stream of water, blocking off some fire that came our way. Nevertheless the heat burned me. “Fie-fie!” hissed Mortimer. Abadaba pried himself from Dad’s arms and shouted, “Abadaba says no!” loudly, but the sound was blocked off by the roar of fire, blazing right into Rocksplit.

 Dirthrundil’s blaze split the two parties of Dad, Abadaba, and Backbreaker apart, and roasted my arms. “Rocksplit!” shouted the leader of the hunt from the other side, but he was gone. I choked at the smoke, and then I stood up weakly. A wall of blazing fire separated us, and Mortimer was screaming with rage and probably sadness. He leaped across the gap, and I could not see through the fire. Mom ran to me, who had some grilled skin but the fleece had kept her alive. I looked down at my burning, charred self with pain at every side. I felt like falling into her arms and going back home. Mortimer ran back, carrying Dad, who’s shirt was now gone, and Abadaba ran behind stiffly in his funny manner. The leader of the hunt ran through seriously. “I have a plan!” explained Mortimer as Dirthrundil flew over us, whipping his tail across the earth. “Abadaba, can you use one more lightning blast?” “Not for over a foot, or I’d die for sure.” Abadaba gasped. “Under a foot is as much as I’ll make you go!” Mortimer plotted, and then he explained the plan.

“Foolish scum!” hissed Dirthrundil, flying above us and clawing the ground like a plow, but he it was mainly feigning. “Now!” Mortimer shouted as Dirthrundil swept in, talons outstretched. Mortimer sprayed out a stream of water and Abadaba tapped it, and it splashed against the beast. Dirthrundil roared as the electricity coursed through his seventy-foot long body. The electricity looked a bit different than in the movies, but it had the same effect. He dropped down motionless, and his wings draped over his body. “That is how you defeat a dragon,” Mortimer said as he toppled into the ocean. “He’s dead!” shouted Colby, feeling Abadaba’s heartbeat. Mortimer ran to him and started pumping at his friend’s chest again and again, but there was no sign of life. We all exchanged sad looks and I prayed sincerely that he would survive, because it was no victory without that faithful friend. Suddenly Abadaba awoke and gasped in the air. We each took a turn hugging him, but he had gone back to a deep and dreamless sleep. “Now, we must say our remembrances to our good friend Rocksplit,” The leader of the hunt sniveled unexpectedly. “He was next in line. He always obeyed orders, and he would make a great leader. He died with honor, with his friends, and now…” he sniveled again. “Now he will join his maker,” He fell onto his knees and two tears traced their way down my cheek. “He once loved to sing, ‘Oh my Darling,’” wept the leader of the hunt gravely. “Let’s sing it, and then go into a hymn, please.” We did as he asked hoarsely, then Dad prayed for us. “Goodbye, dear friend and brother,” cried the usually stern leader. We fashioned a cross out of his two swords, but buried no remains as none could be found. The black diamond radiated beams of shadow, doing something it only did around Dokkalfar. “Oh no,” we turned around and peered over the edge. “Duck!” Dad shouted. Several ropes were grappled onto the cliff face and several boats crowded the banks of the sea. “Fight for Rocksplit!” Backbreaker shouted as the battle began.

Volleys of arrows were shot towards us, one landing beside Dad. “Backbreaker, Mortimer, get sleepyhead out of here!” He pointed to Abadaba. “Colby, take this and run!” he pulled a decoy of the Black Diamond from his bag. “Maurine, follow the others!” He sliced a rope in two by a pocketknife and about four elves fell to their death. Dad Ran to the black diamond that was in the clutches of the dead dragon and hid it in his satchel. Colby ran across the grassy fields as the battle began. A horn blew and Mortimer leapt to the bottom of the cliff after moving Abadaba into the lighthouse. “I’ll fetch weapons!” he shouted as the first two elves reached the top. I stepped back as they closed in on us, but then Mortimer knocked one off the cliff and handed Dad a great sword. Then Dad clashed with the other and gave me a short sword. Both of us sliced at the ropes, sending Dark elves to the bottom. “Backbreaker, take this and run as far as you can!” He handed the bauchan the satchel and I fought with what looked like a dwarf. “After him!” Farbjodr, the king of the Dokkalfar shouted, pointing to Colby. “Toby, I’ll guard the lighthouse. You catch up with Colby and guard him!” I sprinted ahead much faster than the elves, which were in full platinum armor. Two arrows sailed past my head and another sliced the back of my knee. I cried out and felt like falling over. I held my shoulder as I ran down the road towards Colby. I turned around to face the whole army of dark elves. Also there were new creatures, dwarves and more frost giants. I picked up my speed again. So far I had brought down one elf, and that would probably be all before the unexpected end.

I tripped on a piece of gravel and skinned my knee on the asphalt road, but I hopped back up and followed Colby, who was right ahead of me, gasping for breath. “I…thought…dwarves…were good,” he rasped. “But greedy.” I huffed. “And they are warped by the Black…Diamond’s power,” I was impressed with how professional I sounded, but then an arrow struck my arm, and I fell to the ground, near tears. “I’m sorry,” Colby cried as the elves closed in. “I can’t do anything else to save you,” The elves stopped to watch the show, and Colby threw the Black Diamond’s fake. An elf caught it and gawked at it, but a vargr plowed through being ridden by Farbjodr himself. Vargr have sunken eyes, coarse, black fur, and look like evil wolves the size of a horse. Farbjodr snatched the stone away. “A fake!” he hissed, crumbling it in his hands. “To the lighthouse, men! Prepare the ballista!” Colby jerked the arrow out of my arm and I screamed in intense pain. I felt blood trickle down my arm in gushes, and Colby tore his shirt and wrapped it around my elbow, where the arrow had struck. He tore out another piece and added on to the bandage, but I still lay, screaming out in the nightmare.

“Get him up!” “I’m trying, you rock!” “Well just co-op-er-ate,” Mortimer and Backbreaker argued. I felt myself being lifted off the hard asphalt and I was carried for what seemed like hours. I heard a door shut and Mom cry out. I opened my eyes and there was a split spear on the floor as if it had been fired by a giant crossbow, or a ballista. “Die, rat-birds!” shouted Mortimer. Beside me lay Colby and Abadaba. Colby was gasping as Dad stitched up his side, and Abadaba slept peacefully on the carpet next to me. “Have we won?” I asked stupidly. “No, and I don’t think we will,” Backbreaker noted helpfully. “It would be best to just get out of here and avoid more deaths,” Mom wrapped up my arm again with gauze, and I felt hot blood rush down to my hand. “Elevate his feet!” shouted Mortimer from the doorway. “What…happened to Colby?” I gasped. “He was bitten,” Mom cried. He heaved up and down unnaturally, and his arms twitched occasionally. “We have to retreat!” shouted Backbreaker. The glass windows shattered and a ballista bolt splintered against the stone wall. “Take them to the beacon!” Mom screamed. “It’s not safe here!” I looked out the doorway to see Mortimer, Dad and the leader of the hunt battling inside the walls of the lighthouse. By now the ground was littered with bodies and gore. We were lifted up, and I closed my eyes as somebody carried me up some stairs, into the top of the lighthouse. I felt the asthma mask still on my face as I was lowered to the floor. Mom pulled out a bow and nocked an arrow and fired it out the window. Then I went unconscious again.

I awoke in a car, and my head ached and my arm swelled. I realized I was in a chair that was laid back like a lounge, in our rented car. Colby moaned and shifted to his side. “How…did you get…it back?” I gasped. “We had to hike,” Mom informed. “I’m glad your awake. Let’s head home now.”

# Battle Plans

It took a week for us to all get healed, and we took off in a train, and Mortimer was packed in the luggage rack. Once we reached Paris, We gladly took our silver car and rode home. “Did you get the Black Diamond from Dirthrundil?” asked Jonathan who was riding on Windsplitter. “Yes, but the Dark elves took it,” Dad groaned. “And Rocksplit is dead; Abadaba, Maxine, Vaskr and the leader of the hunt are incarcerated!” “What does that mean?” asked Joshua. “Trapped,” informed Jonathan. While Jonathan, who was seven, could spell incarcerated, an essay by Joshua, who is eight, would look like this: “The Buty and the beest, by Joshua Franknorth. Once there was a gurl who got capturd bi a beest. The beest almost at hur but tha fel in luv. The end.” Plus Joshua didn’t care for romance or fairy tales. “Dark elves?” mused Joshua. “I thought we beat them!” “We all did,” Mom groaned. “Well, at least you defeated your worst enemy!” encouraged Joshua. “Dirthrundil’s not my worst enemy anymore. The Black Diamond itself is.”

We had reached home on the seventeenth, and my birthday was the twenty-fourth. “We had to hold off the elves around the lighthouse until they breached the gate,” explained Dad. “On the way back /Colby got bitten by the Vargr of Farbjodr. Then there was a long fight inside the courtyard, until they captured the leader of the hunt and stole the Black Diamond. We were forced to retreat, but Mortimer was shot in the thigh, and he dropped Abadaba, who awoke but was soon captured as well. Then they gawked over how Vaskr and Maxine had come before us, and they released the rest of us for some reason.” “So, my father is dead,” sighed Windsplitter once we finished the tale over a bonfire where the training tree used to be. “I can’t say he didn’t deserve it, but I wish he could have changed before the end.” “This isn’t the way the story is supposed to end,” Colby cried. “It’s not over yet,” Dad fortified. “We have one more fight, then the Dark Elves are over if we succeed.” “Very good, scum.” A shadow flashed in the night and morphed into Farbjodr. “Certain elves can teleport, others like Corvus can transform.” We all leaped back. “Don’t even dare to try to hurt me, or I will give the order to execute the prisoners. We are heading to Iceland, the Vatnajokull, to be precise. If you wish to join us, you will be decimated. But we’ll let you live if you stay here, but for now, meet us there.”

“What do we do?” asked Mortimer intently. “Are allies are short, and we have no army.” “Oh yes we do!” a voice hummed. A bauchan tromped to the front. “I am the leader of the bauchans, and we will join you in this battle. I will not be going, but Girdlegirth will.” “Hello, I am Girdlegirth, third in line to the leader of the hunt, and since Backbreaker is captured and Rocksplit is…dead, then I am the new one. I will lead you as honorably as I can, in the name of the Pantokrator.” “Who dat?” asked Joshua. “It’s another name for Christ,” informed Dad. “Then I’m in.” I drew my sword and placed it over the fire. “Me too,” Joshua drew his axes. “As am I,” Dad swung his sword out of its scabbard. “I’m in,” Jonathan agreed. “Indeed,” Barg held out his two axes. “If I had a flameproof bow I’d be in,” joked Colby. “But I agree,” “Then we will be off!” The leader of the bauchans chuckled. “And Godspeed to you!”

We sat in the attic, once again discussing plans. Fifty bauchan warriors stood out on the roof with their ears perked up. “I am coming this time.” Windsplitter decided. “If the children come, I come. I will not make the same mistake as the first time.” “I will come as well,” Mortimer added. “The house can go unguarded.” Dad decided. “I will fight for Vaskr,” grunted Barg. “Colby, fifty of the bauchans, Mortimer, Joshua and I will fight from the sea, and the rest will fight on land.” “They have lindworms!” hissed Rufflesap, one of the first bauchans we saw. “We have a dragon,” “They have draugar!” “We have a gargoyle, the bane of the undead!” “They have…okay, I’ll go. Still, we’re outnumbered ten to one.” “Look, we can’t stand here talking about the consequences. You do that when you’re about to steal a cookie. All Iceland is in Danger, and if we don’t leave tomorrow, we’re already too late.” We followed the bauchans to their camp, where they were all packing and saying goodbye to their family. “I hope we’re not leading them to death,” Mortimer groaned. “I still can’t forget the death of Rocksplit.” Girdlegirth walked towards us in a full suite of copper armor. “We will follow if it means certain death,” he promised. “I will follow if it means taking the place of the little ones, or anyone else.”

*“Our time is dire, under the scorching fire,*

*We will rise only higher,*

*Through the mire.*

*We march in the night! In the moonlight!*

*We march in the day! Wagons away!*

*We see the sunshine, or hear the rain fall,*

*And all of the time, our hopes grow tall!*

*We ride in the dell! And drink from the well!*

*We climb in the cave, or ride o’er waves!*

*We shiver and shake, and though our bones break,*

*We ride in the night, to our delight!*

*We swim in the deep, and hurricanes sweep,*

*We rush in the hills, and over the fields!*

*We reach in the end, from journey begin,*

*We reach the day’s break, and night’s wake.*

*Never we fall, and always we rise,*

*Together we call, though some must die.”*

“How do we get to the sea with all of you?” asked Mom a few seconds after the song was over. “These,” Girdlegirth clapped and three buses drove up, with cushions guarding the iron, in case of any burns. The three drivers introduced themselves as Rendclaw, Crawbird, and Footsies. That name is weird, as you can imagine. “Watch,” Rendclaw smirked. I saw a bauchan climb through a window and open a hatch on the roof of the middle bus. A three-shooter crossbow was raised to the roof. “We call it the trifaller,” sighed Girdlegirth. “I wish the leader of the hunt and Rocksplit were here to see this,” The bauchan demonstrated the bow by shooting three targets together. He could also change the bolt’s direction, and it resembled a heavy-duty ballista. “We’ll drive,” “We can carry one–hundred fifty bauchans, fifty per bus. I wish to drive this thing to Iceland, but I suppose it won’t fit on the fairy.” “Ferry!” corrected Mom. “Well, I guess we’ll leave once we reach the sea, and I hope you’ll make off well!” We bought a large horse trailer, and Dad would tow it with his FJ cruiser. We made our way back to the house silently, but suddenly a deep growling came from under the porch. “The alphyns!” I exclaimed. “No, they’re just the cubs!” Mom pointed out. Four were bluish and two were reddish. “Their parents were captured,” I growled behind clenched teeth. “We have to take care of them!” “They’re nearly full grown!” Dad objected. “But you said yourself alphyns take care of their young until they’re a year old! I estimate their nine months,” Jonathan speculated. “Sure,” groaned Dad. “And we can ride them in battle!” Joshua added. “Only the males, and only you and Jonathan. But we’ll have to spend all night training them.” After we trained them in the yard, which took hours, we all struggled to sleep, waiting for daylight to bring our next journey.

# Book III

# Ragnarok Falls

# Colby and Toby

# Part One

# Colby

# The Ride to Battle

Hello, my name is Colby Franknorth, blah, blah, blah. You already know this if you read the first book. “If its war then so be it!” shouted Dad. “We didn’t do anything to cause it; it’s them who brought it upon themselves!” “But they want war!” Girdlegirth took his turn and began again. “That’s their plan. To conquer earth.” I groaned with my hand to my head. “Let’s just go already,” grumbled Dad. “We can’t wait here any longer.” Six alphyns yipped and howled from the yard, and Toby, Mom, Jonathan and Barg took one car while I lay back in my car seat along with my Dad, Mortimer, and Joshua. We would ride in my Dad’s FJ cruiser, hauling a horse trailer behind us. Only it didn’t hold horses. It held a twenty foot long dragon that would be released at the northernmost tip of Scotland, Thurso. Two alphyns, the males would ride with the rest of the family, and they would take two buses while we would take one. There would be fifty bauchans per bus. My eyes filled with tears remembering Rocksplit, the first death of my friends that I had seen happen. The scene kept flashing through my mind, the fire overwhelming the helpless bauchan. Though we avenged him, defeated his murderer, the end of our recent journey was not nearly satisfactory. I knew we would lose many men before the end of the war.

It was two forty-three PM, a Tuesday, and the eighteenth of November. Following us was a cushioned bus full of rowdy bauchans, and the bus swerved off and on the road more than once. The fast food we had eaten at twelve didn’t make up for my sadness. “Rocksplit died valiantly,” Mortimer sighed. “Though I never liked his name. I was scared he would split me if I froze!” I didn’t laugh as he straightened his lanky arms. “There will be many other deaths on this journey, I’m afraid. With more men always comes more death. I wish it didn’t have to be this way, but it’s the way the Maker decided. Anyways, it’s not any day you kill a dragon, or save the North!” “One, you killed the dragon, two, we haven’t saved it yet,” I objected. “But I couldn’t have done it without Abadaba, and we still have to rescue him,” Mortimer groaned, stretching his arms. “I’m glad I didn’t see Rocksplit die!” Joshua hummed. I tightened my fists. “No, he’s young. He doesn’t understand,” Mortimer informed, holding me back. The other two buses drove with Mom, Jonathan and Toby, who would fight by land. We, however, would ride a large boat and face the reinforcements. In four long hours, we reached the sea. The sky was dark blue in the night, and the sea loomed ahead of us. Dad opened up the door to the horse trailer and Windsplitter trotted out. “Swim from here to the Orkney Islands, then to the Shetland Islands, after that go to Faroe Island, rest, and go to Iceland. Meet up with the others.” At that moment the bus drove up to us. The bauchan warriors came out of the bus like a mass of students. “Get back in, we have to get to the harbor,” Dad ordered. The bauchans sadly went back in, some holding their noses. Windsplitter said his farewells and dove under the water.

We drove a short distance to the harbor, where a man was talking on his phone. A bauchan stole some Champaign from a cooler and chugged it. “Hello, want to rent a boat?” the man asked after putting down his phone. “Yes, a yacht,” Dad answered. “Well, you’re in luck. I’m trying to get rid of a brand new yacht I was given for early Christmas. That’s ridiculous, eh? Well, anyways, I got better things to do then keep another boat, so you can keep it for a price of…five-hundred pounds.” “Deal,” Dad pulled the money from his pocket and handed it over to the man. “Now, it hasn’t even been christened with Champaign yet. Want to try?” He handed dad a Champaign bottle, but we heard a thump and a bauchan cried, “More! More! More!” banging the bottle of Champaign on the starboard of the ship. “Well, your midget friend seems to have done it already.” “I seen carrabudas!” he slurred, probably already drunk. “They like shiny bauchan for supper!” He rattled his jewelry and we all laughed. “Oh my!” the man said as fifty bauchans hobbled past him. “Call it, ‘The midgetator,’” Dad jested. We walked up the footway to climb onto the large yacht that was worth way more than five-hundred pounds. Two bauchans wheeled a cart with a covered package onto the ship. I guessed it was the trifaller, their awesome three-shot crossbow. Dad lifted Mortimer, who was posed as a normal, creepy gargoyle with his mouth open and teeth bared. “Souvenir!” Dad called to the dumbfounded ship salesman.

The yacht was nice, comfortable, and had a perfect spot for Mortimer to pose and the bauchans to prepare the trifaller. We lifted anchor and sailed into the early night. “Dad,” I sighed next to him, who was steering the boat. “I’m wondering if maybe God doesn’t have a plan. Rocksplit just died, plain as that.” “You’re going to that trick like…well, like the Eskimo wolf trap,” “Dad, no! Don’t even go there!” I felt dizzy after the mere mention of that dreadful tale. “You see, even Dirthrundil had a purpose. If he hadn’t killed my Mom, I would’ve died, and if he hadn’t faced me, I wouldn’t have met your Mom with the chimera.” “I wonder if it’s all wrong,” I groaned. “What if it’s us who have the Mist and everybody else sees it right? What if, you think that way and it drives you insane to see different stuff like, gargoyles and bauchans.” “Still doesn’t explain dragons,” reminded Dad. “I finished writing about vargr now.” He held up a sheet of paper with an awesome drawing of a vargr. “Here’s your early Christmas gift.” He held it out for me. “A fireproof bow!” I awed. “Cord!” I bent back the thin metal string. The bow was bronze and obtained two dragon’s claws at the ends. They were Dirthrundil’s. “Awesome!” I laughed. “He trains my hands to bend the bow of bronze,” recited Dad. “It’s elven make. That’s right; I met light elves last month! I wished I could wait for Christmas before your next action.” “What do you mean light elves?” I asked. “There are only two elf kinds, light elves and dark elves. The light elves are quite kind, fair and jolly, yet when I saw them they were serious. I should have read through their riddles. ‘Darkness is awakening.’ Yep, that’s what they said. Well, go practice. And we need to work on your sword fighting!”

 Joshua sat by railing on the floor, sea spraying in his face. I looked around as a wave splashed Joshua. “The targets are in there,” Mortimer pointed to a closet. “They are really just some painted cardboard, but it’ll do.” Bauchans marched around on the deck, stinking up the nice ship with their sharp odor like a millipede or cockroach. “*A sailor went to sea sea sea, to see what he could see see see, but all that he could see see see, was the bottom of the great blue sea sea sea*!” sang Joshua. “Stop you morbid singing!” shouted Mortimer. “*Row, row, row…*” “Stop!” I screamed. “Ring around the rosy, pocket full of…” “Do you know what that song means even?” asked Mortimer in Joshua’s face. “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. That means we burn the dead men of the bubonic plague and then we die ourselves!” Joshua whimpered.

“Ahh!” screamed Joshua. A craven landed on deck and swiftly morphed into an elf with gray skin and a silver beard. The cruel Corvus marched across the deck. He made a signal like somebody about to do bunny ears as he kicked me onto the ground with his metal boot. “The reason I bring victory, see, ‘v’,” He showed off his “v” with his fingers as if we were two, “is because the landvaettir are being diminished already. There’s a lesson…skill, power, and numbers are better than size. Ragnarok is falling. When the nail ship lands, Ragnarok falls. Tata!” He changed into a crow again and flew off with Mortimer trying to eat him. I stood up and shook my fist, my leg black and blue. “The landvaettir are nearly defeated, and they’re our highest ranks! How long will we last?”

I shot the cardboard targets in the spotlight until my quiver was empty, then I put them all back and repeated my action. As smart as a raven and as annoying as a crow. The craven craven! I kept shooting until my hands were calloused by the bronze string. I dropped the bow, then picked it up again with my blistered hands and hefted it over my shoulder. Then I went to bed in a cot ina room shared with seven other bauchans. The smell hindered my slumber but at last I fell asleep.

When I awoke, it was already late morning. I walked outside to stare at mist so thick I could hardly see the railing when I was a mere ten feet away. I leaned over the rail and exhaled. “Iceland is right over this fog,” Mortimer said, invisible in the clouds. “We should be at the Vatnajokull in half an hour.” “Who rode the boat in the night?” I asked. “A bauchan.” Mortimer groaned, stretching. “They’re usually nocturnal, you know.” “I guess they’re sacrificing a lot for us,” I sighed. “No, they drank lots of caffeine in the bus. They’re asleep now.” The mist only got denser and we were totally blind. Dad was thankful for his radar, or we would have run aground. “We stop here,” he told me while steering. He took the key out of the ignition on deck. “Let’s practice your fencing again.” I gulped. I was flimsy with the sword and had barely ever fought with one. Not anymore than normal fourteen year olds, at least. We fought with fake wooden swords, then with real ones, each one getting their share of casualties. I swung my sword too hard once, but Dad blocked it. “Easy!” he playfully commanded. Instantly all went silent as a roar echoed about the Greenland Sea. “I wish we could help,” I sighed. “We have to hold off the reinforcements,” Dad reminded. “Lookout!” A ship crashed into our hull and tore right through it. I screamed as my smaller side, the tip, sank towards the water. I leaped desperately and grabbed onto the anchor’s chain and scaled it as quickly as I could. Then I realized the ship was made of bones. Human bones fixed together. I nearly vomited as I climbed the chain. When I reached the top several skeletal Vikings marched around the deck, yelling curses at our ship. I ran across the deck and leaped down to our sinking yacht. I slid across the floor, with my legs burning from the jump. As the ship completely passed us, the rudder tore away more of our yacht. The boat tilted dangerously towards the starboard and I continued sliding. I opened the door and saw a pile of bauchans at the end of the hall. “Abandon ship!” screamed several. The ship tilted the other way and the bauchans and I all slid towards the water.

 I grabbed onto the door handle at the last second and heaved it forward and slammed it shut. I kept clutching the handle as draugr[[28]](#footnote-28) laughs could be heard from the ship that had now vanished in the mist. I saw Joshi and Dad clinging to the rail and Mortimer hung to the top of the boat. Two more ships passed us, but these were fashioned of wood, not bones. My already-burning hands reddened as I clutched the handle, the sea now a drop away as the boat continued tilting. Then I let go uncontrollably and fell for the water.

 I felt Dad grab onto my arm as I was feet away from falling into the freezing water. “Now!” He shouted, letting go of the railing. “What!” I screamed, falling down the deck. The hold’s door swung open by Mortimer and all the bauchans tumbled for the mist below us. I landed hard on rotting wood…another draugr ship. Twenty more bauchans fell down, most on top of me. “What about the others?” I asked as dad shattered a draugr’s ribcage. Then around ten more bauchans slid down, probably coming out of their rooms, wondering what was going on. I was desperately sad that the trifaller had gone down into the ocean, but in seconds all the bauchans took up arms and fought. I drew my sword and fenced with a draugr. “Prepare to die, English scum!” he kept repeating. By the time he was a pile of bones the whole ship was taken, with no survivors…if they could be considered survivors. “We have to catch up with those other ships,” Dad growled, spinning the wheel. “Raise the sails; the wind is in our course!” The bauchans pulled the ropes and the sails unfolded. The Viking ship moved on along the sea towards Iceland. I shivered in the cold as we pressed on. “We have to intercept them or our friends have less time!” shouted Dad. “You there!” I saw the slightest light beside us, but Dad lowered the gangplank and several bauchans marched in.

 I slid down the walkway and started slicing and dicing. “Ten bauchans stay on that ship!” Dad pointed to our Viking ship from which we had attacked. “Yes sir!” Rufflesap proclaimed. “We will divide and conquer!” I faced a well-trained draugr that sliced me in the neck first time I saw him. I ran forward and stabbed his arm, shattering it, yet his other hand held a scimitar and I had to duck one of his blows. Then I tore off his leg bone and he fell to the wood, and I stomped on his ribs. I dabbed my neck with my bloodied shirt. “We have victory again!” shouted Dad.

 With a split the hull was torn in two by the sharp, metal tip of an incoming ship. Yellow eyes shone from the mist and alighted onto our ship. “Ahh!” screamed Joshua. A draugr leaped towards him and lifted him by his shirt collar, yet Dad shattered its skull. The ship’s two parts creaked and lowered towards the water, drowning both bauchans and dunking draugar. I fell back as a draugr stabbed my back, but it wasn’t too deep. I screamed in pain, but knocked off his legs with my sword. I slid for the waters but a bauchan grabbed my hand. The ship that split the hull was made of whale bones, and a draugr was attatched to the front like an insignia. Several bauchans, draugar, and our family climbed up the bones like a climbing wall. I fell to the ground as the battle commenced around me. I felt myself drift between unconsciousness and being awake, and then the battle sounds stopped.

 I groaned as someone lifted me up and laid my on a cot. I grunted but Dad shushed me. Mortimer patted my back with his cold hands, easing the pain some. “You’re gonna live,” he repeated again and again. Dad lifted me and tiny hands wrapped up my wound. It was a bauchan, by the smell. I fell asleep restlessly, and when I awoke, we were in another battle.

# The Battle of the Bone Ship

“Stay right there!” ordered Mortimer when I tried to get up. “Our men have it covered!” But I could tell by his voice we didn’t. “I must go,” he bounded out of the room. I felt intense pain in my back and turned around back first. “It seemed like hours before the next person came in the room. “Greetings, scum,” it cracked. “I am Vashnarku, new General, but the English call me Backstabber.” I made an effort to look at him, and wished I hadn’t. He wore rusty armor, a horned helmet, and, most reviling, a spear going through his ribs. The spear had apparently been stabbed in the front, for the point was behind him. “I must speak with you of very important matters. You are the one master chose to be spared.” “Spared for what? Imprisonment? Torture?” I interrupted. “Both. But I see why. You are feisty…but weak, and scrawny. There would be no honor in killing you. Ragnarok will fall. This boat is already captured. The ship of nails was made by the draugar. It took plenty of toenail biting to get it fashioned up. Why would this God of yours’ leave you here to be infected from your wounds? In fact, I believe this boat is sinking already. Farewell, scum.” With that he slammed his hammer into the floor.

 So I lay there in pain as the floorboards creaked. I saw water slowly spurt up from a hole in the floor where he had smacked with his war hammer. Everything was so fast beat, I thought. I struggled to stand and then fell back on the bed. Mortimer ran in and gasped. “Colby, this may hurt!” He lifted me up and my back burned. I screamed out as he ran down the hall, holding me high. He climbed a flight of bone stairs but I heard a cruel voice laugh. “You’re going nowhere!” Backstabber cackled. Mortimer lowered me to the floor and charged the beast. “You cannot kill me that easily, gargoyle! You’re just a statue! A water drain!” “Aye!” He blew steam into the zombie’s eyes and he was blinded for the moment. Mortimer hissed and punched Vashnarku in the face. The skeleton twisted his skull back in place as the boat started lowering faster and faster into the freezing doom. “Mortimer!” I choked. “We have to go!” “Not yet!” But suddenly as he began to yank off his skull I saw the General step back and impale the gargoyle on his spear. “No!” I screamed. I tried to crawl towards him as the ship tilted. Mortimer then limped for me but collapsed, and Vashnarku clutched his leg and pulled him towards the water where he was knee deep. Then I knew I must make my escape, and I climbed the tilted, sinking ship of bones. I leaped off the railing and landed in a rowboat. I sliced the line holding up the rowboat with my sword as the Viking ship disappeared under the waves. Then I fell to the floor and cried, fading into unconsciousness.

Once I awoke, I was still in the boat but Dad was there too, and four bauchans, all conniving. “Mortimer’s dead,” I wept, instantly and grimly remembering. “What?” Dad stood up and the boat rocked. “How?” I saw his spirit damper even more. “He went down with the ship to save me.” “Well, Joshua and the others are also captured on the bone ship, where the draugar are waiting for Naglfar.” “What?” I asked, sitting up in extreme pain. “Naglfar. Ship of nails in Norse mythology. It was, and is captained by a giant who now names himself Hrym. It is the Jotunn ship, sailing all twenty stone giants and frost giants to Vatnajokull. They believe once the ship lands Jormungandr[[29]](#footnote-29) will attack.” “You mean the Midgard serpent?” I asked. “Yes, they hope to bring Ragnarok.” “But where’s Loki, and Thor, or Odin?” I questioned. “They are the gods, remember?” Dad sighed.

We all rode as fast as we could in the mist that was now lifting. I estimated it was about three in the afternoon. “Dad, what if this *is* Ragnarok?” I asked. “All the other stuff is real, why not Ragnarok?” “Because Farbjodr is not Loki, his Vargr is not Fenrir, I am not Odin, and you are not Thor…” “I get it,” I interrupted. “But Joshua would make a better Thor. I’m Frey, god of…” “I hate Frey, he had a boar,” murmured a bauchan. “What are all your names?” I asked. “Burrin,” replied one. “Amberlog,” another grumbled. The rest were Gottleguff and Rumtumble. “Where are the others?” “We have two more boats, the rest were captured. We found you drifting towards the ship, and that gave us more purpose to fight. Your wound was infected.” I rolled on my side, scared of damaging the scar. “I wish,” I murmured again. “I was home. And I thought it was bad with Dirthrundil.” “That was pretty bad,” Dad recalled. “Remember the hydra?” “Dad, you became a berserker.” He laughed emptily. “Mortimer is dead.” “Wait, can’t they breathe underwater?” “Just about as long a hippo,” Dad groaned. “He was a good friend.” “He spent more time in prison than out of it,” I realized aloud. “How could God do that? If he cares for us, then why doesn’t he just help us?” “Colby…God works everything out,” “Tell that to Rocksplit, and the several other bauchans that have died for our hopeless cause!” “God let my Mom and Dad die, I agree, but like I said, you wouldn’t exist if they were still alive,” I started speaking, but quit after Amberlog moaned. “Stop arguing and let’s paddle!” he complained logically.

We kept paddling until the mist was risen, and we saw the ship of bones minutes away from beaching. Instead of mist, though, it was a cloudy day. “Lock and load,” Dad shouted. The bauchans and I all pulled back our bows and fired at the ship. My wound burned as I bended the bow, but I saw a draugr flip over the railing and fall into the sea. “Again!” Dad shouted. I drew back and fired with the others as Dad paddled. We kept shooting and two more were brought down, but we were too late. The ship had landed.

“Not all is lost yet!” shouted Dad. “We can hold them off at land!” But the icy shores were not good fighting land, and in the distance I heard the clangs of battle. Somewhere in there the rest of my family fought. Dry grass covered the land, and the wind was bone cold. My breath came out like Dirthrundil’s smoke, and my lips were blue with frost. “Row!” shouted Dad as the gangplank of the bone ship was lowered. “Keep shooting!” “How can we shoot and row at the same time?” I questioned. “Do this for Mortimer!” Then I aimed my bow and struck a draugr in the chest, and then paddled away. “Summon Naglfar!” I heard a shout. “Keep rowing!” shouted Dad. “What?” I questioned. Amberlog shot down a draugr with a horn to his lips, and we all continued to paddle. “No!” An arrow sailed past me and struck Burrin in the chest. He fell overboard and we pulled ashore. There were nearly twenty draugar fleeing the boat. I stood up wearily, drew my sword and charged across the icy ground, along with my four bauchan allies. Gottleguff climbed a draugar and shot him in the forehead, while the others fired special arrows. Explosions shook the earth as they fired gunpowder-filled darts. Rumtumble was laughing while firing net arrows and Dad ran through the racks, hacking at their chest plates. I shot an arrow right past a visor into a draugr’s eye and he fell back dead, or undead. I saw a draugr drop a burning flag and Amberlog fired another incendiary arrow. I felt cold, bony hands grip my throat and a freezing blade touched my back. “Time for you to be a draugr!”

I heard a hiss and the draugr fell to his knees. Dad pulled out his sword from behind the draugr’s neck and stabbed him though the back. Amberlog was tackling a draugr ready to blow the serpent-shaped horn, but was thrown off onto the ship as large as the Titanic. “He’ll summon Naglfar!” he screamed, standing up. I charged under the stomping feet of the giant and swung my sword occasionally. I jumped over a dead draugr and moved around a sword-swinging draugr. Once I reached the boat, around ten draugar had been defeated. “I am Rogharn, new captain of the ship of bones in Vashnarku’s…delay! No bauchan stands in my way!” he drew a huge broadsword and swung it at the bauchan, who fell back with a cut in the chest. “No! Stop!” I screamed. “Why?” laughed Rogharn. “Because you have to face me!” “Sure, puny human child!” “Teenager!” I screamed.

I charged the beast as he swung his sword, splintering the deck of bone. I stepped back as Dad yelled in fury. I ran towards the draugar and sliced my sword at his leg but he kicked me aside. “Blasted fool!” he screamed. “I want you to see my new ship.” He raised the horn to his lips, but I sliced a rope and the sails crashed down. “Ahh!” he shouted, blinded by them. I aimed my bow and shot him in the side, and he screamed out in pain. Dad ran in and stabbed his leg and then swung his sword, scattering his skeletal system.

“Amberlog!” I screamed. I ran to our dying friend, who lay back, bleeding from his chest wound. “I now know we can make it,” he gasped. “You are both strong warriors…bury me in my camp, not here. I want to be with my people when I go to the Maker…” Then he passed on to a better place. Even as the battle raged on we used the sail to cover his bleeding body, then we turned around and Dad kicked the horn into the water. “For Amberlog, Burrin, Mortimer and Rocksplit!” Dad cheered grimly.

We charged back into battle, hacking at the draugar with new fury. “No more deaths!” Dad shouted hoarsely. “We cannot afford one more death!” I aimed my bow and shot down a draugr. In minutes, we were done with the battle. “The bone ship is ours!” shouted Dad. “Release the others!” Dad cried. We ran down into the hold and released our twenty-five allies and Joshua. “Rufflesap is gone,” a bauchan sighed. “We cannot go on like this, we need more men.” “I couldn’t agree more,” Dad sighed. “But for now, we sit and wait for the cavalry.”

I drank down a cup of hot tea thirstily as we all sat around on the bone ship, observing the line of black specks grow closer and closer. Dad steered the ship closer to the enemy as we lazed around, watching the aurora borealis that lit the ship in green light. Gottleguff burped after wolfing down some bacon, and Rumtumble chugged a glass of Champaign. It turns out he was the one who had drunk the Champaign on the shore. Ten other bauchans and Joshua crowded around us, telling stories of our sacrifices and fights while they were imprisoned. We had lost around ten men so far, so we were very low on allies. “Draw arrows,” Furrin, Burrin’s brother ordered. He was elected the leader of our group now that Rufflesap was dead. He was still, of course, grieving the loss of Burrin. “Men!” Dad shouted from his wheel. “We have survived so far, so we must fight for our lost ones. Previously we believed we wouldn’t last this long! For Pantokrator!” “Pantokrator! Pantokrator!” chanted the bauchans. “I stood up and walked to Dad. “How long will we last?” I asked. “As long as it’s possible,” Dad answered. As we drew closer, I noticed the ships had metal nets in between each individual. Then I knew that it was a sure trap for a bauchan, for iron burns faeries. We stood up; it was too late for a spot of tea. “Archers, at the ready!” shouted Dad. The bauchans pulled back and I followed. “Fire!” A line of arrows flew over the lighted sky and explosions echoed around the ships. That would bring down at least one ship. “Next set, fire at will!” I drew back and pulled an incendiary arrow, then lit the fuse with a match. I fired as the arrow exploded in flame, then struck a ship’s sail. The sail caught ablaze like lint. “What are we facing?” I asked. “Berserkers, draugar and one or two giants,” informed Dad. But the line of ships stretched on and on! I saw the chain twang as a burning ship crumbled into the sea. The ships were unnervingly close when I fired my third arrow. Another explosion rocked the deck, but no arrows were fired from the ships. “No!” Dad yelled in frustration. “This is just the distraction, the wall! The enemies come from below!” We turned around to face several frost giants pulling on chains. “Turn about!” shouted Rumtumble. “Or else we’ll burn!” “Too late!” cried Dad. “We have to go aboard one of the vessels!” We thudded with a ship and climbed aboard. “Look!” Dad pointed to the giants hauling up massive ships of bone. “Cut the nets away!” shouted Dad. “We need to row this time. The wind is slacking.” I went below deck to help with the oars, but it was terribly stinky. “Where did you get that?” asked Joshua, poking my bandage. “Ow! A draugr, but go away! It hurts without you prodding it!” I grabbed a handle as Joshua called the orders. “Get a’working!” he ordered, pretending to be a pirate. I paddled till my hands were sore, then I heard clangs above deck and drew my sword. I ran upstairs, thankful to get away from the stench. A draugr ran right into me and his head went flying as I tumbled down the stairs. I climbed back up warily and on deck there was a great battle taking place. It could have used some theme music, but Joshua would be dancing. The ships beside us were dripping and covered in seaweed. The zombies crept towards us slowly. Then I saw something I never would expect. Windsplitter burst out of the water with Mortimer on his back. “Gee up!” Mortimer hollered. A new spark of hope flickered in my soul and I swung my sword, shattering a draugr’s ribs. What ruined my hopes was six feet tall, had a grinning face, covered in seaweed, and had a spear through his chest. He lifted up a horn from the water and roared. “We have the upper hand now, men! Your General has returned! Fight for Ragnarok, Ramator, Farbjodr, and, most importantly, me…except Farbjodr…of course!!!” He blew hard on his shofar. The sea rumbled with the noise, and I was forced to cover my ears. “What is that?” I gasped. “The reinforcements are coming from the east! A whole ship full of giants!” Vashnarku laughed. “How big would this ship be?” I questioned. “Only the biggest!” laughed the ghoul.

# Part Two

# Toby

# The Recruits

 Our family watched the news curiously as they spoke of the fires in Portugal. “The methane has been dying down, and there have been no sighted fires. Still Cabo Da Roca will not be populated until there have been more research.” I sat up and slapped my hands. “Well, we did one mission, we can do another.” I sat in my Mom’s van beside Barg, the berserker. “What are you looking at?” asked the berserker when I stared at his pair of battle axes. “Nothing,” I squeaked. I sat back and closed my eyes, in case I accidently saw him and he pulled out his axes. Dad still hadn’t made a sheet for berserkers, but it was probably for the better, since Barg would be under the classification of “Glamourous Creatures”. I stretched and looked out the window, viewing the landscape of England. The sun was rising high in the east. We were heading towards the dwarven mines, where we could recruit an army to march against the evil Dokkalfar alliance. The mines were located on the Foinaven, a mountain in Northern Scotland. We kept driving for hours. It’s like American’s Florida. It lasts forever to get from Solihull to Foinaven. In fact it took from breakfast to dinner with no stops besides food and gas. “There it is!” Mom pointed to the mountain looming ahead. “Finally!” laughed Jonathan. Mom pulled the car over and we all moaned. “We hike from here.”

 The buses all pulled up beside us as Mom opened her door so we had no choice but to follow. “I hate this place,” growled Barg. “And I hate dwarves, elves, and all of their kind. How do we know they haven’t given in as well?” “Because Dad said in his notes, here, “‘I met a group of dwarves in the Foinaven that were particularly kind to me.’” “Well Thomas isn’t here and dwarves are greedy and useless. The Black Diamond would enchant them all. Think of the old stories of Andvarenaut, he cursed his ring and all his treasure. The Black Diamond is worth much more than a ring that can make gold. It was found at the exact North Pole when the elves lived there.” I burst out in laughter and Jonathan smirked. “What is wrong with elves in the North Pole?” asked Girdlegirth, the bauchan. “It’s almost Christmas; we don’t want to stop them from making toys!” I laughed, but Barg literally roared. “Enough! No more lollygagging!” I didn’t laugh at his statement this time. “We have to reach the glacier by tomorrow morning. It is already sundown. Three bauchans need to watch the alphyns.” We trudged ahead, falling repetitively. Somehow the bauchans stayed on their feet. “What are you doing?” asked a grim figure my size. He had a large nose, pointed ears and a huge, salt and pepper ruffled beard. One of his eyes had a monocle on it that adjusted on me by a long stem. “I am Ravor, scout of the dwarven pack Enithiron, how come you here?”

 “You’re a dwarf?” I stuttered, lining my arm up with his head. “The elves and, pretty much everybody say you’re short!” “Well I’m not exactly human sized!” The dwarf reminded, doing the same motions with me. “You yourself is short for a human! I see the Mist is lifted for this family.” “We are not a family,” growled Barg, stepping forward with two axes. He was a little shorter than the “dwarf”. “And you should step back,” the dwarf pulled out a long war hammer. Barg roared and lunged at the dwarf, who hit him in the head with his hammer, but he jumped up again and roared, then started to rage. “Enough!” Mom shouted, jumping in between them. “We came for allies against the Dokkalfar.” “Then why didn’t you say so! We knew very little about that evil. We have been focused on mining.” “Sounds like cowardice,” Barg snarled. “Your mother was so dumb she could only name you one syllable!” hissed the dwarf. “What?” asked Barg. “Follow me,” The dwarf stated.

 We followed Ravor, the dwarf scout across the mountainside until my ribs ached. “Here we are,” The dwarf knocked a stone ten times, and the rock opened up slowly. “Interesting,” I noted. I licked my lips in the cold and walked down some stone steps into the tunnel, the bauchans following behind us. The dwarf let us follow with no shackles or chains, but there were several guards in full armor and a headdress that I could see. Barg growled when Ravor turned around and cleared his throat and eyed us with his monocle. “I can take you no further. Guards, you do the rest.” Two guards intercepted us and chained all one hundred bauchans up with few struggles. My manacles were cold and clammy, and then two guards from the back with lances forced us forward. They hung all our weapons up on a rack and we passed through ancient halls delved of stone. It was not unlike the Dokkalfar tunnels, yet these were layered with stone bricks to prevent cave-ins. Ravor passed through two iron gates, and I caught a glimpse of a hall full of miners and gold. The gates slammed shut as we followed the guards who held torches to light our path. “I am the king’s messenger, Hudin,” said a dwarf taller than Mom. “Too many names,” whined a bauchan. “Guards, keep watch. What should I ask the king?” “If he will send reinforcements to Iceland to defeat the Dokkalfar,” Girdlegirth decided. The guards laughed from their belly, and mist came from the hole they breathed through. “You might as well turn around,” chuckled one with a voice muffled. “Silence. I will ask as you say,” decided Hudin. He walked down the hall and we stayed there for so long tha we had to sit down. Right when I sat on the cold, rocky floor the dwarf ran back. “The king wants to see you,” he heaved, gasping for breath.

“Why should I care of what brews behinds these four stone walls?” asked the king first thing after we came in. He had a dreadlocked beard like an odd ponytail and rings on each finger. His crown was gold with diamonds imbedded inside, with a spiked edge and a coned top with a diamond cresting the tip. His beard was white, with strands of sparkling silver, and he wore a gray cloak and was sitting on an emerald throne. He stood up suddenly and walked around the hall, humming an obviously old tune. I could scarcely make out the words,

“Oh, Enithiron, Enithiron, you won’t be succumbed yet,

Enithiron, Enithiron, you won’t be succumbed yet,

To the darkness,

Not yet,

To the darkness,

Not yet,

To the darkness,

You won’t be succumbed yet.

“My king!” Girdlegirth bowed. “In our realm we have no crown, no halls of gold, not even a nugget. But we are in danger, though there is nothing worth stealing. Here the dark elves will plunder gladly, and what is there to steal, you may ask? Every stone here is valuable. Why wait here till the war begins? We should face them now before they gather forces!” “Nice speech, but I’m not convinced,” the king spat onto his sparkling floor.

 “My father is Thomas Franknorth,” I began. “He has no long life like you do, and I don’t either. You knew my father; he drew a picture of Ravor, your scout. But he’ll die. We’ll all be draugr’s if we don’t get help!” “Do not shout at me, young fool! I’m still questioning the odds.” “We can’t just question the odds, or there will be no time!” Mom screamed. “Enough! Get out of my palace, get out!” boomed the king. “You’re going to have to find the light elves for this.” “My king,” Ravor burst into the room. “There are Dokkalfar at our gate. They ask the same thing they did.” “Then do not let them in, for goodness sake!” My king, they are there already.” Suddenly a blade went through the chest of a guard’s iron armor. “We’re under attack!” I heard someone cry out. I whirled around and all those in the room flattened themselves against the wall as a legion of dark elves marched in. “Hello, King Dajin,” greeted Corvus. “I need to be quick, my next stop is at the yacht of Thomas Franknorth; I understand you know him? We can overpower you in an instant if you do not subside. For the first and last time, join us or die!” “Attack!” screamed Girdlegirth. He tossed a stone and it landed right on an elf’s forehead, just like Goliath. Ravor took his hammer and I grabbed a rock as the throne room went into a frenzy. An elf landed next to me with a concussion from the hammer of Ravor, and then the guards ran in. King Dajin swung his sword, slicing an elf’s arm off. I turned around and felt sick. Barg roared and blades bounced off him. I grabbed a sword from a fallen elf and swung my sword into an elf’s platinum chest plate, then ducked as he swung his blade at me and stabbed his foot. He cried out and tumbled over to be trampled by his allies. Girdlegirth and Corvus both locked in on combat, and Girdlegirth’s face was bleeding with a gash down his cheek. He swung his sword but Corvus caught it, scraping his hand badly. I stabbed an elf as the battle grew lighter, and eventually a pile of dead or unconscious bodies lay at our feet. “Tata!” laughed Corvus, changing into a crow and fluttering out of a hatch that shone light onto the throne. “Rat bird!” howled Girdlegirth, though he never heard the nickname. We had twelve fallen, who we separated from the Dokkalfar whom we burned. “Leave, in around two days a small battalion of dwarves will aid you.” “Thank you, my king,” Girdlegirth bowed. We were led back outside and trudged through the ground, now wet with the falling rain. “I told you,” grumbled Barg, extremely pessimistic. “Never trust a dwarf.” “Well they did promise help!” I reminded. “By then we’ll be dead.”

# The Ride Across Waters

We bought a large schooner for a good sum of money and set off again across the sea. The alphyns were in the hold, and Jonathan was with them, training them more. The wind was bitter cold and my feet were nearly frozen off. The sea foam wet my face and I felt tears come down my cheek. “What’s wrong?” asked Mom at my side. “I’ve seen too much death to hold it in,” I wept. “I don’t know if I can go on anymore.” I felt ashamed as two bauchans heard me and snickered. Another one dried his eyes with his handkerchief…after blowing on it. “You’ve held it in too long, I agree.” Mom said gently. “But you’re not weak. You’ve seen more death than any fourteen year old.” “Fifteen, in a week,” I reminded. “But I’m not sure it’ll be too merry.”

I fell asleep wondering how much money my mom had. Then I remembered something about her asking the bauchans to pay half of our expenses. As I drifted to sleep, I had nightmares from Farbjodr. “This is the first time doing this with you,” laughed the destroyer. “I should let you know, the landvaettir are failing. By sunrise they will be defeated.” “Blah, blah, blah. Answer this question…why didn’t Dothador[[30]](#footnote-30) teleport or turn into a craven when he died by the alphyns?” “Do not speak like that to you future king!” hissed Farbjodr. “The answer is there are three kinds of elves, the telepathic, like me, the metamorphic, like Corvus, and the teleporting, like Ohreinn. None can be both. And there’s a surprise for you on deck. You should see it right…” “When?” I sat in bed, and it was still night.

Two crows fluttered onto our deck, lit up in the spotlights. Then another two. Then I realized they were larger than crows. “Cravens!” shouted a bauchan. Hundreds of the blackbirds flew from behind and in a flash of shadow they changed into dark elves. “Fight! Fight for your life!” Girdlegirth yelled. I drew my sword and stabbed an elf in his unarmored gut, then severed another’s head. I hated to do it, though they were as evil as death. “Break this ship apart!” screamed an elf. “I am highest ranking General, in Ohreinn’s stead, prepare to die!” He swung his sword at Girdlegirth, slicing his hand. I supposed few elves could teleport or change into a craven, because Ohreinn was really the highest General. Girdlegirth knocked the elf’s head against a metal wall and kicked him in the back of the knee, but he whirled around and dislocated Girdlegirth’s shoulder, like mine. He screamed, but cracked it back in place and amazingly kept fighting. My watching of the battle was interrupted when an elf swung his sword at my head. I blocked it and aimed a blow for his chest, but my sword split in two. I shouted and punched him in the mouth, loosening up some teeth, but he sliced up my am, and I screamed in pain as I felt the blood trickle to the deck. I had learned to deal with such pain, though. He kicked me in the back of the head and I collapsed, but saw another sword laid not two arm-lengths away. In other words, out of reach. I crawled towards it, but was flattened against the deck as the elf trapped me under his boot. “Let me be the one who kills the slayer of legions!” laughed the cruel voice. “Nobody’s here to save you!” Instantaneously, a roar shook the hull and a horny face peered over the railing. “Windsplitter!” I gasped. I felt hot air blow over my face and the elf screamed in pain and dropped his sword with his hands blistering. My back swelled with pain but I flipped about, grabbed the elf’s sword, and stabbed the back of his knee. “I noticed something was wrong,” the benevolent dragon sighed. He spread his wings and sea spray wet the port. “For Iceland!” I stood up and charged the terrified forces as the dragon charged across the deck, knocking the evil elves across the port and starboard.

Windsplitter roared, standing above a pile of motionless elves. He shook his head, knocking an elf that held onto his horns into the water. “So the first battle for Iceland is won,” he boomed, shaking the boat with his purring. “Something is not right. I smell something like Mortimer, but it is fainter than ever. He is nearby…but far away. I’m afraid he is drowned or drowning. I must leave you. Godspeed!” He plunged under the water leaving our clothes dripping and our teeth chattering. “Help!” Jonathan ran across the deck being chased by an elf, but a bauchan shot him through the neck. I looked away in disgust. “Thank you, Footsies,” applauded Dad. I nearly laughed at the name once more, but I was too tired. I fell asleep again, but it wasn’t morning when I awoke.

# The Bane of Elves

“We’re there,” Mom shook me awake in total darkness. She had a flashlight in hand. “The last attack shattered our light electrics,” she explained, leading me outside. The schooner was alight outside with torches and flashlights, all watching an eerie mist cloud over us. “We’re there,” explained Girdlegirth. “No telling where the rest are now. They may be yards away.” “What about Mortimer?” I asked. “Do you think he’s safe?” “Yes,” confirmed Barg. “I do.” “It’s time to land,” decided Girdlegirth. He spun the steering wheel and aided our course. “We have to be quick, or the landvaettir will die,” I moaned, rubbing my sleepy eyes. In approximately ten minutes, we ran aground. The air was as chilly as ever, and when the railed gangway was lowered, I noticed the ground would be wet and frosty. I heard several shouts in the distance, and then all the bauchans suddenly charged past me in silent, intentional procession. The alphyns followed in the back, one ridden by Jonathan and the other by Girdlegirth. I shone my flashlight into the center of a raging battle.

The landvaettir all stood, huddled together with the big ones fighting and the smaller ones shooting out arrows. But no matter how hard they fought more and more elves came in from the South and West. The reinforcements would come from the East, and we had come from the South. I heard a scream as a ring of stones suddenly sprouted arms and ripped into a group of Svartalfar. “Fire arrows!” a hail of arrows flew into the battlefield. “Call the wolves!” a bauchan shouted. First I thought they would blow a cool horn, but then one screamed really loudly, “HERE, PUPPY, PUPPY, PUPPY!” I heard many howls call in response. “Arctic wolves!” I awed. “Yes!” “Charge!” screamed Girdlegirth. We ran right into the battle and slashed away at the lines. I was near the back and no elf got past the twenty-five bauchans in the front. There were four rows, each bearing twenty-five men. I was in the third row, to my shame. “For Iceland, the North, and for Earth!” screamed Girdlegirth, who was in the second row. Mom was bravely fighting in the second row, which was barely under siege. Two bauchans, Rendclaw and Footsies, lined up near the shore and aimed the trifaller. I swung my sword, splitting a helmet as the barrier was broken.

The wind whipped my hair as around twenty wolves galloped down the mountain opposite to us and the dark elves cried out in surprise as they ran around the battle and to us. “This is my wolf!” Girdlegirth shouted, pointing to the alphyn he rode. “And nobody better even touch him…” Jonathan rode his alphyn to the other alphyn and hugged him, until the alphyn growled deeply. The others mounted their steeds as Girdlegirth screamed, “Fire!” as six huge bolts struck down six more elves. I fenced with another elf as the battle raged around me desperately. Several arrows flew from the back row and took their place accurately in the elves’ scattered ranks. “Fire explosives!” screamed Girdlegirth, slashing down enemies at every side. I stabbed the elf I fought, knocking him to the icy floor, but he scraped my leg as I plunged my sword past a fault in his armor. The wolves all charged into battle, yipping and howling in the night as the landvaettir threw elf after elf into the air. Then the bauchans started chanting quickly,

“We will ride in twilight!

Meet the night, in twilight!

We will ride in daylight!

Keep them at bay, in daylight!

We will ride at midnight!

Face the night, at midnight!

We will roar, on the mountain!

Through the gore, on the mountain!

We will roar, at the scrubland!

Rain will pour in the scrubland!

We will roar at the island!

Burden bore, at the island!

We will fight when in madness!

See the light, when in madness!

We will fight when in sadness!

Beat the blight, when in sadness!

We will fight, when in gladness!

Feat or flight, when in gladness!

When in gladness!”

I hacked down a dark elf as I saw the rest of the elven army flee. “Do we have victory?” questioned Jonathan. “Not yet,” growled Girdlegirth. His wolf snarled and they bore to the battle across the flat plain. “Onward, men!” “What if it’s a trap?” I asked Mom, running through the icy air. “I’m sure we have a plan,” Mom replied. Girdlegirth’s mount leaped over a shallow trench, but suddenly a wall of fire blazed up right before us. “No!” I screamed. “They’ll slaughter him!” “I’ll go!” Barg roared and charged through the field. He leaped through the fire and I heard a roar. He leaped back with Girdlegirth at his side, riding his wolf, as the berserkers ran through the wall of fire unscathed. “Fire arrows!” screamed Girdlegirth as the berserkers all shifted into bears, boars, wolves, lions, and bulls. “Teddy’s family, I presume?” I asked. I brandished my sword as the animals charged into our ranks. Several bauchans took to riding the wolf berserkers, and then from behind us the landvaettir crossed our ranks and smashed at the enemy.

 “Release Poppy!” shouted an elf. An alphyn ran across the field with several canisters strapped to her back. “Poppy seeds!” a bauchan shouted before fainting. I ran as quickly as I could through the battling crowds to escape the spray. “Daylight is coming!” screamed an elf as dawn passed over the horizon. “To the tents!” ordered Ohreinn, General. The whole army fled backwards and some screamed in pain at the light of day. I shouted in victory as the last elves passed over into the darkness of night. “They must be really embarrassed,” I joked. A landvaettir roared so loud I was forced to cover my ears. The berserker animals also fled, as they were now outnumbered, and Poppy passed the battlefield with several bauchans asleep. “Steletar!” I turned to the familiar landvaettir. “Greetings, youngling. I have come from England to aid you in this terrible ordeal. My wife, the oread you saw back there could not come.” “Oreads are female Landvaettir?” I questioned. “Indeed. We have lost too many men. I must join my brothers in the earth.” He dug into the rock-hard permafrost until at last all left of him was a dry bush. “We must rest now,” Mom sighed. “I need it,” I moaned. “Tomorrow night we begin again.” “But we must make camp on the other side of their site. That way they cannot sneak off to the nearest city,” Girdlegirth explained. We walked back to the schooner and I lifted two packed tents from our storage room. We each took at least one tent, and when we returned the bodies were gone. “That’s the work of their fast decomposition, like your dad explained,” Mom clarified. All that remained was scattered armor and some ash. I found a quiver with scattered arrows where a fellow bauchan had fallen.

 We hiked around the monstrous campsite of the Norse army and noticed that four huge giants watched each side of the camp, each one in full armor. In daylight I noticed we were in a beautiful plain with a mountain in the distance and shallow rivers lining the area. There were a few roads but no cars. We set up camp in the daylight and ate breakfast. I went to sleep in my sleeping bag with more dreams. “How did you like your first battle?” asked Farbjodr. “You should say so yourself, you lost more men!” I countered. “But more will come.” “Why do you need more when we have so few?” “Well we weren’t exactly expecting you! But we will soon decimate you, for I will carry out your destruction myself.” I woke up by Mom calling me. “Mom, can’t I sleep?” I mumbled. “No, Girdlegirth has called a meeting.” I sat up from my sleeping bag and walked out of my tent into the daylight. I think it’s unnatural to sleep in the day, but still, I didn’t get a good night’s sleep before the great battle. “We need four volunteers,” I heard Girdlegirth say. “One human and three bauchans,” I raised my hand. “Toby, you don’t even know what he’s going to say!” Mom hissed. “Toby, come here. You are signing up to go into the center of the Dokkalfar camp and to release the prisoners. Who else volunteers? Ahh, Bumblebur, Tuttletooth and Bendroot. Very good. You will each take one of the corners, slip past the giant guards, and each meet each other in the middle tent, the “dungeon” as they call it. We’ve sent scouts and they should return shortly with a sketch of the area.” I sat on a rock, which I actually expected to stand up and talk. “Now you must go and rescue them, if anybody still volunteers.” Nobody objected. “Good, then. Abadaba, Vaskr, Maxine, and the leader of the hunt will be freed.”

 “Very good,” Girdlegirth studied the scouts’ map. “Now four volunteers must go make a copy with the magical printer device. Who volunteers?” Four other bauchans did so, patting their wolves. Jonathan yawned and hugged his alphyn’s neck affectionately. “I’m going back to bed,” I sighed. “No, you will leave instantly,” Mom informed. “I wish you hadn’t volunteered, but I love you no matter what you do.”

 “Time to go,” Girdlegirth said immediately after the printings were donated. I studied the rough sketch of the tents. I was posted on the west side, closest to us. I hiked with the three others across the frosty tundra, and no wonder its “name means glacier of lakes”, it had puddles that I had to trudge through and froze my feet. In the distance I saw my giant asleep. If he was still awake there would be no chance of sneaking past him in the vast plain. The others split up to the other sides as I snuck across towards the sleeping giant dressed in full armor. He sat on the floor, his head in his hands and his visor released fog from his icy breath. By his side lay a military flail[[31]](#footnote-31). I took slow, intentional steps, until I stepped on a squishy spot and water oozed into my wet tennis shoe. I closed my eyes in the cold but my foot sank deeper and deeper, then I took my foot out and it made a sucking noise. Two of the giant’s eyes opened, looked around and above me as if everybody was ten feet tall, then closed his eyes again and fell onto the floor. I took off my shoe and poured the freezing water out, then placed it back on. My heart raced at that scare, but I continued on. There were no walls to the camp, to my pleasure; I suppose they thought that the giants were supposed to be the walls. I was wrong. I heard a scream and laid low as several draugar ran for the east side. The place was crawling with zombies. Then I crawled into the camp before they came back.

I hid behind a tent as four draugar dragged a dead or unconscious bauchan back. It was Tuttletooth, who was posted on the east side. I was glad they decomposed too quickly for them to turn into draugar themselves. I felt as if I was going to vomit. The camp was littered with bones and the tents had cow skulls on the tops of the entrances. I ran past the draugar and motionless bauchan and kept running until I ran into another draugr. I put my finger to my lips and he looked around while I pulled his bones apart. Then I turned around to meet with Bumblebur. “Tuttletooth is dead!” He whimpered. “I saw it with my own eyes! There are draugar everywhere. How did you get past your giant?” “He was sleeping,” I admitted. “How about yours?” “Killed him,” said the bauchan proudly. “With an explosive arrow through the mask.” “Where is…” “Bendroot,” whispered the bauchan. “Last I saw him he was fighting some draugar. Come on, follow me!” He led me past several tents until we reached a wooden fort in the middle. “The dungeon,” Bumblebur awed. “We made it!” “It’s locked,” I tried to open up the door. “Not forever,” I pulled out my pocketknife and picked the lock. The door creaked open slowly. “Very good, mate!” laughed Bumblebur. We looked inside and saw our friends inside, who laughed in joy. “Watch out!” Maxine shouted. “Urgh?” a huge beast looked our way.

This was no giant; but had two long claws, an eye close to the end of its flat snout, a hump, spines on its tail and elephantine feet. It stood with its lanky arms on the ground like a gorilla, and then it roared, revealing pointy teeth. Its coloration was brownish orange and loose skin clung to its hard flesh. “Run! It’s a troll!” screamed a voice. Behind us stood the bauchan Bendroot, covered in sword scratches. “No, we have to fight!” objected Bumblebur. “The Bendroot I knew would never run!” “Colby, come!” “I’d like nothing more,” I agreed, dodging a claw swipe. “But no!” “Then my plan is failed,” I turned around, and instead of Bendroot sat a draugr. I felt blunt pain and was knocked against the wooden wall. I fell onto the icy floor and closed my eyes.

I looked up and opened my eyes and felt hot breath on my face. “Die!” roared the troll, which was actually intelligent. I rolled aside as it slammed its fist into the floor and I jumped up and my back ached. I thrust my sword into the beast’s chin and he roared in pain. I ran to the left and picked the lock of the prisoners’ cell and each one ran out. I noticed Bumblebur was fighting the shapeshifting draugr. Abadaba shot a blast of lightning from his fingers and the giant fell back, dead.

Bumblebur kicked the draugr’s bones apart as we all ran to his side. “Bendroot must be dead,” he sighed. “We must flee from this wretched place.” “Toby, it’s been a long time,” Maxine and Vaskr shook my hand, since it was April when last I saw them. “I remember your birthday!” Abadaba giggled. “Six more days!” “I doubt we’ll celebrate,” I mumbled. “Don’t worry, I won’t be upset, I don’t care a thing about your birthday!” grumbled Backbreaker, in his usual grumpy mood. “How did you not escape in your…gas mode?” I asked Abadaba. “Too windy,” answered the jinni. “Fly!” ordered Bumblebur. We followed him out of the dreaded dungeon and started running through the camp. I lagged behind when I heard voices from a tent. “Get out of my tent you blasted oaf! I don’t want to talk politics yet!” The voice was that of Corvus. I stopped and slipped the door open before stabbing the other elf. Corvus sat at a table eating mushrooms. I put my blade to his throat but he continued eating. “Aren’t you going to call for help or come up with a clever comeback?” I asked. “What do you expect me to say? ‘The British are coming, the British are coming?’” He quickly drew his sword and my blade was knocked from my hand. “You think you can beat a dark elf, fool? Come and try!”

Corvus swung his sword at me and I blocked it with a book, which was torn in two. “A Jack of all trades, are you?” mocked the elf. “You can pick a fight and fight a fight!” he swung downwards and I ducked, but my back was bleeding. “Here’s a line for you! Your master yourself said you were unprepared!” “Never!” Corvus stopped fighting and I grabbed my sword and swung it down towards his head, but another blade blocked his blow and a figure dragged me outside. Corvus tried to follow but stumbled in the light. “Follow me, young man,” ordered Bumblebur. “I’m taking you back to camp. That was foolish and wrong.” I heard a roar and a smash. “Now you risked the life of all of us!” he hissed. We both ran for the west side where our allies were rallied. The armored troll was awake and swinging his flail at my friends. Abadaba stepped back in time for the ball to swing past his chest. The troll had a charred spot in his armor and Abadaba was sweating from using up his energy. “Run!” screamed Maxine. “The camp can hold him off, not us!” confirmed Bumblebur. We ran across the fields as the giant roared and drew back to his corner. Girdlegirth met us as the chefs cooked dinner. More popcorn. “Is anything wrong?” He questioned intently. “Bendroot and Tuttletooth have fallen,” Bumblebur sighed. “But we have rescued the others.” “Toby!” Mom ran to me. “When I heard the roar I was scared you had died!” “Mom, I’ll never try to kill somebody alone again,” I cried. “I tried to kill Corvus.”

“Mom, can you pray with me?” I asked. Everything had seemed so far from God in the last few weeks. I hadn’t prayed, hadn’t read my Bible, and barely even thought about my Maker. “Sure,” Mom said without hesitation. “God, please allow us to complete our mission without any more sins and for us to turn to you every time we do.” “God,” I started. “Please forgive me for my trespasses and let me see your light. I need you in this dark time, and let the others do the killing, please. Amen.” Mom smiled. “I hope the others are okay,” I exhaled. “Night will be coming soon.”

When night did fall, the aurora borealis shone bright in the night sky. “Get ready for battle, men, for battle will come!” shouted Girdlegirth. We had set up barricades and the trifallers were mounted on a hill. “Whoa!” I turned to face a battalion of about fifty dwarves riding atop wild boars. The bauchans growled deeply and the hogs waved their tusks. “Ravor!” Mom exclaimed. “You came!” “Aye, we will fight, if it is our last battle. The last battle it is, indeed, we fight for the entire North. This is a strategic point, they have quick route to Greenland, where the world opens up before them. They could travel to America, or continue with Europe.” “Here they come.” Row upon row of dark elves lined up before us. There were at least a thousand of them, each stepping forward with complete precision with the rest. “Line up, men!” ordered Girdlegirth. “Archers, make ready!” He trotted along their forces on Pete, his Alphyn. “Fire!” hundreds of arrows sailed into the air and took place inside elves’ chests. “Warriors, at the ready!” The warriors, including me, drew their swords as the army steadily drew closer. “Men, though some of us must die, we will keep fighting for our God, and our land! Do you understand? Now we will fight at our very best, and this may be the last battle those scum fight! Cavalry, charge!”

# Farbjodr’s End

 Mom forced Jonathan back as Girdlegirth and the other mounted warriors charged forward. “Warriors, advance, archers, fire at will!” screamed Girdlegirth. Abadaba shot ball lightning into the field, making a dent in their forces. I pressed forward across the field as some dragon-like beasts and a stampede of vargar charged for the riders. “Lindworms!” screamed Mom. I heard the serpents roar and I watched them helplessly as they dug into the forces. I charged forward along with the rest of the bauchans. I felt strange being the tallest of them. I slashed down an elf as another took his place. All of my old scars burned with new fury. I sliced through elf after elf, but the line only got longer. I had faced a dragon, met the destroyer and escaped his dungeon. I was not about to die here. I swung my blade back and forth until I met my first lindworm. It was green with horns at every side of its face, four tiny legs and a tail loaded with a spike. I dodged as it thrashed its tail about and I hacked it off. Then I realized the creature was large enough to ride. I kicked off the ground and stood atop its scaly back, then sat down and grabbed its horns. It’s tail now was useless, so I was safe to plow through the forces. I jerked the horns to the side and it tried to snap at me and reared up on two legs so that I had to hold onto its horns for my life. The beast charged, knocking aside several Dokkalfar foot soldiers. I heard screams and shouts from my right and left, but nobody tried to stop me. I rode closer and closer towards the end…until I felt a bump and my mount collapsed to the ground. I slipped off his back and stared up into the face of Ohreinn. “Stand back, men, I want a fair fight!” he laughed. His men took about two steps back. “You should see yourself!” laughed Ohreinn. “You’re bruised and battered…and shaking!” “It’s the cold, not you,” I commented. “What good did your allies do for you? Nothing. They took you out into the field with minimum training, just for you to die!” He swiped his sword and I fell back with a torn shirt and a blood streak down my chest. “Now feel my pain!” Ohreinn cackled.

 Ohreinn swung his sword at me but I blocked it with two hands. “Pathetic!” laughed Ohreinn, taking out a cat o’ nine tails. He lashed my arm as the leather straps scarred my skin. I swung back but he parried the blow, but suddenly another sword blocked his. “Farbjodr,” I growled. “Ohreinn, leave him to me!” He swiped my face with his blade, and I felt liquid trace down my cheek. I fluctuated my sword towards his gray skin, but an arrow struck him first. “Run!” ordered Girdlegirth as Farbjodr laughed. “Platinum armor, midget!” he swung a mace at the bauchan but he blocked it with his bow, which fell to pieces. I fell over and crawled backwards, watching the fight as the elven warriors cleared the way. Girdlegirth collapsed and his quiver was cloven, as arrows spilt about. He stood up with his arrows still dropping and started running, then grabbed two rocks and rubbed them together. A spark lit an explosive arrow and he kept sprinting. Farbjodr cackled until one by one an arrow would explode. Farbjodr leaped out of the way as the last arrow ignited and he was lost in the detonation. He screamed curses and stood up with a black scar on the side of his face. “I will tear you limb from limb!” he screamed. “I will feed you to the birds and crush your puny skull in my hands!” I stopped listening there, stood up and grabbed my fallen sword. “Ridiculous!” he knocked me aside hard with the flat of his blade. “Once I kill you, he dies!” he screamed, his face dripping black blood. Girdlegirth walked backwards as Farbjodr tromped towards him. “Wait, no, I must show you how pain feels! The kind that is made when one of your allies dies!” He pointed his sword at me and hissed, then ran for me.

 A yard away from sure death, Girdlegirth leaped off the hillside and kicked Farbjodr’s chest. He fell back and cursed. “I was truly expecting that!” he laughed. He swung around and I looked away. When I turned back around, Girdlegirth had drawn two daggers and was fighting the evil destroyer himself. He had a bloody gash down his side that would probably be mortal.

 Girdlegirth clenched his teeth and fell onto the ground. “You shall now die, for I grow tired of this game!” Farbjodr stabbed Girdlegirth in the arm. “No!” I cried. I ran for the monster and swung my blade, but he blocked it easily with his mace as my strength died under his death lock. My sword flipped as I let go and it landed next to me. I held back the mace with all my might but he was too strong. “Toby, move to the left,” whispered Girdlegirth. Sadly, I was incapable and gasped for air. “Oh, here, you can keep it,” Farbjodr dropped his mace and it landed on my neck like a problem plenty weight lifters do. “Now die!” laughed Farbjodr, ready to end my life with his sword. “Not today!” hissed Girdlegirth, releasing an arrow. It flew from his elven bow and sailed through the air, lodging itself in Farbjodr’s clavicle, where there was no armor. He fell over and his eyes lost emotion, though they were black. I crawled over to the dying Girdlegirth, and Abadaba and Maxine ran to my side. “Greater love there is no other, that one should lay down his life for a friend,” quoted Maxine. “In prison I come to the Lord.” “I’m dying here, I don’t want to stray from the subject,” rasped Girdlegirth. “It’s time for me to part, but…I know victory is near. There may be hardships, but you will get through it…”

He closed his eyes gently. “CPR!” ordered Maxine. “I’m getting out the bandages!” “He’s dead!” I cried. “CPR won’t work, it would take twenty, and we don’t have that much time.” Maxine still wrapped up his arm and chest. After the first pump of CPR Abadaba did, Girdlegirth gasped and sat up. “Thank you, God!” I praised. “Lay down, rest,” commanded Maxine. Girdlegirth laid down his head and closed his eyes. “Who sparked me?” he asked hoarsely. “Abadaba!” I laughed. “Lookout!” I pointed to the army of elves closing in. “If we go down, we go down with honor,” Abadaba gulped. “Guard the patient!” “Patient! I’m as impatient as a kitten held back from its tuna!” hissed Girdlegirth. I swung my sword around, stabbing an elf, and then swiped at another. “For Iceland!” screamed Abadaba, clearing a line with his lightning. Maxine grabbed a torch and fried some hair. “We can’t hold them with such close corners!” gulped Maxine. “Fight like you’re dying, which we might, in fact!”

 I screamed and dug my sword past an elves’ collar bone. Abadaba sparked the waters that were around us sparsely and several elves screamed out as the static stung them. Maxine threw his torch at an elf and drew out his double-bladed axe and hacked at the racks of elves. I stood next to Abadaba, who was sweating fiercely after his fury. “Are you in need of assistance?” Ravor plowed through the elves with his ibex, “I will fight alongside my allies.” He drew out a short bow and shot down an elf, then drew out his hammer and charged with his ibex, smashing and clubbing every elf that got in his way. “Ahh! What is it?” screamed an elf. “The berserker scum!” another shouted. I guessed it was Barg in animal form, plowing through the army. “Watch out! From the North!” shouted Maxine. I turned around and in front of me an army of dwarves charged down the mountain, and these were not the nice ones.

 “For Farbjodr!” shrieked a dwarf. “Farbjodr is dead!” I cheered. The leader held a banner with a symbol like this:

Ohreinn was battling Maxine with his two blades against the axe, and Abadaba was finally fighting with a sword, nimbly bouncing about the fields of littered bodies. In another day all that would remain would be the dead animals. I heard a howl and several others joined it, and then an alphyn, Pete, charge through some elves and into our small circle. “Get Girdlegirth on him, he can take him to camp,” ordered Maxine. “He can, right?” “Yes, I think so,” I answered. We both lifted the bauchan onto his steed and the alphyn bounded off across the crowded fields. I was surprised we had lasted so long, though there still were hundreds of elves and now dwarves.

 “Retreat!” shouted a voice. “To the mountain!” I slashed down a boar and its dwarven rider. From the voice I could tell it was a bauchan. “Come on!” Abadaba shouted. He zapped a rock with electricity and it rolled down the mountain, clearing a way for us to pass. “Onward, men!” We ran through the pass with our weapons pointing out to keep back the foes. “Oh no,” I gulped. Above us lay a steep cliff with slippery pebbles on the sides. “Come, Toby, we must not delay,” Ravor sighed, patting his ibex. I stepped on the silt, digging my tennis shoe into the ground, and then took step after step up the steep mountain. From the left I saw around a hundred of our men flee up the cliff, much faster than I was going. I looked behind me and the dwarves had filled in the gap and were closing in. Then I gave up carefulness and ran up the cliff face. I jumped up to avoid an axe hack from a dwarf plodding along with his boar. Ravor galloped about, swinging and bashing with his hammer on his awesome mount. I heaved and gasped as I neared the top of the mountain and Ravor kept the forces back. “Come, lad,” Abadaba said, more serious than ever. My breath puffed up in a mist as my hand groped across freezing snow. “Strong point?” I gasped, shivering in the cold. “More like sure frostbite!” Abadaba gave me his hand and pulled me up to the peak.

 Below me stood the army like rank on rank of ants. I sighed and sat down as Ravor galloped up the hillside. “My allies,” a bauchan ran to us. “Girdlegirth is in serious condition, and Rendclaw and Bumblebur have fallen.” “No,” I breathed. “They were both good allies,” Abadaba groaned. “No, they were friends,” I growled. “Too much death. I can’t stand it.” “I come to tell you we have visitors. Two light elves.”

 We pushed through the crowd and I spotted two shining figures. “I am Silversong, and this is Eldervale,” snorted a silver-haired one with feathers behind his ears and swinging his longsword. “The foul foes keep coming. There is more trouble. To the South there is a ship, named Naglfar.” He swung his sword too close to a bauchan and he pulled out a dagger. “I was merely feigning, filthy fiend!” he laughed. “The ship bears all the giants they could muster,” Eldervale informed. “More than twenty, less than thirty.” “Well we can do that!” I reminded. “We nearly died by one!” Jonathan argued from in front of me. “But we have an army, one hundred bowmen!” “But we have another battle to fight,” Eldervale reminded. “The light elves will come in the morning.” “You may save Iceland but we’ll be dead and…disintegrated.” “If you can hold till morning victory will be imminent,” Silversong hummed, stepping away from the bauchan’s flashing dagger. “We will fight until morning comes, even though death is sure,” Eldervale said encouragingly. “Nay, brother! We will face this foul foe together!” He readied his longsword as we heard the roar of armies grow closer. “Shoot them down, filthy fiends!” The bauchans fired out their arrows, demolishing the first row of charging dwarves. “Warriors, charge!” The bauchans drew out their swords and ran down the mountain, leaping across their helmets. I charged forward with my aword raised high, but I couldn’t get a chance to hack down a dwarf before a bauchan did so. Ravor galloped ahead, clearing a way through the ranks. I charged downhill and stabbed an elf, and then I started thinking we might win this after all…until reinforcements came from the south. Good reinforcements as they were, I had a grim feeling their speed was not to catch up with us.

# The Storm of Jotunn

“Giants!” shouted Dad. “Dozens of giants!” Around twenty bauchans remained in their “merry” group. The bauchans all tried to slash through the ranks but it seemed futile. “We have to help them!” I cried. “I’ll go,” Ravor sighed. “Yah!” His steed forced its way through the lines of berserkers, dwarves and elves. Silversong leaped along, slicing and dicing the “foul foes.” “Look!” towards the shore a huge boat came forth, lit by several lamps in the night. The boat was twice as large as the Titanic and had several giants waiting for the gangplank to be lowered. “Fire explosive arrows!” ordered Eldervale, hacking at two dwarves. A flight of arrows flew past my head and detonated on their precise target. “Windsplitter and Mortimer!” I pointed to the two draconian creatures fighting against the Jotunn who were now leaving their ship. “Ragnarok will fall if we don’t stop it right now!” screamed Eldervale. Silversong leaped off a dwarf’s round helmet and kicked Ohreinn in the face. “Die, foul fighting filthy foolish foe!” He stabbed his scimitar at the armor and then rain started to pour down heavily. “What?” I shouted, fencing an elf. “This is not to our advantage!” But then I kicked the elf and he slid down the cliff, knocking down other elves in his stead. “Abadaba, can you summon lightning?” I asked. “Yes, but it has to be storming, like it is, and in a high place, like that is,” he pointed to the mountain. “But we would go down with it.” “Are those high enough?” I asked, kicking the back of an elf’s knee and aiming to the giants. “Of course!” laughed Abadaba. Two lines of light streaked from the sky and struck down three giants, one with two blasts. The thunder that followed deafened us, but I used it as an advantage and hacked through the stunned warriors. “Noooo!” screamed an unknown giant. He charged towards our allies that were held back from the unstoppable force. “Die, filthy scum!” he swung his huge mace but Silversong shot his arm. Windsplitter charged and with his wings he cleared a way for our allies. “For the Ljiosalfar!” Silversong cried. “For Iceland!” “We’ve said that about five times!” I joked. I swung my blade through the rain and an elf slid down the hill. “Again!” I screamed to Abadaba. “Die! Die! Die!” He screamed, shooting arrows into the sky and sending lightning to the earth. “I am Hrym’s fighter!” the giant with an arrow in his arm shouted. “Who dares challenge me?” “I do!” laughed Silversong. “Fly, friendly friends!” Windsplitter head-butted the back of a giant’s leg and he slid across the wet ground. “Pantokrator is with us!” cried a random bauchan. “This storm was not scheduled,” “You have a TV in the bauchan camp?” I asked, swinging around in a circle. “Of course, how do you think we learned our moves?” I laughed as victory seemed to draw closer. A vargr lunged at me but Mom bashed it aside. I saw the light elf hop over the wet helmets of the elves and dwarves. “For Ragnarok!” roared the giant. “For the rising of the sun, and the setting of giants!” the elf shrieked merrily. Then he leaped for the giant and the fight began.

Two lightning flashes split the sky and two more giants collapsed. Silversong leaped onto the frost giant’s head and swung around onto his back, then started to press his swords through the giant’s thick armor but was knocked to the floor by a monstrous hand. His grin almost was depleted, but not quite. “I’ll wipe that smile off your face, foolish elf!” bellowed the giant. He slammed his mace onto the floor and two giants stood by his side in case he was defeated. One I recognized as the stone giant guarding the west side of the camp. I slashed down another elf while watching the fight, but from behind a dwarf kicked my back and I rolled down the muddy hill. I stopped when I hit an elf’s boot hard. “Ha! Look what the rain brought in!” He laughed, before kicking me. I looked around, finding my sword nowhere. “Kill him, he saw master die!” ordered one. “Master is dead?” asked another. “I am the new master, then!” “Silence, fools, I am the General, thus the rank goes to me, now prepare to meet your end.” I looked away as I heard Ohreinn’s sword go through the elf’s body. “Ahh, you. Get up and face me!” ordered the cruel tyrant. “No thanks,” I decided, kicking his knee. He stepped back but then growled as I ran towards my allies, but I slipped and fell on a dead elf. I screamed and got up again as mud dropped from my body. An arrow sailed past my head and hit an elf behind me. I slipped again and felt like crying. “Give me your hand, human,” Eldervale said, slashing an elf’s armor in two. I held out my arm and he gripped it, and then pulled me to my feet. “Fight with me, friend! Morning will come in two more hours!” That didn’t encourage me but he tossed me his second sword and shot an elf.

I saw a dwarf charge my way in full armor and I started fighting against him. “Meet your end, foul traitor!” Barg ran in front of me and tackled the dwarf. Ravor’s ibex kicked an elf and the head-butted him. From a distance I saw Hrym’s warrior roar with as many arrows as pins in a pincushion. I ducked under a high-aimed blow as Eldervale hacked away closer to the allies that were still battling the racks of elves and dwarves. “Look!” I cried. Ravor turned around and a dwarf riding a polar bear roared in anger. “I am King Ergor, slayer of bird, beast and being. While that battle commences, I challenge Ravor, scout of the Enithiron clan to a duel, on mounts with full armor.” I would have swallowed my gum if we had the privilege of sweets. “Challenge accepted,” agreed Ravor. The king pulled out a cat whip and a great sword while Ravor readied his hammer as we all made room for the fight: dwarf against dwarf…ibex against bear. “Begin!” ordered the king. I peeked over an elf and saw Hrym’s soldier and Silversong’s intense battle. “Why does Hrym tarry?” I heard the light elf shout. “He is old, and decrepit, as his name implies.” The giant replied. The ibex bashed his horns into the bear’s side but then the bear scratched the goat’s hindquarters with his massive paw. Ravor and Ergor locked swords together and Ravor was bucked to the ground. “No!” I screamed as his ibex ran off. Ravor stood up wearily and swung his hammer into the polar bear’s face, and the beast reared up and Ergor fell down as the bear ran away. “Now we fight by the old rules, first one to die loses!” cackled Ergor.

“Die!” screamed the dwarven lord, swinging his great sword around. Ravor bent his sword but the thongs from his whip dug into the dwarf’s back. He jerked back and I looked away, but when I looked back they both were locked in mortal combat. “Send our troops and the berserkers to kill their leader,” ordered Ergor while in combat. “No!” cried Ravor. “Come, lad! Follow me,” Eldervale tugged on my arm. I looked back as they started banging at each other’s swords, but I was forced upwards toward the peak of the mountain. Berserkers all morphed into animal form and charged towards us. A bull berserker was cut down by Eldervale and when I looked down Hrym’s fighter had fallen. I cheered but was cut off by a berserker lynx that pounced on me like a bad kitty. I pulled him off painstakingly with scratches across my face and threw him onto a bear berserker, who swatted his own head several times to try to get it off. I ran as quickly as possible to catch up with Eldervale, but the animals were faster. I cried out when an eagle berserker scratched my back but I proceeded towards the communion of bauchans that watched a stretcher. “Help!” I cried, feeling myself being dragged into the crowd of berserkers. “Hang on!” Eldervale turned around as I was nearly unconscious, but I heard an explosion and all the beasts scattered. Eldervale lifted me onto his shoulders and trudged up the hill.

“Thanks,” I groaned, bleeding all over. “No gratification required, but it is acknowledged,” huffed Eldervale. An arrow whistled past his golden, long hair. “Fire again!” ordered an unknown dwarf. I prayed it wasn’t Ergor, because Ravor would be dead. An arrow slammed against Eldervale’s shoulder and he screamed out, nearly dropping me. “No!” I screamed. Another arrow sailed past his head. “Put me down!” I screamed as Eldervale’s boots slipped on the mud. “Then you’ll be a target too!” “At least you may not die!” I shouted. “Fire!” roared a bauchan. Row upon row of berserkers and archers were brought down by the explosive arrows. Two bauchans ran to us and led us up to the peak, where we could see the whole battle. Our forces had come out to the aid of Dad’s, and Windsplitter stormed through the ranks. “We’ll make it to morning,” encouraged the bauchans. But though the sky grew brighter, it would take at least an hour and a half before reinforcements came, and still we were outnumbered greatly. Lightning struck down another giant as I was placed in a stretcher with the wounded. Colby was one, with a wrapped up back, and Girdlegirth was another. Footsies, the bauchan was mumbling with a scarred scalp and many others lined up in rows. Eldervale groaned as the arrow was pulled out of his shoulder, and my arms were dripping with blood from the animal attacks. “Fire again!” ordered a bauchan. Another row of berserkers went down. Strangely enough, I felt little pain. “I’m not hurt,” I mumbled. “I can fight.” “That’s a very bad sign!” informed the nurse that was one of the only female bauchans I had seen. If I was sane I’d know that was because my nerves were torn. The nurse walked to me and applied a cloth firmly onto my bloody chest and right arm. She sat there for about twenty minutes until more injured men came in, and as I drifted in and out of consciousness, the words…“Fire arrows”…became slurred and slow. “He’s got shock,” I heard her murmur. I felt my feet being raised and nearly threw up twice. I did four times, to my embarrassment. By the time I regained my sanity, the sun was rising.

“They’re here!” I heard a scream. “You can get up now,” the nurse informed. “Pert, Crank, get over here!” The two bauchans helped me to rise and on the other side of the mountain a shining army of eves in gleaming armor marched at a fast pace up the hill. The horn blew twice like a trumpet. “Yes!” cried a bauchan. “Charge, men! We have held them off for so long, now we ride for victory!” “Who has fallen?” I asked, sitting down. “Several,” the nurse sighed. “They went down honorably, and Ravor left a mortal wound to Ergor. They will pass into memory. Ravor gave you this, as a token of friendship,” she handed me a new shimmering sword, so sharp it made me quiver to look at it. “Thank you, ma’am,” I gratified. “Ravor’s dead, isn’t he?” “No, of course not!” The nurse objected. The bauchans ran down the hill with regenerated strength. Very soon the apocalyptic battle was over.

# The Final Battle and the Way Home

“So this is Naglfar?” I questioned, looking at the huge ship with two crutches. “Indeed, Hrym and his guard are still aboard,” Dad answered. The huge ship of keratin had a mast made of a whale’s vertebrae. The alphyns, including the parents were on our ship, ready to be taken back to their den. “Stay back while I go in,” Dad ordered. Joshua and Jonathan were shaking, and I shivered as well. “Get out!” roared a giant-like beast. Outside stumbled a huge creature with bluish skin and a sunken eye covered in coral. Coming from his wrist shot a knife of coral and his back was blistering with reefs. Dad stepped back and swung his blade at the monster’s leg. He howled and fell back across the deck, flattening his smaller stone giant guards. “I AM HRYM!” he roared, shaking the deck. “Sea giant, one of the first inhabitants of Ireland, and captain of the ship Naglfar!” “You’re a Fomorian!” Dad gasped. “You’re not real, though!” “I’m as real as your death!” the monster stood up slowly and used his coral spike to balance himself. He slammed the spike into the hull of the ship, sending cracks across the nail deck. “Daddy!” Joshua screamed as part of the ship that Dad was on sunk into the freezing water. Dad gripped onto the side of the hull and grabbed onto another piece as that piece fell off in his hand. “DIE!” roared Hrym, splitting the deck in two. “For Atlantis!” he cried before the ground crumbled and he sunk under the waves. Dad hauled himself onto the deck and ran backwards, then leaped across the split in the hull, but a blue arm gripped his leg as he groped for the side. I ran for him and held onto his arm but his shoe was already in the freezing water and my feet were slipping on the frosty hull. The battle was over but I would still die before my sixteenth birthday. I drew out my sword with one hand and dropped it down the crack, but Dad caught it and stabbed the arm. Bubbles rose from the surface and blue blood spurted from the wound, but then it dropped under the waves.

Silversong clutched Dad’s other hand and we were able to pull him up and run off deck before it sunk under the waves. Then the first car passed by. We laughed at our good fortune, but it wasn’t really luck at all, I knew now. “We must now count our losses,” sighed Girdlegirth, who actually sat in a makeshift wheelchair fashioned from a dwarven chariot. We paid respect to each one of the fallen, even the wolves and some of the boars and ibexes. I counted those I knew, Bumblebur, Rendclaw, Bendroot, Tuttletooth, Rufflesap, all lost in the bloody war. We buried their armor and placed a landvaettir to guard each one. All except Amberlog, who we took with us to bury on our country. The light elves left without goodbyes to wherever light elves go.

We cared intensely for the wounded on the boat ride back to the mainland, but a few had sadly died in the cold. I felt like crying and laughing together. So many friends had given up their lives for us, yet the War of the Black Diamond was finally over. We found out that the Black Diamond had gone down with the ship Naglfar, never to be claimed again. “See, Colby,” I heard Mom lecture. “Though life doesn’t always have a happy ending, God will never let evil prevail.” Dad was sitting at a desk, not talking to us. “Dad, what’s wrong?” I asked. “Atlantis, Fomorians, sea giants,” He murmured. “Legend says that the Fomorians were defeated by Lugh, grandson of Balor, the leader, and the “fair folk”…light elves and faeries, and driven under the ocean to rise again one day. If that is true, the Black Diamond is still not safe. It never will be. Hrym did not drown; he will take the Black Diamond to Atlantis.” “So…you think we’re in danger still?” “Greater than ever before. I, however, hardly believe Balor’s story. They also are amphibious.” “But he didn’t exactly say he was a Fomorian, he said he was first of Ireland! “Which was believed to be the Fomorians,” Dad recalled. “Well, let’s forget about it for now, and when we find Atlantis we can go face them. I mean, we defeated the dark elf army! Ragnarok is prevented!” “Fine,” decided Dad. “But when we get the slightest bit of proof, I’m going back to mad scientist mode.” I laughed at his joke, though he barely smiled. “It seems I’m never safe when I’m away from you all,” Maxine sighed. “I’m going to move to Nogard’s old house. Stop by or call when you need me. Bet my old cousin Nelson has gotten better by now.” “You’re Nelson Metcalfe’s cousin?” I gasped, gaping like a fish out of water. “Yes, he goes to Solihull school. He’s my sister’s son, so yes, I suppose you know him?” “Yes,” I whined. “Is he still the bully type?” “Yes, and I know he’s a foster child. Is your sister…deceased?” “Yes, but she was a believer. I think it’s my time to adopt that boy.” “Really?” I gulped. “Honestly, he’d be a lot of trouble.” “Toby!” Mom scolded. “Behave!”

When we landed on shore, we drove straight home, riding the same way as last time, and only stopping for food and gas. Girdlegirth’s bus rode to the dwarves so that he could get a mechanical arm where he got stabbed. When we reached home, our house was shining like the sun, even though it was charcoal grey. I walked on my crutches to the house and opened the door. It had been a battle that lasted two nights. It was now the twentieth, four days until my birthday. Inside the house it was silent and dark. “Well, let’s get this place fixed up,” Dad sighed. We turned on the lights and Mom made us dust and mop the floors and furniture. Abadaba left to go on his nomad life, but promised to return regularly. Mortimer found his favorite spots in the city: the pet store bird section and the peanut butter row at the grocery store, which he eats with his hands. The news reported several rocks appearing in different spots at the Vatnajokull, probably by an unscheduled meteor shower with asteroids larger than usual, too large to disintegrate completely. On my birthday, I got a brand new sword, probably given to me before Dirthrundil’s death because of my complaint of bauchan weapons. Despite my other dwarven sword, I decided I would be double-sword wielding. The rest of the presents were mere trinkets from my few friends, but one I loved. It was Rocksplit’s explosive arrow.

I saved my explosive arrow for when times seemed rough, and it seemed they would get rough soon. Colby was the archer, so I guessed that this arrow was a token of friendship. I cried when I got it, but it only made me more proud of Rocksplit’s loss. Girdlegirth slowly got better, and then Backbreaker was able to be new leader of the hunt. After a while I was able to get over the losses, when I realized that’s what happens in real life and they had done it for our survival. When we went back to school, the teachers scolded me for getting hurt again on our “vacation”. For Christmas, Dad got his encyclopedia typed out and published, and Colby was given a new quiver, since the old one was torn.

 “Why do you eat birds if you can talk to them?” I asked Mortimer, who was pretending to be asleep. “A chickadee cussed at me right when I was learning to leap. Then a woodpecker did the same, and I ate him. The end,” explained Mortimer, opening one eye. “Leave now, and never return!” roared Windsplitter, staring down a chipmunk hole. “Ugh,” Mortimer winced. “Sounds like that old chickadee,” he murmured. “Look,” Jonathan pointed at the wooden side of our house. Drilled into the ground was a stick with many handles coming from it. Still smoking, the words charred into the house were in old Greek. “Dad!” I called. “I think we found our first clue.”

# The Passing of Vaskr

 “There it is,” I sighed, staring at the mountain, Sgarbh Breac. “How do we get in?” Toby asked. “If I can remember correctly, there’s a special order to place the stones on the cairn.” “Oh, great,” I grumbled. “Was it something like…never mind,” I groaned, putting my hand to my face in deep thought. “Maybe you’ll remember it once we reach it,” Mom suggested. “Daisy and Rose go free!” giggled Joshua. Jonathan was drawing, as usual. “Here we go.” We left the motorboat and started climbing the hill in daylight. I travelled next to Dad, fingering my bow and gulping constantly. The cold made my nose run and snow coated the ground. The date was February the seventeenth. I shivered as we climbed the grassy hill. I spotted the cairn, coated in snow like the rest. I ran to it, but Dad held me back. “No, just to be safe,” He explained. He walked to it and pulled out four stones of each side of the cairn. Four stone sticks slowly slid out of it and then stopped. I stood, mouth agape and gulped again. “Toby, Colby, Joshua, help me.” I grabbed one of the sides of the cairn and started to push all of my bodyweight towards the other side. Slowly but surely it moved, until Mom gasped as the ground opened up, revealing steps down into a tunnel. “Awesome!” Joshua awed. “I’ll go first,” Dad proclaimed. He descended down the steps and Toby and I followed behind him with the rest of the family behind me. “Surrender!” Dad shouted to an elven guard dressed in full platinum armor. “Never!” he hissed. “Ohreinn is still alive, we can defeat you still!” Two more guards stepped our way. “You have the hard way, then!” Mom blew a white horn and hundreds of light elves stormed in over the hills. “Surrender now?” asked Dad. “Attack!” roared the middle guard. We all rushed forward and hacked down the three guards in no time. “Who are the survivors that I know?” I questioned. “Well, several got away but the only ones I know are Corvus and Ohreinn.” Dad answered, cutting down another one of the evil elves. I shot down two elves with my fire arrows that were given to me by the bauchans. The darkness in the tight halls gave me claustrophobia. “There!” Dad pointed down the hall to two wooden doors. We ran for them and I shot one of the guards down as Silversong shot another. Dad kicked the door open and we stormed inside the room. “Ahh, guests!” laughed Ohreinn. “You may have victory at the old battlefields of Vatnajokull, but not here! Sahun, Akthatha, attack!” Alfalfa, or something, the lindworm lunged at me and pinned me to the ground with his two front feet. He reared up on two legs and swung his tail down towards me. I rolled aside and stood up, then swung my swords around carelessly, thankfully never hitting one of my allies. Dad and Ohreinn fought intensely, Dad dodging and parrying blows and Ohreinn swinging and hacking. “For Ragnarok!” Ohreinn shouted. “For Messiah!” Dad cheered. I stabbed the beast’s chest and he fell right on top of my as my sword pierced through its back. Sahun the vargr was leaping about with Eldervale atop him and the battle was quickly being won. “We have Sgarbh Breac again!” Dad cheered once the fight was over. “The dark elves will not plague earth again for a long time. All survivors will not be taken prisoner, they will remain here. The merfolk will be watching, however.” Vaskr sighed and walked over to Dad. “I will join my people, try to rebuild a better nation,” he said from afar, though I could vaguely hear him. “You’d make a good king,” Dad agreed. “But how do you know they won’t rebel?” “They will honor their king,” assured Vaskr. They shook hands and Vaskr left us, but I wasn’t sad, though I did miss him. In fact we stopped by regularly, and though many elves came to good reason, the prisons were quite full from Ohreinn and his evil followers. “Next step is to go uncover this mystery,” Dad said back home, eyeing the writing on the wall. And we did. The riddle was, *“What lies beneath Basil’s tombs, under hall and spire, doom and fire? You hold the key to the ashes of many, are you ready to begin your journey of memories?”*

# Epilogue

 “What on earth does that mean?” I questioned. “Obviously,” chuckled Dad. “St. Basil’s cathedral. St. Basil was buried there, so next month, we go.” I jumped up and down in fake excitement. “Well, I still don’t like the “Where is that, then?” We made our way to the atlas and studied the numbers on the idea. I mean, why Atlantis, Plato just pretty much skipped over it.” “Because now we can’t just skip over it, we have to go and finish the Fomorians!” “Dad, you’re back in mad scientist mode,” I noted. “Well, get ready to face an army of old men like Hrym,” Dad responded. “Mortimer, are you coming?” “Aye,” he replied. “Good, we’ll need your help. Windsplitter, guard the little ones. They aren’t coming this time.” “Who else is coming, then?” Backbreaker asked. “I know I’ve asked way too much of you, but I wish to bring a few bauchans, including yourself.”

Coming Soon…

Fourth Book of the Franknorth

Adventures

The

Age of Atlantis

1. A small, thin sword that can only whip and stab. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rocs are featured in several Arabian tales, namely Aladdin and The Seventh Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor. They are described as monstrous birds that feast on elephants and giant snakes, known as wyrms. They were native to Socotra and Madagascar, but migrated when food was diminished. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A manticore is a feline with a humanlike head and a barbed tail. Sometimes known to have wings like a dragon, but this is fantastical. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A trow is a shadowy goblin that is known to be aggressive and nocturnal. They are native to both Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. In daylight they hide in mounds and for some reason they enjoy music. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A seashore city in Scotland that is nowhere near Cairn Gorm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berserkers were honored warriors in Norse times, which ran out to war with no armor, simply animal skins. They were described as nearly “becoming the animal itself”, but today people think they took a drug. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A huge squid that lives in the Greenland Sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Has a record of being hit on the head. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A long and pointed stick with an axe-like blade and a spearhead. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frost Giants are monstrous hominids that live in Polar Regions and feast on polar bears. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A Norse zombie that is created by infection or dying in an upright position. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Basically draugar with less intelligence and less wandering. More like classic zombies. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. To those of you who don’t know, a portcullis is a gate with cross-hatched bars. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A sea equine that was described as having a horse’s torso and head and a fish’s tail, but no back legs. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Dragon itself is Dirthrundil the Great, but that’s in next book [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Or genie. An older version is the efreet or ifrit from the Middle East. Known to grant wishes, and are featured in several tales, even modern stories. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Page 55 of The Den of Darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Page 92 of The Den of Darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Page 35 of The Den of Darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Page 77 of The Den of Darkness [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Page 35 of The Den of Darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Page 64 of the Den of Darkness. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. An antelope that can move its horns every which way. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Only a large skull was found, but its mouth is wide and it had powerful jaws, maybe even hooves. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A huge hyena that once lived in the Ice Age. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The grindylow is a water creature with long, spindly arms and drowns children in murky pools. In reality they are taken to be eaten by something else. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. An amphibian that, as a tadpole bears one head, then when on land grows two more heads. Then when a head is cut off, two more grow in its place, but the extra heads all are barely usable, and the middle one is the only head that can see and hear. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Page 92 of The Den of Darkness [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The serpent that awakens at the end of time and wraps around the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Page 77 of The Den of Darkness [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. A large weapon on a chain with a spiked ball at the end. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)