

# Faith & Fairies

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For my wife Sara  
and my son Forest

## Once Upon a Time...

The Father Tree stood hidden from the Tinkers of Nod since the beginning, guarded by Woodkeepers of the High Garden.

It was a portal that connected the folding worlds, managed by the Mythodox, and sought by the Cloven. Then one day some homeless Tinker children, lost in the woods, found it by accident.

Or did they?

# Faith & Fairies

Book One of  
The Father Tree Tetralogy





## Hayland Hollow



It was a year of heavy clouds and light rain, of tender feelings and hard luck, of old pain and new hope, of bitter insults and loving smiles, of falling down and growing up, of new friends and old enemies. It was a year of remembering and a year to remember, a year of secrets and a year to keep secret, a year of celebrations and a year to celebrate.

It was the year of dreams, and the year of reality.

It really all began on a warm summer morning in Putnam County, New York, up in the country where trees were thicker than Terry had ever seen. They were choked with so much green that he couldn't see deeper than a few feet into the forest. He watched them with envy through the front passenger window of the Saturn as they drove up Route 22. There weren't so many trees where he used to live, and he had always longed for more. He loved trees. He loved them because they lived for a very long time. He loved them because they were tall and could see much further down the road. He loved them for the sound of their leaves in the wind, and the sound of their bark creaking as the branches swayed. He loved them for their invigorating, clean smell. And most of all, he loved them because they were strong and never cried out when they were hurt.

They'd been driving for over an hour. The old man who called himself Grandpa Charles wasn't exactly a speedster. Most of the traffic piled up behind him on the two-lane road, hoping to pass at the earliest opportunity. Terry sank in his seat so the passing cars couldn't see him. Charles' walking stick was propped on the floor beside Terry's legs, and whenever it slid into him he nudged it away. The stick's handle had a shape of a butterfly carved into it. Seemed like a rather girlish thing to have on a man's cane.

The other two orphans were lucky. They had been sleeping in the backseat since they had been picked up a couple of hours ago. Charles had introduced them to one another. Scott, the fourteen-year-old, had the thickest eyeglasses Terry had ever seen. Scott had used a

small safety pin to keep one arm of his glasses from falling off, because the tiny screw was lost. It made him look perfectly silly.

What interested Terry was what Scott was hiding in his small tattered suitcase, which he clung onto with white knuckles. You'd think it had his blood supply. He always held it away from everybody, and never left it anywhere. He took it to the bathroom with him. Even now he held it tightly on his lap.

Back at the bus station, Terry noticed Scott opening it and checking something inside, using great care to make sure nobody could see. What could be in there? Surely it was something more important than underpants. Scott must be hiding something from everybody. He could see it in Scott's eyes, enlarged by those magnifying eyeglass lenses. And Terry had spent enough time gazing at himself in the mirror to know what it looked like to hide secrets.

The youngest orphan, Ronnie, was a nine-year-old blond-haired brat. He lay on the seat beside Scott, sleeping contentedly, using his bright-blue backpack as a pillow. Unlike Scott, he wasn't wearing his seatbelt.

He had proved to be a smart-mouth the second he commented on Terry's slicked-back hair, which Terry had worked very hard to get just right.

"How long since you washed your hair?" Ronnie had asked with a frown.

"It's very clean," Terry had replied. "But I grease it."

"Why do you clean it if you want it greasy?"

Terry hadn't dignified the question with a reply. He was sixteen now, and didn't need to explain himself to a little boy. In a couple of years he wouldn't have to explain himself to adults either. He would reach adulthood himself, and the law would no longer support any restrictions by "guardians" and the like. He couldn't wait.

And he couldn't wait for this ride to be over, either. Charles wouldn't stop talking. Didn't he know two-thirds of his audience were asleep and one-third was disinterested? He had one of those kind, round old faces with fly-away gray hair, and a wandering brown eye that seemed to look over your shoulder when he spoke to you. He had a warm, gentle voice with a subtle New York accent, like the grandpa Terry never had. But Terry had only met Charles today for the first time, and he didn't want to be treated like a long-time member of some big happy family.

So Terry did the best he could to ignore Charles' rambling. It was difficult, because Charles loved to tell the most ridiculous stories about his childhood. The one about the moving tree could have been just the product of kids' imaginations exaggerating the moonlight shadows, but the one about his bed sheets floating out the window had Terry wondering if the old man wasn't on some kind of medication.

"...And when we awoke the next morning," Charles went on, "you can only guess what we found outside our tents: piles and piles of freshly picked flowers. Varieties we had never even seen before! Of course we suspected one another, but the truth was that our flashlight was broken, so how could any of us go about in the dark woods, picking flowers in the night?"

Terry rubbed his eyes and sighed, bored and irritated. It felt good to lightly thump his head against the windowpane. How far up in the woods was this orphanage anyway? They kept passing through small towns and leaving them behind.

"We gathered the flowers and carried them back to the house and gave them to old Mrs. Doubletree. She was so happy to see her bedroom filled with color that she got well again, and lived a good ten more years. None of us ever confessed who actually did the picking, but we have been fond of one another ever since."

Terry had half a mind to interrupt Charles and tell him a few stories about his own childhood, just to set reality back on track. There were no hikes with friends, mysterious flowers, spooky lights in the lake, or other imaginative adventures in Terry's past. There was only shouting, anger, and pain. Instead of family and friends there were policemen and psychologists, and strict foster parents—many of them. They blurred together. Since Terry had been taken from his real father and given over to "the system," he had only been fostered by people who wanted to put him to work in their house—doing dishes, washing the car, mowing the lawn. They just wanted free help, not a son. And he never got to choose his parents, either. They chose him. He felt like an old shirt, being passed from couple to couple and always finding its way back into the Salvation Army bin.

"Ah, here we are," said Charles as he stopped at a traffic light that came out of nowhere. They turned onto a peaceful road that wove through the woods between two giant hills, passing under a large archway with the words, Haviland Hollow Road. A wooden signpost

nearby read, *Welcome to the Hamlet of Haviland Hollow*. Below that was a carving of four interlinked circles, like a four-leaf clover.

Charles sighed happily as they passed under the arch. "There's no place like home."

At first there were nothing but trees, but suddenly they came into a quaint little village that looked nothing like the other towns Terry had seen in New York. There were a few shops, some houses, a town hall, and a small diner, but it all looked old-fashioned, like something from at least fifty years ago, or maybe a hundred. Yet it was so perfectly maintained, as if the town had only just been finished last week. Charles exchanged waves with a few town folk who appeared half-asleep as they sat outside on benches, smoking pipes.

Terry groaned to himself. The orphanage was *here*? This town wasn't any bigger than the one he grew up in, though admittedly it looked a lot nicer. But there was no movie theater, no mall, no arcade, nothing he had hoped for. Just little old Tudor markets and Victorian-style houses with picket fences and green lawns, kids playing Frisbee, and squirrels scampering up and down oak trees. Even the gas pumps looked out of date. And there was something else missing that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

It was a good bet they didn't have cable TV or Internet access. At least everywhere he had stayed before had TV Land and Nick-at-Night. Orphanages tended to block most other channels. This new place probably had an old roof antenna with several fuzzy channels on a single old tube set, and lots of TV-time rules. He thumped his head against the window a few more times.

"This is Haviland Hollow," Charles said, oblivious to Terry's discontent. "The whole valley was once filled with Havilands but most of them disappeared, and their descendants scattered. They started this town long ago, and all the guests here keep it the way it always was. They know it's a special place. The Havilands, you see, knew a great secret about these woods, but they weren't allowed to tell any outsiders. You have to move here to learn its secrets."

Terry sensed more hogwash coming, but Charles suddenly braked the car.

"Oh my goodness, I almost forgot," he said. "Ms. Patch would be mad if I didn't pick up some milk and bread." He pulled into a market on the corner of Haviland Hollow Road and East Branch, and parked near the curb with the car facing an exit back onto the road.

"Here we are." He turned off the car and opened the door. A gust of fresh air blew in, carrying the scents of freshly mowed grass and grilled hamburgers. "I'll be just a moment," Charles smiled and winked at Terry. Did he really think Terry was anxious to get there?

Charles carefully climbed out with his hickory cane.

Of course if Terry had been a "good boy" he'd have offered to help the eighty-year-old man carry the groceries. But Terry couldn't see himself doing that. He was an orphan, and orphans had problems. If the old man didn't like it, *tough*.

He watched Charles hobble across the seamless pavement and into the freshly painted white store. A small bell on the market's door rang as Charles passed inside, and Terry heard him say *hello* to a man dressed in white coming out with a case of bottled milk. A milkman? Terry had only seen them on TV. He didn't know they still existed.

The milkman climbed into a small white truck with the words *Haviland Hollow Market* on the back and drove up East Branch, crossing a little wooden bridge over a sparkling stream.

Terry spotted a mother and daughter strolling past on the sidewalk. The mother was holding a little umbrella with tassels. What did they call those? Parasols? Maybe there was a costume party somewhere. The little girl had a balloon and a lollipop, and wore a light-blue skirt with yellow ribbons that matched her mother's.

This place sure had all the old-time trimmings. One thing was certain, Terry did *not* belong here. He wanted to live in New York City, where all the action was.

Sunlight glinted into Terry's eyes, reflecting off the keys Charles had left hanging in the ignition. Terry bit his lip. This might be his chance! But did he have the nerve? He'd never run away before. At least, not from an orphanage. The orphanage was sure to have air conditioning, heat, hot food, TV and a comfortable bed. Terry knew he wouldn't get free room and board anywhere else, except down at the homeless shelter with the weird people.

On the other hand, what was an orphanage but a regimented homeless shelter for minors? He couldn't stand the idea of any more foster parents either. And to be stuck in a town like this without TV? It was unthinkable.

All he had to do was take the car. He could drive down to New York City and ditch it there. But where would he live? He just needed to get a job, any job, and make enough money to get an apartment or

something. Preferably near Central Park, where there were trees. He didn't know how much that would cost, but other people did it, why couldn't he? He had learned how to cook at the last orphanage. There were probably a lot of jobs for short-order cooks in the Big Apple.

His heart raced. All he had to do was drive.

He had driven at home because his dad sent him on runs to the hardware store a lot. Nobody in his hometown ever questioned a fourteen-year-old boy driving a pickup truck by himself. Now he was sixteen, so what was he afraid of? *The traffic*. He'd seen New York City on TV, and driving there looked like a nightmare.

But if he didn't go now, he might wind up stuck *here*. Some orphanages—those for drug addicts and other problem cases—were like prison camps. They must be sending him to a place like that. Why else would it be so deep in the country?

If he didn't take this opportunity, he might never get away.

But there was a bigger problem.

He glanced in the backseat to see that his "new brothers," as Charles called them, were still fast asleep. There was no time to wake them and convince them to get out of the car, or even push them out. They could make all kinds of noise and ruin his plan.

He considered just jumping out of the car and making a run for it, but there were too many witnesses. It seemed like everyone in town older than fifty liked sitting on benches outside their home or shop, waving at passing families, gazing at clouds, laughing at birds, watching traffic, and dozing off under their straw hats. One or two of them would surely take notice of a sixteen-year-old boy running down the sidewalk and into the woods, and they'd be able to tell the authorities which way he went. He couldn't wade up the small brook that sparkled alongside Haviland Hollow Road because there were neighborhood yards all along its banks, and even some kids splashing in the cold shallow water just a ways up.

And it was a long hike to New York City.

No, the best thing was to take the car. If he could drive at least down most of the way, he could ditch the car with the idiots dozing in back and then use what was left of his money to take a bus to New York City. That's what he would do.

He looked around. The coast was clear. He took a deep breath and climbed over into the driver's seat. He clicked on the seat belt. He'd

adjust the seat and mirrors later. He just wanted to get out of here before old Charles came out of the store.

With his heart racing, he turned the keys and started the car. He checked the market. No sign of activity. He shifted the car into drive and slowly pulled out of the small parking lot and onto Haviland Hollow Road. He felt a warm glee fill his body. This was easy. This wasn't going to be a problem at all.

There were only two lanes, like all the roads back in these woods. One lane for him, and one for traffic coming the other way. There were no other cars at the moment. He passed over a bridge where a creek spilled down from the hill to the north and into the bigger one flanking the south side of the road. After the bridge the houses and stores quickly thinned out. The road became a tunnel through the trees that formed a canopy of summertime, which made him feel sleepy despite his racing heart.

But he needed to go around the block and head back to Route 22. Otherwise he was going to get miserably lost.

He spotted a stone mailbox next to an almost hidden driveway on the right. The mailbox had cast-iron letters that read, *Haviland Manor*. A little wooden sign was cheaply painted below that with the word, *Orphanage*.

He could just use the driveway to turn around. But he didn't want to. What if someone up the hill saw the car and recognized it? What if, after he turned around, Charles came out of the market and saw him passing by? He didn't want anyone to know which direction he went.

He slowed down and passed the long orphanage driveway. He glanced up that direction but he couldn't see anything in the trees.

What was he going to do?

Then he remembered the map. He had looked at it a few hours ago, and saw that the place called Haviland Hollow was not too far from the border of Connecticut, and there was a larger town somewhere in this direction called Danbury. He could possibly catch a bus there.

The problem was he didn't have the map with him. It was back at the hotel where his case worker dropped him off to meet Charles.

He glanced down at the gas meter. The car was almost empty!

"Oh *great*," he mumbled nervously, and came to a stop in the middle of the road. He didn't have enough money for gas *and* a bus. Would the tank make it to Danbury? He had no idea.

Maybe he could steal some cash from one of the boys. Without waking them? Doubtful. As if they had cash in the first place.

Change of plans. He would have to walk to Danbury. Somehow. It wasn't that far. He could do it.

A car drove up behind him and honked. It startled him. Drivers in New York sure liked to honk a lot.

Just ahead to the right was a turn called Brimstone Road, but he saw the glint of metal through the trees up in that direction. There were probably houses there. Opposite Brimstone there was a road marked Stage Coach Lane. Thinking quickly, he turned left onto this rough, bumpy road.

There was no sign of a house anywhere, or any mailboxes. Weeds grew up between cracks in the old pavement, and the tires slid on gravel and dirt with each sharp turn. It was not a well traveled road at all. With luck perhaps there was somewhere to park up ahead, where nobody would see the car for a while.

He tried to accelerate but the road wound tightly this way and that, and climbed uphill rather steeply. It was hard to see each turn until he was right on top of it.

Rocks and twigs kicked up by the tires rattled on the underside of the car like hailstones. He glanced in the rearview mirror to see that Scott and Ronnie were still fast asleep, their heads swaying to and fro with each jerky turn.

Just when Terry thought he was nearing the top of this great hill, which was beginning to seem more like a small mountain, the steering wheel suddenly jerked right out of his grasp. Did he hit something? The wheel seemed to turn by itself. And not in a good direction!

He stomped on the brake, but it didn't respond. Even in those desperate seconds he still hoped to get away somehow, so he didn't scream or curse for fear of waking the boys in the back. He fought the steering wheel and pumped the brakes as the car zoomed straight off the road into a clearing and over a small cliff. For a moment the car was airborne, by at least a foot or two.

Gritting his teeth, he felt the car tilt forward and land back on its wheels with a violent thud. Scott and Ronnie popped awake finally, crying out in complete surprise.

But the rude awakening had just begun. The car now charged straight down a steep hill through the woods, barely missing several

stout trees. The backseat passengers screamed, so Terry had nothing to lose by joining them. He never thought he might die in this escape. He wished he had gone out on foot after all. Too late now.

Branches smacked the windshield so hard that it cracked, but the safety glass held together. The hill seemed to go on forever. Ronnie, realizing in terror that he wasn't wearing his seat belt, braced his feet against the back of Terry's chair, set his backpack on his lap, and tucked his head in it.

Finally the car tilted sharply downward again and a huge splash of brackish water sloshed over the windshield. Scott was thrust against his seat belt, and his safety-pin-mended glasses shot off his face like a bullet and landed on the floor. Ronnie's crash position worked well for him, but he swore to himself he'd never ride in a car without wearing his seat belt ever again.

They had landed in a small pond. An air bag popped out of the steering wheel into Terry's face. He gasped and pushed it away.

Scott still gripped his suitcase with white knuckles, panting and trying to regain some sense of what was going on. Crashing down the hill had brought back a horrible feeling, one that his psychologist had helped him finally get rid of. All that work for nothing. But now where was he? What had happened? Without his glasses he couldn't see hardly anything past several feet in front of him.

While Terry fought with his slowly deflating air bag, Scott unbuckled his seat belt and groped on the floor for his glasses. He found them in several inches of water. He quickly shook them and put them on, trying to focus through the drippy lenses. He looked out his window, and saw that the glass was completely shattered. Outside, he could see they were slowly sinking into brown water.

"Aaaah!" Scott shouted in a panic. "We're going down!"

The shore was very close by, so he heaved his suitcase out the window as hard as he could. It barely landed on dry ground. Then he climbed out of the window and fell into the warm swampy water. His arms and legs thrashed, desperate for the bottom, and found nothing for a moment. He quickly splashed close to some thick grass on the shore and pulled himself out of the water, settling near his suitcase.

Ronnie and Terry rolled down their windows. Ronnie flung his backpack up onto the roof, and then climbed out his window and onto the roof himself. Terry rescued his duffel bag from the backseat floor and followed Ronnie's example. From the roof they easily walked to

the trunk of the car, which was only a few inches from dry land, and jumped ashore.

The three boys stood there collecting themselves, panting and watching the car sink. With a loud "blurb!" it tilted dramatically, its rear end pointing into the air, and sank straight down and out of sight. There was nothing left but bubbles. It was surprisingly deep for such a small pond.

Terry noticed Ronnie and Scott staring at him, bewildered. He felt embarrassed and wasn't exactly sure what to say.

"Sorry," he mumbled to them. "Did I wake you?"

"Wake me?" Scott said, his voice breaking up. "I almost drowned!"

"Oh come on, you didn't almost drown."

"I can't swim, Terry! And look at that water! There are probably all kinds of creepy things in there. I could have leeches all over me right now!" Realizing this, Scott danced around swatting at himself and checking under his shirt, but there was nothing there.

"What happened, anyway?" Ronnie asked. "Where's Grandpa Charles?"

Terry casually tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. "He went to the market, and I saw an opportunity to get ourselves out of trouble."

Scott couldn't believe what he was hearing. He knew this older kid was going to be no good.

"You mean you...stole the car?" he gasped, nearly crying with shock. "Kidnapping and car theft are not the best ways to get out of trouble!"

The car crash was not in Terry's original plan, but on the other hand, he *did* want to ditch it. And now it was completely gone, where nobody would find it. But what could he do with these two kids? He should probably just leave them here, and not tell them where he was going. But then they might tell the police what Terry did, and the police would be on the lookout. Trying to catch a bus might become very risky.

Then another thought occurred to him. What if he convinced them to come along, at least for the time being? One was too wimpy and whiny, and the other too young and bratty, and Terry was sure he would get sick of them. And he didn't want to be a baby-sitter. But if

they hiked with him until the sun went down, he could sneak away when they were asleep.

Well, it wasn't the best idea, but he didn't have any other choice. He still wasn't going to tell them where he was really going, just in case.

But what could he say to them? How could he convince them to go along? He had an idea.

"Either of you ever been to a big backwoods orphanage?" Terry asked.

Ronnie shook his head. "The shelter I stayed at in Stamford was like half way between a church and a school, I guess. But lots of grownups took me in temporarily so I lived in houses most of the time."

"Mine was a like a...hospital," Scott said hesitantly, slapping a flying insect, "and nobody wanted me. So what?"

"So I've seen orphanages with the real bad kids, and that's where we were going! You know what they do to you? The last place I was at, they chained me up in the basement and whipped me! And I didn't even do anything wrong."

"Oh, come on!"

"You don't believe me? Then where do you think I got this?" Terry lifted his shirt up to reveal a series of old lash scars across his body, mostly on his back.

"Holy Toledo!" Ronnie said, touching one of them.

"Hey, fingers off," Terry ordered, pulling down his shirt.

"Do they still hurt?" Ronnie asked with wide eyes.

"A little," Terry lied. "They have a way of doing it so that it hurts forever. That's why I couldn't go back. And I did you guys a favor by rescuing you."

"Hold on a second," Scott said. "How do you know *this* orphanage will do that? Grandpa Charles seemed like a nice man."

"You fell for that old trick? I'm just getting started. You'll have to eat lumpy oatmeal with weevils crawling on it, and there's no heat or hot water. And, worst of all, you have to take math class forever!"

Ronnie's face wrinkled up. "Math class forever? Now *that* would be the last straw for me."

Scott frowned, trying to sort it out. Nobody had told him much about what to expect from the orphanage, except that there would be a lot of other kids there. "I thought orphans didn't have to go to school," he admitted. At least, nobody had ever mentioned it.

"The orphanage *is* a school, except you never leave it. You live there! And you even have to take care of it! You have to chop wood in the rain, and clean rusty toilets..."

Ronnie groaned. Terry knew he had Ronnie hook, line, and sinker. But Scott was iffy, and distracted by bird sounds in the woods and bugs flying around him.

The thing Scott couldn't shake was the bad smell. What *was* that? At first he thought it was Terry. Sometimes older kids stank. Body odor or something. But this stench was all around him, like a cloud.

"Speaking of toilets," Scott said, "something around here smells really bad!"

"I think it's this water," Ronnie said. "I've seen it before, when I lived with one of my foster parents in a trailer park. Down the hill there was a little stinky pond that would freeze over at Christmas, and I used to skate around on it with the guys. But those foster parents gave me up again, so here I am."

"These are sewer holes," Terry said. "No wonder they gave you up. When all those kids at the orphanage flush their toilets, it probably comes out here."

Scott looked down at his soaked clothes. "Oh crap!" He threw his suitcase down in some weeds and snapped it open. Terry stepped a little closer so he could see inside, and Scott turned it away from him. Opening it just a crack, Scott slipped out a bottle of hand sanitizer. He clicked the suitcase shut again, and spread the clear gel all over his hands and arms, wiping vigorously.

"Ugh, the germs! I think I even got some on my face. Oh man!"

Several bees zoomed down at his head, and he ducked. "What the...?" Another one dove at him. "Aaah!" Scott screamed. "Bees! I'm being attacked!"

Terry spotted a beehive hanging in the tree right over their heads.

"Whoa! There's a hive up there. Maybe I can knock it down." He opened up his duffel bag and pulled out his slingshot.

A few more bees made runs at Scott, and he freaked. "Yikes! Let's get out of here!"

Before Terry could do anything, Scott took off through the woods, his suitcase slapping against bushes and trees. Terry and Ronnie followed after him. After a minute of wild running, Scott finally

stopped, out of breath, and looked around. Terry and Ronnie caught up to him.

"Can we stop now?" Ronnie said.

Terry tried to figure out which direction they had gone. Away from Danbury, or toward it? He had no idea.

"Yeah, relax!" he said, trying to find the sun through the trees.

"Anyone get stung?" Scott asked.

Terry shook his head. "They didn't chase us, just you."

"That figures."

"Maybe they just don't want you stinking up their home," Ronnie said.

Scott sighed and turned in several circles. "Which way was that town? I was asleep."

"You don't want to go back there," Terry said. "They'll just throw us in the orphanage. Out here we don't answer to nobody. We're free."

"But I'm nine years old," Ronnie said. "I don't think I'm allowed to be free."

Scott gaped at Terry like he was absurd. "What are you saying, that we stay in the woods and die?" He hugged his suitcase to his chest like a bulletproof vest. Terry's eyes sparkled with curiosity. What did Scott have in that suitcase that was so important?

"We won't die. Look, I grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania. Well, it was actually a converted horse stable surrounded by farms, but the point is I know the country."

"Well I grew up in New York City," Scott said, "and everybody knows you don't walk through Central Park at night. And these woods are a lot bigger than Central Park."

Terry considered just bolting into the woods and leaving them here to find their own way.

"You gotta be kidding. Central Park has *people*; that's what makes it dangerous. We're up in the country now, city boy. No people in these woods."

Just then they heard girls singing, far off in the woods. All of them froze and listened. It was a melodious and beautiful chant, and the words were not English. It was hard to tell what language it was. Terry cocked his head and looked this way and that, trying to figure out which way it was coming from, because it seemed to weave through the trees.

Then it faded, and there was nothing left but the sound of the wind blowing through the summer leaves, birds singing, squirrels chattering, and acorns falling down around their heads.

"That sounded like people, don't you think?" Scott said to prove his point.

"Yeah, but how dangerous is a girls' choir?" Ronnie said.

Terry wrinkled his forehead, puzzled. "It didn't sound like a choir, but girls for sure. There must be a house nearby or something." Of course his plan was supposed to take him away from neighborhoods, not toward them, but his curiosity was piqued. He had to see who made that beautiful sound. He imagined they all looked like those girls on the cover of *Maxim* magazine. Maybe he could make friends with them, and ask them for directions to Danbury without the nincompoops hearing. Or, even better...maybe they lived alone, had cable TV, X-box, PlayStation, and high-speed Internet access, and would let Terry live with them.

"Let's go check these girls out," he sputtered, and quickly shuffled off in the direction where the voices had seemed loudest. Ronnie followed, but Scott was very hesitant.

"But, but, but... *Wait*," Scott sputtered. He was a complete idiot around girls. If an attractive girl was anywhere within range he couldn't think straight, talk right, or even walk correctly. And he wasn't too enthused about the idea of letting the other boys see him acting like that.

But they were off and moving, and quickly leaving him behind. Soon the dense woods swallowed them. He could still hear their footsteps, but he couldn't see them anymore.

A branch snapped somewhere in the woods, in the opposite direction. Scott's heart did a leap. *There's bears out here*, he thought to himself. *This is nuts!*

"Hey!" he called after the guys. "Don't leave me here alone!" He had no choice but to hurry after them. He caught up quickly but still trailed somewhat behind, itchy and uneasy.

Ronnie wasn't worried at all about their predicament. He was happy to be out in the woods on an adventure. Terry aimed his empty slingshot at birds and squirrels, pretending to shoot at them. This made Scott feel even more irritated, but he didn't say anything. He wasn't sure how far he could push Terry. The kid was a lot stronger than he, and clearly without a stick of common sense. Scott had to think of a way to

get them back to a road at least. He had to report all of this to the police. He was pretty sure Terry was wrong about the orphanage. Charles just didn't seem like the kind of man who would whip little boys.

Scott used up an entire bottle of hand sanitizer scrubbing his bare arms, neck, face, and ankles. He even applied some to his glasses. There was nothing he could do about his damp clothes, but at least he had been smart enough to pack extra bottles of hand sanitizer.

The faint smells of wood and pollen in the air were invigorating for Terry and Ronnie, but Scott's nose was starting to get stopped up by allergies, and he began sniffing and rubbing his eyes. It was just as well, because he couldn't smell his own stink anymore.

Branches kept snapping him in the face, and somehow he kept walking through invisible cobwebs that tickled his lips and got all over his glasses. He flailed his arms and spit and twitched as he walked, trying to use his suitcase as a shield. How long had they been hiking now? They were going deeper into the woods, he was sure of it. They had to go back before it started getting dark.

Terry and Ronnie had pulled ahead of him. Fortunately, Ronnie's backpack was bright-blue with a cartoon whale on it, which was somewhat easy to track in the woods. But then Terry and Ronnie passed through a thick wall of brush, and Scott lost sight of it again.

"Wait up, you guys! Come on," he complained.

He fought through the weeds and found them standing transfixed in a huge clearing. Scott caught up to them, brushing himself off and looking carefully for ticks.

"We're going to get Lyme disease, I just know it," Scott said irritably. "Look, we've been walking for half an hour, and..." Suddenly he noticed why the other two had stopped in their tracks.

"What in the..." Scott gasped.



# The Enchanted Cottage

Scott's mouth hung open as he arched his neck to see gargantuan branches stretched overhead, providing shade across most of the clearing with leaves as big as his whole body. And yet shafts of sunlight still found a way through and played across the meadow, undulating in the shadows that moved in the afternoon gusts. Carpets of hanging moss swayed on the divided trunks and swarms of fireflies flickered around them.

The tree was so big around that an entire cottage was actually built into its huge exposed root system. The house seemed to blend into the tree, somehow. Scott wiped his glasses so he could see better. There were doors, windows, and a few exposed walls, but most of the house was tucked into the tree, like the trunk grew around it over the years.

The yards were tastefully landscaped with fantastic flower and vegetable gardens, fountains, and winding paths leading up to different patios. Water as bright as polished silver cascaded down beside the tree and fountains, forming several small waterfalls that sent up a cool mist across the lush grasses.

Scott didn't see any electric poles or wires, and no road or driveway.

"Now that's what I call a tree," Terry said with tears in his eyes.

"I never heard of a tree this size in New York state," Scott said, breathless.

"It's awesome," Ronnie said. "I can't even see the top!"

"Isn't the General Sherman in California the biggest living tree in the world? No, wait, there's another one now, but I think it's out west somewhere. How come nobody ever said anything about *this*? I'm sure you can see it for miles around!"

"Hey guys," Ronnie said. "You think the singing came from here?"

Terry looked like he was having a religious experience. "I don't know, but I'd sure love to climb this thing."

"The lowest branch is a hundred feet off the ground," Scott said.

"How do you expect to get up there? A fire truck?"

"I'll bet you can see the Hudson River from up there."

Scott could feel a headache growing. First Terry steals the car, then he wrecks it and almost gets them all killed, then he gets them lost in the woods chasing after girls, now he wants to climb a giant tree.

"I hate heights," Scott said, rubbing his temple. "And I don't like the woods, and I'm not too good around girls either. Now I've had enough of this. The police are probably looking for us already, and I want to be found. Got it? So go knock and see if they got a phone."

Terry didn't like where this was going.

"Why do *I* have to knock?" he said. "*You* knock!"

"I'm not going over there alone."

"What's your problem, anyway? You're afraid of water, bees, woods, the dark, girls, heights, strangers..."

"I'm a pantophobe!"

Terry frowned. "You're afraid of your pants, too?"

"No! A *pantophobe* is a fear of everything."

"You need to get a grip if you want to become a professional orphan someday. You have to sell yourself to the adults by showing them your strengths, not your weaknesses."

"Is that a fact? You haven't done so well."

"That's not my fault! At least I'm not a wimp. Where's your sense of manhood?"

"Well gee, maybe I left it floating around in the sewer hole you *sank the car into!*"

Once again they were interrupted by the sound of girls, this time much closer, slightly muffled. It was enchanting, like before, with voices so warm and friendly that Terry's spine tingled. Scott also felt his spine tingle, but for different reasons.

The voices came from inside the cottage, rising over the splash of the waterfalls. Then it faded. The boys stared at the cottage in silence for a moment.

"Maybe they got the TV up real loud," Ronnie suggested.

"I don't think they got electricity, Ronnie," Scott said.

"Then why do you think they got a phone?" Terry asked.

Scott shrugged.

"But we heard them just as loud back at the sewer hole as we do here."

Terry looked at Ronnie with curiosity. "Yeah, that is weird, I have to admit. And now that you mention it, *none* of the houses in Haviland Hollow have power cables. That's what was missing."

Terry was so curious he just had to do something. "Okay let's go find out who lives here. But let me do the talking."

Scott sighed with anxiety and followed Terry and Ronnie toward the great tree.

A warm breeze swirled the tall grass and flowers that came up to their knees in the outer field, and the great leaves high above them rustled with a sound deeper than the waterfalls. Scott heard a mourning dove cooing on one of the branches, and the distinct rattle of a woodpecker on the tree's corky bark. The air was filled with the perfumes of old oak wood, grass, and flower pollen.

Before they reached the outermost garden patch, they came across a circle of grass that had been laid flat.

"Hey," Ronnie said, stopping at its edge. "Look guys! It's a crop circle!"

Scott frowned, stepping up cautiously. Terry paused, glancing at it incidentally, but not particularly interested.

"This isn't a crop," Scott said, though he knew it didn't matter.

"Crop circles don't need to be in crops, they just call them that," Ronnie said.

Terry was getting impatient. "It's not a crop circle you moron, it's just..." Come to think of it, the impression *was* bizarre. He looked for a signs that it had been walked in.

"Just what?" Ronnie demanded.

"I don't know, but I'm sure no UFO made it! How could a flying saucer land here with all those branches overhead?"

"Hey, maybe the whole tree is an alien!" Ronnie said with wide eyes. "Or maybe it's a flying saucer *disguised* as a tree."

"Crop circles are made by teams of geometry students that get up in the middle of the night with some boards and lots of rope," Scott said, remembering what he'd read. "There's groups of them competing with one another, to see who can make the most complicated design."

"But this is just a boring circle," Ronnie pointed out. "And why would anyone leave it under a tree where passing planes can't see it?"

"I don't understand why passing planes haven't said anything about this tree in the first place," Scott said. "It should be a national landmark or something!"

"Oh who cares?" Terry said loudly. "Come on already!" He continued walking, and didn't care if the other two followed or not. Girls with voices that sweet had to be sweet to look at, too. He just hoped they didn't have a phone.

They walked through the inner yards, where the grass grew shorter, and came to a stone path. They followed it through the garden to the primary front porch built between two magnificent protruding roots of the giant tree. Terry and Ronnie made no attempt to lighten their footsteps on the wood porch, but Scott winced and walked on his toes. It's not that he wanted to sneak up on these people, but he didn't want them to think they had intruders. There were windows here and there between striations of tree bark or roots, and a large protruding room with picture windows, but all Scott could see inside was diffused yellow light. Otherwise they may as well have been mirrors. Scott didn't like one-way windows. He had had enough of them over the last few years.

Scott stopped behind the others when Terry was about to knock.

"In Hansel and Gretel there was a witch that lived in a house in the woods," Ronnie said with his voice low, "and I think she ate kids."

Terry paused, his knuckles suspended in front of the door. He didn't believe in silly things like witches, of course, but on the other hand this was a very weird-looking house, half-built and half-grown, and fused into a tree that shouldn't be here. Perhaps standing by the front door wasn't such a smart idea.

"Nursery rhymes," Terry whispered, forcing a smile at Ronnie.

"Yeah but aren't myths based on real things sometimes?"

Ronnie asked.

"That witch's house was made of candy," Scott pointed out.

"Not a tree."

"You don't actually believe everything you read in books, do you Ronnie?" Terry said rhetorically, swallowing hard. "The wackier it sounds, the more unlikely it is."

"So if you read about a giant tree with a cottage built into it, would you believe it or not?" Ronnie argued. "I mean, here it is."

Terry scratched his head, not really in the mood for this kind of question. "Oh, this is not so odd. They're just...creatively rustic. Come to think of it, the Pennsylvania Dutch live this way. Kinda." Truth was, the Pennsylvania Dutch lived pretty much like everybody else did a few

hundred years ago. But Ronnie clearly didn't know who the Pennsylvania Dutch were, so it was as good an analogy as any.

"I don't think the Amish live in trees, Terry," Scott said from across the porch. Scott wasn't well-traveled but he was a book worm.

"Well my point is that they're harmless," Terry said. "Look how peaceful this place is. Look at all the flowers and plants. Dangerous people don't grow daffodils."

"Those are tulips," Scott corrected.

"Whatever!"

"Okay, so are we going to stand here all day talking on their porch?" Ronnie said.

"Of course not, but you know what? Scott should knock."

Scott made a face like he had just been asked to leap out of an airplane. "You're right next to the door and I'm way over here."

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Terry impatiently grabbed Scott by the arm and nearly dragged him over. "Get over here, Chicken Little, and knock on the stupid door!"

Scott jerked his arm out of Terry's grasp. "You don't need to muscle me."

"It'll be good for you. I'll do the talking, don't worry. All you have to do is knock. Are you afraid of knocking, too?"

Scott knew Terry was interested in the girls they heard. Guys his age were always thinking about girls.

"No, I'm not afraid of knocking, but... Promise me we're just going to ask for a phone, and that's it. We're not here to pick up dates or anything."

Terry was pretty sure they didn't have a phone, but if they did, he didn't want Scott calling the police. He'd have to think of some way of steering Scott away from this plan.

"I promise, I promise."

Scott scratched his irritated chest. He was still damp, and the icky water made his skin itch. "I think I'm getting hives."

"Could you please knock before the sun goes down?"

Scott took a few deep breaths, shook his hands to loosen up his fingers, and then thought it might be smart to stretch his ankles, in case he had to make a run for it.

"You want me to knock?" Ronnie asked anxiously. Scott couldn't bear the thought of a nine-year-old being braver than he.

"I can do it, I can do it," Scott said with a hush.

They were just girls, anyway. He saw them every day in the city. And maybe the voices just *sounded* young. Maybe they were middle-aged women. Older women weren't so scary. Only the ones near his age.

Maybe there was even a family here who might want to adopt a kid. Scott could live in a place like this, if there was a path to town, and there were no ticks or bears, and they could get him some books.

It was serene here, and there was something about this giant tree that made him feel...protected.

"Okay," Scott said. "This is it. Stand by." He knocked on the door softly.

"You better really pound it," Terry said. "That's a thick door."

"No, listen. I hear something."

There was shuffling behind the door. The doorknob turned.

Scott felt compelled to flee but his legs wouldn't move. He held his breath. The door opened slowly, with a long creak. He almost closed his eyes.

The door stopped about a foot open, and a small pretty face peeked out—that of a girl about Ronnie's age with a lot of thick, messy black hair. She opened her mouth, as if to speak, but was suddenly yanked back inside. The door slammed shut. All three boys flinched in surprise and glanced at one other.

"What was that all about?" Scott asked.

Terry had no answers either, but he slowly moved around so that Scott and Ronnie were closer to the door than he. He wasn't afraid of little girls, of course, but there might be some overprotective father in there, too. A big mountain-man who wouldn't take lightly to lanky teenage boys finding his cozy little hideaway.

They listened to a frantic rustling inside the house, and some muffled girls' voices. Terry cocked his head, trying to hear better. It didn't sound like they were speaking English.

The door opened again. Another girl appeared, taller and more elegant than the first. She had soft blue eyes and short, straight blonde hair, or at least it looked short in the front; they couldn't see the rest of her head because she was wearing a brown velvet wraparound cape with the hood up. A necklace with a large maple-leaf design hung around her neck, and under the cape she wore what looked like a green jerkin, or a similar woman's medieval vest.

Terry and Scott stood motionless, stunned by the girl's glowing blue eyes, which seemed to light up the shadow cast by her hood. Ronnie took notice of a small brown feather that drifted out of the doorway and zigzagged down, landing on his foot. He picked it up.

The girl smiled briefly, but looked suspicious of the boys. "May I help you?" she asked with a strong British accent.

Scott just stood there with his mouth hanging open, having to look *up* at her, for she was taller than he. Terry glided up in front of him, nearly shoving him backward.

"Hello there!" he exclaimed with a broad smile. "How are you? Terry's my name, from the Keystone State of Pennsylvania." As he reached out to shake her hand, she recoiled slightly. Terry kept his hand and smile suspended, hoping she was just timid, and because he wasn't exactly sure what he would do if she rejected him in front of the others. After a pensive pause, she slowly took hold of his hand. He shook it gently and warmly. "It's a great, great pleasure to meet you."

She relaxed a little, drawing a deep breath. Her eyes darted between them. "Forgive me for asking, but did you hear our...singing?"

"Yeah, that's right, I did," Terry said. "In fact that's why I came. I just had to see the lips...er, faces...out of which...such lovely voices...sprang." Terry winced, but she didn't seem to notice his clumsiness.

"And your friends? They heard our singing, too?"

"Yes we all heard it," Terry spoke for them. He was afraid Scott was going to say something to embarrass him.

"All three of you? At the same time?"

Terry paused, uncertain what she was getting at. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Brilliant! Good show!" she exclaimed happily.

Terry couldn't fathom why this made her so glad. "We got pretty fine hearing, I guess."

"What are your names, please?"

Terry looked back at Scott, who still hadn't closed his mouth. "Yes, well... That there is Scott, he's a New York City kid, and a little out of it, so you'll have to forgive him."

"Nice to meet you Scott from New York City," she said kindly. "I forgive you."

Scott was so nervous he could hardly think of what he was supposed to say. Some part of his brain went on autopilot and tried to speak on his behalf. "Hi. I'm Scott," he said.

"That's what I understand," she said.

"Thank you for meeting me. I mean you're welcome."

Terry rolled his eyes.

"I'm Ronnie from Redding," Ronnie said, tucking the little brown feather in his breast pocket. "I'm nine and I never had a real Mom and Dad." It was the same introduction he used with Terry.

"Hello, Ronnie from Redding," she said. "My name is M—Ellen."

"Your name is Melon?" Ronnie checked.

"Ellen," she corrected. "Forgive me for being startled. Nobody ever...sees us."

"Terry, the phone," Scott said out of the side of his mouth. "The phone."

"Eh, Scott here's looking for a telephone," Terry said. "You got one?"

"Do we have a telephone? Why...Yes. Yes—" She suddenly spoke louder. "*—We have a telephone.*"

There was more rustling deep within the house, and a sound like something metal dropped on the floor. Embarrassed about the commotion, Ellen stepped out and shut the door behind her with a smile. "It'll be half a moment," she said, adjusting her hood.

Then she caught a whiff of Scott, whose clothes were still damp and foul smelling. Scott's sinuses were too clogged for him to smell them anymore, so he had nearly forgotten about it. He felt his face burn with humiliation.

"Oh I'm sorry," he gasped. "Can you smell my stinky? I mean, I'm stinky, can you smell it? What I mean is, I had an accident..."

Terry decided to help out before Scott ruined this for everybody. "What he means is we wrecked our car in the sewer, which is what brings us to your lovely home," he smiled.

Ronnie chortled. "Oh, that really helped. Thanks, Terry."

"Get away!" Ellen said enthusiastically.

Scott took that as an order directed at him. "Yes, ma'am." He started backing away.

"No, Scott," she said. "I don't mean 'leave.' Like, 'bugger off,' you know?"

Confused, Scott stopped. Did she say 'bugger off?' He immediately turned away from her and wiped his nose on his wrist.

"No, no, I mean, how do you put it here? 'You don't say!' Like that, you see? It's a remarkable story you told."

Scott realized she was using foreign expressions that he didn't understand.

"We don't want to bother you if that's not okay," Scott said, still trying to arrange his words properly. He tried again. "I mean, if we're bothering you that's okay..."

"No, no, carry on. Half a moment..." She checked something behind the door, and there were whisperings. They had only seen two girls so far, but there were definitely more in there.

Scott exchanged looks with Terry and Ronnie. "Do you guys understand her?" he asked.

"I understand *her* better than *you*," Terry said.

"I think she's from England," Scott said.

"Oh!" Ronnie said, "well that makes sense then."

She turned back to them. "The telephone is prepared."

Prepared? What was to prepare? "Just this way. You, too, Scott. Come, come." She opened the door wide, and Terry stepped in first.

The inside of the house had a woodsy decor. It was filled with plants, flowers, jars of grain and petals, and shelves of artifacts the boys couldn't immediately identify. Macramé plant holders and wall decorations were hanging everywhere, and a perch with a pair of lovebirds swung in a nearby corner as if it had just been bumped. The birds didn't have a cage. And curled up on a shelf only feet away from the birds was a large gray cat, which lifted its head and peered at the strangers disturbing its afternoon slumber. The cat gave them a purring meow before tucking its head again, and didn't seem at all interested in the unprotected birds.

There were indeed other girls inside. One of them, with a long braid hanging down in front of each shoulder, leaned against a support beam in a light red and tan-swirled velvet cape. Also with her hood up, she tilted her head to one side, pinning her green eyes on Terry.

Another girl, slightly younger than the first two, sat in a corner with her knees drawn. Her light green hood had long, straight string fringes that swayed in front of her large brown eyes. Clearly shy, she gazed at the boys from behind her knees, peeking out from under her hood.

The youngest girl was the one they had seen first, in the doorway. She excitedly crashed down a wooden circular staircase from an upper level and, upon seeing the boys inside the house, stopped rushing and pretended to take her time. She had also changed into a cape, this one dark green with small, sharp frills. Why did they all wear wraparound capes with their hoods up, as if expecting rain? Scott wondered if this was some kind of formal wear.

The room was quite expansive, and branched into other chambers. Scott could see an adjoining room a couple steps down from this one, and there was yet another girl in there, lying on her back on a bed surrounded by roses. Even from here Scott could see she was a long-haired red-head, despite a dark red velvet hood covering most of it. Because she seemed undisturbed by the racket and her hands lay neatly folded over her belly, Scott got the uncomfortable idea that maybe she wasn't just sleeping.

His stomach knotted up as he glanced about for a phone and didn't see anything that even remotely resembled one. There were square objects hanging on the walls covered with white sheets. Probably they were paintings, but why were they covered?

"I would like you to meet Libby," Ellen said, gesturing toward the green-eyed girl who had eyes for Terry, "and Katy, sitting in the corner..."

Scott stole a quick look at Katy, the girl with the tasseled hood. She was peering right back at him. His heart doubled in speed and he diverted his eyes. There was something really magical about Katy. He had never seen anyone quite like her, and yet there was a vague familiarity, like he'd always known her and never knew it. It was as though she was casting a spell on him, like witches do in those silly stories, but in an innocent—not sinister—way.

The smallest girl had reached the bottom of the stairs, and she walked quickly toward Ronnie with an outstretched hand, much in the same manner that Terry had used when introducing himself earlier. It seemed like she was mimicking Terry. She opened her mouth, as if to say something, but Ellen suddenly said, "And this is Mariam, who is mute and *cannot speak a word.*"

Mariam stopped short, glaring at Ellen, hands on hips. Ellen finally gestured at the bed beyond.

"Sleeping in the back is Anne," she said.

Scott took a small breath of relief. The girl wasn't dead, thank goodness.

Terry was taking it all in as quickly as he could, and he didn't know what to make of this. These girls looked young to be living by themselves. Ellen and Libby could pass for being in their late teens to early twenties for sure, Katy looked barely teenaged, and certainly Mariam couldn't be more than ten. He couldn't tell about Anne from over here, but she seemed roughly about Ellen's age. Weren't there any men around?

"Girls, this is Scott, Ronnie, and Terry," Ellen said.

"Hello there, boys," Libby said seductively. She had a completely different accent from Ellen's. It sounded...French?

"Hello," came the sound of a black mynah bird off in the far corner, which watched and listened from its perch. Like the lovebirds, it had no cage.

"How many of you live here?" Ronnie asked. He must have been reading Terry's mind.

"Just we."

Ronnie was puzzled. "Are you sisters?"

Ellen paused. Mariam was inspecting Ronnie closely, leaning in as if to count his tiniest freckles, and Ronnie felt increasingly uncomfortable about her. Girls his age could be such nuisances. In fact the whole idea that boys could be *attracted* to girls was absurd, and quite annoying. At least that's what Ronnie wanted to believe.

"Yes," Ellen replied.

"No men live here?" Terry confirmed.

"No."

Terry felt almost giddy. No competition! "There is a God," he said to himself.

Ellen seemed to hear him, and nodded in complete agreement.

Libby sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. Scott gulped.

"I smell the—" Libby started. But Ellen interrupted her.

"Yes, Lib, Scott fell into it."

Libby gave a small start and blinked. "He fell into it?"

Scott wanted to shrink to the size of an ant and crawl out of sight between the floorboards.

"If he aroused Anne he'd dry up in a pip, yes?"

"I'm outta here," Scott said without hesitation, making for the door. Terry grabbed him by the arm.

"Whoa, there, Scott..." To Ellen, Terry said, "Could you repeat that? I don't think we heard you right."

Ellen worried she was misunderstood, and looked to Libby for help.

In her French accent, Libby said, "What she means is if you helped Anne wake up, she would...dry Scott's clothes."

The boys didn't quite know what to think of that statement either.

Scott didn't exactly *want* to flee. After all, there was nothing outside but a lot of woods and bugs and animals and allergies, and he had no idea how to get back to civilization, and the sun would be going down in a few hours. And then there was Katy. He was drawn to her and frightened of her at the same time. Stalemate.

He hesitated, scratching himself, and avoided eye contact while hoping a phone would be produced in short order.

"So I guess she does the laundry around here," Ronnie thought out loud.

"If you're sisters, why do you sound like you're from different countries?" Terry asked suspiciously.

"Uh, we...travel a lot," Libby said. "We each learned your language in different places."

"*Our* language?" Terry said. "What is *your* language?"

This chitchat wasn't making Scott feel any less anxious, so he got them back on the subject. "You said there was a telephone, right?"

"Indeed," Ellen said, looking relieved that she didn't have to answer Terry's last question. "Just there." She pointed over to a wall near the door. Scott didn't see anything. Just some shelves and a cupboard.

Terry realized his plan was backfiring. He couldn't let Scott use a phone, but he wasn't sure how to stop it. He needed to find ways of bringing about more conversation.

Thinking quickly, he said, "I didn't see any wires to the house. Is it a cellular?"

Ellen looked shell-shocked by the question. "Cellular?"

"You know, a wireless phone?"

After a beat, Ellen nodded heavily and said, "That is so. No wires."

"Phone lines are underground anyway, Beavis," Ronnie said. "You've been spending too much time with those Pennsylvania Duchesses."

Terry wanted to smack him.

Scott stepped up to the wall and took a closer look at a carved wooden duck on the shelf there. He had seen phones that looked like ducks. You just had to remove the back and speak into it. He could see a crack tracing the back of the carved duck, just where it should be. It was certainly removable. Without a second thought, he snatched the duck from the shelf.

"Here it is," he said to Terry and Ronnie. "It's a duck phone."

Ellen and Libby glanced at one another in puzzlement. Scott lifted the back off the duck and put it to his ear. A waterfall of pistachios spilled out and all over the floor. It wasn't a phone after all, just a container!

Scott stared at his mistake in embarrassment. "Nuts!" he said stunned, with everyone's eyes upon him.

"She pointed at the cupboard, not at the duck," Ronnie said, trying to back away from Mariam.

The sleeping cat took notice of these new events and jumped down from his own shelf, his eyes fixed on the pistachio nuts that spun and slipped across the floor. They sent him into a crazed state. He leapt on one of the nuts, swatting it with his right forepaw so hard that it shot between Ellen's feet, down a few steps, and all the way under the bed where Anne continued sleeping. This drove him even more frantic. He crouched, wiggled his rear end in the air, and scampered after the escaping nut, disappearing under the bed.

"Britches, you behave," Libby said to the cat with a smile.

"It's a duck phone!" said the mynah bird, mocking Scott.

"You too, Fred," Libby said to the bird. "We don't want any trouble out of you right now."

"You named your bird, 'Fred'?" Ronnie said.

"His name is Seritaya, which means 'ruler of peace'. The closest matching name in your language is Fred."

Scott had dropped to his knees and started scooping nuts back into the duck-shaped container before realizing he ought to be throwing them in the trash, not back into the bowl.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he sputtered, and dumped the rest of the nuts out of the duck, making an even bigger pile. "Oops. I didn't mean to do that. I need garbage," he said to Ellen apologetically.

"It's okay, pay it no mind, Scott," Ellen said casually. "Mariam will take care of it."

Mariam shot Ellen an angry look, and then obediently (but with noticeable impatience) stomped over to the pile of nuts, snatched the duck away from Scott, and began scooping them back inside as quickly as possible.

Scott stood and gave her some room, because she looked like she was going to push him away otherwise. Hoping to get this all past him quickly, Scott opened the cupboard Ronnie had indicated.

Inside there was a phone, but not the usual kind. He had seen these only in old movies and pictures. It was a large black box mounted on the wall inside, with a crank and a built-in bell microphone. An earpiece hung separately on a hook. There was no dial pad either. Scott stared at it for a moment, perplexed, and then took the earpiece down. It had no wire attached to it.

Well, she did say it was wireless.

Terry watched with one part amusement and one part confusion. Scott crossed over to him and handed him the receiver, hoping he would know what to do.

"Don't give it to me," Terry said. "You're the one who wanted it."

Ellen saw that Scott was troubled. "Is something wrong?" she asked with suppressed concern.

"I never used this kind before," Scott admitted.

"Listen, why don't you stay a while," Libby said, stepping closer to Terry.

Terry jumped at the opportunity. "Okay!"

Scott shook his head promptly. "I don't think—"

Terry stomped on Scott's foot.

"Ow!"

"I'm sorry, Scott. I thought I saw a cockroach."

Scott glared at him in silence.

"Can I have a word with you?" Terry drew Scott stumbling into the most remote corner he could find, trying to get out of the girls' range of hearing. They stood near Fred, who cocked his head back and forth, watching them closely.

"Hello," Fred said to them with his scratchy voice.

Terry and Scott nodded back in greeting.

While Ellen and Libby chatted with Ronnie, Terry whispered close to Scott's ear.

"I got it figured out," Terry said. "You know what this is?"

"No."

"Think about it. Look how these girls are dressed."

"I saw. So what?"

"This has got to be a cathouse. Huh? Huh?" Terry fluttered his eyebrows and winked his eye a few times.

Scott frowned. "Is there something in your eye?"

"No! Don't you understand, I think this is some kind of cathouse."

A cathouse? Scott twisted his mouth, trying to figure things out. He was distracted by Britches, who chased a pistachio past them across the slick floor. Scott then guessed what Terry meant.

"What would a pet store be doing way out here in the woods?" Scott whispered back.

Terry thought Scott was joking at first, but he realized Scott was legitimately confused.

"Hello," Fred said cheerfully.

"Hello, already," Terry said to the bird.

Then Fred repeated Terry very loudly: "This has got to be a cathouse! Huh? Huh?"

"Shh!" Terry shushed urgently, then covered his eyes in embarrassment as all the girls looked at him. They had clearly heard the mynah bird.

"Hey, this bird learns quick," Scott said with amazement. He leaned toward Fred. "Can you say, 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers'?" he asked clearly.

"Hey, this bird learns quick!" Fred screeched. "This has got to be a cathouse! Huh? Huh?"

"For crying out loud, Scott, stop encouraging him!" Terry said.

"Scott and Terry," Libby called. "Would you come here? There's something we'd like to ask you."

Terry and Scott broke their unproductive huddle and returned to the front of the room. Katy now stood with Ellen and Libby, and Mariam was in line with them. They all looked more serious. Terry scanned the lineup with a lifted eyebrow.

"How much money will it cost us?" he asked, testing his theory.

The girls glanced at one another, puzzled at the remark. "We don't use money," Ellen said hesitantly.

"Hallelujah," Terry said happily, rubbing his hands together.

"Let's get started. What do we do first?"

"Heal Anne for us."

Terry dropped his arms, dumbfounded. "What?"

Katy slowly meandered toward Scott, hands behind her back, lightly shuffling her feet around. Her eyes were cast downward in shyness, and Scott wouldn't look back at her directly.

"She's a-sicky," Katy said. Her voice was so perfect and beautiful, it sounded almost musical to Scott.

Terry's excitement faded. "Well, I'm not a doctor."

"You don't need to be," Ellen said. "Any one of you can help."

"How?"

Ellen paused, trying to find the appropriate word. "You must give her a smack," she said.

"Did you say, *smack* or *snack*?" Ronnie asked.

"You have to kiss her, darling," Libby explained.

Ellen snapped her finger. "Kiss! That's the word. Kiss."

Ronnie gawked at Libby in disbelief. Scott was paralyzed.

"Oh, I see," Terry said. "Well I think I can help after all. Here Scott, hold my things." Terry shoved his duffel bag into Scott's arms and approached Anne's bed. Ronnie followed along with curiosity, and Ellen, Libby, and Mariam joined them.

Katy hung back near Scott, hands clasped behind her, head down. Scott could feel her presence like the glow of a warm fire, and he wished he could step closer to it, but he was afraid of getting burned. He worried that she would smell the stink in his clothes. After a long pause he took a fleeting look at her, to check her distance. She just happened to glance up at him at the same time. They locked eyes briefly, then bashfully turned away.

Terry looked closer at Anne. The smell of fresh red roses was all around him. He almost forgot his naughty ideas and just wanted to watch the girl sleep.

Mariam bounced around anxiously, squirming as if uncomfortable in her clothes.

"Mariam, don't muck about," Ellen said sternly.

Ronnie was on the opposite side of the bed, wide-eyed and mystified. "This is kind of like Sleeping Beauty."

Terry noticed a large red apple on the bed stand. "Yeah, or Snow White."

"Who are Sleeping Beauty and Snow White?" Libby asked innocently. "Your sisters?"

"No," Ronnie said, not even surprised at the question. "Those are cartoons. Since you don't have a TV you probably don't know cartoons, do you? Actually, they were famous fairy tales."

All three girls seemed momentarily startled by Ronnie's remark, but quickly recovered. "Isn't that interesting?" Ellen said finally.

"She's looks like she's actually sleeping," Terry observed. "She's not actually in a coma, is she?"

"Um, well, I don't know the word for it, Sweetie," Libby said. "But if you kiss her she'll wake up. I promise."

It *had* to be an act. "Oookay. Where do I kiss?"

"On the lips, if you don't mind," Ellen said.

"Not at all. Not at all." Terry cleared his throat and swallowed hard.

"Terry, check it out. What if she turns into a frog?" Ronnie said.

"You're too young to understand how great this is, aren't you kid?" Terry said, buying a little time. He looked at Anne's lips. They were very smooth and perfect. His pulse quickened. After all, he really hadn't kissed too many girls in his life. Well, truth be told, he had never kissed a girl on the lips before, but he didn't want the others to know that.

"Well everyone," he breathed. "I'm going in."

He sat on the edge of the bed, and the three girls crowded around closely to watch, silent. Their anticipation was palpable. Ronnie noticed that Mariam kept scratching and clawing at her back. Ellen took a hold of Mariam's hand and pulled it away. What could be her problem?

Borrowing Scott's nervous tactics, Terry twisted his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles. Finally he leaned down into Anne's face. If she was pretending, it was very realistic. She seemed to be out like a light. He could feel her breath on his face when he got close enough. It smelled like freshly cut wood, which was a pleasant smell, but not what he expected. What did she do, swallow a mouthful of sawdust?

He gently pressed his lips on Anne's, but not too hard. Her lips felt warm and slippery. He might have liked it better with her permission, but she just lay there. It made him feel like he was stealing her pocketbook.

Slowly her eyes opened. Seeing this, Terry drew back, glad that it was over. Perhaps now she would actually *consent* to a kiss. That would make him feel a lot better.

But that was just not to be. Anger crossed her face, and she gripped Terry by the neck.

"Ack!" he gasped, trying to say something that was now trapped in his throat.

She made a fist of her other hand and socked him in the eye. Terry toppled backward, landing in a clump on the floor. Ronnie's mouth fell open in astonishment as Anne quickly sat up in bed.

"No Anne!" Ellen interceded.

"He snogged me right on the gob!" Anne shouted with an Irish accent.

"He healed you!" Libby said.

Terry got up from the floor holding his eye, the whole idea of Anne consenting to a kiss fading with every throb of pain. Libby put her arm around him. She smelled like cedar. "Are you alright, baby?" she asked comfortingly.

Normally he would have welcomed her attention, but his ego was tender at the moment. "Of course I'm all right. I just had my guard down, that's all."

"He's a tinker!" Anne said with wide green eyes.

"Yes, there are three," Ellen quickly explained.

"Three tinkers?" Anne repeated, refusing to believe it.

"Tinkers three," Ellen nodded. "They heard us singing. Isn't that jammy?"

Anne looked at Ronnie with astonishment and he smiled at her. She glanced over at Scott, who was watching from near the front door with Katy.

"These are juveniles!"

"Hey, now wait a minute," Terry said defensively. "Ronnie may be a juvenile, but I'm sixteen!"

"*You let juvenile tinkers in the fold?*" Anne said crossly, and reached to remove her hood. Ellen quickly stopped her.

"Ah-ah!" Ellen warned. "Not yet."

"You mean they don't even know?"

"No," Libby said.

"Then how'd you get him to snog me like that?" Anne asked.

"I offered, he accepted," Ellen said.

Terry was certain there was more to these girls than met the eye, and they weren't telling him something. Something big.

"What?" he asked. "What don't we know?"

"I'm sorry I hit you, but you didn't have to smooch," Anne said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

"I wasn't 'smooching,'" he said defensively. "Anyway you're taking this game way too seriously. You couldn't have been really unconscious. A kiss doesn't wake you up, just like that."

Terry must have said something really stupid, judging from the way Anne looked at him. "It does if you're a tinker!" she said.

"How come you keep calling us 'tinkers'?" Ronnie asked, but Anne wasn't paying attention to him.

"I wasn't smooching!" repeated Fred in the adjoining great room.

"How do you feel, Anne?" Libby asked. "We thought we were going to lose you."

"Last thing I remember, I was so dizzy I couldn't see straight, and my stomach was in a desperate shape. Now I feel normal. Who is this?" Anne gestured at Mariam.

"Mariam. She was to be your replacement," Libby explained. Mariam flashed a few hand signals at Anne, and Anne nodded.

While Anne hugged and talked with her friends, Scott and Katy were still timidly preoccupied with each other. Scott had seen what happened, and as far as he was concerned, Terry deserved to be hit by a girl. But he couldn't puzzle out what these girls were all about. It was really hard for him to focus on his original objective, which was to get help. Especially with Katy hanging around so near to him, nudging the floor with her feet. Did he really want the sheriff here?

Some part of him wished he had the bravery to reach over and part the tassels around her face so he could see it better.

He wondered if she detected his stink at all. She was standing a little too close. "Um... I'm sorry if I smell," he said without looking at her. "I could—I could step outside and smell out there, if you want."

Katy didn't speak with any noticeable accent, but she had a cute way of putting things, and her high-pitched voice was as sweet as chocolate milk. "Anne's up now, so you're dry. No more smelly."

Scott felt his pants. He was completely dry. "What in... You're right. How...?" In fact, his clothes felt clean, as if fresh out of the laundry. They had said if Anne was kissed his clothes would dry—and that's exactly what happened. But how? He sniffed his sleeve. No bad smell at all. It didn't make sense.

He became aware that he could breathe easily. His allergies had been fading away ever since he entered the cottage.

"So what do you think of our tree?" Katy asked, instead of addressing his question. She wouldn't look directly at him, and instead played with a couple of objects on the shelf nearby.

"The big one on top of your house? It's great. Roof probably doesn't leak, I guess."

She shuffled closer to him.

"Would you like to go up?"

"Up where?"

"To the top of the tree."

The idea horrified him. The last time he was up that high he fainted. "Oh no, no, I can't do that. I'm afraid of falling. It's too far up."

Katy inched closer, swaying back and forth and tilting her head.

"I'm-a sorry. But, you knows, I can hold you if you want. You won't fall when you're with me. I promise."

Scott swallowed. "Uh...well...it's just that I'm also afraid of...I mean I'm a panty-phobe—er—that's not what I mean—I meant pant-*o*-phobe, not panty-phobe. I'm not afraid of panties. Well actually I *am* afraid of panties. But not yours. Not that I want yours or anything! Oh God in Heaven." Scott covered his eyes in a nervous brain panic.

Fortunately, Ellen stepped up to them and broke Scott's tension.

"Are you hungry, Scott?" she asked politely.

"I suppose, but I'll probably throw it up."

"Well that sounds...jolly," she said. "Maybe we'll all throw it up together, if that's something you'd enjoy. Come outside everyone."

Scott was so startled he forgot about his embarrassment. Why were they all going outside? She wasn't serious about that "throw up" thing, was she? Ellen probably didn't understand the term. Didn't they ever throw up in England?

Terry was still holding his eye when he followed them out the door, and Mariam happily skipped behind Ronnie. Ronnie hurried so that she wouldn't run into him.

"Let's go, Scott," Katy said, a little less shyly. "We'll feed your tummy outside, okay?"

Without looking in Katy's direction, Scott rushed out the door to keep up with the other boys. But he didn't want to get too far away from her either.

Outside, the girls trotted into the field under the great canopy of the giant tree. They were glad to have Anne back from her deep sleep. Scott wondered how long Anne had been out like that, and why they didn't simply take her into town to a doctor. But then he guessed these girls didn't go into town very much. That's why they were so eccentric. But how did they visit so many of the world's countries then?

"Where are we going?" Terry asked, taking a look back at the cottage. He assumed they were going to eat inside.

Ellen was preoccupied, inspecting the ground. "This looks like a fertile spot," she said in the middle of some tall green grass. "Join hands here."

Ellen and Mariam took Ronnie's hands, and Mariam took Terry's hand also. Libby took Terry's other hand.

"Come on Scott, join us," Libby said, encouraging him into the circle.

"What are you doing?" Scott asked.

"You can, you knows, hold my hand if you want to," Katy said bashfully.

Timidly holding out her hand, Katy flashed a cute smile. Scott scratched his head nervously, and after a little thought, let her take hold of his hand. Her skin was warm, soft, and smooth, and holding her hand made him feel less nervous. Libby snatched his other hand unexpectedly. He would have yanked it free, but she held it tightly. Then Anne completed the circle.

All of the girls bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Finally the boys realized what was going on, and they also bowed their heads. But they didn't close their eyes, because they were too bewildered. They weren't sure what to expect. There was nothing out here but tall grass and a few butterflies. Maybe they ate butterflies? Scott felt like he already had a few in his stomach.

Ellen began to pray.

"We thank you for the food you grow for us, for the friends you bring us, and the help they offer. And we are so delighted that you allowed Annisimara to stay with us longer."

Then all of the girls spoke in unison using a language the boys didn't recognize.

*"Moshima kibby-to-soma adonai mimmi-di sochay!"* they said. Suddenly all the grass inside their circle fell flat into a swirled pattern. It looked exactly like a primitive crop circle!

"Wow, so that's how it happens!" Ronnie exclaimed, yanking his hands free of the circle. Terry and Scott jumped back in fear and confusion.

And it wasn't over. In the center of the circle a plant burst out of the ground and grew into a stalk of vegetables.

"Oh my gosh!" Scott exclaimed.

"Wow, cool!" Ronnie said. "It's like special effects in the movies!"

Terry and Scott were not taking things as well as Ronnie. This was not something that could be explained by anything within reason, and the older you got the more you needed reason to explain things.

The plant stopped growing at about Scott's height.

"It's a food stalk," Ellen said, hoping that would help. She picked an ear of corn off one stem and shucked it.

But didn't corn grow on straight stalks? This had various strange branches growing every which way, and each leaf was shaped differently.

Libby picked some cherries. But didn't cherries grow on some kind of tree?

Katy plucked a small branch of grapes and offered one to Scott. "Here, we can share," she said.

But Scott wouldn't move. His eyes were frozen wide, his arms were fixed to his sides, his legs were pinned to the ground, and his mouth wouldn't close. It was no magic that held him still, but something almost as powerful: fear and shock.

Not sure what else to do, Katy decided to place the grape between his open lips. Normally he would have been too bashful to let a girl put a grape in his mouth, but he simply couldn't move. The grape just stuck there, halfway in.

Anne found an apple deep inside the bush, and Mariam yanked out a banana. It was like a mutant bush, with all the different foods growing on it at the same time.

"Come on fellas, it's good," Libby said.

"It just makes veggies?" Ronnie asked. "Does it make anything else?" Veggies were just so boring.

"What food do you like?" Ellen asked.

"Pizza!"

"I don't think I know that..."

"Oh, I know," Libby said. "*Moshima kibby-to-soma pedotray!*"

In response to her foreign words, a pod grew out of the bush, bloated to an extra-large size, and crackled open. There was a pizza inside. Terry ventured a little closer to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. Mushrooms and broccoli actually grew through the cheese, and it was even hot. There was no meat on it, but Ronnie didn't really care.

"Holy moly!" he said.

Libby picked out a piece and handed it to him. "It's already sliced, so you can share it with Scott and Terry if they want some."

But Scott and Terry were in no mood to eat. Scott in fact *did* feel like he wanted to throw up. The grape was still halfway in his mouth.

"Now wait just a minute here," Terry said. All the girls looked at him with big, innocent, beautiful eyes. If he said something rude he'd lose their interest in him, so he had to try to maintain some tact. He struggled to figure out how to say what he wanted to say without being rude. "I've never...seen the Amish do anything like this."

Suddenly Scott snapped out of his trance. "Who are you people?" he sputtered, the grape flying out of his mouth. So much for tact.

"Malini," Anne said to Ellen, "if you've finished being subtle, let's bring an end this charade. If they heard *simsim-aya*, then—"

"*Enda ment semica fimi*," Ellen retorted.

"*Nathapay dolan tabesa! Ma sortis lokey semia sayblue*," Anne argued back.

"What is that, Chinese?" Ronnie asked with a mouthful of pizza.

"Okay then," Ellen said, finally giving in. "We want the three of you to know, we mean no harm. We are a loving and caring race. We have been living among your kind since your beginning, protecting the

Father Tree and assisting in the balance of your natures. Please, we hope you will not run away."

Scott felt his stomach burn with dread, and his body began to tingle. Something else was going to happen, by the sound of it. And he realized he had to use the bathroom really badly.

All the girls tossed their vegetables down and lowered their hoods. The boys could now understand why they had kept their hoods up all this time. It was to hide their ears. Their ears were not normal. They were tall and pointed, protruding out of their hair. Whereas Scott was too afraid to look at Katy before, now he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was quite breathtaking to behold, even if her ears were nothing like what Scott had ever seen outside of storybooks. He could see by her brown eyes that she was sorry, and a little embarrassed.

The boys said nothing; they just stared. Scott was light-headed and felt his knees weakening. Suddenly his eyes rolled back into his head and he fainted, dropping into the soft grass like a limp noodle.

Terry took no notice of Scott, as the girls weren't finished. They each removed their capes, revealing velvet-and-satin jerkins and bodices underneath, along with something else... Something even more incredible than their pointed ears.

Wings.

Each of the girls had a pair twelve- to eighteen-inch brown-feathered wings growing out of the center of her upper back, through the specially designed medieval clothes. Now free from having been flattened and concealed for so long the wings stretched upward, shuddering to release stiff muscles and flapping to cool off.

And that was all Terry could take. He collapsed, out cold, on the other side of Ronnie.

Ronnie was fascinated by the girls, and amused that Scott and Terry had fainted. He had never seen anyone faint before. He finished up his slice of pizza, but didn't want to eat the crust.

He glanced at Scott on one side of him and Terry on the other, making sure they wouldn't be waking up any time soon, before asking the obvious question:

"Can I have their pizza?"



## Woodkeepers



It was late afternoon in the woods, and Ronnie noticed that the shadows being cast by the trees were getting a little longer.

Mariam walked anxiously along at his side while he tried to eat a carrot stick. He didn't like carrots all that much, but he didn't get to finish the rest of the pizza, and Mariam happened to have some carrot sticks in her pocket. Anyway, these carrots didn't taste all that bad. At least they settled his stomach, which was getting a little upset by all the action of the day, chased down by pizza.

The girls had asked Ronnie to show Mariam where the sewer hole was. What good Mariam could do was anyone's guess. She couldn't pull the car out of there, could she?

Unfortunately, that whole bit about her being 'mute' was a bunch of hooley. She was gabbing a lot now, bouncing around him, her wings flapping happily. She had a thick fairy accent, it seemed to Ronnie, because her English was very broken.

"A tinker, a tinker, I'm walking with a tinker! Does you like the wings we got? Does you like the ears? Is you not excited, yes? Never see tinkers do we, never do! Airmakers play with tinkers all the time. I left out, not allowed, but now I can, now I can!"

"No wonder they wouldn't let you say anything," Ronnie said. "You talk way too much."

"No, no, no, you silly, you silly. I'm not with your language learned well, I cannot talk the ways I 'sposed to. I can give us away our secret before we ready!"

"Boy, you're weird." Some part of Ronnie enjoyed her company, strange as it seemed, but he really didn't want to admit it.

She was so distracting that he hadn't been paying attention to where they were going. He was sure he would recognize the woods near the sewer hole if they got close enough and they would surely smell the stink, but so far the forest smelled sweet and fresh. Mariam was getting ahead of him.

"Slow down, you're going too fast," Ronnie said. "I'm supposed to be taking us to the car, remember?"

Then they came upon a small clearing and Ronnie stopped short. He saw the beehive.

"Wait a minute, this is it!" He was sure it was the same hive, but...where was the sewer hole? "But it's gone!" The clearing was just a huge patch of dead grass and solid ground. "The hole was right here! I know it was. See, there's skid marks!" The tire marks just stopped at the edge of the dead grass.

"That was the Crud, the water it was. This brown the scar it is, you see?" Mariam said. Ronnie had no idea what she was saying. "Petooy on the Crud. It went away when Anne came back. We put bees to say 'keep away' but tinkers never listen. Tinkers never see, but you saw. You the special! I'm esposed-a fix the scar. Stand back!"

Mariam pushed Ronnie backward a few feet and he stumbled to the ground. She walked directly up to the beehive and pointed at it.

"*Seseh-kay noby-kay tibi do napikan!*" she said in her fairy language.

Suddenly the bees swarmed out of the hive in a column, straight into Mariam's pointed arm.

Ronnie was horrified, jumping to his feet. But there was nothing he could do; she was too close to the hive, and he was too far away.

"Run, Mariam! Look out!" he shouted.

The bees completely covered Mariam in seconds. Ronnie didn't know what to do. He anxiously looked around.

"Help! Somebody help!" Ronnie called, but the buzzing of the bees was so loud that his voice was mostly drowned out. Then he noticed that none of the bees were coming after *him*.

Mariam, still standing, pointed her other hand at the dead weeds where the pond used to be. Ronnie watched in awe as the bees formed another column and shot into the dead weeds. He backed up against a tree as Mariam hosed the scar down with bees.

At first Ronnie couldn't figure out what was happening. The bees filled the weeds like a buzzing, yellow liquid. But something else was going on. Each bee on the ground was transformed into a flower or plant, rooting into the earth and growing and blossoming at an extreme speed. The sprouts shot up through the blanket of bees, which disappeared one by one.

The buzzing slowly subsided. Soon the whole area was packed with beauty, and all the bees and dead vegetation were gone.

He could see Mariam again, and she seemed perfectly fine. No stings, no panic, not even a little sweat. But she was still pointing at the beehive. Ronnie was about to ask something when he saw the hive melt into a big blob of honey. It stretched down into Mariam's arm and disappeared, as if her skin had drunk it. Nothing was left of the hive now, either.

Mariam picked a huge yellow flower, pranced up to Ronnie, and handed it to him.

"Someday I hope you call me, 'Honey,' " she said. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth with embarrassment and danced off into the forest, giggling. Ronnie stood alone for a moment, holding the flower and gazing at the blossoming field in speechless wonder.

Meanwhile, Scott and Terry still lay fainted. The girls had carried them into the cottage, and placed each of them into a round papasan chair.

This had been a long and stressful day, even for Terry who was used to getting into trouble. He snored, while the gray cat, Britches, stood in his lap and stared at him.

Ellen took down all the cloth sheets that had been covering portraits in the cottage. These were Katy's paintings: many of them scenes of unicorns, fairies, and other fantastic characters. Katy was now happily painting a new one on canvas. Libby was strumming a lute, but not really playing anything. Anne was sitting at a desk looking through a pile of large old books, researching something.

"I can't find anything that says we can do this, Ellen," Anne said in frustration, slamming a huge book closed. The noise should have awakened the boys, but it didn't.

"But these tinkers heard our *simsim-aya*," Libby said. "And they can see the Father Tree. Don't you find that remarkable? There has to be a reason."

"Yes but... Look at these ding-a-lings." Anne gestured at Scott and Terry, who didn't look particularly dignified right now. Scott's glasses had slipped off when they carried him inside, and, not knowing how they worked, the girls put them back on him upside down. "How can they possibly help us rescue anybody?"

"Clearly it is not for us to decide," Ellen said. "We must take them before the *mythodox*. It may be our last chance. Libby, wake them now."

Libby's wings fluttered with joy as she hurried over to the boys. She smiled and sprinkled a saltshaker over Terry and Scott's faces. But instead of salt, a green sparkling dust dispersed over them.

Scott's eyes popped open to see the shaker over him and he cried out, pushing the papasan over backward with a crash. Terry woke with a start.

"Don't eat me!" Scott exclaimed, adjusting his glasses.

"Shh, don't be silly," Libby said. "It's just waking powder."

Scott barricaded himself behind the papasan, peeking out from behind it. Terry just sat and stared, rubbing his eyes, as the four girls lined up in front of them, their wings standing tall and proud.

"Welcome back," Ellen said. "Did you sleep well?"

Terry remembered exactly what had happened, but it all seemed like a dream—one of those dreams you can't wake up from. "What happened?" he asked.

"You fainted, sweetie," Libby said. "But that's okay. It was flattering."

"We tried to be subtle," Ellen said. "But in return for healing Anne we felt we owed you the whole truth."

"You—you got...wings!" Scott said, his voice shaking. The wings might seem out of place on a person, but somehow they looked like they *belonged* on these girls. They were too small to be used for flying, Scott guessed, so what were they for? This couldn't be a hoax. The wings were too alive to be a costume. They moved about on each girl's back, expressively changing position according to her mood or manner.

"It was bound to happen someday," Terry said. "I've been kidnapped by a flock of mutant chicken-women who are taking revenge for all the KFC I eat."

"No, dum dum," said Libby. "We're Woodkeepers of the High Garden."

All of the winged girls simultaneously curtsied to the two boys.

"Oh right, right. That was my second guess," Terry lied.

"The High Garden is a pride in the kingdom of Preservers," Ellen explained. "We are honored with the assignment of *Elim Traynat*

*Udi-mie*. Nod Location Guards of the Father Tree. Our unit is called the *elimu*, for short."

Scott swallowed. "You...guard the giant tree?"

The girls nodded. Certainly the girls weren't posing any threat to them; they were just as pretty and gentle as ever. Scott slowly climbed out from behind the papasan but maintained his distance.

He had read a lot of books, and considered himself to be pretty good at mythology and folklore. As amazing as all of this looked, it was starting to make some crazy kind of sense.

"Goodness sake," Scott said. "You're...you're dryads, aren't you?"

The girls glanced at one another for confirmation of the interpretation, and Anne nodded.

"If I remember your history, that is one way to describe us," Anne said.

Terry wasn't too happy about Scott knowing more about this than he. It was supposed to be the other way around.

"Scott," Terry said. "I need a little help with my scorecard over here."

"Dryads, you know, in ancient folklore? Tree nymphs. Fairies."

Terry couldn't believe Scott actually believed this. Fairies? They looked more like...

"When we crashed, do you think we survived?" Terry asked.

"What are you saying?" Scott said, but he knew perfectly well what Terry was saying. Maybe they were dead, their bodies still in the car. Maybe these were people from... Scott was afraid to explore the possibility, and frankly, so was Terry.

"I'll get back to you later on that," Terry said.

Libby sashayed up to Terry and knelt beside the papasan.

"Poor confused darlings," she said. "Don't be scared of us. We like you. You heard the *simsim-aya*. The sound of our presence."

"You mean, that singing we heard from the woods?" Scott remembered.

"Yes," Ellen said. "It's rare for tinkers to hear and see woodkeepers, and especially the Father Tree. Normally we and the Father Tree are beyond the range of tinkers."

"Beyond the range?" Terry repeated.

"Invisible," Scott translated. "They're invisible. Just not to the three of us."

To the girls, Terry asked, "Why did you hide your wings from us earlier?"

"Because you would have fled into the woods at first sight," Ellen said. She was probably right about that. "We needed your help, so we took advantage of a rare moment. We apologize."

"Wait a second," Terry said. "The reason I wrecked the car was because the steering wheel... It forced me off the road. Did you dryads—I mean woodkeepers—do that? Did you cause it?"

The girls glanced at one another again, and then shook their heads, all except Katy who was preoccupied, stealing glances at Scott.

"No, woodkeepers would need permission from the Empress to do that," Ellen said.

"Well *something* caused me to wreck," Terry insisted. "You have the powers to do that kind of thing, right?"

"Yes, it's called nudging," Ellen said.

"Well someone nudged me right off the road."

"Probably one of the airmakers," Anne said to Ellen. "They've been stirring up trouble in these woods for generations of tinker children."

"They darn near killed us," Terry said.

"No, nudging puts you in no danger," Ellen said. "It just seemed like it at the time, but if you were nudged, your vehicle was always in control. You would not have been hurt."

"Whatever the explanation, I think these tinkers are the answer to our prayers," Libby said. "Prayers to bring you back, Anne, and more..."

"Libby, we mustn't say too much just yet," Ellen said. "We need to move more slowly with them, even still."

While Terry continued the question and answer discussion with the other girls, Katy was inching toward Scott, too timid to look him in the eye. Scott found it hard to listen to the conversation with Katy so close.

"We're sorry we scared you," she said to him. "You don't hate us, do you?"

"No, no," Scott said. "Of course not. It's just that...never in my wildest dreams... I mean, you're...enchanted!"

Katy rolled her eyes up and back and forth in a coy way.

"Maybe you would like to see my new portrait?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah. Okay, sure."

Scott apprehensively followed her up to the easel to see her fresh painting. He could still smell paint in the air. His mom had been an oil painter, so he was used to the smell of oil paints. But he wasn't sure what kind of paint this was. It smelled good, sort of like the smell of hot, buttered popcorn.

Her painting was outstanding. And familiar. It depicted a young couple snuggling together on a tree branch, high off the ground, overlooking the whole country. The two were faced away, but it was clear that the boy was Scott and the girl (who had wings and long dark hair) was Katy. Scott's little suitcase was hanging on a strong twig nearby, and Katy's arm was around his back. Clearly, in the picture, Scott was not afraid of the great height.

"Do you like it?" Katy asked. "I painted it while you slept."

Scott didn't know what to say. He blushed. "I...I...I..."

"Do you know who this is?" She tapped on the boy in the picture.

"I...I...I have to use the bathroom. Do dryads have bathrooms?" He leapt from foot to foot, increasingly uncomfortable.

The other girls stopped talking with Terry, puzzled by Scott's dance. They spoke to each other in their language.

"*Ibini-tofu-sa?*" Ellen asked.

"*Wenda tibini, noba too-da,*" suggested Libby.

"*Yin-sat kibiri timadros,*" Katy added.

"*Til-too-ah,*" Anne said louder than the others. She imitated Scott, bouncing on her toes. "*Tip-benny to-baso-ah!*" She had it figured out.

Suddenly the other girls understood, with a collective, "Ooooh!" Ellen pointed at a doorway, and Scott hurried through it.

As soon as the door slammed, Anne said, "Even if they were kings I'd be embarrassed to take them before the *mythodox*."

"Judge by what's inside the heart, Anne," Ellen said. "Not by what's outside it."

"They saved your life," Libby said, touching a hand to Anne's shoulder as she passed by on the way back to her lute. "We should treat them as if they *were* kings."

The bathroom amazed Scott. It was a huge, ornate room, decorated with marble and gold trimmings. The toilet was more of a throne, sitting up on a platform in the center with fountains on either

side. Light was cast down upon it in shafts of orange from the high windows.

Meanwhile, the front door of the cottage swung open. Ronnie staggered into the common room with Mariam's arms wrapped around his chest, adoring him, her feet dragging on the ground behind. He was panting and breathless, clinging to the yellow flower Mariam had given him that was now broken in a few places.

"You gotta help me..." Ronnie panted at Terry. "She's...she's a monster."

"Ronnie, Ronnie, I love my Ronnie," Mariam said happily.

"Hey, she's not mute," Terry said.

"She's a big mouth is what she is," Anne said.

Ronnie was desperately trying to pry Mariam off of him, squirming and twisting and struggling, but she was draped on him like a wet towel. It was like a scene from a Pepe LePew cartoon.

"Mariam, behave yourself!" Ellen ordered.

"Ronnie's got a girlfriend, Ronnie's got a girlfriend," Terry taunted.

"Shut up and help me, you coward!" Ronnie snapped.

"Come on, Ronnie," Terry said. "Show a little dignity. Show these girls what men are."

As if on cue, Scott charged back out of the bathroom. "Wow!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "You guys should see this. It's the coolest toilet I ever saw!"

Terry covered his eyes. He'd never be able to project a cool manly image with these two around.

"Mariam, let him go," Ellen said again. "We need to ask them if they are willing to help the rest of us."

Mariam finally released Ronnie. "Yes, yes!" She flung Ronnie into a chair so hard it nearly fell over backward. "Will you come with us and give lots of kissy-kissy?"

Ronnie winced. "Oh, *blech!*"

"The kiss of a tinker will heal our sick and dying instantly," Ellen explained. "As you've seen with Anne."

"If you had not come knocking when you did," Libby said, "Anne would not have survived another day. But there are more. Many of us are dying, and we need you. All three of you."

The boys glanced at one another. Scott and Ronnie weren't pleased, but Terry was starting to feel encouraged again.

"How many would we have to kiss?" Terry asked.

"Hundreds," Libby said.

"On the...on the lips?" Scott asked.

Libby winked at him. "Yes, sweetie."

"I got to sit down." Scott plopped back in a papasan.

"I can do this," Terry said. "I can do this! In fact, I was *made* to do this!"

There was a pause as the dryads glanced at one another, mostly with just their eyes. It seemed conspiratorial.

"It's not entirely decided yet, darling," Libby said. "We cannot do this without permission. First, we have to take you before the *mythodox*, our high council. Their decision will be final."

Terry was sick and tired of authority and asking permission for things, so the idea of going before a high council didn't sit well with him. It sounded a lot like court, and he'd seen plenty enough of those for a lifetime.

But the idea of an authority allowing him to kiss hundreds of winged—and beautiful—girls was so intriguing that he couldn't pass it up. He was also insatiably curious about what else these fairy creatures could do.

"I'm in," he said after only a brief pause.

Ellen turned to Ronnie. "Ronnie, how about you?"

Mariam dropped to her knees at his feet, clasping her hands.

"Please? Pleeaaase?"

"Oh, alright!" Ronnie said, over dramatizing his disgust.

"Ronnie's got a girlfriend!" Fred imitated from his perch.

Mariam hopped up and clapped and danced around. The other girls turned to Scott. He didn't know what to say.

He decided to be honest. "I'm scared."

"We'll protect you with our lives, darling," Libby said.

Scott blinked. With their lives? Why would they have to do that?

"You're always scared," Terry said. "It's like a blanket you hide under, covering every decision you make. Just come out from under the blanket and join the rest of us for a change, Scott. Anyway we're just going to see their high council first. They may turn you down, and if

they don't, you can still change your mind." Terry caught Libby's eye to make sure. "Right?"

"That's correct, sweetie," she confirmed.

Katy knelt beside Scott's papasan chair with misty eyes. She did not cast them down or away. Scott looked back into them steadily, captured. For just a few seconds they forgot about their shy attraction to one another, because Katy was serious.

"I'll understand if you say no," she said. "If my friends die, I'll weep for them deeply. But it'll not change my respect for you."

Scott studied her for a minute. He detected a subtle look of desperation buried in those eyes, and his heart melted. He felt more important now than he ever had in his life. They really needed *him*. Nobody had ever needed him.

"Okay," he said with a small voice. "Okay, I'll go."

Katy sighed with relief and smiled warmly at him. She was no longer afraid to look him in the face, and her eyes seem to admire his every feature. Even the big nerdy glasses with a safety pin stuck in the joint. He felt his face burn again, and covered it with his hands.

"Alright," Anne said. "Then get ready for a hike."



# The father Tree



he sun was just starting to go down. It cast beams of orange and red through the forest, highlighting small clouds of gnats. The scent in the air changed. The smell of tree sap and flower pollen was slowly replaced by a cool, fresh breeze that reminded Scott of a day long ago when his Mom and Dad took him on a camping trip in the Catskills. It was a wonderful day in his memory. The last wonderful day he could remember, actually. If he closed his eyes he could still smell the sweet odor of Dad's pipe as they played gin rummy on a rock near the river, their feet splashing in the cold water. Scott would never do that now—dangle his feet in an unknown river like that. No telling what could swim up and bite him. They had snakes up here that could kill a kid, not to mention spiders. And those crawfish! Those little black lobsters hid under river rocks, armed with pincers for the ripe unsuspecting bare toe.

Come to think of it, there was a lot he wasn't so careful about in those days. He was older and wiser now. Yes, much wiser.

Which reminded him—as he, Terry, and Ronnie gathered at a round picnic table out on the patio with their luggage—of what the woods were like at night.

"I hope we're not going to hike in the dark," Scott said. "Spiders and snakes are nocturnal. And the mosquitoes might be coming out. I knew a kid who got the West Nile Virus from a New York mosquito bite. I don't have any spray, do you?"

"No, but I haven't seen any mosquitoes yet," Ronnie said. "Just bees and butterflies. You should have seen what those bees did, guys. It was wild. I mean they covered her whole body, and then they turned into these flowers." Ronnie had placed the yellow flower on the table, and Terry was now inspecting it.

"Yeah, we heard you the first ten times, but it just looks like a normal flower to me. It has black stripes, kind of like a bee. Maybe you were just delirious with love for your new girlfriend, and you thought the flowers were flying."

"Would you quit on that already? It's not funny."

"After what we saw with that food plant," Scott said, "nothing surprises me. They have great powers."

"Yeah, I'm having a hard time getting my head around that," Terry admitted. "I'm afraid of them and attracted to them at the same time. It's driving me crazy."

"So what are you guys bringing?" Ronnie asked. "I'm not kissing any girls, so I'm gonna bring something to do. If it's some kind of hospital, I'll be really bored."

"How long do you think this whole thing's going to take?" Scott asked uneasily.

"They didn't say," Terry said, "but if they all look as good as these girls I don't care how long it takes."

Scott rolled his eyes and sighed. "Great. Let's get this over with."

"We should carry everything in one bag," Terry suggested. "No sense in all three of us bringing luggage. Ronnie, let's use your backpack. It's the smallest and easiest to carry."

"I guess, but I hope you don't ruin it. It's brand-new."

"What about his underwear and stuff?" Scott asked.

"Well if there's room in your suitcase I can put it all in there for now," Ronnie said.

"Not a chance!" Scott said. "I don't want your underwear touching my things."

"It's clean!" Ronnie said with a frown.

"It doesn't make any difference. My suitcase is for my things only. I got everything just the way I want it."

Scott was about the fussiest guy Ronnie had ever met.

"Don't worry about it, sport," Terry said to Ronnie. "I'll make room with my stuff. But you owe me one."

"I do?"

"Good, now that that's settled, put everything you want to bring on the table."

Scott snapped open his suitcase. Aside from clothes he didn't have a whole lot. Most of the things he used to have were sold off by the government agency that took him into their care, and the money was placed in some kind of trust with the rest of his parents' cash holdings. Everything that was left was in this suitcase. Packed in and around a few clothes there was an envelope with his identification papers and a photo of his parents, a slide puzzle of the United States, a

Rubik's Cube, a word puzzle book, some Cow Tails caramel sticks (his favorite candy), a New York City map, some Tylenol, some Pepto Bismol chewables, his allergy pills, his anxiety pills, some Mineral Ice, his eyeglass cleaner fluid, several packs of travel tissues, three more bottles of liquid hand sanitizer, a compact encyclopedia, a fantasy novel, a notebook, some pens and pencils, and...the heirloom.

What was he going to do about the heirloom? He couldn't leave it behind, not under any circumstances. Especially now. But he couldn't let anybody else tote it either.

He pulled it out from in between two folded shirts. It was a flat square wrapped in a leather sheet tied with leather laces. That way, nobody could see it.

He put it on the table and quickly buried it with some other things he wanted to bring. Maybe if he was subtle he could sneak it along without raising any questions.

Ronnie's pile included a small retractable telescope, a bag of marbles, several Batman comics, and a four-colored pen.

Terry contributed a slingshot, a Swiss Army knife, and a cigarette lighter.

"Tell me you don't smoke," Scott said, eyeing the lighter.

"No, smoking reminds me too much of..." Terry paused and quickly recovered his topic. "But the lighter is good for starting...campfires." Terry sorted through Scott and Ronnie's things, and Scott tensed up.

"You got to be kidding?" he said to both of them. "I said bring only what you can use on a hike. The telescope is okay, but I don't see any use for the rest of this stuff. Especially...what are you doing, Scott? You got a whole medicine cabinet here."

"These are for allergies, these are for a headache, these are for a stomachache, and these are for nerves..."

"I know what they're for, but what are the chances you're going to have all these problems?"

Libby walked by with several buckets of leaves and lined them up near a small clearing. As she passed, Scott glanced at her and she threw a playful air-kiss at him.

"The chances are getting better every minute," Scott said, rubbing his head.

"Well I'm sure the girls got cures for all your ailments," Terry said, pushing his medicines to one side. "Now why are you bringing this hand stuff?"

"Duh! For keeping clean." Scott snatched it away. "So I don't get sick."

"Well you can't bring it."

"Who made you boss, anyway?"

"Look, there's not enough room in his backpack for everything. If you want to bring the hand sanitizer, fine, but don't bring all these pills. You'll live. And you don't need this eyeglass cleaner either. Just wipe the lenses off on your shirt." Terry found the heirloom and Scott's hand slammed down on it so hard that Ronnie jumped.

"I'm not leaving *this* behind, and you can't touch it!" Scott shouted before he could stop himself. So much for being subtle.

Terry and Ronnie glanced at each other.

"Well, well, well," Terry said, certain he had found the mysterious object Scott had been hiding in his suitcase. "What exactly is that?"

"None of your business."

"If you're planning on bringing it, it's all our business. What is it?"

"It's an heirloom."

"What's an heirloom?" Ronnie wanted to know.

"Something you pass down in the family," Scott said. "I have to keep it with me. That's what I was told to do in the will."

"The girls said our things are safe here," Terry said. "Given what I've seen so far, I trust their word on that."

"It's not that I don't think it would be safe. It's just that my parents said it's a good luck charm."

"So why can't we see it?" Ronnie asked, fascinated.

"They also said not to show it to anybody."

"Oh, come on," Terry said. "What do you think we're going to do? Steal it? What interest could we have in your heirloom?"

"I don't know, maybe a thief could sell it for money."

"Are you calling us thieves?" Terry asked with wide eyes.

"No, I'm just following instructions, that's all!" Scott said defensively. "This is something I'm supposed to keep secret. It's my own private business."

Terry was quiet for a moment, and Ronnie looked back and forth between them, wondering what was next.

"Alright, it's your business. I don't care what it looks like," Terry said finally. "But I really need... I mean *we* really need to be friends right now, you know? I think we should trust each other. So, I'm going to show you guys something. But it's a secret, okay? You can't tell anybody what it really is. *Nobody*. Is it a deal?"

"Okay," Ronnie said. Scott hesitated and nodded, but he felt sure that Terry had a trick up his sleeve.

Terry dug into his duffel bag for a moment and pulled out a black leather stick with a hand strap on one end. He proudly laid it on the table.

"What's that supposed to be?" Ronnie asked.

"It's a police-issue billy club," Terry said. "They use it for taking down bad guys."

Scott shook his head. "That's your secret? A billy club?"

"Guess who it used to belong to? I'll give you a hint. Who does this saying remind you of: 'Where no man has gone before?'"

Ronnie winced from an uncomfortable memory. "Dr. Morgenstern. You know where he has to put his finger?"

"No, I'm talking about Captain Kirk."

"Captain Kirk does that too?" Ronnie asked incredulously. He couldn't remember any *Star Trek* episodes like that, and he thought he'd seen them all.

"No, you idiot! This belonged to the actor, William Shatner, who played Captain Kirk. He used this very same billy club on his TV series *T.J. Hooker*. He played a cop."

"So how did you get it?" Scott asked. "EBay?"

"Shatner had it with him during a horse show in Pennsylvania. He's a professional horseman too, you know. I saw him drop it when his horse went by after the ceremony. A bunch of us rushed out to pick it up, but I got there first and took off with it. A security guy chased me all over the place, but I lost him in the crowds."

The whole story sounded really fishy to Scott. "Why would William Shatner bring an old TV prop to a horse show?"

Terry paused, rolling the club to and fro on the table. "I think he was going to auction it off in a benefit after the show."

"So it was going to charity, and you stole it," Scott said with his arms folded.

"Oh, come on. It's just a leather stick. You can pick one up for twenty bucks. It's not like he can't afford a new one. Anyway, he dropped it!"

"Well, it's cool I guess," Ronnie said, picking it up and feeling its weight. "You could break a bone with this thing."

"But this is my secret, okay? Don't tell anybody what it really is or where I got it."

Scott was doubtful, but he felt a little jealous anyway. If Terry were fibbing, it would have been more impressive to say that Shatner gave it to him. The way Terry said he acquired it was entirely in keeping with his character. Strange as it sounded, maybe he was telling the truth.

Both Ronnie and Terry eyeballed Scott's heirloom again.

"Oh, alright." Scott sighed, "You can look. Good grief! But like your billy club, it's a secret. Promise?"

"Promise," Terry and Ronnie both said.

Scott unwrapped the leather sheet and withdrew his heirloom. It was a square medallion made of gold with a round black stone set in the middle. The frame had a tongue on one side and an opening for a tongue on a perpendicular side, like a puzzle piece. One corner had a small hole through it.

"Looks like some kind of jigsaw for rich people," Ronnie said.

"Is this gold?" Terry asked, tapping the frame.

"Probably. It's too heavy to be brass. I'm not sure what this black disk in the middle is."

"Does it come with any other pieces?" Ronnie asked.

"I don't know. This is all I got."

"Looks like it's one part of a bigger thing," Ronnie said.

Terry leaned in, gazing into the round stone closely. "There's scratch marks on there. Like letters."

"If they're letters, I can't read them. I can barely see them in really good light."

"Maybe it's another language," Ronnie said, taking a closer look. Scott shrugged. "It looks like it says...Oreo. Hey, maybe this round black thing is supposed to be an Oreo cookie!"

Scott jerked his heirloom out of Ronnie's fingers. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. It's not an Oreo."

"Well I'll tell you this," Terry said, "it'll probably bring you good luck at the bank, but not here in the woods."

Scott wrapped it back up and tied the laces around it. "Where I go, it goes," he said stubbornly. "That's the deal."

"Alright, alright. If Ronnie doesn't mind carrying that big heavy thing."

"Actually, I can't let anyone else carry it."

"Well, you're welcome to wear the backpack then," Ronnie said hopefully.

"Okay, thanks."

Ronnie smiled. "Don't mention it."

The woodkeepers were gathering on the patio clearing now, where Libby had placed the buckets of leaves. The girls wore green tights and brown jerkins with knife sheaths and other gear about their waists.

"Wow," Terry said. "I feel underdressed."

"Where are we going, Neverland?" Ronnie chuckled.

"Where is Neverland?" Libby asked.

Ronnie's smile faded. "Never mind."

Each of the girls picked up a bucket of leaves and poured it out into a separate pile. Scott wasn't sure what they were doing, but he backed away.

Terry held out his slingshot so they could see it. "I'm bringing this along," he said. "If we get into any scrapes, I'm pretty handy with it."

Each girl stood in the middle of her pile of leaves.

"What on earth are you doing?" Terry said to them.

Together, the woodkeepers spoke in that pretty but strange language of theirs: "*Eechee mo-sibi nis-toba!*"

Suddenly the leaves at their feet sprung up into a whirlwind around their bodies, and for a moment they couldn't be seen. Scott ducked quickly under the table, but Terry and Ronnie just stared with awe. Seconds later the leaves settled down again, and now each of the girls had a longbow and a quiver of arrows. The weapons appeared out of nowhere, somehow magically created by the leaves, Scott supposed. The arrows had the same brown feathers as their wings.

"How did you do that?" Terry asked with a dry throat.

"It's called faithcraft, darling," Libby said as they moved out to the edge of the patio. Terry followed them.

"Hey, can you make *anything* appear out of nowhere?" he wanted to know. "Like, say, diamonds?"

"We would not use our faith for your personal gain," Anne said.

"We're using ours for yours," Terry said back. Anne threw him a cross look, but she didn't know how to respond.

"Okay, let's warm up," Ellen said. "Ready? Fire!"

Simultaneously, each of the woodkeepers swiftly turned, reached for an arrow, loaded it, drew, and fired. It was fast and choreographed, effortless and graceful, like ballet. The arrows whistled a hundred feet in the blink of an eye and struck the bull's-eye of a single target set up at the edge of the woods.

"Don't just stand there gawking at us," Anne snapped at Terry. "Pack up your rubber-band toy and get ready to go."

Stunned, Terry glanced at his slingshot. He felt completely stupid with it now. How could he show off to girls like this? What could possibly impress them?

While the dryads adjusted their bows and stretched, the boys quickly packed as they had discussed. Ronnie's clothes were stored in Terry's bag, Terry shoved his knife and lighter in his jeans pockets, and everything else was crammed in Ronnie's backpack. Scott realized Terry was right about all the pills. He decided to leave all his medications behind except his prescription anxiety pills. He made sure there was a hand sanitizer tucked in both of his front pockets, and some travel tissues in one of his back pockets. Hopefully his allergies wouldn't come back as long as he was in the company of the dryads.

"Can I keep my luggage inside?" Scott asked the girls, holding up his suitcase so they could see what he meant.

"Wherever you'd like," Ellen said.

Scott carried his suitcase into the cottage, and Terry followed along behind him with his duffel bag.

"Hey, Terry, have you noticed their accents are fading?" Scott asked as they tucked their things in the corner of the common room, near Fred's perch. "They must be highly adaptive."

"They just made bows and arrows appear out of nowhere and shot a bull's-eye from a distance that would have made Robin Hood jealous, and you noticed their accents?"

"Hello," said Fred.

"I'm good at noticing details. And there's something else I noticed. They're not telling us the whole story."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the way they're acting. And what do they need archery equipment for? They're hiding something."

Terry knew Scott was right. What kind of dangers were the woodkeepers leading them into that would warrant arrows like that? Those were arrows made for killing, not target practice. On that thought, he decided he'd feel at least a little safer if he brought his billy club along.

"That's just your phobia talking," he said, hiding his anxiety. He secured his billy club with a couple of straps on the side of the backpack where he could quickly grab it, just for good measure.

"Just because I have phobias doesn't mean I'm always wrong," Scott said. "Sometimes they give me an edge. I can figure things out a lot of people can't, at least my age. The psychologists told me someday I could join Mensa."

"What's that? It sounds like a flu."

"It's a society for really smart people," Scott said proudly.

"It's a duck phone!" Fred cried out.

"Hey, mind your own business, Fred," Scott said.

"Do they have a society for wimps?" Terry scoffed.

Scott realized he said exactly what the psychologists told him not to. Nobody liked a person who thought he was smarter than everyone else, even if it was true. He was supposed to practice being humble so that he wouldn't get beat up as much.

"You're...probably a candidate for Mensa, too," Scott forced himself to say. "You're a lot smarter than you look."

Scott could see Terry's muscles tensing up, always the first sign of trouble brewing.

"Say that again?" Terry said threateningly.

Scott put up his hands apologetically. "No, no, that came out wrong. I'm sorry. I'm trying to say you're smart, too."

Fred cocked his head and said, "This has got to be a cathouse! Huh? Huh?"

"Shut your beak, you raven," Terry said to Fred.

"I wasn't smooching!" Fred replied.

"It's not a raven, it's a mynah bird," Scott corrected. "And he doesn't understand what we're saying, he just copies sounds."

"You really think you're smart, don't you?" Terry said to Scott.

"I'm not saying I'm smarter than you!" Scott could feel himself quickly losing the battle. "It's just that you have this attitude."

"I have an attitude?"

"Wait, come on, just let me explain. I have a hard time with words, in case you haven't noticed."

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," Fred said.

"Okay. Explain." Terry said, folding his arms.

"Don't try to act so macho all the time. The dryads need our help for something important, but you're going along just so you can kiss a lot of pretty girls."

"You're jealous."

Scott thought about it. "Yes, that's probably true. I'm willing to admit that. But what are you willing to admit?"

There was a beat as Terry gazed at Scott thoughtfully.

"Anyway, you know I'm right. Otherwise, why would you bring your billy club? Self-defense, right?"

"Yeah, I guess," he sighed as the dryads entered the house, Mariam tugging Ronnie along.

"Where are we going?" Ronnie asked, confused as the girls shut the door behind them.

"We're leaving," Anne said. "Aren't you ready?"

"Yes, but why are we going inside?" Ronnie said.

"They're hiding something!" Fred said loudly.

Scott cringed as the woodkeepers glanced at him. Ellen, Anne, and Libby exchanged a few hand signals with one another.

"There's a lot we cannot tell you yet," Anne said finally. "It's against our laws. But you're about to see something tinkers aren't normally allowed to see, so stop complaining."

Ellen marched up the circular stairway. "This is the way. Come along, come along."

Terry followed directly after Libby on purpose. Scott turned back to Fred. "Thanks a lot, Fred."

The billy club stuck up like an antenna when Scott shrugged the backpack on.

"I'm not afraid of panties!" Fred said.

Scott winced. "Knock it off already, you've done enough damage."

Fred bobbed his head a few times, almost as if he was laughing. "Hey, this bird learns quick!" he mimicked.

Scott marched away before the mynah bird said anything else to embarrass him. Katy waited for him. He frowned at the spiral stairs, watching the others disappear into the ceiling.

"The hike is *inside*?" Scott said.

Katy nodded.

In a way he was relieved. It was a lot better than the idea of hiking through the woods at night.

He adjusted the backpack so it felt more comfortable, and took the tightly spiraled stairs ahead of Katy. He imagined they had climbed up several floors at least when they arrived at a room at the top that didn't have any windows. A couple of sconces on the walls shed a warm yellow glow, showing the attic filled with lots of wardrobes with every style of woman's clothing imaginable. And there were shoes simply everywhere. Some were stacked in corners, some were lined up on shelves, some were hung on organizer prongs, and others were scattered about on the floor. Scott stumbled over a set of pumps.

One wall of the room, which cut through it at an angle, was the surface of the Father Tree itself. It had thick, gnarled bark and smelled strongly of deep wood.

Libby took Terry by the hand. "You have to hold our hands to pass the threshold, darling," she said. "Once inside, you're okay."

"Holding hands! Holding hands!" Mariam said, swinging Ronnie's arm back and forth.

"Would you quit it!" Ronnie complained. "You're hurting my shoulder."

Katy took Scott's hand with a shy smile. Whereas it used to make him more nervous for a girl to touch him, it now seemed more comfortable. He just wished his hand wasn't so sweaty.

"*Quiddimin-seeka so-miki doyim-serra!*" Ellen chanted.

The bark of the tree came alive. Scott would have fled back down the stairs if Katy hadn't been holding tight to him. As it was, he stood his ground and closed his eyes. Terry just watched in wonder. The bark twisted and made growling sounds like corky wood being crushed under a heavy weight. The bark separated to form a large knot-like hole and then stopped.

When the sound was gone, Scott opened his eyes again.

"How cool!" Ronnie said. "Did you guys see that?"

"Is...is the tree hollow?" Scott asked shakily.

"If not, it's going to be a tight squeeze," Terry said.

"Into the tree! Watch and see!" Mariam said, bouncing up and down. She hurried quickly toward the hole, Ronnie tripping along behind her.

One by one, they each entered the tree. Scott was certainly the most hesitant, but Katy was patient with him. The doorway was fascinating, and he was very curious about what was inside.

They entered a wooden tunnel, as it were, that twisted this way and that into the depths of the tree. Apparently they didn't have to hold hands once inside, because Libby let go of Terry. Ronnie snatched his hand out of Mariam's grasp and shook it to get the blood back. The hall became so thin that they had to walk single file anyway.

When Katy let go of Scott's hand, she did so slowly, letting her fingers slide down to his fingers, and giving the tips a squeeze before letting them fall away. It sent a tingle down Scott's back. He was glad the light was not so bright, because he was sure he was blushing again. And his palms were sweating. He touched the walls and found them to be cool and dry. He was surprised there wasn't more sap.

The walls looked specially grown rather than carved. They were shaped into shelves and niches for tiny lanterns to illuminate the way. The hall was sometimes a set of stairs, sometimes a ramp, sometimes going up, sometimes going down. But most of the time, to Scott's best guess, they were going upward, because he was panting. And there were intersecting halls, too.

"It's a maze in here," Ronnie said, which was just what Scott was thinking. "How do you know where you're going?"

"Faith," Ellen said simply, which sounded rather like they were guessing which way to go. Scott hoped not, because he doubted there were too many bathrooms in here.

They walked and walked. The interior of the tree must have been much larger than even its size as seen from the outside. Sometimes the hall was so wide they could all walk beside one another, sometimes so narrow they had to slide sideways through a crevice. At times the ceiling was several stories high; other times they had to duck. They passed through a huge network of halls and stairwells and rooms filled with supplies that Scott couldn't explain to himself let alone anyone else: There were colored disks that looked like Frisbees; glowing, half-translucent bricks; wiry trees that looked sort of like TV antennas hanging upside down from ceilings; vessels of sparkling dust; strange maps hanging on walls with plastic rings stuck to them; lots of

huge old books and scrolls and writing desks; and gear rooms with bows and arrows, knives and swords, shields and helmets, and uniforms of many varieties. Some rooms were as large as the entire field that contained the tree itself, with small waterfalls and fountains and tables for eating or meeting, and cozy chairs for lounging. The whole place was also packed with growing vines and giant leaves lining the archways and crevices. The air smelled fresh and invigorating.

Terry, Scott, and Ronnie were overwhelmed with wonder at all they were seeing. The whole place seemed unoccupied and mostly quiet, but there were signs of life. There were peculiar chirping animal sounds, rustling leaves—or rather leaves and vines that appeared to be moving by themselves, quivering and undulating flowers that purred like kittens, and here and there the boys caught sight of a tiny furry creature scampering under their feet like a hamster. Glowing catlike eyes peered out of dark holes and watched them pass, but there was nothing scary about them. They seemed curious but not dangerous.

Scott kept eyeballing the bows and the quiver of lethal arrows the woodkeepers had slung over their wings.

"Gosh, those arrows looked sharp," Scott said finally, broaching the subject.

"Sharp," Mariam repeated. She wasn't mocking him or anything, but she liked the sound of words, and since she was still learning the language she had to practice it.

"They're big enough to kill lions," Scott said.

"Lions," Mariam said.

"Do you expect lions?"

"No lions," Mariam answered promptly.

"What do you expect then?"

"Rams," Mariam said.

"You mean like...mountain goats?"

"Not exactly," Anne said.

"Petooey on the rams," Mariam added.

Terry paused at a dark recess where a pair of yellow eyes peered out at him. "What is that in there?" he asked, deciding to have a better look. He pulled out his cigarette lighter and flicked it on. The eyes disappeared. He reached into the darkness of the niche with his light.

Suddenly there was a shriek that startled him so much he blew the flame out. It was Libby, whose widened eyes were locked on his lighter.

In a split second, Anne grabbed Terry by the shoulder and yanked him backward, and Mariam knocked the lighter out of his hand. It landed on the stair. Anne angrily grabbed Terry by the collar and threw him up against the wall, lifting his entire weight into the air with one arm. It all happened so fast that Scott and Ronnie barely had time to jump out of the way.

"Don't you ever bring fire inside the Father Tree!" Anne said, her lips trembling. "Never bring it near the tree or near us again!"

She had Terry by the throat. He had completely lost his macho composure, and his greased hair was now sticking straight up in the air.

"It's just my lighter," he wheezed.

"Do you understand me?" she growled.

"Yes, ma'am. No fire."

She dropped him and he sighed with relief, massaging his neck.

"He didn't know any better," Libby said.

"Well he does now, I imagine," Ellen said.

Scott and Ronnie were amazed at what they had seen. Even strong grown men couldn't do what Anne had just done.

"Dryads must be stronger than humans," Scott said to Terry.

"You think?" Terry said tersely, combing his greasy hair back down and scanning the floor for his lighter.

"What's in all these lanterns if it's not fire?" Ronnie asked. "You have electricity in here?"

Libby took a lantern and removed its shield (which looked something like a seashell) to reveal an egg-shaped crystalline stone that glowed brightly on a stand. She took the stone and showed it to Ronnie. Ronnie touched the crystal in wonder.

"Wow, it's not even hot," Ronnie said.

"Can I get my lighter?" Terry said, finding it at Anne's feet.

"Yes, but keep it in your pocket or I'll take it from you," Anne said.

"Okay, okay," Terry mumbled, timidly taking it off the floor, wary of being so close to her feet. He jammed it into his front pocket, and they continued on their hike.

It seemed like an hour had passed. Most of the time they walked in silence, but Terry was not one to stay quiet for long. He liked to chat, especially with pretty girls, even if they were magical, and in some cases, temperamental. What interested Terry the most was finding out what they could do. One of many questions he asked was, "Can you transport yourself from one place to another? Like on *Star Trek*?"

"I don't know what you mean," Libby said.

"Well you seem to make objects appear out of nowhere. I'm wondering if what you're really doing is transporting the object from somewhere else. And if so, can you do that with your own bodies? You know, you're inside the cottage one second, then *poof*, you're outside the cottage the next second."

"If we could do something like that, why would we be hiking?" Anne said rhetorically.

"Good point," Terry admitted. "Then how do you actually make an object appear out of nowhere?"

"We don't," Libby said. "It's faithcraft. We have faith over the objects of your world. Your world responds to faith of that strength. That's how it came to be, you know."

Terry still didn't quite understand, and Libby could see his frustration. She put her arm around him as they walked.

"Don't worry, we don't expect you to have that kind of faith," she said comfortingly. "Tinkers question what they believe. That's just the way you were made."

"Why do you keep calling us 'tinkers'?" Ronnie asked again.

"Because your people like to tinker with nature," Ellen explained. "It could be your end someday."

"Tinky-tinky-tinky!" said Mariam, wrapping her arm around Ronnie with affection. Ronnie wanted to squirm away but she was a lot stronger than she looked. Whenever she was this close to him it smelled like that time he got tree sap stuck in his hair. It had made a knot so big he couldn't get it out with a brush or a comb, so he had cut it out with a pair of scissors.

"What kind of perfume are you wearing?" Ronnie asked Mariam with his nose wrinkled.

"We don't wear perfumes," Libby said.

"But you each smell different," Ronnie said to Libby, struggling out of Mariam's grasp. "Mariam smells like Pine-Sol, you smell like an old storage closet, and Ellen kind of smells like breakfast at IHOP."

"I be a *Pine* woodkeeper," Mariam said. "My smell like my tree."

"We are each slightly different breeds of woodkeeper," Libby explained. "I'm a Cedar woodkeeper. Katy's a Willow. Ellen's a Maple. Anne's an Apple."

"Does that mean you each guard those different trees?" Scott asked with interest.

"No, it means we and the trees are one and the same."

Terry wasn't sure how to reconcile this, and he had a hard time believing it. "Are you telling me that you're actually made of wood? That right now my arm is not around a girl, but around a *tree*?"

"If that's true, I have to apologize for Old Shaky," Ronnie said.

"Who is Old Shaky?" Ellen asked.

"He's a dog one of my foster parents used to own. He always used to pee on your feet."

The girls giggled to themselves.

"What's so funny?"

"In our language, the word *pee* means 'tickle'," Libby said.

"It's a little easier to understand if you think of trees as mirrors," Ellen said. "If the three of you looked in a single mirror, you see a single reflection of yourselves, right? So, when you look at any one maple tree, you're seeing a reflection of all the maple woodkeepers, including myself."

"But you don't look anything like a tree," Ronnie said.

"Well, you don't look anything like a mirror," Libby replied.

Both Terry and Ronnie fell silent to think about this for a while, but Scott understood them. Maybe it was because he had read more mythology and folklore than the other boys. Still, the whole thing still seemed so incredible. He doubted any adults would believe this story after it was all over. Stories like this come from imagination when you're young, and from mental illness when you're old. He was glad he was still a kid.

He was sure this wasn't his imagination, because he could feel a very real pain in his feet. It was the same pain he always got when he walked too long. He looked at his calculator watch and the digits were going wacky. There were no numbers at all, just bars of liquid crystal flashing at random.

"Hey guys, what time is it?" he asked. "My watch isn't water proof, and I think it drowned this morning."

Ronnie didn't have a watch, but Terry looked at his. He had an old analog watch. The second hand wasn't moving at all.

"Oh, great," Terry said. "Looks like mine's dead, too. It stopped at 9:15. I presume that's A.M., because it can't be nine at night yet."

"Nine fifteen A.M. is about the time we wrecked the car," Scott said. "Maybe you banged it."

The hallway widened again and they came to a chamber with a large pair of wooden doors locked shut by a massive sliding bolt. Two young women with colorful butterfly wings guarded the doors on either side. Their hair and eyes were light purple, and they wore battle-ready outfits not too different from those of the five woodkeepers.

As soon as the group arrived, the guards stepped forward with loaded handheld crossbows pointed at Scott and Terry. Scott threw up his hands like he was under arrest.

"*Cabinapi!*" said the taller of the two. She was about Terry's height and the shorter one was about the same size as Scott.

Ellen stepped out in front of the group. "*Su elimu: Malini, Annisimara, Libbasee, Katinee, say Mariasam sim-nat Yenyese Maynat,*" she said.

"*Maki hariakin?*" demanded the taller one.

"These are tinkers," Ellen replied, gesturing at the three boys.

"Tinkers in the Father Tree?" said the shorter guard in English with an exotic clipped accent. "This is forbidden!"

"The *elimu* seeks an audience with the *mythodox* to decide just that," Ellen explained.

"The *mythodox* will not see them!" said the shorter guard. "It is too dangerous!"

"These tinkers may help us save the Empress Mother!" Anne shouted. "Now bring about the *mythodox* and do not pass judgment on its behalf!"

The guards slowly lowered their weapons in astonishment.

"What's this about an Empress Mother?" Terry whispered to Libby, but she shushed him. She had her eyes on the shorter guard, who carefully walked up to Terry and touched his arm, face, and hair. She was intrigued.

Libby protectively tugged Terry away from the guard, giving her a hard look. The guard backed away reluctantly, the sides of her lips curling up with wonder.

"These are airmakers of the Blue Circle," Ellen said to the boys.

"I am Petals," said the shorter guard.

"I am Misty," said the taller. They both curtsied elegantly, which didn't seem like something a soldier would normally do.

"Should I kiss them?" Terry asked hopefully.

"They aren't sick, sweetie," Libby said.

"Can I kiss them anyway?"

"I'll tell you who you can kiss, darling," Libby said teasingly. "When the time comes."

Terry smiled at her, but he quickly remembered Anne's attack and the smile was replaced with a look of humility, which wasn't something he was used to.

"Please grant us passage to the *mythodox* at full assembly," Ellen ordered.

"You will be granted your request," Misty said.

Petals took hold of a thick rope dangling nearby and hung on it. They heard the *dong* of a muffled bell. She looked through a small pigeonhole in the wall from which came a green glow that changed to blue, then red.

"Boys, you will conduct yourselves with respect before the *mythodox*," Anne said sternly. "It is the court of the Empress, and it has great power and knowledge, beyond anything your world can grasp. You are the first of your kind to stand before it since your beginning."

"Also, it is best you not speak unless spoken to," Ellen added.

Terry twisted his mouth. He'd heard that instruction many times before. But he nodded along nervously with the other boys. It sounded like they were going to enter some kind of royal palace.

Scott wondered if the U.S. government knew anything about all this. He imagined himself writing a letter to the president of the United States telling him about a race of fairies that live inside a giant tree in New York. Then he imagined some White House intern opening the letter months later and tossing it in the trash with a snicker.

Petals made a hand signal to Misty. Then together the guards slid the dead bolts aside, unlocking the door. Once the doors were unlocked, the airmakers pulled the doors open with a long creak.

The woodkeepers led the boys into a booth partitioned on one side by a curtain of hanging vines. Beyond that they could hear noise of increased talking, humming, buzzing, chattering, and various unidentifiable but friendly sounds, as a large crowd was apparently gathering.

Scott's heart began to race again. He did not like standing in front of crowds. Was he going to have to speak in front of all these fairies? He was afraid to ask.

"Leave all your things in here," Ellen said, looking at Scott.

Scott removed the backpack and set it down, which was a relief. But he didn't want to leave his heirloom, not even for a moment. He dug into the backpack and pulled it out. He'd carry it for now. He just couldn't disobey the last instructions he ever received from his parents. Now, more than ever, he missed them.

"Stay in here until we call upon you," Ellen said to the boys.

"And you two," Anne said to Misty and Petals, who stood in the open door behind them. "Don't touch."

The two guard airmakers looked down at the floor with disappointment as the *elimu* woodkeepers passed through the vines.

The boys looked for a place to sit down. There were several soft-looking stools nearby that looked an awful lot like gigantic mushrooms. Ronnie felt one of them, and then sat on it.

"Hey, check it out guys," he whispered. "These are real."



he auditorium of the *mythodox* was assembling. Many varieties of fairies and dryads were showing up all around the *elimu* team. Some had butterfly wings, some insect wings, others bird wings. Some had strangely colored hair, some had feathers in place of hair, and others had no hair at all. Some wore small masks over their eyes like they were attending a masquerade ball. Some had ears that were extremely tall and pointed; other had ears that were much shorter. Many were human-sized, some were about waist high, and others could stand in the palm of a hand and fly about the room. All of them were females of incredible beauty, wearing various outfits and uniforms of different styles. A few were armed with spears, swords, crossbows, and quarterstaves, but more as a matter of formality than necessity.

A bell rang out, and four palm-sized pollinators hovered down in front of the room. Everyone quieted as the petite insect-winged girls spoke with surprisingly strong but lovely voices.

"*Trem-minarigee, trem-semetris, ko pisty finapis sibillin-adonai kinapi-to!*" they said in unison. Of course all the fairies knew their language, and understood what the pollinators said: "*All ears listen. All eyes look. Upon you is the Council of the Living Book.*"

Then the pollinators dispersed, and four human-sized fairies sat themselves at the high desks that dominated the front of the auditorium. The most important of these was a soultoucher named Vanilla, an immaculate girl with full white hair and a body laced with a cape of huge, shining white feathers that passed for clothing. Her head was adorned with a garland of white rose petals and small diamonds. Her wings were made of white energy, not solid matter, and they undulated behind her with stunning radiance.

To her left sat Victorica, an aspen woodkeeper, with beautiful black-and-white peppered wings and a matching cockatoo-like feather tuft expressively shifting up and down on her head.

To Victorica's left was Swan, a cherry woodkeeper, with incredible blonde hair, glowing blue eyes, and huge white-feathered wings on her back. She wore an elegant white cape with a red lining.

On Vanilla's right was an empty seat. It was her seat, usually, but she was temporarily occupying that of the Empress Mother, in the center. And to the right of that sat an airmaker named Pastel, wearing an incredible silk gown of blue, green, and pink pastels. Her flowing hair was a light blue, and her skin sparkled. She was in care of a large old book held open on the table in front of her by four pollinators. Pastel's huge butterfly-like wings flowed in currents of air.

Vanilla put up her hand to quiet the crowds, then nodded at Ellen to speak.

"Lady Chancellor Vanilla of the Verdant Heights, Ladies Council, we love you," said Ellen. She, Anne, Libby, Katy, and Mariam all curtsied deeply and gracefully.

"*Seebee so mattra tinnibee kobola tinkadawminee?*" Vanilla said. Ellen had just been asked, "*Why do you address us in the language of tinkers?*"

Ellen cleared her throat nervously and said, "Because the *elimu* arrives with tinkers before the Court."

A rumble of shock rippled through the large audience. Victorica stood and leaned forward on her hands. "The room will be silent!" she ordered, her voice arresting in the auditorium. It fell dead silent.

"The *mythodox* recognizes the Nod Location Guard of the Father Tree," Vanilla said. "But we cannot extend this privilege to your guests unless we can see them."

Ellen gestured at her companions. Katy, Mariam, and Libby rushed back across the auditorium and through the vines. There were several nervous voices inside the booth, and finally the girls led Scott, Ronnie, and Terry out onto the floor.

When Scott saw the hundreds of magnificent fairies lining the balconies, shelves, nooks, and crannies around the auditorium, with all their eyes upon him, his knees locked up. Katy had to pull him along, and he walked like a tin soldier. But Terry practically drooled at the sight. He smiled and waved at a few of them, prancing out like a show horse.

"These are Terry, Scott, and Ronnie," Ellen said to the council. "They came to us by *simsim-aya*, and cured Anne of *hocus*. This gave

us the idea that they might bring healing to the others as well, including the Empress Mother."

A gasp of hope flowed through the crowd. Vanilla raised her hand to shush it.

"We hoped the *mythodox* could guide us in this decision," Ellen added.

Vanilla drifted upward in midair, her wings of energy pulsating like a heartbeat and swaying about. She elegantly floated over the high council table and down to Ellen's party. Terry noticed several of the guard fairies standing at the foot of the high council table taking several steps away from Vanilla, as if they were afraid. He also saw Ellen take a step back from her. The queen-like magistrate didn't look angry, so what was the problem?

She stopped about twenty feet in front of the group. Her pale blue eyes were seemingly darkened by the glow of the white around them, making her look almost menacing if not simply superior. Her head was always tilted upward just slightly. Terry wasn't sure if it was conceit or unbridled dignity. Either way, he liked it.

"Come forth, young men," Vanilla said to them. "Stand in awe before the *mythodox* Chancellor."

Terry jumped forward and took position about ten feet in front of Vanilla. Concerned, Libby scampered up and stood close to his side.

Terry bowed to Vanilla. "Your majesty," he said. Her right eyebrow lifted slightly with amusement.

Ronnie took a couple of casual steps forward, and he was certainly in awe as she had commanded. She had the coolest wings he ever seen on any creature. Mariam stayed near him, too.

Scott hesitated and edged forward, but stood behind Terry and Ronnie. Katy was still holding his hand.

"In a line, please," Vanilla ordered. "Side by side, so that I may look upon you evenly."

The boys shuffled backward and forward until they were in a rough line, each with their escort.

Vanilla caught sight of the wrapped heirloom Scott carried in his free hand, gripping it with white knuckles.

"Do you understand what your escorts have done?" Vanilla asked Scott directly.

Scott's heart raced. "No, ma'am," he choked. He hoped that was the right answer.

"Our laws forbid your kind from entering this place," Vanilla said. "They have risked everything they are to bring you to us."

Vanilla drifted even closer, and Scott could feel Katy squeeze harder on his hand. With great curiosity, Vanilla reached toward Scott, as if she wanted to touch him on the cheek, and Katy yanked Scott back so suddenly he almost fell.

Vanilla recoiled and gave Katy a snooty look.

"Forgive me, Lady Chancellor," Katy said, dipping in a small curtsy, "remember you are a soultoucher. We must be mindful of your power."

"There is always more to you than meets the eye, Katy Katinee," Vanilla said. "Be mindful before the *mythodox*."

Katy cast her eyes down, as if in shame. Scott glanced at her with worry.

"What would happen if she touched me?" Scott whispered.

"She would link to your soul," Katy said out loud, in an almost jealous tone.

"You would fall hopelessly in love with her for all eternity," Libby said from Scott's other side, "begging to serve her until your dying breath."

"Perhaps the Lady feels a tinker would make a fine addition to her growing inventory," Anne said boldly, squinting at Vanilla.

Vanilla's eyes hardened as she cast them on Anne.

"Annisimara, I am relieved to see your spirit again," Vanilla said. "But you would also do well to remember how to address the crown-heir."

Anne dipped in a stiff but apologetic curtsy, but she said nothing in return.

"You are very beautiful, your majesty," Terry said quickly, feeling left out. "I'm sure a touch by you would be a great blessing."

Vanilla gave him a smile and a nod, in appreciation for the compliment, but returned her attention to Scott.

"Scott, would that be a gift you bear?" Vanilla asked.

Scott looked at his heirloom. "No, ma'am. I mean...I didn't know I was supposed to bring one. Is it your birthday?"

Several chuckles rippled through the chamber, but since Vanilla wasn't laughing, it quickly hushed.

"What is it that you carry, then, wrapped so well in the skin of a beast?"

Scott paused as he tried to understand what she meant by skin, and then realized of course she referred to the leather wrapping. Quite possibly leather was offensive to the dryads.

"It's a gift to me from my parents when they died," Scott said with a shaking voice.

"Would you by chance be willing to show it to us?"

Why was she so interested in his heirloom?

Before Scott could do or say anything more, an alarm whistle sounded from somewhere in the tunnels. The whole auditorium stirred. Fairies scrambled urgently in every direction, running, climbing, flying, and leaping. Vanilla rose up high in the air as Libby and the gang rushed the boys over to the side of the chamber.

"What's going on? What's going on?" Scott said frantically, hoping all this commotion wasn't because of something he had said.

"Someone's hurt," Katy said with worry.

Fairies were pouring out onto the floor as a troop came into the auditorium carrying a gurney with a faint chestnut woodkeeper named Velvet. She had brown-and-black streaked hair that was dirty and tangled, and brown-and-black mottled eyes that were swollen with tears.

The feather tuft on Victorica's head stood straight in the air. "Bring her to our guests, the tinkers!" she ordered as she hurried down from the council seat with Swan.

Pastel stayed at her post, studying her huge old book with magnifying instruments, ignoring the drama on the court floor.

Velvet was set down near the boys where they could see. There was a light-blue cream on parts of the injured woodkeeper's face and body.

"Oh, no!" Mariam said. "Velvet! Velvet, she my friend!"

Victorica turned Velvet to one side so they could see her back. She was wingless.

"Her wings have been cut off," Victorica said. The boys were shocked. Who would cut off her wings? Who would hurt such an immaculate girl? And Terry wondered, who was *strong* enough to do so?

"*Pie-nee komachi mo, sabini see mekappee,*" Velvet muttered weakly. Then she shuddered, closed her eyes and stopped breathing.

"No!" Swan said, and turned to the boys. "Kiss her fast!"

"But what's all that...goo?" Terry said.

"It's blue," Ronnie said.

"It's blue goo," Scott elaborated.

"One of you three has to do it," Victorica said urgently. "No one else can save her!"

"This is what you came for, Terry," Libby said. "Kiss her."

"Okay, okay," Terry said. He didn't like to be rushed, but he wished he had been warned that the fairies he would have to kiss might be crippled. And that he had to do it in front of a crowd of hundreds.

He swallowed hard. The court was silent and tense. Velvet was still. Terry leaned down and kissed her on the lips for a second, getting a little blue goo on him. He backed away, wiping his face. Nothing happened.

Swan touched the fairy on the forehead with her fingers, feeling for something. Then she looked sad.

"It's too late," Swan said.

Victorica's feather tuft sank flat against her head.

Mariam turned and buried her face on Ronnie's shoulder and cried. Ronnie felt embarrassed by the display, and his arm was getting wet. He tried to pry her off at first, but gave up quickly. This didn't feel like a good time to fight her.

"What do you mean it's too late?" Terry demanded.

"She's already passed."

A cold chill ran through Terry's body. "You mean I kissed a dead dryad?" he asked weakly.

"You waited too long!" Mariam shouted at him suddenly, giving him a nasty kick in the ankle.

"Ouch!" The pain shot through Terry's leg like a bullet and he danced away on his good foot, trying to maintain his balance. His dignity had never been challenged so many times in a single day.

But nobody cared at all about Terry's ankle, and he realized his remark was very rude. He was thinking only about himself. A poor young girl had just died here! His eyes blurred and he blinked quickly to keep them from dripping. He couldn't cry now, not in front of all these fairies. He resisted it as hard as he could.

"I'm...I'm sorry," he said, barely forcing the words out of his clenched throat. He was sorry he had made that rude comment, and sorry that he had hesitated in the first place.

Scott was turning pale at the horrible event. He didn't want to know how the poor fairy died. He was afraid of knowing. Death had

circled him before, and he wanted to stay as far away from it as he could.

But now that he thought of it, in the movies when someone died the doctors would all rush about and try to revive the patient.

Scott cleared his throat. "What about uh..." Suddenly he realized the whole auditorium was listening, and his mind went blank. He couldn't remember what the term was. "The other mouth thing," he said, snapping his fingers. "You know, breathe in her mouth..."

"Resuscitation," Terry said with hope.

"The ways of air that work for tinkers do not work for preservers," Ellen said.

"Who chooses to be her *vey-hinerra*?" Swan asked.

"Please let me, Lady Minister," Mariam said, raising her hand. "She my friend."

Swan nodded. "Proceed with *oobliness*, Mariasam."

The boys watched with curiosity as Mariam stood over Velvet's head and cradled Velvet's face with her hands. She closed her eyes, and everyone was silent.

"I can hear with Velvet speaking to us now," Mariam said, smiling. "She is happy."

Libby tenderly dabbed a tear from Mariam's cheek.

"She chooses Misty, Nia, and Evergreen," Mariam said.

The named fairies came forth and gathered closely around Velvet. One at a time, they took Velvet's lifeless hand and spoke in fairy language.

"What's going on?" Terry asked Anne in a whisper. Scott and Ronnie gathered close to hear her answer.

"It's *oobliness*," Anne whispered back. "These chosen friends must each confess to Velvet a secret pain. When all three have done so, Velvet will be released.

"But I thought she already died," Ronnie whispered.

"Death doesn't mean you cease to exist," Anne replied.

Misty, Nia, and Evergreen finished speaking in their fairy language and backed away from Velvet's body, expecting something to happen.

"Then what do you mean by 'released'?" Terry wanted to know.

It was right then that the most extraordinary thing happened. Suddenly Velvet's body exploded into a thick mass of butterflies.

Scott flinched and almost stumbled into Katy's arms. Terry also gave a start. None of the boys could be sure what had happened, but it would seem that Velvet's body just disappeared and was replaced with thousands of butterflies that immediately scattered about the auditorium. Each was about the size of a baby's hand and had unique colors. There were patterned wings, solid wings, spotted wings, striped wings, blues and greens, yellows and reds, blacks and whites. They all fluttered silently about the crowd, their beauty drawing more tears from many of the fairies. For a minute, the boys couldn't see much of anything but butterflies flowing around them. It was like drifting through a dream of flickering colors. Terry held out his arms to maintain his balance, because the array of swirling beauty was almost dizzying, even if it was quite pleasant.

It started to thin out as the butterflies slowly dispersed and soon began to land. They chose shoulders and heads and outstretched hands. Never did more than one butterfly land on the same person.

"Each butterfly will land on someone special to Velvet," Libby explained. "Someone she wishes to bid farewell."

Scott wanted to ask if the butterflies were actually intelligent, but having seen what just happened, he had a pretty good idea as to the answer.

A green one landed on Mariam and she smiled at it, tears rolling down her small face.

"Bye-bye my friend," she said to it.

And a huge blue-and-yellow butterfly landed on Terry's finger. He felt uncomfortable, because obviously it was a mistake. He wanted to jiggle his hand before anybody saw it, but the butterfly crawled along his finger and seemed to hold tightly.

"Uh...Libby?" Terry said. "One of them is on me by accident."

"No, Terry, it's no accident," Libby said quickly, before he did something rash. "Velvet is saying thank you, for what you did."

"But I failed. I didn't save her life."

"But you tried."

Terry gazed at the butterfly with misty eyes. It gazed back at him, with a tiny face and little antennae, its incredible wings slowly shifting up and down. Terry wanted to apologize to it a thousand times every second, but nothing escaped his throat now. It was choked. He couldn't stop a couple of tears from running down his cheeks.

Around the room, all the butterflies had landed for a moment. Everyone was mostly quiet, some were whispering to one another. But it was a happy moment, not a mournful one. The time for sadness had already passed.

Finally all the butterflies launched again, including Terry's. They flew up high into the air and disappeared, dissolving into fine, colored dust. In only seconds, they were gone. All the fairies applauded, happy for Velvet.

Amazed, Ronnie turned to Scott and spoke in his ear. "I'm glad I didn't bring my pressed butterfly collection," he said. "That would've been embarrassing."

Vanilla, who had watched the whole thing in silence from the middle of the air, drifted downward again. Fairies stepped aside to give her space.

"How did this happen to Velvet?" she asked.

"She went into Halvire to find her sisters," Victorica explained, her black-and-white head tuft lifting upward a little. "She wasn't supposed to go."

"She said something," Terry interrupted. But her last words were in fairy language. "What did she say?"

"She said, 'Follow the throats of the beasts,'" Victorica replied.

"What exactly does that mean?" Terry asked.

Victorica inspected a spot of blue goo left on Terry's shirt collar, wiping it off with a finger and smelling it.

"This is avenoil," she said.

"What's that?" Terry asked quickly. "Like some kind of shampoo, I hope?"

"I know where the prisoners must be kept," Swan said.

"Where, Lady Minister?" Mariam asked. "Where she go to get this happen?"

Swan's huge, white-feathered wings twitched, and she cast her glowing blue eyes downward. "The dungeon of Ram Towers," she replied with distaste.

The crowds of dryads and fairies gasped and groaned in shock and horror.

"Ooh, that doesn't sound good," Terry said.

"Velvet must have escaped and returned without being seen," Victorica said.

Scott turned to Katy, who stood next to him. "Who took off her wings?" he asked with a low voice.

Katy looked into Scott's eyes directly. "Rams," she replied bitterly.

"But why?" Terry asked. "Who are these rams?"

"Rams, pounders, snorts, clops, and elks," Swan said.

"Members of the cloven. Like tinkers, they are forbidden to see the Father Tree, but the cloven know it exists. King Stag desires to use our essence to find it."

"He's a powerful and hateful king," Victorica added, "one of the rulers in Halvire, the world of cloven. He has captured Her Majesty, the Empress Mother Loni."

"The *mythodox* believes she is exhausted, and close to death," Vanilla said.

"That's why many of us are falling ill to *hocus*, like I was," Anne said. "All woodkeepers are part of the Mother in ways you cannot understand."

"We have lost entire formations trying to save her," Swan explained. "Even if she were to be returned to the *mythodox*, she is likely beyond our ability to save."

Victorica's head tuft lifted higher still. "But now we have new hope." She looked directly at Terry. "A kiss from one of you would return her to full strength."

Terry was trying to form a picture in his mind of what this "mother" looked like. And how old she was. "She's the mother of all you here? How is that possible?"

"She has been making new preservers for 100,000 years, by your clockwork," Anne said.

"She's over 100,000 years old?" Terry gasped, his jaw nearly dropping to the floor.

"No wonder she's tired," Ronnie said.

Terry imagined a winged woman so gray and wrinkled that there was nothing left in the folds of skin to see.

"And you want me to kiss her?" he confirmed. "On the lips?"

"You have to!" Mariam exclaimed. Terry took a step or two away from the little girl. "If she die, we die!"

This wasn't quite what Terry had volunteered to do. "Look, please don't get me wrong," he said, "but I thought I was here to kiss a bunch of sick *young* fairies..." He realized how that might have

sounded in another context. "I'm glad the guys at the orphanage didn't hear me say that," he muttered to himself.

"Most of them are prisoners in Ram Towers, like the Empress Mother," Victorica said. "But if one of you doesn't kiss her, kissing all of them will be in vain."

Scott looked at Katy, and she nodded sadly. It was hard to understand how all these girls were connected, but the idea that even Katy herself might die really bothered him. His eyes felt hot. He removed his glasses and pressed his chilly fingers against his closed eyelids. It helped to clear his thoughts.

Vanilla drifted a little closer. "These are trying days, but we must obey the Living Pages," she said with a commanding voice. "There is a decision before the *mythodox*. Will these three tinkers keep all they have seen and heard, and be allowed passage into Halvire to set our people free? Or will they be escorted back to the land of Nod, erased of all they have seen and heard, with the five woodkeepers who violated this law sent into exile?" Vanilla turned and rose into the air again, facing Pastel, who had remained this whole time behind her large old book and studying tools. "Pastel of the Glorious Rings, how do you interpret the Philosophicon?"

All the room looked to Pastel. She rose slightly, her gigantic butterfly wings spreading out as if to help direct her voice forward into the auditorium.

"A tinker is forbidden entry into the Folding Worlds. This is explicitly written," she announced.

This was followed by a disappointed moan in the crowd, and Ellen dropped her head in defeat.

"However," Pastel continued, recapturing everyone's attention, "it is also written that anyone who offers the gift of love for nothing in return should never be denied."

Ellen lifted her head again, new hope shining in her eyes.

"We therefore cannot deny these tinkers if they offer healing at such peril. The Living Pages have spoken."

"*Oh chee khan ma!*" the entire audience chanted in unison.

And now all interest shifted back to the boys.

"You have been permitted to stay and help us, young tinkers," Vanilla said.

"But we cannot force you," Swan added. "You must now decide whether you agree to help us, each on his own."

Terry felt it was time for a huddle. He needed to talk to his business partners. "One moment, please," he said out loud, and then grabbed Scott and Ronnie in a circle, football style.

"Look," Terry said in a whisper, "I can't kiss a woman that old on the lips. I just can't."

"I'm not kissing nobody," Ronnie whispered. "*Blech.*"

Scott was not happy with Terry's attitude, mostly because he wasn't too thrilled with the idea of kissing anybody either.

"But Terry," he said, "I think all the woodkeepers are in danger if we don't help them. All the ones with the feathered wings will die."

"Then will you kiss the Mother?" Terry pressed. "Even if her breath stinks and her teeth are gone and her lips look like the bark of a tree?"

It would have helped if Terry wasn't so descriptive. Scott wiped some sweat from his brow and glanced back at Katy, who was watching him.

Scott turned back to Terry and whispered, "If I hold my breath and close my eyes and pretend I'm kissing..." He paused. He almost admitted something he was afraid to. "I mean, if it means Katy will live, maybe I can," he said honestly.

"Scott's got a thing for Katy," Ronnie teased with a louder voice.

"Shhhhh!" Scott shushed him, his face turning red. "It's just, she painted my picture, and I...I..."

Terry could see there was nothing more to discuss.

"It's a deal then," he said. He broke the huddle and faced Vanilla. "We agree to do this."

The whole chamber erupted with clapping and cheering, and fairies rushed in on the boys like they were celebrities. Scott had no chance of escaping before they picked him up. He would have been nervous if only one girl touched him, but when dozens of them hoisted him up into the air and carried him out of the chamber, he almost passed out again. Ronnie and Terry enjoyed it more than Scott did.

When things settled down, the boys were given something to eat. They sat at a large table in the middle of a bustling shopping mall, or something very similar to one, with layers of balconies and bridges and stairs made from branches and roots that crisscrossed over many levels and lines of stores. Ronnie observed that there was no exchange

for money here. Fairies shopped for items that could hardly be described—like glowing cubes of various colors—but nobody ever paid for anything. He never even saw a credit card. The store merchants seemed to be there only to help shoppers with their selections, and to restock supplies.

Not far from the table was a system of bamboo gutters carrying lemonade down a number of spillways. One of those spillways arrived close to the table where the boys were, so they could refill their cups with lemonade that was so refreshing they couldn't stop drinking it.

Many varieties of fairies begged to serve the boys, and it seemed that each one took her turn at it. Scott felt like a movie star. He had packed his heirloom safely down in the bottom of the backpack and kept the bag leaning against his leg at all times. The way the soultoucher had gazed at his inheritance, he wasn't exactly sure who else might be interested in it. He didn't really suspect anyone would steal it. But on the other hand, he was in a strange place with strange beings and he didn't really know what to be careful of.

The food was terrific, and Scott loved it. Ronnie was disappointed that they didn't have any meat—no steak, no fish, not even chicken. All vegetables, and fruits, and nuts, and pastry. But he didn't complain, because it all tasted very good. And when they had eaten just about every kind of vegetable and fruit that existed, Ronnie was served the best hot apple pie he could possibly imagine, with a side of ice cream. Terry had blueberry pie with blueberry sauce, and he ate it so fast that Ronnie never even got a good look at it. Scott had pecan pie with sweet whipped cream. He ate it slowly and enjoyed every bite.

All of the *elimu* girls were here except for Mariam. Ronnie was grateful she had business elsewhere, but he was curious about what she was doing. In fact, he kept thinking about her all through out the meal.

"The rams have been in power for a long time," Ellen said while they ate. "There are numerous tribes and kingdoms. The one we are dealing with is led by King Stag, who is the most dangerous we have encountered. He has conquered most of the other ram districts, and over the last several hailings, he's become obsessed with trying to find the Father Tree. So he devised a devious plot to capture the Empress, and it worked."

"How did he manage to do it?" Terry wanted to know.

"He invited her to a meeting, offering anything she wanted in return for helping him restore the forests he burned down all around

Ram Towers. She graciously agreed to his request, but it was a trap. She was drugged and taken into captivity. We lost 300 preservers that day, trying to take her back."

"About these towers..." Scott said between mouthfuls of pie.

"How high are they?"

"About a hundred claws to the highest spire," Ellen said.

Scott wasn't too sure how many feet that was, but it sounded plenty high enough. "But we're going down, not up, right?"

"Rescue parties have been trying to infiltrate Ram Towers without much success," Ellen explained. "Most of them get captured before they get inside. It's useless for them to close the outer curtain gate, because we just climb over it. But the fire moat cannot be crossed unless the drawbridge is lowered, not even with the help of watermaidens. Our first few detachments waited until the drawbridge was lowered and snuck in the front way, but they were caught before they reached the Empress. Now we know at least some of them are imprisoned in the dungeons."

"So we're going to wait for the drawbridge to come down?" Ronnie asked with wide eyes. He always wanted to see a castle drawbridge.

"No, they no longer lower it regularly, nor often," Ellen said. "We're going in the same way Velvet got out. By the throats of the beasts."

"That sounds an awful lot like we're planning on getting eaten," Scott said, losing his appetite. This talk about a fire moat wasn't pleasant either. He felt a little heartburn coming on.

Victorica and Swan came down from a stairway with Mariam and several pollinators flying alongside.

"How are the heroes doing?" Victorica asked.

"They are finishing up now, Lady Governess," Anne said.

"Good. The sooner the quest begins, the better."

"Mariam, what is the verdict?" Ellen asked.

"I go," she said simply.

"She is young for such an assignment, but then so are the tinkers," Swan said. "And she feels compelled to join you in memory of her close friend Velvet."

"I thought Mariam was going anyway," Ronnie said, "with the rest of the team?"

"The *elimu*, like all other guardian teams, only number four," Ellen said. "Never more, never less. Mariam isn't one of the *elimu* anymore. She was a recruit we were training to replace Anne, but since Anne is back with us, Mariam is to be returned to her original position, in the High Garden."

"But not until after this mission," Swan said. "She will continue with you until it is over. She has desired to do this even at her own peril."

"And I cannot leave my Ronnie to the danger," Mariam said, walking over to Ronnie and placing her hands on his shoulders.

Ronnie sighed with embarrassment.

Anne stood up from the table and wiped her mouth. "Then we better get on with it."

"I was hoping maybe we could catch a nap," Scott said. The food was making him feel a little sleepy, and he would do anything to buy a little more time.

"Anne is right," Ellen said. "We must go."

Victorica led them through several tangled corridors, more large creaking doors and gates, and even up a short rope ladder into what looked like a tree fort. Which was really cool, Ronnie thought. A tree fort *inside* of a tree. He wished he could have time to explore this whole place.

They walked across a wood-plank bridge into a large enclosed room that had no outlet except a small wooden doorway covered with locks and bolts and guarded on both sides by zinger soldiers. The zingers were waist high with dragonfly-like wings. They wore what looked like sunglasses, but with lenses that were strangely multifaceted.

The *elimu* girls each wore necklaces of glowing crystals, their version of flashlights.

"*Cantori Halvire*," Victorica ordered. One of the zingers disengaged each of the locks and put an ear to the door to listen. After a few seconds, she nodded back to Victorica.

Victorica turned to the group. "You will need to hike due south from here. Ladies, pick some leaves and keep them in your pocket."

Ellen, Katy, Libby, Anne, and Mariam plucked the largest leaves they could find from the surrounding foliage, which was growing out of the inner walls of the room. They took about ten leaves each.

"What's that for?" Ronnie asked. "Food?"

"These keep us out of sight range," Ellen said. "At least until they die."

"You mean you'll be invisible?" Terry asked.

"Only to the cloven, not to you," said Victorica.

"And you must keep hold of our hands," Ellen said. "Then you'll be covered, too."

"Oh, so cool!" Ronnie said. "I always wanted to know what it was like to be invisible!"

Mariam jumped up and down with joy. "Holding hands, holding hands!"

Anne was not pleased with bringing Mariam along, because of the young woodkeeper's childish behavior.

"Mariam, if you don't contain yourself we'll leave you behind," she said.

"Please don't get my hopes up," Ronnie said.

Mariam stopped jumping and pouted.

"Why can't we just take leaves of our own?" Scott asked as Katy took him by the fingers. It wasn't that he didn't want to hold her hand. He was starting to get a little used to it. But he was so nervous that his palms were getting sweaty, and he was sure she'd notice.

"Won't do you any good," Anne said. "Tinkers can't draw life directly from the Father Tree. Not anymore, anyway."

"But as long as you don't let go of us, you'll share it," Libby said. She gave Terry a smile. "It'll be really cozy."

"You mustn't waste time in Halvire," Victorica said. "The leaves die quickly there, and once they are dead you'll lose most of your abilities. Then all the cloven will be able to see you."

"We're ready, Lady Governess," Ellen said. "At your convenience."

"We will pray for your safety. *Omaka-soodi sie, onti-simina maticay.*"

The *elimu* girls all curtsied to Victorica as Ellen said back: "*Onti-simina maticay vu.*"

Victorica gestured at one of the zinger guards, who opened the door inward. The sound of a moaning wind came from outside. Ellen climbed through first, then Libby with Terry's hand, Anne, Mariam with Ronnie, and Katy with Scott.

The boys knew that their adventure had really just begun.