

THE QUEST FOR THE TEMPLE KEY

BOOK ONE:
THE GARGOYLE CHRONICLES

BRANDON KING



THE QUEST FOR THE TEMPLE KEY

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TO OUR BELOVED WATSON,
WHO WAS TINY IN OUR HOUSE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This story began as the shred of a dream, nothing more than a scene unfolding in my slumbering mind. Waking, with the sound of the antagonist's name lingering in my head, I puzzled for a minute or two about its spelling. Then, many years passed by, but the idea for this book never quite left.

The greatest influence upon this story is Jessica, my daughter. Not only did I write it for her, in many respects the main character, Danielle, is based upon her. Jessica got wildly involved in this tale, making many excellent sketches of several characters and important scenes, including one that this cover design is based upon. To top it off, she contributed many plot ideas, twists and turns, as she'd eagerly read a chapter immediately after I'd completed it. I'm very grateful! And proud, too. You see, she's written her first fantasy novel, *NeverSeen*.

Few authors write in abject isolation, even though most write in abject something, whether it is misery in general, battling writer's block, working in a cold writing closet or what have you. I experienced none of those. My wife has been a constant support in all of my writing endeavors, often stealthily bringing in something to snack on when she hasn't seen me emerge from my writing cave for a while.

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Brandon King

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CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE
WITH THE PORTICO



There was really nothing special about the house at the end of the cul-de-sac. It looked very much like all the other split-level, mostly stucco homes on Larch Drive, with two stories, a two-car garage, one lamppost in the front yard and a chimney rising above the black shingle roof. It had a three-color paint scheme like all the other houses on the street, with beige as the main color and the remaining colors lighter or darker. The trees and bushes around the front yard all looked slightly unhealthy. What made the house different was that it was the very last house on the street, and it was the only one with a portico.

But Danielle Wheelen didn't notice any of this. Since this was the first day to collect payment from the people on her paper route, she was too nervous to notice much of anything. So far, she'd mostly enjoyed having a paper route, but she'd been getting increasingly nervous about collection day.

She'd also noticed her parents had started acting differently towards her. Her father had talked about having "grown-up

responsibilities” at dinner the night before, and he seemed to be quite proud of her. Naturally, this made her feel good. But that was yesterday.

Her mother had suggested she dress “nicely,” so Danielle wore her new jeans, a pretty blue and green plaid top and her white patent-leather shoes and tied her long, blond hair in a ponytail. The people on her route had been pleasant, which pleased Danielle, but her feet hurt from wearing the stiff shoes. *Next time I’ll wear my Keds!* she said to herself. Now that she’d been collecting for her route for almost two hours, Danielle’s nervousness was beginning to come under control, although she really just wanted to get home.

So when she hastily walked up to the last house on the cul-de-sac, she didn’t notice that it was the only house with a portico. Because she delivered newspapers before school and early in the mornings even on weekends, all she knew was that everything looked very different now, just before dinnertime, with lengthening shadows from the soon-setting sun. No one wanted to have their newspaper delivery girl collecting early in the morning when they were still in their pajamas. Of course, she didn’t want to see them in their pajamas, either.

The portico’s walls were slightly taller than Danielle’s blond head, so she couldn’t see over them. The walkway to the house went in between two walls, directly to a dark red front door. Had Danielle not still been a little nervous about collecting, she may have looked longer at the walls. She might have noticed that each wall had a vague shape or design in it. Neither wall had a uniform, stucco surface; the lines in the walls may have been cracks, but looked more like they’d been lightly carved in. It almost appeared like a very large wing had been pressed into it before it dried.

As Danielle marched between the fence-high stone walls, towards the door, she glanced at the walls and thought it very curious that each wall had a single, amber-colored circle of glass, about the size of a quarter, embedded in the surface. So intent was she on making her final collection, she failed to notice the house number above the door was not on her list. As she reached up to use the door knocker, she was startled by a rustling noise behind her.

Spinning around to look for the cause of the sound, she saw feathers littered all around the sheltered area, between the portico walls and the front door of the house. She'd never seen feathers so big, and she thought they might be as long as her arm. However, now that her attention was on the walls, she thought they looked odd. *Why would someone go to the trouble of carving wings into them, on both sides?* she wondered.

The sun was glinting off of both amber-colored glass circles. With a shudder, she realized they looked almost like eyes. As she looked down again at the feathers, one gently fell from the top of the right wall, landing with the same rustling sound she'd heard.

Relieved to find the source of the feathers, Danielle turned back to the door, happy she was nearly through with the collections and eager to hurry home to count the money. She was already visualizing her father helping her sort out the bills, dividing what she could keep and what had to be paid back to the newspaper. So when she lifted the knocker away from the door, her attention was only on the door, not the peculiar portico behind her. The portico walls quickly collapsed without a sound, dissolving, melting into weird, grotesque shapes.

At the sound of the crack of the knocker on the door's metal plate, Danielle heard two more cracks, like rocks splitting. At

the same moment, there was a bright flash of amber, and a storm of feathers blew up around her. Something brushed by her right ear. Just as she turned to look—and felt an enormous talon squeezing into her shoulder—there was another crack, followed by a scream. Her scream. The red door vanished. The house vanished. She shut her eyes, unbelieving. Her heart pounding, her shoulder aching, she opened her eyes, surrounded by darkness...and four amber orbs. The orbs slowly changed shape, becoming more like the shape of a football. Then blinked. And Danielle fainted.

CHAPTER TWO

BAD DREAMS



“Oh, I hate this dream,” Danielle muttered. Even though she was dreaming, she could tell she was dreaming. And it was a dream she’d had before, but more like a nightmare. It always started with being chased. It always ended with a dark, cold, cavernous room. In between, there were flashes, scenes, faces. Things just beyond the reach of memory. It was the in-between of her dream that she couldn’t remember. She’d had it several times this summer, in the weeks following the end of seventh grade. Danielle wasn’t sure if it was normal to have strange dreams at her age. When she’d mentioned it to her mother, she’d been told not to worry about it and something about hormones. Still, she hated this dream, especially when in it, and she’d wake up breathless and sweaty. She never could remember why she was breathless. The dream always ended in the cool cavern. Yet, the chasing ended somewhere earlier in the dream. Or did it? It was confusing.

With a start, Danielle woke up. It was dark. Too dark. She must have awakened earlier than normal.

Why aren't the birds singing? she wondered. It was cold. "That's weird. I'm not sweaty," she said quietly. Thinking she'd thrown off her covers during the dream chase, she reached down to the foot of her bed to grab her blankets. There were no blankets. And she wasn't in her bed.

The amber orbs in her dream blinked again.

Danielle screamed. She hadn't been dreaming, after all. This was real. She *was* in the dark, cold cavern.

"What is 'sweaty'?"

Danielle jerked at the sound of the low, rough voice. She didn't move, and hoped the pounding of her heart wasn't loud enough to be heard beyond her own head.

"What is 'sweaty'?" said the hoarse voice again.

"Yes, what is 'sweaty'?" The second voice was much like the first, gravelly, but it was a higher pitch than the other.

She was certain the hammering of her heart could be heard by anyone—or anything—within ten feet of her. But was there really something out there? Was she still dreaming? Was she dreaming she was aware of her dreaming?

"Is there someone there?" she whispered.

There was only the sound of her heart slapping around in her chest.

"Please...am I dreaming? Is there someone there?" she said a little louder, listening for a sound, a voice, anything that would explain what she was experiencing.

"What is 'sweaty'?" said the first gravelly voice a third time.

This time, Danielle was looking directly at the amber orbs on her left, which blinked. That was where the low voice was coming from.

So, stammering from fear and the encroaching cold of the cavern, Danielle said, “Uh...you know... it’s when you get all wet from working real hard, like from running.”

“Hm,” said the higher voice. “Like when it rains?”

“I suppose. Sure,” said Danielle, with very jangled nerves.

“Are you always sweaty?” said the lower voice.

“What? Well, no. Of course not,” Danielle replied.

“Then you dry off when the sun comes out?” said the deep voice.

“Uh...what?” Danielle said, puzzled.

“No, Kimar, you twit,” rumbled the higher voice. “It—*she*—dries off like we do, I bet. From heat. From the sun. Or from fire. Isn’t that right?” The other orbs blinked at Danielle.

“Who are you?” asked Danielle, ignoring the question. Her heart was still pounding hard. She’d wanted to ask “*What* are you?” but was too afraid.

The deep voice replied, “I am Kimar, of course. You heard Ercen say so.”

“And who are you?” the higher-pitched voice asked. Danielle assumed it must be Ercen’s.

“I’m Danielle. Where am I?”

“You are in our home, the ancient cavern of Osberg the Great,” said the deeper voice of Kimar.

Danielle grew more alarmed with each passing moment. Now, learning she was in a place she’d never heard of before, it was very hard to keep her voice calm. “Why can’t I see? How did I get here? Why am I here? Did you bring me here?” Suddenly, Danielle’s fear was overcome by anger. “I want to go home! Now!” Immediately, she regretted making a demand.

“Ah. Of course, Kimar,” murmured Ercen. “She can’t see us. Her eyes are not like our eyes.”

“You are here because we need you. You are here as our... guest. When we...once we have...it is not possible for you to leave just yet.” Kimar’s voice echoed slightly in the dark.

“But we can help you to see,” said Ercen.

Danielle’s hazel eyes were very tired from trying to penetrate the darkness around her. In fact, she wasn’t even sure what direction she was looking. A golden light grew around her feet. It spread slowly away from her, chasing shadows further into the cavern, until she could just make out the cavern’s roof hundreds of feet above her. At first, Danielle was apprehensive. But as her surroundings became visible, fear was quickly replaced by wonder, for the cavern was now glittering in golden light, with stalagmites and stalactites everywhere. Except directly in front of her were two large boulders. Danielle thought they looked out of place. Where everything else in the cavern was sparkling gold, the boulders didn’t reflect any light at all, but seemed to absorb it into their mottled gray and silver stone surface.

Danielle’s eyes followed the gentle curves running up the side of the boulders. The colors reminded her of the mottled shapes and sweeping lines in her parents’ Italian marble kitchen countertops at home. She was sitting very close to the stone masses, so it took several moments for her mind to notice familiar forms within the stone slabs. Tipping her head to one side, she squinted hard.

Well, that’s odd! she thought. *It nearly looks like an arm, here...but it’s too big.*

Her eyes drifted further up the boulders. Doubt crept through her mind, like a cold fog on a winter’s day.

That...resembles an oversized shoulder. But if that’s so, then...

Her eyes stopped abruptly, wide with panic, on two amber orbs near the top of each boulder. She gasped, “Oh...oh...oh, my! Oh, no!”

“Welcome, I am Kimar.”

“Welcome, I am Ercen.”

Her mind had, indeed, made sense of the stone shapes, even though her heart desperately fought accepting the conclusion. Danielle was staring at two enormous gargoyles! She didn't have any idea what to say, so she said nothing. Getting stiff from the cold, she shifted around on the floor, backing away a few feet, feeling frightened but very curious at the same time.

Then, Ercen, who Danielle took to be a girl, said, “Look, Kimar, the human child is cold.” She turned towards Danielle, then said, “Please, do not be afraid. We mean you no harm.”

Without saying anything, Kimar stood up. Danielle had not realized until that moment that both gargoyles had been on their knees. Kimar reached his hands over his head to the ancient stalactite nearest to him and held it very close to its tip. Danielle could see that he didn't touch it. About a minute later, he stooped down to the floor and held his hands against the smooth area where Danielle was sitting. Without understanding what had just happened, Danielle was pleased to feel the floor warming under her. She looked up and noticed Kimar's hands were glowing with a soft golden light. It quickly faded.

Not knowing what else to do, and feeling that it wouldn't help to repeat the same questions again, Danielle struggled with what to do next. She didn't know if these creatures were to be trusted. She didn't know if she could trust herself! Was

her mind playing tricks on her? Her head hurt. Her nerves were jangled.

Finally she just blurted out, “How did I get here? The last thing I remember was...well, I was just about finished collecting for my paper route. And there was one more house—it was strange, though. Like no one had been there for a few days, maybe even weeks because the grass and bushes looked dry...”

She talked quicker when she was nervous. Even so, she observed that Ercen and Kimar watched her intently, like they were waiting for...what?

“...and the house had these strange walls in front of it, and just behind the walls were these huge feathers littered around just in front of the—”

She stopped abruptly, unable to utter a sound. A huge feather, very much like the ones she had seen at the house she'd just been describing, fell from Kimar's shoulder and fluttered onto her lap.

CHAPTER THREE

PARTING



“You...” Danielle whispered. She wasn’t sure if she meant it as a statement or a question.

“Yes, Danielle,” replied Kimar, “we brought you here.” Ercen nodded, knowingly.

“But how? It was—it *must* have been!—your feathers in front of the house. But I didn’t see you before...well, before I ended up here.”

“Didn’t you?” asked Ercen quietly.

“Uh, like I said, there were these two walls blocking my view of most of the entryway to the house. But the walls, they didn’t look quite right for the house. No one else in that neighborhood has them, at least on my route, anyway.” Danielle noticed Kimar’s eyes glint a little when she said this.

“No other house had such an entry,” he said, “because we *were* the walls.”

“But how? How can you be made out of stone—like when you were walls—but then be *alive* like you are now?” Danielle murmured while tugging at her dark, strawberry-blond hair.

“Child,” said Ercen, “when we are stone, we are still alive. But changing from one state to the other often will dislodge a feather or two.”

“I saw lots of feathers littering the courtyard, though,” replied Danielle. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to the question buzzing in her head, but she had to know. “So, when you change from stone to, uh, not-stone, feathers can get knocked out?”

“Yes,” answered both Kimar and Ercen.

“OK, but there were quite a few feathers, maybe twenty or more, so wouldn’t that mean you changed back and forth a bunch of times? How long have you been...walls?”

Kimar, who had been looking at the glittering roof of stalactites overhead, slowly dropped his eyes until he was looking intently into Danielle’s face. “We’d been waiting two of your lunar cycles for you to come.”

Danielle felt a weird tightness forming in her stomach, and almost a shortness of breath.

“‘Two lunar cycles’—do you mean you’ve been waiting for *me* for two months?” Danielle asked, trembling. Her hazel eyes shimmered and welled up with tears, frightened by this thought but determined to learn more about these creatures.

Kimar nodded.

Nervously, Danielle asked, “How did you bring me here? I was knocking at the door of the house and...then I remember the darkness...and then just being here.”

Kimar nodded again and replied, “The realm between your space and our space was parted. It is not unlike stepping through one of your doorways.”

“I’m sorry. What? You ‘parted’ *space*?” Danielle had seen plenty of science fiction programs on television but couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The shows that were popular with her friends she thought were silly enough, but this was too much.

“Yes,” said Kimar. “It does not matter.”

“Of course it matters,” replied Danielle, testily. “It matters a lot to me how I got here.” She pulled her denim jacket tight around her shoulders and hugged her knees tightly to her chest.

“You misunderstand, Danielle,” said Kimar. “The realm between our lands matters, naturally. We simply asked it to not matter so that the space could be parted quickly.”

Confused, Danielle thought of her science teacher, Mr. Johnston, and what he would say to this crazy statement. She replied, dismay lining her forehead, “You...parted space? By asking it to?”

Kimar tilted his head just a little before answering, “Of course.”

“And you have been waiting for two months to do this—this ‘parting’?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Ercen.

The tightness inside was growing stronger. Danielle just wanted this dream to end. It was becoming more frightening than any dream she’d ever had. She heard herself ask, “This is the first time I’ve gone collecting for my paper route. In fact, I’ve only had the route since a week ago Saturday. So”—she

took a deep breath—“how did you even know where to look for me? Why did you wait for me? Why...*me?*” she cried.

“You were foretold to us,” Ercen answered quietly. Her wings lifted and then spread wide, as if she was stretching. Danielle was astonished at how far they reached. She thought they must span the width of her two-car garage at home.

“It is time for us to leave here. It won’t be long until we’re followed,” Kimar said, his amber eyes narrowing.

And before Danielle could say anything, Kimar reached out to take her right hand, while Ercen took hold of Kimar’s and Danielle’s left hand at precisely the same instant. They vanished, just as the glittering light in the cavern fled into darkness.

CHAPTER FOUR

EXCAVATION



Peter Wheelen cried out, “Drat, Amy! Watch where you swing that thing!” A small avalanche of stone and scree had just fallen onto Peter’s hard hat, startling and annoying him.

Amy Wheelen, the recipient of Peter’s umbrage, just smiled and continued humming. She was so happy that even Peter’s yelling couldn’t diminish her joy. “Sorry, Pete!” she purred.

Amy balanced on a rock face about eight feet above where Peter was digging. She’d just been gently hammering the surface of the stone. They were pursuing further evidence of a strange prehistoric fossil, which appeared to be an unknown creature. Other archeologists had found exciting traces of this creature in the three years prior to their arrival at the dig.

Peter and Amy had been in graduate school for a year before they met. Peter had at once fallen in love with red-haired Amy James, the beautiful, freckled transfer student from California. How couldn’t he? She was very smart, equally pretty and could go toe-to-toe with any professor in their sci-

ence department, and often did. In fact, she had the first day Peter met her.

Peter smiled as he swept off the dust and rock from his sweat-lined helmet. Even though it was nearly four years ago, it was like it had only happened yesterday; he still couldn't decide whether it had been funnier to see "Ol' Smitty" at a loss for words, or to witness Amy angrily flush the color of a ripe cherry tomato in a room full of mostly male physical science majors. Peter recalled that Dr. Smithers—the brilliant, contentious and sometimes condescending head of their prestigious university's archeology department—had been droning on about fossil timelines, competing theories and his antiestablishment argument for the potential appearance of "hominids" during the Cretaceous period. Amy wouldn't have it—either his condescending style or his unsupported position—and she challenged him. Dr. Smithers was unaccustomed to being challenged by students, especially female students; he hadn't responded well to Amy, at first thinking she was red from embarrassment. Only the class bell brought their monumental intellectual—and loud—battle to an end. *More like an enforced truce!* Peter thought.

His smile faded quickly as his mind drifted back from his memory to the very real, stifling heat of the midday sun. Grumpy again, Peter called up to Amy, "Ah, never mind. Let's knock off for now and grab some chow, huh? I'm dying here." He pointed to his drenched sleeveless shirt, as if she needed help understanding how hot it was.

"No. I'm not ready yet. I want to get to the base of this section of wall. Go on, and I'll catch up in an hour or so. Maybe less," she replied, cheerily.

“Should have guessed that, Honey. You’re never ‘ready’ until you want to be,” Peter muttered under his breath. He tromped away towards their meager camp, pulled his helmet off and poured the remainder of his canteen onto his head. He shook the water out of his shoulder-length blond hair, then refilled his canteen from the water jug sitting on their dilapidated camp table, draining half the contents in one huge swig.

Peter sighed as he fell heavily into the rattier of their two canvas-back chairs. Disappointment and weariness washed over him like the sweat dripping through the grime on his face. *Could it really be three years that we’ve been here?* he wondered, bitterly. They had so little to show for it. Their excavations impacted rock faces all around the small valley south of Ghorlikharka, a tiny village in the southeast corner of Nepal, near the border with India. Sure, they’d found enough evidence to confirm that the scientists that came before them had, in fact, found something strange, a creature apparently unlike any found before. What was so tantalizing was that the creature didn’t seem to be a bird, nor did it seem to be a mammal. Just a few months earlier, Amy had discovered a fossil revealing a wing. A big wing! If they postulated the scale of an individual wing based upon the partial fossil piece she found, the creature’s full wingspan could be ten feet or more.

The most curious thing about the fossil, though, was that its wing was not like a bird’s wing, at all. Its structure appeared much more like a bat’s wing, but there were, obviously, no known bats that stood well over six feet high with a wing span taller than the inside of a house.

Peter admired his wife’s boldness, though even he considered her a bit rash at times. Especially when Amy proposed, around one of their evening campfires a few weeks earlier, that

the wing represented an entirely new species. Their excavation supervisor, Dr. Hector Ramirez, had vigorously argued with her. He vehemently contended that her findings did *not* represent a single animal, but comprised at least two layers of fossils—one bird, the other mammal—and that she'd jumped to a false conclusion. Although he didn't say anything, Peter was inclined to agree that there simply was not enough evidence to support the assertion that they had discovered a new—and exceedingly remarkable—species.

It had taken Amy more than a week to calm down after Hector had gone back to the United States. Peter grinned to himself as he realized that Dr. Ramirez probably needed at least a week to calm down, too. Amy had a way of getting herself in trouble with people in authority. But then she had since the first time he'd met her.

Hearing shuffling dirt and stone behind him, he turned to see Amy tromping into camp, wiping her face with a filthy kerchief, sporting an enormous smile across her lovely, nut-brown face. A welcoming smile was just beginning to form on his own face when he noticed what she was holding. Then his jaw dropped.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCOVERIES



Amy, who had not been watching her step, nearly fell into their camp's fire ring. In her right hand was a stone, about the size of a football. The shape of it was nothing like an animal's body part, like Peter would have expected from the area that Amy had been excavating. In fact, he never would have expected her to be carrying anything away from the dig site until they'd—together—determined whether it was safe to remove. Their work was called “laborious and painstaking” for good reason.

“What on earth do you have there?” he asked, a little harshly.

“Boy, the heat sure has gotten you sideways, hasn't it?” she replied, flopping down in the other canvas chair.

“Yeah, I guess it has. Sorry.” Peter poured the remainder of his recently filled canteen onto his head and again shook the water out of his hair. “That's better.”

Peering over Amy's knees, which she had folded up in front of her to cradle the object in her lap, Peter again asked, "So, what do you have there?"

For a long moment, Amy did nothing. She said nothing. She continued to stare into her lap, at what it held. "Well, Honey," she said quietly, "I don't rightly know what it is. As I was brushing away the dirt around the end of the wing—you know, around the tip of the feathers," she paused to watch Peter nod, "I could see a small crack in the rock face about an inch beyond the wing's tip. So I brushed the area just a bit, wanting to see how serious the crack was and whether it might jeopardize my dig site..."

Her voice trailed off, and as she looked up at him, Peter could see Amy's eyes sparkling in a peculiar way. He felt his breath quicken, and he gripped the arms of his dilapidated chair.

Not seeming to notice, Amy continued. "Like always—you know how careful I am, Peter— I brushed at the crack with only the slightest force. So, obviously, I was alarmed when it suddenly widened. And it was odd how the crack widened *away* from my dig. Without thinking, I kept brushing bit by bit along the direction of the fissure. Each time I did so, the crack lengthened, twisting down and around until it circled all the way back to where it had started. It was almost as if I had been chiseling the rock face, instead of gently brushing it. Before I knew it, there was this roughly oval crack in the wall, just to the right of my excavation, in the shape you see here." She lifted the jagged object out of her lap with both hands. "Now there's an oval hole where this used to be."

Peter, trying to be careful not to sound critical of his wife, asked, "Uh, why did you cut it out of the wall?"

"I didn't," she replied, distractedly.

Confused and a little annoyed, Peter said, “Well, it didn’t exactly fall out by itself, did it?” After he said it, he realized, too late, it didn’t come across as he intended.

Surprisingly, Amy tipped her head to one side, stared hard at the chunk of rock in her lap, and quietly replied, “Yes. Yes, it did.”

“Huh?” Peter’s forehead wrinkled.

“That’s the thing. I didn’t pry at it or pull at it. At first, I just reached up to probe the crack with my finger—you know, to test the strength and integrity of this section of wall—and then I, well, I laid my hand across the oval, and it just came out of the wall, just like that. Like a cake out of a pan.”

Peter stared at the void in the rock face where she must have had placed her hand. He could still see the area from where he sat.

“Was there any evidence of a fossil behind this chunk? Anything damaged by its removal?” he asked.

Although Peter had asked the question without a hint of criticism in his voice, this question seemed to irritate Amy.

Snapping her head up at him, she retorted, “No, there was nothing behind this chunk of rock besides more rock! But”—her eyes sparkled with an odd glint—“there is something on the *back* of this rock.”

Turning the stone in her hands so Peter could see the side she had been staring at, he saw the unmistakable shape of a key. A large *metal* key, embedded in an ancient rock wall in southeast Nepal, just inches from a fossilized creature never seen before. A key found in the wrong place, in the wrong era, and that defied explanation.

CHAPTER SIX

FARM FRIENDS



Paign Macy had never liked school much. It seemed like a huge waste of time to him; he'd rather be doing than sitting. He was often in trouble with his defensive skills teacher, Alistair Murdoch. "You are not—once again—PAYING ATTENTION!" Professor Murdoch would bellow. Although when his teacher called out like this, he pronounced it in such a way that it sounded more like "pain" instead of "paying." So there was never a question of which student, in the class of eight, the good professor was annoyed with. Nevertheless, Paign excelled at the art of defense, even if he didn't often remember the details surrounding the history of it. What did it matter? He was very, very good in archery and excelled in sword fighting.

His best friend, Anders Knutson, knew everything about the history of defense. In fact, Anders knew everything about everything. It had always been so. They had been friends for so long that Paign could not remember a time when he and

Anders weren't best friends. Some people said that it couldn't have been otherwise, their always being best friends, because Paign's mother was the older sister of Anders's mother. But both Paign and Anders knew that their friendship went beyond, far beyond, simply being cousins.

For one thing, they were only three months apart in age. Anders had been born in May, while Paign was born in August. In addition, neither boy got along well with his own older sister, or with the other's sister. Both boys, now almost thirteen years of age—their upcoming "Age of Becoming" celebration only a few weeks away—had thick hair the color of charcoal and pale blue eyes, like their mothers'. Each boy, regrettably, had lost their fathers to the War of Dominance. Anders's father, Knute, had died when he was not quite five years old, while Paign's father, Roald, was killed just two years ago. Even now, it was difficult for Paign and Anders to talk about Roald's death because Anders took it almost as hard as Paign, since Paign's father had really become like a surrogate to Anders. Both boys had taken on more and more of the responsibilities of their dead fathers, until at this point in their short lives they were the men of their households. Each was nearly full-grown, strong and skilled in the ways of farming and herding.

Where they differed most was in their temperaments. Paign preferred testing his physical skills against any and all comers. He was often in fights, not always of someone else's making. Anders was exceptionally smart and loved to read, learning most everything with ease. He didn't really have much competition intellectually, since he was usually top in their class, with one exception: Freida Skulstad. Although she was a year older than the boys, the three spent most of their time to-

gether after school and on the weekends, after they all finished their chores. Anders and Paign, each in his own way, were quite smitten with Freida, with her bright grey eyes, easygoing personality and wavy, rust-colored hair. Anders worked very hard all the time at impressing her with all the things he knew. Paign, of course, attempted to impress her with his strength and agility. Freida, being very smart herself, knew this about both boys and pretended not to notice. It wouldn't do to let either boy think he was winning her over.

The farm Paign's family owned was set against the western rim of the Honellaken Valley, only a mile from the Knutsons' dairy farm, where Anders lived. Freida's home was farther up the east rim than Anders's family farm. Her father raised sheep and goats, grazing his flocks high up in the mountains above the valley, and she helped him herd the flocks down from the mountain each Saturday. They would rise early in the morning and trudge high above the valley, listening for the jingle of bells on the collar of the lead animals. By then it would be light out, although most often it would remain gloomy from the cloud cover, which only dissipated in the warmest weeks of summer. Once they had gathered up the flocks, Freida and her father, Johann, would turn back towards home, munching on their stale hard breads, an apple and enjoy a long drink from their water flasks.

After their last class was over, on the last day of term, with the excitement that only a two-week winter break can bring, Freida rushed up to where Anders and Paign were waiting for her, at the canopy of oak branches that marked the beginning of the wagon path leading up to their farms. They didn't care whether their desks were messy when they came back from break, like Freida did.

“I *found* it!” she gasped, breathless from running the quarter mile from school. “I am sure I have found it!”

Anders gaped, unbelieving. He knew that the odds of Freida finding the Cave of Parting were, well, nonexistent. Explorers had been searching for the most famous cave in the Highlands for centuries. Of course, they had been searching, too, for as long as Anders could remember.

“Huh. Right, Freida.” Paign tilted his head as he said this. “Look, I have to get home to get our cows milked.”

“Paign, I’m telling you I have found it! I *have* found the cave,” she retorted, throwing an annoyed glance at Anders.

“OK, fine, Freida,” replied Anders. “I have to go, too. Why don’t you tell us about it while we walk?” He smiled, but she could tell he still didn’t believe her.

“Fine!” she snapped, falling in between the boys, as they began the hike up the valley towards their farms. A light snow began to fall.

“Last night, my father needed to check on a nanny he’d tended last weekend. He wanted me to go with him, even though we’d be out until well into the evening...”

“So, that’s why you look so tired,” quipped Paign.

Ignoring him, Freida continued. “The flocks were sheltered on the lower slopes of the central ridge, but spread over the southernmost rise. It was nearly dark, so we needed our lanterns to follow their tracks to the individual animals, looking for the injured nanny goat. My father went up the steepest slope, while I slowly tracked the gullies. The final set of goat tracks I followed took me around a steep, ice-blown shelf. The snow was deep powder there and the passage was difficult, even in snowshoes. In a gaping cavity on the rock face, I could see the glint of our little goat’s eyes from my lantern light.

She was trembling at the mouth of a small opening into the mountain. I scooped her up and hiked back to where my father's lantern was on the higher slope."

"But," interrupted Paign again, "wouldn't that have put you somewhere below Ruar's Peak?" All of the villagers, farmers and herders living in the Highlands territory were very familiar with Ruar's Ridge, the tallest saddle of rock amongst the Honellaken range, which rose up between them and the territory to the north. Ruar's Peak was the tallest peak along the saddle's spine.

"If you were paying more attention, Paign, you'd have heard me say that it was by then very dark, even by lantern light, and dangerous going, so I wasn't exactly keeping track of my position on the ridge," she snapped. "But, yes, I suppose I was somewhere below Ruar's Peak."

"Well," Anders chimed in, "there are no cave entrances anywhere along that ridge. We've climbed all over that rock face, Freida, especially last summer."

"Don't you think I know that?" sighed a dispirited Freida. She'd expected an enthusiastic response from her friends, not the third degree. "What I'm telling you is this: there is a cave opening now. I'm convinced it wasn't there before when we searched for it."

"Oh, come on, Freida!" Paign sounded more irritated than he meant to, but this was getting out of hand. "People in our village have been looking for the Cave of Parting for nearly three hundred years. Our fathers searched for it when they were our age. Their fathers searched for it, and so did their fathers. It hasn't been seen since old hermit Sandersohn wandered into the village, delirious and wild-eyed, declaring he'd seen Widow Vellhelmina vanish into the mountain—that the

mountain had, in his words, ‘devoured her, robes, staff, witch and all!’”

Of course, all the children for miles around their village—perhaps all around the country—had heard the Tale of Vellhelmina and the crazy Hermit since they were wee tots. For Anders, it had become nothing more than a fable elders would tell children to scare them from wandering off into the mountains until they were of age. So, it was difficult to take Freida seriously, except for the fact that she appeared to be as set in her belief as the cold, hard ice crunching on the path under his feet. He could see her face was red, and he didn’t think it was just from the cold wind blowing down the valley.

“OK, Freida, let’s say you have found it.” He shot a glance at Paign, who appeared to choke on something. “We’re almost home. Paign and I have chores to do tonight. You’ll be up in the mountains most of tomorrow with your flocks. Why don’t we all meet Sunday, at noon, behind your barn, and you can take us up and show us what you think you saw?”

“Wha—what I *think* I saw?” Frieda’s eyes were blazing. Her face flushed even redder than before.

“Uh, well, sorry, that’s not what I meant to say,” replied Anders, who thought he heard Paign quietly mutter under his breath, “Yes it is.”

“Please show us the place. Show us on Sunday afternoon. OK?” Anders continued.

“Hm,” Paign said, looking unconvinced that Anders’s plan was worth much. “Come on, Freida. I’m not trying to question you. It’s just that this cave has been the most sought after thing in our country for a very long time. What makes you think you found a cave, especially this cave? Couldn’t it just be that a chunk of rock broke away from the face?”

The cousins could see Freida was quaking, even though her fur-lined hood pulled up tight over her head. Her eyes welling with tears, she stared at both of them in turn and, quietly but fiercely, replied, "Fine. I'll show you. I'll show both of you. Sunday, noon, behind my barn. Then you can explain to me how it is that a fallen chunk of weathered granite reveals a glowing light deep within the passage where no cavern should be!"

With that, she abruptly turned and ran up the path towards home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FREIDA'S FIND



Paign was in a foul mood as he walked across the valley to Anders's farm. He hitched his daypack a little higher on his left shoulder to better distribute the weight of his gear, which included extra layers of warm clothes, enough food and water for the afternoon—and night, if it came to it—and his bow and quiver. His sword was strapped to his belt and swung off his right hip. Tromping through the fresh snow, he replayed in his mind the intense conversation from two days earlier, when Freida told them about discovering the legendary Cave of Parting. Still convinced it was a wild goose chase that Anders had committed him to, he grumbled while he trudged along, looking at the ground and dragging his boots through the snow. At the last moment, he looked up, just in time to slow himself enough to not crash through the Knutsons' gate.

Cursing under his breath, he carefully opened the gate and paused to admire Anders's farmhouse. It included the four-color pattern common to the farmhouses around the Highlands.

But these colors were more vibrant than most, with a deeper green, richer burgundy and lighter yellows. The paint still looked fresh and bright, giving the house a sense of spring-time warmth even in the winter gloom. Admiring the farm was bittersweet for Paign, since it was his father, Roald, who had painted it a little over two years ago, before he was called into the battle from which he didn't return. Paign's mother had asked her husband to help Mrs. Knutson with her farm, and he had done so willingly. He was that kind of man, and he'd enjoyed spending time with his nephew, Anders. He also knew that Knute Knutson would have done the same for his family, had the tables been turned.

Paign had lost track of how long he'd been standing there, but it must have been a few minutes, since he'd accumulated about a quarter inch of snow on his coat. Shaking it free, he walked up to the house, stepped onto the porch and knocked. Just a moment later, Anders pulled it open.

"Where have you been?" Anders asked. Without waiting for an answer, he hollered back into the house, "Mom, we're leaving and won't be back until after dark. See you later!" He pushed Paign back out the door, at the same time hoisting his backpack onto his shoulders.

"Come on!" he yelled at Paign, as he jumped off the porch at a run. "You know how Freida gets when we're late!"

It was a marvel how fast Anders could be. Since he was also already a brighter student, it annoyed Paign that he couldn't quite catch up to Anders. *Well, I have a sword swinging into my knee!* Paign thought. But he didn't say anything and just kept running after Anders.

Nearing the gate of the Skulstad's farmhouse, he could see Freida stomping in the snow behind the barn. Their huge

mastiff, Tiny, chained to the porch's corner post, yawned lazily as he watched Paign run by. Paign smiled to himself at the notion of such an enormous dog being named Tiny, but he knew it was because Freida had fallen in love with the runt of the Olson's mastiff litter. While Tiny gave no heed to Anders or Paign, since they were around Freida so often, he was truly fearsome to strangers.

"You're late!" Freida said to Anders, who had already jogged around the corner of the barn. Without even looking at Paign, she turned on her boot heels and strode up the snow-covered pasture towards the edge of the tree line that marked the base of the ridge. High above, dominating the horizon of their little valley, the ridgeline erupted more than three thousand feet into a jagged sky.

They hiked along the existing snow trail made by the trampling of Freida's goats and sheep, for more than an hour without speaking. Freida led them with a ferocious pace. Anders, just ahead of Paign, was puffing like the steam train that went through their valley twice a month. Paign's throat felt like it was on fire from his hard breathing in this bitter-cold landscape. He was sure that Freida felt every bit as much discomfort as he did. Her pace was her way of showing she was still angry with him for not believing her, Paign was certain. Had he asked, he would have learned how right he was.

Climbing up a steep pitch of snow, kicking the toes of her boots deep into the crusty snow, one above the other until she reached the crest, Freida looked back down to where Paign stood. He thought she looked equally determined and weary. When Paign reached the crest himself, he could see she was nearly finished making a small campfire for them.

“I hope you brought something to eat.” She spoke while rummaging in her pack, without looking up at him.

Paign was quiet. Instead, he pulled out his snow parka, put it on without zipping it, tugged it as low as it would reach and sat down in the snow. He knew he’d cool off pretty quickly now that they weren’t hiking, and he needed to control his core temperature by keeping the heavy coat unzipped and open for only a minute or two. Once they started hiking again, he’d overheat if the parka was zipped, but chill too quickly without it. He’d noticed Anders had already done the same. In fact, so had Freida.

“Yeah. I brought food. Um, thanks for building the fire,” Paign replied, trying to catch her eye.

“Right, then,” said Anders. “Thanks, Freida, for making the fire.”

“It’s not a big deal, you know,” she said, glaring at them.

“Hey,” said Anders quietly, looking at the crackling little fire, “we’re here with you, OK?” He stole a sideways glance at Paign. “It was just a surprise when you told us you’d found what is arguably the most famous and elusive thing in the land, right? It wasn’t like I—we—were calling you a liar or anything. We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t trust you.”

Paign would have sworn that Freida’s grey eyes welled with tears, but with the cold and wind his eyes were starting to water, too. He simply nodded his support to what Anders had said.

A few moments passed before she grinned slightly and said, “Come on and eat whatever you are going to. We need to get to the rock overhang in the next hour if we want to have any time to explore it—the cave—before turning back.”

For the next few minutes, they ate with only the sound of the wind in their cold ears. Quickly, they bundled up their

packs and slung them over their shoulders. Freida kicked snow into the fire and it sizzled out abruptly.

Nearly an hour later and many hundreds of feet higher, threads of cloud swirled around them before blowing down the steep ridge they had just climbed. They had all tied on their snowshoes about fifteen minutes earlier, and Freida continued to lead them with confident steps. She'd begun to traverse the slope laterally, in the direction of the escarpment the boys knew to be to the south, even though they could not see anything but the shifting whites of cloud and snow.

Suddenly, Freida stopped, dropped her backpack on the snow and fished out a rope. Tying it around her waist, she played out about twenty feet and then handed the rest of the rope to Anders. He tied a loop of rope to his waist and then handed the remainder to Paign, so there would be about the same rope distance between them. When he'd also tied into the rope, Freida hoisted her pack and began to climb again. Looking off to his right, Paign could see far below, between the shifting clouds, shreds of sunlight on the valley floor. He walked directly into the back of Anders before realizing the group had stopped walking.

"Hey!" cried a startled Anders, who was knocked over onto his back.

At the same moment, Paign yelled out, "Sorry!"

As Paign reached down to help his friend up, he noticed an odd look on Anders' face. Turning his attention in the direction of Anders' gaze, he saw for a moment a ghostly Freida, shrouded in vaporous snow and cloud. Then, suddenly, she darkened and came into sharp focus as the cloud shredded, leaving only a few swirling flakes around her face, which was engulfed in an enormous, triumphant smile. He heard Anders

breathe out a low, long “Whoa!” Paign then saw immediately behind Freida the unmistakable mouth of a cave he’d never seen before. It could be the ancient Cave of Parting. Maybe Freida *had* found it, after all.

APPENDIX TWO

CHARACTERS



CREATURES

- Tiny* The Skulstads' enormous dog, a mastiff. Very protective of his family, especially of Freida, his mistress. Fond of Anders Knutson and Paign Macy, Freida's best friends.
- Vannveps* Literally means: *water wasps*. Very dangerous, especially when flying in large numbers.
- Vanntorden* Literally means: *water thunder*. Very dangerous, but slower than their cousins, the Vannveps. It is unlikely they would sting their opponents, because they cannot fly. Their roars generate the destructive force of a hundred years of glacial movement, condensed down to moments.

GARGOYLES

- Bahlkrum* Pronounced: "Ball-crum." Minion of Kahrnahrngx, middle rank. Obsidian class.
- Conomorg* Pronounced: "Con-oh-morg." Superior fighter. Granite class.
- Ercen* Pronounced: "Ur-sen." Mate to Kimar. Protector, especially of human children. Granite class.
- Evalcohr* Pronounced: "Evil-core." Commander. Ruthless. Obsidian class.
- Gahrspat* Pronounced: "Gar-spat." Minion of Kahrnahrngx, senior rank. Obsidian class.
- Gustlab* Pronounced: "Goost-lab." Superior fighter. Basalt class.
- Ita-Mudak* Pronounced: "It-ah-moo-dack." Superior fighter. Granite class.
- Kahrnahrngx* Pronounced: "Car-narx." Brother to Kimar. Leader of the gargoyle rebellion. Created the powerful and dreaded Key of Kahrnahrngx by murdering the Widow Vellhelmina. Killed Osberg the Great. Granite class.
- Kimar* Pronounced: "Key-mar." Mate to Ercen, brother to Kahrnahrngx. Leader of the gargoyle defenders and protector of humans. Granite class.
- Lohmong* Pronounced: "Low-mong." Superior fighter. Granite class.

- Lohxnahr* Pronounced: "Locks-nar." Friend of Kimar and Ercen. Guide for Danielle. Slate class.
- Mahtrance* Pronounced: "Mah-trance." Superior fighter. Basalt class.
- Nahgflint* Pronounced: "Nog-flint." Comes to the Wheelens' home to capture Danielle. One of Kahrnahrqx's special hunting units. Slate class.
- Osberg* Pronounced: "Oss-burg." Great leader of the gargoyle clans. Killed by Kahrnahrqx while capturing the Key. Gabbro class.
- Quarastohr* Pronounced: "Koo-war-uh-store." Senior commander of forces opposed to Kahrnahrqx. Leader of the War Council. Soapstone class.
- Prohximus* Pronounced: "Procks-e-muss." Senior commander. War Council member. Very tall. Supremely intelligent. Limestone class.
- Recknab* Pronounced: "Wreck-nab." Superior fighter. Granite class.
- Rutahn* Pronounced: "Rue-tan." Superior fighter. Soapstone class.
- Stenring* Pronounced: "Stenn-ring." Superior fighter. Granite class.
- Strohrnahq* Pronounced: "Stro-ar-nock." Fierce, very mean. Gahrspat's brother. Obsidian class.

- Tiunarz* Pronounced: "Tea-oo-nar-z." Senior squad leader. Obsidian class.
- Urchzahv* Pronounced: "Urch-zahv." Superior fighter. Granite class.
- Uud-Rement* Pronounced: "Ood-rement." Battle-seasoned general of opposition. Gabbro class.
- Zarentil* Pronounced: "Zair-entill." Mystic High Priest and prophet. Ancient. Copper class.

HUMANS

<i>Amy Wheelen</i>	Mother of Danielle. Archaeologist. Professor.
<i>Anders Knutson</i>	Cousin to Paign Macy. Friend of Freida Skulstad.
<i>Anna Vellhelmina</i>	The widow of Parson Vellhelmina. Murdered by Kahrnahrngx.
<i>Danielle Wheelen</i>	The “Chosen One.” Abducted by gargoyles.
<i>Freida Skulstad</i>	Inquisitive, hard-headed friend of Anders Knutson and Paign Macy. Becomes best friend to Danielle Wheelen.
<i>Heidi Skulstad</i>	Mother to Freida.
<i>Johann Skulstad</i>	Burly father to Freida. Primarily a sheep and goat farmer.
<i>Paign Macy</i>	Cousin to Anders Knutson. Friend to Freida Skulstad. Name pronounced like “pain.”
<i>Pers Olson</i>	Wealthy Honellaken merchant. Believed by some to have killed the Widow Vellhelmina. Leader of a secretive society of merchants and important townspeople.
<i>Reverend Pearsson</i>	Pastor to the people of Honellaken. Confidant to Freida, Anders and Paign.

THANK YOU!



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