

THE WIZARD ON THE MOUNTAIN

BY

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Chapter 1

Finding the Amulet

Justin Ranstrom wasn't really looking for anything when he found it. And isn't that just the way of things? Whenever anyone lost something and was turning the house upside down looking for it, Granpa Ranstrom used to say, "Soon's you stop looking for it, you'll trip over the dang thing."

And so it often seemed, though this theory did not hold true for Grandpa Ranstrom himself. He sailed out of Ebbettsport one morning to go fishing and disappeared. He was never found, even when the Coast Guard stopped looking for him. But that's another story. That story happened when Justin, now 12, was only 6 years old and really has nothing much to do with this story about how Justin found the amulet.

On that late August afternoon, Justin was by himself, as usual, which was quite all right with him. Justin's dad was off driving somewhere up or down the coast, or over the mountains to the Sacramento Valley. Olie Ranstrom still thought of himself as a fisherman, from a family of fishermen, even though most of his income came from driving a truck for Nor-Pac Freight Lines. Sally, Justin's mother, was down at the Perko's on Highway One pouring coffee for the tourists.

Best of all, his evil big brother, otherwise known as Lars, was at football practice, one of the special morning and afternoon pre-season practice sessions the coach had scheduled. Justin liked that. It kept Lars away from the house most of the day. But it was nearly three now, and he'd be coming back soon, and probably he'd be bringing his buddies with him. What better place was there to hang out for a sixteen-year-old jock and his buddies, fresh from back to back practice sessions and pumped up on adrenalin, than an empty house with a full refrigerator and a kid brother to torment?

The kitchen clock marched steadily towards the end of peace

and quiet. It gave Justin added incentive to finish the list of chores hanging by a magnet on the refrigerator door as quickly as possible. He'd gotten a good start on them before lunch and finished the last of them just as the clock hit three. He checked the list one more time to be sure, decided he'd done all that was required of him, dashed into his bedroom, and stuffed the latest book he was reading into his daypack. Sticking his nose in a book when the jocks were around invited trouble, so Justin planned on making a strategic withdrawal. Passing the fridge on the way out, he grabbed a can of soda, the first one that his hand encountered. He didn't play favorites. Into the pack it went. He made a quick detour into the pantry to snatch a small bag of chips and then he was out the kitchen door, letting the screen door slam behind him. He reminded himself for the umpteenth time not to do that, because the old wooden framed screen door always threatened to come down and take the back steps with it.

The Ranstrom's house was a low, rambling wood-shingled old farmhouse set on several acres of vegetable gardens and old farm sheds. Everywhere blackberry bushes seemed ready to take over the moment you turned your back on them. The house, the gardens, the sheds, and the blackberries all needed more tending than they were getting. The moist, salty sea wind that blew across the sea-carved terrace where the town of Ebbettsport sprawled made blackberries and redwoods thrive, but was hard on everything man-made.

Justin crossed the backyard to the old shed that had been cleared of enough clutter to allow storing useful things, got his bicycle, and wheeled it around the corner of the house. Mounting, Justin pedaled down the driveway and out the gate, turning left, away from town. The Ranstrom house was just about at that place on Chinquapin Road where it turned from a city street into a country lane, the city limits having stopped short of swallowing up the old farm. It was one of those country lanes that went straight, then turned at a right angle, went straight again, and turned at another right angle. That was because when the road was built it followed the farmers' fence lines, and the farmers liked their fences straight, with nice, neat corners.

In a few minutes, Justin came up to what everyone knew as the Haunted Farmhouse. He didn't really believe it was haunted, at

least not during daylight. It was just an old abandoned farmhouse, slowly falling down. It leaned strongly to one side. The windows were long gone. The front steps had collapsed. And the barn and chicken coops and other outbuildings were in even worse shape. Blackberry bushes were climbing over everything. A row of ancient Monterey cypress trees, in an “L” shape, lined the seaward side of the old farmyard. They were still alive, but showing their age almost as much as the buildings. Their broken limbs and gnarled trunks added to the overall sense of decay and, after the sun set, general spookiness.

“Just an old farmhouse,” Justin thought to himself. “Nothing haunting it but spiders and rats.” But he still crossed to the other side of the road and started pedaling faster as he approached it. And he was glad he did.

Out of the corner of this eye, he caught movement among the blackberries. He turned to see what it was and just briefly got a glimpse of a figure - a man in a battered wide-brimmed hat and ratty coat poking about in the blackberry bushes. Then Justin was down the road and the houseblocked his view. “Just some old homeless guy,” Justin thought, “looking for blackberries.” Probably harmless. Still, you never knew. He kept up his speed and looked back every now and then.

Within a few minutes, he came to the turn that would take him up to the mountain. The mountain actually had two names. The Indians had called it Pah-Tah-Poon-Ta-Hah, or something like that. The white settlers never found out what that name meant. The Indians could have told them, and added many interesting stories as well, but the settlers weren’t interested and called the mountain Simmons’Peak. After a while, no one remembered who the Mr. Simmons was who put his name on it, and some later residents started calling it Pah-Tah-Poon-Ta-Hah again. Justin thought that sounded much better than Simmons Peak.

The mountain itself was a big, irregular lump that rose up quite suddenly from the coastal plain. It was covered with a thick blanket of forest so that you couldn’t really see the mountain itself, just the mixed redwoods and Douglas firs, tan oaks, madrones, and pepperwoods, each with its own particular outline and shade of green.

As the road approached the mountain, it grew steadily worse. It

was old and no longer maintained. The pavement had broken into irregular blocks, faded to pale gray with the years and winter rains and veined with thin strips of grass and weeds. Then, as it started to climb the slope, the pavement ended altogether and the road became just two tire tracks with a strip of weeds between them.

Another hundred yards and Justin came to the gate. Two pieces of large pipe, each almost as tall as Justin, had been set in concrete on either side of the road. A length of pipe, hinged to one upright and padlocked to the other, blocked the road. The entire thing had been painted a bright yellow once. Now it was equal parts very faded yellow and rust.

Justin had never seen the gate open, though it must have been opened sometimes. There were shiny bits of bare metal on the hinges. And, once or twice when he was back in the woods, he'd heard the sound of a truck or a Jeep engine.

Justin got off his bike. He ducked under the gate, then pulled the bike along after him. He mounted the bike and started pedaling, shifting it into a lower gear because the road started climbing steeply almost immediately after the gate.

A small creek, with just a trickle of water defying the late summer dryness, came down from his left and dove into a metal culvert. This was Justin's landmark. The trail uphill started just a little past the culvert. He dismounted from the bike and pulled it up the steep, two-foot bank. He walked the bike a short distance from the road to where a ring of young redwood trees sprouted, marking the circumference of a long-gone forest giant. In the center of the ring, where a massive trunk had once been, was a hollow. It was where Justin usually stashed his bike, out of sight and chained to one of the slender young trees. He secured the bike as usual and then started up the trail.

He had discovered the trail late last summer, during his frontiersman period. He'd found a young reader's copy of *The Last of the Mohicans* at the used book store. For a while he had become "Hawkeye Justin" or "Justin the Deerslayer", roaming the woods with his brother's castoff BB gun. For a tomahawk he carried an old shingling hatchet he'd found in one of the sheds. He'd had no success in interesting any of his friends in playing the game. They were all obsessed with the latest modern heroes. But that was alright. Frontiersmen were solitary sorts.

He continued up the narrow trail on foot, puffing a little because it was a stiff climb. But then it leveled out, wandered back and forth a few times through stands of Douglas fir and redwood, rose again and then came out on a sort of shelf on the side of the mountain, roughly triangular in shape. On two sides of the triangle, the land sloped downward. On the third side, the mountain rose up even more steeply, almost a cliff. Oaks, madrones, and pepperwood trees covered most of the level ground

An oddity occupied the center of the shelf, a circular depression, a bowl, thirty or forty feet across and three feet deep. The sides of the bowl were steep sides but the bottom flat, thickly covered with dead leaves, twigs, and fallen branches. A low, irregular rim rose all the way around it. Trees grew up to the rim and even on the rim, crisscrossing their branches over the bowl, but none grew within the bowl itself. After showing it to some of his friends, he exercised his right as discoverer and named it the Witch Ring. It had been near Halloween at the time, and witches were on his mind. It seemed like the sort of place witches might meet in the dark of night to cackle and dance around their boiling cauldrons.

The name hadn't caught on. Mikey and C.J. thought it was a suitable place to play soldiers, though it was a long way to come and they could play just as well in the old orchard behind the Ranstrom place. And his friend Jessica informed him, rather snippily, that, according to her mother, witches were really mostly nice people who never boiled cauldrons or cast spells on people. And they never, ever, cackled.

On this afternoon, Justin crossed over the rim at a place where he and others had worn a low spot into the gravelly soil. He picked a spot where the light was good and settled down to read. There was a convenient flat rock exposed there. He cleared it of the latest layer of fallen leaves and twigs. He set up his daypack to form a backrest, after, of course, removing his book, the soda, and the chips.

The Witch Ring was a good place to read. It was quiet and somehow seemed appropriate, since so many of the fantasy stories Justin read involved heroes trekking through wildernesses and enchanted forests and the like. The book Justin brought with him, *The Goldenbeard Saga: Return to the Fjordlands*, was no exception. After many perilous adventures, the Viking Hildir Gullskæggr, Goldenbeard, had returned to have it out with his archenemy, the

evil and devious Grymr Blacktooth. Grymr had challenged Hildir to a fight to the death. The match was to take place on an island in the middle of the enchanted lake. Justin fully expected Grymr to pull some dirty trick. He always did. But Hildir was no fool. No Viking who'd traveled in as many lands as Hildir had and lived to return to the Fjordlands would go down easily. Justin was looking forward to an entertaining battle.

Since Justin had discovered fantasy books, he'd developed an interest in almost any story that involved knights, warriors, or wizards. But he particularly liked stories about Vikings. After all, the Ranstroms came from a long line of Vikings. For hundreds of years, ancestral Ranstroms had buckled on their swords, picked up their battle axes, slapped on their horned helmets, and sailed off in their longships to raid England and France and occasionally discover America. They were West Vikings, Vikings from the fjords of Norway.

Once, when Justin had gone on a little too long talking about the family Vikings, his father, a practical man who had never been known to read fiction, tried to point out that most likely the Ranstroms were descended from the Vikings' neighbors and cousins. They were the people who stayed behind to farm the stony fields, pull cod from the icy fjords, and raise up succeeding generations of Ranstroms so eventually there'd be one to emigrate to America. And those horned helmets? Archeologists had never, ever discovered a horned helmet in a Viking grave, or so his father claimed.

But Justin wasn't going to buy that. Why, you just had to look at his brother, Lars. If Lars, who was tall, blond, fair of skin, and well muscled, wasn't a young Viking, then who was? He even played on a high school football team named for the Vikings. As much as Lars picked on him and made his life miserable, Justin had to admit that, watching Lars and his teammates battling down the football field, it was easy to picture them in armor and horned helmets, swinging battleaxes, a Viking war party on a rampage.

And those horned helmets, well, there had to be a reason they'd never been found. Maybe Vikings just treasured them so much they didn't put them in the graves. They were way too cool for the Vikings not to have worn them. There was probably a secret cave where old horned helmets were stashed, like a Viking hall of fame.

Last Halloween Justin had dressed up as a Viking, complete with plastic horned helmet. The result had not been what Justin was attempting to achieve. For several weeks he'd had to endure jokes about the "little horned toad."

It just wasn't fair. Lars took after the Ranstrom side of the family, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Justin took after his mother's side. Sally Santucci Ranstrom was a petite woman. From her ancestors in Sicily she'd inherited glossy black hair, which she'd passed on to Justin. It had a tendency to curl in a very un-Viking manner. She'd also passed along her height. Or rather, lack of height. Most of Justin's classmates had started spurting upwards. But not Justin. What was really vexing about it was that he used to be able to look Jessica, his best friend, eye to eye. Now it was more like eye to chin. Her chin, his eye.

And Justin got his name from his mother as well. Olie Ranstrom had claimed the right to choose the name for his first-born son and had, properly, given him a name borne by many Ranstrom ancestors. Sally had then claimed the right to name her second son and, for no logical reason, had come up with "Justin." The Ranstrom family tree was full of Svens and Gunnars and Leifs. Good Viking names. Leif Ranstrom. Now that was a cool name. But never, ever in history had there been a Ranstrom, or a Viking for that matter, named "Justin." Hildir Gullskæggr. That was a real Viking name. Not Justin Gullskæggr. As Justin settled back, found his place in the book and started to read he idly wondered what he'd have to do, once he was grown up, to officially change his name from Justin to Hildir. And then he let that thought evaporate as the story drew him in.

Those were the days, Justin thought. They knew how to handle bullies back in Viking times. Pull out your sword and lop their heads off. If only, he sighed. For, sitting in the back of his mind like an ugly toad, was the knowledge that summer vacation was ending, and he was one day closer to going back to school. But he wasn't going back to the school he'd spent the last six years at. He was starting at the Morton Elbridge Middle School. Not only would he have the usual bullies to deal with, but he'd have a whole new crew of bullies from the other elementary schools to face. They were all probably having strategy meetings at this very minute, plotting how they would torment their chosen victims. But, at least, for the time

being he could almost forget about that and concentrate on Hildr's adventures. Nobody ever gave Hildr a wedgie. Not more than once.

Absorbed in the story, it took awhile before Justin noticed it. At first he had only a vague feeling something was there, in the trees above him. It was just a glimmer or flash that caught the corner of his eye when the sun hit it just right or a breeze wiggled the treetops and it started shaking.

At first Justin just looked around, a bit confused about what was distracting him. It took awhile but he finally noticed the small patch of reflected light on the leafy floor that sometimes stood still and other times wobbled back and forth as if it were a living thing.

"That's strange," he thought.

He looked around for the source. There was nothing. For a moment, he thought someone was hiding behind the trees at the edge of the depression, playing a trick on him with a mirror. Instinctively he picked up a rock to chuck at whoever it was. But he saw no one. Watching the glimmer and then looking at the sun, he tried to figure out what was reflecting the light.

Finally he looked up and there it was, hanging from an overarching branch a good twenty feet up. He chucked the rock at it and missed. He followed the first rock with a second and a third. They all missed. For the next ten minutes Justin threw rocks at the branch from different positions until one finally connected. The branch shook, and a shiny brass-colored object plopped onto the dry leaves at his feet.

And that was how Justin found it. Or perhaps that was how it found Justin.

Chapter 2

The Amulet

Justin reached down and picked up the shiny object that had fallen from the tree. It was a disk, about the size of a soda can top, suspended from a fine metal chain, and made of metal that might have been brass. In the center was a translucent stone that looked like a crystal. Its surface had been cut into faces, like a jewel, but the flat surfaces were irregular, and instead of being clear, it had a clouded look. Numerous small loops, like wire, except that they seemed to be part of the disk itself and not fastened on later, were arranged around the circumference. When Justin looked closer, he saw that the arrangement of the little loops was irregular. He could see no pattern to it. And, at the base of each loop, the pattern continued as small looping lines engraved in the metal. Sometimes the engraved lines matched the loops, sometimes they did not. Again, there was no obvious pattern to it.

He held it up to the light and watched as it slowly twisted on the end of the chain. Justin had encountered the word “amulet” a few times in reading stories about witches, wizards, and magic. He had never bothered to look it up, but, from the way the word was used, he decided that this strange trinket most likely fit under the heading of amulet. In the books he had read, the fantasy ones, amulets usually were more than just decorative. They had powers or were used by people who had powers. For about ten seconds he entertained the notion that this was a magic amulet, then decided it was just a piece of tacky jewelry someone had won at the county fair and lost here.

Being twelve years old, Justin subscribed to the theory of “Finders Keepers.” So, he dropped the amulet into his backpack. It never occurred to him that if someone had lost it, that someone might also be looking for it. Of course, when it comes to that, it would never occur to most grownups either. Justin went back to his book and read awhile longer. The battle wasn’t quite done, but the

chapter was, and Justin decided he'd better get started for home. He'd finish the battle tonight as his bedtime reading. He stashed the book and the empty soda can in his daypack and started down the trail, barely thinking again of the amulet he'd found.

He made it home just in time to start setting the table. His mother had already returned and was reheating a casserole, one of many she mass-produced and kept in the freezer. As if on cue, Lars came in just as the casserole was ready, followed quickly by his father.

It was a typical dinner. Most of the conversation revolved around Lars and the football team and how the season was shaping up. Then it was time to clean up. While they did the dishes, Lars lodged his usual complaint that they were the only family he knew that didn't have a dishwasher.

"What do you mean? I have two dish washers," his mother replied, patting their shoulders. It was her standard reply. And once the last dishes were done, Lars was off again.

"Gotta study playbooks with Eddie and Chuck," he said as the door slammed behind him.

This was good news for Justin. It meant he had the computer all to himself. He could get back to his current favorite game, *Elven Warriors: The Temple of Karak-Dur*. Elves weren't quite as cool as Vikings, but they were close. And, after some initial setbacks, he was getting the hang of it and making good progress. If Lars had stayed home tonight, he'd have been fighting Lars for the computer instead of making another attempt at taking out the Necromancer in the Twelfth Tower. He was one tough elf. He'd already defeated Justin's character five times. But tonight! Tonight Justin was sure he had figured out the secret to neutralizing the Necromancer's powers!

Justin went to the alcove off the dining room where the computer was set up. He powered it up and started the game, resuming play from where he'd left off the night before. He totally immersed himself in taking out the troll who guarded the third floor of the tower.

One of the drawbacks to having the computer in the alcove was that the alcove was open to the dining room and the dining room was open to the living room. And usually the door to the kitchen was open as well, so that on an evening like this, even though mom

and dad were talking in the kitchen, Justin could hear their conversation. It was mostly just bits of this and that from work or what the neighbors were up to, and Justin could ignore it easily.

But every now and then something would be said that caught his attention. Like tonight.

"I stopped at the boatyard and talked to Herb today," his father was saying. "It's not good. He can't really say a lot for sure without hauling her, but just from what he saw poking around inside her, at least a dozen frames need replacing. Some of the planks are looking pretty bad, too. And she really needs to be refastened. They used galvanized iron when they built her. When it goes bad, it rots out the wood around it." There was a long pause. "Herb said he wouldn't even think about taking her out again, not in the shape she's in. 'Course he might be exaggerating a bit. He'd like to have the business. Things are pretty slow for him."

There was another long pause.

"The *Ingrid* just doesn't pay for herself, Olie," he heard his mother saying. "You're working hard to support us, but, more and more, it seems like you're working even harder to support Pop's boat."

"I know, I know," Justin's father said resignedly. This was not a new conversation. "Common sense says sell the boat, if anyone'll buy her, or haul her out and leave her on the beach, and get out of fishing all together. But, it's like the *Ingrid's* a part of the family. Heck, she's been in the family longer than I have. Pop bought her two years before I was born."

Still another long pause. Justin could picture his father taking another drink of his coffee, then setting the cup down slowly, and just sort of playing with it a little while he thought.

"I know I should sell her off or lay her up. But I keep thinking of something Pop used to say. 'A Ranstrom without a boat is like a cowboy without a horse. It just ain't right.'"

A Ranstrom without a boat! Justin didn't like the sound of that, which was a bit odd since Justin had been seasick every time he'd gone out fishing with his father. Unlike Lars. Lars had demonstrated an unnerving ability to wolf down a thick deli sandwich - with extra pickles and onions and gobs of mayonnaise - and chug a soda regardless of how wildly the *Ingrid* rolled and pitched beneath him. And never would he show the slightest signs

of distress, other than an occasional burp. Just watching Lars eat lunch had been enough to send Justin to the rail more than once.

So it shouldn't have bothered Justin that they might not be able to keep the *Ingrid*, but it did. Justin still had hopes that he would outgrow the seasickness. Or maybe grow used to it. After all, Ranstroms had been sailors as long as codfish had had fins. Or so his Grandpa Ranstrom had said. It was unthinkable that he, a Ranstrom, wouldn't be a sailor. And it would be a lot easier to be a sailor if the Ranstroms still had a boat.

And there was another thing. There was the day that there had been a boat without a Ranstrom. Charlie Holbeck, on the *Mollie B*, had found the *Ingrid* drifting on a gentle swell, lines hanging limp in the water, and no sign of old Anders Ranstrom anywhere.

"Heart attack, most likely," the Sheriff had said. "These old barnacles, go out fishing all alone. Too ornery to pay attention to the symptoms. Next thing you know, it's over the side with 'em."

Sell the *Ingrid*? Haul her up on the beach to rot away? "That couldn't be," Justin thought to himself. "If anything, start the engine and point her west. Set a small fire below decks. Give her a proper Viking funeral."

Later that evening Lars returned. Justin braced himself for the wisecracks or the demand to turn over the computer, but, luckily, after checking in with Mom and Dad, Lars went straight to his room. Unluckily, it reminded Mom of what time it was, and she ordered Justin off the computer and to bed.

"Ok, Mom, in just a minute," Justin replied. He closed down the game, but, before shutting down, he thought of something and opened up the e-mail. He clicked on Jessica's address, then typed in a cryptic "Come over tomorrow, got something to show you," and sent it off.

Justin hurriedly washed up and brushed his teeth, then was sent back to do a proper job of it. He went to his room, put on his pajamas, and retrieved his book from the daypack. With luck, he'd manage to get to the end of the battle before his light was ordered off. His fingers brushed the chain of the amulet, so he pulled it out and held it up to the light. It was a little disappointing now that he had a second look at it, just dangling there, doing nothing. Part of Justin's imagination had been hoping something might happen – anything - just a little flicker of light or something. But nothing

happened. He again decided it was just some cheap jewelry and dropped it into his sock drawer.

He slid under the covers and started on the next chapter, where the battle between Hildr and Grimr was starting to get serious. Justin's room was right next to Lars'. He could hear him through the thin walls, talking on his cellphone.

"Yeah....Down at the Shipwreck Burger.... Me'n'Chuck'n'Eddie....There was this old bum, dumpster diving in back. We chased him...Shoulda seen it! He was like making faces and talking crazy at us."

"That's just like Lars," Justin thought. "Took three of them to chase one old bum."

Sally Ranstrom poked her head into Justin's room. "Lights out, Justin. Save some dragons for tomorrow."

Chapter 3

A Curious Thing

There was a time when the odds of Jessica Hilliard showing up at the Ranstrom home on any given day were very good, whether Justin sent her an email or not. The Hilliards, mother and daughter, lived in a small cottage a quarter of a mile up the road from the Ranstroms.

Jessica had been in Justin's class since the third grade, when she and her mother had moved to Ebbetsport from San Francisco. Her mother ran a gift shop on the tourist side of Highway One, frequently working late. It had quickly become routine for Jessica to go to the Ranstroms' after school. Even in the summer, Jessica was more likely to be found there than at home. It was an agreeable state of affairs. Jessica and Justin got on well together and Sally Ranstrom made no bones about having always wanted a daughter, even a part-time one.

But then Jessica had discovered soccer. This summer it seemed like she was spending more and more of her free time with her friends from the team, Kelsey and Emily. So Justin was glad when he looked out the window to see her pedaling up the driveway.

"So, what is it you've got to show me?" she said to Justin as she came in the kitchen door.

Justin led her into his bedroom. He opened the sock drawer and rummaged around a bit until his fingers found it. It had managed to work its way to the bottom. He grasped the chain with his fingers and pulled the amulet out, dangling it in front of Jessica. She looked at it with a questioning look on her face.

"So? What is it?" she asked, not really all that impressed.

"If I knew, I'd tell you," Justin replied. "But I don't, so I can't. I was kinda hoping you might have some idea."

He handed it to her. She held it up to the window and looked intently at the crystal set in the disk that slowly turned on the end of the chain.

“Not much of a crystal, really,” she said. “You know how you get that sort of rainbow like thing when you hold a crystal up to the light? This one doesn’t do it.”

“Refraction, you mean,” Justin said, with just a trace of smugness.

“Whatever,” Jessica replied, slightly irritated at Justin showing off his vocabulary. “This crystal doesn’t do it.”

“Maybe it’s not a crystal,” Justin said. “But it doesn’t look like just a piece of glass.”

“It doesn’t look like a piece of toy jewelry either,” Jessica said, fingering the metal disk that held the maybe or maybe not crystal. “I mean, it’s made of some kind of metal, not plastic. Like brass. See the greenish crud in all the little grooves?”

“That’s called a patina,” Justin said, unable to resist showing off his knowledge of what to call greenish crud on brass. Jessica shot him a dirty look.

“Anyway, it’s probably kinda old. See how it must have been worn or carried in a pocket or something, because most of the,” Jessica paused for effect, “patina has been rubbed off, except in the low spots.”

“What’s really odd about it is how heavy it is,” Justin said. “I mean, for its size.”

Jessica looked at him questioningly.

“Well, it’s not really very big,” Justin said, a little surprised that she seemed not to have noticed. “The chain is very thin and the metal of the disk is no thicker than a quarter. But that thing is really heavy for its size.”

“Maybe to you it seems heavy, Mister Weenie Arm,” Jessica replied. “It hardly weighs anything.”

She hooked the chain over her index finger and spun the trinket lightly around. “It hardly weighs anything at all,” she said again for emphasis.

Justin took it back. He suspended it from one finger. It felt heavy to him, like it was made of lead. He tried to spin it around like Jessica had done, but after a couple spins the weight of it caused it to slip off his finger and it went flying across the room. It landed with a solid thunk on the floor. Justin went over and picked it up.

“Did that sound like something light to you?”

“Well, maybe it feels light to me but heavy to you.”

“It can’t do that,” Justin replied. “It’s against the laws of physics.”

“Which law?” Jessica asked. “Exactly?”

Justin thought for a moment. He didn’t really know the laws of physics, beyond the fact that there were laws of physics and somebody named Newton came up fairly frequently when physics was mentioned.

“Newton’s Thirty-Fifth Law of Things Don’t Work Like That,” he shot back.

“You made that up.”

“Maybe I did, but things don’t work like that. I say this is heavy. You say it’s light. We need to conduct a test.”

He led her out to one of the storage sheds behind the house. Part of it was crammed with fishing gear and parts for the boat. Most of what was stored there was beyond any possible future use, having been stashed there by Grandpa Ranstrom when Justin’s father was younger than Justin was now. It was that old. And some of it was gear that Grandpa Ransrom’s father had accumulated. Justin had spent a lot of time poking around, trying to decipher what each thing was used for. One item he’d figured out quickly. It had amused him for several days as he played with it. Now he pulled it out of a drawer and blew the dust off it.

He held it up to show Jessica. The device was a metal bar with a shallow bowl attached at each end by three fine chains. The bar was obviously meant to be suspended by another chain attached to a pivot at its center. Right above the pivot was a small arrow, pointing straight up if the bar was level. Justin held it by this chain. The bar tilted one way and then another like a small teeter-totter, then came to rest at the level.

“Ok, what is it? And what does it have to do with this thingee?” Jessica asked, holding up the amulet.

“It’s a scale,” Justin said. “Like the gold miners used to use.”

With his free hand he removed a wooden box from the drawer and opened the lid. Jessica could see that the box contained small brass cylinders, each one sitting in a hole sized exactly to fit it. The cylinders were arranged in order from smallest to largest, and each one was marked with a number.

“Put the amulet in that tray. Then put these weights in the

other tray. When the little pointer in the middle of the bar points straight up, the thing being weighed equals the total of the weights.”

Jessica put the amulet in one tray. It dropped as far as it could go. Then she started putting weights in the tray. She picked one that looked like it might be big enough to match the amulet and was surprised when the scales didn’t move a bit. She added another weight, then a third. The fourth weight caused the tray with the amulet to start to rise, but she still had to add yet another small weight before the bar leveled out. She looked perplexed.

She took all the weights out of the tray and put them in one hand. She hefted them. She took the amulet out of the other tray and held it in her other hand.

“These weights feel much heavier than the amulet,” she said.

“They can’t be,” Justin replied. “The scale proves they weigh as much as the amulet.”

“But they don’t,” Jessica said. “Look at them. All these weights put together are much bigger than the amulet.”

“Maybe you did it wrong,” Justin said.

“And how could I do it wrong? I just put the weights in the tray. Maybe your scale is broken. Did you think of that?”

“Here, you hold the scale, and I’ll handle the weights.”

He gave the scale to Jessica. She held it up by the center chain as Justin had. Justin put the amulet in one tray. Jessica handed him the weights. He picked up what he thought was the first weight she’d used and dropped it in the empty tray. To his surprise the tray sank so rapidly that the amulet went flying out of the other tray.

He picked up the amulet and replaced it in its tray. The tray remained in its high position. Justin removed the weight and tried one that was only half as big. He carefully placed it in the tray this time. The amulet tray rose, but not as quickly. Justin replaced that weight with a smaller one, then another and another until finally the crossbar leveled out and the pointer was pointing straight up again.

Justin and Jessica looked at the weight, the amulet, and each other.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Justin said. “That weight is much smaller than the amulet.”

“I told you, your scale must be broken. Try putting the amulet

in the other tray.”

Justin removed the weight and put the amulet in the other tray. He started trying the weights again, a large one first. Once more he finally balanced the amulet with the small weight he'd ended with the first time.

“I want to try it again,” Jessica said.

She handed the scales to Justin, with the weight and the amulet still in the trays. He grasped it by the chain. Immediately, the tray with the amulet dropped as far as it could and the small weight went flying.

“How did you do that?” Jessica demanded.

“I didn't do anything. I'm just holding it.”

Jessica picked up the fallen weight, put it back in the tray and gently pushed the bar down until it was level. She removed her finger and the weight went flying again. She put the heaviest of the weights in the tray. It barely moved. She added more weights and it finally leveled out. Then she switched sides.

“Let me hold the scale again,” she demanded.

Justin handed held it out. Jessica held the chain. As soon as Justin removed his hand the tray with the weights dropped and the amulet popped up into the air. Jessica caught it with her free hand.

“Weird!” she muttered.

They both stared at the scale and the amulet for a long time. Then Jessica asked, “Where did you find this thing?”

“At the Witch Ring. It was hanging in a tree.”

“You found it at the Witch Ring?” Jessica repeated. “Think there's anything else there? Any more stuff like this?”

“I don't know. I didn't look.”

“Wanna go look?” Jessica asked.

She wasn't really that curious about whether there was anything else, but she had a feeling that if she didn't get Justin out of the shed they were going to spend the whole afternoon there fussing with the scales.

“Sure,” Justin said. “Let's go.”

It hadn't occurred to him that whoever lost the amulet might have lost some other neat stuff as well. Now the possibility intrigued him.

Chapter 4

A Surprise at the Witch Ring

Justin pocketed the amulet and they went back to the house. He picked up his daypack and loaded it with a couple sodas from the refrigerator, a small bag of beef jerky, and a couple of granola bars as they passed through the kitchen on the way back out. A few minutes later they were pedaling down Chinquapin Road.

As they approached the Haunted Farmhouse, Justin mentioned seeing the old tramp there the day before. Without discussing it, they both crossed to the other side of the road, but, as they passed the tumbledown buildings, there were no signs of tramps or anyone else.

Soon they were passing the rusted yellow gate and pedaling slowly up the fire road. Jessica had gotten a little ahead. She went right past the place where the trail to the Witch Ring started. Justin had to call her back. She returned, slightly embarrassed at missing the trail. They dragged their bikes up the trail to where they could hide them behind the clump of young redwoods, chained them to the thickest of the small trees, and then started up the trail.

Habitually, Justin took the lead going up the trail. Sometimes Jessica objected and would jockey for position, but today this was Justin's adventure so she let him go in front of her. Usually they would be talking as they walked, but, after the first several steep patches they started saving their breath.

As they approached the Witch Ring, Jessica grabbed Justin by the daypack. He turned to say something to her but she had a finger to her lips, motioning for silence.

"I hear something," she whispered.

They both stood absolutely still. Sure enough, there was a noise coming from the direction of the Witch Ring. It was the rhythmic swishing, crunching sound of something disturbing dry leaves. It might have been a deer or a few quail, but something about it didn't sound right. It didn't have the right cadence for either a deer or a

pair of quail.

They might have turned around and gone back right then, like sensible people would, but curiosity is a powerful thing. Justin came to the Witch Ring very often and Jessica had been there frequently as well with Justin. They had never seen anyone else there. Sometimes they'd found an empty can or bottle or an empty chip bag, so they knew other people did come to the Witch Ring, but they'd never actually met someone there. So they were really curious who it could be, and a little nervous.

They edged forward slowly, crouching a little and trying to stay low, like people did in movies when they didn't want to be seen. The trees growing on the rim of the bowl obscured their view, but, when they were about twenty feet away from the edge, they saw motion and stopped. Between the tree trunks and the hanging branches they caught glimpses of a figure - a man - moving slowly. Because of the depth of the bowl and the rim around it, they could only see him from the waist up. He had his head down, mostly concealed by a battered old hat with a wide, floppy brim and a low, round crown. He held a long stick in front of him, which he was sweeping back and forth. He'd shuffle forward a little, then swing the stick, making the rustling noise they'd heard. He seemed to be stirring up the leaves, searching for something.

They crept forward a few feet and got a better look at him. He was wearing a coat made of some coarsely woven fabric, almost like a sack, of a reddish brown color. Over the coat, he wore a cloak or blanket, tied around the neck and the sides thrown back. Something about him, or his clothes more likely, since he couldn't see the man's face, seemed really familiar to Justin. After a moment's thought he knew what it was.

"I saw him yesterday," he whispered to Jessica. "At the Haunted Farmhouse."

The man's head jerked around suddenly and he stared in their direction. They froze, holding their breath. If he saw them, he gave no indication, but they got a good look at his face below the hat. He had a beard, long but not as long as an Old Testament prophet. It had once been a dark red in color, but was now streaked with gray, as also was the hair that hung down to his shoulders on either side of his long, weathered face. How old he was Justin couldn't guess, but he certainly seemed older than Justin's father. After a few long

moments, the man went back to poking about in the forest litter.

Justin's hand seemed to go without him willing it to his pocket. He grasped the amulet. Somehow, he knew that the man was looking for it. Without really thinking, he straightened up and started walking towards the rim of the Witch Ring.

"Justin! Come back!" Jessica whispered loudly.

Something told Justin the man needed the amulet. It was important to him. He had to have it. Justin climbed over the rim and stepped down into the Witch Ring. Jessica came along a few feet behind him, not really wanting to go, but not wanting to get too far away from Justin either. The man stopped his sweeping and turned to look at Justin. There was no sign of surprise on his face, just a slight, closed-mouth smile. The dark eyes, hooded by bushy eyebrows, seemed friendly.

Justin held out the amulet, letting it dangle by its chain.

"Excuse me, Mister," he said. "Is this what you're looking for?"

A smile crossed the man's face, partially hidden by the beard, but still evident. He held his left hand out, palm up. Justin dropped the amulet into his hand.

"Meur ras, gowetha," the man said.

"What was that?" Jessica asked Justin quietly. She had edged up close behind Justin, ready to grab his daypack and start dragging him away if necessary.

"I don't know," Justin replied. "Some kind of foreign language, I guess."

Jessica screwed up her face in thought. "It's not Spanish. I know that."

There was a long pause as they looked at the strange man, not quite sure what to do next. The man looked back, as if expecting something.

"What do we do now?" Jessica asked Justin, keeping her voice low.

"How should I know?" Justin replied. "I guess we could leave, but it doesn't seem polite. Seems like we should say something, but what can we say that he'd understand?"

The impasse lasted for another 30 seconds or so before the man spoke again.

"Tethion ap Gurwen," the man said, or at least that's what it sounded like to Justin and Jessica. He seemed to be waiting for a

response from them.

“I didn’t understand that either,” Justin said.

“I wonder if he’s introducing himself. That’s what you do when you meet strangers,” Jessica replied. “But which part is his name? Does ‘Tethion’ mean I am, and his name is Gurwen?”

The man’s smile broadened, as if amused by what Jessica said. He spoke again, this time pointing to himself.

“Tethion,” he said. Then he pointed at Justin and then Jessica.

“Ok, I understand now,” Jessica said. She pointed at the man. “His name is Tethion.” Then she pointed at herself and said “Jessica.”

“Justin,” Justin said, following Jessica’s example and pointing at himself.

“Tethion,” the man said again, again pointing to himself. Then he added something that sounded like “Qwn chwi oni tafodiat areithew?”

“Ok, that sounded like a question,” Jessica said. “But what did he ask us.”

“Well that is the question, isn’t it,” Justin responded, feeling a bit frustrated. “I think maybe it’s time for us to leave.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Jessica replied. “Well, goodbye Mister Tethion,” she said to the man. “Nice meeting you.” They both started to turn and walk away.

“Aros, aros,” Tethion called after them. Whatever it was he said, it didn’t sound like an order or a command, but more like a request.

They stopped and turned to face him again. He pulled a gourd out from under his coat. A leather thong served as a carrying strap. A wooden plug sealed the long neck of the gourd, with a thin strip of leather tied to the plug keeping it from being lost. Tethion worked the plug out, then splashed some of the contents of the gourd into the palm of his left hand. What dripped through his fingers appeared to be nothing more than water.

Tethion stared intently at the small pool in his cupped hand. His mouth began moving, though whatever words he pronounced were too low and indistinct for Justin and Jessica to hear, not that they would have been able to understand them anyway. All they heard was the faintest sounds lost in the rustling of the leaves being disturbed by the breeze above them. Gradually, though, he began to speak louder. They still couldn’t understand what he was saying,

but the sounds seemed to fall into a recognizable pattern, as if he were repeating a sentence or some kind of chant.

Tethion dipped two fingers of his free hand into the tiny puddle. He raised the hand up beside his head and flicked the fingers once, twice, three times towards his left ear. He dipped the fingers again, then he reached towards Justin. Justin started to pull back, but before he could, Tethion flicked a few drops of water on his right ear.

“What the...” Justin said. Before he could complete the sentence, Tethion had done the same to Jessica.

“What was that about?” Jessica asked, her voice betraying an understandable nervousness.

“I don’t know,” Justin replied, “but I really think now it’s time for us to leave.”

It was getting a little too strange. They turned go again. Tethion started to speak. If they’d been able to understand whatever language he was speaking, they’d have heard “Wait, wait. It is a harmless spell. Speak to me.”

What they actually heard sounded more like “Aros, aros. Swyn diniwed taflu.” But curiously they somehow almost seemed to understand what he was trying to tell them.

They turned back to face him again. He was speaking what sounded like long sentences, and the words were totally incomprehensible, but they had a musical lilt to them that was strangely fascinating. Both Justin and Jessica stood and listened, perplexed.

Then, right in mid-sentence, Tethion switched briefly to English and then back again to whatever language he’d been speaking. Justin was certain he heard the word “tree.”

“I just imagined I heard that,” Justin thought. But a moment later he distinctly heard the word “stone.” He looked at Jessica. She was looking back at him with a surprised look on her face.

“Did you hear him say tree?” Jessica asked. “Or something that sounded like tree. Only it didn’t really?”

“Yeah, and stone, and some other words,” Justin replied. “But they sound funny.”

The man kept speaking, long rambling sentences that meant nothing to Justin and Jessica, except that every now and then a word they could understand seemed to pop up. The longer he spoke

the more English words he spoke, though they were still just individual words seemingly coming out at random. Finally, after ten or fifteen minutes, he stopped. He looked back and forth from Justin to Jessica, as if expecting a response. Then he spoke, in what was understandable but odd-sounding English.

“Speak,” Tethion said, “Say...words.”

“What’s he mean?” Jessica asked, not certain what he wanted.

“Isn’t it obvious? He wants us to talk. He’s been talking so we can hear his words. Now he wants to listen to us, so he can hear our words. Just like we’ve been listening to his.”

“Why? And what should we say?”

“Anything. Just talk. Use as many words as possible.”

Justin didn’t want to mention it, since he thought Jessica might be a little impressed with his grasp of what they should do, but he felt certain he’d read about a situation like this in one of his sword and sorcery books. They started taking turns speaking to the stranger.

“My name is Justin. I live in Ebbettsport,” he pointed in the direction he thought the town lay and repeated the name again. “We call this place the Witch Ring....”

“I’m Jessica. I play soccer....”

“These trees are called pepperwoods. Or bay trees. Some people call them bays. Those red-barked ones we call madrones. The tall ones we call redwoods. Except for those other tall ones with the dark brown bark. We call those Douglas firs....”

They talked and talked, saying anything that came to mind. Finally, the man held up a hand in the universally understood signal to stop.

“I think...that...,” he said haltingly, “will...be enough. More will...come...as we...speak.”

He paused. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts. Then he began again.

“My name is Tethion, son of Gurwen,” he said. “I’m a druid and wizard.”

That seemed redundant to Jessica. “Aren’t they the same?” she asked. “Druids and wizards, I mean.”

Tethion looked at her funny and drew himself up stiffly.

“What...? The same? Of course not! There are many druids. Druids of medicine and druids of the law and druids of this, that

and the other thing. Most of them are not wizards. There are somewhat fewer wizards. A good many of them are not also druids. And there are some few of us who are both druids and wizards.” He seemed a little offended at the suggestions druids and wizards were the same.

“Sorry...” Jessica started to say before Justin cut her off.

“Mr. Tethion, why can you understand us now? And why can you speak our language?”

“I am understanding you, that’s true. But I’m not speaking your language. You’re understanding mine.”

“No, you’re speaking English. It sounds a little funny.” Justin regretted saying that immediately. He didn’t want to sound rude, but it was true. His words did have a strange sound to them. “But you’re definitely speaking English.”

“I do not know what this English is. I assume it is what you call your speech, as we call ours The Talk. And that is what I am speaking now. But you are understanding the meaning of my words and so it sounds to you like the speech you are used to hearing. It’s a clever little spell I learned many years ago - most useful for one who travels much.”

“A spell? You cast a spell on us?” Jessica was taken aback by that idea.

“Only a little one. Totally harmless. Don’t worry. It’s approved for general use by the Council of Wizards. It’s a spell of understanding. You see, all languages were once one. As different as the words sound now, the meanings remain locked away somewhere in here.” He tapped the side of his head. “The spell merely helps the mind say to itself ‘Oh, yes, that sound is the same as this one I’m familiar with.’”

“So, we’re speaking our language and you understand what we say? And we understand what you say, though you’re speaking your language?”

“Yes! Exactly. If you listen to me long enough you will learn to speak The Talk, just as I will learn to speak your English. Myself, I’ve gained a passable command of more than a dozen languages, and very useful that has been to me. The secret is to relax. Let the words flow through your mind.

“And, speaking of travel, could you perhaps tell me where this place is that I find myself? The land looks much like where I came

from, though somehow altered. And when I went down the mountain I found not Tregawen but the most odd city I've encountered in all my wandering - and a not very hospitable one at that."

"Where's Tregawen?" Jessica asked. She had a bit of trouble copying Tethion's pronunciation. She thought she was saying it the same way he had, but somehow it didn't come out quite right.

Tethion was silent for a few long moments, his face slightly screwed up as if thinking hard. Then he spoke again.

"Tregawen is the cluster of farmsteads where Guriant's people live. It should be at the base of this mountain, between the mountain and the sea." He looked up through the trees, searching for the sun. Then he pointed roughly to the west. "That way. And just south of Tregawen is the River of the Fallen Mountain. But Tregawen is not there. Tell me, what do you call this city below the mountain?"

"We call it Ebbetsport," Justin replied. It seemed odd to him to hear little Ebbetsport called a city. Then he added, "And there's a river just south of town. We call it the Twelvemile River."

"Hmmm," Tethion mumbled. "And if I sailed south from this Ebbetsport, for a day and a half or perhaps two days, where should I be?"

"You mean sail, like in a sailboat?" Justin asked.

"How else?" Tethion replied. He seemed a little surprised at the question. "Would you want to row that far? I wouldn't."

Jessica was already doing the math in her head. How fast did sailboats move? Five miles an hour she guessed. In a day that meant a hundred and twenty miles. Add another half day and that would be a hundred and sixty miles.

"San Francisco," she said. "More or less. A day and a half of sailing and you might be near San Francisco."

Justin was a little miffed that Jessica beat him to it. Tethion looked even more perplexed.

"San Francisco," he said quietly. Now it was his turn to struggle with the pronunciation. It sounded something like San Francisco, but with a weird intonation. "Tell me, if I continued south along the shore from this San Francisco, which I take to be a city, what would be the next great city I would come to?"

"Los Angeles," Jessica said, beating Justin again.

“Then San Diego,” Justin added.

“Los Angeles,” Tethion repeated, again not quite saying the name the way a native Californian would. “San Diego.” He looked thoughtful for a long time before he spoke again.

“Could you tell me, perhaps, if you’ve ever heard of the city of Aztaculatan?”

Justin and Jessica looked at each other. They’d never heard the name before.

“It might be some place in Mexico,” Justin said, making a guess. “It sounds like a Mexican name. Like a name the Aztecs might have used.”

“Mexico?” Tethion repeated, and Justin noticed he pronounced it more like “Mehico.” And then he said something else, whispering to himself so softly that Justin and Jessica barely heard him. He muttered something about “The Well.”

With that he suddenly seemed to grow weak. He grasped his staff with both hands, struggling to stay upright for a long moment before sinking into a sitting position to the muffled crunching of dried leaves.

Chapter 5

The Wizard's Tale

“Are you Ok?” Jessica asked.

Tethion had slumped into a sitting position. It appeared the only thing keeping him from falling over was the tight grip he maintained on his staff.

“Ok? What does that mean?” he asked. “I’m not understanding that word.” Before Jessica could explain, he said, “Oh, you’re asking if I’m in good health. Yes. I’m quite all right, though tired.” His voice sounded weak. “I’m just tired. Working a spell takes it out of you. And I haven’t really eaten anything but a few berries since I came to this place. When one is not entirely sure of one’s circumstances, it doesn’t pay to eat unfamiliar things.” He paused. “I don’t suppose you would have any food to spare?”

Justin dropped his daypack and rummaged around in it. Jessica was putting on her skeptical look.

“If you’re a wizard, couldn’t you magically produce some food? Like, make an apple appear?”

Tethion looked at her quizzically. “I could, I suppose,” he said after a long pause. “But there would be little point to it. It takes energy to work magic. The energy I gained by eating an apple I created magically would be less than the energy I put into making it. It’s basic wizardry, you know. The Third Law of Energy Balances of, umm, what was his name? The wizard who defined that law. Only thing he’s really remembered for. Learned it so long ago. It’ll come to me momentarily.”

Meanwhile, Justin had pulled a bag of jerky out of his pack. He offered it to Tethion. As he did, he shot a dirty look at Jessica. He thought her question was a bit rude.

“Jerky?” he asked.

“Jerky?” Tethion repeated, as he took the package. He raised one eyebrow quizzically as he turned it over and over in his hands, studying it.

Could it be he didn't know how to open the package, Jessica wondered? She reached down, took the package, and tore open the end. Just to be sure he knew the contents were edible, she took a small piece of jerky before she handed back the package. Tethion watched as she put it in her mouth and started chewing. He took out a piece, examined it briefly, sniffed it, and put it in his mouth.

"Ah, yes," he said, eyes lighting up. "The flavor is different, stronger, but this is what we call echarqui."

He took another piece and started chewing on it. As he did, he held up the package.

"So this is what this strange paper is used for," he said, as if making a great discovery. "I went foraging near the city yesterday. I kept finding things like this, but I couldn't work out what they were for. And the writing is most strange. I take these markings to be writing? It is a form I've not encountered before - very curious."

He pulled another piece of jerky out of the bag. Before putting it in his mouth, he looked closely at it. This piece of jerky had more than its share of cracked pepper corns stuck to it. Tethion removed one with his fingertips and held it up.

"My word," he said, "this bag contains a small fortune in pippali."

"What's pippali?" Justin asked.

"It must be pepper," Jessica said. "That's a piece of black pepper he's holding."

"Black pepper," Tethion repeated slowly. "Pippali to us, black pepper to you. Whatever you call it, you use it lavishly. Are you perhaps of the nobility?"

"No," Justin replied, his head swelling a little at being mistaken for nobility. "Black pepper is common here. Everybody uses it."

"Really?" Tethion said, raising his eyebrows. "Now I know I came through The Well. Where I'm from our only supply of pippali, your black pepper, comes with the Bronze Ship, and it only comes once a year. The people further south can afford to pay more for it than we can. So black pepper for us is quite a luxury."

Jessica couldn't restrain her curiosity any more. "So, where is it you're from, Mister Tethion?" she asked.

"Where am I from?" Tethion repeated the question. "I've lived in many places. But if home is where one's people live, then my home is Nivlog Traeth, or, as you would say...." He paused and thought

for a moment, then asked, "What is your word for the land, where it meets the ocean?"

"The shore?" Jessica responded.

"Or the coast," Justin added, wanting to make a contribution.

"And when the air is dense and gray and damp and flows in off the ocean," Tethion continued. "What do you call that?"

"Fog," Justin and Jessica said together.

"Or mist," Jessica put in. Justin shot her a nasty look. She returned a smirky smile.

"Ah, what we call our land, Nivlog Traeth, that bears a striking resemblance to this countryside, would be called, in your speech, 'shore of fog' or 'shore of mist'. Or perhaps the 'coast of fog.'"

"The Misty Shore," Jessica said. "That sounds like what we'd call it."

"The Misty Shore," Tethion repeated. "That does have a pleasant sound to it."

Tethion had finished the jerky. He reached under his cloak and drew out the gourd flask, pulled out the wooden plug and took a long sip of water. Justin reached into his daypack, felt around, and pulled out a granola bar. He offered it to Tethion.

"Try this," he said. "We call it a 'granola bar.'"

Tethion took the granola bar from Justin. Again he struggled briefly with the wrapping, and held it up to marvel at it once he'd removed it. He inspected the granola bar, broke off a piece, and tasted it. He nodded his head slightly and smiled a closed-mouth smile as he chewed.

"Interesting. We make some small dry cakes for travel, but nothing quite like this." He took a bite directly from the bar.

Tethion strength seemed to have recovered quite quickly. Justin's curiosity got the better of him.

"Pardon me, Mister Tethion," he asked, a little nervous because his mother always told him it wasn't polite to snoop into other people's business. "You said something about a well. Where is The Well?"

"Or what is The Well?" Jessica asked. She had a feeling Tethion wasn't talking about just an ordinary water well.

"Ah, yes, The Well," Tethion said, munching on a second granola bar. And then he was silent for a long time, chewing slowly, though it was obvious to both Justin and Jessica that he was really

thinking.

“I suppose,” he said finally, “that it can do no harm to speak of The Well to you, though many a wizard has come to such a conclusion and lived to regret it. Or not lived. Still, as you’ve shown me courtesy, perhaps I owe you the courtesy of an explanation of how I come to be here in your land. But I must ask that you not reveal the information I am about to impart to anyone else.”

He paused again, taking a swig of water to wash down the last of the granola bar.

“Tasty,” he said, “but very dry.” He cleared his throat and then looked around the Witch Ring, as if making sure no one else was listening.

“This is The Well of Danaan, here.” He made a circular motion with his free hand, indicating the depression. “I wish I could tell you more about it, but I, or Rather we, the Druids of the Grove of the Two Peaks, know very little about it. We know that this one exists, and we believe there is another far to the south. But what The Wells are and what they do, we have only rumors and suspicions.

“But one person does know about them. At least he seems to know how they work. Malduraut. And it’s thanks to Malduraut that I’m here.”

“This Malduraut is another wizard?” Justin asked.

“He claims to be, and it’s hard to argue with him on that point given his demonstrated ability. No one’s certain from where he came. He just appeared at the Council one day many, many years ago, claiming to be a sage from some distant land no one ever heard of. One thing is certain. He is possessed of an unusually strong aptitude for working magic. What is more remarkable, he first appeared, so I’m told, in the year of my birth. Yet the eldest of the Druids, those who were young men when Malduraut first appeared, all vouch that he’s scarcely aged in all this time. No other wizard, in history or legend, has yet managed that feat.

“For many years Malduraut seems to have traveled widely, from the wildlands of the north to the imperial capital, and to the kingdoms far to the south. Not unusual. Most wizards make journeys, some more than others. It’s how we learn things and teach others the things we’ve learned.

“But Malduraut was different. Word came back to the Council about Malduraut and his greed for whatever knowledge he could

gain, in itself not a bad thing for a wizard. But, while Malduraut was eager to feast at the table, he seldom ever brought so much as a minnow or a shriveled apple to the kitchen. And that was a very bad thing. Malduraut was as tight with his knowledge as a miser with a copper. And thus Malduraut wore out his welcome in many places.

“In fairness, one has to say it is a failing wizards are prone to, more so than druids. Often our knowledge has been bought at a dear price, and often enough we are not always eager to give it freely away. But it is also a warning sign. A wizard who is too grasping about knowledge may well have other, more serious faults.”

“This Malduraut doesn’t sound like a very nice person,” Jessica said.

“Oh, you might well say that. But you have yet to hear the entire story. Word also came back to the Council that Malduraut was not careful in his choice of friends. He was known to have consorted with troublemakers, thieves, and the like. Or, perhaps, one might say he was too careful. When these scoundrels’ plots or schemes came to grief there was never more than the suspicion that Malduraut was involved. He concealed his tracks well. And there remains suspicion that a few who might have given information about his plottings were silenced forever, but, again, with never a trace back to Malduraut.”

“Couldn’t your Druid Council have busted him?” Justin asked.

Tethion looked confused.

“Could the other druids have him arrested?” Jessica put in. It was obvious to her that the word busted had no meaning to Tethion. “Couldn’t they have had him locked up?”

“Perhaps they might have tried to confine him, but other wizards hesitate to interfere with fellow wizards, even those they suspect of evil intentions. And as I’m sure you understand, it is no small thing to attempt to apprehend a wizard as powerful as Malduraut. And another thing to consider. Malduraut did not only cultivate friends among the lowest of scoundrels. He had, and still has, friends among the highest-born scoundrels. There are more than a few seemingly respectable people who have use for a powerful and unscrupulous wizard. So, the Council had to be very careful in its dealings with Malduraut. They elected to have him quietly watched.”

“And you were one of the people watching Malduraut?” Jessica asked.

“Not originally. That was before the war, when I was too young to be entrusted with such tasks.”

“When was the war?” Justin asked. A war with wizards, and all that entailed, caught his interest. Judging by how old Tethion looked, Justin thought the war must have been a long time ago.

“Is it ten years ago now? Yes, I believe it is. Ten years ago war came to the Misty Shore, not for the first time, regrettably. As wars go, it was not a great affair. More in the nature of a very large raid, bands of pirates and renegades, and a large contingent of sea raiders from the north. And, of course, they recruited the usual disorderly mob of would-be looters to fill out the ranks.

“Their plan, as we learned later, had been to strike quickly down the coast and seize Ninua Taergoth, there to install their leader as the new ruler. But the greed of their army undid them. A competent military force would have sped past all the villages of the coast, pausing only long enough to replenish their water and steal as much food as they needed. But not that undisciplined band of thieves. They stopped to pillage every village, rath or lonely hovel they found and burdened themselves with whatever caught their eyes. And, as they loaded their vessels with loot, a steady trickle of robbers turned for home, content with what they’d already stolen, while others turned on each other in arguments over trinkets.

“Needless to say, the people of the coast were aroused, the imperial forces were alerted, and a combined force of spears and ships fell on the raiders as they were sacking Traemilian. It was more a slaughter than a battle and few of the invaders ever returned home.”

“Malduraut was their leader?” Jessica asked.

“No, their leader was a notable, and a friend of Malduraut, who had been exiled for previous plots against the empire,” Tethion answered. “Malduraut himself was in Ninua Taergoth, as were a small band of villains who had hidden themselves in the city, ready to commit treachery when the time was ripe. Fortunately, they were discovered and apprehended as the plot unraveled. An order was given to seize Malduraut, since it seemed probable that he was involved as well, but he escaped and seemingly disappeared.”

“He disappeared?” Justin asked. “You mean he really

disappeared. Like he vanished?"

"He was being followed by men-at-arms with orders to capture him. They had tracked him for several days and were within sight of him when he entered a wood. The pursuers quickly set watchers around the wood, lest he slip away. Then a party went into the wood and searched for him. He wasn't there."

"Maybe he was just really, really quick," Justin offered. "Could he have run out the other side of the wood while the good guys were coming in, before the watchers were in place?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," Tethion replied, after considering what they said. "But he was seen going into the wood on foot at mid-morning. The wood filled a small valley, three sides of which were bounded by steep, barren slopes. Malduraut's pursuers were mounted, so they could move much more quickly than Malduraut. They sent riders up the ridges from whence they could see anyone trying to climb the slopes. Others they posted at the entrance to the valley, lest Malduraut escape that way while they searched the wood. They searched until dusk and found no one."

"But, after the sun went down, perhaps he snuck out at night," Jessica suggested. "After it was dark, when no one would see."

"As dusk approached, they fired the wood."

"Fired the wood?" Jessica asked, not understanding what he meant.

"They set fire to the forest," Justin explained.

Jessica seemed a little shocked. She didn't read books where setting fires to forests, villages, and castles was a common occurrence.

"You have to understand, Jessica," Tethion said, "they were very, very angry with Malduraut. They wanted to capture him, and they were prepared to use extreme measures to do so. Still, he never came out of the wood. In the morning, when they searched for his bones, they found nothing."

"But how do they know he didn't make himself invisible or something?" Justin asked. He could think of at least half a dozen stories where the hero or the villain made himself invisible, with a spell or magic cloak or helmet.

"My boy," Tethion responded, a little taken aback, "if you know of someone who can make himself invisible, please introduce me. I want to know how it's done." He paused. "Now, a spell of

obscurity, that's commonplace. Most any reasonably accomplished wizard can do one of those. I myself can perform one with no more effort than batting an eye. A very useful skill at times. But they don't make a person truly invisible, and they only really work if you stand absolutely still. So Malduraut could not have used one to escape. He'd have been spotted as soon as he started to move.

"And don't forget, or perhaps I hadn't mentioned this yet, two respected wizards were accompanying Malduraut's pursuers. No one chases a powerful wizard without having wizards of his own for protection. One remained at the entrance to the valley while the other accompanied the searchers. They were casting spells of revelation to counter any spells Malduraut might have been casting."

Jessica's mind went back to what Tethion had said when he began the story. "You said you're here because of Malduraut. So, Malduraut must have survived and escaped. How'd he do it?"

"No one knew it at the time, but within that wood was another Well of Danaan. We know little enough of The Wells now, and we knew much less about them then. We can only suppose he used The Well to escape."

"But he came back again?" Justin asked.

"Yes, about five years ago," Tethion said. "He was seen moving among the villages of the north, a small band of thugs with him. And then he established himself at Caerbruen and started collecting more thieves and cutpurses pretending to be warriors."

"Where's this Caerbruen?"

Tethion motioned in a generally upriver direction. "Several day's journey upriver. That is, if I were where in my own country, it would be several days' journey that way."

"Is it a town?" Jessica asked.

"No, it's an old fortress from one of the great wars of long ago, carved out of a massive rock outcrop. When manned, as it hasn't been for many years, it controls the pass of Caerbruen, one of the better routes between the coast and the Great Valley. So you can see how some people became concerned when Malduraut reappeared and set up his robbers' nest there.

"And that is how I come to be here. The Council needed someone to find out what Malduraut was plotting. I was not well

known to him. So it fell my lot to go to Caerbruen and pretend to join his band, feigning disaffection with the Council. It worked, for a while, but then I think he became suspicious. Perhaps I was too curious about The Well. Among my tasks was to discover as much as possible about it and how Malduraut used it, and, undoubtedly, I asked too many questions. I finally wheedled enough to get Malduraut to show me The Well. Little did I realize that Malduraut had decided to use The Well to remove me from our world. No doubt he's back at Caerbruen laughing about the young wizard he sent to oblivion."

"You've kinda lost me, Tethion," Justin said. "Just what is The Well, and what does it do?"

"Ah, I was just getting to that. As to what The Well is, it seems to be some sort of rare natural occurrence. Precisely what it is, we do not know. We only know, as I said, that there are at least two of them, this one and the one near Ninua Taergoth. There may be more.

"As to what it does, I now know that it doesn't do what we thought it did. We had assumed that the Wells were linked, that one could enter The Well at Ninua Taergoth and emerge here, or enter here and emerge at Ninua Taergoth. Or perhaps at another Well. But now I believe The Well is an entry to a different world. Your world."

"So, Malduraut sent you through The Well?" Jessica asked.

"We came through together. That is why I wasn't suspicious. What I didn't know is that passage through The Well is extremely disorienting. I'm certain I was unconscious for a time afterwards. Malduraut, knowing what to expect, either recovered himself more quickly or knew of ways to counter the effects. When I awoke he was gone, passed back through The Well I must assume."

"Well that's a terrible trick to play on someone," Jessica remarked.

"Yes it was, and no doubt Malduraut thought it would be the last trick he'd ever play on me. But, since you've returned the akshana-mithona to me there's a good chance that I shall be able to return."

"What's an 'aksa, akshoo,' whatever you said?" Justin asked.

Tethion removed the amulet from the pouch at his belt and let it dangle at the end of its chain. It turned slightly, first one way,

then the other, before stopping and hanging still.

“This is the akshana-mithona.”

Justin and Jessica stared at the amulet for a long minute.

“Is that like a magic charm?” Justin asked.

“Does it open The Well?” Jessica added.

“It doesn’t open The Well. There’s a spell that does that. Fortunately, I have very good ears and a very good memory. I listened well as Malduraut pronounced the spell. I’m almost certain I can repeat it. And, the akshana-mithona itself contains certain reminders.” He ran a finger along the irregular series of loops on the edge of the amulet. “These are symbols have a certain meaning to those familiar with a very ancient language.”

“Those are like letters?” Jessica asked, “in an alphabet?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s what you would call them. Like the strange markings on your food wrappings. But where was I? Yes. These markings do not give the spell, but they give clues as to the spell itself. It was done thusly so that only those who had some familiarity with the spell would be aided by it. You wouldn’t want just anyone to pick up the akshana-mithona and be able to work the spell, would you?”

Justin thought to himself that it might be fun if it he could just pick up an amulet and work a spell, but he didn’t think he should mention that. “No, I don’t think that would be a good idea. But is that all you need the aksh...akso....”

“Akshana-mithona?” Jessica provided. Justin shot her another nasty look at showing him up. She smiled serenely back at him. “Do you just need it to get the spell right?”

“Oh no, no, no,” Tethion replied. “It’s much more important than that. I need three things to work the spell and pass through The Well. The correct wording of the spell, of course. A proper staff, such as this one.” He reached over to where his staff lay on the ground and picked it up, holding it upright for them to admire. It was about five feet long, but would have been substantially longer if all the bends and kinks had been straightened out. The bark had been peeled off and the wood polished and oiled, so that it had a glossy dark yellowish appearance, except at the very tip where it was worn and stained with dirt. At the other end, the wood swelled out and four fingers encircled a crystal the size of a hen’s egg. Whether the wood had grown that way or been reshaped to hold the

crystal was hard to tell. Unlike the crystal in the amulet, this one was not faceted, though it had been polished.

“Does your staff get its power from the crystal?” Justin asked. That’s how it usually worked in the fantasies.

“Power? The crystal? Oh, no. The staff has power because it’s a branch of the proper sort of oak tree and the sacred mistletoe grew upon it. And then wizards with the proper training performed a set of rituals and spells to release and then shape the innate power of the oak.”

He lowered the head of the staff and looked at it a bit smugly. “The crystal’s there because it serves as a focal point for some spells. And I like the way it looks. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Now, as I was saying. Yes, what was I saying?” He paused for a moment. “And thirdly, I need the akshana-mithona. The need for the spell is quite evident. The staff I need to concentrate the power of the spell at the proper place. And the akshana-mithona I need to locate The Well. I said this is the The Well.” He raised an arm and made a circular motion with his hand, describing the Witches’ Ring. “But that’s not entirely correct. The actual Well is a very, very small and very definite place. A very, very, very small place.” He held his thumb and forefinger a bare quarter of an inch apart to illustrate what he meant. “Somewhere here in this depression is The Well. To make the spell work correctly, I must use the staff to concentrate the power of the spell, and I must put the tip of the staff directly on The Well. Close is not good enough. The akshana-mithona is a device with certain powers that, when a correct spell is performed to bring it to life, will point out the location of The Well. Without it I would have to poke about blindly with the staff in hopes of finding The Well by accident.”

“So that’s why you were searching through the leaves?” Jessica asked. “You lost the akshana-mithona and were looking for it?”

“Yes. I was afraid Malduraut had found it and taken it with him. He has his own, of course. This one,” Tethion held it up again, “was discovered quite by accident by a druid who had the sense to send it on to the Council. It sat for many years in a collection of magical curios before anyone understood what it was.” He dropped the amulet back in his belt pouch. “As far as I know, Tethion was not aware that I possessed this. So I assumed it must have fallen out of the pouch when I came through The Well. If Malduraut had

taken the akshana-mithona and my staff, I would have had no hope of ever returning home.”

“That’s funny,” Justin said, thinking of how he’d found the amulet. “The akshana was hanging up in a tree.” He looked around, then pointed to the one he thought it was, “Over there. It was hanging in a branch way up high. If it fell out of the pouch, how did it get up there?”

Tethion looked up at the tree. “Most unusual. Still, objects that have powerful spells upon them sometimes act in strange ways. Lucky for me I suppose. Had it fallen on the ground Malduraut might have found it.”

Strange ways, Jessica thought. “Mister Tethion, does the amu...akshana-mithona feel light or heavy to you?”

Tethion looked at Jessica oddly. “Why, it feels quite weighty considering the size of it. Why do you ask?”

“Because to me it feels heavy,” Justin replied, “but to Jessica it felt light. We even did an experiment with a scale. We put it on a scale. When I held the scales it was heavy. When Jessica held them, it was light.”

“The most likely explanation is that you are more sensitive to the presence of magical powers. Have you had any training in the arts?”

“No.”

“Then perhaps you have a natural talent for such things.”

“Hear that, Jessica?” Justin asked, smiling broadly. “I might be a natural wizard.”

“Not a wizard, Justin,” Tethion said, gravely. “It takes many years of training to become a wizard. But you perhaps have the natural potential to become one. Because you have that potential, you sensed the presence of magical properties in the akshana-mithona. But since you couldn’t know what it was, you felt it as weight.”

“You also have the potential to be late for dinner, mister potential wizard,” Jessica said. She’d been noticing the changing light as the afternoon progressed. “We’d better get started for home.”

They said good-bye and turned to leave. Then another question occurred to Justin. He turned back.

“Mister Tethion,” he asked nervously, “did you cast a spell on

me to get me to give you back the akshana-mithona?”

“I cast a spell, yes,” Tethion answered after a moment’s pause. “But not a spell to force you to do anything. It’s very difficult, not to say unethical, to cast a spell that forces someone to do something, especially if it is something they don’t want to do or know they shouldn’t do. Only a very powerful wizard can do such a thing, and then the spells often come out badly.

“The spell I cast was a spell of summoning. And it was not directed at you but at the akshona-mithona. I was hoping to make it reveal itself. And it seems to have worked after a fashion. You sensed that the akshona-mithona needed to return to me.”

“Well, goodbye again,” Justin paused. “Maybe we can bring you some more food?”

“That would be most kind. Working with magic builds up a terrible hunger.”

Chapter 6

The Shipwreck Burger

“I don’t feel comfortable doing this,” Jessica said as they bicycled away from her house. It was still an hour to the real sunset, but the sun was doing a rehearsal for that act by dropping below the layer of fog that was growing over the ocean.

Justin almost stopped his bike to turn and look at her with his “double dog dare you” look, but he thought better of it. If they stopped moving it would make it easier for Jessica to turn around and go back.

“Doing what?” Justin replied, trying to act like he didn’t know what she meant.

“Going out to meet some strange man just before dark.”

“What’s the problem?”

“If you were a girl, you’d understand the problem.”

“Well I’m not a girl, and I don’t understand your problem.”

“Don’t you ever read the newspapers? Girls get kidnapped all the time. Boys too, sometimes.”

“Well, you don’t have to go, you know. You can turn around and go home.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

“What are you gonna do? Protect me?”

“Maybe I am.”

“Yeah. Sure. How? Gonna hit him with your purse?” Justin, of course, knew that Jessica wasn’t carrying a purse. She didn’t even own one as far as he knew. When he looked back at her he was glad she didn’t, because if she had had a purse she would have been beating him with it.

She glared at him, then said, “If there’s two of us and something bad happens, at least one of us might get away to tell the cops.”

“Jess, nothing bad’s going to happen,” Justin responded, though Jessica’s worrying was starting to make him nervous. “Look, if Tethion was a really bad guy he could have done anything he

wanted to us up on the mountain where there was no one around. Why would he wait until tonight and come down here, close to town?”

Jessica was silent for a while, trying to come up with an answer to that. Justin was starting to think he'd stumped her with his brilliant logic when she spoke again.

“I don't have to explain why he's waited. For all we know, he's totally out of his freakin' mind! People who are out of their minds don't do things the way normal people do. Like this whole wizard thing. How do we know he's really a wizard?”

“Well, he did that spell so we could understand him.”

“Did he? How do we know it really was a spell? Maybe he was just talking gobbledeegook, and then started speaking normally. Maybe it's an act. Maybe he's done it so much he even believes it himself. Who knows?”

Justin hadn't thought of that, and it made him a little more nervous. But he wasn't about to admit it to Jessica, so he kept pedaling. He was relieved at the sound of her bicycle behind him. She wasn't turning back.

After a few minutes she said testily, “I don't know why you said we'd buy him a cheeseburger, anyway.”

“I don't know,” Justin replied. And that was true. Before they'd started to leave he'd offered to bring the wizard some more food. And then, after they'd started to walk away, he'd suddenly turned around and off the top of his head offered to buy Tethion a cheeseburger. “It just seemed like a good thing to do.”

“Has it occurred to you, mister expert on wizards, that maybe Tethion put a spell on you to get you to buy him some food?”

That possibility had not occurred to Justin, and he could have kicked himself for not thinking of it. How often had that happened in his books, a wizard getting someone to do something and the victim not even realizing the wizard was pulling his strings like a marionette. Now he was seriously tempted to turn back, and if Jessica hadn't been there, he probably would have. A few minutes later they were approaching the Shipwreck Burger.

It had taken a little explaining before Tethion had understood what a cheeseburger was. And then it had taken a bit more discussion deciding how and where they should meet. Surprisingly, when Justin suggested meeting near the Shipwreck Burger, the

little hamburger stand near the ruins of the old high school, Tethion already had been there. He explained that he'd found it by following the scent of charring meat.

"But I had no opportunity to investigate further. Some thuggish brutes suddenly appeared and began acting very threatening. You don't have to speak the language of people like that to know what they mean. I had to leave."

Tethion had seemed reluctant to return to the hamburger stand, and it certainly didn't seem wise for Justin and Jessica to walk right up to the order window with him. An old haul road for the Ebbetsport sawmill ran behind the burger place. The mill had closed and then burned down when Justin's father was a boy, but the road was still there, overgrown and used as a walking path. Tethion had discovered it in his earlier visit to the Shipwreck Burger. It offered plenty of concealment, so that's where they agreed to meet.

When Justin and Jessica were just within sight of the Shipwreck Burger, they turned off into the path that connected the mill road and the street. They left their bikes there and walked back the few yards to the road. There was no one waiting.

Jessica looked all the way around, then turned to Justin. "Maybe he decided not to come," she said, with undisguised relief.

"But I did decide to come," a voice said, seemingly from nowhere. And then Tethion appeared, standing just in front of a bush.

Jessica gave a yelp and demanded, "How did you do that?"

Tethion smiled and made a small flourish with his staff. "I believe I mention the spell of obscuration earlier today," he said. "That was it. I heard someone coming, and not being certain if it was you, I hid myself. In my many travels I've learned that there are times when it is best not to be seen."

Justin was confused. "You made yourself invisible. I thought you said that couldn't be done."

"It can't be," Tethion replied, "as far as I know."

"But we couldn't see you. You were invisible."

"No, I wasn't. Not really. The spell merely tricked your eyes into looking around me. If you'd known where to look, and if you'd had some training and a talent for such things, or were able to work a counter spell, you'd have been able to find me quite easily. Or if I

happened to move. That's a problem with spells of obscurity. One must remain motionless or the spell begins to fail very quickly. Motion catches the eye, you know. And another problem with the spell is that it makes one very hungry. You spoke of a cheeseburger?"

"You'd better wait here while we go," Justin started to say when Tethion suddenly disappeared.

Justin and Jessica looked at each other, but, before they could say anything, a voice called out to them. "Hey, it's Runty Ranstrom!"

They turned to see the hulking figure of Derwin Schnook stumping along towards them. Derwin was about the last person they wanted to meet, excepting maybe for Lars and his buddies.

Derwin was actually several months younger than Justin, but he stood more than a foot taller. When they'd been in the first grade together, Derwin had been the tallest boy in the class, and he never lost that advantage, growing as fast as anyone else in the class and faster than most. He was also by far the widest boy in the class. He had been an unusually large baby, a fact that seemed to have made an impression on his mother, who still brought up the subject of how large he'd been at birth at every opportunity. In the following years, his weight had increased even faster than his height

He kept his weight growing by eating constantly. In the school lunch room he'd suck down his own lunch faster than a starving stray dog could devour a can of Alpo. Then he'd start foraging around, inspecting everyone else's lunches. When Derwin's bulk loomed overhead, his slightly squeaky, whiney voice demanding, "Gimme those Twinkies!" few refused him. Justin couldn't count the number of candy bars he'd lost to Derwin, even half-eaten ones. Derwin was well-fed, at least during the school year.

The rumor was that when football practice had started last week, the football coach at Elbridge Middle School had penciled Derwin in as starting center on sight. Then he'd called up the high school to see if he could borrow an extra-extra large uniform. And Derwin had instituted his own private training regime of eating even more than usual.

So, when they saw Derwin approaching on the path from the Shipwreck Burger, they knew what was coming - the Derwin shake down. They started backing away, debating whether to try and

make a run for it. That was an iffy proposition. For all his size, Derwin was surprisingly fast.

Justin looked around for Tethion, to see if he had reappeared. Perhaps the presence of the strange man would deter Derwin. But Tethion was still nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, Runt!” Derwin called. “Stop right there!”

Derwin’s voice was not really very intimidating. In fact, it was a bit funny, especially when he became excited. But, coming from the jowly face and the barrel-like body, made to seem even larger by the bulky, oversized hooded sweatshirt he wore, it was intimidating enough to make them stop in their tracks. Derwin continued stumping towards them until he was almost within arm’s reach.

“I’m hungry!” he said. “Buy me a burger.”

They were both silent at first, uncertain how to respond. If they bought Derwin a burger, and they knew it wouldn’t be just one burger, they wouldn’t have enough left to buy anything for Tethion. Then Jessica got up her courage. Derwin didn’t bother the girls too much anymore. His buddies had started razzing him when he did.

She stood up as tall as she could and jutted her chin out towards him. “We’re not buying you a burger, Derwin.”

“Ok, then buy me a double cheeseburger,” he shot back. “With fries. Double fries!”

Movement caught Justin’s eye. For just a brief moment, he saw Tethion taking a step, behind Derwin and to his right. And then Tethion blinked out of sight again.

“Well? What are you standing here for? Go get my double cheeseburger and double fries. And don’t try sneaking any for yourselves”

Justin spotted Tethion taking another step. He looked at Jessica. It was obvious by the look on her face that she’d seen him too.

“We’re not buying you anything, Derwin,” Justin said defiantly.

Derwin looked a bit surprised. Defiance was something he wasn’t familiar with, but it only threw him off for a moment. His eyes narrowed and he glared at them. “Fine. Gimme some money and I’ll buy it myself.”

The hood of Derwin’s sweatshirt had been down. Now it started to rise, seemingly by itself, and drape over Derwin’s head. Barely visible above it was a hand grasping the material, pulling it up and

setting it in place. Derwin reached up with a start and swatted at the hood. He looked quickly left, right, left again.

“We don’t have any money,” Jessica said. She felt a small lie was justifiable under the circumstances.

“Yeah, right,” Derwin sneered. “You’re goin’ to the Shipwreck Burger but you ain’t got no money. You think I’m stupid or some’in?”

“Or something, yeah.” Justin replied. “Look at it this way, Derwin. We don’t have any money for you.” Knowing Tethion was standing right behind Derwin made Justin feel a whole lot bolder.

“Lemme see your wallet, Runt,” Derwin demanded. “I’ll borrow what I need. Maybe you’re gonna buy me two double-cheeseburgers.”

Justin drew himself up as tall as he could, which wasn’t nearly tall enough, and crossed his arms across his chest. “No!” he said.

Now, at this point, Justin started getting a little nervous. No one he knew had ever stood up to Derwin before, except maybe some guys a few years older who were as big as he was. But Derwin didn’t bother those guys much to begin with, so there was not much there on which to base a guess of how he would react.

And then a disembodied voice boomed out of nowhere. By the odd inflections they knew it had to be Tethion.

“You are a scoundrel and a rascalion! You are a disgrace to your father and your father’s fathers before him. Go! And leave these people alone!”

Derwin whirled around to see who had spoken. He looked rapidly from one side to the other, then slowly scanned the entire lane. He turned back to face Justin and Jessica. Justin had to give him credit. He didn’t scare easily.

“How’d you do that?” he demanded. “You learn ventriloquism or some’in?”

“It wasn’t me,” they both said in unison.

“Yeah, well there ain’t no one else here, so who was it?”

“It wasn’t us,” Jessica said. “And it wasn’t you. So it must have been no one. He’s the only one here besides us.”

“Very funny,” Derwin sneered. “Now gimme some money. My cheeseburger’s gettin’ cold.”

A hand and arm appeared behind Derwin, the hand holding Tethion's staff. The staff flicked forwards to whack Derwin solidly in the rear, then disappeared again.

Derwin yelped, clutched his bottom and jumped forward, almost landing on Justin. He spun around looking wildly for his assailant.

"Wha'the...." he said, his voice higher and whinier than usual. "Who's there? Who did that?"

"I don't see anyone? Do you see anyone, Justin?"

"Nope. I don't see anyone. You see anyone, Derwin?"

"There has to be someone!" he insisted. "Someone kicked me in the butt! Hey! Whoever you are, come out and show yourself! You coward! Come out and face me!"

"Um, who are you talking to, Derwin?"

"There's no one there. Do you see something we don't?"

"There has to be someone!"

"But there's no one...." Jessica started to say. Then she lowered her voice. "Unless it's the poltergeist."

"The polter...polter...?" Derwin asked, his voice uncertain. "What's a poltergeese?"

"It's a ghost," Justin explained. "It plays tricks on people. They can be really nasty sometimes."

"You mean you haven't heard the story about the ghost that haunts the Shipwreck Burger?" Jessica chipped in. "I thought everyone knew about that."

"I ain't never heard about no ghost." Derwin tried to sound defiant, but his voice was starting to tremble a little.

"Oh, it happened a long, long time ago," Jessica explained. "Back in the 1950's - before my mother was even born."

"Yeah," Justin added. "I heard it from my grandfather. He was here back in those days."

"The story my mother heard was that there was this boy, see. And some bullies were picking on him one day. And he tried to run away from them and he ran out into the street and a car hit him."

"No, no," Justin butted in. "It wasn't a car. It was a logging truck. A big truck with a big, heavy load of logs. Ran him right down. Ran right over him."

"Yeah, that's right," Jessica stepped back in. "It wasn't a car. It was a logging truck. And it just smashed him to a pulp."

“When they went to put in him the coffin, they had to get some big sponges,” Justin said gravely. “Cuz all that was left of him was like a big puddle of spaghetti sauce. They had to sponge him up and then wring the sponges out into the coffin.”

It was Jessica’s turn again. “And what they couldn’t pick up with the sponges, the firemen came and they washed down the street with their hoses, right here in front of the Shipwreck Burger. And bits of his skin and hair and teeth and pieces of his liver and his brains all got washed away down the storm drain. That one,” she pointed, “right on the corner.”

“And ever since,” Justin said solemnly, “his ghost has roamed through the night, outside the Shipwreck Burger, searching for the bullies who caused his death. He wants to take revenge on them.”

Derwin had been taking short steps back and towards the street as they spoke, so that Justin and Jessica had had to turn away from Tethion to look at him. They were watching his face to see if he was buying their story. At first it seemed doubtful, then Derwin’s jaw dropped and his eyes grew wide - so wide that it almost seemed to change the shape of his face. He was staring out into the lane. They turned to look at what Derwin saw.

There, appearing to hang in mid-air, about five feet off the ground, was a light. It was about the right height for the top of Tethion’s staff, and if Justin squinted a little he could just make out the fingers of wood grasping the crystal. But Derwin wasn’t noticing them. He just saw a spot of cold, white light hanging in mid-air.

The disembodied voice boomed out. Looking closely Justin could just barely make out moving lips, suspended in the air. “I...told...you...to...be...GONE...fat...pig...of...a...man! GO! Back to your sty! And never come here again!”

Derwin almost knocked Jessica over as he took off running towards the street. Tethion appeared briefly, stooping to pick up a stone which he threw after the retreating figure. Then he disappeared again. When Derwin had turned onto the street and was well away, Tethion reappeared.

“Wow, that was great!” Justin said.

“Think Derwin will ever come back here again?” Jessica asked.

“When he gets hungry enough, maybe.”

“From the looks of him, that may be a fair time,” Tethion said with a quiet laugh.

They agreed that Tethion should wait in the shadows near the bicycles while Justin and Jessica went for the cheeseburger. They returned a few minutes later.

Jessica removed the cheeseburger from the bag and partially unwrapped it. She handed it to Tethion. He took it, looked at it, smelled it and said, "So this is a cheeseburger." He took a bite, chewing slowly, then took another. "That's very good. Very good. I wonder if I could learn to prepare one when I return home?"

He shifted the cheeseburger so that he was holding it with one hand. With his free hand he lifted the top bun and examined the contents.

"Finely chopped meat, I see. Onion slices. What looks to be a form of tomato, more red than what we grow. A leaf I do not recognize." He dipped a finger into the melted cheese and tasted it. "Ah, this must be the cheese, though it's of a variety I am not familiar with." Tethion replaced the top bun and quickly finished the cheeseburger. "Some other flavor there I do not recognize."

"That's their special sauce," Jessica said. "It's a secret."

Justin pulled the paper pouch of fries out of the bag and handed them to Tethion. "These are French fries," he said.

Tethion took one of the fries and examined it. The Shipwreck Burger made their own French fries, from whole potatoes, so they were thick and irregular. "This is a fried French?" he asked. He took a bite of it. "Hmmm. Batata," he said.

"It's made from a potato," Jessica said. "It's called a French fry because of the way it's cooked - in hot oil."

"Hmm. You call it potato; we would call it batata. It seems very like the tubers we grow." He took another and ate it. "Cooked in hot oil, you say. We seldom cook that way, though they do in the kingdoms to the south. It's good. I will have to try it when I return home."

Tethion finished off the French fries quickly. "Well, those were quite good and I thank you. Now I should be getting back to The Well."

They started back down the old mill road. It was getting quite dark now, especially with the way the trees turned the road into a tunnel in places. When they reached a place where a trail led out to the street Justin and Jessica decided to go back that way. They

were on the edge of town, but there were still scattered streetlights. Tethion accompanied them to the curb.

“Well, good night, Tethion,” Jessica said.

“Hope you enjoyed the cheeseburger,” Justin added.

“That I did, and again I thank you,” Tethion replied. Then he paused. He was looking over their heads. “What are those and why are they up there?”

Justin and Jessica both turned around and looked up. A pair of shoes, tied together by the shoelaces, dangled from a telephone line.

“Oh, those are Timmie Dahlstedt’s cross-trainers,” Justin answered. “My rotten brother and his friends took them and threw them up there. They think it’s a joke to do things like that.”

“This Timmie, he couldn’t retrieve these boots? These cross-trainers as you call them?”

“No. They’re stuck up there until the laces rot and they fall down. Then sooner or later they’ll end up in the trash.”

“So, would you say they’ve been abandoned?”

“I suppose so.”

Tethion looked thoughtful. Then he raised his staff and began mumbling. He pointed the end of the staff at the shoes. One of the shoes began rocking back and forth as Tethion gently moved the staff. Then it flipped over the wire once, twice, a third time.

“Hmmm. That doesn’t seem to be doing it.”

Again, Tethion mumbled something and began rotating the tip of the staff in the opposite direction. The shoe circled the wire, going the other way. Finally the pair fell to the ground. Jessica went out to retrieve them. She handed them to Tethion.

“By rights you should return these to this Timmie, but I am in fairly desperate need of footwear.” He held up one foot and displayed the sole of the moccasin-like boot he wore. The sole had been repeatedly patched and could have used more patches. “I have a small store of coinage, though I have my doubts as to whether any of it would be honored here. Still, what would be a fair price?”

“You got them off the wire, they’re yours. Finders keepers.” Justin was feeling very generous with Timmie’s shoes. Besides, Timmie had the most generous allowance of anyone he knew and had already replaced them. Part of the reason Lars and his friends

had taken the shoes was because Timmie had been showing them off.

“Well, if you think it’s proper....”

Tethion sat down on the curb and removed one of his boots. He tried on one of the shoes. Timmie Dahlstedt was famous for his large feet, but the cross-trainers were not quite large enough. Tethion set the shoe down. He took his staff and planted it squarely on the shoe. He mumbled an incantation. Nothing seemed to happen, but when he tried the shoe on again it stretched noticeably. He repeated the performance with the other shoe, then stood up and took a few steps.

“Ah, that is quite remarkable,” he said. “If you could bring a few score of these to the Misty Shore you’d make your fortune. I’m not sure if the spell of fitment will last, but we’ll see. I can always work it again as necessary. And now I must be off.”

“You can find your way back in the dark?”

“I think I’ll be able to manage.” The crystal on top his staff began to glow softly. “Will you be...what was that expression? Ok?”

“No problem. We have streetlights most of the way home.”

“Then I wish you a goodnight, my friends.”

Tethion turned and started up the pathway into the trees. He quickly faded from view, as if he’d done his obscuration spell again.

Chapter 7

Tethion's Spell

Justin hurried through his chores the next day, and then Jessica was late. He was alone in the house, Lars having gone to practice. He decided it was time to forage. He got his daypack from his room and took it to the pantry.

That was an advantage of living in a very old house. It had a real pantry, one you walked into, just off the kitchen. It was like a large closet, with the walls filled from floor to ceiling with shelves. Back when Grandma Ranstrom was alive, the shelves had been filled with glass jar upon glass jar of preserved this and pickled that and at least a year's supply of blackberry jam. But that was a long time ago and Sally Ranstrom, as much as she would have liked to, didn't have the time to put up preserves. So the shelves that were at a convenient height, those where one didn't have to bend over too far or stand on tiptoe to reach, held a plentiful supply of store-bought items. The highest and lowest shelves remained empty, except for a small stock of cleaning supplies and odds and ends of things rarely needed.

At first Justin had started grabbing and tossing things into his daypack. But then he stopped. What was it a wizard would want? What did a wizard normally eat? And what could Justin sneak out of the house that would never be missed? He knew the wizard liked jerky and seemed to like granola bars. But jerky was expensive and Lars liked it too. He'd notice if the stockpile suddenly shrank. Justin replaced the items he had first picked, except for one bag of jerky, and started surveying the shelves.

Tuna came into the house by the case when it was on sale and there had been a sale recently. Justin picked up a can. Everybody likes tuna, he thought. But then he reconsidered. Did the wizard have a can opener? Or did he have a can-opening spell? Did he know what a can was? The can went back on the shelf.

The salami caught his eye. There were half a dozen of them. Lars and his friends could make a whole salami disappear in nothing flat. And salami, or things like salami, Justin had read,

went far back in history. Salami was probably invented by some clever caveman, so it was likely the wizard would be familiar with it. Even better, all he needed was a knife to cut it, so into the daypack went a salami.

Bags of bread and rolls had their own section. One bag had only two sourdough rolls left. They'll never be missed, Justin thought to himself as he stuffed the bag into the backpack. A jar of strawberry jelly, not Justin's favorite, and a jar of peanut butter, one of a dozen, followed the rolls.

The peanut butter made Justin pause for a minute. Would the wizard like peanut butter? Did he know what peanut butter was? "Well," Justin said to himself, "if he doesn't know about it, it's time he found out." For good measure, he tossed in several small bags of potato chips and corn chips.

A stop at the refrigerator yielded some apples and oranges. That would make his mother happy, Justin thought, because she would think that he and Lars were following her frequent advice to eat more fruit. After adding the fruit, Justin hefted his daypack and decided he had a good enough load. He parked the pack on the kitchen table.

Jessica still hadn't arrived.

He went out and killed some more time with what he called "batting practice." He'd played baseball earlier in the summer. His team hadn't done well, and he'd found that he had no great talent at catching or throwing the ball. He also seemed to be the slowest, on any of the teams, at running the bases. The one bright spot was his batting. While he was dead last on a last-place team at everything else, he was first on the team at batting. He had a good eye, good timing, and a good, powerful swing, so he concentrated on that. An advantage was that it was something he could do on his own with no one to make snarky comments when he missed.

Behind the old farm sheds grew a half-dozen aging apple trees, all that was left of an orchard. Justin spent considerable time earlier in the summer picking up windfall apples from the ground, tossing them in the air, and batting them off into the neighbor's pasture. It was better than having to chase a ball, the two cows who lived there didn't complain, and no one was going to miss the apples anyway.

At first he used a regular baseball bat, but Lars got upset about

the residue of apple pulp and apple juice gunking it up. So Justin found a nice piece of wood, cut it to the right length and carved and sanded one end down to make a handle. The other end wasn't as wide as a regular bat, but Justin decided it was even better that way. It forced him to be more accurate in his swing.

He whacked about a dozen apples while he waited. The apples were getting too ripe now. Half of them splattered when he hit them, and the other half went off on weird trajectories with pieces missing. Finally he heard the sound of Jessica's bicycle turning in the driveway.

"Bout time," Justin called out as Jessica leaned her bike against the picket fence.

"You're not the only one who does chores, you know," she shot back at him. "I have stuff to do, too."

Justin mumbled a reply and led Jessica into the kitchen. His daypack waited on the table.

"So what are you bringing?" Jessica asked.

He opened the bulging pack and smugly showed her his collection.

Jessica opened her daypack and somewhat sheepishly showed the contents to Justin.

"Pop tarts?" Justin said, surprised. "A box of pop tarts? And a couple oranges?"

"Look," Jessica replied defensively, "there's only two of us at my house and it's not like my mom keeps a lot of food on hand. She likes to shop every other day and just buy what she needs for the next few days. If too much stuff disappeared, she'd think I had an eating disorder or something. It's not like here. With your brother and his friends around, Attila the Hun and the Mongol hordes could go through your kitchen and no one would notice there was any more food missing than usual."

"Yeah, that's for sure," Justin replied. "If they were a rock band we could call them Lars and the Locusts. Well, anyway, between us I think we have enough for a day or two. Besides, maybe he'll figure out how to get back to where he's from soon and won't need very much. Oh, and it was Attila the Hun and the Hun horde. Not the Mongols."

"Whatever. Let's get going."

They retraced their route from the day before, passing the

rusted yellow gate and again hiding their bikes behind the clump of young redwood trees. Again they followed the faint trail up the hill and onto the plateau, and soon they were approaching the Witch Ring, or, as Justin was starting to think of it, The Well of Danaan.

They climbed over the lip that surrounded the depression and slipped down the other side. They'd expected to find Tethion there but when they looked around he was nowhere to be seen.

"I wonder where he went to?" Justin asked.

"Maybe he went home," Jessica replied.

"Not yet, but soon," a voice said. The voice seemed to come from straight in front of them, but there was no one there. And then, there was. Tethion seemed to materialize in the center of the ring, grinning broadly. Justin and Jessica had already seen him do that trick the night before, but it was still unnerving to watch it.

"Good news, good news," Tethion said, the pleasure in his voice coming through despite the clumsiness he still had in pronouncing the words. "I believe I've worked out the spell. I've spent the morning trying different variations of it. None of them worked. But then I studied the akshana-mithona more carefully, and I realized that there's a small piece broken off, just one loop that's not where it should be. You can see where it used to be." He held the amulet out for them to inspect, but took it back much too quickly for them to really look at it. "And assuming that I'm correct, that makes the proper expression...well, it would be meaningless to you, so I won't trouble your ears with it. But I'm confident that I'm correct. And I'll soon find out."

Justin swung his daypack off his shoulders and held it in front of him. "We brought you some more food, but I guess you won't be needing it now if you're going back."

Tethion smiled broadly and laughed. "It's a foolish wizard who turns down a gift of food. Once I pass through The Well, I expect I'll be traveling quickly. Whatever you can spare me will be most appreciated. Let's see what you have for me."

They put their daypacks on the ground and began pulling things out and laying them on the ground in front of Tethion. Jessica was embarrassed at the few items she had compared to Justin. Tethion crouched down, picking up things, inspecting them, and stowing them in the bag hung over his shoulder. "Ah, echarqui. Most generous of you. Your fruit is excellent. And oranges at this

time of year! Thank you.”

The jar of jelly seemed to confuse him at first, but as Justin was about to show him how it opened he figured it out on his own. He dipped the tip of his little finger into the sticky red jam and tasted it. He smiled. “What do you call this?”

“Strawberry jam,” Jessica said. “It’s made from strawberries.”

“Ahh, I thought I recognized the flavor. We have a small wild berry that we call syfaen that tastes much like this, but not so sweet. And they’re so small it takes forever to gather a handful.”

When they had finished giving him the food, and Tethion had closed up his bag, they all stood up.

“You have been most generous, most generous,” Tethion said. “There is an ancient law in my land, one that has too often fallen into disuse. It is the law of hospitality to strangers. It’s good to know that at least some people still honor it, even here in this strange land. It would do me honor if you would accept a small token of my thanks.”

He reached into his pouch and pulled out two very fine chains. He dangled one in front of each of them. At the end of each was a small metal object made of fine gold wire, woven into an intricate pattern around a tiny crystal.

“They’re pretty. What are they?” Jessica asked.

“Are they charms?” Justin asked. “Do they have spells on them? Power?”

Tethion looked amused. “They have power, of a sort. The power of what they say about those who wear them. They’re symbols that show that the bearers are friends of a Wizard of the Grove of the Two Peaks.”

Justin and Jessica each took one and slipped the chains over their heads.

“And now the time has come,” Tethion said, “to get me back to where I belong.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder and picked up his staff.

“It has been good meeting the both of you. Now I suggest you start on your way. You want to be a good long ways from here before I start. I’ve never done this spell before.”

“Can’t we watch?” Justin asked. “We’ll get back up on the hill.”

“No, no,” Tethion replied. “This could be dangerous. Spells of this power are always dangerous, especially when you don’t know if

you're doing them right. You two need to get far away from here."

Justin reluctantly shouldered his pack and started up the path that cut through the rim of the depression. As he topped the low rise, he turned to look at Tethion one last time. The wizard was already engrossed in contemplating the amulet.

Justin led the way along the trail, Jessica following him. They had gone perhaps a hundred yards and were starting downhill when suddenly he stopped. Jessica collided with him.

"What's wrong?" she asked. She was afraid there might be a rattlesnake on the path.

"Nothing," Justin replied.

"So why'd you stop?"

"Noth...I'm going back," he said.

"What for?"

"I want to watch. I want to see how he does it."

"Does what?"

"How he does the spell. I've never seen anyone do a spell like that before. I want to see what it looks like. How he does it. Is he just going to disappear or what?"

"Justin, no!" Jessica stamped her foot in irritation. "Tethion said to get away from the Witch Ring. He said it was dangerous."

"No, he said it *could* be dangerous. Maybe it won't be dangerous."

"No he didn't. He said spells are always dangerous. Always, as in every time. He said spells are dangerous."

"But I won't get too close. I'll just get to where I can see him. It's not like I'm going to stand behind him or anything."

"Justin, you can't do it. It's too dangerous. Who knows what might happen. What if he gets it backwards and brings some monster or something from his world into this one?"

"That's just silly. How could he bring a monster here when he's trying to get back there? And how do you know there are monsters in his world, anyway?"

"Well, maybe you could ask the monster while he chews on your toes. There are wizards in his world. Why wouldn't there be monsters?"

"I thought you didn't believe he was really a wizard."

"I'm not saying he is, and I'm not saying he isn't. I'm just saying you don't know what he's going to do or what could go wrong, and

he already told us to get far away before he starts.”

“Don’t be a worrywart,” Justin said. “Nothing’s going to happen. I’ll just get close enough to see what’s going on and if it starts looking too weird-like I’ll come back. Just wait for me at the bikes.”

With that he stepped around her and started jogging easily back the way towards the ring.

When he was within sight of the great trees surrounding the Witch Ring he slowed to a walk, then started stepping very carefully, bending over in a not-very-effective crouch. Like Frodo the Hobbit sneaking up on an Orc, he thought. Got to be quiet. And really, really slow.

He heard a twig snap behind him. He started for a moment, then turned to see Jessica walking up behind him. He motioned to her with what he hoped were the right hand signs for her to slow down. Then he motioned for her to get in a crouch, like he was. She gave him a look that said, “This is really stupid,” but she did it anyway.

As he got closer, Justin dropped down onto all fours and crept forwards. He looked back to see that Jessica was doing the same and looking even more unhappy about it than before. He picked a spot where a big, many-trunked pepperwood tree grew out of the bank that surrounded the Witch Ring. Green, fragrant branches hung low, almost down to the ground. It seemed like a good spot to spy from, a place where he could just peep around the shadowed gray-brown trunk.

Tethion stood in the middle of the Witch Ring, holding the amulet studying it or maybe just thinking really hard. Faintly, very faintly, they could hear him speaking, but they couldn’t understand the words. Then Tethion looped the chain from the amulet over the index finger of his right hand. Taking his staff in his left hand he began to twirl the amulet at the end of its chain. As he did so, he began chanting strange words, even stranger than the words of the spell that had enabled Jessica and Justin to understand him.

As the amulet spun at the end of its chain, Tethion raised his arm. He also changed the motion of his hand and forearm until, slowly, the amulet seemed to hang suspended in place and Tethion’s hand was moving around it. Suddenly Tethion removed his hand, and the amulet was hovering in mid-air, the chain spinning rapidly around it. There was something unnatural about

the way it did that. It wobbled a bit at first, but then the wobble disappeared and it seemed like the amulet was actually gaining speed instead of slowing down as one would expect. And, instead of spiraling down to the ground, it stayed right at the level it was at when Tethion released it.

Tethion's chant grew louder. It seemed for just a moment that light was beginning to gather above and below the amulet. And then it fell to the ground. Tethion stroked his beard and stared at the fallen object for a long time.

He picked it up. Again he began the twirling motion, chanting the strange words in a barely audible voice. Again he gradually altered his movements until the amulet was suspended in mid-air.

"Akshana namada," Tethion chanted, or at least that's what it sounded like to Justin.

This time light was definitely gathering above and below the amulet, coalescing into two shimmering balls. The balls stretched out, forming two thick elliptical shapes, one above and the other below the amulet.

"Akshana namada hikshona NIMALA," Tethion cried.

The two bulbous shapes suddenly flashed into a single, thin, laser-like shaft of light going directly down through the crystal at the center of the amulet and marking a spot on the ground. It seemed to Justin that there should have been a crack or a bang or a snap, but there was no sound at all, other than Tethion's chanting, which was growing ever louder.

A second after the beam struck the ground, Tethion planted the tip of his oak staff directly on the spot and grabbed the akshana-mithona with his free hand. A moment later he disappeared as the thin beam of light exploded outwards in a soundless wave. Justin decided he should duck, but it was too late. The wave of light was on him in a fraction of a second. He felt as if he was being lifted up, thrown back. Then he felt as if he were falling, but it was a strange, gentle sort of sensation, not at all frightening - more like drifting slowly to the bottom of a pool of water. Then he just gently drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 8

Lost in the Woods

For a long time he lay on his back just looking up at the tree tops, not even thinking about just why he was lying there, looking up at the treetops. It was like those weekend mornings when no one was around to roust him out of bed, after he'd stayed up too late reading. He would just lay in bed, not really asleep but not really awake either.

Then he remembered where he was and why, and he jerked upright. Jessica was lying on her back about ten feet away from him, one arm thrown over her face. Worried, Justin tiptoed over to her and tentatively poked at her shoulder. He almost fell backwards at the reaction.

"Soccer practice," she yelled, sitting bolt upright. "Mom! I'm late for soccer practice!"

She looked frantically around, like she was surprised at where she found herself. Then she calmed down a bit and stood up.

"What happened?" she asked, confused.

Justin walked over to the lip of the bowl and looked around. Tethion was nowhere to be found.

"I guess Tethion figured out the right spell. He's not here. That must have been some spell! It was like a stick of dynamite going off."

"Like you know what a stick of dynamite going off is like."

"Well, I'd guess it must be something like what knocked us over."

"I told you it was dangerous," she said, a bit smugly. "Have you noticed it's starting to get dark?"

"You're right," Justin said, looking up at the trees. There was no trace of sunshine, even on the tops of the tallest trees. "We must have been really stunned. We'd better get started back."

They picked up and shouldered their daypacks, both of which had come off, then set off down the trail. It seemed more indistinct,

than usual and they lost it several times, but that was to be expected. Under the trees, it grew steadily darker, and they'd never been on the trail this late before. After fifteen minutes, Jessica began to get worried.

"We should have been back at the bikes by now," she said.

"We'll be there any moment now," Justin replied. He tried to sound confident, because he didn't want Jessica to think he was getting worried, even though he was.

"I don't think we're on the trail anymore," Jessica said a few minutes later.

"Doesn't matter," Justin said, trying to sound like the experienced woodsman he thought he was. "We're going downhill. We'll run into the fire road, then we'll turn right, and it'll take us out to the county road. We can get the bikes tomorrow if we have to."

He'd thought it out as they walked, picturing the lay of the land in his mind. The road was downhill from The Well. The road was to the south. The road ran east and west. If they went downhill they had to find the road. The road ran for miles, so far that he'd never come to the end of it in his explorations. But he knew that turning right on the road would bring them out to the gate and then back to town. It was all very simple and absolutely foolproof.

So it was a great surprise to Justin when they came out on a level place and, instead of breaking into the open of the road, they were pushing their way through alders and willows and ferns and other tangled plants he knew grew along the banks of the Twelvemile River. That was puzzling, because the Twelvemile wound through the forest well below the fire road. He stopped short, Jessica crashing into him.

"We've missed the road," he said.

"How?" Jessica asked. "You said we'd find the road by going downhill, but we haven't."

"I don't know. It's dark. Maybe we walked right across it and didn't notice it."

"So what do we do now, Mister Boy Scout?"

Justin thought for a minute. "Ok. We know we're near the river. We can get to the river itself and follow the bank. That will take us to the cove and the highway bridge."

"Do you know how long that'll take? Mom takes me canoeing on

the river sometimes. It winds all over the place, and the banks are like a jungle! We'll be walking all night! And trying to push through all this stuff!" She took a few swipes at the dense vegetation with a stick she'd picked up.

"Ok. We go back uphill to where the trees aren't so thick, then we head west. One thing we know for sure. The Pacific Ocean is to the west. No way we can miss that."

"And how will we know which way is west?"

"I'll look at my compass."

"You have a compass?"

"Of course I have a compass. A good woodsman always takes along a compass when he heads into the woods."

Justin took off his daypack and rummaged around in the back pocket. He pulled out his genuine orienteering compass. He wasn't entirely clear on just what orienteers did, but this was the compass they did it with, so he knew it had to be good.

They set off uphill, trying to follow the path they'd made coming down. When they were back into the firs and oaks, where there was more space between the trees and the walking was easier, they stopped. Justin held up the compass and tried to read it, but the faint green glow of the dial was too dim to make out. He opened his pack again and fished out his small flashlight, a present from last Christmas along with the compass. It was one of those really cool LED flashlights.

"You have a flashlight?" Jessica asked, a sharp tone in her voice.

"Of course I have a flashlight," Justin responded. "A good woodsman always carries a flashlight. In case he gets stuck in the woods after dark."

"Well, why didn't you turn it on before?" Jessica asked, her voice rising.

"I didn't want to run the batteries down. We might need the flashlight more later on. It won't do us any good then if the batteries are dead," Justin said, trying to sound convincing. The truth was he hadn't thought about using the flashlight until just now.

"Justin!" Jessica shouted at him. "We're lost in the forest! It's dark! Use the stupid flashlight!"

"Ok, ok!" Justin said. "I'll use the flashlight."

He twisted the on-off knob and was really happy when it lit up.

He wasn't sure when the last time he used it was, and it would be really embarrassing if the batteries had gone dead. He checked the compass to see which way was west, finding that it was to their left, which was where it should be. Aiming the flashlight in that direction Justin led the way through the trees, intentionally angling slightly up the slope in hopes of finding the road. Justin kept moving the beam of the flashlight back and forth looking for a sign of it. He finally spotted something.

"Here it is," he said to Jessica.

"Is it the road?" she asked, stepping alongside him. She looked at the circle of light. "It doesn't look like the road."

Justin had to agree with her. In front of them, illuminated by the beam of the flashlight, was a narrow patch of bare earth running from right to left. Justin moved the flashlight back and forth. The trail ran as far as the flashlight beam could show it.

"That's not the road, Justin. Where's the road?"

"It's not the road," Justin replied, "but it is a trail and a trail has to go somewhere." He looked at his compass. "We know home is west. So I say let's follow the trail to the west. We're bound to run into something."

"We're going to run into a lot of trouble when we get home. That's what we're going to run into." But she followed Justin without any more argument.

The trail made walking a lot easier, even though it seemed to meander back and forth and dip into gullies a lot. Justin checked his compass frequently to make sure they were going west, and Jessica checked it after him to make sure he read it right. After about twenty minutes the trees seemed to be thinning out. Then they were clear of them altogether, and they could see a starry sky above them.

But what they couldn't see were the lights of Ebbettsport, the lights of the houses scattered around Ebbettsport, or the lights of cars on Highway One.

"There's no lights," Jessica said.

"Maybe there's been a power outage," Justin guessed. Power outages were a frequent occurrence on the coast. Winter storms felled trees by the dozen and knocked down power lines everywhere. Sometimes the power was off for days at a stretch.

"A power outage? In August?" Jessica responded, starting to

sound a bit worried.

“Well, it could be. Why else would all the lights be off? We’ll just keep going towards the west until we find a road or a street, and then we’ll know where we are.”

The trail they were on went in the right direction, so they continued to follow it. Several times, it branched and they had to guess which branch to take. They always chose the one that was most directly heading west. The trail passed through or around small clumps of trees and through patches of tall coyote brush that blocked their view.

But what it didn’t pass through or around were houses or fences or barns. And it never crossed over a paved road. This had Justin concerned. There was no way they could walk this far without encountering some trace of people, unless they had veered too far north and wandered out into the farmlands north of Ebbettsport. That had to be it, he thought. His compass was off. They were way off course. But he wasn’t about to mention this to Jessica, so he kept walking and mumbled replies when Jessica asked a question.

After at least two hours walk, they came out of a patch of brush, still on the trail, or at least on one of many trails they’d been on, and Justin realized he was hearing the sound of the ocean. Jessica heard it too. They were approaching the bluffs above the beach. Ahead of them, even though it was dark, with only the moon, starlight, and a flashlight that wouldn’t reach that far, they could see the edge of the bluffs.

“How could we reach the ocean without crossing Highway One?” Jessica asked.

“Maybe we did and didn’t notice,” Justin replied, not really believing it himself.

“How could we not see a two-lane highway? With fences on either side. Do you remember crossing two fences?”

“We’ve been walking a long time. It’s dark. We’re tired. It’s possible. We just walked right across it and didn’t even notice.”

“So what do we do now, Mister Woodsman? Go back and look for it?”

“I think we should get down to the beach. It’s windy up here, and it’s getting cold. We’ll be more protected from the wind down on the beach, and we can build a fire with drift wood.”

“Do you have matches? Or are you going to rub two sticks together?”

“Of course I have matches. A good woodsman...”

“Does your mother know you carry matches?”

“No. Not really.”

They found it was easy enough getting down to the beach. The trail led straight down a ravine and onto the sand. But they found very little driftwood, and what wood they found was too damp to light. Justin gave up after a dozen matches. He pulled his emergency rescue space blanket out of its box. He'd never had reason to use it before, so it was still neatly folded into a tight little package. He first unfolded and then shook out the aluminized plastic sheet. They found a spot at the base of the bluffs where the wind didn't seem as strong, curled up back to back under the space blanket and tried to go to sleep. Lying there, Justin wished they hadn't given all their food to Tethion.

Chapter 9

The Gardens

It was not very uncomfortable sleeping on the sand. It felt very hard after a while, and not a very long while at that. Besides that, the constant shuffling and wriggling beneath the rescue blanket, as they each tried to find a more comfortable position, made it even harder to sleep. Just as Justin was falling asleep, Jessica would roll over and poke him with an elbow. And then, just when Jessica was falling asleep, Justin would kick her as he twisted and turned. So it was very late, or very early in the morning really, before both fell off into a deep sleep. Therefore, it was rather late in the morning before both of them were fully awake.

Justin was the first to poke his head out from under the blanket. It was a pleasant day, but a bit overcast, which was pretty normal on the coast. There was almost no wind, and the sea was calm, the waves breaking easily on the beach with a gentle rumble. Just beyond the breaker line, a flight of brown pelicans patrolled in formation twenty feet above the water. Occasionally, one or two would fold their wings in against their bodies, nose down and dive bomb for their breakfast.

Jessica woke up soon after Justin did. He tried folding up the rescue blanket. It made a much bigger package than it had when he took it out of the box. He tried it again. There was still no way it was going to fit back in the box. He shook it out a third time.

“Will you hurry up,” Jessica said impatiently. “We’ve been gone all night, and my mother is going to be furious.”

“I’m trying to get this thing folded up like it was before so it won’t take up so much room in my pack,” Justin said.

Jessica didn’t reply. She just grabbed the blanket from Justin’s hands and started folding it. When she was finished she handed it back to him. It still wasn’t as tightly folded as it had originally been, but it was tighter than Justin had managed. He started to say something, but the look on Jessica’s face warned him against it. He

put the blanket back in his pack, closed it up and slung it over his shoulder. Jessica was already starting up the ravine they'd followed in getting down to the beach.

It was easy climbing up from the beach. A well-established trail worked its way up the side of the ravine. Like most of the ravines that cut into the bluffs above the beach, this one was a miniature jungle of brambles, ferns, and willows that threatened to reclaim the trail. Someone had come through recently and hacked them back to keep the trail open.

They soon came out on the level plain at the top of the bluffs. They expected to see the houses on the outskirts of Ebbettsport and Highway One, which they had inexplicably managed to cross the previous night without noticing it. But they saw neither. To the east, the coastal plain rose to the dark green slopes of the forest-covered mountains. Off slightly to their right stood the rounded bulk of Pah-Tah-Poon-Ta-Hah, Simmons Peak, and beyond it was the gap in the mountains where the Twelvemile River cut through. But Ebbettsport and Highway One were nowhere to be seen.

When they looked southeast, where the town should be, they saw an expanse of brown grass, clumps of green coyote brush, and stands of windblown pine trees. Beyond one long row of trees, they saw smoke rising in a narrow column like smoke from a fireplace.

"This doesn't look right, Justin," Jessica said, putting into words exactly what Justin was thinking. "How far did we walk last night?"

"We must be a long way from town," Justin replied. "That looks like Simmons Peak. But this," he waved his arm around, "this doesn't look like any place near town that I've ever seen."

They turned in place, looking for landmarks. When they came around to looking out to sea, they both stopped and stared.

"What's that?" Jessica asked, pointing out to sea.

"That looks like an island," Justin said, trying not to sound panicky.

"I don't remember any islands near Ebbettsport," Jessica said.

"I don't remember any, either. But that's definitely an island. So there must be an island near Ebbettsport."

"I haven't seen it before. Have you seen it before? If there's an island near Ebbettsport, why haven't we seen it before?"

"Maybe we never looked in the right place," Justin replied,

though he didn't believe that himself.

They both studied it for a long time. It was indisputably an island. It wasn't just a large rock covered with a layer of white sea bird droppings but a genuine, full-blown island, with a green forest topping its black cliffs. Justin wasn't that good at judging distances but decided it must be at least several miles off shore, and that meant it was maybe a mile wide. An island that size would be hard to miss.

After a short discussion, they decided where there's smoke there has to be someone tending a fire, so they headed towards the column of smoke. At first they went cross-country, which wasn't all that easy. They had to dodge around clumps of coyote brush and step around little hummocks formed by a type of grass Justin wasn't familiar with. Fortunately they soon found a well-worn path which seemed to head the right way, so they followed it.

They came to a large ravine cutting into the gently sloping plain. The path went over the edge of the ravine, turning to the left and descending until it was near the bottom. There it crossed over a crude bridge that looked like something a Boy Scout troop might have lashed together. Two long redwood saplings crossed the gap. Short pieces of split redwood sapling, laid across the logs and lashed in place with coarse brown rope, formed a deck for the bridge.

Climbing out of the far side of the ravine, they began to see cattle. Not the usual black and white Holsteins or the reddish, broad-chested Hereford's they usually saw in the fields around Ebbettsport. These cattle were smaller, but stocky, and they had wide set horns and shaggy, reddish-brown coats. The horns were worrisome, but the animals seemed shy of people and moved away as Justin and Jessica passed.

Once the path left the ravine, it headed straight towards the long row of pine trees. Justin knew from the shape and color that these were pines and not the much more common Douglas firs and redwoods. They were shorter and more clumpy looking, and a slightly different shade of green.

As they approached the trees they saw that the path cut through them, the lower branches having been trimmed back. Once in the tunnel-like opening it was obvious this wasn't natural forest, but deliberately planted as a windbreak. Back in the old days, when

people started to farm the coastal plain north and south of Ebbettsport, such windbreaks had been common. Some still existed, but, like the “L” of Monterey cypress that lined two sides of the Haunted Farmhouse, the trees were old and starting to fall. The trees in this windbreak were mature, but vigorous and well tended.

When they came out of the grove, they saw a sight that made them stop in their tracks. In front of them was an enclosure, with a fence made of long redwood and fir branches, each seven or eight feet tall. The tips of these branches had been sharpened to points, and the bottom ends had been set into the ground. Every so often a thicker, taller branch had been set in place, more deeply planted than the others. Two lengths of coarse reddish-brown rope were tied to each of these posts and ran to the next post. The two strands of rope were twisted together, with the thinner branches caught inside the twists and thus held in place.

There were gaps between the branches, two or three fingers wide, and Justin and Jessica peeped through these gaps to see what was inside the enclosure.

“It’s a garden,” Jessica said. “Look at that. There’s corn, beans, pumpkins, tomatoes, squash.”

“My mom would go crazy here.”

The path turned right and followed the fence. They continued along the path until they came to the corner of the enclosure. As they turned the corner, they saw that this enclosure was only one of several. There was another one beyond where the path turned and still more in front of them, lined up roughly in rows.

They continued following the path between enclosures. At one place, between the rows of fenced gardens, they crossed a shallow ditch by a bridge made from the two halves of a split tree trunk. Water flowed slowly down the ditch and they could see side ditches leading into the enclosures. Where the side ditches joined the main ditch, rough flat boards shoved into the mud acted as sluice gates.

“Think this is some kind of hippie commune?” Jessica asked.

“A what?”

“A hippie commune,” Jessica repeated. “My mother said when she was young, people used to go off into the country and set up communes where they grew organic food and stuff. And made their own clothes. And some would run around without any clothes!”

They continued past the next row of gardens. As they

approached the third row, someone came walking around the corner of the fence. It was a boy, a little bit taller than Jessica. He wore odd looking, loose fitting brown clothing. His jet black hair was quite a bit longer than her short, brown hair. He carried a dead rabbit and a carved stick. But they didn't really get a good look at him before he saw them.

"Yaaaahh!" he yelled, dropping the stick and the rabbit, turning, and running back the way he came.

"Yaaaahhh!" Justin and Jessica both yelled in unison, jumping back several feet.

It was more out of surprise than fear. This place was so strange, and he had come around the corner so unexpectedly, he might as well have been Frankenstein or the Mummy for the reaction he caused.

After their breathing returned to normal, Justin and Jessica stepped forward to look at the things the boy had dropped. Jessica gingerly picked up the rabbit by a hind leg. It hung limply, eyes blank.

"Do you think he killed it?" she asked. "It's heavy. I bet it was raiding the gardens."

Justin had picked up the stick and was examining it. It was about as long as his forearm, with a shallow curve to it. One end had been carved into a rounded knob. The rest had been carefully shaped into a slightly tapered, curving shaft. The whole thing had been smoothly sanded down.

At first, Justin thought it was a club, but after he hefted it, he realized it was meant for throwing. He tried a few practice swings. He felt certain that, had he let it go, it would have flown straight to wherever his arm pointed. Instead of trying it out he let the stick drop, because he saw the owner coming back, and he wasn't alone. Beside him, Jessica let the rabbit drop.

Close behind the boy was a bearded man carrying what looked like a hoe, but not like any of the tools Justin had seen in the hardware store. The man was taller than the boy by more than a head and very broad shouldered. His beard was shot with gray, as was the long hair that stuck out from beneath an oddly shaped cloth cap. The cap reminded Justin of two pancakes stacked one on top the other, with earflaps hanging down from the bottom one. For the first time, Justin noticed that the boy walked with a limp, as if

his left leg bothered him.

The man shouted something. Neither Justin nor Jessica understood what it was he said. At first, they thought he was yelling at them, but when answering cries came from the gardens, they realized he was calling to others.

Two more men were coming, one from either side. One had a hoe like the one first man carried. The other carried what looked like a narrow-bladed shovel. The tools looked strange, as if they were homemade, the metal parts pounded out of scrap metal. The wooden handles were irregular, not smoothly turned like store-bought handles.

Then a woman appeared, coming through a gate in one of the enclosures and carrying a basket. She gave a noticeable start when she saw Justin and Jessica. She seemed to hesitate, as if considering whether it might be better to go back inside the enclosure, before she started to walk towards them and around them, all the time keeping an eye on the strangers.

“Look at their clothes, Justin,” Jessica whispered.

“They look kinda like what Tethion was wearing,” Justin observed. “Except maybe a little cleaner and not quite as ragged.”

More people began to gather, men, women, and some who might have been teenagers.

“I don’t think we’re in California anymore,” Justin said quietly.

“Ya think?” Jessica replied. She sounded angry. “I don’t suppose you have any idea just where we are?”

