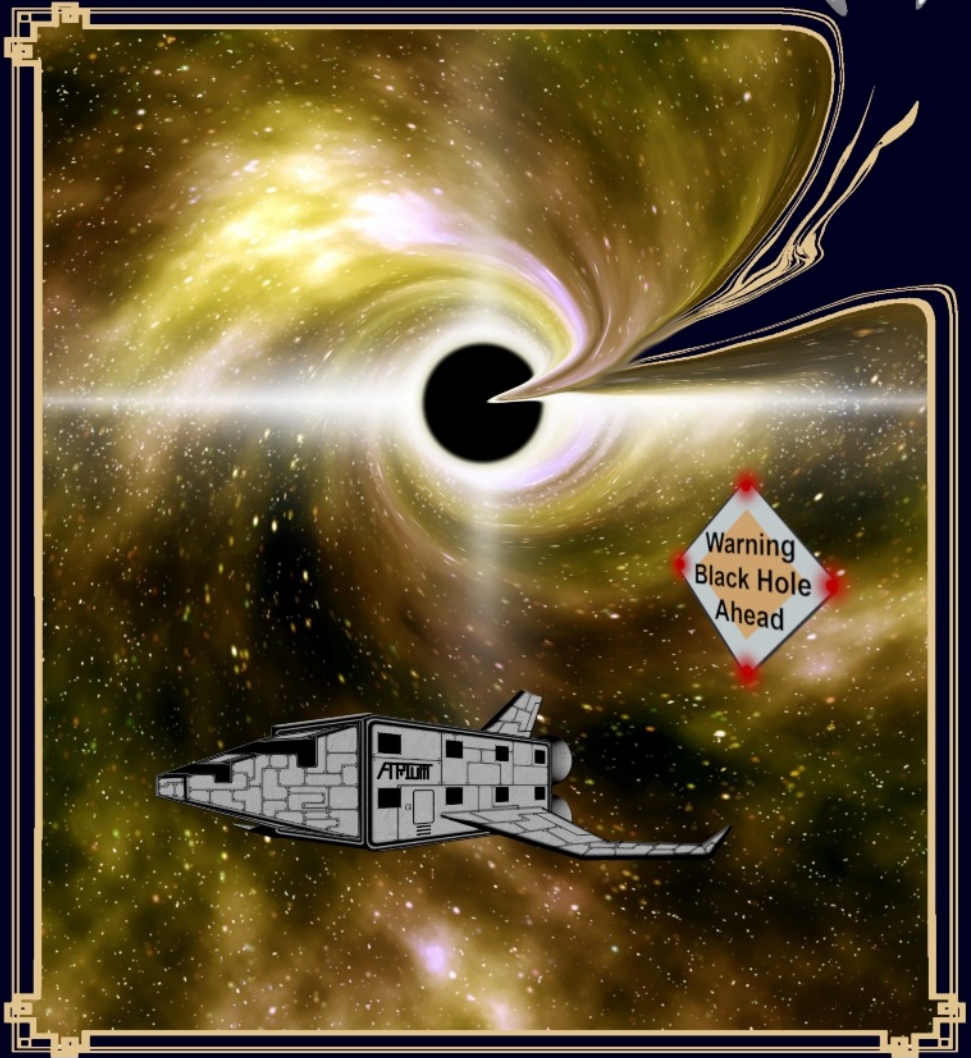
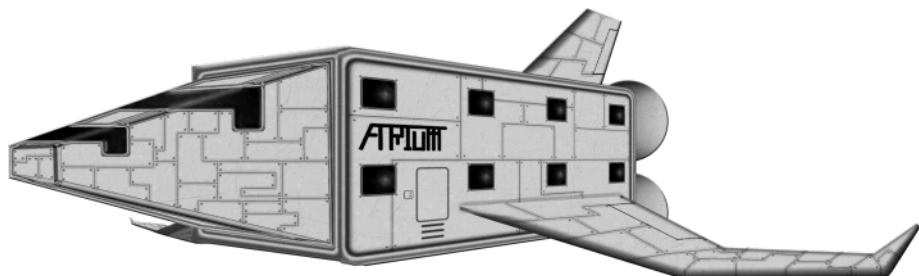


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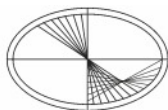


Mark Dellandre
and Britton Learnard

The Entropy of Knowledge



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The Entropy of Knowledge

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Britton Learnard:

As I sit here and write this acknowledgment I cannot help but feel surreal considering the chain of events that led me here. **The Entropy of Knowledge** had its genesis as a conversation that Mark and I had about merging black holes when I was blitheringly drunk. From the ether of my delirium, and Mark's audacity, a dare was made between us to craft a story that was both funny and intelligent: something we will never know because we've read this book so many times.

From here I would like to thank my parents. My mother, who would read stories like *James and the Giant Peach* at a young age, and gave me a great appreciation for books, reading, and eventually writing. My father who instilled in me the virtues of knowledge and learning as we paged through his collection of atlases and encyclopedias (of which he insists he can look up something faster than I can find it on Google. Joke's on you Dad).

I would be remiss as an author of Science Fiction if I were not to tip my hat to the author who made me fall in love with the subject, the late Arthur C. Clarke. I was given a choice by an English teacher to read either *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger or Clarke's *Childhood's End*. Thankfully I chose the latter and was gripped by the science fiction bug indefinitely.

Lastly, I would like to thank our editor Heather Meeks for providing some great ideas as well as some invaluable help on making our story much better, and, let's be honest, coherent. I cannot finish this without also thanking Ken Tupper for taking the time to read our manuscript and managing to see a polished gem hidden within a piece of ore...or at least a shiny rock. Yeah. Managing to see a shiny rock.

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Prologue

WITHIN THE VASTNESS of empty space that exists between the planets of a solar system, there is typically not a lot of traffic. Yet that didn't stop Sophie from screaming into Lester's ears every five minutes about watching where he was going. "You're going to kill us!" the little old lady shouted at her red-faced husband.

"I'm not going to kill anyone!" he reiterated for the thousandth time. "We're not even within a light year of a single thing out here." He gestured to the inky blackness outside the window.

"Keep your hands on the wheel!" Sophie screeched, shaking him by his shoulders. "You're going to hit a comet."

"I might just if you don't unhand me this second, woman!"

Lester and Sophie had been married for 62 long years. They lived full lives, worked hard, made a boatload of money in their time together, and were now leaving their solar system to retire in a warmer part of the galaxy. Maybe somewhere down true south. Sophie was tired of living in a place with two suns, and Lester was tired of listening to her complain, so they crammed their worldly possessions into their little space coupe and set out for the cosmos.

Space travel was rare these days, unless someone had a lot of money like them. The technology was hard to come across for most folks, and even worse, the people who owned space ships didn't have a clue how to operate them. Lester once heard on the AM/XM radio that some planets in his solar system didn't even know what space travel was. Apparently, his wife never forgot this little fact.

"That's why I still think you should stop and ask someone at the next planet for directions," Sophie said. "We might not see another living soul out here for the rest of the trip!"

"We didn't need any directions to get here. We don't need any now!"

"We didn't need directions because Marshall was driving, not you. You couldn't find your way out of a plastic bag!"

Lester felt his cheeks warm under his straw hat. He gripped the crème leather wheel even tighter. She would *never* let him live that plastic bag episode down, would she?

"Look." Sophie stuck her withered finger right past Lester's bulbous nose to point out the window. "That sign there says this is the last planet with a Bob Deans for the next three light years. Let's stop, Lester!"

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The old man glanced at the faded metallic sign floating just outside the window. It was so caked with ice that he could barely make out the restaurant's logo: a breakfast sandwich wearing overalls. He scoffed, looking forward again.

"We don't need to stop. We're making good time."

"But I'm hungry!"

Lester nodded to the glove compartment in front of his wife. "We have plenty of dehydrated food in there. It should last us a decade."

"I don't like any of that stuff. I want scrambled eggs from Bob Deans! And maybe you could ask somebody there for directions."

"If you bring up directions one more time, just ONE MORE TIME, I'm going to plow this baby into the nearest quasar! You better believe it!"

Sophie shrank away and pulled a gumdrop from her pocketbook. "Now, Lester, there's no need to get so upset. If you don't want to stop at Bob Deans, then we don't have to stop at Bob Deans. But when we're months down the road, and you get a craving for some of Bob Deans' home cooked scrambled eggs, don't come crying to me!"

He could hear her false teeth flapping as she chewed, making his blood boil. "I won't get a craving for their scrambled eggs! I don't even *like* their scrambled eggs!"

"What are you talking about; you love Bob Deans' scrambled eggs."

"They're always gritty. I can do without them."

The sound of her chewing got louder. "Maybe this time they won't be. Oh, let's stop anyway. Please."

Before Lester had a chance to respond or make any more wild threats, a massive ship materialized in front of them. It was huge, sleek, and resembled a giant egg. The coupe screeched to a halt.

"Would you look at that," Lester said, catching his breath. "They came out of their warp drive right in front of us. That was a close one."

"They could have killed us!" Sophie clutched her flowery pillbox hat in panic. "I bet they don't even have insurance. You should give them a piece of your mind."

"I wonder what a ship like that is doing in our neck of the woods," Lester went on, ignoring his wife as he so often did. "That there is an invasion ship. Haven't seen one of those in years."

"You've never seen one before; quit lying." Sophie threw down her tiny pocketbook and turned on the dashboard radio. She held the mouthpiece to her lips and spun the rotary dial until she reached the colossal ship's frequency.

"You listen here, now," she shouted into the mouthpiece. "You better watch where you're going! What's the matter with you? There are decent people

out here, you know! So, mind your manners!" She slammed the mouthpiece back on its cradle with an air of finality.

A small compartment opened on the bottom of the egg-shaped ship. A laser turret popped out, blasted the coupe to dust, and retracted back inside. It didn't pay the destroyed vehicle the slightest bit of attention after that.

After all, it had a planet to invade.

Section I

Chapter α

BABYLON BRIGGS WOKE up in his humble room on the morning of his sixteenth birthday. The light of the twin suns shone through the solitary window, bright and warm. His eyes fluttered open, and a wide grin spread across his narrow face. With an excited start, he swung his legs over the side of his straw-stuffed mattress and bounced out of bed. Today wasn't just any other run-of-the-mill birthday. Today was the day he became an adult.

His father, or Papa Briggs as he was sometimes called, was cooking breakfast in the kitchen. He was a thin, middle-aged man with pointed slippers and a tuft of bright blue hair atop his head. The hair wasn't his natural color; it was an occupational necessity.

Papa Briggs worked as the under-jester to the Duke of the province. That meant he was lowest man in the jester hierarchy, and a source of ridicule in the village. Even the manure boys scoffed at him behind their wagons of dung. Sometimes, even Papa Briggs could be caught scoffing at himself in a mirror. All his life he worked towards being the head jester, but try as he might, he couldn't seem to figure out what to do or what color to dye his hair to be promoted. The only person who didn't look down upon his father was Babylon, who saw the daffy old man as the only family he had left in the world.

"Good morning, Son," his father said, with a cheerful jig.

"Good morning, Dad." Babylon yawned. "What's for breakfast?"

"Oh, the usual," the kindly old man said with a smile. "Barley cakes."

Babylon looked into the dingy pot which sizzled on the wood stove and immediately regretted it. The grains inside crackled, giving off an all-too-familiar pungent odor. He rolled his eyes.

"Aw, come on, Dad," he sighed. "Today's going to be important for me. I was hoping for a nice, big breakfast. Or at least one I can keep down 'til lunch."

"Well, I was going to cook up some chicken, but darn it if old Clucky hasn't been clinging to life these last few days." Papa Briggs shot a dirty look at the chicken in its pen outside the window.

Babylon and his father sat and ate their unfortunate breakfast in silence. He was more than ready to get the day started. Today was going to be the biggest day of his whole life. Today he would undergo his Rite of Passage.

Every year, all the children who had recently turned sixteen would endure

the village's Rite of Passage. It was one of their oldest traditions and dated back to the origins of the town. To be considered true adults, the sixteen-year-old boys and girls would journey to the mysterious Mount Trespass and bring back means to protect their families from invaders and the dangerous wildlife that lurked around the village. It used to be a solemn task fraught with all kinds of peril, but nowadays, it was more of an annual celebration.

Over the decades, the children encountered fewer and fewer hardships, and when they did return home, there wasn't really a need to protect their families because most of the dangerous wildlife had moved on to better, tastier villages. The others in town regarded the Rite as an obligation, but Babylon viewed it as the single most important event in his life. He wanted nothing more than to become an adult. To become a man.

When he finished his breakfast, his father stood from his seat and jiggled over to the wooden cabinet by the stove. He opened the dilapidated doors and pulled something out, a goofy grin on his face the whole time.

"I have a little present for you," Papa Briggs said. "I hope it aids you on your journey today." He laid a small, shoddily wrapped package on the table.

"Aw, pop, you shouldn't have," Babylon said, starting to grin himself.

"Happy birthday." His father pulled him into a hug.

Babylon tore the wrapping off the gift to reveal an old wooden box. He opened it, and inside was a small dagger made of solid steel. He held up his new toy, so it glinted in the sunlight. It certainly wasn't a weapon that could kill any vicious animals from the woods, but it would certainly do the job on smaller ones, like Clucky.

"Wow." His mouth hung agape. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, Son. Just make sure you're careful when you play with it," he said, staring at the dagger. "You know, that thing's been in our family for a long time. My dad gave it to me, and his dad gave it to him, and his father stole it from a farmer. I think now is as good a time as any to pass it down to you."

Babylon slipped his gift into his belt and stood. "Now I really can't wait for this journey to begin."

"Whoa, slow down there." His father laughed. "You still have a while yet before the Duke gets here. In fact, there are a couple of chores I need you to do around here. Remember, the whole point of becoming an adult is to care for your family."

Babylon's face fell. He couldn't believe he would have to do chores today. "You're right, Dad," he sighed. "What do you need me to do?"

"For starters, we need to replace our living room wall. It burned down last night."

"Again? How did it happen this time?"

Papa Briggs's eyes darted around. "Well, I was practicing a new trick for the Duke's arrival, and I...well, I guess I haven't really gotten the hang of it yet."

"A new trick?"

"Oh, yeah! I think the Duke's going to love it. I spit fire into the air like a monster. I got the spitting part down, I got the fire part down, but somewhere in between, things just get out of hand. Here, let me show you..."

A few dramatic minutes later, Babylon stepped out of his house onto the dirt road with a task at hand: find wood and straw to replace the wall in the living room and the new smoldering hole in the kitchen.

His village was simple, perhaps too simple. It wasn't a place that put a lot of stock in things like education or common sense, opting instead to focus on more inane fancies, such as rock burying, or dancing, or rock dancing. The residents were a friendly enough group, but Babylon always felt out of place. It was something he couldn't describe, but somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he just didn't belong.

He walked along the dirt road, passing by primitive houses, huts, and lean-tos the residents called home. Some folks had poorly constructed wooden fences with mangy dogs in front of their dwellings. Others had better looking dogs but no fences. The poorest of the lot had neither. Babylon was content to just have a cozy home with a smug chicken hobbling around.

People stopped to wave hello as he walked by, an ax slung over his shoulder. Some said, "Happy birthday," and a few wished him luck on his upcoming Rite. He strode through the village with a smile on his face. He whistled a jaunty little tune, thinking nothing could dampen his bright mood today. Nothing whatsoever.

"Well, well, well," a gruff voice called from behind him. "If it isn't little Babylon Briggs."

He gulped. He didn't need to see the man to know it was Sheriff Kudgle. He spun around; his happiness vanishing within seconds. "Good morning, sheriff," he said, with practiced politesse. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine boy, just fine," the burly man said, with a sneer. "Say, didn't you turn sixteen today?"

"Yes, I did."

"That means you'll be undergoing the Rite of Passage, then?"

Babylon held his head high. "Yes, I will."

Sheriff Kudgle rubbed his copious chin in thought. Finally, he spit on the ground and gave Babylon a sharp smile. "You know, I just realized it's been a long time since somebody got hurt during the Rite. Too long, if you ask me."

The thought made him uneasy. He wasn't sure if the sheriff's words were a threat.

"I do hope you come back safe and sound," Kudgle said. He sauntered away with a joyless laugh.

Sheriff Kudgle hated him; that he was sure of. The sheriff didn't really like anybody, but he seemed to especially hate the Briggs. Maybe it was because, as a proud man of the law, he looked down on a title as low as under-jester. Maybe because as children, Babylon's father and Kudgle were constantly at odds. Or maybe his hatred started when Papa Briggs accidentally burned Kudgle's house down. Whatever the reason, the sheriff held contempt for them and made sure to remind them of it whenever he could.

Babylon tried to forget the ugly encounter as he followed the dirt road that ran through the village and into the forest. This was not his first time rebuilding a section of his home, so he knew where there was an abundance of wood, sticks, and grass deep inside. With his ax in hand, he strolled into the thicket.

The immediate part of the forest had already been harvested for wood, mostly by Babylon. He was one of the few people in town that could use an ax properly. A lot of the other villagers tried chopping trees down with the wrong end, or got their tongues stuck to the blade when it was cold. He ventured deep into the woods. The suns, which shined down so fiercely in the village, were blotted out by the increasing density of the treetops. Before long, the whole area was so dark he could barely see.

Just a little farther, he told himself. Just a few more yards and I'll find something.

Finally, he thought he spotted an easy answer to his problem: a felled tree in the middle of a clearing. It was an old dried out husk, but its branches and trunk still looked useable. For a fleeting moment, he considered just dragging the whole thing back to his house. That way, his father could burn the house down for weeks.

When he tried to lift the trunk to check its weight, something scurried inside the husk. He peered into the darkness and was surprised to see a small furry chipmunk step out. Then a cuddly squirrel. And finally, an adorable, little badger. His first thought was that this was the perfect chance to try out his new dagger. Maybe he could get that hot breakfast after all. But one look at the cuddly critters, with their chubby cheeks and razor teeth, melted his heart. He couldn't bring himself to kill these cute, meatless animals.

"Come on, get out of here," he said, trying to shoo the animals away so he could chop up the tree. But the animals wouldn't leave. Instead, they just looked at him with their furry faces in a way that seemed to plead with him not to take their home. As he looked deep into their adorable crimson eyes, he knew he couldn't go through with it.

"Don't worry, little fellas," he said, looking at each of them. "I won't take your house. But maybe I could just take some of its branches?"

He readied his ax, but the animals stared at him sadly. He could almost hear their tiny words. *Those branches are part of our home, they seemed to say. If you take them, we won't have enough room for everybody.*

He paused for a moment, weighing his options. Finally, he groaned and set his ax down. He couldn't take the branches either. In desperation, he went for a few sticks that were loosely scattered around the base of the tree, giving them a questioning look. The animals just shook their heads. Dejected, he continued further into the forest.

It took a few more minutes, but he finally found another tree that boasted better branches, with much uglier animals living inside it. He surveyed his surroundings. He'd never ventured this deep into the woods before. He was a little worried he might be too close to the Forbidden Zone.

The Forbidden Zone was a large area on the other side of the forest. It was thought to be another, bigger village that existed long before his was founded. Rumors said it was the remnants of a technologically advanced civilization. The Royal Family condemned it centuries ago because no one had ever gone inside and come back. But the greatest simple minds in the village claimed the place contained magical weapons and mystical secrets. It was a tantalizing concept. Everybody was curious to see what wonders lie within, but no one was brave enough to enter.

Babylon was afraid of the Forbidden Zone as well. He'd heard stories of it since he was a child and, like everyone else, the fear was ingrained in him. He resolved right then and there to never travel any further into the forest. He even decided to mark the tree he was about to carve up, so he would never go past it in the future.

It took a little while, but he was finally able to dig the letter "B" into the trunk with his dagger. B for Babylon! Although, most of the bark fell off during the process, so it looked more like a big splotch than an actual letter, but it was close enough. He looked over his handiwork with pride. And as a bonus, some twigs and loose branches fell off the tree while he was working, so there was a fair amount of wood to gather. He smiled.

Before long, his arms were full. He was just about to turn back when something caught his eye. A thin stream of light from the suns glinted off something on the ground a few feet away.

He dropped his bundle on the grass and hurried toward the shiny object, immediately forgetting about his decision to never venture past the tree. He picked the object up and looked it over. It was rectangular, metallic, and flipped open at the top. He studied it intently. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Equal parts bewitching and sophisticated, like a magical item he didn't have the authority to wield.

He opened it, and inside was a small circular wheel. Gripped by a frenzy of discovery, he spun the wheel. Once, twice, three times. It made a pleasant clicking noise and released an unpleasant, burning odor. He spun it one more time, and it sparked into a flame. Excitement jolted through his body. He had made fire in his hand. It was incredible. Most of the time, fire was made in his village with sticks or houses, and even then, there was a bit of luck involved. But now, Babylon held in his hands a device that could make fire at will; a power that not even the Duke's mightiest alchemists wielded.

He turned the flame off and then on again to make sure it worked consistently. It did! Then he lit a few objects in the woods to make sure it was actual fire. It was! He'd made the discovery of a lifetime. Part of him wanted to venture into the forest even farther, to see what other treasures he could find, but his deep-rooted fear got the best of him.

I should quit while I'm ahead, he thought. No point risking my life, especially when I already found something so great. I should just head home.

And head home he did, the new fire-maker in his pocket, a bundle of sticks in his arms, and a song in his heart. When he arrived at his house, he was practically jumping up and down in excitement.

"Dad," he shouted, bursting through the door. "Look at what I found!"

"Is it another goat?" Papa Briggs frowned. "Because we have enough of those already."

"No, it's a magical device that makes fire."

Babylon held out the metal rectangle. His father grabbed it and looked it over carefully. Try as he might, the old man couldn't quite get it to work, no matter how many times he yelled at it or tried to sip it.

He shook his head. "It's made of metal, Son. It will never make fire."

"No, watch," Babylon said. He grabbed the device and flicked it on in one quick motion. The older man recoiled. His father gazed at him the same way he gazed at suspected witches.

"How did you come by such a magical object?" he asked, inching towards his pitchfork.

"Well, I was gathering wood, and I guess I got a little too close to the Forbidden Zone—"

"YOU WENT INTO THE FORBIDDEN ZONE?"

"No, Dad, I was only on the edge of it. I was too afraid to go any further."

His father's face relaxed. "Thank goodness. Don't scare me like that. We have enough problems in this village without you risking your life. Now hand over that fire-maker."

Babylon hesitated before doing as he was told. "But doesn't it make you wonder what other treasures are in there?"

“The only thing that awaits you in that terrible place is death. We’ll discuss this no further.”

His face fell. “All right, Dad. I won’t go into the Forbidden Zone again.”

“YOU WENT INTO THE FORBIDDEN ZONE?”

Babylon got to work repairing the house while his father sat inside, trying his hardest to start the fire-maker. He looked out past the village, into the forest. He was afraid of the dangers that lay on the other side of the thicket, but he also couldn’t deny a needle of curiosity. It was all he could do to focus on the task at hand and not to think about the wonderful treasures waiting for him inside the Forbidden Zone.

Chapter β

TIME SEEMED TO drag on forever. Babylon did everything he could to keep himself busy, but it was no use. He was too excited to sleep and too giddy for chores. When he practiced swordsmanship with his instructor, Nails, he was so distracted by the upcoming Rite that he broke two wooden practice swords and three wooden practice bears.

"Come on, Babylon," Nails said, as he picked up another splintered hilt. "What's gotten into you today?"

Babylon waved him off and stared out the window, not paying attention. Finally, the suns reached their zeniths, heralding midday. That meant only one thing to him and the residents of the town: the Duke would arrive soon.

Every year, the Duke visited the village to honor all those about to participate in the Rite of Passage by giving a grand speech. It was one of the biggest events of the year, and everybody got excited about it. The men always walked the streets holding shovels and hammers to demonstrate their productivity, and the women wore their most provocative tunics in the hopes of catching the Duke's eye.

Before long, an eager crowd had gathered in the village square to await the arrival of their royal leader. Some swapped stories of their own Rites of Passage, others gossiped about their uglier, and therefore less important, neighbors, and Sheriff Kudgle kept order with his new beating stick. A few merchants even set up stands in the middle of the road to sell newer, sportier rocks. Papa Briggs stood off to the side of the throng with the fire-maker in hand and a grin on his face. Babylon worried he might try to debut his dangerous new trick. A frenzy of excitement gripped the town, but none of the villagers were as excited as the four young men standing front and center at the head of the masses.

First and foremost, was Babylon. He felt he was the most excited of the bunch. He rocked back and forth from foot to foot in anticipation. The closer the Rite came, the slower time seemed to move.

"Good luck out there," a feminine voice whispered into his ear.

He turned for a quick peek. His neighbor Emmunda stood there. She had a beautiful pear-shaped face and long hair the color of a radish. She wore a plain gray dress, over which hung a fine white apron with crimson splotches. As the daughter of the butcher, this was not uncommon attire. Emmunda's parents had owned the butchery for years, though in that time Babylon never

saw them hunt animals, and the vagrants they invited over for dinner would seldom leave.

"Thanks, Emmunda," he said, his voice coming out at a higher pitch than he'd meant. "I'll come back safe."

With a smile, she slithered back into the crowd. Babylon breathed a hearty sigh as he watched her leave. He really liked Emmunda and planned to finally ask her out on a date after he returned from Mount Trespass as a real man. This made the Rite of Passage an extra special event in his life and did nothing to calm his nerves.

When she was gone, he grinned and nudged his best friend, Moot Fabrin. Moot gave him an absent-minded nod. He was busy scanning the crowd, probably looking for his family.

Babylon spotted Moot's father, Foxx Fabrin, in the middle of the road, loudly hawking his patented Wonder Dirt. According to him, it was the cure-all the villagers had been searching for. Foxx was an extravagant showman, and Moot was no different. Moot was always spinning a yarn to anybody who would listen about all the monsters he'd fought and the exotic places he'd visited, whether they were true or not. Usually, Babylon wasn't taken in by these stories, but most of the villagers would lend an ear to his tales. After all, nobody who'd slayed all those werewolves and murderous leprechauns could possibly be a liar.

Next to Moot was Stump Muffkin. Whereas most of the villagers were thin due to constant physical exertion and lack of a proper diet, Stump was ridiculously overweight. Because Mr. and Mrs. Muffkin ran the town bakery, they were more financially secure than the rest of the villagers. They always made sure to stuff their son with three or four meals a day, plus desserts. Stump never seemed to be given any chores, either. Instead, he spent his days lying around playing with his action sticks and eating junk. As a matter of fact, in the ten minutes they'd been standing at the front of the crowd, Stump had already consumed an entire rack of pork and a few handfuls of Wonder Dirt.

Stump's best and probably only friend stood to his left. He was, by far, Babylon's least favorite person in the entire universe. He was short, arrogant, and mean-spirited, with a thin face that made even the nicest donkeys angry. Nobody in the village could stand the kid, but they were obligated to like him because his father was the sheriff.

"Stand up straight, Flint," Kudgle said, with a hand on Flint's shoulder. "The Duke will be here soon. Let him see how proud you are. After all, you are *my* son."

"I always stand up straight, pop. You know that," Flint said, a smug smile on his face. "Unlike some of these lowlives." He shot a nasty look in Babylon's direction.

Every word registered like needles in his head. It was all he could do to keep himself from running over there and smacking Flint in his arrogant Flint face. He wanted to do it so bad, in front of everybody, in front of Emmunda. He bit his tongue and firmly planted his feet, like he had so many times in the past. Before he could give in to temptation, the crowd roared with excitement. The Duke's procession approached the village entrance.

The Duke was a tall, middle-aged man who was well-adorned in all the fineries the Royal Family could provide. He came into town on a litter carried by a group of peasants who themselves were carried by a group of peons. He was eating grapes from a vine that was carried on a second smaller litter.

The throng of people wiped the dirt and bugs off their clothing and out of their teeth as their leader approached. They straightened their spines, obviously hoping to catch the Duke's attention for even a fraction of a second.

With a small cloud of dust, the litter came to an abrupt halt in front of the crowd. The peasants and peons took a tired, sweaty breath before stooping down on all fours to form a human pyramid next to the litter. The Duke yawned and strolled down the human staircase.

An awed hush fell over the people as the Duke put a hand to his purple-stained lips and cleared his throat. "Good day to each and every one of you," the Duke said, in a loud booming voice.

Everybody started talking to each other at once. "Did you hear that?" a few of them whispered. "He said good day to me."

The Royal Family's representative waited for everybody to quiet down before continuing. "Another year has passed, and that means it's time, once again, for the village of Pending's Rite of Passage."

More townsfolk chatted amongst themselves. Apparently, "Pending" didn't sound right to them. A couple wondered out loud if the Duke was in the right place.

"Before I send these brave young warriors on their journey," the Duke said, with a perfect smile that revealed a row of purple teeth. "I'm going to regale you all with a little history on the Rite of Passage."

Before the Duke could even finish his sentence, the crowd groaned. He told the same story every year, even the years no one had turned sixteen. Villagers began shuffling their feet in anticipated boredom. Even Babylon was bored. His gaze drifted to things that were more interesting; a rock, and then a stone, and then a rock that looked like a stone.

"The Rite of Passage has been held for decades, before you were all born," the Duke began. "Even before the oldest member of Pending was born."

The oldest member of Pending, Gramps Feffermeyer, swooned when the Duke said this.

"In fact, my very own grandfather used to give this very same speech before he sent his own bold heroes off to Mount Trespass. It's one of our oldest and proudest traditions. According to legend, the first Rite was held hundreds of years ago, well after the older towns had fallen. A group of men and women journeyed out into the dangerous territory to get much needed supplies and weapons for their families. Today, I am proud to say, the new men and women of this village will carry on this tradition." He paused for dramatic effect. A few people applauded weakly, while others nudged their neighbors awake. "Now, let's see who will be honoring us today."

The Duke pulled out a long scroll. "First on my list is...Moot Fabrin. Step forward and face the crowd."

Moot bowed before the Duke and spun around to smile at everyone. There was a smattering of applause and a few awkward coughs.

"Next is Stump Muffkin."

Stump did the same routine as Moot, but slower and drawing louder coughs from the crowd.

"Babylon Briggs."

Babylon stepped forward, and the crowd clapped with a little more enthusiasm. He stood with his chest puffed out next to Moot. This was the happiest moment of his life.

"Flint Kudgle."

The crowd hooted, hollered, and cheered with smiles that looked more anxious than joyful. Sheriff Kudgle gave them all a warning look, and the residents applauded with even more enthusiasm. A few people in the front row hollered so loudly, they passed out. Flint strutted next to the rest of the boys, the smirk on his face growing larger and larger with every clap, roar, and wail. He faced his supposed fans and blew them kisses.

After the noise had died down, the Duke finished his speech. "And now for the final name on our list." The crowd murmured. Babylon looked up and down the row. There were only four people standing there. Not five. He couldn't count too high, but he could at least count to five.

The Duke cleared his throat. "Emmunda Remmundo."

Babylon peeked behind him, where Emmunda was staring off into the distance, her finger in her nose.

She looked around at the faces staring at her and shrugged her shoulders. "What?" she asked.

"You're sixteen, right?" the Duke asked, annoyance clear in his voice. "You're doing the Rite of Passage."

"Ooh!" Emmunda clapped her hands and stepped forward, knocking Moot out of the way.

Babylon stared at her from the corner of his eye. "You never told me you were sixteen," he whispered, trying to hide his excitement.

"I am?" she said, then popped her finger back in her nose.

The Duke pursed his lips and continued, "These five brave heroes will leave this village as mere children, but upon their return from Mount Trespass, they will be adults. Each of them has earned your esteem. Best of luck!"

Once again, the crowd burst forth in a fit of applause. Babylon and the others waved goodbye to their families and headed out. The Duke climbed up his peasants onto his litter and followed them to the exit. Babylon glanced back to see the Duke reclining in his chair with his eyes closed and his purple tongue hanging out. He wondered if the Duke actually did any work besides giving the Rite of Passage speech.

Moot nudged him. "Are you ready?" he asked, with a flickering smile.

Mount Trespass towered over the grassy plains, its summit piercing the sky.

"Yes."

§ § §

Only fifteen yards from the village gate and Flint Kudgle was already testing Babylon's patience. His incessant bragging and smug demeanor were one thing, but the way he talked down to the rest of them was just too much. He acted like he was the star of the whole expedition, and anybody else journeying with him existed for the sole purpose of making his trip easier. Of course, they all acted that way, but Babylon just didn't like Flint.

"This is going to be a dangerous trip," Babylon would say. "We should travel together and take breaks every couple of hours so we don't overexert ourselves."

"Are you kidding me," Flint would interrupt. "This journey is a piece of cake. I could do it on my hands. If you babies need breaks, you can take them, but don't expect me to wait for you."

"I'm with you, Flint," Stump would say between mouthfuls of nuts. Moot wouldn't say a word to back Babylon up, and Emmunda would be staring off at the suns. This was the framework for most of their conversations. Eventually, Babylon gave up trying to make small talk and instead trekked forward in silence.

Before long, they came to a fork in the trail. The right path was serene and lush with grassy slopes, while the left one was desolate and rocky. Of course, they had conflicting opinions about which path to take.

"I say we go left," Flint said.

"I don't know," Babylon said. "To get to Mount Trespass, I know we have to cross the river. And that doesn't look river-ish to me. The right path has greener grass, and there are more birds."

"Birds drink air, not water." Flint scowled at him. "That's how they fly, stupid. My gut is telling me to go left, so I'm going left."

"But, listen," Babylon said. "I hear water flowing to the right. It must be the river."

"I'm with my buddy," Stump said. "He's the son of the sheriff. He knows what he's talking about."

A smug smile spread across Flint's narrow face. "Thank you."

Babylon sighed. "Emmunda, what do you think?"

"You're Babylon."

Flint laughed. "It looks like we're going left," he said, as he started walking down the path. The others followed him, leaving Babylon alone. With another louder sigh, he followed the group the wrong way.

It took a few hours and a couple of rest stops before they reached their destination. Flint bragged the whole way, and Emmunda described how her family removed bones and hair from the meat they sold. Finally, they stood at the banks of the river. The rapid water splashed at their feet, soaking their burlap socks. Flint smirked when they got there, as if he had been right all along. Babylon looked around and had a feeling the group had walked in a circle. In fact, from the river bank, he could see the fork in the road. He mentioned this to the group, but no one seemed to care.

"You're just jealous because I knew the way and you didn't," Flint said.

"That's not it at all. *I* knew the way here. I would have gotten us to the river a long time ago if we'd gone my way."

"Oh, so you're saying you can find your way to Mount Trespass faster than I can?"

"Probably, but we're all on the same team. I don't think we should make it a competition."

Flint was silent for a second, and then his face lit up. "Hey, I have an idea. Let's make a competition out of this."

"What?"

"You heard me. We'll split up. Me and Stump will go our way, you and the—" he snickered, "—rest of the ladies can go yours."

"Who are you calling a lady?" Emmunda said, grimacing and rolling up the sleeves of her dress.

Flint laughed out loud, and so did Stump. Moot did too because, apparently, he didn't get the joke.

"Whoever reaches Mount Trespass first," Flint said, "will be the winner, and therefore the best person ever. What do you say?"

Babylon rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. We should probably stick together—"

"Let's sweeten the deal. Whoever gets there first gets to ask Emmunda out on a date."

Emmunda's grimace turned into a smile. "Ooh, I hope *I* win." She clapped her hands and danced from foot to foot.

Babylon felt his face warm. "You're on!"

"Good, it's settled," Flint said. He ran to the riverbank with Stump in tow. "See you losers at the top!"

Babylon started forward with Moot and Emmunda on either side.

"It's okay," Moot said. "I'm an expert adventurer. This will be a breeze."

"Well, our first problem is getting across this river safely. Flint will have the same problem, too. So, I think we should..." He lost his train of thought as Flint and Stump glided across the turbulent water in a canoe, whose side had the sheriff's crest etched into it. It was Kudgle's personal paddling canoe that was used whenever the sheriff needed to beat people on the other side of the river.

"They're cheating!" Moot cried. "That's not fair."

Flint waved his oar at them and laughed. "Good luck staying dry, losers!"

Babylon clenched his jaw. "Let's swim across," he said in haste. "We won't be too far behind them."

"I can't swim." Moot said.

"What do you mean you can't swim? You said you battled three mermaids last year."

"Yeah, on *land*!"

Flint and Stump dismounted on the opposite bank. Babylon contemplated leaving the others behind and just swimming across himself, but he forced the idea out of his head. To him, the Rite of Passage was about becoming a man. What kind of man left behind friends in need?

"Okay, we'll think of a way across."

The group split up to search for anything useful. They reconvened a few minutes later with armfuls of sticks, rocks, and leaves. Emmunda, apparently confused about the assignment, pulled an assortment of objects from beneath her apron, including a butcher's knife and a vagrant's hat.

"How about we make a bridge with these sticks?" Babylon said, pushing Emmunda's gear to the side. "Then we could just walk across."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Moot said. "I was just about to suggest that."

Unfortunately, building a bridge across a rapid river is easier said than done. Every time they laid a stick in the water, it was quickly washed downstream. They'd watch it go with their hands on their hips, frustrated at their rotten luck. Then they would do it all over again, with similar results. Before long, they were almost out of sticks, and hadn't gotten very far on their bridge's foundation.

"I'll go look for more branches, stronger ones this time," Babylon said. "You two wait here and try to think of another way across."

It took a while for him to find any sticks he considered strong enough. He had to venture away from the river into the surrounding forest before he found anything worthwhile. By the time he returned with an armful of thick branches, the suns in the sky were starting to sink. They would run out of light soon, and they were still stuck on their first obstacle.

He dropped his load when he noticed Moot hunched over Emmunda's legs. "What are you doing?" he asked, shoving him aside.

Moot stood with a smile and showed him the giant fern leaves he had tied to her feet with the twine from his shoes. "During winter, people use snow shoes to travel through the snow. So, I made river shoes to travel through the river!"

"But why are they on Emmunda's feet?"

"I asked her to volunteer to see how they worked."

She smiled and waved. "How about a hug for luck?" she asked.

Babylon's heart raced as he wrapped his arms around her. It was the best moment of his life. Of course, it was undercut by Emmunda rubbing his muscles and saying how much meat she could get out of him. After that, he pulled away, not sure if he was excited or scared.

Moot guided Emmunda into the river, her steps strained by the awkward river shoes. As soon as she took one step off the bank, they realized the flaw in the plan: rivers aren't as solid as snow. It was a small problem, granted, but it certainly had a big effect on the outcome. The shoes, and subsequently Emmunda, sank below the water like a dimwitted rock.

Panic gripped Babylon. "Emmunda?" he called. "Are you okay?"

She didn't come up, and every attempt to fish her out was thwarted by the murkiness of the water. After twenty minutes of trying and failing, Moot suggested they move on.

"We can't leave her!" Babylon said.

"But we're running out of light. We need to get across now. Who knows, maybe we'll find her on the other side."

He perked up. "Do you really think so?"

Moot just shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, I think I have a solution to our problem."

"It better be a good one." Moot said.

"Trust me. I'm sure you'll like it."

That's how Babylon found himself pulling Moot across the river on a raft made from sticks and twine. He swam with all his might, a piece of twine attached to the raft held between his teeth. Moot just laid there, hands around the branches, complaining about his queasy stomach, and asking Babylon to slow down.

Finally, when his strength was just about gone, Babylon reached the other side. He fell onto the muddy bank, panting and sweating. Seconds later, Moot crumpled next to him, panting just as much and sweating even harder. "Well," Moot said, between gulps of air. "It wasn't easy, but we finally made it."

"Yeah, but there's still no sign of Emmunda."

Just then, bubbles started bursting on the surface of the river. The water parted, and a pear-shaped head covered by damp, radish-colored hair popped out. It was Emmunda. She walked clumsily onto the bank, the river shoes still tied to her feet.

"You made it!" Babylon bolted to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Are you okay?"

She took the river shoes off. "Okay, your turn," she said, holding them out for Babylon.

Moot pierced the air with a whistle. "Come on, lovebirds," he said. "We have to catch up to Flint. Let's go!"

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Babylon half walked, half crawled away from the river to the trail that led to the plains. He was still gasping, but Moot insisted they continue moving and that rest was for the weak. After a few minutes of labored movements, Babylon finally gave in and collapsed in front of a wooden hut.

"What are you doing?" Moot asked, eyebrows raised. "We're wasting time."

"Just five minutes," he gasped.

"Sounds like you need more than that," a voice called from inside the hut. A man walked out dressed in a black cloak. He looked at them and continued to speak in a low, slick voice. "If you need to keep your energy up, you might want to consider buying my strength tonic. It'll make you run faster, last longer, and smell stronger than you ever thought possible."

Emmunda's eyes lit up. "Ooh! Do you have it in cherry?"

The man smiled. "No!"

"Hold on," Babylon said, putting a hand up. "First, did you see two other guys come down this path? One is fat and the other looks like a complete jerk."

The man rubbed his chin. "Yes," he said. "Those two boys passed through here a few hours ago. They bought many of my wares. But I still have plenty of fabulous items for sale." He turned to Emmunda. "How would you like a few of my wake-up pills? They're guaranteed to keep you up all night."

Emmunda offered her river shoes in trade, but the salesman told her he already had plenty of those in stock.

Babylon brought the others into a huddle. "Did you hear that? Flint and Stump are ahead of us by hours. We'll never catch up to them now."

"Of course, you can," the man said, standing in the huddle next to them.

"With my patented wing shoes. If you put them on, you can fly over every obstacle you come across!" He held up a pair of old, cracked leather shoes with feathers nailed to their sides.

"That's perfect!" Moot said. "We'll take them."

"Great," the salesman said. "What do you have to trade?"

Moot searched around his belt but came up empty. "Aw, my money satchel," he cried. "It must have fallen into the river. There were at least two chickens in there."

"You don't have any goods to trade?" The man's eyes narrowed.

"No," Moot said, "but if you give me the shoes, I can fly back to my house and get you something."

The man wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and slipped back into his wooden hut. He slammed the door shut, and a lock slid into place. A moment later he peeked through the curtains, then quickly closed them. He did this every few seconds until they left.

"Well, I guess that's that." Babylon laughed. "Let's keep going until it gets dark."

"All right. But I really wish I could have gotten those wing shoes. They would have made things a lot easier...for me."

They made it a few more miles before dusk. In the dim light, they tripped over every rock and bush in their path. A few times Emmunda tripped and landed in Babylon's arms. Every time she did, he smiled and his heart pounded in his chest. When Moot did the same thing, Babylon decided it was a good time to stop.

"Hopefully, we'll get an early start tomorrow," he said, as he laid his supplies on the ground.

"Maybe we shouldn't even sleep," Moot said. "It might help us catch up. Heck, I've gone a few days without sleep before. I'll be fine."

"No, we don't want to risk wearing ourselves out so soon. If we don't rest, we could be in serious trouble."

Moot nodded, and then grabbed himself a nice comfy rock to rest his head on. Babylon followed suit and lay in the tall grass. Emmunda, meanwhile, stood staring up at the night sky.

"Look at all those stars," Babylon said to her. "They sure look beautiful out here away from the fires of the village."

She nodded. "Stars are pretty," she said, drool dripping from her mouth.

Moot yawned. "You should have seen the sky when I went to the desert and fought those trolls. The stars were even better."

Babylon stretched his arms over his head. "I wonder if there are other villages out there on those stars. You know, just other people doing different stuff in another place. That would be neat."

“Don’t be stupid, nobody could live out there. It would be too cold to live on another star.”

“I guess you’re right. Do you think we’ll ever be able to go out there?”

Moot shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably not. I can’t imagine anyone could ever travel to the stars.”

Babylon rolled over to his side. His eyes slipped shut, opened briefly, and then finally closed again. The last thing he saw before drifting off to sleep was a shooting star streaking across the inky black sky.

It was egg-shaped.

Chapter 7

THEY WOKE AT dawn. Well, Babylon woke at dawn; Moot didn't wake up until water was splashed on his face and he was kicked in the ribs. Even then, it took a considerable amount of time before he was ready to move again. When they were finally prepared, had eaten breakfast, and Moot had stopped lying back down and asking for a few more minutes of sleep, they were ready to travel.

"Have you seen Emmunda?" Babylon asked.

Moot yawned. "No. Why don't you look for her while I rest up?"

He surveyed the area. The footprints and felled trees in a line indicated one thing. "She's gone back to the village." He frowned. "I guess the Rite wasn't that important to her."

"What are you going to do?"

He looked back at the path they had taken, then forward to where they were going, then back again. Finally, he let out a sigh. "Emmunda made her decision, and so have I. We keep going. The Rite of Passage is too important." He woke Moot back up and pressed onward.

With the careful rest they'd received, they were able to travel at a brisk pace. And since the suns weren't completely risen yet, the air was still cool and refreshing. They traveled for a few miles before coming to a crossroads. The trail forked into two very contrasting paths. One path led towards the flat and easily traversable plains. The other, as told by its jagged sign and gloomy atmosphere, led to Prospector Woods.

After some careful consideration, Babylon made a decision. "I think we should go through the woods," he said. "We'll be able to make up some lost time."

"Are you sure we want to do that?" Moot gulped. "I heard Prospector Woods is a dangerous place. The crazies live there."

"I think it's worth the risk. The plains go all the way around the woods. It will take too much time. But if we go through the woods, it's a straight shot to Mount Trespass. Besides, I'm positive Flint went through the plains."

"How can you be so sure?"

"He never would have taken such a dangerous route. Especially, with the head start he had. And look at this." He pointed to footprints in the mud. "These tracks and half eaten pieces of cheese lead *away* from the woods."

"Are you positive those are their footprints? They could be anybody's."

Babylon squatted and pointed out the different features in the mud. "Look at this set of small prints. They're the same shape as a boot, and we both know Flint wears the same kicking boots as his father. He never takes them off. And these bigger tracks are probably Stump's. See how deep in the mud they are?"

Moot crossed his arms. "What about that last set of prints? Who do *they* belong to?"

Babylon studied the third group of markings. These tracks seemed fresher than the others, and in some places, they overlapped the older ones, as if whoever had made them was following Stump and Flint. Also, they left an unusual impression, as if the shoes weren't made of bound cloth or animal skins. The edges were crisper, more sophisticated.

"Hey, those *are* strange." Babylon's brow furrowed. "I've never seen tracks like that."

"I have!" Moot pointed his thumb at his chest and smiled.

"Well, it doesn't matter. They all lead to the plains. Our only choice is to cut across Prospector Woods. Now, are you coming or not?"

Moot looked from the deep dark woods to the comfort and security of the plains, then back to Babylon. Finally, he threw up his hands. "Whatever," he said. "If we die, though, I'm going to punch you in the face."

They took one final glance at the simple path they were leaving behind, then steeled themselves for the unknown and walked into the woods. They were plunged into darkness as they trekked into the mysterious forest. The natural light of the suns was extinguished by the thick branches and leaves overhead. The air was cold against their skin. The woods were as terrifying as the rumors said they were. More terrifying, even.

After a few minutes, however, the boys couldn't help but notice a conspicuous lack of crazies. They shared a confident glance. Sure, this place looked scary, but so far, that was it. Babylon's fear evaporated. Clearly, the tales of the crazies were just that: tales. The two increased their stride. A few yards farther, they added a spring to their step.

A quarter of the way through the woods, they were joyfully bobbing and singing loud songs about how safe they were. The anxiety they faced moments earlier gave way to oblivious calm. The woods weren't so scary after all. They were actually quite peaceful. In fact, they were starting to like this forest.

That feeling of safety vanished in an instant when something rustled behind a bush up ahead. They froze in their tracks.

"Did you hear that?" Moot jumped back. "It's one of the crazies!"

"Were you even listening to the song? There are no crazies here. We're completely safe. It was probably just a squirrel."

"Maybe it was a crazy squirrel."

They began tiptoeing, listening to the sounds around them while humming much more ominous tunes. They had only taken a few cautious steps before a high-pitched giggle floated between the trees.

"Let's get out of here," Moot whispered.

"Calm down, that was only the wind laughing at us. We have to keep moving forward." Before they could move, a loud whisper came from above them. Babylon took his dagger from his belt and held it with a shaky hand. "Is someone there?" he asked.

There was no reply. For a few long seconds, the boys stood still, waiting in tense anticipation. They looked at each other before continuing.

A gruff voice came from behind them. "Who goes there?"

They spun around, but all that greeted them was eerie nothingness.

"Who said that?" Moot asked, his whole body quivering. Babylon cocked his head. He could barely make out a whispered conversation.

"Don't scare 'em, Brother Jed," one of the invisible voices said. "They might have some stuff on 'em."

"I'm not scaring them, Brother Ned," the other voice said. "I just want to know who they are."

"You don't have to shout like that, is all. At least not until we search 'em."

"I think my voice was at quite an acceptable level!"

After a few more minutes of this bickering back and forth, Babylon grew impatient. "Hey, guys," he said. "Who's out there? Show yourselves."

"Might as well do what he says," Brother Ned said.

"The heck I do," said Brother Jed. "Who's he think he is marchin' into our woods, singin' songs, and givin' orders like that?"

"Now, Brother Jed, you're bein' rude to our guests."

"They ain't no guests of mine."

"All right, fine. Be that way. But you can't very well search 'em for 'stuff' from that bush over there, now can you?"

"Dagnabbit, Brother Ned! You just gave away my hidin' spot!"

"Well, then I guess there's no use hidin' anymore, is there?"

A figure stepped out from behind a large tree. He was a grizzled old man with a long, white beard and a pair of dirty overalls, the back of which held a pickax. The whole ensemble was completed by an oversized hat on top of his gray head. After he stepped into view, the other man popped up from behind a bush wearing identical clothing.

"It's the crazies!" Moot shouted, staring wide-eyed at the men.

"We ain'ts crazy," Brother Jed said, putting his hands up. "We're just hard-working folks like you."

"Is it just you two out here?" Babylon asked.

"Not at all," Brother Ned said. He shouted to the forest, "All right fellas, come on out!"

Similarly dressed prospectors sprung up from all over the woods. Some were hiding in logs, others swung down from branches on ropes, a few peered out from inside hollow trees, and one had been pretending to be a rock the whole time. The whole forest became alive as men scurried into view.

"Welcome to Prospector Woods," Brother Ned said, with a smile.

"Who goes there!" Brother Jed shouted into the boys' faces.

Moot took another step backwards. "No one, we're leaving." He turned to run away, but Babylon grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him back.

"We're from the village. We're doing our Rite of Passage, and we have to get to Mount Trespass. Cutting through these woods is the fastest way."

"You guys wouldn't happen to have any stuff on you, would you?" Brother Jed asked, his beady eyes narrowing.

"Stuff?" Moot asked.

Brother Ned leaned in close. "Our group, the whole lotta us, does one thing each and every day," he whispered. "We mine for pretty yellow rocks that are worth lots and lots of money."

"You mean gold?" Babylon asked.

Every head perked up in the forest. A loud commotion rang out as each prospector passed the same word through his lips. "Gold?"

"Did someone say gold?" Brother Jed asked, eyes alight with excitement.

"Shh!" Brother Ned said to everybody. "Quiet down now! False alarm. Nobody's found nothin'!"

All the prospectors groaned. One started crying.

"Did I say something wrong?" Babylon asked.

"We don't say the G-word 'round here," Brother Ned said. "Everybody gets in a tizzy when you do. We call it 'stuff' if we have to talk about it."

"So..." Brother Jed leaned in, scratching at his sweaty neck. "Did you bring any stuff?"

"No, I'm sorry."

Everybody groaned again.

"Well, have you boys ever mined for stuff before?" Brother Ned asked.

Before Babylon could open his mouth, Moot shouted, "I have!"

"Did you ever find any?" Brother Jed grabbed the boy by his shoulders and gave him a hearty shake.

Moot put on a big smile. "Yup, lots of times."

Suddenly, everybody was Moot's best friend. The men gathered around, surveying him, asking him questions, and touching his face. They wanted to know everything they could about their new champion.

"You, my boy, are comin' with us to the stream," Brother Jed hollered. "We're finally going to finds us some stuff!"

Babylon watched in bewilderment as the crazies lifted Moot onto their shoulders and led him away, hooting and cheering. Moot beamed from his newfound popularity. When the dust settled, Babylon found himself alone with Brother Ned.

"Well, while your friend is busy, I might as well get you a hot meal," he said, leading Babylon through the woods.

They walked along the dark path in silence. The further they went, the more Prospector Woods lived up to its name. Babylon couldn't take a step without spotting someone searching for gold. They rooted around the ground, panned in the stream running through the center of the woods, and searched in each other's hair. A small group of men had drilled holes into trees and inserted spigots. They sobbed when all that came out was worthless amber.

They came to a clearing crowded with tents and campfires. Babylon guessed this was where the tired prospectors slept after a long day of disappointment and failure. The smaller tents circled a larger tent, which stood proudly in the middle.

"That's our town hall," Brother Ned pointed. "It's where we meet to have great feasts and talk about town issues. Most of which are minin' related."

Ned slipped into the large tent, beckoning for Babylon to join him. Before Babylon followed him inside, he looked at the stream where Moot was panning for gold. He didn't look as happy as he did a few minutes ago. Likewise, some of the prospectors seemed to be losing their patience with him. They were prodding him with sticks and making rude hand gestures.

Babylon couldn't help but chuckle as he stepped into the tent. Inside, there was a great table with rusted pots and pans. A few bent and dirty metal plates were scattered across the floor, some with crumbs still on them. In the back of the tent, a cauldron was boiling over a fire with some sort of strange creature stewing inside. He couldn't tell what the animal was, but he could see part of its trunk sticking out of the scalding water.

"Take a seat," Brother Ned said. Babylon looked around and noticed chairs of all different shapes and sizes. Most of them were wooden, while others were just chair-shaped piles of dirt and bones. One in particular, at the head of the table, caught his eye. It was metal and sported two big wheels on its sides. He ran a hand over its shiny surface and let out an impressed whistle.

"This is nice," he said. "How did you make something like this?"

"Can you keep a secret?" Brother Ned whispered, gaze shifting around the empty tent.

"No."

"I found it in the Forbidden Zone."

Babylon's eyes widened. "The Forbidden Zone? You went there?"

"I went there a while ago with a few of the boys. We were hoping we might find some..." he looked around again. "Well, you know."

"What?"

"G-O-L-D," Brother Ned whispered.

"Oh. Did you?"

"Unfortunately, not. We lost a few good men, too. But we did find one or two little things. That chair bein' one of 'em. Boy, I tell you, that ancient city sure knew how to live."

Babylon walked to the front of the chair and was about to sit down and take a load off, when the prospector shouted.

"What's the matter?" Babylon asked, butt hovering just above the seat.

"You can't sit there," Brother Ned cried. "That there chair is only for our mayor to be sittin' in."

He stood. "Oh, I'm sorry. Which one of you guys is the mayor?"

"I'm the mayor," a voice said. A man walked into the tent with a flask in his hand. "I'm Brother Zedd, ruler of these parts."

Brother Zedd looked a lot like the other prospectors, but something about his appearance made him seem more mature than the rest. His beard was a little longer, his hair a little grayer, and his pickax a little shinier. There was no doubt about it. This man was in charge.

"Hello, Mr. Brother Zedd," Babylon said. "I'm Babylon Briggs. Me and my friend Moot are on our way to Mount Trespass and —"

"Another villager?" Brother Zedd shook his head. "We've had a lot of your kind today."

"What do you mean?"

"We had a young lady in here earlier today. She said she would cook us breakfast."

"Emmunda?" His eyes lit up. "Was it Emmunda?"

"I couldn't tell you. We kicked her out when she tried to stuff Brother Ned into the pot. Right, Brother Ned?"

Brother Ned lowered his head. "I was in the pot."

Babylon looked from bearded face to bearded face. A long, uncomfortable silence followed — one he tried to break, but lost his nerve and cleared his throat instead — then the mayor clapped his hands together and stomped his feet.

"Anybody else hungry?" he asked, then rang a bell that hung above the table. Almost immediately, the room filled with grizzled hungry miners. They all took seats as Brother Ned put on a set of apron overalls and served them stew from the boiling cauldron. The prospectors began their feast, talking excitedly.

"Ooh, I think today's the day we finally find something," one of them said, with his mouth full of tusk. "I can feel it in m'bones."

"Hopefully, that kid is as good as he claims to be," another one said.

"You know, I thought I found some stuff last night," someone else replied. "Turns out it was just a boil that needed lancing."

"I think I found something!" a man shouted at the end of the table. His shaking hand held a small yellow nugget on one of its fingers. "This is it. Gold!"

Excitement shot through the table. The prospectors exchanged words of congratulations. "Where did you find it?" a few of them asked.

"My ear!" the man said. He took a small bite out of the soft nugget and his expression fell. "Nope, that wasn't gold. Sorry."

"I would kill everybody in the entire world for some precious gold," Brother Jed said, under his breath.

There was a moment of silence before Babylon asked, "Have any of you guys ever found gold before?"

"Gold?" everybody shouted at once, jumping up and hollering until Brother Zedd rang the bell to silence them.

"What did I tell you about saying that word?" Brother Ned said, stomping on his own hat.

Babylon looked around the table as the prospectors sat down, muttering to themselves.

"I would sleep with my own wife for just one taste of sweet, sweet gold." Brother Jed's face turned sour.

"Poor old fool doesn't know what he's saying," Brother Ned said, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry," Babylon said, staring at the crowd. "I only meant to ask if anybody here has found any... 'stuff' yet? Ever?"

"Well," Brother Zedd said, "so far we haven't found anything in these woods. But I truly believe there's some here. And if your friend is half as good at finding the stuff as he says he is, then today is going to be a great day for Prospector Woods. Now, you were asking about a safe passage to Mount Trespass earlier. Well, I think the best way for you to go is—"

Just then, a miner burst in, shoving Moot in front of him with a stick. "These boys is liars!" he said.

"Take it easy, Brother Ed. What's wrong?" the mayor asked.

"This boy told us he was an expert at findin' the stuff. But it turns out he's never even seen it before." An angry grumble traveled around the table. The prospectors narrowed their eyes at Babylon and Moot.

"The durn fool even thought my pickax was a lollipop," he said. "He's a phony! They both are!"

At this, the grizzled men started flinging hats and shouting out suggestions of what should be done with the boys. One by one, each person offered a proposal that became more grim and gruesome as it went down the table. Beatings, stabbings, and canings were all popular ideas. Then someone mentioned a hanging was in order. Everybody else nodded. That was an idea all of them could get behind. The angry crowd gathered around them and someone tied a noose together.

"Run!" Babylon shouted, bolting out of the tent. Moot followed behind, trying his best to keep up.

The boys sprinted to the edge of the woods. Babylon had to stop a few times so Moot could catch up. Once or twice, he even gave Moot a head start, only to pass him moments later. All the while the dangerous prospectors were behind them, some of them with their pickaxes lit up like torches. There were even a few miners who had missed the announcement at lunch but went along with the crowd because everybody else was doing it.

After a foot race that seemed to stretch on forever, Babylon and Moot finally made their way out of the forest and into the open space of the plains. Brother Zedd put a hand up to stop his men. "This is the edge of our territory," he said. He shouted to the boys, "Don't come around these parts again." The prospectors, glum with defeat, turned around and headed home. After all, the day was young, and there was still gold to pan for.

"That was too close," Babylon said, between heavy breaths.

"Yeah," Moot gasped. "But I still feel like I could have taken them on."

Babylon surveyed the area. They were no longer on the path. He had no idea where they were or how far they'd gone. Then he caught sight of something that caused him to shout in excitement. Moot looked around for a few seconds, then he shouted too.

Less than half a mile ahead was the base of Mount Trespass.

Chapter Δ

THEY SPINTED ALONG the grassy plains toward the mountain. Babylon couldn't believe their good fortune. The detour through the woods saved them so much time, they might even beat Flint and Stump.

With each hurried step, the soft dirt became harder and rockier. The ground sloped upwards, making Babylon's legs burn. His lungs ached for air, and his heart slammed against his chest. Still, he was doing better than Moot, who was doubled over and wheezing. Babylon stopped running and craned his neck up to see the top. There was a lot of ground to cover yet, but he was so close to his goal that he could almost taste it. He didn't taste it, though. Didn't even try. It probably tasted like rocks, anyway.

The climb was slow, and the hard ground was tough on their feet. Loose stones made the terrain dangerous and unpredictable. A few times, Moot slipped and fell onto his stomach. Once he slid all the way to the bottom, and Babylon had to wait for him to climb back up. In all that time, Babylon saw no sign of Flint or Stump.

Eventually, they began making faster progress. It wasn't that Moot was learning from his mistakes; rather, Babylon tied a rope around their waists so he could pull Moot along. Moot seemed to enjoy having the freedom to fall without regret, and practiced falling as much as he could, much to Babylon's frustration.

About halfway up the mountain, voices began echoing off the cliff side. "Did you hear that?" Babylon asked Moot, who was asleep behind him. "I think that's Flint."

As soon as Babylon climbed over the next ledge, dragging Moot's snoring body behind him, he spotted Flint and Stump.

Stump was sitting on a rock while Flint stood with his arms crossed, yelling at him. "Hurry up, you fat oaf," Flint said. "We'll never reach the top if you keep stopping."

"I'm sorry," Stump said, breathing hard. "I need a handful of butter every now and then to recharge my body. You know that."

"But you just ate a handful of butter. You've been eating one every ten feet."

"I know, this mountain is really hard on me," he said. As if to emphasize his statement, he pulled out another handful of butter from his pocket.

Flint threw his hands up. He turned, his eyes narrowing on Babylon and

Moot. "Well, well, well." He sneered. "Little Babylon Briggs finally made it to Mount Trespass?" He pointed to Moot, who was now wide awake. "And what's this? Are you guys rope buddies now?" Flint shot a glance at Stump and nudged him on the shoulder.

"Joke all you want," Babylon said. "At least *we* didn't squander a huge lead. One that you got by cheating."

"Yeah, by cheating," his rope buddy said, before hiding behind his shoulder.

Flint chuckled. "I take every advantage I can; that's what makes me a winner. And if it wasn't for lazy bones here, I would've already reached the top." He kicked Stump in the shin. Stump yelped and cursed at Flint, but with a mouthful of butter all that came out was a garbled mess.

"Why thank you, Stump," Flint said.

"Too bad you went through the plains," Babylon said, with a smirk. "If you went through Prospector Woods, like we did, then you would have beaten us for sure."

"Yeah, for sure," Moot said, from under Babylon's shirt.

"You guys went through Prospector Woods?" Stump's mouth dropped open, splattering food onto the ground. "Did you meet any of the crazies?"

"They didn't go through Prospector Woods, stupid." Flint shook his head. "They followed us the whole way here."

Babylon stared at Flint, confused. "What are you talking about? This is the first time we've seen you since the river."

"Yeah, right. I don't believe that for a second. I could hear you behind us."

Babylon remembered the third set of footprints in the mud from before. "Wait, did you actually *see* who was following you?"

"I'm looking at him right now." Flint laughed. "I heard you behind us every step of the way. Following us in the plains, raiding our camp at night, tagging Stump's ear—you did it all."

Stump turned his head and displayed the tag on his ear. It had "Plumpus Ignoramus" printed on it.

Babylon looked around. Whoever was following Flint was probably still around, watching them now. "We'd better move," he said.

"I decide who gets to move and when," Flint yelled.

"Listen, I think the guy that's tracking you is still here," Babylon whispered. "And I think he might be from the..." He looked around again. "The Forbidden Zone."

Flint's face paled. A rock clattered down the mountain and the boys jumped. From around the bend, a familiar radish-colored head bobbed into view.

"Emmunda!" Babylon cried.

"Is this Mount Trespass?" she asked.

He wrapped his arms around her. "What happened to you?"

She grinned. "I saw a turkey!"

"Oh, that's right. You come from a family of butchers. I guess you know a lot about animal meat."

"Animal meat?"

Flint stepped between them. "Now's not the time for this," he said. "We're still being watched. It's time to move." Together again, they hurried up the mountain as fast as they could. It wasn't long before they reached the top and stood before a building. It was old, worn-down, and displayed a dilapidated sign that read, in peeling red letters, TRESPASS. Babylon looked at the others, and one at a time they went through the open door.

Babylon once asked the villagers what Mount Trespass was before it became part of the Rite. Some said it was the center of the former civilization, while others told him to get lost. Papa Briggs told him it was something called Manifest Destiny. Now he was in the building and could find out for himself. There were scrapped remnants scattered all over the ground. The floor was made of some sort of material arranged into squares, not the typical wood or straw. There were several large rooms that looked like they were built for an army of people. The place clearly wasn't a house, but people did live here at one time.

"Look at the size of this place," Moot whispered.

"This place is bigger than our vagrant paddock," Emmunda said.

"Let's not waste any time," Babylon said. "We should get what we need and go before that stalker catches up with us."

There was a general murmur of agreement amongst the others.

"Now, the most important thing is to stick together and —"

Flint rolled his eyes. "That's stupid. If we want to get out of here quickly, we should all split, find a weapon, and then meet back here."

There was another murmur of agreement. They shuffled off in different directions, leaving Babylon alone staring at their backs. After a few seconds, he shook his head and walked around the area, searching for scrap metal.

Stump was the first one to find something, or, rather, the first to settle for something. He walked a few feet and bumped into an old, rusty drum. It was big, unwieldy, and ultimately useless for defense, but Stump seemed content. He laid it on its side and sat on it.

Babylon went into the nearest room and found Moot. There was a thin leather bed in the center and charts with giant letters along the walls. Moot was searching through drawers and cabinets when he entered. "Any luck?"

"No," Moot said. "These knives are too small, and these bottles are filled with pills and not weapons." He kicked a bag of liquid across the room, and it splattered against a pair of plastic crutches. Moot let out a gasp. "That's it!"

"What?"

"These!" He picked the crutches up and displayed them to Babylon. "I don't think there's anything else in here. You might as well try somewhere else."

Babylon walked out into the hall and bumped into Flint.

"Watch where you're going, loser," Flint said. He had a thick lead pipe in his hand and used it to bash holes into the walls and ceiling. "Gotta find a weapon," Babylon heard Flint mutter as he disappeared around the corner.

Babylon peeked into a room across the hall. There were rusted cans of food and faded cookbooks on dilapidated shelves. A kitchen. Sure, the stove wasn't wood burning, like the one back home, and the spoons didn't have holes in them, but it was a kitchen nonetheless. He sighed. Every possible piece of scrap had already been cleared out. Skillets, pots, pans, forks, knives, spoons, plates, and even the literal kitchen sink had been taken away by previous generations. All that remained were empty cabinets and cupboards.

"Hurry up," Flint shouted, his voice dripping with scorn. "Everyone else is ready to go. What's taking you so long?"

Babylon brushed the comment off and stepped into the sleeping quarters. There was a long stretch of beds against the wall with lockers hanging open next to them. This area also looked like it was picked clean. He thought about trying to take one of the steel bed frames but realized he didn't have the tools to dismantle it, nor the strength to carry it.

"You're not going to find anything in there," Flint said from the doorway.

Babylon scowled. He was determined to find something in the sleeping quarters. He didn't care if he had to rip the bed apart; he would find something and rub it in Flint's arrogant face. He walked up and down the aisle, desperately looking for anything. Most of the things he found on the floor were useless, like tattered clothes, slippers, and the occasional pillow.

Then something caught his eye. There was a strange object peeking out from under one of the beds. He hurriedly pulled it out and looked it over, only to be disappointed by a long wooden box. There was no metal in wood. Everybody knew that. Even Stump. He started to return the box when something shifted inside it. His curiosity piqued, he remembered boxes sometimes contained things inside of them, like the time he found that white stick in a box at the cemetery.

He gave the wooden box a little shake. There was definitely something moving around in there. He tried to open it, but it had rusty hinges and latches that wouldn't come loose. Determined, and maybe a little bit desperate, he lifted the box above his head and threw it to the ground. The wood exploded into a thousand splinters, and something heavy clattered to the floor.

He picked it up. It was large and made of cold heavy metal. There was an inscription on the side: Model LZ-57 Assault Rifle. He couldn't believe

his good luck. He held in his hands the best thing he could have found. Now, it was his turn to brag. He ran out to join his teammates.

"Wow." Moot's jaw dropped. "That's awesome."

"Thank you." Babylon smiled. "I think it's a pretty good find, if I do say so myself."

Emmunda rubbed the barrel. "Cool," she said, staring him in the eyes for an uncomfortable period of time.

He gulped. "What did you get?" She held up a large rock and grinned. Her hungry gaze made his heart race faster.

Stump came over to ruin the moment. He ran his hand over the sleek steel, though he didn't make as much eye contact. "Man, that's neat," he said. "Good job."

Babylon looked at Flint. "It looks like there was something in there, after all. What did you find?"

Flint held up a lead pipe, and then stared at Babylon's weapon. "You should give that to me," he said. "As the sheriff's son, I'm the only one who could possibly use something like that."

"Dream on, Flint," Babylon said. "I found it, fair and square."

"That's because you looked in the bedroom. If I went down there, I would have found it. Now, hand it over."

"No way!"

"It wasn't a request," Flint said. "Give it to me."

"You aren't going to get it, so back off."

"Oh, I'll get it." Flint lifted his pipe. "One way or another, it'll be mine."

Babylon felt a grin spread across his face. He had been waiting for a moment like this for a long time. "Bring it!"

And bring it he did. Flint swung his weapon down with tremendous force.

Without a second to think, Babylon grabbed his rifle with both hands and took the brunt of the force with the weapon's barrel. The rifle weathered the blow easily, but the soft inferior metal of the lead pipe dented upon impact. Flint screamed with rage and reared back to swing again. Babylon surged forward and shoved him down with the butt of his weapon.

Flint's eyes widened. He stood and took a shaky step forward. "Stay back, Stump," he said. "I got this."

Stump, however, was busy watching a resident caterpillar inch up the nearby wall. Moot, on the other hand, hopped from foot to foot, making suggestions for other places to hit Flint, and Emmunda cheered loudly.

"Go, Babylon," she said. "Beat him! Kill him! Eat him!"

Flint took another wild swing, which Babylon dodged. He returned the favor with a swipe at Flint's hands. Flint brought his pipe up, but as soon as the rifle struck the lead weapon, it bent and flew out of the boy's hands. It skidded

across the floor, coming to a halt on the opposite side of the room. Flint stood there weaponless.

Flint balled his hands into fists. "I don't need a crummy pipe to beat you!"

Flint lunged at him, but before he could make contact, the building started to rattle. They looked at each other in a panic, their battle abandoned. Babylon had no idea what was going on; it felt like the whole planet was being torn apart beneath their feet. Bits of the ceiling fell to the ground, and furniture danced around the room.

Babylon ran to a nearby window and saw something impossible: a small, metallic pod blasting off next to the building, only a few feet from the window. He watched, mouth agape, as it flew through the sky and disappeared into the clouds. After it vanished, the rumbling stopped, and everything went quiet.

"What the heck was that?" Flint asked, his face ashen.

"It looked like an egg," Babylon cried. "A flying metal egg!"

Hearing that, Stump's ears pricked up. "An egg you say?" He licked his lips.

"I've never even heard of something like that," Flint said.

"I have." Moot pointed to his chest with his thumbs. "It was probably just a gremlin egg or something. They're usually pretty big."

"Where did it go?" Emmunda asked, looking out the wrong window.

"It's gone now, whatever it was," Babylon said, as he gazed at the sky.

§ § §

The King stared at the stars and empty space through his window. The foolish planet hovered like a marble just below his warship. He smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

The door opened, and his scout entered.

"Your majesty," he said with a salute. "I've just returned from the planet."

"Yes," the King said. "This I can see."

"I'm ready to give you my full report." The King waited patiently, but his scout just stared at him. He stared at his watch and tapped his foot until the scout continued. "It appears that the air is definitely breathable and will sustain us for as long as we need."

"And the inhabitants?"

"I followed a couple of boys for a little while. They are very similar to us but appear to be much more primitive. The scanner classified them as 'non-threatening.'"

The King cackled. "Perfect," he said. "Luck is on our side. Ready the troops."

Chapter 8

THE JOURNEY HOME passed mostly without incident. Flint tried picking fights with Babylon every now and then, and even tried to steal his assault rifle, but without success. Stump offered to trade his drum and caterpillar with Flint but was brushed off. It was a slow two-day slog through the plains and over the river, especially with Stump stopping every few minutes to rest on top of his rusty drum, but eventually, they arrived home, hungry, dirty, and exhausted.

Babylon expected some sort of fanfare over their return. He thought the town would throw the same party they usually did, or his father would bake him a special barley cake, or at the very least, someone would shake his hand. But, alas, it was not to be. He couldn't really blame the town for their lack of enthusiasm since they were on fire.

"What happened?" he asked nobody, as flames assaulted the rooftops.

"Maybe they're celebrating our return," Moot said.

Babylon stopped to question someone who was running around and screaming with his shoes on fire.

"Hey, Tako. What's going on? What happened?"

"Some fool was playing with something in the windmill," Tako the Troubadour said, as he danced from one flaming foot to the other. "It started a blaze that spread everywhere."

"Who started it? Is everybody all right?" Babylon asked, but Tako only tipped his smoldering hat and ran away screaming.

They walked further into the village, looking for a way to help, or at least another victim to interrogate. Then Papa Briggs ran by with a pail full of water from the well.

"Dad!" Babylon yelled.

Papa Briggs stopped. "You made it back!" he shouted.

"What's going on? How did this fire start?"

His blue hair flopped from side to side as he looked around. He tugged at his collar. "I'm not sure. I think it began in the windmill, but thankfully, nobody got a good look at the guy who started it."

"That's a shame," Babylon said. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"And I'm glad *you're* okay. Did you find something to bring back?"

"I sure did." He displayed the assault rifle.

His dad's blue hair stood straight up. "Wow, that's amazing. That may be the best thing anybody's ever brought back."

Flint huffed. "Mine's better."

"I don't think the fire has reached Poxxy's hut yet. Head over there while you can."

"What are you going to do?" Babylon asked.

"I'm helping." Papa Briggs motioned toward the pail. "The firefighters are over there, fanning the fire out. I bet they're thirsty. I'm going to bring them some water." The under-jester took a sip from the pail before running off.

"Let's get to Poxxy's," Babylon said. The others agreed, and they rushed off to the other end of the village.

Poxxy was the best blacksmith in the area. In fact, he was the only blacksmith in the area. At one time, there were other aspiring blacksmiths that opened shops, but they all died from mysterious anvil related injuries. Thus, Poxxy had cornered the whole blacksmithing market. He also did wedding cakes but wasn't as infamous for it.

The smith was a tall, older man with a wide frame. His face was scarred from years of flying sparks and from experiments smelting gunpowder. He was crotchety and would have been run out of town years ago if he didn't play such a crucial part in the Rite of Passage. He took each piece of scrap the young men and women found and fashioned them into weapons. Most of the people in town still had the swords and knives from their own Rites; almost all of them were crafted by Poxxy.

They entered the blacksmith's hut one at a time. He was sitting with his back to the door, staring out the window and watching the fire. He chuckled.

"Um, sir?" Babylon asked.

Poxxy spun around and threw a knife at the door frame. Babylon didn't flinch. He had visited Poxxy before.

"How long have you been there?" Poxxy cocked an eyebrow.

"We just got here."

"Oh, good." Poxxy hurriedly stuffed a bottle of champagne and a party streamer into a drawer before approaching them. "What can I do for you?"

"We just returned from Mount Trespass," Flint said, with an arrogant smile. "And we found some pretty good supplies."

"Ah, so you survived the Rite, did you? Come forward. Let me see what you brought for ol' Poxxy."

Stump stepped up first. He handed Poxxy his drum, which had been flattened by his rump. The blacksmith looked at the drum and frowned.

"Yeah, all this rust will surely help things," he said. He shot Stump a dirty look and pointed for him to leave the hut. After that, he called for the next person.

Emmunda stood in front of the blacksmith and held out her rock. "I got this for you!" she said.

Poxyy sputtered. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"It's a gift."

"Oh." His leathery face lightened. "Why, thank you." He turned around and put it on the shelf next to the other rocks.

Flint barged forward. "I think I've got something good here," he said, handing him his bent pipe.

"Oh, joy, another one of these pipes," Poxyy said. "They always make me woozy when I melt them. This will be a real thrill."

Moot was next. He handed the crutches to the smith with a grin on his face. The old man just looked at him and shook his head. Moot left with a blissfully ignorant smile.

"Next!" the blacksmith said.

Babylon walked forward and handed over the assault rifle. Poxyy looked it over carefully and let out an impressed whistle.

"High grade metal," he said, turning it this way and that. "No rust, no impurities. My young friend, this will make an excellent sword."

Chapter Z

THE NEXT DAY was one of celebration. It was the same celebration they always had whenever they were forced to rebuild their town. Fires, landslides, and hoedowns were common occurrences, so they were used to starting the town over from scratch. They were so used to it, in fact, that instead of fleeing from their obviously cursed land, they turned the disasters into fun-filled events. There were special “rebuilding the village” songs, and even a few games, like the ever-popular Pin the Tail on the Under-Jester.

The people would hammer away with smiles on their faces. Some would laugh uncontrollably while sawing planks of wood. Even Poxxy had a good time, running around with his party hat on and charging outrageous prices for supplies. It was truly a period of joy for everybody, especially for the group that had just returned from the mountain.

On Babylon’s very first day as a man, he helped his neighbors lay a foundation for their new home and built replacement tables for the town’s market. He really felt like a productive member of the community.

Of course, there were trips into the woods. Lots of trips into the woods. You can’t rebuild a town without sticks; don’t be stupid. Babylon was invited to join the gathering parties. Since he was one of the most adept navigators, they didn’t really have a choice but to bring him along. In turn, he showed them the best places to gather the sturdiest materials, like at the base of trees and in certain shrubs. He also corrected the others if they searched for wood in tar pits or in the mouths of bears. Throughout these trips, he made a conscious decision to keep them away from the tree he had marked. He didn’t want some fool to wander into the Forbidden Zone. The last thing they needed now was a village-wide panic.

Overall, the townspeople rebuilt their homes with their usual productivity. By nightfall, everything was back to the status quo, and the village was as peaceful as it had been before. The townsfolk celebrated a job well done with mead and music. As Babylon sat back and watched the singing and dancing, he couldn’t help but feel empty. The most important moment of his life had come and gone, and nothing had changed. He still didn’t feel like a man.

A large explosion burst from the sky and shook the town. At first, the residents were too busy applying the drunken finishing touches to their homes to notice anything was amiss. They just assumed it was another fire to celebrate.

Only Babylon paid attention to the events transpiring above them. Dozens of metallic egg-shaped pods appeared in the sky out of nowhere. Babylon immediately recognized them as the same type of “gremlin eggs” he’d seen at Mount Trespass. Except now, instead of one, there were dozens.

“Moot! Moot!” Babylon shouted, running to his friend. “Do you see that? It’s those same weird things we saw a couple of days ago.”

“No, they’re not the same. I think these are, uh, meteors,” Moot said. “I heard that they look like that.”

“Meteors? What are meteors?”

“They’re like moon babies. Soon we’ll have a few more moons.”

The pods circled the town before finally landing on various homes and chicken coops. Their doors opened, and troops clad in black armor stormed out. Without hesitation, they attacked. They blasted fancy weapons, set fires, and stomped on flowers. A few folks were outraged at the intrusion, but most just happily picked up saws and began construction again, humming their rebuilding songs.

“Are you sure those are meteors?” Babylon asked, his body tensing. “Cause I didn’t think moon babies did that.”

“Yeah, they do,” Moot said, his beady eyes darting back and forth.

The final pod landed on top of the golden statue of the Duke. Its door opened, and a small man stepped out. He was dressed in the same black armor, but his suit had more decorations lining the chest. He had an air of authority, his tiny hands rested on his tiny hips.

“You,” Babylon heard him say to one of the soldiers. “Rough up that guy with the party hat.”

The army moved through the town, causing damage and mayhem. As soon as they finished with a house or a barn, the villagers would cheer and get to work rebuilding it. Babylon didn’t cheer. He stood in place, keeping his hand on the hilt of his sword the whole time. The tiny man pulled out a strange device from his tiny belt. He pushed a button and spoke into it.

“Sir,” he said. “This is Lieutenant Stryker. I think these guys are about as conquered as they’re going to get. Might as well head on down.”

Babylon’s heart slammed in his chest. He waited, but nothing happened at first. The man called Lieutenant Stryker put the strange device back in his belt and started terrorizing the community with the others. There was a noticeable lack of effort at this point. It seemed the soldiers were tired of terrorizing people that weren’t being terrorized and moved on to shop at the marketplace. One or two even helped rebuild the houses they had knocked down earlier.

A terrible screech erupted from above. A strange object broke through the clouds in a stream of flames and descended towards the town. It was another

pod, just like the others, except made of solid gold. Tethered to its front were two green, scaly, winged creatures that breathed fire.

A few of the more interested townsfolk panicked, but everybody else was too preoccupied with their repairs to notice. The pod did a few loops in the air before landing with a flourish to scattered applause by the townsfolk. Seconds passed. Babylon studied the golden pod, his pulse racing. Only fate could have sent such invaders to his town at the same time he became a man.

The pod's hatch opened. Out stepped a tall, thin, mean-looking man. He was dressed in a regal green and purple robe, under which he wore a green and purple vest. One hand was bare, while the other was covered with a black leather glove. The only contrast on his impeccable outfit was the bright yellow box strapped across his back. The man cleared his throat.

Babylon drew his sword.

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The king cleared his throat again, louder this time. He wanted the attention of this foolish village but wasn't getting it. He coughed as loud as he could to signify he meant business. One of his soldiers handed him a lozenge, which he waved away. "Greetings, fools!" he shouted. "I am your conqueror! Bow before me!"

He waited a few seconds to see if anybody bowed, but no one did. He unleashed a terrifying scowl to see if that would get the ball rolling. It didn't. A few soldiers bowed uncertainly, but that was it.

"My name is King Dragons!" he yelled. "I am from the planet Dragons."

Nobody seemed to notice the king screaming in the town square. Dragons felt a little offended by this. "And these magnificent creatures that you see behind me," he continued louder, motioning toward the green, scaly animals, "are dragons!"

There was a palpable silence before one or two people looked up from what they were doing.

"Who are you?" asked a villager.

"Once again, my name is King Dragons!" he yelled, having lost some of his energy.

"What's a dragon?" another villager asked.

"T—these are dragons," the king said, and made an even more exaggerated gesture toward the beasts.

"But you said you were Dragons," the first villager said, in an accusing tone.

"Yes, I am King Dragons, these animals are just—"

"You can't be the King Dragon, you don't even have scales! You're fibbing!"

Dragons' jaw dropped. This was not going as smoothly as he had hoped. "Does anybody have any other questions?" he asked, with a sigh. "Ones that don't pertain to my name?"

"How do they fly?" a child asked, before his father hushed him.

"Ah! Good question." Dragons tossed the kid a lollipop. "As luck would have it, they can fly anywhere. Even through the dark recesses of space." After he finished his sentence, the machinery on his back began to hum slightly, as if in response to his comment.

"What do you want?" a boy holding a sword asked.

"Your puny planet!" he said, letting out a long, menacing cackle. A few more people started to take notice of him now, especially since he was standing on top of the jailhouse they were trying to rebuild.

"Do you mind?" a villager said, hands on his hips.

"I'm terribly sorry." Dragons stepped out of the way. Then he realized what he was doing and stepped back in the way. "Wait a minute, no! I'm taking this planet from you, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

The villager crossed his arms but didn't press the issue any further.

Lieutenant Stryker stepped forward. "Sir, what are your orders?"

"Destroy this insignificant town!"

Stryker rubbed his neck. "Well, we uh...kind of already tried that."

"Don't argue with me, just do it!"

"Yes, sir." Stryker shook his head and gave the order to the army.

The soldiers moved back around the town, resetting fire to buildings, breaking tools, and tearing down foundations. Dragons cackled again as the destruction unfolded in front of him. After a few seconds, his menacing laugh turned into a mean-spirited giggle, and then into an alarmed chuckle. Everything his men were doing to destroy the village was being immediately negated by the townsfolk. It was hypnotic. The soldiers and villagers entered a rhythm and, eventually, became a sort of assembly line. One man would knock something down, then the man to his left would move in to rebuild it. This spectacle continued for a few minutes before Dragons started to question his process.

"What's going on here?" he asked himself. "These people aren't being defeated. They're only being mildly inconvenienced."

As more time passed, the soldiers and townsfolk began to work as a team. If a soldier wasn't doing a good enough job at breaking somebody's furniture, one of the stronger villager would give him a hand. In return, a few of the armed men started learning a few of the lyrics to the "Rebuilding Song." When the troops started lining up for some of the fun and games, the king knew that something was seriously amiss.

"This is ridiculous." He sighed. "Did they rebuild the apothecary already?"

I just saw that thing go down!" He watched, his forehead starting to pound. "How can it be so? They build without hammers. They plunge without plungers. They paint without brushes, rollers, or sponges!" He puzzled on the situation for a little while longer before he finally came up with an idea.

"Soldiers!" he screamed out at the top of his lungs, interrupting a conga line. "We're switching gears. These puny villagers, feeble as they may be, are also extremely efficient. We might be able to use that to our advantage! So, stop wasting time on destruction. Let's try a different strategy: enslavement."

The soldiers let out a groan. Just as quickly as they had made friends, they were now going to lose them. They began attacking the townsfolk with sticks and blunt objects and bound them with ropes and twine. This seemed to get everybody's attention. They couldn't rebuild their homes if they were tied up, even though some of them tried. After a few minutes of beatings, bindings, and stern talking-to's, all eyes were on King Dragons.

"That's better," he said. "I want to make sure I have your undivided attention. I am your new ruler. You will all bow down before me. Then you will assist me in my plans."

There were a few minutes of silence before someone in the back of the crowd spoke up. "Assist you with what?" That person was immediately slapped by one of the guards.

"Don't you *dare* question your leader!" Dragons shouted at him. "But that is a good point. You people have no idea why I'm here or what I want, do you?"

Everybody shook their heads, afraid to answer out loud.

"Well, allow me to explain why I conquered your village. I come from a far away planet. There was once a rare substance on it called Falkorite. This substance is very important to me and is worth more than gold."

"Gold!" one of the bearded villagers erupted, before he was wrestled down by five soldiers.

"Thank you," Dragons told the soldiers. "Yes, this Falkorite is extremely rare and valuable. The problem is, we ran out of it on my home planet. We mined every single bit of it. So, it became necessary to find a new planet that naturally produced Falkorite. And I did. Yours."

The people shifted and muttered to each other. Apparently, they didn't like the fact that their home was full of an expensive substance that they had to give away. They felt that they should at least get some money for the Falkorite.

"Anything you find in our village is property of the Duke!" one brave soul shouted.

"I have easily conquered your town, and I will easily conquer your duke. And let's make one thing clear. Neither I, nor my men, will be mining for anything. You people, with your remarkable efficiency, will be doing all the work for us."

The villagers groaned. A few of them argued the situation wasn't fair, no matter how easily conquered they were.

"Starting today," Dragons continued. "You will be burrowing deep into your planet. You will bring me the Falkorite, and once I've collected it all, I will leave you in peace. If you refuse, you will die!"

The residents grumbled, but nobody really argued with the plan. They didn't enjoy mining, but they enjoyed dying even less.

"Are we all in agreement? Good! Let's not waste any more time."

A man in front of the crowd broke free from his bindings and stood up screaming. He had a sword in his hand, which he waved menacingly. "I'll never let you get away with this!" he shouted. His face was contorted into a mask of rage.

Dragons chuckled. "And who might you be?" he asked.

The swordsman tossed his sword from hand to hand. "I'm Nails," he said, grimacing. "Nails Franklin. I'm the best swordsman in town. Prepare to meet your doom." He made a few more cliché threats and tough-guy one-liners while swinging his sword around.

Dragons sighed. "Stop that man, get him back in line."

A group of soldiers blocked Nails path, as did a few brown-nosing members of the village. Nails hacked and slashed his way through all of them with ease until he stood before the king. Dragons smiled and unsheathed his saber with his gloved hand.

"This should be fun," he said. "I haven't had to kill anybody in a while."

Nails took a swing at Dragons' head. The king easily blocked the attack and countered with one of his own. Nails ducked and did a backwards flip, landing next to the windmill. The crowd gave an impressed murmur. This was a pretty good fight, they muttered. Much better than the fight between Nails and that arrogant goat.

"I have the moves *and* the skills," Nails said, with a cocky smile. "Tell your men to leave or you will suffer at my hands."

Dragons laughed and stared at his soldiers, who were gathering around Nails. "Stand down," he said. "I'll take care of this."

"Bring it on!" Nails said, who started doing tricks with his sword, demonstrating remarkable skill. Most of the town had apparently seen his fancy swordsmanship before, so the only ones who were really impressed were the guards. They clapped their hands several times during the presentation.

With a final flourish, the warrior threw his weapon into the air and held out his hand to catch it. This was apparently his "Grand Finale." The villagers kept calling it that at least. Nails did a few times as well. In fact, he wouldn't shut up about how he had done this trick so much that he'd perfected it. But this time was different. The machine strapped to Dragons' back started to beep

and whirl. The gears, cogs, and spokes moved and vibrated, and buttons on the side lit up in bright colors. Dragons smiled. This was a sensation he was used to, and always found comforting.

Almost immediately, a gust of wind blew through the village. It rustled through his hair and made the tall grass around the windmill lean over. The sword that was flipping around in the air got caught in the gust, knocking it off course. So now, instead of Nails catching it gracefully in his hands, he caught it screaming in his chest.

The villagers watched this in silence. Apparently, they had never seen this part of the act before. A couple of guys nudged each other and said that this Grand Finale was even better than the old one. Nails staggered around crying, bleeding, and trying to pull the sword free from his body. The machine whirred and beeped again. Nails stumbled into the windmill, as astronomical as the odds were—and Dragons knew. They were printed on the readout on the side of his machine: one in a blublatt! —Nails managed to fall on the tiny spot that was the building's one and only structural weakness. As soon as he made contact with this weakness, the whole wall collapsed. Nails peeked up just as the top of the windmill crashed down on him, crushing both him and any chance for a slave rebellion.

When Nails was good and dead, and the machine had stopped its activity, Dragons took a step toward the crowd. "Oh, did I mention?" He paused and let the moment sink into them. "It's impossible to kill me."

They shook their heads, their faces glum. This was apparently news to them. A few said they wished he had mentioned it before Nails died.

Dragons continued, "Now, is there anybody else who wants to fight me?"

The people glanced over at the crumbled windmill and the corpse beneath it. They shook their heads again, more vehemently this time.

He was pleased. "Excellent. Let's get to work."

The soldiers rounded up the villagers and fitted them with mining equipment. Then, they set up a ten-foot fence around the town with barbed wire and armed guards. The simple village had become a prison.

Dragons entered his golden pod. A set of reins rested in front of him and connected to the dragons outside, which allowed him to steer his pod. Next to those reins was a steering wheel, which also steered the pod, but required less skill. He grabbed the reins and shouted "Giddyap!" The dragons' wings beat, and they took off into the sky.

"On Thunder Blitzen, on Puff!" he said, as they flew higher. He stared out the window and watched his obedient slaves become smaller and even more insignificant, until he lost sight of them completely. The blue sky darkened into inky black nothingness.

The pod pulled into the landing bay of the warship hovering above the planet. Dragons stepped out, smiled to a few soldiers, and waved his hands in victory. He walked into his private chambers and his smile melted away. He was less confident and more worried. With shaking hands, he tugged at his hair. The strands came out with little resistance.

The door opened, and Lieutenant Stryker walked in. Dragons stiffened. "Shut that door!" he said. "Quickly!"

Stryker did as he was told, then moved closer. "I think we did well today, sir," he said.

"I agree," Dragons said, as he pulled more hair from his scalp.

"How is the machine holding up?"

"Not well. It's running on fumes. We need that Falkorite soon, or my luck is going to change forever."

"The slaves have been put to work. It's only a matter of time before they find the mineral."

"I hope so," Dragons said, staring at the clump of hair in his gloved hand. "For the time being, I'm going to stay onboard the warship. No point in risking myself needlessly."

"Yes, sir. I'll stay behind on the planet and watch over the slaves. The moment they mine any Falkorite, I'll deliver it to you personally." With that, Lieutenant Stryker marched out of the chambers.

Dragons let the hair fall from his glove to the ground. "Please, hurry," he said to the empty room.

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About the Authors



Mark Dellandre is a writer, veteran, and full-time college student at Millersville University where he studies Meteorology, a career where he gets to tell even more outrageous stories. His hobbies include reading, gaming, and watching his favorite sports teams lose every year in the playoffs.



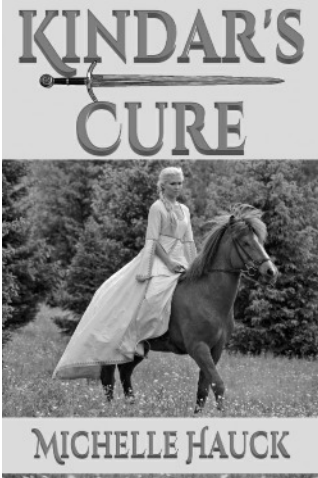
Born in Rochester, New Hampshire, *Britton Learnard* caught the writing bug early when he used to write on a big typewriter the size of a car engine. He went to college for film but quickly abandoned that career path after being chewed up and spit out by the freelance field. He has been described as a consummate toiler, always building or soldering something in his spare time.

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King Dragons, of the planet Dragons, invader of Babylon's home world

"I have something I want to tell you in private. Quickly, come with me to my bedroom. It's this way."

Princess Eileen, who is shaped like a giant eye

"You can't be a pirate. Where's your beard?"

Starbeard, the space pirate

"No more than a few months ago, you were sitting on your home planet, ignorant to the suffering of the cosmos. You think your quest is over; little do you know your real journey is just beginning."

The Elder Scientists, the greatest minds in the galaxy

"You have no idea what the Entropy of Knowledge is, do you?"

Babylon Briggs, in response to the Elder Scientists



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