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For my mom, who has always been my biggest fan.

I love you.





## Chapter 1

The new girl sat alone in the corner of the schoolyard, poking at the ground with a stick. Her long dark hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and strands of it were coming down to cover her eyes. Bevvv hated when her own hair got in her eyes. She didn't know how the other girl could stand it. Maybe she couldn't stand it. She sure didn't look very happy. Her mouth was pulled down at the edges like someone who was thinking about very unpleasant things.

Normally, Bevvv would never have dreamed of going over to talk to her. But the girl was sitting in *her* corner. There was a giant sugar maple there, just outside the iron schoolyard fence, and its big, leaf-laden branches reached over and around in a way that somehow made the ground beneath seem hidden and safe. Bevvv knew it *wasn't* safe, not really, but when she sat there during recess, the other kids usually left her alone. She could retreat there into the tree's shade and read her book and not have to listen to anyone say mean things about her



or feel sad about being left out. It was like her own little world.

Except not today, because that other girl was there.

Bevvy stepped forward until she was standing right in front of the new girl. She waited, but the new girl didn't look up. After a minute, Bevvy sat down beside her.

"What do you want?" the girl asked, not looking at her.

"Nothing," Bevvy said without thinking. "I just—"

"Then go away."

Bevvy didn't move. She kind of *wanted* to go away, but she didn't have any place else to go.

"Your hair is in your eyes," she said.

Now the other girl looked up. Her eyes were green. Not brownish-green or hazel but bright, emerald green.

"So?"

"So doesn't it bother you? I have . . . I have a bobby pin, if you want one."

The girl stared at her. Bevvy stared back, nearly mesmerized by those green eyes. Even though one of them was still partly covered by long strands of dark hair. It was probably a mistake to have offered this strange girl a bobby pin. She didn't look like she'd ever used a bobby pin in her life.

"I like it when my hair covers my eyes," the girl said finally.

"You do? Why? I hate it." She thought about how that sounded. "I mean, I hate when *my* hair covers *my* eyes. I don't hate your hair. Your hair is nice. Although . . . your eyes are so pretty. People could see them better if you kept your hair back."

The girl was staring again. Bevvv clamped her mouth shut. She was always saying dumb things. That's why the other kids didn't like her. Well, one of the reasons. Maybe.

"Why are you talking to me?" the girl asked.

Bevvv felt her face go hot. "I'm sorry. I just— You're in my corner. This is where I always sit." Bevvv took a breath, then added, "But you can stay, I don't mind. I mean, it's not *actually* my corner, like I own it or something. I mean, I'm sure you knew that, it's not like someone can own a corner, I just—"

"You talk a lot," the girl said. But one corner of her frowny mouth twitched upward when she said it.

"I know," Bevvv said. And then, inexplicably, she found herself smiling. "I can't seem to help it."

The other corner of the girl's mouth twitched up. She was very nearly smiling back.

"What's your name?" Bevvv asked, before she could remember to be shy.

The girl hesitated, as though she was thinking about whether or not to answer. Then she said, "Cat."

“Cat? Like the animal?”

The girl—Cat—looked at her sharply, like she was going to be mad, but after studying Bevv’s face for a moment, she just said, “It’s short for Catherine. But no one calls me that.”

“I’m Bevv. It’s short for Beverly. No one calls me that, either. Well, except the teachers.”

“Why don’t you tell them you don’t like it?”

“I...” Bevv paused. This had honestly never occurred to her. “I don’t know.”

Cat poked at the ground with her stick again. “They’re not going to call me Catherine,” she said fiercely to the dirt.

Bevv suddenly wished she had a stick to poke at the dirt, too. It looked very satisfying.

They were quiet for a while after that. Bevv sat and listened to the sugar maple’s leaves rustling and watched the play of shadows on the ground as the light filtered through the branches above her. It had stayed unusually warm past the end of September, and the leaves were still green and vibrant.

She thought about taking out her book, but she was afraid that might make it seem like she didn’t want to talk anymore. She did want to talk; she just couldn’t tell if Cat wanted to. She finally decided to take out her book but not open it. Maybe Cat would ask her about it, and then they’d have something to talk about. It was

a collection of fairy tales from the school library. Bevvv loved fairy tales. She also loved fantasy stories and science fiction stories and really any kind of book that was about someplace other than the regular world. She had to live in the regular world; she certainly didn't want to read books about it. Books were for *escaping* from this world. Escaping and staying away for as long as possible.

Cat glanced at the book but didn't say anything. Bevvv considered and discarded about a hundred different things she could say to reopen the conversation. It was starting to feel weird, sitting there holding her closed book and not talking. She traced a finger along the plastic-covered image on the front: a collage of magical creatures and adventurers and fairies and wizards and castles. All her favorite things. She wondered what kinds of things Cat liked.

Finally, she couldn't bear the silence another second. "Did you just move here? Is today your first day? Where did you live before?"

Cat sighed, as though these were very difficult questions and she was going to have to think very hard about the answers. She dragged her stick slowly back and forth a few times before saying, "Somewhere else."

Bevvv smiled uncertainly. "Well, obviously. But—"

"Listen," Cat said, at last looking up. "I can't— I don't make friends. There's no point. I won't be staying long enough for it to matter."

Bevvy blinked at her. "What? But . . . why?"

"Don't worry about it. It's none of your business anyway."

"But—what does that matter, how long you'll be here? Why can't you make friends for whatever time you'll have?" Bevvy was surprised to find herself almost angry. "I wouldn't turn down a friendship just because it couldn't be forever. I'd be happy to have a friend even if it was just for one day."

Her face went hot again—practically burning this time—as she realized she'd just confessed to this stranger that she didn't have any friends. Well. That was probably the end of that, then. Once a person knew everyone else thought there was something wrong with you, they tended to think so, too. She stuffed her book back into her bag and stood up. "Forget it," she said. "I'll find a different place to sit until you switch schools again or whatever."

She walked away, grateful that it was almost time for recess to be over since she had no idea where else to go. Part of her hoped that Cat would call after her to wait, come back, but of course that didn't happen. Bevvy headed slowly toward the cafeteria doors, careful not to make eye contact with anyone. It was fine, she told herself. It would just be like it was before. No better, but not really any worse. At least Cat hadn't been actively mean to her or anything. But the thought of giving up her tree

corner made her achingly sad. It was the only place in the whole school—other than the library—where she felt anything close to good.

She got through the rest of the day and climbed onto the school bus, sitting in her usual seat right up front where it was easy for everyone to ignore her. She always tried to ignore them, too, but sometimes it was hard. It was hard today. Bevvv knew exchanging a couple of sentences with someone didn't make them your friend. And Cat had made it clear she didn't want friends anyway. But for a few minutes, before Cat had actually *said* she didn't want to be friends, it had seemed possible.

She could hear the other kids behind her, shouting and laughing and talking to each other. Even the quieter ones had someone to talk to, or at least someone they could sit with and not talk to in a comfortable way. Bevvv never had anyone. Not since second grade, when Eva moved away. When Eva had been here, it hadn't mattered that none of the other kids ever really took to her. And after, even though she'd missed Eva terribly, she'd thought that of course she'd make other friends *eventually*. Everyone made friends at some point.

But she just . . . didn't. All the other kids already had their friends. When she'd started middle school this year, she'd thought things would be different, but even the kids who'd come from other elementary schools showed up in groups of existing friendships, and none of them ever

seemed to want more. Or at least, they didn't seem to want *her*. Bevvvy had been nice, she'd been friendly, she'd joined clubs, she'd "made the effort" that her parents kept telling her would bring the other kids around, but none of it ever made a difference. She knew she talked too much once she got started, and she wasn't interested in a lot of the things the other kids were interested in, but she still didn't understand why that meant she was un-friendable. Why there wasn't just one person who thought, *Hey, that Bevvvy girl seems nice, I think I'll invite her to come over after school or to my birthday party or just to sit with me and my other nice friends at lunch.*

And then Damian had transferred into their school during the fourth week of classes, and everything had gotten even worse. The other kids hadn't really been cruel to her before; they just didn't want much to do with her. But Damian wasn't satisfied with just not being her friend. She couldn't explain it—it was like he'd arrived with a personal mission to make her life miserable. On his very first day, he'd swaggered up to her in the hallway and knocked her bag out of her hands and scattered her books all over the floor. Everyone had laughed. Laughed at her overturned bag and laughed at the unicorn book she'd been reading and laughed hardest at her obvious dismay at what had happened. Like she wasn't supposed to be upset, like being upset at what Damian had done was somehow the worst crime of all.

And it was like some kind of signal to all of them, because no one spoke to her from that day onward except to tease or mock or threaten her.

She felt tears pricking at her eyes and forced them angrily back. Letting the other kids see her crying on the bus was certainly not going to help anything. She just wished she could understand what was wrong with her so she could fix it and then maybe things could change.

She just wanted one friend. Just one. She didn't think that was so much to ask for.





## Chapter 2

The next afternoon, Bevvv was relieved to see her corner empty when she came outside. Cat had kindly relinquished it to her. The idea of sitting somewhere else, somewhere more noticeable, had been making her anxious all day. Bevvv settled in under her tree and took out her book and was lost in the story so quickly and completely that she didn't notice Cat standing in front of her until the other girl said her name in an impatient voice.

"Oh," Bevvv said. "Do you—do you want me to move? I can, um . . ." She glanced around, trying to ignore the way her eyes suddenly seemed to need to blink a lot. So much for kindness. Cat had just been late getting out of lunch.

"Don't be stupid," Cat said, sitting down beside her.

Bevvv looked at her in surprise. It wasn't exactly a nice thing to say, but it made her eyes feel better all the same.

Cat found her stick from the day before and started poking at the ground again. After a minute, she asked, "So, how come you don't have any friends?"

It could have been a mean question, but somehow it didn't seem that way. It sounded like Cat was genuinely curious.

Bevvy shrugged and scuffed her foot in the dirt. "I don't know. The other kids don't like me."

"Why not? Did something happen?"

*Did* something happen? Bevvy had asked herself that question a million, million times. She couldn't think of anything. There hadn't ever been a time when things were good and then suddenly they weren't. The other kids had just never liked her. Eva had been the only one who'd ever talked to her, and then Eva had left and that had been that. It was like she had an invisible mark that everyone else could see, one that told them to stay away.

"No," she said finally. "They just don't."

"And that's why you sit here by yourself at recess every day?"

"Yes." Involuntarily, Bevvy's eyes sought out Damian on the playground. As though he could feel her thoughts, Damian looked up suddenly and caught her gaze. Bevvy snapped her eyes downward, but she knew it was too late. He'd seen her looking, and now he was going to come over and punish her for it.

“Who’s that blond-haired kid?” Cat asked, watching—Bevvy assumed—Damian coming toward them.

“Damian,” Bevvy said. It came out as a whisper even though she hadn’t intended it to. And then his shadow fell across the ground in front of her.

“What’cha reading, Bevvy?” Damian asked in a mocking, singsong voice. “Is it one of your little fairy books? Gonna read about some magical fairies?” He laughed, as though he’d made the best joke ever. Bevvy didn’t say anything; sometimes, if she just didn’t engage, he’d lose interest. But she’d forgotten about Cat.

“What’s your problem?” Cat said it casually, like she was asking him what time it was. Bevvy tried not to flinch. This was not the way to get Damian to go away.

“Who asked you?” Damian shot back. Bevvy could tell from his shadow that he’d turned to look at Cat. “Am I interrupting fairy book club? You gonna sit here reading in the corner all day, too?”

“Oh. You’re one of those kids, huh?” Cat kept talking in the same easygoing voice, like she didn’t care that much one way or another what the answer was. “Maybe you should go away and leave us alone.”

“Or what? You gonna make me?”

Cat stood up. “Yeah. If I have to. If you really don’t have anything better to do than stand here bothering us.”

Damian laughed again, but it sounded different this time. Bevvy dared to look up. Damian seemed uncertain,

like maybe he'd decided he actually did have something better to do. But then some of the other boys came up behind him. Marcus, and Noah, and Kai. Damian glanced at them and then back at Cat. And then he pushed her.

Bevvy didn't think she'd been ready for it, but Cat still only stumbled backward rather than falling. In the meantime, Bevvy realized she'd gotten to her own feet without knowing it. "Stop it!" she said.

"Oh, now you're gonna make me, too?" Damian asked.

Bevvy's heart was pounding. This was not, definitely not, how you got Damian to leave you alone. But she forced herself to stare back at him. She wasn't alone. For the first time in forever, it wasn't just everyone against her.

"If I have to," she said. She looked sideways at Cat for support. But something had changed in Cat's face. The calm defiance had vanished, replaced by what looked like fear.

"Forget it," Cat said, talking more to the ground than to anyone else. She grabbed her bag and started to turn away.

"Hey—" Bevvy began, her voice faltering before she could even get the word out. Damian started laughing again, and this time his friends joined him.

"Sorry," Cat mumbled, not meeting Bevvy's eye. "I can't." And then she ran off toward the school.

Leaving Bevvy to face the boys alone.

For a moment, Bevvv couldn't move; she couldn't even breathe. She didn't understand what had just happened.

*Fine*, she told herself. *It's fine. Just walk away. They're not going to do anything. They already had their fun.*

But they hadn't, apparently. She bent to pick up her book from where it had fallen, but Damian snatched it from her hand. He held it up by the front cover, letting the pages fall open.

"Give it back," she said. "Please. It's from the library."

"Oh," said Marcus. "It's from the *liiii*brary. Better not do anything to that book, Damian!"

"What, like this?" Damian asked. He grabbed a section of pages from the middle and tore them out.

"Stop it!" Bevvv shouted again. She lunged forward, reaching for it, but suddenly Noah and Kai were behind her, holding her arms.

"Oh no," Damian said sarcastically, tearing out more pages. "The poor fairy book! I think I might have ripped it."

"Maybe Bevvv's a fairy," Noah said. "Maybe that's why she loves those books so much."

The other boys laughed. Damian looked at her, and she didn't like what she saw in his eyes. "Are you a fairy, Bevvv? Is that your big secret? Show us your wings, then."

"Let me go," Bevvv said. She was crying now. She couldn't help it. Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

“Yeah, show us your wings,” the other boys said. They shoved her back and forth between them.

“Stop it!” Bevvv screamed, yanking herself away. She fell to the ground, scraping her knees as the fabric of her jeans tore against the rough schoolyard pavement. She waited for them to come for her again, but suddenly a new voice cut through their horrible laughter.

“Hey, now!” It was Mr. Michaels, the gym teacher. He pushed through the boys and reached down to help Bevvv up. Then he turned to glare at Damian and the others. “Someone want to give me an explanation?”

“We were just playing around,” Damian said. “We—”

“I saw what you were doing,” Mr. Michaels said. Usually he was one of the friendly teachers, joking with all the kids, but he didn’t sound friendly now. His voice was flat and serious and very cold. “We don’t stand for that behavior at this school. Ever. Take yourselves to the principal’s office, right now. Tell her I’ll be there shortly to explain your presence.”

Damian looked furious but turned and headed toward the school. Marcus and Kai started to follow him, but Noah looked pleadingly at Mr. Michaels. “Come on, Mr. M. We weren’t—”

“Do *not*, Noah. Do not even attempt to make excuses. And don’t call me Mr. M. I am not your friend. I’m the guy who’s going to have some very serious words with your parents this afternoon and hopefully get you

in a lot of trouble. Get inside. Right now.”

Without waiting to see if Noah obeyed, Mr. Michaels knelt before Bevvv. “Are you okay?” he asked in a much gentler voice. “Did they hurt you?”

Bevvv nodded, not knowing what she meant, not trusting herself to speak. She didn’t know what the right answers were, anyway. *Was* she okay? She wasn’t dead or bleeding or anything. They had hurt her, but then they always did. Just . . . not quite like they had today. But most of the pain was coming from Cat’s betrayal. Cat, who had given her a few seconds of hope and then abandoned her.

But Mr. Michaels seemed to expect some kind of verbal response. He was still kneeling there, watching her sniffing.

“They—they ripped my book,” she said finally. “It was from the library.”

“I’ll speak to Ms. Hadi and explain what happened. Don’t you worry about that. I just want to make sure *you’re* okay. Books are replaceable. Beverlys are not.” He gave her a little smile.

“It’s Bevvv,” she whispered.

“What’s that?”

“I like to be called Bevvv,” she said a little louder.

“Oh,” he said, sounding surprised. “Okay. Bevvv, then. Do you want to go to the nurse, Bevvv? I can take you.”

She shook her head. “I want to go to the library.”

“Okay,” he said, standing up. “Come on, I’ll walk you there, and we can talk to Ms. Hadi together before I go to the office. Those boys can just sit there and wait.”

Ms. Hadi was nice about it, of course, once Mr. Michaels explained, but Bevvv still felt awful about the book. Even though the library had another copy of the exact same one. Ms. Hadi went to get it for her.

“Now you don’t even have to wait to finish it,” she said, smiling. “You can pick up right where you left off.”

“Thank you,” Bevvv said, placing the book into her backpack. She didn’t feel much like reading at the moment, but she knew she would later. Later, when she got home and all the sad thoughts about her life started to crowd around inside her mind. She’d be desperate to get back into her book then—desperate to escape and forget, at least for a little while.

She made it through the rest of her classes without anything else terrible happening. She didn’t see Damian and the others in the hallway or anywhere else. She wondered if they’d really get in trouble. In her experience, the people who deserved to get in trouble rarely actually did.

By the time the final bell rang, she was thinking about her book again, thinking she’d get some cookies and curl up in the window seat and read until it was time for dinner and not think about anything else at all. It had been silly to imagine anything could ever be different. Cat had only been nice to her because she hadn’t yet seen what



everyone else did. That Bevvv was wrong somehow. Broken. And then she did see, and so she left. Without a thought for what the consequences would be for Bevvv.

Bevvv got off the school bus at her stop and walked down her street. She used to sometimes walk all the way home instead of taking the bus on nice days like this; her route took her past the woods near the school, and she loved the quiet peacefulness of the trees on one side and the cozy row of homes on the other. But then one time, she walked right into Damian and his friends playing basketball in the driveway outside his house. She always took the bus now.

She looked to see if Mrs. Lerner's kittens were out on the lawn today, but she didn't see any of them. *Figures*, she thought. She could have used a few furry kitty snuggles, but the universe didn't seem inclined to be very generous to her today. Except for the extra copy of the library book, she reminded herself. She should try to be grateful for that, at least.

She took one last look around Mrs. Lerner's front yard and then turned into her driveway.

And saw Cat sitting on her front porch, waiting for her.



## Chapter 3

**H**i," Cat said.

Bevvy stared.

All the bad feelings of the afternoon came flooding back at the sight of the dark-haired girl sitting on the porch. What was Cat doing here? Part of Bevvy wanted to be excited and pleased that Cat was there, wanted to believe there'd been some kind of misunderstanding that would now be corrected, but she tamped that part down good and tight. There hadn't been any misunderstanding. Cat had gotten her to think they could stand up to Damian and then left her to face him and his friends alone.

Bevvy stayed where she'd stopped at the edge of the walkway leading up to the house.

"What do you want?" she asked. And then she thought of a better thing to ask. "How did you know where I live?"

Cat flinched slightly at the second question, which didn't make any sense. "I wanted to talk to you. To try to

explain. I feel terrible about what happened.”

“You should feel terrible! You made everything even worse than it was before!”

“I know.”

“They’re never going to leave me alone now. Never!”

“I know.”

Bevvy was running out of things to shout. It was hard to have an argument with someone when they kept agreeing with you.

“Please just come sit down,” Cat said. “I’ll—I’ll try to explain.”

Bevvy hesitated, then sighed and walked over to the porch. She couldn’t imagine what Cat could possibly say that would make what she’d done okay, but it couldn’t hurt to listen. As soon as she sat down, one of Mrs. Lerner’s kittens materialized out of the bushes and climbed into her lap, hooking her way over Bevvy’s torn pants with her tiny needle claws. Bevvy was glad to have something to focus on other than Cat. And the kitten’s fur was just as soft and comforting as she’d hoped it would be. Bevvy picked her up and kissed her little face, smiling a bit as the kitten tried to eat her hair.

“Who’s that?” Cat asked.

“Scallion,” Bevvy said, not looking up. At the puzzled silence that followed, she added, “Mrs. Lerner always picks a theme for each litter. This one was vegetables.”

“Oh.”

There was another silence. Bevvv busied herself with the kitten. If Cat wanted to talk, then she should be the one to start talking.

"I didn't— I really didn't mean for all that to happen," Cat began finally. "That boy was being such a jerk, and I've dealt with bullies like that before. They make me so mad. I didn't think it through, though. I wanted him to leave you alone, but I should have realized he'd have friends."

"So you got scared when his friends showed up?" Bevvv asked scornfully.

"No! I wasn't scared. Not of them. I just—" She sighed, suddenly sounding very tired. "I can't get in trouble at this school. I can't. And when his friends showed up, I knew it would be a fight. When it was just that one boy—"

"Damian."

"When it was just Damian, I thought I could get him to walk away. He was about to! But then his friends arrived, and I knew I had to get out of there."

"So you left me."

"Yes," Cat said. "I'm really sorry. I got that teacher to notice what was happening so he'd come over, but I know . . . I know he didn't get there fast enough."

"No," Bevvv said flatly. "He didn't."

"I don't expect you to forgive me," Cat said. "I know you won't want to be my friend anymore after this. I just

wanted to explain, so you'd know I didn't do it on purpose. I didn't want that to happen, I swear."

Bevvy stroked Scallion, who had curled up in a ball and gone to sleep. "Why can't you get in trouble? Why is that such a big deal? Everyone gets in trouble sometimes."

"I can't. I don't know how to explain. I just can't."

Suddenly, Bevvy had a flash of understanding. Maybe Cat was like Eva. When Eva got in trouble at school, she got in worse trouble at home. Her dad got really angry sometimes. Worse than angry. That was the reason she and her mom had to move away.

"Is it—is it your parents? Do they—?"

Cat shook her head. "No. My mom . . . doesn't live with us, and my dad would never hurt me."

"Then why?"

"I can't draw attention. I can't do anything that someone might notice."

Bevvy stared at her, thoroughly confused. "What are you talking about? That who might notice? The teachers?"

"No, not the teachers." Cat pressed her hands over her eyes. "Please, just . . . that's all I can tell you."

"You haven't told me anything!"

Just then Bevvy noticed a big black car driving slowly up the road. Which was strange, because they didn't get any random people driving by here; the street ended in a cul-de-sac by Mr. Panya's house. The car's windows were all dark, like it was night inside.

"I wonder who that is," Bevvv said.

"Who?" Cat asked. She moved her hands away from her eyes. And then she froze, staring at the car. "Oh no. Oh no no no."

"What's wrong?"

With a visible effort, Cat turned her head away from the car. Bevvv didn't like the expression on the other girl's face at all. She was starting to get a very bad feeling.

Cat looked at her a moment longer. Then she said, "Put down the kitten."

"What? Why?"

"Because we have to run."

*"What?"*

"Stop asking me questions and put down the kitten!" Cat snapped, jumping to her feet. "We have to go right now."

Bevvv gently lifted Scallion from her lap and set her down on the porch step. "Is it that car? If—if it's someone dangerous, we should go in the house. My mom will be home, she can call the police—"

"No," Cat said. "Not unless you want your mom to die."

*"What?!"*

"Come *on!*" And with that, Cat grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the trees at the edge of the property. Bevvv had no choice but to go stumbling along with her. She heard a muffled shout from the direction of the street, and the sound of car doors opening and closing.

Cat didn't stop or turn around; she only ran faster.

"There's no place to hide in there!" Bevvv said. "The woods aren't that deep, and there's a fence that cuts through—"

"It doesn't matter! Just keep up. Just a little farther."

They ran on, Cat seemingly oblivious to the branches that whipped their faces and bodies as they pushed deeper into the trees. After Bevvv's third time tripping over rocks and the uneven dirt, she kept her eyes on the ground, letting the other girl pull her onward to wherever she thought they were headed. There really wasn't anywhere to hide in here, but Bevvv didn't try to explain that a second time. Cat didn't seem to be in a listening kind of mood.

Suddenly, Cat yanked her sideways. They were behind one of the larger trees, but someone would easily see them hiding there if they got close enough. Bevvv opened her mouth to tell Cat this, but then stopped. Cat was standing perfectly still, eyes closed, like she was concentrating very hard on something. Bevvv didn't want to interrupt her, in case she was about to have a really good idea about what they could do to get away from whoever was chasing them. Bevvv had no idea what was going on, but Cat had obviously been terrified when she saw that car. It seemed very clear that their first priority should be getting somewhere safe. And then, once they got there, she would make Cat explain everything.

From back the way they'd come, branches snapped and leaves crunched and there were voices getting louder. Angry voices—the kind that you didn't want to hear close up. Bevv's chest was tight with panic and fear. They had to get out of there. Cat still hadn't opened her eyes. But as Bevv watched, Cat stretched one arm out in front of her, fingers straight and palm facing the ground. She raised it to shoulder level, holding it straight out. And then the space around the tips of her fingers started to *change*. Bevv stared, the approaching angry voices temporarily forgotten. At first it was merely a faint shimmer, like the air above hot asphalt in the summer. And then there were colors, different colors from the ones in the woods around them. And then a kind of . . . a kind of opening. It was like—it was like—

“There they are!” someone shouted, way too close. Bevv gasped and peered around the tree. The path behind them was full of people, all running toward them. There were at least three men in dark clothes and a woman in a jogging outfit and dark glasses, and then there were other, very *large* people . . . people who seemed somehow to have been squeezed into clothing way too small for them. And their faces were not regular human faces. For a second, Bevv thought they must be masks, but they couldn't be, because the faces were *moving*. And there were other strange



things, too—one of the people had long, scaly fingers stretching from the edge of a brown jacket sleeve, and another had brilliant yellow feathers peeking out from the collar of a ragged black T-shirt. Bevvv wondered if she'd hit her head on a branch during their mad dash through the woods.

Cat was screaming something. Bevvv turned back to see that the other girl's bright green eyes were finally open. It took Bevvv a second to realize that the thing that Cat was screaming was her name.

Cat reached out her hand. The one that wasn't in the middle of the hole that had suddenly appeared in the world. Before Bevvv could think too much about what was happening and what she was doing, she ran forward and grabbed Cat's hand.

The opening in the air exploded outward, becoming a shimmery circle the size of—well, the size of a pair of sixth-grade girls. With just a little room to spare.

A howl of fury erupted from behind her. Bevvv peeked over her shoulder to see one of the too-large people—this one had a face that looked like a raging wolf—launching himself forward. At them.

But then Cat was pulling her sideways again, and this time, instead of hiding behind a tree, they were falling through the hole in the air and away from the snarling, howling, too-many and too-large people. The shouting and snarling were replaced by a sound like rushing wind.

And Bevvv was definitely pretty sure now that she must have hit her head, because the hole closed up behind them and then the woods were gone and they were in a completely new and different place.

A place that was impossible.



## Chapter 4

Bevvy sat on the ground—the ground that was now covered with an enormous field of tall grass, beneath a sky that was somehow the wrong shade of blue—and stared. She thought Cat was maybe saying something somewhere nearby, but that didn't feel very important just then.

They were no longer in the woods behind her house. That was clear. That was *impossible*, but also clear.

They were in a grass-covered valley. The world had gone very quiet, and the air smelled different—lighter and sweeter and somehow easier to breathe. Bevvy's fingertips pressed into soft earth. Around her, tiny purple flowers mixed in with the bright green grass, their petals forming delicate little spirals. In the distance, mountains rose in majestic gray-brown rock formations capped with dark green trees and cradling a sparkling waterfall that cascaded down to some unseen location below. There were woods here, too, off at the edge of the valley.

But this wasn't a small patch of trees like her woods. This looked like the edge of a vast army of trees, great big trees that created great dark spaces between them. Trees that might go on forever.

"Hey!" That was Cat, again. She sat down facing Bevvv and squinted her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Bevvv considered this question for the second time today. Once again, she wasn't dead or bleeding. No broken bones. Didn't that mean she was okay? She felt . . . she couldn't tell what she felt. Nothing seemed exactly real at the moment.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I mean, I have"—she lifted one hand and waved it around at the grass and the mountains and the trees—"I have some questions."

"Yeah," Cat said, looking solemn and resigned and slightly terrified. "I figured you might."

Bevvv tried to decide what the most important question was. "Where are we?"

"It's called Lorelkey. It's not part of the regular world. Our world. It's somewhere else. Somewhere different."

Bevvv took this in. She didn't really feel surprised at this information. What was surprising was that she believed it. It was—like the hole in the air, like the too-large, scary-faced people who had chased them—impossible. But those other things had happened, had been real, and this new place seemed to be real, too. And

what Cat had done, to bring them here . . . well, Bevvv had read enough fairy tales and fantasy novels to know magic when she saw it.

“Are you a witch or a wizard or something?”

“No,” Cat said. “Nothing like that. I can only do certain things. I have—my dad calls them *abilities*. One of my abilities is that I can come to this place.”

“Can those other people come here? The ones who were chasing us?”

“No. That’s why they were chasing us. Chasing *me*. They want me to bring them here.” Cat’s face grew hard and determined. “But I won’t. Not ever.”

“Why not?” Bevvv asked. “If it would get them to leave you alone?”

Cat just shook her head. Bevvv put that question aside for later, when Cat might feel more like answering. There were lots of other questions she could ask in the meantime. For example: “How do we get back?”

“I can take you back. I just need to rest for a while. And we can’t go back to exactly where we came from—they might be waiting for us.”

“You mean at my house?” Bevvv thought about her mother, who was probably already wondering why she hadn’t come inside yet. “And what’s ‘a while,’ exactly? And who *were* those people? Where—”

“Bevvv, stop!” Cat said, not quite shouting, but almost. Then she took a breath and made her voice

calmer. "Let me think a little, okay?" She got back to her feet and stood there, twisting her fingers together in a way that looked painful. "I—I don't know if I did the right thing, bringing you with me. But I was afraid if I left you there, they might . . . hurt you. Since they saw you with me." Suddenly Cat curled her hands into fists and pressed them against her face. "I told you I can't have friends. This is why. They'll be after you now, and it's all my fault."

Bevvy thought about what Cat had said just before they'd run into the woods. "Are they going to hurt my mom and dad? You said before . . ."

Cat lowered her hands and looked at Bevvy. "I don't think so. Some of them might go to your house to ask some questions, but that's probably all. They'll see that your parents don't know anything about me. That's why I couldn't let you bring me inside. But they'll wait for you to come back. They'll be watching. I need to come up with a plan before you go. They'll—they'll stop you when you get there, and they'll ask you about me, but as long as you don't know where I'm going, it will be okay."

None of this seemed *remotely* okay to Bevvy. Those terrible people were going to talk to her parents? They'd be waiting around for Bevvy to come back? "But you just said you were afraid they'd hurt me if you left me behind. Why won't they hurt me when I go back?"

“They just won’t. You tell them the truth, everything you know, and they’ll accept that. They’ll be too busy trying to find me again to worry about you.” Then she put her fists against her forehead again. “But now they know what town we’re in. I have to warn my dad. I’ll just rest a little and figure out where to go, and then we’ll cross back over.”

Bevvy didn’t think Cat was making a lot of sense, but then again, none of this was really making a lot of sense. She got to her feet, trying to push away her anxious thoughts of home. For now.

“All right, then,” Bevvy said, forcing some cheer into her voice. Her dad was always telling her to “project a positive attitude.” She guessed he thought that if you pretended to be happy, then eventually you really would be. It hadn’t helped her one bit in the making-friends department, but maybe it was good advice for some situations. There was a pretty big bright side to all of this, after all. She was in another world!

That fact was finally starting to sink in, and despite her worry, she couldn’t deny the amazed excitement she felt bubbling up inside her. “If we’re not going back right away, tell me more about this place.” She looked around again, marveling at the lush landscape that seemed to be in the full bloom of summer instead of the early fall of home, even though the temperature was mild enough that she was still

comfortable in her light sweatshirt. “Can you show me some of it? What’s it like here? How is it different? Is there magic? Well, obviously there’s magic, because you just did some! But is there more? Are there . . . are there . . .” Bevvv trailed off, staring into the distance.

There was a unicorn coming toward them.

Bevvv couldn’t believe it. It was like she’d actually crawled into the pages of one of her books. The unicorn was enormous and majestic and beautiful, just like she’d always imagined. Maybe it was a little more *muscular* than she’d imagined, but still. It cantered nearer, its sleek white coat shining in the sunlight, its golden horn glinting.

Her face felt strange, and she realized there were tears on her cheeks. She was laughing and crying at the same time. A unicorn! A real, honest-to-goodness unicorn! Unicorns were her second-favorite magical creatures, just after dragons. She stretched out a hand, willing it to come closer. She wanted to touch it. She *had* to touch it. She thought she could go back and face anything, even Damian, if she could just touch this unicorn first.

Cat was pulling at her. “Bevvv, no! Bevvv, come on—we have to go, right now!”

Bevvv shook her off. “Just wait,” she said. “Just let me—”

“No!” Cat said. “Bevvv!”



The unicorn was almost upon them. Cat was still pulling at her, but Bevvv would not budge. No way. Maybe Cat got to come here all the time and unicorns were no big deal to her, but they were totally a big deal to Bevvv. She watched, rapt, as the unicorn reared up, horn thrusting into the sky. It was so beautiful. She'd never seen anything so beautiful in her entire life.

The unicorn reared again, and this time it opened its mouth to reveal sharp, jagged teeth. Bevvv stared, wondering why the teeth looked so sharp, and so red. Suddenly she was aware that there were more unicorns, dozens of them, all galloping across the field toward them. Cat was still shouting at her, and Bevvv finally let the other girl pull her backward just as the first unicorn snapped forward and tried to take a bite out of her face.

*What?*

Cat kept pulling, and Bevvv, shocked and horrified, let herself be dragged toward the trees. The unicorn followed, stamping its feet and baring its pointed teeth at them. Bevvv looked, *really* looked, and saw now that the unicorn's coat was mangy in spots, and that there was blood not only on its mouth but on its muzzle and forelegs, too. Its eyes—those eyes that had looked right into hers—were wide and glassy and full of malice. The other unicorns whinnied, and this one opened its mouth again to answer, screaming as it pawed once more at the air in

front of it. Then it lowered its head and pointed its horn straight at the girls.

Bevvy finally turned and ran with Cat. She was sure they wouldn't have had a chance of outrunning it except that the unicorn kept stopping to rear and scream and prance. As soon as they entered the tree line, Cat grabbed a branch and shouted, "Climb!"

Bevvy had climbed trees in her own woods lots of times. These trees were bigger, but she knew what to do all the same. She grabbed another branch of the same tree and began scrambling up after Cat. Luckily, there were plenty of handholds; these were good climbing trees. Bevvy went as fast as she could safely go—the last thing she wanted was to mess up and fall.

"Don't look down," she whispered to herself. But then she looked down anyway.

The unicorn was right below them. It reared again and thrust its front legs upward. Bevvy yelped as the ragged hooves swiped the air just below her. She quickly went up a few more feet. Cat was a just a little higher, perched in a nook between two branches.

By now, more unicorns had reached the tree. They were glaring up with those malevolent eyes, pawing the air and screaming their terrible horsey screams.

"What's wrong with them?" Bevvy asked, panting as she came up even with Cat. "Why are they doing this?"

“That’s just how unicorns are. I tried to tell you.”

“You mean *all* of them? They’re all like this? These ones aren’t just . . . just rabid or something?”

Cat peered down at the growing mob of unicorns below. “This isn’t like one of your books, Bevvv. Magical creatures aren’t generally very nice. Magical people aren’t generally very nice, either. There are lots of things here that would like to kill you. There’s a reason I’m not supposed to come here unless it’s an emergency. *Lots* of reasons.”

Suddenly, the tree shook violently, and Bevvv had to fling her arms around the trunk to keep from falling.

“What are they doing?” she shrieked. But when she looked down again, it was obvious what they were doing. They were throwing themselves against the tree, trying to knock it down.

She waited for Cat to tell her what they should do now, but Cat just kept staring grimly at the unicorns below.

“Can you bring us back over?” Bevvv asked finally. “Right from here?”

Cat looked apologetic. “I can’t make another door yet. It takes a lot of energy, and I need to recover for a while longer.”

“But we don’t have a while longer!” Bevvv shouted. “What about your other abilities?”

“What?”

The tree shook again, and both girls screamed.

“You said being able to come here was *one* of your abilities,” Bevvv said once she’d stopped screaming.

“What are the other ones?”

“Nothing that would help right now.”

Bevvv would have thrown up her hands if she didn’t have to keep holding on to the tree for dear life. “Well, we have to do something!”

“If you’d run when I first told you to, we wouldn’t be in this situation right now!”

“If you’d explained why you wanted me to run, I would have gone with you!”

“There wasn’t *time* to explain. That’s the whole point!”

Bevvv forced herself to take a deep breath. “Stop,” she said. “Us arguing with each other isn’t going to help.”

“Nothing is going to help! We just have to try to hold on and hope they get bored before they knock the tree over.”

“That’s not much of a plan.”

“Do you have a better one?”

*No, of course not*, Bevvv thought but didn’t say. How could she know what they should do? She was still trying to get used to the idea that this whole place even existed! But she took another deep breath and tried to think anyway. Could they climb into a different tree? She looked

around, but none of the nearby trees were close enough to reach. Fighting the unicorns off obviously wasn't an option, nor was outrunning them, even if they could get safely to the ground. She supposed Cat was right; they just had to hold on and hope the unicorns didn't succeed in either shaking them loose or taking down the whole tree. Maybe if the tree fell, it would crash into another tree and they could escape that way. But that idea made her feel terrible. She didn't want this tree to suffer because of them. Especially not after it had helped them by being so climbable.

The tree shuddered again, and Bevvv closed her eyes and pressed her face against the rough bark. *Please don't let them knock you over*, she thought at the tree. For a second, she almost thought she felt the tree thinking back at her, but before she could puzzle out whether it was really happening or just her overexcited imagination making things up, a deafening, high-pitched screech made her scream again and press her face even harder against the trunk.

"What was that?" Bevvv whimpered once she was able to form words. She forced herself to pull her face from the tree and look at Cat, but Cat just shook her pale, terrified face mutely.

Bevvv risked a look down and saw that the unicorns had retreated slightly. They were standing several feet

back from the tree, facing deeper into the forest. Several of the unicorns, including the one that had almost bitten her face off, were snarling and pawing the ground.

Bevy had to twist around awkwardly in the tree to see what they were looking at. And when she did, her brain took a long time to make sense of what her eyes were seeing.

The creature currently staring down the unicorns was big—about the size of a delivery van. Maybe a little bigger. It looked more than anything else like a giant moth, although she was pretty sure most real moths didn't actually have mouths, just long tongue-things, and she'd certainly never heard one scream like that. It was almost entirely covered in varying shades of brown fur, except for a hint of pink and black peeking out from where the outer wings were tucked in tight against its long, cylindrical body. Its face was dominated by two enormous eyes the shape and color of brown Reese's Pieces (although obviously much, much larger). Two long antennae extended from just above its eyes, skinny but covered with delicate, feathery spikes.

The unicorns were clearly wary of the new creature, but then so was Bevy. It wouldn't be much of an improvement to have the new monster drive off the unicorns just so it could kill the girls itself.

The moth thing opened its mouth again—the mouth

was full of long, pointy teeth, which she was also pretty sure regular moths did not have—and Bevvv braced herself for another of those terrible screeches, but suddenly a woman stepped into view beside the creature and slapped it lightly on the side of the neck.

“That’s enough of that, Fillium,” she said briskly. “Honestly, I have never known anyone to make more of an unnecessary racket.”

The moth thing—Fillium, apparently—closed its mouth with a snap and managed to look faintly embarrassed. Then it stretched its neck out, and the woman stroked it absently while she sized up the unicorns.

“You know you don’t belong in these woods,” she told them. “Are you going to make me enforce that rule?”

Some of the unicorns toward the back of the group were already beginning to prance away, but those in front were standing their ground and glaring angrily at the newcomers. They seemed just as uneasy about the woman as they did about the moth thing. She wasn’t very tall or scary-looking, but she was wearing what appeared to be leather chest armor over her long lavender shirt—or maybe it was a short dress—and the expression on her round, freckled face was definitely not friendly. She had light brown skin and long, wavy, loosely braided red-brown hair that might have been pretty but looked like it could use a wash. Her shirt/dress was tied into a rough

knot at one side, revealing dark leggings tucked into well-worn boots. There was also a sword tucked into a scabbard belted around her waist.

She had an undeniable air of authority, and when she continued to step forward, most of the unicorns shied back. The face-biter was the last to move, but eventually he, too, turned his head away from her. With a final defiant pawing of the air, he galloped off, out of the forest. All the other unicorns fell in behind him.

And then the woman stopped and turned her gaze to stare directly up at Bevvv and Cat. “And you,” she said in a cold voice, “do not belong here either.”





## Chapter 5

Who is that?" Bevvv whispered to Cat. "Do you know?"

Cat only shook her head again.

"I will tell you who I am," the woman called up, "after you come down and tell me who you are and what you are doing in my woods."

"We're fine right where we are," Cat called back, and Bevvv was relieved that the other girl was taking charge of things again.

"That is not true, I'm afraid," the woman said. "I do not take kindly to trespassers. If you do not come down from that tree willingly, I will send Fillium here up to get you. He may not be gentle about it."

The moth thing looked up at them, head cocked to the side, perhaps gauging the distance, perhaps trying to decide how tasty they might be. He was way too big to actually climb the tree; Bevvv wondered if the woman meant he would reach up with those giant wings and pluck them out of the branches. She could see now that

there were sharp-looking hooked claws at each wing tip.

“I’d like to see him try!” Cat shouted.

“Cat!” Bevvv gasped. She was beginning to feel less relieved. She’d forgotten how Cat had provoked Damian. Was she going to provoke this woman and her pet moth creature, too? With similarly disastrous results?

Or worse ones?

The woman sighed impatiently. “Enough of this,” she said. She made a gesture with her left hand, and suddenly the branches became slick and slippery and impossible to hold on to. Bevvv thought she felt the tiniest whisper of apology from the tree just before she and Cat both plummeted toward the ground. She screamed and heard Cat screaming, too, but then the wind was knocked out of them both as they crashed into . . . something. Even in her shock and fear, Bevvv knew it wasn’t the hard, dirt-and-rock-covered forest floor. This was softer and smoother and had a slight give to it and wasn’t nearly as far down as she knew the ground must be. She fetched up against Cat in the center of the thing just as she realized what it was: one of Fillium’s giant moth wings.

The wing tilted then, dumping both girls roughly onto the ground. Bevvv immediately scrambled up to try to run, but Fillium reached out with one huge clawed foot and pushed her unceremoniously back down. Then he held her there with just enough pressure to keep her from moving without actually squeezing the life out of

her. Cat was sitting up but hadn't tried to run; apparently that meant she was to be spared the moth-claw to the rib cage. Bevvv stopped struggling, but she couldn't help a residual shudder as she stared up at the monster.

"If you're quite finished?" the woman asked, and after a moment, Bevvv nodded. Fillium withdrew his shiny black talons, and Bevvv sat up, swiping at her shirt as if she could somehow wipe the contact away. The creature noticed and glared at her sullenly.

"What do you want?" Cat asked. "Can't you just leave us alone?"

"Perhaps," the woman said. "That all depends. Who are you?"

"I'm Cat, and this is Bevvv."

"That is not quite enough of an answer, but we will come back to that. What were you doing in my woods?"

"You saw what we were doing!" Cat said. "We were trying to escape the unicorns!"

"Please," Bevvv put in. "We didn't know they were your woods. Now that we know, we won't ever trespass again. We really were just trying to find someplace safe."

"What were you doing out here in the first place? Everyone knows the fields to the west are unicorn territory now. Were you trying to get yourselves killed?"

Bevvv glanced at Cat, who widened her eyes meaningfully and gave a quick little shake of her head.

The woman didn't miss their not-so-subtle exchange.

"I see you're not planning to be very forthcoming with me. That is not going to end well for you." She turned to Bevvv. "I sense you are the more reasonable one. Tell me what I want to know."

Bevvv gazed up at the woman. She could feel Cat's determined eyes boring into her. "I—I'm not. I mean, I can't. I don't even really know, to be honest. I'm very confused by everything that's happened so far today." With an effort, she closed her mouth. This was not the time to let her nervous talking get the better of her.

The woman waited, but when Bevvv managed to keep silent for nearly a full fifteen seconds (she'd been counting in her head), she sighed again.

"I have no time for this. You don't *seem* like spies—"

"Spies!" Bevvv yelped, unable to help herself.

"—but I cannot take any chances. You will have to come with me."

"We're not—we're not spies!" Bevvv protested just as Cat exclaimed, "We don't even know who you are! Why the heck would we be spying on you?"

"Stand up and come willingly, or I will find another way."

"But we can't come with you!" Bevvv wailed. "We have to—" She saw Cat's face, ready to erupt with some desperate, violent emotion, and cut herself off.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "You have to what?"

"We have to go home," Bevvv muttered miserably.

But when the woman asked her where home was, she just shook her head and stared at the ground, trying very hard not to cry. She knew Cat didn't want her to say that they came from a different world. She didn't know why exactly, but if those other people had been after Cat because of her ability to move between worlds, then maybe people on this side would be, too, if they knew. Cat had said that magical people weren't very nice. This woman certainly appeared to be a magical person, based on what she did to the tree. And now she was trying to force them to go with her to . . . somewhere. Somewhere deeper into this world when what they really needed was to go back.

Although . . . Cat had said they couldn't go back yet anyway. Maybe this situation wasn't quite as bad as it seemed. They could go with this woman and her moth monster for now, and then when Cat was done resting, they'd just cross back over to the regular world from wherever they were. At least they'd be safe from the unicorns in the meantime.

Bevvv looked up to see Cat watching her carefully. Bevvv didn't want to nod or anything, since she knew the woman was watching, too, but she thought Cat might have come to the same conclusion she had. Once Cat seemed satisfied by whatever she saw on Bevvv's face, she got to her feet.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll come with you. It’s better than going back out where the unicorns are, anyway.”

“Good,” the woman said. She waited for Bevvv to stand up, too. “Where we are going is not far. Just keep up and stay close. If I suspect that you are trying to run off, I will let Fillium carry you in his mouth.”

“You said you’d tell us who you are,” Cat said.

The woman regarded Cat for a moment, then said, “My name is Calistine.” With that, she turned and strode off into the forest. Fillium stayed back, clearly waiting for them to follow his mistress.

“That is not quite enough of an answer,” Cat mimicked snarkily under her breath, and Bevvv choked on unexpected laughter. Cat’s face had been drawn and worried, but now she glanced up with the tiniest smile playing at the edges of her mouth.

She gestured at the trees ahead of them. “Well, you said you wanted to see more of this place. Apparently, your wish is granted. Shall we follow the scary tree lady into the deep dark woods before her enormous moth-saurus decides to hurry us along?”

“Yes,” Bevvv said, smiling back. She knew she shouldn’t feel like smiling; she should be terrified. And she was, kind of. She didn’t know what was going to happen. She still hadn’t quite processed everything that had *already* happened. But Cat’s tiny smile, just the fact of

her standing there beside Bevvv—somehow that’s what seemed the most important thing. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had smiled at her like that. Like a friend.

Bevvv looked away before she could ruin the moment by acting all weird. She glanced back at Fillium as they headed deeper into the woods after Calistine. “What is that thing, anyway? It’s not just a giant moth. Did you see its teeth? It’s not really a dinosaur or something, is it? Do they have dinosaurs here? Do they have other giant things? Are they all terrible like the unicorns? Have you seen them?”

Cat didn’t answer, just rolled her eyes and walked a little faster. But Bevvv could still see a hint of that tiny smile on the other girl’s face.



Calistine hadn’t been lying when she said it wasn’t far. Before long they came upon a large stone archway set among the trees. Calistine walked right through, but Bevvv and Cat stopped to stare.

On the other side of the arch, a village seemed to be growing right out of the forest. A long wooden building that looked like a stretched-out log cabin stood in a wide, open area in the center. But along the edges of that open space, the trees themselves curved and stretched

to create other structures—structures formed of trunks and branches with long pieces of green and brown fabric draped into walls and roofs and doors. A few partial buildings were visible in the distance, single-story stone walls with wood or fabric ceilings and sides left open to the air. There were tents scattered among the buildings, and people scattered among everything.

Most of them were working in some way—cooking food, mending clothing, or doing other tasks that Bevvv couldn't immediately identify. Their styles of dress were generally similar: pants or leggings with long shirts or simple dresses, some vests, some boots, lots of patches and mismatched colors. Only a few were wearing armor like Calistine's. The people themselves weren't similar at all, though. It was like in a big city back home, with lots of different skin colors and hair and body types. Like they'd come from different places at some point but now all lived together here.

Something nudged her ungently in the back, and Bevvv turned to see Fillium's giant moth face right behind her. She took the hint and hurried forward after Calistine, Cat beside her. As soon as they cleared the arch, Fillium took off past them at a lumbering run. Now Bevvv could see a large grassy pasture in the distance, beyond what seemed to be the center of the village, where a bunch more of the giant moth creatures clustered busily together. They were all about the same size



but with different fur patterns and colors ranging from off-white and yellow to pink and green and brown to deep black. Several of them trilled at Fillium in greeting, a sound much more pleasant than the awful screech he'd made in the forest.

As the other people noticed their arrival, they stopped what they were doing. Mostly they just stood where they were, watching, but one scruffy-looking, light-skinned man who had been hammering something against a short stone wall placed his tools on the ground and jogged over toward them. When he got close enough, he swept Calistine up into a rather uncomfortably long kiss. Bevvv glanced away, embarrassed, but not before she saw Cat rolling her eyes again.

"Who are your friends?" he asked once the kiss was finally over.

"We're not her friends," Cat said. "She kidnapped us."

"I found them in the western woods," Calistine said, ignoring Cat, "treed by a gloaming of unicorns."

Bevvv wanted to correct her—a group of unicorns was called a *blessing*, not a *gloaming*—but then, these hadn't been the traditional kind of unicorns she'd been led to expect. Maybe in this world there was another name for them. She had to admit that *blessing* didn't really seem appropriate, given the circumstances.

He frowned. "Spies?"

Cat let out a dramatically exasperated breath.

“They claim not,” Calistine said. “I thought it best to be sure.”

“Agreed. I think Lira is at the infirmary.”

“Who’s Lira?” Cat demanded immediately. “And who are you?”

“I’m Fred,” the man said at once, surprising them. Both because he actually answered and because what kind of fantasy-world name was *Fred*? He leaned over to look at Cat directly. “And Lira is someone who can tell if you’re lying, so I suggest you tell the truth.”

Cat snorted derisively, but Bevv thought she could see a hint of fear underneath the other girl’s skeptical expression.

Another man and woman approached then, both in matching dark green clothing with long, brown leather vests on top, fastened with straps and buckles. Each had a sheathed dagger at their hip. Those were their only similarities, though. The man was tall, with dark brown skin and a close-cropped beard and mustache that were both black with flecks of gray. The woman was shorter and had light skin and shoulder-length brown hair. “Trouble?” the man asked, jerking his chin at the girls.

“Not sure yet,” Fred said. “We’ll see what Lira says.”

“Want some help?” the woman asked.

Fred smiled. “I think we can handle these two, Marlyn, thanks. But you and Edgar should perhaps stay within shouting distance, just to be sure.”

Marlyn and the man—Edgar, Bevvv supposed—both smiled a little in return. But their expressions still seemed more cautious than amused.

Fred and Calistine led them deeper into the tree village, past more open-sided buildings and other people doing various kinds of work. There were more people in those dark green and leather outfits now, too. Their hosts were angling away from the big field Bevvv had seen earlier, but she could still hear the occasional trills of Fillium and the other moth creatures through the trees.

Cat was quiet as they walked. And for once, Bevvv had no trouble keeping quiet, either. Her mind was a swirling mess of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

They were obviously in pretty big trouble. They had barely escaped getting killed by the unicorns, and now they were the prisoners of these unsettling strangers. This Lira person was going to interrogate them, and Cat wasn't going to want to tell them the truth, and apparently they'd know if she was lying. That was bad. Calistine didn't seem like someone they should be making angry, and it was clear she had serious issues with people spying on her. Of course they *weren't* spying, but if they couldn't explain what they were really doing there, what would these people do to them?

Bevvv knew they wouldn't be safe until Cat was able to open another of those doorways back to their own world. And she was very worried about what might

happen before then. But at the same time, deep inside, she was practically shrieking in excitement as the realization kept hitting her anew: she was in a real-life fantasy world! It was, absolutely literally, her dream come true. Okay, it wasn't *exactly* how she'd always imagined it—so far everything about this place was at least some degree of terrifying—but coming here was still the most incredible thing to happen to her ever in her whole life. Even with all the danger, she could not bring herself to wish it hadn't happened.

Magic was *real*. Magical *creatures* were real. The whole universe as she knew it was fundamentally changed forever. No matter what happened next, even if they went back home right that second, Bevvv knew nothing would ever be the same again.



## Chapter 6

Lira turned out to be a young woman in her late teens or early twenties, with short black hair and medium-beige skin and a lot of earrings in both ears. One of the earrings had a silver chain that connected to another tiny ring just above one eyebrow. When they found her, she was in front of a triangular wooden building, straddling what looked like a blue-brindle greyhound, trying to wrap something around one of its slender, flailing legs.

“Kindly wait a moment,” she said without looking up. The dog—Bevvy was pretty sure it was just a normal dog—was wriggling frantically, but Lira calmly went about whatever she was doing, holding fast to one leg and ignoring all the others. The dog snapped but didn’t actually try to bite her. It reminded Bevvy of how Scallion could get, when she was tired of playing. Sometimes she’d pretend she was going to bite you, but she never would, really.

Lira finally appeared to accomplish whatever her goal was. She tied off a small bit of cloth around the dog's ankle and then released it. The dog righted itself and bounded off silently, stepping a little delicately on its bandaged leg.

"Thank you," Lira said, turning to face them. She began rolling down the sleeves of her long, cranberry-red shirt, which had been pushed back to her elbows. "If I did not finish with that poultice, I was never going to get another chance. Billie's the worst patient I've ever had. Even worse than you, Fred," she added. Bevvv could see now that the building behind the young woman contained shelves of supplies, including bandages and bundles of dried herbs and small bottles that Bevvv guessed to be medicine or peroxide or something.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Fred said, pointedly ignoring the amused look that passed between Lira and Calistine. "In any case, we're here on business."

Lira had no trouble guessing that the business was Bevvv and Cat. "Well," she said. "Let's see what we can find out, then."

"I don't have anything to say to you," Cat said, crossing her arms.

"I know *that's* not true without even trying," Lira said back. "Why don't you wait until I ask some questions before you begin making things up?" Then she looked

at Bevvv. “But I think I’ll start with your friend here, anyway.”

“Was that really just a regular dog?” Bevvv asked. She hadn’t meant to; it had just popped out. Cat glared at her. Lira looked suddenly extra interested.

“Of course,” Lira said. “What else would he be?”

“I don’t know,” Bevvv said, wishing for the thousandth time that she could better control her tongue. “I just—I just didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Hmm. I see,” Lira said. “Do you like dogs?”

Bevvv shrugged. It seemed like an innocent enough question, so she answered it. “They’re okay. I like cats better, though.”

“Cats?” Lira asked, and Bevvv knew immediately that she’d already made a mistake. Maybe they didn’t even have cats here. Just dogs and giant moths and evil unicorns.

“Look,” Cat said, shooting Bevvv a stare that clearly said *Stop talking and let me handle this*. “We’re not spies. That’s what you want to know, right? Well, we’re not. Am I lying?”

“No,” Lira said, glancing at Calistine and Fred. “You’re not.”

“Then what were you doing in my woods?” Calistine asked.

“We told you!” Cat snapped. “We were trying not to get killed by the unicorns! Which you saw with your own

eyes, by the way. I don't know why you're trying so hard to make there be some other reason."

"All of those statements are also true," Lira verified.

"Why were you in those fields in the first place?" Calistine asked next. "Everyone knows that the unicorns have been driven north by the fires. Why would you risk crossing their territory?"

"I thought Lira was supposed to be asking the questions," Cat countered. "Maybe you should back off."

The way Cat and Calistine were glaring at each other, Bevvv half expected to see sparks shooting out from their eyes. "Please," Bevvv said hastily. "We don't intend you any harm. We just want to go on our way."

"Which way is your way?" Lira asked.

Bevvv looked helplessly at Cat.

"I'm asking you," Lira said, her eyes intense, and Bevvv felt a strange tugging in her head, like someone was pulling ever so gently at her brain.

"Stop that!" Bevvv said, putting a hand to her forehead. "And you can ask me all you want, but I don't know so I can't tell you. We don't have anything to do with you or your people or your dogs or your creepy moth creatures. We just want you to leave us alone."

Lira raised an eyebrow at "creepy moth creatures," letting Bevvv know she'd said another wrong thing. Lira looked at Fred and Calistine again before going on. "Those statements are also true," the young woman said.



“But there’s still something you’re hiding. I won’t feel comfortable clearing you for Calistine until you tell me what that is.”

“That’s too bad,” Cat said. “Because it’s none of your business. You have what you need to know: we’re not spies and we’re not trying to do anything bad to you. We’re not going to tell you anything else. Right, Bevvv?”

“Right,” Bevvv said. She bit the inside of her lip as hard as she could stand. If Cat wanted her to stay quiet, then she would stay quiet. She *would*.

Lira gave Cat a long, searching look. “You’re not just hiding something from me,” she said. “You’re—”

“Shut *up*,” Cat hissed at her.

Fred cleared his throat. “Somehow, I find it hard to believe these girls are all that much of a threat. I admit they are dressed strangely and are acting a bit odd, but . . . they are children, Cal. Maybe it’s a game. Whatever it is, I do not think they are here to hurt us. And they haven’t lied yet,” he added, inclining his head toward Lira. “Couldn’t we—”

“No,” Calistine said, placing her hands on her hips. “I don’t like it. Something is off about these two, and until we learn what it is, we cannot let them leave. And I must return to the forest. They have interrupted my work, and the spell is incomplete. I am not sure I can believe this timing to be a coincidence.”

Fred's face grew more serious. "Is the protection broken?"

"Nearly. The trees are struggling, and I—"

"Go," Fred said. "Leave the girls with me, and we can all talk further when you return."

Calistine nodded once and set off at a brisk jog toward the stone archway.

"Girls," Fred began, getting down on one knee to address them. "I know you want to be on your way. But for now—"

He broke off as a stream of frantic barking erupted nearby, and the dog from before came running back up the alley toward them.

"Billie!" Lira said. "What—?"

But they found out what before Lira could even finish her question, as the building behind them exploded into red and orange fire.

Bevy flew backward, the heat and force of the blaze knocking her off her feet. She saw Fred start to run toward her but then jerk back as a stream of flame shot down out of the sky between them. She tried to look for Cat, but there was smoke everywhere and it was hard to see.

"Cat!" she screamed. She crawled toward where she'd last seen the other girl. Everything seemed to be on fire.

Something knocked into her from the side, and she started to fight before realizing the something was

Lira. "This way!" Lira shouted, tugging Bevvv to her feet and then pushing her toward a rough dirt road leading deeper into the village. Bevvv had no idea whether she was supposed to trust any of these people, but right now all she wanted was to get away from the fire. After she found Cat, that was.

And then she saw her, with the dog, just a little farther ahead. Relieved, Bevvv let Lira push her onward.

The four of them staggered along until the heat and noise of the flames faded somewhat behind them. Lira darted forward to peer around an enormously thick tree trunk, then gestured for the rest of them to join her. Bevvv and Cat followed the dog to where Lira waited and then ran with her around to the other side of the tree.

A pale-green and caramel-brown giant moth thing was there, crouching low to the ground.

"Get on!" Lira said. She bounded forward, somehow scooping up the dog (who was big and gangly but apparently not very heavy) and clutching him awkwardly against her side as she settled herself on the back of the winged creature. Cat scrambled up behind her and then looked back at Bevvv.

"Come on!" Cat shouted, holding out her hand. It was like before, in Bevvv's own woods, when Cat held out her hand . . . but also not at all like that, because this time Cat was sitting on the back of a monster, squished

up against a truth-magic stranger and a very squirmy, out-of-place dog in the middle of a smoke-and-fire-filled fantasy-world tree village.

Bevy was finally properly afraid. This wasn't like one of her books. It was too real; she couldn't put the story down when things got too scary or complicated.

She didn't want to get on the back of that thing, but she couldn't stay in the burning village, and besides, there was no way she was letting Cat out of her sight. Cat was the only thing that made any sense at all to her right now. And Cat was her only way home.

Bevy ran forward, grabbed Cat's outstretched hand, and climbed awkwardly up behind her. As soon as she did so, the creature lurched upward, unfurling its giant wings and rising into the sky.

Bevy grabbed panicked handfuls of the moth thing's fur and then looked back to see what exactly they were running away from. The moth's wings nearly whacked her in the face as they went fully vertical on the upswing, but she could still catch glances past them when they flapped back down.

Behind them, circling above the burning ruins, three impossibly beautiful, vibrantly colored dragons continued to rain fire upon the village below.



## Chapter 7

They flew through the darkening sky, the wind a great rushing roar all around. Bevvv focused everything she had on trying to hold on. Trying to hold on and trying not to look down. She'd caught one glimpse of the faraway ground racing by beneath them in the diminishing light, and that was enough. Now she just hunched, staring straight ahead, gripping handfuls of soft, brown-and-green moth-monster fur. This close, the moth had a scent, noticeable but not unpleasant. It smelled a little like earth and a little like grass and somehow a little like sunlight.

What had happened to the others? She hoped they hadn't been burned in the fire. Fred had been trying to help her the last time she had seen him. She knew those people might not be their friends, but she still hoped they were all okay.

Her mind kept replaying the image of the dragons circling over the fiery ground. She couldn't believe she

had just seen real dragons. She loved dragons. Or . . . she had thought she did. They had been her favorite fantasy creature of all, based on her books. But these—these had been awful and terrifying. But also beautiful. Those *colors*. They weren't the green dragons that most often appeared in her stories. These dragons were like flying jewels. One had been a shining sapphire blue, another varying shades of amethyst pink and fiery red, and the third like a shimmery white opal with gold and silver accents.

Eventually—Bevvy had lost all track of how long they'd been flying—the moth slowed and descended. They slid to the ground in another set of woods, unfamiliar trees stretching long branches up and out in all directions. The trees were beautiful, too. But they weren't her trees, her woods. She was suddenly missing her own woods very much.

Bevvy walked over and placed a hand against the trunk of the nearest tree. Its deep-brown bark was rough, all ridges and grooves under her palm. *I hope you're a nice tree*, she thought at it. *I hope these are nice woods. We don't mean you any harm. I think we just need a safe place to hide for a little while.* She listened for the kind of almost-answer she'd gotten—or thought she'd gotten—from that earlier tree, but then suddenly Cat was there, asking what she was doing.

“Nothing,” Bevvv said quickly, dropping her hand.

“Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt in the fire, did you?”

“I’m fine. I mean, I didn’t get burned or anything. I’m just—I’m just—” She broke off, not knowing what word she wanted.

“I know,” Cat said. “It’s a lot. I mean, it’s a lot just to be here, just to even know that *here* exists, even without the unicorns and Calistine and the dragons and everything else.”

“Yeah.”

There was a quiet exclamation from Lira, and they both turned to watch Billie bouncing exuberantly through a pile of sticks and leaves while Lira tried, unsuccessfully, to get him to calm down.

“Why do they have dogs but no cats?” Bevvv asked.

“Why do they have unicorns that want to eat you?” Cat asked in return. “Nothing really makes sense here.”

“How long have you been coming to this place?” Bevvv asked, leaning back against the tree. Unfamiliar or not, it still felt comforting to lean on.

“Long enough to know better. We shouldn’t be here. We shouldn’t be in Lorelkey at all, and we definitely should not have gotten mixed up with all these other people. I’ve been trying everything not to come back here. And when I—when I used to come, I did my best to stay out of sight and get back home as quickly as possible.”

"But why?" Bevvv asked. "I mean—it's a whole other world! A magical one! Didn't you ever want to explore it?"

"No," Cat said firmly. "Not after I realized how dangerous it is. And my dad, he made me promise never to come back here unless I really had to."

"But why?" Bevvv asked again. "I don't understand. If I could come to another world whenever I wanted—"

"You'd realize how dangerous it is, too, and decide you never wanted to come again."

"It can't all be like this," Bevvv said.

"Yes, it can."

Bevvv fell silent, looking at the ground. She didn't like to argue, but she felt pretty certain that Cat was wrong. How could she know what this entire world was like when it sounded like she'd never really tried to find out? But Bevvv kept that thought to herself. Instead she asked, "Will your dad know you came here? Will he be worried?"

Cat took a moment before answering. "He'll probably guess. When I don't come home, I mean."

"Can he come here, too?"

"No. Not on his own." She sighed. "At least he'll know to be extra careful, once he realizes I had to run. I still wish I could get back and make sure he's all right, though."

"My parents aren't going to have any idea what happened to me," Bevvv said. Somehow, that thought was



suddenly more upsetting than the dragons or the unicorns or anything else. She hadn't really been letting herself think about her parents all this time. What it would be like for them when she didn't come home after school. As it got later and later and they didn't know where she was. They'd be so worried, and it was all her fault. And there was nothing she could do to fix it.

Her eyes started to burn, and she knew she was going to cry. It was ridiculous—she was on an *adventure*; she should not be crying! But the thought of her parents made her so sad, and so homesick, and she suddenly felt very lost and alone and scared. Her parents might not understand her most of the time, but she knew they loved her. *They'll find my backpack*, she thought. *They'll find it and know I came home but didn't come inside, and they won't know what happened.* She tried not to think about how they would feel, but she couldn't help it. And what about those scary people? Cat had said they would have no reason to hurt her parents, but she couldn't know that for sure. Her parents wouldn't know not to trust them. Her parents wouldn't know *anything*.

The tears started. They were quiet tears, but determined. She fought them, but they came anyway, sliding hot and stubborn down her cheeks.

"Hey," Cat said. "Hey, don't—don't do that. Everything's going to be okay." She reached out and awkwardly

patted Bevv's arm. Bevv didn't think Cat had done a lot of arm-patting in her life so far. After a couple of pats, she just stood there, staring at Bevv, watching her cry.

"Can you take us home yet?" Bevv asked between sniffles. She felt so ungrateful, asking to go home. Hadn't she just been telling Cat how much she'd love to be able to come here whenever she wanted?

"Not yet," Cat said. "Soon, okay? I promise."

"Okay," Bevv said. But she started crying harder.

Cat looked around, perhaps thinking of enlisting some assistance, but Lira was still trying to corral Billie, and besides, she was a stranger. Maybe even an enemy. Now Bevv felt bad that she was making Cat so uncomfortable. But she couldn't help it; it had been a very difficult and confusing day, and apparently she'd reached the end of her resiliency.

"No," Cat said, a little desperately. "Bevv, please."

"I'm sorry," Bevv said. "I can't— I'm trying—" But it was no use. She couldn't even get through a sentence. Finally she just gave up and sank to the ground, hiding her face in her hands. Maybe if she stopped fighting them, the tears would all come out and there wouldn't be any left. Not that she really had a choice at this point.

"Bevv," Cat said again. She sounded almost near tears herself, although that was probably unlikely. Cat