

Jonathon Goode,  
Honorary Witch



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The Crystals of Aztlan

By Michael Lingaard



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## Prologue

Twelve thousand years ago, when mankind was very young and civilisation was just beginning, there was an island so fair and proud it was the wonder of the known world.

From her were born all the arts and all the sciences, which her people took to far-off places bringing light into the new lands. Farming, wine-making, weaving, pottery making and writing were some of the skills they brought; astronomy, engineering and medicine were the sciences they taught. They knew the secrets of building in stone, and massive monuments were built all over their empire—for empire it was—as testament to their greatness and fame.

These were the days before history began, and in that far-flung time, great sheets of ice gripped the Earth and all the northern lands were buried far beneath them. The waters of all the seas and all the oceans were much lower and much more benign; the distances between continents were much shorter.

This island was known as Aztlan, and it stood beyond the Pillars of Hercules in the waters of Okeanos, the great sea between continents. And the people of Aztlan plied that ocean with their ships of painted sails and no sea was

unknown to them, for they were the first explorers and knew the secrets of the Earth.

They knew the secrets of crystals and, with those secrets, knew how to draw energy from the very air and ground and water and channel it into power that they could control: power to lift great stones; power to heal; power to calm the waters. For the people of Aztlan were the first magicians and none could stand before them; all peoples bowed to them.

Yet, all things are fleeting and, in one single day and one single night, the Earth convulsed, tore itself apart and erupted, and the proud island of Aztlan fell beneath the waves, never to rise again. The fabled isle became shrouded in myth and legend.

Legend says that all her secrets were drowned with her; myth says ... maybe not.

**It all begins in the little village of Upper Uffing** with the thought that every single event has a beginning and an end. Sometimes, the tricky part is trying to figure out which is which because they're not always blindingly obvious. If other ingredients are added to the equation, say, "when," "why" and "where," then beginnings and endings start to occupy vague and somewhat unclear points in time and space. They become subjective, and very, very hard to pin down. That's because lines of reasoning diverge or converge or just plain merge; opinions are like noses: everybody's got one; a point of view is just mental sightseeing and attention spans are always different lengths but it is universally recognised that everything has a starting point, a beginning. Somewhere. That's definite. And everything has an ending. Somewhere else. That's also definite. But sometimes they overlap, and sometimes they're in the wrong order. Or place. And sometimes the bits in-between get all jumbled up.

It's all very definite.

Probably.

People trying to be mysterious or clever have a saying for it, a metaphor. They say, "Worlds collide." They don't mean real worlds or real collisions, because that would happen only once and then there would be no-one around afterwards to make up clever sayings, although you might imagine the last one ever spoken starting with something like, "I say, did you hear a big bang just then?" No, they just

try to glibly explain their confusion and uncertainty of a time they are struggling to come to terms with.

Reality is the problem. Reality can be very confusing.

On the *other* hand, there is a theory that states that there are many realities, and these realities are variations of a theme arrayed throughout time and space, a multiplex of universes separated from one another like the pages of a book—close, but always separated by the thickness of nothing much at all, and, to follow the analogy, by the lack of a giant, ephemeral, god-like finger to turn the page.

What if, maybe, just maybe, it was these worlds that could collide? Hmmm? Let's then consider a moment in this reality; let's consider a beginning and a journey, although not necessarily in that order.

Let's consider Jonathon Goode.

**Deep in the canal-crossed**, water-laced Fen-country of England's eastern coast, summer was making its presence felt in rare and pleasant fashion. The sun was just warm enough without being too hot, the breeze was gentle enough to cool but not ruffle, the sky was blue and high and the fragrance of the countryside filled the very air.

Jonathon Goode thought the day was almost perfect. There was the security of the solid roof-deck of the narrowboat "Lady Daphne" under his shoulders, there was

the faint rumble of the motor in his ears and the burble of dark water beneath the keel and there were, if he turned his head to one side and looked, the canal banks slipping by at a comfortable three miles an hour. There were just him, his folks, and his aunt and cousin—a rare holiday for five to be enjoyed with diligent sloth and dedicated inaction. As an indication of his commitment to this holiday, he'd even turned his mobile phone to message bank; he was too tired to text. The real world seemed a million miles away.

The unreal world, however, wasn't that far away at all.

Jonathon Goode was a lad nearing a crossroad. Childhood, metaphorical seconds away behind him; his future of unknown prospects far, far away in front of him. And at the start of the year, that future had indeed seemed a long way in front, but now, as the school year approached its final term, he could hear his futures' stealthy approach in the way his parents suddenly were talking about it. Casual questions about his subjects for his penultimate year at school: should he stay on and try for university, was there any particular field of trade or commerce he felt draw to? The questions were as endless as they were insistent.

His cusp of ignorant adolescence was rapidly diminishing.

These were the thoughts lurking in the back of his mind, putting a little cloud over his holiday as he was carried, very slowly, along a ribbon of golden water into the glow of a setting sun. If Jonathon Goode had known what was coming towards him *up* that ribbon of gold, he would have been too terrified to think of a future! Because something *was* coming

towards him. It was nothing physical, metaphors never are, yet it travelled just the same. Something from the past, the ancient past, was moving towards a predestined point in time and space, secret and secretive yet absolutely certain of what it sought—*Jonathon Goode!*

There is an unknown force in our lives that you could call Fate, or you could call Destiny or Bad Luck or even It's All Your Nigel's Fault! It doesn't matter what you call it, because you can't control it. You don't even know it's there! And even if you could guess at its existence, there's no way you could possibly know when it will make its presence known.

But *it* does.

So, soporific in the sunlight, Jonathon Goode let the miles and the day slide gently past his lazing body. The water ahead disappeared into the golden orb of the afternoon sun and, it seemed to his sleepy imagination, to point straight as an arrow to some unknown, far-off horizon where adventure awaited someone just like him.

A shadow replaced the sun and a voice said, 'Jack, you're wanted.' He knew the voice and refused to look up. His cousin Elizabeth, or Lizzie to him and no-one else, was the only one to call him Jack and she had the unhappy knack of knowing when to disturb him at exactly the wrong time.

'Dishes,' the voice persisted. 'Your mum says so.'

With a feigned groan, Jonathon uncoiled himself and stood up. He was very tall for his sixteen years, and quite

thin, and the combination gave him an angular, awkward appearance. Unruly waves of burnished copper hair haloed his head and the greenest of eyes looked out onto the world. There was something about the lad that commanded attention, something that drew the eye.

Without a word, he turned and climbed down into the boat, and his cousin seated herself cross-legged on the vacated deck. Even to anyone who didn't know them, the family resemblance was obvious: she was almost as tall as Jonathon, but that height made her willowy and slender. Her hair, too, was similar, but of the more subdued tone of honey-gold and it was cropped short. Hazel eyes completed the picture. But Elizabeth Waterhouse had a serious advantage over her cousin, one that really counted for something: she was older. Oh, not by much, four months, give or take a day, but that difference was like a bullet in a pistol that she could fire any time she liked. As many times as she liked. Primogeniture? Not quite, but she *was* older than Jonathon and her mother *was* older than Aunty Penelope, therefore there had to be proper order of things. And that order was with her at the top, naturally.

Anyway, as much as she cared for her cousin, when it came down to the picky, niggly, aspects of familial point-scoring, only one thing mattered: he was a boy and deserved everything she could get away with. A smile of satisfaction crossed her lips as she pulled her phone from her pocket, checked her text messages, and began to respond. Lizzie

had a lot of friends and they all demanded attention. Her thumbs literally danced across the keys.

The day continued to slide serenely by.

**One year ago to the day and very close to Upper Uffing**  
Sir Percival Malsmley-Groyne read the few, sparse words with cold, dead eyes and knew that the Random House Unabridged Dictionary could not capture in so few words the reality of the subject.

Cen-taur n 1. Class. Myth, one of a race of monsters having the head, trunk and arms of a man, and the body and legs of a horse.

The dictionary could in no way capture the brutal power of the ... the ... *thing!* Anger burned inside him, hidden from without by the coldness of his gaze, a gaze that now turned to survey the ruins of his laboratory. He should know! Oh, yes! He should know! And he knew, because, just eight hours previously, in the cold, early hours of morning, *he'd seen one!*

Now he needed to think! To collect his thoughts. To make some sense out of things. To go back over events to see what he might have missed! To find a meaning for this insanity. Let's see, last night at two in the morning the security alarms had gone off and he and his staff had raced

down to the little laboratory to find it totally destroyed. Everything was smashed, and the crystal, the precious crystal ball, was missing.

With hands shaking from anger, he had replayed the video on the security cameras and, there, on the screen, the crystal ball sat all alone on its pillar of white plastic tubing in the centre of the laboratory as it always had when, suddenly, a halo appeared around it. A bright nimbus that expanded and expanded until it filled the very room. Then the nightmare began.

A form appeared within the light, a large, dark form. It looked like a man, but then it stepped forward. On four legs. Four hooved legs! And towering above the front legs was the torso of a man! Centaur! Chain mail covered his right arm and chest, and a steel helmet with two great horns crowned his head. He grasped a wicked-looking trident in his right hand and carried a net in his left. A massive curved sword was strapped to his back. With wild rolling eyes he looked about, saw the crystal and, with one deft flick of the net, the crystal was gone. One vicious backwards kick of his powerful rear legs and the work of years lay in ruins.

Then it was gone, back into the light.

Then the light, too, was gone.

Sir Percival realised that there was much more to the crystals than had been foretold, more than had been dreamed about. Much, much more! The strange creature was confirmation that the crystal was a source of great power, power to breach another world, another time maybe. He

didn't know. But he would find out. Oh, yes, he *would* find out. And when he did ... his hands involuntarily formed into fists, as if squeezing the truth out of the very air ... when he did—

**Today Upper Uffing is a rather small, quaint village** built around a lock on the canal. Its little cottages and crooked lanes were a relic of the halcyon days when the canal was first built and Queen Victoria's England was the world leader in cutting edge technology.

The magic of gravity raised and lowered the boats, and the areas either side of the lock had been widened to provide moorings for those boats waiting their turn. Negotiating the lock was a lengthy process, which provided Upper Uffing with a regular supply of tourists who were only too happy to sample the hospitality of the old waterside pub and the wares of the village craft shops.

It was into this idyllic setting that the “Lady Daphne” cruised just at sunset and moored by the bank at the end of a line of similar craft.

An hour or so after arrival, when the sky had just begun to cross over from serious dusk to early night and the canal water had turned as black as ink, Daniel Goode, mug of coffee in hand, stepped down from the boat onto the tow path. His wife, Penelope, and her sister Diane had gone

for a walk into the village as soon as he'd moored the boat. He'd stayed behind to help Jonathon and Elizabeth tidy it up.

The coffee gave up tiny wisps of aromatic steam matching the mist rising from the water. All about was silence and a damp, pervasive, earthy smell.

The decision to take this holiday was starting to pay off, he mused, because the stresses he had been under lately were lifting, and his easy-going nature had returned. Daniel Goode was a freelance journalist, an occupation not known for its regular pay cheques, pleasant subject matters or longevity. Yet, he was good at it and always seemed to get the stories to which others would love to attach their names, but it was hard work and deadlines were merciless in their punctuality. He'd needed a break. Well, not just him, the whole family needed one. He was under no illusion as to how much of his stress flowed into the family. Fortunately, it was school holidays and a week on the water had seemed the perfect choice. Penelope had agreed and, as luck would have it, her sister and niece were also available and eager to join them. Daniel Goode had the happy circumstance of getting on very well with Diane and her daughter Elizabeth. He enjoyed their company. It was a bonus that his son Jonathon and Elizabeth were good friends also.

'Dan!' The shout broke into Daniel's thoughts, and the figures of the two sisters came out of the evening dark, striding down the towpath. Anyone could tell they were

sisters: both were tall, both had almost identical auburn hair, and both affected that dress code favoured by those not particularly interested in clothes: denim jeans, sports trainers and shirt. The only differences between the two sisters were in the colours of the shirts and in the choice of accessories. Although the years had mitigated somewhat their original svelte figures, both were still capable of attracting an admiring glance or two.

Similar the sisters may look, but there was a fundamental difference between them. Or rather, within them. Both were educated and held good jobs—Penelope worked as a solicitors' secretary while Diane was an assistant editor for a publishing house. All very modern and normal. Except ... except that where Penelope had a cool, urbane assurance about her that was part and parcel of a secure, moderately affluent family lifestyle, with a marriage and a future that beckoned brightly, Diane, the elder one, didn't. Oh, she was comfortable in her job and certainly met the obligations of mortgage and bills, but the veneer of assurance on her was thinner, more brittle. It had been that way for the last eight years, ever since her husband had decided that the young secretary in his office offered more excitement than mortgage drudgery and family responsibility. And that had been hard, but she'd managed.

Her whole focus since then had been to steer Elizabeth through the eddies and rapids of adolescence and school. And she had done a very good job. Everybody said so. But, as any decent physics teacher would tell you, there's an equal

and opposite reaction to all things. In other words, there's a cost. And Diane had paid it. No social life. At all. And that meant no love life. At all. Not that she had ever thought ... well ... sometimes, but it didn't matter. Really, it didn't. Then, you wake up near the end of your daughter's school years and find that eight years have flown by, which didn't matter either. Really. It didn't. Because you know that soon you'll be able to find that social life. Soon you'll be able to join the world again. Soon. You hope. Oh yes, you really hope.

'Ah, coffee! Any for us?' Penelope said, as she reached Daniel.

'Yeah. There's a fresh pot inside.' He stepped back and allowed his wife and sister-in-law to precede him on board.

'The lock-keeper tells us that there's a wonderful little pub on the other side of the lock,' Diane informed him as she headed for the small galley. 'And there's a small country fair in progress,' she said, jabbing a finger towards the roofs of the village, 'behind the village, on the commons.'

'It's a perfect night for it,' Daniel replied, looking up at the first faint stars to appear. 'What about the kids? Would they want to have some dinner with us up there or can they amuse themselves at the fair while we sample the local hospitality?'

'I think,' his wife said, 'they would prefer to eat some awful fair-ground rubbish than be seen dead with their parents.'

‘How about we join them up there later?’ Daniel suggested.

Diane nodded in agreement. ‘Sounds good to me,’ she said. ‘Anyway, those two can’t get up to too much mischief there, can they?’

‘Don’t you believe it, Di,’ Daniel replied, reaching for the coffee pot. ‘Mischief finds *them*.’

**The future revealed for five pounds.** Evening had settled in properly and Upper Uffing was a pool of dim light in the darkness of the countryside. A large spill of light from the waterside pub fanned out across the black water and the muted burble of voices followed it. Across the village were many small lights from windows and lamps dotting the huddle of dimly-seen houses like so many fireflies, and, amid the murky light, two figures were trying to organise their own evening.

‘Well,’ said Lizzie, ‘what’s it to be?’

Jack looked around the village. They stood at an intersection ending at the canal’s edge. The road leading away crossed through the only two lanes the village possessed, curved left up a slight rise behind the last of the cottages, and disappeared into the night. Its progress was delineated by the feeble glow of four, widely spaced street lamps. Dark shadows of would-be revellers were heading through the night up that very road.

Where the lamps petered out, a brighter glow lit up the sky just outside the village, atop the rise. Here lights and lamps of all descriptions, and candles, braziers, festoons of

bulbs and flickering neon threw a visual cacophony into the night sky. Noise accompanied the lights. A calliope played its tinny themes as a roundabout spun. Snippets of music drifted from the open fronts of stalls of chance and skill, and buskers added their voices and instruments. Above all, the solid drone of human voices ebbed and flowed as people moved, mingled and enjoyed themselves.

‘What,’ he eventually came up with, ‘that lot there,’ he nodded his head towards the fair, ‘or baked beans on toast on the boat, in front of a microscopic television? Some choice.’

Liz sighed to herself ... he could be such a pain, sometimes. ‘How much money do you have?’ she asked, ignoring his mood.

Jack pulled a battered wallet from his back pocket and peered inside. ‘About ten pounds and some change.’ He looked at his cousin. ‘You?’

Liz gave him a nudge to get him moving and then fell into step with him. ‘Nearly twenty,’ she answered. ‘But I don’t want to spend that much.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Jack grumbled. ‘You could probably buy the whole fair for that.’

A little while later, Jack was actually beginning to enjoy himself. The fair was surprisingly well attended and there were enough rides and stalls to keep everyone busy. He and Liz had tried the dodgem cars first, at his suggestion. This was his perfect way to establish, if only for the night, the pecking order. A few laps knocking his cousin from pillar to post should curtail her gamesmanship, dim her spirit, and

let her know who's boss. And it had started out well for three laps. Then, somehow, she'd slipped behind him and began to attack, repeatedly shoving him in the rear as he tried to escape. Round and round they went, with him—skilfully, he later recalled—manoeuvring through the traffic, Lizzie smashing cars out of the way as she madly pursued him. Fathers with young children on their knees, one hand on the wheel and the other wrapped around an ice-cream cone were suddenly set upon and bumped, unceremoniously, out of the way to be herded into clumps of static cars full of lost cones and squealing kids. In desperation Jack managed to pull a three hundred and sixty degree turn and subject his cousin to the same treatment. Honour was restored.

The House of Horrors, with its wobbly floorboards, was fantastic because they were trying to eat candy floss at the same time. They got their faces covered in sticky sugar as the floor lurched one way and then suddenly dropped. After that, the Hall of Mirrors provided the best laugh they'd both had in ages. Yet, the most pathetic Ghost Train ever, was one of the best rides, because everyone on the train jeered and hooted as roughly made and badly painted skeletons and monsters lurched out of the dark at them, moaning and howling out of synch, courtesy of well-worn tapes.

A bucket of greasy chips and a warm can of soft drink made up the mainstay of Jack's culinary exploration of the fair. He was in the act of stuffing the last of the chips into his mouth when Lizzie nudged his arm.

‘Look. A coconut stall,’ she told him, knowing he would be unable to resist the challenge. And he couldn’t. Jack eyed the stall with an almost professional detachment, noticing the distance to the offered targets: in this case four rather small coconuts well cupped in their sturdy holders. He noticed, too, the slope of the ground in front of the stall as it subtly fell away to the right.

‘*Mmmm mmm,*’ he muttered through a mouthful of chips, as he let Lizzie lead him forward. He knew exactly what the odds were of successfully knocking the coconuts over: they were zero, because all the main prizes were still on display. But as a good swing bowler for the school cricket team, and a very good outfielder with the best throwing arm in that team, Jack was confident of carrying the day.

‘That’s it, young sir,’ the stallholder encouraged. ‘Step right up and win a prize for your young lady.’ Lizzie sniggered at the ‘your young lady’ bit until Jack elbowed her in the ribs. The stallholder was a man of middle years with black hair that was *too* shiny, big teeth that were too white, and a sequined jacket that sparkled under the lights. Several of the sequins were missing. With a confident smirk he accepted Jack’s money and handed over four old softballs; balls that had seen better days. Twenty seconds later the smirk was a fixed grimace as he watched ball after ball fly with unerring accuracy and uncanny power to send every coconut crashing out of its holder. One of the coconuts actually broke open when it hit the ground. Silently, he handed over to a grinning Lizzie his top prize: a large black

and white stuffed penguin that sported a red bow-tie. He hoped that not too many punters had latched on to the lad's style. He couldn't afford too many like that!

Jack felt rather good. He liked to win at things, and he liked to win things. Yet, apart from a talent at cricket, he possessed no ability at sports whatsoever. He didn't like running, swimming was totally ridiculous and football best left to those who saw something purposeful in it. But cricket offered Jack the perfect sport. When he was fielding, he only had to move when the ball came his way. And when he was bowling, he was the centre of attention only for that brief span of an over.

And he wasn't actually a bad student. The stuff he learned went in and stayed in, and his homework came out on time every time. It's just that, like most of his friends, he was in that intellectual middle-ground that was epitomised by consistent report cards that basically said, 'not bad', 'could do better', 'should apply himself more', 'should be more enthusiastic' but, all things being equal, 'we're happy with his progress'. For all that, though, Jack Goode had a large capacity for adventure and controlled recklessness. It didn't take much to prod him in that direction.

Lizzie Waterhouse, by contrast, was not, in any intellectual sense, brighter than her cousin. No, no, she'd never claim that. But academically, well, her report cards were always brimming with superlatives and her percentile marks were always very high. She was a trier

and smart enough to know that work now got her a better shot at her choice of career, whatever that career might be. Besides, she had no interest in sports and the like. Her focus just wasn't in that direction, although she did share some of Jack's enthusiasm for 'adventures' as he like to call them.

They sauntered away from the coconut stall. 'What're you going to call the penguin?' he asked Lizzie.

'It's just a stuffed penguin, Jack,' came the riposte. 'I don't think it would answer to any name.'

Jack thought about that for a second or two. 'So all those dolls you had when you were little didn't have names? You know,' he goaded, 'the ones you used to line up on your bed and talk to?' He ducked just in time as the penguin flew past the point where his head had been microseconds before. Lizzie's round-arm swing had nearly caught him out!

'Okay, smarty-pants,' said Lizzie, feigning indignation, 'you name it.'

'Four balls,' he replied promptly.

'What?'

'It took four balls to win it,' Jack said, deadpan. 'No? Don't like it?' He shrugged. 'Pick your own then.'

Lizzie held the penguin up to eye level and gave it a meaningful stare. 'Tuxedo, bow tie, looks like James Bond to me.'

'That's your name is it? Someone would need a lot of smarts to come up with that.'

Jack was winning this encounter, and she didn't want him to. She needed something.

'007,' she said with conviction. 'That's his name.'

Jack held her gaze, absolutely certain now of victory, and said, '004.'

She couldn't help the laugh that escaped, and she didn't mind. Because it was so perfect. 'Done,' she smiled.

The fair seemed to be getting more crowded and noisier as the after-dinner crowd arrived. Jack checked his watch: seven-thirty five. *Ah, well,* he sighed. *I'm out of money now. We might as well go home.*

'I'm out of money,' he told Lizzie. 'We should probably go back.'

'The folks will still be having dinner at the pub,' she reasoned. 'We could go back to the boat and get something to eat or we could mooch around for a while longer and meet up with them here.'

So they mooched. They wandered around, dragging 004 with them. They had virtually seen everything there was to see, when—

'Jack,' said Lizzie, grabbing his arm and halting his progress through the crowd. 'Look there.'

'Where?' Jack peered into the crowd looking for something unusual and successfully failing to find it.

Lizzie pointed into the dark between two widely spaced stalls. 'There! That tent. See?' A dark tent was set back from the main row of stalls. The tent looked like a large tepee and a small red light illuminated a sign on a

short pole before the entrance. From inside the tent a dim glow showed through the fabric. Both pairs of eyes read the sign:

MADAME ZAMBOANGO  
FORTUNES TOLD & THE FUTURE REVEALED  
FIVE POUNDS

‘Yeah, right!’ said Jack dismissively.

‘I’ve got five pounds,’ said Lizzie in a tone of voice—the soft, silky one—that Jack had learned to be wary of. She also had a mischievous look in her eyes as she held the coins up in front of his eyes.

‘Er,’ he offered, ‘ah, do you mean ...?’ He left the question hanging, and Lizzie waggled the coins at him. The truth hit him fast. ‘No way!’ he all but shouted. ‘Never! Not on your life! No chance!’

Lizzie grinned like a cat that knows it has the mouse trapped. ‘I dare you!’ she hissed.

Horror struck Jack a blow. This was the worst of all challenges—to be *dared*, like it was something easy. This was so unfair. If he refused, Lizzie would tell everyone he’d refused a simple dare. If he accepted, she’d tell everyone he went to a fortune teller! A fortune teller! He would be the laughing stock at school. He—

‘Well?’ Lizzie asked sweetly, certain of her power, her eyes wide and innocent.

The cold fist of reality gripped Jack’s heart. There was no way out. Well, maybe there was. ‘Okay,’ he agreed. ‘On

one condition.' Dares weren't subject to conditions, but this was an exceptional dare and he couldn't take chances if he was to emerge unscathed.

'What condition?' Lizzie's eyes narrowed. She suspected a trap.

'Ah ... ah,' Jack chided. 'Agree or not?'

'Is it a fair condition?' There were rules, and honour must be adhered to in a dare.

'Very,' Jack stated.

'Oh, all right. What is it?'

'You can't tell anyone.'

'What? *What?* You cheat!' The mouse had sprung the trap.

'Deal or no deal?' Now Jack wore a confident grin, certain that Lizzie would release him from the dare.

Lizzie had gone too far to back out now. The same resolve that flowed in Jack's nature flowed in hers too. 'Deal,' she grated. 'It's a deal. But I come in with you.'

'Deal,' Jack agreed, thereby formalizing the agreement.

Madame Zamboanga took a last slurp from her cup of tea and slid the cup and saucer under the table as the curtains parted and Jack, Lizzie and the penguin entered. It had been rather a long day and now that it was drawing to a close, Madame Zamboanga usually stepped to one side and Myrtle Higginbottom took charge. Besides, her feet hurt and she should really get home soon and start dinner. The presence of the two young ones, and their money, quickly brought Madame Zamboanga back.

‘Ah, my young dears,’ she gushed, ‘what can the Fates divulge to you?’ As she spoke, Madame Zamboanga spread her bangle-festooned, fleshy arms to encompass the baize-topped table before her and the large, imposing ball of crystal that sat in an ebony holder on its surface. The bangles rattled heavily.

‘Well,’ began Jack, as Lizzie’s hand shoved him forward, ‘we ... er, I thought ...’ He was out of his depth and he knew it. What do you ask from a clairvoyant, anyway? His experience was very limited indeed.

‘My cousin,’ Lizzie stated firmly, ‘would like to know what the future holds.’ She said it with confidence because that’s what was said in all the stories she had read on the subject and Lizzie had read a lot of stories. Besides, her own mother was an amateur dabbler with the Tarot cards and *that* was what *she* always said.

‘Ah, yes. The future.’ Madame Zamboanga swished back her long black hair and motioned Jack forward. ‘Take a seat, my young friend,’ she offered, her plump palm outstretched for the coins Lizzie offered. ‘Be not afraid.’ Her accent was what she had come to believe was Romany, and she had been perfecting it, badly, for over forty years. ‘The future holds no fears for one such as I. It is a real thing. Be not afraid. It will not harm one of good heart and courage.’

*What a ham!* Lizzie thought. *And I can see grey hair sticking out from the sides of her wig!*

Jack sat down and Lizzie stood behind him. He was secretly glad that she was there. The crystal ball seemed

to fill the space between him and the eyes of Madame Zamboanga, and his were drawn to it.

‘Tell me your name,’ said the fortune teller, warming to the task now that the fee was in her pocket. Her hands encompassed the crystal ball and moved over its surface, caressing it in a slow deliberate way she was certain was exotic and mysterious.

Jack’s mouth was dry, and he actually felt a throb at his temples. ‘Erm, Jack. Sorry. Jonathon.’ He grinned foolishly.

‘Jonathon,’ Madame Zamboanga crooned in a low voice. ‘What can we show of the future of Jonathon?’ The last was addressed to the ball and she made a pretence of peering deeply into its crystalline structure. This was the bit that always got the punters, she knew. Their eyes always followed hers into the ball, allowing her the chance to examine her subject. No-one had ever worked out that they could be seen *through* the ball. Jonathon was no different than most, and she did what she always did: she made it up. She followed the tried and true pathways of the gullible and fed off their dreams: romance; adventure; fame; wealth and success. Pick any two and emphasise them, the rest distribute in moderate, but lesser, quantities. It always worked.

‘Now,’ she intoned, peering harder, ‘let us see what the Fates hold. Let us ...’ her voice trailed off as a letter appeared inside the crystal. It was the letter ‘Y’ and it floated around the inner surface of the crystal and crossed the path of her vision. Madame Zamboanga froze, and

her heart gave an extra beat. The letter was followed by 'O' then 'U'. Time froze for Myrtle Higginbottom. All her life she had pretended an affinity with the Art, and now it appeared to be here! In her very crystal! She was scarcely able to control her glee.

Other letters quickly followed: 'W' then 'I' then two 'L's. 'You will,' she whispered.

'Will what?' Jack asked, peering at the woman opposite who seemed to have gone very pale. Lizzies' hand tapped his shoulder and her finger pointed to the crystal. Letters appeared, swirling in reverse order around the inside of the crystal. His eyes widened in surprise, then his brain kicked in. *How do they do that?* he asked himself.

M-E-E-T. There was a space and other letters followed. A-N space E-L-F space A-T space T-H-E space E-M-P-O-R-I-U-M space W-H-E-R-E space M-A-G-I-C space I-S space B-O-U-G-H-T space A-N-D space S-O-L-D.

The letters spiralled around the inside of the crystal, and as the last of the message was pronounced, they began to speed up. Faster and faster they went, letters blurring together, words indistinguishable. Now they were one continuous ribbon that circled faster, faster, faster, and then, in absolute silence, disappeared.

Madame Zamboanga slumped back in her chair, sweat beaded her brow. What could she possibly tell them? Elves? Magic? What was all *that* about? Moreover, where in blazes had it come from?

'Will what?' Jack repeated.

‘Right,’ the fortune teller said, sitting forward. ‘Remember that the crystal never lies.’ This was absolutely true, because until today it had never said anything at all. ‘But sometimes the message can be, well, of a cryptic nature.’

‘You mean that the real message is hidden,’ Lizzie stated.

With relief Madame Zamboanga seized on Lizzies’ words. ‘Exactly! Hidden.’

‘So what is it that I’m going to meet?’ Jack asked.

‘You, young man, are going to meet an elf.’

Jack’s mouth opened, and then closed. ‘Elf? As in elves?’

‘Yes. Elf. Exactly.’ Madame Zamboanga wasn’t entirely there, the last few minutes had turned her world upside down. But Lizzie was insistent.

‘Where will this be? When?’ she insisted. ‘What’s the hidden message?’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Myrtle Higginbottom really had to concentrate now, because Madame Zamboanga was coming apart at the seams. ‘Obviously,’ she intoned, stating what her eyes had seen, ‘in an emporium.’ She peered across the table at Jack, avoiding the girls’ penetrating gaze. There was something about that look Myrtle Higginbottom certainly recognised. It was an old look, a look that said ‘I know what you’ve done, I know everything.’

‘That’s where it will be revealed. The message.’ She nodded her head as if in complete certainty of her prognostication.

‘Isn’t that a type of shop?’ Jack asked.

‘I think so.’ Madame Zamboanga now fervently wished they would go away.

What a lot of old rubbish, Lizzie wanted to say, but instead she asked, 'And that's it? A shop that only buys and sells magic? What sort of shop's that? There's nothing else?' When her mum did one of her card readings, there was always a lot of vague, ambiguous information; this was totally different.

'I'm afraid not, my dear. An elf, in an emporium, where they buy and sell magic.' She leaned back in her chair and fell into silence, her eyes fixed on the crystal ball. She wondered if it sounded as stupid to the two kids as it did to her own ears. The five pounds she had collected soon assuaged her concerns.

The fair was still going strong when Jack and Lizzie emerged from the fortune teller's tent. It was only eight o'clock. Jack felt let down.

'That's the easiest way to lose five pounds that I've ever seen,' he said. Then regretted the words immediately when he saw the crestfallen look on Lizzie's face. It had been her money. 'Sorry. But you got 004, I got mumbo-jumbo. Let's go back to the boat and have a cup of tea.'

Together they left the fair and soon were walking back down the narrow lane leading to the canal lock. They passed the four street lights and came to a small group of shops on the right-hand side of the road. The first was called The Olde Potters' Wheel, where a darkened window opened onto the collection of pottery knick-knacks that the tourist trade demanded. Then came the window of Silas's Book Store and Reliquary, with one small lamp lighting a single, obviously

ancient, tome. The street lights ended, and the intersection beckoned, narrow and dark. But, as they approached, yellow light suddenly appeared, oozing out from around the corner and lighting up a rectangle of cobbles in the narrow side street. It was a soft, lambent light, both mellow and golden at the same time, the sort of light given off by old gas lamps. There had been no light there when they passed a couple of hours ago, now there was, so Lizzie and Jack both popped their heads around the corner to see what was going on. The light came from a double-fronted shop that had windows made from small panes of pebbled glass either side of a sturdy, set back, wooden door. The windows were dusty and filled with ancient cobwebs, but the door was ajar, and a faded sign hung from its handle,

OPEN WHEN NECESSARY  
FOR  
ANTIQUES AND BRIC-A-BRAC  
ENTER PLEASE

Jack and Lizzie stopped, and stared in astonishment. They couldn't recall seeing *this* on the way to the fair. Unbidden, Jack's eyes travelled up from the light to the darkened second story. On the fascia above the windows, just visible in the faint reflected light, a white name-stone was mounted into the brickwork. There was a name on that stone. And a date.

'Lizzie,' he said quietly, 'take a look up there.'

She pulled her eyes away from the strange window, and saw it immediately. it read,

EMPORIUM

1897

Lizzie's eyes switched rapidly to Jack, who was nodding to himself. Before she could utter a word, he was striding to the door. As he stepped into the light, any apprehension he may have felt melted away like mist. He just knew this was a trick and any minute now the old fortune teller would jump out, cackling with glee.

'*Jack!*' Lizzie hissed, afraid, for some reason, to speak too loudly. Jack stopped at the door, and turned to face her.

'What?'

'What're you doing?' she whispered.

'Why are you whispering?' he whispered back.

'What ...' she stopped and came closer, 'What are you doing?'

Jack looked puzzled. It was obvious, wasn't it? Mysterious message. Emporium. Open door. What else would you do? 'Going in,' he said.

Lizzie's voice had just a tiny hint of, well, not panic, certainly, and not fear—certainly not fear! No, there was just a tiny sense of caution. Yes, that was it, when she said, 'Why?'

'Do you believe elves really exist?' her cousin asked, looking away from her toward the shop.

'I don't know' she replied, and then immediately realised the stupidity of her words as Jack whispered conspiratorially.

'Do you want to find out?'

Something felt wrong to Lizzie, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She stepped towards Jack and became bathed in the mellow light. There were dust motes suspended in the glow and tiny particles flickered and moved as she passed. There was a warmth that made her feel safe and a muted quality to the air. Now it all seemed rather wonderful and exciting.

'Lead the way, 004,' she whispered into the penguin's ear, as she carried her prize before her.

The door creaked a little as they entered, but there was no-one to notice. The place was empty of people, and the only light came from a single, low-wattage globe far away at the rear of the shop. As Jack and Lizzie moved deeper into the building, the light outside slowly faded away. Very soon, only the old, dark cobblestones were left in the street.

The shop floor was absolutely cluttered with the findings from a hundred places, with furniture from a thousand homes, with the memorabilia from a myriad of forgotten people, all bought for a million unfathomable reasons. Everything was arranged neatly in small sections, as if each lot were a separate booth.

'These are all little shops,' Lizzie stated. 'Look. This sign says "If unattended see shop 18".'

'It must be like a co-operative or something.' Jack's eyes were never still. He took in everything. Peering through the gloom, he saw the way the shop went further back than he had expected it to, the glass-covered cases with small precious objects therein, the pieces of furniture that were so ugly they just had to be antiques, tarnished objects of

brass and copper that hung from every wall, dusty paintings stacked in rows. Even the unlit lights that hung above his head looked old, with their brass fittings and fine, coloured bead fringes hanging from the rim of the shades. It was all very *olde worlde* to Jack's eyes.

'There's nobody about,' Lizzie said with some degree of nervousness in her tone. The shop definitely had an eerie feel to it. The door was open and no-one was around. At times like these, Lizzie's renowned logic and unflappability came under a lot of strain. *It's just as well*, she confided to herself, *that Jack's here*. Think it she might, but Lizzie knew she would never, *ever*, say it out aloud.

They heard a sound from the rear of the shop. It was a slithery, bumpy sort of sound, like boxes or drawers being moved. Straight away Jack moved towards it. Lizzie took a look around her at the emptiness and quickly followed with 004 held tightly in her arms.

The small booths ended and a long glass-topped counter greeted them. Its upper surface was absolutely clear, but beneath the glass the shelf was stuffed full of oddments and things that Jack couldn't recognise. Above the counter, a single naked globe threw feeble illumination across the glass and lit a wide, faded sign above it. Again, Jack nodded to himself as if he had just confirmed his suspicions.

'Look at that,' he said pointing to a sign, as Lizzie came up behind him. The sign read,

&  
SELLERS OF SORCEROUS SUPPLIES  
BY ACCLAIM TO THE ART ARCANA

‘Magic bought and sold,’ Lizzie breathed. She looked about, and saw no-one. ‘So where’s the elf, then? According to that old fraud at the fair there should be an elf.’

‘It’s probably her husband with big, stuck-on ears,’ Jack deduced. ‘That fortune teller’s splitting her sides with laughter right now.’ He slapped his hand on the counter. ‘Elf!’ he shouted. ‘Hello! Any elves here?’

Just then a crashing noise came from below the counter and a face appeared, peeping up over the edge. ‘Don’t! shout!’ it shouted.

Jack and Lizzie jumped back in fright at its sudden appearance, and Lizzie squeezed the penguin for all it was worth.

The face was oldish, obviously a man’s, with a large red nose and grey whiskery sideburns that came right down to his chin and almost joined up together. He wore a dark-blue knitted beanie on his head and it was pulled down tight and covered his forehead and ears. Only his eyes peered out, and they were deep-set and hard to see. He had a set of light earphones on his head, which pushed the beanie into his ears, and the tinny sound of music came from them. Slowly, a pair of small hands rose above the counter-top and removed the earphones. Then, ‘I can hear you perfectly well, thank you.’

The face rose up, and was followed by a short, plump body that sported a little pot belly. The whole figure was dressed in a black track suit with a little green alligator on the right chest.

‘Beech,’ the little man said. ‘Sandy Beech. At your service.’ His arms widened to embrace the glass-topped counter. ‘All the very best in magical merchandise, young lady. Brought to you from around the world,’ he grinned slyly, ‘and other places.’ There was a slight, lilting accent in his voice. He looked up at Jack, then back to Lizzie. ‘Please, feel free to browse. Look all you want.’ The little man seemed to focus on Lizzie, and his eyes followed her as she moved along the counter, peering in at the goods. ‘You too, young sir,’ he added, almost as an afterthought.

‘Is there anything that takes the young lady’s fancy? A charm, perhaps? A relic, maybe? No?’ He scuttled along after Lizzie, and Jack followed him. ‘We carry a good range of books for those who seek the knowledge of the art. None of the old-fashioned heavy tomes ... no, no, no. Wouldn’t be modern. Self-help books these days. Easy to read, they are.’

Lizzie shook her head as Jack said, ‘We’re not buying.’

‘Ah? Not buying?’ His eyes narrowed, peering closely at Jack, and then moved slowly back to Lizzie, and then back to Jack. He seemed unsure of who to talk to. ‘Selling, then, maybe? Hmmm?’

‘Selling what?’ Lizzie asked, turning away to the rear of the shop where shadows lurked beyond the light

globes' feeble pool. Something in the dark caught her attention.

'Glamour, perhaps. The odd incantation or three from a favourite aunt's attic trunk. Possibly a brand new conjuration, one you two have been slaving over for months.' He held a finger up. 'Or, you've found a talisman of exceptional power and you—'

'No!' Jack was starting to get irritated by the little man's ceaseless spiel and he—

'Jack! Look what I've found.' Lizzie had moved away from the counter and stood next to a statue of a horse. 'It's a unicorn. Isn't it fantastic?' The statue was more pony-size than horse-size. It was drab grey and sported a twisted horn nearly two feet long that projected from its forehead. Lizzie loved it. She traced her hand down its neck, and the beast felt not like a carving, but more like a very hard, stuffed animal.

'That,' Sandy Beech informed her, 'is Mumps. The perfect pet—makes no mess, doesn't need walking. Quiet as a mouse, too.' He peered at the penguin Lizzie cradled. 'What's that? Your familiar?'

'I shouldn't think so. I've only just been given him.' Lizzie smiled and patted the penguin's head. 'This is 004, secret agent.' The penguin said nothing.

Sandy leaned down slightly and brought his mouth alongside the unicorn's ear. 'She must be powerful indeed, ol' friend,' he whispered, 'if her familiar's a secret agent and she made someone give it to her!' The unicorn declined to reply.

'Is he made up?' Lizzie asked, running her finger along the flutes of the horn.

'Of what?'

Lizzie shrugged. 'A stuffed pony, maybe. With a false horn stuck on.'

'Apart from insulting me, young lady,' the little man said, drawing himself up, 'is there anything, anything at all here that your eye fancies?'

Jack was trying to make sense of things. The place he now found himself in was too weird to be real. There was a word that fitted what he meant, but he couldn't remem— Surreal! That was it! Surreal. He couldn't wait 'til he told his friends about it! No-one would believe him, but luckily he had Lizzie to back him up. But, still, for all the weirdness, there was something missing. There had to be a reason for— Something glittered in the counter, something half-hidden caught his attention.

'What,' he asked in a quiet voice, 'is that?'

Lizzie was getting worried about the little shopkeeper.

For one thing, his questions were annoying, she'd decided. And stupid. Magic is fake. Everyone knows that. Why go on about it? And for another thing, he's practically ignored Jack. And his eyes are always watching me. His eyes. Look at his eyes. They're sort of almond-shaped. And they turn up. 'What,' she heard Jack say, 'is that?' She saw the little shopkeeper spin around toward Jack's direction faster than she would have believed possible of him.

What had caught Jack's eye was the corner of something dull and round and peeking out from beneath some old theatre playbills of Houdini. Whatever it was, he felt drawn to it, and peered down through the glass to get a better look.

Sandy Beech moved quickly up behind the counter. 'What do you see, young sir? What attracts you?' His voice was a whisper and his eyes darted backward and forward between Jack and the counter.

'There,' Jack pointed, 'under those papers.' The shopkeepers small hands travelled slowly under the glass, hovering over the spot Jack had indicated. 'That's it,' Jack said. 'I'd like to look at that.'

With his hand poised, the shopkeeper turned to look at Lizzie for long seconds and there was puzzlement written across his face. With a shake of his head, he faced Jack and slowly retrieved the object and placed it on top of the counter. It was a small, cross-like object, the top of which bifurcated and then closed in again, forming a circle, and the longer, lower stem splayed outward slightly.

Lizzie was trying to see, but there was something about the statue behind her, something different.

'It's an ankh,' Jack said as he picked it up. There was a feeling about the object that fit perfectly with his hand. Unconsciously, he rubbed his thumb over the surface. 'What does it do?'

'Things,' Sandy Beech muttered to himself, 'seem to be somewhat awry.' He reached up and grabbed the beanie he

wore, 'Ah well, in for a penny ...' and removed it. Silver-grey hair tumbled down and, poking through the tresses, were two large, pointed ears. 'What you hold, young sir, is a key.'

Jack's mouth fell open for the second time that night. 'You're an elf!' he breathed. 'Lizzie! He's an elf!'

Lizzie wasn't particularly surprised. There had been a strange feeling in her heart ever since the episode with the fortune teller. Then there was the unicorn that wasn't—or was—and now an elf.

'He's a little short, I think,' she said. 'Maybe they're stuck-on ears.'

The self-declared elf turned a shade of red, but otherwise ignored Lizzie. 'It's a very special key,' he informed Jack. 'It's a key to everywhere.'

Jack's eyes were still fixed on the pointed ears. 'Uh, what?'

'The key,' Sandy said. 'It's a ... er ... an everywhere key. You know, a key to ... um ... everywhere.' He almost seemed apologetic.

'What does it open?'

'Obviously,' the elf informed Jack, now with not a little frustration in his voice, 'a door to *everywhere*. I told you, it's an Everywhere Key.' There was no mistaking the emphasis the elf placed on the key. Jack could practically hear the capital letters. Behind him, Lizzie had moved away from the unicorn, but she kept her head half turned because she was certain there had been a slight movement, just the slightest hint that the supposed unicorn had microscopically *moved!*

‘How does it work?’ Lizzie asked. ‘Show us.’

Sandy held his hands to his head as if he had a headache. ‘This wasn’t supposed to happen,’ he lamented, more to himself than anyone in particular. ‘She was ... he wasn’t ... now he is ... *they* will not be impressed. What will they *think*?’ He actually groaned. Jack and Lizzie just looked at each other, then at the distraught elf.

‘Why don’t you tell us, eh?’ Jack cajoled. ‘Everything. From the beginning.’

‘That, young sir, is not my job. However,’ he looked at the Key Jack held, ‘the ones who can explain are just beyond the door.’

‘What door?’

The shopkeeper pointed to the space in front of Jack. ‘The door that will be *there* when you open it.’ Jack looked owlishly at the ankh in his hand.

‘And I just stick it in the lock, do I?’ he quipped, as he looked around the empty space behind him.

Sandy again held his head. ‘They’re supposed to be *experienced!*’ he hissed. ‘They’re supposed to *know!*’ He looked up at Lizzie, and for long seconds their eyes locked, as if the little man was trying to make up his mind. Finally ...

‘The Key must be held by the long shaft. That’s it,’ he said as Jack adjusted his grip, ‘keep the ring forward and the crossbar horizontal ... just so ... then place the forefinger through the ring as ... that’s it, young sir. Now you have it.’ He rubbed his cheek, it made a raspy sound. ‘Now, you

merely have to point the Key and trace out the outline of a door. That, I am told, is how it is done.' Sandy fell silent, but Jack's mind raced. *What if it were true? Everything else tonight has worked,* he told himself. *Why not this? Yeah! Why not? Go for it!*

With great deliberation, Jack raised his hand and pointed the ankh. Slowly, he traced the outline of a rectangle. Nothing happened. He looked down at the ankh, and then switched an accusatory gaze to the elf.

'It's not a physical key,' Sandy informed him. 'You have to think of a door, *believe* in a door.' He scratched his nose. 'If you can,' he added.

That was the challenge Jack needed. *How hard can it be to imagine a door, right? Right!* He closed his eyes and thought of a door, and hundreds of images poured forth into his mind. Far too many to be helpful. *All right,* he told himself, *I'll think of my bedroom door. Hard. Hard!* He squeezed his eyes tighter and there it was: veneer panelled with a chrome lever handle. While the image was fresh, he raised his hand and traced out its shape. As he completed the circuit, he heard Lizzie gasp. Quickly Jack opened his eyes and the breath caught in his own throat. There before him was a rectangle scribed in the very air. A thin golden outline of a door with tiny fingers of white light squeezing through cast flickering shadows.

Jack let out the breath he had been holding.

'Oh my,' Lizzie breathed. 'What is that, Mister Beech? What is *that*?'

‘An opportunity, young people.’ There was strength about the elf’s voice that was new; it was somehow deeper, more resonant. ‘And a challenge. Beyond lies a mystery of the ages. And a story the like of which you won’t believe.’ The small, pot-bellied elf crossed his arms and looked hard at Jack. ‘All you have to do is push the door open. It’s that simple. That easy. But beware, young sir, if you cross this threshold, your world will change. That’s all I’m allowed to say.’ He fell silent.

*This is real, Jack thought. This is actually real! Dare I do it? Dare I?* Slowly, very, very slowly, he reached out to the door in the air.

Lizzie was frozen; time had slowed. She had heard and seen everything, yet she sensed movement behind her. She saw Jack reach for the door, saw his hand touch it, saw Jack push.

**Somewhere unimaginably far, far away,** standing on a mound in a ruined city at the beginning of a vast coastal plain, a great leader surveyed the night.

Twin moons bathed the land in golden light and the leader could see far across the delta plain, across to the dark uplands and mountains. Even so far off, the timbered nature of the high country was evident, and it was what was in that timber that so annoyed the leader. Ba’akan was his name and all that he could see was under his control. He led the

Centauri and the Centauri ruled everywhere, except for the mountains.

The soft tread of hooves broke the stillness of the night and the cadence of the treads told Ba'akan that it was the Clan Mistweaver, old Subar'da'a, approaching. Without turning, he indicated she should take her place by his side, as custom dictated, and her four legs scabbled on the loose material of the ruins as she complied. Now Ba'akan deigned to look at her and was pleased to see that she had worn the clan blanket of dreams that was woven with the exploits of his people. Her thin shoulders were scarcely wide enough to support such a weight, but she clutched the edges with her thin hands and held it tight to her. Her face was pinched and narrow, framed in wispy grey hair. Her withers and flanks were bare, as custom decreed, but her mane and tail were decorated with beads and ribbons.

Ba'akan looked back to the mountains, arms folded across his massive chest, biceps bulging. The leather cuirass he wore creaked and the chain-mail over-vest jingled faintly. Across his back was slung a great broadsword.

'You must not do this thing, Ba'akan,' the old Mistweaver said. 'It means shame for the clan.' Only Mistweavers had the right to speak freely before a clan leader. Mistweavers kept the threads of clan history alive, and without that history, there was no telling of honour, no history, no clan.

'Shame? That which is beneath my hooves is shame?' His hind leg lifted and he kicked at the rubble. 'This was once a

fair city with great roads running to the sea and mountains. This was once the home of brethren, where arts and music flourished.’ He snorted, and then threw his sword arm out towards the distant mountains. ‘There is the place where those live who inflicted this shame upon us. Look to them for your wise words, woman.’

If the old Mistweaver was cowed by Ba’akan’s words she didn’t show it. ‘It’s ancient history now, Ba’akan. For the elven folk as well as for us. The days of glory vanished many centuries ago. These cities—and theirs—were torn down and destroyed because we forgot how to behave. We forgot how to live alongside each other! We must rebuild that peace, Ba’akan, not live in the past.’ She folded her arms across her thin chest and waited for his reply.

Ba’akan seethed. If it were anyone else who spoke to him so, he would ... he would ... Instead, he calmed himself. ‘I hold this land for the Great Khan, Mistweaver. Although an ocean separates us, I am conscious of my duty. And that duty is very clear, old woman!’ Ba’akan’s eyes flashed anger. ‘The tribes of the Centaur must be free in the places they inhabit. We must be free to exploit the land, to rebuild the glories of the past.’

‘Ha! You want the mines the elves possess. You want to dam their streams and cut down their forests. You, Ba’akan,’ the Mistweaver pointed a withered finger at her leader, ‘want these things for yourself. Oh, yes you do. You want to be strong, you want these resources at your

back and the elves swept from under your feet because ... because, Ba'akan, you want the Khanate.'

'I weary of this, old one. Return to town. Speak no more of these ramblings. Go!' When the sound of the Mistweaver's hooves had faded, Ba'akan, leader of the Western Centaurs, faced the distant mountains once more. *Is it wrong to dream?* he asked himself. *Is it wrong to desire greatness? Is it?*

He watched as the old one slowly made her way down the mound on her way back to the settlement. The sea beyond was a golden lake in the moon's glare, and a thin strip of lights dotted the coast around the harbour the Centauri had made. This was the first of the new places his people would build as they—no—*he* began to wrest this land from the elven folk. He, Ba'akan, and only he, alone, would take this land. The Great Khan was a long way off, far, far across the sea, too far for the Scryers to bridge and too long to sail. Time. That's what he had. Time. Time to subdue this land, time to bring it to heel, and time to exploit it. The forests would give timbers for the fleet he would build; the mines would provide the wealth to buy the loyalty of others like him, others that chafed under the rigid structure of the Khanate.

A flash of light from the harbour brought his attention back. *Ah*. The light came from the harbour itself, in particular from a point of that harbour where he had built his citadel. Far out on a point of rock that jutted deep into the bay, a wooden palisade stood stark against the water. This was the beginning, the centre of a new city that he, Ba'akan, would build. A new city that would be the first of many!

The light that had drawn his eye would be the Scryers attuning their great bowls of quicksilver to the new device. The new *device*. How simple a word, but how fearful its acquisition. He, Ba'akan, bravest of the brave, strongest of the strong, had, for a moment, a brief moment, felt the terror of the unknown, had tasted fear. Yet, he had triumphed. Hadn't he triumphed? Had he not stepped into the unknown? Been where no other Centaur had trodden? And had he not taken the great engine of power?

Ba'akan could afford a grim smile of self-satisfaction now, but, a year ago, a year ago when the Scryers had gazed in alarm at what their Scrying bowls had to show, a year ago he wasn't smiling. A year ago, an agency of Great Power had suddenly made itself known in the disruptions of the quicksilver. His Scryers feared the elven folk had acquired an instrument to counter them. Confusion and panic began to surface. If they really had such a device, of such power, it would completely render the Scrying useless. He, Ba'akan, would be at their mercy. *Never!*

Then, one night, soon after the disruptions had begun, fate stepped in. Fresh from attending his warriors, and still carrying the weaponry and armour of the field, he had gone to the citadel to see for himself how powerful this unknown agency was, and as the Scryers began their attempts at divination, a sudden, high keening note sounded. It was the sound wind makes when crossing the

high mountains: thin and eerie. It came from everywhere and nowhere. As it faded, a blue line of light appeared in the very air. It was chest height and stretched from one side of the Scrying platform to the other. Everyone present stepped back in fear. But not he! Never Ba'akan! Courage must be seen!

Now the blue line contracted and formed into a circle as big as a Centaur. A wind blew out of it and something could be seen within, something that pulsed with a pearly light. Something small that threw pale fingers of throbbing blue light into the air. His Scryers shouted and pointed to their Scrying bowls that now pulsed in unison. And, suddenly, he knew. He knew this pulsing ball of light was the engine of great power that was causing all the confusion. He knew it must be stopped, destroyed. Courage takes but a moment to enact. There is no thought attached to such deeds, just the simple mechanical process of action without fear. Reaching blindly behind him, eyes never moving from the ball, he felt for his weapons saddle. With a grunt he pulled forth his trident and net—perfect close-quarters weapons for a Centaur—and, without so much as a single thought, plunged into the blue light.

Strange forces pulled at him. He fell a million miles in a single step. A cave of glass entrapped him. Objects of occult power and meaning lay all about him. Fear rose like bile, and the ball pulsed before him. With a great shout he swept

the net, capturing, lashing out in his fear, leaping back into the blue hole. Falling. Back.

When he had time to look around, the hole was gone and so too his fear. With a sneer of contempt he held the net aloft. Now *they* had the elves' great engine. Now his Scryers could use it. Now *he* had the power. He. Ba'akan, dreamer of higher things. Dreamer of the Khanate.

**Witches three in Upper Uffing.** The bravest thing Jonathon Goode had ever done in his entire life was to reach out into the unknown. There was no real door before him, but whatever it was pivoted away from him as he reached out. Light bathed him. It was a flickering, intense light and he put his hand up to shield his eyes. There was the suggestion of movement in the light and, as he peered into it, the intensity diminished. In seconds, Jonathon was bathed in what appeared to be sunlight, which formed a bright rectangle around him on the floor of the emporium.

Lizzie was almost struck dumb with shock. Almost. What she was seeing was beyond belief. There, in the very middle of nothing, a door! 'What do you see?' she whispered. 'What's there?' Cautiously, Lizzie moved to one side and craned her head to look behind the door. If it was a trick— The door wasn't there! She could see

Jack staring straight ahead, but there was nothing between them. No door. Nothing! Quickly she pulled back, and the edge of the door appeared, just a bright slit in the air. As she moved back to Jack's side, the whole door took shape.

'It's very bright,' Jack said, 'but I can see trees,' he peered deeper, 'grass, a stream, people. I see people.' Jack couldn't take his eyes from the scene. A summer's day was inside the door, with blue sky and forest and stream. There was also a reception committee waiting for him, because three women stood some distance away looking directly at him! Jack felt no fear at what was happening, neither was his heart racing as he thought it should.

'What is this place, Sandy?' he asked the elf.

The little man stepped past Jack and placed one foot across the threshold. 'For me and Mumps, young sir, it's the way home.' He turned to look directly at Jack. 'For you two, it's a pathway to your destiny.' He stepped through into the sunshine.

The hairs on Lizzie's neck stood on end and her skin crawled. Something was happening behind her back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement—the unicorn walked past her and through the doorway! She was flabbergasted. *I knew it!* she told herself. *I just knew it!* When the unicorn stepped into the light, its coat turned a dappled cream colour and the horn gleamed brilliant white. Lizzie thought it was the most beautiful animal she had ever seen. Then it was through, waiting for her on the other side.

‘Sandy!’ Jack called through the door. ‘If we come through, how do we get back?’

‘The Key, lad. It works both ways.’ Still Jack hesitated. He knew Lizzie wouldn’t take the initiative, but he knew she would follow if he went through. ‘Trust me,’ Sandy said, as he noticed Jack’s hesitancy, ‘I’m an elf. Those three ladies yonder, they’re witches. You’re in safe hands, young sir.’ He turned and walked toward the three women, then hesitated and turned back to Jack. ‘Of course, you might have a different set of values for “safe”.’

*I’ve got to be dreaming, Jack thought, this is soooo weird. But his next thought made up his mind. If, he reasoned, it is a dream, then it’s the best dream I’ve ever had. Why end it now?*

‘Liz, I’m going with them,’ he said, nodding toward the doorway he had opened. ‘Er ... look,’ he said, swallowing nervously, ‘I think I should go alone. Then, if anything goes wrong, you know. If it doesn’t work. The Key, I mean. You can tell my folks and ... er ...’ He trailed off at the look on Lizzie’s face.

‘What? You want me to tell your mum and dad that you just popped off into a doorway you made? Magically? With an *elf*?’ Lizzie was hopping mad. ‘They’ll drag the canal for you, dopey! I’ll get the blame for your disappearance. And who in their right mind would believe my story? Uh? I’d be locked up in some psychiatric place forever, Jonathon Goode, while you went wandering about all over the place ... wherever that place is.’ Her eyes smouldered and Jack

knew he was in trouble the second she called him 'Jonathon'. He could only give in at this stage.

'Okay. Come on. But don't blame me if anything happens to you.' It was the best he could do in the circumstances. Together, Jack and Lizzie stepped through the doorway into the light, and, a few moments after they had done so, the doorway closed up.

In the emporium, it was as if they had never existed.

The new place was a rather large grassy glade surrounded by forests. Tall, dark conifers surrounded them and above was blue sky with white clouds floating serenely across it. Jack and Lizzie both slowly turned around. Trees, sky, grass. One elf. One unicorn. Three witches. That was it. 'I hope,' Jack said quietly, 'we haven't stuffed up big time.'

'Keep the Key handy,' Lizzie advised, as she kept her eyes on the three figures.

As if on signal, the three women Sandy had called witches came towards them. Each wore a white toga-like garment that reached down to the ground and hid her feet. Flowing sleeves covered their arms. The witches seemed to glide across the ground in a seamless fashion. All were the same height and each wore her hair very long and flowing: one was dark haired, one blonde and the third was red. All three could have been sisters: they had the same wide eyes, long fine nose and thin-lipped, wide mouth.

As they neared, Sandy came over and introduced them. 'Young sir, young lady,' he swept his arm wide

towards the three women, 'may I present the mistresses of magic. Here is Hermia,' the dark-haired one glided to a stop and inclined her head towards Lizzie. 'Musidora,' Sandy said, and the blonde one stopped and nodded ... to Lizzie. 'Finally, there is Tryphena.' The elf had a half-smile on his face as he watched the three witches all focus on Lizzie.

Tryphena spoke to Lizzie. 'We are grateful for your arrival—' she began.

'Although younger than we supposed,' Musidora said.

'Your talents are nonetheless—' Hermia carried on.

'Desperately needed,' Tryphena finished. Their voices held no emotion. Each was flat and thin. Their eyes had a blank look to them. If they had any personality in them, it was well hidden.

Lizzie looked at all three, dumbfounded. She had that same prickly feeling she had when she saw Mumps. Something was not right. 'Er ...,' she began, confidently, 'I'm not sure where we are, and I don't know what talents you're talking about.' She cast a quick look at Jack. The three witches followed her gaze and then returned to fix themselves on her. 'So, I think there has been an error ... er ... somewhere. Hasn't there?'

'This place is a space—' Tryphena said.

'Between your universe—' Musidora continued.

'And another,' Hermia finished.

'It is a place where gateways—' Tryphena began.

'Can be created that lead—' Musidora continued.

‘To other realities,’ Hermia said.

‘Other realities, that are—’ Tryphena put in.

‘Just like—’ Musidora offered.

‘Your own world,’ Hermia said.

Jack listened in fascination. It was as if the three were each reading a part of the same script. He looked over at Sandy, but the elf just shrugged.

Lizzie opened her mouth to speak—

‘The talent you possess—’ Tryphena told her.

‘Is the—’ Musidora proposed.

‘Stop!’ Lizzie shouted. ‘Don’t do that. Don’t all keep saying bits of the same sentence.’ She looked at Tryphena, who was nearest. ‘Why don’t you just tell me?’ she asked the red-haired witch.

‘Very well,’ Tryphena said. Just then, a faint blue glow formed around Musidora’s head, exuding a thin tendril out toward Tryphena. A similar glow formed around Hermia’s head and again a tendril reached out to touch Tryphena. *They’re keeping their minds in touch*, Lizzie realised in a flash, *because the spoken word isn’t their natural form of communication*. It made sense to Lizzie, and sort of explained the lack of emotion on all three faces. *What are they?*

‘You have been sought,’ Tryphena continued, ‘because of your bloodline, which carries within it the essence of a talent in the art of magic.’

‘Magic? *Magic?*’ Lizzie was almost struck dumb. ‘In a bloodline?’

'I think,' Jack offered, 'she means genetics. I think she's saying you're genetically a magician.' He covered the snigger but couldn't hide his wide smile.

'Magician?' Tryphena queried. 'No magician is she. The blood of ancient priestesses flows in her veins. The knowledge of natural magic is her hereditary right.'

'So I'm a priestess, am I, and not a magician?' Lizzie hoped Jack had his hand on the Key.

'What you call "magicians" were once priests of the Greater Crystals. Their skills were learned over decades,' Tryphena informed her, 'while priestesses, guardians of the Lesser Crystals, have a smaller, but natural gift. We have sensed the aura of your talent.'

'Whoa! You've lost me now.' This whole thing was sounding strange to *her* ears, and Lizzie had read about a *lot* of strange stuff. 'Crystals and magicians and priestesses? This is too much.' She backed away from Tryphena. Maybe it was time to get out of there while they still could!

'Perhaps,' Sandy broke in, 'you three good ladies should tell your guests the story you told me. It might make it easier for them to understand.' Sandy was standing next to Mumps the unicorn and, when he had finished his comment, he turned to the beast and whispered, 'Just wait 'til they find out the truth, eh?' Mumps nodded his head up and down in an amazingly human way.

'Tell,' Tryphena said, 'and show. It is agreed. You,' she still faced Lizzie, totally excluding Jack, 'shall be shown.' She composed herself, closed her eyes, and crossed her

hands over her chest. Musidora and Hermia copied the action, all the while the faint blue tendrils joined them together.

Unconsciously, Lizzie's hand sought Jack's and as they clasped together, the world changed.

*She was standing on a hillside, bathed in the warmth of a bronze sun. Behind her, a great mountain peak towered high; below her, a city of dazzling white stone grew upwards from the shores of a benign ocean and spread into the foothills.*

*In the centre of the city, princely halls and palaces rose into the sky and great plazas were paved with red brick. Wide roads radiated outwards, heavy with the traffic of commerce; carts and wagons and beasts of burden carried the goods of trade that had made the city rich. Away from the centre, houses of two stories told of the prosperity of the common man.*

*Two massive constructions caught her eye. One was the triple harbour that provided haven for the fleets of ships that plied the seas. The first harbour was open to the sea and its walls were lined with black tiles. Here the navy ships were always at the ready. A large gate led into the second harbour where all the commerce was brought. This was the merchants' harbour and its walls were lined with red brick.*

*Finally, a small gate led to the inner harbour. This was the sacred harbour of the gods, and only priests and priestesses could ply its waters. Gold lined the walls, which shone like a beacon in the sunlight.*

*The second construction was massive beyond belief. A ceremonial road led from the harbour of the gods and followed*

*the water's edge away from the city. It was lined with palm trees and ended at the foot of an enormous stepped pyramid. No. No, not a pyramid. A ziggurat! Covered in beaten copper, it seemed to almost pulse with reflected light and, at its very peak, a small platform could be seen, covered with a golden roof. Its reflection was blinding, as is worthy of the temple to the god of all, Ra.*

*'This,' an inner voice told her, is Aztlan. The great civilisation of myth and legend. She wanted to run down the hillside, into the streets.*

The scene faded, and she was back in the glade, still holding Jack's hand. Dizziness swept over her.

'Oh, wow!' she finally managed. 'Did you see that? Did you?'

Jack was having his own moment of wonder. 'Yeah. I was there all alone.'

'Me too! The harbour.'

'The pyramid.' Both Jack and Lizzie lapsed into wonder.

Sandy Beech took over. 'What they've shown you is the past. The dead past.' He scratched aimlessly at his hairy cheek. 'Like you good folks, I too am an unwitting guest, brought by—'

'Beech!' Tryphena interrupted. 'Your story is for a later time.' There was no emotion in Tryphena's voice. 'Please explain ourselves as agreed.'

Sandy scratched his other cheek, then shuffled his feet for a second or two. 'Ah, 'tis a strange tale, youngsters. At

first I didn't ... well, I found it hard to believe, you see. Then—'

'Mr. Beech,' Jack interrupted, 'we have to go home soon.'

'Ah! Yes! The story.' The little elf composed himself. 'The place you saw existed before written history. In your world, that is.' He looked slyly at the three witches. 'Mine has a different sort of history. Anyway, long before the rise of your earliest civilisations, before the ice-age ended, this Aztlan was the centre of the world.'

'Very powerful they were, and clever with it.' He was warming to the tale. 'They discovered that the energy of the very world itself could be harnessed and used.'

Jack had a mechanical curiosity, which manifested itself in his pulling things apart and forgetting to put them back together afterwards, and it was nudged now, 'How did they harness the energy?'

'Crystals, lad. Whopping big crystals that pulled the energy together and could be accessed by those trained to do so.'

'Magicians,' Lizzie stated. It was obvious to her.

'Well, no, lass. They were actually priests, see? Priests of the Greater Crystals. They had a college—a learning centre, if you like—and a council that ruled the O-Si-Ra. They could control the weather and move huge blocks of stone for constructions, and they could call down the fury of the heavens on their enemies. Pretty powerful, they were.'

‘What happened to them?’ Lizzie desperately wanted to know, especially after seeing them in the vision.

‘Don’t rush,’ Sandy grumbled. ‘*They* want me to tell the tale *their* way. Now, as I said, these crystals were known as Greater Crystals, so for more mundane acts of magic, you know, smaller stuff, they used Lesser Crystals.’

‘How “mundane”?’ Jack asked, and Sandy sighed at the interruption.

‘Healing, for starters. Then there was protecting crops from plagues of insects and the like. Law and order, too. They knew when people were acting badly. Education, as well. They could stimulate people to learn.’

‘These Lesser Crystals were the province of priestesses, who, in turn, were the offspring of earlier priestesses so that the bloodline remained strong. These people, I am reliably informed,’ he cast another glance at the three witches, ‘had a natural ability to work Lesser Magic. A sort of ... of ...’ he floundered for the analogy, ‘of inborn talent. And use of the crystals fixed that talent, and made it stronger.’ His eyes hardened just a little. ‘Made it genetic.’

‘Ahhh,’ sighed Jack and Lizzie simultaneously.

‘Now. Here’s the answer to your earlier question. Twelve thousand years ago, in a gigantic cataclysm, the whole island fell into the sea.’

‘*What?*’ Jack gasped.

‘You’re talking about Atlantis,’ Lizzie, who was a faster off the mark than Jack, said.

Sandy held up his hand. 'You can call it what you want, but' he inclined his head toward the three witches, *they* call it Aztlan. Anyway, a few survivors escaped through doorways like the one you entered, but most struggled to their outlying colonies and tried to rebuild their civilisations,' he cast a long face, and shrugged his thin shoulders, 'but too few priests, too few priestesses, too few crystals. Eventually all was lost, and what was remembered turned into myth and legend.'

Images of what he had seen in the vision flickered through Jack's mind and a great sadness followed them.

'Now comes the final part of the tale,' Sandy continued. 'There were no more centres of learning or training for priests, so the art of the Greater Crystals was lost. Or, most of it, anyway. Apparently it was harder to retain in the bloodline, or something like that. Not impossible, mind, just harder, is all. In time, those rare few who managed to hold on to a crystal and pass on the arts of using it were held in awe as magicians of great power.'

'However,' he held up a finger and tapped it to the side of his nose, 'the art of the Lesser Crystals flowed in the bloodline of the priestesses, and enough of them had survived. Oh yes! Scattered they might have been, but the talent was still there.'

'So, they practiced what they could, stayed in communication where possible, and tried to help. For millennia they tried to help. Generation after generation after generation.' Now it was Sandy's turn to look sad. 'But

people are funny creatures,' he told Jack and Lizzie, who were listening with open-mouthed amazement. 'As new knowledge comes to the fore it pushes out the old. As new ideas take hold they tend to look down on the older ones.

'Sadly, as man grew and learned, he pushed the old ways behind him, and the priestesses suffered and were seen as out-dated, power hungry, out of step with the new way of things. Then, the final irony, they were feared for the knowledge they *did* possess. And priestesses had now evolved into witches.'

Jack and Lizzie were too amazed to say anything, and the silence in the glade was profound. High overhead an eagle joined the sky; it was the only movement to be seen. Long seconds passed. Then—

'Er,' Lizzie began, and then tried again, 'Soooo, why are *we* here?'

Tryphena glided forward. 'A crystal had been detected on your world,' she said, 'but before it could be retrieved, something happened to it. It was stolen by the enemies of Master Beech's people and resides there with them now. They must not learn its secrets.' The perfect features showed no emotion. 'It must be captured and returned to us.'

Lizzie looked at Jack and saw the same puzzlement in his eyes as she knew showed in her own. 'I don't get it,' she said. 'What do we have to do with—' her eyes opened in horror as the word 'bloodline' popped into her mind. 'No!' she whispered. 'No. It's not possible.'

‘Only a witch can retrieve the crystal,’ Tryphena said. ‘Only a witch of the bloodline can even touch it.’

‘No,’ Lizzie whispered again. ‘It’s not possible.’ The witch said nothing, but now the other two witches glided up alongside, and the one called Hermia held both her hands forward, cupped together, and sitting in those cupped hands was a gleaming crystal ball.

‘We must test your abilities,’ Tryphena said. ‘This crystal will free your inner talents, talents that are your heritage.’

Lizzie felt her legs go weak. The crystal was the size of a large grapefruit and seemed to beckon; she knew they *wanted* her to pick it up! ‘No! No way!’ The anger in her voice was caused by fear. ‘You can’t force me!’

The three witches looked at each other and then at Sandy Beech, who just shrugged helplessly. ‘We thought,’ Tryphena said, ‘that you would. That your calling would compel you to.’

‘No. Definitely not!’

Jack pulled the ankh from his pocket and held it up in Lizzie’s sight. ‘You should pick it up,’ he told her. ‘I think you should find out if they’re right or wrong.’

Lizzie shook her head vigorously. ‘No.’

Jack jiggled the Everywhere Key, and there was a serious look on his face.

‘Don’t you say it!’ she told Jack.

Again Jack jiggled the key, as if to say ‘Hey, it was all right for me to jump into the unknown’ and Lizzie knew he was going to say, ‘I dare you!’

Lizzie Waterhouse was not going to be dictated to, not by three very weird people and certainly not by her stupid cousin. It was all right for her to dare him, because that's what Jack did—he *did* dares. He had no worries about the unknown *because he's a boy*, the little voice in Lizzie's head told her. *He's a boy and boys think they can do anything. They think they're so superior because they're bigger and stronger. But they're not, they're just more gullible*, she argued to herself. *They'll do anything for attention. Except ... except, it was pretty brave of him to open that door. And, she had to admit, he hadn't wanted her to be at risk when he went through.*

*No*, she finally decided, *it wouldn't be fair to Jack not to.* So, 'I'll do it,' Lizzie announced.

Hermia held out her arms, and Lizzie was amazed to notice just how clear and transparent the crystal was. There wasn't the slightest blemish or impurity within it.

'Just take the crystal in your hands,' Tryphena told her, 'and let the power infuse your mind.'

Lizzie placed the stuffed penguin on the ground and tentatively reached out with both hands. The ball was almost within her grasp, and she could feel a faint tingling sensation in her hands. Hermia opened her cupped palms. The crystal ball dropped gently and touched her hands.

And her world fragmented into light ...

and noise ...

and anger ...

and PAIN!

A kaleidoscope of searing images raced through her mind too fast to recall, too painful to forget. All the wrongs of the world flew before her eyes: the dark soul of mankind screamed at her from just beyond hearing; pleas and imprecations cascaded like acid rain; blackness beat behind her eyes; loathing filled her mouth with ashes, and slowly, very slowly, Lizzie fell backward. Time had slowed for her; movement was like sinking through thick treacle, but her mind was recoiling from what the crystal was trying to show her, what the crystal was trying to make work inside her mind, what it was doing to her, and it HURT!

Escape was her only hope, sanity must be saved. She had to get away! Her hands slowly released the ball, which fell laboriously towards the ground. Her head arched back, her eyes were filled with the sky, and the small, dark shape of the eagle swam into focus.

*Escape!* her hurt mind shouted. *Escape! Help! Eagle!* Cool, blessed darkness claimed her.

Jonathon Goode was trying to move.

Lizzie had opened her mouth in a silent scream and the world had slowed down! He desperately wanted to catch her before she hit the ground. He reached out his hands for her slowly, and slowly the ball fell away from her. His hands were almost upon her, when the unicorn trotted over.

Mumps moved through the slowing time as if it didn't exist, or as if it didn't bother him. From the corner of his eye, Jack saw the creature appear. Suddenly it was alongside as he was about to grab Lizzie. He saw the unicorn's head tilt

towards him, felt it nudge him away from Lizzie towards the crystal ball. He saw his outstretched hands around the ball, felt them touch, and glory and wonder flooded Jonathon Goode's mind, as the world was locked in a ball of silver and all things were dreams of images that riffled like pages in a book of people, places, micro-moments of familiarity, and he knew everyone and everything, and tempests and tragedies collided with light and harmony and there was a name on the wind and the name was everything and everywhere and it was known for the ages and echoed down them and there was nothing hidden ...

because he was the name ...

because he knew all things ...

of all times. And always had.

Jack was blind. Silver filled his vision, yet he didn't panic. Thoughts began to return to his mind and there was a hard presence in his hands. A hard, inert presence.

He was on his knees, slumped forward on the grass, the crystal clutched tightly to his stomach. Sounds returned to his ears, and the echoes of things the crystal had shown him receded to the far corners of his mind.

Colours coalesced into hues and tones. Shapes returned, the silver faded sideways and images resolved themselves in his eyes.

The three witches watched him, but this time their bland faces were transfixed with expressions of amazement. And confusion. Sandy Beech watched him with a smug expression of his own, as if he had known all

along. And Mumps watched him, but gone now was the unreadable equine visage. Suddenly Jack noticed things about Mumps's face: a raised eyebrow here, a squint of the eye there, a certain tilt of the head that spoke its own language; a language that said 'I *thought* you were the one.'

Jack struggled to his feet, strangely exhausted. With great deliberation he handed the crystal ball back to Hermia and then turned to the outstretched figure of Lizzie. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow, and Jack knelt down beside her. When he looked at her, there was a faint flash of silver in the side of his vision and some of the new things in the back of his mind pushed their way to the front. He looked up into the sky and there was the lone eagle, silently circling, wings outstretched—the monarch of the skies displaying its power. *How appropriate*, Jack thought. With his eyes fixed on the eagle, he reached down and gently shook Lizzie's arm.

'You can come down, now,' he said, quietly.

Freedom was the taste of clear air, the bite of wind. Her wings felt the pressure of the wind; every change in its pressure and position was transmitted through each fragile feather, and powerful muscles reacted accordingly to hold station. The element was cajoled or caressed or simply pushed aside by wing or tail to keep the eyes focused. Great tawny eyes that missed nothing, that saw beyond the far horizon, that saw the smallest movement. Eyes that locked on to the tableau of figures below.

*You can come down now.*

*Ahhh*, Lizzie sighed in her mind, *yesss ...*

and slipped away ...

down ...

and back.

‘I think,’ Lizzie told the group some moments later, ‘that I liked being an eagle.’ She was still a little shaken from the experience, but the exhilaration she had felt at that point had been indescribable. And a little frightening.

‘Borrowing,’ Jack said. ‘It’s called “borrowing”.’ Lizzie knew instinctively that something was different about Jack, something inside, something— She peered closely at his face. The same old Jack looked back, except, there were tiny silver flecks in his eyes. *Very weird*, Lizzie thought.

The three witches were still linked together with the blue haloes, and Tryphena spoke for them all. ‘We are confused,’ she informed Jack. ‘Such a thing is not possible. We are certain of the bloodline. We know it is here, near us. We assumed the female was the one.’

‘Her name is Elizabeth,’ Jack informed them, ‘not “female”.’ Gears shifted in his mind and information tried to flood forward, too much information, too quickly. He had a headache. But he also understood some small things. He looked at the three witches.

‘You’re not human, are you?’ As he spoke there was a tiny silver glow in the corner of his vision.

A very small smile lifted the corners of Tryphena’s mouth, and succeeded in making her look very human

indeed. 'The Greater Crystals,' she informed Jack, 'needed the hearts and minds of priests to work. And through those priests came the priestesses. Countless in their number and generation, the minds of men and women were available to the crystals, for the good of all. All those minds, Jonathon,' it was the first time she had used his name, 'left a mark, a tiny imprint of itself. A tiny spark of humanity in the matrix of the crystal.'

'When Aztlan fell, many crystals were lost. Of those that survived,' she paused and looked at her colleagues, 'some drew on the memories within to create personas for themselves. We needed to find a way to locate the missing crystals and we needed to do it in the world of men.'

'You're *crystals*?' Lizzie gasped.

'The personifications of such,' Tryphena agreed. 'Although, it is very difficult trying to be human. So much concentration is required.'

'Why not just go and get the missing crystals yourselves?' Jack asked. 'Why all this secrecy and mystic magic?'

'Because we cannot exist in the real world. Only in this boundary layer between realities can we hold this form. And from here we operate through agents, like Master Beech here, who came to us through the injudicious use of just such a crystal. And like Mumps there, who came to us through his own free will when we asked his people for help.'

‘That is why we sought the special bloodline that would bring one of those of power to us. How confusing that we were in error.’

‘Not really,’ Jack said. ‘The bloodline you seek is shared by Lizzie and me.’ He smiled as all three witches opened their eyes and mouths in amazement. ‘We’re cousins, you see.’

The blue haloes around each witch disappeared. ‘The bloodline has never run in males,’ Hermia said.

‘Males with the talent are priests,’ Musidora stated.

‘There are no colleges to train priests,’ Hermia explained.

‘No male has had a natural talent like a priestess,’ Tryphena said.

‘Or a witch,’ Lizzie interjected.

‘No males are witches,’ Hermia said.

‘It has never happened in millennia,’ Musidora offered.

‘It is impossible for him to be a witch!’ Hermia was very firm on this point.

‘Unless,’ everyone looked at Lizzie, as she offered, tongue firmly wedged in her cheek, ‘unless, you make him an ... honorary witch.’

Mumps snorted in a way that Jack instinctively knew was laughter. Sandy Beech turned his back and his shoulders shook ever so slightly, while Lizzie wore the broadest grin he’d ever seen on her face. Jack felt embarrassed! *A witch! That’s awful! Not even a junior magician or an apprentice wizard! A witch! What if people found out? What if they laughed?* Then Jack himself laughed.

‘Who would believe a word of this? Who would actually admit to believing in witches?’ He shook his head ruefully. ‘I’m not so sure *I* believe in it.’

‘You will, young man,’ Tryphena informed him. ‘The crystal found a home in the bloodlines you bear. Somehow, somewhere, there has been a crossing of the blood. It has never been heard of before. Yet ... yet the crystal recognised the talent that you possess and attached itself there. You will never be the same as you are right now, and as time passes, your talent will grow and you will avail yourself of the knowledge that the crystal has placed in you.’

Lizzie stared at Jack open eyed. ‘Wow! Jack, you’re a witch!’

‘Yeah? Then what does that make you?’ Jack was feeling just a little peeved.

‘I would say,’ Sandy said by way of intervention, ‘that your ability at “borrowing”, young lady, means that you are a familiar.’

‘Familiar what?’ Lizzie asked, puzzled.

‘Not “what”. “A”. A familiar. All witches have familiars, creatures that are their eyes and ears far away. Creatures that share a bond with the witch.’

‘I’m not a creature!’ Lizzie shouted. ‘I’m no cat or rat or—’

‘Eagle?’ Sandy said innocently, his eyes momentarily looking upwards.

‘Young lady ... Lizzie,’ Tryphena said, ‘you have a remarkable ability at borrowing. For a first effort, borrowing

that eagle was nothing less than extraordinary. I would not be surprised if you made the difficult leap that very few familiars have been privileged to undergo.'

'What's that?' Lizzie asked.

'A true bio-morph. But I think,' Tryphena said, 'it would be best if nature takes its course and you come to the next stage in your own time.' She shifted her attention. 'With you, Jonathon, we must discuss the recovery of the discovered crystal.'

Jack yawned. It had been a very long day. A very unusual day. Besides, his headache was still there and he really needed to get back home, get back to reality.

'I can't. I've seriously got to get home.' He held his hands up to his head. 'I've got to get rid of this headache.'

'We—' Hermia began.

'The lad's right,' Sandy said quickly. 'He's had too much stimulation. He needs rest. Then he needs to come to terms with his new talent.' The fat little elf clasped his hand around Jack's elbow. 'I should imagine he will find that rather awkward at first.'

'But, we will help him.'

'Ladies, I think you should save your help for another time. Seems to me he's been "helped" quite enough for one night.'

Tryphena nodded her head. 'Very well. We will be guided by your advice, Master Beech. Jonathon, you must return to us as soon as you possibly can. It is very important that you do so.' The blue light intensified, almost pulsing with energy

now. 'But first we must ensure that you are able to access the crystal you held.' Tryphena reached into the folds of her gown and drew forth a chain that carried a small golden locket. The locket was pierced with narrow vertical slots and something gleamed, fractal and bright, through the slots. 'This will help you.'

Jack eyed it sceptically. 'What is it?' No way was he going to wear that!

'It is the heart of a broken crystal, powdered into dust,' he was told. 'It is pure and unattached. This will help to bond you to the crystal. It will keep you connected no matter where you are. No matter where you go.' Tryphena laid the locket onto her upturned palm, and with one finger opened it. 'Expose your arm,' she told him.

'What?'

'Your arm, lad,' Sandy explained. 'Roll up your sleeve.'

This wasn't sounding good to Jack's ears. He was wearing a tee-shirt and, although the sleeves were vestigial at best, he felt reluctant to lift even them. 'Er ... I'm ... look, I'm not ... you ... er know ...,' he began cleverly, 'I—'

'It's all right, lad,' Sandy soothed. 'Just expose that bicep o' yours and hold the Key against it.' He smiled up at the doubtful Jack. 'That's all.'

'Oh.' If that was all. 'There you go, then.' He pulled the Key from his pocket right handed and with his left lifted the short right sleeve up and scrunched it up over his shoulder. He then swapped the Key to his left hand, and, with only

a slight hesitation, clasped it to his upper arm. It felt cool to his skin, not to his hand, but to the skin on his arm. The coolness became colder and colder. He frowned and looked at the three witches, a question forming on his lips.

‘Remove it,’ Tryphena commanded. And it *was* a command. There were subtle harmonics there that accentuated the power in her voice. Automatically Jack jerked the Everywhere Key from his arm and saw a faint, red outline of the Key on his skin. Tryphena raised the open locket to her lips and blew. A fine spray of glittering dust rose from her palm; dust that flashed all the colours of the rainbow; dust that began to coalesce, twist; dust that formed a helix that writhed in the air. It bent in the middle, the top part swaying backward and forward like a snake seeking prey. Then suddenly it froze. It was pointing straight at him! Before he could react, the diamond-bright helix poured out towards him, changing shape as it did so. Now it was a narrow silver arrow that shot, in the blink of an eye, straight to Jack’s arm. Straight into the mark of the Everywhere Key it sped, penetrating, driving in, disappearing.

‘*Aaaargh!*’ Jack shouted, more in surprise than pain, because there was no pain. Nothing. No blood, no entry wound. Nothing. He stared, fascinated, as the mark on his arm began to glow with a silver light. It looked for all the world like a silver tattoo of the Key. And as he watched, it faded. In seconds there was no more than a faint image.

Lizzie watched the whole process in silence. Days later she would wonder why she had not been alarmed, but

there had been nothing there to frighten her. Obviously everything was new and strange, yet, at the same time, felt natural and proper. There was something new and evolving in Lizzie's mind that instinctively knew Jack was not going to be hurt. It seemed very important that she knew that; that instinctively she would know of any danger, and it was now her new duty to protect him. It was a weird feeling.

The locket closed with a snap, bringing everyone's attention back to the three witches. 'All priestesses,' Tryphena looked at her sister crystals for a second, 'all witches, must be close by their crystals for them to work. Priests—magicians, if you rather—are different. They can store power for a while from theirs, witches cannot.' She floated away several feet. 'Now, think of the crystal you held, Jonathon. Call it to you with your mind.'

'I can see it,' he told her, pointing to Hermia. 'It's just ...' his words faded as the crystal Hermia held began to glow, and the Key on his arm matched it! It pulsed, beating time with his heart, and in the very air before him, before his eyes, a ghostly image of a crystal ball appeared! 'Hellfire!' he shouted. 'Lizzie! Do you see that?'

His cousin strained to see. There was something there, all right, but it was very faint and indistinct. *Sort of*, she thought, *like a reflection from something*. 'Not really, Jack,' she confessed. 'There is a faint glow, but,' she shrugged, 'it could be anything. Sorry.'

‘What about you, Sandy?’ he asked the elf, turning to face him. And as he did so, the ghostly crystal disappeared and the glow went out.

‘I only buy and sell the stuff, Jack,’ the fat, little elf replied. ‘I can’t actually do it. Or see it either, apparently. Sorry, lad.’

Jack’s eye caught that of Mumps’. The unicorn had a definite knowledgeable glint in the one eye facing him. ‘I don’t suppose you,’ he began and Mumps nodded. ‘You did?’ *Nod.* ‘Good, er, I think,’ he muttered.

‘You will find,’ Tryphena said, ‘that unicorns have very special talents.’

‘But not yet, good ladies,’ Sandy interjected quickly. ‘These young folks need to return home.’

Jack nodded agreement, and then fished the Everywhere Key from his pocket. He weighed it in his hand for a moment, thinking. *Why copy the Key on my arm? Why the Key? I can understand the crystal, that’s a link to the real one. But why the Key? Key. Maybe ... maybe. No, it’s gone.* Whatever was pulling at his mind had gone. Ah, well.

*Point the Everywhere Key,*

*Concentrate, concentrate.*

*A canal, a boat,*

*Scribe four fiery lines in the very air, and ... push!*

‘Come on, Lizzie. Let’s go.’ He pushed the door open, and then paused, looking at it with a quizzical expression on his face. He turned to the three witches and dangled the Everywhere Key in front of them. ‘Why didn’t the

door open into my bedroom as I planned?’ he asked. ‘Hah?’

‘Because we altered it to bring you here.’ Tryphena’s smile was wintery and brittle. ‘Now that we know what you are, it will operate to your commands.’

Jack thought about that for a moment, then nodded his head. ‘Fair enough,’ he said and stepped through the doorway without hesitation. Lizzie followed, then the door closed behind her and the lines vanished.

‘That lad, Mumps,’ Sandy told the unicorn, ‘is a very fast learner. He has “witch” written all over him.’

Mumps cocked his head, raised an eyebrow just so, then gave a very small whinny.

‘Ah, no,’ said Sandy, patiently ‘you can’t actually see the words. It’s just an expression.’

Jonathon Goode stepped out of nowhere onto a dark path. There was a canal alongside and a line of moored narrowboats was just discernible in the darkness ahead. Lizzie followed, almost bumping into his back. Behind her, the doorway disappeared and the night closed in.

‘Liz,’ Jack said, in a small voice, ‘what’s going on? What’s happening to us?’ Stepping back into the real world was like walking into a cold shower. Reaction to the day had set in and he stumbled. Reality’s like that: one minute you’re daydreaming away, enjoying the moment, and the next, you suddenly realise you’ve left the bath running.

His cousin put her arm around him, and was not surprised to find he was shaking. He could barely stand he

was shaking so much. Quickly, Lizzie guided him to a low stone wall that followed the towpath. Jack almost collapsed on to it.

‘What the hell’s going on, Liz?’ Jack’s voice was a whisper, and she had to bend her head to hear him. ‘Was that all real? Did we dream it?’ He shook his head slowly. ‘We saw Atlantis,’ he stopped and looked into Lizzie’s eyes, ‘didn’t we? You became an eagle. Was that real?’ Sweat started to bead on his forehead. ‘Are we crazy? Are we, Lizzie?’

She could see total confusion in his eyes and feel his rising panic. Yet something kept her calm. Something deep within told her that everything was all right. Something new and different and almost within reach, a power she didn’t yet own, a sight that wasn’t hers, not yet. And deep inside Lizzies’ mind, nascent talents began to stir, began to correct things. *A Sight that will be*, came the thought.

‘No, we’re not, Jack. But we are different.’ It was her turn to look into another’s eyes. ‘You know deep down that it’s true. I think you just need more time to adapt, to come to terms with your talent.’

Her words soothed. Jack’s fear and confusion seemed to lessen. They didn’t disappear, just stood off to one side, watching. ‘What about you, Liz? Aren’t you worried?’

‘No. I’m not. I’m dealing with it.’

Jack’s eyes widened. ‘How?’

Lizzie tapped her temple. ‘In here,’ she told him. ‘I’m already adapting, Jack. I can feel it. New things,’ her eyes lost focus for a moment as if she were looking at something

within, 'good things.' Her voice trailed off, then she shook her head and laughed. 'We're going to be different, Jack, I can feel it.'

'Yeah. Maybe you're right.' He peered into the gloom. 'What are we going to tell our folks? They'll go ballistic!'

'Why tell them anything, Jack? What can they do? What can we do?' She thought about that for a second or two. 'We shouldn't even think about it now,' she advised. 'Wait 'til we've had some sleep. I'm sure everything will make sense then.'

This was definitely surreal, he could sense that much, like waiting for a bomb to go off, but you're the only one who knows about it and you can't tell anyone because you're the one who lit the fuse. Besides, it might not go off. 'That's our boat there. Come on.'

'Damn! I left 004 behind.'

Jack laughed, despite his mood and his headache. 'It's in good company. And it can stay there, 'cos I'm not going back for it.'

Lizzie had a feeling. 'Not just yet, anyway,' she muttered under her breath.

'What?'

'Nothing. Let's go.'

**Sir Percival Malmsley-Groyne** was contemplating The Family Secret. Sir Percival was a tall, thin, aristocratic,

urbane, smooth, rich man. He affected a moustache like those favoured by old war-time pilots and his hair was dyed black and parted in the middle. Smiling was a rarity because that allowed others to see in you that which you might not want displayed, and there was around him an air of ruthless efficiency, as if the world was designed as his plaything, a toy to keep him on his toes. He was not ruthless in an evil, brutal sense; more the ruthlessness brought on by disdain and contempt for his fellow man. Total contempt. For everyone. And he'd felt that way all his life. So had his father and *his* father and *his* father. The trait went back to a time when the family name first came into existence and the world had been a very different place. It had been unbroken for nearly nine hundred years since the first Groyne stumbled on what was to become The Family Secret. That's how each generation was taught to think of it—in capitals, and hushed ones at that.

The Secret had brought them wealth, and, by extension, power. Wealth that was tainted by the means of its acquisition, power that had corrupted by means of its implementation. Sir Percival's ancestors hadn't been stupid men, they'd known of the blood and agony and sorrow and loss that every ducat, every mark, every franc and every pound they had ever snatched from the clutches of the weak had carried with it. They'd known of the misery their passing had caused their victims. Of course they'd known! Hadn't it all been written down in meticulous detail, century after century,

so that the generations to come would learn how to be a Groyne? Of course it had! Greed, and its close accomplice, Crime, were by now well entrenched in the family genetic tree. The Groynes had actually evolved into it. Like some people that carry a hereditary mark or gift, the Groynes carried congenital greed. They just couldn't help themselves. It was, as it were, in the blood and they could no more turn to honest endeavours than they could wear the Crown of England. Although, there was an ancient family bible that hinted, in the margins of some totally inappropriate text, that, centuries ago, the family had come *that close* to just such a thing.

Such a Secret can be hidden. It can be kept from discovery by, well, keeping it a secret. It can be disguised as other things, such as eccentricity, or, cleverly, it can actually be hidden by showing it. If the Groyne in question did not appear *too* callous, not *too* rapacious, not *too* greedy, seemingly not any more than his social peers at any rate, *and* if he exhibited just a smidgeon of humour *and* a modicum of social grace and wasn't *too* open in his opinions of others, well, that man would be seen as astute and wily and the kind of man that plays his cards close to his chest. *Oh, yes*, his friends would think, *there goes a man to have on your side*. Yes indeed. Ah, yes.

To that end, Renderly Castle was the perfect family pile. It was a huge country manor house in the flat Eastern corner of England and was surrounded by river, fen and canal and isolated enough to deter all but the most

persistent of visitors. The house should have been named Groyne Castle, but some ancestor decided to retain, in the interests of security, the name of the family that had lost it to the said Groynes. The Groynes were very good at not attracting attention.

The Family Secret that had been handed down was innocuous and simple: they collected certain things. Balls. To be precise: crystal balls. The sort gypsies and fortune-tellers use, solid lumps of clear crystal with chips on them and fractures within that split light into rainbows. Big ones, small ones, it didn't matter to Sir Percival, he just carried on the family tradition of collecting the things. The main dining and living rooms of the castle were filled with hundreds of them, some on pedestals, some in glass-fronted dressers and others on small tables. When the Groynes had guests, lots of candles were lit, and the rooms literally glowed with the reflected light from the crystals. Rainbows arched across ceilings, actinic points of light followed the viewers' eye, and diamond-bright sparkles reflected in the windows. It was a superb spectacle that completely mesmerised. Arrogance was never so wonderfully clothed.

Some of his business friends, however, thought that collecting crystals was a touch odd, but, as many of them also collected things, usually vast armies of tin soldiers or tiny motor vehicles in small boxes, they didn't think it *that* odd. Just a trifle odd. And there was a side benefit to his hobby: Should his friends, or their friends, chance upon a

crystal ball, they would naturally send it to him as a favour, one that could be cashed in at a later date.

Renderly Castle wasn't a real castle, but it was built on the ruins of one. The cellars at Renderly were actually the old dungeons, now equipped with electric lights and modern power, but they were still cold and oppressive and impenetrable as they had been designed to be. And in the lowest dungeon, Sir Percival had his workshop where an efficient staff of three highly paid technicians helped put together the equipment that was needed to examine each new ball. And if that new ball conformed to certain characteristics, it would be added to a small collection of like crystals and then the real work would begin: to break the code contained within.

Earlier in the evening, Sir Percival had stepped into his dungeon office and locked the door behind him. He always took that precaution, in case someone entered and saw what he took from the safe, in case someone saw his secret.

What he had taken from the safe was a collection of old books, extremely old books. Carefully he'd placed them on the desk provided for that purpose and sat down. His hands were long and slender, as those of one unused to the more physical aspects of work. He used those long and slender hands to select one of the books and opened it.

The book was bound in old leather and almost falling apart with age. No title was on the front cover. It held a record of the history of the search for the crystals and went

back a long, long way. They were ancient accounts, copied again and again, of the attempts to find the secret of the crystals. And secrets there were! His eyes re-read tales of how alchemists and would-be magicians of his family had used the powers within the crystals to bring others under their control and dominate them. Riches had been made by that power over others, vast riches, and Sir Percival basked in the success his ancestors had begun.

Now, generations later, he wanted to do more than use the limited powers they provided. He wanted to be the first to unlock all the powers within the crystals. He wanted to wrest the secret of that power from them. Develop it. Use it as it should be used. The old books had spoken of legends, of powerful mages in ages past who could directly control the crystals' powers, could shape the world around them. Ah, yes. *That's* what he wanted. *That* power! *That* control! Oh, he wasn't taken in by myth and legend, but he knew there was basis for truth within them. Myth and legend were just words the ignorant gave to things their tiny minds could not possibly grasp. But mage now—wasn't that an old word for magus? And wasn't a magus a magician, an astrologer, a thinker. And weren't those just ancient words for—dare he think it—scientist?

It had taken years to develop the techniques he now used to unlock the crystals. Years of patient, expensive, hard work. In an anechoic room, where sound is sucked out of noise until the silence hurts, a crystal sat atop a thin column

of plastic, surrounded by various instruments that generated sound waves. Harmonic resonance. That was the key he had patiently worked out over the years. The crystals sang to subtle frequencies, and when he had found the right one and tuned the apparatus to it, the crystal began to resonate and give up its power.

Cables led from the instruments and terminated at a computer. From this computer, a cable connected to what looked like a delicate set of earphones and lay alongside the keyboard. All Sir Percival had to do was sit before the computer, place the earphones on his temples and start the frequency generators, and the power was his. Sort of.

It only worked on a small scale, and only on anything he could contact through the computer. But even with that limited power, he had been able to influence the way certain companies traded shares. He had seen inside company accounts and certainly explored the secret accounts of owners and directors of those companies. Nothing was hidden from his eyes, and nothing could be traced to him. He almost had to only wish a thing to be and it was done! A few undetectable electrons altered in some obscure accountant's computer, and chaos could ensue. Money could disappear for a while, contracts could be misplaced, and confidences would be shaken. Nothing dramatic, but share prices fell, and Sir Percival was always there to buy in cheaply. And life had proceeded apace. Money continued to be made, positions continued to be cemented. Until—

Until that terrible night when the creature appeared! Until that awful night when everything he stood for, believed in, desired, owned, had been ripped away by ... by what? What exactly was that thing? A centaur? They don't exist! They're fable and myth! But they weren't fable and myth. Not now. Not anymore. No. No-no-no. They're reality. And Sir Percival Malmsley-Groyne knew how to deal with reality.

Reality was history, and history told him that events just three weeks prior to the—he grimaced inside every time he thought about it—the creature, had gone a little odd.

It had seemed, at the time, a reasonable thing to do. To conduct the first experiment in a new type of frequency modulation on a new crystal outside on the grounds of the estate. For safety's sake, if nothing else. The crystal was set up, the generators connected and the power turned on. Nothing happened at first. Different frequencies were tried with differing power inputs, still nothing. The day wore on and evening fell. Then, a final alteration to a harmonic variable, one little adjustment—

—and the sky fell in!

A huge clap of thunder split the very air. The sky turned brilliant white for a micro-second, and then collapsed to a small point of light that disappeared as the sound of the thunder rolled away. The computers told him it had been an enormous energy field, and the crystal was responsible for it! At that moment, Sir Percival almost danced with joy, but he was a Groyne and Groynes didn't do that sort of thing.

The crystal was then taken inside and, for three weeks, was probed and examined to determine just what it had actually done. Low power had been fed to it day and night. Sir Percival flinched at the memory: day and night ... night ... nightmare! The Centaur haunted his mind. It had appeared a mere three weeks after the energy field collapsed. Were the two events related? Could it happen again? Would it come back?

**Upper Uffing was fifty miles and two days behind,** and Bogmor Fen just a few miles ahead when Jonathon Goode decided to walk for a while. It wasn't too difficult to walk with a canal boat because they only did three miles per hour and there were frequent stops for cups of tea or to take in a view. And he did need to be alone. Alone to think, to try and put the last two days into perspective.

First there had been the dreams. Not exactly real dreams, but tiny snippets of dreams. People and places popped into his sleeping mind for a second or two and then were replaced by others. Hundreds of others. A face, a person, a scene. All old. All of them from ancient times. The crystal, he knew instinctively, had put them there. It had wanted him to see them.

Then there was the key. The Everywhere Key. What was he supposed to do with it? It nestled in his pocket as he

walked along, a dull weight he felt with every stride. And what about Lizzie? He knew she was changed; he sensed it in her manner, but he didn't know what he should do about it. Should he do something? What? Should he say something? No. There was a barrier between them at the moment, and he was certain it was to do with that stupid key. And those stupid witches.

He trudged along in silence, comfortable in trainers, jeans and an old scruffy football shirt his mother had been trying to throw away for months. Up ahead a road bridge straddled the canal and, before the bridge, a figure was seated at the bank, fishing rod in its hands. Jack trudged on, his head down, his thoughts a million miles away.

'I thought it was you,' a familiar voice said, and Jack jerked to a stop. 'You can see that red hair o' yours a good long way off,' Sandy Beech said.

'Oh. Hi. Er, how did you get here? I thought you were back at the Emporium.'

The elf tapped the side of his nose. 'Ah, young sir, you're not the only one with an Everywhere Key. And doors do open everywhere.' Sandy Beech still wore a track suit, but this one was green, and on his head he sported a large, floppy, knitted cap that looked suspiciously like an old tea cosy.

Jack looked behind him, in case the Lady Daphne had caught up and Lizzie saw him, but the narrowboat was still a long way around the curve of the water. Good. That gave him a chance to ask questions he had been unable to ask before.

‘Mr. Beech, what’s going on?’ He pulled the key from his pocket. ‘All this, and the door and witches. And you? You said it was the way to your home. And Mumps’ home.’ Jonathon Goode was as bewildered as he looked.

The little elf began to reel in his line. ‘I’m not supposed to be here,’ he said, staring out over the water. ‘They,’ he jerked his head to one side as if ‘they’ were nearby, ‘assumed you would be older. And female. The aura was very strong, they said. So things aren’t as easy as they thought, and I figured you could do with a bit of help.’

A sigh of relief escaped Jack’s lips. ‘Then tell me what it’s all about, Mr. Beech.’

‘You call me Sandy, and I’ll call you Jack. Okay?’

‘Okay, Sandy.’

The elf’s almond eyes fixed on Jack. ‘Your cousin Lizzie recognised Mumps straight away, didn’t she?’ Jack nodded. ‘Yet, there are no such things as unicorns, are there? Ever wonder how that could be?’

‘I thought they were made up. You know, myths and stories.’

‘But Mumps exists. You saw him.’

This was the bit Jack wasn’t sure of. ‘Funny you should mention that, Sandy’

‘Oh?’

‘First he was a statue. Then he moved. Then he moved faster than I did when Lizzie touched the crystal. What is he, actually?’

‘Well spotted, lad.’ Sandy tapped the side of his nose again. ‘Nothing gets by you, eh? So, what we have here is a unicorn, all right, but what you saw were its special talents, as it were.’

‘What talents?’

‘Time shifting, lad. They can move a small distance in time. Up or down, doesn’t matter to them.’

‘*Hellfire!*’ Jack breathed.

‘Sure is,’ Sandy agreed. ‘Word to the wise, Jack. Never get seriously offside with a unicorn. Very bad for you.’

‘Bad? How?’

‘Two foot spike in the middle of his forehead... moves in time. You’d never see it coming, lad. In fact, it’d be the last thing you’d ever see.’ Jack shivered at the thought. ‘So, young Jack,’ Sandy continued, ‘if unicorns are real creatures, and if they don’t exist here, how do you suppose they came to be part of your mythology?’ He crossed his arms and waited expectantly for Jack’s reply.

‘Well,’ he wished Lizzie were here, she was much better at this sort of logic. ‘I suppose ...,’ the key was still in his hand and his eyes wandered down to it. ‘Doorways! There were doorways!’

‘Very good, Jack. Now, think of all the other creatures that can’t be explained. Sea monsters, dragons, mermaids, gigantic birds, dwarves.’

‘Dwarves?’ Jack was stunned. ‘Dragons? They’re real?’

‘Oh, aye, lad. They’re real all right. Just like I’m real, but I don’t come from here and neither do they.’ Sandy

began to pack up his equipment. ‘Over the ages, people—humans, that is—have chanced upon a lost crystal or two. Being curious creatures, these humans tried to use the crystals, tried to make them do their bidding.’ He shook his head. ‘Always, they came unstuck. No real magicians left, see? So, disasters happen. A doorway here, a doorway there, out pops something they didn’t expect, and myths are created. Just like me, really.’ The last was said with a whimsical smile.

‘You? I thought you were with, you know, them.’

‘No, Jack. A while ago, someone here tried to use a Greater Crystal. Didn’t work, of course. But it did create a temporary doorway for a few seconds, and as luck would have it, I fell through. Never saw it coming. One minute I’m walking down the lane looking forward to a nice ale or three with friends, the next I’m lying face down in a damp field in the middle of the night. In a different world. It scared me half to death, I can tell you!’

‘How did you ... I mean—’

‘The witches, Jack. They felt the doorway. They do that. They know exactly when someone’s messing about with one o’ them crystals. They rescued me. And I agreed to help them when they needed someone to do their work here.’

‘Did you ever find your way back to your home?’

‘Oh, sure. Once the sequence is known, it’s just another doorway. They send for me when required.’

Jack thought for a moment. ‘So, where do you and the dragons and dwarves and things come from?’

‘The terrible triplets won’t like it, lad, but it’s only fair that you know.’ Sandy looked around conspiratorially, then beckoned Jack to lower his head. ‘There’s more than one place. The witches exist in a place that doesn’t exist. I know, I know, it sounds stupid, but it’s true. Here’s the trick, Jack. From there you can open a door to another place. Another world. It’s called Thallos, and that’s where Mumps and his kind come from. And dwarves.’ He scratched his chin in thought. ‘And Great Worms.’

‘Worms! Yuck!’

‘Dragons, to you lad. Dragons.’

‘*Hellfire!*’ Jack gave the expletive another go. ‘This sounds dangerous. What else is there out there?’

‘No-no-no, lad,’ Sandy said, waving his hands defensively, ‘it’s a civilised placed. Law and order. People. Your type of people, that is.’ He scratched his head. ‘Oh. And Rocs. Yeah. I nearly forgot the Rocs.’

‘Rocks?’

‘Rocs. Giant birds. Massive claws and beaks. They’re domesticated now. Most of them carry riders in the Barons’ service.’

Jack had been holding his breath and let it all go. ‘*Whooo!* Too much, Sandy. How are we going to find a crystal in all that lot?’

‘Ah! It’s not exactly *there*, Jack. We only travel through the place.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘Thought that might o’ been mentioned.’

Nothing now was going to surprise Jack, no matter how insane and fantastic it sounded. ‘Okay. Where are we really going?’

‘We travel to see a magician who will open a door to my world.’

‘And that’s where the crystal is, is it?’ The real world seemed a million miles away. There were no points of reference in this new scenario that he could relate to. It was all so bizarre.

Sandy smiled happily and nodded his head. The tea cosy hat flopped alarmingly. ‘Mystragil, Jack. My home. Forest and brook, trail and mount.’

‘And what sort of deadly creatures can we expect there?’

‘Elven folk are peaceful folk, Jack. We are long in years and history.’

‘Good! Nothing dangerous then.’ That was a relief.

‘I did mention the Centaurs, didn’t I?’

Jack clapped his hands over his eyes. His headache was coming back. ‘Centaurs? As in half man, half horse?’

‘Exactly!’ Sandy beamed. ‘You know them! Wonderful! They shouldn’t be a problem then to a witch of your calibre.’ He playfully poked Jack in the stomach.

Silver flickered in Jack’s eyes and realisation dawned. ‘They’ve got the crystal, haven’t they?’

Sandy managed to look glum. ‘Aye, they have. But we’ll get it back, never fear.’

‘How?’

‘You’ll find that out when you understand your talent more.’

That was the problem. Jack didn't feel that he actually had a talent, just some strange stuff in the back of his mind. 'I don't think I have what they're looking for, you know. I don't feel,' he managed to look embarrassed, 'magical.'

Sandy Beech folded away his camp stool and bundled it up with his rod and creel. 'I'm no expert on magic. Even less on witches, beggin' your pardon, but try something for me, Jack. I didn't catch a thing while I waited for you, so why don't you call up some fish for me?'

'What, like, here, fishy fishy?'

'You could if you like. But I'm thinking the knowledge is there in your head already. Now, from what I've learned, all witches need a pointing device, you know. Something to focus the magic through. And there always seems to be a mnemonic to help call up the spell.' He thought for a moment, 'When you change clocks to summertime the mnemonic is 'spring forward', Okay? When you put them back for autumn the mnemonic is "fall back". Get it?'

'Springtime, move the clocks forward, spring forward. Autumn, fall, move them back. Fall back. Neat! That's great.' He held up the Everywhere Key. 'Will this do?'

Sandy shook his head emphatically. 'Sorry. That's a magical device. You need something personal, something you own.'

Jack reached straight away to his back pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. 'How about this, then?'

‘That should be all right. Try it. Remember, a rhyme to call up the magic, and a pointer to focus it.’

Jack stepped over to the edge of the canal. The water was dark and impenetrable, without the faintest of movement. A quick look around to make sure no-one was watching him make a fool of himself, a quick deep breath,

*Fishy, fishy,  
come to me,  
come you all  
for me to see.*

Jack pointed his mobile phone at the water and waited. And waited. Nothing happened. Long seconds passed and still nothing. He looked sheepishly at Sandy. ‘Nothing’s working.’

‘Turn the silly thing on. That’s how it works, doesn’t it? You turn it on?’

‘Ah, ah,’ Jack grunted, as he pressed the SEND button. Suddenly, a faint silver veil appeared in the corner of his vision, and the water moved, then swirled, then *seethed* as countless fish, large and small, jostled for space in the water before him.

‘Wow! Will you look at that? Sandy, look!’ For the first time in days, excitement surged through Jonathon Goode. He felt wonderful! *What*, he thought, *would happen if I press END?* He pressed the cancel button and immediately the waters subsided. In seconds the canal was as serene and flat as it always had been.

'I did it, Sandy. I did it!'

The old elf clapped his hands together. 'Congratulations, Jack. I just knew you could do it. Now,' he hoisted his fishing tackle upon his shoulder and made to turn and go, 'you need to get acquainted with this talent of yours. A little practice, just to familiarise yourself with the mechanics of it, shall we say?' He wagged a finger under Jack's nose. 'Do not try and be too clever. Take it slowly and then make your decision.'

'What decision?' Jack asked, the euphoria of his first feat of real magic still pumping his adrenalin up.

'The decision to help them, of course. Don't forget, Jack, they need help. They need you. They need the witch you are. So get back to them as soon as possible, eh?'

'Get back? How? Where are they?'

'The Key, lad. The Key. Use the Key. You can go where you want to go because you've already been there. All you have to do is open the door to where you want to be.'

'Okay, Sandy. I'll do what you say.' He suddenly wanted to get back and talk to Lizzie.

'So you'll help? You'll search for the crystal?' The almond eyes bored into him.

Jack swallowed hard. He had to make a decision. He knew that. And something in the back of his mind, something new and rather wonderful, told him that nothing would ever be the same again.

'I'll do it,' he promised. Images of his parents popped into his head and he wondered how he was ever going to explain *this*.

Sandy Beech grabbed Jack's hand and shook it vigorously. 'Well done, lad. Well done. Come and see us when you're ready.' With that he turned and walked away. Jack watched him for a moment, then, he too turned and retraced his steps back to the 'Lady Daphne'. *Just wait 'til I tell Lizzie*, he told himself. *Just wait*.

Sandy Beech turned back and watched Jack walk away. Next to him a door opened to another place and he looked inside.

'Was that what you wanted?' he asked, before stepping through.

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Elizabeth Waterhouse was becoming something of an expert at borrowing. For two days she had secretly viewed the world through a variety of eyes, trod the earth with different feet, and caressed the wind with a wide range of feathers. It was all rather straight forward now, thanks to whatever it was that the crystal had done. But it had not been easy, not that first night. Definitely not. She had lain awake for hours, pretending to be asleep only when her mother and Jack's folks had returned. Those visions from the crystal flickered through her mind's eye and again and again she saw and felt the terrible things it had shown her. And she resented that. Why had Jack not felt that pain? Why should he be given all those powers and she none?

That wasn't right, wasn't fair. And witches are women, aren't they? That's right! She should be the witch! Maybe they got it all wrong; maybe Jack didn't see all those things that he said he did. Yes! That's it! They lied! She'll show them! Try again, that's what should be done. Try again. Wait! What about that terrible pain? It flickered now, and she trembled at the memory of it, remembered the intensity of it, and remembered screaming in silence for a way out, a way away, up ... eagle.

*Flash!*

She could see the boat! There, before her very eyes. The 'Lady Daphne'. Moored across the canal. Even though she knew it was pitch black outside, she could clearly see the boat in shades of monochrome. And smells! The intensity of the smells: earth, fear, water, pelts— Pelts?

Lizzie sat bolt upright in her bed, the vision disappearing, the reality of her cabin around her. She held her breath. It was just like it had been with the eagle! She had seen through other eyes! She had done it! On her own! She frowned in the dark. But how? How did I do it? Can I do it again? Dare I try? Dare. There's that word again. Okay, you stupid witches, I'll show you.

The eagle was the clue. Lizzie was certain of that. Carefully, she tried to blank her mind and let it roam, tried to sense if there was something there. There wasn't. Only silence. And blackness. She tried again. Nothing. Then an image popped into her mind: a small dark speck, high up, far away, to be reached for, yearned for. Something *was*

there! Just like you know there's something in a dark room that you're going to bump into if you could only sense it. And you almost can! You know it's there! Just there, just ... there!

A dark, bulky shape was before her eyes, a big, dark, bulky shape. On the ground. Grass. On the grass. Not moving. Chewing. Cud. Chewing cud! Cow! I'm a cow! I'm—she felt her beast stir, a sense of disquiet percolated into her brain. She was upsetting it. Calm. Calm, must be calm. There. *Sssshhh*. There. *Sssshhh*.

Now she moved the eyes. Slowly. Slowly. No sudden thoughts. Just move the eyes. Good. Now there were other cattle in her vision. Good. *Sssshhh*. Now to move the head. Lizzie could feel the weight of muscles, feel them tense at the sudden urge to move, feel them relax. Now the head moved. Now she could see the field. The hedge. Trees there at the hedge. A gate, dim in the night. Dark all around. Excellent. Now to come back to me. Home.

Lizzie lie still in her bed, only the faint creaking of the 'Lady Daphne's' mooring disturbing the silence. *Was it that easy?* she asked herself. Was it? If it were, then it should be just as easy next time. Like now.

After the last two days practising, Lizzie began to suspect that her mother sensed she was up to something, because it's not natural to stare blank-eyed at nothing in particular while your mind is in some animal's head. Not that her mother suspected *that*, but she did look at her oddly.

‘Liz!’ Jonathon’s voice jerked her out of her reverie. She was sitting at the bow as Jack came walking alongside the boat, his face flushed with excitement. ‘I need to show you something. Come with me.’ Uncle Daniel was fifty feet away at the stern, steering the boat, and she could hear her mum and Aunt Penelope inside chatting away as they set about getting food ready. She waved to Jack’s dad and pointed to the towpath where Jack waited. Her uncle throttled back and moved closer to the path and Lizzie jumped ashore, just like bargees and boatmen had done since the first day the canals were built.

‘What’s up?’ Jack was definitely excited, and the silver in his eyes was more prominent.

Jack waited until the narrowboat had moved on a little. ‘I met Sandy Beech down there.’ He pointed to where the boat was heading. ‘He helped me. Look,’ he pulled his mobile phone out, ‘I’ll show you. Fishy, fishy,’ he began.

‘What “fishy, fishy”?’ Lizzie cackled. ‘What *are* you doing, Jack?’

Jack’s face went red. ‘Listen! It’s a memory aid. It helps me do it.’

‘Do what?’

‘Magic!’ he whispered, afraid to shout the word out loud. ‘I know how it works, Liz.’ He peered hard into his cousin’s eyes, ‘I know how to do it!’

‘OK. You show me yours,’ she said, ‘and I’ll show you mine.’

‘Your what?’

‘Trick, Jack. I’ve been learning too, you know. You’re not the only one who touched the crystal.’

‘Okay. But don’t laugh at the rhymes, they help.

*Fishy, fishy,*

*come to me,*

*come you all*

*for me to see.*

Again Jack pointed the mobile phone at the water and pressed SEND. In seconds the water was seething and Lizzie gasped in astonishment.

‘You can do it! Jack! It works!’ Her own face was now flushed in excitement. Jack pressed the cancel button and the water returned to normal. He held up the phone.

‘Sandy said I should use this as a pointing device to focus the magic.’

‘Like some sort of wand, you mean?’

‘Yeah.’

Lizzie looked at the phone, and thought very hard for a moment. It was an ability she had, to absolutely concentrate on something to the exclusion of all else. Jack had always admired that in Lizzie and it was one of the qualities that made her a good student.

‘This phone,’ she said slowly, her mind still concentrating, ‘operates the spell when you turn it on. Yes?’ Jack nodded. ‘That must mean that you’re using the magic in a way that’s comfortable with you. A way that makes it easy.’

‘Er ...’ Jack began.

‘Think about it! The witches said you had a natural talent and the crystal turned it on, yes? Okay.’ A lot of things seemed very clear and logical to Lizzie at this point. ‘What is more natural than using the things we take for granted? The things we’re familiar with, Jack?’ She pointed to the phone. ‘I’ll bet you could programme the spell into that phone, because that’s what the phone is designed to do, and you’re using it for your purposes.’

‘Let’s try it, then,’ Jack suggested. He opened the address book in the phone. ‘I’ll just put it under F.’ Jack pushed buttons FF for fishy fishy. He pointed the phone and pressed SEND. As he hit the SEND button, Lizzie felt that now-familiar tingle on the back of her neck, and the water churned and roiled as fish came from everywhere.

‘It works!’ Jack was beside himself. ‘Lizzie, you’re a genius!’ He turned the phone off.

‘Actually, I’m a familiar,’ she told him. ‘What the witches said is true, Jack. I feel the presence of magic. It prickles my skin.’ Lizzie rubbed the back of her neck. ‘I have no trouble *borrowing* the minds of animals. I’ve spent a bit of time practicing, and it’s easy. I appear to have, well, some sort of ... sympathy with what you do. I don’t know, maybe I can’t explain it, but—’

‘Empathic resonance,’ Jack said. Then his eyes widened. ‘Wow! That just popped into my head! It just came to me. And they’re the right words, Liz, I know they are!’

He looked lost for a second or two, his eyes far away, and unconsciously his left hand rubbed his right bicep. ‘The crystal again. That’s what it is. Sitting inside my head, popping words out—’

‘And magic too, don’t forget. The witches said your talent would grow, and the knowledge of the crystal would become available to you.’

‘You’re right,’ Jack responded. ‘Again.’

Lizzie laughed and poked him in the ribs. ‘Of course I’m right. A good familiar is always right! I don’t even need to practice that.’

Jack snapped his fingers. ‘Practice. Sandy wants me to practice magic. Says I need to get used to the ... er ... mechanics of it.’ He saw the quizzical look on Lizzie’s face, and he knew he had to tell her. Actually, he knew he couldn’t keep it secret. She was his familiar. They were bonded, and he knew that.

‘I told him I would help find the lost crystal,’ he said.

Lizzie nodded her head slowly. ‘I thought you might agree. That’s why I’ve been practicing my skills.’

‘Borrowing.’ It was a statement.

‘Yes.’ Her eyes followed the departed narrowboat. It was nowhere to be seen. ‘But, before we find the lost crystal, Jack.’

‘Yes?’

‘We’d better find the lost boat.’ Jack looked along the canal. The boat was nowhere to be seen. But there was a slight curve to the canal and there were strands of trees that

grew close to the banks, and a faint silver sheen appeared at the edges of his vision.

‘It’s nearly two miles away,’ he told her with absolute confidence. ‘Too far to run.’

‘Two miles,’ Lizzie repeated. ‘How are we going to get there? Any spells come to mind? Broomsticks?’

Jack shook his head. ‘I don’t think that’s how it’s done.’ He felt the weight of the Everywhere Key in his pocket and pulled it out. ‘Maybe, just maybe, we can use the Key.’

‘You have to visit the witches first,’ Lizzie said, ‘then open a door to where you want to go.’

‘No. They said I have to know where I want to go. I have to have been there first.’

‘That seals it then. You haven’t been that far down the canal before.’

No,’ Jack agreed, ‘I haven’t. But you have. Or will.’ It was Lizzie’s turn to gape at him. ‘Borrow something,’ he explained. ‘See the places in front of the boat and come back and share it with me. I’ll open a door, and we cross over.’ He smiled a disarming smile. ‘Dead simple.’

Lizzie eyed him sceptically, but settled down at the side of the towpath, her back against a tree-trunk. *Something fast*, she thought, closing her eyes. Something close and fast and—there! Her mind caught another’s, a small, simple, quick mind. All she had to do was sort of push.

*The world fell away beneath her in monochromatic sharpness. Trees, paths, fields: all had definitions no human eye could see.*

*Movements in grass and branch told instantly of other creatures, creatures that hid before her. Food.*

With the smallest of effort, Lizzie brought her mind under control. She felt the power of wings as she turned through the air and aimed toward the strip of water. Strong beats of wings brought her hurtling downward to skim rapidly over the surface. The banks blurred as she beat the wings faster and faster, eyes focused on the water ahead. Seconds passed. A lump appeared on the water, a lump that quickly became the rear outline of a boat. Then it was below her, then behind.

Ahead, a footbridge spanned the water with spidery framework, and she brought her speeding body to a halt, talons gripping the handrail. The boat was now a speck half a mile away and approaching. *This will do*, she thought as she launched the bird back into the air and headed back to Jack.

Jack peered up into the sky, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

A dark spot appeared, resolving rapidly into a hawk.

Lizzie stirred, and then awoke. 'There's a bridge,' she told him.

'Show me.' Jack already had the mobile phone ready, the address book open.

*Show me where  
thou hast been,  
make me know  
the very scene.*

He pressed SEND and suddenly the very things Lizzie had seen in her borrowing were there in his mind, crystal clear. 'I'll

keep that spell,' he told Lizzie, typing 'Borrow' into his phone and adding it to his address book, 'for the next borrowing.' The phone disappeared into a pocket, and out of another came the Everywhere Key. With the borrowed images in his mind:

*Key,*

*Concentrate.*

*Scribe four lines,*

*Push.*

The end of a footbridge met his gaze, and he saw steps leading down to the towpath. Jack stepped through and quickly looked around. It wouldn't do to open a doorway and find a tourist or two staring at you. Then he beckoned Lizzie through. The 'Lady Daphne' was two hundred yards away and he could make out his dad at the tiller.

Daniel Goode was watching the countryside slowly slide by. It wasn't hard to pilot a narrowboat and it certainly wasn't a fast craft, so he had plenty of time to observe that which was around him. Penelope emerged from the galley below the open wheelhouse and handed him a sandwich and a steaming mug of coffee.

'Maybe we should pull over for a bit,' she suggested to Daniel, 'and let the kids catch up.'

Daniel smiled. 'I suppose so. They're at least a mile and a half behind. The poor buggers will be exhausted from the walk.'

'Run,' his wife corrected. 'They'll have to run to catch up.'

'Yoohoo!' The call came from the front of the boat, and Daniel saw Diane waving to somebody—two somebody's,

in fact—who were waving at them from a pedestrian bridge a few yards away.

‘How did they do that?’ Daniel asked in amazement, as he looked up into the grinning faces of Jack and Lizzie.

In a place that couldn’t be sensed or touched, five pairs of eyes watched a scene unfold in the depths of a large crystal ball.

‘He certainly catches on quickly,’ Sandy Beech observed.

‘Perhaps we can—’ Tryphena began.

‘Bring forward our plans,’ Hermia continued.

‘And —’ Musidora started to finish, but Mumps shook his head and fixed Sandy Beech with a look.

‘I agree with Mumps,’ Sandy said. ‘The crystal is safe, although in the wrong hands. We know roughly where it is, so there’s no need to panic. And these two,’ he nodded towards the crystal ball and the images therein, ‘need time to get their act together.’

Mumps gave Sandy another look. ‘I know, I’ve been here too long,’ Sandy agreed. ‘I just find the language very expressive.’

‘Time,’ Tryphena said, ‘is available.’

**The dream came upon Jonathon Goode** on his third night as a witch. The ‘Lady Daphne’ was built, in layout, like an old railway carriage. All four cabins were against the port side, and a narrow corridor ran stem to stern outside of them, just

like a railway carriage. They weren't real cabins, just areas that could be partitioned off for privacy. Narrowboats are intimate! Forward was a lounge, and a tiny galley and really tiny eating area were at the stern. Jonathon's cabin was the smallest, the one at the stern, nearest the galley. There was just enough room for a bed and a locker for clothes. A small porthole above the bed provided ventilation.

Sleeping had never been a problem for Jonathon. A growing lad needed all he could get and then some. He prided himself on being able to sleep through anything. Until the third night.

Dreams are funny things: they seem to come from some unknown area of the mind, the hidden part that likes to throw up all those weird things your conscious mind would never put together in a million years. Jonathon Goode had had his share of the weird and wonderful, usually waking up in the wee hours of the morning, covered in sweat, heart pounding, asking himself, *What the hell was that all about?* But this night things were very different.

This night he wasn't aware of falling asleep. His mind was filled with the events of the last two days—the witches, Sandy, crystals, magic, the Key, Lizzie—all combining to form a kaleidoscope of imagery that followed him into unconsciousness. Down he went, the thoughts fading away in step with his conscious mind. Deep sleep drifted in and took everything away.

He was aware of falling. He couldn't see anything, but something was rushing upwards around him, silently,

relentlessly. There was no panic in his dream, it seemed natural, peaceful. Benign. Then, out nowhere, a face drifted up from below him, passed his own face and disappeared upwards. It was a woman's face, but he didn't have time to see her properly, because another appeared and then another. Each one different from the others. Then more came. One after another they began to stream past his sleeping eyes, faster, faster. Hundreds of them, pouring up and away. Then the dream slowed. A face appeared before him, a woman of striking features with a lace shawl covering her head. She was looking away. Dark hair spilled from beneath the shawl and golden earrings glittered brightly. Suddenly, the image recoiled, as if disturbed. The face looked up, directly at him. Haunted eyes widened in surprise, her mouth opened in a silent gasp. Then the dream speeded up and she was gone.

Faster and faster the images flew past. Always a woman's face. Again the dream slowed. Another face materialised. This one was old. Thin blonde hair blew wildly in a gale he couldn't feel. Her clothes were coarse and woollen. Her face emaciated. Lightening seemed to flash around her. A hand reached out imploringly. Her eyes told of a great fear. Then she too was gone.

Onwards his dream ventured. More faces, and more. Now they were a blur. Now he felt a sense of loss, uncertainty, panic. There was a brightness that surrounded him. He needed this dream to stop. Jonathon cried out, 'Stop!' and everything did.

Now a scene was before him. He could see inside a large tent with coverings on the floor and a brazier to one side,

giving off an oily smoke. In the centre of his vision knelt a young woman, her head bowed, her thin arms outstretched. Her skin was the colour of pale copper, and a crystal ball sat in the bowl of her hands. As his vision firmed, he became aware of a voice, faint, chanting. A woman's voice. No, no, his dream self-decided, a young woman. And the tone of her chant was one of what? Pleading? No, no. Beseeching. She was asking for something. Her voice firmed. Now he could hear her words, meaningless, alien, foreign and ancient. They almost made sense. He strived to move forward. He wanted to hear. There seemed to be a silver membrane before him, translucent, pliable. He pushed against it, he had to hear.

'Your daughter implores you for guidance,' he heard. He knew she spoke another tongue, yet he understood her all the same! He pushed closer. Now she was just metres away, and her supplications became clear.

'Great Mother of all, your daughter Noeh-Sen-Atweh seeks wisdom. This lowly priestess seeks your grace. She needs guidance through the darkness and loneliness of this changed world.' Suddenly, the young woman stiffened. Her eyes slowly lifted from the crystal. They slowly travelled upwards and met his. To her credit, she didn't scream. She didn't actually do anything that looked like panic. In fact, for all her youth, the woman exhibited a level of composure the dream-Jack thought amazing.

'Who seeks this one?' she asked, her voice a faint whisper. 'Who seeks Noeh?' Her eyes were huge and brown

and moved from side to side as if she knew he was there, but couldn't quite make him out.

With great effort, Jack pushed hard into the membrane. It was like pushing into a soap bubble from the outside, a very tough soap bubble. First his hands went in and took the membrane with them like a clear rubber glove. Then his arm went in, and finally his face pushed against the membrane and formed an image on the other side. The woman Noeh sat back on her heels, her mouth opened to scream, her eyes were wide with terror. She never let go of the crystal.

'Can you hear me?' the dream-Jack asked. 'Noeh, don't ... I won't hurt you. I'm Jonathon. I want to help you.'

The scream died in Noeh's throat and her eyes fixed on the apparition that had appeared as if through a crystal silver, ephemeral liquid.

'Cho-Na-Thon?' she inquired. 'What are you Cho-Na-Thon? Are you an ancestor? Your name is strange, Cho-Na-Thon. Are you a priest?' Wonder now filled the woman's face.

In his dream, Jack had the feeling that he was a silent observer, both looking at himself and, at the same time, being captive to the moment. 'No. I'm not a priest. I'm someone who carries the bloodline of ancient priestesses.'

'Ancient? How ancient? What priestesses, Cho-Na-Thon?' Young she might be, but she was sharp and controlled, in charge of her craft. He knew he must tell, but not all.

'Do you know of Aztlan, Noeh?' The reaction was not what he expected.

‘Are you one of the lost ones come back to provoke me?’ There was anger in her voice and a strength was building within her. ‘Do you care so little for the fate of our people, our civilisation?’ Her anger was being ground out in harsh, staccato words. ‘Have you lost all compassion for we who remain? Have you lost all hope?’

Realisation was creeping up on the dream Jack. Suddenly the dream itself clicked into place. ‘No, Noeh,’ he said, quietly, ‘I’m not what you think. I will tell you.’ Her anger subsided at his words. ‘But first you must tell me where you are.’

‘We travel along the coast of the inland sea to the eastern borders,’ she said. ‘We have a colony there where the Lion of Aztlan measures the passage of stars.’

‘Why do you travel there, Noeh?’ He was so close; he could image the answer, but not the manner of its delivery.

Tears suddenly cascaded down Noeh’s cheeks and dripped onto her thighs. ‘We travel, Cho-Na-Thon, to save what is left of our people.’ Her voice was now a whisper and he had to strain to hear her. ‘We travel, Cho-Na-Thon, because Aztlan is no more.’ Now Noeh looked directly into his eyes and he could see the pain she carried. ‘We travel, Cho-Na-Thon, because...’ the silent tears kept streaming down her face as her agony unfolded, ‘because ... because two years ago our island was destroyed!’

Jack heard again the words the elf told of the witches’ tale: ‘twelve thousand years ago, in a gigantic cataclysm,

the whole island continent fell into the sea.’ So Noah was a survivor of the destruction of Aztlan. Twelve thousand years! What could he possibly offer? Ah! Yes! ‘Noeh, listen to me. I come from a long, long way off. In time.’ Her head snapped up. ‘It’s true, Noeh. I come from far into your future, and I do carry the blood of priestesses. You called, and it seems I answered.’

‘In time?’ her eyes clouded. ‘Then ... then, Cho-Na-Thon, then it means we survive! Yes?’ A smile broke out across her face, and her whole body seemed to lift, to gather itself.

Images of a great lion staring at the river of stars that flowed before it flashed through his mind, and Jack knew without a doubt Noah and her people would survive. ‘Oh, you survive all right, Noeh.’ Dream-Jack nodded to the girl. ‘You really do survive.’ He laughed. ‘You survive very well.’

Now Noah laughed a tinkling sound that, to Jack, sounded as if it were her first laugh in a long, long time. ‘I must tell Jubal-Te.’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘He will be so ...’ her voice trailed away.

‘Who’s Jubal?’ Jack asked.

‘He is high priest of the O-Si-Ra, the college of the Great Crystals. He leads this expedition.’ Something in her voice told Jack there was more to this Jubal-Te than just leader. ‘He will hear your story, Cho-Na-Thon, he will believe, as I do believe.’ She darted a look around. ‘Would you speak to him? Would you tell that which you know?’

A weariness was settling over Jack. The silver membrane began to exert more pressure. Noah moved farther away as

if he were slowly rising upwards. 'I don't have time, Noeh. I have to go.' He was definitely moving upwards now, and Noeh saw it.

'We will meet again, Cho-Na-Thon!' she called. 'Thank you! Thank you!' Jack was speeding up now and the scene before him was starting to fall away. He could barely make out Noeh now. She turned around as a figure came into the tent. Jack could barely make it out. It looked like a man, one that Noeh was happy to see.

Falling, falling upwards.

Noeh and her antediluvian world disappeared into a point of white light. Farther and farther it receded. Tiny, tiny point of—gone.

Jack shot upright in his bed, sweat dripped from every pore in his body and he gasped for breath, as his heart tried to hammer out of his chest. His eyes struggled to see in the pitch dark and silver flecks flashed at the edge of his vision.

It wasn't a dream, it wasn't a dream!

As silently as he could, Jack fumbled around in the dark for his clothes and pulled them on. The boat was as quiet as a grave as he tip-toed through the galley and out on to the tow-path. Cold night air chilled the sweat on him, and he shivered as he paced up and down the canal's edge. He needed to think! Everything was jumbling together in his head and it was too much. There was no room for reality. There had been too many strange things too soon, and the presence in his mind of something that he couldn't control. Whatever that crystal was, it——

'Jack! What are you doing?' Lizzie whispered from out of the dark, seconds before he saw her. She was wrapped in her bedspread. 'What—' she saw his face and stopped. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. He was trembling. 'Jack?'

'I had a dream,' he told her in a small voice. 'I've seen the past.' Jack was staring vacantly over the water. He could have been talking to himself. 'I've seen—' He shook his head. How could it be real?

Lizzie had never seen her cousin like this. He was obviously frightened and unable to do anything about it. She needed to help. 'Tell me about it. No, don't turn away, Jack. Tell me. We need to share, remember?' Now he looked at her straight on. 'You have to trust me to help, Jack. Okay?'

Jack nodded. 'Okay.' And he told her everything from the dream. Everything he saw, how he felt.

They were both shivering by the time he finished, so Lizzie paced up and down to keep warm and to think and to ask questions, lots of questions. Questions about detail and accuracy. *Why?* she asked herself, ignoring Jack for the moment. *Why have that dream now?* 'Do you know something, Jack,' she said eventually, 'I don't think you had that dream all on your own.'

'Yeah, right! Who do you think was in there with me, eh? The weird sisters? Sandy?' He fixed her with a look. 'It wasn't you, was it?'

'What?'

Jack tapped the side of his head. 'You know. Borrowing. In here.'

'You, you,' she spluttered, 'idiot!' Jack's eyes widened in surprise. 'I think,' she went on, regaining her composure, 'the crystal did it.'

Jack came up with one of his clever responses. 'Huh?'

'I think,' Lizzie said slowly, 'there's something ... er ... outside,' she waved her arm vaguely, 'outside of what's happening that's happening. Independently. On its own.'

Jack was used to his cousin's gibberish, she would often bang on for ages before getting to the point. He decided waiting was the best option.

'What's the common denominator?' Lizzie asked, again to no-one in particular. 'Hmmm?' He was still waiting. *Probably won't be long now*, he thought. Eventually, as Jack's mouth refused to say anything, she said, 'Crystals. That's what links everything together. Does that make sense?' Jack continued to exercise his option.

'Okay,' Lizzie said, in face of her cousin's stoic reticence, 'I think this,' she reached out, stabbing her finger into Jack's upper arm, the one with the crystal ankh, 'did it. The witches said they were personas of crystals, didn't they? So maybe this crystal needs its own persona, Jack.' She removed the accusatory finger. 'Maybe this crystal wants yours!'

It didn't quite make sense, Jack could see that. The witches kept going on about the bloodline and how long it was. Maybe the crystal needed to find out just how long it was. 'It doesn't

make sense, Lizzie,’ he eventually said. ‘Maybe it just wants to, er, adapt. Yeah, adapt to me.’ He looked pleased with himself.

Lizzie was thoughtful for a moment. ‘We have to talk to them. Now.’

‘You’re right.’ Jack pulled the Key from his pocket. ‘We need to know.’

*Everywhere Key,*

*Concentrate.*

*Four fiery lines,*

*Push.*

For a few seconds a square of sunlight lit up the tow-path. Then it was gone as Jack and Lizzie crossed the portal and closed it behind them.

They saw the same scene: the glade; the stream; the tall, dark conifers; and the three witches. They were only a few yards away from the portal, *as if they knew we were coming*, Jack thought. The one called Tryphena drifted forward. The faint blue line was still there binding them together. As if they had learned their lesson, only one witch spoke. ‘We see,’ Tryphena said, ‘that you have accomplished a great deal in so short a time.’

‘You mean the little magic tricks, or the dream?’ Jack asked.

‘Dream? That was no dream, Jonathon. You accessed your racial memory, your blood-line, to find your beginning of things.’

Lizzie knew plain well that Jack couldn’t do that on his own. He didn’t have a set of instructions pointing him in the right direction. *Come to think of it*, she wondered,

*which way exactly is the past? Which way do you turn? What angle to reality do you travel? And how?* ‘I don’t think he did any such thing,’ she stated. All three witches turned their blank gazes upon her. ‘How could he do that without instructions? Or experience?’ She folded her arms and waited for a response.

Jack knew very well the Lizzie in folded-arms mode: she was fiercely unyielding unless she got her way. ‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘that you did it. Sent me there. In the dream.’ He waited, but no reply was forthcoming. Hmmm. ‘Why?’

Now they answered, or rather, Tryphena answered for them. ‘So that we could follow the blood connection, Jonathon Goode. So that we may find the point of union where you acquired the bloodline of a priestess.’

‘Or a witch,’ Lizzie added nastily.

Cold eyes turned on Lizzie. ‘Quite so. Yet without that knowledge, the crystal cannot be tuned. It needs to absorb Jonathon’s past to be part of that past. Symbiotically, so that Jonathon can access all the power within. He and the crystal are two parts of the one whole. And each must play its part fully.’

It was obvious that Lizzie was waiting for more, because she raised one eyebrow. ‘We see Jonathon as an incomplete crystal,’ Tryphena continued. ‘Not all the harmonics are in place, because we cannot see his bloodline. Without complete harmony with the crystal, there cannot be complete power. It must be tuned to the bloodline.’

Now Jack found his voice. 'I'm not a radio, Tryphena. I don't like being ... used, like this. Turned on and off.' The silver had crept back into his vision. 'Do you know where I went? Do you know who I saw? Huh? Did the crystal show you everything?'

'It cannot do that. It is your crystal. Only you can reveal events.'

There was a smug look on Jack's face. 'Is that so? Supposing I don't want—'

'Jack!' The tone of Lizzie's voice told Jack enough was enough.

'Okay. Sorry.' He looked at the three witches, moving his eyes from one to the other. 'I met a woman. A priestess. Her name was Noeh-Sen-Atweh. She was from a very long time ago.'

The blue auras around the witches suddenly intensified, deepened, pulsed. He could almost hear them crackling, like static electricity. And Tryphena's voice changed. It became more human. 'Tell us, Jonathon. Describe her to us.'

Something had moved up a notch, he could feel it. A quick look at Lizzie told him that she had felt it too. There was an intensity around about them, a pressure. The scene without seemed to dim, the trees and sky faded, the foreground contracted. There was a hard pulse in Jack's throat and he didn't like it at all.

'She was young and said she had survived the fall of Aztlan.'

The electrostatic pressure increased, and a stiff wind began to blow over the little group. Jack's mouth was dry and he had to lick his lips.

'She said she—her group, her people—were heading east to where the Lion of Aztlán looked out over a great river of stars.'

Lizzie's hair began to sway out from her head as the electrostatic pressure built up. Jack could feel his own hair doing the same. And all the while the witches' gazes never faltered; if anything, they had become more remote, distant, unfocused, as if their vision were somewhere else, some *when* else!

'There was someone with her,' Jack continued. 'Someone I think she cared for. I only caught a glimpse of him at the end. She said his name was Jubal-Te.'

The wind suddenly tore around them, whipping their hair and clothes. The scenery dissolved into a whirlpool of muted colours that began to swirl around them, a stream of chaos, and their small space now had a glassy sheen to it, as if they were standing on the inside of a large crystal ball.

'Jubal-Te! Jubal-Te! Jubal-Te!' whispered all three witches at once. The auras around their heads were now almost actinic with pulsing light, light that hurt the eyes.

Lizzie leant forward and shouted in Jack's ear. 'Seems to ring a bell with them.'

'Yeah,' Jack shouted back. 'I just hope they think he was one of the good guys.'

Suddenly, silence reigned. The wind, the electrostatic pressure, the colours of chaos without the bubble, all ceased, and a new scene began to form all about. Faintly at first, then gathering in detail as they firmed.

White houses appeared. An azure sky formed overhead. A great triple harbour came into being below, and beyond that, a sapphire sea stretched out to the horizon. Inland, towering above all, stood the great mountain.

Lizzie knew straight away and so did Jack. 'Aztlan!' she breathed, and Jack could only nod in wonder.

Tryphena floated forward, her old self re-established, the tiny flicker of humanity gone. 'You saw this as a vision. Now see it as it was.'

Now there was activity. People came into existence and began doing all those normal things people do in big cities.

'We retain this memory,' the witch told them, as the scene unfolded in their minds' eye, 'of the time of the last High Priest of Aztlan, the last of the O-Si-Ra of the Great Crystals, Jubal-Te.'

**Bogmor Fen was a name** given to a place on the canal that had nothing there at all save a drab, derelict bargee's cottage. Its name said it all. Luckily, within a mile, a pleasant market town existed with enough to occupy everyone for a day or

so. There was an old Saxon church and the remains of an old Norman fort. Black-and-white-framed, Tudor-style shops lined both sides of the cobble-stoned main street, and thatched roofs were in evidence everywhere. It was a little microcosm of an age gone by, one at odds with the modern world. It didn't take long to walk there.

With a huge mental effort, Jack and Lizzie put aside the events of the night. It's impossible to keep that level of emotion going all the time; the human brain needs respite from the harsh realities of life, especially if that reality is weird, bizarre and totally unbelievable..

For a whole day they ambled around with their parents. The situation felt weird to Lizzie, because, on one hand, she and Jack had been drawn into the most fantastical of events, and on the other, well, what do you say to your parents? How do you tell them?

Their world is proceeding normally; they're doing holiday things and trying to enjoy themselves without a clue as to the existence of magic and witches and elves. How do you explain all that? Worse! How do you tell your mum that you can borrow animals' minds? 'WHAT?' she could hear her mum scream, 'are you insane?' And she could imagine herself saying, 'Jack's a witch, too! Well, an honorary one, anyway, but a witch nonetheless. *And* he can do the magic!' Not, Lizzie realised, a good scenario. Yet, there had to be a way.

The sun beat down in a rare consistent manner as the group sampled the town's wares, went, window shopping, ate ice-creams, saw ruins and visited antique shops where

both Jack and Lizzie kept an apprehensive lookout for anything that resembled magic, another ice cream for Jack, a café for lunch, a pub for mid-afternoon where Jack and Lizzie were served soft drinks, more ambling.

The day just drifted by as holiday days should. Then the slow walk back to the 'Lady Daphne' where a cup of tea in the small dining alcove was just the perfect end to a long day.

Almost.

'Jonathon, take off those silly sunglasses,' Penelope said, as she poured tea. 'You've had them on since yesterday.' Jack glanced at Lizzie and saw the wary look in her eyes, but he really had no choice unless he wanted to create a scene.

With a mumbled 'Sorry,' Jack removed the glasses and slipped them into his pocket next to the Everywhere Key. The Key seemed to weigh a little heavier than normal and he could see silver from the corners of his eyes. He knew something from the crystal was surfacing. He tried to keep his eyes down.

'Do you know,' said Penelope Goode as she poured milk into his cup, 'we've only got three more days left to the holiday.' She looked at Jack. 'Plenty of time to tell us how you got ahead of the boat yesterday, eh, Jonathon? What did you do? Fly?'

'He can't run that fast,' Daniel retorted. 'Or that far.'

'I can!' Jack replied indignantly, looking square at his dad. 'We just cut across—'

'Fields,' Lizzie finished for him.

‘Sure!’ Daniel sarcastically agreed, the smile still on his face at the kids’ discomfort. ‘You just ran over two miles across— What’s wrong with your eyes, Jonathon?’

‘Erm, nothing. Too much sun, I guess.’

‘Show me,’ Penelope said. ‘I’ll get some drops if they’re sore. Oh, my. Daniel, look at Jonathon’s eyes. They’ve got silver spots all through the iris.’ There was concern across her face.

His father peered closely at him. ‘Doctor for you tomorrow, young lad. That doesn’t look good.’

‘It’s all right!’ Jack protested, trying to get up from the table and leave. ‘My eyes feel fine.’

‘Sit down,’ his father insisted. ‘Let your mother have a close look at them.’

‘It could be a pigment problem,’ Diane offered. ‘Too much sun.’

‘Whatever it is,’ Penelope decided, ‘the doctor can sort it out tomorrow.’ Silver flashed in Jacks’ vision. ‘It doesn’t look good to me.’

‘CEASE!’ The word had come unbidden from Jacks’ throat and carried with it a power of control and authority, subtle harmonics that resonated within the human psyche and touched all the primal buttons. This was a voice of authority, one used to obedience. Such a voice had been unknown and unheard for centuries. Now it was back!

Everyone at the table froze as if halted in mid-sentence. All three adults sat gaping, unable to put their thoughts together. Even Lizzie was affected. Jack had to do something

quickly before the command wore off. He only had seconds to work. Quickly he dragged the phone from his pocket, his mind whirling furiously, trying to put together a spell.

*Forget the glasses ...*

'Jonathon,' his dad croaked, recovering before the others.

*Please be wise ...*

*forget the interest ...*

Jack's dad was starting to rise.

*in my eyes.* He pressed the SEND button.

'Do you know,' said Daniel Goode as he poured milk into his cup, 'we've only got three more days left to the holiday.' He looked at Jack, a grin on his face. 'Where do you fancy going?' Jack breathed a sigh of relief as everyone started to talk about where they should go next.

Lizzie grabbed Jack's arm and pulled him closer. 'Listen,' she whispered furiously, 'the spell will wear off the minute you cancel the call. Then they'll be totally ... totally ...' she searched for the correct word.

'What do I do?' There was desperation in Jack's eyes and Lizzie knew they couldn't keep up the pretence. 'I lost it back there, Liz. I should have gone along with them and hexed the doctor instead. Damn! What shall I do?' He ran shaking fingers through his hair.

'We, Jack, we. I'm in this too, remember.' Lizzie thought hard. 'We have to tell them everything. If we disappear to look for this missing crystal, what do you think they will think? They'll think we've been abducted. Or drowned in the canal. It's not fair to them, Jack.'

‘What are you two whispering about?’ Diane cajoled.

Jonathon Goode made up his mind. ‘Folks,’ he began, ‘there’s a story you really need to hear.’

‘Seriously,’ Lizzie added, ‘you have to hear what we have to say. It’s important.’

‘Hey,’ Daniel asked, jovially, ‘what have you two been up too?’

‘Just listen, okay, Uncle Daniel?’ Lizzie looked at Jack. ‘You’d better tell them everything.’

Jacks’ mouth was dry and his heart was hammering. But he had to do it; it was getting harder and harder to hide what he was becoming. Three faces looked up at him from the small table as he began.

‘I’m going to tell you a story that you won’t believe,’ he said. ‘Then I’m going to prove it to you.’

‘This is so mysterious,’ Lizzie’s mother said, her small clairvoyant talent prickling her mind. She sensed something was up.

‘When Lizzie and I went to the fair at Upper Uffing,’ Jack began. He then recounted the whole story. Tea went cold in untouched cups, mouths gaped at what ears were hearing, and time moved by unheeded.

‘And that’s it,’ he concluded, ‘right up to this minute.’ Outside, shadows had lengthened.

Three adults looked at each other, worry on their faces. *Is this what’s happening to our kids?* their expressions said.

Diane was the first to react. ‘So, this ... spell... that you say you put on us, you’re going to lift it now?’

Jack nodded and pressed the CANCEL button.

Immediately all three adults jerked back in their seats and gasped. Shock and outrage at what had happened was turning their faces red. They suddenly knew what had happened. They understood what Jack had done! Anger quickly replaced the shock, and Jack decided that they needed time to come to terms with events. And accept them.

*They seek him here, Jack quickly chanted,  
they seek him there,  
they seek Jack Goode  
in thin air.*

He pressed SEND and then vanished.

Penelope screamed. Her son had disappeared before her very eyes! 'Jack! Jack!' she shouted. Daniel leaped to his feet, his arms waving through the spot where Jack had disappeared. Penelope sat open-mouthed and Diane kept repeating 'It's true, it's true.'

Jack, meanwhile, had tip-toed quietly away, climbed the stairway to the deck and stepped down to the tow-path. He hadn't really disappeared, they only thought he had. From inside the 'Lady Daphne' issued voices raised in disbelief. Then he heard Lizzie's voice.

'He's probably outside by now,' she told them. 'But you'll have to take us seriously before he comes back,'

'Oh, yes?' Daniel asked belligerently. 'Do you seriously expect us to believe in elves and witches? This is kids' stuff!' He was angry now, because he struggled to understand what had just transpired. 'Magical lands? Lost crystals? Trips to

Atlantis?’ Jack’s father pointed his finger at Lizzie. ‘I don’t know what you two did before with that disappearing trick, but don’t take us for fools. You think about it. Even if your tale were true ... I mean, come on, do you honestly think we would let two sixteen year olds travel somewhere completely preposterous even if that place did exist, and I don’t think it does, and think it was normal?’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘And what about this crazy story of you borrowing animals’ minds? Anything else? White rabbits? Mad hatters? We could be locked up for even thinking about it!’

She’d known this would happen! Of course their parents wouldn’t believe them! But it had gone too far now and had to be sorted out. Properly. ‘All right,’ she said, ignoring the sarcasm, ‘we’ll prove everything to you.’

Outside, Jack heard her words, and an idea popped into his mind. A quick glance around confirmed the tow path was empty, so he pulled the Everywhere Key from his pocket.

*Everywhere Key,*

*Concentrate.*

*Scribe four fiery lines.*

*Push.*

He knew exactly where he wanted to go and, as he pushed the door wide open, he nodded his head. Perfect. Then he stepped through and the door closed.

‘We can’t let you run off to God-knows where!’ Diane shouted. ‘You’ve ... you’ve got school, you’ve—’ she was floundering. ‘You can’t go!’

‘Elizabeth, get Jonathon back!’ Penelope ordered. There was something ridiculously unreal about this whole affair.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, golden light flooded the interior of the boat.

Penelope gasped as the four lines of light appeared. The three adults backed up against the table in surprise. Lizzie reached forward, held out her hand and pushed! The door opened into a darkened room. Everyone stared at the door, too shocked to speak, except Lizzie, who knew exactly what was happening.

‘Where are you, Jack?’ Lizzie asked.

‘Here.’ *Click.* Light flooded out from the door, and now everyone could see Jonathon sitting on his bed. At home. In London. Daniel Goode was the first adult to recover. In three strides he crossed the intervening space and stepped through. His eyes told him it was Jonathon’s room, but he spun and pulled open the bedroom door and disappeared from view. Jack sat in silence as his dad wandered round, the click of light switches and the opening and closing of doors the only sounds marking his passage through the family home. Occasionally a muffled ‘Bloody hell!’ drifted out from the interior. He heard the front door open and shut. Drawers were opened and banged shut. Then he was back in Jonathon’s room, staring out through the door his son had created.

Daniel beckoned to his wife. ‘Come and have a look here, love.’ He saw her hesitation. ‘It’s okay. It really is home.’ He shook his head in wonder. ‘It’s amazing. Come on.’

With some degree of reluctance, Penelope Goode allowed herself to be led into her own home, while her sister looked on. And it *was* her home! Everything was where it should be. She also could see into the boat and that was miles away! But wait, one step bridged the distance. That's not possible. Is it? *Is it?*

Daniel stepped back onto the boat. 'Stiff drinks all round,' he declared, heading for the galley. 'Er, youngsters excepted, of course. Come on back, Jonathon,' he called over his shoulder. Daniel needed that little space around him to pour the drinks. He needed it because his insight had just kicked in. Gut-feeling it's called. He'd had it before, years ago, when he was a soldier in Bosnia. It had saved his life. Twice. It hadn't saved the lives of those who had meant him harm, he'd seen to that. But it prodded him now. The hairs were still up on the back of his neck. Jonathon may have gotten most of his looks from his mum, but his spirit of adventure was definitely inherited from his dad.

'Let's sit,' Daniel suggested, handing out the gin and tonics and sliding back into the dining table. The others followed suit. He looked at his son. 'So. How does it work, Jonathon? How does it actually work?'

Jack pulled his shirt over his head, exposing his skinny chest. He also exposed the faint, silver Key on his arm. In the dim light of the galley it was hard to see. He needed the crystal ball to show them the truth. He wanted it here now. A glow began to emanate from the Key on his arm,

gathering strength as he thought harder about the crystal. His crystal! He just wanted it there, before him, on the table and within seconds the ghostly image of the crystal ball appeared, ephemeral and bright. ‘That spot of light you can see,’ he began, knowing that even Lizzie struggled to see it properly for what it was, ‘is actually—’

‘A crystal ball,’ Diane said, her eyes riveted on the table.

‘Can you really see it, mum?’ Lizzie asked. This was great! This meant her mum did have some of that priestess blood!

‘Yes, of course.’ Diane looked around the table. ‘Can’t you?’ Her sister and brother-in-law shook their heads.

Lizzie said, ‘Not properly, mum. It’s just a glowing spot to me.’

‘It’s really there, Di?’ Daniel asked. All he saw was a bright spot on the table.

‘Yes, look,’ she said, reaching her hand forward. ‘It’s just there,’ she said, with her finger hovering over the image of the crystal. And then, before Jack realised what she was going to do, she touched it. ‘*Oooooohhhh!*’ she moaned, slumping back in her seat. Her eyes rolled up into their sockets with only the whites showing. Her finger never left the crystal, and a silver glow began to creep up her arm.

The whole thing only took a fraction of a second, but Jack was already in motion. His hand lashed out and grabbed Diane’s wrist. His eyes flashed into silver, and unbidden and unknown abilities rose up within him. Carefully he lifted

Diane's arm from the ball, yet the glow remained on her arm, enveloping his hand.

'Release!' he commanded. His voice was older somehow, still him, but altered. And he willed it so! He knew how to do it; he knew how to recall the power of the crystal! Now the glow ran back down Diane's arm, down to where he held her, and then ran back up his own arm, fading as it went. Then it was gone and his phone was in his hand.

*Reject the pain  
that you have had,  
recall the good  
forget the bad.*

SEND.

He released her arm.

Diane sat forward with a gasp, and her eyes returned to normal. She couldn't help but notice everyone staring at her, everyone except Jonathon. 'Oh!' she exclaimed, in surprise, 'what happened?'

'What did you see, Aunt Di?' Jack asked.

'Well, I saw a crystal. There was pain involved. Oh, nothing serious, and it seemed to go away almost as soon as it began.' There was uncertainty in her voice. 'I had a brief glimpse, very brief, of white houses and a tall mountain.' It was like trying to recall a dream, bits of it were very hazy. 'I know I saw a lot of faces, sort of passing by me. They were all women.' She smiled ruefully. 'Sorry. That's all I can remember.'

‘That’s what the crystal is,’ Jack told them. ‘Part of it is a memory of everyone who has used it, all down through history. Another part seems to provide the power to perform the ... er, you know.’ He was embarrassed to say the word, and gave Lizzie an imploring look.

‘To perform magic,’ she finished for her cousin.

‘Right,’ said Daniel. ‘Magic. What kind are we talking about here? Hocus pocus? Shazam? Abracadabra?’ He pointed to where the doorway to home had been. ‘I mean, how does a thing like that work? It looks like science to me. You know, teleportation or something. Yet it’s done with a little piece of metal that has no moving parts and no circuitry. What’s that all about?’ Jack’s dad rubbed his eyes, as if he were exhausted. ‘For that to happen ... ah ... there has to be an enormous amount of, well, *science* behind it. And it has to have been going on for a very long time.’

Penelope Goode had been sitting and listening, but her mind was going a million miles an hour. She dealt in pragmatic things, day-to-day things. Things that made work and family life go round. This magic business flew in the face of all logic. It was preposterous, yet it appeared to exist! But, according to what Jonathon had said, he shouldn’t have the type of magic he had, that should be Lizzie because it was passed down the female line. Ah hah!

‘Mitochondrial DNA.’ She blurted. ‘That’s how it’s done!’

‘What?’ Her husband looked up. ‘It’s how what’s done?’

‘Mitochondrial DNA is only passed down through the female line,’ she explained. It all seemed so clear now. ‘That’s how witches survived, they passed their powers down the generations through their daughters.’

While his mother explained her discovery, Jack’s mind was somewhere else. He pulled his shirt back on and thought. He needed to recall knowledge, needed to know more about magic. They would ask—he could see *that* coming. They needed to be told enough to keep them happy. He didn’t need to bring back the image of the crystal, because the link to it had worked into his arm. No, all he had to do was think! Think about what he needed to know and let the hidden parts within rise up. Just concentrate on the question. The silver flashed in his eyes.

Diane jumped in. ‘If that’s true, Penny, how did Jonathon get the witches’ powers? And how do we know they are indeed witches powers? Hmmm?’ She surveyed the little group. ‘More to the point, how would we know the difference between what Jonathon does and what someone else does?’

‘You mean a magician,’ Lizzie asked. ‘That’s the only other thing it can be.’

‘Hold on,’ Daniel insisted. ‘Witches, or women who were called witches, are an historical reality. There are court cases and writings and burnings and all sorts of information about them.’ He drained the last of his gin and tonic. ‘Magicians or wizards, on the other hand, don’t exist. There’s no real record of them outside of myth and fable.’

Jack had what he wanted. ‘There are two types of magic,’ he stated. Everybody looked to him, and everybody noticed his eyes. *And when his eyes are silver*, they told themselves, *Jonathon is someone else, someone unknown.* ‘The crystals of the Lesser Path deliver power of a sympathetic nature.’ The words were spoken as if he were reading them. ‘In the control of a trained priestess, that power is resolved into empathic magic.’ He looked at each in turn and all squirmed a little at the tiny silver flecks in his eyes that seemed to flicker slightly. ‘Empathic is natural. Holistic. It is healing. It allows the body or the mind to perform or heal or adapt in a way that is not rejected and is permanent because it’s symbiotic in nature. It can alter and change some physical things, but not permanently.

‘Contagious magic, though, is the domain of the crystals of the Greater Path. That is raw power, channelled and controlled through the priest. It is a permanent force.’ Jack slumped down in his seat, the lesson over, the silver flecks fading a little in his sight. They were still there, tiny silver motes at the edge of his vision. ‘I don’t know how the ability crossed over. I don’t. It shouldn’t happen. The crystal can’t tell me.’ He shrugged; he just didn’t know.

After one of those pauses where everybody looks at the floor or the ceiling rather than someone else because then someone else might see what’s written in your eyes and you don’t want that because you don’t know what it is yet, Daniel stirred himself. ‘Right. My brain hurts. Too

much stuff that's new. I need a fresh gin and tonic. Ladies?' Both his wife and sister-in-law nodded. 'Can the three of us have a chat in the lounge? And Jonathon,' he added, as the adults headed up the other end of the boat to the lounge, 'I need to meet these people—the witches, Sandy, whatever. Okay? Tomorrow. I need to talk to them.'

Of course his dad wanted to talk to them! There'd be something wrong if he didn't!

'Sure, Dad. Just ... er ... tell me what time.' He watched his parents and aunt leave and felt a huge sense of relief that no-one had gone ballistic! Well, not much. Everybody was so calm about things. Well, mostly calm.

He sat back down at the table and Lizzie sat opposite. Murmurings came from the front of the boat and somewhere a clock chimed faintly. The real world was back, except for the flecks in his eyes, which were beginning to bother him because they normally went away when he stopped thinking about the crystal or magic. Now they were like floaters in his eyes. He could see them peripherally, but if he tried to focus on one it disappeared. They were there now, and Lizzie was looking at him strangely. Then her own eyes widened and he saw it too, from within, a single fleck of silver had turned to gold. And flashed.

'Jack!' Lizzie jumped with surprise. 'Did you see that?' She peered closer. 'Now there's two! One in each eye!'

'Of course I saw it!' he retorted. 'I'm the one on the inside, remember?' They were really annoying him now. He

closed his eyes and rubbed them with the heel of his hand. 'Why change?' he asked Lizzie. 'What's—'

'Do you remember,' she said, interrupting, 'what the witches said, Jack? Silver for the Lesser and gold for the Greater.' She looked at him with wide eyes. 'That means that some original bloodline must still exist!'

'My mum said it was that DNA thing. Only women could pass it on.'

'Mitochondrial. But that was for the magic only.' She leaned forward, conspiratorially. 'But all genes go back in time, Jack. Everybody's. Even the priests passed theirs on. It's just that they couldn't pass on the gift of magic with them.'

*Flash!*

The two gold flecks in his eyes pulsed. More! They positively flashed. 'That's it! Now it was his turn to get excited. 'That's what he's done! Wow!'

'What are you talking about? Who's done what?'

Certainty was his. He could see it all, could *feel* it all. And it was absolutely right. The silver. The gold. The Lesser and the Greater. 'Clever, clever man,' he whispered.

'Who?'

'Jubal-Te.' Lizzie's mouth opened, but before she could say anything, Jack carried on. 'It has to be,' he said with intensity in his voice. 'He knew what Noeh saw. He believed her. So I reckon he found a way to carry some part of his talent into the future.'

*Flash!*

This time the pulse was brighter and he actually felt it. 'That's it, Lizzie. That's it! It's a message, a ... a message in a bottle. Yes! He knew I had Noeh's blood and that means I also have his.' Jack was really excited at where his thought patterns were going. 'So he arranged for his genes to carry the talent, just like Noeh's did.'

'How?'

'I don't know, Lizzie,' and he couldn't hide the excitement in his eyes, as he said, 'Why don't we ask him?'

**In tales of a fantastical nature**, there is always a bad guy. And within those tales, it is incumbent upon that character at a moment of triumph to cackle. Or at least gloat in a snide, nasty manner. Sir Percival did neither. Oh, there had been a moment of no small triumph and at that moment his staff had cheered and clapped, but only a pursing of the lips and a nod of the head told of his own joy—wanton acts of emotion had no part to play in his business plan. Or his life, for that matter. The fact that he had a wife *and* a daughter told his friends and acquaintances that it takes all sorts to make the world go around. Yet, privately, they told themselves that if the Devil himself ever came for the soul of Sir Percival, he'd better bring a team of speleologists and a good book to read while they searched for it.

The triumph in question was actually earth-shattering. Literally. Just over one year from that terrible day when the crystal was stolen, there had been a breakthrough. They knew that the original opening had been at specific harmonic and frequency levels, but attempts to replicate the conditions had always failed. After months of creative and, in some cases, imaginary, mathematics, it was realised that there was a second set of harmonics in play that attracted the first. The difficult part was that this second attractor appeared to not have been ... well, was calculated to not have been ... that is ... given the power differential across the opening of this earth. World. Maybe universe, but that was only conjecture. What *was* known, eventually, were the harmonics on *this* side, and, by the way the crystal here reacted, the range of harmonics on the *other*.

Two of his smaller and least powerful crystal balls had finally been linked together in an insulated test room and the original conditions recreated. One crystal acted the part of the one that was lost, and the other was fed the projected harmonics of the first. Millions of combinations, months of programming, and then, quite suddenly, a tiny blue globe formed between the two crystals and then disappeared. *Aha!* The field narrowed, refocussed, recommenced. And within days—jackpot! The little blue orb returned, stabilised, and grew. Now it was a lens into somewhere else.

There was a camera in the test room, and it relayed what it recorded. On a computer screen came the first

indistinct images of another world. It was obvious that the lens was many metres above the surface, because the view was looking down, as ghostly trees resolved themselves into forests. Good. Good. Now that the connection was made, it had to be stabilised. Then, and only then, could the search begin. And when the stolen crystal was found? Oh, yes, there were plans afoot on how to retrieve it. Indeed there were.

**‘Bring me to Jubal-Te.’** The hour was late. Voices drifted in from the lounge, but these voices were now a lot calmer than they had been a little while ago. That boded well for Jack, because he needed a little time. Not much, but he wasn’t sure—he’d never done what he was attempting to do before. He didn’t even know if it *could* be done.

‘Stand up, Lizzie,’ he told his cousin, holding out his left hand. ‘Now, give me your hand.’ He concentrated on his crystal and, after a few seconds, its image appeared, hovering in the air before him. ‘If this is a dream,’ he told Lizzie, lifting her hand up a little, ‘this way you can see it too. Like the way the witches showed us Aztlan. Ready?’

‘No.’

‘Scared?’

‘Yes.’

‘Want to stop?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Let’s try.’ Staring into the crystal’s image, he called up the face of Noeh. ‘Take me to Noeh,’ he whispered. ‘Bring me to Jubal-Te. Bring me to Noeh.’ His eyes bored in to the ghostly ball, and he began to feel a tingling sensation throughout his body. *Power*. He knew it was power! He felt it was power. Building. Focussing. Now his voice changed. ‘Bring me to Jubal-Te,’ he ordered. A name popped into his mind. ‘Bring me to the High Priest of the O-Si-Ra.’ Quietly, and slowly, the crystal image expanded. It grew and grew until it completely enveloped them. It was like being inside the crystal ball and the outside world was dim and indiscernible.

‘Bring me,’ Jack spoke softly now, ‘to Jubal-Te.’ The interior of the crystal darkened and moved! It seemed to twist anti-clockwise. Slowly. Slowly picking up momentum. Spiralling. ‘Jubal-Te,’ breathed Jack. Now the spiralling seemed to draw them in and down. Down. Now the darkness thickened. Now the spiralling was more felt than seen. There was no time, only a memory of time. Down. Down. A tiny point of light appeared in the centre of the spiral, barely brighter than the interior of the crystal, yet it stood out. A tiny point of light now bigger. Bigger. Closer. Closer. Bigger still. Now it filled the interior of the crystal. And in the dim light: two guttering candles, a darkened room, a bed. Night time. Two people sleeping.

‘Jubal-Te,’ Jack whispered again. ‘Noeh.’

With barely a sense of movement, the bed sheet slipped aside and a man stepped to the floor. He was wearing a white cotton shift. He was completely bald. Two eyes reflected the light of the torches, yet there was something within them that burned brighter than any torch. The eyes looked straight at Jack. His mouth opened. ‘You are Cho-Na-Thon.’ It wasn’t a question.

‘Yes, I am Jonathon.’

‘Closer.’ His hands beckoned.

Jack pushed, just as he had in his dream. He willed himself forward. This time there was no silver membrane between them. Lizzie’s grip was fierce.

‘Closer. Ah! Cho-Na-Thon. I see you.’ His eyes widened in surprise. ‘I see both of you.’ Jubal-Te gazed at the images before him, and his eyes held no fear.

Jack saw a face that was chiselled and thin; almond eyes, pupils black and deep; high, prominent cheekbones; a hooked nose, thin and fine; deep lines on either side of a wide, cruel mouth; copper skin. Jubal-Te reached his arm out behind him towards the bed. He shook his arm gently, and the figure in the bed stirred.

‘Noeh,’ Jubal-Te said, softly, ‘your vision from the future has returned.’ Noeh came awake in an instant. There was no transition phase, she was at Jubal’s side in an instant, her own eyes bright and clear.

‘Cho-Na-Thon!’ Happiness radiated from her. Then she spotted Lizzie.

‘Hello, Noeh.’ He couldn’t be sure, but he thought Noeh looked a little older. ‘This is my cousin, Lizzie. She also carries your bloodline.’

‘Li-Tze.’ Noeh breathed. ‘Li-Tze.’ She shook her head in amazement and wonder. She looked from one to the other, then settled on Jack. ‘I have thought often, over the years, Cho-Na-Thon. Your words helped so much in those difficult times.’ She laughed in glee. ‘Now you return!’

He was right! She was older! ‘How many years, Noeh?’ Surely it couldn’t be *that* many?

Doubt flickered in the eyes of the priestess. ‘Why, Cho-Na-Thon, five years have passed since you came to me.’ She searched his face. ‘What is wrong?’

*Five years! Hellfire!* ‘I saw you, uh,’ two pairs of eyes bored into him, ‘ah, yesterday.’ The discovery shocked him, but it didn’t have quite the same effect on Noeh and Jubal-Te. He could see uncertainty in their eyes as they looked at each other and then back to him and Lizzie, but it was the uncertainty of thought, of rapid calculation. Then—

‘Your crystal, Cho-Na-Thon,’ Jubal said, ‘is a Lesser crystal. Yes?’ As Jack half shrugged in confusion, the priest pointed to Jack’s arm. ‘There is a power. There. What is it?’

Jack described what the witches had done so that he could keep in contact with the crystal’s power while he completed their search for the missing one.

‘The heart of a broken crystal?’ Jubal queried. ‘Greater or Lesser? I wonder.’

‘I don’t know, Jubal.’ What did it matter? But he could feel Lizzie’s nervousness. Maybe it did matter! ‘They said it was pure and unattached.’

Jubal nodded to himself. He turned to Noah. ‘Could you do this with a Lesser Crystal?’ he asked her.

‘No, Jubal. The temporal matrix is too broad for such precision. Or depth.’ Noeh turned to Jack. ‘The crystal is being used in a different way, Cho-Na-Thon. Not,’ she added quickly as she saw Jack’s reaction, ‘in a bad way, Cho-Na-Thon, but a different way.’

Jubal-Te pointed to Jack’s arm again. ‘Remote connection through this can bring errors. If this is from a Greater crystal—’

‘Jubal!’ Noeh interrupted. ‘One with the blood of priestesses cannot use a Greater crystal. Even the heart of one untouched would be beyond our powers. You know that.’ She faced Jack again. ‘When you are with the crystal, Cho-Na-Thon, what do you see?’

‘What do you mean, “see”?’

‘When you are with the power of the crystal, what do you see in your eyes?’

‘Ahh! Yes! There are tiny flecks of silver,’ he held his right arm out by the side of his head and wiggled his fingers, ‘here at the edge of my vision.’ He saw Noeh nod and he knew that that was all right. *Pheew!* He’d been so worried—

‘Except,’ Lizzie broke in, ‘he’s just started getting golden flashes.’ Everyone looked at her. ‘Erm, he thought it was a

message. A message in a bottle.' Lizzie's gaze locked with the eyes of Jubal-Te. 'From the past.'

Jubal-Te clapped his hands together softly, then pressed them tight together. 'So, a path unwinds. A scroll unfurls.'

'What path?' Noeh asked. 'What scroll?'

Jubal-Te's face broke into a smile as he looked at Noeh, and to Jack the rather cruel look to his mouth was transformed. 'The path, my love, not yet travelled. The scroll not yet written.' He looked up at Jack and Lizzie. 'I need to stabilise you in time, Cho-Na-Thon. I need to tie together our two ends of this great link through time.'

Now Jack was feeling nervous. 'We don't have much time, Jubal. Our parents are nearby. Maybe we should come back another time?'

It was as if Jubal-Te wasn't listening to them. His eyes had closed and his right arm was held out from his side, palm up. A pale, golden light began to pulse beyond Jack's vision. The light flickered and strengthened as if in motion, and a globe floated in to the room! It was quite large and the pale golden light came from it. Slowly and carefully the crystal settled on Jubal's palm, and the light went out. Jubal-Te raised his left hand. Slowly, with his forefinger, he traced the outline of the crystal shell that carried Jack and Lizzie. His lips moved in silent intonation. He raised his face to them. Opened his eyes and golden light blazed forth from them.

Jack blinked. The bedroom was different. Gone was the night. Gone were the lamps. Sunlight reflected from perfect white walls. *What?* He felt Lizzie tighten her grip and heard her say very softly, 'What the hell?'

Jubal-Te appeared from Jack's right, Noeh in tow. Jubal-Te looked haggard. Dark areas showed under his eyes and he needed a shave. He carried his golden crystal. Noeh looked the same as he last saw her. Both were dressed in long, white, toga-like shifts with purple stitching at the neck and sleeves. A torc graced their necks. 'Our timelines are now synchronised, Cho-Na-Thon,' the priest told him, his voice raspy and tired. 'We occupy two moments of the same event.' Jubal-Te gave a wan smile. 'Although there is a very long time between those two moments in time.'

Noeh stepped forward, her hand resting on the shoulder of Jubal-Te, as if in support. 'Jubal has created the greatest crafting of power that I have ever seen,' she told them, and there was no hiding the pride in her voice. Her eyes glistened. 'None could know, but I. None could see, but I. It has taken four days, yet he never slept. Never faltered.'

'Four days? We've been here four days?' Jack had visions of his and Lizzie's parents frantically looking for them.

'No. No, Cho-Na-Thon,' Jubal-Te said. 'For you, no time has passed. For us,' he looked at Noeh, 'four days

have gone by. But now,' his voice was strong again, 'now, Cho-Na-Thon, we shall meet.' The ball in Jubal's hand gave off an intense golden light that expanded to envelop both him and Noeh. Slowly, the golden ball drifted forward to touch the silver one that enveloped Jack and Lizzie. And when they touched, prismatic light broke out. Rainbow colours threw themselves away from the point of contact and then grew as the contact became stronger. Grew, as the two balls merged. Grew until it was a circle of light around the two glowing balls, which now were one. Gone was any trace of anywhere else, any *when* else.

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Daniel Goode wandered into the galley, an empty glass in his hand. Magic, he was beginning to realise, was a subject that required at least three or four gin and tonics to come to grips with it. Now, if only— He stopped suddenly, because a transparent silver ball was right in the middle of the galley and Jonathon and Elizabeth were inside it! Before he could open his mouth to call out, a point of intense white light came into being opposite the two figures inside and travelled up the curve of the ball. It became a band of light, which grew and grew and travelled down the other side. It became smaller and smaller until it became a point of light. Then, without sound, the ball shrunk to a point and disappeared.

Gone. Now there was just the empty galley. No Jonathon, no Elizabeth. Seconds passed, and Daniel's brain was trying to catch up with what his eyes had seen. He heard Penelope come up behind him.

'What,' she said, peering over his shoulder, 'was that?' She looked around the galley. 'Where are the kids?'

Now his brain caught up. 'They've ... er ... gone out,' he told her, with absolute certainty.

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In that first microsecond of cohesive thought, the first thing that Jack's brain came up with was that it shouldn't have been possible. It *wasn't* possible. Jack struggled with the idea. It couldn't happen! Could it? It contradicted every paradigm and every paradox in physics. Yet, here they were, together, face to face.

In the second microsecond he thought, *Look how small they are!* Jack was six-foot two inches tall, and Lizzie nearly the same, yet Jubal barely came up to Jack's shoulder and Noeh was much shorter than Jubal!

In the third microsecond he said, 'Wow!'

Jubal-Te had seen many things in his life. Nothing in this world was he a stranger to. No force, no will, no event had ever perturbed the master of the college of priests, the O-Si-Ra, as did this young man who stood before

him. He was a giant! And the young woman. Giantess! Never, ever, had Jubal-Te had to look up to anyone! Had he been a lesser man, it would have been a shock. Instead, he held his right hand out and clasped the hand of a young man from twelve thousand years in his future!

Lizzie grasped both hands of the diminutive Noeh and had to sniff back a tear. So, too, she noticed, did the priestess. To actually meet! Surely it's not— 'How is it possible?' she asked, recovering her curiosity before her cousin, who had a far-away, dopey look on his face. 'What have you done?'

Jubal let go of Jack's hand, and put his arm around Noeh's shoulder, as if warding her from the two giants before them. 'Time,' he told them. 'I've taken time from the depths of an ocean. Time that has no meaning or value in that place and used it to pull down the years between us, Li-Tzi, Cho-Na-Thon.' Although his body and mind were exhausted, Jubal's eyes burned with fierce energy and intelligence, and Jack began to really believe that the man before him was the greatest magician who ever was.

'We meet here in the middle of those years. We meet, Cho-Na-Thon, because you gave us a great gift five years ago. You came to Noeh at a time of distress and despair, and you gave her hope and faith.'

His smile said it all, and to Jack, the magician looked years younger. *I wonder how old he really is.* Jack thought.

'Now, I bring a gift to you. Tell me,' he looked straight into Jack's eyes, 'of this search for a lost crystal.'

How did he know about that? Ah, yes, he'd mentioned it to Noeh. Fleetingly. So Jack took a deep breath and told everything about the quest the three witches would have him undertake. He talked about the doorways to other realities, the people and creatures he had been told of, the insistence of the three witches that the crystal must be found, and rescued. He told Jubal-Te everything.

'Ah, portals,' the magician said.

'What?'

'Your doorways to other realms are called portals, Cho-Na-Thon. They are conjectured. We understand the probability of them, but not the practice.' He smiled. 'Attempts to form them have been less than successful, I'm afraid. Although,' he wagged a finger at Jack, 'some crossings were made in the past. Your unicorn, and others, came from one of them.'

'But your journey, ah, to be able to undertake such a thing! Would that I could— No, no matter. The deed is yours, Cho-Na-Thon. But, are you ready for this task?' Burning eyes bored their way into Jack's mind, and he was compelled to return the gaze. 'No,' Jubal said at last, 'I see you are not'.

Deep inside, Jack knew the magician's words were true, yet it was still disappointing to hear them. He knew he wasn't a magician, priestess blood or no priestess blood. He knew he had been playing at the part, pretending to be something that he wasn't. Pretending that all he had to do was follow the wishes of others, and adventure

and cool things would be his. Nowhere had he really considered the dangers involved, the risks to himself or others. The truth, he suddenly realised in a blindingly obvious piece of rationalisation, isn't what you say it is. Or want it to be.

'No, my young friend,' Jubal saw the realisation spread across Jack's face and he felt for the young man, 'the Lesser power alone will not serve you unless you were adept with the skill and power of one such as Noeh. If your three witches are right, and many priests and priestesses managed to cross over to this Thallos when,' a look of pain flashed briefly across his face, 'when Aztlan fell, then you could expect the ways of old to be corrupted into what you understand as witchery and wizardry. True?'

Jack could only nod his head. Lizzie, too, nodded hers, because she had felt from the beginning that there was more to the witches' plan than met the eye.

'Good, Cho-Na-Thon, you understand. Now. Listen!' Power resonated in the magician's voice. 'You also carry the blood of others. The life-spiral of my blood infuses your body, Cho-Na-Thon. Diluted, dormant, but still there.' The crystal in Jubal's hand began to rise. It floated above the magician's head and came to rest level with Jack's eyes. It pulsed slightly, like a golden heartbeat. That comparison entered Jack's mind, and Jubal's eyes narrowed as he looked up, as if he had heard his thought! A small knife appeared in Jubal's right hand, a small knife with an especially narrow, thin blade. Jubal twisted it around so that it reflected the light, and the edge sparkled.

‘This knife, Cho-Na-Thon, is made of electrum, an alloy of gold and silver. Here is represented both colours of the crystals. Give me your hand.’ He held out his left hand and reached for Jack’s left. Jack tentatively held it out, one eye kept on the knife. Gently, Jubal turned Jack’s hand over until it was palm up.

‘Now,’ he told Jack, ‘my gift.’ The point of the knife descended towards Jack’s palm, towards the ball of his thumb, and Jack flinched—being stabbed six thousand years from home didn’t seem like a gift to him! Without feeling, without pain, the skin on Jack’s palm parted as the knife seemed to breathe across his skin. Dark, rich blood welled up and Jack drew a breath. Jubal let go of his hand and upturned his own. The knife breathed again, and blood ran across the magician’s palm.

Slowly, very slowly, Jubal lifted his hand above Jack’s. Slowly, with blood spilling between his fingers, Jubal inverted his hand and his blood dripped into Jack’s palm. Red mixed with red, flowed, combined. Now the magician’s hand descended, clasped Jack’s, and squeezed.

Something happened to Jack, within Jack. His hand felt icy cold, and within the cold was a spot that burned like fire, cold so intense it could sear flesh. His breath stopped at the intensity of it. It travelled up his arm, numbing as it went, infusing his body. He felt a pain he couldn’t describe. It moved into his chest, spreading. Now diffusing and settling throughout his body like phantom snowflakes touching

every fibre of his—. Gone. As suddenly as it had begun, the effect died away. Jonathon Goode gasped at the release.

Jubal-Te eased his grip. There was no more welling blood, no sign of any cut on his palm, only blood remained as evidence of it. ‘What traces you bear of my blood, Cho-Na-Thon, the life-spiral will find.’ He laughed a silent laugh at Jack’s stunned expression. ‘It will be as if our common blood is reborn, re-energised! You, Cho-Na-Thon, you will carry within your life-spiral the ability to access and control the power of a Great crystal.’ He held up a cautionary finger. ‘Not everything, my young friend. That would be impossible. But enough that you may understand and know the way of things, and, with the Lesser crystal to guide you, to develop your own powers within that knowledge.’ Jubal’s eyes appeared to lose focus for a brief moment and his crystal turned black! A tiny iris opened up on the surface, and a thin column of golden light poured out, straight into the crystal tattoo on Jack’s arm. Motes danced in the light, tiny, wriggling motes of something, and Jack’s arm began to throb. Jubal’s eyes refocused, and the column of light ceased. His crystal cleared and drifted away from in front of Jack’s face.

‘Now, Cho-Na-Thon, you have your own Great crystal. Never a complete one. Never that. But it is now attached, to you, Cho-Na-Thon. To you!’

There was a big lump in Jack’s throat, and he struggled to speak around it. ‘I don’t ... I mean, I—’

‘Say nothing for now, Cho-Na-Thon. Nothing. Let it rest. Let it become one with you, and fear not! There is

nothing here, my friend, which is alien or wrong. Nothing sinister. Remember that! It is merely what you are and what you once were long, long ago in the beginning of your bloodline. It is your heritage, Cho-Na-Thon.'

The words struck a chord within Jack, a chord he was totally unfamiliar with. But it existed and resonated with pleasant and familiar harmonies. Jack knew it was the truth. 'I hope,' he eventually managed to say, 'that we'll meet again and I'll be able to tell you how,' he knew the words he wanted to say, but they got all tangled up, 'how ... well ...'

Now the magician's smile positively beamed. 'We will meet again. Oh, yes. As before, in dreams of your construction or maybe, as now, in reality. I will always hear your call, Cho-Na-Thon.' Jubal-Te reached out with his arms and clasped Jack's. Even though he was looking up into the young man's eyes, there was no denying the power and the presence of the magician. 'You would make a fine acolyte for the O-Si-Ra, Cho-Na-Thon.'

'So you are now the O-Si-Ra?' Jack asked.

Jubal laughed. 'No, no, my friend. Ra is many. Ris is one. I am the O-Si-Ris, once a common office long, long ago, before the great colleges were created. And now it has fallen to me to revive and rebuild it, but, it will be done!' A tiny, tiny switch went *click* in the back of Jack's mind. 'So, we must part now. You to save the crystal, Noeh and I to our tasks. Farewell.'

Without any signal being given, the two bubbles slowly began to separate. There was a hurried embrace with Noeh,

Jack bending almost double to allow her thin arms around his neck; a soft kiss on his cheek and a whispered, 'Thank you, Cho-Na-Thon'; a fleeting touch of hands between Jubal and Lizzie, and then the bubbles parted. The light reversed itself to a single point and disappeared. The golden bubble falling away, back into time, smaller and smaller. The silver bubble rotated into a clockwise spiral, faster, farther. The golden bubble, now a point of light, gone. Time spiralled past, the future approached. The galley of the 'Lady Daphne' appeared around them, the bubble faded to nothing, and real time came back! They were home!

Diane came up behind her sister and brother-in-law. She had just heard the last bit of Daniel's comment. 'Gone out? At this time of night? Where would they possibly go to?' Again, in the blink of an eye, the galley was filled with a ghostly silver ball.

'It wasn't far,' Daniel told her, as the ball faded away, leaving Jonathon and Elizabeth standing there, 'because they're back.'

**In Mystragil, land of the Elves,** the Centauri patrol made its way cautiously through the early morning mist. This was upland country. The open trees and brush just below the timberline marked the beginning of elven lands. The patrol was taking every opportunity of cover. It needed

to, because elves were known for their keen eyesight and acute hearing. Not that Centaurs feared elves; it was more that if they had to confront them, the open slopes were a preferable field of action than dense woodland.

There were six Centauri in the group, which Sen'a'na led. He had served the Clan for most of his life, and Ba'akan had rewarded him with command. He didn't intend to let his leader down. And why would he? Had not Ba'akan promised lands and wealth to those who gave themselves to his dream? And had Ba'akan not delivered on that promise? Yes, he had. Almost. The plains and shores were theirs. The uplands were where the new borders were being established, and that task was nearly completed. Sen'a'na was certain Ba'akan would move against the elven folk soon. Already river craft were being prepared; already the great fighting hounds were being sent to Centauri units. Ha! If those hiding in the forest thought a Centaur was a fearsome opponent, wait until they met the war-dogs! There would be no corner of the forest safe to them.

Sen'a'na eyed the mist. Did its shifting currents hide elven bowmen? Did it hide *him* from prying eyes? He pulled his shield a little closer to his chest. The elves were wicked bowmen, but he and his patrol were prepared for that. Each Centaur carried a long, narrow, hide shield that covered the Centaur's torso and foreleg. Plated leather panels, oiled against creaking, hung down either side of his equine body, and was held in place by his weapons saddle. A plain, unadorned helmet covered his head and cheeks, and leather armour guarded his

chest. Sword, javelins, bow, trident and net were all near at hand on his flanks. No, Centauri feared nothing, but just the same, Sen'a'na led his patrol forward as silently as possible, just in case.

Upland began to give way to woodland. The trees took on a taller form, were closer together, and canopied. The mist was thin here, visibility better. Sen'a'na halted his patrol; the map-maker among them needed time to detail the land about.

A low whistle sounded, a Centauri signal. Instantly, every Centaur reached for its weapons, eyes peeled and nerves taut. Elves? Where were they? Quiet hooves came alongside Sen'a'na, and an arm pointed into the canopy. Movement. Sen'a'na signalled. Bows were pulled, arrows notched. Something high in the trees moved, something not quite right. Not elven. It looked like a disc. A pale, blue disc hovering in the air, alone. It was the height of a Centaur and it was slowly rotating, as if looking.

Sen'a'na signalled frantically to back away! *What magic is this?* he wondered. His patrol inched back, back. The disc turned as if it were a giant eye following them! Eye! It looked like an eye from the gods seeking them out! 'Flee! Flee!' he commanded.

The patrol bolted, racing at speeds only the four-legged can achieve. Away from the woodlands, down the slopes, across the uplands. Away! Away!

Under the canopy, other figures watched the blue eye. Silent figures. Hidden figures. They watched it drift slowly

in the direction the Centauri had taken, and then, only then, did they move. Tree and leaf took form, shadows became something else, and the play of light on woodland foliage became elves! There were four of them, tall and woodland lean. Their pale eyes followed the progress of the strange apparition. Then they faded back into the forest and were gone.

In a place unimaginably far from the elven glade, a place unknown and undreamt of by the Centauri, cameras caught the mist-shrouded shapes, and cold eyes looked upon them.

*I have you now.*

**Bogmor Fen** became the mooring for the 'Lady Daphne'. Apart from the derelict cottage, there was nothing actually at the place: no houses, no pub, no locks, no road crossings, nothing. Only the name on a map told of its existence, a name put there to show that at some time someone had actually been there. It was a lonely stretch of canal that had been built across the wastes of an ancient fen, a part of Britain that had been considered too impoverished to do anything with. Most of the surrounding fenland had been drained centuries ago and turned into arable land. Villages and towns had sprung up there, and, if not exactly prospered, they had at least made a fist of things. But not Bogmor Fen. It was too remote, too bleak, too poor, too hard. Even in summer, when everywhere else baked in the warmth of the sun, Bogmor was cold.

Watery bog was everywhere, in every direction. The morning mists were always thick; the damp could leach the warmth through the soles of the best hiking boots money could buy. No, best to just cross it as quickly as possible.

Four people stood in the galley of the narrowboat and sipped scalding cups of tea to ward off the early morning chill. They were waiting. An open doorway on the towpath was a dead giveaway as to what they were waiting for. Jack was in there. Alone. He'd insisted.

Lizzie didn't like it, but Jack *had* rather insisted. He wanted to talk to the three witches on his own. If everything was all right, then their parents were going to enter the witches' realm and meet with them. That's what Uncle Daniel wanted. So they waited.

Jack could immediately sense a difference in the three witches. Not just sense it, but knew it! Because he was different too, and he knew that the witches knew that! Since the meeting with Jubal, a transformation had been going on inside his head. Oh, not the vague feelings he'd had since touching the Lesser crystal, but of someone else sitting in the back of his mind pulling out weird and wonderful bits of information and magic when called upon. That someone was unknown and unseen and erratic and difficult to actually control, a nameless entity that somehow connected him with a hereditary talent that defied all logic! No. The person in the back of his mind was now someone entirely comfortable with himself, an alter ego who knew the sum of things, who was the product of things. All things. Through all ages. This was

the new Jonathon Goode the witches saw, and had they been human, consternation would be written large across their faces.

‘You may,’ he informed them, without preamble, ‘have noticed a change.’ He held his arms wide, as if showing himself off. His voice had also changed. It was older, more assured, with just an undertone of anger. ‘The man to blame for that is my old friend Jubal-Te.’

The three witches were as still as statues, only their eyes moved. The blue auras around their heads were pulsing, yet their eyes were intensely fixed on Jack—or rather, on that which was around him. There were no shadows in the realm between realities, yet there was a field about Jack—an aura, a ghostly outline, a psychic radiance—and it had a definite shape. The head was smooth of outline, and it wasn’t the shape of Jonathon Goode.

‘Take a good look, ladies. Is this the sixteen-year-old you conned into helping you? Hah? No. It isn’t. And do you know why? Don’t bother, I’ll tell you. The greatest magician who ever lived took a block of time from the bottom of an ocean, bent it to his will, and forged a link between us. Us! Me and him! That’s what he did. He telescoped time. And we met! We touched.’ The witches were surrounded now by one blue, pulsing aura. Jack held up his left hand, palm out. ‘He sliced my hand until it bled. He sliced his own. And do you know what we did then? We clasped hands. We shared blood, ladies. And now, all those ancient, forgotten genetic pathways are rebuilt, re-forged, renewed. Reinforced!’

He became calmer. 'I now know things that were lost and how they were lost, in a meandering, genetic sequence. I now know things that were dormant and forgotten, things that are now bright and fresh.' Jack narrowed his eyes so that the witches wouldn't see how much gold was shining in them. 'And that's changing me. It's changing my life. I'm still sixteen, but it feels like I've been sixteen for a very, very long time.' He turned back to the open doorway. 'I'll find your crystal,' he told them over his shoulder. 'But first, my parents and Lizzie's mum want a word with you,' Then Jonathon Goode stepped out on to the towpath without looking back.

Breakfast was eaten in near silence. Bacon, eggs, toast, jam, and still more tea. Everyone had their own thoughts, and whatever had transpired between the adults and the witches was not divulged.

Daniel was particularly quiet. He seemed to be thinking especially hard. Finally, before the silence stretched into tension, he said, as he slurped the last of his tea, 'I think we should all head for home through one of those *doorways* of yours, Jonathon.'

'Sure, dad. Er—'

'We can't stop you doing this,' his father said, and the tone of his voice was mirrored in the seriousness of the look on his face. 'It was explained to us,' he cast a look at Penelope and Diane, and the look was almost one of resignation, 'what led to this point, and what has happened to you and Elizabeth.' Jack had never seen his dad at a loss for anything, and he didn't know what to say that would help

him. 'If they're right, and if you're right, then nothing in your lives will ever be the same again. Nothing. Not friends. Not school. How could they be? And what's happened can't be reversed. There's no going back.' He reached for the pot and poured himself another cup of tea. 'And if there's no going back, lad,' he picked up the cup, 'that means the only way to go is forward,' he sipped, 'into the unknown.'

Jack felt relieved that there was no shouting or arguing. But this quiet resignation was almost as bad. 'Dad,' he said, 'what would you do?'

A smile broke the sombre mien of Daniel's face, and he cupped his hand around his mouth in mock secrecy. 'Don't tell your mum,' he mouthed in a theatrical aside, as his wife next to him listened in, 'but I'd be off like a shot!'

'I'm not so sure, I would take some convincing,' Penelope confessed.

'I'd be off too,' said Diane. 'So we're going to help.'

'Oh, wow!' Lizzie exclaimed. 'Seriously? How?'

Daniel held up a cautionary hand. 'Not so fast. First things first. We have to get you the right equipment. Hence the doorway.' He finished his cup. 'Ready?'

**Going forth to Thallos** took nearly two days, and that was just to get all the equipment for the trip, but that was

perfectly all right with Jack. It meant two nights in his own bed! Two blissful nights! And he'd enjoyed them all the more because he didn't know where he'd be sleeping in the next few days. He suspected it might not be exactly five star accommodation, judging from the equipment his dad had bought.

They didn't actually need a lot of stuff, because he could always open a doorway, but some things were necessary. A small back-pack, a basic first-aid kit, water purification tablets, binoculars, and a knife with so many blades in it that it just made you itch to get your hands on a horse with a stone in its hoof. There was a flexible solar panel attached to the top flap of the back-pack that would provide enough power to charge his mobile phone and one on Lizzie's to charge the camera. Socks, underwear, a couple of extra shirts, jeans, toiletries. Pretty soon the back-pack was full. The other things that his dad had insisted on were boots: military-style jungle boots with canvas uppers and great ankle support. The last thing to be packed was the Everywhere Key, and that went in his pocket.

To be honest, Jack hadn't thought past the first step and the adventure it promised. 'Contingency' was just a long word under 'C' in his dictionary, not a planned course of alternative action. Had he looked at what they were undertaking with his silver eyes, or, even better, his golden ones, he'd have seen straight away the need for such preparation.

‘Ready, Jonathon?’ his mother called. ‘Elizabeth?’ The three adults were wearing similar clothes—jeans, jackets and hiking boots—and Jack knew that his dad hadn’t just prepared him and Lizzie for this, he’d prepared himself and his mum and aunty to be ready for anything. That made Jack feel pretty good.

Time to go. All five assembled in the lounge room.

*Everywhere Key,*

*Concentrate.*

*Four Fiery lines.*

*Push.*

A hole in the fabric of nothing opened and the bright light of a long-lost Aztlán spilled into the room. The witches were waiting for him.

*Don’t they ever sleep?* he asked himself as he and Lizzie stepped through, looking every inch like explorers. The backpacks were hardly noticeable as a burden, but the boots would take some breaking in. Their parents followed, and it was obvious that they were expected as well.

Tryphena glided forward, the faint halos evident around all three witches’ heads. ‘You are prepared?’

Jack and Lizzie shrugged in unison. ‘As well as we’ll ever be, I guess.’ Jack told her. ‘What do we do? Where’s Sandy?’

‘In a moment I will open a door to Thallos. Beyond that door wait Master Beech and his nephew, as well as Mumps and two local guides. But first, you must hear the full tale. You will journey across a small part of the land to a mountain range. In that mountain range you will meet a

magician named Cadifer of Punt. He controls a crystal that is used to keep the mountain passes open and protected. With his powers, he will open another door into the world of Master Beech.'

'Mystragil,' Jack stated.

'Precisely. Cadifer is privy to our quest and offers to assist. But he is the only one. The memory of Aztlan in the history of that land is unknown to many. Only the College of Mages has its knowledge, and that knowledge is fiercely protected.

'From Mystragil it will be impossible to open a door that brings you directly here. You must first come back into Thallos, and then here.'

'With the crystal, you mean,' Lizzie stated.

'If that is possible,' Tryphena looked and sounded very human now. 'We will watch and guard, where we can.' For just a moment Tryphena looked a little uncertain; her eyes took in the three adults, and a decision was reached. 'It is believed that we should give the gift of language to all.' All three witches drifted forward. 'Come together and hold hands. Not,' she insisted, 'you, Jonathon. Nor you, Elizabeth.' All three adults faced inward and held hands. The blue halo extended itself and slowly enveloped their heads. Their vision faded into a blue haze, warmth engulfed them. They heard voices, faint, at the very edge of hearing, meaningless; the words indecipherable. Now getting louder, closer. Some words shaped themselves, made sense. Now more and more the cacophony became a babble and

the babble made sense. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over.

Penelope blinked hard. There was an itch behind her eyes that she couldn't scratch, and a dull ache at the back of her head. 'That was so weird,' she ventured. Her sister and husband nodded in unison. 'What about Jonathon and Elizabeth?' she asked.

'They have the gift,' Tryphena informed her. 'They already know about languages.'

'We do?' This was news to Jack, and he looked sideways at Lizzie, who looked just as stunned as he felt. 'I wish I'd known that back in the school exams.' Then, suddenly, it all made sense. Being able to understand Noeh, talking with Jubal-Te. *Of course he had the gift of languages, he'd had it all the time!*

'It is part of your talent. It will rise when called upon.'

'How do I do that, then? Is it automatic, or what?' Lizzie asked.

'You will know what to do when the time comes,' Tryphena informed him.

*Oh, great!* Jack breathed. *That's a brilliant set of instructions!*

Unbidden, a door opened before them and light streamed out. 'But now you must place your trust in Master Beech's hands.' The three witches waited.

'Er, my folks are pretty nervous about this, you know. So is Lizzie's mum. What we promised to do first was to see if I could open a door back here. From there.' He pointed into the light.

Tryphena nodded, and Jack stepped through. 'If you don't see me in one minute,' he told Lizzie, 'get them to open another door.' Then he was gone and the door vanished.

The trick, Lizzie realised, was not to admit just how weird and strange the whole thing was.

All at once, four bright lines appeared in the air and then swung open. Jack stood in the light, grinning. 'Come and meet the gang,' he invited. 'You won't believe it.'

The first thing that Lizzie saw as she crossed over was Mumps. The unicorn was grazing on the side of what appeared to be a dirt track, filling itself with lush grasses. Daniel, Penelope and Diane tentatively stepped through, eyes searching everywhere and the thought crossed their minds that this wasn't just a door into another room, or into another place on the Earth's surface, this was another world! Diane, in particular, felt a current of excitement run through her very being. It was a jolt. *Déjà vu*. She recognised this place! Maybe it was the image of a long-lost dream, maybe the echo of a secret desire, but it resonated within her. She really hoped she was right.

Daniel stared at the sky, then checked his watch carefully.

Sandy Beech appeared, carrying the penguin. He stepped around Mumps and bowed, a knowing grin on his face. He still wore the green tracksuit, but instead of the horrible tea-cosy hat, he now wore a leather cap that covered all of his head except for his face. Then up stepped two newcomers.

'Jack,' Lizzie hissed, 'they're dwarves!'

The two newcomers were indeed vertically challenged, more so than Sandy Beech. But whereas Sandy was basically a short, thin person with a well-developed stomach, these two were stocky and wide. Short and solid described them best. Both were dressed in dark-green leather jerkins that were studded and worn, and both wore sturdy leather boots that laced up past their ankles. One wore heavy cotton pantaloons, and the other a long leather skirt. Their hair was black and wiry and equally as long as each other, but the one with the skirt had a copper clasp in her hair. Their faces were wide and brown and not unfriendly.

'Jack! Lizzie!' Sandy Beech sauntered across to them, and placed the penguin in Lizzie's arms. 'Your friend, I believe?' For some strange reason, the large stuffed toy was a comfort to Lizzie, a link to reality, and she was pleased to have it back. Quickly, while Sandy completed the introductions, she shed her backpack. Two straps held the top down, and she fitted the penguin's flippers through them. When she put the pack back on, the penguin gazed serenely to the rear.

'Mums and a Dad, too, I believe. Welcome to Thallos!' Sandy swept his arm to include the two newcomers. 'Meet our guides for the journey. Good Master Huwel Oxenheart,' the one in pantaloons bowed slightly, 'and his good lady wife, Mistress Winsome Oxenheart.' The one in the dress nodded her head. It was impossible to even guess their ages. They both came level with Lizzie's midriff.

‘Greetings, Mistress Witch,’ Huwel Oxenheart said to Lizzie, and she understood him perfectly! Jack didn’t at first. All he heard was ‘Gr’zz’ak agg a’aklag’, which was like someone clearing his throat. Then the silver flashed in his eyes and images of runes ran through his mind. Words formed and spoke themselves, and then the world was normal again. It was as if a reference library had been accessed and now all the information was before him.

‘That should be “Master Witch,” Master Oxenheart,’ Jack said. He thought he said it in English, but he couldn’t be sure. The two dwarves looked at each other, then both turned their gaze on Sandy. There was a worried look on each face.

Huwel Oxenheart turned a sombre face to Jack. “‘Master Witch”, says he?’ His eyes were wide open. ‘What sort o’ place stands things on their head like that? Eh? Not right, it isn’t. Master witch indeed.’ The look on his face was one of concern. ‘We holds with convention ’ere,’ he told the lad. ‘Everythin’ in its proper place, you see. Lords are men, ladies are women, magicians are men, and witches are women. Laws o’ nature. You go around upsettin’ that and, well, it wouldn’t be right, would it, Winsome, my love?’

Winsome Oxenheart stared up at Jack, then patted his hand. ‘You must forgive my Huwel,’ she said. ‘Always one for tradition is Huwel. Doesn’t like change at all. But I say, good luck to ye. If a witch ye wants to be, well ye just go ahead and

be a witch.’ She gave Jack a wink and a smile that was full of amazingly white teeth. In the background Lizzie sniggered.

‘Right!’ Sandy Beech rubbed his hands together. ‘Now that we’re all introduced, we should get a move on. What do you say?’

This was the moment. Both Jack and Lizzie turned to their parents. For Jack, it was an awkward kind of moment. I mean, what do you say? You’re on another world, and your folks are going to leave you there! Sort of, sort of. You’ve got the Key, but that’s all you’ve got. Without the magic welling up in his eyes to let him know everything was going to be fine, he only had his own instincts. And right now those instincts were on shaky ground. He wasn’t sure what to say.

‘Before we go,’ his dad said, obviating Jack’s need to say anything, ‘what time of day is it, Sandy?’

Sandy squinted into the sun. ‘I’d say, oh, two hours after sun up.’ He pulled the sleeve back on his left arm and peered at the watch clasped there. ‘Yep. Exactly.’ He saw the others looking. ‘What? *What?*’

Daniel shook his head. Of course you’d do that, why wouldn’t you. The smallest and cheapest type of technology there was, why wouldn’t you use it? ‘Okay. That’s about an hour or so behind us. But that could change since we don’t know the true length of their day. Jack, set your watch to local time, and you, Lizzie, you keep yours on our time. But keep monitoring them. Okay?’

‘Now, make sure that you use that Key. Okay? Regularly. These good ladies,’ he inclined his head towards the three witches, ‘will pass on all messages. We’re taking the boat back to Upper Uffing, so you’ll know where to find us. We’ll extend the hire for another week.’ His dad grinned. ‘That should be long enough for anyone to cross a strange new world and get back in time. Hmmm?’

Jonathon Goode grinned back. ‘No worries, Dad. Piece of cake,’ he prophesied. ‘That right, Lizzie?’ He shared his grin with his cousin.

*I wish you hadn’t said that, Jack Goode. Do not tempt fate.*  
‘Yeah. Sure,’ she grinned back.

There was no fanfare, no words, no bands, no bunting, just a closing of a door.

That’s all it took for Jack and Lizzie to begin. Now they looked around for the first time. Their little group stood on a crude track, which was barely two ruts in the dirt, and bore not the slightest resemblance to a yellow brick road. There were low hedgerows either side of the track, but the countryside was open and undulating. Tilled fields were visible in the near distance and strands of trees divided many of the fields. A heat haze disguised the middle distance, and beyond that, the land rose sharply upward toward the foothills of a range of mountains that disappeared into the far, far horizon.

Jack slowly revolved, taking in the scene. The land was flat and seemed to go on forever, until, at some point, it became impossible to distinguish sky and land. There was

no sign of towns or cities. Above their heads, the sky was a cloudless cobalt vault and the sun was beginning its upward climb into the sky.

‘Which way?’ Jack finally asked, and Sandy pointed down the road.

‘North. To Podger’s Hole. This track is an old logging road. The main road—the mail road they call it—lies yonder across the river. They meet at Podger’s Hole and that’s where we’ll take off across country.’ He pointed to the mountains. ‘Up there is Punt. And Cadifer’s Tower. That, Jack, is our destination.’

They stepped off, 004’s head nodding in time with Lizzie’s steps.

They walked the track for hours. After the first few miles conversation and interest in this new world dwindled for Jack and Lizzie. It wasn’t that there was nothing to see, there was plenty. It’s just that it looked so much like home. The grass was the same, clouds looked like clouds, trees looked exactly like trees. There were noises in the undergrowth that could have been mice or insects, and the birds they saw were just that: birds. As far as they were concerned, this was just a walk in the country.

But what country! What smells! This was a land untainted with pollution. The air was champagne, full of every scent imaginable. Invigorating. Intoxicating. It made you want to walk and walk just to breathe more in.

The dwarves kept a pace that Jack found amazing and soon he had a sweat up. Every now and then he would take the

camera from his pack and take a few shots when no-one was looking, although he never managed to catch Mumps when he had the camera in his hands. Funny, he thought, Mumps was with them one minute, then the next he'd be gone. Then he'd be back. He never managed to see where the unicorn went.

He noticed that the countryside changed little as they descended into the valley, although the track seemed to now follow the meanderings of a tree-lined stream rather than cut a straight line across the land. It was there that Huwel stopped suddenly, his hands signalling for everyone to stop moving. He was looking up into the sky, toward the horizon.

'Quickly,' he urged, 'into the trees! Hurry!' Silently, everyone hurried the few yards to the shelter of the trees.

'What's up?' Sandy asked, but the dwarf just pointed to where his eyes were looking.

Jack squinted. Dots were up there, a long way off. High up. He reached for his binoculars and focussed them. Birds! Huge birds, with— He shook his head in disbelief. Riders? *Hellfire!* They were riders, all right, in uniform, and he could make out the saddles they rode in and the spears they carried. 'What—?' he began.

'Baron's patrol,' Huwel said. He and Winsome hadn't taken their eyes off the birds, and Huwel's voice sounded strained. 'Them birds can see a mouse's whisker twitch a mile off. Wait 'til they're gone.'

A little while later, they entered a copse of trees by the banks of the stream, and the dwarves called a halt. It was

pleasant and cool, and the space under the foliage was fluid with dappled light. It was Lizzie's instinct that told her someone was there, waiting. Someone or something was camouflaged by the dappled light. She instinctively knew the presence, it was a borrowing thing.

Sandy Beech must have been expecting someone, because he bid 'hail' to the hidden shape. 'Is that you, young Dell? Step forward.' In one small place, colours of woodland blended and moved, dappled shadows flowed and resolved themselves, and a man suddenly stood there.

No, Lizzie realised as he stepped forward. He's an elf! More, he was young and tall—as tall as Jack, at least—and lean with wide shoulders and long white hair that cascaded down his back in a braid that was bound with golden wire. His eyes were blue and wide, his face chiselled, and ... and ... and—. It took Lizzie a second to realise that, inside, she was drooling. She couldn't take her eyes off him. His clothes were all made from soft leather or suede, and the long boots, tights and jerkin seemed to alter and blend colours as he moved. As the light played across the colours, they changed: one second they were shades of beige, the next second subtle greens took over. He did, however, wear a white fabric blouse.

Lizzie became aware that the young elf's eyes hadn't left hers either. She also became aware that everyone else had noticed also. Then Jack said very quietly, 'Close your mouth, you're drooling,' and she felt her cheeks redden.

‘Jack. Lizzie,’ Sandy began, ‘I’ve asked my little sister’s youngest to join us. A good man he is with the trackin’, an’ he’ll be takin’ us through the doorway into Mystragil.’ Sandy beamed with pride at his nephew, and he made a mock show of introducing him. ‘Meet Songbird Dell. Songbird, meet—’

Lizzie only heard half of Sandy’s introduction, because her eyes were still drinking in the sight of— *What?* She did a quick mental recall. *What? Songbird! No way!* Out of the corner of her eye she spied Jack turning away, his face contorted as he tried to keep the laughter from escaping. Now the young elf was before her, his eyes only for her. *Think fast!*

‘Hello,’ a name popped into her head, ‘Sunny,’ she said, with some relief. ‘I hope you don’t mind me calling you Sunny. It’s just ... er—’

‘It’s just,’ Jack interposed, ‘that Song ... your name doesn’t translate properly into our language.’ He smiled a bright smile at Lizzie. ‘Sunny’s good. It’s very good.’

Sunny Dell nodded assent. ‘I mind not. To be named by a witch of such grace and charm is an honour,’ he said gallantly to Lizzie.

Lizzie could hear Jack having a violent coughing fit, and she fought to keep her own face straight. ‘Thank you, Sunny, but,’ *oh my, he’s got such lovely eyes*, ‘I’m ... er ... that is ...’ she pointed to her cousin, who was just recovering his breath.

‘Ooops,’ said Jack, ‘that’d be me, wouldn’t it? Good old Jack the Witch! What a laugh! Can’t understand why people don’t spot it straight away.’ He glared at Lizzie.

Sunny Dell cast a quick eye at his uncle, who gave an almost imperceptible nod of his head. 'Apologies,' he offered. 'That too is something that does not translate well.' He held Lizzie's eye for a fraction longer than necessary and she knew that he knew.

Sandy Beech felt it necessary to explain. 'In their world, Song ... Sunny, me lad, things,' he tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially, 'are very different. Oh, yes. Very different indeed.'

'Are we,' came the plaintive voice of Huwel Oxenheart, 'going to eat, or what?' The dwarf stamped into the centre of the clearing. He'd met the elf lad before, so food now had the priority. 'Best to rest here, then,' he said. 'Podger's Hole by nightfall, then a nice barn to sleep in.'

Jack unslung his pack. 'Barn?' He looked enquiringly at Sandy.

'Secrecy, Jack,' Sandy explained. 'The fewer people who know about us the better.' The elf opened his own pack and pulled out a small frying pan. 'Could you explain four people such as yourselves and two elves? No. Besides, this is frontier country. The eastern marches. It's the edge of civilisation and people here are suspicious. Anything unusual gets reported to the baron straight away.' He started to gather wood for a fire, and then looked at Jack expectantly.

'What?' Jack asked.

Sandy nodded towards the stream. 'Fish, lad. Lunch.' A big grin split his face.

Within minutes a fire was lit and Huwel and Winsome were soon busy cleaning fish. Jack's credibility had gone up several notches in Huwel's eyes at the sight of the maelstrom of fish, but Winsome just nodded to herself as if she expected nothing less from a witch.

Sunny's eyes narrowed slightly at such power in the hands of someone so young. He had spent the last ten of his seventeen years studying his craft of the forest and had had no experience of magicians and witches, but he had heard the stories his uncle had told when he returned to the fold, strange tales of strange lands and stranger folk. His eyes slid to a spot beneath the canopy, a spot where his pack lay hidden. Best to trust bow and knife, he reminded himself. Then his eyes again locked with Lizzie's.

*Well, he corrected, until things are clearer.*

The fish were wonderful and there was more than enough for everybody, although Lizzie was amazed at just how much Huwel and Winsome ate. But Sandy's description of the land intrigued her. 'What are marches?' she asked him. 'And what baron? And what's he doing with them?'

'Well, young lady, that'd be Lord Eoghan apSulwyn, Baron of the Eastern Marches, and marches is what's at the edge of the realm. This is where he patrols the borders and keeps out the mountain trolls.'

'Eh?' Jack spluttered on a piece of fish. 'Trolls? What trolls?'

‘Did I not mention them before, young master?’ Sandy asked innocently. ‘I’m sure I did.’

‘No. You mentioned dwarves and dragons and Rocs, but no trolls.’ He noticed that Huwel and Winsome had gone quite pale. ‘What’s wrong?’ he asked them.

‘Them birds is what’s wrong,’ Winsome told him, her eyes searching the sky. ‘No friends of dwarven folk them birds. No indeed! Many a folk been known to make a wild Roc’s lunch, they have. No,’ she shook her head emphatically, ‘dwarven kind have no love of the Roc. Steal their eggs when we can, we do.’

Huwel held his arms out wide, a huge grin on his face. ‘Thumpin’ great omelettes they make, too!’ He patted his stomach. ‘Wonderful flavour.’

Jack was a little perplexed. ‘How do the birds get you if you’re underground?’

‘Eh? Underground? Who’s underground?’ Huwel was getting as perplexed as Jack.

‘Don’t dwarves live underground?’ In all the books Jack had read, dwarves lived underground and worked the mines.

‘Why,’ asked Huwel very slowly, as if questioning a child, ‘should dwarven folk live underground?’

‘Because of your mines?’ Jack asked hopefully.

‘Mines? *Mines?*’ Huwel’s eyes bulged. ‘Do you know how dangerous mines are, lad? They’re full of cave-ins that’ll bury ye forever, and fire-damp that can explode before ye know it’s there. Minin’? That’s a job for trolls, that is. All thick neck and strong backs them lot.’

Sandy scratched his nose. ‘Another myth debunked, eh, Jack?’

‘What do you do, then?’ Lizzie asked.

Huwel put his arm around his wife and they both beamed. ‘We grow the best apples in the county, lad. The best!’

‘And garlic, don’t forget,’ Winsome chimed in. She saw the look of utter loss on Jack’s face. ‘We grow it under the trees to keep the bugs away,’ she explained.

Sandy Beech kicked dry soil over the fire’s embers. ‘This place is different to where you come from, lad. Seems to me there’s a lot of half-truths on your side of the door.’

Jack gave a rueful grin. ‘You could be—’ silver flickered in his vision and Mumps *looked* at him. ‘Trouble’s coming,’ he finished quickly. Sandy was already spinning around as Jack saw Mumps fade out of sight. Faintly, almost beyond hearing, a deep bell tolled.

‘You’re dead right there, lad! Mumps is gone ahead a few seconds in time and that means we can expect—’

*BOOOOOOOOOM!*

The massive crash of thunder was directly overhead and nearly felled everyone. A brilliant light split the air before them and then disappeared, leaving a glowing image on the backs of their eyes. A figure stood on the spot where the light had been. As their eyes adjusted, they could see that the figure was also trying to adjust to a different place from where it had been seconds ago.

It was an old man, bent slightly with age, and sporting a scruffy, grey beard. He wore a beautifully tailored, heavy

tapestry robe that swept to the floor. It was festooned with thousands of sequins that made the robe a blaze of colour. His feet were shod in open leather sandals, and Jack noticed the old man's toe nails were dirty and untrimmed. On his head resided a pillbox hat of soft velvet, and coils of uncut grey hair protruded from beneath its rim. The old man quickly looked about him, then spotted the group.

'Ahhh! Yes! You there!' he gabbled. 'Cease! Sorcery and charlatanism indeed! Hold yourself to account, wa-wa-witch!'

Lizzie's mouth was dry, because the old fool was looking directly at her and, to make sure there was no misunderstanding, he was also pointing a crooked finger her way.

'Er ...' she began confidently, 'I'm afraid I don't understand you, good sir.' *Good sir? Where did that come from?* Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Jack had his hand in his pocket, the pocket with the mobile phone in it. And Sunny had disappeared. *No he hadn't*, her senses told her, *he's just blended into the background.*

'No "sir" I!' the old man shouted. 'F-f-false honours and accolades? Never!' He seemed to regain his composure, as if the trip through the doorway had disoriented him and he was now recovering. 'Wa-wa-witch, I say, and wa-wa-witch you be! The aura is all around. Answer for yourself, str-str-strumpet!' Saliva sprayed as he mouthed the epithet.

Sandy Beech chose this moment to break the magician's concentration, because he was certain the old man was

indeed of that ilk, and witches were not favourably regarded by some sections of the magical profession.

‘Good mage,’ he greeted, bowing low and sweeping his arm wide. ‘We are but travellers venturing this road in the course of our journey. I assure you that the lass is no witch.’

‘You’re a b-b-bit tall and thin for a der-der-dwarf,’ the old magician commented, peering hard at Sandy.

‘I’ve been ill.’ He cast a sad expression on his face. ‘A rare malady that my good friend Cadifer of Punt has promised to correct soon as we arrive.’

*Hellfire*, thought Jack, *he’s very good!* But the words only seemed to incite the magician more.

‘Cadifer! *Cadifer?*’ He was almost apoplectic. ‘A p-p-puppy! A mere p-p-puppy!’ he spluttered, saliva spraying around. ‘New age rationalisation and g-g-green tea! No ma-ma-magician of salt is he.’ he peered slowly around the group, who showed suitable respect and stepped a pace backwards, ‘No m-m-mage of courage or p-p-power. Ha!’ He looked haughtily down at the group, except for Jack and Lizzie: for them he had to look up. ‘He is no Agathos, that one.’

Understanding dawned in Sandy’s eyes. ‘Aha! Good mage, well met,’ he jollied. ‘To think this little band has the fortune to meet Agathos the Farseeker. Happy day indeed!’ He literally beamed.

Agathos seemed mollified at the recognition, and he preened a little. ‘Thus history speaks of me, dwarf.’ He

suddenly focused on Jack. 'But what of you, lad? What are you and where do you hail from? Ah?'

'I'm Jack,' he said, his fingers searching for the right buttons on his phone. 'From, er, Bogmor Fen.' He inclined his head back the way they had travelled. 'Many days yonder.'

'And you?' he switched quickly to Lizzie, and his nose twitched as he sniffed the air. 'There's witch smell here, lass.'

Jack's fingers found what they sought. In a very quiet voice he whispered,

*'Smell of fragrance,'*

'Witches,' Agathos continued, 'must be ...'

*'smell of need,'*

'brought before the ...'

*'fill his nose'*

'College of Mages to examine their ...'

*'with aniseed.'*

SEND

'credentials. *Ugh! Snork!* Agathos grabbed at his nose and staggered back into a coughing fit, his eyes began to water. '*Urk!*

'Oh, my!' Sandy showed genuine remorse at Agathos' predicament. 'It is a new and rare confection we carry for Cadifer. A little pungent, I fear, if one is not used to its efficacy.'

'Liddle?' The magician's nose was now bright red. 'Bungent? Id's derrible!' He was frantically searching his pockets for a handkerchief and obviously failing to find

one. ‘Stupid dwarbes,’ he snuffled. Then with a dramatic throwing open of his arms a light crashed into existence around him. *Crack!* And then it collapsed, leaving the small clearing empty of his presence.

‘Well done, Sandy!’ Lizzie exclaimed. ‘You were brilliant!’ She turned happy eyes to Jack. ‘That was fantastic! Even I could smell the aniseed.’

Huwel nudged his wife. ‘Told ye them boy witches is good.’

Mumps reappeared and fixed Sandy with a *look*.

‘We leave now,’ the elf stated. ‘A good speed for ten minutes. Then Jack, you turn off the phone. Everybody place a hand on Mumps.’

As they hurried to move off, Lizzie saw Sunny emerge from the shadows. One second there was nothing, and the next he was there! She also noticed that he was sheathing a rather large knife. *Hmmm*.

Five minutes later the air in the little clearing was again rent with a clap of thunder and the crash of a doorway being extravagantly opened.

Agathos the Farseeker stepped hurriedly through. ‘Bogmor Fen?’ He shouted. ‘There is no b-b-bogmor.’ His tirade dried up, as it was obvious that his previous audience had gone. ‘Miscreants,’ he mumbled to himself, as he pulled a rather battered book from his pocket and searched its contents. ‘Aha. Hmmm. Right,’ he muttered. Then, satisfied, he pulled a small magnifying glass from his robe, held it to his eye and called out in a strong, clear voice.