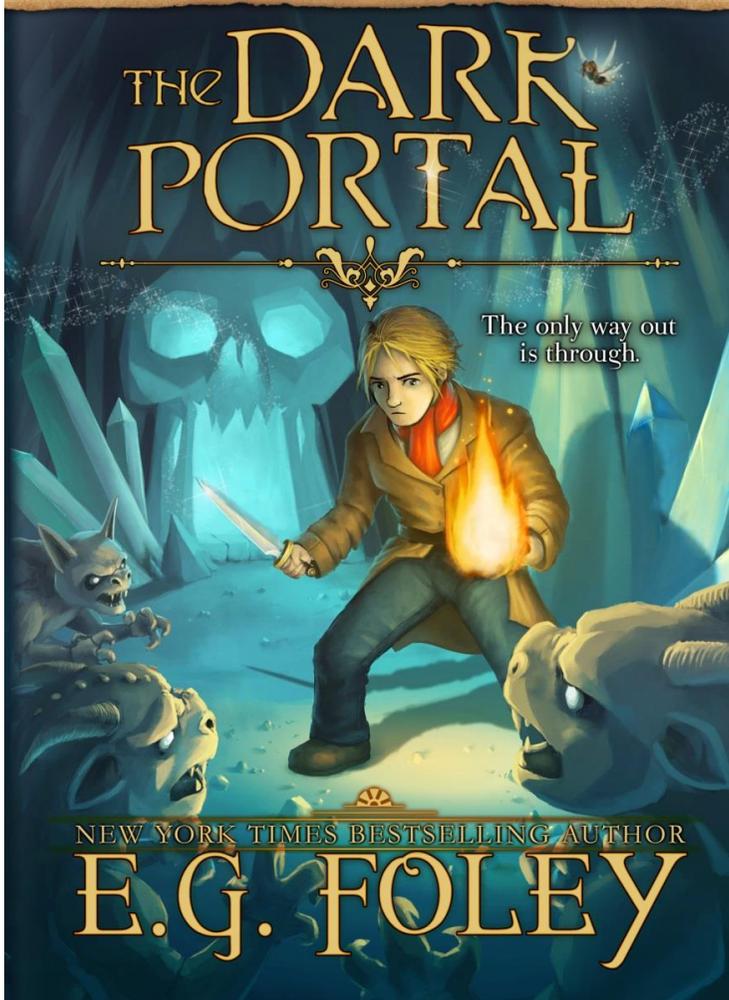


THE GRYPHON CHRONICLES
BOOK THREE



THE GRYPHON CHRONICLES, BOOK THREE:

THE DARK PORTAL

BY
E.G. FOLEY

The Pickpocket Who Inherited a Goldmine

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E.G. FOLEY

THE GRYPHON CHRONICLES, BOOK THREE:

THE DARK PORTAL



At the door of life by the gate of breath,
There are worse things waiting for men than death.

~ Algernon Charles Swinburne

PROLOGUE

The Sorcerer's Tomb

A hundred and fifty feet underground in perfect darkness, a labyrinth of black, twisty tunnels snaked beneath the mountains of Wales. And in one such little-explored passage of the Harris Mine, a simple man called Barney had just discovered a curious phenomenon.

He angled his handheld wedge against a big, tough knuckle of coal and gave it a whack with his hammer to show his fellow miners. "See what I mean? Got a funny sound just there, ain't it?" He tapped again, harder. "Sounds...I dunno, hollow."

"Yer head's hollow," grumbled crew chief Martin. Nevertheless, to Mr. Martin's experienced eye, the problem was plain: They'd hit a stubborn section of the coal seam. He gave his men a nod. "Let's blast it."

Crawling about awkwardly in the narrow, claustrophobic space barely four feet tall, the men fetched the heavy hand-cranked drill and started churning it.

The tip of the drill slowly pierced a thin hole into the rock face, where they would soon pour in the blasting powder. Cranking the drill was backbreaking labor, just like every other job in the coalmine and its sister company, the Harris Ironworks. But coal made the steam that forged the iron that ran the British Empire, which, in turn, ruled the world. And so these rough, rugged miners saw themselves as unsung heroes of a sort. To be sure, not a one of them was ever afraid of the dark.

Even when they should be.

At length, the skinny hole into the bedrock was drilled, the blasting powder carefully poured in.

Daredevil Collins volunteered to light it—always a dangerous job. Cocky as ever, he held the squib carelessly between his teeth and lit it as if it were a cigar instead of a type of firecracker. Swiping it quickly out of his mouth, Collins shoved it into the hole the men had drilled.

As it burned its way toward the little pile of blasting powder, he

scrambled after his crew, who had already scuttled out of range to wait for the explosion.

All four men held their ears and opened their mouths slightly, waiting for the shift in air pressure.

BOOM!

“Ha, ha!” The miners cheered out of habit at the blast. “That’ll teach her!” said Martin.

With pickaxes and hammers at the ready, the men crawled back to harvest the chunks of coal that had been knocked loose from the mountain’s grip by the explosion.

As they approached, the air was so thick with dust and smoke that it blackened their faces until all they could see of their mates was the whites of each other’s eyes. As the men pressed on, the tiny oil lanterns on their hats glowed like four lonely lighthouses in that thickest type of fog, known as a London Peculiar.

Martin whistled for Jones to bring the coal cart so they could load up their fresh haul and carry it topside.

The more coal they brought up to the surface each day, the more money they made for their families. Of course, their pay went right back to the Company through the rent on their houses, owned by the Harris Mine, or through the goods they bought at the Harris Company Store.

The Company, in short, was more powerful around here than Queen Victoria.

“Look!” Barney suddenly burst out with a gasp. “I don’t believe it! I-I was right! It *was* hollow!” He pointed as the smoke cleared to a *hole* they had blasted in the underground wall.

It should not have been there.

Indeed, it was impossible. There shouldn’t be a hollow space left after their controlled blast, just an indentation exposing deeper layers of the earth’s solid bedrock holding up the mountain.

“Well, beggar me,” he murmured, marveling at it.

Bending forward to shine his headlamp in, Barney peered through the hole that opened into a darkness ten times blacker than even the rest of the mine. Then he waved his crewmates over. “Fellas, come and see!”

“What is it now?” Martin grumbled, coming up behind him.

“You got to see for yourself. There’s some kind of room in there!” Barney said in wonder, pointing.

“Don’t be daft. A room? Underground cavern, maybe...”

But as the others crowded round, even stern Mr. Martin had to admit that it was, indeed, an ancient-looking room with smooth, chiseled walls.

Smith squinted into the midnight darkness beyond the hole. "What's a room doing all the way down here?"

"How should I know," Martin said. An uneasy chill ran down his spine, for Wales was not just the land of coal and mist and unexpected spellings. It was also a place of legend. The sacred homeland of countless bards and sorcerers of old; the birthplace of Merlin himself, according to some; a land of ancient magic, mighty castles, and time-forgotten kings.

Collins had that daredevil gleam in his eyes once again as he glanced around at the others. "Fancy a look, boys? C'mon, let's go in!"

"I'm not so sure that's such a good idea," Barney warned him, but coalminers as a rule were not afraid of much.

Even when they *really* should be.

"C'mon, leave it. We've got to cut our support timbers to prop up that hole," Martin said. "It ain't stable."

"Ah, just for a moment." With a laugh, Collins vaulted through the hole, and so was the first to see the ancient, heavy table in the center of the mysterious chamber and the chair...

With a skeleton sitting in it.

A skeleton decked in strange jewelry and wearing the floppy hat and moldy velvet robes of a Renaissance-era scholar.

Collins stopped in his tracks when he saw it and pointed, aghast. "Bones!"

Barney, who was following right behind him, ran into Collins's back on account of not watching where he was going. He was too busy staring all around at the strange subterranean chamber, his eyes wide.

The rest followed, and when they all saw the skeleton, they let out exclamations of wonder and shock; the four big, fearless coalminers unconsciously started huddling together with a creeping, superstitious sense of doom.

For they now realized that they had just disturbed the dead.

"This is no ordinary chamber, my lads," Martin said in a hushed voice, taking control of the situation, as their leader. He looked around at all the odd things inside the chamber, and the bones. "It's a tomb."

"But whose?" Smith murmured, while Barney just gulped.

"Him," Collins whispered, staring at the skeleton. "Whoever he is."

The skull's empty eyes stared right back at them from the darkness, giving them no answers.

Sitting upright, as if he had died right where he sat, whatever soul had once owned those bones had left this life surrounded by his books and papers.

This seemed odd to Barney. "But surely not a tomb, Mr. Martin. I

mean, folk ain't usually buried at their desks, is they?"

"Well, you do have a point there," the crew chief admitted, growing ever more aware of some unseen evil lurking in this place.

"Maybe he died alone down 'ere and nobody ever noticed," Collins opined.

"Likely so," Martin quickly agreed, but Smith shook his head and whispered, "Maybe he couldn't get out."

Somebody gulped in the inky darkness.

"Maybe we'd better leave," Barney squeaked, but unfortunately, Collins had now recovered his nerve.

"Wonder who he was, poor bleeder." As he ventured closer, his hat-lamp shone on the long-dead occupant of the crypt.

Strange jewelry hung around the scholar-skeleton's neck, an intricate metalwork necklace with all sorts of arcane insignia. They had no idea what all the strange little symbols meant.

A chunky ring hung loosely off the skeleton's bony finger. The thick band was probably made from locally mined gold, but none of the men recognized the unusual black rock in the center, though they unearthed gems and semi-precious stones in the Harris Mine nearly every day.

None of them could explain it, either, when the black stone took on a cloudy green glow.

"Why's it doing that?" Smith asked.

"Probably oxidation," Mr. Martin said sagely. As foreman, he was well aware that lots of the minerals buried in the earth changed color when the air touched them. "Lord, it's dank!" he added with a cough.

Air from the mine's ventilation system had begun seeping into the chamber, which had apparently been sealed off for centuries.

The draft poured in, stirring the ancient cobwebs that hung off everything; a puff of breath in the dust, as if the room itself sucked in a deep, agonizing gasp for air.

Smith nodded at the walls around them. "Look at all the quartz."

Giant crystals of glowing, colored quartz poked out of the natural cave walls everywhere. Milky white, candy pink, glassy cornflower blue.

The weird spiritualist lady in town, Madam Sylvia, who claimed to be a medium, sold crystals, Barney thought. The sign on her shop window advertised such stones as having mystical properties. But she had nothing in her shop like these ones, big as railroad ties.

"You know," Collins said abruptly, "there could be something valuable down here. Maybe treasure." He gave Smith a sudden, jolly punch in the arm. "We could be rich, man! Let's have a look around."

Martin harrumphed. "Anything we find will belong to Mr. Harris and

the Company,” he sternly reminded his crew.

“Ha! We’re the ones who risked our necks for it,” Collins muttered. “Finders keepers. What they don’t know won’t hurt ’em. Everyone, spread out! Let’s see what we got down ’ere.”

Martin still grumbled, but couldn’t resist joining in their perusal of the chamber. The miners’ hat-lamps shone in all directions as they moved off to explore the strange, sealed room.

Smith went to examine the giant crystals.

Collins poked around the skeleton’s desk with considerable caution, frowning at the grinning stone statue of a little gargoyle crouched atop a pile of old books.

Martin went reluctantly to look on the shelves that edged the chamber. These were piled with parchments, drawings, and designs. Haphazardly strewn along the shelves, also, were odd weapons; ancient instruments of science; vials and bottles of potions that had long since dried up. And a crooked stick that Martin feared looked very much like a wand. He got a chill down his spine and started sweating.

Barney, meanwhile, stared down at the strange shapes carved into the stone floor. Astrological signs, alchemy symbols or something.

Then he gazed apprehensively at the large gargoyle statues that posed in all four corners of the room. Silent stone guardians, they resembled a hideous mix of apes, frogs, lizards, and hideous, giant bulldogs with horns and tails. Their fanged, ugly faces were frozen in mid-snarl. He grimaced and backed away. *Horrible beasties.*

The oxidation Martin had mentioned must be the reason that some of the gray stone the gargoyles were carved from had started flaking off their muscular bodies.

Indeed, when he glanced over at the desk, he saw that the oxidation was making the skeleton’s ring glow ever brighter. The strange stone on the ring was turning a ghastly shade of malevolent green.

Hold on. Was it a trick of his imagination or was there some kind of black cloud floating up out of that ring? *Lovely, now I’m seeing things.* With a slight shudder, Barney turned away and headed back toward the center of the chamber, when something growled behind him.

He stopped and turned around slowly, looking back at the nearest gargoyle statue. *What?* Had he inhaled too many fumes, or had that thing just *moved?*

Suddenly, on the far end of the chamber, Collins laughed aloud in the gloom. “Gold! I knew it!” He had opened the small wooden cask on the skeleton’s desk. “Look at this, boys! Didn’t I tell you there’d be treasure here? Come and see! This box is filled with gold and jewels!

We're rich, I tell ye, rich!"

Barney put the gargoyle out of his mind and rushed over to see the gold.

"We're rich, rich, rich!" Collins was laughing like a lunatic. He scooped two handfuls of gold together and buried his nose in them, like he was splashing his face with water. "Ha, ha! Mother always said I was born lucky!"

"Put that down!" Martin scolded. "You know it isn't yours!"

Just then, Smith, who was out of sight, called to them from a lower level of the chamber. He had ventured down some black stairs carved into a distant corner of the tomb, and now yelled up to them: "You have *got* to see this, lads!"

They could barely drag themselves away from the gleaming beauty of the gold horde in the little wooden chest, but Martin called back to him. "What did you find?"

"Some sort o' doorway!"

They ran to see it, but no one was prepared for what they found.

Carved into the rock was a huge skull, and the door Smith had found waited inside its open mouth.

"Crikey," Martin said.

Barney frowned, nervously bringing up the rear. "I-I don't think I want to go in there." But he didn't want to be left behind either, so he followed his companions.

They all went cautiously creeping down the few steps into the lower cave.

It was one strange door. Peering into the stone-carved skull's gaping mouth, they saw that massive slabs of gray rock framed the dark portal, like a subterranean Stonehenge. The thick door itself was made of ancient hawthorn wood and covered in strange locks and bolts of intricate, swirling metalwork, like intertwined serpents.

"What on earth?" Martin murmured, squinting at it in disbelief.

"I knew it. It's a vault," Collins said. "That must be where Boney up there hid the rest of his gold! The full stash!"

"I don't think that's a gold vault." Martin shook his head, staring at it.

"Why else would he have it locked up like a bloody bank vault?"

"What should we do?" Smith asked breathlessly.

Then he and Collins looked at each other and shouted the answer simultaneously: "Blasting powder!"

"Are you mad?" Martin cried. "You can't set off an explosion in here! It could cause a cave-in. Use your heads! We haven't even put up any

support beams yet!”

But gold fever had taken hold. Smith and Collins ignored him, racing to set everything up so they could blow the weird, formidable door off its hinges and get to the treasure inside.

They weren't listening to their foreman, nor to Barney, who tried to help Martin convince them for a moment, before he became transfixed by the eyes of the great skull.

He gazed up into them. There was a layer of transparent quartz fitted into each eye socket, like windows made of thick block glass. But he could swear the eyes glowed a little, as though lit from within by burning torches.

Too weird. Unnerved, he glanced around at the corners of the chamber, tingling with ever-increasing terror. “Fellas, I got a bad feeling about this place. I think we need to get out of here...”

They ignored him, Smith and Collins busily working to set up the blast, Martin scolding them in a halfhearted manner—for, in truth, he was just as curious as they were to see if there was a horde of treasure in there.

“Did you hear that?”

As Barney froze, the others stopped and turned to him.

“Hear what?” Smith grunted.

Grrrrrrr...

The sound came from a foot or two behind Barney.

He saw Smith's jaw drop, but he knew they were really in trouble when even Collins turned white.

“Aw, drat,” Barney mumbled in terrified dismay. “There's something horrible behind me, ain't there?”

“*Run!*” Mr. Martin bellowed, his voice echoing off the chamber's stone walls.

But unfortunately, they were too late.

Awful sounds echoed out of the chamber at the bottom of the mine. Bloodcurdling screams, ferocious snarls.

And a low, sinister laugh that grew and grew, until it reverberated throughout the hollow stone chamber.

“*FREE! Free at last! Feed, my children, and I shall do the same.*”

With that, a mysterious black vapor that seemed no more than a puff of smoke floated up from the skeleton's ring and headed for the hole the men had blasted in the wall. It whooshed out of the chamber into the mining tunnel beyond, then headed for the world above.

The hated world of light, and happy living things.

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Wales

Two Days Later

It is a well-known fact that too many hours of travel can make a person silly. Especially if he is twelve and confined in a vehicle with three of his closest friends, one dog, and of course, his pet Gryphon.

Thus, it was not surprising that after the past couple of days—including five carriage changes, a long steam-train ride chugging over the border from England into Wales, and their present slow, plodding slog, rumbling along in the coach sent from Jake’s Welsh estate in the mountains of Snowdonia to collect them—the passengers were very silly indeed.

Boisterous laughter and the clamor of four young friends in a state of merriment came from inside the heavy coach winding its way up a hill through the forest.

When the coach abruptly stopped, however, so did all the noise.

“Hoy! Shush, you lot!” ordered Jake, the twelve-year-old in question. “Why are we stopping?”

“Are we there?” a piping voice exclaimed.

“Dunno! Let’s see.”

Four young faces, still shining with humor, promptly peered through the windows of the sturdy coach to find it had just emerged from the jewel-toned autumn woods.

Now they were surrounded by broad open fields, beyond which lay breathtaking valleys and misty mountain vistas. But when the happy travelers saw what had halted their progress up the road, their eager smiles faded.

“Well, that’s grim,” declared Archie, Jake’s cousin, the boy genius, age eleven.

The two girls, Dani and Isabelle, exchanged a startled glance. Then they, too, stared at the ominous scene ahead.

A long, elaborate funeral procession was crossing the road in front of them, making its way toward the nearby cemetery that covered the bleak brow of a windy hill.

Hundreds of people dressed in black marched slowly on foot all around the coal-black hearse, a solemn, stately carriage drawn by four black horses with ebony plumes on their heads.

Under the cloudy October sky, the slow-moving funeral procession inched by in morbid quiet. Professional hired keeners followed the coffins, moaning and wailing in sorrow. Some slowly beat funeral drums.

Unsmiling men in top hats walked by with clusters of crying women, their faces hidden by long black veils. In this sea of midnight, only the priest had some white on, his long cassock flapping in the breeze like a shroud.

“Gracious, I wonder what’s happened,” murmured Isabelle, Archie’s sister. She was the eldest, at fourteen.

“Derek will find out.” Jake nodded through the window at their escort on this journey, Guardian Derek Stone.

Even now, the big, dark-haired warrior rode his powerful black horse ahead, reining in at the edge of the funeral parade. He dismounted and took off his hat in a show of respect for the dead.

Meanwhile, Miss Helena, their half-French governess, looked on from her perch up on the driver’s seat of the carriage, where she had fled when the children had grown sillier than she could stand.

To be sure, the grim sight before them quickly put a damper on their fun, especially when still *more* hearses came into view as the procession moved along.

“Sweet Bacon!” Archie murmured. “One, two, three—*four* coffins! What the deuce do you suppose happened here?”

“I hope there isn’t a fever in the town.” Dani O’Dell hugged her little brown Norwich terrier a bit closer. Teddy went everywhere with her, even on holiday.

As for his own pet, Jake quickly turned to his Gryphon. The lion-sized beast was lying peaceably on his belly in the center of the carriage between the children’s seats, his scarlet wings folded against his sides.

“Stay down, Red.” Jake threw his discarded greatcoat over the Gryphon’s feathered head, hiding at least part of his large, unusual pet from the hundreds of people streaming past. “Sorry, boy,” he added when a low, indignant “caw” came from underneath his coat. “You know we can’t let you be seen.”

With Red safely hidden, Jake rose from his seat and opened the door, leaning out with one foot braced on the metal carriage step. The

brisk wind riffled through his dark blond forelock as he scanned their surroundings.

Hmm. On the hill opposite the cemetery stood a decidedly spooky-looking, old institution building. With its redbrick towers, it was designed to look like a castle, but to him, it looked more like a jail. Or maybe a madhouse. A wrought-iron fence wrapped around the property, with tall gates closed across the entrance to the long drive that led up to the place. Then Jake spotted the sign planted outside the gates: *The Harris Mine School.*

Well, that explained the presence of the few dozen children he now noticed milling around up by the building. The students must have been at recess, but most had stopped playing and stood motionless, watching the funeral procession in silence.

It was odd to see so many kids in one place and yet hear so little noise, he mused. Then a robed figure caught his eye, walking back and forth along the school's porch—a teacher or headmaster in long black robes and a tasseled cap. He seemed to be in charge.

But when the teacher suddenly dissolved into thin air, Jake's eyebrows shot up. *Oh, a ghost.*

Right. First one he'd seen today. He had had his abilities for six months now; seeing spirits rarely startled him anymore. Still, he couldn't help but smile wryly to himself. Those kids must love going to a haunted school, he thought. But although the headmaster ghost was his first apparition of the day, it wouldn't be his last.

Across the way, scores of them were floating around the cemetery—transparent, bluish versions of who they had been in life. It was a busy day up there, all right.

At least a dozen spirits wandered among the headstones, curiously waiting to greet the new arrivals. Some sat idly on their gravestones, chatting as they leaned against Celtic crosses or sculpted stone angels while they watched the living crowd into the cemetery to bury the new arrivals.

It wasn't as though they had much else to do.

For a moment, Jake watched a couple of child ghosts chasing each other in circles around one of the fancy white marble mausoleums where the richer folk were laid to rest.

As he scanned the row of miniature mansions for the dead, he barely noticed the little gargoyle statue peering down from atop the roof of one, watching the proceedings with a sinister grin.

Or maybe he had just imagined it, because when he looked again, it was gone.

Jake frowned, ducked his head back into the carriage, and sat down in his seat again.

Archie was right. This was an altogether grim way to start a holiday.

They had been so jolly a moment ago, but now a vague, creepy feeling had silenced all four. Of course, the grand funeral was a tad depressing, but it was more than that.

Something just felt...off.

An ominous undercurrent of something very wrong in this place.

He conceded, however, that it could be just his own private dread of their upcoming tour of the goldmine he (a former pickpocket, of all people!) had inherited.

He looked askance at Isabelle. She'd know, he thought.

Unusual talents ran in their family, and if the eerie atmosphere—the presence of evil—here was real, then surely his cousin the empath would sense it, too.

But instead, her delicate face betrayed the fact that all the sadness at the funeral was starting to affect her sensitive soul like a contagion. Her porcelain-doll complexion looked even paler than usual; her golden curls drooped with sorrow that did not quite belong to her.

Jake realized she was picking up on the grief of all those hundreds of mourners. *We need to get her out of here*, he thought, but the road ahead was still clogged.

He gave her a light, fond kick from across the carriage to distract her. "Hey! Come back to us, Izzy. They're them, you're you. Now block out their emotions like Aunt Ramona taught you."

"Easy for you to say," she mumbled.

Dani put her arm around the older girl's shoulders and Archie, sitting beside Jake, pulled faces at his sister until she finally smiled.

When the whole funeral procession had finally crowded into the cemetery for the burial and the road was clear once more, Derek swung back up onto his horse and trotted over, coming alongside the carriage.

"Everyone ready to move on?" he rumbled, skimming the four of them with his usual protective glance.

"More than ready. What happened?" Jake asked, while Archie helpfully pulled the coat off the Gryphon's head. Red snuffled and shook himself, happy to be rid of it.

"Some sort of accident at the Harris Coalmine," the fierce-eyed warrior said.

Isabelle flinched at this news and turned her morose stare out the window.

Archie shook his head sagely. "Dangerous business, mining.

Explosive gases, cave-ins, collapses. Long hours, fires, floods in the tunnels. Dangerous machines. Fantastic machines, of course,” he added with a grin, “but dangerous.”

“Did you say Harris?” Jake asked, trying not to ponder the list of underground dangers Archie had just rattled off, for they only intensified the, er, *slight* phobia he already had about descending into the mine. “That’s the same name as that school over there. Which is haunted, by the way.”

Derek glanced in the direction Jake had nodded and saw the sign by the wrought-iron fence. “Must be a Company school, for the miners’ children.”

“How much farther, Derek?” Dani asked wistfully, petting Teddy on her lap. The little brown terrier wagged his tail as if he, too, couldn’t wait to get out of the coach.

Derek squinted toward the road. He alone of their party had been to Plas-y-Fforest before, the Everton family’s Welsh cottage, having come here on holiday long ago with Jake’s father when the two pals were only kids themselves.

“No more than twenty minutes, I should think. Good thing, too.” He glanced at the sun to judge the hour. “We don’t want to be late for our tour. The dwarves are a prompt people. They’ll be offended if we’re late. Best get moving.”

So, they did, and as usual, Derek was right.

Only another two more miles up and down the winding country road, the coachman turned in at a narrow dirt driveway that disappeared up into the woods. Beside the drive entrance sat a quaint, old, mossy sign that read: *Plas-y-Fforest*.

Which, in Welsh, meant *Mansion in the Forest*—so Jake had been told.

Up the long, bumpy drive the horses climbed, passing through a deep, mysterious pine wood that Jake was sure was full of magic. He could feel it in the air and could almost swear he saw some tiny people in the trees. Not fairies—about that size, but no wings or sparkly trails, and clad in bits of leather and colorful autumn leaves.

He pointed them out, but the others didn’t look fast enough to see.

The tiny people followed, spying on them and running atop the branches to keep up with the carriage.

Hmm! I wonder what they are, Jake thought, but they couldn’t be anything dangerous. His ancestors had protected all three thousand acres of their land here centuries ago with countless magical spells.

Plas-y-Fforest was a very special place in Everton family history,

which was why they had come. As the long-lost heir of the Griffon earldom and the family fortune, Jake still had much to learn about his heritage.

At last, near the top of the mountain, they reached a clearing where his ancestors' rambling old holiday cottage came into sight.

As the carriage rolled to a halt in front of it, the children stared in delight. The sun had come back out; the sky was blue again; the earlier gloom and the sinister feeling up by the cemetery were forgotten.

For there in the sunny clearing before them, hidden among the woods, sat a large medieval cottage right out of a storybook—a wonderful old hodgepodge of gray stone sections, haphazardly joined, and seemingly held together by nothing but the climbing roses and dark green ivy that grew up its sides.

It had banks of narrow mullioned windows, some with colored glass, and a funny little arched doorway at the entrance. A dozen chimneypots poked up from the steep slate roof; gables peered out in all directions like watchful eyes.

Jake loved the place on sight. Despite having "Mansion" in its name, Plas-y-Fforest was not at all grand and imposing, like Everton House in London, but cozy and quirky, and full of nooks and crannies that the children suddenly couldn't wait to explore.

They burst out of the coach, freed at last from the stifling confinement of their journey. Teddy dove out, barking, and started running around in circles.

Red leaped out of the carriage and soared skyward to stretch his wings with a few minutes of much-needed flying.

Perhaps the Welsh-born beast also wanted a moment alone to reacquaint himself with his homeland.

Meanwhile, Derek dismounted from his horse and went to hand Miss Helena down from the driver's box.

At that moment, the cottage door banged open and out rushed a little human whirlwind.

Well, maybe not *human*, exactly, Jake thought.

"Welcome, oh, welcome, lord and ladies! Guardian Stone, so good to see you again! Welcome, children, oh, do please, all of you, come in, come in! Snowdrop Fingle at your service!"

Snowdrop Fingle was no taller than the children and bore a strong resemblance, Jake thought, to a cheery little hedgehog, with shiny dark eyes, slight sideburns, and pointy ears sticking out from beneath her white house cap.

She wore an apron over her plain cotton work dress; the dress hung

to her ankles, revealing her odd bare feet.

The feet seemed just a bit too large for such a diminutive woman: strong, callused feet with slight fuzz growing on them.

Dani elbowed Jake. “*Quit staring,*” she whispered.

Derek did the introductions. “Children, Mr. and Mrs. Fingle have been the faithful caretaker couple here at Plas-y-Fforest for many years.”

The coachman tipped his hat as he jumped down from the carriage and started getting their luggage.

“And if I may say so,” Derek added, “your family is very lucky to have them, Jake. One house brownie can do the work of twenty servants, but you’re blessed with two.”

“Oh, Guardian Stone, such flattery!” The small, hairy she-brownie tittered nervously as she stood by, waiting to hold the door for everyone.

Jake was astonished. House brownies?

He had thought the Welsh driver was merely a short man rather in need of a shave. It was only when Mr. Fingle’s top hat slipped that his pointy ears popped out from beneath the brim.

“Well, dash my wig,” said Jake, but the Fingles were just as mystified by him.

“Sweet bees’ wings,” Snowdrop fairly whispered, “is this the young master who was missing all those years? Oh, but it must be! He looks just like his father.”

“Doesn’t he, though?” Derek agreed with a smile.

Jake swelled with pride, though he felt a bit self-conscious. She took a step toward him. “Welcome to your little Welsh cottage in the woods, Lord Griffon. My Nimbus and I, we do our best to keep it perfect for you at all times. If there’s anything you want changed now that you’re the new owner, you have only to let us know. The same goes for all your guests. House brownies live to make their masters comfortable.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Fingle, you’re very kind,” Jake answered.

“Welcome to you all,” she added, beaming at the others. But when Red landed in their midst, the little house brownie gasped.

“Crafanc!” Snowdrop cried.

“Huh?” Jake said.

She forgot all about the rest of them and went running to throw her arms around the Gryphon’s neck. “Oh, my most noble Lord Crafanc! How marvelous to see you again after all this time!”

Red hugged her back with his front lion-paw.

Apparently, they were already well acquainted, but Jake was puzzled. “Why’d you call him that?”

Snowdrop released the Gryphon and wiped away a tear of joy.

“Because it is his name, of course, my lord! Crafanc-y-Gwrool.”

“Really?” Jake exclaimed, astonished. “I always just called him Red. Or Big Red.”

“Well, he does seem to like that, too,” Snowdrop admitted. “But his real name, his old name, his Welsh name, his royal name, is Crafanc-y-Gwrool. Claw the Courageous,” she translated in a reverent tone.

“Claw the Courageous?” Jake echoed, impressed, as were they all. “Well, that certainly suits you, boy.”

The Gryphon snuffled through his sharp golden beak as though making light of his own magnificence, then fluffed out the scarlet feathers of his mane in kingly fashion and prowled off to the cottage.

He pushed the front door open with his beak and went strolling in like he owned the place—and for all Jake knew, maybe he did. The Evertons would still be peasant farmers if it weren’t for the gratitude of a gryphon long ago.

“Is anyone hungry?” Snowdrop asked brightly. “How about some nice warm bannock cakes with honey?”

That got them moving.

Inside, the pokey old house had low, plaster ceilings crisscrossed with dark, heavy, wooden beams in the old medieval style. Underfoot, the ancient flagstone floors were uneven, tilting this way and that, and the sconces on the walls were for ordinary candles; Plas-y-Fforest had never been updated with gaslamps and probably never would.

While Mr. Nimbus Fingle carried in their traveling trunks far faster than would have been *humanly* possible, Snowdrop showed them around the cottage. She pointed the way to the bedchambers upstairs, where the children chose their rooms for the trip.

But there wasn’t time for unpacking quite yet, or they’d be late for their tour of the Everton Goldmine.

On Derek’s orders, they changed their shoes and put on wellies or good, sturdy boots for the hike up to the mine entrance and for traipsing around through the underground tunnels that awaited them.

Four sets of clomping footfalls rushed back downstairs to the kitchen, then the kids scarfed down the traditional Welsh bannock cakes that Snowdrop had prepared for them. Cut into wedges, they were very much like scones.

It was wonderful.

“Quickly, now.” Miss Helena tapped the dainty watch that hung on a ribbon around her neck. “You mustn’t keep the dwarves waiting.”

“Aren’t you coming?” Isabelle asked.

“No, my dear, I’ll stay behind to get your things unpacked,” said the

governess. "You go on, now, and do as Derek tells you. You're due there in twenty minutes."

"Time is short," Jake agreed, flashing a grin at Archie.

"Ah, yes!" the boy genius drawled. "We don't want the dwarves getting angry. They can be short-tempered."

"We all have our shortcomings," Jake rejoined.

"But I'm sure their anger at us would be short-lived," Dani chimed in.

Isabelle just looked at them. She hadn't found the game very amusing in the carriage, either, during their bout of silliness. But then, empaths were incapable of making fun of people or hurting others' feelings, since they shared them.

Jake harrumphed. Little Miss Perfect was too bloody nice. No wonder she had been chosen as a Keeper of the Unicorns.

"Enough, you lot," Derek grumbled, rising from the table. "Crack a joke like that in front of one of the dwarves, and you'll see what you get."

"They'll make short work of us," Archie said under his breath.

Jake tried not to laugh.

"You're not exactly tall yourself, Master Archie." Derek scowled at them. "Time to go." He stalked out of the room, leaving them to scramble after him.

"I'll grow!" Archie assured the others as they left the table, thanking Snowdrop for the snack and grabbing a few extra bannocks to bring along on their hike.

Miss Helena accepted temporary charge of Dani's dog. Teddy growled as the governess took him in her arms; he accepted Miss Helena but would never quite trust her, considering she was a shapeshifter whose other form was feline.

Dani waved a finger at him. "Teddy, be nice!" Then the Irish redhead ran outside after the others.

Before the group set out on their hike up to the mine's hidden entrance in the woods, Derek gathered them around to reiterate the warning he had already given them several times along their journey.

"Now, children. About this goldmine. Listen well. I know you're tired of hearing it, but as Jake's bodyguard, it is my duty to remind you one last time. It is of the *utmost importance* that you keep everything you're about to see today in strictest secrecy. Understood?"

"Yes, yes, we understand," they mumbled unenthusiastically.

"Even knowing about the Everton Mine's existence, let alone its location, brings a certain risk," he continued. "You may discuss it amongst yourselves or with us, but never speak about it in front of

outsiders. Never forget, having great wealth, like magical abilities, can make a person a target for those with bad intents. Of course, you're well protected here, but always be discreet. We don't need the wrong sort of people hearing about the goldmine and deciding to try to kidnap Jake or any of you, as his closest friends, to make a fortune in ransom money."

"I'd like to see 'em try it," Jake drawled.

The battle-hardened warrior eyed him with a cynical frown, then turned away with one of his meaningful low growls.

"What?" Jake asked in an innocent tone.

"We all know you hate caves, Jake," Derek shot back over his shoulder, "and that you're already dreading going underground into the mine. Your showing off, boasting, and making fun of the dwarves isn't fooling anybody."

"Am not! What do you mean?" he protested, his cheeks coloring as Derek stalked off. "I'm not scared!"

But even his friends chuckled at his protests.

Archie slapped him on the back. "It'll be fine, coz. We'll be right there with you."

"We'll protect you, Jake," Dani teased as they walked away to follow Derek.

Jake scowled after them. What did they know? They had never been sent off from an orphanage at age nine to work in a coalmine. Maybe he had a reason for how he felt!

He shuddered at the memory of the older boys' cruel pranks on him—and his own, even worse retaliation on them. The meanest thing he'd ever done in his life. And that was saying something.

The darkness just seemed to bring out the worst in some people, he guessed. Even a future Lightrider.

He thrust the unsettling memories out of his mind and ran to catch up with the others, still irked—which was probably a very strange emotion for someone who had inherited a goldmine.

Let's just get this over with.

CHAPTER TWO

Master of the Mine

Marching up the mountain path toward the mine's secret entrance in the woods, Derek pointed out the distant boundaries of all the lands belonging to Plas-y-Fforest, practically the whole mountaintop. The outer world believed the property to be simply an outdoorsman's retreat for the Earls of Griffon, passed down from father to son.

The woods and streams were rich grounds for hunting and fishing, after all—a fine country getaway from the hustle and bustle of London life and the Parliamentary duties that Jake would have to take up after he turned the ripe old age of twenty-one.

But the truth was, inside this sprawling parkland, the entrance to the Everton Goldmine was hidden, along with the clan of dwarves who worked it—not to mention the herd of unicorns who roamed inside the magically protected bounds of the wilderness preserve.

As a designated Keeper, Isabelle could hardly wait to go and check on them, find out how the unicorns were faring. The Welsh herd at Plas-y-Fforest was supposed to be much wilder than the tamer group she tended back home at her family's country estate in England, Bradford Park.

For his part, Jake saw no sign of the elusive species, though he scanned the green, leafy shadows constantly as they hiked up the sun-dappled path. Of course, according to unicorn lore, the wary creatures would not come near when they smelled male humans in the area.

They had been hunted by men for too many centuries ever to trust one again, according to Isabelle. The creatures barely even trusted grown women, only young girls, and even the most docile unicorn mare could be extremely dangerous if she decided she didn't like you. Though the boys were envious of the girls' good standing with the creatures, they had no desire to be impaled, and thus were content to keep their distance.

Fortunately, other sorts of beasts had no problem with boys. Gryphons, for example.

A loud caw from the sky signaled the arrival of Red, or rather Crafanc. Jake grinned as the winged beast landed lightly on a mossy outcropping of rock above them.

“There he is!” Archie beckoned to Red with a cheerful grin. “Come on down and join us, boy!”

Red bounded down onto the trail ahead of them and proceeded to lead the way to the goldmine, strutting up the path with a grand, lion-like stride.

“You’re feeling very pleased with yourself today, aren’t you, boy?” Jake asked in amusement.

“I think he’s just happy to be in his homeland again,” Isabelle said.

“Wait, is he *purring*?” Archie exclaimed as they followed the Gryphon through the woods.

They paused to hear the sound.

“How cute!” Dani ran after him and rested her hand on Red’s withers as she walked along beside him.

Derek shook his head with a rueful smile, but since Red had taken the lead, he waited to bring up the rear, waving all his hikers past him. “Keep going, we’re almost there.” He gave Jake a friendly clap on the back as he went by him.

Actually, nobody minded the walk after being cooped up in the carriage. It was a perfect autumn day. The path was steep but not difficult, with a little brook trickling alongside it. Overhead, the sun shone through the changing leaves so they glowed like stained-glass, red and gold and orange. The forest floor around them was covered in ferns turning russet, and squirrels frolicked here and there, arguing with each other in funny chirps as they scampered around, rustling the fallen leaves.

The way Red kept watching the squirrels, Jake suspected his large feathered friend was thinking of gulping one down for a snack.

Fortunately, he didn’t; Isabelle, who could communicate telepathically with animals, besides sensing other people’s emotions, would have been horrified.

At last, the Gryphon stopped where the path ended in front of a small but steep section of the hillside. Red summoned Derek over with a low caw, nodding at the spot.

Derek strode to the front of the group, his long black duster coat trailing out behind him. “I’ll get that.” He started brushing away the tangled growth of vines, uncovering a small, arched, slightly rusty metal door.

It had a round metal handle, like that on a ship’s hatch. He grasped

the metal wheel in both hands and began turning it—or trying to.

Rusted into place, the handle squeaked and creaked in protest as he strained to get it working. “Thing seems...stuck.” Just as he heaved the handle into motion, a little metal peephole in the door suddenly slid open at about Derek’s waist level.

“Hello!”

The greeting startled the mighty warrior so much he nearly fell back onto his rear-end on the path. The kids stifled laughter as he caught himself with a curse.

A pair of blue, twinkly eyes peered out at them through a rectangular peephole opening halfway down the door. “Oh, good, you’re all here! Right on time. One moment, please. I’ll let you in.” The eyes disappeared.

They could hear the small door-guard on sentry duty shuffling about behind the metal barrier, talking to himself. “There’s a mechanism here somewhere...too dark, can’t see. Where did I put my lantern? Can’t believe I dozed off. Oh, here it is. Humph. Be right with you!” he called politely.

“Take your time,” Jake answered, glancing wryly at the others.

“Jump!” the little old dwarf said to himself.

They heard an odd thud and a rusty metal squeak, but nothing happened.

“Oh, blast. Did it open?” the dwarf called.

“Not yet,” Archie answered.

“Hold on! I’ll only be a minute! Drat it,” he muttered to himself. “Jump again, Ufudd.”

Thud-squeak.

“Must be a weight-triggered mechanism of some kind,” Archie murmured sagely.

“Almost got it! It’s just that I’m not quite...heavy enough. Must be losing weight. Maybe I’ll buy a nice apple tart for dessert tonight. Hm, wait, let me get a rock,” the dwarf mumbled to himself. “There. This should do it.”

A pause.

Behind the door, the little dwarf jumped with all his might onto the square metal mechanism, and suddenly, the door popped open.

“Ha! There she goes!”

They heard him throw down the large rock he had picked up for extra weight, then he appeared in the doorway, beaming at them—an old fellow, white haired and white bearded, with a pointy brown hat. “Welcome to you all! Sorry about all that. These outer doors get rusty in

the rain. And, er, don't tell Emrys I dozed off, would you?"

"We won't say anything," Dani answered, tilting her head as she stared at the little fellow in wonder.

"Well then. Greetings to you all!" he said in a more formal fashion, clapping his little hands to his chest. "I am Ufudd, and you are all most welcome." His wrinkled face wreathed in smiles, Ufudd beckoned them in. "Come, come. Mind your head."

When Red hopped in first, the dwarf was overcome with joy, much as the house brownie had been. "My Lord Crafanc! Such an honor to see you again!"

While Ufudd made much of the Gryphon, the rest of them filed into the small, dark antechamber—first the girls, then Archie, each bending down to be able to fit under the dwarf-sized doorway. The six-foot-plus Derek practically had to crawl through on his hands and knees.

Jake was the last to follow, wiping the cold sweat off his palms onto his tan trousers. *Now or never*. Tilting his head back, he took one last, longing look up at the sunshine and the bits of blue sky showing through the parti-colored trees.

Then he braced himself, ducked his head down low, and stepped through the doorway.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he was surprised to find a towering metal door ahead of them, far grander and more formidable than the small hatch behind them.

It was covered with intricate carvings depicting dwarven warriors clad for battle.

"Now then, are we all in?" Ufudd asked. "Security procedures! We cannot open the Great Door until the outer one is shut and locked again. Would you hold this, dear?"

Ufudd gave Dani his lantern, then he marched back to the small door, dusting off his hands.

They watched curiously as he jumped up (it took a few tries), reaching for a knotted rope that dangled down from beside the outer door. When he finally grabbed hold of it, he hung from it with a grunt for a moment, pulling down on it with all his might, making the door creak shut, until his feet touched the ground again.

Jake exchanged a wry glance with Archie, realizing it was another weight-triggered mechanism, this time to get the door closed.

"Ah! There we are. Mind you don't step on that square there or it'll pop open again." Ufudd waddled back to the Great Door ahead of them, taking his lantern back from Dani on the way.

With the outer door shut, the antechamber was plunged into gloom.

One lantern hardly drove off the darkness.

Caught between the two heavy doors, Jake instantly started feeling a tad claustrophobic. Dani must have known—she poked him in the ribs and grinned.

“Well, Lord Crafanc, would you like to do the honors?” Ufudd asked the Gryphon as he stood aside and gestured at the mighty magic door with a flourish.

Red walked up to it proudly and lifted his front paw, placing it in a sculpted indentation that turned out to be a metal paw print.

It fit him perfectly, and when he leaned into it, giving it a slight push, he triggered the mechanism that, otherwise, would have taken a bevy of magical incantations to overcome.

The kids stepped back in caution as great gears and interlocking parts rumbled and rolled. Slowly, the Great Door to the Everton Mine slid open.

But if they had been expecting to see shiny mounds of gold ahead, they were disappointed.

There was only a dark tunnel with small train tracks leading off into it; sitting on the tracks before them were four little wooden mining carts hitched together in a row.

Ufudd gestured toward them. “Your transport awaits, my lords and ladies! If you’ll kindly take a seat, I will bring you down to the Atrium for the Welcome Ceremony. Better let the boys know you’re coming,” he mumbled to himself.

While Jake and the others climbed into the carts, Ufudd hurried over to pull several times on another dangling rope behind the Great Door. This one apparently operated signal bells like those in any great house, wired to the servants’ quarters.

They could hear the signal echo traveling along the taut wires, ringing bells strung together at intervals, and fading off into the distance.

Having sent Master Emrys the alert that their guests were on their way, Ufudd triggered some other mystical mechanism that sent the Great Door rumbling shut again.

It closed with an ominous slam.

Jake swallowed hard and gripped the metal bar across from his seat in the second cart with the boy genius.

“You’re not nervous, are you?” Archie asked.

“Of course not,” he lied.

“I can’t see,” Dani said. The girls were sitting behind him and Archie.

“Everyone hold on tight,” Derek warned from the back car, where he barely fit. His shoulders were as wide as the cart itself, and he had to

bend his knees out at an awkward angle to wedge his long legs into the vehicle.

Ufudd hurried back and sprang up into the first cart, where the Gryphon waited. "Here we go, then. Have you there in a trice!" He pulled a wooden handle and threw a metal switch that gave off sparks, and the cars started to roll down the tracks.

Jake's hair started blowing around as the carts picked up speed. The tunnel was lit with dim lanterns here and there along the way. They began to blur into a chain of staggered lights, a dizzying effect, as the carts began to whiz faster and faster along the tracks.

Around turns, down drops, over bumps, they flew every which way, the girls shrieking now and then behind them. Jake was trying hard not to yell, too, as he was thrown around inside the crazy cart beside his cousin.

With Red's tall, winged form blocking the view in front of him, Jake's disorientation grew. He couldn't see where the tracks were taking them next. He hung on to the bar for dear life, trying not to scream.

He lost that battle when they burst out of the tunnel and plunged down a nearly vertical drop into the great, open hollow of the mine beneath the mountain.

"Ahhhhhhh!"

Jake's stomach lifted inside him as they fell through what felt like empty space, though the rails were still before them. Hair standing on end, he pressed with his feet against the wooden floor of the cart, his grip white-knuckled on the bar.

In the cart ahead, little Ufudd was perfectly serene, driving his vehicle, while the Gryphon seemed to be enjoying every minute of the crazy cart ride, his feathers fluttering with the wind.

If not for his terror, Jake might have taken more notice of the vast working mine all around him.

Everywhere, an intricate web-work of ladders, walkways, scaffolding, buckets on ropes, pulleys and supports, little tracks with more carts full of gold and precious stones, and little wooden footbridges spanned the yawning gulf. It was as busy as an underground city.

As their wee train flattened out again at last after that nauseating drop, they zoomed through the dark underground canyon on a gentler downward spiral, circling down toward some yet-unseen destination.

Far below them, meanwhile, deep in the heart of the mountain, Jake glimpsed the white-hot glow of the forges processing the gold, burning off the dross, shaping and refining it with blasts of pitiless heat.

Sixteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit, to be exact, Archie had

informed him earlier.

All the while, the whole mine reverberated with the low, constant echo of a pounding rhythm, like distant giant drums, as rocks were crushed down to gravel size, then pulverized into dust to free the flecks of gold inside.

“Impressive operation,” Archie remarked as the carts began to slow.

Ufudd hauled on the brakes as they approached a large stone archway ahead: the entrance to the Atrium. Bright gold light shone from inside it, but they could not see the interior of the Atrium until the tracks had carried them under the archway. Then the kids gasped at what they saw.

“Now that’s more like it,” Jake breathed as the mining carts glided to a halt in the middle of the Atrium.

All four sat motionless in the carts for a second, staring all around them. It was hard to say which was more of a wonder: the soaring, gold-plated dome above them; its walls, honeycombed with the entrances to countless tunnels, like the center chamber of a beehive, all lit up with pure, carved crystal chandeliers; or the hundreds of dwarves standing on a semi-circle of tiered bleachers, waiting to greet them.

Red pounced out onto the platform, then prowled up the few wide steps to the Atrium. After him, Ufudd jumped out of his cart with a polite “Ahem!” to jar the others out of their daze.

“Let’s go, kids,” Derek ordered in a low tone, untangling himself from the back cart.

They got out, still wobbly from that wild ride, their hair askew. Jake’s legs felt rubbery beneath him as he climbed out onto the platform and followed Red up the broad, rounded steps.

The dwarves on the bleachers craned their necks and peered over each other’s hats and shoulders, trying to get a look at them. Ufudd escorted them over to where five chairs waited for them, but Jake could not stop staring at the central feature of the Atrium: a life-sized golden statue of a Gryphon rearing up on his hind legs, wings spread, claws bared.

The wings were inlaid with chips of ruby to resemble Red’s scarlet feathers. The statue’s sharp claws were of platinum, but Jake did not recognize the jewels that had been embedded in the Gryphon statue’s eyes. Maybe diamonds?

“Sit, please,” Ufudd invited them, gesturing toward the chairs. For Red, there was a round, tufted ottoman with purple velvet cushions like a throne.

As soon as they all took their places, someone doused the lights.

“What’s going on?” Dani whispered, clutching Jake’s arm.

“How should I know?” he mumbled.

“Quiet!” Derek ordered in a low tone.

Then they learned why, as the dwarves welcomed them to their underground stronghold with a song.

Jake listened, enthralled by their deep, sonorous harmonies. He did not understand the words, for the lyrics were in Welsh, but the melody was brave and stirring.

How could a choir of such small fellows produce such a rich, powerful sound? He could feel the vibrations of their song resonating in his chest. The sound swirled and reverberated under the dome, then he suddenly noticed a peculiar thing happening.

Something began to twinkle in the darkness.

It looked a little bit like Gladwin’s fairy trails, but more silver than gold. Puffs of it appeared here and there in midair in the center of the dome and drifted down slowly like confetti.

“What’s that?” Jake breathed.

“I can’t believe it! It’s Illuminium!” Archie whispered in excitement. “I’ve heard about it, never seen it before. It’s a very rare phosphorescent mineral that’s said to have many magical properties. It lights up when it contacts sound waves of certain frequencies. The dwarves sing to make it glow.”

“Shh!” Derek scolded.

Archie lowered his voice further. “I’ve heard they use it as a backup light source underground. It helps them avoid methane explosions and whatnot. It doesn’t burn.”

“It twinkles!” Dani whispered in excitement.

“It’s beautiful,” Isabelle sighed.

Sparkling dust shimmered in the darkness as the dwarves sang one of their ancient songs, bathing the cloud of Illuminium particles in the sound waves that made them shine. Meanwhile, other dwarves posted at various spots high up all around the Atrium used fireplace bellows to puff powdered Illuminium into the air.

The louder the ones in the bleachers sang, the brighter the darkened Atrium grew, until Jake could see his friends’ faces clearly in the darkened Atrium by the mystical, silvery, twinkling light, as if the stars had floated down close to hear the song.

Jake was sufficiently impressed to be filled with remorse for having poked fun of these good folk earlier.

Then he noticed that the gryphon statue’s eyes must have been made from two rounded chunks of Illuminium, for they, too, glowed as

the dwarves sang.

When their medley ended with a final, fading harmony, the lights came back up on all the chandeliers, and instantly, Jake and the others erupted with applause.

The dwarves themselves joined in the cheering, but Jake soon realized that the hero's welcome was for Red.

The Gryphon bounded down off his purple velvet throne and bowed to his short fans, then launched into the air and took a victory fly around the Atrium, letting out a grand, lion roar. The dwarves went mad with celebration at this display, but Red wasn't quite done showing off yet.

To Jake's amusement, his pet landed in the center of the Atrium and reared up on his hind legs, mimicking the Gryphon statue.

Fluffing out the scarlet feathers around his mane and looking very grand indeed, Red came prowling over to Jake and took his wrist gently in his beak.

"Huh? What are you doing?" Jake asked.

Red pulled him out of his chair and led him over to stand with him in the center of the stage-like Atrium.

Jake realized Red—or rather, Crafac—was presenting him to the dwarves as the new, rightful owner of the Everton Mine.

They all stared, waiting to see what he might do.

Jake had no idea what to do. Suddenly remembering all of Miss Helena's work with him on his manners, he offered the watching assembly of dwarves his most gentlemanly bow. "Thank you all so much for that wonderful singing," he said, his voice echoing under the hollow dome of the Atrium. "I, er, we are all very pleased to be here."

A murmur of approval ran quietly through the bleachers. Red seemed pleased as well.

Whew, Jake thought. He must have done all right, because next, a stern-looking, red-bearded dwarf formally dressed in a kilt and tartan marched out carrying a golden key on a satin pillow.

He cleared his throat nervously. "Ahem." Of course, his first words were to Red. "Noble Lord Crafac-y-Gwrool, we make you welcome. We are most honored by your presence, and we thank you for confirming the bloodline of the rightful heir." The head dwarf seemed uneasy, himself, with all the formality.

He was tall for a dwarf, for when he turned to Jake, Jake noticed they were about the same height. "My lord, I am the mine manager, Emrys, at your service. It is my great honor to present you, as the seventh Earl of Griffon, with the key to the Everton Mine."

The dwarves all applauded as though Jake were accepting an award.

“Thank you,” he answered uncertainly, lifting the large key off the pillow to examine it. He couldn’t believe how heavy it was. “Blimey, is this solid gold?”

The words slipped out at once while the dwarves were still applauding.

Emrys’s stony face cracked a smile. “Aye, lad,” he mumbled in a low tone, “but it’s only ceremonial at this point. You’ll find our security measures have come a long way since that was forged back in the 1400s.”

“I imagine so.” Wonderstruck, Jake started to put the key back gingerly on the pillow.

“Er, sir—they usually want you to lift it up and show it around a bit,” Emrys coached him in a confidential tone.

“Oh, right,” Jake said gratefully. Then he did as Emrys suggested and lifted the key over his head, showing it around so all the dwarves in the bleachers could see how pleased he was to accept it.

Red was practically smiling with pride as he watched him. Having satisfied tradition, Jake laid the heavy golden key back down on the pillow for safekeeping until one day, when he was old, he’d bring his own son or daughter here to pass the mine down to *his* rightful heir.

A lump came into his throat as he thought of his parents’ portrait hanging over the fireplace back at Griffon Castle. Wishing his father could have been here to be a part of this, Jake dropped his gaze to the floor.

With the key returned to its pillow, Emrys announced it was time to return it to the Great Vault. At once, nine kilted dwarf guards marched out and gathered to stand in a half circle around the front of the Gryphon statue with Emrys. “You might want to step back a bit, laddie.”

Jake obeyed.

“We ten were chosen by your father as his most trusted, loyal dwarves. We are the only ones who can open the Great Vault, and only three of us know how to get there.”

Jake returned to his seat and watched, intrigued, as the ten most loyal dwarves began to sing a very peculiar, unexpected melody, each one chiming in at various intervals.

Archie drew in his breath. “It’s a sound lock!”

Jake furrowed his brow, unsure what that meant, but the Illuminium eyes on the Gryphon statue had begun to glow. As the ten most trusted dwarves finished their song, harmonizing the final bar with impressive precision, the Gryphon statue began to rotate aside.

The children watched in astonishment as the heavy statue rolled

away, revealing a hollow, dark space beneath it. When Emrys beckoned to Jake, Archie and Dani and even Isabelle glanced eagerly at him.

“Can they come, too?” Jake called.

While the dwarves in the bleachers chuckled fondly at his request, Emrys cracked another rueful smile. “It’s up to you, my lord. You’re the Master of the Mine! If you trust them.”

“With my life,” Jake declared. “Come on, you lot! Derek, too.”

The kids ran over to the opening beneath the Gryphon statue, where they were surprised to see a few metal steps leading down to an elevator. Red jumped down and led the way, going into it.

Intrigued, Jake and the others followed. Emrys beckoned to Ufudd, who came hurrying over to join them.

“But he’s not one of the most trusted dwarves,” Archie pointed out in a delicate tone.

“Oh, but he was for many years. He’s mostly retired now,” Emrys answered.

“Your grandfather appointed me as one of his ten,” Ufudd informed Jake with an affectionate poke in the stomach, as if he were a cute, chubby baby.

“*Grandfather?*” After so many years as an orphan thinking he had no family at all, Jake was thunderstruck at the notion that he had once had a grandfather.

Blimey, it had seemed such a miracle to discover only recently that he had actually had *parents* at one point—before they were murdered—that he had never contemplated the having of actual grandparents until that very moment, when Ufudd said it.

He was still in shock, and Dani was eyeing him with some concern, as Emrys handed off the pillow and key to Ufudd in order to haul the railed metal elevator door shut. The other nine most trusted dwarves waited above, presumably to guard the opening to the Great Vault while they went to see it and put the key away.

“You might want to hold on,” the head dwarf advised.

Remembering the crazy cart ride, they did, gripping the wrought-iron rails of the boxy elevator.

Then Emrys threw the switch.

They dropped. They screamed. Except for Derek, who laughed, probably remembering when his old friend, Jake’s dad, Jacob, had brought him here for the first time, too.

Archie let out a loud “Woo hoo!” after a moment. As an inventor of flying machines, the boy genius was a bit more used to such wild rides than the rest of them.

They gripped the rails, laughing and terrified, as the elevator careened through a series of underground passages. There were lots of intersections shooting off in all directions, though some were blocked with redoubtable metal doors fortified with rivets.

One such door straight ahead separated into four steel panels that retracted into the walls as they zoomed toward it. Jake realized Emrys was operating the doors as well. This one shut with a puff of steam right behind them, then the elevator immediately jolted to the left, then up, then down.

“We change the pattern through these tunnels every week!” Emrys explained, yelling to be heard over the whooshing noise of wind and motion and the occasional clanks of metal on metal, which produced little showers of sparks in their wake. “Anyone taking the wrong path will be instantly vaporized before they ever reach the Vault.”

“Oh, that’s comforting,” Dani mumbled, holding on for dear life. “I hope he knows the way.”

He did.

Through one last separating door beneath them, they dropped down into the center of a tall underground cavern, where the crazy elevator glided to a halt.

The doors opened with a pleasant *bing!*

But amazement was already replacing Jake’s dizziness, for when they had come through the last door, it had automatically switched on the gaslights, illuminating the inside of the Great Vault.

All their jaws dropped.

Emrys stepped out and waited for them to follow, but all four children stayed motionless for a second, agog at the gleaming gold mountains of treasure all around them.

Jake could not believe his eyes.

He staggered out of the elevator in an utter daze. He had had no idea that anyone was this rich.

Especially not him.

He barely even heard the others laughing in astonishment as he took a few steps out of the elevator, dazzled and, to his surprise, slightly queasy at the sight of gold ingots piled high on all sides.

He went down the center walkway, numb with shock and not quite sure how to feel. Half of him was elated at the endless possibilities his fortune represented.

But the other half looked back on all the times he had nearly starved to death—one homeless orphan among many on the streets of London—and that half of him was furious.

What was the point of all his suffering? Wasn't this gold half the reason his parents had been murdered?

Compared to that loss, this gain was meaningless.

He shook his head, overwhelmed and confused. Money was supposed to solve all a person's problems—and look at the mounds of it he had!

But his heart sank as he realized it would never be enough. It could never replace what he had lost. In his most secret heart of hearts, he was still painfully poor, and probably always would be.

Meaningless.

"You all right, kid?" Derek asked softly, appearing out of nowhere to lay a steadying hand on his shoulder.

Jake looked up at him, unable to find his voice.

Derek knew what he had been through. The Guardian, after all, was the one who had finally hunted him down in the rookery and saved him from his wicked Uncle Waldrick, who had tried to have him killed.

Rage filled Jake from out of the blue as he felt the wound afresh of all that he had been deprived. His mother's hugs, his dad's advice.

And his grandparents, whoever they were.

It really wasn't fair.

But if this inheritance was all that he had left, well then, so be it, he thought bitterly. Might as well make the most of it. And why not?

It's mine. All mine. As he glanced around at the treasure on every side, he felt his heart grow cold and hard inside of him, just like it used to when he would go into the market to steal in order to survive.

His jaw clenched with anger, he strode over to pick up the nearest golden cup.

He inspected it while Dani came toward him cautiously, noticing the strange mood that had come over him. He held up the gold cup to show her. "Nice, ain't it?" he bit out sharply. "You like it? Here, it's yours." He thrust it into her hands.

She looked at it in astonishment, marveling at the fortune he had just handed over without a second thought.

Sure, it was enough to buy her dirt-poor family's whole house back in London, but what did he care?

It was the least she deserved, after all her loyalty to him ever since their rookery days.

He nodded at her, his eyes narrowing, then he grabbed a golden bowl to go with it. "Here. Send this home to your Da. At least you still have some family left." He turned away with a brooding glower.

"Jake, are you feeling all right?" Dani ventured.

“Never better!” he barked, whirling around angrily to find all of them staring at him. “Why wouldn’t I be? Look at all this! It’s mine. All mine! I can do whatever I want with it, can’t I? Archie, you need some new funding for your research?”

“Er, not really. But...thanks.”

Jake ignored his protest and shoved a gold bar into his hands, then stepped past him. “Isabelle! You always said there should be a proper animal hospital in the village back at Gryphondale? Here, I’ll have one built for you.” When she didn’t take the gold ingot fast enough, he nearly dropped it on her toe.

“Jake?” Derek asked in a worried tone.

“Ah, Derek!” Jake strode toward the tall, muscled warrior. “You saved my life. I’ll have the dwarves forge a blade worthy of you! And a solid gold necklace with jewels for Aunt Ramona, and one for Miss Helena, too! What can I give to Henry? Make me a life-sized statue of a wolf for our tutor,” he ordered Emrys, who blinked in surprise.

“Jake, I’m sure Henry wouldn’t really want that,” Isabelle said gingerly, and for some reason, her gentle protest set him off.

What did she understand about being poor?

“*I am the seventh Earl of Griffon!*” he roared, turning on her. “He’ll take it from me whether he wants it or not! What, you think I can’t afford it?” He threw an angry gesture at the treasure around them. “Look at all this! It’s mine. I can do whatever I want! Who’s going to stop me? I could buy off half the Parliament if I wanted to—”

“That’s dangerous talk, Jake,” Derek growled.

“So? You’re not my father. You can’t tell me what to do. What do I care what anyone has to say, when I’m so bloody rich!” With an angry laugh, his heart aching, Jake dove right off the walkway into a sea of gold coins.

Clanking sounds filled his ears as he sank beneath the surface, laughing carelessly, rolling around in his money—aye, swimming in it—and trying to tell himself he was the luckiest bloomin’ mumper in the world.

It was too late now for whining, anyway; he willed himself to believe that this treasure more than made up for what he’d lost. Who needed stupid parents, anyway?

Whoever once said you couldn’t buy happiness was a fool. He’d prove them wrong.

Come to think of it, he thought, drowning in his money, he had the means now to bankrupt every apprentice-master who had ever been cruel to him.

Aye, this gold could be used as a weapon—

All of a sudden, his exultation came to an abrupt halt as a large beak dove into the mound of coins, grabbed the back of his collar, and fished him out by the scruff of his neck. Gold coins rained off him, falling out of his hair and his ears and his pockets and the folds of his clothes as Red pulled him out.

But if Jake assumed his overprotective pet had meant to rescue him, he was sorely mistaken.

Red dropped him on the walkway, tossing him angrily onto his back like a salmon he'd just caught out of the river for a meal.

Jake's eyes widened as the Gryphon reared up over him, tail thrashing, claws bared, his eyes glittering with fury as they did when he was in battle-mode.

Landing on all fours, his lion-paws planted wide before him, Red's scarlet mane-feathers stood on end.

Then the fierce beast roared, full throttle, in his face—and Jake suddenly remembered who all that gold actually belonged to.

Claw the Courageous.

Who alone could not be corrupted.