

**THE GREEN BEANS**

**VOLUME THREE**

**THE CURIOUS CONUNDRUM OF PAN GU**

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## **SOMETHING LIES BENEATH...**

Only a handful of days have passed since the nefarious efforts of Jasper, the evil school janitor, were squashed. Although they are exhilarated with their victory, the Beans have come to realize that Jasper is but the tip of the iceberg in the schemes of a larger organization of dubious methods and goals.

Be that as it may, they're happy to have a break from the astonishing events of recent weeks, and their field trip to the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts seems like the perfect way to relax. It doesn't take long, however, for the Beans to realize that serious weirdness is afoot, and things are not as they initially appear.

In this museum, nothing is what it seems at face value. There are artifacts of mysterious, unknown power, and the staff members are acting awfully peculiar. Most significant of all, the building's primary purpose may not be to serve as a museum at all, but to hide the gargantuan secret that lies beneath it... a secret so big, its unveiling may transform the communities of Portsmouth and Hollow Oak.

## Chapter One

### The Hour Grows Late

Black smoke curled through the air, spewed from the flames that leaped and lurched about. Pieces of rubble fell from the high ceiling, exploding into smaller fragments as they struck the tile floor.

It was a scene of devastation, and above the sounds of crackling flames and deteriorating structure, something else could be heard... the steady, heavy breathing of something... *strange*. It was the breathing of a beast with lungs like a vast, powerful machine.

As she peered through that veil of smoke and fire with her stinging, watering eyes, Maria could see the thing that had caused the terrible carnage that surrounded her. It was the very same thing that could be heard drawing enormous, potent breaths into its massive lungs.

It was some... *thing*. A thing that went beyond imagination... and it was slowly stalking closer.

Though it was monstrous in proportion and gargantuan in girth, the creature moved with lithe, purposeful motions that were almost elegant. When given some consideration, Maria thought this made sense. Nothing could be expected to live as long as *this* thing had – supposedly *thousands* of years – without a great deal of both strength and agility.

Each step that it took conveyed grace and power, sending mild tremors through the floor. And with each stride, the creature drew closer upon its presumed targets: Maria and her sister.

This, she decided, was most unfortunate. Understandably, she found that being the focus of this *humongous*, destructive creature's attention was a rather unsettling experience. Based on the vast damage it had already inflicted, the thing clearly had no regard for the property of others. Furthermore, it seemed to have both skill and enthusiasm when it came to smashing all that lay in its path to smithereens.

As it came closer, Maria could feel her pulse quickening, her heart racing ever faster. Her eyes had grown wide, despite the sting of the black, rancid smoke that moved this way and that, stimulated by the beast's sweeping tail.

But even in this, the darkest and direst of scenarios, the best possible comfort remained close at hand. For Maria was not alone. Her sister, Sara, stood beside her, bravely holding her ground as the creature advanced, refusing to look away from its monstrous gaze. She did not so much as flinch before its terrifying presence.

Sara reached out and took Maria's hand. The two of them held fast to one another, comforted by this simple gesture, despite the enormity of the looming, fuming challenge that faced them.

With their similar, wiry builds, and their matching, coffee-colored ponytails, they almost looked identical, although Sara stood a few inches taller than her younger sister, and she had far fewer freckles upon her face. Though Sara was but eleven years old, and Maria was only ten, they shared an intangible quality that set them apart from others in a subtle, nearly imperceptible way.

As they stood side by side in the eye of such supreme chaos, they appeared small, tiny, even *insignificant*. Yet, the shape of their squared shoulders, and the boldness with which they faced such impending doom, was a strange contrast to their apparent irrelevance amid forces that were far more powerful than they were.

They were possessed of a rare courage, bolstered by the presence of one another, upon whom they had always been able to rely. They were siblings, fiercely loyal to each another, and without a shred of doubt as to their combined abilities.

Years of playing baseball together – during which Sara had pitched, and Maria had caught – had further enhanced their bond to the point where they had come to share an understanding of one another that was nearly telepathic in nature.

This intangible quality, which set them apart from others, was *experience*. It was the experience they had acquired from countless hours during which they had created the rhythm between pitcher and

catcher. It was the experience gained from adventures into the uncanny with their closest friends. And it was the experience that came from learning, year after year, and trial after trial, that each of them had a sister that could be relied upon – no matter what.

“You know something, Maria?” Sara asked. She felt vibrations pass through the soles of her sneakers, as the creature stepped closer, sending the force of its great weight throughout the floor. “What we’re dealing with here is... almost *certainly*... the biggest jam we’ve gotten into yet.”

“That,” Maria replied, “is an observation that I must strenuously agree with.”

The massive creature drew closer still, and the floor trembled with every step that it took, the vibrations growing stronger as it came nearer. Heavy claws sank into the hard surface of the floor as if it were no more than soft soil, and chunks of tile were pulled free.

The beast narrowed its bright, richly colored eyes at the girls, and its lips pulled back to reveal a fearsome and complex arrangement of teeth. It would have made for a rather fascinating sight, were the circumstances not so harrowing.

Maria and Sara could feel the heat of its breath wash over them, even above the warmth from the flames in the room. The exhalation was like a hot summer wind, and it caused wayward strands of hair, which had pulled free from their ponytails, to dance before their eyes.

“Sara,” Maria said in a low voice.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Sara gave Maria’s hand a squeeze, as she kept her eyes locked onto the transfixing creature that approached. “So am I.”

Maria chortled as a chunk of debris fell from the ceiling, shattering upon the floor directly before them. “Can’t you think of *anywhere* you’d rather be at the moment?”

“I can think of *many* places I’d rather be. In fact, *anywhere* but here would be an improvement. But... all things considered... I suppose it could be a tad bit worse, don’t you think? And...” Here, Sara paused to summon some (possibly unwarranted) optimism, stretching her face into a cheerful smile. “... I’m sure we’ll find a way out of this. We always do. How hard could it be?”

Maria squeezed Sara’s hand tighter. “Thanks. And, um... since you mentioned it, have you happened to think of a way that we might be able to get out of this particular predicament? I’m not trying to be a nuisance, but time *does* seem to be of the essence. This place is falling apart at an accelerated rate, to put it mildly.”

The two of them had seen many remarkable things, especially as of late, as one adventure after the next had managed to find them and their friends. Their exploits had been wondrous, and weird, and downright extraordinary. But they had never seen *anything* like that which now towered above them.

“Not to worry, Maria,” Sara told her sister. “We’ll get out of this – just you wait and see!”

A moment passed, which could not have been more than a few seconds in duration. Given the distressing predicament of the Fresco Sisters, however, it seemed like a minor eternity. The heat rose around them, as the flames continued to gain strength, and the breath of the beast engulfed them in its warm, moist clouds.

A very low, deep growl had begun in the creature’s chest, and the sound was now drifting toward the ears of the sisters. To say the very least, it was an *alarming* development.

“Okay,” Maria said. “*How*?”

“*How what*?” Sara asked.

“*How* are we going to get out of this?”

“Well... I haven’t... *quite*... figured that out, yet,” Sara confessed. “I don’t mind admitting, I’m having a bit of a hard time focusing, with this... *thing*... eyeing us for its lunch. I don’t suppose you might have an idea, do you?”

“Nope, but hopefully one will spontaneously pop into our noggins within the next three seconds or so. After all, we’ve been flying by the seat of our pants all day, so we may as well continue the trend of improvisation,” Maria said.

The creature shifted its shoulder blades and lowered its head, bringing it near the floor. At that height, its eyes were almost level with those of Sara and Maria, and they narrowed in examination of the tiny humans who stood before it. The warmth and power of the creature's breath caused the sisters to squint their eyes, and their hair danced about from the strange, organic wind.

"This would be a *really* excellent time to finish up whatever plan might be hatching in that coconut of yours, Sara," Maria pointed out.

The jaws of the beast subtly shifted, causing the teeth within to perform feats that, in perhaps the most optimistic of lights, could be deemed *interesting*. Those fantastic and terrible teeth were covered with a thin film of saliva, and they clinked together, as if in anticipation of a forthcoming meal. The creature's nostrils flared wide with inquisitive inhalations, sniffing at the air.

Though it was not yet even noon, the hour had indeed grown late for the sisters.

"Don't worry," Sara assured Maria, for though the situation appeared utterly hopeless, to simply give up was a notion that was beyond her comprehension. "Any moment now, something's *bound* to occur to us."

"If nothing else... it's certainly been one heck of an interesting day, hasn't it?" Maria asked.

Sara squeezed her sister's hand tighter, and though her voice was not quite her own, her words brought comfort nonetheless. "That's for sure," she said, as she reflected upon the series of events that had brought them to their uncanny predicament. "It has been a most *remarkable* day."

## Chapter Two

### Caught In the Cookie Jar

#### *One Hour Earlier...*

Maria's hand was just about to fall upon the stone surface of the massive statue that stood in front of her... but before her fingers could touch it, she was startled by a woman's clearly projected voice.

"*Young lady!*" came the voice, strict and stern, and sharp as a whip. It was a voice that gave the immediate impression of authority, the voice of a person who was undoubtedly accustomed to being obeyed. "*What, in the name of Amerigo Vespucci, do you think you are doing?*"

Maria was quite impressed by the timber of that voice, and she found herself compelled to freeze in place. Despite the fact that she knew she should gracefully retract her extended hand, and assume a posture of innocence and naiveté, she found this impossible to do.

The voice that had been directed at Maria was simply too powerful, and it had a rather unbalancing effect on her. It was a voice that was crisp and brisk, cutting to the core like a late autumn wind.

Instead of withdrawing her hand and assuming the aforementioned position of desired innocence, Maria stood in an off-balanced pose, limbs akimbo like a total goofball. She precariously teetered in her odd (and suddenly uncomfortable) position, while she forced her freckled face into a smile that she hoped *might* be reassuring to the woman who had so efficiently scolded her.

She was currently standing on the ball of one foot, with her toes flexed within the confines of her sneaker, desperately trying to support her awkwardly distributed weight. Her other foot was well behind her, as she had been forced to stretch it out when she leaned over the barrier that was designed to prevent people from doing precisely what *she* was doing at the moment.

One hand was stretched out toward the statue that she was attempting to lay her fingers upon. Her other hand, Maria came to notice with dismay, had taken up the practice of wildly windmilling about behind her, in an effort to counterbalance her overextended reach. As such, she did not look particularly inconspicuous, as the entire student body of Hollow Oak Elementary came to turn its eyes upon her.

It probably looked, Maria realized, a whole lot like she had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"*Young lady!*" the woman called again. "I see you are going to employ the disagreeable tactic of making me *repeat myself*, and so I shall, though I am in no way pleased with being forced to do so. And so, it is with great reluctance and irritation that I shall ask once again: *What* do you think you are *doing?*"

There were roughly three hundred students on the field trip, and all of them were currently gathered about this dialogue. Once the woman had finished her scolding, they collectively turned their eyes upon Maria, waiting to see how she would respond.

"Who?" Maria asked, as she stood precariously perched on one foot. She stretched her freckled face even farther, until her cheeks burned, testing the limits of her formidable smiling ability. "*Me?* Are you speaking to me, ma'am?"

A few giggles could be heard rippling through the sea of students, amid the shuffling of feet and murmuring.

"*Yes,*" the woman replied sharply. Her tone made it clear that she was neither amused nor bamboozled by Maria's efforts to disarm her. "*You.*"

Maria had taken the briefest of moments to return her eyes to the object of her desire: that incredible statue that she so desperately wanted to lay her fingers upon. She knew that such a thing was forbidden, but she meant it no harm.

It was, quite simply, a breathtaking sculpture. It *spoke* to her, one might say. There was something about it that she could not define.

If only she could lightly brush the tips of her fingers upon it... and surely, she would not harm it, for it was sturdily built from a single, massive slab of granite, and it was in superb condition. It was marred by only the slightest touches of age, which was quite remarkable, considering that it had most likely been built thousands of years ago.

Maria turned away from the statue once more, her fingers remaining inches from their goal. As if magnetically summoned by the power of that voice, and unable to resist its pull, she swiveled her head. She looked away from the magnificent statue that had previously held her gaze, and redirected her attention to the woman who had scolded her.

She was a sharply dressed lady in her mid-thirties, and though she was small and slender, she seemed anything but weak. Every inch of her slightly built frame radiated a professional, no-nonsense attitude, and a strength that contrasted her petite stature.

She wore a suit that was charcoal in color and immaculately tailored. Her black, highly polished shoes gleamed beneath the lights, and not a single speck of dust dared to tarnish their surfaces. Raven-colored hair was tied back into a tight bun at the back of her head, held in place by a clasp that had been fashioned from a midnight-blue seashell.

Nickel-plated glasses were perched on her slender nose, and behind the lenses, a pair of penetrating eyes were directed at Maria. Those intense eyes were a deep, rich green, startling in their clarity. They conveyed alertness and a great sharpness of mind, and Maria found herself a bit unsettled to be the newfound focus of those eyes. The woman was, in a word, *intimidating*.

Her name was Evelyn Magellan, and for the past twenty minutes, she had been giving the students a tour of the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts. As the chief curator of the museum, she had a vast and thorough knowledge of the exhibits, which she dispensed as she led the students about.

Although she had thus far conducted her tour with the utmost professionalism, she was somewhat aloof and distracted. It seemed that she was not particularly excited about giving the tour to the students, and was just going through the motions... as if she were anxious to get back to greater, more pressing matters. For Evelyn, the tour was perhaps nothing more than a bothersome obligation that she had to fulfill, before returning to the duties that truly interested her.

"Oh, *me*?" Maria asked again, trying to stall for time, as she awkwardly perched on the ball of one foot. "Nothing, ma'am. I'm just standing here. Yep. Just standing here, that's all."

Evelyn arched one eyebrow. "It appears to me that you are doing a great deal more than *just standing there*."

"Oh... well, it does a look a tad suspicious, I'll grant you that. But I always stand like this, you see," Maria assured Evelyn, as she windmilled her arm about for balance. She wobbled on one foot, desperately trying to ignore the giggles of her classmates. "It builds character and resilience, I believe."

"*That*," Evelyn slowly stated, "I find extremely unlikely."

"Well, I suppose I should also point out that I'm a bit of a weirdo, ma'am," Maria added, and this was met with more giggles from her peers.

Despite her uncomfortable position, Maria could not help but be somewhat impressed that she had thus far managed to maintain her balance and keep from spilling over. She felt as though this unconventional interrogation had been going on for an *awfully* long time.

If anything, Evelyn's expression had turned even stonier. Her voice became quieter, but somehow, this only enhanced her aura of menace. "A *weirdo*, did you say, young lady?"

"That's right, ma'am," Maria confirmed. Her tone became somber, and it was a strange contrast to the buoyant smile on her face. "A first rate weirdo, I am. You can ask anybody here. There's nothing

that can be done for it – that’s what my dad says, anyway. But then again, my dad says that being weird is a good thing; it just means you see the world in a different light, a unique perspective. He always tells me, ‘Maria, if somebody says you’re weird, you should smile and thank them!’ Or break-dance, you can also do some break-dancing as a way of expressing your gratitude, which is pretty weird in and of itself. When was the last time you saw somebody break-dance? I bet it wasn’t very recent, was it?”

Evelyn’s eyes had narrowed as Maria expounded upon her theories about weirdoes. Based on her expression, it did not appear that the curator was particularly fond of having questions about break-dancing fired in her direction.

Maria had the distinct impression that she was being closely scrutinized... in fact, she was beginning to feel something like an interesting insect beneath the lens of a microscope. Evelyn Magellan could have that effect on a person, Maria was discovering.

## Chapter Three

### The Guardian Lion Looms

Maria continued to smile, in what she could only hope *might* be a comforting manner. The other students were giggling, very much enjoying the interaction between student and museum curator. All the while, Maria teetered and tottered about, waving her arm for balance.

She really *hadn't* meant to cause any trouble. It was just that the statue she had felt compelled to touch was *so ridiculously awesome*, and she was, by her very nature, an extraordinarily curious ten-year-old girl.

She wasn't going to harm the statue... anybody could see that despite its great age, the thing was solidly constructed, and furthermore, it had aged remarkably well, considering how long ago it had reportedly been built. She just wanted to brush her fingertips across its surface, ever so lightly. Nobody would even notice... or so Maria had thought.

The statue was, as Ms. Magellan had informed the students, known as a *Chinese Guardian Lion*. However, in western countries like the United States, these statues were generally referred to as *Foo Dogs*... even though they were not *dogs* at all, but lions. This particular Guardian Lion was enormous, layered with bulging muscles, and downright *ferocious*.

Intricately detailed, the statue had clearly been sculpted by an artist of unrivaled talent and skill. Every square inch of its surface had been meticulously fashioned, and the end result was a representation so realistic, it was breathtaking.

Though there was a definite similarity to the well-known African and Asiatic lions, there were substantial differences, as well. The body of the creature was nearly identical to that of a typical lion, insofar as the distribution of its mass. It looked like a barrel-chested cat with a heavy build... but it was much, much bigger than any lion that the students of Hollow Oak had ever heard of.

The top of Maria's coffee-colored ponytail barely reached the shoulder of the humongous, stone beast. Its head towered above her, frozen in a ferocious glare, brow furrowed over its narrowed, penetrating eyes.

Its jaws were opened, displaying perfectly aligned teeth, most of which seemed to be *quite* pointy. The skin around the mouth and snout wrinkled and stretched, as it loosed its silent roar. The talent that it must have taken the sculptor to render such a likeness... it simply boggled the mind!

Its mane was long and luxurious, filled with curls and swirls, almost like an artist's stylized depiction of the waves of the ocean. The mane of Guardian Lion's hair was sculpted from the same slab of granite as the rest of the statue, but it had been crafted with such skill, each strand was visible upon careful inspection. Entwined within the mane, there had been sculpted strange ornaments, which enhanced its regal appearance.

These were not the only adornments that the Guardian Lion wore. Across its chest, there was a thick sash, imbued with many strange patterns and symbols. It, too, was fashioned from the same slab of granite that comprised the rest of the statue. Even though it was of the same color and texture as the rest of the sculpture, it seemed to be something unique to the beast itself, as if it had been draped across its thick body.

Around its ankles, there were thick, patterned bangles, embedded with the likeness of jewels and bells. Finally, there was an ornament of some odd design latched to the tassel of the Guardian Lion's tail.

The beast sat upon its haunches, and its front legs were extended, with one paw placed flat on the surface of the floor. The other paw rested lightly on a granite globe, decorated with a beautiful, geometric pattern. Earlier, the museum curator had told the schoolchildren that this sphere was a powerful symbol, known in Chinese culture as the *Flower of Life*.

The paws of the Guardian Lion were tipped with three-inch claws that looked sharp enough to shred steel, were such a thing ever called for. Its grasp upon the Flower of Life, however, conveyed a sense of gentleness and protection.

Although the stone beast was sitting, its sculptor had done a remarkable job of imbuing within it an aura of power. The creature seemed tensed, full of potential energy, and ready to pounce, given the slightest provocation.

The statue gave the impression of muscle rippling throughout the Guardian Lion's body, just beneath the skin, ready to be put to use. Strategically placed lighting within the museum perfectly illuminated every fine, meticulously honed detail.

Other than its gigantic size, the portrayal was incredibly lifelike. It was a true masterpiece of sculpture. Crafted from granite it may have been, but it looked as if it might leap into action at any moment.

It was so magnificent, in fact, that it was quite reasonable that Maria had felt compelled to linger nearby, gaping at the statue in admiration and wonder. She had found herself drawn closer and closer to the statue, as if some powerful, invisible force was magnetically reeling her in.

Inch by inch, she had shuffled nearer, until she stood in the shadow of the looming Guardian Lion, her midsection pressed against the protective barrier. And then, before she had been able to stop herself, she had begun leaning over the barrier, *stretching* and *stretching*, trying to sneak but a single, quick touch.

Which was exactly how Maria had come to find herself in her current, undesirable situation. She had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, and now all of her fellow students had their eyes glued upon her, as she hobbled, and wobbled, and teetered on one foot.

## Chapter Four

### Imminent Disaster

“I trust,” Evelyn Magellan said, her gaze fixed and unblinking upon the wobbling Maria, “that you have not the slightest thing resembling a reasonable explanation for your outlandish behavior.”

Maria smiled even wider, but she had quickly come to realize that this museum curator could not be bamboozled so easily. She scrambled for an explanation. If only she could describe how powerfully she had felt drawn to the Guardian Lion! “Well, it’s the darnedest thing, I tell ya...”

Evelyn’s hands had previously been placed upon her hips, in a manner that conveyed unquestionable authority as she barked her words of harsh reprimand. Now, with her striking green eyes unblinking and fixed upon Maria, she slowly shifted her posture. She folded her arms across her chest, and came to assume a stance that was somehow even *more* disapproving than the last.

As she continued to examine Maria, one of Evelyn’s eyebrows arched with incredulity. This, Maria decided, could not possibly be construed as a *good sign*, no matter how optimistic she might generally be.

“I was just standing here, minding my own business, you see, when-” Maria began.

But before she could try to further express the feelings that had compelled her to lay her hand upon the Guardian Lion, disaster struck. Maria felt her balance, which had previously been *dubious* at best, come undone. She felt her weight shift too far in one direction, and then back to the other, as she desperately overcompensated.

She began wobbling about at an accelerated pace, as her arms waved around in the fashion of a windmill. Disaster seemed imminent, and Maria felt powerless to undo her unfortunate course, which unraveled before her in the likeness of slow motion.

“*Uh oh...*” Maria muttered uneasily. “*Whoa...*”

At this alarming development, Evelyn lost her cold, impassive demeanor, and her face contorted with distress. She uncrossed her arms and took a half-step forward, one hand extended before her, as if prepared to pull Maria back from the unspeakable act she was about to commit.

But Evelyn remained frozen where she was, paralyzed by terror or indecision... or perhaps simply realizing that she could not possibly reach Maria in time.

The schoolchildren gasped in alarm, and at the great, collective intake of breath, Maria felt herself veering farther and farther over the barrier that was meant to separate museum patrons from the exhibit. Unfortunately, it had been designed with the intent to let visitors of all sizes view the statue – therefore, its low height made it relatively easy for Maria to tip over its edge, given her current predicament.

She summoned all of her effort, desperately trying to avoid crashing into the Guardian Lion. Yet, to her dismay, she realized there was nothing she could do. Her momentum had progressed too far in one direction, and she could not reverse it, no matter how desperately she flailed her arms.

Maria felt her waist collide with the barrier, and then her upper body began to lurch toward the looming statue. To her horror, she saw that she was about to smash into the Guardian Lion with all the grace of a bumbling, balance-impaired rhinoceros. It was true that the statue looked to be in remarkably good condition... but it was also true that it was incredibly old, and nothing good could come from crashing into its beautiful surface.

Time continued to slow for Maria, as she plummeted forward. It occurred to her that this would, in very short order, become the single most embarrassing (and almost certainly the most *expensive*) moment of her life.

Preparing for impact, she extended the arm that was closest to the statue. She opened her hand, fingers splayed apart, in a last ditch effort to brace herself and evenly distribute her weight.

Maria felt the tip of one finger brush against the surface of the statue. But then, before any more of her weight could come down against it, she felt her body being jerked backward with a great deal of force.

In an instant, she found herself with both of her feet firmly planted on the floor... and she was thankfully on the *correct* side of the exhibit's barrier. There could be heard a great wave of giggles, chuckles, and murmurs from the sea of surrounding students, as the disaster was narrowly averted at the final moment.

Turning her head, Maria saw that her older sister, Sara, had come to her rescue. One of Sara's hands was clenched upon Maria's backpack, her knuckles white with the force of her grip.

"Whew," Maria uttered quietly, as she released a shaky exhalation. "Thanks."

Sara's eyes were wide with alarm. "*Get it together,*" she whispered in a stern hiss. "*You-know-who is just waiting for a chance to get us suspended from school!*"

"I know, you're right," Maria agreed. She offered a sheepish grin. "Thanks for having my back... And I'll try my best to avoid knocking into any more precious artifacts."

"We would all greatly appreciate that," Sara said, offering a reassuring wink to her sister.

By this time, Evelyn Magellan had stalked over to Maria and Sara, and she looked down upon the two of them with nothing short of unbridled disapproval. Though she was a petite woman of slight build, and barely taller than the sisters, she seemed to positively tower above them, such was the aura of her authority.

"I'm really sorry, Ms. Magellan," Maria told the curator. "I shouldn't have done that... it was really reckless of me. I can't explain what got into me!"

Maria's apology was sincere. Though she could not adequately describe the great compulsion she had felt to lay her hand upon the Guardian Lion, the last thing that she had wanted was to potentially damage a priceless, ancient artifact. It was a magnificent statue, and Maria would have felt absolutely terrible if she had harmed it in any way.

Evelyn's clear, green eyes narrowed behind her glasses, and she peered into Maria with an intensity that was unnerving to the utmost. Maria was generally fearless, by any standards of ten-year-olds, but she found her pulse quickening beneath that steely gaze.

Once more, she felt like a bug beneath the lens of a microscope. The only thing that prevented her from taking a few steps backward was her newfound appreciation of the exhibit barrier that was behind her.

What would the curator say, Maria wondered? What manner of reprimand would this no-nonsense woman deliver? Evelyn inhaled sharply, her nostrils flaring, as if the rendering of her final judgment upon Maria required an extra large intake of oxygen.

But before she could speak, she was interrupted. A tall, towering figure lumbered forward, coming to stand beside Evelyn.

"Don't you worry, Ms. Magellan," the interloper roared. "You can't even *begin* to imagine what you're getting into with this meddling lot! *I'll* take care of these troublemakers."

Maria and Sara released a synchronized sigh at the sight of this bumbling, bellowing goon who had arrived to provide his own brand of "assistance". The sisters were not quite sure if they should be amused or alarmed by the interruption... for it was none other than Jasper Cragglemeister: evildoer extraordinaire, school janitor, and nemesis to children everywhere.

## Chapter Five

### Bandaged, Bruised, and Belligerent

"I warned you," Sara whispered to Maria from the side of her mouth. "He's just waiting for the first opportunity to get us!"

"Ugh," Maria muttered beneath her breath. "This doorknob just won't give it a rest, will he?"

Though Jasper was the school janitor of Hollow Oak Elementary, there were elements to his person that far exceeded that which initially met one's eye. Of much greater significance than his occupation as a wielder of broom and mop, was his recently unveiled status as a *mechanical engineer*.

His brilliant abilities in that field were nothing short of genius, but this was a secret that he had kept closely guarded. Jasper's reasons for doing so, as one might suspect, were all nefarious. He did, after all, have a lengthy, well-established history of getting up to no good, even before his elaborate deception had been cracked.

Jasper had been successful in defending his secrets, until but a few days earlier, when the Beans (the Fresco Sisters and their closest friends, Neil and Jack) had learned critical details of the janitor's strange past.

Even more significant than his mechanical skill set was the dark role that he served, that which was his *true* purpose... he was a spy for a group of reprehensible scoundrels who were known as the *Black Hats*. Jasper was a founding member of this band of power-hungry, immoral villains, and his loyalty to their goals was absolute.

Jack's Uncle Lefty also knew of Jasper's true purpose, and the weird history that belonged to him. They had once been close friends, working side by side in the sciences toward common, noble aspirations.

But Lefty had been forced to depart Hollow Oak only a few days ago, as he pursued his nemesis, Ebenezer Widget-Bocker, who was in possession of an immensely powerful, stolen technology. Therefore, the Beans were on their own against this, their most formidable and persistent adversary.

Jasper was, by any measure, a most imposing figure. His staggering height tallied in at six and a half feet, and he towered over his fellow adults. As far as children were concerned, he looked something like a mountain from their relatively diminutive position, from which they would have to crane their necks skyward in order to take in Jasper's full form. Oftentimes, he would blot out the sun itself, depending on the hour of the day and the position of his bearish silhouette.

Jasper's height was well balanced with an equally impressive girth. Broad shouldered and bull-necked, he was built far more like a well-fed lumberjack than a school janitor. His forearms were like birch trees, knotted with thick cords of sinew and muscle. He had huge hands, festooned with knuckles the size of walnuts, peppered with scars from a lifetime of turning wrenches and wielding blast torches.

The crowning aspect to Jasper's intimidating appearance was his black eye patch, which made for the perfect complement to his perpetual scowl. His lone, remaining eye was the color of gray-blue quartz, and it was filled with a cold, calculating menace that was ever present.

Jasper's attire was meticulously maintained, for he was a stickler for cleanliness and order, a trait that served him well in the occupation he had chosen for his double life. A khaki-colored shirt and navy blue overalls were neatly pressed and free of lint, hugging his bulky frame. His black boots were polished to a high shine, reflecting light from their oily surfaces.

Despite his high standards for neatness, however, Jasper's normally immaculate appearance was a bit... *off* today. For he had recently suffered a defeat that he deemed most heinous and unjust (though the Beans would undoubtedly disagree with that assessment), the results of which were plainly visible upon his body.

About his head was wrapped a thick, white bandage, from which his black and silver hair sprung in unruly tufts. Scrapes and bruises were visible on his face and neck, and he was walking with a

pronounced limp. One arm was immobilized within a sling (the other remained free to wield his trusty, mahogany broom).

Jasper was, in short, looking much the worse for wear.

He had suffered *many* injuries when the Beans had bested him and his accomplice within the Black Hats – the mad scientist, Ebenezer Widget-Bocker. With the aid of their own odd allies, the Beans had managed to get the upper hand in their most recent encounter... and Jasper was none too pleased about it. He was a man with a long memory, and he *would* hold a grudge, that much was certain.

Children already ranked very high on Jasper's list of most disliked things. But as for Sara, Maria, Neil, and Jack? They had gone straight to the top of that list, and Jasper would stop at nothing to exact his vengeance. To have been defeated by a group of insolent schoolchildren was, quite simply, too much for him to bear.

Though he was now bruised and bandaged, Jasper had become, if possible, even *more* belligerent than he had ever before been. Furthermore, his passion for crushing those who opposed him had reached new heights.

But this mattered not to the Beans. They had stood up to him before, and they would do so again, no matter how imposing he might be.

It was true that Jasper was an intimidating character, and he inspired fear within all those who met him... and even among those who only knew of his reputation. Nothing more than the sight of him in the halls of the elementary school would cause children to scatter in a mad panic, scrambling about as they pursued safer, janitor-free areas.

Even now, as he came closer to Evelyn in order to dispense his grumbling advice, the children that were closest quickly began to edge away. Within seconds, a wide circle formed around the Fresco Sisters and the two adults who faced them.

Nobody would volunteer to get on Jasper's bad side, and it was understood that such a thing was to be avoided at all costs. Even *adults* would go out of their way to grant him a wide berth, such was the level of cantankerous crankiness that he radiated.

Despite his terrifying nature, however, the Beans had realized that they would stand up to Jasper, regardless of whatever outlandish odds were stacked against them. He was big, he was bad, and he was surly and moody and mean. But the Beans had witnessed such foul injustices rendered by Jasper's hands, they would not – nay, *could* not – remain indifferent to his dastardly deeds.

And so it was that they came to exist in a moral arena that was directly opposed to Jasper's own wayward ethics. The hulking janitor would never relent, and he would never change his ways. But the Beans would likewise remain defiant, and resist him at every turn.

## Chapter Six

### Jasper Blows a Fuse

“Don’t be hoodwinked by these deceptive little sneaks, Ms. Magellan,” Jasper advised in his gravelly, grumbling voice. His eye narrowed to a hateful crescent as he peered down at Maria and Sara, and his corncob pipe shifted between his teeth as he spoke. “They’re nothing but miscreants! Mischievous, little punks, filled to the brim with gumption. *Gumption*, I tell you!”

When they had seen their friends in trouble, Neil and Jack had begun to approach this confrontation. Now, they came to stand just beside Jasper. They were as yet unnoticed, since the hulking janitor’s peripheral vision was sorely lacking, thanks to his missing eye.

“Mr. Cragglemeister, are you really sure that you’re up for this chaperone duty?” Neil asked. “You look a tad under the weather, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Startled by the words, Jasper leaped straight up in the air, as if he had been goosed by nothing short of a flaming poker. His face contorting with outrage, he glowered down at Neil, who stood beside his elbow. “Confound it, boy! Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“Sorry, Mr. Cragglemeister,” Neil responded politely, as he peered up at the broom-wielding behemoth. He adjusted the cap on his head, which featured the logo for the Green Beans baseball team, and scratched at his sandy hair. “But I got to tell it to you straight, sir – you don’t look so hot!”

“Maybe you should go home and take the rest of the day off,” Jack suggested, from beside Jasper’s other elbow.

At this, the janitor once more leaped in the air, startled yet again. He was not accustomed to children standing so close to him, and quite frankly, it made him a bit nervous. It was a completely new experience for him. Generally speaking, children would stay as far from him as possible... and that was exactly where Jasper liked for them to be.

“*Codswallop and hickory sticks!* Why are the two of you sneaking up on me?” Jasper demanded. “You had best respect your elders!”

“We’re just standing here,” Jack pointed out. “There’s not a whole lot of *sneaking* going on, as far as I can tell.”

“Are you giving me lip, boy?” Jasper asked, his voice rich with disdain and outrage. “Do you really think I want, or *need*, advice from a couple of mischievous, rabble-rousing, ten-year-old *punks*?”

“We’re only concerned about your well-being, sir,” Neil assured him. “You look much the worse for wear! I’m sure you’ve noticed that big bandage wrapped around your noggin. And you’re limping about quite a bit, not to mention that your arm’s in a sling. And, say – did you notice those scrapes and bruises on your face?”

Jasper spun about to glower once more at Neil, causing his ring of keys to *jingle* and *jangle* at his hip. He uttered an inarticulate sound of exasperation at the irrepressible fifth graders who were causing him such grief. His face was slowly turning redder, and Neil had a suspicion that the janitor’s ears were on the cusp of emitting streams of smoke. Finally, Jasper turned to Evelyn.

“Do you see what I mean?” he asked. “They’re full of gumption and backtalk! It’s like nothing you’ve ever seen, I tell you! The amount of guff I have to take from this unruly lot defies all reason. It used to be that children respected their elders. They shouldn’t speak unless spoken to, that’s what I always say. But *these four* – they’re a miserable, misbegotten lot, if ever I’ve seen one.”

“Maybe you should have taken a sick day,” Neil suggested, in what he thought was a most helpful manner, despite Jasper’s continuing glower and clenched teeth. “To help you recover from your recent injuries, sir.”

“Never you mind my injuries, boy!” Jasper bellowed, pointing the bristles of his broom at Neil. “I’m the picture of perfect health!”

“I’m not so sure about that...” Jack said, as he rubbed at his chin in thought.

Jasper pointed at Maria's backpack, which had come partially open when her sister had grasped it. "Why, look at what's spilling out of that bag – she's got all kinds of inappropriate stuff in there! I spot one... two... *three* baseballs, along with her catcher's mitt, not to mention whatever else might be crammed in there. Why would anybody ever need to bring baseballs to a museum, much less *three* of them? She could break something!"

Evelyn, having silently observed the exchange between Jasper and the children, finally spoke. "Interesting," she said with a flat voice. "I would have assumed a field trip chaperone would have less difficulty keeping his charges in order."

Jasper initially looked abashed by her words, but this emotion was quickly redirected into anger toward the Beans. "*Hmph*," he grumbled. "I should punish them. That's what I should do. Severe discipline, that's what this situation calls for!"

"I assure you, Mr. Cragglemeister, I have little interest in such trivial matters." Evelyn's eyes swept over the class of schoolchildren, and her expression was one of casual dismissal. "We're already behind schedule, and the tour must recommence so that I can see to my other responsibilities."

"*But... but...*" Jasper seemed genuinely flabbergasted by Evelyn's words. "But there's *always* time for punishment!"

"Perhaps on your schedule, but *not* on mine. My time is precious, and I'm quite confident that we've already wasted more than enough of it on this near disaster."

"*But... but...*" Jasper stammered, looking down at the demure woman who stood before him. He vaguely waved his broom in the direction of the Beans, wordlessly attempting to express his exasperation.

"And there is no smoking in the museum, Mr. Cragglemeister!" Evelyn added.

Standing on the tips of her toes, she deftly snatched the corncob pipe from Jasper's teeth. The Beans were astounded by this act of the plucky Ms. Magellan – rarely was the occasion when an adult stood up to Jasper!

Evelyn's head only came to the height of the behemoth's chest, he was so much bigger than her. Yet, she stood toe to toe with the janitor, not in the least intimidated by his daunting presence.

"Oh, come *on*," Jasper protested. His voice was as close to a whine as the Beans had ever heard it. "There's nothing in it, and I wasn't actually smoking. It's just from force of habit that I carry it around."

Evelyn was unmoved by Jasper's argument, and she showed no indication of reversing her decision to seize the contraband. She held the pipe pinched between her index finger and thumb, eyeing it as if it might be an item of unequalled foulness. It was by her side, but she was careful to keep it at a safe distance from her fine clothing.

Furtively looking around at the schoolchildren, Jasper leaned toward the woman and lowered his voice to a whisper. "*To tell you the truth, I, um... I feel a bit naked without my trusty pipe.*"

Though Jasper had done his best to keep his words between himself and Evelyn, the Beans had been able to hear him. At his strange admission, they burst into giggles.

"I see. You're a bit old for a security blanket, aren't you?" Evelyn asked.

This only made the Beans laugh harder. Jasper swiveled his head, glowering at each of them in turn. Then, with what must have been a *monumental* effort for him, he slowly twisted his lips into a smile. It was a visible struggle to do so, and the expression looked uncomfortable and ill-placed on his face, which was perpetually cast into a surly scowl.

"Um... *please?*" he asked, and the word seemed to almost get wedged stuck in his throat, as if it were something he had not had very much practice at saying in the past.

Evelyn was not impressed by this poor attempt at humility, and she did not return the pipe. "Keep it up, Mr. Cragglemeister, and I just might have to take that fancy broom of yours, too."

At this declaration, Jasper looked positively aghast. He gasped in horror at the very notion of losing his broom, and he reflexively clutched it closer to his chest.

Quickly stepping back from Evelyn, he gave the Beans a final glower, and then departed. He limped away, muttering dark sentiments beneath his breath, his black boots thundering across the tile floor.

“Aw, lighten up, will ya, Jasper?” Jack called out to the janitor’s back as he stomped away.

“Why is everybody always telling ol’ Jasper to lighten up?” the janitor could be heard grumbling, his face as red as a basketful of tomatoes.

He was so furious, the Beans hoped to catch a glimpse of smoke pouring from his ears, or perhaps even a spark or two. Sure, it was implausible (Jasper wasn’t a robot, after all), but he was *really* steamed. He looked like he had *blown a fuse*, as Neil’s dad, Coach, liked to say.

The Beans were a bit disappointed that nothing came shooting from Jasper’s ears, but they reasoned that they could certainly try harder, the next time they went about exasperating the cantankerous janitor. Though it was true that, in some regards, he possessed a genius intellect, in other ways, he was nothing short of a bumbling, ill-tempered buffoon – a *doorknob*, as Uncle Lefty called him.

“*You know something?*” Neil whispered to Jack. “*She’s a bit scary, but I think I really like this curator.*”

## Chapter Seven

### A Curious Thing

At this point, there could be heard a great clamor of *jingles* and *jangles*, signaling the approach of another adult. But this was not the dreaded *jingle-jangle* of Jasper's key ring. No, this was a noise that was much more pleasant to the ear, for it was generated by none other than Ms. Waffler, one of Hollow Oak Elementary's most beloved teachers.

Artistically expressive (to put it mildly), Ms. Waffler always wore a great variety of bracelets, necklaces, and interesting doodads upon her person. There were plenty of beads, bells, and charms, which resulted in her becoming a sort of walking wind chime as she moved around. She had something of a musical quality about her, which was further enhanced by the humming that she oftentimes engaged in (as was now the case).

Ms. Waffler, free of spirit and easily entranced, had become distracted by other exhibits within this rather large portion of the museum. Though she was the second chaperone of the school field trip, she had apparently missed the entire episode involving Maria and the Guardian Lion. Now, she was finally meandering over, humming melodically, her face stretched into a wide, brilliant smile.

Imbued with a perpetually positive outlook on life, Ms. Waffler was always in high spirits. The ever present bounce to her step suggested that powerful springs may have been hidden somewhere in the heels of her shoes. Today, however, she was *particularly* happy. The many wonders of the museum had lifted her to greater heights of cheerfulness, amplifying her zest for life.

"I trust these children aren't giving you any trouble?" Ms. Waffler asked Evelyn. She turned toward the Beans, offering a surreptitious wink. "I suppose I should be paying closer attention to them, but these magnificent exhibits are just so enchanting!"

"It's certainly nothing that can't be... *handled*," Evelyn assured her.

The Beans had no difficulty believing that the curator could manage whatever challenges fell into her lap. After all, she had just dispensed of Jasper in record time, without so much as blinking. There was no doubt about it – Evelyn Magellan was a competent, confident individual. The Beans certainly appreciated her dismantling of Jasper, but they didn't fool themselves into thinking that she was their ally... this was a woman who should not be tested.

"Splendid, *splendid!*" Ms. Waffler exclaimed. She quickly became distracted by something else that had caught her eye, and began wandering off. "Ooh, what's that over there? I should say that it warrants a closer examination..."

As the eccentric teacher turned, her handbag (fashioned after a slice of watermelon) spun about on her shoulder, and her long, colorful skirt twirled like the innards of a kaleidoscope.

Neil stood on his tippy-toes in order to get a better look at Ms. Waffler's mass of frizzy, disorganized hair as she departed. He was still trying to prove his theory that there might be a bird or two living within his teacher's impressively tall stack of disarrayed hair. Neil hadn't yet been able to spot any feathered creatures roosting atop Ms. Waffler's head, but he remained ever hopeful.

"I think it's safe to say that we have spent quite enough time in this part of the museum," Evelyn dryly noted, directing her words at the Beans, and at Maria in particular. "I run this tour on a very tight schedule, and you've taken it upon yourselves to cause me unnecessary delay."

"Again, I'm very sorry, ma'am," Maria told her. "Sometimes my imagination gets the best of me, but I won't let it happen again. The last thing I want is for any harm to come to your beautiful museum... or, er, to hold you up from your other responsibilities. It's a real privilege to be able to come and visit."

"We're very thankful for your surprise invitation, I might add," Neil put in, hoping to smooth things over.

The students and faculty of Hollow Oak Elementary had been filled with joy when, out of the blue, the museum had contacted the school two days previous. The purpose for the call had been to extend a most gracious invitation – a day at the museum, with all expenses paid.

This included the price of admission, lunch, and even transportation. The museum had chartered private, luxurious buses to bring the students from Hollow Oak to Portsmouth, which was a neighboring town, located on the New Hampshire seacoast.

It was a fantastic treat, and the fact that it had been so unexpected, and delivered on such short notice, made it all the more delightful. The schoolchildren were having a wonderful time, and Maria certainly did not wish to upset their generous hosts.

Ms. Waffler had been sent as the chaperone (unfortunately, Jasper had insisted on coming along, as well), while the rest of the school's staff remained behind, engaging in a much needed "catch up day" for administrative duties.

Curiously, the museum had not been particularly clear as to the reason for the impromptu invitation that had been so graciously extended. There had only been a vague reference to some cancellation that had occurred, leaving a vacancy that required filling.

But this was of little concern. The opportunity was one that had thrilled the administrators of the school, and they had been quick to accept the generous offer, pleased to be able to expose their students to such an educational treat. The fact that it would not cost the school (or the students' parents) a single cent, had made the decision an easy one.

It was peculiar, then, that the curator's brisk, standoffish demeanor was largely at odds with the generosity and kindness that the museum had displayed in extending its invitation. The professional, yet cold, attitude of Evelyn Magellan was a stark contrast to the graciousness one would have expected from the staff of such a benevolent enterprise.

Perhaps, the Beans thought, the decision had been made above the curator's head, and she was displeased with it. Maybe she was upset that the museum's generosity had resulted in her having to indulge a herd of rambunctious schoolchildren, distracting her from her more pressing responsibilities.

"Indeed. I'm sure you're all very grateful," Evelyn said, in answer to Neil's sentiment. She spoke without very much enthusiasm, granting the impression that she cared not one whit whether another child ever set foot in the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts. With a crisp motion of her wrist, she consulted the face of her watch. "It seems that I've lost too much time. I'm going to have to pass my tour duties off to my assistant."

As Evelyn looked at her watch, Maria noticed a rather curious thing. When the curator had moved her arm and bent her elbow, the sleeve of her suit jacket and blouse had inched up her forearm a small amount. This had made the delicate, silver watch visible at her wrist. But it had also made something *else* detectable, if only for the briefest of moments.

Evelyn Magellan had a *tattoo*. This struck Maria as incredibly odd, for such a thing directly contrasted the aura of professionalism that the curator projected. Maria tilted her head, so as to try to get a better look at the tattoo, but it was only visible for as long as it took Evelyn to check her watch – perhaps a second or two. Further complicating the matter was the presence of the watch's silver band, which partially concealed the tattoo, obstructing it to some extent.

Positioned at the underside of the woman's wrist, the tattoo was dark in color. It was not very large, measuring at about an inch in diameter. As for what it actually was... that was a bit more difficult to ascertain. As far as Maria could tell, it looked a bit like a cooking pot with two handles, like the kind that her parents would use to boil large amounts of pasta or ears of corn.

This struck Maria as an awfully strange choice. Why would anybody – much less somebody like Evelyn Magellan – choose to get a *cooking pot* tattooed onto her wrist?

## Chapter Eight On With the Tour

Perhaps the curator was an overly large fan of cooking. For all Maria knew, Evelyn might have tattoos of spatulas and whisks and measuring cups all over her body, hidden beneath her fancy suit. It would certainly be a weird choice, but anything was possible.

Still... it seemed so *odd*. Maria would have never speculated that the well-dressed, no-nonsense, professional woman would have a tattoo, especially of something that seemed so randomly chosen.

Maria continued to turn her head, so as to get a better look, until her noggin was turned almost completely horizontal. Apparently noticing Maria's keen interest, Evelyn shot a glare at the curious ten-year-old, and briskly returned her arm to her side. Her sleeve once more covered her wrist, concealing the tattoo from inquisitive eyes.

Evelyn then addressed the student body as a whole, amplifying her crisp voice so that it projected across the museum. "My assistant, Mr. Weatherbee, will now take over for me. Please follow him to the next group of exhibits."

A very short, mildly ruffled man appeared, shuffling forward to lead the group. He was dressed in a dull, brown suit, and he walked with a subtle gait that projected the notion that he was never in a great hurry to get anywhere, or to do anything.

Amazingly, the Beans realized that this man, Mr. Weatherbee, had been standing very close to them, yet they had failed to even notice his presence. Had he been with the tour group the entire time, they wondered?

Mr. Weatherbee had the type of personality and demeanor that enabled him to *blend in*. He was, quite simply, plain and quiet. His stature was diminutive, with slightly rounded shoulders. The generic, boring clothing that he wore did nothing to make him stand out. There was not a single thing about him that might be deemed memorable or remarkable, and one could forget his emotionless face only moments after seeing it.

The only thing about him that was a bit odd was that he had a habit of scratching at the base of his neck. He would frequently place his fingertips on the inside of his shirt collar and move them about, as if the fabric of his clothing was causing his skin to become irritated.

"Go on, follow Mr. Weatherbee," Evelyn said to the group. Turning on her heel, she made to leave, but then reconsidered. She paused and pivoted, directing her attention to Maria. "And do try your best to stay on the *correct* side of the barriers, children."

Despite her generally bold attitude, Maria felt herself withering somewhat beneath that penetrating gaze. "Yes, ma'am!" she assured the curator.

Evelyn's stern expression remained, but she must have been satisfied, for she looked away from Maria and departed. She had a brisk, powerful stride that matched her personality, her heels clicking along the tile floor with purpose.

"This way, please," Mr. Weatherbee said in a dull, monotone voice that suggested he might tumble over and begin napping at any moment.

The tour group fell in behind the shuffling assistant curator as he ambled toward the next section of the museum. Ms. Waffler traipsed along at the back of the group, shepherding the schoolchildren before her, as she openly marveled at the exhibits, releasing plenty of *oohs* and *ahs*, as various wonders caught her eye.

The Beans were somewhere in the middle of this large group. As the sea of students milled about them, talking and laughing, they gathered close.

"*Gears and sprockets!* Did you see how that lady put Jasper in his place?" asked Jack. "That was *magnificent!*"

“We’re all in agreement on that,” Neil assured his friend. “This is a pretty cool museum and all, but when she snatched that corncob pipe out of his mouth, and he was just standing there gaping, like a fish out of water... well, that was the best part of the field trip, by far.”

“And his face when she threatened to take his broom away!” Sara chuckled. “Priceless!”

“Serves him right, after all the evildoing he’s been getting up to lately. I can’t stand that big bully and all the dastardly deeds he’s been committing,” Jack said, as he began counting Jasper’s foul acts upon his fingers. “First, he tries to ruin our river and shut down Coach’s sneaker factory. *Then*, he sets up my dad to take the fall, and gets him shipped off to prison. And *then*, he helped to steal SunTech from Uncle Lefty!”

“He’s a first rate doorknob, there’s no doubt about that,” Neil said. *Doorknob* was a term the Beans had heard Lefty use to describe Jasper, and they had immediately taken a liking to it. There was no doubt that it was an apt description for the bumbling, grumbling janitor. “But on the bright side, Lefty being forced to leave town has resulted in you getting to stay with my folks again.”

“That’s true,” Jack said, and his appreciation was genuine. Though the living arrangements were temporary, Jack and his dog, Nibbler, had once more found a welcome refuge with Neil’s family. “And I couldn’t have asked for a better place to stay.”

The Beans were moving along with the crowd of students, which was slowly heading toward the next section of the museum, following behind Mr. Weatherbee and his dreary, brown suit. Even as they engaged in conversation, they could not help but look this way and that, compelled by the fascinating sights that surrounded them.

There was plenty of strategically placed lighting that helped to illuminate the artifacts. But even more effective than the artificial lighting were the oodles of sunlight that poured in from above the students.

The museum had been cleverly designed with several massive skylights, which were placed throughout the high ceiling. These enormous windows permitted the sunlight to pour into the building on fine days such as this, granting the museum a bright, pleasant atmosphere.

The current area they were in was filled with artifacts from China, such as the splendid Guardian Lion statue, and they were looking forward to whatever pieces might be held in the next.

Suddenly, however, Maria came to a halt, and her body grew rigid.

“*Hey*,” she said to the others in a lowered voice. She had turned her head, and was looking away from the direction that the tour was moving. “Look at what that galoot is doing. Do you think he’s already getting up to something again? When will that buffoon learn?”

Neil, Jack, and Sara looked in the direction that Maria had indicated. There was a wide hallway illuminated by overhead lighting, which branched off from the large, Chinese-themed room that they were currently in. On either side of the hallway, there were rectangular stands that held smaller artifacts, encased in clear cubes that were designed to protect them. Interspersed between these exhibits were framed objects that adorned the walls.

Evelyn Magellan was briskly marching down the hallway, propelled by her purposeful strides. Even from this distance, the Beans could hear her heels clicking along on the tile floor with a machine-like rhythm.

Nothing about this was particularly noteworthy. What *was* interesting, however, was that *Jasper* was clearly in the process of *skulking after Evelyn*.

He was currently doing his best to hunker down behind one of the rectangular stands in the hallway, though this was a rather ridiculous endeavor for such an oafish hulk of a man. He slyly looked this way and that, his single eye narrowed to a sneaky crescent, taking cover behind a collection of colorful vases.

Jasper was not what one would call a *stealthy individual*. Yet, despite the limitations that his unusually large size (not to mention his current limp) imposed upon him, he was doing his best to slink after the curator. Staying as low to the floor as possible, he limped from one piece of cover to the next, peering around edges to keep an eye on his quarry.

Jasper's attempts at stealth were really quite comical, and as they observed his clumsy efforts, the Beans could not help but be reminded of the time he had blundered into a booby trap... a booby trap that had been laid by a band of crafty squirrels.

The reality was, should Evelyn happen to turn around, she would instantly spot Jasper. However, she had no reason whatsoever to suspect that she was being pursued... it certainly wasn't the kind of thing one would expect to occur in her line of work.

Evelyn marched with determination down the hallway, posture rigid, her focus straight ahead. She never glanced back, and Jasper continued about his oafish endeavor unnoticed, his bearish shoulders hunched, his face scrunched into a visage of undeniable menace.

## Chapter Nine

### The Beans Hatch a Plan

“Is he... following the curator?” Neil asked with disbelief. “What’s wrong with him? Maybe he got whacked on the cranium harder than we realized during our last encounter. He does have that big bandage wrapped around his melon...”

“So much for his chaperoning duties,” Jack said. “I bet that doorknob is going to try to get his corn cob pipe back from her.”

“Let’s go after him,” Maria suggested, without the slightest hesitation.

“Jeez, Jasper was right,” Sara said. “You’re full of gumption!”

“*Chockfull* of gumption,” Neil added with a giggle. He adopted his best grumbling imitation of Jasper, and lowering his voice, he growled, “*You miserable lot of miscreants, you’re full to the brim with gumption, I tell you! Why, you’ve scuffed my precious floors with your newfangled sneakers, you have!*”

Neil’s friends chuckled at the worthy impersonation, and he waved an imaginary broom about in the air, uttering inarticulate mumbles and grumbles as he did so.

“Look, that poor curator doesn’t have any idea how crazy Jasper is,” Maria pointed out. “His marbles have long since been spilled. He’s full on bonkers, and evil to boot.”

“Bonkers and evilness... a most *heinous* combination,” Jack opined, to which the others readily agreed.

“This curator may have made a mortal enemy out of Jasper, and not even realized it. She’s awfully strict, but I think I like her,” Sara said.

“So do I,” Neil agreed. “I think we *all* like her, after the chewing out she gave Jasper.”

“Well, we can’t let her get blindsided by that goon. He’s already blown a fuse today, and in his condition, he just might swat her down with his mahogany broom when she has her back turned. I think we’ve firmly established that he’s a thoroughly unhinged lunatic, after all,” Jack said.

The others nodded in assent. They knew what it was like to get blindsided by Jasper, and it wasn’t a fate that they would wish upon anyone. They well remembered the dark schemes he had conjured in recent days, which had led to terrible disruptions in the fabric of their community.

“So let’s *go after him*,” Maria once more suggested, hopping from foot to foot in anticipation.

“Okay, I’ll go with you,” Sara told her sister. Turning to Neil and Jack, she asked, “Can you guys cover for us?”

Though they were loathe to miss out on any sort of adventure, Neil and Jack agreed that it would be for the best if they divided their number for the time being. The boys would stay with the tour group, and should Ms. Waffler inquire as to the whereabouts of Sara and Maria, they would stall her.

“Plus, we should really stick around to keep an eye on Jebediah and Cletus,” Jack pointed out.

“Oafish hayseeds,” Neil muttered, swiveling his head about to look for the pair of hillbillies.

They were not difficult to spot. Being the sons of Jasper, they were genetically inclined toward girth and height alike, and they towered a full head over most of their classmates.

They could be seen some distance off, strolling about with their thumbs hitched into the sides of their denim overalls, which were smeared with axle grease and grass stains. Each of them nonchalantly chewed a plastic straw, and they wore matching ball caps that bore the logo of their team, the Summer Squashes.

As the museum was filled with things to engage the intellect, there really wasn’t much to hold the interest of these troublemakers, who despised all things pertaining to academics. They looked completely disinterested in the many exhibits that the museum had to offer, and their eyes were glazed over with boredom.

Jebediah was in the process of tripping a much smaller student, while Cletus uttered the slow guffaw that so convincingly made him resemble the offspring of an ogre. It was about as much participation as could be reasonably expected from them.

Observing their shenanigans, Sara shook her head with disappointment. Turning to Neil and Jack, she said, "Okay, wish us well. We're off!"

"Have fun," Neil told the sisters, and he sighed wistfully over the prospect of whatever adventures he might potentially miss.

Maria and Sara began to casually work their way toward the perimeter of the student body, weaving between their classmates as they moved toward the edge of the shuffling sea of sneaker-clad schoolchildren. Soon, they had achieved their goal, and they slowed their pace as they reached the outer limits of the herd, nearing the hallway where Jasper was pursuing Evelyn.

Moments later, the sisters maneuvered themselves to the rear, slowing their steps until they had fallen behind the others. It took some stealth to evade the notice of Ms. Waffler, but the teacher was so preoccupied with the exhibits, it did not prove to be terribly difficult.

Maria could feel her heart racing as she looked at the chaperone and all the many students who were walking ahead of her. Busy with their own amusements and discussions, they seemed utterly clueless as to the machinations of the sisters. Yet, should any one of them turn around and take an interest, they could easily alert Ms. Waffler as to what was occurring, should they choose to do so.

"Sara," Maria whispered to her sister. "*Are you ready?*"

"Yep," Sara answered in a whisper of her own. "*One stumbling doorknob is in our sights and ripe for pursuit. Let's proceed, shall we?*"

They waited until they neared the hallway in question, and at the moment when they silently agreed that the peak opportunity had arrived, they scrambled for their destination. Breaking off from the large room they were in, they hustled into the hallway, taking cover behind the first suitable object they encountered – a wide stand that had a collection of colorful masks atop it.

The two of them crouched low to the floor, with their backs pressed against their newfound piece of cover. They were breathing hard from the excitement, and they peered back at the large room from which they had come. The tour group was moving on, and would soon be out of sight... they had broken away from the field trip without being detected.

Maria risked a glance around the edge of the stand, while Sara stayed put. She saw Evelyn round the hallway's corner and carry on, oblivious to Jasper's haphazard method of stalking. The janitor wasted no time in his pursuit, and soon he had vanished around the corner, as well.

"Okay, we can move up," Maria reported to Sara. "They've both gone around the corner up ahead, and they're out of sight. There's no way they can see us from where they are now."

The sisters stood up from their crouches and walked down the hallway as quickly as they could. They dared not run, for fear that the sound of their sneakers slapping the tile floor would be heard. When they reached the place where the hallway bent at a ninety-degree angle, they paused.

Leaning against the wall, they peeked around the corner. Maria went low, and her taller sister went high, and the two of them were able to finagle their heads around the turn, in what they hoped might be a covert manner.

They saw that the hallway continued for some distance, and there were closed, wooden doors to either side. Evelyn was no longer visible, but Jasper was still there. He was plodding ahead, favoring his uninjured leg. No longer fearful of discovery, he walked in the open, heading straight for a door that was at the end of the hallway.

When Jasper reached the door, he did not hesitate. Wrapping a huge hand around the knob, he twisted it open and flung the door wide, revealing what looked to be an office.

From their position of observation, the sisters could see Evelyn sitting behind a large, ornate desk within the room that Jasper had just barged into. As the door to her office burst open, she looked up from a collection of files that was spread on the desk before her.

To her credit, she didn't seem the slightest bit flustered by the odd, unwelcome intrusion. She saw Jasper at the door, and immediately demanded an explanation.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked.

"*Oh*," Jasper said, in the gravelly, condescending tone that the Beans had come to know (and loathe) so well. "I believe you know *exactly* why I'm here. Don't you, Ms. Magellan?"

And with those ominous words, Jasper swung the door closed, slamming it shut behind him. There would be, Maria and Sara knew, no easy escape for Evelyn, no matter how confident and formidable she might be.

## Chapter Ten

### Words Overheard

“I swear,” Sara gasped, as she and her sister departed their point of cover and began racing toward Evelyn’s office. “Keeping an eye on this goon is becoming a full time job!”

No longer fearful of causing too much noise, the sisters accelerated their pace to a jog. They had not an inkling of what they could do to help Evelyn out of her jam, but they raced ahead, nonetheless. They knew only that Jasper was a scoundrel – a villain who they would stand up to, no matter the odious details of his nefarious doings.

As they approached, they saw that there was a brass placard centered at eyelevel in the rich, dark wood of the door. It read E. MAGELLAN on the first line, and CHIEF CURATOR on the second.

Maria’s first impulse was to reach for the doorknob to the office and bust right in without a moment’s hesitation. She was going to *wing it*, as Coach often said, which basically meant to act impulsively and fly by the seat of your pants. But as she extended her hand, Sara grabbed her wrist and pulled her to a halt.

“*Hang on,*” she whispered. “*Before we do anything, let’s try to have a listen first.*”

Maria nodded her head in silent agreement, and the two of them slowly leaned in. They turned to the side, so that they were facing each other, and each of them could place one ear against the door’s surface. Though there was a slight muffling effect through the wood, the words of the speakers came through surprisingly clear.

“I assure you... I can’t begin to imagine why you’re here,” Evelyn could be heard saying on the other side of the door.

Jasper chuckled briefly before answering. “Oh, *really?* I find that difficult to believe, coming from such an intelligent agent. Surely you can piece together the reason for my presence.”

At this, Maria scrunched her eyebrows together and inquisitively looked to her sister. Sara could only shrug, and the two of them continued to focus every ounce of their attention on listening to the strange conversation.

There was a pause that lasted a few long seconds, punctuated only by the slightest sound of creaking wood – perhaps Jasper was pacing in the office, or shifting his weight from foot to foot. The sisters strained to hear more, over the sounds of their own breathing.

Finally, Evelyn spoke. “You’re jeopardizing everything by contacting me here. We were not supposed to meet until later. This entire thing has been a terrible idea – rushed and sloppy from the very start. I can’t even believe this last minute alteration was ever conceived... to risk our plans, simply for some *egotistical nonsense*... not that I’ve been let in on all the details, mind you. I’m very disappointed in both of you.”

At these words, which Maria and Sara could not have possibly predicted, they exchanged worried, confused glances. Evelyn knew Jasper? And she was *in league* with that buffoon? And what did she mean when she had said “both of you”? Who was the other person she was referring to? Just wait until they reported these findings to Neil and Jack – their minds would be blown, the sisters knew.

Breathing shallowly, they continued to listen, with their ears pressed flat against the door, their eyes now grown wide with anticipation and interest.

“*Hah!*” Jasper let loose with a bark of laughter. “You worry far too much, Evelyn. Things are well in hand. You know better than to question our judgment. This is a monumental step toward what we’ve been working for all these many years. This minor modification is but the *icing on the cake*.”

“We were supposed to wait for *his* signal. Only then were we to rendezvous for the next stage,” Evelyn said. “You’re not supposed to be here, not *now*.”

The sisters were doing their best to silently communicate their growing alarm to one another. Who was this “he” that they were referring to, this other person? *Could it be...?*

“Don’t worry,” Jasper replied with an air of dismissal. “I’m meeting you early, but it matters not. The plan is unchanged, and it *will* succeed. It *must* succeed!”

“Oh, is that so? Your plans always go smoothly, do they? Tell me, Jasper, how exactly *did* you acquire all those bumps and bruises? Or was that all part of the *master plan*?”

There were dark murmurings from Jasper, before he gathered enough of his senses to offer an articulate reply. “Oh, they’ll get their comeuppance, they will, those misbegotten whippersnappers. The ones who are responsible will be made to pay, I *promise* you that. Oh, yes... this will be justice at its finest, and my appetite for vengeance will be satisfied... *four times over!*”

Maria and Sara exchanged another alarmed glance. They knew that Jasper was a cantankerous lout who would never forget a grudge, but they were surprised to hear that he already had another dark scheme in mind for the Beans. His reference to the number *four* was undoubtedly reserved for Neil, Jack, Sara, and Maria – the children he most despised in all of Hollow Oak Elementary. Didn’t Jasper have anything better to do, they wondered?

“But enough of that,” Jasper said, his tone noticeably cheering up. “I wanted to commend you on your excellent performance out there. Since your initiation, you’ve been one of our finest and most accomplished agents, and it’s clear to see why. You really had me sold. Why, even *I* almost believed that act you put on out there!”

Evelyn laughed without mirth. “You know something? It really wasn’t hard to summon the energy for that ‘performance’. You just sort of naturally exasperate me, Jasper.”

“Now, listen here, Evelyn. I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but when our backs are against the wall, we’ve always pulled together for the common goal. Our objectives remain the same, our vision united!”

Evelyn could be heard sighing, and when she spoke again, it was with a tone of distraction. “I have work to do. You had best leave me to it.”

Maria and Sara heard these words, but they barely had the time to register them before they realized the danger they were in. With Evelyn’s dismissal of Jasper, he would surely come stumbling out the door within seconds, and the sisters would be standing right there, their eavesdropping completely exposed.

They had been intent on coming to the aid of the curator, and standing up to Jasper. Too late, they had realized that Evelyn did not need protection from the janitor, for she was *in cahoots* with him.

Though Maria and Sara had gathered valuable information, they had also succeeded in placing themselves in a hostile place where two powerful enemies were present. They exchanged identical, horror-stricken looks with one another, and they simultaneously seemed to gather the will to flee.

But it was already too late.

“Very well!” Jasper boomed to Evelyn in departure, his voice closer to the door.

And then... to the utter dismay of the sisters... they heard the doorknob begin to *turn*. It happened as if in the slow motion inspired by a dark nightmare, where one’s limbs refused to work as they should. The girls attempted to reverse their momentum, and get away from the door upon which they had been pressing their ears.

Yet, they had only the briefest of moments to react, and they were essentially paralyzed by the sense of detached reality with which this terrible sequence was occurring. Before they could even begin their retreat, the knob had been turned, the latch disengaged, and the door popped open.

As it did so, Maria and Sara felt their weight come tumbling forward in a terrible instant of undone balance. As one, they toppled to the floor in a flurry of arms, legs, and ponytails.

Feeling extremely vulnerable, they sensed the dark shadow of Jasper fall upon them. The janitor towered above, clenching his mahogany broom and impulsively swishing its bristles against the floor. *Whish, whish* went the broom, in what seemed to be animated agitation.

“Well... well... *well*,” Jasper murmured. His voice was full of confidence, and whatever uncertainty he had suffered from earlier, it was now gone. He had returned to his arrogant, surly self,

and he seemed to be at once angered and pleased to discover these young interlopers. “And *what* do we have *here?*”

## Chapter Eleven

### The Curator's Office

“Oh... hello there, Mr. Cragglemeister,” Maria said, as she looked up at him from the floor. She once more employed her formidable smile, displaying her bright, white chompers. “Would you believe that we were looking for the restroom, and we must have, um... got turned around somehow?”

Sara swiveled her head about the room, looking this way and that. “Nope, this surely isn't it. We must have made a wrong turn some ways back... I suppose we'll just be on our way, then...”

The sisters began clambering to their feet, dusting off their hands and whistling as they went. But before they could engage in a hasty retreat, Jasper had gathered them up. Even with only one arm available, he proved to be remarkably handy with his mahogany broom, and he performed a sort of *sweeping* gesture that somehow drew the both of them farther into the office at once.

Maria and Sara found themselves on their feet, but Jasper had managed to maneuver himself between the two of them and the open office door – effectively blocking their means of escape.

“Aw... you got lost, did you?” Jasper asked, in feigned concern. “You just want to be on your way, is that right?”

“Um... yes?” Sara asked, without very much hope.

“*You can't flimflam me!*” Jasper bellowed. Reaching out, he slammed the door closed, entrapping the girls in the office with himself and Evelyn. “*Sweet sassafras!* You must take me for a fiddle-brained fool!”

Maria and Sara did, as a matter of fact, take Jasper for a fiddle-brained fool. If anything, his current bedraggled appearance made him look even more foolish than usual. Yet, they didn't think it would be particularly wise to point this out to the hulking janitor, for he looked especially enraged at the moment, and he did have them somewhat cornered.

Not to mention, he seemed to have become a bit more *unhinged* as of late, so it was probably best not to egg him on too much... at least, not until they could escape the confines of the curator's office.

At this distance, as Jasper towered above, the sisters could smell the strong presence of pine-scented cleaning formula upon him. Jasper sure loved his janitorial supplies. It was quite possible that he used the stuff for aftershave.

“Sir, perhaps we should be getting back to the group,” Maria suggested, in what she thought to be a most helpful and pleasant manner. “Ms. Waffler will be looking for us.”

“Oh, is that right? I somehow find that unlikely. And I don't see that other pair of irreverent, punk children – those boys that you're always with. No doubt, you've instructed them to cover for your absence,” Jasper said with a dark scowl. Taking in the reactions upon the sisters' faces, he laughed. “Not quite as clever as you imagine yourselves to be, are you? You can't fool ol' Jasper, try as you might!”

From behind her desk, Evelyn could be heard sighing. “Jasper. Pipe down, will you? You're going to draw unwanted attention. Surely you realize that this isn't a soundproofed bunker. Not precisely the master of discretion, are you? It's no wonder Lefty had no problems foiling your espionage attempts for so long.”

Jasper made a squawking noise, and he clutched at his hair in frustration. “Oh, but you don't know how furious these... these... *Beans* have made me! Time and time again!” He seemed to once more be on the very cusp of loosing an anatomically improbable stream of steam from the innards of his ears.

Despite their dire circumstances, Maria and Sara could not help but share a giggle at the way Jasper said the word “Beans”... as if it were a curse word that offended him beyond measure. It gave them great satisfaction to see Jasper acknowledge that they were successfully driving him bonkers. The

sisters wondered just how red they might be able to make him turn, before sparks started shooting from his orifices.

“You’re doing a surprisingly good job of expressing your displeasure, I assure you,” Evelyn promised him, speaking with a dry wit that seemed to escape her colleague entirely.

“Oh, but they’ve scuffed my floors for the final time, I promise you that,” Jasper growled. “After *today*... after all our planning and efforts come to fruition...”

“Um, what’s going to happen, exactly?” Maria asked, hoping to catch Jasper off guard and take advantage of his frazzled disposition – and it seemed that her idea worked, for he began to eagerly babble.

“It will be splendid, I assure you!” he exclaimed, seizing his broom with fresh zeal. “It will be the finest hour of the Black Hats, and we will simultaneously exact our vengeance upon you meddling miscreants!”

“Jasper, perhaps you should pull yourself together,” Evelyn suggested. “They’re just children, after all. No need to let them get you so fired up.”

Looking abashed, Jasper replied, “Just children, eh? Well, I warned you that they’re a sneaky lot. You’ve got to watch out, or they’ll try to get you all mixed up!”

“Er, right... I’ll keep that in mind,” Evelyn said, though she seemed far from convinced.

“I was just curious, that’s all,” Maria said with a shrug. “Nobody’s trying to get you mixed up, Mr. Cragglemeister.”

Jasper scowled down at Maria, grinding his teeth in silence for a moment before responding. “I don’t know how you punks bested me last time, even with the aid of my precious *Mecha-Machine*... but not today, my wee little troublemakers... not today. Today is a day that belongs to the Black Hats, and to the Black Hats *only!*”

As Jasper ranted and raved, Maria was connecting some dots inside of her head, and she finally drew a correlation about the tattoo she had seen earlier. She turned away from Jasper, spinning to face Evelyn, who sat behind her desk in a high-backed, brown chair with large, brass rivets.

Pointing an accusatory finger at Evelyn, Maria said, “That tattoo I saw on your wrist... I didn’t get a very good look at it during the split second it was exposed. I guessed that it might be a cooking pot, but that wouldn’t make much sense, would it? Nope... it isn’t a pot, is it, Ms. Magellan? It’s a hat. A *black* hat.”

## Chapter Twelve

### Famous Faces and Uncharted Places

Evelyn did not answer the query, and she looked impassively back at Maria. But the sisters could have sworn that the curator flinched the slightest amount, as if the admonishment had caused her some small degree of guilt or remorse.

“Yes... I suppose you thought you were rather clever to notice that, eh?” Jasper chuckled.

“Um, no, not particularly,” Maria said. “I was just standing in the right place at the right time. Ms. Magellan checked her watch, her sleeve pulled back, and then I could see it for a moment.”

“It is a symbol of allegiance to our group. All among our number have willingly received the mark, in order to further prove their loyalty to our mission,” Jasper elaborated – without need, of course, but he was in an especially boisterous and talkative mood today. He was undoubtedly emboldened by the great, mysterious victory that he felt was near at hand. “Why, I have the very same tattoo upon my *own* wrist... though you weren’t quite clever enough to ever detect *that*, were you?”

It was true that Maria and Sara had never seen a tattoo on Jasper, but this was a minor point. Such a secret was quite insignificant, considering all the far more outrageous aspects to his strange past.

As Jasper needlessly expounded upon the grandness of the cause of the Black Hats, and how critical it was that their members each held unquestionable loyalty to the organization, the girls had a moment to examine their surroundings. The curator’s office was an interesting, finely appointed room.

Unlike the rest of the museum that they had seen thus far, there were no tiles here. Instead, the floor was built with lengths of a dark, rich wood, which creaked somewhat as the occupants moved about. In the center of the floor, there lay a beautiful Persian rug, imbued with patterns and colors that engaged the eye.

Evelyn’s desk was a broad affair that had been ornately fashioned from fine pieces of cherry wood. Atop its wide surface, there were a number of items, such as a nameplate, a canister of writing implements, protractors, and compasses.

In one corner of the desk, there was a large globe. Beside it, there was the corncob pipe Evelyn had taken from Jasper. There were also a great many papers and folders spread about, which she had clearly been in the process of examining.

Most notable, however, was a map of the earth, half covered by the other papers on the desk. It had been written upon dozens of times with a red marker, though from their position, Maria and Sara could not make out what the annotations actually said.

There were also several “X” marks, which had been placed at various points on the map with the same red ink. They were spread across the earth, spanning from continent to continent... it was an intriguing aspect to the map, to say the least.

If there was any rhyme or reason to the placement of the X marks, the sisters could not discern it – at least not while trying to examine the partially concealed map upside down, and standing back from it at such a distance.

Evelyn had been interrupted in the midst of something most peculiar... something that had been important enough for her to leave the responsibilities of guiding the field trip to her assistant. What could she be up to, the sisters wondered? What could the purpose of this fascinating map *be*?

As Jasper continued to babble, Maria and Sara seized the precious opportunity to scan the rest of the office. Unable to read the map with any amount of careful scrutiny from their current position, they went about searching for additional clues. They slowly swiveled their heads and shifted their eyes, so as to hopefully avoid suspicion of their clandestine activity.

The entire wall behind Evelyn’s desk was filled with books. Custom cases and shelves had been built into that portion of the office, from floor to ceiling. There was a broad array of titles, displaying

such a variety of color, material, shapes, and sizes, it made for a rather interesting (and strangely intimidating) mosaic behind the curator.

To Evelyn's right, there was a wide, panoramic window that provided a wonderful view of the Portsmouth harbor and the vast, seemingly endless ocean beyond. Ships gently swayed with the rhythm of waves, and laborers could be seen scurrying about the docks as they conducted their duties.

Dark clouds appeared in the distance, and it seemed that a storm might have been approaching from the sea. But it had not yet reached shore, and for the time being, the day remained beautiful.

An abundance of sunlight penetrated the window, bathing the office in its warming rays. Through the glass, the faint cries of seagulls could be heard as they circled above the docks, calling to their feathered colleagues who glided about on the currents of air.

To Evelyn's left, there was a wall that featured many portraits, rendered by oil paint and kept within frames that looked expensive enough to befit their current home in a museum. Though many of the faces were not immediately identifiable to the sisters, they did recognize most of the names that were placed beneath each of them, thanks to their studies of history in school.

There were paintings of Marco Polo, Francis Drake, Isabelle Eberhardt, and Walter Raleigh. Others contained likenesses of Ponce de Leon and Amerigo Vespucci, and the sisters could not help but remember that Evelyn had cried out the name of the latter as an exclamation of alarm, when she had caught Maria attempting to touch the statue of the Guardian Lion. There was a portrait of Christopher Columbus, as well – an explorer whom any middle grader would be familiar with.

A man who was dressed in the garb of a desert traveler was represented in a painting, standing beside a camel. Beneath this portrait, a plaque read: "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that all was vanity; but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, and make it possible." –T.E. Lawrence.

One painting stood out from the others, for it contained two individuals, rather than one. The plate beneath it read, "Meriweather Lewis and William Clark". Beside it, there were portraits of John Smith and Henry Hudson. There was even a painting of Neil Armstrong, who the sisters recognized as the first man to ever set foot on the moon.

Undoubtedly, there was a common theme among this collection of portraits – they were all famous explorers; people who had earned their spots in history by venturing into previously uncharted places.

There was something else in the office... something that looked at odds with the rest of the décor. Beside the curator's desk, there stood a wooden sculpture of a penguin. It was about two and a half feet in height, and it was quite plump. Its belly was white, its back was black, and it had webbed feet and rigid wings. Its somewhat whimsical appearance contrasted the otherwise somber aura of the office.

"*Hey! Are you paying attention?*" Jasper demanded, elevating his gravelly voice. "How *dare* you let your minds wander while I'm lecturing you!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Cragglemeister, we're hanging on your every word," Maria assured the janitor. "We were just admiring this wonderful collection of artwork over here, that's all."

"We have the utmost respect for history, you see," Sara told him. "We're big fans of our school lessons."

"For all the good it's done you," Jasper grumbled. "You've failed miserably at the one lesson that you should have absorbed long ago – respect for your elders!"

"Um, right," Sara agreed, without very much enthusiasm, for she was being instructed by a most unethical and cantankerous galoot. "Respect for our elders, it is. Words to live by!"

"You see?" Jasper asked of Evelyn, imploring her to his cause. "Full of gumption and pickled beets, they are. Now, perhaps you're starting to see the picture that I painted for you, and the amount of insolence I'm dealing with here."

"*Pickled beets?*" Maria whispered to her sister.

Sara could only shrug in return, as she stifled a giggle. She knew it was probably best not to laugh too audibly in front of Jasper at the moment.

“Indeed,” Evelyn said, in apparent agreement with the assessment. With a sigh, she added, “I suppose they must be punished, after all.”

“Yes!” Jasper exclaimed, very nearly leaping out of his boots in his excitement. “Now *that’s* the ticket!”

“Very well, Jasper,” Evelyn said in her crisp, business-like tone. “*Bring them closer.*”

## Chapter Thirteen

### The Flip of a Switch

“Now, hold on a moment,” Sara said, stalling for time, as she began edging backward. “We should probably just get back to the group. I can see that you’re a very busy woman, and we’ve *really* taken enough of your valuable time, for which we’re most apologetic.”

“If we were to stick around in order to be punished, why, that would be just plain rude of us, wouldn’t it?” Maria reasoned. “We couldn’t possibly impose any further upon your day. Probably for the best if we just moseyed on back to the hallway, and maybe you could just sort of point us in the direction of that bathroom we were searching for...”

Jasper let loose with a diabolical guffaw that was actually quite bone chilling, all things considered. He had crept up behind the sisters, and they could once more smell the strong aroma of pine-scented cleaning formula, and hear the swishing of the mahogany broom’s bristles upon the floor. He loomed above them, and he looked positively exuberant with the prospect of their impending punishment at the hands of the curator.

With such a thing so close at hand, his face twisted with malicious delight. The combination of his imposing height, girth, and proximity made him as intimidating as ever, despite his bevy of injuries. With his lopsided brand of justice about to be rendered, he seemed to have forgotten all else.

“You’d like to mosey out of here, would you? I don’t think so,” Jasper chuckled. “Things have gone *way... too... far...* to let you simply traipse out of here, you half-pint meddlers.”

“*Jasper!*” Evelyn barked. “Enough of your ridiculous pontificating. This is a museum, not a Shakespearean drama. Bring those two closer, at once.”

“Of course,” Jasper growled, stepping nearer.

Maria and Sara felt the bristles of the janitor’s broom prodding their backs, slowly egging them forward. Jasper once more proved to be surprisingly deft with his mahogany broom, and he wasted no time shuttling the sisters toward Evelyn’s desk, despite their resistance. They stepped closer and closer, prodded on by Jasper, until they were standing atop the Persian rug in the center of the office.

“Take it easy, Jasper!” Maria said.

“Lighten up!” Sara added.

“Oh, no!” Jasper retorted. “Not today! Everybody’s always telling ol’ Jasper to lighten up, but *not today!*”

“Closer!” Evelyn ordered, and she stood from her chair, beckoning them toward her desk.

Jasper continued prodding the sisters with his broom, and he was none too gentle about it.

“Closer!” Evelyn repeated.

The curator was now slowly walking from behind her desk, coming around the edge of it. Soon she stood beside the strange penguin sculpture, and she examined the sisters with her penetrating gaze with such intentness, it seemed as if she might be boring through their very beings with her eyeballs. What on earth did she have in store for them?

“Just a *little* closer,” Evelyn instructed.

Jasper complied, once more prodding Sara and Maria with his broom. They stepped off of the Persian rug, and they were now almost face-to-face with the curator.

“There!” Evelyn announced. “That will do. Now, Jasper, you should probably back up a bit.”

Chortling with glee, Jasper took a step back from the troublemakers he had so elegantly delivered with a few sweeps of his broom.

“Back up a bit more,” Evelyn ordered. She took her eyes from the sisters and closely examined Jasper’s position. “A bit more. Go on, a bit more.”

“Okay,” Jasper readily agreed, shuffling backward one step at a time with each additional instruction. “But get on with the punishment, won’t you?”

“Just a *bit* farther,” Evelyn encouraged, motioning with the fingertips of one hand.

Jasper sighed with exasperation and took a giant step backward. If he was at all confused by Evelyn’s odd directions, he was too excited by the prospect of exacting his vengeance upon the two captured Beans to be very concerned. As for Maria and Sara, they could only exchange baffled looks with one another. Would this be their best opportunity to attempt an escape, they wondered?

“Hmm. I’m afraid that’s just a little bit *too* far,” Evelyn said thoughtfully. “Now, come forward just a bit... just a half step more. Ah, that’s good. And now, a bit to the left... a bit back to the right... there you go. *Excellent.*”

Jasper did as he was told, and he finally began to sense that something was a bit... *off*... about the way Evelyn was directing him this way and that. His single eye began to narrow in the dawning of suspicion, and the skin above his patch furrowed.

It was at this moment that he came to the realization that perhaps he had made a critical error in judgment... but by then, it was too late.

Evelyn’s hand had come to rest gently atop the head of the strange penguin sculpture. When next she spoke, her voice was low, and tinged with the faintest touch of regret. “Goodbye, Jasper. I wish things could have been different.”

Jasper opened his mouth, as if to respond, but no words came forth. His narrowed eye opened wide with alarm, but there was nothing to be done for it. He glanced down, and it was then that he belatedly realized that he had positioned himself exactly in the center of the Persian rug – a rather precise location for him to have been directed to.

Evelyn’s hand made a slight motion, depressing some small amount of force down upon the beak of the penguin. As she did so, its head moved subtly, as if nodding in agreement. There was heard, quite clearly, a very audible *click* – signifying the flipping of a switch hidden inside of the sculpture.

As this was done, the floor beneath Jasper’s feet seemed to *disappear*. It happened so suddenly, it might have been an illusion. One moment he was standing there, and the next... he was gone.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Now That's One Sturdy Broom

"Gobstoppers," Maria whispered.

Turning her awestruck eyes to the curator, Sara asked, "Did you just... make Jasper *disappear*?" Evelyn was nonchalant in her response. "Why, yes. I suppose I *did*."

As Evelyn had depressed the switch that was hidden within the penguin, a concealed trapdoor had opened up in the middle of the office, swallowing both Jasper and the Persian rug he had been standing upon. But as the sisters eyed this strange development, they could see that the chute that was hidden beneath the trapdoor had not *completely* gobbled up the janitor.

Propped against the floorboards was the mahogany broom, arranged horizontally across the gap of the trapdoor. Wrapped around the shaft of the broom was Jasper's huge hand, and the sound of a telltale grumble came from within the hole that had just opened up in the middle of the office.

Uncertain of what had just occurred before their very eyes, the sisters slowly crept toward the place where Jasper had dropped. With the utmost caution, they peered over the edge of the opening. The hole was perfectly square, indicating that it had been purposefully (and rather cleverly) engineered into the floor of the office.

The Persian rug had long since vanished, disappearing into the mysterious hole that had opened up. Jasper's weight upon the rug was more than enough to force it into the dark chute below him, and he had likewise plummeted within.

The only thing keeping him from falling farther was his mahogany broom, which he had somehow managed to maneuver into a horizontal position as he fell. With one end of the broom on either side of the trapdoor, the cleaning implement now had the dubious task of supporting the janitor's entire suspended weight.

There, Jasper dangled. He held onto his broom with one hand, his knuckles white with exertion. He could not lift his other arm to assist, for it was bound in the sling. He peered up at the sisters as they approached, and his face was as red as a basket of superbly ripened strawberries. His teeth were clenched with the effort of hanging on, and a bead of sweat ran down his temple.

It was a most peculiar sight. And one that Maria and Sara found to be hilarious.

"Now that's one sturdy broom," Maria noted with amazement.

And it was true, for though Jasper's mahogany broom flexed and bowed beneath his tremendous weight, it held fast, refusing to splinter or snap in two.

"Hey, look at that," Sara said. "There it is!"

She was pointing at Jasper's hand, where he was holding on for dear life. The sleeve of his shirt had pulled back, exposing his wrist and part of his forearm. There, they could see something that had always before been hidden to them.

Partially concealed by the band of his wristwatch and a thick layer of arm hair, there was a small tattoo. It was identical to the one that Evelyn had, shaped in the likeness of a Black Hat. Of course, Jasper's wrist was so thick, the tattoo was quite insignificant on his person, almost like a birthmark, or a smudge of spilled ink that had taken on a curious shape.

Evelyn appeared beside the girls, and she peered down at Jasper with a cool, calculating interest. "Ah. Still holding on, are you? I was hoping for a cleaner descent, I must admit."

"What's gotten into you?" Jasper squawked. "How dare you do this to me? Don't you realize who I am? *Don't you realize what you've done?*"

"Yes, yes, it's all quite shocking, I'm sure. My apologies, Jasper, but it's all for the best. You'll see in the end." Evelyn considered this for a moment. "Unless if you don't, of course. But perhaps you'll come around, eh? One can always hope."

“This is the blackest of betrayals! The darkest of double crossings! There will be no forgiveness for such treachery, I tell you!” Jasper bellowed, though it was difficult to take him very seriously, as he dangled below them, holding fast to his broom for support.

“Oh, dear. He’s starting to pontificate again,” Evelyn told the sisters. “Once he gets going, it’s oftentimes difficult to stop him, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, yes, we know all about that,” Sara assured the curator.

“You will never, *ever* get away with this!” Jasper promised. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll make you pay for this insult!”

“You see?” Evelyn asked the girls. “There he goes, promising his doom and gloom, ranting about this and that, carrying on about the many grand splendors of his remarkable vision.”

“I take exception to that!” Jasper squawked.

“Young ladies,” Evelyn said to the sisters. “Will you be so kind as to assist Mr. Cragglemeister in his journey? He seems reluctant to depart.”

“Gladly,” they answered in unison, and without the slightest hesitation.

This was a most unique situation, and Maria and Sara felt no qualms about assisting Evelyn in her attempt to dispatch Jasper. He had done such dastardly things in recent days, it was hard to summon any sympathy for him. As the sisters edged closer to the trapdoor, an alarmed look came about Jasper’s face.

“Oh... hello, little children. I’m sure you understand that I was just kidding about all that nonsense about, you know... punishment... and vengeance... and you know, all that stuff I said about you being miserable, misbegotten punks. What say you help ol’ Mr. Cragglemeister up, and we’ll have some milk and cookies, and have a good laugh about all this?”

“*Milk and cookies?* Holy macaroni, Jasper, you really are a fiddle-brained fool, aren’t you?” Sara asked. “Did you actually think we would fall for that?”

Seeing that his weak attempt to hoodwink the girls had failed in spectacular fashion, Jasper returned to his previously enraged condition. He snarled up at them, “Listen, you punks! Don’t you *dare* do this, or I *swear* – it will be the *last* mistake you ever make!”

“Pipe down, you doorknob!” Maria advised in response to this threat. “You’re always spouting off about one thing or another. How about you try saving your voice for a bit?”

“You’re not scaring anybody, Jasper,” Sara told him. “You already tried to crush us with your giant Mecha-Machine, and we got the best of you. After all the things you’ve done to us, you probably think you can just push us around, but it’s not working, is it? Don’t you get it? We’ll always stand up to you – no matter what.”

The sisters had crept to the very edge of the trapdoor, and now they carefully lowered themselves into kneeling positions. Pressing the rubber soles of their sneakers against the wooden floor for purchase, they grabbed hold of the broom and began to slowly push it.

Doing so was not the easiest of feats, but with their combined strength, they were able to inch the end of the broom toward the waiting hole. Once it passed the edge of the trapdoor, Jasper would no longer be supported by anything... and he would plummet like a stone. This, of course, did not go unnoticed by the janitor.

“Don’t you dare! Stop where you are!” Jasper ordered. With his other arm in the sling, he could do nothing but hang on and watch. As his undesirable fate seemed to become increasingly likely, his tone had shifted from one of outrage to that of sheer disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re going to wrong ol’ Jasper like this... you miserable children. I always knew you were punks!”

“Well, I really think you had this coming, Jasper,” Sara told him. “You’ve been up to no good for a long time now. I’m sure you’ll be fine, so long as you land on that rock-like head of yours.”

“And by the way – you stink like one of those cheap air fresheners for cars,” Maria added. “You know what I’m talking about. Those ones that are shaped like trees, with the pine scent. Cleaning solution should never be used as aftershave, in my humble opinion.”

“That’s preposterous! I take my cleaning responsibilities very seriously, I’ll have you know!” Jasper rebutted.

“Scoot, scoot, scoot,” Maria said, as she and her sister continued to slowly push the broom, inching it closer to the edge of the trapdoor’s hole. “Just scoot right along there, Mr. Cranky Pants!”

“I’m telling you, for the last time,” Jasper growled, as his imminent fate closed in upon him. “Don’t you dare do this! Or I *will* make you pay, I *promise* you that!”

“And *we’re* telling *you* for the last time,” Sara answered. “We’re *not* afraid of you.”

There was a moment where the sisters could see that the statement had struck at the core of Jasper. He realized the truth of those words, and they could see the fear in his single eye, mingled with outrage and disbelief. As outlandish as it might seem to him, it was *true*. These children really *weren’t* afraid of him. Their gumption knew no limitations.

No sooner had this realization struck Jasper than the end of the broomstick went over the edge of the hole. Jasper’s weight made him plummet like a bowling ball, and he fell into the darkness below.

“*Curse... you... whippersnappers!*” his voice could be heard, growing fainter as he fell.

There also came the sounds of many *bings* and *dings*, and *bangs* and *booms*, as he thudded his way down the mysterious chute, as well as the interspersed exclamations of “*oof!*”

After several moments of these unruly noises, there was silence from the shaft. There was only darkness, and a mild draft of cool air, whispering up and into the office.

## Chapter Fifteen

### A Change of Tone

“Well, that was bound to happen, sooner or later,” Evelyn said. She briskly dusted her hands together in a gesture of finality. “Though such a thing will result in drastic life changes, I feel quite relieved that it’s behind me. Engaging in a double life is *quite* exhausting, let me tell you.”

Panting with the exertion of their Jasper-dispelling efforts, the sisters peered into the gaping, darkened hole that had been exposed when the trapdoor had sprung open. They had only a brief moment to do so, for with a mechanical *whirl* of sound, the door quickly returned to its closed position, sealing the chute away from their eyes.

When the trapdoor was closed, the seams of its design blended in quite well with the hardwood flooring. Its edges were difficult to spot, even though they were no longer concealed by the carefully placed Persian rug. There was no indication that the trapdoor had, only seconds earlier, gobbled up a cranky janitor and his trusty broom.

Maria and Sara eyed the curator with curiosity, wariness, and even more respect than they had previously held for her. She had just dumped Jasper down a trapdoor, which had earned her oodles of bonus points, yet the sisters were by no means ready to let their guards down entirely.

It was proving incredibly difficult to ascertain the woman’s motives and loyalties – after all, she had admitted to being an operative of the Black Hats, which was quite possibly the most fiendish enterprise on the face of the planet.

Perhaps her feud with Jasper was nothing more than an internal conflict that existed within that heinous organization, and not a condemnation of the Black Hats themselves. Evelyn and Jasper may have both been vying for a similar role in the hierarchy, with this clash simply being a manifestation of that power struggle.

The curator had stepped back from the trapdoor and resumed her former position, standing beside her desk (and penguin). It occurred to the sisters that they could most likely make a break for the office door and engage in a successful escape. But they could not simply bolt, without the acquisition of some answers... their minds had been too thoroughly intrigued by this curious series of events.

There was no way they could simply leave things as they were. They needed answers... and they were determined to get them. Though they did not verbally communicate this thought, they were confident that they were in agreement on the matter, for they understood one another as thoroughly as they knew their own selves.

Sara faced Evelyn and began the questioning. “Um... he’s not... you know... *dead*, is he?”

“We’re not real big fans of Jasper. In fact, we think he’s downright evil, and a big meanie to boot,” Maria explained. “But still... we would feel pretty lousy if we actually *killed* that deranged lunatic.”

At the expression of these sentiments, Evelyn threw back her head and laughed uproariously. Both of the girls jumped slightly at the sound, for it took them off guard. Perhaps because of her brisk, professional demeanor, the sisters had not really perceived Evelyn as a person who was *capable* of laughter. But laugh she did, and it was a warm act that made her shoulders shake.

Wiping a tear from the corner of one eye, Evelyn said, “Heavens, no! I’m sure he’ll be fine. Why, that buffoon is the one who engineered that hidden trapdoor into my office years ago, though he clearly forgot about it in his excitement.”

“Well... what happened to him, exactly?” Sara asked.

“Oh, don’t worry. That trapdoor simply opens into a chute that dumps into the basement’s air duct system. Now that I think of it, he’ll probably have a pretty good time down there, once he gets his bearings and his eye adjusts to the darkness... after all, there should be an abundance of dust bunnies for

him to wrangle up with that ridiculous broom of his. In any event, it should certainly keep him out of my hair for a little while.”

“Uh... okay, then,” Sara said. She was a bit taken aback by the curator’s rapid transformation in demeanor, but she pressed on. “That trapdoor was mighty impressive, I have to admit. And we’re very grateful for you having assisted us. But I gotta ask you, Ms. Magellan... what’s with the penguin? Of all the places you could have hidden the switch for this marvelous trapdoor, why did you pick *that*?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Maria said. “I have to tell you, its presence seems a bit... *weird*, in this finely appointed office of yours. It just doesn’t fit with everything else.”

“Oh, this?” Evelyn asked, as she adoringly patted the head of the resolute, whimsical penguin, who loyally stood at attention beside her desk. “This little guy has special meaning to me. He was sculpted in the likeness of the *Magellanic Penguin*. The artist who crafted him did a wonderful job, don’t you think?”

“The... *Magellanic... Penguin*?” Sara repeated.

She had, of course, seen penguins before, but she had not heard of this particular species. It was impossible to ignore the similarity between the *Magellanic Penguin* and Evelyn’s own last name... surely there was a connection there.

Sara exchanged a quick glance with Maria, who shrugged in return. They were both thinking the same thing: Evelyn’s tone and behavior had undergone a remarkable change since she had disposed of Jasper.

Whereas previously she had been curt, standoffish, and intimidating, she now seemed much... *warmer*. There was a twinkle within her eyes, and a kindness to her smile. She had adopted an aura of friendliness and approachability that seemed – at least on the surface – to be truly genuine.

But was it all an act? Could she possibly be trusted? What were they to believe? Jasper had said that Evelyn was an agent of the Black Hats, and she had admitted this to be true. As such, wasn’t a big part of her job to fool others?

Despite the uncertainty of the situation, the sisters were undaunted. For they had seen many strange things in their days, and experienced many scenarios that went well beyond the norm. And they had each other, and that was comfort enough to face any challenge.

“Can you tell us more about this Magellanic Penguin?” Maria asked. “Why is it called that? Did you discover it yourself?”

Evelyn once more erupted with a burst of laughter. “Did *I* discover it? I *wish*! Oh, what a fine honor that would have been.”

“So... why exactly is it called the Magellanic Penguin, then?” Sara asked. “It can’t be a coincidence... It has the same name as you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does, but not by my own doing. I can’t take any credit for discovering this wonderful bird. It wasn’t me, but my *ancestor* who made the discovery in South America,” Evelyn explained.

Maria exchanged a sideways glance with her sister, and the look in her eyes conveyed that she suspected Evelyn might be a tad bit bonkers herself, in the tradition of the other members of the Black Hats whom they had already met. Perhaps the madness of Jasper and Ebenezer was contagious, and it had spread like a cold throughout their organization.

“You’re, uh... you’re not telling us that you’re related to...” Maria trailed off, not quite able to give voice to such an absurd thought.

Evelyn smiled in return, and she walked toward the collection of paintings that adorned one wall of her office. She stopped at one of the portraits and struck a pose beside it, placing her hands on her hips and tilting her head slightly to one side. Her green eyes sparkled with a mixture of mischief and delight, and she looked to the sisters, waiting for their reaction.

“Well?” she asked. “What do you think?”

There was an undeniable resemblance between Evelyn and the man in the portrait. The ears, the cheekbones, the lines of their faces... even in the subtle way in which they held themselves as they looked ahead.

Most telling, however, were the eyes. The eyes of the man in the portrait held a similar, intangible quality to those of Evelyn, even though they were of different color. They were penetrating, deeply intelligent, and touched by something else that was perhaps best described as *perpetual curiosity* – a drive to learn and discover.

Not quite believing what they were looking at, nor the obvious conclusion that they were being guided toward, the sisters let their eyes roam to the name that was engraved upon the placard that was mounted beneath the painting. It read: FERDINAND MAGELLAN.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Legacy of Magellan

The portrait was of *Ferdinand Magellan*. It was a name that the sisters knew well from their studies of history. He was the first man to successfully lead an expedition that circumnavigated the globe – that is, to travel around the entire world, circling back to where the daring, pioneering voyage had originally begun.

But though they knew the name, the sisters had not put together a connection between Evelyn and Ferdinand. It simply seemed too implausible. They had never suspected such a thing. It seemed rather preposterous... what were the odds that she might be a descendent of the legendary explorer, who had lived and died five centuries earlier?

“Are you... telling us...” Maria trailed off, once more unable to give voice to the notion.

Evelyn smiled in return. “Why, yes! Surely you can see the resemblance between myself and my ancestor.”

Sara pointed a finger at the portrait. “So... you’re...” She realized that she must seem rather dimwitted, voicing her thoughts in such an inarticulate manner. But like her sister, she was having difficulty accepting the suggested conclusion.

“That’s right,” Evelyn assured them. “I am one of the last living descendents of Ferdinand Magellan.”

As unlikely as such a thing seemed, Maria and Sara were inclined to believe Evelyn. Her confidence was quite convincing, and the resemblance between herself and the famous Magellan (a man whose face they remembered from their history books), was undeniable.

“His blood runs within my veins, and our familial curiosity is what propels me through this life,” Evelyn explained, her voice filling with passion. “Our lineage has passed down the knowledge, artifacts, and secrets that began with his epic voyage around the globe, and I am now the trusted caretaker of that estate, which is both intellectual and material in nature.”

“Hang on,” Sara said. She paused, and her eyes squinted in concentration, as she searched through the confines of her memory banks. “I don’t remember Magellan having had *any* surviving children. How could you be his descendant?”

Evelyn looked impressed. “Very good, young lady! Most people aren’t aware of that fact. I see you paid careful attention to your lessons in history. And the official records are in agreement with what you were taught, of course.”

“Well, then?” Maria asked. She was somewhat incredulous at this obvious contradiction. The words and motives of Black Hats, she was quickly discovering, were difficult to pin down. “So you’re *not* related to Magellan?”

“Oh, but I *am*,” Evelyn said, and her voice was resolute with confidence. “I promise you, I *am* the descendent of Magellan, and this is nothing but the truth. This shall become clear to you in time, and you will be as free of doubt as myself on this matter. I said that the *official* records of history reflect the misconception that there were no surviving children of Magellan. But *that*... that is not *the complete story*.”

“Um... Perhaps you might explain further,” Maria suggested. Her curiosity had been triggered, and this was most definitely a poor place to end the tale. She had begun fidgeting, and her hands were moving for emphasis. “Please, keep going!”

Evelyn was up to the challenge, and she eagerly continued. “The history books indicate that Magellan had no children – at least, none that survived. However, this is not true. He *did* have two children who survived: a pair of sons named Rodrigo and Carlos. But when they were still young, they were taken to a remote location for their own safety. They did not die. Those deaths were falsely reported, for their own safety.”

“What were they in danger of?” Sara asked.

“Magellan made many political enemies during his prestigious career, for there was an incomprehensible amount of competition in his field. The powerful European countries of the day – and this was the 1500s, mind you – were engaged in a desperate race to establish routes by sea that would give them access to the Asian kingdoms. It was believed that whoever could find the passage first would be granted wealth, power, and control over their rival nations.

“As you can imagine, the stakes were incredibly high. During his career as an explorer, Magellan had been betrayed many times. Even the king of his native land, Portugal, ostracized him, disregarding all of his hard work. It was this betrayal that prompted Magellan to depart for Spain, from whence he would lead his legendary voyage, the circumnavigation of the world.

“But he learned from his past encounters, and he never forgot those who had feigned friendship, only to turn on him. Consequently, he came to develop a deep mistrust of many people that he interacted with, but particularly of those who held power over him. Only the closest of his companions at sea, those who had proven their loyalty beyond question, earned his complete trust.

“With the birth of his children, Rodrigo and Carlos, Magellan realized that they might be used as leverage against him, should the King of Spain decide to extort him, as his previous king had done. It was this fear for their safety that compelled Magellan to hide his sons away from the prying eyes of others, erasing knowledge of their continued existence.

“Rodrigo and Carlos went on to have families of their own, and so the line of Magellan continued, branching through the centuries as time marched on. Of course, they had to adopt new names, or the ruse would have been for nothing.

“But this was some five hundred years ago, and the Magellan name is once more something that the family can wear with pride, as opposed to hiding it away. Not all of my relatives choose to use the name, but I’m quite fond of it. Very few people would ever draw the conclusion that a relationship between myself and Ferdinand Magellan might exist. It is a matter of ‘hiding in plain sight’, you might say.”

Evelyn paused, taking in the reactions of the sisters. They were leaning forward on the balls of their feet as they were drawn in by this remarkable tale. Their mouths hung agape and their eyes were wide with wonder.

“Shall I go on, then?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes, yes!” Maria and Sara answered in tandem.

Evelyn smiled and continued her story, pacing about her office as she spoke. “Magellan’s life was extraordinary, and hiding his offspring was far from his only secret. His journey around the earth was an experience that can scarcely be put into words... but he tried his best, documenting his travels in his personal, highly protected journal.

“Once more... there is the official record, reflected in the texts of history... and then, there is the *actual* account, faithfully penned in the journal of Magellan himself. This journal – which is the most valuable artifact of our lineage – is filled with the wonders that he witnessed. Lost cities... strange beasts... hidden civilizations... and some things that could not be explained at all. It was an expedition like none that had come before it, into a world that was, quite literally, *unknown* at the time. Compelled by his endless curiosity and seafaring experience, Magellan took full advantage of the resources that he had been supplied with for the expedition.

“Remember, his journey lasted *three years*. Even considering the relatively primitive means by which explorers were forced to travel at the time, do you not believe that this would allow ample opportunity for deviation from the charted course? Though this was a voyage of unprecedented ambition, to suggest it might take three years is a bit of a stretch.

“Why, even the circumnavigation of the world was something of an improvisation. The original mission had simply been to establish effective passage to the Asian kingdoms by sea, thereby enhancing trade routes and commerce. It is only thanks to the curiosity of Magellan and his crew that the earth was eventually circled.”

Evelyn's green eyes took on a distant stare, enraptured by what seemed infinite possibility, as she pondered the travels of Magellan. "*By the stars and the sun...* you have no idea of the things he saw. To quote another famous explorer, Marco Polo: 'I did not write half of what I saw... for I knew I would not be believed.' He uttered those words in his final hours. *Can you imagine?*

"What things did Marco Polo witness, do you think? And likewise... what did my ancestor, Ferdinand Magellan, bear witness to? Can you imagine, my friends? Three years at sea, exploring a world that was completely uncharted at the time. In contemporary terms, it would have been as if exploring the farthest most reaches of our solar system. *Can you imagine?*"

## Chapter Seventeen

### Evelyn's Infiltration

Maria and Sara continued leaning forward, drawn in by the hypnotizing effect of this astonishing tale. The fine hairs on their arms and the napes of their necks were beginning to stand up. Evelyn's words were mesmerizing, her passion electric and infectious.

"Thus, there is a vast disparity between the official records and the personal journal of Magellan," Evelyn explained. "There are two reasons for this: First, like Marco Polo, Magellan feared that much of what he saw would not be believed by others. He might have very well been deemed a madman, driven loopy by too many days at sea and not enough access to fresh fruits and vegetables, his brain fried beneath the unrelenting sun.

"Second, he gained knowledge of things that he felt could not be shared with the King of Spain or *any* ruling authority. These things that he learned of were too powerful, and they might very well be too easily abused for wrongdoing.

"Being the explorer that he was, however, Magellan could not simply let the wonders he had witnessed go undocumented. Therefore, he began his journal, written in a complex code that could only be unscrambled with the aid of his cipher, which is a decoding device. Magellan never made it back home, and these two precious items – the journal and the corresponding cipher – were entrusted to his closest crew member, Juan Sebastian Elcano.

"Magellan's second in command, Elcano completed the expedition when Magellan perished in the Philippines. Having experienced the same wonders and perils, side by side, the two of them had forged a strong, immovable bond. True to his word, Elcano ensured that the journal and cipher reached Magellan's sons."

"And... are *you* the one who now possesses these items?" Maria asked.

"Indeed," Evelyn said with a smile. "I'm pleased to say that I am. And the things that my ancestor wrote of... they are *not* the fantasies of a sailor suffering from sunstroke and malnutrition. They are *true*, for I have seen many of them myself. Using his journal, I have been able to retrace his footsteps to many of the locations he visited."

"*Gears and sprockets*," Sara whispered, her voice so faint that it could barely be heard over the cries of the circling seagulls that soared outside the window. "This is *unbelievable*."

"I realize it must seem so," Evelyn admitted. "It's a lot to absorb at once, I imagine."

"But how did you come to be entangled with the Black Hats?" Maria asked.

"Hah!" Evelyn laughed dismissively at the notion. "*They* did not entangle *me*. It was *I* who approached *them*!"

Sara raised her eyebrows. "What on earth compelled you to do *that*?"

"Several years ago, the Black Hats drew my attention when they began digging about at a location that would have been... the best way to put it is... well, it was a dig site that would have been best left *undisturbed*."

"And this was one of the places that Magellan had documented in his journal?" Sara asked.

"Precisely. I felt I had no choice but to get closer, to see what was occurring. When I realized what they were unearthing, I felt my best option was to infiltrate their ranks, in order to determine what exactly they were in the process of doing, and how far along they were in their project."

"But they're extremely distrustful," Maria pointed out. "How did you manage to convince them?"

"Under most circumstances, I believe it would be nearly impossible to gain access to the Black Hats, for their circle is very tight. It wasn't easy... but when I explained my relationship to Ferdinand Magellan, and the knowledge that I was in possession of, thanks to the legacy that had been passed on to

me... they came to see me as a valuable asset. In order to fully earn their trust, of course, I had to reveal some of the family's secrets, but that was the price I reluctantly agreed to pay."

"What good does that do?" Maria asked.

"I may have had to give up some valuable secrets, but in return, I've gained priceless information about the Black Hats' motives and abilities. Whatever else they might be, their group is a most formidable one. Though they certainly have their flaws, we absolutely cannot afford to underestimate them. They are simply too capable, and too driven.

"Among their number are some of the very greatest minds on the planet, united in conducting their nefarious deeds. For the past several years, they've been relatively harmless... but this week, things have changed, and they've adopted an urgency I've never seen before. I was content to simply keep tabs on them, but now it seems as if something else is afoot... something very *big*."

"I'll be gob-smacked," Maria said. "This is quite a can of worms we've opened up, isn't it?"

Evelyn removed her hands from her hips and abandoned her pose beside the portrait. "Well, then. I suppose we should get on with it, eh? My cover's been blown, and it's only a matter of time before the rest of the Black Hats realize that I can't be trusted. I could really use your assistance, if you're up to it... what do you say?"

The sisters quickly shook off their sensation of being overwhelmed by the odd scenario that had befallen them. In recent weeks, they had gained unfathomable amounts of experience when it came to adventuring, investigating, and delving into all matters weird and wonderful. They were well suited to adapting to any situation, no matter its strangeness.

Their emotions had undergone rapid transformations in the past handful of minutes. They had experienced trepidation, anxiety, surprise, and awe. Now, those feelings were quickly giving way to new ones: those of excitement and eagerness for what lay ahead. No matter what occurred next, they were quite sure that it would by no means be *ordinary*. This outing, they realized, was shaping up to be one heck of a field trip.

The curator certainly had not earned their *complete* trust, for they remained apprehensive of what her true motives might be. But the sisters were ready to embrace whatever odd story was unfolding before them.

Besides – how could they possibly resist the opportunity to learn more from the descendent of Magellan? None of the Beans were particularly well known for their appreciation of caution. But as far as curiosity and adventuring went... those were things that were right up their alley, elements that constructed the very cores of their personalities.

Nonetheless, they were hoping for a bit more proof that they could wholeheartedly trust the curator, without fear of betrayal. This desire prompted them to ask further questions.

"Look, your story is extraordinary, there's no doubt about it. And again, we really appreciate you tossing Jasper down a trapdoor," Sara said. She marveled that this unconventional disposal of the janitor had happened but a few moments ago, an event that would have single-handedly made this a most bizarre day, even without all the revelations that had occurred since. "That really tickled my fancy. But you *did* admit to being a member of the Black Hats, you know. And you've got the tattoo to prove it. *Sooooo*... why exactly would you expect us to trust you, even if everything you've told us about the line of Magellan *is* true?"

"Which is still a bit of a stretch, as awesome as it might be," Maria added.

"Ah! An excellent question," Evelyn admitted. "I understand you have your reservations, and rightfully so. I should hope that sending Jasper for such a well deserved trip through the trapdoor has bought me some amount of goodwill, but I don't think that this alone would be enough to make you blindly follow me about. After all, this is the dicey world of espionage and weird science, is it not? You can't just spend your days moseying about, placing your trust in anybody with a fantastic story about adventuring and exploration, can you?"

"Okay, so give us a compelling reason. Why should we trust you?" Maria asked.

Evelyn spread her hands wide in a placating gesture. “Look, I realize there’s no way that I can completely earn your trust, and that’s understandable. All I can tell you is that something extremely weird is going on here, and it somehow pertains to the two of you, plus two others – your friends, Neil and Jack.”

Maria looked completely baffled by these words. “*How* is that possible?”

“I don’t know what on earth you did to get under the skin of the Black Hats, but you’ve really ticked them off. They’ve got something big in the works, and they want you to be here, so that they can stomp you out in the process. *That’s* the whole reason this field trip was so hastily put together. It wasn’t a gesture of goodwill on behalf of the museum – far from it. It was a ruse, *designed to get the four of you inside this building.*”

“Those doorknobs are unbelievable!” Maria exclaimed.

“Well, we did hand a rather embarrassing defeat to Jasper and Ebenezer a few days ago. They seemed to take it pretty bad,” Sara said, as she exchanged a knowing glance with her sister.

“Who is this Ebenezer character?” Evelyn asked.

“Ebenezer Widget-Bocker,” Sara elaborated. “You know, the leader of the Black Hats! Who did you think we were talking about?”

Evelyn looked confused. “Ebenezer Widget-Bocker... I’ve never heard of him before. For as long as I’ve been with the Black Hats, Mr. Weatherbee has been their leader. He’s the man you saw posing as the assistant curator when we were touring the museum.”

“Hmm... this is very curious,” Maria said, as she tapped at her chin in thought. “If this is true, it seems as though they’ve kept quite a bit hidden from you.”

“In recent days, there’s been a flurry of activity, as the Black Hats have been preparing for something big. They haven’t let me in on all the details, but when they made it clear that part of the plan was to squash a bunch of middle graders... well, I decided it was time to part ways with these maniacs, no matter the consequences,” Evelyn explained.

“The man we told you about, Ebenezer... a few days ago, he stole a very powerful piece of technology from a friend of ours,” Sara said.

Evelyn’s green eyes grew wide behind her nickel-plated glasses. “And... what does this technology do, exactly?”

“It’s called SunTech,” Sara told her. “A power cell that contains the raw, undiluted energy of the sun. According to Lefty – he’s our friend, the scientist who created it – SunTech is going to transform the world!”

“*By the compass of Columbus,*” Evelyn whispered. “*I think I know what they’re planning.*”

## Chapter Eighteen

### All In

“Well? What is it?” Sara demanded anxiously. “What are they planning?”

Evelyn looked squarely at the girls, and her expression grew grim. “There is... something here that they would like to, ah... *power up*, so to speak... but they’ve been lacking the energy to properly do so.”

“It’s in the museum?” Maria asked.

“No,” Evelyn corrected. “Not *in* the museum. *Under* it.”

“How is that possible?” Sara asked.

“Many things are not as they seem upon first inspection, and this building is no exception. Though it is undoubtedly a fine museum with many wondrous exhibits, that it is not this building’s primary purpose. It serves as a base of operations for the Black Hats, but even before that came to be, it was built to conceal the thing *beneath* it.”

“The thing *beneath* it? *Well?*” Maria demanded. She was waving her arms around, leaning forward, her eyes bulging with anticipation. The suspense was killing her! “What is it? *What* is this museum on top of?”

“*Pan Gu*,” Evelyn said, in a voice that was filled with awe. “*It sits atop Pan Gu.*”

At this declaration, the sisters groaned with disappointment and frustration.

“You’re not particularly good at clarifying things, did you know that?” Sara asked. “We still don’t know what the heck a Pan Gu is.”

Evelyn hesitated. “It’s best if I show you. Otherwise, I fear you may not even believe me.”

“Oh, you might be surprised,” Maria told her. “We’ve seen some *pretty* darned weird stuff the past couple of weeks.”

At this, Evelyn laughed, displaying her boisterous, charismatic attitude. “You were able to foil the efforts of the Black Hats previously, and cause them enough of a setback to have them mark you as enemies. As such, I have no doubt that you are exceptionally prepared for such daunting challenges as those which currently face us. But before we go any further, I must ask you – are you sure you wish to proceed with this? Events have escalated rather quickly, I realize. But you must understand, this is a matter most urgent, and the ramifications will extend to points unknown, if the Black Hats are able to further their plans.”

Maria and Sara locked eyes with one another as they considered what lay before them, engaging in the nearly telepathic bond that existed between sisters who had been through so much together, and learned to rely upon one another so thoroughly. Without so much as speaking, they knew that they were on the same page, and they nodded in agreement.

“We’ll help you,” Sara said.

“Jasper has done too much to hurt our town and our friends,” Maria added. “Whatever idiotic plan he and his fellow doorknobs have cooked up, it needs to be stopped!”

“Excellent!” Evelyn exclaimed. “With my recent act of betrayal against the Black Hats, I’ll need all the help I can get. I’m sure you two will prove most resourceful, given the amount of energy they’ve spent on ensuring they can exact their vengeance upon you.”

Spinning to face the wall of portraits, she reached one hand toward the painting of her famous ancestor. With an index finger, she pressed against the upper right corner of the frame.

An audible *click* was heard, and one side of the painting cleanly swung away from the wall, while the other remained firmly secured. The portrait was on hinges, and it had been cleverly designed to open like a door, revealing a hidden safe that had been built into the wall behind it.

“This won’t take but a moment, and then we’ll be on our way,” Evelyn promised.

“On our way to *where*, exactly?” Sara whispered to her sister, but the only response she received was a shrug and an expression of bafflement.

The curator turned her back on the sisters, directing her attention to the safe. With confident motions that had clearly been instilled from frequent repetition, she began spinning the safe’s heavy-duty dial this way and that. After inputting several numbers of the combination, the safe swung open with a *cuh-chunk*.

Evelyn quickly strode from the safe to her desk, her heels clicking sharply against the floorboards. With the fast, efficient motions of an experienced administrator, she began gathering the boatloads of papers and files that were spread across her desk. When they were safely bundled in her arms, she grabbed the map – the one with the intriguing array of X-marks inscribed upon its surface – and rolled it into a tight cylinder.

She was about to turn away from the desk, but with a final afterthought, she lifted Jasper’s corncob pipe from where it lay, near the globe in the corner. She eyed it disdainfully, holding it carefully with two fingers at a prudent distance from her body. The stacks of important documents were held tight against her chest with one arm, and the other was extended, keeping the foul pipe as far from herself as possible.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” she asked the girls.

“Not to mention *ridiculous*,” Maria added with a giggle. “He is a first rate doorknob, after all.”

“And that’s the truth,” Evelyn said, as she tossed the pipe into a wastebasket beside her desk.

The sisters could not help but chortle at the thought of what Jasper’s reaction would have been, should he have witnessed the disposal of his precious pipe in such an unceremonious manner. Perhaps the only thing that would have affected him more aversely would have been to send his mahogany broom through the blade of a buzz saw.

With the disposal of the pipe having been completed, Evelyn strode over to the safe and began to stuff the items from her desk inside. Her movements were hasty, and in a few seconds, she had put everything within the hidden compartment. She closed its door and spun the dial, scrambling the combination and engaging the locking mechanism.

Finally, she returned the painting of Ferdinand Magellan to its original position, swinging it until it had returned to lie flat against the wall, blending in with the other portraits. Once it was in place, it was impossible to tell that anything was concealed behind it, much less a safe containing a myriad of mysterious documents.

“Wait!” Maria exclaimed. Belatedly, she realized they had missed their chance to get a closer look at the interesting map. “What were all those documents about? And that map! What were all those X-marks for?”

“My, you’re full of questions, aren’t you? I very much appreciate an inquisitive mind, but unfortunately, there’s no time to tell you everything right at the moment,” Evelyn said. “But I assure you that you needn’t worry yourselves about such things just now. We have far more pressing matters, if my suspicions prove to be well founded.”

She marched away from the paintings, coming to face the wall of bookshelves behind her desk. With a well-practiced motion, she reached her hand toward a single volume, among the countless that stood before her. It was at about the level of her waist, and near the right hand side of shelving. As her fingers came to rest upon it, the sisters had a brief moment to read the title: *Travels*, by Marco Polo.

Without removing the book from the shelf, Evelyn gripped it by the spine and tilted it back. At once, there was a low, *whirring* noise, and one of the many bookcases began to recede. It moved so smoothly, its design had clearly been crafted with the utmost attention to detail, and with an appreciation of fine mechanical operation.

As the bookcase continued to withdraw, the thing that it had been concealing was revealed: a passageway. This sight brought appreciative *oohs* and *ahs* from the sisters. How many hidden aspects *were* there to this office, they wondered? Over the course of only a few minutes, they had witnessed a trapdoor, a safe, and a passageway, all of which had been concealed to the unassuming eye.

From what they could see, the passageway was illuminated by soft, blue lights, and there came from within a slight draft of cool wind. Its walls were constructed from what looked to be brushed aluminum or a similar material, creating a high tech appearance, which contrasted with the ancient items that the museum was home to. What could possibly be within?

“All right, then,” Evelyn said. Her voice had grown quiet and thoughtful, as if she were reflecting a great deal on what lay before her. She stared into the waiting passageway, lost in contemplation. Almost to herself, she murmured, “I’ve feared what these fools might be up to for a long time. No longer can I remain hidden among their ranks. I must summon my courage and dare to face them.”

Maria and Sara exchanged a glance with one another, their eyebrows raised in curiosity. It once more crossed their minds that they were approaching this situation with what might be deemed slightly less caution than that which was prudent. They had very little idea of what they were getting themselves into, other than the fact that it pertained to Jasper’s nefarious doings, and the dark machinations of the unseemly Black Hats.

But proceed, they would. Their curiosity was simply too strong, their appetite for adventure too powerful. They would not let such an unusual opportunity pass them by. Nor would they permit the deeds of the Black Hats to go unchecked, not if they had any say in the matter. They had seen what Jasper and Ebenezer were capable of, and if they were even now plotting more evildoings, it was up to the Beans to intervene.

Plus... how would Neil and Jack ever let them live it down, if they were to pass up such a strange and wonderful chance that had fallen into their laps? They briefly clasped one another’s hand for support, and the act of that simple gesture lent them courage and determination.

Evelyn still stood before the open doorway of the passageway, gazing within, contemplating what awaited her, both physically and emotionally. She engaged in a deep inhalation, and as her lungs filled with air, her shoulders squared, and her voice took on the confident tone that the sisters had come to recognize in their short time of knowing her. “Let’s begin.”

“We’re with you,” Sara said. Her sister stood beside her, and they nodded their heads in agreement and support. “As you say, Ms. Magellan – let’s begin, shall we?”

## Chapter Nineteen

### Hiding in Plain Sight

Evelyn confidently marched ahead, and her heels clicked against the concrete floor of the passageway. The sisters followed close behind, and after only a few seconds, they heard a *whirring* noise.

Quickly glancing over their shoulders, they saw that the bookcase, which had previously receded to reveal the passageway, was now sliding back into place. It resumed its original position with a solid *thwump*, effectively blocking their exit.

The action seemed to symbolize the notion that they had crossed a critical line, a point of *no return*. Now, they realized, they had no choice but to plunge forward and embrace the adventure.

Evelyn led on, with Maria and Sara close behind. It took their vision a moment to get used to the different setting, for the passageway was rather dim, compared to the brightly lit office they had just left. However, their eyes quickly adjusted, and they were able to see their surroundings quite clearly.

Lights were set into the ceiling, placed at even increments throughout the passageway. They emanated a soft, blue light, which cast the place in a mysterious aura. It was hardly bright, but it was more than enough to safely navigate the strange setting.

“I think it’s time to bring you up to speed on this museum,” Evelyn said. “I’m sure you must have heard something of its modern origins?”

“I think I remember something... I know the museum hasn’t been here all that long, but we were pretty young when it opened,” Sara said.

“Construction of this museum began only seven years ago, and it was opened to the public four years after the project started,” Evelyn clarified. “Officially, the museum’s purpose is to collect historical artifacts from around the globe, placing them on display for the benefit of the public. However, as I’m sure you’ve already guessed, there is far more to this place than that which meets the eye.”

As Maria and Sara followed, they realized that they were not just walking forward, but walking *down*. The floor had a slight pitch to it, angling into a gradual descent.

“It is not by sheer happenstance that the concept of this museum was hatched seven years ago. It was at that time that the Black Hats were formed, and they began scouring the planet for the resources they would need in order to conduct their research and development. They built this place – which appears to be nothing more than a well kept museum to outside observers, a very pillar of the community – to serve as one of their strongholds, a place where some of their greatest assets have been gathered for future use.”

By this time, the sisters had noted that every now and then, a corner would occur in the passageway, forcing them to turn at a ninety-degree angle. These corners always turned to the right. Combined with the mildly sloped floor, this created the impression that they were gradually descending *beneath* the museum.

“But why use a museum, something that would be available to the public, risking exposure?” Sara asked. “Even if the secrets of the Black Hats are tucked away and well hidden, somebody could always stumble upon them. Wouldn’t it make more sense to use an abandoned warehouse or something?”

“An excellent question,” Evelyn responded. “The answer, you’ll find, is one that is deceptively simple – it is just as I have now chosen to wear my last name, rather than concealing it. It is a matter of *hiding in plain sight*. The Black Hats are driven by ego and supreme confidence. They cannot comprehend the possibility of failure.”

The three suddenly pulled to a stop, having been startled by an odd sound that seemed to come from everywhere *and* nowhere, all at once. It was like a weird, disembodied grumble, drifting through the air, and the occasional word, like “*curses*” or “*sassafras*” could be picked out of the strange lingo.

Tilting her head to listen, Evelyn chuckled. “Not to worry. That’s just Jasper, trying to find his way out of the air ducts. I’d imagine he’s lost his bearings and is *quite* befuddled by now.”

This concept greatly pleased the sisters, and they joined Evelyn in her laughter. They could also hear the occasional, muted *thwump*, which they presumed to be Jasper’s broom, thwacking about in the ductwork as he attempted to navigate the tight spaces. The curator resumed her brisk stride, and Sara and Maria fell into step behind her. They continued their journey into the passageway, down, down, *down*... into the hidden, lower recesses of the museum.

“This site proved to be ideal for these villainous, unscrupulous Black Hats. Using a complicated and impenetrable network of fraudulent shell companies, they orchestrated the construction of this site. All the while, they were building it to the very specifications that they require to conduct their vile business and rampant skullduggery. As for the funding of such an elaborate operation... that part came quite easily, I’m afraid.”

“How did they pull it off?” Sara asked. “Where did they get so much money?”

“Money has not proven to be much of a problem for the Black Hats,” Evelyn said. “Among their members are brilliant computer hackers and master thieves, who relish in extravagant acts of daring. After all... this is a group of *geniuses* were talking about.”

“*Evil* geniuses,” Sara added. This, of course, was a point that was obvious, but it never hurt to put it out there.

“Indeed... but you need to understand... that is *not* the way they necessarily perceive themselves. Most of them truly believe that the mission of the Black Hats is a noble one. Although they may have to harm others to achieve their goals, they think that it is for the *greater good*. They believe that people who lack their level of intelligence and achievement do not know what’s best for themselves, and so must be kept in the dark and herded about like sheep. They believe that the *ends* will justify the *means*... they will do *anything*... and *everything*, to achieve their goals, no matter who they must trample along the way.”

Evelyn paused in her stride, coming to a standstill in the hallway. She inhaled with a deepness and a slowness that conveyed a great amount of thought. She released a sigh of equal depth, and an expression of profound sadness and distaste crossed the features of her face.

“And this, young ladies, is a despicable little evil that we call *elitism*. They are brilliant beyond measure, of that there can be no question. But intelligence does not necessarily equal ethical soundness. Though they might believe in their mission wholeheartedly, this does not mean that we should blindly fall into step behind them.”

## Chapter Twenty

### A Rare Harvest

“In recent years, there has been what can only be described as a rather *strenuous* focus on particular minerals that are found within the layers of this planet... they are called *rare earth elements*, and they have become increasingly valuable in the world economy as this exciting century has marched on,” Evelyn explained. “They’re *particularly* special because they’re a critical component in the development and manufacture of many of the newest technologies.”

Maria and Sara followed close behind, eagerly absorbing this information, anxious to see how it all tied into their current objective.

“Now here’s where things get interesting,” Evelyn continued. “There is a limited, finite supply of these minerals in the earth. With our world becoming evermore invested in technology, it’s a logical prediction that we may soon run out of these precious resources – or at the very least, experience severe limitations in availability. Just think... one day, in the near future, these elements may become more precious than gold or platinum!

“With this significance in mind, the Black Hats stepped up their efforts, and began harvesting these rare earth elements with an enthusiasm and vigor that was unrivaled by their peers. They searched the world, wide and far, seeking those circumstances that would best serve their interests. Soon, it became clear that China has an inordinate proportion of these rare earth elements, and it was there that the Black Hats focused their energies, mining for these precious resources... for you understand, there is nothing more important to them than the advancement of technological innovation, for it is the key to advancing their plans.

“It was at one of their Chinese mining sites where something... *strange*... was found. They were seeking rare earth elements, but they had stumbled upon something much more unusual. It was something that they had no experience with, nor did they have any concept of what exactly they had found.”

“What was it?” Maria asked.

“At first, they thought it was a remnant of an ancient civilization, a statue that had been left behind by some unknown group of long ago. Of course, *I* knew the truth of what they had stumbled upon, for I had the benefit of Magellan’s journal. I had been keeping a close eye on their mining operation as they went about extracting their elements, desperately hoping they would not unveil what I knew to be buried there. But once they uncovered it, I felt I had no choice but to approach them and attempt to infiltrate their ranks. For it was *no statue* they had discovered.”

“*Well?*” Sara asked. She and her sister were itching to hear where this was leading. “What was it? Please, tell us!”

“Was it that giant Guardian Lion that I almost touched in the museum?” Maria asked.

Evelyn chuckled. “No, it was not the Guardian Lion, though that was discovered in the same region. What they had stumbled upon was something far larger – a creature called *Pan Gu*.”

“And this creature was buried deep in the earth?” Maria asked.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “As I told you, they had thought that Pan Gu was a statue when they first unearthed it, but this was not the case. Pan Gu is organic in nature, but thousands of years ago, it began a great slumber, or a long-term hibernation. As it engaged in this deep sleep, its body formed a hard outer shell, to protect it from damage... a sort of *exoskeleton*. This is what makes it appear to be a gigantic statue, upon first inspection.”

“And this... this gigantic creature... this is what you’re taking us to go see? Beneath the museum?” Sara asked.

“Indeed, I am! And it’s quite a sight to behold, I assure you. With their elaborate drilling equipment and insatiable thirst for rare earth elements, the Black Hats managed to bore into a network of

caverns. This is where Pan Gu rested, and they were most intrigued by the discovery. With my assistance, they were able to skillfully extract the solidified creature without damaging it. We then transported this remarkable find to Portsmouth, hiding it and then building this museum atop it. Pan Gu is one of the Black Hats' most valuable treasures."

"This is all very interesting, and I can't wait to see what all the fuss is about. But what does it have to do with *us*?" Sara asked. "I just don't get that part of it."

"When you children whipped Jasper and his vaunted Mecha-Machine... well, he took that really badly, as you can imagine. When his carefully laid plans were foiled, he was devastated and enraged. He vowed to avenge this insult to his ego, at all costs... but that's not all, I'm afraid. There has been a great hustle and bustle in recent days, as the plans of the Black Hats have advanced. If they possess this power cell that you've described, I fear for what they're about to attempt."

Maria looked toward her sister, and the both of them exchanged an apprehensive glance. They were beginning to feel a bit nervous about the direction of Evelyn's story. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"If my theory is correct, they're going to try to awaken Pan Gu. I knew they were planning something big, but this... this goes beyond what I had imagined."

"And like you told us, Jasper and his cronies hastily arranged this field trip, didn't they?" Sara asked. "Simply so we could be here when they unveiled their trump card."

"I'm afraid so," Evelyn said. "Jasper has taken an unusually strong interest in you children, and his taste for vengeance cannot be pacified. He's out to get you Beans, I'm afraid."

"But that... that's ridiculous," Maria argued. "We're a bunch of ten and eleven-year-olds. Jasper's a grown man, and he considers himself to be a brilliant mechanical engineer. Doesn't he realize how absurd this is?"

"His ego can tolerate no disrespect, I'm afraid," Evelyn replied. "You've officially made his list of enemies, and he wants you here for what he believes will be his finest hour – and a huge moment for the Black Hats on their march toward supremacy."

"Bring him on," Sara said. "If that doorknob actually thinks we're afraid of him, he must have really bonked his head harder than we thought!"

"He's certainly spilled a few of his marbles, if not all of them," Maria opined. "He's flipped his wig! Fallen off his rocker! Blown a gasket, I tell ya!"

"How are the Black Hats going to use SunTech to waken Pan Gu?" Sara asked. "And more importantly, what do we need to do to stop them?"

Evelyn suddenly came to a halt, and the sisters, who had been following close behind, almost collided with her. Maria and Sara looked beyond the curator, and saw that she had stopped before a large, steel door that was reinforced with heavy rivets and bolts.

To one side, there was a rectangular pad, upon which Evelyn placed her palm. This was apparently the means by which entry was granted, for once she rested her hand against the surface, the door slid open, *whooshing* into a hidden recess.

Evelyn marched ahead, and the sisters followed on her heels. They entered a large corridor with tall, wide doors opposite one another. The doors were incredibly well built and bolted, conveying the impression that they were protecting things of great value.

On the surface of each door, there was a placard with one or two words emblazoned. However, these labels were of little use to the sisters, as they were not familiar with the words, such as *Anubis* and *Nkuba* and *Baba Yaga*... among many, many others.

Here, it seemed that the thudding and cursing of Jasper was louder, as if he might be wiggling his way closer to their position, as he bumbled about the immense air ducts of the building.

"We've arrived," the curator announced. "We've reached the lowest level of the museum... and it sounds as though Jasper is having a devilish time trying to escape."

"So... what would the consequences of awakening Pan Gu be, exactly?" Sara asked.

“It’s impossible to say, of course, but Jasper, being the narcissist that he is, probably believes that he will be the master of this ancient creature, and that it will obey his every wish, indebted to him for awakening it from its slumber. Mr. Weatherbee is equally oblivious, and I’m sure he’s completely onboard with such a notion.”

“So he’s gone bonkers, too, has he?” Maria asked.

“Well, yes, but he’s a *particular* kind of crazy. *Smart* crazy, with a bunch of power at his fingertips.”

“Wonderful,” Sara commented. “That is a truly *fantastic* recipe for disaster.”

“Say, what’s behind all these doors, Ms. Magellan?” Maria asked.

“A great assortment of similarly hibernated creatures, collected from across the globe. Some of them, I regret to admit, I revealed to the Black Hats, in order to gain their trust. I knew of their locations, thanks to Magellan’s journal. Others were discovered as the Black Hats continued their mining expeditions across the planet, greedily harvesting as many rare earth elements as they could. Recently, we’ve run out of empty chambers in this hidden area of study, so we’ve taken to putting newly discovered creatures in with the other exhibits of the museum, upstairs.”

“You mean like that Guardian Lion that I almost knocked into?” Maria asked.

“Precisely.”

“See?” Maria asked her sister. “I told you there was something weird about that thing! Who can blame me for wanting to take a closer look at it?”

Finally, the corridor ended, and there was one last door, straight ahead. It was similar to the others, in terms of height and width. It, too, had the placard squarely placed upon its surface at eye level. Unlike the others, however, there were no words printed on this label.

Instead, there was but a single symbol. It was very intricate, composed from a combination of straight lines and squiggly ones, forming something that was ultimately indecipherable. Although the sisters could not make sense of this symbol, they received a strange impression from it... it was as if the thing was radiating strength, a sort of immovable power that could be accumulated only during the long passage of several centuries.

“This symbol... what does it mean?” Maria asked.

“This,” Evelyn explained, “is the Chinese character for *dragon*.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

### The Pit of Pan Gu

Evelyn grabbed the enormous bolt that kept the door locked, and she muscled it into the open position. Warm air wafted from within, as the door swung outward. Evelyn brushed back a strand that had come loose from her tightly woven hair, readjusted her eyeglasses, and strode forward.

The sisters followed, and they saw that they had entered an enormous, oval chamber, illuminated with giant spotlights that blazed overhead. It was filled with the greatest assortment of technology they had ever seen, making their eyes bulge in wonder.

Even Lefty's laboratory, which had been stocked with marvelous inventions and devices, was tiny by comparison. This was an operation that vastly exceeded anything the sisters could have imagined, and they stared about in awe.

Lining the walls of the oval-shaped room, there were stacks of beeping computer servers, shiny terminals, and flashing monitors. Lights blinked, machines whirred, and hardware hummed.

Additionally, there was a great quantity of strange and curious items sprinkled throughout the area, as well as workbenches, lockers, tool chests, and laboratory equipment. The large number of machines was undoubtedly the source of the increased temperature – combined, they put out an enormous amount of heat.

Across the chamber, there was a series of particularly large monitors, perhaps sixty inches in diameter apiece, which were rapidly cycling through a series of figures and diagrams. Directly below these monitors, there was a terminal that housed an astounding array of buttons, switches, and gauges, as well as one *particularly* shiny lever, which tended to draw the eye.

Before this terminal, an empty chair sat, perfectly positioned for the manipulation of these varied inputs.

It was worth noting that there was also a collection of meticulously ordered cleaning supplies, carefully arranged not far from the chamber's door. There were mops, buckets, and dozens of bottles of solution. This, the sisters knew, was a telltale sign of Jasper's involvement with this dubious operation.

Evil though he may have been, his obsessive compulsion to rigorously clean was mighty impressive. The chamber, though enormous in stature, was free of dust and dirt, and every last electronic component had been polished to a high shine, gleaming beneath the bright beams of the spotlights.

"What you see before you is one of the most closely guarded secrets in the world. This," Evelyn told the sisters, "is the stronghold of the Black Hats. Nobody outside of their tight circle – other than you, of course – has ever laid eyes upon this place."

"It certainly looks nefarious, I'll give you that," Maria said, as she and her sister walked farther into the chamber, ogling at all the strange sights that surrounded them.

"This is an alarming amount of resources," Sara said. "What have they been doing with all this stuff?"

"Oh, all sorts of questionable activities," Evelyn replied. She paused in her stride and pointed toward the center of the chamber, where the floor had been neatly cut away. "But most of their efforts have been focused on *this*."

Maria and Sara walked to the place where Evelyn had directed their attention. The entire center of the room was a hole, surrounded by a steel railing three feet in height. As they approached, the sisters rested their hands upon the barrier and peered over the edge.

"What... what are we looking at?" Sara asked.

"That's Pan Gu, of course," Evelyn said, as she came to stand beside them. She sighed deeply, filled with wonder, as she always was, when gazing upon the ancient creature. "It's quite magnificent, isn't it?"

There was a long silence of several seconds, as Maria and Sara tried to digest what they had been told, and to wrap their brains around what they were looking at. It was enough to beggar their minds, it so thoroughly defied their notions of what was possible, despite all the wonders they had previously witnessed.

“*Gears and sprockets!*” Maria exclaimed. “*That’s Pan Gu? It’s huge!*”

Below them, the pit descended for about thirty feet. Inside, there was something that looked as though it had been carved from a massive slab of dark, gray stone, shaped into a sleeping beast. If the sisters hadn’t been told otherwise, they would have simply assumed that it was an enormous, skillfully rendered statue.

The petrified creature was curled into a ball, as if it had hunkered down for a long nap, and it had tucked its head beneath one of its forelegs. It reminded the sisters of the way Jack’s Labradoodle, Nibbler, oftentimes lay when he was snoozing.

This reduced position that Pan Gu held made it difficult to fully ascertain the beast’s features and true size. Even curled up as it was, however, it was clear to the observers that the thing was *gigantic*.

Though much of its form was hidden and coiled, the creature appeared to have a long, lithe body, four powerful legs, and a tail that wrapped around, further concealing its face and head.

Gazing upon the awe-inspiring sight, the sisters were reminded of the symbol they had seen upon the door to this chamber. It was the Chinese character for *dragon*, Evelyn had told them. Now, they could understand why it had been chosen. Based on its appearance, the petrified creature was exactly that: a dragon, one that looked something like what they had seen on the paper placemats at Chinese restaurants.

“When Magellan discovered the hidden society where Pan Gu lay in slumber, in a remote region of China, the creature had already been resting for over one thousand years, frozen in this form. The people of that land told him that Pan Gu was of ancient origins, and that it had previously looked over their ancestors. The dragon has great power, they said, so much so that they believed it could control the winds themselves, dictating rainfall and storms. It was also a herald of good luck, blessing their society with health and happiness,” Evelyn explained.

“However, Pan Gu is still a wild thing, or so they claimed, and its motives are far beyond the comprehension of humans. It is primal, and powerful, and temperamental, like the elements. Just as it could bring good fortune, it also could bring destruction. Perhaps not by malevolent intention, but by the very nature of its being.”

“What do you mean?” Maria asked. “How could something cause destruction without *meaning* to do it?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Does a violent storm or a hurricane have malicious intent, when it destroys that which lies in its path? Certainly not. It is simply within part of the storm’s very nature... a power that can result in great destruction, not as a consequence of malicious intent, but simply as a consequence of *being*. The elders of this society that Magellan discovered claimed that Pan Gu is not just a creature, but a *force of nature*. It was also said that such was the dragon’s power... mortal men could very easily go mad, simply by looking upon its awesome presence.”

“And they mean to waken this thing? *Why?*” Sara demanded.

“Vanity, mostly,” Evelyn said. “Jasper and Mr. Weatherbee do seem to relish the notion that they are the masterminds of the universe, after all. I’ve tried debating their theory that this powerful being will jump through hoops on their say-so, but they’ll hear none of it. Any possibility of failure completely eludes them, and they’ve got their cronies marching lockstep beside them. Of course, I didn’t think that the Black Hats would actually be able to achieve their lofty goal of waking Pan Gu, but now that they’ve acquired this remarkable power cell you’ve told me about... I fear it may be possible, after all. At the very least, I’m sure they’re going to try their best.”

“*Gobstoppers...* This can’t possibly end well, can it?” Sara asked.

“That’s why we’ve got to prevent it from even *beginning*. Come! We mustn’t dally any longer!”

With that assertion, Evelyn pushed herself away from the railing, tearing her gaze from the mesmerizing sight of Pan Gu. She marched toward the series of large computer monitors, where the master terminal and chair lay waiting.

“We should check to see if the new power cell is in place. If so, we’ll simply grab it and be on our way, while Jasper remains trapped in the air ducts and powerless to stop us. If we can’t find the power cell, we can still sabotage the systems here, rendering them useless.”

But before Evelyn could reach the terminal, music began blasting, startling her to a stop.

The sisters likewise came up short, bumping into the curator with an *oof!* They looked about, trying to identify the source of the music. It seemed that powerful speakers had been strategically placed throughout the chamber, creating a surround sound effect as the tunes were pumped out.

The song that was being played, they realized, was *Eye of the Tiger*, a catchy tune designed to psyche up its listeners. It was a popular selection, oftentimes played before sporting events.

“What’s going on?” Maria asked, shouting to be heard over the music.

It was then that the three of them saw that the empty chair, which had its back toward them, was slowly revolving. As it came to face them, they saw with astonishment that the chair was, in fact, *not* empty.

An individual sat within it, but he was so diminutive in nature, Evelyn and the sisters had not even been able to see him while the chair had faced away from them. He was too short for his head to have cleared the back of the chair, and his feet dangled from the floor.

As he slowly swung about to face them, the man smiled widely, threw back his head, and cackled diabolically. It was none other than Mr. Weatherbee, the unassuming, boring man who had posed as the assistant curator to the museum.

“Oh, dear,” Evelyn lamented. “I’m afraid this may complicate matters.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### The Mad Mind Revealed

The man in the brown suit continued to guffaw as he swiveled about in his chair, scratching at his neck with one hand. His eyes narrowed with malice, and he pointed an accusatory finger at Evelyn as he did so – he had caught her in the act of betrayal, and they both knew it.

“I can explain!” she cried out, shouting to be heard over the music. “I was just bringing these two interlopers to the chamber, in order to-”

“Don’t bother!” Mr. Weatherbee interrupted. “I’m way ahead of you, Ms. Magellan.”

Maria and Sara could not help but notice that Mr. Weatherbee’s demeanor had completely transformed from when they had seen him earlier in the day. No longer was he the quiet, boring man who blended into the background. Now he was loud, confident, and quite brazen. In fact, there was something suspiciously familiar about this aspect of his personality... something that nagged at their memories and created disquiet in their minds.

Leaning toward Evelyn, Maria asked, “What’s Mr. Weatherbee’s first name?”

“It’s Eli. Why do you ask?”

Maria exchanged a worried look with her sister. “*Eli Weatherbee*. So his initials are *E.W.*”

“The same as Ebenezer Widget-Bocker,” Sara groaned with dismay.

“Ooh, you solved the mystery, did you? Do you fancy yourselves to be a pair of detectives?” Mr. Weatherbee taunted from his chair. “It took you long enough, didn’t it? You two certainly aren’t Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, I’ll tell you that much. I suppose we might as well let Ms. Magellan in on the secret, then... she’s certainly been kept in the dark for long enough!”

“Let me in on *what?*” Evelyn asked, utterly flabbergasted by this development. She shouted to be heard over the rollicking tunes of *Eye of the Tiger*. “What’s going on here? What are you carrying on about, Mr. Weatherbee?”

“*Behold!*” the brown-suited man declared... and then, he began a most *curious* transformation.

Mr. Weatherbee grasped the top of his hair with one hand, and with a flamboyant wave of his arm, he exerted force and tugged upward. To the astonishment of Evelyn, her colleague’s hair came off, as if it were a wig.

Far more surprising was that *his face also came free*, pulled away in a single deft motion. He had been wearing a meticulously detailed, skintight mask that had been thoroughly convincing. The mask must have been causing his skin some degree of irritation, which would explain his frequent scratching at the bottom of his neck.

Once it was removed, the truth was instantly revealed to the sisters. The man who had been posing as Mr. Weatherbee was none other than Ebenezer Widget-Bocker: mad scientist extraordinaire, mastermind of nefarious plans, and a person with a serious, *serious* grudge against the Beans.

“*You,*” Maria and Sara said simultaneously, uttering the word like an accusation.

Evelyn was so shocked, she took an involuntary step backward. “Who *are* you?”

“I am Ebenezer Widget-Bocker! I am the greatest mind on the face of the planet... and I certainly had *you* fooled, didn’t I, Ms. Magellan?”

“Well... yes, I guess you did,” Evelyn admitted.

Ebenezer pointed at the realistic mask of Eli Weatherbee, which he had discarded and thrown to the floor. “Quite convincing, isn’t it? Courtesy of the Black Hats’ Espionage Department.”

Evelyn scratched at her head, clearly bewildered by this unforeseen development. “We have an *Espionage Department?*”

Ebenezer hopped out of the chair. He withdrew a pair of thick eyeglasses from an interior pocket and placed them on the bridge of his nose. With a few quick motions, he removed the drab brown suit he

had previously been wearing, revealing a bizarre outfit beneath. He wore a brightly colored leotard, along with a long, flowing cape, which he had somehow kept concealed beneath his suit.

The cape was black with gold trim along the edges, and it fluttered behind Ebenezer as he strutted about in his leotard. He did not remove the brown dress shoes he had been wearing with his suit, nor did he discard his darkly colored socks. The end result was something that was totally absurd, though the sisters suspected that Ebenezer was quite pleased with his outlandish appearance.

With this done, he plopped back into his swiveling chair, as if a king upon his throne, basking in the adoration of his loyal subjects. Gray tufts of hair sprung from his head with disarray in a manner so haphazard, it would have been impossible to suggest that there was any order to such design.

Behind his thick, round glasses (which almost looked like goggles), his shifty, calculating eyeballs darted this way and that, as if eager to digest the reaction of his visitors. Ebenezer had a great zest for showmanship, and he was delighted with his own performance.

It was an odd thing to behold; this tiny man in a rather fanciful cape and foolhardy leotard, bopping his head to *Eye of the Tiger* while concurrently cackling with wholehearted abandon.

Ebenezer was quite pleased with himself, and he was reveling in the moment. But as unobvious as his behavior was, the sisters could not blame him too much for his jubilant mood.

He *had* achieved his objective, after all... by revealing his unexpected presence, he had caught them by surprise and shocked them into a stunned silence. Most bewildered of all was Evelyn, who had worked under Eli Weatherbee's direction for years, never suspecting that it was an assumed identity.

One of Ebenezer's hands rested upon a joystick that was built into an armrest of the chair, and he used this to swivel it about, moving it back and forth to the rhythm of the rock n' roll. His other hand held a remote control, presumably for the oversized stereo of the Black Hats' stronghold, which continued pumping out the rambunctious tunes.

After several moments of prolonged laughter, during which Evelyn and the sisters could only stare, Ebenezer's guffawing finally tapered off, and he brought his swiveling chair to a stop. He lifted the remote control, and with an air of finality, pressed a button.

Nothing happened, and Ebenezer's wild smile faltered. He eyeballed the remote control suspiciously, shaking it about, repeatedly pressing buttons, to no avail. Finally, he flipped it over, removed the batteries and reinserted them, and gave the remote one more shake.

This time, when he pressed the power button, the music came to a stop. The following silence was overwhelming, coming as it did on the heels of such loud, powerful rock n' roll.

"Ah! There we are," Ebenezer declared with satisfaction.

"What was *that* all about?" Sara asked.

"*What?* Why, it was *entrance music* of course," Ebenezer explained, his face falling with disappointment. "Does no one appreciate my flair for the dramatic, my passion for theatrics, my untouchable *style*? I'm surrounded by *philistines*, I tell you!"

Maria and Sara exchanged glances with one another, stifling their giggles. Though Ebenezer's passion for showmanship could be inadvertently amusing, they knew that he used it to comfort his fragile ego and soothe his long harbored insecurities.

While they were briefly looking at each other, the sisters were able to instinctively read one another's intuitions. As their eyes met, they subtly nodded in agreement. Then, without ever having discussed the matter, they slowly began inching forward at a rate so slow, they hoped it would go undetected.

They scarcely lifted their heels from the floor, slowly shuffling forward, masking their intentions with other movements, such as gesticulations of their hands as they spoke, or running their fingers through their hair.

Evelyn had fallen in behind Maria and Sara, and she immediately grasped the notion of their plan. Slowly, ever so slowly, they were creeping toward Ebenezer, aided by his emotional impulses and hotheaded manner... tendencies that made him apt to overlook such subtle movements.

Ebenezer was still a fair distance away from them. At the turtle-like pace at which they were moving, it would take quite some time to close the distance. But the sisters knew that every inch counted, and if they just maintained a slow, steady rate, they might be able to get close enough to Ebenezer... close enough to stop him from engaging in whatever hare-brained plan he had cooked up in that demented noggin of his.

“But how could it be entrance music? You were already in the room, sitting right there in that chair,” Maria pointed out. “You didn’t actually *enter* it. *We* were the ones who entered it. If you think about it, you were playing entrance music for *us*, weren’t you?”

“Now that you put it like that, I suppose that it was awfully thoughtful,” Sara conceded. “*Eye of the Tiger* is a very exciting piece of music!”

Ebenezer ground his teeth and grumbled something inarticulate. His face began to redden, and his eyeballs bulged behind the lenses of his glasses.

Somewhat alarmed by the scientist’s explosive condition, Maria whispered to her sister, “What’s he doing?”

“*Silence!*” Ebenezer squawked, thumping one of his tiny fists against an armrest.

“Relax, there’s no need for such rudeness. If you have something you’d like to say, just wait your turn, and we’d be happy to hear you out, Mr. Widget-Bocker,” Sara assured him.

Ebenezer glowered at Sara, seemingly thrown by her reasoning and politeness. He lost his momentum and stammered, fiddling at the joystick that was mounted to his chair. He had dropped the stereo’s remote control upon his lap, and that hand, now freed, was rhythmically clenching and unclenching, as he muttered beneath his breath.

“Go ahead, Mr. Widget-Bocker, speak your piece!” Maria encouraged him, while slowly continuing to edge forward.

“Did you really think that you could outsmart *me*?” Ebenezer demanded. He seemed to be at once outraged and amused by the notion that others thought they could best him. “*Don’t you know who I am?*”

“Of course we know who you are,” Sara said. “We’ve been through this before. You’re-”

“*I am Ebenezer Widget-Bocker!*” the mad scientist interrupted (quite unnecessarily). “*I am the greatest mind on the face of the planet!*”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### A Serious Grudge

“Yes, we’ve heard all about this unprecedented cranium of yours,” Maria reminded Ebenezer. “You know you’ve told us all this before, right?”

“It was when we whipped you and Jasper. You remember, right?” Sara prompted, hoping to jog the mad scientist’s memory. “You had that big Mecha-Machine, and you were going on about how you were going to squash us, or smash us to smithereens, or some such nefarious nonsense... but then we sent you packing. You had to flee on your jetpack, ranting about your big plans, and this and that. You *do* remember that, right? How could you forget *all that*? It was just a few days ago!”

“Well, he bruised his coconut rather hard when his jetpack crashed,” Maria helpfully pointed out. “Maybe all that stuff was forcefully jostled out of his noggin. He *could* be suffering from some memory loss, I believe.”

“Hmm... Perhaps he’s repressed it, as the result of some sort of psychological defense mechanism,” Sara theorized, as she tapped at her chin with one finger.

“*Insolent children!*” Ebenezer squawked. His small hands had clenched into fists, and his face was transforming into an alarming shade of red, possibly foretelling a physiologically improbable eruption of steam from his ears. “I did not ‘*bruise my coconut*’, as you so disrespectfully suggest – at least, not too badly,” he sheepishly conceded, as he subconsciously ran his fingers through his wild hair, as if testing for tender spots. “And as I recall, you got *quite* lucky when you managed to attain the upper hand in our last encounter. You remember those events *quite differently* than I do. And *I* am the one with the abnormally high functioning cerebral cortex, I might add. So what does *that* tell you?”

Maria exchanged a blank look with her sister, shrugging her shoulders as they continued slowly shuffling forward. “I don’t know that it should tell us anything, Mr. Widget-Bocker. Other than that maybe your noggin was bumped a bit harder than we thought. Would you like for us to take you to the hospital, sir?”

“*Bah!*” Ebenezer spat the exclamation from his mouth with disgust, waving his hand dismissively. “In any event, I can certainly assure you that such a bogus outcome will not happen *this time!* The result will be much more to *my* liking, than to *yours!*”

Sara glanced worriedly at her sister and whispered, “*Looks like he might be about to blow a gasket.*”

“I am about to do *no such thing!*” Ebenezer squawked. “On the contrary... you are here to witness the dawning of my finest hour!”

“Oh, boy,” Sara said, her eyes rolling. “Here we go.”

“You’ll be singing a different tune soon enough, you meddling middle grader,” Ebenezer promised, emboldened by the comment. He pointed toward the pit, where the petrified dragon lay. “*Behold!* The unrivaled power of Pan Gu, harnessed by *me* and none other... the wrath of which shall be directed at *all those who oppose me!*”

“Slow down there, Mr. Widget-Bocker,” Maria said. She held both hands out, palms forward in a placating gesture, as she continued forward. “Are you sure this is such a good idea? There’s no telling what that ancient beast might do, should you actually manage to wake it up. Ms. Magellan was just telling us that Pan Gu is as violent and unpredictable as a hurricane!”

“I know *precisely* what I’m doing, which is far more than you can say for yourselves. It was remarkably easy to manipulate you fools, getting you to show up... putting you exactly where I wanted you to be!”

“Meaning?” Sara asked. She was indulging Ebenezer’s ego, encouraging him to tell them more – hopefully granting the sisters the time they needed to gain some sort of advantage.

It was just a matter of keeping the mad scientist talking. They had to keep egging him on, and he would continue babbling, giving them the opportunity they needed to edge ever closer. He was too much of an egomaniac to resist the chance to gloat and flaunt his superior intellect.

“I *never* forget an insult that has been unduly hurled in my direction. And when the lot of you unruly children... you cursed *Beans*... showed me such insolent disrespect, I made good note of it in my mind, believe me. When you showed your alliance to that lout, Lefty... oh, I took exception to that, and I marked you as my enemies. Without hesitation, I masterminded a way by which I might work you into my greater plan, so as to put you in your proper place, ensure my vengeance is complete, and put wrongs to right!”

“Are you kidding?” Maria asked. “You *do* realize that I’m only ten years old, right?”

“I’m sure you wish that I *was* kidding... but, *no!*” Ebenezer squawked. “Securing the SunTech power cell from Lefty was always in my plans, as was using it to trigger the awakening of Pan Gu. But the true sign of genius is the ability to innovate on the fly, and I cleverly improvised upon my original designs... simply so that I could ensnare you miserable Beans, and strike down two birds with one stone!”

Ebenezer once more broke into a diabolical cackle, throwing his head back as the laughter was loosed from his lips. As far as the sisters were concerned, this was fantastic, for his momentary distraction allowed them to step closer still, quickening their pace while his gaze was averted.

“*Mwa-ha-ha-ha!*,” Ebenezer chortled, his shoulders shaking about with demented glee. “I contacted your school’s administrators, and hastily arranged this *ludicrous* field trip. I made them an offer they couldn’t refuse... To pay for their transportation, and with free admission, to boot! They agreed, of course, and the end result was exactly what I planned upon. Those *fools* stumbled right into my trap, and they delivered *you cursed, meddling Beans* directly into my lap! This way, I will be able to not only waken Pan Gu, but also crush those who have wronged me in the past – *you*. And what better way to test the capabilities of my glorious new pet, than with an immediate field test?”

“You did all that, just to avenge some imaginary slight that we offended you with? We were just defending ourselves, don’t you remember? *You* were the one who tried to squash us like grapes! And what about all the other schoolchildren who are here?” Sara asked. “What about *them*? What have *they* done to incur your misplaced wrath?”

“*Bah!* This is irrelevant!” Ebenezer argued. “They might be squashed in the process, but they’re guilty by association! Any pipsqueaks who might show up in the same school as you undoubtedly deserve to be likewise crushed! They’re a bunch of miscreants, anyway. Jasper’s always complaining to me of how they scuff his floors and spill their food about, helter-skelter. And I’m sure Jasper can manage to evacuate his own children before any harm befalls them. You underestimate the effectiveness and accuracy of our new weapon!”

“Your logic is incredibly flawed, but I suspect you must already know that,” Maria said with a sigh.

Ebenezer glowered in return, the resentment at this accusation clear upon his face. He could barely comprehend the notion of somebody accusing him of having “flawed logic”.

Before he had a chance to respond, however, his attention was drawn toward the ceiling. Likewise, the gaze of the sisters gravitated upward, though they continued to stealthily move forward, ever closer to Ebenezer.

There was an alarming amount of noise coming from the air ducts that ran parallel to the floor, and Maria and Sara suspected that it could only mean one thing. There were *bangs* and *thwops*, as well as intermingled cries of “*hickory sticks!*” and “*confound it!*”

Before the eyes of all those in attendance, there was a great *crashing* and *clanging* and utter *whiz-banging*, as the aluminum pieces of ductwork fell apart, induced by the weird strain that was upon them.

Evelyn, who had been struck speechless during this exchange between the sisters and Ebenezer, was compelled to exclaim, “*Amerigo Vespucci!*”

From above, there fell a foreign object of the oddest variety. It was a broad-shouldered man, clad in overalls and clutching a broom to his barrel chest. The key ring at his waist jangled as he plummeted to the floor, absent of all grace or elegance, further impeded by the restrictions of his incapacitated arm. He groaned on impact, and slowly shook his bandaged noggin from side to side, as if trying to clear away imaginary stars.

It was, of course, Jasper Cragglemeister, returned from the dusty purgatories he had been banished to. He slowly gained his feet, wobbling about as he sought his balance. Awkwardly holding his broom at a strange angle, he used it to brush away the multitude of spider-webs and dust bunnies that had encrusted his clothing.

The janitor had returned... and there was no doubt that he was bearing a serious grudge against those who had sent him down the chute of the carefully concealed trapdoor.

## Chapter Twenty-Four Soap Suds and Science

“*Jasper!* It’s about time you showed up. Must I do everything myself?” Ebenezer demanded.

“It wasn’t my fault!” the confounded janitor protested. “They pulled the sneakiest, most underhanded, vilest trick I’ve ever witnessed. It was a fate most foul for ol’ Jasper, and there was nothing that could be done about it! The injustice of it simply beggars my mind, I tell you.”

“Pipe down, Jasper,” Ebenezer scolded, his voice filled with exasperation. “Nobody cares about your absurd excuses! This is my finest hour, and a crucial moment for the Black Hats. Pull yourself together, and come help me out – at once!”

As Jasper began hobbling over, groaning and muttering to himself, Maria raised her hand and declared, “I have a question, Mr. Widget-Bocker!”

Ebenezer made a noise of disgust, but the sisters knew that he was delighted for them to defer to his supposed wisdom. “What is it, you miserable pipsqueak?”

“If Mr. Weatherbee was really *you* all along, dressed in that fabulous disguise... and you’re *here* now... and Evelyn’s *here*, too... then *who’s* running the field trip?”

“Oh, I left that addle-brained Ms. Waffler in charge,” Ebenezer replied. “But she won’t have to do much – this field trip will be experiencing an abrupt termination shortly!”

Maria and Sara exchanged an uneasy glance. They were both big fans of Ms. Waffler, but they were not sure how the beloved teacher would handle a crisis. She was, after all, quite easily distracted by things that struck her fancy, and she was currently in a museum that was filled with things to engage her whimsy.

Plus, she was eternally optimistic, and the sisters doubted that Ms. Waffler would have any suspicion of evildoings, should the Black Hats continue on with their plan. The implications were clear: Maria and Sara had to prevent Ebenezer and his cronies from commencing their half-baked schemes. They had to protect their classmates from whatever consequences such evildoing might incur. The responsibility fell to *them*.

Ebenezer chortled with deranged delight, rubbing his palms together as his plan came ever closer to its culmination. He fixed his shifty eyes on Evelyn as he said, “All these years, we had you completely fooled. Did you really think that you had gained my trust so easily?”

Evelyn’s confidence was shaken, and she wearily admitted, “Yes, I suppose you and your band of strange colleagues did get the best of me.”

“Yes! I *did* get the best of you, didn’t I?” Ebenezer flaunted. “You were presumptuous enough to think that you were going to play me for a fool, but nothing of the sort transpired. It was *I* who was playing *you* for a fool, all along, Evelyn! I used you for the valuable information you had access to, and it worked like a charm. I never trust outsiders, those who were not among my inner circle from the very beginning. You were always a bit too eager to prove your worth to the Black Hats, and though you made some notable contributions, *you were never truly one of us.*”

“I think that’s a compliment,” Maria said in a low voice that was directed at Evelyn.

“It most certainly is *not!*” Ebenezer retorted, glaring at Maria. “Only the greatest minds on the planet have been recruited to join the Black Hats. It is an immense honor to work in the presence of my genius, you see!”

“Knock it off with your confounded skullduggery, will you? When will you learn to use your science for good, like Lefty?” Sara asked.

“Are you serious?” Ebenezer squawked. “Always carrying on about Lefty... *Lefty this*, and *Lefty that*, as if he invented sliced bread itself. It gets old, I tell you, mighty old!”

“Well, he did create the SunTech power cell, after all,” Sara reminded him. “The very piece of technology that’s so important in your constant, diabolical scheming.”

Ebenezer fumed, grinding his teeth together in aggravation. “*Enough!*” he barked. “We’ll not sit here and debate the scientific merit of my incompetent rival. Not when this moment is all about *me*. Now that we’re all here, it’s time to begin. I hope you enjoy the show... and the front row seats I’ve provided you with!”

Evelyn had been subjected to the reveal of a tremendous deception, and the scope of it had temporarily knocked her out of sorts. But she had been given enough time to regain her quick wits and her confidence, and she now jumped into action.

“Stop him!” she told the sisters. “Whatever happens, *don’t let him engage the master lever!*”

“Oh, yes, that’s a *splendid* idea,” Ebenezer encouraged, laughing madly. “*Stop me?* Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds? You’re asking *children* to stop *me!* I’ve got graduate degrees from a dozen different prestigious universities, you fool! How could *they* possibly stop *me*, with their childish, inadequate intellects?”

Maria glanced at her sister. “How about if we wrestle him to the ground?” she suggested.

Sara shrugged. “Sure.”

Ebenezer’s face fell, as he considered this. Apparently, he had never even pondered such a rudimentary approach. “Oh. That might work, actually.”

Maria and Sara had stealthily been sneaking ever closer to Ebenezer as he boasted of his plans, and they were now a mere fifty feet from him. It became clear to them that they could reach him quickly, should they sprint at full speed, just as if they were running the base paths and attempting to beat a throw – something at which they both had ample practice.

They also had an abundance of practice when it came to tackling their coach to the ground. Oftentimes, they would do just that, and the entire team would engage in a colossal pig-pile upon their outnumbered leader. As such, they were confident they could take down Ebenezer, who was drastically smaller than their coach.

“*Go!*” Sara shouted, as she began sprinting beside her sister.

As one, they began running forward, determined to reach Ebenezer before he could throw the lever and engage his terrible, ludicrous plan.

Ebenezer’s eyes grew wide with alarm, bulging behind the round lenses of his thick glasses. He hurriedly cried out for his colleague to come to his aid. “Get in there, Jasper, and slow them down! Egads, they’re quick little rascals!”

The janitor was still swaying a bit unsteadily on his feet, recuperating from his journey through the colossal air ducts and his subsequent, unceremonious plummet to the hard floor. Pulling his lips into a snarl of determination, he gave his bandaged head a final shake for clarity, and summoned his wits as best he could.

With two long strides, he came to stand before Ebenezer, his mahogany broom held forward, ready to do battle. Even with only one arm in service, he would be a most formidable obstacle.

“I’ll take care of Jasper!” Evelyn shouted.

While Maria and Sara had sprinted forward, Evelyn had instead been moving to the side. She had been running for the neatly stacked shelves of cleaning supplies that Jasper used to keep the chamber spotless.

Wrapping her fingers around the handle of one of the big buckets of soapy water, she lifted it from the floor. She moved her arm in an underhand motion, keeping the bucket low to the floor as she gathered momentum, as if preparing to launch a bowling ball.

With a whoop of glee, she let the thing fly. Evelyn’s aim proved to be accurate, and the bucket skittered across the floor until it collided with one of Jasper’s boots. There was a terrific explosion of soapy suds, and the bubbly water went flying from the bucket.

Jasper was in mid-step, for he had been preparing to intercept Maria and Sara. As the bucket struck his foot, its kinetic energy took him completely by surprise. The combination of the bucket’s momentum and the explosion of soapy water resulted in a quick, sudsy takedown.

He landed flat on his back, his breath rushing from him in a *whoosh*. Stunned, he stared at the ceiling in amazement, groaning as he attempted to gather his bearings. He simply could not believe the ill fortune he was experiencing today – it was a lot for him to take.

“Ooh, done in by your own cleaning supplies. That’s what we call irony, Jasper,” Maria informed him, as she victoriously sprinted past him.

However, she was not impervious to the same fate. The expanding pool of soapy water proved to be too slippery for the sisters, and they soon tumbled to the floor, sliding into a pile of ensnared arms and legs.

Evelyn arrived on the scene with a mop she had retrieved from the collection of cleaning supplies. Within moments, she too had fallen to the soapy floor. She and Jasper struggled to their knees, and they engaged in a bizarre type of fencing duel, one of them armed with a broom, and the other with a mop.

Ebenezer was watching this bizarre spectacle with an expression of disbelief pasted upon his face. “You clowns are making a mockery of my finest hour! This is not the time for such tomfoolery!”

“Go on!” Evelyn cried, as the shaft of her mop went *whap, clap, bap* against her enemy’s mahogany broom. “I’ll keep Jasper occupied. Stop Ebenezer!”

Seizing the opportunity, Maria and Sara did as they were told, scrambling for the scientist in his swiveling chair. But the going was slow, for the floor was so soaped up and slippery, they could not secure their footing.

No longer could they sprint at full speed, for they had to cautiously approach, hanging on to one another for balance. Their sneakers squeaked as they made their way forward, anxiously attempting to reach Ebenezer before he managed to engage the vaunted *master lever*.

The mad scientist’s eyes bugged out as he realized just how close the sisters had come to him. He spun the chair about as fast as he could possibly manipulate it, steering it with the armrest joystick.

Side by side, Maria and Sara made a final leap for Ebenezer’s chair, but he swiveled away from them, evading their grasp by mere inches.

He wrapped his fingers around the giant lever... and with a hoot of pure jubilation, he *pulled down*.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### The Legend Awakens

“No!” Maria and Sara cried out as one, reaching for Ebenezer.

But they were too late. The mad scientist had successfully engaged the lever, and it moved into place with a solid *thwunk*.

Delighted with his triumph, Ebenezer cackled until he shook. Giving the lever a quick, counterclockwise twist with a flip of the wrist, he removed it entirely from the control panel. Without a moment’s hesitation, he hurled it away with as much strength as he could muster.

Maria and Sara watched in dismay and disbelief as the lever soared through the air, descending into the pit at the center of the chamber. It landed with a series of *pings* and *pongs*, coming to a rest far, far beyond anybody’s reach.

“You doorknob!” Maria cried. “What if you need to turn this thing off?”

Ebenezer snorted with indignation at the very suggestion of such a thing. “Why on earth would I want to turn it *off*? This machine has been finely tuned to run at optimal calibration. Why, there’s no chance of anything going wrong. No chance, whatsoever. Haven’t I ever told you about all the different universities that I’ve received graduate degrees from? You’re dealing with a certified *genius* here, young lady!”

Sara placed a palm against her face in despair. Ebenezer’s arrogance was astounding, and his current statements had the ring of *famous last words* to them.

“Ah, it’s beginning!” Ebenezer observed with satisfaction, his voice filled with pride. “Just as it should. Stand back and watch, you small-minded fools... you’re about to witness *history!*”

Behind the control panel and collection of monitors, a giant, pointy thingamajig was rising upon a mechanical lift. The shiny metal of its surface glittered beneath the chamber’s lights, and it had a decidedly nefarious aura about it.

Ebenezer spread his arms wide and belted out, “Behold... the *Spectro-Solar Blaster 1000!*”

Maria and Sara looked up at the giant machine, which had been producing a loud humming noise ever since the lever had been thrown. The sound continued to increase in pitch as the seconds ticked by, and the gigantic, pointy gizmo gathered more energy with every passing moment.

The control panel was littered with gauges of all sizes, and the needles of these meters jumped about as the power climbed. Bulbs lit up with different colors, and the monitors displayed wildly spiking graphs, indicating some manner of scientific shenanigans, as the process rapidly continued.

Evelyn and Jasper halted in their strange fencing battle with broom and mop, drawn by the sight and sound of the noisy, flashing machination. Still resting on their knees in the pool of soapy water, they ignored one another and turned their attention toward the humming contraption. Jasper’s expression was filled with rapture, while Evelyn’s was one of dismay.

As the noisy hum reached the apex of its pitch, the machine began to shake about, as if the power within it was too much to be contained. Though this created a great deal of alarm for Maria, Sara, and Evelyn, the villainous scoundrels appeared to be not concerned in the slightest – as if things were proceeding just as they had planned.

With a loud *pop* that could be heard even over the infernal humming, a cluster of sparks shot out from a panel of the machine. This was instantaneously followed by a blue-white streak of electricity, arcing through the air. This event was duplicated several times in rapid succession, until the chamber looked like it was filled with a display of fireworks.

“Oh, yes, that’s it! Do my bidding, SunTech!” Ebenezer madly ordered the inanimate object, shielding his eyes from the sparks with a raised hand. “And then, this great beast will likewise be compelled to do my bidding, grateful as it must be for my freeing it from its long slumber.”

“What a hare-brained maniac! Does he think this is going to actually work?” Sara hissed to Maria.

The humming persisted at its high-pitched frequency, making the teeth of those present vibrate. As the electric currents continued to arc through the air, and the bursts of sparks exploded this way and that, something *new* began to happen.

The pointed thingamajig that rested high upon the machine began to radiate with a brilliant glow. Blue-white electricity encircled it, illuminating it as the arcs danced about wildly.

“*It’s glorious!*” Ebenezer cackled, rising from his chair. He strode toward the edge of the pit to better observe the process, while his fanciful cape fluttered about behind him, stimulated by the excessive electricity that was in the air. “*Glorious, I tell you!*”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Maria told her sister. “I just don’t see any way this could possibly end well.”

Sara nodded her head in agreement, but with the disposal of the lever that might be used to shut down the machine, the sisters had been rendered powerless. They grasped one another’s hand for support, and together, they walked toward the pit, until they were standing at its edge, beside Ebenezer. They were almost hypnotized by the spectacle of it all.

The pointed thingamajig atop the contraption began swiveling, and the sisters watched in horror as its direction was realigned. When it stopped moving, it was angled so that it was pointed into the pit at the center of the chamber... directly at the sleeping Pan Gu.

“Please, Mr. Widget-Bocker, reconsider! You’ve got to stop this, before it’s too late,” Maria pleaded.

Ebenezer heard Maria’s words, but he did not bother turning to look at her as he addressed her request. “*Stop this?*” He laughed at the notion, and in that moment, he looked truly mad. The arcs of electricity were reflected in the thick lenses of his glasses, and his hair danced about wildly in the charged air. “Why, I couldn’t stop it now, even if I wanted to. Now, behold... *the awakening of a legend!*”

The thingamajig belted out a raucous discord of noise, so impressive that the sisters were forced to cover their ears with their hands. As the sound erupted, a beam of bright, yellow-white light was discharged.

It was a shaft of energy so wide in diameter, it could not be described as anything so miniscule as a *laser*. It was more like a piece of a star, concentrated into a blast of raw, undiluted power. To look upon it was like looking directly into *the sun itself*.

Ebenezer’s goggle-like glasses had transitioned to dark colored lenses that were almost black, permitting him to look at this strange spectacle. “Ah, yes,” he said, rubbing his hands together with vivid anticipation. “Finally... my long years of planning are being realized. And nothing short of the concentrated power of *the sun itself* would suffice for this Herculean task!”

Maria and Sara had been forced to turn their heads away as the bright, yellow-white beam of energy had erupted from the contraption. Now, they cautiously turned back toward the pit. Their eyes had to remain squinted, and they could not look directly at the blast of concentrated power. Nonetheless, they looked into the pit as best they could, peering through their half-closed eyelids.

What they saw was nothing short of mind-boggling. The path of the energy beam was terminating directly in the center of Pan Gu. But rather than splashing away from the solid surface, it seemed as if the petrified beast was actually *absorbing* the energy.

Indeed, the color of the stone was actually transforming... changing from its granite-like appearance into a warm orange, which was slowly spreading across its surface. This color change radiated from the point at which the energy beam struck the statue, inching its way across the shell of stone that encased the dragon’s body.

Before long, the entire creature had attained this orange glow, and its brightness only continued to increase, as if the thing was being heated up from the inside out.

“That’s it!” Ebenezer cried. “Rise, Pan Gu, *rise!* Awaken from your long slumber... and *meet your new master!*”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Hiccups Happen

To the horror of Maria and Sara, they saw *cracks* beginning to appear in the rock surface of Pan Gu. At first, these fractures were tiny, barely noticeable against the weathered appearance of the stone.

Quickly, however, they began to stretch and splinter, until spider webs of cracks became visible throughout the creature's body. Even more alarmingly, pieces of the stone shell began to crumble and drop away, falling to the floor, where they exploded into smaller pieces.

Evelyn gained her feet, and she stumbled over to the railing at the pit's edge. Her jaw dropped in bewilderment, and she stared at Pan Gu with dismay. Perhaps recalling what she had read in her ancestor's journal about this ancient creature, she exclaimed, "This is a really, *really* terrible idea!"

But Ebenezer was not concerned in the slightest. To the contrary, he was beside himself with delight, hopping from foot to foot, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "It won't be long now!"

As more chunks of the stone fell away, the sisters caught their first glimpse of the thing that lay beneath. It was of a rich, dark green in color. After a few moments of study, they realized what they were looking at was scaly, reptilian flesh. The scales had a metallic appearance, glittering in the light of the energy beam, creating the odd, otherworldly impression of *woven emeralds*.

Once the stone began crumbling away, the process rapidly gained momentum. Pieces fell upon the floor like a hailstorm, revealing greater and greater sections of the mysterious monster within.

Before long, the last of the stone that had enshrouded the beast fell away... the great, terrible dragon was finally woken from its many centuries of hibernation.

In a burst of quick, lithe movement, the monster uncurled its form, stretching to its full size. It was, by any measure, an awe-inspiring sight.

Immediately, it became clear that Pan Gu was much larger than it had originally appeared. Its body was long and powerful, layered with muscles and the green scales that glittered like emeralds. It had four strong legs, and its feet were armed with sharp claws. A long tail, feathered with gold and green, swept about as if it were an elaborate flag.

Most impressive was the dragon's head, which featured an extensive, mustachioed snout, pointed ears, and ornate antlers. Oh, and there were teeth... *lots and lots* of teeth.

Pan Gu slowly blinked, and the great, black pupils of its eyes swirled like vortexes. To look into those eyes was like looking into the chaos of a hurricane, and the effect was somewhat hypnotizing.

The dragon turned its monstrous head toward the mechanical thingamajig that was emitting the energy beam, bellowing in displeasure. The yellow-white energy was continuing to pour forth, striking the beast's hide. Pan Gu snorted with irritation, and when it did so, dark smoke streamed from its nostrils, curling into the air.

"I don't think it much cares for that bright light in its face!" Sara exclaimed.

No sooner had she made this observation than Pan Gu reared up on its hind legs, stretching out to an impressive height. With a mighty swat of its foreleg, it struck the humming thingamajig, causing it to swivel wildly.

"*Look out!*" Evelyn cried.

The curator dove to the floor, pressing herself flat, in order to escape the chaos of the energy beam. Realizing the wisdom of this maneuver, the sisters quickly followed Evelyn's example.

The mighty blow that Pan Gu had delivered to the gizmo caused it to frantically spin. The end result was that the trajectory of the energy beam was drastically altered. When the thingamajig finally stopped moving, it was pointed toward the doorway from which Evelyn and the sisters had come.

The energy continued pouring out, flowing down the hallway. Wild arcs of blue-white electricity danced about, and sparks flew this way and that. Combined with the bellows of Pan Gu, the chamber had become a place of utter chaos.

“What do we do?” Maria hollered to her sister.

“Just hold tight!” Sara shouted back from her place on the floor. She held her hands clasped over the back of her head in an effort to protect her noggin in this hectic environment. “We’ll make a break for it as soon as we can!”

The loud humming of the thingamajig continued, but soon there came other sounds... *crazy* sounds. There were *bangs*, and *clangs*, and great *jingle-jangs*... as if heavy metal doors were being forced open, slamming against the walls as they came free from their locking mechanisms.

And far weirder were the noises that sounded like... *howls*, perhaps?

Maria and Sara exchanged worried looks. What was going on? Had the energy from the beam woken up all those slumbering creatures that were in the hallway they had passed through earlier? And what would the consequences of *that* be, they wondered? They had quite enough on their hands with a single rambunctious beastie, never mind a whole herd of them.

“*Pan Gu!*” Ebenezer hollered over the railing. “Simmer down, now! You must remain calm – you’re wrecking my precious laboratory!”

Pan Gu paid Ebenezer not the slightest amount of attention, and the creature seemed to have no inclination whatsoever to do as it was told. It continued bellowing at the thingamajig, stomping its feet into the floor, shaking the very foundation of the museum with the force of the impact.

“Well, I must admit, I didn’t foresee this occurrence... the creature does not seem to be obeying me...” Ebenezer said thoughtfully, more so to himself than to anybody else. The others could just barely hear him, over the chaotic scenario, able to do so only because of his close proximity. He removed a pad from some unknown place within his leotard, and began jotting notes. “Nope, I wasn’t expecting this to happen. Not at all! Interesting... *very* interesting.”

Maria stared at him in exasperation. “How do you reverse this confounded thing you’ve built?”

Ebenezer’s eyes drifted toward the bottom of the pit. “I, ah... seem to have thrown the lever away...”

“Yeah, you did! You said you would never need to turn this thing off, *remember?*” Sara demanded.

“Well, science isn’t always as clean and predictable as we would like, young lady,” Ebenezer lectured. “One can always expect a few hiccups in the process, here and there. Perhaps I need to run some more calculations before I make another attempt. I don’t suppose you would be a good child, and retrieve that lever for me, would you? Just hop on down there and toss it up to me, why don’t you? It shouldn’t be much trouble for a spry young whippersnapper like you!”

“Are you completely bonkers?” Sara asked. “You are, aren’t you?”

“There’s no doubt about it – he’s flipped his wig,” Maria declared.

“Oh, come now, it will be a cinch,” Ebenezer encouraged. “Go ahead – just hop on down there! That big ol’ creature probably won’t even notice you, you’re so small by comparison.”

“Uh, no, I’m not doing that, thank you very much,” Sara told him. “And why don’t you have a spare lever on hand, if you’re in the practice of removing them and throwing them into the worst possible locations?”

“A *spare lever*... you know, that never occurred to me,” Ebenezer confessed, as he jotted the notion into his notepad. “Perhaps I’ll have to manufacture one for occasions such as this... You know, this critter was a lot smaller when he was curled up in a ball, encased in stone, peacefully snoozing on the floor. It seems to be quite unruly, if I do say so myself.”

As if to prove this point, Pan Gu reared up on its hind legs, placing both of its front feet upon the thingamajig. Its talons dug into the metal mechanism, tearing pieces of steel free as it *squeezed* with monstrous pressure.

The beam continued to blast forth, and the yellow-white energy struck Pan Gu directly in the face, splashing wildly about. This only served to further infuriate the dragon, and it bellowed with outrage, sending its whiskers trembling with the undulations of this outburst.

With a final, definitive jerk of its upper arms, Pan Gu wrenched the mechanism completely free from its anchor. The thingamajig was effortlessly thrown across the chamber, *clanging* and *banging* as pieces of it came free, flying this way and that.

With the dismantlement of the Spectro-Solar Blaster 1000, the chamber was suddenly a very different place. No longer was there the loud humming of the machine, and the beam of bright, yellow-white energy had disappeared. The stronghold of the Black Hats had become a much quieter place, and this made the noises of the awakened beast all the more evident.

In the still air of the chamber, Maria and Sara could hear *huffing* and *puffing*, and the snorting, rumbling, shuffling of the creature. They gazed into the swirling, chaotic eyes of the dragon, and they were once more struck by its powerful presence – it was like nothing else on earth, a force of nature, a storm that was longing to break free and tear loose.

“Well, this is just great, Ebenezer,” Maria said. “*Now* what do you suggest we do?”

“Hmmm...” the mad scientist said, scratching at his disarrayed hair in thought. “I don’t... really... know.” He shrugged his shoulders. “What can I tell you? I’m at a loss here. It’s a conundrum we’ve found ourselves in. A very curious conundrum.”

Sara placed the palm of her hand against her face, sighing in exasperation. “What I would give to have Lefty here right now...”

Growling and grumbling, Pan Gu examined its surroundings. There seemed to be an element of confusion to its reaction, as if it could not comprehend this strange, synthetic place in which it had awoken.

It did not seem to be pleased with what it observed. With a ferocity that was akin to that of a hurricane, it began thrashing about, tearing its way through the chamber, which it perceived to be nothing more than an unjust, temporary prison.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Curious Happenings Upstairs

Neil glanced at Jack, and as he did so, his eyebrows shot up in surprise. He had just felt the floor tremble beneath his feet. It had been like a very minor aftershock, following an earthquake.

“Was that my imagination, or did you feel something just now?” he asked.

The bewildered expression on Jack’s face revealed that he *had* felt something. “I don’t think that was your imagination. Is... the building moving? What *was* that?”

They looked around, taking in the reactions of their fellow classmates. Many of the schoolchildren seemed to be oblivious as to anything strange that might be occurring, but several of them were also looking around, as if they too had felt something beneath the soles of their sneakers.

Neil lowered himself to one knee and placed a hand flat against the cool, tile floor. For a few seconds, all was calm. But after a moment, he felt his fingertips vibrate as another small aftershock rippled through the building.

“Uh-huh, just as I suspected. There’s definitely something *weird* going on here,” Neil reported. “Believe me, I know weirdness when I see it. Or, er... feel it, in this case.”

Jack knelt beside his friend and placed his hands upon the floor, gathering his own impressions. The pair of them narrowed their eyes in concentration. Over the constant sounds of murmuring, shuffling students, they thought they could faintly hear something – distant, yet disturbing – that made the hairs on the backs of their necks stand up.

“What do you suppose *that* might be?” asked Jack, straining to hear more closely.

“I don’t know,” Neil said. “Uh... it sounds a bit like Godzilla or King Kong, don’t you think?”

“Or maybe Jasper’s Mecha-Machine,” Jack suggested.

Neil and Jack had been on edge ever since Jasper had slinked away, and the sisters had departed to follow. They had anxiously been awaiting the return of their friends, but that hadn’t happened. Maria and Sara were still missing, and the boys were worried.

“Hey...” Neil said, as he peered around the museum and the milling, meandering students. “What happened to that guy who was leading this tour?”

“Hmm... Mr. Weatherbee, wasn’t it? The assistant curator?” asked Jack.

“Yeah, he was at the front, but he just sort of blends into everything... and now, I don’t even see him. Who’s leading the field trip?”

Their eyes fell upon Ms. Waffler, who was currently studying her colorful shoes, as if she had perhaps felt the strange vibrations, as well. She placed her hands upon her belly, and after a moment’s consideration, she apparently decided to chalk it up to nothing more than a bit of indigestion.

“Must have been that bean burrito I ate,” the teacher proclaimed. And with that dismissal, she resumed her musical humming, wandering about from exhibit to exhibit with an entranced look upon her face.

Neil and Jack adored Ms. Waffler just as much as Maria and Sara did, but they knew that she was not the best person to be left in charge when it came to emergencies. And the Beans could smell an impending crisis. The place was brimming with the possibility of carnage, they felt.

There were too many strange occurrences for it to be coincidence. Jasper’s odd behavior, plus the disappearance of both curators... and now, this – the vibrations that seemed to be emanating from beneath the museum, coupled with the distorted, muffled bellowing.

Oh, yes, the Beans were sure... something *weird* was happening.

Neil swiveled his head about to see if they were being observed, but there was so much commotion, nobody was paying them any attention at all. He quickly walked back toward the entrance of the museum, with Jack keeping pace beside him.

Near the front doors of the museum, there was a payphone tucked away in a dimly lit alcove, and Neil approached it. He and Jack squeezed next to one another and quickly read the instructions for operating this rarely seen contraption.

At first, they feared the payphone might actually be a historical artifact that was part of the museum's collection, but it fortunately proved to be in working order. Between the two of them, they were able to scrounge up enough change from their pockets to place a call.

Neil lifted the receiver as Jack placed coins into the phone, which eagerly gobbled them up. He then quickly punched in a series of digits – the number being for his father's office, located within the Hollow Oak Sneaker Factory.

What followed was a conversation in which Neil's dad (known as Big Bob Bandernath, or Coach) seemed rather befuddled as to why his son was calling from a payphone during the middle of a field trip. Neil ran down the reasons for his concerns and suspicions, but Coach still seemed doubtful.

"Is Ms. Waffler there? I'm sure everything's perfectly under control," Coach assured his son.

Neil held the receiver of the phone at an angle, so that he and Jack could both hear the conversation, and the two of them exchanged an exasperated look. Ms. Waffler had many exemplary traits, but keeping things under control during a Jasper-sized crisis was *not* one of them. This was the galoot who had co-founded the Black Hats and designed the nefarious Mecha-Machine, after all.

"Dad, I'm telling you," Neil pleaded. "Something's seriously out of whack here!"

"And you say that the floor's trembling, do you?" Coach asked. "I don't doubt you, Neil, I just think it's nothing to be worried about. Why, they're always conducting some manner of restoration there in downtown Portsmouth. It's probably just some jackhammers that are being put to use nearby."

Neil looked worriedly at Jack. He was concerned that they might not get the help they were seeking. He *had* to convince Coach!

"Listen, Dad, Jasper's into something real deep here. I can't tell you what exactly, because I'm not entirely sure. But he's up to no good! You know how he is with those dastardly deeds of his. Remember what he did at the factory?"

"Jasper's meddling again, is he?" Coach asked.

His voice had acquired a tone of interest, and Neil could almost imagine his father leaning forward in his office chair, pressing the phone to his ear in concentration. Jasper had recently gotten into heaps of mischief, much of which had resulted in a devastating impact on Coach, the sneaker factory, and the entire town of Hollow Oak. The surly janitor had never been a crowd pleaser, but recently, he had become a first rate scoundrel, and Coach was on high alert against his shenanigans.

"I think he's totally gone out of his gourd this time, and there's no telling what he might do. Sara and Maria went off after him, and they never came back, and we're starting to get really worried. Both of the museum officials have disappeared, and... and I've just got a bad feeling about this, Dad. Look, I think we need help. I think we need Nibbler!"

"*Nibbler?*" Coach asked with incredulity and confusion. "*Nibbler?* I thought you were calling to ask *me* for help!"

"Oh, um... yeah! We are, Dad!" Neil sputtered. "We need your help, too! But, uh... if you could see to it that Nibbler finds his way here, that would be really great. I've got a feeling that terrific nose of his might come in handy."

"You know, if I had a nickel for every time that crazed beast ate one of my shoes or socks or pairs of glasses, I would be a wealthy man by now!" Coach lamented. "But you may be right... that dog's got one heck of a reliable snout, I'll grant you that."

"So... can you bring him?"

"Of course. Why, he's chewing on one of my shoes right now!"

"He is?"

"Yes, I've been bringing him to work with me the past couple of days," Coach explained. "He seems to enjoy it much more than staying at home by himself, and he has a never-ending supply of

things to chew on here at the sneaker factory. It's sort of like a 'Nibbler Paradise', if you will. He's curled up under my desk at the moment, trying to work the shoe from my foot."

"That's great, Dad. Can you bring him as soon as possible?"

"Sure, sure... we can't have Jasper causing chaos in Portsmouth, tarnishing the good name of Hollow Oak. And I'll have to bring Chief Fresco, of course. We'll need him to come along, if his daughters might be in trouble. Plus, we can get there in record time, with that fancy car of his."

"So, it's settled then! Oh, and Dad..." Neil said, as he felt the floor tremble beneath his feet, more violently than before. "Not to be too pushy or anything... but can you hurry?"

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### Minds Gone Awry

During the time in which Neil and Jack had been phoning Coach upstairs, things had taken a decidedly drastic turn for the worse in the chamber below. The stronghold of the Black Hats was rapidly coming undone, as the wrath of Pan Gu increased. The beast seemed to be confused by the strange place it had awoken in, and it was none too pleased.

As a means of embodying this displeasure, the dragon was thrashing and smashing about, and its body proved to be a formidable wrecking ball of destruction. Pieces of steel and broken machinery went flying this way and that, busted loose by tooth and claw, tail and snout. The creature was a whirling, twirling instrument of decimation.

Maria and Sara were still pressed flat against the floor, attempting to take whatever small amount of shelter they could find. Nonetheless, they felt horribly exposed as the awakened monster proceeded to destroy their current surroundings.

The shrieks and bellows of the beast were dreadful to behold, and they reverberated within the chamber like the cries of a banshee. The sisters looked at each other in terror, as they desperately tried to formulate a plan of escape.

They could not return the way from which they had come, for a sweep of Pan Gu's astonishing tail had sent a massive amount of debris crumbling before the doorway. Was that the only way out, the sisters wondered? Surely not, for how had Ebenezer gotten down here? He hadn't come through the same passageway as the sisters, they were sure of that. There *must* be another way out!

The rapid destruction of the chamber was certainly of imminent concern, of that there could be no doubt – after all, there seemed to be a very good chance that the ceiling would come crashing down pretty soon, at this rate. But what was of perhaps even greater concern was the bizarre transformation that had occurred in the adults.

Evelyn, Jasper, and Ebenezer were all acting... strange. Very, *very* strange.

It was as if the whole lot of them had lost their minds. They were wandering about in slow, directionless, shuffling steps. Their eyes had glazed over, and they seemed to be completely oblivious to the total carnage that surrounded them, not to mention the rampaging monster. Sparks flew by their heads, and crumbling debris fell only feet from them, but they didn't even flinch.

"Ms. Magellan!" Maria cried out. "Ms. Magellan, what are you doing? Are you okay? We need to get out of here!"

"This would be a really fantastic time to pull yourself together!" Sara pointed out.

Evelyn did not yield the slightest reaction to their words, and the sisters were sure that they had not been heard. Somehow, the curator had become *severely* out of sorts.

Maria and Sara studied Evelyn's strange behavior for a moment more, and then they turned their attention to Jasper and Ebenezer. The two villains were behaving in an identical manner, meandering about as if they were in a stupor of inconceivable proportions.

The sisters reflected upon what Evelyn had told them earlier, when they had been approaching the chamber. She had claimed that, according to Magellan's journal, legend spoke of Pan Gu's influence in reverent terms.

It was a creature with the power of a hurricane, and the legends also said that it was possible for people to lose their minds, simply by looking upon the creature in its natural form. Was that what was happening now, they wondered? There seemed to be no other explanation.

But why were Maria and Sara not equally flabbergasted by what they were witnessing? Sure, their minds were blown, metaphorically speaking... but they were completely in possession of their faculties, as far as they could tell. It appeared that the responsibility of reversing this absurd problem

would fall upon their shoulders... the problem that Ebenezer and Jasper had so eagerly created in their shortsighted ambition.

It seemed as though their young brains were impervious to whatever mind-boggling effects Pan Gu might render upon those who witnessed his terrible, awesome presence. As they processed this weird reality, they recalled what they had been told by a similarly strange monster, a benevolent, kind-hearted creature they had encountered in their own town: Titus, the swamp beast of Hollow Oak.

Titus had said that children (or little ones, as he called them) were *different* from adults. He had said that though little ones could observe and interact with creatures like him, doing such would be impossible for adults. They would “look right through him”, as he said, for their eyes would refuse to see, and their hearts would refuse to believe.

Their minds would convince them that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, and they would shortly forget the encounter entirely. Such was one of the sad, strange occurrences of adulthood.

For children were young, and they still believed in the wonders of the world. But grownups... grownups had been stripped of their imaginations as the years toward adulthood had marched on... they were, quite simply, *incapable* of processing that which went beyond the norm.

“Well, I guess we’ve got to repair this monumental mess!” Maria hollered to her sister. “It doesn’t look as though the rest of these folks are going to be much help!”

“I believe you hit it right on the head, there, Maria,” Sara agreed.

Pan Gu had once more reared upon its hind legs, searching the ceiling with its swirling, hurricane-like eyes. Its nostrils flared, black smoke erupted from its mouth, and it pounded at the pillars of the chamber with its forelegs.

Maria gripped Sara’s shoulder for comfort, and her sister squeezed right back. As they watched in horror, a colossal piece of the ceiling came crashing down, exploding into a plume of dusty debris. Miraculously, nobody was struck, though the pair of them coughed and sputtered upon the cloudy air.

When the dust began to clear, they blinked away the tears that were forming in the corners of their eyes, and they focused on what had been left behind. Pan Gu was still demolishing the place with a terrific amount of zeal, that much was for certain. But of greater significance was what the monster’s most recent damage had *revealed*.

The massive control panel that had operated the Spectro-Solar Blaster 1000 had largely been *wiped out*... erased by a single swipe of Pan Gu’s tail. Behind it, the sisters could see the rungs of what appeared to be a service ladder.

And *that* led them to the logical conclusion that such a ladder must lead *up* and *out* of their current predicament. They had only to make their way over to it, and climb to freedom.

“Maria, let’s make a break for it! This thing is going to tear the place apart... we don’t have much time,” Sara told her sister.

“Wait a second, we can’t leave Ms. Magellan,” Maria said. “She won’t be able to defend herself!”

“Hmm... this is true,” Sara agreed. She was torn between the need to escape, and the need to help Evelyn, but she knew that her sister was right. They couldn’t leave Evelyn behind, for she would be helpless in her current condition. “Okay, let’s go get her – but we need to be quick!”

The two of them sprung from the floor and sprinted for the discombobulated curator. They immediately realized that keeping their footing was going to be a bit harder than they had anticipated, for the place was bucking, and shaking, and coming apart at the seams... it was like trying to retain balance in the middle of an earthquake.

Maintaining low centers of gravity, the sisters quickly reached Evelyn, and each of them stood by an opposite side, grabbing one arm to support the dazed curator.

“Ms. Magellan, can you hear me?” Sara asked. “You’ve got to get it together! We’re in great danger!”

Evelyn didn't react to the words. Her glasses were askew, perched crookedly upon her nose, and those brilliant green eyes, which had once seemed to be so clear and alert, now lacked focus. The sisters were deeply concerned for her well-being.

"Please, Ms. Magellan, we need to get out of here!" Maria cried in her ear, but to no avail.

"Do you think we should slap her?" Sara asked.

"Um... I dunno... I've never exactly, uh... *slapped* anybody before," Maria said.

"Well, neither have I, but I think this might be the occasion that demands such action," Sara said, as pieces of flaming wreckage came crashing down only feet from where they stood. "It's not like I *want* to slap her!"

"Well, then, go ahead and do it!" Maria encouraged. "I'll get your back, if she starts swinging!"

"Okay, here goes... I'm sorry, Ms. Magellan, but this is for your own good. I think this is what you do, when somebody's hysterical, and time is of the essence," Sara explained remorsefully.

Grimacing, she reared back with one arm. As she brought it forward, she cried out, "*Boo-yah!*"

Sara's open palm collided with Evelyn's cheek, and her glasses went flying from her nose. Maria caught the soaring spectacles with one hand, while retaining her grip on Evelyn with the other. The curator seemed to be mildly affected by the slap, but she remained largely out of sorts, mumbling incoherent gibberish to herself.

"I'll give it a go," Maria offered. She let go of Evelyn and came around to face her. As she offered her own slap, she cried out, "*Hullabaloo!*"

The combination of slaps seemed to revive Evelyn, and she looked around in confusion, murmuring quietly to herself. "*By the compass of Columbus, I was having a terrible dream...*" she muttered.

Sara gripped the curator by her shoulders and shook her as hard as she could. "Ms. Magellan, listen to me! It was *no dream!* We've got to get out of here!"

Evelyn wearily looked around, as Maria gently secured the eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose and behind her ears. "*This can't be...*" she murmured, as she took in the vast amounts of ongoing damage.

The sisters realized that Evelyn was not going to be much help, and they hurried her along to the service ladder. Once there, Sara forced Evelyn to wrap her arms around her shoulders, so that she could carry her up the ladder. Fortunately, the curator was a petite woman, though it would still be quite the burden for the eleven-year-old Sara.

"Ms. Magellan, you've got to hold on!" Sara hollered over the chaos. "Can you do that for me? Can you hold on?"

Evelyn weakly nodded, and the sisters had no choice but to hope that she was up to the task.

"What about Jasper and Ebenezer? Should we go back for them?" Maria asked.

Though the villainous Black Hats had, quite literally, brought this undesirable fate down upon themselves, the sisters were reluctant to leave them behind. It seemed terribly unfair to leave them at the mercy of Pan Gu in their current, bedraggled conditions.

Sara looked over her shoulder, studying the unraveling carnage. She hesitated, trying to decide what the best course of action might be.

But before she could speak, another one of Pan Gu's destructive motions caused a fiery ball of broken machinery to land perilously close to the sisters. It effectively blocked their retreat, and they now had but one option as to where they could go – up.

"Never mind, there's nothing we can do!" Maria cried out. She had her hands raised to her face, as she tried to block the heat from the fire. "We have to get out of here!"

Sara nodded in agreement. Then, placing her hands upon the steel rungs of the service ladder, she began climbing, desperately hoping that safer areas were above them.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### Something Amiss

“Heave!” Sara encouraged her sister. “*Heave!*”

“Oh, I’m heaving, believe me!” Maria replied. “Don’t you recognize good old fashioned *heaving* when you see it?”

The two of them were awkwardly ascending the service ladder, attempting to escape from the crumbling chamber as quickly as they could. Evelyn was also on the ladder, and though she had reacquired a small amount of her wherewithal, she was hardly at full strength.

She was helping a little bit with the climb, but she needed a great deal of aid from the sisters, and it was all she could do just to hang onto Sara’s shoulders. If she *did* fall, it seemed reasonable that such a drop into the fiery carnage below would result in nothing short of doom... and she would most likely take her young companions down with her.

There was no easy way for them to exit the place. However, the sisters were extremely motivated to escape from the rampaging monster beneath them, which was in the process of smashing the place to smithereens. If a giant, bellowing dragon couldn’t inspire you to get moving, it was safe to say that *nothing* could.

With Sara leading the way and Maria bringing up the rear, they awkwardly push-pulled Evelyn up the ladder, while the curator contributed somewhat by weakly assisting, though these efforts did little to help. She was still thoroughly rattled by the effects of Pan Gu. Her senses were scrambled, and her motor skills were scattered to the four corners of her befuddled mind.

Maria and Sara both glanced down. They had managed to climb a good ways up the ladder, and their arms and shoulders were burning with the exertion of hauling Evelyn up the steep ascent. Fortunately, the curator was not a heavy person, but the added weight was still quite noticeable. Below them, the sisters could see the monster *bashing* and *thrashing* and *smashing* its surroundings, tearing apart the stronghold of the Black Hats.

The beast’s strength and intensity had only continued to increase after it had awoken. It was becoming more violent and powerful with each passing second. No longer was it only emitting smoke from its nostrils, but it was also spitting fire from its mouth, haphazardly lighting things ablaze, with nary a thought for consequence.

Its gargantuan tail swept about as it reversed its position, taking out machinery and support columns as if the appendage were a wrecking ball. Claws tore through steel like a hot knife through warm butter, shredding it into metallic ribbons.

Its voice had gained volume as its fury increased. Between snorts of flame and smoke, it bellowed with such ferocity that the sisters felt their bones shake, creating a weird, tingling sensation inside their bodies.

Sara’s eyes bulged as she observed this unparalleled destruction. She once more compelled her sister to heave. “Put your back into it, Maria! Evelyn, I know you’re not feeling well, but you’ve really got to help us out!”

“I’m heaving, I’m heaving!” Maria panted, pushing against Evelyn with all of her might.

“Keep going, we’re almost there,” Sara called.

Between grunts of exertion, Maria told her sister, “I assure you, I have no plans to stop and let this monster gobble us up.”

After much climbing and hauling, and the results of what was nearly a superhuman effort, the trio reached the highest rungs. Once there, Sara could see that the top of the ladder terminated in a round hatch that was above her. She reached up with one hand, placing her palm against its surface. With a grunt, she shoved against the hatch, and it flew open with a *bong!*

Immediately, Sara could feel air against her face that was drastically cooler than the hot atmosphere of the chamber below, which had been heated by the vast amounts of machinery, the spotlights, and (most alarmingly of all), the fiery breath of Pan Gu. It was a wonderful, refreshing feeling, and it filled her with hope.

“Okay, let’s get out of here!” Sara shouted.

She climbed out first, and then helped Maria lift Evelyn up the service ladder. Once the three of them had emerged, they found themselves at the ground level of the museum, where they had earlier been touring with the rest of the group.

However, there was nobody to be seen... had they evacuated when the building started shaking? Even here, away from Pan Gu’s terrible wrath, the effects could be felt. The building was bucking and shaking, and the monster’s bellows, though more distant, could still be heard.

“*Whew!* We made it,” Sara sighed.

She was dog-tired from the struggle up the ladder, but with the last of her strength, she slammed the hatch closed. With that done, the roars of Pan Gu became somewhat muffled, and the barrier between the humans and beast was a welcome one. Exhausted, she plopped to the floor with an *oof*, resting in a tangle of limbs.

Maria did likewise, crashing to the floor beside her sister, her chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. “*We’re safe,*” she mumbled, her voice filled with relief and fatigue. “*Gears and sprockets... We’re safe.*”

Evelyn had fallen to the floor beside the sisters, her arms and legs limp like wet noodles. She was murmuring to herself and weakly pointing toward the massive skylights of the ceiling. “Clouds,” she murmured.

“Yes, they’re clouds,” Maria agreed, in what she hoped was a soothing voice. She turned her head toward Sara and asked, “Do you think she’ll be alright?”

“I think she just needs some rest. She’s certainly better off than if we had left her down in that chamber with Pan Gu.”

Now that the danger had passed, and the sisters had a moment to catch their breath, they examined their surroundings. The hatch they had emerged from was in an unlit alcove of the museum.

Now they could understand how Ebenezer had reached the stronghold below – he must have ditched the tour group, slinked away to this location, and used the cover of the dim lighting to pop the hatch and descend the service ladder. That was how he had beaten Evelyn and the sisters to the chamber, while they were traversing the hidden passageway that began in the curator’s office.

For a few moments, the sisters could do nothing but stay on their backs, trying to regain their breath. As they did so, they marveled at how lucky they were to have escaped unharmed. They were still trying to comprehend what they had just witnessed; to process all the craziness that had been unleashed in such a short period of time.

Finally, Sara spoke. “I guess we had better get out of here and figure out where everybody is, huh?”

“Sure, why not? We need to find Neil and Jack and tell them about what Jasper and Ebenezer have gotten up to. This is a certified disaster,” Maria said.

They rose up, and with a combined effort, they got Evelyn on her feet, supporting her by throwing her arms over their shoulders. Bearing most of her weight, the sisters were able to steer Evelyn about as she shuffled her feet on the floor, mumbling to herself and humming.

They searched their surroundings, trying to get their bearings. Clearly, they were on the first floor of the museum, for they recognized the skylights above, though the exhibits that were immediately present were unfamiliar to them.

“Okay, back this way. I recognize this room up ahead. You see? It’s the room with all those Chinese artifacts,” Maria said.

“Oh, yeah, I see. I recognize that area. That’s the barrier that you almost tripped over, isn’t it?”

“No, that can’t be it. There’s no statue there.”

“Oh, no? Then what’s that?” Sara asked, pointing with her free hand.

Maria looked, and instantly recognized the object her sister was pointing at. It was a stone sphere, intricately detailed with patterns. Maria knew what it was. It was the Flower of Life, as Evelyn had explained to them earlier.

But that made no sense. The Flower of Life was part of the larger statue... and there was no Guardian Lion.

“This... can’t be right. Where *is* it?” Maria asked. She was utterly baffled, convinced that they were somehow mistaken. Had they become so thoroughly disoriented? “Something’s not right. Something’s amiss...”

## Chapter Thirty

### Dangers on Every Side

When Maria and Sara looked closer, they saw that there was a great quantity of stone-colored dust on the floor. There were also larger pieces of what looked like rock, scattered near the Flower of Life.

“Oh, boy. *That* can’t be a good sign,” Sara said. “I think we all know where *this* delightful development is heading.”

This was confirmed by a series of sounds behind them... sounds of heavy, padded footsteps. The sisters stood frozen. They heard the footsteps draw closer, and there was an unmistakable *weight* to them. And with each step of those heavy feet, there was also the distinct sound of what seemed to be a *sleigh bell*.

“Do we even *want* to turn around to look at whatever *that* is?” Maria asked.

The footsteps and bells had stopped, but now there came the sound of deep, steady breathing. Something *big* was puffing behind the sisters, and they felt the warmth of its breath on the backs of their necks, stirring the ends of their ponytails.

Sara let out a long sigh. “I think we already have an unfortunately strong suspicion as to what that might be.”

The sisters began turning, so as to face the thing that had advanced upon their position. They moved awkwardly, for the burden of Evelyn’s limp body slowed them down. But after a few moments of finagling, the sisters managed to turn around, and what they saw was a confirmation of their unsettling suspicions.

Before them stood the Guardian Lion... but it was vastly transformed from when it had been encased in a shell of what had appeared to be granite. It was a breathtaking specimen, a creature the likes of which was unknown to humankind. Though it had been incredible when sealed in stone, and thought to be a statue, it was far more resplendent in life.

Its height and breadth were equally astounding, and it was covered with lustrous, golden-brown fur. Even compared to the biggest of jungle cats, it was an undisputed giant. Its great ears twitched and its lustrous mane rippled, causing the ornaments entwined therein to sparkle with reflected light. Bits of stone dust clung to the bangles that were around its ankles, and it was here that the sleigh bells were mounted, heralding each step of the magnificent beast.

The nostrils of this incredible Guardian Lion flickered and flared, sniffing at the humans who stood before it. As it slowly stepped closer, inspecting them, its whiskers twitched, and the bells around its ankles sounded. A low rumble, filled with bass, began generating within its chest.

“Well, this is just *fantastic*. When Pan Gu whacked that ridiculous Spectro-Solar... whatever it was called... its energy rays blasted all throughout this place. And now look at *this*,” Maria said, pointing in awe at the looming Guardian Lion. “Those doorknobs have opened a real can of worms!”

“I don’t even want to know what else that super-powered gizmo woke up in here... remember all those sealed doors we saw in the lower level of the museum?” Sara asked.

“Yep. But I fear we have more, ah... *immediate* problems, you might say,” Maria pointed out, and her voice had grown very quiet, as the Guardian Lion had continued to approach.

As the beast drew closer, its amazing size became all the more apparent, and it dwarfed the three humans who stood before it. In comparison to the ancient creature, Maria, Sara, and Evelyn were but tiny things. The sisters craned their necks to look up at the Guardian Lion’s face, which was now no more than a few feet above them. Its breath, they thought, smelled a bit like ramen noodles.

“You don’t suppose there’s any chance that this thing is strictly a plant eater, do you?” Sara asked.

“Maybe Evelyn can tell us,” Maria suggested, but without much hope, for the curator was still stupefied, her weight almost completely supported by the sisters.

“Pardon the intrusion, noble beast,” Sara said. “We’ll just be on our way now, if it’s all the same to you. We’re just, uh, looking for some friends of ours. But we’ll get out of your way... you probably have a lot of catching up to do with, um... well, you know... Pan Gu, and whoever else is running around, smashing the place up.”

The Guardian Lion did not seem to register any of Sara’s words, not that she had been too hopeful of it being able to comprehend English. The sisters began to slowly shuffle backward, but the creature kept pace with them, advancing in equal measure to their retreat. Its brilliant, golden eyes tracked them without blinking, and the low growling continued.

They were reminded of the way a cat might stalk a mouse, fixated upon its prey to the point of virtual hypnosis.

“Uh... *this is kind of creeping me out,*” Maria whispered to her sister.

Neither one of them dared to turn their backs and run, and the fact that they were supporting Evelyn’s weight made the notion outright impossible, anyway. They were also vaguely suspicious that any sudden moves might trigger the big creature’s predator instinct, causing it to pounce upon them.

And then, just when it seemed things could not possibly get any worse... they did just that. The floor in the center of the museum began to violently shudder, and with a sound like the tearing of the earth itself, a giant hole opened up. Huge chunks of the floor tumbled within, swallowed by the freshly rendered chasm.

Maria and Sara were at the very edge of this fissure, and with Evelyn in tow, they quickly backpedaled, trying to distance themselves from it. The Guardian Lion’s attention was finally diverted from the sisters, and it propelled itself away from the hole with nimble movements, disappearing into parts unknown.

Maria and Sara gaped at the unthinkable chasm, disbelieving of its materialization. But its source was soon revealed to them.

The floor of the museum had been ripped away by the beast that emerged from within the fissure – it was *Pan Gu*, furious, and snorting, and belching hot flames.

## Chapter Thirty-One

### Nibbler on the Scene

With its lights flashing and its siren wailing, the Hollow Oak police cruiser screeched to a halt in front of the museum. Chief Fresco quickly silenced the siren and leaped from the driver's side of the car.

He stood beside his vehicle, leaning on the open door, gaping up at the building before him. With a trembling hand, he removed the aviator sunglasses from his face, so as to get a better look. His eyes were wide, revealing his astonishment at what faced him.

Chief Fresco was well beyond the limits of the jurisdiction that his badge permitted him, but this did not bother him. He was not here in any official capacity – he had arrived on scene because the children of his town were in danger. Of the greatest concern to him was the news that his daughters were in peril, and he would do anything he could to help bring them home safely.

From the passenger side, Coach jumped out of the car, and he appeared to be equally flabbergasted by what had happened to the museum. His jaw dropped open, and his eyeballs bulged behind the lenses of his spectacles.

Nibbler, the faithful, friendly Labradoodle, had been riding in the front seat, sandwiched between the two men as the police cruiser had barreled along the roads at full speed. He now wiggled his way out of the passenger door, and came to stand beside Coach.

Even Nibbler was visibly taken aback, for his tail remained still, which was a stark contrast to its usual condition of *wag-o-matic*. He somberly gazed at the deteriorating museum, while his snout sniffed at the air, perhaps in an effort to gain olfactory clues as to the curious happening.

The museum was bucking and shuddering, as if it was being torn apart from the inside out. Pieces of rubble and broken glass were falling to the pavement. Most alarming of all, flame was pouring from the doors and windows of the museum.

Three fire trucks from the city of Portsmouth were already on the scene, and their hoses were directed at the blaze, blasting water onto the structure. The firefighters were hustling and bustling, calling to one another and shouting instructions.

But no matter how effectively they battled the flames, they could not seem to gain an upper hand. As soon as they managed to extinguish some of the fires, new ones would spring up... it was almost as if something was inside the museum, starting fires quicker than they could stop them. As Chief Fresco and Coach beheld this, they could not help but wonder... *what* was going on in there?

From within the building came sounds that were downright eerie. They almost sounded like enormous, beastly bellows from the mouth of some unfathomable creature. The firefighters, of course, attributed these noises to what they perceived to be splintering wood and collapsing support beams, yielding to the enormous pressures of the deteriorating structure.

Fortunately, it appeared as if the students had been successfully evacuated from the building before it had come undone. There was a huge group of schoolchildren gathered near the charter buses that had delivered them to their field trip's destination. All things considered, they were behaving remarkably well, for they were collectively stunned by the devastation that had been wrought upon the museum in such a short period of time, not to mention their perilously close escape.

Chief Fresco and Coach ran over to the buses, and Nibbler trotted faithfully at their heels, easily keeping up with them. When they arrived at the herd of students, Chief Fresco desperately searched for his daughters, while Coach called for Neil and Jack.

"Right here, Dad!" Neil shouted. He emerged from the mass of students, with Jack by his side.

"Boys! You're okay!" Coach exclaimed.

He slapped one hand down on Neil's shoulder, and grabbed Jack's collarbone with the other. He then shook them vigorously, as if to confirm to himself that they were, in fact, present and accounted

for, and not simply a panic-induced illusion of his frazzled mind. Nibbler greeted the boys with his usual exuberance, which included smiles, slobber, and boatloads of tail wagging.

“*Woof!*” Nibbler barked, greeting the both of them. “*Woof!*”

Chief Fresco turned to Neil and Jack. “What about my girls?” he asked. “Did they make it out?”

“We haven’t seen them, and there’s no sign of Jasper, either. They went off after that crazy janitor, and they never came back,” Neil quickly explained. “We don’t know where they are now.”

“Chief!” Ms. Waffler called.

She had emerged from the mass of students, looking exhausted and overwhelmed by the bizarre crisis, and the speed with which it had developed. Nonetheless, Ms. Waffler had done well. Despite her reputation for being eccentric and somewhat addle-minded, the teacher had risen to the challenge. When disaster had struck, she had remained calm and successfully directed the evacuation of the students.

“Have you seen my kids?” Chief Fresco asked.

“I’m sorry,” Ms. Waffler answered. Her perpetual exuberance was gone, and her face was drawn with anxiety. She indicated the clipboard that she held in one hand, where long lists of names were printed. “I did a headcount, and we’re still missing two – Maria and Sara. We’ve let the firefighters know, but they haven’t been able to battle their way inside yet... I’m terribly sorry.”

Chief Fresco’s face grew taut, and his eyes hardened with resolve. Absent of any hesitation or fear, he announced, “I’m going in.”

“You can’t!” Coach argued. “There’s no way past the flames!”

Ignoring the protest, Chief Fresco marched toward the museum, his fists clenched in determination. But as he drew closer to the building, it became clear that Coach was right... there was no way to get inside. The inferno was impenetrable, and the heat that it threw was staggering.

Some firefighters were huddled nearby, awaiting any opportunity they might get to penetrate the blaze, but they had not yet been successful. Even in their protective gear, they could not face down the terrible heat of the roaring fires.

Each time the hoses would gain some advantage, the flames would once more lurch from the windows and doors, forcing them backward. They shielded their helmeted heads with their heavy gloves and the sleeves of their fireproof coats, stumbling away from the heat.

It was like no fire they had ever before seen... like something that had a mind of its own, actively fighting back and attempting to block their passage. Chief Fresco’s light brown police uniform and wide-brimmed hat would do nothing whatsoever to shield him from the inferno.

“This can’t be...” Chief Fresco murmured. “There *must* be something we can do.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### Furry and Fearless

“Chief! Dad!” Neil called, as he pointed with one hand. “Look over there!”

They followed the direction of his finger, and they saw a small hole that had formed in the wall of the museum, almost at ground level. As the building was shaking and shuddering, pieces of it were coming undone and falling apart. The brick and mortar of the wall had come loose, and the small, roughly shaped hole had been exposed.

“It’s no good,” Chief Fresco sighed, clearly disappointed. “It’s too small, I’ll never fit through there.”

“The hole’s not for *you*,” Jack explained. “It’s for Nibbler!”

Chief Fresco looked down at Jack dubiously. “What do you mean?”

“That’s why we called you guys, so you could bring Nibbler here,” Neil said. As he observed the mildly offended reactions of the adults, he quickly made an amendment. “Oh, uh, we’re grateful to you, too, of course. Nibbler couldn’t have made it here so quickly without the police escort! But listen, let’s send him in there, and I *bet you anything* he can bring Maria and Sara back out of that mess, I just bet you he can.”

Chief Fresco looked utterly perplexed by the proposal, but Coach was rubbing at his bearded chin, as he always did when engaging in deep thought.

“I don’t know...” Coach said. “He’s not a bloodhound or a tracking dog. He has no training whatsoever in this kind of thing.”

“He can do it!” Jack assured the adults. “Nibbler is no ordinary dog. I know everybody thinks that about their own dog, but I’m telling you – there’s something special about him.”

“It’s true!” Neil put it. “He’s helped us out of some really tight circumstances. Some crazy, weird stuff has been going on the past two weeks, and Nibbler’s been right there by our side, bailing us out of trouble!”

“I will admit, he is one darned peculiar beast,” Coach said, as he continued stroking his beard thoughtfully, gazing down at the happy dog.

Nibbler seemed to realize that he was the subject of their discussion, for he was enthusiastically wagging his tail and smiling, kissing everybody’s hands and knees with his slobbery tongue.

“It seems like a long shot, but we’ve got nothing to lose. I can’t get anywhere near that inferno, and neither can these firefighters. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Jack and Neil are right,” Chief Fresco finally agreed. “We need to send in Nibbler!”

“Hey, boy,” Jack said to his dog. He knelt on the ground before the Labradoodle and scratched him behind the ears. “Maria and Sara – can you find them for us? Can you go get Maria and Sara?”

“Maria and Sara, Nibbler!” Neil repeated. He stood behind the dog, stooping over, speaking directly into his floppy ears. “*Maria! Sara!*”

There was a very good reason for Neil’s use of repetition. Nibbler was a remarkably bright dog, and he had a pretty good vocabulary, too, as far as four-legged critters went.

For instance, if you said, “ball”, he would go fetch it. If you said, “sock”, he would nibble it right off of your foot. He spent plenty of time playing with the Fresco Sisters, so the boys theorized that if they repeatedly stressed the names of Maria and Sara, Nibbler would get the picture.

“*Woof!*” Nibbler responded, and crazy as it might have seemed – the boys had a strong suspicion that he knew exactly what was being asked of him.

“You see?” Neil asked. “I told you he’s up to the task.”

Chief Fresco knelt beside Jack. He placed his palm atop the Labradoodle’s head and looked him in the eye. “Can you do this, Nibbler?” There was a desperate, pleading quality to his voice, which Neil and Jack had never before heard.

Nibbler tilted his head, as if to inquire as to whether or not the chief was serious. The expression on his furry face implied that he thought it was ridiculous that the chief should even question his abilities.

“Well, he seems pretty confident,” Chief Fresco said, as he scratched Nibbler for encouragement.

The museum was rocked by what sounded to be an explosion from within, accompanied by another one of the great, beastly bellows. Hot flames shot from the windows and doors. A rain of fiery debris and busted bricks landed not far from where the students were huddled, forcing them to retreat farther as the firefighters ordered them to move back.

“I guess it’s now or never,” Coach said. “We’re counting on you, Nibbler!”

“Go on, boy! See if you can find them!” Chief Fresco encouraged, fluffing the dog’s ears for luck.

“*Woof!*” Nibbler assured Chief Fresco with a bark, as well as a slobbery kiss to the face.

“Nibbler, there, do you see?” asked Jack.

He pointed toward the small hole that Neil had spotted, near the base of the museum. Nibbler obediently followed the direction of the pointed finger, for he was used to doing such. Jack would often point to things that he wanted Nibbler to retrieve, such as a fallen branch in the yard, and the dog would scurry after the object in question.

“Is he going to know what you’re trying to tell him?” Coach asked.

“Of course he is, Dad!” Neil said with a chuckle. “You guys keep underestimating Nibbler.”

Neil’s confidence was well placed, for Nibbler immediately departed. His tail was wagging wildly as he went, his rump shaking about with delight, as if this were a great, fun game.

“Go get them, Nibbler! Get Maria and Sara!” Jack called, as his dog wiggled his way through the busted bricks and into the small hole.

Nibbler fit through it quite easily, and as his body vanished inside, the last thing that was seen of him was his fluffy tail, which was still happily wagging. He seemed to have not an inkling of the danger he was barreling into headfirst. Either that, or the Labradoodle must have been completely impervious to fear.

Or perhaps, Neil and Jack considered... Nibbler knew *exactly* what kind of danger he was plunging into, but he also comprehended what was at stake. This was, after all, the most steadfast friend that one could hope for, and he was fiercely loyal to all of the Beans, including Maria and Sara.

“That,” Jack said with a sigh, “is a really, *really* good dog.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### A Voice Like Doom

Sara's lungs felt like they were on fire. She was panting with exertion, and the heat of her surroundings was a heavy burden, pressing against her. With the aid of her sister, she was supporting the weight of Evelyn, who was conscious, but still stupefied by whatever disorienting effect Pan Gu's presence had inflicted upon her.

But as strange as it might seem, the sisters were relatively okay with all this. They were used to pressure, after all, and they were also accustomed to forays into the bizarre and uncanny. They were anxious, of course, but still confident they could escape, and comforted by the presence of one another.

The curator was propped up between Maria and Sara, with one arm thrown over each of their shoulders. They were helping her along as they desperately tried to navigate the museum, searching for an exit from what had quickly become a crumbling inferno.

They were discombobulated and disoriented by the chaotic environment. Fire spewed forth, debris crumbled, and deafening noise surrounded them from all sides.

The floor had become extraordinarily wobbly, bucking and shaking as Pan Gu trampled about. Plus, the beast had inflicted irreversible damage to the structural integrity of the museum. The building had taken on a *rickety* quality, inspiring the notion that it might very well come crashing down at any moment.

As for Pan Gu's current activities, the dragon was throwing a most devastating fit, but there was a silver lining to this unsettling scenario. The monster seemed to be completely oblivious to the human beings who scurried in its presence. Indeed, they were of such miniscule stature by comparison, the sisters theorized that they might be considered no more than mice in the eyes of the enraged creature.

They had no complaints whatsoever, concerning this lack of attention. Pan Gu seemed intent only on destroying the museum, not on singling them out and stomping upon them. Maria and Sara realized that this may very well be their only opportunity to get away... *if* they could actually locate an escape avenue, through all the smoke and fire and carnage.

However, the sisters soon realized they had *another* problem – one that was rather large, hairy, and possessed of alarmingly long claws. Though they were under the radar of Pan Gu, and did not interest that beast in the slightest, the same could not be said of the *Guardian Lion*.

As the sisters scrambled through the crumbling, burning museum, desperately seeking a way out, they came to suspect that the creature was stalking them. They would occasionally catch glimpses of its glowing, golden eyes behind sheets of smoke, and they could hear the bangles upon its ankles, the sleigh bells issuing soft *jangles* with each step.

Most alarming of all, the sound of the Guardian Lion's growling reached their ears, though they could not pinpoint the location from which it originated. It sounded like a supernatural jungle cat, and it was downright creepy. The beast was stalking them like they were its next meal, and the sisters realized they would not stand a chance against a predator so large and primal.

They had to get beyond the creature's reach, and *fast*. If they weren't quick about it, they wouldn't have to wait for the building to fall in upon their heads or the flames to overtake them – the Guardian Lion would gobble them up, and that would rather succinctly terminate their days of adventuring.

"I'm not going to lie to you – this is kind of freaking me out!" Maria exclaimed.

"We must be nearing an exit. Keep going!" Sara encouraged.

Above them, Pan Gu roared and spun and smashed. A sweep of its tail caused more debris to plummet to the floor near the sisters, and flame leaped through the air as if it had come alive. A great quantity of smoke gathered in front of the sisters and swirled about, stimulated by the rapid changes in air pressure and the earth-shaking movements of the beast.

As Maria and Sara stared into the swirling, twirling, mess of black smoke, they instantly became even further disoriented. It was like a malicious wall of stuff to impede and gag upon, a wraithlike apparition that was conspiring against them. It soon surrounded them, and with Evelyn still in tow, they slowly spun in a circle, trying to get their bearings and penetrate the smoke with their eyes.

It was a vain effort, however, for they realized that they were hopelessly lost. They could hear the shrieking of Pan Gu and the ongoing destruction that surrounded them, but for the time being, they were without their bearings.

The growling of the Guardian Lion reached their ears, and it seemed as if the beast was right on top of them. But they could not pin down its location, for the deep, rumbling growl reverberated through the air, alternately seeming to come from the right and left, and simultaneously from the front and back. The sporadic sound of the bell-laden bangles could also be heard, though this noise was as aimless as the other.

“Where is it?” Maria asked, her eyes frantically scanning the smokescreen.

“I can’t tell. Stay on your toes!” Sara answered.

Through the dark mass of smoke, they saw a pair of large, golden eyes materialize before them. They could see no other part of the beast, but they knew the eyes belonged to the Guardian Lion. They burned like stars, and were unblinking, fixated upon the sisters.

Maria and Sara were paralyzed by the hypnotizing sight, and they grew rooted to the spot. They could not bring themselves to turn away from those eyes; they were pulled toward them like magnets. Besides which, they knew that to attempt to outrun such a capable, otherworldly predator would be the very height of foolishness, particularly when attempting to tow Evelyn along for the ride.

As they watched, the eyes slowly became larger. The Guardian Lion advanced with purposeful strides. It was a beast within which the genetics of stalking had been hardwired.

The silhouette of the tremendous creature slowly became visible through the wall of smoke, and it was an awe-inspiring sight. Its height was mind-boggling, even for a lion. The shape of its body reinforced how outlandishly large it was, and its shoulder blades slowly switched back and forth with each step that it took.

With an explosion of force from its powerful hindquarters, the Guardian Lion leaped, bursting through the veil of smoke. It attained an impressive altitude as it soared forward. Maria and Sara could only watch, their mouths agape as the beast came for them.

Its forelegs were extended, and even in the darkened, smoky environment, its claws glittered like an array of finely honed cutlery. Its jaws were held wide, revealing a fearsome arrangement of teeth. As it came forth, it roared with an intensity that rattled bones and stirred blood.

And though it was an inarticulate, animal noise, that roar seemed to give voice to a concept nonetheless – *doom*.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### A Curious Quadruped

What happened next occurred rather quickly – perhaps in the span of a second or two. But to Maria and Sara, whose senses had been elevated by the extreme peril, it seemed to be a much longer period of time.

The Guardian Lion came at them like a bullet... a bullet that was enormous, furious, and apparently quite hungry. They saw it coming, but there was little they could do. Though they were possessed of great dexterity and quick wits, the girls felt as though their sneakers were cemented to the floor, particularly with the burden of supporting the semi-comatose Evelyn.

They could only watch, dumbfounded, as this supernatural creature leaped at them, with a roar so profound that it made the blood in their bodies boil with agitation.

With a sound like thunder, the beast landed mere inches in front of them, all four paws colliding with the tile floor. In the shadow of its awesome presence, they had never felt less significant. It towered above them, radiating animal ferocity and an ancient, intangible power... if Pan Gu was likened to a hurricane, this beast was of similar stature, and was a force of nature unto itself.

The sisters could feel the heat of its breath wash over them like an industrial pizza oven, and they felt the spatter of drool upon their faces. They were quite certain that their eyes had never in their lives been wider. Their attention was focused, to say the very least.

As if in slow motion, they saw the beast rear back with one forepaw, its entire body twisting with the effort. It was gathering the entire, formidable strength that was at its command. The sisters saw the sinews of its heavy muscles rippling and shifting, and they witnessed the claws become even more terrifying, as they further extended from those mammoth paws.

“*Duck!*” Sara screamed.

“*Well said!*” Maria replied, even as she hurtled her weight to the floor (and even as her eyes remained in a state of what might best be described as *bulged-out wonder*).

They dove to the floor as one, their grip tightening upon Evelyn as they did so. In this moment of supreme terror, as their very lives were balanced upon the most fragile of outcomes, they would not abandon the person for whom they had assumed responsibility. She was three times their own age, but this mattered not. Evelyn was in need of help, and they would not desert her during her hour of need.

Collectively, they lunged toward the tile floor, screaming with a combination of exertion, alarm, and panic. The three of them collided with a *thwump* upon the unforgiving surface, and they could hear the *swish* of the Guardian Lion’s clawed paw, as it screamed through the air above their heads – the air which they had so immediately vacated.

From their place upon the floor, where they pressed their bodies low and attempted to shelter Evelyn, Maria and Sara peered up. As improbable as it might seem, they could witness the Guardian Lion’s claws rip apart the air itself... and in that moment, they could have sworn that the beast tore the very fabric of existence into pieces.

They saw what looked like *particles* splinter apart before their very eyes, skittering across the three dimensions that were readily available. Such was *impossible*... yet, this was no ordinary creature, and its abilities perhaps went beyond what was generally considered to be within the realm of the *possible*.

Pressed upon the floor, jointly sheltering their adult cargo, the sisters gaped at the towering Guardian Lion. Thanks to their quick reaction, it had completely missed them with its first swipe. But the beast was quick to recover its balance, and in what seemed to be no time at all, it was rearing back for a second go with its alternate paw.

This time, however, the sisters were immobilized by their previous efforts. Hugged against the floor, there was little they could do to evade the fury of the Guardian Lion.

The beast lunged forward, its forepaw rushing at the three prone, helpless humans. This was a monster like none other, and surviving its wrath seemed doubtful, at best.

It was a beast born to roam the plains of the earth, reigning supreme, exerting its dominance over anything that lay in its path. This was a *king*... forced to hibernate for centuries, but now awakened and irritable.

The paw came forward, claws glinting, their sharpness unparalleled. Maria stared. Sara stared. They hugged each other, and they hugged Evelyn.

This was something for which they were utterly unprepared, no matter the extent of their experiences in weirdness. It was a moment so unique, it literally robbed them of their breath. The grips with which they held onto one another, fingers upon shoulders, simultaneously tightened.

But as doom drew upon them, there came the most unexpected of interventions. There was a blur of apricot-colored fur... and then, despite the implausibility of the matter... *Nibbler* had arrived.

Maria and Sara stared at the Labradoodle in disbelief, unable to process what they were witnessing. How on earth was *Nibbler* here? They were flummoxed, utterly flabbergasted. Their brains, already weighted with so much stress, could not quite process the sudden, inexplicable appearance of the exuberant canine.

Nonetheless, no matter how impossible it might seem, it was true. The happy, furry dog skittered to a stop before the girls, *woofing* with excitement. The Guardian Lion, taken aback by such fearlessness, was startled into averting its attack, and it took an involuntary step in reverse.

With no trepidation whatsoever, *Nibbler* stared up at the much larger creature, continuing to bark. He bravely faced the beast, heroically raising his head and releasing a series of *woofs* that were clearly meant to convey the sentiment of: "*back off!*"

Amazingly, the Guardian Lion *did* back off, taking another step away from *Nibbler* and the humans. It could have easily crushed the Labradoodle, but it seemed to be startled (and perhaps even impressed) by the audacity with which it had been faced by this furry critter. It did not go far, only taking two steps backward, but it was a clear acknowledgment of *Nibbler's* warning.

"I think I might be suffering from dehydration," Sara said. "Am I hallucinating, or is that *Nibbler?*"

Maria nodded, her expression one of equal parts bafflement and joy. "Yep, that's *Nibbler* alright. He's one incredible dog, isn't he?"

"And he also has *impeccable* timing," Sara added.

There was a sudden change in the air pressure of the museum, as the fires raged and destruction continued to sprinkle down upon the floor. Pan Gu had lunged across a great span, its tail thrashing wildly, and the displacement of so much air had created a shifting of the winds.

The smoke that had surrounded the sisters was dispersed, and their visibility was vastly improved. They could once more see what was around them, and though the museum was undergoing an alarming state of deterioration, they felt confident that they could find a way out.

*Nibbler* had never removed his eyes from the Guardian Lion, but his demeanor had done a complete turnaround. No longer was he barking, nor was his posture one of rigid aggression. His head was low to the ground, placed between his front paws, and his rump was high in the air, shaking from side to side with the motion of his fiercely wagging tail. Unbelievably, *Nibbler* was trying to *befriend* the monster.

The Guardian Lion began leaning forward, stretching its neck so as to get closer to *Nibbler*. It sniffed inquisitively, nostrils flaring and flickering. Its huge, golden eyes studied the Labradoodle intently, trying to make sense of this curious quadruped.

When the Guardian Lion's face got sufficiently close to his own, *Nibbler* reached up and delivered a sloppy kiss. To the creature's astonishment, *Nibbler's* tongue slurped across its nose.

Leaping up from his pose, *Nibbler* barked once, and then sprinted off. Without hesitation, the Guardian Lion gave chase. The sisters were not sure if the ancient beast was playing with *Nibbler*, or trying to run him down and eat him.

Whatever the case, Nibbler had just given them a second lease on life. He had saved them from the wrath of the Guardian Lion, and they were indebted to their furry friend.

But just when it seemed that things were improving, their luck turned decidedly sour. For as they gazed up at the shaking, shuddering museum, they realized that they had drawn the attention of something even *worse* than the Guardian Lion... peering down at them, its lips pulled back to reveal fangs and smoke and fire, was none other than *Pan Gu*.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### Facing the Toothed Hurricane

Though it was still as ill-tempered and furious as a hurricane, the dragon seemed to be *tiring* a bit. It had slowed down, and its body was heaving with the exertion of the incredible display of power it had put on. Its nostrils flared, spewing black smoke into the air, as it panted to catch its breath.

However, even in this fatigued state, it was still *quite* unsettling to be caught beneath the beast's eyes, which had transformed from their previous state of swirling blackness to a sharp green. It stared down at the sisters, studying them, and it became clear that they had somehow captured its interest.

In that moment, as they watched the panting Pan Gu, Maria and Sara realized they had a great, unexpected feeling of sympathy for this mysterious monster. They began to wonder how *they* would feel, had they awoken in such a strange place, imprisoned beneath a building, with weird gadgets and gizmos pointed at them.

Was Pan Gu's rage simply an effort to escape this unwelcome confinement? And was it under the erroneous impression that the sisters were the ones who were responsible for its circumstance?

After several moments, during which Pan Gu heaved and grunted, its gargantuan lungs filling with air, it seemed to regain its breath. Its green eyes had never left the sisters, and now, it slowly began stalking toward them. Talons tore chunks of tile free from the floor as it advanced, and each step created mild tremors. Its presence was awe-inspiring – and quite unsettling.

Maria and Sara scrambled to their feet, protectively standing over Evelyn. As they gazed up at the approaching monster, they reached for each other's hand, seeking comfort.

"Sara," Maria said in a low voice.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you're here."

Sara gave Maria's hand a squeeze, as she kept her eyes locked onto the transfixing creature that approached. "So am I."

Over the next several moments, they expressed their confidence in one another, subconsciously using humor to lighten the dark scenario. This was bad, but they thought they might yet come out of this okay... after all, they had each other, and they had been in tight spots before.

"If nothing else... it's certainly been one heck of an interesting day, hasn't it?" Maria asked.

Sara squeezed her sister's hand tighter, and though her voice was not quite her own, her words brought comfort nonetheless. "That's for sure," she said, as she reflected upon the series of events that had brought them to their uncanny predicament. "It has been a most *remarkable* day."

"Be that as it may, I don't suppose you have any last second ideas, do you?"

Sara was mesmerized by the sight of the looming Pan Gu, and the beast was now so close that she could get a much better look at its teeth (not that she particularly wanted to). Resisting its hypnotizing effects, she managed to tear her gaze from the creature and look to the ceiling beyond. There, she saw the series of skylights that adorned the museum's roof.

Something was tugging at her mind... the formation of some idea, and she desperately willed it to come together. *Clouds*... what was it about clouds? When Evelyn had been lying on the floor, out of sorts, she had pointed up at the skylights and murmured about the clouds.

Earlier in the day, Sara remembered how much natural lighting had poured in through those giant pieces of glass in the ceiling, helping to illuminate the museum's interior. When they had been inside of Evelyn's office, and they looked out to sea, they had seen that there was a storm on the horizon. Now, the dark cloud cover had moved in, blocking the sunlight and heralding the coming of the rain.

If only the clouds hadn't moved in... perhaps Pan Gu would be drawn toward the illumination of the skylights, realizing it was a way to the outdoors. As it was, however, the skylights were darkened, and the upper regions of the museum were dim, particularly with the hovering smoke.

Sara glanced sideways at Maria and saw that the zipper of her backpack had begun to come undone, revealing the collection of school supplies and sports gear. Though it was a long shot at best, the idea that had been tickling her mind finally took form.

“I think this creature just wants to be free,” Sara told her sister. “It just wants to get *outside*.”

Maria’s mind had already been moving in that direction, and she quickly caught on. “So let’s point it in the right direction! Sara, you’re a genius!”

Maria began removing her backpack. She was excited, and nervous, and she knew that time was of the essence. If they couldn’t act quickly, Pan Gu might decide to devour them, or the building would collapse upon them, or the smoke and flames would overtake them. She moved as quickly as she dared, but she did not go too fast, for she feared that such movement might encourage the monster to pounce.

Without ever removing her eyes from Pan Gu, her heart racing in her chest, she carefully went about the process of removing the backpack’s straps from her shoulders. After what seemed a minor eternity, she finally had the backpack held before her, and she reached inside.

She could swear that the dragon was eyeing her with increased suspicion, its emerald eyes narrowing, but she had no choice but to continue. Withdrawing one of the dirty, grass-stained baseballs, she slowly handed it to her sister, trying to avoid any abrupt movements.

“This is up to you, Sara. You’re the best pitcher I’ve ever played with *or* against in my life. You can do this, I *know* you can.”

Without removing her eyes from the ceiling, Sara took the baseball. From force of habit, she immediately began working it between her hands. The routine was part of her life, and it instantly brought her comfort and increased her calm. As she massaged the worn surface of the baseball with her fingers, her eyes remained glued upon the ceiling, examining her target.

Though it would not be an easy throw by any measure, Maria continued to dial in her sister’s pitching power by speaking confidently into her ear, coaching her on the act.

“It’s a big target, you can’t miss! Throw it right down the middle. Dead center, perfect strike.”

With a final, confident breath, Sara began her windup. She knew that this motion might have undesirable effects and draw the wrath of Pan Gu, but she pushed this notion from her mind. There was no time for such worry, for the task at hand was far too important.

As she finished her pitching windup, her throwing arm came forward like a catapult. The baseball was released from her hand, rolling from her fingertips. Her action *did* cause a reaction in Pan Gu, and its head whipped to the side, tracking the ball that Sara had thrown. A growl rumbled in its throat as it did so, and a puff of smoke erupted from its nostrils.

Maria and Sara held their breath as they watched the baseball fly forth. Despite the difficult, unconventional angle, Sara had channeled all of her ability, and the pitch had plenty of velocity. The ball traveled *up* and *up*, closer to the ceiling. And with a solid *thwack*, it collided with the intended target, striking the skylight dead center.

But to their dismay... the glass did not shatter. The ball struck the big, ceiling-mounted window directly in the middle, but it did not break. A small crack appeared, but this was far from the desired result.

“No problem,” Maria said, never hesitating to express her confidence. She handed her sister another baseball. “You’re ahead in the count, zero balls and one strike. You’ve got this.”

Pan Gu had swiveled its giant, monstrous head back toward the sisters, and it leaned in even closer than before. It seemed to have been agitated by the motion of Sara, and it uttered a deep, rumbling growl. The sisters felt their faces baking beneath the beast’s breath, and their hair was stirred about, tickling their faces and necks. But they did not let this distract them from their mission.

Sara stared at the skylight with the intensity that she might focus upon a batter who she wanted to strike out with all her heart. Maria stood by her side, her support absolute and unwavering.

“Put some mustard on this one, Sara,” Maria encouraged, and by “mustard”, it was understood that she meant *velocity*. “I’m talking about some serious, Grey Poupon style hot and spicy mustard. Bring the heat!”

In the face of the smoke and the fire and the unrelenting pressure, Sara didn't even blink. "You got it."

She once more went through her windup, focusing her power and ability. Her aim again proved true, and the second baseball struck at the center of the skylight... but once more, the glass refused to break. The ball had impacted with great momentum, and the crack that had previously appeared expanded, and then created a spider-web of similar cracks across the surface of the glass, networking this way and that.

Pan Gu became even more agitated. The heat of its breath made that of the Guardian Lion pale in comparison. Smoke spewed from its mouth and nose, making the sisters squint and blink with tears. At any moment, they worried, it might belch another one of its spurts of flame.

Maria reached into her backpack, shoving aside notebooks and erasers and her big catcher's mitt. For a moment, she feared that she had run empty, perhaps having lost one of the balls earlier in the day. But at the very bottom of the bag, she found the third (and final) baseball.

Knowing this was their last opportunity, Maria felt some trepidation, but she never let it show. And the next words that she spoke to her sister were true beyond doubt. "There is nobody on this earth – not even a big league pitcher – that I would rather have make this throw. *This is all you.*"

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### The Final Pitch

Sara accepted the ball without looking. She never removed her gaze from her target, even with Pan Gu so close at hand, snorting and grumbling in her face. She could just barely see the skylight over the shoulder of the looming dragon, but she did not let this become a distraction.

Her mind was clear of all but the task at hand. With nothing but confidence that she would succeed, she entered her windup and let the baseball fly.

It ripped through the air like a laser, and again her aim was true. The ball once more struck the center of the skylight, but this time, it traveled *through* the weakened glass, bursting into the air beyond. With a sound like one thousand disrupted wind chimes, the skylight shattered into countless pieces, raining down upon the museum floor.

“*Yes!*” Maria exclaimed. “You did it, Sara!”

With the removal of the colossal window, a torrent of fresh air suddenly surged into the museum. It brought with it the smells of salt water, and plant life, and the sunlight that existed beyond the clouds. It was the smell of the world that existed beyond the indoors, the aroma of the earth itself. And there were the sounds of seagulls, calling out to their feathered friends, as well as the *pitter-patter* of the first drops of rain.

Its nostrils flaring wide, Pan Gu abruptly turned toward the broken skylight, its attention riveted. Its eyes glowed with excitement, and it made a strange noise that the sisters believed to express joy. Moving with the speed and agility of a serpent, it scrambled for the opening.

The monster’s departure occurred within no more than a handful of seconds. Before the sisters could even believe that it was happening, Pan Gu was gone, free from the confines of the museum and set loose in the world – the place where forces of nature belonged. They could only hope that it would find its way to the peace of the nearby sea, and avoid demolishing the city of Portsmouth on its way there.

“It’s... it’s gone,” Maria said, in a tone of disbelief. They had been in such great peril, it was hard to adjust to the removal of the rampaging beast.

“Indeed, it is. Let’s just hope it doesn’t decide to eat one of those buses our school came here on. As for right now, I think we should focus on our *own* escape. Where’s Nibbler?” Sara asked.

They looked around, finding that the Labradoodle was gleefully sprinting in circles, leading the Guardian Lion on a merry chase. But the giant creature suddenly turned its head, captivated by the escape of Pan Gu. Apparently, the great beast meant to duplicate the feat, though it seemed as though it might be more difficult for the Guardian Lion, for it was significantly smaller than the dragon.

Nonetheless, it found success. Maria and Sara watched as the Guardian Lion leaped from one piece of debris to the next, improvising as it went. When it had scrambled to a place near the ceiling, it performed an extraordinary jump, disappearing through the skylight with impressive dexterity.

Maria and Sara watched this great escape with open-mouthed amazement. As striking as it was, it was of little use to them, as far as figuring out their own getaway. They knew they would not be able to repeat the Guardian Lion’s performance. It was, quite simply, not humanly possible.

Would there be consequences for setting these creatures free in Portsmouth – and if so, what would they be? The sisters could not afford to spend any time worrying about such things, for their own peril was both immediate and great. Pan Gu had left the museum in a state that was not sustainable. It was irrevocably damaged, and it would collapse, of that there could be no doubt.

“At least we don’t have to worry about that thing anymore,” Sara said. “Now, we have to find our own exit.”

With the Guardian Lion gone, Nibbler returned to the girls, happily barking and licking at their hands, his tail wagging at speeds beyond measure. He seemed to want them to follow his lead, and the sisters had no qualms about doing so.

Together, they heaved Evelyn to her feet once more, and supporting her weight, they fell in behind Nibbler. As he led them on, his incessantly wagging tail made his rump shake without pause, and this abundance of happiness made the sisters optimistic.

Surely, Nibbler knew where he was going... he had found his way into this crumbling museum, hadn't he? Of course, they were thrilled to have a guide, for the museum had become a maze of fiery walls and smoky corridors, with every obvious exit having become an impenetrable inferno.

Within moments, Nibbler led them to the very hole he had scrambled through in order to gain entry to the building. He proudly stood beside it, his tail wagging enthusiastically. His face was stretched into a furry smile as he awaited the girls' reaction.

When they saw the hole, and felt the cool, fresh air passing through it, the sisters wept with joy, overcome with relief and emotion.

"That's a good boy!" Sara commended Nibbler, scratching him behind the ears. "That's a good, *good* boy!"

Wiping the tears from her eyes with her free hand, Maria asked, "Nibbler, have we told you lately how much we love you?"

*"Woof!"*

## Epilogue

### *From the Portsmouth Daily News*

Yesterday morning, disaster struck the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts. In what is being described by officials as a “total loss”, the building was devastated by a series of explosions, which ultimately resulted in failure of the structural integrity of the museum. Numerous fires were instigated, the consequence of which was further, irreparable damage.

Though there is no firm dollar figure attached to the loss at this time, it is confirmed that countless artifacts were destroyed in the event.

However, things could have been far worse. At the time of the event, a field trip was in progress, and several hundred students from the visiting school of Hollow Oak Elementary were in the museum. Fortunately, no students were harmed.

Thanks to the quick acting of Ms. Isabelle Waffler, a teacher of Hollow Oak Elementary who was acting as chaperone, the vast majority of students were successfully evacuated. Two female students were initially unaccounted for, but they were successfully guided from the burning museum by what one Portsmouth firefighter described as “the weirdest kind of rescue dog I’ve ever seen”.

This heroic canine, who is known as “Nibbler”, also managed to lead the museum’s chief curator, Ms. Evelyn Magellan, to safety. Ms. Magellan initially appeared to be injured during the event, but she is currently reported to be in stable condition.

On a less cheerful note, two individuals are still unaccounted for, having never left the building once the event began. The first of these is Eli Weatherbee, museum employee and assistant curator. The other is Jasper Cragglemeister, a member of the staff of Hollow Oak Elementary, who was serving as a chaperone for the field trip. Searchers have been unable to locate these missing persons, and their status is unknown.

The search efforts are ongoing.

Though the museum suffered irreparable damage and was almost completely consumed in flames, the Portsmouth Fire Department was able to eventually get the burning building under control. They were aided by the onset of heavy rainfall, which began shortly after the event began.

Officials are blaming the disaster on a faulty natural gas line, which they theorize ruptured, triggering a series of explosions in the lower recesses of the museum. Such was the power of these explosions, some witnesses report that large, unknown objects were thrown as far as the harbor, creating enormous splashes as they landed in the water.

However, some of the Hollow Oak students who were present clearly let their imaginations get the best of them, and they had some other theories as to what may have triggered the disaster.

When asked if he knew what had caused the event, one sandy-haired boy provided the following explanation: “Sure, I know what caused this... it was a *monster*.”

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### Author’s Note

Thank you for reading *The Green Beans, Volume Three: The Curious Conundrum of Pan Gu*. I had a lot of fun writing this story, and I hope you enjoyed your time adventuring with the Green Beans. Please consider leaving customer reviews for the books in this series at your favorite retailers. As an independent author, reviews are very important for building a readership, and I am greatly appreciative of your feedback. As always, thank you for your support and for exploring the world of the Green Beans with me... and I’m looking forward to our next adventure!

-GG

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