

# DROWNFIRE

Nate Brown

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ISBN: Pending

ISBN-13: Pending

To Britt, Cole, Riian, Jackson, and Izzy.  
For teaching me magic.

## **MAGICAL PRIMER**

### **MAGICAL ELEMENTS**

Fire (Plasma)  
Air (Gas)  
Earth (Solid)  
Water (Liquid)

### **MAGICAL COMPOUNDS**

Floatfire  
- Fire and Air  
Glowstone  
- Fire and Earth  
Loamy  
- Air and Water  
Healermud/Poisonmud  
- Water and Earth (Toxic)  
Mimiglass:  
- Air and Earth (Unstable)  
Drownfire:  
- Fire and Water (Unstable)

### **MAGICAL RACES**

Magician  
- Average Lifespan: 307 years  
- Gestation Period: 38 months  
Dwarf  
- Average Lifespan: 209 years  
- Gestation Period: 25 months  
Elf  
- Average Lifespan: 212 years  
- Gestation Period: 25 months  
Orc  
- Average Lifespan: 146 years  
- Gestation Period: 16 months

## *Gunshot*

The gunman raised his arm and took aim.

Without thinking, Rocc grabbed the big yellow bonsai pot and burst out of the back room. His fingers seemed to spark with electricity, and everything seemed to move in slow motion.

He raised the pot in the air. The gunman swung his weapon toward him, knocking the parakeet's cage off the counter. Rocc's dad dove in between, his arm catching Rocc across the chest, pushing him behind.

A gunshot sounded, and the illusion of slow motion ended. Ears ringing, Rocc collapsed to the floor. His dad crashed head-first into the wall, his body going limp, pinning Rocc underneath him.

Fifteen minutes earlier.

"That doesn't look much like algebra to me, son."

The faint Scottish accent echoed in the sparse back room of the convenience store. Rocc's dad, Craig Peterson, frowned at the doodles covering Rocc's homework.

They covered everything Rocc owned - the papers, books, even his arms. Most were of dragons and wizards dueling with magic and fire, and his algebra homework included a maiden in a diamond prison.

Craig's eyes narrowed. "Algebra goes faster if you aren't distracted."

"Maybe you should try it, Dad," Rocc snapped.

"Fine. Let's race."

“Stop it.” Rocc felt his cheeks getting warm. Why did he always try to pick fights? Why was his dad always willing to accept them? He looked through the one-way mirror in the door and counted to ten in his head. Through the tinted glass, the shop counter and colorful convenience store shelves were dim and wavy.

“I can help you with it you don’t understand—”

“That’s not the problem.”

“What then?”

Feeling calmer, Rocc looked up.

Craig Peterson was a burly man with a professional wrestler build — barrel-chested with thick arms that looked like they could crush a boulder. However, the pottery magazine he held betrayed his creative, softer side. He put his solid and gentle hand on Rocc’s shoulder.

“I just hate it,” Rocc said.

“Yeah. I never liked it much, either. Math is hard.”

Rocc shook his head. “Math is hard — algebra is torture.”

Dad laughed. “Indeed. Are you feeling okay, son? You look tired.”

“I always look tired,” Rocc said. “I sleep in the same room as Ben.”

Dad cocked his head. “Is he that bad?”

Rocc rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know. I think he must talk in his sleep. I hear a voice and wake up at least a couple times every night.”

Dad turned his attention back to his magazine. “He’s nine. He’ll grow out of it.” His eyes peeked over the cover. “Unless you’d rather sleep with your sisters?”

“Shut up, Dad.”

“Sibi might not like it, but Ahna would die of happiness.”

“Stop it. I’m doing my homework.”

The few high windows spread a melancholy hue of mountain twilight in the back room of the Peterson Gas Station and Convenience Store. Dad always waited as long as possible to turn the lights on at night because, in his words, “electricity is too much like magic to be trusted.”

Rocc’s homework and a few months’ worth of his dad’s pottery magazines lay across the ancient, dented folding table. Rocc and his dad sat in two of four equally ancient folding chairs around the table, a heavily taped brown shipping box on the chair opposite Rocc. A

telephone with a shining red panic button winked on the top of a large safe in the corner of the room.

Rocc's eyes lingered on the button. The phone had been installed nine years earlier when his dad had been shot. Rocc and his sister Sibi had only been four, but he remembered that day vividly. Sounds and images filled his mind.

His mom screaming.

His dad's shoulder covered in thick, dark blood.

Torn bags of candy and leaking cans of soda covering the floor.

A trail of the gunman's sticky footprints leading out the door.

His mom had been almost nine months pregnant with Ben and Ahna when the shooting had happened. She'd gone into labor as the ambulance had arrived.

Rocc and Sibi rode to the hospital in a police car and spent the night with a woman in hospital scrubs, who repeatedly told them how lucky their family was to have two sets of twins. Doctors operated on Dad's shoulder. Mom went into surgery to have Ben and Ahna by C-section.

Icy shivers prickled up his spine. At least the only permanent damage to his parents had been their scars.

He stared at the doodles on his page. It was useless. "Can I just be done?" He slumped in his chair. "What's the point of being homeschooled if I still have to do homework?"

"Aye," Dad said. "It doesn't make much sense to me either. But your mother will be pretty mad if I don't get you to finish." He glanced at the ceiling as though trying to see his wife in the apartment above. "Still, we can probably take a quick break. I was going to wait to open the package from Mr. Yoshi until we were upstairs, but it won't hurt to peek."

Dad grabbed the box and lifted it carefully, putting it on top of the magazines and papers on the table. He briefly fumbled with the packing tape, but in moments, he had it open.

"Looks like Mr. Yoshi went to a curiosity shop," he said. He lifted a shallow pot, shining brilliantly with glossy canary-yellow enamel. "Ooh, she's a beauty," he cooed, turning the heavy clay vessel over. "And made by a master. We'll have to find a special bonsai for this one."

He set the pot down reverently and emptied the box. Each item had a little card attached.

“A golden bracelet for Sibi. It says here that it has magnets to help her relax and sleep.”

He picked up a handful of tiny toy french fries, hamburgers, and soda cups with straws. “For Ben and Ahna. It says they’re erasers.” He dumped them next to Sibi’s bracelet.

“And a new pair of bonsai clippers for your mom.” He paused to examine the clippers, his lips in a tight line that didn’t quite hide a mischievous smile.

“Stop it,” Rocc said. “It’s not funny.”

Dad chuckled at himself. “And finally, a leather necklace with a, uh...” He studied the attached card. “...sharktooth for you. He says it’s for health and good luck.”

Dad held out the biggest tooth Rocc had ever seen, lashed to the necklace by a thin leather cord. “It must have come from a Great White,” Rocc said. He slid the leather band over his neck and felt the weight of it on his chest. “I love it when Mr. Yoshi sends presents.”

“He’s quite considerate, he is,” Dad said. “And he buys more of my pots than anyone.” He studied Rocc. “That shark tooth looks good on you. It seems like it’s brought some color to your face.”

Rocc smiled. The gift had made him feel better. He picked up his pencil. “Maybe I can try finishing before dinner.”

As Rocc started solving a new quadratic, a car pulling into the gas station sounded through the walls. After a few moments, it drove off.

Rocc didn’t look up. “You should start taking credit cards, Dad. Customers don’t like the ‘Cash Only’ sign.”

The bell above the shop door dinged. Cheaper, Dad’s parakeet, screeched from his cage on the counter. Glancing through the window, Rocc could make out a gruff-looking man with dark spots on his face and deep circles under his eyes stumbling into the shop.

Dad cursed under his breath. “Stay here,” he said.

Rocc’s eyes lingered on his dad as he pushed through the door, but after a minute of hearing the muffled hum of conversation, Rocc turned back to the table. Finishing the current problem, he pulled out a fresh piece of paper.

The break had been helpful — he was able to focus now. After just

a few minutes, Algebra equations filled the page.

As he worked, muffled voices continued talking on the opposite side of the door. Somehow, his dad's voice sounded even more Scottish when you couldn't hear the words. The other voice sounded raspy and thin.

As Rocc started on the last problem, the tone of the voices shifted. He glanced out the one-way mirror.

He jumped up from his chair, catching it just before it clattered to the floor. The man was pointing a gun at Dad!

Rocc crept to the phone and pushed the panic button. A red light started blinking.

Rushing quietly back to the one-way mirror, he tried to make out what his dad was saying. His dad was only a couple of feet away. He pressed his ear to the glass.

The words were pinched and sharp. "You're not going to use that, so put it away. You don't want to do this, young man. It's not worth it."

Young man? Rocc blinked in disbelief. The man was probably ten years older than his dad. If Dad kept talking like that, he'd make the guy mad.

"Give me the rest of the money," the gunman said, his voice like sandpaper. "And the drugs you're hiding."

"That's all of the money. And you'll find no drugs here."

"Liar!" the gunman yelled. "Mountain hippies like you always have drugs. He told me about your drugs. And this isn't even a hundred dollars. Where's the rest?"

"We don't keep much cash," Dad said. "Who said we have drugs?"

"Where's the safe?"

"We, uh... We don't have one?"

Rocc's stomach tightened — Dad was a horrible liar. The part about not having drugs was true, but Rocc was suddenly very aware of the safe behind him. "Don't look, don't look," Rocc whispered. All his dad had to do was not look toward the back room —

His dad's eyes ticked toward Rocc. It was only a moment, but the gunman smiled menacingly, leveling the gun at Dad's head.

Rocc grabbed the yellow pot and pushed the door open, ready to throw. As the gunman turned, Rocc's arm seemed to freeze mid-

throw. Cheaper's cage flew from the counter as the gunman's arm collided with it. Dad stepped between Rocc and the gun.

The shot exploded.

Dad's head hit the wall as he fell on top of Rocc like a three-hundred-pound blanket, knocking him to the floor and pinning him there.

Air. Rocc needed air, but his lungs couldn't expand — his dad was too heavy. He heaved and twisted, and his dad began to shift.

Stars swam in his vision. His dad slipped inch by inch until, finally, Rocc could take a breath.

The gunman stared blankly with his mouth open as Rocc continued to inch his dad off him. "Help me, you idiot," Rocc said. "You shot him. We have to stop the bleeding."

"He's your problem." The gunman stepped through the doorway to the back room.

Rocc continued to twist and heave until his dad finally slid to the floor. Breathing heavily, he crouched over his dad, looking for blood. He leaned forward and touched something hot on the floor.

Jerking his hand away, he saw the source — a deformed slug of metal. The bullet. His stomach twisted. "It went all the way through," he said.

He frantically searched his dad for the wound, but there was nothing. No blood anywhere. The only injuries he could find were an angry red welt on his dad's cheek and a goose egg swelling on his forehead.

The gunman pulled the door open, standing over Rocc like a vulture. "What's the combination?"

"Drop dead," Rocc said.

His side exploded in pain as the gunman's heavy boot drove into his ribs. Somewhere beyond the ringing in his ears and the all-consuming pain, he heard the gunman swear and ask for the combination again. Rocc tried to answer, but his breath wouldn't come.

Another kick to the ribs and Rocc buried his face in his father's chest. Tears flowed freely from his eyes, and stars swam in his vision again.

Agonizing moments passed as he tried to inhale, and after what

felt like minutes, someone pushed him off his dad's chest. Rocc tried to hold on, but his dad slipped away. Was the gunman taking his dad's body?

Fighting against the blackness that threatened to engulf him, Rocc cracked open his eyes, squinting through the pain.

The gunman was on the other side of the shop. His dad, fully alive and conscious, crouched behind shelves stocked with cold medicine and aspirin, moving toward the gunman.

The gunman upended a shelf of donuts and threw one of the bonsai trees through the back window. Behind him, Dad closed in with Mr. Yoshi's yellow pot in both hands, raised high above his head. Rocc rushed forward to help but slipped on an apple fritter and fell into his father.

The gunman whirled and fired again as the heavy clay pot shattered over his head. The sound of the gun's report and the sickening crack of breaking ceramic rang through the shop. Cheaper renewed her frightened chattering and squawking. The terrified bird must have found an opening in her damaged cage because suddenly, she was flying around the shop.

The gunman fell limply into a shelf of potato chips — man and snacks crashing to the ground.

Dad turned, breathing hard. His hands held tightly over his heart, covering the gunshot wound. "Are you alright, son?" he said.

"Sit down, Dad. We need to get you help."

"Aye," Dad said. He glanced down and pulled his hands away from his chest.

"No, don't..." Rocc began. He saw a burnt hole in Dad's shirt but no blood. In his dad's hand lay the second bullet.

They both stared. Cheaper quieted.

Rocc looked up. "How did you stop it?"

His dad's eyes were wide. "He... missed?"

"What?" Rocc blurted. "Are you seriously lying about getting shot? Don't be an..." He let his words trail off again. He didn't need to fight, he realized. He knew how to get his dad to confess.

He waited. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Dad would give in. Every second without Rocc speaking seemed to make his father more anxious. The tension was thick. Dad took a deep breath

— he was about to talk.

A siren sounded in the distance, interrupting the moment. Red and blue lights danced on the store walls.

Down the road from the Peterson Gas Station and Convenience Store, tucked neatly into a pullout on the narrow canyon highway, a dark figure — who sometimes went by the name Mr. Yoshi — watched from an old Buick. He sniffed the air, coughed, and cracked the window.

It would take weeks to get the smell out.

His car wreacking of the heroine addict he'd sent into the store was a small price to pay if this worked.

Lights flashed ahead on the canyon walls. The dark figure ducked out of sight as a police car sped past.

The last time he'd tried this, nine years ago, Craig Peterson had almost died. The prophecies were confusing, but he was sure he'd worked them out this time. Hopefully, Peterson was alive — if he died, it would be much harder to get the prophecy into motion. He'd have to start over.

The police car skid to a stop next to the gas pumps.

The dark figure sat up and turned the key. The Buick hummed quietly as he pulled away, heading up the canyon toward Rocky Mountain National Park.

It was time to leave the crime scene in this nearly magicless wasteland of the Human Void. Time to go home.

And if Peterson was alive, he was leaving behind the spark of a brighter future for orc-kind.

## *The First Lie*

Craig's eyes widened as the flashing lights bounced off the scattered snacks and broken glass. He looked at his chest and then towards the birdcage next to the cash register.

"Cheaper!" he yelled. The parakeet was shivering on a high shelf. The burly man softened his tone. "Cheaper, can you..." He paused. "Talk?" He eyed the frightened bird. "If you can talk, you need to do it now."

She chirped at him.

He nodded, walked behind the counter, and grabbed something from the floor.

"Dad?" Rocc said. "What are you doing?" He'd never seen his dad act so crazy before. Cheaper had never even mimicked a whistle, let alone spoken something intelligible.

His father's head snapped up, eyes widening. He'd forgotten Rocc was there.

"I, er," he sputtered.

"Craig?"

It was the muffled voice of Ema Peterson, Rocc's mom, through the door to the upstairs. She had an accent similar to Dad's but much more faded. "Did I hear firecrackers? What was that noise?"

Her scream sounded before the door had fully opened, her eyes on the unconscious man on the floor. She stumbled backward onto the stairway. Cheaper flew across the room and landed on her head. Mom's freckles became more pronounced as the color drained from her already pale complexion. "Craig, what happened?"

Dad opened his hand, revealing the two squashed bullets.

She gasped. "Did he shoot you? Where?"

He shrugged.

She eyed the hole in the front of his shirt, glancing nervously at Rocc before she spoke. "But that's impossible," she said haltingly. She looked up and noticed the flashing lights for the first time.

Dad followed her gaze. "Rocc must have hit the panic button," he surmised. "He'll be coming through the door any second."

Mom reached a hand up, and Cheaper stepped onto her finger. She lowered her hand to eye level and spoke through her teeth. "Cheaper hasn't said anything, has she?"

Dad shook his head.

Mom regained her composure and crossed to Dad, grabbing the slugs and shoving them into her pants pocket.

"What is going on?" Rocc said.

The front door burst open, and a uniformed police officer crashed through with his gun drawn. "Everybody down!" he yelled.

Once again, Mom screamed, and Cheaper flew back to the high shelf. Rocc dropped to the floor.

"We're okay, Hank," his dad said. Rocc looked up and recognized Officer Henry Martin, a friend of his dad who visited the store about every week. Everybody called him Hank.

Hank kept his gun level as he stared at the gunman. "Diggidy-dang it, Craig, you're not fine. There's a dead body on your floor," Hank said.

Craig looked closer at the unconscious man. "He's not dead. At least, I don't think so." He picked up a glazed yellow shard of clay. "I hit him pretty hard, though. He'll need a doctor."

Officer Hank pushed a button on his shoulder radio and called for an ambulance, absently waving his gun as he spoke.

Dad winced. "Lower your gun, Hank, you're making me nervous."

Hank flushed and fumbled his gun back into the holster. "What the hello-heck-house happened here?" he asked.

Rocc almost laughed despite the tension. Hank's fake swear words always made him giggle, and after everything that had just happened, Rocc didn't feel fully in control.

Dad was slow to respond. "He tried to rob the store," he said.

"With a gun?"

"Yes."

Hank frowned. "And he let you hit him with a pot?"

"Not exactly."

Hank stuck out his chest and stretched himself taller, but still a head shorter than Dad. He drew a deep breath and spoke slowly. "I need to know what happened here, Craig."

Rocc's dad told the story to Officer Hank from the beginning. The robber asking for drugs and money, then getting scared and firing the gun when Rocc burst out of the back room. Bonsais thrown through the window, and another shot fired as the yellow pot broke over his head.

He left out the parts where the bullets hit him. Instead, he sputtered and stumbled on his words, saying he didn't know what happened, and he kept glancing nervously at Cheaper.

Hank looked at him suspiciously. "What happened to your face?"

"I told you," Craig said anxiously. "I hit my head."

"I see the goose egg on your forehead," Hank said, "but how'd you get that mark on your cheek? It looks like you got smacked by a paintball."

Dad just shrugged.

"Could've been a ricochet," Hank mused, looking around the room. "Though I can't imagine what slowed it down enough not to break the skin. What about your shirt? That looks like a point-blank shot. You wearing a vest or something?"

Rocc's dad looked down. "Er... no," he said.

"Where are the slugs — the bullets?"

Dad looked at Mom. She squeaked as she jumped to respond. "They must be here somewhere. Maybe they went out the window."

Hank walked to the window and surveyed the destroyed bonsai garden. Hank loved the bonsai trees. "I'm so sorry, Ema," he said. "Was the window already broken when he threw the bonsais?"

Rocc's dad squirmed. "I don't remember?"

Hank scowled. "Was he shooting blanks? Rubber?" Hank stepped next to the unconscious man and moved the gun away from him with his foot. He bent down and examined the weapon. "Nope. Those are slugs. Dam a river, Craig, you need to tell me what the holy-hello

you're hiding here."

Rocc giggled this time, covering it with a cough. Hank turned.

"Patrocc," he said. Hank always used Rocc's full name. "It looks to me like your dad was shot twice, but the bullets just bounced off his skin. Did you see what happened?"

Rocc's head was spinning. His parents clearly didn't want Hank to know that his dad's skin had stopped the bullets, but Hank could tell they were hiding something.

And Rocc really wanted to tell the truth. It would force his parents to fess up — why wouldn't they tell him what was happening? But there was real fear in their eyes.

Rocc swore in his mind. Hank probably wouldn't have believed him anyway.

He forced himself to start hyperventilating. "Dad didn't tell you everything." He covered his eyes with his hands. "It was all my fault. He told me to stay in the back room. If I hadn't come out, the guy never would have..."

He fell to the ground, rocking back and forth like he'd once seen in a movie. He made crying noises, repeating "I'm sorry" over and over.

Rocc snuck a peak through his fingers and saw Hank close his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. The police officer stepped closer to Ema, whispering a little too loudly. "Take Patrocc somewhere he can feel safe and let him get some rest. I can get you the name of a shrink that can help. It looks like he's going to need it."

Rocc couldn't help smiling, so he hid his face in his hands. He was much better at lying than his dad.

## *Connected*

Hours later, Rocc was asleep and dreaming.

Hundreds of people were around him, everyone moving around busily. A woman in pink workout clothes jogging. A boy in scout khakis building a fire. A man and woman chatting over coffee. Every single person moving around him in frenetic motion.

Except for one. An elderly man sat quietly, observing the chaos with peace and serenity. He wore ornate, ancient robes and had a trimmed white beard. After some time, he stood, searching the crowd with tired eyes.

The mob seemed to get denser, with more people joining the busy scene. Rocc found himself aimlessly moving among them but always watching the old man. The man frowned and closed his eyes.

People started leaving. Rocc didn't notice anyone wander off, but after a few moments, fewer and fewer people were around him.

The elderly man's mouth began moving. A whispered voice drifted on the wind, indistinct but slowly becoming rhythmic and even. Even with the great distance between them, somehow Rocc could see the old man's eyes become watery, and as they closed, tears tracked down his cheeks into his beard.

The language was foreign at first. Then something in the air shifted.

"Spears piercing my grandfather's flesh. My father's last words of love. My mother's final caress. My sister and me. Hidden. Alone."

The old man took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Rocc looked around in the sudden silence. Only he and the old man remained.

The man smiled kindly. "I am your mentor, young one," he said. "What is your name?"

Rocc ignored his question. He had just realized this was a dream. Could he change it to make it more enjoyable? He thought about dragons, hoping one might appear.

The man's bushy eyebrows furrowed with concern.

"Your name, young one. Will you tell me?"

Rocc tried to speak, but his lips wouldn't move. He felt himself waking.

Maybe he could conjure a giant purple dragon with dark green lines on its wings.

The old man reached toward him, and suddenly, Rocc felt fully awake in his dream and completely focused on the old man.

"Please! Your name!" the old man said. His outstretched arm began to shake.

Rocc could feel panic that wasn't his own. He pried his lips apart.

"Rocc. Rocc Peterson"

As his name echoed soundlessly in his ears, Rocc opened his eyes to see the first rays of sunlight on the wall of his bedroom.

What had he been dreaming about? Dragons? Probably dragons. He usually dreamt about dragons.

## *A Dangerous Visitor*

Spring Rapids, Colorado, is just a few tourist shops and the Peterson Gas Station. Crammed next to the Big Thompson River in a canyon on the border of Rocky Mountain National Park, it's a quiet mountain oasis whose economy depends entirely on tourist traffic. The shops change owners every dozen years or so, but the Petersons have been there for decades.

No one passes through frequently. Even Officer Hank spends most of his time closer to Estes Park, the "big" city down the road.

Some of the county's older residents knew Rocc's grandparents and would tell stories when they stopped by. Grandpa and Grandma Peterson had run the gas station for as long as anyone could remember. When they passed away, and Rocc's parents took over, folks were surprised that Grandpa and Grandma Peterson could have a son as young as Craig.

Two weeks.

It had been two weeks since the stoner gunman guy had tried to rob the shop. Two weeks since Rocc's dad survived two gunshots without more than a couple of welts on his skin. Two weeks since he'd helped his parents lie to the police.

The gunshot brought more traffic to the gas station than Rocc had ever seen. They'd told the made-up story of the gunman's attack so many times now that Rocc thought his parents might be starting to believe it. His twin sister Sibi seemed jealous that she hadn't been a part of the story. His little brother and sister took every opportunity

to pepper Rocc with questions about what happened.

Tonight was no exception.

They were sitting in the living room of the family apartment above the gas station, the smells of dinner lingering in the air and Rocc's dog, Kooh, napping at his feet.

Ahna's eyes were wide. "Were you scared?"

"Sure."

Ben smiled. "Did you see it when he shot at Dad?"

"Not really. Dad was in the way."

Ahna relaxed. "Were you so glad Dad was there?"

"I guess so."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you stay in the back room?"

That was the question Rocc was tired of being asked. He knew what they were implying. Whether the person asking was a neighbor, a tourist, or a sibling, what they really meant was, "Why were you the idiot who got the crazy guy to fire his gun in the first place?"

Even this question wasn't what was bothering him, though. What was genuinely annoying him was that his parents still wouldn't tell him why they had all lied in the first place. He'd made sure only to ask when they were alone, and no one else could hear, but they refused to discuss it. "Later" was the only answer he ever got.

And now, Dad was avoiding him.

His dad was also acting weird. In the time since the shooting, he'd become accident-prone, managing to cut or bruise himself almost daily. Rocc could see him in the kitchen now. Instead of his usual polo with the store logo, he wore a jacket to hide the burns and scrapes on his arms. His left thumbnail was black -- he claimed it got closed in his bedroom door. Every finger on his right hand was bandaged.

He insisted he was just klutzy because of trauma, but Rocc knew better.

Dad was trying to be bulletproof again.

"Rocc!"

Ben waved his hands in front of Rocc's face.

"That's enough questions for today," Mom said, "and it's bedtime for you two." She put her hand on Rocc's shoulder. "He was very brave, and we're very glad he and Dad are okay. Now go brush your teeth."

The younger twins lingered, looking at Rocc hopefully. Mom clucked her tongue.

“Rocc knows he should stay in the backroom if something like that happens again.”

Rocc felt the comment snap something inside him. “I just wish they’d found the bullets,” he said. “It was more amazing when I thought Dad was bulletproof.”

Dad froze, and Mom jumped in quickly. “You remember what the police report said. We’re just lucky that the first two shots in his gun were blanks,” she lied. “Otherwise, your father could have been seriously hurt.”

“Lucky,” Rocc said bitterly. “Unbelievably lucky.”

His mom’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“So, what happened to the robber?” Sibi asked. She seemed skeptical of the story — she was suspicious of everything. The only good thing about keeping the secret was that he could lie to her without getting in trouble.

Mom frowned. “When Hank came by yesterday, he said he was still in a coma. He didn’t sound like anyone knew how long it would be before he woke up.” She shifted nervously.

Sibi had seen it, too. “What happens if he wakes up?”

“They’ll ask him questions, I suppose,” Mom said, “but according to the report, he had taken illegal drugs before he came to our store. He might not remember anything.”

Ben grabbed a book and held it above his head. “Get out of my store.” He swung down toward Sibi.

She caught it without looking. “Mom, he’s acting like Dad again.”

Ahna climbed onto the couch next to Rocc. “Tell the story one more time, please?”

Rocc felt his shoulders tense. “Okay,” he said. “How about this time I pretend we found bullets?”

“Patrocc Craig Peterson!” Mom scolded. “Enough!”

Rocc didn’t care. If they weren’t going to tell him the truth, at least he’d get a good fight out of it. He felt his dad’s eyes on him and met them defiantly.

Kooh’s ears perked, and she lifted her head, a low growl in her throat. The doorbell rang.

Mom ordered Kooh to stay and disappeared down the stairs. She returned with a tall man in a dark suit coat and blue jeans. He had a broad, olive-toned face with curly dark hair nearly reaching his shoulders. His white shirt was unbuttoned enough to reveal a gold necklace with silver tags hanging from the chain. A loosely folded red handkerchief stuck out of his front suit pocket.

"This is Special Agent Hedris Grey from the FBI," Mom said as the man flashed a badge. "He says he's come to talk to us."

"Yes, thank you," Agent Grey said. "I was just mentioning to Mrs. Peterson that some new information has come to light regarding the shooting, and I have some questions I'd like to ask you."

Kooh growled. The FBI agent eyed the dog warily.

Mom turned to Rocc and Sibi, speaking calmly. "Why don't you take Ben and Ahna to your rooms? I'm sure this won't take long." Despite her calm tone, their mother's eyes were worried. "Take Kooh, too."

"I was there when it happened," Rocc said. "I should be able to stay to talk about it."

"Patrocc Peterson now is not the time—"

"Actually," Special Agent Grey interjected, "I would prefer for Patrocc and the older sister to stay. What is her name?" He pulled out a little black notebook and scribbled with half a pencil.

"Sibi," Mom said, confusion in her voice.

"Spelled?"

"S-I-B-I."

"And her age?"

"Thirteen," Mom said. "She and Rocc are twins."

"Mmm-hmm," he replied, still writing, "And Patrocc goes by the name 'Rocc?'"

"Yes."

"Is Sibi short for something?"

"Sibihla." Mom spelled it. "She wasn't part of the shooting, though."

Grey kept writing. Mom pointed two fingers at Ben and Ahna and then toward the bedrooms.

"But Mom," Ben whined.

"I want to stay with Rocc," Ahna said.

Mom's jaw set, and she pointed to the rooms again. Kooh covered and walked toward the bedrooms — Ahna and Ben followed.

Mom turned back to the FBI agent. "Would you like to have a seat, Mr... I'm sorry. Could you repeat your name?"

"Special Agent Hedris Grey."

"Mr. Grey, of course. Would you like to sit, Mr. Grey? I can get you something to drink if you'd like. We only have soda and water up here, but if you'd like a juice or something else, we can go to the shop and—"

"No, ma'am." Grey spoke crisply and efficiently. "I've just come from speaking with the man arrested here during the incident. He woke up late this morning. He won't give us any information on who he is, but the man was thrilled to talk about what he remembered from the shooting."

Grey paused. Dad was trying very hard to look casual. Sibi sat on the edge of the couch, her eyes wide.

"Oh?" Mom said.

"When he woke up," Grey continued, "he was sure that Mr. Peterson was dead. He wanted to make it clear that the first shot was an accident and the second shot was in self-defense. We questioned him for quite some time, and he corroborated your story except in one aspect. He said that he saw the fired bullet on the floor next to the boy and that it had signs of mushrooming."

"Mushrooming?" Mom questioned.

"It's what a bullet does when it impacts something without penetrating."

"It must be a mistake," Mom said. "The police said he was a heroin addict—"

"Heroin is not a hallucinogen, Mrs. Peterson," Grey said, "and the suspect was in withdrawal. The evidence very clearly corroborates his story. Two shots fired. Gunfire residue found near the cash register and on Mr. Peterson's shirt. Mr. Peterson's shirt had forensic evidence consistent with a bullet fired at close range as though worn over a bulletproof vest. No bullets found, but Mr. Peterson and his son exhibited strange behavior consistent with witnesses withholding evidence. I do not believe the attacker to be mistaken."

"We don't own bulletproof vests," Mom said, her voice timid.

"No, I'm sure you don't," Grey said. He faced Rocc. "How about

you, Patrocc? Would you like to tell me the truth?"

"There isn't anything more to tell," Rocc said. He looked at his mom. Why were they lying to the FBI?

Grey's eyes darted between Rocc and his mother. "What if I can tell you why your parents don't want to tell the truth?"

Rocc hesitated.

Agent Grey smiled.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself more completely," he said. "I am indeed an agent of the FBI, but I also serve in a more important agency." He addressed Ema and Craig. "I assume you are both familiar with the Frith Assembly."

Ema coughed sharply. Craig clamped his lips shut, and his face reddened. "Um, no," Mom said.

"I see. Then you won't know what I'm talking about when I say I'm assigned to the Void Border, which includes your home. I've been running some tests outside your home, looking for signs of an anomaly, but I haven't found any. Since none of this means anything to you, I assume you won't mind if I run a few tests in here." He slid his hand under his coat, took out a tangle of silvery metal twigs, and pulled them over his hand like a glove. Embedded in each metal twig was a tiny jewel, each jewel a different color. A small creamy-white clam shell sat on the back of it all.

Grey started humming.

Rocc stared in disbelief.

"Why is he singing?" Sibi asked, frowning.

"You'll take that off in my home," Dad said as his face turned an even deeper shade of red.

"Will I?" Grey responded lightly. "And why would I do that?"

"Because you don't have my permission."

A look of smug triumph settled on Grey's face. He removed the metal glove and stored it in his suit coat. Dad stood. Mom's eyes were hard and watery.

Grey paced slowly in front of the four Peterson's like a lion behind glass at a zoo. "What I don't understand is how you could have stonewall in the same environment where a firearm could discharge. That's never been recorded before. We've been under the impression that it's impossible. And yet, the perpetrator is positive about what he

saw and did. I've heard of outcasts experimenting in border anomalies before, but never this far out and never with this kind of success." He stopped pacing. "What really happened?"

"There's no anomaly here. You'll be leaving my home now," Dad said, his fists clenched.

Grey didn't seem to notice. "And on top of that, you were shot nine years ago." He stopped walking and glared accusingly at Rocc's parents. "Or was that just a fabrication to help you hide from us?"

Slowly, Dad took off his jacket and then his shirt.

"Ugh," Sibi said. "What happened to you, Dad?"

The scabs and bruises on his hands and wrists extended up his arms and across his shoulders. A deep scratch sat on the spot where the second bullet had only left a red welt. The heavily faded white circular scar from nine years earlier on his shoulder was hardly visible amid the other injuries.

"Some impressive special effects," Grey said. "Practicing your use of theatrical makeup for future incidents, perhaps? What was different this time? Was the gunshot wound nine years ago faked? A failed experiment? Did you succeed this time?"

"They're all real," Dad said, his voice low, calm, and scary. "You'll be leaving my home now."

Grey pulled out a folded piece of paper from his suit pocket. "This is a warrant to search your store and your home for further signs of a bullet. You are an undocumented expatriate living in an apparent Void Anomaly. I have a right to be in your home by both governments. Now, may I have your registered names?"

"We told you," Mom said, her voice vacant of its previous charm. "Ema and Craig Peter—"

"I have those. What are your real names?"

Mom and Dad stayed silent for several moments.

Grey's words were swirling in Rocc's mind. Expatriate? Both governments? Was the Frith Assembly some Scottish mafia?

Finally, Dad spoke, his tone softening. "We have a right to be known by the names of our choosing as long as we don't engage in commerce across the border."

Grey's smile faded. "I should have known you'd be a part of the Merchant Assembly."

Grey and Dad stared at each other. Sibi inched closer to Rocc and grabbed his arm.

“Patrocc,” Grey said, finally breaking eye contact with Craig. “You can make this much easier if you tell me the truth.”

Rocc considered what to do. On the one hand, his parents were hiding something, and he wanted to know what it was. On the other hand, there was no way he could trust Agent Hedris Grey. He shook his head.

“You are free to search our home according to your warrants,” Dad said. “We have nothing here to hide. We will, however, be leaving as you do so. We’re done answering your questions.”

“That,” Grey spat, ice in his voice, “is unfortunate. I suppose I’ll have to find out for myself.” He smiled.

Rocc’s blood ran cold.

The agent reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a gun, pointing it at Dad.

## *Not Dead*

Rocc stepped between his dad and Agent Grey. "Wait... wait."

Dad grabbed him and pulled him behind, Mom and Sibi stepping back. Sibi was crying. Craig's strong arm locked Rocc to his back.

Rocc couldn't move, so he tried talking. "Please," Rocc said. "There were two bullets. My dad's skin stopped both. We hid them from the police."

Grey's smile fled his face. "That doesn't explain how the firearm could discharge in a Void anomaly." His voice rose in volume. "It isn't possible. Firearms can only discharge in the Void, and stonesskin doesn't exist there. I need the truth!"

Rocc felt the blood draining from his face. If Agent Grey didn't believe him, they were in trouble.

"I don't know how it happened," Dad said. "Do you see my arms? I've been trying to repeat it. I can't."

"I don't believe you. It's a great ruse, but you are all too good at lying."

"You saw Craig earlier," Mom said. "He's not a good liar."

Dad turned his head slightly, scowling, his eyes remaining on Grey's gun. "I'm not that bad."

"You're terrible, Dad," Sibi whimpered, fearful tears still running down her face.

"I am not."

"Shut up!" Grey screamed. Sweat ran down his forehead. His free hands trembled.

Rocc's heart sank.

"Put the gun down," Dad said.

"Tell me how you did it, or I will pull the trigger and see for myself," Grey demanded.

"I don't know," Dad said. "It just happened."

"I don't believe you. I don't think I'll be able to fire at all. I think you faked the whole scene. This building has to be on an anomaly."

"That doesn't make sense," Dad barked.

"One way to find out."

"There are a thousand other ways to find out."

"Which I'm sure you've prepared for," Grey said, leveling the gun.

"If you're wrong, I'll be dead."

Grey's eyes lost focus as he considered Craig's words, his gun drifting down.

Rocc felt his father's arm relax. He leaned his head against his dad's bared shoulder, tears starting down his cheeks.

Sibi stepped toward the kitchen phone. "I'm calling the police," she said.

"No!" Grey yelled, lifting the gun. Sibi froze, and Rocc felt his heart beating rapidly. Five beats. Ten beats.

"I don't believe you," Grey said. His finger squeezed the trigger.

The booming report of the gun shocked everyone, both Agent Grey and Craig cursing at the same time.

Rocc broke free and rounded on his dad. The lead had flattened and was sticking to his dad's chest, exactly over his old scar. Dad peeled the bullet from his skin.

Dad's face and the scar were bright red, the shade deepening on both.

"It's not possible," Grey said.

The doors to the two bedrooms cracked open in unison.

"Stay in your room!" Mom yelled.

"What was that noise?" Ben said.

"Nothing, just stay in your room!"

"Why does Dad have his shirt off," Ahna said. "Gross."

"Close the door!"

"But Kooh wants out," Ben said.

"Fine. Just close the door after her!"

The bedroom door clicked closed as the black and white border

collie came running into the room, her hackles raised. She growled menacingly.

“Good girl, Kooh,” Rocc muttered. He knew she was a scaredy-cat who’d run away with her tail between her legs if Grey walked toward her, but Grey didn’t need to know that.

“You’ll leave now,” Dad said to Grey, his voice dangerous. “Or I will make sure you are unable to come back.”

“I’m not finished!” Grey said. He eyed Kooh warily as he put his gun back in his jacket. “Call your dog off.”

“The dog is the least of your problems,” Dad said. “I will make sure you never work for the Frith again. You’ve violated so many Rules of Void Engagement—”

“Fantastic,” Grey interrupted coolly. “Let me help you lodge your complaint. The first thing I will need is your real name.”

A tense silence took over the room. Even Kooh stopped growling, though the hair on her back still stood straight up.

“All I need are your official names,” Grey said. “Otherwise, I will be back with other investigators from the Assembly. We will investigate you and your children.”

“You have no right!” Dad exploded. “We have a claim of sanctuary in the Void. Violating that claim of sanctuary is a breach of The Void Ethics Act.”

Grey pointed to himself as he argued. “I have the right to investigate anything or anyone that threatens our society. Even in the Void.”

“What threat?”

“A family of dwarfs living on our border, hiding a Void anomaly within their own home,” Grey said as he pointed to the floor. “That is enough of a threat for my actions to be justified.”

“Dwarfs?” Rocc and Sibi said in unison.

The adults ignored them.

“There is no anomaly here,” Dad said.

“You have stonesskin,” Grey said. “That means there is an anomaly.”

“Your weapon discharged,” Mom said. “No one will believe that my husband has stonesskin.”

“Of course they will.”

Mom smiled. "Craig may be a bad liar—"

Dad objected. "I'm not a—"

"Hush," Mom said. She smiled again at Grey. "He may be a bad liar, but the rest of us are not. Are you willing to risk bringing your Frith colleagues here based on your implausible story?"

"They'll believe my report," Grey said.

"Will your report include that Craig was wearing a bulletproof vest?"

Grey scowled. "That's a lovely story, but why would you have hidden that from the police in the first place?"

Mom's smile broadened. "Because we stole it from Officer Hank and didn't want him to find out."

Grey's breath hissed slowly through clenched teeth. He stared murderously at Ema.

Her smile began to falter.

Grey reached into the gun side of his jacket again. Rocc tensed. His dad crouched as though ready to tackle the special agent.

From the suit coat, Grey pulled out a small, white notebook with an attached pen and began to write. He filled the first page and continued to the second.

After filling three more pages in tense silence, Grey pulled a carbon copy from under each page. He dropped the first on the sofa.

"I've recorded your confession of being a dwarf family living under pseudonyms with a claim of sanctuary within fifteen miles of city boundaries." He dropped several more sheets. "I am summoning your two older children to begin attending school due to their inadequate education at home."

"Inadequate education!" Dad said.

Mom slapped his arm.

"But he hasn't even tested their level of edu—"

Mom interrupted him with a second slap to the arm, and he shut his mouth.

Grey shook as he spoke. "The quality of your children's education is determined at my discretion!" Kooh ducked her head, hiding behind Sibi.

Grey looked at his notepad, his excited breaths starting to slow. "The bus will be here for Patrocc and Sibihla at seven fifteen

tomorrow morning. They will need to bring their gaunts. If the children do not meet the bus, or if they will need to rent gaunts from the school, their parents, currently under the pseudonyms of Craig and Ema Peterson, will be required to register their home with the Frith to continue their claim of sanctuary in the Human Void. Once required to register their home, they must also register under their legal names. Is that clear?" He dropped the final sheet onto the sofa.

Paper settled softly in the tense silence.

"Good," Grey said. "I'll see myself out."

Several hours later, Rocc sat on the loveseat in the living room, pretending to read a book. Sibi and Dad were on the sofa, staring at the floor. Mom was in the boys' bedroom with Ben and KooH, settling them down to sleep.

Rocc had felt afraid, angry, annoyed, relieved, and many other emotions since Agent Grey had left, but now he was just frustrated. What were his parents hiding that was so bad that they were willing to let Grey get away with shooting his dad? What did it have to do with his dad being bulletproof? Why were they unwilling to even talk about it?

Mom entered the room. "They're finally asleep," she said. "It's time the two of you get to bed, too."

Rocc slammed his book closed. "What are you and Dad hiding?" he demanded.

"It's not time to talk about that yet," Mom replied.

"Why did he call us a dwarf family?"

"Not time yet."

"What did Agent Grey mean by Void Anomaly? Stoneskin?"

Mom ignored him.

"When is it going to be time?" Rocc said. "Do we have to wait until Dad gets shot again?"

"Patrocc Craig Peterson," Mom said. "Stop it. We will tell you soon enough, but not tonight."

"We have to go to some new school because of your secret," Rocc said. "Can't you at least tell us why?"

Sibi continued staring at the floor. Rocc felt his cheeks getting hot. At least she could try to help him.

"I wanted to talk to you about that, actually," Dad said. "I think I've figured out a loophole in Grey's summons. If the two of you want to stay home tomorrow, you can."

"Yes," Rocc said.

Sibi looked up. "What?"

"They will probably send you home before you even make it to the school," Dad said.

"Why?" Sibi asked.

Dad blushed. "It's, uh, the school requires... It's a special school that you're not..."

Mom stepped in. "There are things about our family that your father and I aren't ready to talk about, at least not yet. Because those things are part of who you are, they won't accept you at the school, and they will send you home."

"But, but... I don't understand," Sibi said. "Why will we have to go home? Are you sure?"

"Yes, honey," Mom said.

Dad blushed deeper.

Sibi locked her eyes on Dad. "What?"

Mom rolled her eyes. "You really are horrible at keeping secrets."

"I keep them fine," Dad said.

"Yes, you're right," Mom said. "You're horrible at hiding secrets."

Sibi was still looking at Dad. "What? What secret?"

Mom shook her head.

"It's just," Dad mumbled, avoiding Mom's eyes, "we don't know for certain that they'll send them home. It's possible they will make it to the school. It's just most likely that they'll send them home."

Mom shook her head. "You're hopeless."

"I believe my penchant for honesty was one of the reasons you married me."

This time, Mom blushed.

Sibi shook her head. "Why would they take us to the school just to send us home?"

Rocc caught her eye. She knew as well as he did that they just needed to wait for Dad to get uncomfortable. If she stopped asking questions, they might get answers.

As the silence stretched, Dad had a hard time keeping still. Mom

glared at him, but that just made it worse.

Finally, Dad broke. "They don't know that you're—"

"Craig!"

"They don't know what?" Rocc asked.

Sibi sighed. "That we're adopted."

"What?"

Sibi ignored him and locked eyes with their dad. "That's what you were going to say. They don't know that we're adopted."

Rocc and his sister had known they were adopted since they were eight. It had been weird at first, but it was old news now. "Why does it matter that we were adopted?"

Mom sighed. "They won't care that you're adopted, but the fact that you're adopted means that you probably won't be able to go to the school. If you go to the school tomorrow, they will most likely find out that you're adopted on the way to the school, and then they will send you home."

Sibi frowned. "That doesn't make sense. How will they know? People always tell me that I look and act just like Dad."

Mom looked sad now. "It has nothing to do with how you look or act."

"Is there a DNA test?"

"No, honey."

Rocc was getting tired of the conversation. "It doesn't matter. Dad says we don't have to go. So we don't go."

"We're going," Sibi said.

"A crazy man with a gun shoots Dad and then tells us we have to go to his school, and you want to go?"

Sibi looked at Dad. "It's not his school," she said. "Is it?"

"No," Dad said. "He won't be at the school."

"See!"

"Fine, you go," Rocc said, "but I'm staying home."

"Pleeeeeease," Sibi begged. "I don't want to go by myself the first day. Please come with me."

"You're being an idiot," Rocc said.

"Rocc," Dad growled. "That's enough."

Rocc bit his tongue. Literally. His mouth always got him in trouble when he was upset.

“Please, Rocc,” Sibi pleaded again, her eyes glistening. Was she crying? “I want to go, but not by myself. I’m tired of homeschool. I want friends. I want to have something to do outside of the gas station.”

Sibi *did* complain a lot about being homeschooled. The truth was, even Rocc was tired of spending all of his time with his family.

On the other hand, Sibi always made Rocc do stuff he didn’t want to. Why did she always get her way?

“I would prefer if you went with her,” Mom said. “It would be nice to have you both there when they send you home.”

Rocc hated it when it felt like a decision had already been made for him. He wanted to fight, but he’d never wear down Sibi and Mom. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll go.”

Dad seemed relieved. He and Mom shared a glance, and she nodded. “Wait here a moment,” Dad said. He walked into the master bedroom, and they heard him digging through the closet. After a few minutes, he returned with two shoe boxes. He handed the black one to Rocc and the red one to Sibi.

“Open them,” Mom said. “We had these made for you when Ben and Ahna were born. They’re your gaunts.”

“Gaunts?” Sibi said as she opened her box and pulled out a white silk bag. Rocc’s shoe box contained a similar black bag. He lifted the bag and hefted its weight—it felt like it was full of nails. He opened the bag and saw a twisted tangle of metal.

These weren’t answers — they were just more questions.

Rocc dropped the bag back into the shoebox. “I’m going to bed.”

## *Remember*

Asleep and dreaming again, Rocc sat in a school classroom, and a familiar old man stood in the front.

The teacher spoke. "Good, good. You are learning well. You are ready to be taught more — you are ready to be taught why."

The old man considered him for a moment before speaking again.

"But perhaps it is too early. You won't remember these new lessons in your waking moments yet, nor will you remember why they will be essential in the trials to come. I think, however, they will be buried within you, waiting to be relearned." He turned to the blackboard.

"Pay attention now, young Rocc Peterson. We will discuss the properties of the elemental combinations you have learned. You must understand these properties as you create more complex workings."

Rocc nodded.

"There are two elemental combinations that are most important for you. One is your gift, your strength, your talent. It allows you to make things happen repeatedly without stutter or shift.

"The other will improve your understanding of the mechanisms of your charms."

The teacher approached Rocc's table and pointed to a dish in the center. His fingers were heavy with silver and gold rings, formed like reptile scales.

"Begin by creating the first."

Rocc obeyed. An undulating blob of orange and blue spun into existence.

“Good. Now give it form with the second.”

Rocc felt the air around the blob with his fingers. Slowly, the blob resolved into a perfect, spinning sphere.

“Excellent. It will not always behave as you see it now. You are dreaming, and it is easier to practice here. In your waking life, you will find that the second combination will be nearly impossible for you at first without a stone to guide you. The first represents your essence. The second represents your complement.”

Rocc nodded, and his teacher smiled.

“All other elemental combinations are neither your essence nor complement but a complicated intertwining of both. They can make decisions you have predetermined and remember things even if you have forgotten them. They can be dangerous, but at the same time, they can fix your mistakes and show you what is wrong. They can increase your speed and reduce your effort.”

Rocc looked at his sphere. Everything seemed so clear, so simple, so connected.

He felt a hand on his chest, and the dream began to slip away. He was waking.

The old man frowned. “Rocc Peterson, you must find someone to teach you while awake. This knowledge will be dangerous if you begin remembering without a teacher.”

The teacher and the classroom blurred and faded.

“Remember! A mentor!”

Rocc opened his eyes to see his mom leaning over him in the dark. She smiled.

“Time to get up.”

As she left the room, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He felt like he’d been dreaming of something important, but all he could remember were gold and silver scales — probably another dragon dream.

## *Bus Ride*

The morning was dark and chilly, the smell of burning firewood hanging in the air. The late September sun wouldn't crest over the mountains for at least an hour, but the first hints of light shone in the eastern sky. The road had no street lamps, the only illumination from the moon waning in the west.

Rocc's breath billowed from his mouth like smoke. Despite everything, he was excited about going to a new school. Maybe they wouldn't get sent home, and then... what? Some superhuman training or something? Learning to stop bullets magically?

That would be cool.

Sibi was shivering. She had decided she didn't want to wear her bulky coat her first day, but her more fashionable light jacket was failing to keep out the cold.

Rocc tilted his arm to see his watch in the moonlight. Seven-fifteen, and still no sign of the bus. Maybe they'd already figured out that he and Sibi wouldn't be allowed to attend. Maybe they weren't coming.

Sibi stared at the ground. She hadn't spoken much all morning and clutched the notebook Mr. Yoshi had given her like a security blanket. Rocc would have made fun of her, but he had brought his gift, too. He touched the outline of the shark tooth under his coat.

Sibi started pacing.

"What's wrong?" Rocc asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

“Not really,” Sibi said, looking up. “It’s just... what if they think we’re weird? What if they send us home because we’re too dorky or something? Why wouldn’t Mom or Dad tell us why they would send us home? I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about it. I don’t want to be sent home.”

“I slept fine,” Rocc said. “I even had a cool dream.”

“About what?”

Rocc thought. “I don’t remember, I guess. I remember feeling like I’d done something cool when I woke up. Something about snakes or dragons or something.”

“You’re so weird,” Sibi said, her voice shivering with her body.

They waited.

After a few minutes, Sibi broke the silence. “Remember, don’t mention that we’re adopted.” Rocc ignored her.

More time passed.

“Do you think they’ll let us get on the bus?”

“I don’t know,” Rocc said. “Maybe they’ll get here, look at us and say, ‘Sorry, our mistake. We thought you’d be taller.’”

Sibi laughed.

“I just wish I knew why they would send us home,” she said. “Maybe I could fix it.”

“Maybe it has something to do with him calling us dwarfs,” Rocc said. “Dad’s over six feet tall, and you and I aren’t short. Maybe this school is for midgets, and Agent Grey was just being mean.”

“Little people.”

“What?”

“Little people,” Sibi repeated. “They don’t like to be called midgets or dwarfs. Midget is a bad word.”

“Little people,” Rocc repeated. “Huh.” It was amazing, the random things Sibi knew.

The sound of a diesel motor echoed off the canyon walls.

“Do you think that’s the bus?” Rocc said as headlights flashed in the distance.

Sibi nodded. She stared at the ground again.

As the bus approached, Rocc’s mind started racing. What was so special about the school? Why would they get sent home? Was it for super-intelligent people? Did Grey want them to look stupid in front of

everybody? How was that related to being adopted? If Mom and Dad were super smart, they certainly didn't act like it.

A few moments passed before the bus rounded the final curve and trudged down the road. The brakes squealed as it stopped.

It was a regular old yellow school bus, but half as long. A cloud of white vapor billowed from the tailpipe. The few flashing yellow and red lights illuminated the words written in big black letters on the side.

## SPECIAL NEEDS

### NEW MAJJIA EDUCATION ASSEMBLY

Rocc's heart sank. "It's a school for handicapped people."

Sibi just stared at the words on the side of the bus.

"He assigned us to a special needs school," Rocc continued, bitterness welling in his chest. "Mom and Dad know we'll get sent home because we're not special needs. They're going to think we have mental problems. Our parents would rather humiliate us than risk their stupid secret."

Rocc turned around. His throat was feeling tight, and angry tears threatened in his eyes.

"Where are you going?" Sibi asked, her voice cracking.

Rocc didn't stop. "I'm going back to bed."

"Wait!"

Rocc ignored her and kept walking.

"Where are you going?" a young woman's voice said. She had a hint of an accent Rocc couldn't place.

He turned. The woman was a silhouette in the bus headlights. Rocc could see that she was slender and had long, curly hair. He took a few steps back from her. "I'm not special needs."

The silhouette spoke again. "If you live here, then you are special needs."

"What do you mean by special needs?" Sibi asked.

The silhouette hesitated. "Did your parents tell you where we are going?"

"No," Rocc and Sibi said in unison.

"Did they say why?"

“No,” Rocc said. “They told us you would probably send us home.”

“Rocc!”

The silhouette spoke. “That’s good to know. My name is Meesh — Meesh V’Day. I’m a journeyman at the New Majjia Education Assembly. I was assigned to escort the two of you to the school.”

“We aren’t retarded,” Rocc said.

“Don’t use the r-word,” Sibi corrected.

“I know, but... we aren’t... I mean... we can...” Rocc sputtered.

“I don’t know what you mean by retarded,” the silhouette named Meesh said, “but you need to get on the bus. The grandmaster instructed me that I wasn’t to leave without you.”

“You can stay here all day,” Rocc said. “I don’t care what you do. You can buy snacks from our shop while you wait — that’ll make Mom and Dad happy — but I’m not getting on the bus.”

“Please, Rocc,” Sibi said. “We should at least try.”

“I’m not going to some school for...” Rocc chose his words more carefully. “Special needs people.”

“I don’t think it means what you think it means,” Sibi said.

“I don’t care.”

“Please,” Sibi begged, wiping a tear from her cheek. “Please just come with me.”

Rocc hated it when he made Sibi cry. It was hard to be someone’s twin without feeling what they felt. Right now, Sibi felt horrible, confused, and scared, and Rocc felt all those things right along with her.

“You’re such a... a...” Rocc stuttered, biting back several choice names. “I don’t...”

Sibi stared at him, her eyes pleading.

“Fine.” He stomped toward the bus. “If Mom and Dad are right, this will all be over soon anyway.”

As he passed Meesh, he was surprised at her attractive, dark, and unfamiliar features. Not at all what he had expected.

He climbed the steps, noticing a gruff old bus driver. Diesel fumes followed him inside, fouling the air.

The bus lights flashed on the driver’s jacket, and suddenly, his shoulder moved on its own. Rocc jumped with a yelp. Some kind of

lizard materialized on the bus driver's shoulder. One eye pointed toward him, the other darting around, looking everywhere else.

A strange gurgling sound came from the back of the bus, bouncing and heaving like laughter.

The lizard continued looking at him with one eye as it slowly faded into the pattern of the driver's jacket again.

"A chameleon," Rocc muttered.

Under the chameleon, on the bus driver's chest, was a plastic name badge with "Oscar" etched into it.

Rocc looked down the center aisle. The only other person on the bus was an older boy in a wheelchair. He was drooling and didn't seem to have control of his limbs.

"I think Special Needs means exactly what I think it means."

Immediately, he felt disgusted with himself and glad Sibi hadn't heard his comment. He swallowed his squeamish feelings and sat across from the boy, hoping he could sit there quietly until the young woman named Meesh sent them home.

He could feel the boy looking at him. He turned and smiled.

The boy moaned and flailed. Rocc turned forward and rested his head on the seat in front of him.

Sibi and the woman named Meesh stepped onto the bus. Sibi wouldn't look at Rocc and chose to sit across the aisle from Meesh. The bus doors closed, and with a growl and a jerk, the bus pulled away.

A sweet smell, like honey and cream, filtered into the air as the diesel fumes subsided. It was the way his home smelled sometimes. The knots in his stomach loosened, and he sat back in his chair. He looked at the disabled boy again.

Once again, the boy moaned and gurgled while waving his arms sporadically.

"Shut up, Douglas," Meesh said.

Rocc sat up. Had she just told the handicapped boy to shut up? The boy was looking at him again, but this time, even though his arms seemed out of control, he was trying to motion Rocc to come closer. Rocc leaned across the aisle.

The boy leaned forward and screamed, his arms extending and smacking Rocc in the face. Rocc jumped back.

"Cut it out, Douglas, you're being a dork," Meesh said, facing him.

Douglas settled back into his chair and poked unsteadily at a strange keyboard attached to the other side of his wheelchair. A flat and buzzy robot voice spoke after every few pokes. "But. It. Is. Funny."

Meesh rolled her eyes. Sibi turned.

Douglas smiled, and for the first time, Rocc really looked at him. Douglas looked right back with sharp, clear eyes behind the loose muscles of his face.

"Is Doug not..." Sibi said, hesitating. "What is wrong with..." She paused again. "What is Doug's disabil..." Her phrase trailed off. Even though it was dark, Rocc sensed Sibi's cheeks getting redder as she searched for words.

Douglas poked at his keyboard again. "Douglas. Not. Doug. I. Have. A. L. S. Think. Stephen. Hawking. Which. Means. I'm. A. Super. Hero. Genius. And. Mish. Loves. Me."

Meesh glared at him. "Cute. You do know I can punch you right now, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Mish. Is. Mean. To. Special. People." Douglas typed exuberantly.

Sibi gasped.

"Don't listen to him," Meesh said, shaking her head.

"See. Mish. Is. Mean."

Meesh smiled despite herself. "And get your stupid computer voice to call me Meesh."

"It. Does. Mish."

"Meesh," she repeated.

"Mish."

"Meeeeeeesh."

"Mih. Ih. Ih. Ihsh," the computer voice pronounced in its buzzy tone. Douglas didn't talk or have much control of his limbs, but he was definitely laughing. Rocc giggled. Sibi looked at him reproachfully.

Clearly, Douglas didn't have a mental handicap, which convinced Rocc that his first impression of the bus was at least partially wrong. Douglas relaxed into his chair and looked out his window.

"So... what kind of school are we going to?" Sibi asked.

"Your parents didn't tell you anything?" Meesh said, an eyebrow raised.

"Just that you would probably send us home like Rocc said." Sibi's voice was tense.

"Hmmm, I guess we'll find out soon enough."

Douglas was poking at his keyboard again. "But. I. Like. Having. Friends. On. The. Bus," the computer voice said.

They passed a sign for Rocky Mountain National Park, and the bus turned sharply onto a gravel road. Meesh sat up straight.

Was she holding her breath?

Rocc fingered the shark tooth under his shirt and wondered why he was so nervous. It felt like he was at a funeral where there was a chance the dead person might wake up.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked.

Meesh just shook her head.

After driving another few minutes, the driver stopped next to two ancient-looking cars, which were barely visible in the brightening twilight.

"Why are we stopping?" Sibi asked, an edge of panic in her voice.

Meesh sighed. "It looks like you two are going home."

The bus door opened, and a man climbed the stairs.

It was Agent Hedris Grey.

Rocc stood up, his limbs suddenly teeming with adrenaline. "What is he doing here?"

"It would seem," Grey said, "that you won't be going to school today. We'll be giving you a ride home."

"If you think I'm riding with a half-witted slimeball like you, then you're an idiot," Rocc seethed. He wondered if there was anything in his backpack he could throw.

"Whoa," Meesh said, standing. "Calm down. Of course, you won't ride with him. He's just here to observe. The school has drivers to take you home." Meesh pointed to one of the cars outside the window. Two matronly women waited in the front seats.

Meesh turned to Grey. "You've met them?"

"Yes. We've... met."

"What did you do?"

"I'm still not sure." Grey stared, unblinking, at Rocc.

Rocc clenched his fists.

Grey smiled cruelly. "Get them off the bus."

"You should test them," Meesh said.

"They're twins."

"Yes," Meesh said. She seemed to think he might be an idiot, too. "Fraternal twins."

"That's okay," Rocc said through his teeth. "We'll go, just as long as we don't have to go with him." He felt tears welling in his eyes.

"No, wait," Sibi said, not looking at Rocc. "What happens if you test us?"

"Then one of you may get to continue, and the other will have to go home," Meesh said.

"See!" Rocc barked, feeling his temper rise. "Let's go. You don't want to go alone, and I don't want to go at all." As he said it, he realized it wasn't true. He wanted to go.

"No," Sibi said again, still carefully avoiding Rocc's eyes. "We should be tested. What if I can... if one of us can go on."

"I'm only here because you asked me to come!" Rocc was so mad his ears were getting hot. "Now you're okay with going to some weird school alone?"

"Shut. Up." Grey said flatly. "I didn't bring anything for the test. They'll just have to go home."

Meesh stared at him, shaking her head. "I can do it," she said.

"I'm. Going. To. Be. Late. For. Class," Douglas typed.

"You're welcome to walk," Meesh said to him with a sarcastic smile.

Sibi furrowed her brow and glared at her. "I'm pretty sure that isn't funny."

Meesh ignored her. "Follow me."

Outside the bus, the rising sun was peeking over the foothills below them. Meesh handed Sibi a large marble. "Hold this in your hand and walk that way," Meesh said, pointing toward a clump of pine trees. "Watch it. If it glows, tell us." She held a different marble out to Rocc. "You take this one and go the opposite way."

Rocc grabbed the marble and started walking. The whole situation was ridiculous. He'd come to support Sibi, and now she was perfectly happy to go on without him. She'd used him — taken him for granted. He squeezed the marble in his hand and fumed as he distanced himself from the bus, from Sibi, from all of it. It was their stupid fault he was walking through the cold morning air clutching a marble that wouldn't light up.

“That’s far enough,” Meesh called out.

Rocc rolled his eyes as he stopped, holding back a few more choice words. He opened his hand.

The sun was peeking over the mountain, but even in its glare, the marble shone brightly.

## *Into the Floatfire*

Rocc watched from the bus window as the rusty blue sedan drove away with Sibi, her crestfallen figure sulking in the back seat. He knew he should feel bad about going on without her, but he didn't. Not yet, anyway. She was the reason all this had happened, and she had been willing to abandon him. She could deal with being disappointed.

The bus jerked forward and continued rumbling down the road. Something was off. Rocc wasn't sure what, but he felt something was missing.

After a few moments, he got it. The bus wasn't making any noise. It was moving forward, but the engine wasn't running.

"Did the bus switch to electric power?" Rocc asked.

"No," Meesh said. "That wouldn't work here."

"What wouldn't work?"

"Never mind that for now. Do you have your gaunt?" Meesh reached into a bag on her seat and pulled out a tangle of metal similar to Sibi's.

"In my backpack," Rocc said.

"Grab it and put it on."

Meesh slid her gaunt on as Rocc took out the bag and pulled out his tangle of metal. He slid it over his hand, but it didn't fit.

"It's beautiful," Meesh said, admiring the tangle of metal as he fought with it. She touched a few of the metal twigs. "Platinum and steel?"

"I'm. Not. Sure," Rocc said, tugging at it and contorting his hand.

He noticed that Meesh's gaunt had gone on quickly and now looked like an elaborate, metal wrist glove that nearly went to her elbow. His gaunt poked his wrist uncomfortably, his thumb flattened against his palm, and his pinky wrenched at a painful angle.

"You're putting it on upside down," a laughing voice said beside him.

Rocc turned to see Douglas sitting straight and strong in his wheelchair, his arms laying calmly on the armrests.

Meesh made a clucking sound. "Let him figure it out for himself."

"You can talk?" Rocc said.

Douglas poked his keyboard again and mimicked the computer voice. "Yes. I. Can." The keyboard console was blank.

"Why were you pretending to be handicapped?" Rocc accused. Usually, Sibi was the one who would be bothered by someone playing a distasteful joke, but it felt like Douglas making a show of drooling and shaking had crossed a line.

Douglas whistled, shaking his head. "You'd better teach this newbie some things quick, Meesh. Before someone gets mad and wails on him."

"Ignore him," Meesh said. "Just get your gaunt on. It will make more sense in a minute."

Rocc turned the metal spines over and tried again. Why would Douglas pretend to have a disability? Who does that? After several tries, the gaunt finally slid into a comfortable position. It seemed to squeeze his hand as it settled into place.

"Weird," Rocc said.

Douglas snickered.

"Good," Meesh said. "Put this on, too. It's called a 'wristore.'" She handed him a curved glass container, the thickness of his finger that looked like a bracelet. A cloudy, golden liquid moved inside. "Do you know your order?"

"My order of what?" Rocc said.

"Hmmm," Meesh hummed. "Let's start with the test you just took." She produced one of the marbles, still shining brightly. "This is a common glowstone, which doesn't work when it's near humans. When you and your sister separated, it showed that your sister is human, but you're not. You're Majjian."

“Not human?” Rocc said.

“Right. Majjian’s come in four types - it’s called your majjish order. Everyone Majjian is either a magician, dwarf, elf, or an orc. These stones will flash if an orc handles them without a gaunt, so we can be sure you’re not an orc. Do you have any idea what order you might be? Maybe your parents mentioned something?”

“The Sith guy said we were a family of dwarves last night,” Rocc offered.

Meesh was trying to suppress a smile. “You mean Frith,” she corrected, “and it’s ‘dwarfs,’ not ‘dwarves.’” She looked at him thoughtfully. “Probably a dwarf, then.”

Some things fell into place in Rocc’s head. “Sibi’s human. Mom and Dad thought you’d send us home because they thought we were both human.”

“That’s right, you said you were adopted.” Meesh shook her head. “We’ll mark you as a likely dwarf, and they can change it if you prove otherwise.”

Questions flooded Rocc’s mind. “How can Sibi be human, and I’m not?” he asked. “We’re twins. We have the same birth parents.”

“Majjish order is genetic,” Meesh answered. “A lot like eye color and earlobes. Some orders are more dominant, and some are more recessive. For example, being human is a recessive trait, like having blue eyes. You don’t always match your parents, and, in your case, each of your birth parents gave your sister recessive human genes. That’s probably why your legal parents decided to live in the Void.” She cocked her head. “Do you know your birth parents?”

Rocc shook his head. “So our birth parents gave us up for adoption because Sibi was human?”

“Maybe,” Meesh said, smiling warmly, “but maybe not. All we really know is that at least one of your birth parents wasn’t human. Majjians don’t have many kids — 2 or 3 at most in their lifetime — so adoption is rare. I think most would rather live in the Void than give up their only chance at having a family.”

“I keep hearing that. Whatt is the Void?”

“It’s also called the Human Void,” Meesh clarified. “It’s any area where humans live.”

Rocc stared at her.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Meesh said. She pulled a shiny black stone out of her bag and handed it to him. “This is obsidian — lava glass. We’re going to use it kind of like a battery for your gaunt. It’s called a neach.” She handed it to him. “You can use just about anything solid, but dwarfs and obsidian do well together. It goes on the back of your gaunt. The wristore goes underneath.”

Rocc placed the black stone on his gaunt, and it stuck like a magnet. The glass bracelet clicked into place on the wrist of the gaunt. “I’ve never seen magnetic glass before,” he marveled.

Douglas scoffed. “Magnetic?”

“We need to give you a primer since you’re coming in the middle of the school year,” Meesh said, ignoring Douglas. “The first lesson is to float fire.”

Rocc nodded. He had no idea what “float fire” meant, but nodding seemed to be the right thing to do.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the four elements, would you?” Meesh asked.

“Four?” Rocc questioned. “There’s more than a hundred on the periodic table.”

Meesh sighed. “Wrong elements,” she said. “The four elements I mean are water, air, fire, and earth. This exercise will use two of them: air and fire. It’s probably the most important thing you’ll learn today - maybe the most important thing you’ll learn this year. Getting air is easy since it’s all around us. The trick is getting the fire.” She straightened in her seat and took a deep breath. “Before we start, you need to sing into your neach.”

Again, Rocc stared at her blankly.

“It’s easy,” she said. “Just try it. Any note will work for this.”

Slowly, Rocc lifted his hand and gaunt to his face and sang a brief note. The note seemed to echo quietly in the black lava glass, a haunting sound adding voices as he listened. “What did you call it?” he asked.

“A neach,” Meesh said. “Like I said, it’s like a battery for your gaunt, and you charge it by singing. Given practice, you only have to do it once a day unless something complicated comes up. Now press the tips of your fingers together on your gaunt hand.” She demonstrated with her hand.

Rocc closed his fingers in the same way. Immediately, a prickle zapped his fingertips, almost like a static shock. He jerked his fingers apart.

“Good,” Meesh said. “Do it again, but this time, move your fingers out slowly and imagine that tingly feeling staying in the middle.”

Rocc obeyed. Knowing what to expect this time, the jolt wasn’t as shocking. He pulled his fingers apart slowly, and a tiny blue and orange flame appeared between his fingers. It hovered there, a couple of inches over his palm. “Whoa,” he said.

“Definitely magician or dwarf,” Douglas said. “Elves never get it that fast.”

Rocc turned his hand around slowly. The cloudy liquid in the bracelet was boiling softly. As his fingers moved, the swirling dot of fire seemed to tug on them with invisible strings. He felt for them with his other hand.

Douglas chuckled at him.

“Shut up, Douglas,” Rocc whispered under his breath. He focused back on Meesh. “How does this work?”

“That,” Meesh said, “is magic.”

Rocc studied her to see if it was a joke. “Magic?”

“Magic,” she said.

“But how does it float like that?”

“Magic,” she repeated.

Rocc huffed. “But what’s pulling on my fingers?”

“Magic.”

Rocc felt his face getting warm. “But how did the fire start?”

“Magic,” Douglas interjected, “and I’ll bet the answer to your next question will be ‘magic.’ You’re definitely dense as a dwarf.”

“At least I’m not a jerk.”

Douglas’s face contorted. “You little—”

“The fire,” Meesh said, speaking over them, “actually came from you, from inside your fingers. That’s how creating a charm works. You have to combine elements in a compound. From there, you combine compounds to create a charm that does something. That’s magic.”

Rocc shook his hand. The flame shook happily with it. He tried to stretch out his fingers away from each other, but it was like having them in a finger trap — the harder he pulled, the stronger the invisible

binding seemed. He shook his hand more forcefully. The fire touched the strap on his backpack, and a puff of acrid black smoke wafted up. "How do I put it out?" he asked.

"Pull it back into your fingers," Meesh said.

"What?"

Meesh smiled. "Just pinch the flame in your fingertips and imagine sucking it back in. The fire returns to your body, and the air is released."

Rocc hesitated. "Won't it burn me?"

"In the Void, where there is no magic, you can be burned by fire," Meesh said. "Here, magicians and dwarfs can only be burned by cursefire. With regular fire, they're fireproof, but floatfire that small wouldn't burn anyone. Watch me." Meesh made her own orange and black flame and squeezed it out with her fingers. "See, no burn. And I'm an elf."

"Why is yours a different color than mine?" Rocc asked.

"Everyone's is different," she said, waving off more questions. "Now you try."

Rocc pinched his fingers together and imagined pulling the flame into his fingertips. The floatfire disappeared, and warmth ran up into his palm. "Magic," he said. Curious, he put the neach up to his ear. The note he had sung was still there, quietly echoing in the stone. "How will I know whether I'm a magician or a dwarf?"

"Magicians are attractive," Douglas said. "Dwarfs are ugly. It makes it easy to tell, really. I should have noticed that in the first place." He put his hand on Rocc's shoulder. "Clearly, you're a dwarf."

Rocc jerked away. "Says the guy who likes to drool on himself to pretend he's disabled."

Douglas stopped smiling. "Some magicians have ALS in the Void, genius."

"What's ALS?" Rocc demanded. "Annoying Loser Syndrome?"

"That's it!" Douglas said. "Let's test if you're a dwarf." He cocked his left arm to throw a punch. Rocc braced himself, but a jet of water shot past him and covered Douglas's arm. He struggled against it.

"Turn it off," Douglas said stiffly, glowering at Meesh. Her gaunt hand was extended, her jaw set. After several moments, she dropped her hand, and the water evaporated into the air.

Douglas sat in his wheelchair, pouting.

Meesh spoke without taking her eyes off Douglas. "ALS stands for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It's a disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. About a third of magicians have it, and only magicians have it. The symptoms only show up in the Human Void."

"So you weren't pretending?" Rocc said.

"Shut up," Doug responded.

"To answer your question," Meesh said cautiously, "the difference between majjish orders mostly centers on how long they live and special magical abilities. Magicians live a long time, and even though fire won't burn them, they can catch fire. Their skin will even char if they're burning long enough."

"Gross," Rocc said, though a quick image in his mind of Douglas catching fire made him feel better.

Meesh smiled. "The charring brushes off as soon as the fire goes out. The bigger problem is that the fire will burn off their clothes."

The image of Douglas burning took an unhappy turn. He shook his head to clear it.

"Every order has its special trait," Meesh continued. "Dwarfs have hard skin and are hard to crush. Elves can stay underwater for hours, sometimes all day. Orcs—"

"Like to dig in the mud like pigs," Douglas spat.

Meesh gave him a dirty look. "Anyway, magicians are naturally gifted in magic. Other orders have to work harder to create compounds for their charms."

Rocc's mind was still swimming in questions. "Aren't dwarves... er, I mean, dwarfs and elves short?"

"Some elf and dwarf clans didn't get along very well centuries ago," Meesh said. She shrugged. "The idea that they're short is part of a smear campaign the clans launched against each other. All the majjish orders look pretty much the same physically. Just like humans."

"And orcs are bad?" Rocc asked.

Meesh hesitated.

"You just have to tell it like it is," Douglas said, butting in again. "Orcs love poison, and they have to use dark magic fire opals to do charms. No one wants to be around poison and dark magic."

The bus exited the forest onto a road high on a cliff edge. Below them, a vast city spread for miles in front of a broad lake. A steep mountain loomed behind.

"Welcome to New Majjia City on Center Lake," Meesh said. "In the middle is Orc Tower. It's protected by an enchantment that vaporizes you if you step onto the shore. Needless to say, everyone avoids it. The city has a population of about a hundred thousand people."

New Majjia City didn't have skyscrapers, but most buildings were two or three stories tall. Trees and canals were everywhere. Fall leaves gleamed in reds, oranges, yellows, and even purples.

"Where are we?" Rocc said.

"New Majjia City, dork," Douglas said.

Rocc bit back a retort. "No, I mean, like, on a map. Where is this?"

"We're in the middle of Rocky Mountain National Park," Meesh said.

"I'm pretty sure this is bigger than the park," Rocc said. The valley was easily twenty miles wide.

"Almost three times as big, actually," Meesh said.

"What?"

Meesh smiled. "Rocky Mountain National Park has about seventy square miles of forest that serve as the border of New Majjia."

"Is it invisible?" Rocc asked. "How do you hide it?"

"I don't know," Meesh said. "But it's not invisible. The border gets all squished together, and the park collapses around it. It's one of the reasons the roads in the park twist and turn so much. The assemblies built the charm centuries ago but don't tell anyone how it works. Somehow, the magic hides New Majjia from humans, and other human lands expand to make up the difference. Have you ever driven through Wyoming?"

"Sure," Rocc said.

Meesh nodded. "It takes forever, nothing seems to change, and it's windy, right?"

"Yeah," Rocc said. "Everything looks the same for, like, a hundred miles."

"It's all part of the charm," Meesh said. "A part of Wyoming is making up for the area that New Majjia is supposed to use. It warps everything, and it takes longer to get through less land. The wind is

passing at a normal speed, but it seems faster. Magic doesn't work outside of Majjian areas, but that has something to do with physics, not magic."

Rocc's head felt full. Majjish orders? New Majjia? Warped Wyoming? He'd need a week to sort it all out. The Void? No. The Human Void?

"So, I'm not human?" Rocc asked.

"Nope, just a wizard dwarf," Douglas said.

"Watch your language, Douglas!" said an imposing woman's voice from the front of the bus. The only other person on the bus besides Meesh and Douglas was the old man driving it. Rocc wondered how that voice could have come from him as he watched the chameleon change colors from green to black.

Douglas rolled his eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

Ma'am? Rocc stared at the back of Oscar's head. He wondered if he had judged Oscar too quickly. Could he be a woman?

"What did Douglas say?" Rocc whispered to Meesh. "All I heard was wizard dwarf."

"What did I just say?" came the woman's voice.

"The w-word," Meesh said, looking meaningfully at Douglas, "is not one you should repeat. It's derogatory. You can get suspended for using it on school grounds."

Were they joking? "Why?" Rocc asked.

"It's what humans have always called us," Doug said. He leaned forward, shielding his mouth from the front of the bus. "Witch is a bad word, too," he whispered.

"Douglas!" the booming woman's voice shouted. Oscar hadn't moved, but his chameleon turned bright orange. Was there a speaker somewhere by the driver? Were they being watched? Rocc searched the ceiling.

Douglas laughed. "Just making sure Mr. Rocks-For-Brains here doesn't accidentally get himself suspended on the first day, ma'am," he said. "Your hearing is amazing, by the way."

Outside, a large sign came into view. "New Majjia Education Assembly School, Est. 1803." As they slowed, an expansive courtyard opened up, a large building with pillars like the Parthenon directly behind it. A long stone building was to the right, and a modern-

looking warehouse stretched into the distance on the left.

The bus came to a stop, and the doors opened.

“Stoneskin test!”

Douglas punched Rocc in the arm. Hard.

For half a second, Rocc was hopeful. It didn’t hurt!

Then, the pain shot up his arm and seemed to fill his whole body.

Women’s voices were yelling, but Rocc was having trouble focusing on anything but how much his arm hurt. He opened his eyes, tears forming at the sides. Douglas was gone, and Meesh was talking heatedly out the bus window. Oscar was scowling, and the chameleon was deep red.

After a few more words out the window, Meesh turned back. “Are you okay?” Meesh asked. “We need to report him to the grandmaster —”

“I’m fine,” Rocc said. The last thing he needed was to be the kid crying to the teachers on his first day of school.

“I’ll talk to him,” Meesh said. “He’s not usually like that.” She grabbed her arm sympathetically. “It was a legitimate test, though. You don’t have stoneskin yet.”

“Great,” Rocc said. He hoped his sarcasm was evident.

“It’s pretty normal,” she replied. “I’m almost twenty, and I still need to breathe when I’m underwater.”

Rocc didn’t reply. He rubbed his arm as the pain began fading to a dull ache. He grabbed his backpack and walked to the bus doors, nodding goodbye to Oscar as he passed, stepping down.

“Back here right after school,” Oscar said in a low, gruff voice that perfectly matched his craggy features. “No more funny business on my bus! You understand?”

Rocc stared at him, wondering if he had some kind of magical split personality.

Oscar shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Off you go,” he said.

Rocc turned, and the woman’s voice spoke again. “Enjoy your first day!”

Rocc looked back. Oscar blinked. The chameleon on his shoulder turned purple.

“Weird,” Rocc muttered as he stepped off the bus.