

Abrideri et Oblectare

The Toymakers



A Grand Story of How
a Brave Boy and a Clever Girl
Rescued the Royal Toymaker
From Blocksbury.

MARILYN SCOTT-WATERS

TO AMUSE & DELIGHT

FOR JULIE, LYNN AND THE MENCATS ©MARILYN SCOTT-WATERS 2006

Patrin's dream started out warm and pleasant as firelight, family all together, the smell of gingerbread and roasted apples filling the kitchen and the kettle boiling merrily on the hearth. His parents were smiling and sitting side by side, while his older sister and brother peered into a small carved box with a mouse pantomime playing inside. The toy mice scurried back and forth getting ready for a party, setting baskets of berries and acorn bowls of cider on a little mushroom table.

There was a tall man standing by the table too, buttoning up his winter coat to leave. Patrin could tell he was a Toymaker from the long scarf that he wore tucked under the lapels of his white jacket. Curious to meet this honored guest in his family's home, he crouched down to get a better look, but a wide brimmed hat kept the Toymaker's face in shadow. Dreams will play tricks, so as many times as Patrin moved around the table, he could never quite get a true glimpse of the man's face. And the more he tried to see who he was, the more the fire sparked and the kettle hissed, though not so cheerfully as the dream unwound.

A loud pop from the fire startled Patrin and he glanced away from the mysterious visitor to see a large toad sitting on the hearthrug, steaming from the heat of the fire. Three more sharp pounding taps shook the room, and Patrin noticed another grey green frog on the table next to the milk jug and two more on a shelf next to some platters. He tried to shoo them away, but as he did other bullfrogs appeared, croaking puffs of smoke from their wide stretched mouths. More and more of the fat, slimy creatures hopped from the fireplace to hide under the chairs and behind the pantry, their croaks filling the room with puffs of smoke. The tall man in the white suit melted into the swirling haze and Patrin awoke to the sound of someone knocking softly on his bedroom door.

Chapter 1

Clio is an unfortunate name for a fourteen-year-old kid to have. Her archeologist parents meant well when they named her after the Greek Muse of history, but everyone assumed her name was Cleopatra, so they did a little Egyptian dance around her and made mummy jokes which had long ago become very tiresome. On this particular morning of the first day of summer, Clio Halina was feeling especially unfortunate as she sat in the car in front of Swenstein Secondary School arguing with her father.

“I still don’t understand why I can’t go with you to Mexico. Why do I have to go to music camp while you guys get to spend the summer working in Cancun? You’re always dumping me off one place or another. This is so not fair!”

“Please Clio, we’ve been through this before. This is a chance for you to meet some of the other kids before you get to high school. I know that we’ve moved around a lot and it’s been hard for you to make friends...”

“Then why can’t I wait until September to meet new people? And why music camp? I don’t even like playing the trumpet! You liked playing the trumpet! I’m not you, Dad!”

“Just try it. If you give it a fair chance then I promise it will be the best summer you’ve ever had!” he replied, using his best “come on, this will be fun!” voice.

Clio rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. There was no use in arguing. Once her father was convinced of something he wasn’t changing his mind.

“Whatever, but if I really hate it I’m calling you collect.”

“It’s a deal. Now if you need anything you can reach me on my cell phone. I’ve got to go meet Mom at the storage locker and finish packing the equipment. We’ve got a long list of things to do.”

Feeling like she was one more thing that was checked off the list, Clio hugged her father goodbye with one arm and watched the jeep pull out of the parking lot.

It was 7:30AM, so Clio was looking forward to at least an hour of not much of anything before the other students started showing up. She dug into her book bag for her sketchbook and doodled circles on the side of her hightops trying to decide what to draw.

First she drew a unicorn and then a tree, then some boxes just to practice perspective. After that, on a new page, she drew a picture of herself black hair, glasses and all, in a suit of armor, sword drawn banishing some sort of swamp monster. The picture was a little small and she drew one of her hands behind her back because she thought hands were impossible to draw right, but it was a comforting picture nonetheless. Somehow fighting a swamp monster seemed preferable to sitting on a bus filled with high school kids that she didn't know. Clio spent most of her time reading, drawing and trying to make things. She hoped that there would be at least some arts and crafts at camp and not just marching and lectures around the campfire.

She checked through her dufflebag for the fifth time to make sure that she hadn't forgotten anything. Sleeping bag, jeans, sweatshirt, toothpaste, a pillow, art stuff, a book for the bus and hidden deep down in the bottom was Wilber, her green velvet stuffed dragon. The end of his nose was a bit worn from age, but the brown yarn around his ears was thick and hung over his felt eyes. She had almost left him at home but at the last minute decided to take him along. "I bet I'll get a hard time for bringing a toy with me," she told herself as she zipped the bag back up.

After a while it began to get a little lonely, with only the sound of the wind blowing the chain against the flagpole to keep her company. Clio started to watch suspiciously as each car drove by. An old truck with some high school boys drove by and they hooted at her, laughed and sped off, so she picked up her gear and hid behind the shrubs by the front office door. She leaned up against the brown stucco wall and wished that she were anywhere but alone at school at 7:30 in the morning.

A small beige two-door car pulled up and the side door swung open before it had even come to a stop. A woman sprang out, her face hidden behind a wave of long dark hair. Clio heard the voices of two people arguing so she crouched down hoping to not be seen.

“Well, I hope you get this out of your system,” a man’s voice said. “ I can’t believe you’re going to interview with a *toy* company.” The way he said the word “toy” sounded to Clio like bits of spit were coming out of his mouth. “You had a perfectly decent offer from Megadyne Computers, with benefits and retirement. You could’ve had a corner office in a couple of years if you played your cards right, and yet here you are with a bunch of stuffed animals. You need to get serious about your life.”

“I am serious, that’s my problem.” The woman’s voice said as the sound of a wooden box being set on concrete scraped in the clear morning air. “ I’m serious about this interview and I think this is something that I could be really good at doing. Life is too short to spend on a job you hate.” Her voice was familiar, but Clio couldn’t quite place it. She shifted down a bit and caught a glimpse of pair of low-heeled brown leather pumps and a longish linen skirt.

“ I guess your plans don’t include being serious about me.” The man’s voice sounded kind of questioning. There was a pause and then an answer.

“No, I guess not, sorry. It’s not you. It’s me. Look, thanks for the ride and all.” The woman’s voice became rushed and fumbly. “They’re sending a car to take me to the airport. I need to pick up some things before they get here.” She spoke quickly as if to reach the end of the conversation as soon as possible. “Thanks again. Bye.”

The car door slammed and Clio peeked around to try and see who had been talking. She saw what looked like a cardboard box with arms and legs coming up the walkway. The box thumped down on the sidewalk and she heard the sound of keys unlocking the office door.

“Clio! Now this is unexpected. What is all this gear?” A familiar face peered down through the oleander leaves. “Are you going to music camp or perhaps running off to join the circus?”

Clio finally recognized who it was. The woman with the box was Miss Ashlyn, the art teacher. She was very strict, and while a lot of her students were disappointed that her class was so hard, the new teacher was still very popular and more than half of the boys had crushes on her.

Clio thought she was the best because she could draw anything, even people, and especially because Miss Ashlyn seemed to actually like looking at her drawings. She never laughed or offered unwanted advice. She just pointed out the good parts and looked as if she was reading the drawing like an exciting story. Clio couldn't believe her good fortune. With any luck she would be able to hang out with Miss Ashlyn until the bus arrived. Clio dragged her gear out of the shrubs.

“Music camp; my parents are making me play the trumpet. But I have some new drawings, would you like to see them?”

“Yes, I would very much. Would you be so kind as to hold the door for me? I need to pick up some things from my room. Can I tell you a secret? I'm going on a job interview with Busby Toys.”

“Noooo!” Clio replied, “You mean that you aren't going to teach anymore? You're a really good teacher, like the best! You can't just quit!” Then realizing that perhaps she wasn't being very polite she added, “I mean good luck with your interview. Busby Toys are really hot right now. They make Floobers you know, and really amazing stuff like Gizwheels.”

Miss Ashlyn smiled and unlocked the door. “Help me get my things in and I'll show you some designs that I did for the new Super Floobers.”

“Sweet!” Clio thought that the day was improving immensely.

Just then an odd pockety-pockety noise drifted around the corner. A very strange looking vehicle wobbled into view that looked like a cross between a giant fish and a motorhome. Clio thought at first that it was a parade float until she saw little yellow flag waving off the back fin imprinted with a smiling bee logo and the words “Busby Toy Company.”

“Um, Miss Ashlyn, I think your ride is here.”

The giant metal fish slowly turned the corner and pulled into the school parking lot. Its little rubber wheels looked like landing gear from an airplane and the whole contraption swayed precariously from side to side as it came to an abrupt stop in front of the walkway. An aluminum door with a porthole above the lower fin mechanically

opened with a hydraulic hiss. The fin folded down at the same time to become a step and a teenage boy, who didn't look old enough to drive, stuck his head out in the morning sun. His sandy colored hair flopped over his blue eyes. He wore an expensive looking gray suit with a red and white striped tie.

“Wow!” he said, squinting in the sunlight, “we made it!” He checked his gold wristwatch, which beeped softly as he twisted the stem. “Hello and hello! I'm Patrin Busby. You must be Kit,” the young man said cheerfully as he took Miss Ashlyn's hand and shook it warmly. She looked at him again and decided that he must be older, in his late twenties or more.

“And you must be her apprentice!” Patrin spun around to smile at Clio. “You must know how very lucky you are! Kit Ashlyn is a major talent!” He ignored the confused look on Clio's face and grabbed her hand, pumping it up and down energetically. She managed to murmur her name and a “nice to meet you” as he dragged her up the stairs. “Come in! Come in! Let me show you around! We are so busy right now, so many new projects!”

They climbed up a short staircase in to a small room with wood floors and bookshelves built into the wall down at one end. A high ceiling with arched brushed aluminum struts held thick glass windows that made up the spine of the fish. On both sides of the room were large portholes. On the wall across from the bookcases a fireplace had cold air blasting out, and what appeared to be snowflakes falling in it. Two chocolate brown club chairs, one regular-sized and curiously the other child-sized, were tucked around a low coffee table. Patrin rummaged through a writing desk that fitted neatly into the wall.

“Here! Look at these! They're called Doppeldolls. They're top secret and brand new!” He held up two plain white dolls that didn't have any faces or markings of any kind except for a blue button on the stomach. “Say cheese!” He pointed the dolls toward Kit and Clio and squeezed the dolls in each hand. A flash went off with a pop and they watched in amazement as the dolls' faces and clothes transformed into miniature copies of their own. “It's amazing the things that we can do with digital technology and toys today!” The young man looked at the dolls and then back at Clio and Kit. A boyish grin

covered his face as he admired his work. He waved in the general direction of the chairs with his elbow and said,

“Sit down! Relax! I’ll be back in just a second.” Patrin took the dolls and closed the door behind him. Clio pulled off her backpack and flopped down in one of the chairs. “Nobody’s going to believe this! I wish I had a camera.”

Miss Ashlyn looked out one of the portholes. Her fingers tapped nervously on the glass.

“This is very strange. Come see this!” Kit pointed out the window. They peered down as Patrin stood the Doppeldolls up on the sidewalk and stepped back. The dolls grew bigger and bigger until they were life-size.

“They look just like us!” They watched as Patrin went around to the back of the dolls and pressed with both hands between their shoulder blades. The dolls jerked to life and expressions came over their faces. Patrin picked up Kit’s big cardboard box and disappeared from view.

“What in the...” Kit ran to the door and tried to open it but the handle wouldn’t turn. “We’re locked in!”

Chapter 2

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Kit said, banging on the door. “Get to the window, see if you can find someone and get their attention.” She grabbed a poker from the fireplace set and swung hard at one of the portholes. It bounced back so she took another swing. The poker didn’t even leave a mark. Kit turned her attention to the door and tried prying it open but it wouldn’t budge. She hit the hinges as hard as she could, trying to knock one of them loose. Long moments passed as she tried to pry the hinges apart until suddenly the whole room gave a shudder.

“Miss Ashlyn, I think we’re moving!” Clio said, her face pressed to one of the portholes. “Hey! That’s my trumpet!” The life-size dolls picked up the rest of the things left on the sidewalk and walked back to the front office. The car backed up slowly and began to pick up speed as the fins on the side of the car unfolded out with a slow creak. The fins started pumping back and forth as the floor jumped beneath their feet. “We’re flying! Look! There’s my apartment!” The school, and in fact the whole street below, appeared to be getting smaller and smaller.

Soon they gained altitude and were up in the clouds.

“This has to be some kind of mistake,” Kit said. “They must have thought you were supposed to come with me.” Clio sank into a chair as Kit, filled with nervous energy, started searching the room.

“Still, this is very weird,” Kit said, running her fingers over the smooth wood of the mantle. “I’ve never heard of an airplane like this.” The room was surprisingly quiet, with only the sound of snowflakes falling in the fireplace and the rocking creak of the wings flapping up and down. She paced around the small room, examining things and opening drawers. “What were those dolls? Robots? People? Some sort of media trick for publicity? I don’t get it.” She opened the drawer that contained the Doppeldolls and sorted through an odd assortment of small toys and papers before slamming it shut, making Clio jump in her chair. Kit knelt down beside Clio and patted her arm reassuringly. “I’m sorry that you’re messed up in this. You should be getting on a bus for summer camp right about now. I’m sure I can convince Mr. Busby to take us back to the

school once I explain it to him. If not..." Kit bit her lip and looked at the door. "Just be ready for anything. Stay low and if there's trouble keep your eyes open."

"It's okay, really." Clio replied, "It'll be a great story to tell when we get back."

"That is, if anybody believes us. This isn't like anything I've ever seen." Kit adjusted her grip on the poker and started studying the contents of the bookcase. The books were all in a foreign language, but not one that she recognized. Carved into the woodwork over the fireplace a crest displayed a ramping griffin on a shield. All the items in the room, from the richly upholstered club chairs and polished mahogany coffee table to a cut glass decanter containing ice water on the writing desk, were beautifully made. Even the rugs on the hardwood floor were thick and lush with a repeating leaf motif woven into them.

Suddenly the bookcase swung open to reveal a compact circular staircase and Patrin Busby. His blue eyes shone as he swooped in balancing an enormous red teapot and cups on a tray with a large pile of muffins, fruit and pastries. "How are you enjoying the trip so far?" He flashed a wide grin at them as he set the tray down on the coffee table. "Is tea okay or would you prefer something cold?"

"Mr. Busby, there's been some kind of mistake." Kit didn't know what to make of this cheerful young man.

"Call me Patrin, I won't be old enough to be Mister Busby for quite a while." He squeezed himself into the little club chair and started pouring tea.

"No, um, Patrin, you see, Clio isn't supposed to be here. She was just at the school waiting to go to music camp."

"That's not a problem; she's more than welcome to tag along! She's obviously oozing with artistic talent. Look at her shoes. Those are the shoes of an artist!" Clio felt her cheeks warming up and looked down at her red high-tops with the doodles all over them.

"Look, you don't understand!" Kit explained, frustrated at Patrin's apparent lack of concern. "Her parents will be beside themselves with worry. You have to turn this, this... fish around and take us back."

"I'm one step ahead of you. The Doppeldolls will take care of everything. Right now her doll is on a bus to summer camp. I took the liberty of making her a pretty good

trumpet player with a popularity rating of nine-five.” Patrin sat back and took a bite of croissant. “When she gets back, she’ll have all kinds of new friends and a solo in the assembly on the first day of school.”

“ And what is my little clone going to be doing? Practicing trombone?” Kit snapped.

“No, no, no! I programmed your doll to go through all the boxes in your garage and get rid of all the stuff that you’ve been meaning to clean out. Don’t worry, no one will be able to tell the difference. All our tests have shown that these dolls are undetectable by 87 percent of casual acquaintances. Since you are not scheduled to see your parents until three weeks after we get back from Blocksbury, it won’t even begin to be a problem!” Patrin finished his pastry and stood up. “So sit back and enjoy the ride. Let me know if I can do anything to make you more comfortable.”

“Look, Buddy!” Kit moved to block Patrin from the door. “We’re not going anywhere with you. I’m not going to stand around and let you kidnap us!” Before Clio could blink Kit grabbed Patrin by the wrist, spun him around and pinned him in an arm-lock on the floor. A look of complete surprise replaced the young man’s cheerful smile.

“Ow! This isn’t...” he protested.

“One sound out of you and I’ll break your arm.” Kit pressed her knee into his back. “Don’t think I won’t either. Take off his shoes and give me the laces!” Clio’s fingers were shaking as she pulled off Patrin’s dress shoes and removed the shoelaces. Kit took them and tightly knotted Patrin’s little fingers together behind his back then pulled off his belt, securing his feet.

“If you lie still you won’t break your fingers,” Kit told Patrin as she headed for the staircase. “Clio, if he moves hit him over the head with the teapot. I’ll see if I can get this thing turned around.”

Chapter 3

“Um... are you okay?” Clio looked down at Patrin tied up on the floor. “I mean, can I get you a pillow or anything?”

“No, thank you, my pinkies hurt a bit, but other than that I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” A few moments went by as they stared at each other. “Miss Ashlyn really ‘packs a wallop’ as you say on your television,” Patrin said with a little bit of awe in his voice. “Her files said that she had studied martial arts extensively and has very quick response times, but I certainly didn’t expect this! Oh well, you might as well have your tea; it’s getting cold. Try the blueberry muffins; they’re rather good.”

“That’s OK, I’m not hungry.” Clio sat down on the carpet next to him so that they could talk better. “What do you mean about Miss Ashlyn’s files? Did you have somebody spy on her?”

“Oh, no! I only know what I read about her in her storybook. There’s most likely one on you in the Queen’s Library. I read up on her before I contacted her for this job. You see we’ve been having all kinds of trouble getting a Toymaker for Blocksbury, and with Queen Iren’s seventy-fifth birthday coming up in six weeks, well, let me tell you, we are desperate! So I was chosen to recruit a designer from, shall we say, “out of the area” to take on the task.”

“Wow! Toymaker sounds like a really cool job. What do you have to do?”

“Make toys, of course. What we really need is something spectacular for the Birthday Celebration. All the Blocksbury Toy Committee has been able to come up with so far is a limited edition of polished maple blocks. This is hardly the kind of thing that is going to get us noticed. There’s going to be a lot of hot competition. Could you scratch the side of my nose? It itches something fierce.” Clio rubbed the side of Patrin’s nose and he looked relieved.

“Much better. Thanks ever so! I was telling Chimka... Chimka! Oh my stars! I forget about Chimka! What if Kit finds him? We could crash! I’m in so much trouble. We are in so much trouble! Big trouble! Big! Big! Big!” Patrin started struggling hard. “You have to untie me, please!” he pleaded, “If Kit finds Chimka and scares him... I hate to think what could happen, we could be thrown off course. He’s not the best pilot under

normal flying conditions. Please! Let me go! What if Chimka hurts Kit? Please, for the love of all things good! We haven't much time!"

"Who's Chimka?" Clio didn't know what to do. She wanted to help Patrin but didn't want to disobey a teacher.

"Chimka is my Friend. Normally, he's very calm and useful but when he gets scared he tends to overreact. He's supposed to be piloting the ship."

"How do I know you won't hurt me or something if I untie you?" Clio was starting to like Patrin and wanted to trust him.

"I promise! I'd never do anything to hurt anybody intentionally. I'm sorry if I caused you and Kit alarm, but I was thinking you'd rather like an adventure."

"I don't know..." Clio replied. The ship lurched under her feet, throwing her back into a chair. It felt like they were falling out of the sky.

"Swear!" Clio studied his blue eyes trying to decide if he was telling the truth or lying. "Give me your best promise. Swear on something super important like ... like ... your worst nightmare."

"I swear on..." The young man closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them. "Exploding Frogs." He looked so serious and pained that Clio felt sorry as soon as the first giggle left her lips. She looked at him skeptically.

"Exploding Frogs? That's too weird to be fake. Miss Ashlyn's going to kill me!" She grabbed a fruit knife off of the tray and after a few moments of sawing helped Patrin to his feet. "Let's go!"

As they climbed up the circular staircase the sounds of breaking glass and strange chattering noises came pouring down.

At the top was a small room that looked like a cockpit. A large arched window looked out over the clouds. Kit was crouched down behind the copilot's chair, lobbing everything that she could get her hands on at something hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the room. Books, tea cups and plates all sailed through the air.

"Chimka! Get down from there! I mean NOW!" Patrin pushed his way into the room, poking his way through the broken china in his stocking feet. "Stop it, I say! Get down here! These people are here to help us." A heavy book hit him on the shoulder. "Hey! That hurt! Chimka! Please!"

Clio poked her head into the room and saw a flash of something red on top of a tall bookcase. The loud screeching noises continued but the deluge of books stopped.

“Yes, I know, I am sorry about that but it’s your own fault,” Patrin said firmly, “I told you not to open the door for anyone but me.” He put his arms out as if he was expecting something to fall into them. “Come on... it’s all right. These are the people I told you about. I know... she was not what I expected either. Yes, yes, I’m sorry about your tea. No, she isn’t mean. It’s just that this is all very new to them and she’s a Greylander. Well you shouldn’t have started throwing things at her!” There was a long pause and a little more chattering but this time it was more subdued. Patrin nodded and said with a smile,

“I’m sure that she will say she’s sorry as soon as you get down from there.”

With a thump a large stuffed monkey jumped into Patrin’s outstretched arms. He was made out of bright red velveteen and had a yellow face with shiny black eyes that looked warily at Clio and Kit.

“He is so cool! A stuffed animal that moves and talks!” Clio held out her hand. “Hi little guy!” The monkey’s face wrinkled in an expression of irritation.

“Chimka, allow me to introduce Kit Ashlyn and Clio Halina, Toymakers from the Greylands. Kit, Clio, this is Chimka, my Friend.” Kit got up from behind the chair and gingerly held out her hand.

“I’m sorry that I threw all those things at you. You caught me by surprise. I’ve never seen a red monkey before.” Kit stared at Chimka in fascination. “Did you make him? How does he move? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“He’s my Friend. You have a Friend, don’t you?” Patrin asked. “You must, you’re a Toymaker! All Toymakers do!”

Kit looked confused so Clio pulled on her sleeve and whispered,

“I think he means a stuffed animal friend,”

“Oh! That kind of friend, um, actually...” Kit replied, a little embarrassed, “yes, well, I did, when I was little but I’ve never seen one that moves before.”

“Patrin said that he can even pilot the ship,” said Clio. Chimka’s eyes got very wide and he chattered something to Patrin.

“What do you mean you turned off the auto-pilot?” He threw the monkey down into one of the chairs and sat down at the console. “Where’s the map? According to the instrument readings we should hit ground in about three minutes! Everybody hold on!” Patrin struggled with the controls.

“I think you’re off with your timing, look!” Kit shouted, as they broke through the mist and hit water.

Chapter 4

The window went dark green except for a wash of bubbles as they submerged. The impact threw them to the floor and Clio felt like she'd belly flopped off of a high dive. Her head ached and she had the start of a bruise on her leg where a set of books had fallen on her. Patrin and Chimka struggled to the console and started pushing buttons and flipping switches in a frantic attempt to get the ship under control. The lighting failed, leaving the room in darkness. A surging noise pulsed up from under the floor and auxiliary lights switched on, bathing the room in an eerie blue glow.

"Underwater power systems on! At least I think that they're on." Patrin pulled hard on the steering wheel and finally got it to turn. "Front searchlights are on! Watch out for whales! Hold on! This could get very wet in a hurry!" The lights did little to illuminate the murky water outside. Strange looking fish came into view and vanished, schooling in the swirling current. Patrin pushed a blond lock of hair out of his eyes and looked intently into the green depths. "We have to get up enough speed to get back into the air. Just give me a second to check the manual." He grabbed a book from off the shelf and flipped through the pages. "It says we have to pull the wheel to the right. Don't let it wobble! We've got to get this thing turned around!" Kit and Clio grabbed the wheel with both hands and pulled for all that they were worth. Chimka pressed buttons furiously as Patrin started reading numbers from the book,

"Water to Sky sequence Beta, red, five, three, three, three, press white and connect seventy-four and GO!"

Clio lost her grip and slid back on the floor as the room tilted up on an extreme angle. She managed to keep from sliding out the door by grabbing the end of Chimka's tail. The monkey squawked in surprise and kept on pushing buttons. Broken teacups and books went sliding on by.

"Steady, steady and..." Patrin's knuckles were white as he pushed hard on a big lever. "...just a little farther!" The dark green viewing window got lighter and fish scattered above them as they neared the surface. With a mighty swoosh the Fish Car shot up like a bottle rocket into the cloud-filled sky, peaked and started falling back. Clio's stomach jumped into her throat as they started falling backwards.

“Convert the power! Convert the power! Not there! There!” Chimka let out a loud screech and pounded a big green button with his fist. After a long moment of horrible silence a familiar pockety-pockety sound kicked in and the ship stabilized.

“Well! I’ve never done that before!” exclaimed Patrin happily.

“Neither have I,” replied Kit, “nor do I intend to repeat it. Are you sure this thing is back on track?” Patrin looked at Chimka who shrugged his velvet shoulders and then nodded.

“Auto-pilot is back on. We have just enough power to make it to Blocksbury,” said Patrin, fiddling with more knobs and buttons.

“But not enough to get back home? How convenient,” replied Kit. “How about you and I have a little talk. Where is this Blocksbury and why are you taking us there?”

“Well... as I was telling Miss Halina earlier, we desperately need a Toymaker in Blocksbury. It’s in the southern region of the Silver Isles. It’s not part of the Greylands so I doubt that you’ve ever heard of it. Queen Iren’s birthday is coming up and all the townships in the kingdom have been working day and night to have the most wonderful presents for Her Majesty’s special party. All we’ve been able to come up with are blocks,” Patrin counted the list on his fingers, “not fun blocks, not beautifully made blocks, just regular boring blocks. The Committee took three months to decide to make rectangular shaped blocks as well as square ones. I’ve spent countless hours in presentation meetings discussing paint finishes. At the current rate we will have a small box of perhaps nine or ten unfinished blocks of wood. It would be an insult! War could break out! Famine! Pestilence! Chaos! We could lose funding! I can’t even begin to describe the horror!” At this point Patrin was waving his arms in the air, and both Kit and Clio tried not to laugh. “So. In an uncharacteristic show of action and unanimity the Toy Committee voted to acquire outside help. I was nominated to hire a freelance Toymaker and, after some research, I chose you, Miss Ashlyn.”

“Me? Why me? I haven’t done that much actual toy work. I’m just an art teacher.” Kit raised a suspicious eyebrow. “There are a lot more people who have more practical experience than me.”

“Your storybook showed pictures of amazing creations. The pieces that you did for your Master’s thesis were pure poetry! And those dolls you did in High School were

good even by our standards. I mean, given your primitive conditions and the materials that you had to work with, you were far and above our first choice!” Patrin beamed at her. “ Please! We can pay you whatever you ask, you’ll have all the supplies and equipment you can think of. My budget here is very extensive. And you’ll have some excellent portfolio pieces to take back with you.”

Kit considered her options. She couldn’t fly the Fish Car by herself and she had no idea where they were. Patrin seemed sincere enough though a little eccentric. She decided to go along with him until she could find someone to help them back home.

“You mentioned that my garage would be cleaned out?”

“ Absolutely! Guaranteed!” Patrin nodded energetically. Clio looked hopefully at Kit. This sounded much more exciting than an entire summer at music camp.

“And Clio will be allowed to participate and have access to a trumpet so that she can practice? And you will ensure our safe return in six weeks.”

“I personally guarantee it. Word of honor.”

“Well... this is all so strange, and I’m not exactly sure what’s going on. But if I can spend my summer making toys, stopping war and famine and get my garage cleaned out then I guess we have a deal. But first tell me, what’s a Greylander?” Kit leaned against the co-pilot’s chair as Chimka bustled around with a dustpan cleaning up the mess.

“People from your world, the Greylands, which as you know are very bland and monotone. Please don’t take it personally,” replied Patrin. “In the Real World things are much more... well... real! Easier! You’ll see!”

Chimka made a chattering noise and rushed to the window. The clouds parted, revealing a rolling green countryside dotted with little cream colored houses with pitched red roofs. They flew over a large city with boulevards paved with cobblestones and lined with old trees.

“Look! It’s Saint Ives the Royal City, capital of the Silver Isles. That’s Queen Iren’s castle, and the parade ground. There’s the Water Park and the Academy of Toys where I went to school.” Patrin pointed out all sorts of interesting places. He was telling them about a place called Kiteflyer’s Bluff when a dark shadow flashed across the sky. For a brief moment the face of what looked like a large winged lion pressed against the

window, its hot breath clouding the glass. Clio screamed and Chimka ducked under a chair. It pushed against the front of the observation window with massive paws the size of dinner plates, flapping its huge wings to try and slow the vehicle down.

“We’ve been seen! We’ve got to lose him! Chimka! Get us out of here!” The pockety-pockety sound of the engines speeded up to a high-pitched whine and the little monkey pushed in the throttle and turned the wheel hard. They dropped into a spin and the lion fell away as Chimka looped back into a sharp climb. Patrin grabbed a couple of wooden handles that were attached to the control panel and unfolded a periscope-like contraption. “Great Bouncing Bunnies! It’s one of the Queen’s guard lions. If he catches us he’ll force us to land. It’ll ruin everything.”

“Let me see that.” Kit peered into the view screen. She scanned in on a fierce looking set of teeth as the giant beast flew at full speed after them. “Does this machine have any weapons?” Patrin shook his head no and Kit took another look.

“What do you know about this, what did you call it, guard lion?” she asked. “Does it have any weaknesses? How high can it fly? Can we outrun it?” Kit noted that the creature was gaining on them.

“I’ve heard that they’re not fond of water,” said Patrin. “Hmm, that gives me an idea. Head for that big storm cloud over there. That should give us some cover.” Soon a great wall of gray cloud rose in front of them and sheets of pounding rain buffeted the observation window. Shocks of lightning flashed bright on the rain clouds below.

“Drop down twenty feet! Stop and wait... good! Wait, wait!” Patrin shouted, “Now head straight up and fly like the hounds of Holyglen are after you.” They all held their breath for a few tense moments as they popped up over the clouds.

“Looks like we lost him. That was tight!” exclaimed Patrin. “Let’s stay at this elevation for a while just to make sure.”

The sun was just starting to set as they headed steadily to the east. Pinks, oranges and purples streaked the western sky as the Fish Car began its descent. Through the window they could see a vast dry valley split by a long lake and surrounded by mountains. On the edge of the lake was a small industrial town with rows and rows of little square buildings with flat roofs. Clio thought that they looked kind of dull and wished that they could go back to Saint Ives. This place didn’t even have a castle, just a

sprawling grey factory with brick chimneys spewing out streams of dark smoke that slashed across the sunset. Still, after all the events of the day, a few days of dull didn't sound so bad. They made their way to the exit door that opened with a hydraulic whoosh. Cold evening air blew in from the mountains.

 "Welcome, my friends!" Patrin said with a sweep of his hand. "Welcome to beautiful, picturesque Blocksbury."

Chapter 5

“I’ve arranged for you to stay in an older part of town by the lake.” Patrin walked down the step and headed around to the front of the Fish Car. He pushed a little button and a large door dropped open like a mouth to reveal a storage compartment, packed with large trunks and their luggage.

“Hey!” exclaimed Clio; “It’s my stuff! I thought we left it behind! Oh... and my trumpet,” she said, her nose wrinkling in dismay.

“These are your things, what you saw before were Doppleduffles!” answered Patrin. “Just the thing for Doppledolls on the go.” He smiled and took a pad of paper out of his pocket. “Chimka, here are the directions to Quad Hall, It’s two blocks on the left after Triangle Square. Don’t turn down Mobius Strip or you’ll never get there. Ladies, why don’t you go on ahead and get settled in? I’ll be there with some dinner and your luggage very shortly.”

The sun was sinking quickly in the western mountains. Chimka grabbed Clio and Kit by the hands and led them off down the street muttering glumly to himself.

The evening air smelled of sewer gas, sour and heavy, as they walked down grimy sidewalks, past boarded up brick buildings and dingy shops, their wrought iron gates chained tight for the night. Clio chatted nonstop with Chimka, who checked his piece of paper from time to time as they wove their way through the narrow streets but Kit looked nervously over her shoulder, not happy at all about the growing shadows in this strange, ugly town.

After they passed a tiny railroad station, the streets became cleaner and wider as they headed toward the lake. The smell of moisture filled the evening air as a breeze blew off the water glistening pink and gold in the last rays of sunset. Impressive, two-story beach houses sat proudly side by side, clean and tidy with painted woodwork. The large homes spilled out thick green lawns that tucked up neatly to a stone boardwalk wrapping neatly around the water’s edge. Kit relaxed a little as they continued through a small park, orderly beds of pansies and snapdragons visible in the lamplight along the winding paths. Chimka pointed to a huge mansion at the end of the park and chattered.

“Is that Quad Hall? We get to stay there?” Clio asked, obviously impressed by the elegant building glowing in the setting sun. Where ever they were it seemed much nicer than a dormitory at music camp. Chimka nodded brightly. It was a beautiful three-story mansion built out of large rectangular wooden blocks. A covered veranda paved with brickwork ran around the outside of the house and intricate cut glass windows in geometric patterns glowed in the night from the warm yellow lights within.

From behind them a high singsong voice called, jolting them out of their reverie. “Hoody-hoo! Hello, little girls.”

Kit spun around and Chimka jumped into Clio’s arms, squeaking panic. Waddling up the walkway, to their surprise, was a clown, almost as wide as he was tall. He wore a purple shirt with huge, lime spots and orange checked pants that strained across his ample belly. His shiny, bald head was fringed with blue, frizzy hair that fell to his shoulders.

“What do you want?” Kit asked sharply, not amused by his greeting, her tone bordering on rudeness. Clio clutched Chimka tight and stepped in close behind her.

“Ooh, no need to be alarmed. I’m Big Happy, your friendly neighborhood, welcoming clown! I just wanted to see if you needed any help.” A wide painted grin stretched over his large, blubbery face as he looked down at them in the lamplight. “Popcorn? Candy? Can I get you anything? How about you?” he asked, looking around Kit to Clio, “What’s your name, little girl?”

Before Clio could answer Kit interrupted loudly,

“Look, we don’t want anything. Now goodbye!”

Frightened of this huge man that appeared out of nowhere Clio clutched the back of Kit’s jacket. Chimka loosened his grip on Clio’s neck, peered around and shrieked out a warning, shaking a little red paw. The clown glared at them for a moment before his lips pulled slowly back into a rubbery smile again.

“No need to get huffy, lady. Just trying to be neighborly.” Big Happy waved his white-gloved hands in front of him and backed away, disappearing into the darkness as abruptly as he appeared. The moment the clown was out of sight they walked as fast as they could toward the big mansion.

“That guy was the creepiest!” Clio said, squeezing Chimka’s paw.

“I don’t like clowns; they smile too much,” Kit said, glancing back into the darkness as they climbed the brick steps of Quad Hall.

It took Patrin a while to drag all the boxes and trunks out of the storage bay and onto the pavement. Then, whistling, he pulled a small red windup racecar from his pocket, turned the crank a few times and set it down on the ground. It grew and grew until it was almost the size of a real car. Still whistling a jaunty tune he pulled a tiny toy wagon out of his other pocket. He spun the wheels to make sure that they turned and set it down next to the luggage compartment. The wagon creaked and stretched into a regular toy wagon. Patrin walked over to it, gave it a kick and stepped back as it swelled to the size of a small sofa.

“Oi! Wot’s this?” a voice cried out from down the sidewalk. A burly, square jawed man wearing a policeman’s uniform with elaborate gold buttons down the front asked, “Do you have papers for all this lot?” He peered in the storage compartment and saw Patrin struggling with a huge trunk. “Ah, it’s only you, Mister Patrin. How was your trip?”

“Delightful, Sergeant Braso, and hopefully a successful one too. Would you be so kind as to give me a hand with these things?” Patrin replied.

They loaded up all the trunks and boxes, leaving Clio’s trumpet case and Kit’s cardboard box till the end. They stacked those carefully on the top and stood back to admire their work.

“Sergeant,” said Patrin, “I need to nip over to the Counsel to pick up a few papers and an extra food box. Would it be possible for you to take this over to Quad Hall? The new Toymakers will be needing their things for the evening.”

“Toymakers! You brought back more than one. This is good news! Our hopes for Blocksbury are all riding on you, sir.” Sergeant Braso mopped his brow with a large yellow handkerchief.

“Well, the young one’s still an apprentice, but I think that we will all be pleasantly surprised with their abilities. Thanks ever so much! I’ll be sure and tell Mr.

Shishka and the rest of the counsel of your hard work.” Patrin hopped in the red racecar and sped off down the street.

Sergeant Braso quickly became tired and hot as he pulled the heavy cart down the sidewalk. He stopped to rest, leaned against the wagon and mopped his forehead again. As he gazed up the street he saw groups of factory workers wearing dull brown work jackets and pants, trudging wearily home in the pale lamplight. As the sergeant waited for them to pass an idea struck him and he stopped two men dressed in the drab white of kitchen help.

“Hey! How ‘bout you two chaps giving me a hand with this lot? It needs to be taken to Quad Hall right away.” He squinted to read their name badges. “Mook and Augwun, here, be good lads and run this cart on down for me.” Braso rummaged in his pocket and took out a few coins. “Here’s a couple of coppers for each of you.” Mook, a gray-eyed young man with a mess of wavy dark hair, took the coins after a moment of hesitation. He touched his forelock and said,

“Not to worry, sir. We’ll get it there in a twinkling of the Maker's eye! Won’t we, friend?” The other worker didn’t look up but just nodded and shuffled from foot to foot.

“Quad Hall it is! Come on, Augie, put your back into it!” Mook grabbed the handle of the wagon and pulled while the other man went to the back and started pushing the load. Sergeant Braso relieved to get rid of his burden, turned back up the street to a warm dinner and wife waiting for him at home.

“Augwun, my friend, I’m asking myself if this is good fortune or bad fortune,” the dark haired young man told his companion as they walked. “Good fortune to have a bit of extra coin in my pocket, bad fortune to be still working when I should be done with the day and putting up my poor, tired feet. Yet, perhaps it is very good fortune to be making this particular delivery,” Mook mused as he turned down an alley with the cart and stopped underneath the dim light of a porch lamp. “It wouldn’t hurt to have a look, now would it?” He opened the top box and studied the contents. “Well, well, well. It looks like we have a new Toymaker in this boring excuse for a town.”

Augwun walked to the side of the wagon. He was tall and very gaunt with long dirt colored hair that fell about his pale green eyes and sharp nose. He looked like a tired

and worried scarecrow. “Don’t, Mook,” he said. “We could get in more trouble than even I can imagine.”

“Are you not curious? Don’t you want to see what amazing things this box might hold? Look at these drawings. This is what the Toy Counsel needs, some new ideas. I used to make toys, you know.” Mook rummaged cheerfully through the box as he talked. “Ran into a spot of trouble and ‘Poof!’ Here I am! Working in the kitchen at Blocksbury.”

“I had no idea. Now, put these back,” Augwun said angrily, taking a few wooden unicorns out of Mook’s hands and shoving them back in the box. “My contract is up in three weeks and I’ve no intention of having any problems between now and then. If you want to make toys then you should ask the new Toymaker to take you on as an assistant. Now get going!” Mook was surprised at the fierceness in his friend’s voice and looked a little wounded.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. You know... you need more fun in your life. Take risks, play more. In all the time I’ve worked with you I’ve never once saw you goof off or take a holiday. It might do you some good.”

“Hmmpf!” replied Augwun, “And pulling this wagon a bit harder might do us both some good.”

They went back to the task at hand and were soon at the delivery entrance to Quad Hall. Mook rang the bell and they stood back waiting for a reply. After a few minutes, the door opened a few inches and Clio peeked out.

“The Toymaker’s luggage, miss,” said Mook, bowing slightly.

“Cool! Thanks! I’m not sure where the big trunks go. I think that these bags are Miss Ashlyn’s.”

“Is she the new Toymaker, miss? Would she like us to take these things up for her?” Mook asked. Clio eyed them suspiciously. Their jacket fronts were covered with food stains. They didn’t look too respectable and smelled like old grease.

“Uh, well, I don’t know,” she replied. Chimka showed up behind her, opening the door wide, followed by Kit who after sizing them up for a moment let them in.

“Hi,” she extended her hand to Mook, “I’m Kit Ashlyn. Thanks so much for bringing our things.”

“No trouble at all, miss. I’m called Mook and this is Augwun.” He smiled and shook her hand with warmth and energy. Augwun gave a curt nod and started unloading boxes off the wagon.

“May we bring these up for you?” Mook asked again, looking at the cardboard box of Kit’s toys with longing.

“Yes, please. The workroom, I believe, is right in through here,” she answered. They each grabbed a box off of the cart and headed inside.

Clio put her carton down and stared at the workroom. It was the most beautiful place she’d ever been in, filled with worktables, shelves full of supplies, books, a sink, and in one corner, a curious looking sewing machine. One whole wall contained high arched windows that looked out over a moonlit lake and a warm fire burned cheerfully in the fireplace. The inlaid floor gleamed in the firelight with a building block pattern of light and dark woods. There were benches for sitting on, overstuffed chairs for relaxing in and windows for daydreaming out of when people grew tired of thinking up wonderful things. But the best thing about the spacious room, Clio thought, was the smell; the smell of glue and paper, paint and wood shavings - the smell of possibilities.

When they brought in the last of boxes Kit let out a tired sigh.

“What a lot of stuff. I don’t know how to thank you.” The extra trunks from the cargo hold were piled in a large pyramid by the door.

“Well, there is one thing, miss.” Mook twisted his fingers together a bit and looked sheepish. “If you could show us some of your work, well... it would be an honor.” Augwun shot a look at his friend and then glanced at the door. Kit saw him glare and studied his haggard face in the light for the first time.

“Do you need to go? Or do you not like toys?” she asked with a smile. Her words had a challenge to them and their eyes locked.

“No, miss. That is...” His eyes fell. “I’m sorry.”

Kit continued staring at him as if to place his face, then shook her head, the memory gone.

“I’ll tell you what, it’s getting late and we had quite a time getting here. Come back tomorrow and I’ll show you my whole portfolio... if you like.” Kit looked brightly at them both. A broad grin broke out on Mook’s face.

“We can come over on our break. We work at the factory kitchen right down the street. Tomorrow then! Goodnight.” He practically danced out of the room with Augwun as his lanky, silent shadow following behind him.

The back door had just closed when the front bell rang and the leaded glass, oak doors burst open with Patrin in carrying three large wooden boxes, spouting apologies.

“So sorry if I kept you waiting! Are you getting settled in? I brought you a food box and two clothes boxes. You must be starving!”

Kit grabbed the top box and carried it into the workroom. She looked inside one and to her surprise it was empty. She shot an inquisitive look at Patrin who rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“You don’t have boxes like this in the Greylands. This is exciting! Where should I start? How about some tea? He laid his hands on top of the green box for an instant and opened it, then took out a brown teapot. “Oops! I forgot cups.” He closed the lid, opened it and took out three ceramic teacups. “Clio, what’s your favorite food?”

“Corn on the cob.”

“You will love this!” Patrin placed her hands on top of the box. “Now see it in your mind’s eye. Think corn, butter, and salt if you like, and don’t forget a plate. Let’s see how we did!”

Clio opened the box and took out a buttery hot ear of corn. “Wow! This is stellar! Can it make anything?” Patrin thought for a moment.

“I think so. It’s a food box, so if you thought of shoes or something they would probably be edible. I’ll have to try it some day. Now Kit, what would you like?”

Kit gingerly laid her hands on the top of the boxes as if testing it to see if it was hot. She closed her eyes and thought hard for a moment. Then she lifted the lid and removed a steaming bowl of soup complete with white napkin and spoon.

“This is great! I knew you both would take to box work with no trouble at all!” Patrin began pulling various types of food out of the box and setting it on the table. “Go ahead and start eating before it gets cold. You know a lot of folks can’t work these things. My housekeeper gets angry if I even mention bringing one in the house. Some people can come up with a few simple things like cheese, but not with any nuance. Others can’t imagine flavors at all, which is why there is a great demand for kitchen workers and

restaurants, especially here in Blocksbury, which is frankly not known for its creative population.

“Our luggage was brought by two men who said they work in the factory kitchen. They didn’t look too prosperous.” Kit remarked as she broke off a piece of bread.

“Didn’t Sergeant Braso bring the luggage?” Patrin looked surprised. “ This is so odd. I wonder what happened to him?” He stood up and stared over at the pile of boxes, counting them quickly to himself. “This is not good! This is not good at all.”

Chapter 6

“Chimka, take a message for me to Sergeant Braso’s house. Find me the names of the two men who brought the luggage over. We need to find them and check them out.”

Patrin turned to Kit and Clio. “Look and make sure none of your things are missing. Theft in this part of the country is not unheard of.”

“I already know the names of the two workers,” Kit said, “At least I remember what they said their names were, let me think... Mook and Augwun. They’re supposed to stop by tomorrow and see my toy portfolio. One of them seemed especially interested in it. They both seemed innocent enough, if you want an intuitive guess, though I’ve been known to be wrong from time to time.” She smiled and popped a grape into her mouth.

Patrin got very excited and asked,

“This man who was interested in the boxes, what did he look like?”

“Young, early twenties I’d guess, nice looking, more on the tall side than not. His hair was dark and wavy, and needed a good wash, gray eyes. He had a bit of an accent although not one I’m familiar with. Am I leaving anything out, Clio?”

“Well, he seemed... ” Clio thought hard before saying tentatively, “...like he was okay.”

Patrin’s face lost its animated look and his lips pursed into a line.

“No, I thought I knew who it might be, but I guess not. Hmm, I guess we can just speak with them tomorrow.”

He shrugged his shoulders and started putting dirty dishes back into the food box. “Let me show you your rooms. Here is a clothes box for each of you. They work on the same principle as the food box. Just think of an article of clothing and open the lid. The box will get to know you and your size after a while, and when the clothes are dirty just put them back in the box. Don’t worry about cleaning up, Chimka and I’ll take care of it.”

Chimka rolled his eyes and he grumbled something that didn’t sound too flattering. Clio and Kit grabbed their bags and Patrin picked up the clothes boxes and headed up the workroom stairs.

“The Council convenes tomorrow for lunch so I’ll introduce you to them then. Toymakers traditionally wear boots, scarves and hats, so you’ll want to dress accordingly. Check out some pictures in the library if you like. The painting over the fireplace is of a famous Toymaker, Hosmer the Troublemaker.”

“Why did they call him that?” asked Kit.

“Well, he made had a nasty habit of making dangerous toys that got the other Toymakers into a lot of trouble. It was a long time ago but every now and then one of his creations pops up and plays a nasty trick on somebody. I used to know someone who wrote a book about him. I’ll have to lend it to you.” Patrin chatted on about various well-known Toymakers through the ages and showed them around the second floor. “I’ll pop by in the morning and we can get started. Sleep sweet!”

Kit made sure that Clio was safely settled into her room.

“Are you going to be alright?” she asked.

Clio nodded. Having Miss Ashlyn here to take care of things made this a far better place to be than her last boarding school, where a group of girls had pelted her with volleyballs and another boy had made a hobby out of sticking gum in her hair. Unable to explain how she felt, Clio could only manage to say,

“I’m fine. This place is really cool.”

“It is... different,” Kit admitted, looking around Clio’s room. Everything in it was decorated with building blocks, from the carved wood paneling to the quilted coverlet on the bed. “I’m going to try to get us out of here just as soon as possible; wherever ‘here’ is. There must be some way of getting back home,” she said, hoping she sounded reassuring. “Let me know if you need anything,” she added and closed the door.

Clio’s bedroom was cozy and warm with a private bathroom and an outdoor sleeping porch. She spent about an hour pulling different pairs of pajamas out of her clothes box, finally settling on a light blue pair covered in white and pink hearts. At the last minute she added a pair of soft pink fur-lined house boots. She brushed her teeth and washed her face, then yawning, crawled into bed, turned out the light and tried to go to sleep. After a moment she got up, went to her backpack and dug down for her stuffed dragon, Wilber.

“It’d be so awesome if you were alive like Chimka,” she said, looking at the green velvet face. “Well, at least you’re real to me.”

Climbing back into bed, she tucked Wilber under the covers next to her, put her glasses on the nightstand, turned out the light and immediately fell asleep.

Kit sat on the edge of her bed, deep in thought, pressing her hands against her temples. She half hoped that by pressing hard enough she would somehow be transported back home, but when she stopped she was still in the same unfamiliar room, wood squares burning cheerily in the fireplace and a light rain pattering on the windowpanes.

Too preoccupied to think about trying the clothes box, Kit dug into her canvas bag for a pair of old gray sweats. She got ready for bed but felt too edgy to lie down, so she slipped downstairs to make sure all the doors were locked in the big mansion. As she reached the workroom she was paralyzed by the soft creak of a window opening inside and a sniffing noise as if an animal was smelling the air. After an eternity of frozen silence, there was the sound of a few quiet footsteps and paper rustling. Through the doorway Kit caught a quick glimpse of a dark shadow disappearing over the railing of the veranda.

Kit had to wait until her heart stopped trying to pound its way out of her chest before her legs would move. Fumbling in the dark she found a key on the side of a table lamp that turned it on, filling the room with warm light and chasing the shadows to the far corners of the big room. She closed the window, locking it shut against the cold, damp air, then checked to see if anything had been stolen. On first glance it looked like nothing had been disturbed; Patrin’s storage trunks were still piled in a dimly lit corner and her large portfolio box of toys sat closed at the end of the long worktable. Then she noticed a line of wet footprints glimmered faintly in the lamplight, leading to a loosely wrapped twist of paper half hidden underneath a workbench. When Kit opened the paper up three little painted wood unicorns tumbled out in a row. She picked up the smallest one and said to it,

“Welcome back. Where have you been?” She wondered if the same person who had taken them had brought them back.

Kit inspected the rest of the box to see if anything was missing, and after repacking all the toys carried it carefully upstairs. She hid it in the armoire in her bedroom placing her duffel bag in front of it to keep anyone from easily opening the door. Lying down, Kit tried to get some rest, but it was almost sunrise before she could close her eyes.

Chapter 7

The morning sun streamed in clear rays through the windowpanes as Clio stretched and tried to remember where she was. Halfway through a really big yawn she heard a little wheezy snore. She jolted up to find Wilber sleeping at the foot of her bed... and he was alive. The stuffed dragon looked groggily at her, blinking his felt eyes, then he slowly studied his own stubby velvet paws, back and front. He had grown considerably overnight to the size of a large dog. They stared sleepily at each other in disbelief for a moment before both yelling at the same time,

“AHHHHHHH!!!” Wilber sounded like a cross between a goose honking and a clarinet being played very badly. Clio grabbed her glasses and shoved them on her nose. She took a good look at him and yelled again. The two stared wide-eyed at each other in awe as Clio put out her hand and Wilber snuffled it with his velvet snout.

“Wow! You’re alive! This is so awesome!” Clio scratched him behind the ear and he leaned into her hand, eyes closed, tail wagging energetically. “Did Patrin do this to you?”

The little dragon scrunched up his face and shook his head.

“No?” Clio asked, “Then who?”

Wilber thought for a moment and pointed a stubby claw at Clio.

“Me? No way? Really!” Clio stared at him for a long time. Wilber had always seemed real to her in her mind, the one constant friend as her family moved from place to place. It somehow didn’t seem that odd to see the stuffed animal grinning back at her.

“Do your wings work? Can you fly?” she asked, as Wilber spun around trying to catch his tail.

Wilber scrunched up his face and flapped his stubby velvet wings. He shot up off the bed, straight into the ceiling, letting out a squashed honk as he hit the floor.

“I guess you need a little practice on indoor flying,” Clio said as he pulled himself up. “Now stay here while I get ready; we get to meet the Toy Council today.” Clio went

into the bathroom to wash. When she came out Wilber was rummaging through her clothes box. He had laid a beautiful dark green suit on the bed. It was unlike anything Clio had ever worn before; a pale gray green silk shirt with simple white embroidered edge around the cuffs, pants and jacket made of soft summer-weight wool, with everything fitting perfectly as she put them on. A pair of shiny black riding boots sat next to the bed. She tucked her pant legs into the boots and stamped her heels down. There was a long mirror in the corner and she admired her reflection.

“Hey! I look pretty good! Thanks!”

Wilber looked her up and down. He dug around in the box a little more and pulled out a long green silk scarf and a wide brimmed hat with a little dragon crest on the hatband. After carefully inspecting the items he gave them to Clio.

“Is this you?” she asked, fingering the soft brim of the hat and staring at the silver of the crest. Wilber nodded happily. “How do you know this? I mean, is this is what I’m supposed to wear?”

The little dragon went to the bookshelf and after rooting through the titles selected a large, beautifully bound book. He flipped through the pages until he found a colorful illustration and pointed at it with his nose. The drawing showed a group of cheerful men and women wearing brightly colored suits, standing on the steps in front of a grand looking building. They too wore similar hats and boots with long scarves hanging over their shoulders. In front of the smiling people was a row of large stuffed animals, an amazing variety of teddy bears, birds, lions, unicorns, even a lemur and a giraffe. In the middle of the group was a splendid gold griffin with magnificent wings looking very regal. Clio studied the drawing closely and saw a red monkey at one end that looked like Chimka.

“I sure wish that I could read this,” said Clio, squinting at the funny lettering. Wilber grabbed the book in his mouth and shook it hard from side to side. When he opened it back up Clio found that she could read the printing underneath the picture.

“Hey! How did you do that?” she asked. Wilber looked up at the corner of the room and shrugged his wings.

“It says,” Clio read, “this is the Annual Toymaker’s meeting in the Royal Hall. It looks impressive. Hey! This sort of looks like Patrin, only lots younger. I wonder if he

was there?" She pointed to another figure, "And who is this guy next to him? He looks pretty important." Her finger rested on the central figure in the group, a Toymaker in a white suit, his hand resting on a baby-faced Patrin's shoulder. The man's face was obscured by the shadow of his brimmed hat.

"Well, Wilber, I guess I'll look pretty sharp for the meeting with my new duds. Let's finish looking at this book over some breakfast. I'm starving!"

Clio hopped down the stairs two at a time with Wilber loping behind her. When they reached the workroom, Clio peeked inside and motioned with her hand for Wilber to be quiet.

"Wait here for a minute," she whispered. "I don't want to surprise Miss Ashlyn. Not that you're super scary looking, but I bet she's never seen anything like you before."

Kit was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and studying a large picture book.

"Good morning," she said, putting her cup down, "did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, thanks, real good," Clio replied, "uh Miss Ashlyn?"

"Yes?" Kit leaned over in her chair to try and see what was scuffling in the hall. A flash of green velvet swooped past the doorway and there was the sound of wings flapping.

"I want you to meet my, um, friend, Wilber."

The stuffed dragon peered shyly into the room.

"Well!" Kit said after a moment. She stood up to get a better look at the strange creature, "According to the pictures in this book, living toys are not that unusual. Where did you find him?"

"I guess I made him," Clio confessed with embarrassed pride. "At least that's what he said."

"So Wilber is his name? He can come in if he likes." Kit held out a piece of toast and Wilber scampered over to sniff it. "Do you know what he eats?"

"Not really. I hope it's not too gross like lizard guts, or something."

At the mention of lizard guts, Wilber scrunched up his face and made a spitting noise with his red felt tongue. He opened the food box and took out a big plate of snowflake shaped cookies. The warm smell of vanilla sugar filled the air as Wilber hopped up on a chair at the table and began popping them in his mouth one by one.

“I went for a little walk early this morning,” Kit said, after Clio had settled down to a bowl of cereal. “I wanted to see where we’ve landed ourselves. There’s so much I don’t understand about this place.” She shook her head angrily. “Most of the people here seem incredibly poor and overworked. I saw bunches of workers walking to the big factory and they all looked so... tired.”

Kit pointed out the window to the lush garden outside, “This neighborhood where we’re staying is lovely, big houses, green lawns, trees. But if you go down a few streets there’s nothing but dingy gray buildings and dirty sidewalks. You’d think that with these boxes everybody would be well fed, well dressed and happy. I don’t get it.” She stared at the bottom of her coffee cup. “Nice suit by the way.”

“Wilber made it for me. Check out this picture.” Clio opened the book to the picture of the Toymakers. “Doesn’t this look like Patrin?”

“Yes, only about ten or eleven years old.” Kit pointed to a man in a dark purple suit. “You know, I think this is one of the workers who came over last night. I wonder what he did to be stuck here? I hope it’s not the punishment for designing boring toys, I could end up doing dishes for life.”

Wilber’s paw froze halfway to his mouth at this comment and his jaw dropped in mock surprise. Then he smiled and let out a silent “aren’t you silly” sort of laugh.

Patrin stuck his head in the door. “You? Boring toys? Never! Good morning, ladies. Lovely suit, Clio.” He set down with a thud the mountainous stack of papers that he was carrying on the table. “We’ve got a busy day today so let’s get straight to work.”

As he sat down he saw Wilber for the first time.

“Great Aunt Minnie’s Marbles! Wh...where did he come from?”

Chapter 8

“Wilber is mine,” Clio said, as she tried to stop the green stuffed dragon from licking her ear. “He’s my Friend, you know, like Chimka. He came to life last night. Isn’t he great?”

“This is amazing! I’m utterly astonished!” Patrin’s blue eyes were wide with delight. “Forgive me for saying so, but I didn’t think that you were capable of animating a Friend on your first day here. There is no precedent for that kind of thing, at least not that I know of, it usually it takes months or even years of training.”

Patrin knelt down next to Wilber and held out his hand.

“Hello, Dragonfriend. Patrin Busby at your service. It’s an honor to have you here in Blocksbury.” The stuffed dragon smiled a big velvety grin and shook the young man’s hand slowly. Patrin beamed at him and said,

“I bet you made Clio’s suit. Great job! Green must be her color,” he said, and pointed to the lapel of his candy apple red jacket. “All Toymakers have a signature color. Mine’s red. Kit, what’s yours?”

“I don’t really know,” she replied. “I mean, I haven’t picked one yet.”

“That’s where having a Friend makes life so much easier,” Patrin told her. “They’re like an extension of your inner self; they seem to instinctively know those kinds of things. What’s really sad is when Toymakers lose their Friends. You get so used to having them around and doing things for you that if something should ever happen...” Patrin stared out the window, adrift in silent thought. Wilber nuzzled his hand and gave a forlorn sympathetic honk. Patrin smiled at the pudgy little dragon then told Clio,

“Just take good care of Wilber and he’ll take excellent care of you.”

Clio nodded as Wilber flapped up to her arms, half knocking her over.

“Let’s get down to business.” Patrin said, spreading one of the tables with charts and maps. “We’ve so much to cover before our meeting. The first thing that you need to know is that the Blocksbury Toy Council is only interested in blocks. They’ll politely look at any other kind of toy, and then they’ll just as politely reject it. Kit, you can show your portfolio and other designs, but be warned, they won’t accept any of them.”

Patrin slumped over, overwhelmed by the sea of papers in front of him. He looked up and said, “Our best chance for the Queen’s seventy-fifth birthday is to come up with an exceptional new kind of building blocks that are more than just a box containing square pieces of wood.”

“What if we hid something in the blocks?” Clio suggested hesitantly. “We wouldn’t have to tell them what it was. It could be a surprise.”

“That might work,” replied Patrin, perking up, “Every block could have something different in inside.” They all sat down around the worktable and started sketching intently.

“What if we made an Advent Calendar, a block for every day of the month or even every day for a whole year?” Kit doodled a drawing of a tree shaped pile of square blocks with toys popping out of a few of them.

“We could color code them.” Patrin got very excited, his boyish enthusiasm returning. “We could have kites and balls for the spring, sleds for the winter. It would be glorious!”

“How would we fit a kite into a block?” Clio asked.

“That’s easy! I have a Dinkelyzer that can shrink almost anything. Chimka can make things smaller and he’ll show Wilber how to do it. We could even fit the boxes with Repeaters that will duplicate the toys every time you took one out. That way the Queen can give them out as party favors.”

“It’d be a lot of design work.” Kit scratched out some numbers on the margin of her notebook. “Three hundred and sixty five toys will be quite a bit of designing to do in just six weeks. Is there anybody you know that could help us?”

“I will!” Mook popped his head in the door. He was dressed in the same grubby kitchen uniform that he had worn the day before, though his face and hands looked a little cleaner.

“Excuse me, miss, for barging in like this. I let myself in and couldn’t help overhearing your idea. It’s the most pleasant thing to reach my ears in a month of Fundays!”

The dark haired young man looked around the spacious workroom with an expression of rapture and hope, like a fallen angel who had been let back into paradise.

“Please give me a chance to help you. I’ll do anything!”

“Patrin, this is Mook.” Kit introduced the newcomer to Patrin and they shook hands. “He delivered our things last night. Mook, this is Patrin Busby of the Busby Toy Company.”

“’Tis my pleasure, sir!” Mook replied, obviously delighted to be introduced to Patrin. “Mr. Busby’s turned the Council on its ear in the last few months; it’s been completely wound up around here! The ideas that he comes up with, why, it’s a breath of fresh air, that’s what I say, miss!”

“Where’s your serious friend, what’s his name, Augwun?” asked Kit. “Wasn’t he interested in coming here?”

“He’s covering for me in the kitchen. There’d be hell and a half to pay if the Kitchen Master caught us both gone before lunch.” A glimmer of fear flickered across Mook’s gray eyes as he spoke.

“What would happen? Would you get fired?” Clio asked, hating the idea of him getting in trouble.

“Set on fire? No, nothing that harsh, he’ll probably just cuff me around a bit for being a lazy sot. I don’t care!” Mook replied, with a short laugh. “ All I’m interested is seeing new toys! I used to make them before I came here.”

Patrin eyed him suspiciously and asked,

“Then why haven’t I ever met you before? I don’t recall ever seeing you at any of the Toymaker Assemblies or Annual Meetings, or have you been erased?”

“Erased? Oh, no, sir! I’ve never done anything that awful, although I did study under Hosmer the Innovator when I was younger.”

“Hosmer the Innovator!” Patrin spat back with obvious disgust. “Hosmer the Troublemaker is more accurate, the last of the Royal Toymakers. He was so awful, stealing peoples’ ideas, selling toys, taking bribes, that there hasn’t been one since. The Council of Justice is still trying to get rid of all the horrible toys that he invented. But that was years ago. How did you end up here?”

“How does anyone end up in Blocksbury?” Mook shrugged and stared at the parquet block pattern on the floor, an embarrassed pink washing across his pale

cheekbones. “I’ve just moved around from town to town following work. Things haven’t been easy for traveling Toymakers lately. I’d do anything to make toys again, sir.”

“What does ‘erased’ mean?” asked Clio, not liking the sound of any of this.

“It’s a very severe punishment,” replied Patrin with a shudder. “Not one that’s given out very often, at least not that many people know about. It’s said that sometimes, convicted criminals are erased from being. They aren’t killed; it’s just that they’re forgotten.”

Patrin started doodling a line of little stick figures on a piece of paper.

“I’m not sure exactly how the Council of Justice does it but every book, memory and trace of the person’s existence is supposedly eradicated,” he explained as he drew.

“I’ve heard that the Council must agree on it unanimously and the Queen needs to give her Royal Seal. I guess it’s like being banished without having to go anywhere.” He dangled the pencil’s eraser over the drawing like a pendulum then let it drop on one of the little figures. He then erased it, leaving only a shadowy outline where the lines had been.

“It seems like a very foolish punishment,” said Kit. “One would think that it would be better to know if somebody living next door to you was a mass murderer.”

“We have other punishments for those kinds of crimes, not that they happen very often.” Patrin replied, crumpling up the paper and throwing it into the trash. “We’re a peaceful people for the most part. Erasing would be a punishment for something so scandalous that it would be better if that person had never existed. Like I said, it would be hard to prove if it had ever been done, wouldn’t it? I think it’s just an old hen’s tale to scare young chicks.”

Patrin opened up Kit’s box of toys. “So Mook, take a look at these. If you can come up with toys of this level of quality I’ll think about getting you a job here. We sure could use the help.”

They opened the box and spread all the toys out across the table. There were Elvin dolls with intricately sewn outfits, little stuffed teddy bears in suits, and a marvelously carved Noah’s Ark. The largest piece was a complex kind of machine with cogwheels that interconnected to make little animals move and pop in and out of windows and

doors. It made a wonderful ticking noise as the pieces spun around, ponies, birds, and giraffes all dancing in a joyful rhythm.

“This must have taken you forever to make this,” said Clio squinting in the back to examine the complex inner mechanism.

“It was for my senior project in college. I don’t think I got a very good grade on it. The instructor said it wasn’t real art and not serious enough. I still like it though,” Kit said thoughtfully, watching a row of tiny wooden cats swayed back and forth on a little rail. “I really haven’t thought about it in years.”

Mook was everywhere, unwrapping things, looking at drawings and studying the toys. He was helping Wilber play a game of checkers against Chimka when a bell struck the hour. Fingering the frayed hem of his apron he said,

“I’m in for it now! Well, I best go back and take my medicine. Thank you so much for letting me see everything, miss. I can’t tell you what this has meant to me, more happiness than I’ve words to describe.”

He bowed quickly to Patrin and said, “Please sir, let me work for you, I’ll do whatever you need, polish the floors, mop the dishes. Please, just give me a chance, I promise I won’t disappoint you.”

Mook bobbed his head once more and darted out the door.

“Well! I hope he doesn’t get into too much trouble for being late,” Patrin looked concerned as he shook his head. “I’ve seen the Kitchen Master and I’d hate to be in his path if he were angered.” He checked his gold wristwatch then jumped up,

“Sweet spinning stars! Speaking of being late, we’d best hurry! We must get there before the Council. Kit, you’ll have a lot more credibility if you are wearing a suit like Clio’s, trust me about this, and you’ll need a scarf with your crest on it We want to look as impressive as possible, just be ready to leave in twenty minutes.”

Kit went upstairs to change. She briefly considered wearing the suit that she had brought for her interview, but decided against it, so she sat down in front of the clothes box and thought hard. She opened the lid but to her dismay the box contained a bright turquoise blue jacket without a back and only one sleeve. Kit tried to envision everything that she wanted in a jacket, the smooth navy blue cloth with plain dark buttons, the cool feel of the satin lining and the softness of the flannel inside the pockets. Holding the

picture very tightly in her mind she placed her hands on the lid and took a deep breath. This time she pulled out a dark blue jacket just as she had imagined as well as a pair of boots, a long straight skirt and white silk shirt. There was also a brimmed hat with a small silver crest on the band. Embossed on the crest ramped a tiny unicorn and a little banner with the word “Blue” engraved in it. At the bottom of the box lay an indigo velvet scarf, dark as ink, with the same crest embroidered on it.

“Where did this come from?” she thought, marveling at the intricacy and wonder of the odd clothing. “I didn’t imagine half of this.”

Kit put the suit on and checked her reflection in the mirror. “I look like I should be giving bus tours in Switzerland,” she laughed.

“Maybe someone on this Blocksbury Toy Council will be able to help us. I wonder what they’re like.” she thought, placing the scarf over her neck. “They sound...quite...quite...” Kit searched for the right word and was halfway down the stairs before she found it, “challenging.”

Chapter 9

Patrin had been part of many meetings in his life, hundreds in the last year alone. He had swept his way through most of them with the power and confidence that comes from the combination of a privileged background and the energy of youth. This meeting today, however wracked him with anxiety and doubt.

“I hope that I’m doing the right thing by bringing Kit here,” he thought as he fastened the gold buttons on his red jacket. “There’s so much at stake. She has to be the one. I did all the research; this has to work! Oh well... What did Chimka tell me? ‘He who takes no risks will eat no coconuts.’ I just hope I survive this whole thing and live to tell an interesting story to everyone back home. Think positive,” he mused, “No one has found me out so far.”

Patrin finished getting ready, slipped a stack of file card notes into his pocket, took a deep breath and went to meet the others.

Clio stood in the entrance hall with a tight grip on Wilber, whose velvet tail was wagging frantically. The stuffed dragon licked her face, knocking her glasses off her nose. They hit the hardwood floor with a bounce, popping one of the lenses out.

“Oh no! Where did they go?” Clio cried, dropping Wilber. “I can’t see without them!”

She nervously searched around on the floor. Patrin picked the pieces up and tried to get the lens to go back in. As he pressed it with his fingers the plastic frames snapped in half.

“We’re going to be late!” he asked, frantically. “Do you really need these?”

“Only to if I want to see anything,” she replied, squinting up at him.

“Oh bother!” said Patrin, slipping the glasses into his pocket and murmured to himself, “I’ll have to take my watch off.” He hesitated for a moment, then said,

“Oh, whatever! You’re bound to find out about me sooner or later.”

As he removed his gold wristwatch Clio heard a chiming mechanical voice from inside the timepiece say,

“Twen-ty-five, twen-ty-four, twen-ty-three, twen-ty two,” the tiny voice from the watch quickly counted down, “eigh-teen, sev-en-teen...”

Clio stared in disbelief, as Patrin seemed to shimmer in front of her hazy vision.

“sixteen, fifteen. Age trans-for-ma-tion com-plete.” The chiming sound ended and the watch gave a last bing as Patrin set it on the hall table.

Clio thought that Patrin had changed in some way, but she couldn’t tell exactly what; he seemed thinner and not quite as tall as he stood in front of her.

“Don’t tell anyone that I did this,” he said, placing his hands softly on her face, covering her eyes. “I’m only supposed to do mending on Saint Puffin’s Day.”

Clio felt a warm wave rush over her and saw a flash of light for a brief moment.

“Did it work?” Patrin asked, “Can you see better now? Bouncing Bunnies! You look really different without those, what do you call them, uh, glasses.” He wrinkled his nose and added, “And I mean that in a nice way.”

When the stars cleared Clio blinked and looked around the room. Everything was crisp and clear. She could see the grain on the oak wall paneling and the individual threads on the hall rug instead of a muddled blur.

“You could be like... an eye doctor!” Clio rubbed her eyes again, “That’s so cool! How did you learn how to do that?”

“Um... it’s just something that I know how to do. Mending... rather... well,” Patrin sounded very embarrassed, “runs in the family.”

Clio stared up at the high arch ceiling of the entrance hall marveling at the colorful geometric pattern painted in red, blue and gold.

“Will it wear off?” she asked after a minute. She tore her eyes away from the ceiling to find Patrin or someone that looked like a much younger Patrin gazing intently at her. She had been so overwhelmed by being able to see without glasses that she hadn’t noticed that either his red suit had grown bigger or his body had shrunk.

“I don’t think so.” Patrin shrugged and ran his hand through his shock of wheat colored hair.

“You! You’re like...” Clio said, staring at the teenage boy standing in front of her, “Like... like a kid!”

“Am not!” Patrin shot back, sounding offended, “I’m fifteen! And I have been for two months.”

“No way!” Clio replied wrinkling up her nose.

“Toymaker’s truth!” he replied, nodding earnestly. His neck stuck out of his too loose collar and his clothes covered him like a turtle shell.

“How did you do that? Get older?”

“Promise not to tell anyone?” Patrin picked up his watch off the table. “No one would take me seriously if they knew I wasn’t a grownup.”

“I promise!” Clio said with a laugh, “Who would I tell? And who’d believe me if I did!”

“It’s my watch, I made a Chronometer.” Patrin held out the shiny gold wristwatch for her to see. “I can set the dial to almost any age and it disguises whoever’s wearing it. It took me months to figure out how to make one. They’re really hard to do.”

He put it back on and as the watch counted up to twenty-five he grew taller and his face and shoulders filled out. Soon he looked as old as he had ten minutes before.

“That’s so weird!” Clio said, not knowing what to think.

“Please don’t tell anybody about it,” Patrin said, sounding worried, “I could get into a basket of trouble.”

“That you did what?” asked Kit, coming down the stairs. “Am I interrupting something?” Patrin and Clio were still standing close together.

“Uh...nothing, I just had something in my eye.” said Clio as they jumped apart. “Uh... a... um ... contact lens, and he was just fixing it.”

“Really? Are you better now?” asked Kit, a little skeptically.

“Yes!” They both answered at the same time.

“Well good. Let me know if there is anything that I can help you with,” she said, still looking at them with suspicion.

A horn honked out front and Wilber honked back.

“Excellent!” said Patrin. “Chimka’s here with the car. Do we have everything? Let’s go meet the Toy Council!” He gathered up an armful of paperwork from a little side table in the entrance hall. “I hope you’re prepared for a very long, dull day.”

Chimka drove up the circular driveway in front of the mansion in a giant windup convertible. The car was bright blue with shiny red seats and made a soft whirring noise as the big winding key in the trunk turned around. They piled in and started gliding slowly down the street.

“We could walk faster than this car drives,” Kit observed after a few minutes.

“Oh yes! I know,” replied Patrin. “But we’re not taking this drive solely for transportation. The townspeople will all be hoping to catch a glimpse of you. This car actually can go quite fast if need be but what would be the fun of that? So relax, enjoy the ride and look as if you were thinking about wonderful things.”

The car slowly wound its way down dingy, narrow streets. People stopped in their tracks to watch them as they passed. It was very quiet, neither cheers nor heckling broke the silence. Kit felt as if they were part of a funeral procession. When they passed a schoolyard the children dressed in gray uniforms stared at them from behind the metal gate. Clio waved at them but they didn’t wave back.

The car finally rolled to a stop in front of the most dismal, drab looking building that either Clio and Kit had ever seen. Walls of beige colored cinderblock bricks loomed overhead blocking out the sun. On the second story a row of small windows broke the expanse of cold concrete, but looked too dirty to let in much light. Scrawny, tired looking shrubs spaced at regimented intervals lined the front walkway. Against the building two narrow dry flowerbeds of hard packed clay contained dust covered rose bushes wilting in the morning shade.

“Welcome to the heart and soul of Blocksbury, the Council Hall. Herein lies the hopes and dreams of its citizens and our future as well,” Patrin proclaimed with a wave of his hand. “Not the most imaginative place I’ve ever worked for but I’m hoping that we can change all that in the next few weeks.”

“Abandon hope all ye who enter here,” muttered Kit to herself.

“Hmm?” asked Clio.

“Oh nothing,” she replied, “Just something from a book about somebody else on a journey.”

Patrin opened the big metal door and they stepped into the lobby. It was a great shadowy room with a wide stone stairway climbing a slate covered wall. The beige linoleum floor tiles, slick from years of wax polish, reflected the dim light like a frozen pond. Hanging above the stairs were several portraits of serious looking men that glared down on them disapprovingly. In the middle of the drafty room sat a spindly wood table and chair. An older woman in a brown uniform manned the table like border check point, stamping papers with intense determination. She looked up at them and said,

“Good afternoon, Mister Busby. And who have we here?”

“Good afternoon, Gassia,” Patrin said with forced cheerfulness. “You know Chimka. This is Miss Kit Ashlyn, Miss Clio Halina and her Friend, Wilber the Dragon.”

At the sound of his name Wilber put his head on the table and sniffed expectantly.

“I see. Toymakers.” The woman looked at them severely. “I assume that your Friend is trained.”

Clio nodded and replied, “Yeah, I guess so. He’s kind of new.”

Wilber tried to lick the stamp pad and Kit grabbed it away from his paw just in time.

“Humph.” Gassia glared at them and pulled out some paperwork from a file on her desk.

“Here are your cards, identification badges, meeting agenda, map of the building and a food voucher. Let me know if you need anything else,” she said without warmth. They took the stack of papers and headed up the bleak staircase.

After winding their way through a maze of narrow hallways they at last came to the Blocksbury Council Chambers. A large shiny conference table took up one end of the room making it hard to walk around. The beige walls were lined with shelves with square blocks evenly spaced in neat rows with the occasional rectangle block doing little to break the monotony. Dusty sunlight filtered through high shuttered windows and an overbright lighting fixture illuminated the table. The air smelled musty and vaguely like dried polish and old food. As they were sitting down the door flung open and the Blocksbury Toy Council arrived.

Chapter 10

A crowd of people in gray suits swept into the room, clutching binders to their chests and moving with purpose. They found their places behind their chairs with efficiency then looked expectantly at a tall, light-haired man who said,

"Welcome to Blocksbury Toy Council meeting number 8,437. The meeting will now begin." A large red-faced man with a bristly mustache at the head of the table rustled through a pile of papers, cleared his throat and said,

"We have some guests with us, brought to us this day all the way from the Greylands by our distinguished Toymaker, Patrin Busby. Mr. Vitus, would you please do us the honor of the introductions?" He looked over to the tall light haired man, who smiled and said,

"Why certainly, Mister Shishka. I'd be delighted." Mr. Vitus stood up and bowed slightly. "Patrin, your guests?" Patrin stood up and bowed in return.

"This is Miss Kit Ashlyn and her apprentice Clio Halina, Toymakers from the Greylands. Ladies, may I present Mr. Leyland Vitus, the Factory Master. "

"We're pleased to be here," replied Kit. Clio wondered if she was ever nervous, she looked so calm and relaxed. Patrin even looked a bit on edge, rubbing the face on his wristwatch uneasily. His red jacket was a striking contrast to all the other dull colors in the room.

"We'd love to have a chance to tour your factory sometime this week," Kit continued, " It's always interesting to see the whole process; how things are made from start to finish."

"Ah yes! Spark new ideas and all that. Excellent! I like your thinking!" Mr. Vitus beamed at them and turned to the red-faced, mustached man at the head of the table. "You see, sir, innovative ideas already! Ladies, allow me to present Burgermeister Bolshia Shishka, head of the Blocksbury Toy Council."

"We're looking forward to great things from you both." Mr. Shishka smiled benignly at them and Mr. Vitus continued his introductions.

"This is Mr. Eli Scrub, our head of Research and Development." Kit and Clio shook hands with a slender, intelligent looking man with straight black hair. Mr. Vitus

continued around the table, “Mistress Esme Poacher, director of Quality Control. She’ll make sure that your work is perfect.” Kit raised an eyebrow and shook the hand of a short older woman with curly blond hair and a thick layer of makeup. A smell of old perfume hung heavily in the air around her. Mr. Vitus pointed next to a portly giant of a young man standing near her.

“Mr. Inok Punter, our Technical Advisor. He’s forgotten more about blocks than most people will ever know.” Mr. Vitus chuckled to himself as Mr. Punter, who was both wide and tall, looked embarrassed and stuck out his hand.

“I’m pleased meet you,” Kit said politely. “I look forward to your help in block design.” The large man blinked at her and let out an uncomfortable laugh. Clio noticed that his sweaty face was pale and his thick fingers were moist when they shook hands.

“Here are our two junior members, Master Prent Galtwell, and Miss Morna Charmian.” Mr. Vitus gushed, “We’ve found it’s good to have contributions from the young. It keeps us focused. These two have been picked to be apprentices for their exceptional abilities and attention to detail. They were selected from hundreds of applicants, the best students in Blocksbury. I’m sure they will be happy to show you around, Miss Halina.”

Clio thought that they looked anything but happy to have anything to do with her. The boy was about thirteen, with thick dark hair slicked across his forehead and blue eyes that looked casually at her. The girl looked older with straight red hair pulled back into a neat bow. She shook Clio’s hand without much enthusiasm and shot a look to Prent. He rolled his eyes then they both smiled at each other making Clio feel very self-conscious. Wilber nuzzled her hand reassuringly and shot a tongue out at the two apprentices. Clio hoped that they hadn’t noticed as she shoved Wilber’s head behind her.

“And finally,” Mr. Vitus said, “may I present our oldest member, Mr. Wintar, our Senior Advisor. He has been on the Toy Council for over seventy years, which I’m pretty sure is a record here in Blocksbury.” He tapped the arm of an ancient looking man. “Mr. Wintar,” he said loudly in his ear, “This is Miss Ashlyn; she’s the new Toymaker.” The old man slowly stood up and gazed at Kit with the palest blue eyes she’d ever seen. “Is she now? The new Toymaker? What was wrong with the one that we had? That’s what I’d like to know. He seemed just fine to me. Everything always changing but never

getting any better. Still, she looks sharp enough, Can't hurt to try something different for a change. Can it now?"

Kit took his hand and replied,

"I'm not hoping to replace anyone, I just hope to learn a lot and help if I can."

They all took their seats and Mister Shishka pulled out a stack of papers and cleared his throat with a blubbery rumble.

"I'd thought it would be good to start out, for the benefit of our guests, by reviewing the history of the block making process. Here are a few handouts, pass them around, some charts and a tentative time schedule for the year's activity. As you can see this year's B series has been very successful. It compares to the great Oblong Collection in popularity. Now that takes us back...."

Mr. Shishka proceeded to lecture on the history of blocks, the theory of block design and a side lecture on wood varieties for three hours. He then pursued a tangent on the superiority of wax finishes as opposed to varnish to lengthen the life of the block and increase stability.

Wilber went to sleep, while Kit made constant notes only stopping to glance over at Patrin with a curious look on her face. Clio tried hard not to fidget and tried to take notes too, but couldn't understand half of what Mr. Shishka was saying. After a while she doodled in her notebook to try to keep from nodding off. Everyone gazed in rapt attention to their leader's words except Mr. Wintar who looked as if he might be asleep. The red haired girl, Morna, kept peeking at Patrin to see what he was doing but he took no notice of the older girl while he made notes in his embossed notebook with a sleek black fountain pen.

Just when Clio thought also she might fall asleep in her chair, she felt a tiny slip of paper slide into her lap. She carefully unfolded it under the table to read it. One word was written in ink, "Persevere" and signed PB with a little bee icon. She glanced up at Patrin, who seemed to be hanging on every word of the Burgermeister's lecture. She tucked the note in her jacket pocket and tried to pay attention.

Finally, after another hour of lectures that explained in great detail each and every award that Blocksbury had ever been given, a soft tap came at the council room door. A rush of people pushed in with rolling carts and started to quickly spread out all kinds of

things to eat and drink on a side table. Clio caught the eye of Mook and he winked at her. She also saw his friend, Augwun, looking nervous as he placed silverware on a rack with intense speed. Watching over the activity was a huge bald man, well over six feet tall. He stood with his thick arms crossed over his chief's jacket observing every movement of the kitchen staff.

"That must be the Kitchen Master that Patrin was talking about," thought Kit. "He does look like someone to stay away from."

A young woman with a long dark braid down her back struggled to carry a heavy silver tray filled with fruit. Kit watched the Kitchen Master's eyes narrow as the girl stumbled a bit and almost dropped it. Augwun's hands shot out and smoothly swept the loaded tray onto the table. The servant girl smiled gratefully and they continued their work. Within minutes an extravagant banquet was laid out, gleaming crystal, polished silver and glowing candles covered the table and the kitchen servants were gone as quickly as they came.

The Burgermeister continued to lecture for another ten minutes as delicious smells filled the air. When he paused in his speech for a moment to take a drink from his water glass Mr. Vitus leapt right in.

"Excellent information, Boss. Superb! You've given us so much to think about."

Mr. Shishka looked a little confused for a moment and then beamed back happily.

"Well then, I'm glad to be of service. My! Look at the time! Shall we continue our meeting tomorrow? Mr. Vitus?"

Blocksbury Toy Council meeting number 8437 is now concluded. We will convene again in the morning. Let's have a little something to sustain us, shall we?" Mr. Vitus stood up from his chair. "Mr. Busby, could you say the Words over the food? Must observe traditional Toymaker protocol and all that."

"I hate this part," Patrin whispered to Clio. "I can never do it as well as... as..." He put his hand over his mouth and thought hard. "Huh! Lost it. Oh well, it will come to me later." Everyone in the room stood up and looked expectantly at Patrin.

"I'd like to welcome everyone here tonight," he said cheerfully, "at least I think it's night time since I haven't looked outside in a while. But my stomach tells me it's time to eat. So, let's enjoy this good food and each other's company. And we're really

glad to have both.” Patrin stood with his palms facing each other about shoulder height and closed his eyes. He clapped his hands together and a flash of light flew up from his fingers illuminating the room for a brief moment. The Council nodded their approval and crowded toward the buffet table.

“Bouncing Bunnies! I’m glad that worked,” Patrin whispered to Clio. “I’m never really sure exactly what’s going to come out. I used to know someone that was really good at it.” He shook his head as if to dislodge a thought, “Although I can’t remember exactly who it was. All Toymaker’s are asked to say the Words before food from time to time. I’ll have to show you how to do it. It’s not hard, not hard at all, once you get the hang of it. Just like animating a toy or flying an airplane, you never really forget how. Are you ready to eat? You must be famished. I know I’m ready for a little portion of something or other.”

Clio put together a plate of food for herself and Wilber who became very excited at the prospect of eating. When she got back to the table, she found Prent and Morna leafing through her sketchbook.

“So Miss Ashlyn is your teacher?” Morna the red haired girl asked with an unpleasant smile.

“Yeah, she teaches at my school,” Clio replied, not feeling too comfortable with strangers looking at her drawings.

“Well, she can’t be very good,” said Prent, grinning at Morna.

“Yes, these drawings are quite amateurish, I can’t believe that you haven’t burned them,” giggled Morna. “We have children in Kinder that can draw better than this.” She handed the sketchbook back with two fingers as if it were covered with germs.

“You’d better take your work a lot more seriously if you think you are going to get any respect from the Council,” the older girl said with a smirk. “Just a bit of advice, unless of course, you like being an amateur.” Prent and Morna laughed together and turned back to the food table.

Clio stood for a minute with only the pounding of her heartbeat and the feeling of air going in and out of her lungs to keep her company. Then she felt the salt tears burning in her eyes and the sound of a little voice in her head saying, “Don’t let them see you cry.

You can't let them see you cry. Don't let them get to you." In a hot fog she picked up the offending notebook and slipped quietly out the door.

Clio wandered blindly down one musty corridor after another. At the bottom of a narrow stairwell she found an exit door that lead outside to a back step. After crying silently to herself until the tears wouldn't come anymore she sat with her head on her knees. The night air felt good on her hot face as she tried to sort through her thoughts. When she fished around in her pocket for a tissue Patrin's little note fell out on the stone step and she read it again in the dim light of the porch lamp. "Persevere."

"I wish I could," Clio thought miserably, "but I'm nothing. I'm not brave or talented or anything." She grabbed her sketchbook and threw it high into the starlit sky. The book fluttered through the air like a wounded bird before landing on a pile of trash stacked neatly by a fence.

"That's where my stuff belongs, in the garbage," she whispered to herself.

From around a corner she heard a merry whistle and Mook appeared hauling a large bucket of scraps for the dustbin.

"Miss Clio! This is a surprise! And what would you be doing here of all places?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied, hoping that her voice wouldn't sound weepy.

"How did the Toy Council treat you? Well, I hope. Hey now, what's this, tears? Did they get to you, those pompous windbags? They're so full of themselves." Mook wiped off her face with a towel he had tucked in his apron strings.

"Mr. Shishka does like to talk," said Clio managing the smallest of smiles. "But I didn't understand half of what he was saying."

"I don't think anyone does, but why the tears, my young friend?" asked Mook, sitting on the step next to her. He wore a pair of dirty oven mitts around his neck on a string that reminded Clio of the three little kittens that lost their mittens.

"No, it's, it's just that I'm so stupid," she blurted out. "I mean, I can't believe I was so stupid to bring my drawing book to the meeting. I can't believe I even thought that I was any good at all, because I'm not! I can't draw and Miss Ashlyn is so the best teacher, I mean she's like the best teacher *ever!*" Clio's words came out in a rush. "And I'm never ever going to draw anything ever again because no matter how hard I try I'm

never going to be any good! And Miss Ashlyn should have a better student than me, somebody serious, not an, an, an ama, ama...shure.”

“Miss, wait, slow down for a minute, “ Mook said, waving his hands at Clio’s outburst. “Do you mean amateur? If you do, then there is no shame in that. An amateur is one who does something for the love of it, not for the money. You draw because it gives you pleasure, and even though the lines on the paper don’t match the picture in your head, that’s all right, it takes lots of practice to be able to make your hand draw what your mind is seeing. Don’t worry that it’s not perfect, whatever that means, just keep doing what you love to do.”

“But he said that Miss Ashlyn couldn’t be very good because my drawings were so awful! And the girl said that I should burn them all and she’s right. ” Clio felt her eyes getting hot and tearful again.

“Now who would say all that nonsense?”

“The kid in the meeting and the red haired girl.”

“You mean Prent Galtwell and Morna Charmian? Those two little toads?” Mook laughed. “They must’ve really been very rattled by you, Miss Clio. Normally, they won’t even speak to people their own age. If they were half of all they pretended to be they’d be part of the Royal Family. They’re probably so jealous of your dragon that you’re lucky they didn’t try to scratch your eyes out. Speaking of which, where is your little Friend?”

“Wilber? I guess he’s back in the meeting room,” replied Clio, looking a tiny bit cheered.

“Well, you better go back and see to him. Who knows what he will get into without you?” Mook stood up, suddenly wary.

“Mook! Mook!” an anxious voice came through the darkness. “Mook, where are you?”

“It looks like my keeper has found me. Augie! Over here!” Mook stepped out in the light to meet Augwun carrying another load of garbage for the dustbin.

“Where have you been?” the gaunt man hissed with desperate worry. “ If Kulak catches you lazing about again, I’ll not be able to stop him. Don’t give him any reason to be angrier than he already is.”

“I’m sorry, Augie. I know you’ve already covered for me once today. It’s just that I...”

“Please, Mr. Augwun,” whispered Clio, “It’s my fault. He was talking to me. Please, don’t let him get in trouble.”

“That’s what we’re trying to avoid. Here take these.” Augwun pushed the buckets at Mook. “Tell Kulak that one of the Council members wandered off and asked for directions. That’ll explain a good amount of time right there. I’ll take care of the young miss. Keep your eyes open and your head down. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Mook emptied the buckets and sped back toward the kitchen. Augwun grabbed Clio’s wrist and practically hauled her up the stairs.

“We must hurry!” he said gruffly, “You’ve no idea how much trouble Mook is in!” Clio ran down the shadowy hallway to keep up with his long strides.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Augwun,” she gasped between breaths, “I didn’t mean to gunk everything up.” Augwun glanced down at Clio’s teary face and slowed his pace a little.

“Of course you didn’t. It isn’t your fault that you’re here.” He let go of her wrist and added, “And by the way, miss, I’m not ‘Mister’ anybody. I’ve no title. ‘Mister’ is reserved for important people like Council Members.”

“You’re important to Mook,” observed Clio still trotting along beside him. “He’s your friend and you look out for him,”

“Ah.” Augwun let out a tired sigh. “That may be. If I can protect him from his own foolishness then I may be more important than I realize.” He stopped and knelt down beside Clio. As he straightened the long green Toymaker’s scarf that was slipping off her shoulders his harsh face softened just for a moment.

“You must try and help him do his job as well,” he told her. “Don’t let him spend time playing when he should be working. If he loses this job he could get sent back to the Factory or even to the Mines, which would be much worse. Could you help him be more responsible, please?”

“I’ll try,” said Clio nodding.

“And watch out for yourself too, miss. I don’t have time to take care of two Toymakers.” The corner of Augwun’s mouth twitched up in a ghost of a smile and he stood up to leave. “Around this corner, down the hall and through the double doors,

you'll see the Council Room from there. Now on your way." He was gone before Clio could say thank you or good-bye. She turned the corner to find Kit walking toward her carrying a distraught Wilber who was wailing and thrashing his tail.

"Clio Halina! Where have you been? We have to get out of here!"

Chapter 11

“I am sorry. I... I went for a walk,” explained Clio clutching Wilber as he licked her face.

“Went for a walk, in a strange building at night? Clio! I hope that next time you show a little more sense. This is a bizarre place and there is something very strange going on here. I get the feeling that we are not being told something.” Kit glanced up the dark hallway. “When we get back to Quad Hall I want to have a little talk with our benevolent kidnapper, Patrin.”

“Did I hear someone mention my name?” Patrin ran up, his tie pulled loose and his face flushed from running. “Miss Halina, I’m so glad that you’ve been found. We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Did you get lost?”

“Um, Yes. I went for a walk and got lost.” Clio hoped that her tears had dried up and no one could tell that she had been crying.

“If you take your Friend with you then you will always know where you are. Wilber will be able to get you back to anywhere you like. He has an excellent sense of direction. Shall we go home now?”

Clio felt a wave of loneliness break over her.

“My home isn’t here,” she said softly. She thought of the empty apartment at home and wondered if her parents missed her at all as they hiked through the jungles of the Yucatan. She hugged Wilber and he gave out a soft honk.

“I am so, so sorry. I didn’t think when I brought you here.” Patrin gave her hand a squeeze. “Please forgive me. I promise to get you back to the Greylands just as soon as I can.”

“I’m sure we will all feel a lot better after a good night’s sleep,” said Kit starting them back to the Council room to collect their things. Clio noticed gratefully that the two younger Council members had left for the evening. The Burgermeister was leaning over a schedule with Mr. Vitus and the Quality Control woman. They glanced up when the door opened, nodded and went on with their discussion. Mr. Punter and Mr. Scrub were

looking over a pile of specification sheets and talking quietly. They immediately came over to talk to Clio.

“We couldn’t help but notice your dragon and were wondering if you could tell us something about his construction?” The massive Mr. Punter took out a little ruler in his sausage like fingers and held it up to Wilber’s nose.

“I don’t know.” Clio wasn’t sure what to say. “I sewed him out of an old velveteen dress and used socks for stuffing.” Mr. Scrub meticulously wrote down her every word.

“Make a note to investigate the use of recycled materials. Exactly how did you animate him?” he asked. Clio looked at him blankly.

“I really don’t know. He was like this when I woke up this morning.” Wilber tried to eat the ruler and jumped around as Mr. Punter kept trying to measure him.

“Perhaps, if you have time this week,” he said pulling on the ruler, “you could make another one, or show us your process. This is really amazing! He is more developed for a newborn than anything we have ever seen.”

“You know,” said Mr. Scrub quietly, “I once had a Friend too. I made her myself. She was a Lemur. She went to sleep one day and never reanimated. Helped me get this job though. I was hoping that you could help me wake her up.”

“Gee, I’m really not an expert or anything. It just happened. Maybe you need to talk to her more.”

“It’s time to go.” Kit was standing by the door, waiting with Patrin. Clio gathered her things together and walked without speaking down the big staircase to the front hall; their footsteps the only sound in the vast emptiness. The lights had been dimmed and the lone reception table was cleared of papers.

Patrin appeared exhausted as he opened the door to their car. Kit looked curiously at him in the moonlight. She got into the backseat and stared thoughtfully into the night sky. Patrin drove much faster than he had that morning. They sped through the deserted streets and arrived in front of Quad Hall in only a few minutes.

“Could you come in for a minute?” Kit had an edge in her voice, the kind teachers use that make students listen. “I know it’s late and we’re all very tired but there is

something that I need to speak to you about.” Patrin looked apprehensive as he climbed out of the car.

Once inside they made their way to the workroom and settled into the sitting area near the warmth of the fireplace. They found Chimka waiting for them with steaming mugs of cocoa for everyone. Wilber busied himself by pulling plates of tea sandwiches and cookies out of the food box. Kit sat on the edge on her chair and opened her notebook.

“Patrin, I don’t think that you’ve been quite honest with us about why we are here. I’m sure you may have a good explanation as to why you brought us here to Blocksbury, but after today’s meeting I know that it is not because the Council wants to give your Queen blocks for her birthday.”

Patrin looked nervous.

“It isn’t?”

“No, it’s not. According to Mister Shishka, this town has been exporting blocks and nothing but blocks for hundreds of years. Why should your Queen Iren or anyone else expect anything different? I’d think that if Blocksbury actually sent other toys it would be very unsettling. So I was hoping that you could tell us the real reason why you brought us here.”

“I can’t tell you.” Patrin sat with his hands clasped between his knees and hung his head. His voice was hardly a whisper, “If I did you’d think that I was mad.”

“ Please, try. We’ve seen a lot of strange things since we met you. I think that you’ll find us willing to listen.”

Patrin looked up at them both and then stared into the glowing coals of the fire.

“ I, we, that is, my family and I are trying to find someone who has been erased. We’re not sure exactly who it is that we are seeking. We just know that we have lost someone and we need to find him soon. It’s been a long journey up to this point so I’ll tell you what I know and afterwards throw myself on your good graces.” He took a deep breath and continued,

“Three years ago I started having dreams. Sometimes they were strange and terrible. Other times they seemed ordinary and mundane. The odd bit was that other people in my family, my sister and brother, my parents, even some of our friends started

having similar dreams. We all had visions of a man, a Toymaker, of skill and power such as has not been seen in many generations. The dreams would sometimes fade in the daylight, as dreams often do, but more often than not they would remain vivid and real. It became hard to separate memories from fantasy. My mother started to write down these recollections in a little book. At first it was just a game, a toy to explain away the confusion that we all felt. Then we started investigating unexplained inventions, toys, odd and glorious drawings all with the same Griffin mark. The Fish Car in which we traveled, we believe that is a creation of this Toymaker, because we can't find any historical record of its invention. As we pieced the puzzle together we realized that the things we were experiencing were not merely dreams, but memories that had been stolen from us.

We don't know his name. We haven't been able to locate a photo or find a written record of him. We don't know what he looks like. We only know that we all feel this horrible sense of loss and sadness. I, unlike the others, also feel terribly guilty. I know that somehow I'm responsible for his disappearance. I can't for the life of me remember what it was that I did but I just know that it was my fault... my fault." Patrin buried his face in his hands, noticeably shaking. After a long silence he took another deep breath and continued, "We've followed countless leads in the last two years. Sometimes we thought that we were close, only to find a dead end. We'd almost lost hope until about a year ago when we uncovered two things. The first was a report of some strange activities here in Blocksbury. I think a friend of my father disappeared down here a year ago. We'd heard rumors that people have been vanishing from time to time from this area. It may be nothing, but I've been following up on it. The second was a collection of photographs of you, Kit. We found them hidden in a book in the Royal Workshop Library with a pile of news clippings about various art shows that your work had been in. It was a long shot but I decided to bring you here.

I traveled to the Greylands and went to work for Busby Enterprises. Toys draw out Toymakers wherever they may be. So I hoped that if this missing person had somehow made his way to the Greylands he would be attracted to innovative ideas and show himself. It also made a perfect cover for getting in touch with you."

Kit thought hard for a moment, sorting through all this new information.

"How old are you really?" she asked suddenly.

“Um, I turned fifteen two months ago.”

“Fifteen? You seem older than that, but I’m beginning to suspect that that is some sort of trick. Isn’t it?”

“How did you guess? It’s this Chronometer I invented.” Patrin brightened up for a moment. “It’s a wristwatch and a perception enhancer. You can program it to make you seem older, or younger for that matter. I’ve set it to twenty something. It helps me deal with the Council Members. It doesn’t work with some people, I’m very impressed that you saw through it so quickly.” He took off his watch and sat back in the chair. Kit couldn’t believe the transformation. He looked the same, same blond hair flopping over his blue eyes, same smile. It was just that he looked like a teenager, not an adult. He quickly put the watch back on and looked around.

“Please don’t tell anyone. It would destroy my credibility, not to mention my driver’s license.”

Kit stared at him in frustration.

“Let me get this straight... We’ve been kidnapped by a fifteen-year-old boy, lied to and hauled off to a strange place where people have been disappearing? I still can’t believe I had to sit through a four-hour meeting on the history of building blocks! Do your parents know about this?” Clio could hear the anger rising in Kit’s voice and Wilber hid under the table. Kit paused for a moment. “No, they don’t know, do they? Your parents have no idea where you are. They must be worried sick! What were you thinking? Well there is nothing that we can do about it tonight. I suggest that we all get some sleep and we can straighten this out in the morning”

Patrin was about to open his mouth in protest when they heard a knock at the door.

Chapter 12

Kit went to the door and peered through the cut glass side window. She cautiously asked, "Can I help you?"

"Please, miss, let us in. He's injured," a voice said. Kit flung the door open and a troubled Augwun half-carried Mook into the entry hall.

"What happened?" Kit asked, aghast at the change in Mook's appearance. His left eye was swollen shut and he was holding his right arm against his body. He was trembling from cold or pain, she couldn't tell which, and his breathing was labored and heavy.

"Kulak went berserk while we were finishing the washing up," Augwun replied, "I've seen him bully workers many times but he's never gone this far before. His anger has been building all day." He glared at Patrin. "You never should have let Mook in here this morning! You, of all people, should have known better. These Greylanders couldn't have known, but you must have foreseen this. You have to help him now! Use your influence to protect him. The Kitchen Master could be here any moment with the authorities. He'll say that we were fighting, drinking, anything to throw the blame away from himself. He's done it before. Please, you must help us."

"Yes, course." Patrin sprang into action. "There's a storage room off of the kitchen. We can lock you in if we have too. Come with me. Kit, stay here and watch for visitors. Stall for time if you can." They carried the half-conscious Mook out of the room.

Kit looked out the window again and turned to Clio. "We may only have a few minutes. Clio and Wilber, hide Patrin's dishes. If anyone shows up say as little as possible. Chimka, you go see if you can help them with anything. I have a feeling they will need it." The nimble monkey grabbed a metal box off of one of the shelves and hurried back toward the kitchen. The minutes ticked by and quiet settled over the room. After a while Wilber curled up on the hearth by the fire and went to sleep. The clock struck eleven and a little line of wooden cats in nightshirts, carrying candlesticks whirled out the front and back again. Clio yawned and shook her head to stay awake. Kit picked up Wilber and scratched him idly behind the ears. He made a wheezing sound that was not unlike purring.

“You go and get some sleep. I’ll let you know if anything happens down here.”

“Is he going to get better?” Clio asked as she started up the stairs.

“I’m sure he will. He just needs some rest, as do you.” Kit hoped her voice sounded more certain than she felt. “Here, take your little Wonderdragon with you. He certainly is an amazing creation. You can be proud of him.” Kit placed the sleeping Wilber in her arms and watched as Clio carried him up to the landing.

“Sweet dreams, you two,” she said softly and headed down the hallway to the kitchen.

They had put together a makeshift bed in the storeroom by covering the long worktable with layers of blankets. Mook half rested in a feverish sleep. Augwun stood at the stove in the kitchen brewing an herbal remedy in a big black pot while Patrin held a compress over Mook’s swollen eye.

“He has internal injuries, cracked ribs, his eye is damaged pretty severely. I’m not sure if his arm is broken or not.” Patrin laid the back of his hand against Mook’s ashen cheek. “He is starting to run a fever.”

“Can’t we get him to a hospital? Why haven’t you called a doctor?” Kit asked.

“The doctors for workers here in Blocksbury are little better than butchers,” replied Augwun bringing the steaming mixture into the storeroom. “It’d be signing his death papers.”

He dipped one of the bandages in the herbs and started wrapping Mook’s swollen arm.

“There are Menders in Saint Ives, good ones, if we only had a way to get him there,” Patrin offered.

“Could you heal him?” asked Kit suddenly. “You somehow fixed Clio’s eyesight. I saw you this morning. Could you do the same for Mook?”

“You, you saw that?” Patrin stammered.

Augwun looked at him curiously. Kit noticed his green eyes spark behind the greasy hair that fell across his face, first in wonderment then in anger. He said in a raw voice,

“The famous Arkus Patrin Orion. I thought that you smelled almost familiar. A Mender masquerading as a Toymaker. Your disguise is very complete. How did you do it?”

His eyes lit on the wristwatch and he grabbed Patrin’s wrist for a moment to study it. “A Chronometer? Nice work. Does your family know you are out on holiday? What will the Council say when they find out?” Augwun shook his head in disgust.

“No! Please! You mustn’t tell. I need more time!” Patrin looked at him wildly as if he had been struck.

“I don’t know what you both are talking about,” snapped Kit. “But you!” She glared up at Augwun. “Leave him alone! Why should you care who he is? What has he ever done to you? And you,” she said turning back to Patrin, “if you can help Mook now might be a good time to start thinking about it.”

He nodded back, all the color drained from his face.

“I’d rather be alone with him for a moment, if that’s all right.”

“Let us know if you need anything.” Kit ushered Augwun out of the storeroom to wait in the kitchen. She leaned back against the cool stone of the sink counter, suddenly exhausted. Augwun stood with his arms wrapped around his ribs, rocking back and forth, staring at the closed door.

“You’re worried about him, aren’t you?” she told him. “And you blame yourself for not being able to protect him.”

“Why should I worry about a Mender?” he replied, not taking his eyes off the door. “This is his calling, what he was born to do, not pretending to be a Toymaker stirring up trouble.”

“I was talking about Mook, not Patrin.”

Kit watched as the haggard man collected his thoughts. There was a long silence and then he spoke,

“I could see it all gathering like storm clouds on the dark sea. Usually I can keep Mook out of harm’s way, but tonight Kulak locked me in the icebox. More often than not, he’s not hard to distract when he starts throwing things, but this time was somehow different. It was if some other force possessed him. By the time I broke out, the Kitchen Master was gone and Mook was lying on the floor. I thought that he was dead.”

“I haven’t known Patrin very long but so far he’s managed to surprise me more than once. Let’s hope for the best.” She glanced over to see Augwun put his hand to his forehead.

“Hey now, what’s this?” Kit impulsively reached up and pushed a stringy lock of hair away from his face to reveal a long cut across his temple. “This must hurt.”

Augwun’s eyes widened with such a look of animal fear that she immediately pulled her hand away.

“It’s nothing,” he muttered.

“Then it will be nothing to get it cleaned up,” replied Kit. “Here, sit down. How do you expect to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders if you get a nasty infection?”

Augwun sat stoically in the chair as she washed away the clotted blood and cleaned the wound.

“What hit you?”

“I think it was a ladle. I’m usually better at dodging things,” he said as she blotted the cut dry.

“What color would you like, green or orange?” she asked, holding up two medicine bottles. “I can’t read the labels.”

“The green one, miss. The orange one is cough syrup.”

“There, all done. That wasn’t so...,” Kit was interrupted by a sharp cry of pain coming from the storeroom. They rushed inside to find Patrin curled up on the floor shaking, with Chimka chattering wildly beside him.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” stammered Patrin. “Just give me a minute to catch my breath. Ow! That was really something!” He laughed and sat up on his knees. “Did it work?”

He pulled himself up and grabbed the edge of the table to keep from toppling over again. The swelling around Mook’s eye was gone and he had fallen into a deep sleep. Augwun put his hand on Mook’s forehead and said that his fever was gone.

“What happened?” Kit led Patrin over to a chair. “You look like you’ve just run a marathon.”

His face was flushed and his eyes were sparkling.

“Just give me a moment, I need to catch my breath. His injuries were worse than I realized. He had a fractured wrist and some ligament damage I think in one leg. It surprised me. This is the first time I’ve tried anything this complicated before. Usually my Mum takes care of injuries of this nature. She’s much better at it than I am.” He stretched his shoulder a bit and felt his ribs.

“All there! See! No worries!” Patrin slumped back in his chair looking extremely pleased with himself.

“How do you do that? How did you heal him?” Kit was astonished.

“ My family are Menders. It’s a gift. I guess it pulls the pain out and through your body, sort of like a transfusion. If you know what you’re doing then it doesn’t hurt so bad; I’m not very experienced.”

He looked over to where Mook lay. “There are plenty of extra rooms on this floor. In a minute we can move him to a bed. He should be ship shape by morning. Good as new! This is odd...” Patrin tilted his head to hear a soft chiming sound. “Someone is ringing the bell. It’s rather late for visitors, one would think.”

For the second time that night Kit went to answer the door.

Chapter 13

Kit cracked the door open a sliver to find Mister Vitus, the Factory Master, standing on the terrace, an anxious grin forced across his colorless face.

“I apologize a hundred times over for the intrusion. I know that it’s horribly late, but I wanted to check and make sure you were safe,” he said, his overloud voice echoing in the night air, “Two workers were seen drinking and causing trouble. I was worried that they might be bothering you.

“Thank you so much for your concern but we’re fine,” Kit answered cautiously.

Vitus glanced around nervously and took a step toward the door. “May I come in?”

“It’s rather late.”

“Please, it will only take a minute,” he whispered as he leaned in toward her. “You’re in danger. I can’t explain but please be careful. Don’t trust anyone. You’re being watched.” The Factory Master glanced around and said in a regular tone. “Again I apologize for the extreme lateness of the call but you know how workers can get out of hand. We’ve had problems before with this type of riffraff.”

“I’ll be sure and let you know if we need any help,” Kit said politely. “Now, good night. It’s been a long day.”

“Yes it has!” the voice of Patrin pitched in brightly. “Vitus, what a pleasant surprise! So glad you stopped by! Would you be so kind as to escort these two workers to the Bunks? We’ve just finished interviewing them; we need more staff around here and these two are prime candidates. Please, take my car. Chimka can drive. Here’re the keys. There’s a good fellow!” He pumped Mister Vitus’ hand enthusiastically and chattered on as he presented Mook and Augwun for his approval, “See that they get through the gates without any problem. I’ll negotiate the purchasing of their contracts with the Warden in the morning. Don’t let anything happen to them!”

Kit was astonished to see them both on their feet looking tired but unscathed. Patrin escorted them out, thanked the Factory Master a few more times and closed the door.

“That was close! A few more minutes and we’d all be sent to the Sugar Mines!”

“Don’t say that, even in jest!” said Augwun in a stern voice. Kit turned, amazed to see him standing behind her. She looked to Patrin for explanation.

“Doppeldolls! I love those things!” he explained with a grin. “We couldn’t risk moving Mook, so I copied them. I’ll retrieve and deactivate the dolls tomorrow. Do you mind if I spend the night here? Chimka won’t be back with my car for a while and frankly I’m quite drained. I also need to keep an eye on these workers,” he said in a passable imitation of Vitus’ voice, “You never can tell what kind of trouble they can get into.”

The clock struck midnight and a row of carved mice sleeping in twelve little wooden beds twirled out of the clock front and back again.

“Do you need anything?” she asked Augwun, “Some tea or something to eat?” He shook his head and looked down at his greasy kitchen uniform.

“Soap and water would be welcome, and some clean clothes if you have them.”

“Of course, of course!” Patrin said, “We’ll have you washed up in no time.”

“Patrin will help you get settled,” Kit told him. “I’m sorry that we got your friend in trouble. Let’s hope we can straighten things out in the morning.”

“Yes, miss, thank you.” Augwun looked sincerely relieved and followed Patrin down the hall. Kit bolted the front door and started turning off the lights.

Later as she got ready for bed, Kit glanced out her window to the garden below. At the very edge, behind a shadowy clump of bushes, she saw two figures dressed as clowns. They stared motionless at the house, so very still that at first Kit thought they might be statues. The tall one looked like the clown they had met in the park the night before. His frizzy blue hair stuck out on each side like horns. He wore a tiny top hat, ruffled collar and striped oversized suit. His white face was frozen in a perpetual, leering grin. The smaller clown’s doll-like features were topped with a shock of curly white hair waving like smoke above her high forehead. Blue circles painted around her eyes and pug nose gave her a skeletal appearance that contrasted grotesquely with the red circles on her cheeks.

Kit pulled away from the window paralyzed with fear. When she finally got the courage to look outside again, the figures had vanished.

“Don’t let this place get to you,” she told herself. “Get a hold of yourself. I must be more tired than I thought. Deep breath.” After checking the lock on her door she crawled into the bed and tried in her tired mind to sort through the events of the day. But soon fatigued overtook her and before she knew it, it was morning.

Patrin had been up since dawn, to make a trip to the Bunks where the most unskilled of the workers were housed. When he had been on an official tour a few months before the compound had seemed clean and efficiently run. This morning he was disturbed to find it a squalid, confined place, little better than a prison. Hundreds of workers and their families huddled in long row houses struggling to stay alive. There was a group of sickly looking children playing on the hard packed earth kicking a bundle of old rags around. Patrin had never been exposed to such misery and it angered him. After finding the Doppeldolls of Mook and Augwun, he quickly negotiated their release with the Bunk Warden, gathered their scanty possessions and was back by seven.

When Kit came down the stairs she found him waiting for her, fidgeting anxiously.

“Miss Ashlyn, might I have a word in private?”

“Of course, there’re a few things I’d like to discuss with you too.” Kit pulled a steaming mug of coffee from the food box and they made their way outside to the veranda.

“I know that you probably have a hundred questions,” Patrin said, “so I thought that I’d make a clean start of it this morning and try to clear things up.”

Kit nodded and he continued, “First of all, my real name is Arkus Patrin Orion, and Augwun was right, I am famous. My family is famous, my parents are famous, and their parents are famous. If I left the house without my Chronometer I’d be mobbed in minutes. That’s why it’s so very important that this whole thing be kept private. It’d ruin everything if I were found out. So I had a little chat with Augwun this morning and he’s agreed to keep quiet in exchange for my buying out their contracts.”

Patrin pulled a silver yoyo with a tangled string out of his pocket and nervously picked at the knots as he talked. “I also told him that I would find Mook an apprenticeship somewhere. I think I’ve enough influence in the Royal City to secure him

one. They'll stay on and help us for a few weeks to avoid arousing suspicion, then be free to go. The other thing that I've asked them to keep quiet is about my being a Healer. If the word got out that I was here in town I would have requests morning, noon and night to fix skinned knees, cure colds, and mend paper cuts. I'd never get anything done."

"So your gift is a bit of a burden," observed Kit.

"Yes, and no. It's a gift I was born with, like being tall or having big feet, nothing that I've earned. I hope that I learn to use it well." Patrin finished untangling the yoyo string and started winding it. "But for now I need to concentrate for the task at hand. We must find the missing Toymaker. I know we're very close. If we make this Toy Tree and you present it at the Queen's Birthday he'll have to come out and show himself."

"Why would this person that I've never met have a collection of pictures about me?"

"Possibly professional curiosity. It could be someone that you met long ago in the Greylands. Think hard. Did you ever meet anyone unusual in one of your classes, at an art opening, on a trip perhaps?" Patrin asked. "I'm hoping that because you're a Greylander that you will be immune to the effects of the erasure and be able to remember something, anything about him."

"I haven't a clue, but I'll give it some thought. Do you have any other information at all?" Kit asked, cradling her cup of coffee in her hands.

"He may have a Friend who is a Griffin. We guessed that from a series of Griffin motifs that were carved into an enormous amount of unattributed work. We're guessing that he's at least in his thirties, it's hard to tell exactly, based on the dates of the pictures of you that we found. He'll be extremely creative."

"Why do you think that?"

"I hope you'll get a chance to see some of the inventions we've uncovered. We've found thousands upon thousands of toys and drawings, which defy description. Whoever kidnapped this Toymaker was able to erase every photo and memory of him but not his work."

"You mentioned that a friend of your father disappeared down here. Who was he? Do you know anything about him?"

“I overheard my dad saying that he sent someone here to investigate the odd rumors about Blocksbury. I’m not sure who it was. They must have wanted to keep it undercover or some such thing.” Patrin stared out across the beautifully manicured garden as two white butterflies worked their way through the morning sun.

“Which leads us to an important question,” Kit said gently. “Your folks don’t know that you’re here, do they?”

“Um, no,” Patrin dipped his head, “They think I’m in the Greylands. I’d send them a message if I could, but this place is very remote. It’s four hours by car to the nearest town and two days by train to Saint Ives. I don’t trust the mail here. There’s too big a risk of being found out.”

“And so your parents are worried sick about you, with no idea where you are?” Kit chose her words carefully, “Is this person that you are trying to find really that important?”

“Yes, I think so. I know I took a chance by borrowing the Fish Car and bringing you here. I acted impulsively and I’m truly sorry. But if you could see my parents and how sad they are, the whole kingdom is out of balance... maybe you would understand better.” He looked so forlorn that Kit patted his arm and said,

“Let’s give it a few days and see if anybody turns up. But I’d like to get word to your parents as soon as possible. Last night Mister Vitus said something about us being watched and not to trust anyone. And there’s something else,” Kit lowered her voice, “this is going to seem silly but have you seen any clowns around here?”

“No, why?”

“It’s probably nothing but last night I saw two clowns standing across the lawn staring at the house. It was the creepiest thing... and we met another one in the park the other night. I’m not a big fan of clowns on the best of days but after seeing them at midnight with Mr. Vitus’ warning and all, well, it was very unnerving.”

“I haven’t heard of a circus coming to the area.” Patrin shook his head, tucking the yoyo back into his pocket as he stood up to go.

“One more thing,” Kit asked, “why does Augwun dislike you so? He seems to have a deep resentment of you. I thought for a minute there last night he was going to smack you. What reason could he have to be so angry at you?”

“It could be that he blames the Council for the sorry state of affairs here in Blocksbury.”

Patrin proceeded to tell Kit about the poverty that he had seen that morning in the Bunks.

“Perhaps there is something we can do about that.” Kit replied. “In the meantime, watch your back. There’s a lot going on here that I don’t understand.” She finished her coffee. “I’m going to check on our patient.”

Kit found Mook resting quite comfortably in a mountain of feather pillows and a sea of coverlets. He was happily engaged in a board game with Chimka that involved running little chickens through a maze. A pitcher of fresh juice and a plate of half eaten breakfast muffins crowded the nightstand.

“I woke up this morning and thought that I was in Paradise. Now I’m sure of it! Seeing your sweet face, miss, has made this day complete.” The young man flashed a bright smile at her and she found it hard to believe that he had been so close to death just the night before.

“How are you feeling this morning?” she asked.

“Don’t tell anyone, but I’m in perfect health.” Mook leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’m afraid if anyone finds out then I’ll have to go back to the kitchen.”

“Well, there is no danger of that happening. Patrin’s made arrangements for you and Augwun to come here to work, to help with the Toymaking, that is if you like.”

“If I like?” Mook blinked several times and let the thought settle into his head. “If I like? By the Box of Saint Jacks!” A look of heavenly bliss covered his face as he pondered his good fortune.

Wilber wandered in and clambered up on the bed. He looked at Kit and made a series of honking noises.

“He says that one of the Council members is here to see you,” explained Mook.

“You can understand what he’s saying?” Kit asked.

“Well, yes. His accent’s a little thick but for the most part, yes.”

“Could you teach me how to speak, um, ...Wilberese?” asked Kit, searching for the right word.

“He speaks ‘Dragonfriend’. It’s easy enough once you know the basic grammar. Now, Ocelot for example, there’s a language fraught with complications. Most Friend languages are very similar though. You’ll pick it up right quick, miss.”

“We’ll have to start soon then, but for now you need rest. You’ll excuse me?” Kit left the room and Mook sank back into the wall of pillows.

“Now there’s true beauty for you, Chimka my friend.” The little red monkey nodded slowly and chattered a bit.

“What’s that? Her ears aren't much to look at? I honestly hadn’t noticed.”

Chapter 14

Eli Scrub stood in the entry hall holding a pasteboard box. He was a serious looking young man, dignified, with a confidence about him that said that he thought his thoughts with a tidy and organized mind, with no room for frivolous things. Yet in spite of his poised appearance he had a touch of hesitation about him, that of a man with little experience in asking for help. His perfectly tailored black suit hung smoothly from his lean frame and his shirt was perfectly white and crisply starched. Every dark hair on his head was precisely in place. Kit greeted him cordially and escorted him in to the workroom.

“Good morning, Mr. Scrub. It’s good to see you again,” Kit said offering him a chair.

“Thank you for receiving me unannounced,” he said, nervously tapping one of his immaculately clean and manicured fingernails against the sides of the box. “I am sorry to just drop in on you like this, but I was wondering if you might help me in a very small matter. If it’s any trouble please say so, but I thought since I’ve heard that you are a Toymaker of such great skill and reputation that you might... take a look... at this toy for me.” His voice became very soft and he mumbled the last few words quickly all together as if he was afraid they wouldn’t get out in time.

“I’d be happy too. I’m no great expert, but I’m always interested in seeing new things.”

“You are?” Scrub’s serious face brightened for a moment. “This is just a design of mine and I was wondering if you could animate, I mean reanimate, it for me.” He opened the box and carefully took out a small stuffed animal. It had soft yellow fur with a long striped tail and little ears, somewhat of a cross between a squirrel and a monkey. The craftsmanship was exquisite and reminded Kit of a museum display she had seen once of antique German toys.

“Did you make this?” she asked. “This is just lovely. How did you do the joints? The glass eyes are very real looking.” She examined the soft pink velveteen lining of the ears and the smooth white belly. It looked almost alive with a sweet innocent expression.

“It’s supposed to be a lemur,” he offered casually, trying not to look too attached.

“It’s truly wonderful! Very well thought out!” Kit said handing back the toy, “I wish that I could help you with, what was it that you said? Animating? I don’t really have any experience with that sort of thing.”

Scrub’s face fell ever so slightly and he started to wrap up the toy to put back in the box. Clio came racing through the room, laughing loudly and being chased by Wilber, who was trying to tickle her with a feather duster. They both froze when they saw that there were adults in the room and Wilber tried to hide the feather duster behind his back.

“Clio, you remember Mr. Scrub,” Kit prompted.

“Uh, hello.” Then her eyes lit up as she saw the stuffed animal. “Did you make this? He’s so cute! Can I hold him?” Her words came streaming out. Eli hesitated a moment then solemnly handed over the toy lemur. She cradled it gently and stroked the soft fur on its neck. The little animal glowed for an instant and then blinked its shiny black eyes. It made a chirrup sound and nuzzled her hand.

“Wow! He’s alive! Look at his little paws! Do you think he’s hungry? ...Mister Scrub?” A look of joy and wonder grew on Eli’s face. He slowly stretched out his finger to touch the tiny creature, which grabbed his hand at once and climbed into his palm. Wilber waddled over to the food box and pulled out a miniature bottle of milk, which the diminutive lemur took greedily and settled in to eat.

“Does it have a name?” asked Kit.

“Her name is Klaria,” answered Eli, still in a fog of amazement.

“She’s beautiful,” said Clio.

They hunted around the workroom and found some soft cloth, which Kit cut and finished into a little cushion and tiny pillow. Clio sewed a small square into a blanket while Wilber found a little wicker basket that made a perfect bed. Patrin wandered in to find them all huddled around the table watching the lemur sleep.

“What ho? Hello Scrub.” He cocked his head and then his mouth dropped open. “Saint Portia! Is this your Friend? What happened? She’s alive! How did you manage it?”

“It was Miss Clio. She has the touch, like I’ve never seen before! Klaria came back the moment that she picked her up,” answered Eli, smiling at Clio with admiration. “It is our good fortune to have her here. I can’t thank you enough. The Council will be impressed, but moreover thank you for bringing her back. See you at the meeting.” He

cradled the sleeping lemur in his arms with all the pride of a new father as he left the room.

“I never expected to see Scrub go all woogie like that,” remarked Patrin. “He’s one of the most straight-laced people that I’ve ever met. Then again I certainly never thought to see Klaria animated again. This is really an event, don’t you think?”

“How does something become unanimated?” asked Clio, looking concerned. She had visions of waking up one morning to find Wilber turned back into a regular stuffed animal.

“There are many theories,” Patrin explained. “I personally believe that people lose contact with what’s real. They lose faith in their own ability and in their own creative power. It’s also a matter of trust that things will just happen like they are supposed to. It’s as if you doubted that the sun would come up in the morning so much that one day it just didn’t. The world will send you good things if you ask for it.” He folded a square of paper into a little origami bird, cupped it in his hands and threw it up into the air. The paper bird flapped its wings and vanished out the window. “No worries about Wilber. He’s real to you and that’s all that matters. What happened with Scrub is that he got so wrapped up in his job at the Toy Council that he forgot to play with Klaria. One day he went home and she was inanimate. I think that he has learned his lesson and will be more attentive in the future.”

The clock struck noon and a row of twelve squirrels danced out of the clock, each carrying a silver tray with carved foodstuffs upon it. A mechanism in the clock pumped out a little puff of steam from each one of the trays to give the illusion of hot food. It played a merry tune and then was silent.

“Lunch time already!” said Patrin. “This will be a good opportunity to get everybody together. Kit, I saw Augwun down by the lake earlier, could you see if he would like something to eat?”

“Sure, there’s something I wanted to check out down there before it gets too much later.”

Kit made her way through the winding gravel path toward the lake. She stopped for a moment to check out the spot where she thought she had seen the clowns the night before. Feeling a little like Sherlock Holmes she searched in the damp earth for

footprints. There were marks in the mud but nothing distinctive. She followed the marks down toward the water's edge and saw several giant footprints mashed in the dirt. "These shoes must have been huge," she thought to herself. "Clown shoes. How ridiculous!" She chided herself for being so frightened the night before. It all seemed so silly. "So Blocksbury has a few wandering clowns in the shrubbery. I'm sure that they are no stranger than toy dragons or monkeys walking around." Still it was a scary, annoying thought that wouldn't go away. She resolved to find out more about the clowns and turned her attention to finding Augwun.

It was a beautiful, sun-filled day with a warm breeze blowing across the lake. An old, painted boathouse connected to a long dock that stretched out into the sparkling water. Seabirds circled around idly in the blue cloudless sky. Kit was surprised to see Augwun reclining on a bench engrossed in a book. He looked remarkably improved after washing and clean clothes, more like a country gentleman than the beleaguered kitchen worker she remembered. His work boots stuck out over the edge of the bench, crossed comfortably. Freshly washed and stripped of grease his dark hair was pulled back showing the fiery red scar, now beginning to heal, across the side of his temple. Kit hesitated for a moment, not wanting to disturb him from his relaxed state. Without looking up from the book he said,

"It's not polite to stare, you know."

"I'm sorry," Kit replied, feeling awkward that she had been caught watching him. "I didn't want to interrupt. What are you reading?" She wondered what sort of books people read in Blocksbury.

"A Catlandian Folk Epic. I started reading it a long time ago and always wondered how it ended. Books have been a bit scarce where I've been lately."

"How do you like it so far?" Kit felt suddenly curious to know what he thought.

"I'll let you know when I get to the end."

"Well, enjoy the rest of it. Patrin sent me down here to tell you that it's lunchtime," Kit said.

Augwun immediately stood up, bristling at the mention of Patrin's name.

"Would he like help with the serving, miss?"

“No, no, I think he wanted you to eat, not to work. Finish your book and I’ll save you a sandwich. You certainly deserve a day off, especially after last night. Patrin wants to put together a plan to make a large number of toys but we won’t get much done if we’re sitting in meetings day and night.”

“Let me know if there is anything you need me to help you with, miss,” offered Augwun.

“Do you know anything about Toymaking, especially about the process of getting things made here in Blocksbury?” Kit asked.

“No, miss, I’m afraid not, except that everything is very time consuming where the Council is concerned. It’s really not for me to say, but they do seem to have a lot of effort invested in planning and not a lot in doing.”

“That all may change in the near future. I’m not much for sitting around waiting for things to happen. Patience isn’t really one of my strong points,” she said with a grin. “My main goal is to get us back home. I’m not sure how making a lot of toys is going to do that but Patrin seems to think that it will help. Where do you know him from, by the way?”

“I think that is something that he’d best explain, miss.” Augwun retreated back into a tightlipped worker from the relaxed book reader of a few moments before.

“Really?” replied Kit, feeling suddenly frustrated. “I guess I’ll have to do that. Like I said, I’m not a very patient person and I want to get out of here. I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

“Yes, miss,” said Augwun. He started to add something else, then checked himself.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to unload all my problems on you. I’d better get back,” Kit pushed a long strand of hair behind her ear and paused for a moment. “Enjoy the fine day. Let me know what you think of the book when you’re done.”

She headed back up the garden path and Augwun watched her disappear through the rose bushes. He finished the last few pages of the novel and stared out across the lake for quite a while, lost in thoughts and memories. At the sound of someone coming from the house down the gravel path he stood up and started back past the boathouse. The old

painted door creaked slowly open blocking his path. A gloved hand stuck a bamboo cane out and hooked his arm.

“Yuk, yuk, yuk! What have we here? Haven’t seen you in a while, bucket scum. Want to play a little game?”

Chapter 15

Patrin looked into Mook's room to find him fast asleep with Chimka sitting at the foot of the bed keeping watch.

"How is he doing?" he asked and Chimka chattered back softly that the patient was recovering quite nicely.

"Well, why don't you let him rest for a bit?" Patrin asked. Chimka shook his head and went back to staring at Mook.

"Come on, he'll be fine. We need to get ready for the meeting at two. There is lots of work to do." He held out his arms expecting Chimka to jump into them, instead the monkey stuck out his lower lip stubbornly and refused to move.

"Okay. Suit yourself. I'll be in the workroom if you change your mind." Patrin went away shaking his head. "This sure is unusual," he thought. "I've never seen Chimka act like that before. I wonder why he is so attached to Mook all of a sudden? I hope the poor man is all right. He seemed to be just fine this morning. Very odd..."

Back in the workroom, Clio was looking through a book with Wilber. She rapidly turned the pages searching for something.

"This is so weird," she said. "It was right here yesterday."

"What are you looking for?" asked Patrin, bounding over to look.

"There was a picture in this book of a big bunch of Toymakers with their Friends and one looked like Chimka. One guy in the picture looked like you. But I've looked through the whole thing three times and I still can't find it."

Patrin got very excited.

"You actually saw a picture of the Toymakers' meeting! This is incredible! Now think very carefully and tell me everything that you remember from the picture, no! Draw it for me."

"But the picture's right here in this book. I know it is!" she said.

"It isn't there now. Trust me, I know. All pictures of the Annual Toymaker's meeting have been erased. I've haven't seen one in years. I remember being there, having the drawing made, seeing it in the Yearbook, but it is not there now. Clio! Do you

know what this means? This is marvelous! You can draw it for me!” He grabbed a handful of drawing paper off the shelf and some pencils then handed them to Clio.

“Now start with the humans, do them first.” He looked at her expectantly and her eyes welled up with angry tears.

“I can’t draw people. I just can’t!” she said frantically, remembering the comments that Morna and Prent had made the night before.

“Here now, please don’t cry. You’ll make your eyes go all puffy. I think I have a handkerchief here somewhere.” He searched his pockets and pulled out all kinds of pens, coins, peanuts, bits of string and a silver inlaid yo-yo before he found it. Wilber had already pulled one out of the clothes box and handed it to her. Clio dried her eyes, mad at herself for crying twice in two days.

“I’m normally not so weepy, honest,” she said apologetically.

“Tut, tut, not of all. If I was far away from my home, here in Blocksbury, I’d cry too.”

“But you are far away from your Mom and Dad, aren’t you? And you are here,” she replied.

“Good point, so I am. Well... I’m not going to admit to tears, but I’m not going to deny that I’ve had my fair share. I’ll tell you what we can do, you tell me what you remember and I’ll draw the picture. How would that be?” Clio looked relieved and thought hard.

“You were there, only younger, standing next to this guy in a white suit. There were about ten people on each row.”

“How many rows?” Patrin sketched out the rough figures.

“Three, I think, and a row of stuffed animals in the front. There was a big yellow winged thing here,” she said pointing to the center of the row.

“Was it a griffin, like this?”

“Yeah! And an elephant, then a lion. I remember a giraffe. Chimka was there, on this end.” Patrin sketched the red monkey sitting on the steps.

“The guy in the white suit, what did he look like?”

“You couldn’t see his face, it was covered by his hat,” Kit said, entering the room. “Why don’t you just check the illustration? It’s in this book.” She started flipping through the pages of the book on the table.

“It’s missing. Disappeared. Erased,” said Patrin. “So we are trying to recreate it from Clio’s memory.”

“Let me give it a go,” said Kit taking up the pencil and deftly sketched in some faces in smooth strong lines.

“There was a young woman here with long blond hair, and an older one here. This man had a bird; I think a blue jay on his shoulder. They all had different colors of suits. Yours was red.” She grabbed a crayon and shaded in a few of the jackets. Working quickly she sketched in the animals in the front. “I can’t remember how many bears there were.”

“Miss Ashlyn, you said that you recognized somebody in the picture, yesterday, remember?” Clio pointed to an unfinished face on the paper.

“I don’t recall. Give me a minute... Dang! It was right there on the tip of my tongue.” She tapped a pencil on the table.

“Don’t try to remember,” said Patrin miserably; “It may be one of the effects of the erasure. It effects your memories, steals them away.”

“It was Mook.” Kit grabbed a colored pencil. “He stood here in a dark purple suit and he had a cat motif on his scarf here. I knew that it would come to me. How could anybody forget a purple suit?” She sketched in a fairly accurate rendering of Mook’s wavy dark hair and wry grin.

“A cat? I wonder if he’s from Catsport? That would place his accent,” wondered Patrin. Kit chewed on the end of the pencil for a minute and continued drawing.

“There was a tall man standing next to him, here and one older man with a white beard like Santa Claus. This woman in orange was dark with a long staff in her hand. I know that there were others but I can’t remember any details.”

“This is astonishing!” remarked Patrin. “Perhaps our theory that erasure doesn’t effect Greylanders is true. This is wonderful news! Do you know what this means, Miss Ashlyn? It means that if you actually saw the missing Toymaker that you might recognize

him. I wish I could send a message to my parents. This is the answer that we have been looking for!”

“Slow down there! I might recognize him if I have actually met him. How do you know if I have ever even seen this person? Suppose he’s just some researcher or even a stalker of some sort. It’s entirely possible that he could know all about me without me having a clue what he looks like.”

“Not to worry! You just being here will draw him out. The toys we make will as well. The more toys we design the more Toymakers will be drawn to Blocksbury. They won’t be able to resist. It’s scientific,” Patrin added with certainty. “I suggest that we convince the Council this afternoon that we need a few weeks to do research. I still want to try to make the Toy Tree. Remember Kit, if we find the missing Toymaker then he’ll know how to recharge the Fish Car and take you both home. Until then you are stuck here.”

“Why is this is starting to sound a bit like blackmail? Does this sound like blackmail to you, Clio?” Kit asked, a little skeptical of all of Patrin’s plans.

“No, Miss Ashlyn. It sounds like fun.”

The thin bamboo cane pulled Augwun into the boathouse and it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He immediately knew who, or what, was waiting for him before he could see. His experience with Jester Control had taught him all the signs of an interrogation taking place. He cursed himself for not being more aware of his surroundings and letting his guard down. The Greylander woman was a distraction. He had been thinking of her when they grabbed him but he knew that he had no one to blame but himself. The first thing that he had learned during his time becoming the number one Obedience Graduate was to never relax, not even for a moment and yet today he had. Smelling the air he quickly placed the two figures in the room. The odor of old sweat and grease paint belonged to Big Happy, one of the guards from the Rehabilitation Grotto. The other presence was equally familiar. The foul breath and squeaky shoes of the smaller figure would be Dolly, the head of Secret Intelligence. She was the most feared of all the clowns in Jester Control for her ability at brain washing and her ruthless

fervor. Augwun felt a cold shiver pass over his body, if Captain Dolly was here then this must be a high level operation. He forced himself to stay calm and stand absolutely still.

“Gotcha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Did you think that we had just forgotten about you? How long has it been, kitchen trash?” Big Happy’s high pitched voice broke the silence. He squeezed a rubber horn in his pocket as he circled around Augwun like a shark.

“Eleven months, three days, five hours, and twenty-six minutes,” he replied lifelessly.

“And how many stripes on my collar?”

“Three, two red and one blue.” The tall clown stood behind him and whispered in his ear.

“And... how many pleats?”

“Twenty six,” Augwun replied. Big Happy spun his collar around to count.

“Woohoo! So there are! It seems our favorite pupil hasn’t forgotten his lessons. You look almost respectable today, Sillywilly. Say hello to Dolly. You remember her, I’m sure.”

“Good to see you again, Captain,” he replied automatically.

“What’s wrong, my dear? Too shy to shake a lady’s hand?” Her voice was raspy and low, grating the air. Augwun forced himself to put out his hand, fully aware of what was going to happen. She had a buzzer in her palm that sent a powerful shock up his arm, knocking the wind out of him and forcing him to his knees. The clowns laughed hysterically and clapped their big white gloves together.

“Gets them every time!” cried Big Happy wiping a fake tear away with a big rainbow colored handkerchief. “Stand up in the presence of a lady, you stupid slob. You’ve forgotten your manners after all. See, Captain, the easy life in the kitchen has made him slow on the uptake. Perhaps he needs a little bit more schooling back at the Grotto.” Augwun struggled to his feet helped by the bamboo cane of the larger clown looped around his neck.

“Unfortunately we don’t have time for that. We want him to do a job for us now,” said Dolly watching his face carefully. “Other, more pressing matters need to be taken care of. We’ve been watching the new Toymaker and it has come to our attention that

some subversive activities are about to take place in Quad Hall. What do you know about that location?"

"The Toymaker Patrin has bought my contract to serve in the Hall," Augwun replied.

"Who is living there now?" asked Dolly.

"The two Greylanders and another kitchen worker." He knew from experience that the less information offered the better.

"What is their purpose? Why are they here? And speak the truth, you dimwitted half brain." The clowns skipped around him in a circle.

"They are Toymakers," he answered.

"We know they are Toymakers!" Dolly hissed. She grabbed his ear and pulled his face very close to hers. "Listen to me and listen to me good. I'm going to give you two weeks and you are going to make me a list of every activity that goes on in that house. I want to know about every mark that is made on every piece of paper. If you so much as leave out one toy I will make you wish that you were back in the mines. We plucked you from there and we can send you back for the rest of your short and miserable life. Do you understand?" Augwun nodded mutely.

"In two weeks they will have created enough illegal toys to have them convicted." She smiled and he could see her multicolored teeth gleaming red, green and blue in the dim light. "And then a big bonfire. We'll burn the lot! And you know who will be on that bonfire if you fail me, won't you, Obedient One? You must find yourself a job in the workroom, get in thick with them. Do you think that a brainless idiot like you can manage that?"

"But I don't make toys," he answered.

"Of course, of course you don't, fool, but you'll find a way. The Greylander woman seemed soft enough. She might even try to teach a pathetic creature like you how to draw if you groveled for her. You seemed to be doing well enough chatting with her earlier. What were you talking about? Books? Ha! How dull! I bet she thinks she's quite the clever one." Dolly chuckled a dry sound. "We owe Kulak a favor; we should give her to him as a treat. That is after we are done rehabilitating her."

Both clowns laughed for a few minutes and danced around the room.

“Speaking of treats, Captain,” said Big Happy in his high singsong voice, “Why don’t we give some yummy yum fun to our good ol’ pal here.”

“Yes, what an excellent idea! Want some candy, garbage boy?” She took a paper container out of her pocket and shook some brightly colored shapes into her hand.

“Candeeze! Here is a whole two weeks worth in advance. Something to make the little voices in your thick head go away for a while. You know you want it, go ahead, take it.”

Augwun slowly took the sugarcoated sweets and made a fist around them. The sound of the bamboo cane whipping through the air made him jerk to attention.

“Aren’t you forgetting to thank the nice lady?” Big Happy walked around behind him and whacked him sharply between the shoulder blades.

“Never mind, Big Happy,” rasped Dolly patting Augwun’s expressionless face. “He can make it up to me later. Let’s get out of here. Remember that we’ll be watching you, so don’t slip up. Toodles!” She reached in her pocket and pulled out a yellow wind up car painted with orange and lavender polka dots. It grew to the size of a small table. The clowns squeezed into it and drove into the door. The car stopped, backed up and honked. Augwun opened the door and watched as they sped away.

Once he was sure that they were gone he slowly opened his hand and stared at the brightly colored shapes for a long time. They brought back horrible memories of time spent laboring knee deep in the sludge of the Sugar Mines; a place that most of the citizens of Blocksbury didn’t even believe existed. Most of the miners had been addicted to the sugary squares and triangles that the guards gave as rewards and withheld as punishments. It was put in the food, the smell of it pervading the air they breathed and eventually even their skin. He went to throw it out the window into the water of the lake below and then stopped. Shaking, he lifted his hand to his lips and smelled the peculiar sweet aroma. Rummaging an old piece of paper from the bottom of one of the boats he carefully wrapped up the Candeeze into a little packet, then reaching up as high as he could, he tucked it up into a crack in the wall above one of the rafters.

The sun was much lower in the sky when Augwun finally stepped out into the fading sunlight. A flock of quick-legged birds ran up and down the shore pecking and scratching while one lone crow dug at a shell in the sand. The honey scent of night blooming jasmine was just beginning to fill the late afternoon air. As he started back up

the path toward the Hall he bent down midstride to swoop up the book from the flowerbed where it had fallen. He dusted it off and continued on up the hill whistling a wild sauntering tune as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 16

“That was blessedly short,” exclaimed Patrin as he came up the front walkway to Quad Hall. Kit was sitting on the veranda writing at a small side table.

The meeting had taken less than an hour. He had given an impassioned plea for time to do research and the need to proceed with caution. The Council had voted to give them the three weeks that they asked for and the meeting was adjourned so that everyone could admire Klaria, Eli’s baby lemur.

“I think the meeting set a record for brevity. Mr. Wintar told me that he was at a Council meeting once where the building caught on fire and it still continued longer than the one today.” Patrin took off his red jacket and slung it over his shoulder.

“Thanks for not making us go,” Kit said. “It was nice to have some free time to relax. Not that another four hour lecture on the history of building blocks wouldn’t have been beneficial,” she added mischievously.

“I heartily agree. It did speed things up not having you there. I think that Shishka feels like he has to explain everything in mind-numbing detail every time we get a new member. If yesterday’s lecture was bad, just remember that it was about the fourth time that I’ve had to sit through it.” Patrin laughed and stretched his shoulders. “Did you have a chance to work up the design plan like I suggested?”

“Yes, here it is. It took a bit of figuring out but it should work. I just wish that you had a copier. I had to rewrite it five times by hand.”

“You should have had Chimka do it for you, it’s just one of things that makes Toymaker’s Friends so useful. They are excellent at copying things. Although, Chimka’s hasn’t left Mook’s side all day. He is usually rather standoffish with strangers. Oh well, perhaps Wilber has been a good influence on him,” Patrin said with a shrug. “Oh! Before I forget, I’ve taken the liberty of having my belongings moved over here to save me the trouble of running back and forth all the time. I think it would be best if I stayed close and kept an eye on things. I’m bringing my housekeeper, Mrs. Hogar, too. She’s somewhat eccentric but I think you’ll like her.”

“That’s a good idea. I’d feel safer at night having a few more people in the house.” She remembered the eerie sight of the two clowns standing in the garden and silently wished for an army of people staying in the Hall. Kit was normally not afraid of much. She had studied martial arts for years and possessed a self-assuredness that bordered on the foolhardy, yet the two clowns somehow gave her the feeling of being a child in an out-of-control adult world.

“A good idea…” she repeated, lost in thought.

“I’m glad that you approve! Let’s gather everyone together and get to work, shall we?”

They all assembled around the big worktable, Patrin at the head, Kit, Clio and Wilber on one side and Augwun and Mook with Chimka on the other. Patrin passed out the project plan that Kit had written up and addressed the group.

“Our goal is to create the largest number of toys possible in the next month for the Queen’s birthday. Each toy will be shrunk to fit into a wooden block and given out as party favors. This is a grand opportunity to put Blocksbury on the map. Miss Kit has been kind enough to devise a work schedule dividing the next four weeks into categories such as dolls, puzzles, games and so on. If you don’t want to work within these guidelines that is not a problem. This is meant as a guide not a constraint.”

“Who’s going to provide the documentation?” asked Mook, his eyes growing wide as he looked over the ambitious plan.

“I thought that we could all pitch in and do our own,” answered Patrin.

“What does documentation mean?” asked Kit.

“Every new design for the Queen’s birthday is required to be registered in the Royal Archives. This insures that the toys are safe to play with, that ideas aren’t stolen, that credit is given where credit is due. It’s more of a formality than anything. It’s rather simple really, just a detailed drawing of the toy and a list of ten questions as to the material used and the purpose and thought behind it,” he explained.

“So, where would everybody like to start? Kit, I see that you have marked yourself down for dolls. Excellent choice! Clio, what is your pleasure?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something easy like a ball or something. I’m not good at drawing stuff,” she said, hanging her head. Still wounded from the nasty comments of the two younger Council members, she decided that she would never enjoy drawing again.

“Ah, piffle! I’ve seen your drawings and they will do just fine. You will be amazed how basic the sketches have to be to work. If you are not happy with your sketches then just have Wilber redraw them for you. I’m sure that he’ll be pleased as Ping-Pong balls to rework anything you come up with. How about I put you down for animals? So far you’ve shown exceptional talent in that area!” The girl and dragon both nodded and Patrin continued, “Mook, how about you? I bet you would like to work on games. You definitely have an affinity for them. Where would you like to start?”

“Anywhere you want me to, sir,” Mook replied beaming. “This seems all good to me.”

“Then games and puzzles it is.” Patrin wrote a few lines into a notebook and went on. “This is wonderful! We’ll have a great variety of toys in no time! Augwun, where do your strengths lie?”

“I worked on the sanding assembly line at the Factory.” he offered tenuously.

“So you want to sand things?” asked Patrin studying the design plan as if a toy sander was one of the things were on the list.

“Augie has good handwriting. Don’t deny it. I’ve seen you write the food lists. He kept all the inventory books for the Kitchen,” Mook said with good humor. “Make him do the documentation. He’s a quick enough study when he wants to be.” Augwun shot him a withering look but Mook just grinned.

“What would you like to work on?” asked Patrin.

“It’s your decision, sir,” he replied.

“Well,” said Patrin, “let’s have you start with paperwork until you get a feel for what it is that interests you. You can change anytime. OK, that’s all set. Let’s get to work!”

Clio would look back on the next few hours as the most wonderful and most terrifying of her life. Patrin was everywhere at once, encouraging, teaching and offering advice. Kit found a trunk full of all kinds of fabrics and lace and started sketching dolls in elaborate costumes. Mook drew out a plan for a wooden puzzle. It started out as a flat

picture but by moving the pieces around it stacked into a miniature castle complete with little people on horseback and towers with flags. When he completed the sketch he passed it on to Augwun who filled out a pile of papers about the project. Patrin took the drawing and started scratching at the corner of the illustration. Clio watched in amazement as he peeled the finished toy right off the paper.

“You see! It’s easy! Just think through the toy from all sides and there you have it. Great work Mook! Clio, what are you working on? Wilber! Help her out. Sit over here and tell him what you want.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Clio said. “Where do I start?”

“Here, start with something simple, say marbles. He pulled a small coin out of his pocket and traced it on a piece of paper. He grabbed a big box of colored pencils and said,

“Pick a color, any color.” After a moment of looking over all the bright colors Clio selected a deep shade of blue.

“Excellent! Now color the circle and ‘think marble’ as you fill it in. Think about the coolness of it, the weight of it, how it will feel when you hold it.” Clio carefully colored in the small circle and even added a little shading so it would look round. Then Patrin put his hand over the drawing and closed his fingers into a fist. When he turned his hand over and opened it a clear blue marble lay in his palm sparkling like a jewel.

“Wow! How did you do that?” Clio’s mouth dropped open.

“It’s easy, just see the marble in your head. Try another one.” She picked a rich dark red color and filled in another circle. Patrin wrapped his fingers around the back of her hand and placed it on the drawing.

“Now, pick it up,” he urged. Clio’s fingers closed around something solid. She unfolded her fist and a cold, smooth marble, dark as blood lay in her palm. She held it up between her fingers and it glowed from inside like a burning coal.

“Ahhh! Beautiful! Now! Here! Color a few more and you are on your way. Here’s a bowl to put them in when they are complete.” Patrin left her happily coloring and moved over to Kit’s side.

“How is it going?” he asked. She showed him a few sketches of a doll in Victorian dress complete with hoop skirt and bonnet.

“This is going to be superb! Here, let’s see what it finishes out to be.” He took the paper and peeled the doll out of it. “Great detail! You even put shoelaces on the boots. How about adding a few more outfits and a doll trunk to put them in?”

Kit sat for a moment holding the little doll in her hand and took up her pencil to start drawing again. The minutes turned into hours as they worked mostly in silence broken by the occasional oohs and ahhs as the toys took on form. The workroom clock struck eight and a little line of dancing animals spun around to a spirited waltz.

“Can you believe it’s eight already and us with no supper?” Patrin stood up to get the food box when the workroom door opened and very small woman with gray streaked hair in a brown homespun dress and blue apron swept into the room. She was less than four feet tall but her face wore a formidable expression. Mook and Augwun immediately stood up.

“Not had dinner!” the old woman exclaimed, “This will not do at all.”

“Ladies, gentleman, may I present Mrs. Hogar. Mrs. Hogar this is the Toymaker Kit Ashlyn from the Greylands and her apprentice Clio Halina.” They shook hands and Kit noticed that her grip was like iron as the housekeeper’s dark eyes appraised her carefully.

“I am pleased to meet you,” Mrs. Hogar said. “The young master has spoken of you highly. I hope that your time here in Blocksbury is productive.”

Patrin introduced the others.

“This is Mook and Augwun. They will be helping us as well.”

The tiny woman stared at Mook and asked,

“Are you a relation of Mookael the Elder from Catsport?”

“I could be, ma’am. It’s been a bit of a stretch of years since I’ve seen the Firth of Cats.”

“You look familiar. Just watch yourself. We’ll have none of your Cat’s Paw ways here.” She gave him a frosty look that could freeze a hot day and turned to appraise Augwun.

“I’ve seen you in the Kitchen. You kept the ledgers for the Kitchen Master,” she said curtly, looking him over as if she was checking for fleas.

“Yes, ma’am. That was one of my tasks.”

“I’ll be expecting you to help with the cooking and cleaning.”

“Of course, ma’am. May I help you with your things now?”

Mrs. Hogar looked to Patrin for approval who nodded ever so slightly. She pursed her lips together in a thin line. “Very well, come with me. You too, Catlander,” she added, pointing to Mook.

“Mrs. Hogar,” said Kit, “Is there anything that I can help you with?”

“Yes, clean up this lot. Set the table and you,” she commanded Clio, “make sure that the dragon washes before dinner.” Wilber had found some paint pots and was quietly making a glorious mess. Mrs. Hogar sailed out of the room followed by Mook and Augwun. Patrin let out a sigh of relief.

“That went well, don’t you think?” he said sinking into a chair.

“What are you talking about? I don’t think that she liked me at all. She seems so... how should I put this? Firm?” Kit said, choosing her words carefully.

“Oh, a tiny bit!” Patrin laughed. “I think you two hit it off splendidly! Not to worry, she’s a strict one but I can tell that she took quite a shining to you, the others too. She won’t work them too hard. She may even fatten them up a bit. It’s funny, but when I asked her last night if she had any clue about those clowns you saw in the garden, she insisted on moving in here. I’ve learned to trust her judgement about things like that. She has sharp eyes and can fight like a tiger when necessary. You may sleep well tonight knowing that she is in the house.” Kit pondered this last bit of information carefully as she cleared the tables and wondered if she would be able to sleep at all.

Chapter 17

They finally sat down to dinner at a quarter till nine after a long argument between Mrs. Hogar and Kit. The tiny housekeeper insisted that Mook and Augwun, being servants, should eat in the kitchen and Kit argued fiercely that if that were the case, that they should all eat in the kitchen because they were all working on the same project. Then Mrs. Hogar decided that if Patrin wanted everyone to eat as a group then they could possibly eat together in the formal dining room as long as they sat at opposite ends of the table. Sparks flew as Kit countered by saying they were adults and should be able to eat wherever they wanted to. Eventually everyone including Mrs. Hogar ended up sharing pizza and salad in the workroom because Wilber had already set the places and they were really too tired to care.

There is something about eating a meal that brings people together. Everyone started telling stories that continued on long after the food was gone. Mook talked about his village in Catsport and the cats that ran sailing ships back and forth to the continent. Patrin told a very funny story about a group of poodles that entered the annual kiteflying competition in Saint Ives, the Royal City and how the kite that they had built was so big that it pulled their entire team into the harbor. Kit talked of riding a camel to see the pyramids in Egypt and Augwun told about being caught in the Forest of Houndes Berk on a Hallowsday many years ago. Even Clio told about her summer camp the previous year when she went river rafting in Alaska. Mrs. Hogar told about fighting in the Wars of Chaos, riding in a cavalry regiment across the Northern Wastelands to Beargarden. Clio felt herself nodding off when the clock struck the half-hour. Well fed and pleasantly tired, they all bid their goodnights and headed off to bed.

Kit stopped Augwun in the hallway and asked to speak to him for a moment. They stepped in to the downstairs library and she touched his hand. She turned it over to show a burn the size of a half-dollar on his palm.

“I’m not your nurse, but you need to put some medicine on this before it gets infected. Who were those people in the Boathouse and how could you let them do this to you?” she asked. Augwun stared for a moment at the blistering red mark on his hand,

then moved quickly to turn off the lights and shut the door. He closed the heavy winter shutters across windows and crouched down on the hearth by the fire.

“I don’t think they are people,” he said in a low voice, motioning for Kit to sit down next to him. “They’re most likely watching the house, but I’m fairly sure that they won’t come too close tonight, not with Mrs. Hogar here. She’s very high up in the Royal Guard and a fierce adversary. Don’t let her small stature fool you. The stories of her feats in battle are used to frighten small children into obeying their parents.” A faint grin flashed across the shadows of his gaunt face. “You stood up to her. I’m impressed.”

“I don’t think I had a firm grasp of the situation. I’ll use a little more tact in the future,” Kit smiled back at him, “I was coming back down to the lake to bring you a sandwich when I saw you being pulled inside. I was curious and crawled underneath the pilings to eavesdrop. Forgive me for not helping out. I wasn’t sure what was going on and honestly, I wasn’t sure if I could trust you.”

“Are you trusting me now?” Augwun asked.

“I’m not, but you didn’t turn in Patrin and you protected Mook so I don’t think that these... these... whatever they are control you as much as they think that they do. Eleven months since what?” she asked abruptly.

“Since I last had the pleasure of being interrogated by Jester Control. They operate outside the mainstream of society. I’m not sure exactly what their mission is, although I think that they’re a threat to the monarchy. Captain Dolly is the Head of Intelligence and Big Happy is one of her guards.”

“Why do they want to burn all the toys?”

“Again, I’m not really sure. They feel that toys destroy the social order, create chaos. They don’t understand them. One of their beliefs is that playing is a waste of time, that people should be following more serious pursuits. The ironic part is that they are willing to use brutal tactics to reach what they think are noble ends. If you listen to them long enough it almost starts to make sense. They are totally misguided, of course,” he added quickly, seeing the disgust on Kit’s face. “It’s like any kind of propaganda, sounds fair on the outside but inside is twisted and weak.”

“Why did you get involved with them?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice there. They came through the mines one day, bought up a dozen workers and took us to a place that they called the Grotto. We were trained as information gatherers. I was fortunate to survive.”

“They bought you?” Kit was incredulous.

Augwun shrugged,

“It happens. It’s impossible to get work without a contract in this part of the world and sometimes papers are sold without warning. Although, I’ve never heard of anything like this happening before. I was held there for six months. It wasn’t an experience I’d care to repeat,” he said lightly as if he had seen a disappointing play.

“Why did you have to know how many pleats?”

“Part of the training... We were always set up for failure. We developed our powers of observation to avoid punishment. They would ask anything, how many squeaks on those infernal horns of theirs, how many green dots on the left sleeve. Most of the guards were not particularly intelligent, merely cruel. Captain Dolly, on the other hand, is a taller piece on the chessboard. She is a formidable adversary.” He shivered and pulled up his bony knees to his chest, “After graduating I was moved to Blocksbury to work in the Factory. When I had just about decided that they had forgotten about me, that it was all part of an unpleasant dream, Big Happy appeared out of nowhere. He told me that a Toymaker had been erased and they were anxious to get their hands on him. He instructed me to keep a watch for any signs of creative activity.”

“And you think that Mook is the one that they are looking for?” asked Kit.

“I’m sure of it. He was hopeless from the start. Always trying to change things, think up better ways of getting things done. He stuck out like a tree in a wheat field. If we hadn’t been transferred to the Kitchen he would have been discovered for sure.”

“Why don’t you just leave? I’m sure Patrin would let you out of your contract.”

“I’d be caught in a matter of days. Their influence is everywhere in this part of the country.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“It is for now.”

“Not for the drugs or what ever it was that they gave you? Did you take them?”

Kit asked, watching his eyes in the dim firelight.

“No!” he said harshly and then in a sadder voice murmured, “There was a time that I would have. All the miners were addicted to it; they put it in the food. It’s beastly stuff, makes you stupid and soft.”

Kit pondered this for a while. She traced the seam on her jeans with her fingernail and finally asked,

“What do you think we should do?”

“I think that you’re safe for a week at least. The clowns will wait until they think that you have designed enough illegal toys to get us all thrown in prison.”

“What’s an illegal toy?” Kit asked.

“There was a Toymaker known as Hosmer the Inventor, or the Troublemaker as he is called now. He made so many dangerous and harmful toys that after he disappeared strict regulations were put into place by the Council of Justice. You must all be careful to make toys that are safe to play with so they won’t have anything to use against you. Perhaps we can work out more of a plan in the next few days,” suggested Augwun shaking his head.

“Well, I’m not too hot on the idea of becoming Kulak’s birthday treat, myself. And I’m not going to let anything happen to Clio. It’s my fault that she’s here. I never should have let her get into that Fish Car. Then again, who could have known that we would end up being kidnapped by Busby Toys and brought to... to this place?”

“Why *are* you here?” Augwun asked, looking at her curiously.

“I wish I knew. Every time I think that I get that part figured out everything changes.” Kit didn’t feel comfortable telling him that Patrin was also looking for a missing Toymaker just yet. “I am sorry, I mean I’m sorry that you were pulled into all this.”

“Is that the sound of pity that I hear?” he laughed, “Please say it’s not, I can accept anything but that. I manufacture enough of my own.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she countered, “but I do appreciate your help, that’s all. It will make things easier if we can work together to get out of here. Do these clown things have any weaknesses? If I punched one of them would they go down or just explode or something?”

“I’d like to be there when that happens. I’ve never tried it myself. Perhaps a little research would shine some light on the problem. The library here is quite extensive,” Augwun said looking up at the tall shelves of books; their embossed bindings flickering red in the firelight. “There is an even larger library upstairs on the third floor. There has to be a few books related to Clown culture and its offshoots.”

“I can’t read these books. They are written in a foreign language.”

“It’s not a foreign language here,” he replied dryly. “You’ll need a Friend to translate them for you, Chimka or the little dragon could do it. How is that you don’t have your Friend with you?”

“I don’t have one. Where I come from no one has even heard of a living stuffed animal. Clío’s is a fluke. Wilber came to life after she got here,” Kit replied.

“Then you’ll have to make one. I’ve never been to the Greylands, but here in the real world no one has ever heard of a Toymaker without a Friend,” he said in a tone that made Kit feel like she went to school in her pajamas.

“What about Mook? He’s a Toymaker. What happened to his Friend?”

“Unless he managed to smuggle his to safety before he was erased, it was most likely unstuffed.”

“Unstuffed! How awful! How could...” Kit stopped midsentence as Augwun put his finger to his lips and listened intently. He moved silently to the door and sniffed the air.

“Mrs. Hogar,” he said soundlessly.

Chapter 18

After a polite knock the door opened to reveal Mrs. Hogar silhouetted in the hallway.

“Unless there is anything else that you require I would like to retire for the night, Miss Ashlyn,” she told Kit.

“Actually there is one thing, if you have a moment. Have you seen anyone in the area that looked like this?” Kit took a piece of paper off of the library table and found a fountain pen. She turned on a small lamp and started sketching a picture of the two clowns.

“I only caught a glimpse of them last night,” she said, “and again this afternoon when they were leaving the boathouse.” Her sketch was very rough and without much detail.

“Perhaps you can help me out,” she said showing the drawing to Augwun. “I can’t remember much more.” Augwun took the pen from her hand and pulled out a fresh piece of paper. His hand was shaking as he started to draw, slowly at first and then with more intensity. Kit and Mrs. Hogar watched in fascination as lines quickly covered the page creating the faces of the two clowns. He captured the looming wild-eyed grin of Big Happy and the smug evil smirk of Captain Dolly. Mrs. Hogar snatched up the picture and let out a hiss that sounded like an angry badger. She studied it for a moment more and carefully burned it in the fire.

“Jester Control. I thought they were destroyed years ago. When Master Patrin told me that you’d seen clowns I didn’t want to believe it. You say they are in the area? How many?”

“Just the two that I know of,” answered Kit and explained how she had seen them questioning Augwun and how they are looking for a Toymaker.

“There’ll be more,” said Mrs. Hogar, “We’d best be careful, though I think they’ll stay away for awhile. They like to lurk about an area before attacking. Tomorrow we can set up some defenses around the house. Tonight I suggest everyone sleep with one eye open. Here laddie, come with me and we’ll find something to put on that hand of

yours. Good night, miss.” Mrs. Hogar led Augwun off to the kitchen like a small boy and Kit went upstairs and tried to sleep.

Once in the kitchen Mrs. Hogar pulled down the medicine kit and told Augwun to have a seat. Even sitting down, he was taller than the tiny woman.

“So you’ve had a rough time of it, eh?” Her voice was thoughtful as she mixed up a salve. She took his hand in her gnarled fingers and applied a generous amount to the wound.

“Yes, ma’am.” His shoulders slumped forward. He had never spoken of his past to anyone, and talking to Kit had left him drained.

“And you’ve seen the inside of the Grotto too. Not one of my happiest memories, let me tell you. I managed to escape after a few miserable days. That is well nigh thirty years ago. I still wake up in the middle of the night, not so much now, but for a long time after. How long were you there?”

“Six months, I think, ma’am.”

Upon hearing this Mrs. Hogar let out an impressed whistle between her teeth.

“You’re lucky to still have your wits about you. Those clowns were evil on earth, they were.” She pulled up her sleeves to show old scars that wrapped around her wrists. “I was able to squeeze between the bars. Being small has its advantages from time to time. I hid in an ash can for two nights before it was taken to the trash heap. From there I was able to make my way back to what was left of my regiment.” She finished wrapping a soft bandage around his hand. “Your hand will be good as new in a few days, lad; the rest of you will be too, though that may take longer.” Her weathered face looked up kindly at him. She patted his arm and said gently, “You poor, wee thing.”

Augwun crumpled over the table, hid his face in his arms and shuddered uncontrollably for a long time.

The next day Clio was up early and asked Kit if she could accompany her on her morning walk. Kit agreed, so off they went at a fast pace that left Clio out of breath after the first ten minutes. Wilber on the other hand had no trouble keeping up. He loped along on his stubby legs using his wings for extra propulsion. After a while he was flying around like a lost bumblebee, sniffing flowers, peering in second story windows, and

making high-speed loops around lampposts. It was a beautiful day in Blocksbury. The dew sparkled like handfuls of diamonds on the lawns of impressive looking mansions. Old oak trees lined the brick sidewalks, casting lacey shadows that danced in the morning sunlight. They passed out of the residential area and headed toward downtown. As they passed the schoolyard Clio started walking slower and lagged behind. Kit looked back to see her slip something between the fence. She waited until Clio caught up with her and asked,

“Sharing the fruits of your labors with some of the neighbors, Miss Halina?”

Clio dug her hands into her pockets and looked embarrassed.

“The kids here looked so sad the other day that I thought that they might like some of the marbles that I made. I’m not going to get in trouble am I?” She looked worried.

“No, of course not. I don’t think that there is anything wrong with that at all. In fact I think that it was very generous of you. We can keep this as our little secret.” Kit surveyed the gray and desolate schoolyard. “Although it might be pretty obvious as to where the marbles came from. Let’s keep walking. It’s going to be warming up soon and we have quite a way to go.”

As they walked down the main street, the little town was just waking up. The merchants were starting to open their shops, sweeping the sidewalks and drawing the blinds. When they got to the Toy Council Building they turned down a cobblestone street and headed back towards the lake. Occasionally the townsfolk bowed as they passed. Others pointed at Wilber and whispered to each other. One man offered them apples from his cart that he was setting up. When Clio gave him one of her marbles in exchange the man clutched it in his hand and thanked them profusely. A crowd of people quickly gathered around to look at the shining green marble and bombard them with questions. It took awhile for Kit and Clio to slip out and continue on their way.

When they reached the waters edge they followed a dirt path along the shore, eating their apples and watching Wilber chase the seabirds up and down the sand. At last they saw the leaded glass windows and spiraling brick chimneys of Quad Hall. Kit gave the boathouse a wide berth as they headed up the hill and through the garden.

They were surprised to see Mrs. Hogar planting a large vegetable bed with Augwun hard at work helping her dig the rows. She wore an old canvas satchel over her shoulder and was poking a hole with a wooden staff every foot or so. Her movements were fluid, piercing the ground with practiced smoothness. Kit thought she handled the long staff like a weapon. The tiny woman carefully took a seed out of the pouch and dropped it into the hole. Then she knelt down by the holes and whispered a few words of encouragement to each seed before covering it up with her hands. Mook and Patrin were setting up an elaborate watering machine with pipes and revolving sprayers. Chimka sat on top of the contraption holding a monkey wrench. He looked very wet and very annoyed.

“Good morning! What are you planting?” asked Kit.

“Oh, a little bit of everything, corn, melons, beans, peas, Jolly’s Bane,” Mrs. Hogar answered.

“Jolly’s Bane?” asked Kit.

“Just something to keep the pests away, if you get my meaning, miss,” Mrs. Hogar said with a wink. “And I don’t hold with all that Box food myself, rather do things the traditional way. Your breakfast is laid out in the dining room. It should still be hot. We are almost done here. Would you like for someone to attend you?”

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Hogar. Thank you.” Kit looked at her watch. It was almost eight. “Perhaps we could get started at nine? We have a lot of toys to make.” She turned to Clio. “But you, little missy, have a date with a trumpet. You haven’t played a note since we got here. I’d like to see an hour of practice put in as soon as you have had some breakfast.”

“Ah! Miss Ashlyn, do I have to? It sounds awful!” Clio hated playing the trumpet. “It makes my lips go all numb!”

“Yes, you do. How do you expect to get any better if you don’t practice? One hour, and no buts about it.”

After breakfast Clio went up stairs to her room and took her trumpet out of the case. The braying notes of scales started to fill the house. Wilber honked along for awhile

and finally even he fled to the safety of the back veranda. At last the hour was at an end and Clio went downstairs to the workroom to find everyone drawing away.

She took her place at the far end of the table. Grabbing a handful of blank paper and a box of colored pencils, she drew marbles for a while. Every color that she could think of went onto the page and then every pattern. Striped marbles, marbles with dots filled a page and that lead to stars and hearts. After a while the stream of ideas ran out and Clio thought for a while chewing on the end of one of the pencils. Resting her head on her arm and covering most of the paper up so that no one could see what she was doing, she took a red pencil and drew a picture of a tiny red dog inside of one of the circle that she had traced. She colored a sky blue sky with clouds around it and then added green grass.

“For the puppy to run on.” She thought to herself. Still shielding the paper with her hands she put her hand over the circle like Patrin had showed her and pulled the marble off the page. To her delight and surprise there was a miniature dog running inside the marble scampering across the green just like any dog would on a warm spring day in an open field. The marble rolled across the table and she barely caught it in time. Taking another sheet of paper, she quickly drew a few more. She colored marbles filled with monkeys swinging from trees, an elephant lumbering along and a kitten chasing a butterfly. Then she drew a page of marbles filled with different kinds of birds, a lone seagull soaring idly in a blue marble sky, a flock of crows and a mother hen with her chicks endlessly scurrying behind her, all captured in the clear marble.

“So I says to myself, that Greylander girl is a marvel, you just stand back and watch and she’ll show the world how it’s done. Well, there I go being right, once again.” Clio looked up from her drawing to see Mook sitting next to her. An impish grin spread across his face as he pulled over a heavy pile of books. “See here, the works of Cosmo the Magnificent, and here,” He opened a beautifully illustrated book. “Here is a collection of prints showing the work of Themis Fate, she was one of the best! Here is a manuscript on Hosmer the Troublemaker, which would do us all good to read and learn from his terrible mistakes. And this...” With a flourish he pulled a squashed looking spiral notebook from under the pile. “...is the work of Clio Halina, destined to take her place in

the heavens among the greats! I thought you might like this back, little love. I rescued this item out of the trash and took the liberty of looking through it.”

Clio looked at her old sketchbook with mixed emotions. On one hand she felt ashamed of her simple drawings and it brought back the sting of Morna and Prent’s mean comments at the Council meeting. She was also surprised at the relief she felt in getting her notebook back. She had secretly missed having it there to put her ideas in.

Mook continued, “There are some amazing things here and I was wondering if I could help you with them. This Aircoaster for example,” he flipped to a funny little doodle of a girl and a dragon soaring through the clouds in a rollercoaster car. “This is brilliant! Tricky to pull off, but just think about it!”

“Do you really think that we could actually make this?” Clio asked.

“Sure! Well, I think we could, I mean we could try. It’s your idea. It belongs to you. What do you say, miss?”

“Gee, I don’t know. How would we start?” By this time Patrin had come over to see what they were looking at. When he saw the Aircoaster drawing he became very excited.

“This would be groundbreaking!” he exclaimed.

“I hope you don’t mean that in a literal way,” laughed Kit, coming over to see what all the commotion was. “It looks a little dangerous to me.”

“Not to worry, miss!” Mook had covered a half a page by this time with calculations. “We could install counter air supports here and here and tie in an entire network of ground safety features.” Mook and Patrin launched into a lengthy discussion of a technical nature. Clio, swept up in the excitement of the project, suggested ideas too. The inventions flew so fast that Augwun was soon surrounded in piles of paperwork to fill out. He shook his head gloomily at the sight of the Aircoaster but didn’t offer any objections. As the day progressed so did the construction. By lunchtime a miniature model of the Aircoaster ran a course around the room. The car was made of brushed aluminum with tiny rivets and a miniature cockpit for the driver and rider. It was shooting around the room building up speed for the final drop when the workroom door swung open suddenly. The Aircoaster flattened into it and fell to the floor in a sad heap. Mrs.

Hogar came in carrying a tray of lemonade. She looked down at the squashed Aircoaster and said in a stern voice.

“Whose idea was this?”

Chapter 19

“Was this your idea, Master Patrin or yours, Catlander?” she asked, scowling at Mook. Silence fell over the room as her dark eyes flashed across each face.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I wasn’t thinking.” Mook stepped forward.

“Obviously not!” she barked back. “What if this had hit someone? It’s pointed metal.” She put the tray down and picked up the crumpled toy. “I don’t even want to think about what would have happened if this had been operating with passengers at full speed!”

“Actually it was sort of my idea,” stammered Clio. “It’s supposed to be an Aircoaster, kind of a cross between a rollercoaster and a rocket. We didn’t mean to hurt anything.” She was so petrified of Mrs. Hogar that her words could hardly get out.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Hogar, fixing her attention on Clio. “Are you aware of the consequences of making dangerous toys?”

“There is no way that she could have known,” said Augwun.

“Ah, but you should have known. Why didn’t you say something?” She pointed an accusing finger at his chest and glared up at him.

“It is not my place,” he replied, letting his gaze drop down to the table. But Mrs. Hogar seemed determined not to let anyone off the hook.

“No, it is your place. You’re doing the documentation. It is your responsibility. If you do not want to make sure that every one of these toys will pass the Toy Council I am sure that Mr. Patrin can find someone else to do the job.” The tiny woman’s words lashed out at him and then her voice lightened a bit. “But I don’t think that will be necessary. Do you think that you could manage to take an interest in the safety of the toys here?”

“As you wish, ma’am,” he replied, straightening up to his full height.

Mrs. Hogar went over to one of the bookcases that flanked the fireplace and scanned the titles. She pulled a handful of slim yellow bound books from off the shelf.

“Here are several copies of *The Royal Rules of Toymaking*. It will do you all good to review this carefully. I’ll check on your progress in an hour.” She turned as she got to the door to give everyone one last look. “Remember, one hour.”

“Who tied a knot in her yo-yo string?” said Mook, after the door shut firmly behind her.

“She’s right you know,” said Patrin. “We’ve been careless. Someone could have been hurt. Not to mention what might have happened if we’d increased the coaster to full size. We take a solemn oath to protect those that play with our toys. If one child is hurt because we made a dangerous toy...” His voice trailed off, his blue eyes lost in a world of misplaced memory. After a few minutes of silence Kit placed her hand on his arm and said,

“Perhaps if we broke into study groups we could help each other cover this material.”

“Hmm?” Patrin slowly came out of his reverie.

“You know, like in school. You work with me. Mook and Augwun can help Clio. Then we can get together and share our findings. Is it a plan?” Patrin nodded and they split up into groups.

“Can we take this outside?” asked Kit, feeling the need for a breath of fresh air.

“Sure, if you like,” answered Patrin picking up the little yellow handbook. They settled into a couple of wicker chairs and Kit noticed that the seeds that Mrs. Hogar had planted a few hours before were sprouting already.

“Does everything grow that fast here?” she asked nodding at the green rows of plants waving in the sunshine.

“No, not usually. When Mrs. Hogar planted them she asked the seeds if they could speed things up a bit. She wanted to have everything ready before nightfall.” Patrin lowered his voice to a whisper. “I don’t know who these clown people are but Mrs. Hogar is all in a bunch about them. She seems to think that they’re very dangerous. You’ll have to forgive her for being so harsh just now. You know she has our best interests at heart.”

“Oh, I totally understand,” replied Kit. “Actually this is good for me, I’d like to know more about what Toymakers here actually do.”

“Let me see if I can put this in Greylander terms.” Patrin collected his thoughts and began to explain, “Here in the real world, matter, as you call it, can be moved by thought or imagination. We have very strict laws governing the creation of things to

prevent utter chaos. Laws are especially exacting about toys to protect our most valuable citizens, children. Hence, every city has a Toy Council to ensure social order. Food, clothes, even houses can be created, theoretically, by anyone but are usually left to professionals or helped by boxes. It gets very tiresome to design a complete set of new clothes every morning, so most people lapse into habit. That the reason that you see so many uniforms, especially here in this unimaginative place.”

“So anybody could make anything?” asked Kit. “That’s incredible! What stops people from just making, I don’t know, all kinds of horrible stuff?”

Patrin pondered the question for a minute and continued, “Just as people in your world stop, for the most part, for red lights, and refrain, for whatever reason, from running over pedestrians, most people here would never dream of making destructive toys. It’s much rarer than crime is where you are from. The Greylands is a very barbaric society. I’ve found the difference to be most apparent in how you see toys. Here they are highly valued; in your culture people don’t seem to care for them much. People here play their whole lives, not just for a few years when they are children. You see, toys are good for you, they keep you healthy. Does this make sense at all?”

“But this place seems pretty violent to me. Just look at what happened to Mook, not to mention those clowns. That is just as bad as anything from back home,” argued Kit.

“Well, yes, you have a point there. But that’s here in Blocksbury. That kind of violence is highly unusual, if not unheard of in other parts of the kingdom. I intend to report the conditions here to the Council of Justice as soon as we get back to Saint Ives. I find it ridiculous that these kinds of activities continue to flourish in these modern times. When Queen Iren finds out about this place. Well! You just wait and see.” Patrin finished this sentence with his arms crossed in an air of finality. “Let’s continue our studies, shall we?”

He opened the book to the first page. “There are five laws that are the challenge of every Toymaker. Here, I’ll read them to you.

The Law of the Toymakers

1. Toymakers shall strive to do their best and highest work at all times.
2. Toys shall not harm or hurt any living thing, neither by intention or carelessness.
3. Toymakers shall be rewarded according to their work.
4. Toys shall give honor to the earth and to the hands that use them.
5. The most care must be given to the simplest toys because those are often loved the best.

Patrin said the words without looking at the page. Kit could tell that not only did he have them memorized but that he believed it with all his being.

“This is amazing,” she said. “Does everybody actually believe in this? And how exactly are you rewarded?”

“Sometimes we are paid gold or gifts and some Toymakers earn land or titles. It’s really amazing what happens....” Patrin’s nose wrinkled up, “But people don’t become Toymakers only for the money. It is financially rewarding but also most prestigious.” They read over the five laws until Kit was confident that she had them memorized.

“What does the rest of the book have to say?” she asked, noting that they only had ten more minutes.

“Nothing, its just blank pages where you can practice drawing toys. If you follow the Five Laws then you know everything that you need to keep on the path.

“Do you think that it might be possible to give some of the toys that we’re making away? There seem to be a lot of children around here that need new playthings.”

“I’ve been thinking that same thing,” replied Patrin. “The children who live over in the Bunks where Mook and Augwun were staying could certainly use a few new toys. Let’s take a load over tomorrow afternoon. I have a Doubler that I brought from home. It’s a handy little thing. It duplicates toys so you don’t have to keep drawing the same thing over and over. Believe me, that can get to be very tiresome. Once I did three hundred chess sets in a week all by hand. They were for a tournament and I put it off until the last minute. The last few pieces were very close to breaking rule number one.”

“Not your highest and best work?” remarked Kit laughing.

“I had hand cramps for days. I guess I came close to breaking rule number two in hurting myself. I suppose I fall in the living thing category.”

“Are Friends living things?” asked Kit; thinking about what Augwun had said about Mook’s Friend probably being unstuffed.

“In a way, yes. They’re in a category all their own. Which leads me to the question, when were you thinking of making your own Friend? T’will make your job so much easier.”

“I don’t know if I can,” replied Kit. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“They have to be made by hand, carved or sewn, it doesn’t really matter. Think back to when you were a child. What did you like?”

“Horses, I liked horses a lot. So all I have to do is sew up a stuffed horse and “poof!” I have a living pet horse to follow me around?”

“It’s not quite that simple, but you’ve the general idea. Bringing it to life can be tricky. It helps to name it and see its personality. Just get the first part done and who knows? Perhaps you will get lucky and it will animate quickly. Sometimes Toymakers have to carry their Friends around for years before anything happens, but I’m sure you won’t have any problems at all.” He looked optimistic but Kit didn’t feel so sure. She had this vision of herself being an old lady lugging around a stuffed animal and talking to it.

“Still,” she thought to herself, “it wouldn’t hurt to try, and I do have an picture in my head....”

Mrs. Hogar grilled them for an hour before she was satisfied that they wouldn’t make any more dangerous toys. They all set back to work, the room silent except for the rustle of paper and the scritch, scritch of pens and pencils. Most of the things that they came up with at first were very safe, soft stuffed animals, balls and felt puppets. Then Mook drew a fine set of wooden baby beads making sure that the colors were edible and the beads so large that no child could possibly choke on one. Augwun meticulously checked each drawing and sent back any that he thought needed revising. Kit, after drawing pages of fluffy baby ducklings, found herself doodling a small drawing of a chubby, little blue horse. Impulsively she added gold stars on its back and a shaggy mane and tail. Graceful feathered wings and a unicorn horn completed the sketch. She looked at

the drawing for a while and then hid it in a pile of papers. After drawing rag dolls for a while, the ideas started to run out so she started rummaging through the supply closet for inspiration. On the top shelf was a bolt of blue velveteen. The fabric rippled into elegant waves as she unrolled it, reflecting the light into sky brights and midnight shadows. As the afternoon stretched into evening Kit kept finding things around the room, here and there, as if they were calling to her. There was a large skein of silken gold yarn, some almond shaped onyx buttons and little gold stars made out of shiny fabric. As they tidied up the workroom at the end of the day Kit piled all of her fabrics and trims that she had collected into an empty box and stored it away in the closet.

Well into the night Kit lay in bed staring at the shadows on the ceiling. She tried to fall asleep but the velvet blue of the fabric and the soft golden thread filled her thoughts. Feeling an overwhelming need to look at the materials again she crept downstairs and got the box out of the closet. She felt rather silly smuggling the box back to her room.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to cut the pieces out. Then I’ll be able to sleep.” Kit sketched the pattern pieces on the velveteen with a piece of chalk and carefully cut them out with a gold handled pair of shears. “What is this going to look like put together? It wouldn’t take too long to just sew the body,” she told herself as she threaded a needle with dark blue thread. One little bit led to another and the hours passed as the little unicorn took shape. Kit had found a bag full of white feathers and lace that she sewed into layers to make a lovely pair of wings. As the sky in the east was beginning to glow with the first signs of dawn Kit sewed the last star onto its back. The unicorn had a sweet thoughtful face with bright black button eyes and a happy grin.

Kit sank back into the pillows and murmured as she fell asleep. “I think I’m going to call him Blue.”

Chapter 20

Kit woke up to find Mrs. Hogar putting a small breakfast tray on her nightstand.

“What time is it?” Kit yawned, trying to sit up and look more awake than she felt.

“It’s well nigh on ten-o-clock, Miss. I thought you could use a bit of nourishment. Had a late night of it?” Mrs. Hogar handed her a steaming mug of hot coffee.

“Hmm? Last night? Oh, yeah, I was making something...” Kit glanced around hoping to see a live unicorn running around. Instead she saw the stuffed animal that she had made lying tipped over on the floor.

“Nice work,” said Mrs. Hogar picking up the small toy and setting it on the bed. “The others are working downstairs. Mr. Vitus and Mr. Scrub from the Toy Council have come to call. My impression is that they are curious as to your progress on the block designs. I took the liberty of putting away all the toys that you have made so far into storage. Master Patrin felt that it might be a bit premature to show them at this time.”

“Good idea.” Kit felt disappointed that Blue wasn’t alive. She turned her attention to the problems at hand.

“Any sign of our clown visitors last night?” Kit asked.

Mrs. Hogar pushed aside the curtains and looked out over the garden.

“No,” she said, “The plantings we made yesterday were very effective. Jolly’s Bane is a clown repellent. They won’t be able to come within fifty feet of the house. I suggest that you get a bit of it to carry with you when you leave the Hall. The pods are especially potent. And if you wish to continue your morning walks I recommend that you take an escort with you as well. Clowns have been known to enlist the aid of others to get what they want.” Kit wanted to protest that she could take care of herself but decided that caution was better than bravado.

“Good idea. Thanks for the coffee.” The warm liquid was helping Kit to wake up. “Oh” she added, “we need to make sure that everyone else gets a handful of this ‘Jolly’s Bane,’ especially Augwun. When I overheard the clown called Captain Dolly questioning him, she said that she would be back in two weeks for a list of all the toys that we have made. So I know that they will try and get to him in the next week or so.” A curious uneasy feeling swirled in Kit’s stomach.

“Mrs. Hogar, may I ask you about something?” The housekeeper nodded and Kit continued, “Do you think that we should be trusting Augwun? I mean, he is the one writing everything down. You don’t think that he would give the clowns the list of toys, do you?”

“Time will tell, won’t it?” Mrs. Hogar pressed her lips together in a paper-thin line. “The man’s been through more than you or I can imagine. However there is something about him that I find unsettling. I’ll watch over him for you, miss.” She drew open the curtains and beams of sunlight streamed into the room. “May I tell your guests that you will be down shortly?”

“Yes, thank you,” Kit replied and Mrs. Hogar swept out of the room.

“Well, my new Friend,” Kit picked up Blue and held him in her hands, “We are in an interesting place, no? I need to figure a way to get us home. Perhaps you could help me fix the Fish Car, or perhaps your wings would be strong enough to carry Clio and me across the ocean. I guess I should have made you a lot bigger.” The little unicorn looked back mutely with shiny almond shaped eyes, but showed no signs of springing to life.

“Well, let’s face the day.” Kit put the unicorn down and poured another cup of coffee.

Patrin had Mr. Vitus and Mr. Scrub engrossed in studying a flip chart of block blueprints. Mr. Scrub’s baby lemur dozed in the crook of his neck. Any hint of any other kind of toys was absent from the room. A small discrete pile of four or five wood blocks lay on one barren worktable.

“And so you see, by adding a point zero three millimeter bevel to the edge we increase stackability by 67 percent!” Patrin gestured broadly in what Kit saw as a first class sales pitch. “Ah! Miss Ashlyn, glad you could join us. I was just filling in Mr. Vitus and Mr. Scrub here on your bevel idea.” He gave Kit a frantic look that clearly said “Help me out here!” so she dove right in.

“A lot of the research that we have been doing shows that bevel technology adds to the stability of the finished product. It also increases ease of use over a quantifiable period. As you can see from this sample,” she picked up a block from off the table, “the bevel also adds a visual alignment feature that increases the, um, ‘fun factor’ quotient 43

percent. Don't you agree, Mr. Busby?" She handed the block to Patrin and smiled at them. The visitors were clearly impressed.

"Yes, indeed, my thoughts exactly. Now if you will excuse us gentlemen, we have a lot of work to get done today. Thank you for stopping by." Patrin started to usher them toward the door. "Best regards to the rest of the Council."

"Mrs. Poacher was supposed to accompany us here to day but had to be excused due to excessive paperwork. " said Mr. Scrub. "She sends her apologies. I know she was anxious to check up on your progress here." Kit remembered the short blond woman who was the Director of Quality Control and her saying that she would make sure that their work was perfect. She felt a big wave of relief that Mrs. Poacher hadn't been able to make it.

Mr. Vitus added, "She'd like to make an appointment for you to come down to the Council building as soon as possible and let her check your work."

"Thank you," answered Patrin politely, "but that will not be necessary at this time. I would prefer to concentrate our efforts on development for the next two weeks. There will be plenty of time for proofing in the weeks ahead." Mr. Vitus looked stressed and started to protest, then suddenly changed his mind. "Fine, fine, I'll tell her that you will delay the proofing until the official meeting." Patrin shut the door behind them and let out a sigh of relief.

Thank the heavens that you came down when you did! I was running out of spin. "Fun factor? Miss Ashlyn! That was brilliant!"

"Patrin, is it an odd thing that Mrs. Poacher wasn't here with Vitus and Eli?" Kit asked.

"That old bat? You should count your lucky dominos that she wasn't here! She would pick apart creation if you'd let her. She's impossible!" cried Patrin.

"She sounds it, but why wasn't she here? You'd think that whatever we are doing here would take priority over everything else. Or am I wrong?"

"No, you have a point. Now that you mention it, it is rather strange that she didn't stop by. You would think that she'd be the first person here checking up on us. What are you thinking?"

“Well... since Mrs. Hogar planted the clown repellent in the backyard I’m suspicious of anyone who suddenly can’t come over for a visit. And that Vitus fellow seemed very nervous about something.”

“So you think that she might be a clown? She’s been on the board since, let me think... about a month after I came here, about eight months.”

“Where did she come from?” asked Kit.

“I’m really not sure. She joined the Counsel about the same time as Mr. Punter. He didn’t show up today either, nor did Mr. Shishka for that matter. I’ll have Mrs. Hogar do a little research into their backgrounds. It may be nothing but it can’t hurt to look.”

“I was also wondering, “ said Kit, “if it would still be a good idea for us to give away copies of the toys that we have made so far. What if one of them turns out to be ‘illegal’ or some such thing? The clowns seemed pretty determined to pin something on us.”

“I have already thought of that. There’s a load full of old toys that I brought with me. I’ve had Mook and Clio making copies all morning in the upstairs workroom. They seemed to be having a good time of it. That Clio is really a quick study! She picked up on how to use the Doubler right away!”

On the very top floor of Quad Hall was a huge, open attic with dormer windows and hardwood floors. Other than countless books lining the walls, floor to ceiling, and a few wooden chairs, it was a wide-open space and reminded Clio of a skate rink. She and Mook started out enthusiastically using the Doubler, which looked like a cross between a red metal raygun and a blunderbuss, on a huge trunk full of toys that Patrin had given them to copy. But it was hard to stick to the task at hand when there were so many interesting things to look at. There were rainbow colored fish puzzles that swam around on the floor when they were put together and a set of rabbit toy explorers in colorful uniforms. Each adventure rabbit had a backpack full of tiny equipment, a tent, a mess kit and climbing gear. The wooden box lid said in simple carved letters, “The Amazing Adventures of Florimel the Magnificent”

Mook opened a long box that contained a folded up pogo stick made in the shape of a jaguar. When unpacked, the jaguar’s upper paws were the handles and the lower

paws and tail made a tripod that bounced the rider up and down the room. They took turns bouncing around for a good half an hour until they were exhausted. The interesting thing about the jaguar pogo stick was that even if they tried to fall off or hit something they couldn't. Clio experimented in trying to crash into the wall but no matter how hard she jumped, a cushion of air kept her from hitting it.

There were all kinds of games to play. Their favorite turned out to be one with wind-up frogs that jumped through rolling hoops. It was so funny that both Clio and Mook had tears rolling down their faces after playing it for only a few minutes. The comical song that the frogs sang was half music and half croak. High and low, deep and squeaky, each frog made a different noise that blended together to make a funny rhythmic tune. They kept trying to catch the windups to put them away but the musical croaking of the frogs in the storage box started them laughing and the game would start all over again. When Patrin and Kit came upstairs they had barely unpacked half the toys.

“See here, what is going on?” Patrin came in and angrily snatched the box of frogs away from Mook. He pushed a small button on the side of the box marked “Clean Up” and all the frogs immediately returned to their resting place and were silent.

“I hate frogs,” he said.

“Why is that?” asked Kit, surprised by his abrupt change in mood.

“Nasty, stupid things,” he replied, tossing the frog game down. He turned his back and started sorting through the boxes. He pulled several stacks off to one side and started using the Doubler to methodically copy the toys without looking up. Mook and Clio stood around awkwardly for a few minutes before Kit sent them downstairs to have some lunch before they left to deliver the toys. Patrin was clearly troubled about something.

“Is there something on your mind?” she asked as they sorted the boxes.

“I'm fine, it's just that I don't care for frogs,” he said.

Kit picked up the frog game and studied the box. On the underside was a small griffin logo embossed into the wood. Puzzle pieces started to fly together in her head.

“This has something to do with your lost Toymaker, doesn't it? Why is it that this game bothers you so? Patrin, look at me, what is it about frogs? Do you remember anything at all?” Patrin shook his head.

“I often have bad dreams about exploding frogs. They’re my worst nightmare. People rushing about, children crying, somehow, although I’m not sure exactly what, I caused a disaster.”

“Did you play a trick on somebody when you were younger? Something that got out of hand?”

“I honestly don’t remember. I try and I try but nothing comes to mind.” Patrin sat on the trunk with his hands between his knees.

“I think perhaps you’re trying too hard. Go take a rest and I’ll finish up here. We’ll be ready to take all these copies in about an hour. That should cheer you up, seeing all those children getting all these very fine toys. These are his toys, the missing Toymaker’s work, aren’t they?” Kit pointed to the tiny griffin marks on all of the packaging.

“Yes! They are really something, aren’t they? This is just a tiny sampling of what we have back home. We’ve collected three warehouses full, hundreds of containers all with his mark. Do you think that he’s still alive?” Patrin looked like a small child needing reassurance. Kit could tell that he felt terribly guilty about something and she couldn’t figure out what a young teenage boy could have done to cause such chaos.

“I’m sure that anyone clever enough to create all these things could surely survive anything that you could dish out, Patrin Busby Arkus Orion or whatever your name is today.” Kit teased him in an attempt to cheer him up.

“You know,” she said, hoping to turn the conversation to some other topic. “Augwun said I should ask you why he knew who you were.” Patrin managed half a smile.

“That’s an easy one! You must promise not to tell anyone but I think it’s something you’d find out sooner or later.” He dug through his pockets and pulled out a handful of coins. He put them one by one into Kit’s hand.

“This is my Dad.” An embossed gold coin showed the profile of a stern looking man wearing a crown. “This is my Mum.” A smaller gold piece had a picture of a beautiful woman with long braids wrapped around her head. “My older brother, my sister, and…” he sorted through a handful of wrappers and string to pull out a small silver coin with his picture as a young boy engraved on it. “Your faithful servant.”

“Well!” exclaimed Kit. “I guess this saves on having to carry family pictures in your wallet. So is your father a King?” she asked studying the curious writing on the back of the coin.

“No, he’s the Crown Prince. My Grandmother is Queen Iren. And if she ever found out that I was down here! The Saints help us all! There aren’t many people who aren’t terrified of her.” Patrin lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’m more scared of her than I am of Mrs. Hogar. So you see why I don’t particularly want anyone to find out who I am.”

After Patrin left, Kit copied the rest of the toys. It was hard for her not to interrupt her work to examine each one; they were all so wonderful to look at. After she got the last few items duplicated and stacked off to one side she couldn’t help but pick up one toy in particular. It was a simple wooden container no more than six inches long with an intricate flourish embossed into the sides and a picture of the sun with a laughing face painted on the top. At one end a little window had some writing over it and a little arrow pointing to the opening. Kit held the box up to her eyes and was enchanted to see a miniature scene of gray mice running around a little furnished mouse house. They wore quaint little outfits and as she watched they seemed to be preparing for a large mouse party complete with food and costumes. Kit became so engrossed in the activities that she didn’t hear the door open. When she finally looked up she was surprised to find that Mook stood in the room watching her.

“I sorry, I didn’t hear you come in,” she said, “Have you been standing there long?”

“No, miss,” he replied, rolling up the sleeves to his workshirt. “Mrs. Hogar sent me to bring down the toys.”

“Well, take a look at this one. Have you ever seen anything like it?” Kit motioned for him to sit down next to her on the trunk.

“A Sun Box, I haven’t seen one of these in ever so long. There’s not many Toymakers that know how to make them,” he said, taking a seat.

His face lit up as he watched the little mice pantomime unfold as the party guests started to arrive bringing tiny baskets of grain and berries.

“Ah, Mr. Nettlebalm seems to be all in a bother over his daughter’s choice of suitors.”

“Which one is he?” Kit asked, peering into the box.

“He’s the portly fellow in the green waistcoat. His daughter Pansy seems to be quite taken by a certain schoolmaster mouse standing by the window. She is clearly snubbing Branford, the son of Squire Peaseblossom, the young tan fellow by the buffet table. Good for her!”

“Oh look!” Kit was enchanted. “He’s put down the cranberry and he’s going over to talk to them. I wish that I could hear what they were saying.”

“There are subtitles up at the top. See, up there.” Mook pointed up to a little space at the top where shapes kept flashing.

“Aaugh! I hate not being able to read.” Kit let the Sun Box fall into her lap and let out a sigh of frustration. “And don’t start in about needing a Friend because I made a unicorn last night and nothing happened. It’s a stuffed animal and it will stay that way.”

“You have to give it time. You should be carrying him around with you. Friends are a serious responsibility; this is why they are so special and so prized. But it takes time for their personality to form. What is his name?”

“Blue.” Kit felt embarrassed to talk about the little stuffed animal. Normally she was hardened to any kind of critique of her work. Over the years she had become so detached from the things that she designed, that compliments and criticism had no effect on her at all. But this little flying unicorn was such a personal, frivolous creation that she felt as awkward as a first year student at her first review. Mook saw the hint of color rise in her cheeks and took her hand.

“He really is special, this Blue? And you feel tender towards him, no?” His honest gray eyes searched hers. “That is a good sign. It may take a while, but he’ll be a good Friend to you. You have to believe in your own ability to create something wonderful.” Kit turned the Sun Box around in her hands and ran a finger over the small griffin mark etched into the side.

“What happened to your Friend, Mook? Surely you must have had one,” she asked, hoping that she wasn’t being too personal.

“I...I think, at least I’m pretty sure that I hid him somewhere safe. Yes, that’s what I did! I think that someone is watching him for me.” Mook looked a little confused as he tried to remember something difficult. “My memory is not what it used to be. Too many whacks on the head from Master Kulak, I guess. Thank you by the way for letting me stay here, Augwun too. He may not have said anything, but we’re both very grateful to be able to work here.”

“And Mrs. Hogar would be more grateful if some work actually got done.” Augwun poked his head in the door. “She’s asking for you downstairs. Chimka has the car ready.” He stared at the cartons of toys for a moment and said, “You’re short sixteen toys. There are 87 children and you’ve only 71 boxes.”

“I never actually thought about how many children there might be.” Kit felt relieved that Augwun had told her that they needed extra toys. “Are you sure about how many children live there?”

“Augie always knows those kinds of things. He’s got an abacus for a brain.” Mook laughed as he stood up. He picked up a load of copied toys and headed toward the door. “I’ll leave you two to figure out the numbers,” he said from behind an armful of boxes. Augwun nodded and started to pick up the Doubler to make more toys.

“How about we make some more of these?” suggested Kit, handing him the Sun Box, “This one is just delightful.” Augwun took the toy in his long spidery fingers and studied it carefully for a moment. He seemed a little puzzled by it, so Kit showed him the little window and explained about the mice party going on inside. He watched intently for a moment and said, “Yes, I suppose that there might be a few children that would be interested in this.”

“Might! What do you mean? It’s a beautiful piece of work, something very special.” Kit felt annoyed that he wasn’t more impressed by the curious object. “You don’t think that they’ll enjoy this?”

“I’m really not an expert, miss,” Augwun replied, still studying the illustrations painted on the wood.

“We’ll see! I guess I feel that since I like it so much that other people should too.” She took the Sun Box back from him and felt the smooth polished wood in her fingers. “Do you think that Patrín would mind if I made a toy for myself? Is that allowed?”

“I don’t see why not, that is, if you really want one.” He looked at her curiously. “If you think that this is an engaging toy than I’m sure that it will be very well received.” He used the Doubler to make her a copy and handed it to her solemnly.

“I can finish up here if you like,” he added, swiftly making copies of toys and stacking them in piles. Kit sat engrossed in watching the mice perform a country waltz. “Hmm? Oh, OK. Thanks,” she said watching as Branford the tan colored mouse tried to cut in on Pansy’s schoolmaster beau. She went downstairs to put her Sun Box away and didn’t return for quite a while. If she had come back earlier, she would have seen Augwun opening and inspecting the contents of each and every box.

Chapter 21

It was mid-afternoon by the time that Kit, Patrin, Mook and Augwun finally loaded all the boxes of toys. Clio, after much fervent protesting, stayed behind with Mrs. Hogar to practice her trumpet. Kit insisted that she needed to practice or she would be in big trouble when school started up again. So after promising she could go next time they set off in Patrin's bright blue windup car.

On the way to the Bunks, Kit kept scanning for evil clowns hiding in the bushes. She was grateful that Mrs. Hogar had given them all amulets filled with Jolly's Bane to keep any clowns from coming near them. A few times she thought that she saw things rustling in the underbrush or glimpsed painted faces staring out of windows but she couldn't be sure if it was a clown or just her overactive imagination. She glanced in the side mirrors from time to time to observe Augwun in the back seat. He sat stoically observing the passing sights, and she wondered if he was watching for clowns as well.

As they passed through the front gates, the men in the guard booth snapped to attention at the site of Patrin in the car. Kit wondered if the guards were to protect the people living there or to keep them from getting out. A gray metal sign that said "The Bunks" in rusty lettering hung over the archway, swinging back and forth in the afternoon breeze. A high wall made of thousands of faded old red and yellow blocks surrounded the buildings. Big sheets of plywood patched holes in the fence where parts had fallen in. The main courtyard was deserted except for a few old men idly sitting around. At the sight of their car, however, it was as if a strong wind had gusted in. Doors and windows opened and closed, people peeked out and children started to wind their way down rickety stairways toward them.

The screen door to the main office swung open and the Bunk Warden came out to greet them. He was a shrewd younger man who seemed eager to please. He exchanged pleasantries with Patrin and shook hands all around, and after a moment's hesitation even with Augwun and Mook. Patrin gave him a fine toy merry-go-round with little owls and storks carved in it. The Bunk Warden was beside himself with gratitude and offered to show them around but Patrin declined.

“No, thank you, I don’t want to take up any more of your time.” Patrin pumped the Bunk Warden’s hand enthusiastically. “You’ve been more than helpful and I’m sure that the children here can help us as well. You see, we’re doing research on some of these inventions and want to distribute a few things in exchange for being able to study the effects of toys on overall health. So with that in mind, let us continue in our work, shall we?” By this time the shiny blue car was surrounded in a sea of grubby children. As they got out Kit noticed that the children all knew Mook and Augwun and swirled around them pulling on their jackets and holding their hands.

“You seem to be very popular,” she told Mook over the chatter of little voices. He looked embarrassed but pleased with all the attention. He nodded and stooped down to talk with a group of youthful admirers.

“These children deserve better than this place,” Kit thought looking over the bleak housing, the peeling paint and the boarded windows.

Patrin had the children line up and called them forward, taking great delight in selecting each one a present. Kit was glad that they had made extras and were in no danger of running out. Soon the courtyard was transformed with the sound of children laughing and scurrying about. As she chased a runaway ball between two buildings she noticed a small girl with long dark hair peaking out a window. She was young, no more than five, and ducked back in behind the shabby curtain in a flash. Kit went back to the car and told Patrin about her.

“I saw a little girl who didn't get a toy. What do we have left?”

Patrin rummaged through the trunk and pulled out a medium sized box that contained a doll cottage. He passed to the box to Augwun, who offered to carry it for Kit. They made their way back to the place where she had seen the little girl and knocked on the door. An elderly dark haired woman with green eyes cracked the door open and looked at them with suspicion. She said something in a language that Kit didn’t understand, and to her surprise, Augwun answered her in the same odd language. It sounded melodic and rough at the same time with throaty sounds that rolled off the words like a cat growling. The old woman gestured for them to come in. She made a greeting motion by touching the back of her hand to her forehead and Augwun returned the

salutation and bowed. The woman turned and immediately started heading toward the back of the house.

They walked quickly down a dimly lit hallway with bare cement floors and sleeping nooks off to each side. Augwun had to duck down to pass through the low doorways. Kit felt a bit awkward intruding into someone's home but she didn't have much time to think about it as they soon reached the kitchen. It was a small room but clean, with bunches of dried onions and herbs hanging from hooks over the wood burning stove. The little girl from the window huddled in the shadows under an old painted table. Her pale green eyes stared out at them warily. Augwun put the package on the floor and crouched down to talk to her. His voice was quiet and calming as he spoke in the odd cat language. Soon the little girl was standing next to him pouring her heart out. Between sobs she explained something at length and ended by burying her tearstained face into his shoulder.

Augwun made a shushing noise and wrapped the distraught child in his long arms for a moment, then said a few words that made her look up. He dipped into his jacket pocket and pulled something out. He held both fists out in front of her and she tapped on the back of one. He turned it over and slowly opened his hand but it was empty. She picked the other hand and when he opened it there was nothing there either. With a mischievous look on his face Augwun reached over and pulled something from behind her ear. She peeled his fingers open to reveal a small carved polar bear. It was smooth plain wood, simply made without much detail, yet just the right size to fit nicely in a child's palm. Her eyes widened as she took it from him with obvious delight. She pulled another one just like it only a bit larger from her apron pocket and clutched them together in one small fist. She reached up and patted his rough face with her free hand and then darted off to show the old woman her new treasure. Augwun stood up, and touched his forehead with the back of his hand again. He gave the old woman the doll cottage with a few more words and turned to go. The little girl ran up to Kit as they were leaving, pulled her close and kissed her cheek.

When they got outside Kit asked, noting the similar coloring and facial features between Augwun, the old woman and little girl.

“Are they family?”

“No, they are Catlanders. I’m a bit rusty with the language; I’m half Catlander on my mother’s side. Mook speaks it much more fluently, being from Catsport. They usually don’t travel this far south.”

“The little girl seemed very upset about something.”

“She thought that you’d come to take away the bear that I’d given her. She said that she didn’t want another toy. I told her that it might be possible to have more than one and the dollhouse was a gift from you,” he explained. “I started whittling small animals out of old scrap pieces of blocks last summer when the children here didn’t have anything to play with.”

“So you do know something about toys after all,” laughed Kit.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because out of all these elaborate toys she wanted that little wooden polar bear from you more than anything. She was completely entranced. You were very sweet with that little girl. Do you think you could help with designing some toys, in addition to doing all the paperwork?”

Before he could reply, they were encircled by a crowd of excited children all wanting to show them their new toys. There were kaleidoscopes, jump ropes, dish sets and sailboats. By the time that they had finished inspecting each one it was time to go. As they started loading the empty boxes into the car Kit thought that she saw a flash of brightly striped clothing through a hole in the fence. A greasepainted eye looked through a knothole and then vanished. Augwun’s sharp nose twitched as he sniffed the air.

“They are close. Very close,” he said.

Chapter 22

Back at Quad Hall Clio was having problems of her own. The afternoon started out disappointingly enough, what with having to stay behind and practice the trumpet instead of getting to deliver wonderful toys to other kids. After an hour of trumpet practice that sent Chimka and Wilber running from the room, the day really started to slide downhill. First Mrs. Hogar wouldn't let her sit and read but made her help work in the garden. It was hot out in the afternoon sun and she had to use a long pole with a sharp blade on the end to cut at the weeds. What also made it difficult was that she didn't really know the difference between a weed and a seedling. She chopped down several small corn stalks before Mrs. Hogar stopped her.

“One would think that you had never worked in a garden before!” Mrs. Hogar exclaimed as she surveyed the damaged plants.

“Um, well honestly... I never have, I mean not much. We had some flowers at the last apartment my folks rented but we didn't have room for vegetables and stuff. It was kind of small,” Clio said, feeling pretty small herself.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Hogar, leaning on her long pole, “a city dweller. Well, you can't be blamed for that, miss. Let me show you a few things before you uproot anything else.” She walked Clio through the rows of plants and explained what each one was. Some of the plant names she recognized like peas and melons, others where less familiar like Rose of Wombat and Saint Sparrow's Wort.

“Saint Sparrow is the patron of Kitemakers. Look here, the leaves look like little kites. It is said that the Little People fly the leaves using spider web for string. I've never actually seen that but that doesn't mean it isn't true,” she said holding up a diamond shaped leaf. Then she picked a large blue striped leaf off of a low sprawling vine. “This is Jolly's Bane, it's very powerful in warding off evil. The leaves turn a purplish color when dried.”

“Miss Ashlyn told me about this one. She says something about it keeping bad clowns away. It sounds kind of weird to me.” Clio fingered the little bag filled with dried leaves that Kit had given her to wear around her neck.

“Well now, you be wary like she told you. Not that all clowns are found to be evil. I have met King Pierrot Lunaire and his Lady and they are good and noble. But some clown folk are very dangerous, wicked things and you need to be careful, little miss.” Mrs. Hogar pointed at Clio’s chest with a wrinkled brown finger.

“I suppose that you study the War Arts in school?” she asked tapping Clio’s ankle quite sharply with her pole.

“Ow! No! Unless you mean history,” Clio replied rubbing her ankle.

“Not history. I am talking about fighting, long staff and swords, archery, hand-to-hand combat. I would think that with the Greylands being as barbaric a place as it is that you would study nothing else. And I would especially think a tiny, wee thing like you would have to work extra hard to survive.” Mrs. Hogar seemed amazed and amused by Clio’s lack of fighting skills.

“Some people are good at that stuff I guess, like Miss Ashlyn,” said Clio remembering how Kit had pinned Patrin in the Fish Car. “But we are not as uncivilized as all that,” she added indignantly, “We study books and history and music, not fighting.”

“Music, like that trumpet of yours? Instead of how to defend yourself? Hmpf!” Mrs. Hogar sniffed. “It is about time you started learning. A girl of your age should know all these things. Come with me.”

They went to a patch of open space in the lawn that was shady and thick with soft grass. Mrs. Hogar removed the sharp blades from the long poles and began to instruct Clio in how to use it as a weapon. After a half an hour of flipping Clio off of her feet with the pole Mrs. Hogar shook her head.

“No, no! Watch your hands, not so close together. Ach! You are hopeless, child. Put your staff down for a moment. Let’s try something else. Suppose some evil thing jumped out and grabbed you, what would you do?” Mrs. Hogar’s hand shot out and grabbed Clio’s wrist with an iron grasp. Clio immediately started pulling away but was held fast.

“You are a lot stronger than you look,” said Clio digging her heels into the grass.

“Strength does not always come from size. It comes from cunning, skill, surprise.” She let go of Clio’s wrist and watched her fall to the ground. “Here, try again. Drop your weight and turn your hand with the rest of you. Push, don’t pull.” Clio tried it

and was able to break away. They practiced this technique for a while and then Mrs. Hogar said, "Here is an easier one. Hold my wrist as hard as you can. Ready?" Clio held on with both hands and braced herself for a fall.

"Let go!" Mrs. Hogar ordered which she promptly did. "What happened?"

"You asked me to let go and so I let go," replied Clio, looking puzzled.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hogar with a gleam in her dark eyes. "So you did. Sometimes the simplest way is the best." She picked up the long staffs and started toward the house. "That is enough training for one day. We'll start again tomorrow. There are visitors coming up the front walkway. We'd best go and greet them."

"I don't hear anything," said Clio.

"Aye, but your Friend does." Mrs. Hogar pointed to Wilber who had woken up from a nap. He was sitting up on a stone bench snuffling the air. His green velvet tail twitched back and forth and he had an annoyed look on his face.

Inside the house the air was cool and soothing, a welcome change to the hot sun of the garden. Clio quickly tried to pull the bits of grass clippings out of her hair as Mrs. Hogar answered the door. As two familiar faces were ushered into the entrance hall Clio realized that her knees and backside were covered in grass stains from falling on the lawn.

"Master Prent and Miss Morna of the Toy Council here to see you, miss." To Clio's horror she looked up to see the two youngest members of the Council staring at her.

"Who is close?" asked Mook, looking confused.

"The clowns that I told you about," explained Augwun as he scanned the walls around the Bunks for more signs of movement. "They were probably drawn here by the toys. They hate them and will probably try to take them away as soon as we are gone."

"No!" cried Kit, "there must be something we can do to stop them." They all stood by the car for a moment and thought. Kit reached under the seat and pulled out the Doubler.

“Would this work on the Jolly’s Bane?” she asked pulling off her amulet from around her neck. “I brought this Doubler thing just in case we needed to make more toys.”

“It’ll work if we make it fun.” Patrin took the Doubler from her and quickly made a huge armful of necklaces. He gathered the swarm of children around him.

“We’re going to play a game. ‘Knights and Dragons’ it is called,” he told them passing out the amulets, two to each child. The strong citrusy fragrance of the Jolly’s Bane filled the air as the crowd of children put the little bags of dried leaves in their pockets and around their necks. He gave a few more armfuls of the necklaces to some of the older boys and girls and instructed them to hide the little bags in the most hard to get to places that they could find.

“Up in the trees, under the floorboards, the more out of the way the better!” he told them with excitement building in his voice, “This game...” he paused and they leaned forward to catch what he was going to say next, “will bring us luck.” The group of older children looked at each other with anticipation. They disbanded and wove their way across the courtyard.

“The rest of you listen closely. Your job is to find and hide the bags again. Each time you find a necklace take a tiny bit of a leaf out and leave it there and hide the bag again in a new spot. Keep track of how many you find and when I come back next week we will see who has found and hidden the most necklaces. Remember to keep one with you at all times. One is to keep and one is to hide. Now go, and good hunting!” The rest of the children nodded and scampered away.

“There!” said Patrin, “That should take care of them for a while! There must have been thirty pounds of Jolly’s Bane. We should have every inch of this place covered with the stuff by nightfall.”

“I’d be surprised if there is a clown left within twenty miles of here! You’ve given them quite a snootful!” laughed Mook. But Augwun didn’t look so convinced.

“They may be gone for a short while. But they will find a way to get what they want. Jester Control is not so easily put off, you see. But this should hold them off for a bit.”

“What did Patrin mean?” Kit asked Augwun, “The game will bring us luck.” as they packed up the leftover boxes. Augwun picked a rock and pointed the Doubler at it. When he pulled the switch nothing happened.

“He is clever, that one,” he said, glancing at Patrin. “Toy Doublers only work on toys, not on other things like food or clothes. By turning this into a game he was able to replicate all the Jolly’s Bane he needed. Those children think that this is all for play, which is as it should be. The only reason that he was able to copy all those amulets was because he believes that everything is just a game. And a game well played can bring good fortune,” he spoke quietly to her so the others could not hear.

“And you? What do you believe?” Kit asked him as he closed the trunk of the car and started turning the big wind-up key for the ride back.

“I believe the stakes are higher than you think,” he said after a moment. He gave the key one last turn and opened the back door of the car for Kit.

Chapter 23

“Good Afternoon, Miss Halina.” Morna, the red haired girl smiled and looked almost friendly. She was wearing a severe gray suit and carrying a briefcase.

“Hey,” replied Clio. She felt dirty and tired and desperately hoped that the visit would be short. Wilber peeked around the corner and glared at them.

“Yes, hello, good to see you again. How are you getting along?” Prent offered his hand, which Clio shook briefly. He was also wearing a gray suit and his dark hair was slicked back. Clio wondered if they felt uncomfortable being so dressed up on a hot day. Prent looked around the entrance hall as if searching for clues.

“Do you want something?” Clio asked abruptly. She wondered why they were being so nice to her all of a sudden.

“The Council asked us to pay you a visit and see if there was anything that you needed,” replied Morna trying to look official. “Is there anything that we can help you with?” She flashed a perfect white smile, full of insincerity.

“No.” Clio replied with an equally fake smile. “Thank you.” Morna appeared flustered and looked at Prent for help. He ran a hand over his shiny hair and said,

“We heard that you were very good at making marbles and were giving some away. Is there any chance of us seeing some of your work?” Clio felt flattered for a moment and then remembered how mean they had been a few days before at the Council Meeting.

“Well gee, let me think about it. Um, no,” she answered pushing them toward the door. By this time Clio felt sure that they were there to spy on them and was anxious for them to go away as soon as possible. Mrs. Hogar entered the room carrying a tray of refreshments.

“Perhaps your visitors would like some lemonade on the veranda while you get cleaned up, miss.” Clio thought that was the last thing that she would like, but could tell that Mrs. Hogar was up to something.

“Yeah, sure.” Clio shrugged. “Why don’t you guys sit outside and relax for a bit. Have some punch and cookies... outside.” Mrs. Hogar ushered them out onto the porch and got them settled and came back into where Clio was still standing.

“Jeez! Mrs. Hogar, I was just getting them to leave and you had to ask them to stay for snacks?” Clio whispered angrily.

“What did I teach you earlier? Don’t fight; guide them where you want them to go. If you send them away too quickly they will only get suspicious and come back again,” Mrs. Hogar explained calmly. “Now quick, go make yourself presentable and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“What am I supposed to wear?” Clio asked, wondering if she should have a suit on too.

“I would recommend something... unexpected,” replied Mrs. Hogar heading toward the kitchen.

Clio went upstairs and stared at the clothes box. Wilber looked at the box and back to her again and rested the side of his green velvet face on one paw and nodded to himself.

“Any ideas?” she asked. Wilber raised one finger to his lips and opened his eyes wide. He wiggled his eyebrows as he lay both paws on the box giving Clio a “I know what I’m doing” look. He opened the lid and took out a sleeveless short dress, made of pale blue linen, the color of a robin’s egg. He reached in the box again and pulled out a pair of light blue sandals to match. Clio finished brushing all the grass clippings out of her dark hair and slipped the dress over her head. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought that she looked nice.

“Do I look OK?” she asked shyly. Wilber gave her a thumbs up and nodded enthusiastically. “Great! Let go see what kind of trouble we can get into.” Clio smiled a funny little smile to herself and headed down the stairs.

Prent and Morna were sitting up very straight in wicker chairs on the veranda. Morna had her briefcase balanced on her lap. They both looked rather warm and uncomfortable. Clio noticed with a bit of satisfaction that Prent’s eyes widened a bit when he saw her and he stood up immediately.

“Um, hello. Welcome back, Miss Halina.” He looked flustered and pulled up a chair for her.

“Hi. Did you get some lemonade?” Clio sat down and poured herself a glass. “If you are going to wait till the others get back you might want to take off your jackets. It’s

been kind of hot today. “ Prent started to take his jacket off when Morna gave him a dirty look and he decided against it. They were silent for a while and stared at each other. Clio was trying to think of something to say when Wilber sidled up and brought a large wooden disc up to the table. It looked like a Chinese checkers game board that had intricate wood inlay of cats that wrapped around a six-pointed star. The board was polished with bee’s wax and the wood was stained in rich dark shades of greens and amber. There were six drawers inset into the sides of the disc that contained the colored playing marbles for the game. Little mouse heads were carved into the wood for drawer pulls.

“Have you ever played this before?” Clio asked innocently. Morna looked a little nervous.

“Of course, we studied it in school. Students must know the rules for all the major games before they graduate,” she said.

“That’s nice,” replied Clio. “Is it like playing Chinese checkers?”

“The Greylander game? Yes, of course. I wrote my eighth form paper on the history of it. But this is Cat’s Paw Checkers; you will find it a little more sophisticated than your primitive Greylander version. ” Morna looked smug and smiled at Prent.

Clio loved to play board games and Chinese checkers was one game she felt halfway decent at playing. It was a gamble to try and play Morna and Prent. She didn’t know how well they knew the game, but the way that Morna reacted made her think that it might be a level playing field. Clio opened one of the drawers and started setting up the marbles.

“You in?” she asked. Prent and Morna nodded and the game began.

Kit sat in the back seat of the windup convertible collecting her thoughts and watching Patrin. He drove smoothly and confidently with his wrist draped over the steering wheel. He was wearing the Chronometer but ever since she had seen him without it he had not seemed as old. “He is a remarkable young man,” she thought, not for the first time. They made the ride back to Quad Hall in silence, tired but in good spirits. As the car pulled into the long driveway Kit could see Clio and the others sitting on the veranda playing a game.

“What are they doing here?” Kit thought to herself as she walked toward the house. “I can’t imagine that they’re here just to play with Clio, they seemed so rude the other day. Perhaps, Mrs. Hogar knows what they want.”

“Hello. How is it going?” Kit asked as she walked up the front stairs to where they were sitting.

“Fine, thanks,” answered Clio. She had won four out of the last five games and was starting to feel more than fine. Prent had barely won the first game by one move, then Clio proceeded to rapidly win the next four. She would have won the first game except that the board mechanically shifted every seventh move rearranging the marbles on the board. There was a pattern to the way that the marbles moved and it took her a while to figure it in to her strategy.

Patrin bounded up the stairs and over the railing and plopped down in a chair next to Clio.

“Hello! Do you mind if I join you? I love this game!”

“Saint Portia’s ghost!” exclaimed Mook, as he out down the load of toys he was carrying and stared at the game board.

“I haven’t played this in ever so long. Would it be at all possible if I could play too, miss?” he said softly to Clio, kneeling down beside her. “I mean, I’ll understand if it’s not allowed.” He looked very serious and sad, his gray eyes looked at her expectantly.

“Of course! That’d be great!” Clio replied. “There’s room for six people. Miss Ashlyn, come play with us!”

“Please, Kit, say yes. Then we can play teams!” Patrin looked at her expectantly. Kit thought about it for a moment. On one hand she wanted to keep an eye on Prent and Morna and on the other she really wanted to talk to Mrs. Hogar undisturbed about the clowns that they had seen earlier.

“I’d love to but I have some things that I need to take care of first. Let me ask Augwun if he would sit in for me.” She turned and went back to the car where he was unloading the leftover boxes from the trunk.

“Would you be available to play a game with the others?” she asked him quietly. “They need a sixth person and I’d like to talk to Mrs. Hogar about this afternoon’s events.”

“Yes, miss.”

“It’s a request, not an order. Play only if you care to. Although, it would be nice to have someone watching over them, to keep them out of trouble, if you know what I mean.” Kit knew that Prent and Morna would be fishing for information and wasn’t sure how secretive the others would be. Augwun looked over at the group of young people laughing over some joke that Patrin was telling and let out a worried breath.

“I’ll do my best, miss.”

They chose teams by playing a chance game of hand signals called “Rat, Snake, Mongoose, Dog.” Clio thought that it was a lot like “Rock, Paper, Scissors” and showed them how to play that. They finally ended up with Clio, Prent and Patrin on one team and Mook, Morna and Augwun on the other. Morna was quite put out to be stuck with two kitchen servants on her team and not Patrin, whose arm she kept patting during the game. Prent seemed content to be sitting next to Clio and explained all the rules at great length to her, and quite a bit of history as well. Patrin offered all kinds of advice to everyone. Augwun whispered something to Mook who nodded and surveyed the playing board like it was a battlefield. Once the game began the competition became quite fierce.

Kit found Mrs. Hogar in the kitchen making a large batch of turnovers. It smelled wonderful as the housekeeper pulled a hot tray out of the oven. Chimka was standing on a chair chopping vegetables and fresh herbs.

“These look delicious!” Kit said sneaking a small piece. “Can I help you with anything?”

“No, miss. I’m almost done.” Mrs. Hogar started rolling out another piece of dough. “Miss Clio has been doing a good job of entertaining our guests this afternoon and she’s managed to keep them from being too nosey. Did your afternoon go well?”

“For the most part, yes,” Kit answered, and proceeded to tell about giving the toys away and doubling the Jolly’s Bane. “Do you think that it will keep those clowns away for a while?” she asked hopefully.

“Aye, it might just. That was mighty clever of you to think of it.”

“It was Patrin who pulled it off. It was amazing to see him motivate all those kids. Even Augwun was impressed.”

“Was he now? Could you ask him to come and help me with the serving when you get a moment?”

“You’ll have to settle for me instead. I’ve already asked him to keep an eye on our young guests outside.”

Mrs. Hogar deftly piled a basket full of the little pies, covered it with a clean white cloth and handed it to Kit.

“Well, then off you go, miss. I’ll be along in a moment. This is a game that will be interesting to see,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

Outside the porch lamps burned brightly in the warm night air. Kit passed around the buttery turnovers and then sat on the railing watching as the players moved their marbles across the board. Mook and Patrin placed their pieces quickly, almost recklessly. Morna chatted about her moves and looked to Patrin for approval. Clio thought carefully and slowly took her turn. Augwun glanced up at Kit and then casually moved one of his marbles. His pieces were scattered all over the board. Prent’s pieces were all grouped together and it looked like he was going to be the winner. Then the board clicked and whirled around shuffling all the marbles. To everyone’s surprise Morna’s pieces were all in line to finish first, which she did. She beamed as her last marker moved across the board and she made a little face at Clio. Clio finished next and then Mook. He moved his last marble and whispered something to Augwun again. Prent just barely managed to finish when the board shifted again. The game was down to Patrin and Augwun. Patrin managed to get all but one piece across the board when the board shifted again, knocking his last marble all the way back to the beginning. His eyes grew wide in disbelief as Augwun finished moving all of his pieces across the finish.

“I won! I won!” Morna clapped her hands and poked at Prent. “Three Toymakers on your team and I won with two kitchen boys. Then again,” she gave Clio a superior look “Clio’s just an assistant so I guess that you had your share of handicaps too. Maybe next time you’ll have better luck. Just kidding, Clio, dear. You played pretty well for a Greylander. After you practice some more you could try again. Well, I guess we should be going. Thank you for a lovely game, Mister Busby.” She smiled at him and picked up her briefcase. Prent shook hands all around and tried to squeeze Clio’s hand but she

pulled it back. After they left and the dishes were put away Patrin was still sitting at the table staring off into the night sky.

“I can’t believe I lost,” he muttered to Kit who was putting the chairs away.

“What do you mean? Everybody loses sometime.”

“I never have, at least not last place, in a team competition in Cat’s Paw Checkers. I must be losing my touch. I can’t believe I came in last place,” he said again.

“It seems that you were up against some pretty stiff competition,” observed Kit as she picked up the game board to put it away. She held it up to look at the underside and saw a small red monkey head embossed into the bottom.

“Hey, this looks like Chimka. Did you invent this game?”

“No. Let me see that.” Patrin took the board from Kit and turned it over to read the inscription. “Part of it has been worn off. ‘To Mookael the Elder, Day of Fathers from your bothersome son...’”

“Perhaps you didn’t win this game because you were playing against the person who invented it. Mrs. Hogar mentioned a ‘Mookael the Elder’ when she met Mook,” suggested Kit. “Did you ever think that he might be the Toymaker that you are looking for?”

Chapter 24

“Mook, the missing Toymaker? I find that hard to believe. He is too young.”
Patrin shook his head and looked at the maker’s mark again on the game board.

“Why do you think that?” Kit asked.

“We have thousands of toys that we have collected that belonged to the man that we are looking for. It is inconceivable that Mook could have created all of them.”

“Perhaps he had help. Or was a child prodigy. How old were you when you started making toys?”

“Pretty young, three or four. My parents were most upset by it. I don’t think that they wanted me to be a Toymaker. I’m the first person that I know of to be a Mender and a Toymaker. I’m not sure what made them change their minds.”

“So if Mook started making toys at age four, say five a day, how old do you think he is? Mid twenties?” Kit figured the numbers on a scrap of paper. “In twenty years you would easily have over forty thousand toys. If he made only one a day for twenty years he would have had time to make over seven thousand toys.”

“What about the picture of you?” Patrin asked.

“A fluke. Maybe an adolescent crush. There could be a hundred different explanations,” Kit said. “He came here, got erased or whatever it is you call it, and lost his memory. Have you noticed how he can remember some things and not others? That would explain why you couldn’t remember him from before. Don’t forget, I did see his picture in that book. He was wearing a dark purple suit.”

“What about the Griffin? Why is there a Griffin mark on all the toys that we found?”

“Augwun said that if he had a Friend that it was probably unstuffed, poor thing. He seems to think that Mook is the one that the Clowns are looking for and that they bribed Kulak to beat him up. He is lucky that you were around or he would have died.”

“I guess you could be right. But the maker’s mark on this piece is a Monkey not a Griffin. Perhaps he had more than one mark. It is done from time to time. If he is the Toymaker that we are looking for, then how can we get his memory back?” Patrin asked.

“I’m not quite sure,” answered Kit. “Perhaps continuing to make toys will jog his memory. Let’s keep an eye on him and see what happens. Perhaps there is some information in the library upstairs that could be of help. I, um, made a Friend to help me read books.” Kit felt embarrassed to talk about Blue, her little flying unicorn, but thought that Patrin should know,

“That is grand news! You should be carrying him around with you every chance you get. You’ll have him animated in no time!” Patrin returned to his normal cheerful self.

“Well, off to Slumberland. We have a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Early the next morning Mrs. Hogar was waiting on the lawn to accompany Kit on her walk. She was dressed in a light tunic and pants and carried two long staves. She handed one to Kit.

“Do you know how to use this?” she asked with a hint of scorn in her voice. “Or have you neglected the War Arts as much as your pupil?”

“You mean Clio? She said you gave her a workout yesterday. No, I do alright,” Kit replied, running her hand over the smooth polished wood. The staff was beautifully balanced and felt good in her hand.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Hogar, noncommittally. “Would you like to warm up a bit before we set off?” She snapped Kit on the collarbone with her long staff and waited.

Kit swooped the stick out suddenly, knocking Mrs. Hogar’s feet out from under her. She sprung up with a quickness that Kit found remarkable for a woman of her age and counterattacked. The sound of wood hitting wood cracked through the morning air as they fought their way across the garden taking out a large number of hollyhocks. Mrs. Hogar used her pole to vault over a bench and attacked from a different angle. Kit spun around to block and parry her blows. After a few minutes of intense sparring Kit laughed and cried out, “Stop! Stop! I’m sorry! I’m warmed up now. How about you?” Mrs. Hogar glared at her fiercely for a second and then let out a chuckle.

“You’ll do.” She lowered her weapon and set off briskly toward the lake. Kit took a quick look back toward the house and was embarrassed to see that Mook, Patrin and Augwun were standing on the veranda staring at her, brought out by the sound of the

noise. Augwun carried a piece of silver that Mrs. Hogar was having him polish and Patrin was wearing a bright red bathrobe, looking very sleepy. Mook had a towel wrapped around him and was dripping water from the shower. Clio, still in her pajamas, leaned out the window and called down,

“You okay?”

“Fine!” she replied with a little wave. “Just getting a little exercise,” and sprinted off to catch up with Mrs. Hogar.

“Now what do you make of that, Augie?” asked Mook as they watched Kit disappear into the garden. Augwun ran his thumb over his lips to hide a small smile,

“Perhaps they are becoming friends.”

Mrs. Hogar set a fast pace and Kit had to jog a bit to catch up with her. The morning fog was just starting to burn off, promising a cloudless day. The wild flowers and sage warming up in the morning sun gave off a wonderful woody smell. Kit was secretly glad that she was there. The panic that she had felt the first few days that she was in Blocksbury had changed to acceptance and excitement. She had always loved to travel, and enjoyed change. She knew that she had to get Clio back to her family, but as she walked down the path by the lake with the sea birds crying in the warm breeze she felt free, more alive than she had felt in a long time. Perhaps after she got back home she could get an office job or go back to teaching, but for now she was content to be outdoors and take whatever the day might bring.

Mrs. Hogar turned sharply and started climbing up an old wooden stairway that wrapped up the hillside. The trail was almost overgrown with wild poppies and trumpet vines but she didn't slow her brisk pace as they ducked under fern branches and scrambled up broken steps. Kit was almost out of breath when they reached the top and hoped that she was in as good a shape as Mrs. Hogar when she got older. They reached the top of the hill and turned for a moment to view the lake. It was glorious view with the town of Blocksbury stretching out next to the water in a grid-like pattern.

“You fought well,” commented Mrs. Hogar.

“Thank you, so did you,” replied Kit. “And thank you for not saying “for a Greylander.”

“Are you in the Guards in your city?” Mrs. Hogar asked. Kit stared down at her long staff.

“No. I... I had a bad experience and promised myself never to be in that kind of situation again.”

They walked on in silence for a while across a wide-open field. The only sound was the occasional scratch of birds pecking for bugs and the warm summer wind rustling through the weeds.

Kit blurted out, “It was in college. I was working late in the art lab on my mechanical animal piece, you know, the one where all the animals dance. A couple of guys from another school showed up, dead drunk. I’d never seen them before. They started playing with my project and giving me a hard time. They laughed and threw the pieces all around. I tried to get them to leave but they wouldn’t. They were so out of it that after ten minutes three months of work was trashed.” Kit pressed her lips together tightly, angry at the memory; then her face softened. “If this other guy hadn’t shown up I don’t know what I would have done. He got rid of the two jerks who smashed my project and put it back together. I thought the piece was completely ruined but he somehow fixed it pretty fast. After that I started studying the “war arts” as you call it.”

Mrs. Hogar stopped walking and leaned on her long staff.

“This student who helped you, was he a friend of yours?”

“He wasn’t a student. He was just on campus visiting one of the professors. I never saw him after that night.”

“He repaired your toy amazingly quick you say? Did that not seem strange at the time?”

“Well I guess, but we were talking and I just figured that nothing was broken somehow... oh.” Kit sorted through the memories of ten years before. “Are you thinking this guy could be your missing person? He was... very different, not like anyone I’ve ever met before or since, charming but kind of geeky. He was so funny. We ended up talking all night and he walked me home to make sure that I was safe.” Kit’s cheeks turned a little pink. “I, um, kissed him goodnight.” She wasn’t sure why she felt compelled to tell Mrs. Hogar about this young man she had met so long ago.

“Think, what did he look like?” Mrs. Hogar’s voice became intensely quiet.

“Oh I don’t know. It’s been ten years. Give me a minute...” Kit thought carefully before replying, “He was badly sunburned with blotchy skin and I remember him saying that his head was shaved because of head lice or something. It made him look very homely in a cute sort of way. He’d just gotten back from a trip somewhere in South America. He had a sharpness about him, you know, the kind that people have when they are really clever but shy about it. I do remember that much.”

“I want you to think some more,” Mrs. Hogar said slowly. She wasn’t looking directly at Kit but instead was staring off in the distance as if she could see the inner working of Kit’s thoughts. “You may remember a name. Don’t speak it yet. Just think it to yourself. Now tell me the first part of what you remember.”

“It was a strange one... Wolfren, the guy’s name was Wolfren. He said it was Swiss.”

“Ah! Did he? Patrin’s mother is from the House of Wolfren. It is one of the oldest and most respected families in the Silver Isles,” Mrs. Hogar said in a faraway voice. “Go on... what else?”

“I remember telling him that my name was odd too. It’s not Katherine like everybody thinks. Not many people know this but it’s short for Kitsune Bi, which means Foxfire in Japanese. My parents were hippies and thought it would make me a free spirit if I had an unusual name. He told me his middle name was Comestible and couldn’t begin to explain how he got that name. I wasn’t able to tell if he was kidding or not but I do remember he made me laugh.”

Mrs. Hogar quickly shook her head. She was concentrating very hard. She put one hand up to her forehead, either to block the sun from her eyes or to ward off some distraction. “I don’t recognize that word. It may be a magic name. Was there more?”

Kit chased down the memories in her minds and strung them together. The young man had sent her a note the next day saying goodbye and had signed it “Wolfren Comestible Skye”.

“Yes. His last name was...” Mrs. Hogar stopped Kit midsentence and stared straight at her.

“If you tell his name to me I won’t remember it and perhaps neither will you. You must keep this information in your heart alone. Don’t share it with a living soul or it will be erased. As it is, I’ll not remember these things in a few moments. Do you understand?” Kit nodded and Mrs. Hogar continued, “This person, if he is still alive and free to do so, should present himself soon. Until then be aware that there are horrible and evil things all about, so be watchful with your mind as well as your eyes.” With that Mrs. Hogar turned and continued on her way as if the conversation had never taken place.

Chapter 25

The summer days started to fall into a rhythm. Kit and Mrs. Hogar went on long walks early every morning. Clio practiced the trumpet without much improvement. From nine in the morning until dinnertime they all sat in the big workroom making toys, with Augwun meticulously filling out the stacks of forms that soon filled a whole shelf of binders. Kit and Augwun spent their evenings in the library searching through hundreds of volumes for information on clowns. Mrs. Hogar kept the big house running and the garden weeded, taking time in the late afternoon to teach Clio self-defense. Fortunately for Clio, she was a better student of martial arts than trumpet playing and got to be fairly adept at the throws and punches that Mrs. Hogar showed her every day. Kit faithfully carried Blue around with her in a cloth satchel that Patrin gave her, but the little flying unicorn never showed any signs of coming to life.

One morning Mrs. Hogar and Kit walked out toward the lake to find something nailed to the door of the boathouse. It was a skinny rag doll, crudely made, little more than a few sticks and rags tied together with string. It had a scarecrow's face painted on it and a few words scrawled across the chest in dark red ink. Mrs. Hogar pulled it off the door and showed it to Kit.

“What does it mean?” Kit asked.

“It's a warning, or a threat depending on how you want to look at it,” answered Mrs. Hogar, her sharp eyes searching the hills around the lake. “It says ‘Death to the Obedient One’”

“They mean Augwun. I heard the clowns call him that. They said that they would throw him on a bonfire if he didn't give them a list of all the toys that we made. We have to do something! We can't let them get to him!” Kit felt fear and panic grip her as she stared at the hideous rag figure in Mrs. Hogar's hand.

“Don't trouble your mind, miss,” Mrs. Hogar replied soothingly. “I have become fond of the man too. We may have a few tricks that those evil things haven't seen yet. A little stone may turn over a great wagon.”

“We should show this to Augwun,” Kit said, her words sounding more like a question than a statement.

“I think that he knows full well what path he has chosen, better than any of us. But he is with friends now. He is not alone. There is strength and comfort in that.” Mrs. Hogar turned down the trail. “Shall we continue before the sun rises too much higher?”

As the weeks went by, the upstairs library became filled with more and more boxes of toys for the Queen’s birthday. An amazing number of interesting and beautiful things were created everyday, far more than Kit had originally thought possible. Patrin’s prediction that toys would bring out the missing Toymaker did not come true, however. Every night Kit went over her notes that she kept in a little journal by her bed, and thought about any new people that she had met during the day. No one ever seemed to fit the description of the man that Patrin was looking for. Even Mook didn’t quite fit into the puzzle. They were no closer to getting home than they had been a month before and Kit had the growing suspicion that they were running out of time.

On one particularly warm afternoon they were all sitting around the big worktable going over the projects that they had completed that day. Mook had made a game with letter tiles that the players used to spell out words, but the board was made out of sand. The wooden tiles would sink into sand and change the game. He called it Quicksand and they could hardly wait to play it that night. Clio had come up with a hide and seek toy that, when thrown, would blend into the color of whatever it hit. They had to search for the invisible toy for an hour before Wilber finally found it by accidentally stepping on it. Patrin made some adjustments on it so that it glowed after five minutes, making it easier to find.

“Ok” said Kit, making notes on the master list of toys, “We need a name for this new invention of Clio’s. Any suggestions?”

“It’s like a chameleon,” offered Patrin. “How about ‘Clio’s Hide and Seek Chameleon’? Not brilliant or clever I know, but descriptive.”

“That sounds good to me. What’s next? Oh, this... thing...” Kit had worked with Patrin to come up with a comical looking creature that looked like a spiny ball with legs. It had a funny wide mouth and ran around the table chomping the air.

“It’s not quite finished,” Kit said. “I’m open for suggestions.”

“What if he ate something? He needs a reason to run around with that great gaping mouth of his,” suggested Mook. They all sat around silently staring at the whimsical creature.

“I’m all out of ideas,” said Patrin, slumping back in his chair. The only noise in the room was the clock ticking and the scratch of Augwun’s pen on paper.

“Bubbles,” Augwun said without looking up from the paperwork that he was filling out. “Have it chase bubbles and if the bubbles giggled then that might add a nice touch.” Patrin shot a look at Clio whose eyes had opened wide in surprise. Augwun had never suggested anything before, let alone something so fanciful. Kit looked down at the drawing of the toy, her face expressionless for a moment and then the corner of her mouth twitched up.

“Done!” She made a note on the drawing.

“What if we call it the “Bubble Biter?” suggested Clio.

“That ought to work,” replied Kit, “So, what’s next?”

By the end of the day Clio had produced a Unicorn Toss game where the little wind-up unicorns ran around and the players tried to throw little gold rings on their horns. Kit had completed a keyboard that was made of different kinds of mechanical dogs from a high-pitched Dachshund to a deep voiced Saint Bernard. Each dog howled a different note when its tail was pressed. Patrin had made a Flying Fish sled. The front fins were like handlebars and the fins moved to propel it over the surface of the water. Mrs. Hogar took Patrin, Mook and Clio down to the lake to try it out before dinner.

“I don’t have to tell you to be careful!” Kit yelled after them. They were loaded up with life jackets, a cartload of floating toys and a couple of Dolphin Lifeguards, which grew to be the size of real dolphins. The dolphins swam around and helped out anyone who had trouble in the water. A blaze of reds and pinks lit up the sky as the sun began to set. The cool water felt refreshing as they splashed around in the hot summer twilight. The Flying Fish sled worked perfectly and even Mrs. Hogar took a turn at it.

“This is the best summer ever!” thought Clio as she raced the Flying Fish against Mook in a small one-person speedboat and Patrin riding a Sea Horse.

Back in the workroom Kit took Blue out of his carrying pouch and set him on the table. After checking to make sure Augwun had his back to her and was steadfastly writing away she picked up the small unicorn and made it gallop across the table. Then she put a cookie in a doll dish and pretended to have Blue eat out of it. She had never felt so foolish in all her life. Patrin had said that if she wanted to animate the little unicorn then she would have to treat it like it was alive, but every time she tried to do that she felt so embarrassed that she would hide Blue away for a few days until she got her nerve up to try again.

“Ah! This will never work!” she cried, tossing the little stuffed animal across the table and burying her face in her hands. When she looked up she was surprised to see the toy placed in front of her on the table. Augwun was standing behind her very close as he leaned over and adjusted the little unicorn. His hair brushed her cheek and his skin smelled of soap and sea air. Without speaking he placed his long fingers over her wrists and held her hands so that they formed a shelter over the toy. She could feel air moving under her palms.

“Breathe,” he told her. Kit took a deep breath and let it out. The air under her hands grew warmer and offered more resistance until Blue slowly yawned and stretched. His silky golden tail twitched and he shook out his tiny mane. A feeble little whinny came out of his mouth, high pitched and happy. His chubby legs wobbled a bit as he took his first tentative steps. He walked over to the dish and nibbled at the cookie with his fuzzy lips. Then he snuggled into a pile of scrap cloth and went to sleep. Kit watched as his velvet sides moved in and out with every breath. She had never seen anything quite so wonderful. When she looked up Augwun had gone back to filling out paperwork.

“What was that?” she asked, sitting down next to him at the table.

“You need a Friend to help you with your research,” he replied, not looking up.

“No, that’s not what I mean. How do you know how to do that? Making toys come to life isn’t something people just do every day. Even Mook can’t do it; at least I’ve never seen him.”

Kit picked up one of the forms that Augwun was filling out and found that she could read it. All the details of the Unicorn Toss game were laid out with a page full of intricate, carefully inked diagrams. She looked across the table at the hundreds of

complex drawings that he had made and was stunned by the magnitude of what he had done. An unexpected thought slipped into her head.

“You, you’re the one that Patrin’s looking for, not Mook. You’re the missing Toymaker,” she said staring at him as if for the first time.

“Why would he be looking for me?” he asked, shaking his head.

“For a hundred reasons, something about an accident, an explosion involving frogs. His family has been looking for you for several years now. He’s very sorry and wants to apologize. What happened? What did they do to you?”

“Nothing I didn’t deserve!” Augwun snarled back at her and she was both surprised and frightened by the force of his words.

Kit just watched him for a moment before replying,

“I find that hard to believe.”

Augwun ran a finger softly over the top of her hand and she could see that he was uncertain as to where to begin.

“It is more what I did to myself,” he explained. “I... I erased myself. It was an incredibly foolish thing to do. If I’d had any idea of the trouble it would cause I might have been braver and not acted so hastily.”

Kit could tell that it pained him to speak as he began to tell his tale.

“Almost three years ago, on the eve of the Queen’s birthday celebration. Prince Arkus Orion or Patrin, as our family calls him, was helping me put the finishing touches on the Queen’s Gift, a huge display of toys to be given to hundreds of partygoers. He thought it would be funny if some of the frog decorations would spit sparks on the court and add excitement to the festivities. I was rather short with him and told him no. He was only twelve at the time and I should have taken more time to explain how dangerous his idea was, but we’d been working long hours for days on end and we were all exhausted. It had taken quite a bit of negotiating with his parents to even let him be there but I had seen his abilities and believed in him. He was born a Mender, you see, of the Royal Family. But his mother, the Princess Atheni, is my sister so I was able to persuade them in to allowing him to be my apprentice. ”

“So, Patrin is your nephew?” Kit asked, trying to piece all this information together. Augwun nodded and continued,

“The next day at the celebration the frogs did explode. Patrin went back and changed them when I wasn’t looking. I’m sure he meant it to be a harmless prank. I can’t believe that he really intended to hurt anybody. But the Royal amphitheater was packed to capacity and with that many people together it is not hard to cause a panic. In the chaos that followed a few people were injured. No one was seriously harmed, but it would have brought horrible dishonor on the Royal family if Patrin had been found out. So I pleaded guilty to negligence and was sentenced to prison.” Augwun shrugged his shoulders and continued,

“After the pressure of preparing so many of toys for the Queen’s Birthday I thought that prison would be a nice change of scenery, which it actually was for a while. I had my own cell and it was quiet. But after the trial, one of the Advisors started asking questions about Patrin and getting closer to the truth about the frogs. I began to think that it would be better that I had never existed at all... so I erased myself. I’d written a book on Hosmer the Troublemaker. He was the Royal Toymaker before me and had pioneered the research on erasure years ago. I could remember who I was but no one else could. It was incredible. I’d been in the public eye since I was born. My mother was a Royal Toymaker and my sister married the Crown Prince.” Augwun explained, ” There wasn’t a person in the kingdom that didn’t know who I was... and then poof! Suddenly I was no one. What I hadn’t realized was how well I’d been treated in prison on account of being related to the Royal Family. As soon as I turned myself into an anonymous nobody, I was shipped off to the Sugar Mines the next day.”

“Couldn’t you just unerase yourself? “ Kit asked.

“No. That’s the sad part that shows what a fool I have been. To unerase someone is simple; just write their name on their forehead and everything, all the books and people’s memories, change back to what they were before. But I can’t remember my own name... I thought I would. Augwun is just what they called me at Jester Control. They named me Obedience Graduate One, which was shortened to OG1,” he explained, pale at the memory. “Not that I would go back even if I could, it’s too late for that.”

“It is not!” Kit flashed back at him, “People make choices. You can learn from your mistakes. Do you have any idea what Patrin and his family has gone through trying

to find you? He even mentioned that his father sent someone down here to look for you, that he's disappeared and may be dead."

"Oh, you mean Mook. He's all right. I think he is swimming in the lake right now."

"Did you erase him too?"

"I had to hide him fast and there weren't many options at the time. I didn't do a very good job of it. Erasure usually takes days of preparation and I only had a matter of seconds to make it work. It's been wearing off for over a month now. Jester Control almost found him the first day he came to Blocksbury. They were going to kill him. For someone who is as brilliant in game strategy as he is, one would think that he would've planned his search a bit better. He can be un erased at anytime. His full name is Koshka Mookael the Younger. We were friends before, although I can't imagine that he will be very happy with me when he finds out what I did to him."

"You are his friend now and you protected him in the only way that you knew how. Mrs. Hogar knows who you are, at least she suspects, I think."

"She has known my family for several hundred years. She is one of the Fair Folk although you might not know it to look at her. I'm not sure exactly how old she is; I've never had the nerve to ask. I think that she could tell from my handwriting that I at least had some Toymaking experience."

"Did you take my unicorns or was that Mook?" Kit asked, remembering the first night that she had been there.

"That was me. I couldn't believe that your things were really here so I took them to study them in the light. I thought that I put them back in the box before you noticed they were gone. Sorry if I worried you."

"Worried me? No, I wouldn't say that." Kit pondered all the things that Augwun had told her. "Where do you know me from?"

"You wouldn't remember," he said, "It was a long time ago."

"Try me." Kit sat back on the table and watched him closely, as he stood up and stared at his feet, unable to look at her.

"When you were in college. You were working on a toy that was amazing. I'd never met anyone like you before. You were the first person I had ever met who didn't

want anything from me. Since I was a child it was always ‘make a toy for me’ and ‘show us a trick,’ but you were just... nice to talk to. I collected pictures of you over the years. Once I traded a green fire crystal from the Ice Caves of Kolinoor for a toy alligator that you made,” he said, looking a little embarrassed. “I never in a hundred lifetimes wanted anything bad to happen to you. When Patrin brought you here I couldn’t believe it. I assumed that he was being irresponsible. Kit, I am so, so sorry.”

“You’re lucky that you have an unusual name.” Kit grabbed a pen from the table and pushed Augwun’s hair back from his forehead. She studied his face and tried to decide if the quirky young college student that she had met ten years before could possibly have become the troubled man standing in front of her. “If this doesn’t work we’re both going to feel kind of silly.” He closed his eyes tensely as she wrote a few words across his skin. “You look a lot different now that you have hair, Wolfren Comestible Skye.” There was a moment of absolute silence as if all the air had been sucked out of the room followed by the sound of thousands of book opening and shutting and papers rushing around in an invisible hurricane.

Kit grabbed a book off the shelf titled “Toymaker’s Quarterly” and flipped to a picture of a tall man in a white suit with a impressive looking Griffin sitting next to him. She peered up at Augwun and down again at the picture. Her face turned a deep red as she shoved the book at him, almost knocking him over.

“You lied to me. I can’t believe that you lied to me!”

Chapter 26

Kit's words lashed out at Skye with an intensity that she didn't know she felt.

"How could you? You lied to me!" she stammered again. "You said that you'd never been to my world! Was it fun lying to me like that? I actually thought that you were a nice person. You didn't trust me enough to tell me who you were?" She spat the words at him and was about to leave when she saw the bewildered look on his face. He pushed his thick hair back with both hands and sighed.

"I never thought you'd remember anything about me. When I first met you I couldn't have told you who I was. It's never done. I said as much of the truth as I was allowed. Don't be angry." With a shy half smile he said, "I'm pleased to hear that you like me just a little or at least you did."

"Actually I like you very much, but..." Kit said softly, feeling her anger drain away. She wanted to say more but was interrupted by Chimka bringing in a tray of dishes to start setting the table for the evening meal.

"Aheeeee!" Chimka screamed and dropped the tray. He ignored the pile of broken dishes and hopped across the table to where Skye was standing. He made a complete backflip, landed on the tall man's shoulders and began pulling his ears chattering loudly.

"Yes! Yes! I know," Skye answered. "It's good to see you too. Not to worry, he'll be right as rockets. Straight away, yes. Yes, she did remember. A parade? I most surely hope not!" He nodded seriously a few more times to the monkey's jabbering lecture. Chimka then leapt to the windowsill and vanished towards the lake.

"Well, at least now two citizens recognize me," Skye said. "Did you figure out that Chimka is Mook's Friend?"

"I had my suspicions. The Cat's Paw Checkerboard had a little red monkey head embossed on the back. Patrin was quite miffed that you and Mook beat him," Kit said with a smile.

"That was nothing! The real feat was placing our pieces so that Miss Morna won the game. Now there was a challenge! But letting her win was the best way of keeping

her out of trouble. She was so busy being pleased with herself that she didn't have time to cause to cause any mischief," he replied.

Mrs. Hogar ran barefoot into the room. She was still wet from swimming in the lake but had managed to pull on a linen tunic and leggings. She carried her boots in her hands. She stood frozen at the door for an instant as she stared at Skye before rushing to greet him.

"Sir Skye!" she cried.

"Commander!" Skye replied with a smile, dropping to one knee to greet her. "Do you remember me?" She threw her arms around his neck, then looked at him and hugged him again.

"It's good to see you back to your old self, sir! I thought it was you but I didn't dare hope.... We've been searching for you for so long."

"Forgive me, Commander Hogar. I've caused you such trouble."

"No apology needed, sir. This is indeed a fortunate day!" Kit saw that Mrs. Hogar's eyes were misting up with tears.

"'Twas all Miss Ashlyn's doing. She unerased me!"

"Unerased you? What's going on?" Mook asked carrying Chimka. Clio and Patrin followed close behind. Mook's eyes fell on the picture of Skye in the book that lay open on the table.

"Say, Augie, this picture looks more like you than anyone has a right to. I don't understand. Didn't you used to be the Royal Toymaker? I can't remember why you never mentioned it before." Mook looked very confused.

"Close your eyes for a moment and I think that it will all come clear to you. Not to worry, this won't hurt." Skye took the pen off the table and wrote Mook's full name on his forehead. The thundering sound of flapping pages and libraries full of books changing rushed through the room again. Wilber was blown across the table and onto the floor. Mook rubbed his eyes with his fists and laughed,

"Well, I'll be! Skye, my old friend!" He saluted him by touching the back of his hand to his forehead just like Kit had seen the Catlander woman do at the Bunks. Skye smiled and returned the greeting.

Patrin hung back toward the door. He wasn't wearing his Chronometer and looked even younger than fifteen. He bit his lip and looked very nervous. Skye stretched out his hand, palm up, toward him.

"Forgive me, Patrin Orion, my little nephew," he said. Patrin stared at Skye's hand for a long moment and then shook it. He looked like he was about to cry and did not speak.

"Excuse us, ladies, sir, Friends." Skye nodded politely to everyone in the room including Wilber and Chimka. He walked with Patrin out of the room to say their apologies in private.

"What's going on?" whispered Clio as she sidled up next to Kit. "Why is everyone calling Mr. Augwun, Skye? He seems kind of different."

"His real name is Wolfren Skye. He's the missing Toymaker that Patrin and Mrs. Hogar have been looking for. He's Patrin's uncle."

"Is he mad at Patrin? Is he in trouble?" Clio asked.

"No, I think that they just need to talk things out. I am sure that everything will be fine as soon as they come back. Let's hope that he'll be able to fix the Fish Car and take us back home."

"No! He can't!" Clio protested frantically. "Music Camp isn't over for another week! I'd have to go there and play trumpet all day. And ...what about Wilber? What would happen to him?"

"Clio, you know we can't stay here forever. We need to go home to our world. Maybe Wilber could stay here with Patrin. Perhaps you could even come back to visit him. There is always a way to work things out. We're not home yet.

"Well, I don't think that Mr. Augwun or Skye or whatever his name is can be the Toymaker that Patrin is looking for," Clio whispered angrily to Kit. "How come we have never seen him make anything? And you said that he worked for those evil clowns didn't you? I think that it is all a trick!"

"Why don't we ask him when he gets back? Now, go change into some dry things and we'll start putting supper on the table. You must be hungry after your swim."

Patrin glanced up at his uncle and tried to think of what to say. They walked out onto the back porch and Patrin sank into one of the wicker chairs that overlooked the garden. Skye leaned his tall frame against one of the posts and waited patiently for Patrin to compose his thoughts. The only sound was the spraying of the sprinkler machine as it watered Mrs. Hogar's vegetable garden, and the crickets chirping in the warm night air.

"I did it," Patrin started, "I made the frogs explode. I should have listened to you when you told me how dangerous it would be, but I thought that you were just being... you know, grown up. I told my parents what I'd done the day after Saint Puffin's Day. They sent an Advisor ahead to ask you about it. They wanted me to go to talk to you in person, but I panicked and ran away from home. I guess that was when you were erased. I couldn't remember why I ran away so I went back. But I still felt guilty and I kept having these terrible dreams. It was Mum who started figuring out that something wasn't right. We've been looking for you everywhere." He stopped for a moment, struggling to gain control over his voice. Then he stood up and forced himself meet his uncle's steady gaze.

"I can only say that I'm truly sorry and am ready to take responsibility for my actions. I'll turn myself in to The Council of Justice as soon as we get back to Saint Ives." Patrin's face was drained of all color. "Was it really horrible in prison?" he added, trying to keep from shaking.

"Perhaps it was no more terrible than your own feelings of guilt. Let's just say that I learned a lot about myself. Patrin, I've already served the sentence for the accident. I would argue that I was responsible for what happened. I erased myself, you know, Mookael too. It was partially to protect you, but also because of my own idiotic pride. Perhaps a more appropriate punishment would be if we apologized to all the people that were at the party. It may take us the rest of our lives," he laughed, "but it seems like the right thing to do."

"But there were a thousand people at the party!" Patrin exclaimed.

"One thousand, two hundred and thirty seven, not including Friends. If we apologized to forty people a week individually it would take about eight months. Or perhaps we could do it all at once," suggested Skye. "Of course we will have to throw ourselves on the mercy of the Queen first. She may not want us to mention it at all."

Patrin looked a little scared at this remark. The Queen terrified nearly all her subjects even her grandchildren. The idea of facing her anger made Patrin's stomach knot up even further.

"Maybe you should talk to her first. She likes you!" he offered hopefully.

"I'm not too sure about that now. She's your grandmother after all. We'll have the opportunity to talk to her soon enough. We also have to get Miss Ashlyn and Miss Clio home."

"I need to apologize to them for all the trouble that I've caused," said Patrin.

"I think that they will find it in their kind hearts to forgive us both. We owe them a debt of gratitude. And one more thing," said Skye sternly.

"Yes, sir?" replied Patrin, bracing himself to receive a long lecture.

"Thank you for coming to find me," said Skye, patting him on the shoulder. Patrin grinned brightly.

"It was my pleasure, sir."

At dinner that night every one except Clio seemed to be full of good cheer. She sat sullenly pushing her food around on her plate and glaring at Skye. As the others sat at the table laughing and marveling at Blue, Clio said little and hugged Wilber close to her.

Later Clio and Wilber wandered into the kitchen with the last of the supper things. She saw Skye at the big stone sink, elbow deep in soapy water, finishing up with the dishes.

"Are you angry with me, Miss Clio?" he asked without turning around.

"You're not a Toymaker," she blurted out. "Toymakers are supposed to be happy and make stuff. You're never happy and I've never seen you make anything!"

Skye nodded and thought about this for a moment. He dried off his hands and knelt down beside her on the polished wood floor.

"You're half right. Believe me, Toymakers are not always happy. Our gift is not necessarily an easy one to live with. But if I did make something would that help ease your fears?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said crossing her arms. He found a pad of paper and a pen and cleared off a space on the kitchen worktable. Then he asked,

“What would you like for me to make?”

“Whatever. You think it up.”

“Ah! Let me see... I’m a little rusty.” His green eyes narrowed like a cat getting ready to pounce as he unscrewed the cap from the pen.

“How about something simple. A ball?” He drew a plain circle on the paper. Clio looked at it and sniffed. She was clearly not impressed.

“More than one perhaps?” Skye drew six circles on the page. They were perfectly spaced and round but plain without embellishment. “There! How is that?”

She looked over at his drawing. “Yeah, right,” Clio said, trying to decide if he was serious. “So peel them off. Make them real, if you can.”

“Fair enough. I think that I remember how to do this.” Skye covered the first circle with his hand and pulled the lines off the page in rapid succession. He held out his closed fist and then opened it slowly. There was nothing there.

“Where did they go?” he asked looking around. “Oh yes now I remember...” He tapped the back of his right hand with the fingers of his left and a glowing, ornate globe popped into the air. It was green and covered with intricate scrollwork that looked like overlapping fern leaves.

“I thought I had more than one.” He tapped his hand again and produced a red globe that twinkled like a thousand rubies. It rose up and hovered next to the green ball. He pulled a bright blue one from behind her ear and a sparkling gold sphere from Wilber’s mouth. He knocked the blue and the red ones together and they split off a violet ball filled with red and blue spots. He shook it and the spots swirled into a beautiful purple striped design. Skye clapped his palms together and a deep orange globe pulsing with dark fire added to the set. He then balanced all the balls one on top of the other and juggled them around until the colors became a swirling rainbow. The glowing shapes all rolled down his arm and came to rest on to the table. Clio still had her arms crossed and her lips were pressed into a tight line. Wilber sat on the marble counter next to her with his paws crossed as well.

“Not convinced, lass? You’re a hard one to please.” He took a fresh piece of paper and drew a line with an oval underneath it and attached a triangle at one end. Then he drew a smaller triangle at the other end of the line. He added a few little circles at the

top. It was a very simple drawing. He then proceeded to peel an ordinary looking trumpet off the paper.

“Here, try it out,” he said handing it to her. She hesitated and then raised the instrument to her lips. Wilber covered his ears. She blew as hard as she could, but instead of a noise like a donkey braying it sounded pure and clean. The tone made her warm down to her toes like the feeling she got waking up on the first day of summer vacation. She turned the trumpet around and looked into the bell.

“Is this a trick?” she asked suspiciously.

“Yes. It is. It’s similar to the kind of horn used by the Fairie hunters when they chase the Dark Stag through the Forest Of Houndes Berk. I’ve a real one that I’ll show you sometime. You’ll still have to practice but you’ll find that it makes playing more enjoyable.”

“How come you don’t make better drawings like Patrin and Mook? Can’t you draw?” Clio asked stubbornly.

“You still don’t believe in me,” Skye replied, shaking his head. “Miss Clio, I am, or at least I was, the Royal Toymaker. I don’t need to draw all the details out because I can see them in my mind. If you have a thing clear in your head, then an elaborate drawing isn’t necessary. Actually you don’t need to draw the toy at all. Sketching it out just helps with the process,” he explained patiently. Wilber yawned and handed him the pen.

“So you would like to see a ‘better drawing’.” Skye thought for a moment and started to sketch on the little pad of paper. Clio watched intently as he put a thousand intricate lines together to make a skillful picture of everyone sitting around the table making toys. The illustration showed Mook and Patrin working on the Aircoaster. Clio was holding Wilber and Kit stood next to Blue. Chimka and Mrs. Hogar were in the picture. The last person that he added was himself sitting at the end of the table. In the picture he was holding a little sign that said “To Miss Clio Halina and Wilber Dragonfriend, your obedient servant, Sir Wolfren Comestible Skye.”

“I know that this is not technically a toy but only a poor portrait. I thought that you might like it as a souvenir of your summer vacation.” He handed it to her solemnly and she took it and studied it carefully.

“Hey! Not bad, but you drew Blue too big!” The picture showed Blue to be the size of a small pony.

“That’s how big he’ll be tomorrow. He needs to grow a bit still,” answered Skye. Clio took in this information and studied the picture some more.

“So you like Miss Ashlyn?” she asked, looking at the way that he had captured Kit midturn with her dark hair swinging around her shoulders.

“Yes,” he nodded gravely. “Yes, I do.”

“Oh.” Clio uncrossed her arms and stuffed her hands in her pockets. “You know Mook kinda likes her too.” Wilber wagged his tail in agreement. If this news surprised Skye his serious face did not show it.

“Then I wish them all the happiness in life,” he replied earnestly. “Mookael is a good man, and my best friend. He is very fortunate to have won the affections of so fine a lady.”

“Oh, I don’t think that she likes him all that much back,” Clio explained bluntly.

“This is problematic. Would you like me to speak to her for him?” he asked, not sure why she was telling him this. Clio rolled her eyes and looked exasperated. She swore to herself that when she grew up she would not be so dense.

“No! Do I have to explain everything? It’s so obvious she’s really...you know...sweet on you. I mean, she sure likes talking to you and stuff. And she looks at you kind of funny sometimes when you can’t see her.”

“I can’t imagine what she would find to like about me.”

“Well, she does! So you just make sure you’re nice to her.... or.... or else!” Clio scrunched up her nose and punched Skye in the arm. She didn’t hurt him but her sudden outburst took him off guard.

“Miss Clio, is that what this is all about? Are you afraid that I might do something to hurt Miss Ashlyn’s feelings?” he asked.

“You wouldn’t dump her would you?”

“No, I would not.”

Clio pondered this reply. She liked this strange man well enough although he frightened her a little. He was so serious and never smiled. But he had always been kind in helping her with the toys that she had made. Although he was not funny like Mook or

easy to talk to like Patrin she figured that if Miss Ashlyn liked him then he must somehow be special.

“Okay, here’s the deal. If you want to go out with Miss Ashlyn you’re going to have to make some changes. First thing is... you need a better job. She can’t be living in that dumpy Bunks place. It’s too scary.” Clio started writing a list. “Number one” she wrote, “A Job, a good one. I don’t want her working in some stinky kitchen with that Kulak guy. He’s a creep. Number two. A house. You need a nice house with a yard and maybe a barn for Blue. And... oh yeah, and three ‘A haircut’. You’d be better looking if you got a haircut.” Skye sat silently while Clio finished scrawling the list and handed it to him. “Got it?” she asked.

“Yes miss, thank you for your kind words of advice.” He tucked the paper inside of his shirt pocket and held the door as Mrs. Hogar came in.

“Thanks for the trumpet and the picture. And don’t forget...” Clio said, making scissors motions with her free hand.

“It’s a pretty tall order but I’ll see what I can do. We can leave for Saint Ives in the morning.”

“What was that all about, sir?” asked Mrs. Hogar. Skye sketched a comb and a sharp pair of barber’s scissors and pulled them gleaming from the paper.

“Commander, could you help me for a moment? Miss Clio has informed me that I’m in need of a haircut.”

Chapter 27

“You can’t! You can’t!” Clio heard a frantic voice pleading in the entrance hall. It was Morna and she was talking to Patrin. “You can’t leave now. What will the Council say?” Clio tried to sneak downstairs unnoticed but Morna called out to her.

“Clio, darling! Come and speak some sense into our dear Patrin. He says that he is leaving us for Saint Ives tomorrow.” Morna grabbed Clio’s arm and pulled her over to where they were standing.

“Um, gee, I don’t know.” Clio fumbled for something to say. “I guess it’s just time for us to go home.”

“You are going too?” Morna spat the words out with surprise. Clio could see a plan forming in Morna’s mind as the older girl studied her with contempt.

“Patrin, you didn’t say that we were all going. Won’t this be a lark? The Royal City, I haven’t been there in ages! Send one of your kitchen boys over in an hour to pick up my things.” Morna said, picking an imaginary piece of lint off of Patrin’s shirt.

Clio felt a burning anger rush through her at Morna’s thoughtless words.

“They’re not boys, they’re grown men and my friends and you need to treat them with more respect,” Clio fumed.

“Oh please,” replied the red haired girl with a sneer, “They work in the kitchen.”

“Yeah! And so what? You are such a snob!” Clio shot back.

“Patrin, perhaps you can explain how things work around here.” Morna appealed to him for help.

“It is not the fine coat that makes the gentleman,” replied Patrin, staring at the inlaid block pattern on the floor. The red haired girl bit her lip in frustration and started to say something in return when Mook entered the room. Her jaw dropped at the sight of Mook and Clio could tell that Morna recognized him now that he had been unerased.

“Shall I start piling the boxes here, sir?” asked Mook cheerfully. “Evening, Miss Morna. Good to see you again,” he added politely as he stacked a toy box and the Doubler on the table and then went back upstairs for another load.

“Oh! Oh! Did you see that!” Morna clutched Clio and looked as if she was about to faint.

“What?” answered Clio, trying to peel Morna’s fingers off her arm, “It’s just Mook.”

“That was Sir Mookael the Game Master. I heard him lecture once at the Academy. Patrin, surely you must recognize him! He’s a good friend of the Royal Toymaker himself!” She stared at Patrin for a moment and said, “Did anyone ever tell you that you look a lot like Prince Orion? I don’t know why I never noticed it before.” Patrin felt his wrist and realized that he had forgotten to put his Chronometer back on.

“I get that all the time,” he said, laughing off her comment. “But I hear that he is not as good looking in person. Well, look how late it is, eight-o’clock already. Better get back to work. Thanks so much for stopping by.” He took her arm and started guiding her to the front door.

“Couldn’t I stay and meet Sir Mookael? Please, Prent will be so jealous when he finds out that I saw him. At least let me shake his hand.” She dug her heels in and wouldn’t move. Then her eyes opened very wide and her mouth opened and shut like a fish gasping for air. Skye was standing in the doorway brushing off his shoulders. His hair was cut like Patrin’s, still longish on the top and shorter in the back. Clio could see the family resemblance in their sharp noses and cowlicks that flopped their thick hair over in their foreheads.

“Good evening, Miss Morna,” he said politely to the dumbstruck girl. She couldn’t speak and her face was flushed as she pointed at him. “Do I meet with your approval, Miss Clio?” he asked.

“Major improvement. You look good.” She gave him a thumbs up as he went upstairs to help Mook with the boxes.

“That was, that was, that was HIM!” Morna finally gasped. She clasped her hand to her mouth to stifle a small squeal and fled the room in panic.

“What’s her problem?” asked Clio as the stained glass doors slammed behind Morna’s retreating figure.

“My uncle is sort of what you might call a celebrity. Think of the most famous person that you can and multiply it times ten and you might have an idea of how well known he is,” Patrin explained. “And he’s the only person I know that isn’t afraid of my Grandmother the Queen, excepting maybe my Dad and Mum. We’ll meet them all soon

enough. I'm sure that you'll like Saint Ives. It's a wonderful place! I'm hoping to talk Uncle Skye and Miss Ashlyn into letting you stay for a few more days so I can show you around."

"That'd be beyond cool!"

"I just hope we don't run into much trouble getting there."

The next morning Kit woke up to see Blue standing by her bed with a tiny book in his mouth. The title read "Practical Clown Essentials" Kit was so astonished to see how big Blue had grown during the night that she didn't notice the book at first. He was now the size of a large Great Dane and his wingspan had increased to six feet. Kit quickly found the information that they had spent the last month searching for. The book had a section on deviant clowns. It went on to explain that rogue clowns were essentially toys created by Hosmer the Troublemaker and the best way to disengage them was a good sock to the nose.

"I know that Skye will be relieved to hear this, Blue. Thank you for finding it. Hey, I hope that you don't get too much bigger or we won't be able to fit you in the Fish Car!" The blue velvet unicorn nuzzled her hand and blinked his onyx button eyes happily.

Kit found Mrs. Hogar waiting in the front hall amidst piles of toy boxes. She was holding two long staves and pacing nervously. The hall clock had just struck six and a line of bathing hippos had just twirled by with scrub brushes.

"We have time for one last morning walk, miss. Sir Skye has gone on ahead to repair the Fish Car and I want to check on his progress," she said giving the clock a disapproving glance.

"Let's go. I found out some information this morning that he will find very interesting." Kit proceeded to tell Mrs. Hogar what she had read about rogue clowns.

"This is heartening news indeed. Still I will be much comforted when we are all safe within the Royal City. Let us be especially watchful today."

It was a cloudy morning and the sky threatened rain as they made their way toward the airfield. Gusty winds blew swirls of leaves across the runway and made the

trees shake and bend. Kit hoped that the weather wouldn't delay their leaving. The Fish Car sat parked with the motor idling. The Busby Bee flag on the tail flapped wildly. Skye appeared in the doorway holding a toolbox and an oversized oil can.

"It's all shipshape and ready for takeoff, Commander," he said. "I only had to overhaul the gills. The scales are recharging now. The sooner we can leave the better." Skye looked uneasily at the surrounding hills and twitched his nostrils.

"Something is out of balance. I can't tell what but it's there. I smell great unrest and fear. Please be careful."

"We will hurry, sir. Stay here and keep an eye on the car," ordered Mrs. Hogar. Kit handed the "Practical Clown Essentials" volume to Skye and told him what she had found out. He nodded and paged through the tiny book.

"My thanks to Blue for finding this. Now good speed."

Kit and Mrs. Hogar turned and ran at a fast pace. Mrs. Hogar froze when they got near to Quad Hall. There was a windup police car was parked in front of the big mansion. Sargent Braso had opened the door and two large police officers were trying to force a handcuffed Mook into the backseat. He was putting up a fierce struggle and yelling loudly.

"Let me go! They took them! You don't understand!"

"Hey you lot," Sargent Braso was saying to Mook, "settle down nice and easy now. Don't make us get tough with you."

"Stall them," whispered Mrs. Hogar. "I'll see what is going on inside." She vanished around the back of the house quick as a bird's shadow. Kit thought fast and decided that she would try the direct approach.

"What seems to be the problem here, officer?" she asked. "What has this man done?"

"He is being arrested for impersonating a Toymaker." Sargent Braso held up a pink slip of paper.

"Him?" she laughed what she hoped was a 'Oh aren't you silly' laugh, "That's ridiculous! Mook, set them straight. Who's been telling you that?" Mook was busy bracing his feet against the car so that they couldn't stuff him in.

"Mrs. Poacher from the Toy Council wrote the paperwork."

“What does she know? She has never visited us.”

“Well Miss, Mrs. Poacher and Mister Punter were just here. They said that they had taken the two other suspects away for questioning.” Sargent Braso mopped his face with a large handkerchief. He wasn’t used to dealing with this kind of problem.

“Other suspects? And who might that be?” Kit felt her heart jump.

“She said it was some kid claiming to be Prince Orion, if you can believe that, and some girl who said she was a Greylander. Don’t concern yourself miss. I’m sure they’ll be getting them back to their parents.”

“That would be a trick,” thought Kit. She looked up at the big policeman. “Clio is my niece,” she lied, “Kids these days will say anything! Tell me where they took them. She should be in school. Boy! Is she going to get it when I get my hands on her!”

“They drove off that way,” said Sargent Braso waving his pudgy hand off in the direction of the train station.

“Oh! Thank you so much! Here, let him go. Mook is my driver. I need him to take me to pick up my niece. I am sure that Mrs. Poacher mistook him for someone else. Her eyesight is not what it used to be,” she explained confidentially. Kit took the keys from one of the officer’s belt and unlocked the handcuffs. The policemen did not stop her but merely looked confused.

“Sorry about the misunderstanding, miss,” Braso apologized.

“Not at all, you were just doing your job, perfectly understandable, come along Mook.” She started walking toward the door and hoped that they could get inside before the police changed their minds.

When Kit opened the door and stepped inside she immediately wished that she were back outside again. Two large clowns were standing in the entrance hall tying up Prent and Morna. Prent looked as if he were in shock and Morna’s face was red and puffy from crying. The clowns were identical twins wearing orange polkadotted vests and big white gloves. Their huge rainbow colored hair framed the carefully painted red and blue smiles on their faces. One lunged at Kit but she moved into his attack, clotheslining him with her arm. His green and yellow giant shoes flew up into the air as he fell heavily to the floor.

“This is where we find out if our research was correct,” she thought as she dropped to bash the clown on the nose. He immediately froze with his eyes open. The other clown swung at her with an inflatable baseball bat. She twisted his wrist and threw him into the wall. As he wobbled to his feet she backhanded him and he fell to the ground paralyzed as well. The entire fight took less than ten seconds.

She and Mook struggled to untie Morna and Prent.

“Remind me never to make you angry, miss,” observed Mook looking at the two fallen figures. Mrs. Hogar rushed into the room.

“We have to get out now! It’s not safe. Someone has pulled up all the Jolly’s Bane. What are you two doing here?” she glared at the two Junior Council members.

“We came to say we were sorry! We didn’t mean to make this much trouble!” replied Prent. Morna was quiet for a moment and then burst into howling tears.

“It was all my fault! She said that it would impress Patrin if we borrowed it and he would take me with him. I didn’t know that she wanted to use it to make clowns!”

“Took what, you silly girl? Get a hold of yourself and tell us what happened,” Mrs. Hogar asked, not long on patience.

“Mrs. Poacher said that if we snuck in and borrowed the Doubler thing that she would show us how to make some toys for Patrin. I only wanted him to like me. Then she made me copy a roomful of clowns, all night, more and more. It was awful.” She sobbed loudly as the others tried to grasp the magnitude of what she had done.

“How many clowns did you make?” Mrs. Hogar grabbed Morna’s arm and shook her.

“I don’t know,” she managed to whimper, terrified by the look on Mrs. Hogar’s face.

“There, there,” said Kit soothingly, “Why don’t you sit down and take a deep breath? We can figure this out. Did you make copies of more than one at a time?”

“Yes, whole lines of them, like an army.”

“And for a long time, say an hour, or more, perhaps five hours? Think back. What time was it when you showed Mrs. Poacher the Doubler?”

“Late, about two in the morning. She was angry that it took so long for us to get there. Then she turned mean and told me to make copies of the clowns or she would have us arrested for stealing. I didn’t want to do it!”

“If she made copies for three hours at ten per minute that could equal over sixteen hundred clowns. Where did they all go?” Kit figured quickly the numbers in her head and then shuddered.

“On the train, to someplace called the Grotto,” said Mook. His normally cheerful face was grim. “They’re going to force Patrin to make war toys for them. They are planning to attack Saint Ives. As soon as you left, Kulak came in and collected up the Jolly’s Bane, then the police took Patrin, Miss Clio and all the Friends. They seized all the toys that we made too. Poacher didn’t seem to recognize me and told the police I was an escaped factory worker.”

“Morna, did you tell Mrs. Poacher that Mookael the Game Master and the Royal Toymaker were here?” asked Mrs. Hogar impatiently. She kept peering out the window to see if anyone was coming up the walkway. The unhappy girl shook her head.

“Good, at least you did one thing right,” snapped Mrs. Hogar. “Can you drive a car?”

“I have my permit,” she replied.

“Here is how you will start to redeem yourself. You!” she pointed to Prent, “Get the Food Box out of the workroom and one of the Clothes Boxes from upstairs. Be quick about it! Morna, take the car out front and drive Prent and the Boxes to the Bunks. There is enough Jolly’s Bane to keep you and the people inside the walls safe from any clown attacks. You may be there for a while so I want you to make sure that each and every one of those people gets enough to eat. This will protect you for the time being.” She gave Morna her bag of Jolly’s Bane. “Drive as fast as you can and don’t stop for anything!” Morna looked horrified at the prospect of going to the Bunks but nodded weakly. They loaded the boxes in the car and Prent and Morna sped off.

“We have to get to Saint Ives and warn the Queen.” Mrs. Hogar stood very still, almost quivering, as she thought of a plan. “Miss, you go and tell Sir Skye to take you to the Royal City. Tell her Majesty what has happened and to start preparing for war. It’s

two days by train and only a few hours by Fish Car. I'll go to the Grotto and bring back the Prince and Miss Clio."

"What would you like for me to do?" Mook asked. Mrs. Hogar tossed a pad of paper at him.

"You have three minutes to invent a way to get me there."

Chapter 28

Clio watched the countryside rush by through the bars. She and Patrin had been thrown into a circus car that was used to transport wild animals. One of the Jester Control officers had painted over the words “Lions and Tigers” and written “Toymakers” in loopy handwriting. Some of the clowns had poked at them with balloon animals and laughed hysterically. Many of the clowns had shook their heads sadly at the sight of the two teenagers locked in a cage. Others pelted Clio and Patrin with handfuls of old popcorn.

“Look at the big, bad Toymakers! Whoo hoo!” a group of little short ones taunted, “It’s time for the toys to run the show!”

One particular nasty looking one dressed in black and red plaid had told them, “You don’t look so important! Just wait until we get to the Grotto. You work for us now!” He squirted Patrin with the plastic flower on his lapel and went away giggling.

The circus train at the station was packed to overflowing with hundreds of clowns. Clio had never seen so many in her life milling around, squeezing each other’s noses and honking rubber horns. She had caught a glimpse of Wilber, Chimka and Blue being locked into crates and loaded into a boxcar. Blue had put up a tremendous fight before being captured and tied up. Several clowns had been tossed into the air by his sharp horn and even more had been sent flying by his quick hooves. As soon as the crates were loaded the whistle blew and the engine started chugging out of the station.

Patrin paced back and forth stopping only to shake the bars in frustration. Clio sat and nervously braided little rings out of the straw that was strewn on the floor. The train chugged through beautiful meadows and by wooded streams.

“This is serious, isn’t it?” asked Clio, not looking up from her weaving. Patrin sat down beside her and started twisting a bit of straw in his fingers.

“Oh, I don’t know. Can’t say that I’ve been in a worse fix, but Uncle Skye will come after us.”

“But there must be about a million clowns on this train and hundreds more still in Blocksbury.” Clio did not share Patrin’s faith in his uncle’s extraordinary abilities. “Face it Patrin, we are so in trouble.”

“They are all just toys, that thing-a-ma-gummy said so at the station.” Patrin smiled a wicked grin. “My uncle will figure out a way to kick them back into the Toy Box permanently!”

“I hope that they hurry. This Grotto place sounds scary.”

“We just have to figure out a way to keep out of harm’s way until we get rescued. But not to worry, they are probably on their way right now. In the meantime it might be fun to stir up a little mischief of our own.”

Kit dashed through Blocksbury toward the airfield. She carried Mrs. Hogar’s letter for Skye to take to the Queen. It was almost a mile there from Quad Hall and she wished she were a faster runner. The streets were deserted as the wind blew swirls of trash and leaves past her feet. It had been drizzling earlier and Kit hoped that she wouldn’t slip on the cobblestones as she wound her way through the narrow alleyways. She turned the last corner and the airfield stretched out before her. To her horror there was a large circle of clowns surrounding Skye and another tall figure pouring something around the Fish Car. As she ran closer she recognized Kulak the Kitchen Master with a large can of kerosene. She hesitated for a moment as to which way to go before deciding to try and stop Kulak.

“If the Fish Car gets damaged we could be stuck in Blocksbury forever.” Kit thought as she adjusted her grip on her long staff. “Okay jerk, I hope that you are not as tough as you look.” The Kitchen Master saw her running toward him and laughed. His hands were covered in a blue substance and Kit guessed it was from pulling up the Jolly’s Bane.

“My little prize, thank you for saving me the trouble of coming to get you,” he said, setting the kerosene can down. The huge man seemed amused by her running to attack him.

“Give me the stick and I’ll be kind to you.” He looked her up and down with a wolfish smile.

“Leave now and I’ll let you, um, leave now.” Kit wished that she sounded wittier but she was concentrating on looking for an opening. Kulak was well over six feet tall,

with broad shoulders and massive arms. He towered over Kit's slender frame. He walked toward her and gestured with his blue stained fingers for her to hand over the long staff.

"Give it to me, girly."

"Don't tempt me!" she shot back, circling around him trying to put some space between them and the oil soaked asphalt. Her heart was pounding hard and she forced herself to breathe deeply to focus. She thought it odd that she didn't feel fear but rather a furious strength as she paced around her opponent.

"Let's hope that the saying 'the bigger they are the harder they fall' is true," Kit thought as she twirled her long staff in her hand. Kulak pulled a box of matches out of his pocket. He casually lit one without looking at it and tossed it to the ground. Kit watched as the wind blew out the flame before it hit the ground. As Kulak reached for a second match Kit lashed out with her stick and knocked him over. He hit the ground and the matches scattered everywhere. Lumbering to his feet the enraged man lunged at her. She parried with the staff to twist his arm up and around his back dislocating his muscle as he crashed hard onto his side. Kulak bellowed in pain and rolled to his feet. Before Kit could get out of the way he shoved her down, knocking the wind out of her as she slid across the rough asphalt. He tried to backhand Kit, but she managed to dodge his fist and whack the back of his arm guiding him face first into the pavement with an armlock throw. The Kitchen Master lay moaning on the ground as Kit turned her attention to the sound of rubber horns honking further down the runway.

"Kit!" Skye's voice traveled over the sound of the horns. "Get away! Hurry!" He was standing in the middle of the circle of clowns. They swarmed around him careful not to get too close. He held something in his hand that the clowns were afraid of and as he turned around they moved away as if repelled by a strong stream of air. The clowns kept trying to attack him from behind. Kit could see Skye's tall figure through the bobbing clown hats and multi-colored hair. His face was calm but his eyes burned with a strange intensity as if he was fighting a battle in some other place. Kit felt a wave of rage rush through her as she watched the circle close in to grab him.

"Get away from him!" Without thinking she rushed toward the ring of clowns and started attacking them with animal-like fury. She broke through the ring and started taking out one clown after another. Kit felt like a thing possessed. The wind whipped her

dark hair around her face making her look like an avenging banshee. She disengaged several more clowns before the rest of the gang dispersed. They shrieked and scattered like birds across the runway. She grabbed Skye by the hand and helped him to his feet.

“We have to GO!” Kit said, pulling him with all her strength.

“But the Fish Car...,” he started, looking puzzled.

“It won’t be there in a moment. Come on!” She had caught a glimpse of fire darting along the pavement out of the corner of her eye. Some of the clowns were playing with the matches, laughing and throwing them at each other. A lit match had hit the oil soaked ground and the flames instantly encircled the Fish Car.

“The clowns will regroup soon. Head towards Quad Hall!” Kit said letting go of his hand so that they could run faster. They had almost made to the edge of the runway when Kit heard the explosion behind her.

“It isn’t likely to be winning any beauty contests but it’s the best I can do given the time, ma’am,” said Mook as he adjusted the steering mechanism on a new Aircoaster. “I designed her for maximum speed. She should be able to catch up with the train with no trouble at all. I even added a luggage compartment.” The full sized Aircoaster sat on the workroom table gleaming black with silver trim. Ten minutes had gone by since Kit had left with Mrs. Hogar’s letter. Mook had never worked so fast in his life.

“As long as it gets us there, Catlander, that’s all I care about.” Mrs. Hogar was quickly stuffing two backpacks full of supplies and weapons. Mook started sketching helmets for them to wear.

“I don’t suppose you have a weapon of choice?” Mrs. Hogar asked doubtfully.

“That would be yo-yos and rubber darts. A few pads of paper might come in handy as well,” replied Mook, tossing her a completed helmet. Mrs. Hogar grabbed it and continued packing a bag full of the requested items. She was strapping on a couple of extra sleeping blankets to the back rack when Mook touched her arm.

“I’m thinking that now might be a good time to leave, ma’am,” he said nodding toward the big windows that faced the lake. A long line of clowns had assembled on the veranda, staring in at them with unblinking wide eyes and merciless grins.

Wilber snuffled the air. He could hear the angry thump of Blue's hooves as he kicked the inside of his crate. He honked a formal greeting in the language of stuffed animal Friends. The sound was soft and inaudible to the untrained ear.

"Hello, this is Wilber Dragonfriend of Clio the Gifted, hello. Can you identify yourself?"

"Hello and hello again, this is Blue Magicfriend of Kitsune the Beloved. You will have to excuse me, I am not very happy right now."

"Can you hear Chimka Monkeyfriend of Mookael Who Talks To Cats?"

"Yes, I, Chimka Monkeyfriend, am not happy as well. But greetings and thank you for inquiring." Chimka chattered back softly. "Is your Person well, Wilber Dragonfriend?" Wilber searched the world with his cotton filled brain, roaming far and wide until he located Clio and replied,

"Yes, Clio the Gifted is on this train, not far from me. She is frightened and hungry but otherwise unharmed. And your Person is in good spirits I hope?"

"He is with Hogar the Fair. She is mighty, she will protect him. They wish to come to rescue us. They are hopeful," replied Chimka after a moment.

"That is good to hear," whinnied Blue softly. "My Person, Kitsune the Beloved is with Skye the Toymaker Who was Lost." Both Wilber and Chimka murmured their approval and Blue continued, "She is full of great anger and worry. Does Chimka Monkeyfriend hear anything from the Friend who Sleeps?"

"Not yet. But I am hopeful for her as well." Chimka pounded on the side of the crate testing its strength. "We must move quickly to help our People. These Toy Clowns are not Friends. They intend to harm Clio the Gifted and Patrin Orion the Mender, Person of the Bear that Flies. I have prepared a plan which I will explain to you now." Chimka proceeded to quietly explain his idea for rescuing Clio and Patrin as the train chugged steadily over the Azure Mountains.

Chapter 29

“Well, let’s see how fast this thing can go, Catlander,” said Mrs. Hogar climbing on the back of the Aircoaster. Mook threw on his helmet and jumped into the driver’s seat.

“Keep your head down, Commander. We’re going straight through the glass!” The Aircoaster fired up, flames shooting out of the back, and flew toward the faces of the horrified clowns. Mook clutched the steering wheels and braced himself for impact. Three inches from the glass the Aircoaster stopped abruptly and hovered in the air.

“It won’t crash! It has safety bumpers designed in!” Mook exclaimed, flipping switches and adjusting controls.

“Then take us out another way and be quick about it!” shouted Mrs. Hogar. The Aircoaster sped around the room and headed toward the door just as a line of clowns rushed into the room.

“Great Flaming Cattails!” swore Mook, “And where would that switch be hiding? Ah! Here you are!” He pulled a lever on the dashboard and the nose cone of the Aircoaster flipped open. A large red boxing glove on an articulated arm popped out.

“I took the liberty, ma’am, of designing in a defense system,” Mook yelled over the roar of the rockets. “It can be operated from your control panels. I suggest that you give it a try!” They circled the room again and Mrs. Hogar started experimenting with the rows of levers and buttons in front of her. Clowns flew in their path as boxing gloves punched out from hidden panels on all sides. Mook let out a Catlander battle yowl as he piloted the Aircoaster up the big staircase in the entrance hall. They flew down the corridor and into Clio’s bedroom. Mook hovered the rocket for a moment and leaned over to pick up Clio’s new trumpet that was sitting on her bed.

“Sorry for the detour, Commander, but I’m thinking that Miss Clio might be wanting this.” Mook grinned as he passed the trumpet back to Mrs. Hogar. He banked the Aircoaster around and opened the door to balcony. Clown heads were starting to pop up over the railing.

“Hold on,” Mook yelled as he pushed a red button marked ‘Extra Juice,’ “This is where it gets interesting!”

The explosion from the Fish Car felt hot on the back of Kit's neck. The blast of air almost knocked her down. After a few moments she glanced back at Skye to see if he was still behind her. He had stopped a terrified family that was running towards the Bunks. Kit ran back to see what was the matter.

"They say that people are gathering there and that it is a safe haven," the frightened man told them.

"Here take this. It will protect you." Kit and Skye gave the family their little sacks of Jolly's Bane and continued toward Quad Hall.

Halfway back, as they ran through the deserted neighborhood, Skye turned suddenly and dashed toward one of the impressive looking houses that lined the boulevard.

"Hurry!" he said climbing up the front porch to the roof and extending a hand to pull her up. "We should be safe enough up here." Kit passed her long staff up to him and quickly scaled the trellis to the roof. They lay flat on the shingles and watched as a squad of clowns combed the street, dressed in orange and purple striped jumpsuits labeled Jester Control Sanitation Department.

"They have a limited range of perception," Skye explained. "They won't look up here for us." Kit hoped that he was right as a crowd of clowns ransacked each house one by one, breaking windows and throwing furniture out on the lawns. Kit was anxious to move and get to a safer location, but Skye motioned for her to keep down.

"Why didn't you run when I asked you to?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the destruction below.

"You looked like you needed some help," Kit whispered back.

"I'd have found a way out, it is the others who need you now," he replied. Kit found it difficult to tell him what had happened.

"Mrs. Poacher and Mr. Punter got to the house before Mrs. Hogar and I returned. They took Patrin and Clio away to that Grotto place that you told me about."

Skye's face hardened as he listened to what she was telling him.

"They left on the train," Kit explained, trying hard to keep her voice steady. "Mrs. Hogar and Mook have gone after them and she's asked us to go to warn your

Queen.” She gave him Mrs. Hogar’s letter. Skye read it quickly and closed his eyes as if the words were too painful to look at again.

“The Fish Car is gone,” Kit said. “What are our options? We must find a way to get to Saint Ives and fast!”

“There is always a way.” Skye tucked the letter in his shirt pocket. “If we can get to the Boathouse, we could escape by water. The lake runs into Grendel’s Sound which connects to the open sea. It would at least get us away from this place.”

“It’s worth a try,” she replied. “I don’t know what other choices we have.” At that moment the Aircoaster went thundering past in the sky overhead. Kit watched it arch over and speed toward the horizon. She thought that she heard the faint voice of Mrs. Hogar yelling directions at Mook. Kit clutched her long staff until her knuckles turned white as she was overcome with a feeling of helplessness.

“Kit,” Skye said, still watching the mob parade through the streets below. “I wish to be there too. I wish, with every fiber of my being, to be doing something, anything to help Miss Clio and Patrin. But so many innocent people are in danger if what this letter says is true. We must trust that Mrs. Hogar and Mook will do their best to rescue those dear to our hearts.” He put his callused hand on top of hers and gripped it tight. “I promise, that as soon as we warn the Queen, we’ll return to find them. I swear it by all the Cats of Saint Ives.”

After the group of clowns moved further along the block, Skye and Kit climbed down the trellis and continued making their way toward the lake. As they ran along, Kit noticed that Skye caught several oak leaves that were blowing through the air and put them in his pocket. He also picked up a few twigs and bits of wood as they ran, never slowing his pace. They managed to escape notice until they got to the Quad Hall garden. Skye froze and motioned for Kit to stay out of sight. There stood an entire unit from Jester Control dressed in black and red uniforms. The ghastly faces of the clowns were painted in stark white with black eyebrows and mouths. Their heads were bald except for a tuft of red hair sticking up like a horn. They carried bamboo canes that they swished through the air, striking down flowers and leaves as they searched the gardens. Several of the massive clowns carried a large red net.

“Saint Portia, protect us,” Skye murmured under his breath. Kit could see the fear in his yellow green eyes. “I’ll need at least five minutes in the Boathouse to get a boat ready to sail. Do you think that you can hold the door for that long?” Kit nodded.

“We’ll need a distraction to get even that far.”

Skye grabbed a small lump of earth and rapidly worked it into an animal shape.

“That part I think I can do.” He tossed the bit of mud toward the clowns. It grew as it soared through the air and became a large wolf made out of clay. Skye’s fingers flew as he made a few more mud animals and released them along the path. The squad disbanded in terror as the snarling shapes ran toward them.

“You’ll have to show me how to do that sometime,” Kit told Skye.

“I would be most pleased,” he replied. “It won’t take long for them to figure out that the wolves are made of mud. Quickly! Now go!” They sprinted to the Boathouse and Kit barred the door by threading her long staff through the curved handles inside. The Boathouse seemed oddly quiet after the loud shouting and destruction of the streets. Skye pulled a small knife out of his pocket and started to rapidly carve a small scrap of wood into the shape of a boat. He bore two holes into the top and fixed straight twigs into them. Then he attached the oak leaves from his pocket for sails. Kit could hear him whispering frantically as he worked.

“Masthead, boarding ladder, jib coils, rudder, cabin, hatches, foredeck, main sail, galley, berth, water barrel.”

The squeak of big shoes and the honk of rubber horns sounded outside the door. A white painted face poked in the window and said, “Looky! Looky! Our little friends are hiding in here. Want to come out and play?”

Kit threw a marlinespike at his nose and the clown shut down. The long staff strained as the clowns pushed at the door. Kit braced herself for another attack as they slammed against the wood. Skye stood up and leaned against the door still mumbling and carving. He reached over to where Kit was holding the door and pulled a few hairs from her head.

“Ow!” she cried. “What was that? I’m a little busy here.” She braced for another jolt from outside.

“I’ve heard that a single hair from the Fairie Queen’s head can save a drowning man. I’m counting on yours to be just as strong.” Skye tied the long strands of hair to the fragile toy boat and wrapped the ends around his wrist. Then he reached up on top of one of the rafters and pulled out the packet of Candeeze that he hid there after being interrogated by Dolly and Big Happy.

“I thought these would come in handy. I hope you’re ready to get wet,” he said pulling her back against the wall. The staff broke and the door burst open. The room filled with clowns, their Jester Control uniforms covered in mud. Skye scattered the brightly colored Candeeze on the floor and the mob rushed to gather them.

“Enjoy, gentlemen!” he said as he pushed Kit through the throng and raced down the dock. His arm wrapped around her waist, crushing the air out of her as they leapt into the lake. Kit saw the toy boat fly into the air then felt a rush of cold water and bubbles surround her as they went under. The light of the sun was blocked out by something looming in front of them as they were pulled toward the surface. Skye’s grip grew even tighter as they shot out of the water and a line swung them down to a deck. A fast moving schooner appeared underneath them with sails the color of oak leaves. A magnificent griffin carved into the bow crested through the waves as the ship sped away from the shore. Kit wiped her eyes and found she was lying on a gleaming deck of varnished mahogany. Skye coughed up water, then hauled himself, dripping and unsteady to the railing. He shouted to the furious squad of black and red clad clowns jumping up and down on the dock,

“Tell Captain Dolly that Sir Wolfren Skye made this!”

The weather started getting cooler as the train wound its way up the narrow tracks over the Azure Mountains. Patrin and Clio huddled together trying to stay warm as the green fields turned to rocky cliffs sparsely dotted with pine trees. By midafternoon Clio felt her stomach ache with hunger. She tried nibbling on the stale popcorn that the clowns had thrown at them and immediately wished that she hadn’t. The salt only made her painfully thirsty. It didn’t help that they passed several waterfalls cascading down beside the tracks.

“Whoever made this train unfortunately did a good job,” said Patrin hopping up to pull on the bars again. “I would say that we are sealed in here tight as tinkertoys. Say!” he said shielding his eyes with his hand against the late noon sun, “It appears that we are going to pass through a town up ahead.” Clio got up to look out the bars. A little wooden signpost said ‘Ubergletch - five miles.’

“Maybe we can get a message to somebody. I wish that we had something to write on,” said Clio.

“If we had a pen and paper we would’ve been out of here by now,” laughed Patrin. “We could have drawn any number of things like a toy that chews through train bars.”

“How about a toy that eats clowns? Wouldn’t that be something?” Clio was cheered by this thought.

“Don’t worry, It ‘s only a matter of time before we get out of here. I’m sure of it!” The train pulled into the station to take on coal and water. The town seemed depressed and shabby and the station was sadly in need of repairs. The workers that brought the coal for the tender worked fearfully as they shoveled the coal. A group of poorly dressed street urchins scrambled up to stare at the prisoners. They pointed at Patrin and scurried off.

“Help us, please!” yelled Clio but they ran away down a deserted street. Just as the train started to leave the station the group of children returned joined by even more ragged kids. They ran along the platform taunting Patrin and Clio and pelting them with garbage.

“Nyeah, Nyeah, Nyeah!” they chanted as they threw pieces of trash through the bars sticking their tongues out and laughing. The clowns in the passenger cars seemed to think that this was funny and threw jellybeans to the children.

“Little cretins!” said Patrin as they pulled away from the station. “That was not called for at all!”

“No! Look! They snuck us food! This is great!” Clio started sorting through the mess and uncorking a bottle of juice. “Look there are apples and oranges, cheeses! Here are a couple of peanutbutter sandwiches. There are even some gloves and knit hats. At least our ears will be warm.”

“They risked a lot to get us these things,” observed Patrin. “I hope that we have the opportunity to thank them in person soon.”

“Try again, Wilber Dragonfriend.” Chimka’s soft voice came from inside of a crate. “You are a Dragon and Dragons breathe fire!” Wilber wheezed up a puff of smoke and honked mournfully.

“You can do it!” urged Blue. “Do it for Clio the Gifted! She needs our help!”

“Well I know that,” replied Wilber. “But fire is not within my grasp at this time. It frightens me.”

“If only the Friend who Sleeps were here,” said Chimka. “She can make fire like none other.”

“She is not here, although I do look forward to the hour of our meeting,” said Blue with a whinny. “Once more Wilber Dragonfriend and fear not!”

“Yes! Fear not! Ura Amara the light of heaven, the Mother of Toys will protect you,” Chimka said with fervor. “Now breathe!” Wilber thought hard for a moment and coughed a bit.

“I have smoke in my nose!” he cried.

“Of course you do, you big bag of stuffing!” snapped Chimka, “Now make fire! Hurry! Something is coming.” A patrolling clown came through the storage car and whacked the sides of the boxes with his cane.

“Ah...ah...ahhhh...” Wilber started to sneeze from the smoke inside his box and he squeezed his velvet snout hard with his paw. The squeak of clown shoes drifted off in the distance and Wilber let loose. “AHCHOO!” A stream of fire exploded from his mouth knocking the side off of his crate. He sneezed again melting the lock off of Chimka’s box. The red monkey hopped out quickly and began picking the lock on Blue’s crate with his tail. Wilber waddled over to watch, rubbing the soot from his nose.

“Well done, Wilber Dragonfriend. And don’t point that thing at me.”

Wilber was about to sneeze again and squished his nose between his paws. Chimka unlocked the big crate and Blue burst out shaking his mane. He spread his wings wide and flapped them until the air was free of smoke.

“Thank you and thank you again. It is good to be free. Now on to the next part of our plan.”

Chapter 30

The Aircoaster responded better than Mook had hoped. It sped effortlessly above the tracks as he and Mrs. Hogar caught up to the speeding circus train.

“Hang on Commander! I’m going to take her down on top of that box car.” The Aircoaster swooshed down and stopped abruptly. They got out and Mook pushed a lever that collapsed the Aircoaster into a thin strip. He then wrapped the strip around his wrist with a snapping motion.

“Don’t want to lose our ride out of here, do we now, mum?” he said with a grin. When he turned around Mrs. Hogar had disappeared. “Commander?” Mook looked up and down the top of the train. She was nowhere to be seen. Mook started to crawl carefully along the top of the boxcar, the wind blowing through his unruly hair. He suddenly found himself sliding down through a trap door that deposited him on a pile of straw. A strong dog odor filled the air. He lay flat on the floor and could see several sets of red eyes staring at him.

“Don’t make any sudden moves, Catlander. We are not alone.” The voice of Mrs. Hogar whispered next to him. When Mook’s eyes adjusted to the dim light he could make out a row of sharp yellow teeth inches from his face. Fierce growls rasped the air as the young man slowly sat up. A row of little poodles with pastel colored collars and little cone hats were crouched before him ready to attack. Mook managed to stay still and addressed them in the language of Dogfriend.

“Greetings, Dogfriends, I am Koshka Mookael the Younger, he who talks to, um, animals.” He was about to say “cats” but decided against it. Using his most formal dog speech he said, “Unlock your word-hoard and tell me the events that led you to this sad place.”

“I am Bon-bon, son of Truffles, War-king of the eaters of flesh,” the tiny dog growled. “Now you see before you the unhappy kennel-dwellers of the evil ones. Lo, for a long time we have sought our freedom but to no avail. We are but miserable captives, slaves to the whims of the painted faces. Once our pack ran in glorious liberty under the open sky. Mighty was our war strength as we strode the valleys and we lived in joy. But now we are trouble’s table-companions.” The other poodles whined in agreement. “Now

our fang-hate is filled with the fierce flames of vengeful fire,” the small white dog snarled. “We seek the day when we will be able to divide the life from the bodies of those who would enslave us.” At these words the other dogs went wild, barking and jumping up the walls of the car.

“Silence!” barked Bon-bon and turned back to Mook. “You are Mookael who talks with the Fisheaters, may their fleas multiply.” He sniffed in disgust. “However I have met your father, a good man among your kind. We will permit you to live.”

“What did he say?” asked Mrs. Hogar watching the little poodle scratch his ear with his back paw.

“He said his name is Bon-bon and they're not going to eat us.”

“That is a comfort,” Mrs. Hogar replied dryly. “How did they get here?”

“He said that they were captured and have been looking for a way to escape.”

“How long have they been on this train?” she asked. Mook relayed the question and listened intently to Bon-bon’s yapping, then replied.

“It is hard to tell, their sense of time is not the same as ours, but probably since yesternight.”

Bon-bon finished chewing on his paw and said, “And you, Mookael, son of Mookael the Brave, unbind your thoughts to us. Tell us your sad tale of woe. How is it that you travel with one of the Fairie people so apart from your litter mates?” Mook explained that they were looking for Patrin and Clio. The poodles sniffed the air.

“We smell the like of your kind not far from here. They do not reek as foul to us as the painted faces. We do not smell blood on them; neither do we sense fear. They have food as well. Fortunate are they who are not gnawed with hunger.”

“We gladly share our kill with our fellow captives,” said Mook politely, giving the poodles some raisin buns out of his pack. The dogs ate the food quickly and sat back down. Mrs. Hogar paced around the inside of the car trying to find a way out. She started to pry at the window with the knife that she wore on her belt. Mook stepped up behind her and said,

“Permit me, Commander,” as he pulled a drawing pad from his pocket. He started to sketch a metal cutter.

“Save your paper, laddie,” said Mrs. Hogar pointing to a small fox head mark embossed in the metal. “This is the mark of Hosmer the Troublemaker. Nothing that you can think up will get us out of here. His foul work has been the bane of Toymakers since before you were born. He may have died years ago but his creations still are impervious to attack. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Skye’s head popped up through the hatchway. He had gone below deck to plot the course for Saint Ives, the Royal City. The massive schooner appeared to be self-sailing and not need a crew as they hurtled through the water.

“The boat seems sound enough. I managed to remember most of the important parts, rudder, keel and all that. We should arrive by late afternoon. However I seem to have forgotten dry clothes and food. I’m very sorry,” he told Kit as she tried to wring the excess water from her shirt.

“Not at all,” she replied, still trying to take in all that had happened. Grey green leaf colored sails filled with the steady ocean breeze. The sun was starting to burn off the morning haze as Blocksbury shrank smaller and smaller in the hills behind them.

“I’m impressed that you made this,” she said grabbing the rail as the deck moved underneath her. “It wasn’t as if you had a lot of time to think it all through.”

“There was a time when I would’ve thought of something as basic as supplies. It’s been so long,” he told her. “We do have fresh water if you like.”

Kit felt thirsty after running so far.

“I’ll get it,” she replied seeing the haggard look on Skye’s face. “You look like you need to sit down.”

“I think I will. Large boat building takes so much energy; it’s not like making other kinds of toys. I must be out of practice.” He leaned against the cabin looking very pale.

“Hey now,” Kit said. “Just relax. I’ll be right back.” She found the water barrel but couldn’t find a cup so she unscrewed one of the light fixtures in the corridor down below and filled the glass globe with water. When she returned to the upper deck Skye was sitting slumped over with his long arms wrapped around his knees.

“Here, drink this.” She handed him the bowl. His hands were shaking and Kit knelt down to help him raise the glass to his lips.

“Thank you,” he said, sounding tired and distracted. “I forgot cups didn’t I?”

“Not to worry. We can improvise,” Kit replied. “I think that you did manage to remember blankets. I’ll get you one so that you don’t catch cold. We can’t have you sneezing all over the Queen.”

“Kit,” he grabbed her hand and held it tight for a moment. “I... I...” Skye searched for the right words to say.

“I know,” Kit told him. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m scared and worried and angry too. But I believe in you, I mean I feel better knowing that you’re here with me.” She blushed red, embarrassed by her sudden confession and fled below deck.

Skye put his fingers to his lips to hide a careful, shy smile as he sank back against the railing.

“Perhaps this was my last reward from Saint Portia,” he murmured, staring out over the railing to the ever-changing shoreline. “I won’t die easily but I will have had the gift of time with her.”

Blue burst out of the boxcar carrying Chimka on his back. The little red monkey was chattering orders and hanging on to Blue’s ears. Wilber followed behind after a running start and swooped up into the air. The train had picked up speed since they had cleared the top of the mountain and now was rolling along at a speedy pace. Wilber and Blue flew in and out of trees as they tried to catch up to the circus car carrying Patrin and Clio. Wilber redoubled his efforts until his stubby wings were hardly visible. He curved around in a high-speed turn and smacked into the bars, sticking his nose into the car and honking. Clio and Patrin jumped up and ran over to see him.

“Wilber, Wow! How did you get out?” Clio said, trying to pull him through the bars with out success. Wilber blew a wisp of smoke out of his nose and wiggled his eyebrows.

“You made fire? That is so cool! Can you get us out of here?” she asked. Wilber nodded and positioned himself by the big padlock on the door. He wrapped his tail around a bar for stability and stared at the lock focusing his energy.

“Honk!” he hacked out a ball of fire and the oversized padlock glowed red.

“Again Wilber! You’re doing great!” Clio exclaimed. The little dragon took a deep breath and prepared for another blast. Before he could cough it out a tree knocked him off the side of the train and he went rolling down the hill.

“Ahhh!” cried Clio as she tried to grab him. Wilber soon reappeared covered with twigs and leaves. He grabbed the bars to try again. This time he blew hard and the lock slid away like melted butter under the hot flames. The door swung open sending Wilber flying into the air. Blue and Chimka came alongside the train; Blue’s wings pumping hard.

“Hurry! You’ll have to jump! Chimka will grab you,” yelled Patrin. Clio judged the distance to the flying unicorn. It looked like a long way to jump.

“What about you?” she yelled back.

“I’ll be fine, Blue can come back and get me as soon as you are safe.” Patrin stood by the open door to help her. Just as Clio started running to leap, Patrin pulled her back throwing her to the ground. A tunnel entrance shaped like a laughing clown head was fast approaching. Big painted laughing eyes were carved into the rock over the opening. Wilber, Blue and Chimka smashed into the wall as the train raced through the mouth of the clown face and disappeared into darkness.

Wilber managed to roll in to the tunnel before the giant smile of the clown crashed shut with an iron thud that echoed through the valley. Blue and Chimka were locked out and nothing would budge or melt the big metal teeth. A faint light shown from far away down the tracks inside the tunnel. The little dragon picked himself up and dusted off his backside. He gave a soft honk goodbye to Chimka and Blue as he started waddling down the shadowy passageway alone.

Chapter 31

“We were so close!” said Patrin as the train sped down the dark tunnel.

“Yeah, but the door is still open,” replied Clio. “Let’s get ready to get out of this box. As soon as the train slows down, we can jump!” Patrin nodded. They hid the extra food in their pockets and stood by the open door of the circus car.

“I see a light,” said Clio looking up ahead. “It looks like we’re coming in to a station. Geeze! There’re clowns everywhere! How are we going to keep from being seen?”

“Let’s climb on top of the car. Then we can drop down to the other side,” suggested Patrin. “Here, let me give you a boost up.” They managed to climb on the top of the car and lay flat until the train started slowing.

“Okay... now!” Patrin said. They dropped down and started back toward the back of the train. It was dark, which slowed their progress. The passenger cars were packed with clowns; hundreds of them jammed together like sardines. They were all singing a song about a monkey in a streetcar. When the clowns got to the chorus they would punch each other’s big stomachs and squeal at the top of their lungs. Clio hoped that they wouldn’t be noticed as she and Patrin crept along. Once they got past the caboose they started moving faster. The noise of the train had faded away in the distance as they stepped from railroad tie to railroad tie.

“I think it is about a mile to the tunnel entrance,” said Patrin quietly as they walked along.

“Oh it’s farther than that,” said a raspy voice before them. Bright lights turned on and shined into their eyes. Clio could make out a gang of huge clowns dressed in black and red. It was the special Jester Control unit, each with a red spike of hair sprouting from his bald head. The shorter clown who had spoken stepped out in front of the lights. Her white wavy hair stuck straight up and she was also dressed in the same black and red uniform.

“I am Captain Dolly. Welcome to the Grotto. I’m sure that you will come to love it here.” She giggled to herself and motioned with her glove to the group of clowns behind them. They rushed forward and swept Clio and Patrin up in a large net and started

running back toward the underground station. Once inside they were carried down mirrored corridors until they were unceremoniously thrown into a cell. The heavy door slammed behind them and all was quiet.

“Ow! That so bites!” said Clio. “We almost got away!” She looked around the cell. It was cold and dark with a rounded ceiling. The only light in the room came from a tiny window high against the wall sealed with thick yellow panes of dirty glass. The peeling walls were painted with wide pink and purple stripes mottled by large areas of brown mold and water damage. There was a stone sleeping bench built into the wall and a small hole in floor that smelled really bad.

“Not the lap of luxury is it?” said Patrin, examining the door. “If they wanted to make us depressed I think that they’ve succeeded.” He didn’t look depressed at all but more like a puppy out on a morning’s walk. “Don’t worry! We’ll be out of here in no time. This is just an interesting story we can tell our grandkids.”

“Are you sure?” Clio asked.

“Definitely!” he said, grinning at her. Patrin proceeded to do an impression of himself as a very old man talking about Blocksbury. He was so funny that Clio forgot all about being locked up and laughed until her sides hurt. They were talking about the Toy Council when the door swung open. Captain Dolly stepped in followed by two large Jester Control Officers.

“Prince Orion. You've been very naughty, very naughty indeed. Running away from home. Making illegal toys and resisting arrest. It is time for your punishment to begin.” She sucked on her multicolored teeth for a moment and suddenly glared at him. “But we wouldn’t dare harm you. We need you alive. So we will have to punish your little friend instead. Take her away.”

“No!” Patrin screamed. He lunged at Captain Dolly but the big clowns were too quick for him. They hurled him against the wall and dragged Clio kicking and yelling from the room.

Patrin lay on the stone floor for what seemed like hours. He sat up when he heard squeaky shoes marching down the hallway. The squeaks stopped outside the door and Clio was pushed inside. Patrin caught her before she fell to the ground and hugged her in relief.

“Did they hurt you? Are you all right? What happened?” Patrin looked at her pale face and could feel her shaking in his arms.

“Nothing. She just talked to me.” She shrugged and sat down on the floor.

“They did harm you. They used you to get to me. Oh my sweet friend!” Patrin sat down next to her. “What did she say to hurt you so?”

“It was nothing.” Clio stared off at the wall. “Don’t worry. I’m fine. You’d laugh if I told you.” She glanced up at Patrin and saw the pain in his clear blue eyes and felt tears welling up in her brown ones.

“She said I was ugly,” Clio whispered. “Ugly and stupid. That they were going to burn all the toys that I made because they were so crummy that no one would take them for free.”

“She said that? To you? Clio, you must know that you are one of the most amazing Toymakers that this world has seen in hundreds of years. You give Uncle Skye a run for his money! Your toys are great! Piffle! You ugly? I don’t think so. That’s ridiculous!”

Clio shook her head. She was sure that Patrin was just saying kind things to her out of pity. Patrin scooted over so that their shoes were touching and leaned in close to her.

“If I tell you something do you promise to keep it a secret?” Clio nodded and blinked back the tears.

“When we were trying to find Uncle Skye and I was desperate to find out anything I could about the missing Toymaker,” Patrin lowered his voice to a whisper, “one night I broke into the Queen’s Own Library. All the storybooks about everyone’s life are in there; completed ones that tell not just past events but things that are going to happen. It’s not allowed to read ahead in storybooks because it’s not good to know too much about the future. I didn’t find anything out about Uncle Skye but I did see a picture of you grown up. It was in my storybook. And the picture of the Toymaker Clio Halina ten years from now was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. You can worry about a lot of things in your life, but growing up to be ugly or stupid is not one of them.” Clio thought about this for a moment and wiped her eyes.

“Honest?”

“I swear,” he said, then smiled at her. “I swear on the exploding frogs.”

The wind picked up and dark clouds rolled in across the water as the schooner crested the waves. Salt spray misted the deck and the air turned cold. Kit watched Skye grow weaker as every hour passed as if the boat was powered by his strength of will alone. They sat together and watched the coastline change as they left the river to the open sea. Skye pointed out the various towns that they could see on the shore, Poniesdale where the talking horses lived and Bubble Beach where bubbles grew to a huge size out of the rocks.

“Why don’t you go below and lie down for a while?” Kit asked him. The exhausted man forced himself to straighten up and replied,

“If I fall asleep there is a possibility that the boat might break apart. I’m afraid I didn’t put in half the things that I should have. Trying to work with all those clowns about did not make it easy. I rather expected to be swimming after we jumped in.”

“This boat is making you sick, isn’t it?” Kit asked.

“Not sick, just tired. The speed of the boat is tied into to my thoughts. It’s hard to explain, I don’t really understand the mechanics of it all myself. We need to travel a long way in a short amount of time. It’s an old Toymaker trick. Not a very good one,” he managed a thin smile, “but the best that I could come up with given the circumstances. I feel awful.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Your company is sustaining enough. We should, with any luck, reach Saint Ives in a few hours. Look! There is Point Mouse.” He waved his bony hand at a small lighthouse on a rocky cliff. His eyes closed and he said softly, “Stay with me, Kit. Stay and talk to me a while. Or sing to me, anything that pleases you.” Kit pulled the blanket closer around him and cradled him in her lap as she talked on about anything that she could think of. Skye’s breathing became very labored and she began to fear that he might die.

A fog rolled in and a white shroud surrounded the schooner as it sailed through the icy waters of the open sea. Then the boat made a sharp turn and Kit could make out two shapes looming up ahead through the mist. Two giant stone griffins stood in the

water at the end of a dock. Their great carved wings arched up to make a shelter over the landing. The boat slowly floated up to the edge and came to a stop.

“Skye, wake up. We’re here, wherever here is.” Kit put her hand on his neck and felt for a pulse. He was barely breathing and his eyes were sunk back into his head. He looked like a skeleton. When he didn’t respond she pulled him to the railing and looked down. It was a three-foot drop and the boat swayed in the dark water.

“Hang on,” she told him. “We may be going for a swim.” Kit managed to flop him over the side and drag his lean frame onto the landing. She covered him up with the blankets and took a look around to see where they were. The dock led up to a stairway cut into a rock cliff.

“I’ll never be able to carry him up that. Where is this place?” she thought studying the steep stairs that wound up through the haze. A loud splashing noise made her spin around. The schooner folded up and sunk into the water, collapsing into a shuddering heap. Kit ran back to Skye, trying not to panic.

“The boat is gone. Skye, I don’t know what to do!” Kit checked for a pulse again. Skye’s eye’s fluttered open.

“Spark,” he whispered. Kit leaned over to catch his faint words. “Under the hearth in a box. Please.”

“Hang on. I’ll be right back,” Kit promised, having no idea what he was talking about. She sprinted up the stairway to the top of the cliff. When she reached the top she saw what looked like a hunting lodge through the pine trees. It was a wooden structure built low with redwood beams and gray green shingles. Wind chimes hung from the trees made eerie mournful sounds as she walked quickly up the gravel path towards the front of the house. The massive door, inset with amber glass squares, swung open easily.

Kit heard scurrying as she stepped inside. A few large rabbits scampered out the back then the house was silent. She found herself in a beautiful wood paneled room with small mullioned windows. It had a low ceiling with exposed beams. The polished oak floors were covered in worn carpets beautifully faded to soft greens and reds. The air smelled like orange oil and cedar. Kit searched frantically until she found a great room with a massive fireplace. A griffin motif was carved into the jade green tiles.

“This must be Skye’s house,” Kit thought, running her hand over the smooth cherry wood of the mantle piece. She took an iron poker and chipped at the base of the hearth. A green tile popped up, and underneath was a metal box with a curious padlock on it. She lifted the box out and looked around for something to open it with. Kit grabbed a knife from the kitchen and an extra blanket from a bedroom overlooking the water, then hurried back to the dock where Skye lay.

“I found the box. Here, look.” Kit propped his head up with the blanket. “I couldn’t find the key. Perhaps we can open it with a knife.”

“No.” Skye shook his head and slowly raised his hand placing his thumb on the padlock. It slid apart easily and Kit opened the box. Inside on a little velvet cushion was a shabby stuffed animal. The fur was almost completely worn off in places and the joints were loose. It looked a little like a griffin with boney wings and jeweled eyes. She placed the toy on Skye’s chest.

“Is this Spark? Your Friend?” she asked. He nodded weakly and lay his hand on the faded gold velvet of the griffin’s back. Kit took his other hand and held it over the toy like she remembered him doing when they animated Blue.

“Breathe,” she said and warm air swirled around them. The old toy sprung up and twirled in space, growing in size with every spin. Bits of light like hot coals flew out and Kit could make out feathers and a fluffy lion’s tail as the toy came alive. A shimmer of stars covered the dock as the griffin shook out a pair of magnificent pair of golden bat wings. The animal howled a fierce shriek and a stream of fire shot up from its beak, dropping cinders into the water with a hiss. The griffin then nuzzled Skye and looked at him with glowing green eyes.

“Hello, old girl,” he said softly, scratching behind the beast’s ear. “Did you have a good nap? Sorry it took so long.” He tried to sit up and Kit moved to help him. Spark snapped at her hand and growled a furious warning. Her tail lashed angrily back and forth as she glared at Kit.

“Spark! No! This is Kit, Kitsune the Beloved, person of Blue Magicfriend.” The huge griffin sat up and looked Kit over.

“Hmphff?” She shot a puff of smoke out of her beak and reluctantly extended a claw.

“I’m honored,” replied Kit, gingerly shaking the sharp talons.

“Kit,” Skye continued, “May I present Spark Griffinfriend, of Wolfren Skye the Toymaker. What’s that?” He listened intently while Spark explained something to him in a low growl.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware of that. Excuse me. Kit, may I present Spark Griffinfriend, of Wolfren Skye the Toymaker Who Has Been Found. It seems that today I have a new title. Shall we see if we can find something to eat? You must be very hungry, I know I am.” Skye slowly stood up and leaned on Spark for support. He still looked pale and tired but considerably improved. It took them a while to get up the stairs and into the lodge. Once there, Skye sank into the overstuffed sofa in front of the fireplace, which burst into a roaring blaze. The exhausted man let out a deep sigh.

“I never thought that I would see this place again. Thank you Kit. Thank you a thousand times.”

“Can I get you anything?” Kit asked.

“No, no. Sit down. Spark has already gone to get Mrs. Wiggles. She keeps the household. You probably gave them quite a scare coming in here. I’m not sure, but I think that you’re the first woman that they’ve ever seen.”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

“All my neighbors are rabbits. There are a few moles and rats down the way. Some very nice otters live down by water. Ah! Here we are.” He stood up to welcome a long row of rabbits that had come in, their noses twitched nervously. Skye introduced Kit to all of them and they greeted her shyly. They had names like Pennythistle and Cobbleweb. A tiny bunny named Little Berry gave Kit a small bouquet of snowdrops and violets before dashing away to safety. Later they brought cherries, chamomile tea and little earthen bowls of vegetable soup followed by a thick stew and carrot bread. Skye ate several helpings of everything with great relish and the color came back to his gaunt cheeks. He chatted for a brief time with a large brown rabbit named Thorn about the crops and various affairs of the estate. After they finished, Skye disappeared up the stairs and returned wearing a plain black suit and carrying a heavy wool overcoat.

“Spark is taking me to the Royal City. I’ll give the Queen Mrs. Hogar’s letter and come back to get just as soon as I can. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours. You’ll be safe here.” He buttoned up his coat and put a scarf in his pocket.

Kit wanted to go with him but sensed that he needed to be alone. “If you are not back by morning I’ll start off without you,” she told him half jokingly. “Don’t you need shoes? It’s cold out.” Kit pointed down to his bare feet.

“I’m appealing for a pardon from the Queen. I hope she will take me back into her good graces.”

“This is for luck.” Kit kissed his cheek. “I’ll be thinking good thoughts for you.”

“Thank you,” Skye said seriously, then he seemed flustered. He put his hand where her lips had touched him and looked almost happy as he turned down the path, vanishing into the night.

“No! No! The nose! Tell them that they have to go for the nose!” Mrs. Hogar told Mook. He was trying to train the poodles to disengage clowns. The little dogs were tireless in their ability to jump up and down. Mook had made a clown face with a push button nose that he held in his hand. He moved it around and the dogs leaped up trying to hit it with their paws or teeth. After a while Mrs. Hogar was satisfied with their progress and told them to try and calm down.

Mook tried again to invent something to open the door. He had worked his way through a long list of ideas; metal cutters, flame-throwers, power drills but nothing would budge the iron walls.

“It’s no use, Catlander. Like I told you, this box is a creation of Hosmer the Troublemaker and your toys won’t have any effect against his foul makings. We are stuck in this car until someone or something decides to let us out.”

“I know, Commander. I’ve heard the stories about Hosmer too. But there is no harm in trying. I’m hoping that there might be something that he forgot to guard against.” He pulled from the paper an automatic boot device that kicked against the door. He thought for a minute more and sketched a few dog harnesses on the paper. He peeled them off and presented them to Bon-bon the head poodle.

“A war gift I bear for you, Dog-brother, to aid you in your fight against the evil ones.” He strapped the harnesses on the little dogs. “May they aid you in your hour of need and carry you to the fields of freedom.”

“What was that all about?” asked Mrs. Hogar, pulling a blanket out of her pack for the night.

“You’ll see. Let’s just hope this door opens soon. And Commander,” Mook said, looking pained, “Please don’t tell anybody that I was made an honorary Dog-brother to poodles. My friends at Catsport would never let me live it down.”

“Do you think that I want the Royal Guard to know that I was locked in a train car with a Catlander and a squad of attack poodles? Your secret is very safe with me, Koshka Mookael the Younger, who talks to cats and dogs.” Mrs. Hogar chuckled to herself and went to sleep.

Chapter 32

Kit wandered idly about the lodge. There was a small kitchen and a sparsely furnished dining room. She climbed a stairway to an observation room with eight large windows that looked out over the cliffs to the sea. Bronze lanterns with yellow glass gave a golden glow over the fine wood paneling and mahogany floors. On a simple oak writing desk sat a picture of Patrin and his family that included a few other people that she didn't recognize. A battered violin case lay on a shelf with some folios of sheet music. She opened the glass doors to one of the cabinets built into the wall and found a collection of oddities. Kit marveled at the shards of crystal, brightly colored river stones, carved boxes inlaid with pearl, and porcelain cups filled with strange coins. There were a few funny little toys and windups, most of which had inscriptions to Skye from the makers. She thought it was odd that there weren't more toys in the house. One cabinet had a collection of peculiar little pots and baskets. Tucked in the back behind them looking out of place was a brightly painted wooden alligator that Kit had made.

"Hello," she said taking it out and turning it over in her hand. "Haven't seen you in a while." The lime green paint was chipped in a few places and the tail had a few dents. "You look like you could tell me a story," she said. Kit was returning it to the case when she heard a soft rustling noise behind her. She turned to see a large coffee-colored rabbit wearing a gray blue vest. He was standing discreetly by the door.

"Greetings, miss," he whispered. Kit knelt down to talk to him.

"Hi, I'm Kit," she said extending her hand.

The rabbit shook it with both paws and said in the same quiet voice, "I am named Hopkins. I speak the words of humans, more or less, not good. The Tall One asked me to care after you. He speak me to see if you need things. Food? Clothes? You want to sleep?" He twitched his nose and looked at her expectantly.

"Actually, is there a place where I could wash up?" Kit asked, making a washing motion with her hands. "Water?" Hopkins thought for a moment and bobbed his head up and down.

"Yes! The water room. We had thoughts you might want cleaning. Here! Now!" He turned and hopped away. He stopped halfway down the hall and thumped a message

with his foot. A soft pounding noise replied and he motioned to Kit to follow. They continued down a spiral staircase to a bathroom built into the rocks. In a few minutes a line of rabbits appeared carrying little buckets of hot water that they poured into a big wooden washtub in the corner. Sunk into the rocks was a clear pool of cold water filled by a waterfall that rushed down one wall. The air in the room was hot and full of steam. On a wood bench lay a few homespun towels and a clean set of clothing that Mrs. Wiggles was smoothing with her paw. The gray housekeeper rabbit whispered something to Hopkins, which he translated to Kit. It was hard for her to hear because of the sound of the falling water but she finally figured out that Mrs. Wiggles wanted to wash her clothes.

“Tell her yes. Thank you,” Kit told him. Her jeans and shirt were stiff from salt spray and still reeked of oily smoke from the explosion of the Fish Car. Mrs. Wiggles gave her a basket to put her dirty things into and a bar of pale green soap that smelled like lavender and parsley. The group of rabbits finished filling the tub and closed the door behind them.

Kit felt refreshed after bathing and put on the soft linen shirt and pants that had been left out for her. They were too big so she rolled up the sleeves and cuffs. The shirt had a tiny griffin monogram embroidered on the pocket. When she got back upstairs Hopkins apologized for the poor fit.

“We have no human woman clothes here. We are sorry. These clothes be good for you?” he asked, nervously pulling on one of his long brown ears. Kit assured him that they were fine and made her way back to the great hall and curled up on the sofa. A small pot of peppermint tea was waiting for her on the side table with some little cheese crescents and chocolate meringues. After a half-hour of watching the flames in the big fireplace dance and pop she fell asleep.

Kit awoke to find Skye lying on the rug by the fire. He was wrapped up in a gray wool blanket and she watched his sides rise and fall in the breath of deep sleep. Kit pulled herself up on one elbow and studied his face in the firelight, searching for any clue as to the outcome of his meeting with the Queen. His serious face was softened by slumber and offered no sign of success or failure. Spark was curled up in a large basket by the hearth; dozing with one eye open. When the formidable griffin saw that Kit was awake she got out the basket and walked over to where Skye was sleeping. Her sharp talons made a

clicking noise on the wood floors. She nudged Skye with her beak, glared at Kit and trotted out of the room.

Skye's eyes popped open and he immediately sat up.

"Good morning," he said. "or at least it will be morning in an hour or so. I trust you slept well?"

Kit answered yes and then asked, "What happened? Did you see the Queen? What did she say?"

"She said, 'Sir Skye, where have you been? We have been looking for you.'" Skye did an imitation of what Kit guessed was the Queen's voice. His eyes were bright as he continued his story. "I've been pardoned and am again the Royal Toymaker. It seems that I wasn't replaced in all the time that I was missing. The Queen looked actually pleased that I was back. The rest of the time was spent arranging defenses against any clowns that may have traveled on ahead. It was simple really. I had the Royal Guard put out Clown Traps all around the surrounding area. "

"Clown Traps?" Kit asked. Skye pulled a handful of what looked like florescent yellow bottle caps out of his pocket and gave them to Kit. The little discs had pictures of clown faces embossed on them.

"These expand into Toy Boxes," Skye explained. "The clowns fit inside."

"Ah!" Kit replied trying to figure out what he was talking about.

"You'll see. Keep them in your pocket, just in case. We need to leave soon. Spark has been in communication with Wilber Dragonfriend and relates that Patrin and Clio are sleeping right now. He says they are safe but uncomfortable. We should be able to get them out of the Grotto in a few hours."

"How are we going to do that?" Kit turned one of the glowing discs in her fingers.

"I am the Royal Toymaker and the clowns are toys. They fall under my charge, my command. It won't be easy but they ultimately will have to submit to my authority."

"So we just walk in and ask them to give us Patrin and Clio?" Kit asked skeptically.

"Yes, that is the plan."

"And if that doesn't work?"

“Then we'll think up another one.” Skye knelt down next to the sofa where Kit was sitting. He looked at her intently. “It is possible that I may be...” he hunted for the exact words, “damaged. I don't know for certain that I will be able to be the Royal Toymaker. I've been nothing for such a long time.”

“No, you're wrong. You were never nothing. Perhaps you were just a man.” Kit told him softly. “Perhaps you're not damaged, maybe you're just experienced. The last few years of your life may have taught you something that you needed to know.”

Skye was silent for a long moment and a look of hope warmed his face.

“You are right. I did learn a lot. Perhaps it will be of some use today.”

They sat quietly for a moment thinking their own thoughts, reluctant to leave the comfort of the fireside. Finally they stood up to prepare to go.

“Tell me something, “ Kit asked as they walked across the great hall, “why aren't there any toys here? There were a few in a bookcase upstairs but I somehow expected that wherever Toymakers lived there would be lots of... well.... toys. Do you have a workshop somewhere?”

“This is just my weekend house. I used to come here to get away from work and to be alone. My main workshop is in the Royal Palace. There's an antique toy collection in my family estate up north that might be of interest to you.” He saw Kit's eyes light up with curiosity. “Would you like to see it?” She nodded and Skye opened the door for her.

“I promise to take you there tomorrow.”

“Hey, wake up,” Clio whispered. It was dark and silent in the cell. All evening they had listened to crowds of clowns partying and breaking glass. The sounds of noisemakers and wild laughter had echoed up and down the halls for hours. Then they heard the stomping of a squad of Jester Control Officers ordering all the merry makers to someplace called “The Big Tent” From time to time a guard would flip open a peephole in the door and check on them. Clio waited until she heard his footsteps squeak away and touched Patrin's arm.

“I'm not really sleeping,” Patrin replied not moving.

“I got something.” Clio pulled a tiny piece of pencil lead from her sock. “Captain Dolly tried to get me to make a toy for her but I pretended not to know how. I bit off the

lead and kept it hidden in my mouth until she wasn't looking. I also talked her into letting me use the bathroom." Clio pulled a small piece of toilet paper out of her other sock. "I was thinking that we could use it to draw something to help us get out of here."

"Good thinking! How about a key?" Patrin whispered excitedly.

"Um, I don't know if we can do this but how about a pad of paper and a bigger pencil? Then we could make anything we want." Clio passed the shred of paper and the pencil lead to Patrin. "You do it, I'm too nervous." Patrin drew a miniature pencil and pulled it carefully from the paper. Then he sketched a square and picked at it with his fingernail.

"It's not working! The paper's too small!" he whispered after a few minutes.

"Let me try." Clio took the shred of paper and closed her palm over it. Nothing happened at first but after a moment she opened her hand. A crisp white piece of paper about an inch square fell to the floor.

"Now we are dangerous!" Patrin smiled as he picked it up. They passed the paper and pencil back and forth a few times until they had full size pads of paper, pencils and a couple of flashlights

"The guard will be back soon. We have to hurry," said Clio.

"I have an idea." Patrin pulled a medium size box from off the paper. Inside was a scene showing the dark room and two huddled figures sleeping on the floor. He crept over to the cell door and attached the box over the peephole.

"That ought to buy us a little bit of time. Now what should we do first?" he asked.

"This is going to creep you out," said Clio. She sketched a pointy hat, a big ruffled collar and a really big pair of pants. "How about we play circus?"

Mook sat doodling a picture of a Bubble Biter trying to ignore the yapping of the war-poodles. They had been working up into a frenzy for the last hour and made sleep impossible. He finally asked them to conserve their energy for battle and they all sat facing the door waiting for it to open, motionless except for the constant vibrating of their pom-pommed tails. Mrs. Hogar looked as if she were about to strangle all of them with her bare hands.

“So tell me, Mrs. Hogar,” Mook asked lightly, hoping to get her distracted from worrying about Patrin and Clio. “How did one of the Fair Folk get to be a Commander in the Queen’s guard?”

“The same way you got to be Game Master, by hard work and odd luck. That and there was Mister Hogar,” she replied.

“Mister Hogar?” Mook looked up from his drawing. He had a hard time imagining her having a husband. “Do you mean to say you married a human?”

“Aye, Catlander, that I did. It was a long time ago, before your grandparents were born. And I would choose him again in the beat of a butterfly’s wing. A rare one he was, handsome as the day is long.” Mrs. Hogar smiled a secret smile to herself. “We lived for many a season in Holy Glen where the days never age. Then I lost him in the First War of Chaos. I took his place in the Cavalry and never went back. I have become used to your kind, that is after many years and much study.” She stood up and put on her pack. “Get ready to move. The door is being opened.” Mook jumped up and gathered his things. He stuffed his drawing pad in his pocket and watched the door slowly lower. The dogs looked like they were about to take flight their tails were wagging so fast. They sprang out ready to attack but the tunnel was deserted. Their frantic barking echoed up and down the empty station.

“Tell the mutts to be quiet!” hissed Mrs. Hogar. At the top of the door a shadow appeared. She was raising her long staff to strike when Wilber’s face peered down at them.

Chapter 33

The War-poodles tore off in twelve different directions. Wilber hovered in the air grinning at Mook and Mrs. Hogar.

“Good to see you, Wilber Dragonfriend. You wouldn’t happen to have an idea as to the whereabouts of Miss Clio and Mister Patrín would you?” Mook asked. Wilber honked a return greeting and waved his paw for them to follow him.

“He says that he smells them over this way, Commander,” Mook said. They followed the buzzing dragon down a dirty corridor and through an old plywood door. It opened up to a vast mirror maze that wound around through dusty gardens filled with glass flowers and fountains that spurted colored water. It had been beautiful at one time but now was suffering from years of neglect. The floor of the maze was painted cement and Mrs. Hogar was able to track their way through by noting the scuff marks on the well-traveled walkways. Mook turned a corner and gave out a yelp. A clown sat in an alcove rocking back and forth.

“It’s just a wind-up,” said Mrs. Hogar, poking the figure with her stick. “Here is another one.” A tall clown in a bowler hat was making a mechanical laugh with his head clicking from side to side. As she reached up to switch him off the laughing clown grabbed her arm and threw the small woman into a mirror shattering the glass. A squad of Jester Control officers crowded into the room, their arms full of cream pies.

“Don’t let the pies touch you!” ordered Mrs. Hogar as she leapt to her feet. Mook pulled a yo-yo from his pocket and spun it out with deadly accuracy. He knocked the noses of several of the clown disengaging them. They froze; glassy eyed, as soon as the yo-yo hit their big noses. Mrs. Hogar snapped out with her staff, knocking pies out of the big clown’s gloved hands. The thick pies were filled with a layer of bright green glue that sealed whatever it touched. One clown managed to lob a pie at Mrs. Hogar’s feet and she was stuck fast to the ground. More pies flew through the air until both Mook and Mrs. Hogar were trapped fast unable to move.

“Away with you!” Mook yelled to Wilber who honked and flew from the room. A few clowns sped after him leaving a group of Jester Control officers to drag out the bodies of the disengaged clowns. After a few minutes when the room was cleared

Captain Dolly came in. Her white hair and face were a stark contrast to the dark circles around her eyes and the tight black uniform that she was wearing. A small roll of white rubbery fat spilled over the skin-tight waistband of her pants. She wore red and white striped knee socks and her too small jacket had blood red epaulets on the shoulders. Her face was reflected a thousand times over in the mirror maze and she paused for a moment to check her rainbow colored teeth. After picking a piece of popcorn out of her mouth and flicking it on the floor she walked slowly over to Mrs. Hogar.

“The little elfling who thinks she’s a human. So you’ve come back to see me. How many years has it been? Since before this one was spawned.” Captain Dolly gave a sly nod at Mook. “Mookael the Game Master, under our noses all the time. Aren’t you a pretty thing? It’s going to be so delicious to rehabilitate you.” She ran a gloved finger across his throat. “You may resist my charms for a while, but soon you’ll learn to be grateful for what I can teach you.”

“I’ve never been one for charm school,” Mook told her.

Captain Dolly snarled, “You’ll learn obedience. Your friend, Augwun did.” She pulled a hand buzzer out of her pocket and placed it in her palm. “And where is your Royal Toymaker? I thought that he’d be here by now. I hope he arrives in time for the show. He’s supposed to be the main attraction. But if he doesn’t make it, then perhaps one of you can star in his place.” Captain Dolly ran her tongue over her painted red lips and smiled.

“If we weren’t in such a pickle I’d be laughing my head off right about now,” Patrin said. He hitched up the baggy trousers to his gold and red striped tuxedo as they prepared to leave the cell. “How do I look?”

Clio stifled a giggle as she inspected Patrin’s clown costume.

“You so don’t want to know!” She pointed her flashlight at his white face. “Ooh, spooky!” Patrin’s bright blue hair stuck straight up and his painted eyebrows gave him a surprised look.

“Actually you look kind of cute.” Clio put her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling again. She looked at her oversized flowered dress and patchwork pinafore. “We

are gonna blend right in,” she said, slipping on her big shoes and adjusting her bright red braids.

“So how ‘bout me? Am I styling?” she asked, twirling around and showing her neon yellow bloomers and ladybug spotted leggings.

“Of course! You look like a doll. Pretty enough to attend the court of Pierrot Lunaire.”

“Who?” asked Clio.

“Pierrot Lunaire, you know, Jack the Harlequin King. He is the ruler of all the clowns. Not all clowns are bad you know, most are good, just like people. They keep to themselves mostly, in the far north up past the Gulf of Parsee. I think that they are related to the Fairies up in that realm. I've been able to visit them a few times with my parents on official business. They're very mysterious and strange but not scary like the clowns here. We'll have to go and visit them someday.”

Clio wondered what that would be like and said, “Well if you say so, but I think after this I'll be tired of clowns for a really long time.” They gathered up all their things and hid their pads of papers and pencils in their big pockets. Clio sketched a little door on her pad of paper and pulled it off. She and Patrin stretched it until it was big enough to crawl through. Then she attached it to the door of the cell and cracked it open. They peered down the corridor and after making sure that all was clear they crept out into the darkness.

Kit changed back into her clothes that Mrs. Wiggles had laundered and mended for her. The rabbit housekeeper also provided her with a warm coat made of soft navy blue wool. After a hurried breakfast of oatmeal and orange juice she met Skye out in front of the lodge. The dawn was just starting to warm the horizon and the crisp smell of pine needles and damp earth filled the woods.

“Does the coat suit you?” Skye asked. He was wearing a long wool overcoat as well.

“Yes, it fits beautifully. Where did you find it?” she asked, glad for its warmth in the chilly morning air.

“I drew it while you were getting ready. I had to guess at the size. It tends to get cold here so close to the sea. And you enjoyed your breakfast?” he asked, pulling an battered looking toy farm truck out of his pocket and placing it on the ground.

“It was very nice, my thanks to Mrs. Wiggles.” Kit watched as Skye pulled on the truck, stretching it until it could easily seat two people. It was a washed out white with spoke tires and a wooden flatbed. A cracked and faded wolf crest was painted on the side door. Skye walked around to the back to wind it up.

“The rabbits should be here any minute to see us off,” he said, turning a small tarnished key. “Oh, I forgot to ask Mrs. Wiggles to give you coffee.” Skye pulled a tiny mug of coffee out of his sleeve. He tapped it with his finger and it grew to full size. Kit took the hot cup from his hands and let the warm aroma fill her senses.

“How did you do that?” she asked incredulously, taking a sip. “This is wonderful! Can you make anything?”

Skye thought for a moment and shook his head.

“Oh no, I’m only a Toymaker not a Magician. There're many things that I’ve tried but didn’t work out. I can’t make Time Gates or Healing Oils like some Toymakers have in the past. I’ve had people ask me to make things that I couldn’t bring myself to do.” He opened the hood of the old truck with a creak and started poking around at the inner gears.

“Like what?” asked Kit.

“Toys for collectors, ugly toys, mean spirited toys. I’ve done a few good luck charms, more for fun than anything else. I can do food fairly well. But I can’t make potions or any kind of conjuring, divinations or transformations. I couldn’t make a potion that would make someone fall in love.” Skye crouched down to check the tires.

“I wouldn’t think that you’d need one,” Kit told him. His eyes flickered up at her in surprise then back down to the ground.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Skye told her. “It's been a while since I've driven this and I want to make sure that it’s working properly.” The rickety truck sputtered down the road and soon the forest was quiet except for the sound of blue jays flitting from tree to tree.

Kit finished drinking her coffee as the pathway in front of the lodge began to fill with rabbits. She noticed that they were dressed in new clothes and that all of the smallest bunnies carried little toys in their paws. Little Berry, who had given Kit a bouquet of flowers the day before, was holding a tiny doll. The small brown bunny shyly held the toy up for Kit's inspection. The doll had dark hair and was dressed in jeans, a plain shirt and running shoes. It looked suspiciously like a miniature version of Kit. She smiled and returned it to Little Berry.

After a few minutes of waiting Kit could here the whirring noise of the truck's inner gears down the road. She set her empty coffee mug down on a nearby rock and waited for a few moments more. The old farm truck sped back down the gravel road and rolled to a stop. Skye hopped out, looking grimly satisfied.

"That went well enough," he said.

"How many days will it take us to get there?" Kit asked.

"Days? We should be there in a few hours if all goes right."

"But it's hundreds of miles!" Kit blurted out and immediately wished that she hadn't. She had clearly wounded Skye with her disbelief.

"My grandfather won the Saint Tortuga races four years in a row in this," he said, pointing to the battered truck. "And it's my favorite!" he added as if that explained everything.

"Oh, okay then."

"You'll see. We'll get there soon enough."

Skye knelt down in front of the crowd of rabbits and whispered something to them in a language that Kit did not understand. He brushed his cheek with the back of his hand and all the rabbits brushed their whiskers in reply. Then he stood up and clapped his hands together. A shower of twinkling sparks fell over them all. As the sparkles hit the ground they changed into little bouncing lights that ricocheted among the leaves of the trees and lit up the forest like a lightning storm for as far as Kit could see. Then he turned to her and said,

"If you're ready we can go now."

Kit buttoned up her coat, they climbed into the truck and took off.

Chapter 34

“Just act clownlike,” said Patrin. “We should blend right in!” He wiggled his fingers in the air and gave her a cheesy grin. Clio stepped on her squeaky shoes and almost tripped.

“I’m sorry!” she whispered, trying hard not to laugh, “It’s hard not to walk funny in shoes like this. So where are we going?”

“I don’t know, I was hoping that we could find a sign or something. If we could get outside we could draw a car or an airplane. But those things aren’t going to do us much good in here.” They wound their way down the dark underground corridors. They passed a sign on the wall that read “Grotto Rehabilitation Center” Clio shuddered and wished that Wilber or Miss Ashlyn were nearby. They wandered around for what seemed like hours until they passed a closed door that said “Interrogation Room” in fancy gold letters. A young sounding voice from inside said,

“Leave my brother alone! Leave him alone!” The voice was full of fear. Another deeper voice said harshly,

“Then tell us what we want to know. I assure you Captain Dolly will not be so friendly,” the deep voice ordered. Inside the room they heard a balloon being squeezed until it popped.

“It sounds like some kids are in trouble,” whispered Clio. “We got to think of something. I mean we can’t just leave them there.” They both took out their pads of paper and sketched frantically. Patrin quickly made a telescope that he held up to the wall.

“There are two really big clowns and two little ones in there. It looks like the smaller one is tied up in a chair.”

“Hey! A telescope that sees through walls, let me look!” Clio looked into the eyepiece and could see the shadowy outlines of four figures in a big room. “I have an idea.” She drew a bit and pulled a giant water pistol off of the paper. The side of the barrel read “Clown Freeze”

“That just might work! Give me a second,” Patrin drew another picture. He pulled a few banana peels and a small smoke bomb off of the paper. “Okay! Let’s go!” He knocked on the door and a harsh voice barked back.

“What do you want?”

“Room service. Speedy Delivery!” The door swung open and a huge Jester Control officer stuck his head out. Patrin tossed the smoke bomb and the banana peels in and turned to run away. The big clown picked up Patrin by his collar and was about to haul him into the room when Clio squirted him with the Clown Freeze. He stopped instantly and left Patrin dangling in the air suspended by his bulky outstretched arm. Clio dashed into the smoke filled room. She coughed and a massive clown lunged at her thorough the haze. They both slipped on some of the banana peels and went spinning across the floor. She hosed him down with the Clown Freeze and was barely able to skid out of the way before he crashed to the ground. As the smoke cleared she saw a beautiful girl clown in a pale silver frock with black pompoms and a little silver cap. She was untying a small boy clown who was dressed in a silver and black diamond print smock and pants.

“Hurry! We must hide,” the girl said. “Please help us!” The little boy jumped up and hugged his sister.

“Help! Get me down from here!” Patrin struggled to get out of his jacket, his feet kicking in the air. They managed to pry his collar out of the frozen clown’s grasp and he fell to the ground. Clio and Patrin grabbed the little boy and girl by the hands and sped off down the hall. They ducked inside a room labeled “Storage.” Hundreds of little bicycles were stacked up against the wall and shelves on the other side of the room held racks of colorful umbrellas. As they caught their breath Clio had a chance to study their new friends. The older girl was slender and tall. It was hard to tell her age but she looked to be in her late teens. She had dark bobbed hair that was tucked neatly behind her pointed ears. Her face was painted white and her lips were dark red. The little boy looked to be about five and was trying very hard not to cry. His sister hugged him in her arms.

“Thank you for saving us, gentlefolk. You were very brave,” she told them in a musical voice. Patrin grinned at her and said,

“Our pleasure, your Highness.” The girl stared at him for a moment and then laughed.

“Prince Patrin Orion! I did not recognize you. Upon my word! What are you doing in this awful place?”

“Trying to get out! Your Highness, allow me to present my good friend Miss Clio Halina. She is a Toymaker from the Greylands.” The girl clown nodded at her gravely and Clio felt like she should curtsy or something but instead she just managed to murmur, “Hey,” and wave her hand. Patrin continued his introductions,

“Clio, this is Her Serene Highness the Princess Isabella Lunaire and her brother Punchello Lunaire. They are my third cousins once removed on my Father’s side. How are you feeling, Punch?” Patrin asked the little boy who hid shyly behind his sister and then peeked around at Clio.

“We rode in a balloon,” Punchello told them.

“Yes and it was captured by these Jester Control persons,” added Isabella. “We’d heard that your uncle had been found so we were all traveling to the Saint Ives to welcome him back. Our balloon was separated from the others and we were brought here. The big clowns wanted to know where our city is, not that I would tell them even if I could.” Her voice was like little bells ringing. Clio thought that she could listen to the Princess talk all day, even though it made her feel clumsy and awkward in comparison. The huge squeaky shoes that she was wearing didn’t help boost her confidence either.

“We need to get you into some other clothes quick! You’re too easily recognized in your royal traveling outfits,” said Patrin. “Clio, you take Isabella and draw up something wild. I’ll dress Punch here in something that will help him blend in.” They pulled out their pads of paper and started drawing funny hats and big pants.

“Miss Halina?” Isabella watched in fascination as Clio began sketching.

“You can call me Clio, if you want. I mean, nobody calls me Miss Halina unless I’m in trouble.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Clio, might I make request? If it doesn’t bother you or anything.”

“Yeah sure! If I can. What would you like?”

“May I have something with spots?” Isabella asked eagerly. “I have always wanted to wear something with polka dots but Mamma would never approve. And a big

hat with feathers... if it isn't too much trouble." Clio drew a widebrimmed hat with ribbons, feathers and flowers streaming down the back. She pulled it off the paper and handed it to the princess. Then she drew a pink wig, pair of striped pants and a spotted jacket with tails. As she pulled them off the paper and handed them to Isabella whose dove gray eyes grew big with astonishment.

"How did you do that? These are lovely! Thank you ever so much!" she said with admiration as she pulled the brightly colored outfit on over her silver frock. "I can't tell you what a treat this is for me. I'm never allowed to wear anything fun. How do I look?"

"Sweet! You're good to go! Don't forget the shoes!" Clio handed her a clunky pair of bright red boots. Isabella laced them up with delight and danced around the room. Punchello laughed as Patrin tied a top hat onto his head.

"I think that we are ready, but where to go is the question?" said Patrin.

"We overheard some of the guards talking about someplace called the Big Tent. They were sending everybody there to watch something to do with toys," replied Isabella.

"If there are toys involved then that's the first place that Uncle Skye will go to look for us. We should try to find this Big Tent."

"Where better to hide in our clown disguises than in a tent full of millions of clowns?" said Clio. "I don't know, it could be nuts."

"Of course there will be nuts, and probably popcorn. Let's go!" Patrin gave everyone a squirt gun of Clown Freeze and they snuck out in the hall. They had barely turned the corner when a worried group of clowns came scuttling their way.

"Turn around! You're going the wrong way!" A short stubby clown told them in a gravelly voice. "The show's this way. Hurry or you'll be late and miss the opening ceremony!" Patrin nodded to the others and they blended in with the group. After a few minutes of rushing about they found themselves funneled into a large arena. Thousands of clowns filled bleachers that surrounded three sawdust filled rings down on the floor. The noise was deafening as the audience hooted their horns and sang rowdy songs. Clio managed to find them seats all together on an aisle toward the back. A clown orchestra came out and started tuning their instruments. Clio found herself wondering what had happened to the trumpet that Skye had given her.

“I should have been nicer to him,” she thought. “The trumpet was such a cool present, I hope it’s not lost. I wish I knew where everybody was.”

The band started playing a march and the audience quieted down, more or less. A large battalion of Jester Control officers came marching in and formed twelve straight rows. They looked very threatening in their black and red uniforms. Their red hair stood up like spikes and their white face scowled at the audience. A murmur of fear rolled from the crowd and frightened mumbles replaced the rowdy merrymaking. A shrouded cage lowered from the ceiling and dangled high above the ground. As the covers were pulled away under the bright lights Clio felt Patrin squeeze her hand. Tied up inside the cage were Mrs. Hogar and Mook.

Kit emerged from the truck feeling like she had just ridden a rollercoaster for three hours. Her legs were shaking and her stomach was in her throat. It was all she could do to keep from throwing up. Skye had driven intently without speaking the entire time, driving at such a tremendous speed that Kit was afraid to distract him with conversation. The countryside soon became a blur as they raced along with farmlands changing to mountain roads, winding and steep. Spark the Griffin seemed to enjoy the ride as she stood in the truck bed leaning into the wind.

Kit leaned over until her legs stopped trembling and the earth stopped spinning, her breath forming white puffs in the frosty mountain air. The grey hillside stretched out past the dirt road, lightly dusted with snow, not far from a set of train tracks. A few gnarled pines fought their way up through the hard-packed earth and large granite boulders dotted the landscape like tombstones. Skye snapped his fingers twice and the truck shook as Spark soared up into the air before finally roosting on a dead tree. The griffin polished her sharp beak on a branch for a minute then spread her wings wide and soared down the hill. Skye grabbed the truck pushing and pulling the metal until he had squashed it back to pocket size. After folding it smaller and smaller until it was the size of a piece of confetti he grabbed Kit’s hand with icy fingers and pressed the tiny square on to the back of her fingernail. As he rubbed it with his thumb the square blended in until it was barely visible. Gripping her hand he told her,

“Keep this and use it to get back if you need to.”

The dirty snow and pine needles crunched beneath their feet as they headed toward the direction of the train tracks. Soon they were standing in front of the entrance to the Grotto. The huge laughing clown face painted around the tunnel opening looked down on them with wide-eyed amusement. Grinning metal teeth clenched shut over the opening and shown brightly in the cold morning sun. A worn out recording of a voice laughing looped over and over, sometimes slow and deep and then fast and high pitched. Waves of fear washed over Kit and she could feel the blood pounding in her chest and her lungs tightening up. She glanced over at Skye and his face was a mask of bleak frustration. One hand was clenched into a fist and he seemed to be struggling to open it. When he finally opened his fingers there was nothing in his palm. He stared at his empty hand with such a look of anguish that Kit forced her legs to move and walk over to his side. She gently took his hand and folded his fingers back into a fist.

“It’s a little early in the day to be expected to save the world on the first try,” she said. “What are you trying to make?”

“I don’t know,” he said, visibly shaken. “My mind... it is blank. There is nothing there, nothing.”

“What kinds of things might open this tunnel?” she asked not taking her eyes off his face.

“Any number of things. I just can’t think of any.”

“A button perhaps?” Kit unfolded his long bony fingers and a small pearl collar button lay in his palm. “Let’s try it,” she said pressing the tiny white circle into the teeth of the grinning clown. Nothing happened and Kit took Skye’s hand again. “How about a lever or a key?” Skye dutifully closed his hand and opened it once again, this time a little easier. A small silver windup key lay in his palm.

“I was thinking more of the kind of a key that you put in a lock but this could work.” Kit took the key and stuck it into a crack between the massive clown teeth and gave it a turn. She cranked it a few times and waited for something in the big wall to move. After a few minutes Skye took the key and gave it a try.

“Open, now!” he told the door. The teeth started to chatter and a rush of foul air came out of the tunnel as the giant metal mouth groaned apart. Skye gave a low whistle and Spark came flying back to his side. To Kit’s surprise and delight Blue softly landed

close behind her and thumped her with his nose. Chimka jumped down from Blue's back and started chattering at Skye.

"Yes I know. Wilber is inside as well as the others. I... we have come to get them out. No, and I'm not too happy about it either," Skye told the little monkey.

"He says that Mook and Mrs. Hogar have been captured. Wilber Dragonfriend has told him that they have been taken to the Big Tent. Clio and Patrin are there too but they seem to have avoided being caught. Rather clever of them, Chimka says. You were right, by the way," he told Kit. "I did learn something from this place. I now know what to expect and the way to the inside. Thanks for helping me see that. If... if I blank out like that again suggest anything that comes into your mind. It doesn't matter what. I knew that I would have trouble creating here but I didn't think that it would be this bad."

"What is it? Are you feeling sick?" Kit asked.

"No, it's fear. You don't understand. When I was here I wasn't brave and I wasn't clever. I just did what they asked me to do and hoped that they wouldn't hit me too much. I never fought back. The sad thing is that I could have, you know. I'm not sure why but I never did... and now with Patrin and Miss Clio here..."

"They'll be all right. They have to be. We can't think of it any other way," she told him. "When the time comes you'll know what to do. I'll help you if I can. A game well played can bring us good fortune." Kit echoed his words from when they had passed out toys at the Bunks. Skye thought about this for a moment and seemed to take on new strength.

"Then we'll play to win," he replied and started walking into the darkness. "Stay close together and watch out for balloons and pies. They'll be expecting us." He paused only long enough to place one of the bright yellow Clown Traps on the tunnel floor. It swelled into a large toy box with a sign that read "Do not open this box."

"So, may I at least ask what might happen if somebody opened that box?" Kit asked as they walked along the dark tunnel.

"There is a place called Circusland. It's a place that is considered to be a paradise for toy clowns. It will take them there," Skye explained. "I'm hoping to convince the majority of clowns to go there willingly. Even the clowns that you deactivated yesterday will be taken there and set free. I think that most of them will be easily persuaded to go."

Most of the clowns here were doubled by Miss Morna. Since toys often take on at least a small bit of their maker's personality I am hoping that the majority will be easily swayed to indulge themselves. If not, it may be necessary to trick some of them into going by one means or another. Either way we will find out soon." They stopped in front of a bare stone wall. "I remember there being a door here somewhere." He clapped his hands together and a ball of orange fire flew into the air and hovered close to the ceiling. It cast a soft light over the tunnel wall revealing a thin line etched into the stone.

"A back entrance, we'll bypass the train station and save a little time. I hope you like slides," he explained as he pushed on the wall. A door swung open into a dingy room with dusty brown carpeting. In the far wall was a round opening that dropped into darkness. A painted wooden sign with a pointing finger read "This way to the Big Tent" A long line of yellow light bulbs blinked off and on around the slide entrance. Overhead rows of clown faces were carved on the ceiling, their mechanical eyes clicking slowly back and forth.

"Stay together. I don't want anyone to get lost," Skye told them. "Are you ready for this?" he asked Kit who had her arm around Blue's neck for comfort. The clown face ceiling gave her the feeling that they were being watched.

"Since I have no idea as to what to expect I don't really know," she replied. Skye stuck his head into the round opening and sniffed the air. He listened intently for a moment.

"A few thousand clowns are sitting in bleachers. A toy burning demonstration is in progress. Mook and Mrs. Hogar are in a cage suspended somewhere in the air. A company of Jester Control Officers are standing in the center ring. Patrin and Clio are in there but I'm not close enough to pinpoint exactly where. Captain Dolly is in the middle of giving a speech."

"Now that I do know what to expect I can't say that I feel any better," Kit said with grim humor. She felt like laughing at the hopelessness of it all. "So, are we going to die?"

"No, I don't think so, not today," Skye replied as he unbuttoned his heavy overcoat.

“Would you mind if we came up with a plan before we marched in there?” Kit asked, taking her coat off in the stuffy little room. Skye took a long white scarf with a griffin embroidered on it and a white hat out of his pocket. He then produced a miniature hatstand and set it on the ground. Kit was so busy watching Skye that she didn’t notice the hatstand growing to full size. His suit was a dazzling white, almost blinding in its brightness. It had a high collar and fitted well, making him seem even taller than he was. He draped the long scarf around his neck and put on the wide hat, smoothing the edge with his fingers. The brim covered his eyes like she remembered from the drawing in the Toymaker’s Annual. His face seemed to glow as well. Tangible energy radiated from him, filling the room with static electricity. Spark shook her wings and wave of sparks popped off her fur and floated slowly down to the ground. The hair on the back of Kit’s neck stood up and she felt a little frightened.

“If Spark and Blue would be so kind as to help Commander Hogar and Mookael down to the ground that will solve that problem. Chimka, I believe you will be able to unlock the cage that they are in. Kit, could you keep an eye out for our young friends, Patrín and Clio? Just make sure they stay close to me and everything will be fine. I will take care of the clowns.” He helped her take off her coat and hung it next to his. “Is that a good enough plan?”

“It sounds reasonable,” Kit managed to say. Her face felt flushed and she was trembling.

“Here now, what’s this?” Skye took Kit’s hands in his and drew her in close. “You are afraid?” He looked confused for a moment. “Of me? You’re afraid of me? Please don’t be, you of all people.” Kit relaxed against him and took a breath.

“You are…” she carefully put her hand up and stroked his cheekbone, “…different”. A trail of blue light radiated out from his skin where she touched him.

“It’s just the suit,” he protested. “Don’t be fooled by it. I’m still the same person.”

“But what kind of person is that?” she asked, full of wonder. Before he could answer Spark growled a low warning. The big griffin was looking into the slide entrance and her tail lashed fire pops across the room. Skye listened at the tunnel opening again.

“Captain Dolly’s speech is ending. Excuse me, but it is time to go to work. You might like a weapon of some sort.” He pulled a small ebony stick out of his sleeve and

rolled it between his palms until it stretched into a long staff. He handed it to her and said, “May Ura Amara the light of heaven smile upon us today. And may Good Luck follow you.”

“And you too.” Kit watched as Skye walked over and disappeared down the chute

Chapter 35

Clio looked over at Patrin and saw tears running down his cheeks. They had watched as the Jester Control officers brought out the toys that they had made and threw them into a big pile in one of the rings. Before she knew what was happening the clown soldiers piled straw around the toys and set them on fire. As Clio looked around she saw that Patrin was not the only one that was crying. Down the silent rows many of the clowns were in tears. All the rowdiness had gone out of the crowd as they watched the destruction. Some of the clowns had tried to leave and the Jester Control Squad had bullied them back to their seats. Others were clutching each other and muffled sobs could be heard all through the arena. Princess Isabella held her head high and cradled her little brother in her arms. The little boy clown had fallen asleep from exhaustion as soon as they sat down. His sister rocked him back and forth and stroked his dark hair as they watched the flames grow. Then some of the Jester Control officers brought in more boxes of toys and start piling them on to the blaze. Clio recognized a lot of the toys from Quad Hall. A black uniformed clown threw the Jumping Jaguar on top of the fire with a box of Rainbow Fish puzzles. Toy after toy disappeared in the flames as the bonfire roared higher and higher.

As the last box went on top of the pile Captain Dolly took her place behind the podium. She glared across the sea of greasepainted faces and then grinned wide. Her red smile made her face look as if it had been slashed from ear to ear.

“My Fellow Clowns! Today we have conquered those who would enslave us. No longer are we the playthings of the Toymasters. Today we are strong! Now we are the ones pulling the strings; no longer are we puppets controlled by our makers. Today we are free! Long have we planned and fought to overthrow the tyrants. I see that some of you are crying but this is no cause for tears. We destroyed these evil toys because they

are treacherous. They caused chaos and disorder! No longer will the world be distracted by these wicked pastimes. Do not be weak or you will be crushed as well under our giant shoes of destruction. They deserve everything that they get! We must be ruthless in our efforts to create a better world.” Captain Dolly’s voice rasped on in the arena. Clio found her mind wandering. She looked up at the cage containing Mrs. Hogar and Mook.

“I hope that they’re okay. There has to be a way to get them out of there,” she thought.

“Why are you weeping, my brothers? “ Captain Dolly’s voice grated back into her consciousness. “Some of you have asked me ‘why was this necessary’? I tell you that you should not worry about such trivial things. These toys were evil! These toys were bad! They promote wasted time; time that should be spent on more serious pursuits. No more shall children squander their childhood playing with silly toys with no meaning or purpose! We will not only conquer these Toymakers that make such frivolous things but we will exterminate them! We are working day and night to wipe them out to make our world a safer, happier, more productive place.” The crowd moved uneasily in their seats, as her harsh voice grew sweeter and more persuasive. “This is our Destiny! We will be glad that we made the sacrifices, We will look back on this day with pride! This is the dawn of a new age, a new revolution and we will crush all the filthy timewasters that oppose us!” She raised her arms over the crowd in triumph. “We will have freedom! Our lives will be our own to live as we see fit! We will run the Show forever!”

The band struck up a stirring march. The rows of Jester Control officers started marching in formation around the ring. Now that the speech was over Clio wondered what would happen next. She noticed that two of the clowns in black making their way to where the ropes that held up the cage were tied.

“We got to help them!” she whispered to Patrin.

“I know, but how?” Patrin replied, “We have to think of a way to get them out of there!”

“Look over behind the stage. Something is going on.” Clio watched as a tube door opened up and Skye stepped out. He dusted himself off and after looking around the arena tapped his knuckles on the inside of the tunnel. Spark followed by Blue carrying a determined looking Chimka shot over the heads of the crowd. Kit came sliding out last

and Skye helped her to her feet. He scanned the crowd and after a moment pointed right to the place where Patrin and Clio sat. Kit started working her way behind the bleachers to where they were. None of the clowns seemed to be paying any attention to Skye and Kit because all eyes were on the cage suspended high above the center ring. Chimka was clutching the bars and picking at the lock with his tail. The door swung open after a long moment and the little monkey quickly untied the captives. As Mook and Mrs. Hogar struggled to their feet Captain Dolly started barking orders to her troops.

“You fools! Cut the rope! Hurry!” Clio lost sight of Skye in the crowd for a moment as the cage swung back and forth over their heads. Mrs. Hogar managed to climb onto Blue’s back and was carried up to the rigging. Mook stood on the edge of the doorway trying to get close enough to Spark to jump over. Chimka, his eyes wide with terror, wrapped his long furry arms around Mook’s neck. As the cage started to fall Mook jumped and grabbed at Spark’s tail. He missed and started to plummet towards the floor. In a flash a pack of flying poodles came soaring up from behind the stage to break his fall. The harnesses that Mook gave them sprouted little wings that flapped like hummingbirds lifting them upwards. They barked frenetically to each other as they bumped his falling body with all the force that their little bodies could muster. Mook flopped like rag doll through the air, lifting and falling as the war poodles buffeted him up and away from the ground. Spark swooped down and grabbed the back of his jacket with her sharp beak and hauled him up to a landing high over head. The poodles lined up on a tightrope high overhead like birds on a clothesline, motionless except for the frenzied wagging of their pompomed tails.

“Well, that was certainly exciting.” Kit sat down next to Clio after climbing up through the bleachers. “How are we doing this morning, Miss Halina? You are looking very colorful today.” She looked over Clio and Patrin’s costumes. “Rumor has it you’ve had quite an experience in the last twenty four hours. How are you feeling?”

“Um, fine, I guess. These are our friends Isabella and Punch.” Clio pointed to the clown princess and her sleeping brother. Isabella nodded regally and returned her attention to Mook scrambling up the high wire. He slipped a little then managed to get his leg over a rope and pull himself up a bit further.

“Is that Mookael the Game Master?” she asked Clio. “He is very brave.” A line of Jester Control clowns started to climb up the ladder to where Mook was dangling. Mrs. Hogar sprinted quickly across the wire, as smoothly as if she had been on level ground to lend him a hand. She jumped over the row of poodles and landed effortlessly on the other side. Not a sound could be heard in the vast arena as all eyes were fixed on Mook trying to struggle his way up to the landing.

“What happened to Mr. Skye?” asked Clio nervously.

“He is down there somewhere.” Kit looked across the Big Tent and caught sight of Skye placing rows of toys around the arena. He worked at an unhurried pace. Occasionally he glanced up to see how Mook was doing and then continued pulling little boxes and toys out of his pockets. A few clowns noticed him as he went about his work but he put his finger to his lips and shushed them, then pointed to the tightrope overhead. Mrs. Hogar grabbed Mook’s arm and pulled him up on the landing just as the first Jester Control officer reached the top. Spark glared over the edge and hissed. A cloud of hot steam came out of her beak causing the line of clowns to lose their grip and slide down to the floor.

“You stupid idiots! Get up there!” Captain Dolly kicked her way through the pile of fallen clowns and started shoving them up the ladder.

As they started to climb again Spark cut through the rope with the swipe of one sharp talon. The black uniformed clowns fell into a pile on top of Captain Dolly and she shrieked with frustration. The crowd roared with laughter as the soldiers tripped over themselves trying to become untangled.

Skye walked calmly on stage and took his place behind the podium. All the clowns rose to their feet as they recognized who it was. He looked over the sea of painted faces and began to speak.

“Good morning, Clownfriends.” The mob of Jester Control clowns stood up and started to rush the stage. The flying poodles dove from the line that they were perched on and flew toward the oncoming clowns. The little dogs swooped down and hit the attacking clowns squarely in the nose, just as Mook had taught them to do. The Jester Control clowns instantly deactivated and fell motionless to the ground in one big pile of

black and red uniforms while the poodles circled around them growling and yapping. The clowns in the bleachers cheered their approval and Skye continued his speech.

“I apologize for not being here sooner. I might have been able to stop the destruction of all these toys. I’m sorry for the distress that it has caused you. Be assured that they were copies and that the originals are safely in the hands of someone who will care for them. And yet I am saddened that these copies were not treated with more respect.”

The crowd murmured in agreement. A good many of the clowns in the audience were copies made by the Doubler and a wave of concern passed over them as they thought about this idea. Skye paused for a moment and continued.

“Many of you were weeping just now because you know in your hearts that the loss of one toy is a loss felt by all. All toys are important, not just the big ones or the beautiful ones.” A row of short little clowns nodded and slapped their hands together at these words.

“Each one of you is unique, it is your experiences that make you so. You may look alike but it is the thoughts that you think and things that that you feel that make you special.” A line of twelve identical green haired clowns looked at each other and giggled into their big spotted handkerchiefs. Spark landed on the stage and walked over to Skye and sat down. Skye patted the griffin’s feathery head and went on.

“But don’t be sad. Captain Dolly was right about one thing; today is a special day, but not because it is a day for fighting and destruction. It is a day for play and fun. Play is not a waste or an evil. It is what gives us strength. Play is what gives us life.” He smiled and pointed to all the little boxes that he had set up around the arena. As he did the boxes started to grow and unfold, slowly spinning as they increased in size. A merry-go-round popped out of one of the boxes and a giant slide stretched out from another. Each box unfolded into a carnival ride. Roller coasters and loop-the-loops expanded to fill the three rings before their eyes. Food stalls unfolded too, filled with good things to eat. Mountains of hot cookies, cakes and pies were stacked on the tables.

“Today you are free to choose where you want to go and who you want to be. I know that you will choose wisely. Delight in your time here together. Please enjoy yourselves. I’m glad that you are here.” Skye bowed his head and walked off the stage.

The band started playing a lively dance tune and the rows of clowns started to make their way down to explore the wonderful rides and toys that were scattered around the arena. Captain Dolly managed to extract herself from the pile of fallen clowns and pushed her way through the pressing crowd. The masses were too much for her and she was swept back towards the center ring. Skye stood facing the back wall and made a sweeping motion with his hands. A huge opening appeared in the wall and golden light shown out over the merrymaking clowns. Calliope music and the smells of caramel and cotton candy wafted out into the air. The clowns gave out a cheer of happiness as they began streaming into the gardens and playgrounds that were inside.

The noise of crowd rushing past them was tremendous. Kit was glad that they were sitting in the back as the clowns raced down to pass through the doorway to Circusland. Isabella got a strange look on her face as if she was in a trance and started to stand up with her little brother in her arms. She handed the sleeping boy to Patrin and started to walk down the steps.

“It looks so lovely. I want to go there!” she said dreamily. Clio blocked her way.

“Why don’t you wait a couple of minutes until the line thins out a bit. It looks pretty crowded and we don’t want to get separated. “

“No, I must go!” she said again in the same faraway voice and pushed Clio away. The clown princess started climbing down the empty bleachers toward the floor. Mrs. Hogar and Mook landed riding Blue and Spark.

“Is that who I think it is, your Highness?” snapped Mrs. Hogar jumping off Blue’s back. Patrin nodded.

“She mustn’t go through that door. She would never want to return and King Lunaire would be more than displeased. Catlander, put some of that muscle of yours to work and bring her back. The rest of you stay together. Whatever you do don’t wander off!”

Mook ran down the steps three at a time and caught up with Isabella. He swooped her up in his arms and carried her kicking and yelling back up to the top of the stairs. She kicked his shins quite hard and was about to box his nose when she looked at his face. He smiled his most charming smile and whispered something into her ear. She laughed and

Mook set her down. The Princess looked as if she had changed her mind and that staying might not be so bad after all.

In less than a half an hour the last clown danced through the opening and Skye started folding up all the carnival rides. The giant stadium was empty and the only sound in the arena was distant laughter through the golden sunlight in Circusland. The sound faded away, becoming softer and softer until the wall changed to solid brick and only a mural of happy clowns dancing in a meadow on a warm Spring day was left.

Skye climbed the stairs to meet the others. Patrin and Clio were trying to wipe the last of the paint off of their faces. Clio felt relieved to finally take off the giant squeaky shoes. Isabella and Mook chatted like old friends as Mrs. Hogar cradled the still sleeping Punchello in her arms.

“That went better than I expected,” Skye said. “Are we missing anyone? Where’s the little dragon?” Chimka chattered something and the Toymaker nodded back.

“Miss Clio, it seems that your friend has got himself stuck in a Toy Box. If the rest of you don’t mind waiting why don’t we see if we can go and get him out?”

Clio followed Skye back down the stairs and out a side door. The corridor lead to the mirror maze again and they worked their way through it until they came to a wooden ramp that had a track on it. Skye sniffed the air and hesitated for a moment before ducking down the low dark tunnel.

“Stay close to me, Miss,” he told Clio. “It seems that the box containing your Friend has been moved.”

Chapter 36

“These are the Grotto tunnels.” Skye knelt down to talk to Clio. He looked warily down the corridor into the wall of darkness. “I have only been in them a few times. You must know that there are many frightening things here. But it’s not safe to leave you here alone and we don’t have time to go back. What do you want to do?”

“Is it really awful? Is Wilber in danger?” Clio pressed her lips together and tried to decide how brave she felt. “We’ve got to get him out of there,” she added as if that settled the question.

“Yes, your little dragon is in a bad spot. Captain Dolly must have grabbed the box during the confusion. She’s unpredictable,” he told her. “These tunnels were made to be more scary than dangerous. I want you to know that before going in. We’ll be safe enough if we stay close together.”

“Then let’s get moving!” Clio took a deep breath and headed down the tunnel with Skye close behind her. They followed the rails on the dirty wooden floor down past weird bone carvings embedded in the walls and old dioramas full of miniature figures showing various events in the Grotto’s history. The scenes set in the walls were dusty and neglected and Clio got the feeling that they were going into an area that wasn’t used very much. One scene had piles of skulls stacked like bricks; another was of humans surrounded by fiery lizards screaming in molten lava.

“This is supposed to be scary?” said Clio. “This is lame! If they wanted to do something really creepy then they should show a junior high math class... and a test on the first day of school.” Skye nodded and replied,

“That *is* a frightening thought.”

“Was that clown speech the scariest one you ever had to give?” asked Clio as they passed crude paintings of skeletons dancing and people getting their heads chopped off.

“Actually no. The worst was one I had to give when I was about your age. The Royal Toymaker became ill and I was asked to fill in for him. It was a room full of hundreds of children on a hot summer day. They were quite noisy and threw things. After that everything seemed easy.”

“Did you barf?” asked Clio. She looked up at the rubber bugs and snakes on strings dangled overhead and spider webs covered the walls. “I know I would have.”

“I believe that I might have done something like that. I still don’t care for large groups of children. Nothing personal, in small groups you are tolerable but a hundred children in one room can be very trying,” Skye admitted as he brushed spider webs out of the way. “I guess it is an occupational hazard.” A live cobra dropped out of the ceiling and Skye’s hand shot out to grab its neck. He held it behind his back as Clio turned around.

“Did you hear something?” she asked, not noticing how pale Skye had become as he struggled to keep the angry snake from wriggling out of his grip.

“Nothing to worry about,” he replied, tossing the poisonous snake into a hole in the wall. The floor became steeper as they walked and jets of cold air blasted out of the walls.

“If I remember correctly, miss, this is the part where things jump out at you.”

“Oh,” said Clio. “Like, what kind of things?” Just then a skeleton face shot out toward them and screamed. Clio screamed back.

“Skeletons, monsters, ghosts, objects of that nature. Here comes another one.” Skye pointed to a door in the wall. It opened and a giant melting face popped up and shrieked. This time Clio didn’t scream.

“Thanks for the warning,” she said as they moved steadily along. Monsters continued to pop out at them as they walked down the dark wooden corridor. Finally they reached a small room with a large rotating passageway at the end.

“Do we have to go through there?” Clio asked as she watched the big drum spin rapidly around.

“Yes, but let me check it first.” Skye took a beach ball out of his pocket and quickly blew it up. As soon as he tossed it into the drum, sharp spikes came out and punctured it. The deflated ball slid to the bottom of the tunnel. The metal spikes retracted with a sharp click as the barrel kept turning.

“It appears that some modifications have been made since the last time that I was here,” Skye said as he studied the spinning tunnel. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“How about a concrete tube? Make it spongy on the outside so the spikes stick into it. Then we can crawl through the tube and not get hurt,” Clio explained.

“Interesting idea.” Skye thought for a moment and pulled a bright lime green tube out of his pocket. He tapped it with his finger and it grew to fill the tunnel. The sharp metal spikes stuck into the thick green layer that covered the outside of the tube. It creaked and groaned under the weight.

“Hurry! Now!” Skye lifted Clio up into the tube and she scrambled through, Skye followed just as the concrete tube started to come apart. With a tremendous crash the pieces of cement broke up and tumbled out onto the floor.

The next room presented the new challenge of a few wobbly planks set across a deep pit littered with bones and sharp rocks. A few snakes slithered in the dark shadows below.

“You’d best take my hand, miss” Skye told her, “The floor here has a tendency to shift.”

“Floor! There is no floor! Geeze!” Clio sounded panicked. The rickety boards looked impossible to cross.

“I know, miss.” Skye didn’t tell her that the last time that he was there he had been pushed in and laid on the floor for several days until the Jester Control officers had grown tired of taunting him and hauled him out. He shook off the painful memory and tried to concentrate.

“What if we make a big slingshot and shoot ourselves across?” Clio asked looking down at the rocks below.

“A landing of that sort might prove difficult but you’ve given me an idea.” He blew into his fist and a tiny bunch of balloons appeared. Skye tugged on the balloons strings and they expanded to full size. He tied a bunch to Clio’s belt and another to his wrist.

“Hang on!”

They took a running start and sailed over the pit. Skye tethered the balloons to the wall and they continued down the tunnel. Somewhere in the gloom ahead echoed a faint honking noise.

“Wilber! He's in trouble!” Clio dashed on up ahead.

“No! Wait!” Skye sprinted close behind. He lost sight of her in the darkness but kept running. The ceiling dropped lower and he had to crouch down to keep going.

Skye turned the corner to find Clio dashing back toward him. She was breathing hard and her face was flushed red.

“They have him! They have him in the room!” she gasped.

“Well then, not to worry. We merely need to go and get him out.”

“No! You don’t understand! She’s got him tied up! You know, the clown with the teeth!” Clio wiggled two fingers like fangs in front of her mouth and made a face.

“Of course she has him tied up. If he weren’t tied up he would have burnt them all into piles of rubber by now. That little dragon of yours is very powerful, more than you know. Now, let’s go see if we can fix this mess,” he told her.

Skye walked quickly to the plywood door at the end of the tunnel. His eyes closed for a moment, as he struggled to master his fear. He clutched his arms across his chest and whispered a silent prayer to Saint Portia, then taking a deep breath, he knocked on the rough wood with his knuckles.

“Captain Dolly, this is Sir Wolfren Skye, Royal Toymaker to Her Majesty the Queen. I need to speak to you.”

The door opened slowly revealing two long rows of Jester Control clowns standing at attention on either side of the room. Big Happy, in a black and red uniform leaned against the wall. He stood next to Captain Dolly, fiddling with his bamboo cane. Dolly clutched a struggling Wilber, his legs and paws tied tight with balloon animal handcuffs. His snout was bound with a leather muzzle and Captain Dolly held a large pair of scissors open at his throat.

“Now Dolly, you know this is not acceptable,” Skye told her as if he was reprimanding a small child.

“Ooh, am I in trouble? What are you going to do to me? Make me stand in the corner? I’m so scared,” she taunted him. Clio stood as close as she could to Skye and hung on to his sleeve. Now that they were inside the room he seemed calm and at ease. Clio peered around to look at Wilber and waved at him and tried to manage a wan smile. Wilber thrashed around and Dolly poked the scissors point into his neck.

“Hey stop it! Knock it off! You’re hurting him!” cried Clio. The lines of clowns started to move to grab Skye but he held his closed hand out and they hesitated for an instant. He opened his fist and a small yellow disc appeared. He tossed it to the floor and they all stared as it grew into a Clown Trap. Skye flipped the lid open and sounds of merriment filled the room.

“Get away from it you fools!” snarled Dolly; “Can’t you see it is one of his filthy tricks?” The smell of burnt sugar and melted butter wafted into the air and carousel music was faintly heard.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Skye addressed the soldiers. “You may go now and not be harmed.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Dolly ordered. “It’s a trap! Big Happy, give this ingrate a message that he won’t forget.” The lumbering clown walked over to strike Skye with his cane.

“Dolly, please let the dragon go, you’re trying my patience.” Skye had an edge to his voice.

“That’s Captain Dolly to you, Augwun,” giggled Big Happy, flexing his cane in his white gloves. He whipped it through the air and it made a sick whistling sound.

“I wasn’t talking to you, and that is not my name,” replied Skye.

“I think you owe the Captain an apology for all the trouble that you have caused. And you too, little twerp.” Big Happy stepped closer. Clio could see the stubble on his chin poking through the greasepaint as he leered down at her. He was raising his cane to strike when Skye calmly flipped Big Happy’s bulbous nose with the back of his hand. The huge clown froze instantly and crashed to the floor.

“I said that I wasn’t talking to you,” replied Skye. Several of the Jester Control clowns dove into the box at these words.

“I’m not going to ask you again.” Skye glared at the remaining clowns. “Either you go to Circusland and promise never to return or I will dismantle each and every one of you. Have I made myself clear?” They blinked their white eyelashes and looked lost.

“Off with you! Before I change my mind!” Skye told them. They scrambled into the box before Captain Dolly could object.

“I’ll get them out you know!” growled Dolly. “And when I do this is what is going to happen!” She took a big snip out of the velvet of Wilber’s neck. Cotton stuffing popped out and Wilber went limp in her arms. Clio started to go to help her Friend but Skye held her back.

“Dolly, give me the scissors.” He held his hand out and Dolly looked around for a way out. Her head twitched back and forth in jerky movements

“No! I won’t! It isn’t fair! I’ll never submit to you! Never! You are evil! Evil to the core, all of you Toymakers are!” she screamed at him. She lunged at him with the scissors, dropping Wilber to the ground. Clio caught the wounded dragon and started pulling on the balloon handcuffs trying to set him free. When she looked up she saw Skye holding Dolly by the wrist to keep her from pushing the scissors into his chest. A thin trickle of red stained his lapel. He twisted the sharp instrument away from her and it fell to the ground with a ringing clatter.

“Shhh! It’s going to be all right. Don’t worry, little one.” Skye’s voice was quiet and soothing.

“I won’t go, I won’t! You are a dead man! I’ll kill you!” The white haired clown thrashed around kicking wildly. “Wait! I can get you anything, Candeeze? You know you want it! I can get you boxes of it. You could share it with all your friends!” Dolly bargained frantically. She ran her tongue across her red, green and blue teeth and waited for his reply.

“No, thank you. Dolly, you know it’s time to go.”

“NO!” she shrieked. “This is wrong! You tricked me! You cheated! All that time and you could have stopped us and you didn’t. Why?” A thought flashed across the frantic clown’s contorted face. “You didn’t know you could. We got to you! We controlled you! Ha!” Dolly looked at her captor slyly and said, “You could have walked out of here at anytime and you didn’t. What an idiot! You are so stupid!”

“You underestimate your powers, Captain,” Skye told her. He encased her wrists tightly with one hand and touched her greasy cheek with the other. “If it is any small comfort to you, I will hear your voice in my head for years to come. Every human that you ever came in contact with will remember you. Does that please you?” The clown’s eyes glinted with triumph.

“Yes, Toymaker, it does. I hope you wake up in the middle of the night in pain. I hope you rot in your misery. You were weak and selfish.” She chuckled to herself.

“Yes I was, and I am sorry.” Skye looked at her sadly. He patted her face with his hand and pressed her nose with his thumb. She froze and Skye laid her stiff body gently on the floor. He unscrewed her head and pulled out a few parts that he placed in his pocket. He did the same for Big Happy and then turned his attention to Clio.

She sat with Wilber cradled in her arms. She had managed to pull off the balloon handcuffs and leather muzzle. The dragon’s head sagged down limply across her shoulder. She cried silently as she clutched the stuffed animal to her face.

“He’s dead! She killed him. He’s not moving anymore!”

Chapter 37

“Let’s have a look. No need for tears. It can’t be bad as all that.” Skye sat cross-legged on the floor next to Clio and pulled a needle from his hatband. “I do have some small experience in mending toys you know.”

“But he’s dead! Look! He’s not moving.” Clio clutched Wilber and rocked back and forth. Skye produced a small spool of green thread and started threading the needle.

“He’s not dead. He’s a toy. Toys can never die as long as someone loves them. He’ll have no more than an interesting scar to show off.” Skye deftly sewed up the cut with tiny stitches, poking the stuffing back into the dragon’s neck as he went.

“Mr. Skye?” Clio hesitated as she watched his fingers fly with the needle.

“Yes, miss?”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t believe you, that you could make toys and stuff.”

“Not to worry miss, I didn’t much believe it myself. I thought that I’d lost the gift. But it’s rather like making a bicycle, as you Greylanders say. Once you learn how to make one you never forget.”

“Don’t you mean like riding a bicycle?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never ridden a bicycle, only made them.”

“Really? No way! You’ve got to learn how. It’s super fun.”

“I shall put it on my list of things to do,” he said with a small smile. Skye snipped the excess thread off with a tiny pair of shears and handed the stuffed animal back to Clio. “There, you see, right as rainbows. Wake up, you lazy beast. Your mistress wants you.” Skye ruffled Wilber’s yarn hair good-naturedly and sat back. Clio felt Wilber’s sides move and watched as one eye popped open and looked at her. Wilber yawned and immediately put one paw to his throat and felt the seam that was there. Then he licked Clio’s face with his velvety tongue and grinned cheerfully.

“You fixed him! You rock!” Clio threw her arms around Skye’s neck and hugged him tight. Wilber hugged him too. The Toymaker looked sheepish and said,

“‘Twas, nothing. He’s your Friend. It’s your belief in him that makes him real.”

“Wow! And I was sure he was toast!” Clio said as Wilber snuggled into her lap. “What about these guys?” She pointed to the fallen bodies of Dolly and Big Happy. “What’s going to happen to them?”

“I removed a few of their faulty parts. They’re inanimate. The Council of Justice will probably ask that they be destroyed.” Skye gazed at them sadly and shook his head. “We can’t have toys running around hurting innocent things. We’ll need to investigate this whole place. It’s hard to believe that someone would make such harmful creatures.”

“Hey, are you bleeding?” Clio just noticed the growing red stain on Skye’s jacket.

“Hmm?” He pulled himself out of his thoughts and looked at his chest with interest. “So I am, It’s not very deep. Looks worse than it is.” Skye unbuttoned his shirt to inspect the injury. He pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it over the wound.

“Do you want me to draw you a Band-Aid?” asked Clio. Skye nodded and she drew a square of soft cloth and handed it to him. Then she sketched some white tape to make it stick. Skye applied the bandage and stood up.

“Thank you, miss. It feels better already.” He paused for a moment and raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Actually it feels a lot better.” He peeled back the bandage and the stab wound was gone.

“You are remarkable, Miss Clio. It is a rare Toymaker that has your talents. I hope you know that and use them wisely.” He buttoned up his shirt and shook the lapel of his jacket. A few sparks flew off and the bright red bloodstain faded away.

“Whoa! How did you do that?” Clio asked.

“Self cleaning suit,” Skye replied. “It’s very handy when you have to work with ink all day. Shall we start back? What’s that?” Wilber honked and pulled on his hand. “Yes, a shortcut would be most welcome.” Wilber flew up to the ceiling and pushed open a panel. Light shown down from the room above.

“If you would produce a ladder, miss, then I can finish cleaning up in here.” Skye carefully rolled the inanimate forms of the clowns in strips of cloth. Then he constructed two long iron boxes and placed the bodies in them. He locked the lids tightly with several padlocks and embossed an official seal on each one that said, “Do not open, under orders of Sir Wolfren Skye, Royal Toymaker to H.M. Queen Iren III.” Skye smacked the seal hard with his open palm and a blue glow incased the boxes.

Clio managed to draw a ladder and pull it off the paper but it wasn't tall enough to reach the ceiling. Wilber stretched it for her until it fit the opening.

"Are they asleep in there?" Clio asked as they got ready to leave.

"No, they are shut down. I sealed up the boxes to ensure that no one accidentally repairs them or uses their parts for any foul purpose."

"It's kind of creepy to think about them locked up in there."

"Yes, I know," answered Skye. He shuddered as they left the boxes behind.

The room above was a laundry area and after a few minutes walking they found the door to the Big Tent. Patrin and Kit were busy making small toys to entertain Punch. The small clown boy was most delighted however with Blue and rode around the ring on the flying unicorn's willing back. Mook and Princess Isabella were still talking and laughing quietly to themselves. Skye walked over to where Mrs. Hogar was feeding the War poodles.

"We'll need to stay and search for survivors, but I'd like to get the children to a more wholesome place. Do you think that Lynderley House would be comforting for them after their experiences here?"

"I am sure that your parents will be overjoyed to see you again, sir, and that we all will be made to feel most welcome."

"I would prefer if you stayed behind to help and Patrin too. There may be wounded people to attend to."

"Perhaps Sir Mookael could be persuaded to take them to Lynderley," observed Mrs. Hogar dryly as they watched Mook trying to teach Princess Isabella how to spin a yo-yo.

"Ah!" replied Skye. The Princess spun the toy around and dissolved in to happy laughter. "That shouldn't be too hard."

Clio found herself sitting in the back of the Aircoaster soaring over alpine meadows and green forests. Skye and Mook had modified the original Aircoaster to include enough seats for Isabella, Punchello and Clio. Chimka sat in the front by Mook chattering instructions as Wilber leaned out over the side and wiggled his ears in the rushing wind. Clio wasn't too happy about leaving Miss Ashlyn and Patrin behind. She

had protested to the point of refusing to budge, but Kit had explained that it was only for a few hours and that afterwards she could help with any prisoners that they found in the Grotto dungeons. At last Clio very reluctantly agreed to go on ahead to wherever this Lynderley place was. The war poodles insisted on accompanying them as far as Soda Springs, where the barking pack of dogs soared off toward the forest below. After about an hour they could see the ocean and swooped down toward an impressive estate surrounded by beautiful, manicured gardens. Not far in the distance they could see the spires of the Saint Ives, the Royal City.

Mook landed the Aircoaster on the front drive with a few bounces and skidded to a stop. Gravel flew everywhere and windows in the huge manor house started flying open as faces peered out to see what was making so much noise. Mook tore off his helmet and sprinted up the marble stairs and to the front door. A crowd of people streamed out and surrounded the Aircoaster like a swarm of bees. Clio figured out that some news of what had happened had preceded them and that people knew who they were.

A tall, elderly woman ran out with her long skirts hiked up to her knees. She put the back of her hand to her forehead and greeted Mook in a language that Clio did not understand. She then hugged him and he grinned back at her. The woman had dark gray hair that was intertwined with strands of tiny sparkling beads and fell in a loose braid down her back. She was smiling and her green eyes twinkled as she came to meet them.

“Your Royal Highness! This is a delight! And Punchello! What a pleasure!” she grasped both of Princess Isabella’s hands and then hugged Punch. The little boy gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek and looked around inquisitively.

“You are looking for someone? Grimmel perhaps?” she asked. Punch nodded shyly. “He’ll be here in a moment, he went to get the Man of the House. I’m sure that he will be pleased as ponies to see you!” Clio wondered who or what a Grimmel was and looked at the sea of faces to see if anyone looked familiar.

Mook grabbed Clio’s hand and pulled her forward to be introduced,

“My lady, may I introduce Miss Clio Halina, Person of Wilber Dragonfriend. She is a Toymaker from the Greylands and she’s a rare one, if I may say so!” Clio felt her cheeks blush hot and didn’t know what to say.

“Clio, this is Lady Wolfren, the Woman of the House.” Clio looked confused so he added in a whisper. “She is Skye’s Mum.” Clio hadn’t ever thought of Skye as having parents so this thought took a while to sink in. She stared up the tall woman smiling down at her and tried to think of something to say.

“Nice to meet you. And thanks for letting us, um, visit.”

“You are most welcome here at Lynderley. We received word yesterday that both Mookael and my son had been found. We've been trying to puzzle together all that has happened ever since.” She smiled kindly at Clio, “We’re hoping you can bring us news of what has taken place.”

As they were walking toward the Hall Wilber squawked frantically and jumped into Clio’s arms. A dark shadow flew overhead, blocking out the sun for an instant. Clio’s mouth dropped open with surprise as a huge winged cat landed gracefully before them. Punchello dashed to hug the black stuffed animal. A serious looking white haired man followed close behind and shook Mook’s hand.

“You have nothing to fear, Wilber Dragonfriend.” Lady Wolfren’s voice was merry as she introduced the large winged cat. “This is Grimmel Longtail, my Friend.” The big black cat winked one shiny button eye at them and let Punchello scratch behind his ears. He licked a velvet paw with his soft pink satin tongue and smoothed back his whiskers. Then he pounced on a leaf that blew by as Punch chased him around and laughed. The crowd of people plied them with questions about what had happened in Blocksbury and the Grotto. Mook told the story with great gusto, with Isabella giving a dramatic rendition of how Mook had barely escaped from the falling cage and been saved by flying poodles. Clio felt tired after hearing all the things that had happened in the last few days and looked around for a place to sit down. Lady Wolfren saw that she was looking a little lost and told her,

“Come, you must be worn out after your long trip. Let’s get you and your Friend inside to rest.” She called over a mischievous looking young woman with thick blond hair and bright green eyes and introduced her to Clio.

“Miss Clio, this is Princess Marina, my granddaughter. I understand you are well acquainted with her little brother, Patrin Orion. She’ll be happy to help you get settled in.”

Clio found herself hustled up a huge staircase and down beautifully furnished corridors. Marina was fascinated by Wilber and asked all kinds of questions about him and where they had been. They finally reached a large suite of rooms that the Princess said were for Clio. There was a sitting room, bedroom and bath all with high arched windows that overlooked the gardens below.

“This is a really nice place!” said Clio, sinking into a pale yellow overstuffed chair. The whole room was decorated prettily in shades of butter yellow and soft blue. Fine lace curtains wafted in the cool summer breeze. She noticed a quaint writing desk with stacks of paper and pens against one wall. Shelves of toys filled the room.

“This is one of the guest rooms for Toymakers. We often have visitors here at Lynderley. You’re lucky you arrived here early. The whole house will soon be filled for the Queen’s Birthday in two days. Queen Iren’s my other Grandmother,” Marina added, “my dad’s mum. Although she is not nearly as nice as Nana, I mean Lady Wolfren. All the Toymakers in the country are traveling here for the celebration.”

“Well if you need me to move or anything, I mean I don’t need anything this fancy.”

Marina laughed at this, as if she thought Clio was making a very silly joke.

“No, really, it’s not like I’m anybody important,” protested Clio.

“But you are Clio Halina, one of the Greylander Toymakers that found Mookael and my uncle. And Princess Isabella said that you and Patrin saved her and Punchello from evil clowns! You’re very brave!”

“Shcha!” Clio shook her head. “I don’t know about that. I thought that Mr. Skye was braver. He talked all these clowns into going through this door. It was really scary but they all went because he told them to. And then he told all these other really big clowns to go in this box and he punched the biggest one who was going to hit me and he froze. Then he got stabbed with a pair of scissors by the really mean lady clown with funny rainbow teeth and he pushed her nose and she turned off. And then he fixed Wilber.” Clio explained all this very rapidly to Marina, who tried to follow what she was saying.

“You do mean Sir Skye the Royal Toymaker?”

“Yeah, him. You know him?”

“Yes, of course, everyone does, and he is my uncle,” replied Marina, with obvious pride and affection. “This is our family’s house.”

“It’s kind of a big house, don’t you think?” observed Clio, sticking her head out the window and trying to see how far it was to the end.

“Many people live here. Some here in the main house and there are three other outbuildings, not to mention the workshops and barns for when animals come to visit. I would be happy to show you about later if you like.”

“That’d be awesome!” replied Clio. “This place is sweet!” Wilber nosed around until he found a Clothes Box. He pulled some clean clothes out for Clio and laid them on the chair.

“I’ll leave you to wash and change. Lady Wolfren thought you might like to rest after all your adventures. Can I get you anything?” Marina looked at her hopefully.

“Gee, no, thanks.” Clio suddenly felt very tired and stifled a yawn.

“Shall I wake you up in time for dinner?”

“That would be real nice,” murmured Clio as she sank into the soft bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Clio woke up several hours later to find Marina standing beside her and calling her name. She sat up and tried to remember where she was.

“Wake up, Miss Clio. They are back. Come and see!” Marina shook her arm. Wilber was sitting on the windowsill peering out, his thick green velvet tail wagged enthusiastically. Clio looked out to see a giant airship that had landed in the courtyard. A stream of people, dressed in rags, were coming out of one end of it. They walked slowly as if they were very tired. Mrs. Hogar came out helping an elderly man who looked very thin. Spark and Blue trotted out pulling wagons with people lying in them. Clio felt a wave of panic wash over her as Skye and Kit came last, carrying Patrin. A huge swarm of people engulfed them and Clio couldn’t tell what was going on for a while. She wanted to bolt downstairs and see what had happened but her legs wouldn’t move. The serious looking white haired man that Clio had seen earlier made his way through the crowd and put his hand on Patrin’s forehead

“Who’s that guy?” asked Clio pointing him out. “Is he like... a doctor?”

“Oh no! He’s a Mender. That’s my Grandfather, Lord Wolfren, the Man of the House. Don’t worry, he’ll soon have my little brother up and about again.”

Clio didn’t share Marina’s optimism in what was going on. She watched nervously as a glow of red light surrounded the two figures until Patrin slowly moved his head. Kit and Skye set him on his feet and he stretched his shoulders as if they were very sore. He looked up and saw Clio hanging out the window and his face lit up with a grin. He gave her a fairly energetic wave and all the heads in the crowd turned up to look at her. Clio felt her face flush pink and waved back. Patrin yelled up,

“I’m fine! No worries! See you at dinner!” and was swept with the others into the Hall.

“You see, they don’t make them any better than my Grandpa. He is a wonderful Mender, one of the best! We’d better hurry now!” said Marina. “Dinner is in an hour and you still need to get dressed.”

“Is this like a fancy dinner? With lots of people? What am I supposed to wear?” Clio looked to Marina for help.

The Princess put her hands on the Clothes Box and sized up Clio.

“Green is your color isn’t it? I know just the thing!”

Chapter 38

“Is Patrin better?” asked Clio as she met with Kit and Blue to go downstairs for dinner. “He looked real sick there for a minute.” Wilber hovered in the air beside her and wagged his head with concern.

“He’s fine, thanks to Skye’s father who was able to make him well. Patrin healed all the prisoners that we found and I think that it overwhelmed him. He was very brave. We found several people that were barely alive and he somehow brought them back,” Kit explained as she patted Blue’s thick gold mane. “I’m glad to be out of that place.” Blue bobbed his head in agreement. They continued walking down a long candlelit corridor. Paintings of the Wolfren Family with gilded frames lined the ornate hallway. Intermixed with the pictures were drawings of toys and one whole wall was covered with portraits of famous teddy bears.

“You look really nice, Miss Ashlyn,” Clio said. Kit was wearing a soft straight tunic of gray blue linen over a dark navy long dress. It had cutwork embroidery on the tight sleeves that came down to a point at her wrist. Her dark hair was intertwined in beadwork like Lady Wolfren’s.

“Thank you, Skye’s mother helped me with the dress and my hair. I must say the same for you, Clio. You’re looking especially pretty tonight.” Clio was wearing a mint colored dress that Marina had pulled out of the Clothes Box for her. The yoke of the dress was solid embroidery in an intricate ivy pattern intertwined with burgundy rosebuds.

“I’m kind of nervous about this dinner thing,” confessed Clio. “You know, meeting Royal people and stuff. Suppose I say something lame? I don’t want to look stupid.”

“I understand how you feel!” laughed Kit. “You’ll do just fine. Keep your eyes open and don’t worry! If there is a large amount of silverware then just watch to see what fork everyone else is using. And don’t be in too big of a hurry to say anything. Remember that most of the people at the table we already know and are our friends. It shouldn’t be that much different from dinner at Quad Hall.” Clio nodded and hoped that she was right.

The dinner started out very formally with official introductions that took a long time. Then there was a certain order that everybody had to march in to be seated in the dining room. Lord Wolfren escorted an interesting looking woman with dark braids named Princess Atheni. Clio figured out that she was Patrin's mom and Skye's sister. She greeted Clio with kind words and made her feel very welcome. Mrs. Hogar was wearing a dark green dress uniform with silver buttons and shiny black boots. A line of medals adorned her left pocket, each with a little silver toy embossed on it. Isabella's father, King Pierrot Lunaire had shook Clio's hand and thanked her for all she had done in rescuing his children. He was wearing a satin suit quilted with black and silver diamonds and his skin was so white that it looked like it had been painted. His fingernails were gilded with polished silver that reflected light like little mirrors. Clio was a little uneasy at first at meeting another clown but King Lunaire was so pleasant and charming that she swiftly forgot her fears.

When they finally got to their chairs they asked Skye to say the Words over the food. He thanked everyone for rescuing him and talked about what a privilege it was to be together as a family. When he clapped his hands together little streams of light wove in and out around everyone where they stood. The ribbons of light connected them with each other and then fell away in a shower of sparks.

"You see," whispered Patrin to Clio. "I told you that I knew someone who could say the Words better than me." He had dark circles under his eyes and looked like he had been ill for a long time but seemed to be his old cheerful self.

Clio felt relieved when she was finally seated between Patrin and Punchello. She felt suddenly very hungry and couldn't remember when she had last eaten. The first course was a clear soup followed by a green spinach soufflé. Clio just stared at the green mound in front of her and poked at it with her fork. Punch pushed his food into a pile and made a face. Everyone else seemed to be eating and talking with relish until Lady Wolfren said,

"You know the rule about working at the table." Skye had pulled a toy train out of his pocket and was fiddling with it. He looked embarrassed and replied,

"I'm not working, Mother. I am..." he searched for the right word. "...cooking. There is a difference." He placed the train on the table and attached several cars onto it

and it chugged off. It wound through the crystal and silver to where Clio and Punch were sitting. Each car had a different kind of Clio's favorite food in it, corn on the cob, fruit salad, mashed potatoes with butter and a caboose filled with chocolate pudding.

"Well I guess in this case we can bend the rules a little bit," said Lord Wolfren with a smile. "I apologize for not knowing the feeding habits of Greylanders and small boy Clowns. Is there anything else that we can get for you, my dear?" He looked at Clio kindly and she shook her head.

"No thanks, I'm good!" she replied. Punchello had already grabbed a spoonful of potatoes and was digging in with gusto.

After dinner they all moved into a spacious drawing room and sat around the big fireplace talking and sharing stories. All the Friends were given their own soft cushions to sit on except for Blue who curled up on a rug and fell asleep. Mrs. Hogar and King Lunaire seemed to be old friends and chatted softly about the goings on of the past few years while keeping a watchful eye on Princess Isabella. She was trying to teach Mook a clown trick of making a coin appear and disappear. The princess wore a long gray and white satin gown that was very elegant. She smiled at Clio and pulled up her layers of skirts ever so slightly. Underneath an abundance of lace petticoats she was still wearing the clunky red boots that Clio had made for her.

Grimmel the flying cat, and Lady Wolfren went around with a tray of cups serving everyone tea and cocoa. Grimmel held a cup in each paw and poured the teapot with his long black tail.

Patrin introduced Clio to his older brother Julian who was as quiet and shy as his brother was outgoing. Then Marina came over and joined them and started teasing Patrin. Before Clio knew it she felt right at home and was laughing at all the funny things that they said. They fussed over Wilber quite a bit and admired his new scar.

"Father was very angry at first when he found out what you had done," Julian told Patrin, "but I think Uncle Skye talked him out of grounding you for life."

"Where is your dad?" asked Clio.

"He has gone to get the Bear. She was in the Greylands looking for you, you know," answered Marina. "You're lucky that you're ever going to see that Friend of yours ever again! I can't tell you how upset Mother has been. We were all worried sick

about you, after you disappeared. We thought that you might have been lost in the Greylands. It's a very dangerous place you know. I mean..." the princess looked at Clio, "no offense, but you must know terrible it is there."

"It seems a lot safer than here. At least to me it does," replied Clio. "Although I'm beginning to think that everywhere is about the same as everywhere else. Except you have better toys here." She snuggled Wilber, who was looking sleepy, into her lap. Patrin looked like he was fading as well. Clio looked around and saw Miss Ashlyn talking with Skye out on the balcony. He was explaining something with great seriousness and she had her fingers to her lips as if she was thinking about how to reply. Then she gave him an odd look and walked over to where Clio was sitting.

"Mr. Skye has made a convincing argument to have us stay here for a few more days. It seems that the Queen's Birthday is the day after tomorrow and we are to be the guests of honor at the celebration. He also says that he will be too busy to take us back until the party is over. All this conveniently happens to coincide with the day your bus gets back from summer camp. He said that waiting will make it a lot easier to swap you with your Doppledoll. I was against it at first but I can't see how a few more days would hurt. We agreed to leave the decision up to you."

"I really would like to meet a Queen," yawned Clio. "And the birthday party sounds like a lot more fun than Music Camp. Please Miss Ashlyn, just a few more days! I really want to see the Royal City. Please?"

"All right, but three more days and then we need to get you home even if we have to walk! Now let's get you to bed before you're too tired to move. You too, Patrin. After all you two have been through in the last few days, you should have been asleep hours ago."

As they said their good nights Clio noticed Kit was back out on the balcony telling Skye that they had decided to stay until after the Queen's Birthday. He looked pleased, and as they talked, he constructed a pair of small kites. He gave one to Kit and the little kites glowed as they flew up into the moonlit night. After Clio got back to her room she looked out the window and could see the shining diamond shapes dancing side by side in the starry sky.

The next day Clio awoke to the sounds of visitors arriving in the front drive. She stared out the window in amazement as a fantastic car chugged up the road. It was purple, copper and pink and the wheels were giant rolling pins. It seemed to be powered by cups of flour that a mechanism dumped into a metal bowl at the back. A copper whisk stirred the doughy mixture in the bowl and clouds of smoke and flour puffed out the tailpipe. The wonderful smell of baking cookies filled the air as the strange vehicle neared the house.

A huge lime-green, stuffed elephant with a small cottage strapped to his back was grazing in one of the flowerbeds. Clio found the Clothes Box and got dressed as quickly as she could. She wanted to go downstairs and get a closer look. Just as she was tying her tennis shoes, there was a brisk knock at the door. Patrin came in carrying a breakfast tray and looking greatly improved after a good night's sleep.

"Best of mornings to you! I brought you a little breakfast. If you had slept any later it would be time for lunch!" He pulled a small table up to the window and started buttering toast.

"This is splendid!" he said. "We can watch all the Toymakers arrive and I won't have to stand at attention and greet each one. All this formality can be rather wearisome, don't you think?" Clio nodded and pointed to the elephant that was eating the oranges off of one of the trees along the drive.

"What's with the green elephant?"

"That is Peanuttle. He is the Friend of Durell Hooplighter, the Toymaker from Ballyfrey. He arrived early this morning with his apprentice Belwyn Bounce. Ballyfrey is known for balls and sporting kinds of toys. You'll be able to recognize Belwyn by her mouse Friend, Squink. That and she'll be the loudest person in the room." Patrin poured himself some tea and chatted on happily. "Except for the Spin twins from Yoyoton. They are very loud and very annoying. They do yo-yo's. Uncle Skye can't stand them, the twins, not yo-yos that is."

"Check out the awesome cookie car!" said Clio leaning out the window.

"That is Galinka Crisp and her apprentice Stiggur Mint. They're here all the way from Doughton. They're lots of fun. I think that you are going to like them!" Two short

figures in striped chef's uniforms hopped out of the Doughmobile. Patrin stood up on his chair to get a better view and exclaimed,

“Hopping Hobby Horses! The Toymakers from Machina on the Marsh, Travis Wrench and Ruchel Tinker have another new car. They make building toys and machinery. They are a pair!” He pointed to a metal bug clopping its way up the road. It had six hinged legs with big black boots that shuffled back and forth. A pudgy young man with white hair was driving the controls at the front while a dark haired woman in an olive jumpsuit was working on the wings of the Bug Car with a big wrench. As the machine lurched along she hung on to the side and tightened loose nuts and bolts. A horse drawn wagon came thundering past the slow moving Bug Car almost knocking it off the road. The woman with the wrench went swinging off wildly as the wings of the car flapped to recover. She regained her balance and waved good-naturedly at the brightly colored wagon.

“Oh good!” said Patrin. “That’s Roseleen and Tip from Piñatas Port with the decorations for the Toymaker’s Ball tonight. Its more of a reception than a real Ball but all the Toymakers will be there. Which reminds me before somebody else asks you first... Would you do me the honor of going with me as my partner?”

“Like a date?” asked Clio.

“Um, yes. If you don’t want to I’ll understand.” He filled her teacup and stirred it vigorously, spilling tea all over the tray.

“No, I guess it would be okay. Yeah, that would be cool.” Clio thought for a moment and fiddled with her spoon. “Do we have to dance and stuff? In front of people?”

“Only if you want to.” Patrin mopped up the spills and continued. “I have dancing shoes if you need them. They aren’t new but they know all the dances.”

“I’ll have to check with Miss Ashlyn but it sounds pretty fun.” Clio watched out the window as a young girl and boy started unloading boxes of decorations and party favors from the wagon. “Do you think that Mr. Skye will ask Miss Ashlyn?”

“If he gets back in time. ” Patrin replied. “He, Commander Hogar and Grandfather Wolfren took a regiment down to Blocksbury to take care of any clowns left making trouble. There was a lot of cleaning up to do. My Mum took Marina and Julian

back into the City to get ready for tomorrow but we have a free day! That is, at least until the Ball tonight.” A glint of metal flashed off in the distance.

“Look! Here comes Asenka Moss and Robin Fletcher. They traveled here all the way from Arrowsford on the Moor. They make all the shooting toys, arrows and things.” A huge dart, the size of a car crested over the forest and embedded in a tree with a loud thunk. A tall woman with blond hair pulled back from her tan face hopped out, followed by a lean hunting hound. A slender young man with long brown hair followed nimbly behind her. He gave a short whistle and a hawk soared down to perch on his wrist. They were dressed in drab green and brown tunics with soft boots and leggings. After shouldering small gray backpacks and quivers they made their way towards the house.

“Asenka’s rather competitive, even by Toymaker standards. Don’t get drawn into a shooting match with her. She’ll make sure that you lose. She’s been hunting Uncle Skye for a long time but I don’t think she’ll catch him,” said Patrin with a grin. “Fletcher is her apprentice but he plays fair. We were at the Royal Academy together. He just became a full apprentice a few months ago I hear. A bit quiet but a good sort once you get to know him.”

“I bet the girls are all over him,” Clio said as the handsome young man moved smoothly through the growing crowd of Toymakers. A coach pulled up and a group of teddy bears streamed out carrying suitcases.

“I think my sister likes him,” replied Patrin. “But I don’t know if my parents...”

“Hey! Who’s that?” Clio pointed to a dark skinned woman in orange robes with a long carved staff coming over the hill. A gray and black cheetah with spots shaped like puzzle pieces loped lazily beside her. The woman walked quickly and with purpose but was hard to follow as she flickered in and out through the trees.

“That’s Sarka the Puzzlemaker. Mook served his apprenticeship with her. She talks in riddles and is sometimes hard to understand. Most Toymakers have a township that sponsors them and that in turn they are responsible for, but she wanders from place to place. Uncle Skye trusts her judgement on things and told me once that she was one of the wisest of all the Toymakers. She’s considered odd because she rarely takes on an apprentice and walks alone.”

Two shiny racecars sped up the road. They kept trying to pass each other as they neared the front of the house. The two cars came to a screeching halt and two young Toymakers in neon orange and yellow race suits hopped out. Clio could hear them yelling over the bustle of the growing crowd.

“I was first! I won!”

“No! I was! And you almost pushed me off the road back there at South Turtleford!”

“I signaled! I can’t help it if you were too slow!” They took off their helmets and kept arguing until Lady Wolfren came out to separate them. One of the Toymakers was a brown haired girl that Clio remembered from the picture in the Toymakers’ Annual. Patrin said that they were the toy car builders from Trans Port and that their names were Brynna Cogsfry and her apprentice Jens Spanner. The apprentice was a short boy with dark hair that bowed to Lady Wolfren and then went back to arguing. They continued as a giant wheel rolled up and two identical men dressed in mustard colored suits jumped out looking a little dizzy.

“That’s Kiryl and Kirton Spin, the twins that I was telling you about. Don’t get trapped in a conversation with them, you’ll never get a word in edgewise! They are good with yo-yos and spinning toys like tops, just don’t talk to them unless you have an hour to spare.” Patrin laughed and finished his toast. There was a soft knock at the door and Kit came in.

“How are you two feeling this morning? Better I hope after a good night’s sleep. I see you’ve had some breakfast.”

“Good morning, Miss Ashlyn,” said Patrin as he politely stood up. “I was just pointing out the different Toymakers to Miss Clio. They’ve been arriving all morning.”

“I know, I’ve been talking with some of them downstairs. I hope I can remember all of their names at the party tonight.”

They all sat down and watched out the window as a puppeteer’s wagon decorated with carvings of snakes and faces wound its way up the drive. An angry looking woman with long curly dark hair and a gray haired man with a blue jay on his stooped shoulders got down.

“Those are the Puppeteers Zinon Bolli and Zella String. They hate each other but neither will give up being Puppetmaster so...” Patrin shrugged, “they’ve learned to work together.”

Wilber brought over a copy of the Toymakers’ Annual and they studied it until Kit and Clio could identify at least most of the Toymakers that would be at the party. As they were finishing up Mook came in wearing a dark purple Toymaker’s suit looking surprisingly respectable. He waved a big brass key at them and said,

“Skye asked me to take you to see the Toy Archives in his absence.”

“Where are Isabella and Punchello?” Kit asked.

“They just left with their father to meet with their people in the Royal City. And more’s the pity, they will not be back for the Toymaker’s Ball tonight.” He sighed dramatically and clutched his heart. “So we should flee our sorrows in the Archives, come, little miss,” he told Clio, “you are in for a rare treat!” They followed Mook through a series of corridors, up a flight of marble stairs and then down again until they came to small oak door. The door was no more than three feet high and Mook knelt down to open a huge padlock with the key. A small brass plate that needed polishing read “Toy Archives.” An even smaller sign said “Please put things back where you found them. Do not take toys from the room. Copies may be obtained from the Lady of the House. Please have fun.”

Clio crawled through the little door and stood up in a vast room. It was nothing like she had expected. It was drab and a little cold with a high vaulted ceiling made out of hundreds of large squares of glass. The floor was cement painted a dingy brick color. Rows of old wooden filing cases lined the walls. Each drawer had a neat little metal label with unfamiliar names. A few ancient tables and chairs were scattered around the huge empty room. There wasn’t a toy in sight.

Chapter 39

“This is it?” asked Clio, clearly disappointed. The huge room felt more like an abandoned factory than the world’s greatest collection of toys. Wilber fluttered around the room and after looking out of the arched windows, settled on a table and rolled over on his back to watch the clouds go by. Patrin rushed over to a drawer and tugged it open. He took out a small maple box with a little black cathead embossed on the top and gold lettering. He slammed the drawer shut and ran back to one of the tables.

“There is a box here for almost every Toymaker for the five hundred years. This one is Grandmother Wolfren’s! She was the Royal Toymaker a long time ago when Uncle Skye and my Mum were children. It’s impossible to pick a favorite but hers is one of the best!” He dumped some of the contents of the little box onto the table and Clio and Kit watched in wonder as tiny toys scattered like grains of rice and grew to full size. There were delicate dolls and gilded carousels, shiny cars and mythical animals. They jumbled across the long table covering every inch of space. Patrin and Clio started inspecting the toys right away with Patrin setting up a funny Elf Tumbler toy that flipped little men across a ladder. Kit walked over to one of the big file cabinets and looked in the drawer. There in neat little rows were dozens more wooden boxes. Each box had a maker’s mark carved or painted on the top. Most of the boxes were dark wood but occasionally a box would be made of lighter colored wood like maple or ash.

“The lighter boxes are the Royal Toymaker archives. The darker boxes are for other Toymakers,” Mook told her. “So what is your pleasure? Dolls? Puzzles? Magic Lanterns perhaps?”

“I don’t even know where to begin. Do these boxes actually go back for five hundred years?”

“Some even farther than that. Lady Wolfren put together a whole team of people to catalog the contents and it took years. Some of the toys were fantastic! Others were very dull. Now here is one you might like.” Mook slid open a drawer and took out an older looking box with a small five petaled flower inlaid in the top. He used a pair of tweezers to take out a tiny little house.

“This is a copy of a house made by Themis Fate. She was one of the greatest of all the Toymakers. She made this for a visiting delegation of Brownies for the Queen’s coronation fifty years ago.” Kit watched as the little house no larger than a pea grew to over five feet tall, filling one of the tables. Ornate spires and high-pitched roofs covered the castle. The windowpanes were leaded like dragonfly wings and ornate metalwork formed swirling balconies and walkways between the turrets. Mook opened up an entire side of the house, just like a regular dollhouse, so Kit could examine the inside. The furniture seemed to have been crafted from flowers. Lady’s slipper petals formed chairs and soft moss made up the carpets. Mushroom tables were set with acorn bowls and tiny leaf napkins. Pansy blankets covered the little wood beds that flowed up from the floor as if they had been grown there. The main staircase was made of antique brass with railings that gave the appearance of woven pine needles. Miniscule pinecones the size of pinto beans dotted the posts. Kit was enchanted as she carefully studied each room. She was inspecting a dining room complete with floors set in a silver fish scale pattern when Skye came through the Archive door. He was dressed in his traditional white Toymaker’s suit and looked as if he had just showered and changed into a clean shirt. Spark followed close behind and after sailing around the room a few times perched contentedly on a crossbeam by one of the windows.

“How are you enjoying the Archives so far?” he asked Kit cordially.

“We haven’t been here very long but so far it is mind boggling. Have you seen this house?”

“Yes, it is one of my favorites, I built a version of it down in Oak Haven to stay in when I have to travel down in the southern cities.” Skye’s eyes lit up. “Look, there are secret passageways here, here and here that connect every floor to the garden.” His long fingers pressed delicate little buttons that opened doors in the paneling. “The library even has books written in Brownie.” Skye left Kit to examine the pictures in a tiny book and went to see Clio who was looking into a kaleidoscope that showed wonderful undersea creatures swimming through a sea of blues and greens.

“May I have a word with you, miss?” Skye asked.

“Yeah, sure,” she replied. They walked over to a row of file cabinets away from the others. Skye set Clio on top of one so that she would be at eye level with him. He

pulled a pencil and a creased piece of paper out of his inside jacket pocket then leaned on the cabinet so she could see the list.

“Number one, a new job.” He read her scrawly handwriting in a soft voice so that the others wouldn’t hear, “I am the Royal Toymaker to Her Majesty, Queen Iren III, and as such am entitled to all the benefits and privileges that it entails. The job does involve a bit of traveling and a certain number of public appearances but all in all I think that I’m better suited to it than working in the kitchen in Blocksbury. Does this line of employment meet with your approval?” Clio grinned and nodded.

“Number two, a house, preferably with a barn. Actually I have several residences in addition to the apartments in the Royal Palace assigned to Royal Toymaker. There is Griffinsgate, my weekend house which has a very nice barn, a rather large treehouse up in Beargarden and, as I was just telling Miss Ashlyn, a home in Oakhaven. Here is a list of the major holdings.” He handed Clio a heavy piece of white stationery with a small gold griffin embossed up at the top. In Skye’s meticulous handwriting were written the names of over a dozen different addresses.

“Hey, this one’s close to my house, and here’s one in France,” Clio pointed out.

“Yes, I like to keep a few houses in the Greylands as landing points. I do travel there from time to time to do research and to check on the Busby Toy Company which falls under my jurisdiction,” Skye explained. “So, with your approval I will cross this off the list.” He made a little checkmark by the words “a house” and pointed to the next item.

“Number Three, “A haircut”, which as you see I have done. I’m not sure if it has improved my appearance as you predicted, but hopefully it satisfies this requirement.”

“Trust me, you look a lot better. Not so wild, you know, more neat,” Clio assured him.

“And finally I took the liberty of adding an additional item.” Skye pointed with his pencil, “Number four, learn to ride a bicycle’. Now this may take a little more time. I did go out very early this morning and attempted to learn to ride a bicycle on a back road behind the marshmallow fields. I must say that it was damaging to my ego and my sense of dignity but I do think with practice that I might learn to enjoy it. It certainly seemed to amuse Spark. I thought that she was going to cough up a fireball from laughing so hard.”

“Did you fall off?” asked Clio remembering the first time she had tried to ride a bike without training wheels.

“Only the first five times or so. After a while it got easier. I did get going quite fast,” Skye enthused. “I was thinking that it might be interesting to try one of those bicycles that you Greylanders ride on dirt!” He checked off the last item and said with a shy half smile, “So, Miss Clio, with your permission I would like to ask Miss Ashlyn to the Toymaker’s Ball tonight.”

Before Clio could answer Kit came over and asked, “What are you two finding so interesting over here?” They both replied “Nothing!” and stuffed the pieces of paper in their pockets. Clio whispered something in Skye’s ear and he turned a little red. He helped her hop down from the filing cabinet and she ran off to help Patrin and Wilber put together a toy labeled “The Mystery Puppet Theatre”.

“What was that all about?” Kit asked.

“Miss Clio and I were just talking about the Toymaker’s Ball. I would like to request the privilege of escorting you tonight, that is, if you wish it.”

“I can think of nothing that would please me more,” Kit replied.

“Ah, well, that’s settled,” Skye said, looking very relieved. “You’ll be asked to accompany me in the Children’s Dance. It’s not hard. I can show it to you now if you like.” Kit nodded and Skye pulled an ornate box from one of the storage cabinets. He wound it up and opened the lid. Music filled the room as several gold discs spun around and dozens of little silver gnomes with tiny hammers stuck harp strings to play a lively tune. Kit picked up the simple dance steps quickly and they practiced several times until Kit was sure that she knew them. Then they waltzed around the floor just for fun and chatted about nothing for a long while, just enjoying being together as if they were the only two people in the world.

Patrin, Clio and Mook were making a tremendous racket working the mechanisms of the puppet theatre. Mook and Patrin were teaching Clio how to work the part of the sea angels that rescue a ship lost in a storm. The boat, mechanical waves and puppet characters were all controlled from wooden keyboards in the front of the stage. The whole contraption was very old and both Patrin and Mook seemed very familiar with it.

“Are the sea angels supposed to come in before or after my big speech?” asked Patrin. He was playing the part of Pinkael the Thief who had just stolen a magic goat with gold bells on its horns. Mook worked the controls for the goat, the ship and the waves and his fingers moved quickly over the buttons that made the parts move.

“It doesn’t matter, “ he said as he pulled a lever that moved a rain cloud across the stage. “It’s a toy. It can be whatever you want it to be.” Clio figured out a way to make the sea angels dance in a conga line. They all dissolved into fits of giggles as the Magic Goat butted the dancers overboard ending the performance. The afternoon flew by too fast and before Clio knew it was time to clean up the toys and get ready for the party.

Chapter 40

“I seem to be a little nervous, how about you?” said Patrin as he and Clio waited to be announced in a long line of Toymakers at the top of the staircase. Several hundred people had already gone down the stairs to the ballroom where an orchestra of bears was playing. Smells of good things to eat from the banquet tables wafted up to where they were standing. Clio felt her stomach rumble. Wilber nibbled on the lilac garland that wrapped around the marble banister.

“Yeah. Nothing like having everybody in the whole world staring at you. How come we have to go at the end of the line?” Clio tugged at the tight waist of her ball gown and hoped that she didn’t step on it on the way down. Mrs. Hogar and Patrin’s mother, brother and sister had already gone downstairs a half an hour before.

“Tradition. The Royal Toymaker and the apprentices are always the last to be presented. I guess it gives everybody else a chance to relax before all the handshaking starts.” Patrin pulled at the high collar of his red Toymaker uniform. It was more formal than the suits that Clio had seen him wearing before, with gold buttons and braid on the cuffs. Even his highly polished boots had three gold buttons on the each side.

“I feel like a toy soldier,” Patrin grouched. “I made the neck too tight. I think that I may have grown since last time I had to wear this suit.”

“You are taller.” Skye came up behind them and adjusted Patrin’s collar. The fabric stretched in his fingers and looked more comfortable. Skye wore a dress uniform similar to Patrin’s only in white with silver buttons. Kit was wearing a pale blue gown that glittered like the ocean in sunlight. The soft thin fabric swirled around her feet. Her dark hair was intertwined with long strands of tiny beaded flowers that sparkled as she moved. Blue and Spark trotted close behind looking brushed and tidy.

“Miss Ashlyn, you look like a fairy princess!” Clio told her.

“I have seen Fairie princesses and you two look far more beautiful,” Mook hurried to join them and was trying to button his cuffs as he walked. His uniform was a dark plum color with little gold cats on the buttons. Chimka fussed and chattered as he buttoned up his own matching jacket. The line moved along and Mook was announced.

“Sir Koshka Mookael the Younger, Game Master to Her Majesty, Queen Iren III,” announced an official looking man with a long gold cane. Mook got the last button fixed and set off down toward the ballroom with Chimka by his side. The orchestra struck up a march and all talking ceased.

“We’re next,” said Patrin and put Clio’s hand on his arm.

“Finally!” Clio whispered back and took a deep breath.

“His Royal Highness, Arkus Patrin Orion, Prince of the Silver Isles and Apprentice to the Royal Toymaker and Miss Clio Halina of the Greylands, Toymaker’s Apprentice,” the man read from the list. A rush of whispers rippled through the crowd as Clio’s name was read. They made it to the bottom of the stairs without tripping and turned to wait for the last names to be called. After a pause the musicians began playing a stately version of the music box song that they had heard earlier in the Toy Archives.

“Sir Wolfren Skye, The Royal Toymaker to Her Majesty, Queen Iren III and Miss Kit Ashlyn of the Greylands, Toymaker.” They came down the big staircase slowly and Clio found it hard to believe that Kit and Skye were the same friends that she knew from Quad Hall and not magical beings. Skye was serious and solemn with Kit on his arm. If Kit was anything but calm and serene she did not show it. Blue and Spark followed looking regal. When they reached the bottom of the stairs Skye bowed to the audience.

“Welcome, Toymakers, Gentlefolk, Friends and most importantly Children. It is an honor to be here with you and good to be home. I hope you enjoy the company here tonight.” Clio felt the warmth of his words fill her with good feelings and in an instant everyone was talking and laughing and shaking hands. Patrin introduced her to an endless line of faces before pulling her through the crowd to get something to eat.

Kit was glad that they had studied the pictures of all the Toymakers earlier in the day as it made it easier to make conversation with the people to whom Skye introduced her. She immediately liked Misha and Sorcha Wintar, the dollhouse makers from Littleton. They were a rosy cheeked older couple. Misha reminded her of Santa Claus and Sorcha greeted Skye in Catlander before shaking Kit’s hand warmly.

Skye’s good humor melted away when he introduced her to Quirin Rook and Elspet Knight from Chessingshire. Rook’s handshake was frosty cold as he greeted Kit.

“You’re a Toymaker from the Greylands?” the Chess Master asked. His sharp blue eyes looked her up and down. “This is unusual.”

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone,” replied Kit with a hint of mischief in her voice, “I’m trying to blend in.”

Elspet Knight, an attractive young woman with ivory white hair piled intricately on top of her head, attached herself intimately onto Skye’s arm.

“It’s so good to see you again, Skye. I’m looking forward to you entertaining me with stories about all of your adventures.”

“There is nothing really to tell. I would like, however, to see your report as to why production has dropped off in the last few quarters in Chessingshire. I’m sure you have a perfectly good explanation for the delays,” he said curtly. The lids lowered halfway over Elspet’s pale gray eyes as she calculated her next move. Skye extracted himself from her grip, made a slight bow and then smiled. “But this isn’t a time to talk about business, this is a party. You will excuse us.”

Skye took Kit’s arm and introduced her to a middle aged couple with three small children clinging to them.

“Hello and look at you!” he said cheerfully. “Kit, here are two of my dearest friends, Keddy and Sosanna Furpaughs. Congratulations, Sosanna, on making Apprentice and on the new addition to your family,” he told the woman wearing a bright blue Toymaker’s suit. She held a baby that wiggled energetically in her arms.

“Thank you sir, we are keeping busy,” she replied.

“And Master Arthur, you might remember me,” Skye said shaking the hand of the oldest boy, who was about eight, then greeted the little girl. “And Miss Mielanie, haven’t seen you since you were in doll clothes. Are you enjoying the party? How do you like having a little brother now?” He knelt down and chatted for a while with the children leaving Kit to talk with the elder Furpaughs.

“So you live in Beargarden?” asked Kit.

“Yes,” replied Sosanna as she passed their youngest child to Skye. The Toymaker held the infant with delight.

“I read an article on your city when I was in Blocksbury,” Kit continued. “Do you really make over five hundred different kinds of Teddy Bears?”

“Probably closer to a thousand,” replied Keddy with obvious pride. “You will have to come and visit us someday. We’d love to show you the Bear Works.”

“I’d like that, but I have to leave soon,” Kit said. The thought filled her with an ache of sadness but she pushed it out of her mind.

“I pronounce this newest addition to your family a fine healthy specimen,” Skye said handing the squirmy infant back to Keddy. “He says that he’s cutting a tooth. Here, try this.” He produced from his pocket an ice blue teething ring and gave it to the drooling baby.

Skye introduced Kit to several more Toymakers, broke up an argument between Brynna Cogsfry and Jens Spanner dealing with airplane ground speed and rescued Mook from a conversation about yo-yo string with the Spin twins by sending them off to find an obscure book title in the library. Skye and Kit were complimenting Roseleen and Tip Regalo from Piñatas Port on the festive party decorations when Lady Wolfren came up to them.

“The children are ready,” she told them, her green eyes shining with happiness at having her son back home again.

“Will you honor me with your hand for this dance?” Skye asked Kit.

“Yes, please. I hope I remember the steps.” She tried to remember why she thought this would be fun earlier in the day.

“You, me and about thirty very nervous small children,” Skye confided. “Don’t worry, we’ll do fine.”

They took their places and waited for the music to begin. The bears raised their instruments and before Kit knew what was happening they were moving between two long rows of children. They wove in and out, down the middle and back again. Everyone, for the most part, remembered where to go, a few of the littlest dancers took quite awhile to walk down to the end and return to their places. But it was all merry and over too soon. When the song ended everyone applauded and the dancers bowed. The bear band started up another fiery tune and before long the whole room was filled with people dancing, children and grown-ups alike. Much to Kit’s amusement half the young women in the room were clustered around Mook hoping for a chance to dance with him and he looked very contented.

Finally Kit and Skye escaped to the cool air of the garden. Hundreds of tiny lanterns lined the brick walkways; their candles flickering like stars along the paths. Skye grabbed a pair of steaming cups from a tray that Grimmel the cat was carrying and gave one to Kit.

“This smells lovely. What is it?” Kit asked cradling the warm cup in her hands as they walked along.

“Ollalieberry wine. My father makes it here on the estate.” They wove their way down the path until they found a bench by one of the fountains in the herb garden.

“Are you happy to finally be going home?” Skye asked.

“Not really. I thought that I would be but now it just seems rather, well, gray.”

“I was wondering if it might be possible to visit you from time to time. I promise not be a bother.”

“And why do you think that I might find you to be a bother?” Skye didn’t answer so Kit asked, “In the Toy Archives, what was it that Clio told you that rattled you so?”

“She said, ‘Don’t blow it! She’s a hottie,’” Skye confessed with a smile. “I find her a little difficult to understand sometimes. What exactly does that mean?”

“I think it means that she approves of you now.”

“And what about you, Kit Ashlyn?”

“There was never a time when I didn’t approve of you,” Kit said honestly. Skye stood up suddenly and looked back towards the ballroom. Two heads ducked down behind a high shrub at the edge of the garden.

“Arkus Patrin Orion! You and Miss Clio need to find something else to do!” Skye said in a stern voice. “Something that doesn’t involve eavesdropping.”

“Dang! He saw us! We are so busted.” Clio’s whisper carried across the lawn. Wilber’s head hovered up and dropped again.

“Make sure the dragon goes with you. And don’t think I won’t know!” Skye threatened. The shrubs rustled and then the herb garden became quiet again except for the sound of water trickling into the fountain’s catch basin.

“The Toymakers from Chessingshire didn’t seem too happy to have you back,” Kit said.

“They’re always calculating something. I wish that they’d spend more of their energy on the affairs of their township. Production is way down and that means less income for the people. I’ll have to make a long trip to inspect production of all the major cities in addition to overseeing the rebuilding of Blocksbury.”

“Was the damage from the clowns very bad?”

“It was nothing compared to the years of neglect due to bad management. There’s a lot of work to do.”

“Poor you,” Kit laughed and took his hand.

“I told you once that I was perfectly capable of manufacturing enough pity of my own.”

“That’s not pity, that is the sound of my caring for you.” She raised his hand to her lips and kissed his palm.

“Marry me, Kit,” Skye said suddenly. “I can offer you a lot of things that I know you don’t care about... like wealth and fame. And I can’t offer you an ordinary, simple life, not that I think that anything ordinary would suit you. My own life doesn’t even belong to me. I’ve had a long time to think about that. I’ve enough responsibilities for ten lifetimes, but with you...” his voice trailed off and he was afraid to look at her.

“I love you too, you know,” Kit answered. “And I like you, I mean, I enjoy your company. I like just being with you. I don’t know what I’m going to tell my parents. I don’t know where we’re going to live, what my job will be. I’m babbling aren’t I?” She hesitated as he put his arm around her waist. “The whole idea is terrifying and wonderful. But yes, it pleases me.”

“What are they doing now?” Clio asked Patrin. They were lying flat on an upstairs balcony with a telescope spying on Kit and Skye.

“Nothing! They’re just talking. No wait, they’re standing up!”

“Let me see that.” Clio took the telescope and watched for a minute. “Whoa! They’re kissing.” Wilber grabbed the telescope away from her and threw it in a nearby planter.

“Hey!” said Clio, just as Spark the Griffin soared down and perched on the railing. She glared at them with her tail lashing angrily back and forth. Wilber hid his eyes in Clio’s shoulder.

“We were just, um, resting,” said Patrin. “And now we are very refreshed and we are going back inside.”

“Yes, that is what we’re doing,” echoed Clio, hoping she sounded convincing. Spark ruffled her wings and steam rose up in the night air. She hissed at them as they scurried back in to join the dance. She snorted a noise that almost sounded like laughing and then went in to take a nap by the fire.

Chapter 41

“Many happy returns, your Majesty. And best regards from my parents as well,” Skye said amiably, taking his hat off. “Working on your birthday?”

Queen Iren sat behind an ornate gold and purple writing desk with the royal seal of two flying lions carved into the front. Papers and folders were arranged in neat piles as she attached her signature to a long legal document.

“Don’t stand there like a schoolboy, sit down. And don’t lecture me, have you ever not worked on your birthday?”

“One year I did have the flu,” he laughed, sinking into a chair and spinning his hat in his hands.

“And you probably worked anyway. How about taking a little holiday after all this infernal fuss is over? Birthdays, Bah! I am too old for such nonsense.” Her grey eyes twinkled as she stamped the Royal seal approving the rebuilding of Blocksbury.

“A bit of time off, ma’am, is one of the reasons for my visit. I’ve decided to take a wife, and have come to ask your permission to marry.” The Queen put down her pen and smiled at him.

“This is excellent news! Though you don’t need my permission, Sir Skye.”

“Actually in this case I do. I would like to marry Kit Ashlyn, the Greylander.”

The Queen’s expression changed instantly from happy to stern.

“Absolutely not! A Greylander! There are precious few Toymakers these days as it is without you sullyng the bloodlines with some inferior foreign woman. There are many fine choices right here at home.” She punctuated her last few words by tapping her pen on the desk. “I would prefer that you marry Asenka Moss from Arrowsford on the Moor. I believe she fancies you. Or what about that Knight woman from Chessingshire? She looks healthy enough.”

“They don’t interest me in the least,” Skye replied, swallowing his anger. He had known the Queen long enough to be aware that she needed to be approached very carefully. He took a deep breath before saying, “When have I ever asked you for anything for myself? All my life I have served you faithfully, my Queen, the Royal family and

your subjects. I have finally found a woman that I want to spend my life with. One that is..." he searched for the right word, "remarkable. I would never be bored."

"It is an impossibility. I forbid it! No Royal Toymaker has ever married a Greylander, not for hundreds of years!" the Queen snapped.

"What about Elined the Inventor? Legend has it that she married a Greylander. I don't want to go against your wishes, your Majesty, but I feel I should be free to choose my own life."

"Then perhaps you should cease to be the Royal Toymaker."

Skye rose to his feet and put his white hat and scarf on her desk. The Queen instantly regretted her words,

"I would ask you to reconsider. The kingdom has fallen into a sorry state of affairs in your absence. Your country needs you, Sir Skye."

"And I need her!" he shot back angrily. The Queen tried a more diplomatic approach.

"Your resignation will throw the Toymakers Guild in to a struggle for power that will devastate our trade agreements, our economy, the health of our children. Would you let that happen?"

Skye slowly picked up his hat and scarf. His face was covered in sadness as he placed the long scarf over his shoulders.

"No, you know I would not. I will abide by your decision, ma'am. But not because I care about the power and the title, but because she would be ashamed of me if I let people suffer when I could do something to stop it."

"Sir Wolfren Skye," said the Queen, using his formal title, "does being the Royal Toymaker mean so little to you?" He thought for a moment and shook his head.

"No, ma'am, it is because she means so much." He bowed slightly and turned to go. "If you will excuse me, your Majesty, I have to attend to the preparations for tonight's festivities."

The Queen sat back down at her desk and started writing again. A knock came at the door and she barked a terse "Enter." Mrs. Hogar came in carrying a sheath of papers.

“Here is my preliminary Blocksbury report, your Majesty,” she said laying the thick folder on the desk.

“Thank you, Commander. That will be all.” The Queen didn’t even look up from her paperwork.

“I saw a very unhappy looking Royal Toymaker in the hallway.” Mrs. Hogar smelled the fragrant bouquet of purple roses in a sterling silver vase on the Queen’s desk and started rearranging the blossoms.

“Spare me the lecture today, Hogar. I’m too old for that,” Queen Iren fussed.

“Old? What do you know about old?” Mrs. Hogar cackled. “If you live to be half as old as I was on the day you were born then you might be able to say something about being old. I promised your grandmother, bless her sweet memory, that I would keep an eye on you, Little Irenka. And so I shall, as long as I have breath. Now what could possibly spoil such a day for Sir Skye?”

“It was ridiculous! He actually asked to marry a Greylander! Of course I said no, the very idea!”

“And exactly what is it about Miss Ashlyn that you find to be so offensive? Her manners? Her looks? I was unaware that you had spent any time with her at all.”

“I don’t need to meet her. Greylanders are barbarians. It is a passing fancy I assure you. He needs to be protected from his own foolishness. The woman is clearly after Sir Skye for his wealth and position.”

“Is she now?” Mrs. Hogar asked as she rearranged a few more of the flowers.

“And you know this for sure?”

“Are you questioning my decision?” The Queen frowned at Mrs. Hogar.

“Of course I am. If I don’t, who will?”

“That is quite enough, Commander! Now go and find Sir Mookael for me. I want those Greylanders out of the country today!”

Queen Iren watched the little woman bow and disappear from the room. She then tried to refocus on the document in front of her. She had read the same paragraph for the fourth time when the guard opened the door and announced Sir Koshka Mookael the Younger, Game Master to Her Majesty the Queen.

Mook stood nervously before her. He had been reprimanded by her more than once in the past and even though he couldn't think of anything he had done wrong lately he was anxious for the meeting to be over as soon as possible.

"It is good to have you back, Sir Mookael," she said smiling at him.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. And best wishes for the happiest of birthdays," he replied.

"You are acquainted the Greylanders, are you not? I hear you spent some time with them in Blocksbury."

"Yes, ma'am. 'Twas my privilege, ma'am."

"What do you think of the woman?" the Queen asked.

"Kit Ashlyn?" Mook's eyes shown. "She is a wonder! She's a grand Toymaker and a fine lady. I would envy Skye if he were not my friend, ma'am, if you get my meaning."

"I wouldn't envy him too much, I want you to take the Greylanders back to... to where ever it is that they came from... immediately."

"Today? Before the party?" Mook was incredulous and forgot his fear for a moment. "But..."

Before he could protest further the Queen was on her feet.

"Why is it that everyone is questioning me this morning? I believe that is what I just said. It shouldn't be too hard! Get a Flying Car from the Royal Storage and take them back to the Greylands where they belong. Now, good day! I am very busy." She dismissed Mook and went back to her paperwork.

About twenty minutes later, Queen Iren was halfway through reading Commander Hogar's report on Blocksbury. She was cursing Greylanders, Toymakers and one Miss Ashlyn in particular. After she read Kit's name in the report for the twelfth time she tossed the folder across her desk, knocking the silver vase of roses onto the carpet. It bounced and rolled under the chair, spilling water and petals everywhere. The Queen found a towel and was cleaning up the mess on the floor when she heard a young voice on the balcony outside.

"Darn it! I think I'm stuck. Down a little lower." A big bunch of balloons appeared with a dark haired girl attached to them. The girl motioned with her hand to

someone below. A rope pulled her down a few feet and she unhooked the balloons from her belt and stepped inside. A flying dragon buzzed in the air closely behind her. The girl saw the Queen down on the floor mopping up water and said,

“Hi! Sorry to bother you. I need to talk to the Queen. Is she here? I got to tell her something. It’s super important.”

“And who might you be? And what are you doing here?” asked the Queen getting up and wiping her hands on the towel.

“I’m Clio Halina and this is Wilber. I’ve got to talk to her. She’s made a big mistake, I mean really big! She’s got it all wrong.” Wilber nodded and stretched his paws wide to show how big Clio meant.

“Really?” The Queen raised an eyebrow at the young intruder. “And what is it that is so important that you had to fly up to the window? You might have broken your neck!”

“It’s about Mister Skye, he’s okay. I mean it’s not like I’m saying the Queen is stupid or anything, I made the same mistake. I didn’t think that he was good enough to marry her either but he’s cleaned up real good and Miss Ashlyn really likes him, so you see he’s cool.”

“So you want to tell the Queen that you think that her Royal Toymaker is good enough to marry a Greylander?” asked the Queen with amusement.

“Yeah! I just got to tell her that he’s really a nice person. He has houses and a job and he got a haircut all for her. Not that Miss Ashlyn cares about that kind of stuff, I mean she liked him before he got famous but I could see how somebody that didn’t know him might make that mistake.” Clio added in a confidential whisper, “He’s even learning how to ride a bike!”

“What if I told you that it was because the Queen didn’t want him marrying a Greylander?”

“Really? That bites! I mean Patrin said that she was scary but he never said that she was dumb enough to think up something that lame.”

“Is that what he said? What if I told you that I am the Queen?” The elderly monarch put the towel down and gave her a quizzical look. Clio pondered this for a moment. She studied the Queen’s plain grey dress and laughed,

“No way! You’re kidding right? If you’re a Queen then why aren’t you wearing a crown and robes or something?”

“The crown is just for special occasions,” she replied. “Besides it’s heavy and gives me a headache.”

Clio looked skeptical.

“So how come you don’t like Miss Ashlyn? It’s not like she’s a bad person or anything.”

“All day long I have had a steady stream of people in here telling how wonderful she is. Guards!” The door instantly swung open and two soldiers wearing purple and gold uniforms came in, their shiny boots clicking sharply on the marble floor.

“Find the Greylander, Kit Ashlyn and bring her here,” ordered the Queen.

“Is she in trouble?” Clio asked nervously. “I didn’t get her in trouble did I?”

“Tell her the Queen requests the pleasure of her company.” Queen Iren informed the guards. “Is that better?” she asked Clio as the guards marched off to fetch Kit.

“I have so blown this,” Clio said, almost in tears. “I’m really sorry, honest! You can put me in jail now I guess.” Wilber hung his head and held his paws out for handcuffs.

“Bah! No one is going to jail. One of the only nice things about being Queen is being able to decide about those kinds of things. Does Patrin really find me frightening?”

“Um, yeah. And he says not to eat any of the little caramels that you give people because they gum up your teeth and then you’ll get asked some big, long question and have to mumble.” Clio told her. At this revelation the Queen stifled a laugh.

“So he is wise to that trick? Don’t worry,” she told Clio confidentially, “I only use that one on diplomats that bore me... and little dragons that are nosy.” She threw a sweet to Wilber who was poking around the papers on her desk. After chewing on it for a moment he started pulling on his snout with both paws.

“This report says that you found Sir Skye and Sir Mookael working in the Blocksbury Kitchen of all places.”

“Yeah, they were real grungy.”

“I take it that means ‘in a bad way.’ It also says that your Miss Ashlyn was the one who was able to unerase Sir Skye.” The Queen flipped through the report.

“Who could have known that would happen? I guess they knew each other in school or something. They figured out how to get rid of the creepy clowns too. They read every book in the library I think, stacks and stacks of them.”

“That is admirable,” the Queen observed. The doors to the room flew open and two tall palace guards escorted Kit in. Her back was straight and her face was pale and serious. She seemed surprised to see Clio and merely nodded at them when Wilber gave her a small wave.

“And you must be the Greylander that every one insists on telling me about.” said the Queen after greeting Kit. “I’ll have you know, young lady, that you have ruined my entire morning.”

“I’m sorry.” Kit replied as she sized up the older woman. She wanted to point out that the Queen had just ruined her entire life but bit back the words. Kit had half expected a giant serpent-like creature instead of the stately grey-haired woman that was quizzing her. But she knew from her walks with Mrs. Hogar that the Queen was a powerful ruler who was shrewd as well as proud.

“And just why should I let you marry a Royal Toymaker?” the Queen asked.

“I don’t want to marry a Royal Toymaker. I want to marry Skye, I don’t care what he does.” Kit didn’t notice that sparks were flying off of her hair and popping around her.

“Sir Skye needs to meet someone of his own social standing.” The Queen said coldly.

“Hey! That is so not fair!” cried Clio. Wilber’s nose scrunched up and an angry puff of steam came out of his ears.

“Clio! Please!” Kit’s voice was firm. “Now go pack your things and say your good-byes. Mook will be taking us home in half an hour.” Clio gave Queen Iren a pleading look, grabbed Wilber and ran from the room.

“Your apprentice spoke most highly of you,” the Queen said as soon as Clio had gone. “She has an unique way of expressing herself but you seem to have inspired a unusual amount of loyalty in her.”

“She’s been remarkably resilient these last few weeks. I only wish that I’d been able to get her home sooner. I know that she misses her parents. May I go?”

“Aren’t you going to ask me to change my mind?”

“No, I hadn’t planned on it.”

“So you are too proud to beg?”

“No...I’m not too proud.” Kit said after a moment. “It’s just that I can’t think of anything that I could say that would alter your opinion of me. I wish that I could.”

The Queen studied Kit carefully. This Greylander was nothing like she had expected. Greylanders wore animal skins and were vulgar, silly creatures, shrill and always grasping for material things. Yet this woman appeared almost normal.

Kit waited stoically as the Queen walked around her, watching and thinking. After a few minutes the Monarch said,

“Why don’t you ask Sir Skye to defy me and marry you without my permission? He is wealthy enough. He could retire to an idle life.”

“How could I ask him to do that?” Kit’s dark eyes blazed and a shower of blue sparks flew off of her hair. “I don’t completely understand it but what he does here is too important. There were children in Blocksbury living horrible, wretched lives! To just walk away from all that unhappiness when he can change it, is that what you think that I want for him? It just wouldn’t be right.” After this outburst Kit stared at the carpet shaking. She forced herself to meet the Queen’s gaze and was startled to see an odd look of amusement on the monarch’s face.

“Mind your tongue, girl!” the Queen said with a chuckle. “You know Sir Skye has a temper too. What a pair you would make. The idea!” Kit looked down at her hands. They were covered in the same blue glow that Skye’s skin had in the Grotto before they had slid down into the Big Tent. She brushed her palms together and streaks of blue light trailed off into the air.

“What is this?” she asked.

“That is called Flash, Toymakers get it when they feel strongly about something... or someone. It will go away if you try and calm yourself. Have a seat and drink this.” The Queen poured her a glass of water from the carafe on her desk, then picked up Mrs. Hogar’s report. “Hogar said that you had the gift but I thought that she was just being kind. I should know better than to doubt her opinion.”

“Skye said it was the suit,” Kit said as she tapped her fingertips together and watched the sparks fly off and float slowly to the ground.

“He was lying,” the Queen replied with a sniff. “He probably didn’t want to alarm you.” She read some more of Mrs. Hogar’s report, “It says here that you have a Friend.”

“Hmm? Yes, Blue. He’s a flying unicorn.” Kit felt a little lightheaded as her anger melted away to fatigue.

“Young lady, it appears that I may have made my decision prematurely.” Kit looked up at her warily from where she was sitting and the Queen continued.

“I had assumed that you were only interested in Sir Skye because of his position in court. I’ve been the ruler of this kingdom long enough to know two things. It’s an exceptional day when so many people brave my wrath to disagree with me. And secondly, you were both willing to give each other up for the good of my people. That kind of devotion does not present itself often enough. I only hope that you’ll make each other happy and may your children inherit enough of your fire to make your lives interesting.”

Chapter 42

Clio sat with Wilber's head in her lap and her duffel bag between her feet. She was packed and ready to go. Her stomach felt like she had swallowed a stone. Patrin sat slumped over next to her with his elbows on his knees at the edge of the Royal amphitheater. Clio normally would have been marveling at the massive columns towering above them with their age stained carvings of flowers and vines. But now as she studied a row of marble statues depicting a dance of wild maidens playing trumpets and tambourines she only felt old and empty. The only thing that broke the silence was the occasional splash of koi fish in the nearby lagoon and the steady pounding of Skye's hammer as he decorated the raised pavilion that made up the Queen's Box. Spark flew around each pillar with heavy garlands of gold and silver laurel leaves as Skye fixed them in place. The ornate metal swags looked crumpled and tawdry in the bright afternoon sun. They finished the pavilion and started working on the stage; moving at a solemn steady pace as if they were preparing for a funeral.

Mook hopped out of a yellow minibus with a large wind-up key on the back. He walked over to wait with the others for Kit.

"Perhaps if I explained this to my Dad and then he could talk to her. But he's not back from the Greylands yet," Patrin offered as they talked about Clio's meeting with the Queen.

"She seemed pretty angry. I just hope that I didn't make things worse." Clio said. "Take good care of Wilber for me." Wilber gave a forlorn honk at the mention of his name and wagged his tail sadly. Mrs. Hogar appeared noiselessly from behind a column to join them.

"Mrs. Hogar, can't you do something?" Patrin asked.

"Try to influence her Majesty's decisions? I'm surprised that you would even suggest of such a thing," she said. "Just remember not to worry about things that may or may not happen. The game is not over till the end." They watched as Kit headed toward the ancient stage. She clutched a thick piece of paper embossed with the royal seal in her hand as she walked quickly through endless rows of stone benches that made up the

amphitheater. Skye dropped the hammer that he was using as he stood up to greet her. His face was filled with sorrow as he watched her make her way toward him.

Clio stood up to join them but Mook stopped her and said.

“Let them say their farewells in private, little love.”

They watched as Skye took the document from Kit’s hand and stared at it for a long time. Then he swooped Kit up in his arms and buried his face in her neck. The sound of their laughter echoed across the open theatre.

“Did I just miss something here?” asked Clio.

“She changed her mind. Queens are allowed to do that you know,” said Mrs. Hogar. “Now how about putting your things away and helping prepare for the Her Majesty’s Birthday Celebration tonight?”

By the time that Clio got back Skye had pulled down all the metal garlands and started over with fresh decorations made from thousands of twinkly lights and little crystalline building blocks. They wove the lights through the ivy that climbed up the pillars and across the front of the stage. Everyone pulled out sketchpads and started to work. Kit drew elegant swan lanterns to float in the lagoon. Mook and Chimka put purple satin cushions embroidered with the Queen’s crest on all the benches. Clio, Patrin and Wilber were in charge of hanging lights from the birch trees that surrounded the amphitheater. With all of them working together they finished quickly.

“Looks to be the best yet, sir,” said Mrs. Hogar as they enjoyed the picnic lunch she had set out for them.

“Thank you all for your help and good ideas.” said Skye pouring Kit another cup of iced lemonade. “You will excuse me. I have to meet with the other Toymakers and approve their submissions for the Queen’s gift tonight. I hope that they have come up with something appropriate in my absence.”

“What about our gift? All the toys that we made?” asked Patrin. “We never got a chance to finish the Toy Tree.”

“Don’t worry,” Skye assured his nephew, “It’ll be a surprise.”

“I don’t know if I like surprises,” mumbled Patrin.

“You will like this one,” Skye replied holding Kit’s hand. “Why don’t you take advantage of what’s left of the afternoon to show Miss Clio and Miss Ashlyn around the city? Commander, would it be possible for you to go and see after them?” He turned to Mook and said, “I am afraid you, my friend, have quite a bit work to do before tonight. Sarka the Puzzlemaker has requested your help in testing a new puzzle game that she has made.”

Mook grinned and ran his fingers through his unruly dark hair.

“I never thought that I’d rather do something more than trying out a new game. Have fun and don’t forget to show them Dolphin’s Home and the Dancing Tiger fountains.”

“The Labyrinth Gardens are particularly beautiful this time of year,” added Skye. “It would take you a month or more to see everything so don’t try. Miss Clio will just have to come back for our wedding and spend some more time here.” This was the first time that Clio had even considered the possibility that she would be allowed to return and the idea filled her with smiles. They packed up all the leftover lunch things and went their separate ways.

The Amphitheater was packed to capacity. The Queen had already made her entrance and greeted the enthusiastic crowd. The first seven rows of the theater were reserved especially for the youngest guests. Hundreds of lucky children sat on the edge of their seats anxious for the overture to finish and the presentation of toys to begin. Patrin and Clio peeked out from the wings and saw the children that had helped them in Uberglech by throwing food to them in the train car were sitting in the front row. They were dressed in new clothes and seemed to be a little overwhelmed by all the festivities. Clio stuck her head out and waved at them. When they saw her they waved back and smiled.

Skye stood next to Kit waiting to give his welcoming speech. The sizeable backstage area was packed with Toymakers from every part of the kingdom. Some like Sarka the Puzzlemaker waited calmly while others like Travis Wrench from Machina on the Marsh worked feverishly to make last minute adjustments on their toys.

“Are you nervous?” Kit asked, noticing Skye's gaze search back and forth over the crowd of brightly dressed Toymakers and Friends. Stuffed animals were walking around everywhere.

“No more than I should be,” he replied. “It was far worse than I'd anticipated. Only a few of the Toymakers were actually ready with appropriate gifts. The Toymakers from Doughton constructed a fairly imaginative diorama from cookie dough depicting highlights from the Queen's reign. Unfortunately they'd decided to use currents for the Queen's eyes and the figures of Her Majesty looked as if she's been in a brawl. So they all had to be baked a second time. Mr. Wrench and Miss Tinker put together a wonderful cogwheel game that jammed every twelfth move and we had to take it apart and reassemble it.” Skye glared at a group of boisterous stuffed tigers that were late getting in line. They straightened up immediately. Then he continued to tell Kit about toys that didn't work, games with missing pieces, dangerous toys that had to be revised.

“The Toymakers from Chessingshire managed to come up with a chess set that could only be won by whoever goes first. Hardly a sporting chance for the other player, don't you think? They were furious but it had to be changed. Excuse me for a moment.”

He walked over to where Brynna Cogsfry and Jens Spanner were arguing about where to roll the pedal car that they had made. He helped them park it, lengthened the sleeves on Jens' florescent orange jacket and gave them a look that made them both settle down to wait quietly. Kit was amazed by the respect that the other Toymakers gave Skye as he moved easily from group to group making last minute adjustments, soothing nerves, and offering words of encouragement. Even the Spin twins who had been so loud and overbearing the night before seemed to want to please him. Skye's face was stern as they showed him a small piece of paper and demonstrated part of a complicated yo-yo routine. He tersely nodded his approval and moved on to inspect the elaborate puppet theatre made by the Toymakers from Marionetta.

Then Skye shook the hand of Eli Scrub from Blocksbury. The slender, dark haired man was wearing a new yellow Toymaker's suit and stood nervously in a corner clutching a box of blocks. His little lemur, Klaria, sat on his hat and peered over the brim. Skye assured Eli that the blocks were fine, handed the tiny yellow stuffed animal a peanut and continued down the line.

Skye returned to the wings and listened for a moment as the bear orchestra finished playing the overture. The corner of his mouth twitched up a bit as he smoothed the brim of his white hat. He strode out under the bright lights as the audience surged to its feet cheering and clapping. A hush fell over the amphitheater as soon as he started to speak. He briefly addressed the eager crowd and introduced the Toymakers from Littleshire, Misha and Sorcha Wintar who were presenting a traveling playhouse complete with running water and little lanterns.

He rejoined Kit and they watched as the Wintar's demonstrated how the playhouse could be folded up to fit in a pocket.

"That was quite a reception," Kit told him. Skye rubbed the back of his neck and looked embarrassed.

"It's been a while," he said with a shrug. "I didn't think that they would even remember me."

"And I see Blocksbury has a new Toymaker," said Kit, as she waved to Eli Scrub across the stage. Klaria sat up on his hat at the sight of Kit and waved a tiny paw back.

"I promoted him yesterday and had him flown in for the celebration." Skye nodded at Eli and said, "He is a sensible fellow and will do a lot to help rebuild the city. The first thing I asked him to do is install mechanical dishwashers in the Factory Kitchens and hire a new Kitchen Master. Kulak was arrested and will be made to appear before the Council of Justice. I also suspended both Miss Morna and Master Prent for stealing a Toy Doubler. Miss Clio requested that I put a good word in for them, so I told the Blocksbury Toy Council to be lenient. They both worked very hard making food and clothing for the people in the Bunks. Perhaps they gained something from their experiences." Skye wrapped Kit's hand around his arm. "I know I did."

"The ceremony seems to be going well," observed Kit as the Toymakers from Dollsbrook presented the Queen with a housekeeper doll that could make beds and sweep floors.

"We're on schedule too, I'm happy to say," Skye said glancing at his watch. "Last year the Spin twins from Yoyoton spoke for over an hour on some small historical points relating to the invention of gyroscopes. The ceremony ran till after midnight and most of

the children were asleep in their seats. I told them if they went over the allotted five minutes I would personally send Spark out on stage to haul them off and they would be in a factory measuring yo-yo string for a year.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’s good to be back and perhaps you were missed,” Kit told him.

“I suppose you could look at it that way,” he replied as he signaled for the next group to go on stage.

“I’m starting to suspect that there is more to you than paperwork and dishes,” Kit laughed.

“You should see me ride a bicycle sometime.”

Patrin and Clio sat up in the rafters high above the stage. Wilber was so tired from flying all over Saint Ives and seeing so many amazing sites that he was asleep on one of the beams next to them. His mouth was open and tiny puffs of smoke came out as he snored quietly.

“Boy! You can really see everything from up here!” Clio said as they watched the Toymakers from Ballyfrey roll out a big red globe that split into smaller balls every time that it bounced.

“I hope they got this toy working. Mook said that it bounced into so many pieces that it took everyone searching for quite a long time to put back together again. Uncle Skye helped them fix it of course; but it was rather hectic there for a while.”

“At least they have a toy to present, even if it is a pretty wild one. What do we have? Nothing! All the stuff we made was destroyed or burned up or something.” Clio watched as balls bounced all over the stage down below.

“Uncle Skye has them hidden somewhere. I know he does! Don’t worry. Who knows what he has stored in the pockets of his suit?” Patrin assured her. “He told the clowns that the toys were in the hands of someone who would take care of them. Remember?” Clio thought hard and nodded.

“I guess. I just wish we knew where our toys were.”

“I wish we could see the audience. I was hoping that my Dad would make it back in time for the show. He’s supposed to bring Puck, my Friend and I really wanted you to

meet him. Oh well, maybe they'll be back by tomorrow. We should climb back down, it is almost time for the Blocksbury toy presentation."

Clio and Patrin stood up to walk back down the rafters to the ladder. Patrin let go of the railing for an instant and turned to see if Clio was following him. A ball from the stage below ricocheted off the wall and hit Patrin squarely on the chest. He lost his footing and started to fall backwards off the catwalk. Wilber zoomed over and hauled him up, his velvet wings flapping with all his might. Patrin was able to grab hold of the ledge but his feet were dangling high above the stage. Clio grabbed his arm and tried to pull him up.

"You're slipping!" she said hoarsely, the words so tight in her chest they could barely make a sound.

A whirring noise came from the stage as a flash of white fur struck Patrin. At first Clio thought that it might have been one of the flying poodles but this animal was much bigger. The flying beast helped Wilber push Patrin back up on the catwalk and a happy grrrr came from its muzzle. When the furry animal slowed down enough for Clio to get a good look at it, she saw that it was a huge polar bear with elegant wings. Patrin threw his arms around the big animal and gave it a hug.

"Clio, allow me to introduce my Friend, Puck the Bear That Flies."

"Hello!" said Clio, after catching her breath. The soft white bear gave her a friendly snuffle.

"Wow! He's usually not so friendly with people."

"Puck, this is Wilber Dragonfriend of Clio the Gifted." Wilber clutched his paws together and looked at Puck shyly. The polar bear wiggled his ears back at Wilber and flashed a set of shiny white fangs. Wilber seemed to be very impressed by this and almost fell off his perch from wagging his tail.

"We'd better hurry! The last thing we want is to be late!" said Patrin. They climbed down carefully and joined the others.

The Toymakers from Piñatas Port passed out crackers that contained small toys to the spectators. The air was filled with pops and snaps as people pulled on the ends of the party crackers. Funny hats flew out and the audience became a rainbow of colored caps,

shining and sparkling in the glow of the twinkling lights. The orchestra played another song as all the Toymakers marched out on stage for the final presentation. Thunderous applause rang out as they lined up. Clio and Patrin stood with Kit and Mook as the song came to a close.

Clio squinted into the bright stage lights trying to see if she recognized anyone. She could see the Queen and the Royal family sitting in the raised pavilion above the audience. Lord and Lady Wolfren sat with Grimmel the flying cat next to King and Queen Lunaire. Princess Isabella waved at Mook who raised his hat to her in return.

“There’s my Dad, next to my Mum,” Patrin whispered. A somber blond man stood proudly next to the Princess Atheni in the Queen’s Box. Clio wondered what her own parents were doing right then and a lonely feeling crept up on her.

Skye’s voice was warm as he began to weave his story. He started by telling about the clowns in Blocksbury and thanked everyone for helping with the rescue. He introduced the row of children that had smuggled food to Clio and Patrin on the train. More applause filled the night air. As he continued to describe the events of the previous weeks Clio felt her mind wander and wondered what her life would be like in high school when she got home. She was wondering if she could talk Miss Ashlyn into letting her come back next summer, when she heard her name called out.

“Miss Clio Halina, Toymaker from the Greylands.” Patrin grabbed her hand and pulled her forward to the front of the stage. Before she knew what was happening Commander Hogar was placing a fine gold chain with a little amulet embossed with the royal seal around her neck. Mook, Kit and Patrin were given one as well. They all bowed to the Queen and the cheering spectators.

Then Skye took Kit’s hand and rubbed her thumbnail. He peeled off the small shape that was embedded on it. He held the tiny object up before the breathless crowd. He deftly unfolded it into a small square and then spun it around in his hand until it grew to be a small building block

“A additional gift from Blocksbury, Your Majesty,” he said as he placed the block on the floor of the stage.

“That’s it? One building block?” Clio heard Quirin Rook, the Toymaker from Chessingshire, remark in a loud whisper. “One would think that they could do better than

that, even in Blocksbury.” A few of the apprentices giggled at this comment but froze silent when Skye turned and put his finger to his lips. He crossed his arms and pretended to think for a moment, then pulled a small toy watering can out of his pocket. As he emptied the contents of the watering can, a stream of sparkles glittered down on the small block. There was a long silence until suddenly the block popped open. A stem spiraled up and square leaves sprouted from each new branch. The whole tree kept growing until it was over twelve feet high and the branches hung with hundreds of square wooden blocks.

Skye casually picked one off of a branch and tossed it to a small boy in the front row. The child opened the lid of the square and one of Clio’s animal marbles fell out. He picked it up and showed it to the other children around him. Inside of the marble was a little dog running across a sunlit field. Ohhs and Ahhs rippled through the crowd. Skye instructed the rows of children to come up on the stage and choose a block. Hidden in the blocks were all the toys that Clio, Patrin, Mook and Kit had designed at Quad Hall. Animals, puzzles, dolls and games came popping out of the blocks and grew to full size in the hands of the astonished children. Every time a block was picked a new one grew in its place.

When the last child had been given a new toy the Queen stood up. She worked her way down from her pavilion to the stage to get a closer look at the marvelous tree. Everyone in the audience bowed and curtsied as the Monarch of the Known World passed down the center aisle.

“Thank you for a most extraordinary birthday present, Sir Skye,” she said as she motioned for everyone to stand up. “Is there something else that you would like to do tonight?” she asked.

Skye took off his white Toymaker’s scarf and walked over to Kit. He carefully removed the dark blue scarf that she was wearing and twisted the two together. When he pulled them apart the scarves were both white with a navy blue crest embroidered on the heavy silk. A new coat of arms showed a ramping griffin facing a rearing winged unicorn. He held the scarves up for the crowd to see as applause burst out from the rows of people. Wild clapping, screams and yells filled the air. Clio noticed quite a few young women crying and fainting. Some had to be taken out of the amphitheater sobbing at the loss of the Royal City’s most eligible bachelor.

“What happened?” Clio asked Patrin who was grinning with indescribable happiness.

“Uncle Skye and Miss Ashlyn just announced their Promise.”

“For serious?”

At that moment Clio decided that she could handle whatever ninth grade would hold.

It was not the first time that a Royal Toymaker had married a Greylander but it was the first occurrence in several hundred years. The wedding was small, with the music provided by a girl who had been flown in all the way from the Greylands to play the trumpet. The entire Royal family was in attendance, as well as an impressive group of Fairie Folk that flickered in and out of the shadows. Rumors flew as to where the newlyweds would spend their honeymoon, each township eager for the honor of being the first to welcome the new couple. The only clue as to the location, however, was a travel book on bicycling through somewhere in the Greylands.