

## 2

Letting out a sigh, Mornak welcomed another Day of Peace. A full year had passed without any sign of the shadowman. In that time, Mornak had journeyed to the Hall of Shadows almost two dozen times and reinforced its magic on many of those visits. He also had placed wards around it as an extra precaution although he was certain that nothing could break in or out.

Mornak readied himself in his chambers for his duties in today's celebration. He knew he should be enjoying this day, but now it marked the anniversary of the day he met the shadowman. He felt that if something somehow were to happen, today would be the day.

As if on cue, one of the Axemen entered. "Sir, you asked to be informed if anything occurred at Shadow Wood."

A cold chill went down Mornak's spine. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, sir," the Axeman replied. "Nothing serious, but you said you wanted to be alerted about *anything* unusual."

"And?"

"And, well, there's a storm cloud over the woods. We thought it was just a passing storm at first, but it doesn't seem to be moving. Shall we send riders to have a look?"

"Ready all the Axemen. We ride out within the hour."

"All, sir?"

"Yes, and let us hope that I am being excessively cautious," Mornak answered and then left to prepare.

After quickly changing from his formal clothes to his traveling ones, Mornak gathered some items and went in search of Dara. He found her in the gardens covered with dirt, playing with her latest puppy—this one blue. He called her over and sat her down for what would be the most important and, possibly, the last talk they would have. Not knowing the significance of the situation, Dara's attention stayed focused on the puppy.

"Dara, you must listen," he said, turning her head toward him and locking his gaze with hers. "This is very important. I am going out to Shadow Wood, and I don't know when I'll be back." From his pocket, he pulled out a small

ring made of silver. A pearl, set in the ring, glowed with a soft white light. "Put this on," he said as he placed it on Dara's finger. "If the light in the pearl goes out before I get back, then you will need to act quickly. I want you to open this scroll and activate its magic," he said as he handed it to her. Unlike the other scrolls Mornak had given Dara to practice magic with, this one was not just a piece of parchment. It wrapped around two rollers, making it look more official, although the old yellow paper and the plain wooden rollers said otherwise.

"What does it do, Papa?"

"I can't tell you that yet, but it is very important. You will do this for me, won't you, Little Rose?"

Dara immediately caught on to his demeanor. "Are we in danger, Papa?"

Mornak could not lie to her, not now. "We may be. I have to go to make sure that we are not. You will be safe here, though."

Dara's face showed a little worry, and she broke his gaze. "What if I can't make it work?"

Mornak smiled. "I have no doubt that you can make it work, Dara. I have watched you practice and have complete faith in you. I need you to tell me that you will do what I need you to do if the time comes."

Straightening up, she looked him in the eye. "I promise, Papa."

He hugged her fiercely. "That's my Little Rose." He wanted to hold onto her forever, but time was important. "Go lock the Scroll in the chest in your room. Keep it safe there until I return or you need to use it." He kissed her forehead and then rushed out to meet the Axemen.

Minutes later, he and the knights were riding with all speed toward Shadow Wood. Mornak glanced at the ring on his finger, the twin to the one he gave Dara. Through it, he sent a tiny bit of his magic into Dara's ring to keep it lit. It required as much effort to maintain the connection between the rings as it did to breathe. And like breathing, he could stop it at will, or it would stop if something very bad happened. However the connection broke, it would then be up to Dara to do her part.

A few hours later, the small army pulled up in front of Shadow Wood. Thunder rumbled in the clouds above although no lightning flashed. When the Axemen dismounted, Senufer ordered them to form ranks in front of Mornak. They put up a brave front, but Mornak could see that most were worried. Worse, he knew they should be.

The sight of this elite force always impressed Mornak. They were a unified force and yet quite diverse at the same time. Even though the Axemen all used axes, the type of axe varied from man to man. Most sported two-handed battle-axes, some throwing axes, and others double hand axes; a few used huge great axes that could only be wielded properly by very strong large men. Of the strong men, Senufer was the strongest. The lead knight wore two magical great axes strapped crisscross on his back, but his axes had no blades. Senufer would draw the heavy metal handles like swords from their scabbards. Once free, though, his right axe burst into a burning yellow axe head while

his left axe chilled into a frozen blue head. He called them Sun Stroke and Bone Chiller. Most of Senufer's opponents tended to back down when he just drew them—at least the smart ones did.

Senufer inspected the ranks before reporting to Mornak. "Do you wish to address the men, my lord?" he asked.

"Yes, Senufer. Thank you," Mornak answered. Senufer moved out of the way to give his king the stage. Mornak seemed more imposing with his magical staff in his hand.

"Many of you men have been with me for years since before the time of peace. You know the dangers that we once faced. You know the friends that we have lost. I fear that a new evil may have surfaced. I encountered it a year ago, and while I was able to defeat it, it escaped. Now it seems it is back, and if its promises are true, then it is even more powerful. Our enemy is a wizard of sorts. I believe he is seeking a way to open the Hall."

Murmurs went through the ranks. They all knew the danger of opening the Hall of Shadows. Senufer felt embarrassment for the undisciplined display. "Axemen! Attention!" he yelled.

Mornak held up a hand to him. "It's all right, Senufer. I know how they feel." He turned back to the Axemen. "Men, you are the best of the knights in the realm. You have met every challenge thrown at you and come out victorious. Our new enemy is quite dangerous and his plans disastrous, but I have confidence that we will overcome him. I have faith in the magic of your blades, the skills in your bodies, and the strength in your hearts. You are Axemen. Let's chop this enemy down."

A great cheer went up from the crowd. Mornak smiled. They had been worried before. He needed them to march with confidence, so he told them what they needed to hear—even if he wasn't sure of it himself.

\* \* \*

They advanced cautiously through the woods, weaving around the trees while trying to maintain their formation. The farther they traveled, the gloomier it became. It did not grow dark so much as it grew hazy. The Axemen seemed as much like shadows as the shadows they cast, as the shadows the trees cast.

"Keep the ranks tight," Senufer ordered, though at this point he could not see enough knights to tell how well the formation was holding. He could make out less than a dozen men; so trusting in their skills, he put his focus on Mornak who seemed to move with purpose.

"How do you know where you're going, my lord?" he asked. "Do you even know where this wizard is?"

"No, I don't," Mornak replied, "but I can feel the magic of the Hall. I'm simply following it. The ground above the Hall is the most likely place for him to be."

"That seems logical," Senufer agreed. He turned to relay the information to his men, but stopped at what he saw—or rather, what he didn't see. None of

his men were behind him. He took a few quick steps back and peered through the gloom, but there were no men, only shadows. He turned back quickly to stop Mornak to inform him of the turn of events, but Mornak was no longer ahead of him either.

“My lord?” he called. “King Mornak?”

Senufer did not have his lord’s skills. He could not tell which way led to the Hall. Right now, he could not even tell which way led out. He decided to follow his last course and try to catch up with Mornak. If he couldn’t find him soon, he’d have to pick a direction and move until he got out of the Wood. He did not like the idea of abandoning his lord or his men, but what other choice did he have? However, if his men were as good as he thought, they would take similar actions, and he would regroup with them at Mornak’s location or on the perimeter of the wood.

\* \* \*

The moment he realized that Senufer was not with him, Mornak cursed himself for a fool. He had been so focused on getting to the Hall that he had missed the immediate threat. The Wood had been enchanted with a spell of misdirection. Because he followed a magical link to the Hall, the spell had not affected him, but by now, all his men were wandering around lost—some probably within a dozen paces of one another—unable to find each other or a way out.

*Of course the shadowman had prepared for him*, he realized. The storm clouds above weren’t a sign of trouble. They were an invitation! The shadowman had turned Shadow Wood into an enormous trap, and Mornak had led his best men right into it. He could try to counter the spell, but that would use up much of his magic just before he needed it. That was the shadowman’s intent, no doubt. No, he had come this far. He would see this through. He had to.

Soon he reached the clearing. Above him the clouds seemed to hang unusually low, and sheet lighting lit them up every now and then. In the center of the clearing stood the shadowman, waiting; his hand was surrounded by a bright green glow. A Death Bolt, Mornak saw. *Same tricks as last time*, he thought. *Stronger magic though.*

“Welcome, Great Mornak,” the shadowman greeted as he took a deep bow.

“And your name?” Mornak asked.

The shadowman tilted his head to the side. “Hmm, you know, I haven’t thought of one yet.”

“I suppose it won’t matter once I rid this world of you,” Mornak threatened.

The shadowman laughed. “I truly doubt you are capable of that.”

“We shall see,” Mornak said as he sent his magic downward, feeling for the Hall of Shadows. It still lay buried beneath him, closed, its wards still in place.

The shadowman seemed to sense his actions. "Yes, it's still locked up," he said. "It's not yet time."

"Time?" Mornak asked.

"You have to be defeated first."

"Then that time will never come," Mornak promised.

"We shall see," the shadowman challenged as he let loose the Death Bolt.

Mornak didn't even try to block it. He'd been waiting for the strike and simply moved out the way. He cast his own Searing Light spell, channeling it through his staff as he moved. It spread out in a cone toward the shadowman, allowing no room to dodge its effect, its immense power. Mornak wanted to end this battle quickly.

The spell struck the shadowman, essentially erasing him on contact. Mornak looked at the area where the man once stood. The spell had burned the grass beneath him and some of the trees behind him. He knew almost immediately that he had won too easily. The shadowman had, most likely, been an illusion. Mornak began to put a shield spell up when something struck him from behind, not painfully but hard enough to knock him to his knees. The large sticky strands of a Web pushed him down and held him fast. Mornak cursed, angrier with himself than the shadowman. Twice he had let his opponent get the better of him. He wouldn't let it happen again.

*Still the same tricks*, he thought. Again, he channeled his energy through his staff. His body caught fire, burning up the web. Getting to his feet, Mornak stated, "Enough of this, wizard. Your tricks won't work on me."

"Perhaps not the old ones," the shadowman snickered, "but the new ones ..."

Just then a hand reached out of the ground, grabbing Mornak's ankle. When he looked down, another grabbed his other ankle. He tried to raise his staff to cast, but another hand seized it, too. Shadows rose out of the ground and took shape into more shadowmen. They reached out, taking hold of Mornak's arms and legs, his waist, his neck. Soon he could not move any part of his body as a dozen shadowmen held him securely.

"No movement, no spells," the shadowman taunted.

Mornak smiled. He had created the staff for this very reason. Its main power didn't need him to move, only think. The ground shook and shifted before him. Then a dozen earthmen rose and attacked. The shadowmen who held Mornak were soon pulled off, and what followed resembled a barroom brawl. The shadows and earth punched and kicked, grappled and threw each other. Both groups felt the blows of the other, but neither seemed to be hurt for long; as each individual was knocked out of the fight, it would pick itself up and jump back into the fray.

When Mornak looked around for the lead shadowman, he found him standing safely to the side of the battle. The two opponents locked gazes.

"That's an impressive weapon," the shadowman admitted. "Would you like to see mine?"



Again the earth rumbled and shook. This time men did not rise from it. The ground erupted, throwing shadowmen and earthmen alike across the clearing. Mornak's eyes went wide with shock when he saw what was coming up: the Hall of Shadows.

Mornak had not seen the Hall since he buried it in this place ten years ago. To see it now was frightening. The Hall, a huge rectangular stone building, stood a dozen storeys tall and over one hundred meters long. When it had been created, it had been perfectly smooth and made of whitenstone. Now its surfaces were warped and had turned gray and black. It seemed more organic, as if the stone were somehow alive. Warped faces and skulls had formed—*no, were forming*, Mornak realized—across its surface as if the souls inside were trying to push free but couldn't. The Hall was transforming, mutating—but into what, Mornak could not tell.

As if to accent its arrival, lightning flashed across the sky, followed by a thunderclap that deafened the wizard-king for a moment. Mornak felt the pressure change and detected the smell that comes just before a storm. This would be a terrible storm indeed.

The wizard-king stared at the building before him wanting to believe it wasn't real, hoping it was some illusion the shadowman created, and yet feeling its familiar presence, which told him his worst nightmare had come true.

"H-how?" he asked more to himself than the shadowman.

The shadowman answered anyway. "It is alive now, powered by the ones it holds prisoner, and it has chosen to release me."

"You are *from* the Hall?" Mornak asked, not believing the words as he spoke them.

"I *am* the Hall!" he yelled. "I am its voice and its hand. I am its Shadow Lord. Now, feel its power."

The Shadow Lord, as he called himself, sent a powerful beam of pure darkness at Mornak. Mornak countered with a shield of light. The beam struck the shield hard but could not break through. Black sparks flew in all directions. Both men grimaced with effort; neither let up.

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"How'd things go with your parents?" Dax asked Alex over the phone.

Shocked, Alex replied, "What? You think I told them? I haven't even decided what I'm going to do yet."

"If it were me," Dax suggested, "I'd go with the audition. Fame, fortune, money!"

Alex rolled his eyes as he replied. "Okay, I'll go take the exam. You go to the audition for me. Oh, wait. Do you have any musical talent? That's right. No!"

"Dude, that's harsh," Dax shot back.

"I'm not in the best mood right now," Alex explained.

Dax decided a change of subject might help. He didn't pick the new subject very well though. "Tanya was looking extremely hot today."

Alex sighed. "Yeah." Alex had a huge crush on Tanya, but he didn't want to tell her. He feared she'd leave the band if she didn't feel the same way.

"Ask her out, dude," Dax prodded. "She likes you."

"As a friend, sure, but I think she's into Scott," Alex countered, referring to the other guitarist in the band.

"Well, Scott is way cooler than you," Dax joked.

"I didn't know you were in his fan club," Alex shot back. "You sure *you* don't want to date him?"

"Ha, ha," Dax replied sarcastically. "Hey, if you don't know what you're going to do tomorrow, then what did you tell everyone else?"

"I told them to go to the audition anyways. Scott can do my riffs. They should be able to pull it off without me."

"I don't think any of them are going to be too thrilled with you. If they get the gig, will they even include you?"

"Include me?" Alex repeated, suddenly realizing the implications. "I never even thought of that."

"Hey, I'm not saying they won't, but ya never know."

Alex felt a knot forming in his stomach.

"Do you really think they might ...?" He couldn't finish.

"Tanya—no." Dax said. "Glenn—probably not. But Scott and Bamm, they might see this as you abandoning them."

"But I'm not. I'm thinking about my future."

"Hey guy, Scott and Bamm have history with us," Dax reminded Alex. "They're skipping the same exam without a second thought."

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White magic shot from Mornak's staff, smashing into the black magic coming from the Shadow Lord. At first, the two seemed equally matched, but then—slowly—the white energy moved toward the Shadow Lord. Mornak smiled, his confidence growing and adding to his strength with each passing moment. This would be over soon; then he would deal with the Hall though he had no idea how. If it had truly become sentient, then his troubles were just beginning.

The black beam continued to shrink as the white beam grew. If the Shadow Lord could sweat, he would be now. Then, suddenly, Mornak was grabbed again. The magic of the staff had worn off; his earthmen had fallen back into the ground, but the shadowmen had not been conjured. They, too, were from the Hall. They quickly took hold of Mornak again, this time tearing the staff from his grasp. Caught once more, he saw little chance of escape this time.

Black fire suddenly coursed through his body, making him cry out in pain. When it stopped, tendrils of smoke wafted up from his body. He looked



up to find the source and saw the Shadow Lord holding his staff. "It amplifies magic," he said, admiring it. "Very impressive!"

Then the Shadow Lord walked up to him. For the first time, Mornak could make out his features, or perhaps, for the first time, he had features to make out. The Shadow Lord stood at the same height as Mornak, but he wore a gray and dark red fez with a golden gem at his forehead. The fez made him seem taller. The features on his bluish gray skin looked as though they had been carved from stone. His robes—black and dark blue with red trim—seemed to be partly made of shadows. They moved like something alive and changing. They reached out and merged with other shadows the Shadow Lord approached and seemed to melt off and separate from shadows left behind him. Long thick straight black hair hung from the Shadow Lord's head to just below his shoulders, and a beard in the style of the Egyptian pharaohs started below his lip and reached past his chin.

He stood above Mornak, holding out the staff.

"You don't mind if I keep this, do you?" Then he hit Mornak over the head with it, knocking him out. The Shadow Lord looked at the staff, smiling.

"Makes a good club, too."

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Dara looked out to the storm from her balcony. She had seen the bursts of magic and knew that her father was fighting to protect her, to protect everyone. Her hands gripped the railing tightly as she nervously watched, hoping her father would win. Then the ring went out.

At first, she didn't do anything. She just stared at it. Then she suddenly understood that its light going out might mean that her father may have died. She could not believe that anything could defeat her father. She brought her hand closer to her face and shook it, hoping the ring's light would come back on. She tapped it with her finger and shook it again. Nothing happened. Then she remembered her father's words: "You will need to act quickly."

She ran back into her room to the chest that held the Scroll. The key to it hung on a chain around her neck. Grabbing the key, she tried to put it in the lock, only to yank her neck down in the process. She silently scolded herself, took the chain off, and tried the key again. She pulled the Scroll out in an instant and opened it to find out what her father's instructions were. To her surprise, the Scroll was blank.

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Senufer realized that the woods were bewitched. Every now and then, he heard the call of an Axeman lost like him, but he could never locate the voice before it disappeared again. He would be lost in these woods forever unless he found a way out. Then it occurred to him that he didn't necessarily

have to *find* a way out. He unsheathed Sun Stroke and Bone Chiller. With a few swipes from Sun Stroke, the tree before him fell in flames; a few taps from Bone Chiller put the flames out. The Axemen chop down all their enemies. This forest had just become his enemy. He was going to cut a path straight out of it.

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Alex reread the same notes for the fifth time. He was getting nowhere. His mind kept wandering. He kept thinking about missing the audition and losing the gig—and maybe losing his friends. He kept thinking about missing the exam, losing a year of school, and really angering his parents. *If I were Scorpius, I could come up with some strategy to get out of this*, he thought, but that line of thinking didn't help the situation. He wasn't Scorpius, and he was never going to meet the guy to ask him what he'd do.

Alex was startled by the phone ringing. It was Tanya.

"So?" she said when he picked up.

"I dunno," he replied.

"You're gonna tell me before you go to bed, right?" she asked hopefully.

"I'll tell you when I know. For now, assume I'm going to the exam."

Tanya sighed. "Alex, a chance like this only comes along once in a lifetime."

"I know. I know. But even if we get the gig, my parents might not let me take it just because of what I did to get it. How did you set this up anyway?"

"Shadowland producers were at the bank to work out a deal with my dad," Tanya explained. Her father was the president of a major bank—Alex could never remember which one—so it was not unusual for Tanya to see or meet important executives and even stars when she visited her dad at work. Sometimes she'd visit because she knew they'd be there. Alex figured that she had done so here.

"*I ran into him* in the elevator," she told Alex, "and got him to agree to listen to us by the time we reached my dad's floor."

"A real elevator pitch," Alex noted. "Tanya, you're amazing."

"Yes, I am. And you had just better take advantage of my amazingness."

"Amazingness?"

"It's a Tanya word. Add it to your vocabulary!"

Alex laughed. Statements like that were among the reasons he liked her so much.

Then her voice took on a more serious tone. "Alex, it ... it just won't be the same if you're not there."

"I know. The sound won't be as—" Alex started to say.

"No! You big dope!" Tanya cut in. "It's you. It's not the sound. We can always get another guitarist, but the Axemen won't be the same without Alex Logan."

Alex felt like she was trying to say more, like she was holding back on something. Maybe Dax was right. Maybe she *did* like him, but she was afraid to tell him—maybe for the same reasons he was afraid to tell her. Then he shook his head. No, that was just wishful thinking.

"I'll call you as soon as I know," Alex said at last.

Tanya huffed. Alex knew that if she were in the room, she'd be giving him her I-know-what's-best look.

"Okay, okay," she relented. "Call me when you know. I hope you can't study. I hope you spill Coke on your texts. I hope ... I hope you're there tomorrow, Alex."

"Will you hate me if I'm not?"

"Never," she swore.

"Thanks. That's important to me."

"Damn! I should have said yes then!"

Alex laughed again. "Okay, I'll talk to you soon, Tanya."

"Good-bye ... Axeman," she said and hung up.

Alex sighed. She was right. If she had said she'd hate him, then that probably would have tipped the scales. He found it amazing that a decision, so hard when based on the facts, became a no-brainer when a girl was thrown in mix. However, this girl was so great that she didn't let her feelings influence his decisions, leaving him back where he started.

He returned to studying, feeling a little better and leaning toward the exam. He fell asleep at his desk somewhere in the late nineteenth century.

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When he awoke, Mornak found himself chained to a wall with his hands spread apart above his head. He looked around to see a large chamber with an arched ceiling. Torches lined the walls, making the room light enough to see everything, but it still remained gloomy. Drawings, like those in ancient caves he had explored, covered the walls; pictures of people in despair and pain being tormented by shadows surrounded him. Mornak avoided looking at them as much as he could. A score of shadowmen stood in two lines leading away from him—dark, dangerous, and armed. They did not appear wispy and insubstantial as before. They were solid, threatening Shadow Warriors. Reclined on an ornate throne on the other side of the lines, the Shadow Lord eyed Mornak with a smile.

"Welcome back," the Shadow Lord greeted.

"Where—" Mornak began to ask, but the Shadow Lord expected the question.

"You are in the Hall of Shadows, of course," he said. "I knew you'd want to see it, and we wanted you awake for all the fun."

Mornak had trouble believing the situation. He had created the Hall, so he knew what was in it. He had never made this chamber or a throne for that matter. Had the Shadow Lord done this or had the Hall, now alive, reshaped itself? He doubted he would get all the answers and decided to focus on buying some time for himself.

"What *fun* is that?" Mornak asked.

"Tearing the life force from your body, of course," the Shadow Lord answered. "As you know, killing you now would cause the Hall of Shadows to

fall apart, and as wonderful as the resulting chaos would be when all the evil in it is released, that's not what we want. The Hall wants to live and control the evil around it. In fact, it needs more. It has consumed some of the evil inside it to get this far, and it needs dark emotions—hatred, fear, despair, you know—to feed on.

“To make sure it lives on after we kill you, we first need to strip all your power from you. So we've brought you inside the Hall to do just that, and I imagine it will be a long painful process.”

The Shadow Lord paused to let the words sink in. “It is only fitting that the thing you created to imprison us now becomes your own prison.”

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She remembered her father's lessons. *Some items are keyed to a specific magic or person and cannot be activated without them.*

“It's protected,” Dara whispered to herself, “so that only I would be able to use it.” She summoned the magic inside her, letting it flow into the Scroll. Soon, words appeared on it, and even though she did not know their meaning, she somehow knew they didn't form a spell. They activated magic within the Scroll. As she began to recite them, the Scroll began to glow with power.

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The Shadow Lord shot dark energy into Mornak, making the wizard-king cry out in pain. His chains held him tightly and kept him from collapsing on the ground, but they also prevented him from casting any spells. Luckily, he didn't need to. He had only to hold out until he felt the call he was waiting for. He hoped Dara's abilities were up to the task. If not, Mythos would soon become worse than some of the mythic hells.

“You were so predictable, Mornak,” the Shadow Lord taunted. “I knew you'd come to reinforce the Hall's power, and each time you did, you unknowingly added to mine. And this staff you've created will make me a more powerful wizard than you ever were.” He strutted around confidently, enjoying his victory. Then he addressed the Shadow Warriors around him.

“We have our jailer, and soon we will suck his powers from him, making us more powerful than anything the realm has ever seen. We will spread through Mythos and plunge it into darkness. Glory to the Hall!”

The Shadow Warriors cheered in hollow, eerie voices.

The Shadow Lord turned his attention back to Mornak. “And you will watch it all happen from a cell in the Hall of Shadows.”

Then Mornak felt a pull on his magic. He smiled. “You may have me, Shadow Lord, but you will never have my powers!” Mornak vowed. Then he screamed as the energy within him ripped away from his body. As he had planned, his powers were sucked out and sent across the distance to

the waiting scroll. Even though he let it happen, even though he wanted it to happen, it was still agony.

"No!" the Shadow Lord screamed in anger, as loudly as Mornak cried in pain. He knew what was happening, but he had no idea how to stop it.

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Dara closed her eyes as the Scroll lit up with a golden white light almost as bright as the sun. She held it as far away from her as she could until, at last, the light dimmed. To Dara's surprise, the Scroll did not appear as it had before. The parchment had thickened and become cream coloured with a silvery shine. The rollers, now solid gold, had runic designs engraved in them. It felt heavier. It felt powerful. Her father had once told her that powerful magical items had to be made from materials of the highest quality to hold the magic properly. Impure or defective items could leak magic or function incorrectly. She realized then that what she had seen before had been an illusion. This was the true Scroll. She stared in wonder as some writing inked itself on the parchment.

*Thank you, Daughter.*

"Father?" Dara asked.

The words faded off the Scroll, but more seemed to write themselves.

*You are reading my thoughts. While you hold the Scroll open, we can communicate.*

"Where are you? What's happened?"

*I have been captured and am in a place where magic cannot help me. I have transferred my power into the Scroll, and only you can use it.*

"But I don't know how to use your powers. I've only just learned a little from you."

*I will teach you in time, but right now, time is short. You are in danger. You must leave.*

"Leave? Leave the palace? But you said I was safe here."

*They will think that I have sent my powers to a safe place in the palace. It is the first place they will come to look. You cannot be there when they do. If they get hold of the Scroll, the entire realm will be lost forever. There is a secret passage in my room behind the statue of your mother. It will take you out beyond the city walls. Go to the town of Kashla to the north and hide there. The leader of the city, Harrod, knows to help you. Do not try to get me out. After what just happened, they will ensure that I am shielded from magical means. My only link to the outside world is this mental tether with the Scroll. I will be with you again in time, but you must protect yourself until then. Be brave, Little Rose. Run, hide, and defend the Scroll.*

Dara waited, but Mornak wrote no more. She stared at the Scroll, now blank again, and then closed it. Quickly gathering her clothes, some bread and cookies, a water skin, and some gold coins, she rushed to her father's chambers. It took some searching to find the switch that moved her mother's statue, but soon Dara was racing through the escape route.

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Senufer had cut a path a hundred meters long. He hoped it was straight. Since he could only see a short distance in front and behind him, he kept moving back and forth along the path to try to make sure it didn't bend. His plan seemed to be working. He also hoped that some of the other Axemen might stumble into the path and follow it to him. The only problem might be if other Axemen had the same idea and were cutting their own paths. Then they would be unwittingly creating a maze of paths within the forest, only making matters worse.

He swung hard at the next tree, but before Sun Stroke connected, its flaming blade blew out. The handle of the axe hit the tree, and the impact sent a shock up Senufer's arm. He recovered quickly, spinning around into a defensive stance, thinking that someone nearby had dispelled the axes' enchantments. He waited several minutes before realizing the truth. Mornak's magic was gone, and to Senufer that meant only one thing: Mornak was gone as well. He dropped to his knees in hopelessness. Not only had he lost his king and best friend, but he and the Axemen would also be trapped in Shadow Wood forever. Who would protect the realm now?

\* \* \*

The alarm clock blared, and Alex's head shot up from his desk. Drool covered his arm. He had managed to get bed head without being in bed, and his body ached from being bent over all night. So far, the day had not started well.

He had an hour to get ready and go to the audition or the exam. He still hadn't decided which. A quick shower later, he sniffed his Axemen shirt and decided it was clean enough to put on. Wearing the logo was important to him. During breakfast, he tried to go over history facts in his head but frowned at what he'd managed to store up there. Slipping his history books into his book bag and grabbing his guitar, he left his house and jumped on his bike for school. As he rode, he mentally drilled himself with questions and facts. The closer he got to school, the fewer facts he seemed to have in his head. It all seemed so clear last night, but maybe that was the imaginings of an exhausted mind.

His bike skidded to a stop at an intersection. *I don't know if I can do this*, he thought. *I really have a good chance of screwing this up*. He turned his head to the right, to the street that would take him to the audition. Then he looked back down toward the school a few blocks ahead of him. As he considered his choices, he ran his hand over his head, pushing his blonde hair back and then pulling it forward again.

*A chance like this only comes along once in a lifetime*, he remembered Tanya saying.

Alex knew better. Several of these chances would come along, but this may be the one that shot them to stardom. Having talent didn't mean automatic fame. You had to get the right person to listen to you when that person was in the right mood and socializing with the right people. Many variables, other than being good, came into play. That's why corporately formed groups topped the charts while extremely talented people had yet to get their big break.

Alex swung his bike around and shot up the street toward the audition. *Why wonder if you're going to fail an exam?* he thought. *Just fail it and get it over with.*

"Grade eleven, here I come again," he sighed.

Unless something special happened at this audition, he was about to lose most of his friends to the twelfth grade and spend the summer grounded. As the studio came into view, he hoped he had made the right decision.