



Castle Falcon

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Chapter One: The Castle

Once upon a time, there was an immense castle crouched near the base of a range of low, heavily-wooded mountains.

This was no elegant fairy-tale castle with flag-topped towers spiking into the sky. It was vast and sprawling, with massive turreted outer walls built of gigantic blocks of roughly-hewn stone, black with the patina of centuries and crusted with moss and lichens. Within those walls the castle's grounds were covered with mansions, halls, outbuildings and scattered ruins, laid out in a maze with no pattern or architectural consistency. Inside these buildings were hundreds of rooms of all shapes and sizes. There were dark catacombs, airy parlors, hidden chambers, attics, quiet cloisters and expansive courtyards open to the sky. There were corridors and passages beyond counting, soaring stone buttresses, and worn slate roofs with brooding and broken gargoyles perched on their edges.

Two children had lived in this castle all their lives, and they loved their ancient home even more than they loved video games.

Katie Falcon and her brother Zach simply called it "the Castle." In nearby Monte Vista, an isolated small town in the American Northwest, people called it "Castle Falcon" when they were talking

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to tourists but sometimes called it “The Wizard’s Place” when they were quietly talking to each other.

It was the first really warm day of spring. Katie, who was almost fourteen and eager to be sixteen, had kicked off her tennis shoes and was curled up in a nest of pillows on the cushioned platform of the big bay window in her room. School, taught by her mother elsewhere in the Castle, had ended for the day and normally Katie would have been outside in the green expanses of the Castle’s inner grounds, but a new book by her favorite author was too good to pass up.

Katie and her brother each had a large room of their own on an upper floor of Falcon Hall (which is what their father called the part of the Castle where the family spent most of its time) and the bay window was the place in her room that Katie liked best. It overlooked the Castle’s surroundings to the west, on the opposite side from the mountains, with a view of the sparse woods nearby and the pastureland that stretched off in that direction. The outer walls of the children’s rooms were actually part of the massive western perimeter wall of the Castle, and the bay window was at the end of a deep alcove cut through the thick stone. The window was not an original feature of the ancient structure and, like a number of other things, had been added when their father had acquired the Castle years ago and refashioned it to his own needs and those of his family.

Katie settled herself more comfortably with her book in her lap, immersed in the difficulties of a hapless wizard who really wasn’t cut out for the job. High up one of the stone and oak-paneled walls of her room, a myrmidon crawled along on its many stubby legs, doing some minor repair above one of the massive wooden bookshelves that covered much of the wall space. Katie paid it no more attention than a farmer would have to a chicken scratching in the yard.

Katie's bookshelves, aside from books, had several large rock crystals used as bookends, and little animals sculpted from wood, stone and glass. There was a model of a steamboat from a school project, an aquarium with a few small fish, and those stuffed animals that were important enough to be displayed rather than shoved into a closet, but not important enough to have been elevated to the envied position on the bed near Katie's pillow. On the few walls where there were no shelves she had photos, drawings, and posters stuck with colored pins to the wooden panels between the stone pillars. None of the posters were of rock singers or movie stars.

There were two doors into her room. One, which was closed, led to the hallway outside. The other, which was open, led to a common room located between her room and Zach's. This room was bigger than both of their rooms combined, and the children had called this the "Middle Room" since they were small.

Katie and Zach were very territorial about their own rooms, but the Middle Room was officially neutral ground. It contained those items that by agreement were considered mutual property, including some old overstuffed leather furniture, a television set they had inherited when their parents had gotten a better one, a number of games, and any joint projects they might be working on.

Katie turned a page. She had been listening with half an ear to her brother puttering around in the Middle Room. Zach was twelve, and pretty much okay with it for the moment. He liked books, but not as much as Katie did, and loved being outdoors on days like this. Katie had expected a major argument when she told him she wanted to stay in and read, but he had seemed unusually cheerful about it. For the last few minutes Zach had been very quiet, but Katie, engrossed in her book, didn't notice this.

She turned the next page and froze. A square hole about two

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inches on a side had been carefully cut through the center of the newly-exposed page, and through most of the pages following, forming a small box in the middle of her book. Curled up in this box was a fat black spider with an abdomen the size of a quarter.

As soon as the light hit it the spider leaped out of the box, landed on Katie's lap, and began running around in tight circles. With a single piercing shriek, Katie levitated off the cushion, sending pillows flying in all directions and the book soaring across the room. Overhead, the startled myrmidon pulled in every last appendage and fell to the floor, hitting with a sound like a small, wet sack of sand. It lay there perfectly still, looking like a badly-inflated brown leather rugby ball.

"*Zach!*" she screamed in fury. Zach stood in the door to the Middle Room, grinning like a shark. He clapped his hands twice, then twice again. The spider hopped off the bay window platform, hit the floor, and skittered across the room towards him.

Jaw clenched, Katie grabbed one of the remaining pillows and hit the floor right behind the spider. Her stockinged feet skidded on the polished wooden planks, but she managed to catch herself. Hauling back, she let fly with the pillow at the fleeing spider. Katie could throw like a baseball pitcher, although she would have said "like a hobbit with a rock." The pillow nailed the spider dead on, trapping it underneath.

Zach's face fell. Too late, he looked up and saw that Katie had slid her socks off to gain traction. The extent of his own predicament descended on him and he pivoted to run. His own feet, as was often the case, were already bare. Even so, Katie caught him halfway across the Middle Room and grabbed his arm in a viselike grip. With a speed and precision born of long practice, she reached into the back of his jeans, grabbed a handful of Zach's boxer shorts, and

hauled powerfully upwards. Zach made a noise like a goosed mule.

“Say ‘Auntie!’” Katie yelled.

“What?” Zach managed.

“Say ‘Auntie!’”

“You mean ‘uncle,’ don’t you? Whoaagh! Ow!”

“*Say it!*”

“Auntie! Auntie!” Zach squeaked.

“I’m going to remember those words,” Katie hissed. “Because if I put ten more pounds of lift on this wedgie, they will be words I might never hear again in my lifetime!” She tugged again. The goosed mule hit a higher octave.

“You cut up my *book!*” Katie shouted at the back of Zach’s head.

“No, no!” Zach yelped. “That’s not your book! Your book’s in the game cupboard! I bought another book! With my own money! *Ow!* Lay off!”

Katie let up on the pressure, but only slightly. “You still went into my room to plant it. That’s a violation!”

“Did not! I switched the books in the Middle Room when you left it on the couch. Ouch! Auntie! Uncle! Cousin! Whatever! You got the darn spider, lemme go!” With a heroic and somewhat anatomically risky effort, he managed to twist free and fled through the doorway to his own room. “Sanctuary!” he shouted in his best Quasimodo voice. “Sanctuary!”

Katie made no effort to pursue him, and walked calmly up to his doorway. In his room, Zach was hunched over, lurching around and swinging his arms. He leaped up onto his bed, where he capered on the mattress and swung around one of the tall oaken bedposts, laughing. “Sanctuary!”

Rolling her eyes, Katie closed his door. Zach would hide out in there until he figured she’d cooled off. She sighed and walked over

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to the large work table in the center of the Middle Room, which had storage cupboards underneath. Crouching down, she opened the game cupboard, felt around among the boxes, found her book, and brought it out. It was in perfect condition. Zach had even marked her page with a slip of paper. In spite of herself, she smiled. That *had* been a pretty good gag. It had probably cost him even more allowance than usual.

Katie took the book back to her own room, shutting the door firmly. The pillow on the floor was quivering slightly, but it was obvious the spider couldn't get out. She sat back down in the bay window and read for a while until the quivering eventually stopped. Then she put the book down, went over, and lifted the pillow. The spider lay there, quite still. With no sign of revulsion or hesitation, she picked it up.

Well, she thought, *that's another one in good shape*. One leg, thicker than the leg on a real spider would be, gave a final twitch. You couldn't get much battery power into something that small and still have any room for the circuitry.

The book idea had been creative, but the action on the spider was pretty simple. She went over to a shelf, popped the spider into one of the small plastic kitchen containers she kept on hand for such contingencies, and snapped on the lid. One couldn't be too careful. There had been that one spider that apparently had been playing possum after she thought it was deactivated and it had sprung to life—startling her *twice*. Now, what was this one, Number 19? Well, the number would be in her notebook. The myrmidon, none the worse for wear, extruded its legs and eyestalks again and started working its way back up the wall.

Someday, Katie thought, *I'll figure out a way to scare that little booger back, and good*. In the meantime, she got some small

satisfaction by applying simple physical vengeance to her brother—within proper bounds, of course, which meant no permanent or visible damage.

She got even more satisfaction from something else. Katie took the container and headed for the door to the hallway. She touched her wristwatch. “Dad? Where are you?”

“Down in the Great Room, Katie,” said her father’s voice. The wristwatch phones, which Katie and Zach always wore, were a gift from their father. Besides the phone, they told time in two different places and, for no particular reason, showed the phases of the moon. To the children’s annoyance, the wristphones couldn’t be used to call anyone but their parents and each other.

Katie walked out into a long, broad hallway with an arched ceiling of ribbed stone. At the far end of the hall to her right was a stained-glass window, showing complex geometric patterns of clear and colored shapes. There were windows like this scattered all over the Castle, no two alike. The sun was shining through it now, painting the hallway floor in yellows, blues and reds.

Katie turned the other way and walked to where the hall ended at an open balcony. Her bare feet padded on irregular gray flagstones worn smooth by centuries of long-vanished inhabitants. The balcony’s heavy stone balustrade overlooked an atrium that was the size of a small sports arena. An enormous iron chandelier hung from the domed ceiling on the end of a chain that could have anchored a ship. This was the Entry Hall of the Castle.

At the side of the balcony was the head of a wide marble staircase that curved as it descended, ending at a landing halfway down. A mirror-image curved staircase rose from the landing to another balcony on the far side of the atrium. From this landing a straight staircase proceeded down to the atrium floor. Katie trotted down

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the stairs, long familiarity adjusting her stride for the slightly varying width of the steps. The wide marble banisters would have been perfect for sliding down, but there were decorative marble knobs mounted on them at regular intervals. Katie and Zach were certain that their father had installed these knobs solely to prevent them from doing just that.

Across from the foot of the central staircase, at the west end of the atrium, was the huge wooden door that was the main front entrance of the Castle. Carved in bas relief across the door was the stylized image of a falcon sitting on a branch, staring straight at Katie. At either side of the atrium beneath the balconies were archways leading to other areas of the Castle.

Katie went through the one on the right and emerged from a short hallway into the Great Room, a large chamber with a high ceiling of carved wooden beams and walls of evenly-laid dark stone. A number of pictures in carved frames hung on the walls. A few were paintings, the rest were photos, usually of the family. The largest of her mother's paintings was here: a landscape of a calm sea and lush green islands, with something that looked like a beautiful spined and whorled seashell depicted hanging serenely in midair above the sea.

The Great Room's most prominent feature was a fireplace occupying much of the north wall. It was built of smooth stones the size of small barrels, and big enough for an adult to walk into upright. Katie's father was lounging on one end of the big couch facing the fireplace, reading a very old-looking leather-covered book.

Dr. Daniel Falcon called himself a scientist and was never more specific, but in the town the word "wizard" was used behind closed doors. After all these years Katie and Zach still weren't sure exactly what their father did, but both of them greatly preferred "wizard"

over “scientist” (although they agreed “mad scientist” would be okay if they couldn’t have “wizard”).

Dr. Falcon didn’t look much like a scientist, mad or otherwise. For that matter, he didn’t look much like a wizard, either. He never wore the white lab coats that the children saw scientists wear in the movies, or the robes and pointed hats that Katie insisted wizards always wore. Today he wore jeans, old hiking boots, and a plaid flannel shirt. He had forgotten to shave that morning, as he often did, and despite frequent combing (usually with his hand), his hair always looked like he had just gotten out of bed in a great hurry. In fact, rather than a scientist or wizard, he looked more like someone who should be hosting a nature show in the Amazon Basin, with an unlit pipe stuck in his mouth while something vicious and probably endangered chewed its way up his pants leg.

Dr. Falcon looked up from his book. “Hello, Kitten,” he said, smiling.

“Hi, Papa,” Katie replied. She walked up to the couch, and with a flourish, handed him the inactive spider in its plastic canister. Dr. Falcon set his book down, opened the canister, and examined the spider carefully through his large, wire-rimmed glasses.

“Very good,” he said. He put the spider back into the container, reached back to extract his wallet, and pulled out a crisp twenty-dollar bill. “No damage, full price.”

“Actually, I could use two tens if you’ve got them.”

“Sure.”

Katie smiled with satisfaction. The second time Zach had startled her with a spider (it had been the first time he had used a mechanical one) she had smashed it to flinders and handed the wreckage to her father with great indignation and calls for parental justice to be dispensed. To her surprise, her father listened to her

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story, looked at the pieces of the spider, and then declared that she and her brother would have to sort this out themselves. Before Katie could protest, he offered her a standing deal of ten dollars for each spider she could recover and deliver to him, and double that if the mechanism was undamaged. Katie was puzzled, but as far as she was concerned money talked, and it outshouted any questions she might have had. Since the bounty had been in place, she had collected almost \$300.

Naturally Katie hadn't informed Zach of this arrangement. Her brother might demand a cut on the reasonable premise that he used his own allowance to build the spiders. Or maybe even eliminate the "middle girl" entirely and build spiders to sell directly to their father. Katie did not like being startled by these little crawling gadgets, but twenty bucks was twenty bucks. Fortunately Zach tended to lay low after a spider session, so her side business was still a secret.

"Where's Mom?" she asked.

"Out reading in the yard."

Katie bent down and kissed him on one scratchy cheek. "Later, Dad," she said. She continued down the length of the Great Room, through a wide doorway at the far end, and into the sunny kitchen.

There were no windows anywhere on the lower levels of the thick outer wall of the Castle, and only the single front door, but there were plenty of windows and doors leading to the open spaces of the Castle's inner grounds, safely inside the walls. Katie opened one of the big sliding glass doors in the kitchen and stepped out into the Quadrangle, a square area open to the sky and over two hundred feet on a side. It was surrounded by a cloister two stories tall, with stone archways around the perimeter on both levels that enclosed narrow walkways. Flower and herb gardens grew all around, with stone paths winding between them.

Kira Falcon sat on a cushioned lawn chair, her bare feet curled under her. The warm sun shone on her long reddish-brown hair, which flowed over the back of the chair and shimmered with gleams of brilliant red, green, and blue, like the colors on the throat of a hummingbird.

She was engrossed in a paperback romance novel, her usual choice of book when she wasn't poring over some dense scientific journal. The cover illustration featured a muscular fellow with no shirt and a kilt (Katie thought there were an awful lot of Scotsmen in her mother's books). Kira's ornately-carved golden metal walking stick lay on the grass near the chair.

Kira was a beautiful woman, but not physically strong, and often used her walking stick when she was anywhere in the Castle other than her own rooms. She used a motorized traveling chair of special design when she had to move longer distances through the Castle or go into town. Like her husband Kira was also a scientist, and like her husband she didn't dress much like a scientist either. Today she wore what she often wore around the Castle, a light gown of soft iridescent colors that were a quiet reflection of the shimmering colors in her hair. In town, or elsewhere outside the Castle, Kira favored sun dresses or jeans, and always wore a hat.

"Hello, honey," Kira said, placing a bookmark in her book. The bookmark was a small photo of her children. She looked up with eyes that were a startling electric blue.

"Hi, Mom," said Katie, handing her mother one of the ten-dollar bills. "This pays up the advance you gave me last week."

Her mother reached up and took the bill. She had a thumb and only three long fingers on hands perfectly proportioned for them. Her bare feet, unfolding out from under her as she reached up, had four toes each.

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Daniel Falcon had been born in the Midwest. Kira Falcon had been born someplace considerably farther away.

Katie kissed her mother on the head. Katie's hands, like her brother's, had the standard five fingers. Katie's hair was a dark strawberry blond, and came only down to her shoulders. While it glimmered with gold highlights in the sun, it had no unearthly colors. Neither did Zach's hair, which was short and blond to the point of being almost white and stuck up like a hedgehog's. However, the children's faces echoed their mother's, and both had her uncanny brilliant blue eyes.

Katie turned and headed back into the Castle. Her father looked up and smiled as Katie went by. With hair that was a nondescript brown going gray at the sides, and thinning at the top, Dr. Falcon had apparently lost the hair lottery in the family.

* * *

Upstairs in his own room, Zach sat at his work table, which as usual was largely invisible under the masses of junk stacked on top of it. His bookshelves, aside from books, displayed his collection of gruesome action figures along with models of planes, cars, and spacecraft. There were boxes of small mechanical and electrical parts, untidy stacks of video game disks, and a fat frog that had escaped from a coffee can, fallen down behind some books and peacefully expired, where it would become a problem in a week or two.

In a cleared space on the table sat a small gadget that Zach worked at with a tiny screwdriver. Finishing, he picked it up, and inspected it from all sides. The device was no bigger than a matchbox and was most definitely *not* a robot spider.

Zach had used a real spider to scare his sister exactly once. After that, he had started building mechanical ones—no two the same—beginning with simple movements and moving on to more complex behaviors as he gained experience. He had once explained to Katie that a real spider wasn't much of a challenge, and probably bad form as well.

This explanation was true up to a point. What Katie did not know was that there was another reason Zach didn't use real spiders anymore. The live spider that he had used to scare Katie that first time—a nice big one—had gotten away from both of them and turned up a couple of days later in a very bad spot while Zach was going to the bathroom. As a result, now Zach was almost as nervous about real spiders as Katie was. Naturally, he wouldn't let Katie find this out in a million years.

Shoving the little box into his pocket, Zach went to the door from his room to the hall. *For a change*, he thought, *Katie will be really glad to see one of my inventions.*

His skateboard was propped by the door. Grabbing it on the way out, Zach dropped it onto the hallway floor and shoved off with one bare foot. The irregular stones and mortared gaps didn't make for smooth riding, despite his best attempts to modify the wheels and suspension of his skateboard. Zach's teeth rattled audibly as he headed toward the dead end of the balcony rail.

Suddenly Katie came around the corner from the top of the stairs. "Look out!" Zach shouted. Skillfully, he hopped off the rear of the board and flipped the board straight up into the air, where he caught it expertly. At least, that's what was supposed to happen. In reality, while he did manage to hop off the rear of the board, the flip sent the board flying forward—missing Katie by inches—and over the edge of the balcony. After a seemingly endless wait, they

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heard a very unpleasant crunching noise from the stone tiled floor of the Entry Hall far below.

Zach went to the rail, peered over, and winced. “That’s going to take some fixing,” he said. “Good thing nobody was down there.”

“You almost clobbered me!” said Katie.

“Take it easy,” said Zach, pulling the small box out of his pocket. “Check *this* out.”

“What’s that?” Katie leaned back warily, as though the box was going to open and yet another mechanical spider leap out of it.

“This,” said Zach, grinning, “is what’s going to finally get us past Dad’s Secret Doors.”

A few minutes later, back in the Middle Room, they stood by the work table with the little box on the table in front of them.

“My theory,” said Zach, “is that if we can see how Dad sets up the lock on a new Secret Door, we can maybe figure the lock out ourselves.”

“Yeah? And how do we do that?”

“I’m getting to that. Last month Dad installed a new Secret Door on a room not far from here.”

“I remember,” said Katie. “But we didn’t even see that one coming until it was all done.”

“Well, you know that other new room he’s setting up? I think he’s going to install a Secret Door on that one, too.”

“How do you know? Did he tell you?”

“Like I’d ask?” said Zach, making a face. “Last thing we need is Dad wondering why we’re interested. He’s been putting in the lights and stuff, but there’s still nothing in the doorway at all. When Dad sets up a regular lab or workroom, he puts up a normal door right away, and outfits it later.”

“And how do you know *that*?”

“I’ve watched him set up a regular workroom twice. He put up the door almost first thing both times, and it was never a Secret Door.”

Zach used the phrase “he put up the door” loosely. He and Katie had no idea who actually did the major construction work in the Castle. All they knew is that every time they’d go look at anything that was under construction, a bit more work had been completed. Nobody was ever around, and nothing ever got done while they watched. They didn’t think their father was doing it all, and he wasn’t likely to let normal contractors into the Castle. Zach had once speculated that it was unionized gnomes.

Katie sat back on her stool. “That’s some good thinking,” she said, impressed in spite of herself, “but not much to go on.”

“It’s all I’ve got right now. And what’ve we got to lose?”

“Dad would never set up a lock if we were watching,” said Katie. “He knows us better than that.”

“That’s where this puppy comes in,” said Zach, patting the little box. “Miniature video camera, motion activated. Stores almost three hours at high resolution. We sneak it down there and keep taking pictures until we catch him setting up a Secret Door.”

“Brilliant!” Katie tended to borrow her exclamations from British television. She grabbed Zach and rubbed his head with her knuckles, but not in an unfriendly manner. “I hereby officially elevate you above the level of pond scum!”

“Oh, wow,” said Zach, dryly. “*That’s* going in my journal.”

They began to lay the plans that would finally crack one of their father’s most unbreakable security measures, and give them access to secrets of the Castle that had been beyond their reach as long as they could remember.

Chapter Two: The Secret Doors

Imagine living in a house so big that even if you had lived there your whole life you still would never have seen it all. That's how it was for Katie and Zach, and one of their favorite things was spending hours exploring the secrets of the Castle.

Only a small part of the Castle saw everyday use by the Falcon family. As far as the children knew, most of the Castle was uninhabited except for mysterious creatures like the fastidious scuttling myrmidons and the wandering Dust Bunny. Katie and Zach sometimes wondered why only four people lived in a Castle that could have housed hundreds of families with ease. When they asked this question, their father said, "I like a lot of extra room," and this seemed reasonable enough to them.

The Castle was ancient, but several improvements had been added that made it much more comfortable than most castles have been throughout history. The inhabited rooms and hallways were warm in the winter, pleasantly cool in the summer, and lit by electric light. There were still a few original lighting fixtures that had somehow remained after the Castle had been abandoned centuries ago, like the iron chandelier in the Entry Hall. At one time these

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old fixtures had used candles, oil lamps, or maybe even torches, but now they glowed with electric light as well.

And, thank goodness, the Castle had been refitted with modern plumbing. Most of it was in the family living areas although, fortunately for two children prone to wandering, there were a few small bathrooms even in the remotest areas of the grounds. There were many places in the Castle called “garderobes,” where the original inhabitants long ago had been forced to go to the bathroom. These were basically holes cut through a stone seat, located in deep niches set into the outer walls of the Castle so that the holes dumped directly into the moat at the end of a long, dark stone shaft. The idea of these made Katie shudder (spiders partly figuring into this), but Zach thought that whizzing down a fifty-foot hole would have been great fun. Of course, nobody used these now. The niches were still there, but the holes had been tightly sealed up. Anyway, except for a little while after a really good rain, the ancient grass-filled moat around the Castle never actually had any water in it.

But not all of the Castle had been modernized. Many of the outlying uninhabited areas were still as dark, cold, and gloomy as they had been for centuries, with the only light in the rooms coming from the deep, narrow slit windows that the original builders had installed. These rooms were mostly empty, and there was usually no way to tell what they had once been used for. Sometimes there were clues, like traces of elaborate paintwork or scraps of gilded wallpaper. Far away from the family’s modern kitchen was a cavernous chamber that must have been the original kitchen, with blackened stone ovens, fireplaces, and rusted remains of metal spits. Another room might have been an ancient library, with fragments of old wooden shelves.

There should have been thick layers of dust in these abandoned

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rooms, and curtains of old cobwebs drifting in the air. It would have added immeasurably to the atmosphere. But between the myrmidons and the Dust Bunny almost every surface in even the most far-flung empty rooms and halls looked like it had been enthusiastically swabbed with a dust rag.

Of course Katie and Zach thought these uninhabited areas were the best for exploring. Usually they just poked around the grounds and buildings near Falcon Hall for a few hours, but sometimes they took longer, more organized tramps around the Castle that they called “Expeditions.” These Expeditions took Katie and Zach far from Falcon Hall and into the furthest and deepest corners of the Castle, through immense chambers with stone pillars reaching up into the darkness, corridors with pitch black, doorless openings on either side, and mazes of twisty little passages, all alike.

Sometimes they took sleeping bags and camped overnight in some distant part of the Castle. Often they stayed out on the Castle’s vast inner grounds, sleeping all night in the grass under the stars far from the softly lit pathways and buildings. Once they slept in a grotto deep below the ground level of the Castle. Its unfinished stone walls were covered with white moss, and there was a deep, quiet pool on the far end with a surface like black glass and tiny pale eyeless fish that darted away when approached.

Other children (and more than a few adults) might have been quite nervous about exploring such places, never mind spending a night there. Any kid who watched monster movies—and Katie and Zach had watched plenty of them—would have told you that almost certainly something awful was going to come out of one of those black openings, or rise dripping out of that black pool. But Katie and Zach had always felt completely safe inside the Castle’s walls, and there was no place inside the Castle they couldn’t explore,

however distant or difficult to find.

Except the places behind the Secret Doors.

Most of the uninhabited rooms had no doors at all, or just broken fragments of doors hanging immovably on hinges of heavily-rusted iron. Only a few old rooms still had thick wooden doors in various states of repair, the wood so old it looked black.

The doors of Falcon Hall, and the other places the family used, were different. They were new, all seemingly made of the same smooth, dark wood, and fitted neatly into the ancient stone doorways. The doorknobs looked like smooth polished brass. Some had locks, with a standard keyhole in the center of the knob. Katie and Zach's rooms had no locks, although their parents' suite did (this was a sore point for Katie and Zach, who had been trying to convince their father for some time that they were old enough for locks on their rooms).

Most of the rooms with locks were usually left unlocked, but a few rooms were locked all the time. Naturally, Katie and Zach had always been quite curious about those particular rooms. This had led to last winter's "Key Incident" and the advent of the Secret Doors.

Katie had found her father's keys forgotten on the kitchen table and had an inspiration. Using the kind of art clay that hardens in an oven, she had managed, just like in the movies, to make a quick mold of the key she knew opened most of the locks.

She and Zach ran into difficulty at that point. Nobody in the movies ever explains how to make a key from a key-shaped hole in a piece of clay. Zach finally used epoxy to mold a positive that he hoped would hold up well enough to copy a metal key from it. They stood in front of the counter of the Monte Vista hardware store one Saturday afternoon, radiating innocence while the clerk

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ground out a key, and hoping that he hadn't seen many movies. The metal key was rough, requiring fiddling and a squirt of oil, but somewhat to their astonishment it worked.

Katie and Zach sneaked down at their first opportunity to a locked room near Falcon Hall, and opened it. They hit pay dirt—their hidden Christmas presents—but they were already wrapped (the children shook them anyway). Unfortunately they were almost caught coming out of the room by their mother, so they lost their nerve and hid the key in a drawer in the Middle Room. By the time they were ready to try again a week later, the key had vanished. Whether their father had found it or it had just gotten misplaced, they never knew. But when the children went exploring again, they discovered that on a few of the locked doors, something had changed.

The doors looked the same as before, but their brass doorknobs, instead of being smooth, had shallow carvings all over them forming raised geometric patterns like some Aztec design. There were no keyholes at all. Katie and Zach learned by careful observation (okay, spying) that these special doorknobs opened only for their parents. They never saw their mother or father use a key, push a switch, or do anything other than simply grasp the knob and turn it. But to Katie's hand, or to Zach's, the ornate knobs remained as immovable as if they were a single piece with the door. They wouldn't even rattle like any decent locked doorknob should. Zach called these "Secret Doors," after the ones in his video games. In the games these doors had "Secret Rooms" behind them filled with extra lives, treasures, and shiny new lethal weapons.

During the rest of the winter, Katie and Zach discovered more Secret Doors all over the Castle. Falcon Hall had some. Others were in distant outbuildings. One or two were in places far from

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Falcon Hall where they would have sworn no one had been in years.

Questioning their parents about these doors got them nowhere. They were told that there was nothing interesting in these rooms, that there were even things in some of the rooms that were dangerous, and that was that. Katie and Zach thought this was ridiculous. How could something dangerous not be interesting? But they had learned quite early that persistent wheedling made no impression on their parents. They were left, like the Elephant's Child, seething with insatiable curiosity.

Katie and Zach took the Secret Doors personally. Who else could the doors have been designed to keep out other than them? It wasn't like anyone else lived in the Castle. They became obsessed with figuring out how the strange doorknobs worked. Magic? Technology? In their unusual home, with their unusual parents, the borderline between sorcery and science was difficult to locate, mostly unguarded, and things tended to sneak across it when nobody was looking. If there had been an old saying needlepointed into a sampler and mounted above the huge fireplace, it would have been Clarke's Third Law.*

Zach suspected that their father had detected their adventure with the fake key and that this new level of security was the result. Despite their frustration, he and Katie were impressed and secretly even a little flattered at the exotic measures being taken to keep

* "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." For the record, Clarke's First Law is "When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong," and his Second Law is "The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible." All good things to remember.

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them out of these rooms.

Now with Zach's camera they might finally have a shot at cracking the mystery.

"We need to get this gadget down to that new room as soon as we can," said Katie. "If the door's already been installed, we're out of luck."

After checking their parents' whereabouts, they ran down to the hallway where the new Secret Room was under construction.

"The door frame's still empty," said Katie. "We didn't miss it."

"All right!" said Zach. "Now give me a boost over here." With Katie's help, Zach managed to duct-tape his camera to a corner of one of the high windows in the hallway opposite the room. The light coming in the window made the tiny camera very hard to see if you didn't know what you were looking for. "A few minutes after we leave," he said, "the motion sensors will turn on the camera next time anyone else comes close."

"Cool," said Katie. "Let's go."

They spent the rest of the day impatiently killing time. It wasn't until long after supper, with their parents finally settling down to read in the Great Room, that they had the chance to sneak down to find out what had happened. The hallway lights had been dimmed for the night as they arrived at the new room.

"Hey, check it out!" said Katie. "The door's here! And you were right, it *is* a Secret Door. Look at the knob."

"Quick, give me another boost," said Zach.

"You aren't getting any lighter," she grunted as she hoisted him up to the stone sill of the now-dark window.

"Crap!" said Zach. "The camera's gone! Let me down."

"You think Mom and Dad found it?"

"No," said Zach in exasperation. "Look here." He held out

some remnants of duct tape. The odd snipped marks on the pieces showed to their experienced eyes that a myrmidon had clipped the camera off the windowsill and carried it away.

“Looks like we’re off to the Junk Room,” said Katie.

The Junk Room was in one of the uninhabited areas of the Castle. Its only distinguishing feature was that the myrmidons had for some reason selected it to deposit all the sundry items that they collected in their endless puttering and cleaning—things somehow deemed too valuable to dispose of, or maybe just inedible.

The myrmidons were little creatures that—there is no other way to put it—infested the Castle, inhabiting a vast network of small hidden tunnels that they bored through almost every stone wall that was thick enough to accommodate them. Their main function seemed to be picking up clutter and debris around the Castle and making minor repairs. The children had no idea what the myrmidons really were, or where they came from. It was one of many subjects about which their father was less than informative.

Myrmidons were easily startled, whereupon they would suddenly retract all their appendages and lie there like a little oval ball. When Zach was younger, he sometimes amused himself by making a myrmidon shut itself up like this, and then bat it around with his hands and feet like a real ball. When he tired of this, the creature would extend its eyes and legs, and go back to what it was doing as if nothing had happened. Zach outgrew this rather quickly. For one thing his sister told him it was mean, even if the myrmidons obviously weren’t hurt by it. For another, Zach saw a myrmidon take out a large rat down in one of the lower corridors (pest control seemed to be another one of their functions). The normally-sedate myrmidon moved with shocking speed, its many legs a blur, leaping on the rat and dragging it out of sight into a

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previously-invisible hole in the wall. The memory of the rat's squeal stayed with Zach, and he treated the myrmidons with considerably more respect after that.

The Junk Room was the only room the children knew of that the myrmidons actually used for something. They sometimes wondered if they had a nest somewhere, or other rooms for other purposes.

Zach had some colorful theories along these lines. He pointed out that myrmidons didn't seem to leave droppings. Katie thought maybe this meant they were some kind of machines instead of animals. But Zach speculated that somewhere in the Castle there must be a room where all myrmidons went for their "morning squat," as he put it. He dubbed this mythical room the "Hall of Fewmets." Every time they explored a new area of the Castle, Zach would declare that surely this time the Hall of Fewmets would be discovered. For her part, Katie silently resolved that if they ever did find the Hall of Fewmets, she would gleefully toss Zach into whatever malodorous steaming pile might be found there.

Katie and Zach arrived at the Junk Room and opened the door (which had no lock at all). The inside of the windowless room was pitch black, which was just fine with the myrmidons.

"Lights, please," said Katie, and the ceiling lights came on. In the center of the room was a small heap of objects: the "Junk Pile." A myrmidon slowly crawled about on the pile, moving items around to no visible purpose. For all Katie and Zach knew it was organizing them alphabetically. The myrmidon ignored the children, not even pulling in an eyestalk. The creatures didn't mind people here,

* Katie was convinced that this medieval word for animal droppings was the only thing Zach had retained from the book *The Once and Future King*.

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or the lights being switched on. Fortunately they also seemed to have no objection to things being removed from the pile.

Among the things on the Junk Pile were scraps of paper, gum wrappers, bottle caps, pencils, coat hangers, nuts and bolts, and a couple of pieces of silverware. There was also some loose change which the children scooped up to be split later. The camera was sitting right on top, and Zach grabbed it. Katie took the silverware and a few other items to be returned to their proper places, and they left.

Back in Zach's room they quickly transferred the movie to Zach's computer and played it. The first shot showed the new door and carved doorknob already in place, and their parents coming down the hallway. Dr. Falcon was holding his arm out to support Kira's arm as she walked by his side. The walking stick in her other hand tapped on the floor.

"That's a relief," said Zach. "I was worried the myrm might've grabbed the camera before we got any pictures."

They watched closely as their parents went up to the Secret Door. Dr. Falcon carefully tapped the knob six times in six places, and then he and Kira grabbed the knob together. There was a faint, clear chime, like a very large bell rung very far away. Both of them released the knob, and then Dr. Falcon grabbed it again, turned it, and opened the door. Their parents entered the room, and the door slowly swung shut after them as if by some gentle hidden spring. From the camera's angle, the children hadn't seen what was inside the room, but it didn't matter.

"Whoo hoo!" yelled Zach, throwing his fists in the air.

Katie rubbed her hands together. "Hee hee hee heeee!" she laughed, in her best Peter Lorre style. They watched the screen until the door opened again. Their parents left the Secret Room

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and walked down the hall and out of sight of the camera. The door closed again behind them.

“It worked!” said Zach. “I wasn’t sure about the range on the motion sensor.” It didn’t occur to him until much later to wonder how, when they had left the camera pointing at an empty door frame, the door had somehow been installed before their parents arrived without activating the motion sensor at all.

They kept watching just to see what happened next. The scene was unchanged for a while. Then suddenly the screen was filled with the small round body of a myrmidon and three little black shoebutton eyes on stalks. The picture whirled and went dark as the camera was carried into one of the many camouflaged entrances to the myrmidon tunnel network. The children watched with considerable interest, since they had no idea what the inside of a myrmidon tunnel looked like, but all they could see was blackness.

The screen stayed dark. Apparently the memory chip had run out before the camera had arrived at the Junk Room. Zach “rewound” the movie and they looked long and hard at their father tapping on the knob. Despite expanding the picture, it was impossible to tell from the grainy image the exact places where the taps had been. Katie went and got her writing pad. Zach got out a more conventional digital camera. Then they went to work on what they called “Project Skeleton Key.”

Over the following weeks Katie and Zach labored to solve the secret of the carved brass doorknobs. They took detailed photos of the carvings—all the knobs were identical—and examined the patterns carefully. They assumed their father had tapped six of the geometric raised shapes on the knob in a certain order, but they didn’t know exactly which ones they were, or even whether a single shape had been tapped more than once. With nothing else to go by, they

began secretly trying combinations of finger taps on the special doorknobs, writing each combination down as they went along.

They tried combinations with both of them grabbing the knob at the same time, like their parents had done. Then with just Katie grabbing the knob afterward. Then just Zach. Nothing ever happened, except for once when a combination caused the knob to give them a harmless but unpleasant shock. They crossed that combination firmly off their list, but it said much for their determination that they continued their experiments regardless.

Aside from the trial-and-error tests, they consulted the internet and books from the library in Monte Vista, studying fractals, statistics, Aztec pictograms, old Tibetan puzzle boxes, magician's lock tricks, and mathematical brainteasers. Of course they never asked their mother and father for help, but their parents would probably have wept for joy to see how much math and science their children were cramming into their heads outside of their home schooling. Katie's notebook, filled with combinations that had been tried and failed, became thicker every day.

All of the experiments had to be done when they were sure their parents weren't anywhere near the particular Secret Door they were working on. Fortunately their parents had fairly regular schedules and never seemed to worry about where the children were in the vast Castle, any more than parents would worry about their children being in another room in a normal house. This seemed unusual even to Katie and Zach, but they were grateful for the freedom.

To make things even more difficult there were other demands on their time, mostly school. Their classes were held in a large room in Falcon Hall with bookshelves, whiteboards, and cabinets covering the walls, granite lab tables and sinks, polished oak computer desks

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with drawers for Katie and Zach, and an upright piano in one corner. The room was brightly lit by huge frosted-glass skylights across the entire ceiling, with aircraft models and mobiles hanging from the stone frames between the glass.

Their mother taught most of the regular subjects: math, history, and basic science. Sometimes their father taught them too, usually things related to mechanics or electricity. They even took some classes online, learning from brilliant and sometimes unconventional teachers scattered around the world.

Kira also taught art and music. She was teaching Katie to play the piano, and it was something to see someone with only eight fingers playing skillfully and near-flawlessly. Katie was learning the normal ten-fingered style but had been trying her mother's eight-fingered moves as well, playing with her little fingers lifted into the air. Zach favored the harmonica, which he was mostly teaching himself. He liked that he could carry it around with him. "Try that with a piano," he told his sister.

Zach also had a drum set he pounded on now and then. Enthusiastically. This was not located in the schoolroom, but in a distant room in an outlying section of Falcon Hall that was largely used for storage. "If any room should be locked up with a Secret Door it should be that one," Katie told Zach. She smiled as she said it, though. She had given Zach the drum set for his last birthday.

Katie and Zach often thought of how fun it might be to attend the school in town with their friends, whom they chatted with online but too seldom saw in person.

At least they could console themselves with two things: their school only lasted half a day, and their summer vacation was much longer than the school in town. So it was on a rainy April day that Katie and Zach finished their last real day of school for the winter,

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although there would still be occasional lessons during the summer. Now they could devote almost all of their time to solving the doorknob riddle.

They went at it with a will, so it wasn't many days before Katie and Zach went for what seemed like the hundredth time down to the Secret Door that they had watched their parents set up. They often used this one for their tests since it was close enough to Falcon Hall to be convenient but far enough away to be relatively safe from observation.

Katie got out her notebook and they began testing new combinations. After nine fruitless attempts, they tapped the next pattern on their list onto the doorknob. Six taps, and then both of them grabbed the knob at the same time. The knob suddenly became quite warm—they almost let go but didn't. They heard the same chime they had heard on the video, only oddly discordant. Keeping their hands on the knob, they turned it together. It rotated easily and smoothly, and they pulled the door open just a crack.

Katie and Zach gawked at each other, and then let out a simultaneous yell of triumph. In their excitement, they both let go of the doorknob and the door swung shut again. Katie grabbed the knob again and tried to turn it. It was as solidly fixed in place as it had ever been.

"*No!*" she cried, twisting furiously at the knob. "I didn't even look into the room!" Zach put his hand on the knob along with hers, and the knob turned easily once more.

"I guess it takes both of us," said Zach. "Maybe we did something wrong?"

Katie breathed a sigh of relief. "Who cares, as long as it still works. Come on!"

They opened the door again and looked inside. A wonder of

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light and color greeted them. The room's walls were covered by dozens of glowing stained glass windows with geometric patterns of bright colors. Katie walked into the room, mouth hanging open, and Zach followed. The door slowly began to swing shut behind them. Katie suddenly stepped back and stopped it. "What's wrong?" said Zach, turning around.

"What if the door locks behind us?"

Zach shrugged. "So what? Big deal. We'll open it again."

"Are we absolutely sure what we did works on the inside knob?"

"Geez, why shouldn't it?"

"I can't think of any logical reason at all," said Katie, "but you said we might have done something wrong. What happens if it doesn't work from the inside? Bam. We're locked in. We have to call Mom or Dad, and they find out we figured out the Secret Doors."

"Whoa," said Zach, softly. "Game over, man!"

"*Aliens*," said Katie. She and Zach would often throw out obscure quotes from movies and books and claim victory if the other couldn't guess the reference.

Zach examined the door while Katie kept it from closing. The edge of the door was smooth and featureless. There was no sign of a latch or anything else. The door kept trying to close, but not very strongly.

Still holding the door open, they grabbed the inside knob together. It didn't turn at all.

"Hah! See?" said Katie.

They both reached around the open door and tried the outside knob again. Now the outside knob wouldn't turn, either.

"What the heck?" said Zach. They stepped out into the hall, and with some apprehension, let the door close all the way again. They both grabbed the knob, and it turned easily again. They left the

door closed and stood there in the hallway.

“Great,” said Katie. “Even the outside knob doesn’t work unless the door’s closed all the way. That means the only way to find out if the inside knob works is to let the door close first, and to open it we’d both have to be inside at the same time.” She folded her arms and made a face. “Rats,” she said. “Do you want to risk it? Or do we go back to our rooms and figure something out?”

“Wait,” said Zach. “Let’s open the door again.” They did, and Zach took a chewed-up pencil stub out of his pocket, set it on the floor in the doorway, and let the door close slowly on it. The pencil jammed between the door and the frame, keeping it from closing all the way. Zach grinned at Katie.

“Okay,” said Katie, grudgingly. “I suppose that works, too.”

They watched for a minute to make sure the door didn’t do anything bizarre like suddenly crush the pencil into fragments, but it seemed quite content to remain slightly ajar. They pulled the door open again, stepped into the room, and let the door close on the pencil.

At last they could explore the room more thoroughly. What looked like stained glass windows on the walls turned out to be large photographic transparencies of the real colored windows scattered throughout the Castle. The walls were covered with glowing white plastic panels, and the transparencies were hung on this like X-rays in a doctor’s office, making them look as luminous as though the sun was shining through the original window.

“Look,” said Katie, pointing. “This is the one in our hall.” The colors washed over everything, and their faces and clothes became red, blue, yellow and green as they moved around the room. It was like being in a tiny cathedral.

There was a desk and chair in the middle of the room. A notebook

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was on the desk, along with some color pencils and a number of sketches of the window patterns. On the front of the notebook in their mother's neat handwriting were the words "Communication in Patterns and Color." Zach reached for it.

"Don't touch it!" said Katie. "I don't think we ought to move anything."

"Aw, man..." said Zach, but he left the notebook alone.

"Mom's studying the colored windows for some reason," said Katie. "Maybe she's collecting painting ideas."

"So why would that need a Secret Room? I don't get it."

After a few more minutes, they reluctantly decided to leave. Pushing the door open, Katie went out. Zach held the door with his foot, and wiped both knobs with the end of his T-shirt before he picked up his pencil and let the door close behind them. "Fingerprints!" he said. Katie rolled her eyes. "Hey," said Zach, "you can never be too careful!"

"Come on, I need to test something," said Katie.

They went to another Secret Room that was close by. Katie looked at her notebook—the working combination was heavily circled—and they repeated the knob-tapping ritual. Warmth, another off-key chime, and then this knob also turned easily in the grip of their hands. They opened the door and took a quick look inside. They saw a little room with a worktable and a chair.

"All right!" said Zach. "If it worked on two doors, it'll probably work on all of them. Want to look around here, too? This room doesn't look all that cool."

"Not yet," said Katie. "We need a camera, some planning, and more time. This calls for an Expedition."

It was several long days before the time was right. Katie and Zach had to wait for a day when they knew both parents were going to

be busy somewhere other than the places they wanted to explore. When that day arrived, the children announced to their parents the night before that they were going on an Expedition, and that they should not be expected back until at least suppertime.

The next morning Katie and Zach packed their backpacks, starting with a few favorite books, snacks, and water bottles. Zach wanted to pack a handheld video game, but Katie complained that this made him supremely boring, and insisted on games they could both play together (they eventually settled on a pack of cards). Each of them took a special lantern, gifts from their online astronomy teacher in California. These resembled a little ship's lantern made of dark green metal. The lanterns needed no batteries and emitted a clear, cool light that was surprisingly powerful for such a small object.

Katie always took her notebooks, where she carefully noted locations, directions, and distances with a mechanical pencil. In one closet of the Middle Room was a large easel with sheet after sheet of painstakingly-drawn maps of the Castle. When they returned from an Expedition the information in her notebook would be plotted and added to these maps.

Zach's equipment included a few small tools and a flashlight in case the lanterns failed (they never had, but he liked to be prepared). Sometimes he would sneak in a box containing one or two of his latest mechanical spiders. He never had the nerve to spring one of these on Katie during an Expedition, but again, he liked to be prepared.

Katie checked her watch for what must have been the fiftieth time. "Okay," she said. "Mom'll be working in her rooms, Dad'll be in that lab in the northern wing, and I've got the map and the route laid out."

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She put one fist on her hip, and threw her other hand forward in her best Explorer Pose. “Forth now, and fear no darkness!”

“Dang,” said Zach, after a moment’s pause. “What’s that from?”

“Ha! Theoden. *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Cool! Sydney or the Bush!”

“Huh?” said Katie.

“‘Ha,’ yourself! Sally, from *Peanuts*. It’s Australian. Means something like ‘do or die.’”

“Okay,” laughed Katie. “We’ll call that one a tie.” They hoisted their packs onto their backs, and they were off.

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The first Secret Door on their list was actually the closest, inside Falcon Hall itself. They activated the carved doorknob and went inside. Zach set down one of several new unsharpened pencils he had brought along to prop the door open.

“Okay,” he said, looking around. “This is weird. It’s an office. And it looks just like Dad’s office.” It did resemble their father’s main office, which was located just off the Great Room. Katie and Zach had spent a lot of time with their father in that office. This one had a similar oak desk, the same comfortable leather chairs, and walls covered with bookshelves, polished wood cabinets, and pictures.

“Not quite,” said Katie. “This room’s a lot smaller. So is the desk. And Dad’s real office has a fireplace over on this side, and a big door that leads to the Drawing Room. There’s just bookshelves here where that stuff should be. And the pictures on the wall are different.”

“Hey,” said Zach. “There’s a fridge here, too.” In the other office, their father kept snacks in a small refrigerator for himself and his guests.

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“Hands off,” Katie reminded him.

They had resolved that they would disturb or touch nothing. There were two reasons for this. First, their very observant parents would probably notice anything that had been moved. Second: common sense. After all, they did live in an ancient fortress inhabited by a wizard/mad scientist. In such a place, Pushing The Nice Shiny Button, Sticking Your Hand In The Cage, Pulling The Big Red Lever, Opening The Iron Door With The Mystic Seal On It, or Reading Aloud From the Dread Book of Summoning would really not be a smart thing to do.

So while Zach took photos with his digital camera, Katie, from childhood habit, held her hands behind her back as she examined various items. They didn't open drawers or cabinets. They looked at the books on the shelves, but didn't pull them out. These books were not like the ordinary books in their father's main office. Most of them had no titles on the spines. Of those that did, many were in other languages. One book was bound in what looked like pearl, with golden hinges connecting the covers to the spine. Another was covered in what looked like short, black fur.

One of their mother's paintings hung on the wall, showing a range of low green mountains and again, the seashell-like object hanging mysteriously in the pale blue sky above them. There were also a number of small framed photos. Most were the same sort of family photos that were hanging in their father's other office, but some were different.

One black-and-white photo looked like their mother. She was wearing a long dress with a white collar, and a large hat different than the one she usually wore outside the Castle. In the background were some kind of statues: a tall pointed tower and a large white sphere. Another little gray photo was of a group of stodgy-looking

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men posed around some piece of equipment.

“We better not take too long,” said Katie. “This room looks like Dad spends a lot of time here.”

“Good point,” said Zach. He made another round of the shelves and walls, taking more photos. “Okay, that should do it,” he said. As they pushed open the door to leave, Zach picked up the pencil holding the door ajar, and then wiped the doorknobs again.

“You know,” said Katie, “you really don’t have to do that. Dad’s kind of paranoid, but I doubt he dusts all the knobs in the Castle for fingerprints every day.”

“Whatever,” said Zach. He finished rubbing his shirt on the knob, but it was just to make a point and he didn’t do it any more after that.

The next room on the list was the Stained Glass room, the first one they had succeeded in opening. Since they had already explored it, they went in just long enough for Zach to take photos of the glowing patterns on the walls.

Then came the second Secret Room they had tried out on that first day. Katie and Zach went inside and again saw a small room with a brightly-lit worktable and a chair. This time they noticed a number of intricate tools arranged neatly on a rack near the table. On the table were some little cardboard boxes and an empty plastic container.

“Check out these tools!” said Zach. “Wish I had a few of these in my room.”

“Well, I wouldn’t ask Dad to borrow them if I were you.”

She looked at an open notebook on the worktable. An entry had just been started in her father’s messy handwriting. *The mechanisms are quite remarkable*, it said. *The capabilities of these devices measurably exceed the possible capacity of the components used.* It was

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the kind of high-ended way their father liked to talk when he was discussing science with other scientists. If he had been talking to Katie and Zach, he would have said something like “These gadgets work a lot better than they ought to.” Zach took photos, mostly of the tool rack, and then they left the room.

They would have been much more interested had they been able to page back through the notebook and seen the diagrams of eight jointed legs, small rounded bodies, circuits, batteries and microscopic motors. Or if Katie had recognized the empty plastic container from weeks ago, when it had held a captured mechanical spider. On the whole, considering the questions that would have come up on Zach’s part, it was probably fortunate for Katie and her “spider bounty” enterprise that they saw nothing more than they did.

The next stop was a long walk away to the southeast section of the Castle grounds, but the day was warm and the walk was pleasant, down shady paths past the Hippodrome and the Frog Pond. They arrived at a very old building with fluted marble columns in poor repair. The Secret Door was inside, at the end of a long, dim hallway. When they activated the knob and opened the door, they entered a large room lit by standard light fixtures hanging from a high stone ceiling.

Scattered around this room were about two dozen statues. Most were of men and women, life-sized, dressed in clothing that looked like it came from classical Greek times. They were on short metal pedestals, with padded clamps and brackets supporting the statues at various points.

At first Katie and Zach moved between the statues in delighted amazement. The delight began to fade as they looked more closely. Most statues they had seen in books or on rare trips to museums

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were of beautiful men and women in proud poses. These statues, although they were certainly dressed like something you'd see in a museum, were of ordinary-looking people. Most were short. A few were rather chubby. The detail on the statues was incredible—every wrinkle showed. Katie looked closely at a hand that looked as though someone had been biting the fingernails. The eyeballs were smooth and didn't have the little holes that normal statues used to indicate pupils in the eyes. Katie went up to a statue of a young woman and risked touching the statue's cheek. It was cold and hard. She had almost expected it to give to the pressure of her hand.

If any of these statues moves in the slightest, she thought, I am going to be out of that door and back in my room like a cheetah with its tail on fire.

"Look at their faces," said Zach. The statues in museums typically wore an expression of serenity, but the faces on these statues were anything but serene. Some just looked surprised, as though someone unexpected had come into the room. Others looked like they had just seen the worst thing they had ever seen in their lives. A horrible suspicion began creeping up on the children. In fact, the style of clothing on the statues practically shoved the thought into their heads.

"These aren't statues," said Katie, quietly. "These are people who've been turned to stone. And I can only think of one thing that could do that."

Their heads spun as they both looked around fearfully, but the room had no real places of concealment. At the far end they could see lab tables, shelves, and small cabinets. There were no closets, and no other doors or openings. Nothing with snakes for hair suddenly leaped out at them.

"From the looks of it," Katie said, trying to keep her voice calm,

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“there’s nobody here that’s been turned to stone less than two thousand years ago, unless this happened at a toga party.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Zach. “But remember what happened to Medusa in the end? Head chopped off and stuffed in a bag? Rule or no rule about touching stuff, I wouldn’t open one of those little cabinets for a thousand dollars.” He looked at Katie. “What if these people had been wearing modern clothes? Then what?”

“They aren’t,” said Katie. But the thought made her uneasy. Gorgons turned people to stone. But now that she thought about it, in some stories, so did wizards. The idea shocked her even as it crossed her mind. *Not our Dad!* She firmly shoved the thought back to a corner of her mind.

“Look over here,” said Zach. There were some stone animals too, including a couple of deer and some mangy-looking cats. A shelf on a side wall had about thirty stone rats in various poses. They walked toward the end of the room where the lab equipment was. The tables were covered with test tubes and glass containers connected by tubing. There were some black boxes with dials and switches connected to rings woven of shiny copper wire. Colored liquid sat quietly in some of the containers. Nothing was bubbling, or doing anything else.

A few small glass cages sat on a shelf, all empty and clean. They had little water bottles and feeders, also empty. On another shelf were two specimen jars like you might see in a natural history museum, filled with pale liquid. Each contained a dead rat. Parts of their bodies looked like normal flesh and gray hair. Neither rat was floating, as specimens often did in such jars. The parts of their bodies made of stone wouldn’t let them float.

“These aren’t thousands of years old,” said Zach. “These are real animals, turned partly to stone.”

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“So you...you think Dad did this to them?” said Katie, putting her worst fear into words.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. There’s something about these rats, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

Katie and Zach were very quiet as they left the room. They picked up the pencil in the doorway and let the door close as they headed out of the building.

“I wonder where Dad got the statues from?” said Zach. Katie had no answer.

The walk to the next Secret Door on their list was shorter. Katie and Zach soon arrived at an ancient keep, and went inside through an open archway. The door here was also at the end of a hallway. They activated the doorknob and opened the door.

The room beyond was long and narrow. It had very rough stone walls with pale lichens growing on them. It was dimly lit, but the light was red, not white. It might have been a darkroom, but there was no sign of any photo equipment. The room had no other doors or openings and was empty except for two things: The far end of the room was completely closed off by a row of vertical metal bars spaced about a foot apart. The bars were almost two inches thick. The other thing was a small metal box mounted on the wall near the door with a keypad and a tiny green light. The area beyond the bars looked as empty as the rest of the room. There was a smell in the air. The children couldn’t identify it, but it wasn’t pleasant.

Zach looked at Katie and shrugged. They walked a little closer to the bars, but still kept their distance, peering at all the corners of the room beyond the bars in case there was some niche they had missed where something might be hiding. All they saw was a metal plate in the ceiling of the cage. It might have been a door, but it was tightly shut. Katie looked at Zach, and shrugged back. Zach

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raised his camera, set it for “flash,” and took a picture of the empty cage. Light flared.

There was a loud thud, unmistakably the sound of something very large slamming against the bars from the other side. They felt the shock through the bottom of their shoes. As they stood there, frozen, mouths open, staring at the still-empty cage, there were scraping noises behind the bars and a sound like something soft and wet slapping against the stone floor. A wave of stench hit them. The metal bars looked unaffected by the impact. So far.

Katie and Zach looked at each other and without a word, turned and ran for the door behind them like the devil was after them. For all they knew, he was. They were halfway down the long hall outside when Zach stopped.

“I left the pencil in the door!” he whispered.

“Fool!” Katie whapped him lightly on the head with her hand, but to her credit, accompanied him all the way back to the door where the pencil was still holding it ajar. The cage remained quiet, which was fortunate. If the unseen thing in the room had slammed itself into the bars right then, they probably would have had to return home for a change of clothes. Zach pulled the pencil out, and the door swung shut as they fled down the hallway again.

“What the *hell* was that?” yelled Zach, when they were outside in the sunlight again.

“An invisible monster in a cage!” Katie yelled back. “Wasn’t that obvious?” She and Zach were breathing a bit hard, and it wasn’t from the exercise.

“And what the hell is Dad doing with an invisible monster in a cage?”

“I don’t know! Maybe it’s part of his Gorgon research! He’s developed the world’s first safe Gorgon! It’s bloody invisible!”

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Zach grinned in spite of himself. Then his face grew serious again and he sat down hard on the grass. "I'm not sure this is as much fun as I thought it would be," he said.

"So Dad has some bizarre things squirreled away around here," said Katie, plopping down next to Zach. "Is that really a major shock?"

"Nah, I suppose not," said Zach. "But I expected a more... normal kind of bizarre, I guess. Some of this stuff is a bit past that. Moving a few notches into the scary zone, now."

"I know what you mean. The statues, and now this."

"It can't get any weirder, can it?"

"I can't believe you just *said* that!" said Katie. "That's such an obvious cue. If we had any brains we would just go home right now!" Both of them laughed. "Come on," she said. "Let's hit the next door on the list."

"Yeah, down in the sub levels," said Zach. "Just wonderful."

They walked north through open courtyards with cracked marble flagstones until they arrived at a complex of old windowless buildings. Entering one of them, they walked down a rough stone hallway lit by narrow skylights. They passed several doorways, most without doors and leading to dark, empty rooms. But one doorway had a new door and the carved knob that marked it as a Secret Door. With some nervousness, they activated the knob, opened the door, set the pencil in place, and walked in.

The room was a surprise after the dim ancient hallway outside. It was small and brightly lit by a contemporary frosted-glass ceiling. The walls were smooth, clean and white, and the floor was white tile. It looked like a modern hospital room. There was a metal worktable and chair against the far wall. On the worktable were a couple of metal pans and some shiny chrome instruments neatly

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laid out on a white cloth. Each side wall of the room had a row of about a dozen white metal cabinets mounted on it. Katie and Zach walked over to the first of the line of cabinets on the right.

The cabinet door was made of heavy glass that looked like the bulletproof glass in a bank window. It had chrome handles and a modern lock. Inside the cabinet was a round ceramic jar, roughly finished with a gray metallic glaze. Its lid was sealed with what looked like red wax. It looked like the sort of urn you'd put someone's ashes in, only bigger. The jar was set in a cushioned base, with soft straps holding the jar firmly to the back wall of the cabinet.

"Look at that," said Zach, pointing. The jar had a thick reddish-orange wire wrapped many times around its lower half. Both ends of the wire ran into the back wall of the inside of the cabinet. Near where the wire went into the wall, there was a covered switch. The switch cover also had a small key lock on it.

"A locked switch," said Katie. "Inside a locked cabinet. Behind a magic door that nobody else is supposed to be able to open. How paranoid is *that*?"

"Hey, *we're* in here, aren't we?" said Zach.

"Good point. What's in the jar, and what do you think the wire's for?"

"No idea on the first and not sure on the second," said Zach. "Let's look at the other ones." They walked down the row of cabinets. A few cabinets were empty, but each of the others had a container in it, in the same kind of support, wrapped with the same wires. The containers, although all roughly the same size, were all different. Two others, like the first, looked like glazed pottery. There were three metal ones—one like brass, another of silver, and one that looked like it was made of polished gold. Some had unreadable symbols carved on the container surface or painted in

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the glaze. Most of them looked very old, like museum pieces. They crossed the room to the cabinets on the other side and walked back up that row, noting another gold container and a square iron-looking one with a horse's head engraved on it. Then they stopped cold.

The next cabinet had a container that was transparent. In an odd contrast to the other exotic containers, it was an ordinary large Mason canning jar with a lid wired on, no different than one you might buy at a hardware store. It even had the brand embossed on the glass.

Inside the jar was a human heart, immersed in a thick, clear liquid. But it wasn't floating silently like a preserved medical specimen should be. The heart was beating. Beating as calmly as if it was in someone's body, dark red and healthy, quietly pumping absolutely nothing except the liquid around it. The liquid's surface rippled slightly with the movement. When Katie listened carefully she could actually hear the soft beating. The large veins and arteries leading into the heart had been snipped neatly off. There was no sign of any blood.

"Do you think they all have... hearts in them?" whispered Katie, looking around. Zach went to a cabinet on the other side and stood on tiptoe, pressing his ear against the glass. He tried another one, then another, then turned to Katie and nodded his head, his eyes wide.

Katie turned back to the Mason jar. She wondered why she wasn't feeling sick. Maybe it was just how normal the organ looked in there, floating and beating in a jar, without a care in the world.

"Okay," she said, her voice a bit stronger now, "what's all this, then?"

"I haven't got the slightest idea," said Zach. His voice didn't sound so good either. He mechanically lifted his camera, and went

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down the rows, taking photos of each jar. None of the other containers was transparent, and there were thirteen containers in all. Thirteen impossibly beating hearts. He put the camera down. "You were right," he said. "I *really* shouldn't have said it couldn't get any weirder."

Then he looked more closely at the container in the cabinet next to him. "Hey," he said, "I know what those wires are, now. They're heating wires. They're used for all kinds of things. That orange coating is high-temperature silicone."

"Push the switch, and then what?" said Katie.

"Boiled heart, I guess," said Zach. "But why?"

"I don't know," said Katie. "Maybe we don't want to know. Let's get out of here. You got enough pictures?"

"Oh, yeah," said Zach. "More than enough." They stood there by the door for a few moments. In the sudden deep quiet they could now faintly hear the beating of thirteen hearts in different rhythms. They made a kind of rumbling purr that was, strangely, almost soothing. Then they left.

"Let's stop at the Broken Room and eat," said Zach. "It's way past lunchtime, and it's sort of on the way."

"Okay," said Katie. All things considered, she was a bit surprised that she was hungry at all.

They walked silently to the northeast part of the Castle grounds where there was a very old building constructed of small, roughly-stacked stones. They went inside, down a wide hallway with a number of doorways, and into a room at the far end of the hall.

Katie and Zach had named this the Broken Room because of a small breach, maybe centuries old, at the base of one wall of the room. The displaced stones had fallen inside the room in a heap and left a hole to the outdoors. It was a good place to be on nice

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days—sheltered, yet breezy. Like all the rooms in this particular outbuilding, the original door was long gone and had never been replaced, leaving only an open stone doorway. There was no glass in the narrow windows.

Cobwebs fluttered in the corners, and there were small piles of leaves and debris that had blown in through the breached wall over the years. The myrmidons and the Dust Bunny did not consider this room part of their domain, perhaps because of the ruined wall. In support of this theory, the other rooms in the old building were still intact, and all of them had the usual uncanny cleanliness that those entities left behind them. A streak of windblown dirt stretched from the hole in the wall across the floor to the empty doorway to the hall. The streak was cut off exactly at the doorway as though someone had swept a vacuum cleaner across the hall floor outside the room.

Katie and Zach sat down on the floor by the wall. They unpacked cans of soda and sandwiches, then propped their backpacks behind them so they could lean back in comfort and eat. The breeze blew in, smelling of the wildflowers growing in a nearby courtyard. This outbuilding was one of many that had no electric lights, but at this time of day there was plenty of light coming in.

Both of them were quiet, thinking about what they'd seen that day. The dark places of the Castle seemed less harmless now than they used to. What else was sharing their vast home with them?

Zach idly tossed a small rock into the hallway and wondered how long it would stay there before a myrmidon picked it up. Then he examined the hole in the wall. On previous stops in the Broken Room, he and Katie had started puttering around trying to fit the loose stones on the floor back into the gap. The stones were of different sizes and shapes, and it was like a puzzle. Now there were

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only four loose stones left, and the opening in the wall was getting quite small. Zach noticed a matching shape that he'd missed last time, and suddenly saw how the rest of the stones would fit. He gulped down the rest of his soda, stood up, stretched, and let go with a first-class root beer belch. "Ahhh, that was a good one!" he said. "Hey, help me out. We can finish this up!"

"Wait'll I'm done with my lunch," Katie said, her mouth full. She wished she could distract herself so easily.

Zach bent over, hauled one of the stones off the floor with a grunt and shoved it into the gap, careful not to knock loose the stones they had placed before.

If it bothered Katie that she was taking her time eating while Zach strained to lift rocks, she showed no sign of it. In fact, she looked like she could watch Zach lift rocks all day long. But then Zach awkwardly tried hoisting a second stone, and almost knocked the whole stack out of the gap.

"Okay, okay, cut it out," said Katie. She stuffed the rest of her sandwich in her mouth and came over. "Here, I'll hold it up while you get it straight." Between the two of them, it went more easily. They fitted the last stone, carefully sliding it into the final hole, then stood back and admired their work. There were still gaps in the stonework, and if they stood back they could see daylight coming through the chinks.

"Let's head out," said Katie. She finished her own soda, and set their empty cans neatly in the hall beyond the doorway where the myrmidons would take them. When she turned back, Zach was standing there just staring at the stones.

"Dad's trying to cure them," he said, quietly.

"Huh? What?"

"Dad didn't turn anything into stone in that statue room. Even

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if those statues weren't thousands of years old, why would somebody turn a bunch of people into stone first and *then* start trying it on rats? But if you were a scientist trying to *reverse* it, you'd start with the stone rats, wouldn't you? To see if it worked before you tried it on people?"

"Oh. Right. Sure!" *Of course*, Katie thought with relief. *Experiment Boy would see that first.*

"The rats weren't turned partly to stone," said Zach. "They've been turned partly back. Just not enough yet for them to be alive."

They walked out of the Broken Room, went outside, and started across the grounds. "What if the cure works someday?" said Katie. "Wouldn't it be cool to talk to ancient Greeks?"

"Maybe not so cool for them," said Zach. "Modern life might totally freak them out."

"It's got to be cooler than being a statue." Katie was quiet for a minute as they walked. Then, "Thanks, Zach. I hate to admit it, but I was a bit worried about Dad for a minute there."

"Sure," said Zach. "Now all you have to worry about is invisible monsters and hearts in jars."

Katie scowled at him, but didn't say anything.

The final door on their list for the day was the one that was farthest from Falcon Hall, on the lower levels of an uninhabited structure huddled against the eastern outer wall. By the time they got there it was already well into the afternoon. They went into the building and walked through an atrium to where some wide stone stairs headed downward. A dimly-lit button on a nearby wall indicated the presence of one of the small, unobtrusive elevators installed around the Castle for their mother's convenience. It was a sign that the area wasn't as unused as it seemed. Katie and Zach took the stairs, descending two long flights to a broad hallway

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softly lit by hidden fixtures.

The right side of this hallway was made of normal stone bricks, but the left wall consisted of immense blocks of ancient rock, each bigger than their family's car. This was the exposed face of the great outer wall of the Castle, something they had rarely seen indoors. In most of the Castle's chambers adjacent to the wall, including the children's own rooms, these huge blocks were mostly concealed behind stone facing or paneling.

The Secret Door down here was set right in the middle of one of these blocks of stone. Katie and Zach had been especially interested in this door since they had first discovered it. For one thing, it was considerably larger than any of the other Secret Doors they had found. For another, it was a door in the outer wall. It might just lead to some odd cellar on the other side of the wall, but it might also lead them somewhere entirely outside the Castle!

They activated the knob and turned it. When they pulled the door open, a sudden flow of air into the gap tugged at it. The knob slipped out of their hands and the wind blew the door shut again. They looked at each other, and tried again. The door hauled at their grip but now they were ready for it, and as it opened farther the wind settled down to a light but steady breeze. They walked through. Zach put the pencil down on the doorjamb and let the door close. The wind grabbed the door again, but the door's hidden spring resisted and it closed gently on the pencil. The air flowed steadily through the crack, making a soft whistling noise.

The children turned around. What met their eyes was something quite different than a Secret Room. For a few yards there was a short tunnel somewhat bigger than the doorway, cut smoothly through the stone block of the outer wall. Beyond that, there was a larger corridor, going straight as an arrow into the distance ahead

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of them. The corridor was about fifteen feet square, made of dull gray metal with lines of round-headed rivets. It was brilliantly lit by ornate polished brass candle holders that stuck out from the wall at regular intervals down the corridor. Katie squinted, putting her hand over her eyes. "I can't see the end," she said. "If there is one, it must be like a mile away."

"Keen are the eyes of the elves," said Zach.

"*Two Towers*," said Katie. "Shut up." But she was smiling, and her voice was eager. "This isn't a Secret Room. This is an actual Secret Passage, and it goes right outside the Castle toward the mountains. This could be the coolest thing yet!" She pulled out her notebook and started bringing her map notes up to date.

Zach walked to where the metal corridor began, and looked up at the nearest light fixture. It was elaborately carved, with a winged dragon figuring prominently in the carving. The small receptacle at the end that would normally hold a candle did not hold an electric bulb like he'd first thought. Instead, it was a tiny ball of light, unenclosed by a bulb or anything else. It seemed to float unsupported about a half inch above the holder, burning like a miniature sun without smoking or flickering. Zach could feel the faint warmth. The lights were too high to reach or he might have tried blowing one out.

Katie looked at her watch. "One hour, we walk," she said. "An hour and a half at most. If we haven't hit something, we turn around and try again another day."

"Works for me," said Zach.

They looked ahead to the lines of lights, meeting in the distance. Then they looked at each other, and grinned.

"Sydney or the Bush!" said Katie.

Chapter Four: The Cave

Katie and Zach had been walking briskly down the metal corridor for about half an hour. The corridor was still running in a straight line. The floor was reasonably level, maybe with a slight downward slope.

Katie had stopped counting paces and was counting the brass lights on the wall instead, having figured out the distance between them. “I think we’ve gone far enough that we might be under the hills already,” she said.

“I really wish I had my skateboard,” said Zach. His sneakers squeaked on the metal floor.

“I wish I had our bikes, or a Harley, or a Mustang convertible. But there it is,” said Katie.

“Laugh it up,” said Zach. “At some point one of us is going to have to pee. We haven’t passed any johns so far, and I’m not seeing a lot of bushes either.”

Katie tried not to think about that.

Almost an hour after they had gone through the Secret Door, Katie pointed. “Hey, we’re finally getting someplace! I think I can see the end up ahead.”

They picked up the pace and reached the end of the metal corridor. Then they stood there, gaping. The corridor opened into a very large cave. It was long and narrow, almost more of a huge passageway than a cave, and stretched out in front of them in the same direction the corridor had gone—almost due east. The cave's walls were natural limestone, typical of other caves scattered through the hills behind the Castle. Most of these were relatively featureless, shaped over eons by water that was long gone, leaving only dry, brown rock without the decorative stalactites, crystals, waterfalls, and other things that made caves interesting.

The brass light fixtures were in here, too, mounted on the rock walls at intervals down the length of the cave, so it was fairly well-lit. The far end of the cave was still some distance ahead, but at least they could see it from here.

Katie checked her watch again. “Heck,” she said. “Let’s keep going.” She pulled a water bottle out of her pack and took some gulps, but not too much, remembering Zach’s warning about bathrooms.

“Still works for me,” said Zach. “No way we turn back now!”

They walked through the cave. When they stopped for a moment and stood quietly, they could feel a faint breeze at their backs. There were a number of cracks and irregularly-shaped openings scattered along the side walls. They seemed to be natural extensions of the main cave, some large enough that Katie and Zach could have easily walked into them. The lights in the main passage illuminated only the entrances of these black openings. Beyond was nothing but darkness.

They stayed near the center of the passageway, away from those dark side passages. Neither would have admitted that the holes made them uneasy, but they were far from the security of the Castle

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now. How safe were they here? The things they had seen today (or in one case, hadn't seen) made them a bit more nervous than they might have been otherwise.

"Hey!" said Zach, pointing at the cave floor. "Look down here." Most of the floor was bare rock, but an isolated patch of dirt was covering part of the floor in front of them. There were tracks in it.

"Dad," said Katie, noticing the pattern of their father's shoes. "And Mom." The tracks from their mother's traveling chair were also distinctive. There were quite a lot of tracks going both ways. Obviously, both of their parents had been here and more than a few times.

The same idea occurred to both of them at once, and they looked back. Had they stepped through other patches of dirt and left distinctive tracks of their own? Just to be safe, they went back a short ways to check this out. Fortunately the patch they had seen had apparently been the only one in their path. They continued, skirting the dirt patch with the tracks and watching the floor now for other such places.

They were nearing the far end of the long cavern. Here, the previously-flat passage sloped up into a wide stone ramp rising from the cavern floor. The ramp and passage extended onward and upward out of sight through a huge hole in the ceiling. Unlike the rest of the cave, this ramp and the hole looked like it had been shaped by tools. The ramp rose gradually, probably intended to be easily negotiated by their mother's traveling chair.

Katie and Zach started up the ramp. The lines of light fixtures ended where the ramp began, and as they climbed it started getting darker. They passed the level of the cave roof and kept going up through what was now a sloping tunnel about twenty feet wide.

"Should we get the lanterns out?" asked Katie.

“No, look up there,” said Zach, pointing.

Above them, the ceiling was dimly lit from some unseen source ahead. It didn’t look like the light from the brass light fixtures. It had the color of daylight. In a few moments they would be far enough up the ramp to see beyond it.

Then they heard the breathing.

Loud breathing, somewhere ahead of them. It was slow and steady, like that of a sleeping giant. Maybe the sound had just started, or maybe it had been at the edge of their hearing all along and they were only close enough now to notice it. The children stopped dead still. Katie desperately tried to rationalize what could be making a noise like that other than something breathing. She had heard of blowholes in Hawaii that made breathing noises but that was from ocean waves. The unseen breather heaved a deep sigh. If it was lungs making that noise—and it was becoming difficult to draw any other conclusion—it was no small set of lungs. The way the passage echoed, there was no real way to tell how far away it was. The children stood there, partway up the ramp, paralyzed by fear and indecision. Whatever it was sounded like it was sleeping, and it didn’t seem to be aware of them. Yet.

Katie looked over at Zach. He held his finger to his lips and motioned for her to give him her notebook and pencil. He scribbled for a moment and handed it back.

It said, “*If dangerous, why would Mom and Dad come here?*”

“*Good point,*” Katie wrote back. Then she did the bravest thing she had done in a long time, and started slowly forward again. Zach did the bravest thing he had done since putting a spider in Katie’s favorite book, and followed her.

As the ramp rose, the upper part of an opening came into view ahead of them. More of the opening became visible and they could

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see that it led into a much larger cave, or maybe a deep canyon, lit from somewhere up above by daylight.

At the top of the ramp the floor leveled off while they were still about thirty feet from the opening. From this vantage point nothing was visible of the cave beyond except a blank wall of limestone on the far side, maybe a hundred feet away. There were two more of the unusual light fixtures mounted on that wall, but these weren't lit. They could still hear the breathing, but without the echoes of the tunnel it sounded farther away—somewhere off to the left out of their sight. The breeze still blew from behind them and Zach fervently hoped that whatever it was out there did not have a good sense of smell.

The children hugged the left wall of the passage to stay out of view of whatever was doing the breathing, and crept up to the opening. More of the cave became visible. It seemed naturally-formed, and enormous. Katie reached the opening and very slowly slid her eye around the edge. She pulled her head back quickly, her eyes like saucers, but she didn't sprint back down the ramp. In fact, she peeked back around the corner again. Zach crawled forward under her and looked as well.

Against the far wall of the cave to their left, curled up and motionless except for the slow breathing, was a dragon the size of a railroad car. It was lying on a raised area of rock that formed a large, flat platform about two or three feet higher than the cave floor. Immense bat-like wings, folded down its spined back, rose and fell slightly with the breathing. A long tail was wrapped around its body. There was a long neck, curled away from them. The head wasn't visible, but the creature seemed to be sound asleep.

A short distance beyond the dragon was a large, perfectly round hole bored into the far wall of the cave. Strangely, this opening had

a line of bright electric lights on the ceiling, extending into the tunnel out of their view. They were nothing like the brass fixtures they had seen so far.

The children pulled their heads back and stood in the passage with their backs flat to the wall. Katie's mind was buzzing. What was a real live *dragon* doing here? Was it tied up or restrained somehow? Why was there an elaborate secret passage from the Castle to a dragon's cave?

Zach's brain was also spinning. Was it really safe, just because their parents came here? Was the dragon something keyed only to their parents, like the doorknobs? Would it eat anybody who wasn't their mother and father?

They were very slowly and quietly backing down towards the ramp again when they heard a voice from inside the cave:

“Come on in, Katie. Come on in, Zach.”

They were startled at first, but although the voice was deep and vast there was a hint of a chuckle in it. It gave the impression that its owner was somebody's grandfather—and it knew them by name. They put their heads warily around the corner again. The dragon's body hadn't moved but its neck was upright now and two huge black eyes on a reptilian head were looking right at them. Almost in spite of themselves, Katie and Zach walked slowly out of the passage opening, and into the dragon's cave.

The dragon moved and they froze, but it was only getting up and rearranging its body on the rock platform. Its movements were strange. Two forelegs and two larger hind legs unfolded from beneath it. The long, sinuous body floated up weightlessly, the feet seeming to barely touch the platform. The tail waved languorously in the air, and the dragon settled slowly down again. Anyone watching that didn't know better might have sworn that the creature

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was moving underwater. Through the entire exercise, the head remained almost motionless at the end of the flexible neck, still looking at the children.

“Come and talk a while,” the dragon said. The creature tilted its head. “Incidentally, do either of you happen to have a pack of playing cards?”

Katie and Zach looked at each other. Cards? Their fears began to ebb a little and they started walking again, trying to look around them while still keeping a wary eye on the creature they were approaching.

The cave was gigantic and even higher than it was wide. The ceiling was well over a hundred feet above them. To their right the wall of the cave rose up in a sheer cliff to an apparent ledge far above. There was obviously an opening to the outside up there somewhere out of sight, since daylight lit the cave ceiling and reflected into the cave below. They saw more unlit brass candle holders on the walls around them. Almost before they knew it, Katie and Zach were standing right next to the dragon. They stopped and looked up.

The dragon’s head towered over them. It had a long snout with a wicked-looking steely beak at the end. The jaws parted slightly when the dragon spoke, exposing sharp metallic teeth several inches long, but the jaws did not otherwise move. The dragon’s voice seemed to come not from its mouth, but somewhere deep inside. The dragon’s ears resembled Japanese fans, with ribs and a membrane between them. They moved constantly. Around the front of the dragon’s mouth several long, flexible tendrils hung like a weird Fu Manchu moustache. Some tendrils were almost three feet in length. These, too, moved constantly.

The dragon’s eyes were large and completely black, reflecting the light around them like polished glass. There seemed to be some

kind of vague movement within the eyes as the dragon watched them, like one of those big camera lenses with components inside that shift back and forth when the focus changes.

The dragon's body was covered with scales, not surprisingly, but the scales were in elaborate patterns, fitting together like the images in an Escher drawing. Up close, each individual scale seemed to be made of smaller patterns, and so on as far down as the eye could see. The scales were dark gray, shining like gun metal.

"Who *are* you?" asked Katie. "How long have you been here?" She found to her surprise that her fear had almost vanished. This was the first fabulous creature she had ever met that could actually hold a conversation. On impulse, Katie reached out to touch the dragon's scaled side. Her hand stopped. "May I?" she said. *May I?* she thought. *Where did that come from?* Katie had never been one for formal manners, and had been told on occasion that even normal manners weren't her strong suit.

"Of course," said the dragon. Again, there was a hint of amusement in the voice.

Katie ran her hand across the scales. She had expected cold, but the dragon felt warm to the touch, like an oven in the afternoon that had been used to bake cookies that morning.

"I have not been here long," said the dragon. "About since the time you were born. As for names, 'Dragon' will do. My true name is inscribed in the patterns of my integument, and would take many years to explain fully. In any case, my name is not important."

"Slartibartfast," whispered Zach, next to Katie.

"*Hitchhiker's Guide*," Katie whispered back. "Shut up!" The Dragon paid no attention to this. "Why are you here?" she asked the Dragon. "Do you know my Mom and Dad? What do they do when they come out here?" Her hands flew up to the sides of her

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head. “Oh, *crap!*” She had just realized the ramifications of meeting something behind a Secret Door that routinely talked to her parents.

“Katie!” said Zach. He wasn’t usually scandalized by language, but he wasn’t sure what it took to offend a dragon, and he didn’t want to find out.

“Please, Mr. Dragon,” said Katie, “you can’t tell our Mom and Dad we were here! It would just wreck everything!”

The Dragon raised his head and tilted it, looking at them. “I don’t lie,” he said, and was silent for a long moment. “But I don’t answer all questions put to me either. I believe you can rely on my discretion.” Katie and Zach looked at each other, working it out. It was probably the best they could expect. They didn’t realize until later how similar this was to their father’s way of not telling them things.

“Thanks,” said Katie.

“Yeah,” said Zach.

“As for what your parents and I do,” said the Dragon, “mostly we talk, or play cards or other games where chance is an issue. Chess is a rigid game, and there is not much challenge for me.”

“Oh, I forgot!” said Katie. “We actually do have a deck of cards.” She hadn’t noticed that the Dragon had evaded the “why are you here” part of the question. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a rather scruffy box of cards. “What do you want to play?” Oddly, it now seemed the most natural thing in the world to be discussing this with a dragon. She had forgotten how her heart had been pounding when they were listening to that breathing noise. She also hadn’t noticed how quietly the Dragon was breathing now.

“I’m partial to poker,” said the Dragon.

“Oh,” said Zach. “Usually Katie and me play War.”

“I don’t know that one,” said the Dragon. “How does it go?”

“Well,” said Katie, “first you deal out all the cards...” She explained the rules, then opened the box and slid the cards into her hand. The Dragon quickly dropped his huge head down to their level. Involuntarily, the children backed up.

“May I deal?” said the Dragon. Katie held out the cards, wondering how the Dragon was going to deal cards with claws a foot long. The long tendrils at either side of the Dragon’s jaws whipped forward, and grabbed the stack of cards. The ends of the tendrils were split into smaller tendrils, and those into even smaller ones, so manipulating delicate or tiny objects was apparently no problem.

The tendrils shuffled the cards expertly, including a couple of impressive riffle shuffles. Katie and Zach laughed in delight. The Dragon snapped the cards into neat piles on a clear spot on the rock platform. Katie won two games, Zach three, and the Dragon one. After the last game, the Dragon looked upward. “The sun will be going down soon,” he said. “The bats will be leaving.”

“There’s bats here?” said Zach. “Cool!” The children looked up at the distant cave ceiling, glowing with reflected daylight. Outside, the sun was lower in the sky, and more light was entering the unseen opening of the western-facing cave.

“They keep me company when there is no one else here,” said the Dragon.

Katie squinted. Now that she was looking for it, she could see an irregular blanket of bats covering part of the ceiling, particularly in the shadowed areas. And now that it was quiet she heard, or maybe imagined, faint intermittent squeaks. Katie looked down at the cave floor. While there were rocks and pebbles scattered around, it was quite bare and dry. “This looks pretty clean for a bat cave,” she

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said. She had seen pictures of bat caves. Bats weren't at all particular about where they went to the bathroom.

"They would not be so rude as to foul my cave," said the Dragon in an amused voice.

"You potty-trained bats?" said Zach, peering upward. "What did you do, put newspapers on the ceiling?"

"Can you talk to them?" asked Katie.

"No," said the Dragon. "They are only bats. But I can communicate a few simple things." The Dragon looked up, and emitted a sound at the very edge of hearing. As one, hundreds of bats dropped from the ceiling, and their chittering became quite loud. The bats flew, not out into the waning daylight, but down to where the children were, swirling and squeaking. Katie and Zach weren't afraid of bats and stood quite still, knowing that the bats' sonar would prevent collisions and that they didn't fly into your hair. The bats swarmed in a cloud around them.

Suddenly the Dragon reared back with the same graceful, weightless movements they had seen before, and the two great wings unfolded. With a single pump of the wings, the Dragon lifted slowly into the air and drifted like an immense elongated balloon into the center of the cave. The Dragon began a fluid dance in mid-air, twisting and turning in complex patterns. The bats flew next to him and began to weave complementary patterns around him as he slowly looped. His wings moved lazily, and it was obvious that they were not what was holding the Dragon up. He swam in the air as though gravity was optional.

Silhouetted by the light reflected from the cave's ceiling and surrounded by the clouds of joyful bats, the Dragon looked like a gigantic sea creature viewed from underneath, surrounded by swirling schools of fish. The children stared upward in awe as the

Dragon's shadow washed over them.

Then the bats flew back up to the top of the cave and settled on the ceiling again. Although most of the ceiling was now bathed in the light of the setting sun, the bats seemed unbothered by it, which was odd for bats. The Dragon drifted back to his rock platform, folded his wings, and touched down as gently as if he'd been lowered on wires.

"That rocked!" said Zach.

"You should go home before long," said the Dragon. "It will be dark here soon."

Zach walked past the Dragon to the tunnel bored into the wall, and peered into it. The tunnel was perfectly round, obviously machine-made, and about twenty feet in diameter. It was at least a few hundred feet long, and reminded him of a big sewer pipe. The far end was a small circle of darkness. Little round electric lights were attached to the top of the tunnel at intervals all the way down to that black circle, illuminating the length of the tunnel clearly. A thin electric wire connected them, and ran out the tunnel's opening. He looked behind him. It was hard to see it if you didn't know where it was, but he could follow the wire as it ran along the cave wall and out the ramp opening on the far side. The gentle wind blew past him and down the tunnel, making a low, hollow sound. An odd feeling stole over Zach as he looked at the distant tunnel end. The idea was completely ridiculous, but somehow it felt like this tunnel led to some vast, endless void.

Zach shook the weird feeling off. "HELLO!" he yelled. There was an impressive resonance, but he heard no echoes. He looked back and was startled to find the Dragon right behind him at the tunnel's entrance, watching him closely with those disturbing telescope-lens eyes, and his webbed ears splayed wide open. Or was the

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Dragon looking at the tunnel beyond him?

“Can I go in there?” asked Zach.

“No.” It hadn’t been loud, or angry, but the word was as flat and final as a brick dropping. Zach wasn’t about to try arguing, and somehow, he felt a bit relieved.

“You’re guarding a treasure, aren’t you?” Zach said, smiling. “Isn’t that what dragons do?”

The Dragon looked at Zach for a long moment, then over at his sister, who had come up to the tunnel entrance. “Yes,” the Dragon said. “I suppose I am.”

Zach pulled his camera out of his pack. He’d completely forgotten it until now.

“I would prefer that you took no photographs of me,” said the Dragon.

“Awww...okay,” said Zach. Again, arguing didn’t seem to be a good idea. “Can I take some shots of the tunnel?”

“Yes,” said the Dragon.

Zach took a few photos down the tunnel. He thought about trying to sneak a shot of the Dragon anyway, and then thought better of it.

Katie picked up her cards and put them back into her pack. “Come on, Zach,” she yelled. “Let’s get back.” The Dragon seemed to want them to go soon, and Zach’s earlier warning about lack of bathrooms was beginning to come back to haunt her.

Zach came back from the tunnel and they both hoisted their packs. “Goodbye,” said Katie to the Dragon. She paused for a moment. “Is it okay if we come back again sometime?”

“I look forward to it,” said the Dragon.

“We can bring other games, too,” said Zach. “It was really cool meeting you. Later!”

“May the Sun banish all darkness around you until you return,” said the Dragon. He curled back up on the slab of rock, raised his head, and fixed his gaze steadily on the dark, round tunnel opening. The image reminded Katie of something, but she didn’t know what.

Katie and Zach said nothing more until they had reached the lower passageway and were walking toward the metal corridor. “I wonder if the Dragon’s been in these other side caves?” said Zach.

“He’s too big,” said Katie. “He could fit down the ramp and through this big passage, but he wouldn’t fit through any of these side openings, or the metal tunnel to the Castle. I wonder if he gets out of that cave at all. Maybe the opening up on top? I couldn’t see it from where we were, but it must be pretty big from all the light coming in.”

Zach shrugged. “He got *in* there somehow, didn’t he?” He was looking at the stone passage walls. Now that he knew what to look for, he could see the electric wire from the tunnel lights running along the passage near the ceiling. When they got to the opening of the metal corridor, the wire disappeared into a hole next to the opening and Zach couldn’t follow it any more.

They went back down the long metal corridor until they finally arrived at the hole cut in the Castle’s foundations, and the Secret Door. They pushed the door open against the steady wind, and Zach bent down to pick up the pencil. The door closed behind them, and they headed home.

* * *

The Dragon smiled inwardly as the children started down the ramp. His face wasn’t really equipped to smile any other way.

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He had been excited when he first heard the Falcon children coming towards his cave although he had no idea why they were coming alone. He had heard much about them over the years but had never met them. On a sudden impulse, the Dragon had decided on a small test of courage. He discarded a few interesting ideas along those lines—he wanted to test the children, not give them coronaries or risk soiling the floor of his cave when the bats were so good about keeping it clean. Finally he had settled for the loud breathing. In truth, he didn't really need to breathe at all unless he was talking.

There was a flurry of movement nearby that few beings other than the Dragon would have noticed. "You were right, Little Brother," said the Dragon. "They are fascinating young people. I think they can be discreet, if only in their own interest. You might reconsider your unwillingness to be revealed, at least to them." There was no response, but the flicker of motion moved down the ramp passage in the blink of an eye. The door at the far end of the metal corridor would only be open for moments after the children passed through it, and it was no easy matter to enter the Castle otherwise.

The Dragon's cave was quiet once more. The ceiling grew dimmer. The sun would soon be dropping behind the hills between the cave and the plains beyond. The endless breeze blew past him, flowing from the cave entrance and the passage below and pouring into the round tunnel in front of him. The Dragon inhaled the air from above. It carried the scent of forests and the damp freshness of the nearby river, well-seasoned with the smell of bats. The air from the cave passage below held the scent of old stone, the metal of the corridor, and sometimes stranger things, like when it occasionally and unexplainably carried the distinct smell of the open sea.

The breeze flowed in only one direction, into the round

tunnel—the borehole. Sometimes it blew more strongly than other times, depending on the weather outside. Only once, during an intense storm in the mountains years ago, the barometric pressure had dropped so low that the breeze had reversed direction and for a short time air came pouring out of the hole instead of into it. The Dragon still remembered that odor. Overhead, the bats had also caught the scent and broken away from the ceiling, fleeing shrieking in a frantic cloud into the teeth of the storm outside. They had never returned. The Dragon was pleased when, much later, a different colony of bats had moved in and taken their place. Dr. Falcon and the others kept him company, and maybe now so would the Falcon children, but it would still be dull in this cave without the bats.

The cave was darker now. As if by some signal, the bats dropped from the ceiling and poured out of sight through the hidden opening above, heading for their nightly hunt for insects. They would be back before morning. The daylight continued to fade, and soon only the electric lights in the borehole lit the cave.

The Dragon's body hummed faintly. He opened his mouth, and a small, brilliant point of light, like a baby sun, drifted out. It floated over to the nearest empty brass candle holder, and parked itself obediently just above it, shining brightly. The Dragon did this several times, like an old-time lamplighter, until all the fixtures in the cave had their own little points of light. Then he reached out with his power and reinvigorated the dragonfire lamps in the passage below and in the metal corridor beyond.

The Dragon's odd ears swiveled backwards, listening to a noise far beyond the range of human hearing. Something was coming up from the Gate. Something that might have earlier scented possible prey walking around the Dragon's cave. Something that seemed to

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be getting a little too brave. The Dragon moved to the borehole and stuck his head into the opening. The electrical lights at the far end of the borehole had gone out, and that end was lost in darkness. The lights that were nearer were flickering and going dim. The stealthy sounds from the far end of the borehole stopped dead. Although the darkness beyond the reach of the lights would have been absolute to a human, the Dragon's eyes could see perfectly well what was there. Again, he smiled inwardly.

The humming noise from the Dragon's body began again, a bit louder this time. His mouth opened once more, and a ball of light much larger than the ones on the light fixtures emerged and floated in front of him. The hum changed pitch, and the ball began moving rapidly down the length of the borehole. There was a frantic scrabbling fading into the distance as the fireball sped down the borehole and out beyond its end, chasing after the fleeing interloper. Then the ball exploded with a flare of light that blazed back up the borehole and cast the Dragon's shadow on the opposite wall of the cave.

"Boo," said the Dragon.