

Flight of the Queen

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Part 1:

Chapter 1

This day began like any other. It began like many that had gone before. And it began like many that would come after. It began in the most ordinary way imaginable. In fact, its beginning was so dreadfully dull that one can only hope its ending was extraordinary.

It began—like so many do—with a command: “Get up! It’s time for school.”

This is a command that people both dread to hear and dread to say. On the receiving end, you are expected to comply. On the delivering end, you are expected to repeat yourself.

“Get up, Luther! You have to get ready for school!”

This command has been delivered countless times before. A far greater number than I, a simple storyteller, can count. And it will be delivered countless times again. Right now, for instance: “Luther, I’ve already told you twice. Get up. You are going to be late for school.”

Luther needed to get up. He had to get up. Three times was the limit. Three was pushing it. There wouldn’t be a fourth. But it was so cold in his room. And so warm in his bed! The floor was so hard. And his bed was so soft! He peeked over the covers. She was still there. In the doorway. Waiting.

“You didn’t think I was going to give up that easily, did you?” his mother asked.

“Alright,” he sighed as he pulled the covers down. She watched until he had placed both feet on the ground before she turned and walked into the kitchen.

He contemplated diving for the covers again. But she was sure to come back if she didn’t hear the water in the bathroom running. And it would be a short-lived respite, anyways. Most of the struggle is in getting both feet on the ground, he thought.

He wrapped his robe around him and pulled it tight at his waist. Even with the robe, his body shivered as he walked out of his room and into the bathroom. His toothbrush was waiting for him. His cold, blue eyes watched him from the mirror. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, and—walking back into his room—changed into his new school clothes. His mom had bought them for him that past weekend.

Well, they weren’t technically new—she had gotten them from a second-hand store. But he

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thought they were in really good shape considering. He rolled the sleeves of the shirt. It was too big. The bottom of the shirt hung down close to his knees. But she usually bought clothes that were too big and let him grow into them. And he didn't mind. He knew that money was really tight right now. She didn't want to admit it to him. She didn't want to worry him, so she tried to hide it. She would even put the second-hand clothes in bags from the stores at the mall and *accidentally* leave the bags around so he would see them. But he still knew.

He contemplated the end of his shirt. It really was way too long. He finally decided to tuck the shirt into his pants. It ballooned out in the back and looked silly. But if he didn't tuck it in, he felt like he was wearing a bed sheet with sleeves. When he was dressed, a bowl, a spoon, milk, and his box of cereal were sitting on the table in the kitchen for him. The bowl rattled as he poured himself a large bowl of cereal. He was always hungry in the morning. And he put plenty of milk into the bowl. He despised dry cereal.

His mother came into the kitchen again while he was eating. She was wearing her scrubs.

"I'm going to be working a double-shift at the hospital tonight. So your father is going to pick you up from school. Alright? And you'll stay with him until the weekend. I'll come get you on Friday. Okay? Luther?"

She waited for him until he nodded.

"I've got to run. I'm going to leave the apartment door open a crack. Once you finish your breakfast, get your school things—I've set them all by the door. I've also put a lunch in your backpack for you. It's in the brown, paper bag. Mrs. Grubbs is going to walk you to the bus."

She paused again, waiting.

"Alright?" she asked. He nodded again. "Alright, sweetheart. Have a good first day."

She walked over to stand behind him and kissed the back of his brown, shaggy hair. Her fingers ran through his hair. He tried to shake her off.

"I love you," she said as she walked out the apartment door.

"Love you, too, Mom," he called out around a mouthful of cereal.

His cereal was getting soggy. He hated soggy cereal, too. It was a complicated process—getting cereal that was the perfect consistency. He shoveled it into his mouth quickly. Once he could see the bottom of the bowl, his hands cupped the sides and brought the bowl to his lips. He drank the left-over milk in three, large gulps. He smacked his lips and licked the thick, milk mustache from above his mouth.

No day is a total loss if one has a good breakfast in their belly, he decided. He put away the

milk and cereal. Turning on the sink, his hands worked quickly as they washed the bowl and spoon. He couldn't reach the cabinets in the new apartment. So he placed the clean bowl and spoon on the counter underneath the correct cabinet—at least he thought it was the correct one.

His unfamiliarity could be forgiven. He had just moved to a new apartment—and to a new school—in Atlanta. His eyes searched out the clock. Still fifteen minutes before he had to leave. Mrs. Grubbs would be early. She liked talking with him, and she always sought him out. It wasn't bad. She repeated herself a lot, but she was a nice-enough lady. And she liked to bake. She had given him two plates of cookies already, and he had only lived there for a week and a half.

She was a widower. That meant her husband was dead. Luther was under strict instructions from his mother not to discuss that topic with Mrs. Grubbs. But it was awkward because she always brought it up. Every conversation she would mention that she always wanted to have children, but her husband passed away and she never remarried. He didn't know what to say. How can you not discuss a topic when the other person constantly brings it up?, Luther wanted to know.

He wandered around the apartment. 37 Evercross Road, Apartment 4B, in Kirkwood. It was a nice apartment. Clean. And quiet. Not like the last one with the people who always argued in the stairwell so their kids wouldn't hear them. His mom had promised there would be plenty of kids here, too. He hadn't seen any, though. Only that intense, small lady who lived right below them. And Mrs. Grubbs from across the hall.

After wandering through the living room with its blue, stained couch and TV and down the hallway with the flat-white paint, he stopped in his bedroom door. His new room was smaller than his old one. It had a double bed, a shelf in the corner, a dresser against the wall, and boxes. Maybe it was the boxes that made it look so small. It had that same flat-white paint as the rest of the apartment.

He had accidentally smudged it twice already. He didn't mean to. But his shoulder brushed against it, and his backpack thumped against it. Both times a large, black mark was left on the wall. The paint absorbed everything. He was really clumsy. He hated it. He wanted to be nimble and coordinated, but his body didn't cooperate. No matter how carefully he commanded his body to do something, it always hit two or three extra things in the process.

“Luther! Dear! You ready?” Mrs. Grubbs knocked on the apartment door as she opened it.

“Yes, Mrs. Grubbs.” He walked back into the living room. Mrs. Grubbs was a hunched, curved woman like a question mark with thick, enormous glasses that magnified her slightly-cloudy eyes. Her white hair was always in a tightly-curved perm, and her odd, sack-like dresses were always

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pilly and smelled like mothballs. She carried an enormous, shapeless, brown handbag with her. She had noticeable whiskers around her chin and above her lip that Luther tried politely to ignore and lipstick that always seemed to wander aimlessly across her face. She reminded Luther vaguely of a caterpillar half-finished with making its cocoon.

“Are you excited for your first day of sixth grade? Starting middle school! Should be a fun year!” she asked as she walked over and ruffled his hair.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He smoothed his hair back into place.

“Where is your bag? I have something to put in your lunch! A little treat. Hopefully your mom doesn’t mind. My world-famous, homemade peanut brittle. I made enough for all of your classmates, too! Children love sweets. You’ll be the most popular boy in school if you share this. Children love sweets. Don’t eat it all yourself! Okay?”

She rummaged in her bag and eventually produced a clear plastic bag filled with massive hunks of some brown substance.

“Um, it’s over there.” Luther pointed out his backpack.

“Oh, good.” She shuffled over and stuffed the plastic bag into his backpack. “Now, come on, dear. We’ve got to start walking. We don’t want you to miss your bus. You’d be out of luck! The state of Georgia won’t let me drive anymore. Claims I’m a hazard! Little, old me! A hazard!? Seems preposterous, don’t ya’ think?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He walked over and took the bag from her hands.

“I’m so glad you and your mother moved in. It’s been so nice to have a polite, young boy living here. Before you, there were no children at all!” She led the way out of the apartment and down the stairs. Luther locked the door behind him and put the key in his backpack.

“No children at all! Just adults. It was too quiet. We old folks need some young people around to help keep us young ourselves! Otherwise we just do old-people things all day. You know I always wanted to have children. Herb and I were planning on it. We had it all planned out. But we kept putting it off and putting it off. Not quite the right time, we would tell ourselves. Not quite the right time. And then he had his heart attack and passed away, bless him. So sad. And I never remarried. And then I wasn’t able to have any children of my own. So I’m so glad you’ve moved in and I can spoil you with my world-famous, homemade peanut brittle like I would have done to my children. Children love sweets! You’ll have to share my world-famous, homemade peanut brittle with your classmates. You’ll be the most popular boy in school in no time! Children love sweets!”

Mrs. Grubbs kept up her repetitive chatter the entire way down the stairs and out the door

of the apartment building. Luther didn't understand why he couldn't walk to the bus stop himself. But his mother had insisted the night before that he should be escorted—at least on the first day.

But Mrs. Grubbs was walking so slowly that they might actually miss his bus. And he was honestly a little embarrassed to show up to the bus stop with Mrs. Grubbs in tow. She was a nice lady and all. But he didn't think most of the other kids would have a chaperon. Even if they did, it would be their parents. Not a dotty old lady who smelled like mothballs.

“But I never did have children.” He realized Mrs. Grubbs was still talking and he hadn't been paying attention. She paused slightly and looked at him expectantly.

“No?” he guessed, not sure what an appropriate response would be.

“No, I'm afraid not. With Herbert passing and all. But I'm so glad you've moved in,” she said for what felt like the hundredth time. “You'll have to visit me often. Okay, dear, the bus stop is on the other side of the street. Best hold my hand to get across.”

Luther stared at her for a moment in shock. She must be joking. He was ten years old! Sure he had always been small, and his old school had skipped him ahead a grade, which only made him seem that much smaller in comparison to the other students. But he was still old enough to walk across a relatively small street without holding her hand! He didn't even think he needed help walking to the bus stop, much less crossing a street.

“Come on, dear. Hold my hand. We'll get across this street together,” she said again, peering around her as if she was lost. Her bony fingers reached out and felt for his hand at his side. He took a deep breath and, resigning himself to his fate, took her hand.

It was moist, bony, and covered in loose skin. It was like holding a wet rubber glove with a plastic skeleton's hand shoved inside. She gripped his hand tightly and started to shuffle across the street without looking first. A car slammed on its breaks and honked lightly as she stepped off the curb in front of it. She glared at the car through her thick glasses and pulled Luther behind her into the street.

“I'm walking this young boy to his bus stop for his first day of school! He's nervous enough with being so tiny and not knowing anyone without getting honked at!” she shouted at the car as she continued her determined shuffling into traffic. The driver—looking extremely embarrassed as this little, old lady shuffled in front of his car—just waived and sat idling. Luther hung his head in shame as Mrs. Grubbs continued her trek into traffic, pulling him along behind her.

There was a large collection of kids and several parents already at the bus stop watching the curious duo work their way across the street. Luther could feel his face turning bright pink as kids

pointed and snickered behind their hands.

“We’ll make it, dear. We’ll make it,” Mrs. Grubbs assured him over and over as she pulled him along. She took a gasp and peered forward, as if she was maneuvering through a dense fog rather than the cloudless, sunny day that was around them. Several other cars had now come to a complete stop as Mrs. Grubbs walked in front of them, too. It was clear that the drivers felt too awkward to honk at an old lady crossing the middle of the street in front of oncoming traffic, so they all sat there and waited patiently.

Several parents now walked out into the street and helped Mrs. Grubbs across, waiving apologetically at the cars she had stopped in both directions. Mrs. Grubbs kept a tight grip on Luther’s hand the entire time. As he surveyed all of the kids watching him, he was quite positive he would never live this down. What a way to make an entrance. Being walked across the street like a five year old, and still managing to almost die and stop all of the traffic.

They reached the other side of the street, and Mrs. Grubbs mounted the curb with a wheezing grunt.

“Oh, thank you, dears. Thank you,” she said to the parents who had helped her across the street. “It’s further than it looks. I didn’t realize those cars would be so fast! Cars really do move quickly nowadays. No need to move that quickly. It’s dangerous! The state of Georgia says I’m a hazard behind the wheel. But I never drove that fast! I drove nice and slowly—right down the very middle of the road. I was no hazard! People could walk faster than I drove. Yes, dears, thank you. They’re the real hazards, if you ask me.”

She gestured towards the cars that were now driving away. She then pulled Luther onto the curb behind her. “Now, is anyone else here going into the sixth grade?”

Her neck craned around at the kids waiting at the stop—who were all watching her curiously now. A few of them raised their hands. The boy closest to Luther and Mrs. Grubbs, a large kid with buzzed, black hair, raised his hand.

“Oh, good. Well this is Luther Whittle!” She pulled Luther forward by the hand and tousled his hair again. “He’s new this year. And he’s smaller than all of you because he got pushed ahead a grade. He’s very smart. His mother is quite proud of that fact. Told me so herself! So you’ll have to look after him for me. Okay? What’s your name, son?”

The question was directed at the large boy with the buzzed head.

“Slayton. Jeremy Slayton, Ma’am,” he said. His face was tight as he tried to keep from laughing at Luther and Mrs. Grubbs.

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“Well, Mr. Slayton, I’ll trust you with Luther’s welfare. He’s a small, shy, quiet boy who is quite sweet and very sensitive! So I’ll need you to make sure none of the big kids are mean to him on his first day. He’s new and so little. They might bully him. He just moved here, and he doesn’t have any friends at all!”

Luther was absolutely mortified. He thought his face might catch on fire it was burning so red. Slayton surveyed him with unmistakable glee at Luther’s embarrassment.

“Luther, sweetie, you might share your peanut brittle with this young man. A good way to make friends is by sharing tasty treats! And children love sweets. Jeremy, I’ve made some of my world-famous, home-made peanut brittle. You’ll be sure to get some of it from Luther. Won’t you? You obviously love sweets! Look at how big you are!”

“I’ll be sure, Ma’am,” Slayton said, still staring at Luther. Luther had been to enough schools to recognize the look on Slayton’s face. This was not going to end well for him.

“Well, there’s the bus!” Mrs. Grubbs exclaimed excitedly. “We got here just in time, Luther! Alright, come here, sweetie.”

She gave him a big, wet kiss on the cheek that tickled his face with her whiskers and left a large, misshapen lip-stick mark.

“I know your father will be picking you up after school. So I won’t get to see my little Luthy for a whole week! I’ve so enjoyed you moving in—how will I manage? You’ll have to come visit me when your mother picks you up, okay? Oh well, have a great day at school, dear. Oh, your face is so red! You’re not getting sick on your first day, are you?”

She pressed her lips to his forehead to feel his temperature. He was sure she had left another large, misshapen lipstick mark.

“Well, you do feel a little warm. Tell the nurse that she may want to keep an eye on you. Okay? Jeremy, Jeremy, dear! Tell the nurse my little Luthy may be getting sick on his first day. Be sure to show him where the nurse is, alright? Okay, watch out now. It’s his first day. Watch out. Excuse me. First day. Move, young lady. First day.”

She hustled through the crowd of children and parents—nudging other people out of the way who had been there first—and made sure Luther was first in line to get on the bus as it pulled to a stop. As he walked past all of the other kids who were clearly trying not to laugh, he was not so sure that he liked Mrs. Grubbs anymore. She pushed him onto the bus and waived enthusiastically as he climbed the steps. Her loose skin on her arm jiggled back and forth.

“Um, Ma’am, other people need to get on the bus, Ma’am,” the bus driver said as politely as

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she could when Mrs. Grubbs continued to stand in the doorway and waive.

“Oh, of course. Good Luck, Luther!” she called one last time. She then turned and started her shuffling process back across the street, immediately stepping in front of a car that came to a screeching halt. Mrs. Grubbs appeared not to notice. One of the parents said a hurried goodbye to his daughter and raced to catch up with Mrs. Grubbs to make sure she made it across without getting hit. As Luther walked along the inside of the bus, he heard Mrs. Grubbs saying to the man, “Herbert passed away, bless him. A heart attack. So I never had any children of my own—” while the man nodded politely and waived at the new round of cars that were coming to a stop while Mrs. Grubbs shuffled in front of them.

Luther walked to the very back of the bus and slunk as low as he could into the seat. Everyone eyed him with giant grins on their faces as they climbed onto the bus after him. He sunk even lower into the seat, wishing he could sink right into the stained, oddly-smelling, plastic fabric. This was not at all the way he had wanted to start his first day.

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Chapter 2

No one sat next to Luther on the bus. When they finally reached the school, he waited until everyone else got up before he stood up and followed them off the bus. Slayton and another boy were waiting when Luther stepped off the steps.

“Where’s your Grammy? Not here to make sure everyone’s nice to our sweet, little boy?” Slayton taunted Luther softly as Slayton fell into step behind him.

Luther kept walking, trying to ignore him.

“Hey, new kid! Little Luther! Little Luther!” Slayton kept taunting him as he walked. When he refused to turn around, Slayton started lightly slapping the back of his backpack. As Luther stepped into the school, Slayton reached back and hit Luther’s backpack sideways as hard as he could. Luther stumbled to the side and ran into a girl walking past him. They both collapsed into a pile. The girl let out a cry as she hit the tile floor of the hallway. She rubbed her elbow and yelled at Luther to watch where he was going.

Luther climbed to his feet and apologized to the girl, trying to help her up. She brushed aside his hand and stood up.

“Hey! You two! Knock it off! Get to your classes!” a teacher shouted as he pushed through the stream of kids walking down the hall. He quickly stepped between Slayton and Luther. “Now!”

The girl glared at Luther before storming off. Both Luther and Slayton walked down the hallway on opposite sides. After his run-in with Slayton, Luther stepped into one of the less crowded side halls and leaned against the lockers that lined the walls. His hands were trembling. He was more scared than he wanted to admit to himself.

His hands fumbled in his bag and eventually found his class list. He read through the classrooms and started searching for Classroom Number 116 for Social Studies. Luther had Mr. Dannis. The teacher was wearing a beige sweater, khaki pants, and beige shoes—all of which blended into the beige chair in which the teacher sat. He was young, by Luther’s teacher-standards anyways, but he seemed to lack any energy.

Luther normally enjoyed Social Studies, but Mr. Dannis proved to be such a boring teacher that he even seemed to bore himself. Whenever Mr. Dannis had to write on the board, he just rolled his chair over to the board and stretch from his seat. He only used the bottom half of the board because he couldn’t reach the top half while sitting as he plodded through the schedule for the year without once getting up from his chair. His voice had a lazy, lolling quality. His mouth continually

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hung open after he finished speaking, like he simply didn't have the energy to close it after expending so much energy speaking to the class. Luther kept expecting a huge dollop of drool to cascade from the corner of Mr. Dannis' mouth.

Luther then had Mrs. Bite for science. Her room had a bizarre, pungent smell to it. The room was filled with small, black tables with gas nozzles pointing from the middle of each table. "They are for Bunsen burners," Mrs. Bite explained as everyone examined them curiously.

She had short, gray hair and seemed to be bursting with energy after Mr. Dannis. She positively bounced around the room and promised them they would all perform some fantastic science experiments that year.

"As a first day treat, we will be making soap as a class. We'll be using a 400 mL beaker, 100 mL graduated cylinder, a Bunsen burner, 30 g oil, 15 mL of 50% NaOH solution, 30 mL ethyl alcohol, 100 mL distilled water, and 200 mL saturated NaCl solution. Remember to first get your lab goggles, latex gloves, and instruction sheet. Once everyone has those, we'll discuss the basics of what we will be doing today, and then I will go over the instruction sheet with you. This is an ambitious, first-day project. So we will be taking things slowly, and I will walk you through each step."

He decided he really liked Mrs. Bite. He made it through his next class—Spanish—without any problems. The teacher, Mr. Ramirez, seemed nice enough. He even let all the students out five minutes early, "Because it's the first day, and you all look a bit worn out already."

Math was Luther's last class before lunch. When he walked into the classroom, an enormous man with a huge belly and a baseball cap on his head was standing by the door. His face looked shiny and slightly sweaty as he loomed over each student and ushered the terrified-looking kids into the room.

"No need to fear, kiddo! No need to fear!" he boomed to a small, red-headed girl that paled and took a step back when she first entered the classroom to find this tree-sized man standing in front of her. "Come on, now! Find a seat. I won't bite. I'm not an ogre!"

The girl cast nervous glances at him as she found a seat, as if she was afraid he might attack her the moment she took her eyes off of him. After everyone was sitting and the bell rung, he turned to face the class.

"Now, my name is Sam Stillbur. And I'll be teachin' ya' math this year. No need to fear me, kiddos. Every year you all start off looking terrified. But I promise I'm a nice enough fella'. As long as you like math, that is. If you don't" He paced slowly towards the kids sitting in the front row

and scowled hotly at them. They all leaned back. “Only joking! Only joking!”

He boomed with laughter as he held up his hands in submission. “I’m only joking. If you don’t like math, we’ll make it through this year alright anyways. Okay? Now, everyone get out your supplies. Let’s start discussin’ what we’ll be covering this year.”

After class, Luther dug through his bag, looking for his lunch as he walked to the cafeteria. He promptly got lost—which was no small feat considering everyone had lunch right now and thus everyone was going to the same place. He started to retrace his steps through the maze of hallways lined with lockers, trying to find some other students he could follow. He turned a corner and then quickly tried to double back. Slayton and three other boys were standing about halfway down the hall. It was too late, though.

“Little, Whittle Luthy!” Slayton called out gleefully when he saw Luther. Luther tried to walk back the way he had come, but two of Slayton’s friends darted down the hallway and cut him off.

“Phil Whineback, Mike Vicker—meet our new friend, Whittle Luthy. He’s a new student this year. And I’m under strict instructions from his Grammy that I’m to make sure he feels special and well-taken-care-of. We can do that, can’t we?” Slayton said quietly as he advanced on Luther. Luther backed up as much as he could. But the two boys he hadn’t seen before—Whineback and Vicker apparently—closed in from behind him. Slayton and the boy that had been with him by the bus stood in front of Luther. He wasn’t going anywhere.

“What are you wearing, Luthy? An old bag or something?” Slayton surveyed Luther’s overlarge shirt with its rolled sleeves and its ballooning at the back where he had tucked it in. “Next time, get some better reject-clothes. These are truly pathetic. Or where you trying to match your Grammy’s sense of style with her old bag clothes? Now, let’s see this world-famous peanut butter whatever.”

Slayton grabbed Luther’s bag from his hands. Slayton pulled Luther’s lunch in its brown paper bag and the plastic bag of peanut brittle out of his backpack. Luther tried to grab his bag back, but Whineback and Vicker caught him from behind and pinned his arms to his side. Luther struggled and kicked, but they held on. Dropping Luther’s lunch on the floor, Slayton’s foot came down hard on the brown bag, crushing Luther’s lunch. Slayton then pulled a hunk of peanut brittle from the plastic bag, bit off a piece, and threw the rest into Luther’s face.

“This stuff tastes terrible! What was your Grammy thinking, Luthy?” Slayton laughed as he glanced at his third friend, whose name Luther still didn’t know. “Siggle, I think we need to find a trashcan for this filth. Oh, my mistake.”

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Slayton threw his hands up in mock embarrassment at himself. “Whittle, little Luthy—this is your new friend, Paul Siggle. You two will become much better acquainted throughout the year. Don’t worry.”

Siggle—the fourth boy—was much smaller than the other three. He rubbed his fingers together and repeatedly touched his face absentmindedly, like a rat cleaning itself, and smiled wickedly as he glanced around.

“One’s down there.” He pointed a few dozen feet down the hall to a large, plastic, open-topped trashcan. Slayton waived at Whineback and Vicker. They both started dragging Luther towards the trashcan. Luther was thrashing and kicking as hard as he could now, but he couldn’t break free. He was yelling at them to let him go. Siggle must have thought there was a chance Luther would be able to break free because he caught one of Luther’s legs to help hold him. The three of them hoisted Luther upside down and pitched him head-first into the trashcan.

“Oh, the trashcan’s empty! That’s too bad,” Slayton complained as Luther’s face hit the bottom of the trashcan. “Oh well, we’ll just have to get him again when there’s some garbage.”

Slayton chucked Luther’s backpack and the peanut brittle in on top of his kicking legs. Luther could hear the boys laughing as they walked off down the hall. But Luther had bigger problems.

The trashcan didn’t have any garbage in it, but it was lined with a plastic trash bag that was pressed against his face. His own weight was keeping his head down and pressed firmly against the bottom corner of the trash bag. It was clinging to his face. He couldn’t breathe.

He struggled and kicked, but his arms were pinned and uselessly scraped the sides of the bag while his legs weighed him down. He couldn’t get any purchase. He had to breathe. He had to get out of the trashcan.

His lungs were screaming. His mouth was sucking in the trash bag—his body was so desperate for air. His vision was swimming. Finally he started to flop his body back and forth sideways—like a fish when it was pulled out of water. His body bucked hard to the side, and the trashcan finally tipped over. It hit the tile floor hard with a crash. Luther’s body bounced when it hit the tile. But he was able to force his body backwards out of the trashcan. His lungs ached as he breathed in air.

He lay panting on his side. His face was bright red and glistening with sweat and tears. His head was still sitting inside the rim of the trashcan. His heart finally slowed down enough that he was able to sit up and pull his head from the trashcan. Pushing himself into a sitting position, he

slumped against the lockers along the wall.

He struggled to calm down. His foot lashed out and kicked the empty trashcan away. After a moment, he clambered to his feet, pulled his backpack from the floor by the trashcan, and put it onto his back. His lunch was a completely-crushed mess. He righted the trashcan and tossed his ruined lunch into it. He tossed the peanut brittle in for good measure, too.

There was still a fair amount of time left before lunch ended. But Luther didn't have any money to buy food from the cafeteria. It didn't matter. He had lost his appetite anyways. He retraced his steps and found a hallway he recognized.

Eventually he just went to class early. He sat at the back of the classroom and tried not to make eye contact with anyone as students started walking in towards the end of lunch. The bell rang, and a primly-dressed lady with blue-brown hair in a tight bun came into the room. She stood at the front of the class and glared at everyone through tiny, black, beady eyes.

“My name is Mrs. Crump, and I will be teaching you History this year. Everyone get out their books, *World Histories & Their Connections to your Lives*. We'll be working our way through chapter one today in class. Then I'll distribute these worksheets for you all to complete with the rest of the time in class. Anything you don't finish will be your homework.” Her voice was gravelly and nasally at the same time—like she was constantly on the verge of a sneeze but trying to hold it in.

Mrs. Crump read the first paragraph of chapter one out loud to everyone. She then went down each row of students and had each student read several paragraphs out loud before having the next student read the next section. It was incredibly dull, and there were lots of names that students had trouble pronouncing. Mrs. Crump made everyone who mispronounced a word repeat it correctly three times before they could move on. Luther mispronounced six names and five geographic regions. Mrs. Crump had him repeat them each at least five times before he got the pronunciations correct. He could hear a few snickers from other students as he struggled through the names.

He finished with relief. When the next student didn't begin, though, he looked up to find Mrs. Crump standing in front of the class with her hand raised for their attention. She cleared her throat wetly before saying, “Well, given your difficulties in reading, Mr. Whittle, we'll give you some much needed additional practice.” With a snap of her finger, she pointed to the space in front of her old, wooden desk. He fumbled out of his desk. His foot caught the metal leg, making him trip to his knees. He got up and walked nervously to the front of the class, and she continued, “We'll need you to finish reading the rest of the chapter out loud.”

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He could see relieved looks on the faces of the students who were supposed to have their turns after him. He apparently took too long to start, though, because she snapped her fingers and jabbed at the next paragraph in her own book. She made him stop repeatedly to re-read paragraphs with complex names.

He stumbled over a name and she snapped, “Speak more clearly! Do you want everyone to think that you’re a baby or a mature, grown-up young man who can piece two words together?”

It took him so long to read the first chapter out loud that none of them got any of the worksheets done. They would have to all do them for homework, and there were several muttered complaints directed towards Luther and his slow progress.

Luther tried to ignore them and instead surveyed the worksheets. They all looked exceedingly tedious. Essentially just finding facts in the text book and copying them onto the sheets. He sighed and stuffed them into his backpack. It had not been a good first day so far. He just wanted to get through his next class and go home.

English was his last class of the day. He eventually found the classroom, and he walked in to find a woman sitting in a rigid, wooden chair in front of the class and sitting with a rigid, wooden posture. She had bushy, brown hair that was streaked liberally with grey, and a pair of reading glasses perched on her nose.

The classroom was filled with pictures of cats. Everywhere Luther looked, there were cats. He stared curiously at them as he found a desk. The woman swiveled just her head—rather than shifting her entire body—as she peered at each new student enter and find a seat from over the tops of her reading glasses. Even her facial expression was a rigid, wooden mask. Finally, the bell rang, and the last few students ran into the room. The woman stood up in front of everyone with her back as straight as a pencil.

“What - is the first thing you wondered - when you entered this room?” she said, taking brief pauses as she spoke. Her voice sounded stern, and she paced back and forth in front of the class while her eyes peered constantly over the tops of her glasses. No one responded.

“Come on, now, children. Someone be brave. What was the first thing you wondered? I promise you—you are all thinking the correct answer right now.”

Still no one responded. She sat on her stool and resumed her wooden posture. “Who. Is feeling. *Bold?*” she asked, subjecting the entire class to an intense examination with her eyes as she leaned towards them on her stool.

Thinking he may be about to make another mistake at his new school, Luther raised his

hand.

“Yes?” she pointed at Luther.

“The cats?” he said. His voice came out an octave higher than it usually did. She turned her intense examination entirely onto Luther. He felt like she was taking detailed notes of everything he did.

“What’s your name?” A new light of approval had slipped into her eyes.

“Luther Whittle.”

“Well, Luther, you are exactly correct. The cats. Everyone must know about the cats. My name is Constance Agrippina Trevel. Also known as . . . ?”

She paused and looked at Luther.

“C. A. T. Or cat,” he said.

“Good job! Yes, my initials spell ‘cat.’ So they’re something of an obsession of mine, I’m afraid. You can all call me Ms. Trevel. Although I do occasionally respond . . . to a meow,” she said with a smile while looking over her glasses. The class laughed. She smiled again, the corners of her eyes crinkling happily.

“Now, we have quite the ambitious reading list this year. But I know you are all up for it! We will also be writing throughout the year. Beyond a journal, which I will expect you to keep on at least a weekly basis, you will each be writing multiple papers throughout the year. I’m going to pass out our reading list for this year and the basic instructions for the journal. We’ll go over what I will need from you for the papers when we get closer to each due date.”

The class went much better than his other ones had, but he was still relieved when the final bell rang. Stuffing everything into his backpack, he forced his way into the crowded hall and let the flow of students funnel him towards the exit.

Luther walked out of the school and saw his dad’s truck parked down the block. It was a white, blocky truck with ‘Whittle’s Electricians’ written on the side in large, green letters. His dad—unsurprisingly based on the truck—was an electrician. His dad used to have a bunch of people working for him. Luther remembered as a little kid thinking his dad was some all-powerful being. He would go out in terrible weather and restore heat and power to people’s homes. He would help save them by giving them electricity. His dad had a bunch of employees working for him who would always talk with Luther at company parties about how his dad helped them put food on the tables for their families.

But his dad’s business hadn’t been doing very well over the last several years. Luther didn’t

know exactly what had happened. But he knew that his dad had sold off all of the trucks except for his. And he had no more employees. He only occasionally brought people on for short-term projects now. Mostly his dad worked by himself.

Luther walked over and climbed into the passenger's side of the truck. His dad reached over and patted him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Luth! How was your first day, buddy? Does it look like it'll be a good school for you?" his dad asked in his raspy voice. The truck was dirty and smelled of stale sweat. His dad looked tired. And he needed to shave.

"Yeah, it was fine. Seems good," Luther said vaguely.

"Have a lot of homework tonight?"

"Not too much, but some."

"Alright, bud. I got us some rotisserie chicken, mashed potatoes, and biscuits from that little place you like for dinner. Thought we should celebrate your first day! Does that sound good?"

"Yeah."

They drove home to his father's house. It was a little, two bedroom ranch house east of downtown Atlanta. His dad lived at 398 Kirkwood Heights Avenue. Luther did his homework at the kitchen table while his dad worked on rewiring projects for some of his customers in the garage. Around seven o'clock his dad put the chicken, mashed potatoes, and biscuits in the oven to reheat them. Luther cleared off his homework from the table, and they sat and ate in silence.

Towards the end of dinner, his dad looked at him and said, "You like the new place your mom and you moved into?"

"Yeah."

"How's your mom liking her new hospital?"

"I think she likes it."

"She's at Grady, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's a tough job, being a nurse. I've got a lot of respect for your mom."

"Yeah."

"It'll be nice having you closer into the city. I'll get to see you more. I know we haven't gotten to see a lot of each other over the last few years with you and your mom living farther north and all. So I'm glad I'll be able to be around more."

"Yeah," Luther again repeated, picking at his food. "Dad, can I just go to bed?"

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“You feelin’ alright, bud? You didn’t eat very much.”

“I’m okay. It was just a long day. I’m a little tired.” It had not been a good first day. But Luther didn’t want to trouble his dad with what had actually happened at school. He knew both of his parents were having a tough time right now, even if they didn’t want him to know. He didn’t want to add to their worries with his own.

“Sure, bud. I’ll save some food for you in case you get hungry later tonight. Okay?” Luther nodded as he cleared his plate. He was walking out of the kitchen towards his bedroom when he stopped in the doorway and turned back to his dad.

“Dad?”

“Yes, Luth?” His dad was sitting under the light fixture at the kitchen table. The light highlighted the gray streaks in his hair and the heavy creases and lines crisscrossing his face.

“Thanks for picking me up today. I’m glad I’ll get to see more of you, too.”

“Really?” His dad smiled hopefully with a new brightness in his eyes.

“Yeah, Dad.” Luther smiled, too.

He walked down the short hallway with its peeling, gray wallpaper to his room. He changed into his pajamas, brushed his teeth, and climbed into bed. His room here was almost empty. His bed and a dresser were the only two pieces of furniture in the room. It was only a little after eight o’clock. But he was tired. It really hadn’t been a good day. He stretched out under his blanket and sheets and fell asleep.

Footsteps were approaching. He rolled over and heard what sounded like the crunching of leaves. He just wanted to sleep. It couldn’t be morning yet. Could it? He tried to quiet his mind and fall back asleep.

Something sharp poked at his side. Was it a spring in the mattress? Did he fall asleep with something in his bed? He tried to push it away. His hands couldn’t find it now. He just rolled away from it. He would figure out what it was in the morning. His hand searched around for the blanket. It must have fallen off in his sleep. His hand closed on . . . leaves?

Something sharp now jabbed him in the side hard enough that he cried out in pain. He started to open his eyes when he heard a commanding, girl’s voice by his side and froze.

“You there. Peasant. Assist me!”

Chapter 3

His eyes flew open. He was momentarily blinded by sunlight pouring across the horizon and into his eyes. The sun must have just risen. He sat up and discovered he was sitting in a sparse forest surrounded by old, dried leaves. His hands grasped at them and held some of the leaves up to his eyes.

“Peasant! Why are you still sitting there? I require your assistance. Immediately!” the girl’s voice spoke in a sharp, commanding tone again. He turned his head to the side to take in a girl about his own age. She was wearing a thick, leather vest over simple cotton pants and a shirt. The vest looked like armor of some sort. Soft, leather boots were laced around her feet and calves. She had a belt around her waist with a small knife, a heavy leather pouch, and an empty scabbard. In her right hand shown a slim, glittering short sword with a silver cross-guard stretching across the top of the handle and an intricate, silver pommel in the shape of a dragon’s head at the bottom of the sword’s handle. Her hair was a dark golden brown with heavy streaks of red and extremely disheveled. It was pulled back into a single braid down her back. But strands were sticking out in all directions, and the braid was slowly unraveling. Her eyes were a deep, cherry brown—verging on red, like her hair—and they had narrow, vertical irises, almost like a cat’s eyes.

He observed his surroundings in something of a stupor. What was going on? Where was he? His hands rubbed at his eyes before his brain processed that he was still holding leaves and had just rubbed them on his face. He dropped them, and his hands returned to his eyes. He rubbed hard until he saw spots, trying to wake himself up. He opened his eyes to find this strange, curious girl still staring at him. She then went to poke him again. He suddenly realized the sharp thing poking at his side had been her sword.

“Get! Up!” she commanded as she tried to jab him again. He pushed himself backwards to avoid the sword point. He scrambled to his feet and promptly fell over. On his second attempt, he managed to stay on his feet.

“What?” was all he could manage.

“I demand your assistance. I am the rightful Queen of this land. And as such, you shall assist me!”

“ . . . what?” he said again. His brain wouldn’t work at all. It couldn’t process anything. His eyes blinked to try to get the leaf remnants off of his face. He must be dreaming.

She surveyed him closely, taking in his confused state, his clothes, the smears of dried leaves

on his face, and his lack of shoes. He glanced down and suddenly realized he was still wearing his pajamas.

“You aren’t . . . simple . . . are you? I cannot abide simple people,” the girl said airily.

“No, I’m not simple! I’m just . . .,” he glanced around hopelessly, “. . . lost,” he finally said.

“Yes, well While you attempt to find yourself, your Queen requires your assistance. I am being pursued by soldiers under the command of my evil cousin, Magdalena. I am not sure how close behind me they are. But I need your help as I travel to the north.”

Her eyes suddenly narrowed as she studied his face.

“You aren’t a supporter of Magdalena. Are you?” The sword quivered ominously in her hand.

“Um, no. *Definitely* not.” While Luther had no idea what she was talking about, he decided it was best to agree with the person holding the sharp object.

“Excellent. Is your hovel . . . or hut . . . or whatever wretched shelter you live in close by? I require food and a place to rest for a few hours now that it is daylight.”

Luther glanced around again. “I don’t think so.”

“Just my luck,” she sighed and shook her head as she spoke to herself. “One of the most populated kingdoms in all of Hassoon, and I have to stumble across this simple fellow who can’t even find his own hovel.”

“I am not simple!” Luther shouted now. She held her hand up suddenly. Her entire body went rigid as she stood on the balls of her feet and peered into the distance behind her. Her eyes narrowed into slits. Luther could have sworn her ears moved independently of each other while her nose twitched, like an animal trying to catch a scent. Her entire focus—her entire being—seemed to be far away in the distance.

She suddenly dropped to the flats of her feet again. Her eyes turned on him with a new look of panic.

“They are far closer than I realized. We must fly! Immediately! Or they’re sure to catch us.” She darted past him and ran farther into the woods. He stared, completely nonplussed, as she ran off into the woods. After a few seconds, she came racing back towards him.

“Come with me, you simple fool! What are you doing? They’ll catch you! They’ll torture you to find out my location!”

She grabbed his hand and tried to pull him after her. He resisted, still completely lost as to what was going on. They suddenly heard a horn in the distance.

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Over the crest of a small hill several hundred yards in the distance, a single rider on a horse reigned to a stop. He wore all-black armor and carried a long, thin spear. The black helmet of the rider moved slowly side-to-side, showing that the rider was studying the countryside closely. The girl had gone completely still. She whispered hoarsely, “The eye is much better at detecting movement than shapes at that distance. Do. Not. Move.”

The sun rose slightly higher in the sky and glinted off the sword blade in her hand. The rider spurred his horse and came galloping down the hillside towards them. As he did, he raised a horn to his lips and blew three, sharp blasts.

“He’s seen us. He’s a scout, and there will be more soldiers behind. Run! RUN!” the girl screamed frantically. She sheathed her sword and raced back into the woods behind them. Luther still had no idea what was happening. But the girl seemed to be terrified of the rider, and she had only poked him a few times with her sword. Between a rider who might torture him or impale him with a spear and a girl whose primary faults seemed to be a conviction that he was an idiot and being a little too willing to poke strangers with a sword—he was going to stick with the girl. He turned and sprinted after her.

Thankfully the woods grew thicker and thicker as they ran. Luther thought it would be harder to ride a horse through dense woods. He had never actually seen a horse in real life. Well, he probably had seen them as he rode past in a car at some point. But they must do better in open country. Right? The denser woods also meant the ground was covered with more dried leaves, which were much easier for Luther to run on because he had no shoes. He was struggling to keep up with the girl as she whipped around trees and leapt fallen branches. She seemed barely to make a noise as she ran.

She leapt into a shallow stream and waived at him to follow her. They headed upstream through the shallow water. Finally finding a small piece of land with an old, haggard-looking tree that jutted out over the stream where water had washed away enough earth underneath to create a muddy cave, her hand motioned him into the cave, and she slithered in after him.

They lay panting, side-by-side, as the girl listened intently.

“I think we may have lost them,” she whispered. “But it will be too dangerous to travel again for at least a few hours with them so close behind me. We will have to rest here for a while.”

“Um, okay,” was all Luther could think to whisper at this point.

“My name is Olwen Drakan, Queen of Dracnas, as you surely know. But I have decided I will travel under the name Lisabin Wing to avoid detection.”

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“Luther Whittle,” he whispered back. He awkwardly shook her hand. She accepted the gesture but seemed to be confused by it.

“Well, Mr. Whittle, I’ve been traveling most of the night. Do you think you could take the first watch?”

“ . . . sure? I mean, yes.”

“You have the gratitude of your Queen.”

“ . . . that’s good,” he eventually whispered back. She rolled over and promptly fell asleep, letting out a soft rumble of a snore.

Luther spent the next several hours trying to wake himself up. He had been in dreams before in which, once he realized he was dreaming, he could force himself to wake up. He eventually gave up that idea, though. He couldn’t get himself to wake up. What now? Was he in a dream?

He had to be, right? None of this made any sense. He remembered his first day of school. He came home, did homework, and ate dinner. He could remember getting ready for bed and going to sleep. He was still wearing his pajamas. That was embarrassing enough by itself. But he must be dreaming then. He couldn’t remember ever leaving his bed.

He glanced over at the bizarre girl sleeping next to him. She had said something about Hassoon. “All of Hassoon.” Maybe that was where he was. She had said her name was Olwen. She was being hunted by someone. Her cousin or something? He felt discouraged when he realized that was everything that he knew or could remember. It wasn’t much.

The light outside the little cave’s entrance had noticeably shifted. He didn’t know how long it had been, but he thought it might have been a few hours by now. His hand felt for her shoulder in the muddy cave.

“Miss? Ah, Miss . . . Olwen?” He shook her shoulder lightly.

“I am not traveling under that name. It is Lisabin. And it would be *Queen* Olwen, if I were. Or Your Highness,” came her curt reply. “How long has it been?”

“I’m not sure. I think . . . long enough.”

“Ah, you simple fellow. Remind me to teach you how to tell time,” she sighed as she rubbed her eyes and struggled from the cave.

“It’s not that! I can tell time!” he whispered after her as he followed her out.

He found her trying to rinse off as much mud from her clothes and her leather armor as she could in the stream. He stooped down and tried to rinse off the caked-on mud, as well. The woods around them were quiet and slowly darkening. It may have been later than he realized. He eventually

gave up on the mud. The girl started drinking from the stream. He suddenly realized just how thirsty and hungry he was. His lips clung together like glue. He drank from the stream, too, but he didn't think there was much he could do about food.

"Come. We need to get moving. I think we've lost them, but I don't want to stay here for too long. I know of some poachers' camps that should be abandoned this time of year. We should be safe in one of them for the night. But we'll have to reach them first. It will take several hours."

The girl promptly turned and walked out of the stream and into the woods. At a loss as to what else to do, Luther eventually followed. They walked through the woods as dusk and then night fell around them. Luther had no idea where they were going, but the girl seemed to be sure of their direction. They didn't speak.

As the woods darkened, Luther saw set after set of eyes begin to watch them from the darkness. Birds called out in warning to other creatures as they approached and then passed. He could have sworn the eyes in the darkness were getting closer to them as they kept walking. The girl—on the other hand—seemed serenely unconcerned about the encroaching blackness. Luther knew nothing about nature. He had never even been camping.

"Confidence," she suddenly spoke after hours of silence.

"What?"

"Confidence. Hold yourself up with confidence, even if you have to pretend. You reek of unease. That makes some animals nervous. It makes others *hungry*."

With that, she fell silent again. Somehow, that didn't help him feel confident. The flat, dense woods began thinning as they climbed up into hillier country. She led him up a steep, short hill that had an outcropping of woods at its peak. He was tired, thirsty, hungry, and cold. His feet were throbbing and bruised from walking barefoot through these woods. Despite the heavy blanket of leaves that lay on the ground, his feet seemed to have found every sharp stone.

As he was thinking about his poor feet, his right foot came down into a putrid puddle of strange liquid. He hopped forward and tried to wipe his foot off on the leaves. He was sure his feet must be disgusting and muddy by now.

They pushed through the dense woods at the peak of the small hill and found a stone circle in the middle surrounding a cleared space with a smaller, taller stone circle at the very center. The girl—Lisabin apparently from now on—slid smoothly over the outer ring of stones into the cleared ground. Luther clambered after her and fell over. She walked once around the outer circle, peering around.

“Good, no signs of recent use. And the fire pit,” Luther realized she must be referring to the smaller circle in the center, “is built up enough that we should be able to make a small fire without giving away our location. Go gather wood and kindling, and get a fire going. You must be cold in that ridiculous outfit of yours. I’m certainly cold myself.”

She shivered some in the cooling night air. She unbuckled her sword and rested it against one of the outer stones. With a heave, her leather armor slid over her head, and she rested it next to her sword.

“I’ll see if I can find anything edible around here. I had to flee in such a rush, I’m very poorly provisioned.”

She disappeared into the darkness. Luther followed her into the darkness around the circle and began gathering anything he thought might burn. He had managed to find some large limbs and sticks by the time she slipped back into the circle.

“You haven’t gotten the fire going yet?” she asked as she dumped thick, dirt-covered roots by the fire pit.

“I don’t really know how to make a fire,” he admitted, knowing what response was coming.

“You don’t know how to make a fire? What kind of?” she started, sounding outraged. She then took a deep breath to calm herself down. “I keep forgetting, you simple fellow.”

She sounded almost pitying as she looked at him. “How have you survived for so long? Well, bring me those sticks and that small pile right there. I’ll show you.”

In the most condescending voice Luther had ever heard, Lisabin walked him through the steps of making a fire. Normally he would have been furious by her tone, but he was shivering from the cold and willing to put up with pretty much any obnoxious thing Lisabin could say as long as warmth was at the end of it. They eventually had a small fire going, and the stones around the fire were high enough to block almost all of the light.

Lisabin scrubbed as much dirt as she could from the roots and placed them close to the fire without letting them actually touch the flames.

“Unfortunately dinner will be a poor affair tonight. But my father always said, ‘poor food is better than no food,’” she said as she turned the roots as their sides started to blacken. They sat in silence as she continued to rotate the roots.

Eventually the smell of a baked potato mixed with burning dirt filled the hill peak. Lisabin speared one of the roots with her small knife and declared them cooked. She cut off the ends of the root she had speared, slit open the skin in one, smooth motion from end-to-end, and handed it to

Luther.

“Roll the skin back and eat the dull, grey part in the middle,” she instructed with hand motions in case his simple brain couldn’t understand her words. “It will taste bland—at best—but it will fill you up.”

Lisabin then patted her stomach and smiled, making sure poor, dull Luther understood that it was food. He ignored her and focused on the food. Pulling back the skin of the root, his teeth bared as they sank into the soft flesh inside. It actually wasn’t all that bad. It really did just taste like a mostly-flavorless potato. But he was hungry, so he quickly ate it as she ate one herself. They split the rest of the roots and were soon sitting by the fire with full stomachs. Even if he was still lost, he decided it could be worse. No day is a total loss if one has a good dinner in their belly, he decided.

After a few minutes, he felt Lisabin watching him. He looked over and met her eyes. She was studying him closely again, taking in his pajamas and muddy, bruised feet.

“You really are lost. Aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Where are you from?”

“Atlanta. It’s in America.”

“America? Is that a land across the Great Sea?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did you get here?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. She gave him another very condescending look as she shook her head.

“Well, you are sitting on the edge of Ravenwood. It’s a forest in the heart of Hassoon. North of us is the land of Norwraith. Here.” She grabbed a stick and scratched a rough map in the dirt.

“Norwraith is a hard, barren country with massive coastlines. The people along the coast are dangerous fighters, ruthless businesspeople, and some of the most skilled merchant sailors and most dangerous pirates there are. My uncle is a pirate King along the coast of Norwraith. He commands a fleet of hundreds of pirate ships. They do a bit of honest trading, too. But not too much, my uncle says, because they’ll get soft.

“The Norwraith are brave, but independent and disorganized. They are forever fighting amongst themselves. And they make for poor soldiers in an army. Unwilling to follow others’ orders. Their soldiers have a funny habit of asking, ‘Why?’ before carrying out any command. Most Norwraith consider themselves to be simple businesspeople and traders. Pursuit of trade is their

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interest. But my uncle says that, even with the most respectable Norwraith trader, there's a little bit of pirate inside of them. The flags of Norwraith will always show trading ships or sea birds—but if you look carefully, you can always find a curved dagger hidden somewhere.

“Closer in are the open, grass plains of Midwraith. They breed great war horses and fight as mounted warriors. Never face a Midwraithian in a joust. They are sure to win—and most likely will kill you in the process.

“To our east is the kingdom of Edlegold. It is flat farm country with black, rich soil and massive fields of wheat, barley, rye, and fruit orchards. It claims it loves peace and tranquility above all else. However, it is also most *prosperous* in peace time when it can sell its grains to every other kingdom. Really its people are placid and timid. They will put up with much provocation and insults to avoid an expensive and costly war.

“In the south are the forests of Seigen. The humans there are wise and studious. Interested in books and learning. Some of the greatest minds and wisest advisors in the land come from Seigen. However, some of the humans have spent too much time in the woods with the sprites and elves. They are forever drinking tea from the woodrose and smoking the elvenflower. The sprites and elves take great delight in tricking unwary humans into drinking their teas and smoking from their pipes. The humans then become befuddled, wandering further and further into the forests—never to be seen again.

“In the west is where the mountains are born. The humans are fantastic craftspeople and make all sorts of goods. Some of the best armor and weapons come from the smiths of the Wyck mountain ranges. But they have also allied themselves with the trolls, goblins, dwarfs, and giants living in the mountain ranges. Trolls and giants will never truly be allies with humans. The dwarfs and goblins are friendlier because they are excellent traders themselves. But they are only interested in the wealth the humans can bring them. The westerners have been foolish to so willingly give their allegiances to creatures that do not return their loyalty. And they too often arm other kingdoms instead of taking action themselves.

“Here, in the middle, is the kingdom of Dracnas.” She spoke the name with obvious relish and pride.

“It was my father's kingdom. We descend from a long line of faery Kings and Queens who ruled all of Hassoon once. Over a thousand years ago, the great warrior King Drakan—who was half-human and half-faery—rode his enormous, silver dragon, Aetherux, into battle. Aetherux was the most ancient dragon known in the *entire* world—with one red eye and one blue. King Drakan led

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the Armies of Light against the demon King Malkarta and his Shadow Army. King Malkarta rode his ravenblak, Claw. A ravenblak is an enormous, four-legged bird the size of five horses with the head of a raven. It has talons that can rip a man in half and a beak so strong it can crush armor. King Drakan and his armies were victorious. King Malkarta and his Second, Greykin, fled across the Great Sea. King Malkarta took the last of the ravenblaks with him.

“King Drakan then united all of Hassoon under his banner, which he made a silver dragon head with one red eye and one blue. He ruled over this land for over two hundred years from his Castle Nahura, leading to a time of prosperity and joy for all. Castle Nahura lies at the exact center of Hassoon. It is a castle of white marble that sits on a hill surrounded by flat land. When the sun rises behind it, the castle erupts like a burning flame in the heart of Hassoon.

“He died of old age, and long-forgotten rivalries reared. Slowly the unions and the peace crumbled. My people have been attempting to reunite the five regions of Hassoon ever since. I am a direct descendant of King Drakan, and I have his faery blood my veins. My father, King Landavor, was a great king in this land, but he died recently. When he did, my cousin, Magdalena, seized the throne with the help of her wicked Second, Xenia Paine. She ordered my arrest and execution, knowing that the people would rally around me as their rightful Queen if she gave them the chance. She has a dark soul, my cousin, and will be a cruel and venomous Queen. People whisper that she is the Red Queen for her bloodthirsty and torturous nature.

“I managed to escape, but just barely. I only had time to flee with the clothes on my back and some of the treasury gold.” She reached over and jingled the heavy pouch that hung from her belt. Luther’s eyes were the size of dinner plates as he listened—speechless—to her story. “But I managed to get one other thing before I fled. This.”

She stood up and drew the sword with which she had poked Luther earlier. It glinted in the firelight. She flipped it in the air and deftly caught it by the blade without cutting herself. She held the sword out—hilt first—to Luther. He took it gently and was shocked at how light and warm it was. The blade thinned in the middle and bulged again at the tip. It had deep grooves that ran the length of the middle of the blade on both sides. The grip of the hilt—the handle of the sword—was ringed with cherry-colored, smooth wood. The dragon head on the pommel—at the end of the hilt—was intricately detailed, showing a roaring dragon with sharp fangs and a small red ruby and a small blue sapphire for eyes.

“It was King Drakan’s short sword that he carried into the battle against King Malkarta. It is my most prized, treasured possession in the entire world. I risked capture and certain death when I

delayed my escape to get that sword from the armory. It was difficult, too. It was closely guarded. King Drakan crafted it himself. He was a very skilled blacksmith. But he did something extra special for this blade. He put three drops of his own blood and three drops of his dragon, Aetherux's, blood into the steel while he was forging it. The sword has the deep, natural magic of the faeries and the strength and immortality of the dragons. It is said to be indestructible. Its name is Dragon Fang."

"So do dragons exist, too?" Luther asked, staring at this strange girl in absolute wonder.

"Don't be simple! Everyone knows dragons are extinct. Unfortunately they were hunted to extinction for their hides, fangs, bones, claws, and hearts. They may be immortal, magical creatures, but they are solitary, too. They never die from old age, but they can be killed. They could not resist the crush of the hunters when people realized how valuable dragons could be. My uncle claims that there are still dragons on islands of ice in the far north. He even sent a fleet of ships to find them with massive, flat-bottomed boats specially designed to hold dragons. He was convinced he was going to make a fortune by returning dragons to Hassoon. But the ships were never seen again."

"And you're part faery?"

"Only a small amount of faery blood remains in our family. There are no pure faeries anymore, but there are families like mine that can trace their lines back to the great faeries that ruled the world thousands of years ago."

"What are you going to do now that your cousin is chasing you?"

"I shall flee north. I must find my uncle. He will lend me his pirate army, and I will lead them back in *full force* against my usurper." She brought her hand down rigidly and spoke so matter-of-factly, as if this was the most natural and obvious thing to do.

"Aren't you scared?" he asked. She shrugged.

"Life can be scary. But that doesn't change who we are or what we must do." She leaned towards him across the fire. "Besides, if the path ahead of you doesn't scare you a little bit, where's the fun in traveling it? I am the rightful Queen of this land. I am a faery warrior, like my family before me. And I must fight for my people."

Luther stared at her, unsure what to make of this whole situation. He eventually handed the sword back to Lisabin, who returned it to its sheath.

"What will you do? How will you find your people and return to your home?" she asked him.

"I don't know. But I have no idea how I got here. So I think I'm stuck here for now." He

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looked around the small camp with a lost expression, as if hoping someone would walk up and explain how he got there and how he could get home.

She watched him for a moment before saying, “Come with me!” Lisabin’s face lit up as she spoke.

“What?”

“Come with me! Help me find my uncle. I would welcome the company. And you are stuck here anyways. Come with me to the north. If you assist me in making it to the north, I shall make you a knight of my kingdom!”

“Really?” Luther had to admit that he was tempted.

“Absolutely! I am your Queen—now that you’re stuck in my kingdom. And I command it. We shall find some adventure, you and I!”

“Yeah?”

“Of course! Life’s more fun with a little adventure now and then!”

Luther thought for a moment before saying, “Alright!” His spirits immediately lifted as he spoke. Lisabin’s face split into a giant smile.

“Excellent! We shall have to get provisioned, if we are going to make it all the way. There is a town about a day’s walk from here. That’s where I was headed. We’ll have to leave first thing in the morning. But I have the gold to get us properly equipped for the trip. We’ll have to watch for my cousin’s soldiers. If we don’t see any tomorrow, we should be safe to stay in the town long enough to buy our supplies. After visiting the town, we’ll have to stay off the main roads. Travel across the open country. It will take longer, but it will be safer.”

They settled by the fire to get some sleep before dawn. Neither of them was dressed to sleep in the open, so they piled limbs and sticks and anything else they could find on the fire before sleeping. Luther had a hard time falling asleep, though. It wasn’t the cold. Or the ground. Or being lost. Or anything else that would be reasonable or mature or grown-up. Visions of a great warrior flying into battle on top of a dragon against a demon king kept filling his head. And he found it hard to sleep as he thought about becoming a knight for that warrior’s descendant.