



A PACK OF TROUBLE

James Gauthier



**HOMEWORLD
PRESS**

River Forest, IL





A PACK OF TROUBLE


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DEDICATION

Author's Dedication

This book is dedicated to Barry Blair, the first artist who started to draw the illustrations for the book before his untimely death, and to Sal Amendola, the fantastic artist who actually did all the marvelous illustrations for the book. And also to the real-life Sidney, Cooper and Taylor, three great kids who helped make this book possible.

Artist's Dedication

Dedicated to Al Williamson.
You've more than earned your rest, ol' man,
but we'll miss you deeply.

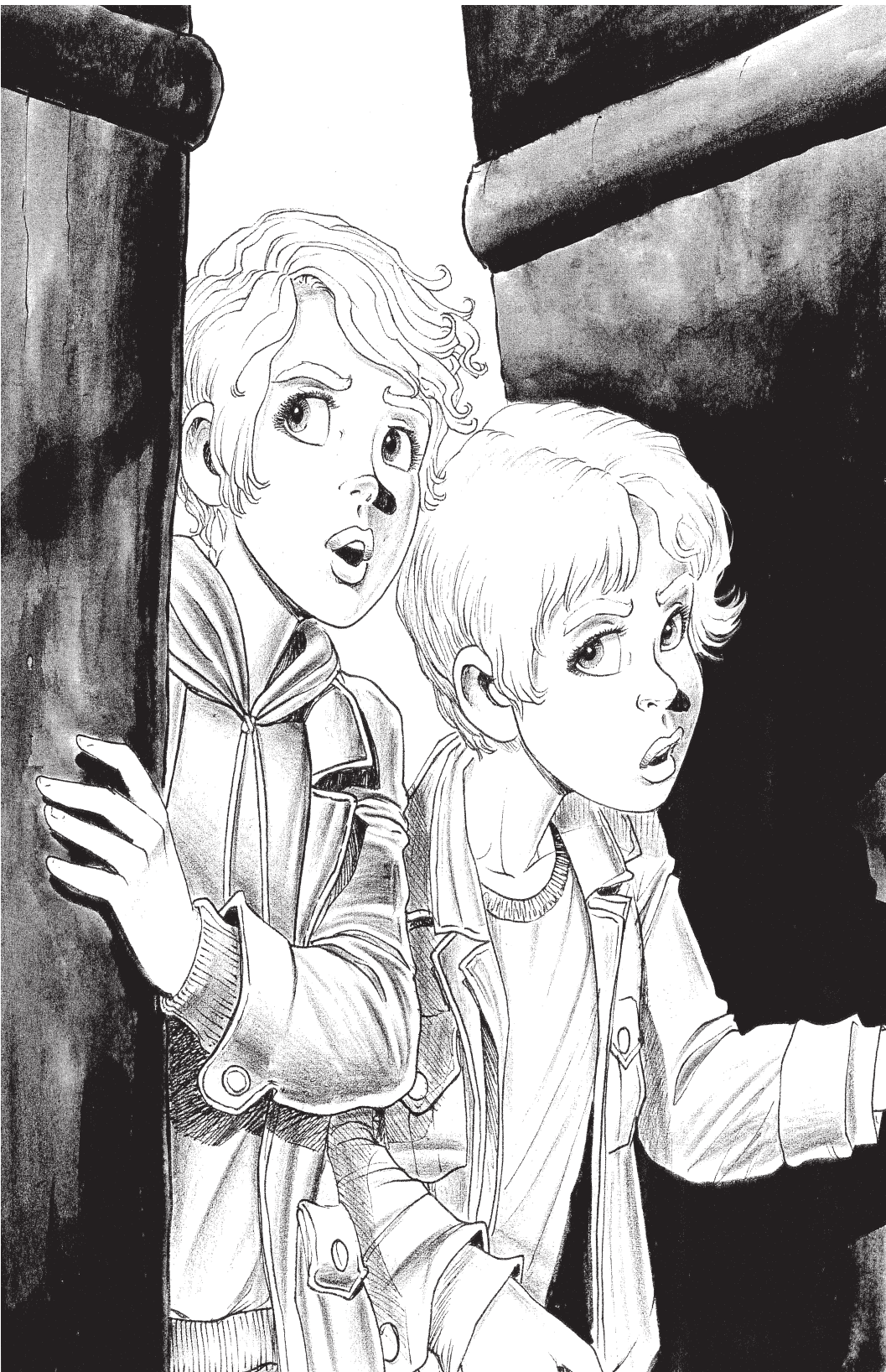


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One:	Bell, Book and Candle.....	7
Chapter Two:	Great Expectations.....	17
Chapter Three:	A Timely Intervention.....	29
Chapter Four:	Just In Case.....	37
Chapter Five:	Do You See What I See?.....	49
Chapter Six:	That's Not Fair.....	55
Chapter Seven:	A Fine Mess.....	69
Chapter Eight:	Twiddle Twaddle Trouble.....	83
Chapter Nine:	Twiddle Twaddle Riddle.....	93
Chapter Ten:	What Now?.....	109
Chapter Eleven:	Fathom This.....	121
Chapter Twelve:	Leapin' Lizards.....	137
Chapter Thirteen:	Out of His League.....	153
Chapter Fourteen:	We're Not Out of This Yet.....	163
Chapter Fifteen:	It's a Good Life.....	175
Chapter Sixteen:	It's in the Bag.....	191
Chapter Seventeen:	Three Times the Trouble. Three Times the Fun.....	199
Chapter Eighteen:	Who do We Have Here?.....	207
Chapter Nineteen:	For Everything There is A Time.....	223
Chapter Twenty:	The Centaur of It All.....	229
Chapter Twenty One:	The End for Some.....	245



CHAPTER ONE

BELL, BOOK & CANDLE

My name is Sid and I always thought I was a normal twelve year old boy but in the past month I have killed a dragon, ended a war, become a merboy, gotten super powers and also saved the world. Now I want it understood from the start that I have read many books on magic and sorcery, but I never believed in a million years that any type of adventure would happen to anyone I knew, let alone to me! I want to tell you what happened from the beginning, but it is a little hard to figure out when that was exactly. I mean, I thought that it probably began the first time I saw that strange magic store. But after thinking about it for some time I think that everything in my life has been adding up to that moment, and even my finding the store paled in comparison to what was to come.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I live in a pretty big city in Connecticut with my family, about whom you will learn more about real soon.

Shortly after my twelfth birthday I was walking home from school with my twin brother Coop. His real name is Cooper but everyone always calls him Coop. We live about a mile away from school so walk the same route home everyday. As always we were busy talking about manga, which is Japanese animation, and we almost didn't see the weird building across the street.

I nudged Coop and pointed at the building. "Hey, Coop, look at that." Coop wasn't too impressed. "Yeah, so what? It's just a stupid old building."

"Yeah," I replied, "but it's never been there before. It's always been a vacant lot."



"No it hasn't."

"Yes it has," I said. "Don't you remember the pile of tires we used to play on?"

"Oh, yeah," Coop said.

I pointed again. "They used to be there."

"That building looks like it's over a hundred years old," Coop observed. "Nobody builds old buildings on vacant lots. You've got to be mistaken."

I pulled on his coat sleeve. "No I'm not, come on let's take a look."

As we crossed the street I could see a lot of stuff about the building I had missed before. It was small and had one store with a large dusty picture window. When I looked up I saw two big ugly stone gargoyles staring down from the roof. The window was so filthy that we could barely see inside. Above the door hung a faded sign in ancient corny lettering, and the name on it was "Merlin's Ye Olde Magik Shoppe."

I pointed the sign out to Coop but he was unimpressed.

"So what, it's just a stupid sign," he said. "And who the heck is Merlin, anyway?"

"Come on Coop, don't you remember? He was in that old movie that Dad showed us last week."

"Which one? He's always showing us old movies."

"It was the movie with all the knights in armor and King Arthur."

"I don't remember that one."

"That's 'cause you slept through it. You're always sleeping through his movies."

"That's 'cause they're always boring," Coop said defensively.

"Well this one wasn't. There was tons of fighting and killing."

Coop gave me a little shove. "Why didn't you wake me then? I would have stayed awake for that."

"That's not important. Let's go in."

"I don't want to," Coop said. "It looks stupid and boring. Besides, I don't care about magic."

"I do."

That's how different me and my brother could be. Even though we were twins we didn't look or act alike. When I say we didn't look alike I mean we weren't identical twins. There was a strong family resemblance, but nobody ever had any trouble telling us apart. We are short for our age and Coop has freckles over most of his body where I don't have any.

I was fascinated by magicians and I tried to read as much as I could about them. Unlike Coop, I liked the movies that Dad showed us. Not all of them were as cool as the movies that I saw in the theater but a lot of them were fun.

Coop was the opposite of me. He didn't like to read. He was too busy playing one sport or another. He liked to play basketball but he was too

short for any of the local teams. Instead Dad signed Coop up for gymnastics. He tried signing us both up but I really stunk at it. The one thing we did have in common was our love for manga. I love it because of all the imaginative characters and stories. Coop on the other hand loves it for all of the fights and battles. Coop's a great brother but sometimes he really gets in my hair. I heard that expression in one of Dad's old movies. He explained that it refers to someone who keeps bothering you or does irritating things. That describes Coop sometimes, because occasionally he does things that really can annoy me.

I grabbed Coop by his coat sleeve. "Come on, Coop. Just for a minute."

Coop easily pulled away from me. "No, I've got to go home and get somethin' to eat. You know it's Friday and I've got gymnastics right after dinner."



Coop started to walk away from me. I was almost going to go into the store without him but I decided that I would talk him into coming back with me later. We were almost past the store when I saw something in the window that I could swear hadn't been there the first time I looked. Hanging in the old dusty store window was a small sign that said, "Manga Cards and Paraphernalia Inside."

"Look," I shouted. "They've got manga in there."

That stopped Coop in his tracks.

"Where?"

I pointed at the sign. "In there. Look."

Coop looked at the small sign. "What's para-fer-nalia?"

I shook my head. "How should I know? But it's got to have somethin' to do with manga. Come on, let's go in."

Coop shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Just for a few minutes. They probably don't have anything that we don't already have."

The inside of the store was even stranger than the outside. There were all sorts of unusual globes, weird stuffed creatures, statues, books, rings and other items either hanging from the ceiling or scattered around the room. But nothing looked like it had been put here recently or even within the past century. Most of it was covered with cobwebs and layers of dust, and it didn't look as if anyone had ever touched it.

The walls were filled with maps of all different places, some of which I had heard of, others I hadn't. Strange sounding places like Pern, Xanth, Narnia and Galifrey. The fact that some of these places were imaginary didn't bother me, it was that all of them looked like actual maps, like you would find if you actually went to these places, all the detail and such.

I was so busy looking at all the junk that I hadn't even noticed there was someone else in the room with us, until I heard him speak.

"Welcome, young friends, welcome, young friends, to the store where the law of science always bends. You'll find surprises and more, upon every shelf galore, but how you handle them is something to look forward to, forevermore. There's crystals exotic and sometimes demonic, tomes old and new, written especially for you. We sell mystical treasures that guarantee pleasures, and infinite possibilities beyond your measure."

"Look around young friends, look around young friends, to a store where your expectation never ends. We've got the teeth of a Minotaur that were lost in a war and the wings of a bat who was incredibly fat. Spells from a sorcerer's pen that number just ten and of course you will see many more wonders I know you'll agree. We take everything in trade, from worthless glass to precious jade. But remember, anything you're purchasing is more than it seems. You're buying the story of destiny and dreams."

I swear that while he was saying this I could almost hear weird music coming from all around. When he stopped long enough to take a breath, I

looked at him and said, "I'm just lookin'."

He kept calling us his young friends, but he looked like a kid, no older than us. He also had a very funny look about him. He was very strangely dressed, strange even for this day and age. He was wearing tights and boots and things that people wore hundreds of years ago when there were knights in shining armor.

"Fine, fine," the kid continued. "My name is Toby. Come in and relax, cool yourselves off."

That was the first strange thing that happened, because it was about thirty degrees outside, and I told him so.

"I'm sorry, my young friend. I didn't notice your coat. I never know what time of year it is outside when we arrive in a new location."

"Oh", I said, "You just recently set up shop here?"

"Well, not exactly. I don't think that I am allowed to, uh, that I am able to explain it to you. You'll have to talk to the owner about that. He should be back any minute."

Toby glanced at a strange wooden clock on the wall behind the counter. It took me a few seconds to realize just how weird it was – mainly because it was running backwards!

I didn't have time to study it any further because a tall skinny old man with a very long beard suddenly came through the back door. He was almost seven feet tall. If I didn't know any better, I would have sworn that he could pass as the real Merlin from King Arthur's time. He wore a blue cloak covered in stars and a funny looking hat with a odd symbol on it.

What I didn't know at the time was that a large ugly python was beginning to uncoil from its perch on a nearby bookshelf. It slowly slithered closer behind me but I was too busy watching the man with the very long beard to notice it. It suddenly wrapped itself around my legs and was quickly moving up my body! A second later it was totally wrapped around my body and it began to squeeze me. Its grip on me tightened and I could feel the air being crushed out of my lungs. I couldn't even call out for help. Then I saw Coop grab a dusty book from the counter and strike the python's head with it. The snake immediately loosened its hold on me and it quickly unwrapped itself from me and began to slither away. But before it could get too far Toby came over and grabbed it. He looked at it and shook his head and even though he wasn't saying anything it looked like he was communicating with the snake somehow. He then recited some words that I couldn't understand and the python began to shrink until it was so small that I couldn't see it any longer.

"Sorry about that," Toby apologized. "He thought you were somebody else. Monty is getting a bit nearsighted in his old age."

The old man walked behind the counter and snapped his fingers. Toby ran over to him. The tall man opened his hand, revealing a small, strange

looking creature. It looked like a tiny dragon from one of Dad's old movies. A small puff of smoke and fire shot out of its mouth. Toby reached up and took it from his hand, then disappeared into the back room.

The tall man then turned his attention to me and Coop. "May I be of assistance?" he asked. He said this in a voice that was so commanding I couldn't do anything but meekly answer back. I was even too afraid to mention the snake that had just attacked me.

"Uh, we're here about the sign in the window."

"Oh yes. That!" He waved his hand and the sign flew out of the window, slowed down and hovered in the air before his face. He looked at it for a few seconds as if he had never seen it before.

"Hmmm," he said softly. "Manga. I am not familiar with that word. I will need to consult the book." He snapped his fingers. "Toby! THE book!"

Toby scampered out of the back room and swiftly searched for the book. I went over to Coop, who was on his cell phone.

"Who are you callin'?" I asked.

Coop snapped his phone shut. "Nobody! There's no reception in here. So where is the manga you promised, Sid?"

"The owner is looking for it now."

At that moment Toby ran past me carrying the largest book I have ever seen. The dusty thick leather cover looked like it hadn't been opened in years. Toby struggled as he held it in both hands as high as he could. The owner waved his hand and the book opened and the pages flipped back and forth by themselves.

"Do you see that Coop?"

"Yeah, so what? They do that in the *Harry Potter* movies all the time."

"That's done with special effects in the movies. This isn't a movie!"

"He's doin' it with wires or somethin'," Coop replied. "There's no such thing as magic."

The owner smiled as the pages stopped flipping and flapping. He seemed to find what he was looking for.

"Here it is," the man said. "Manga!" He slowly nodded his head as he softly read from the book. For a few seconds I thought there was a bright light behind us and when I turned there was a large assortment of items on the counter that hadn't been there before. I was pretty sure that they hadn't been there.

Coop's eyes opened wide. He had that silly grin on his face that he gets when he's found something that he's been looking for. He ran over to the counter and grabbed several of the items.

"Dang," Coop exclaimed. "Look at these things, Sid. They've got a ton of rare manga stuff here!"

I was tempted to go over and look at the objects, but instead I turned around to see what the owner and Toby were doing. Toby and the book





were gone and the owner was walking back towards the counter. As he approached I noticed something else very odd happening. The maps on the walls began to change and the images were no longer places of exotic lands but instead they became posters of different manga characters. In fact the longer I watched the more I saw things in the store transform into something else. I tried pointing this out to Coop but he was too engrossed in rummaging through all the manga stuff on the counter to pay any attention to me or what was going on around him.

"Normally I don't deal directly with the customer," the owner of the store said. "But I thought that Toby could use some assistance, since he practically runs the shop himself, in addition to all the time he spends learning his, ahem, lessons. We don't get many customers, but the ones that we do get are pretty reliable, and they have been coming here for years." As he said those last few words, a peculiar smile appeared on his face.

"Customers?" I asked in disbelief. "You actually get customers in here?"

The owner smiled. "My young friend, this is the finest and largest stocked magic shop in existence."

"How do you get any customers?" I asked. "First off, I don't see a single magic trick, and I've seen enough professional magic acts to know what kind of stuff they use. And another thing: This is the first time that we've seen this store here, and we go by this lot every day to and from school."

"To begin with my young friend, the customers we get are not what

you would call mere stage magicians, and we do not sell their cheap and phony apparatus here," the owner replied. "We have too much integrity for that! And as for your second point, may I ask you what was in this spot, if we were not?"

"It was an empty field with a large pile of tires," I answered.

"An empty field? Then what you seem to be telling me is that this building just appeared out of thin air, overnight?"

"Well, no, it couldn't have." I was getting nervous.

"Then we must have been here for quite some time, and you just never noticed us before," the owner said with sudden authority. Toby had come back and he was keeping an eye on Coop. He probably thought that Coop was going to steal something.

"Would it set your mind at ease if I told you that this store only appears to those people that have a need of its services, and that, to the rest of the world, it just doesn't exist?"

"Yeah, right!" I laughed. "Look, I know that that kind of stuff only happens in books, and not in real life, so just give me a break. And how come a lot of the stuff in the store looks different now. The store didn't look like this when we walked in."

"My establishment adjusts itself to the needs of the customer," the owner said. "Whether you know of the need or not."

Coop came over and he had both hands full of stuff. "Hey, how much for all of this? There's no prices on anything."

"I'm sorry my young friend, but you are only permitted to buy one item a day," the owner replied.

I could tell that Coop was starting to get upset. "One!?" he asked. "What kind of crazy place is this? How can you sell only one thing to a customer?"

"That is how it has always been and that is how it shall always be," the owner said. "Magic has its own rules. I merely follow them. I do not create them."

"What are you talking about?" Coop said. "I don't want magic. I just want this stuff."

"Everything in this store is magical," the owner replied. "If you cannot abide by the rules then you will not be permitted to purchase anything."

He clapped his hands and Toby began to take stuff away from Coop.

"Okay!" Coop said. "Fine! I'll just get one thing. Will that make you happy?"

"That is our policy," the owner said. "You may return some other day and purchase another item if you wish."

Coop looked through the stuff that he had left in his hands. I could tell that he was having a hard time deciding what to get. He finally had it down to three things: A video game, a DVD and a pack of manga cards.

He reluctantly put down the DVD and video game and held up the pack of cards. "How much is this?"

"A wise choice, my young friend," the owner said. "That is yours for the small price of one drachma."

Coop looked at me. I just shrugged. I had no idea how much that was.

"Come again?" Coop asked.

"Ah, I see, wrong currency," the owner replied. "How about a farthing?"

Coop just shook his head.

"A sou?" the owner tried another time.

Coop shook his head again.

"Franc? Dinar? Peso? Shilling? Rupee? Lira? Yen?"

The owner looked wearily at Toby. "What is the local means of exchange?" he asked.

Toby closed his eyes and he looked like he was concentrating real hard. "Cents! Dollars! Cents are the lowest denomination. One hundred cents equals one dollar."

"Very well, my young friend, the price is one dollar."

Coop reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar. Even I knew that the cards were worth a lot more than that. He turned to me.

"I got what I want, now you get somethin', Sid."

The owner raised his hand and shook his head. "No! You have your one purchase and that is all that you are allowed. It does not matter how many there are of you. You are only entitled to one item."

"That's not fair," Coop complained.

"That is not my concern." The owner looked directly at me. "Tomorrow, if you wish, it will be your time to choose," he said. Then he waved his hand and the front door swung open. "Now it is time for both of you to leave."

Before we could protest further we both started walking to the front door. I tried to stop but it was like I had no control over my legs. One look at Coop and I could tell he was also moving somewhat against his will. When we got to the sidewalk the door slammed behind us. We tried to open the door but it wouldn't budge.

"That's weird," I said.

"Whatever," Coop replied. "Let's go home and check out what cards I got."

Coop began running in the direction of our home as fast as he could. I tried to keep up with him because I didn't want him opening the cards before I got there. If I had known what was going to happen when he finally opened the pack I might not have run as hard as I did.

CHAPTER TWO

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Soon after we left the magic store we were hit with a freezing rain. I don't know how - Coop being much faster on his feet than me and all - but we both managed to make it home at the same time and we were drenched. It was still too early for Dad to get home from work so Coop used his house key and we ran inside. There was a message on the answering machine. I thought that Dad might have left a message for us but it turned out to be from Coop's gymnastics teacher calling to say that practice was canceled because of the ice storm.

A minute later we were up in our bedroom and Coop threw his wet backpack on my bed.

"Hey," I complained, "you're getting the bed all wet."

"So what," Coop replied. "It isn't my bed."

I knocked his backpack off my bed. It fell to the floor with a thud. Coop paid no attention to it as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the precious pack of manga cards. I hovered next to him as he slowly began opening it.

"Come on already, Coop," I insisted.

"What's your hurry?" Coop asked. "These are mine, and I will open them when I want. Maybe I don't want to right now."

"That's not fair," I protested. "I'm your brother. We always share everything. And I swear that I'll share whatever I get with you. Brother's oath."

Coop thought long and hard and then he finally nodded his head. "Okay, okay," he said. "I promise. Brother's oath. We split fifty-fifty everything we get from the magic store."

When Coop opened the pack I thought I saw a small flash of light. But I looked again and all I saw were the cards. Coop slowly examined all ten of them. I could tell by his smile that they were ones that we didn't already have in our collection.

"What did we get?" I said anxiously.

Coop laid out the ten cards on his bed. I stood over them and looked at each one slowly. I couldn't believe our luck. Normally it's impossible to find one or two rare cards in a pack but this pack had cards neither of us had seen or heard of before. They must all be super rare cards. The first card had an older looking kid wearing a black and red costume. The cool thing was that he was shooting blasts of fire out of his palms. He sure had a great power.

The second card was an underwater creature. He was half boy and half fish. If it was a girl it would've been a mermaid but since it was a boy they probably called it a merboy or something like that. It looked like a stupid power and I wasn't too interested in it so I quickly moved on to the next one.

The third card was a cool one. It had a creature made of smoke. Now that was a great power. If I could become smoke I could do really cool stuff, because smoke rises and dissipates in one place and reassembles some place else. My mind began to think of all the fun things I could do if I had that power.

That's something that me and Coop did all the time. We would find a card that we liked and pretend that we had the power it depicted.

Card number four had two young elves riding on top of two large dog-like creatures. I wasn't sure where these characters were from. I had never seen any of them before.

At first I wasn't sure who the character was on the fifth card. The card was in black and white and it pictured a kid about my age. He didn't look very special at all. I was going to go right on to the next card but then I looked more closely and saw that his name was Alon. He was a warrior even though he was dressed like a superhero and he fought demons and creatures with a sword.

The sixth card was a girl that looked a little bit older than me. She was wearing a colorful superhero suit. The name on the card was Princess Power. The card explained that she had a different colored ring on every finger and each one had a special power. She could fly, generate heat vision, read minds, see the future and talk to animals among her ten abilities but she could only use one ring at a time. I wouldn't mind having those rings; I could have a lot of fun with them. Alongside the girl was a bigger boy who was wearing cool goggles. He was also dressed in a superhero type costume that had several neat devices around his waist. The card didn't say what his powers were; it only said that his name was Hap-Hazard.

I still hadn't seen a single card that any of my friends had. I knew they



were going to be jealous when I showed them my score. The seventh card featured a nasty looking bald headed creature with four arms. It had claws on all its hands and feet. Just one look at that creepy face and I could tell that he was bad news. He looked meaner than Jake, the bully at my school who was always teasing me and Coop. According to the card his name was Amorphous. He started to give me the spooks so I hastily looked at the next card.

When I first saw the eighth card I thought it had two kids riding horses on it. Then I realized that they were actually part of the horses. The bottom half of each creature was a horse and the top half was a boy. According to the

card they were called centaurs. I thought I had seen them somewhere before but I couldn't remember where.

The ninth card reminded me a lot of the magic store owner and Toby. Underneath the picture was the character's name. It was the mage Merlin. His power level was the highest I had ever seen.

The last card was the strangest of the group. When I first looked at the card it appeared to be completely black. But if I stared at it in a certain light I could see a large black question mark on a solid black background. I had heard about this card but I never thought I would see one. You were supposed to scratch the card with a coin and it would reveal a super rare manga card.

I looked over at Coop. "So what cards are you going to take?"

Coop didn't bother looking at me. He was too busy studying the cards. Finally he picked up the kid in the black and red costume shooting fireballs. "Okay, now you." I had a feeling he was going to pick that card. It would have been my first choice too. I decided to take the third card the one with the smoke creature. I was thinking about taking the black card but I was afraid that when I scratched it that it would turn out to be something stupid.

As soon as I picked up my card Coop snatched up the fourth one – the card with the two elves on top of the giant dogs. I was going to ask him why he picked that one when I suddenly had the urge to grab another card. Without thinking I picked up the merboy. Funny; I thought it was a stupid card the first time I saw it, but when I grabbed it I suddenly changed my mind.

I was surprised when Coop took the Amorphous card, but I was also kind of glad that he did because I didn't like it for some reason.

Even though it had a girl on it, I took the Princess Power card since I liked all the cool rings that she had.

Coop quickly picked up the Alon card.

I was planning on taking that card. Suddenly I had an uncontrollable urge to grab the card with the two centaurs.

Finally it was down to the last two cards. Coop's hand moved back and forth between the wizard card and the black one. Finally his hand stopped over the wizard card and he grabbed it. I was kind of glad that he did because I really wanted to see what was under the black card even if it did turn out to be something dumb.

"Are you going to scratch it off now?" Coop asked as I picked up the last card.

Half of me wanted to know what it was and the other half wanted to hold off for awhile. I saw that Coop was real anxious for me to scratch it off so that helped me make up my mind.

"I'm gonna wait awhile," I said with a smile. I could see that he was disappointed and for some reason I took some pleasure out of it. It was weird. I had never done anything before that would hurt Coop in any way,

but now I felt a little happy about causing him distress. Then I forgot about it when I heard Dad call us down for dinner. We had been so focused on the cards that we didn't hear him come in. I put my cards in my shirt pocket and headed for the door. I felt a strange tingle for a few seconds when I put them in my pocket, but it didn't last. I meant to ask Coop if the same thing happened to him but I forgot all about it by the time we got downstairs to eat.

After dinner we watched another old movie with Dad. It was a funny one about a fat man and his skinny friend who were stuck on top of a building that was being built. Several times it looked like they were going to fall off but then something funny happened that stopped them. I was feeling a bit tired by the time it was done. Dad sent Coop and me off to bed very soon after.

I was just getting into bed when I remembered the manga cards in my shirt pocket. Coop was already in his bed. I guess he wasn't asleep yet because I heard him yawn.

"What are you doing?" he asked as I walked across the room to where I had left my shirt.

"I just want to look at my cards a little while before going to sleep," I replied.

He yawned again. "Give me mine, too."

I pulled his cards out of his shirt pocket and handed them to him before getting into bed.

I don't remember how long I looked at the cards before I finally fell asleep but when I woke up the next morning they were scattered all over my blanket. I went to pick up the one closest to me and it felt like my hand went right through it. I tried again and the same thing happened. I jumped out of bed but the strangest thing happened. My feet didn't touch the floor. I just hovered a few inches above it and then I slowly started to rise. I looked at my hands and arms and they were turning to smoke. I had no idea what was happening to me. As I rose up higher I could see Coop still asleep in his bunk.

"Hey Coop!" I cried. "Wake up!" As the words came out of my mouth so did little puffs of smoke. I was starting to freak out.

Coop began to slowly raise his eyelids, but they popped open when he saw me floating in front of him.

"What in the world are you doin' Sid?"

"Don't ask me," I said, puffs of smoke blowing out of my mouth. "It just happened when I woke up a few minutes ago."

"You're all smoky," Coop observed. "It's getting harder to make out your face." He looked over the side of his bunk. "What are your pajamas doing on the floor?"

"Huh?" I looked down at the floor dumbfounded. Down below my smoky feet were the pajamas that I had worn to bed last night. "I don't know. They must have fallen off me when I turned to smoke."

Coop began to laugh. "You're naked!"

"Ha, ha, very funny!" I said hotly. "Somehow I've changed into a character on one of my manga cards. It's really weird. I feel so lightheaded."

Coop swung his arm around and it went right through me.

"Hey," I yelled. "Cut that out!"

"Sorry," Coop said. "Did it hurt?"

"No, I didn't feel you at all. I just felt a cool breeze for a second."

Coop walked around me looking me over from top to bottom.

"You sort of look like you, but not really," he said. "You're like a boy made out of smoke."

"Look at the card on my bed," I begged. "It's got to say something about this character I've changed into."

Coop picked up all the cards on my bed and looked at each one.

"Nope, there's no card about a smoke creature."

"There's got to be! I remember it!"

Coop held up four cards in one hand and one card in the other. "You've got these four cards with other characters on them and then this card is all blank."

"Blank? I didn't have any blank cards!"

Coop turned the card over and over. "Well it's blank now. There's nothing on either side."

"I know that it had a smoke creature on it before I went to bed," I said in a huff, puffing more smoke. "Maybe when I got the power of the card it caused the card to go blank."

Coop shrugged. "We've gotten cards before. Cards can't do that."

I floated around the room looking at everything. Stuff looked so different when I was seeing it through smoke eyes. "Well, we never got cards at a magic shop before either," I said.

At that moment Dad knocked on the door.

"Are you two coming down for breakfast?"

The doorknob started to turn. Without thinking much about it, Coop grabbed my pajamas and threw them under the bed. I got very nervous as Dad walked into the room. I didn't know how I could explain any of this to him. I floated closer to the wall and before I realized it I was slipping through a crack near the ceiling. Suddenly I found myself in the bathroom. Coop saw me slip through the wall but I don't think Dad noticed. I could hear the two of them talking in the next room.

"Where's Sid?" Dad asked.

"Uh, he was here a minute ago," Coop stammered. "He must have gone to the bathroom or somethin'."

"Well, when he gets back I want you two downstairs as soon as you get changed."

"I don't know if he can change back," Coop said.



"What?"

"Uh, I mean I don't know if he has any clean clothes to change into," Coop recovered.

"You two have more than enough clothes," Dad declared. "Just look in your closet." I heard him close the door behind him and I slipped back into the room.

"Boy that was close," Coop said. "Where did you disappear to?"

"It was the weirdest thing," I said. "I wanted to be out of the room and suddenly I found myself going out. One second I'm in the room with you and the next I'm slipping through a crack in the wall into the bathroom."

"Bathroom," Coop said. "That reminds me, I've got to go."

Coop ran out of the bedroom. I floated around for a few minutes waiting for him. I didn't know what to do next. Then I thought I heard something coming from the bathroom. It sounded like the shower was running. I was starting to get a little mad at Coop. Instead of coming back and helping me he decided to take a shower. I slipped under the bathroom door to talk with him.

The room was filled with steam when I entered it. I always took a shower before Coop because he used up all the hot water when he took his. As I passed through the steam my body, or my smoke body I should say, started to tingle. It was a peculiar sensation. I tried calling out to Coop but my voice was suddenly very hoarse and he was singing so loudly in the shower that he didn't hear me. I continued to drift closer to the shower and, without thinking about it, I slipped right past the curtain. The instant I felt the water hit me I felt intense pain run all through my body. I screamed and pulled away.

I must have passed out because the next thing I knew Coop was kneeling above me. He had a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Sid! Sid! Are you okay?"

I was feeling a little woozy and I couldn't sit up yet. Coop produced a glass of water for me. I felt very thirsty but I also felt a little afraid of the water.

"It's okay, Sid," Coop said. "You're back to normal. You're not smoke anymore."

I lifted my arm and looked at my hand; it looked like it was supposed to. I slowly drank the water and I was starting to feel like my old self. When I finished I saw that Coop was handing me a bath towel.

"What happened?" I asked as I wrapped the towel around me. "The last thing I remember is floating in here to talk to you and then I felt something very painful."

"Yeah, I heard you scream when the water hit you," Coop said. "I'm surprised Dad didn't hear you. What happened?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Maybe it has something to do with water. I was made of smoke and smoke and water don't mix very well. It must be like what salt is to a snail or acid is to us. I must have changed back instinctively because the water was killing me."

We walked back into our room and got dressed without saying much. I picked up my cards that had fallen. Looking them over I saw that he was right about what he had said earlier. The card that had the smoke creature on it was now blank. I couldn't figure it out but I knew what I was going to do about it.

"After breakfast I'm going back to that magic store," I said to Coop. "They've got some explaining to do!"

Coop put his cards into his shirt pocket. We both raced downstairs. By the time we got to the dining room table Dad had finished his breakfast. He was in the living room watching the news. Coop and me sat down at the table and began to whisper to each other.

"So what was it like?" Coop asked.

"What? You mean being made out of smoke? Kinda cool. It felt so weird being able to float like that and slip through cracks and all. That would be a great power to have if I could turn it on and off when I wanted to."

"Yeah, the only problem is that you wind up naked when you're done," Coop added.

"Maybe I could get some special kind of superhero suit that would change when I used the power."

"That only happens in comic books," Coop said.

"Well so do things like turning into smoke."

As I finished my breakfast and I pulled out my manga cards and spread them out on the table. I stared at the one that had pictured the smoke monster.

"Look at that! Now I've only got four that are worth anything. I'm going to ask for my money back for this blank one."

"It was my money," Coop said. "And besides, I only paid a dollar for all of them. Remember?"

Coop pulled his cards out. "At least all of mine are okay." He smiled as he shuffled through them, but he suddenly looked serious as he put them down on the table.

I saw that one of his cards was now blank, too. "So it happened to you too Mr. Know It All!" I laughed. "What did that card have on it?"

Coop shook his head. "I don't know. I don't remember all of the cards."

He looked a little worried and scared. I hadn't seen him like this before.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I haven't changed in any way, right? I mean, you changed when your card went blank. Now one of mine is blank. I don't look any different, do I?"

"No, you're still your old ugly self," I replied.

"I'm serious, Sid. Come on, let's go back to that store and find out what's going on."

A lot of the ice from yesterday's storm was melting in the morning sun and we made it to the store without any problems. I was surprised at how few people we saw along the way.

I had to walk pretty fast to keep up with Coop. He ran the final block and when I caught up with him he was scowling at the magic store's front door.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He pointed at a sign on the door that said the store was closed.

"So what?" I said. "We'll just come back later. It's probably too early for them to be open anyway."

Coop was grim. "No, look at the sign above that."

The second sign featured the store hours. It was closed on Saturdays and Sundays. What kind of magic store isn't open on weekends when people want to shop?

"Crappers," I said, grateful that Dad wasn't there to hear me say that. "Now what do we do?"

Coop peered through the window. "I know there's somebody in there. I can see something moving around in there."

I looked through the glass. "I don't think so, it looks pretty dark inside. I can't see anything."

Coop knocked on the door. "Open up," he said. "I know you're in there."

I grabbed his arm and stopped him for a moment. "Coop, come on. We'll come back later."

"No," he said. "I know there's someone here."

I walked away and waited on the sidewalk. I knew that he would give up in a minute and we could go home. He kept peering through the window and knocking on the door. He was so busy doing this that he didn't notice the movement from above that I saw. The two large stone gargoyles we had seen yesterday on the roof's ledge had begun to move. They were right above Coop, but he didn't see them. I just knew something bad was going to happen.

I yelled out a warning and Coop looked up in surprise. They didn't seem interested in me; they were busy circling the store and making terrible noises at Coop. I didn't know how I could help him and before I could say anything Coop began to panic and he started banging his fists against the door frantically trying to get in.

A funny thing happened when Coop started to bang on the door. Every time he pounded on it blasts of fire shot out of the palms of his hands. Coop didn't seem to notice and he just kept at it. The harder he pounded the bigger the blasts of fire became. And then I saw another strange thing happen. It looked like his clothes were starting to change; after a minute Coop was dressed in a black and red superhero costume. Like something out of a manga book. I knew it had something to do with the cards. It was probably the clothing on the character on the blank card that Coop couldn't remember. Now that I could see the costume better I could see that the

patches of red resembled flames.

At that point I realized what was going on: If a card went blank that meant we would get the power shown on that card! I didn't think it was fair that Coop got a cool costume and all I got was smoke.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud blast. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Coop was angrily shooting blasts of fire out of his palms at the magic store door trying desperately to get safely inside.

Somehow the wooden door was able to withstand Coop's powerful blasts. After the first six failed to blow the door open he looked at the large window next to it and he got ready to fire a blast and shatter the glass. But before he did I saw one of the gargoyles was flying down in his direction.

I yelled out a warning, and when Coop turned and looked in my direction I almost didn't recognize him. He looked a little taller and older than he had a few minutes earlier and his hair was much shorter and lighter. In fact even his costume looked a lot redder than it had a minute ago. The costume appeared to be covered in red flames.

I pointed at the advancing gargoyle. For something that was made out of stone it was amazing how quick and agile this creature was. I felt so helpless because all I could do was stand there and watch Coop shoot fireballs at them. But before the fireballs could reach their targets the gargoyles flew out of their path.

It was a good thing that it was still somewhat early in the morning and the streets were deserted.

With malice in its eyes one of the gargoyles headed again towards Coop. He almost didn't see it because he was too busy watching the other one. I yelled out to him and he tumbled out of the way just as his would-be attacker took a swipe at him. While still on the ground, he shot a fireball at the gargoyle. He missed and it hit a brick building across the street. Several broken bricks fell to the sidewalk.

Even though Coop suddenly had an awesome power he didn't have any experience shooting at moving objects. He was constantly missing the gargoyles, but at least he was able to keep them from striking him. Unfortunately the crafty gargoyles came up with a new attack plan: While one of them continued to go after Coop, the other started to head towards me!

"Hey, a little help over here!" I screamed.

Coop didn't even look at me. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

I dove behind some trashcans and hit the sidewalk hard as the gargoyle swooped down. It missed me, but I ripped the right knee of my new jeans as I scrambled out of its way.

"Crappers, now Dad's really gonna kill me," I moaned. It was all Coop's fault. If he had been paying attention to me he could have stopped the gargoyle. I peeked out and saw that Coop was still unable to blast our

stone assailants. But he had lots of luck hitting everything else. I counted three parked cars, four garbage cans, a mailbox and a billboard that he hit with his fireballs.

As I watched him continue firing it looked as if his fireballs were starting to get smaller. He also wasn't firing them as often as he had just a couple of minutes ago, and he was sweating profusely from the effort. Maybe he was running low on power or he was starting to get tired from all of this.

Then I saw the two gargoyles circling faster and faster above Coop. I had an idea that I knew would work but he was too far away to hear me. I hoped they wouldn't spot me as I stepped away from the trashcans and started to run back across the street. I was so busy watching out for the gargoyles that I didn't see a patch of ice in the road until I stepped on it. I yelled out as I fell to the ground.

I must have knocked my head on the pavement because I was feeling a bit dazed and I couldn't move. I didn't even notice that one of the gargoyles was flying in my direction again. Coop tried to fire another fireball at it but nothing happened. He suddenly looked helpless and confused as he stared at his palms. Then he held out his hands again, his face scrunched up as if he was making a huge effort, and the next thing I knew he screamed and fired his biggest blast yet! The gargoyle took a direct hit and exploded into several large pieces. Coop fell to his knees exhausted, unaware that the other gargoyle was closing in on him – and that a large stone fragment from the one he had just killed was hurtling toward me!

CHAPTER THREE

A TIMELY INTERVENTION

The large gargoyle fragment was just a few feet away from hitting me and I knew there was no way I could avoid getting hit by it. Coop was still on the ground recuperating from his last blast and I was still too dazed to move. I was starting to say my final goodbyes when the fragment flew right through me. All I felt was a small whoosh as it passed through my body. Looking down at my hands I saw that they were all smoky again. In fact my whole body was smoke, and I figured it happened a few seconds before impact. I floated above the crash site and the gargoyle piece was embedded in the middle of the street. Even worse I could see my new jeans partially sticking out from underneath it.

Before I had time to think about what had just happened I heard Coop yell out behind me. I turned and saw the remaining gargoyle heading for him. He tried to raise his hands to shoot a fireball at it but he was too tired to do it. Without thinking I flew directly in front of the gargoyle. I felt it begin to whoosh through my body. I concentrated and I moved along with it so I now surrounded the gargoyle.

It gave out a horrible screech. I turned my head around just in time to see Coop roll out of our path. We both struck the ground. The gargoyle smashed into many pieces and I flew off in several directions. It was a weird sensation breaking up into several smaller pieces of smoke. The other strange thing was that I was in control of the various small parts of me. I could make one part of me float over and check out Coop while a couple of others looked over the broken gargoyle.

I concentrated again and the smaller pieces of me came back and merged together into one piece again. I flew back to Coop.



"Are you okay?"

Coop started to get to his feet. "Yeah, I guess so. That last fireball took a lot out of me."

"That's okay, you saved my life with it," I said. "Kinda."

"Yeah, I didn't expect any of the pieces would hit you," Coop said. "It's a good thing you changed into smoke when you did."

"I didn't do it on purpose, it just sort of happened by instinct."

"That's how it was with me and the fireballs. I just kinda did it without thinking."

"I saw you shooting all those fireballs, you shot a lot of them out, but your aim stinks Coop. I don't want to be around when someone sees all this damage."

Coop wobbled a few steps. "I think I can make it home, I just need a few minutes to get my strength back. That whole thing took a lot out of me."

"Well at least you got a cool costume out of it," I said. "My clothes are stuck under that large gargoyle piece over there."

Coop looked down at his costume as if noticing it for the first time. "I was so busy fighting those things that I didn't know my clothes had changed. Cool."

"That's not all that changed," I added.

"What? What else changed?" He put his hands up to his face.

I tried not to alarm him. "You just look a little different but not in an ugly way."

His hands reached the top of his head and he ran his fingers through his hair.

"My hair, it's short!"

Coop and me always kept our hair long and it was strange seeing him with short hair.

"It's not only short, it's also blonde," I added.

"Blonde? That's crazy!"

As Coop lowered his hands I noticed something else happening. His costume was changing color. While he was fighting the gargoyles it was mostly blazing red with a little black running through it. I noticed that the majority of the red flames were slowly disappearing from his costume. Now it was mostly all black with a few red flames.

"Hey, Coop, check out your costume."

Coop looked down and saw the changes in colors. "This is starting to freak me out."

"Can you forget about that for now? I need some help getting my clothes out from under that broken gargoyle. I don't want to float all the way home and I am also not walking home naked!"

Coop walked over and tried to move the large fragment but it was too heavy for him. He then tried to pull my jeans out from underneath but he only ended up ripping them more.

"Stop it, Coop. You're only making it worse."

Coop raised his hands and aimed for the gargoyle chunk. "Maybe I can blast it off."

"Yeah, and blast the rest of my clothes along with it. Forget it."

I started to feel defeated and slowly sank to the ground. The second I touched the sidewalk I felt my feet begin to change back to normal. Looking down I saw the transformation continue to move from my feet and up my legs. I began to worry about turning back to my normal self and being naked in the middle of the street. But then I saw shoes mysteriously materialize on my feet. Not the kind of shoes I normally wear but more like the fancy looking boots that Coop was now wearing. After the boots formed a blue costume similar to Coop's also began to materialize. At least I didn't have to run home naked. Then I noticed that my normal clothes were disappearing from under the gargoyle piece. They disappeared completely the moment the uniform I was now wearing fully materialized.

Although our costumes looked similar there was a small difference between them. Mine was sky blue with wisps of white running through it and a strange symbol on the chest while Coop had several kooky symbols on his. I looked up at Coop. I didn't think it was fair that he was now a lot taller than me. He looked down at me and smiled.

"How's the weather down there," he laughed.

"Cut it out," I grumbled. "At least I look like myself. I hardly recognize

you. You've got the body of a fourteen year old and you look like a refugee from a boy band."

Our argument was suddenly cut short when we heard someone shouting from across the street.

"Holy crap!" he bellowed. "What the hell happened to my car?!"

We both turned and saw this big, burly, angry guy standing next to a car that Coop accidentally destroyed earlier with one of his fireballs.

The guy looked up in our direction and pointed at us. "Hey, you two punks!" he screamed as he charged toward us. "Are you responsible for this?"

I don't know what the boots we were now wearing were made out of but one thing I can say for sure is that they were very good for running because we both took off like a shot when we saw that guy coming for us. It's not unusual for Coop to run faster than me when he's in his normal body but now that he had been changed into this older, bigger version of himself he was a good block ahead of me before he finally stopped running and let me catch up with him.

"I just ran six blocks and I don't feel tired at all," I said in amazement.

"Yeah, me either," Coop replied. "And not only that but it's got to be below freezing out here and I'm not even cold."

I realized that I wasn't cold, either. We should have been because the costumes that we were wearing were made of some pretty thin material and I couldn't understand how they could protect us from the cold like this.

I didn't have long to think about it because at that moment we heard someone cry out for help from the nearby alley. We ran over to the alley and saw two guys beating up an old man. The poor old guy had just been knocked to the ground by the time we saw them. He was clutching tightly to a black briefcase and even though one of the guys tried taking it from him the old guy refused to let go.

"Leave that guy alone," I yelled.

The larger of the two stopped attacking the man and turned in our direction. He laughed and tapped his friend on the shoulder. The other guy momentarily stopped trying to grab the briefcase and stared at us. He looked mean.

"You're a little late for Halloween," the bigger guy said.

"This has nothing to do with you twerps," the other one added. "Go somewhere else and play."

Although I'm not normally a fighter I just couldn't let these two guys keep beating up this poor old man. I clenched my fists and got ready for a fight. Coop just smirked at them and rested his hands on his sides. I thought at first he was looking for pockets but these costumes don't have any. Then I realized he was just planning our next move.

Coop finally stepped forward. "We have come to help this man," he warned. "So leave now and you won't get hurt."

The two guys burst out laughing. I've had kids at school laugh at things I've done, but never adults. It was a little embarrassing and I was really starting to get mad. Then I found myself saying something I never thought I would say.

"Get your stinkin' asses out of here or else!"

The two men walked away from the old man and slowly headed in our direction. The larger man reached into his pocket and pulled out a small gun which he pointed at us.

"Or what, little boy?" he asked with a smirk.

"Or else, this," I said as I instantly changed to smoke. I noticed that my new costume didn't fall off of me when I turned to smoke. It just disappeared when I changed. I hoped that it would come back again when I turned back to human form.

To the two guys it must have looked like I disappeared in a puff of smoke, kind of like a magician's trick. They didn't realize that the smoke was me. They stopped walking and looked at each other for a few seconds trying to figure out what had just happened. That's when I took action. I flew right at them and surrounded them both so they couldn't see a thing. I felt them waving their arms around desperately trying to see something but I concentrated harder and became even thicker so it was impossible for them to see each other let alone anything else.

While I was doing this Coop walked past us and crouched down to help the old man. At first I wasn't sure if the old guy was still alive, but I heard him moan a little so at least he wasn't dead.

The two robbers were busy rubbing tears from their eyes and coughing like crazy from all the smoke in their faces. "That will teach you to mess with us," I said with a laugh.

I looked at Coop again and he was signaling me to move away from the two crooks. I was having too much fun but I reluctantly did as Coop wanted. They stood there for a few seconds, still coughing and disoriented, facing away from Coop and me.

Suddenly, Coop shot two small fireballs at them that hit them right on their butts. They both yelled. Back ends glowing and smoking, they ran like heck out of the alley. I was tempted to float after them and see where they went but I wanted to see how the old man was doing.

I lowered myself to the ground and just like before my feet began to materialize, boots and all. The rest of me and my costume followed. I walked over to Coop, who was crouched on the ground holding up the old guy's head. I squatted down next to them.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Not too good," Coop replied. "He hasn't said anything yet. He just keeps holding on to that briefcase."

"That must be what those two guys wanted," I said. "It must be very important if he wouldn't give it to them."

"Extremely important," the old man whispered. It's a good thing that Coop and me were so close to him otherwise I don't think we would have heard him.

"Who are you?" Coop asked. "What did those two guys want?"

"My name is Stanley Excalibur," the old man replied. "Who are you boys?"

"I'm Coop and this is my brother Sid. We were passing by and heard you call out for help."

"It's a good thing you came to my assistance," Mr. Excalibur said. A brief coughing fit followed. He let go of the briefcase with one hand but he still held on to it firmly with the other. Mr. Excalibur reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a business card and he handed it to Coop. "If I don't make it out of here, it is extremely important that you both deliver this briefcase to this address," he said with some difficulty. "You must give it to the man whose name is on that card and to nobody else."

"What's in it?" I asked.

Mr. Excalibur tried to reply but all he could do was cough. It didn't look like he had much time left. I felt a little sorry for him. He was going to die in this dirty alley with no family or friends around. Then I thought about it. We were kinda like his friends. We had helped him when he needed it. I felt a little better.

Mr. Excalibur closed his eyes. I looked at Coop.

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

Coop looked at me and shook his head. Mr. Excalibur was no longer breathing. He gently lowered Mr. Excalibur's head to the ground and carefully pried the briefcase from his hand. Neither of us said anything for a little while. We had never been this close to a dead man before and it was a little disturbing. And he seemed like a nice old man.

"What do you think is in the briefcase?" I finally asked.

At first Coop didn't reply. He was too busy looking at the card while he held the briefcase under his arm.

I decided to try a different question. "What's the card say?" I asked.

"Calm down," he said. "Geez, you're like a little kid sometimes."

"I'm the same age as you," I reminded him. "Just because you look bigger and older than me right now just remember that you're not."

"Yeah, whatever," Coop laughed. He went to put the card in his pocket but he forgot that his costume didn't have any. After a couple of futile attempts at sliding it into non-existent pockets he handed the card to me.

"Here, you can hold on to this," he said as if he were bestowing a great honor on me.

"Gee, thanks a lot," I said sarcastically. "Do you think you can trust me with it?"

"Doesn't matter," Coop said as he turned to walk away. "I've memorized it."

Big deal, I thought to myself. He memorized a little business card, but see how good he is at remembering things when we have a history test.

Coop didn't say much during the walk home and I didn't really feel like talking to him. Since he'd gotten his power and changed he'd been behaving a little differently toward me. We always talked about the things we were going to do but now he was starting to tell me what to do.

I was glad that nobody saw us in our uniforms. I didn't know how I would have explained it to Dad. Coop didn't seem to care. He just kept humming as we walked. I've never heard him do that before, either.

When I finally saw the house I noticed Dad's car was missing from the driveway. We both had a spare key so it wasn't unusual for him to leave and lock the door. We walked up the front steps and Coop stopped humming as he tried opening the door. It was locked, as I knew it would be.

"Come on, Coop," I said. "Unlock the door."

Coop patted the sides of his uniform. "How am I gonna do that, small fry? I don't have the key."

"You had it before," I said. "And watch who you're calling small fry!" I was really starting to hate his jokes about my size. I was the normal-sized one as far as I was concerned. Coop was the abnormal one. I couldn't wait for him to change back to normal.

"You had them before," I added.

"Well it must have disappeared," Coop replied, sounding a little anxious. "It was in my pants pocket when my pants disappeared and this uniform materialized on me. I didn't walk out of here dressed like this. Remember?"

"We can use my key," I said as I went to reach into my pocket. Then I realized that I didn't have any pockets, either. My key was still in my pants and they were under the large broken gargoyle rock back at the magic store.

"Oh, great!" Coop complained. Then a serious look crossed his face and before I knew what was happening he aimed his hands at the front door as if he were getting ready to blast it down with a fireball.

"What are you doing?" I gasped.

"We have to get in," Coop said. "I'm going to knock down the door and get us in. Or do you want to stand out here dressed like this until Dad gets home?"

"No, I don't. But that doesn't mean you should blast down the door. I'm not going to explain how that happened to Dad. Just wait a minute. I've got an idea."

Coop watched as I transformed into smoke and slid under the door. A minute later I was back to normal and unlocked the door from the inside. Coop came in without so much as a thank you. He walked over to the couch and put the briefcase on the coffee table.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"We are not going to do anything," Coop said "I am going to open this briefcase."

"Mr. Excalibur didn't say we could open it," I warned.

"Well he's not here," Coop replied. "And besides, he didn't say we couldn't. He only said that we had to deliver it to the guy on the card. Give it to me."

I looked for the card but I didn't have it anymore.

"It's gone," I said, sounding a little guilty.

"You had it before we came in! I saw it in your hand."

"Yeah, I think it disappeared when I turned into smoke and slid under the door."

Coop reached for a pad and a pencil and began writing. "It's a good thing I memorized it," he said.

"Then why did you want to see it again?" I muttered.

He gave me a quick dirty look and finished writing. I could tell he was deep in thought because he always has a funny look on his face when he's thinking hard.

When he smiled I knew that he came up with some crazy idea. The way he was looking at me I wasn't sure if I really wanted to hear what it was, because from the looks of it, it involved me, and that always meant trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUST IN CASE

Coop's ideas were not always the greatest. In fact, I can't remember a single good one that he's ever had. Usually they involve me getting hurt somehow. From the look on his face I could tell that this time wasn't going to be any different.

"Whatever it is you want me to do forget it," I said with unusual force.

He stood up and flashed me one of his fake sincere smile. "Come on Sid, you want to know what's so important in that briefcase just as much as I do. It's got to be something really fantastic or valuable if those two guys were willing to steal it."

"But we promised to deliver it," I protested.

Coop nodded. "We are going to deliver it. But we never promised that we wouldn't take a peek at it."

"But it's locked and we don't have a key."

"Yeah, but we do got you, Smokey," Coop smiled. "And you can open this using your new power."

It was true that I really enjoyed using my new power and I couldn't wait to use it again. "Okay," I agreed. "I will help you open it using my power, but all we are going to do is look at it. We're not going to do anything else with it."

"Of course not," Coop lied. "We're only going to look at it. Now just turn into smoke and slip into the briefcase and then push it open from the inside."

I concentrated and started to change to smoke. Once I completed that task, I slowly made my way in through the keyhole. This took some time, as the opening was very small. I couldn't believe what I was doing! It was very dark and cramped inside the briefcase. I could hear Coop's muffled voice from outside it.

"Are you in there?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said. I wasn't sure if he could hear me or not.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing! It's pitch black in here. I can't see a thing."

"Well, hurry up," Coop demanded. "I want to know what's in there."

He was really starting to bug me. I don't know how long I was inside that thing before I finally thought of something. I figured that I could compress myself really close and then push upward as hard as I could. Maybe the force would break the lock and pop open the briefcase. I focused very hard and I felt myself getting denser. I then pushed upward as hard as I could. I pushed and pushed and just before I was about to give up I heard something snap. I was blinded by the sudden light all around me. The case was open!

By the time I had changed back to my normal self and adjusted to the light Coop was holding something in his hand.

"What is that?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Coop replied. "It's the thing from the briefcase."

He turned it around several times trying to figure it out. It appeared to be a small flat screen television with some odd attachments sticking out of it. There didn't seem to be any controls and Coop was having a hard time trying to turn it on. Finally he put it down on the coffee table and I picked it up to get a closer look at it. I could tell that it was definitely more than just a flat screen monitor. There was a slot where you could slip in a DVD or disc of some sort. I figured that the skinny antenna sticking out of it had to be some kind of receptors. I also didn't see any openings where you could plug in a power cord.

"Do you think they'll give us a reward for delivering it back?" Coop asked, sounding greedy.

"How should I know?" I said. "Where do we have to take it to?"

"The card that Mr. Excalibur gave us was for a man named Clinton Killingworth. He's President of Starr-Bolle Electronics."

"I never heard of them."

Coop shrugged. "Me either. The other problem is that he is located in San Antonio, Texas."

"Texas?" I exclaimed. "No way is Dad going to let us go there."

I heard the phone ring and when I turned to answer it I thought I saw someone or something out of the corner of my eye moving in the kitchen. I was about to mention it to Coop but the phone rang again.

"Aren't you going to answer that small fry?"

I wanted to tell Coop to stop calling me that but I decided to answer the phone instead. Coop ignored me while I was in the kitchen, but a few minutes later, after I finished the call, he was full of questions.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"It was Dad. He was calling from a pay phone. He said he forgot his cell phone at home and he didn't have a lot of time to talk."

"What did he want? When's he coming home?"

"He's not. Aunt Sue got into a bad car accident."

"Aunt Sue? What happened? How is she?"

"He isn't sure. She's in California so Dad's got to leave town for a few days to be with her. He wants me to call Uncle Ron and see if we can stay with him for a couple of days. Dad tried calling him first but there was no answer so he told me to follow up on it."

"Well that's good," Coop said, sounding cold and uncaring even for him. "Now we can take this thing down to Texas and get the reward and Dad won't even know we're gone."

Now I was the one with all the questions. "How are we going to get down there? And what about Uncle Ron? What do we tell him? He's going to be expecting us."

"No he won't. Because we're not going to call him," Coop said.

"But Dad told us...."

"What Dad doesn't know won't hurt him."

I was about to tell Coop that he was being an ass, but then I saw something moving again in the kitchen. I motioned for Coop to keep quiet while I switched back into smoke form and floated into the other room.

What I saw in there was nothing like I had ever seen before or could even imagine. Moving about the kitchen was a creature a little larger than my father. Its four massive arms were busy rummaging through the kitchen. I didn't think it knew I was there but it turned in my direction and looked right at me. I was glad that I was smoke because it looked like it could have hurt me pretty bad if I was in my normal form. It was a very strange looking creature because it only had two eyes and a mouth on its bald head. It had no ears or nose but somehow it must have heard me because it suddenly spoke.

"Where are they?" he said in a low gravelly voice.

I was a little too afraid to move or speak. Then I suddenly remembered where I had seen this thing before. It was a creature from our new manga cards.

"Where are they?" he growled in the same gravelly voice but a lot meaner now.

"I... I... I don't know what you're talking about," I stammered. "Where's who?"

"Do not toy with me!" He raised one of its right hands in the air. "I am Amorphous!" he said as electricity crackled from his finger tips. "I am power incarnate!"

Lightning flew from his finger tips and shot across the room passing through me before hitting the refrigerator. The door exploded and everything inside the fridge crashed to the floor.

Coop came running into the room. "What the heck is going on in here?" he shouted, stepping over the food that had fallen from the fridge. "Dad's gonna be pissed! That was a new fridge."



Somehow, Coop had failed to notice the large multi-armed creature standing in the middle of our kitchen. I pointed a smoky hand at Amorphous and Coop turned in his direction.

"Dang!" Coop exclaimed.

"That's Amorphous," I answered. "That's what blew up the fridge."

Amorphous looked at Coop and scowled. "Where are they?" Amorphous asked again.

"Where's who?" Coop stammered. He was looking at me.

"I don't know either," I said, my voice sounding as nervous as I felt. "When I asked Amorphous that same question he blew up the fridge."

Coop raised two hands and aimed them at Amorphous.

"I say we take this thing out like we did the gargoyles," Coop said.

"Not in the house," I begged. "We're already going to be in trouble over the fridge."

"Then we've got nothing to lose." Coop's uniform changed to red as he shot two fireballs at Amorphous. Before they could hit him, Amorphous shot electricity from his fingers and it intercepted the fireballs causing them both to explode.

"Dang, that thing is good," Coop said, sounding oddly impressed.

I floated in front of the fridge and looked down at the mess. The floor was covered with broken eggs, spilled milk and juice along with a couple of sticks of butter.

"Someone's gonna have to clean this up before Dad gets home," I warned. As I was talking, Amorphous shot two electrical blasts toward Coop, narrowly missing him.

"You want to worry about that some other time," Coop was freaked. "I'm busy trying not to get blown up here!"

Coop shot two more fireballs at Amorphous, but Amorphous dodged them and they hit the cabinets over the sink. A stack of dishes went crashing to the floor.

Amorphous turned to see what the noise was. While his attention was diverted away from us, Coop shot two more fireballs at our obnoxious intruder. They were smaller than the others. I guess Coop hadn't had time enough to fully recharge between blasts. One of them missed Amorphous but the other hit him in the back. Amorphous roared, turned in our direction and started to run straight at Coop. We both froze. This thing meant business.

Amorphous was so determined to reach Coop that he didn't watch where he was going and he slipped in the mess by the refrigerator, his feet flying up toward the ceiling, his head smashing into the floor. He stopped moving and lay there very still.

Coop's uniform changed from mostly red to black and red as he slowly powered down and approached Amorphous.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. But I don't want to be around if he wakes up. Let's get out of here!"

I floated up to our room and for once I got there before Coop did. I changed back to human form and my uniform reappeared. Coop came into the room a couple of minutes later carrying the monitor thing from the briefcase. He put it on my mattress and then he went under the bed. He came back out a few seconds later holding a small safe I kept under there.

"What are you doing with that?" I demanded. "That's my vacation money!"

"Come on Sid. We've got no time to argue about this. That thing could wake up at any moment. We've got to get out of here and we're gonna need money."

"Okay, fine. But why does it always have to be my money that we end up using?"

Coop threw my backpack on the bed and shoved the monitor thing into it. "Because, duh. You know I always spend mine as soon as I get it and you've always got some hidden away where you think I can't find it."

"Coop, do you think the cards can give us anymore info about that creature?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you recognize that thing? It was one of the creatures from the manga cards!"

Coop shook his head. Negative. He was never very good at remembering stuff.

"Where are the manga cards?" I asked.

"The last time I saw them they were in our pockets," Coop said. "But that was before our old clothes disappeared and we got these uniforms."

"Shoot! I wish these uniforms had pockets."

"Me, too," Coop said, adding, "and also looked a little different so we wouldn't stand out in a crowd."

The weirdness kept on coming. As soon as Coop finished expressing his wish about his uniform it started to change. Soon it began to look like something he wore when we went camping with Dad. But there were still some remnants of his uniform left. His shirt had a round patch with the same strange symbol that his uniform had. Wrapped around his shirt was a funny looking belt with a lot of weird things fastened to it including a cool miniature sword. The shorts he was now wearing were a little shorter than what he usually wore. It actually made him look taller. And he had a pair of goggles stretched across his forehead. I was so busy watching his uniform change that I didn't realize that he was looking at me strangely.

"What are you staring at?" I asked.

"You're dressed totally different than you were a minute ago!" Coop exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

I looked toward the full length mirror on our closet door and saw that Coop wasn't kidding. I was now wearing a T-shirt and shorts but they looked very different from the clothes Coop had on. Instead of goggles like Coop was wearing I had on an oversized hat. At first I thought the only thing that was similar to Coop's outfit was the round patch on my T-shirt with the symbol from my uniform. Then I saw that Coop and me both had large devices around our right wrists.

Coop must have noticed his reflection in the mirror and saw how he was now dressed. He lifted his right arm. "What do you think these things are for?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe they're some kind of communication devices?" That was my best guess. I noticed that we had pockets in our shorts.

"Hey Coop, check it out. Pockets!" I reached into my left pocket and felt something flat inside. I pulled it out and was surprised to see my manga cards. "Look! My cards! Check your pockets too. See if you got yours back."

Coop reached into his pockets and pulled out a small stack of cards. He rifled through them, then frowned. "Two of them are blank," he complained. "Only three cards have something on them."

I knew what was coming. "Let me guess. The Amorphous card is blank now."

Coop nodded.

"First chance we get, we're going to write down what the rest of the cards are," I said.

I took the money out of my safe and put it in the backpack along with the other stuff that Coop had put in there. Then I threw it on and we quietly walked downstairs and looked in the kitchen. Amorphous was not on the floor. Thankfully, there was no sign of the nasty creature, so Coop and me ran out back and got on our bicycles. Now that he was bigger Coop's bike looked too small for him and he seemed to be having a little trouble riding it.

We had only ridden our bikes a short while when we passed the magic store. There were four police cars parked out front and several officers were busy interviewing people about the mess we had left behind. Two others were busy directing traffic around the large pieces of broken gargoyle that were still in the road. I slowly rode my bike past the one that almost hit me. I thought about what would have happened if I hadn't changed into smoke when I did.

Even though I was wearing a T-shirt and shorts I still didn't feel the cold. I could tell that it was freezing outside because everyone else around us was wearing heavy winter coats, but Coop and me just rode past them in our summer clothes. They must have been made from the same warm material our uniforms were made from. I wondered what that material might be and where our clothes and costumes had come from.

We rode to a commuter lot where we locked up our bikes and waited for a bus. When it finally arrived the only other people who got on with us were

an elderly couple and a young woman holding a baby. Coop and me raced to the back of the empty bus where we could talk quietly.

"So how are we going to get to Texas?" I asked. It felt odd asking Coop questions like that. Normally he was the one who would be asking them of me. But ever since he changed we've both been behaving like he was the older brother.

"The fastest way that I know of is to fly," Coop replied.

"You can't fly! And all I can do is float around. I can't float all the way to Texas!"

Coop shook his head. "Fly like in a plane, dip-wad. Duh!"

I thought about how expensive it would be to fly and worried about my dwindling vacation fund. As if he knew what I was thinking, Coop suddenly said something to make me feel better.

"Don't worry about the cost. I'm sure that Killingworth guy will pay us a lot of money when we return this thing to him. Then you'll get all your money back plus more."

It hadn't occurred to me that there would be a reward for returning the item, but it made sense since Mr. Excalibur gave his life protecting it.

We continued to talk about what we were going to do with the reward money we were so certain we were going to get. I took out a little notebook that Coop had packed and wrote down all the information I could from the remaining manga cards. Finally the bus made it to the airport. We had only been there a few times before and Dad had always been in charge. We never had to know where we were going in the terminal because we just followed him, but we managed to find the ticket counter. There was a long line of people in front of it. I pulled Coop aside.

"Look at all these people, Coop. They're never going to let two kids buy tickets without an adult. How are we going to get tickets?"

Before Coop could reply the strange device on my right wrist began to beep. I lifted my arm to look at it and I saw a light blue glow coming from it.

"Activation mode initiated," it said, sounding like a male GPS voice.

I jumped a little because I wasn't expecting it to speak. I could have sworn I had heard its voice somewhere before. Then Coop's device also began to glow but it was pale green.

"Power transfer complete," Coop's device said in a pleasant female voice.

We both moved further away from the line of people so they wouldn't hear what these things were saying. We found an empty bench and sat down. Coop looked just as confused as I felt.

"Did you just talk?" I said to the device on my wrist.

"Affirmative," it replied. "Power transfer has been initiated and completed. We are fully functional within set parameters."

"What are you?" I asked.

"My designation is Alpha Byte," it said. "I gather and supply information as well as uplink to your system and interface it to other non compatible systems."

"I'm not sure what that means," I said.

Then Coop asked his device a question.

"What are you? What do you come do?"

"You can just call me Beta Bit," it replied. "I supply you with devices that you will need for protection while you are in power down mode."

"Power down mode?" Coop said. "What is that?"

My device then answered Coop's question instead of the one he was wearing did.

"Power up mode is when your sibling's body has the ability to transform into smoke and when you can shoot fireballs," Alpha Byte explained. "Power down mode is when your bodies are recharging and you are unable to utilize your abilities."

"How do we know when we've got our powers back?" I asked.

"Your bodies are unable to supply energy to both your powers and to us," Alpha Byte said. "We power down and transform when you have sufficient energy requirements to reinstate your abilities."

"So Coop and me have no special powers right now?"

"Affirmative," Alpha Byte responded. "You are currently in power down mode after all your activity today. When you power down, we power up. We must be attached to your bodies in order for you to power up."

Coop removed the small sword from his belt and addressed Beta Bit.

"So this is something you created for my protection?"

"That's correct," Beta Bit replied. "You are the designated protector unit and it is your function to guard and defend."

"Guard and defend who?" Coop asked. "Against what?"

"I'm sorry dear," Beta Bit said sweetly. "But that information has not been programmed into my system."

"Well can you transform this sword into something else that won't get us arrested?" Coop asked. "There's no way that they are going to let me and Sid on a plane carrying this thing."

The sword began to glow the same color green as the Beta Bit device on Coop's wrist. Then it began to shrink and change. A few seconds later it looked just like a cell phone.

"To reactivate the unit all you need to do is scroll through the menu choice until you find one that you desire," Beta Bit said.

I watched as Coop scrolled through his menu screen. I saw a long list of different types of weapons. There were swords, knives, guns and other things that I didn't even recognize. I wasn't sure if it was going to be safe with Coop having access to so much fire power, especially considering how much damage he did with his fireballs back at the magic shop and at home.

"At least we know what my gadget does," Coop said.

"Just call me Beta," Beta Bit purred.

"Okay, fine, whatever," Coop said. "We know what Beta can do, but what does yours do?"

"Go purchase your tickets and I will demonstrate my function," Alpha Byte instructed.

Coop and me walked over to the ticket line. I still wasn't sure what we were going to do once we got to the counter. It didn't take long for us to get to the front of the line, where we were called to a young woman behind a terminal. Her name badge said her name was Kira.

"What can I do for you two young gentlemen today?" she asked.

I was going crazy trying to think of what to say when suddenly I felt a strange tingle run through me. I felt like I was no longer in control of my own body.

"Our father called ahead and reserved tickets for us," I heard myself say. I gave her our last name and she typed it into her computer.

"Oh yes, I see you both listed here," she said as she began to print out a set of tickets. "Your flight to San Antonio will be about three and a half hours long. If you need anything before you meet up with your father just ask one of the flight attendants for assistance."

She handed me the tickets. I took them and smiled at her. It was like someone else was controlling me. My smile was much broader than usual. I looked stupid. Coop laughed.

"I appreciate your assistance in this matter," I replied. "Is it permissible for my sibling and me to transmit our belongings onto the aircraft with us?"

"That would be fine," Kira replied. "You both are in first class so there is plenty of room to store your things. You'll be boarding at Gate 12."

Coop stopped me as we walked to the gate.

"What just happened back there?" he asked. "Why were you talking so funny? And why were you smiling like a dork?"

"Interface mode deactivating," I said, without attempting to say it. Then I felt another odd tingle run through my body and I had control over myself again.

"I don't know," I continued. "It's like I had no control over what I was saying or doing."

"Affirmative," Alpha Byte said. "I interfaced with your system and acquired the necessary papers that you required. While I was interfaced with you I also uplinked to their systems and added your names to the aircraft's manifest."

"So you were talking through me and controlling me and the electronic devices around me?" I asked.

"Affirmative."

"That is so creepy," I said. "In fact, everything about this is creepy."

"I don't know about that," Coop interjected. "I kind of like being the protector. I get lots of cool weapons and powers."

"If you're the protector then what am I supposed to be?"

"That is part of your mission," Alpha Byte said. "To comprehend and accept your mission in life."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Alpha Byte didn't answer. I found out later that it wouldn't be the last time Alpha didn't answer one of my questions. A moment later we arrived at Gate 12, which was filled with people waiting to board the plane. In fact, there were so many people sitting and standing around the place it was impossible to see them all. That's why I didn't notice a familiar individual in the crowd. But he saw me, and when our eyes met a mischievous smile crossed his face. It was Toby from the magic shop! I only saw him for a few seconds before he disappeared into the crowd.

It would be awhile before I finally saw him again and even longer before I would find out what he was smiling about.

CHAPTER FIVE

DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

I've never flown first class before on a plane but I can tell you that I liked it a lot. It almost made me forget all the crazy things that have happened to us today. I didn't get a chance to talk to Coop much during the flight because he spent most of the trip talking to some red headed girl in the aisle across from us. He had never been too interested in girls before. Now that he's changed and looks older he's been acting so different. I wondered if it was more than just physical changes happening to Coop. Maybe there were mental changes going on, too. I wanted to ask Alpha Byte about it but I didn't want anyone on the plane to see me talking to it.

I spent most of the flight watching movies on the television that was attached to my seat. Every seat had one but most people didn't bother using theirs. I wish we had one of these attached to our chairs in school. It would make going to school a whole lot more fun. I didn't get to talk to Coop again until it was time for the plane to land and the flight attendant told everyone to sit down and buckle up for the landing.

"Glad you could drag yourself away from your new friend," I said bitterly. He spent the entire flight hanging around that girl and we never had a chance to talk about everything that's been going on. I would have punched him if he hadn't been bigger than me.

"Her name is Taylor," Coop said. "She's traveling with her mom to San Antonio to compete in a regional gymnastics competition. I told her that I also do gymnastics and we just got to talking."

"You never cared to talk to girls before about anything," I replied.

"You wouldn't understand. Wait until you're older."

"I'm the same age as you," I said. I felt like I had to keep reminding him.

Coop just shook his head and laughed. "You were but not anymore, small fry. Just wait a couple of years until you're my age and you'll understand everything like I do."

I got so mad at him that I stopped talking until we were leaving the airport terminal. I felt for sure that there were mental changes going on inside Coop and that it probably wasn't his fault that he was acting like this. I was just going to have to get used to it until this whole thing was over and he went back to his old self. At least I hoped that he was going to go back to his old self when this was over. What if he were stuck this way forever? It was night time when we landed and it wouldn't be possible to see Mr. Killingworth at his office, so I tried to get a taxi but all of them were already in use.

"We're never going to get out of here," I said.

"Oh, are you talking to me again?" Coop said. "I didn't know how long the silent treatment was going to last this time."

"Coop, you're my brother, but sometimes you can be such a jerk."

Coop looked at me and laughed. "So can you, small fry. But this isn't doing us any good getting out of here. We need to find a hotel for the night. I'm getting tired."

I looked at my watch and was surprised that it was almost midnight. No wonder we were both tired, we had both had a long and hectic day.

We were finally able to get a cab and instructed the driver to take us to a hotel. After paying for both the cab and the hotel I could see my money pile start to dwindle.

It was just as easy checking into the hotel using Alpha Byte as it had been getting airplane tickets. We went to our room and I had just flopped down on one of the twin beds when there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it now?" I whined. I was really feeling fatigued and I didn't feel like getting up and opening the door. Fortunately Coop was still standing up and he went over and opened it.

"Who is it, Coop?"

"I don't know," Coop replied as he looked up and down the empty hallway. "There's nobody out here."

Just as he was about to close the door we heard another knock. I looked around the room and saw the closet door move a little. I knew it was the closet door because I had just tossed my backpack in there a minute earlier.

I got up from the bed and cautiously walked to the closet. I grabbed the knob and waited for Coop to come over. I thought that the two of us might be able to handle what was in there. Whatever it was.

Turning the door knob I swung open the closet door ready for anything. Well almost anything, because I really didn't expect to see what I saw inside the closet. Standing just on the other side of the door was the kid Toby from

the magic shop.

"Thank you, my young friend," Toby said. "I didn't think you were ever going to open the door."

"What are you doing in our closet?" I asked.

Toby said in mock surprise. "I most certainly am not in a closet. I am at work in the shop and it is time for you to make your next selection."

"Shop? What?"

And that's when I noticed that behind Toby was not the inside of our closet. He was actually standing inside the magic shop. The entire store was on the other side of our closet door.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

Toby just shook his head. "Did my master not explain to you that the shop appears to those who need it, when they need it? Come in, come in, my young friend." Then Toby looked at Coop as if he were noticing him for the first time. "And you may also enter, my not as young friend. It appears that you have begun your adventure already."

Coop and me walked into the doorway and followed Toby into the shop. It felt so weird, there was no way all of this could fit in our small closet but here we were walking around like we did yesterday. Toby closed the door behind us as we entered.

Everything was exactly where we had last seen it. I don't think anything has ever been moved in this place. I could see that Coop was busy looking around for something but I didn't know what.

"What are you looking for?" I asked him.

"The owner guy," Coop replied. "He's got some explaining to do."

"My master will be here momentarily," Toby said. "He is finishing up his latest batch and it requires all of his attention."

"Latest batch of what?" I asked.

Toby didn't answer. Instead, he only smiled and then walked behind the counter.

I was just about to ask him again when I heard this giant explosion and a door flew open and a large cloud of smoke poured out. It wasn't until a few seconds later that I saw a large figure walk through the smoke into the room. It was Merlin.

"I do believe I used too much garlic powder that time," Merlin mused.

"What kind of spell were you cooking up this time?" Coop asked. "Something to make gargoyles come to life? Oh wait, you already did that one."

"Oh, dear me no, my young friend," Merlin replied. "One never uses garlic in a gargoyle spell. Tabasco sauce works much better. Heats things up very nicely. I've been cooking up spells all morning so I decided that it was time to cook up some chili for lunch."

"Lunch?" I said in shock. "That's some explosive chili."

"Toby and I do tend to like it a little hotter than most," Merlin said.

"Okay, enough of this!" Coop demanded. "I want to know what is going on around here."

Merlin walked behind the counter and whispered something to Toby, who then ran off behind a pile of stuff. I couldn't see where he went after that. Then Merlin turned his attention back to us.

"The time has now approached for your brother to make his selection for the day," Merlin said. "You do remember that you are allowed one selection a day. Your opportunity was yesterday and now it is his turn."

"I don't care about that," Coop wailed. "Look at me! I look totally different from yesterday."

"You do?" Merlin said in mock surprise. "You appear the same to me as you did the first time that I saw you. If you do not believe me just gaze into the mirror behind you."

It was the oddest thing, but when Coop turned to see his reflection in the mirror he saw his old self looking back at him. But I could see that he was still in his new body. It was very freaky for me to see the two different images, but all that Coop could see was his old body looking back at him in the mirror.

"That's a cool trick," I said. "But even I can see that there is a different image in the mirror. Coop's still in his new body."

Merlin just shook his head. "You have yet to understand that what is outside may change over time, but it is what we are on the inside that reflects who we really are."

"I don't understand," Coop said.

"It is very simple," Merlin said as he walked from behind the counter and stood next to Coop.

"When you greet each day with a smile, you will find out after awhile," the magician began to sing. "That the life you lead and the things you do, will enrich your life every time that you, just look at yourself, both inside and out, and you will begin to see what life is all about."

A funny thing happened then because Merlin walked away from Coop but Merlin's reflection was still standing next to Coop's in the mirror.

"For the life you lead reflects upon you, and the deeds you do are a reflection of you, and all that you do always reflects upon you," Merlin's reflection stated. "Doing something nice for your sisters and brothers, benefits you as much as it benefits others."

I noticed that Toby had come back into the room carrying a few items. He put them on the counter but Coop didn't see him because he was too busy listening to Merlin.

Merlin walked back and stood next to Coop. Then his reflection walked away from Coop's so now they were both only looking at Coop's mirror image.

"Now remember these words everywhere you go, and reflect only good as you continue to grow." Merlin said.

It appeared that he was finished because he left Coop and slowly walked back to the counter as Coop just stood there gazing in the mirror almost as if he were in a daze.

Merlin turned to me. "So, my young friend, it is now time for you to choose."

He waved his hand over the items below him on the counter. I was so involved in the choosing process that I had completely forgotten to ask him about the manga cards and their affect on us.

There were several things from which to choose. I cautiously went through the pile looking carefully at each item. The first thing I saw was a manga graphic novel that had some cool characters on the cover. Under that was a computer game that I quickly put aside because it looked like one that we already had. Below that was a box with a flip open case, and when I opened it I saw the neatest action figures that I had ever seen. I was about to choose them but I felt compelled to keep looking. At first I didn't think there was going to be anything else under that because it seemed I had reached the end of the pile but when I lifted up the action figures box I noticed a DVD case on the table.

As soon as I touched the case I knew that I wanted to choose it for my selection. I'm not quite sure why I chose that one because it didn't look too rare, in fact it looked like one that I had seen in the rental store. It was a Peekasneeze DVD from the cartoon show that used to be on TV all the time. When I was younger I used to dress up like him for Halloween. He looked just like I remembered him from his funny brown pointy ears down to his little brown monkey tail. Standing next to him was another character from the show, a short black catlike character called Boo Boo Kitty. I couldn't remember what, if any, power he had. I haven't seen a Peekasneeze cartoon in a long time and I strangely felt the urge to watch one now.

"How much for this?" I asked.

"One dollar," Merlin replied.

Most of my money was in my backpack but I knew that I had a couple of bucks on me that were left over from the taxi ride. I handed Merlin a dollar and Toby put the DVD into a black bag and handed it to me.

"I am sure you will find this very entertaining," Toby said with a chuckle.

The back door behind Toby swung open. I could now see our hotel room on the other side.

"Come on, Coop," I urged. I had to pry Coop away from the mirror. I don't think he was aware of anything that had happened in the shop since he began looking in the mirror.

I took Coop by the hand and led him back to the door. He appeared a little dazed but he followed me without any struggle.

When we walked through the doorway and were back in our room the door behind us closed with a slam. That seemed to wake Coop out of his daze. He shook his head and looked around the room bewildered.

"How did we get back here?"

"Don't you remember Coop? We just came through the door."

"No, the last thing I remember is looking in that mirror and..."

Without finishing his sentence Coop turned and reopened the closet door, but instead of finding the magic shop, he only saw the closet with my backpack in it. I was glad to see that since most of our money was tucked inside.

Coop silently stood there a moment before he closed the door.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Coop nodded. "When we went in there I really wanted him to change me back. But now it doesn't feel so important somehow. It's more important how I feel on the inside and not the outside."

Then he saw the bag that I was holding. "So what did you get?"

"I'll show you tomorrow," I said as I tossed the bag on a nearby table. "I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

We had forgotten to pack any pajamas for the trip so we went to bed dressed like we were. I just took off the oversized hat and put that on the table across from my bed along with the DVD bag. At first I thought about wearing the Alpha Byte device to bed but it felt too bulky to sleep with it on, so I took it off and put it on the table along with the bag and my hat.

I could tell that Coop was also tired because he didn't argue with me. He took off his belt with all the weird devices attached to it and dropped it on the floor next to his bed. He removed Beta Bit from his wrist and dropped it next to his belt.

Coop fell asleep immediately. He started snoring about a minute after his head hit the pillow. He was always able to fall right to sleep, while for me it always took awhile before I fell asleep. My Dad told me that's because my mind was always thinking about a million different things. I turned off the light. But this time I also fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I guess if I had still been awake I would have noticed that the DVD in the bag on the table was beginning to glow.

CHAPTER SIX

THAT'S NOT FAIR

I'm not sure how long I slept but I woke up feeling very refreshed and animated. As I opened my eyes I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I was lying in a cartoon room. It was all done in manga style. I looked around for Coop but I was the only one in the room. Mine was the only bed. The room was so alive with colors that I almost forgot about Coop until I heard a knock on the door.

"Coop?" I squeaked out. My voice sounded funny and I coughed a couple of times trying to clear my throat. After a few more knocks the door flung open and standing in the doorway was a big female black cat wearing a pink apron. She came walking into my room on two legs and finally stopped next to my bed.

"What's the matter, Boo Boo?" she said. "It's almost time for school. Don't you want to get up? Is mommy's little one sick?"

"Boo Boo?" I thought to myself. What was going on around here? From the sounds of it this female cat creature thought she was my mother. I figured that I would go along with it until I could work out what was going on.

"I'm fine," I said in the same squeaky voice. "I just slept late."

Before I could say anything else an even larger black cat burst through the door and began screaming things at me. He had one of those large cartoon mouths that are usually very funny when you see them but this time it scared me so much I flew into the air higher than I imagined possible. I fell to the floor and the huge black cat was still screaming stuff. Occasionally I could make out the words "Boo Boo" and "Now!" I got to my feet and realized that I was so small that I barely came up to their waists.

"I've got your school clothes on the chair for you," the mother cat said. "Come on down for breakfast when you're done."

The two large cats left the room and as I walked over to the chair I passed a mirror on a nearby wall. I looked at it and staring back at me was a small black cat wearing a pajama top with the words Boo Boo on it. I had been turned into a cartoon cat!

"Crappers," I said.

I turned to the side and dangling from under the pajama top was a black cat tail. I looked down. Instead of two hands and ten fingers I saw two paws with four fingers each.

Lying on the chair was a bright blue T-shirt. I looked under it but I didn't see any pants. I guess characters in this cartoon only wore tops and no bottoms. I thought about it for a few moments and remembered that most of the cartoon animals were dressed like that. Until you've become one you never really think about it. I pulled off the pajama top and put on the T-shirt. Of course the words Boo Boo were on the T-shirt as well. I was thinking what a stupid name that was when I accidentally knocked a large book off a table and it fell onto my foot. I let out a howl and hopped around on one foot for a few seconds. As I hopped around I bumped into a floor lamp and that fell over and hit me on the head. I was beginning to see where the name Boo Boo came into play.

Carefully I made my way to the kitchen and sat down on one of the chairs. I forgot that I had a tail and I sat on it. I howled again and jumped out of the chair knocking the breakfast table over. It seemed that I couldn't do anything right in this world.

The largest cat who I figured out must be the father cat began to jabber away very loudly and very quickly. I wondered if anyone ever knew what he was saying.

"I'm sorry, mom," I squeaked in my tiny voice. I didn't think I could get used to hearing that tiny voice coming out of me.

She kissed me on the forehead. "That's okay, Boo Boo."

At that moment an extremely loud horn sounded. I jumped in the air again and landed on a nearby counter.

"What was that?" I managed to squeak out.

"That's just the school bus honey," the mother cat said. "You'd better scurry or you'll be late."

I jumped down from the counter and she handed me three school books. I opened the front door and saw a multi-color cartoon school bus parked in front of the house. The bus door swung open and an old billy goat sitting in the driver's seat bleated out, "Hurry up, we haven't got all day!"

He was a small sized goat. The gas and brake pedals of the bus were higher off the floor so his feet could reach them. The steering wheel stretched from the dashboard so he could steer. It was a funny sight and I giggled when



I saw him.

Getting on the bus I saw that it was filled with all different types of animals and creatures. They were all different sizes and colors. I walked past a pink ostrich in a cheerleader's outfit sitting next to a blue squirrel wearing a football jersey. I finally found an empty seat next to a small round yellow creature with large eyes and pointed ears. I tried talking to him but all he kept saying was "Puka Puka". I gave up trying to talk to him and watched the kids as they got on the bus. Most of them walked past me without saying anything which was okay with me. Only two of them said hi to me and I just said a quick hello back.

Then a cute girl came on to the bus. She wasn't an animal but she wasn't entirely human, either. She was pink skinned but she had large cartoonish eyes and a nose and mouth. The other odd thing is that she had very large pointy ears sticking out of her red hair. She wore a tight golden sweater that didn't leave much to the imagination. She walked past me but before she did she smiled and winked at me. She looked at the remaining seats in the back, shook her head, turned around and sat down next to a girl fox in the seat across from me.

I looked out the window thinking about her. I tried to think why she looked so familiar when I finally figured it out. Except for the ears and eyes she reminded me a lot of the girl that Coop had been talking to on the plane. I think he said her name was Taylor.

I was so lost in thought looking out the window and thinking about the girl that it took me a few seconds to notice that the little yellow creature next to me was jumping up and down on its seat yelling out "Puka Puka Puka" and pointing past me.

I turned and saw a large hippo turning around and preparing to sit down in my seat!

"Hey!" I squeaked out, but it was too late because before I could say anything else he sat down right on top of me! He was so big that I don't think he even noticed that he was sitting on me. I could hear the muffled sounds of the creature next to me saying that Puka Puka stuff but I doubt the hippo could understand it any better than I did. But I guess the hippo kid did understand because a minute later he got up. From what I was told later he had to peel me off the seat because I was completely flattened out. He shook me in the air a couple of times and I inflated back up. This was a very crazy world I was in and I didn't think I would get used to it.

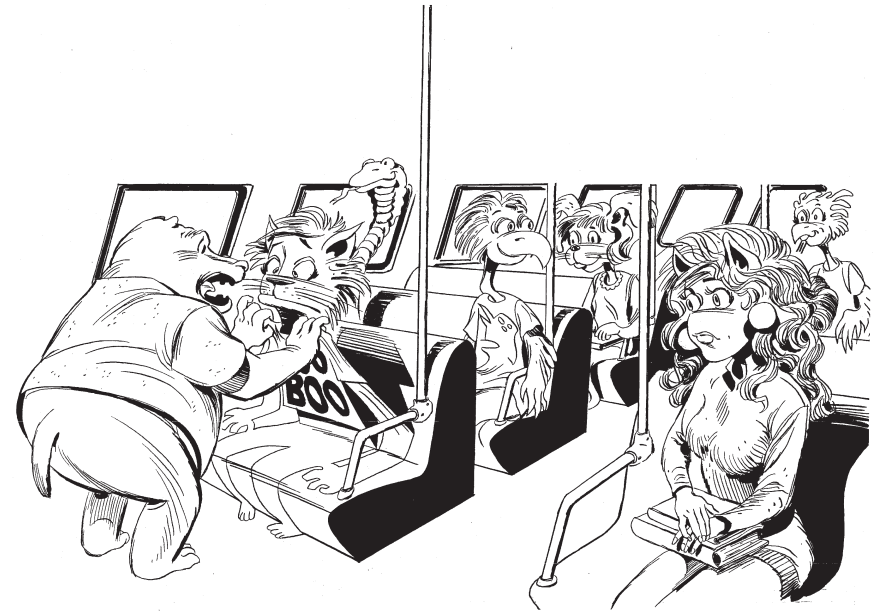
"Sorry, Boo Boo," the hippo kid said. "I didn't see you there."

He put me back down on my seat and walked to the back of the bus.

"Crappers," I mumbled. "Today is just not my day."

As soon as I said that a skinny brown monkey kid sitting nearby looked in my direction.

"Who said that?" he asked looking around. "Was it the little kitty cat?"



"Yeah I said it," I replied. "So what about it?"

I thought that he was gonna throw a punch at me with the way my luck was running but instead he came over, picked me up and gave me a hug.

"Is it really you, Sid?" he asked as he dropped me back on my seat. "You won't believe what's been happening kid. I'm Coop your bro, and you just got to know. I woke up this morn, feelin' sad and forlorn. I awoke in a tree, lookin' like a monkey. What has happened to us? Did it happen to everyone on the bus?"

I gave him a strange look. "Why are you talking so weird?"

"I'm not talking weird you see, this kind of speech feels normal to me," he replied. "I arose this morning speaking in rhyme. I just have to do it, do it all the time."

I laughed. "And I thought I had it bad."

Coop nodded. "It's a curse having to speak in verse."

"I woke up and I didn't see you," I explained. "I didn't know if I was ever gonna find you, and if I found you, if you would even recognize me in this body. It must have something to do with the DVD that I got from the magic shop last night. It was an old Peekasneeze and Boo Boo Kitty cartoon."

Coop nodded more vigorously now. "As I swung through the trees, everyone kept calling me Peekasneeze."

"So I wonder what we're supposed to be doing here?" I said. "There's got to be a reason for all of this."

"What do you mean about having a reason? Can't we just be here because it is pleasin'?"

"Ouch," I winced. "That was a bad one. You've got to work on those rhymes of yours."

"I can't help what I say. It just comes out this way."

"Whatever," I said. "What I mean is that every time that something has happened to us there seems to be some sort of reason. When we first got our powers we used them against the gargoyles and that Amorphous creature. Then we helped out Mr. Excalibur and found that strange thing in the briefcase. Then we finally wound up in Texas. All of this seems to be leading us somewhere. But I don't know why we're here."

At that moment the school bus stopped and the driver opened the door. All the kids piled out including the red haired girl. Coop and me were the last ones to get off the bus.

The school looked like a normal enough building; in fact it kind of reminded me of the one that Coop and me went to. The only difference was that our school had normal looking kids hanging around outside. This one had different animals of all assorted colors and sizes standing around on two feet and talking.

The two of us slowly walked towards the front door but before we got there a hand reached out and pulled Coop away from me. I didn't notice it until I was on the front steps and looked next to me where he should have been.

"Coop?" I frantically looked about but it was hard to spot him because so many of the surrounding kids were a lot bigger than me. I went from group to group looking for my brother. I called out his name but nobody was paying any attention to me. My small squeaky voice didn't seem to carry very far in this crowd. Finally I spotted a couple of kids about my size so I went over to them. They weren't really kids; one was a squirrel another was a gopher and the last three were chipmunks.

"Have any of you seen Coop?" I squeaked.

"Coop?" the squirrel kid said. "Who is Coop?"

"Is he new here?" the gopher kid asked.

"Hey, maybe Coop is a she," one of the chipmunks said.

"That would be cool," the second chipmunk added. "It's been so long since any new girls have come to school. Maybe I can get first shot at her."

The last chipmunk poked the second with his arm. "Like you would know what to do with a girl if you did."

The rest of the group all laughed at the joke but I was starting to get worried.

"Coop is not a she, he's a he," I said.

I guess they could tell that I was upset because they all stopped laughing.

"Sorry, Boo Boo," the gopher kid said. "We were just having a little fun."

At that moment the ground began to shake. I could hear loud thumps in the distance. The closer the thumps came the harder the ground shook.

I looked around. "What is that?" I fearfully asked. But there was nobody to answer me because the kids that I was just talking to all ran off leaving me there by myself. I saw many of the other kids also running off. For a second I thought I spotted Coop in the crowd but then a big elephant kid got in my way.

"Hey out of my way, fatso," I squeaked as loud as I could.

The elephant kid turned and looked down in my direction. In a way he reminded me of Jake, the bully from school. From the look on his face I could tell that he wasn't too pleased by what I had just said.

"Fatso?" he said. "Seems like someone is looking for a pachyderm punch."

"Don't you mean a knuckle sandwich?" I asked.

"This is gonna be much worse than that."

That didn't sound like a good thing to me so I tried to run away from him. But I wasn't fast enough and he grabbed my tail with his trunk and lifted me up in the air. I swung my paws as hard as I could but none of them even came close to hitting him.

"Not so tough now are you, squirt?" he said with a laugh. "I usually just take lunch money away from little twerps like you but now I'm gonna give you somethin' instead."

"Crappers," I said. Of all the kids here I would have to pick on the school bully.

I closed my eyes and braced myself for the inevitable punch. After a few seconds and nothing happened I slowly opened one eye and looked at my large adversary. He was busy staring up in the sky at something. I tried to see what he was looking at but the way he was holding me it was very difficult to see anything. The only thing I noticed is that it had gotten very dark all of a sudden. The sun had been shining just a few seconds ago and now it had become very gloomy.

I heard another loud thud and suddenly the elephant kid released his grip on me and I fell to the ground with a thump. When I finally got to my feet I caught a glimpse of him as he ran away from me. I wasn't sure what had scared him off because I knew it wasn't anything that I had said or done.

Taking a quick look around I noticed that most of the kids that had been outside the school were now gone. I was about to call out for Coop again when something bumped into me. It was one of the chipmunk kids that I had been talking to a few minutes ago. He looked very terrified and his teeth were chattering.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"M-M-M-Matter?" he said nervously. "Can't you see? M-M-M-Morgrifar has returned!"

"Morgrifar?" I said. "Who's that?"

He raised his chipmunk arm and pointed in the air.

"That!"

I looked upwards and saw the largest creature I have ever seen in my life. It was so enormous it blocked out the sun. Its huge body was covered with dull green scales and it had a long thick tail that it cracked like thunder. Its long neck moved around like a snake. I finally caught a glimpse of its horrible head. It had a long fierce face with a huge mouth and when its mouth opened a long red tongue slithered out. Suddenly it let out a roar and fire sprang out of both nostrils. I think that I was seeing my very first fire breathing dragon! That must have been what was making that thud sound and causing those vibrations. The closer it came here the heavier the thuds and vibrations got.

"Wh-wh-what can we do?" I stammered.

"We're too little to do anything," he said. "But Peekasneeze will help us."

I remembered that Coop had said that everyone had called him Peekasneeze earlier today, but I didn't know what he could do to stop this creature. Then I started to remember the cartoons that I used to watch and I recalled that Peekasneeze was the hero because he was able to do things nobody else could in the cartoon. But where was Coop now?

Before I could ask that question I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Sid, I've been looking all over for you. Please tell me what to do."

I turned around and there was Coop. I was so happy to see him that I forgot all about the chipmunk kid.

"Coop, where have you been?"

"A couple of guys pulled me away from you," he said. "They had someone they wanted to introduce me to. She's a girl that is new to the school, and though she looks odd she seems really cool. She had cute pointy ears and a hot smoking sweater. She was so cute and sweet that I just got to know her better. You can't miss her because of her long red hair, and she said that her name is KristiKare."

From the way he described her I knew that he was talking about the girl that I saw on the school bus who had winked at me, but I didn't have time to think about that.

I jumped in the air and pounded my fists at him. I could tell that he hardly felt the punches.

"Can you forget about girls for right now?" I shouted. But even when I shouted it still came out in the same small squeaky voice.

Coop laughed a silly monkey laugh. "When you do that your eyes and mouth get all funny and big. It makes me laugh, you squeak like a little pig."

"I'm not a pig, I'm a cat," I said in my own defense.

Coop nodded. "Yes I know that you are a cat. But big just doesn't rhyme with that."

"Oh, brother," I groaned. I wondered how we would ever defeat that dragon if Coop was more interested in his rhymes.

"Forget about that Coop. Do you see that dragon?" I pointed at the monster that was busy terrifying a small group of kids. "That's Morgrifar! He's the bad guy!"

I then jumped up in the air very agitated. "It's up to you to beat it. Everyone's expecting you to defeat it."

"Now you've got me rhyming," I said quickly and loudly. I was beginning to sound like the father cat I met this morning when I woke up. I was starting to notice that the longer I stayed in this form the more I was beginning to act like the character of Boo Boo Kitty. I didn't want to become this character permanently so I knew we were going to have to finish this adventure real soon.

"Peekasneeze, you've got to help us," the chipmunk kid pleaded. I had forgotten all about him.

Coop sighed. "I will help you if I can, but I'm not sure that I'm your man."

As Coop walked to Morgrifar he accidentally stepped on my foot.

"Mee-owch," I howled. "Watch where you're going, Peekasneeze!"

I don't know what surprised me more, me howling like a cat or me calling my brother Peekasneeze instead of Coop.

Coop, or Peekasneeze as I was now starting to think of him as, was the only one that was walking towards Morgrifar. Everyone else seemed to have enough sense to run away from it. He seemed so small near the dragon that I hoped that the dragon wouldn't notice him. Suddenly, Morgrifar turned and looked right in Peekasneeze's direction.

Morgrifar blew a stream of fire at him but Peekasneeze did an amazing series of somersaults and got out of path of the deadly flames. For the next couple of minutes Peekasneeze was able to avoid the dragon's flames by doing multiple flips and jumps and other gymnastics moves. I've seen him do gymnastics before but when he was in this body he seemed more agile and faster.

"Why doesn't Peekasneeze use his power?" the chipmunk kid asked me.

"What power?" I replied.

"His famous stone toss," the chipmunk kid said. He looked at me as if I had grown two heads or something. "How can you not know that? The two of you have had many adventures together. You've seen him use it many times."

Probably the real Boo Boo Kitty had, but it had been so long since I'd

seen a Peekasneeze cartoon that I didn't remember a lot of what happened in them. Then my attention was taken away from the chipmunk kid when I heard the dragon's mighty roar.

Looking back at them I saw that Morgrifar had Peekasneeze backed up against a small rock covered hill. There was no place for him to jump or dive out of the way. I wanted to yell out to him but I knew there was no way that he could hear me. I felt so helpless being stuck in this body not able to do anything to help him.

Then, just before it looked like Morgrifar was about to flame broil my brother a small pink figure jumped off the top of the small hill onto Morgrifar's back. Running closer to the scene I saw that it was KristiKare, the girl from the bus, and she had a long sword in her hand. She was also dressed from the neck down in knight's armor, but not the big bulky kind of armor that I saw in the King Arthur movie. This was skin tight armor that moved easily along with her body. I couldn't believe it. It was just like a girl to take time out from a dangerous situation and waste a few minutes to change for battle.

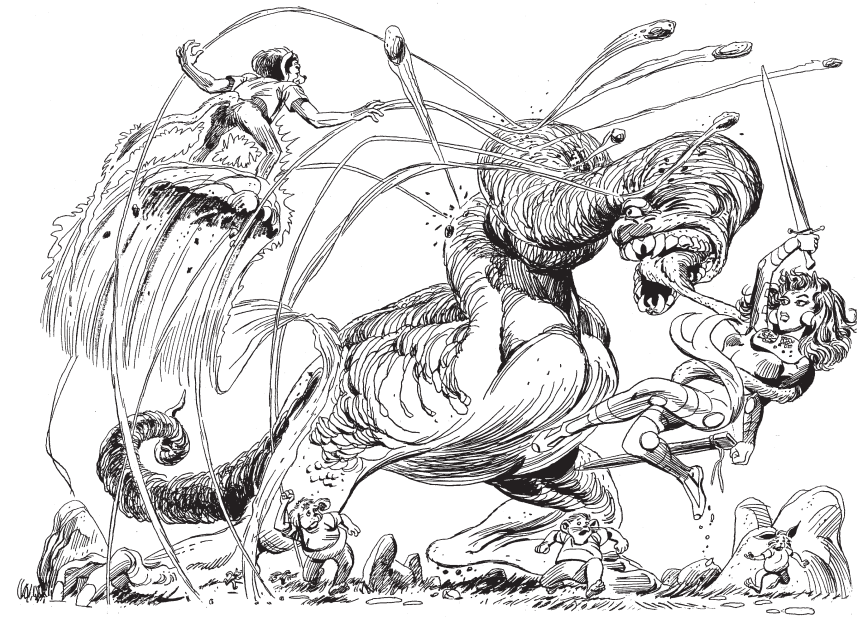
Distracted by this new adversary, Morgrifar took his attention away from Peekasneeze. As Peekasneeze tried to sneak away his foot stepped on one of the stones and it began to glow. He must have noticed it because he looked downward at the glowing rock. When he took his foot off the rock the glow slowly disappeared but when he stepped back on it the rock glowed again. He stared at the rock and it glowed brighter. Then it rose from the ground and floated in front of Peekasneeze. He smiled as if he finally understood what was going on and he pointed at Morgrifar. The rock flew from Peekasneeze and headed right for Morgrifar. The dragon barely noticed as the rock hit its body. His head flung back and forth as it tried to get a bead on KristiKare who was busy swinging her sword on the dragon's back.

Peekasneeze quickly went from stone to stone and as he did each one glowed and rose up into the air. Soon a small barrage of rocks were pelting Morgrifar's body.

Now in addition to avoiding Morgrifar's sharp teeth and deadly flames, KristiKare also had the problem of evading the various rocks that were flying in her direction. It seemed that once again Peekasneeze, I mean Coop, was going to have to work on his aim. It reminded me of the fireballs and the gargoyles all over again.

One of the small rocks that had been intended for Morgrifar grazed KristiKare on the side of the head and she was momentarily dazed. Seeing this Morgrifar opened his mouth and his tongue sprang out and wrapped itself around her.

Seeing KristiKare in danger Peekasneeze quickly looked around for something bigger to throw at Morgrifar. He spotted a large boulder sticking out of the ground. He jumped on top of it and it glowed softly. This one seemed to require more of his attention and he concentrated harder on it. The



boulder's glow slowly grew brighter and it gradually rose out of the ground. Peekasneeze had just enough time to jump off of it as it hovered several feet in the air. Sweat began to pour off of his face. He slowly pointed at Morgrifar.

Morgrifar's attention was on the struggling KristiKare who was trying her best to avoid being pulled in and eaten by the dragon. The dragon's mouth opened wider as it pulled her closer toward its sharp teeth.

Just as Morgrifar was about to pull KristiKare into his mouth the boulder went flying and hit him in the side of the head. The dragon howled and released its hold on KristiKare. She quickly ran away from the dragon's head and prepared for another swing at the dragon.

The effort of hurling such a large boulder took its toll on Peekasneeze. He collapsed to the ground, exhausted.

Seeing his chance, Morgrifar raised one of his large claws and started to smash it down on Peekasneeze. I tried running closer but I knew that I couldn't make it in time to do anything. But KristiKare must have seen what the dragon was intending to do because she ran over to Peekasneeze just as the dragon's claw was about to stomp him. She crouched down and stuck her sword into the ground. The dragon's claw stopped at the sword's end just a few feet from the ground. She held on valiantly to the sword as the dragon struggled to push the sword further into the ground.

I looked around for something that I could use against the dragon. In this small body I didn't have much hope of finding anything that I could use.

If Peekeasneeze with his power and KristiKare with her sword couldn't defeat it what hope did I have?

I was so busy looking at the ground for something to use against Morgrifar that I didn't see what was in front of me until I banged my head against it.

"Mee-owch," I howled again.

I rubbed my head with one paw as I looked up at what I had walked into. Sitting there was the abandoned school bus that we had ridden to school on just a short time earlier. I wondered if I could somehow use this in battle with Morgrifar. I probably was too small to drive it even if I knew how. I hoped that maybe there might be someone hiding inside that could drive it for me.

The bus door was open. There was definitely nobody inside but my heart began to race when I noticed the driver's seat. I had forgotten that the driver was short like me and all the controls were made for him. I jumped into the driver's seat and looked at the dashboard. It actually looked easier than the car my Dad drove. There was a button for start and another for stop. Then there were two pedals that I could reach. One was labeled "go" and the other "slow". Finally I saw a stick. If I pushed it forward the bus went ahead, and when I moved it back the bus backed up. It seemed too easy; I guess they drew the cartoon this way for some reason. Probably the less they had to draw the easier it was to animate.

I quickly got the bus going and steered it towards Morgrifar. I didn't know how much damage I could do by smashing the bus into him but I thought it would distract him enough so KristiKare and Peekasneeze could escape.

Morgrifar must have heard me coming because he looked over in my direction and blew a stream of flames right at me! The heat from the flames shattered most of the windows including the front windshield. I covered my eyes with my paws for a moment to protect them from the flying glass. I could feel the heat emanating from the bus, various parts of it were now on fire but I was still able to keep the bus on course towards Morgrifar.

Flames started to shoot out from under the hood as the heat got even more intense inside the bus. I was sweating very hard and I had to steer with one paw as I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my other paw.

I was within several yards of Morgrifar when he suddenly dropped his monstrous head to the ground and opened his giant mouth. It looked like he was intending to eat me, bus and all!

Just before the bus entered his gaping mouth I leapt out of the bus and rolled along the ground away from Morgrifar. After I stopped rolling I looked back and saw the dragon raise his head with the burning bus still inside his mouth. I guess the fire must have hit the gas tank because a few seconds later the bus exploded along with Morgrifar's head. Pieces of the bus and

Morgrifar's head flew all over the place. I was able to dodge some of them. You could hear me meowching for the next couple of minutes as I kept getting hit by small parts of the bus.

Finally after all the pieces had landed I carefully made my way past the burning bus remains and went to the claw that KristiKare and Peekasneeze were under. Now that the dragon was dead KristiKare was able to move it away from them and she was sitting on the ground next to an unconscious Peekasneeze.

She saw me coming and smiled.

"That was some pretty smart thinking," she said.

"It was nothing," I replied modestly.

"Saving our lives was not nothing," she said as she wiped her sword against the grass trying to clean it. She must have hit Morgrifar with it when I wasn't looking. It was cool the way she jumped into the fight to help out with her sword. She was a lot different from the girls in my school. I wish I had a girl like her going to my school.

She looked back and forth at me and Peekasneeze.

"You both performed magnificently. I'm glad I was able to share this adventure with you. I hope we can have lots more together."

"I would like that," I said. "But me and Peekasneeze have got to be going soon."

She nodded. "I understand."

KristiKare stood up and held her sword high in the air as she watched it glisten in the sunlight.

"I've got to be going too," she said. "Take care of your brother until he wakes up, Sid. I hope to run into you and Coop again real soon."

She smiled and winked at me and then she took off in a dash. It was then that I realized that she had called us by our real names. I didn't have time to ask her how she knew who we really were. I didn't remember saying our real names when we were with her. And Coop wouldn't have told her. There was definitely more to her than meets the eye, but before I could do anything else the world around me began to swirl and when it cleared we were back in our hotel room. I was in my bed and Coop was in his and a stranger was sitting in a chair across from us holding a gun!

CHAPTER SEVEN

A FINE MESS

I didn't react right away when I saw the stranger sitting in our room. At first I wasn't sure if what had just happened to us was only a dream and I couldn't be certain that this might not also be a dream. I was also worried about Coop and how he was doing. I saw that he was sound asleep. He still didn't look like the old Coop but at least he didn't look like a brown monkey, either.

I looked back and the stranger was just sitting quietly in the chair, patiently waiting for something. I couldn't tell if he was waiting for me to say something first or not. He was dressed all in black from head to toe and he was a little creepy looking. His long black coat went all the way down to his black shoes and he was wearing a black hat that was similar to the ones that I've seen in Dad's old movies. He also had a black scarf wrapped around his mouth that hid half of his face. He had the meanest looking eyes that I've ever seen and the way he looked at us I knew that he wouldn't think twice about using the gun that he was clutching in his right hand.

Finally the stranger broke the silence.

"I'm not going to ask how you pulled that re-appearing trick kid," he said in a low muffled voice.

"What... what trick?" I nervously asked. I had never had anyone point a gun at me and I didn't like it.

"You know what I'm talking about," the stranger replied. "I've been sitting here alone for the past half hour waiting for you two to come back to your room and just a minute ago you both pop up in your beds out of nowhere. I've had my eye on that door the whole time and it never opened."

"Maybe we know another way to get back in here," I shot back



defensively. "But I don't have to explain anything to you. This is our room! What are you doing in here?"

"I'm here to take you someplace. There is someone who is very interested in meeting you."

"What if we don't want to go?"

He pointed the gun in my direction.

"I brought my little friend along to help persuade you," he said with a low maniacal chuckle.

I reached over to my wrist. I was planning to activate my power using Alpha Byte but I didn't feel the device. Looking over at the table I saw it lying next to the bag with the DVD that I got at the magic store. I forgot that I had taken it off before I went to bed. I saw Beta Bit lying on the floor next to Coop's bed. He wouldn't be able to activate his power either, and without them we were just two helpless kids. I tried to think of what to do next but the stranger spoke again.

"I haven't got all day so hurry up and wake the other brat!"

The stranger kept a careful watch on me as I got out of bed to wake up Coop. I wanted to make a grab for Alpha Byte but the stranger was between it and me.

I had to shake Coop several times before he finally started to wake up. Sometimes he's a very heavy sleeper and can sleep through pretty much anything.

"Come on, Coop," I said. "Time to wake up."

Even though he hadn't opened his eyes yet I could tell that he was awake.

"Hey Sid, I had such a crazy dream," Coop said. "I fought a dragon and a girl was on my team. She was very cute, dressed in her armor suit."

It sounded like Coop had had the same dream that I had. And he was still talking in rhyme like he did in the dream. Maybe it all wasn't a dream after all. Somehow it must have really happened to us.

"Listen Coop, there's no time for that now. We've got company."

"Huh?" he said as he yawned.

Coop opened his eyes. He quickly sat up in bed the moment he saw the man holding the gun.

"Who's that?" Coop asked.

"He didn't say his name," I replied. "He wants to take us somewhere to meet someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know! If you want to know so much, why don't you ask him?"

I sat down at the end of Coop's bed feeling a little frustrated. I'm not normally a morning person and after being startled awake the past couple of days I was really beginning to hate mornings.

"Who are you?" Coop asked. "What do you want with us?"

"Look kid," the man said. "I don't have anything against you two personally; I just don't like little brats. I'm just being paid to take you to see Doc. If it will make you two move any quicker you can call me Gunner."

Gunner stood up and pointed his gun in my direction.

"Now empty one of those pillow cases and throw all of your things into it," he demanded.

Reluctantly I did what I was told. When I picked up Alpha Byte I was tempted to put it on but I was afraid that Gunner would shoot me before I could activate my power.

After I was done putting both of our devices, the DVD and Coop's belt into the pillow case I grabbed my hat and put it on.

"Is that everything?" Gunner asked.

I didn't want him to find out about the backpack in the closet so I just nodded my head.

"Well then, why don't we just take a quick look around and make sure you haven't forgotten anything," he said motioning his gun at me.

I grudgingly opened the empty bureau drawers. He seemed satisfied that we weren't hiding anything in them.

"Don't forget the closet, kid," Gunner said.

"Uh, there's nothing in there," I lied.

His hand moved so fast that I didn't see it but I sure felt it when he slapped me hard in the face. My jaw stung from the powerful slap.

I was pissed. I never had anyone hit me so hard before and I really wanted to do something to him to get back at him.

"I only ask once kid," Gunner sneered. "Let that be your only reminder."

I closed my eyes and swung open the door. I wasn't sure if he was going to see the magic shop or just my backpack but I was afraid to look.

"Okay, so you were telling the truth," Gunner said. "Let's go."

I opened my eyes and looked in the closet. Not only was there no magic shop in there but my backpack was also missing. I didn't have time to wonder where the backpack had disappeared to because Coop handed me the packed pillow case.

"But Coop, ... it... where...," I stuttered.

"Forget about it, Sid," Coop said as he opened the hotel room door. "We'll worry about it later. Right now we've got more important things to worry about."

"Hold it, kid," Gunner said as Coop was about to step into the hallway. We both turned in his direction and he pulled a small device out of his pocket with his free hand. At first it looked like an ordinary cell phone but it had a strange glow when he flipped it open. He pressed a few buttons and then held it above his head as he pressed one final button. After that there was a bright flash in the room and when my eyes cleared again everything looked the same with one exception. Gunner looked totally different than he had a few seconds ago. Now he was dressed in normal street clothes and he resembled an actor that I had seen at the movies.

"Don't let the disguise fool you, kid," Gunner said. "This is just an illusion. I've still got my gun even though you can't see it. This is just to make it easier to move around outside without drawing suspicion."

Then he looked at me and Coop and shook his head. He began pushing some more buttons on his device.

"I can't take the chance that someone will spot either of you so just hold on a second," Gunner said as he raised the device above his head again and pressed a button. "This won't hurt."

There was another flash and at first I didn't think anything happened until I heard Coop laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked. But as I turned toward Coop I laughed too. Instead of Coop there was another kid standing there. He looked familiar and it took a few seconds before I recognized him. He was one of those twin brothers that have their own television show on the Cable Channel.

"You should see yourself," the kid said in Coop's voice. "You look like one of the brothers from 'The Secret Life of Twins.'"

When I heard him speak I realized it was Coop. He sounded the same. He just looked different.

"So do you," I said.

"It's just a preprogrammed hologram," Gunner said. "You haven't physically changed; this device merely changes people's perceptions of how you appear. This is how I am able to get in and out of places without anyone being the wiser. There aren't any other kid's images stored on here. Doc only put these two on so I can get you there unnoticed. Just keep quiet and remember that I'll have my gun pointed at you the whole time."

This was the second time that he mentioned someone called 'Doc'. I knew that neither Coop nor me knew anyone called Doc so I had no idea why he would be so interested in meeting us.

Instead of getting a cab outside the hotel Gunner had us walk down the street. It was still early morning and the streets were pretty deserted with just an occasional car passing by. I always thought that our hometown was pretty big but it paled in comparison to San Antonio. When we were done with this adventure I was planning on asking Dad if he could take us here sometime on vacation. It looked pretty amazing.

A dozen blocks later we came upon an old stone building. It looked out of place among all the other newer structures and I didn't know what it was doing there. We came upon a sign. It said that this was the Alamo.

Coop also noticed the sign. "So, what's the Alamo?" he asked.

"There was a very famous battle here a couple of hundred years ago," I told him. "Of course back then this fort was a lot bigger and there was nothing else around for miles. There weren't any of these stores or hotels around it then."

"How do you know all of that?" Coop asked.

"It was in that movie that Dad showed us last month," I answered. "There was a lot of fighting and lots of people getting killed. Don't you remember?"

"I must have slept through it," Coop said.

"Are there any of Dad's movies that you stay awake through, Coop?" I asked in frustration.

Coop thought for a moment and then shook his head. I couldn't wait to tell Dad about that. There was more information about the Alamo on the sign but instead of reading it Coop was more interested in looking at a pretty girl he saw walking down the street.

As usual Coop wasn't too impressed by where we were. The only time he was excited about going anywhere was when Dad took us to the basketball museum in Massachusetts. That was the only time that I was ever bored going to a museum. I couldn't believe that they devoted a whole museum to something stupid like basketball, but Coop was in his glory that entire day. I'd rather go to a regular museum where you can see tons of great stuff like dinosaur skeletons, cool rocks and other neat things like that.

"Come on, punks," Gunner said. "Let's go inside."

"But the sign says that they are not open yet," I said.

"The building isn't open to the public yet, but the gardens next to it are," Gunner said. "And that's where we're heading."

When we went into the gardens I saw that we weren't the only ones in there. A mother and her two young daughters were over by a bench. One of the girls looked in our direction and she screamed and pointed at us. Her sister looked at us and they both came running over and asked for

our autographs. I guess they thought we were the kids from that Cable show because they were telling us what big fans they were and how they never missed an episode.

Gunner seemed surprised at all the attention we were getting but he quickly took control of things. He lied to the girls and told them that we were going to be shooting an episode here today and that we were here early to rehearse a scene. He told them that if they waited quietly outside the gardens that they could have lunch with us later.

The girls ran back to tell their mother the news. I guess she believed them because a few minutes later we were alone in the gardens.

"I'm going to kill Doc when I see him," Gunner said. "He wants me to bring you here unnoticed and then he programs two recognizable images for you. Me and him are going to have a long talk."

I actually thought it was pretty neat having someone wanting my autograph but I didn't say anything because I could tell by his voice that Gunner was really mad at the moment.

We followed him as he went over to a small fountain that was on the side of a vine covered wall. Gunner pulled out his small cell phone device and flipped it open. He pressed a button and I heard a high pitch whistle. Coop and me had to cover our ears but the noise didn't seem to bother Gunner because he just stood there, waiting.

Finally the whistle stopped and so did the water that had been flowing out of the fountain. A few seconds later the fountain wall swung outward revealing a dimly lit passage down into... well, I wasn't sure.

Gunner motioned for us to go down the steps. After the three of us began our descent I heard the wall close behind us. Even though the walls and steps looked like they had been there for a couple of hundred years they were illuminated with modern lights. That was a good thing because I didn't want to try and go down this winding passage in the dark.

At the bottom of the stairs it split off into two separate tunnels going in opposite directions.

"Head to the left," Gunner said as if he were reading my mind.

Several minutes later we came to this door that opened into a huge underground room which held tons of strange electronic equipment including an area filled with computers. Along one wall were racks of test tubes and shelves of beakers filled with chemicals of various colors. There was only one person in the room, a man wearing a long white coat and glasses who was busy reading gauges and marking down the readings on a clipboard. He was so engrossed in his work that he didn't know that we were there until Gunner fired his gun in the man's direction. The bullet whizzed past him and missed him by a few inches at the most. The startled man dropped his clipboard and his glasses slid down his nose.

"Over here, Doc," Gunner said.

So this was the famous "Doc".

"Who? What?" Doc said as he fumbled around adjusting his glasses. Then he turned in our direction and finally noticed us.

"Oh, Gunner, it's you," Doc continued. "You can remove the disguise I know who you are. After all I'm the one who programmed the Reimager for you in the first place."

Doc examined the hole in the wall that Gunner's bullet had just created.

"You need to be a little more restrained with your entrances," Doc said. "You came very close to hitting me that time."

Gunner took the Reimager out of his pocket and punched a few buttons.

"A guy's got to have a little fun around here, Doc," Gunner said. "It's been a very frustrating day. I'm not used to being a babysitter."

Gunner held the Reimager above his head and pressed another button and just like before there was a bright flash and a second later he looked different. This time he looked totally different from the first time I saw him. His hat and scarf were gone and instead of a long black coat he was wearing a black leather jacket. He still had a mean looking face that looked like it hadn't been shaved in awhile. He had jet black hair that was even longer than mine. The one thing that didn't change was that he was still holding a gun.

"Besides Doc, you know that if I had intended to shoot you, I wouldn't have missed," Gunner said with a smile.

"Never mind all of that," Doc said. "Are these the two individuals that I sent you after?"

"They were the only ones in the room that you sent me to," Gunner said. "So I guess they must be."

"Well then remove their disguises so I can speak to them," Doc said.

Gunner started to press a few more buttons on the Reimager.

"By the way, these disguises you programmed into this thing were a bust," Gunner said. "We were supposed to get here unnoticed and you go ahead and make them look like two kids from a popular TV show!"

"I was pressed for time and had to use the first images I could utilize," Doc said.

"Wait a minute," I said to Gunner. "Why do you look so different from when we first saw you in our room? What do you really look like?"

Gunner laughed. "That was just another image that I created using this handy little device. I sometimes use that one to intimidate and scare my victims. This is what I really look like."

I wanted to tell him that the way he looked now was scary enough but I didn't want to make him any madder than he already was.

Gunner held the Reimager above his head and another bright flash appeared. A second later I saw Coop looking like himself. Not like his real self but the new body that he's been in the past day or so.

"Fine," Doc said. Then he looked directly at us and held out his hand. "Now give me back what was stolen from me."

Coop and me looked at each other totally confused. Neither of us knew what he was talking about.

"We didn't take anything from you," I said.

"Very well, if that is the way you wish to behave." Doc turned from us and looked at Gunner. "Did you bring their things with you?"

"Yeah," Gunner replied. "It's in the bag that the little twerp is holding."

Doc looked at me. "Empty it out," he ordered.

I opened up the pillow case and poured all the contents onto the floor. Doc looked at everything and seemed to be very upset.

"Where's the rest of it?" Doc asked.

"That's all they had," Gunner replied. "I went through the entire room and they had nothing else with them. Are you sure they had it?"

"Of course they had it, my instruments don't lie," Doc said. "I've been tracking it since they left Connecticut."

Doc went to a computer monitor and pointed at it. "You see? My machine registers as this little blip on my monitor and I've been constantly tracking it."

"I don't see any blip," I said.

"What?" Doc said.

"He's right, Doc," Gunner said. "There's no blip."

Doc looked closely at the monitor and then typed a few commands into the computer. The image on the monitor did not change.

"This is impossible," Doc declared. "It just couldn't have disappeared from the face of the Earth."

"Maybe your machine is malfunctioning," Gunner said.

"My machines do not malfunction," Doc said angrily. "I've been tracking the Digi-Max and now it is no longer registering on my equipment."

"What's a Digi-Max?" I asked.

"It's a compact device I created that is capable of doing several remarkable things, including capturing images from digital media and creating physical manifestations. At least it would if I could get it to work. It looks like a small portable DVD player. It was stolen from me by my ex-partner, Stanley Excalibur."

As soon as Doc said that I knew what he was talking about. That must be the thing we found in Mr. Excalibur's briefcase that was in my backpack.

"I don't care what the thing does, all I want is my money and I'm out of here," Gunner growled.

"I am not paying you yet," Doc responded.

"I brought you the brats like you said and now I want my money!" Gunner cried.

Doc was angry but calm. "I am paying you to retrieve my Digi-Max,

and you won't get your money until it is in my possession."

Gunner was furious. He grabbed Coop and wrapped his arm around his neck. Coop tried pulling free with both hands but he couldn't loosen Gunner's grip. Gunner pressed his gun up against Coop's face and snarled.

"Look kid, I don't have time for your stupid games, tell me where his device is!"

"I'm telling you I don't know," Coop said as he continued struggling.

"Release the boy," Doc ordered. "I will not allow any bloodshed in my laboratory. There are other ways to get the information that I require."

Gunner did not budge; instead he tightened his grip on my brother's neck. I heard Coop gasping to breathe. I didn't know what to do. Even if I had time to grab Alpha Byte and activate my power it still wouldn't do any good. Turning into smoke wouldn't help in this situation.

"Maybe if I blow your head off it will make it easier for your brother to remember what you kids did with it," Gunner threatened. "Besides, I only need one of you alive to tell me what I want to know!"

"We don't know where it is!" I screamed. "Please let him go!"

"You got until the count of three to tell me kid," Gunner said.

"One..."

I was really wishing that Dad would walk in and help save the day but I knew that he wasn't going to show up. And I knew that KristiKare wasn't going to pop out of nowhere either like she did when Coop was battling Morgrifar.

"Two..."

At that moment I saw Doc standing behind Gunner and Coop and he was holding a large monitor above his head. It looked as though he had just ripped it away from one of his computers. If I didn't know better I could swear that he was about to bring it crashing down on Gunner.

"Thr..."

Ka-rash!

Before Gunner could finish the count of three, Doc smashed the computer monitor onto Gunner's head. Gunner released his grip on Coop and fell unconscious to the floor. Coop dropped to his knees gasping for breath. I ran to his side to see how he was doing.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Coop slowly nodded his head and tried standing up. He was a little shaky but he made it up all right.

"I think he was really going to shoot me," Coop said.

"I have no doubt that he would have," Doc replied. "Gunner can be quite barbaric at times. His ways are a trifle reprehensible but he does have a remarkable success record, so I find it necessary to utilize his services from time to time. That is why I created the Reimager for him to use. But I could not allow him to do harm to you and your sibling. Therefore it became



necessary to render him unconscious. I'm afraid that he's not going to be in a very pleasant mood when he wakes up."

"That's for sure," I said. "But I don't care. He deserved it."

"Yes, he did," Doc said. "And yet I find that I'm still no closer to finding my Digi-Max than I was before it was stolen."

Doc bent down and picked up Alpha Byte and Beta Bit off the floor. He examined them very closely.

"Very sophisticated toys they are making now-a-days," he mused. "Not like when I was a lad. What do they do?"

I looked at Coop. "Do you think we can trust him?"

Coop nodded. "He saved my life."

"Okay," I said to Doc. "Give them to us and we'll show you."

"I don't see any harm in that," he said, handing them over to us.

It felt good putting Alpha Byte back on my wrist. I saw the faint blue glow letting me know that it was working.

"Activation mode initiated," Alpha said.

"Hi, Alpha," I said. "Sorry it's been awhile since we talked to you."

"Time is meaningless," Alpha said.

Meanwhile, Coop put Beta Bit on his wrist. It glowed a pale green.

"How ya doin', sweetie?" Beta said in her cute voice.

Doc pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. I noticed that Doc's glasses had a tendency to slide down his nose a lot. "Remarkable," he said.

"Registering two other life forms within the proximity, scanning for threat level," Alpha said.

"He must mean Doc and Gunner," Coop said.

"Well, duh," I replied. "There's nobody else here."

"Threat level low," Alpha said. "Unconscious life form on the floor a meter away is designated Percy 'Gunner' Richardson and he shall remain in this state for another ten-point-five minutes."

"Percy?" Coop laughed. "I can see why he wants everyone to call him Gunner. Who would be afraid of someone called Percy?"

"You would if he had a gun to your head," I said. "And he did! So it doesn't matter what he is called when he's a crazy lunatic."

"Second life form is Doctor Benjamin Franklin," Alpha said. "Renowned physicist and inventor and the only person to win four Nobel Prizes."

"Come on!" Coop said. "He can't be Ben Franklin! He would be over two hundred years old! Even I know that!"

"No, I am not that Ben Franklin," Doc said. "My parents just thought it would be a wonderful idea to name me after him. They believed that I would benefit from having the same name as a famous individual, but instead all I got was teased the entire time I was growing up. That's why I prefer to be called Doc."

"I don't blame you," Coop said. "It's rough having a name that's different."

"But how does that device know all of this?" Doc asked. "And more importantly where did you get it?"

"We don't know how they work," I said. "But I think that Alpha got most of that information from your computers over there. He's able to link to

all kinds of computers and things from a distance.”

“Yeah,” Coop added. “And we got them when we powered down.”

“Powered down?” Doc was perplexed. “Whatever does that mean?”

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” Coop said. “It will be a lot easier if I just showed you.”

Coop lifted his arm and addressed Beta.

“Can we power up now?” he asked.

“Not totally, hon,” Beta said, her voice as sweet as sugar. “Alpha and I need to be in physical contact with you both in order for you to recharge your powers. Our link to you was temporarily disrupted when you removed us.”

“Crappers,” I said. I had been hoping to change into smoke form and show Doc what I could do.

Suddenly we all heard something begin to beep. I couldn’t tell where it was coming from at first, but pretty soon I noticed that it was coming from the pile of Coop’s stuff that was on the floor. I picked up his goggles and belt and as soon as I did I could tell that it was Coop’s cell phone device that was beeping.

I handed everything over to Coop.

“Stand by for a partial recharge,” Beta said sweetly.

There was a bright flash and a few seconds later after my eyes adjusted I saw that Coop had changed. Instead of the casual clothes that he had been wearing he was now dressed in a sleek black superhero suit. His goggles were back on his head but even they had changed a little and were more stylized. He had on these way cool high tech looking sneakers and he had some sort of weapon in his left hand.

Doc slowly walked around Coop and examined him.

“Remarkable,” Doc exclaimed. “I thought that I was the first one to create a Reimager, but your device does the same thing.”

“Incorrect,” Alpha said. “The device that you call a Reimager is merely an optical particle phase unit that alters perception. It does not alter or change the physical being.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Doc explained. “You can’t change or alter matter without an extremely large energy conversion that would require gigawatts of power. Albert Einstein proved that and it is impossible to do.”

“Incorrect,” Alpha said again. “Energy, matter manipulation is possible.”

“No, that’s not possible,” Doc said emphatically.

“It’s true, Doc,” Coop said as he held up his gun. “This isn’t just an illusion of a gun, it’s the real thing.”

“You did not have any weapons with you when Gunner brought you here,” Doc recalled. “He would have made sure that you were stripped of any weaponry.”

“Exactly,” Coop said. “And now I’ve got one. Here, watch this!”

“No, Coop, don’t!” I shouted but it was too late.

Coop pointed the gun and aimed it across the room and fired. Instead of a bullet, a bright burst of light shot out of the gun and hit one of the monitors. It exploded into a million pieces.

Doc shook his head. “I’m afraid that I am going through monitors at an alarming rate of speed today.”

Alpha started to violently flash, interrupting Doc.

“Warning! Warning!” Alpha cried. “Threat level increasing! Threat level increasing!”

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Extremely powerful and malevolent life form is approaching,” Alpha continued. “Current location is sixteen point six meters distant.”

“Sid, you’re the smart one,” Coop said. “How far is that?”

“How should I know?” I said, my voice shaking. “You’re in the same class as me. You know that we haven’t covered the metric system yet.”

“It’s approximately fifty feet,” Doc informed us as he ran over to one of his few remaining monitors. “Your parents should have a stern talk with your school system.”

Doc typed in a few commands and an image appeared on the screen.

“Heavens!” Doc said. “What is that thing?”

I ran over to the monitor and looked at the image. A disturbingly familiar figure filled the screen.

“Crappers!” I shouted. “It’s Amorphous!”

We were screwed. In a few seconds we would be going into battle against this powerful creature and I was without my power!

CHAPTER EIGHT

TWIDDLE TWADDLE TROUBLE

Doc looked at me and it was clear by the expression on his face that for once he was totally in the dark about something. "I beg your pardon but what did you just say?"

"Amorphous!" I declared.

Coop's head turned when he heard me say that dreadful name.

"Amorphous?" Coop said. "He's back? How did he find us here?"

I shook my head. "I don't know Coop, but he did somehow because he's coming right to us!"

"Who is this Amorphous person that you are referring to?" Doc asked.

"It's not a person," I said. "It's some kind of creature that came after us before."

"But I defeated it, with my fireballs," Coop said with pride.

"No you didn't," I said. "He slipped on the floor and got knocked out."

"Well, I would have defeated him if he hadn't done that."

I ran over and closed the door into the laboratory.

"Is there anything we can use to block the door?" I asked.

Doc looked at the monitor. "There isn't time. That creature is almost here!"

I ran away from the door just as it exploded inward in a hundred pieces. The force of the explosion knocked me to the floor. I saw Amorphous standing in the doorway. His large frame almost filled it. He looked bigger than he did the last time we saw him.

"Where are they?" Amorphous growled.

"Where's who?" Doc asked.

I shook my head. "Don't ask him that. The last time we asked him he blew up our refrigerator."

"Do not toy with me!" Amorphous said as he raised his two top hands in the air. "I am Amorphous!" As he said his name energy crackled from his finger tips. "I am power incarnate!"

"Boy, that sure sounds familiar," I said. "That's what he said the first time I saw him."

I looked around the floor where the explosion had thrown me and I noticed that I was a few inches away from the unconscious Gunner. It seemed like he wasn't going to be unconscious much longer because I heard him moaning.

"Hmmm," Doc said. "It's possible that his higher brain functions are in a direct polar opposite to his strength and he can only respond to certain stimulus in a preconditioned manner."

"What's that mean?" Coop asked.

"It means he's stupid," I answered.

Amorphous growled when he heard that and shot a blast of electricity at me from his fingers. I ducked and the blast just grazed the top of my head causing it to sting a little. I heard a small explosion behind me. Another one of Doc's monitors was no more.

"Please stop your fighting," Doc implored. "There is a lot of valuable and irreplaceable equipment here. And I'm not insured for loss from monsters."

I chuckled when I heard him say that, but Coop didn't have time to laugh. As soon as Amorphous fired his blast in my direction, Coop aimed his gun and fired at him. It was a very valiant try and he came very close to hitting him but Coop's aim with a gun seemed to be as good as it was with fireballs and rocks. He ended up hitting a wall.

"Nice try, Coop," I said. "Next time you want to try hitting him?"

"Hey, I'm not used to firing a gun you know." Coop was defensive. "You'd better not tell Dad that I fired one, either."

Amorphous growled again.

"Fine, if we make it out of here alive I promise I won't tell," I said. "Brother's oath."

"Where are they?" Amorphous asked again. "I can smell traces of them here."

"Traces of who?" Coop asked in return.

"Traces of my captors!" Amorphous growled.

"Good, he's saying something different now," I said. "Keep him talking, Coop. If he's talking, he's not shooting at us."

Amorphous kept walking around the room as if searching for someone. He finally stopped in front of the wall that had beakers filled with chemicals.

"I will not be imprisoned again!" Amorphous roared.

I was so busy keeping my eye on Amorphous that I didn't notice

Gunner had regained consciousness and had gotten to his feet.

"What the hell is that thing?" Gunner asked in disbelief.

"It's a powerful creature," I said as I slowly made my way over to Coop. "Don't get him angry."

"Like I need to take orders from some punk brat!" Gunner aimed his gun at Amorphous.

"Gunner! Stop!" Doc ordered.

But either Gunner didn't hear him or he didn't care what Doc said because a second later he fired his gun point blank at Amorphous. Although the bullet failed to penetrate his body, Amorphous growled and raised his hands to shoot an electrical blast at Gunner.

As much as I didn't like Gunner I still didn't want to see him get fried.

"Do something, Coop!" I said.

"I'm on it," Coop said as he aimed his gun and fired. I guess if he had taken a few more seconds to aim that it would have been too late to save Gunner's life, but if he had taken those few extra seconds to aim it's possible that he might have hit Amorphous instead of the beakers that Amorphous was standing in front of.

I don't know what was in those beakers but they sure didn't react very well to the ray that hit them. The last thing that I remember is a tremendous explosion.

I'm not sure how long I was unconscious for but it must have been quite awhile because all I heard when I woke up were some birds singing.

My head was pounding as I slowly opened my eyes. The first thing I noticed when I opened them was the intense light. I knew right away that I wasn't in Doc's underground laboratory because the suns were shining in the sky.

Wait a minute; I was seeing two suns in the sky? That was so freaky. I was tempted to stare at them longer but I wanted to see more of where I was. I seemed to be lying down in a large comfortable pile of very colorful leaves. I picked up a couple and rubbed them in my hands. I was surprised how different they felt from leaves back home. They were extremely soft, and felt almost rubbery in texture.

I sat up and saw a small river to my right and on my left there was a small group of trees. Large patches of brightly colored flowers were scattered all around. I was feeling a little thirsty and so I stood up and was about to walk to the stream for a drink. When I got up I heard something behind me. I quickly turned around. I was afraid that it might be Amorphous. But the terrible creature wasn't there; instead, there were a couple of other figures sleeping on beds of leaves with their backs to me.

I quietly made my way to the river and kneeled down beside it. I leaned over to get a sip and I suddenly saw my reflection in the water. I didn't look at all like myself. My hair was long like normal but it was very light in color,

but that wasn't what surprised me. Sticking out from my hair were two very long and pointy ears! Then I remembered that one of the manga cards that I picked had two elves on it. I had been transformed into one.

I took a drink of water and my head immediately stopped pounding. I have to admit that it was the most refreshing water that I had ever tasted. I was about to take another sip when I thought I heard someone call my name. I stood up and looked around but all I saw were the two other bodies asleep on the leaves.

Looking down I saw that I was not wearing Alpha Byte, but I wasn't too surprised about that. What did surprise me was that I was wearing a short leather tunic with a large belt and brightly colored tights. I was glad that none of the kids from school was here.

I didn't have much time to think about that because this time I definitely heard someone say my name. I knew I wasn't imagining it so I walked back to the two figures that were sleeping nearby. When I got closer I saw that they were dressed in a similar fashion to me. One of them was wearing an open leather jacket with a large pendant around his neck that had a bright red gem in the center. He was the one that was already awake and looking around in a dazed and confused manner.

"Sid?" he said, a little bewildered.

I knelt down beside him. "Coop, is that you?" I asked.

He slowly nodded his head and then he winced in pain.

"Oww! Yeah, it's me. Is that really you Sid? You look so different. And my head hurts."

"Well, you look different too," I said. "Your ears are way bigger than mine. Don't worry, my head hurt when I woke up but I feel better now. Follow me, maybe the water can help you feel better, too."

At first I didn't think that Coop was going to follow me but he slowly got up and walked with me to the river. After two sips of water I saw him smile and I knew that he had fully recovered.

"That's very tasty water," Coop said. "Kinda sweet, like honey."

"It sure doesn't taste like the water back home," I said. "And from the looks of things we are a far way from home. Have you noticed that?"

I pointed at the two suns blazing in the sky. Coop looked up and his mouth opened wide in amazement.

"Dang," he said. "Where on Earth are we?"

"Definitely not on Earth," I said.

"I didn't know that places could have two suns."

"I saw a show on TV which said that solar systems with double suns are more common than the single sun one like we got," I said, showing off a little.

"So... we're in another solar system?" Coop asked.

"Maybe," I replied. "Or some other dimension. It's got to have something to do with the manga cards because I had one that had two elves

on it. And that's what you look like right now."

I laughed and Coop shoved me. "Yeah, well so do you. So what are we doing here? And who is that sleeping over there?"

I shrugged. "You got me. I only woke up a few minutes before you. Maybe we should go wake him up and ask him."

We walked back to the sleeping figure but when we got there he was no longer asleep. Now that I could see him better I saw that he was also an elf, but a much older one. He was lying on his back staring at the sky and humming an interesting tune. I wanted to interrupt him and ask him who he was but I was so captivated by the melody that I had to listen to it all.

Finally he stopped humming and smiled.

"Pleasant greetings of the day, young Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo," he said to us. "I trust you both had an enjoyable sleep."

I guess that Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo were our names in these elf bodies. From the sounds of it the real Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo were brothers, too. I guess I would have to figure out which one was me later.

"Uh, yeah, I slept good," I answered. "What was that song you were humming?"

He laughed. "I was just saying thank you and pleasant greetings to the Providers. There is nothing unusual in that. You have both heard me do it every morning. And when you both come of age you will both add your voices to the song."

"The Providers?" Coop said as he looked around. "Where are they? I only see us here."

The older elf laughed a hearty laugh.

"You never fail to amuse me, Fli-Lo," he said as he gestured towards the two suns. "You know that the Providers look down on us every day and give us all that we require. They give us light, warmth, food, life and so much more."

"He's talking about the two suns," I whispered to Coop.

"Well why didn't he say so?" Coop whispered back.

"Come, young ones," the older elf said. "The day races and we do not. Let us awake Flickers and continue our quest."

I didn't know who or what this Flickers person was that he was talking about. Coop and me looked around but we didn't see anyone else in the area.

"I don't see anyone named Flickers," Coop said.

The older elf laughed again. "Another fine jest, Fli-Lo, but come, he should still be sleeping where we left him last night."

We followed the old elf to a large field of flowers.

Suddenly the older elf stooped down and smiled. "As I thought. He sleeps still."

Coop and me looked down and saw what looked like a petite fairy

sleeping on a small bed of flowers. With the utmost of care the older elf gently nudged the tiny sleeping fairy until he opened his eyes. He looked up at the older elf and smiled.

"Papai-Jo," he said in a small voice. "Is it time already to continue the journey? I am still so very tired."

Normally I don't think I would have heard him but the large ears that I now had made it very easy to hear things I wouldn't have before.

The elder elf laughed. "I fear you would sleep the day away if I let you, young Twiddle," Papai-Jo said. "But we must make haste if we are to make it to the land of the Twaddles before the Providers leave us."

As soon as Papai-Jo said the word Twaddles, Flickers' wings started to flap very rapidly.

"I wish that I had not been chosen to take you to that horrible place," Flickers squeaked. "I do not like the Twaddles!"

"Wait a minute," Coop said. "Didn't Papai-Jo just say that you are a Twaddle?"

Flickers became very agitated when he heard that. "Indeed I am not! I am a Twiddle, not a Twaddle! Twiddles are good and kind and peaceful. Twaddles are nasty and wicked creatures. They lie and cheat and steal. Me? A Twaddle? Indeed not!"

Papai-Jo held up his hand. "Peace, young Twiddle," he said. "I have promised your king that I would travel with my kin to the land of the Twaddles and obtain the Orb of Prophecy that they stole from your people. You are one of the few Twiddles who have traveled there and made it back safely."

Flickers smiled and laughed. "That is because I am quick and smart and the Twaddles are slow and stupid."

Papai-Jo shook his head. "You have much to learn, young Twiddle. In time you will understand that everyone and everything has a purpose and a place in the great song. Young Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo will soon learn their purpose when they take their place in the great song."

Papai-Jo then turned and looked at me. "It is time for us to depart. You will need to retrieve your sword, Sky-Lo, while your brother helps me get ready for our journey."

I smiled. A sword? I actually got to carry a weapon in this adventure? So far Coop had always been the one who got to have a weapon but now it was my turn. I quickly looked around and found a small glimmering sword next to the bed of leaves that I had been sleeping in. I picked it up and thrust it through the air a couple of times. It felt very cool. I've never held a real sword before and I suddenly wondered if it might not be magic somehow. Before I had time to think about that Flickers flew over and hovered in front of me.

"Make haste, make haste," he said in his tiny voice as he flew off towards Coop and Papai-Jo.

It was hard to believe that a short while ago I was in Texas fighting a monster called Amorphous and now I was on another world ready to go into battle against some creatures called Twaddles. If they were anything like Flickers I knew that I would have no problem defeating them.

It wouldn't be long before I found out just how different they were from Flickers.

For the rest of the day we followed Flickers as he flew ahead of us. From time to time he would perch on a bush or a tree and wait for us to catch up with him. He could fly a lot faster than we could walk. Pretty soon we entered a large dark forest that seemed to blot out the suns. Flickers was very hesitant to enter but Papai-Jo convinced him that it was for the good of the Twiddles.

As soon as we entered the forest the mood around us began to change. Numerous large ugly trees blotted out much of the sunlight. The brightly colored flowers that used to be everywhere were now gone. Growing in their place were large foul smelling ferns and weeds. It was becoming harder to see Flickers and what was ahead of us. Then, suddenly, the red pendant that Coop wore began to shine very brightly and light the way in front of us.

The mood was very somber as we walked. Nobody really felt like talking. That was a good thing because I was getting tired of listening to Flickers' stories. The way he talked, it sounded like he knew every tree, flower and animal by name.

I kept having the feeling that we were being watched and that somebody was following us. But every time I looked back I couldn't see anyone. Still, I felt that it wouldn't hurt to have my sword ready for a fight just in case we were attacked.

I finally decided to break the silence and ask Papai-Jo a question.

"Have you ever seen a Twaddle, Papai-Jo?"

"Yes," he replied. "Many, many, many seasons ago when I was a young elf, no older than you are now. My brother and I were out hunting for the great Twildrabeast that had been terrorizing our village. Things were different back then and it wasn't uncommon to send out all the males of the village to the hunt regardless of their age. Since that time the elders have forbidden hunting by the younger elves except when the need is extremely dire."

"You have a brother, Papai-Jo?" I asked.

Papai-Jo frowned and slowly nodded his head. "Yes, I had a brother... once."

"What happened to him?" Coop asked.

"Coop.., I mean, Fli-Lo, you shouldn't ask him about that," I said. "He probably doesn't want to talk about it."

"No, young Sky-Lo, your brother has a right to ask questions," Papai-Jo said. "That is how one learns, by asking questions and being curious."

Papai-Jo looked around and sighed. "It happened in a spot much



like this one during the time of the great Twildrabeast hunt. We had gotten separated from the rest of the tribe and had wandered into the Twaddle forest. Of course, at the time we did not know that it was the Twaddle forest. We were both very young and tremendously fearless. We thought that we could defeat anything as long as we were together."

Papai-Jo turned and looked at Coop. "Jorja-Jo, my brother, was very much like you in many ways, young Fli-Lo. He was always the first to rush in

and fight when danger was near."

Papai-Jo then turned and looked at me. "Not that I doubt your courage, young Sky-Lo. I have seen you handle your sword as well as any other elfling. But your destiny is not the same as your brother's and when you stop trying to be like him, you will find out where your true destiny lies."

"But what about your brother?" Coop asked.

I wanted to ask Papai-Jo more about my destiny because it seemed like he knew more than he was saying, but he was too busy answering Coop.

"We saw movement in the distance and heard what we thought was the cry of a wounded Twildrabeast. My brother ran off after it before I could ready my sword. Seconds after his departure I heard some more sounds coming from another direction that were like nothing I had ever heard before. I turned and a few paces away from me were the strangest looking creatures I have ever seen. There were six of them and they were half my size. So I let down my guard and did not keep my caution with me. That was a mistake that I still regret to this day. I remember it all very clearly. I was about to run away when I heard one of them speak. He was totally hairless. Never have I seen another so lacking in hair. In his hand he carried a club with sharp stones sticking out of it. The Twaddle accused me of trespassing on their land."

Papai-Jo motioned with his hand. "The other Twaddles formed a circle around me and repeated everything their leader said. I explained that I meant them no harm. That my brother and I were there to hunt the Twildrabeast and we would be gone once we had finished with our hunt."

Papai-Jo frowned. "The one with the club told me to go, and to return no more. He said that the other would pay the price for the offense."

"The other?" I asked. "And what did he mean by pay the price?"

Papai-Jo looked at us and shook his head. "Before the bald one could answer I heard my brother scream out. I started to call out to him but something hit me on the head. When I awoke I was no longer in the land of Twaddles."

"But what about Jorja-Jo?" Coop asked. "What happened to him?"

Papai-Jo closed his eyes and just shook his head.

At this point Flickers became very excited. He started to fly around us so fast that it was almost impossible to see him clearly.

"Our young Twiddle friend is trying to warn us about danger nearby," Papai-Jo warned. "Sky-Lo, Fli-Lo, be alert!"

I wasn't sure what danger they were talking about but I got my sword ready and I looked around. Then I saw it. Or I should say I saw them. A few feet away I saw two small figures scamper behind a large dead tree. I ran towards them. I could hear Papai-Jo call after me to stop and wait for him but I had my sword and I felt like I could handle anything. I ran behind the tree and saw two creatures about half my size just standing there with a wicked grin on their faces.

They were strange looking creatures and it's kind of hard to compare them to anything I've seen before, but some people would probably refer to them as goblins. They had long pointy ears but they were different from elf ears in a few ways. And that is where the similarities with elves ended. The shorter of the two had very large muscular arms and it looked like he didn't have any legs, just feet. The other one had very long arms and the stupidest looking face that you can imagine.

The short one with the big arms looked up at me and waved.

"Bonk-bonk," he said. "Bye-bye."

"Bye-bye?" I said. "What are you..."

Before I could finish my sentence I heard something. I caught a quick glimpse of another goblin hiding on a tree branch above me. I heard him laugh and the last thing I remember seeing was the club that he swung at me. I felt a sharp blow to my head and I fell unconscious to the ground as they all laughed manically over me.

CHAPTER NINE

Twiddle Twaddle Riddle

If I thought that my head hurt when I woke up this morning then I was very much mistaken, because it felt like an elephant was dancing on it when I finally regained consciousness. That bump I received on the head was a doozy. I kept hoping that I would find myself back home safe in my own bed but I could feel that I was sitting on cold hard ground and not my warm soft bed. I tried to sit up but I was unable to move because both my hands and feet were tightly bound by some type of thick green vine.

Lying unconscious on the ground a few feet away from me were Papai-Jo and Coop. They were tied up in the same manner. I tried calling out to them but they were still out cold.

I could see no signs of Flickers and I hoped that nothing bad had happened to him. From what I could tell the Twiddles and the Twaddles didn't get along very well and it wasn't safe for him to be found alone in these woods.

Eventually I heard some voices. I wiggled around and saw six of those small strange goblin creatures that I now knew were Twaddles. They all looked very different from each other and were dressed in bizarre clothing. Two of them were females if you could call them that. I thought that a few girls in my class were butt ugly but they don't come close to being as ugly as these two were. One had long green hair with a goofy looking bone in it, and the other had long dark blue hair tied up in a ponytail. If I had to make a choice I would have to say that she was the uglier of the two.

I immediately recognized two of the others because they had been the ones I saw behind the tree shortly before I was knocked out. The third one

in the group had these real freaky eyes that looked like they were going to pop out of his head at any moment. It was gross and also kind of cool at the same time. The last one with the club in his hand must have been the one who hit me from above. From the sounds of things he had to be the leader of the motley group.

At that moment the one with the big arms started to speak.

"Did good," he said in a slow monotonous voice. "Did good we did, did we do good? Crush like to do good."

"Yes, Crush," the bald one with the club screeched. "You did good. We all did good. The intruders will think twice before they sneak into the Land of the Twaddles."

"When do we kill them?" the one with the freaky eyes asked. "It's my turn to kill them. It's been so long since it's been my turn to kill anything."

"We can't kill them until we bring them to the chief," the bald one with the club screeched. "The chief says that we cannot kill them until they are brought before him. They will be given the test as all the others have been and if they fail to pass the test then we get to kill them!"

The other five Twaddles laughed and started to clap their hands when he said that. They seemed to be very anxious to kill us for some reason. I wished that I had my sword because I felt that I could take them all out very easily. But it was sticking out of the ground several feet away from me and there was no way for me to get it.

I knew that if I had my power back I could turn to smoke and escape from these vines very easily. But while I was an elf I didn't seem to have any special powers. I knew that brawn was not going to get us out of this mess and that it would be better to outsmart them. From the sounds of things, they were not too bright to begin with. Or as my Dad would say, they were a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

I had been sitting there for several minutes trying to think of a brilliant escape plan when I felt my nose begin to itch. Before I could stop it I let out a very loud sneeze. I guess none of them had ever heard a sneeze before because it startled the Twaddles and they all ran for cover, all except the one called Crush. Since it looked like he didn't have any legs he pretty much hopped for cover. It made me wonder what they would have done if I had farted instead. I can have some pretty deadly farts sometimes.

One by one they peeked their heads out of where they were hiding and cautiously looked around. They carefully searched high and low for signs of an intruder. Finally Crush hopped his way over to me and saw that I was awake. I don't know why but I kind of liked Crush. He always had this silly look on his face and the other Twaddles tended to look down on him like he wasn't as good as them.

"Awake you are," Crush said. "Awakey wake."

The other five Twaddles were too far away to notice us. I decided to

use that to my advantage.

"Yes Crush, I am awake," I replied. "I knew you would be the one who found me. I can tell that you are the smart one in your tribe."

Crush looked a little confused. "Crush not smart, Screech am smart, not Crush."

Screech must be the name of the bald Twaddle carrying the club. I could see where he got the name from. He had a very annoying voice. But I still kept working on Crush, hoping to trick him.

"No Crush," I said. "Screech tells you he is smart because he is afraid that you will find out the truth. That you are way smarter than him. You are smarter than all of them."

Crush stood silent for a minute thinking very hard and it began to look like I was finally winning him over.

"Crush am smart," he said, nodding his big head. "Am smart. Not listen to Screech no more. No more."

"That's right, Crush," I said. "You don't need Screech to tell you what to do. You tell Screech what to do!"

Crush pounded his chest and smiled an even bigger silly grin than before. "Yes, Crush tell Screech what to do. Him not tell Crush. Me tell Screech. Tell Screech."

I smiled. "Very good, Crush," I said. "Now if you will just untie me we can both find Screech and tell him."

The smile suddenly disappeared from Crush's face. "No, no. Can no untie you. Screech say you stay tied. Screech say."

"But you don't need to listen to Screech," I said more emphatically. "You tell Screech. Him not, I mean he doesn't tell you, you tell him! It's okay to untie me. I'm your friend. Your friend."

Crush slowly pondered that over. "Friend. Friend. Crush untie friend, friend." He smiled. I couldn't believe I had finally gotten through to him. I thought he was going to untie me but instead he just grabbed the vines and ripped them apart. He was extremely strong for his size. I was glad that he wasn't extremely smart, as well.

I got to my feet and saw the other Twaddles were still busy searching high and low. Fortunately they hadn't seen me. My sword just a few yards away. I made a dash for it and I almost had it in my grasp but at the last second it was knocked out of my reach by a large staff. A dark cloaked figure about my size was holding it.

I could hear Crush whimpering. When I finally spotted him he was cowering behind me holding his hands over his head.

"Crush sorry Mighty One," Crush sobbed. "Sorry Crush am."

"Silence!" the cloaked figure ordered. "Go retrieve the others!"

Crush quickly hopped away towards the other Twaddles. I could hear him calling out for them.

"Screech! Mighty One am here!" he cried out. "Cram! Creepers! Come, come. Mighty one am here! Cringe! Twinge! Crush! No, wait, me am Crush. Am Crush."

I shook my head. I was so close to getting my sword and now this. Before I had time to find out more about this cloaked figure I was quickly surrounded by the six Twaddles. The ugly girl Twaddle with the dark blue hair pointed her spear at me while the one with the purple hair threw a couple of kisses at me! I think she was flirting with me. Her flirting didn't escape the eye of the other Twaddles.

"Heeeee-heeee," the one with freaky eyes laughed. "Twinge likes the intruder. Maybe she can play with it before we kills it. Heeee-heeee!"

The cloaked figure raised his arm.

"Silence, Creepers!" he said in a commanding voice. "Cringe, put down your spear!"

The ugly girl Twaddle reluctantly lowered her spear and slowly moved next to Screech.

The Twaddle with the long face and arms spoke next.

"But Mighty One, the intruder has trespassed onto our land."

The cloaked one nodded. "Yes, Cram, he has. And he and his traveling companions will be dealt with as the law demands. But he must first face the test!"

All six of the Twaddles began hooting and hollering. It was around that time that I saw Coop and Papai-Jo were finally starting to wake up.

"Owww," Coop groaned. "I am really getting tired of waking up with a headache."

It was then that he noticed that he was tied up. "What's going on? Why am I tied up? Sid? Sid!"

"Relax, Coop, uh, Fli-Lo, I'm right here," I said. I turned and looked back at the cloaked figure. "Can you please release my brother? He won't cause any trouble."

The cloaked figure raised his hand and pointed at Coop and Papai-Jo. Immediately two of the Twaddles ran over and released them.

Coop got up and walked over to me. I could tell that he was confused. Papai-Jo also looked a bit confused. He kept looking back and forth between the six Twaddles and the cloaked figure and shaking his head.

"What's going on, Sid?" Coop whispered. "The last thing I remember is running after you and when I got to the other side of the tree you were unconscious on the ground."

"Then what?" I asked.

Coop shook his head. "A second later I felt a blow to my head and the next thing I'm waking up on the ground and I'm all tied up."

I filled Coop in with all that had happened since I last saw him.

"So those things are Twaddles?" he asked.

"Well I didn't get their business cards but that's what I've been calling them," I replied. "They must have been what Papai-Jo saw long ago."

"Where's Flickers?" he asked.

I shook my head. I looked back at the Twaddles and Twinge blew another kiss in my direction.

"Watch out for that one," I said, pointing at her.

"Why?" Coop asked. "Is she dangerous?"

"No, just ugly." I was about to tell him something else when Screech suddenly yelled out.

"The test!" Screech screeched. "The intruders must be put to the test!"

All of the Twaddles began to clap their hands and repeat the word "test" over and over.

The cloaked figure raised his staff in the air and they suddenly became silent.

"Bring forward the test!" he said.

Screech ran away and returned a few moments later with what appeared to be a large white bowling ball, complete with three holes on one side. On the other side there were some words inscribed upon it.

The cloaked figure pointed his staff at me. "The young elf shall be the first to take the test!" he said.

Screech put the globe down on a rock that was almost as tall as he was. Then he slowly backed away from it and stood several feet away. The other Twaddles stared at the globe in awe. I walked over and looked at it.

At that moment, Flickers suddenly flew out of nowhere and headed straight for the globe. He must have been hiding somewhere nearby.

"It is the Orb of Prophecy!" Flickers excitedly squeaked. "This belongs to us Twiddles! It is ours! Not yours! You stole it from us! Thieves! Thieves!"

Flickers circled around the globe trying to protect it. I don't know what else he could do. It was definitely too large and heavy for him to move. I didn't see what was so great about the thing that everyone wanted to have it. It just looked like a white bowling ball to me.

I guess Flickers was more interested in the globe instead of what was going on around him because as he flew around it, Crush rushed over and grabbed him in mid-flight.

"Crush catch noisy thing," Crush said. "Noisy thing annoy Crush."

I could hear Flickers begging to be set free but Crush was paying no attention to him. He was more interested in listening to the cloaked figure.

"Long have we waited for someone who can decipher the writings on the sacred orb and unlock the wonders that it holds," the cloaked figure proclaimed.

I shrugged. "It's easy enough to read," I said. "It's in English."

"What is this Ingalesh you speak about?" the cloaked figure asked. "How do you come to know it?"

"I just do," I replied, not wanting to give too much away. "Both me and my brother know it."

I thought that we had been speaking English the whole time we were in this crazy world but I guess that wouldn't make sense. Why would creatures from another world know how to speak English? We must be able to understand their language while we were in these bodies. I was glad we could still remember our own as well.

Cringe pointed her spear at Coop's chest. "Speak the sacred words or this one will die," she said.

"Okay, okay, fine, but don't blame me if you don't understand them," I said. I looked down and began to read off the inscription:

"Without lock, and without key,
I always was, I always shall be.
The only way to open me,
Is with a person who cannot be.
Son of Adam, is whence he came,
Yet now he goes by another name.
Through magic he is, what he appears to be,
With youthful fingers, that can open me!"

All the Twaddles stood silently awestruck as they listened to these words. I doubted that any of them had the faintest idea what any of it meant but that wasn't my concern. I had passed the test and had read the inscription.

The tall cloaked figure stomped his staff to the ground and all turned towards him.

"The sacred words have been uttered," he said. "We must give thanks to the young elf who has delivered them to us."

Something struck me as odd when he said that. None of the other Twaddles referred to any of us as elves. We were either intruders or outsiders, but the cloaked figure knew what we were. And it was also strange that he was twice the size of the Twaddles. I was beginning to wonder just who and what was hiding under that cloak, so I decided to test my theory.

"It is not enough to know the words," I said. "You've got to solve the riddle."

Coop was nervous. "Sid, uh, Sky-Lo, don't push it. I think they are ready to let us go."

"No, Coo.. I mean Fli-Lo. I know what I'm doing."

Coop just rolled his eyes as if he had heard that many times before and he probably has, but I usually do know what I'm doing, even if he doesn't most of the time.

"What is this riddle that you speak of?" the cloaked figure asked.

"The inscription is not just sacred words, it's a riddle that you have to

solve," I explained. I looked the words over again and pointed at the last line.

"Right here," I said. "It says, 'With youthful fingers that can open me.' Don't you know what that means?"

The Twaddles looked puzzled. I still couldn't see the face of the cloaked figure. But Papai-Jo seemed to understand.

"Yes, young Sky-Lo," Papai-Jo said. "You are taking your first steps towards your true destiny. Continue."

"It means that this is a box," I said. They still looked confused. "You know, a box, a container. Something that holds something else inside."

"Like mug that hold Crush water, Crush water?" Crush asked.

The other Twaddles burst out laughing. Crush looked dejected.

"No, no, don't laugh," I said to them. "Crush is right. We just have to figure out how to open it up and see what's inside."

"How do we do that?" Coop asked.

"We just have to figure it out."

I really enjoy solving riddles and puzzles and I'm usually pretty good at word problems when we have them in school. Most of the time I have to help Coop with them because they tend to confuse him.

"Well it just doesn't make any sense to me," Coop said dejectedly.

"That's the point," I said. "If it was easy it wouldn't be any fun."

I knew that Coop was frustrated because he just shook his head and put his hands into the air.

"Whatever!" he said. "Knowing you, you've probably got it all solved by now."

"No! I don't!" I replied. "But unlike you, I don't throw my hands up in the air and walk away from it! That's how you handle everything, that's your problem!"

"I don't always do that," Coop replied defensively.

"No, not always," I agreed. "Sometimes you attack the problem without thinking ahead and coming up with a plan. Remember the gargoyles, and Amorphous? You just started attacking without thinking of a plan of attack!"

"I didn't have time to think!" Coop shouted.

I was getting angry. "You always say that!" I said. "Why is it that I always have time and you never do?"

"Maybe because I'm always busy saving your butt while you're too busy thinking!" Coop yelled.

"I never asked you to!" I screamed back at him.

I could see that the Twaddles were entertained by my little fight with Coop. They were just standing there laughing at us. All but one, that is. Creepers was laughing so hard that he had fallen and was rolling on the ground laughing hysterically.

"Fine!" Coop said. "Then I won't bother saving your butt the next time!"

Suddenly the cloaked figure swung his staff. It came right between me

and Coop and just missed us by inches.

"Enough!" the cloaked figure said. "The young elf must finish his task!" I looked back at the Orb of Prophecy and reread the first two lines.

"From the sounds of it, this can't be opened like a normal lock because it doesn't need a key," I said.

Cringe looked at Twinge.

"What is a lock?" Cringe asked.

Twinge just shook her head. "What is a key?" she replied.

"A key is something that you use to open a lock," I answered. From their confused looks I could tell that they had no idea what I was talking about.

"Yeah," Coop said. "But look where it says that it can only be opened by someone who can't be. What does that mean? If a person can't be, then he isn't."

"I don't think so," I replied. "I think what it means is that it can only be opened by somebody who can't be but is."

"Huh?" Coop said.

"Let's get back to that part," I continued. "Look at the next part. 'Son of Adam is whence he came, yet now he goes by another name.' Now what does that mean to you?"

Coop frowned. "How should I know? You know I stink at riddles."

"Think about it," I said. "Son of Adam. Adam is Dad's name."

Coop thought about it for a minute before I saw that he had finally gotten it.

"So then both of us are sons of Adam," Coop said.

"That's right," I replied. "Twiddles and Twaddles and Elves in this world don't have names like we do back home. I think that is why nobody here could open this thing, because it can only be done by someone who is from Earth."

"But I still don't understand the rest of the riddle," Coop replied.

"I think I've got that figured out. Look at this part of the riddle that says 'Now he goes by another name.'"

"Who does?" Coop asked.

"The person who can open the Orb! Look at the last two lines: 'Through magic he is what he appears to be, with youthful fingers that can open me.' That's us, Coop!"

"Huh?" Coop was still confused.

"It's easy," I explained. "It says that only someone who is a human can open it, but someone who's been changed by magic and is called someone else because of it. That's us. We are human, but we been changed by magic and now everyone calls us Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo and both of us have youthful fingers because we're both kids."

"But what about the part about someone who shouldn't be?" Coop asked.

"We are here because of magic but we really shouldn't be," I said. "We should be back home in our normal bodies, but instead we are here, so if you think about it, we shouldn't be, because we don't belong here."

I picked up the Orb of Prophecy. "And look at these holes. The Twaddles' fingers are way too fat to fit into them and the Twiddles have tiny hands and could never deal with them, either. But mine do."

With that I put three of my fingers into the holes like I did when we went bowling back home. They fit very easily. For a second nothing happened, but then the globe began to glow.

It continued to glow brighter until I finally had to close my eyes because it had become too bright. It was brighter than the two suns in the sky. Then I felt like it was safe to open my eyes. When I did I saw that my hand was empty and that the Orb of Prophecy had disappeared. But that wasn't the only odd thing that I noticed. It had been warm all day and now a gentle cool breeze was blowing through the forest.

As it did it seemed to have a calming effect on the Twaddles. They were just standing around smiling. Even Coop was smiling. It was almost like they were listening to something that I couldn't hear. Then I saw her.

At first I thought it was Flickers because it was a fairy, but then I saw that Flickers was sitting spellbound in Crush's open hands. And besides, when this fairy got closer I could easily see that she was a girl fairy. She sat down on a large rock and as soon as she touched it small colorful flowers sprang up, totally covering its surface. She looked at me and smiled.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What's going on?"

She giggled and when she did I thought for a second that I recognized her from somewhere else, but then I suddenly forgot about that.

"I am the Orb of Prophecy," she said. "Or at least I was. I am here to answer your questions."

"You don't look like the Orb of Prophecy," I replied. "You look more like a Twiddle."

"Things are not always what they appear to be," she said still smiling. "You should know that, Sky-Lo."

I thought about what she said and nodded. If there was one thing I was learning from all of this, it's that everything isn't always what it looks like.

"Or do you prefer to be called Sid?" she added with a giggle.

That derailed my train of thought. "You know who I really am?"

It was a few seconds before she answered. "I know who you are, but not yet who you are soon to be. You still have more traveling to do in your journey before you understand who you really are."

"Who I really am?" I said. "I know who I really am. Don't I?"

"You will know the answer to that when you reach the end of your journey," she replied.

"What did you do to Coop and all the others?" I asked. "Why are they

smiling?"

"They are merely listening to the great song and understanding their part in it," she explained. "All but your brother, that is. He is only listening to the great song. It is not yet his time to understand his part in it."

"What is this great song?" I asked. I felt like I should be mad but it was hard for me to feel angry at the moment.

"The great song surrounds all and is part of everything," she said. "We are all bound together and are connected by the great song. If you close your eyes I can let you hear some of it."

I closed my eyes. Everything suddenly felt very different and yet very familiar. Even though my eyes were closed I could sense everything around me. Not just the Twaddles and Coop and Papai-Jo, but also many more things. The trees both far and near, flowers that were growing in the field that I woke up in, and animals that I had not yet had the chance to meet. I could feel them all and I could hear them singing. Even the Twaddles and Flickers were singing and their voices added more to the song. In addition to feeling very good I also felt very energetic, like I could run a mile in less than a minute. Tons of energy was surging through my body. I wanted to listen further but I was abruptly snapped out of it when I felt something tapping on my nose. I opened my eyes and saw the fairy fluttering in front of me.

"Do you understand now?" she asked.

"I... I... think so," I said slowly. "Is that what Papai-Jo was talking about earlier when he was singing to the Providers?"

"He added his voice to the song, but there is something that keeps him from fully entering it," she answered.

The fairy momentarily looked up in the sky as if she was listening to someone else and then she turned back and looked at me.

"Your time here is almost over," she said. "And there is still more that you need to do."

"But I haven't done anything yet," I replied.

She giggled once more and when she did I had that feeling again like I had met her somewhere before, but then the feeling vanished for a second time.

"Of course you did," she said in between her giggles. "You solved the riddle and helped bring together the Twaddles and the Twiddles by helping them become friends."

"They're friends now?" I asked.

"Nobody can remain enemies once they have become part of the great song," she answered. "Take a look at them."

I looked at the smiling Twaddles. They did look different, somehow. I had seen them smile before but it was a mean kind of smile. But this one was different. Even Flickers looked happy. Maybe I had done something helpful after all.



"There is still one more who needs your help," she said, looking at Papai-Jo. "You must finish your task before you leave. I will return before it is time for you to depart."

Before I could ask any more questions the fairy flew off and disappeared. As she did the others slowly came out of their enchantment. Coop still had a dopey grin on his face when he looked at me.

"That was so beautiful," Coop said. "Did you hear it, Sid?"

I nodded and laughed. "A little bit, but I think you got a bigger dose than I did. I wish I had a camera now. You've got a really stupid grin on your face."

Instead of arguing Coop just stood there grinning at me. I couldn't take it anymore, so I walked over to Papai-Jo. He had also just come out of his trance.

"Papai-Jo," I said. "The Orb of Prophecy is gone."

Papai-Jo looked at the gleeful Twaddles. "If they have embraced the song then it has fulfilled its purpose. There is no more need for it."

"She did say there was one more thing that had to be done," I mumbled to myself as I walked towards the Twaddles. I couldn't get over the change in their behavior. Both Screech and Twinge had dropped their weapons to the ground and they were all now sitting in a circle with Flickers flying in the middle telling them another one of his fanciful stories.

The cloaked figure wasn't taking part in their activities. He had wandered off and was standing alone by a large old tree. He slowly turned and looked in my direction. I couldn't see his face but somehow I could tell that he was not in a good mood.

"You were supposed to fail the test," he finally said. "Everyone has always failed the test. Now that the prophecy has been fulfilled they no longer need me."

"Is that why you're here?" I asked. "Because the Twaddles needed you? I can think of other people who need you more."

"It didn't start off that way," he said. "You don't understand."

"Understand what? That you're not one of them?" I pointed to the giddy Twaddles.

"How do you know that?"

"You're way too tall to be a Twaddle," I replied. "In fact, when I first saw you I thought you were more elf size than Twaddle size. And you didn't talk like a Twaddle. You didn't refer to us as invaders or intruders."

"Old habits are hard to break. But I can't go back. Too much pain has been inflicted."

"On who?" I asked. "You? Or Papai-Jo?"

The cloaked figure slowly removed his hood, revealing the face of an old elf who resembled Papai-Jo in several ways. It confirmed my suspicions; the cloaked figure that had been holding us captive was really Papai-Jo's long lost brother, Jorja-Jo.

"I thought that was him when Screech brought you all to me for the test, but I felt that I had put that part of my life behind me many seasons ago," Jorja-Jo said.

"Why don't you go over and talk to him?" I asked.

"You are still a young elf and you do not understand the conflicts that can arise between brothers," Jorja-Jo solemnly replied.

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. If anyone knew about problems between brothers it was definitely me and Coop.

"Just because I'm young doesn't mean I don't understand," I said after I had finished laughing. "Coo, uh, I mean Fli-Lo and me have problems all the time. We probably fight more with each other than we do with anyone else. But that doesn't mean that we don't like each other. We just prefer different things and that's okay. Sometimes it's kind of fun to fight. I don't think he would fight with me if he didn't really care about me."

Jorja-Jo looked confused. "If he cares about you, why does he fight

with you?"

"If he didn't care about me, he would just ignore me and not bother with me at all. He listens to me and even if he doesn't always agree with me at least he pays attention. Fighting is just one way that he shows his feelings. He does other things too, both nice and not so nice. But no matter what happens I know that he always has good intentions towards me."

"The Twaddles care about me and pay heed to what I say," Jorja-Jo said.

I looked over at the Twaddles who were still busy listening to Flickers as he told them yet another story. I think he has so many stories that he could have kept them there for weeks.

"It doesn't look like they do now," I said. "How do you know that Papai-Jo won't want to talk to you? What happened between you two?"

"I always fancied the hunt and excelled at it," Jorja-Jo explained. "But my brother who wished to imitate me, was not meant to be a hunter. He could not see this and I could not tell him the truth because it would distress him. During the time of the great twildrabeast hunt we came into the land of the Twaddles. We became separated and I came upon two Twaddles who had just stolen the Orb of Prophecy from the Twaddles. They were most intrigued by it but they did not understand how it worked. I noticed its markings and told them that all they needed to do was decipher them and they would understand. When I refused to help them they told me that they had captured the other intruder and that he was to be put to death for trespassing on their lands. The thought of my brother dying at the hands of these creatures was too painful for me and I screamed out. I told them that I would stay and help them if they would spare Papai-Jo's life. They promised to set him free and I have been here all these seasons helping solve the writings of the Orb of Prophecy. It is not what I wished to do, but it was necessary to save Papai-Jo."

Apparently Papai-Jo didn't know everything. I knew that it was time for him to find out the truth about his brother.

"Wait here," I said. Then I ran over to Papai-Jo. I heard Jorja-Jo yell out for me to stop but I ignored him. When I reached him, Papai-Jo was talking to Coop. It sounded like he was explaining the great song to him in greater detail.

"Papai-Jo, you must come quick!" I said. "There is something you need to see!"

I quickly led Papai-Jo back to Jorja-Jo, who had turned his back to us. A few seconds later, a curious Coop was by my side.

"What is the need of such haste?" Papai-Jo asked as we approached Jorja-Jo. "Greetings, brother," Jorja-Jo said softly as he slowly turned around.

Papai-Jo stood very still and silently stared at his long lost brother. Jorja-Jo became more nervous as his brother continued looking at him. He began to slowly back away from us. Finally Papai-Jo broke the silence.

"I have asked the Providers every day since your disappearance for this joyous event," Papai-Jo said. He then reached over and hugged his brother.

It felt good to bring them back together again. I was even happier to see my sword was only a few feet away. I quickly snatched it up and hoped that I still had time to use it. But then the female fairy that used to be the Orb of Prophecy returned.

"You will not require that on the next part of your journey," she said with a giggle.

"Who is that?" Coop asked.

"She is, uh, I mean she was...uh..."

I was having a hard time explaining who and what she was.

"I am Jela," she said as she flew around Coop's head. "And I am an orb."

"You're a Twiddle, like Flickers, aren't you?" Coop asked.

"I am many things," she giggled. "And I am full of surprises. You will see many more of them very soon. But now it is time for both of you to go."

"Go where?" Coop asked.

"You cannot stay here," she warned. "You must return to the place where you and Sid came from."

Coop looked at me. "Did you tell her your real name?"

I shook my head. "No, she already knew it."

"Do you know who I am?" Coop asked her.

"Of course, silly," she giggled again. "You are Fli-Lo. And you are also Coop."

Coop was shocked by what she said but he looked even more shaken as she continued.

"You are also Peekasneeze and Alon and Hap-Hazard and many, many more."

"What? Who... Who's Alon? And that Hap person you mentioned. And how did you know about Peek..." Coop started to ask, but Jela interrupted him.

"I know many, many things," she said as she flew back to me. "Just ask your brother Sky-Lo if you want to know how. Sid will tell you what you wish to know or if you desire you may ask Boo Boo Kitty instead."

Jela flew around me and giggled. "You were a very cute Boo Boo Kitty."

"Sid! How does she know all this?" Coop asked.

"It's a long story, Coop."

"Stories for another time," Jela said. "Time now to say good-byes."

Coop and me went to Papai-Jo who was in the middle of an emotional talk with his brother. I was a little afraid to interrupt.

"Uh, Papai-Jo," I finally said. "I think it's time for Fli-Lo and me to leave."

"Let us not speak of departures, young Sky-Lo," Papai-Jo said joyously. "We need instead to speak of celebrations. My brother has been returned to me."

Jela kept flying around me. "Time, time, hurry you must go," she said.

"I'm sorry, but Jela says that we are running out of time," I said.

Papai-Jo looked around. "Jela?" he asked. "Who is Jela?"

"She's the Twiddle that's flying around me," I replied.

"The only Twiddle I see is Flickers and he is elsewhere," Papai-Jo said. "Do you feel well, young Sky-Lo? It has been a most trying day for you. Perhaps you should rest."

"No one can see me but you and your brother," Jela explained. "It's a little trick that I know how to do."

"Why just us?" I asked.

"Because you solved the riddle," Jela giggled. "And your brother, because I think he is cute."

She giggled some more and flew around Coop. We left Papai-Jo and went to Flickers who had finally finished his current story and was doing aerial tricks to amuse the Twaddles.

"Flickers," I said. "We're going to be leaving you now."

He quickly flew away from the Twaddles and hovered in front of me. "Leave? Leave? You cannot leave! You must come back with me and we will tell all the Twiddles about our great and glorious and wondrous adventure."

"Maybe another day," I said. "We really have to go."

Flickers started to head back towards the Twaddles. He looked back at me and smiled.

"Then I will tell all the story of Sky-Lo and Fli-Lo and your names will long be remembered!" he said. Then he flew back to the anxiously awaiting Twaddles. It would be nice if he could tell the story with our real names but I didn't see any sense in explaining that to him.

Before I left the Twaddles, Twinge blew me one final kiss and Crush waved his huge hands and yelled out "bye-bye". I chuckled because the last words he was saying to me were also the first ones he said to me. Even though he was a gruesome creature I was going to miss him.

I turned to Coop and saw that Jela was still flying around him and giggling.

"So how do we leave?" I asked.

"The way back home had to be changed," Jela said. "A new method of transport had to be arranged. I must now be the one to take you back."

Like the Orb of Prophecy did earlier, Jela began to glow. Very quickly the glow intensified in brightness. I was about to close my eyes when there was another one of those sudden flashes.

After the flash my eyes slowly came back into focus and I could see that instead of being in the land of the Twaddles, Coop and me were back at Doc's laboratory. Doc and Gunner were exactly where we had left them. And so was Amorphous!

CHAPTER TEN

WHAT NOW?

Even though our adventure in the Land of the Twaddles lasted for almost a day, only a few seconds had passed in Doc's laboratory since we left. I quickly surveyed the area and found a large portion of the room in ruins. The chemical explosion had blown out one of the walls and there was debris everywhere. Looking at Coop I noticed that he was once again wearing the sleek black costume that he had on just before we entered the world of the Twaddles. One bit of good news was that we were both wearing our power devices. But I didn't have much time to think about that because I noticed that the explosion had knocked Doc to the floor. He was very bloody and I couldn't tell if he was alive or not.

I rushed over and found he was still breathing. "Coop," I shouted. "We've got a problem. Doc is hurt!"

"That's not our only problem," Coop replied. "Look up there!"

I looked towards the ceiling where he was pointing and noticed it had also been damaged in the explosion and looked like it was going to come crashing down upon us at any minute. I wasn't sure how far underground we were but I didn't feel like getting buried alive down here. Then I saw Gunner crawl out from under a pile of debris.

"Gunner," I said. "I need your help. We've got to get Doc out of here before the roof collapses!"

"Sorry kid," he said, brushing some of the dust off his shirt. "But I didn't sign up for any of this. I'm out of here!"

Gunner picked up his fallen gun and bolted for the door. A few seconds later he had disappeared up the stairs.

"Crappers!" I screamed. "Coop! I need your help!" I heard Coop's gun fire. "Not now, Sid," he shouted back. "I'm a little busy."

I looked over and saw that he had engaged Amorphous in another battle. That left me alone with Doc.

"Now what am I going to do?" I said to myself.

"You could try throwing some water in his face," a voice behind me said.

I turned and saw a cute young red haired girl in a tank top and jeans standing behind me. She looked familiar. A couple of seconds later I remembered where I had seen her before.

"You're Taylor," I said. "I saw you on the plane. How did you get here?"

"There's no time for a quiz right now," she replied. "Do you want to get your friend out of here alive? Come on, move it!"

"And do what?" I asked.

She sighed. "You could try going to that sink over there and bringing back some water as I suggested."

Over in the corner of the room where she had pointed was a small white sink. It wasn't in the path of Coop and Amorphous, so I made it back quickly with a beaker filled with water. Fortunately, I was able to find an unbroken one in the rubble.

"Here!" I said as I handed her the beaker.

"Thanks, Sky, uh, Sid," she said taking the beaker. She poured the water on Doc's face and he suddenly regained consciousness.

"Wha... wha..." he sputtered, wiping the water from his face. "What happened?"

"There was an explosion," I explained. "We've got to get out of here before the whole place comes crashing down on us!"

Doc sat up and looked at the devastation. "No, no, no!" he cried. "My life's work! It's ruined! Years of sweat and toil down the proverbial drain!"

Taylor and me helped Doc to his feet. "There's no time to worry about that!" I said. "Come on!"

We led him to the door and as we made it outside the lab I turned and shouted back at my brother. "Hurry up, Coop!"

Coop was doing a pretty good job of keeping Amorphous to the other side of the room. "I'm coming," he said as he pointed his gun towards the ceiling. "I just got one more thing to shoot."

We were helping Doc up the stairs as I heard a large crash behind us. Seconds later Coop ran up behind me.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I wasn't able to kill Amorphous with this gun so I used it to blast the ceiling and bury him."

"That was a good idea," I said.

"Thanks," Coop replied. "You're not the only one who gets them you know."

We finally made it to the top of the stairs where Doc pushed something on the wall that I couldn't see. The wall in front of us swung open and we were back in the garden. I don't know what time it was but fortunately there weren't very many people there and we were able to close the opening before anyone saw us. As we led Doc to a bench where he could sit and rest for a few minutes we walked past the two girls that we met in the garden earlier.

"Hey there," I said to the two girls. "How is it going?"

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"We met earlier," I said.

She shook her head. "No we didn't."

"Yes we did. It was..." I stopped myself when I remembered that Coop and me looked different the last time we saw them. When we saw them earlier we were disguised with Doc's Reimager to resemble the two brothers from that TV show. Now we looked totally different. No wonder they didn't know who we were.

"Nevermind," I said. "I thought you were someone else."

I turned my attention back to Doc who seemed to be breathing better now that he had time to rest.

"How are you, Doc?" I asked.

"Physically I have acquired no broken bones and have sustained no concussions. But emotionally I am quite devastated."

"What does that mean?" Coop asked.

"It means he'll live," I replied.

Taylor laughed when I said that and that's when Coop first seemed to notice her.

"Hey, I recognize you," he said. "You're Taylor. We met on the plane."

"Yes," she giggled. "But you weren't so fancifully dressed then."

Coop looked down and saw that he was still dressed in the sleek black superhero costume.

"Oops," he said. "With all the excitement, I forgot."

He tapped Beta Bit a couple of times. "Beta, can you do something about my clothes?"

"Sure thing sugar," she said. "In the future all you need to do is say either 'Power Down or Power Up' and I will take care of everything."

There was a brief flash of light and Coop's black superhero suit was transformed into a black shirt with black and red pants. Several gadgets were attached to his belt and the gun that he was still holding in his hand was changing back into a cell phone.

"Thanks, Beta," Coop said.

"That's what I'm here for sugar," she replied.

"When will I be charged up again and be able to shoot powerballs?" Coop asked.

"At the rate you've been going I would estimate sometime tomorrow afternoon," Beta said.

Doc was shaking his head and muttering different calculations under his breath. I think he was trying to figure out how Beta could do all that. Taylor just stood there; I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Maybe I should explain all this to you," Coop said to her.

Taylor just shrugged. "It looked like a simple matter conversion to me," she said. "But what I really want to know is why neither of you have thanked me yet."

Coop and me looked at each other. Neither of us knew what she was talking about. I was hoping that she would say something else, like why we were supposed to be thanking her, but she just stood there staring at us and waiting.

Finally I said, "Uh, thank you. I, uh, guess."

She threw her hands up in the air in frustration. "Boys! It's not enough that I have to come in and help save your butts again, but then you can't even thank me nicely for it!"

Then I remembered that she did help me get Doc out of the laboratory before it was destroyed.

"Thank you for helping with Doc," I said.

She seemed to be a little satisfied with that. "That will do for now. You're welcome."

"But wait a minute," I said. "How did you get down there in the first place? And how do you know so much about everything?"

She smiled. "You're always full of questions. That's a good thing, Sid. It shows an inquisitive mind."

"Yeah, Dad tells me that all the time," I said. "But you're still not answering my questions."

"I guess I owe you a couple of answers, even though I've already done a lot for you already. You just don't know that I did."

"What does that mean?" Coop asked.

"Your brother is quite repetitious in that inquiry," Doc said.

"Huh?" Coop said.

"He says you ask that question a lot," I answered.

"So what?" Coop said. "That's only because Doc doesn't talk like normal people. Besides, I've got more important things to worry about."

"That's correct," Beta Bit added. "You are the designated protector unit. It is your function to guard and defend."

"You see?" Coop said. "Beta knows."

I pointed to Taylor. "But what about her? Why is she here?"

"Silly Sid," she giggled. "I told you that the way back home had to be

changed and a new method of transport had to be arranged. I was the one who had to bring you back."

"That wasn't you," I said. "Jela said that she..."

I stopped in mid-sentence and looked very closely at Taylor. Now I knew why Jela had looked so familiar. I had seen her before on the plane. She was Taylor! I mean, Taylor didn't look exactly like Jela, but there were very many similar features.

Taylor grinned. "It looks like you've figured it out."

"Figured what out?" Coop asked.

"That Taylor is also Jela," I said.

"I was," she said. "But that was just one of my different bodies. I've had lots more. Just like you two have."

"What? How?" I fumbled, trying to ask a complete question.

She rubbed her hand through my hair. "You're not the only ones who found the magic store."

"Magic! Humph!" Doc grumbled. "Pure balderdash. Utter nonsense and poppycock."

"Doc doesn't believe in magic," I said to Taylor.

Taylor laughed. "I can tell."

"Wait a minute," Coop said. "Are you saying that you have also been to that kooky magic store?"

"Yep," Taylor replied. "I found it a few months ago and I've been having lots of fun adventures. But lately my adventures have been involving the two of you."

"So that was you in the land of the Twaddles," I said.

"Yes, and I also helped Coop when he battled Morgrifar," Taylor added.

"You mean that you were KristiKare?" Coop asked.

Taylor smiled and nodded.

"I knew you looked familiar," I said. "I mean that KristiKare looked familiar when I saw her."

"That's how it is when I'm in those worlds," Taylor said. "I'm still me in one way or another. But I knew who you two were even though you were in totally different bodies."

"How?" I asked.

"By the way you spoke and acted," she answered. "No matter what bodies you are in you both talk and behave like yourselves."

"Well how come when I was Boo Boo Kitty I felt like I was acting more like he would have?" I asked. "Towards the end I wasn't feeling like myself at all. I kept thinking of Coop as Peekasneeze instead of Coop."

Taylor nodded again. "Yes, that's the danger of being in a different body for too long. The original personality starts trying to regain its body. That's why it was necessary to bring you back from the land of the Twaddles so abruptly. You can't stay in those bodies for too long or else the original

host takes back control and you might not ever be able to return. You were very lucky that you both got out when you did after battling Morgrifar. It took you longer to complete your task in that world, probably because it was your first time."

"You mean that Coop and me could have been stuck as Peekasneeze and Boo Boo Kitty forever?"

"Yes, I've heard of things like that happening," Taylor said solemnly.

At this point Doc got up from the bench and shook his head.

"I am afraid that I do not have time for your fanciful fairy tales," he said.

"I must return home and determine the true extent of my injuries and apply antiseptics to my wounds."

He reached into his pocket and handed me a business card.

"I thank you wholeheartedly for your assistance in our hasty departure from that catastrophic calamity, and if you wish to contact me you have my number on that card."

I watched as Doc hobbled out of the gardens and hailed a passing cab. Coop and me were finally alone with Taylor.

"You are going to meet a lot of people like that," Taylor said. "They refuse to believe in something even when they see it with their own eyes."

"Why is that?" Coop asked.

"I don't know. They just close their minds to anything that goes against what they believe to be true. I like to believe that anything is possible."

"Me too," I said. "Well, almost anything. I don't think it's possible for Coop to score 100 on a test."

"Hey!" Coop complained.

Taylor smiled. "I don't know. He might surprise you one day. Just like you might surprise him by doing something he doesn't expect you to do."

Coop laughed. "Yeah, I'd like to see that."

"That's what's so great about all of this," she said. "Back home people only expect me to do well in gymnastics, but when I'm in those other worlds there is no end to what I can do. I've had wings and flown and I've also fought dragons. It's all so amazing!"

Something started beeping. Taylor reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a cell phone. She looked at the screen and frowned.

"That's mom," she said. "I need to get back to the hotel and get changed for the gymnastics semi-finals today."

She looked at Coop. "Can you come?"

I could tell that Coop was almost ready to say yes and I knew that he would if I didn't say something first.

"That sounds neat but we have to see Mr. Killingworth today, remember Coop?"

"We don't have to do that first thing," Coop said. "Besides, I think it would be fun to go watch Taylor compete."

"You know I don't enjoy sitting all day watching those things," I said. "It's bad enough that I have to go to watch you compete."

"You're just jealous because you can't do it," Coop said.

"Maybe I'm just not interested."

"Well, maybe you don't have to come," Coop replied. "Why don't you go find a museum or something to keep you busy? I'll catch up with you in the hotel later."

"Fine," I replied. "Go to your boring gymnastics thing. I've got better things to do with my time."

As Coop and Taylor walked back to her hotel I could hear Coop telling her how he knew she was going to be terrific in the semi-finals today. I knew that I should be angry with him, but that was just typical Coop. If something better came along he would drop me like a rock and I would have to be by myself for the rest of the day. I wasn't sure what I was going to do and then I remembered about Alpha.

"Alpha, are you on?" I asked.

"While I am connected to you I am always in active mode until you power up," Alpha replied.

That was good; with Coop gone at least I had Alpha to talk to. I didn't need Coop anyhow. I would go see Mr. Killingworth without him. Then I remembered. I didn't know where his office address was, but I figured that Alpha would know.

"Can you tell me where Clinton Killingworth works?"

Without any hesitation Alpha promptly responded. "Affirmative. Clinton Killingworth works at Starr-Bolle Enterprises and they are located ten streets north and five streets west of our present location."

"Thanks, Alpha," I said as I began to head down the street.

"You are walking in a southerly direction," Alpha said. "You must turn around and head in a northerly direction."

"Okay, so I'm not good at north and south. What am I? A boy scout?"

I turned around and began walking. I noticed that I was no longer wearing my hat. It must have gotten lost when we were escaping from the destruction of Doc's lab. I didn't miss it since I'm not much of a hat guy anyway. I reached into my pocket and felt the manga cards inside. At least I still had them.

I couldn't get over how different San Antonio was from back home. The longer I walked the more amazing things I saw. I passed by a shopping mall that had a river running through it. I was on a bridge that went over the river and I saw that there was a walkway down along the water. Many different shops were located along its bank. Several small boats traveled along the river and I hoped that I could catch a ride on one of them later. Reluctantly I turned away from the river and continued walking.

"You have reached your destination," Alpha said a few blocks later.

The building in front of me wasn't very high, probably six or seven stories at the most, but it was pretty wide. It was still early and people were just starting to arrive at work. Now that I knew where it was I was trying to decide if I should go in and see Mr. Killingworth without Coop. I really wasn't sure if I should try giving the device back to him since Doc said that it had been stolen from him in the first place. Not that I could give it back to him if I wanted to since I didn't have it at the moment.

I stood in front of the building for several minutes thinking it all over. Then a long black limousine pulled up in front of the building and a very overweight man in a gray pin striped suit got out. I couldn't believe how obese he was. He must have weighed over six hundred pounds. He turned and looked in my direction. He had a mean scowl that reminded me of Gunner and for a few seconds I thought he was staring right at me. Then he suddenly turned around and went into the building.

"That was freaky," I said. "I wonder who that was."

"That was Clinton Killingworth," Alpha replied.

It figures. With the way that my luck had been going lately that would have to be Mr. Killingworth. I began to rethink my idea about seeing him alone without Coop. I hoped that he would turn out to be a good guy and not another adversary. If he wanted to I bet he could probably squish me to death.

It is hard to say how long I stood in front of Starr-Bolle Enterprises before I finally decided on a course of action. I wasn't going to go back and wait for Coop at the hotel room. I've been to lots of his gymnastic events and they can go on for hours. I was sure that Taylor's would be no different. I was anxious to find out what was going on in this building. I figured that before we gave the device to Mr. Killingworth I would learn everything about his company including all the things they didn't want anyone to find out about.

"How am I going to get in there unseen?" I said to myself. "There's no way they are going to let me walk around by myself. If only I had my power."

"Do you desire power activation?" Alpha asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "But Beta said that we couldn't fully power up until tomorrow."

"Incorrect," Alpha said. "The Beta unit stated that your brother would not have full access to his power until tomorrow but you are not presently restricted. You have full activation ability."

"Why me?" I asked.

"Smoke transformation requires far less energy conversion than discharging powerballs. In addition your brother has been utilizing power by employing his other power levels."

"What other power levels? There are other power levels?"

"Affirmative," Alpha said. "His initial transformation was power level one which is his most powerful level and it allows him to discharge powerballs.



He has recently been utilizing power level three which allows him use of various fire arms and weaponry. Each power level requires different amounts of energy and the time to recharge after use varies depending upon usage and length of time."

"Do I also have different power levels?"

"Affirmative. For you, smoke transformation is power level one."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You did not inquire," Alpha replied.

"Fine, then I want to power up."

"Power activating," Alpha said as he began to glow.

Before I realized it Alpha had disappeared along with the clothes that I had been wearing. In their place was the blue uniform I had on before.

I concentrated on turning into smoke and I could see my hand begin to change. The transformation continued along my arm and a few seconds later I had transformed completely into smoke.

I was now ready to sneak into the building and do some snooping. I would be able to show Coop that I could do things just as good as he did and that I didn't need him around all the time. I was feeling very confident. It's just too bad that the feeling wouldn't last.

In smoke form it was very easy to sneak inside through one of the air vents. It took me quite awhile to float from floor to floor and explore the inside. Most of the time when I slid under the door I only found a boring office or a stupid store room. I was being very careful not to be seen.

I was beginning to believe that there was nothing out of the ordinary going on in the building until I came upon a door that had a restricted sign on it. There was also a keypad and what looked like a fingerprint access control pad. They sure didn't want very many people to see whatever was on the other side of this door. I saw no reason for that to stop me so I just slipped under it.

The room reminded me a little of Doc's laboratory. Many things were the same but there were also several differences. There were two men in white coats talking to a very fat man who had his back to me. It had to be Mr. Killingworth because I doubt that they had two people that large working for this company. I floated to the ceiling and listened in.

"I won't stand for any more excuses or delays," Mr. Killingworth said angrily. "I've got to demonstrate the prototype to our investors today and they won't stand for any more postponements."

One of the men in the white coats rubbed his forehead. "But sir," he said. "It's too soon for full activation. We haven't had time to finish our experiments on it. There are still several more tests that we have to run."

"I told you that I don't have time for more tests!" Mr. Killingworth slammed his fist on the table causing both men to jump. "The time for games has passed! Activate it now! It's about time that I saw what we've poured a ridiculous amount of money into."

One of the men sat down at a computer and began typing furiously. A panel in the wall slid open. It was too dark inside to see anything. I was about to float in there when two very small red lights appeared in the darkness. They kept coming closer. A few seconds later they were at the opening and a large metal robot stepped out. This vicious looking robot was very tall and it towered over the man in the white coat standing next to it.

"So far its motor skills are controlled through this terminal," the man typing into the computer said. "But soon its programming will be complete and it will have full mobility independent of this system."

Mr. Killingworth stepped a few feet towards the robot.

"Is it safe?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the man at the computer said. "Isaac has programmed it to

only hunt and destroy its designated target."

The man in the white coat next to the robot had a surprised look on his face.

"No, Roger," he said. "I told you that I was going to program that in later this week. I've been busy working on increasing its strength. Don't you remember that we received the new memo saying that some of the specs needed to be changed?"

"There have been tons of new memos," Roger said. "I don't have time to read them all."

"Maybe if you weren't so busy surfing the Internet for recipes you would have time!" Isaac replied.

"You should talk," Roger responded nastily. "You're just jealous that my crème brûlée won first prize last month."

Suddenly the robot's head tilted back and it was looking straight up at me.

"Why did it do that?" Mr. Killingworth asked.

Roger forgot about his little argument with Isaac and typed a few commands into the computer but the robot didn't move. It kept staring at me with its intense red eyes. I don't know how he knew I was floating on the ceiling but he did.

"I don't know, sir," Roger said his voice betraying his nervousness. "It's nothing that I did. The unit did it on its own!"

"I thought you said that it didn't have independent movement yet," Mr. Killingworth growled.

"It doesn't," Roger said. "Or at least it shouldn't. We told you that it hasn't been fully tested yet."

Isaac must have decided to see what the robot was looking at because a few seconds later he was also looking at me.

"Up there, sir," Isaac said, pointing at me with a trembling finger. "Smoke! The unit's sensors must have detected the smoke from a fire!"

"I don't see a fire," Roger said.

Isaac was beginning to panic. "It probably started in the wiring in the walls! Quick set off the alarms! I'm too young to die!"

I was trying to decide on my next course of action as the situation spiraled out of my control. A few seconds later a fire alarm began to sound and a sprinkler system blasted on. I screamed as the water pelted through my smoke body and I found myself floating down to the floor. The pain intensified as the water kept passing through me. I was having a hard time keeping this form and a minute later I was on the floor and I was back in human form. I could still feel water hitting me but it no longer hurt like it did before. I looked up and saw the three men staring down at me in astonishment.

Mr. Killingworth glared at me with an evil smile. "Well, well, well. And just who do we have here?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FATHOM THIS

As I looked up at the three men I knew that I would need help in getting out of this predicament. The only help that I could think of was Alpha but as long as I remained powered up I couldn't access him. So I quickly shouted out, "Power down!"

A second later my blue and white uniform disappeared and I was in my regular street clothes. But more importantly I was now wearing Alpha again.

"Alpha get me out of here!" I commanded.

"Do you desire card activation?" Alpha asked.

I didn't know what that meant but I was hoping that it could get me out of there. I saw one of the men in white coats reaching down for me.

"Yes," I responded quickly. "Card activation! Do it! Do it now!"

As the man was about to grab me things suddenly became very blurry. A wave of tranquility washed over me and I felt very cool and relaxed. I felt like I was floating comfortably in our pool back home.

I opened my eyes and found that I was underwater! I swiftly swam for the surface. Normally I'm an okay swimmer but once I headed for the surface I began to move like lightning and I saw it quickly appear ahead of me.

I popped my head out of the water and took a deep breath of air. But something was wrong. I suddenly began to choke. No matter how much I tried I could not breathe and I was gasping for air. I began to sink once again below the surface. Then a strange thing happened. My choking stopped and I was breathing normally again. I popped my head above the surface and just like before I began to choke and I couldn't breathe. Was the air on this world toxic or something?

I sank again below the surface and my breathing was calm. I couldn't understand why I was having trouble breathing above the water and yet I was having no problem doing so underwater.

It was then that I noticed I was shirtless. I remember before I passed out that I was wearing a shirt. I looked down hoping that I was still wearing pants or even a swimsuit and not just floating around the water naked. It turned out to be none of those things. Instead of legs and feet I saw a giant fish tail. I was now half human and half fish, like some kind of merboy.

Then it suddenly hit me! I remembered the manga card with the merboy on it. That must have been what Alpha meant when he asked me if I wanted card activation right before I passed out. I was now on some other world in a different body. And for the first time I was here alone without Coop. He was still back at Taylor's gymnastics event. So I couldn't count on any help from him or Taylor to get me out of this world. And if I didn't make it out of this world I could be stuck here forever and they would never know what happened to me. I was suddenly beginning to panic. I felt my heart racing. I took a few deep breaths, somehow, and I tried to calm down. I began to think things out rationally. It's true that I was stuck on this world without anyone's help, but I didn't have any idea yet what my mission here was. It could be something very simple and I could be home in no time. And my arms were now a lot more muscular than they were back home. So if strength was required in this task I should have no trouble at all.

I decided to explore this world a little more and I swam down towards the bottom. I've done a little underwater exploring back home when Dad took us on vacation to Florida. We rented some scuba equipment and did that for an hour. But this was different. Now I didn't require goggles to see or an oxygen tank strapped to my back to breathe. It's amazing how quickly I got adjusted to swimming with a fish tail. It actually helped propel me through the water much faster.

I swam for a while taking in all the amazing things that I was seeing underwater and I wondered if things looked like this in our oceans back home. When I went scuba diving back there I saw schools of fish and lots of old tires and garbage that people had thrown into the ocean. I saw plenty of fish here but I saw no signs of any trash.

Pretty soon I saw a light in the distance and headed towards it. I didn't know what I would find there but I hoped that it might give me a clue as to what I needed to do in this world.

It was amazing how fast I was able to swim in this new powerful body. Before I knew it I saw the source of the light. It was incredible. There was a whole undersea city in front of me. A minute later I was inside the city and I saw merpeople of all ages and sizes swimming around. It was almost like being in the 'Little Mermaid' cartoon. The only difference was that this was real and not a cartoon like when I was Boo Boo Kitty.



With all the merpeople and buildings around I had to slow down my swimming. I wanted to see everything so I could tell Coop about it when I got back. I was feeling a little guilty about being here. Coop is a better swimmer than me and he probably would do better in what I needed to do here. I forgot to ask Taylor why we had to do these things in these worlds, she only said that we had to do them within a specific time or else. I didn't know how long my time limit was in this world. Did we have the same amount of time to spend in each world or was each one different? There were so many questions that I wanted to ask her.

I was so busy thinking about Coop and Taylor that I didn't notice where I was going and I accidentally bumped into a young mergirl. Or was she a mermaid? I wasn't sure what the difference was or if there even was a difference. At first I thought that it was Taylor and that she had made it to this world after all but when she turned and looked at me I could tell that she wasn't. She looked nothing at all like Taylor. She had long purple hair that was very wavy and she was older than Taylor. I think that she was a lot prettier than Taylor too. I wondered who she was.

She looked at me and smiled. "There you are, NickNack," she said. The odd thing is that her mouth didn't move when she spoke. Being underwater I guess that it wouldn't make sense for her to speak using her mouth. Instead I just heard the words in my head. I've seen this before in a lot of science-fiction movies. It's called mental telepathy, although the correct way to say it is simply telepathy.

I guess that I knew her and before I could respond the name Allianna popped into my head. One of the advantages to telepathy must be knowing everyone's names.

"Hi, Allianna," I thought back to her. I wasn't sure if it was going to work but a few seconds later she responded.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "It's almost time. The others are ready to begin. You don't want to miss out do you?"

"No, of course not," I said, not knowing what she was talking about. For once I wished that I could pop into a world and know exactly what was going on. I couldn't even ask Alpha because it never came along with me to these different worlds.

Allianna wrapped her arm around mine and I swam along with her. It's just as well that she led the way since I had no idea where we were going. The entire time we swam she talked constantly. Most of the conversation was about her, I think that her favorite subject was herself. A lot of the girls I know are like that, but Taylor was different. She was the opposite of most of the girls in my school. She didn't talk a lot about herself. In the few minutes that I was with Allianna I knew more about her than I ever did about any other girl I knew. She was very pretty but the problem is that she knew it and she wanted everyone else to know it. Normally those things would have turned me off from her right away but there was something about her that I found mesmerizing.

We went around a building and we came across a large clearing filled with lots of merpeople. Off to one side of them were two dozen merboys of various ages. They were all lined up behind a seaweed rope.

Allianna kissed me on the cheek. "Good fortune in the race," she said. "Do you still promise that I can have your wish if you win?"

"Wish?" I said confused. "What wish?"

She put her hands on her hips and gave me a sorrowful pout. "You're not going back on your promise are you?"

"What promise?"

"You said that I could have your wish if you win the race and find the wish pearl," she said. She then ran her hand through my hair and it felt pretty good. "You promised me last night. You do remember last night, don't you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I said. Part of me liked her and wanted her to have whatever she asked for. But the other part of me was wondering about the wish pearl she mentioned.

"So this wish can be for anything?" I asked.

Allianna laughed. "Of course, it wouldn't be a proper wish pearl if it couldn't grant you anything you wanted."

"So can I wish for a hundred more wishes?" I asked thinking of all the things I could get.

"Of course not," she said. "You can only ever get one wish from a wish pearl and then it disappears. Really, NickNack, you know all of this."

"Yeah, I do," I replied. "I just want to make sure you knew it."

"Of course I know it," she said. "Every merperson knows that the sea witch creates one wish pearl a year and all the merboys get the opportunity to find it in the annual race."

I laughed because it sounded like something out of the 'Little Mermaid' movie. "Yeah, right, a sea witch. And I'll bet she's a fat ugly woman with eight legs like an octopus."

"Why would she have eight legs like an octopus?" Allianna asked. "She's a merperson just like everyone else. She can change her appearance but she's always a mermaid. What a silly thing to say, NickNack."

"Yeah, well, I guess I heard it wrong," I said.

"I just don't think it's fair that you merboys get to race for the wish pearl every year and that we mermaids can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Golly wolly, NickNack, you're asking some silly questions today," she said. "It's because of the prophecy. The prophecy says that the sea witch will be destroyed when one of her kind finds a wish pearl. So she enchants every wish pearl with a spell so that no mermaid can find one and fulfill the prophecy. Even the youngest merbaby knows that story."

"Then why does she create a wish pearl in the first place if they can be used to destroy her?"

"To catch any unfortunate merboy in the race that falls into one of her traps and turn him into one of her slaves, of course."

I thought about it and it did make sense. While I didn't want to be captured and turned into one of the sea witch's slaves, I knew that I had to compete in the race and find the wish pearl in order to get out of this world.

"I'll see you after the race," I said as I swam towards the other merboys.

As I approached the starting line I noticed that every one of the merboys had different colored hair. I saw lime green and orange and purple and many

other colors of hair that I wasn't used to seeing. It made me wonder what color mine was and what my face looked like. I hadn't had the chance to see it yet, all that I knew was that I was in a bigger and stronger body than I had back home. That was one of the reasons that I felt so confident that I could win this race.

I got in line beside a merboy with fiery red hair. He was a scrawny looking kid. There was something about him that I didn't like. I wasn't sure what it was but something inside me was warning me not to trust him. I wondered if I was sensing things from the original owner of this body. Being telepathic, they might have stronger control over their bodies than the ones I took over in the other worlds.

"You can forget about finding that wish pearl, bottom feeder," the kid with the fiery red hair said. "That prize is as good as mine."

When I heard that voice I felt a sudden sinking sensation in my stomach. Once again a name popped into my head. The instant it did I took an immediate dislike to it. Something inside me didn't like being called a bottom feeder.

"The race isn't over yet, MaliKi," I replied. "I'm going to get that pearl first."

MaliKi gave me a malevolent grin. "Not if I find it first, and I will!"

I definitely didn't trust this kid. I knew that I would have to be on the lookout for him in the race. I didn't know the rules of the race but I was sure that he wasn't going to stick to any of them.

An older merman with bushy blue hair swam to the front of the starting line and started to address us.

"Great seaweed, this is quite a remarkable turnout this year," he said. "I've never seen so many young merboys try out for the race. I know that all of you fine lads are extremely anxious to begin the race but I must first make sure you understand the rules."

"Sure we do," MaliKi said. "There are no rules. Those are the rules."

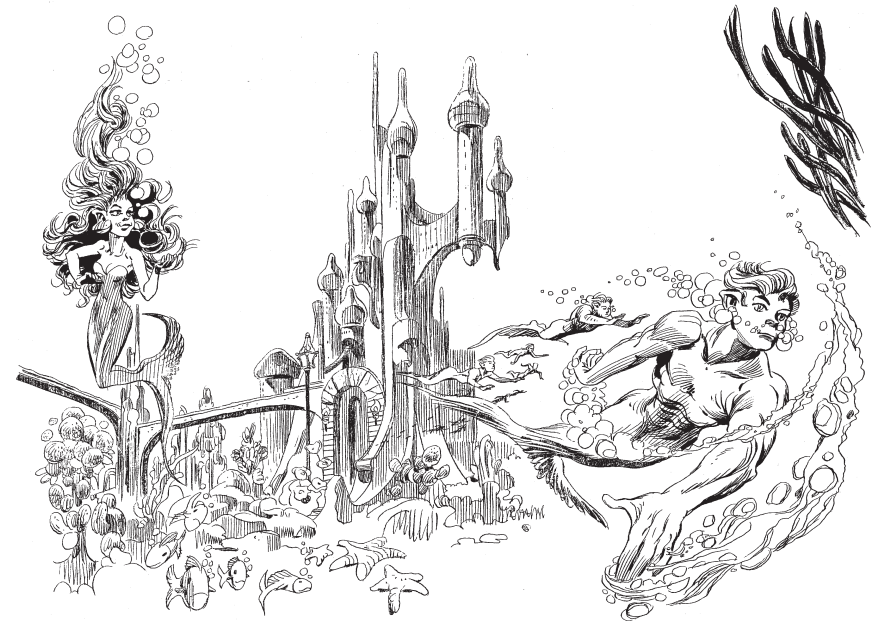
The other merboys laughed and even the older merman smiled.

"That's not exactly true, but it is close. Once you begin, the victory shall go to the first merboy who finds the wish pearl. Beware of any traps set by the sea witch. She is extremely clever and dangerous and it is forbidden for any merboy to aid her in capturing a merboy and enslaving him. Other than that, the ocean is the limit so get ready to acquire your heart's desire."

"Good fortune, NickNack," I heard Allianna say to me. "I know that you'll win and keep your promise."

MaliKi must have also heard her because he turned and gave me a nasty look. "Not if you get caught by the sea witch you won't!"

I really wanted to beat the crap out of this kid. It would have been no problem since I was so much bigger than he was. But then I thought of the bigger kids back at my school and how they loved to pick on kids that were smaller than them. Most of the time it was me they enjoyed tormenting. I didn't want to become like one of them so I just ignored MaliKi and pretended that



he wasn't there.

I was so busy ignoring MaliKi that I almost missed the start of the race. There was a sudden flash of light and immediately every one of the other merboys swam off like a shot. I quickly followed and very swiftly caught up with them. I was getting really used to this body. It was perfect for swimming. Since I didn't know where I was headed I decided to keep pace with the other merboys and see where they went. We came upon an undersea mountain and half the merboys headed to one side of it while the others went to the other side. I was in the group of merboys that went to the right side. Behind me I saw MaliKi struggling to keep up with us.

We swam alongside the gigantic rock for awhile until we spotted a large opening in the side. Some of our group stopped while a merboy with dark green hair swam into it. I began to worry when he didn't come out. I thought that something terrible must have happened to him when he suddenly swam out of the opening. A giant tentacle slid out after him. It reached him and swiftly wrapped itself around the struggling merboy. I immediately swam over and grabbed his hands and tried to yank him free from its grip. As I pulled I called out to the other merboys for help. I couldn't believe it. They were all just floating there watching in terror. All but MaliKi. He had taken the opportunity to swim on and continue the search for the wish pearl.

The tentacle was pulling the merboy into the cave and the kid was really freaking out. He kept screaming for help. I was able to slow down his capture but I wasn't strong enough to stop it. I threw some more muscle into it and I

could feel my arms begin to ache. But it was doing some good because the merboy was no longer being pulled into the cave. The only problem was that I knew that I couldn't keep this up for much longer and the pulling on both ends was taking a toll on the poor merboy. He was literally being pulled apart.

Just when I thought that I was going to have to let him go I saw a couple of pair of hands grab the end of the tentacle and try to unwrap it from the struggling merboy. I glanced over and saw two other merboys had finally decided to come over and help us. It was a welcome relief and couldn't have come at a better time. Another minute or so and I would have given up.

I guess the creature decided that it was too much effort for one small merboy because it released its grip and the tentacle quickly disappeared back into the cave.

We swam a safe distance away from the opening. The merboy was very grateful and he couldn't stop thanking us for rescuing him.

It was the first time that I've ever had anyone thanking me for saving their life. It felt very good. Even though my whole body ached I knew that I had done the right thing and that I would definitely do it again if I ever had the chance. Then the merboy turned and started to swim back in the direction we had just come from.

"Where are you going?" I asked. "Everyone else is heading the other way."

"I'm going home," he replied. "I've had enough."

"But what about the wish pearl?" I asked.

"You just saved my life," he said. "I couldn't wish for anything better than that. I'm not going to risk it again for a stupid pearl."

As he swam off I couldn't help but think that our numbers were beginning to dwindle down. Half of our number had swum off to the opposite direction before and now one of our twelve had given up already. I wondered how many more would give up or get caught in one of the sea witch's traps before this was all over.

I felt a little exhausted after rescuing the merboy and I had to stop for a minute and catch my breath. For a split second I thought I was NickNack and I suddenly had a rush of his memories enter my head. Before I could react the memories and feeling subsided and I felt like Sid again. I realized that must have been the real NickNack trying to take control of his body. Since he was telepathic and I was in a weakened state it gave him an opportunity for a second. Fortunately for me it didn't last long and I was myself again. I hoped that it wouldn't happen again before I could leave this world.

I noticed that the other merboys had continued with the race and that they were way ahead of me. I followed after them and I almost caught up when I saw three merboys swimming along the ocean floor. They had spotted a large bed of gigantic oysters and they were searching for the wish pearl down there.

I figured that it was worth a look and I ditched the other merboys and

swam downward. Most of the gigantic oysters were closed but a few of them were wide open. I was watching one younger merboy with tiger striped hair as he swam very close to an open oyster. Suddenly the oyster snapped shut trapping the unfortunate merboy inside. None of the other merboys noticed and they continued their search for the wish pearl. I swam off in the direction of the ensnared merboy.

When I arrived at the ocean's bottom I saw the largest oyster I've ever seen in my life. All of the oysters that I've seen before you could hold in your hand but this one and all the surrounding ones were big enough to easily swallow a merboy whole.

I tried casting my thoughts inside at the kid to see if he was okay but I heard nothing back. I hoped that he was still alive. If this was one of the sea witch's traps it was very likely that she would have put a spell on it to prevent anyone from telepathically calling out for help from it.

Swinging my tail, I hit the top of the oyster with all my might several times. I didn't think it would open the oyster but if the kid was still conscious inside he would know that someone was outside trying to help him. About ten seconds later the oyster shook a little. He must have shaken it to let me know that he heard me.

I grabbed the side of the oyster and tried to pry it open. I could feel it resist against me struggling to stay closed but I eventually saw a very small opening. The merboy must have seen it too because I saw his hands move into the opening and he began to help. With the two of us working at it the oyster didn't have a chance. The opening kept getting bigger and bigger until it was just about wide enough for the merboy to squeeze through. As he began to squeeze to freedom the oyster fought back even harder and I had to hold on with all my strength until he got out safely.

A minute later he was safe and sound outside the oyster.

"Thank you, thank you very much," he said gratefully. "I didn't think that anyone knew I was in there until I felt you knocking from outside. I kept calling out for help but I didn't hear anything."

"I couldn't hear you when you were inside that thing," I said. "I think there was a spell on it to prevent anyone from hearing you. Let's go warn the others before they fall into the same trap."

We quickly found the other merboys. Fortunately none of them had become trapped in any of the other oysters. The merboy that I had rescued told them about his harrowing escape and he was easily able to convince them to abandon the race and head back home.

Unfortunately I couldn't do the same. Something told me that the only way home for me was to complete my task and find that wish pearl. Again I had to fight off the strong desire to give my wish to Allianna. It seemed like every time I overexerted myself some of the real NickNack's personality tried to regain control and he seemed to have very strong feelings towards Allianna.

I rested for a minute and I felt more like myself again. I had lost track of the remaining merboys and had no idea where they were. I was going to have to continue the race on my own.

I spent most of the remaining day rescuing merboys out of various traps. One had become entrapped in a strong aquatic vine. Another one had gotten pulled into a strange underwater plant. And yet another had almost gotten sucked into a dormant undersea volcano. It was the weirdest thing but as soon as he passed over the volcano a huge vortex appeared and began pulling him into it. He was lucky that I happened to see him swim by it. I knew that all of these traps were set by the sea witch but I had still not seen her, although a couple of times I'm sure I saw MaliKi watching maliciously from a distance.

After the next four rescues I was becoming a little fatigued and I didn't know if I was going to be able to finish the race. Then I heard another voice cry out for help. There was something familiar about it and when I got to the trapped merboy I found out why.

A few yards away I saw a large white pearl sitting in a giant oyster, and floating a few feet away was MaliKi. He was wrapped tightly in the grip of an oversized electric eel.

"Need a little help, MaliKi?" I asked sarcastically.

"Push off, bottom feeder," he snarled. "I don't want your help."

I still didn't know what he meant by calling me a bottom feeder but I could tell by his tone that it was definitely meant as an insult.

"Fine by me," I said. "I'll just grab this pearl and leave you there for someone else to find. Maybe someone like the sea witch."

"I'd rather have her take me for her slave then be rescued by you," he said. "Go ahead, take the pearl and get out of here."

I was about to reach for the pearl when I suddenly stopped. Something didn't feel right about all of this. If MaliKi were truly caught in one of the sea witch's traps he should be begging for me to rescue him. Instead it was almost like he was pushing me to take the pearl instead of saving him.

I swam around for a few seconds and found what I was looking for, a long piece of coral that I broke off from a nearby reef. I brought it over to the giant oyster and carefully got it in position to use. My plan was to push the pearl out of the oyster using the long piece of coral.

"What are you doing?" MaliKi asked. "That's not fair! You've got to grab for the pearl!"

"I can do whatever I want," I replied. "Don't you remember? There are no rules!"

I moved the coral into the oyster and started to push the pearl out when the oyster suddenly slammed shut on the coral splitting it in two.

"It's a good thing that wasn't my arm," I said. "Or I would have..."

I stopped speaking abruptly when I turned and saw that MaliKi was no longer trapped in the grip of the large electric eel. Instead the eel floated behind

him while he looked at me with a vicious stare.

"You were supposed to fall into that trap, bottom feeder. I had everything all figured out. How did you suspect something?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out, MaliKi. Or should I call you by your real name, sea witch!"

MaliKi laughed. "I'm not the sea witch you stupid dolt!"

That surprised me because I thought that he was going to turn out to be the sea witch in disguise. Allianna said that the sea witch could change her appearance and I thought that she had disguised herself as one of the other merboys in the race so it would be easier to trap the others.

"I saw you lurking around when all the other merboys got trapped," I said. "Why do all this if you're not the sea witch?"

"That's simple. I made a deal with the sea witch before the race. I would help her trap as many merboys as I could and she would see to it that I got the real wish pearl. Also, I did all this because I hate you!"

"Hate me?" I said. "Why?"

"Because you've got everything that I don't," he said bitterly. "You're big and strong and everyone likes you, especially all the mermaids. Merboys like me have to settle for the rejects that you don't want. All of that is going to change when I get the wish pearl. I will use my wish to swap bodies with you. Then I'll have your big and powerful body and you'll get stuck with mine. Then see how you like it."

"Dude, you've got some serious issues."

"Since you didn't fall into my first trap I guess I will have to go to my second plan," MaliKi said.

He motioned to the electric eel behind him. "My little pet will have to keep you detained like he pretended to do to me until the sea witch comes for you."

He looked at the eel and pointed to me. "Get him!"

I've never been up against an electric eel before and I didn't want to go up against one now. I took off as soon as I saw it swim towards me. I wasn't sure if I could out swim an eel but I was going to give it a try. I swam back in the direction that I had just come from. The eel was a little smaller than I was so it could make it through anything that I could swim through. I was swimming as hard as I could and I was just barely keeping ahead of it.

As I swam I recognized a few familiar locations, the places that I had stopped to help trapped merboys. I wished that a few of the merboys were still around to help me out in this situation. Then up ahead I saw something that gave me an idea: The large bed of gigantic oysters where I had rescued the second merboy. Some of the oysters were still open waiting for their next victim. I was hoping that I could be quick enough for what I was planning. If I could time it right I might be able to trap the eel inside one of the large oysters.

I dove down and headed for the oysters. As I expected the eel followed

right behind me. I headed for the open oysters and when I got there I swam into one side of it. With a final burst of energy I came out the other side just as the oyster had slammed shut. Looking back I saw that the eel had followed me into the oyster but it didn't make it out in time.

I floated there for a few minutes to make sure that it wasn't getting out, plus I needed to rest for a moment. Just like before when I had overexerted myself I could feel parts of the real NickNack come to the surface. He felt like beating the crap out of MaliKi and I felt like doing the same. Even though the real NickNack and me were so different in appearance I could feel that we had a lot of things in common. Maybe that's why I was given his body in this world.

I don't remember much about the swim back to MaliKi. All I could feel was a rising hatred for him. I didn't know if it was me feeling it or the real NickNack but I didn't care. I had been through a lot and I didn't need a pain in the butt like MaliKi getting in my way. It was bad enough that I still had the sea witch to worry about but I didn't need him, too.

I arrived at the last spot I had seen MaliKi and as I expected he was no longer there. The large oyster with the pearl was still there and I was certain that it couldn't be the wish pearl because MaliKi would have made off with it by now. So the real wish pearl had to be somewhere else.

I floated for a few seconds trying to decide where to go next when I heard a voice from behind me.

"NickNack I'm so happy that you are safe!"

I spun around and was surprised to see Allianna.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "It's very dangerous out here."

"No it's not, NickNack," she replied sweetly. "Don't you remember that the sea witch isn't interested in making mermaids her slaves? Only merboys. I'm perfectly safe. But I had to come and see how you were. I was so worried about you."

"Well, I did run across a lot of traps today but there wasn't anything that I couldn't handle," I boasted. It did feel good to be in a strong body that could get me out of so many dangerous situations.

"I'm afraid that I'm no closer to finding the wish pearl than I was when I started," I continued.

She ran her fingers through my hair. "I know that you will and that you will keep your promise," she said. "Forget about the race for a little bit and let's go for a swim."

She wrapped her arm around mine and we began to take a nice leisurely swim together. I suddenly lost interest in the race and I just felt like being with Allianna wherever she took me. The longer I was with Allianna the more enchanted I became by her. She really was the prettiest girl that I've ever seen. And she had the sweetest voice I've ever heard. I felt that if I were to get stuck in a world that this one would be the best to be in. I was in a strong body and I had the most beautiful girlfriend. I definitely had it over all the other merboys.

I was lost in thought for awhile when we finally arrived in a large alcove. "What are we doing here?" I asked.

Allianna pulled closer to me. "I thought you might like to spend a little time alone with me." Her lips moved closer to mine and my heart began to race. Before she made contact I heard another familiar voice.

"Get away from her, bottom feeder!"

I turned from Allianna and saw MaliKi behind us.

"Can't I ever get rid of you?" I asked.

"Not until I find the wish pearl. It's almost mine now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like you don't know! That's why you're here, because you knew it was here."

I looked in the corner of the alcove and saw a large oyster sitting on a large rock. It was closed but not for long. As soon as I spotted it the oyster began to open. When it did I saw a giant pearl shining brightly inside. I somehow knew that it was the wish pearl.

I was so mesmerized by it that I forgot all about Allianna and MaliKi as I swam over to the oyster. Putting my hands on its rim I stared intently at the pearl. I was thinking how happy Allianna would be when I gave it to her. I was about to reach for it when I heard MaliKi scream out.

"Stop! That's mine!"

He swam past Allianna and headed like a bullet straight towards me. Before I could react I noticed Allianna shake her head.

"No!" she yelled. "Not when I'm so close!"

She waved one hand above her head and gestured at the advancing MaliKi. The expression on his face changed dramatically and he stopped immediately in his tracks. His hair began to fall off and his entire skin color changed to a dull gray. I could hear his screams inside my head as his entire body started to shrink. His pleas for help were deafening as his hands turned into claws. Part of me wanted to do something to help him, but something inside me told me to watch and not interfere. As MaliKi continued to shrink he grew an extra set of legs and his body changed into a shell. I could no longer hear his screams in my head. When the transformation had completed MaliKi had become a crab! He scuttled along the ground in search of food to eat.

I knew that I should feel bad for him but something inside me was very happy to see him become the very thing that he kept calling me, a bottom feeder. I swam back to the giant oyster. Allianna floated nearby.

"You did it, NickNack!" she said. "You found the wish pearl. When you touch it remember to give your wish to me."

"Aren't you even interested in what happened to MaliKi?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Oh him? I don't need him anymore. He's served his purpose."

"What purpose? What are you talking about?"

She wrapped her arm again around mine and I almost forgot all about MaliKi. I wanted nothing more than to grab the wish pearl and give my wish to Allianna.

"You never told me what your wish is going to be when I give it to you," I said sweetly to Allianna. I was very anxious to hear her adorable voice again and I wanted so much to make her happy.

"The same thing that I've always wanted since I started creating these stupid wish pearls," she said.

I looked into her beautiful eyes. "I thought the sea witch made them."

She smiled. "She did. I'm the sea witch, sweetie. And I've been casting little love spells on you every time we've touched since our date last night."

I knew that her date last night was with the real NickNack, but before I could say anything she released my arm and with a wicked laugh she started to transform. Where a few seconds ago floated the most beautiful mermaid I had ever seen, now in her place was probably the ugliest one ever born. She was extremely overweight and her once long wavy hair was now straggly clumps of hair attached to a wart covered head.

Seeing her like this snapped me out of the spell she had cast on me. I was no longer her love struck boyfriend. I didn't have any time to be tied down by any girl, normal or half-fish.

"Grab the pearl and grant me your wish!" she demanded.

"And what if I don't?"

She pointed one of her bony fingers at the transformed MaliKi. "Then you will suffer the same fate as your foolish friend down there."

I definitely did not want to spend the rest of my life as a crab scuttling around the ocean floor. Reluctantly I reached for the wish pearl.

"You never did tell me what you're going to wish for," I said, trying to stall for time.

"I intend to wish myself away from this world and return home," she said. "I can't tell you how long I've been stuck on this world. When I arrived here I was transformed into this hideous body. I didn't always look like this. Before I came here I was beautiful and I had so many boyfriends I can't even remember their names. But I found that even with all my magic I am unable to return home until one of you stupid merboys gives me his wish. That is also part of the prophecy. I made sure that no one knew about that piece of it. In a few moments you will give me your wish and I can finally return back home."

"Back home?" I asked. "You're not from here?"

"No," she said. "Being a stupid merboy you wouldn't have heard of my world but I've been stuck here for decades and I want to go home. The wish pearl is my only way back."

I understood what she meant. I was pretty much in the same predicament as she was. I also needed the pearl to return back to my world.

"You might not believe me but I know what you're going through," I said.



She cackled again. "I am so sick of you merpeople and this world. Before I go I'm going to cast the most powerful spell I know and wipe you all out. That will be my parting gift to all of you."

"That's not fair," I replied. "I'm helping you like I said I would."

"Then I may decide to let you live. Or I might not. Now hurry up! I can't wait to get back home to New York."

She said New York. There couldn't possibly be two worlds with a New York on them. She must also be from Earth like me. Suddenly the prophecy was beginning to make sense. I smiled as I touched the wish pearl. I felt a tingle course through my body.

"Before I give you my wish there is something I want to say," I said.

I could tell that she was anxious to get my wish and get out of here. "Hurry it up or it will be too late for you."

I laughed. "I don't think it's going to be too late for me. Instead you should worry about yourself."

"What are you talking about?" she said. "You're just a simple merboy. I am a powerful sea witch. There is nothing a merboy can do to me. The prophecy states that I will only be destroyed when one of my own kind touches the wish pearl and there are no mermaids here. Just you, a foolish merboy."

"Wrong again," I stated simply. "The prophecy says that you will be destroyed by one of your own kind. It didn't mean another mermaid because

you weren't always a mermaid. You became one when you came to this world. What the prophecy was talking about was one of your own kind, meaning someone from Earth."

"I still have nothing to fear," she cackled. "There is no one from Earth..." She stopped and looked at me strangely.

"How do you know about Earth?" she inquired. "I didn't say that name."

"Nope," I smiled. "You didn't. But I'm from Connecticut and that's right next to New York, so I know all about Earth."

Suddenly a look of fear trembled across her face. "No! No! It can't be! Not when I'm so close to going home!"

She raised her arms like she was getting ready to cast a spell but before she could do anything she abruptly howled out in pain. Her face and body began to twitch and start to rotate. She spun faster and faster and she screamed out louder in pain. By touching the wish pearl I had caused the prophecy to be fulfilled. She spun so fast that I could no longer see her hideous face and then her body suddenly exploded into a million pieces. It was totally gross and a little awesome, too. I was really unprepared for what happened next!

CHAPTER TWELVE

LEAPIN' LIZARDS

I didn't find out about this following bit until later, but it seems that while I had been swimming through my quest in the Merpeople world, Coop and Taylor were struggling with their own dangers in a black and white world. I mean totally! No colors! It was awesome! This is what they later told me.

Coop and Taylor had made a quick stop at her hotel room so she could get changed for her gymnastics' event. She came out of the bathroom wearing a yellow leotard and matching pants. She had a large duffle bag slung over her shoulder which Coop offered to carry for her. They reached the sidewalk, chatting, when Taylor's cell phone chimed. She quickly took the call, then popped the phone back into her pocket and shook her head.

"That was Kelly," she said. "She's on my gymnastics' team. She said that today's meet has been canceled because two of the judges are sick."

"So what do you want to do now?" Coop said. "Should we hook up with Sid?"

Taylor smiled and held Coop's hand. "How about we spend a little time together without Sid? Besides, he's probably busy playing some video game somewhere. You know how little kids are."

She spotted a fast food place across the street.

"Let's grab a bite to eat," she said. "I'm famished."

There were so many people ordering inside that it was almost twenty minutes later before they got their food and finally found an empty table to sit at.

"There sure are a lot of people here," Coop said. He looked at the salad that Taylor had ordered. "I thought you said you were famished."

"I am," she replied. "I ordered the jumbo sized salad."

Coop laughed. "When Sid is famished he usually orders the jumbo sized everything."

Taylor dropped her fork and as she bent down to pick it up, Coop did the same. Just before he started to reach for the fallen utensil, Coop thought he saw Toby from the magic shop watching them from across the crowded room. A couple of people passed between them and when he looked again he couldn't see any signs of him. He continued leaning down and he suddenly bumped heads with Taylor. They laughed. As they started to pull up they stopped and looked into each other's eyes. They were just inches apart from one another. Taylor closed her eyes and pursed her lips. She slowly moved towards Coop who was nervously getting ready to kiss her.

Their lips were just about to make contact when Coop felt something jump on his back.

Startled he fell to the ground and when he opened his eyes he was surprised to see that he was no longer in the fast food restaurant. Instead, he was in a dense forest. The table with their food was gone and in its place was a large rock with a very attractive girl sitting on the ground nearby. At first he thought it might be Taylor, but this girl's hair wasn't red like Taylor's. It was jet black. Even the formfitting costume that she wore was completely black. As he looked around that wasn't the only black thing he saw, everywhere he looked everything was in black and white. It was like being in one of Dad's old movies where there were no colors.

"Dang!" Coop exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"It looks like we are on another adventure," the girl said.

"Taylor? Is that you?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, let me guess, I look all different and stuff. You've got to be prepared for that. You look totally different, but I can tell it's you."

"You've got to show me how you can do that," Coop said.

"How do I look?" Taylor asked. "I'm not witch ugly am I? I mean, I've been real ugly on another adventure but I didn't enjoy it."

"No, you look very nice," Coop replied. "Just different. Your hair is real dark and you also look a couple of years older. And you're dressed real strange."

Taylor giggled. "Then I'm not the only one."

"What?" Coop asked. He looked down at how he was dressed. He was wearing a superhero type of outfit with dark boots and a cape. He got a little embarrassed when he saw that his legs were bare and that all he had on was a grayish top and matching brief. There was a dark belt around his waist with a large letter A on the clip.

"Oh man," Coop said. "A cape? I'm glad my friends at school can't see me."

"They wouldn't recognize you if they could," Taylor said. She got up and walked over to him. She ran her fingers through his hair. "You look cute with curly hair."

Coop shook his head. "Dang!"

Taylor walked around the large rock taking in their surroundings.

"It's a very strange looking world," she observed.

"How did we get here?" Coop asked. "The last thing I remember is that I was going to, uh, you know, and then something jumped on my back. The next thing I know we are both here."

Taylor pointed to a small ape like creature standing a few feet away from Coop. It stood about two feet tall and instead of fur it was covered in tiny feathers.

"Maybe that's what you felt," Taylor said.

Coop looked at the funny looking creature in amazement. "What is it?"

"My guess is that he is one of the inhabitants of this world," Taylor said. "He looks friendly."

She bent down and held out her hand. The creature slowly walked towards her, never taking his eyes off of Coop. He stopped about a foot away from her. She reached over and petted him on the head. He began to purr like a kitten.

Suddenly a loud roar blasted through the air and the creature scampered away. Taylor stood up looking around for the source of the sound. Coop ran to her side and looked around too. A minute later a large scaly lizard walked out of the nearby bushes. It turned towards Taylor and Coop and sounded another thunderous roar.

"What is that!" Taylor exclaimed.

"I don't know," Coop replied. "But it doesn't look too friendly!"

The creature advanced towards them and they cautiously backed away. As they retreated they picked up rocks and hurled them at the creature. The rocks just bounced off and the creature kept walking towards them. They stopped when they suddenly backed into a very large tree.

"What do we do now?" Taylor asked.

"I'm not sure," Coop replied. "It's not like when we went up against Morgrifar. At least then I had powers and you were armed."

"Maybe we have powers now," Taylor said. "Let's give it a try."

They both held out their arms and waved their hands at the creature hoping that something would happen. The creature stopped for a moment and then continued closer.

"Nope, no powers," Taylor said disappointed. "I haven't had an adventure yet where I got any."

"If we don't get away from this thing we won't be having anymore adventures," Coop said.

It was then that they heard a weird howl and a moment later a strange figure landed on the ground beside them.

It was a young boy, a bit shorter than either of them and covered in hair from head to toe. Around his neck was a small rope and dangling at the bottom



of it was a beautiful glowing dark crystal. He held a coconut sized ball in each of his hands and he threw one at the creature. The ball impacted against the creature's hide and a gooey substance covered part of its side. The creature gave another loud roar and a few seconds later the second ball hit it and some more gooey stuff slimed the creature.

"That didn't do very much," Coop said. "What good does that do?"

Before Taylor could answer a loud buzzing sound was heard and they both turned and saw a large black cloud heading quickly towards them.

"What is that?" Coop asked.

"I'm not sure but the creature doesn't look too happy," Taylor replied.

Sure enough, the creature turned from them and started to walk away very quickly. Before it got too far the black cloud arrived and they both noticed that it was comprised of black flying insects. They were larger than a horsefly and they looked a lot meaner. They descended on the creature and began attacking it.

"Why are they doing that?" Coop asked.

"I think that gooey stuff is attracting those things," Taylor replied. "Look at how they are all centered around the sticky goo on the creature."

"Yeah and it doesn't like it," Coop observed.

The young ape boy grunted a few times and he took Taylor and Coop's hand and tried pulling them away.

"He wants us to follow him," Taylor said.

"Might as well," Coop said. "Those things have devoured half that creature already. We should get out of here before they decide to snack on us."

The ape boy led them a short distance away where they found a very serene looking pond. The ape boy sat on a large rock by the water's edge and looked at them with a puzzled expression.

"What do you think he wants?" Coop asked.

"I'm not sure," Taylor replied. "He is funny looking. He reminds me of your brother a little bit." Taylor laughed.

Coop laughed along with Taylor. "Sid's not that hairy. I wish he was here. He'd know what we are supposed to be doing."

Taylor took Coop by the hand. "That's sweet. You're really good friends with your little brother aren't you?"

"Yeah, he's good for some things," Coop said. At that second he was momentarily blinded by something bright. He blinked and observed something shiny hanging on a tree. He walked towards it and as he got closer he saw that it was a long sword hanging from a limb. He looked around but didn't see anyone close by and he took the sword from the limb. It felt good in his hand, and he swung it through the air several times. It felt like he was meant to have it. It almost felt like a part of him. He swung it a few more times and even though it was a long, thick blade it felt like it weighed almost nothing.

Taylor arrived at his side a few seconds later. "Looks like you found

something useful.”

Coop swung the sword at a large tree limb and effortlessly cut through the limb.

“This thing is wickedly awesome,” Coop said happily. “Too bad there’s not another one for you.”

“That’s okay, I...” Taylor stopped talking as she spotted something sitting atop a nearby bush. Picking it up she noticed that it was a leather belt with two very sharp daggers attached to it. She placed the belt around her waist and it was a perfect fit. She detached the daggers and twirled them in her hands. She had never held daggers before but as soon as she held them she knew almost instinctively how to handle them.

Taylor decided to try and communicate with the ape boy but when she looked back to where they last saw him he was gone.

“Where did he go?” Taylor asked. “I didn’t see or hear him leave.”

Coop thrust his sword into a tree and pulled it back out. “I don’t know. But it’s a good thing he brought us here. Otherwise we never would have found this cool stuff.”

“Hmmm,” Taylor said. “I wonder if he was a Guider.”

“A what?” Coop asked.

“A Guider,” Taylor replied. “I’ve heard of them but I’ve never met one. From what I’ve heard, Guiders are mystical beings that bounce around from world to world and they help guide people like us on our mission. They can assume any form and they never hang around for very long.”

“So they are good people,” Coop said.

Taylor shook her head. “No, not always. I’ve heard that there are some Guiders who do the opposite and try and sabotage your mission.”

There was a sudden rustling in the bushes and Coop turned with his sword raised.

A moment later an older man, wearing a military type outfit and a peculiarly styled metal helmet stepped into view. He held a weapon that looked like a futuristic rifle and there was a small dagger attached to his belt. He lowered his weapon and smiled.

“At last, I’ve found you two,” he said. “It’s getting late. Why haven’t you returned to the ship?”

Coop looked at Taylor and she just shrugged. Coop turned back to the man.

“We, uh, lost track of time,” Coop said.

“You may be our best defense operative, Alon, but I am still in charge of this expedition,” the man said. “You and Maeve were supposed to report back. The sun is about to set and you know how dangerous it is outside the ship at night. As captain, you are all my responsibility until we are able to get back home.”

When Coop heard the name Alon he suddenly remembered the

character on the manga card he had picked with the same name. He realized that he must be that person on this world, but he couldn’t remember much about him and he wished he had paid more attention to his cards when he was choosing them.

“Uh, sorry, captain,” Coop said. “We lost track of time, but we were just heading back.”

They began following the captain and as they walked they heard the sounds of many different animals off in the distance. Most were sounds they had never heard before and from the looks of the captain they were probably being made by very dangerous creatures like the one they had encountered earlier. The sun was beginning to set and it was quickly becoming dark. The sounds seemed to be getting closer. Coop looked up and saw a large moon over the horizon. It was three times the size of the moon back home and Coop stopped for a moment to look at it.

“Alon!” the captain shouted. “No slacking! We’re almost there!”

Coop continued walking and a few minutes later he saw the remains of a large spaceship. From the size of the hole in its side he knew that it would never be able to fly again. Several overweight people in similar garb to the captain’s were standing just outside the hole holding the same type of rifle; they looked very relieved when they saw the captain walking towards them.

Coop was surprised to see all the people salute as the three of them entered the ship through the giant hole. The captain turned and looked at them for a moment; he didn’t say a word but his expression told them all that they needed to know. The captain seemed worried and very tired. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Coop gazed around the inside of the ship and saw more overweight people walking around dejectedly.

“You can store your weapons in the weapons locker,” the captain said. He gazed for a few seconds at a door that was guarded by two men. “If help doesn’t arrive soon, there won’t be anything left to guard. What I am about to tell you can go no further, but we are extremely low on ammunition. In the coming days we will have to rely more on the two of you for protection until the rescue ship arrives.”

“Will the rescue ship arrive soon?” Taylor asked.

The captain shook his head solemnly. “We can only hope. It’s been two years since the crash and there is no way to be sure that our distress calls were heard before we lost the communications systems. I know that I’ve been giving you all the impression that everything is fine and not to lose hope, but I discovered something that leads me to believe that our crashing here was no accident.”

“You mean someone wanted the ship to crash?” Coop asked in disbelief.

The captain nodded. “Yes, I recently uncovered some evidence that prove the ship was sabotaged! But it is late and I must get some rest. I will have some food sent to your rooms.”

Coop said that it took them awhile to find their rooms and when they did he couldn't believe the size of it. He said that our bathroom at home was bigger than where he had to sleep. He must have been tired because he fell asleep before the food arrived and the next thing he knew he was awoken suddenly from alarms blasting.

He jumped out of bed and realized that he had fallen asleep still dressed in his clothes from the day before. He ran out of his room and wished that he hadn't been required to put his sword in the weapons locker. He felt that it might come in handy very soon. He followed the crowd of people and arrived at the captain's quarters. There were several people blocking the doorway but he pushed his way inside and saw the bloodied body of the captain lying on his bed with a small pistol beside him. Someone was just covering up the body when Taylor came into the room. She was dressed a little different from the previous day and it looked like she hadn't had time to brush her hair because it was very unkempt.

"What happened?" Taylor asked. Coop took her by the arm and led her from the room that was getting more crowded by the minute. They found an isolated spot near the ship's giant hole and stopped for minute.

"I'm not sure," Coop replied. "I was asleep in bed when I got woken up by the alarms. When I got to the captain's room he was already dead. I overheard some of the crew say that it was suicide, but a few others said that it was murder."

"I didn't know the captain for very long," Taylor said. "But he didn't seem the kind of person who would commit suicide. And besides, didn't he say that he was going to tell us this morning about the ship being sabotaged?"

Coop nodded. He went to the weapons locker and removed their weapons. He handed Taylor her daggers and he held his sword looking at it in admiration.

"It's amazing how this sword feels when I use it," Coop said. "It's so light it's almost like I'm not holding anything, but it's so strong it can probably cut through anything."

"It's kind of like that with my daggers," Taylor added.

Coop swung the sword through the air and tossed it back and forth from one hand to the other. "So do you think we are here to solve the mystery of the captain's death?" he asked.

Taylor didn't hear him. She had spotted something moving outside the ship and she moved closer to the hole to get a better look. Coop walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped.

"What's the matter?" Coop asked.

"Nothing," Taylor replied. "I thought I saw something moving outside."

"There are plenty of creatures out there," Coop said. "One of them probably just walked close by."

He looked around the perimeter.

"That's strange, there's nobody guarding the hole. I thought there was supposed to be someone here always guarding it so nothing could get inside."

"They probably went inside to see what the alarms were all about," Taylor said. She saw something moving in a nearby bush and she pointed it out to Coop.

"There! Did you see it?"

"I think so," Coop said. Before he could react he saw the bush move again and a second later the young ape boy wearing the glowing crystal stepped out.

He took a few steps towards them and then he stopped. He looked at them as if waiting for them to do something. When they didn't he motioned for them to come outside the ship.

"Should we go?" Taylor asked.

"Why not?" Coop replied. "We've got our weapons so what could happen?"

They took a few steps outside the ship and the ape boy pounded the ground with his hands and made several strange grunting sounds. He stopped when they were about a foot away from him. Although he didn't have his sword raised, Coop had it at the ready.

The ape boy then pointed to them and then at the ship and he shook his head. He pointed again at them and then at the jungle behind him and nodded his head. He repeated this several times until Taylor held up her hand.

"Okay, okay, we got it," Taylor said.

Coop looked at her confused. "We do?"

Taylor nodded. "Yes, he's trying to tell us that our mission isn't inside the ship but it's outside in the jungle. Whatever happened to the captain isn't our concern."

The ape boy jumped up and down and repeated the strange grunting noises.

"You got all that from what he did?" Coop asked.

"Sure," Taylor responded. "Didn't you?"

"No," Coop said dejectedly. "Usually Sid helps me figure out things I don't understand."

Taylor smiled at him. "Then it's a good thing you've got me here then. I hope that Sid won't be too upset that he missed out on this adventure."

At that moment they all heard a terrible screech from above. Looking up they saw a large bird diving through the sky in their direction. Its long beak was open and Coop could see its razor sharp teeth.

Coop didn't have time to think, he immediately reacted to the threat and he grabbed the sword in both hands and swung at the bird as it narrowly missed him. He heard two thuds and he saw that the first one was the bird as it crashed into the side of the ship. The second thud was the enormous bird's head as it fell to the ground by Taylor's feet. It all happened so fast that he

hadn't realized that he had managed to strike the bird or that he had sliced the bird's head off.

He looked over at Taylor and she was smiling.

"That was pretty good for your first attempt," she said.

"I didn't even know that I was doing it," Coop said. "It all happened so fast and I just did it instinctively. It was like I knew how to do it without thinking about it."

Suddenly they heard some loud sounds coming closer. They looked and they were distressed to see several large lizard type creatures heading towards the ship.

Coop thought he heard someone close by so he quickly turned and he caught a glimpse of the ape boy who was standing several feet away. The ape boy held the glowing dark crystal in his hand and for the first time he spoke actual words. Coop couldn't hear them all, but the ones he heard were definitely not any language he had ever heard before. The dark crystal began to glow brighter and there was a sudden flash and the next instant both the ape boy and the crystal were gone!

"Taylor!" Coop cried out. "You'll never guess what happened."

"Yes, I see them." She reached for her daggers and held one in each hand. "I'll handle the two on the right and you can have the three on the left."

She yelled loudly as she ran towards one of the large lizards. Coop watched her for a few seconds as she thrust her dagger into the lizard's tough hide. It screeched out in pain and it swung its long neck towards her attempting to grab her in his might jaw.

Coop had no more time to watch as he went after the three lizards heading in his direction. For the next half hour the twosome fought their five opponents and a couple of times Coop thought that he was almost a goner but he learned to trust his instincts and he finally managed to defeat two of his foes.

He was fighting the last of the lizards and he thought he heard Taylor calling out for him. He had lost track of her during their battle against the lizards and he turned his attention away from the creature to look for her and he suddenly felt razor sharp claws strike against his chest. He looked down at his shirt and he was amazed that it was still intact. He knew that the lizard's claw had struck him but he had not been injured. He reasoned that the clothes he was wearing must be made of some material that protected him from their fatal blows. Originally he had been concerned about having to wear these strange looking clothes but he was now grateful that he had them on. Enraged by the attack he swung at the lizard's throat slicing it off neatly. It fell to a crashing thud beside him and he took a few seconds to breathe.

He looked around and noticed that his fight with the lizards had taken him away from the ship. He remembered chasing them but he hadn't realized that he had chased them so far.



A minute later Taylor walked into view. She was also breathing heavily but at least she wasn't injured. He felt relief as he saw her walking towards him. He dropped his sword and he ran to her and he gave her a big hug.

"I thought I had lost you for a moment," he said.

"It was touch and go for me a couple of times," she said.

He released her and he walked back to retrieve his sword. He felt almost naked without it.

He picked up the sword and he looked back at Taylor.

"So what do we do now?" he asked. "Do we go back to the ship?"

"Do you want to go back to the ship?" she asked.

Coop didn't even need to think about his answer.

"No way!" he exclaimed. "That was so awesome."

"I feel the same way," Taylor said. "I think we should keep patrolling the area and keep the ship safe from anymore creatures that might attack it."

She took his hand and they began to explore this strange new world together. They encountered many strange and dangerous beasts that day and together they managed to defeat them all.

At the end of that day they returned to the ship to eat and get some rest. They were so excited to return to the jungle and patrol that they took little notice of the problems the crew were having inside the ship trying to keep things working smoothly without the captain.

They continued patrolling and protecting the ship from the dangerous creatures that threatened their existence. Since they spent most of their time together, alone in the jungle, they tended to call each other by their real names instead of the names of the bodies that they inhabited. As the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months a special bond grew between them.

Finally at the end of their second month on the planet something unusual happened. It was getting close to the end of the day and they were starting their return to the ship.

"You know Coop," Taylor said. "We've been on this adventure for two months. This is the longest I've ever been on a mission."

She took him by the hand. "Sometimes I feel like I never want it to end."

"I know how you feel," Coop replied. "It's been great and I can't wait to tell Sid all about it. He must be going crazy wondering where we are."

"Remember, time flows differently between the worlds. So even though we've been here two months, very little time has passed on Earth. Sid has probably just finished his second video game or something."

Coop was about to reply when he suddenly stopped.

Taylor became alarmed. "What's the matter? You look worried."

"I thought I heard something," Coop said.

Taylor went for one of her daggers. "A creature?"

Coop shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

He turned his head when he heard the sound again. Taylor also turned her head in the same direction.

"I heard it too," she said. "That's not one of the creatures."

Coop began to race towards the sound. Taylor followed off after him.

"No, it's not," he said as he charged through the jungle. "I remember hearing it when we first came to this world. It's the ape boy! And he sounds like he's in trouble!"

Taylor ran alongside Coop and motioned for him to stop. They rested for a moment beside a fallen tree limb.

"But he's a Guider," Taylor said. "I didn't know that they could get into trouble."

"You said there's not a lot you know about them," Coop said. "But he helped save our butts when we first got here so if he's in trouble I've got to go help him!"

"You and me both," Taylor said.

Coop looked at her with that smile of his and said, "Race you! Last one there is a smelly fart!"

Coop suddenly took off with Taylor in quick pursuit. Both of them wanted to get there first and be the first one to rescue their friend, the ape boy. They made their way into a part of the jungle that they had never been to before. Eventually they came upon a large cave and the wails of the ape boy were coming from inside.

Taylor made it to the cave's entrance a few steps ahead of Coop. They both stopped to catch their breath. Taylor looked at the cave and frowned. She didn't like going into places like this without knowing what was in there first. She looked at Coop who was still out of breath from the race.

"So who's a smelly fart now?" Taylor laughed as she punched Coop in the arm.

"I forgot I wasn't racing Sid," Coop replied. "I can always beat him in a race."

They were suddenly interrupted when they saw a large fierce looking two headed lizard walking out of the cave on its two hind legs.

"Cool," Coop said. "We've never seen a two headed creature before."

Taylor nodded as she looked at it. "That's one head for each of us."

She grabbed one of her daggers and aimed it at the throat of the lizard's left head. She threw it with perfect aim. As it sailed towards its destination the lizard saw the approaching item and opened one of its mouths. A blast of fire spewed out hitting the dagger, knocking it to the ground.

"Awesome!" Coop said. "A fire breather! It's been almost two weeks since we came across anything that breathes fire."

Coop readied his sword and advanced towards the lizard.

"Be careful Coop," Taylor warned.

"Don't worry," Coop said. "Remember that my cape is fireproof. It saved my life against the last two fire breathers we battled."

With that Coop grabbed his cape with his free hand and pulled it in front of himself. The lizard saw him approaching and let out a blast of fire straight at Coop. He laughed as the flames bounced off his cape.

He had gone several feet when the lizard stopped spewing fire. He slowly kept advancing towards the beast.

"Look out!" Taylor warned. "He's opening his other mouth."

"Don't worry," Coop said. "He can't hurt me. My cape will protect me."

Before Coop could take another step the lizard opened its mouth and instead of fire spewing out, Coop was hit by a dark stream of goo instead. It stuck to his cape and the rest of his body and very quickly he was covered in the sticky substance. He lost his grip on his sword and it fell to the ground. He tried to take another step but the goo had already hardened and he toppled over and fell on his face.

The lizard ran over and faster than Taylor could have imagined it wrapped its tail around the helpless Coop and scurried off with him into its cave.

Taylor ran over to pick up her fallen dagger but she suddenly pulled her hand back. It was still too hot to touch from the lizard's fiery blast. She went to where Coop had dropped his sword and she picked it up. With her lone dagger in her other hand she went off into the cave after Coop.

About a hundred feet into the cave she came upon a large area that was dimly illuminated by several small holes in the ceiling that let in light. Even

though there was light coming in it still was fairly dark inside and it took her eyes a few minutes to get adjusted to the darkness.

When she was able to see well enough she looked around the cave. Scattered about were the carcasses of smaller animals that the lizard had devoured over the course of time. On one side of the cave was a giant nest filled with many large eggs. Standing in front of the nest protecting it was the giant two headed lizard. About a dozen feet away on the floor lay the helpless ape boy. He was also entrapped in the same goo that had gotten on Coop. Further away from the ape boy was Coop who was struggling without success against the creature's goo that held him captive.

"Get out of here!" Coop said as he spied Taylor. "The creature will get you next!"

"Not if I can help it!" Taylor said. The lizard spotted her and opened its mouth. Taylor couldn't tell if it was the mouth that shot the goo or fire, but she was prepared for either. Dropping Coop's sword she suddenly did several somersaults and flips and was now standing beside Coop.

"It looks like I got to do some gymnastics after all," Taylor said. Coop started talking and the ape boy began making his grunting sounds and the giant lizard cried out a horrible screech and it became very hard for Taylor to hear what Coop was saying. Using her dagger she cut off the goo that held Coop captive and he flexed his arms.

"Thanks," he said. "I figured I was a goner." He looked at the captive ape boy. "I thought we were both goners."

"I'll take care of him while you stop that lizard," Taylor said. "Your sword is over there."

Coop ran off to retrieve his sword as Taylor cautiously approached the ape boy. When she got there she knelt down beside him. Just before she started cutting she looked into his eyes and she saw how terrified he was. As she tried cutting the goo she saw Coop standing in front of the lizard with his sword held up in defiance. She was having trouble cutting the toughened goo. Since the goo had been on the ape boy longer than it had been on Coop she reasoned that it must have hardened even more.

The lizard screeched as Coop advanced towards it. He tried to pull his cape in front of him but it was still stuck with goo to the back of his shirt. The lizard spewed a fiery blast of flames at Coop and he barely survived by jumping onto a nearby rock. The lizard got ready for another fiery blast.

Taylor knew that she had to do something to help Coop but they were too far away for her to reach them in time. She couldn't use her dagger because it was already sticking to the goo. She spotted some nice sized throwing rocks nearby and she reached down and swooped them up. Taking quick aim she threw them as hard as she could at the lizard's two heads. Both stones made contact and the lizard twirled around in her direction. It was about to come towards her when Coop did a tremendous leap and sliced both throats with

his sword. The creature wavered for a moment and then fell dead right next to the nest of eggs.

Coop ran over to her. "Are you all right?"

Taylor smiled and nodded. She had never been more proud of anyone before in her life and she was so happy that they had been able to spend this time together.

"I'm just having a little trouble with this stuff," she said.

"Stand back," Coop said. He raised his sword and with pinpoint accuracy he sliced through the goo and freed the ape boy. The ape boy went to Taylor and gave her a tremendous hug and a second later he did the same to Coop. Before he let go he said something that Coop was finally able to understand.

"Thank you," the ape boy said.

"You're welcome," Coop replied. "Hey wait a minute! You can speak English!"

The ape boy nodded. "Yes, English is one of the three hundred languages that I can speak. I'm not supposed to break character like this. It's against all the rules, but both of you have done superbly."

"Are you, uh, are you a Guider?" Taylor asked apprehensively.

The ape boy nodded. "Yes, and this was my first assignment. Wait until I get back and tell the rest of the kids in my class about the two of you. I've read about humans but I didn't think I would meet any on my first assignment."

"Aren't you a human?" Coop asked.

The ape boy shook his head. "No, I don't normally look like this. It's just a body that was chosen for me to use on this assignment. My true form is quite different from what you are used to seeing. And when I grow up I will have to choose a permanent form."

"So you're really just a kid?" Coop asked.

"Of course," the ape boy replied. "In your way of telling time I am only two hundred and twenty two years old."

"Two hundred and twenty two and you're still just a kid?" Coop said in awe.

"Sure, we live very long lives compared to your short ones," the ape boy said.

They walked out of the cave into the growing darkness. A bright light flashed across the sky.

"What was that?" Taylor asked.

The ape boy held up his crystal and stared into it for a moment and then he released it.

"That is the rescue ship," he said.

"You mean we're rescued? We finally get to leave this planet?" Coop asked.

"Sort of," the ape boy answered. "The survivors of the expedition are going to be leaving by that ship, but both of you will be going home a different

way.”

“How do you know all of that?” Coop asked. “And how do you come and go so quickly?”

The ape boy raised the crystal. “With this. We all have one. It is the source of all our power and knowledge.”

“Why couldn’t you use it to escape from the lizard?” Taylor asked.

“I was trapped in that substance before I could use its power,” the ape boy said. “I have to hold it in order to draw upon its resources. But thanks to the two of you I am able to return home. Just as you both shall be in just a few moments.”

He held the glowing crystal for a final time and said a few words and disappeared. Coop looked at Taylor.

“I guess we’re going to be leaving soon too,” he said. “Before we go there’s something I want to tell you. Something real important. I don’t know if I will have enough nerve to tell you back home.”

“It’s nothing bad is it?” Taylor asked.

Coop shook his head. “No, nothing bad. It’s just that spending all this time on this planet together I found out something. I guess I’ve known about it for awhile but there never seemed to be a good time to tell you.”

“What is it?” Taylor asked her interest piqued.

“Okay, I’m just going to come out and say it. Taylor, I...”

Before he could finish his sentence Taylor disappeared and Coop was standing in the middle of the jungle alone.

“Dang!” he said before he too disappeared.

When they popped back to Earth they were back in the fast food place and their food was still warm. Almost no time had passed at all. Taylor looked at Coop waiting for him to finish his sentence. Coop looked around at the crowded restaurant and chomped down on a hamburger instead.

I could never get Coop to tell me what he was going to tell Taylor no matter how many times I asked. But that’s okay because before our adventures were over I would have a fantastic secret of my own.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OUT OF HIS LEAGUE

Back on the Merpeople world I watched as the various pieces of the sea witch scattered across the alcove and beyond. Several of them landed on MaliKi. He didn’t seem to notice. I thought that he might change back once the sea witch had been destroyed but I guess her spells remain intact even after her death.

I could sense that it was time to go home but I wanted to make my wish before I left. Even with all the nasty things that happened on this world I still had a good time here and I think it was because I was able to do it all by myself. And that was because I was in a stronger and bigger body. So I wished that when I returned home that I would still have a powerful body just like the one I had on the water world.

As soon as I made my wish the ocean began to swirl around me. It was becoming harder to see anything. A minute later everything started to slow down and I saw a large familiar face above me. I had returned home but I was right back where I had departed from. Clinton Killingworth and his two assistants were still standing over me. They all had surprised looks on their faces.

Before I could figure out why I started gasping for air. I began to thrash about on the floor as I tried to breathe. While I kicked about I accidentally knocked one of the men in white coats to the floor with my tail. It was then that I realized that my wish had been granted. I did have a powerful body but it was a merboy’s body! I couldn’t breathe! I was completely helpless!

I once thought that there wasn’t anything scarier than not being able to breathe but I was about to find out that there were many things worse than that.

It's hard to remember the events that followed immediately after my return. I passed out and it was quite some time before I regained consciousness.

While I was still unconscious I had a very unusual dream. I dreamt that it was many years later and I was still stuck in a merboy's body. I was on exhibit somewhere in a large glass tank and Coop came to visit me with his wife and kids. I begged him to help me but he just shrugged his shoulders and said that he tried but he finally gave up because there was nothing he could do. He said that it was my fault for getting into the situation in the first place. I must have made his youngest kid upset somehow because she started to cry and asked to be taken away. Coop picked her up and walked away with his family without another word. I couldn't believe that he would abandon me like that. I was so mad that I started to smash everything within range with my tail. That was the last thing that I remember before waking up.

When I awakened I saw Mr. Killingworth in the corner of the room with one of his technicians next to a security panel. They hadn't noticed that I was awake and they were discussing the procedures for disarming the security system.

I was encased in a circular glass container filled with water. I had enough room to move around but just barely. I was still a merboy but at least I was able to breathe and I was grateful for that. I floated there listening to the two men talk for a few minutes before the technician became aware that I was awake.

"Sir," Isaac said. "The creature is conscious."

Mr. Killingworth smiled. "It's about time. Now, maybe we can get some answers out of it."

I definitely didn't appreciate being referred to as a 'creature' or an 'it'. If I could get my hands on either one of them I would teach them not to call me names.

Mr. Killingworth walked towards me and stopped about a foot away. He slowly looked me over from top to bottom before he finally addressed me.

"You are quite the curiosity," he said. "I don't know what to make of you just yet. One moment this oddly dressed boy appears out of nowhere and then just as suddenly he disappears and you appear in his place. Just who and what are you?"

I pretended that I couldn't understand him and I simply shrugged my shoulders.

He put his hand to his chin and slowly tapped his finger against it. "Not to worry," he continued. "If I can't get the answers I want from you the easy way, then there is always the hard way. I will have my people take you apart piece by piece and examine you on the cellular level until they have the answers I desire. Sorry to say, you won't be around to hear their results. But I will silently mourn your departure as I enjoy a glass of brandy."

Mr. Killingworth laughed and started to walk away from me. I really began to hate this guy and a feeling of loathing swept through me. Just before

the feeling passed I noticed something interesting happen. Mr. Killingworth stopped walking and he clutched his chest with one hand. He looked like he was about to have a heart attack. Isaac went to his aid and got him safely into a chair.

Isaac started scurrying around the room frantically searching for something.

"A phone!" he cried. "Where is a phone? Why is there never a stupid phone around when someone needs one?"

"Forget the phone!" Mr. Killingworth yelled. "I'm going to be fine. Just a mild attack." Then he turned and looked right at me. "Or something."

Mr. Killingworth rose from the chair. "Come with me. I want to go over some different options with you regarding our 'guest'."

He activated the alarm system. Even though he didn't say anything out loud I could hear the numbers in my head that he was using to arm the device. He opened the door.

"Shouldn't we feed it first, sir?" Isaac said.

"In the morning, maybe," Mr. Killingworth replied. "Let's see how it behaves on an empty stomach."

He laughed as he turned off the lights and closed the door behind them. The only light left on in the room was a small one above me. I felt like a fish trapped in an aquarium. It wasn't until he had mentioned food that I realized how hungry I was. The last time I remembered eating was on the plane to San Antonio. And that seemed like an extremely long time ago. My stomach began to rumble just thinking about food.

I tried to take my mind off my hunger. I thought about the strange thing that happened to Mr. Killingworth when I had that feeling pass through me. It was almost like my mind had caused him to have that mild heart attack.

In addition to telepathy I began to wonder if I was able to do more things with my mind. I knew that moving things with my mind was called telekinesis, but I wasn't sure how to do it. It was an instinctive impulse before and I didn't know if I could do it on command. I decided to test it out on something small. I thought about the light switch on the opposite wall. I concentrated as hard as I could on moving it. I pictured it in my mind and imagined flicking it on. I did this over and over thinking harder and harder. But still nothing happened. I was becoming dejected and very angry that I wasn't able to do it. I got so angry that I hit the side of the container with my tail. A split second later the lights went on.

I wondered if emotions had something to do with my telekinesis. I looked around the room looking for anything that I could use to get myself out of this terrible situation. I certainly didn't want to hang around and get dissected.

Other than a sink and some cabinets on the other side of the room it was pretty empty in there. I saw no signs of Alpha or my manga cards. I knew that I was going to need some serious help in getting out of here. It's not like I could just walk out of the building on my own. Because of my stupid wish I was stuck

in a merboy's body and I was confined to water.

I began to wonder if I had these abilities back on the merpeople's world or if they only started because I was on Earth. Perhaps the bodies we are in react differently when they are taken to another place other than their homeworld.

I figured that Coop and Taylor had finished with her gymnastics by now and were probably wondering where I was. I wished that I had gone with them. Gymnastics can be boring sometimes but at least it couldn't get you killed. I can't believe that I didn't leave them a note telling them where I was going.

I promised myself that if I got out of this mess that I would tell everyone where I was going from now on.

I began to feel a little despondent. I felt that I was never going to get out safely and Coop and Dad would never know what happened to me. What was the good of having a strong body when you couldn't use it to get yourself out of trouble?

After floating there for the next few hours feeling sorry for myself I heard a small commotion outside in the hallway. A few seconds later I heard a thud and then everything was silent again. Then I heard a familiar voice calling from the hallway.

"Sid?" Are you in there Sid?"

It was Coop! I don't know how he knew I was here but somehow he managed to find me. But how was he going to get in here? I looked at the security system and I knew that he couldn't get in without the security code. I knew that Coop didn't know it. But then I remembered that I did! I overheard Mr. Killingworth when he activated it.

I knew that my telepathy worked on other merpeople but I didn't know if it would work on Coop. But I knew that I had to give it a try. I concentrated as hard as I could and I thought the numbers to him. I wasn't sure if it had worked until a minute later when I saw the door open and Coop ran into the room. At least I think it was Coop. He looked different again. His hair was a lot longer and he was dressed like he had just stumbled out of a jungle. His shirt was torn and he was carrying a long spear. By this time I was almost getting used to seeing Coop appear differently every time I saw him.

A few seconds later Taylor entered the room as well. She also looked different from before. She looked a lot older than the last time I saw her and she also appeared to be more muscular than I remembered. I bet if she wanted to she could knock out Coop with one punch. She had on a short tight shirt that exposed her stomach and a pair of loose fitting khakis with several small pouches hanging from her belt.

They looked around the room a few times.

"I thought you said that he was in here!" Taylor exclaimed.

"He is," Coop replied. "I heard him give me the combination."

"Well, I didn't hear anything," she said. "And I don't see him. The only one in here is that thing floating in that giant fishbowl."

"Gee, thanks," I thought at them. "First I'm called a 'creature' and an 'it' and now you call me a 'thing'. It's like nobody's ever seen a merboy before."

That caught their attention because they both had a surprised look on their face.

"Did you hear that?" Coop asked. "I just heard Sid's voice."

"I heard it too," Taylor said. "I thought it came from that thing over there."

Coop came over and stared at me closely.

"Sid? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me," I replied. "Crappers! It's not like I'm a horrible looking monster or something."

"No," Taylor replied. "But you look so... unusual."

"So do the two of you!" I retorted.

"But at least we're human," Coop replied with some bitterness.

"So am I," I said. "Well, half human at least."

"Wait a minute," Coop said. "How come I can hear you? I don't see your mouth moving."

"You're hearing my thoughts. It's telepathy. All the merpeople can do it."

"Merpeople?" Taylor asked. "Like in 'The Little Mermaid'? You went to one of their worlds? That is so cool. I've been hoping to get sent there for a long time but I haven't yet."

"Yeah, it was kind of fun, except for this nasty kid, named MaliKi, and the sea witch."

"Sea witch?" Taylor said. "Was she a..."

"Half octopus?" I finished. "No, she was a mermaid."

"Oh," Taylor sighed, sounding disappointed. "What did she..."

"She was gorgeous when I first saw her but then she changed into this gruesome mermaid witch right before she exploded."

"Exploded?" Coop said. "Cool!"

"Yeah, it was because of the prophecy, but that's a long story. The thing is when I left that world and returned back here I was still a merboy."

"So you didn't change back?" Taylor asked. "That's very strange. The only time that you remain in that body is when you become trapped on that world when your time runs out."

"I don't know how it happened," I lied. I didn't want them to know that I was stuck like this because I made a stupid wish.

"How are we going to get you out of here like that?" Coop asked.

"Why are you asking me? If I knew the answer to that I would have gotten myself out before you got here!" I was feeling very angry. Coop suddenly stepped back a few feet as if someone had just shoved him.

"Whoa!" he said. "What just happened? It felt like someone just pushed me."

"Sorry. That was probably me. I found out that I can do things like that when I get angry."

"Maybe that can help us get you out of here somehow," Taylor said, suddenly sounding hopeful.

Then I remembered something that I had been meaning to ask them.

"How did you find me? Did you come looking for me after the gymnastics event?"

"We didn't go to the event," Taylor said.

"You didn't?"

"No," Coop said. "It was canceled because two of the judges were sick. And it's a good thing because we ended up having an awesome adventure in another world!"

"It was fantastic!" Taylor added. "And Coop was great!"

"Not as good as you," Coop said to her. "If you hadn't chopped off that creature's head when you did I wouldn't have made it back."

"Yes, but you were the one who blew up that nest of raptors before they could attack us."

"You went on an adventure without me?" I asked. I was bummed.

"It's not like we could prevent it from happening," Coop said. "One minute we were eating lunch at some fast food place and the next minute everything changed and we were on another world."

"Yes, and it wasn't like any world that I've been to before," Taylor added.

"That's right," Coop said. "Everything in that world was in black and white. There was no color anywhere. The sky, the water, the plants, the nasty creatures..."

"Even the two of us were in black and white," Taylor interjected.

"That's strange," I said. "Maybe you were both color blind in that world."

"It was like being in one of those old black and white movies that Dad is always showing us," Coop said. "I just think there was no color in that world. And the place was filled with all these nasty dinosaur type creatures. We spent most of the time wiping them out."

"Is that why you're dressed like that?" I asked.

Coop looked down at his clothes. He had changed so many times in the past two days that he probably didn't remember what he looked like anymore.

"No, we looked totally different in that world. I was a warrior kid named Alon and it was my job to protect the survivors of the ship from the monsters of that world."

"Survivors of what ship?" I asked.

"It was a deep space exploration ship that had crash landed on a primitive world and Coop and me were part of a small group that guarded the ship's survivors," Taylor explained. "Most of the other people from the ship were a lot older and out of shape and they never would have survived if it hadn't been for people like Coop and me."

"There were a few other people on the ship who helped protect them but they stayed around the ship most of the time because there were constant

threats from the different creatures trying to get into the ship through a giant hole in its hull that was caused by the crash," Coop recalled.

"The people inside the ship got to use the few guns that were still working," Taylor continued. "But they were real short on ammunition and couldn't use them very much. They weren't prepared for survival on that type of world. They never would have landed on it if their ship hadn't malfunctioned."

"I still think it was sabotaged," Coop said. "Remember how they found the remains of the captain's body? That was no accident."

Taylor nodded her head. "Probably, but we weren't there to figure out how they crashed or why. We were just there to protect them until the rescue ship arrived."

I was getting swept up into their story. "Did you have a gun, too?" I asked Coop.

"No, but I had this really cool sword," he said. "And I used it for the whole two months that we were there."

"You were there for two months?" I asked in disbelief.

"Two months on that world," Taylor said. "But the days were longer than they are here. So many things were different there, but I knew that I could depend on Coop no matter what trouble we got in."

"I didn't think we were going to defeat that large fire breathing lizard creature," Coop shuddered.

"You mean like Morgrifar?" I asked. I was thinking back to the monster on the first world that we had visited.

Coop shook his head. "No, this one wasn't as big as Morgrifar, but it was lots faster and it had two heads. The only way we defeated it was that Taylor temporarily distracted it and I leaped up and cut off both its heads with my sword."

Taylor gave Coop a kiss on the cheek. "That was a pretty high leap," she said, sounding like a schoolgirl with a crush. "If he hadn't done that the creature would have gotten me a few seconds later."

Coop blushed. "That was to pay you back for the swamp creature you killed that had snuck up behind me."

"We were constantly fighting the whole time we were there and then finally after two months we saw the rescue ship arrive," Taylor said.

"Yeah, we had only been on that world for two months but these people had been there for two years waiting for the rescue ship to come," Coop added.

"So that's all you had to do in that world?" I asked. "Fight a couple of creatures?"

Coop laughed. "Fight a couple of creatures? You make it sound like all we had to do was step on a couple of bugs. These things were big and mean and deadly!"

"And it was more than just a couple," Taylor corrected.

"It sure was!" Coop boasted. "More like a couple of hundred! I really

wish you could have been there with us, Sid."

I sure was sorry to have missed out on the action of that world but I was still happy that I had my own adventure on the merpeople's world.

"When we got back I used Beta to change into this," Coop continued. "It's power level four. It was the best that she could do considering I didn't have time for much of a recharge yet. But even at a low power level I still got some great stuff."

He pointed to a device wrapped around his right arm.

"This is a motion detector that works even through walls. We used this to spot a lot of the guards when we broke in here. And my goggles let me see in the dark. They have other settings but I don't know what else they do yet. And I can adjust these gloves to increase my strength. It only works for a brief period of time but that's okay since Taylor has also changed and can help out in the strength department."

I looked at Taylor. "How are you able to change?"

She took off one of her gloves revealing a small charm bracelet around her left wrist. It looked like one of the charms on it was glowing.

"I got this at the magic shop on my first visit," she said, smiling at the memory. "Each charm allows me to change into a specific body, but only for a limited time."

I noticed that Coop hadn't said anything about the spear he was holding.

"What does the spear do?"

"Stab things, mostly," he said. "Nothing special. It just came with the rest of the stuff."

Coop's attention was suddenly drawn to the flashing motion detector on his wrist.

"Uh, oh, look's like we've got some more company coming."

He turned and started heading for the door but Taylor stopped him.

"You stay here with Sid," she said. "I'll take care of them." The second she finished talking she turned and ran out the door into the hallway.

"Looks like you two are getting along pretty good," I said after Taylor had left.

"Yeah, she's way cool," Coop replied. "But when we were in that other world I kept thinking that it would have been more fun if you were also there with us."

"I was thinking the same thing when I was in the merpeople's world."

"How did you get there in the first place?"

"I was snooping around this building in smoke form and the sprinkler system went off and I was forced to revert back to my human body. I was helpless on the floor and about to get captured by three guys when Alpha saved me by sending me to that world. The only problem is that when I finished my task there I returned right back here and I was in worse shape than when I started."

"How did Alpha send you there?" Coop asked.

"I asked him for help and he wanted to know if I needed card activation and I told him yes and I was suddenly in one of the manga card worlds."

"If Alpha can activate the manga cards I wonder if Beta can, too," Coop suggested.

I was impressed. That was a very good idea and I was surprised that I hadn't thought of it first.

"Power down," Coop said. An instant later he was transformed back, not to his normal body but to the one he had been in since this adventure started. I have got to ask Taylor if she knows anything about why Coop has a different body but I don't.

"That was quick, sugar," Beta said. "You didn't stay in that power mode for very long. Did you find your brother?"

"He's right in front of us!" Coop said with some annoyance. "He's been transformed into a merboy."

There was a slight pause as Beta's light flashed rapidly for a few seconds. Then she spoke again.

"I scanned another life form in the room, species number fourteen fifty eight of the multiverse to be exact, but I was unaware that it was your brother. I shall readjust accordingly."

"Is there any way that you can change him back?" Coop asked.

"I'm afraid not sugar," Beta replied. "I am only able to transform you. But Alpha can change him back."

Coop smiled. "Really? That's great! Do you hear that Sid? All you have to do is ask Alpha to change you back!"

"Yeah, that would be great, but there's a problem," I said. "I don't know where Alpha is. Since I was changed into a merboy I haven't seen him."

"Dang!" Coop cursed.

Then I had an idea. "Why don't we have Beta activate one of your cards? I might change again when we get sent to another world."

"Can you do that?" Coop asked Beta.

"Sure can, sugar," Beta said, sweeter than ever. "You have only one card to activate."

"Only one?" Coop asked. "You mean that I've gone through four of them already?"

"Fraid so, sugar. Are you sure you wish to activate it?"

Coop reached into his pocket and pulled out his manga cards. Four of them were blank just as Beta had said. The only one left with an image was the last one which had the mage Merlin and his assistant on it.

Coop held the card in front of me. "Do you think I should use it?"

I thought about it for a moment and then I made my decision.

"Go for it," I answered. "Maybe he has something that can change me back."

"You really think it will work?" Coop asked.

"I don't know. But we don't have a lot of choices left."

"Okay, Beta, activate it," Coop said, holding the card aloft.

A second later Beta said, "Done, sugar."

We both looked around but nothing had changed. I don't know what I expected but I thought that something would have happened by now. Then we heard it, a knock on the door just like we heard back in our hotel room. But the only door to the room was already open and there was nobody there.

"Where did that knock come from?" I asked.

"I don't know." Coop was quiet. Then the knocking started up again. "It sounds like it's coming from the other side of the room."

"There's only a sink with a couple of cabinets under it over there," I said.

Coop walked over to the sink. "It definitely sounds louder over here."

Coop reached down and opened one of the cabinet doors. There were a few bottles filled with liquid inside but nothing else. He opened the next set of doors and found some cleaning materials. The knocking continued. Finally he opened the last cabinet door and I heard him shout out.

"Dang! You're not going to believe this!"

"What is it?" I asked. "I can't see anything. You're blocking my view."

Coop stood to the side and I saw inside the cabinet a miniature version of the magic shop. Standing in the small doorway was a tiny Toby. He was only a few inches high and he definitely didn't look very happy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WE'RE NOT OUT OF THIS YET

Toby was definitely angry. That was super clear to me when he began to speak. It was obvious by the look on his face that Coop could not understand what Toby was saying. Because Toby was so small Coop was unable to hear his tiny voice but I could pick up on his thoughts easily enough. I could also sense that he was keeping something a secret and he was trying hard to keep me from finding out what it was.

Finally Toby took a few steps out of the cabinet and he began to grow. Once he reached his normal size it became much easier for Coop to hear him.

"Why did you summon us?" Toby shouted. "I was right in the middle of something very important! You called on us before I could finish! You're going to regret it if I don't get back in time!"

"Hey," Coop said. "This is important. It's about Sid. He needs your help. He's trapped in the body of a merboy!"

Toby looked in my direction.

"So what do you want us to do about it?" Toby asked. "He got himself into this mess and he should get out of it by himself."

At that moment the wizard entered the small doorway. He was almost as small as Toby had been but like Toby he grew to his normal size when he entered the room.

"Now Toby," the wizard said. "It is their right to use their cards in any manner that they desire." He turned to me. "However, there was no need to summon us since you were entitled to return to the shop without it. It is the third day and you are permitted to choose another item for purchase."

I didn't know what the heck he was talking about. Coop looked confused,

too.

As the wizard spoke he lifted his hand and muttered some strange incantation. As soon as he was done casting the spell the image of the wizard slowly materialized back onto the blank card in Coop's hand.

"I have reactivated your card," the wizard explained. "Make sure you use it when you are in desperate need of me and not when you wish to visit my shop. When you have need of my shop and it is the proper time, it will come to you."

"I don't care about any of that," Coop said. "I just want Sid back to his normal self again."

"We might have something to accommodate you," the wizard remarked after some thought. "Toby, please go and retrieve the item in the glass jar on the second shelf behind the register."

"He's not going anywhere without me," Coop said. "I don't trust him. How do we know he's going to bring back the right thing?"

Toby looked at the wizard and the wizard nodded his head. Then Toby and Coop went to the cabinet and as they approached it they both shrunk in size until they were small enough to enter.

The wizard walked over and stood in front of me.

"My, my," he said. "It appears that you have been busy since we last met."

"You can say that again," I replied.

"Yes, I could, but I have no desire to," the wizard said. "Both you and your brother appear to be doing well in the worlds beyond the prime world, but you are both still lacking the skills necessary in this one. But that comes with time and experience and if there is one thing you both have it's time."

"But why are we being sent to these other worlds?" I asked.

The wizard stroked his beard for a few moments before answering.

"You may compare it to one of your schools," he finally replied. "Part of it is a learning experience and yet another part is a test. A select few are sent to the worlds beyond, and even fewer return. You met one of the unfortunate ones in the last world you visited."

"You mean Allianna? The sea witch?"

The wizard nodded. "Yes, but Allianna was not her real name. In this world she was known as Leah, and I had some misgivings about sending her beyond, but she and a friend created a minor disturbance in my store and I felt a trip for them both would help resolve the issue."

"What did they do?" I asked.

"They both tried to, hmmm, what is the word for it here?" The wizard waved his hand and a book suddenly appeared and floated in front of him. The pages began to flip until they stopped on a specific page. The wizard glanced down at the page and nodded.

"Shoplift," he replied. "Are you familiar with the word?"

"Yeah, of course, they tried stealing something from you."

"Exactly," the wizard replied. "So they were both sent to separate worlds but only one returned. She learned a lesson from the experience and was free to return home. She was one of the luckier ones. There are those who have traveled to the other worlds and returned as something less than what they were."

"Physically or mentally?" I asked.

"Both." The wizard was solemn. "Although you take another form when you visit those worlds, everything must stay in alignment. The balance between worlds must remain constant or else chaos will seize control. So whatever happens to a body in one world, also happens to the body you left behind."

It was then that I noticed that I couldn't sense anything from the wizard with my telepathy. No matter how hard I tried I wasn't able to pick up any of his thoughts.

"What kind of a wizard would I be if I allowed you to read my thoughts?" he responded, having clearly read mine.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

He smiled. "A wizard can do more than just cast spells my young friend. But our time for chatting has come to an end. I see that Toby and your brother have returned."

Coop was walking towards us and Toby was a couple of feet behind him. Toby had a very sour expression and I could tell that Coop must have said something to him that he didn't like. Coop, meanwhile, was carrying a small glass jar with a slimy jelly fish-type of creature inside.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Coop asked, staring at the creature.

"We must put it into the tank with your brother," the wizard replied. "Toby, do you feel capable of doing a simple levitation spell?"

Toby's demeanor changed when he heard that.

"Yes sir, thank you," he said gratefully.

Toby raised one hand in the air and made several gestures as he repeated a couple of nonsensical words. Slowly the jar moved out of Coop's hands and gradually floated up above the top of my tank. Toby made one final gesture and the jar spun around spilling the contents into the tank with me. The small creature floated in front of me for a second and then it started to move around.

"Nothing's happening," Coop said. "He's still a fish."

"Half fish!" I corrected him.

"The transformation will not occur until your brother has completed his part of it," the wizard advised.

"Me? What am I supposed to do?"

"You merely have to digest the creature in order to regain your normal body," the wizard told me.

"Digest it? You mean, like eat it?"

"I believe that is the correct definition of the word."

I stared at the nasty looking thing. "Gross! No way!"

"Magic sometimes requires a little sacrifice," the wizard noted.

"Come on, Sid," Coop said. "You can do it. Just think of it like one of our school lunches. They're pretty gross, too."

Coop was right; a lot of our school lunches were pretty awful looking. But not anything like this! At least they didn't move when you tried to eat them. Well, maybe Tuesday's mystery meat did but only a little.

Fortunately the creature wasn't moving very quickly so I was able to grab it without any difficulty. It felt very slimy in my hands.

"In order for the transformation to work you must digest the whole creature," the wizard said.

"The whole thing?!" I shouted.

The wizard nodded. Toby was looking a little too happy right now. He seemed to be enjoying this way too much.

I looked at the creature and thought about how much I wanted to be back in my normal body. But as I brought it a little closer to my mouth I started to change my mind. Maybe we could find another way to change me back.

"There is no other way," the wizard thought.

"Stop reading my mind!" I angrily thought back.

"Hurry up Sid," Coop said. "We've got to get out of here!"

I closed my eyes and without any more hesitation I pushed the thing into my mouth. I thought that it would taste totally gross but instead it had a sweet taste to it like a candy bar.

Once I swallowed the entire thing I felt a rumbling in my stomach. I opened my eyes and things began to happen. My muscular arms began to shrink in size and the muscles began to disappear. I also saw my tail start to change color and shape. Very quickly my toes and feet began to take shape, followed by my legs. It was at this moment that I noticed that I was having difficulty breathing. I swam to the top of the tank and popped my head out. I took a deep breath of air.

I climbed out of the tank, dropped to the floor and sat there for a minute taking nice long deep breaths. I noticed that I had my regular street clothes on and not my superhero suit. My clothes were sopping wet but I didn't care. I had my normal body back and I was glad to have it. I looked down and saw that I was wearing Alpha once more.

Coop helped me to my feet, even though I didn't need his assistance.

"It's a good thing that tank didn't have a lid to keep you inside," Coop said.

I shook my head. "They figured it wasn't necessary because even if I could get out there was no place I could go. I could only breathe underwater."

"How about changing Coop back to his normal body," I asked the

wizard. "If you can change me you should be able to change him."

"You have received your one item from my shop today," the wizard said. "You are not allowed another until tomorrow. At that time you may choose something that will change your brother back, or you might decide on something you desire more."

"That's not fair," I protested. "The only reason we chose that item is because I was stuck in a body I didn't want."

"Then why did you wish for it?" the wizard asked.

"I didn't mean to! I mean that I was thinking of..." I was so flustered that I couldn't get the words out.

Coop put his hand on my shoulder. "That's okay, Sid. I don't mind being in this body. It's got some neat benefits."

"Like what?" I asked.

"I think Taylor likes me and she thinks this is what I really look like. I don't think that she would like me if she saw me in my normal body."

The wizard interrupted Coop. "Remember what I told you, my young friend. For the life you lead reflects upon you, and the deeds you do are a reflection of you, and all that you do always reflects upon you."

With that, the wizard and Toby turned and headed back to the small entrance to their magic shop.

"Aren't you going to help us get out of here?" I called after them.

They both continued to walk to the entrance and as they did they started to shrink. Then I heard the wizard's final words.

"I cannot help you any further today. Your friends are more than capable of assisting you."

A few seconds later they were several inches high. They entered the cabinet and closed the door.

"Should we go after them?" Coop asked.

"It won't do any good," I sighed. "If you open the cabinet door again I'm sure the shop will be gone."

"Affirmative," Alpha said. "Energy readings and the space time continuum have returned to normal."

"It's good to hear your voice again, Alpha," I said.

"Yeah, well where is Taylor?" Coop asked. "She should have been back by now. I hope that nothing has happened to her."

"I detect one life form heading in this direction," Alpha reported.

"There you go, Coop," I said. "She's okay. It probably took her longer than she expected. But she's coming back now."

"How do I look?" Coop asked. "Do I look okay?"

"You look fine," I said. "You're not the one standing around in sopping wet clothes."

Then I had a brilliant idea. "Alpha, can I power up?"

"Power level three and four are obtainable," Alpha responded.

"Okay! Power up, level three," I commanded.

A second later Alpha was gone and I was wearing my blue and white superhero outfit, but at least it was dry.

"I thought I would get a different outfit like you did when you went to a different power level," I said to Coop.

"It looks a little different," Coop replied. "The symbol on your chest has changed."

I looked down but it was hard to make out what the symbol was. At that point I heard someone enter the room. I looked up expecting to see Taylor, but instead I saw a large security guard pointing a gun at us. In the past few days I've seen more guns pointed at me than I ever thought I would see in a lifetime.

The guard pulled a walkie talkie from his belt with his free hand and spoke into it.

"Sector four reporting," he said. "I've located two minors in a restricted area. I am bringing them in for questioning."

I looked at Coop. "That's not Taylor."

"Duh!"

"Do you want to take him on or should I?"

"You're already powered up," Coop said. "Give it a try."

"I don't know what my power is in level three."

"Now's a good enough time to find out."

I wasn't sure how to activate my power. The first time I used it in level one my power activated by itself. Eventually I learned to turn it on and off by thinking about it. I decided that it might work if I concentrated hard enough. It was hard to concentrate with the guard pointing his gun at us so I closed my eyes and tried to forget about him. Instead I thought as hard as I could about powering up. I could feel my body begin to tingle. A second later I heard Coop gasp. I opened my eyes and he was staring at me.

"Did something happen?" I asked. As soon as I said it I noticed how funny my voice sounded. It was very warbled like someone trying to speak underwater.

"You can say that again," Coop whispered in shock. "You're all water now."

"What?"

"Your whole body is made of water. I can see right through you!"

I raised my hand. My hand and arm were all water. First I changed into smoke and now water! I wondered what my other power levels were. I didn't have much time to think about that because a moment later the angry guard began shouting at us.

"What the hell is going on?" he screamed.

I started to walk towards him but it felt more like I was gliding across the floor. It was a weird sensation. In school I learned that three quarters of the human body is composed of water but now mine was one hundred percent

water and it felt very different from what I was used to.

The nervous guard was now pointing his gun straight at me. He was shaking.

"I'm warning you, stay where you are!"

I kept moving towards him. The closer I got the more he shook.

"Stay away!" he cried. "Stay away!"

He fired his gun. The bullet passed right through my body, but I didn't feel a thing and I kept moving. He fired several more times and each time the bullet went through me without any effect. Finally he threw his gun at me. It splashed right through my chest. I wondered why he did that. Since he saw that bullets had no effect on my why would he think that throwing a gun at me would have any effect?

"What are you?" he croaked, overcome with fear.

I was close enough to touch him. I raised my watery hand to his face. He backed away towards the door, never taking his eyes off me.

Suddenly a hand reached out from the hallway and stabbed him in the neck with a small needle. The guard went limp and fell to the floor. A second later Taylor entered the room. She looked at me and shook her head.

"You two don't stay in one body for very long do you?"

"Power down," I said. A moment later I was back in my normal body. I don't know how but my clothes were now dry.

"You're not a fish anymore," Taylor said.

"Half-fish!" I replied. "No thanks to you. You were supposed to stop the guards from getting in here. Where were you?"

She looked down at me. "I was busy. That guard wasn't the only thing I had to take care of."

"How did you knock him out?" I asked.

She opened up one of the small pouches on her belt and pulled out a small dart.

"It's a tranquilizer dart," she said. "I used them on the guards to get us in here. But I'm almost out. This is my last one. How did you get turned back to normal?"

"Sid came up with the idea of using one of our manga cards and summoning the wizard," Coop replied.

"Actually it was Coop's idea," I said.

"Really?" Taylor was impressed. "That's some pretty smart thinking. And you told me that Sid was the brains of your outfit."

"He did?" I said in disbelief. I wasn't used to Coop saying nice things about me to anyone.

"Yes, when we were on the other world he talked about you all the time," Taylor recalled. "He admires his little brother."

I wanted to tell her that we were the same age but Coop gave me a look and shook his head. I decided to keep quiet about it for now.

At that moment we heard a voice coming from the unconscious guard's walkie talkie.

"Ben, report status," the voice commanded. There was a long pause and we heard the voice again. "Report status, Ben. Ben, are you there?"

"What do we do?" Coop asked.

I picked up the walkie talkie and handed it to Coop.

"Here, pretend you're Ben and answer him."

"What do I say?"

"I don't know. Say hello or something."

Coop pressed the button on the side of the device and spoke in a lower voice.

"Hello, uh, this is Ben. Everything is okay here. Uh, I got everything under control. So, uh, don't worry and stuff."

Coop released the button and looked at me.

"Do you think it worked?" he asked.

Suddenly alarms started to sound and red lights on the ceiling began flashing.

I shook my head. "Crappers! I don't think so."

Taylor, Coop and me ran out of the room and down the corridor. There were flashing lights and alarms wherever we ran. I looked down at Alpha.

"Alpha, can you do anything about these alarms?"

"Negative," Alpha replied. "We are too far from that system to disable it."

We ran down yet another corridor.

"Does anyone know where we're running to?" I asked.

"I'm following Taylor," Coop replied.

"I'm following Sid," Taylor said.

I stopped running and a second later they did also.

"I don't know where we are," I said. "I was unconscious when they brought me to that room. I thought you guys knew where we were going."

Taylor pointed to a door down the hall. "There's a stairwell over there. That's got to go somewhere."

We went into the stairwell and we heard someone coming down the stairs a few floors above us. We ran down the stairs hoping for the best.

"Can you activate Beta and use one of your power levels?" I asked Coop.

"I'll try! Beta, power up, level one!"

"Sorry, sugar, you really need to spend some time charging up," Beta replied. "The best I can do is level four. But be careful, your power reserves are very low right now."

"It's better than nothing I guess," Coop said. "Okay, power up, level four."

Instantly Coop was transformed back into the jungle type body that he had when he first broke into the lab. The spear was his only weapon.

"You can change into smoke and get out of here," Coop said to me.

"I thought of that. But I'm not going to desert the two of you. We're going to get out of this together or not at all."

We made it to the bottom of the stairwell and I tried opening the door. It wouldn't budge. Coop tried helping by adding his weight to the door but it still wouldn't open. The footsteps above us were coming closer. Finally Taylor added her weight to the door and it banged open.

We ran into a large hot room filled with pipes and lots of different machinery, some of which had steam seeping out of them.

"What is this place?" Coop asked.

"It looks like a furnace room or something," I replied.

Taylor cautiously walked around the room. "I think there's someone else here."

At that moment the person who had been chasing us down the stairwell came bursting through the doorway. It was an overweight security guard, huffing and puffing from all the running he had done. At first I thought he was going to have a heart attack because his face was beet red and he was gasping for breath. I guess the sudden exercise was more than he could handle. He slowly raised his gun and pointed it in our general direction.

"Stop... where... you... are..." he wheezed. "I've... got... you... covered..."

"We don't have time for this," Taylor said. She reached into her pouch and pulled out a tranquilizer dart and threw it at the guard. It hit him in his large neck and he looked stunned for a moment. Then he plopped to the floor like a large sack of potatoes.

"Good goin'!" Coop cheered.

"Yes, but that was my last dart," Taylor said.

I suddenly felt a little uneasy and I turned around to find out why.

"That's okay," I said. "I don't think darts are going to work on that."

I pointed at the large figure before me. It was the robot that I saw earlier in the laboratory. Its red eyes were staring down at me almost like he remembered me.

"What is that?" Coop asked.

"It's a robot that Mr. Killingworth's people created. I saw it earlier when I snuck in here. But it's not supposed to move by itself. It needs someone working the controls."

"Quite right," a voice said. Mr. Killingworth and Isaac, one of his technicians, appeared from behind a large boiler. Isaac held a remote control in his hand.

"You and your friends have created quite the disturbance today," Mr. Killingworth growled pointing a pudgy little finger at me. "First you break into a secure room without detection and now you've knocked out most of my security guards."

Coop turned and gave Taylor a high five. "I told you we took down a lot

of them. You thought we only got about half."

"I thought he would have more security guards on duty," Taylor said. "I only counted twenty."

"Twenty one," Coop said. "Don't forget the one you got in the bathroom."

Taylor laughed. "I forgot about him. Did you see the look on his face when he came out of the stall and saw us with his pants down?"

Coop laughed. "Yeah, I wish I had a camera then."

"I am pleased that my men entertained you so well," Mr. Killingworth said. "It will make your last moments more pleasant."

Mr. Killingworth snorted a nasty little chuckle and pointed at us. "Isaac, dispose of them."

Isaac pressed a few buttons on the remote control and the robot roared into action. It raised its arms and grabbed me before I could even move. I struggled but it did no good. I could feel its strong metal fingers pressing into my arms as it lifted me off the floor. Small trickles of blood ran down my arms as it squeezed deeper into my flesh.

I knew that I only had a few moments left before it finished me off. I didn't know what Coop or Taylor could do to save my life. I began to feel like this was the end of my adventure.

Then I heard Mr. Killingworth scream. He was paralyzed with fear. He had his arm out and he was screaming at Isaac.

"Get it off me!" he cried in terror. "Get it off me now!"

Distracted from his duty of eliminating me with the robot, Isaac ran over to Mr. Killingworth.

"What is the problem, sir?" a nervous Isaac asked.

"Can't you see?" Mr. Killingworth asked. "There! On my arm! Get that disgusting thing off of me!"

Isaac took a close look at Mr. Killingworth's arm and shook his head. There was a tiny little spider on his sleeve.

"I only see a spider there, sir," he sheepishly replied.

"That's it! That's it!" Mr. Killingworth yelled. "Get it off me! I abhor spiders!"

Isaac brushed the spider off Mr. Killingworth's arm. Mr. Killingworth stared down at it in horror.

"Kill it!" he commanded. "Step on it!"

Isaac stepped on the spider. Seconds later Mr. Killingworth returned back to his normal wicked self.

"Say nothing of this to anyone," Mr. Killingworth told Isaac. "If you do, losing your job is going to be the least of your problems."

Isaac returned to the robot's controls. I felt its grip intensify. The pain was severe and it was hard keeping my mind off of it. I looked at my bloodied arms and saw that the blood had also gotten onto Alpha. Then I realized that I did have a way out of this mess.

"Alpha," I managed to say through the pain. "Power on, level four!"

And just as quickly as it had begun, the pain disappeared as my body transformed to water. The robot lost its grip on me and I flowed to the floor. It took me a few seconds to get oriented and when I did I could see the robot now advancing towards Coop. Taylor tried a few karate kicks but the robot didn't feel the blows. The robot was much stronger than Taylor, even in her current body.

Then a strange thing happened. Both of the robot's hands detached themselves from the rest of its body. They hovered in the air for a few seconds and then they flew at Taylor. From the smile on his face I knew that Mr. Killingworth knew more of the robot's secrets than I did. I wish that I had learned more about the robot in the lab before I was discovered.

Taylor somersaulted out of the way of the hands just in the nick of time. Even though the robot was handleless it still was able to wrap its arms around Coop and hold him tightly against its chest. Coop struggled but it looked like even at power level four he was no match against his assailant.

There wasn't much that I could do to help Coop or Taylor against the robot, but I had to do something anyway. I saw that Isaac had all his attention on the robot's remote control and the battle with Taylor and he had forgotten all about me. I carefully made my way over to him. I thought that I might be able to short out the remote control with my watery body. I was just a couple of feet away from him and was about to grab the controls when I saw my hands change back to normal and Alpha reappeared around my wrist.

"Power expended," Alpha said. "Automatic power down complete."

"Crappers!" I cried. "You couldn't wait just a few more seconds?"

"Negative," Alpha said. "System recharge in process."

I noticed that Isaac was still too involved in working the controls and still had not noticed me. I decided to grab the remote away from him, even if I couldn't short it out I could still prevent him from using it against us. I was about to reach for it when I heard Alpha again.

"Warning! Threat level increasing!" Alpha said.

I looked at the robot. It was still holding on tightly to Coop and trying to pummel Taylor with its flying hands.

"What threat?" I asked. "The robot's busy over there."

I felt two fat but strong hands grab me.

"That's true," Mr. Killingworth said. "But I'm right here. And now you're going to tell me everything I want to know about yourself and your friends over there."

"You can't make me," I said. "I'll tell my father!"

Mr. Killingworth laughed. "There won't be enough of you and your friends left for anyone to be able to identify."

For such a roly poly man he definitely had a very wicked laugh. If I had access to my power I knew that I could escape his grasp but being stuck in

power down mode I was limited to what I could do. Then I thought about the manga cards.

"Alpha, can you do card activation?" I asked.

"Affirmative," Alpha replied.

I knew that I had three cards left but I could only remember what one of them was, and that was the black mystery card. I didn't want to activate that one yet so I decided to active one of the others.

"Card activate!" I commanded. "Any one but the black card."

There was a sudden intense flash of light and a few seconds later I was able to see again. And then I wished I couldn't, because I saw that I was standing on the edge of a roof ledge looking straight down from at least ten stories high!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT'S A GOOD LIFE

Normally I'm not afraid of heights but let me tell you, when you are standing on a ledge staring down several hundred feet I don't think there is anyone who wouldn't be a little freaked. I don't know how long I stood there frozen with fear before someone suddenly yanked me back off the edge.

I fell on my butt and looked up at two colorfully dressed figures that were staring down at me. Even though it was night I could still make them out in the moonlight. One was an older boy with dark blue hair wearing a green superhero costume that had several gadgets attached to his belt. The other was a short red haired girl around the same age wearing a purple costume.

"Are you okay?" the girl asked.

"Crappers, what do you think?!" I said still shaking. "Someone pulls me off a high ledge and throws me on my butt. How do you think I feel?"

The dark haired kid looked at the girl and smiled.

"Yep, that sounds like Sid," he said.

"Is that you, Coop?" I asked.

He held out his hand to help me up.

"Of course it is, small fry. Next time try speaking a little nicer when you talk to Taylor."

I got to my feet and looked at her. Taylor's hair was the same color as back on Earth, but she looked different. Maybe it was the superhero costume she was wearing or something.

"I'm sorry," I said to her. "I just wasn't expecting to be standing on that ledge after I activated the card."

Taylor smiled. "No problem."

Then I remembered where I had seen Coop and Taylor's new bodies before. They had been on one of my manga cards.

"We must be in a world where you two are superheroes," I said. "You were both on one of my manga cards. Taylor is Princess Power and Coop is Hap-Hazard."

"Hap-Hazard?" Coop said. "What kind of a goofy name is that?"

"I don't know. That's what it said on the card."

"So this is a superhero world?" Taylor looked at me. "That explains the way that you are dressed."

"Huh?"

I looked down and saw that I was also attired in a colorful superhero costume. I had on a blue shirt and red tights with blue and white boots. There was also a giant letter Y on my belt. I didn't know what it stood for, maybe my character's name.

"So what's your name here?" Coop asked.

"I don't know. This character wasn't on the card, just the two of you."

"You took quite a fall," Taylor said. "Are you hurt?"

"No," I replied. "Actually I didn't feel a thing. I mean, my butt hit the roof pretty hard but I didn't feel anything. Maybe I'm invulnerable."

"Let's see if you are," Coop teased as he punched me hard in the arm.

"Hey!" I said.

"Oww!" Coop cried out, tucking his punching hand under the opposite arm. "It was like hitting a rock!"

"Did you feel anything, Sid?" Taylor asked.

I looked down at my arm. "Nope. If I hadn't seen him punch me I wouldn't have known that he even tried."

"That's not fair," Coop complained. "With all these muscles I should have super strength."

"Maybe you do," Taylor said. "But it won't make a difference if Sid is invulnerable. That means nothing can harm him."

I liked the sound of that. "Finally an adventure where I can't get hurt. Cool! I wonder what else I can do?"

Coop grimaced in pain and shook the hand that he hit me with. "Isn't invulnerability enough? At least you got an idea what you can do. Taylor and me don't have a clue about our powers."

"The card said that every one of Princess Power's rings gives her a different power," I recalled. "But she can only use one power at a time."

"Really?" Taylor was surprised. "I wonder how I can get them to work."

She turned the ring on her right index finger and a yellow glowing disc appeared under her feet. Before she could say anything the disc lifted her several feet into the air. It took her a few seconds to balance herself but she quickly got the hang of it and within seconds the disc was flying her around the rooftop. Finally the glowing disc safely landed her a few yards away from us.

When the disc touched the roof it disappeared.

Coop ran over to her. "That was so cool! How did you do that?"

"I'm not sure," Taylor said. "I just thought about where I wanted to go and it took me there. The hardest part was keeping my balance on it but then my gymnastics training automatically kicked in and it was a breeze."

"Too bad it's only big enough to carry one person," Coop said. "And I still don't know what power I got."

He walked over to a wooden door that must lead to the stairway down and he punched it in frustration. The door flew off its hinges.

"Crappers," I exclaimed. "Did you see that? That was awesome!"

"Yeah I saw it," Coop grimaced, shaking his hand. "And I felt it. Isn't there anything I can hit and not feel pain?"

Before anyone could reply we suddenly heard a cry for help from the street below. We ran over to the rooftop's edge, but before I started to look down I saw the weirdest thing. High in the sky above the city was a gigantic floating platform with an enormous building shining brightly on top of it. It was brighter than the moon. I didn't know what was keeping it up there, but before I could think anymore about it I heard another scream from below and I looked down. In the street below we saw a group of street thugs who were attempting to rob a young couple and their son.

Taylor was the first to spring into action. She twirled the ring on her right index finger and the glowing yellow disc reappeared under her feet. She hovered a few inches in the air.

"I'll meet you both down there," she said as she flew off the rooftop and headed down.

"Last one down is a smelly fart," Coop laughed as he jumped onto the nearest fire escape and ran down the stairs.

I was just about to follow him when I had an idea. Since I was invulnerable, I should be able to jump off the roof and land safely on the sidewalk below.

It would be the first time that I beat Coop in a race and I knew he wouldn't like that. It took me a minute to get up my nerve once I decided to take the plunge. I hopped off the ledge and plummeted downward. On the way down I passed by Coop who was still only halfway down the fire escape. I smiled and waved as I went by and he had the funniest surprised look on his face. As the sidewalk raced up under me I started to wonder if this really was such a great idea after all. A few seconds later I didn't have anything to worry about. My feet hit the pavement with a thunderous boom and aside from the noise the only other thing that happened was that I had created a hole about a foot deep in the sidewalk. I hadn't felt a thing, but I did gain the attention of the street gang.

I brushed off the dust from my costume as I surveyed the scene. Taylor was flying around on her glowing disc trying her best to keep several gang members away from their victims. I was just about to engage one of them in

battle when Coop finally made it down.

"That's no fair," he protested, totally out of breath. "You cheated. You're not supposed to jump down."

"You never said I couldn't," I bragged. Coop had never lost a race to me and he definitely wasn't happy about it.

He was about to reply when I saw one of the thugs running up behind him. I shouted out a warning and Coop spun around and punched the guy right in the stomach. The man fell to the ground clutching his gut.

"All right!" Coop cheered, no longer out of breath. "That's what I'm talking about! Finally something I can punch and not hurt myself."

He immediately ran after the group of thieves who were busy attempting to knock Taylor off her disc. She looked a little relieved when Coop began punching away at them. He definitely had strength on his side. Taylor was doing her best to lead the gang away from their intended targets. The man they tried to rob was holding tightly to his wife to protect her and she in turn was busy clutching their young son.

Then I saw that one of the gang had pulled a gun from his jacket and was pointing it in Coop's direction. I was too far away to reach the crook but I was close enough to Coop to do something. I ran towards him and got directly between him and the guy with the gun. I heard the shot and although I couldn't feel the bullet I did see it bounce off my chest and fall to the ground. He fired several more times at me with the same result. Then one of the other gang members slapped him in the side of the head.

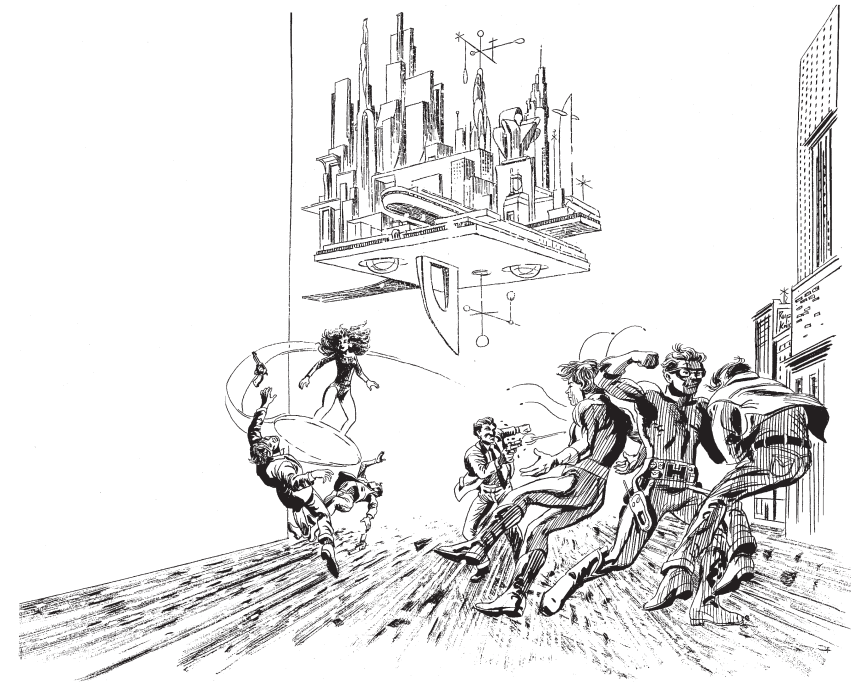
"What's the matter with you stupid?" the man who hit him said. "Don't you know who that is? That's the Yankee Youth! You can't hurt him with bullets! He's indestructible, you dope!"

"Sorry boss," the guy with the gun replied. "We don't have anyone like him back in Megamax City. You can shoot our Supers."

A couple of gang members had piled up on Coop and he was having a difficult time attacking them all. I didn't know if I had super strength but I couldn't let them get away with that so I started swinging away at them. I didn't knock any of them down with my punches but I think I cracked a few of their ribs. They probably didn't like being hit by an invulnerable object.

I looked over and watched Taylor fly by one crook and kick him right in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Pretty soon between the three of us there were more crooks on the ground than there were attacking us. I've never done this good before in a fight and I was really enjoying myself. It was like when I was on the merpeople's world helping the merboys who had gotten caught in the sea witch's traps. It felt good helping out someone who needed my help. I could now see why the crime fighters in comic books did this for a living. It was fun.

Then I heard some police sirens heading in our direction. The thieves heard them too and scrambled into a nearby van. The one with the gun jumped



into the driver's seat and hit the gas pedal. They roared away.

By the time I made it over to the shaken couple Taylor was already there talking to them.

"I don't know how to thank you," the man said to us. "This is our first visit to New Kroy and it is one that my wife and I will not soon forget."

Their son who looked to be about six years old, just stood there staring at the three of us. His father must have noticed this too, and he picked up the frightened young boy.

"It's okay, Burton," he said to his son. "These young people are heroes. They help protect people like us."

"You'll have to excuse him," the man said. "He's never seen a real Super in person. He's got action figures of his favorite Supers, but I'm afraid we don't have any Supers fighting crime in our small town."

"That's fine," Coop stammered. "It's, uh, part of the job. If you'll excuse us, we've got more, uh, crime to prevent and we have to, uh, finish our patrol."

The man reached into his pocket and handed Coop a business card.

"If you are ever in our neck of the woods, please stop by for a visit," he said.

The police cars were getting closer. I knew we needed to get out of there before they arrived.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go."

I ran off and headed around the corner. I was running at normal speed so I knew that superspeed wasn't one of my powers. As I ran I was puzzled to see the lights in several buildings flashing on and off. I was about a block away before Coop and Taylor caught up with me.

"What's up Sid?" Taylor said as she flew past me on her disc. "Why were you in such a hurry to get away?"

I stopped running. "I don't know. I just wanted to get away before the police arrived."

"We're heroes!" Coop said. "We don't have to worry about the police."

"Yeah, I know," I replied. "I was afraid that they would ask a lot of questions and we don't know too much about this place yet."

At that moment a sleek black limousine pulled up and beeped its horn. None of us moved and a few seconds later the driver's window rolled down and a familiar looking man popped his head out of the car. He looked exactly like Doc back in San Antonio. The only difference was that his hair was spiked up. He was busy chewing gum and he had just finished blowing a huge bubble that suddenly popped.

"Are you three dudes going to hang out here all night or do you want a lift home?" he asked.

The back door popped open. Taylor deactivated her flying disc and we cautiously entered the car. I've never been in a limousine before but if this is what they were like I could definitely get used to it very quickly. There was a large flat panel monitor between us and the driver and a small refrigerator and microwave to my left.

"Is it my imagination or did that guy look just like Doc?" I asked.

"Yeah, it looked like him," Coop answered. "But it can't be him? Can it?"

"Probably not," Taylor said. "I've had it happen a few times on other worlds where I will see people who look just like people from back home but it's just their double."

"Double?" I asked.

"Some worlds have inhabitants who are exact doubles of people we know back home," Taylor said. "They look like them but they don't act like them."

The car took off and suddenly the monitor popped to life and Doc's face filled the screen.

"It sounds like you dudes had a successful night," he said.

"Uh, yeah," Coop replied. "We rescued a man and his wife."

"Extremely cool," Doc said. "Did you catch his name? I can add it to your list of exploits dude."

Coop pulled out the business card and read it over.

"It says Doctor Seymour Pknose," he said.

"And don't forget his son," Taylor said. "I think his name was Burton."

"Got it," Doc said. "Seymour and Burton Pknose."

"Burton Pknose?" I said. "What a strange name. Isn't that a weird name Doc?"

"Doc?" the driver replied. "Who's Doc. No Doc here, dude. Just me. Loyal and faithful Benny. Oh and uh, dudes, you told me to tell you when they were going to televise that super special about you super guys. It's comin' on in a couple of minutes. Do you want me to patch it through to you?"

"Sure," I said. I had no idea what Benny was talking about, but I hoped that whatever it was we were about to watch would help answer some questions about the bodies we were now in.

I pulled out a soda from the fridge as Benny's face - or was it Doc's - disappeared from the monitor and was replaced by a newscaster. He was talking about the recent power fluctuations. He assured everyone that the public had nothing to worry about. From what he was saying it sounded like the large platform that I saw floating in the sky was actually the source of power for the city. No, not the city, but the whole world. This totally automated plant converted a combination of solar energy and cosmic radiation and transmitted it to similar platforms all around the world. The newscaster was now interviewing the inventor of the whole thing, a Professor Smartypants. Were they kidding? Was this guy's name really Smartypants? He must have been picked on constantly when he was growing up. Anyway, this Professor Smartypants said that the system was designed to fight off any unauthorized entry so there was no chance that it had been sabotaged. He believed that the power fluctuations were caused by a gizmo that needed resetting. He was heading up there right after the interview to fix the problem.

A few seconds later his image disappeared and was replaced with a picture of the three of us and the words 'The Triumphant Trio.'

None of us said anything as we began watching the special. It started off by telling the history of superheroes, who were known as Supers. It started over a hundred years ago when an alien ship arrived on this world. Before the aliens left they had genetically changed a random portion of the population by giving them superpowers. Some of the people used their abilities for good while others decided to use theirs to rob and steal. The ones who fought crime were called Supers and the ones who used their powers to steal were called Crims and that is who we spent most of our time fighting.

Then it began talking about the three of us. It seems that my power of invulnerability is a rare ability. Normally it is just as easy to kill a Super as it is to kill a normal person. And so the mortality rate is pretty high for Supers and not many live to a ripe old age. All six of our parents died when we were very young and we became wards of the state. A few years ago when our powers began to develop the three of us banded together and formed a group called 'The Triumphant Trio.'

I sat mesmerized as I watched various clips from our former battles. It seems that we've fought a good number of Crims. They briefly mentioned a

few of the worst Crims that we've encountered and several of them had some pretty weird sounding names such as Easy Sleezy, Floral and Lardy, Corporal Punishment and the Ghastly Ghoul. It was hard to believe watching all of this that such stuff was normal activity in this world.

There were Triumphant Trio fan clubs, cartoon shows, toys, a line of clothing with our names and faces and they were just opening up a Triumphant Trio theme park. It mentioned how much money we've made this year from merchandising. We were extremely rich!

None of us had a secret identity. I guess that's why none of us had to wear a mask. Only a few key state officials knew where we lived. It went on to say that we were home schooled because our presence in a normal school would cause too much of a disruption.

The rest of the show dealt with a segment showcasing each one of us separately. Coop, who in this world fought under the name Hap-Hazard, was the oldest and was regarded as the team leader. His parents died trying to rescue people from a burning skyscraper when he was only five years old. He had super strength and it was believed that as he grew older he would continue to get stronger. He hadn't yet reached his full potential. In addition to having super strength he also used various devices that he wore on his belt. These devices were constantly being created by the government for his use and every time he went out he had a different set of things to test for them.

As I already knew because of the manga card, Taylor was known as Princess Power. Her story started off pretty much like Coop's. Her parents also died trying to rescue a family when she was toddler. The rings that she wore originally belonged to her parents. They each had five rings and after they died the government tried them out on other candidates but the rings wouldn't work for any of them. Finally when she was old enough the government returned them to her and she discovered that she could utilize their many powers. She now uses all of them in her battle against the Crims.

My own parents died a few years ago at the hands of a group of Crims called 'The Triple Threat.' I was what they referred to as a random factor. I didn't inherit the same powers that my parents had. Most Supers do, but once in a great while a Super is born with a new power and I was one of them.

Just as the show was ending the limo came to a stop and the door swung open. Doc, or Benny as he was called in this world, held the door and the three of us got out. We found ourselves standing in a large underground cavern.

"Hope you dudes didn't mind the long ride," Benny said. "I took the scenic route just in case we were being followed."

Taylor looked around in awe. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Home sweet home," Benny said. "Safe and sound. You dudes got some time to change before dinner is ready."

We followed Benny out of the cave into a large tunnel. The tunnel took us into another cavern. This cavern was bigger than the first one and it was

filled with numerous trophy cases and souvenirs from our many missions. I slowly walked by them and saw little plaques attached to each one. I saw an ordinary looking canvas bag and the plaque said it was confiscated from The Bagman on a particular date. There were many more things like that displayed around the room, each one with a Crims name attached and a date. I hoped that I would have the chance to find out more about these missions.

We stopped in the center of the cavern which was mysteriously empty. I noticed that around the cavern walls were many doors each with a different symbol on it. Three of them must lead to our rooms because I saw large letters Y, P and H on three of them.

I walked over and opened the door to my room. It looked like a typical boy's hangout. There were books and games scattered all over the place but the best thing that I saw was a large monitor on the wall. It must have been over a hundred inches! I rummaged through some stuff on my bed until I found a remote control. There were a ton of buttons on it and none of them were marked.

I pressed the top button and a panel in the wall slid open. I walked over and peered inside. It was a closet filled with over a dozen superhero costumes, all my size. I rifled through them and saw that they were all red, white and blue but they were all different styles. Then I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Sorry dude, I thought you had already changed for dinner."

I turned around and saw Benny in the doorway.

"Uh, no, not yet," I replied. "I was just looking for something. But I can't find any regular clothes."

"Regular clothes?" Benny asked.

"Yeah, you know, street clothes. No costume."

"I can try to find you some street clothes, but you always wear a uniform," Benny replied.

"Why do I have so many different ones?" I asked.

Benny laughed. "Dude, just because you're indestructible doesn't mean your uniforms are. Sometimes I wish they were. It would make my job much easier. They complain because I put in too many requisitions for the three of you for new ones. But you guys keep tearing through them. Tonight is one of the few nights all three of you have come back with no rips or tears."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess it was a pretty light night for crime."

"I don't know how you little dudes do it everyday. I've got the easy job, taking care of you three until you come of age. But hey, dinner's getting cold dude. Do you need more time?"

I threw the remote control on the bed. "No, I'm fine. Let's go."

I followed Benny out of my room. The lights in the complex flickered several times before we eventually went through another door where I saw Coop and Taylor seated at a large round table. Like me, Coop hadn't changed clothes, but Taylor had. She was now wearing a pink costume with giant boots.

I sat down in the empty chair and a few seconds later Benny brought out three plates loaded with fried chicken. It wasn't until I took the first bite that I realized how hungry I was.

But it didn't stop there. Benny returned a minute later carrying six large pizzas, each one with a different topping. He put them on the table and left the room again only to return with a large pan filled with lasagna. He kept going back and forth and each time he came back with large quantities of food.

Before I knew it I had finished off ten pieces of chicken and I was ready to dive into the pizzas. I usually eat two or three pieces of chicken but at that moment I felt like I could eat everything on the table. Coop must also have been hungry because he ate everything as quickly as I did. Strangely enough, Taylor only ate a couple of slices of pizza and nothing else. Finally we finished all the food that Benny had brought in, including dessert.

Coop leaned back and belched. "That was super! Thanks Benny."

Benny started to clean off the table. "No problem, dude. Was everything okay? I didn't have time to prepare everything you like. I hope it was enough."

"Enough?" I burped in astonishment. "You made enough food to feed an army."

"Yeah," Benny said. "I'm glad I don't have a super metabolism that requires me to burn off so many calories like you two dudes. Good thing Double P's powers aren't physical like you two dudes because I'd be cooking all day for the three of you."

I yawned. I was starting to feel a little tired and I noticed by the clock on the wall that it was almost midnight.

"Why don't you dudes hit the sack?" Benny said. "I've still got some things to finish up here. I'll see you in the morning."

I think Coop and Taylor were also tired because neither one said very much on the way back to our rooms. When I was in mine I took another look at the large bed that took up one side of the wall. It felt weird having a room all to myself. All my life I've had to share a room with Coop and this was the first time we've slept in separate rooms. In a way it felt nice because I could turn on the monitor and watch television before I fell asleep. I flopped down on the bed and finally found the right button that turned on the set.

I don't remember falling asleep but I must have because the next thing I knew I was suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by a blaring alarm. I sprang out of bed and stumbled out of my room. It's a good thing that I fell asleep in my costume because I was still in it when I ran into the trophy area where I found Coop and Taylor.

Taylor was also dressed in the superhero costume that she wore earlier. I guess that Coop must have gotten undressed for bed because he was standing there half asleep and still in his underwear. I don't think he realized it yet.

Benny came running into the room wearing a psychedelic bathrobe. He pulled a small device out of his pocket and pressed a button. Suddenly a hole

opened in the center of the cavern floor and a large console rose out of it. It had tons of blinking lights and I hoped that we weren't expected to know how to operate it. It finally stopped moving after a minute and it must have been about four feet high.

Coop rubbed his eyes and yawned. "What's going on?"

"Not sure yet, dude," Benny said. "Your help is needed somewhere. I haven't found out where yet. Oh, and by the way dude, you might want to get dressed unless you want to fight Crims in your tighty whiteys."

Coop looked down and then over at Taylor. "Dang!" he said. He blushed and raced back into his bedroom.

Benny worked a few controls on the console and a large holographic image of a bank appeared above it. It looked so real, I was tempted to touch it.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Someone set off the alarms at the New Balance Bank," Benny replied.

As I watched the holographic image I noticed that the large metal front doors had either been blown off or ripped off.

"Who could have done that?" I asked.

"It's still too early to know for sure," Benny continued. "But all indicators point to The Bagman!"

"The Bagman?" Taylor asked puzzled.

"Yes, that fiendish felon," Benny said. "Whenever he gets in a fix he reaches into his bag of tricks."

At that moment Coop ran back into the room. He was wearing a different costume from before. It was probably the first one that he found and had quickly changed into. I could tell that he was anxious to get started.

"What did I miss?" Coop asked. "What's going on?"

"A bank is being robbed," Taylor said.

"By someone called The Bagman," I added.

"Awesome!" Coop smiled. "How far away is it? How soon can we get there?"

"It will take too long to get you there by limo," Benny said. "Double P can get there under her own power, but you two dudes can use the Hoppers."

"Hoppers?" I asked.

"A new experimental gadget the Govs sent over last week," Benny explained. "You were supposed to test them out but I kind of forgot about them until now."

Benny ran over to a large box and started rummaging through it, tossing out several strange looking gadgets until he finally held up two pairs of strange looking boots with extremely thick rubber soles.

"These fit over your shoes and once you program your destination into them they will automatically take you there," he said. "Or so they say."

After we strapped on the boots Benny led all three of us to an exit. Stepping outside I saw that we were in the country somewhere. It was so

peaceful and quiet. A full moon shined brightly above us which was a good thing because it would have been totally dark outside without it.

Taylor activated her ring and the yellow disc appeared. She hopped on it as I looked at Coop.

"You ready?"

"Yep," he replied. "Let's go!"

We activated the boots and I heard could hear a slight hum emanate from them.

I started to take a step. "What nowwwwwwwwwwwwwww!!!!!"

I screamed as I was suddenly catapulted into the air in mid-step. Before I knew it I was twenty feet in the air and I was quickly heading downward. As soon as my foot hit the ground I took off, again bouncing into the air. I was having a very difficult time keeping steady as I bounced higher and higher with each step. I flapped my arms wildly trying to maintain my balance.

Then I was startled to see someone next to me in the air. It was Coop. I had forgotten that he had on the same goofy boots.

"The next time you land put both feet on the ground," Coop yelled at me. "After you unexpectedly took off Benny told me that you can't walk in these things. You have to hop with both feet."

"Now you tell me," I said.

Up until that time I only managed to put one foot down before taking off again. I struggled to lock both legs together and brace myself for another landing. When both feet hit the ground I bounced again but this time it was much easier. I was able to maintain my balance and it felt more like a hop than a bounce. The next few times that I landed I used both feet to take off again and the whole bouncing thing started to get easier. It was like a wild game of leap frog with Coop and me hopping along.

The boots were programmed to take us to the bank. Since Taylor didn't know where it was she followed closely behind us on her floating disc.

Before too long we were approaching the city. I saw an impressive structure that looked familiar. As we drew nearer I recognized it as the bank we had seen on the holograph machine back at our lair. It was definitely the right bank because I could see the large metal doors that had been ripped off their hinges. I saw a few police cars parked in front but I didn't see any policemen outside.

I looked over at Coop and pointed at the building. He nodded.

"Do you know how to stop hopping in these things?" I asked him.

Coop shook his head. "I forgot to ask."

We were quickly approaching the bank and I couldn't figure out how to stop hopping. At this rate we would hop right past it.

"I got an idea," Coop said. "Why don't you try landing on your butt? If your feet don't touch the ground you shouldn't be able to hop."

"Me? Why should I land on my butt? Why don't you?"



"Because you're the one who is indestructible."

Coop had me there. The bank was a half block away and I was heading back down again. I knew it wouldn't hurt but I was still not sure if this was the best way to go. At the last moment I raised my legs and landed butt first on the ground. I hit the sidewalk pretty hard and I didn't stop immediately. The momentum kept me tumbling down the street, knocking over several trash cans in the process. I finally came to a stop when I hit a building. I looked down and other than a little garbage that had stuck to me I was in pretty good shape.

I took off the boots and got to my feet. I was tempted to throw them in the nearest trash can but I held on to them just in case we had to return them. I looked around for Coop and Taylor but I didn't see them anywhere. As I walked to the bank I brushed off some pieces of garbage that were stuck to my costume. I noticed one or two small rips in it. I hoped they wouldn't get worse since I didn't have a change of clothes with me.

I made it to the front steps of the bank. I looked up the long flight of steps and saw two familiar figures at the top. Coop and Taylor were standing there. Coop laughed when he saw me. I ran up the stairs.

"How did you get here ahead of me?" I asked. "How did you stop?"

"I figured the boots would stop automatically once they reached their destination," Coop replied. "And I was right. My last hop landed me right here and then the boots shut off."

"If you thought of that why did you let me land on my butt and crash into those garbage cans?" I said.

"For two reasons," Coop said. "First, because I knew you wouldn't get hurt by doing it. And secondly to pay you back for jumping off that building and beating me down to the street when we first arrived in this world."

I felt like knocking that smirk off Coop's face but before I could react, Taylor stomped her foot.

"Enough of your games," she said. "We've got a job to do. You don't want to be stuck in this world forever, do you?"

"That wouldn't be so bad," I replied. "It is kind of neat here. I've got super powers and tons of money and I get to beat up the bad guys every day. I could get used to it."

"But it's not your life," Taylor cautioned. "It's someone else's. Eventually you would tire of it and want to return home but it would be too late by then. You would be stuck here forever."

I thought about Leah and how she had been trapped in that body on the merpeople's world. It probably started off fun for her, too, but she stayed too long and she came to regret it. Now, thanks to me, she would never get back.

"Yeah, you're right," Coop said to Taylor. "I just enjoy teasing my little bro sometimes."

"I am not..." I began to shout, but I stopped when Coop gave me that look of his. He was still afraid that Taylor wouldn't like him if she knew we were

the same age. I kept quiet for now but I didn't know how long I would be able to keep it up.

We cautiously entered the bank. We walked past empty desks and teller counters with no signs of any intruders or police.

It was then that we heard a noise coming from a room behind the teller counters. It was filled with cabinets and desks and there was an enormous open vault at the far end.

I was wondering who had opened the door when I heard Taylor gasp. She pointed to something on the floor. I looked down and saw a half dozen policemen lying in front of us. Even though I couldn't see any blood it was a pretty shocking site. It was so eerie seeing them just lying there. I was certain they were dead. I was about to turn away when one of them moved slightly. Taylor also saw it and she grabbed Coop's arm.

"One of them is alive!" she cried.

"Actually, I don't think any of them are dead," Coop said.

"What?" I said. "How come?"

"Listen," he said. "Do you hear anything?"

At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but then I heard it. It was very soft but I recognized the noise right away. It was the sound of people snoring. The guards weren't dead, they were just sound asleep. Somehow they had all been made to sleep at the same time. This must be what it was like to go up against someone else with superpowers. You can never predict what you are going to encounter.

I was a little nervous but also a little anxious because this was going to be my first battle with a Crim. The first gang we fought were non-super powered people. But this Crim had super powers and he was going to be tougher to fight.

Then I heard a voice come from somewhere.

"Have more guests come to the Bagman's party? I hope they don't turn out to be more party poopers. I do so hate party poopers."

I couldn't see who was speaking but his voice sounded very familiar. I looked around trying to spot him. The only other people in the room were Coop, Taylor and the sleeping police on the floor.

Then he suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He was standing in front of the open vault laughing at us. In his right hand he held a large canvas bag and in his left hand he gripped a bag overflowing with cash. As soon as I saw the Bagman I knew why his voice was so familiar. The Bagman was our Dad!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT'S IN THE BAG

A quick look at Coop and I could tell that he was just as astounded as I was to see that the Crim was Dad.

"What's the matter?" Taylor asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Worse," Coop replied. "The Bagman is our Dad."

"What?" Taylor asked.

I pointed to the Bagman. "That's our Dad. How did he get here?"

Taylor shook her head. "It's not him. It's another duplicate. Remember I told you that you will see people who look like someone you know but it's not them."

The Bagman laughed. "What's wrong? Don't you want to come to my party? I thought all kiddies liked parties!"

He dropped the bag of money, reached into the canvas bag, pulled out a blue ball and he tossed it in our direction. It landed about a foot away from me and, before we could react, it exploded. If it had been a grenade it would have killed Coop and Taylor. I'm not sure what it was, but the instant it blew up we were engulfed in tons of brightly colored streamers and confetti. There was so much of the stuff that I couldn't see Coop or Taylor. It took a minute or two before it all settled to the floor and I could see again. Both Coop and Taylor were covered from head to toe with confetti. I glanced back at the Bagman.

"Let the party begin!" he laughed.

He grabbed the sack of money and took off.

"Can any of your rings stop him?" Coop asked Taylor.

"I don't know," she replied. "I've only tried one of them."

She twisted a different ring and suddenly she disappeared.

Coop turned his head looking in different directions. "Where did she go?"

"I didn't go anywhere," Taylor said. "I'm right here."

"I don't see you," Coop replied.

"Me neither," I added.

Right then Coop jumped.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Something pinched me on the butt!"

"That was me," Taylor said. "I'm right here. Can't you see me?"

"No," I replied. "One of your rings must make you invisible."

Suddenly Taylor reappeared.

"That's a great power," she said. "But it's no help to us right now. Let's worry about the other rings at another time. The Bagman's getting away!"

We ran off in the same direction as the Bagman right to the back door into an alley. We saw the Bagman arguing with a woman dressed in a dark blue uniform. Like Coop she also wore a belt with small pouches attached to it.

Taylor froze.

"What's up?" I asked.

"That woman he is talking to looks just like my Mom," she gasped.

I shook my head. "This world is full of duplicates from our world. I wonder who else we're going to see."

"They're arguing about something," Coop said.

"We need more money, you fool," the woman complained. "Go back and get more!"

"I can only carry one sack of money," the Bagman insisted.

"You could carry more if you left that stupid canvas bag behind," she said.

"Never!" The Bagman clutched the canvas bag close to his chest. "I would never leave my bag of tricks behind. It took me a long time to find a replacement after losing my last one to that tactless Triumphant Trio."

"I will take care of those troublesome tykes," the woman said. "They will succumb to my power."

The Bagman laughed. "You have no power. You are not a true Crim. Your talent comes from science and your powder. Without it you are nothing!"

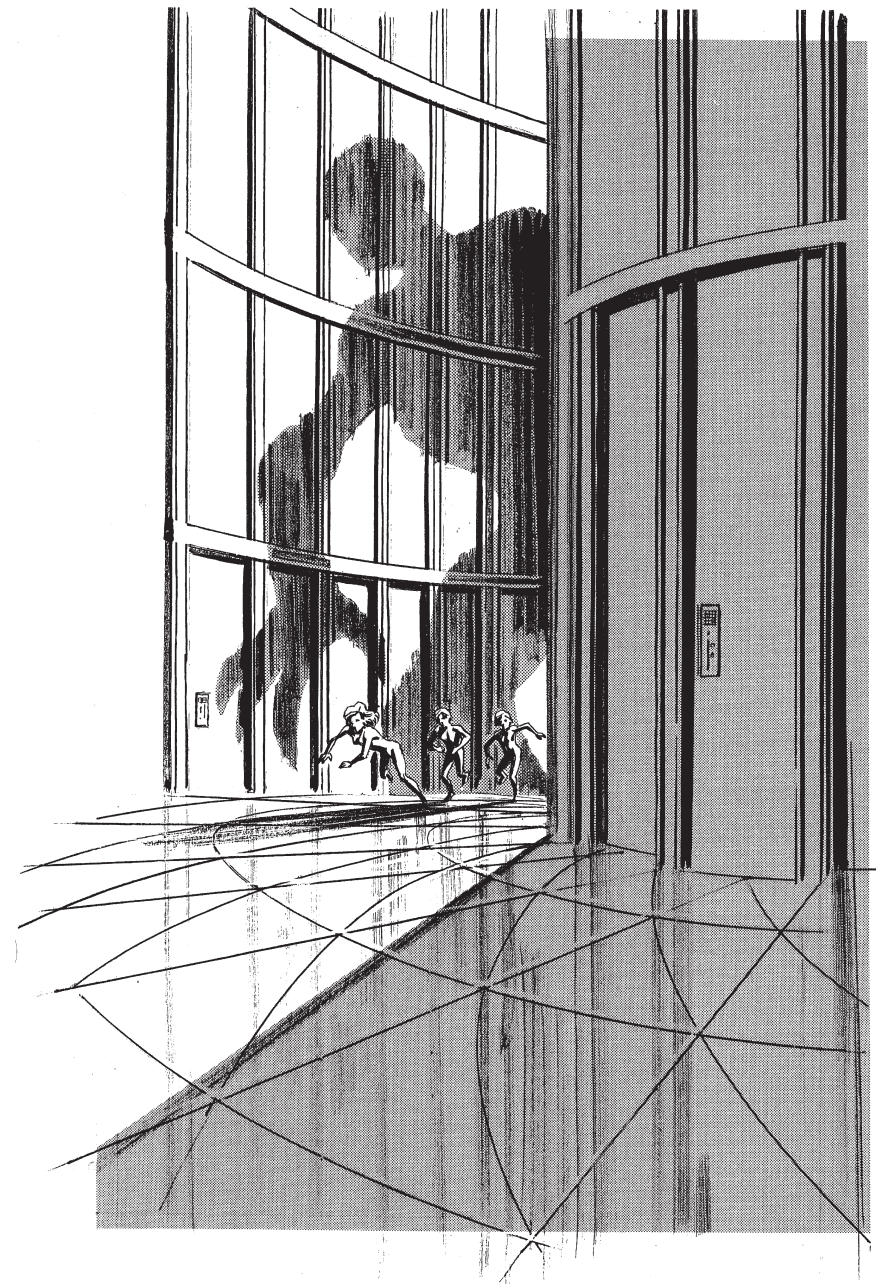
The woman raised her hand and swiftly scratched the Bagman on his cheek with one of her long fingernails. A trickle of blood ran down his face.

"I am still more than a match for you!" she said. "Now go!"

The Bagman scowled and reluctantly turned back to the bank. It was then that he noticed us.

"Ah, the toddling tots," he said with a nasty chuckle. "I was afraid that you weren't going to stay for the rest of my party. Now the fun and games can commence."

He reached into his canvas bag and pulled out a small clown doll. He



wound it up and placed it on the ground. It quickly walked down the alley to me. I picked it up and looked at it. I thought it might be a bomb, but I wasn't worried, seeing as I was indestructible and all. Besides, it looked pretty harmless.

"Every party needs a clown," the Bagman laughed.

Sure enough, as soon as he said that the doll exploded in my hands. I was unharmed but after the smoke had cleared I saw that the explosion had knocked Coop and Taylor to the ground and the Bagman had returned into the bank.

I saw the woman who looked like Taylor's mom standing across the alley. She had picked up the sack of money that the Bagman had left behind and she was walking away from us. I wanted to run after her but I figured I should check out Coop and Taylor first. They were a little dazed but they weren't hurt.

"Hey, you!" I yelled at the woman. "Stop! You're under arrest."

She stopped and turned around. She had a smile on her face that looked like she was up to no good.

"Arrest me for what?" she asked. "All I did was pick up a sack that I found in the alley. There's no crime in that is there?"

I slowly walked towards her. She was right on that point. She hadn't actually robbed the bank. The Bagman did that.

"Well I'm sure you must have done something wrong," I said. "I'm just not sure what that is. But I'm still gonna arrest you."

She sighed and looked at her watch. "It's getting late and I've got places to go to."

With that she opened up one of the leather pouches on her belt and pulled out something that looked like a fine powder. "Time for Betty Bye to send you beddie bye," she teased. Then she flung the stuff in my direction.

Just before the powder hit me I was knocked to the ground. I looked up and saw that my assailant was Coop.

"What's the big idea?" I asked. "She can't hurt me with anything. I'm invulnerable!"

"Yeah, but not to that," Coop said. "That stuff doesn't hurt you, it puts you to sleep. Taylor told me. She read about this lady back at the lair."

Coop yawned. "Her name is Betty Bye and she puts people to sleep with a powder in her pouch." Coop yawned again.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Coop yawned once more. "I think some of that stuff hit me when I knocked you down. But I'm okay."

I looked up at Betty Bye. "If you weren't a woman I would hit you right now."

She reached into another pouch and was just about to fling the contents at Coop and me. "How sad for you that you are a gentleman," she teased again.

"But I'm not!" Taylor exclaimed as she suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She was floating on her glowing disc next to Betty. She swung her foot at Betty and kicked her right in the arm. The contents of Betty's hand went flying in the other direction as Coop and me stood up. Coop was unsteady but I was fine.

"You two go inside and take care of the Bagman," Taylor said. "I can handle Betty Bye on my own."

I was ready to head back into the bank when I noticed that Coop and Taylor were staring at each other and they both had goofy grins. I had to punch him in the arm to get his attention.

"You coming or what?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure."

Coop waved goodbye to Taylor and the two of us ran back into the bank. It wasn't hard locating the Bagman since I figured he would head right to the vault. He hadn't noticed us because he was too busy trying to break into a large safe deposit box. He was using a small drill on the front of box unsuccessfully trying to open it. We watched as the drill sputtered and went dead. The Bagman looked at it for a second and then dropped it to the floor where there were a few small mounds of clay lying around his feet. He reached into his bag and pulled out an identical drill and he continued to work on opening the safe deposit box.

Then a strange thing occurred. The drill that he dropped to the floor began to transform. It started to change color and lose its shape. A few seconds later it resembled the other lumps of clay on the floor. Coop was about to yell out to the Bagman but I stopped him. I knew what the Bagman was up to but I wanted to know more about him. It was so peculiar that the first Crim we had to fight looked like our Dad.

A minute later the new drill that the Bagman was using also sputtered and went dead. He dropped that one to the floor and he reached into his bag again pulling out yet another drill. Just like the last one, the old drill began to transform and change into a lump of clay.

"Did you see that?" I whispered to Coop.

"Yeah, he's trying to break into that safe deposit box," Coop whispered back.

"No, not that. Everything he's pulled out of the box stops working after a minute and then it changes into a lump of clay. Look at all the lumps by his feet."

"So what?" Coop protested. "I say we go get him!"

At that moment Coop charged into action and went running towards the vault. The Bagman turned in our direction and laughed when he saw Coop coming at him. He dropped the drill and reached into his bag. It was a few seconds before he pulled his hand back out of the bag. It looked like he was busy thinking of something. Then he pulled out a black ball and he threw it.

Coop didn't have time to dodge the sphere and it impacted against his chest. The ball broke and a black goo poured out and began to wrap itself around Coop. Within seconds it expanded until it completely covered Coops body from the neck down. He was a few feet away from the Bagman when he suddenly stopped and started to raise his arm as if to swing it at the Bagman. But try as he could he wasn't able to raise his arm any higher. He struggled to move his legs but they were also frozen still.

"A fun little toy," the Bagman said with an evil grin. "Once it encircles its captive it solidifies and you are completely immobile. The effects don't last long but they will last long enough for me to escape."

"I'm still here to stop you," I said defiantly.

"Oh yes, the youngest of the group," he sneered. "And just how does the toddler expect to stop me when his older companions couldn't? I can reach into my bag and pull out anything I need to combat you."

I started to walk towards him. "Yeah, you can," I said. "But it only lasts a minute before it turns into a lump of clay. And without that bag you are nothing. You can't do anything to me without it. I'm invulnerable and you're not."

I continued to walk towards him. I was a few feet away from Coop who was still trapped in the black goo. The Bagman started to reach into his bag.

I cleared my throat and pointed upward. "And while we've been talking Princess Power snuck in here and is floating above you right now," I said.

The Bagman didn't know that Taylor was busy in the alley battling Betty Bye so he looked above him trying to spot her. As soon as his attention was off me I raced towards him and knocked him to the ground. His bag fell to the floor a little bit away from us. I got in a few good punches before he pushed me off. I rolled a few feet away from him.

When he got to his feet he started to scan the floor. I held his canvas bag in my hand.

"Is this what you're looking for?" I asked.

"Give it back to me," he demanded. "Children shouldn't play with grownup things. Besides it won't work for you."

"I know," I said smiling. "But it won't work for you either if you don't have it."

He lunged towards me intent on grabbing the bag. I jumped back just in time. I started to run. He gave chase but I was faster.

"You can't keep this up forever," the Bagman said.

I saw a door ajar on the other side of the room. I ran towards it and dove inside. Unfortunately it was a small supply closet. I turned to leave but the Bagman was now blocking the doorway. He reached over and snatched the canvas bag from my hand.

"Someone's been a very naughty boy," he laughed. "I think you need a time out."

He reached into his bag and pulled out a small alarm clock with a burning fuse on the top. He chuckled as he prepared to toss it at me. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind. He had barely turned around before he was punched in the face. He twirled around several times before he finally fell to the floor unconscious. His canvas bag lay on the floor a few feet away with the alarm clock bomb right next to it. I saw Coop standing in the doorway smiling. He still had a few flakes of the black goo clinging to his costume.

"Did you see that?" Coop was beaming. "One punch and he was out!"

I looked at the bomb that was about to go off.

"Yeah, that's great, but we need to get out of here," I replied. "That thing is about to blow up!"

Coop easily picked up the still unconscious Bagman and we both ran for the exit to the back alley. Just as we made it to the doorway the bomb exploded and the force blew us all outside.

Coop and me were knocked to the ground by the explosion and it took us a minute to get back on our feet. The Bagman was still unconscious. Just a few feet away we saw Betty Bye tied up nice and neat.

"Great job, Taylor" I said. I then looked around and realized she was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Taylor?" I asked Coop.

"I don't know. Maybe she had to go somewhere else for a minute."

"Like where?" I asked.

"How should I know? She probably had to go to the bathroom or something."

"Yeah, right," I said. "Like when is the last time you ever saw Superman or Batman go to the bathroom in the middle of a battle."

I saw one of Betty Bye's pouches lying on the ground next to her. It must have fallen off when she was captured. I figured that I would show it to Benny later as a souvenir of our encounter. I picked it up and hooked it onto my belt.

It was then that Coop noticed a note attached to the ropes surrounding Betty Bye.

"Hey, look!" he said. "Taylor left us a note."

He silently read the note and as he did he began to frown.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Without a word he handed me the note. It wasn't from Taylor. The note said that Princess Power was their captive and if we wanted to see her again we had to meet them at a specified time and location. It was signed by Mr. Ease, the leader of the Triple Threat.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Three Times The Trouble, Three Times The Fun

There is no way I can describe how angry Coop was as we headed for the location where Taylor was being held prisoner. It was all I could do to keep him at the bank until the police arrived to take the Bagman safely back to prison.

It wasn't too hard to find our way, because the note said that she was being held at an intersection right in downtown New Kroy. I wanted to stop and get something to eat. Even though we had only eaten a short time ago I was already hungry again. But Coop wouldn't listen to reason; he said we had to go and rescue Taylor. As we walked I saw the lights go out in several buildings but this time they didn't go back on after a few minutes as they had before. They stayed off. I looked up at the floating power plant and wondered how Professor Smartypants was doing up there. I wasn't sure but it almost looked like the power plant was shining a lot brighter than before.

"How much do you know about the Triple Threat?" I asked as we made our way down the street. I must have interrupted Coop's train of thought because it took him a few seconds to respond.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"I asked you how much you know about the Triple Threat," I repeated. "If we're gonna have to fight them we should know something about them."

Coop just shook his head. "What's to know? We beat them up and we get Taylor back. It's that simple."

If there was one thing that I learned from our adventures so far is that nothing is ever simple, but I knew there was no reasoning with Coop right now. He was too worried about Taylor. I was also concerned about her but not in

the same way that Coop seemed to be.

We finally arrived at the specified location. Even though it was late at night there were still many people passing by. Many of them smiled and nodded at us as they walked by while others didn't seem to notice us because they were too busy talking on their cell phones.

Coop threw the note on the ground and stomped on it.
 "Okay, we're here!" he shouted. "Show yourselves!"

Nothing happened for a minute. It looked like Coop was about to shout again when we suddenly glimpsed some objects flying towards us from high above. As they approached I saw three red haired figures heading our way. A few seconds later they were much closer and I could see that two of them were just a couple of years older than I was while the third one was an older man with tons of muscles. They were all dressed in colorful uniforms and their capes flapped in the breeze as they stared down at us. It was then that I realized that none of us got to have a cool cape like they did. At first I thought they might be Supers coming to help. But I soon realized that they weren't because people on the street began to scatter as they flew down.

"Glad to see that the two of you can follow instructions," the older man said as he landed in the middle of the street.

The girl flew down and floated about a foot away from Coop.

"It looks like someone is in a grumpy mood," she said with a giggle. She put her hand on his cheek. "Maybe you need someone to cheer you up."

Coop took a swing at her but missed because she quickly flew back a few feet. She shook her finger at him. "Naughty, naughty, mustn't hurt poor little Atima, or poor little Super won't get his girlfriend back."

"What are you doing?" I asked him. "You can't hit a girl!"

"She knows where Tay..., um, Princess Power is," Coop replied. "I need to get her back."

The boy who had been flying next to Atima soared off and flew back a minute later holding an unconscious Taylor. He dangled her just out of Coop's reach.

"Is this what lover boy wants?" he said mockingly. "His little girlfriend?"

"Wait your turn, Corey," Atima said. "I'm not finished with him yet."

"Well hurry it up," he replied nastily. "I haven't got all night. I don't know how much time I've got left."

I wasn't sure what Corey meant by that, but before I could think about it I felt someone grab me from behind and suddenly I was no longer walking on the sidewalk.

"I hope you're not afraid of heights," Atima said. "Cause I don't fly low."

It was when she said fly low I thought back to the world of the Twiddles and the Twaddles. Fli-Lo had been Coop's name back on that world. I wished we were back there instead of this place. Things were a lot easier there. It seemed like the tasks were getting more difficult with every world we went to.



Atima lifted me higher off the ground and very soon we were soaring into the sky. I struggled as hard as I could but she continued to carry me dangerously close to several skyscrapers. Pretty soon we were flying high above the tallest building. She laughed and loosened her hold on me. I suddenly realized just how high we were. I had a feeling that she was going to drop me very soon.

Sure enough, she let go and I instantly began my downward plunge.

As I plummeted I suddenly realized that she had carried me away from the downtown area because I was now hurtling towards an empty baseball field. I don't remember what was going through my mind at the time but I do remember seeing Atima fly past me at a super speed and heading towards the stadium.

With the ground swiftly approaching I felt remarkably calm. I wasn't scared of what would happen because I knew that I was invulnerable. I just hoped that I wouldn't break anything when I landed on it. Luckily I landed near

third base and the only damage that I created was a major hole on the playing field.

I slowly climbed out of the hole and looked around the large empty stadium. It was pretty much like a baseball field back home. The field was surrounded by unfilled bleachers and there was a giant scoreboard a few hundred yards away.

Atima was hovering a few feet above the pitcher's mound. She didn't appear to be real concerned that I was walking towards her. Instead she was busy looking in the sky. I was about to call out to her when I saw some objects flying towards us.

When they got closer I saw Corey holding onto the rope that held the unconscious Taylor, while the large muscular man had a tight grip on Coop who was busy struggling to get loose. They seemed to be of equal strength which was amazing considering how very strong the older man looked. When they were a few feet above me the man released his grip and Coop fell to the ground right on the pitcher's mound.

Coop quickly got up and shook his fist at the man. His only response was to laugh at Coop.

Atima shook her head.

"This is much too easy," Atima said. "What's the matter? It's like neither of you is even trying to defeat us?"

Coop turned his attention back to Atima.

"What do you want?" Coop asked.

Before Atima could reply, the large man flew over to us and hovered a few feet above us.

"Power!" he said. "It's all about power! Power is control and one can never have too much power. And with you three meddlesome brats out of the way, my control will grow."

"Control over what?" Coop asked. He sounded really angry.

The large man laughed. "Everything! Control over everyone and everything! And not just control over this world. There are more worlds out there that need control."

"Your control?" I asked, sounding as snide as possible.

He laughed again. "Of course! After all, I know what is best for everyone."

I stared directly at him. "Not if we have anything to say about it!"

This got the biggest laugh yet out of him. "Big talk for a small boy! I know all about you. I've studied up on you and your teammates. I know all of your weaknesses!"

That surprised me, because I didn't think this body had a weakness.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "I'm invulnerable! I don't have a weakness. I can't be harmed."

"Not by force," he replied. "But I know your darkest secret."

He flew down closer until he was just a few inches away from me.

"I know that you carry a lot of guilt over the death of your parents. I know that you blame yourself for their demise and that you are terrified that your adoring fans will discover the truth about you! You will do anything to prevent the truth from coming out, won't you?"

I didn't know what he was talking about since I wasn't the real Yankee Youth of this world. So I didn't care what he knew or said because I wasn't bothered by it.

The large man just hovered there in front of me with a nasty smirk on his face. It was then that I remembered the pouch I had taken from Betty Bye that was still attached to my belt. I knew that I would never get another chance. I slowly reached towards the pouch and carefully opened it. I reached inside and grabbed the remaining amount of sleeping dust.

"What's the matter, boy?" the large man said. "No quick comebacks? No silly remarks? No final words? Very well. It's time for your demise!"

"It's not demise time," I said with a smile. "It's beddie bye time."

I flung the sleeping powder into his eyes. Before he could say anything else he yawned and fell asleep while still floating in mid air. I gently pushed down on his chest and he slowly sank closer to the ground with a smile on his face.

I felt pretty good. He was the biggest one of the trio and I had defeated him with no problem. I felt pretty confident that I would have no problems with the other two Crims.

"He took out Mr. Ease!" Corey exclaimed in amazement.

I looked around and saw that Atima was now going after Coop. He was trying to punch her but I could tell that he wasn't trying very hard, probably because we've always been told not to beat up on girls.

Suddenly Atima grabbed Coop's wrist and lifted him off the ground. Since he is bigger than I am she didn't seem to be able to lift him as far or as fast as she did with me.

"Coop!" I shouted. "Try using some of the things in your utility belt."

"I don't know what these things do!" Coop yelled back, flustered.

"Well, try some of them out! It can't hurt."

"It can't hurt you," Coop yelled again. "But it can hurt me!"

"Just hurry up and do it!" I cried.

Coop managed to release a few small pink pellets from his belt and he crushed them in his free hand. A small pink gas rose from his hand and floated into Atima's face.

Suddenly the expression on her face dramatically changed. The evil stare that she had been giving Coop was replaced with a silly grin. She grabbed hold of Coop's free hand and pulled him up to her until they were nose to nose.

I couldn't believe what I saw next. She placed her hands behind Coop's head and gave him a long kiss. At first Coop was too surprised to react and then he started to pull away. She resisted but he was stronger than her. She lost her

grip on Coop and he started falling to the ground. There wasn't anything that I could do to stop him from getting injured.

"Coop!!!" I yelled.

Just before he hit the ground Atima grabbed him and gently placed him on the pitcher's mound. I ran over to them.

"Are you okay?" I shouted. "I thought you were almost a goner!"

"Me too," Coop replied. "But she saved me for some strange reason."

Atima flung herself at Coop and tried to kiss him again but Coop pushed her away, struggling to keep her at arm's length.

"She's been like this ever since she sniffed that pink gas," Coop complained.

"It's like she's under some kind of love spell," I said.

Atima kept struggling in vain to get her hands on Coop. I could tell that she wasn't planning to beat the crap out of him.

"What are we going to do with her?" Coop asked. "If I let go she's just going to come after me. And we still haven't gotten Taylor back yet."

"I don't know," I replied. "Check your gadgets and see if you have anything that will help."

Coop fiddled around with his belt and two small green pellets fell out. The instant they hit they made two good sized holes in the ground. There was no explosion or noise, just instant holes.

Coop kept poking around and found a small tube. He opened it and some blue goo came oozing out. I grabbed it and pressed it between my fingers. It felt a little doughy and I was about to toss it on the ground when it suddenly hardened. The blue goo was rock solid and it was impossible to move my fingers because the goo had stuck them together.

I wasn't sure what we could use this stuff for— and then it hit me!

"Coop, you can use this stuff to tie her up and keep her from bothering us."

"Bother us?" Coop was bewildered. "It doesn't look like she even knows you are here. She's all over me!"

"Just use it on her hands and feet."

"I will if I can get her to stand still for a minute!"

"Well why don't you just tell her to stand still?" I said.

"Atima," Coop said sweetly, "If you stand perfectly still and do exactly what I say then I will give you another kiss."

Atima giggled in delight and instantly stopped her attempts to grope him.

"Now hold out your wrists and put them together," Coop instructed.

After she did, Coop quickly squeezed the tube and wrapped the gooey substance around her wrists. A few seconds later it hardened and Coop was busy repeating the process around her ankles.

"Instant handcuffs," he said. "That's a cool idea."

Atima stood there waiting for her reward. Coop was about to walk away

when I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Didn't you forget something?"

"What?" he asked.

"Her! You promised."

"Dang, do I have to?"

"Hey, you're the one that promised her, not me."

"Fine," Coop said as he quickly gave Atima a peck on the cheek. She giggled and just looked lovingly at Coop.

I held out my goo-encrusted hand.

"Can you help with this too, lover boy?" I laughed. I knew that I was going to have loads of fun taunting him about this adventure.

Coop just growled and squeezed my hand. The hardened goo crumbled away and I could move my fingers again. It was a good thing that I was invulnerable because I was pretty sure that he wasn't holding anything back when he crushed my hand.

Coop walked over where Corey was floating and holding Taylor. She was still unconscious.

"Release Taylor or you're next!" Coop warned him.

"Coop, her name in this world is Princess Power," I reminded him.

Coop continued to stare at Corey. "Whatever! Princess Power or whatever you want to call her, I want you to let Taylor go!"

Corey was stunned. He looked at Taylor. "Taylor?" he said. "No, it can't be her! Not here! Not now!"

Corey unexpectedly let go of Taylor and she fell a few feet with a thud. The fall to the ground woke her up immediately. Coop ran over to where she landed and started to untie her. Meanwhile, Corey kept zooming in and out trying to get a good look at Taylor. But every time that he got close to her Coop would just swat him away like a pesky fly.

Finally Taylor opened her eyes and smiled when she saw Coop kneeling over her.

"Are you okay?" Coop asked. "Did they hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," Taylor assured him. "Just a little sore, but nothing worse than what I feel after gymnastics. The last thing that I remember is standing in the alley behind the bank. I felt a sharp sting in the back of my neck and the next thing that I know I'm waking up here. What's going on?"

"The Triple Threat kidnapped you," Coop said. "I came to rescue you."

"WE came to rescue you!" I corrected. "Don't forget that I took out Mr. Ease all by myself."

"So what?" Coop replied. "Atima was a lot harder to beat than he was."

"Yeah, right, she's just a girl."

"A girl who beat you!"

"That's only 'cause I was so busy with other stuff that I didn't see what she was doing until it was too late," I said defensively. "But I could have defeated

her if it had been a fair fight. And besides, it's not over yet. We still got Corey to deal with."

It was then that Taylor noticed Corey nervously floating nearby.

"Did you say Corey?" she said in disbelief.

"Yeah," I said. "That's Corey. He's the third part of The Triple Threat that captured you. He freaked out when he heard Coop say your name."

"Princess Power?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, your real name. Taylor."

Taylor immediately got to her feet and marched over to Corey who was still floating about ten feet off the ground.

"Corey, if that's you I want you to get down here immediately!" Taylor demanded.

Corey slowly dropped down about a foot and then stopped, still hovering above her.

"If you don't come down here right now I'm gonna tell Mom and Dad on you," she threatened.

Corey slowly sank down to the ground. "All right, all right," he said. "But I didn't know that it was you. I swear."

"Taylor, do you know him?" Coop asked.

"Yeah, I know him," she replied, not taking her eyes off Corey.

"But we haven't been on this world long enough for you to meet anyone else," Coop said.

"She met Benny," I reminded him.

"Okay, so she met Benny."

"And that family we rescued when we first got here," I added.

"Yeah, okay and them too," Coop said. "But she's been everywhere that we've been and I've never seen him before."

"You haven't," Taylor said. "But I have. But not on this world. Back home."

"You mean he's a duplicate of someone from back home?" I asked.

Taylor just shook her head. "No, not a duplicate of someone. He doesn't look like this back there. Back home he looks like a little twerp."

"Hey!" Corey said.

"Who is he?" Coop asked.

Taylor smiled. "He's my brother."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHO DO WE HAVE HERE?

I stared back and forth in amazement at Taylor and Corey. I didn't even know that she had a brother. Coop looked just as surprised as I was.

"You didn't tell me you had a brother," Coop said.

"That's so weird," I added. "How did you know it was your brother and how did he get here?"

"I recognized him because the body he is in is just an older version of his normal body and he got here the same way we did, through something he got from the magic store."

"He knows about that place too?" Coop asked.

"Yes, he followed me there one day without me noticing him," Taylor said. "By the time I found out that he was there it was too late. He learned that the magic store was real."

"That's not all that I found out," Corey interjected. "There's something else I'll bet she hasn't told you about."

Taylor shot him a look that I've seen from Coop many times. It was the shut up before I kill you look.

"Was he in the other worlds with us?" I asked.

Taylor shook her head. "No, I would have noticed him. He usually messes things up and I have to save his butt."

Taylor turned and looked directly at Corey. "And you shouldn't be here now! How long have you been here?"

Corey just shrugged his shoulders. "A month or two, I think. I've been having too much fun to pay much attention to that."

"A month or two?" I asked. Then I turned to Taylor. "Didn't anyone

notice him missing?"

"A month or two in these worlds is only like a minute or two in ours," Taylor explained. "Remember, time doesn't run the same between the worlds. Your adventures have been so short that almost no time has gone by since you left."

We were so busy talking that none of us noticed that Mr. Ease had woken from his nap and was right behind Coop. He grabbed Coop and swung him around. It looked like Mr. Ease was just about to punch Coop in the face when he glanced at his arm and suddenly screamed like a little girl. He quickly released Coop.

"Coop, what did you do to him?" I asked.

Coop just shook his head. "Nothing. I thought he was going to punch me, but then he stopped."

"Get it off me!" Mr. Ease screamed. "Get it off me now!"

"What is he talking about?" Taylor asked.

"Can't you see?" Mr. Ease asked. "There! On my arm! Get that disgusting thing off of me!"

I looked closely and I saw a large black long legged spider crawling on his arm. Then it hit me. The whole time I had been talking to Mr. Ease he had reminded me of someone and now I knew who it was. Mr. Ease reminded me of Mr. Killingworth, even down to his fear of spiders. He just stood there terrified and screaming.

"Kill it! Kill it! Get it off me! I can't stand spiders!"

I pulled Coop and Taylor aside.

"You know what I think?" I asked.

Coop and Taylor just shook their heads.

"I think that's Mr. Killingworth from back home!"

"That can't be him," Coop said. "How could he get to this place without using something from the magic store?"

"I think he did, in a way," I replied. "Remember, he was holding on to me when Alpha activated one of my magic cards, so the magic card must have brought him here along with the rest of us."

"But he didn't look like this back home," Coop insisted.

"He doesn't have to," I said. "We don't look like this back home, either. It's how it all seems to work. Different worlds, different bodies."

We all watched Mr. Ease squirm in fear as the spider slowly crawled up his arm.

"I guess it's possible," Taylor mused. "But if it is him we have to get him back quickly before he creates too much trouble in this world."

"But how do we get him back?" Coop asked.

"The same way we get back from any world. We have to complete our mission and then we automatically get sent back."

"I still don't know what our mission is," I admitted.

"It's usually something different in every world," Taylor said. "Most of the time I don't know I've done it until I've done it."

"We could sure use a Guider right about now," Coop said.

At that moment we saw a burst of light illuminate the sky above us. The floating power station was sending out short bursts of light, each one momentarily lighting up the sky and making it seem like daytime. At the same instant we heard a strange beeping sound coming from somewhere nearby. One of the gadgets on Coop's belt was flashing along with the beeps.

"What's that?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Coop asked. "I don't know what most of this stuff is for!"

Coop detached the gadget from his belt and as soon as he had it in his hand it popped open and a small three dimensional image of Benny appeared floating above it. He looked extremely nervous.

"Jumpin' jetpacks, trio," Benny squeaked. "There is some mega explosive news on the scene! What have you dudes been up to? You should have reported back ages ago!"

"We ran into a little problem," Taylor said.

"Actually three little problems," I added.

Benny took control. "Forget about them. We've got a mammoth, colossal, world shattering problem to worry about. Have you dudes been noticing the activity emanating from the power plant?"

"Yes," Taylor answered. "Isn't Professor Smartypants up there now, fixing it?"

I chuckled. I still couldn't stop laughing when I heard someone say his name.

"He was," Benny replied. "And it's no laughing matter. He's toast. Literally."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's toast, fried, charcoal, and singed beyond belief. In other words, he's deader than dead."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was able to tap into the power plant's monitoring system and I watched his progress as he entered the facility. He made it safely past all the security systems but when he started to access the computer's main system he was struck by a barrage of laser blasts. They fried him to a crisp."

"That's awful!" Taylor gasped.

"So what do they do now," Coop asked. "Do they have a back-up plan?"

Benny shook his head. "Dude, Professor Smartypants was the back-up plan."

"What happens now?" Taylor asked.

"If that system isn't shut down soon, and I mean real soon, it's going to go into a major overload and that's going to cascade to all the connecting

power stations all around the world. The resulting explosions will cause a chain reaction that will burn off the entire atmosphere."

"Burn off the atmosphere?" I asked in amazement. "You mean no air to breathe?"

"That's what they are predicting," Benny said gravely. "No air means dead planet."

"Can't the three of us do anything to help stop it?" I asked.

"You've got to find a way to get up there," Benny said. "I wasn't expecting this and I've got your airship in for maintenance. And there's no airport close enough to you guys."

"Tay..., I mean, Princess Power can fly up there using her own power," I suggested hopefully.

Benny shook his head. "She would never make it past all the security features alone, dude. Sorry Princess. I don't know if even the three of you could handle this."

I looked over at our three captives and I suddenly had an idea.

"Why don't we get The Triple Threat to help us? They could fly us up there in time."

"They're Crims," Benny scowled. "They don't help Supers."

"They've got to," I replied. "If they don't they're going to die, too."

I turned to face The Triple Threat. Corey was floating a few inches away looking worriedly at Taylor. He was probably planning some way of getting out of this mess without getting into more trouble with his sister. Atima was still under the spell of the pink gas and she was busy making goo-goo eyes at Coop. Mr. Ease was still watching in terror as the spider slowly crawled up his arm.

"Did you guys hear that?!" I shouted at them. "We've got to stop fighting and work together!"

"Get this thing off me and we'll talk!" Mr. Ease replied.

Coop removed an empty capsule from his belt, scooped up the spider and put it in the capsule which he snapped back onto his belt.

"This might come in handy later," he said.

With the immediate threat of the spider gone, Mr. Ease's commanding appearance came back in full force. An evil smile overtook his face and he began to pound his fists together.

"Thank you," Mr. Ease said. "Now it's time that we finished this."

"Will you forget about fighting for a minute!" I commanded. "If we don't work together we are all going to die!"

Mr. Ease suddenly stopped pounding and his whole expression changed. He didn't say anything for a few moments and it looked like he was busy weighing all his options.

Finally he spoke. "I suppose you are correct. But this isn't over between us. Once we are done fighting this new obstacle we have a few things we need to settle. In the meantime, I will be in charge."

"No way!" Coop shouted. "You're a Crim, you can't be in charge!"

"I am older and smarter than you," Mr. Ease sneered. "I get to be in charge!"

"Oh yeah?" Coop replied. "We were smart enough to get past all your security guards back home and rescue Sid."

Mr. Ease's eyes widened in surprise. He looked at the three of us very carefully.

"So you are the three meddlesome brats who caused all that trouble for me and my men," Mr. Ease said. "And now you're in this world, too? There is a lot more to you than meets the eye. I am going to find out how you do all of these things and use them to my own advantage."

I punched Coop in the arm. "Good goin'," I said. "He didn't know all this stuff until you opened your big mouth."

"In any event," Mr. Ease continued. "I am the natural one to be in charge since I am the most powerful." He flexed his muscles and looked at them in admiration. "What a wonderful specimen of a body."

"Oh yeah?" Coop grumbled. "I'm just as strong if not stronger than you are."

Mr. Ease flew off and returned a minute later with a baseball bat and a bucket of baseballs.

"Watch this!" he commanded as he tossed three baseballs in the air and swung at each one, knocking them all into the top bleachers. He handed the bat to Coop. "Let's see you do better."

Taking the bat Coop threw three balls into the air and swung. The first ball went sailing right through the large scoreboard at the other end of the field. The second traveled low along third base until it hit the ground and was buried several feet in the dirt. The third ball went sailing out of the park and I could hear the sound of breaking glass in the distance.

Mr. Ease then lowered himself to the ground. He quickly did a dozen pushups and then he continued doing them with one hand.

Coop got on the ground and also began doing pushups but instead of using both hands or even one hand he did them using just one finger!

Frustrated, Mr. Ease rose to his feet and looked at his two teammates. "Come along, let's get this over with quickly. I've wasted enough time with these three."

I looked at Coop and pointed at Atima.

"You've got to set her free," I said.

"Wait! She's gonna try to kiss me and stuff again," Coop complained.

"You'll survive," I replied. "We need everyone to help out."

Coop reluctantly nodded and he crushed the blue cuffs that were around Atima's wrists and ankles. Once she was free she wrapped her arms around Coop, hugged him and flew him high in the sky.

Mr. Ease suddenly grabbed me and carried me skyward, too. Looking

back I saw Taylor create a floating disc which she hopped on. Then she started flying behind us. Corey was the last one to take off but he quickly flew past Taylor.

The light pouring out of the power plant was so intense that we had to shield our eyes the closer we got.

It wasn't long before we were almost at the floating platform where the power plant stood. We circled around the huge building trying to find some place to land. The enormous structure took up most of the space on the platform and there was nowhere on the power plant itself to land. Finally Taylor indicated that she spotted something and we followed her to a small area that was just large enough for us to land on.

An open metal door stood just a few feet away from us. This must have been the way that Professor Smartypants had gotten into the building. It was a small doorway and there was only room for one of us to go through at a time. I started to go through the doorway first but Mr. Ease grabbed me and pushed me aside. He was just barely able to get through the small opening. The rest of us followed. The corridor that we traveled down was just as narrow as the doorway and we had to walk slowly because Mr. Ease was having a hard time moving on account of it was such a tight squeeze for him, and all.

"This isn't too bad," Coop said. "At least we have a way of getting out of here if we run into any trouble."

At that moment the door behind us swung shut on its own and the lights in the corridor went out. We slowly continued walking forward since that was the only direction we could go.

"I don't like this place," Corey said behind me.

"Shut up, Corey," Mr. Ease and Taylor replied in unison.

"Don't worry," I added. "It will all be over soon."

"Yeah, but in a good way or a bad way?" Corey asked, his voice betraying his nerves.

"I don't know why I must be forced to deal with infants," Mr. Ease complained. "I can handle this on my own. There's nothing that I can't do in this body."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Then how come I was able to beat you so fast?"

Mr. Ease sputtered a nervous cough. "Ah, well, uh, that was because I am still getting used to all of the variables and appropriate responses to the various stimuli."

"What?" Coop said.

"It means he still doesn't know what he's doing," I explained.

Atima giggled. Coop jumped and yelled, "Stop that!"

"What happened?" I asked nervously.

"She pinched my butt!" Coop exclaimed. "Why are girls always pinching my butt?"

I was about to say something when Mr. Ease screamed. From the way

it sounded it seemed like he was moving away from us at a fast speed. I kept walking behind him and all of a sudden I felt the walls of the corridor disappear. Suddenly, the floor dropped out from under me and I started to go down some type of slide. I heard the shouts of the others as they also began their sudden descent.

We collided with each other at the bottom of the slide. Then the lights popped back on and we saw that we were in an extremely large room. The ceiling must have been over sixty feet high. The only door that I could see was on top of a very long flight of stairs across the room.

"This doesn't look too bad," Coop observed.

At that moment a panel opened up on the far right wall and a familiar shape appeared in the opening. It looked just like the robot from Mr. Killingworth's company back on Earth. As soon as it entered the room another robot appeared. Then a small line of robots walked through the opening. When the last one came into the room the panel closed.

"I count six of them," Coop said. "No problem."

I looked at him in disbelief. "No problem? How can you say that? We were fighting only one of them back home and it was whipping our butts!"

Coop flexed his arm. "Yeah, but we didn't have superpowers like this!"

The robots began advancing towards us. They all looked identical except for one detail. Each one had a different set of shining colored eyes. The one with red glowing eyes came towards me and the one with bright green eyes was advancing towards Coop. Mr. Ease was the closest to them and the one with yellow eyes almost got him before he flew into the air out of its reach.

"There is more than one way to skin a cat," Mr. Ease said with a chuckle. Suddenly a hole opened up in the wall and a small missile shot out of it heading straight for him. It didn't look like he noticed it and I started to shout a warning to him when I was suddenly hit by the robot with the red eyes. It didn't hurt me but it distracted me long enough so I didn't get to warn Mr. Ease in time. The missile hit him, knocking him all the way to the far side of the room. He fell to the floor. I saw that his two teammates didn't go over to see how he was; only Taylor headed in his direction. She got to him and nodded her head to let us know that he was okay.

I saw Coop hit his robot and he made a nice dent in it. Unfortunately, I could see that he had also hurt his hand. He yelled out in pain.

Corey and Atima were doing better. After seeing what had happened to Mr. Ease they flew out of the reach of their robots but they were also on the lookout for any missiles that might head in their direction. They spent the next couple of minutes avoiding both the robots and the missiles that kept getting shot at them.

My robot gave me another hit on the head. I just looked at it in disbelief. After the first hit you would think that it would know that it couldn't hurt me, but I guess these robots didn't learn from their mistakes. He hit me several



more times on the head with no result. I started to walk away from it and it just followed me still pounding me on the head. Stupid robot.

Two robots headed towards Taylor and the unconscious Mr. Ease. Taylor could have easily created her flying disc and gotten out away from them but that would have left Mr. Ease defenseless. So Taylor suddenly started to twist the rings on her fingers to see the results.

An instant later there were four Taylors standing in front of me. They stared at each other in amazement for a few seconds. The two robots stopped in their tracks. They didn't know which one was the real Taylor, either. The four Taylors started taunting the robots calling them names and making fun of them

as they began to circle the two confused robots.

Coop seemed quite happy to see four Taylors just a few feet away him. He reached to his belt and pulled off a familiar looking tube from it.

"Hey Taylor," he yelled as he threw the tube at her. "Use this on them. It will harden real fast."

One of the Taylors grabbed the tube and moved closer to the two confused robots that were now standing back to back. She squeezed the tube and the blue goo shot out at them. She continued shooting it until they were both covered in the goo. A few seconds later it hardened and the robots were unable to move. One of the Taylors twisted one of her rings and the other three Taylors merged back into her.

Meanwhile, Coop was not having much luck punching his robot. Whenever he managed to hit the robot he made a dent or two, but his hands were starting to hurt from hitting such a hard object.

"Coop," I shouted. "That's not working! You've got to try something different!"

"Like what?" he shouted back as the robot swung at him. "No matter how many times I hit it, it still keeps fighting!"

"Then stop hitting it with your fists," I said. "Hit it with something else."

Coop smiled. He ran over to the two immobile robots that were covered in blue goo. Coop grabbed their legs and lifted them effortlessly. The robot that had been attacking him followed. Holding the robots like a very big baseball bat he swung at the advancing robot and sent it sailing through the air straight into the robot that was trying to grab Atima. The two robots collided and they flew into the far wall, breaking into several pieces.

"Home run!" Coop cheered.

The remaining robot was chasing after Corey. Suddenly Corey flew up behind me and floated a few inches above the floor. Before I could ask him what he wanted two large metallic arms surrounded me and picked me up. I had been captured by the robot that Corey had led in my direction.

Corey laughed. "Sorry, but that's the only way I could think of getting rid of that thing. I needed something else to take its attention off of me. But I'm sure you can figure a way out of this. If not, oh well, sorry... not."

With a laugh, Corey flew away. I couldn't move and out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of Taylor. She was at the other side of the room helping Mr. Ease get to his feet. He was still dazed from the missile explosion. Atima floated a few feet away but I could see no sign of Coop.

Since I was indestructible I knew that the robot couldn't kill me, but on the other hand I was also unable to get loose and continue our mission. I knew I couldn't count on Corey, but Coop and Taylor would help me. The three of us were becoming a good team together just like the real Triumphant Trio.

I struggled to get loose but it didn't do any good. The robot had me in a tight embrace. Suddenly I saw something fly above my head and smash against

the opposite wall. It looked like the head of a robot. A second later the robot lost its grip on me and I fell to the floor. The robot that had been holding me was weaving back and forth with no head! Coop was holding the remains of a broken robot arm in his hand. He must have used it like a baseball bat to smash the robot's head off.

He smiled. "Okay, now what, small fry?"

I ignored his teasing. I think it was his way of coping with all these things that he wasn't used to dealing with before.

I pointed to the door at the top of the stairs. "We've got to get out of here and that's the only way out."

Coop raced up the stairs. He almost made it to the top landing when the steps under him suddenly moved and sloped down creating a giant slide. Coop fell on his butt and slid all the way to the bottom, landing a big thump. A few seconds later he got up and he tried running up the ramp but it was too steep. He kept losing his footing falling on his face and he sliding back down.

Coop was getting pretty mad. I could tell that he was about to say something that Dad wouldn't be very happy to hear when suddenly Corey flew past him and effortlessly landed on the landing outside the door. He was just about to grab the doorknob when he turned around and looked down at Taylor and Coop.

"Better luck next time losers," he said. "It's my turn to win one now!"

As he spoke he didn't see Mr. Ease fly up and quietly land behind him.

Corey turned around and jumped when he saw Mr. Ease's huge body between him and the door.

"If anyone is going to win, it is going to be me," Mr. Ease said, pushing Corey off the landing. Corey slid all the way down the stair slide and hit the floor near Coop.

With a triumphant laugh, Mr. Ease turned and grabbed the doorknob. Then there was a large explosion at the top of the landing and it sent Mr. Ease reeling.

I got angry as everyone just stood there and watched him topple off the landing.

"Fly up there and save him!" I yelled at Corey and Atima.

They were startled but took off like a shot and managed to grab Mr. Ease in mid-air. As they lowered him to the floor I could see that he had been injured by the explosion. Where his right hand used to be there was now a bleeding stump. Mr. Ease howled in pain.

"Coop, tear up Mr. Ease's cape into small strips," I commanded. "Then we can wrap it around the wound to stop the bleeding."

Coop hastily tore off Mr. Ease's cape and ripped it into strips that Taylor and Atima carefully wrapped around the wound.

Corey just stood there looking very shaken.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"That could have been me!"

"What?"

"If he hadn't stopped me from opening the door it would have been my hand that had gotten blown off," Corey said.

"He didn't do it to save you," I said. "He did it because he had to be the first one through."

I looked up. Except for some smoke and blood splattered on it, the door was still intact.

"That must be a very strong door to survive that explosion," I said.

"What if there are more traps?" Corey asked.

"Fly me up there and I'll try it. If there are anymore explosions they won't hurt me."

Corey grabbed me under the shoulders and flew me up to the landing. He didn't stay for more than a second before he flew quickly away.

I looked at the door for a few seconds. There wasn't even a hole where the doorknob had been. It was a solid door with no way of opening it. Slowly I touched it but nothing happened. Then I touched it in a few more places. Nothing. Then I banged and kicked the door, but it wouldn't budge.

A few seconds later Atima flew Coop up to the landing. She then flew away to a safe distance next to Corey.

"I thought you could use some help," Coop offered.

"Thanks," I replied. "I don't think there are any more traps but I don't see how we are going to get through. Whatever it's made of it feels very hard."

"Let me try," Coop said as he gave the door a quick thrust of his fist. He managed to make a very small dent in the door but he did even worse to his hand.

"Dang!" he shouted in pain.

He looked like he was going to punch the door again but I stopped him.

"Coop, you're doing more damage to your hand than you are to the door."

"We've got to get through," he said.

"Yeah, but using your fist isn't going to work. If only you had something that you could use as a battering ram. You could break the door down with that."

Coop looked at me and gave me that smile that I knew meant trouble for me.

"What?" I asked.

"We do have a battering ram," he said. "In fact, it's an indestructible battering ram."

Suddenly I figured out what he was thinking and I was starting to back away.

"No, Coop, I don't think..."

Before I could finish Coop grabbed me and lifted me.

"Sorry Sid, but you said this is the only way. Now hold still and shut up."
Coop then turned me on my side and aimed me head first at the door. I was about to say something when he suddenly thrust me forward. I couldn't feel anything but I heard a large thud.

"How do you feel?" Coop asked.

"Fine. Did it do anything?"

"Oh yeah," Coop answered. "There's a nice size dent in the door. A couple more times and I think we'll get through."

Coop continued to pound my head against the door like a battering ram and about a minute later I heard the door fall to the floor.

"We made it!" Coop exclaimed.

He lowered me to the floor. A few seconds later we were joined by Corey, who was assisting Mr. Ease. Then Atima flew up followed by Taylor on her floating disc.

As we walked through the doorway I saw that we had finally made it into the control room. It was very big and branched out into several corridors. There were different types of machines lining the walls along with dozens of computer stations scattered all around. It was intensely hot in the room and things were getting hotter by the minute. I didn't feel the heat but I could tell by the way everyone else was sweating that it must have been sweltering. It didn't look like we had any time left before disaster struck. Taylor stood silently by us as she kept a careful eye on the three Crims.

Coop looked baffled by all the controls and machinery in the room. He frantically looked around for something.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"For the off switch! Shouldn't there be something we pull to turn it all off?"

"I don't think it's something that simple," I replied. "I wonder if Benny is still monitoring us. Why don't you contact him?"

Just like he did before, Coop detached the gadget from his belt and as soon as he had it in his hand it popped open and a small three dimensional image of Benny appeared.

"Cool, I see you dudes made it," Benny said.

Coop shook his head. "There's nothing cool about it. It's hot as heck in here."

"That's because of the massive energy build up," Benny explained. "The good news is that it will get a lot cooler once it all discharges."

"That's good," Coop agreed.

"The bad news is that when it does, we will have about two minutes left before all the air on the planet burns off," Benny added glumly.

"That's not so good," Coop sighed.

"How do we stop it?" Taylor asked anxiously.

"You need to access the main computer controls," Benny said.



"There are dozens of computers around here," Coop complained. "How do we know which one is the main computer control?"

"Just look for the one with the charred remains of Professor Smartypants sitting nearby."

"Okay, listen up," I shouted, commanding the attention of the three Crims. "We've got to find a computer station with a dead guy sitting at the controls. Spread out and yell if you find it."

The Crims grumbled and slowly walked together in one direction.

"What are you doing?" I shouted at them. "Break up and run!"

Corey shook his head. The sweat was pouring down his forehead "It's too hot to run."

"What's the use?" Mr. Ease wailed. "We're never going to make it."

"We won't if you keep thinking like that," I said. All three looked like they had given up hope. "We can cover more ground if we all go in different directions! Do you want to get blown up when this place explodes?"

They shook their heads.

"Then go!" I cried. "Now!"

They grumbled again but this time they each took off in different directions and at a faster pace than before.

I felt bad having to yell at Mr. Ease with all the pain that he must be in, but we didn't have much time left before this place would blow up. We couldn't waste a second.

I had only made it a few yards when I heard Taylor scream. I followed the direction of the screams but by the time I got there I saw that Coop had beaten me to her and had Taylor in his arms. She was crying and he was trying to comfort her. I was about to ask what had happened when I looked to her right and saw a seated figure. Benny wasn't kidding when he said that Mr. Smartypants' remains were charred. Between the looks and the smell it was something pretty awful. It was a tragic way to go but if we didn't stop this place from blowing up then everyone here would face a similar death.

A second later Corey entered the area and saw Mr. Smartypants' remains lying over the controls.

"That is so gross," he said. "But this is all so cool! I never had an adventure with a gross dead body in it before."

"We need to get at the controls," I said to Corey, ignoring his inappropriate good cheer. "Move the body."

"No way," he said. "I'm not touching that thing."

"You'd better move it or none of us are going back home!"

Corey mumbled something but he finally walked over to the body and touched it. His hand sprang away and he was about to leave but I gave him the look my Dad gives us when we have to do something that we don't want to do.

With a little effort he managed to pull the body away from the controls and off of the chair. There was no way that I was going to sit in it after what happened but I did stand at the controls.

"Okay, what do I do now?" I asked as I stared at the control panel. Before anyone could answer I saw something moving out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look but I was momentarily blinded by several laser blasts. Fortunately they didn't hurt me but they did a lot of damage to my uniform. If we ever made it safely out of this place I definitely had to get a new uniform.

When I could see again I saw some more bad news. One of the blasts must have hit the control panel because it was now in a million pieces. Coop was already speaking to Benny again asking what to do next.

"Totally negative news about the controls dude," Benny said. "But we've got one last chance. On the wall behind you is the emergency shut off switch."

"Well if he was so smart, why didn't the Professor use it?" Coop asked.

I didn't see the switch Benny was talking about until I looked way up and saw it near the ceiling. It was pretty hard to miss. It was a very big lever.

"Probably because he couldn't reach it," I pointed out.

"Why did they put it up there?" Coop asked.

"How should I know?" I answered. "Maybe they didn't want anyone to accidentally pull the switch."

"Who cares?" Corey said as he flew up to the switch. "Let's pull it and

get out of this hot house."

He touched the lever and screamed.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Hot! Hot! Hot!" Corey flew in circles, flapping his hands in the air in a desperate attempt to cool them off. He looked like some weird bird doing that and I laughed for a moment, forgetting about our dire predicament.

I looked at the lever and knew that it was too hot for anyone else in the group to touch except for me.

"If I could get up there I should be able to do it," I said.

"How are you going to get up there?" Taylor asked. "You're too short to reach it."

"Coop can help," I replied.

Coop looked at the lever and then at me. I was about to ask him what he was thinking when he bent down and grabbed my ankles. He lifted me up and he threw me at the lever. Forgetting for a few seconds that I was indestructible I began to scream as I flew quickly towards the lever. I thought for a second that I was going to miss it entirely and smash into the wall but for the first time Coop's aim was good and I was able to grab the lever. I wasn't scorched by the searing hot metal. I tried pulling the lever but it wouldn't budge. I didn't have the strength to move it.

"What's taking you so long?" Coop asked in frustration.

"I'm trying, but I can't budge it!"

"I can't believe it!" Coop said. "Do I have to do everything?"

All of a sudden I felt a sharp tug on my ankles and I was tumbling back down to the floor. Not only that, but the lever was moving with me. When I landed on the floor I looked at Coop in amazement.

"I did it!" I said cried.

Coop shook his head. "We did it. I figured that all my strength wasn't just in my arms and so I used my super strong legs to jump up and grab you. I pulled on you so hard that we were able to move it together."

"However you did it, you are both wonderful," Taylor said as she grabbed Coop and gave him a kiss. Coop seemed to be just as surprised as I was. This was the first time he had ever been kissed by a girl.

Coop was too dazed to do anything so I grabbed the device from his belt and a second later Benny's image appeared.

"Totally tremendous, trio!" Benny cheered. "Awesomely awesome!"

"So that's it?" I asked. "We're done?"

"Definitely dude," Benny replied. "The system is totally shut down and the world is safe. Of course nobody on the planet has any electricity except people like us with emergency generators. But that should only be temporary until the tech dudes can get everything back online."

I suddenly had an uneasy feeling and I instinctively knew somehow that our adventure on this world was coming to an end and we would be leaving

any moment. I looked at Coop but he seemed to be unaware of anything out of the ordinary. He was still too busy talking to Benny. I also glanced at Taylor and it was almost like she knew what I was thinking because she smiled and nodded her head. I was sorry to see our adventure coming to an end on this world. I was about to wish that we could have more exploits here but then I remembered what happened the last time I made a wish on one of these worlds and I wasn't going to go through anything like that again.

Coop finished talking to Benny and he looked very happy. "I'm famished," he said. "Let's go out and get a couple dozen pizzas."

Before I could reply the room suddenly went black and I could feel myself being pulled out of this body and heading back home. Normally when this happened it was instantaneous but this time I was in blackness for a few seconds. During that time something very unusual happened. A shadowy figure appeared out of nowhere and spoke to me.

"Be wary, Sid," it said. "You are heading into danger."

"Who are you?" I asked.

The shadowy figure continued as if it hadn't heard me.

"Nothing is what it seems," it said. "You must fulfill your destiny before it is too late."

"I don't know what my destiny is!" I shouted back.

"Your brother's life depends upon it," the figure warned as it faded away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A TIME

Suddenly it was light again and I saw that we were back in the basement of Starr-Bolle Enterprises. The room looked exactly the same as it did before we activated the manga card. It felt like we had been away for days but nothing had changed since we left. Isaac was still working the controls of the robot and it still held Coop tightly in its embrace. The two detached robot hands were still flying around trying to make contact with Taylor who was still in her stronger body from before. She seemed momentarily disoriented. I knew how she felt. Several times after returning back from another world I also felt disoriented and it took me a minute to figure out what was going on. But this time I didn't have that feeling. I wondered if it had anything to do with that shadowy figure I met on the trip home.

When we left Mr. Killingworth had been holding on to me with both hands. But now I only felt one hand holding my arm. I turned and saw that Mr. Killingworth was also disoriented. A second later he screamed out in pain and released his grip on me. He held up his right arm. Where his right hand had been there was now only a stump, just like it had been back on the superhero world.

Then I remembered what the wizard said to me before about the worlds we went to. That whatever happened to a body in one world also happened to our bodies back home. It had something to do with balance and stuff. I didn't remember it all.

Isaac immediately stopped working the robot's controls and ran to Mr. Killingworth's aid. And it was just in time, as one of the robot's hands just

missed hitting Taylor in the head.

While Mr. Killingworth was busy screaming at Isaac, Taylor ran over to the robot and began pulling at its arms trying to free Coop. Without anyone to work its controls the robot did not fight back but it was also following its last command and that was to hold onto my brother. I felt like helping her but without my powers I knew that I couldn't do anything that would free him.

Finally with a powerful pull Taylor tore the arms away from Coop and he fell to the floor. Before she could do anything else a strange pink glow surrounded her and her body began to shrink. A few seconds later she was standing there in her normal body. She must have expended all of her energy freeing Coop.

I spotted an exit a few yards away. I shouted out to Coop and Taylor.

"Follow me! I've found a way out."

I ran for the door and for once luck was with us and it wasn't locked. Coop quickly headed in my direction and Taylor was just a few feet behind him. Our departure did not escape the notice of Mr. Killingworth. He stopped yelling at Isaac long enough to shout out another command.

"Stop them!"

Isaac made a grab for Coop but missed him by a few inches. But Taylor was not so lucky. When it was her time to get past them Isaac managed to grab her arm. Coop didn't notice until he got to the door with me.

"Give yourselves up," Mr. Killingworth commanded. "You've got nowhere to hide and I've got your little friend."

Coop was ready to turn back and rescue Taylor but I stopped him.

"It's no use, Coop," I said. "We don't have any way to activate our special powers and we can't fight him without them."

"We just can't leave Taylor with them," Coop said angrily. "He knows we've got special abilities and he might hurt her trying to find out how we got them."

Coop was right. I wasn't sure how we could stop them from hurting Taylor until I remembered the thing that had brought us to San Antonio in the first place.

"You'd better let us go because we've got something you want," I shouted.

"What could you possibly have that I would desire?" Mr. Killingworth sneered.

"How about the Digi-Max?"

As soon as I said that name Mr. Killingworth's mouth opened wide.

"What do you know about that?" he demanded to know.

"We got it from Mr. Excalibur before he died and we were going to bring it to you before we found out how mean you are," I replied.

"I only found out this morning about Stanley's demise," Mr. Killingworth said. "How do you know about it?"

"We were there trying to help him. He gave us his briefcase with the Digi-Max inside and told us to bring it to you before he died."

"And we were going to give it to you," Coop added, "If there was a reward for it. But there isn't enough money in the world that would make me give it to you now!"

"That machine is my lawful property," Mr. Killingworth roared. "I'll contact the police if you don't return it!"

"That's not what Doc said," I replied. "He said he created it and it is his."

"Doc?" Mr. Killingworth said. "Who is this Doc character?"

"He's a scientist that we met and his real name is Benjamin Franklin," Coop replied.

Mr. Killingworth laughed. "That crackpot. I fired his sorry ass years ago. He believes everything he created belonged to him."

"Well if he created it, it should belong to him," I asserted.

"That's not how the real world works, kid," Mr. Killingworth said. "As I told you before, it's all about power and control. I pay these minions to work for me and anything that they create while I am paying them belongs to me. That is how the rich get richer and why your lot stays in the sorry state that you are in."

I'm not sure if Coop understood everything that Mr. Killingworth was talking about but I sure did. He was exploiting his employees to make himself better off. I've heard Dad talking about people like this but I didn't think I would ever meet any of them. I wanted to do something to stop Mr. Killingworth from taking advantage of people but I didn't know how.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll return the Digi-Max to me and I won't press charges against you and your little friend here," Mr. Killingworth added. He pulled a cell phone out of his coat pocket with his remaining hand and flipped it open.

"One little call to the authorities and I will not only have you three incarcerated but your parents as well," he said with a chuckle.

"We don't have it with us," I said. "We've got to go get it."

"Do not dally," Mr. Killingworth warned. "I will keep your friend here for insurance that you will return with my property. If you're not back in one hour I shall be contacting the authorities."

"What if we call the police and tell them you have Taylor?" Coop said.

Mr. Killingworth laughed. "Who are they going to believe? A couple of foolish children? Or the CEO of a major corporation?"

He had a point and I could tell that Coop didn't want to leave Taylor with those two but we didn't have any choice. Without our powers we couldn't stop Mr. Killingworth and I wasn't sure that an hour would be enough time to recharge and get our powers back.

The door that we went through led to a flight of stairs that took us up to the lobby of the building. There were two unconscious guards on the floor

next to a security desk. They must have encountered Taylor and her tranquilizer darts earlier in the evening. It was dark outside and I began to wonder how long we had been on this adventure of ours. It was so hard to keep track of time when we kept bouncing back and forth between worlds. I wasn't sure if Dad was even aware that we weren't at Uncle Ron's.

Coop stopped me before we got to the front doors.

"Where are we going, Sid? We don't know where that Digi-Max thing is. It disappeared when the magic shop appeared in our hotel room."

"We've got to do something," I replied. "It's our fault that Taylor is in this mess to begin with."

"What's going to happen when this whole thing is over?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we're done with everything that we have to do am I going to get my real body back?" Coop asked. "And if I do, what will Taylor think? She thinks this is who I really am."

I shook my head. "I don't know, but I think Taylor likes you for who you are and not what you look like. It's like the things that Merlin told you before about who you are on the inside reflecting more about yourself than your outside does."

Coop thought about that for a moment. It looked like he might be about to say something when I suddenly remembered something.

"The cards!" I yelled, much louder than I meant to.

"What?"

"Everything we've done so far has revolved around the manga cards! Maybe they have the answer. What cards do you have left?"

Coop reached into his pocket and pulled out five cards. Four of them were blank but the last one had the image of Merlin and Toby. I reached into my pocket and pulled my cards out. I only had two with something on them, the one with the kids who were half horse and the unknown black card. I don't know why but I was afraid to find out what was on the black card. I thought about the mysterious figure that I met after returning from the last world and his warning about something dangerous happening to Coop. It's possible that it might have something to do with the strange black card.

A funny thing happened when we held out our cards. Coop's card with Merlin began to glow. At first the glow was soft, but it steadily grew brighter. All of a sudden the front glass doors came crashing in and standing on the broken glass was a very angry looking Amorphous!

"Where are they?" he said in a low gravelly voice.

"You know, somehow I knew he was going to say that," I told Coop. Every time we met Amorphous he always asked that question first. After all this time we had still been unable to find out who he was talking about.

"Do not toy with me!" he warned as he raised his right hands in the air. "I am Amorphous!" he said as electricity crackled from his finger tips.

"Yeah, I know and you are power incarnate," I said before he could get the words out.

He briefly looked as if he had lost his train of thought.

"Yes, power, I am power incarnate," he said, regaining his composure. "And I can sense traces of my captors here!"

"What captors?" I asked. "It's just the two of us here! Where are these captors you keep talking about?"

Amorphous looked around until his eyes finally settled on the card that Coop was holding. It still blazed brightly but you could still make out the figures on the card. Amorphous raised his four arms and pointed at the card.

"There!"

When he pointed to the Merlin card it all started to make sense. Amorphous had originally been on one of Coop's cards from the magic store. So it must have been Merlin who put him on the card to begin with. Ever since he got released from the card he's been trying to track down the wizard, but all of his efforts kept leading him back to the cards that we had because he could sense the wizard's magic on them. Well, if Merlin was powerful enough to capture Amorphous onto a card in the first place I figured that he should be able to do it again.

"Coop, activate the wizard card!" I said.

"Huh? Why?"

"Don't ask why, just do it!"

Coop shrugged his shoulders. "Okay." He held up the card and said, "Card activate!"

There was a sudden flash and standing in front of us was Merlin. For some reason he appeared without Toby. For the first time he looked very angry.

"Not yet!" Merlin said. "It's too soon! I'm still missing one ingredient!"

"At last!" Amorphous said. "My captor!"

Amorphous raised an arm and lightning flew from his fingertips at the wizard. Merlin lifted his hand and quickly mumbled a few words and the lightning was deflected by a glowing blue shield.

Merlin looked at me and shook his head. "Too soon, you called upon me too soon. One more ingredient is still required. You have one last world to visit."

As he kept his right hand up to ward off Amorphous' attacks, he raised his left hand and pointed at the cards in my hand.

"Activious, Centurious, Magicallious!" Merlin shouted as one of the cards in my hand began to glow. I didn't know which one he had activated and before I could look everything went black!

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE CENTAUR
OF IT ALL

Everything that I had been looking at was instantly replaced by the sights and sounds of another world. I was now standing in a field surrounded by several small groves of trees. From first appearances it seemed like a normal Earth environment and there was nothing out of the ordinary. Even though I couldn't see him I could sense that Coop was somewhere nearby. The more worlds that we visited the more in tune I was becoming with those places. I heard some happy playful voices coming from a nearby group of trees and started to walk in that direction. It was when I began walking that I noticed I was walking on four legs!

From the waist up I was a normal looking kid with two arms and everything, but from the waist down I had the body of a horse, tail and all. Then I thought about the manga card and remembered that the same creature was on it and it was called a centaur. I hoped I would find more people like me around and I wouldn't be the only centaur on this world.

I followed the sounds of the voices and I came upon a group of kids tossing a ball around. There was a mix of boys and girls and every one of them had a horse's body from the waist down. The color of the horse's body tended to be the same color as the hair on the top of their heads. Some of the boys were shirtless but a couple of them wore a short loose fitting shirt like the one I had on. Standing near the boys were a couple of girls all of whom had on some type of shirt or top. They didn't seem to be interested in joining with the boys in their activity; they appeared to be happy just to watch. The girls back in my school would never do that. A lot of them were just as good if not better in sports than some of the boys in our class, including me.

This world appeared to be much more peaceful than the last one we were in and I hoped that our task here wouldn't be too difficult. I wouldn't mind staying on this world for awhile because I could use a rest after everything we had been through so far. I couldn't even remember the last time I had a full night's sleep.

A moment later my thoughts were interrupted when the ball quickly rolled next to one of my feet I mean, hooves. I'm pretty sure that's what they call horse's feet back home. One of the boys came romping over to retrieve it. Except for the horse's body and the pointy ears he looked like one of the kids from my school. He grabbed the ball and galloped back to his friends.

They looked like they were having so much fun I was very tempted to join in with them. Part of me wanted to go looking for Coop but another part wanted to enjoy myself for a change. I knew I should be looking for my brother but even as I thought about it I was soon trotting over and joining in with the rest of the boys. We tossed the ball back and forth and I never knew I could have so much fun playing such a simple game. All my anxieties and worries seemed to disappear as we threw the ball around.

The more we tossed the ball around the more at ease I was becoming in this new body. It felt good not having anything to worry about and just being able to have some fun. In fact I was having so much fun that I began to feel like I had been playing with these other colts all my life. The memories of my old life were beginning to slip away. As we continued to toss the ball around I felt as if I was supposed to be with somebody doing something else.

Eventually a bell sounded and everyone stopped what they were doing. They all appeared anxious as if something wonderful was about to happen. They began to march single file in one direction. There was a young palomino kid walking in front of me and when I asked him what was going on, his only response was "Willow".

I didn't know who or what Willow was but I also felt drawn to walk in the same direction as everyone else. It wasn't long before we walked past a wooden structure with an older dark haired kid standing by a wooden fence. He didn't look familiar but the name of "Coop" entered my head. It was a strange sounding name and I was about to walk past him when a vision suddenly appeared a few feet above me. It was a very old man with a long beard and two legs in battle with an even stranger two legged creature with four arms. As I watched them fight it felt very familiar. Then the bearded man was hit on the arm with an electrical blast. At that instant all my memories returned. I remembered about Merlin and Amorphous and most importantly I remembered about Coop and I knew somehow that the dark haired centaur standing by the fence was Coop in this world.

I broke loose from the procession of kids and trotted over to Coop. I didn't think he had noticed me but he eventually turned in my direction and glanced at me with glazed look in his eyes.

"Greetings young colt," he said.

"What do you mean, 'young colt?'" I asked. "You know my name. I'm your brother."

He cocked his head and shook it back and forth.

"Nay, we have not met before, young one."

I didn't have time for Coop to get his memory back. I was getting very upset about the whole situation.

I slapped Coop's face. "We don't have time for this!" I said. I had never hit him before but I felt like it was the only way that I could get through to him.

He rubbed his hand against his cheek and the expression on his face changed.

"Dang, Sid, that hurt," Coop said. "Why did you hit me so hard?"

"Coop! You know who I am?" I was amazed that my trick had worked.

"Yeah, you're my brother and you are going to get your butt kicked when we get back home."

Then he looked at me as if noticing how I looked for the first time.

"Hey, wait a minute, you're half horse."

"Yeah, duh, we both are. We are on a world full of them as far as I can tell. They're called centaurs and for some reason we forgot who we were shortly after arriving here."

"I remember bits of it now," Coop said. "The wizard was fighting Amorphous and then we were here."

"The wizard activated my card while he was distracted in his battle against Amorphous," I explained. "Maybe he didn't cast the spell properly and that's why we started to forget things when we got here."

"You don't think he intended to leave us here, do you Sid?"

I thought about what Coop had asked. It hadn't occurred to me and then I remembered that the wizard mentioned that he still needed one more ingredient for a spell and that must be why we were here.

"No, I think he needs us to do something here," I said. "He activated my card and said that it was too soon and that we had one more world to visit because he was missing one ingredient."

"Ingredient for what?"

I shook my head.

Coop looked around. "Is Taylor here?"

"I don't think so. I think it's just the two of us this time."

"Well let's do what we've got to do and go back and rescue her."

"It probably has something to do with Willow," I said.

"Willow?" Coop asked. "Who's that?"

"I'm not sure. We were all heading to Willow when I stopped to talk to you."

"Come on," Coop said. "Let's catch up with them."

We had to gallop to catch up with the rest of the group and it felt pretty

cool running on four legs. It was really a remarkable sensation. By the time we caught up with everyone they were all standing before a small tree. Nobody said anything and I was about to ask the kid next to me what we were all waiting for when I heard the strangest thing.

All of the kids began to hum together in harmony. Gradually the humming increased and another sound began. It was the sound of someone singing. It was a beautiful song and it reminded me of the song I heard back on the world of the Twiddles and the Twaddles. Eventually the humming died down and all that remained was the singing. I looked around but I could not see who was singing the wonderful song.

Then the song ended and an older centaur came out of nowhere and stood next to the tree facing us. He looked to be the same age as Dad but his long white hair and flowing white beard made him look much older. His beard wasn't as long as Merlin's but that's what it reminded me of.

"Young ones," he addressed us. "You have been called here because Willow, our life giving Tree Goddess has fallen ill."

There was a gasp of shock among the other centaurs. A few of the girls began to cry.

The old centaur raised his hand and the crowd became silent once more.

"She has told me that two of you are needed to seek the cure that will restore her back to health."

"Why us?" a young boy asked. He was a lot smaller than the rest of us and looked to be the youngest of our group.

A couple of the centaurs next to him were telling him to be quiet and pretty soon it was getting very noisy and I couldn't make out what anyone was saying.

Suddenly the old centaur raised his two front legs high in the air and slammed them hard to the ground. That got everyone's attention and they all shut up again.

"You are very young," the old centaur said, "and you do not know that it is not up to us to question the will of Willow. As long as our race has existed we have prospered and survived thanks to the gracious gifts of the Tree Goddesses. We give thanks to all the Tree Goddesses that have looked over us. Just as Willow was spawned by her mother, the great Tree Goddess Serenity, so shall she one day give birth to our next Tree Goddess. We all have our task in the great tree of life. And it is her decree that it's the task of two of your number to go out and return with the cure."

Almost all of the kids instantly raised their hands volunteering for the chance to go on the quest. The only two that hadn't done so were Coop and me. I didn't think we had time for a quest and I was just hoping to get a moment to ask Willow how we could get back home. Since she was a Tree Goddess she must have some powers and hopefully one of them would be the ability to return us home.

The old centaur shook his head. "Willow has already chosen her two champions to go on her quest," he said. Then he pointed in our direction. "The two brothers of a foreign land who have recently arrived must go."

All of the other kids slowly left. A few of them patted me on the back and wished me luck as they trotted by. Eventually there was only me and Coop and the old centaur standing by the tree.

Coop finally broke the silence. "How do you know so much about us?"

"All has been foretold by Willow," the old centaur explained. "She told me that two strangers would come and that they would be brothers from a foreign land. She decreed that only they could find the cure for her illness and restore her back to health."

"Where is this Willow person?" Coop wanted to know. "How does she know about us?"

"Willow is here but she is not well enough to speak to you in person," the old centaur replied. "She knows about you as she knows about everyone under her protection. She protects and nourishes us as we protect and nourish her. She will make herself known to you when you have completed your task."

"Okay, fine, whatever." Coop raised his arms in a frustrated gesture. I could tell that he was having a hard time following the old centaur's explanations. He always got upset rather than ask someone to explain something further to him.

"We've got to get this over quickly because I've got someone back home who needs my help," he continued.

The old centaur cocked his head and stood silent as if he was listening to someone, but neither of us could hear a thing. Then he looked back at Coop.

"Your friend Taylor is currently safe and Willow has promised that she will remain that way until your job here is done."

Coop's jaw dropped at the mention of Taylor's name.

"How did... I didn't mention her... you said...," Coop was so surprised at hearing Taylor's name that he was having a hard time getting his next question out.

The old centaur raised his hand. "Enough questions. Time runs short for both Willow and the two of you. You must travel to the Secluded Glen and return with water from the Pool of Truth. I can show you the direction but the two of you must go it alone. And you must take care because the pool is guarded by a dangerous satyr who is a mischievous trickster."

He walked behind a group of bushes and returned with two containers that he handed to us.

"You will require these to carry the water in. Bring it back here before the sun sets," the old centaur said. Then he pointed towards a small creek. "Follow the running water and it will take you to the Secluded Glen. But make haste. Time is always our enemy."

He stood there as we both walked to the creek. There was nothing but

open field as far as the eye could see. If there was any type of Secluded Glen it must be quite a distance away.

Coop looked at me with that smile of his and said, "Race you! Last one there is a smelly fart!"

With that he galloped off and I quickly followed after him. We ran for quite a long time and because he was in a larger and stronger body Coop remained in the lead the whole time. But I didn't care because I was having too much fun. Even though I couldn't keep up with Coop I knew I was running faster than any kid in my school including all of the kids on the track team.

Eventually we came upon a forest. We slowed down as we entered it. Coop stopped and waited for me to catch up with him.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, of course."

"I didn't want to ask that guy, but what is a satyr?"

I shook my head. "I was afraid to ask because I didn't want to sound stupid. I don't have a clue. I think it's some kind of ugly monster."

Coop nodded. "Sounds right to me."

We began walking and before long we heard someone a few yards away from us. I motioned to Coop to keep quiet and we silently moved towards the sound. We were very careful not to be heard because if it was the satyr we didn't want him to know that we were coming. We came to a large overgrowth of bushes and when we peered through them we saw a very strange sight. A kid playing on some ropes. He didn't look like any of the kids back home or even like one of the other centaurs. From the waist up he was a kid about Coop's age with a pair of small horns on his head, but from the waist down he had the body of a two legged goat including a small tail. Like Coop he was shirtless and he had a pouch or bag of some kind hanging on his side.

"Do you think that's the satyr?" Coop asked.

I shook my head. "No. That's not an ugly monster, it's just some kid who is half goat."

"Better him than me," Coop said. "I think it's better being half horse than half goat. I bet we could out run him easily."

"Shhh," I said. "He's saying something."

We listened for a second and it turned out that the goat kid was singing.

"Time rolls fast, and time rolls slow. We had so much so long ago. So long ago when I was young, old stories told and old songs sung. What fun we had, what joy we knew. But time goes by, now we are few. Each year it all returns to me, the way that my life used to be."

I tried moving in to get a closer look at him but I stepped on a fallen branch and there was a very loud snap. The goat kid turned in our direction and smiled.

"Visitors!" he exclaimed. "Come, come, let's have some fun!"

Coop and I cleared the bushes.



"Ah, I don't see many of your kind in these parts," the goat kid said. "What brings you to the Satyr's Glen?"

"We were sent on a mission to find something in the Secluded Glen," I said.

"And we were warned about the satyr," Coop added. "We figured he must be an ugly monster because we were told to watch out for him."

The goat kid nodded. "Indeed you are correct," he said. "The satyr is a horrible and dangerous creature and he lives not too far from here. My name is Sham, and who are you?"

I wasn't sure what our names were supposed to be in this world so I decided to tell him our real ones.

"I'm Sid and this is my brother, Coop."

"A pleasure, a pleasure indeed," Sham said. "Come, I know tons of fun games we can play."

I shook my head. "No, we've got to find the Pool of Truth in the Secluded Glen before sunset."

"Is it far from here?" Coop asked.

"I am not familiar with it," Sham stated. "I don't leave this glen, but I'm sure the satyr could tell you how to get there if you are very careful. He is a very powerful and angry satyr. I have seen him smash huge boulders with his bare hands and breathe fire. A most fearsome creature."

Coop looked a little apprehensive. "Isn't there another way?"

"We're running out of time, Coop," I said. "Don't you want to get back and help Taylor?"

Coop nodded.

"Is there anything we can do to protect us from the satyr if he becomes violent?" I asked.

Sham smiled and opened the pouch at his side. He pulled out two round objects about the size of baseballs made of large leaves.

"These are trimple plants that are deadly to satyrs. If you fear for your lives, merely toss them directly at the satyr and he will be coated with their lethal pollen and will fall instantly to his death."

"Are they safe for us to carry like this?" I asked as he handed one to each of us.

"Oh, yes indeed," Sham replied happily. "They are only poisonous to the fearsome and deadly satyr. You will find him in a cottage a short distance up the way."

We both thanked him and started off on our way. Now that Coop had something to use as a weapon he was feeling a bit more confident about finding the satyr. We walked side by side following the creek. It continued to wind its way deeper into the forest and soon I had to start walking behind Coop because there were so many trees in our way. That's why Coop was the first one to spot the small cottage on the other side of the creek.

We had to step into the creek to get across it. The water felt so refreshing on my hooves. We could tell that there was someone inside the cottage because there was smoke coming out of the chimney and a light was shining through the window. Looking inside we saw the oddest looking creature standing over a stove.

The inside of the cottage looked very old fashioned with a dirt floor and an odd assortment of furniture scattered all around. Standing in front of a stove on the opposite side of us was a tall green lizard creature with very large ears and a long skinny tail. He didn't look like the fire breathing dragon we met on another world. He stood on two feet and his face didn't have a long mouth and nose. He had just scooped a small cup into a pot that was boiling on the funny looking stove.

"What do you think is in the pot?" I asked.

"Probably someone he caught asking for directions," Coop said.

"Gee, thanks, that makes me feel so much better."

"Don't worry, Sid. I've got your back. We don't have anything to fear as long as we got these trimple plants that Sham gave us."

"Well just make sure you do a better job of hitting the satyr with them than you did hitting the gargoyles with your fireballs."

"I'm a lot better with my aim now," Coop said defensively. "Don't be nervous."



"I'm not nervous," I said. "You are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Your tail is swishing like crazy."

Coop turned and looked at his tail. It was flapping back and forth wildly.

"Dang," Coop said. "How do you turn that thing off?"

"Got me," I replied. "You want to knock on the door and see if he's in a good mood?"

Coop nodded and we walked over to the door. After a few knocks the door opened and the satyr stood in the doorway.

"Oh my goodness!" he said. "Guests! You're just in the nick of time. I've got some leftovers brewing on the stove. I was hoping some guests would come and help spice things up. Come in, come in."

I didn't like the sound of that. What did he mean by "spice things up?"

The satyr stepped aside and I followed Coop into the cottage. Whatever he was cooking it sure did smell good, but I was afraid to ask what it was.

"We don't have time to eat," Coop said. "All we want are directions to the Secluded Glen."

The creature giggled. "What funny creatures you are. You want to play a game before we eat."

Coop shook his head. "No, no games, just tell us where the Secluded Glen is."

The creature laughed. "A most amusing game you play," he said. "Pretending you don't know where you are. Now it is time for me to show you something."

The creature coughed a few times and then he opened his mouth wide. Coop was on his guard and he quickly grabbed my trimple plant with his free hand.

"Look out Sid, he's going to shoot flames at us!"

Coop threw the two plants at the satyr. As they hit his body they opened up and he was instantly coated with bright yellow pollen. What didn't cling to his body fell on the dirt floor around his big green feet.

The creature was dumbfounded. He looked at himself and at the floor and he started sputtering.

"Uh, uh, uh, uh."

"See Sid? I hit him with both of them!"

"It wasn't too difficult, Coop. He was standing three feet in front of you. Even I could hit him that close."

Instead of dropping dead, the creature suddenly grabbed a nearby broom and pointed the pointy wooden end at us.

"Oh my goodness!" he screamed. "You vicious beasts! I don't know what type of games you creatures play where you come from, but one doesn't pelt a person with trimple plants in his very home! Now I must clean up before eating."

"Uh, Sid, that didn't work," Coop said. "Sham said those things were poisonous to the satyr."

"Who are you calling a satyr?" the creature asked, sounding a bit peeved.

"You!" Coop exclaimed. "You're a satyr!"

"I most certainly am not!" The creature was indignant. "I am a Hob Nob and we look nothing like satyrs! Do I look like I have the legs and horns of a goat?"

"No, of course not," Coop said. "Sham has..."

It was in that second that Coop and me realized that Sham was really the satyr. He had tricked us into believing this creature was the satyr instead of him.

"So you can't tell us where the Secluded Glen is?" Coop asked.

The creature kept pointing the broom in our direction.

"Why do you keep asking that?" he replied. "This is the Secluded Glen. It always has been."

"Sham told us it was the Satyr's Glen," Coop corrected him.

"Of course he calls it that," the creature said. "He's a satyr. Satyrs think everything belongs to them!"

He scooted behind us and whacked Coop in the rump with the bottom of his broom.

"Now, shoo, shoo," he said.

He opened the door and we both walked dejectedly outside. We had screwed this task up pretty good and I wondered how much time we had left before sunset. I didn't know how long the days were on this world.

Coop also looked as bad as I felt. We had both acted pretty stupid in there. I hate to say it but we both felt like horse's asses over the whole thing.

We took off, once again running. It wasn't too long before we made it back to the place where we first saw Sham. He was dancing and singing another song.

"Oh, a horse is a horse of course of course, but a kid is smarter than a silly horse. They think they're smart and oh so cool, but they're just dumb as a stubborn mule. They've only got the smallest brain, they don't know when to come in from the rain, I just can't stop so don't complain. So who is a dolt? A foolish colt! Who's a bright kid? Not Coop or Sid! Can't you just see? It's little old me!"

He was so busy singing and prancing about that he didn't notice us walking up behind him.

Coop grabbed Sham by the arm and he immediately stopped singing. He whirled around and looked a little surprised to see us both again.

"You're back so soon?" Sham stammered. "Uh, I mean, how did it go? Did you defeat the terrifying satyr?"

"You can stop pretending," Coop said. "We know that you're really the satyr."

Sham giggled. "You found that out faster than I thought you would. I figured I could trick you for days."

"Why do you do the things you do?" I asked. "Why do you trick everyone?"

"I don't trick everyone," Sham said. "Only those who aren't like me. The rest are fair game. And it's a fun game. A kid needs to have some fun. Besides, who best to kid you than a kid?"

He giggled again and started another song. Coop tightened his grip on Sham's wrist and he stopped singing.

"Ow, that hurts!" Sham protested, looking not too gleeful.

"We don't have time for your stupid games!" Coop said angrily. "Tell us where the Pool of Truth is!"

"Okay, okay," Sham said. "You don't have to hurt me."

Coop released his hold and we followed Sham to side of a large hill. He moved some bushes that were hiding the entrance to a cave. We followed him inside. A few feet from the entrance I saw water trickling from the side of the wall and collecting in a small pool in the rocks below.

"This is the Pool of Truth?" I asked, feeling a little let down.

"What were you silly ponies expecting?" Sham said bitterly. "Birds and fairies flying and singing all about?"

"I don't know, I just thought there would be more to it," I complained.

"Things are not always what they appear to be," Sham said. "You might think this was an ordinary pool of water but anyone who drinks from it is compelled to tell the truth for a day."

"How do we know Sham is telling the truth?" Coop asked me.

I shrugged. "I guess we just take a sip and see if it works."

"You first!"

Coop watched as I dipped my hand into the cool water and took a sip. It tasted like the water back home and I didn't feel any different.

"Well, did it work?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't feel any different. I'm still way smarter than you and I think you'd be better off waiting until we find the Pool of Smarts, because if there is anything you could really use after your last report card it's some smarts."

I laughed so hard water shot out of my nose. I couldn't stop the things I was saying.

"In fact, it's a good thing that it's your job to be the protector, because if you had to be the one to figure things out we would be at Uncle Ron's house right now instead of this goofy world."

"What are you talking about?" Coop asked.

"Oh and another thing that you don't know is that I've known all the time that you secretly pick your nose. But you haven't done it since we started this adventure, and..."

Before I could continue Coop stomped the ground with his two front hooves.

"Shut up Sid!" Coop bellowed. "I don't need your crap right now!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I laughed.

"You're talking all this stuff about me!"

"It's the Pool of Truth," Sham replied. "He's compelled to tell the truth. He can't help it."

"Dad said he's going to sign you up for ballet if you quit gymnastics," I said, still laughing.

"How do I get him to stop?" Coop asked.

Sham laughed. "You wanted the Pool of Truth and you got it!"

Sham ran out of the cave. Coop almost went after him, but he just shook his head and dunked his container into the pool filling it as quickly as he could.

When he finished I filled mine up.

It was still daylight but it looked like the sun was beginning to set. Coop was pissed. He galloped off without a word. I trotted after him.

We followed the stream and made it back to the old centaur, who was still standing silently by the small tree. He smiled as he saw us approaching.

"Willow be praised, the young ones have returned!" he said joyfully.

"We would have gotten here sooner, but Coop got tricked by the satyr and then we saw a Hob-Nob and he wasn't very happy with us and then..." I babbled.

"My brother drank from the Pool of Truth," Coop said. "Is there any way to stop him from telling the truth?"

"Most assuredly," the old centaur said. "When Willow has been restored she can cure him from the water's effects."

The old centaur took a container from Coop and carefully poured it around the small tree. A minute later the singing that I heard earlier began again. Suddenly there was an infant floating in front of us. She looked to be about two to three years old. She had dark brown hair the color of the tree and she wore a dress of leaves. A golden glow surrounded her. The old centaur bent his front two legs and bowed to the ground before the infant. She was smiling at both Coop and me.

"I am happy to see you both again," she said.

"Again?" Coop asked. "We've never seen you before. We don't even know who you are."

"Of course we've met before, Coop," she said. "You were here earlier with the other young ones and that's when you were given your task to help me."

"I didn't see you," Coop said.

"I was there then as I am now," she said, smiling sweetly. "I am the young tree that stands behind me. I am Willow and I can take this form now because you helped restore my strength."

"You're a Tree Goddess?" I asked. "But you're so young."

She giggled. "That's because I'm still a young tree and I have a lot of growing still to do. You shouldn't judge things by appearance. By your way of tracking time I am older than the both of you. But in our time I am still very young."

"So are you all better now?" Coop asked.

"Yes, Coop, and I can help you."

"And that's another thing," Coop said. "How do you know our names and all the other things about us?"

"I know all those things through the song that you are hearing," she said. "It is the song that all living things sing. Although some choose to close their ears to the song they are still a part of it. It is the same song that is sung on every world that you have visited and so I know all about your many adventures. And



I know that you have one left to finish.”

“Can you send us back home?” Coop asked.

“Yes, but there is no need for me to do so,” Willow continued. “Your task here is done and you shall be drawn back to your world momentarily. I have already cured Sid of the water’s effects. It is not customary for the truth to be spoken in your world. That is so sad and yet it is very common among so many of your race. Perhaps that is why they have trouble hearing the song.”

I suddenly had the tugging feeling that I had before in the superhero world when we were about to leave it. All of a sudden Willow and everyone else disappeared and just like before I was abruptly flung alone into a strange void. A moment later I felt the presence of another. I turned around and there

was the cloaked figure that had warned me before in the void. This time it was a little easier to make out some of his features. Although I still couldn’t see very much of him from what I could see he was a man about Dad’s age.

“Be very careful, Sid,” he said. “You are getting very close to the end and some major changes are about to occur in your life.”

“How do you know what’s going to happen?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You will find out the answers soon enough.”

“Who are you?”

“When you activate the black card you will find out.”

As before, everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE END FOR SOME

Something very unusual happened when we returned from the centaur world. Normally when we came back from one of our adventures we returned to the same place and time that we left from. This time we were surprised to find that we were standing in the magic shop. The wizard wasn't there but Toby was bent over a pile of junk frantically looking for something.

"Dragon's breath!" he cursed. "Where is it?"

He must have been talking to himself because I was pretty sure that he was unaware we were there.

"What are you looking for?" Coop asked.

Toby popped his head up from the small pile of clutter that he had created.

"You two!" he screamed. "You're responsible for all of this! You activated the card too soon! Can't either of you get anything right? You're spoiling all the fun!"

"Hey!" Coop yelled back. "We didn't do anything wrong. Maybe if you told us what we were supposed to be doing instead of throwing us into things unprepared."

Toby stood up and marched over to Coop and stared him straight in the eyes. It was then that I noticed something different about him. Toby was no longer shorter than us. He was actually as tall as Coop.

"Coop, check out Toby," I said. "He's taller than he used to be."

Both Coop and Toby appeared surprised by my statement. Toby looked at Coop from head to toe.

"Dragon's breath!" Toby declared. "He must be in some serious trouble."

He's tapping into my magic."

"What's going on?" Coop asked.

I suddenly heard a familiar voice.

"The walls between the worlds are beginning to weaken," Alpha Byte said. "Ninety percent of power reserves have been drained."

I looked at my arm and saw a happy sight.

"Alpha, you're back!" I said happily.

"Affirmative."

"What do you mean, that your power reserves have been drained?" I asked. "We haven't been using you."

"Incorrect," Alpha said. "Our power derives from the same source as your cards and the fabric that separates the multi-worlds."

"You mean magic?" I asked.

"Yes, magic," Toby said. "At least that's what we call it. It's got other names on other worlds."

As Toby spoke his entire appearance began to change. Although his old fashioned clothes remained the same his body and features slowly began transforming. He was beginning to look more like a kid Coop's age.

Coop pointed at Toby. "What's happening to your face?"

On the wall behind Toby was a large mirror in an old wooden frame that had a large dragon's head carved into the top of it. Toby turned and looked at his reflection. He then mumbled some sort of incantation and snapped his fingers. But nothing happened.

"Bats poop!" he said bitterly. "I'm changing back."

"Back to what?" Coop asked.

"Back to my normal body, duh," Toby mocked. "I only assume the body you're used to seeing me in when I'm working here and taking my magic lessons from Merlin."

"Who are you, really?" Coop asked.

"You should know. We met before on the superhero world."

"You're Corey, Taylor's brother!" I exclaimed.

"Yeah, I told you that she had a secret but I didn't tell you that I had one, too."

"What's her secret?" Coop demanded. "Tell me!"

At that moment there was a rumbling sound and the entire magic shop started to shake. Toby's transformation stopped and he looked totally different.

"There's no time!" Corey said. "We've got to find the items and bring them to Merlin. He's getting his ass kicked by Amorphous!"

"What items?" I asked.

"The stuff from the other worlds that you visited," Corey explained. "Every time you return from another world, something from that world comes here and Merlin uses it in his spells. The worlds that you were sent to had items he needed to defeat and imprison Amorphous. I wasn't with you in most of

those worlds, so I really don't know what I'm supposed to be looking for."

It was then that I noticed something familiar on a cluttered shelf. It was a giant pearl.

"Look Coop, it's the Wish Pearl from the Merboy world."

Coop pointed to another part of the store. On another shelf was a large white bowling ball with an inscription on the side.

"And that looks like the Orb of Prophecy from the Twiddles and Twaddles world."

"Great! That's two items!" Corey said. "But we've still got three more things to find."

As we began looking for the stuff the store shook again. I decided to ask Corey another question.

"How did you get started working for the wizard?"

Corey didn't look up from what he was going through but he finally answered.

"As I told you before, I found this place by following Taylor and her friend one day. Taylor came out but her friend Leah never did, so I went in to investigate. Merlin was the only person inside. It was pretty easy for him to convince me that he really had magic powers. I was very anxious to have him teach me how to do magic. He agreed but only on the condition that I couldn't tell anyone who I really was and I had to work here in disguise. He wouldn't explain why but he said I would find out when the time was right. From time to time I was allowed to travel to the other worlds but I spend most of my time in here."

"Well you sure don't talk like you did when we first met you," I said.

Corey laughed. "Yeah, that's all just part of the disguise. Working here I meet a lot of strange people and they expect you to speak like that."

"I wouldn't mind working here if I could learn some magic," I said.

Corey shook his head. "I thought about that when I first met you. I asked Merlin because I could use some help here. But he said that what I do isn't part of your destiny that you have another road to travel upon."

"Did he say what that was?" I asked.

"Nope, sorry," Corey said.

Coop held a small leather bag above his head waving it back and forth.

"I think I found another item," he said. "It looks like Betty Bye's sleeping powder bag."

When I moved towards him my foot hit something mushy on the floor. I looked down and saw the filled container from the centaur world.

"And here's number four," I said happily. "One more to go."

Just then the magic shop had its biggest shake causing many items to fall off the shelves. It also threw Corey off balance and he bumped into Coop causing him to drop what he had been holding.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Coop said. "We've got to find the last

item fast and rescue Taylor.”

Corey gave Coop a shove. “Don’t you think I know that? She’s my sister, you know.”

Coop shoved Corey back a lot harder than Corey had shoved him.

“Well keep your distance!” Coop said.

Corey pushed Coop as hard as he could and Coop went sailing backwards into an old wooden bookcase filled with stuff. The bookcase began to wobble and several items fell to the floor around Coop’s feet. At the top of the bookcase was an old bulky pouch that tipped over and fell right onto his head.

Coop cried out in pain. The pouch opened and several large, black and white triangular objects fell out. He was about to pick one up when Corey suddenly smacked his hand away.

“Don’t touch them!” he warned. “They’re very sharp!”

“What are they?” I asked.

“They’re lizard scales,” Corey explained. “But they’re larger and sharper than any I’ve seen before.”

Coop stood up. “They must be from the world that me and Taylor were in for two months,” he said. “We killed a lot of giant lizards and other nasty creatures.”

Corey carefully put the lizard’s scales back into the pouch and tied it up.

“That’s it,” Corey said. “Let’s take all this stuff to Merlin. I hope it’s not too late!”

As we were heading for the door I saw something on the counter that I had completely forgotten about.

“Hey, it’s my backpack!” I said. I opened the main flap and saw that the Digi-Max machine that had started us onto this wild adventure was still inside. In addition to some clothes and money, there was also the Peekasneeze DVD that I got from the magic store. I closed it back up and flung it on my back as I followed Coop and Corey out the door.

When we left the magic shop we were suddenly standing in the lobby of Mr. Killingworth’s office building. The battle between the wizard and Amorphous was still going on. Any furniture that had been there before was now in pieces scattered around the room. The wizard still had the glowing blue shield in front of him that helped ward off Amorphous’ attacks but it seemed to be smaller than before. Coop and Corey were carrying the five items and the wizard smiled when he saw them.

“Bring them here!” Merlin commanded.

Coop and Corey tried to run across the room towards the wizard but Amorphous hurled two bolts of energy at them. The wizard removed his shield and cast two smaller ones between the two boys and Amorphous. The shields deflected most of the blast but exploded, throwing Coop and Corey to the floor. The five items fell and were scattered about.

Before I could run to Coop’s aid I saw movement near a small doorway. Entering the lobby was Mr. Killingworth, his assistant Isaac and the robot that was still holding onto Taylor. At first she noticed Amorphous and the wizard but then her gaze went to the floor and she saw the bodies of Coop and Corey lying in front of her, motionless. She called out to them and struggled to free herself from the robot’s grip but she wasn’t strong enough. Mr. Killingworth just stood there watching the events that were unfolding before him.

The wizard held up one hand and a smaller version of the shield appeared in front of him just in time to stop another blast from Amorphous. With his other hand he began to point at the items at the floor. Then he began chanting incantations. The Orb of Prophecy and the Wish Pearl began to glow and they rose from the floor. The other items quickly followed and they all floated in the air and began to revolve around. Meanwhile, contents of the three bags spilled out and the air was suddenly filled with the all the items from the other worlds. They circled faster and faster and very soon they began to transform into a large bright revolving ring of light. The ring of light moved towards Amorphous, who stopped his attacks on the wizard and he began blasting the ring. But his blasts had no effect on it and the ring continued to move towards him.

I could tell that all of this was having an effect on the wizard. He looked very tired and he was sweating a lot.

I heard a blood-curdling scream and turned just in time to see Amorphous standing in the center of the revolving ring of light. He tried punching the ring and it just grew brighter until it was impossible to stare at it any longer. Suddenly there was a bright flash and when I opened my eyes again the ring and Amorphous were gone. In the spot where Amorphous had been standing there was now a card lying on the floor. The wizard picked it up and shoved it up his sleeve. He then walked over to Coop and Corey and bent down to examine them. He nodded his head a little and he held his hand over them and said an incantation. Nothing happened. His hand glowed briefly and he tried the incantation louder but with the same result. He stood up and looked at me.

“They shall live, but I am too weakened to do any more for them at this time,” Merlin said.

I heard some heavy footsteps coming in my direction. Mr. Killingworth walked towards me, followed by the robot that was still holding Taylor.

“I must say, you put on a very entertaining show at my expense,” Mr. Killingworth said. “Someone is going to have to pay for all this damage to my building. And I believe you know what I want.”

I looked at the wizard. “You’ve got to stop this guy!” I pleaded.

The wizard looked at Mr. Killingworth and just shook his head. “I do not have the strength to stop anything from happening. What little power I have left has already been cast and you can only utilize the magic that is currently in use.”

“What magic is still in use?” I asked. “Alpha and Beta are almost powerless

and the only magic things that I know of are the manga cards!"

It was then that I remembered the last remaining card and what the cloaked figure had said about it. He told me that I would have the answers when I activated the black card and I had held off because I was afraid of what it might do. But I was out of options. Coop was unconscious on the floor, the wizard couldn't help me and I didn't have any special powers. So I did the only thing I could.

I pulled out the black card and held it up. "Activate!"

As soon as I activated the card I noticed the black question mark slowly beginning to disappear. I could see something appearing where the blackness had been but I couldn't make out what it was. After the question mark was completely gone the rest of the blackness on the card began to disappear. I was starting to make out what was on the card, instead of a picture there were words appearing. The words spelled out, Happy Fiftieth Birthday Sid.

I shook my head in disbelief. I had been worried about this card the whole time and it was just a gag card.

"Hey, Taylor, you're never going to believe what's on this card," I said.

It was then that I noticed how quiet the room had gotten. I looked up from the card and I saw everyone standing still. They were all frozen like statues. I walked over to Taylor.

"Taylor?" I said. She didn't respond. I tried pulling her loose from the robot's grip but she felt as hard as stone. I began to panic and I raced around to all the other people in the room but it was the same everywhere. I couldn't get a response out of anybody. It was like they were all dead.

Suddenly I heard a voice behind me.

"They're not dead, Sid."

I turned around and there was the cloaked figure from the void. He was standing near the wizard and he was busy gazing at him.

"It's been a long time, old friend," the figure said as he touched the wizard on the shoulder. "I wonder what you would say if you could see me now. Knowing you, you probably knew this was going to happen before I did."

The figure turned and started walking towards me. I was a little afraid of him and I began to back up.

"Stop, Sid. I have no intentions of harming you," he said.

He then grabbed the top of his hood and pulled it back revealing an older man with white hair.

"What's going on?" I asked.

The older man sighed. "It's kind of hard to figure out what to tell you first."

"You can start by telling me who you are," I suggested.

He thought for a moment and nodded. "You're right," he said. "You know, you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for."

"There are other kids in my class that are smarter than me," I said.

"Smarter in some things, perhaps," he replied. "But how many of them could have done the things you've done these past few days?"

"I didn't do all that much."

He laughed. "Didn't you? You were the one who figured out how to defeat Morgrifar, and you were smart enough to outwit the sea witch and escape all of her traps. I could go on and on. You solved the riddle of the Orb of Prophecy and you figured out the secret behind the cards. Don't underestimate yourself, Sid. You have a very bright mind. You can do many things if you just apply yourself and stop trying to be like your brother."

"Coop is a great brother," I said defensively. "What's wrong with trying to be like him?"

"Because, just as he is unique in his way, you are unique in your way and that is a great thing. Anyone can fit into the crowd and follow others, but it takes a true leader to be unique enough to break from the pack and be his own person."

"It's easy for Coop," I said. "Things come easier for him."

"Some things do, Sid, but he still struggles with many things. One day he will be a great protector, but he still has a long way to go before that happens."

"How do you know so much about us and what's going to happen?"

"Think about the black card, Sid. What did it say?"

"It was just a gag card," I sputtered. "It only said, Happy Fiftieth Birthday Sid. And there is no way that I'm fifty!"

"Not yet," he said. "But one day you will be and when that day comes you will get a unique gift. You will be able to meet yourself when you are twelve years old and get to talk to the boy you are now."

"Yeah, so what will I say to..."

And then I stopped and thought about what he said and I looked at him, I mean really looked at him and I thought I saw something familiar. He had the same look on his face that I get when I explain things to Coop and he finally understands what I'm telling him.

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "Are you saying that you're me? A future me?"

He nodded. "In fact, I just turned fifty. But don't let my white hair fool you. That happened on an adventure years ago that you haven't had yet."

"But that's not possible."

"Exactly what have you done this week that your friends at school would say is possible? You're a very smart kid, Sid, but there is still a lot you have to learn. And you are going to have so many exciting adventures along the way."

"Will I ever find out what my destiny is?" I asked.

"I think you already know it," my older self replied. "Think about it for a minute."

I thought about everything that we had been through and all the things that I've done and how whenever I tried to be like Coop and fight my way out of trouble I just got into more trouble. But whenever I used my brains, I got us

out of whatever mess we were in.

"If Coop is the protector, then I must be the leader, the one who decides what we have to do by thinking about the best possible course of action."

"It's that and much more, but you will learn as you get older," my older self said. He sounded wistful. "My time grows short and there is so much I want to tell you."

"There's so much I want to ask," I said. "What other kinds of adventures do we have? And how do we get out of this one? Coop's unconscious and the wizard can't help and it's only just me."

"You are going to have lots of great adventures still to come. You'll meet some old friends and make many more new ones along the way. Just remember the things that you learn as you go from world to world. These are important things that will help you both in the other worlds and in this one."

"I didn't really learn anything from these trips," I sighed.

"Yes, you did, just stop and think for a moment. You need to start concentrating more on what's happening around you. There is one common thing that was consistent with every world that you went to. Both the Orb of Prophecy and Sham spelled it out for you."

I thought back to the different worlds and all the things that happened and then I remembered what they both said.

"They said that things are not always what they appear to be!" I recalled.

"That's right, and just as Coop and Toby aren't what they appeared to be so are many other things around you. But if you pay attention you will see what things really are under the surface."

"But how does that help me get out of this mess?" I asked. "I don't have anything to stop the robot or Mr. Killingworth."

My older self pointed at my backpack. "The answer is closer than you think. Remember what Merlin said about magic, that you can still tap into magic that is in use?"

I opened up the backpack and pulled out the Digi-Max.

"I've got this but Doc said it doesn't work yet," I said. Then I noticed something glowing inside and I pulled out the Peekasneeze DVD.

"Wait a minute! We got this from the magic store and it took us to their world. Maybe I can use it now."

My older self nodded and smiled. "Now you're getting it, Sid. You're thinking before rushing into things."

He pulled back his sleeve and revealed a very familiar device around his wrist.

"Alpha, I think it's time for us to return home," my older self said. "Are you ready?"

"Affirmative!"

"You still have Alpha?" I asked.

"Of course, although I don't use him as much as I used to. But we still

have our adventures together."

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Of course you will, in exactly thirty eight years," my older self said.

He reached into his cloak and handed me a small rubbery object.

"Here's a little gift to remember me by. You will know when the time is right to use it."

He smiled and waved. "Let's go, Alpha."

The moment he faded out of existence everyone returned back to normal.

An evil smirk was on Mr. Killingworth's face when he saw me holding the Digi-Max.

"Finally," he said. "Give it to me, and I will instruct Isaac to release your little friend."

By this time I had learned not to trust anything Mr. Killingworth said. The last thing I was going to do was give him the machine. I popped open the DVD case and slid the Peekasneeze DVD into the Digi-Max. At first nothing happened and I was getting a little worried but then the device began to hum and the screen popped on. Instead of seeing the normal opening credits all that appeared was a swirling pool of colors.

All of a sudden Mr. Killingworth grabbed the machine from my hands.

"It works!" he exclaimed. "And that bumbling fool tried to convince me that it hadn't been perfected yet. I will make billions off of this!"

Then the strangest thing happened. All of the colors on the screen came rushing out and began to swirl around in the air behind Mr. Killingworth. A moment later they stopped and became three distinctive forms. It was the elephant kid, the hippo kid and the father cat from the Peekasneeze cartoon and they looked very real.

Mr. Killingworth didn't notice what was happening because he was too busy looking at the Digi-Max, but his assistant definitely saw them.

"Uh, Mr. Killingworth, uh, sir. There's uh, what I mean to say is, uh, if you would just look, uh, oh dear," Isaac stammered.

"What are you babbling about?" Mr. Killingworth bellowed as he turned to face Isaac. When he did he came face to face with the three characters.

"Impressive," Mr. Killingworth said. He placed the Digi-Max on the ground by his feet and he poked the elephant kid with his finger.

"Hey!" the elephant kid exclaimed. "Watch who you're poking, tubby!"

Mr. Killingworth laughed. "When it comes to girth my roly-poly friend, you exceed my limitations."

"What are these silly creatures?" the hippo kid asked.

"He's a bad guy," I replied. The three characters looked at me.

"Who are you?" the hippo kid asked.

I was about to tell them who I was but then I thought that they wouldn't know me from the next guy. But they did know who Boo Boo Kitty was!

"It's me, Boo Boo Kitty," I said. "These silly creatures cast a spell on me and Coop, uh I mean Peekasneeze, and changed us into one of them."

I pointed to the unconscious Coop. "That's what they did to Peekasneeze. You've got to help us!"

The hippo kid nodded and he grabbed Mr. Killingworth's arms and pinned them behind his back.

"Take your hands off of me!" Mr. Killingworth demanded. "Isaac! Command the robot to free me from this asinine situation!"

The robot released its grip on Taylor and headed towards Mr. Killingworth. Taylor ran to Coop and her brother and tried to revive them.

The elephant kid grabbed Isaac and he dropped the robot's controls. Then the father cat grabbed the robot.

I wasn't prepared for what happened next. The three cartoon characters began to glow and change back into colored light. Their captives changed also. The colors swirled around and around and then they entered the screen of the Digi-Max. I ran over and picked it up.

On the screen the three cartoon characters still had something in their grips but nothing looked right. The father cat had been holding the deadly robot but he was now holding a small wind-up toy robot. The elephant kid had been holding Isaac but now had a silly looking chicken man in his grip. Strangest of all, the hippo kid had his hands on Mr. Killingworth when they left but he was now holding onto a spider creature and it was missing one of its hands, just like Mr. Killingworth!

A moment later Taylor came over with Coop and Corey.

"Coop!" I said. "You're okay!"

Coop rubbed his head. "Yeah, but I still have a nasty headache."

Corey also rubbed his head. "Me, too. Taylor told us what happened to Amorphous. I hope he's gone up for good."

"What are you looking at?" Taylor asked.

"It's the Digi-Max," I said. "It brought the characters out of the Peekasneeze cartoon and they took Mr. Killingworth, Isaac and the robot back to their world."

We looked at the screen. The spider creature was hollering.

"Let go of me! Do you know who I am? I am Clinton Killingworth and I am a very powerful person!"

"Uh, sir, cluck, cluck," the chicken man said. "You look different, cluck." Mr. Killingworth looked down at his spidery body and screamed.

"Get it off me! Get it off me!"

All four of us laughed as I popped the Peekasneeze DVD out of the Digi-Max and it powered down.

"So is that it?" Coop asked. "He's not going to bother us again?"

"Merlin said that the only magic left was magic that was still in use. That was when I decided to use the Peekasneeze DVD to power the Digi-

Max machine. Even though Doc said it didn't work I thought it might if it was powered by the magic of the DVD."

"That was a great idea, Sid," Taylor said. "How did you think of it?"

I thought back to my future self and smiled. "You could say that I gave myself the idea."

A few minutes later we followed the wizard back to the magic shop. He looked around and shook his head.

"What a mess!" he declared. "It's going to take a little bit of overtime to get this back into shape."

"Are you going to be needing me?" Corey asked.

"No, I think that you have earned a break," Merlin said. "In fact, I think you all deserve some time off before your next adventure. But before you leave you may each choose one item to take with you."

Taylor and Corey ran off in search of something to take and it was just Merlin left with Coop and me.

"Don't either of you desire something from my shop?" Merlin asked.

"Do you have anything to change Coop back?" I asked. "We've got to go back home and Dad can't see him like this."

"I can try casting a spell to return things back to the way they were before," Merlin stated. "But in my weakened state I do not know if I will succeed."

Merlin began to chant some words over and over and soon the whole room seemed to fill with his voice. When he finished he waved his arms into the air.

I watched in fascination as lowered his arms. Coop was starting to change back to his normal body, the one he had when we first walked into the magic store. As his body began to transform he looked over at Taylor and smiled. He then looked down at his own body that was getting younger and smaller and he shook his head. He stared back at Taylor and a determined look came across his face. Suddenly his conversion stopped and it seemed like he was changing back to his older form. It almost seemed like Coop was fighting his transformation back to normal. Coop never took his eyes off Taylor as he slowly reverted back to his older self.

Coop finally took his eyes off of Taylor and looked down at his appearance. He nodded as though he was satisfied that he hadn't changed back to his younger body. He looked at me and shrugged and then he looked back at Taylor and smiled. He ran over to Taylor and gave her a big hug.

"What just happened?" I asked the wizard.

"Either I am not strong enough for the spell to work properly, or there is something preventing me from changing him back to his former self."

It was then that I realized what had just happened. Coop had fallen in love with Taylor and he was afraid that he would lose her if he was younger than she was. Somehow he had caused Merlin's spell to malfunction and he

managed to stay in his older body.

"But what's Dad going to say when he sees Coop?"

"Your father will not see anything out of the ordinary," Merlin explained. "As long as your sibling retains this form only you, he, Toby and I shall know that the two of you were twins. To everyone else, he shall always have been your older brother. His form will be normal to everyone who ever knew him."

"So what is the secret that Corey was talking about?" I asked. "The one about Taylor?"

"It would seem that she and your sibling both share the same secret," Merlin said.

"What secret does Coop..." I stopped myself and thought about things for a moment and then it hit me. "Do you mean that Taylor is also supposed to be younger? And that she's now in an older body?"

"That is correct," Merlin said. "Her brother is the only other person who remembers her true form."

I looked over at Taylor, she was about to pick up a glowing purple ball from a dusty shelf. Just as she was about to get it, Coop grabbed her arm and twirled her around until they were face to face. They smiled at each other for a few seconds and then he leaned towards her and kissed her. I watched for a few seconds and then I turned away.

"So what do we do now?" I asked the wizard.

"Before you leave for home I believe you still have something to return that belongs to another," Merlin said.

"Oh, yeah, the Digi-Max," I said. "Doc will be happy to see that it works."

"The gentleman will find that without the power source of the DVD, as you call it, the device will no longer function."

"Crappers," I said. "I was hoping we could have some fun with it before we returned it."

"Do not worry my young friend," Merlin said. "Although your business with my establishment has come to a close, you have many more adventures yet to come."

"What do you mean that my business has come to a close?" I asked. "Aren't we coming back here?"

"I fear not, my young friend," Merlin said. "It would seem that both you and your sibling have gotten what you need and so there is no further call for either of you to return to my shop."

I thought about what he said and it started to make sense to me. When we had first come to the magic store we thought we needed manga stuff for our collection. But instead we both got something very different. I got a better understanding of who I was and that I should not try to imitate Coop. But it seemed that all Coop got out of it was a girlfriend and that didn't seem very important.

"I understand why I found the store, but what did Coop get from it other

than a girlfriend," I asked. "Making him older and finding him a girlfriend can't be that important."

"The important choices that you make in life are sometimes based on things that you are completely unaware of," Merlin said.

He raised his hand and said a small incantation. A dirty, stained, leather bound book flew off of the top shelf and came right at me. I grabbed it and looked in disbelief at the cover, it had Coop's name as the title.

"That is the book of your brother's life," Merlin said. "Or rather it is what his life would have been if he had not encountered my establishment. Look inside and see what your sibling's life would have been."

I opened the book and saw that it really was all about Coop. It was in chronological order and I quickly jumped to the date when we discovered the magic shop. But when I got to that date I saw that instead of going into the magic shop Coop had talked me into going straight home. The next few days after that were pretty uneventful so I jumped ahead a couple of years. We were now both in high school and Coop had made some new friends that I didn't like and it slowly caused us to drift apart. The more that he hung out with these new friends the more trouble he got into. It all started off with little things but soon it ballooned into some pretty bad stuff. I kept skipping ahead and things just kept getting worse and worse for Coop. I finally shut the book and handed it back to Merlin.

"Is all that stuff really true?" I asked. "Are all those things really going to happen to Coop?"

Merlin shook his head.

"Not anymore, my young friend," he said. "This tome is merely a first edition and it reflects what would have been. But since encountering my establishment your brother is on a different course in his life and a new book has been written."

Merlin raised his hand again and chanted another incantation. Just like before a book flew off of the shelf and headed in my direction. But this time the book stopped in mid-air a few feet away from me. This book also had Coop's name on it, but it was a much cleaner looking book. I reached for it but the book flew out of my reach.

"This is the revised edition of your brother's story," Merlin said. "Unfortunately I cannot allow you to view the interior. You must discover what it contains in the same fashion that your brother does, over the course of time."

Merlin waved his hand and the first book with Coop's name flew into a garbage can while the new one flew back onto the shelf.

"Each person only has one book, although that book can be rewritten based on choices made," Merlin said. "The shop felt it was necessary for your brother to encounter the young lady at this point in his life in order to avoid the future that you saw for him."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're saying the magic shop did all of this?"

How can a store do anything? It's not alive."

"My establishment is magical," Merlin said. "I have been a wizard for over a thousand years and the one thing that I can tell you with absolute certainty is that one does not question magic."

"So all of those bad things that were supposed to happen to Coop won't happen because he met Taylor?" I asked.

"Precisely," Merlin said. "Just as a new book has been written for your brother, a new one has also been written for you."

"You mean there's a book with my name on it?" I asked. "Can I look at it?"

Merlin shook his head. "You have already been granted a glimpse of your future. That is more than most people get."

"Then everything that happened to us was just your way of getting us to learn more about ourselves and to acquire stuff for your spell against Amorphous?" I asked.

"That is not entirely true," Merlin replied. "There is something else very important about your presence in those worlds that you could not be told about before since it might have affected your judgment."

"What was so important?"

"When you entered those worlds you encountered situations there with your own rather distinctive way of handling things," Merlin said. "These other world encounters had different outcomes because you and your brother were there and not the original beings whose bodies you inhabited."

"Different outcomes?" I said. "Are you saying things would have happened differently if we hadn't been there?"

"Without a doubt," Merlin said. "In every one of those worlds you visited all of the events that transpired would have ended tragically if they had been encountered by the original host. The original Peekasneeze, Sky-Lo and his brother Fli-Lo, NickNack, Alon and even the Triumphant Trio all would have failed and been defeated by their tasks."

"How is that possible?" I asked. "They were more skilled in things than we were."

"Sometimes an advantage can become a disadvantage," Merlin said. "For example in the world of super powered beings, the original Triumphant Trio would not have sought the assistance of the criminal element to help them overcome the global catastrophe that you encountered. Their confidence in their own abilities would have given them the confidence that they could prevent the catastrophe on their own without the added assistance of their vicious foes. Assured of their own success based on their previous history together they would have assumed that they were up to the task. But they wouldn't have been and that would have spelt doom for their world. By intervening on their world you added your own special uniqueness and changed that outcome. That is how it was on every world you visited. When you did things based on

your own decisions you changed the destiny of those worlds for the better."

I smiled. I hadn't realized that we really did so much good on the worlds that we went to. I just assumed that the people whose bodies we borrowed would have succeeded even if we hadn't been there.

I suddenly heard a crash and I turned to look in that direction. There was a broken bottle at Coop's feet and he was busy wiping some powder off his clothes.

"Dang," Coop said. "This just isn't my day."

As Coop tried to brush the green powder off I noticed that he was shrinking. By the time I walked over to him he was only six inches tall. It's a good thing that his clothes shrunk along with him. I picked him up and held him in my hand.

"Fear not," Merlin said. "The effects of that powder are only temporary."

I laughed. "Well Coop, who's the little brother now?"

True to Merlin's word, the effects turned out to be only temporary and Coop was fine by the time we got home. And when we did, it was all as Merlin said. Nobody noticed that there was anything different about Coop. Everyone treated him like he was my older brother.

It was less than a month later when I heard a knock at the door. I was surprised to see a certain familiar face there. But maybe I will tell you the story about that adventure at another time. For now I'm glad that things turned out the way they did. I'm the only kid in my class who has saved a world and that's a pretty good thing.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Gauthier has served as a consultant to writers of comic books and syndicated comic strips. *A Pack of Trouble* is his fifth novel. In addition to writing illustrated novels he is currently busy editing a series of books reprinting the classic comic strip *Mary Perkins On Stage* by Leonard Starr. More information about that series can be found at www.classiccomicspress.com. You may contact him with comments or suggestions through the website www.homeworldpress.com.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sal Amendola began his illustration career in 1969, most notably for DC and Archie Comics, in every phase of writing, art, production and editorial. Sal left comics in 1990. In 1974, Sal began teaching art, almost exclusively at New York's prestigious School of Visual Arts, where he now maintains only one class per week, in order to resume his career as full time writer and illustrator.

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