

CHAPTER ONE

The fight started at the Taco Bell where a lot of seniors and some juniors went for lunch. I'm a junior. I fit in there as well as anywhere. Which is not very well.

Page | 1 I'm new, in a school where almost no one is new. Not just "a" new kid. I was "the" new kid. Worse yet, I was the new kid who'd been seen with Senna Wales in his car on Sunday. Down by the lake. Lake Michigan.

It was stupid of me. I shouldn't have rubbed Christopher's nose in it. I didn't know for a fact that he'd be down at the lake. I didn't know for a fact that he'd seen us. But when you have an unusually warm, sunny Sunday right in the middle of a rainy late September, well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that kids will be hanging out down at the water.

I drove Senna down there. Top down on my big old Buick. Senna on the cracked, white leather seat beside me. Long blond hair whipping in the wind. Pale face with Julia Roberts lips. Eyes the color of rain clouds that had stayed for weeks and would return the next day.

I drove down there knowing that people would see. I don't know what the point was. Probably just some lame "look at me!" thing. I was with Senna. I wanted people to know it. I wanted them to say, "Whoa, that new guy David Levin is going with Senna."

Like that really meant something.

Maybe I just wanted Christopher to see. Christopher, who'd been with Senna ever since the last week of sophomore year. Christopher, the wit, the comedian. He'd left half my English Lit class peeing themselves from laughing so hard. At me, as I read aloud a poem I'd written as a class assignment.

Christopher is a funny guy. I mean, he has a real talent that way. You know a guy is funny when a week later you can still feel the little knives he stuck in you.

Senna wasn't the most popular girl in school. Not even the most beautiful. A lot of guys were scared of her. Truth. There was always something about her that seemed remote, cool. Like she lived behind a veil. Like she could see you but you couldn't quite see her, not really her, just a shadow.

So she scared some guys. But me? First time I saw her I knew that everything that had ever mattered to me just didn't anymore. I could feel the course of my future suddenly swerve. I was like a planet drawn into the gravity well of a black hole. No escape. No desire to escape.

Surrender, David.

I didn't walk the three blocks to the Taco Bell that Monday lunch, I drove. So did lots of kids, so they could roll down their windows and crank their stereos. Or sneak a smoke. Or sneak whatever.

My old Buick's stereo was just an AM radio. The FM was broken, and I only got three stations on the AM: some political talk station, some religious talk station, and a classic rock station.

Hard to tell which I wanted to listen to least.

The car's a beast, but I wanted a convertible, had to have one. I hate the feeling of being all cramped in. And this was all the convertible I could afford.

I drove the few blocks with the top down and elbow stuck out, driving with one hand, praying I wouldn't stall out at the stoplight and have to get out and push the old beast over to the curb.

By some miracle, there was a parking space. I slid in and jumped out. It didn't take long for Christopher to spot me.

People figure a guy who's class clown is probably a wimp. Maybe Christopher is. But he had a lot of friends. So when the door of the Taco Bell blew open and Christopher came out, bristling and scowling, he had three other guys helping him hold up that bad-ass act.

I didn't pretend not to see him. I stopped walking and waited. He came right up to me. I gave him credit for that. I have a rep as a fairly tough guy. Maybe I deserve it, I don't know.

Would he have confronted me without his crew along? Don't know. He looked mad enough to.

"We have a problem," he snapped.

"Do we?" I asked.

Then, *wham!*

I never saw the blow coming. It wasn't Christopher. It was one of his boys. Just loaded up on me and nailed me with a left hook that connected with my right cheek. I staggered. I went down on one knee. My knee crunched a soda cup someone had dropped. Pepsi or whatever soaked into my jeans.

Then, *wham!*

The punk's knee came up and caught me in the nose. It was like someone exploded a hand grenade in my face. It was stars and Tweety birds, just like some old Looney Tunes cartoon.

I heard a lot of shouting. A lot of it was Christopher. He was dragging the guy off me and yelling, "I didn't say hit him, you moron! Get out of here or I'll kick *your* butt."

Someone, or several someones, dragged and frog-walked me away around to the back of the Taco Bell. Back to the greasy Dumpster.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled, trying to stand up. I stood up for about three seconds before I tottered back into the wood fence that surrounded the Dumpster.

The rain decided this would be a good time to start pouring. So down it came. It was a blessing. It helped me straighten out my whirling, loopy head.

It was Christopher himself holding me upright. And beside him, this girl named April. She's Senna's half sister. Three months and a universe of difference separate them. Senna is cool, blond, and remote. April is all green eyes and auburn hair and big, mocking smiles. Be with Senna for a million years and you won't know her. Be with April ten minutes and it's like you grew up together.

Jalil was there. I knew Jalil from school. The poem I'd had to read that Christopher ridiculed? Jalil came up afterward and told me exactly, precisely *why* it sucked. But with no rancor and no ridicule, just because he knew.

Jalil doesn't believe the truth should piss anyone off. Or maybe he doesn't care if it does. He just cares that it's true. That's giving him the benefit of the doubt. Take away that grace and maybe he's just a condescending know-it-all.

He was one of the first kids I got to sort of know at school. Not friends, exactly. More like two off-center loners who recognized a bit of themselves in the other person. We were guys who nodded at each other. Once he stepped over and just sort of made his presence known when I was getting hassled by some black kids. Once I did the same for him when he was getting some grief from some white guys.

Jalil has this habit of not turning his head much, just moving his eyes, skeptical, appraising, not impressed by much. It takes him a while to talk and you might think he's slow. But you get to know him you realize he's slow to talk because his brain's already jumped ahead three spaces and he has to back up to deal with you.

Me, I'm not that smart. Not schoolbook smart, anyway. I don't have the focus for that. When I was a kid I had that attention deficit disorder thing. I was always jumping around, looking at all the wrong things, missing what I was supposed to get, and getting the things no one else thought were important.

Here's my entire childhood: "David, settle down!"

By the time I was thirteen I was a confirmed skateboard freak. Pants so big I could have had another couple of people in there with me. My board was, like, surgically attached to me. Could not be without it.

Here's my entire junior high existence: "Hey, kid, get offa there!"

Now I was older. A year away from college or a job or the military. Now I didn't know what I was.

Oh, wait. Yes, I did. I was a chump with a piece of raw burger where my nose used to be.

"What are you all staring at?" I raged.

"I can't speak for any of the others," Christopher said, "but personally, I'm looking at a guy who got sucker-punched and looks like he needs a new nose. I mean, damn, what are you going to breathe with?"

I felt my nose. Gingerly. It didn't hurt. Not yet, but it would.

"You let that punk do your fighting for you?" I demanded.

Christopher shook his head. "Uh-uh, don't lay that on me. What you and me have going on, you and me can deal with. That wasn't my idea, what happened back there."

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"What the hell is the matter with you two?" April demanded, but in a tone that was at least half amusement. "Let me guess. This had to involve Senna."

I glared at Christopher. He glared back at me. Some of my blood was on his shirt. He'd helped me stand up.

"We should move on," Jalil said. "Someone may have called the cops."

"I didn't do anything wrong," I said, intensifying my glare at Christopher.

"Who cares about you?" Jalil asked blandly. "I'm a young black male. The cops show up, they'll bust me on general principle. So come on, let's take this show down the road before I end up playing Rodney King over your problems."

That was how we all came together the first time. Me wobbling along holding my face, Christopher propping me up and showing no sign of guilt as he made jokes at my expense, April thinking the whole thing was amusing and touching and idiotic, and Jalil looking out for himself even while he helped me out.

That's where it all began: around a girl named Senna who wasn't even there.

CHAPTER TWO

"You look terrible," Senna said.

"Thanks. So do you." A lie.

It was later that night, after the Taco Bell Incident. We were in my car. The top was down. We were driving. Driving nowhere. Just driving.

We stopped at a light. She slid across the seat. Her bare knee pressed against my jeans. She reached with long, sensitive fingers to touch my swollen, smashed-plum nose.

Her eyes were glittery in the neon of city night. She looked at my messed-up face. She looked a little too long, maybe. Her expression was...I don't know what it was. It made me look away.

I guess she spaced, because suddenly her fingers were pressing too hard. Pain shot through my nose.

"Hey!"

"Sorry," she said. She pulled her fingers away. There was blood on her fingertips. She looked at it and did not wipe it away.

“It’s okay,” I said.

“You were fighting over me,” she said.

Green light. I pulled away slowly. Too slowly for the cab behind me. He gave me three seconds of horn.

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“I would have been. Fighting for you, I mean. If I’d given Christopher half a chance. But instead I decided to grab that punk’s knee and use it to beat the hell out of my face.”

She smiled, teeth blue and gold from a Blockbuster sign we were passing.

She slid closer still. “Christopher wouldn’t have fought you. He’s not that way.”

“You don’t have a very high opinion of him. Why’d you go out with him?”

“I liked him. I still like him. He’s smart and funny.”

That stung. “Yeah? So why aren’t you still seeing him? Why are you with me?”

“Don’t tell me where I am or who I’m with, David,” she said.

I shot a look at her. Red light. She considered me, her eyes roaming over my face. Not at the injured nose anymore, but at my own face. My chin, like she was judging it. My eyes, but without making contact.

Then she kissed me.

Green light. This time I took off a little faster.

We drove to a place where we could watch the moon come up over the lake. I parked the car.

I looked at her. I knew nothing about her. I knew her face, her eyes, her hair. Nothing.

What I knew about Senna Wales was really about me, not her. I knew that if only I could have her, if only she could somehow be with me, be a part of me, if only I could get up each day knowing she’d look at me, see me, smile at me, then she would be a wall to block out everything, a chasm between past and future.

But that was about me. That was all about the twists in my head. About her, I knew nothing.

“Sorry the radio sucks,” I apologized.

“I like it quiet.”

So we sat there, side by side in silence, and listened to the breeze and the not-so-distant sound of traffic and the mellow lapping of water at the shore.

I was trying to work up my nerve to kiss her again. But there was a wall around her. Untouchable.

“Something is going to happen,” she said, gazing out at the water.

For a moment I didn't know if she was done talking or not. And then I didn't know if I should say anything.

Page | 6 “What do you mean? What's going to happen?”

Slowly, very slowly, she shook her head. “I don't know. I only know something will happen. Soon. Something...terrible.”

I shivered. I don't shiver. I don't scare that easily. I shivered.

She turned and smiled at me. “Sometimes I know things before they happen. Sometimes I can see a scene in my head. Like watching a movie. And then it will happen. I think, did I make it happen? Or did I just see it somehow?”

I shrugged, helplessly confused. Not wanting to make her turn away, wanting to keep her eyes looking at me. “I don't know. Maybe a little of both.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. But she acted like I did.

“Yes. Maybe,” she said. Then, almost shyly, she asked the question that would enslave me. “David, when it happens...when it happens, David, will you save me?”

I don't know what I thought. That she was crazy. That I didn't care if she was crazy.

“Yes, Senna. I'll save you.”

She kissed me then, and then again. And each time she opened her lips to me I felt another part of myself drained away. And I didn't care.

CHAPTER THREE

I dreamed about Senna that night. I almost always remember my dreams, although I always pretend not to. There are some things that pop up in my dreams I don't want to remember. Stuff from a long-gone, faraway time, rising up to torture me.

But I dreamed of her that night. And that dream I wanted to keep forever.

She came to me. Right there in my room. She just appeared. Even before I'd opened my eyes. She wasn't smiling. She looked distant and distracted and wary.

But she came to stand beside my bed and took my hand in hers. I felt something like electricity, only, no, no, not electricity. Electricity would travel from her into me, and that's not what I felt.

I felt her hand and it was cold. Not death cold, steel cold. Emptiness cold. My own hand, hot, could not affect her. My heat could not raise her temperature by one degree, and that fact, that physical fact made it seem that my own hand was burning.

She looked at me but there were other eyes looking out through hers.

She scared me. I felt she could reach down and take my throat and squeeze and I would be helpless, helpless, batting at her with weak arms, unable to so much as bruise the liquid steel of her delicate body.

She waved her other hand, and all at once the walls of my room were gone, and we were outside in sunlight, in a field of wildflowers. All fake, I knew that right away. I knew it and it made my insides churn. An illusion she had created, that was it, a movie backdrop for the big scene.

She bent low then, low to me sprawled on the grass, and pressed her lips to mine. Her hair whipped my face, stinging. I flinched but she smiled and I smiled, too, a different smile as she kissed me, and now I was screaming in silent pain as the burning in my hand spread through my body.

I reached for her to pull her down, but I might have been tugging at a marble statue.

No control, David. You have no control. She said that. Or was it me? Or was it some voice from someone watching, unseen?

She laughed. David the Dragonslayer, she said. General David. David the Fool. Lord David. And more names, more titles, all mocking, but as she went on, more bitter, more angry. Like she was seeing a list reeled off, a list she liked less and less.

Then her eyes saw something that made her mouth form into a snarl.

Plans within plans, she said thoughtfully, wary again. Secrets within secrets.

But you will never betray me, will you, David?

No, no, no! I cried, as if someone were ripping the words from my throat.

You will always be mine, she said.

She kissed me again and pressed her body against mine, and now at last she was warm and real. And then she disappeared.

CHAPTER FOUR

It happened the next day. The terrible thing.

It was early. Gray dawn. More gray than dawn, really, because the clouds were hanging low over the lake. It was chilly, which is how I like it when I go for a run.

I run maybe three times a week. I'm no athlete; it's just that sometimes I'll wake up way too early and be full of this dangerous energy. The kind of feeling that makes you go looking for trouble. Maybe it was some hangover from my dream. Maybe I just hadn't slept well.

All I know is I woke up tingling, teeth grinding, eyes way too clear and alert. So I got up and ran.

I rolled out of bed and pulled on a pair of gray shorts, a faded Radiohead T-shirt, and a sweatshirt with the arms cut short. I dug in my drawer for clean socks and laced up my shoes.

I crept down the stairs past my mom's room. Her door was partly open. A man's leg was sticking out from beneath crumpled sheets. I looked away.

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We have a house in a kind of old neighborhood. It's a nice house, with a standard lawn and a fence around the backyard. The street is quiet. It's eight, nine blocks to the lake and downhill all the way.

I headed toward the lake. No warm-up. I wasn't planning a long run. Through the still-sleeping downtown, past the Breugger's and the Barnes and Noble and the health food store.

I listened to the sound of my shoes hitting sidewalk. I listened to the sound of my own breathing, calm and steady for the first few blocks, getting a little harsher after that. I had to breathe through my mouth. My nose hurt less that way.

Down to Sheridan, still mostly devoid of traffic. I caught a red light, shot a look each way, and ran across. There's park all along the lake. Grass and big trees and winding paths for runners and bikers. People take their dogs there. Kids play there. At this hour of the morning, though, there were just a few runners spaced far apart on the crushed shell path.

There's an L-shaped pier of concrete blocks. It shelters the powerboat launching ramp. I saw someone sitting out there on the end. Past the railing, perched on a rough, white concrete boulder. I knew right away it was her.

Senna sat gazing out at the mist-shrouded lake, hands pressed down on the rock, legs drawn up to her chin, a little girl. She was wearing a jean jacket a couple of sizes too big. She looked so small. Weak. Not the creature from my dream.

My steady steps faltered. I heard the different rhythm as my feet slowed, then sped up, then slowed again.

I should have wanted to go to her. But I didn't. I should have felt lucky. Lucky to see her alone on a morning when I expected to be alone with myself.

But that's not what I felt.

Dread.

That's what I felt. Dread.

There was a voice in my head, a lunatic voice screaming, *Run away! Run away!* A panicky voice.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked myself, wanting to hear my own, true voice. "Getting jumpy? That knee in the face must have rattled your brain, David."

I headed toward Senna, toward the start of the pier. But my feet were listening to that other voice, that faint but insistent madman in my brain. My feet were out of rhythm, they missed steps, they dragged, they didn't want to go any closer.

And then I saw the others. And they saw me, and I swear the chill breeze became a frozen wind that went right through my skin and iced my insides.

Jalil was just pulling up in his car. I saw him clearly. He saw me. I guess we were both trying to look normal, but we both knew there was nothing normal here.

Christopher was walking from the other direction. He looked worried and harassed. Like a guy who's late for an appointment he doesn't want to make.

April was sitting on a bench, looking out at Senna. I would be next to her in a dozen steps. I stopped.

"Hi, April," I said, trying to sound normal.

She turned her startling green eyes on me. "What does it mean, David?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

I heard a car door close. Jalil joined us. He said nothing. He looked at me. He looked at April. Only his eyes moved. Then, as if he didn't want to look, as if he didn't want to have to turn his head, he looked at Senna. At Senna's profile, because she did not turn to look at us.

"Excuse me, but does anyone else have a case of the unholy creeps?" Christopher asked. Christopher's a big guy, bigger than me. Blond. Looks like a surfer dude. His tan was looking a little green.

He had walked up and stopped, like me, a few feet away from April.

"I was blaming it on brain damage," I said, pointing at my bandaged nose.

"My brain's fine," Jalil said. "It's my stomach telling me to get the hell out of here."

"Too weird," Christopher said. "We're all here? *She's* out there? What is this?"

"I heard her leave really early this morning," April said. "We share a wall between our rooms. She...and then, I felt like I had to follow her." She shrugged.

"What is this?" Christopher demanded in a loud voice. Deliberately loud. Maybe loud enough for Senna to hear if she was listening.

"Ask *her*," April said.

Slowly Senna climbed to her feet. She turned and looked at us. She was maybe a hundred feet away.

I could see confusion on her face.

Her mouth formed the word “no.”

And then the entire universe ripped apart.

CHAPTER FIVE

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It was like a fade. Like on a TV show when they fade from one picture to another. One minute you're seeing one picture, then slowly another picture emerges beneath the first.

Only this was not TV. And this was happening in three dimensions.

The picture had sight, sound, smell. It had the breeze that smelled of damp. It had the soft sounds of water sighing against the shore. It had the feel of chill, and of soft grass under my soles, and of sweat cooling on my body. It had low, heavy clouds that seemed to squeeze the air out of my lungs.

It had Senna, alone, at the end of the pier, and the memory of her lips on mine.

In one sickening moment all that began to shimmer, as if it had all been a reflection in a bowl of water and someone had tapped the bowl. It shimmered and sent a way of fear-sickness through me.

The clouds twisted as if a tornado were forming. The pier seemed almost to curl, like a pig's tail. I looked at Jalil. His face was turning inside out. Inside out! I could see the back of his eyes, the gray wrinkled brain, the heaving, gasping trachea in his throat.

I held my hands up instinctively, blocking that vision, but my own hands were twisted and deformed. The skin was flayed and spread out, as if I'd been skinned. I could see blood-soaked muscles beneath, the white bones. I saw the arteries pumping blood up through my wrists.

I cried out. But my moaning voice came from somewhere outside of myself and rang distant and false in my ears.

The ground opened, opened until I could see buried rocks pushing up beneath me. But I didn't fall. The sky split apart, a blue-gray curtain drawn back to reveal black space and a sun burning too close. The clouds boiled madly.

I've gone insane, I cried, I but the thought itself was nothing but dancing electrical charges, sparks between neurons that I could see behind my eyes.

And in all this twisted chaos, all this hallucinatory madness, I still Senna, whole, complete, herself.

The gray, choppy surface of the lake swelled up, rising higher and higher, as if it would crash down on us in a tidal wave. It rose, and as it did, the chop roughened, lengthened, formed itself into a mountain of shaggy gray fur.

The mountain pulled up and back, bringing more into view. Two ears, a brow, eyes! Brown and yellow eyes the size of backyard kiddie pools. Intelligent, cold, gleeful, malicious.

Up rose the snout of the wolf's head. Up behind Senna, who still looked at me, right at me.

Up it came and opened wide, with glittering teeth that may have been six feet long.

The wolf's mouth opened wide and lunged.

Page | 11 Only then did Senna turn away from me and face the wolf. She held her thin arms up in a pathetic gesture of resistance, but the wolf snatched her up in one swift bite.

It closed its jaws around her, but gently, holding her helpless, limp, unresisting now.

"Senna!" I shouted. "Senna!" And now the voice was coming from inside me, and it sounded real and raw and impotent.

The ground became the ground again. My hand was skin over muscle over bone. Jalil's face was a face twisted by shock, but a human face.

It was ending.

It was ending with the wolf, the monstrous wolf, sinking slowly back into the water. In a few seconds it would be gone.

I had been frozen in place, but now my legs moved. Shaking, wobbling, my stomach twisted, I ran after her. Down to the pier.

"David! Don't do it!" Jalil yelled.

It was Christopher who answered him. "Like hell," he said. "That thing's got her!"

Then Christopher was running, too. And April behind him, and Jalil behind her. We were all four running, our footsteps pounding.

The closer we came to the wolf, the more the universe around us became twisted and distorted again. The pier itself suddenly swooped uphill, soft and twisted as a piece of taffy. But we ran.

Courage? Panic? Rage? Some stupid, animal instinct?

I don't know. I don't know why we ran after that monster from another world.

We ran as it turned away. We ran, the twisted universe receding with us, racing the wave of distortion.

Suddenly, the sound of feet on damp concrete stopped. There was nothing beneath my feet. I leaped!

CHAPTER SIX

I leaped and was frozen.

Still, utterly still, unable to move, unable to do more than slowly, slowly aim my eyes. I shifted my slow-motion gaze from nothing to nothing to nothing more.

I was buried in cotton, cloud, whiteness all around me. It didn't touch me. Nothing touched me.

I floated, naked. Exposed.

Watched?

Yes, maybe. I felt something. Yes, watched.

"Play your story for me, David. Show me your secrets."

I was in summer camp. I didn't want to go to summer camp. My parents made me. Good for me, you see. But I knew things were wrong at home, I knew there was trouble between my parents; I had felt the hard, sure edges of my life beginning to crumble.

I said, *"But I don't want to go."*

"Once you get there, you'll like it."

Awake, pretending to be asleep in my bunk. Listening to the snores and farts and crying and sleep-mumbling of a dozen kids around me.

Pretending not to hear Donny's footsteps. White nylon camp windbreaker bright in reflected moonlight, moving confidently, arrogantly. He had the power. The counselor. We were just kids.

Why was he doing it? Why didn't he just go away?

He stopped beside the same cot as before. It was wrong, what he was doing. It was bad. Why didn't the kid cry out? Why didn't he yell?

Save him, David. Don't pretend to sleep, don't inch the blanket higher around your head. Don't press your hands over your ears. Don't...

"Will you save me, David?"

Later, older, last year. Last year?

Walking out of the gym, sweaty from some after-school one-on-one. Walking past the coach's office. It was none of my business.

A loud, berating voice.

"What's the matter with you!"

I slow my walk and look through the glass door. Some kid from the junior varsity football team, in jersey and shoulder pads, sitting there, head hung.

"You disgust me, you make me sick, your attitude out there on the field. You make me want to throw up. You might as well be a little girl. Are you a man, or are you some kind of faggot?"

I open the door. Some part of me, some part of my brain has taken over my body in a flash, no thought, no hesitation. The switch has been thrown. The rage adrenaline is flooding my arms and legs, stiff with repressed energy.

The kid is crying. Crying in his cot.

“Leave him alone.”

“What are you doing in here, Levin? Get the hell out of my office!”

“I can take care of myself,” the kid yells, nearly hysterical, face streaked with mud and tears, turning his anger on me.

I’m two feet away from the coach. He’s my size. Older, though, fat in the middle, slow.

“Leave the kid alone.”

“I ought to kick your ass!” the coach roars.

“Screw you! Screw you!” the kid yells, at me. *“You think you’re so tough.”*

I walk away.

“Ah,” a voice says. *“I see.”*

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke in agony.

Pain in every muscle fiber, every joint. I tried to move but something was wrong. My arms were pinned, my legs seemed to be dangling, my chest was stretched, my spine...

My eyes snapped open.

I couldn’t make sense of what I saw. It was like that moment when you wake from a dream and look around your room, unable to figure out where you are or what things mean.

I was hanging by my arms. My back was against a stone wall. Stones as big as cars. Chains were attached to my wrists with shackles. The chains and shackles could have held King Kong.

A dream! Had to be. Wake up!

Come on, David, wake up!

I slammed my head back against wet, mildewed stone. The pain was real. I closed my eyes tight and opened them again.

I was still hanging by my wrists. My clothes were shredded. I could feel my partly bare butt scraping against the stone. My heels kicked back and hit rock.

I was hanging like a piece of meat, dangling stretched, helpless.

“Hey! Is anyone there?” I yelled. Not a brilliant thing to say. But what do you say when you wake up to find yourself hanging against a wall?

“We’re all here,” a harsh, strained voice said.

“April?” I pushed my head out and twisted it to look around my own armpits.

She was hanging about ten feet away on the same wall. I could see her wrists. They were scraped raw. Blood had run down her arm and dried. We’d been hanging for a while. I was cold. Very cold.

“Yes, it’s me,” she said. Her voice came out in ragged gasps. I guess mine did, too.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“I don’t really know, David,” she said with surprising gentleness, despite her strained breathing. She even managed just a hint of mockery. “I don’t think I’m familiar with this place. But I can tell you one thing. Don’t look down.”

I looked down. Down was a long, long way. My running shoes were hundreds of feet above jumbled, jagged rocks that formed a shoreline. If I fell, I’d have plenty of time to scream before I was sliced and smashed.

I looked up. This was harder to do, but more reassuring. There was an end to the wall. A parapet, I guess you’d have to call it. The wall rose only six or eight feet above my head, topped by tall, stone teeth. My chains went up between two of the teeth.

“Are you okay?” I asked April.

“I’m alive,” she said. “I think Jalil’s breathing, but he’s still unconscious. I can’t see Christopher very well. He’s on the other side of you.”

I twisted my head to the left and saw Christopher. He must have just awakened. He was looking around, wild-eyed, till he spotted me.

“Well, this isn’t good,” Christopher said. “Where are we?”

I sighed. Then, a thought. “Senna? Is she here?”

“No,” April said. “At least not that I can see. Maybe on the far side of Jalil. I can’t tell.”

“Jalil!” I yelled. “Jalil, wake up!”

“What? What?” he said. “Oh, man!”

“Got that right,” Christopher muttered.

“Jalil, is anyone hanging to your right?” I asked.

“No. No one else.”

“This is one bitch of a dream,” Christopher said.

“Not a dream,” Jalil said. “Doesn’t feel right for a dream.”

“Of course it’s a dream,” Christopher said scornfully. “What, we’re actually hanging by our wrists on some castle wall? I don’t think so.”

“Maybe he’s right,” I said to April. “Maybe I’m dreaming.”

“Then dream me up a parka. It’s cold,” April said.

I looked away from her and out across the landscape. It was a gray day, just like it had been. But nothing else was the same.

The castle, if that’s what it was, seemed to be at the end of an unbelievably steep chasm. Rugged, bare, black stone walls rose sheer on both sides. In the bottom of this canyon was a lake, or maybe an inlet. One way or the other, there was dark, glass-smooth water. It reflected the harsh cliffs so that they seemed to go down forever.

It was a picture in shades of gray, from near black to near white, but with never a splash of color.

Until a dot of red appeared. I squinted and focused. Down along the left-side cliff wall, maybe a half mile away, there was a boat. It was bow-on to us, so I couldn’t see how big it was. But it was flashing out a sail as it rounded a point of land. A square sail with some sort of logo or symbol in red.

Were there people on that boat? I couldn’t see that far.

“There’s a boat,” I said.

“Maybe they’ll help us,” Christopher said. “I can’t take this, man. My arms...my wrists are all bloody. I think maybe one of my shoulders is dislocated.”

“I have Advil in my backpack,” April said. “I think I still have it on. But it’s going to be hard to get anything out.”

I glanced over. She was wearing a backpack. It pushed her out from the wall. It must have been painful.

This was ridiculous. We were hanging by our wrists! Where was the lake? Where was the city? There’s no castle in the Chicago area. Where were we?

I took a couple of deep breaths, fighting down the urge to start yelling. If I started acting scared I’d start being even more scared. I was scared plenty. I was good and scared.

But being scared was one thing. That was normal. *How* you acted once you were scared—that’s what mattered.

My dad told me that. He has two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star that prove he has a right to talk about fear.

“Has to be a nightmare,” Christopher grunted, trying to reassure himself. “Has to be. The whole thing. Senna, the wolf, this, all of it.”

“I don’t think so,” Jalil said. “It’s going on too long. It doesn’t have the *feel* of a dream. It’s bizarre, but I think it’s real. I push my legs back, my body goes away from the wall: cause and effect. In dreams you lose normal cause and effect. You jump around in time. This is reality.”

“Dammit, someone help us! Help! Help!” Christopher yelled. “Help us! Help!” I guess he was tired of hearing Jalil analyze things.

I kept my attention on the boat. It was something to focus on. Something better than focusing on pain and fear.

I like to sail. My dad had a forty-two-footer, back in Annapolis, where we used to live. A wooden boat, practically an antique. When I was younger we’d take it out on the bay on Saturdays. Him and my mom and me.

Then my dad retired from the navy and we ended up in Chicago. We brought the boat with us, but since then my folks got divorced. My dad remarried a woman with her own kids. So I don’t see my dad as much. Anyway, you can’t compare sailing on Lake Michigan with sailing on the Chesapeake Bay.

The boat with the red-emblazoned sail was turning slowly as the wind caught the canvas. I could see that it was bigger than I’d expected. Longer. Riding low in the water.

Oars? Were those oars I saw? And...yes, there were figures moving about on deck. I caught faint suggestions of blond hair, flashes of polished metal.

Then I saw the figurehead. The graceful prow that rose high till it ended in an ornate carving of a dragon’s head.

I barked out a laugh. “No way.”

But it was true. There was no mistaking the unique lines, the very sight of which had once sent brave men running.

“It’s a longboat,” I said.

“Yeah, really long, who gives a rat’s ass how long it is?” Christopher demanded. “Help! Help!”

“No. it’s a *longboat*,” I said, not believing my own words. “A Viking longboat.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The fitful breeze was in our faces, and the longboat swiftly closed the distance to the castle.

It was easy to see the rows of shields arrayed along the sides, each painted with the identical red emblem: a snake, mouth open, fangs out, dripping venom onto an agonized, upturned face. It was the same emblem on the big, rectangular sail.

“Nice logo,” Christopher said darkly. “That’s right up there with the Pillsbury Doughboy and Betty Crocker. Those boys need a new sponsor.”

On deck, some sitting at oars, others standing around in conversation, were forty, maybe fifty men. They were big men, most of them. Big in size and in body language. Most were bearded. Not trimmed, Lincoln Park yuppie beards, but big, bristling, red or gold or brown beards, glistening with grease. Their hair was long and wild.

They wore a motley array of garments: baggy trousers, long chain-mail shirts, and what might have been bearskins and goatskins draped down from their massive shoulders and cinched at the waist with wide leather belts. Some had crude high-top sandals laced over rag socks. Others had knee-high, buff leather boots.

At their sides most wore long, heavy swords. Others carried crude axes, some like tomahawks, others with handles maybe four feet long.

From time to time a few would look up at us, hanging a hundred feet or so above them. They pointed and guffawed loudly. But the laughter died quickly, followed by a cautious hush.

They were burly, rough-looking men. Fighters. Killers. But they were nervous. Afraid.

As they came within a few dozen yards of the rocks below, they struck the sail. They worked their oars till someone yelled a signal, at which point all the oars rose clear of the water. The helmsman leaned into the one long steering oar and guided the craft into a slow turn that brought the longboat kissing up against what I could now see was a dock.

Fore and aft, the men holding ropes jumped ashore and tied the ship off. But though they looked as if they’d done this many times before, there were frequent nervous glances up at the castle.

Baaa! Baaaa!

I heard the bleating of sheep. Three of the animals were being dragged up from the hold of the longboat. They were manhandled over the side onto the rock slab shore.

Half a dozen of the Norsemen jumped out after the sheep and wrestled the first one up onto a flat obsidian stone.

An altar, I realized.

I glanced at April. She was staring down, transfixed. Her hair kept blowing in her face. Even Christopher was silent.

“You may not want to see this,” Jalil warned in a quiet voice. Talking to April? To me?

An old Norseman, big but stooped with age, climbed painfully out of the ship. No one offered him help. He looked like the kind of man who’d chop off a hand offered in help. His beard was mostly gray, but you could still tell that it had once been blond. He was mostly bald, and even from high above I could see a scar from an old wound that must have opened his skull.

The old man walked, with the cautious gait of arthritis, over to the sheep. The first sheep was bleating and squirming, stretched out on its back on the stone.

The knife flashed, coming up with surprising swiftness from the old man's belt. Down it arced, slicing the sheep's throat, silencing its stuttering cries.

"No!" April cried, but softly.

One after the other, the two remaining sheep met the same fate. Blood ran from the edges of the altar.

There was no ceremony. Simple slaughter, carried out hurriedly, nervously.

The old Norseman glanced up at the castle, as if he were looking at us. But I knew, as a chill of premonition tingled from my tailbone up to my neck, that it was not us he saw.

I craned my head back, looking upward. I could see nothing there. But I heard the deep, rasping breathing of some huge creature. A slow, long inhalation, followed by a blast of reeking, carnivore breath.

The wolf.

The Norsemen turned and boarded their ship. The oars were extended and the longboat backed swiftly away.

From above us, a hard, unnatural, animal growling said, "Pull them up. Take them to my father."

Suddenly I felt a sharp, excruciating jerk that made my chest and shoulders scream. My back and butt were scraping up along the stone wall. Jerk and agony, jerk and agony.

I was afraid, but mad, too. I tried to prepare myself for whatever might be happening, but pain overwhelmed me. Tears came to my eyes.

Rough hands grabbed me, hauling me over the parapet. They threw me down onto stone. I cried out. My kneecaps hit hard. I was on all fours. The second time in as many days.

April landed before me, flung down just as roughly.

I tried to climb to my feet, but pushing myself up, my arms gave way. They were weak, limp. My hands were numb.

A foot, iron-booted, was before me. A hand reached and grabbed my arm. A hand so big it closed all the way around my biceps.

A hand with only three fingers, each as thick as a salami.

I jerked my face upward, still fighting the pain, trying to shut off the flow of tears. I looked up into a face that had never been human.

"Who are you? What's happening?" I heard Christopher ask.

Instantly came the thud of a short, hard punch. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Christopher crumple.

“Silence!” a brutish voice yelled. Then, more quietly, but with seething malice, “Be silent while you can. You will speak soon. You will say all your words and pray for more words to offer when you come before Great Loki.”

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They unlocked our manacles and tossed the heavy chains aside. They stood us up, supporting us as they trotted us along the stone walkway. And now I could see them clearly. They were maybe eight feet tall and almost as broad. They looked as if they'd been chiseled out of living rock, with limbs so thick they could have been live oak trees.

They had three fingers on each hand and clanking iron boots. They wore simple tunics, a rectangle of fabric with a hole for the head, a thick belt, a sword, and a knife.

Their heads were low, forward-thrust. Like rhinos without the horn. From the back they looked headless.

Someone shoved me in line behind Jalil.

“Jalil,” I whispered. “Lopi. What's Lopi?”

He spared a quick, wondering glance for me. I swear he would have smiled if he wasn't grimacing from the pain.

“Loki,” he corrected. “The Norse god of destruction.”

CHAPTER NINE

There was only one thing keeping all four of us from falling apart: I don't think any of us thought it was real. How could we? It was completely impossible!

Life makes sense, mostly. Maybe not people's behavior, but for the most part, one thing follows from another. Cause and effect. But what was the cause here? What was the effect?

It had to be a nightmare. A hallucination. Something. Anything but reality.

But it did feel real. They marched us along a wide battlement. The walls of the castle must have been twenty feet thick. On our left, the tall, daggerlike teeth of the crenellated walls. In the gaps between the sharp merlons we could see the water, the valley. On our right we looked down on sharply pitched tile roofs. As we marched, the roofs gave way to reveal a large courtyard. Our guards slowed us down a little at that point so we could get a good look.

The courtyard was only vaguely rectangular. It was maybe two-thirds of a football field in size.

In the courtyard were half a dozen more like our lumpish guards. Tall, wide, thick, slow-moving creatures who seemed to be drunk and working on getting drunker. They sat against a wall on the ground and on low stone benches. Most held crude wooden bowls, like something your mom would make salad in.

They dipped the bowls into a cut-down keg and drew out something with a head on it. Then they threw back their rhino heads and quaffed it down.

Christopher gave me a look. His lip was split from the guard's punch. He looked as bad as me now. "It's a freak show kegger," he whispered, winking to show he hadn't been totally intimidated.

There were humans in the courtyard, too. Over wool trousers they wore tunics with the snake and face emblem. They had helmets the color of old bathroom faucets. The helmets came down to below the ear and had a nose guard. Nothing elaborate.

These men were practicing sword fighting. The *clang, clang* of steel carried up to us. A hard, one-armed man swaggered around among them, slapping whoever annoyed him with the flat of his own sword, yelling, berating.

But that's not what our guards wanted us to see. What they wanted us to see was a man, black-haired, smooth-faced, with deep-set eyes. Not a Viking. He was dressed in rags, but rags that had once been an elaborate costume. He was being dragged across the courtyard toward a hole. The hole was six feet across. A pair of the big rhino heads dragged the prisoner to the edge of this pit and bent him forward so he could look down into it.

I guess this was supposed to scare the prisoner. And maybe it did. But he wasn't giving anything to the guards. Even as they were yanking him back and forth, teasing him, hoping for a few good screams, the man delivered a speech in high, fluty tones.

"I came in peace from my lord Amon-Ra as an emissary to Wise Odin. Hear me all, and witness! I came in peace carrying the words of Ra!"

The guards didn't much like this show of spirit. They dragged the man back from the pit and took turns slamming pile-driver fists into his face. Only then did they throw the dark-haired man into the pit.

The guards laughed and slapped one another on the back. Then they stood around the lip of the hole looking down, laughing and pointing. Bloodthirsty fans at a prizefight.

I don't know what was in the pit. But the man who had been brave was now screaming. And each scream brought fresh hilarity from the brutes.

Our own guards shoved us to get us moving again. They'd shown us what they wanted us to see. Message delivered.

Through a dark arched doorway. Then down a winding stone staircase. Down and down forever. Finally we reached a series of dank, torchlit tunnels. It took a while for me to notice the torches. They were tarred sticks jammed into holders mounted in the walls. The holders were skulls.

We marched past a series of archways that opened into a vast kitchen. Dozens of filthy, grease-spattered men and women turned spits above roaring fires. The spits were long enough to

impale four or five sheep and pigs. The smell of roasting meat reminded me of how hungry I was.

I should have had breakfast. Maybe lunch by now. Yes, I was hungry enough that I should have been getting lunch. Maybe back at the same Taco Bell. Maybe just a Coke and a premade sandwich from the machines outside the school cafeteria.

I guess your mind looks for something normal to grab on to when you're scared enough. Familiar hunger. Familiar memories.

What was I doing here? I raged silently. What was happening?

We left the kitchen behind, with its charred meat and boiling black pots. Gradually we left the smell behind, too. Then it was up, up, up a long stairway. Three times as high as the one we'd taken down. We were going up into some sort of tower that was higher than the walls.

What was it they called them? I strained my memory. Hadn't I read *Ivanhoe*? Sure. Oh, no, just the Cliff Notes. Yeah, and a B minus on the paper, too.

A "keep." Yeah, that was the word. The big tower, the castle within a castle, the holdout. That must be where we were headed. I'd seen it rising impossibly high above the courtyard. But I'd been paying attention to the courtyard.

At the top of the stairs, just as my thigh muscles were screaming, we found ourselves in a hallway. We emerged suddenly up through one of several doors.

Here the décor improved. The ceiling arched high overhead, maybe ten stories. Huge, intricately carved timbers supported the roof. Dim tapestries hung on the walls. Along the left wall it looked as if something had disarranged the tapestries. A dozen pinched, dirty, anxious-looking women were using long-handled hooks to straighten them again.

The floor was paved in lustrous black flagstones. They echoed flatly with every footstep of our monstrous guards. Our own footsteps were slight, light, insignificant.

I saw an immense doorway ahead. It stood open, with flickering yellow light coming from beyond. And then a smell reached my nostrils. One of the guards muttered something under his breath. He jerked me rudely aside to walk around what looked like a pile of dog crap. But a pile that came up to my knees.

More of the anxious, starved-looking women in pinafores and cloth caps came rushing with shovels and mops in hand.

Suddenly we were in a room so big you could have lost a cathedral in it. It could have been a hangar for 747's. it was more enclosed space than I had ever experienced. I felt like a bug.

Across the room, a football field away, was a massive throne. Someone had started with a slab of stone the size of my house and then chiseled it down into a throne. In one wall, high up, were narrow arched windows that glowed dully with gray light.

A man sat on the throne, with a wolf pacing the floor before him.

Only there was something wrong. Either I was confused about size and distance, or the man and the wolf were each impossibly large.

The guards lowered their already low-slung heads and formed into two more or less straight lines with us between them.

We marched at a fast trot. My legs were cramped from all the climbing. My hands had gone from numb to painful. But I could keep up.

Christopher tripped on a flagstone. He was probably still woozy from the monster's punch. He stumbled. A guard violently yanked him to his feet.

Closer and closer we came, and still the man and the wolf refused to retreat to normal size. The man sat in his throne, gripping the arms, slumped down with his chin on his chest. He was dressed much as the Norsemen had been, but in a version more like a Ralph Lauren designer-label Viking outfit. His boots were knee-high, shining supple leather trimmed in black fur. His trousers were deep green. The long, belted shirt was golden chain mail. Gathered across his collarbones with a golden chain was a fur from some huge white beast.

His hair was blond, long, and combed. His face was thin, cruel but not stupid. He was handsome in a way. Handsome like a poisonous snake can be beautiful. But he was nervous, too. Drumming his fingers on stone. Rocking just slightly back and forth. Yeah, nervous. Afraid despite his power.

Or maybe I was putting my own feelings off on him. Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see.

I could feel fear bubbling up inside me. But I had it under control. I was not going to show anything. I arranged my face into a rigid mask. Indifference. That's all I would show.

Give him nothing, I told myself. Show no fear and he'll at least have respect for you. Show fear and you'll feel the fear even worse. And then it might get away, might boil up out of control.

I gritted my teeth hard. I clenched my fists. *You don't scare me, I said silently. You don't scare me. Not me.*

The wolf paced back and forth. It was a huge gray beast the size of an elephant, but it moved with the easy grace that comes from tremendous strength. It watched us with yellow eyes that burned with more than canine intelligence. The same eyes that had gloated as it snatched Senna from the end of the pier.

The wolf was so big he made the ten-foot-tall man on the throne seem small. And yet despite the teeth the wolf showed us, it was the man who held my attention.

He had not looked at us yet. Had not spoken. He didn't need to. I could feel his power.

When I was little, my dad took me aboard his ship when it came in. it was an assault carrier. Mostly helicopters, but with a few Harriers, too. You know, jump jets. He showed me around the

big belowdecks hangar where they keep the planes. I remember standing beneath a big, muscular Harrier, already loaded up with its complement of weaponry.

It's funny about warplanes. You could live your whole life in a cave and never even see a Piper Cub, but when you see a warplane for the first time, you know it's deadly. You can feel the power and the danger.

That was my first impression of Loki.

I had never seen a god before. Never known of such a creature, never suspected one existed, but I felt the power and the danger. I understood what I was seeing.

Then he looked at us. And I knew I was wrong. I understood nothing.

This creature was not simply dangerous. He was evil.

I felt my stomach lurch. I felt my knees buckle. To my amazement, I sank slowly to my knees. The four of us knelt in slow motion, knees hitting flagstones.

Loki looked at us with amused contempt. He looked as if he might burst out laughing. He looked as if he might have us dragged away to the pit in the courtyard. He looked as if he might step down off his throne and rip us apart with his bare hands like four rag dolls.

"Welcome," Loki said in a voice that echoed around the vast hall. "Welcome to Everworld."

CHAPTER TEN

I was shaking. I'd always hoped, assumed, believed I was brave, but I was shaking. I glanced left and saw April. She was crying. I couldn't see Christopher, but I did see Jalil. His eyes were narrowed, his lips pressed tight. Scared but not panicky.

I shook myself, trying to get a grip on the wild images of terror my own imagination had called up to torture me.

"This is my humble home," Loki said, waving a ham-sized hand around casually. "You've already met Fenrir, my son."

He nodded in the direction of the wolf, who stood poised, ready, bristling with barely contained energy.

I should have wondered how in hell he had a son who was a wolf, but there was a long list of things to wonder about.

"Eat? Drink?" Loki asked, mocking.

I shook my head. No. I had a horrible moment of thinking Christopher might make some smart remark. But no one said anything.

Loki leaned forward, bringing his face closer to us. His lips actually drew back in a snarl that would have been appropriate for his son. “Good. Then, if we have the necessary pleasantries out of the way, let me ask you: WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THE WITCH?”

The blast of sound knocked me back. It was a hammer! I hit my head hard on the floor. My ears rang. The wind of his voice, the heat of his rage was like opening a furnace door.

Then I felt more than that. Suddenly Loki was no ten-foot man, but a towering monster that dwarfed the wolf Fenrir, reducing his foul-breathed son to Chihuahua size.

He reached down and grabbed me. Fay Wray in King Kong’s grip. He held me, helpless, up to his gnashing mouth.

But this time his voice was gentle and sinister. “What have you done with my witch?”

He could have swallowed me. He could have bitten my head off and chewed my skull. He was huge; I was helpless. I shook. Uncontrollably. Just shook as if I were coming apart.

“Speak up, mortal,” Loki said, suddenly all sympathy and reasonableness. “I realize you’ve had a difficult day. It can’t be very pleasant hanging from my wall. But I had to know whether you were mortal or some more significant foe in disguise. Only a mortal could have allowed himself to be hung in chains like a criminal, so now I know *what* you are. Do you hear me? Are you paying attention?”

I nodded, but even that familiar gesture was jerky with trembling.

“Good, good,” Loki said. He reached over and set me back down alongside my shocked companions. I noticed Jalil’s eyes glance down at my shorts. They were wet.

Loki shrank back to his normal ten-foot dimension. “Now that I have your attention, tell me: Where is my witch? What have you done with her? Speak up.”

“I... I... I don’t know any witch...” I stammered. I cringed. I couldn’t help it. I cringed on my knees before him.

“Oh, but you must,” Loki said, still reasonable, suave. “You came through the barrier with her. I went to incredible trouble to allow Fenrir to cross over, all so I could have the witch. I have exhausted myself! I have borrowed power from others that I must now repay. Do you have any idea what that witch cost me? And now, NOW, NOW I don’t have her. And you tell me you don’t know any witch.”

Loki blazed. Literally. His hair was on fire, his face twisted, his eyes seemed to burn into me. Burn right into my brain, burn through my pathetic teeth-clenching tough-guy pretensions.

“Leave me alone,” I whispered, begging.

His expression changed to one of bemusement. He laughed. “You really *don’t* know. Blind little mortal.” And then he did something that rocked me to the core.

The room filled with a blinding glow. An instant later, where Loki had stood now stood Senna.

She was beautiful. Dressed in the clothes she'd worn on the pier. "Fenrir penetrated the barrier and brought me back to serve Great Loki," she said. The voice was not hers. It was a feminine voice but not hers. A parody of a girl's voice.

"I came through the void, but the four of you came through, too. And somehow in the confusion, the imbalance of that moment, I slipped from Fenrir's jaw and disappeared."

Senna, who was not Senna, walked over to me. She stood very close. Her face. It was her face. Her eyes, her mouth. She touched me gently on my wounded nose. "What have you done with me?" she asked.

And then she dug her nails into my nose and twisted.

"Ahhh!" I yelled. I batted at her hand, turned my face away to break her grip.

"Leave him alone!" April yelled. "No one knows what happened to Senna. We didn't do anything to her."

Loki became Loki again. He was breathing heavily, as though he'd just climbed the stairs to his own tower. He was weary. The rage was burning out.

Fenrir decided to take a leak. He pissed a firehose stream against the far wall. The wolf urine steamed.

From the shadows behind Loki's throne a figure emerged, gliding across the floor.

He was not large, no bigger than me, maybe a little smaller. But the wings he kept folded back made his shoulders seem very broad. He moved on thin, bowed legs that ended in soft pads rather than feet. They made a faint squishing sound, a little like someone with new sneakers. Just above the feet there were knees, and from the knees sharp, forward-aimed spikes protruded.

The head was round, dominated by two large, flat insect eyes. But the single thing that caught my attention was the mouth. It was almost human at its center, but three jointed, grasping claws ringed the mouth. The claws worked constantly, reaching, grabbing at nothing, then pulling in toward the mouth.

Loki, for all his evil power, was clearly a creature of Earth. Fenrir, the huge wolf, too. But this monster, this... thing... was just as clearly not.

Loki didn't look at the figure, but I could see that he felt his presence. Loki's lip twitched into a sneer.

"They know nothing," the winged insect said in a fluttery, whispery voice.

"They have stolen my witch!"

"You have failed," the creature said without a trace of emotion. "You have not opened a door into your Old World as you promised Ka Anor you would."

Loki turned to look at the creature. "I could have Fenrir chew you up and crap you out, you Hetwan filth."

"You are a treacherous creature, Loki. Ka Anor knows this. Ka Anor will not be surprised if you kill me. But Ka Anor will not be happy, either. I will leave now and report to Ka Anor. I think Ka Anor will eat you."

All this without any sense of fear or worry. The delicate alien creature seemed unconcerned by Loki. And he had no interest in us.

Loki looked at the huge wolf and jerked his head ever so slightly. The Hetwan offered no resistance. He lay passively in the panting jaws. One of Fenrir's huge teeth was drawing yellow blood.

Fenrir carried him to Loki. Loki twisted his head sideways to look right in the Hetwan's blank eyes. "You tell your Ka Anor that I don't die easily." Loki threw out a hand, pointing at a tapestry embroidered with the red serpent picture we'd seen earlier.

"Do you see that? Do you know what it means, Hetwan? Odin, the All-Father, imprisoned me, bound by enchanted chains between massive rocks. And he created a snake to writhe above my upturned face, a snake that dribbled its venom into my eyes. The pain..." Loki flinched at the memory and swept a hand over his face as if wiping something away.

"It was agony. Day after day, year after year. Odin meant me to lie there in agony forever, for the crime of killing Baldur! But when the Great Change came, when Everworld was born, in the cataclysm I escaped. I lay in wait and I found the time." Loki's voice was a whisper now. "And I found the way. And the weapon. And I seized the indestructible Odin. And now it is Odin who lies writhing in torment."

Loki's face was suffused with remembered pleasure. He savored the memory. "Odin One-Eye, all-powerful Odin, is in my power now. I entertain myself devising new tortures for him."

Loki took a few deep breaths, shaking off the happy visions. He smiled at the Hetwan. "So, you see, there's a moral to the story. One you should pass along to that alien interloper, Ka Anor: Loki is not easy to kill. The bastard of Asgard now entertains Asgard's former master in his dungeon."

He nodded at Fenrir. The wolf let the Hetwan fall.

The Hetwan picked himself up. His three-clawed mouth still sought for food that did not exist.

He walked calmly to one of the tall, arched windows, spread his wings, and flew up and through it without another word.

Loki glared after him.

"Double the guard," he said to Fenrir. "Have our vassals kept alert. I will the fool who lets any Hetwan enter my domain. Likewise any creature of Huitzilopoctli. They're of a piece, these aliens and those bloodthirsty madmen. Death-worshippers all."

Fenrir nodded his shaggy wolf head. “And what of these mortals?” he asked in his strange, animal voice.

Loki shrugged. “Have the trolls take them to the pit. Kill them.” He looked right at me and curled his lip in contempt. “Have them kill the cowardly one slowly.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We marched from the great hall away from Loki and Fenrir.

I had to get up off my knees to move. I had to get up and walk with my own piss drenching my shorts. Christopher was behind me. He had to see. He had to know what I'd done.

My God, I was a coward! Loki was right. I was a coward.

I was still shaking. I was glad, relieved to be away from Loki and his foul-smelling son. But terrified of what lay ahead.

All my life I'd wondered. Like every boy. Like every man. Maybe girls, too, I don't know. But there has never been a male born who did not wonder whether he was brave.

You hear stories, you read books about men who were brave when they had to be. Men who had stood up against unbelievable odds. I'd failed. And not for the first time.

Was it Loki who had opened my mind and looked in at my secrets when we crossed over? Had it been Loki whose voice I'd heard as I hung suspended, in the blank white void between worlds?

Ah, I see.

No. Someone else. Not Loki. But Loki hadn't needed to open my mind to understand me.

Kill the cowardly one slowly.

I wasn't ready. I hadn't known it was going to happen, I told myself. This wasn't what I'd ever pictured. A war, maybe. Yes, I could be brave in a war. I'd thought about it many times. But this! My test had come and I wasn't ready.

No excuses! Coward! Coward! I'd wet myself like a little baby. I had cried. I would have begged if I'd had the chance.

Oh, my God, how could I be a coward?

Now they'd kill me and it would almost be a relief. How could I ever tell my father what I'd done?

I was in a haze. Disconnected from what was happening. Like it was all happening to someone else. Some far-distant person was being marched down that long stairway. Someone else, someone I didn't even know, was blinking in the sudden light of the courtyard. Someone else was walking meekly toward the pit.

Not me. Not David Levin. Not me. That wasn't me shuffling along, head bowed, tears welling in my eyes behind a swaggering troll. No. No, that wasn't me.

"NO!" I yelled.

It happened in a flash. I lunged. My hand grabbed the sword hilt. My fingers closed around it, unfamiliar yet expected. I pulled.

It was long. It seemed to take forever to draw out of the troll's scabbard. Then, there it was: a blade. Not glittering but dull. There was a fine coating of powdery rust below the pommel. It was heavier than I'd thought it would be.

The troll turned his brute face to me. Seeing the sword in my hand, he registered slow surprise.

I held it awkwardly, pointing straight out but with my wrist all wrong. I saw the sword point. I saw the troll's chest and neck and head.

And in that awful moment of suspended time, some clockwork part of my brain, some cold, distant, untouched part of my brain told me, *The neck will be most vulnerable.*

I thrust, blindly, wildly. No art. No style. Just a convulsive jerk forward.

The iron blade entered the troll's neck and stopped. In sheer panic, I leaned into the sword, thrusting with all my weight, all my adrenaline-powered strength.

The troll gaped at me, amazed. He reached up and touched the sword that now protruded through his neck, skewering him.

A second troll began to draw his own sword.

I yanked the sword from the troll's neck and swung it hard. My panicked, sweeping blow nearly decapitated April, but she was just short enough. The blade caught the sword arm of the second troll.

The arm dropped, bloodless, to the ground, still holding a sword. It stiffened. It became rock, like something hacked off a statue.

"Run!" Christopher yelled.

I hesitated, but only for a moment. The troll I'd stabbed was not bleeding from the gaping wound in his neck. The area of the wound was already stone. Hard. Lifeless. It was spreading out from the wound, turning what must have been living flesh to granite.

The troll still looked puzzled. Then the stone-stiffening reached his face and the look became permanent.

I turned and ran.

Jalil, April, and Christopher were already racing back down the tunnel we'd come through. There were too many men and trolls in the courtyard to stand and fight there. Trolls and men

were coming after us, but the two nearest, our remaining troll guards, were too slow for teenagers in running shoes.

We pelted down the stairs but leaped off after only a few dozen feet of descent. We were in a tunnel, colder, darker than before. Dustier, as if it hadn't been used much lately.

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I still held the sword, which made it awkward to run. Several times the blade scraped on the stone wall and set off sprays of sparks. But I'd give up my life before I'd let go of that sword.

The tunnel came to a three-way divide.

"That's the direction we came from," Jalil said breathlessly, pointing at the left branch. "Back toward Loki."

"Yeah? Then how about another choice?" Christopher suggested.

"Right," I said, and led the way into darkness.

I was fifty feet or so down the right-hand tunnel when I realized April wasn't with us.

I stopped and grabbed Christopher, who was running past. I yanked him to a stop and Jalil plowed into us. We froze, backs pressed against dripping walls, scared of making a sound.

I looked back and saw April silhouetted in torchlight. Trolls and men, all with swords drawn, were descending on her.

If we went back for her, we'd all be killed. If we didn't...

"They've gone to murder Loki!" April screamed. "Stop them! Stop them! They've gone to murder Great Loki!"

She kept yelling and pointing down the left-hand tunnel.

It was idiotic. No way anyone would fall for such a lame trick.

And yet the motley assortment of men and trolls roared away down the left tunnel.

One man, a large, brutal-looking Norseman, hesitated. He looked at April and squinted, as if trying to form a thought. I tensed, wondering if I could take him on.

"Yeah, right," I muttered under my breath. "He's been swinging a sword since he was four!"

April didn't give the Norseman a chance to form his suspicion fully. "What will happen if they reach Loki? His anger will be terrible! Do you want to be the *last* to defend him?"

That penetrated the thick blond head. Loki's anger was something he could understand. Showing up late was probably not a good idea when your boss was a lunatic god.

With a battle roar, he went off in pursuit of the others.

April ran to us, panting.

“Not bad,” Christopher said. “You should be an actor.”

“I *am* an actor,” April said shakily. “Obviously, you missed *Cuckoo’s Nest* last year. I killed as Nurse Ratched.”

“Which way?” I asked, like someone might have an answer.

“How about away from the last troll we saw?” Jalil suggested.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. We took off at a trot. We were all exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, but adrenaline is an amazing substance. If you’re scared enough, you find more energy than you thought possible.

And we were definitely scared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was a long tunnel. And a long way between flickering skull-sconce torches.

Worst of all, the tunnel was not straight. It was curving, and the more it curved the more we feared it might lead back to Loki and the men and trolls who must be looking for us. Our footsteps seemed awfully loud. And we were leaving prints in the dust.

We talked in low, muttering whispers. Scared. But relieved, too. We should be dead. We weren’t.

“So are we definite that this is not a dream?” Christopher asked at one point.

I had been off in dark thoughts, remembering my shameful terror before Loki. “Not a dream,” I muttered. I smelled of urine. I smelled like a men’s room.

“Then what the hell is it?” he demanded. “I mean, what’s going on? Is this someone’s idea of a joke? Loki? A Norse god? A wolf the size of a bus? Some creepy alien? Trolls? Vikings killing sheep? I mean, what’s the deal?”

“Loki called it ‘Everworld,’ ” Jalil said. “Not that that tells us much.”

“Maybe we’ve all gone nuts,” April said, laughing a little at the idea. “Maybe we’re psychotics walking around a padded room wearing paper slippers and straitjackets.”

“Sounds like you took *Cuckoo’s Nest* a little too seriously,” Christopher said.

“Did you see it?”

“Yeah. I needed some extra credit in English so I wrote a report on it.”

“And?”

“And you were very good, April,” Christopher said. “But nothing compared to your performance with that dumb Viking back there.”

April laughed again. It annoyed me. What right did she have to laugh? She would laugh at me, no doubt. Probably already had. Big deal David, tough guy David, David with the attitude, crying and squirming and...

I couldn't think about it. It made me want to crawl out of my own skin.

"This is all connected to Senna," Jalil said. "This didn't start with us hanging off a wall. This started with all four of us being there at the lake this morning. And her being there."

What was he talking about? I tried to tear my mind off my own self-loathing.

Jalil was right. Only it may have started even earlier. I said nothing, but I wondered if it had started with the fight at a Taco Bell. Why had we all been there? Was that part of some plan?

I flashed on my car, Senna beside me.

"Something is going to happen." That's what she said.

"What's going to happen?"

"I don't know. I only know something will happen. Soon. Something...terrible."

Yesterday. A million years ago, and yet I could still see the way her eyes glittered. *"Sometimes I know things before they happen. Sometimes I can see a scene in my head. Like watching a movie. And then it will happen. I think, did I make it happen? Or did I just see it somehow?"*

Good question, I thought grimly. *Very good question, Senna.*

Senna, the "witch" Loki wanted so badly.

"David, when it happens... when it happens, David, will you save me?"

I grabbed my head with my two hands and pressed hard on my temples. *No, I won't save you Senna, I'll shake and quiver like a scared rabbit. That's what I'll do, Senna.*

"Hey, watch where you're waving that thing," April said, looking at the sword. "You have a headache or something?" She swung her backpack around and began digging inside.

The question was so mundane I had to laugh. A headache? Did I have a headache? I was living a nightmare inside a nightmare.

April dug out a small blue-and-white bottle. She twisted the cap off and handed me a round, dark rust-colored pill—an Advil.

"Here. You'll have to swallow it dry. I better ration them, so see if this one works before you take another."

"Oh, April," I sighed, shaking my head.

"What?"

“Nothing. Save it. You’re right, we may need it.”

Jalil quickened his pace to catch up to us. “What else do you have in that backpack?”

“Good question,” Christopher muttered. “And if you say, ‘I have my nine-millimeter Glock and an extra clip,’ I’ll kiss your feet.”

We kept moving as April searched by dim torchlight. “The Advil. Bottle of a hundred, maybe half gone. Um... my CD player.”

“What CDs?” Christopher asked.

“Alanis Morissette... Um, that Lilith Fair CD...”

Christopher and I both groaned.

“The Bach B-minor mass. And the sound track from *Rent*.”

Jalil groaned. “Oh, man. Show tunes? We’re stuck a long way from the nearest Sam Goody and all we have is whiny women and show tunes?”

“Hey, she brought some Johann Sebastian, too,” Christopher said, changing sides. “Lighten up on the girl. Broaden your tastes.”

“Sorry, if I’d known I was going off to bizarre world to hang out with trolls and Norse gods, I’d have brought a wider selection,” April said. “Not to mention extra batteries. And don’t dis *Rent*, drama club is putting that on this year.”

“Not just Norse gods,” Jalil said, thoughtful once more. “There’s that alien and that Ka Anor thing. And Loki said something about Huitzilopoctli. And the prisoner was talking Ra.”

“Didn’t he play third base for the Cubs back in the eighties?” Christopher said.

Humor. The just-nearly-died brand of giddy humor.

“I have this vague memory that Huitzilopoctli is some kind of Aztec god. And, of course, Ra. Egyptian.”

“Aztecs? Why would there be Aztecs?” Christopher demanded.

“Why would there be Loki? Why would there be a big freaking wolf?” I demanded, suddenly angry. “Why would we all go trotting down to the lack and end up hanging in chains? You want to start with the ‘why this’ and ‘why that?’ ”

“Touchy, isn’t he?” Christopher mocked. “Must be the wet pants.”

I was on him before he finished the last word. I grabbed him by his collar and shoved him against the wall. His hair was inches from the flame of a skull torch.

“Don’t push me!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Don’t push me or I’ll shove this sword up your ass and see how brave you are!”

I was panting. Christopher looked amazed.

Jalil grabbed my sword hand, whipped his other arm around my neck, and yanked me back. He spun me away.

I stumbled but kept to my feet. I clenched the sword and tensed my arm, ready to do murder.

April stepped between me and Jalil.

“What are you, crazy?!” Christopher yelled.

“Shut up, all of you!” April hissed. “We’re in a tunnel, you idiots. Voices carry. You want to have those... those trolls all over us? I don’t. so shut up and calm down and stop acting like little boys.”

She was right. Obviously. But I almost didn’t care. Christopher had as much as called me a coward. I couldn’t let that stand.

April sighed and smoothed her hair back. In a calm voice she said, “Listen to me. We don’t need this. We stick together or we don’t have a chance. Even if we do stick together, we don’t have much of a chance. We have to figure out what’s going on and get home, and stay alive in the meantime. We’ll need food and water and warm clothing.”

“And weapons,” Jalil interjected.

“That, too. What we don’t need is a bunch of macho crap.”

For a while no one spoke. Christopher and I both sort of came down at the same time. Like a pair of balloons someone had poked holes in.

“We’re dead meat, anyway,” Christopher said.

“Oh, really?” April said. She pointed back down the tunnel. “Then head back that way, go find the nearest troll or whatever, and die. Okay? Otherwise, if you want to stay with us, work on helping and stop being a baby. And, by the way? We’re not dead meat. We have one big advantage: We’re smarter than those guys.”

“We are?” Christopher asked skeptically.

“Would you have fallen for that ‘They went thataway’ routine back there?” April asked him.

I avoided looking at Christopher. But I saw Jalil nodding agreement. “The Trojan Horse,” he said to himself. Then for the benefit of the rest of us, “Trojan Horse. You know, war of Troy, Greeks against Trojans.”

“The Greeks fought against condoms?” Christopher asked.

Jalil ignored him. “The Trojans are inside the city, Greeks can’t get them out, so the Greeks build this big horse, hide a bunch of guys inside it, the rest sail off and leave the horse for the Trojans, telling them it’s a surrender gift. The Trojans haul it into the city, the guys climb out at night, open the gates, bye-bye Trojans.”

“Who would be that dumb?” Christopher asked.

“I think that’s his point,” April said. “Not dumb, maybe. Just naïve. I mean, we come from a cynical age. Suspicious of everything. Maybe that’s an advantage we have.”

“Yeah, our bad attitudes versus their swords and axes and giant wolves,” Christopher said darkly. “Let’s just find the trapdoor to get out here and back home.”

“I’m for that,” April said.

We started walking. April searched through her backpack again. I had to say something. I couldn’t let it all just lie there.

So I said, “Okay, we look for a way home. But we all go. All or none. The four of us *and* Senna.”

No one said no.

No one said yes, either.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fifty-seven Advil.

A Sony personal CD player with headphones.

Four double-A batteries, mostly charged.

An Alanis CD, the Lilith Fair CD, Bach, and *Rent* CDs.

Two books: *Great Poetry of the English Language*, and *Chemistry: Principles and Application*.

One spiral notebook.

A pencil, a felt-tip pen, and two ballpoint pens.

Tampons.

Clinique blusher.

Keys.

That was what we found in April’s backpack.

Jalil had keys, a Swiss Army knife, eleven dollars and forty cents, a watch that had been crushed by the chains around his wrists, and his dad’s Shell credit card. Christopher had keys, twenty-

one dollars and nine cents, a receipt from Marshall Fields for a three-pack of underwear, and a phone card.

I had keys and a quarter.

“Well, if keys turn out to be money around here, we’re pretty well set,” Christopher said. “Lots of keys. No Uzi, which is what we need in this nuthouse. No grenades, which would come in very handy. Nope, a little pocketknife and a lot of keys.”

“How do they keep these torches lit?” Jalil wondered. Then, “Forget the pocketknife and the keys. The most important thing is the chemistry textbook.”

“Why? You thinking we’ll whip up some—” The joke died on his lips. He grabbed April and pulled her to the side of the tunnel. We all froze. “Shhh!”

We listened, straining. Nothing. Then...

Voices!

“Behind or ahead?”

“Behind,” April said. “They’re after us.” She didn’t mention that they’d probably heard Christopher and me going at it.

“Let’s run,” Jalil said.

“But quietly.”

We ran. One big advantage we had over the Norsemen and trolls: They wore boots, we wore sneakers. Hard for men in boots to outrun teenagers in sneakers. Harder still to hear sneakers if you’re busy stomping around in boots.

We ran and now, ahead of us, gray light.

“That’s not torchlight,” April said, panting.

We soon reached the source of the light. A tunnel that went off to the left. It was not meant for people to walk through. It was no more than four feet square. But at the end I saw a perfect square of blue.

“Ventilation shaft,” Jalil said. “I don’t know how high up we are, but we’re definitely up. We go that way, we’re probably looking at a long drop.”

I snagged a piece of the frayed sleeve of my sweatshirt and ripped it off. I wedged the fabric in a crack in the rocks. “Maybe this’ll make them think we went that way.”

We continued along the tunnel, running at a pace we could handle. The noise behind us was fading. We were gaining. Then, a sudden turn in the tunnel, around the corner with Jalil in the lead, and—

“Stop! Back! Back! Back!” Jalil stopped fast, jumped back, and spread his arms to stop the rest of us.

I glimpsed a sheer drop. The tunnel simply came to an end, opening into a vast natural cave. Stalagmites shot up from the floor, natural skyscrapers. Stalactites hung down from above. An eerie glow filled the cavern. It was a glow that came from a living creature.

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There, curled and coiled, its loops wrapped casually around pillars of stone, lay a snake. It was radioactive green, with a pattern of hollow squares, like yellow leopard spots, all along its length. The yellow spots were each the size of a basketball court.

It was a snake the size of a fifty-car freight train. And that was only the part we could see. There was no way of knowing how far back down the caves this hideous, impossible creature stretched.

“You know that film they showed in, like, fourth grade?” Christopher said. “That nature film where they showed a python eating a small pig and you could see the bulge of the pig going through the snake?”

I didn’t remember ever seeing that film. But I knew what Christopher was talking about.

“Well,” he said, “this snake could swallow a cement truck. With no bulge.”

We stood rooted in place at the edge of the precipice, the four of us pressed against Jalil’s arms, staring down at the snake.

Just then, I guess someone finally told Loki we’d escaped.

“FIND THEM!”

The voice blasted down the tunnel. It was thunder! It was bombs going off! It shook the rock beneath our feet.

April fell against Jalil.

Jalil windmilled his arms madly, trying to fly. I stuck out a hand and grabbed his right arm. He spun to face me. His foot slipped. He fell.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I gripped Jalil’s hand but his fingers escaped.

His face hit hard on the edge of the floor. His hands scrabbled on stone. April screamed.

Jalil was slipping. I dropped to my belly. Jalil’s left hand waved, helpless, unable to grab anything but air.

I clamped both my hands on his right arm, but it was a weak grip. His fingernails clawed at stone. Sweat slicked his forearm.

And now I was slipping. I snatched his sleeve to improve my grip. But I was being dragged, dragged toward the edge.

He looked at me, eyes huge, mouth open like he was screaming, but no sound came out.

Slipping... slipping... I had to let go or I'd—

April landed on my back, too hard, almost knocking the wind out of me, but stopping my slide.

I caught a flash of Christopher down on his belly, too. He was extended out over the edge, trying to grab Jalil's flailing hand. My fingers slipped. Damp, smooth flesh. I couldn't hold on. I dug my fingernails, ready to tear Jalil's skin to save him.

Slip!

“Ahhh!”

I caught him again at the wrist. Now his other hand was too far for Christopher to reach. But I could hold onto the wrist better. Both hands tight around Jalil's wrist till they cramped.

Then, behind Jalil's head, I saw it.

The snake's head rose up, up, slit eyes amused and eager. A bluish tongue, forked, thick as bridge cable, thirty, forty feet long, whipped out, whipped back, whipped out and quivered, tasting the air.

I flashed on Loki's tapestry, the uniforms of his men: Was this the snake who'd been used to drop venom on the god's face?

“FIND THEM!” Loki cried again. The sound hammered at them, confusing my thoughts.

“I HAVE THEM, FATHER!”

This voice had come from the snake. No lips had moved. It had no lips. But the sound had come from the snake with the intelligent, mocking eyes.

“Father? Father?” Christopher demanded shrilly. “I thought *my* family was messed up!”

The snake's mouth opened like an automatic garage door. It opened and then there were the fangs, glittering in the puffy pink-flesh mouth.

Jalil flailed. Christopher nearly toppled over the edge, reaching for his hand. In seconds the snake would strike.

“April! Backpack,” I gasped. “Give it to Christopher.”

I could feel her on me, squirming, getting it off her. “Here!” she yelled.

Christopher wrapped one hand through a strap and swung the pack out, trying to lasso Jalil's other hand.

A grab, a miss! A grab...

Yes!

Jalil's hand snagged the strap, Christopher clamped his own hands around Jalil's wrist, and we pulled. Jalil's feet scrabbled at the sheer wall below him and found some tiny edge to push against.

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Up he came.

The snake's eyes darkened.

Like a bullwhip, it struck!

Jalil clambered up as the snake's head slammed against the tunnel opening, fangs out. Fangs so big I could have stuck my fist up inside the hypodermic hole.

But the snake's head was too big for the tunnel. We wobbled to our feet and ran. Then we stopped very suddenly.

Christopher yelled a curse. We were face-to-face with a tunnel crammed with trolls and men, all with swords drawn and axes held ready.

Behind us, the enraged snake reared back and slammed itself against the tunnel opening again.

"Down!" Jalil yelled. He shoved me face-forward. I plowed into April. Christopher must have figured it out on his own because he hit the dirt like he'd been tackled from behind.

The snake's forked tongue shot just inches above us. It darted forward down the tunnel, knocking down a handful of trolls and men like bowling pins.

The forked tongue curved and wrapped and snapped back.

Snapped back over us with several hundred pounds of bellowing trolls and wild Norsemen.

I was kicked, pummeled, and nearly slashed by a sword blade. I raised my head just enough to see them sucked, screaming, into that pulpy pink mouth.

The two men and single troll who were left backpedaled fast. I charged, sword held straight out in front of me.

Taken by surprise, the two men slammed back against the tunnel wall. The troll stood blinking stupidly. I rammed the sword into his chest and kept on running.

April was right behind me, Jalil, Christopher.

Suddenly, the sound of a bag of cement hitting the ground.

One of the men had tripped Christopher. The Norseman was drawing a long knife from his belt. He pulled Christopher's head back by the hair, exposing his throat.

Jalil fumbled in his pocket.

“Damn it!” I yelled in utter frustration. I had no weapon. Nothing! The remaining Norseman was grinning. Grinning at April. He grabbed at her. She evaded him.

Just then I saw the tiny Swiss Army knife open in Jalil’s hand. He slashed at the knife hand of the guy who had Christopher. The big man gaped at the small red wound on his hand. Christopher twisted around on his back, pulled both his legs up into fetal position, and unloaded with every muscle in his body.

His feet hit the big Viking in the very location that no man—not even a big Viking—wants to be kicked.

“Argh!” the Norseman said. He stumbled back and grabbed himself.

His companion guffawed like an idiot and said, “Now I’ll have the woman to myself! Haw, haw, haw.”

April swung. The heel of her hand came up and nailed the end of the man’s nose. I grabbed his sword arm, slammed his elbow against the rock, and yanked his sword from his numbed hand.

We didn’t stay around to see any more. We hauled.

“The air shaft,” Jalil panted. “Only way.”

It was just fifty feet down the tunnel. A hundred feet down the tunnel was a new rush of armed men.

A race.

I hit the air shaft first, about three seconds before the wave of Norsemen. I jumped to block them from reaching the opening.

“Go! Go! Go!” I yelled to the others.

I held the sword out, ready. A huge man, blond hair greased into Heidi pigtails that hung down from his dingy helmet, stood facing me. He was holding a long-handled battle-ax.

He looked like I was the best thing he’d seen in years. He laughed. He grinned the happy grin of a mad warrior getting ready to do battle.

He roared a threat at me, like some World Wrestling Federation character putting on a ferocious act. Only this was no act.

The others were all in the air shaft, crawling like infants. An undignified parade of butts.

I could stay and fight. I’d lose. I barely knew which end of a sword to hold on to. Or I could run for it.

I backed up into the air shaft, keeping my sword out. The Viking looked disappointed. But he wasn't going to let me get away. In he came after me.

I was crab-walking, scuffling, backward-crawling, losing more skin off my knees, banging my head on the low ceiling. I swung the sword weakly, back and forth.

"I'll kill you!" I yelled.

The Viking laughed. With good reason. He was crawling forward, I was going backward. I was scared to death. He was at a party. He was having the time of his life. He was grinning like a guy who'd just scored the winning touchdown.

But he'd overlooked one major fact: It's hard to do much with a four-foot-long ax in a four-foot-square tunnel. He jabbed, but I could stay out of reach and even knock his sword aside occasionally.

I heard Christopher cursing behind me. "There's nothing here!" he yelled.

I kept backing up.

"It's like, a five-hundred-foot drop into the water!"

The choices were not good. But I knew one thing: There might be a ninety-nine-percent chance that a drop that far would kill us all. There was a one-hundred-percent chance we'd die if we stayed to talk things over with the Vikings.

"Do it!" I yelled.

"Oh, man, I should have just let the snake eat me," Jalil said.

I glanced over my shoulder. The square of light was closer than I'd expected. I could see it past Jalil's butt and April's hair.

The Viking took advantage of the distraction. He lunged with the ax. The side of the blade bit into my chest just below my collarbone.

"Just jump!" I bellowed in panic. "Jump! Jump, he's gonna kill me!"

I backed and backed and backed, and suddenly there was nowhere else to back.

The last thing I saw as I fell was the Viking's crestfallen face.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I dropped rear-first from the air shaft.

My foot caught and spun me so I twisted around facedown. I could see the others below me. I could see the inky water below them. I could see the cut-with-a-knife cliffs all around us.

We were falling.

Falling four hundred feet. The height of a forty-story building. Like jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, which people did when they didn't expect to survive.

I was going to hit that water and die.

Except that I was still falling. And so was Christopher, who was closest to hitting. We were all still falling. But slowly. Way too slowly. The air felt normal; it wasn't whipping past. I breathed it in short, desperate gulps. My heart was hammering. My deep brain was still convinced I would be crushed by the impact.

But then I saw Christopher hit. He entered the water with barely a ripple. Like an Olympic diver.

Right behind him, April and Jalil. Both with no more impact than if they'd jumped off the side of a pool.

I had time to straighten myself up, to pull my legs up, then extend them again, pointing downward.

And as I did this I happened to see a pinpoint of light shining from between two daggerlike rocks atop the cliff. The light shone, then winked, came on again and, just as I hit the water, disappeared.

My feet hit water. I plunged down, but no more than five or six feet.

For a few seconds the water actually felt good. My wrists were scraped to the meat, my upper chest had been stabbed, and my nose was still a mess.

More to the point, the water cleaned away the rank smell of my own cowardice.

But then, cold. The water was about one degree away from being a big block of ice. I plowed back up to the surface.

"Oh!" Jalil said, sucking in air not two feet from me. "Oh, that's cold."

Christopher and April were not far away.

"Swim for shore," I said.

"Gee, do you think?" Christopher chattered. "I was wondering if maybe we could get up a game of water polo."

I kicked hard to push myself up for a better view. We were in some kind of narrow inlet. The black cliffs rose around us on all sides. We almost could have been in some huge well. I felt I could sense which way the open water lay, but I couldn't see it. The cliffs seemed to hang like curtains in every direction I looked.

I saw a boat. Instinctively I ducked. But that was stupid. Anyone in the boat would have seen us falling. Besides, the boat seemed to be drifting.

"There's a boat," I said. The cold was really attacking my muscles now.

“Leonardo,” April muttered through shuddering teeth.

“What?” I said.

“Leo DiCaprio. *Titanic*. Drowned in the icy North Atlantic. Cold like this.”

Page | 42 “I didn’t see it. Come on, let’s swim for the boat.”

“You didn’t see *Titanic*?” Her incredulous voice followed me as I began swimming hard for the boat.

It wasn’t far. I grabbed the gunwale and rocked the boat down so I could look inside. No one. Some stuff tied up with rope and a couple of oars.

The boat belonged to someone. But it was my boat now.

I hauled myself up like I was doing a push-up, then twisted and squirmed until I flopped, wet and frozen, in the bottom of the boat.

I wanted to just lie there and rest, but I hauled my lead-heavy body up to my knees and helped manhandle Christopher up and over. The two of us easily yanked Jalil and April up out of the water.

Then we all just lay there, lifeless, crumpled, arms and legs splayed out, staying as we’d fallen. We knew we should be running or at least rowing for our lives. But we’d been long since exhausted, and nothing adds to weariness like cold.

I hauled my granite-stiff body up and leaned back against the tied bundle. It was soft. I closed my eyes. I never intended to fall asleep, not there, rocking in a twenty-foot rowboat. But I was done for.

I closed my eyes on the black cliffs towering over my head.

And I opened them in World Civilizations. Last period.

“Ahhh!” I sat upright in my desk. My book went sliding off and hit the floor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Yes, Mr. Levin?” the teacher, Mr. Arbuthnot, asked me, arching one eyebrow and peering over the top of his half-glasses. “Was that an exclamation of delight at the contributions made by Galileo?”

I grabbed my desktop. I stared at the girl sitting across the aisle from me. I was in my desk. In *my* desk.

I was dry. Warm. I was dressed in jeans and a baggy cotton sweater. I stared at my wrists. Nothing! No blood, no scabs, no scars.

I slapped my hand to my chest. No stab wound.

I touched my nose. Cotton bandages. My nose was tender. At least that was real.

“A dream?” I muttered.

Mr. Arbuthnot had lost patience. “Mr. Levin, we are rather busy studying the Italian Renaissance. Granted, only two or three of your fellow students are paying attention, but do you suppose that for their sake you could control yourself?”

This was insane. It had all been a dream? No way. Not poss—

My eyes snapped open. Open on Jalil’s annoyed face. He was smothering me, his hand clamped over my nose and mouth.

I slapped his icy fingers away. “What the hell are you doing?”

“See?” he said calmly. “No need to yell. Simply shut off the flow of oxygen and a person will wake up.”

He sat back, clutching his arms, shivering.

I blinked at him. Utter confusion. A wet April and a wet Christopher glared at me.

“How can you sleep?” April demanded, outraged.

“He has the only pillow.” Christopher pushed past me and began untying the bundle I was leaning on. But the knots wouldn’t give way to his blue-tinged fingers.

Jalil unfolded his knife, inspected the ropes and cut once. He pulled the rope away, wound it up, and stuck it into April’s backpack.

I stared, uncomprehending. I was still dealing with having been in Arbuthnot’s class. Was that a dream? Was this? Both had seemed real. Both had felt... complete.

“Clothes,” Christopher said. “Warm clothes. Here.” He tossed a dull gray wool dress to April.

“I must have dreamed,” I said. “I was back home. In class. Last period. World Civ.”

“Yeah? Well, your dreams suck,” Christopher said. “You could have dreamed anything. You come up with World Civ? Here.”

He handed me a skin. Shaggy gray fur. Actually two, crudely stitched together. I wrapped it around myself. I found a belt and cinched it around the waist. Then realized I had the rough garment on upside down. There was no neck hole, but the skins formed vague shoulders.

And really all that mattered to me was that it was warm.

“Okay, does anyone else have a slight problem with this?” Jalil asked. “There just happens to be a boat and no one around? There just happens to be a bunch of warm clothing that just happens to fit us?”

I rose gingerly to my feet, careful not to capsize the boat. I looked around. Bare rock wall plunged straight from the clouds down into the water and probably hundreds of feet farther down. I saw no beach. No place to get out of the water, except for a tumble of boulders where one of the rock faces had collapsed.

“If we hadn’t found the boat, we’d have frozen and died,” I said. “No way out of the water.”

“We were awfully lucky, then,” April said darkly. “Way lucky.”

“How about the way we fell?” Christopher asked. “Like slow motion. You can’t be jumping that far and survive.”

“Someone wants us alive,” April said. “And I want to thank them.”

Jalil shook his head. He was bundled in a sheepskin jacket, fur turned inward. He’d found a matching hat. I would have laughed, only I was wearing a fur coat. And to be honest, I was jealous of the hat. It looked warm.

“Before I thank them I want to know how they did it,” Jalil said. “How do you make someone fall slowly? No wires? No parachute? How do you make someone fall slowly?”

Christopher looked like he was trying to work up a snappy comeback. But instead he unwrapped a small parcel that had been with the clothing. He pulled out what looked like it might be a turkey drumstick.

“What? No cornbread dressing?” he said wonderingly. “There’s four of these. I don’t see any maggots or mildew or anything.”

“I’m a vegetarian,” April said. “And even if I weren’t, I don’t think I’d be eating skanky old turkey legs.”

“I’d eat a live turkey about now,” Christopher said.

“Let’s get this boat moving,” I said. “Anyone know how to row? How to handle a boat?”

“What’s to know?” Christopher asked as he ripped a mouthful of meat from his drumstick.

“What’s to know,” I muttered. “Figures. I’d better row.”

I settled myself facing the stern and fitted the oars to the carved bone oarlocks. I dipped the oars and the boat began to move. It was a sluggish thing, but I felt better moving.

“We need to think about where we are, what we’re doing,” Jalil said.

Christopher grinned over his drumstick. “Surely you know where we are? We’re up a certain well-known creek, but *with* a paddle.”

Jalil did not smile. April did. And she glanced at the meat, too.

“Want some?” Christopher offered a piece to Jalil.

Jalil shook his head. “No. I’m waiting to see if you die first. Salmonella. Botulism. Poison…”

Christopher took a defiant bite.

Jalil said, “So, here’s what we have. We’ve been transported to some place that shouldn’t exist, but obviously does. We’ve run into creatures who shouldn’t exist, but obviously do. Loki, Fenrir, that snake the size of a derailed Amtrak, trolls. Not to mention Vikings. We jump and fall too slowly, just happening to land near a boat loaded with clothes for three males and one female. And while we’re at it: Why does a Norse god speak English?”

I was getting into the rowing. The familiar rhythm was reassuring. But it was causing blood to seep from the shallow puncture in my chest. Not much blood. Not enough to worry about. But it wasn’t going to heal with me rowing.

The cliff face passed by, undifferentiated, featureless. I glanced over my shoulder every so often. Nothing visible ahead, either.

I saw April smile mischievously at Jalil. “It’s magic. It’s all magic.” She was baiting Jalil. I guess she knew something about him that I didn’t.

Jalil jumped at the bait. “Magic? You mean, what? Something supernatural?”

The word “supernatural” was a sneer.

“Superstitious nonsense. It’s for idiots. Horoscopes, New Age baloney, magic, auras, all of it. If something exists, it’s part of nature. So the whole idea of something being ‘supernatural’ is ridiculous. I mean, by definition nature is the sum of all things that exist, so if something exists, it’s in nature.”

April grinned, satisfied at having provoked Jalil. “So what’s your explanation, Jalil? I may be wrong, but that guy back there calling himself Loki looked pretty supernatural to me.”

“No. No. see, that’s my point. I’m obviously not denying that Loki and all the rest of this is real. I’m just saying that one way or another there will be a logical, natural explanation.”

Christopher laughed. “You know, I thought all black guys in Chicago area wanted to grow up to be Michael Jordan. You want to grow up to be Mr. Tuvok.”

“Who’s Mr. Tuvok?” Jalil said coldly. “And by the way, all black guys don’t want any one thing. Oh, wait: No, we do all want not to be stereotyped by ignorant white trash.”

Christopher held up his hands, palms out, miming “no offense.” Then he said, “Hey, I basically agree with you. I believe in what I can see and touch and eat and drink and spend. Everything else is bull.”

April nodded. “You are so right, Christopher. I mean, you are so right and so forceful and all that, you just get me hot. I mean, you really do, and we’re going to die anyway, so just take me now.” She scooted back toward Christopher and lowered her voice to a husky whisper. “You think I’m kidding, but I’m not. I want you here and now.”

She was just convincing enough that Christopher made a sort of move to put his arm around her. She pushed away, laughing slyly.

“Ah, so you just believe in what you can see, huh? Looks to me like you were ready to believe in a miracle.”

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Christopher flushed, gaped, and then laughed. I gave him credit for that. Lots of guys can laugh at someone else. Christopher could laugh at himself. You see a lot less of that.

I kept rowing. I was thinking about what Jalil had said. He had definite beliefs. Me, I was clueless. I just knew one thing: All of it involved Senna.

I was remembering her when we came around a sharp corner and were, very suddenly, not alone.

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