

FIVE KINGDOMS

SKY RAIDERS



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OF THE FABLEHAVEN AND BEYONDERS SERIES

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CHAPTER

1

HALLOWEEN

Weaving down the hall, Cole avoided a ninja, a witch, a pirate, and a zombie bride. He paused when a sad clown in a trench coat and fedora waved at him. “Dalton?”

His friend nodded and smiled, which looked weird since his mouth was painted into a frown. “I wondered if you would recognize me.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Cole replied, relieved to see that his best friend had worn an elaborate costume. Cole had worried whether his own outfit was too much.

They met up in the middle of the hall. Kids streamed by on either side; some dressed for Halloween, some not.

“Ready to score some candy tonight?” Dalton asked.

Cole hesitated. Now that they were sixth graders, he was a little nervous that people would think they were too old to go door to door. He didn’t want to look like a kindergartener. “Have you heard about the haunted house on Wilson?”

“The spook alley house?” Dalton clarified. “I heard it has live rats and snakes.”

Cole nodded. "The guy who moved in there is supposed to be a special effects expert. I guess he worked on some big movies. It might just be hype, but I keep hearing amazing things, too. We should check it out."

"Yeah, sure, I'm curious," Dalton said. "But I don't want to skip the candy."

Cole had noticed some sixth graders trick-or-treating in his neighborhood last year. A few kids had looked even older. Besides, did it matter what anyone else thought? If people were handing out free candy, why not take advantage? They already had the costumes. "Okay. We can start early."

"That'll work."

The first bell rang. Class would start soon. "See you at recess," Cole said.

"Later."

Cole went to his classroom and noticed that Jenna Hunt was already at her desk. Cole tried not to care. He liked her, but not in *that* way. Sure, in the past, he might have felt excited and scared whenever she was around, but now she was just a friend.

At least that was what he kept telling himself as he tried to take his seat behind her. He was dressed up as a scarecrow that had been used for archery practice. The feathered shafts protruding from his chest and side made it tricky to sit down.

Did he used to have a crush on Jenna? Maybe, when he was younger. During second grade, at recess, the girls went through a phase when they ran around trying to kiss the boys. It had been disgusting. Like tag, except with cooties involved. The teachers had been against it. Cole had been against it

too—except when it was with Jenna. When she was chasing him, a secret part of him had wanted to get caught.

It wasn't his fault he kept noticing Jenna during third, fourth, and fifth grades. She was too pretty. He wasn't the only one who thought so. She had modeled in some catalogs. Her dark hair had just the right amount of curl, and her thick eyelashes made her eyes look made-up, even without cosmetics.

He used to sometimes daydream about older jerks picking on Jenna. In his imagination, he would come along and save the day with a burst of bravery and action movie karate skills. Afterward, he would be forced to suffer through her tearful thanks.

But everything had changed at the start of sixth grade. Jenna had not only ended up in his class, but by pure chance the seating chart had placed him directly behind her. They had worked together on group projects. He had learned to relax around her, and they had started to talk regularly and make jokes. She had turned out to be cooler than he had hoped. They were actually becoming friends. So there was no reason for his heart to pound just because she was dressed up like Cleopatra.

Jenna turned and looked back at him. She wore a wig of limp black hair with ruler-straight bangs. Dramatic makeup accentuated her eyes. A golden circlet with a snake at the front served as her crown. "What are you?" she asked. "A dead scarecrow?"

"Close," Cole replied. "I'm a scarecrow that got used for target practice."

“Are those real arrows?”

“Yeah, but I broke off the tips. Halloween or not, I figured they would send me home if I brought sharp arrows to school. I like your costume.”

“Do you know who I am?”

Cole scrunched his face as if she had stumped him. “A ghost?”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “You know, right?”

He nodded. “You’re one of the most famous ladies in history. Queen Elizabeth.”

“Wrong country.”

“I’m kidding. Cleopatra.”

“Wrong again. Are you even trying?”

“Seriously? I thought I knew it for sure.”

“I’m Cleopatra’s twin sister.”

“You got me.”

“Maybe I should have come as Dorothy all shot up with arrows,” Jenna said. “Then we would have matched.”

“We would have been the sadder ending to *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“The ending where the wizard turns out to be Robin Hood.”

Laini Palmer, dressed as the Statue of Liberty, arrived at the desk next to Jenna. Jenna turned and started talking to her.

Cole glanced at the clock. There were still a few minutes before class would begin. Jenna had a habit of arriving by the first bell, and Cole had coincidentally developed that habit as well. More kids were coming in: a zombie, a vampire fairy,

a rock star, an army guy. Kevin Murdock wore no costume. Neither did Sheila Jones.

When Jenna had finished talking to Laini, Cole tapped her shoulder. "Have you heard about that new haunted house?"

"On Wilson Avenue?" Jenna asked. "People keep talking about it. I've never really been scared by Halloween decorations. I always know they're fake."

"The guy who just moved in there supposedly did effects for Hollywood," Cole replied. "I heard that some of the stuff in his spook alley is real. Like, live bats and tarantulas and amputated body parts from hospitals."

"I guess that might be freaky," Jenna admitted. "I'd have to see it to believe it."

"It's supposed to be free. Are you going trick-or-treating?"

"Yeah, with Chelsea and Amanda. You?"

"I was planning to go around with Dalton." He was relieved she would be out hunting candy as well.

"Do you know the address?" Jenna asked.

"For the haunted house? I wrote it down."

"I keep hearing about it. We'd better check it out. Want to meet up at around seven?"

Cole tried to keep his expression casual. "Where?"

"Do you know that old guy's house on the corner, with the huge flagpole?"

"Sure." Everybody in the area knew that house. It was one story, but the flagpole was basically a skyscraper. The old guy looked like a veteran. He raised and lowered the flag every morning and night. "Meet there?"

"Bring the address."

Cole retrieved a notebook from his backpack and opened it. While he looked for his homework, his mind strayed. He had never hung out with Jenna after school, but it wasn't like they were going on a date. They would just be part of a group of kids checking to see if a spook alley was actually cool.

Mr. Brock started class a few moments later. He was dressed as a cowboy, with chaps, a big hat, and a sheriff's badge. The outfit made it tough to take him seriously.

Cole walked along the street beside Dalton, one foot on the curb, the other in the dry gutter. He was still a scarecrow bristling with arrows. The straw poking from his neck kept tickling the bottom of his chin. Dalton remained a gloomy clown.

"She wanted to meet at the flagpole?" Dalton verified.

"Just near the house," Cole said. "Not on his lawn."

Dalton pulled back the sleeve of his coat and checked his watch. "We're going to be early."

"Only a little."

"Are you nervous?"

Cole shot him a scowl. "I'm not afraid of haunted houses."

"I don't mean the spook alley," Dalton clarified. "Haven't you always sort of liked—"

"No, Dalton, come on," Cole interrupted. "Be serious. It isn't like that. We're friends."

Dalton bobbed his eyebrows up and down. "My parents say they started out as friends."

"Gross, knock it off." Cole could not have Dalton saying or doing anything that might make Jenna suspect he thought

she was cute. “I shouldn’t have ever told you I used to like her. That was forever ago. We’re just doing this for fun.”

Dalton squinted up ahead. “Looks like a big group.”

He was right. They found Jenna waiting with seven other kids—three of them boys. She was still dressed like Cleopatra.

“Here they are,” Jenna announced. “We can go now.”

“I have the address,” Cole offered.

“I know where it is,” Blake said. “I went by earlier tonight.”

“What’s it like?” Dalton asked.

“I didn’t go inside,” Blake replied. “I just live nearby.”

Cole knew Blake from school. He was the kind of guy who liked to take charge and talked a lot. He always wanted to be goalie at recess, even though he wasn’t that good.

As they started walking, Blake took the lead. Cole fell in beside Jenna. “So what’s your name?”

“Huh?” she replied. “Cleopatra?”

“No, you’re her twin.”

“Right. Want to guess?”

“Irma?”

“That doesn’t sound very Egyptian.”

“Queen Tut?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.” Jenna laughed lightly, then strayed over to her friend Amanda and started talking. Cole fell back to walk with Dalton.

“Do you think the spook alley will actually be freaky?” Dalton asked.

“It better be,” Cole said. “I have my hopes up.”

Blake set a quick pace. They marched briskly, passing a

herd of little kids with plastic superhero faces. Most of the houses had halfhearted decorations. Some had none. A few had really elaborate jack-o'-lanterns that must have been carved using patterns.

Dalton elbowed Cole and nodded toward a doorway. A portly witch was handing out full-size Twix bars to a group of little kids.

"It's okay," Cole said, hefting his pillowcase. "We already made a good haul."

"Not much full-size candy," Dalton pointed out.

"A few little Twix bars are just as good," Cole said, unsure about whether he had any in his bag.

"I heard they have some real cadavers," Blake was explaining. "Dead bodies donated to science but stolen to use as decorations."

"Think that's true?" Dalton wondered.

"I doubt it," Cole replied. "The guy would end up in jail."

"What do you know about it?" Blake challenged. "Have you been stealing corpses?"

"Nope," Cole said. "Your mom was too broke to hire me."

Everyone laughed at that one, and Blake had no reply. Cole had always been good at comebacks. It was his best defense mechanism, and usually kept kids from bothering him.

As they continued down the street, Cole tried to think of an excuse to walk alongside Jenna. Unfortunately, she now had Chelsea on one side and Amanda on the other. Cole had spoken enough with Jenna to feel fairly natural around her. Amanda and Chelsea were a different story. He couldn't work

up enough nerve to barge in and hijack their conversation. Every possible comment that came to mind seemed clumsy and forced. At least Dalton was getting plenty of proof that he and Jenna were only friends.

Cole paid attention to the address. Part of him hoped that Blake would lead them the wrong way, but he made no mistakes. When the spook alley house came into view, Blake displayed it to the others, as if he had decorated it personally.

The house looked decent on the outside. Much better than average. A few fake ravens perched on the roof. Webby curtains hung from the gutters. One of the jack-o'-lanterns puked seeds and pulp all over the sidewalk. The lawn had lots of cardboard headstones, with an occasional plastic hand or leg poking up through the grass.

"Pretty good," Dalton conceded.

"I don't know," Cole said. "After all the buildup, I was expecting granite tombstones with actual human skeletons. Maybe some ghost holograms."

"The best stuff might be inside," Dalton said.

"We'll see," Cole replied. He paused, studying the details. Why did he feel so disappointed? Did he care that much about the impressiveness of the decorations? He had talked Jenna into coming here. If the haunted house was cool, he might get some reflected glory. If it was weak, she would have gone out of her way for nothing. Was that it? Maybe he was just frustrated that he had hardly talked to her.

Blake led the way to the door. He knocked while the other nine kids mobbed the porch. A guy with long hair and a stubbly beard answered. He had a cleaver through his head,

with plenty of blood draining from the wound.

“He must be the special effects pro,” Dalton murmured.

“I don’t know,” Cole said. “It’s pretty gory, but not the ultimate.”

The fatally injured man stepped away from the door to invite them in. A strobe light flashed nonstop. Smoke from dry ice drifted across the floor. Tinfoil coated the walls, reflecting the pulsing light. There were webs and skulls and candelabras. A knight in full armor came toward them, raising a huge sword. The strobe light made his movements look all jerky. A couple of the girls screamed.

The knight lowered his sword. He moved around a little more, mostly from side to side, trying to milk the moment, but he was less menacing because he had failed to pursue his attack. Seeming to realize he was no longer very threatening, the knight started doing robotic dance moves. A few of the kids laughed.

Cole frowned, feeling even more disappointed. “Why did everyone build this up so much?” he asked Dalton.

“What were you expecting?” Dalton replied.

Cole shrugged. “Rabid wolves fighting to the death.”

“It’s not bad,” Dalton consoled.

“Too much hype,” Cole replied. “My expectations were through the roof.” Turning, he found Jenna beside him. “Are you terrified?”

“Not really,” she said, looking around appraisingly. “I don’t see any body parts. They did a good job, though.”

The clunky knight was retreating to his hiding place. The cleaver guy started distributing miniature candy bars, and he

gave everybody two or three of each.

Then an older kid with messy hair wandered into the hall. He was skinny, probably around college age. He wore jeans and an orange T-shirt that said BOO in huge black letters. Otherwise, he had no costume.

“Was this scary enough?” he asked nonchalantly.

A couple of the girls said yes. Most of the kids were silent. Cole felt like it would be rude to tell the truth.

The Boo guy folded his skinny arms. “Some of you don’t look very frightened. Anybody want to see the really scary part?”

He acted serious, but it also could have been a setup for some corny joke.

“Sure,” Cole volunteered. Jenna and a bunch of the others chimed in as well.

The Boo guy stared at them like he was a general and this new batch of troops might not be up to his standards. “All right, if you say so. Fair warning: If any of this other stuff was freaky at all, don’t come.”

Two of the girls started shaking their heads and backing toward the door. One of them turned and buried her head against Stuart Fulsom. Stu left with them.

“Check out Stu,” Cole muttered to Dalton. “He thinks he’s Dr. Love.”

“Why would those girls have come in the first place if they didn’t want to get freaked out?” Dalton complained.

Cole shrugged. If Jenna had wanted to bail, would he have left with her? Maybe if she had buried her head against his chest, trembling with worry . . .

The remaining seven kids followed the Boo guy. He led them through a regular kitchen to a white door with a plain brass knob. "It's down in the basement. I won't be coming. You sure you want to go? It's really messed up."

Blake opened the door and led the way down. Cole and Dalton shared a glance. They had come this far. No way were they wimping out now. None of the others chickened out either.

CHAPTER

2

SPOOK ALLEY

Cole followed Jenna down into the dark basement. Not far beyond the foot of the creaky stairs, black curtains ran from the floor to the ceiling on all sides, concealing most of the room. The only light leaked from an old lantern on a low stool. Grimy and rusty, it looked like a relic from the Old West.

Dalton tugged on Cole's sleeve. Dramatic shadows fell across his face, making his frowning clown makeup look eerie. A painted tear sparkled on one cheek, the glitter in it barely reflecting the lantern's glow.

"That guy locked the door," Dalton whispered. He had been the last kid down the stairs.

"What?"

"The Boo shirt guy. When he shut the door I heard it click, so I checked. We're locked down here."

Sighing, Cole glanced up the stairs. "He probably just did it to add suspense."

"I don't like it," Dalton insisted.

Cole had been friends with Dalton since moving to Mesa, Arizona, from Boise in first grade. They enjoyed many of the same books and video games. They both played soccer and liked riding their bikes. But Dalton tended to get easily stressed.

Cole recalled a time at the movies when Dalton accidentally left his ticket stub in the restroom before the show. Dalton had spent the rest of the time freaking out that the movie police were going to catch him without it and accuse him of theater hopping. He finally went and confessed to a worker about his lost stub. Of course the guy told him not to worry about it.

"It's just for effect," Cole assured his friend. "They're trying to make it scarier."

Dalton shook his head. "He did it quietly. I barely heard it. What kind of affect does it have when nobody hears it?"

"You heard it. You checked. You're scared. Seems like they're experts."

"Or psychopaths."

The five other kids were milling around the area at the bottom of the stairs. Blake had crouched to inspect the lantern. Stepping away from the light, he tugged at one of the black curtains. "This way."

As he pulled the drapery aside, Blake revealed a large man. Lantern light reflected off a mostly bald head with a stubbly fringe around the sides. His wide, flat nose topped a drooping handlebar mustache. A fragile bone protruded from one earlobe. His overalls looked homemade, sloppily patched together from rough material. Curly hair sprouted

from his thick, bare shoulders.

Most of the kids jumped or stepped back. Chelsea shrieked. The bulky stranger grinned at the reaction. Two of his teeth looked to be made of dull gray metal.

“Ready to be scared?” he asked, eyes eager. His voice had a vaguely Southern twang. He rubbed his meaty hands together.

Cole glanced at Dalton. Maybe his friend had been right. He didn’t like the idea of being locked down here with this weirdo.

“Who are you?” Jenna asked.

“Me?” the man replied, squinting at her. “You came here to be frightened, am I wrong?”

“That’s right,” Blake said.

The big stranger leered. “I’ll make sure you get what you came for. I’ll take you around, be certain you behave. You mustn’t touch anything.”

Dalton stepped closer to Cole. Jenna held hands with Chelsea.

“They call me Ham,” the man said, picking up the lantern. The thickset man reeked of dust and sweat. “Tonight I will guide you to terrors like you have never known. Sure you want to keep going?”

“The door is locked,” Dalton said weakly, twitching his chin toward the stairs.

Ham glared at Dalton. “Then you better stay with me.” The big man held the curtain aside. Blake led the way through. Cole and Dalton brought up the rear.

Cole was on the shorter side in his grade, as was Dalton.

They barely came up to Ham's chest. After Cole and Dalton had moved beyond the curtain, Ham let it fall.

More dark curtains created a perimeter around the next space. Bones lay on the floor; some a little yellowed, some cracked or chipped. Human bones mingled with strange animal bones. To one side of the space rested a skull the size of a shopping cart and with a pair of thick, broken tusks. It couldn't be real. The giant skull didn't match any animal Cole could picture, not even prehistoric ones. But it looked just as genuine as the other bones, which probably meant they were all fake.

Blake picked up what looked like an arm bone. "This feels realistic," he said.

"Real as you are," Ham replied.

"Run!" a young voice screamed, coming from somewhere behind the curtains to the left. "It's almost too late. Run for it! This isn't a—"

The voice was abruptly cut off.

Ham grinned. "You weren't supposed to hear that. Pay it no mind."

Dalton gave Cole a worried look. Cole had to admit the warning was a nice touch. It had sounded sincere. And Ham was unsettling. He seemed a little off—not very bright, big, creepy-looking, maybe not totally sane. He was the perfect pick to host a scary tour. Could he be a professional actor?

The curtains at the far side of the area parted and a short, dark woman emerged. She had a stocky build, and wispy black whiskers above the sides of her mouth. Strands of gray highlighted her tangled black hair. Her clothes looked like

layers of tattered rags.

“Last group,” the woman announced, her eyes on Ham. “Ansel wants to get gone.”

“Ansel is the boss,” Ham replied.

The woman turned her attention to the visitors. “You kids came here to be scared. What do you know of fear? What do you know about hardship? You come from a soft, fat world full of soft, fat communities that breed soft, fat children. What kind of world celebrates bleakness on its holidays? A world that knows no bleakness. A world where bleakness has become a novelty.”

“Is this going to be educational?” Blake sighed with despair.

The woman smiled. “I expect it might be very educational. You came here for thrills, boy, and thrills you will have.”

“I hope so,” Blake said. “These bones are about as scary as a museum.”

“If you had any sense, the bones would scare you plenty,” the woman said. “The bones are a warning. The bones are trophies. You came here to feel fear, and it is only fair that you should be rewarded. Fear can be relative. What frightens one may not frighten another. Take this hunter roach, for example.”

She held up a mottled brown cockroach the length of a pencil. The roach squirmed and hissed, legs wriggling. A pair of long antennae swiveled and twitched. As she held it, the roach curled its head to repeatedly strike at her thumb.

“See it biting me?” the woman asked. “On the prairie, you either build up a tolerance to the venom or you die. Would any of you care to hold it?”

Nobody volunteered.

The woman shrugged. "To you this critter might seem scary. And maybe it should, because its venom would burn and fester beneath your skin. Might even kill you. But to me it's a snack." She popped the cockroach into her mouth and chewed. Cole heard it crunching. Black juice dribbled from one corner of her lips. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, leaving a faint, smeared stain. Cole glanced over at Dalton, who made a gagging face. Chelsea and Amanda turned away, murmuring hysterically to each other. The woman's eyes were on Blake. "Scared yet?"

"A little," Blake admitted. "But that was more gross than scary."

The woman gave a small smile. "You have no idea what lies beyond those curtains. You are all in quite a predicament. Would it scare you to know that your time in this world is over? Would it scare you to know that you will never see your families again? Would it scare you to know that all your plans and expectations for what your lives would hold became irrelevant when you walked down those stairs?"

"That isn't funny," Jenna said. "Halloween or not, you shouldn't make those kinds of jokes."

Cole agreed with Jenna. With those threats, the woman was crossing a line that should not be crossed. The locked door and the creepiness of Ham and the shouted warning and the eating of the roach were adding up in ways he didn't like. They really might be in trouble. If it was all a trick, it was working.

The woman nodded. "You're catching on. None of this is

funny. You belong to us now. You kids want to be scared?" She raised her voice. "Time to pack up! Tear down the drapes! Let's round up these stragglers and get gone!"

The black curtains began to fall; many torn down, some hurled aside. Various men were revealed. A muscular redhead in a leather vest and buckskin trousers clutched a short metal rod. A pale, lanky man with white hair bared teeth that had been filed down to cruel triangles. A short Asian man in robes and a tightly wrapped turban held a net and a wooden pole. And a person with the head of a wolf and golden fur flexed fingers tipped with claws. If it was a costume, it was the best one Cole had ever seen.

A few other men were in view, but Cole found his attention straying past the grubby assortment of villains. His eyes went to the cages. Beyond the curtains, on both sides of the room, were cages packed with kids in Halloween costumes. The kids were seated, subdued, defeated.

Part of Cole still hoped this was all an elaborate hoax. If this was just part of the spook alley, then the creators had succeeded, because he felt certain that he and his friends were in genuine danger, that the men advancing on them were not actors in costumes, they were real criminals. The captives in the cages were definitely kids from the neighborhood. Cole recognized a few of them.

The men charged forward. The redhead seized Blake by the back of the neck and hurled him to the ground. Ham was reaching for Jenna.

That was all Cole needed to see. If these guys were getting physical, this was officially real. Stepping toward Ham, Cole

swung his candy bag at the lantern, as if he were trying to knock it out of a ballpark. The casing shattered with a flash, plunging the room into darkness.

Somebody jostled roughly into him, and Cole went down. He could see nothing. People were screaming. He rose, staggering blindly toward the stairs. Somebody had to get away. If these were kidnappers, somebody had to make it to the police before the situation turned even uglier.

Cole found himself tangled in curtains. Yanking desperately, he pulled them down. Instead of falling and letting him pass, the drapes landed on him. He tried to keep moving forward, but he hurried straight into a wall and fell.

A moment later a light came on. Instinctively, Cole held still. He was hidden beneath the fallen curtains. He heard orders being shouted. More lights were lit.

Moving slowly, Cole peeked out from under the edge of the fallen curtain. An overhead electric light was on, along with three glowing lanterns. He had run exactly the wrong way. He was on the far side of the room, away from the stairs that led up to the kitchen. His friends were being manhandled into cages.

The stocky woman stood conversing with a lean man in a wide-brimmed hat and a long, weathered duster. He held a sickle in one veiny hand.

Ham tromped up the stairs. He knocked on the door three times, hard enough to make it shake. The Boo guy opened it.

"We're done," Ham said.

"Good," Boo replied. "Great. I take it you're satisfied?"

"You did your part." Ham grunted, handing over a bulging

sack. Boo accepted it. When he reached inside, Cole heard the unmistakable clink and rattle of coins. From his position on the floor, where he had slightly tented the curtain so he could peer out, Cole caught a glint of gold as Boo removed a few coins from the sack, weighing them in his hand.

“Do you need anything else from us?” Boo asked.

Ham looked back at the lean man in the duster, who shook his head. “Just get far away from here. After that, rest easy. Nobody will be able to follow us. Nobody will see these kids again. They’ll soon be forgotten.”

Boo hefted the bag of coins in a sort of salute. “A pleasure. Safe travels. Happy Halloween.” He closed the door.

Ham came back down the stairs. He and the redhead wrestled the lid off of a manhole cover in the center of the room. The pale man walked over to one of the cages, keys in hand.

The lean man in the wide-brimmed hat held up a hand, and the room went silent. “Smart children,” he said in a parched voice, not much more than a stage whisper. “You behaved well. Most of you kept silent as directed. Those who did not suffered as promised. We do not wish to harm you. This will be orderly. You will pay if you try something. We will make an example of you. We are your masters now. Treat us with due respect, and we will deal with you fairly.” He motioned with his sickle for the pale man to proceed.

The cage opened. Kids filed out. They all wore iron collars. Their legs were chained together. Cole guessed they were mostly between fifth and seventh grade. He saw no really little ones. One boy dressed as a pirate was gagged and

had a huge bruise on his cheek that did not seem to be part of his costume.

The kids were paraded over to the open manhole. Ham went down first, slowly disappearing as he descended an unseen ladder. Before his head vanished he paused. "When the rungs stop, just drop," he said. Then his head was gone.

The first kid, a girl with sparkly horns and a red cape, paused at the brink. "Down there?"

"Go," the pale man urged. "You're worth more alive, but we can make use of more bones."

She turned. It seemed awkward for her to get started with her ankles chained together. She crouched and started down.

Cole slowly let the edge of the curtain down, closing off his view. He had ended up near a far corner of the room. There were fallen curtains everywhere, resting in lumpy piles. If he kept still, they might miss him. Unless they tidied up the curtains before they left.

Where could the manhole lead? Were there big sewer tunnels running under Mesa? Apparently, they at least had some under this neighborhood. Maybe the men would surface inside a warehouse where semitrailers stood waiting. Maybe the trucks would head over the border by some secret route. Anything seemed possible.

Occasionally, a kid would protest from down in the manhole. The men up top would growl at him or her to drop. Cole heard several echoing screams trail off ominously.

These criminals were kidnapping dozens of people. They were taking Dalton. They were taking Jenna. He had to do

something.

But he had to be smart. If he emerged now, he would get caught. Once they were gone, he could probably climb the stairs, break down the door, and go to the police. Would it be too late? Would the cops be able to follow the kidnappers through the sewers? If alerted quickly, would the authorities be able to guess where these men might be headed? What about Boo? Had he already left with the other spook alley workers? Or would they all be there waiting for him?

He lay with his chin on the cement floor. The heavy drapes were making him sweat. His heart thudded in his chest.

Cole peeked again. Now that the kids understood the drill, the procession into the manhole was going fast.

He closed his peephole. Nobody was looking his way. Nobody was talking about a kid gone missing. One of the men was gathering up bones, but nobody was gathering curtains.

How could somebody kidnap this many people? It should be national news! There had to be more than forty kids. The community would be in an uproar! The whole country would demand answers!

Raising the edge of the curtain, Cole watched as the last kids descended into the hole. Jenna was among them. Dalton was already gone. Cole had missed it. Some of the men had gone down as well.

The man in the wide-brimmed hat checked an old-fashioned pocket watch. "The way will close in less than ten minutes."

"Excellent timing, Ansel," the woman said. "You were right. This was a good plan. We'll be sitting pretty."

“It’s too early to count money,” Ansel said. “Slaves taken are not slaves delivered. We sank most of our funds into this operation. I’ll celebrate when the cargo has been sold.”

Men tossed bones down the manhole. Cole did not hear them landing. Lastly, the redhead and a scarred man with long blond hair lowered the great skull down the hole, disappearing with it.

Soon only Ansel and the woman remained. His eyes swept the room. Cole felt the urge to lower the edge of the curtain, but he realized that a hasty movement might draw the eye. He held still, trusting that his face was tucked far enough back into the shadows to escape observation.

“Are we finished?” the woman asked.

Ansel checked his pocket watch. “Just over six minutes left.” He gazed around the room. “Doesn’t matter how we leave the place. Nobody can follow us. We’re done here.”

She climbed down the manhole and he followed. “Do we cover it?” her voice asked from out of sight.

“No need.”

Cole waited. The room became silent. Were they really gone? Seemed like it. What would change in six minutes? Were they bombing the sewer tunnel? Closing it off somehow? Were they really going to sell all those kids into slavery?

In a far corner of the room, a little girl crawled out from under a heap of curtains. She was small and skinny, with wavy auburn hair and freckles. She was dressed as an angel. Her wings had crumpled and her tinsel halo was askew.

The girl looked around furtively. She approached the manhole cautiously and peered down. Then she turned for

the stairs.

“Hey,” Cole called.

The girl whirled and jumped, her face contorting with fear. Cole came out from under his curtains. She stared at him in shock and wonder, as if he must be a mirage. “You hid too?” she asked.

“By accident,” Cole said. “I got lucky.”

“I was part of a big group,” the girl explained. “I ran for the corner and hid behind the curtains. Nobody noticed me. When the curtains came down, they covered me. I watched three groups get nabbed after I came here. You were with the last group.”

“Right,” Cole said.

“I wanted to warn you guys, but it was too late. They would have gotten me too.”

“Once we came down the stairs we were doomed,” Cole said. “My friend heard them lock the door. He had a bad feeling about it. I ignored him. And he was captured.”

“What do we do?”

Cole shrugged. “Sounded like they sent away the guys upstairs.”

“I think you’re right,” she agreed.

Cole looked at the manhole. “They didn’t think they could be followed.”

“I didn’t understand why not,” the girl said. “A lot of what they said didn’t make sense. Where could they sell kids as slaves?”

“Some foreign country I guess,” Cole said. He walked to the open manhole and stared down. Rungs descended as far

as he could see, which was not very far. It got dark quickly.

“Look,” Cole said. “Why don’t you go for help? Call the police. I’ll go down and see if I can figure out where they’re going.”

“They’ll catch you,” the girl warned, her eyes wide. “They’re fast and strong. You should come with me.”

Cole folded his arms. She might be right. Then again, part of her plea was probably because she felt scared and wanted company. The kidnappers had seemed confident of escape. They had a ton of kids! They had Dalton! They had Jenna! Could he let them sneak away? “I’ll be careful. I’ll follow at a distance. I won’t get too close.”

The girl shrugged. “Up to you.”

Cole looked around the room. There were a couple of windows on one side. “Don’t go up the stairs. Use the windows. Break the glass if you have to.”

“Good idea,” she agreed. “In case those other guys haven’t left yet.”

“What’s your name?” Cole asked.

“I’m Delaney.”

“I’m Cole Randolph. Tell the police where I went. Tell them they have to hurry.”

She nodded and ran over to one of the windows. Cole started down the hole. If he stepped lightly, the metal rungs were reasonably quiet. Of course, for anybody staring up from the bottom, he was probably silhouetted against the light above. But the kidnappers hadn’t seemed like they intended to wait around. Besides, they had brought lanterns down with them. If they were still within view, he would see

their lights below instead of the darkness.

Cole heard nothing as he descended. The space around him became black. He looked up at the circle of light above him.

Suddenly, his foot could find no next rung. He looked down and kicked around. There was nothing to be seen, nothing to be felt. The rungs simply stopped.

The kidnappers had given instructions to jump from the last rung. They had all come down here. The drop had to be relatively safe. How far would he fall? He could only see shapeless blackness below.

Cole peered up at the circle of light. It was not too late to head back up, but what if he saw something that could save everybody? The license plate of a truck, or the tunnel the kidnappers took. If they had lights and he was in darkness, they would be easy to follow, and he would be hard to see. He had to try. He couldn't desert his best friend and the nicest girl he knew.

He tried not to imagine Jenna hugging him and calling him her hero. The thought embarrassed him, but it also helped confirm his decision.

Cole stepped away from the rungs and dropped into the darkness.

CHAPTER

3

RESCUE

Cole was braced to land within a few feet, but instead he kept falling through darkness, picking up speed. Air whistled past him. With great alarm he tried to prepare for a serious impact. Intuition suggested that he might want to keep his body loose. Had the others who climbed down here all died? Was he about to join a pile of corpses? Could there be water at the bottom? With water he might fare better if he kept his body rigid and entered straight.

His speed kept increasing. He tucked his arms against his chest. At this velocity, simply clipping the wall would cause major injuries. Could there be an airbag at the bottom? If so, he should probably land on his back. He could hardly believe how far he was falling! He was going to die! Even if water awaited at the bottom, nobody could survive a drop like this.

Glancing up he saw only darkness. Same when he looked down. His speed was no longer increasing. Only the air rushing by confirmed that he remained in motion.

For a moment he became so violently nauseated that he

lost all awareness of his other senses. It felt like his stomach was being folded inside out. He clenched his teeth to avoid releasing a stream of vomit.

The nausea departed as quickly as it had arrived. He felt dizzy. A severe ache blossomed behind the midpoint of his forehead.

It took Cole a moment to realize that he was no longer falling. Air no longer rushed past him. He was seated on the ground. Dimly realizing that his eyes were closed, he opened them.

He was seated on scorched dirt, encircled by a symmetrical ring of twelve stone pillars. Sparse brush grew here and there, as if the land lacked the fertility to support abundant weeds. Uneven brown plains extended in all directions. Near and far, lonely trees grew at random, like the haphazard survivors of a plague-ravaged forest. The sun had set, bathing the lonely prairie in soft twilight.

The kidnappers were not far off, backlit by the glowing horizon, loading the kids into horse-drawn cages. In the foreground, between two of the pillars, a hooded figure faced away from Cole, observing the activity.

Cole could hardly believe he was uninjured. A fall like he had experienced should have pulverized his bones. Apparently, none of the others had been hurt either. He could see the muscular redhead and the scarred blond man lugging the huge skull between them.

The brown landscape was unfamiliar. Cole knew of nowhere near his town where the terrain looked like this. He had never seen this ring of tall gray pillars. He looked up.

There was only sky. How could dropping down a manhole deposit him on a barren prairie? Yet here he sat. Something supernatural had happened, something inexplicable.

Holding his breath and staying low, Cole scuttled sideways, hoping to take cover behind one of the pillars. As he got closer he realized that the pillar was textured like bark, and in a flash he realized the pillars were petrified trees.

On the far side of the fossilized tree, Cole sat with his back to the stone. The petrified trunk was plenty wide to conceal him. If nobody came to this side of the tree circle, he might not be discovered. But then what? How had he gotten here? How could he get back to the manhole and the basement?

Motion off to one side caught his eye. The hooded, robed figure had moved into view. The person continued to stare toward the kidnappers, but he clearly addressed Cole. "You are a surprise." The male voice was somewhat deep, the words enunciated clearly, the tone neither menacing nor friendly.

"Please don't give me away," Cole asked quietly.

"The slavers have their quarry," the man said, still not looking at him. "They told me not to expect anyone else. The way closed right after you came through."

"What way?" Cole asked. "Where am I?"

"Far from home." There was a hint of pity behind the words. "You have crossed over to the Outskirts."

"The outskirts of where?"

"A difficult question. The outskirts of everywhere, perhaps. Certainly the outskirts of the world you know. This is an in-between place."

The man was showing no hostility. He showed no fear

of the kidnapers, either. He stood in plain sight. Cole felt wary, but he needed information. "How do I get back?"

"You don't. It is hard to find the Outskirts, but much harder to truly leave."

"Who are you?"

"I am a Wayminder. I help control access to the Outskirts."

"Can't you send me home? And my friends too? Those guys kidnapped them."

"I will not be able to open a way here for months. I have overtaxed my influence in this place. Others of my order would be able to accomplish the feat sooner. The slavers paid me well to open this way."

"You opened it for them?" Cole sputtered, unable to hide his anger.

"Harvesting slaves from outside the boundaries is no crime," the Wayminder said. "Many who dwell in the Outskirts can trace their origins back to the slave trade."

"What if I pay you?" Cole asked. "You know, like the slavers did. Could you open a way for me?"

"Not in this location for some time," the Wayminder said. "Elsewhere, perhaps. But your problem involves more than simply opening a way. Once you have come to the Outskirts, you will inevitably be drawn back here. The pull is considerably stronger if this is your birthplace, but once you have visited, all roads tend to lead you back."

Cole could hardly believe what he was hearing. "So even if I make it home, I'll end up here again?"

"Most likely within hours of your departure."

"This can't be happening."

"I sympathize with your disorientation. Be grateful you did not come here as a slave."

"They took my friends. I wanted to help them."

"Your friends are beyond any aid you could offer. They have been claimed by the slavers. They will be sold."

Cole was nervous about the next question. He worried that mentioning his vulnerability could end the unspoken truce, but he needed to know what the Wayminder intended to do with him. "You're not going to turn me over to them?"

"I am no slaver, and I no longer work for the slavers. They paid me to open a way. I performed my duty. I held the way open for the agreed duration. Now the way is closed. Our arrangement was specific and temporary. You came through on your own. They presently have no claim on you. Nor do I. But if they catch you unmarked, they can take ownership of you."

"Unmarked?"

"Slaves bear a mark. The freeborn bear a different mark. Without a mark, the slavers could still claim you. Not all slaves hail from outside our boundaries."

"Can I get marked as free?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Many places, none of them close at hand. The nearest would probably be the village of Keeva. You would present yourself to a needle master. Any unmarked person can request a freemark. Naturally, you would have to avoid any slavers on your way there. Until you bear a freemark, any slaver given half a chance would promptly label you as their

property.”

“My friends will all be slaves?”

“If the slavers brought your friends here, their fates are sealed.”

Cole tried to digest the information. He had thought he was following his friends into a sewer. Getting stranded in a desolate, magical prairie was a lot more than he had bargained for. Had he really left the world he knew behind? Was he really stuck here? If so, should he abandon his friends and run off to a village to get a mark that would protect him from slavery? If he fled, would he ever find his friends again?

“Will you help me?” Cole asked.

“I won’t turn you in,” the Wayminder replied. “I have no reason to do you harm. It costs me little to answer a question or two. But you will have to make your own way. Traveling with an unmarked person is a dangerous business. I have my own affairs to worry about.”

“I need to save my friends,” Cole said.

“Do not cross slavers,” the Wayminder warned. “They are already marking the slaves. Your friends are now their property. If you free them, you would be committing a crime. And you would not succeed. These slavers know their trade. If you try to help your friends, you will join them. Wait until darkness falls or the slave wagons roll away, then take your chance on the prairie.”

“Could you help me get to that town?”

“Keeva? You’re on your own, friend. I need to move. If I tarry much longer, I will arouse their suspicions.” Holding both hands behind his back, the Wayminder pointed in a

certain direction. “The village is that way. Avoid people. It will be a tough walk, but less arduous than a life of slavery. Good luck.”

The Wayminder strolled out of view. Cole had never gotten a good look at his face. There had been no eye contact. The Wayminder was reasonably tall. His hands had been a chocolate brown.

The light was gradually fading. Cole could hear the blurred murmur of distant conversation. He heard horses and an occasional clanging. What should he do? If he was marked a free person, might he someday find his friends and free them? How big was this world? If he lost sight of the slavers, what were the chances of ever finding his friends again?

The Wayminder had warned him against a rescue. But maybe the Wayminder was overcautious. He hadn’t seemed like the type to stick his neck out for others.

With his back to the petrified trunk, knees bent, Cole hugged his shins. He had no idea how to survive in the wild. Wandering the barren prairie alone, he might die of thirst or starvation before ever finding a village. If he could rescue Dalton, Jenna, and maybe some of the others, they could set off together. Even if he failed and got caught, at least he would be with his friends. And he would have some protection from the wilderness. Maybe he could escape later.

But Cole had not been caught yet. If he was careful, maybe he really could save his friends. He had to think positively.

The light faded. Bright stars adorned the moonless sky. He was no astronomer, but the swirling bands of dense stars above him were unmistakably grouped in different patterns

than the stars back home. Camping in the desert, his dad had once pointed out the Milky Way. The crowded strips of stars above him seemed like multiple Milky Ways, curved galactic arms stretching across the firmament. Several stars glowed in brighter shades of blue and red than he had ever seen.

The only other luminance originated from a number of campfires among the cage wagons. Using the dark night as cover, Cole crept closer to the camp. By the dancing firelight, he could see the kids in the cages, still in their Halloween costumes, the sad victims of the cruelest spook alley in history. The girls had been separated from the boys. Some of them were trying to sleep. Others moped, slumping against the bars. A few conversed quietly. He saw Jenna whispering to Amanda. In a different cage, Dalton rested his forehead against his folded hands.

Dalton had noticed the locked door after they had descended the stairs. He had wanted to leave. Not only had Cole shrugged off his friend's concerns, he had suggested the haunted house to Dalton and Jenna in the first place. He had sentenced his friends to slavery. He had to save them.

Not all the wagons looked like cages. Some were more like coaches. A couple looked almost like portable houses, with humble decorations and quaint windows in the sides.

Cole waited. A single sentry circled the camp, strolling through the gloom beyond the firelight. The first sentry had been the scarred man with blond hair. Now it was Ham. Nobody else seemed concerned about security. Cole watched as the slavers joked and ate. He never glimpsed Ansel, but he saw the woman go in and out of one of the

homier-looking wagons. Maybe she had been talking with him. The other kidnappers were all present, along with four men Cole had not seen earlier. They must have stayed behind with the wagons.

The slavers eventually bedded down—some in wagons, some under wagons, some on the open ground. Most of the kids fell asleep. But not all. Dalton leaned against the bars of his cage, staring vacantly at the dwindling light of the nearest campfire. The sight made Cole blink away tears. His friend did not deserve to be chained up in a portable cage like a circus animal.

The camp became silent. The muscular redhead took over as sentry. He paced around the encampment in lazy circles, eyes studying the empty night. Empty except for Cole, huddled in a low depression at what he hoped was a safe distance.

Cole tried to form a plan. It was hard from this far. Presumably the cages were locked. He had seen no keys. Nobody had gone in or out of the cages since he had started spying on the camp.

He could do nothing from where he was hiding. He needed to either risk moving in closer or try his luck finding the village of Keeva. Looking away from the campfires, Cole considered the empty gloom of the prairie. He could not wander off into the night alone and abandon his friends. It was his fault they were stuck here.

Cole waited for the sentry to walk around to the far side of the camp, then hurriedly approached in a crouch. He raced for the cage that held Dalton. His friend and a couple

of other boys perked up as they saw him coming. Cole had carefully observed that none of the kidnappers had crawled under that particular wagon to sleep. With a finger to his lips, he dove into the concealing shadows.

“Cole?” Dalton whispered in disbelief.

Cole could barely hear his friend, but he still worried the greeting had been too loud. He had to respond. He needed info. But he waited a moment to be sure the camp remained still.

Sitting up, Cole put his mouth near one of the cracks in the plank floor of the cage. “I came through to this place on my own. I’m here to bust you out. Are the cages locked?”

“Yes,” Dalton whispered through the same crack. “Ham has the key. The guy who first greeted us in the basement.”

“I remember him,” Cole said. Ham had gone into one of the coaches. “I saw where he went to sleep. I’ll try to steal the key.”

“Are you nuts?” Dalton hissed.

“Not so loud,” Cole scolded.

“They’ll catch you too. You should run for it.”

“No,” another voice chimed in. “Get us out.”

“Shut it,” a third voice whispered urgently.

The boys above fell silent. Cole heard footsteps approaching. His body went rigid. He tried to breathe silently. Boots and legs became visible.

“What’s all the commotion?” the redhead inquired in a rough whisper.

“Nothing,” one of the boys answered.

“They were trying to take my coat,” Dalton improvised

quietly.

“Keep it down or I’ll confiscate it,” the redhead threatened. “It’s time to sleep. I don’t want to talk with you again.”

“Sorry,” Dalton said.

“Don’t apologize,” the redhead stressed. “Just stop talking.”

“Excuse me,” a girl called softly from a neighboring wagon.

“That goes for all of you,” the redhead snapped, barely maintaining his whisper.

“I just thought you might want to know about the boy hiding under the wagon,” the girl replied.

Cole felt like he had suddenly been immersed in ice water.

The boots shuffled. “What?”

“Ansel told us we would be punished for not telling what we know,” the girl said. “A boy under that wagon is planning an escape.”

The redhead crouched and met eyes with Cole. “Well, who have we here?”

Cole tried to force words from his throat. It took a second. “Me? I’m a free citizen looking for work.”

“Free, you say?” The man chuckled. “I can see your wrist, lad. Free for the moment perhaps. Not for long.”

CHAPTER

4

BONDMARK

Cole knew he had to get away, but for a moment the shock of discovery held him paralyzed. His only chance was to run. They were on an empty prairie at night. If he went far enough, fast enough, maybe the kidnappers would lose him.

When the crouching redhead reached under the wagon, Cole rolled the opposite way. Springing to his feet, he took off, passing other wagons and jumping a sleeping figure bundled in a worn blanket.

“Intruder!” went up the alarm from the redhead. “On your feet! Intruder! Don’t let him get away!”

The shouted words fed Cole’s panic. Men all around the encampment cast aside their covers and scrambled out from under wagons, fumbling to their feet. Racing toward the open prairie, Cole saw two men running parallel to him and a little ahead, gradually converging. Both were faster than him. If he kept going straight, they would have him, so he abruptly doubled back, hoping to streak through the camp

and shake them in the confusion.

The change in direction only revealed the redhead coming at him from behind, along with several others. Lacking other options, Cole swerved toward the nearest wagon, grabbed the bars, and climbed up on top. The fingers of the redhead brushed his heel, but failed to grab him.

Crouched atop the wooden roof of the wagon, Cole couldn't see his pursuers, but he could hear them coming from all directions. Cole had never been the fastest runner, but he was a confident climber. Heights had never bothered him. There was another wagon parked not too far away. With a running start, he jumped to the next roof, barely clearing the gap.

"He's moving!" shouted a gruff voice.

Cole ran across the wagon and leaped to the roof of another, landing in a sprawl, one cheek against the splintery wood. Rising to his knees, he realized that he had reached the end of the line. Unless he turned around, there was no other wagon within range.

"Still on the move!" a voice boomed. "He's on this one!"

If he stayed put, they would take him. Cole ran and jumped from the roof as far as he could. As the ground rushed up to greet him, he saw men coming at him from off to one side. Cole tried to land running but flopped painfully forward into the dirt instead, the impact jarring his bones. Driven by adrenalized panic, he scrambled to his feet just in time for a large body to tackle him from behind.

All the air whooshed from his lungs, and Cole found himself pinned beneath the bulk of a large man who stank of

leather and sweat. Cole squirmed but calloused hands held him firmly. Dirt had invaded his mouth, and a thorny weed prickled against one cheek. Other men gathered around him.

Then the men hushed one another. A light approached, accompanied by footsteps. Craning his neck, Cole saw Ansel, a lantern in one hand. He wore his wide-brimmed hat, a long underwear shirt, pants with suspenders, and a dusty pair of boots. In his other hand, he held a sickle. Cole closed his eyes, dread coiling inside.

The boots halted a pace away from Cole's face. "What have we here?" that dry voice asked.

Cole opened his eyes and kept silent.

"Found him under a wagon," the redhead reported. "Must've slipped into camp."

Ansel crouched down, setting the lantern on the ground. The nearby brightness made it hard to see Ansel's face. "Time to fess up, Scarecrow. Slipped into camp from where?"

"Just passing through," Cole tried.

"One of the girls said he was planning an escape," the redhead volunteered.

"She ratted him out?" Ansel asked.

"Sure did," the redhead said.

Ansel nodded. "Good for her. She might make a go of it here. That little darling deserves a reward. We have any of those cookies left? The frosted ones?"

"A few," a voice answered.

"She gets them all," Ansel said. "Give her the royal treatment the rest of the way to Five Roads. First served, largest helpings, front wagon—whatever we can do to make

her comfortable.”

Cole hoped the cookies would give her food poisoning. But he kept his mouth shut.

Ansel stood, picking up the lantern. “Let him up.”

The man let go of Cole and got off him. A rough hand grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him to his feet. Ansel studied him through eyes so narrow that they almost looked closed.

“Were you planning to steal my slaves, Scarecrow?”

Cole glanced at the sickle—the wicked curve of the blade, the sharp point. He had no idea what this guy wanted to hear. “You took my friends.”

“You’re from over there,” Ansel said. “From outside. You followed us through.”

“Where are we?”

Ansel grinned. Not a happy grin. It was the grin of a killer who knew the police would never find the body. “That’s the question, now, isn’t it? See, we’re not in Arizona anymore. We’re not on Earth. I’m no astronomer, but this might not even be the same universe as Earth. We’re in the Outskirts.”

“And that means you can kidnap people?”

Ansel glanced at his men. “Scarecrow has the right questions.” The lantern swung a little, squeaking. “In Arizona, yes, I stole your friends, and in those parts they might find me guilty. Your problem is, we’re not there no more. Once we reached the Outskirts and marked those kids, they became our property, according to the law of the land here. And by trying to take my property, Scarecrow, well, you made yourself a criminal.”

Cole felt sick. How could they accuse him of wrongdoing for trying to help his kidnapped friends? Everything was upside down. "I don't know the laws here."

Ansel chuckled, and his grin almost became sincere. "Wouldn't that be nice, fellas, if you only had to keep the laws you knew about? I'd spend my life traveling, and I'd stay as ignorant as possible." He eyed Cole up and down. "You working alone?"

Cole almost laughed. "You guys better watch it. My backup will be here any second."

Ansel became expressionless in a scary way. "That wasn't an answer. One more try. You working alone?"

Cole nodded. "Yeah. I came through alone. Nobody is helping me."

"If you lie to me . . . that'll be it."

"I'm not lying." They stared at each other in silence for a moment. "What are you going to do with me?"

The grin returned, cunning this time. "You tell me, Scarecrow."

Cole swallowed. All eyes watched him expectantly. "I become a slave?"

Ansel held his sickle higher, his eyes caressing the blade. "My vote was to take away your hands and feet as an example. Slavers can't have people swiping their merchandise. Bad for business. But . . . Scarecrow . . . you caught me in a good mood. How often does that happen, fellas?"

All the other men found someplace else to look.

Ansel stepped closer to Cole. "Notice how they don't answer? Well, that's your answer. But we made a fine haul

tonight, best in a long while, so I'm going to grant your wish and take you as a slave." He raised his voice, calling over his shoulder. "Secha? Tag him! He'll walk behind the rear wagon tomorrow. No food or water. We'll let him keep his extremities, but that don't mean we got to coddle the boy. Show's over. Now let's get settled again. We start our march in the morning."

Ansel turned and strode back toward his wagon, boots crunching over the dry ground. The woman who had eaten the cockroach approached with a lantern of her own. She held it out toward Cole. "You're the one that swung your bag at Ham."

Cole nodded.

"You came through voluntarily," Secha said. "Means you belong here more than they do. Means some other things besides. Let's get the bondmark on you so I can turn in. Hold out your left hand."

Cole briefly considered resistance. But two men stood right behind him. For all he knew, if he made a fuss, Ansel would return with his sickle. Cole held out his left hand.

Secha produced a drawstring bag and opened the mouth. The third finger on her left hand had an extra long nail. She dipped it into the bag.

"Hold still," she told Cole. "Help him."

One of the men grabbed Cole's arm just above the wrist. The other man braced himself against Cole from behind. Cole clenched his teeth. If they were holding him like this, it meant the mark was going to hurt. He tried to ready himself for the pain.

When her fingernail touched his wrist, it felt extremely hot and cold at the same time. He wanted to yank his hand away, but the brawny redhead held him tightly, and he didn't want to look weak. Secha moved her lips as she traced a simple pattern with her fingernail. Then she backed away. The bondmark she had drawn blazed an angry red. It still felt hot and cold, though not as intensely as when her nail was in contact with his skin.

"Try not to touch it," Secha advised. "You'll slow the healing." She turned and walked away.

With a viselike hand on his shoulder, the redhead marched Cole over to the rear of one of the cages and chained him to it with a tight manacle on his unmarked wrist.

"Not a sound," the redhead threatened. "You better sleep. Long day tomorrow."

The redhead walked away. Cole didn't know any of the kids in this wagon. They were pretending to be asleep, but he had seen two of them peek at him.

Cole got down on the ground. He had no blanket. The earth was lumpy and hard. The chain wasn't long enough to let his hand rest on the ground, and his wrist dangled about four inches up.

He couldn't see Dalton or Jenna. Their wagons were lost in shadows, and he had no desire to draw more attention to himself by calling out to them.

The night became quiet except for the pop and crackle of the campfires. Less than half an hour ago Cole had watched the camp from a distance. Many options had been open to him. He wished he could rewind time and do it over again,

but it was too late. Now he was a slave like the others.

What kind of slave would he be? Would he labor in mines, busting open rocks with a pickax? Would he row slave ships? Would he work farms? Would he fight in a gladiator arena? All of the above? None? He expected he would have answers sooner than he wanted. Cole closed his eyes and tried his best to relax, but sleep was a long time coming.

CHAPTER

5

CARAVAN

The next day got worse with every step. Chained to the rear wagon, Cole had more dust to deal with than any other member of the procession. The kids in the cages got dusty as well, but at least they could turn their backs to it. Cole found that by staying really close to his wagon, squinting his eyes, keeping his head down, and covering his nose and mouth with his unchained hand, he could avoid enough of the dust to remain on his feet. Some stretches of the way proved dustier than others.

Most of the time the wagon moved at a pace where he had to maintain a fast walk. The mounted guards wouldn't let him hold the bars of the cage, but he stayed close enough to touch them. At a certain distance from the wagon, the chain would help pull him along, but it also threatened to tug him off balance. Up inclines, the wagon went slower; down slopes, a little faster. The land remained more or less level, without any major hills or valleys.

By the time they broke for lunch, Cole was hungrier and

thirstier than he could remember ever feeling. His crusty mouth tasted like he had tried to eat the prairie.

The wagons formed up into a loose circle. He sat alone while the others ate, his body and legs exhausted. How was he supposed to keep going without food and water? Maybe that was the idea. Maybe he would end up getting dragged to death.

Most of the kids in the cage wagons avoided eye contact with him. Nobody tried to toss him any food. He couldn't really blame them. They didn't want to end up chained beside him. It was hard to watch them eat and drink. They only had bread and water, but to Cole it seemed like a generous feast.

Dalton and Jenna were in two of the farthest wagons. He told himself they would try to sneak him food if they weren't so distant. They kept looking his way, so he did his best to act content. He even managed some smiles.

When the wagons started rolling again, Cole's legs were stiff and cramped. Maybe resting hadn't been a great idea. Cole began to wonder if he could last until the end of the day. He didn't look at the guards. He didn't watch the kids in the cage. He didn't check the sun. Head down, he just kept trudging forward.

The afternoon grew warmer. Sweat soaked his scarecrow costume. He had gotten rid of the straw and the arrows, but he wished the sleeves were shorter. At least his hat kept the sun off his face and neck. The inside of his mouth became frighteningly desiccated. His tongue felt swollen. When he tried to open his mouth, his lips stuck together.

As evening approached, he often stumbled and sometimes

fell. If he didn't get up right away, the chain towed him forward. Once, he let the chain drag him a good distance, hoping it might rest his legs. The manacle hurt his wrist terribly, and he soon realized that if he didn't stay on his feet, the front side of his body would become one huge scab.

While the sunset faded, his head pounded painfully. His tongue felt like an old sponge that had become rigid. No strength remained in his rubbery legs, but he trudged onward, because the alternative was worse.

When the wagon came to a halt, Cole collapsed and promptly lost consciousness. He awoke with Ham trickling water into his mouth from a canteen, a little at a time. Warm and metallic, it somehow managed to still taste heavenly. A little food followed—fragments of bread, accompanied by some more water.

"Learn your lesson yet?" Ham asked when Cole met his gaze.

Not trusting his voice, Cole nodded.

"Want to join the rest of the slaves in the wagon?" Ham asked.

"Yes, please," Cole croaked.

"Boss asked after you," Ham said. "I told him you might not last another day on foot."

Cole nodded. Ham was probably right.

"Boss never goes easy on thieves," Ham said. "But you only tried. You never got away with nothing. And you're his now. Boss likes to turn a profit when he can. Nobody buys dead slaves. I expect he'll load you in a cage."

"Hope so," Cole managed. Ham gave him a little more

water.

“You’ll sleep chained here tonight,” Ham said. “Get some shut-eye.”

As Ham walked away, Cole slumped down and closed his eyes. The ground was lumpy, the camp was noisy, but falling asleep was no problem.

In the cool twilight before dawn, Ham used a key to unfasten the manacle. Cole tenderly rubbed where his wrist had been scraped and bruised. He stood unsteadily, his legs stiff and sore. Following instructions, he entered the rear wagon’s cage. Breakfast consisted of a crumbly biscuit and a strip of tough, dried meat. He drank gritty water from a dirty tin cup, then collected and ate all the crumbs shed by the biscuit.

After the wagon started rolling, Cole curled up and slept, heedless of the jolts and vibrations of the uneven terrain. When he woke, all horizons were a bright orange, as if multiple suns were rising in every direction.

“What’s with the sky?” he asked.

“Been that way for hours,” a girl said quietly. She wore bloody scrubs, as if she came from a horribly botched surgery.

“Shhh,” hissed a boy dressed like a commando. “We’re not supposed to talk.”

Surgeon Girl looked guilty. Cole glanced around, but didn’t see anyone who was likely to overhear them. A couple of the men roved up and down the caravan on horseback, but none were currently nearby. The wagon was noisy, and the driver didn’t seem to be paying attention. Still, Cole could understand Commando Boy not wanting to make a bad

situation worse. The eight kids in this cage had all watched him stumble along behind the wagon yesterday. None would be eager to risk trying it.

Cole settled back and gazed at the sky. There had been a sun yesterday, so what was with the weird lighting? Surgeon Girl must have been mistaken. The sky couldn't have been like this for hours.

But as the wagon rumbled onward, the sky stayed the same, as if the sun were about to rise or had recently set in all directions. The other kids all kept their heads down. No effort was made to whisper to one another.

Leaning against the bars with his back to the dust, Cole thought about home. His mom and dad were probably out of their minds. Even his sister, Chelsea, was probably worried.

And he wasn't the only person missing. All the parents had to be freaking out. That many kids disappearing without a trace would make the news for sure. Cole had never heard a story to top it.

He hoped the little angel girl had made it to the police. Assuming she had, there was no way even the best detective would follow their trail to another dimension. Her story would just make the disappearances more mysterious.

Looking around at the barren prairie, and glancing ahead at the other kids locked up like circus animals, Cole realized he might never make it home. If he did, according to the Wayminder, he wouldn't get to stay there.

What had been his last words to his family? He clearly recalled his final remark to his sister. Chelsea was two years older and considered herself an expert on maturity. Just

before he left to meet up with Dalton, she had been getting dressed up for a Halloween party. As he was leaving, she had informed him how immature he was for going trick-or-treating. He had told her she looked like something Halloween had thrown up.

He felt bad for it now, although it was better than having no comeback. He wondered if Chelsea would think disappearing forever was immature.

His last words to his mom were assurances he would be home by nine thirty. His dad had asked him to take out the trash, and he had promised to do it later. He hadn't lied to them on purpose.

Maybe he would see them again. But somehow, as he rattled along a lonely prairie in a world where a stationary sunrise glowed in all directions, he had a hard time believing it.

He tried to look ahead and spot Dalton or Jenna, but with so much dust, and with the wagons in single file, he could seldom see much beyond the wagon in front of him. He wondered if they were looking for him.

Brown prairie, more or less level, stretched in all directions. Cole saw weeds and brush and some isolated trees, but not much else. He decided that if he wanted to be bored by nature, he had come to the right place.

Staring down at the floorboards of the cage, Cole noticed where somebody had carved a happy face into the wood. It was simple—a circle with two dots for eyes and a curved smile. The circle was imperfect, but not bad considering it had been scratched into wood.

The face struck him as odd. "Who would draw a smiley face while riding in a slave wagon?" he muttered.

"Somebody who wanted company," the happy face answered in a friendly voice. "The miles go by faster when you have a buddy." The mouth didn't open when it spoke, but it quivered.

Cole jumped in surprise. He glanced over at the other kids in the wagon. Nobody was paying attention to him. He stared at the smiley face. "Did you just talk?" he whispered.

"Sure did," the face answered, mouth trembling again. "I'm happy as a clam to meet a nice boy like you."

The voice wasn't very loud and sounded like a young boy.

Cole rubbed his face with both hands. Was he dreaming? Hallucinating? Surgeon Girl was sitting closest to him. He crawled over to her and tapped her shoulder. "Check something for me."

"What?" she asked, glancing around for guards.

Cole had already looked. One rider was way behind them, and two others roved much farther up the line of wagons. He motioned her over to the happy face. She followed uncertainly. "Say something to her," Cole instructed.

"Today is the bestest day ever to make a new friend," the cheerful face said.

The girl blinked, then looked at Cole in surprise. "How'd you do that? Are you a ventriloquist?"

"Yeah," Cole said. "Cool trick, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "What's the matter with you? Does this seem like a good time for jokes?" She scooted back to her former position.

Cole hunched down with his head near the happy face. He put his hand up to cover his lips. "Do you mind talking quietly?"

"Not a smidge," the face said at a lower volume, although still chipper. "I'm just glad as can be to have a new pal."

"What are you?" Cole asked. "How are you talking?"

"I'm a semblance, silly. I was shaped to talk."

"A what?"

"I was made by Kevin, the superdy duperest Shaper in all the land. After he was taken as a slave, he made me to keep him company. When he got sold, he left me here to cheer up anyone who talked to me. Feeling better yet?"

Cole could hardly believe he was talking to a magical happy face. It seemed even weirder to him than slave traders from another world. The little guy was so enthusiastic, Cole couldn't help feeling a bit better. "Yeah, actually. Do you have a name?"

"Happy."

"I'm Cole. Can you see me?"

"Sure, silly billy. I can see up your nostrils."

Cole stifled a chuckle. He glanced at the other kids, but they all sat with their heads bowed, wrapped up in their fears.

"Does it hurt if people step on you?"

"Not a bit. You stepped on me when you came in here."

"Sorry."

"No harm done. You have a good sole."

Cole smiled for Happy's benefit. "You said the kid who made you was a Shaper. Did he shape you with a knife?"

"No, silly, with his shaping."

“What? Like magic?”

“Kind of, I guess. Life is magical.”

“He brought you to life?”

“Not really. I’m a semblance. I seem alive, don’t I?” The face gave a squeaky giggle.

“Did Kevin program your words?”

“I just say what I say, Kevin showed me the way, in this cage I will stay, while you’re here, we should play.”

Cole wondered whether Kevin or the little face had created the rhyme. “Do you feel alive?”

“I love to talk, especially with a special new friend.”

The face seemed mostly designed to act friendly. Cole wanted to check if it could tell him anything useful. “Why is the sky like this? Why does it look like sunrise everywhere?”

“We’re lucky it’s a duskday—not too hot, not too cold. It’s nice to feel glad about the weather.”

“Are there lots of duskdays here?”

“They come and go. It depends. Are you from outside?”

“Outside of this place? I’m from Earth. These slave guys kidnapped my friends.”

“Don’t let greedy slavers keep you down. Whenever you fall, remember to bounce!”

“Listen, Happy. Can you help me get out of here?”

“I’d surely help if I could. I’m just a face on some wood.”

Cole glanced around to make sure nobody was noticing his conversation. No guards were near, and the other kids still ignored him. “You’ve been here a long time. Maybe you know something that could help me.”

“You bet I do,” Happy chirped. “Here’s a good one: If at

first you don't succeed, another chance is all you need!"

"I mean info about the slavers," Cole said. "Or about this wagon. Secrets that might be useful to help me get away."

Happy giggled nervously. "Don't try to get away. It makes them very grumpy. You'll get to leave when they sell you."

"Where will they sell me?"

"The slave market at Five Roads."

"What kind of people might buy me?"

"The kind with money, silly. The kind who need slaves."

"What sort of work will I do?"

"You never know, but you can always hope for the best. You might get to do something really amazing!"

Happy didn't seem like a fountain of useful information. "Let me see if I've got this straight. You're saying I should never stop chasing that rainbow?"

The smile widened. "That's the spirit! Follow a star! Keep your chin up and you'll go far."

"Do the slavers know about you?"

"The Shaper does, Secha. She told Ansel. They spoke with me one night. I'm tricky to remove, so they let me be."

"Secha is a Shaper?" Cole asked.

Happy giggled. "She marked you, didn't she?"

Cole remembered her tracing on his wrist with her fingernail. He looked at the maroon mark. "Does it talk?"

Happy laughed hard. "Your bondmark? That isn't even a semblance!"

"Why would it be tricky for them to remove you?"

"Kevin wanted me to stick. If I get destroyed or removed, I take shape elsewhere on the wagon. They'd have to scrap

the whole wagon to get rid of me.”

“Can you move on your own?” Cole wondered.

One of the eyes flattened in a wink. “Just a little.”

Cole traced the circle of the happy face with his fingertip. Happy laughed, as if it tickled. How could such a thing have been created? “What else can Shapers do?”

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On what they want to make, silly! And whether they can.”

Cole sighed. Happy was cheerful, and it was unbelievable he existed, but prying anything useful from him was exasperating.

“Do you know any secrets that will help me survive here?” Cole asked.

“They’re not secrets,” Happy said. “Enjoy the beauty of the sky, and keep a twinkle in your eye.”

The wagons came to a stop.

Cole sat up, looking around. He couldn’t see the front of the procession. “What’s going on?”

“We stopped,” Happy said. “Seems early for lunch.”

When they had stopped to eat in the past, the wagons had formed a circle. This time they remained in a line. Was there an obstacle up at the front? Cole couldn’t tell.

After some time, Ansel walked away with a man Cole hadn’t seen before into a field off to one side. The man was shorter than Ansel, with graying hair and bushy sideburns. He used a cane and walked with a limp. They headed out far enough to be visible from all wagons at once, then turned to

face the caravan.

“We’ve met a customer by chance on the road,” Ansel announced, his parched voice even more gravelly when he raised it. “This gentleman works with the Sky Raiders at the Brink. Those names won’t mean much to you newcomers, but the Raiders have a heavy need for slave labor, in part because the life expectancy for a new slave among them is around two weeks.”

This caused a stir among the caged trick-or-treaters. Ansel waited for the murmuring to die down.

“Our customer was returning from a supply run,” Ansel said, “but figured he should take advantage of our encounter by gaining an extra pair of hands. Although he can have his pick, and since the slave who goes with him will probably perish shortly, I mentioned the new boy who caused a ruckus the other night. I only denied him Amanda, who pointed out the clumsy thief.”

Ansel then led the man directly to Cole’s cage wagon. As they approached, the other kids in the cage crowded away from Cole, who sat cross-legged.

If this stranger bought him, how would he ever find Dalton, Jenna, and the other kids from his neighborhood? Then again, they all would probably get sold to different places anyhow. At least this guy seemed kind of old and not too quick on his feet. There might come a chance to escape.

The potential buyer stepped forward and looked up at Cole through the bars. “You’re the boy who caused the commotion?” His clearly enunciated words made him seem professorial. Or maybe it was the slightly battered top hat in

his hand.

“Yeah,” Cole replied.

“You came from outside voluntarily?”

“I followed the slavers here because they kidnapped my friends.”

“Any physical handicaps? Chronic illnesses?”

“I’m healthy. A little hungry.”

“We feed them twice what most slaves get,” Ansel inserted.

“They’re in prime condition, fresh from a prosperous world.”

The man nodded, eyes still on Cole. “How well do you handle heights?”

Cole wondered whether he should lie. Maybe a fear of heights would disqualify him from the dangerous work Ansel had mentioned. But the buyer looked and acted nice, which was more than Cole could say for the slavers. He decided to see where honesty might lead him. “I’m not scared of heights.”

The man shifted his stance. “How do you feel when standing near a high brink?”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Cole said. “Never has.”

The man turned to Ansel. “Easy as that. I’ll take him.”

CHAPTER

6

THE BRINK

The quick decision surprised Cole. The buyer turned away, and a tall, muscled stranger came into view, glaring at Cole distrustfully. So much for making an easy escape from the old limping guy. He should have guessed the buyer would have help.

On his way out of the cage wagon, Cole leaned close to Surgeon Girl. "If you get lonely, talk to the happy face."

She looked at him like he was crazy.

Cole hopped down to where the tall stranger awaited him. "This way," the man said, pointing toward the front of the caravan. He had a familiar reddish mark on his wrist.

"Are you a slave too?" Cole asked.

The man cuffed Cole on the ear hard enough to knock him to the ground. Cole stayed down for a moment, the side of his head smarting and his mind buzzing with anger.

"Don't speak unless spoken to," the man said. "Up."

Cole got to his feet. The kids in the slave wagons watched him with wide eyes. Without an audience, he would have

followed instructions. But he didn't want all those kids to see him offering no resistance to a bully. It set a bad precedent.

So he turned and kicked at the side of the stranger's knee as hard as he could. Crouching, the man swiveled, caught Cole's ankle in one hand, then swept his other foot out from under him with a brisk kick.

Cole's back hit the ground first with a flat slap, and he found himself unable to breathe. Rolling onto his side, he shuddered as he tried to get his paralyzed lungs to kick into gear. He needed air, but couldn't inhale. Then the paralysis passed, and he was breathing again. He gratefully took several deep breaths.

"You have any fight left in you?" the tall stranger asked, releasing Cole's ankle. "I could do this all day."

Cole rocked into a sitting position. A glance at the wagon showed the occupants all pointedly looking elsewhere. He had taught them that defiance led to pain and failure. Not exactly the lesson he had in mind.

Cole got up and brushed himself off. The tall guard gestured for him to proceed. "Bye, Happy," Cole called toward the cage wagon.

"Bye" came a faint, high-pitched reply.

Cole noticed several heads in the cage swivel toward the floor.

Well ahead of them now, the buyer limped beside Ansel toward a group of burdened mules at the front of the caravan. "Those your mules?" Cole asked.

The man cuffed Cole on the other ear, not as hard as last time, but enough to make him stagger. "You learn slower

than most dogs.”

“You didn’t hit me for saying good-bye,” Cole replied.

“I’m not that heartless,” the man said. “No more out of you.”

Cole watched the wagons as he walked. He saw Jenna, her Cleopatra costume filthy and bedraggled. Cole forced a smile and gave her a little two-fingered wave.

“You were brave to come for us,” Jenna called. “Amanda deserves to be run over by every wagon in the line!”

The other kids in her wagon distanced themselves from her. She stood by the bars defiantly.

“This isn’t over,” Cole promised, ducking just in time to feel the man’s hand whoosh over his head. He had swung hard that time. Cole sprang to the side, barely avoiding a kick, then ran ahead toward the mules.

Something struck the back of his head and sent him tumbling. It was hard to tell whether it had been a fist, a rock, or a club, but it hurt plenty. Cole curled up, cradling his sore skull, worried that more blows might rain down. When none came, he risked a peek. The big man stood over him, frowning, arms folded.

“I misspoke,” the man said. “I’m not willing to do this all day. Act up again, and we’ll have to cart you to the Brink in a wheelbarrow. On your feet.”

Head still throbbing, Cole rose to find Dalton staring at him from behind nearby bars. Heavily powdered by dust and with his frowning makeup smudged and faded, his friend looked like the saddest clown ever. Dalton cautiously shook his head, warning Cole not to speak.

Cole nodded at his friend and mouthed, *I'll find you.*

Dalton waved, tears brimming in his eyes.

Cole looked away. Would he really find his friend? Or was this the last time he would see anyone from his world? He had been mostly trying to give Dalton a little hope, but he found that he really meant his words. Maybe he would lead a slave revolt. Maybe he would sneak away on his own. It was hard to guess what opportunities he would find, but he silently vowed never to stop watching for a chance to escape from being a slave and to find his friends.

When Cole reached the mules, the buyer already sat astride a horse. A long-haired man with a shiny burn scar on his chin rode beside him. "Come here, slave," the professorial man invited.

Cole approached the man on the horse.

"I heard you sassing Vidal," the man said. "Slaves don't speak unless they're alone among peers or we ask them a question. Is that hard to grasp?"

"I'm a quick learner," Cole said. "All it usually takes is a concussion or two."

The man looked beyond Cole and held up a hand to stay Vidal. "The slave was answering a question." The man returned his gaze to Cole. "A little spirit might serve you well at the Brink. A lot will serve you ill. You're not from here, so our treatment of slaves might seem barbaric, but you had better get used to it. Even if I don't personally cherish certain aspects of slavery, we're teaching you the order of things for your own good. I'm Durny, this is Ed, and we have some riding ahead of us. You're now the property of

Jim Jones, owner of the Cliffside Salvage Yard and leader of the Sky Raiders. Don't make problems, or you'll pay dearly. Understood?"

"I get it," Cole said.

Durny looked to Vidal. "Put him on Maribel. Our business here is done."

By his sixth day of riding, Cole had grown accustomed to Maribel. In spite of her burden, she and the other eleven mules plodded tirelessly forward from daybreak to nightfall. Normal suns had crossed the sky ever since the duskday ended, and today was no exception.

Cole had found the ride lonely. The men tended to converse when he was out of earshot—They only addressed him directly with basic instructions. He had to unpack and brush the mules at night and get them ready to travel every morning.

The cold treatment wore on Cole. He had never felt like such an outcast. After having been marked, chained up, caged, and now ignored, as if he was less than a person, Cole had to fight worries that his life was over. He began to doubt whether he would have another happy day.

Today they had started early, in the gray chill before sunrise. Durny had explained that the Brink was dangerous at night and that a long ride should get them to their destination before sunset.

As the day progressed, Cole tried to enjoy the scenery. At least the land had grown more interesting, with ridges, hills, and ravines. Grasses and brush thrived everywhere, along

with numerous bushes and occasional stands of tall trees. He saw many rabbits and squirrels, and occasionally glimpsed deer or foxes.

Cole kept an eye on the sun as it began to sink. Durny had made a point throughout the day of hurrying the mules along, not wanting to end up near the Brink after dark. The sun was less than an hour away from setting when Durny dropped back to ride beside Cole.

“Come with me, slave,” he said. “Let Ed and Vidal tend the mules for a spell.”

Durny dismounted and Cole did likewise. Durny motioned for him to follow, then led him onto a trail and up a rise. Up ahead, the trail came to a sudden end at what was clearly a precipice.

Durny nudged Cole’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “You claimed not to mind edges. Why not give that one a try?”

Cole crept to the where the ground stopped, then leaned forward to look down the cliff.

And down.

And down.

He had never seen anything like it.

He wasn’t looking down at the ground in the distance. He was looking down at sky that darkened toward purple the steeper he peered.

Durny came up beside him. “Welcome to the Brink.”

“Permission to speak?”

“Granted.”

“Where’s the bottom?”

Durny shrugged. "Far as anyone can tell, there is no bottom. Expeditions have explored by climbing and flying. No one who ever returned has seen where the cliff ends. It seems to go down beyond infinity."

"It's like the end of the world," Cole said, staring out at the emptiness.

"Exactly."

Cole glanced at Durny. "The world can't just end."

"This one does. At least in this direction. The Brink doesn't go all the way around the Outskirts, at least as far as we've been able to explore." He waved a hand to the right. "Go far enough in that direction and you'll reach the Eastern Cloudwall. Can't go over it, can't slide under it, can't dodge around it. Of those who have tried to go through it, none have returned. Same story with the Western Cloudwall, if you follow the Brink in the other direction. What lies behind or within the Cloudwalls none can tell, for they cannot be breached by land or air. Notice anything else out there? Look closely."

Scanning outward from the Brink, all Cole saw were sky and some clouds, the same view he got if he looked up. Wait, on one of the smaller clouds, in the distance, he observed the distinct shape of a castle with several towers.

"That cloud looks just like a castle," he said, pointing.

"That *is* a castle," Durny replied.

"It can't be," Cole said. "It's floating."

"Once again, welcome to the Brink."

Cole gave Durny a suspicious stare. "You have to be kidding. This place might be weird, but not that weird."

Durny reached inside his coat and removed a collapsible brass spyglass. Extending it, he raised it to one eye and focused it before passing it to Cole.

Since the spyglass was powerful, it took Cole a frustrating moment to line it up with the castle. Sure enough, the structure appeared to be made of stone, inexplicably resting on a wisp of cloud with nothing but blue sky all around. It had battlements, banners, towers, windows—even a visible drawbridge.

Cole lowered the spyglass. “How is it possible?”

“Specifically, I have no answer,” Durny said. “Generally, we’re in Sambria. This part of the Outskirts is the most susceptible to deliberate physical tampering. Some things I have seen shaped here make me wonder whether anything is impossible.”

“I’ve heard about shaping,” Cole said. “What is it? Like magic?”

Durny harrumphed. “Any phenomenon we don’t understand seems like magic. To a primitive culture, fire might seem like magic. This spyglass certainly would.”

“Shaping is science?”

“Not exactly. It’s . . . the ability to rearrange how things are and to imbue them with new qualities. Some people have a knack for it. I have a share of the talent myself. No matter how much talent you have, it’s easier to shape material here in Sambria.”

Cole gazed out across the gulf of sky. “Somebody shaped that castle?”

“Nobody knows who shapes the castles,” Durny said

thoughtfully. "They appear out of the Eastern Cloudwall and drift across into the Western Cloudwall. Today is a quiet day. You can often see a dozen or more from a single spot. While the castles migrate from one cloudwall to the other, we salvage what we can."

"Wait," Cole said in disbelief. "The Sky Raiders raid the castles?"

"You're catching on," Durny approved. "And you'll be helping us."

"How do you get to them? Planes? Helicopters?"

"Skycraft. Flying ships."

"How do they fly?"

Durny glanced toward the sun. "Last question. We need to get indoors before dark. Near the base of the castles are suspensors, commonly called floatstones. They keep the castles aloft. We harvest them from time to time and use them in the construction of skycraft."

Cole could not believe what he was hearing and seeing. But it was hard to argue with the sight of the castle in the distance. After all, he had crossed over to a mysterious world through a manhole in a spook alley, and he had held a conversation with a happy face. "The job is dangerous? Raiding the castles."

Durny gave a snort. "I called for no more questions, but what do you think? Now come—let's go meet your owner."