

THE LURE OF THE DRAGON

A Prexct anthology edited by Errol Elumir



FEATURING

DEBBIE RIDPATH OHI • JULIA NEVINS • KARI MAAREN
LIZETTE TANNER • MAGS STOREY • MANDA WHITNEY



A Prexcyt Anthology

LURE OF THE DRAGON

Edited by
Errol Elumir

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THE PRISONER

By Debbie Ridpath Ohi

Kohl had worked as Master Min's apprentice for nearly two seasons before he noticed the Door.

While struggling to master his basic Level II Spell Of Levitation yet again, Kohl's concentration stumbled when a circling fly landed on his nose. The painted wooden balls promptly fell from their precarious orbits, bouncing across the worn floorboards.

Good thing Master Min is out on errands, Kohl thought as he began retrieving the coloured balls.

FOCUS! His Master would have yelled, face apoplectic. *Will you never learn to FOCUS?*

It took Kohl a while to find the last ball, which had rolled into the shadows beneath a dusty corner table (Kohl made a mental note to clean that table before Master Min used that an excuse for more yelling). As he knelt and reached for it, Kohl heard a voice.

He started in surprise and then straightened, face flushing as he turned around, expecting to find Master Min glowering from the doorway.

But no one was there.

Kohl went to the shop window and looked out. No sign of the wagon. His Master was still out on errands.

The voice hadn't been Master Min's, Kohl belatedly realized. It had been higher pitched, like a girl's.

"Um...hello?" he called out, still confused.

No one answered.

It must have been someone outside, passing by.

Kohl paused. What had he been doing when he thought he had heard a voice? He blinked, the memory slipping away like a cake of wet soap. His gaze landed on the wooden balls on the workbench, alongside his scribbled lesson notes. Levitation. That's right, he had been practising his Level II Spell Of Levitation. Why had that been so difficult to remember?

The green ball was missing, and Kohl recalled dropping it. Where was it?

He looked around the room, but couldn't see it anywhere. But hadn't he just been reaching for it?

This disorientation about something that had just happened — it was familiar. Then Kohl remembered: he had felt this way a few weeks ago when Master Min had demonstrated how a Spell Of Distraction worked. When Kohl had asked Master Minn to teach him, however, his Master waved him away and told him to get back to his errands.

"You need to work on your focus," Master Min had told Kohl. "You have convinced me that you may have some minor aptitude, which is why I agreed to mentor you, but it remains to be seen whether or not you have what it takes to become a Master someday."

Focus, Kohl told himself. Distraction Spells were only effective as long as you didn't know there was one in place.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to concentrate, to think about where he had been reaching out for the green ball.

Ah yes, the corner.

The green ball was still lying where he had last seen it, and this time he picked it up.

That's when he noticed the Door in the wall.

Is someone there?

The voice again, definitely that of a young girl. Except Kohl realized something odd: the voice wasn't coming from the other side of the door. It was in his head.

Please don't go!

It was as if the owner of the voice could see him start to back away. Kohl hesitated, curiosity battling fear.

"Who are you?" Kohl said.

Prex, said the voice in his head, or at least that's what the word sounded like. *You're Kohl, aren't you?*

"How do you know my name?"

Because I hear Master Min using it all the time, of course. You're his Apprentice.

"How are you doing that?" Kohl asked.

Doing what?

"Talking inside my head."

It's something I learned to do years ago.

Kohl paused. "Who are you?"

I already told you.

“What are you doing here?”

Kohl heard the girl sigh in his head. *Isn't it obvious? I'm a prisoner. I'm also a former Apprentice of your Master.*

“A former what?”

Listen, this form of communication takes a lot of energy. Is there any chance we could speak face to face?

Kohl stared at the Door.

Please. I haven't talked with anyone for weeks. Also, is there any water out there? I'm so thirsty.

“I...I don't think I can, sorry.” Kohl started to move away, but the girl cried out in his mind, making him wince.

Don't go, please! If you do, you'll forget I'm here again.

“What do you mean, again?”

This is our second conversation. Our first was nearly a month ago.

“I don't remember that.”

You were snooping through your Master's library while he was away visiting Lady Zoë. You don't remember because of Min's Spell Of Distraction.

“I never-” Kohl began to say automatically, then paused. He did remember how the Master had returned home early that day (rebuffed by the Lady, no doubt) and nearly caught Kohl snooping through his private cupboard. He tried to recall the details of what had happened, but the memory was fuzzy around the edges.

“Even if I did decide to help you,” said Kohl, “How am I supposed to get in? The Door's locked and I don't know where Master Min keeps the key.”

The Door isn't locked.

"Of course it is," Kohl started to say, but then stopped.

It's the Distraction Spell that keeps you from thinking about trying the doorknob. I can help you from this end, just a little bit. But as I said before, I'm very weak. I don't think...

But then the voice in his head trailed off.

"Prex?" Kohl said, alarmed.

When Prex spoke again in his mind, her voice was a thread of a whisper.

Kohl...please. Just open the Door. I can help, but only for a few minutes more. I....

She was gone again.

"Prex," said Kohl but this time, she didn't answer.

Before he could let himself think too much, Kohl reached out and turned the doorknob. The metal felt briefly cold to the touch, as if it had been stored in an icebox, but then warmed as he turned it. As he pushed open the door, the warmth spread from his hand and up his arm. He let go of the knob, but the warmth lingered for a few moments before fading.

Kohl opened the door all the way. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Kohl saw a tiny shuttered window in what looked like a small storeroom, devoid of any furniture except for a covered cage.

His nose wrinkled at the smell of sweat and human waste.

"Prex?" he whispered.

A slight stirring inside the cage, but no answer.

Kohl cast a quick glance behind him at the window, but

there was no sign that Master Min was returning. After a brief hesitation, Kohl went to the window and opened the shutters. Light streamed in, tiny motes of dust swirling in its path.

The girl was curled up in fetal position inside a small cage, her eyes closed. She looked to be around his own age. Kohl was immediately struck by how her pale hair contrasted with the dark skin, even through all the grime.

He ventured closer.

“Prex?” he said, a little louder. Was she even breathing? What was she doing in here, anyway? And in such miserable surroundings? Even when he was angry at Kohl or in the foulest mood, Master Min had never struck Kohl or mistreated him in any way. No matter what crime the girl had committed, no one deserved to be kept in conditions like this.

As Kohl knelt on the stone floor beside the cage, the girl stirred. Kohl tensed, ready to jump away, but she only murmured something unintelligible.

“It’s Kohl,” he said. “Are you okay?” Stupid question, he realized. Of course she wasn’t ok.

The girl’s head turned slowly and Kohl saw her eyelids flutter. “Kohl?” Her voice sounded exactly the same as it had in his head, except weaker.

“Prex?”

“Thank you for finding me...” The girl’s voice broke.

Unease nudged Kohl. Did she think he was going to let her go? “What are you doing here? Why is Master Min keeping your prisoner like this?”

But Prex was crying, her thin shoulders shaking. She

curled up again, wrapping her arms around her knees, her tangled pale hair falling over her face. Kohl had never seen hair that colour before. Like the moon, he thought, and had a momentary impulse to reach out and touch it.

Guilt shot through him. How could he be think about Prex's hair when the girl was so clearly suffering?

Helpless, Kohl looked around the room, not exactly sure what he was looking for but hoping to find something that might help. There was a jug and a cup on a nearby wooden table.

"Are you thirsty?" he asked, scrambling to his feet.

"Yes," whispered Prex as Kohl picked up the jug. Liquid sloshed inside, and he poured some into the mug, which had a chipped edge. He fought the impulse to look for a better cup elsewhere in the house. What if the Master came back?

Kohl could already tell that the mug would not fit through the bars of the cage. He hesitated.

"Please," Prex said. She had pushed herself up onto one elbow, her expression pleading. "I'm so thirsty."

"I don't know where Master Min keeps the key," said Kohl. He looked around but was half-relieved not to see it. He was pretty sure his Master would not want him opening the cage, even just to give the girl some water.

"Min has the key with him," said Prex. "I'm sure you can unlock it, though."

Kohl examined the lock, which looked like the ordinary metal warded type. He had taken one apart when Master Min was not around, in hopes it might help him make faster pro-

gress in his Spell of Unlocking.

The girl struggled to sit upright, brushed broken stalks of hay away from her cheek. "I know you can do it, Kohl. He taught you the spell last month."

"How do you know?"

"I told you before, I can sometimes hear your lessons."

"I don't know," said Kohl. "Master Min would kill me if I let you out. Besides, I don't—" He stopped when he saw her close her eyes, swaying, clearly making an effort to stay upright.

"Please," Prex said, her voice tired. "If you're worrying about me making a break for it, just look at me. How far do you think I could get, even if I had the strength? No one would want to help me."

She was right. There was no way she could escape being noticed, with her pale hair, dark skin and blue eyes. Odd. Kohl had thought her eyes green a moment ago, but it must just have been a trick of the light.

He examined the lock, trying to remember the spell. "If you were listening to my lessons," he muttered, "You'll already know that I am not the most successful Apprentice."

"You're much better than you think," the girl said, the straw rustling as she shifted a bit closer. Not enough to alarm him, but close enough that Kohl became aware of a fragrance that cut through the underlying stench of the cage. A fresh, clean smell, one that reminded him of growing things and sunlight.

"Kohl."

Startled, Kohl looked up and saw that Prex was staring

intently at him. "Master Min sees the potential in you," she said. "He's also trying to keep you from seeing it."

"What are you talking about?" said Kohl.

"You have more power than he lets you believe. With the right training, you could be one of the best."

Kohl frowned. "I don't know. Master Min says that unless I improve, I may not ever get to Level III of my Apprenticeship."

"Kohl, I'm not talking about your Apprenticeship. I'm saying that you could be a Master, and higher level than Master Min." Prex's dark gaze did not waver from his, and she seemed to be waiting.

"How would you know?" he said. "You said you were just an Apprentice yourself."

A faint smile touched the girl's lips. "I didn't really want to be Min's Apprentice. I thought he had something I wanted."

"What was it?"

Prex shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore. It turns out the object was just a trinket, a cheap copy of the real talisman. But Master Min caught me trying to steal it, and put me in this cage."

"So you're a thief."

"Yes, I am. I wish I hadn't come here. I miss my family. I miss —" Her voice caught and she stopped, took a deep breath. "Never mind that. Right now, I'm just very tired and thirsty." Prex looked pointedly at the mug of water in Kohl's hand.

Putting the mug on the floor, Kohl examined the lock on the cage more closely. "I'd unlock it if I could, but this looks it needs a much higher level spell than I can manage."

"I told you, I can help you," Prex said.

"How?" Kohl asked.

"You know the Level I Spell of Unlocking, don't you?"

"I've done it once," Kohl admitted. "But that was only after half a day of trying, and I haven't been able to do it since."

"All you need is the essence of that spell. I can help you the rest of the way."

"If you already know how to do it, why can't you free yourself?"

"Because I'm the one inside the cage. Kohl, please try." Before Kohl could back away, Prex reached out through the bars and put a hand on his arm. The girl's touch was gentle, however, so he did not try to shake it off.

Still, Kohl hesitated. "I don't know if—"

"Just focus," Prex said, and Kohl felt her grip on his arm tighten slightly.

FOCUS. Prex spoke in his mind now. *Look at the lock. Don't try to go through all that ritual mumbo-jumbo about the spell that your Master taught you. Just LOOK at the lock.*

Kohl looked at the lock.

Now unlock it.

"But...—"

FOCUS, Kohl.

The girl's voice was encouraging, soothing, and so unlike Master Min's constant barrage of shouted criticism.

Taking a deep breath, Kohl concentrated. And suddenly, as if someone had lit a torch, he could see it clearly in his mind's eye: the small concentric plates inside the contraption

that would block a key from turning if the notches on the key didn't match up perfectly.

The warmth on his arm from Prex's touch spread.

Don't worry, the girl said quickly, before he could startle. I'm just helping. Keep focusing. You're doing well.

The heat from the girl's hand on his arm increased, but Kohl was barely aware as her praise bolstered his confidence.

With his mind, he disengaged a small bolt. There was another level of protection, he saw, but he pushed through that like thin paper. Something clicked, and the lock fell away from the cage onto the hay-covered floor.

"You did it!" Prex cried. She pulled her hand back through the cage and clapped in delight. "Kohl, I knew you could do it."

Trying not to beam too much, Kohl pulled open the cage door and handed the mug of water to the girl. She took it with both hands and lifted it to her mouth and tilting it up, gulping greedily. Thin rivulets of water spilled out from the corners of her mouth, leaving streaks of clean skin as it trailed down her chin.

When Prex had drained the mug, she handed it back to Kohl as she wiped her mouth. "That helped so much, Kohl. May I please have just a little more?"

I can't believe it worked, thought Kohl as he stumbled to his feet and hurried to the jug on the table. I didn't go through any of the proper steps that Master Min taught me, but it still worked.

As he lifted the jug to refill the mug, he became aware of a dull pain in his arm where Prex had touched him. Kohl put the

jug down and pushed up the sleeve of his roughly-woven tunic. There was an imprint of a hand on his arm in bright red. Or ... not exactly a hand. What was that?

A crash prompted Kohl to whirl around. Prex was standing beside the remains of the cage. Pieces of the metal bars lay broken in pieces on the hay, some distorted as if melted.

“Good riddance.” Prex sounded satisfied.

Kohl stared at the crumpled cage. How had the girl done that? And would he be next?

I’ve made a terrible mistake, realized Kohl.

“No, you haven’t,” said Prex. Her pupils were bright gold now, part of him noticed. The other part was paralyzed with terror. “And why on earth would I want to harm you? You gave me back my freedom. I’ve been listening to your thoughts for a while now. It’s how I knew you were a good person, someone I could trust.”

“Master Min is going to kill me,” Kohl said, miserable.

Prex snorted. “Min only got through his own Apprenticeship levels through artifice. He’s been a cheat and a bully all his life.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Because Min and I have dealings before. I let my guard slip the last time. That will never happen again.” Prex smiled, and this time her eyes flashed red. “Get away from here, my boy. This is a dead-end little town in the middle of nowhere, and Min will grind you into the dust with his arrogance and need to dominate.” The girl’s appearance was changing. Her body undulating, dirt falling away from her face and limbs. Be-

neath the grime, her skin gleamed.

I owe you a debt, said Prex, her neck lengthening then separating into five, each with its own snout and glittering pair of eyes. Giant wings gradually unfolding from her body.

Prex was a dragon.

Something nagged at the edge Kohl's memory at the sight of the different coloured heads, but his thoughts were interrupted as the dragon's wings spread wide, easily pushing through the flimsy walls of Master Min's house. Prex reared up and the ceiling collapsed in pieces of wood and shingle. Kohl cried out, but an outstretched wing shielded the boy from the falling debris.

Sunlight streamed in through the gaping hole in the ceiling as Prex carefully withdrew her wing, and Kohl was dimly aware of shouts in the distance, squinting against the brightness of the day.

Stop panicking and listen to me, Prex's voice said in his mind. *I only have a few moments - your Master is coming back and I am still too weak to fight off his feeble capture spell. Are you listening?*

Kohl nodded, unable to speak. He was mesmerized by the five pairs of eyes now fixed on his own.

Good. Come find me in the Ruins of Lum. Remember what I said: you are far better than your Master wants you to believe. A pause, and then: *Not all cages have bars.*

The dragon spread her wings again and jumped into the sky, sunlight gleaming off her scales. Her wings beat once, twice, and the wind from them buffeted the Kohl. The boy shut

his eyes tightly against the swirling bits of Master Min's house.

When he opened them again, Prex was gone.

Staggering back to his feet, Kohl shaded his eyes and looked up and saw the diminishing speck, heading eastward with great speed.

"KOHL!" The boy turned to see his Master jumping off his wagon just beyond the pile of broken boards and rubble. A crowd had gathered, and Kohl recognized some of their neighbours. Master Min's face was a mask of fury. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

Kohl's immediate impulse was to dissolve his usual gibbering of apologies and excuses, but a twinge of pain made him glance at his arm. The imprint of Prex's grip had been burned into the boy's skin, red and inflamed. Even after healing, he could tell the mark would remain.

Good, thought Kohl.

Then the boy took a deep breath, and prepared to face Master Min.



JULIA NEVINS

Julia Nevins is the author of the Amovae Chronicles series of Young Adult/Teen novels. She is a reader by night and writer by day who loves any story involving heists, con artists, or assassins. Or puppies. Add a dash of romance, history, or fantasy, and she's in her happy place. She lives near Seattle with her husband Justin, his Cryptex® workshop, and their sweet, neurotic border collie. You can connect with her online at julianevins.com.

PREXCYT AND THE RELIC MAKER'S SON

By Julia Nevins

CHAPTER 1

*Somewhere in the foothills of the Alps
Sometime in the late Dark Ages to early Middle Ages
February*

Giving the copper wire a final twist with my father's pincers, I lock the amber bead in place.

"Done. *Parfait!*"

I hold up my creation—an oak box sized to hold a full set of hand bones, decorated with amber, copper, and a bit of gold leaf.

"Fit for Saint Germain," I say in French, and give it a kiss for being so exquisite.

Across the wagon, my father opens his eyes long enough to grunt two words in Gaelic:

"Loose metalwork."

The bumpy journey hasn't improved his headache.

I examine my copper wiring.

“Wrong this time, Da,” I say in Gaelic. “It’s perfect. Once the bishop in Paris sees the workmanship on my relic boxes, he’ll have to hire me. I won’t need to travel around to these muddy towns in the middle of—”

The wagon lurches, and I almost drop my new reliquary.

The road’s been bumpy all day as we’ve made our way through the foothills up from Midgaard, so I’m used to it. My reliquary isn’t, though.

The amber bead shoots out of its wire casing, hits a floor plank, and rolls out of sight under Da’s bench.

I scramble after, bumping his arm.

Da sighs and sits up. “Muddy towns in the middle of nowhere, you said?”

I grimace, head stuffed under the bench as I reach for the bead, which rolls again.

“Da, I didn’t mean... Well, you have Asgaill. He’ll be the Kirk after you, so I need to find my own living.”

I sit up and see the humor on my father’s face. He’s pulled the window curtain to find—

I laugh. “A muddy town in the middle of nowhere.”

To be precise, a village of stone and thatch houses and huts, a decent-sized church, horse and pig and sheep pens, and cultivated fields. All well-maintained, if a bit uneven. The mud streets are hardpacked and tidy.

Villagers talk and laugh outside, enjoying the late-winter frost. Their tunics and gowns are yellow, green, and blue—dyes hard to come by in these parts. Two goats hang on a spit, roast-

ing over the village hearthpit. I can smell the smoke.

Feastday.

“They’re waiting for you, Da. Asgaill might have picked out a good one.” I open a cabinet with a half-dozen reliquaries and add my current creation, sans amber bead. “I’m just surprised he chose this out-of-the-way village. He usually prefers the cities.”

“If they need our help, it’s enough.” My father reaches for his cloak. “You’re right, they do seem prosperous. The merchants in our train will do well here. In a hamlet this size I doubt there’s a market for our reliquaries, though, other than the one for the saint. Show them your toys. Perhaps you’ll sell one or two.”

“Toys?” I kneel to keep searching for the missing amber bead. My father’s correct, of course. The box needs more wire.

As do I—my stash of copper is low.

“Games, then. Puzzle boxes. You haven’t named your inventions yet.”

“Works of genius? Chefs-d’œuvre?”

He chuckles. “Just try to be more perceptive, Nivin. And have a care with the coin—you’re always too trusting.”



I throw open the canvas flap that serves as our wagon’s side door.

And gasp.

“Watch it!” Ragen, the captain of my father’s caravan,

yells from horseback, three carts ahead. "Steep dropoff."

"Thank you, Ragen. Very timely."

Ragen winks. He knows I hate heights.

"Other side, Da."

I back into the wagon, away from the cliff's edge, sit on the bench, and try to calm my breathing. The horses pulling us must be antsy as well, because the wagon sways.

Da peers out. "Prexcyr, indeed."

"Prexcyr?"

"Village's name. 'Precarious' in the local dialect." He nods toward the other side flap. "You'd know if you bothered to learn any language other than French. Are you planning to lounge all day?"

I grin and stand. Then open the flap of the wagon's safe side.

Outside is a goddess.

She's at the edge of the crowd. Around my age, sixteen or so, and stunning. Glowing, almost.

A trumpet blares, a discordant *BLAAHT!* that breaks the spell. And my ears.

The townsfolk have gathered next to our wagon, at the entrance to the village.

My father smiles at the crowd and waves a blessing over them. Not that he's a priest, but people seem to like it.

These folks do, too. At least, they clap and cheer for him.

I search for the beautiful girl, but she's gone.

The trumpet sounds its horrible *BLAAHT!* again, tinny and off-key.

“Gotfried,” an old woman yells, “take a strap to that child!”

A handful of villagers laugh at the outburst, although most seem embarrassed.

My father’s wrong—I have picked up the Germanic tongues spoken in the region, the basics at least.

I spot the trumpeter: A girl with a smudged face in a tunic and pants. In her lowered hands is a straight brass trumpet she clearly cherishes. It’s polished to a golden sheen.

She scowls at the old woman.

“Da!” Asgaill shouts. He’s running toward us, strands of ash blonde hair falling loose from his cap. “Come with me! The healer expects it will be tonight.”

Solemnity falls over the crowd as they remember the purpose of my father’s presence.

A traveling healer priest—one with a Gift who’s performed witnessed Miracles, and will therefore become a saint—took gravely ill while visiting. As soon as he dies, his Gift must be preserved in his bones to make a Holy Relic.

Such a relic, imbued with a Gift of the Holy Spirit, has magic. Pilgrims will travel from faraway lands, spending money, of course, to view and touch a relic—the prime reason it’s important to hire a reputable, Gifted relic maker.

My father, the Kirk, comes from a respected line of Scots relic makers. He’s been commissioned to cut off fingers and toes for the greatest cathedrals in Europe.

Asgaill and I have wondered more than once why he gives his time to help these hamlets hold onto their Gifted saints, a

piece or two of them anyway. He'd fare better in the cities.

Da embraces my older brother. "Show us to the saint. He's at the church?"

Asgaill nods, glancing toward the stone structure.

"Da?" I ask. "Do you need my help, or...?"

With Asgaill here, I shouldn't be needed. Besides, I find the work of cutting off the body parts of corpses to be... unpleasant.

Da nods. "Yes, Nivin. You should help. I'd like you to do the final lock on the relic."

"I've witnessed your work a hundred times, Da," I say in Gaelic. "I won't learn anything new. Why don't I greet the townspeople on your behalf, instead? And, while I'm at it, perhaps I'll shop for wire for the relic boxes. I always need more copper."

Asgaill grins and pats me on the shoulder. "Same old Nivin. Go to the smithy, little brother. It's well-stocked."

Da frowns at Asgaill, but finally nods. "Come to the church when done at the smithy, Nivin. I want you to be there when we make the relic."

I nod. "I will, Da."



I do my duty, greeting three villagers and formally thanking them for their hospitality... before asking about the smithy.

The feast won't be ready until nightfall anyway, and the villagers aren't interested in a sixteen-year-old boy. Captain Ra-

gen and the two merchants in our wagon train have already captured their attention.

I feel guilty abandoning my father, but he has Asgaill. As the oldest son, Asgaill is heir to the family business.

And I do need copper.

"I'll take you to the smith."

The little trumpeter tugs at my sleeve. She can't be more than seven years-old.

"Thank you. What's your name?" I ask as we walk into the village. "I'm Nivin."

"Gunther."

"But you're a girl."

"I'm not. See?"

She motions to her chin-length hair and boy's tunic, then slides the trumpet into her beltsheath like a sword.

"I'm a warrior."

"You fight with your trumpet?"

Quick as a viper, she whips out the trumpet and blows.

BLAAHT!

"Ow!" I stagger, holding my ear. And laughing. "Terrifying. Maybe Captain Ragen will hire you to guard our train."

"Not interested, thanks. I'm to be a dragonslayer."

I grin. "Indeed? Are there dragon-hunting grounds nearby?"

She points up the mountain. "Beyond the outcropping. That's the cave where she lives."

"Oh." I gaze up the mountain, where orange and red afternoon sun glitter off the snow. My grin falls. "That's very..."

precise.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “You don’t believe me.”

“You’ve seen a dragon up there?”

“No. But ask anyone. They think you’re here to kill Prexcyt for us.”

“What?” I stop walking.

“Prexcyt. Her name. It means ‘The eyes of Prexcyr’. Because she’s got ten of them. Five heads in different colors, and each one kills you in a different way.”

I shake my head. “No, I mean... Who expects us to slay this imaginary dragon?”

She frowns. “Everyone. It’s what your brother’s been telling us, that you and your family can help us get rid of the dragon. Isn’t Asgaill your brother?”

“Yes. How’s he involved?”

“The town spent a fortune bringing your father here! Do you think we’d do that for a stupid Holy Relic?”

“Uh... yes?” I’m not sure if I’m offended. After a few seconds of trying to form a response, I close my mouth with a snap.

“Then you’re not very bright.”

Now I’m sure I’m offended. “You know, people pay us all the time for relics! We make the best relics in the world. My father comes from a line of—” I stop short of reciting my genealogy to a little girl in a muddy lane in the middle of nowhere. That wouldn’t do.

She sighs. “Asgaill told everyone his father and brother had Gifts to defeat Prexcyt. I’m starting to doubt that. He wasn’t lying, was he?”

I stare, hoping she just has a vivid imagination. As to whether Asgaill might lie to an entire village to make some extra coin...

Wouldn't be the first time.

But I laugh it off. "My brother—lie? Never." I pretend to think about it. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" She peers into my face, frowning.

"Unless he's tortured by excessively loud trumpet music."

The girl whose name could be Gunther punches me in the shoulder. Then she giggles and keeps walking. "You're odd."

I catch up and shove her back, lightly. "You, too, Gunther."



The smithy is a block away. When we arrive, it's dark and cold, with its coal fire banked. My guide walks straight through the smithy to the rear door, which leads into a house.

The house's center hearthpit burns cleanly, with minimal smoke, and over it stands a man with his broad back to us, tending a cauldron.

Stew, from the aroma. My stomach growls.

"Guntrude, that you?" the man says. "Your trumpeting during the welcome was a Gift from God."

I raise my eyebrows. *Guntrude?*

She shrugs and goes to help the cook.

"This is Nivin, Papa," Gunther, or Guntrude, says. "He's the Kirk's son."

Her father turns, surprised to find a visitor, and introduces himself as Gotfried the smith.

“That trumpet was ear-splitting!” a voice says.

It’s the old woman who reprimanded Guntrude earlier. She sits at a wooden table, laying out winterberries on a drying rack.

Next to her, sweeping the floor, is the beautiful girl I saw before.

The goddess.

“This is my grandmother, Frith,” Guntrude says. “And our servant, Sildah.”

Sildah. I’m fairly certain I’m in love.

Until she speaks.

“He’s shorter than his brother,” Sildah says to the grandmother. “And his muscles are tiny. What good is he if he can’t fight?”

“Sildah! Watch your tongue!” Frith exclaims, throwing a winterberry at the girl’s backside. Her voice sounds angry but her expression is... amused. “I’ll take a strap to you once I’m done beating Guntrude.”

Sildah picks up the berry from the floor and eats it, grinning at Frith, then returns to her sweeping. Neither she nor Guntrude appear frightened.

I try to laugh, since I suspect they’re joking. But once again, I’m a bit insulted.

And flustered by Sildah. Again I notice how radiant, almost glowing, her skin and deep brown hair are. Like it’s a...

“Are you Gifted, Sildah?” I ask.

Everyone freezes, me included.

I'm mortified. *I can't believe I blurted that out!*

Instantly, I regret it. Such a topic shouldn't be discussed publicly.

But they've got me off-kilter, between the little girl insulting me in the street, and the beautiful girl insulting my muscles...

Wonderful. Now I'm blushing.

"Gifted?" Frith repeats. "This savage girl? She can barely clean a floor, much less stitch or cook or do anything useful. Worthless servant she's been. Especially lately, lazy and sleeping all the time. A witch is more like it. We never should have taken her in those years ago."

"I'll put a spell on you, old hag," Sildah says, pointing her broomstick. She's blushing, though, too.

Once again, I suspect she's joking, but feel uneasy for a new reason. Dangerous business to joke of being a witch.

Gotfried doesn't seem to understand them, either. "Mother! You shouldn't say such things in front of strangers. Sildah's a good girl."

"She's no saint," Frith says with a snort, "so she can't have a Gift."

"Not all who have Gifts are saints," he says.

Sildah hangs the broom on a hook and takes down her cloak. "Time for me to go to the feast. Frau Heste asked me to help."

Guntrude watches from the cauldron next to her father, blowing on a spoonful of stew. "Nivin would know if she's Gift-

ed, wouldn't he? He's the Kirk's son."

All eyes turn to me. Even Sildah, who's halfway out the door.

"I suppose I should be able to tell," I say, uncomfortable with the attention. I'm even less comfortable with the next part.

I hold out my hand to Sildah.

She hesitates, but steps forward and puts her hand in mine.

"They're both so red!" Guntrude says.

"Child, hush," Frith says.

I step backwards in embarrassment, but Sildah grabs my wrist.

She wants to know, too.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and open my awareness, like my father taught me. I run through the Five Gifts in my mind. But...

Not a single one.

I open my eyes to meet Sildah's.

"Forgive me. I don't sense any of the Five Gifts in you. I made a mistake." To confuse a Gift with attraction to a girl...

Asgaill would make fun of me forever.

Everyone seems relieved, especially Sildah. She nods her thanks and leaves for the feast without bothering to fasten her cloak.

Frith stands with her hands on her hips. "Five Gifts? Everyone knows the gods gave us Four Gifts. Are you certain you're a relic maker?"

She's correct about the Four, given to people who can

control the elements—earth, wind, fire, water—to perform Miracles, like moving stones with their minds.

But in my family, we recognize a fifth Gift, our own. Our Gift is the ability to sense the Four Gifts in others, to help lock a saint's Gift into a Holy Relic at the time of death.

Like my father and Asgaill are preparing to do right now. I open my mouth to explain the Gifts, but Gotfried speaks first.

"God," he says to Frith, nervously. "There's only one god, as you are well aware, mother. Nivin's father works with priests. Nivin, I apologize. She forgets herself, speaking of witches and pagan gods."

"It's fine," I say. "Truly, we aren't the sort to report you. Might put a spell on you, though."

No one gets my joke, so I pretend to hold a broom and cast a spell, like Sildah did. Still, no one laughs.

Except Guntrude, finally. "He's odd, Papa. But he's nice."

"Hmph." The old woman scowls at me, then Gotfried.

"So, Gotfried," I say. "Have any copper wire?"



Gotfried wipes his hands on his apron and leads me out to the smithy.

"Haven't flattened any copper lately," he says, unlocking a heavy closet.

Inside is a selection of metalwork in various stages of completion, including daggers, swords, and attempts at musi-

cal instruments.

“Got some scraps, though. And brass wire, if you’re interested.”

“Always interested!” Which is true, when speaking of metalwork. Asgaill often teases me about being more interested in relic box construction than the relics themselves.

I’m soon engrossed in the conversation, and end up buying a spool of brass wire thread and as many sheet scraps of copper as I can fit in my coat and cloak pockets. Even scraps can be useful for decorations and engravings.

Gotfried and I get to chatting about our crafts—his every kind of metal, and mine, reliquary-making, which involves masonry, gemstone, and woodwork, as well as metalwork.

I show him my most compact wooden puzzle box—the only one small enough to fit in a cloak pocket—a rare chance to share my art with another craftsman. My father and Asgaill tend to be unappreciative of the work required to build these boxes, or the artistry.

Gotfried buys it for Guntrude, handing back the coin I used for one of the copper scraps.

“She’s got a quick mind, that one,” he says. “I can’t make enough trumpets and horns and whistles to keep her occupied.”

“Yes, she’s quite inventive,” I say. “She mentioned something about a... a dragon?”

Gotfried nods. “Is it true? Can you and your father help?”

I was expecting him to laugh. *Hoping* for a laugh. “I’ll need to talk to my father. Find out more. Have you, uh, seen

it?”

He shakes his head. “Many have, over the years. Prexcyt used to stay in her cave and leave the villages alone. Lately, though...”

“What?”

“People have gone missing. A healer who lives down the hill. And a child, too. None from our village yet, thank God. We need to stop her before anyone else disappears.”

A bell tolls and I jump.

Gotfried looks in the church’s direction. “I suppose your father will be at the feast?”

I blink, realizing what he means. Only now do I notice twilight has fallen—people in the lane carry lit torches.

“The saint has died! I’m late!”

Stuffing my purchases into my pockets, I thank Gotfried and rush out into the lane.

How long did we discuss copper wire and brass trumpets? My father will be furious.

Two houses away, remembering my manners, I return to the smithy.

“I am terribly sorry for your village’s loss, Gotfried. You must be so grieved.”

He shrugs. “Didn’t know the man. He was a visitor, passing through when he took ill.”

“Oh good! What a relief.”

His eyes widen.

“I mean, it’s not good... that he died. Just good you didn’t know him. Or rather...” I’m stuck. “I have to go.”

The village is only two lanes wide, so my run to the stone church is quick. The bell is still ringing when I arrive, with the crowd converging.

Perhaps I'm on time. Maybe they're still working on the relic.

My hope lasts until I spot my father next to the church, speaking to a priest. Which means he's done with tonight's work.

I stop, turn around, and walk back the way I came.

I'll wait until the feast to speak to Da. Wouldn't want to interrupt his conversation with—

"Nivin!" my father calls, once again stopping me. He doesn't sound pleased.



He takes leave of the priest and strides toward me. I only manage three reluctant steps in his direction before he reaches me.

"Da..." I start. "I'm so sorry. I lost track of time, and—"

"Never mind that," he says, pace increasing. He grabs my arm and pulls me away from the crowd, toward the wagon train. In a loud voice, he says, "What a pity you're ill, my boy! You must take rest."

I stumble. "Da?"

"Go find Ragen." He speaks in a low voice. "Stay with him and don't eat anything here. You're not to attend the feast."

We reach the first wagon in the train, and still he doesn't

slow.

“Da!”

I pull him between two wagons, stepping carefully. Our horses have been moved to the village corral for the night, but their dung hasn’t. Also, the cliff makes me nervous.

“What happened? Did the relic-making fail?”

He shakes his head, scanning the area to be certain we’re alone. “The priest who died today was a bishop. Bishop Ebbol.”

“Bishop Ebbol! He’s the most famous healer in the world. So many Miracles...” I frown. “What was he doing here?”

“Passing through on his way to Regensburg. Healing people as he went, no doubt.” He nods toward the church. “Did you see the man I was speaking to just now? The priest?”

I nod.

“He was in the bishop’s entourage. Insists the bishop was poisoned when they arrived here.”

“A villager poisoned him? Why?”

“Do you know the amount of money the village stands to earn if they own a Holy Relic of Bishop Ebbol’s? If a saint of such high status dies here? The money from pilgrims alone could make the whole village rich.”

“It’s a sin! I mean, murder is always a sin, but to murder a saint like Bishop Ebbol...”

I study the village, imagining Guntrude and Sildah, and Gotfried and Frith. The pagan words Frith said—maybe they don’t care about saints, or sins. But...

“They don’t seem like murderers.”

My father sighs. “No, they don’t. They seem like good

people. But it only takes one bad person to put poison in a drink.”

“What should we do?”

“Nothing. We cannot prove the accusation. All we can do is observe the formalities and leave. I’ll attend the feast and we’ll depart in the morning. You stay here under guard.”

My stomach growls as the aroma from the cookfires reaches me. But the food!

“Why hide me, Da? If Bishop Ebbol were murdered, it’s unlikely his murderer would target me. I’m not a priest, much less a saint.”

“Not every Gifted person is a priest,” my father says.

His words are so like Gotfried’s, a chill runs up my spine.

Nevertheless, I’m hungry and there’s a feast starting a hundred yards away. His caution seems excessive.

“But Da, you’re more famous than I. You’re at more risk. Let me go in your place.”

He gives me a flat look. “No.”

“Will you send Asgaill here to hide out and pretend to be sick with me?”

“No, Asgaill makes his own decisions. He’s a grown man, and—”

“So am I!”

“—and he’s been here for a month. If anyone wanted to poison him, they would have already.”

“Da, I—”

“Dammit, Nivin! Will you just obey for once? You are my heir and I need you to stay safe.”

I stare. "Asgaill is your heir."

He gazes into the darkness beyond the cliff. "Promise me you'll stay in the wagon."

I'm on the verge of arguing when I hear a man shouting. I hurry out from between the wagons.

Gotfried runs toward me, yelling. "Nivin, is your father with you?"

Da moves into view.

"It's Sildah!" Gotfried says. "Will you help us? The dragon has taken Sildah!"

CHAPTER 2

“Gotfried!” a village man shouts. “Hurry! We need more weapons!”

Gotfried doesn’t wait for our answer. He races toward his smithy, to his cache of swords and daggers.

My father watches him for all of two heartbeats before striding away.

I follow. “Da? Where are you going?”

“The wagon.”

“Da, we can’t leave! They’re serious about the dragon. And I know Sildah. She’s a nice girl and could be in danger! Da!”

He stops long enough to put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not leaving. I’m preparing.”

I follow him to our wagon, where he changes into boots suitable for snow, a heavy tunic and coat, then a cloak. Next he belts on his sword, the one that’s been in our family for generations.

It’s not decorative? Whenever we’ve practiced swords, he’s always used a training blade.

I find my own pair of snow boots.

“Nivin...”

“You can’t hide me here, Da.”

He’s silent, watching me as I tie the leather straps of my boots.

I square my shoulders and face him. “What?”

“Ragen will have a sword for you.”

I gape. “You’re letting me... Wait, you believe in the drag-

on?”

“I don’t know what to believe.” He fills two water flasks. “Asgaill told me of these dragon stories. He believes them to be true. But whether a dragon truly lives in the cave, we have three undeniable facts.”

“We do?”

“One, a girl is in danger and may need our help. Two, short of tying you up, I can’t stop you from going after her. And three...” He stoppers the flasks. “I’d rather keep you next to me than have you strike out on your own like a fool once I’ve left.”

He hands me a water flask, which I tie onto my belt as I follow him out into the cold night air.



Weapons and torches in hand, Ragen, my father, and I join the first group of men—six of us—heading up the mountain.

Apparently the wine and ale for the feast have flowed steadily all afternoon, leaving most of the men drunk. Father sent word to Asgaill at the church, so he’ll be on the way soon with the village men still sober enough to walk.

Gotfried, armed with a heavy blacksmith’s axe, leads us up a trail that’s barely visible in the torchlight. Before we’ve gone far, though, snow covers the mountainside, brightening the trail.

I’m last in the group, trudging up through the snow behind my father.

“At least two entrances to Prexcyt’s cave,” Gotfried says once we’re twenty minutes out of Prexcyr. “Maybe more. These mountains are riddled with caves and tunnels.”

He speaks quietly in case the dragon is near. We’ve been trying to walk softly as well, but snow and ice crunch beneath our feet.

“The beast has five heads. Red one breaths fire. The green has a venom like a snake—we know because she bit a man from Midgaard. His arm turned green before he died.”

“I’m not sure we’ll beat such a beast in a fight,” Ragen says. “If we come in strong on one side, perhaps we’ll drive her out through the other. Make her leave the girl so we can retrieve her.”

He doesn’t say what we’re all thinking, gratefully. That Sildah may already be dead.

My father stops without warning, and I almost run into him. Ahead, Gotfried, Ragen and the two other men in the group test a rope ladder hanging down a sheer cliff face.

We’re climbing that??

“At least Prexcyt hasn’t burnt the ropes off,” Gotfried says. He glances at the rest of us. When he sees my face, he adds, “There’s a second way around. Takes an extra hour to hike it.”

Ragen growls. “If the boy can’t climb fifty feet on a ladder, he’s got no business fighting a damned dragon.”

“The boy can climb fifty feet on a damned ladder,” I growl back, pushing to the front. “Aren’t we in a hurry?”

I scramble up the rope ladder, so furious with Ragen I

forget to look down. Until I reach the top.

At the top rope rung, I—stupidly—look down at the line of men below. And gasp.

“Move, Nivin!” Ragen says from below. “Stop gawking.”

I want to tell him I’m not gawking, but I can’t speak because... well, I’m probably gawking.

Breathless, I crawl over the cliff’s lip and fall on my face.

Ice!

I slide backwards, toward the cliff’s edge, clawing at the ice. But I can’t get traction.

My legs slide straight out over the abyss, and—

“Nivin!”

Da’s hand clamps over my calf. “Use your dagger.”

It takes me a moment to realize I’m no longer sliding.

“Dagger, yes.” I feel around for it on my hip.

“Other side.”

Eventually, I pull out my dagger, stabbing the ice until it holds. Then I pull myself forward, panting.

Leaving the dagger in the ground for the others, I crawl to a level spot. And try to get my breathing to slow.

It doesn’t work. By the time my father crawls up next to me, I’m shaking and unable to catch my breath.

I expect Da to reprimand me for being so foolish.

“He can’t lock the Gifts,” he says, also breathing heavily. In his case it’s more from exertion than fear.

“Huh?”

“Your brother. He can extract Gifts from people, but he can’t lock them into the relics.”

Not the reprimand I was expecting.

“Of course he can, Da. If I can do it, Asgaill can.”

He’s surprised. “Nivin, you’ve become stronger than either Asgaill or I. Some of your first relics still have their Gifts, five years later! Which is why I need you to stop avoiding these relic-making jobs. You need more practice and I need the help.”

I realize my mouth is hanging open. “Are you trying to distract me from almost dying?”

“Yes.” He smiles. “But it’s also true.”

I shake my head. “Asgaill always told me...” *I was a weakling.*

“Asgaill says a lot of things,” Da mutters, going to help the next man on the ladder.

The man, a villager, is more careful than I—probably wise—and took more time to climb. Using his own dagger as well as mine, plus my father’s assistance, he pulls himself to safety, then helps Gotfried.

My father returns to crouch next to me in the snow.

“It’s why we’re here, isn’t it?” I say. “Asgaill told them we’d defeat their dragon. Da, why would he say that?”

“Might be the truth. Our particular Gift is rare.”

“Are you joking? What could our Gift do, against a dragon? If she does actually exist. Throw a Holy Relic at it?”

He barks a laugh. “I spoke at length with the priest here, and with Asgaill, about this dragon. Have you heard what she does to men? Fire, ice, lightning, acid, poison...”

“You think her magic is related to the Gifts?”

“Could be.”

“Fire manipulation is an elemental Gift. As are Air, Water, and Earth.” I frown. “But not lightning or acid.”

“Don’t you imagine the right combination of Air and Fire could create lightning? Or Water and Air to create ice? Earth and Water to make poison?”

I understand what he’s suggesting—the dragon’s magic is a combination of Gifts, that she possesses more than one. *But how could acid be a Gift?*

“Da, even if it’s all true, we couldn’t extract those Gifts from her. Gifts can’t be taken involuntarily. The saints who offer them up at their time of death choose to do so.”

My father folds his hands. “It’s what I’ve always taught you, yes.”

“*What?*”

“Ah, here’s Ragen.” Da stands and dusts the snow from his cloak. “Let’s talk more about this later.”

I stare, a hundred questions racing through my head. “But—”

But it’s time to go.



Gotfried and Ragen once again take the lead and we hike in silence, listening for noises other than our own feet.

Soon they slow, and Ragen waves for us to crouch in the bushes while he and Gotfried scout ahead. We bunch at the edge of a clearing next to a new cliff face.

At first I’m afraid it’s another rope ladder.

But no. We're at the cave entrance.

Ragen and Gotfried cross the clearing without incident, taking positions on either side of the cave. They peer inside with their swords drawn.

Taking cautious steps inside, they stay covered behind boulders and rock outcroppings.

"Let me go!" a child's voice—not Sildah—shouts from inside the cave. "Let me out of here!"

At the sound of the voice, Ragen and Gotfried abandon their positions and race into the cave.

The four of us at the clearing's edge aren't far behind.

"Not you, Nivin!" Da throws his arm in front of my chest, stopping me.

"Da, let me go!"

"You'll stay and guard the entrance."

"For what? A second dragon?" I try to push past him but he bars my way.

"What if we're rushing into a trap? We may need reinforcements. You're to stay here unless we call for help."

"Da, I—"

"Please."

I don't want to stay outside like a coward while the other men fight the dragon or whatever's inside the cave. But he could be right about reinforcements. And his tone startled me—my father never begs.

Finally I nod and station myself behind a boulder at the cave entrance, resting on a knee. I draw my sword, though, so I'm ready.

“Thank you,” he says, and sprints after Ragen.

The child has stopped yelling, and I hear nothing. I’m praying it means Ragen arrived in time.

I should be with them. I’m acting like such a coward out here.

Looking back the way we came, I wonder when Asgaill and the others will arrive.

I’m definitely going into the cave then.

A violent screech from the cave—like nothing I’ve ever heard before—breaks the night air, followed by the shouts of men.

Instantly I’m on my feet, staring into the torchlit cave entrance, torn.

He begged me to stay here, but what if he’s in trouble?

Again, I look back, praying for Asgaill and the others to arrive.

A petite figure breaks free of the bushes and races toward me.

“Guntrude! What are you doing here?”

She doesn’t slow. Instead she shoots past me, straight through the cave entrance.

“Guntrude, no!”

She ignores me and keeps running.

I can’t let a little girl go into a dragon’s lair on her own!

So I chase her through the entrance to the cave and into a tunnel.

By the light of my torch, the tunnel looks empty, other than rock formations and boulders. I slip on a patch of ice but

catch myself before falling, and keep running.

Twenty feet on, the tunnel turns, with burn marks streaking the jagged stone walls. Judging by the noise, fast-moving shadows, and sounds of fighting, I'm close.

Around the corner, the tunnel opens into a wide cavern.

And inside—

"Oh, gods," I breathe.



"It's a dragon."

I don't realize I've spoken aloud—or that I'm standing in the entrance to a dragon's lair, fully exposed—until Ragen grabs my arm.

"Of course it's a dragon, you damned fool!" He drags me backwards and stuffs me behind a boulder.

I ran straight past him and didn't notice. What else have I missed?

Do try to be more perceptive, Nivin, my father always says. Usually I tell him I'm plenty perceptive.

I'm willing to concede that I could be wrong.

Frantic, I peer around the boulder to search for Guntrude, but don't see her in the tunnel behind me nor in the cavern ahead.

Two men lie unconscious on the cavern floor near the dragon. They were on the trail with us, and I don't even know their names.

Neither man is my father.

Da crouches behind his own stack of boulders, sword in hand. He's not pleased to see me. Gotfried isn't in view.

I exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding and focus on the monster.

Prexcyt.

Almost twice the height of a man, with five long necks and huge, lizard-like heads. And bizarrely, each head and neck is a different color.

She's occupied by something in the far corner, but four of her heads guard her back, keeping watch on the cavern.

A puff of smoke emanates from the red snout's enormous nostrils, and a bonfire burns in the corner. The scent of smoke and charred wood is overpowering.

"Red is fire," I whisper. "Green is poison."

"Ice," Ragen says, pointing to a man on the cave floor. "The white one froze him. Like a fog of ice, right out of the beast's mouth. That quick he was dead—nothing to be done. Your father and I tried to help him but he was already solid ice."

I stare at the monster, horrified. How can we beat her?

Ragen continues. "The blue head is worse. Reaches further than the others. Like a bolt of lightning. Stay the hell away from it, Nivin. Stay the hell away from them all. Aren't you supposed to be outside?"

I'm squinting into the dark corners at piles of rocks and boulders littering the cavern floor. Where could a child hide?

"I saw Guntrude—" I start to explain.

Ragen yells and shoves me down. "Aahh!"

He plants one foot on my back, the other on my shoul-

der, and propels himself off the boulder, sword waving. With a single swipe, he plunges his sword into the dragon's red neck.

The fire head, now partially detached, falls forward and hangs as if dead. Prexcyt's other heads roar, claws slashing.

I gasp. How did the dragon move across the cavern, all the way to us, so fast?

Ragen rolls toward the cavern's center, just out of Prexcyt's grasp—although a talon slices through his cloak and coat like paper.

The dragon's blue mouth yawns open, and I feel...

Like fingernails are running up my spine. The crackling of a fire, like it's building strength.

Lightning.

"Get out of the way!" I scream to Ragen. He's in the cavern's center, exposed.

The blue head swivels at the sound of my voice.

Oh gods.

She's coming for me now. I back up hastily.

And slip on ice, falling hard. My sword clatters to the ground and the air leaves my lungs with a heavy *oohf!*

I struggle to rise, to breathe.

Prexcyt's blue head enters my line of sight, and once again the mouth opens, and I feel—

BLAAHT!

Prexcyt, distracted by the horrific sound of Guntrude's trumpet, jumps backwards. I would too—the trumpet is next to my ear—if I weren't flailing like an upended turtle.

"Nivin, move!" Guntrude yells, dropping her trumpet on

the ice and wrenching my arms up.

Once my feet are under me, I run, keeping Guntrude out front to block her from Prexcyt.

Behind us the dragon roars.

With a look back, I see my father standing in front of Prexcyt with his bloody sword raised high. He's already struck one blow.

The beast's white neck and head bleed and look broken, with eyes closed. The head falls forward on its long neck as though dead.

"Nivin, run!" Guntrude tugs my arm toward the exit.

I can't. I watch as the three remaining dragon heads focus on my father.

"No," I breathe. Then bolt, running toward my father and the cavern. I don't know where my sword went, and I have no idea what to do against a dragon. Distract her, perhaps. "Da!"

Ragen arrives first, then Gotfried—not sure where he's been—each taking on a head.

My father stands immobile. His sword droops, and Prexcyt takes a step closer.

Why is he just standing there?

Gotfried, axe swinging, manages to chop off the green head entirely. Ragen slices up the blue so badly it hangs torn and limp from the creature's neck, barely attached by scaly blue skin.

The last head—the black one—is focused on Da. Its jaws open.

Mist sprays from Prexcyt's last head, the edge of its cloud

reaching my father.

“Ah!” Da yells in pain, dropping his sword and falling to his knees. He covers his face with both hands.

The dragon knocks Gotfried with her heavy tail, throwing him into a wall. The smith screams, cradling his axe arm to his body.

In the next instant, Prexcyt bashes her head into Ragen’s. He crumples, unconscious, like a rag doll.

The dragon looks my way, and—shockingly—runs the other direction, toward the cavern’s opposite side, her original location when I entered.

“Da!”

My father is curled into a ball, moaning and holding his hands to his eyes.

“Da, let me see.” I pull a hand from his face to find the skin around his eyes red and burnt. His eyes themselves...

“Acid,” he groans, his voice raspy. “Can you wash it out?”

I pull out my belt flask and start to pour water over his eyes when a child’s voice yells out for help. Another joins in.

It’s coming from the cavern’s far side, beyond Prexcyt.

Now I know what’s occupying her.

Her captives.

Da’s hand flails and grasps mine. “Nivin, go help. Get the children out of here. I don’t believe the dragon will hurt you.”

“Da, you’re not making sense.”

I don’t want to leave him, but Guntrude appears at my shoulder and takes the flask from me. She pulls Da’s hand, helping him to his feet. “Go! I’ll help your father outside.”

“Guntrude!” Gotfried struggles to stand—his leg is bleeding and his arm looks broken. He limps to his daughter, casting glances toward the dragon. “What are you doing here?!”

Guntrude looks at me. “Go, Nivin! I’ll take care of them.”
I nod and pick up Da’s sword.

CHAPTER 3

I skirt the cavern's edge, moving quietly and sprinting between boulders to keep obstacles between me and the dragon.

Prexcyt's attention is elsewhere, but I'm scared of her speed and strength. While reduced to one functional neck and head, she still defeated three men.

My only opportunity is now. She's weakened, almost deflated. As I near, I see she's leaning against the cavern wall's uneven stone.

Crunch!

I freeze when glass breaks under my foot. The dragon doesn't look at me, so I check the floor.

It's a pane of glass the size of my palm, crushed by my boot. Out the corner of my eye are other reflections of shiny metal and glass. Edging sideways—in case it's a discarded shield, which could be useful—I find...

A reliquary?

One of my own reliquaries, in fact. A gem-encrusted box I made for a Gifted saint near Paris last year. It's now broken open and the relic is missing. Two emeralds have fallen off and lie in the mud.

Of course, I didn't use sufficient copper wire.

I have no idea how a dragon came to possess a relic box, or what she's doing with it—perhaps the gemstones?—but it's not a shield.

I drop the gems into my coat pocket, where they roll into the brass and copper from Gotfried's smithy.

Stupid. Should have left my purchases in the wagon. Not like I needed extra weight for the hike up the mountain, with a dragon to fight at the top.

At the thought of the dragon, the full weight of where I am, of what I'm doing, hits me. And my knees almost go out.

Can't simply tap her on the back and ask for a fair fight. "Excuse me, Madame Prexcyt..." A nervous giggle wells up in my chest, but I'm not quite stupid enough to let it out.

"Get it together, Nivin," I whisper.

Between me and the dragon is an imposing rock formation. I dive behind it, climb as stealthily as I can, and peer over the top.

She isn't far away, perhaps twenty feet. From this angle, I see what she's guarding.

Her prisoners.

There are five: Sildah and another young woman, plus an old man and two children—a girl and a boy. In a locked wooden cage.

They look like they're sleeping, bundled in heavy woolen and fur cloaks. In truth, I can't tell if they're alive or dead. Sildah looks so pale.

He's moving!

A prisoner, the boy, sits up and blinks at Prexcyt. He tries to stand but is too groggy.

"Help!" he calls out. I recognize his voice—it's weaker now. "Is anyone there?"

Prexcyt's last head swivels toward the boy, and I'm terrified she means to spray him with acid.

I crawl over the ledge, positioning myself to jump, maybe distract her attention from the child.

Until I notice she hasn't opened her enormous jaws. Instead she stares at the boy. Like she's...

She's stealing his Gift!

I'm frozen as I watch—or sense—the Gift move from the boy to the dragon. It's a Water Gift.

The boy seems to get weaker and weaker. Finally, he sits next to Sildah and leans against her, closing his eyes.

Prexycyt breathes deeply, absorbing the Gift.

Her severed green neck lengthens, and at the end is the beginning of a head. The blue head Gotfried almost decapitated is already half-healed.

She's growing her heads back!

Da was correct—the dragon does use the Gifts. She kidnaps people with Gifts and steals from them. And from Holy Relics. She must have found a way to extract their Gifts and use them for herself.

I gape as Prexycyt's green head grows and re-forms.

How we can defeat her if she can heal herself, and if she has multiple Gifts?

At least she's keeping her captives alive. She must need them to restore her own strength.

I rest my head on the rocky ledge, hiding from her, feeling defeated and exhausted. I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open.

How can we keep fighting her?

I should wait for the second wave of village men to ar-

rive. Certainly the safest course. Would it be so bad to rest while I wait?

Yes.

Much as I want to rest, it's too dangerous. I try to lift my heavy lids. On one attempt, I get a glimpse of Prexcyt.

And find her watching me.



I gasp, waking myself with a jolt.

"You're trying to steal my Gift!" I say to the dragon, who can't possibly understand me.

Her eyes narrow and she jumps forward, closing the twenty feet between us in three steps. Launching herself up the rock formation, she slashes my throat with her talon.

I drop Da's sword and clasp my hand over my neck, certain I'm dying. When I look at my hand, though, I find no blood.

She didn't pierce my throat, just my shirt collar.

She yanks me towards her by the collar, off the rock, and throws me against floor so hard my vision swims.

I struggle to pull myself to my knees, aware of how slowly I'm moving. She could strike any time. I glare up at her, wondering when the spray of acid will come.

Three breaths pass, though, and she doesn't strike.

She doesn't want my life—she wants my Gift!

I don't intend to give her either one. My Gift is the ability to manipulate the other Gifts—if anyone can withstand her, it would be me.

But not if she bashes my head in. So I let myself fall back onto the cave floor and pretend to pass out.

Before long, I hear her giant claws click-clack against the rocks of the cave floor, until they're next to my face.

I work to slow my heartbeat, my breathing, so she'll think I'm unconscious. Certainly I'm no longer sleepy.

Impossible to be sleepy with dagger-sharp talons next to my head.

Not helpful, Nivin! Play dead, play dead, play dead...

Then I feel it: She's extracting my Gift.

Without pushing back too obviously, I put up a wall of resistance. Perhaps she'll believe my Gift is just tough to extract, and keep me alive until the next wave of people arrive on the mountain.

On my next breath, once my resistance feels steady, I open my awareness and try to identify the dragon's Gifts. I sense her Fire Gift, but it's... strange, almost detached from her. Loose. As is the Earth Gift.

The Water Gift, I sense the easiest—it belongs to the boy in the cage. I can feel, almost tangibly, how the Water Gift doesn't fit the dragon properly. Like a Holy Relic whose Gift will drain away too soon, go back into the aether. Or into its rightful owner, if still alive.

She can't hold onto the stolen Gifts forever.

I'm certain this is why she keeps her prisoners alive. As soon as their Gifts drain out of her, she has to go back for more.

Unless she had my Gift.

The thought hits me with a force that almost makes me

gasp.

She wants my Gift... because my Gift would allow her to keep everyone else's. For years. Didn't my father say some of my locks lasted five years?

But how would a dragon know of my Gift?

Once again, I reach out and open my awareness, to a different kind of Gift—the fifth one, similar to my own.

I find it.

And want to weep. I have no idea how he transformed himself into a dragon, but I also know, without a doubt, who is standing in front of me.

I open my eyes to see my brother's bare feet.



"Stop pretending to sleep," Asgaill says, pulling on a pair of pants and a tunic. "We need to get this over with."

He yanks me to my feet and shoves me onto a flat boulder, where I sit. He does it effortlessly.

I glance around, half-expecting the dragon again, although I know—logically—Prexcyt won't be there.

It was my brother the whole time. I have to see that now.

Not that I have any idea how he transformed into a five-headed dragon.

"One of your prisoners has an Air Shifting Gift?" I ask, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets to keep warm. Ineffective tactic—the metal from the smithy and the emeralds from the relic boxes are keeping my hands cool. "You have the strength

of an Air Gift.”

“Yes. So I can beat you within an inch of your life, if you don’t cooperate.”

“You wouldn’t need to beat me—your Gift is stronger than mine.” It’s what he always tells me.

Asgaill smiles. “Maybe you should’ve practiced extractions more and spent less time making puzzle boxes.”

He leans over and puts his hand on my forehead. Extractions work better with physical contact.

“It’s wrong to use other people’s Gifts, Asgaill. Too much power for one person.”

“What do you think Holy Relics are? Good luck charms? This is stupid—stop talking.”

“Relics make people feel like they’re in touch with the divine. They don’t make anyone all-powerful. And they are donated willingly.”

He closes his eyes to focus and begin the extraction.

“What will Da say?” I ask, hoping to keep him talking.

“I said stop talking. Open your mind.”

“He figured it out when he saw you in dragon form, didn’t he? It’s why he couldn’t kill you.”

Asgaill punches me across the chin. Then he lays his palm against my forehead and closes his eyes.

Instantly, I feel the extraction begin. It’s strange, to be on the receiving end of it, feeling my Gift drained away.

He’ll beat me senseless if I try to stop him, so I don’t fight too hard. As before, I put up a wall of mild resistance, letting a trickle of my Gift drain from me, and hoping he won’t notice

how slowly he's progressing.

And praying someone else shows up soon to stop or distract him.

I feel myself becoming sleepier as he works, so I hold the scraps of copper and brass sheets in my pockets, allowing them bite into my skin. Maybe the pain will keep me awake.

The copper sheet scraps also help me block Asgaill, if only slightly. When we put metals into our relic boxes, it isn't just decorative—it helps prevent the Gifts from leaking out.

"When did you plan this?" I speak softly to avoid a retaliatory blow. "I mean, how did you invent the, uh, dragon shape? Do you hate me and Da so much you'd lock us in a cage forever and steal our Gifts? Or are you planning to kill us?"

Asgaill doesn't speak—he's focused on his task. His mouth twists in a way I've seen a hundred times, usually before he tells me I'm a weakling.

"Da says I'm good at locking the Gifts into Holy Relics," I say. "Better than either you or him. Which is why you want my Gift. To steal other people's Gifts and lock them into yourself. Correct?"

He slaps me. In my sleepy state, it's refreshing. My eyes pop open and I try to focus, keep my awareness on my brother. He seems... weaker.

I blink. Why did he transform back into his own shape?

Doing a Gift extraction is exhausting, and Asgaill has been doing them all night. Even though he's physically stronger from all of the Gifts, he's weaker in other ways.

Must be almost impossible for him to hold onto the other

Gifts while extracting mine.

“Did you poison Bishop Ebbol to lure us here?” I loosen my grip on the metal in my left pocket and wrap my fingers around an emerald.

“Stop baiting me, Nivin,” he growls, too focused on his task to hit me. “It won’t stop the extraction.”

“Sorry. I suppose I’m chatty when I’m being robbed. One thing I don’t understand—”

“I don’t care what you don’t understand. Shut up.” He punches me again, with a fraction of his former strength. He’s sweating with exertion despite the frigidity of the cave’s air.

“—is how you can do an extraction while holding onto four other Gifts. It’s impressive. Especially if you don’t have a relic to put them into.”

He frowns and punches at me again.

I dodge, rolling off the boulder to land in a crouch next to our father’s sword.

His eyes go wide and he jumps backwards.

“You seem weak, Asgaill,” I say, grabbing the sword. “I mean, you’ve taken part of my Gift from me. What happened to the other four?”

He gasps. “What did you do?”

“While you were occupied with stealing my Gift, I borrowed the other ones. You don’t mind, do you?” I back away from him, waving the sword in front of me.

In fact, I can barely stand. I used the bulk of my strength to pull the stolen Gifts out of him. He’d already stripped me of so much of my Gift by then, that I couldn’t hold onto the

others. I just released them into the aether—they'll go back to their rightful owners, where they belong.

Roaring, I jump at him with the sword.

He stumbles and runs from me, across the cavern.

I straighten my posture and follow, trying to appear strong and confident, full of the four elemental Gifts.

Eventually he'll see that I'm bluffing, that even without Air or Water or Earth Gifts, he's now stronger in the Fifth Gift—our family's Gift. He could steal the others back again.

If he stays near his prisoners.

As if reading my thoughts, Asgaill stops midway across the cavern, changing direction.

Dammit.

He heads to Ragen, who still lies unmoving, and picks up his sword.

"I love how strong this Air Gift makes me feel," I say, waving my sword. "I wouldn't recommend fighting me."

"You're a horrible liar, Nivin. Anyway, you don't have it in you to hurt me." He approaches in fighting stance.

"You almost killed me with lightning!" I don't want to back up, but if he keeps coming, I have no choice. He's the better fighter. "What do I have to lose?"

"I wasn't going to kill you... just knock you out." He circles, sword raised. I can tell he's still uncertain about my strength. But he won't be for long.

"You sprayed Da with acid!"

"He'll be fine. It's like a sunburn. It's just—"

He leaps at me mid-sentence, catching me off guard.

I stumble backwards, barely getting my sword up in time to block the first blow.

He grins. He knows I'm bluffing now, so it'll be over fast. He raises his sword again, and—

A gust of wind blows through the cavern, knocking me to the ground.

I scramble to my feet in case Asgaill comes at me again but...

My brother is on the ground, eyes closed. Next to his head is a rock covered in his blood. The wind gust was aimed at him, not me.

I rush to him, not sure what to hope.

He's breathing. But he's unconscious, with blood soaking his ash blonde hair and pooling under his head.

His eyelids flutter.

I gather my strength and put up an internal wall between us, a block to prevent him from pulling any more of my Gift from me.

He opens his eyes and looks at me. In the reflection of his eyes, over my shoulder, is a red shape.

A dragon's head.



I gasp, rolling from my kneeling position onto my back, then my feet, away from the dragon.

I thought Asgaill was the dragon! There are two??

"Oh gods," I mumble. "Please don't kill me."

For now it has all five heads, and looks perfectly healed.

"She won't," a child's voice says. It's the boy from the cage. "Not you, anyway."

I tear my eyes from the dragon to the boy.

All the prisoners are awake now, walking free. A young woman with red hair helps the old man, who's limping. Their cage has been ripped open.

And the dragon...

I gasp again. She's leaning over Asgaill, snarling. One of her claws rises to stab him.

"No! Please! He's my brother."

The giant talon lowers, resting threateningly on Asgaill's chest. With a twitch, she could impale him through the heart.

Asgaill seems to have awakened fully, although he's pale, either from fear or blood loss. He wasn't afraid of me earlier, not really. But now he looks terrified.

"Kill him! He kept us locked up for a month!" the old man says, and a gust of angry wind blows past, whipping my cloak. He's the one with the Air Gift.

"If you don't do it, Sildah, I will," the young red-headed woman says, gesturing to the bloody rock next to Asgaill's head. The rock rises as her Earth Shifting Gift reaches it, hovering a moment before dropping to the ground.

"Sildah?" I ask. I don't see her. "Where is she?"

Everyone is staring at the dragon, and they don't seem scared. Except Asgaill, of course.

"Sildah?" I repeat, this time to the dragon.

It can't be.

My brother, still lying on the ground under the dragon's foot, lets out a breath of laughter, even though I can tell he's ready to wet himself.

"It's an unusual Gift, Nivin, unlike anything we've seen before. Shape Shifting." He speaks to me without looking away from the dragon above him. "Have you noticed how she's so pretty half the time? She's much fiercer than you think. You might want to focus your energy on her, instead of me. You can take her Gift from her."

The dragon lets out a terrifying chorus of five growls, baring teeth on all of her heads. Once again she raises her claw over Asgaill.

I jump forward. "No!"

The green head, facing me, bats me aside.

I stumble, and feel...

Sildah's Gift.

It's the same one I felt at the smithy. Not an elemental—Air Shifting, or Water, Earth, or Fire—and not control of the elementals, like my Gift.

Shape Shifting, Asgaill said. A new Gift. Which he stole from her so he could transform into a dragon.

Could I steal it, like Asgaill suggested, in my weakened state?

I can't let her kill my brother. Nor can I let Asgaill hurt anyone again.

"Please, Sildah."

Hesitantly, I step closer, looking up at her. It's terrifying as well as disconcerting—all those eyes!

“Please don’t kill him. I’ll extract his Gift so he can’t hurt anyone.”

“Don’t listen to the boy, Sildah!” the red-headed Earth Shifter says. She points at Asgaill. “Kill him. It’s the only way.”

“Why don’t *you* do it?” the old man asks the Earth Shifter. “You said you would if she didn’t. So throw one of your damned rocks at his head. Or you,” he says to the young girl, who couldn’t be more than twelve. “Burn him with your Fire Gift.”

I might have the strength left for one or two Gift extractions. But I can’t take on them all.

Fortunately, no one moves.

Looking from one of Asgaill’s captives to the next, their exhaustion and fear are plain. They look... downtrodden, beat-up, poor. Their clothes aren’t just worn and dirty from a month of captivity—most weren’t better than rags to begin with. They have the look of people who live wild, outside the towns and villages.

Outcasts.

“We’d be hanged for murdering a rich man,” the Fire Shifter girl says. Her voice lowers to a whisper. “Or worse. My mother’s cousin was drowned as a witch.”

Da’s words come back to me. *Not every Gifted person is a priest.*

Only now do I wonder how many Gifted people exist, living on the fringes of society and praying not to be branded a witch. Hiding their Gifts.

Until a monster steals them.

I glance at my brother, bleeding on the ground, and the five-headed dragon above him, and I know which is the real monster.

Pulling an emerald from my pocket, I kneel next to Asgaill.

The dragon doesn't stop me, but leaves her heavy foot on his chest. A warning.

Asgaill looks exhausted. When I lay my hand on his forehead, he closes his eyes and relaxes, letting go. "Get it over with."

I extract his Gift as quickly as I can. I'm too tired to hold onto it, so I redirect it into the emerald in my other hand.

Next I lock the Gift into the gemstone, sealing it the way my father always taught me. It doesn't lock into the emerald as well as it would into one of Asgaill's own bones, but I don't feel up to cutting a finger off my brother.

"Is it done?" the man with the Air Gift asks.

I nod, sitting heavily in the hard-packed mud next to my brother. Asgaill appears to be asleep. "His Gift is locked inside the emerald."

A sharp claw wraps around my shoulder, jarring me from my stupor.

I freeze, looking up to find all five dragon heads staring at me. Her wide eyes are no longer so frightening. Instead, they seem sorrowful.

The claw bumps the emerald in my hand, almost knocking it loose.

I climb to my feet and pull the second emerald from my

pocket. “Yes, I have another one. Are you sure?”

“She hates it,” the Earth Shifter woman says. “Shape Shifting. She can’t control when it happens, so she runs away. She told me about it earlier tonight when we were both awake. She’s been using this cave to hide for years.”

“But Sildah was in the village until tonight. Why didn’t she tell anyone Asgaill was stealing her Gift from her?”

“She didn’t know what was going on until tonight. She’s just been feeling weak lately, and hearing the stories about the dragon.”

The red snout lowers until it almost touches my nose, and keeps going until it reaches my hand.

I hesitate, but finally touch my fingers to the dragon head. It isn’t hot, now that it doesn’t have the stolen Fire Gift.

Laying my full hand on the red, scaly cheek, I close my eyes and open my awareness.

I’m exhausted, too—Gift extraction takes a toll. But I can’t refuse to help a girl stuck in a dragon’s body.

It takes more time to extract the Shape Shifting Gift, but eventually I lock it into the second emerald.

When I open my eyes again, I—stupidly—expect to see the dragon still in front of me. Instead I find...

Sildah, eyes closed. *Naked.*

I clap my hand over my own eyes and turn around so fast I stumble.

“Oh! Sorry, Sildah. Take this!” the Earth Shifter says, running forward.

A moment later, I feel a hand on my arm. Peeking with

one eye open, I find that it's Sildah, wrapped in the Earth Shifter's cloak.

She looks exhausted, but relieved.

And different. Her features are plainer than before—more real, more human. The glow is gone, too. Her hair and skin aren't so shiny or radiant or flawless anymore. Instead she seems more authentic, more real.

I feel like I'm seeing her true face for the first time. And to me, she's much prettier now.



"Tie him up," the old Air Shifter says, breaking the spell.

Not far from us, Ragen is still on the ground, unmoving. I run to check on him and am relieved to find him not only breathing, but snoring.

Da!

I run outside.

Guntrude is in the clearing between our fathers, wrapping Gotfried's arm in a makeshift sling while he tries not to cry out.

My father lies in the snow with Guntrude's cloak propping up his head, eyes closed and breath labored. His face is red and burnt from the acid, but not as damaged as I feared.

"Da!" I plop down next to him. "Are you all right?"

"Nivin," he says in a rasp. He starts to open his eyes and winces in pain. I take his hand.

"Don't speak. We'll get you help!"

Asgaill's prisoners aren't far behind. They lead their former captor out with hands bound. The red-headed Earth Shifter holds a dagger to his ribs, fury in her eyes.

My brother's face is contrite, but he's pretending. I know his expressions too well.

He doesn't care that he's tied up. It's a joke to him.

He probably expects me to release his Gift—or he'll make me release it—as soon as we leave.

I frown. I don't know how I'll stop him. I can't lock up his Gift forever.

Nor can I have him imprisoned. How could I convince anyone of his crimes? If I talked to a sheriff or magistrate, it would be my word against my brother's. Who would believe me when I said my brother took the form of a dragon and terrorized a village? They'd think me mad. I'd be the one locked up.

My father is too ill to speak just now; in any case, he never saw Asgaill in the cave. He just sensed him, guessed it was his son. He wouldn't be able to confirm my story.

Likewise, neither Gotfried nor Ragen witnessed wrongdoing by Asgaill.

I glance at the outcasts... Who would believe their testimony, if they were willing to testify at all?

My eyes turn to my brother, who's watching me. He looks smug.

He knows I can't kill him. I can't have him imprisoned. He'll just move on and find more Gifted people to rob.

If I can't lock up Asgaill, and I can't kill him, I must lock up his Gift. But how?

I pull the two emeralds from my pocket.

My best relics, in my securest metal-plated reliquaries, last a handful of years. The Gifts always leak out the corners. I picture the reliquary Asgaill smashed to bits in the cavern, and the ones stored in the wagon.

I shake my head.

Even with a strong reliquary box, it's only a matter of time before Asgaill's Gift leaks out of the emerald and into the aether, to find its way back to him. Because the Gifts always leak out the corners.

I gasp.

"Nivin?" Sildah lays her hand on my shoulder. I hadn't noticed her coming outside. "What's wrong?"

I look up. "The Gifts always leak out the corners."

"Huh?"

"Guntrude!" I jump up. "Where's your—? Never mind. I remember."

Returning to the tunnel, I find Guntrude's trumpet. Gotfried's axe is across the cavern.

After a silent apology to Guntrude, I lift the axe and hack off both ends of the trumpet, leaving a brass tube half the length of my forearm.

I stick one end of the tube into the dying bonfire in the corner, and wait for it to soften. The brass isn't terribly pliable, but eventually I'm able to close up an end of the trumpet by bashing it with the axe butt.

Using my dagger to slice off a strip of cloth from my shirt, I wrap both emeralds and stuff them into the brass cylinder.

Sildah won't ever want her Gift. To her, it's a curse.

Repeating the bonfire and axe butt technique, I close up the other end. Next I spend time with each end in the fire, softening the metal, melting it, just enough to seal the tube.

Finally I sit, breathing heavily.

Barely allowing myself to hope, I close my eyes, open my awareness, and focus on the brass cylinder in my hands. And...

Nothing.

I try again.

Once again, nothing. I can sense neither Asgaill's nor Sildah's Gifts in the cylinder.

"There are no leaks," I whisper.

"Nivin?" Sildah asks, approaching.

"I figured it out! I figured out how to lock the Gifts into a box permanently. The trick is a cylinder! A brass cylinder, you see? I have to tell my Da!"

"Nivin!"

She reaches out for me as I pass. The tone in her voice stops me.

"Nivin, it's about your father. The acid seems to have gotten all the way into his lungs. I'm so sorry..."

EPILOGUE

Midgaard
A few years later
March 1st

I rotate the brass dials on the cylindrical box, feeling for a hitch. But no, the dials spin easily, without hesitation. It's perfectly tuned—no one will be able to pick the lock.

"Done!" I announce, holding up the box. Six engraved brass dials with five decorative spacer rings—each a different color of marble or granite—between them. "*Foirfe!*"

"*Foirfe?*" Sildah says, setting a mug of ale on the workbench in front of me. She takes the cylindrical box from me. "It's heavy."

"It means 'perfect' in Gaelic. And it's heavy because the interior is made of brass. And because of the stone rings, of course."

She runs her finger along the rings. Blue, green, white, red, and black. Like a certain five-headed dragon. "It couldn't have been easy to obtain five different colors of stone."

Next to impossible, but...

"Seemed important for this particular box." I shrug. "Want to see how it works?"

I point to the engraved dials.

"To unlock it, line up the correct letter on each of the five dials to spell a code—here."

“Brilliant,” she murmurs. “What’s the code?”

“Guess.”

“You made it for *me*, didn’t you?” She grins, rotating the dials to S-I-L-D-A-H. Her smile falls. “It doesn’t work.”

Guilty, I take back the box. “Oh. It must be broken.”

Her eyes narrow. Before I can stop her, she snatches the box from my hand and runs off.

Before long, she returns. With the box open.

“How did you know—?” I stop.

Of course she’s figured out the code. She knows me better than I know myself.

Without a word—with a glare instead—she sets the box on my workbench, picks up my mug of ale, and stalks out.

“I should have thought that through better,” I say to my empty workshop. “‘Sildah’. Why didn’t I set the code to ‘Sildah’?”

Opening a drawer in my workbench, I pull out the beat-up brass cylinder that used to be part of Guntrude’s old trumpet.

Guntrude has long forgiven me for destroying it. Of course, she insisted on playing her new flute at our wedding.

Gods that was awful!

Like I do almost daily, I hold the brass trumpet in both hands and close my eyes, searching. I smile. No leaks yet.

Picking up my new creation, the cylindrical locking box with the dials, I slide the old brass tube inside. Then I close the box up and spin the dials to lock it.

“It fits,” Sildah says, coming up behind me.

She stares at it for three full breaths. Finally she nods.

And plants a kiss on my cheek, to let me know she's gotten over my failure to use her name in the code. She, too, is relieved her Gift is locked away. More than I can imagine.

"About the code..." I start, but she waves my concern away.

"Hide it where your brother can never find it," she says. "Perhaps then you'll be willing to decrease the number of guards on the house."

"Maybe we can get a few guard dogs?"

"You shouldn't worry so much. Ragen won't let your brother anywhere near." She straightens. "But we don't have time to think about that now—we've got a full afternoon ahead of us."

"Ah yes... We're visiting the village by Eastgaard, aren't we? The family with the Water Gift?"

"Plus Westgaard, if we have time."

"Westgaard? What's in Westgaard?"

"The jail, of course! One of prisoners has a Fire Gift. The Mayor doesn't want to execute him—he's only in prison until his debts are paid. But the Mayor's afraid the prisoner will burn down the whole jail. So just a temporary extraction."

She regards my new invention, the cylindrical lockbox.

"How many of those can you make?"

"Do you know how long it took to create this one?" I stand and look around. "What happened to my ale?"

She chuckles. "I'll put it in a flask for you. Hold on."

While she's gone, I blow out the candle on my work-

bench and bank the fire. Late morning light streams through the window. It's almost spring.

"Nivin..." Sildah says, returning to the workshop with the flask in her hand and our cloaks over her arm. "What will you call it? Your new invention?"

"Does it need a name?"

"Of course it does. It's not a reliquary, but it is used for Gifts. A Gift box? Miracle box?"

"How about a Sildah box?"

"Nice try." She smiles. "But no."

"It should have something to do with you. Your Gift is the reason I invented it. Yours and Asgaill's."

"I'm so grateful not to spontaneously transform into a cursed dragon anymore. You can't imagine what an awful childhood I had."

No, I can't imagine. "So I can't call the boxes 'Prexcyt', then?"

She sticks out her tongue, letting me know her opinion of that idea.

"What about transforming it into something not-Prexcyt? Your Shape Shifting Gift is about transformation, after all."

I pick up a pencil to write out the letters, changing them around in different combinations: PYRTXEC, TRYCEXP, CEP-TRYX...

I've done a half-dozen combinations when Sildah, looking over my shoulder, speaks softly.

"Cryptex."

I stop writing. "Say that again."

“*Cryptex*,” she says, emphasizing each syllable. “Like cryptography, for the code word.”

Yes, that sounds right.

I write it out to be certain it contains the correct letters.

“Does it sound too morbid?” I ask. “Like a crypt?”

She laughs. “A relic maker’s son is worried about sounding morbid?”

I beam, holding my new creation out to her. “My lady, may I present you with the first ever... *Cryptex*!”

“It’s perfect,” she says, examining it again. “‘*Foirfe*?’ Was that the word?”

I give her a kiss. “Yes, *Foirfe. Parfait. Perfecto!*”

“Nivin!” Ragen’s voice shouts, just before he bangs on the door. “Sildah? Are you two home? It’s time to leave for Eastgaard!”

“Does he have to be so punctual? Maybe I should fire him. Then I wouldn’t have to go anywhere.”

Sildah hands me my cloak and the flask of ale. “Sorry, my love. The Kirk’s job is never done.”



KARI MAAREN

Kari Maaren is a writer, cartoonist, musician, and reasonably grumpy university instructor. Her first novel, the YA-friendly fantasy adventure *Weave a Circle Round*, was published in the fall of 2017. She has a completed webcomic, *West of Bathurst*, and an active one, *It Never Rains*; she has also produced two CDs of original music, *Beowulf Pulled My Arm Off* and *Everybody Hates Elves*, and has won Aurora Awards for her music (2013 and 2015) and comics (2015).

Kari was born in Burnaby, B.C., but now lives in Toronto, Ontario with far too many musical instruments and an astounding number of books.

PREXCYT VS. THE INTERNET, OR, THAT TIME MY GRANDMA TOLD A PREXCYT STORY AND GOT IT WRONG AS USUAL

By Kari Maaren

Seriously, guys, my grandma is the weirdest.

Other people get cute grandmas or mean grandmas, but my grandma doesn't act like a grandma at all. I think she thinks she turned into a grandma accidentally and is still surprised to see kids bouncing all over her all the time. She doesn't know how to handle it. Her brain goes *fsst* and leaves her all, Oh, there are children everywhere, helllp meeeee. Maybe that's why she's always with the stories. Most grandmas would just hand their grandkids an iPad and tell them to shut the hell up.

The thing is, though, Grandma's stories are terrible. She doesn't realise. She doesn't have any idea why she ends up with kids screaming at her all the way through, like, Grandma, you're telling it wrong. Grandma, that's not the way it goes. I don't know why she can't tell a proper story. Scott says she's old and on the verge of death and probably can't remember anything any more, and I continually point out that she's only

fifty-three, but he won't stop. Scott is a dick a lot of the time. He's the oldest cousin and the only boy, so he thinks he knows everything. I used to bite him a lot when we were younger.

Anyway, I wanted to tell you about the time Grandma told us the Prexcyt story, but I needed to warn you first. This is not going to be some cuddly old lady sitting down and going, So once upon a time, there was a king with three sons. Grandma's stories never start that way, which is part of the problem. Maybe we should ask our parents to club together and get her an iPad so she can distract us with it when we visit. I'd be fine with that.

So here, basically, is what we've got:

Grandma's apartment. Not huge, but okay for one grandma. But when you take seven cousins, the oldest fifteen and the youngest almost two, and shove them into this space and tell Grandma to look after them for five hours, you get total chaos, obviously. Baby Michelle screaming. Carolyn and Letitia pulling each other's hair. Scott above it all, playing with his phone, until Alyx knocks it out of his hand and cracks the screen, and then Scott is screaming at Alyx. Josie picking her nose in the corner. Me, trying to read, since I read everywhere I go, but I have only a chapter left in my book and forgot to bring another one with me and know I'm doomed to spend five hours being tortured by Carolyn and Letitia. And Grandma standing in the middle of everything, her giant glasses trembling on her nose, looking as if someone's thrown her against a wall. Grandma is weird, but I feel sorry for her sometimes.

Grandma eventually sits down and says she's going to

tell us a story, which usually happens at some point during these visits, but not generally in the first five minutes. There's a lot of moaning. Scott is all, Screw that, I was playing this game with zombies in it, WHERE ARE MY ZOMBIES NOW, which is basically Scott all the time since he turned fifteen and lost his ability to function as a human. Michelle doesn't know any better and plops herself right down on Grandma's lap. Everybody else howls and whines for a solid ten minutes before settling down. Grandma's going to tell the story no matter what. You can't stop her. She's relentless. So we all prepare to get it over with, or most of us do. Scott is still muttering about zombies. I hit Scott hard on the arm to shut him up. I'm the second oldest and the only one of us who's an only child, so I'm allowed to do that.

Grandma says, How about a Prexcyt story? I don't think I've told you one of those before.

And now, damn it, I'm actually interested. Anybody would be. Prexcyt stories are the best stories. I mean, okay, they're everywhere. I don't remember a time when I *didn't* know the story of Prexcyt and the waterfall. And then there's the one about the Hero of Chelm who defeats Prexcyt in a riddle contest, and the one about the town with the Prexcyt statue in its central square, and the one about the king who tries to trick Prexcyt and ends up chained naked to a mountainside for all of eternity. And those are just the fairy tales. There are also the ten billion writers who've been all, Hey, this Prexcyt thing just gives us a wealth of material. And they write novels and films about Prexcyt, usually quest stories about shepherd boys

who eventually become kings, and Prexcyt is the big obstacle they have to get past, or maybe Prexcyt gives them the answer to an important question or something. There's even a four-hundred-and-sixteen-issue comic series called *The Astonishing Prexcyt*, but no one takes that one seriously any more. It mixes up the colours and powers of Prexcyt's heads, and between 1972 and 1974, the artist drew Prexcyt as a two-headed green dragon who told jokes all the times. The book I've got with me during this visit to Grandma's place is a Prexcyt book. I'm kind of obsessed with Prexcyt, to be honest.

Maybe Grandma even got the idea from looking at the cover of my book. Who knows? But everybody likes Prexcyt stories, so we all shut up except Scott, who says not really under his breath, She's just going to ruin Prexcyt like she ruins everything.

I hit Scott on the arm again.

Grandma starts, So there was once this girl sitting around playing on her smartphone—

I KNEW IT, yells Scott. He has a point. Grandma does this *every time*.

Carolyn says, No, Grandma, Prexcyt is totally not around now. You can't tell a Prexcyt story with a smartphone in it.

I can if I want to, says Grandma, her mouth all stubborn. Grandma may look kind of like a giant stick insect, but she never budes on the stories, no matter how often she's corrected.

You've ruined it already, says Scott. Prexcyt is ruined, just like the zombies. Just like my life.

Am I going to be like that when I'm fifteen? It's only two

years away. Can I be embarrassed for myself in anticipation? I hit Scott a third time and say, to my own surprise, Oh, come on, give her a chance. She didn't even get through the first sentence.

I *never* defend Grandma's stories. What's wrong with me? Is this that hormonal imbalance thing everybody's always going on about?

Scott grumbles and snarls but stops being dramatic, and Grandma starts again.

She says, Like I said, the girl was playing on her smartphone. She lived alone in the middle of the forest, just her and her smartphone and one goat. The girl was a humble charcoal burner. She rarely left the forest. She hadn't even seen the latest *Star Wars* movie.

Scott opens his mouth, but it's Carolyn who says, Why is she a charcoal burner if she has a smartphone? What's a charcoal burner? Why hasn't she seen *Star Wars*? Doesn't she know about Rey? Doesn't she—

Grandma says, The girl was playing *Pokémon Go* and walking through the forest while thinking about feeding her goat when she heard something up ahead, and she went to see. She walked into a parking lot. There, on top of a station wagon, was Prexcyt.

I am such a Prexcyt fangirl. In one way, I'm pretty mad at Grandma for making Prexcyt land on top of a car—Prexcyt belongs in the once-upon-a-time time with all the woodcutters and questing heroes and talking animals and maybe Bilbo Baggins, okay, since Bilbo does riddles and Prexcyt does riddles

and oh my God, I just had the best idea for a fanfic—but in another way, I just can't wait for there to be more Prexcyt all the hell over this story. You know which head is my favourite? It's the red one. Just kidding. It's the black one. Just kidding! It's all of them. I want to be an arrogant five-headed dragon that tells riddles for fun. I want to make all the kings feel bad about themselves. I want to eat shepherd boys for dinner. Metaphorically speaking.

Grandma says, The girl knew about Prexcyt, but she'd never heard of her coming anywhere near human habitations before. Prexcyt was supposed to keep herself to herself. The girl was a little afraid, since Prexcyt was very large and had five heads that kept spitting fire and ice and lightning and acid and poison, and the girl had heard things about what happened when Prexcyt asked a riddle that someone couldn't answer, but she also knew this was a great opportunity. She'd heard—

This time, I'm the one who interrupts. It's just that I know this fact about Prexcyt really well.

I say, She'd heard that if you asked Prexcyt a riddle before Prexcyt got one out, Prexcyt would have to answer it. And if she couldn't she would owe you something. Plus she wouldn't eat you, which was a bonus.

Nerd, mutters Scott under his breath.

Grandma looks a little startled, but she nods and says, That's right. Besides, the girl knew that if she didn't speak up, Prexcyt would ask *her* a riddle. That was the way Prexcyt rolled. The girl didn't even think about it; she knew there was no time. She opened her mouth and asked: 0011001000101011001100

1000111101?

Damn it, Grandma. Every time. *Every time* you wreck the stories. I know what those numbers are, though not what they specifically mean, but I'm almost the only one of us who even gets that far. The usual Grandma-Is-Telling-One-of-Her-Infuriating-Stories-Again ruckus starts at this point. Carolyn is all, That's not a riddle, and Alyx is doing the thing where she makes the ridiculously exaggerated sigh, and Letitia and Josie, who are twins but not identical, start slapping each other, and Michelle begins to cry, and Scott says, Is that binary? So at least I'm not the only one who recognises it. But I don't know how Grandma knows about binary. She doesn't even have an iPad.

It's a perfectly good riddle, says Grandma, all on her dignity.

I'm about to go, No, Grandma. That's not a riddle, and this is what a riddle is, and let me go into the history a bit, and did you know these interesting facts about medieval English, and let's keep our riddles real so you don't ruin the Prexcyt story, okay? But Grandma is already pushing on.

She says, Prexcyt looked at the girl narrowly from out of all five of her faces. The girl was standing there, all innocence, holding her smartphone, knowing she was about to defeat Prexcyt.

But then Prexcyt said, The answer is four.

Well, the girl didn't like that. She'd thought for sure Prexcyt wouldn't know anything about binary. Prexcyt hopped down off the car and said, Now you are mine.

Hold off a minute, said the girl. You have to ask me a rid-

dle first.

That's not how this works, said Prexcyt.

It is here, said the girl. Don't you know where you are? This is the king's own parking lot. Everything's fair in the king's own parking lot.

Prexcyt had never been to this particular parking lot before, and she couldn't be sure the girl wasn't telling the truth, so she said, Fine. I've got a great riddle for you:

What is tall as shortness

thin as fatness

empty as fullness

and found whenever it is lost?

Prexcyt liked riddles like that. She knew the girl wouldn't know the answer, and she waited for the crying and begging to begin.

But the girl said, That depends.

Prexcyt said, Depends? How can it depend?

The girl held up her smartphone and said, When I Google that riddle, most of the results say the answer is "hope," but some people disagree and say there's no way anyone would think of that and the riddle is an Emperor's-new-clothes sort of thing where everyone pretends afterwards to understand it but doesn't really.

Prexcyt stood there with various lethal substances leaking from her five mouths. She didn't know how to deal with this. Everyone usually just answered her riddles or didn't answer them. This was a completely new experience for her. She thought—

GRANDMA, says Carolyn, who's been trying to get Grandma's attention for a while now. NO. A Prexcyt story CAN'T HAVE GOOGLE IN IT.

Carolyn is eight, but she's also right. I like Prexcyt stories and Prexcyt books and fifteen of the twenty-three existing Prexcyt films because none of them are set now. In the book I'm reading, Prexcyt goes up against an army—an entire army, right—and she's so wise that not one person can guess her riddle. And Grandma's telling us about some girl who can answer any riddle because she's got the Internet in her pocket.

Grandma says, Prexcyt doesn't play fair, so why should anybody else?

Scott throws up his hands and proclaims this the worst story ever and goes into a monologue about some girl at his school with “chocolatey hair” (his words) and can I just not be a teenager? Ever? Please? Carolyn says there's no such thing as chocolatey hair, and Scott says the girl's hair looks and smells like chocolate, and Josie asks Grandma if she's got any chocolate-chip cookies, and for a moment, I think the story's done through sheer force of audience obnoxiousness. But Grandma doesn't give up that easy. She waits through the worst of the whining, then says:

Prexcyt was taken aback by this. She'd spent centuries sculpting her beautiful riddles, and they'd never failed her before. It was true that the answer to this one was “hope.” No one had ever got it right. And here was this girl saying that no one had got it right because it wasn't fair.

Prexcyt said, Um—

The girl was on her phone again. She said, Okay, I get another riddle now. What's this?

She held out her phone, and Prexcyt looked at it. On the screen was a picture of a rabbit. Or was it a duck? No, it was a rabbit. But wait: it was definitely a duck. Depending on how you looked at it, the picture could have been either.

Prexcyt said disdainfully, That is an optical illusion. My turn.

She drew herself up and breathed fire and lightning into the air as three of her heads intoned:

*I am the end of everything
the path into shadow
the disdainful apprentice's last thought
the meddling butler's final scream
and I live in your heart
but touch it not.*

Okay, said the girl, it looks like the answer to this one is "envy," but again, it only makes sense if you take a lot of poetic licence and try not to think about it too much.

Prexcyt was at a loss for words. This was the first time she'd ever had a problem like this.

I've got another one for you, said the girl. How tall is Mount Everest?

Prexcyt said, Are you trying to insult me? That is not a riddle. That is a fun fact.

The girl said, I could ask you what's in my pockets if you like.

That's from *The Hobbit*, says Scott. You're stealing from

The Hobbit now. Why are you like this?

I don't usually agree with Scott, but this is different. I don't like how Grandma is telling the Prexcyt story. I mean, sure, I don't like how Grandma tells any of her stories, but this is worse than usual, somehow. I don't know why. It feels like she's cheating. How can you cheat at telling a story?

Grandma shrugs and says, Bilbo won't mind. Anyway, Prexcyt just stared at the girl with ten eyes and said, Eight thousand, eight hundred and forty-eight metres.

And the contest kept going. The girl kept telling riddles that weren't really riddles, and Prexcyt dredged up her nastiest, spikiest, most obscure riddles, and the girl looked up the answers on the Internet. *All* Prexcyt's riddles were on the Internet. She thought for sure the one that just went *I eat everything but myself* wouldn't be, but the girl found the answer on a Prexcyt fan page. There didn't seem to be any reason the contest would ever end.

Finally, Prexcyt had had enough. She was used to either winning or losing, not both at the same time. She knew something had to be done. So she froze time—

WHAT, says Scott, just like that, without the question mark. I can't help speaking up again too. I say, Grandma, Prexcyt can't freeze time.

Yes, she can, says Grandma.

No, she can't, I say.

Grandma says, Well, technically, what she did in that instance was create a localised time pocket that allowed her to leave the girl safely immobilised while normal time continued

outside it.

This is so unexpected that while we're all still trying to figure out how to deal with it, Grandma is moving on.

She says, Prexcyt flew to the nearest mini-mall and signed up for a two-year data plan. She took her new phone home to her smoking mountain and spent a while getting acquainted with it. Since she'd made sure to choose the most expensive plan, the only one she considered worthy of herself, she had plenty of data, and she quickly mastered the phone. Then she flew back to the parking lot and unfroze time.

We're all just sitting there staring at Grandma in disbelief. This is low even for her. But not even Carolyn or Scott speaks up. How do you explain to your weird grandma that Prexcyt can't own a smartphone? Is she even going to understand what you're saying? Is Scott right about her just being super old?

You know, I normally don't like Grandma's stories, but I don't hate them. I hate this one. It feels personal, sort of, like Grandma is taking something beautiful and pure and distant and slapping a McDonald's uniform on it. It's like she doesn't even know what stories are for. Stories aren't about now. They're not about *here*. Prexcyt isn't our next-door neighbour. She doesn't fit in with school and smartphones and brushing your teeth and listening to your parents talk about politics and hiding in the bathroom at recess so Kayla Macmillan won't slam your face into a chain-link fence.

Grandma says, The girl never realised she'd been frozen, but she was surprised to see that Prexcyt had a phone now. Prexcyt said, Here is my next riddle.

She held the phone out towards the girl. There was a picture on the screen.

Prexcyt said, What colour is this dress?

The girl looked hard at the picture. The dress looked white and gold to her. But when she Googled it, some people were saying it was white and gold, and some were saying it was blue and black, and no one could agree on the answer. Some people posted other pictures of the same dress and pointed out that in those pictures, the dress was blue and black, but other people said they needed to be talking about the colour of the dress in that one picture, not in other pictures, and then the discussion moved on to the nature of truth and the power of subjective observation, and the girl briefly skimmed the abstract of somebody's philosophy dissertation on the significance of the dress and what its existence said about the fundamental nature of reality.

Prexcyt was tapping her claws against the pavement. Well? she said. I'm waiting.

The girl couldn't figure out how to answer. What if she said blue and black, but Prexcyt asked her if that was how *she* saw the dress? What if she said white and gold, but Prexcyt pointed out that the real dress was blue and black? What if the philosophy scholar was right? The girl stood there and said nothing.

Prexcyt had finally won the contest. She ate the girl, smartphone and all, then flew home again, though she stopped several times on the way to capture Pokémon. She told everyone she had achieved a great victory. However, for the rest of

her life, she always felt vaguely unsatisfied about it.

The end.

Scott's mouth is hanging open. Carolyn's bottom lip is all sort of sticking out from her face, and she says, Grandma, you can't tell stories like that. What's the fundamental nature of reality? The twins and Alyx have stopped paying attention, and Michelle is asleep.

But I'm mad. I pick up my book and slam out of the room, even though there are only like two rooms in this apartment, and the only thing I can do to get away from the others is shut myself in the bedroom. So I do that. And I try to read the last chapter of my book. But the chapter has Prexcyt in it, and Grandma just ruined Prexcyt forever. That's what she does. My grandma is a ruiner.

When I grow up and get married and have kids and they have kids and I have to look after the kids all through one afternoon, I'm not going to tell them stories. I'm going to hand them an iPad and go off to bake cookies. That's what grandmas are for.

So I sit there with my book and try to read through blurry eyes that definitely don't have tears in them, and I can't get past this one paragraph, and then Prexcyt sticks her five heads out of the book and says, What's wrong with YOU?

She doesn't really do that. Prexcyt isn't real. That's the whole problem with Grandma's story: it makes it way too obvious how not real Prexcyt is. But still, Prexcyt sticks her heads out of the book and asks me the question.

I say, Grandma just told a story about you, and it was

making FUN of you. It had a SMARTPHONE in it.

So? says Prexcyt out of the red head's mouth. I've had a smartphone for a decade.

I say, You can't. You're not allowed.

Am too, says Prexcyt, and shoots a bit of lightning at me. All the hair on my arms stands up.

I say, And now I'll never be able to think of you as NOT having a smartphone. Everything is awful.

Prexcyt says, I thought you didn't want to be a dramatic teenager like Scott. I thought you wanted to be different. I LIKE my smartphone. You know why?

I shake my head. Prexcyt is burning all the corners of my book, but she doesn't notice.

Because it gives me the Internet, says Prexcyt, and I'm all over the Internet. I'm the STAR of the Internet. People there LOVE me. They worship me! And I'll be there forever because you can't really ever delete anything from the Internet. I've achieved immortality. There are Prexcyt fan clubs! There's Prexcyt fanfic! I prove Rule 34! Somebody made a "What if all the Disney princesses were Prexcyt?" post on Tumblr! I LOVE the Internet.

I'm squirming a bit. Okay, so I do write Prexcyt fanfic. But it doesn't have smartphones in it.

Suck it up, small human, says Prexcyt, and ducks back into my smouldering book.

Later, I go back out into the main room.

Everyone's moved on. Scott and Carolyn are arguing about chocolatey girl hair, which Carolyn still says isn't a thing.

Alyx is in full meltdown because she's five and that's just what five-year-olds do. Letitia and Josie are trying to get Michelle to eat a cookie, and Michelle keeps yelling NO and turning herself upside down. Nobody even notices me, which is normal. I go sit in the corner with my almost-finished book.

Grandma does look at me once. She raises her eyebrows in the universal signal of, We good here?

I raise my eyebrows back in the universal signal of, Don't you dare do that again.

As Scott and Carolyn descend into a full-blown fistfight, I open my book. I'd better find out what's happened to Prexcyt this time.



LIZETTE TANNER

Lizette is an amateur writer. Most of her writing involves health reports and other government documents that have nothing to do with dragons. She lives in Alberta with her husband, her daughter, and a fluffy creature that is more or less a dog.

THE CAVE

By Lizette Tanner

The cave was cold. Blue was awake first, as usual. The grotto seemed awfully quiet.

This was the first time left alone, entrusted with the safety of their home. Blue remembered her mother's words, "You're the level-headed one. Watch out for your sisters and please don't let them do anything crazy."

Blue raised her head and the movement jostled Red awake. Red spit out a fiery breath that ricocheted off White's ear.

"OUCH! Watch it!" White awoke and head-butted Red.

"Blue's the one who startled me!" Red retorted which initiated their daily exchange of back-and-forth insults.

"Stop!" Blue interrupted them. "Listen."

The three raised their heads in attention. Nothing.

At this point, Black stirred. She had always been the least patient of the five and willed their body to start moving forward as she sniffed for breakfast.

"Wait, Black. Don't you think this is odd? It's so quiet in here." The three awake heads ignored her and all started searching for insects to snack on.

Blue shook her head frustrated. No one ever seemed to

listen to her. They always complained she “thought too much.” However, this time, it was not her thoughts that were bothering her. It was her instincts.

The cave was their home. During the winter, they allowed many animals to take shelter in the cave as long as they stayed out of the dragon’s way. Therefore, in small crevices and secret hideaways, one would find colonies of mice or even a small skulk of foxes. Sometimes Blue would wake up to find vermin scurrying around looking for water or nipping at her scaly dead skin. Where was everybody now?

Blue was the middle head so she was most able to direct their body in any direction. She willed them forward to the opening of the cave. She tried to push the rock that stood at the entranceway to the cave. It would not budge. The four heads struggled and were able to push the rock slightly to make a small opening to the outside. Blue peered outside and then gasped.

“WHAT?” Green woke up suddenly when she heard the gasp. Each head jostled for a glimpse into the small opening to the outside world.

There was a blizzard and a hill of snow covered most of the egress of the cave.

“Augh! We’re doomed! What will we do?” asked Red.

“Let’s go to the very back of the cave and wait there until this terrible thing is over,” said Green as she put her head down back to nap.

“It’s just snow,” said White.

Red snorted. “It’s not just snow! Did you see how high it

was? We're trapped in here. Black, melt a hole in the door. We get out and fly above the clouds. Then we'll be above the storm and can fly to some place warmer."

White balked. "You'd be an idiot to try to fly in zero visibility."

"Why are you afraid of a little snow. You're the head that can create cold!"

"I'm not afraid of snow!" said White.

Black piped up. "Red is right. We're not going to wait around here to die. That wind is picking up. How long can we wait here? We eventually will need food and water."

Green shook away what was left of the dreams that were still floating in her head. "We're not going anywhere. I'm not going to try to fly in that storm. It'll freeze up all my glands and I won't be able to create any poison if we come across any adversaries."

"We don't need your poison to fight. I'll just burn everyone to death," Red said.

"No one would be fool enough to go out in that storm so we're not going to meet any adversaries if we go out there," White countered.

Green turned her red eyes to face Blue. "Blue, be reasonable. We're staying, right?"

Red and White spoke at the same time.

"Of course, we're staying. Right, Blue?"

"Of course, we're going. Right, Blue?"

Blue had blocked them out and had been scanning the inside of the cave. It was as still as death. "What were they

afraid of?” Blue said mostly to herself.

Red puffed up her face indignantly and blew smoke into Blue’s face. “I’m not afraid of anything. Especially not some silly snow storm. We gotta get outta here, Blue!”

“I’m not talking about us being afraid. I’m talking about the other animals. They seem to be gone. Where did they go? What were they afraid of?”

“What did I tell you?” Black jumped in anxiously. “Rats. Sinking ship. Humans have that phrase for a reason! It’s a grave in here.”

A struggle ensued as two legs went toward the door and the other two legs went towards the back of the cave. A chaotic brawl ensued with the four arguing heads butting each other or releasing their respective ammunition. Fire, ice, poison and acid flew around the grotto and different heads would get whipped by their tail depending on which head had gained control of it. Finally, a flash of light snapped against the side of the cave leaving a scorch mark.

Blue frowned and closed her eyes. She always got a headache when she released that much electricity. She sighed. “We don’t have time to argue. This is serious. I don’t think the animals left because of the storm. They left because they smelled something dangerous. They can sense something approaching.”

“Exactly!” cried Black. “Which is why we have to go!”

“That’s just conjecture. We’re going to fly in a blizzard because the boogie man is coming?” Green argued.

“Blue, you’re the deciding vote. You said it yourself. The

animals left because of something dangerous. We have to go!” Red blew smoke again but this time out of fear rather than annoyance.

The four heads glared at her expectantly. Together, they controlled a foot and started tapping it.

Blue stared at the coordinated tapping and smiled. They were always at their best when they worked together. “We’re not doing either. We’re going to leave and we’re going to stay.” Blue ignored the other heads’ protests and resolutely moved their body towards the back of the cave. She couldn’t leave the cave completely unprotected. This was their home and the home of other animals in the winter. She could not let it be destroyed. But she also could not endanger her heads. They were her family.

“Green, we need another door,” Blue instructed and motioned to the hewn rock wall near the back of the cave. It was a narrow part of the cave that jutted above the surface of the ground. Green shrugged, extruded thick acid from her nose and flung it at the limestone. The other heads made the requisite “ew” sound.

The rock melted like butter as Green worked away at the multiple layers. As soon as Blue saw a glimpse of the snow from the outside world, she nodded to Red who read her mind. She blew out hot fire melting a hole in the snow. White blew cold air to freeze the sides of the hole to keep the hole from collapsing. Together, they created an enclosure in the snow outside of the cave.

The dragon entered the igloo-like passageway and Green

left a trail of poison around the circumference of the opening to the cave. If something dangerous were to come, the poison would put it to sleep. White created an iced one-way mirror to the cave so that they could see in but could not be seen themselves. And then they waited. The grotto was awfully quiet.

An hour later, the heads could hear sounds: crunching of snow, scraping against the rock, grunting. The dragon braced itself. The rock at the cave opening did not move. Maybe they were safe? Whatever it was did not have enough strength to move the rock. Then they saw a hooded head pop through the small opening that the dragon had made to peer out. It was a human. He squeezed his tiny body and a small pack through the opening. Another female human followed. They hugged and shivered together, both talking frantically and sobbing in fear and relief. The female started gathering sticks of wood while the male rummaged through his sack, taking out food and some tools. Once they started a fire, they sat close and ate silently.

White shook her head. "This is what the animals were scared of? Puny humans with snacks?"

Red muttered, "What idiot goes hiking in a snowstorm?"

Black whispered back, "Let's eat them."

Blue hushed them. "Leave them be. They'll be gone by tomorrow when the storm is done."

Green snorted. "Wait. We're going to sit here all day watching these pests? I can't sleep in this uncomfortable ice coffin!" Within seconds, Green was asleep. Black got bored and fell asleep next. White and Red argued softly about "hog-

ging all the space” but then fell asleep leaning their heads together. Blue watched the fire.

It was peacefully quiet in the grotto.

And then the roof of the ice cave came crashing down and killed them all...



“That did not happen, Red,” said the teenaged Blue, annoyed that Red had interrupted her story.

Red shrugged. “Your story was getting boring. Anyway, it’s my turn. I have a much better story of a hero who was the size of a mountain, but he was no match for our cleverness! And then there was the follow-up story of his fire-breathing pet that was the size of the ocean!”

White guffawed.

“That didn’t happen either, Red,” said Green.

“How would you know? You were scared the whole time,” said Red.

“I was not scared,” said Green.

“It all happened six hundred years ago,” said Red.

“We weren’t alive then,” said White.

Blue smiled. Red would get her way and the story would turn out even more fantastic than her summary. It was late, and Blue closed her eyes for a quick nap, but she took a peek at the roof to make sure it was intact ... just in case.



MAGS STOREY

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Dead Girls Don't: <http://amazon.ca/Dead-Girls-Dont-Mags-Storey/dp/1771483067>

THE NUMBERS GAME

By Mags Storey

Hi, I'm Guy, and I'll admit it, I like playing games.

Especially the Numbers Game. You know the one where you meet someone online, and tell her she's The One, when in reality you've got a whole bunch of others on the side?

Oh, don't judge me. They're the one who wandered in and started chatting with a stranger. And sure, I might also play with a few hearts sometimes, just like any savvy hunter toys with his prey before swooping in for that final kill.

But it's all in good fun. And if somebody does get hurt, oh well, then they should've been smarter about who they were chatting with.

In my case, the number was five.

Bianca, Ebony, Olive, Ruby and Cyan—five totally unique, different and interesting women. I met each of them online in various ways in the past few of weeks, and have been happily juggling them all ever since in five different chat boxes floating around my screen waiting until I was ready to make a move on one of them.

Then they all invited me to the exact same event. The *Y Ex Crept Challenge* was supposedly this huge, epic puzzle

maze being held in an old warehouse down in the East end of the city. *"Disguise Who You Are, Solve Riddles, Meet Someone New,"* was the tagline and it sounded right up my alley.

Maybe going to an event that the five girls I'd been stringing along were also going to be at wasn't the smartest move. But the website said the game had hundreds of players. It would give me a chance to scope out Bianca, Ebony, Olive, Ruby and Cyan in person and decide if any of them really were The One.

After all, I'd be in disguise and it's not like I had any idea how the game would end.

I went as a knight with a sword, shield, breastplate and helmet made of the very best shining armor that cardboard, duct tape and tinfoil could create. I took a ride-share to the warehouse so no one would spot my car and joined the throng of people dressed as wild and unimaginable creatures lined up to get in. Thankfully I was the only one who'd even thought of coming as a monster slayer. When I finally made it through the door into a large room decorated with fake boulders and moss, none of the women I'd come looking for were anywhere in sight. I went down the stairs and ended up in a darker room that was even more cavernous than the first. But still, no Bianca, Ebony, Olive, Ruby or Cyan. So I kept exploring, down staircase after staircase, half looking for even one of the five women I'd told were The One, and half trying to figure out what kind of game this was and when it would start. The deeper I went the more elaborate the rooms became, with real echoes and sound effects like dripping water, and smooth, curved walls that al-

most looked like real rock. The longer I walked and the lower I went the more elaborate the costumes became until I almost believed I was wandering alone in some underground maze surrounded by monsters.

Finally I reached a very plain door set in a very normal looking wall with a sign taped to it that someone had clearly just scrawled in marker on a piece of office paper. "*Y Ex Crept Challenge*" it said in big block letters with smaller letters underneath that read, "*Disguise Who You Are, Solve Riddles, Meet Someone New*".

I turned the door handle and there was nothing remarkable about it. It wasn't cold or hot, shining or dull. It was just a door handle with nothing ominous or weird about it to indicate what lay on the other side.

The first thing I saw were the top five heads all bent seriously over five laptops. Then they looked up. It was them. All of them. All of my exclusive The One online girlfriends, Bianca, Ebony, Olive, Ruby and Cyan were all sitting around a table staring at me over their screens, while I stood there hoping none of them recognized me in my sweaty cardboard, tinfoil, and duct taped armor.

What did I do? What would you do? I panicked. I turned on my heels and walked right back out the door. Or I would've if the door had still been there. But it wasn't. Neither was the wall or even the room. Instead there was darkness like a thick haze of smoke that had suddenly filled the place and swamped my gaze.

I spun back ready to demand someone tell me what was

going on, and came face to face with a dragon. Well, the head of a dragon specifically. I couldn't see their body in the darkness. But from the head alone it was unmistakable what it was. It was flaming red, the color of cherry lollipops and fast race cars, and instinctively I raised my tinfoil sword.

"How was I made?" asked the dragon.

I blinked. Was that some kind of quiz? Had I stumbled into the game?

The dragon continued, *"Just a spark. Flamed in the dark. I cared. I yearned. But I was..."*

"Burned!" I hollered triumphantly. My voice echoed back as if I really was in some kind of cave. But my throat burned like some kind of irritant in the air had singed it. I swallowed hard. "You were forged in a fire, right?"

"Behcee ohceee eacwwf batot" the dragon called and then it vanished.

Darkness filled my gaze and relief flooded over me. Okay, so I'd solved a puzzle and received a clue. Whatever this was and however I'd stumbled into it, it was apparently pretty easy. Clearly I'd underestimated just how elaborate the production value of this thing was and still had no idea how to play it. Also, I wasn't quite sure what to think of the fact all five women I'd been stringing along apparently knew each other. But at least I seemed to be making some kind of progress.

I turned, hoping to find the door I'd lost. Instead, I was face to face with a second dragon. This one was white, with a face so bright it almost hurt my eyes.

"How was I made?" asked the dragon, her voice smooth

and cold like icicles.

This again? Was the whole puzzle going to be piecing together the tragic backstory of an indeterminate number of dragons?

I held up my hand. It shook. My throat might still be on fire, but my fingers were so cold they were almost numb. "I'm sorry, but I seemed to have missed the briefing part of this. Can I get a hint or some idea how this game is played?"

But the dragon didn't answer. Instead, she just snarled, showing off a set of pearly iridescent fangs.

"I believed you when you said you cared. I believed that I was chosen. Yet when I opened up my heart to yours, I found your love was..."

"Frozen!" I said. Not quite as loudly as I'd shouted the first solution, but still quite pleased at how quickly I'd solved the first two riddles.

Once again, the dragon faded. Once again her voice lingered a moment in the air, *"efoht, suhtac wlae,i arhuda"*

So that made two pieces of a puzzle I had now. Not that I had any way of writing them down or remembering them. But clearly I was getting the hang of it and I was bound to find a gamemaster, sooner or later, who'd help fill in what I missed.

I heard the next two dragons before I saw them, their heavy footsteps seemed to shake the ground beneath me and echo in the dark, damp chamber.

The first was blue and the second was green, like a waterfall and a rain forest, or an ocean wave and algae. Their two faces loomed from the darkness and I wondered if I'd ever get

to see a full dragon or if the game designers had just created heads.

The blue one spoke first, *"How was I made?"*

"Look, I get it," I said. "This is your thing. But if I could give some constructive feedback? This game just has too many dragons and the riddles are way too easy. Have you thought of—"

"My love was electric but yours was diluted. We made a connection. I was..."

"Electrocuted," I hazard. I was irritated now. Tension rose like static to the back of my neck. "Seriously. These riddles aren't that hard."

Large blue lips turned up with a smile that was so nuanced, so clever and so downright menacing that for a moment I almost forgot I'd stumbled into some kind of game and that nothing I was seeing was actually real.

She whispered, *"cuyooc erooka e,ugag cdack"* Then the two dragons exchanged a glance that made me look around for the door.

"Look," I said. "I get that someone went to a lot of trouble to make this... thing." Words failed me. What was I in the middle of anyway? A puzzle filled interactive drama? An escape room? Some kind of maze? "But I'd like to talk to a gamemaster and get more information about the rules. Also, I need a pencil and paper to write down these clues, because I can't possibly remember them all. And someone should really do something about the temperature."

"How was I made?" the green dragon asked and her

voice seemed to drip into my ears and swim through my veins, until it pooled into a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. *“Your eyes held guile. So did your smile. Your words were vile. With poisoned—”*

“Bile?” I guessed. “Poisoned bile? Like some kind of venom?”

I was beginning to sense a common theme among the dragons and I was pretty sure I didn’t like it. They’d all been hurt. They’d all been jilted and spurned. Plus they all seemed to be female. What were the odds that all five women I’d tricked and led into believing they were The One had worked on this? Had they compared notes? Did they all know they were dating me?

The green dragon spoke as both heads disappeared, *“aloourh ttob.u hbsrnh kenae”*

My stomach roiled. My throat burned. My fingers were numb. Tension sparked at the back of my neck. Something was wrong. Very wrong. Surely exits should be clearly marked and a game master should’ve shown up by now. Not to mention, I should’ve seen or at least heard another player by now. I waved my hands in all directions, hoping to signal whoever might be watching the security cameras.

“Hey! Look, whoever’s out there you can’t actually keep me in here! I demand to see a manager and I want to be let out!”

Laughter echoed in the darkness, deep and long, and I knew it was the dragons. They were the ones watching. They were the ones listening. This was their game and I was trapped

inside it.

Then I felt a breath on my body that somehow seemed to move through my skin, eating through the protective layers until it somehow seeped deep inside.

Two eyes opened in front of me shining bright in a face so black I couldn't see where its fearsome features started and where they ended.

"How. Was. I. Made?" Each of her words sounded like a thunderclap around me.

"You were hurt?" I ventured, pouring bravado into my voice and forcing myself to ignore the burning, the cold, the sparking and the sickness. "You cared about someone who treated you wrong so now you trap people in rooms and don't let them out?"

"You burned me and you froze me out. You shocked and poisoned my heart. Your corrosive games spread like acid through my veins, tearing me—"

"Apart!" I shouted. "Okay, yes, fine! You win! I can be jerk. I'll admit it! But in my defense, it was all just a game!"

The dragon spoke, *"rwusso o,srBs eeeodt hryn."*

Lights flashed on, the scene changed, and I saw them Bianca, Ebony, Olive, Ruby and Cyan all looking up at me over their laptops. Five faces. Five heads. Five sets of eyes. Five pairs of lips curled in the same grin I'd seen on the dragon's faces.

But only one body. Why hadn't I noticed before there was only one body?

"Who are you?" I shouted. "What is this?"

"Don't you know?" Five mouths parted, speaking to-

gether as one. *"You said so yourself. We're The One."*

Then the lights flickered again and I was in a cavern. It was huge—wider, and deeper and higher than even the building I'd stepped into.

Then I saw her, the dragon, with one strong body supporting all five heads now looming over me. Five mouths opened. Five rows of fangs came toward me, clamping on my body, tearing me apart...

Hello, I'm Prexcyt, and I'll admit it, I like playing games. Especially the Numbers Game. You know the one where you meet someone and tell him you're a whole bunch of faces, when in reality you're just One?

You may judge me. But, he's the one who wandered in and started chatting with a stranger. And sure, I might also play with a few hearts sometimes, just like any savvy hunter toys with her prey before swooping in for that final kill.

But it's all in good fun. And if somebody does get hurt, oh well, then he should've been smarter about who he was chatting with.



MANDA WHITNEY

Manda Whitney is a Toronto based writer and performer. While her focus is writing and performing comedic scripts (which includes two webseries, three stage plays and various sketches), she has also branched out to writing and designing narrative for large scale escape events. When she is not working on projects, she is usually playing video games, board games, watching strange, foreign shows or updating her blog at **mandawhitney.com** when she remembers to.

THE TEST

By Manda Whitney

Maeve's hand hesitated slightly, half raised to knock on the heavy wooden door. Her stomach curled into knots and her breath caught in her throat.

She was standing in an apartment hallway. It had an air of a building that had at one point been grand but since faded thanks to time and a degrading economy. The carpet had faded ages ago and there were dents in the heavy wooden doors.

"It's okay...you've got this..." she said to herself, not caring how stupid she sounded. She brought her hand forward and knocked firmly five times on the door, hoping she had the rhythm correct.

A moment passed. At first Maeve could only hear her own nervous breathing. It was soon joined by a shuffling from within the apartment.

"Password?" A voice asked from within.

"Sandcastle," Maeve replied.

The door clicked open. Maeve felt her breath stop.

Before her stood a woman in her late forties. Her hair was tied haphazardly back into a messy ponytail and she wore an ill-fitting blouse. Her face was plain and held a stern, un-

trusting expression. She regarded Maeve quizzically.

“Yes?” She asked.

Maeve took a deep breath. This was it.

“My name is Maeve Turner. I’m...here for the beta test.” she said as confidently as she could. The woman’s eyebrows rose in response.

“You are, are you?” she said. “How did you hear about us?”

Maeve gulped, unsure of how to answer. For years there had been rumours of a mysterious game called Prexycyt’s Lament being tested. No one knew when development had begun. No one knew how long it had been tested for. What made it the stuff of urban legend though was the location.

Anyone wishing to test the game first had to locate where it was being tested. No other instructions were given. The gaming community had been obsessed ever since. If anyone had played the game, they were not talking.

The thought that she had made it renewed her excitement. She looked the woman in the eyes.

“Friends...” Maeve replied vaguely. “We’ve all been working on it.”

“And yet here you are, alone.”

Maeve pursed her lips.

“We work alone,” she said, shrugging. “It’s not really a win if you can’t do it on your own.”

The woman regarded her carefully.

“So you found us all on your own?”

“Yes,” Maeve said. It was a mostly true statement. She,

Allison and Jean had worked together scouring the advertisement for clues, reading forums and delving deep into the puzzle community for ideas.

But Maeve had been the one to make order of the chaos of information and put together the last piece of the puzzle. No doubt they would be wondering now why she had not shown up to class. She felt a slight pang of guilt which she quickly ignored. Surely they would understand.

“Many hope to test Prexcyt’s Lament,” The woman said, “Thinking they are clever enough to beat our game. What makes you think you are worthy to take on the challenge when so many have--”

“Who is it Michelle?!” An excited voice called out from behind the door. “Is it a tester?! I hope it’s a tester! Don’t scare them away!”

The woman named Michelle sighed deeply and rolled her eyes.

“Yes, Liz, it’s a tester. I was just trying to imbue a sense of suspense and exclusivity. I guess that’s not necessary now.”

She turned her focus back to Maeve and opened the door wider.

“Well, you’d better come in.” She turned and went into the apartment. Maeve followed, a little bewildered.

She was not sure what she had been expecting to find inside. She had pictured a scene out of the Matrix. The room would be full of computer monitors and cyberpunk decor. Everyone would be wearing leather jackets and sport mohawks.

Instead what she got was a sad looking living room com-

plete with sagging couch, scratched coffee table and faded curtains. In fact, the only notable thing about the entire apartment was the several bookshelves lining every available wall space. Maeve saw titles ranging from game design to cooking to fantasy novels to comic books to home repair. There did not seem to be any rhyme or reason to the order.

Michelle had wandered a little further in and impatiently motioned to Maeve.

“Have a seat.”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than a woman burst through a door down the hallway. She looked about the same age as Michelle but that was about where the similarity ended. She had short, spiky hair dyed blue and wore a batman tshirt and jeans. She seemed to be brimming with energy.

Liz... Maeve thought. She was not wrong.

“Liz, this is--”

“A tester! I know! Welcome! So you solved the puzzle, congratulations! It’s always thrilling when we get a new tester! Was the puzzle difficult? What were your favourite parts? I hope you’re ready for some fun, tester!”

“Maeve,” Michelle said patiently as though there had been no interruption at all. “Her name is Maeve.”

“Oh! Sorry, I always get ramby when a new tester comes in. If it wasn’t for Michelle here I don’t think I’d find out any names. Not that it matters. I’ll probably forget your name anyway. Are you ready to play Prexcyt’s Lament?”

“No, she is not,” Another voice said. Maeve turned to-

ward the hallway. A third woman had entered the room. She wore glasses and spoke with a nasally tone. She held a clipboard and gripped the pencil she was holding tightly.

“What? Why not? She solved the puzzle to find the place! She’s proven herself!”

“That may be so, but we still have to interview her. All test subjects need to be interviewed. You know this. It’s vitally important to gather data to get a better understanding of the game,” She said as she sat down on a chair across from Maeve. Liz folded her arms and plopped herself cross-legged on the floor.

“You’re such a spoil sport, Sally,” Liz said. “I wanna know what she thinks of the game!”

“You’ll have plenty of time for that,” Michelle said, still standing, still regarding Maeve ruefully.

“Agreed,” The woman named Sally said, then went back to her clipboard. “Let’s start then. Name?”

“We know her name! Maeve Turner. Skip ahead,” Michelle said impatiently.

“Yes, you know that, but I would like to hear it from her,” Sally snapped, then turned back to Maeve. “Sorry, we do try to be professional, but it’s difficult sometimes. So, name?”

Despite the whirlwind greeting and the dubious location, Maeve’s excitement remained intact.

“Maeve Turner, just like she said,” she replied.

“Very good,” Sally said, scribbling on the clipboard. “And how long did it take you to find the location of the beta test?”

“Um...well, since hearing about your game, about three

months.”

Maeve and her friends had always loved puzzles and games, but had only discovered the game after starting college. Since then it had often taken priority over doing their course work.

Sally nodded, neither impressed nor unimpressed. Michelle rose her eyebrows a little which could have meant anything. Liz seemed excited, though Maeve had quickly learned that it was probably a constant state of being for her.

“And what do you hope to learn while playing Prexycyt’s Lament?”

Maeve paused. Getting to play the game had been her goal. There hadn’t been much thought to after.

“I’m not sure. I know almost nothing about the game. I assume it’s puzzles like the one I solved to get here? In that case...I hope for some difficult puzzles.”

“How difficult?” Liz interjected. Sally gave her a look.

“What would you say is your capacity when it comes to puzzle difficulty?”

“Same question as mine, really,” Liz said from the floor.

“Any difficulty is fine for me,” Maeve said. “I’m up for it.”

“This game is far different from anything you’ve played,” Michelle said.

“I told you, don’t scare her,” Liz shouted from the floor.

“What’s to be scared of? It’s a game,” Maeve said, surprised by how confident she sounded. She hated it when people tried to undermine her intelligence, though. It was always a sensitive subject for her.

“Marking you down as high difficulty, then,” Sally said, ignoring her companions. “And what do you know about Prexcyt.”

“Sorry?”

“Prexcyt. The dragon. Also the name of the game,” Michelle said, more than a little impatient.

“Whatever I learned in school. Dragon, five heads, riddles, all that stuff. Is it important that I know the lore or something?”

Sally shook her head, never taking her eyes from the clipboard.

“Not at all. We just like to get a sense of who is playing our game.”

“Right,” Maeve said.

“Alright, that should be sufficient for now. We should get the testing started,” Sally said. Liz jumped up.

“Excellent! Right this way!”

She ushered Maeve down the apartment hallway to a door and quickly opened it. She motioned for Maeve to follow her. Michelle and Sally were not far behind.

Maeve’s heart started beating a bit faster. This was it. After all this time, she would get to play the fabled game. She had done it. Not Allison. Not Jean. Not any of the gamers on the forums. She was among the few to glimpse behind this door. She should enjoy this moment. She couldn’t imagine what sort of set-up they had.

VR? Full body immersion? Some other crazy futuristic technology?... Maeve thought as she rounded the corner.

The testing room was barren save for a desk, a chair and a large, clunky looking computer. Maeve's wonderment immediately deflated.

The computer looked about twenty years old. The monitor was enormous. The tower had a CD ROM tray and even a port for a 3 ½ inch floppy disk, something Maeve had only ever heard about in her computers class. Both the mouse and the keyboard were in need of a good cleaning.

"This is it?" Maeve asked, unable to help herself. She had been working to get here for months, only to find that this oh-so-coveted game was pretty much an artifact. She wondered if the three women before her were simply delusional or just plain insane.

"I know," Liz said, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Michelle seemed to have a better sense of Maeve's outlook.

"It's about time we upgraded. And we plan to. It's hard to find the time."

"If you don't mind my asking...how long have you been testing this?"

"Too long," Michelle responded with a sigh.

"And it's still not ready? Seriously, I'm sure you could just release it and just patch whatever bugs are left. There can't be that many."

"Even so, we haven't had enough play tests yet," Sally said, punctuating each word with a pen stroke as she spoke.

"Then why be so exclusive? If you need so many testers, why make such a complicated puzzle to even get here?"

Why not just advertise the game? No offense, but you've set all these expectations now for your players that will probably never be met. I mean...look at this, any game made after 2000 would beat whatever is on this thing!"

All three women turned to her. It was not that they had not been paying attention, but now all of their undivided focus was on her. Maeve sensed she had perhaps been too forward. She tried to meet their gaze although a nervous lump had formed in her throat.

It was Michelle that finally spoke. "Do you still want to test the game?"

Maeve did not want to push her luck. She nodded.

"Are you sure it will run?" Maeve asked. "What engine is it?"

"The graphics and the engine matter little in the long run. What you are here to test are the puzzles. Just the puzzles," Michelle said.

That made sense. Maeve had solved puzzles to find the place, after all.

"Okay," She said. "Let's do it."

Liz nodded, suddenly serious. Her hand dove into an enormous pant pocket and pulled out a CD-ROM. Maeve tried not to snicker. She thought of Allison and Jean. They would get a good laugh out of this when she told them. They might even forgive her for going without them when they found out the game they had been obsessing over for months was not even compatible with most modern machines.

Liz had slid the CD into the tray and closed it. Sally gently

led Maeve to the desk chair. Despite the ridiculous situation, Maeve suddenly felt nervous. She could not place why though.

“Anything I should know about the game?” Maeve asked.

“We try not to influence a player’s experience too much,” Michelle said, “It skews the test results. The only important thing to know is that you’ll need your brains. When you meet Prexcyt, be prepared to think quickly.”

“I can handle it,” Maeve said. “I have no problems when it comes to tests.”

“Of course,” Sally said and made another note on her clipboard. “We will leave you to it, then.”

“Good luck!” Liz said, giving Maeve a double thumbs up. She was truly lame, Maeve decided.

“We’ll be observing from the next room,” said Michelle. They began to exit.

“Wait! How will you watch? There are no cameras in here...”

“We’ll manage,” said Sally before promptly closing the door. For the first time since knocking, Maeve was alone.

For a moment all Maeve could hear was the sound of her own breathing and the loud hum of the old computer as it booted up the game. Suddenly the screen lit up with the grainy, cartoony image of a cave entrance. MIDI style music began to play and the title “Prexcyt’s Lament” floated into the foreground along with some menu options.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” Maeve muttered. Better to get this over with. She sighed and clicked on “New Game”. A prompt asked her to type in her name. She did so and the menu

dissolved away leaving only the cave entrance and a cursor.

“Nice cut scene,” Maeve said sarcastically.

It seemed to be a first person view. Seeing little other option, she clicked the cursor on to the cave. The cursor jumped her forward closer to the entrance. It sort of reminded her a little of *Myst* but with lower quality. That was not exactly a good thing.

As she entered the cave, she was surprised to find the tunnels leading off from the entrance had been sealed off. Strange symbols marked each door.

“First puzzle, I guess,” She said, unable to help feeling a kernel of interest. Despite all of the strangeness, a good puzzle always got her excited. She leaned in closer to the screen.

She spent the first hour or so looking around outside the cave, gathering clues as well as a torch for her inventory, and continually staring at the seals on each door. No doubt that would come in handy later.

Maeve had to admit, this was tougher than she had imagined. She made liberal use of the notepad and pencil, sketching out maps and algorithms on every spare bit of space. It was around the two hour mark that she finally cracked the code to the sealed doors.

“Yes!” She cried out when the code she tried on the door worked. With some jerky animation, the door to the tunnels opened for her. Maeve felt on top of the world. This would be a breeze.

A MIDI sound effect chirped out of the computer. She turned around in the tunnel and looked back at the entrance.

Perhaps the door had shut. There was nothing though.

Maeve shook her head and turned back around. It might be the game's attempt at a dripping cave. She equipped her torch and began to traverse further into the caves, making sure to map as she went along.

Abruptly the tunnel she was walking through gave way to a large cavern.

"Woah," she exclaimed.

Even with the outdated graphics, the cavern was something to behold. It was enormous, the walls reaching so high up that the ceiling was lost in the darkness. Every available surface seemed to be damaged in some way.

Some rock was blackened as though from fire. Some had cracked and snapped, perhaps from the cold. Some rock seemed to have melted away as though acid had been poured onto it. There seemed to be no pattern as to what each rock was damaged with.

The only undamaged bit of the cavern was a pedestal in the centre. Something had been engraved on it. Maeve recognized the signs from every fairy tale she had been read.

"Prexcyt's lair," she said out loud, the thrill rising once again. It was quickly followed by confusion. This felt like a final boss type of room. It seemed a bit too soon to be finding it. Was she simply that good?

The buzz of the MIDI sounded again, jolting Maeve out of her thoughts. They could have chosen a less annoying sound, that was for sure. Maeve shrugged, making a mental note to tell the designers later, and moved toward the pedestal.

It was difficult to tell with the poor graphics, but it seemed to be made of marble. It was in the same language as that of the sealed doors. Maeve dove for her notebook.

The phrase translated to...a riddle? Or was it perhaps a logic problem? Or a map? It had to be one of those...or perhaps a combination of all three? She clicked on the pedestal. A prompt came up:

“Please input answer.”

Maeve stared at it, utterly flummoxed as to what to do next. She began to write down possibilities: Caesar shift, Roman numerals, Braille, some wordplay options, absolutely anything she could think of.

The computer chirped the MIDI sound again. Maeve ignored it, concentrating on the puzzle. It came again, louder this time and Maeve turned from the pedestal to see a shadow emerging from the tunnel.

“Shit!” She hissed, looking around the space. There were no other exits. Michelle’s warning rang in her head. *Be prepared to think quickly.*

She turned back to the pedestal. A timed puzzle. What a cheap shot. The MIDI sound came again.

“Focus,” Maeve said, staring down at the riddle. Five minutes passed. She was hardly breathing. She seemed to have one part figured out. Her brow furrowed.

Part of it seemed to involve some sort of wordplay. She wished Allison were here. She was always the best with wordplay.

The MIDI sound came again, this time from the speaker

closest to the tower. Maeve swore, refusing to turn around. She could try bruting some answers, but Jean was their bruter.

There was no time though. Maeve put in what she was sure was the first letter of the answer. A distorted MIDI sound erupted. Something like...pain?

“That’s right, jerk,” she said. “Eat it.”

Maeve looked at her notes and put in the second letter.

Silence greeted her. She paused. Had she entered the correct letter? She looked once again at her notes. She was positive that was the answer.

Another MIDI sound, this one more threatening.

“Come on...” Maeve said, a little desperate now. She considered again, choosing a different letter. More silence, then a louder MIDI sound, and then another soon after. She saw a shadow pass over the pedestal.

“Screw this!” She shouted. She would just have to face Prexcyt on her own. She clicked the mouse and turned toward the source of the shadow.

Nothing was there.

“What?”

Maeve sat there. Logic told her to keep playing the game, but some small, primal part of her brain was making her hair stand on end and telling her something was very wrong.

A series of clicks, as though from claws, sounded behind her. The computer was utterly silent now. Maeve was reminded of nightmares she had as a child, in which she was suddenly rooted to the spot while a very scary something snuck up behind her. This felt very much like that.

“Liz? Michelle?” Maeve asked. Nothing answered her. Something was breathing though. More like five somethings.

Maeve did not dare turn around. *This is stupid*, she thought, *It’s a stupid prank. This is so stupid.* But the panic in her brain continued to rise, screaming at her to solve the puzzle.

Forcing her fingers to the keyboard, she typed in a series of letters. No. She typed in another series. She could feel breath on the back of her neck. It was hot, cold, shocking and stung all at the same time. She banged at random keys, frenzied now.

The screen suddenly froze. Nothing was responding. Maeve could only stare at it, terrified. Absolutely no sound was in the room. For a split second, Maeve felt relief at having imagined it all.

Then the reflection of five pairs of eyes appeared on the screen. A voice with sulphur smelling breath whispered the answer in her ear. Maeve screamed.

Her last thoughts were of Allison and Jean. She wondered if they would come looking for her. She hoped not.



Michelle sighed, closing the observation portal.

“Another failure,” She said.

“They’re not failures,” Sally said wearily. It was not the first time they had this discussion. It would not be the last. “Every test gives us something.”

“Poop,” said Liz. She was back on the ground, arms fold-

ed. "I was hoping she might be the one to finally get the answer! Almost two letters! That's more than most!"

"Too cocky, perhaps," Michelle said. "I doubt she got here on her own. Serves her right."

"Really?" Liz asked looking somewhat horrified. Michelle sighed again.

"No...no, of course not. Do you suppose anyone will miss her?"

"Probably. It's rare no one will notice a missing person," Sally said. She took the paper out of her clipboard now and wandered over to a filing cabinet. "We'll manage it."

"She came close this time," Liz said, not her usual chipper self. Michelle could understand. "Prexcyt, I mean."

"I know," Michelle said. "We'll have to--"

She did not finish. Five rhythmic knocks had come from the apartment door. Liz perked back up.

"Ooooooh," she said. Michelle shushed her. She looked at Sally.

Sally nodded. She grabbed a blank piece of paper and put it in the clipboard.

"Well, we better at least see who it is," she said.



ERROL ELUMIR

Errol Elumir has played adventure games ever since they were text on screens loading from cassette tapes. He loves escape rooms and is obsessed with puzzle design. After creating the puzzles for large-scale, theatrical escape events, he is very happy to create puzzles with a bit more difficulty in this puzzle hunt. Errol has a daily webcomic about his nerdy life raising two teenagers which you can find on myneighborerrol.com. He also has a podcast about escape rooms on roomescapedivas.com. And if you still want to connect with him, there's Twitter at [@elumir](https://twitter.com/elumir).

THE SAGES

By Errol Elumir

The bell sounded early in the morning, counting the hours before the next attack. The warning, however, was redundant. Most of the city had evacuated, leaving only the delusional hungry for glory.

Mil was holed up with his companions in the city's Town Hall, probably the only ones in all of Midgaard fully aware of the potential devastation. Staring out from the second floor, his gaze was focused on the city's park further to the west. The Druids had protected the area till the very end, but it was nothing more than ash and dirt now.

Another batch of the country's best and eager heroes had gathered in the park. Some running through drills, others strutting their prowess.

"I don't see how they think any of that would be effective," said Mil.

"We suffer the same hubris," said Nor, studying books at a large table.

"We've fought her before," said Mil.

"And thus she's ready for us," said Nor.

Mil turned back to his work and rubbed his eyes. They

stung from days of fatigue. It was time for a break, but before Mil could voice his intentions, a loud bang came from the doors. A third sage, arms full of books, papers, and scrolls, had kicked them open and rushed into the room.

“Guys! I have an idea!” shouted Lum as he emptied his inventory onto an already over-laden table.

“No,” Mil said.

“Ok, I know it’s a bit much, but this is a new glyph system I came up with,” said Lum. He was smoothing out a large scroll in the center of the table. On it were markings unfamiliar to the other two.

“No,” Mil repeated.

“This first sheet, which looks quite similar to the second, but don’t worry about that now, this first sheet needs to be looked at first! See? It has 27 symbols, right? It’s a numbering system that’s base 27! Ha! I made a base 27 numbering system!”

“That’s the most moronic thing I’ve ever heard during my entire existence,” said Mil.

“You said that the last time,” said Lum.

“We almost died!” said Mil.

“Ha ha! Yeah. That was funny,” said Lum.

“No, it wasn’t!”

“Why 27?” asked Nor.

“Great question! Great question. There’s a reason for that, but let me get to it later. Let’s start with this. There are three of us, right? So I made some core symbols to represent each sage! Ha! We should start using these symbols as brand-

ing. Maybe get our own personalized wax seal. I love those things. Anyway, this glyph here? This one's yours, Mil."

Lum pointed to a slash-like glyph on the scroll.

"It's pointy and harsh, like you. It also represents the number one, because you're the first sage," said Lum.

"How am I pointy and harsh? And since when were we numbered?" asked Mil.

"This one is yours, Nor. See it's curved and almost looks like an old, wizened figure with a cloak. A bit. Maybe if you turn your head and squint. Anyway, that will represent you, as the second sage."

Nor's eyes scanned the other symbols on the page. He noted most of the symbols were made up of the two Lum had pointed out, thus why he labeled them "core" symbols.

"My symbol represents zero and is rarely used other than a placeholder when you get numbers 27 and larger. Thus, when you reach the number 27, you'll use Mil's symbol and then mine. Remember, base 27!"

Lum pointed to a circular symbol that resembled a fan. Beside it were the words 'equals zero', and beside that, Lum signed his name. And surrounding all of this were doodles of dragons cowering in fear before the zero symbol.

"You aren't answering my questions," said Mil. However, Lum wasn't stopping.

"This is how it works. Every time you rotate a glyph by 120 degrees clockwise, you multiply it by three! So Mil's glyph, when rotated by 120 degrees, becomes a new glyph which represents the number 3!"

Lum pointed to the same slash which had been rotated so it's top pointed downwards.

"This is the cool part. We can make more glyphs by combining the core glyphs, similar to the far eastern provinces! So if I were to combine Mil's one glyph and then his three glyph, we get a new, unique glyph that represents the number four! Why four? Because we add the numbers together of the core glyphs. Huzzah! It's like interbreeding! Ok! It's time for a test to see if you got this! Let's take Nor's glyph and rotate it once, and then combine it with Mil's glyph which is rotated twice. What does that give us?"

"A waste of time," said Mil.

"Fifteen. Those glyphs together represent fifteen. My glyph is two, rotation multiplies it by three, giving us six. Mil's glyph rotated twice is nine. Combining them together is fifteen," answered Nor.

"You're so smart!" said Lum.

"Clarification. The maximum number of rotations is twice, right? If you rotate a glyph a third time, then it's back to its original position, correct?" asked Nor.

"Correct! This is why you're a sage!" said Lum.

"How does this help us?" asked Mil.

Lum brought out the second scroll and laid it on top.

"We have 26 unique glyphs for the numbers 1 to 26. The reason I chose 26 is because that's the same number of letters in the alphabet! If you take any of the numeric glyphs and flip it, not rotate it, then you get the corresponding letter of the alphabet. Hah! So take the first glyph, Mil's glyph, which is one,

and flip it, and that's the letter 'A'. The second glyph flipped over is 'B', and so on. Now we have both an alphabet and a numerical set with unique symbols! Of course, if you are trying to work out what the alphabet letter is, remember that it's flipped so its elements rotate counter-clockwise. Everything's upside down."

"You're honestly not suggesting what I think you're suggesting. We don't have time for this, Lum. Remember? There's a dragon attacking us by nightfall, which we are supposed to prep for, but you're making decoder rings!"

"Oh! Good idea! I should make decoder rings," said Lum to himself.

"You have a stack of other scrolls and paper," said Nor.

"Yes! They're my riddles! Hee hee!" said Lum, as he started stacking large scrolls on the table. Mil took one and rolled it out. The glyphs were huge, painted with thick dark strokes, large enough to be seen from a three story window.

"You better not be asking us to transcribe our riddles using your new system," asked Mil.

"Prexcyt keeps solving ours too quickly. The last time we barely set up the Banishment circle because she solved one of the puzzles ahead of schedule," said Lum.

"That was your puzzle she solved easily, by the way," said Mil.

"I would prefer to keep our work environment safe from blame," said Lum.

"It could increase her solving time by a little," said Nor.

Mil furrowed his brow. Nor was right. Every second

counted against Prexcyt.

“Yes, but it’s a lot of work sprung on us at the last second. If we agree to this, Lum’s the one wearing the armor,” said Mil.

“Again!? I always have to wear it! And I hate the sweater! At least this idea is much safer than last year,” said Lum.

“I haven’t forgiven you for last year,” said Mil.

“Hah hah! That was hilarious,” said Lum.

“Death isn’t funny!”

Nor took one of the sheets and began encoding his numbers into base 27. His hands trembled a little; they had been at this for a long time. Prexcyt was immortal, but they were getting near the end of their life cycle. One day, they would need to train apprentices. Until then, there was a dragon to attend to.

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