



KALIK[★]A

MAGIC

EMERALD
CHILD

KAREN HUGHES

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admin@kalikamagic.com

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Australia

www.kalikamagic.com

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For Andrew



The Old Chest

A barefoot boy stood by a smoky fire. Above him, the lights of the village twinkled in the trees. Polished steps wound around the tree trunks to the houses hidden in the leaves. Bridges of rope swayed from tree to tree.

At the boy's feet sat an old woman. Her skin was dark, her hair pure white. When she stirred the fire, the smell of magic filled the air.

‘Will it be tonight?’ the boy whispered.

The old woman nodded. ‘The moon is full,’ she said. ‘The spirits are dancing.’ She crushed a sage leaf between her palms and threw it on the flames. ‘Sit with me, Kai,’ she said.

The smoke writhed and hissed. It twisted around the boy, forming pictures – an old chest buried in the sand; five bark huts in a circle of purple flowers; a staircase winding down and down.

Kai leaned forward. He reached out his hand and watched the smoke curl around his fingers.

‘I can't see ...’ he began. Then he stopped.

‘Look, Grandma!’ he said. ‘It's her, isn't it?’

The old woman's eyes filled with tears. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, it is.’

‘You must be careful,’ said Grandma Helki, packing black bread and hard white cheese into a satchel. ‘She must not know.’

‘Why shouldn’t she know?’ asked Kai. ‘It’s not fair she doesn’t know.’

‘The silver veil is not easy to cross. It will be more dangerous if she knows.’

‘But I know.’

‘You are different, Kai.’

The boy felt the chill breath of the ancients; he watched the prayer flags twist and turn.

‘*Ki-somma*,’ the old woman whispered. She pressed the satchel into his hands.

The boy flinched at her words. ‘I can’t do it,’ he said.

The old woman was silent. She poked the fire, watching the sparks scatter in the sky.

‘It is time, Kai,’ she said, ‘whether you are ready or not.’

*

Beyond the forest, over cruel reefs and forgotten seas, there lay an island. It was small and rocky and covered with crooked trees. From a distance, it looked the same as the waves that crashed against its shore. The sand was a muddy green, the rocks a deep glass blue. Even the trees were like strands of seaweed, waving in the water.

At the edge of the sand, wedged between two large rocks, stood an ancient chest. It was heavy with barnacles and scuttling crabs, and there were flames carved into one side and a rusty lock at the front. On the lid was a circle of shining stones, embedded in the wood. When the days were warm and the moon was full, the stones would dance with colour and smoke would come creeping out from under the lid.

A girl sat cross-legged beside the chest, peering into the smoke. It swirled around her, forming nebulous patterns in the air. She watched the patterns shift and change. Her eyes were red and her throat was dry, but she had to keep watching.

Sometimes she could see figures in the smoke: shadows, dancing in the firelight. She thought they might be people, but she could never see their faces.

This time it was different. This time she could see a boy. He was something real among the shadows.

*

‘Indie! You come up here immediately.’ Aunt Sofia stood at the top of the cliff, her arms folded and her face pinched. She was a pointy person, all elbows and angles, and so thin that if the wind were any stronger Indie felt it would have carried her out to sea.

Indie turned away from the chest. She picked up the book she had left lying in the sand. ‘I’m reading,’ she called. ‘I have to finish the page.’

‘You are not allowed down there,’ cried Aunt Sofia. ‘Your Aunty Mai will have a fit when she finds out.’

Indie frowned. She closed the book. ‘I’m coming,’ she called. ‘You don’t have to tell her.’

Wreaths of smoke twisted through her hair, as if unwilling to let her go. In the smoke she could see the boy. He had a brown face and serious eyes, and he was staring at her.

‘Who are you?’ she whispered. ‘Can you see me?’

The boy nodded. He put his finger to his lips.

‘*Ki-somma,*’ he said.

*

Indie climbed the winding path to the top of the cliff. She followed Aunt Sofia across the rocks, watching her aunt set one foot in front of the other in deliberate, angry steps.

On the other side of the island, in the shade of the crooked trees, stood five huts. When they first came to the island, when Indie was very small, Aunt Sofia and the other women had built the huts with knobby poles and a draping of buf-

falo hide. They planted purple coneflowers and danced, calling on the spirits to protect the huts and keep them hidden. Over the years, they added extra rooms of stick and bark, and a kitchen with a fireplace and six stools carved from tree-stumps.

‘I won’t tell Aunty Mai,’ said Aunt Sofia, arranging the stools in a perfect circle. ‘It’ll be our little secret.’

Indie shuddered. Just what she needed, secrets with Aunt Sofia. She looked at her aunt’s grasping fingers, the eager smile on her face.

Old witch.

Aunt Sofia spun to face her. Indie froze. Had she said it out loud? She hadn’t meant to. She watched her aunt’s face change, her eyes turning to blue steel behind the square black frames of her glasses.

‘Aunty Mai told you not to go down there.’ Aunt Sofia spat the words. ‘What were you doing?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? I thought you were reading.’ She snatched the book from Indie’s hand. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘Aunty Mai gave it to me. It’s poetry.’

Aunt Sofia flicked the pages open and began to read.

In ancient times, the Emperor of Moto forged the Sword of Veladin.

He climbed the sleeping mountain,

crossed the rivers of ice, and

explored the silent caves.

By the light of the crescent moon, he carried the sword to Ballyndor.

Her nose crinkled and she closed the book with a snap. ‘You’re supposed to be doing your mathematics,’ she said, ‘not filling your head with nonsense.’

Indie looked at her feet. ‘But I hate maths.’

‘Mathematics is important,’ said her aunt, frowning.

‘So is poetry,’ said Indie.

‘Poetry is hardly going to change the world.’

‘It might.’ Indie held up an imaginary sword and recited in a low, solemn voice.

When pure of heart the princess comes,

And stands before the darkened throne,

And says to death, ‘I fear you not,

Then shall the spirits all rise up.

Aunt Sofia glared at her. ‘That’s enough, Indie.’

Indie gave one last flourish. ‘The Sword of Veladin was the greatest sword ever made,’ she said. ‘I wish I had a sword like that.’

Her aunt sniffed. ‘I doubt very much you’d know how to use it.’

‘I could learn.’

‘Ladies do not need swords.’

Indie plonked herself on the closest stool and pushed her tangled hair behind her ears. She looked down at her dirty shirt, her torn fingernails, her sandy toes. Then she looked back at Aunt Sofia and grinned.

‘Do you really think I’m a lady?’ she said.

Her aunt said nothing, but her mouth set in a hard line. ‘I’m going to help Aunty Mai with the saskaberries,’ she said. ‘You can finish your multiplication – yes, page seventeen, don’t think I’ve forgotten – and then we’ll begin your astronomy lesson.’

She tucked the book under her arm and swept away under the trees; heels clicking on the stones, hair coiled tight against her neck.

Indie watched her go. She wanted to talk to her about the chest and the smoke and the boy, but she knew it would be a bad idea. Aunt Sofia's anger was like a lightning bolt: it burst from the sky without warning and sizzled you to pieces. No, better to wait and ask Aunty Mai instead.

*

Aunty Mai was picking blue saskaberries; Aunt Sofia stood beside her with her hands on her hips. Every now and then Aunt Sofia would scoop a caterpillar from the leaves and crush it between her fingers.

Indie sat above them, concealed in the leaves of a tall black tree. Spying on her aunts was the only way she ever found out anything. Besides, it was fun.

She leaned as far as she could through the branches, straining to hear their voices.

'She must be sick, hiding away all day,' said Aunty Mai. 'Too much homework, that's the problem.'

'Rubbish,' said Aunt Sofia. 'She's not sick, she's lazy. Bone lazy. You're too soft on her.'

Aunty Mai frowned. 'She needs more sun —'

'More sun? *Pah!* More lessons, that's what she needs.'

'Poetry lessons?' asked Aunty Mai, her eyes lighting up.

'Definitely not,' said Aunt Sofia. 'You should never have given her that book. Now she says she wants a sword.'

Aunty Mai sighed. 'She needs something to distract her. She can't keep playing near that old chest. It isn't safe.'

'How do you know it isn't safe?' said Aunt Sofia. 'We haven't heard a word in nearly ten years. We can't wait here forever. You have to face it, Mai, Grandma Helki isn't coming.'

'Well, we can't go back by ourselves.' Aunty Mai's voice was brittle. 'It's too dangerous.'

Indie settled back against the broad trunk of the tree and closed her eyes. It was always the same. Aunt Sofia arguing that it was time to leave the island, and Aunty Mai refusing to go. ‘Not yet,’ Aunty Mai would say, her fingers working feverishly at whatever job she was doing. ‘We promised to keep Indie hidden until Grandma Helki came for us.’

It didn’t matter how many times Indie asked her. Aunty Mai would never explain who Grandma Helki was, or why they had made such a promise.

*

Indie’s mind drifted. She thought about the smoke, enveloping her, pulling her close. She tried to picture the boy’s face – the curly hair, the smudge of a smile. In her mind, the stones on the chest blazed with colour, calling to her.

‘I’m going to the huts to get Indie,’ Aunty Mai’s voice came floating through the branches. ‘It’s a beautiful day. She should be playing outside.’

‘Call her,’ said Aunt Sofia, glancing at the tree. ‘I’m sure she’ll hear you.’

The smoke vanished, the colours faded. The chest at the edge of the sea sat still and silent, hiding its secrets.

Indie swung her skinny brown ankles over the bough. Quickly and easily, she scaled the lower branches; then she shimmied down the trunk to the ground. She waited a few moments, and then ran around the saskaberry bushes, puffing, as if she’d run all the way from the huts.

‘And about time,’ said Aunt Sofia.

‘But you told me to finish my –’

‘Oh there you are, Indie dear.’ Aunty Mai let go of the twig she’d been holding and it sprang into the air. ‘I’m sure you’ve done enough study for one day. Perhaps you could help me out here instead.’

Indie hopped from one foot to the other. There were scratches and scrapes all over her legs, right to the frayed edge of her shorts.

‘I’d rather do my multiplication,’ she said, smiling sweetly at Aunt Sofia. ‘I was just getting to the good bit.’

‘I find that hard to believe,’ said Aunt Sofia. ‘Still, more mathematics never hurt anyone. You may go back to your lessons.’

‘Oh for goodness sake, Sofia.’ Aunty Mai waved her hand as if to shoo her sister away. ‘Why don’t you go and weed the coneflowers.’

She turned to Indie. ‘Look. Tiki wants to go for a walk. Take her to the stream and throw a few sticks. You can come back when its time for bed.’

‘But it’ll be dark down there.’

‘It won’t be dark for at least an hour.’

‘But the trees lean right over the water and it gets dark fast and ... and Tiki doesn’t like it.’

Aunty Mai’s hand tightened on her basket. ‘Doli and Chepi are picking sweet corn for dinner, and Lulu has gone to the beach to check our fishing lines. You can find them and make yourself useful, or you can run off and play. Your choice.’

Aunty Mai’s back was stiff, her brown cheeks flushed; a determined frown settled over her pretty face. Indie sighed; there would be no more spying today. She ran off across the rocks with Tiki at her heels. The little dog raced around her legs a few times and then barrelled into the bushes, looking for rabbits.

Aunty Mai and Aunt Sofia stood in silence, watching girl and dog disappear; then Aunty Mai smiled and turned back to the saskaberries.

Aunt Sofia did not smile. Her lips were white and thin.

*

Indie ran through puddles slithering with tadpoles, she jumped from stone to mossy stone. She played with Tiki for a long time, thinking always about the chest and the smoke and the boy. But she was back before sunset, before the shadows came slipping through the trees.

‘You’d better be in bed before I count to ten,’ Aunt Sofia called from her stool beside the fire. ‘If I have to come in there ...’

Aunty Mai rolled her eyes. ‘Do you need anything?’ she asked Indie. ‘I could make you some tea.’

‘No thanks,’ said Indie, hastily burrowing under the blankets. The full moon shone through the doorway of the hut, making her hair shine like copper.

‘Your new pyjamas look lovely,’ Aunty Mai said, kissing her cheek. ‘They match your eyes.’

‘They’re too green,’ said Indie. ‘And look, she’s sewed little beads on the back that stick into me when I lie down.’

‘Your Aunt Sofia spent all week making those. She even tore up one of her old silk dresses,’ said Aunty Mai. ‘She wanted to leave the island to find some nice material, but I—’

‘You told her it was too dangerous.’ Indie propped herself up on the pillows, her eyes suddenly serious. ‘Aunty Mai,’ she whispered. ‘There’s something strange happening to the old chest. There’s more smoke, and I could see a boy—’

‘You’re not to touch it!’ said Aunty Mai.

‘But—’

‘I’ve told you over and over.’

‘But I saw—’

‘Promise me you won’t even think about it! Some things are better left as they are.’

*

Indie couldn’t sleep. Aunty Mai was curled beside her, her little snores bubbling under the blankets. The other huts were silent. The women had called goodnight and snuffed out their candles. Aunt Sofia was always last. Sometimes she stayed awake until dawn, poring over her science books. Sometimes she was so busy making sketches and writing notes that she would forget to sleep at all.

But not tonight. Tonight Aunt Sofia's hut was dark and still.

Indie climbed out of bed and tiptoed down the hill. The moon cast a clear white light through the trees, showing her the path down to the sand.

For a few moments she stood before the chest, watching the moonlight as it made a sparkling pool on the lid. Then she reached out and put her hands in the pool.

A faint whisper came from the chest, '*Ki-somma. Kokomi ki-somma.*'

Fighting the urge to snatch her hand away, she tapped the wood tentatively. Nothing happened. She tapped harder. There was a hollow thud and a groan, and then silence.

Curiosity swamped her fear and she began to pound on the lid with her fists. *Aunty Mai will kill me, she thought. But I don't care. I don't care! I have to know about the boy.*

The pool of light shimmered and swirled. The whisper grew louder, '*Ki-somma. Kokomi ki-somma.*'

A ribbon of smoke wound its way through the keyhole.

The lock shuddered and fell to the ground.

Slowly the lid began to rise and in fascination, Indie leaned over the edge. She could see nothing. Black, empty nothing.

No ... *wait.*

She leaned further, gasping as the world fell away beneath her eyes. Inside the chest was a tunnel, and a staircase leading down into the darkness.



The Secret Tunnel

The first part of the staircase was little more than a ladder, twisting down and down. Indie climbed slowly, testing each step, finding the wood strong and smooth beneath her bare feet.

Shadows swam around her as she climbed. She could hear whispers, muffled footsteps, the beating of a drum; but when she stopped there was only silence.

Just a little further, she thought. Then I'll find out about the boy and the smoke, and then I can shut the chest and go back to bed and nobody will ever know.

Clunk. The patch of light at the top of the staircase vanished. Indie tried to run back, but the wood buckled beneath her feet. When she looked up, she saw the staircase had become a slope – slippery and smooth, impossible to climb.

‘Aunty Mai!’ she cried, in sudden panic. ‘Aunty Mai!’

Her voice echoed in the darkness, but Aunty Mai did not come.

She took a deep breath. It was so much darker with the lid shut, and the dark made her feel small. It made her think of the nightmares she used to have, curled beneath the blankets, calling for her mother. ‘No use crying,’ Aunt Sofia would say. ‘Crying won’t bring her back.’

She clenched her fists and lifted her chin. She couldn’t possibly climb this slope. There was nowhere to go but down.

‘Hurry,’ said a voice. ‘You have to walk faster.’

‘Who’s there?’ said Indie. She looked down the staircase, but it was too dark to see.

‘Down here,’ said the voice. ‘I’m just below you.’

Indie took a step. A curtain of mist floated in front of her, sparkling with light. She touched it, carefully, with the tip of her finger. It was like silk. She put out both hands and ran them through the curtain, moving it with her fingers, draping it over her skin.

‘You have to close your eyes,’ said the voice. ‘You can’t be afraid.’

Indie looked back. The staircase had become even steeper now, as if it were rising up behind her, ready to push her off. She looked down at the curtain. She couldn’t stay here, trapped in the dark. The voice sounded friendly enough, and young. *It’s the boy*, she thought. *It must be the boy.*

‘Come on,’ said the boy’s voice. ‘I can help you.’

Indie took another deep breath. She closed her eyes and stepped into the mist. The silk wrapped around her body. She felt the boy’s hands grabbing her wrists and pulling, pulling her through.

‘Wait! I don’t like this.’ The silk was twisting around her and she began to fight against it, overtaken by a rising sense of unease.

The boy pulled harder. ‘*Ki-somma*,’ he whispered. ‘*Kokomi ki-somma*.’

‘It’s too tight,’ cried Indie, struggling to break free. ‘I can’t breath.’

‘*Aohkii. Kokomi ki-somma*.’

‘Help me!’ She flailed her arms. The boy held on tightly, pulling harder and harder.

‘I can’t ... oh ... no, I ...’

There was a squelching, sucking sound and Indie tumbled through the mist, landing on the next step. Her foot slipped and she teetered on the edge, only saved from falling into the darkness by the boy beside her, holding her.

He was younger than her, tall and thin, with dark skin and even darker hair. His eyes were blue, like the sky in summer, and he wore a purple cloak-like garment that fell to his ankles.

Indie stared at him. ‘Who are you?’ she whispered.

‘I’m Kai,’ the boy said, ‘Come on, we have to hurry.’

Indie couldn’t move, struck by his strange clothes. ‘But you’re wearing a dress,’ she said. ‘Why are you wearing a purple dress?’

‘It’s not a dress,’ Kai gathered the cloak around him and stood up straight. ‘It’s a magic robe.’

Indie grinned; she couldn’t help teasing him. ‘It’s very pretty,’ she said.

Kai frowned. ‘It is not *pretty*. It’s —’ he bit his lip. ‘Well, look at you; you can’t talk,’ he said. ‘What are those things supposed to be?’

Indie looked down at her pyjamas. She shrugged. ‘My Aunt Sofia made them for me. She knew I’d hate them. Let’s just go, okay.’

The staircase was wider now. Kai led the way. Not a sound, not a word; just the smooth swish of his cloak and the pad of his bare feet. The darkness was broken by hundreds of tiny lights, floating in the air, peppering the walls with gold.

‘Lava beetles’, said Kai. ‘Don’t let them land on you. They sting.’

‘Lava beetles,’ whispered Indie. She brushed one from her arm, feeling a sharp tingle against her skin. ‘What is this place?’

‘It’s the road to Ballyndor,’ said Kai.

‘Ballyndor? The city in Aunty Mai’s book?’

‘The biggest city in Gort.’

‘But I’ve never heard of Gort.’

‘Yes you have,’ said Kai.

Indie was silent. *He’s teasing me*, she thought. *He’s making it up*.

Kai jumped the next three steps and turned to her with a grin. ‘You have to trust me, Indie,’ he said. ‘I’m taking you home.’

Indie frowned. ‘Home?’ she said. ‘What do you mean home?’

*

Down and down they climbed; on and on.

‘I’m over this,’ Indie said at last. ‘I have to stop.’

‘But we’re nearly there,’ said Kai.

Indie sat on the step. She had a stitch in her side and her cheeks were flushed.

‘This is the easy part,’ said Kai, sitting beside her.

‘*Easy?*’ said Indie. ‘These stairs go on forever.’

‘I know,’ said Kai. ‘But you’ll make it. You have to.’

Indie wasn’t convinced in the slightest. Adventures were supposed to be fun, not hard work. And who went adventuring in green silk pyjamas?

‘*Why* do I have to make it?’ she said. ‘What if I don’t want to?’

‘We need you, Indie,’ Kai said softly. ‘But I’m not supposed to tell you too much. Grandma Helki says it’s dangerous. She says Uncle Paco will tell you everything you need to know.’

Grandma Helki? Uncle Paco? Indie sighed. But she couldn’t go back now. There were too many questions to ask.

Kai stood, and began to glide down the stairs. ‘There are better things ahead,’ he said. ‘You just have to trust me.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Indie muttered, stomping after him.

Down, down, down.

And then, suddenly, Kai stopped. He put his finger to his lips. ‘*Shhh.*’

The stairs had widened into a platform. In one corner was a seat with a faded yellow cushion; next to it stood a column of gold. A large crystal ball floated above the column, sparkling and glittering with light.

The boy walked forward and raised his hand to touch the ball, gently.

‘What’s that?’ said Indie, her eyes widening in astonishment. ‘Why are you touching it?’

‘*Shhh,*’ said Kai. ‘*Listen.* Can you hear?’

Indie stood beside him, her arms crossed. Green eyes – cat’s eyes – shining in the lamplight.

‘What are we listening for?’ she asked.

‘Who,’ said Kai.

‘Who?’

‘Yes, we’re listening for a ‘who’, not a ‘what’.’

‘Oh, you’re so annoying! Who, then.’

‘Grandma Helki. She promised she’d meet me here.’

‘Grandma Helki!’

‘She’s my great grandmother.’

‘Your great grandmother! So tell me what an old lady would be doing miles underground – ’

Sizzle! Snip! The ball crackled with light, sparks of yellow splintering the blue.

‘What *is* that thing?’ Indie asked, pointing. ‘Can I touch it?’ She took a step forward, but was brought up short by the sharp tone in Kai’s voice.

‘No!’

‘What’s it for? Is it magic?’

Kai looked at her in approval. ‘Questions are good. Grandma Helki says they show an interest in the world around you.’

‘Answers are good too.’

Kai bit his lip. ‘Not always,’ he said.

Indie stood in silence. She put her hand on her stomach – it seemed like hours since she'd eaten her dinner. *I hope this grandma is the kind who bakes, she thought. I wonder how long she'll be.*

Kai sat on the seat. 'There'll be plenty of food there,' he said.

'So now you can read my mind.'

'No,' Kai laughed. 'I can hear your stomach grumbling.'

Indie wanted to punch him.

'You're really starting to annoy me,' she said. 'If you don't tell me what's going on, right now ...'

'We-ell. I'm not supposed to.'

Indie sat next to him on the faded cushion. She leaned across and stuck her elbow in his ribs.

'Ow!' cried Kai. 'What did you do that for?'

'Just tell me.'

'You don't have to poke me.'

'Why would we be meeting your great grandmother here? In the dark?'

'She promised she'd be here,' Kai said. 'She always keeps her promises.'

'But why –'

'To *help* me, okay? To help me with the magic.'

'So she's a witch, then?'

Kai's voice was scornful: 'No. That's a dumb thing to say. She's one of the Kallika, the forest people. She works with plants mostly, makes medicines and lotions from them. She says she's best friends with Mother Earth and,' he put on the crackling voice of an old woman, *'if that makes me a witch, then so be it.'*

'But why would she be climbing down the stairs? Is she coming to get us like Aunty Mai said?'

‘Not exactly,’ said Kai.

‘Then why would she —’

‘I can’t tell you, Indie.’

‘But —’

‘Shhh,’ said Kai, holding up his hand. ‘I’m listening.’

*

Eventually, the boy stood up. ‘She mustn’t be coming after all,’ he said flatly. ‘She promised she’d come. She promised I wouldn’t have to face him by myself.’ He started walking down the stairs. Indie followed, wrapping her arms against the cold and against the strange things Kai was telling her.

Deeper, deeper.

The air grew dank and musty; the specks of golden light began to fade.

It was too quiet. Indie couldn’t shake the feeling she was being watched. She began to walk faster.

After a while, the stairs ended abruptly, and Indie stumbled without warning into an enormous cave with black walls and a floor as smooth as marble. A mist rose from the floor and wreathed around her head, brushing her hair with icy fingers; then it crept up the staircase, leaving a trail of wispy white.

Indie watched, fascinated as, one by one, the steps dissolved behind her. The walls of the cavern formed a circle, strong and dark.

‘Now what?’ she whispered.



Uncle Paco

Kai stood at the centre of the cavern, his palms pressed together as though in prayer. His eyes were closed and a small smile played across his lips.

He began to chant.

Locked be the pathway,

Locked be the door,

Locked be the castle gate,

Upon the distant shore.

He stopped, lifted his arms high above his head and spread his fingers wide. His voice echoed through the cavern. ‘Open now to the children of Ballyndor!’

Stretching out his arms he began to spin, slowly at first and then faster – his robe whirling around him, strange letters Indie hadn’t noticed before in the darkness now glowing gold on the hem.

‘Ki-somma. Kokomi ki-somma.’

The walls began to tremble. A cloud of dust rose from the floor, making Indie cough. She pulled the collar of her pyjamas up around her nose, crouched down and buried her head in her arms.

When the chanting stopped and the dust cleared, Indie looked up. Kai stood before an enormous door set into the wall of the cave, dominated by a gold knocker

in the shape of an eagle. He stepped forward and pressed his palms against the wood.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Smells good, doesn’t it?’

‘Smells like wood,’ said Indie, coming forward to run her fingers across the surface. ‘How did —’

‘It comes from the old cedar tree near my uncle's house. Grandma Helki said it was struck by lightning the year I was born. She said it was an omen.’

‘No, I mean, how did you —’

‘An omen’s a sign. It means something bad is going to happen.’

‘I know what an omen is. I want to know where the door —’

Kai looked away. ‘My uncle lives here now, under the ground. I haven't seen him for years. Grandma Helki thinks we’ll learn a lot from him. She says ...’ He took a deep breath. ‘She says he’s not as bad as he seems.’

He reached up and grasped the gold knocker. The eagle glowered at him as he hammered. *Once, twice, three times.*

There was a faint hiss. Indie took a step back. *I must have dust in my ears,* she thought.

Silence. Then the pad-pad-pad of footsteps and the rattle of keys on a chain.

‘I'm coming, I'm *coming,*’ said an irritated voice. More shuffling of keys, more footsteps.

Finally the door swung open to reveal an old man. His eyes were the same deep blue as Kai’s but they were narrow and hooded, as if he’d seen too much of the world.

He looked gravely at Indie, shivering in her silk pyjamas. She stared back at him through her matted hair: her face was smeared with dirt, her eyes wary.

‘So,’ the old man said, ‘she has finally sent you to me.’ He cracked his knuckles one by one. ‘At last you will be safe. Yes, yes. You will be safe here.’

He turned and walked away.

Kai followed. ‘Come on, Indie,’ he said, holding out his hand. ‘It’ll be okay. I promise.’

She hesitated. Then she stepped through the doorway, some instinct making her look over her shoulder. The door was gone and the smooth wall of the cavern stood in its place.

They now stood in an even larger cave, with branching tunnels at the far end. The air was sweet and filled with the smell of incense. ‘Sandalwood,’ Kai whispered. ‘For protection.’

Rugs of red and gold covered the floor, woven with trees and castles, horses and swordsmen. The walls were lined with shelves and each shelf was filled with hundreds and hundreds of books. Indie had never seen so many books.

‘Look around you,’ the old man said, beckoning them to sit on the cushions at his feet. ‘See the curling pages, dusty with age. Amazing stories, wonderful drawings – the history of our world and every other world since time began. Priceless. Yes, yes. Marvellous ... yes.’

‘Uncle Paco,’ Kai sounded uncertain. There was no sign of his smile. ‘We’re really tired. Can we start in the morning?’

‘But there's so much to be done. Yes, yes. So much to be done.’ The old man shook his head, looking at Indie’s bedraggled appearance. ‘Still, a warm bath ... and perhaps some better clothes ... ’

He walked over to a writing desk scattered with parchment paper, quills and bottles of ink. On one corner stood a silver bell, which rang high and clear as the old man picked it up.

A grey-haired woman with a feather duster scurried into the room. She was small and round, and over her dress she wore a pink apron with ruffles at the edge.

‘Ah, the children have arrived.’ She smiled so broadly her eyes crinkled into her cheeks. ‘My dear Kai, I’m so glad you’re here. And this must be Indie.’ She looked at her carefully. ‘Not a princess yet, my dear, but there’s plenty of time.’

‘That’s enough, Millie,’ the old man said. ‘Take the children to the bathing room and find them some fresh nightclothes. Hurry. We have work to do.’

Millie led them through the tunnels until they reached a cave filled with pools of steaming water. ‘You can wash here,’ she told Indie, pointing to a stream that bubbled from the wall. ‘Then spend as long as you like in the hot springs.’ She patted Indie’s hand. ‘Have a good long soak, lovey. You look like you need it.’

*

Half an hour later, they were bathed and dressed in flowing white nightshirts, and Millie was bringing in a tray of bread and cheese. Sitting on silk cushions, they munched ravenously, listening while the old man talked.

‘Do you see these books?’ he began, pointing to the shelves that lined the closest wall. ‘All the history of Gort, and within it the great city of Ballyndor.’

He picked out a blue book with silver binding and began to read. ‘In 354, the year of the lunar eclipse, our gracious king and queen rule the kingdom of Gort.’

‘Ah, Gort,’ he gazed past the children. ‘Glorious Gort.’

‘One day,’ he said, his voice trembling. ‘One day, you will see Gort and you will know why I speak this way. It is a place that never leaves you, no matter how widely you travel. A beautiful place.’

‘Uncle Paco ...’

‘What is it, lad?’

‘I ... I think it’s time Indie was told.’

‘Indie will remember when she needs to,’ the old man’s voice was sharp with warning. ‘She must find out for herself.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Kai looked down. ‘It’s just ... well ... I think she should know now.’

Indie sat quietly, picking at her dinner, trying not to let her confusion show too obviously.

What is this place? she thought. *There are so many books. But I can’t have come all this way to sit in a cave and read.*

Sit in a cave ...

She frowned. Something wasn't right. She knew every cave on the island. She had crawled through shallow tunnels of blue green glass, hidden in caverns that rose from the sand like an ocean wave. Even the cliffs were a deep sea green. But this cave was made of dry black rock, which crumbled against her hand.

The back of Indie's neck tingled in shock.

It was too *different*.

It wasn't like her island at all ...

'At least tell her about Ballyndor,' Kai was saying, when Indie finally came to her senses.

The old man looked up. 'She will remember in time.'

He turned to Indie. 'You don't need me to tell you,' he said. 'Ballyndor is already a part of you: part of your bones, part of the very blood that courses through your veins.'

His eyes grew distant and he whispered in a singsong voice,

Ballyndor, in the land of kings,

Where the river meets the sea,

Where the Kalika Forest stands alone,

And all men will be free.

'It's no more than a children's rhyme but it's part of our heritage and at least it is safe now. All the writings of Ballyndor are safe and most of the paintings. We couldn't save everything, of course. But we tried.' He gazed at the books. 'We feared our great civilisation would be lost, that there would be nothing left of her beauty, nothing of her promise. We used all the magic we could and brought every-

thing here, deep within the earth. The sorcerer knows it is here, but he cannot break the ancient spells. So we are protected ... for a time. And keeping it here does him no harm, I suppose. He is more afraid of those who try to find it, those who remember the glory of the city before the sorcerer came.'

Indie sat forward on her cushion, her dinner forgotten. 'Sorcerer?' she said, her eyes shining. 'There's a sorcerer? That's great! What happens next? Does he turn the king into a toad?' She looked at Kai, but he wasn't laughing.

Uncle Paco picked up the cup beside him and took a small, considered sip. 'There is a sorcerer. His name is Tenzel and he sits upon the throne of Ballyndor.' He looked around the room with wary eyes. 'They say ...' He leaned closer. 'They say all who challenge him are turned into mice and eaten by his cat, Sheba.'

'Oh, that's so lame,' Indie said, laughing. 'Why wouldn't he just wave his wand and turn them into ashes or dust or something?'

The old man sighed. 'It is not a story drummed up to spook children into good behaviour. The sorcerer is a terrible creature and Ballyndor is in very real danger.' He was quiet for a moment, turning the cup round and round in his hands. 'But I see now it has been too long. You really have forgotten.'

He cleared his throat with a low harrumph. 'Bring me that book from the shelf, Kai,' he said, pointing. 'The heavy one, bound in gold.'



A Real Prince

The old man put on a tiny pair of spectacles and began to read.

Many years ago, an old king ruled the land of Gort on the shores of the Shining Sea. The king had one son, a flame-haired lad by the name of Eamon. Eamon was brave and adventurous, and he loved nothing more than to ride through the Kalika Forest on Canto, his thoroughbred.

‘I’d love to ride a horse,’ said Indie. ‘I’ve only ever see them in books.’

The old man smiled. ‘Canto was a marvellous horse,’ he said. ‘You have never seen such a horse.’

He turned back to the page.

On one of these outings, the prince met a girl of the forest gathering herbs in the glen. Her name was Tala. She had dark brown skin and clear blue eyes, and she was as beautiful as the day is long.

He stopped, looking closely at Indie. ‘She was my niece,’ he said. ‘My sister’s child.’

Indie squirmed under his gaze. ‘What happened then?’ she asked.

Prince Eamon fell in love with Tala and took her back to the castle of Ballyndor to be his bride.

When the old king died, Eamon and Tala ruled the land of Gort, side by side. All was peaceful until the birth of their second child. He was sickly and weak, and the doctors said he would not last the winter.

The king and queen called upon the healers of the forest. They summoned the doctors of the Inner Circle. But it was no use. Even Helki, the wisest of them all, held little hope for the boy.

‘Helki!’ cried Indie. ‘Do you mean Kai’s Grandma Helki?’

‘Stop interrupting,’ said Kai. ‘This is important.’

‘I was just asking – ’

‘If you’ve quite finished.’ The old man fixed them with a reproving look. ‘Now where was I? Oh yes, back at the castle.’

One night, a strange man knocked at the castle gate. He spent three days with the young prince – murmuring incantations, burning incense, lighting candles. On the morning of the fourth day the child slept peacefully and the queen knew that he would live. The sorcerer, Tenzel, had saved her son.

The old man closed the book. ‘After that neither the king nor the queen would make a decision without the sorcerer’s advice. I was the only one in the castle who didn’t like it. Yes, yes ... the only one who did not trust this man.’

‘So what did you do?’ asked Indie leaning forward, her eyes wide.

‘I began to move as many of the books and works of art to the caves that I could. Secretly at first and then, when the sorcerer began urging people to burn their books – ’

‘Burn their books? But why? Didn't he like the stories?’

‘Books can be powerful. Art and music, too. All those precious ideas, handed down through the ages, were a threat to Tenzel. His plan was to rule the city and the whole country by making the people forget who they had been; where they had come from.’

‘But surely the king and queen could have stopped him? Why didn't they stop him?’

‘The king and queen were bewitched. Tenzel had saved their son, you see, and so they did whatever the sorcerer told them to do. On the day he appointed him-

self High General of the Royal Army I begged Tala to open her eyes. She wouldn't listen.'

The old man picked up his teacup, found it full of dregs and put it down with a sigh. 'By this stage I had cleared the castle libraries and the city galleries, stealing the treasures out from under the sorcerer's nose. He was not a clever man. I guess he thought it had all been destroyed, as he had ordered. Finally, he announced the king and queen were taking a holiday and he would take over while they were away.'

The silence in the cavern grew deeper. Millie had gone to bed. Indie guessed it was late, perhaps after midnight. 'What happened to the king and queen?' she whispered. 'Did they ever come back?'

The old man bowed his head. 'No,' he said. 'And Ballyndor has fallen into darkness without them.'

Indie sat staring at the old man. It was a great story. The lost king and queen, the terrible sorcerer. But why was he telling her this? What did it have to do with her?

Kai stood up. 'Uncle Paco, I'm really tired. I'm going to bed.'

The old man nodded, 'Go. Though it would be better for you to hear the story again and again, until it is printed on your soul.'

'But Uncle, I ...'

'You have much to do, Kai, and you will need to remember everything I tell you if you are to succeed.'

'You blame me.' Kai's voice was quiet. 'You think it was my fault.'

'You were a tiny baby, Kai. How could I blame you?' The old man rubbed his eyes. 'No, I do not blame you. I blame myself.'

He stood up. 'I am going to bed.'

He turned to Indie. 'I suggest you do the same, Indie. We have a long day ahead of us. I will call you when the sun rises.'

*

When they were alone in their room, lying on feather cushions, Kai said, 'I'm sorry about my uncle. He used to live at the castle, you know. He was one of the king's chief advisers. He's never had much time for children.'

'Don't be sorry; his story was great,' Indie said, yawning. 'That stuff about Ballyndor isn't true though, is it? I mean, about the sorcerer and everything?'

'Yes,' Kai whispered, pulling up the blankets. 'It's all true.'

'But why should he blame you? What did you do?'

Silence.

'Kai? Are you still awake? Hey! Kai?'

More silence, and then a whisper, almost too faint to hear: 'He blames me because I was the baby prince. I was the one the sorcerer cured. The sorcerer became powerful because of me.'

Indie stayed awake for a long time, gazing into the darkness. *Kai was a prince? A real prince? This scruffy boy with his purple dress? It couldn't be true.*

When sleep came, she dreamed of a city with domed roofs and golden spires. She dreamed of a castle set high on a hill and a stable of horses with proud eyes and tossing manes.

And she dreamed of a garden filled with flowers, and a woman in a white dress, dancing ... dancing with a blue-eyed baby in her arms.



The Willow Stick

The sun beat down on the grey-green sand, and the heat stretched its prickly fingers into every corner of the little island. At the bottom of the cliff, drenched in perspiration and feeling sure they would collapse at any moment, five women stood at the open chest, staring into the darkness.

‘Well, at least it’d be cooler down there,’ said Doli, wiping her forehead with a large black leaf.

‘There’s no way in this world I’m climbing down a great dirty hole to rescue that scallywag,’ said Chepi. ‘Anyway, she won’t get far. If I can’t cross the silver veil, there’ll be no way that she can. I’m going back to the huts to finish shucking the corn. If you have any sense, you’ll come with me.’

‘Fine idea, I say,’ said Lulu, waddling across the sand on her pudgy old legs. ‘Let’s put the kettle on, shall we?’

‘Oh for heaven’s sake,’ said Aunt Sofia. ‘I’m not suggesting we climb into the chest.’

‘Well what are you suggesting?’

The women all looked at Aunt Sofia.

‘Yes, Sofia,’ said Doli, wiping her face again and huffing a little. ‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Aunt Sofia put her hands on her hips. ‘Indie couldn’t open the chest herself, and if Grandma Helki had come for her, she would have taken us all back. No, I’d say the sorcerer is behind this.’

‘Oh no!’ gasped Doli. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘Simple,’ said Aunt Sofia. ‘We must go back to Gort. What else can we do?’

‘Gort! Good Lord, Sofia. We haven't been back in years.’ Doli looked shocked. ‘I've completely forgotten the way there and I'm sure you have too.’

‘I never forget anything, Doli, as you well know.’

‘That's not quite true, Sofia dear. Why, just last year you forgot my birthday ...’

Aunt Sofia glared at her.

Aunty Mai had broken away from the circle and was gazing out at the sea. ‘What do you think, Mai?’ asked Doli. ‘Should we go rushing back to Gort after all these years?’

Aunty Mai turned, her face pale. ‘Poor Indie,’ she whispered. ‘We should have told her the truth.’

Aunt Sofia frowned. ‘We couldn't. Remember what Grandma Helki said? The best way to keep her hidden from the sorcerer was to make sure she knew nothing about Gort.’

‘We could have told her about her mother,’ said Aunty Mai.

‘What? And break her poor little heart? No, it's better this way.’

Aunty Mai turned back to the chest, peering into its depths. ‘I'll go,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Aunt Sofia, a little too sharply. ‘You're not well enough to make the journey. No, don't frown at me, Mai. You've been so tired.’

‘Well, of all the – ’

‘Besides, it's dangerous. The forest is burning. Tala and Eamon are missing. And Tenzel is a nasty piece of work, with his potions and his factory. But someone must go and using magic is the quickest way.’ She tapped the chest with her fingernails. ‘Do you think a willow stick is too old-fashioned, girls?’

Reaching into the darkness, she pulled out a smooth willow branch, its leaves fresh and green.

‘Oh Sofia,’ whispered Doli. ‘You mean you've kept it all these years?’

‘And a good thing too,’ said Aunt Sofia, shaking off the cobwebs.

‘You’ll still have to cross the silver veil,’ said Aunty Mai quietly. ‘Even if you don’t go through the chest, you’d have to do that.’

Aunt Sofia's smile didn't reach her eyes. ‘I keep telling you I’m just as powerful as Grandma Helki,’ she said. ‘I wish you’d believe that.’

‘It takes more than a magic spell to cross the silver veil. You have to have the magic inside you.’

Aunt Sofia frowned. ‘Pass me my hat, Doli,’ she said, motioning toward the straw hat she’d left lying on the sand. It was a hideous hat, with a wide orange band and limp yellow petunias scattered around the brim.

‘Lulu! Call on the spirits of the four directions.’

The women looked at each other.

‘Are you sure you'll be all right by yourself?’ asked Doli, passing Aunt Sofia the hat and watching Lulu, her three chins and wobbly bottom quivering, as she tried to summon the spirits.

‘I'll be fine,’ snapped Aunt Sofia. Her face seemed to be changing. As they watched, her hair grew darker and the wrinkles around her eyes disappeared.

‘Sofia,’ Aunty Mai did not like what was happening. ‘Sofia, I think perhaps we’d better talk about this a bit more.’

‘There's nothing to talk about,’ Aunt Sofia put on her hat and readied the willow stick. ‘I'll bring that girl back safe and sound. You just keep the circle strong while I'm away.’

And with that, she whispered the secret words every woman knows but few are brave enough to use; tilted her head forward so the petunias danced wildly up and down; and shot out over the wide blue sea.

‘Oh dear.’ Doli crushed the leaf in her hands. ‘There's something not quite right ...’

‘Stuff and nonsense,’ said Lulu, puffing her way up the hill. ‘She’ll be fine. Now, who wants a cup of tea?’

Only Aunty Mai stayed behind. She walked over to the chest, tapped the lid three times, and watched it close. Then she stepped back and folded her arms, frowning as she watched her sister speed into the clouds and disappear from view.



The Cave of Treasures

When Indie woke, it was impossible to tell what time it was or how long she'd been asleep. In the darkness of the caves it was always night. Only Uncle Paco, with his ticking silver watch and his impatient call to rise, seemed to recognise the morning.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and thought how different this place was to the island, with the sun bursting through the trees and the coneflowers standing purple outside her door. She sat up as a thought struck her. Her aunts would be really worried. They would be searching for her everywhere.

'Kai,' she whispered to the boy lying on the other side of the cave. 'I have to go back. I have to tell Aunty Mai.'

Kai rolled over with a grunt. 'She knows,' he said, his eyes still closed.

Indie stared at him. 'How could she –'

'Good morning sleepyheads.' Millie sang, bustling into the room. 'It's time for breakfast.' She lowered her voice. 'Mind you don't keep your uncle waiting. He has a terrible temper.'

Kai went out to the spring to wash and change, while Indie pulled on the dress she found at the edge of her bed. It was long and white and it took forever to do up the buttons. Still, anything was better than the green pyjamas.

'The hot springs are great, aren't they?' Kai's voice came floating from somewhere along the passage. 'The water smells funny though – a bit like rotten eggs. I wonder if you can drink it.'

'Don't you know?' Indie said. 'I thought you'd been here before.'

Kai came into the cavern, looking uncomfortable in a crisp white shirt and black shorts with gold symbols embroidered on the hem.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Uncle Paco can't stand the sight of me. Grandma Helki brought me to visit once when I was four years old and he sent us away. He said it hurt too much to look at me.’

‘That’s horrible!’

‘He told Grandma Helki I reminded him too much of my mother.’ His voice tightened. ‘My mother. I wish I could remember her.’

Somewhere deep in Indie’s mind a memory stirred. A lady in a white dress, laughing, her hands fluttering around her face, her body swaying. No, not swaying, dancing. She was dancing.

‘I think breakfast is this way,’ Kai was already walking ahead, following the tunnel Millie had pointed to. It opened into another large cave. Stacked around the walls were bags of flour, sugar, salt and tea; strings of onions, garlic, apples and pears; and crates of root vegetables – potatoes, pumpkins, carrots and bumpy squash. It looked as if there was enough to last the whole summer and most of the winter too.

In the centre of the cave was a table and around it four chairs of the same heavy wood. The table was set with a blue-checked cloth and Millie was laying out a feast of dried fruits, nuts and yoghurt; hunks of crusty bread and blue cheese; and pitchers of sweet orange juice.

The old man sat down and asked how they’d slept. He didn’t seem so gruff and unapproachable to Indie now as he helped himself to the orange juice.

‘Oh, the things I am going to show you! Paintings the like of which you’ve never seen,’ he said, his voice rising with enthusiasm. ‘Tales of such daring, such beauty.’

And so they were.

‘One history book will never tell you the whole story,’ the old man warned, as he read to them from a leather-bound journal. ‘You must read as much as you

can, and try to read things written by people who were there. Although,' he stared past them, frowning, and then shook his head and smiled, 'sometimes, yes ... yes ... sometimes they are the stories you can trust least of all.'

Days passed. To her surprise, Indie found she was eager to learn all the old man could teach her. It had been so different with Aunt Sofia. Aunt Sofia's books were new, with stiff pages and bright covers; but the stories were black and white. Stories about faraway places and wonderful inventions. Marcos Dentos and his fire stick. Peter Von Tinkle and his clockwork toys. The Marvels of Modern Medicine.

'The world has to change, Indie. It has to grow,' Aunt Sofia said, over and over. 'History is only useful if it serves a practical purpose.'

Indie had spent most of her lessons gazing out through the trees.

But here, sitting in a secret cavern, surrounded by sculptures and paintings and stories of battles and kings, she wanted to learn as much as she could.

'Is Ballyndor a real place? I thought it was just a story.'

'It is not in your world,' Uncle Paco said.

'What do you mean, not in my world?'

'Exactly what I said. No, don't look at me like that. I am telling you the truth.'

'The islands of Gort are strange and wonderful,' the old man continued. 'You cannot see them from the mainland. They blend into the sea. The only way to find them is by magic.'

'But how—'

'Each island is like a doorway, leading from Gort to a new land. Between the lands there is a barrier, a wall of pure energy. The Kalika call it the silver veil. It is so fine in places you can pass right through.'

'So the staircase in the chest—'

'Passed through the silver veil, yes.'

'But ... I don't get it. Am I still *inside* the chest, then?'

‘Well, yes and no.’ The old man smiled. ‘There was a crystal ball on the stairs. Do you remember?’

Indie nodded.

‘That ball was like a key. Kai used it to open the silver veil, so that you could pass through. It takes a powerful magic, ancient and dark. I’m still not sure how he did it.’

‘*Kai* did that?’ Indie stared at the boy, her eyes wide. ‘Kai did the magic? I don’t believe it.’

Kai shrugged and looked at the floor.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Indie said again. She looked around the cave, at the paintings of the queen in her blue silk dress and the king with his flaming red beard. ‘So I am inside the chest, *but* ... I’m in another world as well. This is too strange.’

After that she asked hundreds of questions. She read every book she could lay her hands on, climbing the rickety stepladder to reach the highest shelves. She pored over the pages, musty and yellow, with Kai looking over her shoulder.

*

Kai grew quiet as the days continued. The old stories of Ballyndor were filled with courage and glory. There were pitched battles fought for noble causes, strong kings and valiant queens. Then the stories changed. The king’s son lay dying; the lands around the city fell to ruin. The old man told Kai it wasn’t his fault. The king was weak and Tala – dear beautiful Tala – was weak also.

Indie could stand it no longer. ‘Weak?’ she demanded, after Uncle Paco told them about the water-lily lake Eamon built for Tala on her birthday. ‘But they loved each other so much, and they loved Kai ...’

‘Not enough,’ Kai muttered. ‘Or they wouldn’t have gone away.’

Indie was quiet. *You’re not the only one*, she thought. *My mother went away, too. But she loved me. She must have loved me.*

Kai put down the picture he'd been studying – a miniature, in oils, showing Tala holding a baby girl.

‘Maybe the king was weak, and maybe it was because of me,’ he said, gathering his courage. ‘But I’m not weak. I’m not like them!’

There was an uncomfortable silence. The clock on the wall chimed the hour in a series of tings and tangs, like a clockwork toy winding down.

‘Uncle Paco, I’m ready. I’m ready now.’

The old man said nothing.

‘Aren’t we here to learn how to defeat the sorcerer?’ Kai demanded. ‘Isn’t that the whole point?’

The old man’s face was hollow and grey.

‘You are only a child, Kai,’ he said. ‘You are safe here.’

‘But that’s not – ’

‘Knowledge is your greatest weapon. You must stay and learn all you can until you are old enough to face Tenzel. Try to be patient.’

‘But I know enough *now*! If we wait it will be too late.’

‘And if you do not wait, you will die.’



The Locking Away Spell

Kai and Indie sat on the floor with a wooden board between them. It was painted with bright green squares and they took turns throwing the dice and moving their silver horses from square to square.

‘I want to know about the baby girl,’ said Indie. ‘The one the queen was holding in that painting. Do you have a sister, Kai?’

Kai looked at his uncle. The old man frowned and held up his hand. ‘All in good time, Indie,’ he said. ‘Yes, yes ... all in good time.’

‘Did something happen to her?’ whispered Indie, suddenly afraid of what she might hear. She moved her horse in front of Kai’s and collected a gold token.

‘Yes,’ said the old man. ‘She asked too many questions and the goblins ate her.’

Indie dropped her tokens with a clatter. ‘Are there goblins in Ballyndor?’

‘No,’ said Kai, giving his uncle an angry look. ‘He’s just trying to scare you.’

‘It would do you good to be afraid,’ said the old man. ‘There are worse things than goblins. Now hush. I must finish telling you about the castle.’ He cleared his throat and continued.

‘The castle of Ballyndor is thousands of years old. For centuries it has stood above the city, protecting the people of Gort. To the north is the water-lily lake, to the east the stables and the yards. Now let me think. The gardens are on the southern side. Yes, yes ... where there’s more sun. And the servants quarters are to the west, close to the great stone wall.’

Kai rolled his eyes. ‘You’ve already told us about the castle and the fine stables and the glorious gardens. We know everything about Ballyndor.’

‘Rubbish,’ said the old man. ‘You think you know everything, but there is much to learn. Yes, yes ... much to learn. Now, have I spoken of the Kalika people?’

‘Yes,’ said Indie. ‘They live in tree houses in the Kalika Forest and the sorcerer hates them.’

‘We know all that!’ said Kai. ‘We know the Kalika are in danger. We know Ballyndor is in danger. We need to go and face the sorcerer. I’m sick of talking and doing nothing. It is time to fight!’

The old man sighed and shook his head. ‘After the king and queen disappeared, Tenzel posted guards all around the walls of the castle; heavily armed guards. You know that, Kai. You know it is impossible to get inside.’

‘But Grandma Helki said there was a tunnel —’

Uncle Paco snorted. ‘Much use that will do you,’ he said. ‘Only the king knows where it is, and the king is most likely dead.’

‘He is not dead!’ cried Kai. He stood up, knocking the horses from the board. ‘Why did you say that? Where’s the proof?’

‘I don’t know; there is no proof.’ The old man turned away. ‘Alive, dead ... it matters not.’ He stood slowly and shuffled from the room, muttering to himself. ‘Lost. Ballyndor is lost. Yes, yes ... my beautiful city ... lost.’

*

Indie woke with a sense of dread. ‘I feel like a prisoner here,’ she whispered.

‘So do I.’ Kai’s voice was soft in the darkness. ‘I don’t even know what day it is.’

‘Thursday, I think. No, maybe Friday.’ Indie was quiet. Then she said, ‘Why is he doing this, Kai? It’s like he wants to keep us locked up with his treasures. You’re the prince of Gort, maybe you need to be kept safe —’

‘I do not!’

‘... but why me? Why can’t I go home to Aunty Mai?’

There was a rustle in the passage. ‘Who's that?’ asked Indie. ‘Who’s there?’

‘Shhh,’ said a voice. ‘It’s only me.’

There was a flicker of candlelight and Millie stood in the doorway, her face as old and faded as her dressing gown.

‘You must leave,’ she said. ‘You can’t stay here.’

‘What’s happening?’ asked Kai, his feet on the floor in an instant.

Millie came into the cave, her candle casting shadows on the wall. ‘Your uncle is so afraid. The poor dear, he’s not himself at all.’

‘What do you mean? What’s he doing?’

‘He says he should have done more to protect Tala, to save her from the sorcerer. He has been pacing the floor every night. He says he won’t let the same thing happen to you.’

Indie stared at the old woman. ‘He’s not going to let us go, is he?’

‘He can’t keep us locked down here!’ Kai was pulling on his boots. ‘He’s crazy!’

‘No,’ said Millie, her eyes filling with tears. ‘He’s just frightened. He means well, but he’s so afraid of losing you.’ She blinked and then straightened her shoulders. ‘Right’ she said, in a voice stronger than she looked. ‘Let’s get you packed.’

‘Packed?’ said Indie. ‘But where are we going?’

‘You must leave; you can’t stay here any longer. Your uncle is preparing one of Chief Wicasa’s spells. I tried to stop him.’

Indie remembered a book filled with spidery writing and beautiful drawings – the spells of a great Kalika chief. The book was hundreds of years old. Uncle Paco had shown it to her, but he wouldn’t let her touch it.

‘Which one, Millie?’ Kai was asking. ‘Which spell is he going to use?’

‘It’s a spell of protection: a locking away spell. It will seal off the caves until the date he sets for them to be opened. Your uncle has been muttering many things to himself these last few days. He says boys do not become men overnight. He says

you must stay here and learn all you need to learn before he'll let you face the sorcerer.'

'Learn everything he thinks we need to learn? That could take years!' Indie was standing next to her bed, rooted to the spot.

'He *is* crazy. He can't keep us locked down here, just because he's scared.' Kai was pulling clothes from a chest in the corner and passing them to Indie. 'Hurry. Put these on.'

He had chosen a shirt and shorts similar to his own, as well as a sturdy pair of boots. Indie wriggled her toes in them, stomping up and down a few times to get used to the unaccustomed feeling of confinement.

Millie pressed a bundle into her hands, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

'Food,' she whispered. 'For the long road ahead.'

She turned to Kai, 'Take the tunnels leading south and don't stop until you reach the sea. Go quickly. He'll be starting any minute – if he can find the nettles I put on top of the bookcase and the mugwort I hid in the root cellar.' She chuckled, but there were tears in her eyes. 'Be safe,' she whispered.

Kai kissed the old woman's cheek. 'We'll see you again, Millie,' he said. 'I promise.'

'Oh my boy, my poor boy,' she said, clasping his hand.

Indie followed Kai through a maze of tunnels, until they reached a wide passageway.

'Listen.' Kai slowed to a jog. 'He must have found the herbs.'

Indie could hear the hum of the old man's voice. She couldn't make out the words, but the sound was low and solemn and she shuddered to think what it meant. The darkness closed in on her and she clutched the bundle to her chest.

They ran along the passage. It became so narrow that Indie was forced to fall in behind Kai, her elbows scraping against the walls.

Kai ran faster. Indie found herself having to sprint to keep up.

‘What’s happening?’ she shouted. ‘Why are you going so fast? Has he finished the spell?’

‘Can't you hear it?’ Kai was running as fast as he could now.

‘Hear what?’

The passage was filled with a howling scream.

‘What is it?’ Indie cried. Kai’s answer came in gasps as they ran.

‘The spell ... it's the spell. It'll ... block the ... opening ... of the tunnel.’

Indie could see a small patch of blue, a light in the darkness.

‘Run! Run faster!’ Kai cried.

They hurtled toward the light. Indie felt a blast of heat on the back of her neck, as if her hair were on fire. Sparks filled the air.

‘We're not going to make it!’ Kai was reaching his arms out in front, trying to bring the blue closer.

‘Yes we are,’ Indie was right on his heels, pushing him onwards through the tunnel.

She felt a surge of power. Her fear fell away. She knew one thing and one thing only – they had to reach the light.

And then they were free. Bursting through the opening, the hot breath of the spell almost on top of them.

Kai stumbled and fell in a heap on the ground. Indie landed next to him, flat on her face, fighting to catch her breath. Behind them, a haze of gold snapped and sizzled across the entrance to the tunnel.

Indie propped herself on one elbow and stretched her other hand toward the tunnel entrance out of curiosity. ‘Ouch!’ she cried, snatching her fingers away. ‘I guess we won't be going back that way.’



Trapped

Indie looked around. They were sitting on a wide ledge. Above them, pinnacles of grey rock pointed to the sky, like the fingers of a giant. Below, the waves crashed against the cliff face and the cries of seagulls echoed across the sea.

The heat of the day and the salt breeze lifted Indie's spirits, but Kai sat hunched beside her, shivering.

‘Are you okay?’ Indie asked, patting him on the shoulder.

Kai shook her off. ‘We can't go back,’ he said. ‘We can't go up or down. We have no food, no water.’ He put his head in his hands. ‘And no one can rescue us because no one knows we're here.’

Indie smiled. ‘Is that all?’ She had escaped a magic spell powerful enough to incinerate her. Surely now, she could do anything. ‘Feel the sun, Kai,’ she said, stretching her arms wide. ‘Feel the wind. We're free! We'll think of something.’

‘Like what?’ Kai muttered.

‘I dunno ... something. Don't be such a grouch.’ She untied the string around the bundle Millie had given her. Inside there was a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, some smoked ham and six red apples.

Kai brightened when he saw the food spilling out of the package. He remembered the water bottle hanging from the strap on his back and offered Indie a drink.

‘Ta da!’ said Indie, with a flourish of her arm. ‘Food, water and fresh air. That’s real magic.’ She took the bottle. The water was cool and sweet as she gulped it down.

‘Hey, go easy,’ said Kai, between mouthfuls of bread and cheese. ‘We don't know when we'll find more water. Or food.’ His face looked gloomy again; leaning back against a rock, he closed his eyes.

Indie was rummaging under the ham to make sure there was nothing else. No, she’d pulled out all the food. There was nothing hiding underneath, but a second look at the wrapping paper made her stop in the act of scrunching it up. Yes. The paper wrapped around the bread was covered in writing.

‘Hey, look at this,’ she said, handing it to Kai. ‘What does it say?’

The characters were tiny and intricate. Each letter curled and twisted around the next.

Kai looked at it for a long time. ‘It’s a very old language, from the earliest days of Gort,’ he said.

‘Can you read it?’

He squinted at the paper. ‘It's a spell,’ he said. ‘One of Chief Wicasa's, I think.’

‘Millie would have known we’d come out on this ledge, wouldn’t she?’ Indie tied up the bundle of food. ‘Go on, say it, Kai. Maybe it's a way out of here.’

‘I don't know if it’s a good idea to say a spell when you don't know what it does. It might turn us into birds or something.’

‘Well at least we could fly off this ledge.’

‘But then what?’ Kai turned the paper over in his hands. ‘We’d have to build a nest and eat worms and –’

‘You’re such a wimp. Just say the words, Kai, and see what happens.’

Kai sighed. It had been different on the journey to the caves. He’d known exactly where to go and what to do. But now ... Uncle Paco was right. Out here in

the real world – in the sorcerer’s world – he was just a boy again. A stupid, scared, unready boy.

‘Come on, Kai,’ Indie was trying to read over his shoulder. ‘Just say it.’

Kai took a deep breath. He couldn’t let Indie down. He’d promised Grandma Helki he would bring her home.

He closed his eyes and whispered:

Spirits of the earth and sky,

Of thunder, lightening, wind and snow,

Of night-time black and forest green,

Of cloud on high and field below,

Protect us now.

‘Is that the spell?’ Indie asked. ‘Is that it? Nothing’s happening.’

‘No,’ Kai snapped, cross with himself for being so scared. ‘I’m just saying a few words of protection, if you don’t mind.’

‘Oh,’ said Indie. ‘Sorry.’

Kai stared at the paper, committing the words to memory; then he closed his eyes and began to chant.

Hasama kokomi

Ki ki yama, ki ki yo

Hasama kokomi

Mottaka, mottaka.

The language sounded like trickling water on his tongue; cool and clear and full of hope. When he’d finished reciting the spell, Kai held his breath and looked around. Indie did the same.

Nothing happened.

‘Oh well,’ Indie said at last. ‘At least we haven't grown feathers.’

She grinned, but it took a lot of effort. ‘Maybe if we stand here near the edge and flap our arms like this ...’

‘You're not funny, you know.’ Kai turned his back on her and stomped across to the entrance of the tunnel. ‘There must be some way we can get back inside,’ he muttered, staring at the snarling spell.

‘Kai! Kai! Look at me!’

He ignored her. *Stupid girl.*

‘Look! Kai! You have to look!’

Kai turned, and almost fell off the ledge. Indie was still flapping her arms, but she wasn't standing on the ground. She was hovering in the air, about level with Kai's head.

‘Look at me!’ she cried. ‘I'm flying! I'm really flying!’

Kai's jaw dropped and he took a step towards her; then he stopped and looked at the paper in his hand. ‘It must be Chief Wicasa's famous flying spell,’ he said. ‘I can't believe it. No one's used that spell for hundreds of years.’

‘Flap your arms,’ Indie said, rising into the air. ‘Let's get out of here.’

Kai began to flap his arms, feeling a bit silly at first. He was surprised to feel his weight drop away and a lightness fill his body. He gave a shriek of utter joy, a high ‘*eeeeek!*’, about which he was teased for a long time afterward. Soon he was flapping as wildly as Indie.

Higher and higher they rose, until they were almost level with the top of the cliff. ‘Don't go any further,’ Kai called. ‘We'd better stay below the clouds.’

Indie looked down. The cliff formed the edge of an island. As she watched, it seemed to shudder and sink into the sea.

‘It’s one of the Disappearing Islands,’ said Kai. ‘There are hundreds of them, all up and down the coast. Some blend into the waves, others rise and sink without warning. Most people don’t even know they exist.’

‘Will we be able to find our way back?’ Indie asked, wondering how she was ever going to get home to Aunty Mai.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Kai. ‘And why would we want to? We can’t get into the caves.’

‘But you promised Millie you’d see her again.’

Kai stared at the place where the island had been. ‘I know,’ he whispered.

*

After a time, they found they didn’t need to flap so energetically to keep aloft. They could float on their backs in the warm air currents, or pull themselves along with their arms as if they were swimming. They were too low to meet the clouds and too high to be drenched by the sea spray. It was a glorious way to travel.

Indie turned a somersault. She spread her arms and soared over the waves, gazing down at the sea. The water was clear and blue. Schools of fish darted through the coral. Ahead, the shoreline rose into a flat stretch of sand, so white it made Indie’s eyes hurt.

‘Look! Hey, look over there.’ Kai pushed his arms forward, gliding through the sky.

‘What is it?’ Indie called.

‘The Kalika Forest,’ Kai’s voice floated back. ‘Can you see it? All those trees. Looks just like your island, doesn’t it.’ He flipped over and did a casual backstroke through the sky.

Indie looked beyond the white sands, across plains whispering with grass and bushes red with berries, all the way up the hill to the forest.

‘What do you mean ‘just like your island’?’ she said. ‘It’s nothing like my island.’

Indie's island was crooked black trees and glass blue rocks. It was seabirds calling, silver lizards basking and Tiki chasing them with a silly grin on her face.

The forest ahead was dark and brooding. Grey-leafed trees towered over a world of shadows. Dark shapes surely lurked in the undergrowth.

'You've got to be joking,' Indie said. 'There's no way I'm going in there.'



The Seeing Tree

The sun was low and Indie's arms were aching. The ground was a soft green blur.

If I don't land soon, she thought. I'll fall out of the sky.

Kai was already on the ground. 'Steady ... steady, Indie,' he called. 'You'll have to slow down or you'll end up as mush. Slow down! Just sit in the air; it'll take you down. Indie! You're going too fast!'

Indie ignored him. *He's such a baby, she thought. I'm not going to sit in the air. I'm going to land gracefully. With style.*

She could do this by herself; she knew she could. She made a gradual swoop – arms out to a glide – and then ... rolling, tumbling, head down, mouth full of grass, over and over and over until *clump* she was flat on her back, completely out of breath.

She stood up, rubbing bruised knees and elbows, glaring at Kai. 'It wasn't that funny,' she said.

'Yes it was,' said Kai, unable to stop spluttering with laughter.

Indie frowned. So she'd come in a little too fast. So what? She heard Aunt Sofia's voice in her head. 'You should try listening occasionally, Indie. You might learn something.'

'You've got dirt all over your face,' said Kai, grinning.

'Look, if you don't shut up ...' Indie flapped her arms. Nothing happened.

'It only works till you land.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘The flying spell,’ he said. ‘You have to say it every time you want to fly’.

Indie dropped her arms and looked around. She was standing in the middle of a green field. The grass was tall and sweet and smelled like honey. Up ahead the forest crouched, waiting, its branches stretching towards her.

‘Come on,’ Kai said. ‘We’d better hurry.’

‘I think I’ll stay here,’ said Indie. The sun was setting. The trees loomed above her like fairytale giants. *Fee Fi Fo Fum* ... nope, she wasn't going in there.

Kai stopped. ‘Don't be dumb,’ he said. ‘It's almost dark.’

‘I'm not coming. I followed you into the caves remember? I trusted you and look what happened.’

‘That's not fair.’

‘Well, it's not fair you dragging me in there.’

They stood facing each other; feet apart, fists clenched.

‘Come on, Indie. Don't be such a girl.’

‘Such a girl! All the girls I’ve read about are braver than you’ll ever be, you little creep.’

‘Brave! You call this brave? You’re just being stupid.’ He grabbed her hand.

‘Ow. You’re hurting me.’

‘We need to go,’ he said. *Now.*

‘I’m not going in there.’

‘Come on! There are worse things out here. The forest is safe; it’s home.’

‘Your home, maybe,’ she yanked her hand away. ‘I'll take my chances out here.’

‘You’re an idiot,’ Kai turned and strode off into the trees. ‘You’ll be in so much trouble. I’m going to get Dargan.’

‘Do what you like,’ Indie said. ‘I’m staying here.’

She watched him go, a sudden doubt coming into her mind. Maybe – not that she believed it or anything – but ... well, what if Kai was right? What if there were worse things out here. Just waiting?

Waiting, waiting ...

Indie gave herself a shake, telling herself she was being silly. She'd stack some branches against that log over there and curl inside for the night. Trudging through the blackness was a dumb idea. She'd find Kai – and Dargan, whoever he might be – in the morning when the sun was shining.

She looked around for some sturdy branches, but this wasn't like her own island where sticks and leaves piled around the base of trees and you could pick up armloads without searching too far. The ground here was a living creature, a breathing mass of compost that fell to pieces in her hands.

She walked a little further until she came to a tree, its branches wider than a large man's chest. There was an opening in the trunk at the base, and the earth all around was smooth and flat.

She dropped to her hands and knees and looked into the hollow. It was almost dark, so she couldn't see much, but she could tell that it was warm and dry. She crawled in – the ground rough against her palms – and found to her surprise that she could stand up.

She thought of Kai tramping through the forest by himself.

There are worse things out here.

You're an idiot.

You'll be in so much trouble.

Curling into a ball on the ground, she consoled herself with the thought that she would find him as soon as the sun came up. Yes, she would find him and tell him about this great tree and maybe say sorry for staying behind, but only if he said sorry first.

Indie's eyes closed. She was just on the edge of sleep when she heard a voice. She sat up and looked around, but it was too dark to see.

‘Who is it?’ she whispered, tendrils of fear shooting up her spine. ‘Who are you?’

‘A hundred years of sleep, and I was having such a good dream.’ The voice was deep and husky. ‘Hmmm, you’re not one of the Kalika. Still, I am here for everyone.’

A yawn thundered through the hollow and then the voice again. ‘Go on then, ask me a question. Anything you like.’

‘But I ...’ Indie couldn't see anything and she couldn't feel anything. She seemed to be the only one inside the tree. So where was the voice coming from?

‘I am the Tree of Vision, the Tree of Prophecy, the Seeing Tree, whatever. They have called me many things over the years.’ Another yawn, and then a slight note of impatience in the voice. ‘Ask what you will. I haven't got all night.’

‘What do you mean? What should I ask?’

‘Oh please. Is that your question? What should I ask? Why, that’s the most pathetic question I've had yet. Now then, let's see. How about “What will I have for breakfast tomorrow?” Or “How many hairs are there on the head of a llama?” Or “How far is it to the shores of Lake Wattipittitango?”’

‘Well, actually ... um ...’ Indie wasn't quite sure how to talk to a tree, ‘I need a place to sleep. Could I stay here? I don't want to sleep outside.’

Something very like a sigh came from the tree: a creaking, groaning sound that rattled the bark and shook the highest leaves.

‘Oh very well, go to sleep,’ the voice sounded insulted. It began to mutter, ‘a hundred years of sleep and a frightened child wakes me up, and she doesn't even have a question ...’

Indie sat down. ‘I'm not frightened,’ she said, hoping she sounded like it. ‘You just startled me. And I do have questions. I have hundreds of questions. But I’m so tired.’

‘Ah. The frightened child has some spirit. Well, go on. Go to sleep. Your dreams may surprise you.’

Deep inside the hollow, Indie curled against the warm earth. Sleep came on tip-toe. Dreams followed.

She saw a flame-haired man with the clothes of a king lifting her onto a pony; and a queen, brown-skinned and laughing, her dark hair falling down her back. She saw a gardener with broken fingernails and grasshopper legs digging holes for the spring planting, ‘Mind yerself there, young miss. The queen’ll skin me alive if ye git yerself covered in mud’; and a baby, quiet and big-eyed. ‘Don’t poke him, Indie. He is not a toy.’ And she saw the queen crying. Crying, crying, as she was picked up by an old woman with white hair and taken far, far away.

*

She woke with a start. The sun was streaming into the hollow in the side of the tree. It was like being in a cave, but the walls were living wood and she could hear the whisper of branches, the shiver of leaves.

‘Well, well. Good morning, little one.’ The voice of the tree was not at all frightening in the light of day.

‘Good morning,’ said Indie, stretching her arms.

‘My name is Kaosha,’ the voice murmured, filling the hollow with a gentle hum. ‘I have shown you some memories which lay in the darkness, waiting for you to find them. You are more than you seem, little one.’ There was a strange sound, like a chuckle, and the voice went on, ‘A princess, eh? You don’t look like a princess.’

‘I’m not a princess.’ Indie kicked the dirt with the toe of her boot. ‘I mean, I can’t be. Kai is the prince. He has the robe and the spinning and the spells and everything. I’m just helping him.’

‘Did you not understand the dream? You are the king’s eldest child. The wise women took you away to the islands to hide you. You have hair and eyes like your father, King Eamon, which meant they couldn’t hide you among the forest people like they could your brother.’

‘My brother?’ Indie jumped to her feet.

‘The boy who brought you here.’

‘*Kai?* Is Kai my brother?’

‘Yes.’

Indie couldn’t believe it. Kai was her brother. She had a brother...

Kaosha rustled his branches and spoke again, ‘Come now, child. What do you ask of me? What is it you wish to know?’

‘Kai ... my brother ... ran off into the forest by himself.’ She paused. ‘I ... I should have gone with him. But it was so dark and there’s a sorcerer, you know, an evil sorcerer and Kai wouldn’t listen and I got angry ...’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the tree. ‘And your question is?’

‘I have a brother,’ Indie whispered, still trying to comprehend this new life-changing event. ‘Kai is my brother.’

The tree was quiet. Birdsong floated on the breeze. Insects buzzed.

Indie looked up. Kaosha was singing.

In the depths of the forest you will find it,

In the shadows where the darkest ones bide,

Where Yoki dances in springtime,

And the moss lays a path by her side.

Look beneath the roots of old Willow,

'Neath the cut of the rock shining bright,

Take from him the gift you will find there ...

Kaosha stopped and made a ‘grumphing’ sound in his throat. Indie didn’t know if trees had throats, but she didn’t feel it was right to ask.

‘Look,’ Kaosha said, ‘I could do the whole lot in rhyme like I’m supposed to – all very poetic, but a little tedious from the teller’s end. I’m happy to tell it the way it is, if that’s all right with you.’

‘Sure,’ said Indie. ‘I’m in a bit of a hurry anyway.’

‘All right then, pay attention. You must go deep into the forest to the place where the Yoki River flows, where the banks are covered in moss. There you’ll see an old willow tree with a twisted trunk. Don’t expect him to speak to you: he’s been asleep even longer than I have. Beneath his roots, on the edge where the rocks are most colourful, you’ll find a wooden box. Your father, King Eamon, buried it there many years ago. Open the box and you will find what you are looking for.’

A box. Under a tree. Near the river.

‘Thanks Kaosha,’ she called, crawling out of the hollow and running into the forest. The voice of the tree followed her, but she couldn’t make out the words.

‘Goodbye!’ she called. ‘Thanks!’

Kaosha watched her disappear. He called after her. ‘Your brother is much more than he appears. You must learn to trust him.’

‘Poor child,’ he rumbled to himself. ‘That sorcerer is the least of her worries.’



The Village in the Treetops

While Indie was dreaming her strange and vivid dreams, Kai was running – on and on until the sun faded from the sky and the forest came alive with the rhythms of the night.

Shhh-cha, shhh-cha. Lava beetles flew around his head: flashes of red in the dark.

Mo-chikachik, mo-chikachik. An owl sat on a branch, watching him.

He was still angry with Indie. Dumb girl. Staying out in the grasslands where the sorcerer's men could find her. Dargan would know what to do. Indie would listen to him, and if she didn't ... well, Dargan would carry her if he had to.

By the time Kai reached the trees marking the entrance to the village, the moon was hiding in the clouds. Stars sprinkled the sky with silver. He tried to make out the thatched roofs of the tree houses, high above the ground; but the shadows covered them, keeping them safe.

Kai walked between the trees and stood very still. It was too quiet.

He stepped back into the shadows, watching, waiting; and then crept through the darkness to Grandma Helki's tree. Steps wound up through the branches, decorated with the same shining stones that decorated the old chest on Indie's island.

Chimes tinkled, high in the branches.

Kai stopped. What was that?

I'm just scaring myself, he thought.

‘Grandma,’ he called softly. She’d be so pleased he was home. ‘Grandma Helki. Are you awake?’

The moon burst from the clouds and bathed the forest in her pale, cold light. Kai was almost at the top of the stairs. He looked past the shadows to the other tree houses and the sway bridges that led from house to house.

Smoke drifted from the remains of the village. The bridges swung against the scarred trunks of the trees. Everything was charred and black.

‘Grandma Helki!’ he cried, not caring who heard, hoping there was someone left to hear. ‘Grandma Helki! Dargan! Where are you? Can you hear me?’

Silence.

He climbed further. Grandma Helki's house was still standing; he didn't have time to wonder why. The door flew open. Rough hands hauled him inside.

He was face to face with two men, wearing black tunics with the sorcerer's star emblazoned across the chest. Their faces were worn and marked, and when they spoke their voices were low and terrible.

‘The king's brat,’ said the tallest, a big hairy man with the arms of a bear. ‘Told ya he'd come back.’

‘Bout time,’ said the other, spitting on Grandma Helki's polished floor. ‘Two days we bin waitin' and nought to eat but rabbit food. Let's get back to the castle. I want a big, juicy crocodilla steak.’

‘Wait!’ The big man held Kai by the arms and his breath washed over the boy in rank waves. His teeth were black. One eye was white and lifeless, sinking into the base of his eye socket.

‘The Lady said there were two brats. We can't go back without the other one; it's more than our lives are worth. She'll show up soon enough.’

He tied Kai's arms behind his back and stuffed a rag into his mouth. Then he shoved the boy into the corner, kicked him, and told him to lie still.

The smaller man smiled a gold-toothed smile. He sharpened his knife on a stone. 'Why don't we finish this one off now, Gar? Save us the trouble of carryin' 'im to Ballyndor.'

'You're a fool, Pem. You heard what the Lady said: bring 'em back alive.'

Gar hammered the smaller man on the head with his fist. 'Now shuddup. It's bad enough we lost all the others.'

'Yeah, bad luck for them that they were still 'ere when we captured the camp. Hard fighters, I'll give 'em that,' Pem rubbed a grimy hand across his face. 'Took five of us to knock down the big guy.'

'Well they're not here now,' Gar growled. 'I leave you to guard 'em, with five of me best soldiers, and when I come back they're gone and all I 'ave is a bunch of men standin' round shaking their 'eads. The sorcerer'll be furious.'

'An' the Lady,' muttered Pem.

'She's a nasty piece of work, that one,' Gar said, shuddering. 'Even meaner 'n him.'

He nodded toward Kai, who was listening with a sick, hopeless feeling in the pit of his stomach. 'Wouldn't like to be you, boy. Not when she gets a hold of ya.'

Outside there was a cracking of twigs and a rustling of bushes.

'Shh,' Pem whispered. 'It'll be the other brat.'

He picked up his knife and stuck it in his belt before creeping across to the window. Gar crouched by the door.

The sounds were closer now.

Kai scabbled at the ropes. He had to warn Indie. He tried to spit the rag from his mouth.

'Hey, none of that!' The man's boot caught him in the jaw. His head rang at the impact and he could taste blood on his lips.

There were footsteps on the stairs below.

The moon filled Kai with hope. Surely, Indie must have seen the damaged tree houses; she must have smelled the smoke. He closed his eyes and tried to send a message with his mind.

Turn back, Indie, he thought, trying to picture her. *Run! Hide!*

Over and over he sent out the thoughts, but the footsteps kept coming. Higher and higher, closer and closer until they were at the top: right outside the door.

Gar winked at Pem with his good eye. Pem stood next to the door, his knife at the ready.

‘Now?’ he mouthed, reaching to rest his hand on the door handle.

Gar nodded.

Both men charged at the door, flinging it open and hurling themselves outside.

They stopped.

There was no one outside the door, no one at the top of Grandma Helki's stairs; no one waiting to be pounced on and dragged inside, kicking and screaming.

Kai closed his eyes, breathing hard. He was still lying here trussed up like a chicken. He had the power to warn Indie, it seemed, but not the power to free himself.

‘Be free,’ he told his wrists, hoping desperately that this time the spell might work. ‘Rope be gone!’

He rolled against the wall, suddenly outraged. *How dare they tie up a prince of Bal-lyndor! How dare they burn the village!* A surge of anger built up inside him like a fire: hot and red and ready to explode.

He pulled his arms again. ‘Rope ... be gone!’

And it *was*. Completely gone.

He was free.

A shadow filled the doorway. He saw Gar hurtle out of the tree and land with a thump. Pem ran back into the tree house, pushed Kai aside and flung himself through the window, desperate to escape.

There was the sound of men running and shouting.

‘Dargan,’ called a voice. ‘Are the children there? Have you found them?’

The figure in the doorway pushed back his hood to reveal a face Kai had known and loved since he was a small child. He ran to the man and threw himself into his arms.

‘Dargan,’ he cried. ‘They said you’d fallen.’

Dargan looked grim. ‘The people of the forest do not stay down for long,’ he said. ‘Even when the attack comes at night and the attackers are men with poison in their hearts.’ He glanced around. ‘Hurry. The sorcerer knows you’re here. He won’t risk losing you again.’

The man’s eyes darkened as they searched the empty cabin. ‘Where is your sister?’

‘She stayed at the edge of the forest.’

‘You left her there?’

‘She wasn’t going anywhere. I was coming to find you and – ’

‘She doesn’t know this place like you do. You should not have left her.’

‘I’m sorry Dargan, I thought – ’

‘You didn’t think, boy, you never do. I told Grandma Helki you weren’t ready for this.’

Kai hung his head.

‘Indie’s strong,’ he whispered. ‘She’ll be okay.’

Dargan turned away. ‘Not if Tenzel finds her,’ he muttered.

The first rays of the sun broke through the forest canopy as Dargan gathered his men. They were brown-skinned, like Kai, and they had long supple fingers better suited to making medicines than holding a sword.

And, in fact, they were healers not killers. From the earliest days of Ballyndor, the people had looked to the Kalika to take away their ills and ease their pain, but the sorcerer had changed all that.

‘Tenzel has threatened us many times since he stole the throne,’ Dargan addressed the men assembled before him. ‘He has taught the people to fear us, where once we had love and respect. He has forced us to defend ourselves. Now he knows we have Kai and Indie, it will be much worse.’

He turned to a heavy-set man with a black beard. ‘Maja, I want you to take five men and return to the camp. It’s only a matter of time before Tenzel sends in his army.’ The man nodded and disappeared into the trees.

Dargan looked at the others. ‘Brek, you come with me. You others take your positions in the forest.’

The men ran off on swift and silent feet. Kai was left with Dargan and Brek, a smaller man with gentle eyes and a quiet smile.

‘Hello Kai,’ he said, ruffling the boy’s hair. ‘Looks like things are about to get exciting.’

Dargan fastened a hunting knife to his belt. He pulled a tiny bottle from the pouch at his hip and looked inside, before wrapping it up again.

‘What’s that?’ asked Kai, noticing a strange glow around the mouth of the bottle.

‘Yarrow. To mend wounds and stop bleeding.’ Dargan said. ‘Pray we will not need it.’ He ran ahead in the direction Kai had pointed.

He’s still angry with me for leaving Indie, thought Kai. All the elation he had felt when the ropes disappeared and Dargan stood in the doorway was gone. Hunger and exhaustion seeped through his body. He felt a hunk of *moka* bread pushed into his hand.

‘Can you eat and run at the same time?’ Brek called as he disappeared after Dargan into the trees.

It took all Kai's speed and strength to keep up with the two men. They raced across the uneven ground – through gullies full of water from the summer rains; beneath bushes thick with leaves and thorns; around trees so massive they seemed to touch the clouds.

By the time Kai reached the grasslands, Dargan had already gone. He had found Indie's tracks leading into the forest and was standing at the Seeing Tree, waiting for the others to catch up.

‘She slept inside the tree last night,’ Dargan said, when Brek and Kai were standing beside him. ‘Clever girl. I wonder if she knew what she was doing.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kai was clutching his side, fighting for breath.

Dargan didn't answer. He knelt to search for Indie's trail.

‘They say this tree has been asleep for a hundred years,’ Brek said. ‘See these marks on the trunk, and here where the moss has been disturbed. The tree must have woken, just like in the prophecy.’

‘Prophecy?’ Kai asked. ‘You mean the old stories Grandma Helki used to tell? About the Fiery Emerald and the Sword of Veladin ...’

Brek smiled and began to recite, ‘The trees of Gort, asleep for a hundred years, will be woken by the Emerald Child; the child who will save Gort from a century of sorrow.’

‘And she'll have flaming hair and emerald eyes, and all the power of the kingdom will be hers,’ said Kai. ‘But it's only a story. Trees don't wake up. Next you'll be saying it spoke to her.’

Brek winked. ‘Who's to say it didn't?’

‘Trees can't speak.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I've never heard one.’

Brek smiled again. ‘Maybe you weren't listening.’

Dargan stood up. ‘Come on, we're wasting time here. She's headed toward the river. She can't be too far ahead.’

They ran on, zig-zagging along hidden pathways, until they reached the old willow by the river's edge.

‘Hello there,’ Brek said. ‘Still snoring, I see.’

He gave the bark an affectionate pat. It quivered beneath his palm and a thin voice said, ‘Snoring! Why I've never snored in my life, you cheeky young whippersnapper.’

There was a slow creaking of branches and Brek stepped back, his eyes widening in dismay. ‘I ... I ... beg your pardon,’ he stammered. ‘I didn't mean to be rude.’

Kai grabbed Dargan's arm. ‘The tree is talking!’

The man shook him off. ‘Look at the ground.’ He pointed to the roots. There were fresh boot prints: some large, some small.

He plucked a scrap of cloth from one of the branches. ‘Do you recognise this?’

‘It's a piece of Indie's shirt. See, it's exactly the same as mine.’

Kai looked up at the old tree, ‘Excuse me, Mr Willow... sir,’ he said. ‘Do you know what happened here? Did you see a girl about my size with red hair and green eyes? Wearing the same clothes as me?’

The tree was silent. ‘Oh please,’ Kai said, patting the bark. ‘You must have seen something.’

Brek pulled Kai away. ‘It's gone back to sleep,’ he said. ‘It's enough that it was awake.’

‘How can that be enough?’ asked Kai, flailing his hand against the trunk in frustration. ‘It must know something. It must be able to help us.’

‘It is enough, Kai.’ Dargan was turning the material over and over. ‘Don't you understand? The wise women told us long ago the trees would wake for the true heir, the child who would save Gort. And it is happening. First the Seeing Tree, now the old willow ...’ His voice trailed off.

‘We have to find that girl,’ he said softly. ‘We have to find your sister.’



Captured

On the other side of the river, hidden in the leaves of a very prickly bush, Indie struggled to call out to Kai.

Aunt Sofia sat next to her, hissing in her ear.

Indie had been happy to see her aunt at first. She hadn't been able to believe her eyes as Aunt Sofia stepped out from behind a tree, wearing that dreadful hat she always wore – the straw one with the droopy flowers. In her hands was a wooden box, covered with dirt.

'Looking for this?' she said, and her smile had turned strangely cold.

Now Indie was held fast by two men, so big they were more like ogres in size, staring at her aunt in bewilderment as she sat there, toying with the box and laughing.

'All those years I watched you growing up. All those horrible clothes I had to sew. Just waiting for that old witch, Helki, to send for you.'

She reached out and pinched Indie hard on the cheek.

Indie stared at her indignantly, any answer she might have given stifled by the huge paw across her mouth.

'I thought we'd make quite a team, you and I,' Aunt Sofia continued. 'I tried to teach you the things that matter. I tried to give you vision. But all you could think about was poetry and fairytales. Useless. Like your mother, my perfect sister. Pah! Far better all round if I rule this land myself.'

Indie wriggled and thrashed her legs in a vain attempt to kick the ogre holding her. She tried to bite his fingers, but he merely swore loudly and tightened his grip.

Aunt Sofia's eyes flashed. 'Only two things stand between me and the throne of Ballyndor,' she whispered. 'One is you – and we'll soon fix that – and the other is your nasty little brother.'

Indie stopped thrashing; tried to think. She looked across the river. It was deep, but smooth flowing and slow moving and didn't look too difficult to cross. With a shock, she noticed Kai, standing at the edge with two strange men. The men put their knives between their teeth and waded into the water. Her aunt's eyes followed her gaze.

'Deal with them quickly and return to the castle,' Aunt Sofia ordered her ogres. She rummaged through the bushes, cursing to herself. 'Ah ha!' she said, pulling out a smooth green stick. 'Rise up, rise up. *Mottaka, mottaka.*'

Indie found herself sitting behind Aunt Sofia as the stick lifted them into the air. Below, she could see Kai clambering up the rocks, his clothes soaked and the water from his hair dripping into his eyes. He was pointing at her, and waving wildly to the others. She tried to call out, but they were too high and her voice was lost in the wind.

Aunt Sofia gave the stick a jerk. 'Call out all you like,' she said. 'Your friends can't help you now.' She dissolved into peals of laughter, which shook the flowers on her hat and made her stick wobble, causing Indie to tighten her hold in alarm.

'Up!' she screamed. 'Faster, faster, you useless piece of wood!'

The stick gave a splutter. Thick white smoke poured from its tail.

'On to Ballyndor!' cried Aunt Sofia.

*

Kai shook the water from his eyes and looked up to see two men pounding towards him. One was a hunchback with his teeth filed to points; the other was a bald-headed giant with ears like cauliflowers.

Dargan spun to one side, bracing himself.

Brek held his hands out: knees bent, eyes steady.

The brutes came running forward, their arms outstretched. Brek caught the hunchback under the chin with the side of his foot. Dargan sliced with his hand, knocking the giant in the mouth. Then he crouched and drove himself into the man's legs.

The four men wrestled through the rocks and down to the river's edge: punching, kicking, biting, gouging.

Dargan threw himself onto the giant's back. He tightened his arms around the giant's neck only to be shrugged off with a casual twist of the shoulders. Dargan crashed to the ground as the giant made to bring his boot down on his chest.

Brek threw a rock. It hit the giant above the eye, but the giant brushed at his face as if shooing away a fly and sniggered. Meanwhile, the hunchback had taken advantage of Brek's distraction to reach out an enormous paw, grab Brek by the front of his shirt and shake him so hard his teeth rattled.

Kai stood rooted to the spot. *I have to do something!*

He ran toward the men, shouting, but it was as if they couldn't hear him.

He shoved the giant in the back, but the big man swatted him like a fly.

The hunchback finished shaking Brek and threw him to the ground. 'Yer not so tough now, are ya?' he growled, spitting on Brek's boots.

Kai closed his eyes. This couldn't be happening. He looked at Brek, bleeding, his hands over his face. He looked at Dargan, crumpled and broken under the giant's boot.

No. No. No ...

He stretched out his hands and cried, '*Mareka tali hom che rum.*' He didn't know where the words came from. It was if he'd found them in his heart.

The air around him crackled. He could see flashes of colour – blue and green and gold. He was dimly aware of the sparks raining from his fingertips; of Aunt

Sofia's men rising into the air, shock and fear upon their faces, before tumbling back to the ground with their eyes closed, snoring.

Kai stood there stunned, staring at his hands.

Dargan pulled Brek to his feet.

'Out cold,' Brek said, taking a cursory look at the fallen ogres. He looked at the boy and shook his head. 'You're full of surprises, Kai.'

Dargan brushed the dirt from his clothes. 'Was that one of Wicasa's spells?' he asked.

'Didn't sound like it.' Brek was rubbing his shoulder. 'Effective though, whatever it was.'

Kai looked at the thugs, anxiously. 'They're not dead, are they?'

'No,' said Brek. 'You've put them to sleep, that's all.' He started to laugh and stopped, wincing. 'They'll have headaches when they wake. Magic can do that to you.'

'Should we leave them here?'

Dargan had taken the yarrow bottle from his pouch and was dabbing at his cuts. 'That's your decision, Kai,' he said. 'If it weren't for you we'd be tied up now. They'd be dragging us back to the dungeons.'

'Or we'd be dead,' said Brek.

'If it weren't for me, Indie would be here.' Kai kicked a rock, feeling the dull thud through his boot.

Dargan put the bottle away. He laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'It takes courage to make your own decisions,' he said.

Brek watched him walk away. 'I'd take that as an apology if I were you.'

'What do you mean?' asked Kai.

‘Dargan has been hard on you because he expects so much. Your sister may one day be queen, but you are the hope of the Kalika people. The spells, the power inside you ...’ he winced again and held his ribs.

‘It was you who brought the princess here,’ he said. ‘Grandma Helki was right. We thought you were too young, too unsure of yourself to make the journey. But you proved us wrong, just as she said you would.’

Dargan appeared from the bushes. ‘The witch is headed for the castle. Come on. We have to hurry.’

Brek frowned. ‘We should talk to Grandma Helki before we go any further,’ he said. ‘What do you think, Kai?’

Kai wasn’t listening. He’d thought Dargan was angry with him for leaving Indie behind, for making the wrong decision. Now Dargan said it took courage to make your own decisions. Did he mean it took courage to make the wrong decision? Or maybe there was no right or wrong, just different choices.

‘What do I think?’ He looked startled. Was Brek teasing him? No, both Brek and Dargan were looking at him, waiting for his answer.

‘Um ... I think ... I ... ’

Dargan began to turn away.

‘Wait,’ Kai said desperately. ‘I ... um ... Why was Indie sitting on a willow stick? Who flies on a willow stick any more?’

‘I may be able to answer that,’ said a voice.

Kai took a startled step backwards.

Another voice, slightly hysterical, said ‘Oh sweet Mother Earth, here at last. I shall never, ever recover.’

And a third, huffing and puffing, ‘You could’ve at least waited until I finished my tea.’

The sky began to swirl. Kai could feel sparks of energy zapping his toes, making his hair stand on end. Lightening zigzagged through the trees.

The four women of the island stepped out of the air and stood before them, brushing the sky from their hair.

‘Aunty Mai!’ Kai gasped. ‘I’ve seen you in the smoke.’ He stared at the women as if he couldn’t believe they were real. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Perhaps I should ask you the same question,’ said Aunty Mai. ‘Dragging Indie from her bed in the middle of the night, without so much as a goodbye. Now, don’t stand there gawping. I need to speak to her. She’s in terrible danger.’

‘Yes,’ said Doli, smearing dust across her nose with her fingers. ‘It’s a matter of life and death.’

Aunty Mai turned to Dargan. ‘Ah, Paco’s boy. Dargan, is it? My goodness, you were just a lad when we left the forest.’ She stopped, looking around her.

‘Where is Indie?’ she asked. ‘Why isn’t she here?’

‘She flew off on a willow stick,’ said Kai. ‘With a lady – I couldn’t see her face, but she was wearing a really ugly hat.’

‘Oh dear,’ Aunty Mai wrung her hands. ‘We sent your Aunt Sofia ahead to find you. She insisted on coming alone.’

‘I thought it was suspicious,’ said Doli. ‘Do you remember, Mai, how I said I didn’t like it?’

Aunty Mai ignored her. ‘Sofia has fooled us all,’ she said. ‘I didn’t realise it until she flew away. ‘With his potions and his factory,’ she said. Well, I thought to myself, what on earth is she talking about? What factory? There were no factories in Ballyndor when we left, all those years ago.’

‘And did you notice her face change as she left?’ said Lulu, nodding sagely so her three chins wobbled up and down. ‘I’m sure it was one of Chief Wicasa’s youth spells. And you know what they can do to your brain.’

Aunty Mai looked distressed. ‘I found drawings in her hut. Plans for the factory, with a note to tell Tenzel to dump the waste in the water-lily lake.’

‘She was always using magic for the wrong reasons, even when she was a girl,’ said Doli with a sigh. ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s been in league with that nasty Tenzel all along.’

Aunty Mai looked distressed. ‘You must take us to Grandma Helki at once,’ she said to Dargan.

Dargan stood still, a frown on his face. Aunty Mai began to tap her foot, when Brek, whom the ladies had not yet noticed, held out his hand to her in greeting. ‘I was just heading back to see Grandma Helki myself,’ he said. ‘You probably don’t remember me; I’m Brek. I packed your books for you when you took Indie away to the island.’

Aunty Mai smiled as she took his arm. ‘Of course I remember you, Brek. You always had such lovely manners.’

Dargan walked behind the others, keeping his distance as they followed the river upstream. Kai walked next to him. They could hear the occasional giggle from the ladies up ahead.

‘They think they’re on a picnic,’ Dargan muttered. ‘It’s at least an hour to the Jindi Bridge – maybe two at the speed they’re hobbling. We’re wasting time.’

‘But they’re wise women, no matter how silly they sound,’ Kai said. ‘They’re the ones Grandma Helki sent away with Indie to keep her safe. They wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.’

‘It’s more important to find your sister.’

Dargan stopped. ‘You go with Brek,’ he said. ‘There’s no sense in us all going back. Tell him to gather the men and prepare them to defend the forest. I’ve seen no sign of Tenzel’s army yet, but it’s only a matter of time.’

‘What about you? Where are you going?’

‘To Ballyndor.’

‘Ballyndor! But how will I find you?’

‘I hope you won’t have to,’ Dargan said. ‘I hope I can bring the princess back to the forest, safe and sound.’

He looked at the boy for a moment, his eyes dark. ‘*Ki-somma,*’ he whispered.



Aunt Sofia

Indie clung to the end of the willow stick. The forest below gave way to hills, patterned in brown and yellow. The hills rolled into a patchwork of fields. Houses rose from the earth, squat and round, with thatched roofs and ragged fences.

The fields grew smaller, the houses closer together. A wall of stone slashed the land, winding like a great snake around the city. Indie could see guards marching along the top, dressed in black and silver.

Over gold-roofed houses and cobbled lanes they flew, through the avenues of trees that lined the empty streets. The houses were derelict, the gardens neglected and brown. Even the temple stood silent, its windows smeared with dust, its door hanging by a single, rusted hinge.

Indie remembered the market square from Uncle Paco's books. She strained her eyes to see the coloured rugs and clothing, the silver teapots and the clay bowls. She looked for the flowers, the spices, the wooden toys; but the stalls were bare.

Where were the gypsy traders and the fortune-tellers? Where were the musicians with their pipes and their mandolins?

She looked for the fountain at the centre, with its diamond sprays and trickling streams; but it was dusty and cracked, the water slimy at its base.

'Where are the people?' Indie asked, not sure whether she really wanted to know. Maybe they were dead. Maybe they were locked in the dungeon.

‘Oh, don’t worry about them. They’re in the castle garden.’ Aunt Sofia began to laugh. Indie wished she’d stop.

They flew through a canopy of branches to the street below and wound their way in and out of stone archways and covered wooden bridges until they reached the lake. Queen Tala’s lake, with its crystal waters and white water lilies. Indie looked away, tears in her eyes. The water was cloudy and grey, and the water lilies were dead.

‘No one ever built me a lake,’ Aunt Sofia muttered, slowing the willow stick and peering over the edge. ‘I had Tenzel dump the waste from the new factory in there. It’s one of the few things he’s done right.’

‘New factory? What new factory?’ Indie hadn’t read about factories in any of Paco’s books.

‘We’ve turned the stables into a factory to make potions and spells. A sorcerer has to have a ready supply of spells, you know.’

‘But don’t you just *say* a spell?’ The only spells Indie had seen were Chief Wicasa’s and you didn’t need a factory for those.

‘Stupid child,’ said Aunt Sofia, swerving with a cruel twist of her arm. ‘There are very few sorcerers who can say a spell and then sit back and watch it happen. You need some candles, a potion or two, the moon in the right spot. Tenzel’s factory has all that – and more. Now shut up, I’m trying to drive.’

‘But what about Chief Wicasa?’

‘What do you know about Wicasa?’ Aunt Sofia slowed the willow stick right down and skimmed the top of the water. Indie had to bend her knees to stop her boots getting wet.

‘I don’t know anything. I just heard he was a great sorcerer.’

‘There has never been a sorcerer like Wicasa. But now, with his book ...’ Aunt Sofia’s arm tightened on the box.

Indie kept her mouth shut. Whatever King Eamon had put in that box, she was willing to bet it was not Chief Wicasa's book. Not unless there were two copies.

By the time they reached the far side of the lake, Aunt Sofia had picked up speed again. She rounded the northern turret at a reckless pace, almost crashing into an oversized statue at the base of the castle steps.

'The fool,' she hissed, bringing the willow stick to a dramatic halt, unseating her passenger.

Indie landed uncomfortably hard on the bottom step. 'Ow,' she said, rubbing her behind. 'What did you do that for?'

'Enough!' Aunt Sofia glared at her. 'You will not speak again unless I tell you to. Now follow me.' She looked back at the statue. 'The fool,' she muttered. 'He has built a statue almost as large as his ego. I cannot leave him for a second.'

Indie looked up at the marble form above her. It was a heroic figure: a sorcerer in flowing robes with a tall pointed hat. In his outstretched hand he held a staff, and on top of the staff was a ball covered in stars.

'I *said*, 'Follow me!'' Aunt Sofia's mood was growing blacker. She led Indie up the staircase to the doors of the castle, still muttering to herself.

Two guards blocked their way.

'State your business,' barked one, holding the hilt of his sword.

'How dare you?' cried Aunt Sofia, suddenly appearing taller. 'Do you not recognise your queen?'

The guards dropped their hands and shuffled backward, bowing and groveling. 'It was the hat, m'lady,' stammered one, staring at the wilted petunias. 'And the willow stick,' said the other. 'We was expecting your carriage.'

'I am in disguise, you numbskulls.' She narrowed her eyes. 'You will take care to recognise your queen when you see her or you will regret it.'

With a flourish of her skirts she swept through the doorway. Indie followed, the guards looking at her curiously – wondering why the Lady would bring a child to the castle when everyone knew both she and the sorcerer detested children.

They didn't have to wonder for long. Before Indie could take another step Aunt Sofia spun on her heel and stood facing her, both hands on her hips.

'And where do you think you're going?' she demanded.

She really is quite crazy, Indie thought, staring at her aunt.

'With you ... ?' she began, then hesitated at the look on Sofia's face.

'Guards!' Aunt Sofia screeched.

Three men came running: their swords at the ready.

'Yes, m'lady?' they cried, looking around for the enemy, puzzled that all the fuss was over one small, rather dirty, girl.

'Take her to the tower,' Aunt Sofia commanded.

She turned to Indie. 'I'll just take a look at my new book,' she said, 'and then I'll decide what to do with you.'

She marched away, the precious box still under her arm.

'Come on, miss,' one of the guards took hold of Indie's right arm while another took her left. The third came up behind.

'What are you doing?' Indie cried, struggling to break free. 'Wait! Aunt Sofia!'

But Aunt Sofia was gone.

The guards dragged Indie through winding corridors, up and down flights of stairs, deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of the castle. She was just beginning to think they were lost when they reached a spiral of rickety steps.

At the top was a massive door, bolted and padlocked.

'Welcome to your new home,' one of the guards jeered, as he wrestled with a rusty key. He slid the bolts back one by one; then he shoved Indie through the doorway and onto the floor.

The door slammed shut.

‘Wait!’ she cried, banging on the wood with both fists. ‘Why am I being locked in here? What have I done?’

‘Nothing to do with us,’ came a muffled voice from the other side. ‘The Lady's orders.’

She heard the bolts slide home, the padlock click, heavy boots clumping down the stairs.

Well that's it then, she thought, sinking to the ground. Now I'll never find Kai.

The floor was hard. The room smelled terrible. There were probably rats.

‘I hate you, Aunt Sofia!’ she said aloud, rubbing her nose. ‘Can you hear me, you stupid witch?’

But there was no answer, only the echo of footsteps going down, down, down.



The Hiding Place

‘I’m sure it wasn’t this overgrown when we were here last,’ said Doli, her face red and shiny. ‘Do you remember it being like this, Mai?’

‘Completely unkempt,’ Aunty Mai said, looking around. ‘There was a lovely clear path here before.’

‘We must keep the path secret now,’ Brek said. ‘Grandma Helki still protects the forest, but she won’t be with us for much longer.’

‘What do you mean?’ Kai had caught up and was helping Aunty Mai over the fallen logs.

Brek stopped. ‘Grandma Helki is dying,’ he said, looking at the boy. ‘That’s why it is so important for you to go back. It is only her protection that has stopped the sorcerer attacking us all these years.’

He sighed. ‘We are healers, not warriors. With Grandma Helki gone, the Kalika are finished. We’ll be destroyed, like the Dasa tribes in the south. Do you remember last year when Tenzel led his army into the mountains? The fighting was over in a few hours.’

A cold hand had taken hold of Kai’s heart and was squeezing the life out of it. Grandma Helki dying? It wasn’t true. She’d looked after him for as long as he could remember. She’d taught him everything – the wisdom of Mother Earth, the power of herbs, even magic. She couldn’t die.

Brek had started walking again, with the other ladies following him. But Aunty Mai stayed behind.

‘I don’t want her to go,’ Kai whispered.

Aunty Mai took his hand. They walked in silence.

‘Are the stories true?’ Kai asked at last. ‘Grandma Helki’s stories about the Enchanted Island. Do you really go there when you die?’

‘Everyone has their own story,’ said Aunty Mai. ‘The Kalika tell of a green island covered with apple trees, where the dead rest until they’re ready to come back. In Ballyndor they say we’ll live forever in a city in the sky, with gates of pearl and streets of gold.’

‘But —’

‘And the Dasa people, poor things, believed in a giant cauldron stirred by Old Mother Moon, where the souls of the dead were all mixed together to make new souls.’

‘But which is it?’ Kai had heard the stories. He wanted a real answer.

‘I don’t think it matters,’ said Aunty Mai, squeezing his hand. ‘Grandma Helki loves you, Kai, more than anything. She’ll be watching over you wherever she is.’

She stopped and looked around, as though to check no one was listening.

‘I have something for you,’ she whispered. ‘Mind you look after it.’

She pressed something hard into Kai’s hands. A whistle escaped his lips. It couldn’t be ...

It was.

‘But how —’ he turned it over, staring at the battered leather cover.

‘Shh,’ Aunty Mai said, winking. ‘Your Aunt Millie sends her love. Now, don’t let anyone know you have it. Quickly, tuck it inside your shirt and let’s find the others. I don’t fancy spending the night out here.’

*

In the deepest part of the forest, they stopped.

Brek held up his hand. 'Beyond the ancient fig tree, through the secret tunnel of green, protected by magic from the dawn of time ...'

He pulled back a curtain of vines and waved his hand with a flourish.

'Well, thank sweet Mother Earth,' said Doli, puffing. 'I thought we'd never get here.'

The vines opened into a clearing, surrounded by grey-trunked trees. At the base of the trees, nodding in the dim light, were hundreds and hundreds of purple coneflowers, forming a perfect circle. At the centre was a fireplace and around it, like giant mushrooms in the grass, stood a village of grey huts.

Faces peered from narrow doorways.

A cry went up. 'It's the aunties! The aunties have returned!'

People began to run from the huts, waving their arms. 'It's Kai! He's come home! He's safe!'

There were hugs and kisses, tears and laughter.

'Oh dear,' said Auntie Mai, wiping her eyes. 'It's been such a long time.'

*

Kai walked with Brek to Grandma Helki's hut. He found her lying on sheets of silk, her white hair spread across the pillow. Her eyes were closed and her breathing fast and shallow.

'I'd better come back later,' Kai whispered, turning to leave.

'You'll do no such thing.' The old woman's eyes shot open, still the brilliant blue he remembered. She tried to sit up. Kai threw himself on the bed and put both arms around her.

'You're squashing me, you big lug,' she croaked.

'Grandma,' Kai said, leaning back. 'They said you were dying.'

'Dying? *Pah!*' Her eyes were twinkling now. 'You should know better than that, after all I've taught you.'

‘But you’re going away?’ Kai looked uncertain, his hands playing across the sheets.

She took both his hands in hers. ‘It’s your turn now, dear boy. I can’t protect our people any longer. When the coneflowers fade the protection will fade, and there will be nothing to stop Tenzel.’

She took a deep breath. ‘I’ve always believed in you, Kai.’

‘But Grandma, I —’

‘Shhh. It’s time ... for you to start ... believing in yourself.’

Her eyes closed.

‘But what must I do?’ Kai asked. ‘Please Grandma, what must I do?’

Brek put his hand on the boy's shoulder and led him from the bedside.

‘Let her rest,’ he whispered.

Kai felt tears smart in his eyes. He looked at the frail old woman who had loved him so completely for so many years.

‘Do you see why you had to come back?’ Brek said softly. ‘The coneflowers are fading. The tree houses are gone. We have nowhere left to hide.’

He walked out of the hut and toward the fireplace, where a group of people were bustling around with trays of vegetables and bowls of fluffy grain.

‘Come on, you need to eat.’

‘You go ahead,’ said Kai. ‘I’m not hungry.’ He walked away to sit by himself in front of the hut. He felt the book against his chest and pulled it from his shirt, handling it gently, fearing it would fall apart in his hands. He opened the cover and stared at the inscription on the first page.

Only one may share my secrets,

Only one may know my truths,

Only one will have the courage to follow me.

If you are that one, I bless you.

The way is not easy, but it is yours to discover.

Wicasa, High Chief of the Kalika

Kai looked at the faded scrawl. He felt a tingle in his fingers. His heart beat a little faster. He turned to the next page.

Incantation for Opening your Heart

Did he dare to read on? Did he want to open his heart? What would happen? Would it hurt?

His eyes wandered to the next line and, before he knew it, he was whispering the words.

I fill my heart with emerald green,

Banish the red glow of fear,

Banish the black haze of dread,

Banish the shadows of doubt.

He closed his eyes and imagined his chest filled with emerald green. The colour gave him strength. His fears fell away. Magic crackled in the air around him. He could feel it; he was part of it.

He turned the page and saw the words on the next page come alive – the gold letters swirling and dancing across the page. It was a spell for understanding the earth. Should he ...?

He whispered the words.

The trees stirred. Their breath was soft against his cheek; their thoughts touched his soul. He could sense the movement of the wind. He could feel the earth rippling at his feet, making him leap up in reflex.

On the edge of the clearing was a moss-covered rock, as ancient as the land itself. He ran to it and put his hands on it. Magic pulsed through his body. It tingled in his arms and legs, sparking at the tips of his toes.

He could make out voices ...

‘We were wondering when you would find the path. There are few these days who know it exists.’

‘Who are you?’ Kai whispered. ‘I ... I didn’t see a path.’

The voices hummed in the air. ‘We are the trees, the rocks, the birds. We are the sun in the sky and the wind in the grass. We are summer and winter, autumn and spring. It is all one and the same. Your path, like that of Wicasa before you, is to discover this for yourself.’

‘But there will be nothing left to discover if we don’t do something soon! The sorcerer, Tenzel, is trying to destroy everything.’

‘Sorcerer!’ The voices sounded contemptuous. ‘He does not deserve such a title. A true sorcerer is one with the living earth. That is where he finds his magic. That is the only way to find true magic.’

‘He has burned the tree houses – ’

‘He follows the orders of another,’ the voices said. ‘A woman bitter with jealousy, consumed by hatred.’

‘Aunt Sofia,’ he whispered.

‘The trees are burning. The birds and animals have fled. In Ballyndor, the fish of the great lake are dying and the water lilies have gone. The green hills have been slashed and burned. The soil of the plains lies barren and dead.’

‘What will happen to us?’ asked Kai. ‘What will happen to the Kalika?’

‘Sofia will not rest until the forest lies in ashes at her feet. Her army is coming. They will attack at dawn.’

‘But Grandma Helki is dying.’ Kai was close to tears.

The voices faded to a murmur. 'We are one. We have endured for centuries. Trust us. We will be with you when the time comes.'

There was a sighing and Kai thought he saw the trees moving, but the air was hot and still and he could not feel a breeze.



A Prisoner in the Tower

Indie stopped pounding on the door. She sank to the floor and put her head in her hands.

‘You give up too easily,’ said a voice.

She looked up. Who was talking to her this time? The walls? The rickety old bed in the corner? Then she noticed that the rickety old bed wasn’t empty.

Slowly, very slowly, a man sat up. Indie thought she heard his bones cracking with the effort. His clothes were old and tattered, and his hair was matted with dirt. His beard reached to his chest in a salt and pepper blanket. When he smiled his teeth were yellow, and his lips were cracked and dry as he spoke.

‘I said, you give up too easily.’

‘I heard you the first time,’ said Indie, trying to hide her fear.

‘Did you now?’ The man looked delighted. ‘And what are you going to do about it?’

There was a clunk and a clatter outside the door. Indie could hear the bolts sliding free. Something hurtled into the room, smashing on the floor at her feet. It was the wooden box.

A guard poked his head through the doorway. ‘Have your pathetic trinket,’ he said. The Lady’s furious. She was expecting a book or something.’

The door slammed.

Indie rummaged through the splintered wood and pulled out a heart-shaped locket. Silver threads twined across the front into a pattern of leaves and branches.

‘There’s something written on the back,’ said Indie. ‘But I can’t read it.’

The man on the bed leaned forward. ‘*Ki-somma*,’ he whispered.

Indie looked up. ‘What did you say?’

‘*Ki-somma*. It’s an old Kalika word. It means courage.’

‘How did you know that?’

He didn’t answer.

Indie flicked the clasp. ‘There’s nothing inside,’ she said, disappointed.

She looked at the silver hearts, hinged in the middle. At the centre of each was a spiral pattern she hadn’t noticed before. She looked harder. The spirals were moving.

The silver began to glow with different colours. The spirals formed pictures, one on either side.

Indie leapt to her feet. ‘Hey!’ she cried. ‘It’s Kai. I can see Kai.’

Kai was sitting in front of a small hut with a thatched roof and walls of bark and twig. He held a book in his hands and his eyes were closed.

The man held out his hand. ‘Please ...’ he said.

Reluctantly she passed him the locket. He held it as if it were a fragile flower, ready to fall to pieces.

‘Did you look at both sides?’ he asked.

‘No.’

He held it out to her, studying her face.

Indie looked at the picture of Kai. She saw him close the book, tuck it inside his shirt and walk across to the trees behind the hut.

Then she looked at the second picture and her eyes grew wide. It showed a girl with red hair and a dirty face standing inside a tower room, and the girl was looking down at a heart-shaped locket in her hands.

‘Queen Tala’s locket,’ the man said. ‘Her most precious possession. She could see her two children wherever they were.’

‘Then it is true.’ Indie stared through the bars of the window. ‘She was my mother.’

The man stood up. He leaned against the wall, took a deep breath and then hobbled across the room.

‘Your mother ... yes ...’ He stood beside her, his knuckles white on the bars.

Indie slipped the locket around her neck. She looked out at the murky waters of the lake. She saw black smoke floating through the air, over hills parched and brown.

‘What happened to her?’ she whispered.

‘Sofia,’ the man said, wincing as though the name burned his tongue. ‘Queen Tala’s sister.’

He sighed. ‘Sofia said Ballyndor was old-fashioned, afraid to grow. “We can conquer all,” she said. “We can be mighty, powerful – a nation of warriors.” She talked of towers reaching to the sky, of roads cutting through the forest. Tala thought she was mad. We all did.’

Indie stared at him. ‘Did Sofia do something to Tala? Did she hurt her? Is that why she’s missing?’

The man leaned his forehead against the bars. ‘I don’t know,’ he said.

*

‘Why won’t you tell me who you are?’ said Indie. She was sitting in the corner, her knees pulled up to her chest.

‘Because it doesn’t matter. I am nobody. I gave up on myself a long time ago.’

Indie refused to be put off. ‘No, who are you really? Are you a soldier?’

He gave her a weary smile. ‘A soldier? I guess you could call me that, though I didn’t fight when I should have.’

‘What’s your name?’

He began to speak, thought better of it, and then said ‘The guards call me Aric. It’s not my real name, but it will do.’

‘Well I’m Indie, and I’m sick of being here.’ She jumped to her feet. ‘You may have given up, but I haven’t.’

‘I’m not going to sit here while Aunt Sofia destroys everything. Kai came to find me – he must have thought I could make a difference. And I will ... I will.’

Her cheeks were flushed, her fists clenched. She threw the straw mattress to the ground and tugged at the bed.

Aric smiled. ‘And how do you propose to get out of here?’

‘When the guard comes we’ll throw the slats –’

‘Slats!’ Aric began to laugh. ‘We have no sword, no dagger. It won’t be much of a battle.’

‘We have to try,’ she said, wrestling with the nails. ‘We have to do something.’

‘You’ll get hurt.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Give it to me, then.’ Aric stood taller. He gripped the slat. ‘I won’t let anything happen to you. Run as fast as you can and don’t look back.’

Indie looked at the bruises on his cheek, the dried blood across his forehead. She bit her lip. ‘Maybe you shouldn’t –’

He winked at her. ‘I’m stronger than I look,’ he said.

*

The door creaked. It was the guard, carrying two plates of food.

The first slat hit him across the temple. He stumbled. The plates clattered to the floor.

‘What the —’

Another slat flew across the room.

‘Why, you...’ The guard ran at Aric and pushed him to the ground.

Aric looked up at Indie. ‘Run!’ his eyes said. ‘Run!’

Indie ran to the door. Then she stopped. She felt the slat in her hand. Turning, she rushed at the guard. He stepped backwards, catching his feet in the splintered box. His arms flailed. His head thumped against the wall.

‘Bravo!’ Aric cried. ‘But go ... you must go. He’ll wake up soon.’

‘Come with me,’ Indie said.

‘I can’t.’

‘Yes you can.’ She pulled him to his feet.

‘But I’ll slow you down.’

She grinned. ‘Then we’d better get moving,’ she said.

They ran without stopping, without speaking, until they reached a grand chamber room, the bed draped in silk and the walls lined with books.

‘Sofia’s room,’ Aric whispered. He was standing in front of a drawing board, staring at sketches of factories and towers.

‘We can’t stop,’ Indie said. ‘I can hear —’

She froze. Someone was turning the door handle.

‘In here,’ it was a man’s voice, rough and hard.

‘Right behind you, Gar.’

Aric grabbed Indie’s hand and pulled her to the window.

‘Iron pegs,’ he hissed. ‘Down the wall.’

Indie climbed onto the ledge and looked down. It was a long way to fall.

The door flew open. Three guards in black and silver burst into the room.

‘Stop!’ cried the first.

Indie began to climb. She could hear Aric above her, his breathing fast. A head poked out the window, swore loudly and poked back in again. A shiny black boot landed on the first peg.

The guard moved quickly. Down, down, down. Then he stopped and swung his foot. Aric threw himself sideways, clinging with one hand. The guard cursed, straightened and kicked again. His boot thumped into Aric’s hand.

Indie heard Aric gasp. She was close to the ground now, but not close enough to jump.

‘They’re below us,’ she cried. ‘They’re waiting for us.’

‘No ...’ Aric sounded like a dying man. He looked up, just as the man above let go and fell to the next peg, his boot swinging into Aric’s chin. Aric’s hand slipped from the peg. He tumbled to the ground, the guard on top of him.

The guard pulled himself to his feet. ‘Hold him. I’ll get the girl.’

Indie began to climb back up.

‘Oh no, you don’t.’ The guard reached out and grabbed her by the ankle. She kicked his hand free. His foot slipped and he fell back with a curse.

‘Let her go, Gar,’ said one of the men on the ground. He had a weasel nose and sharp black eyes. ‘The boys inside’ll soon find her.’

‘Yeah,’ said another. ‘Let’s get this one to the Lady.’

‘I’m not takin’ him anywhere,’ said Weasel-nose. ‘He’s a madman. Haven’t ya heard the stories?’

The first guard looked at Aric and spat at his feet. ‘Lock ’im in the shed then,’ he growled. ‘I’ll get the Lady.’

*

Indie hung from the wall outside the window. She peered inside. The room was empty. She pulled herself over the sill and ran to the door.

There was no one in the corridor. She ran swiftly, ducking behind furniture, weaving in and out of silent rooms: running, running, her cheeks covered in tears.

I'm not giving up, she thought fiercely, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. *I'll never give up.*

*

Aric slumped against the wall. He was covered in bruises and his left eye was swollen shut. Weasel-nose stood outside the door, humming.

Clink, tunk, bump.

Weasel-nose looked up.

Clatter, ping, tink.

He grasped his sword and walked around the side of the shed. 'Show yerself,' he called. 'You'll be sorry if I have to come after ya.'

Indie watched him turn the corner. She was pressed behind a large urn filled with yellow flowers. She gathered another handful of pebbles, ready to fling them across the roof, but he didn't reappear.

She ran on tiptoe to the door, pulled back the bolt and darted inside.

Weasel-nose shrugged and strolled back to his position, waiting for the Lady. He didn't have to wait long. She swept up the pathway – jewels sparkling at her throat, flowers in her hair.

'Where is he?' she demanded, her eyes narrow.

'Right here, my queen,' Weasel-nose stuttered, standing aside. 'In the gardener's shed.'

'Then why haven't you locked the door?'

'I thought ...' Weasel-nose looked at the bolt. 'It was ... um ... I think...'

‘Stand aside, fool,’ she pushed the door open and stepped inside, squinting into the gloom. The room was empty.

The guards ran wildly to each corner, tossing sacks and pots and tools.

‘You idiots,’ hissed Aunt Sofia. She looked at the fireplace and saw traces of soot on the hearth. ‘They’re inside the chimney.’

*

Indie dragged Aric across the roof. There was a tree against the far edge.

‘Can you make it?’ she whispered.

Aric was limping; blood dripped from his forehead and he swiped at it with an impatient hand.

He gave her a weak grin. ‘They won’t catch me this time,’ he said.

Indie slithered down the tree. She could hear the guards clattering across the roof.

Aric followed, stumbling as his feet hit the ground.

‘See that fence over there?’ he whispered. ‘Run to the bush on the corner. Go. I’ll be right behind you.’

Indie ran. She could hear the guards clambering down the tree, swearing as their swords caught in the branches. When she reached the bush, she threw herself onto the ground and crawled into its midst. Aric did the same. Indie hardly dared to breathe as the guards ran past them into the gardens.

‘Quickly.’ Aric pushed his way out and doubled back along the fence, veering sharply into the chicken yard. The chickens clucked and flapped. Indie stood still, holding her breath.

Aric began to hum. ‘I used to sing to them,’ he said. ‘Works like a charm.’

Then they were crawling, through feathers and chicken poo, up the ramp and into the shed. They scrambled under the nesting boxes, buried themselves in the straw, and waited.

*

Weasel-nose came back to the castle some time later, shaking his head.

‘Gone,’ he kept saying. ‘I can’t understand it.’

Neither could Aunt Sofia. She looked at the man in disgust, then she took out a small blue bottle and scattered a few drops on her hand.

‘No,’ Weasel-nose whispered. ‘Please! You have to give me another chance.
Please ...!’

‘*Otako namito,*’ said Aunt Sofia.

And she smiled, as a bright blue light flashed from her hands and a shiny black beetle scuttled across the floor.



The Garden of Shadows

The trees cast shadows on the grass, creeping like ghosts across their path. The moon had barely shown her face.

‘What if the sorcerer finds us?’ Indie asked, brushing the straw from her hair. ‘Will he turn us into mice?’

Aric smiled and shook his head. ‘Tenzel is no more a sorcerer than you or I. He couldn't change us into mice if he tried.’

‘But I thought he could do magic. Uncle Paco said –’

Aric stopped dead and stared at her in astonishment. ‘You’ve seen Paco?’

‘In the caves. With all his books and paintings and treasures. He told us heaps of stuff about Tenzel.’

‘In the caves?’ Well, well. Some good news at last.’

He beckoned her to stay low. They ran past the gardener’s shed, across the lawn and into the shelter of a clump of bushes.

‘Paco’s a smart man, an excellent man,’ Aric whispered, as they crawled through a prickly hedge, ‘but he’s wrong about Tenzel.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Tenzel pretends to be a sorcerer, but he’s not. He’s a puppet. He does everything your Aunt Sofia tells him to do. The burning forest, Ballyndor in ruins, the people disappearing – it’s not Tenzel behind all the destruction; it’s your Aunt Sofia.’

Indie thought of all those afternoons with Aunt Sofia on the island. Her aunt tossing history books in the sand: ‘Useless. Those days are gone.’ Her aunt piling science books into her arms. ‘Oh Indie, I have such plans for us.’

Such plans. Such evil plans.

*

Aunt Sofia stormed into the throne room, her eyes wild and her hair flowing behind her. She walked the length of the carpet and came to a stop in front of the throne.

‘How *could* you let them escape?’ she cried.

The man on the throne flinched. He gathered his robes around him in a futile gesture of protection.

‘I’m so sorry, my dearest,’ he said, wringing his hands. ‘They were there before dinner. I made sure Cook sent up the most dreadful gruel – slimy potato and rancid rice. I guess they weren’t hungry.’

He chuckled, stopping when he saw the look in her eyes.

‘You useless worm,’ she hissed. ‘You continue to fail me in every possible way.’

‘But my precious, my angel –’

She silenced him with a glare. ‘You wouldn’t be sitting on that throne if I hadn’t fed poisonous berries to the prince.’ She gazed into the distance. ‘Sweet Prince Kai, so perfect, so healthy. *Pah!* Even Grandma Helki couldn’t guess. The old witch. So much for all her wisdom; she’s just as stupid as the rest.’

‘But my dear, I –’

‘You were *nothing* before I took you in hand, Tenzel. Do you hear me? Nothing.’ She tossed her head. ‘I should throw you back in the gutter where you belong.’

‘But sweetness,’ Tenzel’s face was grey, ‘I’ve been here by your side through everything. Who was it who tortured the king every day to find out where he hid your book? Who set up the factory for you to make your potions? I helped you get rid

of all those people you didn't like, including the queen ...' his voice trailed off. He was rather sorry about what had happened to the queen.

'But you couldn't get rid of the Kalika people, could you?' said Aunt Sofia, 'If it weren't for the old witch, I would have been Queen of Gort years ago.' She gave a bitter laugh. 'Well, the old witch is finally dying. Prepare the army. We will attack the forest at daybreak.'

Tenzel flinched again. The 'old witch' referred to so dismissively was Helki, Sofia's own grandmother. The Kalika were Sofia's people – her family. He'd never met anyone filled with such single-minded hatred, such relentless anger. He looked at her admiringly: she was certainly something.

'Yes my dear,' he said. 'The forest is as good as gone.'

'It had better be,' she said, turning to leave. 'Do not disappoint me, Tenzel.'

*

'Stay close,' Aric whispered. Indie's heart beat faster. There were eyes in the bushes and faces in the grass. She could see them. They were watching her.

And there were voices. Whispering in the trees, whispering all around her.

'Help us,' they said. 'Please help us.'

It's only the breeze, she told herself. It's only the shadows.

Aric stopped. 'I can hear something,' he said.

Indie moved closer. 'I thought it was the wind.'

'It's not,' said Aric.

She felt a prickling on the back of her neck. 'I don't like it here,' she said.

They crossed a courtyard surrounded by daisies and stopped next to a statue. It was a woman, with a long cloak and a shining sword.

The leaves whispered above them. 'Help us. Please help us.'

'Keep walking,' Aric said. 'We must leave this place.'

They passed through a grove of laurel trees, their branches gnarled and twisted. The voices were louder now: crying to Indie, begging her to stop. She reached out involuntarily for Aric's hand.

Aric looked at her, his eyes dark with grief and horror. 'The pond, Indie, did you see the pond? There were faces in the water, and I knew them. I knew them!' He sat on the grass and buried his head in his hands. 'Arms reaching out to us. Fingers dripping with weeds and slime. Did you see them? Oh Indie, did you see them?' He slumped to the ground in despair.

Indie sat down beside to him, the bark of an apple tree against her back. 'We can't stop,' she said. 'We have to keep going.'

There was a hum behind her and then a yawn, and the branches of the tree began to sway. 'Well, bless the sky and paint the stars silver,' said a voice. 'A lot of people are going to be very glad to see you.'

Aric struggled to his feet. 'Who is it?' he asked. 'Who's there?'

'I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the girl. And a fine lass she is too. Come to put things right, so they say.'

Indie blinked. The voice was coming from the apple tree. She thought she should be used to talking trees by now, but it was a shock every time.

'Please,' she whispered, putting her hand against the trunk, 'there's something not right about this garden. Aric heard voices, we both did. And there are faces ...' she shuddered again at the thought of the pond and its contents.

The tree rustled. 'That vicious little Sofia,' it said, 'I knew she'd never amount to any good. Always horrible to her sisters, they say, even when she was a little girl. And the tantrums! Well! You've never seen the like.'

'What did she do?' Indie asked, her eyes wide.

'What *hasn't* she done?' the old tree retorted. 'She's somehow got her hands on Wicasa's transformation spell and imprisoned hundreds of poor souls in the garden. Locked them away, she has, in the leaves of trees and the blades of grass,

even in the petals of flowers. Made all of us cramped and uncomfortable. No one's too happy about it, I can tell you.'

'The people,' said Aric. 'Sweet Mother Earth. Are they still alive? Even now?'

'Oh yes.' The tree shook her branches. 'Won't be for much longer, though. The magic grows stronger as time passes. Soon it will crystallise and ... well ... that will be that I suppose.'

'What do you mean?' Indie asked. 'How does magic crystallise?'

'It becomes solid. You know, hard like a crystal. You do know what a crystal is?'

Indie nodded. She remembered the crystals in Aunt Sofia's hut: rocks of all shapes and colours; some clear like glass, others with smoky and mysterious depths.

Aric was pale. 'The people will be locked in the garden forever. Innocent people whose only crime was to believe in their king.'

'The trees are waking up,' he said. 'Do you have any idea what this means? Come, we don't have much time. The forest people are on our side. There must be others —'

The tree rustled again. 'Patience,' it said, 'I have not finished. The Seeing Tree sends you this warning. The king must return to the throne before the magic crystallises or the Kalika will die. Sofia will destroy the forest and all who live in it.'

'But the prophecy ... the Emerald Child —'

'The girl will not live to see her next birthday, let alone fulfil her destiny.'

Aric clenched his fists. 'The king will return to the throne. He will not fail his children again. Not if I have anything to do with it.'

Indie stared at him. There was something different about his voice. It was as if it had been broken and now ... well, now it was fixed. His face was still bruised and bloody, but it seemed stronger — younger — and his eyes were green and clear.

I know him, she thought.

The hedge beside the apple tree swayed, just slightly, and Indie grabbed Aric's arm. 'Did you see that?' she hissed.

Aric picked up a branch, and at the same time pulled Indie behind him.

A man with brown skin and a long silver knife stepped from the leaves. He smiled and held up his hands.

'My friend,' he said softly. 'Do you not recognise me?'

Aric froze, branch held threateningly aloft; then his face lit up. Dropping the branch, he threw his arms around the stranger.

'Dargan,' he cried. 'I thought you were dead.'

'And I was sure you were. There are men looking for you all over the city.'

Dargan looked at Indie. 'I have waited a long time to see you again, my princess.'

Indie stared at this stranger, with his bare feet and his angry eyes. He looked so much like Kai, but his face was hard and his manner cold. Indie was yet to understand that Dargan was always like this on the outside; that here was a man who, despite his strength and courage, was afraid to let his feelings show.

Dargan turned back to Aric. 'Grandma Helki is dying,' he said. 'Tenzel has already burned the tree houses and large parts of the forest. My people are hiding —'

There was a clatter of footsteps in the distance.

'The guards,' he whispered. 'They've moved beyond the castle, but they'll be back. You're not safe here.'

'It seems to me we won't be safe anywhere until we deal with Sofia,' said Aric, 'Tell me, is there anyone in Ballyndor still loyal to the king?'

Dargan's eyes shone. 'Follow me,' he said.



All the King's Men

They were close to the gate now; Indie could see it in the wall. Two guards lay in front of the massive doors, their eyes closed and their mouths open.

Dargan gestured at the bamboo pipe at his belt in explanation. 'Sleeping darts,' he whispered.

They crept through the gateway. Ballyndor lay before them in the moonlight, her cobbled streets filled with shadows, her houses dark and silent.

Dargan led them down an alley, between two buildings of yellow stone. One had a brass sign out the front: Healing Centre. The other looked like it had been a bookstore, with faded posters and empty shelves. Both had sagging balconies and were covered in cobwebs, and planks of wood had been nailed across the windows.

At the end of the alley was a door. Dargan knocked twice, waited, then knocked again.

'Who is it?' It was young voice, timid and a little bit squeaky.

'Dargan of the Kalika. I'm looking for Tomas, the Captain of the King's Guard.'

The door opened and a boy with fair hair and a solemn face looked out cautiously. 'Dargan,' he said. 'We've been waiting for you. Tomas is out gathering the men. There's talk that the trees are waking up – ' He stopped short in surprise, staring at Indie.

'Then it is it true,' he whispered.

Hustling them inside, he found buckets of water, soap and towels. ‘What have you been doing?’ he asked with a grin. ‘Sleeping in a chicken coop?’

Aric winked at Indie. ‘Something like that,’ he said.

*

Indie gave up trying to pull a comb through her tangled hair. She rubbed her face dry and looked across the room. Aric was standing by himself in front of a mirror. He was staring grimly at his beard, a pair of scissors in his hand.

‘I think we’d better leave him to it,’ Dargan whispered.

He led Indie into the next room, where a group of men sat around a long table. They stopped talking as soon as she entered.

‘Sweet Mother Earth,’ said an old man at the end, his quill poised above the notes he’d been writing. ‘After all these years. Can it be true?’

Dargan smiled. ‘Yes, it is true. The princess has returned. It is time to stop sitting in the shadows. It is time to face down this usurping fool who is destroying our country.’

A murmur went around the table. A few of the younger men jumped to their feet, but the others remained where they were.

‘She is only a child,’ said the old man. ‘We must remain in the shadows for a while longer.’

‘Aye,’ said a small man with a gold hoop in his ear. ‘We can’t fight a sorcerer without magic.’

‘You are wrong, my friends.’ The men looked up. Aric was standing before them. He had washed the dirt from his hair and it glinted like fire in the lamplight; his beard was trimmed close to his chin, and he wore a white shirt with silver buttons.

For a moment there was silence. Then the door opened again, and a tall man wearing boots and a travelling cloak entered the room. He gave a cry and fell to his knees. ‘My king,’ he said.

‘King!’ Indie was too astonished to do any more than gape foolishly at him. ‘What do you mean, king?’

‘Stand, Tomas,’ Aric said gently. He put his hand on the captain’s shoulder. ‘I’m sorry I have been away for so long. Forgive me. But take hope from my daughter, as I have done. She is strong. She has given me the courage to fight again.’

The men were all standing now. They looked ready to battle an entire army with their bare hands. Indie stood silent in the midst of them, mortified. Aric was the king? Why hadn't he said something? Indie was angry with him, but she was even angrier with herself. Why hadn't she recognised her own father?

‘How many men do you have?’ Aric – no, King Eamon – was asking.

‘About three hundred, all up,’ the captain replied, ‘but they’re not all soldiers. They’re farmers, tradesmen – ’

‘So few ...’ Eamon sighed. ‘And horses?’

‘About the same number. Hidden around the villages on the outskirts of the city.’

‘Ah. That, at least, is better than I expected. Gather the men and horses and meet us at the city gate. Sofia knows I’ve escaped. She won’t wait much longer.’

And that, it seemed, was that. No: ‘Sorry, Indie, I should have told you’. No ‘I’ve missed you, Indie’. Indie’s face reddened in anger as she watched the king talking with his men. It was as if she didn’t exist.

He’d sent her away from Ballyndor. He hadn’t wanted her or he would have tried harder to keep her; he would have done something earlier to stop Aunt Sofia. This was not how she’d imagined it would be when she found her father. This was not the way it was supposed to happen. Indie felt her world crumbling in front of her.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. Suddenly, Indie didn’t want to be in the same room as this father who so completely ignored her. She pushed back her chair, knocking her knee against the leg of the table. The men stopped talking. They were staring at her; they were all staring at her. ‘Indie...’ the king was holding out

his hand, but it was too late. It was far too late. She pushed past the captain, who stepped back in surprise, and ran blindly from the room.

The king found her sitting at the edge of the fountain, hidden by shadows. Her face was smeared where she had rubbed the tears away with dirty hands. The king sat down next to her and looked out at the sleeping city.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Indie said. She felt hollow. She wished she’d never left Aunty Mai, never stepped into the darkness of the chest.

The king sighed. He looked down at his hands. ‘I wanted to tell you,’ he said. ‘When I saw you in the tower, when I was sure it was you, I wanted to tell you everything.’

‘Then why didn’t you?’

‘I was ashamed, Indie. When you found me, I was a filthy broken shell of a man. A coward, a fool. No child deserves a father like that.’

Indie said nothing. It was a stupid answer. It wasn’t enough.

‘Have you heard of Grandma Helki?’ Aric (or King Eamon or whoever he was) continued. Indie nodded sullenly. ‘When Grandma Helki realised what was happening, when she realised how powerful Tenzel had become, she came from the forest herself to take you away.’

‘She was harsh with your mother, told her she didn’t trust the sorcerer and she was taking you somewhere safe until he was gone. So your mother let her take you, both you and Kai, and then she went with your Aunt Sofia to speak to Tenzel – to tell him to leave the castle. ‘ He paused for a moment, his face stern, and swallowed audibly before going on.

‘I should have gone with them. I was sitting in my study, planning a campaign; a way to take back the lands I had already lost. The whole kingdom was falling apart around me and I couldn’t see it.’

The king held out his hand. ‘Please Indie,’ he whispered, ‘I’m trying to tell you that I’m sorry. I’m sorry you had to go away. I’m sorry I let your mother go into

the sorcerer's quarters with Sofia that day.' He paused and took a deep breath. 'It was the last time I saw her.'

Indie didn't want to hear it. It hurt too much. But she needed to know everything.

'When your mother didn't come back, I went looking for her. I found her locket in the garden, lying in the dirt. I knew then that I had lost her.'

Somehow, Indie found herself reaching out and putting her hand in his and he held it tightly, tears in his eyes. 'I rode Canto to the river and buried the locket beneath an old willow tree, then I came back to the castle with my sword drawn.'

Indie looked down at the sword hanging at his belt. The hilt was simply wrought, the scabbard plain.

'It doesn't look like much, does it,' he said, 'but it is very dear to me. It has been in our family for generations. The Kalika speak of a prophecy, something about the 'true heir' wielding the Sword of Veladin and saving the kingdom. It's all superstition, of course, but it was all I could think of as I walked in, swinging the sword and shouting for the sorcerer. They must have thought I'd gone mad.'

He shook his head. 'It was a stupid thing to do. Achieved nothing and gave Sofia a good excuse to declare me insane and have me locked in the tower.'

Indie stood up. 'I don't think it was stupid,' she said. 'I think it was brave. I think you were brave. And I'm not ashamed of you.'

He hugged her then and her anger melted away. She had found her father. He was here, he was real, and he wasn't going to let her down ever again. She wouldn't let him.

*

Indie sat at the table and held her mother's locket. In all the turmoil, it made her feel safe.

She opened it and saw Kai sitting cross-legged in front of a candle, the flame flaring brightly, straight and tall before his face. His eyes were closed and there was a tear running down his cheek.

Indie looked at him for a long time.

‘I'm coming, Kai,’ she whispered.

*

‘No, Indie. You'll be safe here,’ said the king, pulling on his boots.

‘But what about everything you said? About how important I am in all of this? How I'm the strong one? You can't leave me behind!’

‘I meant it. You are important, more important than you realise.’ He checked the hilt of his sword and fastened the strap on his scabbard. ‘But a battle is no place for a child. It is terrible when men fight – I hope you never have to see it.’

Indie opened her mouth, but her father stopped her with a look.

‘No more arguments,’ he said. ‘You're not coming.’



Race to the Forest

Indie watched the men disappear into the night. Then, with the moon still guiding her steps, she ran back through the quiet streets until she reached the fenced off yards at the base of the castle wall. The castle towered over her, bleak and dark grey. There was a chill in the air, as there often is before sunrise, and the grass beneath her feet was wet with dew.

Maybe there's a potion or something I can use, she thought. If only I can get inside.

She was just about to climb into the yards when she heard a voice. 'And what d'ye think yer doin', young missy?'

Indie stopped, one foot on the bottom rail. It was too late to turn and run.

'Who's that?' she called, trying to sound brave. 'Who's there?'

'I'd be askin' you the same question, my girl. And I'd not be climbin' any further if I was you.'

Indie could just make out a small bent man standing against the fence, all the way over the other side of the paddock. In between them, beginning to whinny and paw the ground, was the most beautiful horse she had ever seen. He was golden, with a white star on his forehead, and he was looking at her with a faintly puzzled air.

'Master Tenzel wanted me to bring 'is horse in for the great ride this morning, but Canto here don't like bein' a sorcerer's horse.'

'Canto!' Indie exclaimed. 'But he belongs to the king.'

‘Seems old Tenzel has taken pretty much everything that belonged to the king. He's had a bit of trouble takin' this here pony, though.’ The man chuckled. ‘Hasna' been ridden fer years. Won't let anyone touch him.’

Indie stared at Canto.

‘Canto is the fastest horse in Gort, isn't he?’ she called across the field. She had climbed the fence and was now sitting on the top rung. Canto whinnied and moved a little closer.

‘Aye, lass, that he is,’ he said. ‘I'd get down from there if I were you. He's liable to push ye off.’

‘Has the sorcerer left the castle yet?’ Her voice was rising.

‘They're just riding out now. The sun'll be up soon. Guards runnin' about everywhere like usual. I'd be getting' back to your folks, if ye know what's good fer ye.’

Canto whinnied again, softly, and took a few more steps. ‘Hello boy,’ Indie whispered. ‘Do you remember me?’

Canto's head lifted and he came right over to the fence. Indie looked into his eyes and remembered sunny days long ago when she would sit proudly on his back, her legs dangling high above the stirrups. She remembered she had loved Canto, and she saw by the recognition in his eyes that Canto remembered it too. Taking a deep breath, she leaned out and threw herself onto the horse's back.

‘Come on, Canto,’ she said. ‘Show me how fast you can go.’

Canto felt the girl's slight weight and knew the connection between them, with that deep understanding horses have. He had loved the father and, instinctively, he would protect the child. He spun and cantered toward the fence, leaping high over the railing as the old man yelled in protest.

But he was too far away to stop them. Indie clung to Canto's mane, as they careered down the street.

‘To the forest!’ she cried, without the faintest idea whether she was going the right way. In the end she just held on as tightly as she could and hoped Canto knew where he was going.

She could see the first rays of sunlight breaking through the trees as they came over the brown hills. There, stretching out before her, was the dim cool underworld of the forest.

It seemed only moments later that she reached the fringe of the trees, and slumping to the ground she lay there for a moment, stunned at the ease of her escape. She'd felt the rhythm of the horse beneath her, matched her breathing and her thoughts to Canto's, and felt like she belonged there, as if she and the horse were one.

Canto leaned down and rubbed his nose against her cheek.

'Thank you,' Indie said, reaching out to pat him. 'I'll be okay now. I don't think you want to come in here with me, do you?'

She jumped to her feet and looked into the tangle of trees and vines. *Fee fi fo fum ...*

'I'll come back as I soon as I can,' she whispered.

Canto whinnied softly and turned away.

Indie clenched her fists. *I can do this*, she thought. *I am not afraid.*

It was rough going, pushing her way through the vines and creepers. The trees towered over her, pressing in around her. There was no pathway, no trail, not even a stream to follow. No, this was nothing like the island she knew.

She didn't even know which way to go to find the fabled hiding place the sorcerer was going to attack. And there was the real problem: if it was such a good hiding place – a place that no one had found – how was she supposed to find it?

After a while she stopped, discouraged and tired, and sat down on a mossy log. The sun was shining now, its light trickling through the forest canopy, and she could hear the crashing and swearing of the sorcerer's army as they tried to make their way through the trees.

Snap. A twig cracked right behind her.

A hand clamped over her mouth.

‘Shhh,’ said a voice, close to her ear. ‘Don't make a sound.’

She turned. Behind her were six men, brown-skinned and blue-eyed, dressed in the same soft brown as Dargan.

‘I am Brek of the Kalika,’ whispered the smallest of the men, the one who had put his hand over her mouth. ‘It's not safe for you here. You must come with me.’

She didn't see where the other men went; they blended quietly back into the trees. Brek beckoned her to follow, moving ahead so lightly that his footsteps made no sound as he plunged further into the forest. And then he stopped, in front of an enormous tree. He gestured in the direction of what looked to Indie like a green curtain of vines. ‘Through there,’ he said. ‘You'll find your brother in the furthest hut. The little one on the right, closest to the coneflowers.’

‘But where are you going?’ Indie asked.

‘Ah,’ he said, with a mischievous grin. ‘Tenzel's men are already a little afraid of us from the stories he has told them. It's time to rattle them a bit more. We don't have enough men to fight, and it's not our way to kill people. We have blow darts tipped with sleeping herbs and powders that make you itch so much you think you might die. We know the secret paths of the forest, the hidden tunnels and the hollow trees. We will sneak up on them when they least expect it and, at the very least, we will slow them down as they keep looking over their shoulders for the next threat.’

He winked at Indie and turned to disappear. ‘Wait,’ Indie said. ‘The king. He's coming with three hundred men. He can't be too far away. How can I let him know where you'll be?’

Brek's face lit up. ‘There's always hope,’ he mused, ‘even when things seem impossible. Be strong, princess, this will all be over soon.’

He turned and vanished into the trees.

Indie lifted the curtain of vines and found that she was at the mouth of a long green tunnel. It was completely camouflaged – she would never have found it on her own.

She stepped out into a clearing, and knew she was in the right place. A group of huts stood within a circle of faded coneflowers, just as she'd seen in the locket. All was quiet. There was no sign of life. But as she crossed the clearing, she glimpsed faces at the windows of the huts and shadows dancing in the firelight.



Grandma Helki

The candle flickered, once, twice and then went out. Kai sat in the shadows, listening.

‘You mustn’t be afraid, Kai,’ Grandma Helki said softly. ‘Fear is Tenzel's only real weapon. If you are frightened of him, he will win.’

‘But I am frightened of him,’ Kai said. ‘I don't know what I’m supposed to do. The coneflowers –’

‘The coneflowers are gone.’ The old woman began to cough. Kai waited until she could speak again. ‘You do not need flowers, child; your powers lie far deeper. You must touch the spirit of the living earth.’

Kai looked at Chief Wicasa's book, lying half-forgotten at his feet. A breeze ruffled the pages; they turned one after another, and then stopped.

‘Read it,’ whispered Grandma Helki.

Kai picked up the book and began to read.

Air, Fire, Water, Earth.

Be not afraid to call upon the spirits of land and sea. Be not afraid to work with the four forces. They are part of you, and you are part of them.

Follow the path of the great chiefs.

Take courage.

Remember who you are.

‘It’s a different kind of magic,’ Grandma Helki said. ‘I have never used it – I don’t know if I could. But you, Kai ... I see such power in you.’ She stopped and caught her breath. ‘You must find your sister. You will have ... more strength if she is with you ... Two of you must stand together ...’

Her eyes closed.

Kai pressed his cheek against her withered hands; then he walked to the door, clutching the book. Outside the forest was silent. The first rays of the sun were sneaking through the trees.

I can’t do this by myself, he thought.

Voices hummed around him. ‘Everything happens for a reason. Everything is as it should be.’ But it didn’t look that way to him.

He was about to tiptoe out of the hut when Grandma Helki spoke again. ‘Wait. There is one more thing you must know.’

He hurried to the bed and held her hand.

‘I watched your Aunt Sofia growing up. Always fighting with poor Tala, always wanting what she had. I tried to teach Sofia ... tried to help her. She was so smart, so gifted. She learned so quickly.’

‘When your mother married Eamon, Sofia ran away to the mountains. There is an evil man there, a shaman who mixes poisons and practises black magic. I should have known ... I should have suspected Sofia would look for him. I didn’t want to believe it.’

Her voice was cracked, her breathing harsh. ‘You must understand, Kai. Every time Sofia uses the shaman’s magic, she loses part of herself. You will defeat Tenzel – he is a weak man, a coward – but Sofia ... Sofia ...’

A tear rolled down her cheek and she turned her face away.

Kai walked away from the bed, his heart tight in his chest. He wanted to cry, to curl up in a corner and hide until it was all over; but he couldn’t. Grandma Helki

needed him. The Kalika – his people – needed him. He rubbed his hand across his eyes; then he squared his shoulders and opened the door.

Standing on the other side, her clothes filthy and her hair full of leaves, was the last person he had ever expected to see.

‘Indie!’ he cried, throwing both arms around her. ‘But how ...?’

Indie grinned. ‘It’s a long story,’ she said.

*

Indie looked at the boy standing before her. He was smiling. His dark hair danced in curls and spikes across his head, as if he’d never brushed it in his life. Scratches and scrapes covered his arms and legs.

He’s my brother, she thought. My brother.

And, for a moment, nothing else mattered.

‘I’m sorry –’ he began.

‘I’m sorry, too,’ she said.

*

‘Well about time, young lady,’ said a familiar voice. ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

Indie almost fell over: Aunty Mai was standing right behind her.

‘Come along Kai,’ her aunt was saying. She hustled him outside, whispering to Indie as she left. ‘Your great grandmother wants to see you. Hurry now, just a quick hello.’

Indie stared at the frail old lady on the bed. ‘Grandma Helki?’ she whispered, moving closer.

‘My beautiful child.’ The old woman’s lips were white. She spoke in slips of sound. ‘My Indie ... my little one ...’

Her hands fell slack against the sheets. ‘*Ki-somma,*’ she whispered. ‘*Kokomi ki-somma.*’

After a moment, Aunty Mai led Indie to the door.

‘Kai needs you,’ she said softly. ‘We all do.’ She gave the girl a gentle push. ‘I’ll be here with Grandma. Go now. He’s waiting.’

Indie found Kai outside, stoking a small fire, Chief Wicasa’s book open on the ground beside him.

‘Are you ready?’ he said.

Indie sat down. She watched the flames dance. ‘I know who you are,’ she said.

Kai stared into the fire.

Indie picked up a stick. She scratched in the dirt. She stood up and sat down again. ‘I found the king,’ she said.

There was still no answer.

‘Are you listening to me? I found the king ... King Eamon ... our *father*, Kai.’

Kai didn’t even blink. She might have been talking to a rock.

‘The sorcerer is here,’ Indie said, standing again. ‘He has hundreds ... no, thousands of men. The Kalika are trying to weaken his army, but it won’t be enough.’

Kai pressed his palms together and bowed his head.

‘The king is riding in with three hundred soldiers,’ Indie went on, her voice rising. ‘But I don’t think that’ll be enough either.’

‘I know what the sorcerer does to his prisoners.’ Her face was pale, her eyes a brilliant green. ‘I’ve seen the castle gardens. There’s a terrible magic there. Aunt Sofia has locked people inside the trees. She’s locked them in the grass, even in the flowers. They’ll die, Kai. They’re all going to die!’

She hit him then. On the shoulder. Hard.

‘*Kai!*’

‘Kai! Why won’t you speak to me?’

‘It’s okay, Indie.’ Kai said, looking up at last. ‘I’m scared too, but it’s going to be okay.’ He picked up the book. ‘Sit next to me and close your eyes.’

‘But I don’t – ’

‘Just close your eyes.’

Spirits of the earth and sky,

Of thunder, lightening, wind and snow,

Of night-time black and forest green,

Of cloud on high and field below,

Protect us now.

‘Are you going to spin like last time?’ Indie whispered.

‘Shhh,’ said Kai. ‘I’m trying to concentrate.’

*

There was a great stomping and crashing near the entrance to the green tunnel.

‘I know it’s here somewhere,’ said a voice.

‘Keep searching, you fools.’

‘Aaaah, I’m so itchy my arms are fallin’ orf.’

‘Help me, will you? Frego has passed out.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘No, snorin’ like the others.’

‘It’s witchcraft, that’s what it is.’

The voices were getting closer.

Indie looked at Kai: his face was pale and his hands trembled. She sat beside him and closed her eyes.

'I'm ready,' she whispered.



Air and Fire

Air,

Element of the East,

Breath of the rising sun.

The words swirled around Indie, until she was conscious only of the breeze about her body and the wind against her face.

Moving, changing, growing Wind,

We acknowledge your strength,

We ask you to help us.

Kai's voice was rising, soaring into the air to become one with the element he called. The breeze, which had caressed Indie's skin and ruffled her hair, was growing stronger. High over their heads it became a wind, tossing the treetops as if they were twigs.

The wind slammed through the spaces between the trees, shrieking and howling, battering all in its path. It thundered through the forest, making the whole world shake.

Indie felt a rush inside her. She waited for the blast she was sure would knock her off her feet, but the clearing remained still. The fire burned with barely a flicker. It was as if they were sitting in the eye of a hurricane.

*

Tenzel's men were not so lucky. The wind tore their shields and swords from their grasp, whipping at their clothing, wrapping their hair and beards around their eyes so they couldn't see. It churned up dust, leaves and twigs from the forest floor and threw it into their faces. When they opened their mouths to scream, the wind snatched the breath from their lungs and filled their throats with dirt.

This was not an enemy they could fight. It picked them up and dashed them against tree trunks. It threw them like sticks into the bushes. When they clawed their way free of the thorny undergrowth, they were so shaken they could barely stand up.

‘Stay together,’ Tenzel cried. ‘It’s a trick!’

The journey had been full of tricks. First, tiny arrows flying out of nowhere, then the terrible itching and the clatter of arms as the men tumbled to the ground asleep, and now this. He clung with both his arms and legs to the base of a tree, watching as his army was scattered.

The tempest passed. The howling died away. Each man was filled with a sense of dread he could not describe, a sense that time had stopped.

Tenzel stood up, his robes twisted and torn. He tried to brush off the dirt. ‘What are you waiting for, you fools?’ he said. ‘Are you scared of a little wind?’

There was silence. The men looked warily at each other.

‘Keep searching!’ the sorcerer screamed, waving his hands in the air. His eyes were wild; his hair tangled with leaves and twigs.

‘But we've lost our swords, General Tenzel, Sir.’ Pem limped up beside him, his gold tooth missing.

‘Then find them,’ Tenzel growled. ‘And find those miserable forest people.’

*

Indie couldn't contain herself; she got up and danced around the fire. ‘That was amazing!’ she said.

Kai sat quietly, the book in his hands. 'It's not over yet,' he whispered.

He began to read.

Fire,

Element of the West,

Force of rage, passion and courage.

Indie sat once again beside him. Waves of heat passed through her body. She felt flames spiralling into her chest, making her head spin.

Kai had his hands on the ground, as if he was trying to stay there.

'Can you feel it?' he said. 'It feels like it's going to carry me away.'

'Me, too.' Indie was elated. 'It feels like I'm flying already.'

'Steady now.' The women from the island were quietly making a ring around the fire.

'Ready girls,' Aunty Mai said crisply. 'One for each direction and hold the circle strong.'

The women sat down. They bowed their heads and began to mumble.

'What are they doing?' Indie asked. She was being pulled back to earth at an alarming speed.

'Grounding us,' Kai was breathing heavily. 'Keeping us strong. Ready? Brace yourself.'

*

Pem turned to the sorcerer. 'Er, General Tenzel ... Sir ... I think I can smell smoke.'

A tower of fire burst from the ground. Green and purple flames shot into the sky, surrounding the sorcerer's men. Some yelled wildly and beat at the flames

with their hands; others, including the sorcerer, cowered at the centre, crouching and whimpering with their few remaining shields protecting their heads.

Beyond the fire, a strange group was gathering. It looked as if the smaller trees had picked themselves up and were walking towards the flames – trees with arms and legs, and streaks of brown across their faces.

A spindly tree in the front signalled to a tree with grey leaves on the other side. ‘Hsst ... It’s Brek. We've covered half the trees in sticksap – should slow them down a bit.’

The grey-leafed tree grinned. ‘We've been dragging the sleepers to the far side of the forest.’

‘And the itchers?’

‘Still scratching as they ran back to Ballyndor.’

‘Excellent work.’

‘Thanks.’ White teeth shone through the leaves. ‘What do you make of the wind and fire?’

‘I'm guessing Kai has something to do with it.’

‘And the king? Any sign of him?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Tenzel doesn't have many men left. There'll be even fewer after this.’ The man sounded hopeful, but his eyes betrayed him.

Brek’s face was grim. ‘There are still too many,’ he said.

*

Tenzel’s men screamed and cried. Great sheaths of flame flew up around them.

A few tried to run through the spitting heat. They emerged on the other side with their clothes smoking and the tips of their hair on fire. They ran without thinking, blinded by smoke and terror, until they reached the river and threw themselves into the water.

*

Indie jumped to her feet. She couldn't stand still, let alone sit. She could hear the screams and smell the smoke and see the flames rising from the forest. She could feel the energy of the fire running through her veins.

The words of the Seeing Tree came back to her: 'Open the box and you will find what you are looking for.'

The locket showed her and her brother together, side by side.

That was it. She finally understood. She had forgotten her family, forgotten who she was. The locket had led her to her father and her brother. And to Ballyndor.

You will find what you are looking for.

But my mother, Indie thought. What about my mother?



Water

Water,

Element of the South,

Flow of emotion and awareness.

Kai gave Indie a wicked grin. ‘This should cool them off,’ he said.

*

The roar of the fire faded and a hush fell. Tenzel pulled himself to his feet. Clinging to Pem with one arm, he watched his men flee through the forest. ‘Traitors,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll have them all hanged when I get back to Ballyndor.’

Those soldiers still beside him felt the touch of raindrops and turned their charcoal faces to the sky. It had not rained in Gort for months. They opened their mouths to taste the sweet cool water, almost crying with joy.

The sorcerer saw the change in their eyes. ‘Come on lads,’ he cried, rubbing his hands together. ‘It’s time to end this.’

A crack of thunder rocked the ground; lightening shattered the sky. The great tree at the entrance to the tunnel was split completely in two.

Dark clouds rolled across the sun, leaving the forest in shadow.

The sorcerer's men clutched their weapons. This was no ordinary magic. They'd never seen a spell bring on howling winds, circles of fire and now a mighty storm. No, this was something else entirely; and the sorcerer seemed as helpless against it as they were.

The storm, when it hit, was like a snarling beast. The rain whipped their faces and their bodies. It drenched them to the bone and left them shaking.

'We have to find higher ground,' Pem cried, tugging at the sorcerer's sleeve.

Tenzel remained where he was, stunned.

'The river is coming,' Pem screamed in his ear. 'You have to get the men out of here. We'll all be drowned.'

Tenzel looked about him, his eyes wide with horror. 'Save yourselves,' he croaked, tearing his sleeve from Pem's grasp and running for the closest tree. He hauled himself up, fighting the rain that tore at his cloak and drove spears of water into the back of his neck.

The men found their own trees. They scrambled up the branches as a wall of water came roaring towards them, crashing into tree trunks, dragging at their boots.

Climbing higher and higher, some of the men found they could go no further. The branches were covered with a thick gluey sap. They lay, unable to move, while the river foamed beneath them and the rain cut into their backs. The more they wriggled, the stickier the sap became.

The trees bent and swayed. Those men who weren't stuck were flung into the churning waters, clinging to fallen branches and screaming for the sorcerer to save them. But the sorcerer did not save them. He clung to his branch with his eyes shut tight.

'What kind of people can call the clouds to do their bidding? What kind of people can summon the river?' He lifted his head and banged it on the branch above. 'Arrgh ... I should have burned the whole forest to the ground while I had the chance.'

He opened his eyes. From his position high in the tree he could see the river flowing in a perfect circle. At the centre of that circle was exactly what he'd been looking for – a clearing filled with huts.

His fear turned to anger.

‘So...’ he said. ‘Witches. Calling up the wind and the rain, tormenting us with their unnatural spells. And all the while their brats play by the fire.’

He waved his fist in the air and almost fell out of the tree. ‘I will not be defeated like this,’ he cried. ‘I am the great Sorcerer Tenzel!’

He clambered to the ground and surveyed the sorry remains of his army. Soden. Bedraggled. Missing an eyebrow here and there. And useless too – half of the men were still up in the trees.

‘Get down here immediately,’ he yelled, stamping his muddy boots.

There was a lot of shaking branches and squirming soldiers but not a single man came down.

‘Cowards,’ the sorcerer muttered, and he picked up his sword and stalked into the forest.

*

Indie heard it first – the squelch of boots and the hacking of swords. ‘He’s here,’ she whispered. ‘The sorcerer. He’s found the tunnel.’

‘He's still coming?’ Kai sat back, letting the book slide to the ground in frustration. ‘Then it’s no use. It’s no use, Indie! We’ve failed.’

‘We haven't failed. Not yet.’ Indie picked up the book and put it in his hands. ‘You said there were four elements. What about the last one?’

‘Earth,’ Kai said quietly. ‘It means security, stability, strength. It’s the element of protection. It’s not a weapon.’

The boots were inside the tunnel now.

‘Try it,’ Indie said. ‘We have to try. We can't just give up.’

*

The first of Tenzel's men to venture into the clearing was felled on the spot by sleeping darts. The next was not so foolish. He picked up a dripping branch and used it as a shield.

The sorcerer's voice floated in behind them. 'What are you waiting for, you idiots? Burn the huts. Bring the prisoners to me.'

A war cry went up from the trees at the edge of the clearing. The sound of drums filled the forest. *Boom taka ta. Boom taka ta.* Women and children and old men appeared in their doorways, brandishing sticks and stones.

The cry grew louder. The drums beat faster. The men of the Kalika burst from the bushes, waving their silver knives.



Earth

Indie watched the first man fall. No, not a man: a boy. A Kalika boy. With brown skin and serious eyes, and a face very much like Kai's.

It's a terrible thing when men fight.

She grabbed her brother's arm. 'I'm going to find a sword,' she said.

'No you're not,' said Kai. 'I need you.'

She sat beside him, holding his hand, as he whispered the final words.

Earth,

Element of the North,

Sacred mother to us all.

Kai closed his eyes. It was hopeless. He'd done everything he'd been told to, everything Grandma Helki had asked, and still it wasn't enough. He'd been fooling himself: he would never be like the great Wicasa. He was no different to anyone else.

'You're too hard on yourself, boy.'

He jumped to his feet. 'Who's that?' he asked. 'Who's there?'

'Be still.' The voice was deep and slow. 'The others can't hear me. Look at your poor sister staring at you. She thinks you've gone mad.'

There was a chuckle. ‘Now sit down and finish the job. You’re more connected with Mother Earth than I had hoped; certainly more connected than I was at your age.’ The voice was fading. ‘Look after that book of mine.’

In front of Grandma Helki’s hut stood a shadowy figure – an old man with a mysterious smile. Next to him ... no, it couldn’t be...

‘Sit down, Kai,’ Grandma Helki said softly. ‘Do what you must do.’

Kai felt tears in his eyes. He looked across at Brek, fallen to the ground, a great gash across his forehead; and at the others, all locked together, their knives flashing. There was too much happening, too much to take in.

Indie dragged him back down by his shorts.

‘Come on, Kai,’ she said. ‘You can’t lose it now. We have to finish this thing.’

Kai looked over at the hut. The two shadows were still there, watching him. He could feel their love and strength flowing over him, but he was so afraid.

‘Kai!’ Indie was shaking him. ‘Kai! You have to finish the spell!’

‘I can’t ...’

‘Yes you can.’

‘No ... it’s no use.’

‘Then give it to me.’ Indie grabbed for the book. ‘I’m not afraid to try!’

‘No!’ Kai felt a strange calm spreading through him. His fingertips began to tingle. He closed his eyes and thought about his breathing. In, out, in, out. Gradually the screams and cries faded, and the world around him grew still.

‘*Koko makani ki maka maka,*’ he whispered.

The words were not Chief Wicasa’s. They were his own.

A rough hand grabbed Indie’s shoulder. She bit and kicked as the soldier dragged her away from the fire.

‘Kai!’ she screamed. ‘Kai! Help me!’

‘Get your hands off her, you brute.’ Aunty Mai flew at the soldier’s face, battering him with a stick in a futile attempt to get him to drop Indie.

Focus... Kai took another deep breath. ‘*Koko makani ki maka maka,*’ he said.

The soldier threw Indie over his left shoulder. She beat at his back with her fists.

‘Shut up,’ he was saying. ‘Just you wait until the Lady ...’

‘Koko makani ki maka maka.’

And then everything changed. The sun burst through the clouds. A tremor shook the ground. Voices filled the air.

‘We are with you. We are one. Do not be afraid.’

One by one, the sorcerer's men stopped fighting and gazed around. The hard slant of their faces seemed to ease. The anger, the hatred, the fear – it was all gone as if it had never been. The Kalika could feel the change. They watched in amazement as those soldiers who still had weapons lowered them to the ground.

‘The forest,’ stuttered Pem, his eyes wide. ‘It’s ... it’s beautiful!’

‘Do you see those purple coneflowers over there?’ said one of his companions, rubbing his eyes as if he’d been asleep. ‘I hadn't noticed them before.’

The soldier who had picked up Indie gently set her down. ‘I’m so sorry, miss,’ he said. He stared at the faces peeping out of the huts. ‘There are women and children here,’ he said. ‘I'm not hurtin' women and children.’

‘Nor I,’ said the man behind him. ‘An' I'm not messin' up this place. Look how tall the trees are! An' listen to those birds.’

‘You fools,’ Tenzel screamed. ‘You don't have to hurt anyone.’ He brandished his battered sword. ‘Just take them prisoner. I'll deal with them when we get back to the castle.’

Not a man moved. The voices hummed around them, washing over them. ‘Look around. We are with you. We are one.’

‘No,’ said Pem, turning to face Tenzel. ‘We aren't takin' anyone prisoner. Not today. Not any day.’

‘You've got that right, friend,’ said a voice.

King Eamon emerged from the tunnel, brushing the leaves from his hair. Dargan and the captain followed.

‘My men have rounded up all those who fled your army,’ the king said. ‘A sad defeated bunch they were, too.’ He laughed, and his laughter sounded bright and strong in the morning air.

A whisper went through the ranks. ‘The king has returned!’

Pem threw himself onto his knees. ‘Your Majesty,’ he said. ‘The General ... I mean, Tenzel ... he told us you were dead. He said all those who didn't follow him were traitors and would be killed.’

Eamon looked at the snivelling man in front of him. ‘It seems Tenzel has said a lot of things. Stand up, man. You probably don't deserve it, but I'm giving you a second chance. Come back to your king and regain your honour.’

He looked around. ‘Soldiers of Ballyndor. You are right. Your king has returned.’

A loud cheer rang through the clearing as he continued.

‘It's time to reclaim Gort from those who have cast her into despair. This was once a joyous land, a bountiful place. This was a place where the people of Ballyndor and the people of the forest lived side by side in harmony. The self-described sorcerer Tenzel and she who calls herself Queen have forced you to live with hatred, with fear but now ...’

He stopped. ‘Where is Tenzel?’ he said, a frown of concern on his face.

Dargan and the captain shook their heads. The men looked at each other.

‘I think he's gone, sir. I think he's run off to hide,’ said Pem, his eyes downcast. ‘I think that's just what he would do.’

‘Let him go,’ the king said, grasping the handle of his sword. ‘He’ll run back to Sofia and we’ll take them both at the castle. He is a coward and a bully, and such men are easily dealt with.’

He paused, and looked around at the beaten faces of Tenzel's army.

‘Dargan,’ he said, turning to the man beside him. ‘Can you organise some food and a place for the men to rest?’

Dargan looked at him in disbelief. ‘These men came here to kill my people, and now you ask us to feed them?’

‘These men are our brothers. They are soldiers of the Royal Army.’

‘Our brothers! It didn’t take much for them to believe the Kalika were their enemies.’

‘They were afraid,’ the king said, regret evident in his voice. ‘It is not hard to replace fear with hatred.’

‘That’s no excuse.’ Dargan's voice was a hostile whisper. ‘They came here to destroy us.’

A young man with pale skin and hair the colour of corn walked over to Dargan. ‘I’m sorry, my brother,’ he said, holding out his hand. ‘For a long time I thought we were following the king. When the sorcerer told us he was dead, I just kept following orders. That’s what we were trained to do. Forgive me. I will not be so blind next time.’

‘Pray there will not be a next time, brother,’ said Dargan, clasping his hand.

Eamon turned back to the army.

‘Men of Ballyndor,’ he said. ‘Dargan is right. I need to know I have your allegiance. You have all seen the damage one evil man can do – the forest burned, the trees cut down.’

‘More than that, it seems the old stories are coming true. The lady who calls herself Queen has vowed to destroy the royal family. If the stories are to be be-

lieved, she will lead Gort into a hundred years of sorrow. We cannot let this happen.

‘The people of the forest have always been our allies and our friends. They stand by me in this fight. Soldiers of Ballyndor, are you with us?’

There was another loud cheer and all the men raised their fists in the air. Not a man stayed silent.

‘We're coming too.’

Eamon turned. Kai and Indie were standing beside him.

The king laughed. ‘Well, we can hardly leave you behind after this morning's effort.’ He cast a shrewd glance at Indie. ‘I won't ask how you made it to the forest before we did.’

Indie grinned. ‘I borrowed Canto,’ she said. ‘I was sure you wouldn't make it in time. He's amazing! Come on. I'll show you where I left him.’

‘You go on ahead,’ Dargan said. ‘I'll get things organised here and follow with my men when they come back.’

‘And I'll gather my lads,’ said the captain. ‘They won't want to miss this.’

*

When the shuffling, broken soldiers had been led away to find food, and the captain had run back through the tunnel to find as many of his men as he could to tell them the news, the king took Kai and Indie aside.

‘I don't know what happened today,’ he said, looking closely at them both. ‘I don't know what to think. Perhaps the old prophecies really are coming true.’

He sighed. ‘It will be dangerous facing Sofia. I'd be a lot happier if you stayed here.’

‘But we can help you,’ said Indie. ‘We're not afraid.’

‘That's what scares me most,’ said her father.



The Transformation Spell

In the stables behind the castle, clad in a dress of flowing emerald green, Aunt Sofia stood muttering to herself. The walls around her were lined with shelves, and on each shelf stood a row of coloured bottles. Aunt Sofia studied the closest row for some time. Then she picked up a small orange bottle, walked across the room to the window, and waited.

Tap, tap, tap.

‘Come in, Tenzel,’ she said. ‘The door is open.’

The man who entered was very different to the one who had ridden out before dawn, leading his great army. Tenzel's robes were torn and muddy, his eyebrows were gone, his face was smeared with blood.

‘What happened to *you*?’ Aunt Sofia’s voice was soft, but Tenzel was not deceived. She was at her most dangerous when she spoke like this.

‘Witchcraft,’ Tenzel said. ‘Wind, fire, lightening, rain. It was terrible.’

‘You fool.’ Aunt Sofia looked at him without a trace of sympathy. ‘They have Wicasa's book, or didn't you realise that? It was all a trick, an illusion. You imagined the whole thing.’

Tenzel shook his head. ‘No, it was real. It was all real.’

‘Rubbish. No one has that kind of power. That is the work of a true sorcerer, and there hasn't been one of those around since Wicasa.’

‘But the child –’

‘What child?’

‘The boy ... the girl ... I don't know. Both, I think. They were there together.’

‘And you let them escape?’

‘They were sitting next to a fire,’ Tenzel said, rubbing his nose. ‘They were playing. At least, I think they were playing. I was up in a tree.’

‘Was anyone else there?’

‘Four women, sitting in a circle –’

Sofia raised a contemptuous eyebrow. ‘You are an idiot. Defeated by four women, two brats and a bunch of medicine men.’ She scowled. ‘Where is my army?’

Tenzel looked down. ‘Um ... they ... well ...’

‘Where are they, Tenzel? Did you lose them?’

‘No, I ...’ He took a deep breath. ‘They all went with the king.’

‘The king! Then it is worse than I thought.’ She turned back to the window. Tenzel, thinking himself dismissed, began to shuffle towards the door.

‘Did I say you could leave?’

‘No ... Sorry ... I –’

‘Make sure the guards are in position.’ She spoke very slowly, as if to a halfwit. ‘I need to be alone. Do you understand me, Tenzel? Do not let anyone disturb me.’

She watched him scurry out, his shoulders stooped and his head bowed. She’d deal with him later and it would make her feel so much better. Perhaps she would turn him into a worm. Yes, a slimy little worm. He would make such a satisfying squish under the heel of her shoe.

*

Indie and Kai waited for Tenzel’s footsteps to pass.

They had not expected to make the journey at such speed. Canto had carried them both so easily. Mane flying, hooves pounding, with their father beside them on the captain's grey mare and the army of Ballyndor thundering behind.

'Let's ride straight up to the castle,' Indie had cried. 'Oh, I wish I had a sword!'

'A sword?' Kai began to laugh. 'What would you do with a sword? I bet you couldn't even lift it.'

'I bet I could.'

'Well, even if you could, why would we ride up to the front door? What about the guards? What about the sorcerer? What about *Aunt Sofia*?'

'What's your brilliant idea then, smartypants?'

The king had stopped at the wall, out of sight of the guards, and slid from the saddle. He was laughing too.

'My brave and reckless Indie,' he said. 'Nothing has changed. But come. Follow me. I know a better way into the castle.'

And now here they were, in a tunnel of stone – right under Tenzel's nose.

'Indie,' the king whispered. 'Can you remember how to get back to the gardens?'

'Yes, but –'

'I need you to go there. Both of you. I need you to break that spell.' He looked at Kai. 'If the magic sets, people will die.'

'It won't set,' said Indie. 'We won't let it.'

Kai said nothing. He looked down at his hands. It was all very well for her to say that, but who was responsible for actually doing the spell? *What if it does set?* he thought. *What if I can't stop it?*

'I'm going to find Sofia,' said the king. 'Dargan will be here soon and I don't want you two caught up in any fighting.' He lowered himself to the ground crawled along the passage, without looking back.

Kai watched him go. ‘Do you think he'll be okay by himself?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Indie. ‘That's why we have to hurry.’

*

The sun was high by the time they reached the gardens. The tunnel ended on the far side of the castle, so they had to navigate a screen of densely planted bushes to get inside. Under the trees it was cool and shady, a secret world of streams and flowers: the only place in the whole city where the grass was still green.

Kai stopped. Tiny fingers of dread tiptoed along his spine. ‘You were right,’ he whispered. ‘This place is creepy.’

Indie led him across the lawns to the apple tree. ‘Hurry,’ she said. ‘See what the book says.’

Kai was breathing heavily. ‘We’re too late. Can’t you feel the magic? It’s everywhere. It’s black ... all black ...’

‘No,’ cried Indie. ‘We can't be too late. It can't have set already.’ She grabbed Kai’s arm. ‘Just try. We have to try.’

Kai sat under the tree and laid the book on the grass. The breeze rustled the pages; they flipped over, one by one, and then they stopped. Kai read the heading in a quiet voice.

Spell for the Reversal of a Transformation Spell

He looked at Indie.

‘Go on,’ she whispered.

Doubt crept inside his head, stealing his power, and he faltered: ‘I can’t.’

Indie took his hand. ‘Yes you can.’

He took a deep breath, gathered his will, and whispered the words.

Awake now from your secret sleep,

Follow my voice from your prison deep,

Let your heart and mind be free,

Awake now, and come back to me.

And then, a faint moan came from the trees and the grass: a painful sound that made Indie's fingers tingle and the small hairs on her neck stand on end.

'What's that?' she said. 'What's happening?'

'It's the spell,' said Kai. 'I've stirred it up.'

The moaning grew louder and higher until it became a scream. The ground began to shake. Indie found herself clinging to the base of the tree, her eyes wide and her breathing fast. Kai sat with his eyes closed, swaying.

The leaves above them whirled in a frightening dance – branches writhing and crashing, bark shedding in spirals. Indie pressed both her hands to the apple tree and whispered 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry', but the tree made no sound.

Kai could feel the original spell fighting against him, like a storm cloud trying to block the sun. In his mind he could see specks of gold, breaking free from the darkness, trying to find their way back to the light. He called to them, 'Awake now, awake now,' but the darkness covered everything.

The spell was all around him. Smothering him. Draining him of courage.

I can't get out, he thought. I can't do this.

The spell seeped into his body. Cold. Damp. A fog that filled his mind and heart. *So this is what it feels like ...*

Can't get out.

Can't do this.

Can't.

Someone was shaking his arm. Indie's voice swam into the darkness surrounding him. 'Kai! What can I do? How can I help you?'

And after hers, there came more voices. ‘Be strong, Kai. We are with you. We are one.’

He clutched the book to his chest, suddenly hopeful. He wasn’t alone. He was part of a great river: a rushing, whirling river that filled his body and flowed into everything around him.

‘*Ki-somma,*’ he whispered. ‘*Kokomi ki-somma.*’

And the darkness was gone. The sun was pouring into his heart. It felt like every good thing that had ever happened to him was all happening at once, like he might shoot up into the sky and never come down. But he didn’t. Instead, he was knocked backwards by arms – human arms – reaching out of the apple tree.

The screaming grew louder. A black cloud rose from the garden. It hovered for a moment and then began to shrink: spinning and shrieking as it did so.

People stepped out of the trees and the bushes; they drifted up from the grass and the flowers. They emerged, dripping, from the ponds and the streams. It was as if the whole garden had come to human life.

The people looked confused, as though they weren't sure what was happening or who they were. They gathered in a circle around Indie and Kai. No one spoke; no one moved. They had been prisoners for so long they didn’t know they were free.

Indie took a deep breath.

‘People of Ballyndor ... People of the Forest,’ she began, her voice trembling, ‘you’ve been under a terrible spell. The queen’s sister, Sofia –’ She stopped.

Sofia ... *her* Aunt Sofia ... even now, she couldn’t believe it. She’d never really liked her aunt, but who would’ve guessed ...

Kai gave her a nudge. The people were staring at her. She gathered her wits and continued.

‘Sorry ... um ... yes, Sofia and the sorcerer, Tenzel, have taken over the castle. They were going to lock you up here forever.’

She looked at the pale faces and her voice grew stronger. ‘But my brother, Kai,’ she pointed to Kai, who smiled shyly and looked at the ground. ‘My brother, Kai, has broken the spell. The magic is gone. And you are free.’

An old woman put her hands to her face. Small brown hands. Ready to catch her tears.

‘Please don’t be afraid,’ Indie said. ‘King Eamon has returned. He has taken back his army and they’re riding to the castle. It’s all over. You don’t need to be afraid any more.’

Silence. Then a little girl in the front said, ‘Who are you?’

Indie tried to smile. ‘I’m Indie ... I mean, I am ...’ She realized then that she didn’t know her full name. Even after all that time with Paco –after reading all those old books – there was still so much she didn’t know.

Kai took her arm. ‘This is Princess Indigo of Ballyndor,’ he said. ‘This is the king’s daughter.’

The king’s daughter.

A whisper went around the circle: it was like ice melting. People shook themselves. Faces lost their frozen expressions, smiles started to appear. Some cried, others laughed and thumped each other on the back. Mothers hugged their children, tears running down their cheeks. Men of the forest shouted and began to dance. There was drumming and music, though no one could have said where it was coming from.

Kai and Indie were lifted onto strong shoulders and carried like heroes to the garden wall. Indie was laughing, her hands flung high in the air, but Kai was quiet.

‘What’s wrong?’ Indie called.

She could only just make out his answer.

‘I can’t see the queen anywhere.’



The Sword of Veladin

A sea of free people surged into the castle, sweeping into the crowd the guards who tried to stand in their way. Dargan and the captain were already there with their men, battling what was left of Tenzel's army. The sorcerer himself was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the king.

'Kai!' Indie cried, looking frantically for her brother, 'Kai! Look. Over there. Flashes of light. Look! Coming from the old stables.'

Kai ran through the crowd. He dodged around the wall, past the yards. He stopped in front of the stable door. Indie pushed past him. She grabbed the handle and turned it, knowing what she would find.

Aunt Sofia spun around to face them as they burst into the room. She was laughing.

'So,' she said. 'You have come to make the same mistake as your poor stupid father.'

'Where is he?' demanded Indie. 'What have you done with him?'

The thick walls muffled the battle outside. Aunt Sofia stood smiling at them, as if nothing was happening at all.

'You'd better tell us where the king is,' Indie said, stepping closer. 'Do you hear that?' She pointed toward the window. 'That's the sound of the army, our army, taking back the castle.'

Aunt Sofia narrowed her eyes. She looked at Indie as if she were a cockroach.

‘Do you see this ring on my finger?’ Aunt Sofia said softly. ‘I wanted a ruby, but your father makes a rather handsome sapphire, don't you think?’

She held up her hand, watching the gem sparkle in the light.

‘No!’ Kai ran towards her, Chief Wicasa’s book still under his arm. He was saying the spell he’d used in the garden. *‘Awake now from your secret sleep – ’*

Aunt Sofia raised her other hand; it was covered in a bright orange liquid. She sang out in a clear ringing voice, *‘Otako namito sik patetat. Asaksiwa namito sik maok.’*

‘Kai!’ Indie screamed.

But it was too late. Aunt Sofia smiled a cold, twisted smile. She held out her right hand. There, next to the sapphire, was a smaller ring – a shimmering red ring that caught the sunlight and sent it flying around the room.

‘My ruby,’ she said. ‘And look! My book. After all these years.’ She leaned down and plucked the battered volume from the floor. ‘Wicasa’s magic. The power of the ages. Mine.’

She turned to Indie. ‘Now, let's see. What next? An emerald, I think. A fiery green emerald, that would be fitting.’

Indie stared at her aunt. It couldn’t end like this.

‘Wait.’ she said. ‘I ... I ...’

And then she saw it. Lying on the floor.

The king’s sword.

It wasn't far away. If she stretched she might just be able to reach it. She had to try ...

‘What about my mother?’ Indie asked. Anything to distract her aunt, she thought, as she took a cautious sidestep. ‘The queen. She wasn’t in the garden. What have you done to her?’

Aunt Sofia laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. ‘Your mother,’ she cried. ‘Your mother, the princess ... the queen! So beautiful, so perfect in every way. Ha.’ Her laughter faded and she looked at Indie with bitter eyes.

‘All those years I spent studying magic,’ she said. ‘All those years I wasted, learning all I could from that old witch, Helki, only to be robbed of my rightful place as queen. Yes, robbed. By your precious mother.’

‘But you didn't marry the king,’ Indie said. ‘How could you be queen?’

‘I was in the forest collecting herbs that day. Yes, me. I met Eamon and he became my friend. *Mine*. He was supposed to marry *me*. I used potions, spells, everything I knew. But he chose her.’

Indie looked appalled. ‘You’ve done all this, destroyed this beautiful place, because you *wanted to marry my father?*’

‘Don't be ridiculous, girl. I have destroyed nothing. I have simply cleared the way for bigger things.’

‘But you’ve burned the trees. And you’ve locked up the people —’

‘Stupid child. I have only destroyed that which wasn't necessary. In time the forest will be gone and not a soul will miss it. Ballyndor will be a great city like those in other worlds. We will build towers to the sky. We will build roads ... more factories ...’ Aunt Sofia stopped, a faraway look in her eyes.

‘The people of Gort will forget their past,’ she said. She stretched out her hand; orange dripped from her palm onto the dusty floor. ‘I will make sure there's nothing left to remind them.’

The door swung open. Tenzel came running inside.

‘Sofia!’ The sorcerer was panting and his face was red. ‘All is lost. The men are fleeing. You must do something!’

Aunt Sofia turned on him with blazing eyes.

‘I will,’ she said. ‘Something I should have done a long time ago.’

There was a flash of orange and there, on the exact spot where Tenzel had stood, crawled a very puzzled earthworm. Aunt Sofia walked over to it and ground it to a pulp with the heel of her shoe.

‘Right,’ she said, turning back to Indie. ‘Now where were we?’

Indie looked at her aunt. For an instant, she saw herself through those cruel blue eyes – sitting on the floor of her hut; saying her times tables over and over; pulling on the scratchy jumpers Aunt Sofia knitted; drinking the bitter lemon juice Aunt Sofia squeezed.

No use crying, Indie. Your mother is never coming for you.

You're such a stupid girl, Indie. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I don't know why I bother.

Sharp stones, chipping away at her sense of self. Trying to squish her like an earthworm.

Aunt Sofia raised both hands, preparing to finish Indie off.

‘You still haven't told me where my mother is,’ Indie blurted. She took another step toward the sword.

Aunt Sofia trembled with sudden anger. ‘You thought you were so clever, didn't you? Calling up the wind and the fire, the water and the earth. Wicasa's precious little spells may have scared that weakling, Tenzel, but they don't scare me. You are no sorcerer.’

Indie could almost touch the sword with her toe, *now, just one more step ...* ‘I never said I was. I don't know anything about spells or magic,’ she said. ‘I just want to know what you've done with my mother.’

‘You pathetic brat,’ Aunt Sofia hissed. ‘No more questions. No more talk. It is time for you to die.’

‘No,’ said Indie. ‘First tell me where my mother is. You stole her from me, just like you stole my father and my brother. I deserve to know what you've done to her.’ She stopped, her fists clenched.

Sparks started to flow from Aunt Sofia's fingertips, but a strange calm settled over Indie.

She braced herself.

‘Aunt Sofia,’ she said, lifting her chin and looking straight into her aunt's eyes, ‘you took my whole family, my whole life away from me, because you were jealous.’

But you haven't taken everything. I know now who I am. I am Indigo, Princess of Ballyndor. And you can't change that, no matter what you do to me.'

Aunt Sofia's face changed. Her eyes darkened and her cheeks turned pale.

'I'm not afraid of you,' Indie said. Then she said it again, and her words echoed all around. 'I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of you. *I'm not afraid of you.*'

Aunt Sofia snarled. She sent a flash of orange searing across the room, cutting the shadows to shreds.

Indie threw herself sideways onto the floor as another bolt of orange lightning came flying from her aunt's hand, scrabbling in desperation for the sword ...

She had it! Indie rolled and grabbed the hilt with both hands, almost overcome by its weight: she couldn't believe how heavy it was. She swung it with all of her strength and a violent tremor shook her arms and ran all the way up to her shoulders. The sword seemed to change shape with that tremor; transforming into a weapon so light and comfortable it might have been made for her.

The orange light flashed towards her. She raised the sword in front of her face. The blade turned from grey to silver and the hilt shone with gold.

The light glanced off the sword and shot back at Aunt Sofia, knocking her to the floor. Then it ricocheted from wall to wall, shattering the bottles behind her.

Aunt Sofia flung out her hand once more, but this time nothing happened. '*Otako namito,*' she screamed. But there was no flash of orange.

The ground was covered with glass. The potions oozed together into a pool of bubbling sludge.

'You fool!' Aunt Sofia hissed, clutching her throat. 'You've killed us both.'

Indie could see a strange smoke rising from the sludge. It smelled foul and it burned the back of her throat. She stood still, the sword in her hands. She could see her face in the bubbles. Strong, it looked, and unafraid.

'You stupid, stupid girl.' Aunt Sofia was crawling towards her. 'We're both dead. Do you hear me? We're both dead.'

Indie gripped the sword. Aunt Sofia was wrong. Indie had never felt so alive.

*

‘So it has come to this,’ said a quiet voice.

Aunt Sofia looked up in alarm; Grandma Helki was floating above her head.

‘You’ve done it now,’ said the great Wicasa, floating next to Grandma Helki. ‘Did you not learn anything in all your years of magic?’

‘No,’ whispered Aunt Sofia. ‘This cannot be ...’

‘The child is worthy of her destiny.’ Chief Wicasa looked proudly at Indie. ‘She has the courage of a true heir of Ballyndor.’

Grandma Helki held out both her hands, her palms facing upwards. Indie felt the air around her change, as if the whole world was standing still.

‘You have broken the most important rule of magic,’ the old woman said, turning to Aunt Sofia. ‘*Do no harm*. You knew the rule, Sofia. It was the first thing I taught you.’

‘Do no harm,’ echoed Chief Wicasa. ‘Break the rule and you know what happens, don’t you Sofia?’

Aunt Sofia began to moan. It sent a shiver through Indie’s heart that travelled all the way down the length of her spine and came out at her toes.

‘Not in this life,’ the aunt gasped. ‘Not this quickly.’

‘You’ve broken the natural law and you have been challenged. Time has nothing to do with it. Don’t you remember the old verses?’

When pure of heart the princess comes,

And stands before the darkened throne,

And says to death, ‘I fear you not,’

Then shall the spirits all rise up.

Foul deeds shall pass in sun’s bright light,

*Shadows fade and death take flight,
For threefold are the powers that wait
To lift the dark, to banish hate.*

The bottles on the other shelves were trembling now, their contents splashing against the sides. Some had already fallen. Indie could see the potions dripping down the walls.

‘Please ...’ whispered Aunt Sofia.

She held out both her hands to Grandma Helki, but the old woman was fading away. Her words floated back like a sigh. ‘You have destroyed yourself, Sofia. There is nothing I can do.’

Bottles flew from the shelves, shattering on the ground. The room hummed. Clouds of smoke filled the air.

The world began to spin.

*

Dargan and the captain, chasing the last of Tenzel's guards, were knocked backwards by the blast. They covered their heads with their hands. Dirt and splinters showered down. When they looked up, all they could see were shining drops – in every colour of the rainbow – pattering down to earth.

Where the stables had been, there was nothing but a gaping black hole.



Queen Tala's Locket

Indie woke to the sound of voices: an older voice, reading, and then Kai's voice whispering, 'Is that what it really says, Uncle Paco? Show me.'

There was a rustling of pages, and a low whistle.

'Wow, you're right. *Shadows fade and death take flight.* Do you think that's what really happened? And listen to this. *Two hundred years ago, Kaosha, the Seeing Tree, warned that Gort would face dark and terrible times. Kaosha said Gort would only be saved by the courage of her children.*'

'Yes, yes,' Uncle Paco sounded like he was smiling, 'We all know how brave and clever you are.'

Indie tried to sit up, but her whole body ached and her arms wouldn't do what she wanted them to.

'Shhhh.' It was Aunty Mai. 'You must try to rest.'

Indie was lying in a bed of white, her head propped on a feather pillow. She was in a small room with walls of stone. Next to the bed was a window and outside, lawns and trees.

I'm in the castle, she thought.

There was some kind of bandage around her forehead and she touched it, wincing.

'Indie!' Kai was almost sitting on top of her. 'You're awake!'

‘We were very worried about you, Indie,’ said Uncle Paco. He leaned over from his armchair and patted her hand.

‘But how ...?’ Indie could see Millie on the other side of the room, chatting quietly with the women from the island.

‘There were a few nasty spells lying around, which were made by people who should never have made them.’ Uncle Paco looked sheepishly at the book on his lap. ‘When the stables exploded, those spells were destroyed. Lucky for us.’

‘Yes,’ said Kai, ‘I didn't want to be a ruby for the rest of my life. It was pretty cramped in there.’

‘And I didn't fancy being locked up in those caves forever.’ Millie walked over to the armchair and placed her hand on Uncle Paco's shoulder. ‘Even if it was with you, Paco.’

‘I did what I thought was right at the time,’ Uncle Paco said gruffly. ‘I made a mistake. But it wasn't so bad for you, Millie. The spell only blocked the southern tunnel. You could still go up to Mai's house.’ He gave her a shrewd look. ‘You could still sneak Chief Wicasa's book out from under my nose.’

‘Well it was a good thing one of us had some sense.’ Millie gave him a kiss on the cheek. ‘Come along, you old windbag. They're bringing all the treasures back to Ballyndor today. We'd better go supervise.’

She waved to the ladies in the corner and blew Indie a kiss. ‘Come and see us soon,’ she called, as she led the old man from the room. ‘We're living in the cottage next to the museum. I'm sure your Uncle Paco would love to show you the rest of his books.’

When they had gone, Indie turned to her brother. ‘What happened to Aunt Sofia?’ she asked.

Kai looked at Aunty Mai, who nodded slightly. ‘She's gone,’ he said simply.

‘You mean, she's dead?’

‘We think so.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘It was a big explosion, Indie. You were thrown clear. There was nothing left of Aunt Sofia.’

Indie flinched. *Nothing left.* It was a terrible thought.

She was silent for a moment, then she asked, 'How long have I been asleep?'

'About four days,' he said. 'But we thought you'd wake up today. You've been talking in your sleep all morning.'

'Have I? What did I say?'

'Something about Grandma Helki and the Sword of Veladin and not being afraid. I don't know. It sounded like gibberish to me until Uncle Paco read that poem.'

'Where is Grandma Helki?' Indie asked. Kai looked at her and she knew in her heart what her brother would say.

Kai looked down at his hands. 'She died, Indie, as we were leaving the forest.'

Indie was quiet for a moment. 'She was with me at the stables,' she said.

Aunty Mai, who'd been listening with a curious look on her face, leaned over and kissed Indie on the forehead. 'Come along Kai,' she said, taking the boy's arm. 'It's time to let your sister rest.'

*

Indie lay by herself, trying to ignore the throbbing in her head. She hadn't even seen her father yet; had forgotten to ask Kai before he left the room. Where was he? And where was the queen? They must have found her. She must be here. Maybe she'd been hurt too.

Easing herself out of bed, she made her way across to the window. The grounds were filled with people. Some were digging in the garden and pulling up the weeds, others were cleaning out the rubble where the stables had been. One or two saw her standing at the window and stopped to wave. She waved back, feeling as if she was in a dream.

'Well, well. Awake at last.' The king's voice made her turn so quickly she almost lost her balance. Strong arms caught her and she was lifted into a bear hug.

‘It’s good to have you back, my daughter,’ Eamon whispered, holding her tight. He carried her to the bed and laid her gently down.

‘Where is my mother?’ Indie asked. ‘Please ... I want to see her.’

The king looked away. ‘I’m sorry, Indie,’ he said. ‘We’ve searched all over the city, all through the forest. I’ve sent men to every corner of Gort, but we cannot find her.’

Kai sneaked in behind the king and climbed into the armchair. ‘Aunty Mai keeps chasing me out,’ he said, mischief in his eyes. ‘She thinks I’m in the kitchen with Cook.’

He stopped, his gaze caught by the locket around Indie's neck.

‘What's that?’ he asked. ‘Can I see it?’

‘It was your mother's,’ the king said, as Kai took the locket in his hand. ‘I found it in the gardens after she disappeared, before they threw me in the tower. It was the only thing I had left to remind me ...’ His voice trailed away.

Kai was staring at the locket as though he hadn’t heard a word. It felt warm, like a living creature. When he closed his eyes he could see his mother's face. She was calling to him, begging him to help her.

He looked up; the walls shimmered as if they were made of water. Clouds of colour whirled around the room – pink and blue and green and gold.

‘Are you all right, Kai?’ The king's voice was a hum in the background. ‘Kai? Can you hear me?’

Kai was a tree, an ancient tree, with his roots growing deep in the earth. He was the grass outside the window, the red owl in the apple tree.

Words came into his head and he said them as they came.

Spirits from the web of time,

Nature's magic, light sublime,

Surround me now and hear my plea,

Release the one who calls to me.

Indie, gazing at her brother from the safety of the bed, saw a mist rise from the locket. It swirled around the room and slowly took the shape of a woman. Her hair was dark, her dress a deep sea green. On her wrists were bands of silver. She stood in the centre of the room, as the mist cleared around her.

‘Tala!’ The king leapt from the bed. ‘Tala, my love!’

Tears ran down the queen’s cheeks. ‘My darlings,’ she whispered, ‘I thought I’d never see you again.’

Kai steadied himself and stood up. He felt nothing but love. Aunt Sofia's hatred had made the spell on the locket more powerful than any other, and now it was gone; Aunt Sofia was completely gone. He looked at his mother and smiled.

Indie had spent a long time imagining this moment. Tears and cuddles and ‘I love you, Indie.’ Now she wasn’t so sure. This beautiful woman was a stranger. She hadn’t seen Indie since she was three years old. Indie with her wild red hair, with her cuts and bruises. What if the queen was expecting someone different? What if she was expecting a princess with nice manners and neat clothing?

I don’t remember her, Indie thought. What if she doesn’t remember me?

And then it all came back. A full moon, and flowers. A woman dancing with a blue-eyed baby in her arms. A little girl, tousled with sleep, watching from the shadows.

‘Mama,’ Indie whispered.

The queen turned to her daughter, her eyes filled with love. ‘My beautiful girl,’ she said, holding out her arms. ‘My Indie.’



Look Out Ballydor!

The old groom stood at the gate, shouting pointers. ‘Keep yer head up Miss. That’s right. Guide ’im with yer feet.’

Canto stopped and snorted. ‘What’s the matter, boy?’ Indie asked, leaning to pat his neck.

She squinted into the distance. Was that ...? It looked like Kai. Waving his arms in the air.

Indie urged Canto across the field so she could see more clearly. Yep, it was Kai all right. It looked like he was running in circles. And there was someone with him ...

Aunty Mai. Aunty Mai was beside him. Smiling broadly and *whistling*.

Indie cantered over to them. She threw down the reins and sprang to the ground, holding out her arms. ‘Tiki,’ she cried. ‘Oh, Tiki!’

And there was Tiki, beautiful Tiki with her silly grin and her loud yap, licking Indie’s face and jumping all over her.

‘But how —’

‘Easy,’ said Kai. ‘A purple robe, a willow stick. *Ki-somma, kokomi ki-somma.*’

‘Now don’t get cocky, young man,’ said Aunty Mai. ‘You’re not a sorcerer yet.’

‘Oh, but I will be,’ said Kai.

Indie laughed. She picked up Tiki and climbed back into the saddle. ‘You’ll be a sorcerer, Kai, and I’ll be a queen with a shining sword.’ She raised one arm in the air. ‘Look out, Ballyndor!’

‘Look out, world!’ cried Kai, pulling himself up behind her.

‘That will be quite enough of that,’ said Aunty Mai.

*

And far away in another world, on a green island shaded by apple trees, a man with a mysterious smile was making a pot of coco for a lady in a purple cloak.

‘Well, that was all very exciting,’ said the lady, reaching for a slice of *moka* bread. ‘But I think I’ll choose a quieter life this time, something a little less dramatic.’

‘Oh get away with you, Helki,’ said the great Wicasa with a twinkle in his eye. ‘You loved every minute of it.’

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